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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Helping Our Teachers (HOT) Program, a community volunteer program started in the fall of 2000 at Julia P. Bryant Elementary School in Statesboro, Georgia. The purpose of the program is to formally organize all parent volunteers to help teachers and staff with school-related activities previously shouldered by paraprofessionals. The paper describes: (1) the background of parent volunteers; (2) organization of the HOT Program; (3) how the HOT Program works; (4) the program's special features; (5) the program's achievement; (6) factors contributing to its success; and (7) the value of the HOT Program. The paper concludes with a discussion of several lessons learned from program implementation. (Contains 29 references.) (EV)

Running head: HOT PROGRAM

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## **HOT Program: A Success Story of Community Support for Education**

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## **HOT Program: A Success Story of Community Support for Education**

### **Introduction**

Helping Our Teachers (HOT) Program is a unique community volunteer program that started in Fall, 2000 at Julia P. Bryant Elementary School at Statesboro, Georgia. The purpose of this volunteer program is to formally organize all parent volunteers to help teachers and staff by participating in school related activities. Julia P. Bryant Elementary School has had an excellent record of strong community support. A great abundance of dedicated parents, grandparents and family members have donated hundreds of hours to the school. However, due to the growing number of students in the school and the shortage in the number of paraprofessionals, the need for community voluntary help has increased. In the HOT Program, volunteers are organized to assist the teachers and staff with various activities (e.g. lunchroom duty, copying, laminating, cutting, putting up, bulletin boards, and helping students read).

### **Background of Parent Volunteers**

Most of the needed voluntary assistance at Julia Bryant was coordinated through the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). Since the Georgia A+ Education Reform Act was passed in early 2000, the school has been reorganized to contain more classes and fewer paraprofessional positions. As a result, the school was left with much more needed work to be done with no additional support. It is obvious that the school cannot be functionally operated without calling for increased parent voluntary assistance. The HOT Program was introduced to the school as a voluntary support program aimed at assisting teachers.

The idea of parent volunteers at school is well grounded in literature. Parent volunteers at school were described by Amundson (1999), Fillipczak (1977), and Smith (1981). When school develops program of partnership, parents will get involved (Davies, 1990; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Epstein, 1991; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Two categories of parental involvement were cited: home-based involvement and school-based involvement (Brown, 1989). While some research findings support the impact of parental involvement on student achievement (Amundson, 1999; Clark, 1995; Duran, 1983; Slaughter-DeFoe, 1991), some others have concluded with no positive findings (Ho & Fong, 1990; Ming, 1990). Colon-Tarrats (1988) found that student dropout in school was related to lack of family involvement in school activities. Peterson's study (1989) indicated that parental participation in school helped the development of children's self-esteem, self-discipline, mental health, and long-term aspiration. The effort of the entire school in support of the parent volunteer program was explored by Brown (1989), Coulombs (1995), Dugan (1994), Massachusetts Department of Education (1990), and Su (1989). Aten, Mueller, New and Peschang (1998) provided evidence of the lack of parental involvement and its impact on school operation. Barriers to parent-school relationship were the foci of the studies of Baker (2000), Brown (1989), Davino, (1993), First & Carrera (1988), Ho & Fong (1991), Lee (1988), Musser (1998), New York City Board of Education (1980), Ortiz-Colon (1985), Thompson (1991), and Yao (1985). In summary, most of the literature reviewed by the authors has indicated that strong parental support is a factor for school success.

**Organization of the HOT Program**

The HOT Program is fully supported by the school administration and the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). More than 100 volunteers participated in Fall Semester, 2000. They signed up in nine needed work areas identified by the teachers: (1) assist in copying, (2) decorating assistance, (3) lunchroom supervision, (4) assistance for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades, (5) assistance at media center, (6) yearbook publication, (7) reading and tutoring, (8) beautification, and (9) arrangement for guest speakers. Each work area is headed by a volunteer who serves as the coordinator of activities. All area coordinators work closely with the school principal and the assistant principals to ensure that the teachers' and the staff's needs are met. A committee is established in each of the nine areas to coordinate the work. Karen Martin, an assistant principal of the school, also suggested that a HOT parent volunteer be placed on each of the school committees for better communication of needs (i.e., Care Bears, awards, incentives and community involvement). All the activities of the HOT Program are coordinated at the HOT Program headquarters, a room in the school designated to parent volunteers. HOT is strictly a voluntary program with no fiscal involvement. It does not function the same as PTO, a support organization, which focuses on fund raising, recommending facility improvement, providing financial support for field trips, and consulting with the principal on various school issues as they arise.

