



## National PTA in Conversation with AchieveMission

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Interview by Angela Romans, Interim Executive Director, AchieveMission

### **Why did the National PTA decide to engage in this project to deepen diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) throughout the association?**

**Nathan** - When [the Bill and Melinda] Gates [Foundation] made us aware of the possibility of receiving this kind of consultation and support, we had to say yes. National PTA is very reflective of the rest of the country, and our levels of sophistication around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion vary consistently all across the system. Even at our very best we know that there's room for improving the way that we engage all of our members, help them share power in our decisions, and making sure those that don't know us are welcome and included in the PTA community. So, we knew we could benefit from people who do this for a living. People who have fresh eyes and don't look at it the exact way we do, because we have our own biases about the way we do our work. So, it's like going to the doctor -- let's assess where we are, where we need to learn, and where we need to grow. Then, let's develop a plan to address that.

**Sylvia** - As Nathan said, PTA is always in a reflective mode about what we can do and what we can do better. From my perspective, the whole philosophy of continuously improving and wanting to be that entity that is reflective of the community and has the pulse on what's happening in our environment, and in the nation, is the work of PTA. The whole idea of taking the mission statement and saying that we represent all children, and we're the advocates for all children, but what does all children mean? It means just that. There was that need, and that push to continuously improve in diversity, inclusivity, and equity. We wanted to look to those who are experts in that arena. We certainly have an outstanding partnership with AchieveMission because putting that into a context and framework and making sure that everyone could understand what we wanted to do, just, it all fell into place. The current environment has called for it. PTA is noted and noticed for its receptiveness to what is called for at the moment and how we need to respond, and I think we responded.



**A few months into our partnership, COVID-19 really hit in the US, and then soon after, a national uprising against racial injustice. What effect did that national context have?**

**Nathan** - They say never let a good crisis go to waste. So, in spite of us never wishing for our country to go through challenges, it has really caused us to go back to the basics of how and why we do things, and to rethink what that means in any environmental situation. So, from both pandemics you mentioned, as well as the economic decline that we're experiencing that so many of our families are suffering from, it pointed out, in fresh ways, the many injustices we are suffering from as a society. The pandemic, the economy, racial injustice, they do not affect us all the same way. So, we realized in our communities that we serve that we don't all experience these pandemic situations in the same way. Different levels of income inequality, different levels of parents going to work and being able to stay home, different child care that's available, different demands of people going back to work, different health care outcomes, different experiences in the streets about protesting [versus] rioting and what that means, all of that has created an opportunity for PTA to use its lens to drive a better understanding of the work that needs to be done in PTA, but also in the greater society.

**Sylvia** - I agree with everything Nathan said. The national uprising caused us to focus on the many injustices that exist within many of our social structures. We had to look at how we handle injustice issues and check if we are that advocacy organization that speaks for all children. We then had to determine how we take our work to a point where it does make a difference in the lives of the children we support and represent. It caused our focus to tighten. As I said before, the responsiveness of PTA has always been noted. We take what we have before us, determine how it meets our members' needs, and work to help leaders help their members at the local level. People are hungry for that information. Taking on the work was certainly a natural hand and glove match for NPTA's agenda because of PTA's continued focus on doing what's right for children and always being responsive to children. The heightened awareness of structural racism and social injustices that are in full view today focused the work and made it even more prominent in the association.

**Nathan** - I would also add the media and members of government have reached out to PTA much more than they normally would, because they want to hear the parent voice in the middle of this. So, just being able to point out injustices like access to digital support from across the country and how unevenly that's being provided across the country. We've been able to be that voice for that. I also think it's allowed us internally and externally to speak with a clear voice about the racial reckoning. I think we've sometimes danced around that before. We would sometimes say the right things, but not as forceful as we should have and it gave us the



responsibility and the opportunity to be much clearer about issues like Black Lives Matter for instance.

### **What are the most important insights you're taking away from the work?**

**Sylvia** - I think the approach of trying to establish a common understanding when we say the words diversity, equity, and inclusion is an essential first step in making sure everyone is on the same page. What it might mean to me might be different from someone else. Having the Board, the leaders of the association, understand how we approach the work from a common perspective, so we are focused on the right things at the right time. I do believe the work of the [Diversity, Inclusion, and Outreach (DIO)] committee as well the Board are essential for providing awareness and understanding of what we mean when we talk about diversity, inclusion, and equity, and what we believe in to move the social justice issues throughout the association. Our efforts also helped to provide a solid direction for making substantive change. In other words, we needed to know and help others understand what we, as members of an association, are willing to fall on the sword for, advocate for, to make a difference in all children's lives. The approaches of developing a common definition of diversity, inclusion, and equity and defining our beliefs provided a solid foundation for building tools and resources to ensure the work of social justice permeates throughout the association. We found that we were speaking with one voice, then making it possible for members to explain the work to others in a way that everyone can embrace. We established a Facebook page. We have increased membership on that site. I think that there's a hunger for direction, [for] the right thing because our leaders always want to do the right thing, but don't always have the direction. Our work is now focused on helping them, [leaders], do that. It's a lot of hard work, but certainly rewarding work.

**Nathan** - Couple extra things I would add. One thing is making sure that we are vocal about what we're actually doing in this work, because we can be too humble at times. On the staff side, we were looking at disparate impact on evaluation of HR practices, we were doing it, but weren't telling people we were doing it, and we weren't talking about it unless there was a problem. Being more explicit about our intent and activities was really important and we learned we needed to do that. There's something still sticking from the convening: if we bring people together, they're all there, and we don't teach them how to share power, we will never get to equity. As a grassroots organization, filled with folks from all different organizations, if there's any great lesson for us, it will be teaching everyone how to share power, so that everybody has an impact on the lives of our children, and then we can get to some equity. That skill of sharing power is something that I think we need to spend a lot of time working on.



