

Connecting PTA's Incredible Past to Its Unlimited Future

Our founders—Alice McLellan Birney, Phoebe Apperson Hearst, and Selena Sloan Butler—were extraordinary women. Denied the right to vote by their government, and discouraged from activism by their society, these women still advocated on behalf of children with a voice that awakened a nation. Education and social justice were more important to them than expectations and social mores, and their beliefs ignited a movement to the benefit of all children in this country. Their passion and spirit have lived on through generations of PTA leaders, most recently (and most visibly) in our dynamic Chief Executive Officer Warlene Gary.

Warlene's strength of character and enthusiasm for child advocacy are immediately obvious to anyone who's met her. Since 2003, she has been more than our CEO—she has been one of PTA's strongest voices calling for equity in education and the greater health and wellness of our children. So it is with tremendous appreciation that we will bid her farewell when Warlene retires this summer.

Today, PTA is a stronger and more inclusive organization because of her efforts. She came to PTA wanting to connect with more minority families, create new partnerships, and engage parents from *all* cultural and economic backgrounds in their children's lives and educations. With Warlene's guidance, we have established the Emerging Minority Leaders Conference, Take Your Family to School Week, the Training and Capacity Building Initiative, and Community Connections. Her legacy is one which stresses the importance of reaching out to everyone in the school community—and the necessity of continuing the critical work that's only just begun.

PTA has successes to build on, but there is also much more to be done, and we need to remember that our CEO won't be the only one stepping down this summer. PTA leaders at all levels of our organization will complete their term in office this spring. But that doesn't necessarily mean we will lose their counsel, nor does it mean we will be left without talented people to follow them. Through proper transition planning, leaders can find appropriate ways to remain active in PTA, and emerging leaders can learn from their predecessors and hit the ground running.

Thoughtful leadership transition is important in all organizations, but it is of special importance within ours. Because PTA leaders generally serve for only a year or two, having a process in place to transfer the collective knowledge of previous officeholders to newcomers is crucial to taking advantage of our 112 year history. The next generation of PTA leaders can only benefit from the wisdom of experience if we are committed to taking the time to engage them.

Nurturing our emerging leaders does more than ensure the continuous, smooth operation of units—it is an essential part of keeping our organization growing and connected to

contemporary thought. The constant influx of fresh members and new ideas allows PTA to be a relevant resource for all families and a powerful voice for all children. When we welcome new members and leaders into PTA, we are welcoming the future of this organization. Without them, our ability to advocate for children is seriously diminished.

PTA has been at the forefront of children's issues for over a century now. We have been effective advocates because of our members' devotion. We have endured because our organization has always embraced the next generation of PTA members, and because we have supported and nurtured new generations of leadership.

We will miss Warlene's exuberance and guidance and wisdom when she retires, but let us not forget our responsibility in developing those who will be Warlene's successors, in spirit, if not in title. The future leaders of PTA could be anywhere, and they could be you.

Jan Harp Domene
2007-2009 PTA National President