

Questions and Issues to Discuss and Recommendations to Consider When Starting or Running a PTA Listserv

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Note: This information sheet is also available on the MCCPTA website:

<http://www.mccpta.net/listserves.html>

Every PTA and school community is unique, so the purpose of this document is not to tell any given community what to do, but rather to provide a starting point and ideas to consider when engaging in a dialogue at the local level. Listservs provide a powerful means of communicating information quickly and economically, but are also fraught with potential problems. Careful consideration of the implications of running a listserv can help you to avoid most problems, and to deal with ones that do occur effectively and quickly.

Important note: This document was written by a moderator whose experience and knowledge lies with Yahoo groups, after years of moderating. There are other listserv providers, but they are not mentioned here due to lack of knowledge about them beyond their existence. Therefore, please read this document with that in mind.

Questions and issues to discuss at your PTA meetings:

- To whom does the listserv belong? Before you get started, you need to decide who will maintain the list. Is it to be under the control of the PTA, the school, or a joint project?
- How will the rules be made? Who will be in charge of making the rules the list will operate under? Will it be a committee, the PTA Board of Directors, the general membership? How will new rules be proposed and put into place? How will they be enforced? What consequences will there be for those that violate the rules?
- What is the purpose of the list? Is the purpose to send out information, to hold discussions, or both?
- Who will be allowed to post?
- Will the moderator be a true moderator, or just an administrator? Will posts be moderated – i.e., will the moderator need to approve all messages before they go out? What criteria will be used in this process? How many moderators will you have?

- Will there be limits on the number of posts per person per topic?
- Who will be allowed to join the list? If membership is restricted, how will you verify identity or affiliation? Will you do a yearly purge of those that are no longer allowed to be members?
- How will list ownership be passed on as current owners or moderators move on to other schools?
- Will certain topics be off limits? Will posts be limited to school news only? Community news? Anything?
- Will posts be sent out throughout the day or combined and sent once a day or once a week?

Recommendations for your listserv, whether new or already functioning:

- Have your PTA minutes reflect all the decisions you make regarding your listserv so there is a record for future years.
- MCCPTA recommends that the PTA own the list, not the school. This avoids issues regarding control of content as well as protects the ability of the PTA to access the listserv should future legal issues force a change in MCPS/PTA collaboration. (As happened during August, 2006, with the flyer policy.)
- Consider adding a disclaimer to the footer of every message and possibly the group website. The MCCPTA_Delegates listserv has the following disclaimer:

This is a discussion list for approved MCCPTA Board members, MCCPTA delegates, local PTA/PTSA officers and Board members. The opinions and suggestions posted do not reflect the official position of MCCPTA. This list is designed to allow our members to discuss in a non-restricted venue issues that they "the members" feel impact our children. The opinions are those of individuals and should not be interpreted as the official position of any local PTA/PTSA or MCCPTA. All comments posted on this listserv must be considered "off the record" by members of the press.

MCCPTA:

** Does not exert editorial control over materials that are posted by third parties onto its website or materials that are e-mailed by third parties to any other persons.*

** Specifically disclaims any and all liability for any claims or damages that result from postings by third parties.*

** Does not exert editorial or other control over content provided by links from the PTA website or newsletters.*

- Try to make the name descriptive. If possible, put PTA in the name so there is no question of ownership.
- On the listserv website, or in other public places, state for all to see the purpose and ownership of the listserv. The organization that is running it determines who makes the rules.
- On a very basic level, you have two choices for your listserv:
 - It can be a discussion listserv, where everyone who is a member is allowed to post, and responses go to the entire list, or
 - It can be an announcement only listserv where only a select few can post and there is no discussion.

Each school community needs to decide for itself what fits its needs. Some people feel that without discussion, the sense of community is lost. On the other hand, discussion listservs have been known to spawn divisive arguments. If your community decides to have a listserv with discussion, then starting with a set of rules and stating them up front, and to all people who subsequently join the list, can prevent problems down the road. Examples of some rules used by local school community listservs are:

- Limits on the number of posts on a topic.
 - Restricting who is permitted to post.
 - Prohibiting inflammatory postings.
 - Restricting topics for posting.
 - Consequences for violating the listserv rules.
- Have multiple owners and moderators, but choose wisely. If you only have one owner, and something happens to the person, you may end up losing control over the list, and Yahoo will not help you. If you use a Yahoo groups listserv, their policy towards ownership is one of “hands off.” Once someone starts a group, they will not interfere regarding ownership, with the one exception of if the group is being used irresponsibly for spamming purposes. Otherwise, they will not help you with matters of ownership. Decide in advance who the primary owner and moderator will be, and if necessary, define who does what to avoid duplication of efforts and confusion.
 - Train new owners and moderators, preferably before giving them privileges, or consider limiting their privileges. It is possible to make changes that cannot be recovered once someone is given full privileges.

- Consider having new owners and moderators sign an agreement regarding orderly transfer of the listserv when they leave. A sample document is provided at the end of this one to assist you.
- Consider putting a request for email addresses to be added to your listserv on your PTA membership form.
- Be aware that if posts become too numerous, you may lose members. Be sure that subscribers are made aware of the option of getting all the messages posted in a given time period (typically each day) sent as a daily digest.

If your PTA wants to start a Yahoo groups listserv, the Listservs Moderator can provide technical assistance on the setup and help you to get the list functioning in the way you desire. Don't hesitate to ask any questions you may have.

Listsers Moderator
listservsmod@mccpta.com

Sample Listserv Owner/Moderator Agreement

I acknowledge that the listserv, [NAME], is owned by the [NAME] PT(S)A, and that they alone have rights to its use, control, and the use of the email addresses subscribed to it. As an owner/moderator, I serve at the request of the PT(S)A Board of Directors, and if asked to step down, will do so in a timely manner, as defined by the Board of Directors, after turning over owner/moderator privileges as instructed by the Board of Directors.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Witnessed by (member of the Board of Directors):
