

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ARTICLE



WatchDOGS Unleashed on Schools

WATCH D.O.G.S. is a K–12 program that makes it easy for fathers (or father figures) to spend meaningful time with their children in a school setting. The program is overseen by a “Top Dog” volunteer dad who partners with the school administrator to identify opportunities for WatchDOGS dads. Included: Principals share their experiences with the program.

Who let the (Watch)DOGS in?

Schools did, and once they opened the doors, they kept coming in packs.

These are no ordinary canines, though; they are fathers, stepfathers, godfathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and neighbors participating in the WATCH D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students) Across America school volunteer program, an initiative of the National Center for Fathering.

WATCH D.O.G.S. was designed to encourage dads and other male role models to get more involved in their children's education, starting with spending a day volunteering at school. Administrators who use the program said that once dads get in the building, they often continue to volunteer and attend other school functions such as parent conferences, awards nights, and PTA meetings. They also report more positive school climates and improvement in student behavior since unleashing the WATCH D.O.G.S. program in their buildings.



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"They become fathers and father figures; kids want to perform for them and get praise from them," according to WATCH D.O.G.S. national director Scott Huse. "Schools really win when dads come in."

SECURITY AND MORE

About 400 schools nationwide, most of them elementary schools, now are participating in WATCH D.O.G.S., Huse told Education World.

"It's easiest at the elementary schools; if all of a sudden fathers show up in high school, that's weird. We want kids to grow up with the program."

WATCH D.O.G.S. evolved out of one father's concern about school safety. After the 1998 shootings at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, WATCH D.O.G.S. founder Jim Moore decided he wanted to prevent that type of tragedy at his children's school or any other school by getting more men into school buildings. Moore talked with the principal of his oldest child's school, George Elementary in Springdale, Arkansas, and the program was launched there.

WATCH D.O.G.S. is trying to shatter the idea many men inherited from their fathers that volunteering at school, unless it is sports-related, is a woman's job.

"The involvement piece is number one," said Randy Doerksen, principal of Prairie Ridge Elementary School in Shawnee, Kansas, which started WATCH D.O.G.S. in February. "If they [fathers] get involved, other things fall into place. The first by-product is the security piece.

"We emphasize parent involvement, and we have a lot of moms who spend a lot of time in the building," Doerksen continued. "I just felt if we extended the right kind of invitation, fathers would come. And, boy, did they come."

From February to May, Prairie Ridge had 175 dads spend at least one day in the building. "Sometimes we'd have five or six in the building on one day," Doerksen added.

And almost any man can be a WatchDOG. About 30 percent of U.S. children live in single-parent homes, so WATCH D.O.G.S. welcomes other male role models, as long as they are at least 18, Huse said. In one community, the local firefighters are WatchDOGS, and take turns volunteering in one school. Since not all children have dads, the program offers shirts to children that say "My hero is a WatchDOG."

"When Granddad shows up, that's like a Teddy Bear coming to school," Huse joked. His father comes once a year and spends the day at school with Huse and his child.

"What man can resist when a child puts his arms around your leg and says, 'Will you be my play daddy?' There are not many men that hard-hearted who can say no. It brings big men to tears."

WATCHDOG DAYS

When a WatchDOG comes to volunteer in school, he receives a t-shirt, "dog tags," attends a brief orientation, and is handed a detailed agenda for the day, and is announced to the school.

In most schools, WatchDOGS start off the day helping with bus duty and greeting students as they come in, and then tour the school's hallways and walk the perimeter of the building outside. Often they will check outside doors every hour or so to make sure they are locked. Then they spend time in their child's class, working with individual students or groups, and helping with lunch and recess duty.

"We're guys, we need that schedule," Huse said. "We're not going to go up to someone and ask, 'How can I help?'"

Doerksen makes it a point to talk with each WatchDOG when they come in. "I spend time with them at the beginning of the day -- I feel for that five to seven minutes it's important for me to be there -- I love it. It's a great way to start the day."

