



# Mastering the Three-Legged Race



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## PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Engaging Families and Communities*

Every Field Day, the three-legged-race is a big event. And, every year, within the first 10 yards, it is easy to see which teams will finish well and which won't.

Some teams move in smooth coordination, employing some pre-agreed system to stay in sync. Other teams are clearly out of balance, with one teammate pulling harder than the other, or taking long, fast steps while the other moves at a different pace.

At the extreme, these teammates pull against each other, tumble over, get angry and start blaming.

The relationship between a school's administration and parent organization can be a bit like a team in a three-legged-race. You are bound together, in a very public way, and you are supposed to be moving together toward a common goal line. With a bit of careful forethought and agreed upon operating systems, the entire school community wins when the leadership in both organizations takes steps to ensure the partnership works together well. Not all PTAs are created equal. Some schools have stronger PTAs than others, but principals can help support the development of a PTA no matter where theirs currently stands.

First, a reminder of who makes up the team. A Parent Teacher Association (PTA or other parent organization) is legally separated from a school system. They select their own leadership and committee chairs. They write their own by-laws, draft their own budget, and manage their own finances. They create annual goals, decide which programs to implement, and establish their meeting calendar. They are supported by their own district, regional, state, and national systems, which provide excellent structures and leadership development programs.



## Strategies to build a productive relationship with your PTA

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Schools, on the other hand, are bound by national and state laws, district policies, and collective bargaining agreements. Their success, and the success of their administration, are judged by the ability to achieve externally-determined metrics. A single school administrator may, in many cases, be responsible for the performance of 60-90 direct reports. Reaching out for more-frequent and deeper involvement with a PTA may feel impossible to an already overworked school administrator.

So, why add one more leadership role to your list of duties? Put simply, most parents and the community at large conjoin these two organizations when forming their impression of your school. Almost everything you do to strengthen the relationship between your school and your school's PTA has the potential to increase student achievement, parent satisfaction, school safety, and the overall sense that your school is well-functioning.

Too often, new administrators view organized parent groups as a threat. It's easy to worry about what gets talked about in the parking lot, or whether parents are second guessing your actions. As a new administrator, you are the last one in the door. Parents, in some cases, have been with the school for decades. Seasoned, successful administrators know that a healthy PTA can help achieve many desired elements in a school's vision, far beyond what a school's resources

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or staffing can handle. But, where to begin?

Nothing starts the administrator/PTA relationship on the right path better than a meeting before the start of the school year to share goals, discuss procedures, and clarify roles. Here is a possible agenda for an early August meeting between the school principal and the PTA Executive Committee:

## TRAPS FOR ADMINISTRATORS TO AVOID:

- Treating PTA leaders as employees who can be told what to do and how to do it. Remember, these folks are volunteers, giving their time out of a desire to serve.
- Allowing preferential treatment for the children of PTA leaders. Nothing good ever comes from this. Ever.
- Leaving PTA leadership in the dark about upcoming changes and challenges. When you share news with your PTA leaders you gain a sense of how the range of parents in the community will respond, and help those parent leaders explain to other parents the rationale behind an upcoming change.

## SAMPLE AGENDA

1. Discuss/write norms and guidelines for your shared time. Encourage your PTA leaders to bring along any plans or materials that they would like to share with you.
2. Talk through the annual goals for the school, and those for the PTA. Seek ways for these two organizations to mutually support each other, and to identify and focus on shared goals. Think Venn Diagram.
3. Review the annual calendar for the school and the PTA. Identify and resolve potential conflicts, including busy times of the year when school families might feel overly stretched or testing windows when there is limited access for visitors or events on campus.
4. Clarify contact people within the school for the following:
  - a. Request for use of the facility
  - b. Additions/changes to the school event calendar
  - c. Access to the site after hours
  - d. Providing information for the school or PTA newsletter
  - e. Requesting background clearance for volunteers
  - f. Proposing before/after school clubs and activities
5. Clarify whether the PTA can use the school's photocopiers, and, if so, how copies will be tracked and charged. If the PTA will have access to photocopiers, clarify who will provide training for the volunteers, how to report a paper jam or refill the paper drawer. Address access to other workroom materials, such as colored paper, staplers, and markers.
6. Talk through systems for distributing PTA flyers and other materials to students and their families, and the need for the PTA logo to be on each item distributed.
7. Discuss the handling of money. PTA rules and often district policies prohibit school staff from collecting money for a PTA function during their paid work day. If this is the case, clarify who from the PTA will be available to receive money from parents or students for PTA functions. Consider installing a locked office drop box for PTA membership forms and checks.
8. Review the procedures for signing in and out when on campus as a volunteer.
9. Talk through where, if at all, PTA supplies may be stored on the site.
10. Explain how custodial time and services can be requested for non-school events, and whether there is a charge.
11. Work out the expected role of the school administration at PTA meetings. Will there be a scheduled time on each meeting's agenda for a Principal's Report?
12. Talk about how the PTA Exec Committee and the principal will communicate. Will the Committee request time on the principal's calendar?
13. Remind everyone that every minute at school is instructional time. Proposed assemblies and other uses of the instructional day are expected to contribute to the educational program and must tie directly to one or more state standards.
14. Clarify that the PTA does not have a say in school decisions, but can be an important sounding board before decisions are made, a key source of parent representatives on hiring committees, an essential resource as chaperones on field trips, trained as effective classroom volunteers, and serve in many other ways that contribute to the overall functioning of the school.

