

National PTA's Liberal Politics Cost Parental Support

Parents Joining Independent Organizations That Care About Education, Not Politics

By Kathryn Jean Lopez

Summary: The PTA was one of the most successful voluntary associations in the United States. But it has become an unabashed advocate of liberal political causes that alienate many parents. As the PTA continues its political advocacy, parents in increasing numbers are abandoning the organization.

The PTA. It's so familiar-sounding. It's as American as apple pie. But if you are like many Americans, the last time you thought about the PTA was to recall the lyrics of the "Harper Valley PTA" song.

If the PTA seems ever-present it's because so many schools have parent-teacher groups that have adopted the "PTA" name. Look more carefully, though, and you'll find that many are unrelated to the official organization. Many parents don't even know there is such a thing as the National PTA.

But the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (it has a trademark on the names "National PTA" and "PTA") has more serious problems than clarifying the role of local chapters in its organizational structure. Critics and parents (often the same) say the PTA has become just another special-interest lobby, more interested in representing the teacher unions than in fulfilling the practical needs of our nation's schools. That's why PTA's membership rolls are on the decline and it faces a very uncertain future.



Parents want an organization that addresses their immediate concerns for their children's education. The National PTA focuses on political advocacy.

Politics and Demographics Threaten PTA

The PTA was once enormous. In the 1960s its membership reached an historic high of 12 million, and it still lays claim to being the fifth largest voluntary organization in the United States. But PTA officials now claim only 6.5 million members, and membership continues to fall rapidly. According to its own annual reports, the PTA lost some 450,000 members between 1993 and 1998.

Critics are even skeptical of the 6.5 million claim. Charlene K. Haar, president of the Education Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, writes in her new book, *The Politics of the PTA*, "If all [6.5 million] were parents, the PTA would

enroll members from about 22 percent of all families with school-age children." She estimates that the figure is closer to 10 percent, putting PTA's membership at closer to 5.3 million. According to the PTA, there are some 26,000 local PTA affiliates in

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118,276 U.S. elementary and secondary schools. (The PTA's own publications list varying numbers, from 21,849 to 26,000.) Haar thinks this too is an overestimation. She argues that the PTA's total doesn't take into account factors like discrepancies between the claimed membership provided by state chapters and actual dues collected and the double (or more) counting of parents with more than one child in different schools.

Why the sharp decline in PTA membership? One reason is the changing demographics of the American family. Who has time for PTA meetings in households where both parents work or in single-parent households? Another possible reason is the changing nature of neighborhood communities, which today have so many more outlets around which to organize family activities. But a third reason is surely the PTA's liberal political agenda. The National PTA is preoccupied with political maneuvering that is of little interest to busy parents, and it advocates public policies on a host of issues that do not

reflect parents' views.

Says Haar, "The National PTA is a figurehead organization that does not conduct itself in an open and straightforward manner, either with the public at large or with its members. Most members would be much more involved if the PTA were primarily interested in meeting the needs of members' children in their local schools. Instead, the National PTA devotes its energies to lobbying for welfare and educational legislation, and tries to persuade parents to do so too."

PTA officials are dismayed by their loss of membership, but give no indication that they are prepared to abandon their dedication to political advocacy or even moderate their agenda of big government solutions. Like the League of Women Voters, the PTA is a venerable organization that is oriented towards women and once expressed traditional civic concerns. But today's PTA is also like the League in its declining membership and concentration on liberal political advocacy. PTA's current ideological clamor may well prove to be the deathknell of this old American institution.

Organization

The PTA was called the National Congress of Mothers when Alice Birney organized it in 1897. Birney, a twice-widowed working mother, was its first president. Phoebe Hearst, mother of publisher William Randolph Hearst, was first vice president, and Mrs. Adlai Stevenson, wife of President Cleveland's vice president, was second vice president. The mothers met in Washington, D.C. "for the interchange of views, and the study of home problems which can be solved by woman alone."

In 1908 the group's name was changed to the National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations. By 1926, the PTA hit the million-member mark; it reached a peak of 12,131,318 members in the 1962-63 school year. Observes Haar, "If past as well as present members are counted, it may have enrolled over its lifetime more members than any other existing organization."

