

PTO vs. PTA: What's the Difference?

Nearly 75 percent of parent groups are independent PTOs that have no affiliation with the National PTA.

by Tim Sullivan

For some groups, the PTO vs. PTA debate is simply a matter of dollars and cents—either "We don't want to send any money out of our school" or "Are we getting enough service for the money we send out of our school?" For others, though, the debate takes on a significantly increased importance. If we don't speak for all children, then who will? the PTA's most loyal defenders often ask.

Independence vs. Affiliation

The technical differences between a PTA and a PTO are fairly simple. The National PTA is a formal membership organization headquartered in Chicago with a 105-year history of working for children. Local groups that choose to belong to the PTA must pay dues to the state and national organizations and abide by state and national group rules. In return, they get member benefits, and they get a voice in the operations of the larger organization. The National PTA maintains a Washington, D.C., lobbying office, and most state PTAs advocate at their respective state capitals, as well. The PTA carefully protects its name, so that in theory only dues-paying members of the group can call themselves a PTA.

PTO, on the other hand, is a more generic term. It generally represents the thousands of groups that choose to remain independent of the PTA. The acronym PTO is the most popular name, but other common monikers include PCC, PTG, and HSA. These are most often single-school groups that operate under their own bylaws and by and large concern themselves with the goings-on at their building or in their town only.

For years, the debate has been exceedingly simple to frame. Do we want to be part of something larger and spend our group dollars outside of our school? Or do we want to focus exclusively on improving and creating community at our school? Since the PTA was the only formal national school parent group, the decision was often PTA or not PTA.

The Rise of PTOs

Obviously, the trouble for the National PTA is not evidenced in its long list of high-profile affiliations. Instead, the problem is at the local level, where groups struggle to justify the rising expense and sometimes-questionable practical benefits of belonging to the PTA.

The average local PTA forwards roughly \$1,000 to its state and national organizations in dues alone. Increasingly, groups are looking at those dollars in terms of what the money could buy for the local school—an extra field trip, perhaps, or maybe a new color printer for each grade. Other groups would prefer to charge no dues (not an option for PTAs), preferring instead to consider all parents automatic members of the parent group at their children's school. While PTA leaders are quick to point out that many parent group purchases should actually be part of a school budget, local parent groups—both PTAs and PTOs—often step in and provide extras for their schools when school budgets run dry. When measured in purely economic (cost-benefit) terms, local groups often ask, "Are we getting enough value for the hundreds of dollars we pay in dues?"

PTOs No Longer Alone

Even one of the PTA's most common selling points—"A PTO is not part of a national or state organization and therefore doesn't have a network to get information from" is the common refrain on most state PTA websites—is less true today than ever before. Since the establishment in 1999 of PTO Today Inc., a company focused on providing resources and services to parent-teacher groups, all parent groups now have access to the types of services once available only to PTAs. With a print magazine, an active website, a series of training events and conferences across the country, and a host of similarly focused products and programs, PTO Today has established itself as a valuable resource for all parent groups.

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