- Shortcutting the PTA decision-making process. No individual PTA member, even the PTA president, can commit to a project or decision without first consulting their board. PTAs are self-governing, member-led associations with bylaws and guidelines. Honor their structure, processes and timeline.
- Failing to support enrichment and recognition programs offered by your PTA. Our state and local organizations have access to many programs that support children, families and schools. If your PTA wants to offer a program, find a staff member who will serve as the school liaison to the committee organizing this assistance, and make sure the program receives the attention and support it needs.
- Neglecting to model to staff the respect and appreciation for the PTA that these volunteers deserve.



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### OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER:

Be clear as to which PTA events/ programs need to be approved by the school administration before they are shared with parents, and which can be approved by someone other than the school’s administration.

The PTA Board members will be talking with many more parents than the school administration and can be effective ‘ears on the ground’ to identify concerns and issues in the school community. Clarify when and what kind of concerns (or gossip) to share with each other, and how to respond if a student’s safety is at risk.

Remember that if the PTA leadership finds itself in a jam the school administration can be a helpful, confidential resource. Principals know a lot about leadership, problem-solving, and working with difficult people. You share the PTA’s desire that the school environment be positive and well-functioning. Be open to help as needed.

While principals cannot serve on a PTA’s nominating committee, administration and office staff can be especially helpful to PTAs by keeping an eye out for other parents who regularly volunteer at the school and contribute to a positive school climate. PTA leadership changes from year to year as children graduate and parents move on. Identifying future parent leaders can help sustain a high performing PTA, and for struggling PTAs this is a way you can help build their membership.

If the PTA is in the fortunate situation of having funds that can be used for classroom or school grants, help the PTA understand any limitations and weed out requests

ahead of time that shouldn’t be under consideration. For example, the classroom pet that the science teacher is asking the PTA to buy may not be permitted under district policy, or perhaps the climbing wall the PTA is excited about adding to the gym can not be covered by the district insurance.

New PTA leaders should understand that, when speaking with the school administration or another staff member, they need to be clear when they are speaking as a parent and when they are representing the PTA.

PTA members must be trained on FERPA laws. Students and families have a right to privacy, and a child’s safety may even be a stake. Schools by law may not share addresses, parent contact information, phone numbers, student names or birth dates with anyone without a parent’s permission. FERPA also applies to photographs taken at school and at events in which student faces are recognizable. As a workaround, PTAs will often have their own social media accounts and will want to share pictures publicly, following their organization’s privacy policies.

Discuss the expectation that PTA volunteers will follow the district’s confidentiality policies. When on campus, volunteers will inevitably observe actions and come across information that must remain private. It helps to rehearse possible scenarios and appropriate responses, including which staff will serve as a contact to handle questions and concerns from PTA volunteers.

Often, PTA regions or councils offer a workshop titled, “PTA and the Principal.” Invite your PTA President

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or Executive Committee to attend with you. This is one more way administrators can strengthen their relationship with their school's PTA leadership and can demonstrate their active, visible support of the organization's positive influence on the school.

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## CROSSING THE FINISH LINE, TOGETHER

It takes time, effort and foresight to establish and maintain a positive relationship between a school administration and PTA. When that relationship is working well the administration feels supported and in sync with the parent community. School staff benefit from a powerful partner, helping them meet the needs of their students. Members of the PTA see their efforts and energy making a positive, direct impact. The entire school community benefits from the coordination between these two entities, capitalizing on the talents and energy of parents to advance the mission of the school.

Remember that field day analogy and the three-legged race?

The cheers that erupt when a team successfully crosses the finish line can also echo in June if your admin/PTA team is functioning well. Coordinated teamwork is the foundation for success, in which students' lives are enriched, teachers are supported and parents are engaged.

A positive administration/PTA relationship becomes a model for



other partnerships and is a reason for the entire school community to celebrate. Your leadership can build that level of coordination and get that team to the finish line smoothly, efficiently and without a lot of shouting or blame. ■

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## TRAPS FOR PTA MEMBERS TO AVOID:

- As actively involved school volunteers, assuming a level of familiarity and sidestepping rules. Always sign in. Always wear a visitor badge, even if “they know me.” Do not drop by a classroom unexpectedly. It's important for PTA members to remember they serve as role models for parent engagement in the school's community.
- Using PTA funds to cover items that should be paid out of the district or school's budget. Parents feel strongly about helping out their school and want to make sure no need goes unmet, but PTA funding should be for enhancements or enrichments, not basic education.
- Being overly social with the front office staff during school hours. PTA members want to feel connected with the school and can forget that all paid staff have many other responsibilities that need to be completed throughout the day.
- Blurring the lines between PTA and school programs and events. This can lead to invalidated insurance coverage for PTAs and confusion over who is responsible if an incident occurs. Make sure that contracts for PTA events are signed by PTA elected officers and PTA money, either for an event, fundraising or membership, is handled only by PTA volunteers and not staff, unless those staff are ‘off the clock.’
- Interceding in parent concerns. If a parent approaches you to complain about something at school the most helpful response is, “I know the school is working hard to serve this community, and I know they want to hear from you if you have a concern. Have you talked with the teacher/staff member/administration about this yet?”