

Civic Engagement and Education Advocacy:  
The Past, Present, and Future of the  
Parent Teacher Association

by

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This work is in loving memory of *Chester Distler*.

*“If you stop and think about our history, one of the reasons we had an American Century and there is an American Dream was because at key points in our history we made very bold decisions about making sure that there was very broad, universal access to quality education.”*

– Ken Mehlman

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# PROLOGUE

Professor Kus' class, Social Mobility, Politics and Morals, was one of a handful of courses that perfectly blended my academic career at Wesleyan. The level of discourse in Professor Kus' classroom was unmatched, because so few classes integrate both my Political Theory and American Studies backgrounds quite so elegantly. While I could tell that my past learning had contributed to my studies in Professor Kus' class, it was not until the class trip to New Haven that I realized just how intrigued I was by the course material. In many ways, it was this field trip that ultimately inspired my thesis.

After comparing statistics between two neighborhoods in New Haven, Fair Haven (06513) and East Rock (06511), it was apparent that the neighborhoods, though close in proximity, were vastly different. Ethnically, 42% of Fair Haven residents identify as white and a majority, 52%, identify as Hispanic/Latino.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, 72% of East Rock residents identify as white, while only 12% identify as Hispanic/Latino.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, over half of Fair Haven residents do not speak English at home, whereas less than a third of the East Rock population do not speak English at home.<sup>3</sup> According to these data, even segregation creates structural imbalances that are hard to overcome. Recent trends show that these communities are becoming even further segregated. During the ten-year period, beginning in the year 2000, Fair Haven's

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<sup>1</sup> "DataHaven 2012 New Haven Neighborhood Estimates," DataHaven, Accessed on April

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

composition became more Hispanic (+36%), Black (+4%), and Asian (+59%), while it also experienced an outward migration of whites (-25%). In contrast, East Rock experienced an influx of Asians (+25%) and whites (+7%) and an outward migration of Blacks (-34%) and Hispanics (-12%).<sup>4</sup> The large disparity in the racial and ethnic makeup of the two neighborhoods quantitatively illustrates the striking differences between the two.<sup>5</sup>

Only 57% of Fair Haven residents have high school degrees or higher, compared to the 91% in East Rock.<sup>6</sup> In Fair Haven, 11% of households report incomes over \$100,000 and the average income is slightly over \$45,000, but in East Rock, 22% of households report incomes over \$100,000 and the average income is just under \$85,000.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, while the average unemployment rate in Connecticut is 8%, the unemployment rate in Fair Haven is 14%, while in East Rock it is only 3%.<sup>8</sup> These statistics illustrate just how poorly Fair Haven is faring as compared to East Rock, just down the road.

With this background, the class boarded a van to New Haven, where we met with the principal of Columbus Family Academy, a public school in Fair Haven, before walking a few blocks to meet with the principal of Worthington Hooker, a public elementary school in East Rock. The schools themselves are vastly different. Columbus Family Academy was built upon a 1960s bomb

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Bloch et al., "Mapping the 2010 U.S. Census," *The New York Times*, Accessed April 1, 2015, <http://projects.nytimes.com/census/2010/map>.

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Distler and Deren Ertas, "Social Mobility, Politics and Morals," unpublished manuscript, Wesleyan University, 2014, 1.

<sup>6</sup> "DataHaven 2012."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

shelter.<sup>9</sup> After buzzing in, we were met in the main office by a secretary as well as a security guard. The school is a Hispanic Heritage School, which utilizes a dual-language program in English and Spanish. The principal, Dr. Benitez, was welcoming and informative. She took us on a tour of the school while explaining the programs, demographic, and funding. She told us that in one year, she spent over 750 volunteer hours working on grant applications and attending social functions to raise money for her schoolchildren.<sup>10</sup> She admitted, "I am famous for begging."<sup>11</sup> She also said that many of the schoolteachers volunteer their time in order to keep the school running.<sup>12</sup>

Worthington Hooker, on the other hand, is housed in a tudor-style building refurbished to meet present needs. When you walk into the highly regarded Worthington Hooker, you see exquisite, hand-carved wood beams, high ceilings, hanging art projects, and large-sized cubbies. The atmosphere at each school is extremely different and while the teachers at Columbus Family Academy offer their resources *to* the community, the teachers working at Worthington Hooker are offered resources *from* the community, for example a \$300 per year allowance for each teacher to spend on his or her class.<sup>13</sup> While both scenarios benefit the children, this highlights the differences in their financial circumstances and relationship to the community.

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<sup>9</sup> Distler and Ertas, "Social Mobility, Politics and Morals," 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The Parent Teacher Association had been brought up during both visits, but in very different contexts. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) at the Columbus Family Academy organizes Family Nights, where the school provides the families with meals from the cafeteria and workshops to give them skills that will help better educate their bilingual children at home, while the PTA at Worthington Hooker plays a more traditional role by raising funds, providing administrative support, and hosting fundraising galas.<sup>14</sup> These differences are not necessarily failings on the part of either school, but do indicate the different demographics and financial circumstances of each.

Among other indicators of demographic challenges is the difference in the percentage of students who qualify for free lunches at each school. Although New Haven has a universal lunch program, 76% of students at Columbus Family Academy qualify for free lunches, while only 36% of children qualify for free lunches at Worthington Hooker.<sup>15</sup> This exemplifies that Dr. Benitez must work with a greater number of students who come from predominantly lower income families, which impacts children's psychological and physical well-being, as well as, their academic performance. Dr. Benitez explained that the federal and state funds that Columbus Family Academy receives are not enough to support a comprehensive program.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Dr. Robles, the principal at Worthington Hooker, explained the differences between the schools in terms of the district-wide tier system, emphasizing the first-tier title at her school, as

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<sup>14</sup> Distler and Ertas, "Social Mobility, Politics, and Morals," 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

compared to the second-tier Columbus Family Academy.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, she discussed the “benefits” that tier-two and tier-three schools receive, such as greater government funding and grants, which are denied to her school. With regard to this funding, Dr. Robles remarked, “if you do well, you get less.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, even the high performing, more well off schools struggle to maintain their high standards. Dr. Benitez explained that her school works to delegitimize stigmas against being Latino or bilingual, describing the stereotypes of both the identity and the language as barriers, whereas Dr. Robles did not find differences in ethnicity or language particularly problematic at her school.<sup>19</sup> She described Worthington Hooker as an institution that celebrates cultural diversity, rather than one that considers it an obstacle to its pedagogy.<sup>20</sup> However, this view can only be taken by those who are privileged enough to see beyond the restrictions of race and ethnicity, whether they reside below the surface, as they often do, or not.

This field trip solidified the statistics and readings we had done and made them real. After spending the day in New Haven, I was so intrigued by the differences between the schools, which were within walking distance, that it became a passion. As I delved into the topic further, I realized the subject was worthy of a thesis. There is a gap in the conversation, in which schools are not being supported and communities are being too passive. Even those schools held to high performance standards with supplemental support from their active

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<sup>17</sup> Distler and Ertas, “Social Mobility, Politics and Morals,” 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

PTAs are struggling to keep up, leaving those without such resources far behind. I am grateful to have had my peer and friend, Deren Ertas, as my partner during this field trip and project; her ideas and conversations led me to inquire further to uncover the inequalities witnessed in the public education sector. Despite the fact that Professor Kus was unable to be the official thesis advisor on this project, I owe her many thanks for her eye-opening course and for wholeheartedly encouraging me to see this project through.

# 1. FOUNDATION

The current crisis in American public education constitutes a social problem that threatens those features of American culture that have been central to the construction of the concept of the American Dream. Drawing from my background in political theory and American Studies' approaches to cultural history, my thesis will analyze the ways in which the American public education system has failed over the last fifty years and the innumerable ways in which the National Parent Teacher Association has supplemented and supported the system by shedding light on major issues in need of reform. Simultaneously, however, the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) has also been institutionalizing inequality and immobility in America. How can such a well-known organization, built on child advocacy and civic engagement, be both beneficial and detrimental to the American public? Before analyzing the PTA more thoroughly, it is important to note the many ways in which the private and public spheres in America have evolved and the many theories that provide the foundation upon which my thesis is built, concentrating specifically on theories of the American Dream and the family unit, American networks and civic engagement trends, and capital in America. Each of these themes illuminates another dimension of the social problem threatening American culture and builds a compelling argument for my conclusion that the PTA has the potential to provide immense benefits to the failing public education system and to American society at large.

To analyze the current education crisis and the effects of the PTA, one must first consider the context in which both are occurring and the history that has brought us to the present cultural landscape in America, a landscape fueled by the American Dream. “According to the ideology of the American dream, America is the land of limitless opportunity in which individuals can go as far as their own merit takes them...you get out of the system what you put into it.”<sup>21</sup> It is a concept based on meritocracy, mobility, and individualism, rooted in the Weberian Protestant ethic fundamental to the notion of the self-made man. The term “American Dream” was first coined by James Truslow Adams, an author in the early twentieth century, who defined it in his best-selling book, *The Epic of America*, as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.”<sup>22</sup> Adams, writing in the 1930s, specifically mentioned that “possibly the greatest of these struggles lies just ahead of us at this present time—not a struggle of revolutionists against the established order, but of the ordinary man to hold fast to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’”<sup>23</sup> While the American Dream seems to be a powerful myth and symbol of our nation, next to the belief in our fundamental rights, it may not accurately reflect the current economic or social climate in America today. As George Carlin wrote in *Brain Droppings*, “the reason they call it the American Dream is because you

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr., *The American Dream: Origins and Prospects* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers INC., 2009), 1.

<sup>22</sup> James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1931), 404

<sup>23</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

have to be asleep to believe it.”<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the proportion of the population that believes in the American Dream is unrealistic.

Although most Americans enthusiastically endorse this image in abstract terms, their lived experiences often tell them that factors other than individual merit play a role in getting ahead: it takes money to make money (inheritance); it’s not what you know but whom you know (connection); what matters is being in the right place at the right time (luck); the playing field isn’t level (discrimination); and he or she married into money (marriage).<sup>25</sup>

Many of the major components of meritocracy contradict our current system, requiring freedom of choice at the individual level and an equal opportunity at the societal level, both of which are not equally available to all in America. The issue is not whether or not meritocracy is a real phenomenon today. Through empirical data, we know it is not. The issue is that many Americans still subscribe to it, despite the overwhelming data and personal experiences that indicate otherwise. “According to the ideology of meritocracy, inequality is seen to be fair because everyone presumably has an equal chance to succeed, and success is determined by *individual* merit.”<sup>26</sup> This perception of meritocracy also relies on a series of excuses to explain those who cannot move up the ladder of success. Some of these excuses include an inherited culture of poverty, laziness, attitude problems, and under-qualification; many of these, of course, are used primarily to label minorities. In Mason Cooley’s words, “The rich feel full of

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<sup>24</sup> George Carlin, *Brain Droppings* (New York: Comedy Concepts, Inc., 1997), 83

<sup>25</sup> McNamee and Miller, *The American Dream*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

merit.”<sup>27</sup> In reality, today, meritocracy is essentially nonexistent and the main cause of this social stagnation is economic immobility.

The PEW Research Study on American Economic Mobility, published in August 2011, states that “economic mobility is the ability to move up and down the income ladder during one’s lifetime and across generations. So, having an understanding of economic mobility is therefore having an understanding of the health and status of the American Dream.”<sup>28</sup> In order to differentiate the ways in which mobility is actually failing in our nation, the PEW Research Study differentiates between absolute economic mobility and relative economic mobility. When observing the former, America seems to be achieving mobility, since, technically, “the vast majority of Americans have higher incomes in inflation-adjusted dollars than their parents did at the same age,” which holds true across the income distribution spectrum.<sup>29</sup> However, the latter is concerned with an individual’s rank within the income distribution as a whole. For instance, the study uses an escalator as the exemplary mechanism for mobility in America. Multiple people can get on the escalator, one after the other, so that each person is standing on the step below the person before them, and all people are moving up at the same time, everyone is rising, which would illustrate absolute mobility. This is the picture of mobility today and some would say that it is enough for everyone to be rising together. However, this type of mobility does not provide

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<sup>27</sup> Carlin, *Brain Droppings*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> The PEW Charitable Trusts, “Pursuing the American Dream,” *Economic Mobility Project*, accessed March 30, 2015, <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/0001/01/01/pursuing-the-american-dream>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

the equal opportunity that is so sacred to meritocracy and to the American Dream, in general. If, however, we all get on the escalator, but those who are last to get on are able to climb the steps to get to the top at the same time as those who started before they did, the escalator would exemplify relative mobility, since those who start at the bottom would have a chance to catch up to those who are closer to the top. Unfortunately, this is not the case in American society today and most Americans do not have the opportunity to better their station in life.

In fact, many Americans, especially those at the top and bottom of the income distribution scale, are not likely to experience any mobility: “of those whose parents were in the bottom fifth of the income distribution, about 40% remain in the bottom themselves as adults.”<sup>30</sup> Similar statistics were found for those in the top fifth of the income distribution, as well. PEW coined this phenomenon “stickiness at the ends,” since the people at the top and bottom of the income distribution seem stuck in those positions across generations. “By this measure of mobility, the American Dream is struggling.”<sup>31</sup> The PEW study claims that in order for the American Dream to come true both types of mobility must be flourishing. The report also names education, savings, and neighborhood poverty as the main culprits for immobility. (All of which I discuss further in following chapters as major components of the current crisis in America.) In a well-publicized speech in December 2013, President Obama argued:

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<sup>30</sup> PEW, “Pursuing the American Dream.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

The combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental threat to the American Dream, our way of life, and what we stand for around the globe. And it is not simply a moral claim that I'm making here. There are practical consequences to rising inequality and reduced mobility.<sup>32</sup>

Evidently, the President believes that inequality and immobility are major issues in America today and that, when coupled with the crippling belief in a nonexistent system of American meritocracy, can be extremely detrimental to American society. In addition, the last component of the American Dream, individualism, which is equally as important as meritocracy and mobility, also fails to effectuate its presumptive societal changes.

Individualism is at the core of phrases like “masters of our own fate,” in which we assume personal responsibility for the ways in which our lives turn out. This notion of self-responsibility and blame “is not a historical accident but is firmly rooted in religious, political, economic, and cultural experiences of America as a nation of immigrants.”<sup>33</sup> Max Weber, for example, studied the Protestant ethic in relation to individual endeavors in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which he argues that “the twin ethics of hard work and self-denial were associated with the early development of capitalism. Hard work generated productivity, while self-denial encouraged investment through savings.”<sup>34</sup> Another instance in which these individualistic values were especially evident occurred during the Great Depression in the 1930's. Many historians today blame the lack of initial action on the part of the government and among

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<sup>32</sup> President Barack Obama, Remarks on Economic Mobility, The White House, Washington D.C., 4 Dec. 2013.

<sup>33</sup> McNamee and Miller, *The American Dream*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Americans on the individualistic ideals that led many men to blame themselves for their lack of money and jobs. Due to the previously experienced high rates of mobility in the 1920s, men and women saw their inability to care for their families as a personal problem, rather than a systemic one.<sup>35</sup>

Contrary to this theory of the American Dream, I believe that while these individualistic roots are fruitful, they ultimately connect to an explanation of American society based not on the individual, but rather, based on the family as the smallest tangible social unit. The guilt, shame, and disappointment that grows within oneself upon failure are due to the inability to meet expectations, whether those expectations are God's, parents', husbands', wives', or children's. America was not built by individuals, but rather families, working together to start new lives.

Three centuries ago the American family was the fundamental economic, educational, political, and religious unit of society. The family, and not the isolated individual, was the unit of which church and state were made. The household was not only the locus of production, it was also the institution primarily responsible for the education of children...<sup>36</sup>

When Alexis de Tocqueville first came to America in 1831, American families had already shifted in purpose.<sup>37</sup> Families were, above all else, social units of love and the home was a haven. Marriages were based on commitment, children lived at home longer, parents nurtured their children longer, roles in the household were more egalitarian along gender lines, and many of the

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<sup>35</sup>Joseph P. Ferrie, "History Lessons: The End Of American Exceptionalism? Mobility In The United States Since 1850," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19 (2005): 1.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (Free Press, 1988), xvi.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

responsibilities that were once performed only by the family, such as educating the young and caring for the elderly and sick, were delegated to public institutions.<sup>38</sup> This was the start of a longstanding trend away from the all-encompassing family unit that eliminated some of its responsibilities, while strengthening others.

After the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the family was redefined from traditional patriarchy to the “companionate family,” in which husband and wife were bound by affection and mutual interest and befriended their children, rather than merely dictating to them.<sup>39</sup> The new style American family unit peaked after the end of World War II, when family “togetherness” was ideal and rising income spurred comfort in the home. More children were born, more families were staying together, more people were living longer and the image of the family was transforming. Whereas in the early twentieth century, individualism was a main tenet of the American Dream, representing the internalization of responsibility, “since the 1960s America has become a permissive society, not merely in the superficial sense of becoming more open and tolerant, but in the more profound sense of becoming reluctant to accept responsibility for the economic and social consequences of social change.”<sup>40</sup> Issues such as care for children, elderly, poor, sick, and handicapped are floating in limbo today, without a specific place in either the private or public sphere. “Unable to decide whether further to encourage the transfer of traditional family

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<sup>38</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, xvi.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

functions to public institutions or to help families to become more capable of handling these problems on their own, Americans have responded with a pervasive sense of uncertainty.”<sup>41</sup> This uncertainty impacts American public education. How much responsibility should be taken by the family and how much belongs to the government? Before attempting to answer such a question, I will unpack the family unit through theory, starting with the earliest scholars who analyzed the family unit as it progressed over time.

In his work, *Ancient Law* (1861), which led to his place as one of the forefathers of modern sociology of law, Henry James Sumner Maine wrote, “ancient law...knows next to nothing of individuals. It is concerned not with individuals, but with Families, not with single human beings, but groups.”<sup>42</sup> Dating back to the ancient theorists on whose work much of our own political theories are based, the family is the epicenter of all political life. In fact, one of Plato’s most critiqued statements is his recommendation, in *The Republic*, to abolish all families and replace them with the Guardians.<sup>43</sup> Aristotle’s reply to Plato is that children will be neglected if they are the responsibility of the community, since “what is common to many is taken least care of.”<sup>44</sup> Plato’s utopian ideal involves the deletion of all inequitable ownership of private property, but Aristotle rebuts him, arguing that to break up the family in order to

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<sup>41</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, xviii.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon J. Schochet, *The Authoritarian Family and Political Attitudes in 17<sup>th</sup>- Century England* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, Inc., 1988), 226.

<sup>43</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Digireads.com Publishing, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Aristotle, *A Treatise on Government* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1912), Book 2, Chapter 3, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6762/6762-h/6762-h.htm#link2HCH0003> (accessed 30 Mar. 2015).

release all ties to private property would be unmanageable and undesirable. That being said, by directly relating the family and children to private property, Plato and Aristotle imply that the parents are responsible for their children and that the familial social unit is at the core of society, whether they consider it a good thing or not.

Certainly, in mainstream society, family is important for a variety of reasons. We rely on our families to teach us social interaction and values, to provide us with early education...and to provide stability and support during difficult times. Failings within the family are often reflected in the children, in both cognitive ability and behavioral issues. For this reason, it is no surprise that Aristotle so vehemently opposed his teacher's idea.<sup>45</sup>

Evidently, the discussions of the ancient theorists are just as applicable to today's world as they were to theirs. This argument between Plato and Aristotle is one of many conversations between theorists on whether the family is or should be at the center of society.

