

INTRODUCTION

Prioritizing accessibility in your PTA creates a welcoming and inclusive community, strengthens membership and fosters a sense of belonging. While accessibility is crucial in all aspects of PTA work, it is especially valuable when ensuring that programs and events can be enjoyed by all students and families, regardless of ability. Fun and engaging programs enhance the student learning experience, but they often overlook the needs of students with disabilities, leading to isolation and missed opportunities for community learning. This resource will help your PTA understand what accessibility looks like in programming and how it can transform family engagement. You'll also receive valuable tips from PTA and SEPTA leaders* to ensure your PTA activities are accessible to everyone.

*With special thanks to feedback provided by leaders from Fairfax County SEPTA, Hillsborough County SEPTA, North Shore SEPTA, Redlands SEPTA, Fort Worth ISD SEPTA, Spencerport SEPTA, Symmes Elementary PTA and Warhill High School PTSA.

WHAT IS ACCESSIBILITY?

Accessibility in PTA programs means making sure all students, families and volunteers can join in activities, no matter if they have a disability or not. This means making information, activities and places easy to understand and use for as many people as possible. When you make accessibility a key part of your PTA programming, you create a more welcoming environment, run better programs and grow your PTA membership.

Understanding Different Types of Accessibility

People have a wide range of ability, so it's important to consider all types of accessibility—physical, sensory and cognitive—when planning your programs. By addressing these diverse needs, you ensure that everyone in your community can fully participate and feel included.

Physical Accessibility

Designing environments and products to ensure usability for people with physical disabilities and facilitating navigation and interaction for those with mobility impairments. Ideas your PTA can implement:

- **Pathways and Seating:** Ensure pathways are at least 36 inches wide for wheelchairs. Example: Arrange chairs in rows with enough space between them for easy movement.
- **Signage:** Use large, clear fonts (18-point) at eye-level for wheelchair users. Example: Place signs at 48-60 inches from the ground.
- **Elevators and Lifts:** Ensure that elevators or lifts are available and in working order. Example: Have a backup plan in case an elevator is out of order.
- **Parking and Drop-off Zones:** Designate accessible parking close to entrances. Example: Mark parking spots with the wheelchair symbol.

Sensory Accessibility

Ensuring environments and services are accessible to individuals with sensory impairments by providing alternative formats, assistive technologies and appropriate design elements. Suggestions for your PTA to explore:

- **Quiet Zones and Sensory Rooms:** Create areas with soft lighting and comfortable seating. Example: Set up a room with bean bags and dim lights.
- **Allergy-Conscious Zones:** Implement nut-free zones. Example: Label food items with potential allergens.
- **Multiple Formats:** Provide information in written, visual and audio formats. Example: Use printed handouts, visual aids and audio recordings.

- High-Contrast Colors and Large Fonts: Use black text on a white background with at least 18-point font. Example: Print brochures with high-contrast colors.
- Assistive Listening Devices and Captioning: Offer hearing loops or FM systems and real-time captioning. Example: Provide captioning during presentations.

Cognitive Accessibility

Making information and services easy to understand and use for people with cognitive impairments, through simplified language, clear instructions and supportive environments. PTAs can try these ideas:

- Clear and Simple Instructions: Use plain language and break down steps. Example: "Step 1: Open the door. Step 2: Enter the room."
- Verbal and Written Formats: Provide instructions both verbally and in writing. Example: Explain verbally and hand out printed instructions.
- Visual Aids: Use diagrams and images. Example: Include charts in presentations.
- Accessible Formats: Offer materials in print and digital formats. Example: Provide PDFs that can be read by screen readers.
- Engaging Activities: Include hands-on activities and regular breaks. Example: Plan interactive workshops with movement breaks.

TRANSFORMATIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH ACCESSIBILITY

Transformative family engagement connects families, schools and community leaders in a shared effort to support and advance the education of all students. With the guiding principles of the [4 I's of Transformative Family Engagement](#)—Inclusive, Individualized, Integrated, Impactful—PTAs can more easily and effectively advance efforts to increase accessibility in their community.

