

# Public School News

## Managing Volunteers to Prevent Sexual Abuse in Schools

*By Christiane Groth, Risk Analyst, United Educators*

It is a school's worst nightmare: A seemingly exemplary parent volunteers at his child's school. Later, the parent is arrested for child molestation. Reports of molestation at schools are often broadcast on the TV news, terrifying parents and causing school administrators to wonder what more they could have done to protect their students from harm and safeguard themselves against liability claims. The example that follows is a composite, drawn from national news stories about school volunteers involved in sexual misconduct and from UE molestation claims. It illustrates how inadequate selection and management of volunteers can endanger students and schools, and offers guidance to help avoid student molestation.

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### **"He seemed like a dream come true."**

Michael seemed to be a model parent—a friendly and outgoing man who regularly attended school functions and was devoted to his 13-year-old son. No one hesitated when he asked to volunteer as an assistant coach to the boys' soccer team. It was only after Michael's arrest a year later on child pornography and sexual molestation charges that the school learned it had a dangerous predator in its midst. In the aftermath of his arrest, the school struggled with many questions: Who approved Michael as a volunteer at the school? Did anyone notice any signs of inappropriate behavior? Who was monitoring his activities at the school?

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UE's claims experience shows that sexual abuse of children is one of the most severe risks facing schools today. A molestation claim can easily reach six figures, and UE has handled a case that cost more than \$10 million.

The effects of sexual abuse can have devastating consequences for the victim, the school, and the entire community. While schools are taking steps to decrease the risk of abuse by employees through stronger employee-screening methods, including background checks, they are not paying as much attention to the selection, supervision, and training of their volunteers who work closely with children.

Volunteers fill important roles in our schools, working as tutors, classroom assistants, playground monitors, and chaperones. As budgets tighten, schools increasingly rely on volunteers, who can provide services at little or no financial cost. There are risks, though, and administrators and teachers who do not heed them may find that the costs of liability are high. Good risk management practices include closely examining the background and suitability of all adults working with children, volunteers as well as employees.

## Missed Opportunity 1: Volunteer Screening

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### **“We know Michael, and he’s great with the kids.”**

When teachers and administrators first met Michael, they were impressed by his interest in his son’s daily activities and his frequent attendance at school functions. He seemed genuinely interested in all of the children and regularly volunteered to supply cupcakes or cookies for homeroom parties. During his son’s second year with the soccer team, it seemed only natural to school employees and other parents that Michael would volunteer as an assistant coach when another parent quit the position.

The coach of the boys’ soccer team, a school employee, was thrilled when Michael came to talk with him about the volunteer position. He knew how difficult it was to find a volunteer willing to attend practices and games regularly. The coach also appreciated that Michael wanted to learn more about coaching and was willing to be a mentor to the kids. With an eager handshake, the two agreed that Michael could start right away.

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The school had been lulled into a false sense of safety since Michael had been involved with activities for almost a year before he began volunteering. Teachers, administrators, and other parents felt that they knew him, and parents of other boys on the soccer team instinctively trusted him with their children. If no one was apprehensive, it is not surprising. Sexual predators often first gain the trust of adults in a community before seeking close interactions with children. If volunteers like these are not who we think, it is by their design.

Schools must carefully consider how they select volunteers who will have close contact with children. An increasing number of public and private schools rely on criminal background checks to make decisions about volunteers. However, fewer than 5 percent of these investigations turn up adverse information on applicants. While background checks are useful, they do not go far enough. A formal application, reference and other background checks, and an interview with school staff in appropriate circumstances can provide further insight into potential volunteers and help administrators choose those best suited to working in their schools. A rigorous screening process alone may serve as a deterrent to some people with illicit motives.

### **Develop a Volunteer Application**

Volunteer applications should request much of the same information as employment applications. They should ask for demographic details including address; home, business, and cell phone numbers; email address; emergency contact information; and three references. They should also request details about current and former employment and volunteer experience. Volunteer applications are also useful for gaining insight into potential volunteers’ personality and motivation for working with children. Schools should ask volunteers to respond to questions like the following:

- Describe your previous experience working with children.
- Why would you like to be a volunteer in our school?
- What strengths and experiences would make you a successful volunteer?
- What do you hope to gain from your volunteer experience?

