I N 1897 at a meeting of the National Education Association, General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC) president Ellen M. Henrotin gave a speech on the role of women’s organizations in public education. She posited that the two major movements of the late nineteenth century—the “woman movement” and the development of popular education—were, in fact, interdependent, as women volunteers worked tirelessly to shape schools and the curriculum through their associations. She announced, “The work of the general federation from 1896 to 1898 will be devoted to furthering a knowledge of and interest in the educational conditions of the United States, both in the state and public-school systems.” Citing the duplication of organized women’s work around the nation, Henrotin informed her audience of professional educators that superintendents and teachers are “often unable to secure needed reforms in this direction from the school boards. It needs an outside influence.” The outside influence, women’s federated associations, enabled women to wield public influence during a time when they were denied power through other means. Henrotin’s speech foreshadowed women’s educational activism for decades to come, through her own association and others, such as the National Association of Colored Women, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, known colloquially as the PTA.1 To Henrotin and her contemporaries, the benefits of organization were clear; they allowed for many members to unite around a common cause and to carry out work that relied on the strength of numbers. And no project was more important than education.
This book examines the history of what was arguably the largest voluntary organization in the twentieth century, the National PTA. The organization was founded in 1897 as the National Congress of Mothers to serve as a clearinghouse of information for parents. In 1908 its name was changed to the National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations, reflecting broader trends in parent-teacher organizing around the country. By 1924 it was called the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. Two years later, the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers was founded as a completely segregated branch, with separate national, state, and local units to serve the schools of the Jim Crow South. Despite an announcement to members shortly after the Brown v. Board of Education decision on May 17, 1954, that segregated state and local units were to work together toward integration, the two PTA branches did not unify until 1970, resulting in the dissolution of the black PTA and loss of black and white members in significant numbers nationally.

My focus is on organizational development, the networks that were forged, and how the rise and fall of PTA membership influenced schools in local communities, federal legislation, and, in particular, equity in education. I ask how legions of women came together to join a major federated organization and what they sought to accomplish by building such an extensive network dedicated to public schooling. Moreover, and what challenges the popular perception of the PTA, I posit that one cannot truly understand the history of the PTA until one gazes through the lens of race. In this book I contrast the work of the white and black PTA branches, showing how racial uplift and interracial cooperation served as guiding principles to the black association, while white PTA state and local branches did not have to consider either. In particular, I argue that the National PTA’s inclusive racial policy often conflicted with its own and public schools’ segregationist practices, and I demonstrate that what began in the Progressive era as an earnest, if not elitist, effort by organized white women to include all parents and citizens in membership based on the principles of child welfare became, during the Civil Rights movement, an embarrassing clash of principle and practice. Essentially, the federated design of the National PTA—modeled on the U.S. government—helped sustain segregationist practices, as local and state levels of the organization had the oversight of their own particular programs and activities.

The PTA was founded at the height of the women’s club movement and was one of a long succession of voluntary organizations to shape the nation’s political and social life; its membership drew on both the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the National Association of Colored Women. The tradition of women’s and men’s voluntary membership associations reaches back to the nation’s early decades, on which French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville remarked, “Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds
constantly unite. . . . Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.” For Tocqueville as well as contemporary scholars, the voluntary organizations that made up civil society were a critical feature of civic engagement in a democracy, and were not entirely separate from the state and electoral politics. More recently, political scientist Theda Skocpol has reminded us that voluntary membership associations of many kinds peppered the American landscape, many of them forming in the post–Civil War years, and became increasingly connected to “translocal organizational networks” that ran parallel to the local-state-national structure of the U.S. state. Fraternal orders, women’s organizations, and veterans’ groups are just some of the kinds of networks that developed, overlapped, and shaped U.S. political, civic, and social life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Americans’ civic engagement throughout history has been expressed generally through formal party politics and voluntary associations. Arguably, voluntary associations have been more robust expressions of civic engagement, since they allow for a greater number of participants. They also allow for different kinds of civic work, day-to-day efforts that elicit more tangible results. Women thus could enact their political lives through organizations long before they had the vote, but as this study shows, women’s voluntary efforts continued long after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. This research is based on the understanding that voluntary associations are at the heart of civil society, or the networks of groups and organizations within which people relate to one another and engage in community and political affairs. Civil society, in other words, operates in the space between individual citizens and the government. Americans’ propensity for forming voluntary membership associations has captured the interest of sociologists, historians, and political scientists but has been largely overlooked by educational historians. Certainly, historians of education have studied such organizations as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the National Education Association, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons, but they have not investigated them as political entities or looked at the role of organized networks as institutions in the history of schooling and the curriculum. Some studies have argued significant determination on the part of African American parents and citizens, but these are local case histories that overlook the translocal networks of organized volunteers and how these state and national associations shaped and informed local activities. Therefore, I argue that volunteers with a vested interest in public education were widely and deeply linked through voluntary organizations that wielded much power through fundraising, curriculum work, and political lobbying well beyond the Progressive era.

