Almost 500 capable, understanding, personable men and women in Springfield, Missouri—Springfield School Volunteers—are finding a new kind of satisfaction and fulfillment. They give generously of their time and energies to help school children to achieve, to have a better self-image, and to become better school citizens.

These paraprofessionals represent the hands, hearts, and minds that work right along with teachers and principals in order to help the Cindys and Martys better achieve their potential. And, incidentally, they are serving as important public relations persons for the school as well.

Under the direction and guidance of professionals, the paraprofessionals worked a total of 21,106 hours during the school year 1970-71 in all 43 elementary schools in the Springfield Public Schools. All of the volunteers, with the exception of those on lunchroom supervision, served at least a half-day a week on a regular basis. Yet they are limited only by their own time, energy, and judgment as to the number of hours they may work. One retired teacher, for example, is working four days a week. Lunchroom volunteers serve an average of 1 1/2 hours one day a week.

Springfield School Volunteers serve the individual school as the principal—a key man in the entire program—sees the need. The principal approves each volunteer, and he usually does the scheduling of the volunteer, matching up the needs of his building with the abilities of the volunteer. Although the Coordinator of Volunteer Services is constantly recruiting new workers, the principal may do some recruiting on his own.

Many of the paraprofessionals in a school are parents in that particular community. However, in accordance with the "Guidelines for School Volunteers" set up by the Board of Education, these volunteers do not work in their children's rooms.

Paraprofessional Duties

Typical paraprofessional duties include listening to children read; participation in reading games, story dramatizations, and other activities to enrich the reading program; helping in arithmetic skills; working on spelling assignments, social studies projects, and

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science experiments; accompanying children's singing; and serving as a "picture lady" or paint mixer for the art program.

Springfield School Volunteers also provide valuable service in checking tests, spelling, and arithmetic papers; typing and filing; operating ditto machines; developing bulletin boards; rewriting some resource materials in more usable form; and checking in and out traveling library collections.

Although there must be a certificated person on playground duty with the volunteer because of assigned legal responsibility, this is also an important task for many. There is great value, particularly, in having some male volunteers doing playground work because many children who have no father or male image in the home have an opportunity to identify with a man who is interested in them and their varied play activities. At the present time, several college students interested in physical education serve on playground duty, as do a few fathers who have flexible working hours.

There are a few children with special needs, such as two children in one school who need transportation during school hours to attend special therapy sessions. Three different volunteers provide that service three days a week.

Just as important as these specific duties are the times when a volunteer is called upon to give needed consolation, encouragement, or companionship.

Rewards of Serving

The only remuneration Springfield School Volunteers receive is the personal satisfaction they gain from helping the children plus a better understanding of what the world of children is all about. This latter benefit, in turn, helps the parent-volunteer to better understand his or her own child.

Attitudes and understandings developed in the volunteer-school relationships are expressed in many different ways:

"I understand my own children much better now."

"I really got to understand the school a lot better. I have a new appreciation for the tremendous job Springfield schools are doing."

"You learn a lot from the children. They are life's best teachers."

"I just loved it. My work with school children has helped me understand the many tasks teachers have to do."

"You don't really understand kids until you see them at school."

"I think I'll go back to school and get my degree so I can teach."

"This work has done more for me than I possibly could have done for the school. There is such satisfaction in it."

These are but a few of the comments
that have come from the school volunteers, many of whom have served all three of the years this program has been an official part of the Springfield school system's operation.

Comments from the school staff, taken from a year-end evaluation sheet as were those of the volunteers, show how they appreciate the volunteer program. Among those were:

"A major outcome of the program has certainly been more informed parents."

"Volunteers have a high regard for what we do, and a better understanding of what the school day is like."

"Children have been encouraged and skills and work habits have been strengthened."

"We feel that by helping in the school the parents gain an insight into the school program and that the volunteers are our goodwill ambassadors."

"Teachers have an easier way with parents and see their desire to help."

"Individual help has been given to students who needed it. They are much more adequate in reading and mathematics as a result."

