The National PTA, Race, and Civic Engagement, 1897-1970

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“YOU CAN’T teach a child if he doesn’t come to school. He can’t come to school if he doesn’t have any shoes—he doesn’t have any clothes on his back.” These were the thoughts of newly trained Jeanes teacher Narvie Jordan Harris, when she decided to organize a parent-teacher council in DeKalb County, Georgia, in 1945. After looking over the conditions of the region and visiting homes, she noted extreme poverty and the lack of educational opportunities as two major challenges in the lives of African Americans. First she tried working with parents individually, but she found it was not effective. So she met with her principals to form a support network for the schools in her purview:

So that’s when I got with my principals, and I said . . . “I would like for you to send [teachers], and when possible, you come.” I had principals to come [sic], “and we are going to work with these parents to try to improve them.” . . . My office was in a funeral home, upstairs. And there was a chapel as you came in the door. So people say that one day Mrs. Harris was having a meeting in there and there was a body in there the next day. But the body didn’t ever bother me, and I didn’t bother them, one way or the other. We would make a joke about it. But that is where we were headquartered and where we met. And it was through them that we tried to do something—well, we did. We didn’t try; we did.

After having initiated the parent-teacher movement in her region, in the post–World War II years Harris went on to unite the seventeen schools for African
Americans in DeKalb County, twelve of which were in churches and lodge halls. These schools became the DeKalb County Council of Colored Parents and Teachers.¹

Born around 1917, Harris was raised in Atlanta, the second of seven children of James and Anna Jordan. James Jordan was the only black man to own a department store in the city and he, like his wife, was active in church and civic organizations. In 1948 James Jordan fought for the integration of Atlanta’s police force. In addition to the lessons of fighting for racial equality, Harris recalled another important dictum her parents taught her: “Education is the answer. You don’t get anywhere if you are illiterate.” Along with her siblings, Harris attended Booker T. Washington High School—the only high school for blacks in Atlanta at that time—and graduated in 1934. She then majored in home economics with a minor in education at Clark College, where she also earned a master’s degree. After a short stint in the public schools of Henry and Calhoun counties, Narvie Harris was hired as one of the first six Jeanes teachers in DeKalb County, a position she held from 1944 to 1968. It was as a Jeanes teacher that she led the development of a PTA network in her region (see figure 3.1). Harris served as Atlanta PTA district president from 1953 to 1959 and later was elected to the office of the president of the Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (1966–71), seeing the organization through its most crucial episode, the desegregation of the organization in that state and across the nation.²

Harris was the typical black PTA leader in the South in the mid-twentieth century. The majority were teachers, and many were Jeanes supervisors, who took it upon themselves to organize in the schools and communities in which they worked. They usually acquired their inclination to organize from their families and the education they received at historically black colleges and universities. Harris recalled that while at Clark she learned to acquaint herself with agencies that would support her work, such as the Red Cross and police and fire departments. As a student she was required to undertake a community study to meet the requirements for supervision, so she surveyed the health conditions at the Avondale Colored Elementary and High School in DeKalb. This type of training would later serve black PTA leaders such as Harris in their work, both by teaching them skills in community organizing and by helping them maintain close contact with a network of graduates. Furthermore, black history and culture were emphasized at places such as Clark University, as racial uplift was stressed throughout the academic curriculum.³

Harris, like some other regional PTA leaders, was not completely aware of the efforts to organize parent-teacher associations going on across the South or the founding of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. Therefore, the impetus to organize came not necessarily from her knowledge
FIGURE 3.1
Jeanes teacher and PTA organizer Narvie Harris (center) in her office above Cox Funeral Home, 1945. The teachers on either side of her are Isoline Sherard (left) and Marion Wells (right). (Source: Photo reprinted with permission from Narvie J. Harris and Dee Taylor, African-American Education in DeKalb County, Arcadia Publishing, 1999; http://www.arcadiapublishing.com)
of the organization but out of necessity in the workplace and community. As she explained, “Now, I had been doing things [other parent-teacher associations] did, but I told you I was not aware when I organized—I did it for convenience of a better education and training for my people. . . . I was in isolation as far as PTA was concerned.” Moreover, her training as a Jeanes teacher placed her in the center of a web of relations; workers around the state “would know the Jeanes supervisor if they didn’t know anybody else.” As Harris explains, the Jeanes supervisors were the liaisons among citizens, schools and groups, agencies, and organizations such as the Urban League and United Way. Despite Harris’s not being aware of—or paying much attention to—the national-level development of the PTA, the association was growing and expanding. However, it did not take long for Harris to rise through the ranks to become a well-known PTA leader in the state of Georgia.

Twenty years before Harris organized PTA units in her region, white PTA president Margaretta Willis Reeve attempted to clarify the organization’s program to its members and to stem the tide of PTA workers overstepping their boundaries in school matters. Her words, that the PTA was “not a crusade to reform the schools. . . . [nor was it] a federation of clubs, in which each club develops its peculiar interest according to its fancy,” contradicted virtually everything members believed about the organization. This comment was made in 1924, just after the organization dropped the words “Congress of Mothers” from its name to become the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, or NCPT, and ceased to be a department in the National Education Association. As the other women’s organizations faded into the background and took up work in other arenas, the NCPT took one giant step forward in terms of developing its organizational network and enlisting members in helping support the public schools. At this juncture, Reeve tried in vain to bring members into line with a streamlined focus and programs, but members’ resistance to these changes resulted in a stronger, more expansive organization.

After the Progressive era, the PTA leadership sought to distinguish itself from women’s organizations by defining for itself rhetorically a more supportive role in public education, one that deferred to the expertise of professional educators. It instituted a bylaw—one that challenged PTA officers and members for years to come—that instructed members not to seek to direct the administration of schools or influence education policy. However, it was practically impossible to change the activities of local units and redirect women volunteers into other pursuits. For local-level members, the PTA offered a means by which they could attend to more pressing matters of school funding and curriculum development. Therefore, in practice, the PTA sought to strike a balance between directing member units to adhere to bylaws and policies and allowing for local concerns to determine local interests, and nowhere was
this more evident than in the Colored Congress branches. From the time of the founding of the NCCPT to World War II, local units tailored the PTA program to the immediate needs of communities as both branches of the organization grew stronger and continued to have wide appeal to different constituencies.7

The Progressive-era school reform efforts had ended by the mid-1920s. However, in the decades that followed, black and white women volunteers took up the cause of PTA work with even greater zeal, often to the consternation of education professionals. Even though national-level PTA leaders were not successful in directing members away from meddling in local schools, they did accomplish an important feat in organizational stability: they were able to standardize organizing procedures and programs in order to maintain continuity across state and local units around the country. From the mid-1920s until World War II, the organization focused on building a stronger membership base, fundraising, and shaping the school curriculum while it struggled to define the relationship between its black and white branches. PTA leaders at the state and local levels were well networked and willing to donate much time on behalf of the organization and education. The majority of white PTA leaders were married women who did not work outside the home, which left them time for volunteer work. Most black PTA leaders, in contrast, were educators who assumed PTA activities as part of their professional responsibilities. What the two groups had in common was their commitment and multiple memberships in civic associations, and these affiliations aided them in their work by affording them a large measure of social capital to assist them in carrying out PTA activities.

The ability of local-level PTA members to make change in education is evidenced in the threat they posed to school administrators, who wished to contain and direct their energy and activities. White PTA women challenged the authority of male school administrators with their ability to organize volunteers, raise money for schools, and shape the school curriculum and schools as institutions. For white school leaders, fundraising was especially challenging and thus was a double-edged sword; it provided needed funds to local schools but threatened the emerging structures of school funding and administrative control in the 1920s and 1930s. In segregated schools, fundraising took on a greater sense of urgency because it was a necessity; without it there would be no schools and no books and materials. Likewise, white school administrators thought PTA workers too involved in curricular decisions. These tensions around the school curriculum were not as evident in black parent-teacher associations, since local units were often led by teachers.

