



PS 8 PTA

Helping Parents Help Our School

PTA of PS8 Guidebook

An overview of the PTA for parents and guardians
who want to know how our PTA works
and how to get involved.

April 2008

Who Can Join The PTA?

All parents and guardians of PS8 children are automatically members of the PTA. Teachers are too. Principal Phillips participates in almost all Executive Board meetings and General Meetings and spends a lot of time collaborating with the PTA leadership team, but technically the Principal, Assistant Principals and Supervisors can't be members of the PTA.

What's The PTA's Mission and Role?

The PTA is responsible for setting its own goals and objectives and for planning activities to meet them. At PS8, here's how the current PTA leadership sees things...

The NYC Department of Education *prepares students to meet grade-level standards in reading, writing and math, and prepares high school students to pass Regents exams and to meet graduation requirements* - that's its official mission statement.

Our school's mission builds on these fundamentals: *PS8 is a creative learning community that is dedicated to having all of its members flourish. Our mission is academic excellence and, in its pursuit, we are committed to the development of the whole child.*

This ambition has guided our school on its journey from poor performance, to high achievements.

But PS8's success has taken and will continue to require resources and support beyond those supplied by the DoE alone.

This poses both a challenge and a choice for our community. Are we content with achieving the DoE's mission and stopping there?

Or do we embrace PS8's mission, which goes further, and if so are we willing and able to provide the incremental support PS8 needs to achieve it?

The financial support and volunteer-time our community contributes to PS8 indicate that many parents share our school's vision and want to supply the help needed to achieve it.

Doing so successfully requires that the community collaborate, organize its efforts and partner with the Principal and school leaders.

To that end, the thing that the PTA can do that will make the biggest difference to our school is be an organization focused upon *helping parents help PS8*. That's a broad mission, but in reality the PTA's role boils down to three points of focus:

1. Help members of our community get connected to the news, views & each other.

Our community is better able to collaborate when families know one another and share a common sense of purpose that is well informed and equipped with the facts. Parents can help by volunteering to enhance communication activities and run community events.

2. Help raise and assemble the right resources.

Resources come in many forms, and PS8 needs all of them. Parents can volunteer to help the community raise money and/or pool their many and varied skills, talents and passions.

3. Help deploy those resources in the right place at the right time.

Parents can volunteer to help our school channel resources to where they matter most and in some cases, like Teacher Assistants, literally employ the resources directly.

Who Runs The PTA?

The simple answer is that the PTA is an organization for our community run by our community. As an organization, PTA activities are coordinated largely by PS8 parents who

decide to help PS8 by volunteering their time to serve on what's called the PTA Executive Board.

These are the only PTA roles that involve elections. Parents who would like to volunteer in this way simply nominate themselves when the elections come along.

The next elections are on May 29th, and take place during one of the regularly scheduled General Meetings.

Parents elected on May 29th of this year will serve from July 1st 2008 to June 31st 2009.

While the PTA is 'run by' the executive board, in reality every parent is welcome to attend and participate fully in virtually all executive board meetings and nearly everything involves consultation and information sharing with parents and guardians at the PTA General Meetings.

Technically there doesn't need to be more than 4 General Meetings per year, but at PS8 we hold them every month.

So there are ample ways for every parent to discuss things with the board members and help collaborate on big decisions...the idea is that while there may be an executive board everyone is encouraged to participate.

How Is the Executive Board Structured?

While there are up to ten people on the Executive Board, it actually has five core jobs on offer: President, Vice-President, Treasury, Recording Secretary and Corresponding Secretary.

There are up to ten people because every parent is time-starved and there's quite a lot to do, so we make this easier to cope with at PS8 by having the option of a bit of 'job-sharing' (we've all got children and families and busy lives – so this really helps). This is explained in more depth below, but essentially parents can volunteer as an individual or partner with another parent to nominate themselves as a team of two. So we can end up with two Co-Presidents, two Vice-Presidents, two Co-Recording Secretaries, two Co-Corresponding Secretaries and both a Treasurer and an Assistant Treasurer.

