FOR YEARS I have had the joy of having a research topic that is as easy to explain to the layperson as to the professional historian—the mere mention that I was writing a book on the history of the PTA caused people to nod in immediate understanding. Yet I found myself frustrated in trying to overcome the popular culture stereotypes of a PTA composed of white, middle-class soccer moms vying for power and control in local schools. To me, the organization has meant more, despite the large measure of truth to these characterizations. Such contemporary images belie the association’s past as a civic organization that has allowed for diverse members’ expression of hopes and goals for public education. For me, the history of the PTA has always been about race and difference, in terms of who was included, who was excluded, and what ideals they espoused. Therefore, while I acknowledge that the National PTA has always been overwhelmingly represented by white, middle-class women, I hope that this book reveals how the racial policies and practices of the organization presented the biggest challenge to its leaders.

Among the great voluntary federations of the twentieth century, the PTA was widely accepted by citizens who saw in the organization the opportunity to lead, to serve, and to address society’s most challenging issues through education, such as poverty, child welfare, health, and discrimination. Such were the advantages of membership and activism in civil society, that space between individual action and governmental oversight. While millions of members around the country studied and adhered to PTA policy as if it were gospel, the organization’s federated design allowed for variance in addressing regionally,
ethnically, racially, ideologically, and socioeconomically diverse needs. This was both a benefit and a drawback. While it allowed for the rapid and far-reaching growth and expansion of the organization, at times national leaders were powerless to enforce policy, as exemplified by the attempts to desegregate Southern units. One way to view this is that bridging social capital—connections among unlike groups and individuals—was as necessary as bonding social capital—links with similar individuals or groups—to bring diverse members together to span the geographic reaches of the United States. Likewise, distrust motivated members to take ownership of their roles, learn PTA policy, and develop programs to serve their communities, instead of allowing others to teach, guide, and monitor their children. The development of a strong, well-coordinated infrastructure helped individuals develop leadership skills, spread the PTA program around the country, and made members—the majority of whom were women—feel as though they were able to bring about large-scale change. Citizens from different regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultures found appealing the organization’s emphasis on school and social reform. Oddly enough, the organization was at its strongest numerically when it was segregated and members realized what would be lost with unification.

One of the benefits of membership in voluntary associations is the opportunity to be a part of something bigger, to meet people outside of one’s geographic region and social circle, in addition to getting to know one’s neighbors better. Regularly held face-to-face meetings are an important aspect of voluntary organizations, as citizens come together to discuss, debate, and even socialize. In such settings the potential exists for discourse around problems and challenges in education and other social issues. This discursive arena, found in church groups, fraternal societies, and other organizations, was not fully realized in the National PTA. In one sense, the PTA achieved a modicum of success by providing a forum for exchange of concerns, ideas, wants, and needs between black and white educators and lay activists through formal committees. There were few other arenas in the early twentieth century for these discussions to take place, particularly in regard to public education. Nonetheless, segregation proved too difficult for the organization to overcome. The National PTA could not devise a suitable structure to bring black and white members together with regularity to address issues of concern, even though the potential existed through committees and extension offices.

One of the central arguments in this book has been although the PTA was indeed run by a majority of middle-class, white women, we are well cautioned to remember that it was adapted by diverse groups of citizens who found in its design a viable means to work with the growing public education system. This feature of the PTA was a central theme in this study, as I explored the meaning and influence of civic organizations in public education. If we take
parents and citizens as organized volunteers and not as individuals vested primarily in their particular interests, the landscape of the school volunteer looks much different than has been portrayed in the historiography. In other words, cooperation and conflict are not the only ways to frame this history. Therefore, this book examined how the PTA idea—that of organized groups of volunteers—took root and gave voice to those in the center as well as those on the margins of decision making in schools, understanding that the location of the margin and center depend on where one stands. In some instances, black teachers and PTA leaders—such as Narvie Harris and Clara Gay—at the hub of their communities, were on the periphery of school decision making when it came to all-white boards of education. In other cases, white nonprofessionals—state leaders such as Eunice Harper Leonard of South Carolina and Martha Rutledge of Alabama—were marginalized in schools, which led to the strengthening of a parallel educational institution that afforded them some measure of power and influence in education. Therefore, the PTA, as a federated association, defined a civic space for women volunteers. The PTA program took on different forms, purposes, and goals in different locales as ideas and skills were transferred from one place to another and changed over time. Black and white women rose through the ranks, and some activities remained constant over time, such as the emphasis on providing school lunches and holding fundraisers.