Black and white PTA workers, however, successfully promoted practical-oriented developments in the curriculum, in particular the Cardinal Principles of the Committee on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (1918),
which emphasized health, citizenship, and the strengthening of family life. The PTA adopted the Cardinal Principles in 1929, which guided organizational programs at least until the 1960s, long after educational leaders had rejected them. Called life-adjustment curriculum in the 1930s and 1940s, the Cardinal Principles Report was the codification of the early-twentieth-century curriculum shift that created tensions between proponents of the liberal arts and more practical courses of study, such as business math, business English, and home economics. While the National PTA for decades organized its program around the principles of life adjustment, white, middle-class PTA leaders made sure their own children were educated in the liberal arts. Just as the leaders of the NCM embraced Spencer’s functional criteria for the development of curriculum, PTA leaders of the twentieth century refused to give up on the idea of schooling for the masses as preparation for home and family life. In contrast, local-level black PTA units did not make much of a distinction between liberal arts and the functional curriculum, since black teachers viewed both as critical for the future success of young African Americans.8

From the 1920s through the mid-1940s, a tenuous relationship existed between the two branches of the PTA as white leaders acted in an advisory capacity to the black organization, reflecting an unequal balance of power. This imbalance was there from the start, since the creation of the black PTA in 1926 was aided by the white association. Adeline Wessels, chair of the Committee-at-Large on Extension among Colored People at the time, assisted founding president Selena Sloan Butler and the NCCPT as needed. Some state units enlisted extension workers on special committees as well. In the late 1920s, Texas, North Carolina, Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, California, and Oklahoma benefited from such committees. In some cases, the Extension among Colored People committees prepared the bylaws for the black state associations, instructed them on PTA protocol, and distributed PTA literature to them. Even though the white association worked with the black branch, its work could be described as assistance from a distance. White PTA leaders would attend the occasional state-level meeting of the Colored Congress, or correspond with black leaders, but they generally did not partake in the day-to-day work of local units in segregated schools.9

In the two PTA branches, individual leaders had to contend with their racial beliefs and prejudices as each had to filter assumptions about the other through the association’s espoused ideals and programs. In some cases, especially at the local level in the South, whites and blacks suffered for lack of resources, a fact that united them despite their differences. As Narvie Harris observed, “we had the cooperation of the whites, way back in the forties. And I thought that was significant. . . . They want to eat; they want to be warm. They get cold. All of us want education for our children. So there was a lot of
commonality—even though we did not meet together, when we approached
them, they were struggling as well as the blacks.” Yet, in terms of the state and
national PTA leadership, in many instances the threat posed by white women
to school leaders was, in turn, the same threat they sensed in their relationship
with the black association. One major concern of white officers, having over-
looked the sheer necessity of fundraising, was black workers’ extensive atten-
tion to it. Until the World War II years, black parent-teacher associations and
school improvement societies devoted almost all their energy to fundraising
in order to get black schools much-needed buildings, supplies, transportation,
and programs. Fundraising did not raise the issue of challenging professionals
within black communities, because citizens and teachers were generally united
in bringing resources and educational programs to local schools. One com-
community member recalled that the relationship was not perfect but that parents
and teachers were in agreement because “all they did was for the betterment
of the children.” However, the efforts of black educators and local PTA leaders
did often create conflict with white school boards and administrators.  

This chapter analyzes the work of local and state units from 1924 to 1945,
tracing organizational growth and stability through the Depression to the end
of World War II. During these decades, the PTA emerged as a major voluntary
organization yet struggled with its own growing pains as a segregated associa-
tion. Some confusion resulted after the Colored Congress was organized, as
PTA leaders struggled with the place of African Americans in the organization
and as black members and organizers sought to maintain control over the
education of their children while reaping the benefits of membership in the
federation. During these years, the PTA became firmly segregated, as the Col-
ored Congress made the transition to independence, for the most part, from
white oversight and assistance. In what follows, I compare and contrast the
work of the two PTA branches, considering the centrality of race work for the
black association alongside the virtual silence of race in the work of the white
PTA. In particular, both PTA branches focused primarily on fundraising and
curricular issues in schools while developing a network of leaders to perpetu-
ate the organization and its activities. The successes they met in local schools
and in developing a strong organizational infrastructure were not paralleled in
the relationship between the black and white branches.

Ease, Quick Results, and Economy

Even though they were part of the same organization, the two branches of
the PTA followed different paths to development. The white PTA, founded
in 1897, was organized from the top down by elite society matrons; it was a
national organization from the start, after which state and local units were added. Conversely, the black PTA grew from the bottom up, beginning with local clubs and school improvement associations that coalesced into state units, after which a national leadership team was elected. Both organizations depended on existing networks of women’s voluntary and education professional associations for their development, and both later broke away from them once the PTA infrastructure was established. The membership of the white PTA had increased almost tenfold in a decade; in 1910 there were 20,013 members, which grew to 189,212 in 1920. By 1926 the white PTA had units at the state level in all existing U.S. states, the majority of which had been formed between 1905 and 1923 (see figure 3.2). International affiliations were made in 1958 with the recognition of the European Congress of Parents and Teachers and as late as 1991 with the Pacific Congress.

During the mid-twentieth century, membership rose exponentially for the white PTA, as women flocked to join the federated parent-teacher association. By 1930 the NCPT had approximately 1.5 million members, which was about 1.3 percent of the total U.S. population. The organization’s growth through the mid-1950s was fueled in large part by women leaders who dedicated themselves to lead, serve, and promote PTA policy, as well as by the public’s perceived need for the institution (see figure 3.3).¹¹

Local-level black and white PTA meetings were remarkably similar around the country, owing to the association’s standardized program and policies, which were circulated to members through official publications. Yet, despite the expectation of national-level leaders that local units adhere to the framework of ideas and suggestions given them, tremendous flexibility existed in state, regional, and local parent-teacher associations, which allowed for members to sustain their interest. This organizational structure—standardization with built-in flexibility—accounted for the steady growth and longevity of the PTA. In a circular titled “Why Belong to the State and National?” the PTA leadership spelled out the benefits of the association, under the headings courage, safety, ease, quick results, and economy. In addition to connecting members at the local level to “all the most important child welfare sources in the country,” membership in the National PTA prevented a local unit from just “muddling through” by expediting their specific agenda items not only through the considerable organizational network but also through its cooperating organizations, such as the American Legion, the Boy Scouts of America, and the YWCA. The importance of a well-organized array of PTA workers was an argument that would sustain the organization through the desegregation years.¹²

National-level NCPT leaders scripted the start-up meetings at the local level with such documents as “How to Organize.” The initial gatherings were
State units of the NCPT, 1902, 1912, 1922, and 1957. (Source: CEP data, in possession of the author)
to be adequately advertised to community members, and it was suggested that the first meeting include community singing, a short address on “Why a PTA,” the adoption of bylaws and nomination of officers, and, after other organizational business, the requisite “Social Hour” to give members a chance to become acquainted with one another. No detail was overlooked, even something as innocuous as singing at meetings. Community singing was defended by the NCPT as “the most effective means of opening a program. If well conducted, it makes for a spirit of fellowship and informality, and it draws the audience from its little groups of two and three conversing together into a unit ready for group thought and action.” PTA literature was even made available to help guide subsequent gatherings, which included convening the executive and organization committees. Once local units were organized, the national office sent them an outline on how to run meetings, which included instructions to begin on time, how to incorporate entertainment as well as business matters, and the importance of ending on time. It was highly recommended, and therefore happened quite frequently, that each meeting end with a hospitality hour during which it was suggested that members visit classrooms, view school exhibits, play games, and even partake in folk dancing.13

Therefore, the typical PTA program for white and black units in the mid-twentieth century was part social hour, part business meeting. The social hour became a central feature, as it was an integral part of the cultural and community-building work of women volunteers. Meetings included a well-ordered lineup of singing, praying, readings by or listening to speakers, and ongoing reports of committees on legislation, publicity, and membership, among

FIGURE 3.3
NCPT membership, 1930–55. (Source: CEP data, in possession of the author)
other matters. Tree plantings were a major feature of PTA gatherings, and were usually carried out annually. Since the oak tree became the official symbol of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers in 1922, local and state units around the country planted them to honor PTA founders and to remind themselves and the community of their strength in numbers. Local units were directed to adhere to the monthly themes that covered membership, Founders Day, and other elements of an educational program, all while allowing for local issues and needs to be addressed in the face-to-face meetings of the PTA forum. Therefore, the PTA meeting not only served as a social space but also offered a civic space within which members could share their hopes for public education and a better America. One of the primary organizational goals was to develop leaders in communities and to give them the skills and means to solve local problems and undertake school reform work.\footnote{14}

The example of the white John's Island, South Carolina, PTA illustrates the origins and early years of a developing local PTA unit. In the South, even though the women's club movement lagged ten to twenty years behind the North, South Carolina clubwomen quickly caught up. The South Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs (SCFWC) was organized in 1898, and within a year it had twenty-six clubs and over a thousand members. The Julian Mitchell School formed the first parent-teacher association in the state in 1912, although, of course, women's clubs and school improvement societies undertaking similar work already existed. By the early 1920s the SCFWC had over 4,000 members, and the South Carolina Congress of Parents and Teachers brought approximately 1,800 members into its fold at its founding meeting in 1921. The PTA became so popular in the state that by 1932, the South Carolina Congress of Parents and Teachers had won an award for being second in the nation in percentage of membership.\footnote{15}

