



# Neighborhood-Supported Schools

Tom Pollak – 8/6/24

## Executive Summary

Low-income youth in DC are NOT getting their needs met in or out of school. This has created a downward spiral of high truancy rates, poor academic results, ongoing public safety issues, and an angry public that is failing to take the long-term solution-focused approach that we need.

We can reverse this by creating an upward spiral of neighborhood involvement:

- Work with school leaders to create **a practical vision for volunteers**: How could an unlimited number of reliable, mature, and trained local volunteers be used in the school to support students as well as staff. How many volunteers could the school, it's after-school programs, and any other current or potential neighborhood programs use? What training would be needed? What hours would they work, etc.?
- **Recruit neighborhood volunteers**. Proactively educate and recruit people in the neighborhood about how they can get involved in making the vision a reality and the difference it will make.
- Create a "**Sister Neighborhoods**" program to promote groups (or individuals) from neighborhoods with fewer kids, more people with discretionary time (financially secure retirees or singles) helping to support neighborhoods where we struggle to find volunteers.
- **Inspire and motivate people to get involved!** Ultimately, this initiative will rise or fall on our ability to motivate people to action -- and I believe we can. DCTMI signed up 4,000 people last year to help. More than half probably didn't actually complete the process to get involved, but there's so much more we can do to start scaling this work to greater level.

We expect to see major educational and civic outcomes from this work, including:

- Improved ability of students to succeed at reading and math.
- Greater satisfaction with school and a decline in chronic absenteeism and truancy.
- A sense among volunteers that they find the work fulfilling and that they enjoy the sense of giving back to the kids as well as contributing to their neighborhoods or broader community.
- Longer term, we expect community members to feel more positive and hopeful about their neighborhoods and especially about its children.

## Introduction

DCTMI recruited more than 4,000 people in 2023 for our 50+ nonprofit partner organizations and schools. We tabled at 4 or 5 farmers markets every weekend, at all the major festivals, posted

regularly on social media, and tried to take advantage of opportunities to connect groups from employers, clubs, or religious congregations whenever we could. Yet the number pales compared to the need: **15,000 DC kids miss at least a day a week of school; 60,000 -- 2 out of 3 -- are reading below grade level; many more are behind in math or simply need an extra caring adult in their lives** to help them navigate the challenges of childhood and their teen years.

Key public and private stakeholders **can** fix this if we work together and work proactively to mobilize community members at a neighborhood level. If 1 out of 9 or 10 DC adults helped out, every one of these 60,000 kids would have an extra caring adult in their lives. (Key public stakeholders include DCPS, OSSE, Mayor Bowser. Private nonprofit stakeholders include DCTMI, MENTOR Maryland|DC, DC Action, and CityTutor.)

**Here's our three-prong approach to making this happen:**

## **1. A Practical Vision for Each School**

Work with school staff and the PTA/PTO to imagine their best-case scenario, their vision, for using reliable, mature, and trained volunteers:

- **IN-SCHOOL BASIC READING OR MATH TUTORING:** What if each teacher could have an unlimited number of volunteers to help with 30-minute sessions led by tutors who could work one-on-one with a student or with a small group of 3-5 students? The volunteers could work in the classroom or take the students to a different space within the school. How many of these sessions would you want? (One of our teacher-advisors who worked at Amidon, where 80% of kids are reading below grade level, suggested that FOUR half-hour sessions per day would be ideal.)

We know that teachers struggle teaching kids with different learning goals in the same class. "Do I teach the subject matter and at a pace that meets the needs of the fast group, the middle group, or the slower group?" That's a difficult question they must answer every day.

- **IN-SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES OR SCIENCE TUTORING:** Schools may need additional help with these core subjects. (One middle school, for example, has requested two volunteers per day per grade level to assist in these subjects.)
- **LUNCH TIME and RECESS:** Some schools may want help during lunch-time or recess to provide a break for teachers and other school staff and to provide more opportunities for students to connect in small groups with caring adults.
- **AFTER-SCHOOL:** Many elementary schools have Out-of-School Time (OST) providers running after-school programs while some schools may run their own. Malcolm X, for example, has requested 5-10 volunteers to help during the two-hour block from 3:30-5:30pm each day.

## **Upward & Downward Spirals**

That extra caring adult could be the difference for a young student between an upward spiral of academic success, increased confidence in their ability to succeed, and positive connections with the adult world and a downward spiral of academic struggles, a growing sense of failure and not being good enough, acting out and truancy to avoid the feeling of inadequacy, a further slide away from academic competence, and toward a life of work and financial insecurity.

## 2. Neighborhood Outreach

Proactively educate and recruit people in the neighborhood about how they can get involved in making the vision a reality and the difference it will make.