That way two people split each job, using a bit of common-sense divide-and-conquer, helping reduce the workload for any one volunteer.

What Do The Co-President Do?

Officially the Co-Presidents (currently Lisa Edstrom and Joanne Singleton) *act as the*

executive officers of the organization, preside at all general meetings, and one of them countersigns all checks.

That means keeping the executive board on track with its mission, partnering effectively and productively with the Principal and staying focused on PS8 activities and needs through the school year. This in turn involves:

- ★Managing the PTA Calendar
- ★Organizing and conducting the monthly Board Meetings and General Meetings (and providing a President's Report at each General Meeting)
- ★Weekly meetings with the Principal, providing a meeting summary to the PTA Board, and managing follow up actions as required
- ★Working with the other members of the Board to oversee their functions
- ★Providing PTA Board representation to the School Leadership Team which meets twice monthly
- ★Providing PTA Board representation to the District 13 PTA Presidents' Council, which meets monthly
- ★Attending to paperwork like building permits for meetings in the school, Chancellor Regulation forms, and the filing of the PTA's

records such as Meeting Minutes (and the storage of the records)

★During the summer, the main activities include setting the school year calendar of events and meeting dates, and preparation and distribution of the “Summer Mailing” (PTA letter and various other informational materials, sent in coordination with the Principal).

“All of us bring our own individual skill set to our jobs. For example, this year, as a nurse, Joanne played an integral role in the allergy management planning and was our health expert when MRSA affected our community. I’m an educator with years of elementary school experience (teaching and administrative); my research on parent involvement from a few years ago had a direct impact on some of the PTA’s current practices. The diversity of experiences and skills we bring to the board only serve to strengthen the organization.” says current Co-President Lisa Edstrom, who is about to complete her second and final term in the role (our by-laws dictate a maximum two-year term for any parent on the board in any one capacity).

“We were new to PS 8 last year and getting involved as Co-Chair for the Paddlewheeler was

a great way to really become a part of this great community. In consultation with my family, Jon (3rd grade) and Dai (1st grade) felt very strongly that I should run with Lisa for co-president. It is clear to me that my boys recognize the important role parents and guardians have in helping PS 8 through our PTA. A lot of work? No question. Rewarding? No question,” adds current Co-President Joanne Singleton.

What Do The Vice-President Do?

The Vice-Presidents (currently Sam Bernstein and AnneMarie Gussman) assist the Co-Presidents and preside in their absence. One of them may countersign checks.

Fortunately our Co-Presidents are rarely absent and our Vice Presidents muck in to help run many of the PTA events like the Ice Cream Social or Paddlewheeler and other tasks like recruiting Teacher Assistants or whatever needs to be done that doesn’t naturally belong to any of the other executive board roles.

As Sam puts it *“I agreed to join the Board because I wanted to contribute some of my time to the school and to help make my daughter’s time at PS8 as productive and fulfilling for her as possible. It has been a real*

education for me, working with the other parents who serve on the Board, all of whom are volunteers, discovering what goes on behind the scenes and some of what it really takes and how difficult and fragile it is to keep PS8 moving forward in a positive direction.”

What Do The Co-Recording Secretaries Do?

The Co-Recording Secretaries (currently Cynthia Arata and Tim Eldridge, although Tim’s been covering the Communications role) *keep accurate minutes of executive board and general meetings, including records of the materials handed out, and keep an accurate list of the members.*

In practice our ability to keep member records is defined by parents’ inclination to supply them. This year we’ve made that a lot easier by introducing new email software that helps parents to provide their information online.

“If this sounds rather mundane, it is not. These minutes help the Board keep track of our work throughout the school year and allow PTA members who cannot attend meetings to stay informed. In addition, keeping an accurate and complete set of our Minutes helps our school when it is evaluated each year by the [NYC]

Department of Education, as the DOE checks the status of our Minutes book.

"On a personal level, I have been a PS 8 parent for four years and I have never felt as connected to the school as I have this year as a member of the Executive Board. To be honest, I would not have run for Recording Secretary had someone else volunteered for the job. However, the position was unfilled as of the morning of last year's election, and I was told that the PTA could not legally operate if the position remained open. So I jumped in, but mainly out of a sense of duty and guilt. In the end, I benefited as much as I gave.

