

**Montgomery County Council
of
Parent Teacher Associations**

**NEWSLETTER EDITORS
GUIDEBOOK**

2009-2010

**2096 Gaither Road
Suite 204
Rockville, MD 20850
Telephone:
301-208-0111
Fax:
301-208-2003**

**Hours of Operation – 10 am – 2 pm Monday – Friday (School Year)
10 am – 2 pm Tuesday and Thursday (Summer)**

www.mccpta.net

The job of newsletter editor for your PTA/PTSA can be daunting and time consuming. There are lots of decisions to make and lots of written and unwritten rules.

- What are the differences between elementary, middle, and high school newsletters?
- What is the best way to prepare a newsletter for mailing?
- Do you wonder about PTA policy on advertising?
- Would you like to ask a question or get feedback from other newsletter editors?

Let's talk about policies, procedures, and best practices to help you make your newsletter a success! In this brief class we want to cover the technical aspects of putting a newsletter together, but also any possible issues that might arise for you as editors. Topics include advantages of different formats and file types, where to get content, how to treat items, grammar, images, and working with a professional printer.

First, the Rules...

There are few of these. In the words of one experienced MCCPTA member, "I've really never seen any hard and fast rules at Maryland PTA or elsewhere -- only suggestions, and not many of those. The most important guidelines are being factual and fair."

In general, the rules you have for your PTA meetings and email lists apply to your newsletter. For instance, you wouldn't want to have personal opinions or articles completely unrelated to schools, education, or the PTA's mission.

You can include advertising – even paid advertising, but only if you pay for full postage or send by backpack. Be aware that the post office has very strict rules prohibiting advertisements if the newsletter is using a bulk rate permit. Since each post office operates somewhat independently, it is best to talk to the post office which holds the permit for guidance.

In addition, advertising revenue is considered unrelated business income for IRS purposes. This is treated differently than other PTA fundraising income on your 990 tax return so you will need to keep track of your total advertising income and make sure you are filing properly.

There are no specific requirements for content. In general, most newsletters act as a communication tool to help parent keep aware of current school events and upcoming events. Some PTAs may include content specifically for students, teachers, or another audience, but parents are the main focus of most.

Decisions To Be Made

The following are some questions you and/or your executive board should consider. You will want to have answers for your newsletter and for your PTA based on these:

- Is your newsletter a school and PTA newsletter or PTA only?
- Who will have review and refusal rights in your newsletter? Will your PTA President review all or certain items? If your newsletter is considered a PTA publication, then the Principal does not have editorial control. If your newsletter is considered a joint publication than the PTA and Principal share editorial control. This should be discussed with your executive board so you build time into your schedule for review or can tell people when they ask.
- Should you mail the newsletter or send via backpack? This makes a difference to your production, some content, and overall costs.
- Will you print the newsletter yourself or work with a printing service? If you work with a printing service, you need to work with them on what you want the final product to look like, how much it will cost, and how they want to receive your "copy." Some prefer a black and white PDF emailed to them. Others may be happy to have your native Word or Publisher file.
- What about paid advertising? Can you sell ads? Can you accept sponsorships? Do you know about tax ramifications of this? Remember to check with your treasurer and your bylaws. You can sell ads or have sponsors, but there should be a plan/policy in place before accepting either. For instance, you can limit advertising to the back page of the newsletter and include a disclaimer about PTA not endorsing them. Sponsors can be businesses or parents. This money can make a big difference in meeting the budget for printing costs.
- Who will routinely provide your content? Teachers, parents, PTA officers, the principal? Will you write articles or take selections from the National PTA website? Remind everyone when you need their submissions. If you take content from a website, remember you are responsible for making sure you have the right to use the content or include a reference to the source. In addition, PTA use is considered the same as academic fair use for most copyrighted content. That means that you can use some of published articles like magazines as long as you give the author and original publisher credit.
- What will your schedule be set up as? Do you have people to help you? It is a good idea to set a schedule which includes time for each step in the process. It also helps to have several people ready to help in steps like

reproduction or mailing. Don't forget, how often will you publish? Monthly, specific dates, or some other schedule? Make sure that is reflected in your schedule.

Best Practices

The following are suggestions from current editors about what works best:

- If at all possible, you will want at least one proofreader. In order to save time, make the person who proof reads the executive member who has final say on content. Often, a newsletter editor has a lot of leeway and only asks for input if they have a question about certain content or are worried that something may not be appropriate. Make sure to set guidelines on what must be reviewed and by who. Include the Principal in discussions if appropriate. Newsletters using backpack mail may go through additional proofreading by a designated person.
- Stress to everyone involved that the newsletter is an important way to get information out to parents about upcoming activities. Remind the people you expect content from them a week or so before the deadline. For example, on the 10th I ask the school secretary to put a note up in the teacher's lounge to remind them, content is due on the 15th for the edition for the following month. This reminder ALWAYS generates a flurry of activity within the next day or so from teachers and the principal.
- Gather a group of volunteers and delegate as much as possible. For instance, if you mail your newsletter, someone must be in charge of mailing them... someone who will address the newsletters and work with the post office. Remember to order your sets of address labels at school in plenty of time (at least one week prior to need). If you use bulk mail, make sure you have the bulk mail information included on your newsletter template at printing to avoid double work. Also, 2 special notes for bulk mail: if your newsletter is folded, make sure the folded edge is below the address, this allows the newsletter to pass through mail machines easily. If the loose pages point down compared to the label, they must be processed by hand. Also, you may be able to cut your mailing costs if you use tape or tabs to "seal" your folded newsletter closed. Check with your post office for their preferences or requirements. Typically there is one person who works with bulk mailings.
- Setting deadlines for contributions and sticking to them is crucial. Many editors have to routinely pry information out of the volunteers and then end up writing articles themselves. If you see yourself running short of content, there are lots of resources for interesting items, including the nation PTA website, school related and newsletter content websites, and

others. There is no magic solution here.

