

**Testimony of Kathy Patenaude, President, Rhode Island Parent Teachers Association,
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**Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
Hearing on NCLB Reauthorization: Effective Strategies for Engaging Parents and
Communities in Schools
Wednesday, March 28, 2007 – 3:00 pm
Room 430, Dirksen Senate Office Building**

Mr. Chairman:

I wish to thank the Committee for giving me this opportunity to speak on behalf of the nearly five thousand members of the Rhode Island State PTA and the 5.5 million PTA members nationwide. I am glad to see Congress working so hard for our children.

My name is Kathy Patenaude and I am the President of the Rhode Island State PTA. I have been a PTA member for more than 15 years, and have served as a local unit president, as a council president, and as the legislative chair, vice president for leadership, president-elect and finally president for the Rhode Island PTA. Most importantly though, I am the mother of a 19 year old daughter, Kasey, who attended school in the Coventry Public School District and is presently a sophomore at Providence College.

In two years, the Rhode Island PTA will celebrate its 100th anniversary. We are a vibrant and growing organization; our membership increasing by nearly 7 percent this year alone. The national PTA organization is celebrating its 110th anniversary this year and stands today as the largest volunteer child advocacy organization in the United States with members in 25,000 local, council, district, and state PTAs in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Department of Defense Dependents Schools overseas.

Since its founding in 1897, PTA has reminded our country of its obligations to children and provided parents and families with a powerful voice to speak on behalf of every child. PTA strives to provide parents with the best tools to help their children succeed in school and in life. But PTA does not act alone. Rather, PTA works in cooperation with many national organizations, governmental agencies, and responsible corporate citizens on projects that benefit children and bring valuable resources to PTA members.

For more than a century, PTA has been a strong, respected advocate for children's health, public education, and increased parent involvement in children's lives. Through consistent hard work, sometimes after years of perseverance, our voices have been heard. Ideas that grew out of local PTA meetings are now accepted as national norms: kindergarten classes, child labor laws, a public health service, hot lunch programs, a juvenile justice system, and mandatory immunizations. In addition, PTA provides practical resources and programs to assist parents and other volunteers in their advocacy efforts. Those resources and programs include Reflections arts recognition, the National Standards for Parent and Family Involvement Programs, Parent Involvement Schools of Excellence Certification, leadership and advocacy training, resources on children's health and safety, and much more.

Mr. Chairman, numerous studies have documented that regardless of the economic, ethnic, or cultural background of the family, parent involvement in a child's education is a major factor in determining success in school. Successful parental involvement strategies vary from region to region, school-to-school, parent to parent. However, it is important that Congress find ways to help provide parents more opportunities to get involved. As you begin work on the upcoming reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act I ask that you pay special attention to the role our local communities have in trying to improve the academic achievement of all students.

As the President of the Rhode Island PTA I have first hand knowledge of the importance of parent involvement. Moving beyond the normal definition of involvement has been key to helping many of the schools across Rhode Island. Still, there is much work left to do.

As parents work longer hours they are often unable to commit the time to joining important organizations like the PTA. Priorities have shifted and it is harder now than ever for many families to provide a roof over their children's head much less volunteer in their classroom, read to them every night and check their homework. Through all of this however, the PTA and the many other parent organizations, continue to bring parents together--- Forming a network of help and assistance, empowering the community, and providing assistance to children and their families.

Improving parent involvement begins with the teacher. Training educators in how to not just bring the parent into the school but also helping them feel welcome in the school is very important. Most teachers already understand the importance of parent involvement. However, with such limited time in the day, and so many parents wanting their time, teachers hardly have the chance to go into the depth needed for a true, constructive discussion. The advent of email has been very helpful in broadening the communication between parent and teacher; But e-mail needs to supplement not take the place of a face to face conversation.

It is time for schools and their administration to start to think differently. There are many ways in which to get families involved and specifically engage parents in their child's school work. Training teachers to take full advantage of every note they send home with the child, every parent-teacher conference, and every community-based activity within the school to promote parent involvement must be placed higher on the agenda. Teachers can be stewards of parent involvement. Improving the academic success of the child is a shared goal of both parents and teachers. It is time for them to be an effective team so their goals can become reality.

Another barrier that I find exists in Rhode Island, especially in the urban areas, is a lack of discussion with parents about the true academic future of their child. There seems to be little opportunity for parents and teachers to discuss the role that education plays in their child's life. If the parent-teacher partnership can, at an early age, impress upon the child why their education is so important, the student will be encouraged to stay in school. This will also help more parents to stay involved through the academic tenure of their child. The relationship of parent involvement certainly evolves as the child gets older. However the amount of involvement should never dissipate. By identifying academic goals, parent and child will have a better chance at becoming more actively engaged in the student's academic success.