"I have learned invaluable information about the school, including its triumphs and challenges; forged strong bonds and new friendships with my fellow board members; and have had the opportunity to work directly with Seth and our staff and teachers. It's been a great experience," says Cynthia.

What Do The Co-Corresponding Secretaries Do?

The Co-Corresponding Secretaries (currently Tim Eldridge is performing this role) *attends to correspondence and notices for regular and special meetings.* At PS8 the most frequent and

easiest to manage form of communication is Timely Notices and so getting news and information out through email is a big part of the job.

"My sister works in public education in Ohio, and was a parent 15 years before me. She told me to get involved with the PTA because 'when kids see that their school is important enough to their parents that their parents get involved, they really understand that it ought to be important to them too.' My son knows that I spend a heck of a lot of time working on PS8 PTA projects at home and at the school.

"I enjoy the work. And it's been easier to make the changes important to me by getting involved. (For example, my son has food allergies and during the year I've worked with Principal Phillips and Joanne Singleton to get the entire staff trained on food allergy awareness and EpiPen administration and the introduction of a so-called code-yellow emergency response protocol for anaphylaxis.)

"But the main thing is the sense I get that my 1st grader knows that his Mom and Dad care about his school and I think this makes a huge difference in his desire to be there, to do well and to feel safe and happy there," says Tim.

What Do The Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer Do?

The Treasurer (currently Amy Linden) and Assistant Treasurer (currently Elizabeth Delfs) *have custody of all the PTA funds, works (with our newly appointed accounting firm) to keep an accurate record of receipts and expenditures and, together with a Co-President and Vice-President, signs all checks. This involves collecting monies and delivering it to the bank, and giving monthly financial reports and recommendations to the membership.*

It also includes maintaining the relationship with the PTA's bank, Sovereign Bank, so that we are treated fairly and get the best prices for their services. All financial transactions, no matter how small need proper recording, and the status of the PTA's income and expenses need monitoring against the planned budget. Bank statements need reconciling and all receipts and related information kept on file.

This year additional functions were involved with the significant increase in funds raised and the new PTA responsibility for the employment of the Teacher's Assistants. The first new function was that of cash flow and investment management. Despite some unexpected expenses such as payroll taxes and Licenders,

by carefully planning out our cash needs over the year and managing the cash in the primary checking account to be at the minimum levels needed to pay expenses, we've already been able to earn at least \$4000 in interest earnings from maintaining a Money Market account and making 90-day and 6-month CD investments.

The other new function was that of establishing and overseeing a payroll process, for which the Board hired a payroll service to assist in managing the bi-weekly payroll for the Teacher Assistants, including required tax filings.

Although the school oversees the hiring and the performance of the Assistants in the classrooms, the PTA must do all that is required as an employer, including getting proper insurance, getting proper tax-related forms filed, and generally communicating with the Assistants so that they understand our processes and the terms of their employment, and generally feel welcomed as employees of the PTA.

"Next year, the Treasurer will benefit from improvements in our processes that we're putting in place now – in particular having a professional accountant on board to do our tax filings and advise the Board as needed and moving our files to QuickBooks software - and of course, from all the learning that we've done

this year with the many new areas of responsibility that the PTA Board has taken on.

"Having worked over 20 years with capital finance for multi-billion dollar infrastructure investment programs, I can't overemphasize the satisfaction in making every single penny count for the PTA, when every penny really does count.

"The PTA Board experience has shown me the critical importance of the involvement of parents and guardians to the success of our children's school," says Amy.

Elisabeth adds *"I was the liaison to the Library and Enrichment Committees too. The Enrichment Committee is very active and meets at least once a month. The Library committee just met once and the communication goes through email.*

"I learned a lot about school policy in general and the budget constraints. I really enjoyed the meetings of the Executive Board which were always very cordial and friendly. Especially as a foreigner, it is a great opportunity to give me insights I would never get as a parent."

