

# Making the Grade

## How to volunteer when you're crazy busy

By ANNETTE GENDLER

Three years ago, I became board president of my children's elementary school, a role that was never on my list of lifetime goals. It was not the right time: I was working as project manager for an HR consulting firm, a job that required travel and long hours. I was also completing an MFA degree, and I had just accepted an evening teaching engagement. My children were 7, 10 and 11 at the time. I did it because I saw it as a call to civic service, and because I was committed to the school's success.

Here is what I was not expecting: Volunteering at my kids' school changed me more than it changed the school. Sure, I managed to hire a director of operations, and ramped up the school's PR campaign. But in the end, the benefits of giving—and not simply giving, but giving to my kids' school—had a transformative effect on me—and my kids.

### THE BENEFITS

Just ask Malia Beal, a Chicago mom who works full-time as a fundraiser: "Volunteering at my kids' school demonstrates to my children that their school and learning experience is very important to me." Beal has chaperoned field trips and helped at book fairs since her daughter started at the Ted Lenart Regional Gifted Center.

Holly Raider moved to Glencoe when her sons were beyond the age where parents hang out at tot-meets. Volunteering at school gives her a chance to meet other parents. She spends weeks abroad running executive leadership workshops, but she also co-chairs the PTA's lunch program, and serves hot lunch when she's in town. She cherishes the opportunity to see her kids during their school day. She feels that "as children get older, parents are less involved

in classroom activities, and volunteering allows me to get a pulse on what is happening."

Raider also points out a different benefit: "Through volunteering I am visible to the teachers and staff—and they can informally mention what's going on with my child." Translation: Why wait until parent-teacher conferences to hear how your child is doing? Your presence in the school builds an organic and healthy relationship with your child's teachers."

Larry White, father of three, manages a growing law practice and currently serves as board president of Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School. Making it work is challenging at times, but he finds

it inspirational to work "with others who value the success of the school and how it produces young adults we can all be proud of—what better way could there be for me to spend my time?"

### REAL-WORLD SOLUTIONS

The benefits of volunteering are clear. The problem is: Where do you find the time?

**1. Identify needs that match your skills and availability.** Holly Raider used her web skills to program the PTA's lunch ordering site, a four-week project that fit between two of her trips. Before becoming president, I served as board secretary for many years. While that meant I had to attend all board meetings, they were in the evenings, and the minutes could be typed on a plane.

**2. Do it your way:** Clarify how you will contribute. I couldn't be around as much as the previous president, so I managed board activities through e-mail, scheduled meetings early in the morning, and I did not immerse myself in every aspect of school governance.

**3. Work with a team.** In my corporate life, my colleagues were very similar to me. At the school, I worked with people whose skills and thought processes were different from my own, but our differences congealed to creative problem solving because we shared the same goal. A team approach also ensures you're not the only one shouldering responsibility.

**4. Say no.** Schools have endless needs, and if you're the go-getter type, it's easy to plug yourself into every hole you see and become overcommitted, burned out, and ineffective. I said no when asked if I could sew costumes for the school play, even though I know how to sew.

**5. Learn not to be perfect.** Larry White finds that "somehow things do get gone—although not always as well as I'd like. That has taken some getting used to—accepting that doing my best under the circumstances is all I can do."

**6. Make it a finite commitment.** Having an end in sight helped me do my best. I promised myself and my family that I would be board president for two years, and I kept that promise. From day one I had my eye on my successor.

**7. Enjoy it.** As president, I honed leadership skills I didn't know I had. I grew as a person because I was out of my comfort zone. I did things I never thought I would—like haggle with the local alderman. I made friends I never would have made, and the fabric of community has become denser and more meaningful to me. I also perfected those juggling skills that any working parent has to have. Volunteering can be stressful at times, but it is also immensely rewarding. Find out for yourself.

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