

**Gender and Minority Status of United States Educational Parent Volunteers:
A Quantitative Examination of Parent Participation in
High-Risk and Low-Risk Activities**

Didi Fahey, Ph.D.

Director Research & Collaborative Program Development
Denver Area Council, Boy Scouts of America
Greenwood Village, CO 80111
Tel. 303-455-5522 * E-mail: dfahey@denverareacouncil.com

Abstract

Parent volunteerism is not a homogenous commodity within the United States school community. While diverse in particulars, generally, the jobs that parents do for schools can be classified as either high-risk or low-risk. High-risk volunteer jobs are those that place the volunteer in closer proximity to the children and could result in litigation against the volunteer, volunteer organization, or the school, while low-risk jobs are more visible and socially oriented. How parents volunteer is impacted by their minority status and gender. Women and men volunteer in very different ways, as do minority and non-minority parents. Contrary to current research, analyses of data from the Current Population Survey indicate that fathers volunteer for more high-risk jobs and mothers prefer to volunteer for more low-risk jobs.

Keywords:

volunteerism, liability, parent, school, risk

Introduction

Since the days of the one-room school house, parent volunteerism has been an integral part of the educational system. In addition to helping with clerical duties or attending field trips, parents have constructed buildings, paid salaries, established local school policies (Siddle Walker, 1993; Evans, 1989), assisted teachers, and raised money (Epstein, 2001; Brown, 1998; National Congress of Jewish Women, 1996) for the schools their children attended. Parent volunteerism is a type of parent involvement that most educators would acknowledge as being highly important to the success of their students and a demonstrated show of support for education from the community at large (Epstein, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Brown, 1998; NCJW, 1996). For the most part, research has focused on the effects of parent volunteerism. For instance, children of parent volunteers get better grades and have

fewer disciplinary problems (Nord, Brimhall & West, 1997). The perceived positive impacts of parent volunteerism are so strong, in fact, that they have been codified at the national level. *No Child Left Behind* has stipulations mandating that schools provide opportunities for parents to volunteer for such things as classroom work or sitting on decision-making panels (NCLB, 2001, §11118).

While its importance and impact on students and schools has been the focus of much research, as a construct unto itself, parent volunteerism has received very little attention. In fact, there is no clear agreement as to what constitutes parent volunteerism or even an understanding as to what types of jobs are generally considered to be parent volunteer activities. Are parents sitting on school boards considered parent volunteers? Is car-pooling high school athletes to a school match parent volunteerism or is it more an extension of

parenting? Without clear definitions, volunteer roles and expectations become ambiguous (Merrell, 2000), vouchsafing responsibility of the volunteer and the volunteer activity to whoever is currently in charge. This serendipitous approach leaves the possibility of litigation open to both internal and external parties. The situations of liability and responsibility are compounded even more when the concepts of parenting and parent volunteerism differ between the school and the home. Some consider monitoring homework a volunteer activity (Epstein, 2001), while others consider it an extension of parenting (Lareau, 2000; Naples, 1992).

Review of Related Literature

The problems of not knowing what constitutes school parent volunteerism in United States schools rest precariously on practice, while support for that volunteerism rests on the legal issues of compliance and liability, especially as it concerns safety and labor administration. Who is responsible for parent volunteers working within the building during a fire drill? Is there an emergency evacuation policy in effect for those who are neither student nor paid staff? Who sees that all parent volunteers understand and follow the evacuation plan? These types of issues raise serious legal concerns, subjecting both the school and the parent to potential lawsuits. A car accident while transporting students to a graded and mandatory school event, such as a music performance competition, could spell financial disaster for the school as well as the volunteer.