"There is a definite change in the children's interpersonal relations in accepting adults in the classroom."

"There is more time for teachers to teach and less clerical work for them to do at home."

Development of Program

The Springfield School Volunteers program, which prompted the preceding comments, was born in the hearts and minds of the Church Women United in March 1965. The American Association of University Women became involved very early in the planning stages of this project, as did the Springfield Council of Parents and Teachers. With guidance from the board of education, it started as a pilot project in just one school with seven volunteers. At the close of the 1967-68 school year, there were 30 volunteers headed by a chairman.

In 1968-69 the Springfield School Volunteers became an official part of the school system, with 346 volunteers giving the equivalent of 1,094 eight-hour days of service in 38 schools. When taken over by the district, the program was put under the direction of a Coordinator of Volunteer Services. Since that time there has been steady growth.

To assure proper administration of the program, time sheets, guidelines, orientation sessions, and various acceptable procedures were developed—always keeping in mind this service is for Springfield school children and must be of the highest caliber possible. Rules and regulations for the program were drawn up and included in the district's operational manual.

Qualifications for Springfield School Volunteers are few, but there is very careful screening. The volunteer must love children; must be of good character; have patience and understanding; be a willing worker whatever the job at hand; should have at least a high school education; be neat and clean; and be personable around children and adults. In the recruiting interviews, qualities of warmth and flexibility are sought.

The Orientation

It is important for each volunteer to know what is expected of him or her in the way of “behavior” at the very beginning. The school principal and the Coordinator of Volunteers sit down informally with each volunteer or several and discuss what the job entails. Much emphasis is given to the fact that the paraprofessional follows the same code of ethics that the professional does. In
this phase of the orientation, discussion centers on, among other things, the following:

1. Respect, dignity, and worth of the individual.
2. The importance of recognizing certain confidential information and keeping it that way. (Volunteers have no access to personal records or test scores. When they work with children’s papers, they may check them but not grade them.)
3. The feeling of loyalty to the school and its staff.
4. Respect “family business” that belongs only at school.
5. The teacher is the planner and decision maker for and with the children; even though the volunteer does not always agree, he cooperates willingly.
6. Volunteers do not discuss other volunteers or teachers in a derogatory way among themselves.

**Individual Development**

Many ideas for working with children are brought out in the orientation discussion. For example, volunteers are reminded of the fact that each home sends a product of that particular background to school, which makes for many differences in the children in a group. All of these differences and needs must be recognized and dealt with. At this point, the school system’s philosophy is discussed. Basically, it says: “. . . the main task of the schools is to help each young person acquire the understanding, skills, ideas, and values necessary for him to achieve his highest personal development.”

The volunteer can give the extra help sometimes needed for a child to reach his potential. Also, quite often, the child will work especially hard to earn respect from this new person in his life. The child is usually impressed that here is someone who cares about him enough to work for free.

Other tips offered to volunteers for effectively dealing with children include:

1. Keep voices down so children will need to be quiet to listen.
2. Have a kind but firm attitude.
3. Give simple but clear directions; be sure the child understands.
4. Always show patience.
5. Show the child you believe in him and have faith in him. Let him know you expect his best and that is enough.
6. Avoid showing shock or undue interest in personal stories.

The orientation session is designed to be a warm, friendly hour and a half that leaves the volunteer feeling a part of the school team. As the volunteer builds on relationships with the school and its work, he or she grows and develops into a very valuable staff member, a new friend for children, teachers, and the schools.

Many volunteers have become so deeply interested in helping children learn to read that they have left the ranks of volunteers to go back to college. Two are working toward master’s degrees in remedial reading.

The administration of the Springfield school system believes in and encourages the volunteer program and gives it a boost whenever possible. The school principals realize its value and are willing to plan carefully in order for the volunteer to give the greatest service.

The investment in time and effort on the part of administrators is small in comparison with the returns. In addition to the help in the classroom, the volunteer becomes —once he or she has had contact with the schools and the personnel—an ambassador of goodwill for the schools.