Applicants who fail to complete the questions should be disqualified from volunteering. If an applicant submits the application with incomplete or inadequate information, the person should undergo a personal interview (see Interview Volunteer Applicants).

A completed application provides not only a snapshot of a potential volunteer but also a safeguard if a claim involving the volunteer is brought against the school. It can help demonstrate the school's steps in taking reasonable care.

### **Conduct Reference Checks**

References flesh out the details on the application so that administrators can see what the potential volunteer would be like on the job. Ask applicants for the names and contact information of people who can discuss their skills and suitability for working with children. Suitable references include previous employers as well as neighbors or friends. Employers can confirm employment dates and responsibilities, while neighbors and friends can serve as character references. References should not be relatives.

Schools should follow the same procedure with volunteer reference checks as they do with prospective employees: Call references by phone or send them a form that requests a written statement about the applicant's suitability for working with children. Also use the reference checks to confirm information provided by the potential volunteer in the application (for example, employment and residence history). Other questions that can provide insight into the applicant's suitability include the following:

- How would the reference describe the applicant's personal characteristics, such as maturity, decisiveness, and assertiveness?
- Has the reference observed the applicant working with children? What were his or her impressions?
- Is the reference aware of any conditions or problems that may interfere with the applicant's ability to volunteer?

Reference checks allow the school to learn more about an applicant's personality and suitability for volunteer work. Schools should check that the information from the references agrees with the information the applicant provided. They should discuss any discrepancies with the applicant in an interview. Schools should document each reference check and summarize the findings.

### **Conduct Appropriate Background Checks**

Among the most frequently conducted background checks are criminal history and motor vehicle records checks. Others include educational records checks and financial credit checks. The type of background checks that are conducted should correspond to the work the volunteer is being asked to perform. Volunteers who work with children, for example, should submit to a criminal records check and fingerprinting.

To relieve some of the burden that comes with conducting background checks, schools can limit the number by restricting them to volunteers who will have contact with children. The Wake County Public School System in North Carolina, for example, has four different levels of volunteer activities, and it undertakes screening procedures according to the level assigned to a specific volunteering activity. To quote from the school's description at [www.wcpss.net/volunteer/getting\\_started.html](http://www.wcpss.net/volunteer/getting_started.html):

- **“Level 1:** Activity takes place with supervision, in a public setting, and it involves little or no student contact. The volunteer is always within unobstructed view of school staff or multiple adults....

- **“Level 2:** Activity takes place in the classroom or other group setting. Staff or other adults can enter and observe at any time, and there is no solitary time with a student. The volunteer is always within unobstructed view of school staff or multiple adults, but the ability of school staff to monitor a volunteer’s interactions with students is limited....
- **“Level 3:** Activity involves direct contact with students under limited supervision by school staff, and takes place in the classroom or other group setting. The volunteer could have solitary time with students of short duration, and may be outside the view of school staff or multiple adults for brief periods....
- **“Level 4:** Activity allows unsupervised contact with a student on or off campus and may be in a private setting such as the home or community setting. There may also be extended solitary time with a student, involvement with transporting students, and participating in overnight field trips....”

Volunteers who apply for level one and two activities must submit their name, address, phone number, and email address, but they do not undergo a criminal records check. Those applying for level three and four activities provide the same information as applicants for the first two levels, but for criminal records check they must also provide their birth date, driver’s license number, social security number, and residential addresses for the preceding seven years.

State laws vary on background checks for school employees and volunteers. Massachusetts, for example, in 2003 passed a law requiring all schools to conduct background checks on volunteers who may have direct and unsupervised contact with children. In response to this change Phillips Academy undertook a review of its volunteer procedures and developed an easy-to-understand grid that allows faculty and staff to quickly determine what records checks and training a volunteer in their department would require. However, the academy cautions that “departments must continue to be attentive to who is visiting campus...and that procedures are followed.” For more details on the topic of background checks, see the UE article “Background Checks at Independent Schools,” listed in Resources.