- I stress "proactive" because we don't wait for people to come to us. We table at farmers markets and respectfully make our quick pitch:
- We respectfully approach people in front of grocery stores or at Metro stations and attempt to engage them in conversation about how they can get involved. We knock on doors in a neighborhood. We host volunteer fairs and Neighborhood Gatherings, spending thousands of dollars to get the word out on social media.
- We also work to engage local businesses, religious congregations, and political leaders who can help us get the word out and promote the need and the opportunity on local listserves and Nextdoor.

## 3. Sister Neighborhoods

Create a "Sister Neighborhoods" program to promote groups (or individuals) from neighborhoods with fewer kids, more people with discretionary time (financially secure retirees or singles) helping to support neighborhoods where we struggle to find volunteers.

For some communities, this could be easy. For example, Capitol Hill, Navy Yard, and Southwest DC have a wide mix of income levels spanning people living in poverty to people who are likely to be in top 1-5% of earners nationwide. It is a short car ride from most parts of those neighborhoods to areas of Southeast Ward 8 that are time-consuming to reach by public transportation. If, say, half of the thousands of people we've recruited over the years from those neighborhoods were willing to carpool to Ward 8, that would make an appreciable impact for every school in the ward.

(Unfortunately, a good number of the people we've recruited over the years have either moved away, are unreachable, or are no longer available to help so that we must continue our outreach efforts there for both neighborhood partners and schools as well as those across the river in Ward 8.

## Can This Approach Work? From "Me" to "We"

Our ability to inspire and motivate people to get involved as volunteers is the "fuel" that powers this initiative. Can we do it? I think the odds are that we can. We can shift the frame from "Is this something *I* would enjoy?" to "This is something *my community* needs to do, and I need to do my part." There's no single simple strategy but there are a variety of approaches that build on one another:

- Create a cadre of civic leaders who can talk to their friends and neighbors and help organize house parties and other small events like the estimated 2 million people who helped Obama win in 2008.
- Use video, social media, and storytelling to supplement our face-to-face work.

- Build teams of people who experience the joy that comes from working together to achieve a shared goal.
- Support good habits and coach people to organize their lives so they can serve their community for 1-2 hours a week and still get their own needs met. (Our CivLead app – our “Fitbit for civic engagement” – is one vehicle for this.)

Over the past eight years, DCTMI has honed its message to people we talk with. It's still a challenge but the fact that we signed up 4,000 people in the DC area last year gives me a measure of hope. Many sign up in a moment of enthusiasm and don't follow through but the fact that they signed up in the first place shows a measure of empathy and interest that we can build on.

Other reasons to be hopeful: Psychologists estimate that 98% of people feel empathy. Of course, that empathy may be limited to their family or people who look like them. But not necessarily. For example, in times of natural and manmade disasters, we usually see a groundswell of altruism, purpose, camaraderie, and joy!

As Rebecca Solnit describes it in her 2010 book, *Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disasters*: "In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing, or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbors as well as friends and loved ones... When all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up—not all, but the great preponderance—to become their brothers' keepers. And that purposefulness and connectedness bring joy even amid death, chaos, fear, and loss."

## Our Vision

Here's a different way to frame it: Imagine if 1 out of every 10 of adults in DC volunteered 1-2 hours every week, all 50,000 DC elementary school students could have an extra caring adult in their lives to help them improve their reading or math and, equally important, work with them 1-on-1 or in small groups so they make academic progress AND start feeling confident about their ability to learn. When they lack that “growth mindset,” they are far more likely to misbehave and wind up on a downward spiral of becoming disengaged at school, which in turn leaves them even further behind.

It's unconscionable not to break this downward spiral that begins with kids feeling like they can't keep up with the work and spirals downward into hopelessness, a sense that school “isn't for me,” and behaviors like skipping class or school or misbehaving so they can get out of class.

## An Alternative Perspective

Imagine this: If every elementary school teacher in one of the 39 or so high-need DCPS schools where at least 50% of the kids are considered at-risk had two hours of trained and reliable volunteer time each day, virtually every student in most of these schools could have small group tutoring at least three times a week – critical for helping them catch up. (This is the “dosage” recommended by the High Impact Tutoring research for consistently effective academic improvement.)

There are elementary schools that need extra support in every quadrant of the city. Here are the percentages of students reading AT or ABOVE grade level in an elementary school in each quadrant of the city (and there are MANY more):

- NE - Nalle Elem. – 10%
- SE - Malcolm X Elem.– 3%
- SW - Amidon Bowen Elem. – 20%
- NW – Brightwood Elem. – 14%

## The Numbers: The Petworth/Brightwood Example

Let's walk through the numbers in one typical community. Petworth has a total population of 67,000 while Brightwood has only 3,700 residents. However, combined, this represents a lot of potential volunteers -- even if one excludes children, parents, non-English speakers, and people who might be working two jobs or unable to help for other reasons.

