

Honoring the Past, Inspiring the Future: 40 Years of Unity

By Leslie Cushman

June 22, 1970, was one of Atlanta's usual hot and languid summer days. But one of the day's coming events was anything but usual. After nearly 40 years, The National Congress of Parents and Teachers (National PTA) and The National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT) would unite. These organizations had operated separately since the latter organization was founded in 1926, but had identical missions with regard to child advocacy. During their separate existence, both congresses worked together on issues and projects and often attended the same conferences. From these mutual collaborations, the possibility of unifying the organizations took root.

Selena Sloan Butler dreamed that children of color would have the same educational opportunities as their white counterparts. Mrs. Butler requested information about the National PTA and began a dialog with educators in Atlanta concerning the prospect of starting such an organization for African-American families. As an educator herself, she knew such a PTA would have an important impact on black families, schools, and the community. In 1911, with the help of individuals who supported her ideas, she formed Yonge PTA, the first African-American

parent teacher association. Its success led her to create the statewide Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (GCCPT) in 1921.

The GCCPT was supported from its inception by the National PTA, and that support awakened a greater interest in developing a parent teacher association for both races. Alabama, Delaware, and Florida were the first states to come on board. Interest continued to grow, as other states began requesting Butler's help in expanding the organization to their individual states. The success of the GCCPT led to the formation of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT) in 1926.

The potential to unite in segregated states prior to court-ordered integration was impossible. Even after integration, many states had seen so much violent opposition to integration that some state governments actually considered closing the schools rather than comply with the Supreme Court orders. Black principals and teachers were losing their jobs, and black schools were being closed in the name of integration. Nonetheless, with racial segregation finally ending, these two great organizations did the right thing.

The road to unification

Talks about unification began in the mid 1960s. On January 28, 1970, the unification plan was approved unanimously by both National Congresses and the plan was submitted to the Board of Managers of the National PTA at its meeting in Dallas. The plan agreed to receive all of the archives of the NCCPT and give them an honored place alongside and as a part of the corresponding records of the National PTA. Life members of the NCCPT would be accorded full status as National PTA life members. National PTA designated a Board of Managers position for an African American, and it has remained filled to this day. The seven states of National PTA with NCCPT parallel organizations—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas—would go on to authorize actions parallel to those of the National PTA when they met individually for their annual conventions.



The ceremony took place during the 45th and final NCCPT annual convention in Atlanta. The setting was fitting, as Alice McLellan Birney, cofounder of the National PTA, and Selena Sloan Butler, founder of the NCCPT, were both Georgia natives. After 45 years of cooperative, but separate work on behalf of families and schools, the NCCPT declared that its "mission had been accomplished, and the time had come to unite with the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the National PTA." As she presided over the final meeting of the 350,000-member organization, Clara Gay, President of the NCCPT, announced, "We have served our purpose" as a separate organization. Mrs. Gay and Mrs. Leon Price of the National PTA reminded the group that the goal of the integrated organization would be "quality living and quality learning for all Americans." Narvie J. Harris, president of GCCPT, and Margie Britt, president of GPTA, two past presidents of the Georgia Congresses, were present and remembered the ceremony to be "significantly moving, the spirit of the moment defining our future."

An Atlanta Journal Constitution article (June 23, 1970) following the unification meeting reported:

"The black and the white national parent-teacher associations formally became one Monday after hearing Atlanta educator Dr. Benjamin Mays, president of the Atlanta Board of Education and president emeritus of Morehouse College, challenge them to make their unification 'an honest marriage.' He challenged the delegates to 'merge with justice, not only to the white, but to the black. ... This merger, which is right and which you are obliged to do, is going to require deep understanding of the situation,' Mays declared, 'and it's going to require rationality—more rationality than emotionalism.'"

As we mark and remember the momentous day that took place 40 years ago, let us continue to embrace the changes our organization continues to make. Our leadership encompasses many varied and diverse groups. PTA has set the tone and implemented change before society has fully acknowledged the importance of our message. We have, at times, sustained assaults on our credibility by those who did not agree with our positions, and we have become a much stronger organization for it. National PTA delegates again recognized the change in our destiny as we elected the first male President, Charles J. "Chuck" Saylor, and Byron V. Garrett became our first male CEO. We will continue to trail blaze, being mindful of who we are and where we need to go.



Leslie Cushman is a past president of Georgia PTA 2007-2009



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