Organized in 1924, the John's Island PTA held its meetings the first Friday of every month at four o'clock in the afternoon to allow as many parents to attend as possible. Fourteen members attended its first gathering on March 7, 1924. At that meeting the membership committee reported “six letters written, 9 homes visited, resulting in securing five new members, bringing the total membership to date, 14.” The association agreed to discuss training for parents and health matters at its next meeting. So, at its next meeting the County Nurse spoke on “The Dangers of Disease Lurking in the Common Drinking Cup.” Within a short time, the John's Island PTA began to hold fundraisers to support the local school. One such fundraiser was the idea of paying for “half a piano” if the school would pay for the other half and holding a recital to raise money for its purse. School and PTA ended up sharing the cost of the piano, which the association used for entertainment at its meetings and rented out for community events to raise additional money.\footnote{16}
Another early task that the John’s Island PTA members took on was enlisting a committee of men who would help locate a Scout master to lead a Boy Scout troop at the school. Not only was this a need perceived by the community, but it was not uncommon for parent-teacher associations around the country to work closely with the Boy and Girl Scouts of America; they frequently enlisted local troops to become a part of their opening and closing rituals. Thus, the parent-teacher meetings became one of the main social events on John’s Island as it united citizens around the school calendar and through school and other shared activities.\(^{17}\) Entertainments were a central feature of the John’s Island PTA meetings, which helped build community through members’ engaging in shared activities and projects. Often, schoolchildren provided the entertainment by singing or putting on plays. Officers sought to make the duller aspects of meetings lively; for example, the John’s Island PTA had members responding to roll call with their favorite flower, vegetable, and once “by slogan.”\(^{18}\)

Local and state unit leaders often attended PTA-sponsored workshops—called PTA Schools—to learn more about the organization and how to run meetings. Mrs. Sherman Roe of Denver, Colorado, a member of the Executive Board of the National PTA and a field secretary, traveled the country in the 1920s and 1930s, teaching local leaders about PTA programs and policies. The classes were open to educators, parents, and anyone else interested in PTA work, and those attending earned certificates confirming their having participated in a National Institute. In the late 1920s Roe gave a series of workshops in South Carolina that were well attended. Her classes covered topics such as PTA history and leaders, its publications, study circles, parliamentary law, and the “Ethics of Money Raising.” Roe even tailored her workshop by including information about the origins of the South Carolina PTA.\(^{19}\)

Mary K. Newton, a South Carolina PTA leader who rose through the ranks in the 1920s, first serving as a district president, then publicity chair, and finally a state board member, attended Roe’s workshops and took copious notes about what she learned. Newton learned the importance of district meetings and district presidents—a position of “greater honor” than state vice president, according to Roe, who furthered the organization’s interest in having strong leaders close to the ground. Another important lesson was recorded by Newton, to “adapt not adopt National standards,” revealing the flexibility of the federation. In addition to the role of PTA Councils (a group of associations rather than individuals in a particular region) and the organization’s standing committees, Newton’s abbreviated notes recorded the importance of hospitality: “Hospitality necessary in these meetings. Play together. A laugh is worth a dollar to the box office. Never go through a hard and fast program. Song. Chestnut Tree.” Further advice included keeping the organizational meeting “snappy” and the importance of a “peppy song leader.” The National
PTA used these workshops to circulate its documents on the standardization of local meetings, sharing organizational flowcharts and other items such as “Leadership,” “The Parent-Teacher Meeting,” “How to Organize,” and the “Model Parent-Teacher Meeting.” These strategies to standardize the organization’s activities and programs were successful, not only in South Carolina, but around the country. Circulating these and other key documents took the guesswork out of organizing local units and, according to PTA policy, helped leaders develop their skills while leading.\(^{20}\)

In South Carolina, as elsewhere, men appeared in the leadership ranks, but not to a significant degree. Overall, the PTA remained a women’s organization. Since the John’s Island PTA’s founding in 1924, a small fraction of its membership was male, about two or three of the total of forty regular members. Often at the state level, male education professors would be elected to officers’ positions, such as Dr. Leon Banov and Dr. Harry Clark, who served as vice presidents of the South Carolina Congress of Parents and Teachers in 1930. In a study conducted in 1934, Elmer Holbeck of Teachers College, Columbia, found that on average men made up 10 percent of the membership of white local units. In addition to being education professors, many of them were community and civic leaders, businessmen, and school administrators. Given the greater percentage of education professionals in leadership positions in the Colored Congress, and the emphasis on race work, men appeared in a slightly larger percentage.\(^{21}\)

At the local level, men who were not members or PTA officers were encouraged to participate in special “Daddy’s meetings” as guests. These meetings were held infrequently, usually once a year. For example, in the case of the John’s Island PTA, local units recognized the importance of including men, so in 1927 the group decided to initiate a “Daddy’s Meeting,” at which coffee and sandwiches would be served. The first of the series was a success, as fathers “were made welcome and given seats of honor.” The women members decided to sing “America” instead of the PTA song, presumably because the men knew the lyrics. After an account of the history and work of the John’s Island PTA, the fathers listened to a presentation on “children and their daddies.” The meeting was seen as a success, so much so that they held another the following year, at which the school principal appealed to the fathers to “be companions and buddies to their sons.” Including fathers periodically in special meetings brought them into the fold of PTA business without handing over to them the work of running the association. They were available in an advisory capacity in limited numbers in the white PTA, which contrasts with their more regular presence as leaders in the Colored Congress.\(^{22}\)

Men’s involvement in PTA leadership reveals the partnership in education between laypersons and professional educators, as it was not all that uncommon to find men serving as officers at the local, state, and national levels.
For instance, Dr. John C. Moffitt of Provo, Utah, was both superintendent of schools and a vice president of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers in 1959. Also, Dr. Kenneth E. Howe, dean of the School of Education at University of North Carolina at Greensboro, was also a vice president of the white PTA in 1965. In the black PTA, Charles W. DuVaul served as the Georgia Colored Congress president from 1952 to 1954. After his term he remained with the NCCPT as an advisor to help train new leaders. These examples reflect a general acceptance—though not a preponderance—of male professionals in the association who served as leaders. Men also were invited speakers at annual conventions at both state and national levels, a trend begun by Birney and Hearst at the founding meeting in 1897.²³

Nonetheless, women remained the overwhelming majority of PTA leaders and members. Like the national level of the organization, state and local PTA units enlisted an energetic corps of women leaders who threw themselves into PTA work with great dedication and enthusiasm. Many were community leaders who belonged to various civic associations such as the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the League of Women Voters. As discussed in chapter 1, there was much overlap in membership in the PTA and GFWC, which continued throughout the twentieth century. PTA work offered white women a means to express their civic selves by volunteering for the betterment of the community and the country—as opposed to a means to further their own self-interests and their children’s educational advancement, as is often argued in the scholarship—and also was a way to express democratic ideals through participation in legislation reforms and curriculum development. PTA work was virtually the same for black women, but with the added urgency of race work. The leaders of the Colored Congress, many of them teachers and school administrators, assumed the role of PTA organizing as part of their professional responsibilities.²⁴

As the white PTA grew exponentially mid-century by creating local units with apparent ease, the black PTA toiled to establish a network to serve far-flung local schools. Nonetheless, the NCCPT quadrupled its membership, growing from 3,000 in 1926 to nearly 12,000 two years later. By the mid-1930s, despite the report by the white PTA at this time that the black PTA “had not grown numerically,” the NCCPT membership reached 45,000, representing roughly 0.05 percent of the black population in the South (see figure 3.4). At the same time, however, the white PTA enlisted over 1 percent of the U.S. population in its membership, a significant accomplishment for a voluntary organization. Over time, the Colored Congress continued to grow as it gave black members a civic space for electing leaders, debating educational matters, and exercising rights denied them by white school boards and
administrators. Thus, membership offered black citizens a “surrogate political role,” in which they could hone leadership skills that would serve them in civil society.  

The absence of a fully established black PTA network, however, was not an indication that collaborative parent-teacher work at the local level was not being undertaken. Many local associations were organized very much like the ones Narvie Harris coordinated in DeKalb County, Georgia, out of an educator’s desire to more effectively teach and improve the lives of her students, their parents, and the community at large. A critical component to her success was spreading home-school groups elsewhere, as Harris gave advice to other teachers on how to start parent-teacher associations. She told one interested organizer, “Well, Honey, you do the same thing I did. . . . There’s a handbook that the National put out, and it has everything in there what to do.” As more and more local units were established, they became increasingly invested in the work of supporting schools and the NCCPT program which, like the NCPT program, was flexible enough to allow for activities that served particular community interests. In the early 1920s, the NCPT’s Special Committee on Colored Parent-Teacher Associations encouraged black citizens to “organize their own Parent-Teacher Associations if possible” according to local traditions and needs. In the early years, communication was uneven across the various levels of organization as black teachers and principals had to face racism, prejudice, and separate and unequal facilities on a daily basis. As one NCCPT worker explained, “Problems of illiteracy and segregation, together with the denial of basic rights to Negroes, made difficult the job of establishing an effective, ongoing national-to-state-to-local unit program.”  

![Graph showing NCCPT membership, 1930–55. (Source: Data from Coral Anniversary History and Our National Family)](image-url)
Even though white PTA leaders attempted to establish a separate organization for black members, the founding of the NCCPT in 1926 presented logistical and structural challenges to the organization. Immediately after the founding meeting of the black PTA, the NCPT created the Committee on Extension Work among Colored People and appointed white PTA worker Adeline Wessels its chair. To prepare for her new role, Wessels collected data on the status of African Americans in the PTA to “give the newly appointed members of this committee an idea of the work that has already been accomplished.” Wessels found that even though black members were welcome in PTA units outside the Southeast, few held officer positions or other leadership roles. One of the main questions facing the organization’s leaders at this juncture was whether existing black members should be “retired” from the NCPT, as Wessels put it, and encouraged to join the newly formed National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. Wessels deferred to the white Board of Managers, which debated at its September 1926 meeting the suggestion that state units “neither solicit nor admit members who are eligible to membership” in the NCCPT. With no way to resolve the issue, the NCPT deferred to individual state units to handle the matter on a case-by-case basis: “Where schools have an attendance of both white and colored members, it is suggested that a friendly spirit be retained between the races, each state branch deciding for itself the advisability of organizing separate colored associations, and colored state branches.”