Organized on national, state, and local levels, the stated mission of the PTA is: "To support and speak on behalf of children and youth in the schools, in the community and before governmental bodies and other organizations that make decisions affecting children...assist parents in developing the skills they need to raise and protect their children [and] encourage parent and public involvement in the public schools of this nation." The PTA then organizes its mission into objectives:

* "To promote the welfare of the children and youth in home, school, community, and place of worship";

* "To raise the standards of home life";

* "To secure adequate laws for the care and protection of children and youth";

* "To bring into closer relation the home and the school, that parents and teachers may cooperate intelligently in the education of children and youth";

* "To develop between educators and the general public such united efforts as will secure for all children and youth the highest advantages in physical, mental, social, and spiritual education."

Funny how only two of these objectives have anything to do with school.

PTA officials claim that about 89 percent of PTA member families had children in public schools in 2000-2001, while about 11 percent had children in private schools. Parents and teachers of children in private schools are not formally prohibited from PTA membership, but membership is not encouraged. That's not surprising when you consider the PTA's opposition to school choice.

Local PTA chapters typically sponsor programs that are supposed to benefit their local public schools. (Exceptions include private kindergartens, Head Start programs, and preschools.) Chapters meet in local schools and have some legal and financial autonomy in choosing school-support programs, but they also promote

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the National PTA's latest political message to parents. National PTA bylaws forbid using pupils to convey political messages, but it's not uncommon for teachers to sometimes resort to this practice, particularly when it comes to issues like vouchers, which have an impact on their jobs.

PTA individual member dues are low—between \$5 and \$10 annually—but even a declining mass membership can generate substantial sums for state affiliates, which receive \$1.75 of each individual member's dues and from 50 cents to \$5 from each local affiliate. Per capita dues are also the primary funding source for the National PTA; they generate 80 percent of the National PTA's annual revenue of \$9 million (1999). The national office also receives revenue from investments, fees for training programs, policy conferences, convention exhibits, sale of merchandise, and government grants.

For instance, in fiscal year 1997-98, the PTA received a U.S. Department of Education Star School program grant for \$30,000 and a \$100,000 supplemental grant from the Centers for Disease Control for PTA affiliates' health programs. In 1995, the PTA entered into a long-term project (initially three years, then extended to six) with the Environmental Protection Agency to develop environmental awareness training workshops and other environmental-education tools; the EPA agreed to contribute \$250,000 a year, 95 percent of the project's cost.

Additional investment income is generated by the 1996 sale of the PTA national headquarters building in Chicago to the government of Thailand for \$3.1 million. PTA's national office, still located in Chicago, employs about 56 fulltime staff. Four fulltime staff handle lobbying in the group's Washington, D.C. office.

The PTA was started by upper-middle-class women who wanted to help women become good parents and teachers. But it has become something very different. Haar writes in *The Politics of the PTA*:

From our perspective, at the beginning of the twenty-first century...the PTA is an anomaly. It was founded upon an ideology that appeals less and less to upper-middle-class women, despite the social status of its early leaders and activities. The steep decline in birth rates among upper-middle-class women, the huge increases in cohabitation and children born out of wedlock, the expansion of educational and occupational opportunities for women, and the declining prestige of homemaking suggest that the founding rationale for the PTA no longer holds much appeal for upper-middle-class mothers.

The PTA, Haar suggests, "survived these dramatic social changes by gradually replacing its focus on motherhood with a welfare-state agenda."

Politics has given the PTA a renewed sense of purpose. But by abandoning a focus on direct services to parents and teachers of schoolchildren, the group has paid a heavy price. Observes Jennifer A. Marshall, a policy analyst at Empower America, a Washington, D.C. think tank: "National PTA material can give the impression that school is almost an afterthought."

Foe of School Choice and Education Reform

The PTA did advocate public policies in its earlier years. It called for child-labor laws, urged that vaccination be made mandatory, and endorsed the federal school-lunch program. But more recently it has become the ideological twin of the National Education Association, the political powerhouse for public-school teacher interests.

Like the NEA, the PTA is all about liberal protest politics. It vehemently opposes school choice of any kind. "Vouchers usurp the will of the people and grant to a select few the right to determine how to spend our tax dollars," one PTA lobbyist recently argued in a "PTA Legislative Update."

Outside official circles, PTA attacks can be even more strident. In 1999 one local PTA in Rochester, Michigan distributed an inflammatory leaflet at North Hill Elementary School warning parents about proponents of the school-voucher movement. Its vitriolic description of the Nobel laureate who supports parental choice: "Milton Friedman is best known to the world as the former economics advisor to Augusto Pinochet, the fascist dictator of Chile."

