

California State PTA 112th Annual Convention Executive Director's Report – Paul Richman May 1, 2011, Long Beach, CA

Thank you, Jo. I want to congratulate you on a great job running the convention this week. I've had the chance to work closely with Jo these past two years and, I have to say, I continue to be amazed at the incredible amount of time and thought and energy and care that she puts into being your state president. I've seen how carefully she weighs decisions and the impact they'll have on children, and the reputation of PTA. She's a leader with a vision, with drive, with toughness, and of course, a leader with style. Most of all, Jo, you have set a very high standards for the work of our association. And you have embodied our mission: You have truly made a positive impact on the lives of all children and families, and you have represented and empowered our members!

In just a short while, you're going to have a chance to hear from our incoming state president, Carol Kocivar. You'll see that we are blessed because great leadership runs in the PTA family. Carol is, quite simply, an inspiring, phenomenal advocate for kids.

These past two years I've also had the honor to work with and support your board of directors and board of managers. To a person they are thoughtful, dedicated and passionate about our association. They take their responsibilities as board members very seriously – while still making sure to keep it fun. They've shown creativity and skill in crafting the future direction of PTA, and they've moved our association forward. Thank you, state board members for all that you do!

I want to give a special acknowledgement to Kathy Stevenson, our VP for Convention, and the entire amazing convention planning team. This is one of the most impressive conventions that any association anywhere puts on, and the fact that it is so well organized and well run is a testament to the power of what can be done when a group of PTA volunteers put their headsets together.

I also have the chance to work with a small but mighty team of staff members in Sacramento. It is now my pleasure to introduce them to you. I truly believe they are the most dedicated staff team of any nonprofit association in the state. Some of them have been here during this week, some have already left, and some were back at the office, but I hope you don't mind if I introduce them all, whether they're here today or not, because they have worked very hard on your behalf, and they deserve your recognition: From our accounting team, Jennifer Rice, Cyndi Barton, Elvie Knox and Erika Trujillo; from our communications team, Pat Ruiz and Alison apRoberts; our arts education project manager is Janelle Davila; from our governance support team, Tamara Sortman, Marisol Garcia and Cindy McCain; and our shipping, production and

technology team, Brian Miller and Ralph Ruiz. Please join me in acknowledging the team once more.

As you saw in the skit earlier, PTA has a very rich history. We're 114 years old. To put that into perspective, we were formed back before the Wright Brothers first flight or Einstein's theory of relativity.

PTA was invented before the Band-Aid, stainless steel, insulin, Scotch tape, the ballpoint pen or Valium. We were invented before TV, the microwave oven or the Internet. Before the first McDonald's or even Jamba Juice.

The letters PTA together have been around longer than MRIs or LCDs or HMOs or NBC or the NFL or the ADA or IEPs or SUVs or LOL or OMG or CNN or AEDs or even, the venerable SAT.

Of course, during all that time, the world has changed a lot. Whole nations have come and gone. Huge corporations and entire industries have come and gone. World wars have come and gone. Even Jerry Brown has come and gone and ... well ... come again.

Yet, throughout all these years, PTA has remained a constant.

Why? Because of the importance of what we do. Our purpose, our reason for existing – looking out for kids – that has never changed.

So, a while back, several members of our state board were in a meeting discussing how we could make PTA even stronger. Someone from outside our association, who was with us, made this observation. She said, "You know what, all of you in the PTA, you're just too nice sometimes. You're all such a bunch of pleasers."

"Nice" is sort of in our PTA DNA, right? We want to do for others, make others happy. We want to help others, to please.

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And I'm not saying that being nice doesn't have its place – especially when we reach out to make everyone feel welcome in our PTAs – I'm just saying, the sandbox in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., it's not such a nice place to play these days. The policymaking and budget processes can be rough and nasty.

How can we make sure that an association such as ours, an association that never endorses candidates, that never gives



money to them and never engages in partisan activities – how can we make sure that a “nice” organization like ours continues to have a powerful impact on the lives of all children, even in today’s more money-driven, highly partisan, rough and tumble policymaking environment?

I’ll tell you: By speaking the truth.

By speaking the truth over and over again, so that we become a thorn in the side of our elected leaders.

