CHAPTER 2

“To Work More Effectively and Gain Better Leadership Experience”

*The Founding of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers*

IN HER address at the National Congress of Mothers’ first meeting in 1897, activist and writer Frances Ellen Watkins Harper appealed to the elite white women to support education for African Americans.

I do not ask any special favor for the colored mother. . . . But I do ask you to give what we cannot touch with our hands, the ideal things that can not be measured with a line nor weighed in a balance. . . . Trample, if you will, on our bodies, but do not crush out self-respect from our souls. If you want us to act as women, treat us as women.

Citing thirty years of emancipation from slavery and the paltry gains made in the schooling of freedpeople, Harper implored her audience to provide for the education of the young black women working as domestic servants in their homes. She argued, “A young girl trained as a kindergarten pupil might be of great value to a young mother as a useful assistant in the work of child-rearing.” Harper was a powerful presence, a seventy-one-year-old writer and leader who had dedicated her life to temperance and other moral issues from the postbellum years into the twentieth century. Harper’s speech was a rare attempt by a black woman to address the racism of whites in a public forum, but any suggestion of reproach was palliated by the acceptance given her by the Mothers’ Congress. She was viewed by PTA leaders as nonthreatening and sympathetic to the ideals of the association: child welfare and parent education. Her presence was intended to reinforce the NCM’s position that it would
be open “to all mankind and to all womankind, regardless of race, color, or condition.” Newspapers reported the next day that Harper’s “address was liberally applauded.”

Another reason Frances Harper was the perfect choice to speak at the PTA’s first gathering is that she was a member of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), which was organized in 1896 by black clubwomen who were barred from membership in the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC). As I demonstrate in the previous chapter, the PTA relied on an existing network of women’s clubs and associations to establish a national organization. The ability to tap into this network—or multiple networks—of women enabled white PTA leaders to disseminate their ideas rapidly and efficiently in order to build a membership base, but the problem of how to enlist black women remained. Despite the racially inclusive policy that was pronounced at the founding meeting of the Mothers’ Congress, the elite white Board of Managers could not ever, in the context of the Jim Crow era, conceive of working side-by-side with black women. Moreover, attempts at being racially inclusive were thwarted by the practice of segregation within the organization over time. The Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* solidified the segregation of the races in 1896, and Jim Crow laws were firmly codified that decade. By the early 1920s the white PTA began to deny membership to any local club that was affiliated with a segregated school. The organization, for the first several decades of its existence, attempted to manage black women through available networks and eventually succeeded in helping coordinate the founding of a segregated black association with a parallel structure of local, state, and national units. In large part, the PTA accomplished this by working with the leadership of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).

With or without white oversight, however, an analogous and independent movement to organize black parent-teacher associations emerged in the 1890s in the American South. During the Progressive era educated black women—working within a long tradition of clubs and benevolent societies since the early nineteenth century—began to establish parent-teacher groups and school improvement societies. Black women’s organizations predated those of white women, as they were the first to organize on behalf of self- and community improvement in the 1830s. Given that African Americans led the campaign for public education during Reconstruction, community-school groups in the late nineteenth century were a natural evolution of such events. These efforts at promoting education and building schools were part of a collective consciousness of African Americans who believed that their status depended on their relationship with the larger group.

When the NACW was founded in 1896, it began to unite the work of local-level school improvement groups with a network of black women leaders,
becoming a nationally coordinated effort to support schools and to undertake reform work through a federated organization. After having been barred from membership in the GFWC, middle-class black women organized the NACW and, like the Congress of Mothers, proclaimed, “we are not drawing the color line.” Given that the original purposes of the NACW were “to elevate and dignify colored American womanhood” and to “foster ‘moral, mental, and material progress,” the organization’s leaders placed a special emphasis on education. The NACW’s focus on education was reflective of the interests of the majority of its founding members who were teachers, but also reveals how black clubwomen were raised and educated with a sense of mutual obligation among other clubwomen, their families, and the wider community.

In this chapter I investigate the origins of the black PTA, the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT), and reveal how the federation developed from the ground up, in contrast to the white PTA. Its genesis can be located in at least several different movements for black education in the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two of which developed translocal networks of parent-teacher associations. One major force was the club organizing of the NACW, and another was a group of teachers, the Jeans supervising teachers, funded by white philanthropists, who worked across the South to establish rural schools. These two major efforts were supported by the white PTA leadership, who encouraged black women to organize a separate association but did not work alongside them. However, black women’s volunteer efforts in schools were just as widely networked as white women’s through churches and voluntary associations, though these networks were not always visible to the wider public. Also, black women’s club organizing was deeply committed to racial uplift. The charge to create parent-teacher associations was that of black teachers who, by virtue of their race and profession, had a lengthy list of responsibilities that extended beyond the school walls and out into the communities in which they worked.

Thus the differences between black and white clubwomen’s approaches to school reform work were grounded in their contrasting ideologies of womanhood and motherhood. As I demonstrate in the previous chapter, white women extended motherhood from their own homes out to municipalities in order to exert moral influence over their own and other people’s children. The distinction with black women’s mothering is that while it, too, sought to exert moral influence on others, it had the additional purpose of protecting black children in a racist world. As Paula Giddings argues, for African American women “the home [and its ideological extension to the community] was not so much a refuge from the outside world as a bulwark to secure one’s passage through it.” Even more so than white women, middle-class black clubwomen made the home the center of social reform as they fought to challenge the
stereotype of the black woman as immoral. It was this stereotype of the black woman that Frances Harper challenged at the first Mothers’ Congress when she asked that black women be treated as women first, emphasizing the unity women shared around gender rather than the chasm between them called race.7

Molly Ladd-Taylor’s assertion that “maternalist politics were necessarily racial politics” is evidenced in the white PTA’s claims that it would not discriminate, because all women were mothers first, a condition that in theory united them across racial and ethnic barriers. However, the social and political climate at the turn of the twentieth century necessarily held that women of color would not be treated as equals. While black women activists drew on the language of motherhood, they cannot be considered maternalists, because they generally rejected the notion that all women were intended for motherhood. Instead, black clubwomen believed that they should not be forced into traditional roles, and they often spoke out on this in club publications, even challenging the limited expectations of them by black men. Black women led starkly different lives with regard to labor, employment, child rearing, and waged and unwaged labor, and these differences shaped their work in schools and communities.8 Nevertheless, clubwomen such as Frances Harper used the language of maternalism to appeal to the National Congress of Mothers and other white women’s groups. Another major difference between the social reform work of black and white clubwomen was that they had different attitudes toward the poor. White women were more likely to differentiate the worthy from the unworthy poor, while black women’s views of class and poverty favored environmental factors, not birth or previous experience. In fact, black clubwomen often bridged class barriers by taking up issues that affected the poor, working mothers, and tenant farmers. Race and prejudice united black women across these differences, and this contrasting perspective gave black clubwomen a different approach to working with lower-class women and children, which carried over to community-school organizing in the South.9

During the first three decades of its existence, the PTA struggled with the challenge of remaining true to its inclusive policy in a racist and segregated society. At the 1901 annual meeting in Des Moines, white PTA leaders announced that “every mother identified with the Congress, rich or poor, black or white, is welcomed to attend this reception, her tiny badge of pink and blue being her credential of admission.”10 Yet, despite these pronouncements, local units remained segregated with few exceptions, and these examples were reflective of working relationships, tradition, and Jim Crow laws in communities around the country.11 Beyond the South, a handful of white clubs included black members but still practiced the custom of segregation at their meetings. The state PTA units for Ohio and Tennessee, for example, seated
African American members at separate banquet tables and in segregated sections of gathering spaces during state and regional conventions. Only rarely did black and white clubs join together. The leaders of the Annie Murray Club, for instance, the only African American women’s club in Des Moines, occasionally joined efforts with the white Iowa Congress of Mothers. A half-century later, PTA historians Harry and Bonaro Overstreet defended the PTA’s segregationist practices, claiming societal pressures thwarted organizers’ efforts to be inclusive: “the Congress did not operate in a social vacuum; it operated in a society that, at certain times and in certain places, has drawn racial lines.” However, segregation did not always come from white resistance. In many instances, black PTA members did not wish to work alongside white women, because they wished to manage the education of African American children.

