



## How to get voluntary work in a school

If you want to either apply for Initial Teacher Training, or for a job in a school, it is essential to have some experience in an English school first. The best way to get this experience is through volunteering for a short period in a school at the level (either primary or secondary) you want to teach. This could involve watching what the teacher does, while not being directly involved (observation) or working with the teacher as an assistant (volunteering).

There is no standard way to apply for voluntary experience, but the guidelines below give you further information about the best way to approach schools and highlight your experience.

## Where to look for a school

The first step is to think about schools that you may know in your local area. If you or your friends and relatives have children, the school they go to is an ideal place to start. You may also walk past a school every day, so having a search for schools near where you live can be useful. Another option is using the internet for your search through the websites below.

DirectGov Schools Finder <http://schoolsfinder.direct.gov.uk/>

The DirectGov schools finder allows you to search for schools in your area using your postcode. You can specify if you are looking for a primary or secondary school. It will then show you a map of your local area with further information on each school. It is possible to refine your search to include age range, funding type (state or private), gender as well as other features, such as Special Needs provision and / or Nursery Provision.

<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DL1/Directories/Localcouncils/index.htm>

DirectGov also has a list of all county, borough and district councils in the UK – your local authority. Each authority has their own website, where you can search for schools in your area. Once you are on your local council's website you can search for schools. You can do this either through typing "schools" in the search box on the homepage, or through the A-Z section that the websites may have.

The National College for Teaching and Leadership runs the School Experience Programme (SEP). You will need to meet the programme requirements to be able to apply for the SEP: if you hold a first class or 2.1 degree and are considering teaching secondary maths, chemistry, physics, modern foreign languages (MFL), history, English, geography, computer science or biology. You can also apply as an undergraduate if you are in your final year of studying for a degree in one of these subjects, are interested in teaching one of these subjects and are predicted at least a 2.1 degree. The programme lasts between one and ten days, where you can watch one or two lessons, as well as an assembly or tutor group, but places are very limited. To see if they have places available call the Teaching Line on 0800 389 2500. You will need to register beforehand so you can apply for the SEP.

<http://www.education.gov.uk/get-into-teaching/school-experience/sep.aspx>

## How to approach the school

Once you have found a school you want to approach, the first step is to find the appropriate person to approach at the school. If you have children at the school, you can request an appointment with the deputy headteacher or headteacher. Alternatively, you can try the school's website, and read the Ofsted Report (available through the DirectGov school finder as well as <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report>). This report is a detailed review of how the school is performing. The school website often names the roles of specific staff who could be appropriate contacts.

It is a good idea to look out for these job titles on the website:

- The person responsible for your subject in the school (e.g. head of maths),
- The Headteacher (for Primary schools),
- The Ethnic Minority Achievement (EMA) Coordinator,
- The Community Links or Community Development Officer,
- The EAL (English as an Additional Language) Coordinator,
- The Home or Family Liaison Worker,
- The Volunteer / Student Placement Coordinator.

To get the person's full name, try ringing the school and asking for the name, for example of the EAL Coordinator, and what days and hours they work. Only ask for their details at this stage, not for a voluntary placement.

When you apply to the school, think of it like applying for a paid job. You should write your CV and a cover letter addressed to the correct person and take them to the school in person. Wearing a suit or smart clothes is also advisable, as you would to a job interview. You can ask at the reception to see the particular person, and hand it to them directly. This gives you a chance to meet them, and make a good impression. If they are not available, you can leave the letter with the receptionist to pass on.

After one to two weeks, if you have not heard from the school, telephone them to ask for feedback on your application. If they are unable to offer you a position, you can ask them what the reason for this is and ask if there are ways you can improve your application. Schools are often very busy, and it may be they already have someone volunteering – you may need to apply to ten or more schools to increase your chances of finding a place.

If the school would like to meet you to talk about volunteering, think of the meeting like a job interview. Again, you can wear a suit or smart clothes to make a good impression in case the school has a dress code. Ask about the school's behaviour policy, dress code, what time classes start and when you would be expected to start and finish each day.

## **Presenting your skills and experience**

Your CV and cover letter will tell the school all they need to know about your skills, motivation and experience. Your cover letter should be personalised to the right contact in the school, and should tell them why you want to volunteer at that particular school. Do not forget to check the spelling and grammar. There are several things you can include to make your cover letter strong:

- Address the letter specifically to the contact name you have in the school,
- Mention the school by name, rather than just I want to volunteer,
- Tell them why you are looking for voluntary work e.g. I am looking to apply for a PGCE at Leeds Metropolitan University and would like to gain the required experience to support my application,
- Find one specific thing about the school (you can visit the school website to help you or read the Ofsted report) that makes it desirable e.g. St. Mary's school has a strong Special Education Needs (SEN) commitment, an area I have a lot of experience in,
- Do not forget to talk about your overseas experience; it makes you a real asset to the school,
- If you speak languages that could be really useful to the school, say so, e.g. I am fluent in Arabic, reflecting one of the main languages spoken at Little Angels Primary School,

- Finally, say exactly for how long, and when, you can volunteer. A specific time frame gives your application urgency, and tells them you have thought specifically about their school.

## **Getting the most out of your volunteer placement**

Once you have found a school where you can volunteer, you can make sure that your placement benefits you as much as the school will benefit from your help.

It is important that you also have the chance to observe qualified staff within the school. If you are volunteering to meet the requirements for applying for Initial Teacher Training, you will need to observe a qualified teacher. If you are hoping to eventually gain paid work as a teaching assistant or work in another support staff role, you should request an opportunity to observe someone doing that role.

Doing this means you can gain a very good understanding of what the role involves, the responsibilities as well as the skills and knowledge you will need in order to do the job. Whether you are filling in an application or interviewing for a job or a training place on a course, you will be expected to:

- Show an in depth understanding of the role by describing your observations and relevant experience in detail,
- Provide examples that prove you have experience carrying out at least some of the same or similar responsibilities,
- Display a willingness to learn any of the required skills or knowledge that you may be lacking.

## **After your observation or voluntary work**

Towards the end of your observation or voluntary work, it is a good idea to ask the person you are observing, or another staff member, if they can provide a reference for you. If you apply for Initial Teacher Training, you will be asked for two references, one ideally related to employment. You can let the school know you will be applying for Initial Teacher Training; they are used to people asking for references, so this shouldn't be a problem.

Sometimes you may do voluntary work for a while before you apply for teacher training, or look for a job. You may also volunteer at more than one

school. To make sure you have all the details from the place you volunteered, it is useful to keep a record of the relevant details of the school, including the address, the name of the teacher you observed, and what dates you were at the school. This will help you to contact references, as well as write your personal statement in your Initial Teacher Training application.

If you are on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), volunteering in a school should not affect this, as long as you still satisfy the basic conditions for claiming JSA. These are: you need to be actively looking for paid work, free to go to an interview at 48 hours notice, and be able to start work within one week of notice from Jobcentre Plus.

However, in practice, Jobcentre Plus may be less happy if you are volunteering over 16 hours a week as some say the remaining hours are not enough to look for a job.

