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

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I N A 1940 article in National Parent-Teacher, the magazine produced by the white PTA, the author reminded readers, “As parents and as teachers we cannot neglect the opportunity to make America strong from within. In brief, this building of America through its children and youth is the unique function of the parent-teacher movement in American democracy.” With 2.4 million white members and 26,000 black members that year, the PTA was a growing force with a well-established federated infrastructure. White PTA leaders positioned the organization as a patriotic institution on the vanguard of upholding American ideals such as prosperity and clean, wholesome living. In the South, the days of building schools were generally over, since black local units had successfully created a viable system of schools in the early twentieth century. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, white and black PTA members, steered by the Committee on the Reorganization of Secondary Education’s (CRSE) Cardinal Principles, focused on increasing membership and attending to educational matters such as study circles and parent education programs. Local units continued fundraising activities as national and state leaders led campaigns for legislation to benefit children and families, such as school lunches. As this chapter reveals, while both PTA branches supported the principles of democracy, each interpreted and applied them differently. The separate paths, however, led to the same conclusion by the end of World War II: a segregated PTA was true to neither the nation’s nor the organization’s founding principles.¹

Both branches of the PTA experienced their greatest growth trajectories from the mid-1920s through the years after World War II, although the black
PTA continued to lag behind in the proportion of members of the African American population. The work carried out by each Congress in the early decades of the twentieth century had set the foundation for a strong intra- and interstate network of units and regenerating corps of leaders. In the 1930s and 1940s, as R. Scott Baker explains, the “tempo of African American educational activism quickened,” to which I would add that the infrastructure of the black PTA allowed for this activism in an organization that whites perceived as nonthreatening. The biggest increase for the NCCPT occurred during the 1951–52 school year, with a membership drive that far exceeded its goal of a 10 percent increase, bringing instead a 21 percent jump. The momentum around civil rights activity contributed to black citizens joining in increasing numbers after World War II. During the mid-twentieth century, the white PTA grew from 3.5 million to over 8.8 million in 1954, while the membership of its segregated counterpart doubled, from approximately one hundred to two hundred thousand.2

As Crawford and Levitt argue, during these years, the PTA “reaped the rewards of a societal emphasis on traditional families . . . and concerted membership drives.”3 Awards given to state and local units with the largest membership increases allowed for parent-teacher associations around the country to enjoy growing rosters. These competitions—in which members were recruited through door-to-door canvassing, media advertisements, and publicity announcements—as well as the PTA network and publications, illustrated to members around the country what other units were doing. One white state officer from South Carolina, making a case for a membership drive in the Palmetto state, revealed that some PTA units were aided by state boards of education. West Virginia doubled their membership in two years, she explained, because “Their State Department of Education has ruled that no rural school may be ACCREDITED without PTA that is a Congress unit, and DOES it bring in the bacon?” By 1950, however, leaders within the organization questioned the intensity of membership drives and wondered whether it came at the expense of having PTA workers dedicated to other organizational pursuits. They argued, “Large memberships should not be our goal, but more efficient understanding members who desire to have a share in the work of this child welfare organization and are eager to do their part.” On the home front, between the two World Wars, many were anxious about juvenile delinquency, crime, and poverty, which helped the PTA position itself as an agency to help ameliorate society’s ills through parent education, support of local schools, and legislation.4

The black PTA continued its focus on fundraising in an effort to generate enough of a cash flow to cover costs and support local schools while having enough money to run the state and national offices, which remained a cause
for concern among the organization’s leaders. The NCCPT struggled with bankruptcy over the years and sought various means to remedy the situation as financial solvency varied across segregated state units. For instance, Georgia enjoyed fiscal stability and maintained a support staff and state office, while others struggled with bringing independent units into the fold. Alabama reported that their “total State membership is unknown because many local units are operating under the name of PTA but are not taking part with the State organization.” Because of poverty in many rural areas, some local organizations did not join the federation and remained independent, but the NCCPT leadership discovered this trend in more densely populated areas as well. This hesitation is a subtext in the history of the PTA, as some black local units resisted joining what was generally perceived as a white organization. Nonetheless, the main reason remained financial: why send dues to state and national governing bodies when tangible results were not immediately apparent? As a result, during the middle decades of the twentieth century, the national office of the Colored Congress was very much concerned with building a stronger network of parent-teacher groups.  

In addition to local-level fundraisers, other efforts raised money for state units. In 1950, pressed for ways to generate income, the NCCPT started charging an annual subscription rate of fifty cents for its quarterly, Our National Family, and increased it to one dollar two years later. Founded Day celebrations were also moneymakers for the organization, and the NCCPT saw them as especially important to financial solvency, given that dues were low and membership proportionately small. One officer reminded members of the rationale for Founders’ Day celebrations: “Remember, we are trying to run a National Office and dues alone cannot do this and carry out our program thus planned. . . . [M]oney is needed, much money.” Nevertheless, NCCPT leaders prided themselves on the fact that less attention was being given to fundraising and more to educational projects by the early 1950s. The leaders of the Colored Congresses in North Carolina and West Virginia heralded the fact that “There has been a tendency to reduce the amount of time devoted to money-raising activities and concentrate the efforts on home-school cooperation, community betterment, and youth participation.” West Virginia state president A. L. Younger argued, “To place emphasis on fund raising campaigns throughout the year thereby neglecting to set aside time at each meeting to study problems affecting the development of youth is indeed a serious charge to those who are responsible for leadership.” In spite of this, some state units organized major fundraisers. The Texas Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers raised a thousand dollars to give to the American Red Cross Fund in 1952.  

Beyond fundraising efforts, the PTA agenda from the mid-1920s to just after World War II focused on two interrelated ideas of the Sevenfold Program
of Home and School: health initiatives and civic education. Each of these interests eventually led black and white PTA leaders to consider the matter of race and inequality in the organization, schools, and U.S. society in general. Even though successive white and black PTA presidents introduced new platforms after each election, the organization’s agenda remained remarkably consistent over time and across region. In particular, PTA leaders continued to draw on the core ideals of the CRSE’s Cardinal Principles of 1918 at least until the early 1950s, and into the 1960s for the NCCPT. For instance, when white PTA leader Mabel Wilhams Hughes took office in 1946, her administration implemented a Four-Point Program that included strengthening the school curriculum, improving the health of the nation’s children, promoting world understanding, and stressing parent education. Black PTA leaders also revised their programs around the same principles. In 1951 Virginia’s Twelve-Point Program included vocational education, health, and social and mental adjustment. In many respects the social service initiatives implemented in schools during the Progressive era did not disappear as the twentieth century wore on. Instead, the National PTA took the lead among civic associations in strengthening its connection to local schools with such issues as lunches, civic education programs, home economics, and other such matters that forged greater connections among school, society, and home. Therefore, the PTA became a supporter, promoter, and mobilizer of educational reform initiatives by virtue of its location in civil society, in the interstices of schools and the public.