James D. Anderson argues that rural blacks built a network of segregated schools in the South between 1900 and 1935 with their own resources since they received little to no help from state and local governments. Concomitantly, a black teaching force was trained during these years, with the largest growth occurring between 1920 and 1930. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the development of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers marched alongside the advancement of black schooling and the development of a black teaching cadre in the South. As various school improvement societies and parent-teacher associations became increasingly linked to one another within and across state lines, forming part of the institutional infrastructure of segregated schools, schoolhouses were built and curricula put into place by teachers and volunteers.

After three decades of local work on behalf of public education, the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers was organized in 1926 by black teachers, clubwomen, and school leaders. The existing scholarship has overlooked the role of widespread voluntary groups of African Americans in carrying out this task; in fact, a growing network of black parent-teacher associations was integral to the development of a school system for African Americans in the South and unified by a political agenda to promote education for black children and a liberal arts curriculum. In contrast to white clubwomen’s extensive school reform efforts, which supported the state in controlling the lives of schoolchildren, black clubwomen’s reform efforts did not have the same political influence. In other words, black women’s efforts often operated in opposition to state control and other forces that sought to direct black education and to implement the Hampton-Tuskegee, or industrial, model of curriculum. Nonetheless, the struggles over the school curriculum in segregated schools are not easily parsed between liberal arts and industrial education. Homemakers’ clubs, an important philanthropic initiative that taught agricul-
tural skills to rural African Americans, and that supported the development of the black PTA, were generally embraced by black communities in the South.

The existence and types of parent-teacher organizations in the segregated schools of the South challenge the central interpretation in the research on the history of the relationship between parents and schools. The cooperation-conflict dualism was virtually nonexistent in the early years of PTA organizing in segregated schools because black teachers enlisted community members in the endeavor to build schools. Moreover, these same educators organized and led local parent-teacher associations and school improvement societies, so the friction between professional and lay constituencies was muted for the first several decades of the twentieth century. The typical tensions between white parents and teachers during this era arose out of different approaches to child rearing and conflicting opinions over who had responsibility for education. However, this friction did not exist for segregated schools, because black educators and parents were united—usually in opposition to white citizens and school board members—in securing educational opportunities for youth, and black teachers were respected as community leaders. Not only were black educators and community leaders often working at odds with whites; they were also beholden to them: virtually all black educators, from rural teachers to college presidents, were appointed by whites during this era. Thus, the most salient difference among African American citizens in the drive to build schools and organize curricula was socioeconomic class, which was most evident in the relationship between black clubwomen and teachers and the community members they enlisted to build a system of schools.15

The Origins of Black School-Community Groups

The post-Reconstruction era, also called the time of the New South, saw a regression in the rights of African Americans and their subjugation under white supremacy. Historian C. Vann Woodward remarks that during this period the per-capita wealth of the South lagged significantly behind that of the North. The distribution of health, education, and a comfortable standard of living was uneven between the South and the rest of the country and even within the South itself. Inequities were perhaps most pronounced in the schools for black children. Blacks in rural areas, unlike the working classes elsewhere in America, received little support for schooling from state and local governments. Although the lack of funds and the need for child labor allowed for a shorter school year, education consistently remained a priority in black communities in the South. After having been denied access to literacy and education because of slavery, the freedpeoples saw education as both
an expression of freedom and a way to guard themselves against deception and manipulation. Through decades of oppression following Reconstruction, Southern African Americans rallied around the need to provide education for their young in the hopes that it would lead to release from oppressive conditions as well as to economic stability and security. Political leaders as well as clubwomen viewed education as the means to racial equality and the development of African Americans’ full potential. Nonetheless, despite this valuing of education there remained, by the end of the nineteenth century, too few schools in the South; two-thirds of the school-aged population did not have access to free, public education.16

Many whites in the South were opposed to education for African Americans out of fear that with it would come their greater political and economic power. Even among those whites who supported education a tension existed; while education would make African Americans better citizens and workers, it held the potential to educate them out of their places in the socioeconomic and racial hierarchies. Sociologist Hortense Powdermaker, conducting a study of a town in Mississippi in the 1930s, documented a commonly held belief among white Southerners on the inadequacy of either position: “If you educate the [Negroes], you ruin the South; if you don’t educate them, you ruin it too.”17

Overall, the development of schools in the South—for blacks and whites—lagged behind the rest of the nation. It was not until the first three decades of the twentieth century that school systems were developed, although the resources allotted to segregated schools were paltry. African Americans carried the burden of double taxation for public schools, wherein their funds went primarily to white schools, after which they dug deeper into nearly empty pockets to pay for schools for their own children. In addition to monetary contributions, community members and teachers provided labor and materials to improve schools and educational resources. These efforts sought to support and sustain schools that were too few in number according to black educational and political leaders. Furthermore, the separate schools for African Americans suffered in virtually every way, with the exception of community spirit. School terms were shorter, educational resources and materials were outdated or, worse yet, scarce, and physical plants suffered for proper ventilation and lighting.18

In addition to the drive for education from within black communities, white philanthropists contributed to the development of a system of segregated schools. In 1900 the creation of the General Education Board (GEB) and Southern Educational Board (SEB) created a virtual monopoly over the development of segregated schools in the South. The GEB, a consortium of philanthropists, and the SEB, composed of Southern white male educators,
were created to fund and oversee the development of schools and the implementation of a curriculum for African Americans in the South. While the SEB focused on studying and disseminating industrial education for blacks, the GEB was its funding machine. Originally set up by John D. Rockefeller, Sr., in 1901 with an endowment of $1 million in 1902, the GEB’s purse grew to a staggering $53 million by 1909 with supplementary funding. By 1929 Rockefeller had contributed over $129 million to the Board, which was used to establish rural one-room schools, county training schools, and urban public high schools around the South.19

Northern philanthropists and other white educational leaders resolved that if education was to come to the black community in the South, it would emphasize an industrial curriculum and prepare African Americans for manual labor. Therefore, schools funded by white philanthropists were supposed to have an industrial curriculum, but Anderson argues that this rarely was the case, as black community members resisted the industrial model being imposed on them and as segregated schools embraced liberal arts curricula that included black history. Likewise, many black women's clubs studied African American literature and history, which they sought to bring to segregated schools. The shaping of the school curriculum also was aided by the nascent networks of black professional educators, who shared notions about teaching black history and the liberal arts. Oftentimes, however, vocational and liberal arts education were not either-or but both-and propositions for educators and citizens who wished to give their children every opportunity for success.20

In characterizing the curriculum debates in black education of this era, historians frequently draw on the opposing stances of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Yet, in practice, these polar views were often melded together. Washington, a former slave and a principal at Tuskegee Institute, was perhaps the most well-known African American public figure at the turn of the twentieth century. He viewed education in manual labor for work as the precursor to economic stability and advancement, a position that white philanthropists and business leaders embraced. Harvard-educated scholar and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois favored education in the liberal arts for the “talented tenth,” or teachers, who would then lead the rest of the race. Each philosophy took root in educational institutions during the period in a variety of ways, and often the two were combined. Institutions emphasizing the liberal arts almost always included some measure of vocational education, while schools such as Tuskegee, even though their emphasis was on manual training at least until the 1920s, incorporated the liberal arts, but with vocational ends in mind.21

With the development of segregated schools in scattered local areas in the South came the rise of black school-community groups beginning in the
1890s, primarily as a result of the efforts of teachers and other educational leaders. These endeavors often relied on the support of black professional and voluntary associations, such as the local and state branches of the National Association for Colored Women and the National Association for Teachers in Colored Schools. Another push for the development of black parent-teacher associations came from white philanthropy, which channeled money through the GEB to support segregated schools. In most instances, the teachers of those schools organized school improvement societies and other types of parent-teacher groups. Therefore, white philanthropists and school administrators unwittingly aided in the establishment of networks of parent-teacher associations across the South by funding black teachers’ efforts in building schools, thereby strengthening their networks.22

“In Union Is Strength”: The National Association of Colored Women

One of the major factors that supported the development of the black parent-teacher movement in the late nineteenth century was the founding of the National Association of Colored Women. With education at the center of its program, the NACW also offered a national network to support the spread of ideas and coordinate the efforts of local-level clubs. The NACW emerged as a federated association shortly after the creation of the GFWC (1890) but just before the PTA (1897) and, like them, experienced a significant increase in membership in its first three decades. However, by the 1920s the PTA’s membership far surpassed that of the GFWC and NACW (see figure 2.1). As might be expected, the leadership and membership of the two white associations overlapped a great deal, while there was virtually no crossover between white and black association membership. Nonetheless, the leaders of each of these three organizations spoke on occasion at the annual meetings of the other two. Even though the leaders of the major women’s organizations worked along the same lines in the Progressive spirit for a better society, racial relations and tensions between and among women club leaders played out on a national stage.