Wessels thereby established a structure by which each state president would appoint five members to serve on a statewide extension committee to aid Colored Congress units. She drew up parameters for organizing state branches of the NCCPT that required ten associations with a minimum membership of 300, and all state and local units were directed to follow the NCPT constitution and bylaws. Keeping in line with PTA practice of collaborating with other organizations, Wessels suggested that the NCCPT join forces with American Child Health Association and Home Demonstration Agents and County Nurses. The Colored Congress experienced growing pains during these early years as it became part of the federation. An early incident resulting from confusion over who qualified as a delegate at its fifth annual meeting prompted Wessels and her committee to draft a grievance policy for the NCCPT. It required Colored Congress units to bring their disagreements to the NCPT, which in turn would be handled by the Committee on Extension Work among Colored People. The Committee also added, however, that the NCCPT should “settle all disagreements within its ranks, the responsibility of our advisors being merely advisory.”

As the newly elected president of the NCCPT, Selena Butler was deliberate about organizing her association according to the guidelines of the NCPT. She
was well versed in PTA bylaws, since the black parent-teacher organizations had for years worked under the guidance of white units. One of Butler’s first tasks was to circulate literature that promoted and disseminated organizational policy and activities in an effort to educate black PTA leaders on the expectations of the NCPT. Colored Congress officers at the local level were instructed to obtain a copy of the leaflet *Reasons and Objects* for information on how to organize and sustain an association. Butler urged her growing list of workers to meet with school principals, church pastors, and other influential individuals in the communities in which they resided. In addition to relying on the white PTA for assistance, she preferred to work with the organizations she knew best in establishing the NCCPT: the Urban League and the National Association for Teachers in Colored Schools. These organizations, rather than the American Child Health Association and Home Demonstration Agents and County Nurses, as suggested by Wessels, would view the NCCPT on equal footing. Both groups had supported the fledgling organization in the early years, helping to establish the state units of the NCCPT. Butler encouraged local units to follow closely the directions for organizing “in order to keep the work standardized,” and she encouraged black PTA workers to hold their meetings in the schools so that “parents could become acquainted with teachers and their work.” In those states that did not have a recognized (i.e., dues-paying) state congress unit, local units were instructed to work directly with the national leadership of the Colored Congress.29

Getting the organizational infrastructure and leaders in place was a challenge for which the NCCPT had to rely on existing networks. The white PTA was available on request, but was not too intrusive. A year after the black PTA was founded, its officers wished to hold an annual convention but knew they did not have enough members, and hence delegates, to secure reduced railroad and meeting hall rates. Therefore, Butler contacted C. J. Calloway, the Executive Secretary of the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools (NATCS), for help. She asked whether it were possible for the NCCPT to hold its convention two days prior to the NATCS meeting in Nashville in order to benefit from the reduced rates, and her request was granted. However, another problem remained. There was no Nashville branch of the Colored Congress to issue an invitation to hold a convention, a requirement of PTA bylaws. So again Butler made use of another network. She contacted Adeline Wessels, chair of extension work of the white PTA, who in turn contacted the white Tennessee PTA president, Mrs. Herman Ferger. The board of managers of the white Tennessee group unanimously extended the invitation, and black school leaders and clubwomen in Nashville lent their support to the gathering by helping to organize the program and handle the logistics of the meeting. The president of the Nashville Association of Colored Women’s Clubs
worked with the Nashville PTA leaders to help coordinate the meeting, and some white PTA officers attended what was considered the first convention of the NCCPT.\textsuperscript{30}

Foreseeing that her organization would struggle in years to come with building its membership and financial base, Butler encouraged those attending the convention not only to carry out the work of the black PTA according to its ideals, but to do so “in cooperation with other agencies.” The first convention subsequently prompted the organizing of black state units, which were added to the original four of Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and Delaware. For example, Tennessee was organized in 1928, a result of the NCCPT’s gathering in Nashville the previous year. White and black PTA leaders, along with school leaders and members of the Tennessee Interracial Commission, organized the Tennessee Colored Congress with a membership of fifteen local units and 532 dues-paying members. Butler worked with Missouri’s white PTA president, Mrs. W. A. Masters, to organize a segregated unit there the same year, similar to the manner in which the Tennessee unit was created. Missouri, like Tennessee, was organized by Butler and the white state PTA president, Mrs. W. A. Masters. Some states, such as Illinois, California, and Ohio, did not have the minimum number of members and associations to join the NCCPT, so they did not form Colored Congress branches. Those that did, such as New Mexico, Kansas, and Oklahoma, formed state units because of local interest, even though they did not practice \textit{de jure} segregation in those states.\textsuperscript{31}

Butler, like many black community activists in the South at this time, viewed her office as working not only for African Americans but also in support of interracial work, something the white association did not explicitly claim as part of its agenda. Michael Fultz argues that black teachers were often called upon to “serve as interracial diplomats and to work at developing support for their schools among influential whites.” After the 1920s the white PTA no longer espoused Progressive-era ideals about uniting women across racial lines. That work was carried on separately and became part of the mission of the black PTA. Selena Butler was both spokesperson for her race at such events as the 1930 White House Conference on the “negro mother,” and an attendee at the 1931 meeting of the Committee on Interracial Cooperation in Atlanta, Georgia. Butler maintained that the NCCPT was “a fine channel through which effective interracial work could be carried on.” Therefore, the black PTA negotiated across the gap between home and school, and between black and white citizens. By 1930, Butler had conceded on the point that separate Colored Congress units could be established in those states without legal segregation (see figure 3.5).\textsuperscript{32}

Over time, other voluntary associations and governmental agencies continued to support the work of the Colored Congress. In the early 1930s the
National Kindergarten Association donated literature to and advised the black PTA on establishing kindergartens in segregated schools, and the National Urban League guided the organization on vocational education. During the Depression the white PTA in the South helped out materially. As one black PTA historian explained, “Letters also came to the [black] national office telling of the help and cooperation that the local units were receiving from the white parent-teacher workers—help and cooperation in the form of food and used clothing and aid in contacting welfare agencies. Such reports were encouraging.
to black national officers, making the load lighter.” Each of the Southern states had an advisory committee—as required by the white PTA—that was composed of white and black members. The purpose was to aid NCCPT units and serve as a forum for concerns. However, the committees’ work was hierarchical rather than mutually supportive, and typically involved white members giving literature to black clubs and answering questions on protocol and policy as needed. Face-to-face meetings to discuss matters of common concern never materialized.34

Both black and white branches were invited to the White House Conferences on Child and Health Protection held each year. In large part, the access to a national forum and leading national policymakers was a major reason the NCCPT was formed as a segregated branch of the white association. Having the ear of American presidents and visibility on a national stage was important to black PTA leaders, who wished to have a platform for the discussion of racial equality. In 1931 Herbert Hoover wrote to Selena Sloan Butler, “The annual convention of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers . . . brings to this city representatives of a very important movement in the improvement of children of the race . . . . I am interested to note that the program of your convention stresses the children’s charter as a challenge to better standards of child care and protection.”35

Five years after it had been organized, the NCCPT had established, with the assistance of white PTA leaders, a network of state and local units across the American South and beyond, with only New Mexico and the District of Columbia creating Colored Congress units later, after 1932 (see figure 3.5). Its membership stood at approximately 15,000, which was not particularly strong but was representative of teachers, community members, and other community leaders. This growth and stability prompted NCPT officers to reassess the nature of the relationship between the two PTA branches. The NCPT’s Executive Committee “agreed that the growth and strength of the Colored Congress made desirable a new type of cooperation,” and handily abolished the extension committee to coordinate the efforts of the NCCPT. Thus, Adeline Wessels’s ties to the Colored Congress were severed. She wrote Butler, “Please do not forget, although I will not be your National Advisor any longer, I am always ready to talk things over with you, if you wish, and to help in any way you may wish me to.” Wessels also commended Butler for her work meeting the needs of “your people.”36

Butler had moved on as well, and although she was no longer NCCPT president, she remained affiliated with the organization to ensure continuity and training in leadership. Butler continued to allow her home to serve as the organization’s headquarters through the 1930s. Mary W. Blocker of Florida, Butler’s successor as NCCPT president, believed the organization should stand
on its own under her leadership, so she attempted to negotiate a new relationship with the NCPT. In 1931 she announced, “The time has come to try our own wings.” However, despite the desire of NCCPT leaders to stand on their own, little had changed in terms of their relationship, other than the termination of the extension committee. In its place a Committee on Cooperation with the Colored Congress was formed in which white state presidents and other interested parties assumed the role of guiding and advising the black PTA. Mrs. Charles Center, the chair of the committee, attended the NCCPT’s annual meeting in 1936 and found the Colored Congress still struggling: “In hearing their reports we found the most urgent need for a simplified program material and a simplified outline for a health program.” Both congresses found the committee beneficial; the white PTA continued to monitor the black PTA’s program and development, and the black organization became stronger through the support materials and advice as it continued to work toward a racial understanding.

