



# Helping Hands

Use students' strengths, interests, skills, and enthusiasm to solve school dilemmas

By *Randee Bonagura*

**W**hen I was in elementary school, the biggest problem we faced was that chalkboard erasers needed cleaning. Students were thrilled to get the job of taking erasers outside and banging them together. This was before recycling was a thing, of course, and certainly before computers were used widely in schools.

Today, there are so many moving parts to an elementary school that using students' strengths, interests, and skills is a valuable way to solve problems and develop students' talents. Here

are some common dilemmas and a few free, practical ideas you can implement in your school:

**Chaos at dismissal with walkers and bussers everywhere?** Have older students serve as part of a safety patrol to help keep younger students in the correct lines for their buses at the end of the day or meet parents/guardians. AAA offers a free program with training materials, and you can use lanyards, badges, or pins to distinguish student helpers. Students involved

in a safety patrol learn leadership skills and problem-solving strategies, as well as how to communicate kindly with younger students.

**Students wandering aimlessly at recess or getting into trouble because they are bored?** Put students in charge of small clubs that take place during lunch and/or recess. A short survey can be given out so students can share what kind of club or activity they'd like to oversee—board games, crafts, sports, etc. If you have lots of interested advisers, make a

schedule so that each club gets its chance. Participating students can sign up for a club in advance or join on the day the club takes place. If you have an aide, a monitor, or an adult volunteer available to help oversee the club, even better! Students learn organizational skills and get to flex their creative muscles.

**Teachers calling the office in the morning because their classroom technology isn't working right?** Kids today know so much about technology that they can fix just about any problem with classroom devices as well as, or better than, many adults. Create a student fix-it squad that volunteers each morning before school starts. Assign members to a classroom or grade level, and have them stop in to see whether or not teachers need help.

They can log in on tablets and laptops, fix interactive whiteboards, and help substitute teachers who are less familiar with the school's technology. If you have a technology/computer/STEM teacher who can show the students a few tricks, it will make the fix-it squad helpers even more valuable while developing their skill sets. Who knows? Maybe it will lead to a career in the tech industry.

**Parents donating lots of books or craft supplies, and you've run out of ways to use them and places to put them?** Find an extra cart or bookshelf and some mismatched bins, and get some student helpers to organize the books and supplies. Make donated books available to all students in a book nook, from which students can take and keep any book; student helpers can replenish and reorganize it as needed, maybe under the guidance of a school librarian or reading teacher. Extra craft supplies can be used for recess or STEAM activities.

**Students complaining about the cleanliness or behavior observed in bathrooms?** Have concerned students form committees to make



announcements over the loud-speaker, create posters to hang in the bathrooms, or make a video showing the preferred behaviors. (Have an adult edit their work before display.) This experience can lead to students feeling empowered to solve problems in their community.

**Students throwing out unwanted, unopened snacks at lunch, wasting food?** Have student helpers decorate a box or bin for the donation of unwanted, wrapped, nonperishable food items, and make signs explaining the program. Hungry students can help themselves to the snacks, and extra items can be donated to a local food pantry. Students will learn that food is a valuable commodity and that they can help others by making thoughtful choices.

**Plastic water bottles overflowing from classroom garbage pails?**

Students can take turns bagging empty water bottles and redeeming them for money in a local supermarket or bottle depository. The money can then be used for a schoolwide goal, such as additional recess equipment or a donation to a local organization.

I have been involved in every one of these projects and have seen how students benefit from having the opportunity to make a difference. At the end of the year, you can thank student helpers with a certificate, shoutout, or group photo in the yearbook or newsletter—or go big and invite them to a special event to show your appreciation. The students will likely internalize that helping is its own reward—and as their principal, you'll feel their pride. **P**

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