The research of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba explores the United States’ “participant-civic culture,” in which citizens believed themselves to be
quite successful in influencing government at high levels. The same notion may be applied to the PTA's impact on public education. Among the most powerful groups in the twentieth century, the PTA, while leaving the management of the school to professionals, wielded a large measure of influence on school officials, the curriculum, and education in general. Black and white PTA workers were quite confident, in fact, about their ability to carry out their program and to shape public schools. They ran health programs, raised money for books and buses, and promoted international initiatives such as UNESCO to members in local units. Rather than employing a microanalytical approach that focuses on the relationships between and among individuals such as parents and teachers, this book views citizens' and volunteers' efforts to play a role in education as a form of civic engagement. Therein lies the book's contribution: acknowledging the important role that voluntary organizations, or civil society, played in education in the twentieth century.

The PTA was more solid and durable than a loosely knit band of volunteers. Soon after its founding in 1897, it became an institution in American civic life that counted in its membership professional educators and administrators, especially in the segregated schools of the South. In the pages that follow I demonstrate how the development of its infrastructure worked to serve schools and communities in diverse regions and settings. By taking an institutional view, this organizational history examines the role of a federated network in and its impact on public education, rather than considering the role of scattered, disconnected citizens. In particular, I reveal how the organization was founded on the principle of including African American citizens, how black women worked to form their own segregated PTA units since they were not admitted into full membership in the white PTA, and the ways in which organizational leaders worked to unite the two PTA branches in the post-\textit{Brown} years. I begin with the understanding that members worked together through networks, choosing to act based on organizational bylaws and guidelines and interpreting these rules according to their own goals within local communities. However, as Skocpol argues, an institutional perspective maintains that, just as much as trust, distrust is important to organizational vibrancy and, hence, a healthy democracy. Distrust and conflict were at the heart of the segregated PTA's development as members of marginalized groups found a place in the association and helped extend its institutional infrastructure through the American South. However, this distrust—or racism, really—resulted in the near-undoing of the association. As PTA leaders at the national level directed state and local units in the South to unify, the organization lost one-quarter of its membership during the 1960s and decreased to one-half its size by 1980. Many black parents no longer felt welcome in the desegregated units of local schools, and white members in some locations in the South did not want to be a part of an integrated association.
Volunteer work through the PTA—organizing fundraisers, coordinating workshops and meetings, and running for office—shaped local schools and gave members, the vast majority of whom were women, leadership training in fundraising, parliamentary practice, and legislative matters. Such activities allowed women to enact their political lives before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. After 1920 the same association continued to help women serve the public. It helped white members play a leading role in helping pass the School Lunch Act and also provided a venue for black teachers to coordinate civil rights work when membership in the NAACP was perilous or even banned. Yet the PTA held great importance in black and white women’s social and political lives, beyond political participation. Within the organization the average person rose to new levels of leadership, coordinated legislative and educational plans through a vast network, and relied on a clear system of order and rules in place to guide the program and activities of volunteers. Yet the PTA, like other voluntary associations, was not rigid and static, and in fact has always had much flexibility to allow for local units to conduct relevant and meaningful work not always directly related to the larger purposes expressed in the goals of the national association. A unifying issue bonded all members around one or more core issues: the welfare of children and young people. While the PTA did not focus solely on public education—or at least it did not intend to originally—it became an educational institution itself in the twentieth century.8

**Lines of Inquiry**

The history of American education has focused, in general, on two major themes: the development of formal schooling and the professionalization of teaching. In order to understand these foci, one must consider the context of significant economic, intellectual, and social changes, such as greater automation and a reliance on technology, urbanization and the transition from an agrarian economy, and the rise of science as a guiding principle in life and the economy. These changes called for greater attention to the education of youth and their preparation for life in a democracy. In this context, public schools took shape, and with them the school curriculum, which was remade to serve functional ends. This book adds yet another important context to the rise of popular education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the role of civil society and voluntary organizations, in particular women’s associations.

