

California State PTA 114th Annual Convention President-elect Message – Colleen A.R. You May 2013, San Jose, CA



Good morning, PTA! In light of the fact that you've been the recipients of a lot of words these past few days, and now that convention is winding down, it's very important to me that my address to you be realistic, yet tempered with optimism.

Those who know me well would likely consider me a fairly "serious" person. One of the things in my life that I take very seriously is PTA. Just ask my family! And speaking of family, allow me to introduce the folks who keep me grounded, encourage me, and support all of my efforts on behalf of this great association.

Initially, I grappled with how to share my vision. Unexpectedly, something occurred to me. Thoughtful words, shared by a teenager many years ago, in earnest, and from the heart, still affect me deeply. "Here you stand today (ready) to take the next big step in life...As you move forward, think of all you have (done) and will accomplish. Always treat others with respect and know they are in the same boat as you. (They're) facing the same challenges, jumping over the same hurdles. Never let anyone tell you that you cannot do something. Hold your head high and take life one day at a time. When you feel like giving up, take a deep breath and try again."

Isn't that a great message? And isn't that an inspiration for us, in times when it seems we try and take one step forward for children and education, and forces beyond our control seemingly conspire to repel us three steps backwards? Those words give

me courage, and show me we can't be "graded" by anyone, or unfairly judged by anyone, if we speak from the heart about PTA and share our experiences.

Why do folks join PTA? What is it about PTA that resonates with them, inspires them, and excites them? For me, it was "the ask." What is "the ask," you say? Well, it was from a PTA leader in my daughter and son's elementary school. She needed help for the Nesbit Puma Fund Run – sound familiar? I said, "Well, sure, but only if my friend can help out, too." This investment of time resonated with me, because I saw that every child at school was involved, and the money raised from this event went to support school assemblies, supplies for the classrooms, and field trips. And, face it folks, any expenditure of time on our part, both then and now, is definitely an *investment*. Up to that point, I'd not been to a PTA unit meeting, had no concept of councils, or districts, or even this thing called "state PTA."

Later, that same PTA leader told me about councils, and how we had PTA districts in California, and the uniting factor was the PTA members, who were all focused on children's education, health, and welfare. One day, another PTA leader at school approached me and said, "Would you like to attend PTA convention?" I could not believe that this unit wanted to underwrite my attendance! What I saw at my first convention in 1994 broadened my perspective, because compellingly and completely, the resonance moved from **my** children and **my** school to the "balcony" perspective – to our belief in "every child, one voice."

A few years passed, and gradually my involvement and engagement in district and state PTA deepened, but it did not happen all at once. After attending

conventions, and meeting folks who were just as persistent, and passionate, and purposeful, there was no turning back. *But, remember, it all started locally*, being “just” a PTA member: not necessarily volunteering, but gradually “being asked” and then finding a niche of engagement that made sense and fit into my lifestyle.

Certainly, the PTA leadership and membership in 1897 mirrored a different age. Those individuals possessed different capabilities to affect change, and different specific challenges - but the focus in 2013 on **what’s best for children and families has remained consistent**. Some have told me we’re engaged in a “righteous” endeavor. The fact that PTA is unafraid to stand on principle, even when it’s unpopular, the fact that PTA is beholden to no special interests other than improving the lives of children, the fact that we choose to devote precious time to speak, to grow, to remind, again and again, if necessary, of the absolute necessity of our mission – *those facts continue to inspire and excite me*.

Meeting you in workshops, in the hallways, and at meal events, has shown me that these beliefs resonate with you, too. Our challenge, moving forward, is how to convey this to all of the parents, teachers, and families in our great state? What I hope you’re thinking about as you return home to your school PTAs is local **outreach**, and how to attract new parents, teachers, administrators and families, and excite them about our mission. Our continued relevance, and the value membership brings, is best demonstrated by effectively engaging and resonating with all members. This first begins in our local schools and communities, where you see firsthand the emergent issues in classrooms and schools, and can effectively share your story, and demonstrate how parent and family engagement is the key factor for student achievement and success.