Because not all jobs are created equal, risk for some volunteer duties therefore is greater than others, not only for the parent volunteer, but also for the school. Parents who volunteer to supervise children or operate equipment, for instance, work at greater risk than those who sit on advisory

boards. The issue of risk and who should assume legal responsibility for that risk is a growing concern for the third sector in general and for schools in particular. Unlike school staff members who enjoy protection for their actions through negotiated contracts and other laws protecting public employees, volunteers in the United States are not as fortunate. Regardless of personal training, education, or level of expertise, many districts require volunteers to sign a form releasing the school from any liability due to the actions or inaction of the volunteer. Volunteer organizations recognize three elements of liability:

1. The organization's responsibility to any third party for the actions of a volunteer;
2. The responsibility to the volunteer for any injuries that may occur while on duty; and
3. The volunteer's personal responsibility for their actions while volunteering (Martinez, 2003).

High-risk activities would include any situation where a volunteer has access to children, sensitive information, or use of equipment. These types of jobs would include coaching, tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and any type of office work that allows for contact with children's school records or personnel files. Other high-risk activities would include the preparation and serving of food, and general labor such as construction or moving furniture. Low-risk activities, on the other hand, are opportunities for volunteers to work as part of a larger group or committee. These activities would be ushering at a school event, participating or assisting in a musical performance, collecting and distributing clothing or uniforms, and offering professional services such as vision screening or grant writing. While there are others, these general categories represent a

large number of volunteer tasks and services (US Census Bureau, 2006).

The type of work a volunteer performs is impacted by the perception of who is a volunteer. In education, this dichotomy between how men and women volunteer is evident not only by educators' perceptions and interpretations, but also in the types of jobs available for the volunteer. Educators perceive a father's involvement as representing strong, general family support for education. Fathers' involvement is talked about and praised, whereas a mother's is viewed as being anticipated or nothing out of the ordinary (Lareau, 2000). "Teachers talked more about a father volunteering in the classroom than mothers coming to school. Mothers' volunteering was routine; fathers' visits were newsworthy" (Lareau, 2000; p. 94).

In two-parent households, it is the mother who is more likely to volunteer. This may be a reflection of the division of labor within the household (Nord, et al., 1997) and a broader expectation for women's roles within society. Despite their increased presence within the workforce in the past few decades, mothers have remained a staple in their children's schools (Lareau, 2000). Fathers are more likely to be involved with their child's education by making decisions (Lareau, 2000) and attending school events. These activities often occur outside of regular business or work hours, making it easier for men to attend (Nord, et al., 1997), while traditional concepts of a mother's involvement in schools can be considered as an extension of child-rearing (Lareau, 2000). Fathers' work with the schools may be considered to be volunteerism, while the same work performed by a mother may be perceived to be an extension of parenting (Lareau, 2000).

Just as there are differences between mothers' and fathers' versions of parent volunteerism, race is also a factor.

Volunteerism is very much culturally defined and practiced (Leistnya, 2002). Volunteer effort in one community may not even be recognized as helpful behavior by members of another community, or its value to the community could be substantially discounted (Musick, Wilson, & Bynum, 2000). Historically and culturally, the dominant culture of parent volunteerism present in U.S. schools is that of white individuals. Unlike minority parents, white parents are more inclined to work within the roles and boundaries outlined by the schools because there exists a cultural understanding between educators and white parents (Lareau, 2000).

This cultural understanding extends to the interpretations of what parent volunteerism accomplishes. For white parents, volunteerism is a means to forward the interests of their own child. For most minorities, however, it is work performed on behalf of the entire community (Abrahams, 1996). Minority patterns of parent volunteerism differ from whites in that minority parenting styles tend to be more authoritarian and less coercive, resulting in a clear division between social institutions and the family. As a group, they tend not to participate in school-initiated functions such as joining the parent volunteer organizations, attending conferences, or speaking with teachers (Pong, et al., 2005). For instance, Hispanic parents tend not to network with non-Hispanic parents, limiting the ability to build social capital in the larger community (Pong, et al., 2005). Instead, Hispanic American mothers prefer more whole and extended family opportunities benefiting immediate needs within a closed community (Powell, et al., 1990). Similarly, African-Americans tend to focus their energies on activities that have a direct benefit to their families and communities, while Whites take up volunteer activities

that support broader constructs (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Powell, et al., 1990).