In July 1895, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, a community leader and clubwoman, convened a meeting in Boston to organize the Afro-American Federation of Colored Women. A year later, the organization joined forces with the Colored Women’s League of Washington, DC, to create a new entity, the NACW. Activist and educator Mary Church Terrell became its first president. The founding leaders of the association wanted, in part, to carry out what they called “human service work,” independent of white women’s associations and the Baptist church, through which many middle-class black women were
linked. This would free them from the attempts at subordination by men in the Baptist convention, even though during this period black Baptist women continued to work through the convention, broadening its public division and making it, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues, “the most powerful institution of racial self-help in the African American community.”

Even though black clubwomen founded the NACW as a reaction to having been barred from the GFWC, the organization was not an emulation of the white women’s club movement, nor did black women’s reform efforts draw on the same motivations as white women. Black women had been raised by families and in communities that taught them to use their education in socially responsible ways; unlike white women they were prepared for lives of activism. In addition to municipal housekeeping, their activism focused on strategies of resistance to assaults on black men, women, and children. Chicagoan Fannie Barrier Williams outlined the central difference between white and black women’s clubs at the time by explaining, “The club movement among colored women reaches into the sub-condition of the entire race. . . . [It is] the struggle of an enlightened conscience against the whole brood of social miseries, born out of the stress and pain of a hated past.” The leaders of the NACW were an exceptional group of college-educated black women who spread middle-class values among the masses as they generated financial support for community institutions and their educational and social service programs. In addition to working for others, and unlike white women community reformers, black women were also working for themselves. Knowing that they were judged by whites who made little distinction between lower- and middle-class blacks,
African American clubwomen knew that in order to gain respect, they needed to improve the economic and social conditions of the entire race. Unfortunately, however, they were sometimes elitist in their work with blacks of lower socioeconomic status, which at times widened the gaps between the classes. While a sense of *noblesse oblige* in working with the less fortunate gave white and black clubwomen a common bond, the similarities stopped there. The leadership group of black clubwomen stands in contrast to the all-white Congress of Mothers leadership of this time, which was not viewed as radical, or even liberal. They were conservative white women without much recognition in the public eye, except for their being related to well-known men. On their own, or affiliated with the organization, the leadership cadre of white women did not achieve the kind of public recognition that the leaders of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers did. Black PTA leaders were activist women who were used to being in the public eye, for better and for worse. At the very least, the key similarity between the leadership groups of the two branches of the PTA is that they had the approval of male leaders across the political spectrum.

What little crossover there was between the two organizations took place at national, and sometimes state, meetings. At least several NACW leaders served as token representatives of their race at the early annual meetings of the PTA, such as Frances Harper, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, community leader and educator Mary Church Terrell, and kindergarten reformer Anna J. Murray. Attempting to remain true to the inclusive policy of the Mothers’ Congress, white PTA leaders invited them as fellow clubwomen and representatives of their race at the rate of about one notable black speaker each year. Harper, Terrell, and Murray agreed to address the white delegates because it was an opportunity to further racial goals by enlisting potential allies. Moreover, each one seized the opportunity to promote her particular agenda.

Mary Eliza Church Terrell, a graduate of Oberlin College, was a suffragist and teacher from Memphis. She later taught at the M Street School in Washington, DC, and served on the District of Columbia Board of Education from 1895 to 1901 and then again from 1906 to 1911, the first black woman to do so. Terrell gave an official welcome from the National Association of Colored Women at the third annual Congress of Mothers in 1899 and used her time on the platform to address racial inequality. She began, “[we] are putting forth every possible effort to discharge our duty [as NACW members] worthily. Into the homes of our people we go preaching the gospel of cleanliness, and morality, cultivation of the mind and the dignity of labor.” After having reassured her audience of black women’s intentions, she admonished them, “[d]id it ever occur to you, Mothers of the Congress how difficult a thing it is for colored women
to inspire their children with hope or offer them an incentive for their best endeavor under the existing conditions of things in this country?” Terrell’s call for the equal treatment of children of all races was based on her argument of motherhood uniting all women across racial lines, a central tenet of the NCM leaders’ maternalist belief. Therefore, Terrell’s message likely came across not as abrasive but as worthy of compassion and support.

A kindergarten educator from Washington, DC, Anna Murray, took the same tack in her talk on “Mothers’ Clubs Among Colored Women” at the 1900 meeting of the PTA, by addressing the delegates as compatriots. Murray recognized a fundraising opportunity even though she had been advised by NCM officers not to solicit donations. In her presentation she alluded to the rapid ascension of the NCM organization, stating that she could not bring comparable “reports of systematic organization [of the NACW]. . . . We are too young . . . to have accomplished as much as has been brought here from the different states by the more fortunate women.” Revealing black women’s appreciation of the inclusive policy of the Mothers’ Congress, she noted that the women of the NACW looked favorably on the founding mission of the PTA: “It appealed to us because, as Americans—not as colored women—we believed it struck at the very root fibres of our national character.” Murray’s time on the podium at the Mothers’ Congress was spent kowtowing to the NCM delegates and allying herself, at least in public, with Booker T. Washington’s approach to racial relations. Echoing his metaphor, she announced to the crowd that black clubwomen decided “to allow each one to let down her bucket where she could do the most good.”

Murray spoke to the parallel work of black women’s clubs by detailing the work of the early years of the NACW in regard to education, which focused on initiating mothers’ meetings, establishing day nurseries and kindergartens, and opening homes for orphaned children. With each example she showed how a dedicated organizer brought women of a community together and taught them about the work that was to be undertaken, all of which led to the spread of local associations and their eventual coalescing into state units. She shared the examples of Margaret Murray Washington, who developed a network in Alabama, and Laura Titus, who carried out similar work in Virginia, where she had enlisted twenty-five clubs in a new state organization. Prior to her speech, NCM officers had instructed her not to ask for donations for her efforts in establishing more kindergartens for African American children in the District of Columbia, explaining, “those who wished to learn more of [your] special work could seek information from [you] in person.” Murray ignored their request and, after she had spent some time establishing the common bonds between white and black clubwomen, spoke in detail about the work of the kindergartens in meeting special “race needs” by teaching character
She concluded with an announcement that the kindergartens were in dire need of funding and appealed to the white delegates’ patriotism and dedication to the principles of freedom in supporting her venture. 27

Terrell, Murray, and Harper played into the sentiments of the leaders of the Mothers’ Congress to obtain a wider public support for their message about race and education. Like many others at the turn of the twentieth century, they recognized the magnitude of the growing association and its influence on public life, so they were willing to appear on the annual meeting programs with other leading public figures. In addition to emphasizing motherhood as a shared bond, African American educational leaders used the PTA’s declaration of inclusivity to attempt to forge racial understandings. None of the remarks offended the delegates and leaders of the Mothers’ Congress since the black speakers positioned themselves as subordinate to whites, and NCM leaders satisfied their wishes to reach across the racial divide. However, black clubwomen realized that their words fell on deaf ears as they saw clearly the PTA’s tokenism, observing that the “WHITE organization had shown little or no interest in NEGRO children although they were sworn to work for child welfare.” 28

