

# Getting Started: Ministry to Schools: Practical Lessons Learned from Serving Schools and Building Community Partnerships

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For many churches, local schools can feel like closed doors. Questions about legal boundaries, cultural tensions, public perception, and uncertainty about what is allowed often leave churches unsure how to engage the education system meaningfully and faithfully. As a result, many congregations assume ministry in schools is either too difficult, too risky, or simply not worth pursuing.

Our experience taught us something different.

Schools may be one of the greatest ministry opportunities sitting right in front of many churches. Students spend most of their waking hours there. Families gather there. Teachers and administrators carry significant emotional and relational burdens there. In many communities, schools have become one of the most important gathering places in public life.

When I first moved to New Kent, Virginia, I quickly realized that if our church genuinely wanted to reach the community, we could not spend all our time waiting for the community to walk through the church doors. We needed to learn how to walk into the places where the community was already gathering. That realization eventually led us into school ministry.

What follows is not a blueprint. Every community is different. Every school system is different. Every church has different resources, volunteers, and opportunities. These are simply lessons we learned through trial and error while serving local schools over the last several years.

## Lesson 1: Start with a Question, Not a Program

One of the most common mistakes churches make is beginning with a ministry plan. Church leaders brainstorm ideas. They create programs. They design initiatives. Then they approach schools hoping administrators will accommodate what they have already decided to do.

We did the opposite.

One of the first things I did after arriving in New Kent was schedule meetings with the superintendent and several local principals. I introduced myself simply as a pastor who believed our church should actively serve our community. I explained that we wanted to support schools, encourage teachers, and help students however we could.



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Then I asked a question. "What needs do you have, and how can we help?"

That question changed everything.

The elementary school principal suggested lunch monitors. The high school principal identified opportunities to support extracurricular activities and invited us to provide a meal for the marching band and serve hot chocolate during a school event. The middle school principal discussed opportunities through the Watch D.O.G.S. (Dads Of Great Students) program and Teacher Appreciation Week.

What surprised me most was that each answer was different. The schools had different needs because they were different schools. Had we arrived with a prepackaged ministry plan, we likely would have missed the opportunities that actually mattered to each campus. **Instead, we listened.** Looking back, I believe listening was one of the most important things we did.

We were not trying to create needs to justify our involvement. We were responding to needs school leaders had already identified. That distinction matters. When schools see churches responding to their actual needs instead of pushing a predetermined agenda, trust begins to develop much faster.

## Lesson 2: Walk Through the Doors That Open

Many churches spend enormous energy trying to force doors open. We learned to look for open doors instead. Not every opportunity will fit your church. Not every invitation should be accepted. Not every need can be met. Churches have limited resources, limited volunteers, and limited capacity. Wisdom requires recognizing both opportunities and limitations.

Some of our earliest opportunities seemed incredibly ordinary:

- Lunch monitoring
- Hot chocolate stations
- Face painting
- Teacher appreciation lunches
- Marching band meals
- Encouragement notes

None of these opportunities were particularly glamorous; yet each one communicated something important: we were willing to serve. Over time, administrators stopped seeing us as outsiders. They increasingly viewed us as partners. One reason this happened is because we responded to opportunities that originated with them. We weren't trying to convince school leaders that our ideas were important. They already knew these needs were important. We were simply helping.

**The best way to find an open door is often to knock, see which doors open, and then faithfully walk through.**



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## Lesson 3: Consistent Is Better Than Big

Today our church is probably best known for a large Teacher Appreciation event. But if I am honest, most of our impact did not come from that event. It came from a hundred smaller moments.

- We painted faces at homecoming.
- We served coffee.
- We handed out hot chocolate.
- We collected ties for Tie Tuesday.
- We volunteered during lunch periods.
- We fed the marching band.
- We delivered encouragement notes.

None of those activities attracted much attention on their own. Yet together they built trust. Many churches underestimate the ministry value of simply becoming familiar. Teachers saw the same faces repeatedly. Students recognized volunteers. Administrators knew who to call. **Trust grew because people encountered us again and again.** Large events can create momentum. Consistency transforms momentum into relationships. Relationships are where ministry happens. One of the most important lessons we learned is that schools do not simply need churches capable of hosting impressive events. Schools need churches that will reliably show up.

**Consistency communicates sincerity.** When the same people continue serving month after month and year after year, schools begin believing the church genuinely cares. Trust develops. And trust opens doors.

## Lesson 4: Speak with Words and Actions

For us, the message was simple: **We care about you.** The challenge was making sure people actually heard that message. Acts of service communicate care. Words of encouragement often explain it. When we delivered coffee, we attached handwritten encouragement notes. When we served events, volunteers wore "Corinth Cares" shirts. When we hosted appreciation activities, we frequently included cards, books, prayers, and personal messages. We wanted people to know not only that someone cared, but who cared. . . Not because we wanted recognition; because we wanted relationship.

