

Education

Subject

Women Take a Stand to Better Education

Description

The Parent Teacher Association, better known as the PTA, has been helping children, parents, and teachers since 1897. Initially it was known as the National Congress of Mothers until 1925 when it became the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. The founders of the association were Alice McLellan Birney and Phoebe Apperson Hearst. Women were not allowed to vote at this time but the welfare of children was more important than how society might view their attempts at activism. Birney and Hearst felt that regardless of how this campaign might be viewed by society, in the end mothers would support any mission that sought to eliminate threats that endangered children. Their assumptions were correct when on February 17, 1897 over 2,000 people came to Washington, D.C. to attend the first meeting of the National Congress of Mothers.

The meeting in Washington was a huge success and the National Congress of Mothers spread like wildfire. The need for better educational environments spread throughout the United States and in 1911 another organization was founded. The educational needs of children were being handled for the most part by the National Congress of Mothers. However, the educational welfare of the children in segregated schools had yet to be addressed. Selena Sloane Butler founded the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers at Yonge Street Elementary School in Atlanta. The Congress of Mothers worked closely with the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers and by 1970 the two merged to create the National PTA. As of today the National PTA is comprised of 54 state congresses and over 20,000 local units. The National PTA coordinates with the state chapters which act as a liaison for the local chapters.

The National Congress of Parents and Teachers were not only committed to the enhancement of education for children but also the improved relationship and cooperation between parents and teachers. To establish this working relationship and stress the importance of the PTA the program of cooperation with teacher-education institutions was established. National Congress stated that in order for teachers to fully understand the benefits of working with the PTA, the teacher's professional training should include the study of parent-teacher relationships. The objectives of the program revolved around the cooperation of the parent and teacher. The teachers were asked to develop the philosophy that in order for the child to get the best education there should be a mutual partnership between the home and the school. The teachers were also to be made aware of the benefits that would come from utilizing the parent-teacher organization as they continued to work towards their goals. The goals of the parent-teacher organization were to improve schools, to aim towards higher standards of home life, and community forces that are in the best interest of the child.

The implementation of the objectives of the program gave teachers a wide variety of options to choose from. The National Congress would make student packets and literature for the teachers to use to become more familiar with the program. The schools could request an extension specialist that would come into the schools and provide hands on instruction. The National Congress would send representatives if requested to conduct summer workshops for the teachers. There was also a graduate class offered to faculty members at Northwestern University in the hopes that they could teach similar classes to other teachers at their school. The program was successful at integrating teachers into active participation with the parent-teacher organization that was new to many states. This particular program from the National Congress of Parents and Teachers was implemented and accredited to the active president of the organization at the time, Mrs. Mabel Williams Hughes.

In 1902 Alice McLellan Birney stepped down as president of the National Congress of Mothers. Throughout the years many women served as president for the National Congress of Mothers and each one brought their own ideas to the association. The presidents managed the yearly conventions and the themes for the conventions as well as tried to help state chapters evolve with the times. In 1946 Mrs. Mabel Williams Hughes from Tennessee was elected president of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. Mabel Williams Hughes was monumental in bringing awareness to the needs of the public education in Tennessee. A portrait of Mrs. Hughes was placed in the state office and a tributary about her achievements was given by Mrs. C. E. Rogers.

Rogers talked about all of the impressive things that Hughes accomplished for the state of Tennessee and for the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. Hughes' sister Charl Ormond Williams edited a book entitled "Our Public Schools" this book inspired another book "Tennessee's Public Schools" which was edited by the dean of the University of Tennessee. The PTA was able to sell ten thousand copies of the book and because of the PTA getting this book out to the public it aided in getting the General Education Bill of 1947 passed unanimously.

After aiding in the passing of major educational legislation Hughes set her sights on convincing school administrators to stop opposing the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. Rogers states that because of Hughes' "superb leadership the PTA became the cement which bound together the educational forces of Tennessee". Because of all of Hughes' extraordinary achievements the nominating committee unanimously asked her to become president of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. On May 22, 1946 in Denver, Colorado she was officially inaugurated. In her three years of being president she set a record of membership for the National Congress of Parents and Teachers as almost two million new members were gained.

Hughes was known for many of her accomplishments while she was the president of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. She was the one that started the graduate training course for educators at Northwestern University. The success of this course prompted eight other colleges around the country to offer the course and join in on the program. Mrs. Hughes was the first president of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers that was able to speak at an assembly of the American Association of School Administrators. Aside from it being the largest group of educators in the world, her address was included in the Congressional Record.

Mabel Williams Hughes' lifetime achievement as president was when the National Headquarters of the Congress of Parents and Teachers was built. Hughes wanted the building to serve as a memorial to all of the men and women that dedicated their lives to making the world a better place for children. When the building was dedicated in 1955 Mrs. Hughes gave the dedicatory speech where she said "We dedicate this new building to the inalienable rights of children that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness shall not perish from the earth". The National Congress of Mothers, the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, and finally the National Parent Teacher Association have a legacy of over a hundred years of service and devotion to children. Today this organization is still helping parents, teachers, and children achieve a brighter future through education. And it all started with two women that stepped away from their sphere of domesticity and said our children deserve better.

Further Reading

Melanie S. Gustafson, "Birney, Alice Josephine McLellan." *World Book Advanced*. World Book, 2015. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

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Womack, Carlisle E., "Selena Sloan Butler (ca. 1872-1964)." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. August 08, 2013. Accessed April 04, 2015. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/selena-sloan-butler-ca-1872-1964>.

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