Review of PTA and Facility Use
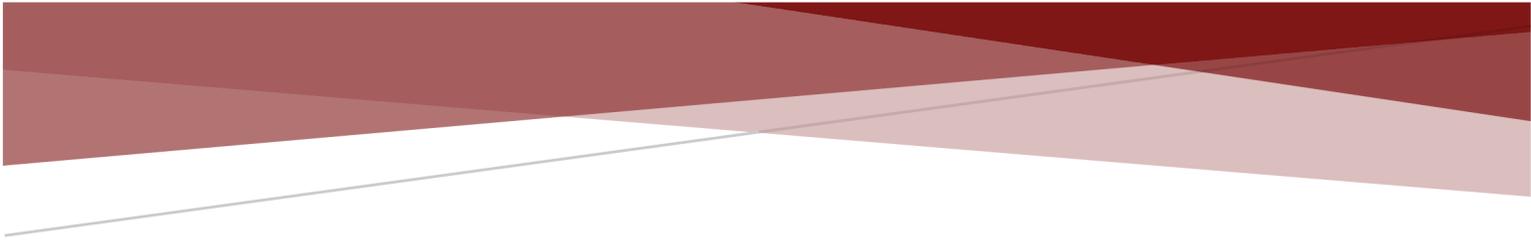
The BERC Group

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Review of PTA and Facilty Use

Prepared for Seattle Public Schools

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Introduction

PTAs play a significant, visible role in many Seattle Public Schools communities, from raising money, organizing events, funding programs, and, in some cases, pay for additional staffing or services that directly affect students' day-to-day experiences. Principals often describe PTAs as central to neighborhood relationships, with one observing that "relationship with community is important for principals to build via PTA."

However, PTA activity intersects with district systems in ways that raise questions about equity, safety, and governance. In schools with well-resourced PTAs, family fundraising can reach levels that allow parents to underwrite staff positions, multiple enrichment programs, or substantial grants for academic initiatives. In other schools, PTAs have limited capacity to raise funds at all. Central leaders have noted that "a lot of our PTAs will end up… infusing cash to… to buy positions back, and stuff like that," and have reacted with concern. These patterns have been explicitly named as equity issues and there have been efforts to balance out inequities by spreading PTA funds to other schools in hopes of rebalancing the scales. But even providing additional funds does not replace the driven, student-focused, groups of parents in more active PTAs.

The ways in which PTAs engage external providers, use facilities, and blend PTA dollars with other funding sources have also created confusion about roles and expectations. Principals and central staff voiced a desire for clearer district guidance. During the course of our evaluation alone, multiple instances of PTAs wanting to engage a provider but running into roadblocks because of unclear pathways and guidelines occurred, with district staff wondering why these guidelines didn't exist in the first place.

This strand of the audit focuses on how PTA funding and facility use intersect with student-facing activities in SPS: PTA-funded staffing and programs, PTA-sponsored vendors working with students in school spaces, and PTA use of district facilities (often under rent waivers or reduced-fee arrangements). The aim is to describe the current state of these practices, identify core equity and oversight challenges, and outline corrective actions that preserve the strengths of PTA engagement while providing clearer, fairer boundaries for schools and families.

Our priority throughout the evaluation was strengths-based and improvement-oriented. Many procedures adhere to policy and already work well and many staff and volunteers go to great lengths to support students. The findings highlight where accountability and safety expectations are least visible or most variable, especially for student-facing work, so that school leaders and central teams share a common understanding of what "effective" looks like and can build on what's working while providing the tools, knowledge, and procedural guidance to sunset partnerships or contracts that do not serve the best interests of SPS students.

Methodology

BERC researchers use a theoretical framework that involves collecting multiple perspectives from stakeholders and employing rigorous data collection methods and analyses for mixed-methods evaluations (Creswell, 2022). In this study, the BERC research team employed a

utilization-focused participatory evaluation model that centers intended users and practical use of findings (Patton, 2014). Researchers used a convergent mixed-methods design to examine three strands of student-facing work in Seattle Public Schools: Personal Services Contracts (PSC), community partnerships governed by MOUs, and PTA–school collaboration and facility use. The inquiry focused on how accountability and safety expectations are interpreted in practice and the consistency of those practices across schools.

We engaged 27 stakeholders through 60–90 minute semi-structured interviews, with several participants meeting multiple times as the project scope expanded. Stakeholders included district office staff spanning the organizational chart and PTA leaders. This purposive approach ensured representation of decision-makers, implementers, and community partners who interact with student-facing services from different vantage points.

Researchers also reviewed key artifacts and administrative materials relevant to each strand, including volunteer/background-check and sexual-misconduct training guidance, facility-use procedures and co-sponsorship guidance, and relevant board and superintendent policies. Consistent with a utilization-focused, participatory stance, we triangulated across interviews, documents, and administrative artifacts.