It would be facile to characterize these and other black speakers at the white PTA annual meetings as either accommodationist or liberalist, along the lines of Washington and Du Bois. Such categorizations are overly simplistic, do not fully capture black women’s hopes in addressing white audiences, and do not account for individuals’ changing viewpoints over time. For instance, while Frances Harper’s rhetorical tactics in 1897 seemed to echo the accommodating racial politics of Booker T. Washington, she was, in fact, a supporter of liberal arts education for blacks along the lines of W. E. B. Du Bois’ “talented tenth.” Also, while Mary Church Terrell was far less reserved than Harper in her speech just two years later, her politics at the time favored accommodationism before she moved further to the left as early as 1905. No matter what their beliefs, Terrell and other leaders were not going to let the PTA’s policy on race stand without comment. In her address to the PTA, Terrell challenged the organization to remain true to its commitment to being inclusive by raising their own children by the same principles: “May I not ask you then, that when you teach your children the lofty principles this Congress represents, you will make a special effort to train them to be just and broad enough to judge men and women by their intrinsic merit, rather than by the adventitious circumstances of race, or color or creed?” The NCM’s inclusive policy gave black women club leaders a modicum of hope that equality in education and of opportunity might be attempted, if not accomplished. 29

Other than the occasional black speaker at annual meetings and the few instances of integrated PTA gatherings discussed above, little transpired in
terms of improved race relations in women's clubs and parent-teacher associations at the turn of the twentieth century. By 1902, in an effort to appease its racist clubs, the GFWC took a firmer stance on segregation in its ranks and announced publicly that it would not include any black women's clubs in its membership. This presented a problem for the PTA, since it was founded on the principle of racial inclusion at the same time it sought to build on the existing network of GFWC local units. As a result, calls for interracial coalitions in the PTA fell silent after 1902, because organizational leaders did not want to jeopardize their partnership with the GFWC. The alliance grew even stronger in the first two decades of the twentieth century as the PTA, GFWC, and other white women's organizations banded together in the Department of Women's Organizations of the National Educational Association to dovetail forces around school reform activities.30

However, a small but growing number of black organizations continued to seek membership in the PTA at the local and state levels, challenging leaders with how to include them given variances among state and local laws and practices, particularly in the South. Regional differences tended to dictate local practice. In Delaware black and white clubs generally worked together, while in Indiana and Illinois black members had limited roles in the local units. African American members could join, but did not typically hold leadership positions. In the West, given that the black population was small, there were very few organized black associations. Therefore, black members attended Congress conventions and meetings in Washington and California. The South was an entirely different matter; black and white clubwomen almost never met together. For white PTA leaders who were interested in building racial bridges in the South, the only appropriate way to organize black women was to help create segregated associations, rather than coordinate integrated clubs. To do otherwise would not only be inappropriate; it would risk alienating white members.31

After the white PTAs' first decade, its leaders expressed an interest in forging a stronger connection with black clubwomen, so they attempted to organize them in ways the GFWC would have found challenging to its politically and regionally diverse membership. In 1908 the PTA endeavored to organize a black national parent-teacher association and gave officer Helen T. Birney, sister-in-law of Alice Birney, the charge of identifying a black clubwoman “who would take the initiative in forming a congress of colored mothers.” Helen Birney was deeply involved with both the National Congress leadership and the District of Columbia Congress of Mothers, having served as its president for eleven years. She was known among her peers as an efficient and business-like leader. Because black club leaders distrusted the women of the NCM, they consequently refused the overture and stated their intention to continue
to work through the NACW network, explaining, “A colored woman would do a better job organizing the colored mothers of the country.” The effort was viewed as a failure by PTA leaders, since no black national organization resulted. However, the white PTA’s efforts did help galvanize the development of local-level parent-teacher associations in segregated schools since it offered a model for organizing the communities around the newly forming schools. Most of the work in segregated schools, therefore, found guidance not from the women of the PTA or GFWC but, as black educational and business leaders had wished, through the NACW.

By coordinating extensive work in education at the local level, the NACW served a function that would later be assumed by local and state black PTA units and eventually the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. From its inception in 1896, the organization had maintained a commitment to education and by 1904 created departments for mothers’ clubs, kindergartens, and domestic science. Each of the departments, twelve in all, was to carry out its work under an appointed leader and to support the goal of “making a conscientious and untiring effort for race elevation.” The educational work of the NACW in its first thirty years challenged the Social Darwinist belief of the turn of the twentieth century that the races progress in an evolutionary manner. Black clubwomen, in considering the progress of civilization as related to their own “perfect womanhood,” sought to show that they, too, could reach a higher level of civilization and, ultimately, achieve social equality with whites. NACW leaders and members acknowledged this common assumption of the times, conceding, “no people could reach perfection in sixty years,” as their work focused on illiterate parents, mothers who were ignorant and who therefore bred “criminal types,” parents without respect for law and order, children without proper recreation, and children who received “no aesthetic training.”

In addition to these broader interests in advancing the race, the efforts of local-level women’s clubs, black parent-teacher associations, and school improvement societies served local needs and interests. As they did so, the development of the NACW as a federation generally followed the same pattern; women’s clubs and parent-teacher associations emerged in local settings, forged state units, and joined the national organization once they achieved a certain measure of success and stability in membership. For example, in Henderson, Kentucky, the Peerless Club was organized in 1904 to “help in the charitable, civic, and religious work of the community.” Having enjoyed many successes in its work, in 1908 it joined the state unit, the Kentucky Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, which two years later affiliated with the NACW. Since the Peerless Club had carried out school improvement efforts beginning with its first meeting in 1904, a separate parent-teacher association grew out
of the work, as the Douglass Street PTA was organized formally in 1910. It equipped playgrounds for local schools, purchased a high school for African American students, and fed and clothed needy children in the community. The two organizations—the women's club and the parent-teacher association—worked together to improve the community and educational, economic, and social conditions for blacks. The Peerless Club president, Eugenia A. Mundy, reported the group's accomplishments to the NACW: “We have contributed to the tuberculosis hospital, to the child health clinics, to the N.A.A.C.P., and to the Douglass High School Parent-Teacher Association toward the purchase of the first building which was used until the present year.” Another central interest for black leaders at this time, civic education and voting, captured the interest of the Douglass Street PTA, which paid for a citizenship course at the high school.35

In 1916 women in Wilmington, Delaware, joined the State Federation of Black Women's Clubs in order to carry out their work more efficiently. Through the 1920s they established schools for African American youth and, like clubwomen around the state, successfully lobbied for the passage of a bill to appropriate funding for industrial schools for girls. They also successfully petitioned the City Board of Education for a black nurse for the Wilmington Public Schools. As one club president put it, “The legislative Department is very active and exercises all efforts to see all bills are passed for the protection of women and girls in our racial group.” In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Jacksonville, Florida, unit of the NACW engaged in typical women's club work by establishing playgrounds, improving school plants, and placing nurses in the colored schools. More formal curricular endeavors also interested the work of local women's clubs, including civic education, as discussed above, and homemaking and farming skills. These extensive efforts challenge the understanding that black schools fought against an industrial curriculum in favor of the liberal arts (see figure 2.2).36

Many women's clubs and parent-teacher associations in segregated schools supported homemaking and other practical curricular activities along with a humanistic course of study to give black youth essential skills for their health and survival during the lean years of the early twentieth century. In a retrospective written in 1932, one member of an NACW-affiliated club noted that her group had been among the first to organize canning clubs among black citizens, that at its peak it had over 46 members, and that its president worked with “white friends” to enlist a “Colored County Canning Demonstrator.” Securing the canning demonstrator was significant because it virtually ensured that the network would expand; the charge of the demonstrator was to organize new clubs in her region. The emphasis on homemaking and other practical skills supported the efforts of white philanthropists and the U.S.
FIGURE 2.2
government. Therefore, the commitment by black clubwomen to homemaking education intersected with philanthropic and governmental initiatives to help establish home-school associations and a network of citizens and professionals across the South. As the NACW locals were gradually building a national network, homemakers’ clubs were organized with increasing frequency after 1910, part of the growing interest in developing industrial and agricultural education for African Americans in rural areas.37