Besides patrolling the halls and school grounds, a typical day at Clinton Primary School in Hope, Arkansas, includes working one-on-one with students, working in small groups, mentoring, tutoring, reading aloud, practicing flash cards, "and just holding conversations and giving kids one-on-one attention," said assistant principal Tiffany Beasley. "They play with them on the playground. They help our teachers and students."

WatchDOGS also join their own children for lunch in the cafeteria. ("We have some with more than one child who eat lunch two, three, or four times," said Doerksen), and help monitor recess and clean up the cafeteria after lunch. One father even pitched in doing dishes.

Another father who had served in Iraq and whose story was featured in a *Reader's Digest* article, read the article out loud to the class before it was published, according to Doerksen.

He also asks his WatchDOGS to help with a school service project, which in one case involved arranging a display of flags in a hallway.

At Doerksen's school, the WatchDOGS and students for whom they are volunteering get their picture taken for the school's Wall of Fame. "This puts peer pressure on the other dads to volunteer," he said.

"IT BRINGS BIG MEN TO TEARS"

Once men get into the schools, they usually are hooked.

"What man can resist when a child puts his arms around your leg and says, 'Will you be my play daddy?'" said Fredrick T. Nolan, coordinator of the Jackson (Mississippi) Public Schools WATCH D.O.G.S. program. "There are not many men that hard-hearted who can say no. It brings big men to tears."

One man who usually takes his birthday off from work every year to play golf instead volunteered at Prairie Ridge Elementary on his birthday because his daughter asked him to. At the end of the day, he said he planned to spend his birthday volunteering at the school from now on, Doerksen said.

And not only are they hooked, but enlightened.

"They leave at the end of the day dragging their tails -- they are exhausted," Doerksen said. "They had no idea what was involved in trying to get 550 kids going the right way all at once. I feel it has positively affected the culture and the perspective on school. They go home and talk to moms. There is a different feeling in the building."

LOOKING FOR SOME GOOD MEN

The keys to getting men involved with WATCH D.O.G.S. are issuing male-friendly invitations and giving men jobs they want to do, according to Huse and administrators using the program. WATCH D.O.G.S. provides schools with step-by-step instructions for launching the program and training volunteers, starting with a kick-off pizza night for dads and kids.

"Men don't go to meetings. They go to events," Huse noted. "This gets them in the school. Once you get them involved, they start to care about education. Guys want to help, but they like the idea of providing safety and security."

In no way, though, is WATCH D.O.G.S.' intention to turn fathers into security guards, Huse told Education World. "We tell them it's important that people see you outside the school and in the hallways. It's all about positive role models on campus," he said. "They are another set of eyes and ears. We tell them if you are in a high school and a fight breaks out, call it in."

In one instance, a WatchDOG saw a man pull up to the school and start throwing bicycles in the back of a truck. The father wrote down the license plate of the truck and gave it to school administrators who notified police and caught the man.

After a school signs up, staff and fathers participate in training via a conference call, and are encouraged to follow a seven-step process for launching the program. One father, the Top DOG, coordinates the volunteer schedule.

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"Dads are more comfortable because the programs are just for them," added Nolan.

DOGS IN THE HOUSE

The WATCH D.O.G.S. approach to get men involved is both necessary and effective, according to Nolan "It's not new under the sun; I call it a program to get men off the bench and into the game," Nolan told Education World. "We like it for the positive male role models and the unobtrusive school security presence."

Jackson is using the program in 27 of its 38 elementary schools and plans to launch it in their middle schools in January 2007. In the 2005-2006 school year, Jackson had 2,000 WatchDOGS volunteer

2,200 hours.

"We want to get a firm foundation at the elementary level and have the children grow into it, so that by middle school and high school, they are used to seeing dads in school," Nolan noted.

"Young men need role models. They need to see average men who are productive members of society, so they don't think that the only jobs are in entertainment or professional sports."

And once the school is committed to having them, the men will do the rest. "You have to extend the invitation, make sure the whole school team buys into it, and make them [male volunteers] feel welcome," Doerksen said.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

WATCH D.O.G.S.

This page on the fathers.com Web site of The National Center for Fathering offers background information about the WATCH D.O.G.S. program, as well as information about program training; fathering tips for dads of kids of all ages; information about special programs, including contests; and much more.

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