Building a separate PTA was a challenge through the 1930s, even though it had established practically all Southern state-level offices by 1932. As local PTA units were being organized during the Depression years, it was difficult to enlist them all in state and national membership. Many African American units remained independent of the federation because they would rather donate money to local schools than pay dues to a national association, the benefits of which were not immediately apparent. The distribution of PTA materials by white fieldworkers to local black associations was intended to build the membership base, and was intended only for members of the federation, or dues-paying members. However, since some unaffiliated associations were receiving the materials, the white PTA began the practice of distributing materials only to the NCCPT office, for dissemination to local units. This helped solidify the national level’s role as a home base and clearinghouse of materials for segregated state and local units and took some of the control, or direct contact with black local units, away from the national and state leadership of the white PTA.

Despite the challenges of building the NCCPT through the Depression years, by 1940 its membership reached into the tens of thousands, marking a transition to greater independence. Its membership base and network were now strong enough to sustain national and statewide meetings and undertake school improvement work on a wider scale. In 1942 the black PTA had the most state affiliates of its forty-four-year run: twenty associations, which included Washington, DC, and the Virgin Islands. It began to hold its own meetings separate from the American Teachers’ Association—formerly the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools—because it now had enough members to secure reduced travel and conference rates. The two associations
did not stop working together, however; in 1954 the headquarters for the Georgia Teachers and Education Association furnished space for the offices of the Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers.39

The growth of local units began to increase by the 1940s, during the time Narvie Harris was organizing parent-teacher associations in Georgia. For example, a 1940 study of the Alabama Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers revealed that roughly one-third of the state’s segregated schools had organized local units and noted that there were more that were unaffiliated with the federation, bringing that number even higher. Of the state’s approximately 2,300 rural and 100 urban schools, there were 846 local associations that year. The majority of these associations, of course, were in rural settings, having been organized by the Jeanes teachers’ network. The Jeanes teachers of Alabama distributed PTA publications to local units at the opening of the school year, which included “year-round programs recommended by the vice-presidents in charge of organization, extension, welfare, education, home service, and health activities.” Black local associations employed the strategies mentioned in the publications to build their membership base, of which serving refreshments, holding attendance contests, and hosting social hours were “the most popular and effective.” Nonetheless, it remained a challenge to get rural Alabamans to PTA meetings. Several reasons accounted for this, such as the great distance parents had to travel, as well as work and other family obligations. Many mothers revealed that they could not attend PTA meetings because of domestic service duties.40

At this time, black associations adapted another staple of the PTA program, Founders’ Day, with one distinct difference. Many local black PTA units celebrated only the founding of the Colored Congress and honored Butler and the other early officers. When white PTA leaders at the national level learned that black local units were celebrating only the founding of the NCCPT, they cited PTA bylaws and instructed them to celebrate also the Congress of Mothers conveners, Birney and Hearst. While the local units of the Colored Congress began to include the white PTA founders in its celebrations, no suggestion was made to local white PTA units around the country to also celebrate the founding of the Colored Congress. The white PTA found itself with a new challenge: to ensure that the black association honored the founders of the National PTA.41

In addition to abiding by the program and policies of the white PTA, the black PTA was able to craft its own agenda. Black leaders argued that because of their particular race needs, their PTA program and interests were necessarily “broad and complex” as they kept members abreast of the organization’s program, activities, and officers through their publication, Our National Family. These needs included an emphasis on fundraising, voting and voter
registration, encouraging literacy, and teaching black history in the schools. For example, at the NCCPT’s founding convention of May 1926, one of the first items of business was adopting a resolution that denounced the deplorable train depot and railcar conditions facing black patrons. What white PTA workers saw as part of their own association, the freedom to allow white local and state units to adapt rather than adopt PTA policies according to their own particular interests and needs, they had difficulty accepting as part of the black PTA agenda. Such additions to the PTA program, such as voter registration drives, the centrality of fundraising, and other matters, were viewed by white PTA leaders as a “deviation from the standard” and a “false interpretation of objectives.”

For black citizens, the gap between home and school was much less pronounced than for white PTA members, as schools were viewed as a part of the community and essential to racial uplift. The 1940 study found that many black PTA units in Alabama extended their work beyond the school. Its author argued, “While the association does much in connection with school problems, its unique opportunity seems to arise from those problems of an educational nature growing out of home and general community life or out of the relationship between these environments on the one hand and that of the school on the other.” Black PTA leaders such as Georgia’s Narvie Harris knew they could not begin to teach if basic needs were not being met. Harris felt that “you couldn’t separate . . . educational from personal basic needs that people have.” Therefore, PTA organizers reached into homes and into businesses as well. For example, local black units during the Depression set out to meet with business leaders to investigate “why they refused to employ Negroes in large numbers.” The national officers of the Colored Congress, challenged by the flexibility of the organization and the projects that local units took on, decided not to endorse this particular initiative. Caught between the potential of alienating white PTA leaders and supporting their commitment to race work, they instead “urged the local units to compliment those who were responsible for these [job] opportunities.”

Mary Blocker, the NCCPT’s second president, (1931–35) who, like her predecessor Selena Butler, was educated at Spelman, made the needs of African Americans in the South an explicit part of her association’s program. She explained to her constituents that “the race and the individuals must develop through their own initiative.” Blocker led the charge to place blacks on school boards and as assistant superintendents of education in segregated school systems to protect the interests of African Americans in the education of their youth, a goal that went largely unrealized. What remained central was fundraising, especially through the Depression years, since without a solid financial base the NCCPT could not continue to build schools and its membership.
Successors Essie D. Mack of Louisville, Kentucky (1935–39), and Mary Foster McDavid (1939–42) continued Blocker’s agenda of developing black community and educational leadership. PTA workshops for the Colored Congress were typically hosted by local universities and coincided with in-service workshops that provided training for black teachers. For example, Essie Mack enrolled at Louisville Municipal College while at the helm of the organization in order to “increase her own efficiency as a leader.” Through the mid-1930s, the association’s leaders paid their own expenses and sought to enlist increasing numbers of volunteers in leadership roles. Also during those years, despite admonitions to focus on educational programs, the majority of the activities of local black and white PTA units were fundraisers to support local schools.

The Organization “Gives and It Receives”: Fundraising in the PTA

In 1928 Cornell professor of education Julian Butterworth concluded in his study of white NCPT units, “It is not the responsibility of the parent-teacher association to finance the schools.” That PTA workers spent so much of their time doing so was proof to him that they did not understand “the basic principles of public school financing, as now generally accepted by progressive thinkers.” Butterworth’s position that volunteers’ involvement in school fundraising overstepped professional boundaries is reflective of school leaders during a time of PTA organizational growth and stabilization. In the most positive light, parent-teacher groups in the early twentieth century helped build bridges between the schools, which were becoming increasingly professionalized and centralized, and the broader community. Butterworth himself noted that their “material contributions . . . have been commendable.” However, by the mid-1920s, the ability of PTA workers to raise funds began to challenge the professional domain of school administrators, who sought to contain and direct this power into projects of their own choosing. As the line of demarcation was becoming clearer between women volunteers and professional educators, white PTA women were accused of being out of touch with the latest educational developments and contributing to schools as though they were still, as one educator put it, “in the days of the little red schoolhouse.” PTA workers’ fundraising was portrayed as quaint and obsolete by Butterworth, but in truth these contributions, inasmuch as they continued to fund materials and the building of schools, challenged the newly institutionalized means of funding for public education. This tension was reflected in male school leaders’ comments that they were concerned with the “meddling attitude” of PTA women and therefore preferred to work with individuals rather than groups. Generally,
however, male administrators struggled with the idea of which was easier to manage: groups of women or individual women volunteers.45

In the 1920s and 1930s two education scholars, Julian Butterworth and Elmer Holbeck, commented on the white PTA’s overreliance on fundraising, and attempted to change this practice by parsing different aspects of PTA work into “acceptable” and “unacceptable” categories. That they commented at all is a testament to their concerns over the influence of the organization on local schools. In particular, they sought to make a distinction between the educational function of local units and their fundraising efforts. Elmer Holbeck of Teachers College, Columbia, echoed Butterworth’s claim that white women’s PTA work focused too heavily on purchasing school supplies and equipment, hosting fundraisers, and what he called engaging in “other non-educational activities.” Butterworth cautioned that the PTA could potentially endanger schools if the associations continued their policies of raising and giving money as they saw fit, and concluded that the energies of local white organizations “were directed into new and in many ways less important fields.”46