CARRYING OUT this research has been a formidable challenge. While sources on the white PTA, or NCPT, are abundant and can be found easily, it was difficult to research the black PTA because so little documentation exists. All a researcher needs to do is visit a local historical society or peruse the databases of university and public archives, and an overwhelming amount of data can be found on the NCPT. There is more than one can possibly assess for one book. Moreover, the National PTA headquarters had maintained an extensive collection of minutes, state histories, periodicals, photos, and ledgers—now housed at the University of Illinois at Chicago—yet sources on the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers are hard to find in that particular collection and elsewhere. A couple of treasure troves helped provide much-needed information about the black PTA’s leaders and activities: two organizational histories, of the NCCPT and Georgia Colored Congress, and the extant issues of Our National Family and Our Georgia Family, housed at the Library of Congress.

The dearth of documentation, especially of state and local units, on the NCCPT is reflective of its relationship to the white association and its status as an organization in the history of American education. Since no national
headquarters remains for the Colored Congress, my early research explorations had me contacting the NCPT state affiliates around the South, only to learn that little was saved for posterity. In contrast to the many collections on white PTA units found around the United States, I located only one collection of black PTA documents in Alabama, and it was thin. Thankfully, however, it was enough to help me understand and interpret the challenges of desegregating a state unit.

What I came to realize was that when Southern state and local PTA units integrated, the many documents of the black association were not kept despite one of the provisions of the unification agreement, that the white PTA would “receive all of the archives of the NCCPT . . . and will give them an honored place alongside and as part of the corresponding records of the NCPT.” My find in Alabama helped me learn that the NCCPT took great care to turn over its assets, debts, and papers, but they were not catalogued appropriately, or even saved. In May 1972 former state president Tessie Nixon delivered the files of the Alabama Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers so that they could become part of the history and holdings of the newly integrated PTA. As records show, her boxes and containers were “graciously accepted by the Board of Alabama Congress of Parents and Teachers,” though only one folder of materials remains in the present-day archives. The impression I obtained after these early research explorations was that the NCCPT was seen as almost an entirely separate and distinct organization by many at the local and state levels, and my fear is that much was discarded. This insight was remarkable to me because I knew the NCCPT valued the preservation of its legacy, kept careful records, and created a paper trail, the tracings of which had been scattered as Southern PTA units integrated beginning with the Brown decision of 1954 and ending with the unification in 1970. For example, local units maintained their own historical records, as part of PTA policy. These “procedure books” are referred to time and again in black PTA histories and periodicals, but I have not located a single one.

Even though the black PTA was proportionately smaller than the white PTA, it is important to recognize how widely linked it was with civil rights and African American organizations. Moreover, it served as an integral part of the PTA infrastructure by allowing the association to find its way into African American rural and urban communities and schools. The black PTA network accomplished much throughout the duration of its existence. Most importantly, it helped create and support a system of schools in the American South and provided a network for black educators across the South during the days of segregated schools. This network united schools and educational leaders across location, and it was there for the schoolteachers, who learned about organizing citizens to support local schools from colleagues at NCCPT.
meetings and through other organizations with which the black PTA was net-
worked, such as the American Teachers’ Association, the NAACP, and the
Urban League. Therefore, membership in the NCCPT afforded black women
teachers and other community members leadership training, collegiality, and a
means to express their hopes for public education and the school curriculum.
Beyond this, it kept the white PTA honest, in a manner of speaking. In other
words, the white PTA did not always act on the rhetoric on child welfare and
inclusion that it espoused. This is the contribution the segregated PTA made;
by its very existence it kept the idea of racial equality and inclusion on the
PTA program. As these pages reveal, however, the black PTA placed race at
the center of its platform, while white local and state PTA units, in most cases,
chose not to address race or inequality.

