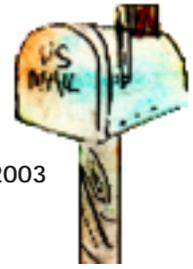


Staying in Touch

News from the Center for School Change in Rural Minnesota

Feb. 2003



Background checks?

Schools' volunteer policies vary

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 back-

ground 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.

See survey results on back ...

Helpful Resources

Larry Long, long time friend of the Center for School Change, is featured in the spring issue of *Teaching Tolerance Magazine*.

The issue also includes information about ordering a free CD and songbook Long created in cooperation with the magazine. *I Will Be Your Friend: Songs and Activities for Young Peacemakers*, was prepared with elementary students in mind and includes 26 "learnable, singable" songs that cover a variety of musical styles.

The CD-songbook package (recommended for grades 2-5) is available at no charge to elementary schools and teachers. Send a request on school letterhead, signed by a principal or administrator, to:
I Will be Your Friend
Teaching Tolerance
Order Dept.
400 Washington Ave.
Montgomery AL 36104.

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.

Published by the Center for School Change in Rural Minnesota, *Staying in Touch* provides a monthly connection between CSC and rural school sites. Material is prepared for publication by rural outreach coordinators Terri Anderson and Vicki Nelson. Copies are available by mail or at the CSC Web site, www.centerforschoolchange.org. Please send comments or questions to Vicki Nelson at 37848 Deer Lake Way, Grand Rapids, MN 55744 or vickinel@lcp2.net.

The University of Minnesota is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to its programs, facilities and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status or sexual orientation.

The Center for School Change in Rural Minnesota
A Project of the Center for School Change
HHH Institute of Public Affairs - U. of Minnesota
301 Nineteenth Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55455

www.centerforschoolchange.org