We are united in that we seek what’s best for children. And that’s what we know all parents and teachers want: what’s best for kids. I remember when my children were just starting in school, and the principal said to me, “Colleen, your children watch what you do. They see that you believe school is important, and you are involved. Therefore, they grow to value education.” And that is what each of you bring to PTA - *in whatever capacity you are able*. Not everyone can spend

time volunteering, but everyone **can join** PTA. Joining is a form of engagement and involvement. And new parents and families can start there.

One of the things I am so excited about is our School SMARTs Parent Academies. I believe that this program is key to engaging parents and can rise to the level of the Reflections program as one of the signature programs of PTA. We’ve piloted School SMARTs through a generous grant from the Hewlett Foundation. Schools hold a family engagement event, followed by sign-ups to participate in several topical workshops. These sessions are accompanied by art activities to build community and knowledge. After the sessions, parents have the tools they need to “navigate” through school. The goal is to welcome and involve families who may not otherwise come to the school campus, empower them to be more comfortable at school, and eventually include them as powerful advocates in the membership and activities of PTA. I am inspired by the participants and graduates I have met, particularly one recent immigrant who stated “this is the first program I’ve attended since coming to the US, and I am grateful for all I have learned to support my child.” It is essential that our association remain focused and committed to working on specific strategies to expand this program, and actively involve PTA councils/districts and other entities to sustain School SMARTs beyond the grant.

So what are some other ways your state association, the California State PTA, can continue to remain relevant and responsive to our PTA leaders and members? Traveling and speaking to our districts from San Diego to Chico, I’ve been sharing my observations about what I see as some essential areas of focus and continuity.

For one thing, we have become more data-driven, and have informed our decisions based on feedback from our local leaders and members. I envision that we will continue to base our goals in large part on your feedback, and actively seeking, listening, and responding to that feedback is a priority. We must continue to build on the public’s awareness about the importance and value of PTA. PTA was featured in many news stories this past year, and not just around election-time! We’ve actively promoted our association through e-media like FaceBook, Patch, op-eds, and video vignettes, and my vision is

that these efforts will expand, refine, and continue. And I'm told I'll be joining the Twitter-verse, too! Each of you has a powerful role as a storyteller and as an ambassador to build awareness about PTA.

Communications and technology growth have been unprecedented in the past few decades. As a former unit president, I would spend an entire evening telephoning each and every one of our unit board members to check-in and see if they had items for the agenda. Recently, I read that the millennial generation, those individuals born between 1979 and 1993, cannot remember a time when communication was not constant and instant. Think about that. We have an unprecedented opportunity to continue to rethink and reshape our PTA messaging in ways that reach and inspire our parents and families and educators. And we've started this essential work by performing an extensive communications audit, and have embarked on a strategic communications plan. The plan includes improving and formatting our capta.org website to be timely, easy to navigate, and a useful resource for both our PTA leaders and members. We're looking at posting a "living" PTA Toolkit online, so that it can be updated throughout the year. Information provided will start simple, with options to "dig deeper" as the visitor desires. These are the types of changes I believe will facilitate and increase use, and provide valuable and easily accessible resources and programmatic information to our membership.

Simplifying compliance and processes is an issue that resonates with our members. Many of these issues are driven by entities outside of the PTA, nonetheless, your state PTA has worked hard this term to support school PTAs through the maze of tax requirements and Charitable Trust issues. While those topics may not seem very entertaining, our goal has been to constructively assist the over 3,500 independent, non-profit PTA associations throughout the state to free up your precious time to deliver programs and projects at your local schools. Providing expanded staff expertise and assistance for our units, councils, and districts is a continued priority, as this underscores the benefits of being a PTA, and demonstrates our commitment to actively find ways to support your local efforts for the children in your communities.