Yet, instead of advising PTA leaders to cease all fundraising efforts, Butterworth suggested they continue these activities with administrators’ approval and guidance. He noted that his recommendation to focus on educational work did not “preclude the parent-teacher association from engaging in certain types of activities to finance the school more adequately.” Therefore, Butterworth drew up parameters for raising funds under special conditions, which he attempted to limit to providing satisfactory facilities in the poorest school districts that lacked adequate tax money to cover costs. Other than that, he explained, “it is preferable for the parent-teacher organization to create public recognition of the need for better standards than to raise the money through its own efforts.” Additional approved activities included raising money for operating expenses. To Butterworth the most egregious offense was the use of PTA contributions to raise a teacher’s salary, because it usually contradicted the salary schedule of the school. White PTA workers generally complied with this request and, after 1930, began to hold teacher appreciation lunches and dinners instead of supplementing their paychecks. In other cases, the PTA applauded salary standardization efforts. In 1927 in Cincinnati, the PTA publicly commended the superintendent of schools for creating a standardized salary schedule. By cautioning PTA workers against raising money for local schools, Holbeck articulated the fear on school leaders’ minds: that fundraising afforded PTA workers “a greater opportunity to influence policies, legislation, and educational practice.”47

Even though many school leaders saw fundraising as beneficial, the efforts of both white and black parent-teacher associations were imbued with gender and racial dynamics. White women volunteers’ strength in numbers
challenged the rising male administrative hierarchy of schools in the 1920s, posing a threat to the male power structure that sought to manage and control women through parent-teacher associations and women's clubs. This threat did not originate in the 1920s; it had existed since the Mothers’ Congress was organized in the late 1890s, during the heyday of the women's club movement. For example, in Denver in 1897, the women of the mothers’ clubs were “denounced as ‘faddists’” for their support of kindergartens and nature study. Denver's male school administrators were so concerned with the potential power of an organized group of women that they successfully forced the nearly 4,000 members of the city's educational union to disband by running a successful smear campaign in the 1890s. However, in the twentieth century, as the PTA grew stronger as an organization, members had the benefits of training and a well-organized network to coordinate more expansive and successful fundraisers. Thus, as Holbeck observed in 1934, the “efforts of local [PTA] units were directed into money-raising activities and other fields which had no connection with the original need which had brought the organization into being.” Therefore, educational leaders such as Holbeck and Butterworth sought to make use of the network to inform volunteers about appropriate means to raise cash.⁴⁸

Why did black and white PTA workers spend so much time and effort raising money? Women volunteers, in their desire to put children and child welfare first, perceived many school needs to be addressed and a curriculum that warranted their influence. For instance, fundraisers helped build new schools or renovate them, purchase books and materials for schools, provide uniforms for sports teams, and pay for hot, nutritious lunches. Holbeck found that most of the money raised by PTA workers came from sponsorship of entertainment programs, donations, and various sales. White PTA workers were so dedicated to fundraising that, according to Butterworth, providing cash donations accounted for more than 50 percent of all activities ranked in his 1928 study.⁴⁹

Fundraising was a universal activity among PTA units around the United States, and regional differences called for a variety of needs to be addressed. Butterworth explained that in poorer communities there was a greater reliance on PTA fundraising, “either because a reasonable tax rate does not bring in enough or because the citizens are more reluctant to raise funds for school purposes.” For example, not only did the John’s Island PTA in South Carolina purchase “half a piano,” which it then used as a moneymaker; it successfully led a campaign to install a power plant to light the school. Its Light Committee was formed in 1924, shortly after the association was organized. At the meeting at which the idea was first proposed, members passed a hat to get the fund started. By 1926 the committee had convinced the County Education Board
to put up half the money for an electric plant to run the lights for the school, while the PTA agreed to raise the other half by soliciting donations from community members and businesses. In April 1927, only six months later, the John’s Island PTA reported that it “had a nice sum to pay toward our electric plant fund. Let us hope that in the near future we will be able to make the final payment.” By the start of the next school year they had done so. Similar ventures were carried out around the country, especially in Southern white associations. PTA units in the three Southern states in Butterworth’s study, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia, ranked the highest in providing money for schools. Conversely, because of Butterworth’s attempt to separate acceptable (educational) from unacceptable (fundraising) activities, these states ranked at the bottom of the study in the category “directly concerned with the promotion of educational objectives.” White Southern PTA women saw local schools as being in need of their constant support and attention. As a result, their voluntary efforts were political acts, as white women as a group challenged the authority of male school administrators more than the individual taxpayer ever could. In large part, the influence of white PTA women far exceeded the power of taxpayers because the former were well organized and widely networked, and because they walked the line between outsider and insider. Not only were they connected to a major educational organization, but the typical association also held its meetings at the school and enjoyed a fair representation of teachers in its membership. As a result, male administrators around the South and the nation questioned whether such extensive fundraising was the best use of volunteers’ time.

Although the amount of time spent on fundraising activities by white parent-teacher associations was significant, it was far surpassed by black teachers and community members in the segregated schools of the South from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1960s. As black teachers made organizing local units a top priority, they, along with volunteers, believed that the PTA’s primary purpose was to provide for the financial needs of the school. Continuing to contend with double taxation well into the twentieth century, black citizens gave money, materials, and their time in order to build the schools they wanted for the children in their communities. Around the South, parent-teacher associations paid for the land on which new elementary and high schools were built. After schools were up and running, black citizens continued giving in order that there would be enough money for books and materials, maintenance, and transportation. This “resource development,” Carter Julian Savage argues, was a central feature in the lives of black community members at least until the days of desegregation.

Black PTA workers continued to work closely with local schools as their networks expanded across state lines through the Colored Congress. As the
organization continued to grow, the national office struggled with having enough money to coordinate the efforts of local and state units. Dues trickled in—members paid as they could—but the shortage of money was not a reflection of the level of commitment of PTA workers in segregated schools. Founding president Selena Butler expressed her concern with the heavy focus on fundraising while her own office suffered because of a lack of adequate financing. She sided with white National PTA officers when she told her constituents that she feared the “real spirit of the work for children would be lost if the organization converted into a purely money-raising machine.” She cautioned delegates at the second convention in 1928 “not to make money the object of their parent-teacher work. Money [is] necessary to carry on the work but needed more [is] sympathetic cooperation between parents, teachers, and school authorities.” By supporting the guidelines of the majority organization, Butler echoed the sentiments of Butterworth and Holbeck that PTA work should not focus on fundraising, lest it detract from more legitimate educational purposes. However, what sustained the black PTA’s commitment to fundraising over time was the belief that giving had mutual benefits for leaders and the membership, and that it was a way to strengthen the federation. NCCPT leaders explained that the organization “gives and it receives.” It furnished guidance, materials, and a clearly defined program to its members, who in turn built the association and raised money in order to carry out its program.53

Black national and state PTA officers nonetheless remained significantly underfunded and, therefore, had little to work with and even less to give to members in need. Even though the NCPT gave small cash donations to the black organization, its leaders were more inclined to donate publications and other materials to NCCPT local and state units. In its second year, the NCCPT main office remained without a typewriter and other office equipment. The executive board approved the purchase of a typewriter and, as an NCCPT historian explained that “because the organization was young and without funds, the committee felt that the other expenses of the national office should be left to the discretion of the president.” This meant that Butler purchased for herself and her office what she needed out of her own pocket. Even though she did not have the same travel funds as the white PTA president, her ability to attend state meetings was not curtailed; she merely paid her own way.54

In addition to traveling, Butler kept in touch with the membership through correspondence and the NCCPT magazine, Our National Family, which helped the black PTA maintain a collective consciousness. In its pages were shared the activities of local units, the expectations of national and state leaders, and the history of the organization in each February issue, during the time of Founders’ Day celebrations. By establishing its own means of print communication in the
late 1930s, the NCCPT took another step in standing firmly on its own to the extent that it could. The journal was free for members until later that decade, when leaders decided it would sell subscriptions to raise money. Unlike the white PTA, which enjoyed financial solvency courtesy of an endowment fund established in the early 1900s by its second president, Hannah Kent Schoff, the black PTA struggled to secure enough funds in order to provide leadership to its local units through the mid-twentieth century. Yet, despite such challenges, the NCCPT managed to remain a viable organization, accomplishing much with little money, not unlike the schools it was supporting.55

After 1930, as the NCCPT infrastructure gave black civic leaders and educators a means by which to generate greater political and moral support of PTA work, they also had a network to coordinate and train members in fundraising techniques. During these years the black PTA faced the challenge of following the program of the white PTA while attending to the specific material needs of its constituency. A 1929 report by the chair of the Extension among Colored People Committee, Adeline Wessels, revealed the patronizing attitude of the NCPT leadership toward its black counterpart on the matter of fundraising. Wessels expressed concern that black PTA leaders could not be trusted to follow the program of the PTA: “The work done by local colored parent-teacher associations should be along the same lines as those pursued by our own parent-teacher associations and in our capacity as advisors, we should see that nothing detrimental to the welfare of home, school, community, and church be undertaken by their associations.” Wessels’s use of the word “detrimental” shows her belief that an emphasis on making money took away from the mission and ideals of the PTA. Such seemingly quotidian activities, such as bake sales, Halloween parties, popularity contests, and other moneymaking events, were viewed by white PTA leaders as embracing a “politically subversive character within southern society,” as black citizens gained power and control by raising money for education.56