Who Can Be On The Executive Board?

Any parent/guardian member of the PTA may

run for a board position, unless they are an employee of the school.

Beyond the basic eligibility requirement of being a parent or legal guardian of a child enrolled at PS 8, there are no qualifications necessary for being a board member.

How Do I Nominate Myself For One Of These Roles?

At the March General Meeting parents Chris Givler, Barbara Lesesne and Olivia Hicks volunteered to help encourage nominees to step forward and to run the election process itself (it's not very complicated but someone has to do the things that need to be done to get next year's board appointed).

Officially, this 'team' is known as the Nominating Committee, and was elected to their posts by the members present at the March meeting. This committee is temporary and ceases to exist after the election.

Pretty soon nomination forms will go up in the parent's room – just put your name on the board for the position you are interested in. A member of the Nominating Committee will have you fill out a willingness to serve form and verify your eligibility.

It is important to note that while it has become our practice, it is not required that our board positions be shared. Individuals can run for President, Vice-President, Corresponding Secretary and Recording Secretary. However, if you want to share a position, you must nominate yourself along with a running mate as a single ticket. If you are interested in running with a partner but do not have one in mind, the Nominating Committee can help you find one.

It's more than important that we end up with nominees for the executive board positions. Without parents stepping forward there is no election slate and with no elected officials the PTA isn't allowed to operate. That would really, really be detrimental to the school and the children.

How Does The Election Work?

Members who come to the General Meeting at which the elections take place are asked to vote, position by position, for the people who have been nominated. Simple as that, you can't vote if you're not there. And you can't be elected if you're not there either.

There will be written ballots in the event that more than one person or pair is nominated for a position. If the election is uncontested, the

current recording secretary casts one ballot on behalf of the membership.

What About All Of Those Committees – How Do They Work?

First of all you're not alone if you're not in love with "committees". The thing is, the word 'committee' is just a name given to a group of parents looking for a way to help PS8 and figure out what needs doing, how, where, when and by whom. So don't be put off by a label. So think of the committees as just a group of parents gathering to figure stuff out and turn ideas into actions that impact the school and the children in positive ways. In fact, while we've spent much time talking above about the executive board, the majority of parents get involved with PS8 through the different PTA committees, and it's here that the bulk of the work gets done. At PS8 there are committees for:

1. Communications

As outlined at the beginning in the PTA mission statement, our community is better able to collaborate when families know one another and share a common sense of purpose that is well informed and equipped with the facts.

Many parents volunteer to help with communications by bringing the particular skills to the table. Our current team includes graphic designers, writers and editors, photographers, interactive/web specialists and others with skills in and a passion for helping improve the flow of information from the school and PTA to the community.

This team of parents, whose efforts are co-ordinated by parent volunteers Susan Sellers and Georgie Stouts, oversee things like the PS8PTA website, the production of Currents and the school handbook, enhancing email communication, plus a plethora of posters, flyers, invites and other materials needed to promote and support school events.

2. Fundraising

Our mission statement also clearly calls out the fact that without incremental support the school cannot achieve its mission, and no team feels the heat on this point quite like the parents who want to help with Fundraising.

Led by parent volunteer Todd Glass, so far this year about \$120,000 has been raised to forward-fund vital school programs and investments in 2008/9. The parents on this team have helped take fund raising from events like Read-a-thon and the Spring Auction to

record levels. But there remains much to be done – we may need to raise as much as \$290,000 (about \$580 per student) to generate the funds needed to support the many things like Teacher Assistants and Enrichment Programs next year, which will be for the for a while with the double whammy of exhausted Magnet Grant funds and potential DoE budget cuts.

3. Grant Writing

The Magnet Grant is an excellent example of the upside potential for our school of successfully applying for grants from various federal, state, academic and other institutions and businesses. Every dollar counts – this team, led by parent volunteer Judith O'Driscoll, hunts for funding for specific needs in the form of grant. Help from parents interested in identifying more grant opportunities, lobbying successfully for them and securing the funds is always welcome.