**How the HOT Program Works**

An initial and continuous task of the HOT Program coordinators is to notify the parents and other community members of the need for volunteer assistance at the school. Then, a vigorous effort

is launched to recruit potential volunteers to support the program. Volunteers will receive training in the selected areas they choose, be given a HOT volunteer badge, and receive a reduced price for lunch on days they work. Then, a list of weekly tasks that would be permanently delegated to parent volunteers is compiled. These parents will choose a day and time that they will work within the school. If they cannot come on the day they have scheduled, they will contact one of the coordinators to fill their spot. All the teachers' requests for voluntary help will be forwarded to the HOT coordinators. This is to make sure all teacher requests are fulfilled and nothing falls by the wayside. Specific work of each of the nine areas are described as follows:

- (1) Assist in copying: The copy center is staffed by responsible HOT volunteers who copy instructional materials for classroom use. This is set up on a filing system by grade level. Teachers place their copy requests in their folders with the date needed. The earlier they are placed in the folder, the sooner they are prepared. The completed copies are placed in the teachers' mailboxes.
- (2) Decorating assistance: Volunteers are responsible for preparing cutouts for bulletin boards, doors, and classrooms. They sometimes help with painting props and preparing equipment for music programs.
- (3) Lunchroom supervision: The work in this area includes helping students find seating, opening milk cartons, and providing napkins or condiments, since children must remain seated. Times for volunteering in the lunchroom are from 10:45 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. each day. Working parents can volunteer a single lunch hour a week if they so desire.

(4) Assistance for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades: Since these grades have no paraprofessionals, volunteers are needed to provide morning and afternoon bathroom breaks and assist with general classroom needs. They copy materials or work with individual students.

(5) Assistance in Media Center: Work in this area includes helping with book checkouts and reshelving books throughout the day. Volunteer assistance is particularly needed during the times when the Book Fairs are held. HOT volunteers also assist in laminating materials for teachers.

(6) Yearbook publication: Yearbook planning, sales and preparation are the main tasks of this area. Volunteers in this area discuss the yearbook contents with faculty advisors. Editing the yearbook and soliciting appropriate advertisement are very time consuming tasks. HOT volunteers spend numerous hours assigned by the Yearbook editor with these tasks.

(7) Reading and tutoring: The work in this area includes scheduling of volunteers for the Book Buddy Program, Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) program at the library, and volunteers to hand out prizes on Accelerated Reader (AR) Award Days. The operation of these programs need strong support from volunteers. Parents work with students in small groups to help with reading, and assist with student oriented reading functions.

(8) Beautification: Volunteers assist with school landscaping and gardening projects to create an attractive environment conducive to learning. They also help students with science and nature projects.

(9) Arrangement for guest speakers: Volunteers who are interested in making classroom presentations on specific topics such as geology, story-telling, careers, etc. are encouraged to do so. HOT volunteers also contact potential speakers and help coordinate presentation activities.

**HOT Program: Special Features**

The HOT Program is not just another community voluntary effort. It is a very unique program distinguished from other similar programs in four ways:

(1) Organization – The HOT Program is well planned to solicit teacher input. It is organized to meet many aspects of teacher and staff needs. Nine areas are included to provide assistance to classroom instruction, and day to day activities in the school.

(2) Work assignment – HOT volunteers are recruited to work in areas of their choice. Some are assigned to perform specific tasks that come up urgent from time to time. Training is provided to volunteers before they are assigned to perform certain duties.