A major concern of Americans during the Depression was the significant number of unemployed youth, which prompted educators to rethink how the school curriculum could address the dual challenges of eradicating juvenile delinquency and preparing young people for gainful employment. Beginning with Roosevelt’s New Deal initiatives, the federal government began to play a greater role in public education in the 1930s. These efforts culminated in the National Defense in Education Act of 1958, which increased federal involvement in the school curriculum in terms of preparing citizens for a modern, technological society. During the war years, the curriculum changed from critiquing capitalism and the social order to emphasizing patriotism and national cohesion, and the PTA followed suit by supporting and promoting the new curricular emphases and helping with war projects. Voices of concern could be heard in PTA meetings around the country. Kentucky’s white PTA president summed up these changes in society, schools, and the PTA:

Chet Huntley of N.B.C. Television team really woke us up with some astonishing statements in his speech on the last night [of the PTA convention]. Some agreed and many disagreed on his accusations of the P.T.A. being responsible for so much being spent on recreation and fine cafeterias; and so little being
spent for the actual teaching of our children. It seems that nearly all children
of foreign countries can speak our language but we are unable to speak theirs.
With everything changing and the world shrinking so fast it seems that we
have plenty food for thought concerning the education of our children.11

No matter what the PTA agenda emphasized, and no matter how many
points it included in its programs year after year, citizenship and democracy
remained as core ideals. This emphasis, along with the postwar interest in
international relations and the growing Civil Rights movement, challenged
the organization ultimately to face its complicity in perpetuating discrimina-
tion, prejudice, and segregation by maintaining a separate and unequal organ-
ization. During the mid-twentieth century, the National PTA was forced to
look again at itself in terms of what ideals it espoused, and while the white
PTA emphasized tolerance and the eradication of prejudice, its focus was on
international, not domestic, relations. The black PTA, conversely, focused on
the United States and called forth the founders’ ideals, challenging the entire
organization to return to one of its original principles, racial inclusion. Beat-
rice Morgan, the NCCPT’s president from 1949 to 1953, was fond of restating
Alice Birney’s call that the PTA was open to all, “irrespective of creed, color, or
condition.” Yet Morgan maintained a position of self-sufficiency as she chal-
lenged black PTA members to act on these words, telling them, “We must
stop looking to the white people and to God to do for us what we can do for
ourselves.”12

The NCCPT embraced the organization’s mid-century emphasis on rights,
tolerance, and equality, as evidenced in the materials it circulated to members
and the Intergroup Relations committees it coordinated. In large part, the
publications of the two PTA branches helped shape and sustain the discus-
sion about race, difference, and tolerance. The role of black periodicals helped
inform members’ civic and organizational vision, as discussions of tolerance
and difference were framed in terms of democracy. It is important, however, to
remember that these resulted in multiple discourses instead of binary, oppos-
ing discourses, as PTA leaders and members interpreted the organization’s
goals according to their own beliefs. Some white PTA members were allies to
the cause of racial equality; some were not. Also, while virtually all black PTA
members supported racial equality and desegregation, some wondered what
desegregation of schools would do to the organization they had taken years of
hard work to establish. Nonetheless, it is important to view the organization
and the schools they supported as sites of political activism by members, in
particular black members who were allied with a large-scale, majority-white
voluntary organization. In this regard, PTA activities at the local, state, and
national levels continued to be political endeavors over time as members
worked for or against desegregation of schools and the organization. And the roots of this impulse were found in the interwar years.\textsuperscript{13}

Additional subtle changes are evident in the development of both organizations during the mid-twentieth century. The white PTA developed an experienced leadership group that influenced national legislation that had an impact on local schools. White PTA leaders were nationally known, especially in Washington, DC, lobbying circles. Yet both branches enjoyed the visibility of national events, such as the 1950 White House Conference on Child Welfare, which white and black PTA presidents attended. The National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers came to rely less and less on the NCPT and began to stand on its own as it, too, developed a regenerating group of leaders and recruited teenagers to be members of Junior PTA units in order to sustain leadership and the organization beginning in the early 1950s. Topics such as “Education for Responsible Leadership” were part of the program—for black and white members—that sought to perpetuate the organization through proper management according to PTA policies and practices. A workshop held by the NCCPT in 1949 was described as enlightening leaders who “in turn shall develop similar workshops in their own states and thus increase the numbers of local workers who are qualified to lead.” Black PTA officers viewed the establishment of the organization’s headquarters in Dover, Delaware, in 1948 as the start of “a new era” for the organization, since it was its first permanent location. For black PTA workers, leadership became an essential element to carry out the work of racial uplift and racial equality as the twentieth century wore on.\textsuperscript{14}

One transformation within black local units was that the language of cooperation seeped into its interactions in schools and at meetings. For example, a 1951 report of the Maryland Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers annual meeting noted a “lack of cooperation between the church, the home and the school.” The black PTA, by coming into its own, began to reflect the tensions between professional educators and volunteers that had long been a characteristic of white PTA units. Yet cooperation also referred to how the two organizations related to each other, and the two branches of the PTA developed different interpretations of the term. For example, the white Arkansas Congress of Parents and Teachers (ACPT) claimed in 1948 that it had been cooperating with the Arkansas Colored Congress for years because it had donated surplus publications and program materials to the black PTA and offered assistance with workshops, conventions, and district meetings. In contrast, cooperation for black PTA members meant more than charitable giving; it meant working together to solve racial problems. By 1945 NCCPT president Anna Strong requested that the two associations meet regularly to discuss common concerns. Generally, white PTA leaders agreed to meet with
black PTA units on occasion, but walked a fine line between welcoming African American members as part of their political base, which could potentially alienate white racist members, and keeping them at arm’s length. In so doing, white PTA leaders and members were free to not work for racial equality if they did not wish to. Therefore, in many communities around the country NCPT units carried on without regard for the interests of black members.15

“Perhaps I Am Too Interested in This Project”: The Politics of Health

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, the National PTA designed its programs and projects around the foundational Seven-Fold Program of the late 1920s and promoted healthful living as a means to a stronger democracy. Improving the health of American children and adults emerged as a primary aim for black and white congresses alike. Both branches of the PTA worked closely with the American Cancer Society, the March of Dimes, and other associations dedicated to eradicating disease during the mid-twentieth century and included health issues in parent education workshops and programs. Yet, while health was a centerpiece of both programs, it was of acute importance for the black PTA because of poverty and lack of access to information and health care among black communities in the South. As white PTA women worked to teach and disseminate information on healthful living, nutrition, and disease prevention, black PTA women viewed improving the health and health education of African American community members as critical to equality of opportunity and the vibrancy of an African American citizenry.

In her first message as president of the NCCPT in 1949, Beatrice Moore Morgan outlined the dual focus of her tenure: better health and increased membership, which could be construed as organizational health. Morgan explained that the “specific objective [of the NCCPT] must be to help in every way possible to produce a generation of healthy minds within healthy bodies.” Under her leadership, the NCCPT publicized National Negro Health Week, a nationwide effort it credited to Booker T. Washington. By 1950 it was a year-round program run by the Public Health Service of the Federal Security Agency. With the potential for the desegregation of schools and public places looming as litigation moved through the courts, black PTA members tried to be proactive in protecting their interests, and references to health programs became increasingly linked to the idea of equality. In the early 1950s the NCCPT sought to remove any references to “Negro program” in federal health initiatives for fear of being excluded. If they were in a separate category, they could be overlooked or, worse yet, dropped. Therefore, the NCCPT
encouraged members to “work towards a complete oneness in all state health programs.” S. M. Burrell, chair of the NCCPT’s Health Committee in 1951, explained that “Interpreting . . . the work of your state department to local communities and fostering as many projects as possible [will] bring about a good working relation between the two races from the standpoint of better health for all.” In 1952, before she stepped down, Morgan continued to instruct NCCPT local units to plan the new school year around Summer Round-up, immunization programs, and school lunches.16

The PTA’s commitment to health typically meant getting involved in federal legislation; at mid-century the PTA was aggressively political in terms of its ability to mobilize members around legislative causes. The PTA relied on strategies that had been developed by women’s associations in the late nineteenth century that, by the second decade of the twentieth century, became part of the skill repertoire of the organizations as they combined forces to agitate for legislation on behalf of women and children. The NCPT had cut its activist teeth in the 1910s with the fight for the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Infancy and Maternity Protection Act. PTA leaders’ experience with this major piece of federal legislation helped develop their lobbying abilities and strengthened the communication network of the organization. The Sheppard-Towner Act, which was passed in 1921, sought to reduce infant mortality rates by providing federally subsidized prenatal clinics and health care education to mothers. The National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations was one of several women’s groups, along with the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and Association of Collegiate Alumnae, to lobby extensively for the passage of the act, which was repealed in 1929.17

Even though maternalism had become outdated as an ideological framework after 1920 with the fight for women’s suffrage having been won, the PTA continued to work for national legislation in the interest of child welfare, having honed its political lobbying skills and extended its federated network across the country with millions of members united through a well-coordinated infrastructure. Elizabeth Tilton, the chair of the NCPT’s Legislative Department in 1922, set the tone for PTA legislative efforts for decades to come:

Legislation is the high-tide of all Civic work. Good things are tried out in local communities and when their worth is proved, the call comes to give them to everybody and the only way to do this is to pass a federal law. There is no better investment of energy than that put into the passage of a beneficent law, it is so-far-reaching in its effect.