Historians have not only emphasized the professionalization of teaching and educational administration as a central interpretive thread in the history of American education but have also tended to examine the past from the
perspective of professional educators. Some argue that the original impetus to form home-school groups came from within the school and that women volunteers, or parents, were concerned primarily with their own children. This interpretation overlooks civil society and the ability of organized women to mobilize a great number of volunteers around issues that were common to a diverse body of people, arguing that to do so was to serve the greater good. Therefore, existing scholarship not only gives a limited view but also tends to downplay and even denigrate citizens’ contributions to public education. Thus, much of the history of education has omitted or marginalized the citizen, the volunteer, and the layperson. Were we to synthesize the many works on the history of schooling, we might come away with the impression that citizens and school volunteers were meddlers, rabble-rousers, or, worse yet, completely absent. As a result, the role that volunteers have played in the development of schools and the curriculum becomes trivialized in and tangential to the larger story of public education.

My research takes a different view, looking from the perspective of associational ties to show how the women’s club movement of the turn of the twentieth century and the rise of popular education during this era converged in the creation of the National PTA. In so doing, I reiterate William J. Reese’s dialectic approach in that I investigate the role of outsiders to education. Yet I extend the time period covered by Reese to argue that the PTA had its greatest impact on schools and citizens after the Progressive era, when it grew to become a political and social reform behemoth. From the mid-1920s to the dissolution of the black PTA in 1970, the PTA was integrally involved in curricular decisions, school maintenance, and legislation on behalf of children and families. Viewing such efforts and the actors who coordinated them not as meddling masses but as efficiently organized citizens with intellectual, moral, and political motives expands the history of American education to consider the role and influence of civil society. In other words, I explore how a nationally networked voluntary organization sought to impose order from the outside of newly emerging school systems. It should not be underestimated that the PTA was networked nationally in a way public schools never were during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century.

The PTA is commonly understood to be a white, middle-class women’s organization. However, although the membership of the organization was not exceedingly diverse, it was more varied than we have understood it to be, for in its membership could be counted black and white, men and women, and volunteers and professionals. Other scholars to investigate the association have focused appropriately on its white female leaders’ elitism and noblesse oblige in public and educational projects. I wish to move beyond this understanding, taking it as a given—that white middle-class women wished to control
and manage the working classes and people of color—while investigating how those on the margins of the organization, African American teachers and community leaders, used the federated organization to their own ends. In particular, black members sought to have a voice in public education. They viewed the PTA as a means to gain decision-making power in schools and a way to fight for educational equity because their own associations, for most of the twentieth century, did not have as much authority in national matters.¹¹

Nonetheless, we are well cautioned to remember that the PTA has neither sought to make radical change in schools and society, nor were its leaders—black or white—on the vanguard of liberalism. PTA leaders were not innovators but rather popularizers and promoters of others’ ideas. Thus, the history of the PTA is less about noteworthy achievements and more about the day-to-day work it has carried out in countless communities in the north and south, and city and country. Following Darlene Rebecca Roth’s observation that “Historians are disappointed when organizations do not make powerful political statements,” I maintain that in the history of the PTA, common, everyday acts had a power and force of their own that have been overlooked.¹² The importance of the organization in public education is as much about the small, everyday acts of promoting study groups to educate parents, holding fundraisers to buy books and materials, and developing leaders within its ranks as it is about the major legislative reforms it has coordinated.¹³ Yet I maintain that it is through these routine and ordinary acts that the PTA developed a strong organization and wielded power. That is, we should not view the minutiae of local PTA activity as separate and distinct from its broader civic role in shaping public education. At the local level, especially in the South for African American women, such acts were political, since they challenged white school leaders by influencing the curriculum and getting the resources that white school boards would not fund.¹⁴ Therefore, the importance of the organization is revealed through its officers’ and members’ interactions in the interstices of its program goals and the mission of public education. It also allowed for rapid dissemination of information to members and the American public, the development of leaders within its ranks at each level of the organization, and the implementation of initiatives and programs around core principles that included healthful living and citizenship.

