



## How to PTA in Challenging Times: Texas PTA Rally Day 2021

COVID-19 ushered in a new era of virtual working, teaching and learning. But neither a global pandemic, nor an historic ice storm, could stop Texas PTA from rallying for students and families. Learn how they leveraged BAND and other digital technology to stay civically engaged in a physically-distanced world.

The power of a Parent Teacher Association® (PTA), as we've always known it, relies on two fundamental truths: That students will be in public schools, and that PTAs will be able to convene families in person. That was before the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools for months on end, canceled in-person events and ushered in a new era of virtual working, teaching and learning. State, regional and local PTAs could not go into "hibernation mode"—students needed their support more than ever before. Rather, they had to think differently about how to PTA. Texas PTA is a shining example of that new way of thinking. They leaned on digital technology to reimagine their beloved Rally Day for a virtual world. Learn how they found creative ways to advocate for Texas students and families in the midst of the pandemic.

### The Problem: Advocacy in Jeopardy

Like their counterparts across the country, Texas PTA was hard hit by the pandemic. Membership for the 2020-2021 school year was down 40%. A survey indicated about 80% of local PTAs were not conducting any in-person gatherings. Even as students gradually returned to school buildings, parents and volunteers were often not allowed inside or to hold events. Understandably, PTA leaders felt paralyzed by the public health crisis.

But the looming 87th legislative session meant the biannual Texas PTA Rally Day was around the corner. Normally, they would convene 2,000 PTA members and students on the steps of the Texas Capitol in Austin.



### Texas PTA by the Numbers

- + 2,642 local PTAs
- + 515,919 members (pre-pandemic)
- + 1.95 million students served directly (PTA-affiliated schools)
- + Largest child advocacy association in the state

"Our teachers and faculties are out there adjusting. Our kids are adjusting. And so, as PTA, we have to adjust as well."

**Latasha King-Crump, VP of Programs,  
Hogg Middle School PTA, Houston**

A live marching band and cheerleaders would join this celebrated advocacy event. Buoyed by the fanfare, delegates (all wearing Texas PTA t-shirts, many carrying PTA signs and flags) would then hold small-group meetings with state policymakers to champion their top legislative priorities.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed everything. It was clear to Texas PTA that in-person gatherings of that size would not be possible for quite some time. Rather than cancel Rally Day—and risk diminishing their impact—they pivoted to planning an entirely virtual event that would be held Feb. 22, 2021. “We only meet every other year, so we couldn’t take a break,” says Texas PTA Executive Director Kyle Ward. “There is no pause when it comes to education. They’re still passing laws that are going to impact our students and families for years to come.”

How could they be a thunderous voice for the state’s more than 5.4 million public school students if they couldn’t be in person? They needed to figure that out quickly.

### The Solution: Rally Day, Reimagined

To translate Rally Day 2021 for a virtual setting, Texas PTA sought to recreate its most important elements as best they could. Central to these efforts was BAND, a free app that helps groups improve their organization, engagement and transparency. Texas PTA leaders liked that BAND’s suite of communication tools could be a one-stop-shop for their members, free of the clutter and distractions you often encounter on email and social media.

The virtual Rally Day 2021 included:

- + **Council Rally Day Toolkit:** Participants received posters, stickers, a sample press release and other useful information to spread the word.
- + **Webinars:** Once the Rally Day 2021 BAND was up and running, Texas PTA conducted all their advocacy trainings on the BAND platform. These webinars educated PTA members about the event and the legislative priorities they would be pushing for during meetings with policymakers.
- + **Livestreams:** The Priorities Caucus was livestreamed exclusively on BAND, and Rally Time was simulcast live via both BAND and Facebook on Feb. 22. The videos captured remarks from Texas PTA President Suzi Kennon and state leaders, as well as the popular marching band and cheerleading performances.
- + **Watch Parties:** PTA Councils organized virtual watch parties so people could still feel like they were together.
- + **Meetings with Policymakers:** Texas PTA scheduled the small-group meetings via Zoom. This turned out to be very efficient. “With everyone being virtual, the legislators were a little more accessible. I think Zoom really helped us connect and get on their schedule,” says Latasha King-Crump, VP of Programs for Hogg Middle School PTA in Houston.
- + **Communications:** All pre- and post-event messaging went out through BAND. The gentle pushes and reminders encouraged participation.

The BAND corporate team was impressed with how Rally Day 2021 came together on the app. “It just showed how involved and invested the Texas PTA leaders were in advancing this initiative,” says Sidney Chae from BAND.

### Roll Call: Texas PTA succeeded in getting several state leaders to prerecord remarks for Rally Day 2021

#### They included:

- + Texas Supreme Court Justice Eva Guzman
- + Sen. Robert Nichols
- + Sen. Donna Howard
- + Rep. Gary VanDeaver
- + Sen. Larry Taylor
- + State Board of Education Chair Kevin Ellis

These state leaders met live (and in person) with Texas PTA leaders in Austin on Rally Day:

- + Rep. Trent Ashby
- + Rep. James Talarico (a former public school teacher!)



Sign up for **BAND** to join the official Rally Day Band.

Visit Texas PTA online for details on joining the Band:

**JOIN THE BAND**

### RALLY TIME

12:30 PM livestream

WATCH: Texas PTA Rally Day Band & Facebook page



Suzi Kennon  
President, Texas PTA



Rep. James Talarico  
House District 52



Rep. Trent Ashby  
House District 57

## Rally Day Results in the Face of Unprecedented Challenges

To be clear: Nothing can replace the pure energy of a face-to-face encounter like Rally Day. The pandemic has robbed us of many such moments. “I believe what is missing in the virtual is who PTA really is. That’s the networking, the talking to each other in the halls between sessions and the networking when they go back home,” says Ward.

Little did they know that, on top of it all, an unprecedented ice storm would hit Texas the same month. Power was restored to some people just days before Rally Day 2021 took place, but many were without power during and even through Rally Day. In fact, a number of Texas PTA board and staff were still without running water, and those who did have water were under a boil notice throughout the final days of preparing and producing the Rally Day event.

But in many important ways, Texas PTA still was able to meet, and even exceed, its benchmarks for Rally Day 2021. About 900 people registered for the event, with 535 watching the livestream on BAND and the rest on Facebook Live. While that is smaller than the typical in-person crowd, this was primarily due to students not being able to attend the event during the school day; the number of adult participants was about the same. The virtual Rally Day 2021 also helped Texas PTA reduce their costs during an economically challenging year.

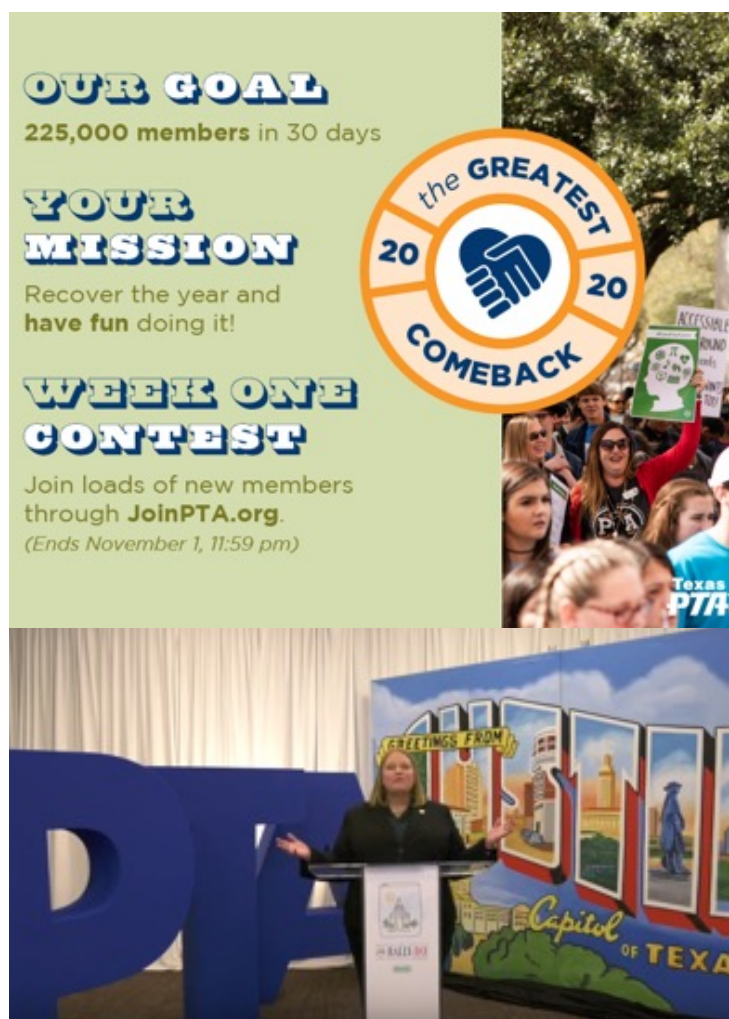
What’s more, the virtual setting made Rally Day 2021 accessible to more PTA members. Not everyone can make it to Austin or get away from their work and family commitments. But just about anyone can log on for a livestreamed event or watch the recording later. For this reason, participation in virtual PTA meetings and trainings—not just Rally Day—has gone up dramatically across the state. As life returns to normal, this is a vote for a hybrid approach, to allow more PTA members to make their voices heard.

“The pandemic taught us a lot about other ways to do business,” says Texas PTA President Suzi Kennon. “I think it moved the needle forward for us on several fronts that would have taken years otherwise.”

### 10 Tips for Running Your PTA Virtually

Whether you’re planning a PTA convention, advocacy day, board meeting or fundraiser, follow these best practices.

- 1. Lead with emotion.** Acknowledge what people are going through, whether it’s the pandemic, a natural disaster or other current events. Audra Frigon recommends scheduling periodic emotional check-ins, with no PTA business.
- 2. Get buy-in.** People need to understand why your PTA is doing things differently. This can help overcome any fear of new technology.
- 3. Put it all in one place.** A comprehensive app like BAND can replace several tools, such as texting, email and social media. Texas PTA members enjoyed having a dedicated space for Rally Day 2021 information, calendars, reminders, sign-ups, livestreams and more.
- 4. Emphasize device flexibility.** There are laptop people, phone people and tablet people. Stress that most new technology works across many devices, so members can PTA the way that works best for them.



### Virtual Ups and Downs

As with any new venture, the shift to virtual events comes with pros and cons.

#### Pros:

- + Stronger engagement with all-in-one platforms like BAND
- + Higher participation from members who cannot travel
- + More cost-effective without the need for lodging, food and transportation

#### Cons:

- + Cannot replace the energy of a live event (PTA leaders and speakers may find it hard to “feel the room,” as King-Crump puts it.)
- + Learning curve with new technology
- + Risk of technical glitches, particularly with livestream audio and video



5. **Go small before you go big.** Test new technology internally and on smaller events, when the stakes are lower. Also test on the same day and time as your planned event, when internet traffic will be comparable. This way, you can work out any kinks beforehand.
6. **Nail the timing:** Folks tend to be most available during lunchtime or later in the evening. "I think there's a huge benefit to being able to get on Zoom at 8:30 at night and have your board meeting after you put your kids to bed," says Kennon.
7. **Make it interactive.** Chats, watch parties, polls and contests make any virtual event more engaging.
8. **Work with workarounds.** All-in-one platforms trade customization for flexibility. If a particular feature doesn't suit your needs, that's OK! Frigon found BAND's sub-groups too cumbersome, but the group chats were just right.
9. **Play tech support.** Designate a help team who is very familiar with the new technology. Create how-to videos and documents or, better yet, curate and share ones that already exist.
10. **Record everything** so members can watch later, on their own time.