Thomas Hobbes, for example, wrote much on the subject of the family. As one scholar has noted, he said, "Cities and kingdoms...are but greater Families. In his own English translation of *De Cive*, he stated that 'a family is a little city,' later writing that 'a great family is a kingdom, and a little kingdom a family.'<sup>46</sup> While Hobbes' reason for concentrating on the family as such a strong unit may be rooted in his patriarchal tendencies, explaining how, in the State of Nature, the father was the sovereign and "the power of parents was a virtual reward for preserving the lives of their children when they had the ability and right to

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<sup>45</sup> June Alice M. Brown, "Plato and the Abolition of the Family," (paper presented at the SJSU Philosophy Club Student Symposium, San Jose, California, Dec 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Schochet, *The Authoritarian Family*, 430.

destroy them."<sup>47</sup> The notion that a family unit was stronger than an individual derives from Hobbes' idea that parents chose to preserve their children and the child would in return, according to Hobbes' fourth law of nature, the law of gratitude, thereby be thankful and appreciate their parents. A central tenet of Hobbes' thesis was "that men, not nature, were the authors of their own subjection."<sup>48</sup> Leo Strauss believes that Hobbes "maintained up to the end that paternal authority and consequently patrimonial monarchy is, if not the legal, nevertheless the historical, origin of all or the majority of the States."<sup>49</sup> Hobbes' state of nature concept moved beyond the clichéd primitive individual fighting for his life. "The elemental social unit for Hobbes was not the individual, but the family, and a characterization such as Bertrand de Jouvenel's that 'Hobbes gives a picture of individuals living each man for himself,' cannot be accepted without qualification."<sup>50</sup> Hobbes' theory of families in the state of nature assumes that children belong to their parents while the parents preserve and protect them with the expectation that the children will respect their rule in return. Therefore, Hobbes places children under the responsibility of parents and the family at the center of political life and society, as did both Plato and Aristotle.

Similarly, John Locke believed that children were very much the responsibility of the parents and that the family as a unit was a main building block of the community.

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<sup>47</sup> Schochet, *The Authoritarian Family*, 432.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>49</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 60.

<sup>50</sup> Gordon J. Schochet, "Thomas Hobbes on the Family and the State of Nature," *Political Science Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (Sept. 1967), 443.

The duty of parents, and in fact the principal reason for marriage is procreation and education. In speaking of 'Paternal Power' in the *Two Treatises*, Locke charges that parents must 'take care of their Off-spring, during the imperfect state of Childhood' and must 'inform the mind, and govern the Actions of their yet ignorant Nonage.'<sup>51</sup>

Locke believed that education is at the core of society, arguing that "because children are born without a natural knowledge of virtue, early education greatly shapes their development,"<sup>52</sup> and that parents should be left in charge of their children's education:

The well educating of their children is so much the duty and concern of parents, and the welfare and prosperity of the nation so much depends on it, that I would have everyone lay it seriously to heart and...set his helping hand to promote everywhere that way of training up youth...which is the easiest, shortest, and likeliest to produce virtuous, useful, and able men in their distinct callings.<sup>53</sup>

While Locke believed in an education through societal norms and family, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory requires that children learn only by their own reason, specifically from nature, from men, and from things.<sup>54</sup> In *Emile*, Rousseau replaces the parents with nurses and tutors, who will care for the child and raise him, guiding him through his education, rather than socializing him to fit the mold of society, as Locke suggests.<sup>55</sup> Timothy O'Hagan, Emeritus Professor at the University of East Anglia and a Rousseau specialist, explains Rousseau's position in *Emile*: "since public institutions of schools and colleges were irredeemably

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<sup>51</sup> Jamie Gianoutsos, "Locke and Rousseau: Early Childhood Education," *The Pulse* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2006), 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education: And, of the Conduct of the Understanding* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1693), 8.

<sup>54</sup> Gianoutsos, "Locke and Rousseau."

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979).

corrupted, the only solution was to withdraw both pupil and teacher from society, and conduct the experiment in isolation from it.”<sup>56</sup> While *Emile* was merely a theoretical experiment, Rousseau does recommend that “more intimate communities allow parents to shield their children from the ‘filthy morals of the town’” and that families move to rural settings “because it allows parents to be the masters of everything that surrounds their child.”<sup>57</sup>

Whereas Locke and Rousseau have extremely different views of what education should look like, both find that parents are instrumental to successful development. Locke suggests that parents create a society for their children in which they can replicate their social interactions and learn to be complete citizens. Locke suggests that children “be in the company of their parents,” so that the children can be brought into conversation and parents can protect their children from vices that will spoil them.<sup>58</sup> Rousseau also believes that parents should protect their children from “filthy morals,” but “insists that parents should not instruct young children through teaching in social settings or through commands...but parents should allow the child to grow naturally by protecting the integrity of the state and keeping the evils of city life out.”<sup>59</sup> The tension between these two philosophers regarding the perils of the world beyond the family is addressed in Hannah Arendt’s theory of the public sphere and the private sphere.

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<sup>56</sup> Joy A. Palmer et al., edit, *Fifty Major Thinkers On Education: From Confucius to Dewey – Routledge Key Guides* (London: Routledge, 2001), 56.

<sup>57</sup> Gianoutsos, “Locke and Rousseau,” 11.

<sup>58</sup> John Locke, *The Beauties of Locke; Consisting of Selections from his Philosophical, Moral, and Theological Works*, edit. Alfred Howard (London: T. Davison, 1843), 50.

<sup>59</sup> Gianoutsos, “Locke and Rousseau,” 16.

Arendt explains that political life and private life have existed since ancient times, but that social life is a modern phenomenon.

The scientific thought that corresponds to this development is no longer political science but 'national economy' or 'social economy' or *Volkswirtschaft*, all of which indicate a kind of 'collective housekeeping;' the collective of families economically organized into the facsimile of one super-human family is what we call 'society.'<sup>60</sup>

Arendt believes that family units were absorbed into social groups and those social groups were in turn absorbed by mass society. She describes an alienating world in which "society becomes the substitute for the family."<sup>61</sup> Today, this issue of private and political spheres blending together and bleeding into one society remains at the heart of the issue, especially when considering the ways in which politics can be influenced by action within the private sphere.

The emergence of society—the rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems, and organizational devices—from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen. Not only would we not agree with the Greeks that a life spent in the privacy of "one's own" (*idion*), outside the world of the common, is "idiotic" by definition, or with the Romans to whom privacy offered but a temporary refuge from the business of the *res publica*; we call private today a sphere of intimacy whose beginnings we may be able to trace back to late Roman, though hardly to any period of Greek antiquity, but whose peculiar manifoldness and variety were certainly unknown to any period prior to the modern age.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

Although Arendt believes that the family unit has been absorbed, it is not gone, but rather, it is reallocated in a taxonomy of families and lumped together to give it meaning in a world of mass society. Whereas membership in the family unit is the main factor connecting citizens, membership in a social class became part of one's identity.<sup>63</sup> Some may argue that those two are one and the same: the family's membership in a social class defines all of its members. In fact, that would appear to be the assumption in the PEW study of the immobility experienced by most Americans today: "forty percent of children cannot escape their parents' income distribution level."<sup>64</sup> The family to which one belongs defines one's place in society through economic, social and cultural hierarchies and the groups with which we associate are the context in which we build connections and organize ourselves within that society.

That being said, these groups or networks in which we are involved have evolved since the time of mass society that Arendt wrote about. Just as theorizing about the American Dream and the family as a social unit provides an important context for my analysis of the PTA in this thesis, so too, does studying the ways in which networks and civic groups have shaped our society. These theoretical frameworks provide the foundation that will be built upon in future chapters to help describe the formation of the PTA and the strengths and weaknesses that set it apart from other civic groups. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote,

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<sup>63</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 256.

<sup>64</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Economic Mobility and the American Dream," 2012, accessed March 31, 2015, <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/multimedia/video/2011/economic-mobility-and-the-american-dream>.

“Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations.... nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.”<sup>65</sup> The networks and civic engagement groups that characterized America are more important in today’s world than ever before, yet are on a steady decline from the lively groups that Tocqueville observed. In order to map out the PTA, we must first survey the backdrop.

Mark S. Granovetter conducted an analysis of American social networks in his work, *The Strength of Weak Ties* (1973). In this work, he took a model used for macro level sociological theory and applied it to micro levels. He analyzed the strength of dyadic ties and the degree of overlap between two individuals’ friendship networks, specifically studying the diffusion of influence and information, mobility opportunities, community organization and social cohesion through interpersonal relations. Granovetter defines a strong tie through four major components: amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy (mutual confiding), and reciprocity. He argues that if A and B have a strong tie and A and C have a strong tie, then B and C most likely have a tie and he proves this through three factors: time, similarity, and psychological strain. The time factor is relatively straightforward. The more time A spends with B then the less time A spends with C, but the more time each spends with A, the more likely their time together will overlap. “Implicit here is Homans’s idea that ‘the more frequently persons interact with one another, the stronger their sentiments of

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<sup>65</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), Book II, Chapter V, 489.

friendship for one another are apt to be.”<sup>66</sup> The second factor, similarity, is also relatively simple. “Empirical evidence that the stronger the tie connecting two individuals, the more similar they are, in various ways.”<sup>67</sup> Therefore, if A and B are similar and A and C are similar, the chances that B and C are similar to one another is high, thus increasing the chances of a friendship once the two have met. Lastly, psychological strain depends on the theory of cognitive balance articulated by Heider (1958) and Newcomb (1961). “If strong ties A-B and A-C exist, and if B and C are aware of one another, anything short of a positive tie would introduce a ‘psychological strain’...since C will want his own feelings to be congruent with those of his good friend, A, and similarly, for B.”<sup>68</sup> Through these factors, two strong ties can produce another tie on their own. Whether the third tie is weak or strong, B and C are bridged together through their relationship with A. Once Granovetter has established his definition of a strong tie and the factors that create a bridge, he explains the central versus marginal actors: “those receiving many choices [of friend paths] are characterized as ‘central,’ those with few as ‘marginal.’”<sup>69</sup>

Granovetter’s work proves that those who are marginal actors in a network are the most important to the diffusion of information. “What is to be diffused can reach a larger number of people, and traverse greater social

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<sup>66</sup> Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, issue 6 (1973), 1362.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 1366.

distance, when passed through weak ties rather than strong.”<sup>70</sup> He explains that if someone tells a rumor to his best friends, and they do the same, the rumor will merely circulate within a small group of best friends (those who have strong ties), but if the rumor is spread to someone on the outskirts of that friend group (presumably someone with a weak tie), it will most likely spread much further. Another diffusion study by Rapoport and Horvath (1961) asked all 851 students at a Michigan junior high school to list their eight best friends. From that sample, they randomly chose 9 individuals. “The first and second choices of each sample member were tabulated, then the first and second choices of *these* people were added in, etc., counting, at each remove, *only* names not previously chosen, and continuing until no new people were reached.”<sup>71</sup> They then repeated the same procedure for third and fourth, fifth and sixth, and seventh and eighth choices. “The smallest total number of people was reached through the networks generated by first and second choices—presumably the strongest ties—and the largest number through seventh and eighth choices.”<sup>72</sup> This proves Granovetter’s hypothesis that more people are reached through weak ties than strong ones. This concept, applied to the job search network, further strengthens Granovetter’s thesis.

Granovetter admits that labor economists have known that American blue-collar workers find new jobs more through personal contacts than other methods. This information has more recently been proven for other markets,

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<sup>70</sup> Granovetter, “Strength of Weak Ties,” 1366.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 1369.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

such as professional, technical and managerial. When Granovetter asked “those who found a new job through contacts how often they *saw* the contact around the time that he passed on job information to them” and used that as a measure of the strength of the tie, he found that most reported only occasionally seeing them (55.6%) and the second highest response was “rarely” (27.8%).<sup>73</sup>

Granovetter explains this by arguing that “those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive.”<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Granovetter asked respondents where their contact *got* the job information. The highest response to this question was that there was one intermediary between himself and the employer (45.3%).<sup>75</sup> This highlights the claim that weak ties diffuse information in the most beneficial way. “Had long information paths been involved, large numbers might have found out about any given job, and no particular tie would have been crucial.”<sup>76</sup> In fact, Granovetter also found that “people rarely *act* on mass-media information unless it is also transmitted through personal ties.”<sup>77</sup> Therefore, any newspaper ads would be less effective than a weak personal tie. Moreover, these trends are evidence that weak ties facilitate social mobility on micro levels. However, this social mobility is not easily accessible for everyone. In a study of Boston’s West End and its inability to mobilize to prevent urban renewal, lower-, working-, and middle-class sub-

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<sup>73</sup> Granovetter, “Strength of Weak Ties,” 1371.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 1372.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 1374.

cultures were compared, “concluding that only the last provides sufficient trust in leaders and practice in working toward common goals to enable formation of an effective organization.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, a group of lower- or working-class parents will most likely be less effective at organizing than will middle-class parents, for example. Granovetter’s main take-away is that weak ties can be more beneficial than strong ones in diffusing information, in increasing social mobility opportunities, in organizing politically, and in heightening social cohesion. His findings increase in value exponentially once paired with Pierre Bourdieu’s work on social and cultural capital.

Pierre Bourdieu defined capital in his article, *The Forms of Capital*, as “accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor.”<sup>79</sup> In fact, Bourdieu argues that the very inequality of opportunity that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the negation of the existence of the American Dream, is due to capital, the accumulation of which creates staggering differences between those who have the ability accumulate and those who do not. “The structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints...which govern its

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<sup>78</sup> Granovetter, “Strength of Weak Ties,” 1373.

<sup>79</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 81.

functioning...determining the chances of success.”<sup>80</sup> Bourdieu also recognizes that few look beyond the highly examined economic capital to study cultural and social capital, that may turn into economic gains or losses depending on the situation, but that stand on their own as major components of society.

Bourdieu introduces cultural capital by explaining that the epiphany that capital exists in the cultural realm occurred while testing his theoretical hypothesis on the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes and their academic success, “i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market [affects] the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions.”<sup>81</sup> He defines three types of cultural capital. While many studies were done prior to Bourdieu’s, most only studied the monetary investments and profits, for instance the cost of schools and cost of the time spent studying, but they were unable to explain the different proportions of their resources which different social classes allocate to economic investment. They neglected to admit the most impactful determinant in educational investment: the domestic transmission of cultural capital. “Many studies that consider social repercussions at all merely study the ‘social rate of return,’ or the ‘social gain of education as measured by its effects on national productivity.’”<sup>82</sup> Bourdieu believes that “from the very beginning, a definition of human capital, despite its humanistic connotations, does not move beyond economism and ignores, inter alia, the fact

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<sup>80</sup> Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” 81.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

that the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family.”<sup>83</sup> Just as John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau were adamant that the parents were a major player in their children’s education, so too is Bourdieu. Whereas many theorists, economists and social scientists may study the effects of differing socio-economic class on academic achievement, they all miss another important factor differentiating the families—the cultural and social capital that each parent can pass on to his or her child.

Bourdieu introduces three different types of cultural capital. The first type is the embodied state, in which the body acts as a wallet holding and displaying one’s accumulated etiquette and habitus. Embodied capital “cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by bequest, purchase or exchange.”<sup>84</sup> Embodied capital is only as valuable as the appropriated body in which it is accumulated; therefore, cultural capital is somewhat a capital of hereditary transmission. “The initial accumulation of cultural capital, the precondition for the fast, easy accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital, starts at the outset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, cultural capital, especially in its embodied state, relies on the family into which one is born and the amount of social capital one can accumulate can be imagined as the very escalator from the beginning of the

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<sup>83</sup> Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” 83.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 84.

chapter, in which families rich in cultural capital give birth to offspring who immediately get on the escalator and begin moving upward, whereas children of other families start at the bottom much later.

The second type of cultural capital is the objectified state, in which “material objects and media, such as writings, paintings, monuments, instruments, etc.,” contain cultural capital that is transmissible in its materiality.<sup>86</sup> Bourdieu is not simply referencing the monetary value of cultural goods, but rather the cultural capital that comes with the accumulation of these goods—the language one uses to discuss them, the area in which one showcases them, the ways in which one becomes part of a society of owners of such precious materials. Similarly to embodied capital, the materials only hold the weight of the high capital returns if the appropriated body knows how to use them to his or her advantage, and so, while the materials themselves may be passed through a family will, the cultural capital that comes with the monetary value of the objects may not be passed along as well.

The third and last type of cultural capital defined by Bourdieu is an institutionalized state, which implies an academic qualification, with which “a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture.”<sup>87</sup> This academic requirement creates a market of cultural capital, in which different qualifications and qualification holders can be compared and exchanged. Bourdieu alludes to the very education crisis that we are experiencing today by stating that “the

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<sup>86</sup> Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” 85.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

strategies for converting economic capital into cultural capital, which are among the short-term factors of the schooling explosion and the inflation of qualifications, are governed by changes in the structure of the chances of profit offered by the different types of capital.”<sup>88</sup>

Social capital, on the other hand,

is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.<sup>89</sup>

Social capital may be socially instituted, by a family name, class, school, or party, and it is reinforced in social exchanges between actors, which often depend on proximity—be it geographic, economic, social, or virtual. The amount of social capital one accumulates depends on the “size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected.”<sup>90</sup> One example of such a capital is that which comes from the genealogical definition of family, in which the capital is formed by the family group. Social capital requires investments that solidify the relationship, whether such investments come in the form of time spent together, gifts given, or favors received.

The network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously

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<sup>88</sup> Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” 86.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term, i.e. at transforming contingent relations, such as those of neighborhood, the workplace, or even kinship, into relationships that are at once necessary and elective, implying durable obligations subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship, etc.) or institutionally guaranteed (rights).<sup>91</sup>

Thus, social capital is one reason that cycles of immobility and economic inequality continue yield the same result. Those who are known to have high social capital, those we might call the popular people, are sought after for their capital. Since they are already well known, they are worthy of being known by others, so the cycle continues. Thus, in the same way in which those who are financially wealthy pass their wealth to their children, those who are socially wealthy pass their name to their children, who then maintain that high level of social capital, as well. Furthermore, it takes much grooming to keep up the appearance. High social capital is institutionalized by choosing the right neighborhoods, the right sports, the right schools and the right extracurricular activities. "At the most elementary degree of institutionalization, the head of the family, the *pater familias*, the eldest, most senior member, is tacitly recognized as the only person entitled to speak on behalf of the family group in all official circumstances."<sup>92</sup> An example of such a scenario is the royal family of England, in which family members embody the social relationships and cultural etiquettes that they are meant to represent. In fact, the royal family has become a symbol more than anything else.