Guiding Questions

1. How do PTA-sponsored vendors and programs intersect with district safety, vetting, and insurance expectations? Are they treated consistently with other student-facing partners and contractors?
2. How do PTA-related facility-use practices (including rent waivers and scheduling of outside vendors) align with district policy and with safety and equity goals?

Findings

Lack of Clear Guardrails

Principals and PTA leaders alike described a lack of clear, shared guardrails around what schools can or should fund for PTAs and how they should interact with school and district systems. PTA leaders reiterated that their goal is to "be helpful," but they are often unsure whether particular ideas—funding positions, supporting specific academic initiatives, or hosting community events such as "know your rights" sessions—are within acceptable bounds.

PTA leaders noted that much of PTA activity is reactive or collaborative: sometimes "PTA needs to go in and say, here is an event we do or want to do," while other times "they come out of a principal saying, could you do" a particular event or program. Occasionally, ideas come from external organizations seeking space or partnership. Without clear guidance, PTAs and principals navigate each scenario individually, increasing the risk of inconsistency and misunderstanding.

There is also a pattern of what PTA leaders described as "conditioning" over time. PTAs have learned that schools "need volunteers because they can't do the work themselves," and that "different people will take it off their plate." At the same time, PTA members reported that if they are seen as "putting more on [staff's] plate," they may encounter resistance. This dynamic

reinforces the importance of having explicit agreements about roles and expectations, so that PTAs are not inadvertently taking on responsibilities that should rest with the district or adding work for school staff in ways that feel unsustainable.

PTA-Sponsored Volunteers and Safety/Vetting Gaps

Volunteer management emerged as a major area of concern. Discussions with PTA interviewees provide vivid examples of how, in the absence of clear and consistently applied processes at some buildings, PTA volunteers have been placed in quasi-official roles with significant responsibility for safety-related tasks. In one case, "one lady was supposed to do the background checks, a parent, on volunteers for a frisbee [program] (on other parents)," and "no one on staff asked if all of these people passed the background checks." In another school, a parent volunteer served as "a volunteer coordinator… [whose] job is to check [and] make sure that everyone has done what they have had to do, including background check." These arrangements blur the line between district responsibilities and volunteer contributions and create significant liability and safety risks if not supported by clear oversight.

PTA members and staff alike noted that there is "not sufficient staffing in central office to get background checks done quickly and effectively," which has, in practice, led some schools to rely more heavily on parent volunteers to manage or track checks. These stories underscore the need for clear, district-owned systems that relieve PTAs and individual schools of having to invent or improvise safety processes.

Insurance and Liability

Insurance and liability are other areas where PTA leaders expressed both knowledge and concern. It was noted that "PTA should have insurance, vendor should have insurance," and that "all of the PTAs should have their own insurance (AIM)." Leaders also clarified that "PTA can't be fiscal sponsors, liability has shifted at the state level," and that "now it's clear that the fiscal sponsor is liable, so the outside organization or vendor should be carrying the insurance." These comments reflect an increasing awareness that PTAs themselves should not be the primary risk-bearing entity for external programs operating in school facilities.

The distinction between PTAs and PTOs is especially important in this context. PTAs receive training and guidance from Washington State PTA and council structures, while "PTOs don't have anyone giving them the training or knowledge on this." To a school, both groups may appear as parent organizations trying to do similar work, but from a risk and compliance standpoint, they are not equivalent. Some PTOs "are great and some are sloppy," meaning that their understanding of insurance, liability, and district expectations may be uneven. This raises additional oversight challenges for SPS, as policies and supports need to account for both types of organizations if the district expects consistent standards of safety and financial stewardship.

Facility use and Building-Level Processes

PTA leaders highlighted facility use as a major source of "confusion and chaos," but emphasized that the difficulty often stems from building-level processes rather than from the district itself. They reported that "confusion and chaos comes from principal/front office [who] puts up hoops for getting facility use forms filled and sent." For PTAs, the desire is straightforward: "We want

to build community via these events," and they would like a clear, predictable building-level process where the school says, in effect, "here are dates and facility use forms." When this happens, PTAs felt, "the district process moves smoothly for the PTA." When it does not, they experience delays, mixed messages, or inconsistent requirements.

These observations reinforce prior findings that facility use decisions often sit at the intersection of policy, school practice, and PTA expectations. PTAs perceive themselves as trying to host community-building or informational events but run into inconsistent interpretations of rules and expectations at the school level. This, in turn, can strain relationships and give PTAs the impression that barriers are being erected rather than support offered.