Home schooling particularly arouses PTA ire. In 1987, when home schooling was in its infancy, the PTA adopted a resolution increasing education regulations to weaken the movement. And in 1990 the Iowa PTA opposed a state ballot initiative to legalize home schooling. One Iowa home-schooler complained to *Organization Trends*: "The PTA sees itself as the lay support arm of the great and holy Church of Education. There is one school, and the Director of the Department of Ed is its prophet...The PTA tolerates private and religious schools, which at least observe the forms of the great church (they have to be accredited in Iowa, unlike about half the states). Home schoolers come in for special wrath because we defy the church." Fortunately, the PTA failed; today more than 5,300 schoolchildren in Iowa are home schooled.

Charlene Haar notes that "inasmuch as home schooling is the ultimate in parental involvement, one might expect the PTA to be supportive of it, but this is not the case." The PTA's position seems to confirm its real goal: bolstering public schools despite the successes shown in recent years by alternative ways to educate children.

The National PTA focuses its heavy-duty lobbying on Washington, D.C. In July 2002 Linda Moody, president of the Washington, D.C. PTA, testified against a bill sponsored by Rep. Dick Armey (R-TX) to provide scholarships so poor children in the nation's capital can attend private schools. Because Washington's public schools perform so poorly you might have hoped she would lend support for an attempt to help kids get a decent private education. But speaking on a witness panel that included a pro-school choice parent and someone from the anti-choice People

for the American Way, Moody made her position clear: “The solution to failing schools should not be programs that encourage the abandonment of our public schools. Public policy should promote programs that fix the problems facing public schools. Vouchers do nothing to improve public schools.”

The National PTA also signed onto a brief filed by the National School Boards Association that opposed Cleveland, Ohio’s school-choice program. The brief, prepared for the U.S. Supreme Court, said in part: “Vouchers, particularly the Cleveland program, fail to offer meaningful choice, fail to improve student achievement for participating students, and fail to improve public education for nonparticipating students.” Last June when the Court ruled in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* that Cleveland inner-city parents could use tax-funded vouchers to send their children to any public, private or parochial school, the National PTA “vowed” to keep fighting school choice. “Vouchers divert funds from public schools that are already inadequately funded,” said National PTA president Shirley Igo. “We will continue to fight voucher programs and advocate for programs that improve education for all children.” (For more information on the organizations allied with the PTA in opposing school choice, see the September 2002 issue of *Organization Trends* “What Next After the Education Voucher Victory?”)

At least the PTA’s opposition to school choice and home schooling demonstrates its stalwart defense of public schooling. More puzzling is its focus on issues having little or no relevance to education. National PTA recently encouraged a letter writing campaign of opposition to nuclear-waste storage at Yucca Mountain in Nevada. The California PTA has publicly supported abortion rights since 1972. The National PTA opposed the first Bush tax cut. Policy positions of this sort can best be understood as PTA efforts to remain in good standing with other political advocacy organizations.

What passes for liberal political activism is hardly the worst aspect of the PTA.

What’s most disheartening is the PTA’s neglect of parents. Haar tells *Organization Trends*, “Parents do not know what they are paying for. What parents get for their money is PTA’s agenda, and that is often in opposition to what parents are hoping to accomplish for their child’s education.” A 1996 Wirthlin poll found that “an overwhelming majority—82 percent—are unaware of the organization’s political and lobbying activities.”

The Price of Political Advocacy: Declining Membership

PTA is losing members as parents realize that it’s irrelevant to the education of their children. No doubt, many of the 450,000 people who disappeared from the PTA rolls between 1993 and 1998 simply failed to renew their membership. But others have joined independent parent-teacher organizations—called “PTOs”—that are springing up throughout the country.

At its 2001 national convention, the PTA director of public relations dismissed parents and teachers who support the new independent groups. Lobbying for a dues increase, she said, “We want people who are committed to this agenda, and if they’re not, that’s fine. Go be a PTO [an independent parent-teacher organization] and have a nice life.”

In other words, if you can’t hold on to your members, pretend you don’t want them. Adds Haar, “This attitude signifies a departure from the National PTA’s legacy of keeping dues very low to attract all parent groups.”

What today’s PTA ignores or forgets is that most parents join school groups because of parochial concerns. They want to know what is taught in *their* school. They want to be sure that *their* school has enough teachers and resources to educate *their* children. But clearly this is not PTA’s “agenda.” That gap between the interests of the National PTA and the interest of parents is responsible for the exodus of PTA members in recent years.

