

Nothing's Free: Calculating the Cost of Volunteers

By W. Kyle Ingle, Ph.D.

Most school district administrators recognize the benefits of using parent and community volunteers, including improved school-community relations. But volunteers are not cost free.

In examining the nature and costs of volunteerism in schools, researcher Brian Brent (2000) identified the costs associated with training and volunteer recognition programs and activities, as well as corresponding incidental costs, such as bus and cab fare reimbursement, postage, supplies, telephone, and printing. He also identified a troubling source of costs: litigation. Two schools represented in Brent's study were embroiled in workplace injury litigation related to volunteer activities.

At their best, volunteers can be a valuable resource for schools and districts. At their worst, volunteers can consume already limited resources.

Determining expenditures specifically related to an activity such as volunteerism requires more than budget-

ary data alone. Why? Budgets typically report on a line-item basis and do not reflect programmatic spending. For example, a copier may appear as a line item under "equipment" on a school's budget, but how much of the annual cost of this machine is related to printing handouts or manuals for volunteers?

School business managers can use Levin and McEwan's "ingredients method" (2001) to estimate resource costs with greater precision than relying solely on budgetary or expenditure data. The analogy of baking a cake can illustrate this concept (Iatarola and Ingle 2004). Common ingredients are needed regardless of the recipe, but the amount of each ingredient may vary from recipe to recipe. A monetary value is then placed on the ingredients using multiple sources of data.

A study of levy campaign volunteer costs in five districts serves as the basis of this article (Table 1). Four of the five districts in our sample used volunteers and

