

A Sense of Community

A focus on building relationships helps this group thrive on change.

by June Allan Corrigan

Annual budget \$37,000

850 students

LEWIS ELEMENTARY HAS BEEN THROUGH a lot of changes in recent years. More low-income students now attend the school in Temple Terrace, Fla., and fewer parents speak English as a first language. But two years after Lewis became a Title I school, principal Delilah Rabeiro sees the PTA, with its emphasis on community and unflagging support for academics, as her greatest asset.

PTA membership stands at more than 400, with seven board members and 32 committee chairs tackling matters like cultural and socioeconomic diversity head-on. They do so with such enthusiasm and drive that an increasing number of families at the school have responded by becoming more involved. In recognition of these efforts, PTO Today has selected Lewis Elementary as the 2016 National Parent Group of the Year.

Chalk messages are one way the Lewis PTA shows the love to teachers and staff.





A Welcoming Crew

There's no better place to start than at the beginning, which is precisely what Lewis Elementary does. When new families come to the school, they are greeted with PTA signs welcoming them in all the community's different languages. On the first day of school, kindergarten parents and other incoming families can meet officers and ask questions at the PTA's New to Lewis breakfast. The group also gives tours of the school throughout the year to show prospective parents what a positive and nurturing environment it is.

As the academic year rolls on, the Lewis PTA makes it a priority to keep families informed about what's happening at the school. The shift in demographics has meant that English is no longer the first language for many school families. As such, the PTA reconfigured its website so that it now gets translated into 11 additional languages with one click.

Extending this courtesy caused a few parents with translating abilities to come forward and offer their services, according to Lewis PTA president Tiffany Sperry. "Several are actually going to serve on our board next year. Their translating abilities will come in handy when we need someone to help teachers at conference time, or at our meetings or with our newsletters," Sperry says. "It's intimidating

What You Can Learn From Lewis



Appreciate your volunteers. A thank-you goes a long way. If someone takes time out of her day to volunteer and make a difference at school, recognize her efforts. "End-of-the-year volunteer breakfasts and banquets are one way, but throughout the year, write a note, send an email, or simply take time to go up to people and say 'Thanks so much for coming. We really appreciate you being here.' It will help keep people coming back," says PTA president Tiffany Sperry.



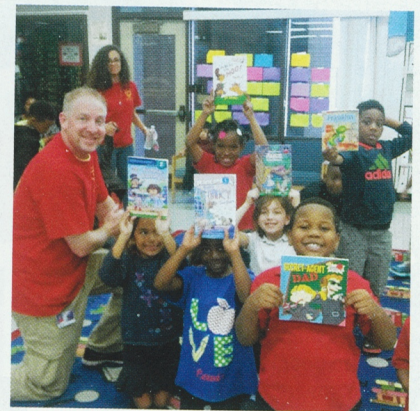
Align passions with tasks. Efforts to recruit new members will be much more successful if you find the right job for each person. Take the time to identify certain traits in others. If they have a passion for photography and design, for example, heading the yearbook committee might prove a good fit, as it did once for Sperry. "Match talents with the things you need accomplished," she says.



Always look for ways to improve. Get feedback after events about what worked and what didn't, and record these observations for future reference. Leave a paper or digital trail. Ask "How can we make it better next time?"



Maintain good relationships with administrators and faculty members. "Foster a good relationship, schedule regular monthly meetings, keep the lines of communication open," Sperry advises. "You all want to stay on the same page."



Community donations go a long way toward helping Lewis' popular book swap provide "new" books to all grade levels.

Rethink Your Outreach

Ways to recruit potential new help.

PTOtoday.com/magazine

for parents who don't speak the language to come to something entirely in English. We plan on continuing our efforts to change that."

Another way the PTA facilitates communication between home and school is through its homeroom parent program. Lewis PTA treasurer Christine Cooksley implemented the program last year, successfully recruiting more than 50 parents and grandparents to serve in classrooms and take charge of relaying vital PTA information. This streamlined communication plan has proved helpful in organizing events and gaining volunteers. Teachers have also benefited from having an extra set of hands in the classroom. "Our biggest goal is to just be there for the children and do whatever we can to help them. But also to try to reach out to families who aren't as accessible as they had been four or five years ago," Cooksley says.

Making Technology a Priority

Lewis PTA holds only one big fundraiser, its annual walkathon known as Pride Walk. Kickoff activities leading up to it are themed, and this past year's superhero theme was cause for plenty

of hilarity. Staff members, students, and even two PTA mascots dressed accordingly for the event. Pride Walk not only promotes physical fitness, a sense of community, and downright fun; in fall 2015, it also raised \$17,000 for the school, an amount that still impresses Rabeiro. "When your school population is 70 percent free and reduced lunch and you can still drum up \$17,000, that's a lot of money," she says.

Over the past four years, the school's administrators have partnered with the PTA to bring new technology into Lewis. Money raised by the parent group has helped outfit K-5 classrooms with tablets, interactive whiteboards, and more. "We realized that a lot of the children don't have the tools they need at home. Technology is the wave of the future, and we want to make sure they're prepared," Sperry says. "In Florida, 5th graders have to complete standardized state tests on the computer. The more



The annual Pride Walk fundraiser, made fun (and funny) with themes like superheroes, helps fund classroom technology, among other academic enhancements.

they're able to use computers, practice on them, the better off they will be."

More Fun and Learning

There was a high demand for chess among students last year, so the Lewis PTA started an after-school club. Drama is another popular activity that the PTA supports through donations; they were able to provide some microphones and lights last year. Two PTA-organized book fairs, a literacy night, and a popular book swap program all encourage reading skills. The book swap involves families and the greater community donating books that the PTA is then able to give out to all grade levels.

The PTA also sponsors a reading tutoring program known as PAL that benefits more than 80 students at the school. "Even as a Title I school, you only get a certain amount of money from your

district for budget and so you can only get a certain amount of manpower. To help out, the PTA revived the PAL program this year. They provide the training, they set up the schedules, we give them the name of the students who need tutoring, they match the students with the tutors, they follow up," Rabeiro says. "It's been a very successful program. We've been able to service 81 students and give them additional help, all thanks to the PTA."

We Are Family

Lewis PTA makes a concerted effort to involve a variety of family members. Their monthly iMOM meetings, for example, modeled after a nonprofit educational organization, allow mothers to feel part of the school community and to share concerns and experiences with one another. Grandparents bingo night offers an opportunity for students and their grandparents or other family mentors to bond (and reminds grandparents that they are always welcome).

"The passion that our community and our parents bring to the school has been a part of the reason our PTA has thrived. We're a Title I school with a lot of diversity and changes happening, but we still have a core group of parents who do a lot for this school and feel very passionate about it," Sperry says. "The community coming together and our principal and teachers getting on board—we're really all like one big family. It's a very special thing to be a part of. That's what makes us work." ■



Efforts like a chess club and book fair show that learning is a priority—but so is having fun.