This study of the PTA, which explores a dimension of community-school relations, adds an institutional view from outside of schools but within communities in the hopes of revealing new insights about the role of civic organizations in popular education. The existing scholarship on the history of schools and communities consists generally of three overlapping lines of inquiry in interpreting the role of volunteers and citizens, organized and otherwise, each of which is useful in investigating the history of the PTA: gender, the conflict-
cooperation continuum, and social capital. The first, gender, is one of the most common lenses and perhaps the most obvious. Since women made up the majority of school volunteers, this approach examines their efforts in light of various tropes, such as that of “new woman” or maternalism.\textsuperscript{15} Employing them necessarily relies on the framework of separate spheres, which derives an understanding of separate and distinct arenas of activity for men (public, work) and women (private, home).\textsuperscript{16} Therefore, much of the scholarship on women’s clubs and parent-teacher associations argues that such groups gave white, middle-class women an acceptable public space in which to work.\textsuperscript{17} For example, James L. Leloudis’s study on the Woman’s Association for the Betterment of Public Schools (WABPS) of North Carolina, a group which was formed in the early twentieth century and which later became the white PTA for that state, argues that volunteer work in schools gave bored, middle-class women an acceptable outlet for activity in the public sphere. Leloudis explains, “In performing that work, the women regained their lost self-esteem and perfected their traditional role in a public as well as private capacity.” The WABPS took pains to reassure the public that there was no “new woman” attitude about their work, sought to distance themselves from the ideology of the new woman, and reminded the public that they were genteel Southern mothers.\textsuperscript{18}

William J. Reese’s research on grassroots efforts in school reform during the Progressive era makes a strong case for the importance of women volunteers in public education. He argues a point that has largely been overlooked in the history of education scholarship: that members of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and other women’s associations influenced virtually every administrative, curricular, and social service reform in urban public schools in the early twentieth century. Reese uses the phrase “new woman” in reference to the clubwomen in his study and also calls them liberals. However, while the clubwomen in his study had a liberal political bent, the term does not adequately describe the ideological diversity of clubwomen undertaking similar work around the nation. Therefore, the historiography of the roles that women’s organizations played in school reform efforts raises definitional issues regarding how to characterize the women members of the PTA. In seeking to categorize women school volunteers, historians have reached for readily available categories, which are not necessarily appropriate for a history of the PTA because the classifications are not able to span the geographical and temporal reaches of such a large organizational network. Moreover, since most of the terms connote degrees of political conservatism or liberalism, it is practically impossible to find one descriptor to capture a relatively broad range of beliefs. That is, what may be appropriate for a local case history or abbreviated time period, such as the Progressive era, does not hold when one considers
that PTA women were part of larger translocal networks and that, in many instances, their work changed with circumstance and over time.¹⁹

Maternalism, or the belief that women’s public work is based on their proclivity for care and nurturance, and that all women are united in their “common capacity for motherhood,” is another frequently employed interpretation of women in the early PTA. Molly Ladd-Taylor uses the phrase “sentimental maternalists” to portray the founding leaders of the PTA, who were more apt to use the rhetoric of motherhood to argue for morality and social order than for democracy and justice. While the idea of sentimental motherhood certainly is useful in understanding the early leadership and program of the PTA, it is limited, again, because the movement to reform schools through volunteer efforts was so widespread and so appealing a notion, politically and socioeconomically, and because racially diverse women were involved in leading state and local units around the country. In fact, many PTA leaders outside of the inner circle of founding officers did frame their program and efforts in terms of justice and democracy. Finally, since maternalism as a framework became outdated after 1920, when women won the vote with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, it is inappropriate to use the term to describe PTA women through the mid-twentieth century.²⁰