My inclination is to work through existing partner organizations if possible but also try to get a broader perspective and support from school administrators, something I'd hope the community association could help with. Here's how I would frame it for principals and perhaps for the association to get people thinking big about to fix a system that simply doesn't work for the majority of at-risk students:

- If you had an unlimited number of reliable and trained volunteers (and the support staff to manage them), how many volunteers could you use and how would you use them?
- Teacher Bernie Jankowski felt that 2 hours of volunteer time per day per class would have been ideal at Amidon for helping small groups of struggling students. With a typical elementary school having 300 or so students with 20 students per class, that's 15 classes or **150 IN-SCHOOL TUTORING HOURS PER WEEK** (2 hours per day x 5 days per week x 15 classes). Jan Silver, my go-to reading specialist and ex-principal felt the numbers are likely to be higher, especially if volunteers could get more training in how to teach reading.
- And that doesn't include volunteers for after-school, lunch-time, or for other non-academic activities, so let's add another 10 hours per day (5 after-school volunteers, each volunteering for 90 minutes a day = 7.5 hours) plus 2.5 hours for help with art, lunch and recess, etc. This brings us to an even **200 VOLUNTEER HOURS PER WEEK** as our goal for each school -- while recognizing that there could be substantial differences between schools. This could be divided between somewhere between 100 and 200 volunteers depending on how many hours people had to spare. (Some of our partners like AARP's Experience Corps had asked volunteers to help at least twice a week for an average of at least 2.5 hours.)

## Orienting Quotes

As mentioned earlier, the academic and social-emotional needs of students reinforce each other and can create a wonderful upward spiral of success begetting success, joy and self-confidence -- or a

downward spiral that leads a child who starts school full of hope toward a deeply felt sense of failure and alienation from the mainstream. Let me offer a few quotes that capture these dynamics for better and for worse:

DC Attorney General Brian Schwalbe: Kids would rather be viewed [by their peers] as “bad” rather than “stupid.”

Jan Silver (former teacher and principal, and now a private tutor): I spend 60% of my tutoring time just getting kids to believe in themselves. I tell them that they are not allowed to say “I don’t get it” but they can say “I don’t get it YET!”

Bernie Jankowski, teacher & author: Matthew... had been kicked out of his previous school for behavioral issues. [I set aside time for each student so I can assess each student's reading.] I ask Matthew to read a passage. He started by giving me an overview of what the pictures in the book meant... I tested his reading skills and found he could only read four words per minute. "All right, Matthew, now we know what we need to do. Let's link these letters with sounds, let's chunk it out." Matthew enthusiastically embraced his new understanding.

He no longer had to hide and act out to avoid being called on to read. We read together every day. I gave him books to take home and he would report back on how much he read with his sister. He was excited to show me his progress. Any time he saw me having a spare moment, he would ask, "Mr. J., can we read?" or "Can I come see you at lunch?" By the end of the year, Matthew was up to ninety-four words per minute and well on his way to being on grade level. - Excerpted from *Music in the Halls: The Heart and Heartbreak of Teaching at a High-Poverty School in Washington, DC (2024)*

Jan Silver (again): To be a tutor, you don't have to be an expert. You just have to care. We'll give you the tools!

## **A Holistic Approach**

Volunteers with athletic or artistic or other enticing skills or experiences may be able to expand the range of ways that students view their options or help them find new activities they are passionate about and, perhaps, have a strong aptitude for. Perhaps the volunteer majored in theater or dance or graphic arts in college even though that is not their current career. They can still communicate their passion and some of their skills.

Or perhaps it's the volunteer who never went to college but who apprenticed as a skilled carpenter or electrician, or who went to work in a sound design or special events business that they eventually came to lead. Or perhaps it's the accomplished runner or chess player to starts an after-school running or chess club that provides a safe space and a sense of camaraderie for a group of youth who aren't particularly good at traditional sports or other activities.

Examples that I've run across include:

- Martial Arts
  - The pair of Brazilian Jujitsu instructors who started a program to help kids develop the physical and mental discipline and the ethical approach of martial arts they need to succeed at school and in life.

