

FPSPI

PARENT PERSPECTIVES



Please send your questions or comments to the Parent Committee via Chair, Deb Woythal at dwoythal@gmail.com



We're Not Teachers...Just Parents

(Teaching FPS as Parent Coaches)

by Jeannine Ripp

This month's contribution comes from Jeannine Ripp, a parent coach in Austin, Texas.

I believe it was May of last year when we received an email from our school's FPS teacher saying that she was retiring from teaching FPS and moving on to other things in her life. Since the sad state of limited funding in our district would not allow a full-time teacher to be hired as her replacement, the several of us who received the email felt the panic that comes from knowing that if someone did not take over her duties, *this program would cease to be* as a part of our school. (I will not elaborate on the incalculable value of this program, as I'm sure the reader is already well-aware.)

The second part of this beloved teacher's email was a call for help. She asked if any of we parents might know someone who would be willing to teach the class, or even be willing to TEACH IT OURSELVES. Now, I am a stay-at-home parent, as is my fellow coach, Alison. I am not a teacher. Nor is she. We do not have any certificates or diplomas related to teaching. At that time, our days were spent rousing children out of beds for school, assembling lunches and snacks and dinners, scheduling school events, after-school events, play dates, sport activities, doctor appointments, driving little people to these events, running errands, accomplishing daily chores, and volunteering, volunteering, volunteering.



So, why, when this particular call for help appeared in my inbox, did I jump for the keyboard and type a resounding "I WILL TEACH IT!!!" What exactly was I thinking? Why did I think I was qualified? What about this program compelled me to delusions of grandeur to make me think I could lead children to understanding a complex problem solving methodology? Hmm. These were good questions. I did have some answers, I assured myself. 1. My child had been in the program and went on to the State Bowl, so I was vaguely aware of the program's goals, and I knew I liked those goals and found them interesting. 2. Both my children were identified gifted & talented, so it was reasonable to assume that the other children in the program were, in some way, of similar...intensity. 3. I had spent an awful lot of time reading and studying about about the minds of creative, intelligent, out-of-the-box thinking children. I had attended several conventions and seminars, and had even served on a scholarship committee of a state gifted and talented advocacy group. I felt like I understood these kids. 4. It is in my nature to seek adventure. I was up for something new and exciting.



So, with these justifications in mind, I heartily agreed to take on the task of teaching the FPS process to 5 classes of students, 2nd-5th grade, at my local elementary school, on a volunteer basis, without any prior experience. The great silver lining was that I was not alone. Another (also delusional) parent had agreed to teach it with me. At least any terrible failure would not be solely on my shoulders, and I happened to really like this other delusional parent, so that made the endeavor even easier to undertake.

Our early days preparing for our classes involved attending an in-depth training, which equipped us with a handy blue instruction guide (which we still refer to as “the blue packet”), some very important experiences with the process, and the wisdom of experienced teachers. We left the training a little overwhelmed, but feeling confident in our inherent understanding of

things. What was more of a mystery was the school environment. How would we find a room to teach in? What time of day would we teach? Would we have to teach for many hours, every day (like REAL teachers)? Would we be allowed materials to use? Would other teachers support us and include us? How would the principal support us? Would parents of our students find us to be legitimate instructors? Do we even call them “our students?” What does that make us? Teachers?? We quickly said no. We are not worthy of that distinction. See paragraph 2 above. We are just parents. We’ll call ourselves “coaches.”

As we sat down to prepare for our first few lessons, the fact that we were not teachers was clearly apparent. How do we introduce this topic? How much time do we spend on this aspect? How do we bridge this idea with that activity? How does this dovetail into that? Should we do this extra thing, or not? What if they talk too much? What if they don’t listen? How will we know if they are getting it? What if someone gets sick in class, or has an accident or acts out? How do we make sure the needs of the quiet ones are met as well those of the ones who need lots of movement and excitement. These are things teachers would know instinctively. They could do it with their eyes closed, and they’d do it well. We were just parents. We’d have to rely on intuition to get the job done.



