A question during a breakout session at the recent Minnesota School Boards Association leadership conference prompted a bit of research on school policies related to background checks for volunteers. Many thanks to Center for School Change sites and others who shared information for this story!

Minnesota law requires criminal background checks for individuals hired to work in public schools, but there is leeway when it comes to volunteers.

Minn. Statute 123B.03 says, “... A school hiring authority may, at its discretion, request a criminal history background check ... on any individual who seeks to enter a school or its grounds for the purpose of serving as a school volunteer or working as an independent contractor or student employee.”

While some of the CSC schools that responded to an informal survey do not require background checks for volunteers, there are many schools that do. Kathryn Thomas, director of the Minnesota Parent Project at the PACER Center, Minneapolis, said requiring background checks for volunteers is becoming common. Many nonprofits and schools are doing so, she said, in order to protect themselves from possible lawsuits.

Cathy McIntyre, policy services director for the Minnesota School Boards Association agreed. Because of situations that may leave them open to liability, she suggested, “... Some schools have decided to do the background checks even though the law does not specifically require it.”

Among seven CSC schools that replied to survey questions about volunteers, three use some background checks. Six keep track of parents and volunteers by requiring them to both sign in and carry identification passes or badges. Sites also expressed different expectations at elementary and secondary levels. Responses from elementary schools indicated that teachers or other school staff members are always present when volunteers work with students. In contrast, volunteers at secondary schools sometimes work without teachers on hand.

For more information, visit www.tolerance.org/teach/expand/mag.
Responses to Background Check Survey

1. Does your school require background checks for volunteers who help teachers in or out of the classroom? Four schools said “No.” One said “Sometimes.” Two others said “No” for parents, but “Yes” for community or business volunteers.

2. Does your school allow volunteers to work with children when a teacher or other school staff person is not present? Four (all elementary) said neither parents nor community volunteers work alone with students. Three (all secondary) said parents and community members sometimes work without a teacher.

3. How do you monitor volunteers or visitors? Six of the schools require volunteers and visitors to sign in and wear a badge or carry a pass.

4. Do you have a follow-up plan for volunteers? Six of the schools recognize volunteers with events or gifts. None of the schools survey volunteers to determine how they feel about their volunteer experiences.

Based on a survey voluntarily returned by former CSC sites — Feb. 2003.

Great news!

EdVisions, Inc., Henderson, Minn., has received a $4.5 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to replicate the project-based learning model used by Minnesota New Country School and the teacher-owner governance model of EdVisions Cooperative.

Funds will allow EdVisions to work with 20 new sites throughout the nation. An earlier Gates grant provided money to help EdVisions develop several schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Former Center for School Change outreach coordinator Doug Thomas is president of EdVisions, Inc.