Volunteering With Students With Disabilities
A guide for volunteers
Visiting a school and working with students can be very rewarding – whether you are volunteering at a Career Day or other school event, or participating in IBM-sponsored programs such as National Engineers Week, MentorPlace, or the EXITE technology camps for girls.

Some volunteer opportunities are at specialized schools for students with disabilities, while volunteers in mainstream education classrooms might also encounter a number of these students. In many cases, you will not be able to identify them by their appearance or initial comments.

Working with these students can be especially rewarding, but there are some additional considerations to be aware of, especially for novice or first-time volunteers, in light of the challenges each individual child is faced with. This awareness will help you make your classroom experience productive for every child in the group.

This resource is designed to help you engage students with disabilities in educational activities to support their ongoing learning. The following information, tips and resources can help you create a meaningful student learning and volunteer opportunity.

The following content has been developed with the assistance of the Clarke School, Helen Keller National Center, National Business and Disability Council, National Center for Learning Disabilities, New York School for the Deaf, and Overbrook School for the Blind. Portions are used with permission of the contributors.
There are general assumptions and understandings that, if agreed upon by the volunteer and the school or not-for-profit organization, are integral to the success of activities planned on behalf of students with disabilities. Understanding the tenets below, and planning accordingly, is vital to a successful learning and volunteer experience.

- The planned activity or program is valued and endorsed by all – teachers, students and parents.
- Everyone involved agrees that all students can learn – at varying levels of success, with different content and skills.
- Students perceive themselves as being able to achieve success.
- The presenter/trainer has a positive relationship with the organization.
- Features of the activity or program are designed in partnership with the school or not-for-profit organization.
- If possible, the activity or program is linked to existing curricula – what the students learned already, are learning now, and will be learning.
- The school or organization pre-selects students for participation and provides an overview and orientation to students, faculty and others.
- Careful planning is done to account for any specialized equipment or preliminary staff training required.
- Information Technology (IT) support is available during and after sessions.
- Plans are made to sustain and/or replicate the program at other schools or locations.
Volunteering with special-needs children can be a very rewarding experience, but volunteers must be patient and an ample amount of time must be planned for the event. Additionally, volunteers need to be prepared for dealing with various challenges that the children might face.

**Cognitive and developmental disabilities**
- Students may have limited ability to “explain” or “repeat.”
- Present limited amounts of new information at a time, and be prepared to re-teach and review frequently.

**Blind or low vision, and deaf or hard of hearing**
- Vision: Be prepared to address students by name, narrate (explain) your actions, describe visual displays and how things “look.”
- Hearing: Be prepared to use “total communication” – a combination of signs, gestures, finger spelling, lip reading, printed text – and maintain good eye contact.
- To ensure quality and equal access to communication, consider the students’ learning environment:
  - Quiet learning environments for individuals who are hard of hearing
  - Environments free of visual distraction.
  - Consider lighting, glare, color contrast, magnification.
  - Assess the optimal location of the facilitator, e.g. front of room, in the middle among the students.
  - Use appropriate graphics.
- During group discussions, ensure equal participation and “turn taking” when utilizing interpreters:
  - Have speakers consult with the interpreter beforehand.
  - Speak directly to students.
  - Members of the group should identify themselves prior to speaking.
  - One person speaks at a time.
Motor impairments

- Students may need assistance from a non-disabled peer or adult to complete activities. To the extent possible, help students to accomplish tasks on their own.
- If the student is seated, interact at eye level whenever possible.
- Be patient and allow extra time for motor output (or multiple attempts at manipulating a mouse or keyboard).
- Look for activities that teach the same concept that can be accomplished by using a computer and assistive technology.

Learning disabilities and disorders of attention

- Students may have difficulty with reading, spelling and written expression. Be prepared to read aloud from instructions or from printed text, and adjust expectations for typing/writing.
- Students may hear information accurately but misunderstand instructions or react impulsively. Clarify key points, repeat instructions, provide a model, and allow for practice with prompt feedback.
- These students often have areas of particular strength; work with teachers (and students) to identify ways to tap students' resources.
- Many students already have identified learning strategies and accommodations that work for them in school; ask teachers to share this information and incorporate into teaching and follow-up activities.
Technologies

Screen magnification software:

Many persons with low vision can use a computer with magnification software, which allows a variety of magnification sizes as well as contrasting colors. Two examples are ZoomText screen magnification software and SuperNova, which provides screen magnification as well as a screen reader to enable Braille display.

Screen reader software:

This uses synthesized speech to read computer-based information to visually impaired people. Some products can also enable Braille displays (see below). Window-Eyes and JAWS are two examples of screen reader software.

Braille note-taking devices:

These keyboards and portable devices enable people to take notes, save files and use calendar/schedule information using Braille or synthesized speech. They can connect to the Internet, a PC, and some can be used with a Global Positioning System. HumanWare produces a line of note-taking devices, and Freedom Scientific makes the PacMate Pocket PC solution for blind and low-vision users.

Scanner/reader software:

In conjunction with a scanner, this lets you scan printed material and hear it via synthesized speech, or read it via a Braille display. One example of scanner/reader software is Open Book.

Braille displays:

Refreshable Braille displays work in conjunction with screen reader software to enable persons to read and navigate computer-based information by providing a row of Braille characters on a device similar in appearance to a keyboard. Two examples of Braille displays are the Focus 40 and Focus 80.

Braille translation software:

This converts text into Braille and formats it for an embosser (printer). Duxbury Braille Translator is an example of software that can help produce books, teaching materials, memos, signs compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and more.