Therefore, the multiple networks of black clubs and associations were not, during this time, very far from white intervention. Many white educational leaders saw the network of the NACW and other groups as means to organize segregated schools and to further the goals of agricultural education. In a November 1913 report, the white State Supervisor of Negro Schools for Kentucky, F. C. Button, noted “three matters of large import to the colored people” in his state to organize black education: the Kentucky Educational Association for Colored Teachers, the Women’s Clubs, and the government’s farm demonstration project. He remarked on the Educational Association’s growing membership and decision to permanently locate itself in Louisville, which offered a couple of advantages. It afforded the association reduced railroad rates and, since it planned to meet the same time as the white association, “they will be able to secure many of the best white speakers for their meetings.” White speakers, of course, could promote the industrial and agricultural curriculum and maintain at least a modicum of oversight of the building of black schools. The second network, the NACW’s Kentucky branch, representing 102 local clubs, was viewed by Button as a vehicle for education work as well. He reported, “I spoke to them concerning the rural schools and we shall have the influence, which is very large, of this Federation back of us in the work of the colored rural schools.”38

Button noted correctly the significance of the third effort, the farm demonstration project, that he was expected to help coordinate and report on to the GEB. In the 1910s the GEB disbursed funds to help support agricultural and horticultural training for blacks and had two benefits, according to the U.S. government. First, it would advantage the nation by developing farming skills among and providing food for a rural, poor population. Congress rationalized that the effort would “awaken . . . a more lively, immediate interest in the industrial development of the country generally, and […] change specifically the agricultural condition throughout the land.” Next, political and educational leaders believed it provided moral education to a population that needed it, “so as to change and check the present alarming tendency towards city life and excitement.” The education of black citizens took place in organized groups, called Homemakers’ Clubs, which were managed by white educational leaders who in turn enlisted the help of black teachers. It was a
complex endeavor that, although it had the oversight of white educational leaders, was run by black educators who took ownership of the clubs and developed a network of school improvement associations across the South by the late 1910s.39

“I Esteem It a Favor to Myself and My Race”:
The Homemakers’ Club Initiative

The GEB and its partner, the SEB, were responsible for funding the separate schools of the South and coordinating the implementation of a curriculum that emphasized industrial training for African Americans. The Rosenwald Schools paid for by the GEB essentially became the system of schools for African Americans in rural areas in the first three decades of the twentieth century, during what Anderson calls the “second crusade for universal common schooling,” the first being the efforts of the Reconstruction era. By 1932 nearly five thousand Rosenwald schools had been built with white philanthropic money and black labor, time, and capital. Two of the GEB’s other funding initiatives, the Jeanes Supervising Industrial Teachers and Homemakers’ Clubs, contributed to the organization of a nascent network of local parent-teacher associations and school improvement societies that later helped form the foundation for the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. The local units of the NACW and the teachers affiliated with the National Association for Teachers in Colored Schools—which had a low membership but was spread across fifteen Southern states at the time—also contributed to this foundation. Therefore, the parent-teacher groups of the newly built schools were not completely disconnected local groups as is often portrayed in the scholarship, but were linked through associational alliances to existing voluntary networks.40

In 1908, the General Education Board began to disburse the funds for the Jeanes Supervising Industrial Teachers, previously called the Negro Rural School Fund, which hired black educators to travel around the rural areas of the South, not only to enlist volunteers in building schools but also to promote industrial education and community involvement in the schools. Within two years there were 129 Jeanes teachers across thirteen Southern states, and the majority of them had been trained at Hampton and Tuskegee, which stressed industrial education. Jeanes teachers interpreted their role broadly, both as teachers and as community builders. As one historian put it, “No absolute rules were laid down for Jeanes Supervisors.” Their efforts in remote regions resulted in the unintended consequence of a network that promoted lay involvement in the newly constructed separate schools and helped rally com-
community members around education. Most importantly, the Jeanes teachers did not just call on individual parents and citizens; they worked with local teachers in organizing them into home-school groups. As a result, Jeanes teachers honed their own leadership skills, as well as those of rural teachers and community members.41

The GEB also strongly supported the creation of citizens’ organizations once it assumed responsibility for the Homemakers’ Clubs. The clubs had been started by the United States Department of Agriculture through the Office of Farmers’ Cooperative Demonstration Work around 1912. At that time the U.S. government initiated Homemakers’ Clubs in Kentucky and Virginia, and in Arkansas the following year. In 1914 the Smith-Lever Bill was passed, providing federal money for extension services and agricultural education for the improvement of rural life among blacks and whites. Agricultural education, through initiatives like Smith-Lever, in part sought to preserve the virtues of agrarian life in a rapidly changing industrial and social order in the early twentieth century. The Smith-Lever Act, then, was additional ammunition for philanthropic efforts that promoted industrial education as the most appropriate to prepare African Americans for a subordinate role in the Southern economy and society. At that time, the federal government found it expeditious to hand off the Homemakers’ Clubs to the GEB, since they dovetailed with the Board’s other projects.42

In 1914 the GEB began to send appropriations to Southern state departments of education to hire Homemakers’ Club agents—the majority of whom were black women teachers—to travel around the state and establish clubs to teach young men, women, and their mothers farming and food preservation techniques. The state supervisors of Negro education acted as liaisons between the teachers and the GEB and oversaw the project. During the first year the GEB funded them, Homemakers’ Clubs formed in six states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia. The clubs varied according to region, relying on local needs to determine their foci. For example, they were called “corn clubs,” “canning clubs,” and “pig clubs,” depending on local agricultural and farming emphases. Homemakers’ Club agents received specialized training in canning and preserving foods so that they could teach citizens these skills. In many of the participating Southern states the agents attended the well-known Tuskegee summer institutes, which stressed housekeeping, sanitation, and canning. While the club agents sometimes covered their own expenses for these institutes, the GEB paid their tuition in most instances, seeing it as a worthwhile investment.43

Homemakers’ Clubs among the black population in the South were intended to extend the school day’s focus on industrial arts by offering home economics for girls and their mothers and agricultural education for boys.
The idea was similar to the vacation schools in Northern urban areas that occupied young people's free time. Using the club model was an efficient way—according to those directing the program—to organize blacks around common educational goals. It also afforded a way to easily link the movement with other African American organizations in order to promote the model of industrial education. For instance, J. A. Presson, the white state supervisor of Negro schools in Arkansas, directed the Jeanes teachers to exhibit the clubs’ wares at meetings of the National Association for Teachers in Colored Schools. Moreover, club work took care of the problem of how to occupy black children during the summer months of a too-short school year; it also enlisted the children's parents in learning about agriculture. Club work emphasized practical education, mirroring the zeitgeist of curriculum reform in the early twentieth century and revealing attitudes toward the intellectual capacity of blacks. For six years the GEB funded Homemakers’ Clubs throughout the South, encouraging them to teach rural African Americans to preserve produce, raise livestock, and harvest staple crops such as corn. Club members displayed their products and often sold them to raise money for local schools.

The idea to use the Jeanes teachers as Homemakers’ Club agents was first proposed in 1913 by the Arkansas State Supervisor of Negro Education, Leo M. Favrot, as the GEB was assuming responsibility for the clubs. Favrot submitted a “Plan for Broadening the Spheres an[d] Increasing the Utility of the County Industrial Teacher” to the GEB in which he suggested that “Jeanes Fund teachers desiring to do so be made collaborators in farm demonstration, for the purposes of organizing boys’ and girls’ agricultural clubs.” Enlisting the Jeanes teachers helped the school supervisors who were overburdened with work responsibilities, but it also helped the teachers. Being hired as Homemakers’ Clubs agents gave the Jeanes teachers summer employment, which allowed them to earn year-round salaries. In most cases it paid them for work they were already doing anyway, since organizing local citizens into clubs predated the initiative.

The Virginia State Supervisor for Negro Schools, Jackson Davis, reported on the vast organizing of Homemakers’ Clubs being carried out in the eastern part of the state. In October and November of 1912 he spent about half his time in the office and the rest in the field visiting, among other things, YMCA meetings; attending a “Colored teachers’ meeting in Ruthville”; and attending exhibits of the girls’ canning clubs in the commonwealth. He reported, “Most of the mothers have also taken up the work and learned to can more kinds of vegetables.” About fifteen mothers “testified” at the meeting that they had saved more canned goods than “ever before” and that they had “better things to eat during the winter months.” Revealing the challenges of his job in the following month’s report, Davis wrote again of his travels and explained,
“It was encouraging to note the progress which these schools [of Henrico County] have made within the last few years, but we found in two school communities considerable prejudice still remaining on the part of the colored patrons against industrial work in the schools.” At that time, given Davis’s many duties, he appointed Jeanes supervisor Virginia Randolph to “look after his Negro schools” because he did not have time to do so. The trend, in which Jeanes teachers were given increasing responsibility to relieve the load of state educational supervisors, was common among Southern states. With each new responsibility, the Jeanes teachers further developed their leadership and organizational skills.

