



# Community PTAs Believe It Takes a Village to Improve Education

By Vanessa Bush

The academic achievement of our children is a national concern. Thus, PTA focuses not only on individual schools, but also on the communities they serve. One of the innovative approaches to community involvement in education is the community PTA.

Community PTAs are not tied to a single school, but instead offer membership and involvement to various groups within a community. While community PTAs can be more inclusive, they also pose challenges.

## Black Star Community PTA

Community PTAs form for a variety of reasons. In Chicago, adults feeling left out of the education decision-making process have been the prime motivator behind the creation of community PTAs. For Black Star Community PTA (BSCPTA), the hot-button issue that galvanized parents to action was the Chicago Public School (CPS) system's 2009 proposed policy for admitting students to its coveted magnet and selective-enrollment schools following the end of federal scrutiny of desegregation efforts. The proposed policy, which focused on enrolling more children living near the schools, had the potential to shut out children from poorer, more distant neighborhoods from attending the best of these schools.

Cynthia Flowers, a former nurse and stay-at-home mom with three children in CPS, was on the front line of worried parents. When Phillip Jackson, head of the Black Star Project, a nonprofit educational agency, proposed the idea of a community PTA, Flowers, who has been active in school-based PTAs, was interested immediately.

"Phillip had been involved with the Illinois PTA as a consultant and realized an opportunity to further tap into urban communities," she says. Flowers, who helped found the community PTA and acted as its first president, "was willing to take a stab because PTA has a long and well-established history. I didn't know then how much curriculum and resources were available to make this venture easier."

BSCPTA was chartered in 2009 and has a membership of more than 250. The Black Star Project provides the PTA with a regular meeting place and support staff at its office, and through a unique membership-sharing structure, uses a portion of donations to the Black Star Project to pay for PTA memberships.

In the PTA's first year, BSCPTA members protested the CPS policy before meetings at the Board of Education and mobilized parents on the issue. Flowers was later named to a CPS blue ribbon committee that hammered out a compromise position that provided some access to selective-enrollment schools based on socioeconomic factors.

## Challenge of focus

Although concerns about inequality in public education continue, the issue of selective enrollment has receded a bit, posing the challenge of managing an organization that is not tied to a particular school and its day-to-day concerns.

"Sometimes parents can feel that we're not addressing issues at their school, so this (PTA) is not beneficial for them," says Asiaha Butler, one of the early organizers of BSCPTA and its current president. "We're looking at more variables than a particular school. For me, I wanted a group that looked at the bigger picture citywide."

Given the broad interests of the PTA, Butler is mindful of the challenge of maintaining the commitment of her board. "I talk to the board and listen to their true passions, why they joined the PTA, and try to give them structure and goals" that align with their particular interests. The board communicates weekly via telephone conference calls and meets with members once a month.

Parent empowerment is becoming the overarching focus of the community PTA as it seeks to maintain member commitment. Butler, who has an 8th grader in CPS, has refocused PTA's efforts on school closings, particularly in the South Side community of Englewood where she has been involved in community organizing for years. "I wanted



to align all these causes into one and make it easier to get everyone on board in terms of how we can help Englewood and how Englewood can help the community PTA.”

Butler is a member of Englewood’s local community action council (CAC), a CPS effort to promote community engagement by getting residents to develop strategic plans for schools in their neighborhoods. But, even before the Englewood CAC could solidify its plans, CPS announced several proposed school closings in the community. The resulting frustration is sparking interest in a community PTA in Englewood, an effort that Butler is heading.

In mid-January, the Englewood CAC sponsored a Parent Empowerment Summit, where Butler, Flowers, and others conducted workshops to educate parents about their rights and responsibilities. The summit utilized curricula from the PTA’s Urban Family Engagement Initiative (UFEI) ([PTA.org/5028.htm](http://PTA.org/5028.htm)).

“We find parents want information about how school districts work, how to understand school report cards and improvement plans,” says Flowers, a UFEI team leader and education issues director of the Illinois PTA. “We’re hoping that as we give parents all this information about schools and what PTA can provide, they will realize how empowered they can become and become more involved in the legislative component of PTA. We give them information about their rights and how to be accountable so they can use the democratic processes already in place in their schools. Through PTA training, they realize they are capable of taking leadership roles, that they can step up and make a difference in their schools.”

## A future of community involvement

An important part of BSCPTA’s mission has been to encourage development of other community PTAs. Unfettered by connections to a single school or community, BSCPTA continues to utilize the UFEI template and has begun to reach out to parents throughout the city. The group worked with Illinois PTA and other community partners to host Leading with Literacy events at several public libraries across Chicago last fall. BSCPTA has already inspired the creation of Educational Village Keepers (EdVK) Community PTSA, founded by a retired school teacher (see sidebar, “How to start a community PTA”).

When it comes to organizations that empower parents “we know there are gaps,” says Flowers. “So we have to take our show on the road.” The result could be inspiration for even more community PTAs. **OC**

*Vanessa Bush teaches at Columbia College in Chicago and writes book reviews for Booklist magazine, published by the American Library Association. She is actively involved with Black Star Community PTA.*

## How to start a community PTA

Just do it. That is the basic advice that Carmen Palmer, PhD, former school teacher and head of Educational Village Keepers (EdVK) Community PTSA would give to those considering developing a community PTA.

Dr. Palmer’s recommendations are as follows:

- Take full advantage of all training available from state and National PTA.
- Develop a clear definition of the purpose of the community PTA.
- Be servant leaders who understand that they are there to assist those they serve.

Cynthia Flowers advises organizers to “gather parents to talk about education issues and get an idea about what’s important to that segment of the community. I think a community PTA functions best when it can identify its focus. Then create a mission statement, an objective, and annual goals for meeting those objectives.”

Because community PTAs are out and about in communities rather than connected to a single school, they face the challenge of having a consistent routine. “You need to meet regularly, have productive meetings, and adhere to the mandates of your bylaws to maintain compliance with the state and National PTA structure needed to run an organization,” advises Flowers.

Flowers is also aware of the importance of succession and continuing the work of the Black Star Community PTA. During her presidency, Flowers groomed her first vice president Asiaha Butler to succeed her as president. Butler is doing the same to ensure that the community PTA’s mission continues on seamlessly.