From this point, the National PTA made the commitment to focus on education bills in the U.S. Congress.18
By the end of the 1920s it became apparent that a female voting bloc was not going to materialize as expected, and concomitant changes occurred in terms of the ability of organized women to influence legislation and social policy. However, the PTA continued to focus on legislation through the twentieth century, since it had built its program around child welfare and had the organizational strength to effect change in the U.S. Congress. Moreover, focusing on legislation, according to PTA members, was one aspect of the “practice of citizenship” or, as one PTA officer put it, “in a democracy legislation should be designed to accomplish the greatest good for the greatest number.”

PTA members were notified about critical issues and were frequently called upon to publicize them to the rest of the membership and the public and to write to elected officials. The major issues on which the legislative committees of both PTA branches focused at mid-century included federal aid to education, the School Lunch Act, the Child Labor Act, and national defense matters, such as the creation and promotion of the United Nations in an effort to support international peace.

All the while, the NCCPT did not have the numerical or political force on its own to rally its members around legislation, which was one of the reasons black educational leaders remained as a segregated branch of the PTA for so long. As part of the PTA, black educators reaped the benefits of an alliance with a powerful organization that had the ability to make significant change and to reach citizens across the South as well as politicians and policymakers. However, the NCCPT did not just publicize the white PTA’s legislative agenda verbatim but amended each proposal, increasing its appeal to disenfranchised citizens and working to further racial equality. This was the reason the NCCPT supported such initiatives as the equalization of schools and salaries for teachers in the 1940s. By 1951, the organization was recognized for its ability to mobilize citizens by becoming the first black organization invited to join the Women’s Joint Congressional Committee, a nonpartisan agency designed to bring women’s organizations together around legislative matters of common concern. African American PTA leaders endeavored to show their political lobbying in the best light, not as agitation but, in typical PTA parlance, as supporting the tenets of child welfare and democracy. As William I. Lee, chair of the NCCPT’s Legislation Committee in 1952 put it, “[Being involved in federal legislation] is not political interference, but a helpful force which should always exert its influence at the right time and in the right place to balance our national scales and do justice as far as it is humanly possible.”

The proposal to support federal aid to education, an issue taken up by professional associations and civic groups, was a major agenda item for the PTA’s legislative committees and can serve as an example of how the black PTA infused the initiative with the language of racial equality. Following the NEA’s lead, both branches of the PTA backed the federal aid issue, but the NCPT
did not explicitly mention race when explaining its support for the measure to its membership. At its annual meeting in 1949, however, the NCCPT added the proviso that such legislation “will guarantee to all children, regardless of race, creed, or color the same financial assistance without discrimination on the part of the states which are recipients of such Federal Aid.” Through the 1950s the NCCPT used the fight for federal aid to education as one way to work for equal school facilities and opportunities for black children, hoping and expecting that if enacted, it would “apply equally to all school children without regard to race or color.” In so doing, they joined forces with the NAACP, the American Teachers’ Association, and the National Association of Colored Women. Yet black PTA leaders knew that their support, hopefully, would make segregation so expensive that it would “die of its own weight,” as was the intended goal of the NAACP’s equalization suits in the 1930s. Members had learned to be outspoken about these matters, since earlier experiences, such as with the Sheppard-Towner Act, had raised their suspicion as to whether the argument for states’ rights was bolstered by such legislation with matching appropriations for reform measures.

Another major campaign for the PTA was the support of federal legislation for school lunches. The project culminated in the U.S. Congress’s passing of the School Lunch Act, which was touted as a “nation-wide effort to improve health and nutrition of America’s school children.” Spearheaded by committee chair and South Carolinian Eunice Harper Leonard, the passage of the School Lunch Act reveals the effectiveness of the PTA network in legislative matters mid-century. Leonard, like most white PTA workers, rose through the ranks by taking on leadership roles at increasingly higher levels of the association. And, like other PTA leaders, by assuming these positions she developed skills and attributes through her affiliation with the PTA and the other organizations with which she was active, such as the American Association of University Women, the American Cancer Society, the Carolina Business and Professional Women’s Club, the Daughters of the American Colonists, and the South Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs. After graduating from Winthrop College and taking graduate courses at the University of South Carolina, she married Paul H. Leonard, who was elected to the state’s House of Representatives and later served as South Carolina’s hotel inspector. Leonard began as a local unit president in the early 1930s and by the end of the decade (1937–41) was South Carolina’s state PTA president. She later became NCPT vice president of Region III (1941–44), in the Southeast, and ended her run as a PTA leader as national chair of the School Lunch Committee (1947–50). Of her many accomplishments, Leonard was most proud of the role she played in the National PTA in promoting school lunches nationwide and getting the School Lunch Act passed in 1946. In the midst of her leadership of the school
lunch initiative, Leonard confessed to NCPT president Minetta Hastings that she was, perhaps, “too interested in this project.” However, the single-minded devotion to PTA objectives and enthusiasm of members such as Leonard were responsible for the success of its legislative initiatives.24

In the Progressive era, organized women started serving meals in public schools as an extension of their municipal housekeeping efforts. Lunch programs were first run and maintained by women’s clubs, who later relied on local school boards and municipal funding to ensure their continued implementation. William J. Reese argues that school lunches, part of the school health movement of the turn of the twentieth century, were not always imbued with democratic ideals about giving the poor and marginalized an equal chance at thriving and learning. He posits that some elites viewed health initiatives as a form of capital investment, “a response to the allegedly inferior biological makeup of the native poor and certain ethnic groups.” This notion was carried beyond the Progressive era as the PTA and other civic organizations continued to work to institute the school lunch, justifying it as a means to a stronger nation. With citizenship ever at the core of PTA ideals, the organization’s leaders viewed promoting good health and nutrition as an important aspect of its program, arguing that it was “a chief factor in creating responsible citizens of high integrity.”25

The institution of lunches in schools as comprehensive and equitable did not happen during the Progressive era, despite clubwomen’s best efforts. It took the Depression and extreme poverty and destitution to prompt Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal programs focusing on recovery, relief, and reform to bolster the school lunch initiative. In the 1930s, with a stronger and wider organizational network, and supported by its investment in the Cardinal Principles of Education, the National PTA backed the federal government and stepped up its push for health and nutrition in the schools. As Eunice Leonard went from leading a local unit to serving as president of the South Carolina Congress of Parents and Teachers, one of her first actions was to request that the white national office coordinate a study of school lunches in order to make recommendations to the federal government. The results presented a convincing argument: “hungry, underfed children could not do their best at school.” Consequently, Leonard was appointed chair of the School Lunch Committee and began working with the U.S. Office of Education to help find a way to make school lunches available to all children. Thus, the PTA ended up positioning itself at the forefront of a national effort to get lunches in the public schools, and even though it was one of many voluntary organizations involved in the endeavor, it was one of the largest and most widely networked. The federal government recognized the organization’s ability to mobilize volunteers around the country and invited it as the only civic
organization to serve on the National Cooperating Committee on School Lunches in the early 1940s.26