One mother in Broward County, Florida says she regrets becoming involved in her children’s elementary school PTA. She

reports: “I attended a leadership workshop one Saturday in September. If I hadn’t been driving the car pool that day, I would have left after the first speech. They proceeded to inform us that we are not our mother’s PTA. They said that their goal was to be the #1 Children’s Advocacy Lobby. They told us that we were to get politically involved in every aspect of education. I attended a special workshop where they taught us how to go about contacting our lawmakers to pass the laws they supported. I am a conservative Republican and was so upset by the constant bashing of all Republicans, especially Jeb and George W. Bush. I vowed that after my term is finished, I would never pay my PTA dues again.”

Another parent of a North Carolina magnet-school says she quit the PTA in frustration: “I could not accept that the only way to be a good parent was to toe the NEA political line. And what was that line? It appeared to me to be: Democrats in office, delegation of authority to their certified experts, lots more money for schools and, while we were at it, a general tax-based redistribution of money.”

The PTA also has taken strong stands on sex education that will not endear it to more conservative parents. It issued statements of support for Jocelyn Elders, the Clinton Administration’s controversial surgeon general. (As Arkansas state health director she adorned her desk with a “condom tree.”) And it supports guidelines issued by the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), which call for comprehensive sexual education starting in kindergarten.

Faced with criticism, the PTA typically responds by calling names. It sees “right-wing extremists” and the “religious right” behind every bush. The National Education Association even paid to send several PTA members to attend a training conference sponsored by Americans United (formerly called Americans United for Separation of Church and State). Its title: “Public Schools Under Assault: Why the Religious Right Must Lose!” (For more information on Americans United, see the **December 2002** *Organization Trends*)

“Americans United for Separation of Church and State”).

In 1999 the syndicated columnist Molly Ivins was invited to address the PTA’s national convention. She ridiculed “right-wing” groups for supporting vouchers, privatization and competition in education; called the Christian Right “the most frightened people in America!” and alleged that it would limit freedoms. Ivins announced that “many home schoolers will permit their children to read only the Bible” and told the PTA gathering, “If ever there was any evidence that man is descended from monkeys, and damned recently too, it is Tom Delay!”

Still, PTA’s knee-jerk liberalism is not the real problem, argues Tim Sullivan, president of PTO Today, Inc., a national service company that assists the formation of non-PTA parent-teacher organizations. Sullivan says parents are less troubled by some of the PTA’s liberal views than by its insistence on making public policy advocacy the heart of its mission. Says Sullivan, “The fact that the PTA makes the political mission so prominent (not the particular views, but the *emphasis* on views in general) is a problematic misfit for more groups. Most of the involved parents I run across get involved for the connection to their child’s school. They care passionately about making their local school a great place and they look for services to help them do that.”

Instead of raising dues and lobbying for more federal school funding, the PTA should be made to answer for its support of failed legislative proposals like GOALS 2000. GOALS 2000 was an education plan developed by the first Bush Administration and pushed by President Clinton. It was yet another unimaginative proposal to increase spending and undermine local control without reforming failing public schools. This PTA-backed legislation failed to do what the PTA promised—improve school performance and increase parental involvement in public schools.

In 1995, then-Virginia governor George Allen explained that GOALS 2000 money was “equivalent to less than a penny per day per student. Avoiding participation in

the program would be a small price to pay to safeguard the principle of local control of public education.” But the PTA took the position that even a small increase in federal money would make a big difference in poor school districts.

In her book Haar describes the PTA’s aversion to private and voluntary action.

[I]n its entire history, the PTA has always promoted government over private solutions to social problems. Indeed, it does not appear that the PTA’s leadership has considered the possibility that government programs may have different dynamics and outcomes than do private efforts to solve the same problems...Virtually every PTA activity that started out as a private charitable activity has led to a government program that supposedly obviates the need for private action.

Minority Outreach: Will It Boost Membership?

Even while parents are opting out of local PTA groups, many local PTA groups are themselves seceding from the national organization to form PTOs. Because they are independent from any state or national organization, membership numbers are hard to pin down. But PTO Today head Tim Sullivan estimates there are about 46,000 PTOs in the U.S.

PTA’s declining membership has led it to initiate new outreach programs, especially to minority groups. The National PTA is currently targeting Hispanic parents in Texas, Florida, and California. (A recent survey found only three percent of PTA respondents identify themselves as Hispanic.) The \$250,000 outreach campaign has as its slogan: “*Los buenos padres no nacen, se hacen*” (Good parents are not born, but made.) The National PTA is eager to provide translators at meetings and promote bilingual literature, and it has been an active opponent of English-language initiatives like California’s “English for the Children,” a project sponsored by businessman Ron Unz. National PTA plans to take the Hispanic-recruitment program

nationwide in 2004 if it proves successful in Texas, Florida, and California.

