Another school year is set to begin, and unfortunately, there are questions about what that will look like. With the resurgence of this new Delta variant, the virus continues to spread, and we cannot be sure how things will move forward at this time as far as school reopening, and PTA activities. We may still have some restrictions on in-person activities, but I urge you to continue to watch for news from NYS PTA regarding these issues. Let’s continue to hope for the best and safest reopening for the children and staff in our schools, as we navigate these still uncertain times. See the statement from our Governor, Kathy Hochul in this newsletter.

The new membership year has begun, and we are anxious to surpass last year’s total of 159 members, but we cannot do that without your assistance! We always need more voices at this critical time when so much is at stake for our children and youth. Please consider adding your voice again to our Empire State PTSA and encourage others as well. Membership information can be found at https://esptsa.memberhub.com/store. Our newsletter editor, Laurie May, has added a “plus one” membership challenge, so I hope to see some great pictures of our members and their “plus ones” out there! Let’s grow our current number of members by 64 X 2!

Our “Shining a Light” this month features two of our members who work in education, and they share with us their perspective on the back-to-school challenges and the “new normal”. We also have some important information regarding our financial report. Please review the note from Empire State treasurer, Neil Johanning.

We will be holding a special virtual Empire State meeting on Monday, September 13th to review and discuss the end of year financial report and a revision of the Muriel Berk Service Award. Further details and registration will be forthcoming soon, so watch for the information in your email, so that you can register and receive the zoom log in. You MUST be a current member to attend, so remember to renew your membership if you have not already done so.

We are looking forward to our annual live meeting, at NYS PTA’s 125th Convention in November in Syracuse. The planning process is in the works now, and we hope that if you are attending convention, you will join us for our first in-person meeting since 2019. When you register, do not forget to check the box for the Empire State PTSA meeting! The meeting will be held at breakfast on Sunday morning. We will be recognizing our Muriel Berk recipient, Gracemarie Rozea celebrating our past PTA accomplishments for both Empire State and NYS. (We might even challenge your knowledge of PTA history!) In addition, we will appoint members to a committee to review our bylaws and a committee for the Muriel Berk Award. Our current officer terms expire in 2022, so this year we will need to elect a nominating committee. If you are interested in serving on either the bylaws committee or Muriel Berk award committee, please let me know at esptsa.president@nyspta.org.

Below is some NYS PTA history:

1895- founding president, Alice McLellan Birney attends “School for Parents” meeting in Chautauqua, NY
1900s - NYS PTA urges supervision of motion pictures and vaudeville
1919 - PTAs sponsor hot lunch projects in school
1926 - PTA supports Kindergarten bill
1939 - PTA stresses need to separate juvenile courts and detention homes

Stay tuned for additional PTA history in future newsletters as we proudly celebrate 125 years!

On behalf of the Empire State PTSA Executive Committee, Laurie, Kelly, Neil, and me, we wish all a successful “back to school.”

Warm regards,
Jacqueline Wilson
ESPTSA President
SHINING A LIGHT ON OUR MEMBERS

Dana Platin

I have spent my entire career as an educator in a kindergarten classroom. In the early years as a teacher, and after taking a 16 year “maternity leave”, as a paraprofessional, and I have loved every minute! Kindergarten is now quite different than it was when I first stepped into a classroom at the age of 22. Back then, it was a half-day program, geared more towards play and socialization, while learning the alphabet and how to count. And though those things are still of great importance, there is now a full-day, rigorous kindergarten curriculum that comes with high expectations for these young learners. By the end of the school year, my students are reading, journaling, writing 3-5 sentence paragraphs, and adding and subtracting.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, our expectations did not change or falter, but we had to learn new ways to teach and engage our students in a digital, remote world, all while trying to figure it out as we went along. Our school year ended abruptly that year, but everyone did their very best to continue to teach their classes and provide for their students.

When children returned last fall, teachers did everything possible to make up for those lost months, while also making sure to stay on track. The rules changed, but teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and support staff managed as well as they could. They dedicated countless hours to addressing health and safety concerns, while also providing a robust and equitable academic experience for both in-school and remote learners.

And now, as I sit here at my laptop, we are only a week away from the launch of another new school year. Unfortunately, we still have many issues and concerns related to Covid-19 and, so, we won’t be returning to any kind of normalcy just yet. That said however, PTA volunteers will once again be allowed into school buildings, and activities, programs and events can be resumed. Guidelines and precautions have been put in place to protect us as best as they can, so we can get back to the fun and business of PTA again. Hallelujah!!