The early lessons were planned with much care, over many hours, with much deliberation. Alison and I met twice a week to flesh it all out and bounce ideas between us. At first, we felt the need to stick to these lessons exactly. But what we found was that it was much more fun for the kids and for us to have a general idea of the lesson plan and to be flexible during class, going with the flow, allowing ideas to be shared, making sure everyone had a chance to participate. This freedom of expression seemed very, very important, we noticed. This is how they learned from one another and from us, and how we learned from them. We started to realize that, not being teachers, we could make our own structure in the class. We had no preconceived notions, no written standards that we were held to. We felt that, for maximum creativity, we needed to broaden the boundaries. Our only two rules became: 1) Listen respectfully; and 2) Don’t hurt anyone. Doodling was okay. Sitting on the floor was okay. Drawing your thoughts out on the white board was okay. Using multi-colored pens was okay. Chewing gum was okay. Wild and crazy ideas that didn’t immediately make sense were okay. Piggybacking on ideas was most certainly okay. “Can we act out our challenge?” Sure! “Can we make a commercial for an invention we thought of?” Yes! Connections and ah-ha moments that we had along the way were something worth stopping for, something to appreciate and to celebrate.



These new boundaries created such enthusiasm and energy and excitement that some days felt like a circus: a 3rd grader snuck away to the bathroom, unnoticed, and drew a mustache on his face; a curious 2nd grader took apart a pen and lost the spring, denying he was the culprit; a 4th grader leapt from the top of his desk at his sheer excitement to share an idea; a whole class became so loud while excitedly working in groups that the floor of the portable was literally shaking; 3rd graders frenetically flicked marshmallows across the room using self-constructed catapults to demonstrate the solution of getting food from Sherwood Forest to Nottingham. (It looked like it had snowed all over the floor by the time we proved that we could, indeed, get food across the village walls.)

ATTENTION ALL PARENTS!

Each affiliate program is constantly seeking parents as volunteers to coach, evaluate, provide help at the State Bowl and do what ever it takes to keep FPS alive and vibrant across the globe!

Won't you consider volunteering your services as Jeannine and Alison have? We invite you to contact your Affiliate Director and volunteer!



Please Note: Every school, school district, state or affiliate has different requirements and regulations for volunteers in the school. We encourage you to discover what your area's regulations are prior to volunteering.

Jeannie and Alison have complied with all of the Texas and Austin ISD requirements in order to be parent volunteers in the classroom, which include a criminal background check.

At the same time that all this euphoria was to be had, being “just parents” provided us with technical challenges. We teach in a sparse portable behind the school. If we want to show the kids a YouTube video of a Good Morning America segment related to Surveillance Society, how do we do that? There is no projector in the room. There is no laptop. There *is* WiFi, but you can't access it unless you have a district log-in and password, which we don't have, as we are not employees. The AV staff person told us we could borrow a laptop and projector that is attached to a cart. A cart that is waaaay down in the 3rd grade wing. We arrived early to locate the cart (NOT where we were told it was located), pushed it out of the school, up the broken pavement of the side walk, across some gravel, and up the steep portable ramp. Once inside, we did our best to plug it in and set it up, only to find that -- you guessed it-- it didn't work. We grabbed a heroic teacher from the playground for assistance, as the kids would be in the room at any second, who very graciously investigated. She told us that we don't have the correct dongle. Where can we get the correct dongle, we asked. She shrugged, apologetically. We abandoned the cart and the whole idea of showing the video. Next time, we bring our cell phones, find a pod-cast and plug in the phone to a portable speaker. Bam! We're in business. So, we practice our own flexibility, creativity and problem solving in skirting around technical issues. (We have, since then, managed to find the correct dongle and can now push out the cart, no matter sleet, nor hail, and set it up, all by ourselves.)

With no let-up on our regular stay-at-home duties during the week, on Tuesdays, we teach two classes back-to-back, and on Thursdays we teach 3 classes back-to-back, with 0-5 minutes in-between. We pull the children from their regular classrooms, right before their lunch,

which they eat in our class. All the classes are doing different activities and working on different topics. All the classes have personalities and require slightly different approaches. All the classes require a high degree of energy from us. With this and with the circus and with the technical difficulties, FPS days can leave us utterly exhausted. When I come home on Thursdays, I literally lay down on my entry-way rug and let out a big, long sigh. I'm just a parent, I say to myself. I don't have all the training and resilience that REAL teachers have.

But, as I lay there, a smile creeps across my face as I go over in my mind the exciting moments, the ah-has and connections, the exhilaration of coaching (no, *teaching*) a complex process to a group of highly interesting kids and having their amazing ideas and understanding come back to you with joy and confidence. And still I'm just a parent. **I'm a parent who teaches FPS, and who is totally fulfilled.**

“Volunteers don't get paid, not because they are worthless, but because they are priceless!”

~Author Unknown~

**Thank you to
all our FPSP
Parent
Volunteers!**