Methods

Because parents’ relationships to education differ by race and gender (Lamont & Lareau, 1988), and volunteerism is peculiar to cultural practices (Leistnya, 2002), a parent-centric examination of volunteer activities will enable policy-makers, educators, and parents to examine the construct of parent volunteerism as it exists for different individuals operating under different circumstances. One aspect of this parent-centric examination is the development of a profile of how parents choose to volunteer, asking the research question:

Does gender and minority status affect parents’ participation in high- or low-risk volunteer activities?

To answer this question, data on parent involvement and volunteerism were selected from the 2006 Special Volunteer Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS), available on-line via Data Ferrett [sic], an extraction program designed and maintained by the United States Census

Bureau (US Census Bureau, 2006). Variables were selected based on general demographic characteristics and the types of jobs they performed as volunteers for educational activities. The data were then sorted by parental status of having school-aged children, volunteer status, and whether or not parents volunteered for youth educational and recreational activities. Other types of youth activities such as religious, civic, medical, or recreational sports were not selected as they did not reflect activities that occurred in the schools.

Independent variables of “Gender” and those identified as describing Minority Status were selected from the data set. While Gender is a dichotomous variable taken directly from the survey results, Minority Status was created from the two survey variables as shown in Table 1. The CPS asks both questions, RACE and HISPANIC ORIGIN. Because this study is concerned with how minority parents volunteer, the two re-coded variables were combined into one dichotomous variable MINORITY, with the levels of Minority and Non-Minority.

Table 1
Study Variables.

Variable Name	Description	Type
Gender	FATHERS MOTHERS	Parent of at least one school-aged (5-18) child
Minority Status	MINORITY NON-MINORITY	Race + Hispanic Origin
High-Risk Volunteer Jobs	HRISK	Coaching, Tutoring, Mentoring, Food Preparation, Counseling, General Labor, and General Office
Low-Risk Volunteer Jobs	LRISK	Ushering, Distributing Clothing, Fundraising, Professional/Management Services, Music Performance

Table 2
Study Hypotheses.

Hypotheses	Description
H _{1a0} : $\mu_{\text{minority}} = \mu_{\text{non-minority}}$	There is no significant effect of minority status on parents' participation in high-risk volunteer jobs.
H _{2a0} : $\mu_{\text{mothers}} = \mu_{\text{fathers}}$	There is no significant effect of gender on parents' participation in high-risk volunteer jobs.
H _{3a0} : $\Sigma\alpha\beta_{ij} = 0$; where α = gender and β = minority status	There is no significant effect of the interaction of gender and minority status on parents' participation in high-risk volunteer jobs.
H _{1b0} : $\mu_{\text{minority}} = \mu_{\text{non-minority}}$	There is no significant effect of minority status on parents' participation in low-risk volunteer jobs.
H _{2b0} : $\mu_{\text{mothers}} = \mu_{\text{fathers}}$	There is no significant effect of gender on parents' participation in low-risk volunteer jobs.
H _{3b0} : $\Sigma\alpha\beta_{ij} = 0$; where α = gender and β = minority status	There is no significant effect of the interaction of gender and minority status on parents' participation in low-risk volunteer jobs.

Thirteen types of jobs performed by volunteers served as the dependent variables and were also recoded into two main categories—High-Risk and Low-Risk, based upon standing US legal interpretations of working with children, equipment, sensitive information, or presence on school property. The variables Coaching, Tutoring, Mentoring, Food Preparation, Counseling, General Labor, and General Office were combined to reflect a High-Risk category, while Ushering, Distributing Clothing, Fundraising, Professional/Management Services, Music Performance and all Other, non-defined types of volunteer efforts were combined to form a new variable of Low-Risk jobs.

A two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to determine if a statistically significant difference exists between groups for both High-Risk and

Low-Risk jobs with the null hypotheses as listed in Table 2.

Findings

To determine if there are significant differences between groups for each type of volunteer job, it was necessary to test both main effects and interaction effects of Gender and Minority Status on parents' participation in High-Risk and Low-Risk activities.

