

# Putting the parent in PTO: Become a school volunteer

By JENNIFER COLTON

Chairing a committee. Baking five dozen cupcakes. Running an event. Going door-to-door with surveys.

For some parents, the idea of joining a PTA or PTO can be daunting, but local parent club members say that's not typically the case.

"I think people are intimidated," says Tiah Devin, who works with the parent club at Armand Larive Middle School in Hermiston. "They think if they come, they'll be wrangled into doing something (extensive), but we're happy with someone offering to cut hearts in their house for minutes and send it back in. It shouldn't be intimidating."

The stigma remains – until parents join a parent club, whether it is a PTA, a PTO, or a booster club. Area members say they ask parents to volunteer at school, perhaps helping with a carnival or Read Across America events, or help with projects at home.

"It can be dropping off plates for a teacher appreciation meal or chaperoning the end-of-year pool party. You don't have to be president of the PTO," Jane Walder says, with a laugh. "Just a small commitment here and there really makes a big difference."

Walder is president of Partners in Education (PIE) in Athena and has been involved for two years. PIE focuses on bringing in learning enrichment opportunities, including OMSI and musical performances, as well as sponsoring field trips. Field trips are a popular request from teachers to parent clubs, and most area clubs raise money to help supplement school programs.

Wendy Griffin is the secretary



and media coordinator for the Stanfield Booster Club and has been involved with parent groups for the entire time her son has been in school, from first-grader to high school senior. She said she was shocked to learn some of the needs the schools and teachers had, from new nets and balls for PE classes, water bottles for students during testing, or purchasing a new ice machine.

"Sometimes it's about safety. Sometimes it's just something else they need, but all the money goes back to the school in some way, shape, or form," she says.

That is true regardless of which type of parent group it is. The three most common types parents will see are PTA, PTO, and Booster Club.

- A PTA is a parent group that is a formal member of the National Parent Teacher Association, a group founded in 1897. Groups that belong to the PTA pay dues and receive member benefits, such as networking and training.
- A PTO is a parent-teacher organi-

zation that remains independent of the national PTA. In Eastern Oregon, many parent groups go by different versions of parent club or school-specific monikers like PAWS – Parents at Work in our School – at Armand Larive Middle School in Hermiston (a tie-in with the school's bullpen mascot) or Pendleton's Sherwood Heights POSSE – Providing Opportunities to Support Sherwood Excellence.

- A Booster Club is generally, but not always, a parent-run organization that helps to "boost" sports teams, music programs, or other organizations. Booster clubs are usually found at high schools. The booster club can support all sports at a school, one specific team, or anything in between.

Many parents, including Griffin, continue through multiple parent clubs as their children grow and attend different schools.

PAWS at Armand Larive Middle School is a new parent club en-



## Strategies

tering its second year. The group started when parents saw the need for their children as they moved from elementary to middle school.

"We all had kids coming out of an elementary school with a strong parent club and we knew what it could do for a school, so it was something we really wanted to make happen," says Tiah Devin. "We had a good, core group and started with little, low-cost things we thought would make a difference in our school."

The group began selling concessions and T-shirts. Devin says they hope to buy every staff member a staff shirt, to support the robotics program with extra equipment, and help with other material items not in the school budget.

"We'll take as many people that want to participate as possible," she said. "Anything you can offer is appreciated."

Every parent group contacted could use more members and more help in their mission to help area schools; members say the parents benefit just as much as the schools.

"It's a good way to get involved, meet the staff, and give back to the community," Griffin says. "You learn the needs of your local school, and it's just a lot of fun."

As an added bonus, many groups provide free childcare, so it's a win-win-win situation.

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