

INTRODUCTION

At National PTA, we believe that diversity and inclusion are our strength. We represent parents, caregivers, educators and communities of all children, which enables us to best achieve our mission to make every child's potential a reality. Fostering an association where everyone feels they belong means tending to power dynamics where they occur and setting up a level playing field for all to engage in our work.

PTAs across the country have been stepping up and finding ways to better understand and celebrate diverse cultures and elevate equity in their communities. Read on to explore the stories of three PTAs that have advanced racial justice, economic justice and disability advocacy in their schools and districts.

AUSTIN COUNCIL PTA'S RACETALKS

In 2019, when Austin Council PTA and the Austin Independent School District joined forces to create RaceTalks, the nation was amidst a movement as continued police violence against Black people spurred the fight for racial justice. Families needed an outlet to talk about these topics. Several PTA leaders, who were also members of the district's Racial Equity Committee, set out to create a space for families to talk about race.

Although the planning team was an all-female group, it was otherwise representative of their community, with racial, cultural and socioeconomic diversity. From the onset, this group relied on resources from experts like Glenn Singleton to shape the agenda for these conversations, but they also recognized that community input would be crucial. After the first few sessions, they let the community's needs and interests guide the path forward.

Lessons From Austin Council PTA's RaceTalks

- Assemble a planning team that is representative of the community you serve.
- Do the pre-work needed to lead challenging conversations responsibly.
- Collaborate with the school district to build momentum.

Leveraging the Moment for Lasting Change

The group faced minor pushback by some who felt they weren't included in the decision-making, but overwhelmingly the program was met with support. When asked about the positive reception RaceTalks received, PTA leader Nina Wilson shared, "One [reason] was what was going on in our society at the time. The conversation around the murdering of George Floyd was at its pinnacle and it forced an awareness." She continued, "And the second was that we had white leaders in positions of power in [the school district] that were a part of this. That mattered."

The planning team had ongoing discussions about the intended audience for this work. Leaders had conflicting feelings about building discussions for a predominantly white audience, but as Nina noted, "there were not as many people of color because I will tell you that we're exhausted with the conversation, and in those spaces, it can be harmful for us."

In addition, the planning team addressed the power imbalances by acting intentionally when dividing participants into groups, often creating a breakout room for white allies and one for people of color. Another tactic the team used to keep people safe was requiring all attendees to participate actively, with their real names and their cameras on. At the beginning of the meeting, if individuals did not want to agree to those norms, they would be asked to leave.

Planning for a Sustainable Future

The first few sessions drew in a large group of participants. People were curious to see what RaceTalks would be about. As the program has evolved, district central office staff's participation has waned but enthusiasm for the work has remained strong. The planning team intentionally chose a collective leadership model, rather than having one person in charge in order to ensure the longevity and sustainability of the work.

RaceTalks has already had a meaningful impact on the community by creating new opportunities for people to engage in critical conversations about race. Many participants have become regulars in this space, committing to make the time every month to do the work. PTA leader Laurie Solis shared, "These meetings became a refuge to really let go and be honest and feel and lean in on this type of conversation and work."

When the leaders reflected on what they've learned, they had several pieces of advice to share with other leaders interested in implementing a similar approach. Laurie shared, "If we were to do it again, I think it's a collaboration with partners who really are experts in this work to help lead it and be part of it...I really see this as the strength, collaboration and partnerships, because I'd hate to add another PTA thing where we think we're the expert and we're really not."

Nina highlighted, "There's a lot of harm that can be done with this kind of thing, and it's not something that you jump into lightly. It needs to be someone who's steeped in doing their own work first, who leads and connects with humility, and is connected to a community."

EVANSTON/SKOKIE PTA COUNCIL'S PTA EQUITY PROJECT

PTA fundraising can exacerbate inequities since schools with wealthier populations consistently raise more money than neighboring schools with lower income families. Evanston/Skokie PTA Council launched the PTA Equity Project (PEP) in 2016 to examine and address the economic disparities across PTAs in the district.

The project began with a fact-finding mission and included educating PTA leaders about equity, building trust and developing a sense of unity amongst PTA leaders across the district. Today, PEP facilitates the pooling of all PTA resources district-wide and oversees the redistribution of these funds based on school size and socioeconomic status.

Understanding Community Context

Evanston/Skokie School District is quite small with 18 schools across three miles and only one high school. This allowed PEP to help shift PTA leaders' thinking to outside the bubble of their school and see the district as the community they are supporting. Once PTA leaders agreed to share information about their budgets with each other, PEP led leaders through the data using visual storytelling. PEP leader Fuschia Winston emphasized that using charts to map out the funding disparities was crucial, "because if you can see [the disparity], you can no longer ignore it."

