

A Team Approach to Volunteering

Early in the fall, on "Back to School Night," my children's teacher made sign-up sheets available for areas where she would need classroom help during the year. The class had the usual "room parents" who were available for organizing and helping with special social events and securing additional supplies, but the teacher also welcomed parents to help with curriculum-related tasks. Terrarium and aquarium upkeep, photocopying, reading stories at pre-designated times, assistance with the health curriculum (a parent who was a doctor showed the kids how the digestive system worked using mushed up food in plastic bags and was a huge hit!), and a "book publishing" project were among the jobs for which parents could volunteer.

I was a writer and editor and volunteered to help with the book project. This took a small team of parents several months to complete. In the fall and winter, children wrote a series of stories in class under the teacher's guidance (using regular and inventive spelling). Parents signed up for days and times to type the stories onto the classroom computer and print them out (they were 4-5 pages, with 3-4 sentences per page). Meanwhile, the children drew illustrations to go with their stories and also made one for the book's cover.

On designated Fridays, groups of 2-3 parents then worked with 4-5 children at a time at a separate table to cut and paste the pictures and text onto sheets of construction paper. Parents later laminated each sheet, cut them apart into pages, put them in order, and bound the resulting book on the spiral-edge binding machine in the school. Before Open House night in the spring, I went into the classroom and photographed each child individually (two photos each, in case one wasn't usable), developed the film at a one-hour photo place, and returned the photos to the teacher. The children pasted their photo onto an "Author" page on which they'd written background information about themselves. These sheets and their books were displayed on the children's desks at Open House. By the end of the year, the children had written four or five books, which their classmates also had the chance to read.

What made this project work so well for the students was that the teacher tied it into the Language Arts curriculum. The students were learning about authors, illustrations, beginnings, middles, and ends of stories. They were doing real writing, making real books. They *were* real authors. They took this job seriously and were very creative! My children still have the books they wrote and made.

What made it a successful project for volunteers was that the teacher had organized the regular times (Friday afternoons) for the team to come in, gave clear instructions for the task of the day, and had the materials to do the job. If one volunteer was absent, the others were still available to work with the children. The teacher could not have supervised the children, organized the materials (parents brought in the extra glue sticks needed) for the class and put the books together without these extra pairs of hands. She was able to keep teaching most of the class while a group of children worked on their books (about fifteen minutes per group).

What I learned as a volunteer was how hard the teacher worked managing the great variety of the children's personalities and styles of working. She was always welcoming, cheerful, and kind but also businesslike with both the students *and* parents. There was a real job to do! I really came to respect her great skill as a teacher in daring to take on such a complicated project (she was, in effect, teaching the volunteer parents as well). It was also very clear how much she respected the children's capabilities by the care that she took to let them take pride in their real accomplishments (displaying the work at Open House told them this). My respect for this teacher as a result of this project is what drew me into the school and got me involved with the PTO and planning other projects that benefited more students than those in my own children's classrooms.