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<sup>91</sup> Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 87.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital are applicable to the ways in which the family has developed from the ancient writings of Plato and Aristotle to the modern-day unit it has become. Even Locke agrees that parents should "continue to nurture their children by crafting societal interactions, instilling their children with manners, and training them to act correctly in social situations."<sup>93</sup> Parents who hope to cash in on their social and cultural capital, and produce and accumulate more, send their children to the best school available, and those who do not have the luxury of cashing in on such capital are left with fewer options. Granovetter discussed the ways in which weak ties can connect people; however, he fails to make the full connection between his work and that of Bourdieu's. Bourdieu discusses social capital in connections and networks one builds, so that, as Granovetter explains, "when a man changes jobs, he is not only moving from one network of ties to another, but also establishing a link between these."<sup>94</sup> In this way, his social network is growing and his capital is increasing. However, Bourdieu explains that those with social capital attract others with social capital and often participate in the same types of activities and attend the same types of schools, jobs, and functions, which according to Granovetter, would be hindering the expansion of their actual social capital. One theorist admits that those with high social capital groom themselves by weeding out those of lower capital classes, but the other maintains that including a mixture of different classes would be the most beneficial for any person's accumulation of social capital. (However, it must be noted that this theory of inclusion would not

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<sup>93</sup> Gianoutsos, "Locke and Rousseau," 5.

<sup>94</sup> Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," 1373.

hold for cultural capital, which relies much more on inheritance than does social capital.) In connecting social networks with social capital, Robert Putnam provides the evidence that is necessary to fill in the blanks.

Robert Putnam's thesis in his well-known article, *Bowling Alone*, also relies on Alexis de Tocqueville's account of democracy to highlight the active civic life that once characterized America. However, Putnam argues that civic society has shrunk in America since the 1960s and 1970s. First, Putnam establishes that researchers in various fields ranging from education, to urban poverty, to unemployment, have discussed the many ways in which civically engaged communities have increased rates of successful outcomes. He admits that civic engagement and social connectedness create more prosperous communities—better schools, faster economic development, lower crime and more effective government.<sup>95</sup> Bourdieu's theory of social capital becomes a strong framework for Putnam's work on decreasing civic society. "For a variety of reasons, life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital."<sup>96</sup> Among these reasons are that civic engagement facilitates norms of reciprocity, social trust, coordination, communication, and develops the "I" into the "we," with a goal of collective benefits rather than just individual ones.

Putnam conducted his study by using a series of questions from the Roper Organization survey, which asked identical questions to a national sample ten times each year over the preceding two decades. The results are

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<sup>95</sup> Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone," in *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995): 65-78, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://archive.realtor.org/sites/default/files/BowlingAlone.pdf>, 2.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

disheartening for those who believe that a civic-minded society is the key to a prosperous democracy. The number of Americans who reported that “in the past year” they have “attended a public meeting on town or school affairs” had plummeted by over a third since 1973 (from 22 percent to 13 percent in 1993).<sup>97</sup> Despite the fact that average levels of education, the most accurate predictor of political participation, have risen, American’s direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily over the last generation. Similarly, when asked if they trust the “government in Washington,” both responses between “some of the time” and “almost never” have “risen steadily from 30 percent in 1966 to 75 percent in 1992.”<sup>98</sup> This inactivity and general distrust was reflected in the low volume of civic activity he found in America at the time of his writing.

In less political spheres, the same drops are reflected in memberships. For example, the Boy Scouts’ volunteer base had dropped 26% from 1970 to 1995 and the Red Cross by 61% in that same time period.<sup>99</sup> “In sum, after expanding steadily throughout most of this century, many major civic organizations have experienced a sudden, substantial, and nearly simultaneous decline in membership over the past decade or two.”<sup>100</sup> Putnam’s title, *Bowling Alone*, refers to the trend, between 1980 and 1993, that 10% more Americans were bowling than ever before, but 40% fewer Americans were bowling in

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<sup>97</sup> Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” 3.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

organized leagues.<sup>101</sup> This trend is due to more Americans bowling with family or work friends, in individualized pockets of friends and smaller networks. This trend of private socialization specifically endangers the very weak ties that Granovetter discusses. Granovetter argues that weak ties and associations through friends can lead to beneficial diffusion of information, upward mobility, effective community organization and heightened social cohesion, but when Americans stick to close-knit groups of good friends, or strong ties, these four effects of networking are hampered. Whereas mass-membership groups may provide cross-class diversity, facilitating friendships among different people, expanding social networks, and increasing social capital and information opportunities, the lack of large group meetings can have the opposite effects.

Putnam considers countertrends that could be attracting civically inclined citizens to participate in other ways. First, he mentions that “perhaps the traditional forms of civic organization whose decay we have been tracing have been replaced by vibrant new organizations.”<sup>102</sup> He uses the Sierra Club and the National Organization of Women as examples, since their memberships rose swiftly in the 1970s and 1980s, accounting for hundreds of thousands of dues-paying members. Another example is the AARP, “which grew exponentially from 400,000 card-carrying members in 1960 to 33 million in 1993, becoming (after the Catholic Church) the largest private organization in the world.”<sup>103</sup> These groups represent a new level of organizing, which Putnam terms “tertiary

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<sup>101</sup> Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” 5.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 6.

associations.”<sup>104</sup> These mass-membership organizations merely consist of writing checks for dues and occasionally reading newsletters. Putnam explains that members of such groups have no more of a connection than two random Red Sox fans at a game. They both came to cheer the same team and wear the same colors, they may even share some interests, but other than sitting in a sea of chanting fans, they don’t realize each other’s existence.

Their ties, in short, are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to one another. The theory of social capital argues that associational membership accounts should, for example, increase social trust, but this prediction is much less straightforward with regard to membership in tertiary associations.<sup>105</sup>

Evidently, the type of ties that are created between members in such mass-membership groups in which each member separately signs online and donates an amount by entering their credit card information, is not the type that Granovetter meant when discussing the strength of weak ties. Some ties are just so weak that they are virtually absent.

The second countertrend that Putnam mentions is that of the “growing prominence of nonprofit organizations, especially nonprofit service agencies.”<sup>106</sup> Putnam calls this a “third sector,” which includes such institutions as Oxfam and the Ford Foundation. Putnam denies any correlation between social connectedness and trends in the growth of the nonprofit sector, since “members” are hardly creating meaningful relations and most nonprofits are run

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<sup>104</sup> Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” 6.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

as businesses, rather than complete civic organizations exercising the power of the people.

The third countertrend he identified was the large growth in popularity of support groups, such as AA. “Robert Wuthnow reports that fully 40 percent of all Americans claim to be ‘currently involved in [a] small group that meets regularly and provides support or caring for those who participate in it.’”<sup>107</sup> Putnam also mentions that “5 percent of Wuthnow’s national sample claim to participate in a ‘self help’ group, such as AA, and nearly as many say they belong to book-discussion groups and hobby clubs.”<sup>108</sup> Putnam argues that such groups focus on the individual rather than the social setting and many are not obligatory, with a more informal, flexible commitment level than those which provide strong bonds in communities. While these groups may provide strong ties, they are often comprised of citizens of the same class and background and most times do not lead to the same benefits that Granovetter discusses, which arise from weak ties. However, they do sound somewhat eerily similar to the types of clubs that Bourdieu discussed regarding social capital, in that belonging to the same book club and horseback riding school can provide a family with the right connections to increase their social capital through associations with others of heightened social capital.

By consulting the General Society Survey, Putnam compares these three countertrends with the explicit devolution of civic society. He discovers that across all levels of educational and social background, the overall average

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<sup>107</sup> Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” 6.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

number of associational memberships had fallen by one fourth over the previous twenty-five years.<sup>109</sup> “American social capital in the form of civic associations has significantly eroded over the last generation.”<sup>110</sup>

Apparently, Americans were only growing further apart, separating in their individual circles and withdrawing, rather than branching out to the community in the same ways in which they had in previous decades. Putnam considers the factors that may have led to this decline in civic activity, specifically identifying the family and neighborliness as deteriorating social connections. “The most fundamental form of social capital is the family, and the massive evidence of the loosening of bonds within the family (both extended and nuclear) is well known.”<sup>111</sup> Similarly, the number of Americans who socialized with their neighbors more than once a year had waned over the past decades from 72 percent in 1974 to 61 percent in 1993 and socializing with friends that live out-of-town was increasing.<sup>112</sup> Perhaps, this was facilitated by increasing rates of suburbanization and longer commutes to the workplace where many friendships were fostered. Other possible reasons included the movement of women into the labor force, which “reduced the time and energy available for building social capital...[and]...for certain organizations, such as the PTA, the League of Women Voters, the Federation of Women’s Clubs, and the Red Cross”.<sup>113</sup> By the 1970’s, women’s membership had halved since the late

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<sup>109</sup> Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” 7.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 9.

1960s.<sup>114</sup> Another cause could have been higher rates of mobility, which uprooted families and led to fewer long-lasting ties. Putnam's third cause is the demographic transformations, such as changes in the family unit: fewer marriages, more divorces, fewer children, and lower real wages. "Married, middle-class parents are generally more socially involved than other people," so the decline of such marriages could have affected the numbers of members in civic organizations.<sup>115</sup> Lastly, Putnam argues that technological transformations, such as television, could have effects on the ways in which citizens spend their leisure time, opting to spend that time in their individual homes in front of the television, rather than socializing with the community. In fact, this very thought is where Theda Skocpol begins her discussion of civic associations in, *Unraveling From Above*, an article which opens with the speculation that, "if only folks would turn off the TV and start attending PTA meetings, America's future could be as bright as its civically engaged past."<sup>116</sup> She goes on, nevertheless, to debunk this claim by comparing the ways in which conservatives and liberals argue for the same civic engagement for different reasons and for different results.

While Skocpol's argument is compelling, it means little without the background provided in her previous work, *The Tocqueville Problem: Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, to provide evidence. In *The Tocqueville Problem*, Skocpol describes the Civic Engagement Project, a research study in

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<sup>114</sup> Putnam, "Bowling Alone," 9.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Theda Skocpol, "Unravelling From Above," *The American Prospect* no. 25 (March-April 1996): 20-25, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://epn.org/prospect/25/25-cnt2.html>, 20.

which she led a group of Harvard University students with the hope of identifying and mapping all of the “voluntary associations across U.S. national history that, at any point, succeeded in enrolling as members 1% or more of the population (it could be 1% of women or of men if the group was formally restricted to gender).”<sup>117</sup> This project stood out to me in particular, since the PTA made the list. In her investigation, she uncovered the ways in which these mass-membership associations differed from smaller ones and the ways in which they differed from groups today. Since she required that all groups on the list garner at least 1% of the adult American population as members, all groups had to have some “broad, more-than-elite membership.”<sup>118</sup> One of her most impressive findings was that there were clusters of eras in which successful foundings occurred, such as the 1820s to the 1850s and the late 1930s to the early 1940s. Most importantly, these were times during which “mobilization of eligible (white male) voters was at an all-time high...[and] when federal government activity and influence were relatively great,” which disproves the often heard conservative claim that civic engagement should be used to complement a more laissez-faire government, by supplementing it with privatization.<sup>119</sup>

Skocpol’s results illustrate that many mass-membership, U.S. voluntary associations’ memberships peaked in the 1960s and 1970s. Another trend was the increasing number of local units in most communities, expanding throughout all states. Furthermore, associations grew stronger in influencing popular

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<sup>117</sup> Theda Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem: Civic Engagement in American Democracy,” *Social Science History* 21 (1997): 463.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 466.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

opinion in localities and got better at articulating those opinions while lobbying legislators and administrators in all levels of government.<sup>120</sup> This federal structure was common among large-scale civic associations, a structure that they adopted “to facilitate simultaneous interactions with local communities and with state and national governments.”<sup>121</sup> The most telling of Skocpol’s results was that “most large U.S. associations from the 1800s to the 1950s were cross-class, single-gender affairs,” in which “business and professional people joined together with white-collar folks and perhaps with more privileged farmers or craft or industrial workers.”<sup>122</sup> These findings correlate with Granovetter, Bourdieu, and Putnam, in that the golden age of civic engagement came hand-in-hand with mass-membership that facilitated weak ties, social cohesion, and, thus, social capital. This also validates the decline in civic engagement that Putnam witnessed in his research, since civic associations no longer mirrored this mass-membership set-up. Interestingly, most of these large cross-class, cross-regional groups were uni-gendered, in that either predominantly men or predominantly women made up the membership of such groups, but not both.

Skocpol explains that this is not too surprising, since “in twentieth-century America, male military veterans and higher-educated women have been leaders of encompassing associations—in large part, [Skocpol] would argue because both veterans and educated women were spread out geographically.”<sup>123</sup> Whereas college-educated men lived and worked in metropolitan areas, female

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<sup>120</sup> Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem,” 468.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

teachers traveled anywhere in the country to get a job working at a local school and presumably, they would settle down in those cities and towns, where they would start families themselves. Women mostly stayed in local communities across the nation and became leaders in multiple civic and volunteer organizations. Today, higher-educated women have options in the workforce and crowd into the same metropolitan areas as do men. Skocpol also found a shift in the way in which professionals see themselves. Whereas they were once leaders in the community, they were now experts at their jobs, leaving the job of community leader open. Similarly, the professionalization of staffed advocacy groups and lobbyists filled the holes which large-scale voluntary civic federations formerly filled. This professionalization was felt throughout all the national organizations; however, it was especially rough for the National Parent Teacher Association, which relied on parents to act as advocates for their children and to devote time to work as volunteers. The PTA is the perfect exemplar for Skocpol's work, a large federation that hit its glory days during the early-to-mid twentieth century, incorporating cross-class and cross-regional parents and teachers, uniting volunteers under the cause of child advocacy and equal opportunity in education for all.

More specifically, the National Parent Teacher Association's mission statement is "to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children."<sup>124</sup> The PTA

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<sup>124</sup> "PTA Mission & Values," The National Parent Teacher Association. Accessed April 1, 2015. <http://www.pta.org/about/content.cfm?ItemNumber=944&navItemNumber=552>.

is an extraordinary civic organization, which has been motivating citizens to get involved with youth and education for over a century; however, as a national organization, the PTA also reinforces inequality and creates double standards that hamper social mobility in America today. In this way, the PTA fails to realize its mission of creating opportunities for *all*. Thus, while facilitating parent participation and government action, the PTA actually magnified the very problems it was designed to solve. With the decrease in civic engagement felt throughout the country, how can the PTA increase membership and effectiveness in a time when American public education needs it the most?

In this introductory chapter, I have presented theories that I will use throughout the body of my thesis in order to ground my own theory. In chapter two, I will take an in-depth look at the current American public education crisis. In chapter three, I will outline the ways in which the PTA evolved throughout the twentieth century, overcame hardships and pushed for government reform, creating real change and empowering others to make a difference as well. The PTA has handled many crises effectively, so what about today's current public education crisis has stalled the machine that was once the PTA? Perhaps, it is the decline in membership or the change in the ways in which government lobbying is conducted, or maybe the PTA has changed for the worse. In chapter four, I will discuss the dark side of the PTA and the ways in which it has reinforced inequality and immobility throughout the nation. The very federation format that Skocpol discusses as one of the major strengths of the large, mass-membership U.S. volunteer organizations, actually caused local units in the post-

golden-age era to create their own mini-systems, funneling money and opportunity into their own communities, while other less fortunate communities in neighboring towns or districts are left with too little to run a school properly. I will use the background research provided in this chapter to discuss whether or not it is a parent's responsibility to ensure that all children are receiving equal education, after many of the theorists I noted agree that parents are responsible for their own children. In my conclusion, I will offer solutions to the current public education crisis in America, specifically stating ways that the PTA can remobilize and fight the good fight that it once did. The PTA could be a force in governance throughout communities across America as a major civic association, but today, it is merely an echo of what it used to be.

## 2. EDUCATION

Although public education in America predates the American Revolution, it was not until the mid-1800s that free, universal public education became a nationwide goal.<sup>125</sup> By comparison, Europe was late to adopt these ideas and only more recently, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, expanded educational opportunities, which have since exceeded ours.<sup>126</sup> For a time, America's better-educated masses launched the United States into a powerful position in the world economy, thereby setting new standards for education. No longer were ages 12 or 13 appropriate cut-offs.<sup>127</sup> Whereas a middle school education had seemingly been enough at one point, a secondary education from a local public school became the new threshold for the job market. For example, the personnel chief at the National Cash Register Company in Dayton, Ohio said in 1902, "in the factory we like the boys to have a high school education if possible."<sup>128</sup> The workforce that once consisted of children in factories was now required to acquire a more complex set of skills. This upward spiral continued and by the end of the twentieth century, a college degree displaced a high school diploma as the new workforce standard.

There are a multitude of perspectives regarding the way in which public education in America has evolved since its early days. Some may argue that high

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<sup>125</sup> Timothy Noah, "The United States of Inequality," *Slate Magazine – Politics, Business, Technology, and the Arts*, September 15, 2010, accessed April 1, 2015, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/the\\_great\\_divergence/features/2010/the\\_united\\_states\\_of\\_inequality/introducing\\_the\\_great\\_divergence.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_great_divergence/features/2010/the_united_states_of_inequality/introducing_the_great_divergence.html).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

standards continued to rise, eventually leading to the invention of school rankings and prestigious private and charter school competitors that stole students, money, faculty, and attention from public school programs, while others may argue that standardization of public education led to cookie-cutter graduates who cannot compete in the global job market. Many other arguments can be made as to why the fair and equal goals of the initial public education programs that were so important in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century lost their potency leading up to and during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Essentially, the questions to ask are, how can we hold students to ever-rising standards when public schools are given ever-falling amounts of funding and resources and how does this imbalance affect America today?

Education is a struggling public sector in America that has influenced inequality and social mobility rates for over a century. Since the 1970's, the United States has faced an unprecedented and uniquely American trend of education inequality. Harvard University economists, Lawrence Katz and Claudia Goldin, termed this period "The Great Divergence."

Katz and Goldin's work has pushed boundaries, removing us from the monolithic view that the problem with our education program is based solely on its inability to keep up with the technological developments of the last fifty years. While computerization is an obstacle, the American education system was able to adapt to technological developments in the past, such as industrialization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or suburbanization post World War II. Katz and Goldin claim that the issue from the 1970's to the present, the heart of the Great

Divergence, is that “the education system has not been able to increase the supply of better-educated workers, and so the price of those workers (i.e. their incomes) has risen faster relative to the general population.”<sup>129</sup> In other words, “The Americans got smarter at a much slower rate than they did during previous periods of technological change.”<sup>130</sup> This education stagnation is uncharacteristic of the United States, the country that pioneered universal free public schools. An upward spiral sprouted from the growing pressure to obtain a diploma. By the end of the twentieth century, a college degree had already replaced a high school diploma as the new standard, which required even greater investment to acquire the increasingly valuable degree. This further indicates that more funds are required for public higher education, not less, and underscores the amplifying inequality first witnessed in the Great Divergence.

Education, politics and inequality have always been closely correlated. From 1900 to 1970 there was an unprecedented drop in inequality, which coincided with the vast numbers of soldiers returning from war. For example, in 1944, the GI Bill promised tuition to returning soldiers and the National Defense Education Act boosted federal spending at every education level and created student-loan options to encourage greater numbers of graduates. These policies encouraged soldiers and young adults to continue learning. “The average person born in 1945 received two more years of schooling than his parents...the average person born in 1975 received only half a year more schooling than his

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<sup>129</sup> Noah, “The United States of Inequality.”

