

## INTRODUCTION

The goal of any PTA program or event should be to create a welcoming, fun and educational environment that *everyone* in the school community can enjoy. Unfortunately, accessibility for students and families with disabilities is often overlooked during planning, which isolates these families and diminishes the overall value and impact of PTA programs and events.

PTAs can foster change and prevent these oversights through committed and proactive efforts to offer programs and events that ensure everyone feels included and valued. To see what this looks like in action, let's explore how several [National PTA School of Excellence](#) designees used their Excellence Action Plan to intentionally invest in and enhance accessibility.

Congratulations, once again, to the designees featured below, along with all of the 2022-2024 and 2023-2025 School of Excellence designees.

### 2022-2024 Schools of Excellence Featured

- Meadow Brook PTA
- Spring Run Elementary PTA
- Parish Hill-PHACT PTSA

### 2023-2025 Schools of Excellence Featured

- Corbell Elementary PTA
- Timberwood Park PTA
- Great Bridge High School PTSA
- Ed C. Lewis Elementary PTA
- Cimarron Elementary PTA
- Casselberry PTA

## CELEBRATING DIVERSE ABILITIES AND EXPERIENCES

By framing events about disability as celebrations, PTAs can create a positive and empathetic atmosphere where differences are not just acknowledged but celebrated. This helps to shift the focus from limitations to abilities, encouraging a mindset of appreciation and respect for diversity. Educational workshops, awareness days, inclusive events, collaborative projects and storytelling can foster empathy and inclusivity. Partnering with local organizations enhances resources and support, promoting a culture of respect and understanding within the community.

Corbell Elementary PTA  
Frisco, Texas | 2023-2025 School of Excellence

Partnering with [Texas-based Lonestar Abilities Network](#) and several teachers, Corbell Elementary PTA hosted a Diverse Abilities Week aimed at fostering empathy. During the week, students received lessons on disability awareness and information on what it might be like to live with a different cognitive or physical ability. This gives students a personal experience with some of the challenges faced by their peers, which helps them see beyond disabilities and recognize the person behind it. Through their programming, the PTA found that framing events about disability as celebrations can create a positive and empathetic atmosphere where differences are not just acknowledged but celebrated. This helps to shift the focus from limitations to abilities, encouraging a mindset of appreciation and respect for diversity.

### Lessons Learned

**Celebrate Differences:** Create a positive atmosphere by celebrating disabilities.

**Offer Engaging Programs:** Make disability awareness fun and educational.

**Build Partnerships:** Collaborate with local organizations for better support.

### Timberwood Park PTA

#### San Antonio, Texas | 2023-2025 School of Excellence

PTAs can combine celebrations and learning experiences to make programs that focus on disability awareness more engaging and enjoyable for students, as Timberwood Park PTA saw in their Divers-ability Day. During the day-long celebration, the entire student body visited different stations in the gym that provided learning experiences about disabilities so students could better understand their peers and be understood by those around them. Divers-ability Day was a huge success, with parents sharing feedback from their children like, “My son was excited to share what he learned from school” and, “They helped him to understand that we all have unique special qualities and to never give up.” Along with educating the larger community, the event also helped to make students with disabilities feel included. One parent shared, “My son is autistic. He enjoyed the day and felt included and seen.”

### Great Bridge High School PTSA

#### Chesapeake, Va. | 2023-2025 School of Excellence

Opportunities for students, families and communities to learn more about different disabilities through celebration not only builds knowledge, but also creates a positive and supportive atmosphere where differences are acknowledged and valued. Making these learning experiences celebratory and inclusive not only benefits students with disabilities, but also enriches the entire community by promoting a more compassionate and understanding environment.

Great Bridge High School PTSA worked to achieve this environment by making thoughtful education around disability a vital component of creating a welcoming community. The PTSA used a multifaceted approach—social media posts, monthly newsletters, school spirit weeks, club partnerships, segments during the school morning news and programs—to highlight the important influences and innovations made by individuals with physical or mental disabilities. Celebrating these innovations and fostering discussions in school gave students greater appreciation of their peers and helped create connection points where students could engage and learn from each other. Similarly, sharing with families what the students were learning provided opportunities for greater conversations at home.

## HOSTING ACCESSIBLE EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES

Because accessibility features, such as clear and simple language or alternative formats (like captions or transcripts), enhance the overall user experience, events and programs designed with accessibility in mind often become more user-friendly and effective for all participants, not just those with disabilities. Moreover, prioritizing accessibility at events and programs specifically communicates that your PTA wants everyone, regardless of their abilities, to participate fully. This leads to increased engagement, innovation and a stronger sense of belonging among participants.

