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Pulling the Parent Trigger

Education Next talks with **BEN AUSTIN** and **MICHAEL J. PETRILLI**

Championed by California-based Parent Revolution, and adopted first by California in early 2010, more than a half-dozen states now have parent trigger laws. The parent trigger, which allows a majority of parents at a low-performing school to vote to seize control from the local district, has been wielded at four California schools. Is the parent trigger a good idea? Can empowered families transform the system one school at a time? Making the case for the parent trigger is Ben Austin, executive director of Parent Revolution and former deputy mayor of Los Angeles. Questioning the merits of the trigger is Michael Petrilli, vice president for policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and an executive editor of Education Next.

Empowered Families Can Transform the System

by BEN AUSTIN

California passed a “parent trigger” law in January 2010. A few months ago, parents in Adelanto, California, became the first parents in American history to win a parent trigger campaign.

After years of systemic failure at Desert Trails Elementary, in 2011 parents with children at the school formed an autonomous organization, the Desert Trails Parent Union, and went door-to-door, working alongside other parents, to develop an agenda for change and get the word out about this new legal right they had. Desert Trails parents met with teachers, the principal, and the deputy superintendent of the school system to create a list of objectives for improving the school. At the heart of the list was one simple idea: that all

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There’s a Better Way to Unlock Parent Power

by MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

It’s hard not to sympathize with the impulse behind the parent trigger. Here’s a mechanism that empowers disadvantaged parents to force speedy and transformative change at schools long considered dysfunctional. It upends the stasis that pervades so many urban districts: the veto power that teachers unions and other adult interests hold over all decisions; the culture of low expectations that blames social factors (and the parents themselves) for poor student achievement; the slow pace of reform that subjects yet another generation of students to failure while the system struggles to get its act together.

For these reasons and more, it’s worth experimenting with the parent trigger. But I strongly suspect that the experiment will fall flat, at least most of the time, at least when it comes

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decisions, from staffing to budget to curriculum, should be driven by the best interests of their children.

In response, the defenders of the status quo launched a campaign of lies and intimidation against parents who signed the petition. Parents even uncovered direct evidence of fraud and forgeries.

This past October, a superior court judge concluded a year-long legal battle, confirming that parents have the right under the parent trigger law to transform their school, while ordering the school district to abide by the parents' petition. This followed a July court decision that was also in favor of the parents.

Two court decisions, two judges, and two victories for parent power.

In early January, the Adelanto School Board approved the parents' recommendation for a highly qualified, nonprofit charter-school operator to begin transforming Desert Trails Elementary School in August 2013.

Public Support

Even in this era of partisan gridlock and paralysis, politicians across the political spectrum find common ground around the simple notion of giving parents power over the education of their own children. Last November, former Florida governor Jeb Bush, a Republican, and former Clinton chief of staff John Podesta, a Democrat, shared a Washington, D.C., stage to laud the parent trigger movement for moving the issue of education reform past partisan bickering to focus squarely on the needs of kids trapped in failing schools.

Meanwhile, a 2012 Gallup Poll showed 70 percent of respondents favor parent trigger laws as a long-term education reform solution.

A vocal minority of detractors also spans the political spectrum. Detractors on the right contend that the parent trigger gives parents too little power. They argue that the parent trigger is too difficult, laden with bureaucratic hurdles, limited in its options, and ultimately unscalable.

What these detractors overlook is ongoing work with the California State Board of Education to create a regulatory framework around the parent trigger process that removes unwarranted barriers and codifies the legal steps leading to the successful transformation of a failing school.

When the parent trigger was signed into law in 2010, the president of the California Federation of Teachers famously called it a "lynch mob" law. Major elements of the education establishment still believe parents do not have the formal training or knowledge required to have direct, legitimate power within the public education system, and that parents should step out of the way and let the experts do their jobs.

Yet we need outside pressure from parents. No movement in the history of our country has been able to achieve the



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scale and transformative change needed in public education without a powerful, informed grassroots movement pushing for it. In the absence of an organized parent effort applying pressure to the system, bureaucratic inertia and skewed political-incentive structures determine how decisions are made. Having passionate, committed people working on the inside on behalf of kids is necessary but not sufficient if the goal is change that puts kids first.

