Family & Community Engagement

Handbook 2020 - 2021

Washington State PTA
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This handbook provides information about making Family and Community Engagement (FACE) part of all things that a PTA does, with a focus on building important relationships between parents, schools, and the community in order to better serve families.

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1.   Introduction

Family and community engagement (FACE) is at the center of everything that PTAs accomplish. It is not one thing a PTA does; it is part of all things that a PTA does. The goal of family and community engagement is for each and every child and family in a community to feel as though they are part of a PTA family, and for that PTA family to be an active part of the community in which it resides.

Family and community engagement:

- Fosters and builds community within schools and other child-centered activities where all feel welcome, can contribute, can benefit, and can make a positive difference for all children;
- Builds and supports positive relationships between teachers, staff, administrators, families, and community partners;
- Provides an accessible support system between school and community resources and families.

2.   Why is FACE a priority?

Prioritizing family and community engagement can lead to greater student academic achievement, increased volunteerism and participation by families, staff, and community, and will likely result in an increase in PTA membership through deeper understanding of PTA and its benefits.

3.   Role of the FACE chair or vice president

PTAs may identify a position focused on helping the PTA make family and community engagement a priority. This may be an elected position, such as vice president, or a chair position. This person works in conjunction with the board of directors to:

- Assess community needs;
- Develop PTA goals and objectives based on those needs;
- Oversee the execution of FACE goals and objectives;
- Encourage the board to allocate appropriate time and resources to meet these goals;
- Advocate to change mindsets, activities, and schedules to meet the needs of a community;
- Implement plans to increase family and community engagement in both PTA and the greater school community;
- Work to actively engage all families and community members;
- Evaluate the results of actions taken.

There are some specific skills that will help the FACE chair or vice president be successful in their work. PTAs should seek individuals for this position who:

- Understand and respect the diversity in the community;
- Enjoy building relationships with people around them;
- Embrace the PTA mission to support every child and to support the whole child;
- Collaborate with families, teachers, administration, and community groups to bring together all stakeholders to plan and implement FACE activities and initiatives;
- Encourage PTA leaders to be frequently present on campus so that PTA becomes a staple in all aspects of the school community through recognizable, friendly faces both before and after each school day and at various school activities;
- Possess knowledge of school, district, and community resources for families and children.

Note: Elected positions must be included in a PTA's or council's standing rules and must be elected by the membership. Chairs must be appointed and approved according to a local PTA's or council's standing rules.

4. Assessment

Identifying community needs takes time and effort, but it will provide the necessary information to set relevant and productive goals that ensure the PTA is meeting the needs of the families in the community. The PTA must also take time to assess the resources that are available to meet these needs.

4.1 Community assessment

A variety of methods and resources are available to help PTAs identify the diverse populations and needs within their communities. Some of these are listed below.

- Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) provides information about the economic and cultural make-up of schools across Washington on its website.
- School districts may have demographic information about individual schools that will be useful. This information is a good starting place to get a basic understanding of the make-up of the community.
- Discuss the community with school or district administration and specialists including the principal, counselors, and English Language Learner instructors. Ask about school learning goals, behavior goals, and information about the community. How many kids bus to school? Walk? Discuss state test scores with the principal. What goals is the school setting for improvement?
- Visit with families any time they are present at the school. Curriculum night, orientation meetings, and pick-up or drop-off are some possibilities. Personal contact is the best way to connect with people.

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- Survey the community using a variety of methods. Be aware of "sample bias," which means that the people answering the survey are those who receive certain communications, speak certain languages, or who are engaged with the school or PTA.
- Form a committee or focus group. Ask a variety of people to meet with PTA leaders, together or one-on-one, and listen to their knowledge and impressions of PTA. Ask what they believe PTA could do to be relevant in the community.
- Utilize the National PTA FACE assessment tool: *The National Standards Assessment Guide*. At first glance, this tool might look complicated, but it will help provide a clear picture of where good work is being done and where new goals will be helpful. It is a great exercise to do as a team during a board retreat or board meeting and is even more valuable when used in collaboration with the school principal. This tool is available on National PTA's website: www.pta.org.
- The National PTA School of Excellence program is designed to promote family-school partnerships for enriching children's educational experiences and well-being. Work with school administration to evaluate family engagement and receive practical feedback to improve.

4.2 Resource assessment

PTAs operate with finite financial and volunteer resources to do their very important work. Identifying the resources that are available will help PTAs make more sustainable decisions about their goals and objectives and will help identify areas in which PTAs need to further develop their resources.

- A culturally diverse community is a rich resource.
- Identify the skill sets of volunteers. People like to use their special skills to support their children. Surveys and personal conversations can help identify these skills.
- Identify the capacity of the community for volunteer service. How many parents are available to volunteer? Are there other community volunteer resources that could be investigated, such as a local place of worship or senior center?
- Evaluate communication tools and resources. These may include a website, newsletters (electronic or paper), social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), "kid mail," posters, flyers in apartments or community centers where families congregate, district e-flyer distribution, email groups, and more.
- Become familiar with the resources available to families in the community. Do families have access to school district resources, such as translators, speakers, or other specialists? Are families served by local or county food banks or clothing banks? Other resources to investigate include local businesses, libraries, middle and high school clubs and associations, city councils and chambers of commerce, and community groups such as Lions Clubs International or Rotary International.