### **What was the hardest thing?**

**Sylvia** - Whenever I work with a group of individuals I'm not usually associated with or that I don't have a history of working with, I assume the best in everyone. I try to approach the work from the perspective that we can accomplish great things through constant communication and understanding. DEI work is challenging because the topic can be sensitive, and individuals can be sensitive about the subject, but there's good in everyone at the end of the day. Everyone wants to do what is right and just for the association and the children we serve. Approaching the work from that perspective and knowing deep down that our goal, as a committee, was to be that common voice for children, helped to focus the work. While the work was hard because of its sensitive nature, the deep conversations and greater understandings garnered through the conversations helped us focus on our desired end. That end product was a common understanding of what we know about DEI, what we believe in, and developing practical ideas about approaching everyone's work in their local settings with a DEI lens. The bottom line, our work has to trickle down the association to change the culture. We're changing cultures and mindsets. That's not easy work in any arena. When it's happening in a heightened flurry of activity around us, the urgency of wanting to do something is compelling. With that said, you have to focus on it; you have to center it, you have to approach it to bring everyone along with you, and in a meaningful way. I feel that the committee I work with has a laser-like focus on developing meaningful messages and resources. There was a lot of grace that we gave each other for our initial misunderstandings, but now we are focused, much more, on being in sync on knowing what the work is and how we do it--because it is important--it means changing our society for our children. It's not easy work. Changing cultures and mindsets is not easy work.

**Nathan** - I would say there are two areas that are hard. One, getting people to look past their intent versus their impact. So, we have a lot of really well-meaning people, but their background does not make them aware of their impact on others. That has been a hard lesson and will continue to be a hard lesson for us. The other thing is structural, NPTA is an affiliation of 22,000 local parent groups, and 54 states and 1 national association. It's easy to have an illusion that we can make all of them get them in line with our practices and definitions. We can make a lot of progress in one location and take steps back in another location. Fidelity of the implementation of our policies, definitions, practices is our hardest thing now and will be the hardest thing moving forward.

### **Who was involved in the project, and in what ways?**

**Nathan** - The project managers on this project were our Director of Human Resources and the



Director of our Center for Family Engagement. Those are two places where this is a real influence on the work we did. Those two are really project managers that partnered with the DIO Committee that Sylvia was chairing, so she was providing leadership on the volunteer side along with the President, and of course I was as Executive Director. All of the leaders of our association who were in top positions were actively engaged. We weren't just reporting things. We were a part of the process. As we went through each of our sides, everyone was surveyed, groups met in staff teams. Our Board was involved in this process, Sylvia has reported out to them and engaged them in the work. They voted in new definitions of what we mean by diversity, equity, and inclusion and adapted them as their own. We engaged our state leaders in this conversation. All of our committees, as we go into our National Governance Retreat, will be trained on where we are thus far, but they will also be asked about how they will address diversity, equity, and inclusion as it relates to their work regardless of the committee.

**Sylvia** - I don't want to minimize the attention to this focus by leadership. The President of the association was really actively focused on this. Sometimes with associations, you might have that as a goal, or you have someone spout this as something they want to focus on, but for NPTA, the leadership on the staff and volunteer sides were actively involved in the process. That cannot be understated. When you have everyone working in sync, everyone working towards that, that common understanding and then taking that to action helps shift mindsets. When you have that constant reminder that everything you do should be viewed through a DEI lens, it makes the work easier. That is a testament to the vision and the commitment of our leaders, staff, and members to serve all children.

**Do you have any advice for other nonprofit leaders who are thinking about deepening diversity, equity, and inclusion in their organizations?**

**Sylvia** - There's a saying, "there's no crying in baseball." Well, there's no crying in this work either. Though it's hard work, it's very rewarding work. Most every nonprofit, association, or organization has within their credo or vision statement about their willingness to be diverse and inclusive, but few do it. You have to focus and work at it. It enriches the work when you engage individuals from all networks, locations, perspectives, ages, etc. When you engage everyone, you can implement change more quickly. I would advise anyone who has not done this kind of work to engage your stakeholders, set a vision, create a theory of action and change, develop the resources, execute the plan, and evaluate the success. When you develop thoughtful strategies that involve everyone, you create strong bonds with individuals. When you get to know how people think and feel and incorporate their thoughts and feedback in the plan, it makes advocates and champions for the work--everyone is vested in success. That's when you



have real change.

**Nathan** - If you can't engage your entire leadership in the process, don't do it. There won't be ownership of the work. You have to be ready to commit significant time and a level of vulnerability to find out things you aren't good at and be willing to embrace that. You have to be able to find out some information you might not want to hear and get good people to work with you. The partner outside who's working with you really matters. We need to have a good fit. We were fortunate enough to find a fit that works for us. Not everybody is a good fit. You have to find who works best with the organization, and be really clear about that relationship, so that you're progressing all together.

**Sylvia** - To expand on that, if it wasn't for your guidance, Angela, and AchieveMission to help move the work, I don't know that we would've been able to meet our timeline, and I don't know that we would've been able to make the impact we have today. When Nathan speaks to a good fit, the outside advisor was and is critical.

**Nathan** - One last thing I would say is be prepared for disruption. If you like being really, really, comfortable don't do this work.