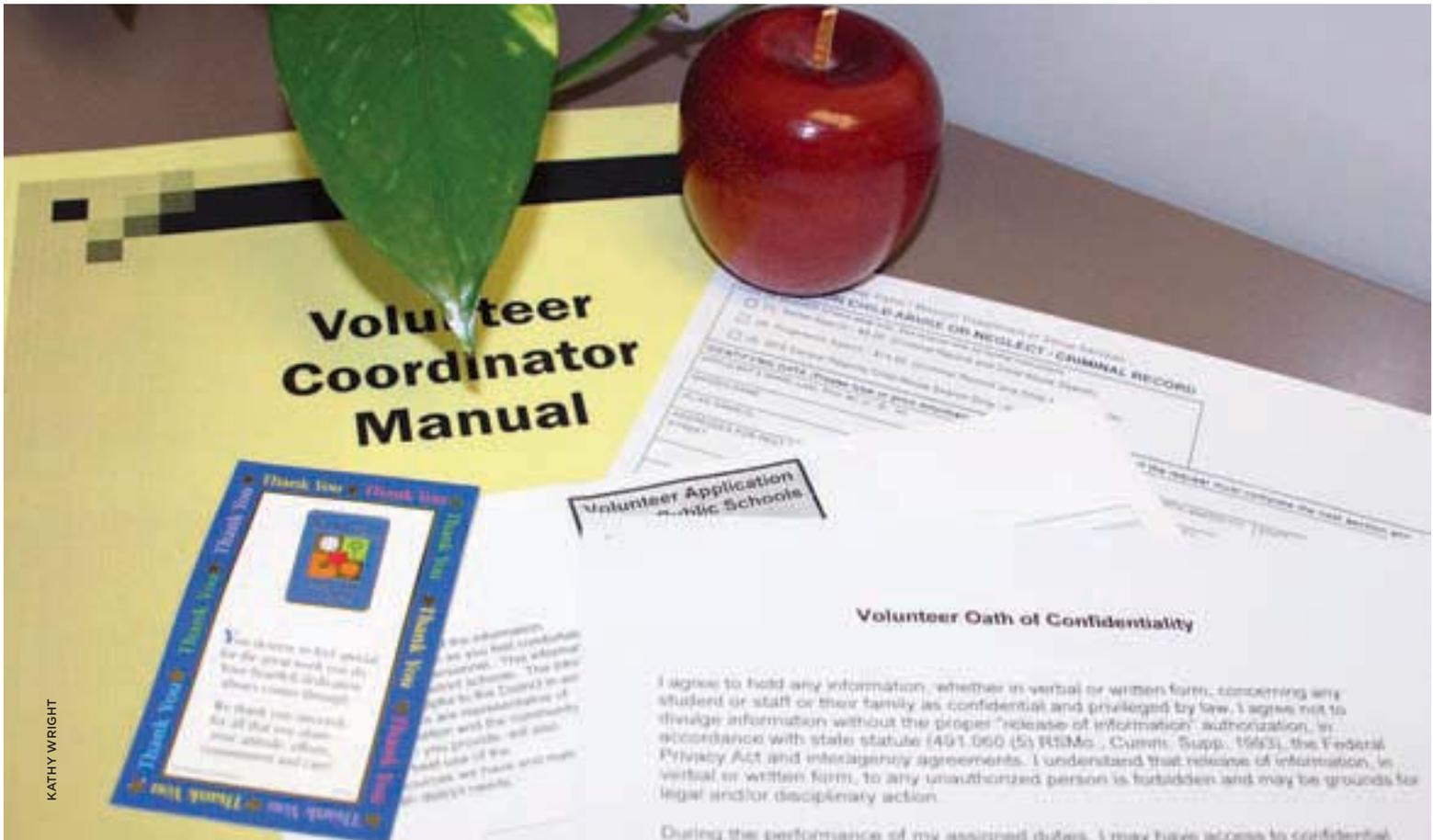


Table 1. Select District Characteristics, 2008

Characteristic	District A	District B	District C	District D	District E
District type	Suburban	Suburban	Rural	Rural	Major urban— very high poverty
District total population	17,000 (31,000) ^a	13,900	3,700 (5,200) ^a	7,800 (10,000) ^a	47,400
K-12 student enrollment	4,500	3,000	1,400	2,200	6,900
Levy outcome (% voting yes)	Pass (53.6)	Fail (46.6)	Pass (54.3)	Fail (36.4)	Pass (51.4)

Note: Population and enrollment numbers are rounded to the nearest 100 to protect the identity of the cooperating districts.
^aIncludes unincorporated rural areas served by the school district.

reported acknowledging the value of their services at public events, such as school board meetings or campaign committee meetings. The sources of data included district and campaign budgets, state reports, district Websites, and interviews with key stakeholders.

With regard to volunteer-related budgetary costs, cost ingredients included event fees, transportation, T-shirts, and volunteer recognition expenditures (Table 2).

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For example, in the case of District A, cost of volunteer participation in a levy campaign included T-shirts for volunteers (\$900) and an event fee for participating in a festival and parade (\$25).

District E, a large urban district, incurred a cost of \$168 for transporting parent and community volunteers to and from meetings and events by buses and cabs.

Costs for volunteer recognition were difficult to extract from campaign budgets. Supplies included refreshments, paper plates, napkins, and so forth, but they may also have been used for community meetings and forums. In such cases, high, medium, and low estimates were needed.

Brent (2000) reported that costs associated with volunteer recognition programs averaged \$122 per school. His average was used for District A's medium estimate, which, among the five districts, most heavily engaged its community members. High and low averages were estimated, using 10% above and 10% below the medium estimate. A similar process was used for Districts B and C.

District E reported exact costs (\$795) spent on a "levy watch party" for volunteers. The event's purpose was to watch the election returns and publicly thank campaign volunteers for their service. Total volunteer-related budgetary costs ranged from a low of zero for District D

(which opted not to use community volunteers) to a high of \$1,059 (District A).

Opportunity Costs

Then there are the opportunity costs associated with volunteerism. Some districts (Districts A and E) used parent and community volunteers more heavily than others (Districts B and C). District D chose to operate a "central office campaign" that used no community volunteers.

To estimate opportunity costs associated with volunteers, one only needs to know how many volunteers were involved, who those volunteers were, and how many hours they worked.

Since volunteer time was not tracked consistently across all five districts, hour estimates were calculated based on the available data, which formed the midline base. For student volunteers, minimum wage was used as the medium estimate for earning potential. For parent and community volunteers, the median income in the district was used as the medium estimate for earning potential. Hours and earning potential were then adjusted by adding 10% to provide a high range. The low estimate for volunteers was based only on the number of hours spent to train volunteers—the assumption being that volunteers do so willingly and actually receive benefits from their volunteerism (Mendenhall 2009).

