

# Schools favor background checks for volunteers

## D.C. Everest, Merrill districts could join Wausau in requiring searches for criminal records

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Other school districts in north central Wisconsin plan to follow Wausau's lead in requiring classroom volunteers to undergo criminal background checks.

That means parents and others will have to submit personal information and face scrutiny of their records before they will be allowed to help with school activities.

Paid school district employees long have been required to undergo background checks for student safety reasons, but the Wausau School Board approved a new policy last year that required volunteers to go through the same process.

D.C. Everest Area School District Assistant Superintendent Tom Owens said he supports background checks for volunteers, and administrators in that district are looking into developing a policy. The Merrill School Board is reviewing drafts of its school district's volunteer policy, which would include mandatory background checks, said Bruce King, an assistant superintendent. King hopes the board will approve the Merrill policy this spring.

"Volunteers in our schools are important," Anderson said. "We value their role, and balance that by having everyone who is in contact with children have clearance through a background check."

Since approving its policy, the Wausau School District has conducted more than 200 background checks on volunteers. Just three people have been refused a volunteer opportunity because

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Roxane Hagedorn, the volunteer coordinator for Wausau schools, said anyone who is a mentor, tutor, has one-on-one contact with a student or is a frequent volunteer must undergo the background check. Guest speakers or people working a non-education activity, such as an after-school concession stand, do not need a background check but must remain in the view of a school employee, she said.

"If it is a working relationship with a child and you can build a relationship with a child, you must have a (background) check," Hagedorn said.

Marnholtz said some people have been concerned about giving their personal information, but the data are handled only by the human relations department and are kept in secure files. Background checks are valid for four years, and volunteers who are convicted of a crime between checks are obligated to tell the school district, she said.

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Mary Ellen Marnholtz  
Wausau School District  
community relations coordinator

of the results of the checks. Jeff Gress, director of human resources and employee relations for the Wausau School District, said one person who applied for a volunteer position and was refused had recent convictions for possessing controlled substances, a second person was convicted of assault and battery, and the third person had been convicted of a sex crime in another state.

"We want parents and community members to participate (in school activities) because they add to the education of students, but we want to protect the students," Wausau School District community relations coordinator Mary Ellen Marnholtz said. "This allows us to maintain that security in our schools."

Volunteers are asked to complete a profile questionnaire that asks people about where they want to volunteer, their specialties, contact information and if they have been convicted of a felony. Prospective volunteers are required to submit their Social Security numbers for a third-party company to conduct the background check, as is done for paid district employees.

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# Background checks are a prudent step

Our local schools depend on volunteers for help with everything from field trips to classroom activities. In at least one case, a volunteer crossing guard helps keep children safe outside of Wausau's Riverview Elementary School.

That's a good thing, not a bad thing. It's good that we have parents and other community members who want to be involved in our schools. And as we've written before in this space, it's a necessity for schools to have a system that allows for plenty of participation by volunteers. It fosters community engagement, and it works both ways — that sort of engagement also keeps the community's bond with the schools strong.

**Subject:**  
**School**  
**volunteers**  
**Help keep kids**  
**safe.**

But having community volunteers working with the schools also means that the schools must have a strong mechanism for screening and checking on all the people who will be working directly with students.

In the Wausau School District, that means performing background checks on classroom volunteers. That's a good thing. And the news that the D.C. Everest Area School District as well as Merrill Area Public Schools will begin following the same practice is a step in the right direction. In fact, the question might be why they haven't done this already.

We entrust our schools with a lot — the education of our children, and also their safety. The nightmare scenario is that students would come into contact with someone out to criminally take advantage of them.

Background checks for volunteers aren't a foolproof way to prevent that from happening. But they're a prudent additional layer of security.

"Volunteers in our schools are important," said Merrill co-Assistant Superintendent Bruce Anderson. "We value their role, and balance that by having everyone who is in contact with children have clearance through a background check."

To be sure, we live in skeptical times. This practice probably would not have been deemed necessary in decades past. But the fact is that when children are involved, the stakes are very high. The downside of not performing thorough and careful checks on volunteers outweighs the downside of asking volunteers to submit personal information for a background check.