According to National PTA public-relations representative Jennifer Gaster Sopko, “National PTA has also identified Hispanic leaders/mentors in each of the pilot areas and will be bringing them together with protégés in each of their respective states—there will be 15 mentors to 30 protégés. The next step includes the mentors and protégés traveling to Chicago for a leadership and development training—then returning to their states to develop a plan for increasing Hispanic membership in PTA.”

PTA: Not Reformable?

It seems unlikely that the PTA can woo enough minorities to halt its membership slide. Nor is the PTA likely to abandon liberal advocacy or support school choice. Once co-opted by the Left, the PTA will stay Left.

The fact is the National PTA has been set up to be a legislative lobby for politicians, bureaucrats and unions, not parents. Notes Harr, “Reforming the PTA to become more responsive to parent needs would require making basic changes in the National PTA, especially its governance structure and its neutrality with regard to collective bargaining issues...Perhaps the National PTA is an organization that has outlived its usefulness and should be left to wither away.”

That would be a boon to education reform. American parents need organizations that will trust and help them. They don’t need organizations to administer political litmus tests they must pass to prove their worthiness as parents.

Kathryn Jean Lopez is editor of National Review Online.

BrieflyNoted

People for the American Way, the **Alliance for Justice** and other liberal groups vow to stop President Bush's federal court nominees, especially Charles Pickering and Priscilla Owen, who will be renominated to serve on appellate courts. Says **Nan Aron** of the Alliance for Justice, "It is hard to believe that the Administration wishes to refight the Pickering and Owen battles." Aron says that since the Administration does not want to engage in "a conciliatory process" then senators "must resist the administration's efforts to undermine our system of justice." The advocacy groups are trying to keep Republicans on the defensive following the controversy over Senator Trent Lott's praise of Strom Thurmond's 1948 presidential campaign. **Ralph Neas** of People for the American Way says the Bush nominees want to return the nation "to the 'states' rights' judicial era" and "turn back the clock decades on civil and voting rights." In a memo to journalists, "Approaching Judicial Armageddon," Neas says his coalition is not "playing the race card" by labeling the conservative strict construction philosophy a "states' rights judicial philosophy."

Civil rights groups also plan a post-Lott campaign to force Republican acquiescence to their agenda. The **Leadership Conference on Civil Rights**, a coalition of 180 civil rights, labor and other groups, has identified a half-dozen legislative goals. They include nomination of judges committed to maintaining racial preference policies; passage of hate crimes laws and prohibitions on employment discrimination; and a ban on racial profiling. **Jesse Jackson** said his **Rainbow/PUSH Coalition** plans demonstrations in cities and on college campuses to support affirmative action.

Conservative groups criticized two Bush Administration officials for speaking at **Jesse Jackson's** annual Wall Street Project. **Michael Powell**, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, and **Roel Campos**, a Securities and Exchange Commission member, appeared at Jackson's event on January 16. Launched in 1997, the **Wall Street Project** is supposed to promote minority participation in corporate America. Sandy Weill, Chairman and CEO of Citigroup, co-convened the first Wall Street Project and continues to be a major sponsor of the event. In reality, the Project is a way for Jackson to force corporations to "donate" money to his many activist groups. Says Ken Boehm, chairman of the National Legal and Policy Center, "Jackson has a very tawdry history of using his association with government figures improperly and unethically."

Nine states and the District of Columbia are establishing a **joint nonprofit operation to manage their drug prescription plans**. The nonprofit would compete with private pharmacy benefit managers who currently manage drug benefits for state employees and Medicaid recipients. These companies get rebates by promoting certain drugs. By managing their own drug benefit programs, the states intend to keep the rebates from the drug companies for themselves. Participants include New York, Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Hawaii and the District of Columbia.

On January 6, **People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)** announced a boycott of **KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken)** because of alleged animal-rights abuses. Like Jackson, PETA successfully uses corporate boycotts to raise money and advance its agenda. It says it couldn't persuade KFC's parent company, Yum Brands Inc., to change the way it raises and slaughters chickens. Yum denies the charges: "We require all of our suppliers to follow welfare guidelines, developed by us with leading experts on our animal welfare advisory council." Among other things, PETA says chickens need more space.