In the 1930s white PTA leaders continued to disparage the Colored Congress over the very issue school administrators were criticizing them for: too much time spent on fundraising. Throughout the Depression years, the black PTA struggled to retain members, since the majority of its membership base was drawn from wage earners. As unemployment increased, income for the black PTA decreased. Therefore, the membership of the NCCPT dropped and “its work suffered serious setbacks,” at least at the national level. Even though many state units stopped holding annual conventions from 1931 to 1936, local parent-teacher associations continued to meet whether dues were paid or not. A study conducted in 1938 of the black PTA units in Alabama found that not only were local units still meeting and conducting PTA business, but there was an overwhelming commitment to fundraising. In fact, it was the most popular
activity, followed by scheduling speakers to appear at meetings. Of the 184 local units surveyed by white University of Chicago graduate student Bishop Montgomery, “money raising efforts” was the topic most often reported in meeting minutes. However, Montgomery failed to take into account “sundry contests,” which she reported as a separate category; their inclusion would have made her calculations even higher for fundraising. Contests were often, if not always, fundraisers for black local PTA units. Other items of business did not appear with as much frequency, such as musical programs (30 references), open forums (16 references), and study courses (14 references), which were the educational activities promoted by Butterworth and Holbeck.57

Even though the main purpose of fundraising in the early twentieth century was to create schools, either by building them or purchasing existing structures, black PTA units continued to hold fundraisers long after schools were built. For NCCPT units in Alabama during the school year 1938–39, after dues were paid to the state and national units, funds were used to supplement teachers’ salaries, maintain school buildings and grounds, and purchase school equipment and supplies. In addition to providing nutritious lunches and paying for books and other school materials, black parent-teacher associations collected, repaired, and distributed clothing to schoolchildren and provided eyeglasses and medical examinations for children. Like the white PTA, the black PTA noted the low salaries paid to teachers and sought to “upgrade teaching salaries and to recruit persons for teaching careers.” However, because of the relative absence of friction between black principals and the PTA members of a community, contributions to supplement teachers’ salaries were often welcomed. PTA members also collaborated with school principals on other spending decisions. Thus the NCCPT contributed as it could to the salary equalization drives, though it may have undercut the endeavor by contributing voluntarily and unevenly, while not working to make the salary increases permanent and part of school districts’ salary schedules.58

Also, once lower schools were built, school-community groups focused on securing high schools (see figure 3.6). In Mississippi, local PTA units built the first black high school in the state in the 1940s in DeKalb County and later built one in Scott County. Following this, it financed lunch programs and bought uniforms for the school band. In Caswell County, North Carolina, the parent-teacher association approached State Supervisor of Negro Education, N. C. Newbold, in 1938 to lobby for a high school. Newbold agreed, even though the high school was not built for another thirteen years. Since white administrators and boards of education often required black citizens to come up with matching funds, it sometimes held up the process of building a school, as in the case of Caswell County.59

Narvie Harris used a variety of approaches to raise money and to get the resources she needed for the schools in her purview. She networked with
parents and other agencies to coordinate donations of much-needed items, often being directed by white supervisors to raise the money herself. She explained that in the 1940s she “had invited Mr. Nelson [Superintendent of DeKalb County Schools] to one of our county-wide [PTA] meetings at Avondale, and among the things the teachers asked, you know: ‘Can we get some construction paper; can we get some pencils and tablets;’ et cetera—and he said to them that day that [we would] if we raised the money. . . . [T]his was the thing in the South, you raised the money—when I was teaching, we would get peanuts from the children and then have a carnival and sell them to them.”

As with white PTA units, sometimes the money raised by black organizations was used to prepare the next generation of teachers and community leaders. The black PTA of Alabama, like other state units, had autonomy in developing and awarding college scholarships. The Alabama Colored Congress of Parents and Teachers gave three full scholarships at its annual meeting to the top high school students in the state to attend teachers’ colleges. However, its leaders wanted to give more but could not, given the lack of funds, so it successfully encouraged other civic, social, and fraternal associations to award scholarships as well. Full scholarships were rare, though. In the 1930s the Maryland Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers awarded what it called
“senatorial scholarships” to supplement the tuition for high school students who wanted to attend Maryland colleges, and in the 1940s Arkansas began to give $100 scholarships to students entering colleges in that state. At least as late as 1961, the South Carolina Colored Congress awarded two scholarships a year. Another common way for black PTA units to help students get to college from the 1930s to the 1950s was to create student loan funds, in which students were charged low interest rates; Texas had such a fund, as did Maryland. In the late 1930s Maryland initiated an annual scholarship loan fund, which lasted into the 1960s.61

In her survey of principals and PTA officers on the seven aims of the Alabama Colored PTA, Montgomery found virtual unanimity around promoting the welfare of children, uniting home and school, and helping citizens better understand the workings of public education. Like white PTA workers and white school leaders, black PTA workers and black administrators differed in their opinions on the centrality of fundraising to support local schools. Black principals were much more supportive than black PTA officers of these activities, whereas white school leaders tended to be less supportive of fundraising than white PTA officers. As the leaders of segregated schools, black principals knew their successes depended on the money that could be raised by the PTA network. In Vanessa Siddle Walker’s study, when Principal Dillard decided he wanted a regional high school to be built for the people of Caswell County, he invited the parents and patrons of the Yanceyville PTA to school meetings and then, in 1933, enlisted them in the effort. He needed their advocacy with the state board of education to get the school built. After the PTA was told the funding would be approved if enough students could be found, the parents canvassed the county. The Yanceyville PTA saw the school through to completion, and even as late as 1952 it continued to support the school, supplying Venetian blinds worth over three thousand dollars.62

White PTA leaders remained critical of the fundraising activities of black units, in large part because they were concerned that it would lead to gambling or other immoral acts, and they could never have the organization associated with such unseemly activities. As Montgomery observed, “This unusual emphasis on money raising, despite its justification on other grounds, may divert the attention of parents from the main purposes of the parent-teacher organization. One favorable aspect of these financial efforts, however, is revealed in the fact that associations have not resorted to gambling, raffling, and other forms of entertainment detrimental to character building in communities.” This assertion echoes Adeline Wessels’s concerns of a decade earlier, that black PTA units potentially might initiate money-raising activities that were illegal or immoral, reflecting racist beliefs about black citizens’ inability to manage their finances and channel fundraising efforts in proper, acceptable ways.63
Such attitudes about black PTA fundraisers continued into the 1950s, when a similar study conducted by Marguerite Taylor, a white PTA officer at the state level in Missouri, argued virtually the same points. Taylor surveyed the 75 local units in elementary and high schools—representing roughly 3,400 members—of the Missouri Colored Congress for her master’s thesis. Taylor’s objective was to “propose or recommend ways or means of improving the programs of the Colored Parent-Teacher Association.” She examined the activities of these local units and compared them to the approved activities of the white PTA, noting in her conclusions that activities deemed secondary by the white PTA were quite primary for black units, especially fundraising. Taylor, like other white PTA leaders, overlooked the necessity of fundraising activities for segregated schools and concluded, “Although entertainments and money making devices often contribute valuable and legitimate services to the school and the community, care [should be] exercised to keep such activities in proper relationship to the real purpose for which the organization is structured—the welfare of children.”

Sometimes, however, fundraising and the welfare of children intersected in ways other than monetary contributions to local schools, which was something Taylor had overlooked. In 1951 the officers of the Missouri Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers learned that the Missouri State Department of Education was about to organize a Citizens’ Commission for the Study of Education to examine the scope, content, and quality of educational programs in the state. Infuriated that none of their members was “allowed active representation on the Commission,” they decided to conduct their own study of the “inequalities of facilities and services” for black children, which they would submit to the State Commissioner of Education. Similar studies were taken up around the South to protest unequal conditions with increasing frequency in the late 1940s and early 1950s and were often initiated by whites who wanted to maintain segregation. Overcrowding and inadequate facilities were typical findings that resulted, and they were published in Our National Family so that all NCCPT members could be aware of the results. By 1952 the Missouri Colored Congress began to spread the word to other state congresses in the federation, arguing that “the elimination of bad community influences and conditions as well as the removal of unequal educational opportunities in all school districts are the responsibility of the [PTA] Council.” This effort shaped its platform in its sunset years, as the Missouri Colored Congress became more outspoken about unequal educational opportunities for children in the state. In 1952 it launched its “Pennies for Opportunity” project, which had the goal of funding the statewide study of “educational opportunities available to Negro children.”

Raising enough money at local, state, and national levels of the organization remained a constant concern for black PTA leaders through the middle
decades of the twentieth century. One NCCPT historian summarized years of financial struggle, challenging its focus on raising money for its operations:

The question of finance has long been a problem for the National [Colored] Congress as well as for its state branches and local units. As is often the case with budding organizations, many local units were prone to borrow too much time from their programs for children for fund-raising projects. Little of the money they raised, however, was converted into parent-teacher dues and often the expense of carrying out the work of the Congress exceeded the dues forwarded to the national treasury by the state congresses. Some local units, too, were poor and needed to look to the National Congress for aid, financial and otherwise, which it was not in a position to give. If the Congress had been better financed it could have given more attention to the needy areas.