Braille embossers:

These produce a hard copy of any document in Braille by embossing paper. Two companies producing Braille embossers are Sighted Electronics and Enabling Technologies.
It's important to create and maintain an environment for the student that feels comfortable and safe, and encourages learning. Educators call this “classroom management,” and it includes setting appropriate behavioral standards, as well as understanding the best way to instruct students. As a volunteer, you aren’t expected to know exactly how classroom management works, but you can still benefit from techniques for managing a classroom, interacting with students, and conducting activities.

Planning/technology tips

- Computer workstations and their operating systems should be current (e.g., Windows XT).
- Be sure that demo materials are identical at all workstations (any special hardware should be the same model, and all stations should have the same material).
- Plan ahead to make the best use of any assistive technologies and special accommodations already part of the school’s or not-for-profit organization’s teaching environment (e.g. microphones, Braille printers, scanners, captioning, sign-language interpreters).
- Anticipate the need for more time on tasks and opportunities for repetition (re-teaching) and practice.
- If you begin sessions in a large group, consider using breakout rooms for activities, then recap in a large group.
- Consider the benefit of working with smaller groups of students and offering repeat or concurrent sessions.
- Try to arrange for one adult per table who is trained on the software or technology to be used.
- Activities should be hands-on.
- If you plan a field trip, it should reinforce what’s already been learned, and provide ample time for breaks, physical activity, etc.
• Ensure that the location, if not at the school or organization, is accessible to all. A useful reference is the Americans with Disabilities (ADA) Act guidelines.

**Teaching tips**

• Always introduce yourself and encourage students to ask questions.
• Explain goals, nature of activities, and expectations to teachers and students before starting a session.
• Teaching should be explicit, and teach one task/concept at a time.
• Sample student skills and knowledge frequently (e.g., show me, tell me).
• Do not make assumptions about students’ prior knowledge.
• Do not assume that students will be able to generalize what they’ve learned to the next activity or to new settings.
• Teaching should be varied: students should listen, repeat, model, do hands-on activities.
• If possible, engage a student or teacher with a disability to serve as a role model.
• Provide a notebook or worksheets for students (e.g., important keystrokes, where to find help when you get stuck). For blind students, Braille versions should be included, if possible.
• Provide an orientation for students coming from other schools.
• Engage students in peer-assisted learning activities whenever possible (students helping students).
• As appropriate, introduce strategies to help students identify, organize, comprehend, and recall information.
• Work closely with teachers and school personnel to assign students to appropriate groups.
• To the extent possible, create leadership roles for students.
• Work closely with teachers and school personnel to schedule breaks in activities as appropriate (i.e. bathroom, after lunch).
If the program is held in a school setting, prior to your visit:

1. Contact school/program leadership and establish goals that complement the school’s curricula, culture and climate.
2. Clarify the cooperative, versus competitive, nature of the program.
3. Contact classroom teachers, aides and other support personnel to clarify their roles and solicit feedback about any unique opportunities and challenges.
4. Contact local IT support personnel and check their availability for support. Ask them to be on site 30 minutes before your session begins to check hardware and software.
5. Make sure workstations have current operating systems capable of running any software you plan to use.
6. Identify resources for follow-up and a plan for ongoing activities and support, including student activities at home, access to hardware and software, cost.
7. Conduct a dry-run session with your volunteer teammates before the day of the event, in person, to ensure a smooth session.
8. Plan ahead to make the best use of assistive technologies and special accommodations already part of the teaching environment – microphones, Braille printers, scanners, captioning, sign-language interpreters, etc.
9. Try to arrange to have one adult per table who is trained on the software you will be using during the session.
Resources

After meeting with the preschool director and scheduling your workshop, spend some time reviewing the instructor’s training materials that you plan to present.

Web sites and organizations

- **TryScience** offers activities for children ages 8-15 with content from over 650 science museums around the World. Some activities also contain helpful tips on how they can be used with different disability groups.

- The **Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice** is a Web site offering hints and help on teaching and intervention techniques. It is focused on activities that are research-based and have proven successful with students who struggle to learn and those with identified special education needs. It also has a **section for parents**, with information that would be useful for volunteers.

- The **University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning** has a series of Content Enhancement Teaching Routines that can help teach academically diverse classes in ways that all students can understand and remember key information. Content enhancement uses powerful teaching devices to organize and present curriculum content in an understandable and easy-to-learn manner that actively engages students with the content.

- The **National Center on Low-Incidence Disabilities**, located on the campus of the University of Northern Colorado, focuses on blindness and visual impairment, deafness & hard of hearing, and severe disabilities. It offers a variety of tools for use with students.

- **Education World** is a Web site with many teaching resources for students of both regular and special education. There are lesson plans, activity ideas, subject specific information, and more. Its article **Teaching Special Kids** offers a useful overview for volunteers.
Volunteering With Students With Disabilities: Resources

- **Do2Learn** is a Web site with games, songs, communication cards, print resources, and information on special needs.
- The Utah Education Network maintains a list of activities to help special education students learn basic math.
- **The Teacher’s Guide** has resources created by teachers for teachers, including many related to special education.
- Matthews Media offers a variety of publications and tools related to special education.
- The University of New York’s State Education Department provides resources for teachers about educating students with disabilities.
- The **Council for Exceptional Children** is dedicated to improving education for students with disabilities, as well as gifted students.

**Books**

**Paperbacks For Educators** is a specialized bookseller that lists books available on a wide variety of particular disabilities or problems affecting children. Additionally, the following books are recommended sources of information on teaching students with disabilities: