

Make Your PTA an Essential Resource to Your Community

By Delcenia Jones



In February 2010, the online magazine *District Administration: Solutions for School District Management* reported that Chicago has nearly 300 street gangs and 10,000 gang members, many of whom are enrolled in Chicago schools. This report was not news to the Black Star Community PTA in Chicago. Many of its members have lived in the Chicago area for more than two decades and have experienced the negative impact of widespread street gang activity. To combat these negative effects, the Black Star Community PTA has begun working with other local community organizations focused on addressing critical local issues, such as student violence, and the importance of creating and maintaining strong parental support systems students need to succeed.

In these stressful times, many PTA leaders are finding membership recruitment and retention to be particularly challenging. The Black Star Community PTA has found some unique methods of getting their community to support students and families, and join PTA. The basis for their efforts is in recognizing the needs of their community, and finding innovative ways to bring the community together to share and work toward the goals of PTA. Through such collaborations, this PTA has become an essential resource to the community it serves.

Innovative approaches to involvement

The Black Star Community PTA is an offshoot of The Black Star Project (<http://blackstarproject.org/action>), which was founded in 1996 “to improve the quality of life in Black and Latino communities of Chicago and nationwide by eliminating the racial academic achievement gap.” The Black Star Project is part of the PTA MORE coalition (PTA.org/MORE), which is dedicated to increasing male involvement, and this affiliation became a

natural rallying point for creating the Black Star Community PTA in 2009.

The Black Star Community PTA serves as a catalyst for gathering concerned members of the community to discuss pressing issues with experts who offer information and direction on such topics as reducing gang activity. Some of these gatherings have featured screenings of documentary movies such as *We Need to Talk*, a poignant and honest look at the lives of 10 women and the harsh results of the choices they have made; a workshop titled “The Role of PTA in Creating Great Schools”; and a seminar offered as part of the Toyota/Black Star Parent University called “How to Help Your Elementary School Student with Math.”

The Black Star Community PTA regularly invites members of the Illinois PTA as keynote speakers at their community events. In November 2010, Illinois PTA’s Legislative Chair Barbara Quinn was the featured guest at a special meeting held to inform attendees about pending Illinois legislation, as well as ways parents and communities can get involved in the political process.

Getting the word out about PTA efforts is not limited to sending a note home with students. The Black Star Community PTA utilizes various means of communication, including e-newsletters, e-blasts, community blogs, local church bulletins, text messages, and public access television. This PTA’s commitment to bringing relevant issues directly to the community, ensuring that true community collaboration occurs, has earned the respect of many local PTAs in the Chicago area and encouraged these units to partner with the Black Star Community PTA.

With a membership of more than 250 concerned and active members, that is growing consistently, the Black Star Community PTA has proven that the challenges of finding innovative and effective ways to attract new parents and caregivers to PTA can

be overcome. They have proven that by being aware of the challenges and current issues facing parents, they can face them head-on, and can ensure that they are providing relevant information, support, and resources to the families. In turn, they expect their PTA membership will begin to soar in no time.

Strategies you can try today

Here are some ways you can put the community into your PTA:

Find the experts in your backyard—Extend an invitation to community leaders, as well as PTA leaders to speak at your next PTA meeting. Ensure that they are presenting on a topic that is relevant to your community or school. By involving community leaders, not only will you be helping your membership get relevant information they need, but you will also be building bridges with other organizations.

Reach out across communities—Do not limit your communications to just your school or PTA members. Contact your local public access station or local television and radio affiliates and ask them to advertise your upcoming meetings and events; most stations make public service announcements free of charge. Tap into any other networks you can think of, including websites that cover local news and events and Twitter members who reach across several communities, including community leaders and regional newspapers.


Get to know your community and its needs—Read your community newspaper and/or municipal website to find out what is happening in your community. Many concerned parents and community advocates write op-eds or respond to articles and online posts. Not only can you find some great advocates in your community to join your PTA, but you also will be able to better gauge what resources your PTA might be able to offer to the community.

While the community PTA model allows PTA leaders to expand their level of service and support to the entire community, many of the strategies being used by such PTAs can work for your school-based PTA. PTA speaks for every child with one voice, and that includes children in other communities. The more you “cross-pollinate,” the stronger your PTA will be. **OC**

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For more information about community building in your school, read “Community Schools and Community Building” at PTA.org/2219.htm.



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