- Learn what is available from local PTA councils and region service delivery teams. WSPTA and National PTA offer resources through their websites, and much more. Learn more about PTA resources by attending a WSPTA region conference, contacting a region director, or by contacting the WSPTA FACE Director: ptafacedir@wastatepta.org.

5.   FACE goals and objectives

Specific goals and objectives should be based on the completed assessments of the community and the PTA resources. The goals and objectives will depend solely on the needs of a PTA's families and community. SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound) make results easier to measure and evaluate. Some possible topics for goals include developing active community partnerships, establishing FACE as a priority for the PTA, increasing positive staff and family interactions, becoming a relevant resource for families in the community, reflecting the diversity of the community, and assisting parents in developing parenting skills, advocacy, and awareness.

Some sample goals and objectives:
1. Establish FACE as a priority for the PTA by:
   A. Creating a FACE chair position for the specified school year.
   B. Creating a task force to assess community and PTA resources by a specified date.
   C. Utilizing the report of the task force to create new FACE goals by a specified date.
2. Develop PTA leadership that reflects the diversity of the community by:
   A. Assessing the community demographics using data from the school district and OSPI by a specified date.
   B. Arranging personal meetings with a specified number of diverse community leaders to listen to their input about PTA.
   C. Identifying two community members who will translate for PTA at meetings and in communications.
   D. Actively seeking candidates for the nominating committee from diverse groups.

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6.   Build relationships and bolster community

Building relationships with families, school staff, and the greater community is the first and most critical aspect of engagement. Without these personal connections, a PTA will not succeed in building a community that will empower families and support all children. Again, this endeavor must be embraced by all of the PTA leadership, not only the FACE representative. The following are activities and programs PTAs can consider adopting to build community relationships, to be a relevant resource to the community, and to connect their families with the resources in the greater community.

6.1 Welcoming activities

Anything that a PTA does might be the first impression for a new family. Consider what that impression should be. Ideas to keep in mind:

- Are the website and newsletter welcoming? Do they have information for new families? Are they easy to navigate?
- Collaborate with the school to have PTA volunteers help with the kindergarten registration process so that PTA is part of the school experience from the very first contact. PTA can provide childcare, provide directional signs, or provide translators. PTA volunteers can distribute contact information to encourage people to ask questions.
- Collaborate with the school to send information to new families about summer play dates. Have friendly PTA families host summer play events and invite "guest stars" such as the principal, teachers, and staff. Hold events at various times and places (community parks, schools, and other recreational areas) so working families and families with small children can pick times and locations that work for them.
- Have a helpful presence at back-to-school events. Provide help to parents with turning in forms or finding classrooms, and wear identifiable clothes so you can be found (bright shirts, vests). Try "ask me" buttons. Use caution – if a PTA tends to talk only among its own members, the bright shirts will give that away very quickly and create a "clique-ish" feeling in the school.
- Host a back-to-school barbeque or picnic and invite staff. Have information about the school and district, a PTA events calendar, and PTA members available to answer questions.
- PTA meetings should include name tags, greeters, friendly people scattered through the room, and easily identified PTA members (lanyards, shirts, hats). Offer translators or conduct meetings in two prevalent languages.
- PTA events may include name tags, greeters, identifiable PTA members, banners or posters about PTA, and PTA officer business cards with contact information, and more.

6.2 Facilitate parent-school relationships

PTA can provide opportunities for families to interact with the principal and staff. These interactions help build community trust and increase parent participation in the education process, empowering parents to advocate for their children. Some suggestions for relationship-focused activities include:

- Host a principal "welcome night" where parents are invited to the school and the principal gives an opening address, establishes basic expectations for the year, and invites parents to ask questions. Provide a form on which parents can write their contact information, best times to contact them, and preferred methods of communication. The principal can provide the same information to parents. Large schools may consider smaller groups by hosting just one or two grades at a time.

- PTA can organize monthly or bimonthly informal "coffee chat" gatherings with the principal. Have times vary to include as many families as possible. Set a topic of conversation or keep it open for discussion. Invite bilingual parents to translate as necessary.
- Invite the principal to write a weekly or monthly article for the PTA newsletter.
- Include a monthly newsletter article spotlighting a staff member (interview her or him and include slightly personal questions such as what school he or she attended growing up, a favorite book, or his or her favorite subject in school.)
- If there are changes going on in the district (boundary changes, bond campaign, school reconfiguration, transportation routes, communication systems, emergency plan changes, etc.), host a school or district information night and invite district personnel to share information and allow families to ask questions. Provide childcare and translation if necessary.