I’m always reluctant to see summer come to an end, but every September, I feel giddy and excited to get back to school. I can’t wait to see my friends and I’m really eager to meet the new children in my class.

In my role as NYS PTA President, I encourage you to start the brand-new year filled with hope and promise. It’s a new beginning! Reach out to old members and draw in new members with enthusiasm and gusto! Share your passion of PTA and, together, you will make a difference for all children and their families!

Jane Harsha

I teach writing, research, and critical thinking to first-year students at Pace University, most of whom have attended public schools. I’ve always found that the understanding of public education and youth development gained through PTA advocacy is an invaluable resource for college teaching. The insights into my students’ pre-college lives and learning provides context for the work we do and the relationships we build in classes.

The first year of college is much like kindergarten—students are suddenly on their own, independent of mom and dad. They must navigate new places and new situations, make new friends, take on unfamiliar roles and responsibilities. They will learn to follow directions, meet high expectations, prepare for the unexpected, work through a problem, be good to others, and clean up their own mess. First-year assignments aim to foster collaboration and peer review among students with different backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. Covid upended these processes by forcing the college experience online. Such growth can happen remotely, but the impact is not the same.

Most of my students felt some level of loss last year. Whether living at home or on campus, the majority tried to maintain a student life under difficult circumstances. But extracurriculars like student clubs, dorm parties, concerts, dances, and games were discontinued. Campus visitors were not allowed, and on-campus students took meals in separate spaces. Even those living in dorms took many online classes alone in their rooms. It was easy for a student to tune out online and fall behind without the in-person support of classmates and academic services. Continual stress and isolation led to physical and mental health problems.

On the other hand, some students reported that they had a very successful year because they were able to delve into their studies in a way they wouldn’t have given the normal distractions of college life. Other students with health or mobility issues found that online classes provided greater equity of class attendance and participation.

The past year has underscored the importance of laying the groundwork for self-sustainability before students reach college, by helping them develop an effective study system and skills in time management, mental and physical health, and interpersonal relations. These skills nurture the self-awareness required to identify their needs and opportunities and take action to fulfill them, becoming resilient, successful advocates for themselves and others.
Governor Kathy Hochul today announced that her strategy to reopen schools safely took a major leap forward on two fronts, demonstrating her administration’s commitment to making the health and well-being of students, teachers, and families a top priority. Earlier today, the Public Health and Health Planning Council passed an emergency regulation and the Health Commissioner issued a determination requiring all teachers, administrators and other school employees to submit to weekly COVID-19 testing unless they show proof of vaccination, with either a CDC vaccine card or the Excelsior Pass.
SHINING A LIGHT ON STUDENT WELLNESS

In a 'normal' year, kids can experience stress as they grow and mature. Navigating social interactions, social media and technology use, peer pressure, and the need for increasing autonomy and independence can all contribute to the level of stress our children feel on their journeys toward adulthood. In the time of COVID, the increased isolation, uncertainty, and losses suffered by many young people have greatly increased their stress levels beyond what is 'normal' for growing up.

As families and caregivers, there are things we can do to help strengthen our children's mental health and provide them with the tools to build resilience and navigate these life changes safely:

1. Encourage healthy sleep patterns and regular exercise -- these might be things that especially teens tend not to do, but they are critically important for both mental and physical health!

2. Talk with your kids about healthy coping mechanisms and strategies to alleviate stress. Meditative breathing, yoga, having a time-out, taking a walk, or simply counting to ten can reduce students' stress levels. (*For a challenge, have them say the alphabet backwards! Shifting one's attention to a task that requires concentration can sometimes help to refocus and redirect mental energies in a more positive direction!)

3. Be present - but don't hover. (This might be the hardest part, as family members.) When we see our children face challenges, our first instinct is to step in and take over to make things easier for our kids. However, an essential part of kids learning to be resilient is for them to practice problem-solving skills and become self-advocates. Be a cheerleader and a coach: give them the proper tools -- and then step back and allow them to use those tools.

4. Be supportive and listen (without judgment). Having a handle on our kids' mental health is essential, and kids are more likely to share things with you when they know you can be supportive and calm. One suggestion is to have conversations in the car -- it's a private place for kids to share information without the added pressure of eye contact or anyone overhearing the conversation. Remind them that they can come to you with concerns and that you're there for them. If they feel comfortable sharing the 'little' things with you, they might be more likely to open up to you when their stresses get a bit bigger, too.