The U.S. government had plenty to gain by passing the School Lunch Act. In the midst of the Depression it was looking to solve the problems of hunger and poverty while increasing the consumption of its abundant agricultural commodities by expanding markets nationally and abroad. Propaganda of the era argued that much went to “waste on the farm while millions were hungry for these products in the cities.”27 Beginning in 1936, the U.S. Department of Agriculture began to distribute surplus farm products to local and state relief administrations which, through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, and the National Youth Administration, turned the foodstuffs over to local educational and welfare agencies and civic organizations—such as the PTA and American Legion—for distribution in communities. The benefits were immediately apparent in remote regions in the South. African American PTA members in the School at Society Corner on James Island, South Carolina, brought vegetables to school for lunches, while the WPA funded the purchase of cooking utensils and paid for a cook. The program—nationally coordinated and much more connected to and supported by the U.S. government than the disconnected local efforts of the Progressive era—became the framework for the school lunch program in decades to come.28

The federal government became more invested in providing school meals as the United States entered World War II and the national draft was instituted, having found that nearly half of those drafted could not pass the physical exam, which was blamed on a lack of nutrition during their childhood years. With the presumed threat of national security in jeopardy, the federal government expanded the existing lunch program in 1942 to include any child who would “benefit nutritionally without reference to financial status.” The program lasted only a year, ending on June 30, 1943. The WPA, an important liaison between the government and civic organizations, was dismantled in April of that year, as a result of the war and transportation issues. Moreover, agricultural surpluses had waned, leaving little for distribution to local communities. To protect against potential problems that would result either financially or nutritionally from the immediate removal of lunch programs from the schools, an indemnity program was established in March 1943 that reimbursed school districts for purchasing the agricultural commodities used for lunches. The U.S. government supplemented the school meals on occasion as it distributed surplus foodstuffs that could not make it to troops overseas because of shipping and transportation lapses.29

It became clear to educational administrators and PTA leaders that in order for school lunches to become instituted nationally, they needed to be
funded by the U.S. government and could not depend on the availability of farm surpluses. Therefore, Leonard and her committee took the lead in reviving the bill and wanted it placed under the aegis of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Instead, the government wanted local communities to handle it as they had in the past. When the school lunch committee met in September 1944, its members declared their intention to keep “before the public the importance of continuing to make and keep the school lunch a permanent part of the education program and to emphasize the fact that it is a permanent institution needing permanent support.” Leonard’s committee used the networks of voluntary civic associations to get an amendment passed with the Annual Appropriation Bill, which earmarked $50 million for school meals. Meanwhile, state boards of education and the PTA successfully convinced the federal government to extend the Program for School Lunch Aid on a year-by-year basis, while states such as Illinois passed legislation to appropriate funds that supplemented federal monies. This gave the PTA, state education authorities, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture time to come to a workable solution to the school-lunch funding issue.30

School leaders, in the meantime, found that the School Lunch Program was reaching more and more children. Whereas the program had served 342,000 children in 3,800 schools in 1937, it grew to feed 6.5 million children in 44,000 schools in 1945. Over the next several years, Leonard worked with representatives from the Office of Education and the U.S. Department of Agriculture in drafting a bill for nutritious lunches to be made available to all children and asking for matching appropriations from the federal government. As they had done in the past, PTA leaders contacted “every member of Congress” in order to get the bill passed. The bill went through many revisions and ultimately included the requirements that school lunches make use of agricultural surpluses and be made available only to children with limited means, although local communities could supplement the lunches. The School Lunch Act was signed by President Truman on June 6, 1946, and Leonard was elected National Chair of School Lunches in order to see the program through to 1950, when it would be implemented nationally.31

In her report for 1947–48, Leonard commented that thirty-four states and Hawaii each had a state supervisor of school lunch programs, many of whom were trained nutritionists. That year, her committee estimated that “parent-teacher members were wholly responsible for or were assisting with school lunches” in 10 percent of the schools serving lunches nationally. Other groups that pitched in included church and civic groups and patriotic organizations. In reflections of Progressive-era efforts, the PTA and other civic organizations even set up school gardens to provide produce for lunches and, following the trend begun in homemaking clubs, the PTA directed canning and food
preservation efforts in no fewer than fifteen states. School meals thus became a staple in the PTA’s health program mid-century as black and white PTA workers led health and nutrition efforts in local communities. The NCCPT created its own network of local and state “Health Chairmen,” who helped members sponsor health clinics and lunch programs.\(^{32}\)

In the late 1940s, PTA volunteers did not just help make lunches; they promoted the idea that education about nutrition should be a part of the school curriculum.\(^ {33}\) For example, the white PTA School Lunch Committee in Leland, Maryland, gave advice on the lunch menu and procedures. In Leland and other schools in Maryland, teachers studied ways to include nutrition in the curriculum and helped teach parents how to plan meals. In Louisiana, one superintendent required his schools to teach health and nutrition, using the school lunch as a laboratory. The interest in nutrition seeped into training courses for parents in the PTA and at state colleges and universities, where county and district supervisors took graduate-level courses in nutrition and home economics. The Georgia Colored Congress showed the film “The School That Learned to Eat” at its annual convention in 1949 and encouraged local units to study the School Lunch Program at its meetings. School lunches were so important to both PTA branches that the topic was included on a rare joint committee meeting of NCPT and NCCPT representatives held in August 1950 at Tuskegee, during which both sides worked out the details on holding more frequent meetings between them and creating a list of topics common to the two organizations.\(^ {34}\)

The school lunch was just one of a number of health issues that the PTA took on. Both PTA branches were still conducting Summer Round-Ups at mid-century and were continuing to work toward federal support of well-baby and maternal clinics, programs that had begun in the Progressive era with the Sheppard-Towner Act. Moreover, the NCCPT supported better dental health and dental education, an improved foster care system, and more nursery schools. Through the 1940s and beyond, the NCPT focused its efforts on legislation to safeguard the health and well-being of children and families. It continued to direct its members to be informed on current bills the organization supported and to “urge members to discuss proposed legislation with candidates, seeking their support ahead of time.” PTA members were instructed to contact legislators to get their position and support. Even after bills were passed, PTA members were told to “Follow up on the administration or enforcement of laws enacted, looking toward need for improvement by amendment.”External agencies recognized the PTA’s extensive role in promoting health matters. For example, Ben F. Wyman, the State Health Officer of the South Carolina Board of Health, remarked that the South Carolina Congress of Parents and Teachers was one of the most “effective organizations in the
state for the promotion and development of education—especially for one of education’s most important phases, health education.” Wyman echoed the sentiments of PTA workers “that education is dependent on good health.”

Reports submitted to School Lunch Chair Eunice Leonard from schools in North Carolina sum up best the PTA’s belief about the connections among health, citizenship, and education, revealing how the organization remained true to the Cardinal Principles report. For educators and PTA members in that state, the school lunch program “has taught democracy and how to work together harmoniously. It has laid the foundation stone for personal, social etiquette, enabling children to eat with ease and relaxation, converse with others comfortably and intelligently. This program pays dividends now and for the future—dividends in better scholastic averages, fewer absences from school because of illness, and in countless ways building stronger more mentally alert citizens.” For PTA and school leaders, children who ate well-balanced meals grew to become thoughtful, concerned citizens. Such goals were at the top of the PTA agenda for the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Meeting New Needs:
Civics, Citizenship, and the Tenets of Democracy

The CRSE’s Cardinal Principles of Education, in addition to emphasizing health, placed civics and citizenship education at the centerpiece of the school curriculum. The United States was a different place between the wars; with immigration quotas in place, the onset of the Depression, and a proliferation of ethnic cultural groups and associations, civic education was transformed from emphasizing assimilation to incorporating the experiences and perspectives of minority groups who had been outsiders to American political, social, and educational life. Moreover, the threat of totalitarianism in Europe prompted educational leaders to develop programs that highlighted the advantages of democracy. This new vision of civic education emphasized the notion of cultural pluralism, and the new programs were engineered to teach how democracies dealt with ethnic, racial, and religious difference.