One discovery surprised us. Teachers frequently remembered the notes more than the gifts. Some educators saved encouragement cards for months. Again and again, teachers talked less about the gift card and more about the message attached to it. That revealed something important.

Many educators are carrying burdens invisible to most people. They need encouragement. They need affirmation. They need reminders that what they do matters. In a culture where criticism often comes easily, encouragement itself becomes ministry.

### **Simple ways to encourage educators:**

- Handwritten thank-you cards
- Prayer cards
- Coffee and breakfast stations
- Birthday recognition
- Encouragement books
- Teacher appreciation lunches
- Small gift cards with personal notes



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## Lesson 5: Appreciation Opens Doors

If one ministry has had the greatest impact on our relationship with local schools, it has been teacher appreciation. Several years ago we accepted an invitation to provide meals during Teacher Appreciation Week. The concept was simple: give teachers one evening off from cooking. What started as a modest effort eventually became one of the largest outreach ministries in our church.

- Teachers place meal orders in advance.
- Volunteers stand outside greeting them as they arrive.
- Traffic flows through a predetermined route.
- Food teams prepare meals.
- Runners coordinate orders.
- Dessert teams package treats.
- Greeters welcome guests.

But perhaps the most meaningful moment often occurs while teachers are waiting. **A volunteer simply asks: "Is there anything we can pray for you about?"**

No pressure.

No agenda.

No expectations.

Just an offer.

Some decline.

Many don't.

And those brief conversations often become the most memorable part of the event. In 2026, we distributed 576 meals to educators, firefighters, sheriff's deputies, and other community servants. But the significance of the event was never found solely in the meal count. The greater impact was relational. Teachers became more open. Administrators called when needs arose. Conversations deepened. Trust expanded. Appreciation opened doors.

### Supplies Needed for a Teacher Appreciation Event

#### Volunteers

- Greeters
- Parking attendants
- Food preparation team
- Food runners
- Dessert team
- Prayer volunteers
- Registration volunteers
- Setup team
- Cleanup team

#### Equipment

- Traffic cones
- Directional signage
- Tables
- Food warmers
- Coolers
- Serving utensils
- Meal containers
- Name tags

#### Printed Materials

- Registration forms
- Order forms
- Encouragement cards
- Prayer cards
- Volunteer assignments



## Lesson 6: Walk a Careful Line

School ministry requires wisdom. Schools are responsible for students, staff, schedules, policies, and families from many different backgrounds. If churches fail to respect those realities, trust evaporates quickly. We worked hard to respect school policies while remaining open about who we were.

One day a language teacher invited me to explain Hebrew and Greek.

Another invited me to discuss poetry with students.

A principal invited me to speak during Tie Tuesday about character and maturity.

These opportunities were not forced.

They emerged naturally.

One of the greatest misunderstandings about ministry in schools is the assumption that Christians must choose between silence and confrontation. Our experience suggested another path.

- Serve faithfully.
- Build trust.
- Respect boundaries.
- Remain authentic.
- Be prepared when opportunities emerge.

**Ironically, the more schools trusted us not to force an agenda, the more opportunities for meaningful, sometimes spiritual, conversations seemed to emerge naturally.**

## Lesson 7: Cast the Vision Again and Again

One of the greatest challenges was not serving schools. It was helping the church understand why school ministry mattered.

Only two months after becoming pastor, I stood before the congregation during Vision Sunday and shared what I had learned from school leaders. Then I asked the church to help provide meals for an entire middle school staff and their families during Teacher Appreciation Week.

There was one small problem. We had never done anything like it before. The event was not in the budget. We had no established systems. Honestly, we did not fully know what we were doing. Yet the church unanimously agreed to move forward, and the event succeeded. The larger challenge came later.

People naturally began asking questions:

- Is this working?
- When will we see results?
- Why are we investing so heavily?
- Where is the fruit?



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I discovered that vision casting is never a one-time event.  
You cast it again. . . . And again. . . .And again.  
Because relationships take time.  
Trust takes time.  
Ministry takes time.

I frequently reminded our congregation that school ministry resembles farming far more than fishing. Fishing often produces immediate visible results. Farming requires preparation, planting, watering, waiting, and trusting God for growth. School ministry is farming.

## Lesson 8: Don't Quit—Learn

Before some of our greatest ministry successes came one of our biggest failures. Early on, we decided to prepare barbecue ourselves for an entire school staff. Volunteers spent the weekend smoking pork shoulders and packaging food. Everything seemed ready; then Sunday morning arrived and I discovered our refrigeration system could not safely handle the amount of food we had prepared. The food entered the temperature danger zone and could not be safely served.