Testing first for high-risk activities (H_{1a0}, H_{2a0} and H_{3a0}), the greatest difference between means as listed in Table 3, shows that non-minority fathers volunteer for more high-risk activities than minority mothers (1.51 to 1.19, respectively). Significant differences between mothers and fathers, ($F_{1, 4553} = 12.759, p < .05$) and their participation with high-risk volunteer activities are listed in Table 4. Therefore, we reject the first null hypothesis and

conclude that gender holds a significant effect upon parents' participation in high-risk volunteer activities. Likewise, there is a statistically significant difference between minority parents and non-minority parents. The means indicate that non-minority parents (1.43) participate in more high-risk volunteer activities than minority parents (1.28). Again, Table 4 shows this significant difference ($F_{1, 4553} = 4.342, p < .05$), allowing us to reject the second null hypothesis and conclude that minority status has a significant effect upon parents' participation in high-risk volunteer activities.

Testing for the interaction of gender and minority status for high-risk activity, the means in Table 3 show that non-minority parents volunteered for more high-risk

activities than did minority parents (1.51 for Non-minority Fathers and 1.39 for Non-minority Mothers), compared to minority parents (1.47 for Minority Fathers and 1.19 for Minority Mothers). Table 4 also shows that the interaction effect for Gender and Minority Status for High-Risk parent volunteer activity is not-significant ($F_{1, 4553} = 2.066, p > .05$). As such, we fail to reject the third null hypothesis and conclude that the interaction of gender and minority status does not have a significant effect on parents' participation in high-risk volunteer activities.

The hypotheses for low-risk activities (H_{1b0} , H_{2b0} and H_{3b0}) also tested the main effects of gender and minority status, as well as the interaction effect for both factors.

Table 3
High-Risk Descriptive Statistics.

Gender	Minority Status	N	Mean	SD	Variance	Skew	Kurtosis
Fathers	Non-Minority	1427	1.51	1.33	1.77	1.24	1.22
	Minority	236	1.47	1.32	1.74	1.52	2.40
Mothers	Non-Minority	2400	1.39	1.28	1.63	1.17	1.20
	Minority	494	1.19	1.16	1.33	1.43	2.47

Table 4
High-Risk Activity for Between-Subjects Effects.

Source	SS (Type 3)	df	MS	F	Sig.	Partial η^2
Gender	20.998	1	20.998	12.759*	.000	.003
Minority	7.145	1	7.145	4.342*	.037	.001
Gender * Minority	3.400	1	3.400	2.066 ^{ns}	.151	.000
Error	7492.909	4553	1.646			

* $p < .05$ ns = non-significant

Table 6 indicates that gender has a significant effect on parents participation in low-risk volunteer activities, ($F_{1, 4553} = 37.591, p < .05$). Mothers averaged a combined total of 1.08 low-risk volunteer jobs compared to the .81 of fathers. Subsequently, we reject the first null hypothesis and conclude that gender has a significant effect on parents' participation in low-risk volunteer activities.

As indicated in Table 6, there is a significant effect of minority status ($F_{1, 4553} = 13.160, p < .05$) on low-risk volunteer activities. Overall, non-minority parents volunteer for an average of 1.01 low-risk jobs while minority parents volunteer for an average of .86 jobs (Table 5). Again, we

can reject the second null hypothesis and conclude that minority status has a significant effect on parent participation in low-risk volunteer activities.

For sub-groups, the differences are less clear. Table 5 shows that Non-Minority Fathers volunteer for an average of .83 Low-Risk jobs while Non-Minority Mothers volunteered for an average of 1.11 low-risk jobs. Similarly, Minority Fathers volunteer for fewer low-risk jobs (.68) than Minority Mothers (.94).

As with parents' participation in high-risk volunteer activities, there is no significant effect of the interaction of Gender and Minority status ($F_{1, 4553} = .050, p > .05$).

Table 5
Low-Risk Descriptive Statistics.

