

PTA Website Design from PTAC

Each PTA within PAUSD needs to have a separate website. PTA websites are needed because the following information is not allowed on the school websites: all forms of advocacy (for example anything that might call for support of the Parcel Tax), after school programs and activities, information on PTA fundraisers, eNews, and student directories. All of these things can be linked to from the PAUSD hosted school website, but this content cannot be part of a PAUSD hosted website.

Fortunately, the Palo Alto Council of PTAs (PTAC) provides an easy way for each PTA within PAUSD to create a simple PTA website that is separate from the school's website.

The simple PTA website design from PTAC is based on a standard for PTA websites that has been evolving over the last several years. The goals of this new standard are to create websites that are easy to maintain and use and encourage cooperation among the webmasters of the various sites throughout the district. All of this should result in more efficient use of volunteer time and ultimately better overall communication.

The new standard is based on the WordPress content management system (CMS). Prior to the development of the CMS, website management required someone with programming knowledge (usually HTML knowledge) to make even the simplest change. With a CMS, users who do not necessarily have specific technical skills can do most of work to maintain and update the content of website. This means that the PTAs are much less dependent on finding someone with programming skills and a significant amount of spare time to maintain their websites.

Ten years ago, there were a wide variety of CMS solutions. Now, there are three solutions that have most of the CMS market: WordPress, Joomla, and Drupal. Of the three, WordPress is easiest to use, the easiest to learn, and the most popular. This makes it ideal for the PTA websites. PTAs depend heavily on parent volunteers and those volunteers are usually only active for a limited time. PTAs are more likely to find volunteers who are familiar with WordPress, and even if they cannot find someone who knows it, then it is much easier for incoming webmasters to learn it than the other CMS solutions.

The look and feel of any CMS based website is determined in large part on its theme. There are literally thousands of themes for WordPress, and it is critical to choose one that is both feature rich and long lasting. The majority of PTAs in Palo Alto that have adopted WordPress have adopted the TwentyFourteen theme. This theme is developed by WordPress itself, so it has staying power and it will likely be kept up to date as new features are added. TwentyFourteen is also a responsive theme, meaning that the theme will attempt to detect the type of device that the website is being

displayed upon and try to optimize the way that it is displayed based on that device.

One of the goals of trying to establish a standard for PTA sites is to encourage collaboration between the technical people who run the websites. In the past, PTA websites would be developed based on the knowledge of whoever the PTA could recruit to be webmaster. This led to a situation where each PTA had its own particular type of website and opportunities for collaboration were quite limited. With eight PTA websites now running Word Press and the majority of those websites using the TwentyFourteen theme, the opportunities for collaboration are enormous. The Webmasters for the majority of these sites have been meeting every month to exchange ideas and collaborate to solve problems.

The regular webmaster meetings combined with the standardization on WordPress and in particular the Twenty Fourteen theme has led to a common appearance for PTA websites. Users of the websites are now able to go to these websites and find the same information in approximately the same location on each site. If you consider the case of a parent whose child moves from Fairmeadow to JLS to Paly, that parent would be able to easily find information throughout the child's journey through the Palo Alto schools once she/he had mastered the layout of the Fairmeadow website. This is an incredible improvement over the old system of deliberately different websites.

In summary, the advantages of having a PTA website based on the PTAC standard are many including:

- Easy to use
- Easy to Learn
- Easy to maintain
- Less volunteer time required
- Less technical knowledge required
- Easier to find qualified volunteers
- Volunteers benefit from sharing knowledge with the PTAs of other schools
- Device independent
- More common view for end user
- And ultimately better communications