

Workplace Flexibility Case Study
PRO Group's School Leave Policy
by Ken Giglio

Company: PRO Group (www.pro-group.com)

Company profile: PRO Group is an international consortium that develops merchandising and marketing programs for its distributor and retail members in the United States, Canada and Europe. PRO Group's operating units include PRO Hardware, GardenMaster, FARM MART and GOLDEN-LINK, representing more than \$3 billion in annual buying power. The company is based in Denver, Colorado, and employs 33 people, with a roughly equal number of male to female workers, many of whom are college-educated. PRO Group is a non-union workplace.

Program profile: PRO Group's school leave policy is designed to encourage employees to help children succeed in school and to improve the education process through volunteerism. Employees are granted paid time off to participate in the program. Specifically, salary exempt and non-exempt full-time employees are given up to 16 hours per year to participate in school-related activities that take place during hours in which they would normally be required to work. Part-time employees who generally work 30 hours or more are granted 12 hours of school leave per year. Absences are to be taken in minimum segments of two hours, and must receive prior approval from a supervisor. For parent employees, the program allows them to spend time aiding in their own child's educational experience. Non-parent employees, who make up about 50% of program participants, are able to take part in educationally-based activities such as being a career-day speaker or a classroom volunteer. The program, which is run by the company's Human Resources department, was implemented in 1998 after the company's chief executive read about a similar program at a major toy manufacturer. Approximately 25% of PRO Group's employees participated in the School Leave program during 2004.

Benefits to Employees: Workers who are parents or guardians are allowed to use their School Leave time for such things as parent-teacher meetings, field trips, school programs and other activities without using up vacation or sick time. The company has found that non-parent workers have also taken advantage of the program to be career day speakers, classroom volunteers, or to help a school set up a computer system.

Benefits to Employer: PRO Group says its benefit lies mainly in the knowledge that it is providing a positive program to employees and to the local community. As company Chief Executive Richard Paige puts it, "We just thought that giving help to schools was the right thing to do." In addition, PRO Group offers a Flex-Hours policy to its employees, which makes for a 39.5 hour week for workers but also allows the company to service customers for 44.5 hours per week. It additionally allows the Colorado company to better meet the needs of its East Coast customer base. As with the School Leave program, Flex-Hours is available to all employees.

The Challenge: PRO Group implemented its School Leave and Flex-Hours policies simply because company leaders felt it was “the right thing to do.” They see the options as being able to give something back to the community as well as offering a benefit for employees and customers. It sees employee satisfaction and retention as ancillary benefits of these offerings. Interestingly, PRO Group went through something of a learning curve when it first began offering flexible work hours. The company found that it needed a bit more structure than was originally offered. The resulting Flex-Hours policy has proven positive for the company, its employees, and customers.

Lessons Learned: Company leaders, such as Chief Executive Richard Paige, have tried several times to convince other companies to consider a school-leave policy as a benefit for the local community. They argue that the benefits the company receives as a result of its program are simply “a plus.” And, while Paige believes that a flexible hours policy is purely up to each individual company to decide on its own, he says “it works for us.”

Personal profile: Executive Administrator Deb Boe uses PRO Group’s school leave policy to volunteer at the Emily Griffith Center Ranch, a school/rehab center for boys who have suffered from mental, physical or sexual abuse. All of the boys at the center have been kicked out of other facilities. The center serves as the final chance for them to avoid being sent to jail or out on the street. Boe leads a group of volunteers who provide two special meals for the boys each year, a Christmas dinner and a summer barbecue. Boe has been volunteering at the center for about seven years, and originally took a day of vacation, but now is able to use her School Leave to cover her absence from work. She says she probably wouldn’t be the coordinator of the special meals if she still had to take vacation time. “The School Leave Policy enables me to volunteer twice a year . . .” [and the organizers are] “. . . very grateful that my company allows me time off to take care of these special meals.”

Company Contact: Steve Synnott, steve.synnott@pro-group.com