(3) Reward for volunteers – HOT volunteers are recognized for their contributions at appreciation luncheons and special school functions. However, as Susan Williams, a program coordinator, put it, “The greatest reward of a HOT volunteer is the self satisfaction that they have made a difference.”

(4) Fiscal aspect – The HOT Program is strictly a voluntary program with no fiscal reward for volunteers and the program activities do not incur any expenses. All office supplies and equipment are furnished by the school.

**Achievement of the Program**

The HOT Program contributes directly to student success. Some HOT volunteers actually serve as aides to help students with their reading and school projects. Other HOT volunteers also contribute indirectly to student success. They help teachers in cutting, copying, laminating, and filing. In this way, teachers’ time can be freed up to concentrate on working with students. In



addition, the HOT volunteers support the academic program through arranging for community guest speakers for the school. Furthermore, the volunteer program is an added bonus to the support of the school in the following areas: lunchroom supervision, media center operation, campus beautification, and yearbook publication.

*Comments from Teachers:*

“Kindergarten has thoroughly enjoyed the HOT volunteers. Hopefully, we’ll see them again next year.”

“The HOT Volunteer Program has proven to be a highly successful and beneficial addition to the Julia P. Bryant family. The dedication to their children’s education that these parents are showing is not only advantageous to teachers, office, and students, but is heartwarming as well.” (1<sup>st</sup> Grade)

“The HOT (Helping Our Teachers) Program has been a huge success at our school. The parents volunteer to do many things for the teachers. They are willing to copy papers, laminate, cut items out, put student booklets together and many other things. Their help allows teachers to spend more time on planning instruction for the students. We are very lucky to have such a program at our school.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Grade)

“Our school’s parent volunteer program should be a model for every school. The dedication of this group makes such a difference in so many ways – they do everything – from weeding the gardens to running fundraisers to copying papers. They are really very helpful to me, as a teacher in reducing the amount of time I have to spend on non-teaching tasks. I don’t know how I ever made it without them!” (3<sup>rd</sup> Grade)

“The HOT Volunteer Program has been beneficial in assisting the fourth grade teachers to make daily preparations needed during school hours. Some of the wonderful help that parents provide are running copies, designing bulletin boards, and helping with classroom activities. Our teachers have greatly appreciated this form of parent involvement.” (4<sup>th</sup> Grade)

*Comments from HOT Volunteers:*

“It’s great! Personally it gives me a chance to know the school better and meet the teachers. We put in a lot of volunteer hours that are needed.” (Parent of children in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Grades)

“I do it because the teachers need the help. I see a need for teachers to have additional support in the classroom. I appreciate all the efforts of teachers. The opportunity to be in the classroom has been an eye opening experience for me.” (Parent of children in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Grades):

### **Factors Contributing to Program Success**

The HOT Program was introduced to Julia P. Bryant Elementary School at a time when volunteer help was needed. Since Fall Semester, 2000, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers have no longer been assigned with a regular paraprofessional and the entire faculty and staff have had their hands full to adjust to this change as well as to prepare for the visitation of the SACS accreditation team. Therefore, HOT, a well organized parent volunteer program, came just in time to relieve the teachers and staff with much of the tedious copying, laminating, cutting and decorating work. Other factors also contribute to the success of the HOT Program:

(1) Sense of belonging – For years, parents and community members of Julia Bryant Elementary School have had a strong sense of “belonging” to the school. This sense of belonging turns into a constructive effort to help the school achieve its educational goals. As Susan Williams, a HOT Program coordinator, said, “This is the most significant factor contributing to program success.”

(2) Support of PTO – The HOT Program is strongly supported by the Parental Teacher Organization of the school. In fact, many HOT volunteers are recruited through PTO’s community contacts.

(3) Teacher involvement – Program coordinators surveyed the teachers to assess the specific needs in the classrooms. By responding to this survey, teachers were given an opportunity to identify critical areas in their programs that need assistance from HOT volunteers.

(4) School environment – The work environment created by the school administration is most inviting. The HOT volunteers feel at home. Designated copying time, a special HOT volunteer room, and reduced prices for school lunches are just some of the special things that the school did to show appreciation to the HOT volunteers. The volunteers were also provided the opportunity to purchase a special HOT t-shirt from the program coordinators.