- Midtown Youth Academy (boxing)
- The Arts
  - The artist working with artist friends to set up an after-school program to engage students in both visual and performing arts.
  - Sitar Arts Center - visual arts, dance, creative writing, drama, music, digital arts, and music lessons - <https://www.sitarartscenter.org/>
- Music
  - Teach the Beat - <https://www.thebeatisgogo.com/teaching-go-go>
  - DC Strings Workshop - Andrew Lee -
  - Linda Zhang – classical music
  - Music in Me Foundation
- Sports
  - DC Scores – combines soccer and poetry
  - Teens Runs DC (recently out of business)
  - Girls on the Run (SEL too)
- Nature and Outdoors
  - City Kids
  - Local outdoor educators' programs
- Social-Emotional Learning, Meditation
  - One Community Unity
  - Tumaini DC - <https://www.tumainidc.org/>
  - The Zones of Regulation curriculum
- Restorative Justice, Conflict Resolution, Communication Skills, & Mediation
  - DC Peace Team – Restorative Youth Circles - <https://www.dcpeaceteam.org/restorative-justice-offerings>
  - School Talk's RestorativeDC - <https://schooltalkdc.org/restoratedc/>
  - Community Mediation DC - <https://communitymediationdc.org/>
  - Latin American Youth Center program
- Creating a pathway for students to get interested and involved in STEM
  - Math Speaks - <https://www.mathspeaksdc.org/> - For middle school students. Shaundra Wood
  - Verizon STEM program for middle schoolers
  - Girls Who Code
  - RESET
- Debate
  - Mikva Challenge – 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade
  - Washington Debate League
- Boys and Young Men
  - Life Pieces to Masterpieces
- Girls and Young Women
  - Radical Monarchs – social justice badges
  - Girl Up – International focus

- Literacy
  - Reading Partners
  - Everybody Wins DC
- Much more prominently (and featured in a book by NY Times columnist David Brooks) is Baltimore's Thread program, which wraps a "family" of 6 or 7 volunteers around each disconnected teen so that each youth has a variety of caring adults to support them. ([www.thread.org](http://www.thread.org) or <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/26/opinion/thread-baltimore-american-renewal-community-program.html> )

See Appendix A for other interesting programs.

## **Educational and Civic Benefits**

We expect several positive civic and educational benefits:

- Most obviously, we expect students to be doing better academically, as measured by standardized test scores and teacher evaluations.
- We expect kids to LIKE school more because they get much more positive attention from adult tutors and mentors, are able to keep up with class, and, more broadly, feel more successful!
- We expect lower chronic absenteeism and truancy rates.
- We expect volunteers to feel their experiences are fulfilling and that they enrich their lives overall. This includes their interactions with the kids, their interactions with other volunteers and teachers, and the joy and fulfillment that comes from being part of a community or team working together for a shared purpose -- especially one that resonates with their core values.
- We expect everyone in the community to feel happier and more satisfied with their community! It may be beyond the reach of the neighborhood but, in an ideal scenario, residents in a neighborhood implementing this program would complete a survey to gauge their awareness of the program and their overall feelings about the neighborhood. We would expect (1) broad awareness, (2) a general agreement with statements like:
  - "In our neighborhood, people work together to make it better!"
  - "We feel safe in our neighborhood."
  - "People in our neighborhood are welcoming and friendly."
  - "I am not afraid of kids in my neighborhood."
  - "The kids in my neighborhood are friendly, respectful, and helpful."



## Getting Started: Guide for Schools

DCTMI can start the process of placing volunteers with a school quickly. The starting point is an in-depth conversation to work through the process for onboarding and managing volunteers. Most schools seem to have the capacity to quickly start slowly with 3-10 volunteers and add more over the course of a semester. (This works well for DCTMI since it also takes us time to recruit the volunteers.)

Here's how we can get started now:

- **Get potential volunteers excited about getting involved at your school:** We describe your needs and the volunteer opportunities before school, in classrooms, at lunchtime/recess, and after school during the school year and the likelihood of other opportunities between (roughly) 9 and 3 pm during the summer.
- **DCPS Volunteer Clearance Process:** We will encourage the potential volunteers to start the DCPS Volunteer Clearance Process as soon as possible so they could get a taste for volunteering this year, which should increase the chance of them being ready to go in the fall.

**The "Handoff":** Once they get back to us with their clearance documents, we'd like to send each person an email copying your contact person and have you all work out the details with the volunteer. If we have current information on your needs, we can also slot them into a specific role -- e.g., before-school tutoring -- and make sure you have the right mix of volunteer skills and availability.

Other questions and options:

1. Would someone at your school interview the volunteer before they start? Provide an orientation?
2. We can provide a database or secure file structure where DCPS clearance letters are stored.
3. We can provide access to the system we use for scheduling volunteers.
4. We can help to find volunteers with specialized skills for presentations or to help with clubs.
5. We can connect you to our partner organizations that might have the capacity to help manage the volunteers on a day-to-day basis if you don't have the internal capacity.
6. Are there any specific training sessions you'd like us to offer some or all of your volunteers prior to or after starting?