Jackson Davis was among those white workers promoting parent-teacher collaboration associations and gatherings by encouraging the segregated schools to hold Patrons’ Day events. He reported to the GEB in 1912, “I have also used every effort to have Patrons’ Day, November 1st observed in the colored schools. I have had very heavy correspondence and have sent out a good deal of literature in connection with this work. I think the day was generally observed with excellent results.” Arkansas’ J. A. Presson instructed his Jeanes teachers on how to conduct their work: “Industrial classes for both boys and girls should be organized in each school. . . . It is expected that the county industrial teacher, in cooperation with the local teacher, organize and maintain an active school improvement Association in connection with each school. Probably no better way will be found for securing the interest and cooperation of the patrons.” As always, the industrial education of youth involved enlisting parents, as white educators worked to teach entire communities the virtues of agricultural education through the clubs. As George Godard, the State Supervisor of Georgia’s Negro Schools, explained to his agents, “Get the consent and secure the cooperation of the parents of these members. You can do very little without their help.”

Despite the emphasis on agricultural education, the Jeanes teachers embraced the Homemakers’ Clubs initiative. They also supported the involvement of parents and citizens as a result of the values they learned at home and in schools; they shared strategies and ideas for doing so at the various institutes and meetings they attended. Jeanes supervisor Virginia Randolph explained, “We used labor donated by parents to make repairs and improvements on school buildings and grounds. I am very proud of the Home Improvement Societies I was able to organize.” Ardenah Marcus, a State Industrial Teacher in Georgia, did the same thing during her travels across the state each month as she encouraged the formation of patrons’ clubs. In general, the agents followed the stated purpose of the Homemakers’ Clubs and taught African American girls, boys, and mothers how to preserve food, raise farm animals, and carry out other homemaking duties, all with the intended goal of improving
the quality of life for African Americans. While industrial education was generally a tough sell to black communities, this was not always the case. Black teachers helped develop and sustain a network of citizens interested in education and schooling across their respective states, and they taught much-needed skills to the masses. Moreover, club work around agriculture lessened some of the class distinctions that were found in women’s club reform work because of the emphasis on agricultural production and sustainability for all.

As with the rest of their reform work, the Homemakers’ Club Agents themselves viewed the clubs as important to racial uplift and the development of community. As Stephanie J. Shaw argues in her book on black professional women, their efforts were “not simply acts of charity[;] . . . they were a matter of developing the infrastructure of the community and community itself.” Even under the watchful eyes of white supervisors, the agents enacted a form of community-building among the counties they visited as they encouraged African Americans to clean up homes and schools by whitewashing and tiding them, and to work for the common good through food preservation and other activities. Moreover, this emphasis on cleanliness in segregated schools was connected to the teachers’ aims to encourage character development both within the school population and in the community in general. Most importantly, they did not just tell citizens what to do; they established Patrons’ Clubs and School Improvement Leagues and enlisted local teachers and citizens to lead them since they traveled throughout the year and were not always there to lead each meeting. In Alabama a rural supervisor explained how the Homemakers’ Clubs were run in his region: “In some communities a local teacher or competent mother agreed to act as president of the club and give weekly lessons during the season under the general supervision of the agent. In others, the instruction was given entirely by the agent and the club met only when the agent made her visits.” Therefore, an important part of community-building was the establishment of networks of citizens and professionals, linked through club ties and teachers’ associations.51

The club agents displayed much ownership of the initiative, viewing it as an extension of their classroom work. The rural teacher thus was “teaching all the time.” One agent in Alabama in 1915 revealed her commitment to Homemakers’ Clubs by claiming, “I esteem it a favor to myself and my race.” The enthusiasm of E. Birdie Taylor of Kentucky is evidenced through her eagerness to get to work, even though the club agents did not typically begin until mid-May: “I would like to begin the club work if possible, the first of March in order to have all the children well started before school is out. I would like to have all the members plant seed early in boxes or hot beds.” The agents traveled far and wide to enlist citizens in the educational efforts of the Homemakers’ Club, but as discussed above, the boundaries of this work were fluid. Lula
M. Thomas, an agent in Montgomery County, Alabama, reported that she had used two days in August of 1915 to attend Sunday school and a “Woman’s Missionary Convention.” She also traveled around the county, attending school improvement society meetings, discussing “school improvement work with them and urg[ing] them to fix up their schoolhouses.”

Often, as in the case of Virginia Randolph, Jeanes supervisors rose to leadership positions to assist the state supervisors in overseeing the Homemakers’ Club agents. Medora Reed of Arkansas took on work of exhausting proportions, which included organizing local home-school associations, leading canning clubs, traveling vast distances, and preparing reports for the Negro School Supervisors. One spring, Reed spent only five days in the office preparing reports; the rest were spent going to meetings and demonstrations. An entry for mid-March notes, “As the agent in Mississippi County was new, I spent almost the entire week with her, trying to give the needed instructions as to the beginning of her work.”

Another entry for April reveals the multifaceted nature of her work and the centrality of organizing community members:

This week was spent with the agent in Mississippi County. As she was new in the county, her work was principally organizing. We found all schools and communities eager for the work and even ready to begin work. The schools at Osceola and Holt have some equipment for a kitchen and very effective work can be done there. At Joiner, the clubs were organized and after an explanation of the work, they were very much interested in poultry. The women are very eager to learn to can vegetables and promise to plant to that effect. This is a large county, with a fine field for the work. Saturday was office day.

By 1917, even though the Homemakers’ Club initiative was not successful in terms of the proportion of rural blacks it enlisted, each of the Southern states had devoted workers like Reed, who traveled the state organizing Homemakers’ Clubs and establishing a nascent network of home-school associations that they then left in the hands of local teachers to manage.

In 1917 the U.S. Congress combined Smith-Lever with a major industrial education initiative to form the Smith-Hughes Act, which offered federal monies to the states for vocational education. With this move, vocational education was planted firmly in the public schools and was funded generously by the federal government. As Herbert Kliebard argues, “Congress found it expedient to link the needs of industry and agriculture under the general aegis of the national interest.” With the passage of Smith-Hughes, funding for Homemakers’ Clubs was removed from the administration of the GEB, thereby ending the short-lived philanthropic support for the clubs as of July 1, 1919. In 1919, the last year of the GEB’s support, eleven states in the South had established
Homemakers’ Club networks: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The appropriations that year ranged from a low of $1,375 for Maryland to a high of $7,800 for Virginia. Whereas the GEB was the sole source of funding for the Clubs in 1914, by 1919 appropriations were supplemented with other state and local funds, which was the express hope of the GEB. The result was less attention to the specific needs of blacks in terms of what whites thought of as industrial education, as Smith-Hughes broadened its scope to encompass the entire nation. Nonetheless, important groundwork had been carried out during that time in developing a network of school leaders who organized community members around the goals of education, racial uplift, and community-building. By this time, the clubs were standing on their own as some began to be linked to the network of black parent-teacher associations that were emerging in Georgia, Alabama, and elsewhere.  

Although the Homemakers’ Clubs did not accomplish the far-reaching goals set for them by policymakers and the GEB, what did result was greater momentum around community-school organizing in segregated schools and an even stronger network of associations organized under the Jeanes Industrial Teachers, which continued until the 1960s. Since the Jeanes network remained intact through the middle decades of the twentieth century and Homemakers’ Clubs were transformed into home-school organizations, black PTA organizers had a more solid foundation on which to build. The Homemakers’ Club initiative, coordinated primarily by Jeanes teachers, thus can be given the credit for the widespread promotion and establishment of community clubs of various types, parent-teacher associations, and school improvement societies, and the Negro Rural Supervisors and other educational administrators recognized this.