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

parents.”<sup>131</sup> Moreover, during the period between 1970 and 1976, college enrollment increased by 50%, which reduced the “college premium” dramatically.<sup>132</sup> College premium is a term coined by Richard Freeman in his 1976 book, *The Overeducated American*, which outlines the advantages a college-educated person in the workforce has over his/her non-college-educated peers.<sup>133</sup> Today, the growing college premium accounts for two-thirds of the increase in income inequality.<sup>134</sup> When interviewed, Lawrence Katz said, “we have the most-educated 55 year-olds in the world but we’re in the middle of the pack for 25 year-olds.”<sup>135</sup> Katz and Goldin call for better elementary and secondary school programs to teach children the material they need to know and to feed all children into bigger and better programs for their futures. Between the inadequacy of elementary, middle, and high schools and the high costs and perceived low benefits of a college education in the workforce today, social mobility rates are decreasing in America. Today, it takes a lot more than just a public school education to keep up.

Many theorists who study the American education system believe that we are in crisis, frozen between insurmountable standards and no standards at all. William Galston, a professor and director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland School of Public Affairs, claims that there are two systems of public education that are recklessly disguised as one:

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<sup>131</sup> Noah, “The United States of Inequality.”

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Richard Freeman, *The Overeducated American* (Academic Press, 1967).

<sup>134</sup> Noah, “The United States of Inequality.”

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

the wealthy urban and suburban districts vs. the poorer urban and rural areas. Those who cannot afford to supplement their children's educations are falling behind. Galston notes, "While money matters, it's not the only thing that matters. School safety and discipline matter a lot. Teacher quality matters a lot. Support from parents and the surrounding community matters a lot and a culture of learning matters a lot."<sup>136</sup> According to Galston, there is a clear gap in the consistency of education.

Furthermore, this gap is magnified when considering the ways in which inequality is institutionalized across school districts and the nation at large. In 1971, the California Supreme Court ruled that local funding of elementary and secondary public education, which traditionally depended on local property taxes for principal funding, was unconstitutional, "because of the disparities in expenditures that it generated. In subsequent rulings, the California Court mandated that per pupil expenditures be set at virtually identical levels across school districts."<sup>137</sup> This case ruling was a huge step in the right direction, since segregation and suburbanization throughout American history has created pockets of low-income areas that are nearly impossible to break out of. "A primary outcome of low-income housing was to concentrate the poor and minority in neighborhoods that feed into segregation and underperforming

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<sup>136</sup> William Galston, "Is There A Crisis?" *PBS*, January 1, 2014, Accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/vouchers/howbad/crisis.html>.

<sup>137</sup> Sarah H. Hill and D. Roderick Kiewiet, "The Impact of State Supreme Court Decisions on Public School Finance," *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* (2014), 2. <http://jleo.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/02/17/jleo.ewu001.full.pdfhtml>.

schools—conditions that reproduce conditions of poverty and disadvantage”<sup>138</sup>.

Often, low-income schools in segregated neighborhoods have

insufficient school funding, few, if any, advanced courses, too few qualified teachers, undemanding pedagogy, buildings in disrepair and unprepared teachers, large classes, and all-too-often, unchallenging academic content. All of this contributes to fewer opportunities to learn, lower graduation rates, ultimately very low college graduation rates, and fewer labor market possibilities.<sup>139</sup>

Therefore, by removing the lower local property taxes from the equation, schools in low-income areas would presumably have a better chance of receiving more funding for their students.

Since the original 1971 case, *Serrano v Priest*, cases against local property taxes funding schools have been brought to courts in many states with successful outcomes in about twenty; however, winning a supreme court case is not enough to ensure that action will be taken to spread equality amongst the districts.

According to his pioneering study, Gerald Rosenberg, an award-winning Associate Professor of Political Science and Lecturer in Law at the University of Chicago Law School (1991), maintains that courts must “depend upon the actions of others for their decisions to be implemented,” in which case the state legislators have little motivation to change the mechanism reproducing inequality in school districts.<sup>140</sup> “Some state legislators have concocted new funding mechanisms that do not fully address the court’s original objections, or

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<sup>138</sup> Jean Anyon, *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 101.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Hill and Kiewiet, “Public School Finance,” 2.

that fail to pass muster on other constitutional grounds.”<sup>141</sup> Since 1971, the California Supreme Court has only loosened its original funding reforms that were supposed to facilitate a more equal allocation of money across schools: “the several billion dollars allocated annually by the state government to local districts in the form of 120 or so categorical aid programs—roughly a third of the total budget for K-12 education—is not subject to equalization constraints.”<sup>142</sup> Since 1989, plaintiffs have used a different argument to get their cases to states’ Supreme Courts, mainly switching their position from that of inequality across districts to one of acquiring adequate funding for students in poor school districts. Adequacy cases seemed to fair better in court and in action than did the equity cases. While adequacy reforms do not require the leveling of expenditures, per se, they do enforce an increase in funding for poorer districts to reach a level perhaps comparable to that of the high-expenditure districts.<sup>143</sup>

Accept that some parents are more willing and able than others to spend money on their children’s education. When school districts depend heavily upon their local tax base for revenue, however, children in poor school districts, who tend to be from poor families, are further disadvantaged. What Coons et al. reject is not inequality per se, but the idea that the state should accept institutional arrangements that reinforce already strong market-based tendencies toward inequality.<sup>144</sup>

Coons et al. hypothesize that “fiscal neutrality” will allow the quality of education a school provides to be unrelated to the amount of wealth present in the district. According to the Coleman Report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, per pupil

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<sup>141</sup> Hill and Kiewiet, “Public School Finance,” 2.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

expenditures and other school district characteristics impact the performance much less than family characteristics (i.e. the parents' level of education) and other socioeconomic influences. "Previous research has led many to doubt that these or any other readily observable teacher characteristics are valid measures of educational quality, primarily because they are often found to be uncorrelated with student test scores."<sup>145</sup> Even if poor districts were given enough funding to compete with wealthier school districts, there would still be a domino effect in which the downward spiral would continue. Neighborhood safety and disposition reduce the attractiveness of low-income districts to teachers. The environment, location, and cultural amenities are three of the less quantifiable ways in which wealthier districts have institutionalized a culture of success and inequality. Teachers with more education and experience are attracted to the wealthier areas for cultural and social reasons, beyond those of salaries and benefits. Therefore, while these equalizing moves are a positive step in the right direction, there are many ways in which simply changing the source of funding does not equalize the school districts across the state and certainly not across the country.

This cycle of inequality is reproduced through low social mobility rates in low-income American neighborhoods today. Of the almost 50 million children attending public schools, more students are from low-income families than ever before.<sup>146</sup> This statistic is presumably a good sign, implying that public education

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<sup>145</sup> Hill and Kiewiet, "Public School Finance," 5.

<sup>146</sup> Jordan Weissmann, "Study: Almost Half of Public School Students Are Now Low-Income," *The Atlantic*, October 17, 2013. Accessed 1, 2015.

is successfully creating schools for fair and equal education for all, if fair and equal were the case. The findings of the study, published in January 2015, illustrate that “in 2011, there were 17 states where at least half of all public school students came from low-income families, up from just four in 2000.”<sup>147</sup> It is beneficial that those who would not have had the opportunity to earn a diploma can attend public schools across the nation, but with the number of states with a majority of low income students attending public schools quadrupling in the past ten years, American public schools and their students are only getting poorer. Furthermore, even if school funding is calculated and allocated in ways other than local property taxes, it is clear that schools with a majority of low-income families are at a disadvantage. These numbers raise the question of social mobility, or the lack thereof. Are the continuing cycles of poverty-stricken families sending their poverty-stricken kids to schools just to become poverty-stricken parents themselves? Furthermore, this begs the question, what can we do to improve the quality of our schools to produce students who can break the cycle? This question, too, refers back to the initial problem, raising standards and falling resources.

In fall 2014, approximately 49.8 million students attended public elementary and secondary schools, but almost a third of the states were entering the upcoming school year with less funding than they had the year before.<sup>148</sup>

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<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/10/study-almost-half-of-public-school-students-are-now-low-income/280664/>.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> “Back to School Statistics 2014,” National Center for Education Statistics, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>.

Furthermore, “states’ new budgets are providing less per-pupil funding for kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade than they did 6 years ago—often far less.”<sup>149</sup> While this decline may be attributed to the presence and aftermath of the recent recession, “at a time when states and the nation are trying to produce workers with the skills to master new technologies and adapt to the complexities of a global economy, this decline in a state educational investment is cause for concern.”<sup>150</sup> In fact, over two-thirds of states (34 of 48) are allocating less per-student funding for K-12 education in the 2014 fiscal year than they did in fiscal year 2008 and even those that are increasing funding are doing it at too low a rate to make up for the recent hits.<sup>151</sup> In New Mexico, for example, schools are increasing funding by \$72 per pupil this year, which doesn’t even make a dent in the \$946 per-pupil cut over the past five years.<sup>152</sup> Almost half the funding to run schools in America comes from state governments, which often use some type of formula to distribute funds between districts, attempting to allocate more funding to needier schools; however, these formulas are insufficient to equalize funding.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, the dependence on such formulas means that a cut to state funding crushes school funding, meaning fewer programs, less equipment, fewer resources, fewer options and more layoffs.

Layoffs are often used as a tool in the public sector to regulate budgets.

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<sup>149</sup> Michael Leachman and Chris Mai, “Most States Funding Schools Less Than Before the Recession,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, last revised May 20, 2014, <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=4011>.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

The number of people employed in the public sector decreased by 24,000 in the first three months of [2011], half of those in education, as schools and colleges shed staff at a rate of 1,000 a week. The figures, released by the Office of National Statistics, show that compared with the last three months of 2010 there were 12,000 fewer people working in education.<sup>154</sup>

While layoffs can have destructive effects in all departments, they are particularly devastating in public schools, where they range from administrators, who keep the schools running, to janitors, who keep them clean and safe, to teachers, whose direct relationship with the children impacts their lives immeasurably. In fact, according to the National Education Association,

Student test scores indicate that small class sizes help close the achievement gap in grades K-3 by up to 38 percent. Students who have small classes for at least three of those formative years continue to benefit throughout their academic years and later in life, with higher graduation rates leading to higher salary earning potential.<sup>155</sup>

Even with statistics indicating direct benefits of small classes, schools are left with few options but to drop faculty from the budget. The detriments of larger class sizes include less attention from the teacher, less wiggle room in the curriculum, and especially, fewer resources per student.

A recent survey by the American Association of School Administrators illustrated that in 2009-2010, forty-four percent of districts increased class sizes, which was three times as many as the year before.<sup>156</sup> As America fights for its

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<sup>154</sup> Polly Curtis, "Education Bears Brunt of Public Sector Job Losses," *The Guardian*, June 15, 2011, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2011/jun/15/education-bears-brunt-of-public-sector-job-losses>.

<sup>155</sup> Amanda Litvinov, "Budget Cuts + Teacher Layoffs = Larger Class Sizes," *National Education Association*, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.nea.org/home/35617.htm>.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

place back at the top of the international charts, the standardization of curricula to produce high test scores is heightened when classes become too large to handle on a more creative basis. Even classes with no standardized testing are affected. For example, Gina Marie Warswick, a teacher in El Paso, Texas, asks, “How am I supposed to teach art to 80 kids on a \$200 budget? Even the most basic projects will cost more than \$2.50 [per child] in supplies, and obviously I can’t have them complete only one assignment for the year.”<sup>157</sup> Additionally, teachers who are worried about being laid-off must show high results on testing from their class to illustrate their own high performance, an added pressure on a variable that is difficult to control. Furthermore, with seniority factors, such as tenure, it is almost impossible for new teachers to break into schools. The pressure of high performance standards with such large numbers of children on such low budgets, makes teaching “well” nearly impossible, and the new hire is always the first to go in these situations, which does not always benefit the children and definitely hurts those who are graduating with teaching degrees in hopes of changing children’s lives for the better.

With budgets decreasing and class sizes increasing, we find many teachers struggling on a micro scale in the same way the country is struggling overall. Financial deficits, due to recession, inflation, and austerity policies, decrease budget flows to schools, which must react while attempting to raise standards nationally and within the district. All of this is happening in the classroom on a much smaller scale. NEA research analyst, Kathy Tuck, admits,

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<sup>157</sup> Litvinov, “Larger Class Sizes.”

“the momentum that we’ve seen over the past few years in state laws on class size reduction is clearly weakening and, unfortunately, the students that need our help the most are the ones that are being hurt the most by increasing class sizes.”<sup>158</sup> Regrettably, this process is the norm for many districts. The School District of Philadelphia, for example, has a ritual of cutting the budget before the school year begins. Finally, in 2014, the ever-dwindling budget got too minimal for more cuts and “the School Reform Commission, the school district’s state-imposed governing body, for the first time and in violation of the city charter, refused to pass a budget, arguing that there were insufficient funds to run the school responsibly.”<sup>159</sup> The district superintendent was forced to announce that schools might not open on time due to too many layoffs, since many schools were left without a single counselor, secretary, or arts/sports program. Philadelphia’s school system is the eighth largest in the United States, yet it cannot even promise a school year start date. From 2011 to 2012 “the district cut 17% of its workforce, including nearly 2,000 teachers.”<sup>160</sup> John Caskey surmises that three events triggered the 2012 education crunch: “an abrupt reduction in federal and state funding, the inability of the district to cut many of its costs, and political pressures on the district to spend available revenues in a given year.”<sup>161</sup> However, when considering the pressures coming from every direction, it is nearly impossible to pinpoint the causal arrows. The federal

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<sup>158</sup> Litvinov, “Larger Class Sizes.”

<sup>159</sup> John Caskey and Mark Kuperberg, “The Philadelphia School District’s Ongoing Financial Crisis,” *EducationNext* 14, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://educationnext.org/philadelphia-school-districts-ongoing-financial-crisis/>.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

government wants higher test scores, the state governments want budget cuts, the districts want to reduce costs and raise efficiency, the parents want to see their children succeed, the teachers' unions want job stability and fair pay.

With so many contradictory goals, it can be difficult to get things done. In Detroit, for example, "just 10 days into his term as Emergency Manager of Detroit Public Schools, Darnell Earley said Thursday that layoffs may be needed to help close a deficit of nearly \$170 million."<sup>162</sup> David Alexander Bullock, Pastor of Greater St. Matthew Baptist Church and Change Agent Consortium National Spokesman argued that "an emergency manager cannot begin to chart a clear plan toward the resolution of these issues in 18 months while fighting the school board, the teachers union and [the previous administration's mistakes]."<sup>163</sup> Even after successfully fixing the budget crisis, Earley would then have to focus on declining enrollment and low academic performance issues within the district. It is unclear whether a performance-based business model, run by an emergency manager, could effectively educate the students.

Similarly, Chicago Public Schools are looking at grim numbers for the 2014-2015 school year. In August 2014, Chicago Public Schools notified about 1,150 employees that they would be laid off due to decreasing enrollment

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<sup>162</sup> Shawn D. Lewis, "New EM: Detroit Public Schools Staff Layoffs Possible," *The Detroit News*, January 23, 2015, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/wayne-county/2015/01/22/new-em-detroit-public-schools-staff-layoffs-possible/22196551/>.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

numbers.<sup>164</sup> The Chicago Teachers Union “decried the cuts are a continuation of ‘the destruction and decimation of neighborhood schools,’ and blamed policies championed by the mayor and his appointed school board.”<sup>165</sup> Cases such as the Detroit School District, the Philadelphia School District and the Chicago School District highlight the ways in which states vary their allocation of funds and the ways in which they attempt to solve budget deficiencies. No school district has found the golden answer, if one even exists. Clearly these deficiencies are being felt across the nation and, unfortunately, there does not seem to be one clear solution. Certainly, there is more to the education crisis than merely budget cuts. Perhaps, the issue lies in the way American history has shaped our ideas of public education, especially in light of the ways in which our education system has grown.

In sum, the American public education system is in shambles. Those who are able to carry on day-to-day classroom activities, extracurricular programs, and creative curricula have to overcome obstacles of every shape and form and may not have the strength to continue for much longer. Evidently, the United States public education system has come a long way since the 1800s. The demand for well-educated workers and thinkers has swelled and fallen in tides that have been swayed by such factors as public opinion, politics, and the education market, overall. Inequality hits public education two-fold—firstly, in the way states choose to allocate funds and secondly, in the way in which school

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<sup>164</sup> Lauren FitzPatrick, “CPS Announces More Than 1,000 Staff Layoff,” *Chicago Sun Times*, June 26, 2014, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://chicago.suntimes.com/chicago-politics/7/71/163628/cps-announces-more-than-1000-staff-layoffs>.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

districts allocate funds. Social mobility is stifled two-fold as well—by the mechanisms in place to distribute state funding to the schools and by the seniority-favoring mechanisms that support those faculty members who have attained tenure, without the ability to offer any further incentives, as well as, an inability to incentivize new teachers to make it that far. Social mobility is also stifled within the student body itself, as a greater percentage of low-income students attend the public schools each year. Inter-district allocations have forced major layoffs, which can be witnessed at an extreme in cities such as Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago. Although these are only three case studies, which I briefly discussed, this education crisis is hitting American public schools across the nation. Ultimately, I return to the unanswered question of how to support the rising demands and standards for diplomas in an ever-expanding marketplace with ever-dwindling resources and funding. Perhaps, we must look beyond the government, the district, the teachers' union, and the student body. Perhaps, the answer lies in a separate organization.

### 3. BENEFITS

The PTA has been an active organization in America since the late nineteenth century. It has pushed legal reform and raised spirits during national crises, gained momentum and mobilized communities during times of good fortune, and has outlasted many of the other large, mass-membership voluntary organizations that peaked in the twentieth century, according to Theda Skocpol. However, the echo of the PTA that exists today is nothing like the organization of the mid-20th century. In, *The Tocqueville Problem: Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (1997), Skocpol examined and compared mass-membership voluntary organizations that registered at least one percent of the entire U.S. population. This chapter explores the major accomplishments of the PTA as one of those mass membership organizations, while also considering the reasons so many people joined the PTA, the incredible changes that the PTA brought about, and the effectiveness of the PTA overall. In order to do so, I will first analyze the longevity of the PTA at the national level, and then study the flexibility of the PTA at the local level.

Through her Civic Engagement Project, a research project conducted with help from sociology and political science students at Harvard University (1997), Skocpol discovered that “foundings of big associations are remarkably spread out over the entire life of the nation, yet there is some degree of clustering of foundings in the 1820s to the 1850s, from the 1850s through the 1890s, in the

middle to late 1910s, and in the 1930s and early 1940s.”<sup>166</sup> These clusters correlate with high electoral participation, competition, and mobilization, especially around the Civil War and subsequent wars. The PTA was founded in 1897, the early Progressive Era, as the National Congress of Mothers.<sup>167</sup> The birth of the PTA aligns precisely with the dates provided by Skocpol as years notable for foundings of organizations with high success rates. In fact, Skocpol’s research on large voluntary organizations describes the PTA almost perfectly.

On February 17, 1897, more than 2,000 people, mostly mothers, attended the first convocation of the National Congress of Mothers in Washington, D.C..<sup>168</sup> As one may assume from the name, women assembled and rallied for the PTA from the start. The founders, Alice McLellan Birney and Phoebe Apperson Hearst, realized in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that a problem existed in the American public education system, in that the best interests of all children were not being met.

Our founders represented women of imagination and courage. They had a simple idea—to improve the lives and futures of all children. They understood the power of individual action, worked beyond the accepted barriers of their day, and took action to change the world.<sup>169</sup>

Before women had the right to vote and before the outbreak of social activism in 20<sup>th</sup> century America, education was one realm in which women had the ability to take action, mainly because education was considered a maternal

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<sup>166</sup> Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem,” 467.

