

PTO Frequently Asked Questions

1. What does "PTO" mean?

"PTO" typically stands for "parent-teacher organization" and is the general acronym for the approximately 75 percent of parent-teacher groups that choose to remain independent of the National PTA. Many independent groups refer to themselves as a PTO; others have acronyms such as HSA (Home and School Association), PCC (Parent Communication Council), or the like. In the typical PTO vs. PTA discussion, all independent groups—those not affiliated with the National PTA—fall under the general PTO umbrella.

2. What's the difference between "PTO" and "PTA"?

In a nutshell, PTAs are local groups that affiliate with the National PTA. These groups pay dues to their respective state PTAs and to the National PTA, and they receive benefits from those organizations. "PTO" is the general acronym for the many groups (PTOs, PCCs, HSAs, etc.) that choose to remain independent. PTOs are free to write their own bylaws, and they can either charge no dues at all—a nice touch to encourage involvement—or keep whatever dues they do charge at their school.

While "PTA" is the most well-recognized acronym to the general public but these days approximately 75 percent of K-8 parent-teacher groups are actually independent PTOs. Of the more than 112,000 K-12 schools in the United States, only about 25,000 of those still have formally affiliated PTA units.

3. Is it true that PTOs don't have access to resources and can't be official, standalone, not-for-profit organizations?

No, not at all.

PTOs have always been eligible to get their own 501(c)(3) status from the IRS, and thousands of PTOs have already done so. This is exactly the same legal/tax designation that PTAs typically have.

Some PTOs do not take the step of officially establishing their independence with the IRS, which typically results in the group being basically a committee or organization of the school. This option is especially common at religious and private schools. It's a structural choice that has worked for many groups for a long time and is acceptable, if that's what your group wants.

For many years, being a PTO did mean being completely on your own, with little assistance or help available. If you wanted insurance as a PTO, for example, your only real option was going to your local broker and trying your luck. Similarly, there was really nowhere to turn for insight on something as innocuous as how to run a spaghetti supper or as essential as building parent involvement—and why involvement is so important.

Since 1999, however, PTO leaders as well as PTA leaders have had the many resources provided by PTO Today to help them do their work more effectively. The vast majority of PTO Today's resources—our 80,000-circulation print magazine, most of this ptotoday.com website, and our many kits and programs, for example—are provided free of charge to all parent-teacher groups, no matter the acronym.

As another example, whereas once PTOs really could only get insurance at a very high rate from a local broker, today PTOs can get very competitive group rates through a resource that PTO Today has put together.

4. What's the relationship between PTO Today and local PTOs and PTAs?

PTO Today is a media and services company focused on the world of parent-teacher groups. Our print magazine is mailed to every K-8 school in the country (addressed to the PTO or PTA officers) seven times per year. Similarly, this website and our many services are used by tens of thousands of parent group leaders from both PTOs and PTAs every week.

That's really the extent of it. Neither PTOs nor PTAs "belong" to PTO Today nor are they "members" of PTO Today, as PTO Today is not a membership organization. PTAs and PTOs can, however, join [PTO Today Plus](#) for a fee which provides parent groups an even higher level of service and benefits. Groups do not need to belong to Plus to make use of a majority of our services.

If you have ideas for how we can be of more service, please [let us know](#).

5. Do PTOs lobby or get involved with politics?

Sometimes yes. Sometimes no. It's really up to the local PTO.

That said, this really is one of the fundamental differences between PTOs and PTAs. The National PTA is very openly an advocacy organization with a lobbying office in Washington and similar efforts in several state capitals. Being a PTA ties you into that political effort. That's a positive for some groups (those for whom state or national political advocacy is a goal) and a negative for others.

PTOs usually take one of two directions when it comes to politics and lobbying. They either decide to stay completely out of it, usually because they choose to focus on involvement and community and feel that politics gets in the way of that, or they get active at the local level with at-school or in-district issues.

6. How do we join/contact the National PTO?

There is no "National PTO" in the traditional sense. Even though PTOs are the most common type of parent group, each PTO is independent.

That said, many folks consider PTO Today Inc. to be the closest equivalent to a national PTO. With our national magazine, national website, events across the country, and PTO Today Plus package of benefits, PTO Today is providing key services to a broad spectrum of parent groups in all 50 states.