Districts A and B had the highest opportunity costs for parent and community volunteers, but the median income was higher than that of other districts (Table 2). In comparing opportunity costs of volunteers and school district personnel, districts that heavily engaged volunteers may have had higher opportunity costs for volunteers, but in District A, school district personnel's opportunity costs were much lower (Table 3). For example, a superintendent and school treasurer are paid an annual salary to provide district leadership and manage limited resources according to the school district's vision, mission, and goals. If they spend a large proportion of their time on a levy campaign, that time is taken away from other important job functions.

Table 2. Costs Related to Parent/Community Volunteers (in dollars)

Cost Categories and Ingredients	District A			District B			District C		
	Low Estimate	Medium Estimate	High Estimate	Low Estimate	Medium Estimate	High Estimate	Low Estimate	Medium Estimate	High Estimate
Volunteer-related budgetary costs									
Event fees	25	25	25	0	0	0	0	0	0
Transportation costs	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
T-shirts	900	900	900	0	0	0	0	0	0
Volunteer recognition	110	122	134	99	110	121	90	99	109
Subtotal	1,035	1,047	1,059	99	110	121	90	99	109
Human resource opportunity costs									
Parent/community volunteers	28,941	33,255	37,465	12,477	13,863	17,991	2,796	3,452	4,177
Students	936	1,147	1,358	65	73	80	159	196	237
Subtotal	29,877	34,402	38,823	12,542	13,936	18,071	2,955	3,648	4,414
Total volunteer costs	30,912	35,449	39,882	12,641	14,046	18,192	3,045	3,747	4,523
Volunteer cost per resident	1.00	1.14	1.29	.91	1.01	1.31	.56	.72	.87
Cost Categories and Ingredients	District D			District E					
	Low Estimate	Medium Estimate	High Estimate	Low Estimate	Medium Estimate	High Estimate			
Volunteer-related budgetary costs									
Event fees	0	0	0	0	0	0			
Transportation costs	0	0	0	168	168	168			
T-shirts	0	0	0	0	0	0			
Volunteer recognition	0	0	0	795	795	795			
Subtotal	0	0	0	963	963	963			
Human resource opportunity costs									
Parent/community volunteers	0	0	0	5,735	10,321	16,650			
Students	0	0	0	0	0	0			
Subtotal	0	0	0	5,735	10,321	16,650			
Total volunteer costs	0	0	0	6,698	11,284	17,613			
Volunteer cost per resident	0	0	0	.14	.24	.37			

Note: Costs are rounded to the nearest dollar amount.

Table 3. Comparing Opportunity Costs of Parent/Community Volunteers and School District Personnel (in dollars)

Cost Categories and Ingredients	District A			District B			District C			
	Low Estimate	Medium Estimate	High Estimate	Low Estimate	Medium Estimate	High Estimate	Low Estimate	Medium Estimate	High Estimate	
Human resources										
School district personnel ^a	2,048	2,305	2,553	17,561	19,225	33,060	3,866	4,772	5,774	
Volunteers ^b	29,877	34,402	38,823	12,542	13,936	18,071	2,955	3,648	4,414	
Cost Categories and Ingredients										
Human resources										
School district personnel ^a	15,046	18,575	22,476	27,487	36,091	47,524				
Volunteers ^b	0	0	0	5,735	10,321	16,650				

^aIncludes district-level administrators/staff, school-level administrators, teachers, and paid professional consultants/services.

^bIncludes parents, community members, and student volunteers.



KATHY WRIGHT

Weighing It All

While parent and community volunteers are valuable resources to schools, they are not cost free. However, their use minimizes the opportunity costs of school district personnel and they can energize public support for levy campaigns.

School district personnel will continue to be involved with school levy campaigns; however, their opportunity costs can be minimized by heavily engaging the community and allowing school district personnel to focus on what they are paid to do: teach and lead.

References

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