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## Back to school prep for parent volunteers

Vanessa Wamsley, Education Columnist  
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As summer vacation comes to a close, students are not alone in their back-to-school preparation. Parents are readying their committee phone trees and snack schedules (nut-free, please) in an effort to stay involved with their children's education. But the world of school volunteers has morphed over the last 15 years. Security concerns, technology shifts and shrinking education budgets have made volunteering harder, easier and more important than ever. Community involvement, including the presence of parents in schools, is identified as a key component of all highly successful schools and has been affirmed by researchers as a crucial factor for student success. According to a National Education Association policy brief, "When schools, parents, families, and communities work together to support learning, students tend to earn higher grades, attend school more regularly, stay in school longer, and enroll in higher level programs."

The relationship between parents and schools has strengthened dramatically as educators have become more aware of the importance of parental involvement and have been trained to fully utilize parent volunteers. This shift has occurred alongside decreasing school budgets. Ballooning classroom size and decreasing staff numbers compel strong parent-school partnerships.

Parent volunteers who were once given scissors to prepare bulletin board letters or handed a worksheet and directed to the copy machine are now partnered individually with students to provide what may be the only one-on-one reading instruction the child receives in the school day. In a classroom of 25 students with only one classroom teacher, the mere presence of one or two parent volunteers creates a more focused learning environment. In 2005, William Jaynes of California State University conducted a survey of 41 studies of 20,000 kindergarten through sixth-grade students. His survey showed that students whose parents volunteered in their school showed actual improvements in grades and test scores.

With a more critical and satisfying role to play in their child's classroom, parents may be more eager to join the back-to-school rush this fall. However, they may find it tougher to get into the classroom than they expect. School security and student safety top the priority list for educational policy makers. As a result, rules for volunteers have changed. Volunteers complete applications and provide information for a background check. Some districts even require volunteers to be fingerprinted. While the necessity of such practices is unfortunate and may make it more difficult for parents to help in their child's school, these precautions provide an important layer of protection for school children.

Technology, on the other hand, has upgraded the parent volunteer experience. Websites like VolunteerSpot.com, Doodle.com, schoolvolunteer.org, Yahoo Groups and Google Calendar organize volunteer opportunities and calendars, sending automatic reminders for anything from class parties to one-on-one reading help. Some schools have gone even further. The Washington, D.C., and Seattle district websites, for example, enable parents to fill out application and screening forms, schedule a fingerprinting appointment, and view and request volunteer opportunities online. So whether a parent is looking for a one-on-one tutoring experience or wants to help out in the background with bulletin boards and school fundraisers, online sign up can streamline the process.

Parent volunteers can effect positive change in schools, and educators are looking for school-family partnerships, now more than ever. While safety concerns have made it more difficult to volunteer, online systems have eased the process of getting involved. Helping at school is a simple way for parents to stay involved in their child's world and provide continuity between home and school. So while they are going over their children's supply lists and shopping for new backpacks and notebooks, parents should consider what arrangements they can make before the first day of school, like applying as a school volunteer or checking out the online schedule for classroom volunteers. After all, parents are headed back to school, too.



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