### **Interview Volunteer Applicants**

A personal interview gives school personnel a chance to meet a potential volunteer who will be working directly with children, get more information about the person, and confirm details on the application. An interview also gives staff a chance to ask about the volunteer’s motivation for volunteering to work with children. Nonprofit organizations like the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, 4-H, the Boy Scouts, and the Girl Scouts ask probing questions such as why applicants want to work with their organization and with children or how their experiences and skills would ensure a successful volunteer experience. Interview questions can include:

- Why are you interested in volunteer work with children?
- How would you describe yourself?
- Why do you enjoy working with children?
- What about this volunteer opportunity appeals to you?
- Tell me about your childhood. What are some of your happiest and saddest memories?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses that you will bring to volunteering?

For examples of other questions, see chapter five of the *Boys & Girls Clubs of America Staff Screening Guide*, by John C. Patterson.

Schools should be alert for applicants who overidentify with children or who seem unusually excited about the prospect of working with children. Many child abusers find it difficult to maintain meaningful adult relationships, and their descriptions of them may be less detailed and enthusiastic than those of their relationships with children. Other signs to be on the lookout for include unstable employment or residence history, low self-esteem, excessive interest in developing one-on-one relationships with children, and idealized statements about children coupled with negative or pessimistic statements about adults.

Schools should also use the interview to discuss any findings, including discrepancies, from the reference or background checks or the application. Applicants who dismiss information gained from outside sources or cannot satisfactorily clarify discrepancies should not be considered.

Schools can streamline the interview process by adopting a segmented approach to volunteer interviews similar to that outlined for conducting background checks. It would require interviews of volunteers who would interact with children under limited or no supervision and exempt others.

### **Document the Volunteer Application Process**

A written record is useful because people retire, change jobs, or forget key details by the time a lawsuit is filed—in some instances, many years later. Also, written documentation of the volunteer-screening process can provide evidence, should there be a claim, that your school took reasonable care in selecting personnel. Here are a few tips to help you manage the documentation process:

- Require all volunteers to fill out an application.
- Keep all volunteer applications and related paperwork such as reference documentation and interview notes in one location.
- Consider developing an online application to streamline paperwork and computerize records.
- Appoint a volunteer coordinator to oversee the volunteer program and documentation.

### **Missed Opportunity 2: Volunteer Supervision**

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#### **“Who’s supervising Michael?”**

At the end of the boys’ soccer season, everyone had reason to celebrate. The team boasted a winning record and even defeated its archrivals. It was no surprise that everyone eagerly accepted Michael’s suggestion of a celebratory camping trip. Michael volunteered to make the arrangements for the overnight trip to a nearby state park. When the tent assignments were distributed, the coach noticed that Michael had assigned one adult to sleep in each of the players’ tents. The coach did not feel comfortable with the tent assignments, but he couldn’t explain why, and no school policy specifically addressed the issue. The coach expressed his concern to Michael. Michael laughed it off, saying that he knew how adventurous the boys could be, and he didn’t want them sneaking out at night and getting into trouble. The coach had no reason to doubt Michael’s intentions. Nor did he feel he had the authority to insist otherwise.

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While it is important to screen volunteers, it is also important to provide appropriate supervision. Schools need to establish clear expectations about volunteer conduct and performance and convey that information to volunteer supervisors and coordinators. In the scenario about the camping trip, the coach did not understand that he had authority over Michael's actions. This confusion is fairly common when volunteers are chosen spontaneously. The organization is grateful for the volunteer's time and efforts and avoids a potentially unpleasant conversation about supervision and responsible behavior. Schools should clearly identify who is supervising a volunteer and provide the individual with additional training, if necessary.