Now, I have a confession: When I first moved to Sacramento, I worked for legislators. (The best part of that job was I met my wife in the halls of the State Capitol.) I worked for a total of three state senators – a Republican, a Democrat, and then an independent. I liked to think back then I was very open-minded. My wife says I was just indecisive. Regardless, I can tell you one thing without hesitation about those legislators and all legislators, no matter what their political party or where they were elected from: None of them likes a thorn in the side.

And you know what they try to do about people who are thorns in their side? They hope they’ll go away. They hope that at some point those people who speak the truth and demand that the right things be done – they hope those people will get tired or frustrated or bogged down with business as usual in Sacramento. They hope that after a while those people will just exhaust themselves and accept that somehow the State of California can’t do any better by its citizens and its children. They hope that nice people like us will just give up.

If that’s what they think, though, they don’t know us very well, do they? Because, as we’ve just established, PTA has been around a long, long time, and if there’s one thing that PTA moms and dads and aunts and uncles and grandmas and grandpas and students and teachers are NOT very good at – if there’s one thing PTA really sucks at – it’s giving up, right?

I know you’ve had a busy, intense week here, but you have to promise one last thing before you walk out of this convention hall today. Will you promise? You have to promise that when it comes to speaking the truth on behalf of all kids, starting tomorrow, there’ll be no more Mrs. Nice PTA Mom. No More Mr. Nice PTA Dad!

When it comes to speaking the truth, promise you will be firm, loud, relentless.

We have to make sure that legislators in every community in every district throughout the state will think twice before deciding to get sideways with the million-member PTA!

That doesn’t mean we won’t be fair or respectful or thoughtful or nonpartisan in all of our PTA work, because we will. But when it comes to the lives of kids, we won’t shy away from saying the things that must be said. And we won’t give up.

In particular, one of the things that must be said is the truth about the state budget. We need to be straight up, and call the situation what it really is. And it is this: Ignorance.

The notion that we can somehow set high standards, then not give all students the support they need to achieve them – and then blame the teachers or the families. That is ignorance.

Think about this: Most traditional school years still include three months off during the summer. Yet, there is compelling

research that the achievement gap actually widens the most during the times when kids are not in school.

If we are serious as a state about closing the achievement gap, we need to find ways to lengthen the school year, not chop it shorter due to budget cuts.

If we’re serious as a state about helping all kids compete successfully in the global economy, we need to give more children access to summer school, after-school and enrichment programs, not chop them off due to budget cuts.

If we’re serious about lowering the dropout rate, we need to give all students access to a complete and dynamic curriculum, not wipe out everything, due to budget cuts.

Research also shows beyond doubt that healthier kids learn better. Yet too many of our kids continue to lack access to basic health and dental and vision services. Denying even more kids access to these services when they’re proven to give kids a better chance to succeed: That’s ignorance.

This whole notion that we can somehow solve a \$26 billion budget deficit by making deeper and deeper cuts to schools and to programs that serve kids – the future engine of our economy and our democratic society – how can we call that anything else but ignorance?

Luckily, if I know one thing about PTA’s history, it’s that we’ve fought long and hard to stamp out ignorance.

Please understand, too, that this is not about partisanship. It’s true that the current state budget situation has centered on the need to find a few more Republican legislators to vote for a balanced approach. But the \$18 billion in cuts that have been made to schools in the last three years, those were enacted with the votes of many more Democrats than Republicans.

Of course, they’ll say on both sides of the aisle that they had no choice. But there is always a choice.

And the choice is to start doing things the PTA way – to work together for the common good.

The choice is for elected officials to check their D’s and R’s at the door, the way our PTAs do.

The choice is for the adults to step up and make good, rational public policy, instead of making a mess.

So, are you ready to leave here today and be less nice when it comes to speaking the truth about kids?

Are you ready to become one enormous thorn in the side of our elected officials?

The road ahead won’t be easy. If legislators or policymakers don’t want to hear what we have to say when we speak the truth, we’ll have to speak it louder. And if they still don’t pay attention, we’ll have to join up with more people and speak it even louder! And we’ll have to keep speaking the truth about kids until it gets so loud it can’t possibly be ignored!

Because our message to them – and to everyone – is that investment beats ignorance.

Thanks to each of you for all of the work that you do every day to support children. Thank you for being a part of the PTA! It is truly a privilege to serve as your executive director.