

# *Volunteer Help: Resource in Instruction?*

**CHARLES W. HICKMAN, JR.\***

**D**URING the past decade, much has been written in educational journals about the problems of communication between the public schools and the lay public. Hold-the-line budgets, school bond failures, election of ultra-conservative school boards, growth of private schools, loss of professional prestige by educators, and student rebellion all attest to the urgency of the problem. Having recognized this communications gap, what can public educators do about it?

One of the most promising factors in the solution of this depressing picture is the meaningful involvement of the public in the mainstream of the instructional program itself. Traditionally, the schools have not encouraged this process. Through the parent-teacher associations and fund-raising activities, parents have been involved in the school in a very shallow sense.

Gradually, some parents moved from this kind of involvement to working within the confines of the school building itself, serving as volunteers in the health room, cafeteria, library, and the school office. However, the classroom steadfastly remained the last citadel to be entered by parent involvement. Most teachers viewed the classroom as their sacred domain, and nonprofessional help therein was largely discouraged.

Parents in general tended to agree with

the teachers' "my castle" concept—feeling that only a college-trained professional was qualified to work with their children. School principals further facilitated the concept, as they traditionally viewed their own role as the "gate-keeper"—one who kept the lay public out of the classroom so that the teacher could do what he or she was paid to do, "teach."

Painfully, there has been a reappraisal of this stance by the professional. The mixing of racial and ethnic groups, the emphasis on individualized instruction, and the cry of failure in the schools have forced a new look at the legitimacy of involving lay people in instruction with the professional teacher.

## **Parent Volunteers**

The most common use of lay people in instruction has been the parent serving in a tutorial capacity. Most of these tutors work outside the confines of the classroom in a one-to-one relationship with a student in some designated content or skill area identified by the teacher. Often the relationship which develops between the tutor and

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Many student volunteers plan to pursue a career in teaching.

student is more important than the actual instruction. This type of tutoring is most effective when the teacher and tutor have periodic evaluative sessions about individual children. Some tutors have been placed in learning center or clinic groups where students go for specific purposes.

In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System, six elementary schools have organized clinics for remedial reading development. Each school has a lay coordinator who helps the principal direct the clinic. These people in turn have the services of a part-time reading consultant provided by the school system to give professional advice to the teachers and volunteers. The consultant assists in the diagnosis of student difficulties and helps develop simple materials that volunteers can use with the students.

In-class volunteers generally become instructional aides to the teacher. Most ele-

mentary teachers use the volunteer as a second hand in the supervision of a youngster's individual work while the teacher is working with formal groupings. Usually, the well prepared teacher plans some follow-up activities for the tutor with small groups of students, particularly with students who need a great deal of adult supervision. The utilization of learning centers is rapidly becoming a top priority in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System. Such a priority will increase the effectiveness of volunteers who find themselves moving from station to station, assisting students who direct their own learning.

### **Student Volunteers**

Another group being recognized as effective volunteers are high school students. A significant pilot project developed in two

of our senior high schools provides an opportunity for students to earn a credit toward graduation while they devote a school period or more to a neighboring elementary school. Some students complete their academic requirements in the morning hours and devote the remainder of the school day to the elementary school. Other students are released for a shorter length of time, usually one or two school periods, and then return to their schools for afternoon classes.

In one of these high schools, the guidance counselors and elementary school teachers organized a formal orientation class, with sessions conducted on both campuses. Among the topics studied were child growth and development, elementary teaching methods, use of volunteers in an elementary school, and the development of an educational philosophy. These sessions were interspersed with classroom observation and short sessions in which the volunteer would work with individual students.

A third high school has allowed students to go to a neighboring elementary school to work with boys who have a poor self-concept. Most of their work centered around individual students in a physical activity program, followed by counseling sessions. A number of male athletes from the high school not only helped elementary children improve their self-concept, but the high school students found that scoring a touchdown or hitting a homerun was not the only way to become a hero. Helping youngsters to find themselves was reward enough for these student volunteers.

Many of the participants in the three high schools are members of the future teachers club. It is expected that this early experience in elementary education will help them to make a wise choice in pursuing their career in teaching.

## Other Community Volunteers

For many years, urban school districts have had enrichment activities to which they could send their students. Through voluntary contributions, thousands of young people were bused to free symphony concerts, circus performances, museums, and zoos. Most of these activities were provided through volunteer funds but with little personal effort on the part of the contributors.

There is a trend for more involvement by the cultural community in the individual school setting. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg a cultural arts committee was organized to recruit community groups who would go into the schools and give performances in drama, literary study, music, and puppetry. This spring a college music dean held a workshop for high school music teachers using the choral groups in one high school to demonstrate techniques of teaching music.

Business leaders can also play a part in the development of the instructional atmosphere of the public schools. In the spring of 1971 a dozen personnel directors of major businesses in the Charlotte area met in a number of sessions with the 31 secondary principals and their assistants to look at the whole range of problems dealing with grievance procedures, building human relations, and the role of management in a large concern. The thrust of the workshop was to get school principals to examine their role in dealing with students and teachers. These businessmen gladly gave their time to the workshop.

## A Promising Concept

A concept that could have significance for an urban school district would be that of attaching a large industrial concern to a

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junior or senior high school. With the new directions in occupational and career education, a large company would have much to offer a school. The company would have a range of employees from the plant janitor to the president, all of whom would have unique talents to offer to a secondary school.

Since most large companies have accountants, production departments, salesmen, office personnel, assembly line workers, legal counsel, and management personnel, each company would be able to offer a variety of experiences as needed by the school. The company would develop an understanding of the needs of the school, school personnel would learn the resources of the company, and students would benefit from the variety of experiences offered. Perhaps the most significant benefit from such a plan would be the loyalties that would develop between the business community and the schools.

Although this type of volunteer plan has

not been tried in our school system, the merits of such a plan have been discussed. A great deal of preliminary planning has been envisaged before an approach could be made to a business organization, but the tying together of the "real world of work" with the program of the schools should pay great dividends.

### Need for Close Supervision

The essential ingredient in the use of volunteers in the instructional program is supervision. The volunteers and teachers are more likely to cooperate where supervision exists. In schools where the principal and a lay person have taken the responsibility of supervising a volunteer program, it has succeeded; where the principal has shown a lackadaisical attitude, it has failed.

A most interesting project which was initiated in Charlotte-Mecklenburg was a joint venture by the countywide parent-teacher council and the school system. The council received a \$75,000 ESEA grant to employ some 57 part-time volunteer coordinators. The coordinators were responsible to the principal in supervising the activities of volunteers in the school. Most coordinators had the responsibility of recruiting, orienting, organizing, training, and building a schedule for volunteers. The central administration employed a volunteer coordinator to maintain close ties with the school coordinators.

Principals have been very enthusiastic about the volunteer coordinator program. They feel that teachers are less reluctant to use volunteers in their classrooms, and they have seen the coordinator as probably the finest public relations arm that their school has ever had in relaying the program of the school to the community.

It is evident that school volunteers can provide valuable support for the instructional program of a school system. The responsibility of the educator is to be alert in identifying these talents and then to be flexible enough to use them once they are recognized. □

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