Remember: Virtual is not all or nothing. As society reopens, try alternating virtual and in-person events. Also rethink your concept of hybrid, as running simultaneous in-person and online events can put a lot of pressure on your PTA team. When it makes sense, consider hosting back-to-back events on consecutive nights or weekends instead.

## Online Tools and How to Use Them

While much of this technology starts off free, you can use your PTA budget to pay for upgraded versions as needed. (Always ask about a nonprofit discount.)



## Closing the Membership Gap

Rally Day 2021 was a strong incentive for Texas PTAs to renew their membership. In fall 2020, Texas PTA turned to social media for "The Greatest Comeback." With weekly challenges and prize drawings, the monthlong membership campaign encouraged locals and councils to join and renew, contributing to a 40% increase in online memberships. As Kennon puts it, "The campaign was a concerted effort to get PTAs to be okay with asking for membership this year."

"I believe the pandemic has taught us how to do it virtually and how to do it well."

**Kyle Ward, Executive Director, Texas PTA**

Tool:	Works well for:
Video conferencing (Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, etc.)	Meetings, trainings and workshops
BAND	Ongoing group communication, including chats, live events, calendars, polls, sign-ups, reminders and sharing photos and videos
Google Classroom	Dynamic leadership trainings and retreats with videos and quizzes
G-Suite for Nonprofits	A little bit of everything: Gmail, drive storage, centralized calendars, Google Meet and more
Notion	An all-in-one workspace where you can share and work on the same content
Canva for Nonprofits	Designing social media graphics, posters and other visual content

## Don't Press "Pause" on PTA

Yes, Rally Day looked different this time around. Yes, everyone missed those hugs and high fives. But Texas PTA proved virtual is doable—and it's here to stay. Long-term, they plan to incorporate virtual experiences into board meetings, their Emerging Leadership Academy, Reflections award ceremonies and more. "I think we've seen too many benefits from virtual to go back to not having it at all," Frigon states.

When asked whether they would attend the Texas PTA convention ("LAUNCH") virtually, 66% of members said yes. While CDC guidelines, state and local ordinances now allow for a fully in-person LAUNCH in summer 2021, Texas PTA leaders expressed relief that a virtual convening could be a viable option if circumstances changed in the future.

COVID-19 has changed how PTAs/PTSAs communicate, grow and accomplish their goals. We hope there will never be another pandemic in our lifetime—but that doesn't mean other things won't shake up how PTAs do business.

"We have to stay relevant and try this new technology. You never know what's going to happen," says Ward. "To say 'this is our new normal' or 'we're just going to pause'—that's not going to make every child's potential reality."

Neither a global pandemic, nor an historic ice storm, could stop Texas PTA from rallying for students and families. When the odds were stacked against them, PTA leaders kept the course—and found virtual ways to stay connected and deliver on their mission.

*This case study was prepared by consultant Anna Baker with Three Story Strategies, LLC., contracted by National PTA using sponsorship funds from BAND. National PTA and Texas PTA do not endorse any commercial entity, product, or service. No endorsement of BAND is implied.*

"Keep PTA going. That's going to be better for kids and better for families."

**Audra Frigon, President, North East Independent School District (NvEISD) Council of PTAs**

## About BAND

BAND is an official Proud National PTA Sponsor and is a supporting sponsor of Reflections and Teacher Appreciation Week, as well as a supporter of various PTA events in the field such as Texas PTA Rally Day. BAND aims to help state, regional and local PTAs communicate better and stay organized in one place. "PTA members are dedicated volunteers. They are really passionate about what they're doing, and they do it all for the sake of the students. We feel really great about partnering with National PTA and providing this free tool that will help them make their schools and their students' lives better."—Sidney Chae, BAND

[Learn more about using the BAND group communication app for your PTA.](#)

"It was a hard year and it's easy to get beaten down by that. Be brave and do what you think is going to work. If it doesn't, pivot again."

**—Suzi Kennon, President, Texas PTA Board of Directors**

# ACTION CHANGES THINGS



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