Yet cultural pluralism existed in different forms. Inasmuch as it was intended to promote open-mindedness about various cultures and ethnicities, Jonathan Zimmerman reminds us that it also was used in some instances to support ideological conformity. Therefore, no one version of cultural pluralism won out, as theory was interpreted and applied by different groups in a variety of settings to suit any number of political standpoints.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, PTA workers—positioning themselves as popularizers of the latest educational theory and practices—
endorsed cultural pluralism in local communities and schools. Citizenship had always been a central goal in the organization's program, but the PTA's stance on civic education was a complex one—melding a variety of political perspectives—that changed only slightly over time. In the years leading up to World War I, the Congress of Mothers promoted peace and the “outlawry of war,” based on maternalist notions that the mothers of the nation could never support military aggression. In this regard they were in step with educators and political leaders who saw educational reform efforts as part of international restructuring efforts. Even though the organization continued to support peace over the course of the twentieth century, it balanced these ideals with an emphasis on patriotic duty. In the late 1920s, the NCPT’s citizenship committee developed a definition of what they meant by citizenship and “citizenship training”; they observed what other agencies were doing and how they construed citizenship before deciding to craft a new platform that sought to “encourage voters to vote.”

The emphasis on voting as a civic duty did not end up being the centerpiece of the revised civic program but nonetheless was important for black and white PTA members in local units. White PTA women in the 1920s persuaded newly enfranchised members to vote, and in later decades asked members to guide their fellow citizens in voting on issues of particular interest to the organization. Voting rights were especially important to black PTA leaders, as they joined other civil rights and civic organizations in the effort to enfranchise black adults. In the 1940s and 1950s, the NCCPT assisted with voter registration drives and helped bring voting machines to schools as part of their civic education programs. Narvie Harris, the PTA worker in Georgia introduced in the previous chapter, claimed that she registered high school students to vote, which in turn resulted in her registering their parents. Therefore, voting as a central dimension of citizenship held much more salience for the NCCPT, as references to citizenship and civic duty in black PTA publications almost always included a statement on racial equality.

In 1928 the NCPT committee on citizenship put forth its four-point platform, which included encouraging members to register to vote; teaching laws and the necessity of obeying them; aiding in Americanization efforts; and cultivating “Junior Citizenship” among children, which meant teaching children to obey laws. The emphasis on a law-abiding citizenry was a change in direction from its promotion of peace and community activism just two decades earlier. Revealing the political leanings of the NCPT, the committee suggested that local units carry out certain activities, which consisted of inviting “well-informed, competent, and conservative speakers for citizenship programs,” celebrating citizenship by holding festivals for new citizens, and giving awards for students’ citizenship essays. As always, NCPT leaders encouraged coop-
eration with other civic groups in these endeavors. The pillars of citizenship continued to guide the association’s program at least thirty years after they were outlined in the late 1920s. The PTAs committee on citizenship drew up virtually identical activities in its 1943–46 plan, with the added component of wartime activities. For instance, it suggested that local units build “wartime citizenship through the High-School Victory Corps” and “begin postwar planning now” in teaching the tenets of democracy.41

During the Depression, the white PTA emphasized patriotism as it took more seriously its own role as preserver of American values. In some ways, this contrasted with the school curriculum, which advanced a critique of capitalism. The PTA joined other civic organizations in promoting patriotism but did not challenge school authorities as had the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the American Legion, and others who suggested a revised history canon. The PTA leadership created, through words and images, an organization that embraced patriotic ideals. Around the country it was not uncommon for local school meetings to be part business, part patriotic exhibition. A November 1934 meeting of the white Jamestown, New York, Parent-Teacher Association included tables decorated with American flags and red, white, and blue candles, and speeches on the work of the school boy patrol and the importance of keeping dues current. Throughout the 1930s, at the monthly meetings of the Jamestown PTA, members took part in different patriotic and civic-oriented activities: they sang the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and they discussed “The Home's Responsibility in Developing the Fundamental Standards of Good Citizenship.” The emphasis on patriotism and teaching citizenship continued through the 1940s as the Jamestown PTA listened to schoolchildren sing the “Star-Spangled Banner” and debated whether to order new china for their monthly meetings, given the importance of rationing and doing away with nonnecessities during World War II.42

Yet in the 1930s the citizenship committee had begun to incorporate the language of “world good will” into its discussions. The PTA continued to focus on educating law-abiding citizens, but reintroduced an emphasis on peace that it had retreated from temporarily in the early 1920s, because that stance was associated with communism and subversion. Moreover, the PTA was helping to promote to the American population the thinking of liberal educators and social scientists who positioned the school as the ideal place to teach harmonious democratic relationships and world citizenship. PTA committee members explained, “Peace should know no boundaries. There should be international understanding, and universal good will among peoples. . . . Every parent-teacher should study the peace movement, so that there will be no question as to whether children shall be trained in the ideals of peace or the habits of war.” For white PTA leaders, world goodwill and patriotism went
hand-in-hand, as the good citizen educated herself about and respected other cultures. However, acting on these principles was challenging, because PTA leaders would be forced to reconcile the organization’s commitment to racial inclusion with its policy on segregation. During the 1930s and 1940s, even though the white PTA began to emphasize tolerance and understanding, it circumvented the matter of racism within its ranks by placing these ideas in an international context. State-level meetings of white units reiterated the focus on international understanding over domestic race relations. In contrast, the black PTA accepted the new emphasis and acted on it, using the platform of cultural pluralism to promote racial equality and understanding in schools, to the white PTA, and in the public at large. The NCCPT also had embraced the growing intercultural education movement and incorporated its ideas and activities into its program.\textsuperscript{43}

As the United States entered World War II, the PTA took on world tolerance and understanding as part of its platform, as organization leaders expressed renewed interest in improving the school curriculum to “meet new needs.” It was a reflection of concerns about the welfare of children around the globe, as well as an interest in protecting American patriotic ideals. Even the NCPT’s Committee on Reading and Library Service declared, “Only when there is an educated public, fully informed and able to make wise choices, is the nation safe from the forces of ignorance, fear, intolerance, and greed. Such a public is dependent for its existence and maintenance upon good reading habits and an adequate supply of reading material.”\textsuperscript{44}

When the United Nations (UN) charter was drafted and ratified in the early 1940s, the PTA seized the opportunity to promote the idea of the care and protection of children worldwide. The organization’s leaders were especially interested in the founding of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The NCPT’s Committee on International Relations, led by Lucille L. Jesse, stepped up plans to raise the standards of political education among PTA members and youth in schools. Jesse declared, “We must educate ourselves and our neighbors so that we have a nucleus of informed and understanding citizens, whose vigilance will produce intelligent public opinion to give support to our leaders at the peace table.” In particular, the committee called for understanding others’ viewpoints, exercising tolerance toward different beliefs, and studying other cultures and nations. The committee suggested that in order to become more informed on these issues members at the local level peruse articles on international understanding in the organization’s magazine, \textit{National Parent-Teacher}.\textsuperscript{45}

This was a pivotal point at which white national-level officers began to examine the hypocrisy of maintaining a segregated organization. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, \textit{National Parent-Teacher} published
fewer than a dozen articles on tolerance and cultural understanding that chal-
lenged white members to consider their own complicity in racism and dis-
crimination. The articles reflected NCPT leaders’ awareness of the global sociopolitical context, in particular of Britain and France declaring war on Germany, in relation to citizenship issues for youth. NCPT leaders announced they were revising the organization’s original philosophy and programs to meet “present social needs,” reminding members, “A spirit of genuine tolerance permeates every phase of the work” of the organization. However, discussions of tolerance were in reference to religious tolerance, as a result of the outreach efforts of the National Council of Christians and Jews. Features in National Parent-Teacher reflected this renewed direction. A 1939 article by Annette Smith asked, “Should a democracy permit any kind of propaganda? Should it permit pleas for dictatorship, for violence, for ‘race’ prejudice?” These questions were intended to link world events to what was going on in the United States. Smith’s true objective is revealed at the end of the piece, in which she advised parents and teachers of ways to prepare young people for “responsible citizenship in a democracy”: by examining assumptions and prejudices, reflecting on American ideals, and teaching about the “contributions of various racial and national groups to American life.”

