

# Finding and Keeping Volunteers

**Don't wait until teacher shortage puts you in crisis mode!**

Does your Sunday school struggle to find enough teachers? Do your teachers feel unappreciated or burdened by being over committed? If your teachers tire and burn out regularly, look for ways to attract and retain volunteers to build a strong successful program.

## Expanding Your Volunteer Pool

Who do you expect to teach Sunday school? Some congregations expect the parent of every student in the program to teach. Other congregations expect one or two experienced or qualified people to teach. If current teacher expectations are not working, start by identifying why people are reluctant to step up, and creatively go about expanding your pool of volunteers.

- **Work to expand your church's sense of Sunday school mission** so that the entire congregation has a greater appreciation for teachers. Highlighting the importance of Sunday school helps volunteers feel valued for their efforts.
- **Identify people who have potential to become successful teachers.** When you approach them, let them know that you think they are able to do a good job. Assure them that you will arrange support by providing lessons, and helping with discipline issues that may come up.
- **Train new teachers** so that they feel confident about what is expected.
- **If the thought of teaching is scary,** offer potential recruits the opportunity to sit in and watch an experienced teacher before stepping in themselves.
- **Encourage experienced teachers to be mentors.** Pair a new volunteer with an experienced teacher. Have them team teach several times before a new recruit teaches alone.
- **Teens often respond well to young adults.** Tap into the singles in your congregation.
- **Knowledgeable teens can be capable and energetic teachers of young children.** Invite teens to join your staff and give them the support needed to succeed.
- **Invite teens to assist** if you have large groups of young children. Extra hands can be a life-saver for busy project times and assisting children with their personal needs. This is a gentle way to build confidence and introduce teens to teaching.
- **Approach newer members of the congregation.** Adults may feel confident teaching younger children the stories of the Word—especially if they have

young children of their own. Pair newcomers with an experienced teacher and provide them with a lesson that is well laid out and easy to manage.

- **If your Sunday school program includes community service weeks** for older children or teens, use them as an opportunity to bring new members of the congregation onto the teaching team.

Don't wait until teacher shortage puts you in crisis mode! Finding even a few more teachers can share the burden, making it lighter for all. Once new volunteers are in place, affirm them frequently to retain them.

## Supporting Volunteers

Recognizing and affirming volunteers will inspire them to invest in what they are doing. Creating a strategy for regular volunteer acknowledgment can make volunteering less of a burden. Make plans to support volunteers as you set up your annual schedule. Here are a few ideas for creating a positive volunteer climate.

### EACH WEEK

- **Visit classrooms as children leave.** Ask teachers how lessons went. Listen attentively as teachers explain how things worked out.
- **Celebrate successes!**
- **Debrief about challenging students and lessons** that did not go as well as expected right away, before feelings of anxiety and frustration build up.
- **Say “thank you”.**
- **Provide equipment** to make the job easier, e.g. access to a computer, printer, copier, paper cutter, etc.

### THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

Develop a plan to thank volunteers monthly, every other month, or quarterly depending on the time commitment of your volunteers.

- **Let teachers know that you care about them** by inviting them to call for help or with concerns at any time.
- **Call *them*** during the week to find out if there is anything you can do to help.
- **Send thank-you notes** to each volunteer once or twice a year. Prepare them in advance and send them out at Christmas, Easter, New Church Day, the first or last lesson of the year, etc. Target a specific time of year to help you remember. This is a good volunteer opportunity for someone who is looking for a way to support the program without much involvement.
- **Arrange “thank you” notes from the children.** Schedule specific lessons for making notes well ahead of time to be sure they do not fall by the wayside!

Include these dates in the master schedule for the year. Remind volunteers who are teaching when they are scheduled to be sent out. Make it easy by sending out ready-made [Sunday school teacher thank you cards](#) (PDF) or [Ideas for making cards](#) (PDF).

- **Give flowers** at Easter, Mother's Day, or the first day of spring.
- **Send birthday and holiday cards** and/or small gifts e.g. bookmarks, gift certificates, Christmas tree ornaments, note cards, etc.
- **Provide an occasional snack or treat** for all volunteers.
- **Hold a teachers breakfast or lunch** before church, after church, on a Saturday, in your home, or at a restaurant. Use the time to listen to teachers' ideas and concerns, and give affirm what they are doing.
- **If a behavior or problem becomes a matter of concern, plan a meeting** to address it. Collaborative problem solving may be an asset to all.
- **Develop a Sunday school resource area** and stock it with nice project supplies and teaching resources, such as CDs, pictures, resource books, etc.

Look at what you are currently doing and find one way to do just a little more!

## Student Safety

Most Sunday Schools assign one teacher for each age group, assuming that there are up to ten or fifteen children in each group. Two adults, or an adult and a teenaged helper may be helpful when larger groups, or groups of preschoolers are involved. This gives one adult the ability to focus on teaching at all times, while the helper takes care of toilet needs, separation issues, project assistance etc. It is also marvelous to have an extra set of hands to help with glue, scissors and clean-up!

It is common sense to avoid setting up situations in which a lone adult is responsible for overseeing students in potentially risky situations, e.g. in a vehicle, on a weekend retreat, in a remote classroom, etc. Adequate staffing will both assure the safety of your students and afford protection for teachers in your program. If you have further concerns about student safety, we suggest you discuss them with your pastor.