

Volunteering for a Short Term Project...

I volunteered for a very simple task that had big consequences. The teachers in my son's grade were not teaching much science well into the fall, because they lacked time to go through the school's available science kits to see what was there. The kits were unusable in any case, because materials were missing from them. I was part of a team of parents who documented what supplies were missing so that they could be reordered. Each parent went through the 3-4 kits per grade, took an inventory, and made lists of what was needed. This took about half an hour on a designated afternoon. The teacher participated, although she didn't need to. We gave the list to the parent who volunteered to handle the reordering. In a few weeks the supplies arrived, and the teachers used them.

Why this worked well: This project was organized through a PTO committee after parents learned of the problem by talking with some teachers individually and the principal about ways to improve science instruction.

This turned out to be a very time-limited task. The teachers simply had to make some time to find the kits and the checklists. It was the kind of project that lingered until somebody just did it. The school hadn't had procedures in place to take care of the problem quickly, so parents were able to help accomplish that with the teachers' help. Teachers were pleased that someone took charge, organized the work, and wrote out all the orders, and that they received the materials they needed. Parents were pleased that the teachers were able to teach science units after all. The principal was pleased because he did not have to ask specific teachers to take on what had seemed to be a huge task.

What I learned as a volunteer: Teachers were not "being difficult" about teaching science, as some parents claimed. They were ready, willing, and able to teach the curriculum units, if they could get the necessary supplies. I learned that school procedures that may have been in place weren't always known or remembered by newer staff members. Some teachers were reluctant to ask for individual help, since it would look as though they didn't know their job. By dividing the job up into small parts and sharing the work with parents, it took very little time overall. No teacher had to ask for "special" help. Parents realized that this was a school-wide problem, not an individual classroom's. The success of this project went a long way toward improving morale among teachers. Parents also felt pleased that they were able to make a positive contribution.