Race presents an additional complication for a study that includes black PTA workers, a group not typically considered by historians to be “new women” or maternalist in political bent. The lives of black women were vastly different from those of white women, even those of the middling classes, largely because of the need to combine waged with unwaged work, such as housekeeping and childrearing, as well as the emphasis on racial uplift that pervaded black women’s lives. However, the presumption of greater economic and social independence has led Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore to argue that black college-educated women had indeed been “new women” since the days of Reconstruction, long before their white counterparts, just as their voluntary organizations predated white women’s.²¹ Ladd-Taylor reflects on maternalism in terms of the women of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), arguing that even though they were involved in child welfare work and used the rhetoric of motherhood to justify their efforts, they cannot be considered maternalists, because they valued women’s economic independence more than white women did. In this book, instead of applying existing constructs, I take a cue from Anne Meis Knupfer and choose a focus on the perspectives of black PTA workers from within their association that is grounded in their day-to-day activities and that seeks to acknowledge the interweaving of race, class, and gender. Again, my point is that given the relative diversity of PTA women, and the fact that this study spans seven decades, it is difficult, if not impossible, to utilize an existing trope from the research on gender and women’s history to
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illuminate the political perspectives or frameworks within which PTA women worked. Nonetheless, the reader will find that some of the ideas discussed above can be found in my analysis of women’s organized work in schools prior to 1920.22

In addition to using gender as an interpretive framework in the history of school volunteers, scholars have emphasized the struggle between professionals and laypersons, based on the premise that they are two distinct and opposing groups. This argument assumes that when the two interact, the result is either cooperation or conflict due to an imbalance of power and a struggle for control. The cooperation-conflict interpretation appears to be so obvious that we do not question its application. It necessarily hinges on the development of teaching as a profession and the bureaucratization of schools, as it presupposes a fissure between two institutions, home and school, and establishes a tension that must be resolved through the amity or enmity between them.23

Also, a tendency in the cooperation-conflict interpretation is to view schools as organizations in opposition to individuals, usually parents. One need not look further than the title of William W. Cutler’s study, Parents and Schools, to note this imbalance. In his foundational study, Cutler argues that the relationship between teaching professionals and parent volunteers went from adversarial in the mid-nineteenth century to cooperative at the turn of the twentieth century and back again to adversarial from the mid-nineteenth to late twentieth centuries. Building on the work of David Tyack, he argues that the central reason for this tension is the bureaucratization of schools, which created a rift between home and school. However, while Tyack argues that bureaucratization drove parents and teachers apart, Cutler claims instead that bureaucratization and professionalization gave educators the skills to enlist parents as allies and to build them into the organizational framework of the school.24

This scholarship, by focusing on the potentially adversarial relationship between community members and education professionals, has created a dualism in the history of homes and schools that does not always hold. It is an appropriate interpretation, but a limited one. The cooperation-conflict line of inquiry overlooks the possibility of multiple constituencies, such as homes, schools, businesses, government, civic associations, all with a stake in public education. Also, this line of inquiry assumes that membership did not overlap and that the two groups—professional and citizen—are separate and distinct. As this study reveals, the leadership of the black PTA was composed almost entirely of teachers. African American teachers and school leaders built the NCCPT and directed it until the merger in 1970. Therefore, my analysis views the PTA as an organization unto itself as well as in relation to public education without placing the dichotomous relationship between school and home
at the center. Moreover, in research on the segregated schools of the South in the early twentieth century, one rarely finds the cooperation-conflict interpretation, for good reason. In almost all of these cases, home and school—black teachers, parents, and citizens—were united by race work and the necessity of educating African American children in a racist and segregated society. Often these parties were united against white business leaders and school boards. Also, the fact that the black PTA at local, state, and national levels was led by black teachers changed the nature of PTA work, since it was typically viewed by the wider community as a professional association, or at the very least a hybrid that blended professional pursuits and volunteer efforts.25