Nonetheless, the black PTA carried out its work as many needy communities benefited from its leaders’ and members’ efforts in supporting education for African American children in underfunded schools. White PTA workers continued fundraising as a main activity at least through the 1950s, when the organization decided that its role in schools and communities had to change once and for all, and it shed the emphasis on raising cash. While fundraising certainly was central to the work of black and white local-level units from the mid-1920s through the 1940s and beyond, other educational concerns were shared by the various levels of leadership. In particular, a major area of concern for black and white parent-teacher associations was the school curriculum.

“Offerings That Are More Functional”: The PTA and the School Curriculum

Despite Margaretta Willis Reeve’s public pronouncement that the PTA was not a crusade to reform the schools, the organization had been doing just that, and continued to do so through the mid-twentieth century. The most significant contribution the PTA and other women’s clubs made to the school curriculum during the Progressive era was initiating curriculum innovations—such as kindergartens, vacation schools, school lunches, and vocational education programs—that helped to transform schools into social service institutions. Through the mid-twentieth century, curriculum reform continued to be as central to local-level PTA work as fundraising, even though members were cautioned to defer to the expertise of professional educators. Even Bishop Montgomery, who criticized the emphasis on fundraising of Alabama’s black
PTA units, noticed “quite clearly that the activities of the organization are not devoted exclusively to the matter of raising money for school buildings and equipment.” She was referring to the many citizenship and character-building clubs the Alabama Colored Congress coordinated around the state. These clubs were not unique; they were a project commonly undertaken by black and white PTA units around the country.67

By the late 1920s the National PTA took inspiration and direction from a major document drawn up by one of the curriculum committees of the NEA in the 1910s, the Cardinal Principles report. The Cardinal Principles were conceptualized by the NEA’s Committee to Reorganize Secondary Education in 1918, and they intended to rework the school curriculum around seven ideals: sound health, vocational effectiveness, wise use of leisure, ethical character, worthy home membership, mastery of the tools and techniques of learning, and useful citizenship. These principles emerged in the early twentieth century as part of a movement to prepare citizens for different yet complementary tasks—thus the emphasis on relevance and differentiation in the school curriculum. While historians of education give credit to the Cardinal Principles for shaping the comprehensive high school in the early twentieth century, they have overlooked their wider role in elementary and secondary education and, in particular, their popularization by civic groups such as the PTA. Having lost the battle to reform the school curriculum around parenting and childrearing in the 1910s, and agreeing with professional educators that the school curriculum should prepare students for life beyond school, the National PTA placed the Cardinal Principles at the center of its program, in large part as a result of the focus on worthy home membership, but also because of its valuing of health and character and citizenship education. In other words, what others saw in the revised school curriculum—vocational preparation for future roles—NCPT and NCCPT members welcomed as an opportunity to prepare students to be family members and citizens, with a particular emphasis on their future roles as parents.68

The Cardinal Principles anchored PTA programs and activities as the organization was able to further publicize them to the American citizen. In a series of meetings to determine what each of the principles meant for PTA workers and the organization, committee members discussed the meaning of “worthy home membership.” This aim was welcomed by PTA members who believed it could help members improve their family lives and work for “laws raising the requirements for marriage,” better housing, better building codes, better neighborhood parks and playgrounds, and also better municipal planning. Worthy home membership, PTA leaders hoped, was also the justification for high school courses on homemaking and parenting. However, the organization’s leaders promoted the notion that such courses were to be more
Chapter 3

expansive than cooking and sewing classes and should, instead, be “a broad study of the home and the family living in the home and their relation within the home and in the community.” They hoped that the courses would become “a highly desirable part of the program of study of every girl and boy.”

In 1928 the white PTA formally developed its own “Sevenfold Program of Home and School,” which essentially was a restatement of the Cardinal Principles of Education. The Sevenfold Program was promoted in PTA magazines and at workshops in the late 1920s, to let members know that the “Seven Cardinal Principles of education [will be the] permanent platform of Parent Teacher work.” This revised platform guided the association’s activities at all levels, was reproduced in PTA publications, and provided topics at meetings and for speakers for decades to come. Each of the seven points was considered essential to a “Program of Work for a Good Citizen.” The justification for the Sevenfold Program was made clear by an officer of the PTA at its September 1928 Board of Managers Meeting: “In spite of the fact that these objectives have been before the country for some time, great numbers of parents and teachers still think of education in terms so narrow that many children are denied a fair start in life.” However, an emphasis on vocational education was not to be entirely embraced by the middle-class women who served as NCPT leaders at the state and local levels. Even though women such as Eunice Harper Leonard of South Carolina promoted the Sevenfold Program, they did so mainly for other people’s children. While Leonard was fond of statements such as “It is better to be an expert blacksmith than a failure in law,” her four children were college-educated professionals.

The black PTA also, of course, put the Cardinal Principles front and center in its program, which eventually caused it to further question the organization’s racial policies and practices. In regard to the Cardinal Principle “wise use of leisure time,” the NCCPT sought to give African American youth appropriate and wholesome recreational activities. Its leaders felt that “Negroes had a greater need for recreation facilities than did other groups. Because of their generally low financial status . . . [t]hey had few parks, community centers, and supervised playgrounds in their communities.” The association wanted municipalities to fund such wholesome endeavors as recreational dancing because, in part, “Municipal recreation was democratic and inclusive.” Another issue, health, was of critical importance to black PTA members, so it became one of the most central curricular issues. The NCCPT defined health as more than physical wellness: “it was emotional stability, a wholesome outlook on life, the ability to adapt one’s self to society and the environment, the capacity to create and enjoy happiness.” The Colored Congress of Alabama had a wide range of health initiatives in the late 1930s, which included the Summer and Pre-School Round-Ups, checkups by county nurses for preschool children,
vaccination of all school students, the provision for hot lunches at school, and special health programs such as cleanup campaigns and pictures and features for the schools. Montgomery, the graduate student who analyzed the Alabama black PTA’s program, remarked, “Recognizing that health is one of the cardinal principles of education, the Alabama Branch of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers contributes to the health program of the public schools.”

In practice, however, black PTA leaders wanted schools to include liberal arts, or what they called the “more traditional” courses, and even suggested that they replace the “offerings that are more functional.” Therefore, local units emphasized two seemingly disparate matters in the school curriculum: vocational education and the liberal arts, including black history. NCCPT leaders, the majority of whom were teachers, did not distinguish between the two and saw both as critical to success in a democracy. Adopting the slogan “Train People for Jobs,” the black PTA pushed for an extensive program of vocational education “to prepare youth to take their places in the labor world; for the full development of the pupil and to continue the ideals of democracy.” Local units also promoted the teaching of black history. For example, in the late 1920s the West Virginia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers donated books on black history to school libraries. The association also passed a resolution urging that “Negro history become a required subject in the school curriculum.”

This initiative was there from the start, when the first president Selena Butler reiterated what other black educational and civic leaders were calling for: “Hang upon the walls of your homes pictures of the men and women of your own race;... fill your libraries with books that are the product of the Negro brain.” The importance of teaching black history was clear to PTA members, as it was related to a positive sense of self and group identity that would impel young African American students to be successful and to fight inequality. Such was the meaning of one black PTA leader’s statement in 1952 when she asked, “Can we, in spite of some sort of strategy which has omitted the Negro from the American History textbook, motivate our boys and girls to go on?”

In this sense, the attention paid to history can be considered the rare liberal arts curriculum issue the PTA took on. In general, white and black PTA units did not interject their opinions on the formal curriculum, though they did engage in a small way in the turf wars around textbook adoption.

The centrality and importance of family, citizenship education, health, and wise use of leisure were the elements that most appealed to black and white PTA workers and ended up shaping policies and programs beyond the World War II years. Therefore, the PTA was in large part responsible for the success of the Cardinal Principles in the schools, since it included them in its literature and publications and promoted them to its ever-growing membership.
Attention to citizenship by the association never waned, though the ways PTA leaders construed citizenship and its goals changed over time. In general, however, what began in the 1920s as a commitment to democratic ideals by cultivating character and virtue was replaced with an emphasis in the 1940s on cultural understanding and, for the black PTA, civil rights.

From the mid-1920s to the end of World War II, the two branches of the National PTA grew steadily and enlisted many volunteers around the country. By the end of the war, the two PTA branches had fully developed infrastructures with separate local, state, and national levels of leadership that followed the same program. While the white PTA sought to ensure the black PTA's compliance with its program, it nonetheless recognized the flexibility of the federated structure in letting local and state units cultivate their own interests around the core ideals of the National PTA. However, despite PTA and school leaders' insistence that the purpose of the organization was not to fund the public schools, black and white PTA workers continued to hold fundraisers through the 1960s as a central activity. During the twentieth century, the PTA based its program on the Cardinal Principles of Education, as health and civic education pervaded the work of the association. Emphasizing the role of citizens in a democracy led the black PTA to be increasingly outspoken about inequalities in education and society and led to their questioning the NCPT’s policies on racial segregation.