

# NSVP Information Bank

a service for members of the National School Volunteer Program, Inc. (NSVP)

## THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS DURING TEACHER STRIKES

By Sue Szentlaszloi

*Sue Szentlaszloi, Coordinator of the Volunteer Program for West Chester, Pa., Area School District, describes how the volunteer organization chose to maintain a position of neutrality during negotiations between teachers and the school board.*

Our school district has not been involved in a teacher strike, but during last year's negotiations we were close enough that it became necessary to seriously consider the role of volunteers, and particularly our volunteer organization, in the event of a strike.

This is the framework of reference from which we made our decision:

1. The State of Pennsylvania enacted a Public Collective Bargaining Act in 1970 which includes teachers. Act 195 provides the conditions for establishing bargaining units, bargaining guidelines, and a schedule for the collective bargaining process in addition to conditions for unfair labor practices and remedies for resolving problems. The law specifies the point at which a strike may be called. Therefore, assuming parties have followed established procedures, teacher strikes are legal in Pennsylvania.

The bargaining unit is the West Chester Area Education Association, the local branch of the National Education Association (NEA). We have a small AFT (American Federation of Teachers) membership which is very vocal but has not yet become powerful enough to replace the Education Association.

2. The West Chester Area School District is in Chester County, about 30 miles west of Philadelphia, with a student population of just under 12,000, a teaching staff of 650 in 11 elementary schools, three middle schools and two high schools. We are the largest in Chester County and have the largest Education Association, and therefore we are watched carefully by the surrounding districts. In a sense, we are likely to establish precedents or at least influence the direction that nearby districts take.

3. We have in our district well organized volunteer programs supported by the district. In 1973, the Board and new Superintendent began establishing throughout the community and within the system the concept that the schools and community needed to find ways to develop a cooperative, collaborative relationship. One step taken that year to encourage the development and growth of that concept was the creation of

Because we had a corps of well-trained school chairpeople and more than 500 working and experienced volunteers, it would have been logistically possible to use the volunteer organization to help keep schools open during a strike. We could have hooked the volunteer organization into the communications network of the administrative game plan and recruited and deployed volunteers to those schools where they were needed almost on a daily basis. There was support for this concept within the system and there would have been considerable community support for such action. Parents do not want schools closed! In this way, we could have effectively and efficiently used volunteers as strike breakers.

Thus we could have solved a short-term problem, but what would the long-term results of such action be?

Teachers request volunteers on a voluntary basis. Good volunteer programs require a climate of acceptance, cooperation and collaboration on the part of volunteers and teachers. Even teachers who do not personally use volunteer help must accept the idea for the creation of a positive climate in a school.

Negotiations, by their very nature, set up an adversary relationship between teachers and the board. The reality of the negotiation process is that it is a political process revolving around the issues of money and power. Feelings run high and positions become polarized. By using volunteers to break strikes, we would be formally establishing the "side" of the adversary relationship that volunteers are on, and it isn't the teachers' side. We would be adding a third "power group," the community, to strengthen one side (the board) against the other (the teachers). It would undoubtedly have an effect.

But when the teachers return to work after a strike and are asked if they want their volunteers to return to work, what would you expect them to say? And what position would the Education Association adopt in relation to volunteers? Are we really serving our students and communities best in the long run by choosing to be actively involved in resolving a short-term conflict? Is it worth risking the destruction of the programs and relationships built up slowly over several years and possibly losing those 25,000 hours of volunteer help? What would be the attitude of the children of the volunteers toward their teachers when normal classes resume?

We considered all those questions and chose to keep the volunteer organization out of the line of fire if a strike was called. Letters were sent to all school volunteer chairpeople indicating that we would maintain a position of neutrality. We felt that this position would permit school volunteers to play an active role in the healing process when schools resumed normal activity and could in that way best serve the students and schools.

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