The question, then, centers not on whether we must build a parent movement for change, but rather on the most effective and empowering way to go about it. Empowering parents to levy a direct and immediate impact on the lives of the children in their community is the answer. Therein lies the importance of laws such as the parent trigger, which give parents a government-sanctioned mandate to organize and take control of the educational destiny of their children.

The parent trigger provides parents with options other strategies may not. One of its greatest advantages is enabling parents in socio-economically disadvantaged communities to



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to turning around failing schools and/or forcing significant reform on the part of failing school districts. Three factors come into play here. First, the parent trigger mechanism itself will continue to get bogged down in lawsuits and other blocking tactics, as has been the case to date. Second, if and when the trigger gets pulled, the resulting school turnarounds won't generally amount to much. And third, empowering parents via the parent trigger (creating a "bargaining chip") won't be enough to force larger changes in dysfunctional districts—because nothing will force such change.

The Lawyer Trigger

Parent Revolution has launched parent trigger campaigns in two California schools: McKinley Elementary in Compton and Desert Trails Elementary in Adelanto. (As this article goes to press, Parent Revolution has helped parents pull the trigger in a third school, 24th Street Elementary in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and a fourth campaign is underway.)

The campaigns in McKinley and Desert Trails were characterized predominantly by lawsuits that revolved, first, around the parent signatures on the trigger petitions. In Compton, district officials demanded that signatures be verified in person and with photo identification (reminiscent of the wave of Voter ID laws passed by Republicans in 2011–12). A judge issued a restraining order, ruling that such requirements were illegal. Compton was allowed to cross-check signatures with student records, however, and to reject those that did not match. Compton also wanted to allow parents to rescind their support for the petition,

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arguing that they weren't truly aware of what they were signing. These strategies eventually succeeded: the effort fizzled, and Parent Revolution lobbied the state board of education to tighten its regulations in an attempt to prevent such tactics from prevailing the next time around.

The story started out much the same in Adelanto. Parent Revolution organized a trigger petition and obtained signatures from a majority of Desert Trails' parents. But the school board then allowed parents to rescind their support for the petition (97 did so), causing it to fail. Parent Revolution sued, and a county judge ruled that the board's action was illegal; it could only verify signatures, not give parents a chance to remove them.

Soon afterward, the Adelanto school board voted to accept the parents' petition but not their preferred course of action (turning the school into a charter school). So the parents went back to court, and a judge ruled again in their favor.

Finally, the school board (which had experienced significant turnover in the November 2012 elections) agreed to hear a proposal from the parents' chosen charter operator, which hopes to take over the school in the fall.

While the Adelanto outcome is better than what happened in Compton, the story indicates that successfully pulling the parent trigger is going to be a slow, expensive slog anywhere that school boards choose to resist. Nor should that be surprising. We've known forever that when institutions face external threats—via competition or otherwise—they respond first by using their power to crush the opposition and quash the threat.

Macke Raymond, director of Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), and an expert on monopolies in the public and private sectors, made this clear at a 2006 forum organized by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. "Change is the last thing districts will do," Raymond said, with regard to competition from new schools. When threatened, Raymond argued, monopolies

...launch a series of wars. First is the war of entry: prohibiting new entrants into the market. They try to set high barriers through law and regulation. In general, the monopolist is dismissive of potential entrants. The second war is of survival—they launch games of irritation. These include delaying tactics, non-responsiveness, and nonpayment. They try to limit the discretion of the new entrants. The public relations strategy is to



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generate change at their neighborhood school. With the school-choice alternative, for example, parents wanting the best education for their child often need financial means and knowledge of the educational options to make an informed choice of another school, resources not always available in low-income communities.

Additionally, the parent trigger is focused solely on public education. It is our belief that the work of real and lasting change must take place in our public school system.