Instead, the research on schools in the Jim Crow South has tended to employ social or cultural capital as an explanatory framework for citizens’ efforts, meaning the benefits accrued to an individual or group through their networks or sets of relationships.26 Because black schools in the South suffered materially for most of the twentieth century, the historiography of African American community-school relations draws heavily on social theory, in particular the theories of social and cultural capital, to reveal how segregated schools were built and supplied with resources donated by citizens. For example, V. P. Franklin explains that social capital within the black community helped develop banks, orphanages, settlement houses, and schools. He argues, “African Americans mobilized their collective resources to establish social and cultural institutions that would benefit not just individuals, but the entire group.” Though the interpretive framework of social capital is not central, the idea of it is apparent in the research on case studies of black communities and schools, including Vanessa Siddle Walker’s study of the Caswell County Training School and David Cecelski’s treatment of Hyde County, North Carolina, during the Civil Rights movement. Both Walker and Cecelski uncover communities that supported schooling and education despite gross inequities in funding. These communities and others in the literature were rich in social and cultural capital.27

This study of the PTA, therefore, draws on the notion of social capital, especially its two forms. The first, bonding social capital, refers to members joining an organization because they are similar to one another, such as middle-class, white PTA women. Robert Putnam contrasts bonding with bridging social capital, which unites people across social and cultural divisions. For example, bridging capital is evidenced in the links that were formed across racial and class lines in the PTA, which united disparate members around a common goal or idea. In essence, bridging social capital, similar to Mark Granovetter’s notion of the “strength of weak ties,” makes for stronger associations and connections than bonding social capital because it links together a greater number of people. Therefore, bridging social capital helps explain the
PTA’s ability to conduct such large-scale work across diverse communities and to be so successful for so long a period of time.\(^{28}\)

Yet social capital does not entirely help me interpret the development of the PTA as an organization, because the concept is contingent on the idea of members trusting one another. An element of distrust pervaded the efforts of the segregated PTA. White PTA leaders did not trust that black PTA units in the South would remain true to the organization’s principles, so they developed ways to monitor the NCCPT’s activities over time. For example, although fundraising was a central feature of PTA work, white PTA leaders criticized black local units for their fundraising efforts, wondering aloud whether they detracted from the educational purposes of the organization. Likewise, black PTA leaders did not always trust that their best interests would be considered by white organizational leaders, yet over time many black PTA leaders became increasingly invested in the organization as a way to maintain control over the schooling and curriculum of black children. Motivated by distrust, African Americans in the PTA organized, amassed resources, and mobilized themselves through an organization that denied them full membership because that same organization gave them standing in the wider public and access to national educational and political leaders. Therefore, by considering social distrust in addition to social capital—which Skocpol argues is critical to understanding large-scale voluntary associations—I am able to look beyond networks of individuals to take a broader, institutional view that allows me to map the development of the PTA, placing up front questions about how members related to one another and for what purposes.\(^{29}\)

White and black PTA branches, both federated associations with broad-based influential networks by the mid-twentieth century, employed various tactics to spread ideas and repertoires of skills among members to effect change in education. Viewing the PTA as an institution with a well-coordinated infrastructure reveals organizational leaders’ efforts and accomplishments that do not emerge in individual case histories. PTA work was remarkably similar across the nation and constant across time, as a result of its organizational structure and bylaws. Yet local needs were met through the flexibility of this structure, which allowed for the organization’s longevity. Central to this story is how black and white PTA workers carved out a means by which they could express themselves and their wishes for public education and faced the challenges of racism and segregation, and how they employed and interpreted PTA bylaws, structure, and programs to achieve various goals in the push to desegregate schools and the organization. In addition to recounting important ways the PTA shaped public education, I consider what is obscured by historians’ interpretations to date and what other ways of looking might aid us in understanding the past of voluntary contributions to public education.
Diminishing as It Advanced