### Ed C. Lewis Elementary PTA

#### Downey, Calif. | 2023-2025 School of Excellence

Incorporating accessibility into your PTA event or program should be specific and intentional so that your plans will have the most impact and relevance for your community’s experience. Leaders at Ed C. Lewis Elementary PTA explained that sometimes PTAs fail to be inclusive simply because they are unaware of how to be inclusive when it comes to people with disabilities.

#### Lessons Learned

**Prioritize Accessibility:** User-friendly events are better for *everyone*.

**Communicate Proactively:** Clearly communicate accessibility features and options in advance.

**Collaborate Thoughtfully:** Ask families about their needs and work together to meet them.

To better understand event accessibility needs, Ed C. Lewis Elementary PTA collaborated with special education teachers to discuss specific strategies, ideas and tools to make sure their School of Excellence program events were accessible. Because the teachers know the students, the school and the community, their advice is specific and actionable for PTAs. The PTA will further use their community’s knowledge and experiences to host accessible events. They added new chairs to their board—a special education chair and a deaf or hard-of-hearing chair—that will help spotlight inclusivity needs, practices and ideas that may be overlooked otherwise.

### Meadow Brook PTA

#### Rochester Hills, Mich. | 2022-2024 School of Excellence

Another strategy, as used by Meadow Brook PTA, is to include space on all PTA fliers inviting families to share what they need to comfortably attend PTA events. In doing so, the PTA was able to accommodate the specific needs of their community members, including those with food allergies, and welcome some families to their first-ever school event. While allergies are often forgotten in conversations around accessibility, Meadow Brook PTA’s proactive efforts to understand their community needs allowed them to plan their school events with more intention and achieve more impact. One parent shared, “My youngest still has multiple food allergies which can be very challenging to navigate. I just wanted to thank you for including the children who cannot eat freely. It really means a lot to see that our school is keeping their safety in mind.”

### Spring Run Elementary PTA

#### Midlothian, Va. | 2022-2024 School of Excellence

Spring Run PTA focused on sensory accessibility at events with great impact. Providing sensory-friendly times, areas and resources allowed the PTA to host events that made families feel comfortable and wanted. With almost 900 students, Spring Run PTA found that adding low sensory times and sensory activities slightly removed from the main event allowed for shorter lines, lower noise levels and a higher ratio of volunteers to students. The sensory activities, which included things like applying stickers and stamps to paper or sensory bins with small toys and corn, helped all students, not just those with disabilities.

## USING PROCESSES AND STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT ACCESSIBILITY

PTAs can ensure their programs and events are accessible and inclusive by creating clear processes and roles dedicated to accessibility. This proactive approach demonstrates commitment and prevents issues before they arise. Specific roles filled by individuals with expertise or lived experience provide guidance, training and integration of accessibility considerations. Additionally, gathering feedback from teachers, families and caregivers helps meet the specific needs of students with disabilities.

### Cimarron Elementary PTA

#### Katy, Texas | 2023-2025 School of Excellence

Cimarron Elementary PTA found great success in surveying community members as part of the School of Excellence program and began using community feedback to drive specific efforts to welcome families, including those with disabilities. Through additional surveys, the PTA learned that parents often did not feel welcome or a part of the school events due to their child’s disability. Recognizing the feedback as an opportunity for the PTA to be a voice for every child, they took on the task of ensuring all felt welcome, including parents.

#### Lessons Learned

##### **Empower Accessibility Champions:**

Designate roles dedicated to ensuring inclusive planning and support.

##### **Ensure Visibility and Representation:**

Actively involve people with disabilities in decision-making.

##### **Proactively Gather Feedback:**

Gather feedback from teachers, families and caregivers to meet the specific community needs.

To directly ensure these families were included, the PTA developed and adopted a policy that ensures all school-wide events offer specific event space and a coordinator to ensure students with disabilities can fully participate. This proactive approach to gathering and acting on feedback underscores the critical importance of employing best practices to continually enhance the PTA's support for students with disabilities.

### Great Bridge High School PTSA

#### Chesapeake, Va. | 2023-2025 School of Excellence

Great Bridge High School PTSA also used a dedicated PTA role to better reach all their students and community members—the special needs and diversity chairperson. Being the first high school in their area to establish this position, the PTSA explored different avenues and methods to make this specific role more impactful, including student and staff involvement. The Chair utilized student volunteers to design and curate celebration displays, which helped students feel more connected with the PTSA and the community. They also collaborated with the library staff to curate reading selections and educational bulletin boards around different types of disabilities and people with disabilities.

