



How I Became a Child Advocate

As an active member of your PTA, you are making a difference in the life of a child every day. When you drop off your child on his very first day of school, every parent wonders what she can do to make the child's school experience a positive one. The best advice I ever got was "join the PTA." I was told that being involved in the PTA would keep me abreast of education matters and help me to make the best decisions for my child. My 22 years of active PTA involvement have certainly proved that statement true.

Many join the PTA at our child's school because we are concerned parents; we want to support the school and its activities, and become a vital part of the school community. We may initially get involved to help our own children, but as we work within our individual schools, we realize the impact our work has on all children. For 105 years, PTA has been a leading voice for the children of this nation. We have been at the forefront of the fight for landmark legislation and programs that affect children, in areas including education, health, safety, the environment, and other child-related issues that improve children's lives.

Every day thousands of PTA members volunteer in schools and classrooms throughout the nation. The work done by our members in their schools and communities reaches out and touches children beyond one school, community or district. As a local unit member, it is hard for us to understand that it is our work that provides the foundation and impetus for our many successes in Washington, DC, and in the 50 state capitals. The information sent to us from National PTA serves to inform and educate us to the needs of children.

My first local PTA had a very active legislation committee. It surprised me to hear that PTA did not end with volunteering in the classroom but that I could actually call or write my legislator. It was at first intimidating but at the same time exciting to hear that our help was needed to write to our legislators regarding an issue of importance to children. Would our individual letters and calls really make a difference? Given the choice between writing a letter and making a phone call, I found it much easier to write a letter at first. I did not even know the name of my state legislator, so imagine my surprise when the legislator responded by thanking me for taking the time to contact him. It showed me that somebody in that office had read my letter and that legislators do want to hear from their constituents.

I quickly learned that the voice of PTA is an important one and with the help of PTA's legislative talking points and background briefs, phone calls are just as easy as writing a letter. I found that policy makers wanted to hear from us. The hands-on knowledge we gain from our volunteer activities is invaluable and allows us to speak with authority on the needs of our schools. As intimidating as it may be to make that first phone call to a policy maker, it is remarkable how easy it is to speak passionately about our schools and our children. Legislators recognize this passion and dedication and listen carefully to what you have to say. The local PTA voice is the most important of all. You are closest to the schools, community, and our children.

The lack of adequate funding for public education is a topic that draws a lot of attention. As parents we share the frustrations of teachers, administrators, and concerned citizens over the budget for education. We are used to writing letters and making phone calls to let our policy makers know that our children and schools deserve much more. However, as parents we are concerned about all facets of our child's educational program. How often do we ask ourselves, and others, Are our children being tested too much? Is physical education and recess still a part of the school day? How about the arts? Wouldn't it be safer if there were a traffic light and crossing guard at that intersection? Is the air quality in the school making our children sick?

This is what makes PTA different from other parent groups. As a member of the PTA, we don't just discuss these issues, but we do something about it. When we first walk through those school doors on the first day of school with our children, none of us imagines that we can become effective advocates and lobby on behalf of our children's needs. I was amazed at the knowledge and commitment of the PTA leaders at my school. When they talked to us about issues that affected our children, either at the school district, state, or national level, and told us how we could help, I never thought I would be able to do what they were doing. I was happy if I could successfully write a letter or make a phone call to a policy maker. But, as you take that first step and realize how very much that one letter or phone call help PTA's voice make a difference in the lives of children, you know that you can do more, and we do.

Every one of us can be a powerful voice for children. All of the voices that came before us started as members of local PTAs, and probably like you and me, they did not think they could be the strong advocates that they became.

"everychild.onevoice." That means you and me.

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