**Principal’s Gold Mine: Organizational Value and Resources of a PTO**

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As much as we hope to lead with vision and do our utmost to develop our schools, there is a recognized component toward achieving success, a resourceful, collaborative Parent-Teacher organization (PTO). Research has been ample to qualify the necessity of highly functional relationships between parents and students and students and teachers, but we also know the value of the parent-teacher relationship as a correlated factor in student achievement, social development, and interest in schoolwork (Matzye, 1995).

**What the PTO Can Do For You?**

Involvement of parents gives us the most critical key since the 1966 Coleman Report told us that of all the “differences” analyzed, it was not so much the difference in schools, administrators, or teachers, but rather the “differences in families” that transfer the importance of education, habits, and disciplines which influence students’ academic achievement (Wherry, 2007). Studies since that time have long confirmed this. Parents are busier today than ever, and many fail to recognize the vital role they play and strategies they can employ to bolster the efforts of their students’ schools. There are many ways that a PTO can make a positive impact for your school, but first connections need to be established.

**Conduit to Stakeholders**

Governance of any school should be led by the principal, with board, student, faculty, and community support; and as leader of the proverbial “ship,” communication is critical for the transparency, stability, and trust platform within stakeholder relationships. It is far better to forge a bond with parents as soon as possible each school year in order to be the responsible leader and resource, the gatekeeper, for all activities of the PTO.

**Establish a Trusting Relationship**

In their enthusiasm, PTO members may be inclined toward choosing vendors with past poor performance, taking initiatives that are redundant or in conflict with other school programs or policies. They may attempt to reach into resources that are just not feasible from the principal’s wise perspective and experience. They may also share disparaging information, whether accurate or not; therefore, it is good judgment to be close and readily available for PTO meetings. Many potential issues can be nipped before becoming problematic simply through providing prompt, honest answers.

**Facilitate Communication**

The PTO offers the best means to link everyone together for a common cause, a richly resourceful, industrious, harmonious school community. Sometimes though, leadership of the principal or the PTO is lacking, and that can invite conflict where the volunteers work against the efforts of the principal. Research has correlated a high level of turnover, weak communication, and minimal training of the PTO officers to these conflicts (Lareau and Munoz, 2012). A cooperative liaison between the principal and the president of the PTO with scheduled one-on-one meetings is vital for best results. Your PTO’s newsletters can provide insightful content to what is happening with programs and competitions in school; news to become more familiar with the accomplishments of your students, faculty, and staff; and tips for better family support. PTO meeting minutes also reflect the positive regard which is useful for schools’ accreditation reviews. It is one of many avenues that tell the story of your school, and it should be a story of successes and enfranchisement!

**Enrich Learning Experiences**

There are many co-curricular possibilities for your students thanks to the personal knowledge that your PTO members can provide. From knitting know-how to extra soccer coaches, the PTO adults can greatly add to your students’, teachers’, and other parents’ brain reserves. Programs like Jr. Achievement, 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and many others are often led by the volunteers of your PTO. Many of these also offer opportunities for publicly recognized awards and honors that make your school look great!

**Volunteer Pool**

There can never be enough helping hands for fun fairs, neighborhood clean-up days, science fair judges, and career day. The beauty of a PTO is that everyone can work and also find a friend to pitch in for free labor. What school can’t use that? Everyone intuitively understands that school communities benefit from the participation of people willing to demonstrate unselfish efforts, and the PTO models that for students. Character and values we hold are implied through actions which are in themselves lessons for life.

**Fundraising**

Many principals cringe at the thought of annual fundraising; yet a survey of 1000 principals by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) demonstrated that 94 percent of U.S. schools do it, and a whopping 87 percent thought it worthwhile (Krueger, 2007). It is, and probably always will be, a reality that our schools will teach valuable lessons to our students about, as many college admissions officers have privately expressed their appreciation for students who know, how to get money. Yet again, the principal should monitor and control the amount and type of fundraising activities with an awareness to avoid “fundraising fatigue.” In their zeal, too many groups have a tendency to converge in the last segment of the school year to generate revenue for clubs, graduations, and field trips, and the principal should guard against an overload of funding requests. Since many organizations plan their fundraising efforts in advance, school groups should make an effort to schedule their programs in the early part of the year too.

**Provide Resources**

With Islamic schools representing the most diverse populations, although the majority of families are mostly Muslim, there is great potential to learn about the cultures, ethnic origins, languages, cuisines, religions, and ways of relating of many diverse people. Cultural diversity and the willingness to be open to each other are impressed upon us via surah Al-Hujarat 49:13. “O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware” (Pickthall translation).

A study on cultural diversity found that even teachers have preconceived notions about “good” parents. They favor those who participate in open houses, parent-teacher conferences, who volunteer for field trips and room parties (Smith, 2006). Yet, they may not realize that some parents feel insecure or unsure about what role they may play, especially if families have recently immigrated, to help their students and teachers. Overcoming these barriers to meet the needs of the diverse student population can be bridged by the PTO. Every parent has something to contribute, and a friendly, welcoming PTO can open the door to resistant parents.