<sup>167</sup> “National PTA History,” The National Parent Teacher Association. Accessed April 1, 2015.

<http://www.pta.org/about/content.cfm?ItemNumber=944&navItemNumber=552>.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

responsibility. The roots of this assumption can be traced back to Lockean ideals, as reviewed in chapter one, that held education should be performed in the household. As Steven Mintz wrote, “three centuries ago...the household was not only the locus of production, it was also the institution primarily responsible for the education of children...”<sup>170</sup> Although much of her research applies to less-educated women of the era, Sarah Eisenstein studied women in the workforce and the changing family unit between the Civil War and World War I. She found several major factors that shaped the lives of women by the time the Congress of Mothers was established. “First, changes in the structure of the workforce together with shifts in family relations resulted in changed patterns of participation by women in the labor force.”<sup>171</sup> Many women were widowed, orphaned, or deserted due to the Civil War and thus left without a man to provide for them; in addition, “a body of women workers who were mostly young and unmarried, and who expected as a matter of course to work for a time in their lives entered the labor force after the Civil War.”<sup>172</sup> She also found that immigration impacted rates of women entering the workforce. As daughters of or immigrants themselves, “their experience of changes in family structure and work life was intimately connected to the immigrant experience.”<sup>173</sup> This, of course, paired with the growing industrial market that required women workers with no prerequisite level of education to operate machinery in factories, created

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<sup>170</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, xiv.

<sup>171</sup> Sarah Eisenstein, *Give Us Bread but Give Us Roses: Working Women's Consciousness in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 48.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

demand for female workers, domestic or immigrant, increasing female participation in the labor force, overall.

Eisenstein's research, while not directly applicable to those women who were from wealthier backgrounds or to those who could afford higher education, provides a valuable context for understanding the changing roles of women and the family. Marriage and motherhood still came first, but a stint in the workforce became common in many women's lives. This common experience of women in the workforce also contributed to a social network that had previously been cut off by household duties that kept women segregated and alienated in their own homes, which had previously doubled as the production center and as the school for children, as outlined in chapter one. By joining the workforce, women were making friendships, spreading information, and discussing news, all the while creating those strong and weak ties that Granovetter studied. However fruitful these relationships may have been, the growth of the women's workforce also hindered social networks and capital irreparably. Whereas a mother's work had been to care for her house and children, join clubs, and participate in social activities with other mothers, as the twentieth century continued, more mothers were spending more time working than socializing and although this change occurred quite gradually, it marked the beginning of a decline in traditional social networks and capital.

After the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the new dynamics of women's work and family life changed even more dramatically. Robert Putnam, who studied social groups from the 1960s to the 1990s, concluded that one major reason for

the erosion of U.S. social capital was the further movement of married women into the labor force. "Over these same two or three decades many millions of American women have moved out of the home into paid employment."<sup>174</sup> In reality, Putnam failed to consider that new types of social capital had been created, as women forged relationships in the workplace, but from the perspective of his traditional definition of local networks, Putnam was correct that women out of the home, with busy days earning economic capital were much less likely to be accumulating social capital than women who attended social clubs and activities. This is especially true since women were not given (and are still not given today) equal opportunities in the job market. Instead, joining the workforce meant educated women obtained jobs mostly as secretaries, assistants, and teachers, that were highly feminized throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and are still feminized today.

Alison Oram describes the complex position of women teachers at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Teaching was associated with the feminine sphere of working with children and involvement in their nurturing and upbringing. Women teachers were public employees, but in a maternal role. Thus the woman teacher was in the unusual and contradictory position of being both a *woman* and a *professional*.<sup>175</sup>

Evidently, there is a distinction between those women Eisenstein describes, lower class and immigrant women, and the women Oram depicts. Young women involved in education were of a higher class than those who were working in

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<sup>174</sup> Putnam, "Bowling Alone," 8.

<sup>175</sup> Alison Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics, 1900-1939* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1996), 14.

factories. Teachers attended normal schools to gain the expertise and credentials necessary to be hired to teach. They were held to higher standards than regular mothers and wives, since they were expected to spread virtue and morals to American youth, as role models and guides. In order to attain such a position, it was important for a woman to have enough monetary capital to fund her own schooling and to have enough accumulated social and cultural capital, as well. As reviewed in chapter one, Bourdieu defined social and cultural capital in *The Forms of Capital* (1986), as embodied and accumulated separately for each person; therefore, careers exploiting social and cultural capital further identified the female professional as her own body of capital, her own person, individualizing women out of the context of the family.<sup>176</sup> Although, the family did play a large role in the accumulation of all types of capital, teaching gave a woman the promise of beginning her own accumulation of money, friendships, and work relationships. Each year of schooling added a certain degree of capital. Likewise, her family's status, her parents' jobs, her religion, and her clothes, increased a woman's chances of getting a job as a teacher at the turn of the twentieth century, a position that opened a world of opportunity for a young woman. In fact, teaching positions often led to other leadership positions in the community, since teaching was a bridge between maternal household work in the private sphere and professional work in the public sphere.

The idea that women—implicitly middle-class women—had particular skills, spiritual qualities and knowledge by virtue of their sex, class position and experience as wives and mothers, had been used to justify their entry into the public spheres of

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<sup>176</sup> Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."

voluntary and philanthropic work in the mid-nineteenth century, into certain spheres of local government as Poor Law Guardians and members of local School Boards in the later nineteenth century and also into paid work as nurses, health visitors and factory inspectors.<sup>177</sup>

All of these positions were acceptable for women as extensions of their motherly and household duties and they were often labeled as “social housekeeping” or “social maternalism.”<sup>178</sup> The founders of the PTA, the mothers who planted the seeds to inspire others and to build a community to work to protect children and their interests, began their work in the late nineteenth century, at the emergence of this so-called “social housekeeping,” before women even had the right to vote. However, the education sphere had always been teetering on the edge between public and private realms, as evidenced by women’s empowerment in the education sphere before women’s enablement in the public sphere at large, as indicated by the lack of voting rights and wage equality, among other gender injustices. Taking advantage of their power in the public/private space of the school, the PTA founders created a social organization that gained recognition immediately.

Within 20 years after its first meeting in D.C in 1897, the PTA had chartered 37 state congresses, and had expanded from the two thousand attendees at its first convocation to over 12 million members by the 1970s.<sup>179</sup> This coincides with Skocpol’s preliminary research on membership trends, which illustrates that “many large U.S. voluntary associations achieved

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<sup>177</sup> Oram, *Women Teachers*, 17.

<sup>178</sup> Linda Eisenmann, edit., *Historical Dictionary of Women’s Education in the United States* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998), 390.

<sup>179</sup> “National PTA History.”

membership peaks in the 1960s or 1970s.”<sup>180</sup> While there has been a precipitous decline in the number of members since then to less than 5 million today, there are still over “54 state congresses and more than 20,000 local units in all 50 states, D.C., U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Department of Defense Schools in Europe.”<sup>181</sup> As the PTA spread imperialistically, planting branches across the nation and even abroad throughout the twentieth century, it took on a federation model, in which local branches answered to the national leadership. This federation system reflects Skocpol’s paradigm.

Very much in tandem with the growth of state and national governmental functions and decision-making, many U.S. associations launched in the nineteenth century recruited more and more new members. Even before membership swelled, moreover, encompassing voluntary associations spread out across all 48-50 states and planted local units in most communities of any import.<sup>182</sup>

The goal of the PTA was to spread its reach and increase inclusion, “bringing more and less urban places into the same networks of organization.”<sup>183</sup> These networks would be important to creating cross-cultural and cross-regional groups of the sort that Putnam believes are so important to the health of American democracy and to the nation as a whole. Similarly, these large-scale groups would build ties, no matter how strong or weak, that would increase nationwide diffusion of influence and information, mobility opportunities, community organization, and social cohesion through interpersonal relations.

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<sup>180</sup> Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem,” 468.

<sup>181</sup> “National PTA History.”

<sup>182</sup> Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem,” 468.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

This federation paradigm was particularly successful for the PTA, since its main constituents were mothers and teachers. In fact, women taking teaching positions across the country facilitated the growth of these voluntary groups in extremely beneficial ways.

From early in this century, college-educated U.S. men tended to live and work in metropolitan centers. But not higher-educated women. They went everywhere to teach school, then got married and had to stop teaching. Yet they often remained in local communities across all the states. Well-educated women became mainstays of local and state as well as national voluntary life.<sup>184</sup>

Thus, the PTA thrived on young, well-educated women who moved across America for small-town teaching jobs, where they would eventually marry, start families of their own, and reenter the public education system as concerned mothers, who knew much about the public schools and remained active and involved. Today, the teaching market has evolved and, due to the teacher layoffs and budget cuts discussed in chapter two, education is no longer as appealing. “Higher-educated women now have nationally oriented careers, and they crowd into the same cosmopolitan centers as professional or managerial men.”<sup>185</sup> The hope and stability once promised by a small-town teaching job hardly exists today, and for those who do aspire to teach, the benefits are much different, as well. Whereas teachers were once “trustees of the community,” this does not seem to be true today. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

While the federation system was perfect for the young teachers spread geographically across the nation, it was not unique to the PTA. “Most translocal

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<sup>184</sup> Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem,” 475.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

U.S. associations founded prior to the most recent decades have had a federal structure...in part, to facilitate simultaneous interaction with local communities and with state and national government.”<sup>186</sup> In addition, a federated organization was especially effective because it could mobilize leadership in local organizations to watch government activity and lobby relevant local officials and legislators much more effectively than a national umbrella organization could. For instance, during mid-1960s bomb scare, as a “bill in support of a Fallout Shelter Program appropriating spending for shelters in federal and public buildings began to make its way through the House of Representatives that September [1964],” the PTA teamed up with the Future Women for Peace, although many of its leaders overlapped in the first place, and “presented a report that evaluated children’s reactions to the nuclear threat and recommended that the State PTA Congress request the National PTA reevaluate their statement on Civil Defense contained in the Parent-Teacher manual. They also sent a letter to the Chicago Board of Education and Superintendent Willis demanding termination of school space for fallout shelters.”<sup>187</sup> Not only does this exemplify the ways in which the PTA bolstered the strength of a federation model, but also the ways in which they teamed up with other mass-membership groups, specifically those run by active women, many of whom lead more than one such group, to create real change.

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<sup>186</sup> Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem,” 470.

<sup>187</sup> Amy C. Schneidhorst, *Building A Just and Secure World: Popular Front Women’s Struggle for Peace and Justice in Chicago During the 1960s* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 44.

The PTA proved incredibly successful at responding to the needs of the American people and influencing government policies. The federation system worked effectively to give the PTA foot soldiers, those leaders in local communities efficiently collecting information on local political leaders, as well as, commanders, those calling the shots from the federal offices and managing national campaigns that would be the focus each year. By keeping nationwide goals and commanding local chapters to allocate their own resources appropriately, the PTA created the perfect federation. The PTA's official website includes a timeline detailing the different agendas on a yearly basis beginning in 1900 and continuing until the present, as well as, giving information on why and how to join and supplying names and contact information of those in leadership positions today. Using this information, it is easy to piece together the history of the PTA and the incredible ways in which the organization shaped reform and grew exponentially. Although my work focuses on the last half century, specifically from the 1960s to the present, the best way to illustrate the plasticity of the PTA to conform to the needs of our nation is to consider the biggest changes in the briefest time, which occurred from the 1920s to the 1930s, or the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression.

As the detailed timeline on the PTA website reveals, the Roaring Twenties was a booming decade for the PTA, just as it was for America at large. In 1920, the National PTA Convention Resolution backed a bill for universal physical education in public schools and recommended that every state establish schools

for deaf children.<sup>188</sup> In promoting such an agenda, the PTA was encouraging even more government spending on education. In addition, PTA participation grew rapidly as its influence expanded and its successes mounted. In 1920, membership reached a new high of 189,282 in 37 state branches and, just five years later, by 1925, the membership had increased over four-fold to 875,240 members in 48 state branches.<sup>189</sup> The PTA was branching out to new countries, such as Mexico and Brazil, and the PTA was building awareness, sending its President to an International Child Welfare Conference in Geneva, Switzerland in 1925, as well as, to numerous others throughout the decade.<sup>190</sup> In 1928, the PTA's first textbook was published, grants were issued, and parent-education programs were breaking new ground.<sup>191</sup> Then came the stock market crash of 1929 and the crushing depression of the 1930's. Rather than programs focused on spending, campaigns urged the expansion of services so that children would not suffer during the depression. The PTA offered resolutions suggesting ways to meet the problem of girls and boys "taking to the road" and focusing on special projects, such as meeting child nutrition needs in bleak times.<sup>192</sup> While the PTA adapted as much as possible during the Great Depression, many meetings were still suspended due to entire school districts going bankrupt and schools closing. Although some local branches were obliterated, the federal model of the PTA allowed the national campaign to continue working, with wealthier and steadfast

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<sup>188</sup> "National PTA History."

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

programs outlasting those that couldn't withstand the depression. During a time when money was scarce, food was hard to come by, and education was failing in the form of school closings, the PTA was strong enough to endure and to focus on programs that addressed the tremendous social issues of the decade so that eventually, it could help revive the American education system. Clearly, it was not strong enough to save the system from the damage caused by the Great Depression, but that would have been an insurmountable task.

Fast-forwarding some thirty years, the PTA had regained its strength in the era of postwar affluence. The national PTA president was appointed chairman of the President's 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth.<sup>193</sup> The National PTA worked closely with the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT) on campaigns and was well represented at an International Conference on the Family, sponsored by the International Union of Family Organizations (IUFO).<sup>194</sup> In addition, the National PTA jumpstarted its own radio-TV series, Parents Ask About School, and by the year 1965, the National PTA membership had risen to 11,992,726.<sup>195</sup> With mushrooming membership rates, the PTA was becoming a pillar in American culture. The international hit single, "Harper Valley PTA," written by Tom T. Hall and sung by Jeannie C. Riley in 1968, exemplifies just how integrated into the American vocabulary and lifestyle the PTA had become by the late 1960s. In fact, "the song made Riley the first woman to top both Billboard's Hot 100 and the U.S

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<sup>193</sup> "National PTA History."

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

Hot Country Singles charts with the same song, a feat that would go unrepeated until Dolly Parton's "9 to 5" in 1981."<sup>196</sup> Irrespective of the lyrics, the mere fact that the PTA figures so prominently in such a popular song underscores its ubiquity in American society. The PTA was simultaneously growing in popularity and growing as a major player in government reform.

The PTA of the mid-twentieth century had momentum and took every opportunity to reform the American education system. In 1970, the NCCPT and the PTA united to serve all children. New programs such as "Quality Living and Quality Learning for All Americans" were initiated and the first week of October was proclaimed National PTA Week.<sup>197</sup> In addition, the PTA participated in White House conferences, worked with juvenile courts to launch volunteer programs, and launched its new project RISE (Reading Improvement Services Everywhere).<sup>198</sup> The PTA President was one of six women invited to tour France by the French government.<sup>199</sup> The timeline on the website lists multitudinous campaigns and projects that were launched, meetings and conferences attended, and goals achieved. On a national level, especially during the golden age of the PTA, the campaigns were strong and centered on spreading equal opportunity for all. For instance, the RISE program was designed to include reading in early education across all spectrums. The success of this particular program is debatable; however, the effectiveness of the PTA on a national level, especially

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<sup>196</sup> "Harper Valley PTA," Wikipedia, accessed April 1, 2015, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harper\\_Valley\\_PTA](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harper_Valley_PTA)

<sup>197</sup> "National PTA History."

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

with regard to government reform had never been higher, and, unfortunately, has not hit that height again, at least not yet.

The sense of agency at all levels of the PTA's federal system fed into the rising membership rate throughout the twentieth century. With the fundamental structure of education at the heart of its mission, the PTA not only helped parents donate to their children's education and schools' funds themselves, it also helped children have a better relationship with more involved parents. The PTA connected the community and provided a network of ties that revived and bolstered civic engagement throughout America. Upon examining the reasons why membership rates swelled during the golden age of the PTA, there are a number of factors that made membership appealing.

The PTA was a strong, extraordinary civic organization, offering parents a club to join during a time when local civic groups were increasingly popular. The PTA motivated citizens to get involved with youth and, in particular, their own children's educations, which was becoming increasingly more valuable as education standards were rising. A quality education had become even more of a necessity for success and high school diplomas were increasingly critical credentials. The PTA advertised itself as a middleman between the community and the local school and the local school and the national government, which meant that members could produce change at their local level and push for reforms on a national scale, as well. More importantly, the PTA exploited the American Dream and similar ideologies that had been ingrained in the minds of parents across the nation for decades and had pushed those parents to work for

better lives for their children, which had come to depend upon a better education. Using the foundation built in chapters one and two, I will examine the PTA at a micro level and analyze the flexibility of the PTA's local branches, which amplified the power of the PTA and made it an extraordinarily influential civic organization in the twentieth century.

The PTA's biggest strength was its ability to exploit the strong family associations and the ideologies promoted by the allure of the American Dream. "According to the ideology of the American Dream, America is the land of limitless opportunity in which individuals can go as far as their own merit takes them...you get out of the system what you put into it."<sup>200</sup> The PTA successfully utilized an environment in which Americans could feel as though they were living in the same world that Tocqueville once described, thus exploiting the gap in the American mindset between what people believe they are feeding into and what they are really getting out. Parents want their children to succeed more than they succeeded. They want their children to work hard and do well and they want to foster the very individualism and meritocracy in their children that inspired them to work, whether they actually earned their worth or not. The concept that a parent can join a club, send in money, and participate in bake sales and parties, all while benefiting their own flesh and blood is genius. Each parent wants to see his or her child succeed and the PTA provided the best route to get involved.

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<sup>200</sup> McNamee and Miller, *The American Dream*, 1.

Parents were joining local chapters because they saw direct impact on their children's schools from their volunteer time. For instance, the bake sale, for which they volunteered, raised money for the arts program at the school, the car wash raised money for new library books, and fundraising money allowed classes to have holiday parties. Parent donors receive complimentary school spirit gear or have their name engraved on a donated bench, while feeling like they have contributed to their children's future. Furthermore, most donations are tax deductible, so parents could help their children and be moderately rewarded by the government for their donations to the public school. Likewise, creating a culture of parent donations and PTA fundraising became increasingly important for the future of the school, especially with the unforeseen public education system deficits and deep government budget cuts. In this way, the public school is benefiting directly from parents who want to donate their time and/or money to the district and this direct, local connection is incredibly important for the PTA to gain respect and initiate change at the local level. Having flexible local branches also meant that donations were not required, nor was attendance, so parents with less time or money were not forced to donate in order to be involved. They still received the same newsletters and had the option of attending the occasional meeting, all while holding the title of PTA member.

Another reason parents were joining the PTA was for the informational benefits. The PTA was fundamentally an information diffusion source for parents who were involved in current issues and included in the decision making process. Through newsletters and meetings, parents could be involved without

being unduly burdened by membership responsibilities. Those who could do more, did do more. In fact, “parental involvement is well documented as a significant contributor to the self-efficacy and academic achievement of students.”<sup>201</sup> While children were profiting from parent participation at school, parents were reaping the social benefits of being part of a network, becoming friends with the parents of their children’s peers, and creating friendships that could lead to carpooling and play dates. Of course, these social benefits carried over to their children’s lives as well. Those whose parents were involved had play dates and played on sports teams while their parents would get together or cheer on the sidelines together. These situations created opportunities to build social ties, which in turn created opportunities for information diffusion, mobility, community organization and social cohesion. Therefore, not only did the PTA recruit parents on the premise of spreading information, but parents who joined the PTA had the added benefit of befriending people who could help increase their social mobility and capital.