- Whether you are using your directory to create labels or you get them from school, privacy issues are important; so the list of names and addresses should not be used for any other purpose.
- Set up a template that is both easy to use and flexible enough to be interesting each time. A template helps recurring items look familiar each time.

Advice From the Trenches...

Question	Answer
How do you get people to submit copy without having to remind them 10 times?	Set the submission date the same for each month (15th) for the following month and ONE notice is put up in the teachers lounge that week. If you don't get material, it doesn't go in. Occasionally email someone who is a regular submitter if you haven't seen something from them. You will run into one of two problems – too much content, or not enough. See below for more comments on this.
If you do mail your newsletter, how do you get addresses?	Your school can order these for you from the county or the school secretary can print them herself. This is typically for a small fee or free and is based on the list of parents who wish to receive mailings.
I've heard of this company called Schoolhouse News... what do you think?	This is a fairly expensive option, but one which lets you avoid all the tool and layout issues. Here is the information you will need: http://schoolhousenews.com/ takes newsletter content and does all the layout and publishing for you. You just gather the content each month and give it to these guys via their website and you get a PDF file to print. The format is theirs. You tell them your newsletter/school name/mascot, and they plug that into their template. They do no editing of content (NO spell check, grammar check, well written, etc.), so you still need someone with those skills to look at stuff before you submit it. You have their fee (\$300 for 5 newsletters, \$500 for 10) in addition to printing costs. The lead time is about two weeks.
How much do you edit?	This varies on the contributor of the article, the editor, and the policies of your local PTA. For instance, one newsletter editor said, "I edit everyone...from a parent

Question	Answer
	right on up to the Principal. Everyone gets trimmed for length and wordiness." Another editor reports that "if I edit to the extreme, I send the updated copy back to the author to approve before including it in the newsletter. So far, no complaints." Again, just make sure you have a clear policy on this worked out with your executive board.
What tool should I use to create the newsletter?	There is no "best" tool. Many of the current newsletter editors use Microsoft Publisher which costs around \$100. Microsoft Word is also used by one very experienced editor, because she knows that the template she made and the newsletter job will be passed on to someone else who may or may not be experienced in a more advanced tool.
I have too much content, what do I do?	First, look at your content as individual items. Can you set importance for each submitted item? Are there timeframes involved in the items? (would the announcement make more sense for the next month, or will the newsletter come out after the event anyway?) Who submitted the item? (if you routinely have content from the PTA President and they aren't longer than usual, you wouldn't want to make that "feature article" go away one month and come back the next.) If they are a regular submitter, can you ask them to wait for the next edition? OK, now to the editing! After you have selected the important, timely items, if things are still too long, start looking for duplicate information or wordy sentences that can be trimmed. Remember active voice construction is almost always shorter than passive. Switch it up and save room for a few images. Avoid reducing your font size unless you feel it is as short and clear as possible and important to fit in as is.
How much will it cost?	This depends a lot. How many copies do you need, but first, is there software you can use at school or have at home? Your PTA may want to purchase a single license of a reliable tool to use and give to the editor for the year. Tools range in price from \$100 to nearly \$1000. Very professional results can be obtained from even the simplest program. Next, reproduction – who makes the copies? The school, a PTA member at the

Question	Answer
	local copy shop, or a print house? The price of each is very different and each have their advantages. If your newsletter is mailed, don't forget to put aside funds for the postage and if you must purchase sealing tape or tags or address labels. In the end, your newsletter costs depend directly on these choices.
I want to put my newsletter online, is there a best way to do this?	Does your PTA have a website or will you add to the school website? If so, you can use some files, like Microsoft Word directly. You can convert your file to a Portable Document Format (PDF) using another tool. The least expensive conversion tool is around \$20 and many have free trial versions you can use 5 or more times. If you have the skills, you can add content in HTML. Each requires different levels of knowledge. Work with the person running the specific web page. Check with that person for advice or tools they may have available. This can also be an opportunity to assist the webmaster if you have skills in this area.
I want to create a PDF to put online and send to my printer but I can't afford Adobe Acrobat...	There are a few options here. You can check online for inexpensive conversion tools – these vary a lot in quality and price. Check with your PTA to see if they have purchased a license to use, if not, your school may allow you to use tools they have available in their media center or school office. You can also poll your parent base and see if someone has a copy of Acrobat that they can donate to PTA... remind them that the donation can be tax deductible.
What is the best format for a newsletter?	There is no "best" format. One newsletter may be on regular paper stapled, another printed on 11x17 paper and folded news-sheet style. There are costs and benefits to every design decision, so look at your costs before deciding on a format. Check with other newsletter editors, your printer, or former newsletter editors at your school for advice.
How many newsletters do you print?	This depends on your content. You will want to have a copy for each family (or student) and often extra copies for staff, teachers, and/or to be picked up from the media center or office. One PTA group asked parents who wished to read the newsletter online to submit a request and then pulled those names from the print

Question	Answer
	version list in order to save on printing and mailing costs.
How should I deliver my newsletter?	This depends on several things. The age of the kids, the expectations of your parents, and the format of the newsletter all play into this. For elementary school, the backpack mail works well. This is much less expensive than mailing and you are reasonably assured that they will get to the parents. Middle school students' pack packs are a black hole from which nothing escapes. For this group, mailing is often the only option. High school age can go either way. You will want to offer an online version if possible, but remember you can't expect every parent to have online access.

Questions? Contact...

- MCCPTA Office or Maryland PTA (MDPTA.org) for help with policy questions.
- Your school and PTA Executive Board for any policies and preferences.