In a matter of minutes, one of our most exciting outreach opportunities appeared headed toward disaster. We could have canceled; instead, we started making phone calls. Eventually a local barbecue restaurant agreed to help. I explained the situation honestly to our congregation and shared the financial need. Before the service ended, the required funds had been given and the event moved forward.

Looking back, the lesson was bigger than food safety. Leadership is not about avoiding every mistake. Ministry is not about perfection. It is about honesty, adaptability, humility, and perseverance. We upgraded equipment; we improved systems; we adjusted our procedures. And we kept going. **Failure does not have to be final unless you allow it to stop you.**

## **Lesson 9: Think Beyond the School**

When we started serving schools, I assumed the long-term impact would primarily involve teachers, students, and parents. That happened; but something much larger happened as well.

The broader community began paying attention. People who never attended events heard about them. People with no children in school heard stories. Community leaders noticed; relationships spread; and word traveled. Over time, people began associating our church with encouragement, service, and compassion. **"Corinth Cares" stopped being a slogan. It became our reputation.** Showing care for schools communicated care for the community itself. Looking back, I learned that school ministry was never really only about schools. It was about loving an entire community through one of the places where that community gathers most consistently.

## **Conclusion: Presence Before Influence**

When people ask about our schools ministry, they often want to know which event made the biggest difference. Was it the Teacher Appreciation meals? The marching band dinners? The hot chocolate stations? The encouragement notes? The answer is both simpler and less exciting than most people expect. The greatest impact did not come from any single event. It came from showing up. . . . again and again and again.



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Over time, we learned that ministry to schools is not primarily about creating programs. It is about cultivating presence. It is about churches learning to listen before speaking, serve before leading, and build trust before expecting influence. It is about entering the everyday spaces where people already live their lives and faithfully demonstrating the love of Christ there. The schools in your community may not need another event as much as they need a reliable partner. They may not need a church that appears occasionally. They may need a church that consistently shows up. Trust is built one relationship at a time. Credibility is established through faithfulness. Opportunities often emerge not because churches demand them, but because schools learn they can depend on the people serving them.

That may be the most important lesson we learned. The doors were not opened through pressure, politics, or persuasion. They were opened through appreciation, encouragement, consistency, and genuine care.

Jesus did not wait for people to come to Him before entering their world. He walked among people, listened to people, taught people, served people, and loved people where they already were. Ministry in schools became one practical way for our church to do the same. If your church is considering school ministry, you do not need a perfect strategy. You do not need a large budget. You do not need every answer before you begin.

## Start with a conversation.

Ask a question.

Listen carefully.

Find one need and meet it well.

Then keep showing up.

Over time, God may use those simple acts of faithfulness to open doors you never could have forced open yourself. And you may discover, as we did, that serving schools is ultimately about something far larger than schools. It is about loving an entire community in the name of Jesus.

## Best Practices

### Building Relationships

- Meet with school leadership first.
- Ask questions before proposing solutions.
- Listen more than you speak.
- Follow through on commitments.
- Build trust before seeking influence.

### Volunteer Development

- Use dependable volunteers.
- Provide clear expectations.
- Train volunteers appropriately.
- Train volunteers in child protection.
- Celebrate volunteer stories when the church gathers.
- Encourage long-term involvement.

### Communication

- Pair service with encouragement.
- Communicate appreciation frequently.
- Focus on relationships over publicity.
- Let actions and words reinforce one another.

### Sustainability

- Start smaller than you think you should.
- Grow slowly.
- Evaluate regularly.
- Learn from mistakes.
- Prioritize consistency over scale.



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Many churches make the mistake of measuring school ministry, or any outreach ministry for that matter, only by the new church attendance it yields. Healthier measures include:

## Measures of Success

### Relationship Indicators

- New educator relationships
- Repeat invitations to serve
- Volunteer engagement
- Prayer opportunities

### Trust Indicators

- Administrators contacting the church proactively
- New partnership opportunities
- Positive community reputation
- Invitations to participate in additional events

### Kingdom Indicators

- Spiritual conversations
- Opportunities to pray with people
- Deepening community relationships
- Growing opportunities for Gospel witness

## Final Encouragement

One of the greatest misconceptions about school ministry is that churches need a perfect plan before they begin.

They don't.

Most effective school ministries begin with a conversation. A church leader asks a question. A principal identifies a need. A church shows up. . . . Then it shows up again. . . . And again. . . . And again.

**If you wait until you know everything and can guarantee success before starting something new, you will probably never start at all.** School ministry requires patience, humility, adaptability, and perseverance. But when churches faithfully step into the places where their communities are already gathering, God often opens doors they never could have opened themselves.

