



A Takeover Tale

Is the parent trigger ready for its close-up?

***Won't Back Down* (2012)**

A film directed by Daniel Barnz

As reviewed by Andrew Kelly

The parent trigger is American education's latest "it" reform. It's a simple, powerful idea: if a majority of parents in a failing school sign a petition, the district must implement the parents' preferred turnaround model. The notion is so intriguing it has captured Hollywood's attention. The parent trigger has come to the silver screen in *Won't Back Down*—a big-budget film that chronicles a fictional turnaround effort. Starring Maggie Gyllenhaal, Viola Davis, and Holly Hunter, the film bills itself as "inspired by actual events." Gyllenhaal plays the mother of a dyslexic child desperate for a way out of her struggling neighborhood school, and Davis the once-great teacher who joins Gyllenhaal's trigger campaign. Hunter plays the union boss who tries to stop them.

The phrase "inspired by actual events" is a bit generous. Sure, four states currently have a law in place (watered-down versions in Indiana and Connecticut don't count), and the U.S. Conference of Mayors pledged a vote of unanimous support for the policy. But at the time the movie was made, there had not yet been a successful petition drive, let alone a trigger-driven turnaround.

In the battle for hearts and minds, though, the fictional effort in *Won't Back Down* may be more important to the future of the parent trigger than its track record on the ground. Produced by Walden Media, the same folks who backed the high-profile 2010 documentary *Waiting for Superman*, this feel-good film has already courted controversy. After its two-and-a-half-minute trailer was released, the antitesting, anticharter activist Parents Across America declared that "corporate reformers are once again turning to Hollywood to sell a version of school reform that parents reject."

But lumping the two films together is a mistake. *Won't Back Down* is a very different project, one that reflects frustrations with *Superman*'s limited reach. Davis Guggenheim's film was not made for mass consumption, but for

the art-house crowd—educated elites and true believers in education reform. And even within those circles, *Superman* was limited by what many (even sympathetic) critics saw as a simplistic, anti-union tone.

With its all-star cast and classic underdog story, *Won't Back Down* is clearly built for a wider audience. Whereas *Superman* debuted in 4 theaters on opening night, *Won't Back Down* opened in 2,100.

The question for reformers is whether the film presents a convincing case for education reform to the mass public. Judged by this measuring stick, *Won't Back Down* does a fine job of sketching out the problems with the status quo—a lack of quality options, unresponsive bureaucracies, entrenched interests—in a way that resonates. But when it comes time to propose a solution, the film falls short.

The movie is most compelling in its first half, when Gyllenhaal's struggle to find a better education for her daughter exposes the obstacles that plague dissatisfied parents. She starts small, asking the principal to switch her daughter from the abusive, lazy teacher she currently has to the marginally better one across the hall, but eventually moves on to other options, including a charter school lottery with too few seats. Her search ultimately leads to the central office, where a kindly receptionist informs her that walk-in appointments are impossible before inadvertently telling her about the parent trigger. Every step builds a sense that the entire system is designed to protect the interests of its employees and frustrate change. But the film's strength is that it does not lecture the audience, relying on the story to expose the obstacles rather than spoon-feeding through the voice of a narrator. The mounting frustration sets up the eventual epiphany: parents cannot get what they need unless they take matters into their own hands.

Won't Back Down is also notable for its remarkably even-handed look at the conflicted relationship between the unions and the rank-and-file teachers they represent.

Make no mistake: union management is clearly the villain here. We see the dirty political tricks, personal threats, and steadfast opposition to change that you'd expect in a reform-minded film.

But the film makes it clear that many teachers recognize the problems in the system and feel conflicted about the role of unions. The filmmakers use "Mr. Raymond," the school's young, zealous, Teach For America (TFA) alum, to explore a teacher's perspective on unions and reform. As Gyllenhaal's love interest, he serves as a counterpoint to her frustration with the union, reminding her of the legitimate job protections that unions provide to teachers. For most of the movie, the TFA teacher articulates the "reform unionism" view: parents should work with the union rather than going around it. It's Hollywood, of course, so he ultimately comes to believe that the union's interests stand in the way of school reform, but the discussion along the way adds depth that is often missing in education debates.

Unfortunately, the film gets less realistic as it comes time to solve the problem. First off, the writers modify the parent trigger law to fit the story's narrative arc. In the Hollywood version, a successful petition requires not only a majority of *parents*, but a majority of *teachers* as well. This change allows director Daniel Barnz—who describes himself as "extremely pro-union"—to place teachers at the center of the reform effort.

But in the rough-and-tumble world of education politics, requiring teacher buy-in would effectively negate the parent trigger. Teachers would hold veto power over parents, and union threats could keep risk-averse teachers in line. Such a provision would so sabotage the parent trigger that the California Teachers Association tried (without success) to write such a "poison pill" provision into the California law.

What's more, *Won't Back Down* may lead audiences to imagine that line-dancing, hand-holding parent-teacher collaboration will be enough to transform awful schools. The narrative allows the filmmakers to avoid the frank but controversial reality that the parent trigger will most often be used to bring in new operators to take over failing schools.

The big problem, though, is the film's implicit suggestion that the parent trigger is a solution in and of itself; if parents and good-hearted teachers can only wrest control away from the bureaucracy and the unions, the schools will improve. Charter school conversions, which typically require majority teacher support, are perhaps the closest analogue to the film's version of the trigger. But while high-profile conversions like Green Dot's turnaround of Locke High School have shown promise, the limited research on charter conversion suggests that the process is far from a panacea. And Chicago's experiment with local school

councils suggests the limits of relying on parent input. By the mid-1990s, sociologist Anthony Bryk and his colleagues found that, at best, one-third of the councils had undertaken a coherent reform effort that led to improvement. More than 20 years later, the councils can't attract enough parents to serve; in the latest election cycle, just over 2,000 candidates had signed up for nearly 7,000 slots by the filing deadline.

It's not that efforts to promote parent empowerment are naive or misguided. On the contrary, the recent spate of parent activism will help build a lasting constituency for school reform. But the parent trigger is simply a lever to push for school-level reform, not a solution. At the end of a successful petition drive, parents will still have a struggling school to turn around, and even the most engaged will need continued help to do so.

Unfortunately, *Won't Back Down* leaves this part out, skipping from the pivotal state school board vote approving the trigger to a cheerful image of a school transformed. The film should inspire some moviegoers to look more favorably on reforms like the parent trigger. But increased attention also raises the stakes of making those reforms work, and happy endings will require much more than passion, protest, and petitions.

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"It's a good citizen's responsibility to question authority.
Not *my* authority, of course."