In some instances, Jeanes teachers who worked on behalf of the Homemakers’ Clubs went on to leadership roles in the NCCPT. For example, Annie W. Holland was hired as one of the first Homemakers’ Club agents in North Carolina and rapidly rose through the ranks to become a leader of agents. She was discharged with the duty of training agents in homemaking tasks and organizing community members. N. C. Newbold recognized her capabilities, writing, “Mrs. Holland has been visiting some of the new supervisors and helping them organize and promote the Home-Makers’ Club work in ten counties.” Holland worked in this leadership role for the duration of the GEB initiative, from 1914 to 1919, and remained the highest-paid agent in the state. Her work as a Homemakers’ Club agent gave her leadership training that served her in her later role as first president and founder of the North Carolina Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers in 1927. Her efforts, and those of other Jeanes teachers, were mirrored in urban areas by clubwomen and teachers who organized parent-teacher associations.
Organizing the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the pace of organizing parent-teacher associations and school improvement societies increased as a result of various grassroots efforts. In some instances, middle-class black clubwomen worked in the cities and aided rural areas and schools. In others, Jeanes supervising teachers organized Patrons’ and Homemakers’ clubs for the betterment of schools and communities, and these associations were further supported by white educational administrators. Through in-service workshops, teacher training, and membership in state education associations and the NACW, black teachers began to learn about similar efforts in other regions and discovered they were not alone in the effort to organize citizens. Thus the founding of the black PTA was the result of a confluence of grassroots forces in rural and urban areas and from black as well as white leaders.

If the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers can be said to have originated in any one location, it would be Atlanta, under the leadership of clubwoman Selena Sloan Butler. Butler was educated at Spelman and active locally and nationally in civic and educational reform throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In 1897 she wrote to her alumnae magazine, The Spelman Messenger, and revealed her support of black advancement and education: “study the past and current history of your race and with pride tell it to your pupils in the classroom or to your children as you sit around the fireside. If you do not do this, who will?” Butler’s associational ties were vast; she was a representative of the Atlanta Woman’s Club at the organizational meeting of the NACW, organized a chapter of the Eastern Star in Atlanta, and served on the board of the Phillis Wheatley Young Women’s Christian Association. The alumnae publication remarked on her accomplishments, “Temperance, health, Sunday School, and church work, free kindergarten, social purity, parent-teacher clubs, in fact, every kind of movement for the betterment of her race [has been] worthy to receive her encouragement and aid.”

Married to one of Atlanta’s first black doctors, Butler had worked as a kindergarten teacher before serving as preceptor at Florida State College at Tallahassee. She was known by Mothers’ Congress leaders because she was one of the NACW members contacted by Helen Birney of the NCM in 1908 to organize a black national PTA. Butler refused their offer, having decided at that time to continue to work at the local level in the Atlanta area. Her resistance was reflective of black club leaders’ distrust of white clubwomen, inasmuch as it shows the suspicion of the wider black community in the South, which had turned increasingly inward from the 1880s to the 1920s, refusing white help from the networks of civil society or the federal government. Moreover, Butler likely considered the task too challenging at that juncture. Given that
the majority of African Americans in the South lived in rural areas and the establishment of schools and school systems were still being undertaken, Butler had virtually no foundation on which to build a segregated PTA. Instead, the networks with which Butler worked, such as the YWCA and NACW, were already providing the support that the Congress of Mothers would offer, but in black associations and with black leadership. In short, Butler and other community leaders had nothing to gain by joining the white PTA in 1908.60

Butler and other black Atlantans were, at that time, much more focused on the crisis that had arisen in the city’s educational system during a time of racial unrest and educational inequity. At the turn of the twentieth century, black residents began fighting for equitable funding in education and adequate school facilities. Starting in 1908, with over 90 percent of them living in poverty, 4,500 children were closed out of the city’s public schools. For the next several years, black children attended half-time, as segregated schools were used for double sessions. In March 1911 Butler organized a parent-teacher association for African Americans at the Yonge Street School, with the help of principal Olive Taylor, in order to rally community members around the issue (see figure 2.3). Taylor’s invitation to parents was well received, and at the first meeting they established a parent-teacher association and elected Butler as president. Neighbors took note of the successes of the new parent-teacher association. For instance, a 1913 report of schools compiled by black settlement workers of the Atlanta Neighborhood Union found “unhealthful conditions existing in all of our public schools except Yonge Street School.” As the Yonge Street PTA continued to meet during the school year, Butler and her associates reached out and helped nearby Atlanta schools organize their own associations. Clubs spread so rapidly that by the next school year Butler created the Parent-Teacher Council of Atlanta to coordinate the efforts of the local groups.61

Selena Butler continued to lead local efforts around the greater Atlanta region until 1919, when she called a statewide meeting of parent-teacher associations. Held at the War Camp Community Center in Atlanta, the first state meeting drew the attention of white Georgia PTA president J. E. Andrews, who contributed ten dollars to the fledgling organization. Butler again was elected president and led the black local units in starting school libraries and health programs, instituting school lunches and playgrounds, and holding leadership workshops. She was not alone. Similar work was being carried out in other Southern states such as Alabama, Texas, and Delaware by a cadre of educated black women that mirrored the ground-up organizational development pattern in Georgia. Grassroots organizing led to the gradual building of a nascent infrastructure as organizers linked their local units to regional or state councils with the support of established associations, such as the NACW, YWCA, and Urban League.62
FIGURE 2.3
The Yonge Street Parent-Teacher Association (date unknown). (Source: Photo reprinted with permission and courtesy of National PTA)
As in other Southern states, there were gross inequities in funding between Alabama’s black and white schools. Also, while the school term in the state for blacks was under 100 days in the 1910s, it was 142 days for whites. Double taxation was a way of life for the state’s African Americans. Organized women worked diligently in many counties, purchasing the land for school buildings, often with donations that matched the GEB’s funds for Rosenwald Schools. Parent-teacher organizing in the state began in Selma, Alabama, under the leadership of schoolteacher and clubwoman M. A. Dillard, who was a representative of the Woman’s Mutual Improvement Club at the NACW organizational meeting convened by Josephine Ruffin in Boston in 1895. In 1914 she served as the president of the Alabama State Mothers’ League, which ten years later changed its name to the Alabama State [Black] PTA. The origins of the black PTA in Alabama reflect larger trends across the South; the association was driven, in large part, by educators. The State Mothers’ League—the name was chosen so it would not be confused with the white Alabama Congress of Parents and Teachers—held its inaugural meeting at State Teachers College in Montgomery. Dillard was elected its first president, and her energies in those early years were focused on getting parents interested in PTA work and providing the leadership training to parents and teachers necessary to sustain the movement. White and black educational leaders at the state level helped guide the new association, including J. S. Lambert, a state Rosenwald worker; H. Councill Trenholm, the president of Alabama State Teachers College; John W. Abercrombie, the state superintendent of education; and Mary Foster, a state supervisor. Foster operated as a field secretary for the newly formed organization, adding the duty without compensation to her travels around the state. Lambert, Trenholm, and Abercrombie were well-known political and educational leaders in Alabama at this time, so their involvement with the founding of a statewide black PTA lent visibility to the venture. Black PTA organizers, however, did not always need or get the support of state educational administrators. In Fort Worth, Texas, schoolteacher W. S. Benton organized a mothers’ club in her home around 1908. Encouraged by local principals, she helped establish mothers’ clubs for each public school in Fort Worth in the 1910s; these were eventually subsumed under a citywide PTA council. Having been encouraged by her successes, and swept up in the fervor that characterized parent-teacher organizing, Benton took her skills on the road and organized parent-teacher associations in Dallas, Mineral Wells, LaRue, Clarendon, and Port Arthur, covering hundreds of miles in doing so. The perils of travel for African Americans during this era cannot be underestimated, as few hotels opened their doors to them and many railcars were segregated. The specter of racism added to the burden of treks into rural areas with underdeveloped transportation systems, as black women leaders
often felt humiliated when dealing with Jim Crow laws around the South. Such challenges continued into the twentieth century. For example, in the 1930s NCCPT President Sarah F. Brown faced many obstacles in her travels because she often journeyed at night by train in order to attend the next day’s meetings. Many times she was met by horse and buggy and “had to ride over the poor and uncomfortable roads in order to visit the organized unit or to organize new units.”