4. Student Enrichment

Enrichment Programs are instrumental in helping the school meet its vision for the children's education. As the Magnet Grant is now exhausted increasingly the PTA will play a key

role in both helping our community understand the nature of these programs and collaborate with the fundraising team to help finance them.

In recent weeks this team of volunteers, chaired by Amy Shire and Olivia Sohmer Rosenbaum, has produced snapshots of seven of the programs, now posted on our website, and we hope to cover the rest too.

The programs include:

- ★The Guggenheim Museum
- ★Studio in A School
- ★The Marquis Studios
- ★The Mark Morris Dance Group
- ★Bargemusic
- ★The Rotunda Gallery
- ★The Brooklyn Center For The Urban Environment
- ★Chess for Children

5. Hospitality

Parent volunteer Rebecca Smart is the one to thank for making sure that so many of our events are amply supplied with food and beverage for parents and children alike, be that

big-production community events or some pizzas for the kids while their parents attend General Meetings.

This is a significant and often taken-for-granted undertaking and we need many more parents to join the crew that caters these events.

6. Class Parents

Parent volunteers Lisa Kopel and Diane Miller help coordinate the efforts of the many Class Parents who volunteer to help the parents of each class stay connected to the news, views, events and developments unique to their child's class.

7. Future Of PS8

The Future of PS Committee, one of the newer groups, was started this school year when the co-presidents of the PTA brought forth to the membership the concept of a committee to give the PTA the opportunity to be proactive in discussing the needs of a rapidly growing school. The membership voted to accept this new committee, and its focus this year has been the space needs of PS 8 in its current configuration as a PK through 5th grade elementary school.

The expertise of current membership is in the area of space planning and in some cases, like team leader Rolf Karl's, in the field of architecture. Additional expertise is needed in areas of public policy and strategic planning. Sometimes this group gets together with members of other important local institutions, like the leaders of the Brooklyn Heights Association, for example, to help look at the outlook for the school in terms of population growth and liaison with local authorities.

8. PS8 Alumni

Parent volunteer Phil Wilentz works with a number of parent volunteers to stay in touch with ex-students of PS8, many of whom continue to like to know what's going on at the school and even help contribute today. There's well over a hundred alumni on the team's database of one time PS8ers and many of them got together last year to mark the school's centennial.

9. Library

Librarian Amanda Green collaborates with parent volunteers to help make the library a successful cornerstone of the children's

educational experience at PS8. Parents often do volunteer work in the library itself. The PTA has also helped Amanda by purchasing books and equipment with PTA funds in addition to helping Amanda alert parents to the specific books she needs so that parents can buy them from a wish-list that has been set up on Amazon (go to "library news" on the website to find out more).

10. Middle School

After PS8 the children go to Middle School. It is the role of the Middle School Committee to research and communicate with parents about the middle school application process. This year the committee is led by Agnes Ceron and Estrella Jimenez. In addition, some parents and community members are working to figure out how they can help PS8 parents by making sure that we have a voice in any organizations or movements related to the DoE's long term Middle School plans for our district. Obviously this is something that affects parents in all primary schools in district 13 and so invariably these parents do a lot of outreach to other institutions, politicians and organizations. Anyone wanting to know more about this should look out for a team meeting and attend one to meet the parents involved.

11. Procedural

At the moment, this isn't so much a committee as it is a parent, Victor Goldblum, who has kindly volunteered to take on the less than glamorous task of making sure that the PTA approach and activities are articulated in the form of bylaws that are coherent and consistent with NYC DoE regulations. Of course, this is a committee that others are welcome to join. Copies of the bylaws are available in the parent's room and at the PTA website.

So, Does The Executive Board Tell The Committees What To Do?

No. The parents who gather in these various committees determine their own agenda, but there needs to be good dialogue between the committees and the executive board to help coordinate everything and keep things aligned with the overall school agenda. Often the committees will need to the board to discuss what is / is not doable / possible and get aligned with the principal too on new ideas and key projects.

The committee spokes-persons, or chairs, regularly come along to the board meetings and general meetings to report on what's going on with their teams and what help they might need.

