

---

## Empowerment

The Academy leadership and perhaps all organizational leaders put great importance on the services provided to members. After all, when the time comes for members to write the dues check, many pens hesitate as the mind recounts the reasons for belonging. Journals, life and disability insurance, continuing education, and annual meetings probably are some of the things you think about that steady your pen to task. *Empowerment* is probably not one of the reasons most of us internally enumerate when we renew our various memberships each year, but in the case of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, it should be.

My dictionary doesn't even list the word empowerment, but its meaning is clear from its root, to empower, and its colloquial use in advancing the status of underrepresented groups. It means to invest with legal power and in today's jargon, it means to give to an individual or group power or some segment of power. More often than not, the group previously was denied power or participation.

The history of the Academy is one of member empowerment. Old-timers remember when the Academy had 100 members and no intention of spreading the power beyond that group. That changed and we have, today, the organization that we recognize as representative of all pediatric dentistry. More recently,

regionalization ended what might be called a benevolent oligarchy and empowered the grass roots membership as it had never been before.

That tradition of empowerment continues. In addition to official regional representation on the Board of Trustees, the membership enjoys an informal presence and participation at every Board of Trustees meeting in the form of the component representatives, fondly known by now as *the peanut gallery*. These dozens of members have the opportunity to listen, often to comment, and to discuss the issues of the day. In its own way, this sunshine and fresh air policy is empowerment and is rare in an organization of this size.

In recent years, the Academy has fostered opportunities for member input into policy at reference hearings at the annual session. We've formed groups addressing the needs of a changing membership. I wonder how many members realize that the Academy has *encouraged* development of its many constituent groups — educators, women, young pediatric dentists, uniformed pediatric dentists, pediatric dentist-orthodontists, public health pediatric dentists, program directors, foreign pediatric dentists, and on and on — sanctioning meetings at the annual session, financing activities, providing access to the decision-making structure, and, yes, *empowering* with assimilation of people, policy, and proposals into its overall operations and leadership.

Most of us don't realize our own empowerment within the Academy! Ours is an organization small enough that we can approach our leaders with an opinion or a desire to serve. We can stand at the business

meeting at the annual session and express our opinions without being a delegate or component officer. We can send a letter and know that it will be published, acted upon, or at the very least, responded to by a human being and not a copying machine.

Those members who ask to serve on committees need to know that their names aren't lost or tossed aside. My own education came just recently from a couple of former presidents-elect who took me to task about the "Blue Box". This is the list of names of members who have asked to serve in some capacity and it is passed on each year to the new president-elect with the succession of officers. I saw this practice as a black hole for the energy and desire of the membership. It was eye-opening for me to discover that, contrary to my mistaken belief, the blue box was still another source of empowerment. Countless hours are spent reviewing names, soliciting opinions about them, and constructing the complex matrix of our committees and sub-committees to maximize the opportunity for those who wish to participate to do so.

What is it in the character of this particular organization that encourages participation and empowerment? Why is it that we are unified and not a protoplasmic conglomeration of interest groups without direction? Without waxing philosophical, I'd propose that our strength is in a unifying goal to improve the condition of children. In that pursuit, we have a common benchmark against which to measure every policy, motion and conversation, irrespective of its source or intention. In that pursuit, we look constantly for a better way — to man-

age behavior, to reach more children, or to move a tooth — and are willing to listen to diverse opinions to find that better way. And in that pursuit, unlike more glamorous but less demanding specialties, we share a common bond of those in the trenches. That bond brings together the diverse and adds credibility to opinions.

This isn't a pitch to pay dues — in fact, the stability of our dues structure over the last half-dozen years is still another example of empowerment! This is really a call to participation in the formal and informal arenas of Academy activity. The changes to come in health care are an opportunity to influence a generation of children and we need the ideas and wisdom of all our members. You are *empowered!*



Paul Casamassimo, DDS, MS