Another article, Ruth Benedict’s “Let’s Get Rid of Prejudice,” was more explicit in terms of addressing racism. Benedict asked parents—mothers, really—to begin by looking at themselves and their habits and comments to see whether they were perpetuating bigotry by making comments such as “What can you expect of Negroes?” or complaining about “Mr. Angotti in the corner grocery store,” because “all Italians . . . cheat.” The author linked such comments, and those denigrating statements directed at ethnic minorities, to Nazism and the belief in racial superiority. By using a strategy that associated prejudice and discrimination with genocide and mass murder—a tactic Smith used in the earlier article—Benedict left no gray area for the reader: bigotry of any kind was wrong. Her piece stood out among the other articles in National Parent-Teacher because it took on racism in the United States directly. The other articles connected race obliquely to the problems of discrimination against other nationalities without discussing racism within the borders of the United States. Despite these calls for an end to intolerance in the pages of the NCPT periodical—and perhaps because there were so few of them—little changed in the day-to-day activities of local-level white units.

At the national level of the organization, white PTA leaders’ thinking about difference, race, and tolerance was furthered by their involvement in a series of conferences convened by the State Department toward the end of the war on the formation of the United Nations. NCPT President Minnetta Hastings
was invited to attend meetings held from August to October, 1944, which came to be called the Dumbarton Oaks conferences. The result of the conferences was a proposal for a new international peace organization, the United Nations. Hastings was most enthusiastic about PTA involvement at this level and her having been invited to the 1945 conference held in San Francisco, at which the UN charter was signed by fifty nations. The high-security gathering included representatives from the leading national women's organizations, such as Margaret Hickey of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, and La Fell Dickson, the GFWC president, as well as men's veterans' organizations and service clubs, such as the Kiwanis, Rotary, and Lions clubs, in an effort to get their input regarding the United Nations. In particular, the PTA was one of several education organizations asked for their feedback on the feasibility and purpose of an international office of education. It was the government's way of getting in touch with the American public, by tapping into civil society and the reach of civic associations. With the inclusion of the PTA, a vast communication and action network was at hand. In her report to the NCPT, Hastings bragged about the ability of the PTA to reach across the United States at lightning speed. While in San Francisco she had sent telegrams to the state PTA presidents of New Jersey, Michigan, Texas, and Minnesota, states that had congressional representatives among the U.S. delegates at the San Francisco conference. She explained, “Within twenty-four hours each state [PTA] congress had sent a fine telegram to its [U.S.] congressman delegate. The president of the American Council on Education, the N.E.A. consultant, and the others just couldn’t believe it. They said, ‘It has been no time at all since we talked about the possibility of doing this—and here it’s done! Whenever the P.T.A. people say they will do something, they come through all over the country.’”

Attending the UN organizing conferences helped shape the NCPT leader’s thoughts and led her to rework the platform of the organization; Hastings was exposed to new ideas that challenged the head of the Judeo-Christian-oriented PTA. She remarked on the religious differences presented at the San Francisco conference: “The meeting opened with a minute of silent meditation. With Moslems and Buddhists and people of many other creeds represented there, it was not quite politic to say a word of prayer.” Also, while at the conference, she along with the other attendees watched international films on such countries as the Netherlands, France, and the USSR that depicted the atrocities of war as well as the customs and lifestyles of other people. At the end of the conference Hastings noted the importance of coming to understand “peoples of other lands,” an insight she took back to her role as leader of the PTA. Most importantly, the experiences she had in San Francisco led her to question the PTA’s approach to difference in its membership and programs.
Hastings returned to her work invigorated about getting the word out about the importance of the United Nations. One PTA member wrote, “Thousands of letters were written to congressmen urging adherence to the principles of the UNO” as a result of having attended the conference. Moreover, the PTA took it upon itself at this time to educate its membership and the public. The “vast resources of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers were mobilized into a gigantic educational project to explain the structure and scope of the UNO, not only to its own membership but to the citizens of every community where there is a P.T.A.” The NCCPT followed suit and promoted UN Day, asking members to remember “that education for freedom will make a nation free indeed.” The PTA stepped up efforts to teach about foreign lands and people, claiming that pageants have proven to be “unusually successful as a means of fostering appreciation of other cultures.” These pageants, a staple of early intercultural education programs, were becoming increasingly common in schools around the country. Likewise, food and clothing drives were promoted as a way to involve children in reaching out to the less fortunate and teaching them to be thankful for American abundance.

As a result of the war and the creation of the UN, the national leadership of the white PTA began to question its commitment to all children. In a rare acknowledgment of the NCPT’s inconsistency regarding racial equality, Hastings made a statement that was celebrated by the black PTA; at the annual meeting of the NCPT in 1943, she announced, “If ‘all children are our children,’ it follows that there can surely be no inequality among the children living in a country that proudly calls itself the arsenal of democracy. The first step toward citizenship in an interdependent world must be the elimination of all prejudice and bias toward minority groups within our own border.”

White units at the local level, however, did not have to heed Hastings’ call, because there was no direct pressure on them to do so. While their objectives needed to match the platform of the national level, the flexible federated infrastructure of the PTA allowed them the freedom to interpret those objectives according to their own interests and local contexts. Therefore, at the local level, white PTA units carried on with business as usual, except in those regions that already were doing interracial work through the PTA, such as Delaware. In the South, white units included world citizenship in their state programs and at annual meetings; they had to, just as other regions did, but avoided any direct mention of racial understanding in the United States. For example, while the 1947 annual meeting of the South Carolina Congress of Parents and Teachers (SCCPT) featured health and citizenship prominently in the program, it downplayed cultivating friendly feelings toward other nations and encouraging “peoples of different origins in a community to participate in community affairs.” Despite the white South Carolina PTA’s recounting of the
earlier theme “all children are our children,” its focus remained on children of other lands. This pattern continued through the 1950s, as the SCCPT reiterated the NCPT’s central ideas but refused to acknowledge Jim Crow segregation and other forms of racial discrimination.54

The focus on world citizenship was embraced by the NCCPT, which began to infuse the idea into its programs and publications, with a special emphasis on eradicating racism stateside. Intercultural education became the vehicle that would help the black PTA address such issues. Black PTA leaders were much more willing to take action than their white counterparts, as they took an interest in the intercultural education movement that was growing in popularity and entering the school curriculum in the United States. From 1936 to 1941 the local units of the black PTA were encouraged to study the economic, social, and educational needs of their communities in order to make recommendations for change. One of the outcomes of this effort was that local units began to institute intercultural education programs in their communities. Beginning in the 1940s the association successfully encouraged state and local units to form committees on intercultural relations with the white PTA representatives in Southern states. Little is known about how racial and ethnic minorities felt about the goals of intercultural education or how they adapted its programs. Stephanie J. Shaw examines the involvement of black professional women in intercultural and intergroup relations efforts and argues that black women were exploited by white managers who enlisted them in cultural sensitivity groups because of their orientation toward social justice and racial uplift and their willingness to work on behalf of these issues for little or no wages. She claims that those white managers who embraced intercultural education did so out of fear of the emerging radical left. However, the black PTA’s use of intercultural education shows another application, as African American members sought to use the Intergroup Relations committees to their advantage by employing such groups in gaining equal resources in schools, and especially after desegregation became inevitable. By 1945 intercultural education was a staple of the adult education programs sponsored by the NCCPT.55

Initiated by Rachel Davis DuBois, a classroom teacher from New Jersey, intercultural education was intended to cultivate sympathetic attitudes in schoolchildren toward people of other races and ethnicities. In the 1920s and 1930s, DuBois designed and led assemblies and lessons that highlighted the contributions of minority groups, in particular African Americans. She drew on her Quakerism and status as an active member of the NAACP to seek to improve relations between the races. In 1934 DuBois organized the Service Bureau for Intercultural Education (SBIE) as a center for teachers. Later criticized for glorifying ethnicity and fostering divisiveness among Americans, the SBIE was wrested from her control and redirected under new leadership
toward a focus on “respect for a national culture with limits to expression of cultural differences.” DuBois continued her work, however, by creating the Workshop for Cultural Democracy in 1941. For the rest of her long life, DuBois worked with community groups and schools, implementing her “group conversation method,” which involved different groups of people getting to know one another socially in order to overcome stereotypes and prejudices. The group conversation method was adapted by civic groups, educational institutions, and churches in an effort to build racial and ethnic understanding.