As Granovetter explained in his work and as I mentioned in chapter one, parent participation increased their own and their children’s future employment opportunities. If their son’s friend’s father worked at a large company, the parents might have a connection through the PTA that could be helpful in the job market, which is definitely still true today. Similarly, the PTA allowed communities that were once very close to maintain that tight-knit feel, despite

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<sup>201</sup> Namok Choi et al., “A Structural Model of Parent Involvement with Demographic and Academic Variables,” *Psychology in the Schools* 52 (2015), accessed April 1, 2015, 1, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1002/pits.21813/asset/pits21813.pdf?v=1&t=i7zrbnv2&s=ec0d19117bd7b1e0c6ee40a4b650e52319d946a9>.

the increasing number of neighborhoods that were beginning to expand during the twentieth century. Whereas each town had once provided all the services, utilities, and conveniences necessary for the community to survive, neighborhoods were becoming more spread out and each neighborhood was less self-sufficient. This so-called “suburban sprawl” is still a major point of contention today, with many scholars debating the costs, effects, and benefits of such a movement. “Sprawl, such writers suggest, is, by and large, a *good* thing because it fulfills Americans’ preferences for privacy and mobility and provides a spatial context in which millions of citizens can access the American dream of a comfortable private home in a safe, pleasant neighborhood.”<sup>202</sup> Suburban sprawl took shape across America outside large cities, demanding longer commutes, major highways running through town centers, and a less amiable atmosphere between farther separated neighbors. Thus, the relationships made through the PTA were central to building a school and town community, which reinforces Granovetter’s theory that social ties are major factors in community organization and social cohesion. The PTA, utilizing the federation model, still provided a vehicle to make associations with neighbors, even during a period when neighborhoods were becoming less relevant. Rather than socializing in cross-cultural groups, citizens were spending more time in individualized circles. Putnam discusses this phenomenon in his theory on bowling groups. More people were bowling, but fewer were joining large cross-class and cross-

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<sup>202</sup> Thad Williamson, *Sprawl, Justice, and Citizenship: The Civic Costs of the American Way of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, INC., 2010), 4.

regional bowling leagues and were bowling with family members or work friends instead.<sup>203</sup>

With the promise of making connections to other parents and staying connected in terms of school news and school decisions, the PTA had the perfect advertising scheme. By preying on the fears of parents being shamed as bad and on the ideologies of the American dream that promised success to those who worked hard, parents were easily persuaded to give up extra time and money to work for the PTA. These micro, personal motivations were bolstered by the fact that helping children get a good education is a goal unto itself. Few could argue against a program that wanted to help children succeed. Through its flexibility at the local level, the PTA asked just enough of its members to encourage them to participate, without asking so much as to turn them away. The golden age of the PTA was highly active and successful on many levels; however, it created a system that actually promoted inequality and immobility, which diminished its effectiveness and contributed to the culture that led to the Great Divergence.

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<sup>203</sup> Putnam, "Bowling Alone."

## 4. COSTS

The National Parent Teacher Association has a vibrant history that is intertwined with the accomplishments and the heartaches of the country as a whole. During the golden age of the PTA, the benefits of the boundary breaking, mass-membership voluntary organization overshadowed the associated costs, which included practices and policies that worked to institutionalize inequality and immobility, and may have actually contributed to the current public education crisis in America. In some ways, the swells in membership and the major successes of the PTA during its golden age may have incidentally caused some of the problems the PTA faces today, although some of the issues it faces may be only due to the nationwide changes that took place between the last century and this one. The previous chapter documents the many reasons why the PTA can be considered an incredible organization and the many ways in which it has benefited our nation, but whether or not the benefits have outweighed the costs is difficult to determine. My hope is that by examining the negative aspects of the PTA's history and its current situation, the ways in which the PTA might reprise its golden age can be identified, or more precisely, the ways in which the PTA might be re-configured to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century needs in order to address the current education crisis. In this chapter, the reasons why the membership and success rates have dropped since its golden age will be reviewed, as well as the overall costs of the PTA to America's public education system.

As discussed in chapter three, the history of the PTA is replete with impressive success stories spanning over a century, beginning with its founding by two women who did not even have the right to vote. The initiative taken by these women and all the mothers and teachers who have supported and promoted the PTA since then is, in and of itself, a success story for women in America. The Women's Rights and feminist movements made incredible progress throughout the twentieth century. However, while women were earning rights and establishing themselves as individuals apart from their fathers and husbands, they were simultaneously weakening the structure that had spurred much success for the PTA during the first half of the twentieth century. The movement of young, educated women to small towns across the nation to teach, one of the few careers attainable by women, was extremely beneficial to the PTA in creating active, local branches. Women today have many more options than women did before the late twentieth century. One of the many factors that influenced the changing role of women in American society since the Industrial Revolution was the broadening job market and the opportunity to participate in it. Today, women are moving into more professional positions than ever before and the cities, which were professional hubs dominated by men, are increasingly populated by women with similar goals.<sup>204</sup> "Higher-educated women now have nationally oriented careers, and they crowd into the same cosmopolitan centers as professional or managerial

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<sup>204</sup> Skocpol, "The Tocqueville Problem," 475.

men.”<sup>205</sup> Highly motivated young women, who were geographically flexible, were no longer as available to become small-town community leaders by the final quarter of the twentieth century.

The movement of young women away from teaching correlates with the increasing value of diplomas, as discussed in chapter two. As more years of schooling became required in order to obtain a professional job, the number of colleges opening their doors to women rose, although this happened at an extremely slow pace across the country. Thus, as time passed, women stayed in school longer, earning advanced degrees, and waited longer to start families, which further slowed the process of local PTA growth that had been dependent on women starting families and advocating for their children in local schools. Therefore, not only did earning an advanced degree take longer, like men, women wished to excel in the workplace. The average age of first-time mothers was already increasing and, as a result, so too was the age of new PTA members.<sup>206</sup> “The demography of motherhood in the United States has shifted strikingly in the past two decades. Compared with mothers of newborns in 1990, today’s mothers of newborns are older and better educated.”<sup>207</sup> While seemingly a positive that women had vaster educational opportunities, mothers were now spending more time putting that education to use in the workforce in full-time positions and had less time to commit to the PTA.

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<sup>205</sup> Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem,” 475.

<sup>206</sup> Gretchen Livingston and D’Vera Cohn, “The New Demography of American Motherhood,” *Pew Research Center*, May 6, 2010, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/05/06/the-new-demography-of-american-motherhood/>.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

Furthermore, the teaching market evolved and, due to the current education crisis, fewer women and men choose to teach in the public schools. With teacher layoffs threatening job security and low wages threatening quality of life, teaching children is less appealing than ever. With such conditions making it less likely for the profession to attract those who are capable of gaining positions in more attractive fields of work, teaching is left to those who are either incredibly committed, ignorant of the current crisis, veterans of the profession, or less able to secure better jobs. Yet, today, the problem with the teaching profession is still not one of numbers, especially since many graduating students still seek to join the teaching workforce each year. Recent graduates, who may only plan to teach for a couple of years before moving onto a corporate career, for example those in Teach For America, are placed in lower-income schools that could better use the attention of devoted teachers who plan to make teaching their careers. The chances that a recent college graduate will join the PTA are much lower than that of a woman who plans to stay at her local school for an extended period, let alone her entire teaching career. Placing inexperienced young men and women in lower-income school districts to teach may be hurting our nation's public education system at every level.

With so many changes to women's roles in the public sphere, women's jobs within the private sphere were evolving as well. In identifying some reasons why social capital is eroding, Putnam names the movement of women into the labor force and out of the home.

It seems highly plausible that this social revolution should have reduced the time and energy available for building social capital.

For certain organizations, such as the PTA, the League of Women Voters, the Federation of Women's Clubs, and the Red Cross, this is almost certainly an important part of the story. The sharpest decline in women's civic participation seems to have come in the 1970s; membership in such 'women's' organizations as these has been virtually halved since the late 1960s. By contrast, most of the decline in participation in men's organizations occurred about ten years later; the total decline to date has been approximately 25 percent for the typical organization.<sup>208</sup>

The mothers who once ran the PTA as if it were their job, now had actual jobs on which to focus. Stay-at-home mothers became a smaller subset of the female population. In fact, according to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, the number of stay-at-home mothers in America rose for the first time in the year 2000 after declining for several decades. "About 49 percent of mothers stayed at home in 1967 (during the golden age of the PTA), but that number decreased until 1999."<sup>209</sup> The decline in the number of women in the home with time to volunteer for such organizations as the PTA coincides with the membership decline after its mid-century golden age peak. This also coincides with Skocpol's research on large-scale organizations and with Putnam's work on civic groups and social capital. As Putnam pointed out,

A range of additional changes has transformed the American family since the 1960s—fewer marriages, more divorces, fewer children, lower real wages. Each of these changes might account for some of the slackening of civic engagement, since married, middle-class parents are generally more socially involved than other people.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Putnam, "Bowling Alone," 9.

<sup>209</sup> Jess Bidgood, "Number of Mothers in U.S. Who Stay at Home Rises," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2014, accessed April 1, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/us/number-of-stay-at-home-mothers-in-us-rises.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/us/number-of-stay-at-home-mothers-in-us-rises.html?_r=0).

<sup>210</sup> Putnam, "Bowling Alone," 9.

While marriage and motherhood remain important to a majority of modern women, both roles have changed markedly throughout the twentieth century.

The changing role of the American woman during the twentieth century and the beginning of this one, parallels the changing dynamic of membership in voluntary organizations. "After expanding steadily throughout most of the [last] century, many major civic organizations have experienced a sudden, substantial, and nearly simultaneous decline in membership" between the 1970s and 1990s.<sup>211</sup> (Putnam 5) Today, fewer organizations require a connectedness between members. Instead, they ask for support in the form of send-in, drop-off, or online donations in exchange for the title of member and perhaps even a card for one's wallet or some kind of mailed-out informational or material rewards, for example, flyers, newsletters, t-shirts, or pens.

These new mass-membership organizations are plainly of great political importance. From the point of view of social connectedness, however, they are sufficiently different...for a vast majority of their members, the only act of membership consists in writing a check for dues or perhaps occasionally reading a newsletter. Few ever attend any meetings of such organizations, and most are unlikely ever (knowingly) to encounter any other member.<sup>212</sup> (Putnam 6)

In this new type of organization that has come to predominate in recent years, members may not know each other as they pass on the street. This kind of membership is not nearly as beneficial or bonding as the type that fostered close-knit communities and friendships. Even in the era of changing membership, the PTA has managed to nurture a sense of community and

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<sup>211</sup> Putnam, "Bowling Alone," 5.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 6.

volunteerism at some level, by maintaining its policy of accepting nominal, dues-paying members and its flexibility regarding parent participation requirements. While other large-scale groups' memberships waned under these new social standards, the PTA continues today, just as a weaker organization than that which once brought neighborhoods and school districts together. This new kind of membership is not nearly as socially effective. The PTA of the golden age strengthened the type and multiplied the number of ties in a local community, which Granovetter would argue is much more beneficial than mass-membership groups in which members never know each other personally. Large organizations in which members are disconnected from the leadership, activities, and each other do not provide opportunities for information diffusion, mobility, community organization or social cohesion through social ties. In other words, the benefits of belonging to this new type of group are greatly reduced when compared with the benefits formerly available to those who participated in civic organizations during the mid-twentieth century.

As Putnam describes in *Bowling Alone*, more people are bowling in more intimate groups rather than large-scale bowling leagues. This privatization of leisure time further serves to decrease the number and strength of the ties that Granovetter argued were indispensable to achieving success within American culture and that Tocqueville once argued were imperative to the strength of American Democracy. "There is reason to believe that deep-seated technological trends are radically 'privatizing' or 'individualizing' our use of leisure time and

thus disrupting many opportunities for social-capital formation.”<sup>213</sup> As America threw itself into the modernity of the twenty-first century, much accumulated social capital was lost and an even greater amount was not even able to be harvested. However, just because the ways in which social capital could be accumulated are greatly reduced, does not mean the value of that social capital is diminished. In fact, some may argue that the value of social ties is rising as the ability to accumulate it is falling.

Fewer cross-regional, cross-class organizations were available by the end of the twentieth century; therefore, those who didn't intimately know well-connected people were at a loss. The extinction of weak ties in this way was incredibly detrimental to American culture according to Granovetter's theory. Recall Granovetter argued that strong ties are not nearly as beneficial as weak ties, since information diffused between strong ties is usually confined to that small group of friends. Instead, weak ties are how many people secure jobs and learn new information. With social circles getting smaller, these weak ties are becoming weaker or extinct, which means the value of social capital is inflated. Since groups of people are staying within their own social spheres, one could argue that social capital is only as important as those who are members of those social spheres decide it is. Therefore, social capital based on strong ties loses value. However, one could also argue that job opportunities are more dependent on contacts and networking (i.e. weak ties) than ever before. Thus, the demand for weak ties rises while the supply falls. According to the supply-demand theory

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<sup>213</sup> Putnam, "Bowling Alone," 9.

in Keynesian economics, rising demand and falling supply lead to an increase in value. So, as the form of large civic organizations evolves into more independent, privatized groups, fewer weak ties are made, making those ties that can lead to information diffusion, mobility, community organization and social cohesion even more valuable in the American social economy.

By the end of the twentieth century, opportunities for women were greater than ever before, civic organizations were evolving, and social capital was increasing in value, all of which weakened the federation system that once propelled the PTA to unmatched success. In fact, today this federation system is weaker and more problematic than at any other time in the history of the PTA. While Skocpol praised the twentieth-century, mass-membership voluntary organizations that were formed as federations and that widened membership to a cross regional and cross-class demographic, the very reasons that she valued such groups are many of the same reasons that they are failing today.

Firstly, whereas the federation model had worked well in the twentieth century, many national campaigns today are not trickling down enough to help the individual schools and schoolchildren. This is due, in part, to the inability of the national PTA to take advantage of its strength as an advocacy group. For example, in 2010, the PTA launched a nationwide campaign against childhood obesity, with First Lady, Michelle Obama.<sup>214</sup> Similarly, in 2011, the PTA worked with U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, to launch the anti-bullying Connect to Respect initiative, and “released Parent Guides on

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<sup>214</sup> “National PTA History.”

the Common Core State Standards for English and Math, grades K-12 in English and Spanish.”<sup>215</sup> Evidently, in recent years the PTA has kept up a national agenda, but whether or not the changes they are fighting for make it down to the local level deserves some investigation.

In light of the current national push toward standardized testing and the core curriculum regime, one might think the PTA would use its collective voice and leadership position to better represent the needs of its members and their children. Instead, the PTA website provides little more than an official position statement against the movement and a collection of informative parent guides. These parent guides on core curriculum illustrate the PTA’s attempt to adapt to the new standardized program that has taken over, but in so doing, it failed to recognize that with the core curriculum in place it had become more difficult to fight for reform on any level—local, state, or federal. While standardizing public schools nationwide via national standardized testing may be one way to provide an equal education for all children, it does not follow that it is the best education for all children.

According to Rob Berler, a journalist who has published in the New York Times and Chicago Tribune and who studied students and educators at Brookside Elementary School in Norwalk, Connecticut, this public school “was just one of thousands of American public schools classified as failing during the 2010-2011 school year, according to standardized test scores.”<sup>216</sup> Berler

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<sup>215</sup> “National PTA History.”

<sup>216</sup> Brooke Berger, “Don’t Teach to the Test: Journalist Ron Berler explains how standardized testing is preventing students from learning,” *U.S. News*, April 11, 2013,

explains that testing is not a fair measure of school quality, for example a fifth grader, who started the year at a second-grade level and progressed to a fourth-grade level by the end of the year, improved two grade levels, but is tested in a fifth-grade curriculum, which does not indicate the significant growth he made throughout the year. When asked what he thinks would be the best ways to invest in education, Berler replied:

I would say reduce and adjust the amount of standardized testing. Reallocate your existing funds so that the thrust of your investment goes to elementary school, early school education, rather than your middle and high school. And finally, parents have to be intimately involved in their child's school lives for them to succeed. And, I think, if you look at my book, you'll see that it doesn't have an agenda. It's balanced, and it's [written] through the voices and the feelings of those who are involved in the daily pressures brought on by No Child Left Behind.<sup>217</sup>

The No Child Left Behind Act was the springboard for our present-day national education reform movement, based on the core curriculum standards.

Unfortunately, these reform mandates have not been well funded, but have required schools to adapt new standardized curriculums and engage in high stakes testing which greatly impact both teachers and students. Although this reform was intended to increase student readiness for college and career, preparing our youth to compete in a global economy, instead it appears that our students are falling further behind.<sup>218</sup> So much more needs to be addressed in order to equip our children with the best education possible. Furthermore,

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accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2013/04/11/why-excessive-standardized-testing-is-causing-american-schools-to-fail>.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> "Are The Common Core Standards A Good Idea?" U.S. News & World Report, Accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/are-the-common-core-standards-a-good-idea>.

drawing from chapter one, Locke believed that children are too unique in their own ways to be taught in the same way:

A child not properly guided could become an irrational, cruel being because 'the minds of children [are] as easily turned this or that way as water itself. Indeed, so many various tempers can be found that 'there are possibly scarce two children who can be conducted by exactly the same method.'<sup>219</sup>

Thus, while the PTA sends out parent guides to help adapt to the new law, they should instead simplify and crystallize its goals and work to create a new education bill that better accommodates and adjusts to the differences in children's learning. Perhaps, that is asking too much of the organization, but according to its own mission statement, its goal is "to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children."<sup>220</sup> If this is its goal, then shouldn't it support the drafting of petitions or bills to change a system that is failing children? Evidently, the PTA can have Michelle Obama speak at its conference but hosting guest speakers does not translate to actual reform, at least not the type of reform and action for which it was once known. As the leading advocacy group in education in the United States, the PTA should be the go-to source for parents to find information and ways in which to easily get involved. The PTA should be on the tips of concerned parents' tongues and it should be facilitating their participation.

Secondly, Theda Skocpol discovered trends among mass-membership voluntary organizations that made them powerhouses for recruiting active

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<sup>219</sup> Gianoutsos, "Locke and Rousseau," 2.

<sup>220</sup> "PTA Mission & Values."

participants in civic engagement during the twentieth century; however, many of her findings are not applicable to the PTA today. In fact, not only are many inaccurate, but often, the opposite is true. She writes that “associations became good at simultaneously influencing and reflecting popular opinion in localities.”<sup>221</sup> Today, rather than creating a network of communication and influence, each local branch has become its own organization, shaped by its own needs and its own demographics. This is the flip side of the flexibility that was lauded in the last chapter. The PTA was more flexible than any organization, allowing members to donate how much or how little they wanted and to come to all meetings, some, or none. It also allowed members to work to reform programs within their own school, without pressure to communicate with other neighboring schools. While the direct effects of parents’ fundraising and donations on behalf of their children’s education is a major selling point when recruiting parents to join the PTA, it is also creating institutionalized double standards across the country; by not redistributing enough funds, the money stays too local.

