

## Valley Gives - The Need for Teacher Support

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Photo by Barbara Dyskant

The Education team at CDSS is working on the creation of resources for school teachers who are interested in including participatory American folk dance in their classrooms. To that end, Pat MacPherson, CDSS Director of Education, and I are talking to teachers about what they need, and we are actively fundraising through [Valley Gives](#) again this year, on 12.12.13, to allow us to produce the best possible resources to meet those needs.

Last month, as part of this important and exciting initiative, I had the pleasure of going to Washington Elementary School, in Kingsport, TN, and meeting with Physical Education and Music teachers from that school district to discuss the role participatory American folk dance can play in their classrooms. Long story short, a PE teacher from the school, named John Luppe, came to one of the contra dances put on by the Historic Jonesborough Dance Society. Once John spoke to David Wiley, HJDS's president, about his wish to bring contra dance to his school, it was a done deal that something would happen! John's enthusiasm was the spark and David's superb organizational skill and commitment to dance in Tennessee was the reason the meeting with the teachers happened. I got a call from David the week before *Sassafras Stomp* and I were scheduled to come to Tennessee to play, and the next thing we all knew we were scheduled for an arts residency at Washington Elementary the following week. Whew!

The teachers I met in Kingsport, while interested in the idea of bringing participatory folk dance into their classrooms, spoke about having an already jam-packed curriculum which included a broad overview of many kinds of dance, from Maori Stick-Dancing to Ballroom Dancing to the Electric Slide, and many things in between. Square dancing, while part of the survey, seemed in some cases to be pushed to the end, "if we have time," presumably because the teachers feel less confident in their ability to teach the dances. As a result, they have a harder time engaging their students in a satisfying experience. Contra dancing was not mentioned, although the Virginia Reel was. It was clear that the teachers knew, and used, some Play Party games, but didn't call them by that name. There was a general sense among the assembled group that, while American folk dance is a great thing to include in their dance program, students have no context and connection to the importance of that experience, and teachers, at least in the assembled group, lack appropriate repertoire and skills to become dance callers for a week.

After the informal lunch and discussion, we adjourned to the school's auditorium for two 40-minute sessions, each with around 40 kindergarten and first grade students. Teachers, parents, administrators, and guests observed as I split the children into smaller groups of twenty, and led each group through the same 20 minute lesson. The lesson covered the skills necessary to a successful dance experience:

- Appreciating the music and musicians
- Listening and responding to the music
- Moving in time to the music, individually and as a group
- Holding hands respectfully
- Listening and responding to the caller
- Learning a song and associated dance

My lesson was as much for the teachers as for the children, showing a solid, basic, accessible lesson to begin the building of a culture of participatory dance in a classroom of young children. And the children—such sweet faces, and such openness to a new experience. My tour around the South was ten days, and the experience at Washington Elementary was, hands down, the most memorable and meaningful of my time on the road.

Please help support this important work through a generous donation to CDSS through [Valley Gives](#) on 12.12.13. Your gift will fund our outreach work in schools and our development of useful, accessible resources for teachers and schools.