In 1946 the PTA convened its first meeting of the Group Relations Committee that was composed of members from the NCPT and NCCPT. However, the committee met only once, revealing the difficulties in bringing the two parties together. Leaders of both PTA branches met at Tuskegee in the summer of 1950 and decided to revive the committee. A photo of the gathering, with the committee posing under the statue of Booker T. Washington, made the cover of the NCCPT’s magazine, but the gathering went without mention in the pages of the National Parent-Teacher. The Group Relations Committee met again at Tuskegee the following year and decided to attempt to build on the plan of work outlined five years earlier. By this time, the national officers of both branches decided they would work together for the common good, claiming it would be “one of the biggest contributions” the PTA could make “to the national welfare and to the future good of all our children.” In so doing, the committee resolved to make Group Relations a standing committee of the two PTA branches and instructed its state units to do the same. The committee was determined to work on equity issues, such as regularly scheduled conferences on race relations, equity in education—especially in terms of personnel and school facilities—and adequate housing. The NCCPT found additional benefits of having the Group Relations Committee as a newly formed part of its infrastructure; in 1951 it used the new mechanism to request that the NCPT not usurp its authority by sending materials directly to its local units.

Having adapted a model—the group conversation method—that enabled the leaders of the segregated branches to communicate, the PTA formalized the Group Relations committees to coordinate and promote intercultural education programs among its membership. The committees thereby carved out a “discursive arena” within the National PTA that was not there before. That is, while civic organizations enjoyed the benefits of face-to-face meetings, such interactions were not possible in a segregated association. A structure had to be imported to bring leaders of the two branches together. Needing a committee chair, the group selected the dynamic Deborah Partridge, a black scholar, to fill the job. At the time, Partridge was a visiting professor at New York University and an assistant professor at Queens College, and was doing postdoctoral work at the University of Pennsylvania. Within a year of her appointment
as chair, Partridge began to push for the “integration of all people into the [PTA] program,” calling for joint meetings between the two congresses beyond what had already been established. However, her call to action and the Group Relations Committee met with limited success. Within months, she was able to report that nine state units had developed programs on human relations, but little else transpired, as white Southerners were resistant to being active on the Group Relations committees.58

Nevertheless, the NCCPT made the ideals of intercultural education part of its program and formed groups to work on racial harmony and educational equity. African American PTA leaders viewed intercultural understanding as “basic to the development of both character and citizenship.” Throughout these years, black and white local units were directed to utilize the talents and abilities of the different cultural groups in their communities, but the white PTA continued its focus on world cultures—promoting the purposes and activities of the UN and asking all members to support food and clothing drives for poorer nations and to show “unending patience in compromising differences within and among nations”—while the black PTA sustained its focus on racism in America. By the 1950s Rachel Davis DuBois had become a featured speaker at the annual meetings of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. She was among a list of well-known scholars to speak at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the NCCPT, along with Horace Mann Bond and local dignitaries such as Oscar J. Chapman, president of Delaware State College, and William J. Storey, the mayor of Dover, Delaware. In northeastern urban communities that experienced racial conflict, DuBois was called upon to lead group conversations to solve problems. When the conflict involved schools, DuBois favored having local PTA groups partake in the exchange. In her memoirs DuBois recounts one such day in the early 1950s in New York City:

After ten weeks of working together and sharing, a mothers’ group gathered in the coffee canteen of a West Side public school in Manhattan to celebrate in January’s zero weather the birth of two babies on the same day—one black and one white, brought to the PTA when a month old, by their mothers. The fun of sharing old-wives’ tales about birth and babies moved into a deep feeling of joy when they sang each other’s lullabies, while passing the babies around the circle.

In this recollection, DuBois romanticizes her hopes for intercultural education and the group conversation method. It was a scenario that was, if at all accurate, rarely replayed in local PTA units around the nation and particularly in the South.59
Nonetheless, the NCPT could not, by 1950, ignore the importance of race relations in its program and objectives. “Human relations” became one of the points of the NCPT’s Four-Point program that year, and the black PTA devised programs and enlisted speakers to serve the goal. That year, Delaware conducted a program titled “Human Relations through the Parent-Teacher Program,” and Georgia’s president, Ethel Kight, emphasized “human understanding” during her tenure (1946–52). NCCPT leaders considered with irony the white PTA’s rhetoric on global understanding and the continuing existence of segregation and prejudice in the United States. Dr. John W. Davis, president of West Virginia State College and keynote speaker at the 1952 annual meeting of the NCCPT, connected world understanding to the plight of African American youth for the delegates: “It is important that not only the salvation of the Negro be considered; this means salvation of all peoples, black, white, yellow, brown. The growth of the youth in Georgia has something to do with the total growth of youth in Indonesia, China.”

Unlike National Parent-Teacher, the NCCPT journal Our National Family featured discussions on prejudice, tolerance, and racial equality in virtually every issue, and local units remained focused on race work through curricular initiatives and community projects. Thus NCCPT leaders interpreted the PTA platform as supporting race work and capitalized on the emphasis on democracy to further equal educational opportunity. For example, in a piece titled “Problems of Prejudice,” Mrs. Charles L. Williams, an NCCPT officer, used war imagery in a manner similar to her white counterparts, but did not avoid critiquing the United States. “In our nation, the minorities are still behind the barbed wire fence of prejudice,” she wrote in 1952. Like the authors of the articles in National Parent-Teacher, Williams called for members to turn inward and examine their own lives and prejudices. Guest speakers at the black PTA’s annual meetings echoed the refrain, challenging democracy as “weakest in the field of racial equality.” The journal promoted special events in the community around racial pride, furthering the activities of Carter G. Woodson’s Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, such as Race Relations Day, Brotherhood Day, and Negro History Week. Beatrice Morgan, the outspoken president of the black PTA from 1949 to 1953, helped come up with the theme for the organization’s twenty-fifth anniversary that made clear the organization’s position: “Every Child an Equal Chance.” Morgan gave her reasons for choosing this theme: because “three million Negro children in America are handicapped by the incident of color.” NCCPT leaders did not just state their beliefs; they encouraged local units to speak out against inequality in constructive ways: “Develop the courage to speak up when things are unfair” and “Be cooperative,” they instructed members. As always, the burden was on the oppressed, as black PTA members worked to
build interracial bridges. Maryland’s Colored Congress reported in 1951 that it had “increase[d] its efforts to promote more inter-racial activities in the State and local associations.” Black PTA leaders believed that the one of the best antidotes to racial discrimination was education for citizenship, what Morgan defined as “responsible citizenship[,] . . . the kind of education that will enable persons to make a confident, satisfactory, happy adjustment anywhere on this globe.”