In 2012, the “PTA launched Our Home—Our Legacy—Our Future, an unprecedented fundraising campaign.”<sup>222</sup> This highlights just how successful the PTA is at tapping into the classic American Dream ideology, in which parents believe that donating to their legacy will ultimately help their children’s future. However, this also emphasizes just how localized the PTA has become. The PTA’s great success in appealing to the family unit is the reason why some schools in

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<sup>221</sup> Skocpol, “The Tocqueville Problem,” 468.

<sup>222</sup> “National PTA History.”

higher-income areas receive many donations from parents who can afford to give money or time for bake sales, while some schools in lower-income neighborhoods can barely afford to keep class sizes at a manageable level. “As the PTA grew, local branches differed widely in political tactics and activities.”<sup>223</sup> The PTA’s genius is that it has worked its way into local communities like a chameleon, changing shape for what is needed. In well-off schools, this comes in the form of spirit gear, membership dues, bake sales and even galas for parents who join. Fundraising goes to teacher allowances for the classroom, class trips, science equipment, arts and sports. For those in lower-income areas, PTA Nights sometimes translate to family nights, whereby parents accompany their children to the school to share a dinner in the cafeteria and participate in workshops on how to raise a bilingual child. The great diversity and flexibility within the PTA system make it so incredible in some ways and yet so ineffective and detrimental in others.

While some schools are fundraising hundreds and even thousands of dollars, others are barely surviving on government grants. As the discussion in chapter 2 of funding issues in public schools today reveals, it is evident that schools in which parents are able to add substantial funds provide much better opportunities to their students than those schools that do not have access to such significant donations. Furthermore, in those communities with enough funds to supplement their school’s needs, government officials see parents doing their jobs and back off, since it saves them time, money, and effort. This

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<sup>223</sup> Lynn Y. Weiner, “History of Education Society,” *History of Education Quarterly* 41 (2001): 554, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3218261.pdf>.

assumption that parents are supplementing schools enough to replace government funding could be further aggravating the current crisis. The institutionalized double standard, which was referred to earlier, points directly to the fundamental concept of inequality in public education. A strong PTA in one district enables government to abdicate its responsibility to provide a quality public education system while a neighboring PTA, in a socio-economically deprived district cannot match that effort, and thus, many children suffer when government officials assume the PTA is contributing sorely needed additional funding. If local and state officials do not believe that education must be one of their major priorities, when in reality it should be at or near the top of the list, we find ourselves in the position we are in today, with insufficient funding and inadequate attention to problems, and misallocation of precious resources. Furthermore, with tax-deductible donations, parents who can afford to donate are encouraged by the government to do so, but this type of tax benefit only serves to further segregate the areas with wealthy families that can afford to donate from the areas with families that cannot be economically incentivized to donate, since they do not have the means to do so. Nevertheless, the inequalities engendered by hyper-localization extend far beyond fundraising, tax benefits, and indeed, far beyond economic capital, in general.

Due to the changing structure and the hyper-localization of the PTA today, parents who live in higher-income areas and participate in the PTA may not come in contact with parents who live in lower-income areas, all of whom live within miles of each other. Indeed, even within the same community, “free

riders” exist, who absorb both social and economic capital without contributing any.<sup>224</sup> However, it has always been the PTA’s policy to accept all parents who wish to join regardless of their level of participation. As groups become more localized, there are fewer reasons for cross-regional branches to communicate and as leisure time becomes more privatized, there is even less incentive for parents to befriend other parents in neighboring towns, let alone in their own town. Still, the strong and weak ties built between parents in higher-income neighborhoods, who attend the same fundraising parties, or who cheer their children on at the same soccer game, are incredibly valuable. Parents in these higher-income areas may have white-collar professions, which means that parents with strong or weak ties to them have access to white-collar professionals and perhaps to white-collar careers themselves, all of which benefits their children, as well, assuming the parents are good stewards of social capital.

On the other hand, parents in lower-income areas may work in blue-collar occupations. In these areas, the strength of weak ties is not nearly as powerful as those in the higher-income neighborhoods. Therefore, parents making weak ties in the PTA in lower-income areas will find themselves without the same information diffusion, mobility, community organization, and social cohesion that is available to those who make connections with parents who have more social capital. Therefore, the strength of weak ties is much more valuable when dealing with greater access to high social capital. When there are lesser

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<sup>224</sup> Donald Moon, “Foundations of Civic Engagement” (lecture, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, Spring 2013).

amounts of accumulated social capital, the weak ties will be less effective in spreading news about new government candidates, in offering access to better job positions and upward mobility, in uniting the community to fight or encourage reform, and in expanding social cohesion. There is an incestuous cycle of wealthier parents sending their children to schools, donating to those schools, sending their children to good colleges, and then having grandchildren attend wealthy schools, where their children send donations, as well. In this way, the cycle perpetuates itself. In fact, "it is usually wealthy people who marry each other."<sup>225</sup> With the rich marrying the rich and the poor marrying the poor, the cycle of inequality continues. This stickiness at the ends, mentioned earlier, is mimicked through local branches of the PTA that encourage parents to donate for their children, but do not ask them to look further than the limb of their own family tree. Thus, the PTA fosters absolute mobility, as explained in chapter one. We all get on the escalator and the PTA does work, pushes reform, and encourages donations to make the escalator rise, bringing all children up higher than they began when they stepped on and higher than they would be if the PTA did not exist, but it ignores the relative mobility, the lack of which is hurting the nation. The PTA provides no compensatory support to those children who get on the escalator after other children. It does not provide them with relief from a lower-income childhood. If anything, the PTA provides a path for wealthier families to ensure that their children make it to the top long before any other children. Moreover, the proliferation of Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO's),

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<sup>225</sup> Ferdinand Lundberg, *The Rich and the Super-Rich: A Study in the Power of Money Today* (New York: Lyle Stuart, Inc., 1968), 18.

Home and School Associations (HASA's), and Education Foundations, provides middle class neighborhoods and up with direct local funding and participation and as a result, has affected membership in the National PTA. The essence of this problem is that these organizations siphon the funding as well as the voice of those communities that have them, thereby diminishing the vocal force of the PTA, as a whole. These groups provide a shortcut for those who want the benefits of the local PTA, without the encumbrance of a national organization. These groups facilitate the funneling of money directly to their children's educations. Therefore, these associations threaten the power of the PTA on multiple levels. In fact, the PTA felt so threatened by the for-profit company, PTO Today, that it sued them in late 2012. "The lawsuit also accuses School Family Media President Tim Sullivan of contacting PTA members 'in an effort to induce them to leave' the older organization."<sup>226</sup> After a year, the two parties reached a settlement without monetary damages. The PTA works for all children and PTO's work for those children whose parents form PTO's in their communities. One is a nonprofit and one is a profit-generating machine. "Schools and parents nationwide are much better served by both the PTA and PTO Today focusing on our mutual good work rather than on legal battles, PTO Today founder Tim Sullivan said in the statement."<sup>227</sup> The PTA may say what sets it apart is its work for the betterment of all children, but with its major contribution to the absolute

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<sup>226</sup> Michael Tarm, "Parent Teacher Association Sues For-Profit Rival PTO Today," *The Huffington Post*, September 26, 2012, Last modified November 26, 2012. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/26/parent-teacher-associatio\\_0\\_n\\_1916711.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/26/parent-teacher-associatio_0_n_1916711.html).

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

mobility of children in America today, it is failing to follow through on the major tenet that it claims sets it apart. The PTA needs to focus more on the relative mobility problem that advances such inequality between American children today.

The escalator analogy is reinforced when considering that many children who are in the low-income areas are living in segregated neighborhoods or slums. Since the 1970s and 1980s, when the word disappeared from everyday speech and political debate, segregation has been ignored. Racism and segregation discussions have been taboo, but without a discussion of institutionalized racial and economic inequalities, the analysis of the negative side of the PTA's impact would be incomplete. How can any discussion of differences between local PTA branches proceed without noting that some neighborhoods have been banished to the lowest rung?

[Most Americans] view segregation as an unfortunate holdover from a racist past, one that is fading progressively over time. If racial residential segregation persists, they reason, it is only because civil rights laws passed during the 1960s have not had enough time to work or because many blacks still prefer to live in black neighborhoods... segregation is the missing link in prior attempts to understand the plight of the urban poor.<sup>228</sup>

The PTA is dependent on the neighborhood and the residential status of the area and if we consider that the neighborhood can be dependent on the PTA for child advocacy, then those who need the PTA the most are those who benefit the least on the local level. "Residential segregation is not a neutral fact; it systematically

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<sup>228</sup> Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 3.

undermines the social and economic well-being of blacks in the United States.”<sup>229</sup> Furthermore, as has been repeatedly said and proven multiple times, parent involvement is a major factor contributing to success in schools, but black children who are condemned to low-income housing live surrounded by poverty, where “joblessness [is] the norm, where a majority of children are born out of wedlock, where most families are on welfare, where educational failure prevails, and where social and physical deterioration abound.”<sup>230</sup> These conditions are structures of the community and they create an incestuous cycle just as wealthier parents do by donating money to wealthier schools in upscale neighborhoods.

During the golden age of the PTA, the 1960s and 1970s, one must wonder how golden it was for those who were black. Kenneth B. Clark wrote in *Dark Ghetto*, in 1965, that “the dark ghetto’s invisible walls have been erected by the white society, by those who have power, both to confine those who have no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness. The dark ghettos are social, political, educational, and—above all—economic colonies.”<sup>231</sup> The PTA made strides to connect with the black community, working hand-in-hand with the NCCPT, as mentioned in chapter three, but segregation is not gone today, and it seems as though neither the national organization nor local branches of the PTA have realized the ways in which its operating structure is confining and condemning those who have been systemically inducted into an incestuous cycle

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<sup>229</sup> Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*,” 2.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 11.

of failure. William W. Cutler III wrote in his book, *Parents and Schools: the 150-Year Struggle for Control in American Education*:

Although the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT) was founded in 1926 in cooperation with the PTA...the NCCPT and the PTA were 'competitors.' Racism among the white PTA membership and within the segregated American educational system contributed to the founding of the Colored PTA, which merged with the national PTA in 1970.<sup>232</sup>

Cutler points out that the PTA was omnipresent, with policies and influence at the national and local levels and that tension regarding social justice and race surfaced throughout the twentieth century.<sup>233</sup> Rather than promoting equal opportunity, the PTA's federation structure heightens the differences between children and further stratifies children of different socioeconomic classes. While I discuss this trend among African Americans in segregated communities, these patterns extend to many different race and ethnic minorities, who are further marginalized by the PTA.

This chapter should not be considered a wholesale indictment of the PTA. The PTA provides an excellent opportunity for parents to be part of their children's lives. It gives parents and teachers a platform and it encourages communitywide engagement. However, the side effects of such benefits may be even more costly than the positive effects themselves. The PTA needs to adapt again; it needs to realize that it perpetuates the very problems it attempts to solve and it needs to change. The PTA is full of potential; whether that potential can be realized is the question.

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<sup>232</sup> Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 11.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 554

## 5. CONCLUSION

Throughout this work, I have mapped out the ways in which America has changed since the beginning of the twentieth century, paying close attention to the impact of those changes on public education, the ways in which the American public education system relies upon the Parent Teacher Association, and the ways in which the Parent Teacher Association fails to address the current crisis in education. I began by introducing concepts such as the American Dream—meritocracy, mobility, and individualism—which I argued were less about the individual and more about the family unit as a social entity throughout American history. Using the family unit as a cultural foundation, I outlined the ways in which the private and public spheres detached and the home evolved from a place of production to a place of companionship, defining the woman’s changing role as central to this change, as well as, many other developments in the twentieth century. This led to a more detailed discussion of parents’ roles in their children’s lives, since parent participation has been proven to be incredibly beneficial for children, by all accounts. Through family ties, we establish our wider associations as individuals in American society. I found that theorists such as Mark S. Granovetter and Robert Putnam recognized these associations to be fundamental to American culture. Through such connections, we establish social networks and accumulate social capital, which multiply our opportunities for the diffusion of information, upward mobility through job and cultural networking, the organization of communities, and the strengthening of social cohesion.

Granovetter proved that weak ties, relationships that emerge from the fringe of friend groups or social arrangements, are the most beneficial, whereas strong ties limit relationships to smaller, tight-knit groups of people. Putnam found that the privatization of leisure time meant that fewer mass-membership groups exist today and that more Americans are spending their time surrounded by those with whom they have strong ties, so that weak ties are becoming weaker or even nonexistent. Whereas large civic groups once connected entire communities and people from all income levels, regions, and races, today membership rates are lower than ever and many large civic organizations, such as the AARP, do not require members to meet in order to join; thus, cardholders may never even know when they pass each other. This trend is increasingly threatening to American culture when considering Theda Skocpol's work on the success of the largest mass-membership groups of the twentieth century, some of which do not exist today and some of which are considerably weaker now. The PTA is one organization that fits Skocpol's description almost perfectly and Skocpol's emphasis on the PTA leaves the reader wondering what happened.

The PTA's mission statement is "to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children."<sup>234</sup> Working in American public schools, the PTA provides parents and teachers a voice with which to advocate for their children and school; however, as Skocpol's research shows, the decline in effectiveness of the PTA and similar organizations has occurred at the same time as the United States needs a civic

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<sup>234</sup> "PTA Mission & Values."

hero most. The American public education system is in crisis. Rising standards require students to accumulate degrees in order to compete in a worldwide job market. This development increases the importance of education and lengthens the time spent pursuing it, in order to succeed. Indeed, as the number of diplomas needed to compete rises, the value of those diplomas also rises. Simultaneously, education inequality has been growing since the 1970s at faster rates than ever before, which is why Lawrence Katz and Claudia Goldin label this period the “Great Divergence.” Furthermore, this stagnation has put pressure on the Federal government to react aggressively to make American school children better competitors in the international landscape, which in turn, has led to national regulations and standards, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and the establishment and reinforcement of the Core Curriculum State Standards. While educational immobility is costly for America at large, it hits those in lower-income neighborhoods the hardest. This is mainly due to the reliance on property taxes to fund school districts; the allocation of supplemental government funds does not adequately rectify the inequalities between different communities and school districts. Through a discussion of court cases in which the government fund allocation equation was debated and ultimately favored those who were previously under-funded, I highlight the fact that court decisions do not translate to immediate, direct action. Without strong local PTAs, for example, change is extremely slow and often can be stalled by pressure to maintain the status quo.

In Chapter Two, it is noted that public schools across the nation are allocated less funding than they had been during the 2008 recession year. The effect of this is heightened when considering that the number of children living in poverty who attend public schools is greater than ever before. The consequence of reduced funding is quite real and immediate for the children who attend those schools and the teachers who work there. For instance, budget cuts often lead to fewer programs in the arts and sports and usually more teacher layoffs, which can lead to larger class sizes. While such effects are detrimental to all children, they are especially harmful to children in low-income neighborhoods, who often do not have the resources to supplement a poor education with tutors or help from their parents. Furthermore, merely changing economic funding levels would not change the fact that teachers and parents would rather avoid schools in declining neighborhoods. With more desperate teachers taking positions in poorer neighborhoods and more desperate parents, who most likely live in those neighborhoods, the social and cultural capital at those schools is much lower than that of the wealthier schools across town and access to that social capital is declining at a rapid pace. The snowball effect of low-income affects the school, the teachers, the parents, and most importantly, the schoolchildren, on multiple levels. In order to emphasize the concreteness of these issues, I provided brief case studies on Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago, all of which are cities struggling with their public school systems, much like many other cities across the nation. The inequality in modern America's public

education system hits schools with a twofold punch—via individual state allocation reductions and individual school allocation reductions.

With all of these issues in the American public education system, PTA involvement is more necessary than ever, which, one would assume, would not be difficult considering its rich history of child advocacy in America. The golden age of the PTA though, had run its course between its founding at the turn of the twentieth century and the 1970s. During that period, the PTA fit Skocpol's description of successful civic organizations almost perfectly. The success of the PTA was facilitated by the role of women in the early 1900s, when the PTA was founded by mothers and supported by female teachers. The role of women in American society and in public education in particular, during the twentieth century, grew enormously, which empowered the PTA even more. As women worked their way out of the private sphere and into the workforce of the public sphere, the highly feminized role of the teacher became all the more appealing and important, for those with the proper social, cultural, and economic capital and the right family heritage, since teaching was (and is) a noble profession. As the PTA grew, it expanded almost imperialistically, planting local branches across America and, in some cases, beyond. In fact, the role of young female teachers expedited and strengthened the spread of the PTA by providing young women who had moved to small town locales for teaching positions and had the energy and capacity to be active community leaders. While the rise of the federation system was not unique to the PTA, it was able to bolster support from these young women, who worked in the schools, found husbands in their towns,

and eventually sent their children to the same schools, committing their lives to providing better education in the local area, all the while actively participating in the PTA. Local branches of the PTA were strong and responsive and the organization benefited from this model on many levels. While the national level of the PTA was able to push for reform on a macro scale, the local chapters were flexible enough to work with the community's needs and small enough to see direct results of actions taken in their schools.

While the children and the schools benefited from the volunteer work of the PTA, the parents involved also benefited in a multitude of ways. In fact, all the benefits of strong and weak ties that Granovetter discussed were realized by parents participating in the type of organization that Putnam believed was the most beneficial for accumulating social capital and strengthening networks. Not only were parents able to donate money directly to their children's education, but children also benefited directly from their parents' participation in their lives. Parents also realized the benefits of having a local network for social connections, whether they were friendships or job networking opportunities. Parents in the PTA were able to set up carpools and playdates and make friends, all of which could increase their social capital while making their lives easier. These parent friendships directly affected the children immediately and potentially could provide opportunities for those children in the way of internships and jobs in the future. Additionally, parents benefited by being better informed about their children's education. Through occasional meetings and newsletters, parents were included in updates, events, and major decisions.

Furthermore, flexibility at the local level meant that parents were able to join the PTA without requirements for how much money or time must be donated or how many events they must attend. A parent could be part of the club without being heavily pressured to participate in every function. This flexibility was especially important for mothers, since the number of stay-at-home moms has declined sharply since 1967, although it has taken a slight upward turn recently (which may be explained by several reasons not the least of which are unemployment, technology, telecommuting, and flex work programs). With more women joining the workforce, the PTA provided a route by which they could stay involved through civic engagement and volunteerism. In reality, the federation system worked so perfectly for the PTA by exploiting the American Dream ideology, which promised parents would get back more than what they had put into the system in terms of providing a better education for their children. Until the late twentieth century, the PTA flourished at both the national and local levels, benefiting the children, the parents, local schools, and the public education system as a whole. Today, however, we see only an echo of what the PTA used to be, which could be due to overall national changes in recent years or perhaps caused by some of the practices of the PTA itself.