All black PTA state units began as segregated associations, with the exception of Delaware. That state, where PTA work began fairly early on, presents a unique case of an integrated network that later segregated itself. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Delaware had an active network of women’s clubs that did much work on behalf of education. The women’s clubs of the federated National Association of Colored Women started parent-teacher associations, since much of their work focused on education, and these associations began to work with the white Congress of Parents and Teachers in that state. The white state PTA in Delaware was officially organized in 1911, the year it joined the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. From the beginning, many of the local units were integrated, and they remained so for nearly a decade, after which black PTA workers began to voice their concern over their lack of representation with the state Board of Managers. In the 1910s the lone black representative was J. Graham Scott, principal of Banneker Junior High, who served as “first vice-president in charge of Negro activities.” As black members became increasingly interested in managing their own affairs, they decided to leave the white PTA in 1920 and create their own organization, as they explained it, to “work more effectively and gain better leadership experience.” Nonetheless, they continued to work cooperatively with the white units in the 1920s; they were the only civic organization in the state to do so.

African American teachers’ organizations also helped advance the network of parent-teacher associations. For example, in Henderson, Kentucky, the parent-teacher association of Alves Street and Douglass High Schools was organized in 1910 to establish playgrounds, provide books for school libraries, and build a new high school. During this time, the local black parent-teacher associations of Kentucky were welcomed at the annual meetings of the Kentucky Teachers and Education Association (KT&EA) until 1917, when their attendance became too large and made the meetings unwieldy. Therefore, the KT&EA relegated nonteachers to a separate department, which consequently became the Kentucky [Black] PTA in 1921. Time and again black educators took the lead in organizing PTA units. In nearby West Virginia, Dr. W. W. Sanders founded a school improvement society in Premier to serve the one-room schoolhouse he was in charge of in 1911. Three years later he became the first black State Supervisor of Negro Schools in the country. This position
afforded him the opportunity, among other things, to catalyze the creation of local-level parent-teacher associations around the state, which eventually culminated in the founding of the West Virginia [Black] PTA in 1923. The West Virginia black PTA attempted to join the white PTA but was denied membership, because by that time the National Congress of Parents and Teachers had begun the practice of not accepting into state or national membership any black parent-teacher associations from segregated school systems. In just two decades the National Congress of Parents and Teachers had reneged on its promise to be inclusive, thus creating the impetus for a segregated branch. 

The pace of organizing black parent-teacher associations gained momentum by the early 1920s as Selena Butler and many other black activists and educational leaders carried out the process of building schools and communities as they sought to reform them. Butler’s organizing of a state black parent-teacher association drew the attention of the black community of Georgia, as well as the attention of the white Georgia Congress of Parents and Teachers. In some instances the parent-teacher association was organized before the school was built in order to gather resources. One local group in Mississippi in the early 1920s focused on their “immediate problem . . . [which] was to get something resembling a school.”

Even though the black state PTA in Georgia represented approximately one hundred local associations in 1923, with strong representation in Atlanta, it faced a crisis that it could not totally avert. The educational situation in Atlanta had deteriorated further, with schools running on triple sessions and a board of education continuing its overt discrimination of African American schools and students. As the white PTA was growing stronger in its national influence and ability to shape schools and the curriculum, it was at this juncture that Butler decided to organize the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, almost twenty years after she was first approached by white PTA representatives. In correspondence with white PTA president Margaretta Willis Reeve, Butler expressed her desire that they adopt the YWCA model by having separate state and local units but one national leadership. Reeve refused, however, and insisted on two separate national offices, out of fear of alienating white PTA members.

With the support and encouragement of white PTA leaders, as well as those of the National Urban League and National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools (NACTS), Butler issued a call to the other black state associations to send delegates to Georgia’s sixth annual convention in 1926. Of these, three accepted the invitation: Alabama, Delaware, and Florida. The call explained that the new organization would “offer opportunities for its members to develop their abilities to an extent not otherwise possible” and was endorsed by the white PTA president, A. H. Reeve, and chair of the Committee on Extension of Parent-Teacher Associations among Colored People,
F. W. McAllister. At the Liberty Baptist Church in Atlanta, on May 7, 1926, the Colored Congress was created as a segregated federation to the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. A long list of officers was elected, with representatives from the four original member states. In addition to seven vice presidents to handle the different departments (e.g., health, public welfare, home service), the NCCPT elected a historian to record the organization’s accomplishments.⁷¹

In accordance with NCPT policy, a white PTA member was appointed to chair its “Committee of Extension among Colored People.” PTA member Mrs. Fred Wessels assumed the role of liaison to the NCCPT. She immediately surveyed the white state PTA units on the existence of and need for separate black PTA organizations. In her first report to the National PTA leadership she justified the establishment of an entirely separate federation: “Equality of races, is not an amalgamation of races, as so many negroes seem to think, therefore it is logical for them to form their own associations for the development and progress of their race, thus becoming originators, and not merely imitators.” Inasmuch as NCPT leaders wanted to include black members on behalf of child welfare and parent education, they were not up to the challenge of creating an integrated association. Therefore, they helped create a separate and unequal organization that, at least in the beginning, depended on the leadership and contributions of the white association. White and black PTA leaders at the national level drew up bylaws outlining that a state could create a Colored PTA branch if it had fifteen associations with a membership of 300 persons, thereby allowing the NCCPT to extend its network beyond the de jure segregation in the Southern United States.⁷²

However, black PTA leaders viewed the reach of the Colored Congress differently. Selena Butler made it clear to the new members that the organization was only to “function in those states where separate schools for the races were maintained.”⁷³ She did not want to encourage the spread of segregation elsewhere:

Where there are no separate schools for the races I would not advise organizing a separate Association for Colored Patrons. There has been too much separate working already where it was not necessary. The colored women should join the P.-T.A. of the school of which they are patrons and throw their best efforts and unselfish cooperation with the Association of the school. . . . In those sections where separate schools are maintained because of TRADITION, the Colored schools must have their own P.-T.A.’s.⁷⁴

The four states—Georgia, Alabama, Delaware, and Florida—representing approximately 3,000 members in 300 units, were the first to join the NCCPT.
This was small in comparison to the white PTA, but Butler assured her counterparts in the NCPT that it would not take long to establish a membership base. She was elected the organization’s first president and, referring to the wider reach that an affiliation with the PTA would have, explained that the Colored Congress would “give leadership among [its] members as well as develop deeper interest in the work and thereby accomplish better and larger results.” Butler believed her organization would unite the efforts at organizing home-school associations around the South, in which African American teachers and parents were working to resolve complex local problems and to develop individual children and the community in the process.

The ground-up development of the black PTA allowed for a gradual building of an institutional infrastructure that relied on the strength and leadership of existing African American organizations. The women’s club movement, Homemakers’ Club initiative, and endeavors of black teachers converged to set the foundation for the NCCPT. These networks could have stood on their own to serve segregated schools, but they did not. Not only did they link with one another; they affiliated with the National PTA. In the 1920s, after decades of working separately, Butler and other black educational and community leaders found it propitious to join forces with the white PTA for several reasons. Black educators during the early twentieth century were all too aware of racial hostility and the threat it posed to the tenuous nature of the development of schools and school systems for African American children. Moreover, blacks in the South were voiceless in improving public schooling through existing educational policies, so their influence had only indirect channels through which to go. By the 1920s, however, black educational and civic leaders recognized the growing strength and influence of the white PTA and viewed it as an indirect avenue for race work.

As the National PTA ceased to work through the NEA Department of School Patrons and began to develop its membership base through the 1920s, it assumed responsibility for aiding in the support of public schools. During this time its membership increased exponentially. Developing a segregated branch with separate national, state, and local units presented its own set of challenges, not the least of which was communication and the continuity of programs and policies. With associational ties came distrust and confusion over how to coordinate the efforts of a segregated federation, while difference and diversity allowed for a fuller extension of the Congress into communities that otherwise would not have access to its network and programs. Through the middle decades of the twentieth century, the NCPT struggled with its relationship to the NCCPT as both PTA branches worked toward the same goals but with different emphases.