Such efforts always had to be balanced, however, with the conservative political stance of the white PTA. As a result, black PTA officers found themselves in the difficult position of using the organization and its platform to challenge the status quo while seeking not to offend white PTA officers and members. The balancing act became all the more demanding as civil rights litigation heated up in the South and the prospect of the desegregation of schools appeared. The school equalization movement, begun in the 1930s, was favored by both blacks who wanted to make segregation expensive to force the issue and whites who wished to maintain a separate system of education. School desegregation became a contentious point for PTA leaders at the state and local levels, which national officers had a difficult time managing. In 1950 the NAACP fought for the desegregation of schools in South Carolina with the *Briggs v. Elliott* case, but lost. Instead, Governor James Byrnes was instrumental in maintaining segregation with a $75 million school equalization program, which the South Carolina’s Colored Congress of Parents and Teachers vowed to “carry out to the letter.” Black local units were instructed to “make inventories of their respective educational facilities on county and local levels and . . . [to present] their findings . . . to the education officials.” The Colored Congress responded, “We further urge the institution of court action, if that becomes necessary, to secure our objectives.” The white state PTA endorsed the measure as well, since it would help maintain separate schools. The white members of the South Carolina Congress of Parents and Teachers were implored to “act now” in making sure every member was registered to vote and did vote on “legislation that will provide equal educational opportunities for our children in South Carolina.” Overall, the effort failed to equalize school facilities for African Americans because only 57 percent of the money collected through the special sales tax went to the separate schools. It was not enough to equalize the value of school properties in South Carolina, which stood at $19.7 million for black schools and $83.9 million for white ones. The South Carolina Colored Congress of Parents and Teachers (SCCCPT) would take on Governor Byrnes and the state legislature at least once more in the 1950s, condemning the “vindictive action” proposed by his administration to remove the law providing for public schools from the state constitution. A handful of religious groups, the NAACP, the Palmetto Education Association,
and the state's Colored Congress fought the attempt to deny blacks public education if desegregation became the law of the land. South Carolina's white PTA remained silent on the matter. Eventually, South Carolina's Colored Congress backed away from the school equalization efforts to follow the lead of the NAACP in fighting for the desegregation of schools.65

As civil rights organizations were gearing up for the battle in the courts to desegregate schools, members of the Colored Congress watched, listened, and volunteered when they could. The pages of Our National Family kept the membership informed by featuring articles by prominent civil rights leaders. A 1953 article by NAACP field secretary June Shagaloff argued that the movement to equalize school facilities was "Superficial, because construction materials are not always of the best quality, school curricula, student-teacher ratio and teaching materials are often ignored." It is ironic that Shagaloff’s piece appeared in the same issue—on the same page, no less—in which NCCPT president Beatrice Morgan reported, "The shining new and up-to-date school plants, the rehabilitation of old ones, and the modern school supplies which I have observed as I have traveled over the states, dictate that a new personality may be born in the Negro boy and girl." Nonetheless, one cannot assume that Morgan's comments are to be taken as accommodationism; instead, such statements were often intended to deceive—or at the very least, there was more to Morgan’s position than what appears at face value. NCCPT leaders knew that if schools and facilities were to be truly equalized, that would be a setback in race relations and equality. Morgan and other NCCPT leaders nonetheless reflect a tension that was a constant in the organization’s history. Whereas the NCPT advocated a “race-blind” approach to child welfare work, black PTA leaders understood that one could not raise young people and educate them without paying attention to race and racial inequality. In the pages of Our National Family, therefore, Morgan's comments and other essays collectively represented a site of resistance within a white-majority organization and offered a public forum for challenging segregation and racial equality.66

However, even though the black PTA gave more time and attention to intergroup and intercultural relations than did the white PTA, it was not the foremost issue on local units’ agendas. Overall, by the 1950s little had changed in the National PTA program and activities, except that the NCCPT and its state and local units began to become more outspoken about racial equality. Black and white local-level meetings in the early 1950s looked similar to those of decades prior, with fundraising and social events dominating the monthly meetings. The all-white Sixth District PTA of South Carolina reported in 1953 on its activities and accomplishments of that school year. One unit, the A. C. Moore PTA, explained that the theme chosen for that year was “The Child in a Democratic Community.” It held a series of Fathers’ Nights, and students put
on plays; officers gave reports on membership drives, school inspections, and fundraising activities. “Three paper drives and two coat hanger drives have been held. From these drives we have given $250 to the Library to purchase books.” The Arden PTA, in the same district, reported that a representative group of members attended a parent education workshop at Winthrop College that July. The theme was “Partners in Child Development” that year, and they had heard local judge J. T. Sloan speak on the “Function of Juvenile Courts and Synopsis of Juvenile Bill.” The Arden PTA also conducted a fair amount of fundraising: “A set of books were bought for the library and each room given $10 to be used for room improvement.” These reports were repeated around the country, each one detailing the ongoing efforts of women volunteers and their contributions to local schools.87

“Plan for a Changed PTA”: Transitions at Mid-Century

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, the modern PTA was forged with a membership in the millions, a far-reaching network, and the ability to sway national legislation. The organization was viewed by others, in particular the U.S. government, as a force to be reckoned with and an organization that could rally the average American around supporting such causes as the United Nations, school lunches, and the ubiquitous fundraisers. The NCCPT began to rely less on the NCPT for direction and guidance as it came into its own by the 1940s. With a relatively small but growing membership, the black PTA was developing its own program, based on the NCPT’s platform but informed by race and the fight for equality. The white PTA, too, began to include tolerance and understanding in its guiding principles, but tended to speak in terms of world tolerance and the understanding of peoples of different nations. Nonetheless, the NCPT began again to consider racial inclusion and what it meant for the organization.

By the early 1950s, the black PTA, in the manner of civil rights organizations, had become more vocal about the need for racial equality in all facets of American life. After World War II, conflict in Korea caused concern among the American public because the United Nations forces—with a considerable representation of American troops—had been deployed and were facing the formidable Chinese communist army. Americans’ hopes for worldwide peace were dashed as truce negotiations dragged on for years. NCCPT leaders followed closely the cases being tried in the Supreme Court and kept members apprised of each new development. In 1952 Beatrice Morgan vacated the NCCPT president’s office in the association’s new digs in Dover, Delaware,
as Mayme Williams of Florida took over the leadership position at a crucial time. Referring to the issue that was on everyone’s mind, school desegregation, Williams established a committee “to study the problems and to formulate helpful policies, for the Congress planned to be ready with a definite but flexible program whatever the decision of the United States Supreme Court might be.” Williams urged greater cooperation between the two PTA branches on a more level playing field. With her tenure began the tradition of the two PTA presidents speaking at each other’s annual meetings. During this time, the black PTA sought to show the white PTA it no longer needed it as an advisor, but as a peer. African American leaders, such as U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge William Hastie, informed black PTA members at one annual meeting that they could ably serve the role of developing “reason and understanding in their own communities.” He thereby helped PTA members see themselves as an important part of the process of school desegregation by educating the public. Portending challenges for the association in years to come, Hastie could not have been more right when he advised black PTA members to “plan for a changed PTA.”

Overall, by the early 1950s the PTA’s valuing of difference, race, and inclusion had returned after not having been addressed in any public way for nearly fifty years, since the organization’s founding in 1897. At this time, however, the PTA was more directly challenged by society and its own members when it came to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the enforcement of desegregation in the ensuing decades. With the passing of *Brown* the PTA faced the challenge of supporting desegregation not only in the schools but also within its own organization. After the Supreme Court’s decision was rendered, both PTA branches issued their own statement of support, encouraging local and state units to work toward the integration of schools and PTA units.

During the mid-twentieth century the black and white leaders of the PTA had created an administrative structure that would help facilitate integration: the Intergroup Relations committees. However, the committees were limited in their reach and effectiveness in uniting the two PTA branches and offering guidance on the desegregation of schools. Some committees addressed regional interests, such as religious diversity, while others did not meet at all. In some instances, the committees were effective, as in some border states, where the Intergroup Relations committees successfully negotiated desegregation of local units. While the white PTAs’ national-level officers were opposed to segregation and tried to encourage the membership to work toward unification of the PTA, they faced violent opposition from the white PTA units in the Deep South. By allowing each state to determine the pace of the desegregation of its units, the white PTA leadership set the stage for a protracted process of integration that lasted nearly twenty years.