

Promote Cultural Diversity in Your PTA

By Susan Shaffer

The population of the United States is undergoing significant changes. New ethnic groups and family structures are enriching our cultural landscape. But, one thing has stayed the same: no matter where parents come from or what language and customs they follow, they all want the best for their children. To help these parents learn to work with their schools, PTAs must reinvent themselves as organizations that understand the cultures that make up our school communities.

Why is culture important?

It is critical to move PTA into the future as a viable association that represents all children. So, what exactly is culture?

Culture comprises the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group. Culture shapes how we feel, act, and think; the ideas we value and cherish; how we learn; what we believe; and how we behave and react. Language and culture are the fundamental building blocks of identity.

Children gain a feeling of belonging from their family, a sense of personal history, the joy of shared meaning, and the security of knowing who they are and where they come from. Schools and PTAs that treat diversity and culture as sources of pride help a child's sense of identity and self-worth become more validated, and parental involvement and academic achievement is much more likely to occur.

To deny the significance of culture is to deny the significance of human experience, but cultural exchange is not something we can demand. Like a finely spun web, culture is made of many interlocking, intricate strands. We cannot understand another person's culture without earning his or her trust, and being willing to engage with the person on his or her own terms.

Negative attitudes and behavior patterns emerge when schools and PTAs fail to affirm and address the values and norms of the diverse and rich cultures of their students. Effective PTAs understand their own culture and cultural assumptions, as well as those with whom they interact; only with this understanding, can we build relationships and earn trust.

Strategies for engagement

As part of our association's reinvention, National PTA* established the Urban Family Engagement Initiative (UFEI). Among its services, UFEI provides training to PTAs leaders to help them engage diverse parents and caregivers in their local schools and communities. UFEI offers a baker's dozen strategies for engagement:

1. Provide multiple ways for families to give input on issues, policies, and programs.
2. Use school data (demographics, perception, student achievement, and programs) to learn about your families and students and ensure your PTA represents all your families.
3. Involve diverse parents in committee and subcommittee work.
4. Create an environment for interactive meetings.
5. Conduct meetings in multiple languages, if necessary.
6. Hold meetings in conjunction with existing school events.
7. Sponsor cultural activities that reflect families' backgrounds.
8. Link families to people, resources, and organizations in the school and community.
9. Have printed materials in multiple languages, if needed.
10. Offer English as a second language classes and/or Spanish for English speakers.
11. Offer incentives for families to attend and participate in PTA activities.
12. Establish a parent/community resource room, if space is available.
13. Promote your PTA as an advocate for all children in the school.

National PTA is focused on promoting cultural understanding among diverse groups by helping identify and overcome barriers and challenges PTA families and school staff face in building partnerships. We encourage PTAs and schools to address and meet the needs of all students, families, and staff in a culturally sensitive manner that ultimately improves academic success. **OC**

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PTA Urban Family Engagement Initiative
[PTA.org/3374.htm]
PTA E-Learning Module: "Cultural Competency"
[PTA.org/leadership_training.asp]