As schools release reopening plans and students begin attending in-person classes, some students may experience anxiety. Mask mandates, vaccination availability, and being in close proximity to others (when we have been distant for so many months) may significantly add to stress levels as well. It's important for us to pay attention to our children's habits and patterns so that we notice if something seems 'off' and we need to offer support or intervention.

Signs that children might be experiencing a mental health issue:

- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Significant changes in friend groups
- Social withdrawal
- Anxiety or excessive irritability

Trust your instincts. You know your kids best. Make contact with your child's school counselor or pediatrician if you have concerns or if you see marked changes in behavior. They should be able to give you more information about the best ways to help your child.

Amy Hysick
NYS PTA
Wellness Coordinator
ESPTSA FINANCIALS

We have been working with State Treasurer Patty Frazier and the State Office staff to reconcile the ESPTSA accounts with the NYS PTA accounts. We have discovered a few errors in the ESPTSA financial reporting from back in 2018-19 and 2019-20. Some membership deposits and some expenses were double counted. We believe the errors occurred because of the twice per year reporting of ESPTSA that overlapped two different membership years. **No funds have been lost – only reporting errors.** We will be putting a single entry in the ESPTSA books (exact amount being determined) to align the accounts starting at the beginning of FY 2020-21. Going forward, ESPTSA will produce quarterly financial reports ending 9/30, 12/30, 3/31, and 6/30. We will be reconciling the ESPTSA and NYS PTA accounts quarterly as well. Lastly, we will also be deferring income from “early” membership purchases in April, May, and June until 7/1. That way membership income will be credited in the correct fiscal year. Thank you for your patience while we get this straightened out. We will send out the financial report for 2020-21 as soon as it is completed.

Neil Johanning
ESPTSA Treasurer

SHINING A LIGHT ON PROGRAMS

The Programs team is gearing up for another fun and exciting school year! The theme for this year’s Reflections program is- **I will change the world by...** Information is available on the NYS PTA website. If you know of a unit that is looking for a new program, spread the word. This is a great way to get students involved in the arts.

The literacy committee is also developing ways to spread literacy information to families in a fun and engaging way. We are looking forward to all the new PARP programs in the upcoming year. As always, make sure you check out the NYS PTA awards page, for all of the great awards for leaders across the state. Honor someone you know who does great things for the children!
Kelly Howe
NYS PTA
Programs Coordinator

NATIONAL PTA PODCAST NOTES FROM THE BACKPACK

**41 | How Can We Prioritize Wellness at School?**
Chandrai Jackson-Saunders

How can we prepare to meet every child’s needs as they return to school? We spoke with National School Psychologist of the Year, Chandrai Jackson-Saunders to learn how schools can set children up for success and how families can help by focusing on the whole child. She offers concrete strategies school communities should implement to meet the variety of needs children will have in the wake of the pandemic. [Listen Now](https://www.nyspta.org/podcast/notes-backpack/41-how-can-we-prioritize-wellness-at-school-chandrai-jackson-saunders)
We are over the moon with excitement and anticipation as the doors to Convention 2021 have been opened wide for a live and in-person event! Mark your calendars to attend this milestone convention as we celebrate 125 years of the birth of PTA right here in New York State and our founders Alice McLellan Birney and Phoebe Apperson Hearst. Google calendars ready? **Here we go! November 19-21, 2021**, at the newly renovated, beautiful, historic hotel, the Syracuse Downtown Marriott, check it out [here](#)!

While it would make us beyond thrilled to see our members attend in person, this convention will be fully virtual as well! All workshops and General Sessions will be live-streamed! Never attended a convention before? Now is your chance to be a part of outstanding leadership training that will cover a wide range of informative and relevant topics, the election of our State officers, hear inspiring speakers that will kick your advocacy efforts into high gear, say yay or nay to new resolutions that serve as the roadmap that guide us in our advocacy efforts, celebrate award winners, and share in the comradery of like-minded fellow advocates that want to add their voice as one for every child.

A few short weeks ago we weren’t sure a fully in-person convention was going to be possible, keeping our finger crossed, we are now hard at work tweaking details to bring you a memorable, worthwhile event that will make you proud to be part of PTA. Look for your registration packet around the middle of September.

Pack your noise makers, convention will be accessible by train, plane and automobile, so let’s celebrate and advocate in Syracuse, together!

Laurie May  
2021 Convention Coordinator