Recommendations

Create Unified PTA Partnerships Guidance

Seattle Public Schools should develop a single, unified set of guidance and workflows for PTA engagement and contracted services. Right now, PTAs, principals, and front offices are each piecing together their understanding of what is expected, which leads to variation, friction, and occasional conflict. A district-aligned guidance package would explicitly outline how PTAs should engage with schools, how external vendors and volunteers are vetted, and what responsibilities sit with PTAs, with schools, and with central offices.

This guidance should clearly describe the end-to-end workflow for common types of PTA activity: community-building events, academic grants, PTA-sponsored vendors working with students, and large grants that affect staffing or core programs. For each scenario, it should state expectations for event supervision, volunteer and vendor background checks, use of systems such as Samaritan and MyCOI, and documentation of insurance for both PTAs and outside organizations. The intent is to replace informal norms and assumptions with a transparent, step-by-step description that any PTA leader, principal, or office manager can reference.

The document and associated tools should be co-designed with the people who will use them. SPS should convene a working group that includes central staff, principals, and PTA leaders to shape the content, language, and examples. Co-designing these resources will help ensure that the guidance addresses real pain points on all sides—for example, PTAs' frustration when facility-use processes feel like "hoops," or principals' worries about unvetted volunteers. Once developed, the guidance should be accompanied by simple, printable checklists and an annotated toolkit: for instance, a PTA event planning checklist that walks through facility use and safety steps; a PTA-sponsored vendor checklist that covers insurance, background checks, and supervision; and a short set of "questions to ask" before accepting PTA grants for staffing or academic programs.

Strengthen Principal–PTA Collaboration

Because the relationship between principals and PTAs is ongoing and highly influential, SPS should invest in structures that support yearlong, joint learning rather than relying on one-off memos or reactive conversations. PTA leaders described wanting to "be helpful" and to build community, but also feeling constrained when building-level processes are unclear or when they

are asked to take on tasks that feel like district responsibilities. Principals, for their part, are navigating PTA energy, facility-use demands, safety concerns, and equity considerations, often without a forum for shared planning.

The district should fuse existing leadership structures to anchor this collaboration. As part of the Summer Leadership Institute, SPS could host a principal–PTA kickoff breakfast or session where the new PTA partnerships guidance is introduced, expectations are clarified, and examples of strong principal–PTA collaboration are highlighted. This is an opportunity for principals and PTA representatives to hear the same messages at the same time, ask questions together, and leave with shared commitments for the year. During the school year, SPS, potentially in partnership with the PTA council, can offer quarterly workshops or virtual check-ins where principals and PTA leaders discuss recurring issues such as volunteer management, use of Samaritan, facility-use bottlenecks, and the design of more equitable scholarship or grant programs. These regular touchpoints can become a predictable space for troubleshooting, sharing bright spots, and updating participants on any changes in guidance.

By making joint learning and engagement an expected, yearlong practice, SPS can strengthen trust, reduce misunderstandings, and align PTA efforts more tightly with school and district goals. Instead of confronting challenges only when a problem arises—a denied event request, a last-minute background-check issue, or an equity concern about a PTA-funded program—principals and PTAs will have a standing structure for addressing them together.

Standardize Safety and Insurance Vetting

Discussions made clear that safety practices for PTA volunteers and PTA-sponsored providers are uneven and, in some cases, risky. Examples of parents informally conducting background checks on other parents, or serving as de facto volunteer coordinators responsible for verifying training and checks, show how responsibilities have drifted into spaces that should be governed by clear district systems. To address this, SPS should standardize safety and insurance vetting for all PTA-related volunteers and vendors and ensure that these processes are owned by the district, not by PTAs.

A central pillar of this work is to make Samaritan, or the district's designated volunteer-management system, the required pathway for all PTA volunteers who interact with students. Whether a volunteer is serving as an art docent, supervising a frisbee club, chaperoning a field trip, or helping with an after-school program, their background check should be initiated and tracked through the same system used for other volunteers. PTAs should no longer be asked to manage checks or determine whether someone has "passed." Instead, central staff and school offices should have clear visibility into each volunteer's status.

For this to function, every school site needs training on how to use the system. Principals, office managers, and designated staff should know how to confirm whether a PTA volunteer has completed the background-check process, what the different clearance levels mean in terms of whether a volunteer can be alone with a student or must remain under supervision, and what steps to take if a volunteer has not yet been cleared. This training should be repeated periodically and accompanied by written guidance, so that turnover in front offices does not erode capacity.

The same principle should apply to PTA-sponsored vendors and programs. Any external organization working with students on school property must meet the district's standard safety and insurance requirements, irrespective of whether funding comes from PTA, PTO, grants, or district budgets. Staff of those organizations should complete required background checks and trainings, and their insurance should be documented and verified through the district's existing system. PTAs should not serve as fiscal sponsors in ways that shift liability onto them; instead, outside organizations should clearly carry their own coverage.