6.3 Learning-focused activities

Parents are more likely to participate in programs that they believe will help their child be more successful in school. Linking PTA programs and events to learning creates effective family and community engagement opportunities. Some ideas for learning-focused activities include:

Literacy events: Invite a school "celebrity" to read a book (kids can vote on a staff member, district superintendent, city mayor, local sports celebrity, firefighters, police officers, military service personnel). Have book trivia questions, used book fairs or swaps, campus book clubs, Read Across America celebrations with guest readers (see "celebrities" list above), or invite an author to speak to classes or run a workshop.	**STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) activities**: Invite community businesses and family members involved in STEM as careers or hobbies to talk about or demonstrate their work. High school clubs such as robotics or material science and engineering clubs can bring materials and offer demonstrations. Offer hands-on science experiences for children; collaborate with staff and teachers and have them run science "fun" stations. School assemblies or in-class activities related to STEM can also be provided by PTA.
Math games night: Collaborate with school administrators and teachers to invite parents to play math games with children in classrooms. Teachers can explain what kids are learning through these games, and what parents can do at home to help. Game shops will sometimes sponsor these events.	

6.4 Engaging the greater community

Engaging community members, businesses, and organizations as partners in education can improve the learning community. These community partners may be able to provide expanded learning opportunities and build broad-based support for increased school funding and support.

Network with community establishments such as hospitals, community centers, banks, and libraries to get free services or informational sessions for the school. (Before moving ahead, a PTA might ask the principal for a list of priorities regarding services for the school and its families).	**Connect middle and high school students** with elementary school students for activities such as tutoring or performances by music groups and drama clubs. Older students can read to younger students and help with events and in return they accrue needed service hours for clubs and honor societies.
Invite community groups, youth organizations, elected city officials, and district employees to school shows, sporting events, and showcases of service-learning projects, thus publicizing what students have accomplished. Ask these groups how you can work toward shared goals in support of the school (firefighters and police personnel may help with field days, reading to children, and speaking at career days).	

6.5 Multicultural activities

Multicultural communities provide wonderful opportunities for children to learn about their world. Engage families from a variety of cultures in school activities by creating the opportunity to share cultural traditions. PTA can also help families new to the U.S. culture and school system understand how it works and how they can be involved. Some suggestions for culture-focused activities are below:

- Invite families from an international community to sign up to bring board games they played growing up (including traditional American games). Set up tables by country and have parents and children teach games from around the world as they roam from country to country.
- Hold a potluck and culture night. Families dress in traditional clothing, bring information and objects that represent their culture, and provide small bites of traditional cuisine.
- Hold a dance that includes music for everyone. Contemporary music for kids, "the twist" and other favorites that anyone can learn (chicken dance, hokey pokey, Macarena), and have families from the community teach traditional dances from their countries. Plan ahead to have music available from all cultures.
- Hold community PTA meetings to include new groups. Include families who meet as a group in other places (apartment building where many families live, cultural center, or place of worship) by asking to bring the principal and PTA to them for a meeting. Have bilingual community members translate or bring a translator if necessary.
- Collaborate with school administration to begin a Natural Leaders program.

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6.6 Special needs considerations

- Provide links to district, city, county, state, and national support resources on the PTA website. Market them in newsletters and directly to families with special needs children.
- Consider sponsoring a wide range of programs and activities so that all families feel included.
- Provide a quiet room at large gatherings for individuals who need a break from the activity.
- Invite a special needs chair to join the PTA board of directors to communicate with families about how PTA can provide inclusive experiences for all students. Or, work directly with school resource specialists to connect with families in the community.

7.   Summary

Focused family and community engagement ensures that a PTA's goals and objectives reflect their mission to support all children in their community. A FACE board position can help the PTA to be mindful of relationship building and inclusion in it activities and programs. As with other board positions, the FACE position isn't solely in charge of directing those programs, but rather, facilitates and supports the volunteers who chair them. Through family and community engagement, the PTA can truly be a relevant, integral part of its community.

Resources

National PTA: www.pta.org
Resources include Spanish language materials, "Diversify your PTA," family engagement tools, and information about supporting military families; https://www.pta.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/cfe-4-i's-publication.pdf

Washington State PTA: www.wastatepta.org

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI): www.k12.wa.us
OSPI provides funding, resources, tools, data, and technical assistance that enable educators to ensure students succeed in our public schools, are prepared to access post-secondary training and education, and are equipped to thrive in their careers and lives.

Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO): http://oeo.wa.gov/
OEO resolves complaints impartially and confidentially and works with all parties involved to find collaborative solutions focusing on the best interests of students. Other functions of OEO include: collecting data and making public policy recommendations to elected officials, promoting family engagement in education, and identifying strategies to close the achievement gap.

Washington Alliance for Better Schools: www.wabsalliance.org

Information is available about the Natural Leaders project, where parents take on a leadership role. They build relationships with families in their community, identify what helps these families be successful with education and then implement these ideas.

Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships.
Anne T. Henderson, Karen L., Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson, and Don Davies. 2007.

101 Ways to Create Real Family Engagement. Steven M. Constantino, Ed.D. 2008.