### **Value of the HOT Program**

(1) The HOT Program contributes to student success by offering assistance to teachers. As Principal Kelly Tharp said, "... the program is really great to help teachers in two ways: First, it has a strong parental presence in the school, which is good for student achievement. Second, it helps free paraprofessionals to do other things."

(2) The HOT Program motivates parental support for education. "With everything that has happened with paraprofessionals, it's vital that parents step in and help," Teresa Nessmith, a parent volunteer, said, "and we're just doing the busy work!" Principal Tharp also added, "The program is helpful in picking up some of the duties such as copying that had fallen to paraprofessionals. It's nice to have that strong parent support." HOT volunteers who have children at the school are particularly excited about what else they could do to help the school.

### **Looking ahead**

Encouraged by the success of the HOT Program, the faculty and the program volunteers are planning to move ahead with further exciting developments:

(1) *Initiate a Math Challenge Program.* Each grade would have a challenge sheet that is appropriate for each grade level. Each week a Math Challenge Sheet would be given to all

the students and they have until Thursday to return the completed sheet. Students who turn in a correctly completed sheet would earn points to be used for prizes. This would be strictly voluntary and would be graded by the HOT volunteers.

(2) *Begin a volunteer tutoring/one-on-one help program.* Since some students could benefit more from a one on one instructional program, HOT volunteers could be of great assistance to this educational process. Volunteers will need specific guidance from the teachers in order to really help kids with the areas in which they are struggling.

**Conclusion:**

The HOT Program, designed to provide voluntary help to teachers, opens up an unlimited source of educational support. Through the HOT volunteers, many other sources of community support to education have been found available. As a matter of fact, the essence of the program is to encourage parental participation. It proves once again that school based parental involvement works. Administrators at Julia P. Bryant Elementary welcome and encourage their support. HOT volunteers' valuable assistance is appreciated and is recognized by the school and community.

## **Lessons Learned**

Experiences we learn from the success story of the HOT Program are valuable:

- As long as the program contributes to school success, it will continue to gain support from parents, and teachers. It is the administrators' responsibility to identify solid evidence of success that the program demonstrates.
- HOT Program volunteers need to feel that they are part of the school community. School administrators need to create the positive environment to make them feel at home and at the same time treat them as education partners.
- School administrators need to nurture the HOT Program as an independent entity to help the school. HOT Program coordinators could contribute to the program very creatively if they are encouraged to explore new ideas.
- Many community volunteers, whether they have children at school or not, are willing and are ready to offer their service to a school in their community. School administrators need to publicize the HOT Program and focus on recruiting these community volunteers.
- School administrators need to make sure that HOT volunteers are assigned a job they have the knowledge and the skill to perform. In some instances, the school may need to offer some short preparation sessions to the volunteers.
- The needs of the school have to be assessed from time to time to ensure that the HOT volunteers are on the track to offer help to the teachers. The needs of teachers identified some time ago may have been satisfied while some other new needs may have recently

emerged. Therefore, a teacher need assessment will update information to help administrators make best use of the volunteers' time.

- School administrators need to value the service offered by the HOT program and work on continuous motivation of the volunteers. An award or recognition program of voluntary service needs to be in place.
- Many HOT volunteers are also actively serving on the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) of the school. However, school administrators need to recognize that HOT and PTO serve different purposes and should function independently.
- School administrators need to check on the insurance policy of the school system to ensure that it covers the HOT volunteers working at school during and after school hours.
- All HOT volunteers in and out of the school need to be distinctly identified, and proper record should be maintained of the time, place, and the nature of the voluntary help.
- School administrators need to keep the channel of communication open to teachers and volunteers. Regular coordinating meetings among administrators, teachers, and HOT volunteers need to be scheduled to resolve any possible program issues.
- School administrators need to include all the HOT Program activities and accomplishments in their school improvement plans with established goals and objectives.
- School administrators could make best use of the HOT Program to draw many community resources in support of education. HOT volunteers have established community contacts to achieve this purpose.

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