Over the past two and a half terms, we've undergone a comprehensive internal structures review process, and carefully considered board structures and meeting logistics. For me, continuity in this process is essential, because the more effective we are at governance, the better supported our units, councils, and districts will be. We've evaluated the composition of our state commissions and committees taking into account capacity, diversity and support. A task force to study and make recommendations regarding the state board nominating committee process will be appointed after this convention to evaluate the current model. Work will include examination of the best practices of other non-profit associations, and focus on concrete strategies of how our board composition can better reflect the diversity of our state. I anticipate we'll continue to take a hard look at our leadership trainings and support, field services, and annual convention, particularly in terms of venues, length, program, and delivery models. Beginning next term, we will begin "test-driving" some of the recommendations that have come out of the review process. I anticipate that we will encounter challenges, but hold firm in the belief that nothing prevents us from regrouping and reconsidering if need be.

Ultimately, how do we "grow" our association? I believe we have to move out of our comfort-level, and identify our shared motivators in ways that we've not tried before. For me, it is reassuring to know that although our educational and life experiences are unique, there is an underlying similarity that allows us to derive strength from our friends. **But PTA can't survive with "just" our friends.** We must adopt an attitude of inclusion that rejoices in similarities, but exults in differences! Our ability to do this, stems from a very simple concept, one I mentioned earlier, and was practiced by Phoebe, Alice, and Selena: we gain so much from treating others as we would be treated. This principle should be our guide in our PTA relationships with our potential members. Carrying this respect beyond ourselves, to our communities, to the parents and families with students just entering school, or who are unfamiliar with our education system, allows us to appreciate our differences, learn from each other and live productively. And, it strengthens our association. It ensures there are those who value our mission beyond the time our children are in school. And

beyond the time that we are engaged as members and leaders.

Looking forward, my focus is that the California State PTA leadership continues to be responsible stewards of the per capita membership dues portions that you remit. It is absolutely essential to convey to you that all of our state board members take this responsibility very seriously. After a thoughtful process, this term we invested in a membership marketing study utilizing demographics, membership statistics, phone interview data and focus groups to deliver the messages, programs, and services that resonate with our members, and that they need and value. I am committed to ensuring this information is utilized to move our association in directions that best serve our members and ultimately result in improved local outcomes for our children.

The California State PTA has unprecedented opportunities to learn, to grow and to accomplish anything. We must not let fear or discouragement hold us back. Our challenges are many - you've heard the statistics throughout general meetings, in workshops, and while networking: inadequate school finance, decline in children's physical fitness and overall health status, summer learning loss, challenges for special needs students, the increased prevalence of bullying. So what keeps me optimistic? In PTA we have an amazing phenomenon called "social capital." More than in any other association with which I've been involved, PTA benefits from the diverse assets that each individual brings and shares - often overlooked, seldom trumpeted, but absolutely an essential driver of who we are and what we can accomplish. Advocacy, both local and statewide, is informed and strengthened by this capital, and remains our powerful bedrock and mission; it lends to our credibility, and ensures the collective voice for children is not silenced.

Oh, and those words I referred to at the beginning of my remarks? Well, they were shared with me by my daughter, Heather, who is on the screen now with her family in a picture from December 2011.



Heather, Martin, and Alex could not be here today as they live in Scotland. Who would have thought in 2003, as a school board member, when I asked that teenager for guidance on what to convey to a group of 8th grade middle school graduates, that ten years later those words would resonate so completely in my 2013 address to you, our convention delegates and guests? So, for our steadfast members, teachers, and leaders of this great association, I say THANK YOU. And, I remind you again: here is why PTA persists.

It is for children like my grandson Alexander, and for all children, that we break large challenges into small increments; tread forward unafraid, and remain excited to meet all that awaits us. Persistence will carry us far. And remember, the only people who do not make mistakes are the people who "don't do anything!" I have great hopes for this association: it will mean taking steps with which we are sometimes uncomfortable, but people have heard me say: change is incremental, is often painful, but absolutely necessary if we are to continue as the preeminent association that speaks for every child with one voice. Let's move forward together, secure in the knowledge that commonalities bind us, mission unites us, and diversity excites us!