Gender	Minority Status	N	Mean	SD	Variance	Skew	Kurtosis
Fathers	Non-Minority	1427	.83	.99	.97	1.40	2.24
	Minority	236	.68	.99	.99	2.08	5.32
Mothers	Non-Minority	2400	1.11	1.07	1.14	1.07	.96
	Minority	494	.94	1.06	1.11	1.54	2.77

Table 6
Low-Risk Activity for Between-Subjects Effects.

Source	SS (Type 3)	df	MS	F	Sig.	Partial η^2
Gender	40.479	1	40.479	37.591*	.000	.008
Minority	14.171	1	14.171	13.160*	.000	.003
Gender * Minority	.054	1	.054	.050 ^{ns}	.824	.000
Error	4902.843	4553	1.077			

* $p < .05$ ns = non-significant

We fail to reject the third null hypotheses and conclude that the interaction of gender and minority status hold no significant effect on parents' participation in low-risk volunteer activities.

These results are confirmed by Figure 1, Estimated Marginal Means for High-Risk Activity and Figure 2, Estimated

Marginal Means for Low-Risk Activity. While fathers volunteer at nearly the same rate for high-risk activities, mothers' participation has a greater, but not significant difference. Furthermore, minority status affects parents' participation at Low-Risk activities at about the same rate for fathers as mothers.

FIGURE 1
Estimate Marginal Means for High-Risk Activity.

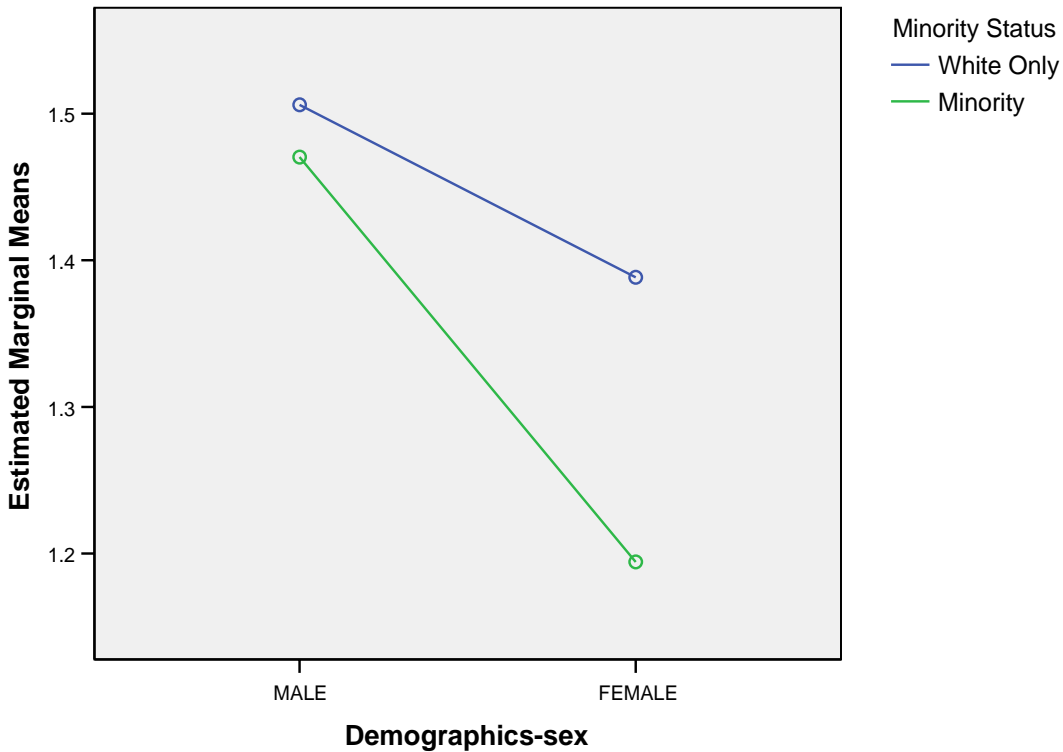
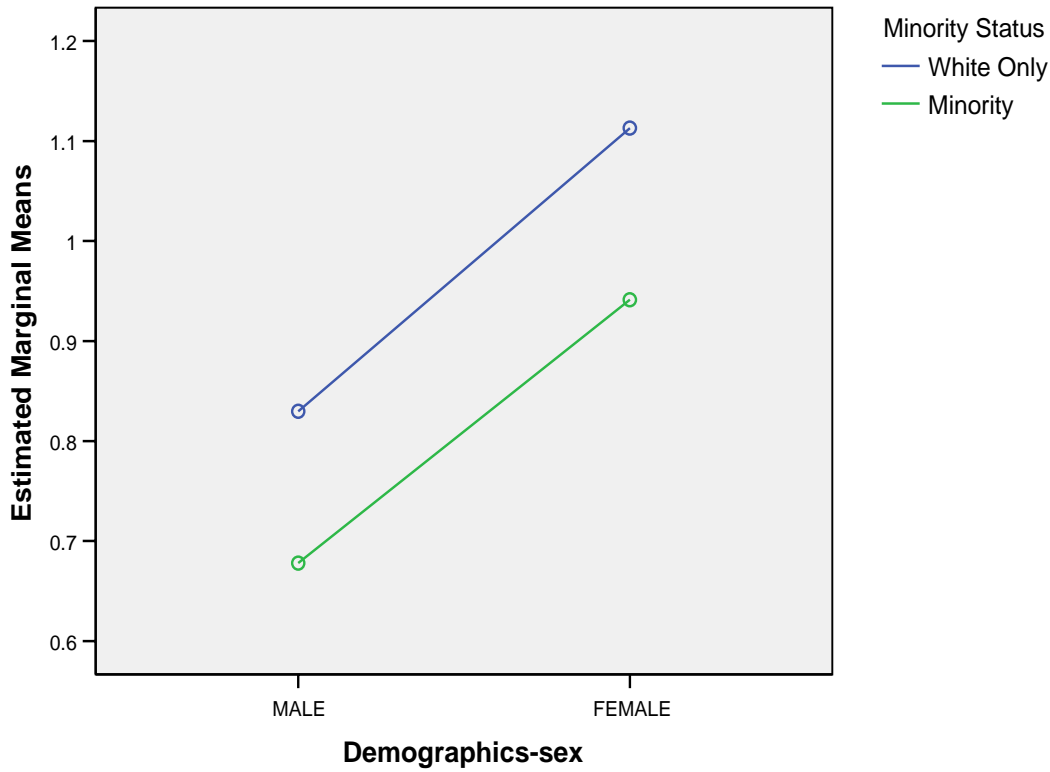