The PTA is so ubiquitous in the popular imagination that we often assume we know precisely what the organization stood for, who its members were, and what it sought to accomplish. While it is, of course, true that the organization focused on education and that its membership was largely composed of white, middle-class women, there is a subtext to the history of the PTA that has mostly gone unnoticed: the muted voices of those who wished to have a say in public life and education but who were marginalized in it. This book, therefore, is anchored by questions of race, difference, and equality as an investigation of the segregated policies and practices of the PTA drives the analysis. While the organization brought members together around certain core ideals—the belief in public education as the cornerstone of democracy, and the understanding that volunteers, citizens, and parents should play a role in schools and the shaping of the curriculum—it likewise offered a venue for racism, factionalism, and territorialism. Theoretically, the PTA allowed for its diverse membership to discuss and debate its hopes for the future through common projects and face-to-face meetings; such were the benefits of being part of a major national voluntary organization. Whereas the PTA could have given citizens what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls a discursive arena, or a “social space of unifying and conflicting discourses,” this potential was not realized, because of its completely separate federated structure and the infrequency of regular meetings between the two organizations. Therefore, the potential for the PTA to bring diverse members together around common issues was largely untapped, since the vast majority of local and state units were not integrated. Nevertheless, the separate PTA groups availed members a public place to carry on conversations about race and inequality, though these discussions were held within homogeneous groups.30

The PTA idea appealed to African American teachers and citizens, since it embodied principles and ideals that were not unique to any race, culture, gender, or socioeconomic class: the education of young people and their preparation for life in a democracy. The articulations of the segregated branch of the PTA, the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT), for a long time had been drowned out by the din of the larger, white, majority association. Founded as a parallel organization in 1926 for black members and with separate national, state, and local units, the Colored Congress, or black PTA, provided a forum for the wishes of African American educational leaders and citizens, mainly in the southern United States, in public education. We do not have a full picture of the history of the PTA until we consider the history of its segregated association and its relationship to the white organization.31
Proportionately smaller than the NCPT, but well known among and networked with black educational and political leaders and associations, the NCCPT gave its members a measure of control within school systems that sought to exclude or marginalize them. It allowed for the development of a black educational leadership that sustained itself over time and added an additional network that united social, political, and educational leaders across the South to such organizations as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), the National Association for Teachers in Colored Schools (NATCS), the Urban League, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP). The fight for the desegregation of schools and the PTA by black members came at a steep price; in 1970 the two PTA branches desegregated, or merged, resulting in the loss of the black PTA’s leaders, its membership base, and the control it had over the education of African American youth. Black PTA leaders debated among themselves the price to be paid with desegregation, and ultimately, though not all were willing, they agreed to merge with the white organization. An organizational history of the NCCPT written by one of its members presages this fact in a foreboding note. Published in 1961, a decade before the last two state units were desegregated, its closing line reads, “So the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers marches on, diminishing as it advances.”

Reading the available documentation on the Colored Congress, which is sparse in comparison to the primary source materials on the white PTA, I was struck by the importance of the organization among black communities, the role it played in segregated schools, and its ability to bring together educational leaders across great distances. As desegregation proceeded, black PTA records note the anxiety and concern that years of hard work would be lost, and its leaders called for the recording of its history and accomplishments. This was a failed effort, as little documentation remains of the organization. Therefore, this book seeks, in part, to remedy the situation by reclaiming the history of the NCCPT as I raise questions about the role of an organized, networked black citizenry in the lives of all schoolchildren. Through the process of reconstructing and interpreting this history, reading the extant papers of the NCCPT alongside NCPT documents offered a stunning revelation. While desegregation and equality in education were the central issues for the black PTA, they were barely mentioned in the voluminous white PTA collections I perused. Even though PTA founders built the organization’s original platform on racial inclusivity, over time white members and leaders had the luxury of not attending to racial matters. At the same time, black PTA leaders used the organization to fight for racial equality and to build interracial bridges, a task that they only partly accomplished.

In the pages that follow, my narrative interweaves organizational development, the day-to-day activities of the PTA, and the association’s racial policies
and practices. I begin with an analysis of the development of the white PTA, the National Congress of Mothers (NCM), during the height of the women’s club movement of the late nineteenth century. At this time, women’s organizations began to focus intensely on improving public school systems around the country. Chapter 1 reveals how the federated Congress of Mothers was organized from the top down in a very short period of time as a result of its leaders’ ability to build on existing networks, such as the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. In addition to championing school reform efforts, the organization’s leaders promoted the functional over liberal arts course of study by arguing that the rearing of children belonged in the school curriculum, but their hopes of remaking the school curriculum around parenting was never realized, because the interest of business and commerce won out as the curriculum came to favor vocationalism over parenting and home life. This chapter also shows how the PTA used its membership in the National Education Association’s Department of Women’s Organizations to create local- and state-level units around the country. While organized women at first stood on virtually equal ground with professional educational leaders, they were later relegated to a supporting role which, paradoxically, ended up strengthening the organization.