### **Training Employees to Supervise Volunteers**

There are many models of supervision, but for any of them to function properly, there has to be agreement on who has responsibility for the day-to-day supervision of the volunteer. Typically, a volunteer coordinator oversees all volunteers, or individual volunteers report to a staff member according to the type of work he or she performs. Sometimes, a volunteer reports to both.

Schools need to ensure that individuals who are supervising volunteers have the ability, training, and time to perform these functions. Supervision of a volunteer is comparable to supervision of a paid employee. The supervisors need to be ready to handle typical managerial duties, such as dealing with tardiness or absenteeism, poor performance, or inappropriate dress. They should have enough time to work with volunteers to maximize their experience and to establish clear guidance on how volunteers should discharge their responsibilities. Supervisors should also provide evaluations to highlight the volunteer's contributions or document any concerns. The evaluation can be a brief note in a volunteer's file every six months. In conjunction with the evaluation, supervisors should confirm that the volunteer's demographic information (address, telephone numbers, and so forth) provided in the application remains the same. Volunteer coordinators should monitor evaluations in order to identify and address problems early with a volunteer.

All school staff supervising volunteers should understand that they have an obligation to monitor a volunteer's interaction with children and to question and halt any activity that appears suspicious. They should understand appropriate physical and emotional boundaries when working with children. They should also be able to identify when adults adopt inappropriate boundaries with children, such as touching intimate areas, contacting students outside of school, sharing personal information, and seeking one-on-one opportunities with students. Supervising staff should be able to discuss with volunteers appropriate and inappropriate ways of interacting with students. It is important that school personnel receive ongoing training in this area. Training can be included in staff meetings and during teacher in-service days. Staff should be encouraged to report concerns regarding a volunteer's conduct to the school administration. Because most state laws identify school employees as mandatory reporters, schools should also train volunteer supervisors on their obligations to report suspected cases of child abuse directly to law enforcement or protective services authorities. The UE article "Boundary Training in Schools," listed in Resources offers further information.

Schools can get additional information on training volunteer coordinators and supervisors from some free online resources. The Nonprofit Risk Management Center, for example, offers an online tutorial called *No Surprises* as well as several informative articles. VolunteerMatch is a website that provides helpful guidance for managing volunteers. See Resources for links to these organizations and other helpful information.

## Missed Opportunity 3: Volunteer Training

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### **“We never thought it could happen here.”**

Several weeks after the camping trip, rumors about Michael began to surface. One of the boys assigned to Michael’s tent had withdrawn from the team and seemed melancholy. The boy, usually gregarious with classmates and teachers alike, was also withdrawn in his classes and seemed to confide only in his volunteer tutor in the school’s after-care program. After several weeks, the boy withdrew from the school. No one seemed sure why he had left, and his teammates were saddened by his departure. He had been a star player who had seemed eager to return next season. When the coach spoke with Michael about the boy’s departure from the school, Michael brushed it off, stating that kids were unpredictable. The coach did not raise the issue again or bring it to the attention of school administrators.

The tight-knit school community was understandably stunned when the police showed up at the school one day to question members of the soccer team, particularly those who had spent the night in Michael’s tent. Parents of the soccer players were quick to praise his coaching and several school administrators, having known Michael for years, also defended him. It was an even greater shock to the community when Michael was arrested after images of child pornography were found on his home computer while police were investigating child abuse allegations against Michael.

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Following Michael’s arrest and subsequent trial, the entire community suffered. The principal was forced to resign, the school faced a multimillion dollar lawsuit, and the victim and his family felt compelled to leave the community. The intense media spotlight on the school did not highlight the many positive achievements of students and teachers and precipitated a decline in donations as well as interest in volunteerism.

Child abuse is devastating for the victim as well as for a school community. Schools that use volunteers should train them on the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate conduct with children, the warning signs for child abuse, and procedures for reporting suspicious behavior or suspected child abuse. By doing so, a school can increase the number of adults working to keep children safe.

### **Provide Training to Volunteers**

In the case of Michael, the volunteer after-school tutor witnessed symptoms of child abuse: melancholy and withdrawn behavior as well as the avoidance of certain activities and individuals. However, because the volunteer tutor was not trained to recognize that these traits were symptoms of abuse, she did not act.