Parents enduring a parent trigger campaign are transformed. Some, like the parents at Desert Trails, are forced to endure lengthy legal battles, a process most of them have never experienced. Others, including the parents of 24th Street Elementary School and also Haddon Avenue Elementary in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), find a responsive school district that wants to collaborate with them in changing their school. No matter the intensity of the campaign, it is transformative.

Many of these parents, for the first time in their lives, feel real power, not only over their child's destiny but over their

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own as well. These parents, and parents like them, are the key to the future of public education in America. Each parent trigger campaign focuses on changing the conditions of a particular school. In that sense, each campaign is unique. The common thread is empowering parents to make decisions about their child's education, knowing they have the legal capability to do so.

Parents Want Good Schools

Parents don't care if a public school is a traditional district school or a charter school; they just want it to be a good school. In California, the parent trigger law gives parents a seat at the decisionmaking table. It empowers parents to transform a failing school through community organizing. According to the law, if 51 percent of parents with children in a school agree to change the direction of the school, the school board must listen.

Parent Revolution created the parent trigger based on our conclusion that the public education system is failing because it's not designed to succeed. It doesn't serve the interests of children, because it's not designed to; it's designed to serve the interests of powerful adults. The fundamental idea behind the parent trigger is to effect an unapologetic transfer of raw political power from the defenders of the status quo to parents, which is necessary because parents have wholly different incentive structures and a far greater sense of urgency than those who hold the power in the education system.

None of the bold reforms and technocratic fixes of any ideological stripe, no matter how well intentioned, can substitute for empowered parents. When parents organize into independent, autonomous organizations like parent union chapters, they have the power to hold all those within a school district, as well as the school, accountable to serve the interests of their children rather than the interests of adults.

The parent trigger movement is not a substitute for other reforms. It is a necessary precondition for their ultimate and sustained success. Parents can have direct input into teacher evaluation and efforts to improve teacher quality. Parents can participate in decisions regarding the academic programs and recreational opportunities being offered to their children. Importantly, parents become a highly visible and integral part of the daily life of the school, interacting with teachers, students, and administrators in a new way.

As the parent trigger movement grows, it will be important to understand what success looks like. Successful parent empowerment means sustained, organized, and ongoing engagement by parents, whether through parent union chapters or otherwise. Successful outcomes may range from negotiated improvements to ensure safer school conditions or improved special-education policies, to charter conversion or school leadership changes.



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smear the new opponents, often personally. Third is the war of containment. They will heap on as many costs as possible to wear you down, such as more reporting requirements and cost studies. The public relations battle becomes more aggressive and organized. Fourth is the war of elimination; the biggest indicator is the legal challenge. The opposition forms into coalitions designed to destroy the new entrants. After all of these wars, you will see change. But you have to survive first.

That, I predict, is what the future holds for other communities that want to pull the parent trigger: more lawsuits, more “delaying tactics,” more smearing. But will it be worth it if the parent organizers survive these wars? Probably not. That’s the second problem.

Conversions a Recipe for More Failure

Let’s suppose that parent advocates run this gauntlet and manage to force a turnaround at a given school, as appears to be happening at Desert Trails. What are the chances of success? If the history of charter school conversions and district school turnarounds is any guide, the answer is: very low.

Ever since the beginning of the charter movement 20 years ago, most state charter laws have included a “teacher trigger” of sorts. A majority (or sometimes supermajority) of teachers could vote to turn their district school into a charter. And in the early days many did.

Yet enthusiasm for these charter conversions soon fizzled. Partly that was because they were seen as “faux charters.” Legally, they typically remained part of the school district; often their teachers continued to be covered by the district’s collective-bargaining agreement. They gained a few operational freedoms but not enough to make much of a difference.

School districts—and boards—generally haven’t known what to do with these charter schools. Usually they end up either micromanaging or ignoring them. The latter might sound good to advocates for greater school autonomy, but it has created many problems in terms of charter school quality. In fact, many of the charter sector’s quality headaches stem from school boards that abdicate their responsibilities as charter school authorizers, a role they probably never wanted to play in the first place. Recent research, again from Raymond’s CREDO, demonstrates that charter schools that start out mediocre rarely improve. One could imagine a similar dynamic playing out in charter schools created via the parent trigger.