Additionally each of the board members takes on the role of liaison between the board and one or two committees.

What's The School Leadership Team Then?

The SLT is not a PTA committee. It is a governance committee of the school made up of equal numbers of parents and staff (including the principal and teachers). One of the PTA Co-Presidents automatically sits on this committee. Aside from the principal and PTA Co-President, all other members of this committee are elected to the committee by their constituents. Parents elect their SLT members directly following the PTA election at the May General Meeting. The PTA Nominating Committee runs this election as well.

Can Anyone Speak At A PTA General Meeting?

Any member of the PTA can speak at a meeting, but it's helpful to talk to the board first so we can plan the agenda and get everyone home in time to put the kids to bed!

Outside individuals and organizations need to ask the board for approval to speak at a general meeting.

How Is The PTA Budget Set And Managed?

In the Spring the PTA executive board collaborates with Principal Phillips to form a view on what's going to be needed the following year.

This then gives the PTA good idea of the ways in which it can help the school, more often than not through fundraising.

The board then informs the community on the lay of the land, as it did in the March General Meeting and the April 1st Timely Notice article "THE RESOURCE OUTLOOK FOR OUR SCHOOL AND PTA" which is also posted at the school and on our website.

There's as much art as science to setting this budget because much of the information remains unknown. For example, at the time of writing this we don't have the DoE 2008/9 budget yet, and we don't know how much more money the community will donate between now and the end of the year. So we have to do a bit of educated forecasting.

Parents who joined the April 16th board meeting were able to see the board looking at a long list of funding needs with a price tag significantly higher than the budgets raised so far.

Ultimately the thinking will be shared with parents in the May and June general meetings

so that by the end of the year we have an approved budget for next year.

The most important thing to know is that as the budgets are assembled the executive board relies heavily on the Principal to advise the PTA on what investments are in the best interests of the children's education.

Inevitably things crop up during the year that weren't anticipated – last fall, for example, it was a lice outbreak – and when that happens the board can recommend unplanned expenditures providing it discusses the ideas in the PTA general meetings.

So, It All Sounds Like A Well-Oiled Machine, Right?

Err, not entirely. Everyone who volunteers leads a busy life – the folk who do all the work end up having to work around their schedules and that inevitably involves a bit of schedule-juggling and a wee bit of chaos from time to time. Additionally, it's probably true to say that most parents actively engaged in all of this have a list of things that they would like to see done that is longer than the list of things that have actually been done...it's this gap that propels us forward.

That said, for the most part the PTA has every reason to feel proud of its accomplishments and the support it gives to the school.

So far this year we have:

- ★ Raised a lot of money – with record-breaking funds being raised during the Read-a-thon and Spring Auction events
- ★ Hired and managed five Teacher Assistants
- ★ Financed two Enrichment Programs
- ★ Financed new capital expenditures at the school including air conditioners and rugs for the children to sit on in their classrooms
- ★ Purchased new books and equipment for the library
- ★ Funded healthcare support like Licenders and been instrumental in strengthening the schools ability to manage the increasing number of children with food allergies
- ★ Sent somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 emails to parents to keep them in touch with news and information
- ★ Increased the number of parents on our email database from about 200 last October to approaching 500 today

- ★ Introduced a way for parents to manage their PTA contact information online
- ★ Run some very successful community events like Potluck Dinner, with more to come.
- ★ Produced a new school handbook
- ★ Produced a new edition of Currents
- ★ Published profiles of seven enrichment programs online
- ★ Significantly improved the depth, breadth and functionality of the PTA website, including the addition of many articles and hundreds of photographs
- ★ Introduced online donation capabilities
- ★ Funded a variety of Teacher Grants
- ★ Provided specific grants to PS8's first and final grades.

How Do I Get Involved?

Easy.

Nominate yourself for a board position.

And / or, show up at any committee meeting uttering the magic words, "how can I help?"

And / or, respond to one-off requests for volunteers for one-off projects.

And /or respond to fund raising requests.

And if you want to know any more about any of this, reach out to the board members (our contact details are on the website) or email ps8pta@gmail.com.