As President of the Rhode Island PTA, I have the responsibility of coordinating with many other groups in order to help our members find the services they need. One group of great importance to the many urban areas in my state is Rhode Island's Parental Information and Resource Center or PIRC. . They have been effective in areas that have even been difficult for PTA to reach. I hope this committee reauthorizes the PIRC program and provides additional resources to meet their growing need. PIRCs are critically important vehicles in promoting and encouraging parent involvement. The following are just a few of the initiatives in which the Rhode Island PIRC has been involved:

- In Providence, the PIRC has partnered with the Providence School Department's Parent Engagement Office in designing and co-presenting parent engagement workshops to approximately 2000 Providence teachers.
- In Central Falls, the PIRC trains the Home-School Liaisons who, in turn, return to their schools with new skills and information to share with their parents and families.
- In Bristol/Warren, the PIRC led a team of educators and parents in developing Home-School Compact and school level parent involvement policies for Title I schools.
- In Pawtucket the PIRC presents parent involvement workshops to teachers at Jenks Junior High and conducted a Family Friendly Walk-Through. These walk-throughs help schools to recognize and consider improving the friendliness of their schools so that parents and families feel more welcome and more likely to go to school events and actively engage in their child's education. The Family Friendly Walk-Through is a good starting place for schools to begin improving and expanding their parent involvement practices.
- The Rhode Island PIRC staff contributed to a standards-based calendar for all children entering kindergarten in several districts including Providence, Pawtucket, Warwick and Cranston. The calendar is for parents and includes activities for families to do together to improve children's readiness for entering kindergarten. This project was completed with a state library group and Childspan.
- They have widely distributed the U.S. Education Department's "Tool Kits for Hispanic Families" which includes information regarding No Child Left Behind.
- The 5 Question Project. The Rhode Island PIRC helped create and disseminate 5 Question posters listing the 5 top questions to ask your child's teacher. These posters have been distributed to many schools around the state and it has become a district initiative in East Providence, Woonsocket, Central Falls, Providence and some of Pawtucket.

Mr. Chairmen, as you can see Parental Information and Resource Centers can have a major influence on promoting and initiating parent involvement in those areas that need it most. The PTA is proud to be a partner with the Rhode Island PIRC. As their role becomes more defined, I hope to help provide more assistance to the PIRC in promoting standards for family involvement and helping parents find the services they need throughout my state.

And finally Mr. Chairman, I would like to touch on the initiatives put forth by the national PTA organization to improve the parent involvement provisions within No Child Left Behind. While

Congress cannot mandate parental engagement in every school, the government can help to provide parents multiple opportunities to be an active participant in their child's education. PTA's recommendations for the ESEA-NCLB reauthorization are built on four core principles:

1) *Better data through a more understandable delivery system*

- The information from the accountability systems should be geared towards informing parents. The parents have the primary decision making responsibility for their child's education. If No Child Left Behind was supposed to provide parents with more options, how can they make the correct choice for their child's education if they are not armed the proper information?

2) *More accountability to parents*

- Each state needs to hold schools accountable for implementing their Parental Involvement plans. Mechanisms need to be put in place to help a school found to be "In Need of Improvement" in the area of parent involvement, to keep parents informed about their options, and to hold the district accountable to remediation plans for school improvement.
- Parents must be better informed of what is going on in their child's school. Whether its being an integral part of a schools parental involvement plan or making key decisions on how to improve the school, parents need to be at the table when these decisions are being made.

3) *Better resources to help teachers and parents*

- Parental Information and Resource Centers and other existing state and local resources with expertise in parent engagement and community outreach should be better utilized as part of the solution when there is a need for school improvement in the area of parental involvement. These resources can not only disperse information and materials to parents but work effectively with schools that have not made Adequate Yearly Progress.
- Teachers need better preparation on how to engage and develop positive partnerships with parents to support active parent participation in their child's education. Through better preparation teachers can be stewards of parental involvement and support student achievement at home and school.

4) *Community Support*

- Schools need to be an active, essential part of a community again. Partnerships between residents, businesses, and schools in the community must become involved and part of the solutions for our schools and our children. Each segment of the community served by a school must have a stake in every child's education and the new law must create incentives for this to happen.

Mr. Chairmen, members of the Committee, I thank you for this chance to speak on behalf of the parents and children of Rhode Island and PTAs across the nation. I believe in your efforts to improve the law to close the achievement gap, provide a better education for every child and support our children to be more competitive in a world-wide market place. People in every community across the country are trying to improve parent involvement. If this Committee can see that by giving these partnerships more resources and more flexibility to provide innovative

solutions, our children's academic achievement will rise. Thank you again for this opportunity. I look forward to further discussions on this important issue.