Inspire

Definitions and Screening for Volunteers in the Christian School

The *Standard 11 Checklist* of the ACSI *Inspire* protocol requires background checks. The requirement to conduct background checks is not limited to paid faculty and staff, as the school should also conduct background checks on certain volunteers that serve in various capacities at a Christian school. Some schools ask: What category of volunteer should be included in this process, and what level of screening is required? How often should these be repeated? There is no absolute answer to those questions; however, we can provide some guidelines to help your school make good decisions.

Defining A Volunteer vs. Visitor for Screening Purposes:

There is no single law, either federal or state, that is going to define volunteers for your school. However, it is important to check your state laws to see if they provide any guidance in this area. It is likely that states will have laws that require background checks for schools that receive state funds. That is not always the case for private schools; however, following the state guidelines for schools is a good idea. Non-profit organizations should have policies that fit the type of organization that they are. Some schools define a volunteer as any parent or other adult that comes onto campus or otherwise helps with students. That is a decision each school will need to make. It is important to have a policy that defines the category of volunteer that must be included in background check screening and be consistent in requiring that all adults that fall into that category have the required background checks.

Whether or not a drop-in visitor that is on campus for a specific purpose would need to have been vetted beforehand would depend on your school's situation. Will that person always be escorted to the classroom by school personnel and supervised once there? Will they be alone in the hallway and therefore have access to students in a bathroom or other secluded area? There may be a variety of questions that your school will ask to develop a policy about which parents/adults need to be classified as volunteers vs. visitors. In some schools, all visitors need to be escorted, while volunteers (who have passed a background check) can walk through the halls with a badge by themselves. **Establish a policy and enforce it 100% of the time.** This policy must be unique to your school's situation. Many schools use the definition: "If a person has the potential of working directly with or ever being alone with a student even in the hallway or bathroom, they must be processed as a volunteer."

What Should Volunteer Screening Include?

Once you have determined that a person is a volunteer, the question arises, what should be included in the background check? Again, there is no single law that will answer this question for us. If your state has a law or guidelines for public schools or for all schools, follow your state law. If that doesn't exist, here are some guidelines to consider.

1. Most schools include criminal checks. While many states and counties feed information into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), it does not contain all the records needed. Some estimates say that the NCIC may only have slightly over half of the available criminal records. Other sources are needed to fill in the missing information. Commercial companies assemble criminal records from a wide variety of sources and fill in the missing information. Most of these are name-based checks. You may want to choose a company that is FCRA (Fair Credit Reporting Act) Compliant. The FCRA is the federal law regulating employment background, and it applies to all employment background checks conducted by a third party, whether they include a credit report or not. Another organization that provides recommendations on background check companies is the National Association of Professional Background Screeners. What makes some of the background checks more or less expensive is the number of counties checked and the number of years back in time the check was conducted.

2. Some states require fingerprint-based methods. While these have their advantages, they are not complete by themselves either. Some states require this for Early Ed programs.
3. Sex Offender Registry – These can vary from local to national in scope. Again, commercial companies have access to multiple levels that individuals/schools cannot access on their own.
4. ID Verification – This should be included so that individuals who have used multiple names or submitted a false social security number will be identified.
5. Motor vehicle checks – very important if the school will be allowing the individual to drive, as for a field trip. Some schools require this for all volunteers so they can catch things like a DUI.
6. Other types of checks would most likely be needed for employees but may not be needed for volunteers, depending on the role they will be in. Those would be Employment/Education Verification, Social Media Checks, and Credit/Financial Checks.

Are Automated Systems That Use Drivers Licenses Adequate?

Increasingly, schools are using an automated visitor management system that asks each person entering the building to show their driver's license as part of the security system. That may work well for visitors and is likely to catch current sex offenders. It is not set up to catch criminals and does not do the other types of checks mentioned above. However, some of these automated systems also have a volunteer management system that incorporates a background check and tracks volunteer service hours. In these cases, a school may choose what level of background check is included. The lowest levels would not meet the requirements outlined above but the highest levels would probably suffice. The school would need to look at the specific checks included and see if those meet their unique situation and policy.

What About Young Volunteers?

Volunteers that are college age (22 and younger) rarely show any information on commercial background checks. In some schools, the only young people that might be volunteering are alumni. As long as you have references from trusted adults (pastor, professors, mentors) that have maintained relationships with the alumnus, that should suffice. If you have young people from a nearby college or church that are unknown to your school, you may want to create a policy that states that they must provide the same types of references from people in respected positions (church, college, work), and you may want to specify that they are supervised by one of your staff members for the first year. **Create a manageable policy that applies to every individual in the category and hold to it.**

How Often Should background Checks Be Repeated?

Most schools use a range of two to five years for re-doing background checks on volunteers. Some schools have a policy that requires people to re-do their background check if they leave the school and return, even if it is less than the established period of time. In other situations, the school pays for a more expensive check, knowing they will be alerted if an individual's status changes. Create a written policy for your school's situation and follow your policy for everyone.

Additional Resources:

Eight Popular Background Checks for Volunteer Organizations by Basil Sadiq

Volunteer Background Checks: Giving Back Without Giving Up on Privacy by Privacy Rights Clearinghouse