

National Representative Speech for State Conventions (Fall 2009)

It is not just PTA's influence, but our association itself which spans families over generations and countries over the globe. Yet if we are going to continue to be a relevant place for families in the 21st century—a place which not only serves, but also includes, all of America—then there is one question every one of you must be able to answer. When you invite people to join us, you must have an answer for “Why PTA?” This isn't easy, because there is no *single* right answer. There are many. So the “right” answer depends entirely upon who is asking the question. Parents, grandparents, and caregivers, teachers and neighbors, businessmen and congresswomen—they all have a place in PTA, but each has their own motivation for supporting our mission. Responding to “Why PTA?” becomes even more difficult when our detractors use just one word to answer “Why *not* PTA?”: “Dues.”

Because it's used so commonly as a complaint, and because it's so easy to counter, let's get right to that misleading idea about dues—then we can begin to tackle the larger question. It is true that dues are required of every member in PTA. National dues are a *huge* \$1.75!

With those less than two dollar dues, your state is individually assisted by a national service representative, on call whenever you need them. For those seven quarters, you get an unlimited number of phone calls to PTA's customer service department, there to answer questions about bylaws or building successful partnerships. For the price of one Sunday newspaper, your state and local leaders get news *and* resources year-round, with plenty of training available—online and in-person.

Justifying those dues for members is as easy as comparing it to getting a full year's worth of groceries (for an entire family) for just the cost of a glass of milk. With so much great information for families, National PTA's website may be the single best asset available to any member. On PTA.org, you can learn about everything your \$1.75 helps pay for, including the Official PTA Kit, cash grants for local units, member benefits, national programs like Reflections, and so much more.

It is that “so much more” part which is the key to the rest of the answer to “Why PTA?” “So much more” encompasses all the intangibles of PTA membership. These intangibles are not

easily summarized, but they are exactly the reason why PTA is a historic association woven into the very fabric of American society. They are what connects members to new information and inspiration, they are what keeps education an issue of national importance, they are what enables PTA to achieve so much at both local schools and on Capitol Hill. They are, in short, *you*.

You, and the millions of other dedicated members, are the reason why PTA will *always* be a more effective parent involvement organization than any stand-alone website, magazine, or localized group ever could be. Not just because you can “network,” but because you are committed people united by a common purpose. There is a bond that you share with other PTA members, whether you’ve ever met them in person or not. There is a belief that together we can accomplish great things for all of America’s children, *including our own*—because we already have, many, many times before.

It can be a point of personal pride that you are a member of the largest child advocacy group in the country—over 5 million members strong. But be aware that any time you make an assertion like that, there is often an unspoken, but legitimate, question from those who are not PTA members: “What does that mean for my child?” It means that things we take for granted now, like universal kindergarten, free hot lunch programs, and a juvenile justice system, were all PTA advocacy successes. It means that *your* state Parental Involvement Resource Center—*your* PIRC—is federally funded, and that the Elementary Secondary Education Act-NCLB explicitly requires *your* schools to have parent involvement provisions. PTA leaders and members were the advocates that made those achievements possible. Not only is PTA continuing to work, *right now*, with the White House and Congress on nutrition in our schools and family engagement in our cities, we are also providing vaccines to thousands of communities through Let’s Fight Flu Together! and offering families over 250,000 special retail discounts through the PTA Rewards Card. PTA can only do these things because of your support.

Because we are the largest child advocacy group in America, that means there is one more unspoken, but legitimate, question for every PTA member: “What will you *personally* do to contribute to PTA’s legacy?” Will you ask people to join PTA who have never been asked before—especially men, youth, and ethnically diverse families? Will you build stronger partnerships with the educators at your school and the members of your community? Will you engage your elected leaders—both locally and nationally—so that our children can, without question, be the healthiest and most successful students in the world? PTA can be the single best place for

families trying to support the next great generation of Americans—but only if you are willing to help build an association that serves all families *and reflects all families*. We have accomplished much with a membership whose appearance has remained largely unchanged for decades. But we now run the risk of becoming irrelevant if we cannot welcome new faces into PTA. Unparalleled diversity is one of our country’s great strengths, and it *must* be one of PTA’s as well.

Years ago, President John F. Kennedy said, “Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education.” While you are planning back-to-school events, sorting out the details of a fundraiser with the principal, or working a PTA table outside the gym during home games, you may not realize how these little things are connected to our prosperity as a people. It’s not the most obvious line to follow, but it *is* there. When PTA gets more parents involved and volunteering, more students will perform better in school. They will score higher on tests, be more likely to graduate and go to college, and be healthier and better prepared as workers and citizens. These are undeniable facts, supported by countless studies. The line that connects all these things runs for decades—starting with strong families and going straight through to better schools, flourishing communities, stronger local economies, and a nation ready to lead the rest of the world through whatever the future may hold. This is why it’s so important to have a national organization dedicated to parent involvement, and why you have such a vital role to play as PTA members.

I can tell you 1,000 times how invaluable your contributions are. So can teachers, and principals, and education policy experts, and even the President of the United States. In fact, all of these people *have* publicly declared the importance of involved parents in successfully educating children and building the America of tomorrow. But none of that matters if you do not believe it yourselves. If you do not believe that more involved parents can help your school, that reaching out to new families and community members is the single most important thing you can do as PTA members, then there is an excellent chance that we will fail our children.

This past spring, President Obama said, “The relative decline of American education is untenable for our economy, it’s unsustainable for our democracy, and it’s unacceptable for our children... America’s entire education system must once more be the envy of the world.”

We have arrived at a watershed moment in American history. We can either bring families, schools, and communities together to improve the way our education system works in

this country, or we can allow our students to continue their slide on the international stage. The size of the task before us simply cannot be underestimated, and we need to have as many people involved as we possibly can. But you need to look no further than the history of this association to see that we *can* get huge new numbers of parents more involved in schools. We *can* bring the deep and broad talents filling our communities into our classrooms. And we *can* be the ones who help our fellow citizens answer the call to serve their country by serving their school community first.

I know we have the ability to do this, because everything we need to make it happen is already in this room right now: PTA members willing to do the work that will make their predecessors proud. You are not ordinary people, and this is not an ordinary association. For 112 years, this has been the home of the most effective child advocates the world has ever seen, where parent involvement comes first, and great schools with healthy kids naturally come next. This is the place where moms and dads and neighbors *just like you* take on the big challenges, and then deliver the even bigger solutions. This is where our nation's history, its future, and its millions of current citizens come together to support its students. This is *your* PTA. Now it's time we make it *America's* PTA.