FIGURE 2
Estimate Marginal Means for Low-Risk Activity.



While the analyses indicate that significance exists, it is important to note that the error variance for both High-Risk (7492.90) and Low-Risk (4902.84) activities are very large (See Tables 4 and Table 6) and sample effect size for the interaction accounts for virtually none of the variance (High-Risk Partial $\eta^2 = .000$ and Low-Risk Partial $\eta^2 = .000$). Taken together, the very large error variance and low partial eta-square, or the correlation between the effect and the dependent variable (Keppel & Wickens, 2004), indicates that perhaps variables aside from gender and minority status are necessary to explain the differences in parents' participation.

Implications for the Profession

The differences in how minorities and non-minorities volunteer are marked.

At nearly a uniform rate, minority fathers and mothers volunteer for statistically fewer low-risk activities than non-minority parents. Similarly, there are statistical differences between the two groups of parents for high-risk activities. These data reflect statistics from NCES and other research stating that minorities do not participate as volunteers in their children's schools at the same rate as non-minority parents (Epstein, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). The data may also reflect cultural practice for both minorities and non-minorities. Most parent volunteer organizations were started by non-minorities and have large non-minority memberships. Subsequently, these organizations have developed practices and networks that favor non-minority

participation (Toch, 2001; Lareau, 2000; Woyshner, 1998).