Schools need to train volunteers to recognize signs of sexual abuse so they are alert to suspicious circumstances. As an Ohio State University Fact Sheet for the 4-H extension notes, “two signs that are usually given by an abused or neglected child are physical indicators and behavioral indicators.” The Girl Scouts website on the subject notes that “abused children [may] exhibit low self-esteem, anger, guilt, aggressive or disruptive behavior, withdrawal, poor school performance, or the use of drugs and alcohol.” Physical symptoms of abuse are often easier to recognize, but through appropriate awareness training, volunteers can also be educated to identify some of the less obvious behavioral indicators such as melancholy, aggression, and withdrawal.

Schools should require volunteers to report suspected child abuse to school administrators, and they should develop a reporting policy and procedure for volunteers to follow. The school policy should be clear about the behaviors and physical symptoms that volunteers must report, the person to whom the volunteer should report the information, and the importance of maintaining the student's confidentiality. In at least 18 states, volunteers also are required to report suspected child abuse directly to authorities, so any training should provide volunteers with guidance on this process as well. Schools should check with their state's mandatory-reporting statutes and regulations to understand a volunteer's obligation under those statutes and regulations.

Schools should also be clear about the manner in which volunteers should discharge their duties. They should ensure that volunteers working with children understand the importance of setting appropriate boundaries to avoid harm to a child or any appearance of impropriety. Unacceptable behavior can include inappropriate touching, being alone with a student for extended periods, working with students in an unsupervised setting behind closed doors, and transporting students without their parents' knowledge and consent.

### **Keeping Schools Safe Through Good Volunteer Practices**

When volunteers are involved with children at school, it is up to the school to know as much as it can about their background and abilities in order to help ensure student safety. In small communities where many people know each other, a school can be complacent about the need to screen, train, and supervise school volunteers or find it difficult to begin the discussion on the need for improved volunteer management.

When starting a program of good volunteer management, schools need to convey the benefits. A program aimed at improved screening, training, and supervision of volunteers can serve to deter individuals with inappropriate motives from seeking volunteer opportunities. Further, a volunteer management program makes every adult working closely with children a guardian of their safety. St. Bernadette School in Maryland, for example, discusses the use of volunteer applications and criminal history checks as part of its ongoing commitment to student safety. Phillips Academy in Massachusetts found that parents were extremely receptive to a school initiative devoted to developing a volunteer screening policy. When discussions about student safety and security measures are regularly included in parent meetings and materials provided to parents, the school's volunteer management program will be viewed as a positive step toward fulfilling a school's commitment to student safety—and safeguard them from abusers like Michael.

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## School Websites

Arlington County, Virginia, Public Schools  
[www.arlington.k12.va.us/SCR/PIE/index.shtml](http://www.arlington.k12.va.us/SCR/PIE/index.shtml)

Seattle Public Schools  
[www.seattleschools.org/area/vol/vol\\_now.xml](http://www.seattleschools.org/area/vol/vol_now.xml)

Spokane, Washington, Public Schools, School Volunteer Orientation Manual  
[www.spokaneschools.org/ComRel/Volunteer\\_Manual.pdf](http://www.spokaneschools.org/ComRel/Volunteer_Manual.pdf)

Wake County, North Carolina, Public School System  
[www.wcpss.net/volunteer/index.html](http://www.wcpss.net/volunteer/index.html)

Wales, Wis., Kettle-Morraine Public Schools  
<http://district.kmsd.edu/volunteerapp.pdf>

Washington School for the Deaf  
[www.wsd.wa.gov/about/documents/volunteer\\_application.pdf](http://www.wsd.wa.gov/about/documents/volunteer_application.pdf)

## UE Publications

Note: To access the UE resources cited in this document, you will need a password for the Risk Management Library of the UE website. To obtain a password, go to the website at [www.ue.org](http://www.ue.org) and take a few minutes to register. Passwords are usually activated by the next business day.

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