Therefore, the commitment to racial inclusion in schools, society, and the
organization manifested itself in vastly different ways in the two PTA branches.
It appeared more frequently as slogans than actions in the white PTA, while
the black PTA placed race and racial equality at the center of its program. Even
though the Congress of Mothers was more forward-thinking than other wom-
en’s organizations about racial inclusion at the turn of the twentieth century,
its leaders never did find a way to successfully bring together black and white
members in one association. In these early years, white and black school-
 improvement associations worked separately, each focusing on the needs at
hand.

After 1920, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, the years of
maternalist politics ended, but white and black women continued their school
support efforts with increasing vigor through the 1960s. What is to account
for women’s activism through the middle decades of the twentieth century?
Although women had the vote, they took up volunteer work in communities
and schools with even greater urgency. Several conclusions may be reached.
First, women’s membership in the PTA and other civic associations was viewed
as a part of life, parenting, and being a citizen and community member, in
addition to formal political participation. Also, however, the wide appeal of
parent-teacher groups cannot be overlooked, as well as the fact that the PTA
idea and structure allowed for the participation of many and the expression of
hopes for education and child welfare in a democracy through membership in
a federated voluntary organization. Finally, it suggests that the historiography
of women’s political activism in the twentieth century needs to be viewed in a
new light. While scholars have tended to adhere to the periodization offered
by the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, contrasting women’s activism
before and after they had the vote, I would like to suggest adding a different
perspective. Given that membership in voluntary associations has played such
a significant role in women’s—and men’s—lives in the twentieth century, we
should reconsider women's activism according to political scientists' findings
regarding the rise and fall (and even rise again) of volunteerism and member-
ship in civic organizations. This would help explain the significant growth and
influence of the National PTA through mid-century and would account for the
steep declines in the 1960s.

THIS BOOK joins the growing number of scholarly works in recent years
that have revealed the losses faced by black communities with the implementa-
tion of desegregation. It adds another layer to this history, moving beyond
the local case study, to show the intersection of volunteer and professional
roles on a broader scale, through a national network. The benefits of mem-
bership in the federation—being linked to a formidable operation that would
represent local interests and offer training and leadership—continued on for
most of the twentieth century. Yet, in the quest for equitable public schooling,
desegregation efforts challenged the infrastructure of the organization and
began to erode an important dimension of civil society, the associational link
between home and school. We are learning of late how a multitude of African
American teachers and principals lost their jobs after Brown, yet continued to
fight for desegregation despite their knowledge of what was to come. Along
with unemployment came the erosion of a segment of civil society that helped
give agency to African Americans. The implications of these losses are not
to be taken lightly and should be considered by researchers seeking to study
parental involvement in today's schools.

I hope that the gaps in this study will lead other scholars to further explora-
tion. In particular, this work focuses on a dichotomized black-white member-
ship at the expense of investigating other ethnic, cultural, and racial groups.
To a certain extent, this was a function of the available documentation, but to
an even greater degree, it was the result of my own research interests in seg-
regated schools and the networks of support that guided them in the early to
mid-twentieth century. The PTA's structure as a segregated organization also
led to the black-white bifurcation in this study. For the interested researcher,
there were many other ethnic and cultural groups that ran affiliated parent-
teacher associations around the country. Finally, one of the historian's greatest
challenges is not seeing what she expects to see. At times throughout I was
faced with the challenge of not resorting to oversimplification in writing about
white and black PTA members, by keeping myself from painting white work-
ers as passive about race work and black members in a sentimental light. There
existed several different opinions and ideologies within each of the two groups
that I hope I have portrayed with accuracy and nuance, such as the white
national-level leaders who felt frustrated with segregationist state and local
leaders in the South, black leaders who disagreed on whether to integrate, and white segregationists who refused to join the same association as African Americans.  

This history of the National PTA raises questions about the role of voluntary associations, civic engagement, and civil society in public education. What is the relationship between civic organizations, as expressions of democracy, and public schools, places where the principles of democracy and democratic life are to be taught? Where is the line between professional and volunteer support, and how does this line complicate democratic ideas about who has a say in education? In what ways do national civic organizations help or hinder local, state, and national educational reforms? Most pressing for me in this research was considering the dissolution of a federated network of black educators and volunteers and what this has meant for families, schools, and communities around the nation. It has had an impact on us all.