Additionally, minority parents view volunteerism in the schools differently than non-minorities. Instead of being an extension of parenting, volunteerism in the schools is a means of tying the community to the institutions within it (Pong, et al, 2005; Abrahams, 1996). As a result, there is a difference of approach toward parent involvement and how that involvement is structured and interpreted by communities. Minority participation in local institutions, therefore, translates into minorities volunteering in ways that educators may prefer, but for other, non-educational organizations. Minority parents are more likely to volunteer for child-centered activities in religious organizations than they are for educational groups (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007).

Just as there are differences between minorities and non-minorities, there are also statistical differences based on gender. Within the confines of education, fathers volunteer for high-risk activities at a much greater rate than mothers. This may be attributed to how men elect to volunteer. Men prefer to volunteer in ways that combine visible effort (Gerstel, 2000) with acknowledged groups (Putnam, 2000), and in activities that differ from their day to day work (Petrzelka & Mannon, 2006). High-risk jobs consist of highly visible tasks that differ from most middle class professional-wage workers. Favorite jobs for men include coaching and general labor (BLS, 2007). Of the 85 referees available to officiate girls' high school volleyball matches in Ohio, for example, 83 are men (Ohio High School Athletic Association, 2007).

Conversely, as a rule, mothers volunteer more for low-risk activities. Just as men prefer a more visible volunteer task, women prefer more social tasks (Putnam,

2000; Clary & Snyder, 1999). Low-risk jobs include more social tasks associated with committee work such as professional services and fundraising. Furthermore, since women volunteer in similar ways and for the same sort of institutions as their mothers (Putnam, 2000; Naples, 1992), volunteering for educational organizations may be a function of family tradition.

As gender is concerned, parent volunteers exhibit a pattern of volunteer behavior that is more closely aligned with other types of volunteerism as it regards preference of type of job. Current research of patterns of parent involvement and volunteerism in the schools indicate that women are more likely to participate in activities that directly involve their children (Epstein, 2001; Lareau, 2000). These data indicate otherwise. Men participate more in high-risk activities, which include teaching, coaching, tutoring, and mentoring. Women, on the other hand, participate in more low-risk activities such as fundraising, committee work, ushering, and performance.

While mothers and fathers volunteer in statistically different ways than minorities and non-minorities, an analysis of means does not yield statistically significant differences between the four subgroups of parents. For instance, Minority Mothers volunteer at higher rates for Low-Risk activities than Non-Minority Fathers. Likewise, Minority Fathers volunteer for High-Risk activities more than Non-Minority Mothers. The differences between the four subgroups of parents cannot be explained simply by demographics, as evidenced by the high error variances present. Instead, it becomes necessary to examine how parents from each of the subgroups elect to participate in the different types of volunteer activities.

Understanding if gender or ethnic groups differ in their total volunteer habits will enable schools to tailor parent volunteer

opportunities to more closely match that of the surrounding community. Because volunteers select and sort themselves into varying industries for their volunteer work (Segal & Weisbrod, 2002), schools must learn how to successfully compete for volunteer labor. If volunteerism is viewed as parenting, then educators must engage in a public parent-education campaign. If, on the other hand, volunteerism is the work and donation of effort for a particular cause, then schools need to learn how to apply for volunteer labor in a competitive market, and how to protect the students, volunteers, and districts from negligence or other potentially risky practices. Treating volunteerism as a homogenous commodity that can be gained through successful marketing techniques underscores the importance of networking between the organization and the community, as well as between the volunteers themselves (Putnam, 2000; Hirschman, 1970). It cannot be produced if the right situations are absent. Parent volunteerism is an access point to the broader governance structures of the school and provides a means for communities to engage adults in the educational processes.

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About the Author

The mother of four children and long-time parent volunteer for public schools, Didi Fahey applied her knowledge and understanding of how parents elect to volunteer to her academic studies. Recently completing her doctorate from the College of Education and Human Ecology at the Ohio State University in Quantitative Research Evaluation and Measurement in Education, she currently works for the Denver Area Boy Scout Council as the Director of Research and Collaborative Program Development.