Some may attribute the recent decline of the PTA to falling membership rates, much of which could be due to more women in the workforce and out of the home with limited time to devote to civic organizations, such as the PTA. Furthermore, the trend of suburban sprawl, in which neighborhoods were more spread out and in which parents were forced to commute to work in nearby

cities or surrounding towns, separated communities that once centered on civic life. Parents had work friends from surrounding areas that made relationships with parents from their children's schools less important and neighborhoods were divided by highways and thoroughfares running through the center of town. In many ways, the transformation of America between the 1970s and today is responsible for many of the changes that negatively impacted the productivity of the PTA. In fact, Putnam blames technology, such as the television, for facilitating the privatization of leisure time in America because citizens were less likely to attend meetings of large volunteer groups than they were to sit on their couches with work friends or spouses to watch popular TV shows. This is emblematic of the very process of a decline in the formation of weak ties described earlier. As more parents commuted to work and found friends outside the neighborhood, they had fewer social ties in town and felt less compelled to participate in local organizations. This is especially detrimental today, since weak ties are more important than ever for networking in terms of job searches and information diffusion. While PTA membership numbers have plummeted, the connections made today between members are all the more valuable. Besides the issues brought on by large-scale demographic, technological, and social changes across the country, the PTA has floundered due to its own mismanagement as well.

Recently, the PTA has executed national reform campaigns poorly and with minimal success. The few reasons I have found that may be responsible for this trend are the fact that information about national reforms is not trickling

down to local levels, so that the national PTA is more concerned with the image of change than change itself and that the national push for standardization is pushing back on the PTA, creating insurmountable obstacles in its quest to provide opportunities for all children. Unfortunately, many of the campaigns at the national level are not impacting the local level enough to make waves in small communities, especially since many of those school districts are struggling with a lack of funding and attention in other ways. Reforms designed to address childhood obesity, for example, which was a national PTA priority in 2010, are not as pressing as keeping class sizes manageable. However, the national PTA has done a great job keeping up appearances, as exemplified by Michelle Obama speaking at a recent National PTA Conference. With the help of guest speakers, the PTA is able to briefly break into the news, but the publicity and photo opportunities are not enough to encourage the same type of participation that it once had. Even more, these high profile events may be causing some people to believe that other parents are doing a good enough job supporting the PTA that their help is unnecessary, which is definitely not the case. The “free rider” problem often occurs in civic society, when people benefit from the work of others. However, if everyone thought that way then nobody would benefit, thus the PTA would be stuck in neutral. While the PTA is still a recognizable name across the nation, it is hardly considered a force to be reckoned with and few people can even tell you the name of, let alone the concept behind, its latest campaign.

The national education reform movement resulted in the standardization of curricula and high stakes testing in schools across America, impeding the very flexibility that contributed to the PTA's prior success. This movement seemingly causes more problems than it resolves and rather than working to improve it, the PTA passively sent out informative parent guides in 2011 to educate parents on the core curriculum. While I believe the PTA must adapt, I would hope that it means more than merely changing to fit the times; instead, it should fight to make education better for all schoolchildren.

Besides the national flaws of the current PTA, the federation system has become hyper-localized, to the point that nearby PTAs do not communicate and each school becomes isolated. This in turn promotes inequality and immobility, thereby institutionalizing both. The PTA has become too flexible in each separate district, only supporting the needs of the local demographic, rather than all children. This is especially apparent when comparing the differences between schools in high-income areas to schools in low-income areas. Whereas high-income schools most likely have parents who can afford to donate money to the school and who can afford to make time to volunteer at the school, low-income parents do not have those options. The poorer school districts discussed in chapter two are weakened further by the lack of a well-funded PTA. While the PTA does not hurt the low-income schools and in fact, is still beneficial in many ways, it does further separate children from lower-income areas from their counterparts in higher-income areas. The rich children get richer educations and the poor children get poorer ones. This institutionalizes inequality within the

public education system and creates a cycle that is hard to break. In this way, the PTA only affects absolute mobility, raising the lowest of the low at the same pace as it raises all others, still leaving the lower-income children to suffer with larger class sizes, fewer teachers, fewer supplies and resources, and fewer influential role models. Children raised in low-income areas are often surrounded by parents with blue collar jobs, single-parent families, and limited after school activities, whereas children raised in higher-income families often have parents with white-collar jobs, fewer single-parent families, and many afterschool activities. Discrepancies such as these go beyond the school funding issues and the differences in donation dollars from the PTA. Children of low-income families are less likely to accumulate the same amount of social and cultural capital that is increasingly important in today's world. They are also less likely to meet people out of their low-income neighborhood and make connections with children who have parents with white-collar professions that might one day help them land a better job. The lack of connections such as these is just as harmful to lower-income children as the lack of economic capital and it is especially destructive in areas that are burdened by segregation. Minorities today are living in lower-income areas and the connection between race and low-income cannot be ignored. For these reasons and more, the PTA has failed the United States, but it does not mean there is no hope. The PTA can still provide the benefits it once did; it still has the opportunity to connect people and create reform that improves children's lives and helps them realize their potential, despite disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is hard to say what the next move for the PTA should be. Attempting to appeal to all parents from different walks of life is precisely what got them into this hyper-localized mess in the first place. I will use the rest of the chapter to offer potential solutions to these issues, although admittedly, some will be harder to execute than others. The first recommendation for the PTA is that it seek to better promote the personal benefits of joining in hopes of boosting membership. While this is most easily done by word-of-mouth among parents, it is paramount that parents believe that membership directly affects their children positively. In addition, the connections parents make at the local school can help them improve their family outlook by increasing their social capital. While this will be easier to accomplish in some communities than others, and while it may seem somewhat hypocritical in light of the criticism of the PTA's methodologies discussed in the previous chapter, the PTA must increase its size in order to regain its national prominence and influence. The PTA does not usually acquire life-long members. Instead, parents of schoolchildren participate during their children's years in the public schools and quit after their graduation. An opportunity exists for the PTA to establish some type of life-long membership, rather than the cycle of joining and quitting after a child has graduated. By exploiting the networking capabilities and their social aspects, the PTA can become a community that endures beyond a child's public school career. Just as American scouting programs have multiple levels or titles based on years of participation, so too could the PTA. For example, parents of elementary school students might be designated Freshmen or Form 1, parents of

middle school students might be designated Sophomore or Form 2, parents of high school students might be designated Junior or Form 3, and post-public school parents, whether their kids are going to college or to get a job or to join the military, might be Senior or Form 4. These four titles would be universal nationwide, standardizing the PTA and allowing families to move without losing connections. Similarly, Form 4 parents would keep their title and connections, allowing younger parents to graduate to the Form 4 parent group and meet parents who have children in the workforce already. This program does not require greater participation, but encourages long-term participation. With this type of program in place, parents move on to a more senior title, rather than that of non-member. In this way, parents would continue to receive newsletters, stay informed, and might continue to donate and participate in some social activities. If parents made friends in the PTA, they would be more likely to attend functions with those friends, even after their children have moved on. Similarly, the PTA would benefit from asserting that public colleges and universities are an extension of the American public education system. By expanding membership eligibility to those whose children attend public universities, the PTA can strengthen its core. Advocating for children to have the highest quality education at the least possible cost through their college years can advance our society and provide more ways for the United States to compete globally. Furthermore, as I mentioned in chapter two, it is becoming more important for students to acquire college degrees; therefore, if the PTA sold itself as an organization protecting your child from kindergarten through college graduation, it would be more likely

to maintain the family atmosphere and life-long memberships that would secure a strong core. In addition, since the quality of local school systems directly affects property values, continued participation may draw interest from a financial prospective, as well. This progressive system of titles would also create an opportunity to honor those parents who have stayed with the organization for certain numbers of years. Realizing that this is not the main purpose of the PTA, it is still important that members join and participate with conviction, rather than merely join for the duration of their children's public education careers.

The second solution involves creating "PTA Pockets." This campaign would partner surrounding schools either in small groups or pairs. By creating a buddy system for neighboring areas, the parents in the PTA at one school can befriend parents in a neighboring town. This would also foster more cross-class and cross-regional activities, such as PTA-funded middle-school dances that involve multiple schools. While one school's PTA may donate more than another, the funds would be mixed and anonymous and the benefits would be spread evenly among all participating schools. Not only does this give lower-income schools a chance to raise money, it gives parents from all participating schools a chance to reach out to other parents and see what neighboring schools may be like. In addition, with the hope of fostering closer relationships between parents, students, and teachers, all could work together to devise cross-school projects or low budget field trips with neighboring schools. National funding is allocated at the state level, so there is no harm in parents, students, and teachers learning

more about the other schools in their state or region. Knowledge is power. Knowing one's neighbor by name and as a person can work to reverse the isolation and alienation that comes with suburban sprawl. Of course, there are some potential drawbacks to such a campaign, such as the potential for jealousy that might reinforce racial, ethnic, and class stereotypes if districts are too disparate. Despite these risks, the benefits of making connections and forging friendships seem most compelling.

A third solution would be to create "focus groups" within the local community of PTA members. Parents who find an alarming local problem can band together in a focus group that can act as an activist limb of the PTA to lobby local officials who can then initiate change or take it to the national level. Furthermore, these groups can connect with other groups across the nation. For example, if the problem is local, such as a lack of smart boards in the science classrooms at the local level, a focus group can form to work to secure smart boards for the local school. However, if say, smart boards were found to be releasing noxious gas, focus groups across the nation could work together to remove them from classrooms nationwide. In this way, a focus group in Oregon could connect with a focus group in Connecticut based on their mutual interest. This way, parents would be feeding the fire of change and connecting to each other across the country.

The PTA has an incredible website and database; however, it is too passive and must be reconfigured as an active site to encourage parents to collaborate and participate in local and national education conversation. In that

way, PTA members using their member logins, could have access to district, regional, and national information. Of course, by assuming that all people across the United States have access to the Internet, the PTA would be marginalizing those from the lowest-income areas. However, if the PTA began a campaign to provide all schools with a certain number of computers that would match a threshold percentage based on the number of children who attend the school, and then lobbied for parents to have access to those computers during after-school hours, the PTA could begin the work of leveling the playing field. It would be another step in the right direction and it could open many opportunities for networking and building influence on a national scale. While its website is extremely informational, it could be used in other ways to facilitate online chats between parents or connect parents with similar interests and goals. Of course, all of this would be completely useless if Putnam is correct and a new era of civic engagement has arrived, one that merely requires mail-in checks and nothing more. While the PTA has always been based on volunteerism, it is becoming less and less so. This trend implies that asking more of parents who are already doing the bare minimum would be unlikely to yield any incremental positive effect, unless counteracted by the increasing use of social media and other online tools.

A fourth solution also involves the Internet. The creation of a strong closed-network online funding source would further connect PTA parents. While, I do not believe that the PTA should completely redistribute donations raised by the parents themselves, I do believe that online sources, such as

Kickstarter, could be useful platforms for raising money for specific issues targeted around the nation. Kickstarter is a website that allows people to post their creative projects and ideas online independently, with the hope of raising funds to implement their ideas. It is both a platform and a resource, where backers come from all walks of life and pledge different amounts of money to any number of projects. The PTA could take advantage of such a platform. For example, if a low-income school does not have proper plumbing, they could post on the closed-network PTA “Kickstarter-type” platform and PTA’s from around the country could pledge some of their donations to the plumbing. Another example would be a Kickstarter-type campaign set up to raise money for a school play, which can be very expensive. With the help of other PTA’s, lower-income schools could thrive. Moreover, I suggest that this format could be used to support national PTA campaigns and focus groups, so that, as mentioned earlier, the very focus groups that were connecting across the country would have a mechanism by which all the local PTA chapters could get involved, raising awareness of and funds for a cause.

A fifth solution for the PTA would be to initiate a stronger grant program. If a relatively small percentage of fundraising went to a national “pot” of funds allocated to grants for which each school could apply, each year, a PTA grant program could account for a greater redistribution without the complete sharing of funds. Also, if the PTA could encourage private companies or individual donors to create grants in their names, the PTA could partner with them, in terms of advertising and could foster better relations in the business world while

accumulating more funds to distribute across the nation. These supplemental grants would not fix all the problems, but they would provide a valuable financial resource for schools that are struggling, while providing exposure for those corporations and individuals.

The PTA learned early on that one size does not fit all. Whereas it was once a pioneer of flexibility, it is now standardizing conformism. It is important to remind those who run the PTA and those who participate in it that they are needed; they are central to American educational reform. Civic engagement can help save the country from the current education crisis, but in order to do so, the PTA must refocus and consolidate its influence nationwide. It must find the strands of hope that once connected this country and it must empower parents across the nation with the commitment to and pride of success. The PTA has this potential, but it is floundering. I believe this is due to a lack of information. If more parents and community leaders had an epiphanic moment whereby they realized that they could individually benefit as their children's public schools benefit from their participation, perhaps even the most self-centered citizens would join. How to get the word out is the hard part, since promoting advantages for parents in any discussion of schoolchildren seems incongruous.

Providing and disseminating accurate information is vital. I believe the PTA needs to change its current image from one of parents donating to kids to one of activists who create change. The PTA needs the type of influence it had during the mid-twentieth century. Rather than focusing on the local bake-sale, it should focus on the current education crisis, banding together public schools

across the nation and gathering support at every level. It should develop an agenda to resolve the current crisis. The PTA should be the go-to place for information on the education crisis. In a recent New York Times article, dated March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the faculty director of the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, Linda Darling-Hammond, did not mention the PTA in her contribution to an Opinion Page titled, "Is Improving Schools All About Money?"<sup>235</sup> It is as if the PTA does not even exist as an advocacy group. Where are its five million members? Today, the PTA is not where people look for information or action, but it could and should be. It needs to reclaim its potential and put it to use. The PTA should be making friends with government officials. It should be putting its agenda on party platforms and getting involved in politics from the local to the national level. No matter which party, it should be pushing for civic engagement and protection of children's rights, as well as, equal and consistently improving education in all public schools. Since there is not enough overall funding to make a difference, the lack of action by the PTA is the principal issue. I am hopeful that if the solutions offered herein were instituted it would re-energize the PTA. The primary focus of the PTA should not be fundraising, per se, since no matter how much money it raises, it will not be enough to make a difference without the support of a strong government.

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<sup>235</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, "Society Benefits When We Spend More on Education," *Is Improving Schools All About Money – The New York Times Opinion Pages*, March 26, 2015, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/03/26/is-improving-schools-all-about-money/society-benefits-when-we-spend-more-on-education>.

The neoliberal concept, favoring free trade, minimal government interference, privatization, and reduced public spending, has weakened our education system by opposing tax reforms that would target the wealthy to help fund public education at the levels it once enjoyed. The golden age of the PTA was only made possible by a strong government willing to prioritize education. I At the margins, the power of eight million more people, bringing membership rates back to the PTA's peak numbers, could make a profound difference when lobbying the government, as compared to the incremental effect that their dues could make collectively. Either way, the American government needs to spend more money at every level in order to effect meaningful change.

Furthermore, the PTA should focus on creating platforms, endorsing candidates, and pushing for critical initiatives in major political agendas, along with the customary signing of petitions. This type of program might help to undo the polarization that exists in politics today. The ability to disseminate information will be crucial to the success of such depolarization. Although the PTA has so much information online, if it utilized the techniques of other sites, such as DailyKos.com, in which an ad pops up to entice the reader to sign a petition, it might increase direct, active parent participation with a powerful, unified voice. If the PTA were to encourage parents to check-in online or to "re-tweet" PTA tweets from the Twitter feed that is already advertised at PTA.org, it would provide fuel for change by keeping topics in the news longer. For example, the PTA could start a hashtag, such as #2015educationcrisis, and could tweet out information, including statistics, regarding the current state of our nation's

public education system. Perhaps, molding itself to contemporary information media would spike activity. Imagine if the website were bookmarked on every parent's computer; then it would be a useful and relevant source of information. The PTA needs to reboot the activist mentality for educational reform that inspired its founding.

Included in that reboot, should be an unwavering PTA support for the restoration of respect for teaching as a profession. Our teachers are not supported the way they were just fifty years ago. Teachers are no longer recognized as leaders in their communities. By increasing appreciation for teachers, the profession will become more appealing. Another way to increase the number of quality teachers in America would be to provide tuition rebates/credits to those majoring in teaching at public colleges or universities and to start a debt forgiveness program for those who qualify that would be implemented following completion of five years of service at a public school. Thus, teachers would have fewer student debts and schools would be able to hire quality teachers. These programs would encourage people from all walks of life to become teachers, including attracting talented students from low-income backgrounds, who might not afford a teaching education otherwise. This program would also highlight the ways in which we value our teachers and public education in America and would advertise that support publicly. Furthermore, it would create a culture that would bolster tenure as a positive incentive for good teachers to obtain job security, rather than the current negative assumption that it only insulates poor quality teachers from the threat

of being let go. It is imperative that the Parent Teacher Association supports its teachers and increases the number of active, quality teachers in its membership.

Skocpol explained in her work that America is at consensus on civic engagement. “We find ourselves at a unique moment in American history,’ applauds multimillionaire Arianna Huffington writing in the Wall Street Journal, ‘when thoughtful people all across the political spectrum are coming together to recognize the primacy of civil society to our national health.’”<sup>236</sup> On the right, civic engagement means the federal government could be reined in and state and local governments, along with volunteer groups, could handle more social issues. Conservatives argue that extended government weakens democracy, encouraging citizens who could be helping each other to look to the government for handouts. George Will explained, “as the state waxes, other institutions wane.”<sup>237</sup> “Newt Gingrich wants to ‘renew America’ by ‘replacing the welfare state with an opportunity society’ featuring market incentives and ‘volunteerism and spiritual renewal.’”<sup>238</sup> In fact, there happens to be a movement on the right called “Applied Tocqueville.” *Policy Review: The Journal of American Citizenship* declares,

We will focus on the institutions of civil society—families, communities, voluntary associations, churches and other religious organizations, business enterprises, public and private schools, local governments—that are solving problems more effectively than large, centralized, bureaucratic government...we hope many liberals and centrists will join us in this endeavor.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Skocpol, “Unravelling From Above.”

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

In response to this statement, Skocpol writes, “but liberals and thoughtful centrists are rightfully reluctant to conflate business and the market with civil society, while pitting voluntarism and charity in zero-sum opposition to government.”<sup>240</sup> In fact, she points out that the United States has never had a large welfare state or large government compared to that of other countries. In the United States, volunteer groups, advocacy groups, religious groups and charities have always supplemented the government. Commenting on the harmful effects of reducing the government further and replacing it with private economic incentives, Senator Bill Bradley declared in February 1995: “The market acts blindly to sell and to make money...too often those who trash government as the enemy of freedom and destroyer of families are strangely silent about the market’s corrosive effects on those very same values in civil society.”<sup>241</sup> Evidently, our hyperpolarized America may not agree on how or why civic society may be revived, but the country can unite on the fact that civic groups, such as the PTA, are beneficial to the nation on multiple levels. As explained in chapter two, public education in America is not receiving nearly enough funding; therefore, cutting back is not a solution. Arguably, increasing donations and privatization of funding through the PTA, may seem to be a potential stimulant for the failing system, but the financial resources it has available pale in comparison to the enormity of the problem. It would seem then, that the PTA’s role is more about numbers than dollars. In other words, increased active membership is far more important than marginal increases in

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<sup>240</sup> Skocpol, “Unravelling From Above.”

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

funding. The ability of the PTA to effect change is directly dependent on an increase in active participants. The PTA cannot solve the problem of the education crisis on its own, but it must be a leading activist force. It must start the debate that ends in action, however, currently, the PTA does not have the membership, resources, or influence to do so. The PTA needs and deserves our support. There is no downside to helping children obtain a fair and well-rounded, higher-quality education. The goal should be the best for all without limits.

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