



Published: October 19, 2009

Not Your Mother's PTA

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Colleen McKerley of Mount Lebanon may not be on the payroll at nearby Jubilee Christian School of the South Hills, a few miles southwest of downtown Pittsburgh, but she says serving the school is almost a full-time job.

McKerley is the co-chairwoman of the school's parent-teacher group, which has volunteers who log more than 7,000 hours a year doing everything from helping in the library and school buses to assisting with the academic curriculum. The association is involved with an annual school program each March that teaches the students about a particular foreign country, which will be Russia this year. McKerley's organization is helping the teachers plan the projects, and

members are doing research on different aspects of the country, like Russian games.

The parent group even helped interview candidates for a new principal recently, says McKerley, 43. It's a long way from the parent groups she remembers from her own childhood.

"For the most part, (the club) at that point was probably a lot more social," she says. "There were some social things and maybe a little bit of fundraising. Now, it's more on the academic side, like helping the teachers."

Parent-teacher school groups, some of which are affiliated with the National Parent Teacher Association, or PTA, have evolved significantly from their simple room-mother image of yesteryear, says Michele Morrow, president of the Pennsylvania PTA.

"We are certainly not the cupcake-selling, cookie-baking PTA" that our mothers had, says Morrow, a resident of Bath, about 10 miles north of Allentown and Bethlehem and 60 miles north of Philadelphia.

Actually, with the National PTA — which has more than 6 million members — the role of the association hasn't changed that much since it began in 1897, Morrow says. What has changed, rather, is the public's perception of the organization, which always has worked on legislative issues and been a national advocate for children and education. Not that PTA members don't like cupcakes, she jokes.

"It's fun," she says. "Of course, we like to eat."

[← Back to Story](#)



The most notable change in the past two decades has been technology. With e-mail, computers, the Internet and the like, PTA members can connect and communicate much more easily, Morrow says.

Another great change that has been happening in recent years is the increase in male PTA membership, Morrow says. Traditionally, the PTA has been comprised of mostly middle-aged, middle-class, white women. Yet now, fathers are getting more involved. Even the PTA national president, Chuck Saylor, is male.

One such dad is George Stash III of Connellsville, about 40 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. The single father is the parent-teacher group president at Dunbar Township Elementary School, where his two children — Elizabeth, 8; and George IV, 6 — attend. Stash says that, as a male, he still is in the minority, but that more dads are participating.

In his organization, Stash and his fellow volunteers put on activities that aim to get students involved outside the classroom. For instance, pictures submitted by students are on display in the school's main lobby. It shows activities the kids did during the summer. The Dunbar PTO sponsors fundraisers, including one in the fall that collects as much as to \$10,000 in catalog sales of jewelry, magazines, and more.

Being an active PTO volunteer, particularly as president, is a huge time commitment, Stash says. He is self-employed with a lawn care business, but spends a lot of time at Dunbar in the mornings, where he attended school years ago.

"I've been there not every day, but pretty much every other day, since school has begun," says Stash, 33. "It works out pretty well for me."

Susan Kline also says her involvement as president of the parent-teacher group at Cardinal Maida Academy in Vandergrift — the school her 10-year-old daughter Ariel attends about 25 miles northeast of Pittsburgh — is time consuming, but very rewarding. Kline's organization sponsors numerous activities throughout the year, including an Italian Heritage Day, a Cash Bash, and a dinner and dance gala with a silent auction. The fundraisers help keep tuition costs down, she says. Kline, 54, also works part-time at Cardinal Maida as a kindergarten aide.

When school began, Kline says her husband, Patrick, told Ariel: "Well, we may as well say goodbye to mom now for another 9 months."

The biggest reward of her group involvement, Kline says, is what it does for the kids.

"Everything is geared for the kids," says Kline, a resident of Parks, a few miles north of Vandergrift. "It brings everybody together."

Kline says she doesn't remember even having a parent-teacher group in her elementary school.

"My mother never went to a single meeting," she says. "Compared to what I had — which was nothing — to what I do here, it was light years away."

McKerley agrees.

"It's definitely my mission in life right now to be there for the kids and support their

education, she says.

By being involved in the parent group, McKerley says, she is investing in the education of her children: Nathan, 14, Kate, 12, and Seth, 9.

"They know that this is something that is valuable for you," she says. "Not only are you writing a check every month, you're also investing your own time and energy."

Amy King Allegra of Scottdale, about 30 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, says that most of the people in her parent-teacher group at Verna Montessori School in nearby Mount Pleasant work full time, and the professionals include a podiatrist, a Web site designer and a professor. Despite busy schedules, they find time to volunteer for the group's activities, like planning fundraisers for the school's enrichment programs.

"We truly have professionals who give an incredible amount of hours," says Allegra, 41, who is on the group's publicity committee. Her kids are Joshua, 9, and Brianne, 4.

The adults are "giving a tremendous amount of commitment for the betterment of the school."

On the Net:

Pennsylvania PTA: <http://www.papta.org/>

Information from: <http://www.pittsburghlive.com/>

Copyright 2009 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.