

PTO vs. PTA: Differences at a Glance

| | PTA | PTO |
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| DEFINITION | A local parent group formally affiliated with its state's PTA organization and the National PTA. | An independent parent group; in other words, any non-PTA group. Many acronyms—such as HSA, PCC, PTO, and more—fall under the independent group umbrella. (In this chart, we use “PTO” generically to mean any independent parent group.) |
| HOW MANY? | National PTA reports close to 25,000 units. The number has generally been between 22,000 and 26,000 units for years. | Our estimate (PTOs are not required to register, so this count is an educated calculation): approximately 55,000 PTOs in the United States. (The PTO estimate takes the roughly 83,000 K-8 schools in the US, subtracts the roughly 22,500 K-8 PTA units, and subtracts an additional 5,000 for K-8 schools with no parent group.) |
| UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION/ PROFESSIONAL STAFF | National PTA has dozens of paid employees at its Alexandria, Va., headquarters. Many state PTAs have at least one additional paid staff member. Most national and state PTA revenues come from dues from local units. | There is no “national PTO” akin to National PTA and no official umbrella organization for PTOs. PTO Today is a media and services company (30-plus employees) that aims to serve both local PTO and local PTA groups. The vast majority of PTO Today's income comes from paid advertising, not from PTO or PTA groups. |
| DUES—REQUIRED? | Yes. | No. The decision to charge dues is completely up to your local group. |
| DUES—HOW MUCH? | Because state dues vary and because the number of units vary per state, this number is not exact. But a very conservative estimate says that the average local PTA unit sends more than \$700 to its state PTA and to National PTA in dues payments. This number is based on a weighted average of 175 paid PTA members per local PTA unit and an average combined state-plus-national-dues figure of just \$4. Units with more members will spend more in state and national dues. Units with fewer members will spend less in state and national dues. | It is up to your group, but the entire amount stays at your school. Many PTOs choose to charge no dues as a way to foster parent involvement. They consider all parents members automatically. |
| INSURANCE—REQUIRED? | Varies by state. Most often, yes. | No; it is up to your group. But we highly recommend that all groups get insurance. |
| INSURANCE—ACCESS | Most state PTAs have a negotiated rate with a preferred provider. | PTOs can access preferred rates through the optional PTO Today Plus program or obtain insurance on their own. |

PTO vs. PTA: Differences at a Glance (continued)

| | PTA | PTO |
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| INSURANCE—COST | Varies by state. Typically (but not always) insurance is less expensive for PTAs than for PTOs. But groups must pay PTA dues in order to access the sometimes lower PTA rates. | PTO Today Plus insurance rates range from \$70 to \$165 for different types of coverage, including officer liability, general liability, and property insurance. |
| NONPROFIT STATUS | Required. Status is typically granted automatically as part of a parent group's affiliation with National PTA and payment of annual dues. | Not required. If your group decides to become a registered nonprofit, it applies directly to the IRS and pays a one-time \$750 fee. Step-by-step instructions (successfully used by hundreds of groups) are available from PTO Today. |
| TOTAL COST OF AFFILIATION | The biggest factor is how many paid members you will have. Our estimate is that the average PTA unit spends more than \$700 per year on state plus national PTA dues, and most PTA units add an additional \$100 to \$300 for insurance. You can get exact costs for your state from your state PTA. Typically, smaller units pay less to affiliate with the PTA and larger units pay more. | Can be zero, if the group doesn't apply for tax-exempt status and doesn't get insurance. Tax-exempt status is a one-time (not annual) fee of \$750. Insurance can be secured individually (often \$500+ per year) or as part of the PTO Today Plus program, which provides several benefits as well as discounted insurance for roughly \$300 per year. |
| ADVOCACY | Required. National PTA is openly an advocacy organization for PTA-approved positions. Local PTA groups cannot advocate publicly against PTA-approved positions. PTA dues support state and national PTA advocacy efforts. | Not required. Groups can choose to play an advocacy/political role; however, many PTOs opt to remain focused on parent involvement, school/teacher/student support, and community-building at their local school. |
| NATIONAL VOICE | Yes. This is a key difference. Your group is part of state and national political and advocacy efforts. And your group can play a role in determining National PTA positions. | No. Most PTOs choose to devote their energies toward work focused on a single school or perhaps a single town. Many PTOs don't feel that politics are what they're about or don't like the potential acrimony that politics can bring (or both). |

Want the National PTA's views on these same issues? [Check out their "differences" page here.](#)

Resources

The good news is that today, both PTOs and PTAs have access to more resources than ever before. The PTA offers several programs—including a well-received Reflections arts program—and a good deal of assistance, resources, and insight most often available to PTAs only.

PTO Today's extensive list of programs, articles, and resources are all available to all parent groups, regardless of acronym. A short list of those resources include the [School Family Nights](#) program (free kits for putting on involvement events), our [Back2School](#) program (which includes free magazines and samples for parents), our [Happy Healthy School Kids](#) program, and our [PTO Expos](#), as well as the [hundreds of articles and resources](#) archived on ptotoday.com.

If you are discussing a choice between PTO and PTA, our best advice is to:

1. Determine your group's goals (example: is national advocacy a priority?)
2. Determine which resources you'd take advantage of most, and what your group is willing to pay for those.
3. Figure out which acronym is the best fit for your group based on the above preferences.
4. Make your choice and get back to the more important work of building parent involvement.

Both PTOs and PTAs have done and will continue to do great work for children and schools. PTO Today looks forward to being of service no matter which option you choose.