Inclusive

Supporting families and students with disabilities in an inclusive way means building relationships with and between families to foster open conversation and invite diverse perspectives to solve problems in innovative ways. In prioritizing accessibility, your PTA questions assumptions about students and families with disabilities and challenges the mindset that makes prioritizing accessibility an afterthought.

Individualized

Programs are most accessible when they offer person-specific accommodations and meet the needs of students and families with disabilities from their community. This can be achieved through personalized invitations that ask families about their accommodation needs, tailored experiences that allow people with disabilities to participate fully and prompt responses to feedback provided about the program.

Integrated

Programs that directly link to learning and go beyond one-time events help align the school experience for students with disabilities to the broader educational system. Alignment to classroom learning gives PTAs a new opportunity to put the "T" in PTA by engaging and supporting teachers and educators in meaningful conversations around accessibility.

Impactful

Programs are most impactful when they provide participants with new knowledge, skills and opportunities to practice and interact with that new knowledge. Programs that intentionally engage students and families with disabilities enhance these experiences and challenge PTAs to measure success with nuanced considerations like how accessible the program is for the entire community.

TIPS FROM PTA LEADERS

Change Your Mindset

By shifting mindsets to proactively prioritize the inclusion of people with disabilities, you foster a community where everyone can thrive and participate fully. Some ways you can do this include:

- Regularly communicate the importance of accessibility and recognize efforts to improve accessibility within the school or PTA.
- Embrace training and educational resources from experts in accessibility and disability inclusion.
- Build a resource library with articles, videos and toolkits to ensure accessibility is ingrained in your planning.

Talk to Your Community

Seeking expertise and input from people with disabilities enhances the quality of your programs and fosters a sense of belonging and respect. Consider these options:

- Engage people with disabilities and disability advocacy groups to gain insights and ideas for making events more inclusive.
- Maintain ongoing communication with relevant groups to continuously improve and adapt your practices to include people in the ways that serve them best.
- Use surveys or listening sessions to get feedback on how to improve your programs.
- Keep your community informed about how their feedback has been used to improve accessibility.

Create Standard Practices

Standardized accessibility practices streamline processes, making it easier for staff and volunteers to implement accommodations consistently. Some ways to accomplish this are to:

- Embed accessibility checks into standard program workflows, such as event planning checklists, communication templates or easy-to-use guidelines for accessibility.
- Include accessibility goals in your program planning to focus efforts and resources on specific accessibility improvements.
- Establish channels for families to provide feedback on accessibility issues and suggestions for improvement.
- Create dedicated volunteer roles or committees that prioritize and advance accessibility goals and include people with disabilities, families, teachers and/or staff.

Utilize Hybrid Learning Opportunities

Hybrid or virtual alternatives can effectively meet diverse needs, ensuring everyone can engage and benefit. Some approaches to this are to:

- Use technology to provide more accommodations. Video conferencing platforms often have features like closed captioning and compatibility with assistive technologies.
- Alternate between in-person and virtual programs so participants can choose the format that works best for their schedules and personal circumstances.
- Share recordings and materials in various formats, such as accessible PDFs and audio descriptions, to accommodate diverse learning styles.

CONCLUSION

Prioritizing accessibility in PTA programs is essential for creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for all participants. This not only enhances the quality of programs, but also fosters a sense of belonging and community, ultimately leading to a stronger and more diverse PTA membership. By embracing the principles of transformative family engagement and incorporating these practical tips from PTA leaders, PTAs can ensure that their activities are accessible to everyone, regardless of their abilities.

For more information on making your PTA more inclusive, check out the materials below. Then, for even more resources, including podcasts, videos, webinars and tip sheets, head to [PTA.org/Programs](https://www.pta.org/Programs).

- [Accessibility in Action: PTA Schools of Excellence](#)
- [Strengthening Family-School Partnerships for Students with Disabilities Guide](#)
- [10 Minutes to PTA the Transformative Way – Let's Talk about Ableism Webisode](#)
- [10 Minutes to PTA the Transformative Way – Let's Talk about Advocating with Students with Learning Disabilities Webisode](#)
- [PTAs Leading the Way in Transformative Family Engagement \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Programing Webinar](#)
- [10 Minutes to PTA the Transformative Way – Let's Talk about Inclusive Meetings Webisode](#)