Project TEACH: How Business Helps Our Schools

Hilary G. Cowan

"Teaching is not as easy as I'd thought. My wife used to come home exhausted, and I couldn't imagine why—all she did was sit behind a desk all day. Wrong!"

These are the words of an enlightened husband who participated in Project TEACH, a program to place volunteers in classrooms. Now in its second year, this ambitious project reaches out to the 74 elementary and 3 special education schools in Kanawha County, West Virginia.

Project TEACH began as the result of a shortage of funds for training. In spring 1987, the Kanawha County Board of Education initiated a four-year plan to place computers in its elementary schools and to provide elementary teachers with computer training; however, the board could not provide enough money for substitutes to allow released-time training. John Chapman, president of the local chamber of commerce, suggested staffing classrooms temporarily with volunteers, and Project TEACH emerged.

The members of the committee that organized Project TEACH were concerned that the logistics of the program might prove overwhelming. Annually, a total of 700 three-hour time slots would have to be filled by volunteers from the community. The legal question of supervision in the classroom also caused concern. Volunteers are not certified to teach, so either two classes must be combined and taught by an Assistant Teacher and a volunteer, or someone in a supervisory capacity must stay with the volunteer. Neither alternative is problem-free, but most school staffs have found ways to make them work.

We established a Project TEACH Lesson Planning Committee, which decided that all volunteers would be asked to create a three-hour lesson plan. Talented teachers and business volunteers worked with Jane Hange, Director of Classroom Instruction at the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, to put together a Project TEACH kit, which included information on child development, sample lesson plans, and suggested short activities. The Lesson Planning Committee also created a three-hour inservice session to prepare volunteers for teaching by allaying their fears, modeling good teaching practices, and introducing the kit materials.

After we received a start-up grant from a local foundation, a part-time coordinator, Marietta Crews, was hired to help orchestrate the project. In July we held a kick-off breakfast for CEOs from large companies. We asked local businesses and community members to contribute money, or time in the form of in-class visits or field trips. Within one month, 268 three-hour time slots had been filled by 42 local businesses.

By the end of the first year, more than 80 area businesses had contributed thousands of hours of volunteer time to release teachers for computer training. Many local businesses had helped to pay for project expenses, and the DuPont Corporation had produced a videotape of Project TEACH to be used in training and recruitment. During the 1988-89 school year, local officials, university students, and more than 90 businesses participated in the project.

Project TEACH has been successful because we have carefully managed the logistics. Juggling over 600 volunteers from 90 businesses with 350 teachers in 76 schools is no simple matter. Effective communication can be a daily problem. For this reason, a secretary was added to the project staff during the second year.

Project TEACH has grown well beyond its original purpose of meeting an existing financial need. To date, at least 10,000 students in kindergarten through grade 6 have participated in classroom activities with Project TEACH volunteers. Lesson plans have included writing checks, filling out job applications, working cash registers, touring chemical plants—the list includes hundreds of experiences that may influence career decisions and will surely be remembered by students long after they leave school. Together, Kanawha County citizens are creating a new understanding of what education means to the community and what the community means to education.

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