

# Volunteer Training Olympic Style

What would happen if athletes showed up at the Olympic Games equipped the way Sunday School Teachers often enter their classrooms? Some would be gripped by fear, since they'd never really competed before. Others might quickly study the rule book as they waited for the starter's gun.

The image is absurd.

But now turn the image around and think what might happen if we took passing on faith to our children as seriously as Olympic athletes take passing on a baton in a relay. Imagine how strong a volunteer team you could have if you prepared volunteers with an Olympic-style workout program. Ten years ago Search Institute surveyed about 1,500 children's ministry volunteers Protestants in more than 500 congregations as part of a national study. The findings suggest several key components of a well-rounded, Olympic-style workout program for children's ministry volunteers.

## Get a Physical Exam

Athletes get a physical examination before they start training. Your ministry also needs a physical to determine its fitness level.

Most volunteers recognize their need for a strenuous "workout program" because many miss some of the basics. The study revealed that:

- Just 38 percent of teachers know and understand the Bible.
- Only 39 percent of teachers know how religious faith forms and develops.
- Even fewer (30 percent) know about different learning styles.
- Only three out of 10 know and understand their denomination's theology and tradition.
- And one out of four (27 percent) know educational theory and practice.

Despite the clear need for growth, many teachers don't appear eager to get involved. According to this study, just 44 percent of volunteers say they're interested in more teacher-training events. Part of the problem may be that the available training opportunities don't always meet their interests and needs.

## Customize the Training Program

By tracking the areas of greatest concern during training, you're more likely to get volunteers interested and involved. Ask your volunteers what they'd like to learn about. What are they struggling with? What challenges are they facing? What would they most like to learn about? Sometimes we worry so much about meeting kids' needs that we forget about the volunteers' needs.

## Eat Healthy Food

A steady diet of healthy food ensures that the athlete is up for the workout. Otherwise, the body gives out before the race is over. Similarly, a healthy spiritual diet is essential for volunteers, who work with children. A Christian education program's effectiveness is significantly influenced by the leaders' faith maturity.

Unfortunately, two thirds of Sunday School Teachers may not be getting the kind of balanced diet they need. In Search Institute's study, only 32 percent of children's volunteers express a mature faith characterized by a life-transforming relationship with God and a consistent devotion to serving others.

Thus a majority of children's volunteers are at risk of burning out early because they don't have the spiritual resources to keep them going. Furthermore, most churches don't provide any regular opportunities for volunteers to nourish their faith.

## **Develop "Game Plans"**

Imagine what would happen to an Olympic team that spends its entire training time in a classroom listening to the coach telling how to play the game. Then, when it comes to game time, the players run out on the field to apply what they've "learned". Unfortunately, many churches rely on such an approach: They hand out curricula, introduce a few concepts, then send volunteers out to the classroom. No wonder many teachers are inadequate and ill-prepared!

Effective teachers know educational theory and practice. Yet only 27 percent of volunteers report that they are familiar with the theory and practice of what they do. Similarly, teachers don't always give themselves high marks in key areas. Only about half of all volunteers think their teaching is good or excellent.

Part of the problem is that teachers have few opportunities to learn how to teach. For example, 50 percent of volunteers report never receiving training in effective teaching methods. And 82 percent report never receiving training in denominational theology.

A volunteer-training program should include the same kinds of experience-based training that athletes use. Workshops should focus on learning by doing – and then talking about what happened. Another effective approach is to pair a new teacher with an experienced teacher so that the novice can learn from an expert by watching and imitating.

## **Celebrate the Victories**

All athletes have down days. All athletes sometimes wonder if all the work is worth the effort. All athletes need someone to encourage and support them through the tough times.

Sunday School teachers are no different. They, too, get discouraged and stretched beyond their limits. They, too, need someone to give them pats on the back (or hugs) and to remind them that their work is important to the church.

Search Institute's research confirms that one element of an effective Christian education is a strong sense of teacher support, encouragement and recognition. Indeed, the Apostle Paul began most of his letters with encouragement (see, for example, Philippians 1:3-8).

Volunteer affirmation and support can come in many ways:

- Recognize teachers in worship once a year. The DYE has a wonderful teacher recognition service for church.
- Sponsor a teacher banquet or brunch. Have older children serve their leaders.
- Write one or two personal notes to teachers so they receive a personal appreciation occasionally through the year.

Along with these personal affirmations is the companion piece: evaluation. Most churches apparently don't think of evaluation as positive, since only 16 percent evaluate teachers annually. Yet, when done well, evaluation can be affirming and encouraging for volunteers. It gives you an opportunity to tell volunteers directly what they're doing well and how important they are to the ministry. It can also gently challenge them to improve in areas where they may be less skilled.

## **Remember the Goal**

Athletes are most successful when they keep their eyes fixed on their ultimate goal. The same principle should guide a training program. Every element should be geared toward the goal of helping children and teachers grow in their faith.

In his own ministry, Paul used imagery from athletics to remind people of this principle. "Brothers and sisters," he wrote, "I know that I have not yet reached the goal, but there is one thing I always do." Forgetting the past and straining toward what is ahead, I keep trying to reach the goal and get the prize for which God called me through Christ to the life above" (Philippians 3:13-14).