**Network and Outreach**

Our school communities are our “villages” which should serve to reinforce Islamic identity, communicate values, manners, and provide a feeling of belonging to all who come through our doors. That is not always the case, unfortunately, but a PTO can be a significant entity to offer the opportunity for course correction and monitoring of our school climate. In discussions, we can recognize the needs, access resources for solutions, and implement them. Whether they be tutors, mentors, teaching classes, planning teacher appreciation breakfasts, or passing out box lunches on Field-Sport Day, our PTO parents demonstrate care and kindness. Modeling active service, they teach values we want for our *ummah*, our community.

**Apply For Grants**

Parent organizations can also access grants for programs. College Preparatory School in Lombard, IL was able to get equipment for Physical Education classes and funding for a successful assembly program about healthy lifestyle and foods. Halal food company representatives and local athletic personalities gave short presentations after school one day when there were fun and physical activities for students and parents. Awareness was raised about the new school lunch program, and parents were encouraged to provide healthy foods for their students. Free samples and prizes accompanied the event which was joyful and educational in every aspect. Seek out what prospects are out there for your school, and have your PTO take the lead in gathering support and applying for grants.

**Why Join the PTO?**

Although there are many advantages for the principal to have the benefit of a PTO, there is a common struggle to attract more participants. To that extent, it is useful to know the reasons why your students’ parents would want to join the PTO and what you can do to increase participation. As research correlates low socio-economic status, lack of families valuing education, race, and poor relationships with students to low PTO participation, these really do not apply to most families of Islamic schools (Paylor, 2011). What common factors that research reveals as barriers for involvement are lack of time, conflicts with parents’ work obligations, and reliance on other resources to help students. Solve these issues, spice up the benefits to families, and enrollment in the PTO should rise.

**Know School Personnel First-hand**

As a parent, it is helpful to have first-hand knowledge of the personalities and temperaments of the people one’s students interface with each day. There is no discounting the value of being known by those people also, since relationships do carry benefits. If a student has an issue with someone at the school, it can be useful to already have a familiarity with the person. A parent can gauge the situation better and may have some leverage if already known as a “good” parent by school personnel. The reality is that relationships matter.

**Make New Acquaintances**

It can be lonely staying home each day with or without another adult with whom to be social. The PTO can offer an avenue for changing venues and having a pleasant social outlet. Also, for many working parents, it is comforting to see familiar faces of other parents who share a commitment to one’s school. The type of adult who makes time for engaging their interest in school activism gives a sense of well-being and security to parents with similar service values.

**Develop Leadership and Management Skills**

As school leaders, the principal and officers of the PTO hone skills of organization, event planning, creativity, crowd control, bookkeeping and budgeting, marketing, writing and editing, research, motivation and behavior management, and other interpersonal skills. The PTO experience can vastly enrich people’s lives and offer opportunities for personal growth that may be inaccessible otherwise. As advocates for life-long learning, the PTO gives ample outlets to exercise these abilities, whether learned from past experiences or acquired as new ones.

**Become an Integral Part of School Achievement!**

Increasing parental participation in the PTO was achieved, along with improvements in less discipline problems, better grades, and a rise in student self-esteem when a year-long program was designed by a doctoral student who sought to increase parents’ involvement in a middle school (Amato). The tactics used were, creating a special newsletter encouraging interaction with their children and their children’s teachers, participating in class trips and activities, assemblies, and programs, joining the PTO, providing a quiet place for parents to work with their children daily, parenting and child development workshops, and the chance to discuss their roles as parents and the school’s policies.

**Become the School’s “Village” Community**

Demonstrating mutual support and collaboration, a school community is vastly different from a traditional corporate structure. That difference is in the inclusive and cooperative attitude that places the collective aspect of the school’s identity before the individual. If everyone took personal responsibility for the “village” welfare, the basic foundation for building a sound, support system for all stakeholders is established. Each individual needs to be aware that they play an integral role in the school’s success, and that in turn benefits the outcome for every student of that school. Opportunities for growth, healthy relationships, and personal support should be the outcome of such a community where everyone belongs and everyone can serve.

**Experience New Things and Have Fun!**

Day in and day out, we have the means to spice up our lives and the precious lives we are stewards for, our children. As school stakeholders, we can do nothing, a little, or a lot, but the greatest benefits are derived when horizons are stretched toward new avenues of discovery. The PTO can open those routes toward greater living and appreciation through a variety of ways if we engage with each other to offer our investment of time, thoughts, and energy to making an impact. There are professional organizations that can help immensely in guidance.

**Resources: Tools to Succeed**

**National Standards for Family-School Partnership from PTA.org**

PTA.org is a non-profit membership based organization that features programs for family engagement, health and safety, and arts and education. They have long established strength as a political advocate for member schools and a program of standards that promote a continuous loop of improvement similar to many accreditation programs. Six steps with graded levels of competency are featured at the downloadable <http://www.pta.org/files/National_Standards_Assessment_Guide.pdf>

**PTO Today**

PTO Today is a profit business entity that features a wide array of support through their website <http://www.ptotoday.com/> It is a rich resource that links into many free guides that can help get a PTO started, provide documents for operation, forums for networking and guidance, and spark creative new ideas for school communities.

These two websites can help any organization in starting up or enhancing established PTOs with roadmaps and sources for becoming the gold mine that every principal can treasure. Helping hands serving our schools is what makes a community strong and resilient. Enriching the lives of everyone in school is what merits reward and the pleasure of Allah.

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