



The Meaning of Advocacy to National PTA

At any given time, a parent may engage in a variety of activities that represent a broad spectrum of efforts in support of children – his or her own children, a group of children, or all children. When parents take action or speak out on behalf of a child, an issue, or a cause, what they are engaging in is advocacy. Parents usually begin the role as advocate by speaking on behalf of their own children. We may first be advocates by participating in parent-teacher conferences where we discuss our child’s needs and strengths with the teacher. Soon we recognize that the children in the classroom, school, or school district face similar challenges that need attention.

The message for us ought to be that there is strength in numbers – the more concerned parents the better. If we only work for our own children, then there is no need for PTA.

Advocacy, as defined in the *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Program*, is “Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.” This definition should not be seen as differing significantly for advocacy in terms of advocacy training for PTA members or leaders, or participating in legislative activities at the local, state, and national levels. The principles of advocacy are the same for all – focused persuasion in support of a desired outcome. Some of the techniques or strategies may vary, some of the needed training may vary, but the advocacy processes should not be particularly different.

For National PTA, advocacy is a broad spectrum of activities within the context of the association’s strategic plan as well as its organizational activities. The core purpose of the strategic plan reads, “To speak with a national voice and to empower members to advocate on behalf of children.” The goal says, “Every PTA member will be a trained effective advocate for children by 2020.” This may seem a lofty goal, but it is certainly achievable given National PTA’s membership base.

Whether PTA members realize it, they have indicated their commitment to advocacy by joining the PTA so that together we share one voice that speaks on behalf of children. PTA members are dedicated parents/adults and teachers in a school, council, state, or National PTA who serve as advocates by participating in PTA and school work groups, and for instance, PTA committees and school improvement teams.

The PTA difference

If PTA members did not take their advocacy outside the school building or community, then they might just as well be members of any parent-teacher organization, not PTA. Again the strength is in numbers and in building the connections to the broader community.

Advocacy’s relationship with parent/family involvement is based on empowerment and ownership. Parents need to feel that their participation gives them some ownership in the work that the schools are doing with their children.

When we write a letter from the National PTA to United States senators or representatives about a piece of federal legislation, we start the letter by reminding them that our members are the constituents and that National PTA is the oldest and largest child advocacy organization in the nation. All politics are local because they are based on the fact that the grassroots organizations communicate with those who make decisions, policies, and laws.

Think about child advocacy. What does it mean to you? Does it mean the following?

- Participating in parent-teacher conferences
- Joining the PTA
- Learning about testing and curriculum in the school so as to support one's child
- Working on PTA and school committees
- Setting up a telephone tree for parents to hear about what's going on in school
- Providing input on the school system budget
- Collecting signatures on petitions
- Discussing education and children's issues at meetings with other parents
- Reaching out to those parents who do not usually participate in PTA
- Writing letters to the editor and op-ed pieces
- Attending school board meetings
- Working on bond issues and referendum questions
- Being part of a principal or superintendent selection process
- Writing resolutions for adoptions by state PTA and National PTA
- Attending "PTA Day" at the state legislature
- Developing and participating in surveys of public opinion
- Writing letters, making phone calls, arranging visits to decision makers
- Representing the PTA at outside meetings and with other groups
- Building coalitions
- Attending legislators' district meetings to remind them about your issues
- Being part of National PTA's Member-to-Member Network
- Testifying on regulations, policies, laws
- Visiting the state capital or Washington, DC, to talk to lawmakers about introducing or supporting legislation
- Educating others about the needs of children and young people
- Serving as a public official who is sensitive to the needs of children

There are many other activities that can be included in the spectrum of child advocacy efforts.

Every effort made on behalf of children by PTAs everywhere is advocacy. The whole PTA advocating together within the framework of the PTA mission is important. The PTA mission statement's first section says "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." That section defines advocacy very clearly.

Advocacy is a spectrum of activities based on concern for our children and all children. When you are part of the PTA, you are an advocate and a member of the leading child advocacy organization in the United States. Being an advocate for your children and all children is easy. Remember, advocacy is just focused persuasion.

Taken from:
Our Children Magazine
October 2000

Written by:
Vicki Rafel
National PTA VP for Legislation

12/03 jtw