Another highly impactful process used by the PTSA was intentionally gathering feedback and engaging in conversations with teachers, families and caregivers of students with disabilities to better understand their specific needs. The information gathered revealed that various populations felt unseen and unheard, which inspired and motivated many of the PTSA's efforts to celebrate inclusivity and diversity as well as help students and families feel connected to the school community.

### Spring Run Elementary PTA

#### Midlothian, Va. | 2022-2024 School of Excellence

Recognizing that students with disabilities were often overlooked in their planning around school-wide initiatives, Spring Run Elementary PTA also created parent representative roles as part of their Excellence Action Plan. The representatives focused specifically on supporting students with disabilities and providing direct input around planning inclusive programs and events throughout the year. As a result of the PTA considering the feedback given from these representatives, families felt more included in the school and PTA community. Special education staff and assistants also felt more supported and began to view the relationship with PTA as more of a partnership than just an additional entity in the school.

## ADVOCATING FOR ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION

By incorporating advocacy into their efforts to make events and programs more accessible, PTAs can expand their community voice and make a significant difference. Advocacy involves actively promoting the rights and needs of people with disabilities and requires making time for regular discussions and educational sessions around accessibility advocacy. These sessions can help raise awareness about the importance of accessibility and provide practical tips on how to support students with disabilities.

### Casselberry PTA

#### Casselberry, Fla. | 2023-2025 School of Excellence

The educational sessions, like the EP Binder Night hosted by Casselberry PTA, can also provide resources and tools to support parents in advocating for their students. The evening event, while open to all, was geared towards families with students on an IEP or 504 plan and aimed at educating and empowering parents.

#### Lessons Learned

**Keep Educating:** Promote the rights and needs of people with disabilities through regular discussions and educational sessions.

**Foster Community Engagement:** Involve the community and guest speakers in advocacy efforts to build a stronger support network.

**Strive for Continuous Improvement:** Regularly review and update accessibility practices to address emerging needs.

Attendees were able to listen and learn with a guest speaker from Florida Disability Rights and then received materials, information and instructions to build their own tabbed binder for storing all communication and documents pertaining to their child's IEP/504 Plan.

### Parish Hill-PHACT PTSA

#### **Chaplin, Conn. | 2022-2024 School of Excellence**

A critical element of advocacy around disability is understanding and navigating the legal elements of supporting students with disabilities. Offering opportunities for community members to learn, share their experiences and develop their own voice for change is essential. Parish Hill-PHACT PTSA did just this as part of their School of Excellence programming and hosted two Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC) presentations on the ABCs of special education. The presentations—one for parents and caregivers and one for teachers and administration—educated attendees on various laws that support students with disabilities and the principles of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Through education and learning about disability and disability education laws, the PTA created new advocates who were informed, empowered and motivated to support the needs of people with disabilities.

Parish Hill-PHACT PTSA put into action the knowledge and experience gained and actively advocated on the state level for a fairer reimbursement formula for special education costs at state symposiums and worked with the Superintendent to advocate for this cause. Their efforts helped pass a state bill that increased grants for small rural districts like theirs.

### Spring Run Elementary PTA

#### **Midlothian, Va. | 2022-2024 School of Excellence**

Advocacy also means being proactive in identifying and addressing barriers to accessibility. School staff and PTAs can work together to develop policies and procedures that prioritize accessibility and ensure that all events, communications and activities are inclusive. Spring Run PTA used their Excellence Action Plan to proactively address unequal PTA funding allocations for classrooms with higher support needs. To fix this, they dedicated specific funds and resources to these classrooms and made sure to backfill any previous PTA budget commitments. Through these efforts and their attention to identifying community needs, the PTA purchased noise-canceling headphones and self-regulation tools that will benefit the entire student body and began efforts to gain county support for better wheelchair access to the school's play field.

## CONCLUSION

As PTA Schools of Excellence, these PTAs demonstrate the critical value of incorporating accessibility into their core programming and efforts to foster family engagement. By proactively addressing accessibility with intention and dedication and celebrating the differences that make each community unique, their efforts show that prioritizing accessibility not only improves the school experience for all families but also communicates a commitment to inclusivity, leading to increased engagement, innovation and a stronger sense of belonging within the community. Drawing inspiration from the successful strategies of these Schools of Excellence, PTAs can lead the way in making their communities more accessible and supportive for all.

If you're interested in advancing accessibility in your community, check out all the available resources from National PTA at [PTA.org/Programs](https://pta.org/Programs). Then, take it up a notch by getting your own PTA involved with the [School of Excellence program](https://pta.org/SchoolofExcellence)! You can use your ideas and passion for inclusion to achieve the designation and gain recognition for the work your PTA does to make your community more accessible. Local PTAs can enroll each spring at [PTA.org/Excellence](https://pta.org/Excellence).