Chapter 2 traces the parallel efforts of black educators and clubwomen over the same time period, from the late 1890s to the mid-1920s, to establish a network of parent-teacher or home-school associations. I posit that the black club movement, as well as philanthropic initiatives to establish schools, resulted in the slow but steady rise of black home-school groups and school improvement societies. Unlike the white PTA, the black PTA was organized from the ground up by professional educators who provided leadership to black communities around the South. Four state organizations united in 1926 to create the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, which relied on the white organization—by that time called the National Congress of Parents and Teachers—for materials and guidance.

Chapter 3 explores the work of the black and white PTA branches from the mid-1920s to the end of World War II, showing how the same bylaws and program were interpreted and implemented in each. The focus of this chapter is on the fundraising efforts of both congresses; I argue that what was supplemental for white units was essential for black. In other words, by the third decade of the twentieth century, white parent-teacher associations had the luxury of holding bake sales and other fundraisers for the nonessentials in schools. Since school taxes were disproportionately funneled to white schools, black PTA units focused on fundraising for the most basic of needs: to build schools and to buy books and other educational materials. For this, it was criticized by white PTA leaders who worried that such an overemphasis on money might be detrimental to the PTA program and to its focus on the moral
and character education of young people. Also, I reveal how both branches of the PTA continued to concentrate on the school curriculum, in particular in promoting and helping carry out the Cardinal Principles of Education that originated with the National Education Association's Committee to Reorganize Secondary Education in 1918. Decades after public school educators embraced the seven Cardinal Principles, the PTA continued to organize its educational program around them.

Chapter 4 investigates the legislative and civic education initiatives of the segregated PTA and argues that the seeds for its unification were sown during the 1930s and 1940s as it focused on intercultural education and international understanding. As the white PTA came to wield much power legislatively, both branches benefited. Most importantly during these decades, as the organization began to embrace and promote the cause of the United Nations after World War II, its leaders were forced to face the segregationist practices of the organization. While the white PTA referred obliquely to race and inequality in the United States in its journals, the black PTA used the new programmatic focus to enlist members in the cause of racial equality in the PTA, and in schools and communities.

The last chapter explores the impact of the Brown decision on the segregated PTA. After the Supreme Court's decision on May 17, 1954, both congresses issued statements supporting the desegregation of schools and instructed members to do all they could to help educate communities and support education professionals. However, because the National Congress of Parents and Teachers deferred to its local and state units to determine the timeline and procedures for desegregation, it took nearly twenty years for the organization to unite. While the PTA units in the border states made the transition smoothly, the organizations—black and white—in the Deep South, following the pattern of school desegregation, held on until they were forced to comply by the National PTA leadership in 1970. With desegregation—or unification, as it was called—came the end of the Colored Congress, its strong leadership base in the black community, and the oversight it had of the education of black children. Also, membership among whites in the newly unified PTA dropped precipitously as a result.

The National PTA emerged from the women's club movement in the late nineteenth century as women began to organize in greater numbers to shape society through their activism. The PTA notion that organized parent and citizen volunteers can and should play a supportive role in schools was embraced by many, whether rural, urban, or suburban, rich or poor. It emerged as school improvement societies in the segregated schools of the American South in the early twentieth century and in the middle- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods of the 1950s in Upstate New York. It manifested itself in the West
through a series of organized citizens, and it became a site of activism in urban schools in the Northeast and Midwest in the second half of the twentieth century. It availed its members a voice in legislation, the power to shape local schools and curriculum, and an opportunity to socialize and build community. Few civic organizations can claim such a central place in American life, education, and culture. As it organized education for the better part of the twentieth century, its own challenges with segregation and difference resulted in a weakened federation and diminished power in schools and society. Since that time, there has been no centralized, united force of volunteers and citizens organizing on behalf of schooling, nor has there been an infrastructure to support the marginalized and voiceless. We should wonder what has been lost, what has been gained, and what role civil society can play in public education in the future.