Of course, the parent trigger can be used for more than just charter school conversions. Turnarounds or “transformations,” in the current lingo, are options, too. But there’s plenty of reason for skepticism on that front. As Andy Smar-



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ick wrote in these pages a few years ago (“The Turnaround Fallacy,” *features*, Winter 2010), “school turnaround efforts have consistently fallen far short of hopes and expectations.”

And most of those turnarounds were initiated, at least somewhat enthusiastically, by district officials. The people in charge of making them succeed wanted them to succeed. How likely is it that school boards and district officials will jump onboard a turnaround process after spending months trying to stop it? Turnarounds are difficult, if not impossible, under the best of circumstances. Turnarounds forced upon districts by angry parents seem destined to fail.

Can the Parent Trigger Change Local Politics?

Some advocates of the parent trigger acknowledge the concerns raised above, but still believe it to be a useful tool in forcing recalcitrant districts to change their ways. As Ben Austin of Parent Revolution has argued elsewhere, “There are parents right now who are organizing at schools around



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Over the coming 12 to 18 months, as successful conversions take place at schools using the parent trigger, we are confident the new school leadership will bring significant improvement in student learning and achievement. In Desert Trails, the parents selected and the school board approved a high-quality nonprofit charter operator with significant, measurable academic success in the other school it operates.

Power to the Parents

In January 2013, more than 150 parents and children from the 24th Street Elementary School in Los Angeles presented their parent trigger petition to the superintendent of the LAUSD. In February, the LAUSD board unanimously approved their petition, allowing the parents to move forward in selecting a new operator for the school. Eight organizations, including the district, are now putting together proposals to transform this chronically failing inner-city school.

Six states have followed California's lead, enacting parent trigger laws of their own, and more than a dozen states are considering doing the same in 2013.

In the coming weeks and months, parents throughout California and across America will follow in the historic footsteps of the Desert Trails Parent Union. As they organize on behalf of their children, 2013 will become the year of parent power. ■

the parent trigger without really the intent to pull the trigger. They are organizing in order to have bargaining leverage, to basically say, 'look, there are things about our school that we like, but there are things about our school that we are unhappy with and nobody has listened to us until now. Well, I represent 51 percent of the parents. We now have the power, for all intents and purposes, to fire you. So fix these things within x number of days. Otherwise we're going to fire you.'"

This mirrors the longtime optimism among school choice advocates that the exodus of students and money—the threat of competition leading to hemorrhage leading to downfall—would change power relationships inside school districts. Reform-minded superintendents and board members, in particular, could force intransigent teacher unions to make concessions that would make their district schools more attractive to parents and thereby stem the losses.

Evidence of this happening in the real world, however, is quite thin. Perhaps a few cities have seen major, positive changes because of competition (Washington, D.C., comes to mind). In most, however, district dysfunction, and union intransigence, continues. (Think: Detroit, Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, Oakland.) And that's even after losing tens of thousands of students and hundreds of millions of dollars to charter schools.

It's hard to imagine, then, that the threat of a parent trigger at a single school is going to force school board members, district bureaucrats, or union officials to the bargaining table. Sure, it could happen. But if Macke Raymond is right, it will be a long time coming.

Conclusion

"Parent power" is a critical component of education reform; there's little doubt that many of the problems in American education come from the mismatch in power between the workers in the system and its clients. To the degree that the parent trigger helps reformers to organize and empower parents, it should be embraced wholeheartedly.

But as a strategy to change schools or districts, it seems likely to fail. A more constructive approach is the road we've been traveling for 20 years now: expanding school choice via new, high-quality options. More independent charter schools. Additional opportunities for private-school choice via taxpayer-funded scholarship programs. Digital learning. And so forth.

Perhaps school choice, at scale, will finally force districts to improve. But even if it doesn't (as I suspect will be the case in many cities), we will be left with lots more excellent options from which parents—as consumers—can choose. We might even put districts out of business altogether. Now *that's* power. ■



"Yes, I am the school nurse, but I can't heal an ailing public education system."