PEP has been successful because the leaders intentionally earned buy-in from PTA leaders and the larger community and made changes gradually. PEP began by implementing a pilot intervention that divided PTAs into three earning categories: those that earned up to \$70 per student, those that earned \$71-\$90 per student and those that earned over \$90 per student. The highest earners were asked to contribute 12%-15% of their earnings so they could be redistributed to ensure every PTA had at least \$65 per student.

Once successfully implementing that approach, PEP shifted to their current One Fund Initiative through which all money raised by PTAs is collected and redistributed on a base per student rate plus a variable dollar amount per student to provide additional funding to schools with higher rates of free and reduced lunch.

Celebrating Successes

PEP has already accomplished a great deal in its first seven years, and Evanston/Skokie PTA Council is looking forward to continued progress. They are particularly proud of how this initiative has shifted mindsets to unite the entire district. They've seen collaboration between PTAs increase and have pushed to have more student-centered programming, like district-wide student art days.

Lessons From Evanston/Skokie PTA Council's PTA Equity Project

- Education is key to building buy in.
- Make change gradually.
- Think strategically about sustainability.

Evanston/Skokie PTA Council's dedication to equity across schools has helped them partner effectively with the district as well. Now that the council has a clear picture of what PTAs are spending money on, they can advocate for the district to pick up some of the organizing and labor costs.

So far, the council has successfully advocated for the district to take on the organizational and some financial responsibility for student school supplies and after school enrichment, all of which

were historically fully paid for and organized by PTAs. PEP leader Meghan Shea shared, "Having leaders at the district level that share the same values has been a tremendous help. The commitment to One Fund has given us credibility to engage and partner with District 65 administration around solving various issues as we become aware of them."

PEP's focus is now on sustainability. As new families join PTAs in the district each year, there is an ongoing need for re-education around what equity means and the purpose of PEP. They are also always working to ensure that they have a pipeline of passionate advocates so that PEP can thrive even once its current leaders have moved on.

SWANSON ELEMENTARY PTA'S AUTISM ADVOCACY

Swanson PTA in Arvada, Colo. began their autism advocacy work while participating in National PTA's diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) grant. Understanding that meaningful DEI work starts with listening, the PTA surveyed families and educators of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to determine how to create a more welcoming environment. They received two main pieces of feedback. First, there needs to be greater awareness of the autistic students within Swanson's community.

Despite the fact that Swanson houses an autism center, and a sizable population of students with ASD, many families don't know that the classroom exists. Second, the families and educators wanted PTA and school leaders to be more intentional and purposeful in including the ASD community in events and programming.

Lessons From Swanson Elementary PTA's Autism Advocacy

- Survey your community to determine needs.
- Start with low-hanging fruit to build momentum.
- Encourage individuals most affected to lead.

Engaging the Community

After reviewing the feedback, Swanson PTA decided to start with outreach and education. "Outreach and education is foundational," said Swanson PTA President Robert Foley. "It's low-cost and can move the needle." With this in mind, in early 2023, the PTA convened a small group of families from the ASD classroom to brainstorm ideas for Autism Awareness Month. Together, the team planned several weeks of activities. Many events were focused on raising awareness through spirit week and fun activities.

The PTA also used their regular communication channels to embed learning opportunities, including facts about ASD in their Friday newsletter every week in April. The efforts were met with positive feedback. Robert shared, "We heard from family members and our educators in the ASD center that the activities conducted were appreciated for their intentionality and thoughtfulness."

Looking Ahead

Robert emphasized that the work is not limited to one month a year and that one of the biggest goals moving forward is to rethink PTA's programming in an ongoing way. As the PTA plans for the next school year, they're reflecting on their operations and activities and figuring out how to make them more inclusive. They're exploring adding a sensory-friendly time at the beginning of their biannual roller-skating parties and will consult with families to determine if any adjustments should be made to their annual fun run. Robert also posed a broader question as their PTA looks ahead: "Do we need to make this activity inclusive, or do we just create new activities?"

While the PTA has not faced any opposition yet, Robert does anticipate that revamping some of the PTA's long-established events could be met with pushback. If there's hesitation to reimagine these activities, Robert plans to address that by focusing more intentionally on education and awareness-building within the PTA. In fact, that has already begun as educators from the ASD center presented at the April PTA meeting. Ultimately, Swanson Elementary PTA aims to create a greater acceptance of students on the spectrum into the wider school community and ensure that the voices of ASD families, educators and students are included in the PTA's ongoing growth.

CONCLUSION

These PTAs have established initiatives that have advanced diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) by addressing specific needs in their community. DEI work is not one size fits all and it will look different depending on the unique attributes of the families and communities you serve. PTA leaders can reflect on their own DEI journey and determine next steps using the rubrics in National PTA's [Local Leader Guidance](#). For even more resources, including podcasts, videos, webinars and tip sheets, explore [PTA.org/DEI](https://pta.org/DEI).