



Why we oppose California's Parent Trigger law:

It represents neither real parent choice nor empowerment

California's Parent Empowerment Act passed in early 2010 and has been supported by backers of corporate education reform nationwide. It is now being used as a model for legislation in other states, including New Jersey, Colorado and elsewhere.

The law creates a process known as the Parent Trigger, which allows a majority of parents at a low-performing school to sign a petition to trigger one of a narrow set of options – firing all or some of the staff, turning the school over to a charter operator, or closing the school. These are the same options offered in the federal School Improvement Grant program, despite the fact that none has been consistently successful in improving schools nationwide.

Although Parents Across America strongly supports *true* parent empowerment, we oppose the Parent Trigger process. While the Parent Trigger allows parents to voice discontent with a school, it gives them no opportunity to choose among more positive reforms, and fails to promote the best practices for parent involvement from the ground up. In addition, the process creates huge potential for abuse, disruption and divisiveness to school communities.

Parents Across America instead supports a process in which parents are authentically involved at the ground level in developing strategies for improvement. These strategies might include smaller classes, more parent involvement, or other reforms that have been proven to work and are aligned with the individual needs of the school and its students.

Background on the Parent Trigger

California's Parent Trigger law was promoted by the organization Parent Revolution, which was founded by charter school operators and backed financially by venture philanthropists. Parent Trigger drives have occurred in two California schools.

The more high-profile drive targeted McKinley Elementary in Compton, near Los Angeles. Parent Revolution selected the school and the charter operator *before* sending paid operatives into the Compton community to collect signatures. The campaign was secretive, and Compton parents had no opportunity to consider all the options.

In December 2010, signatures of more than 60% of the school's parents were submitted to the

school district, calling for turning the school over to the Celerity Educational Group charter operator.

Soon after the petition was submitted, confusion and chaos broke out. Some parents who signed said they had misunderstood the petition, or had been misled about what it called for. Some Parent Trigger supporters said they had been harassed. Angry parents protested at a Compton school board meeting. The district created a clumsy signature verification process that Parent Revolution branded intimidation. Parent Revolution went to court to quash that process; district officials reviewed the petition signatures and declared many of them invalid. Charges and countercharges continue to fly.

The other, largely forgotten Parent Trigger drive, at Mount Gleason Middle School in Sunland near Los Angeles, was started by a former parent at the school who says she is only calling for replacing the principal. That drive appears to have stalled.

Problems with the Parent Trigger as currently formulated

- True parent empowerment is the heart of Parents Across America's mission. However, we are concerned that the real goal of California's Parent Empowerment Act may be to turn schools over to charter operators.
- The narrow and disruptive range of options offered in the Parent Empowerment Act –the same options offered in the federal School Improvement Grant program – have shown no overall success in improving schools nationwide.
- The potential outcome of a Parent Trigger drive – disrupting and dismantling schools – is likely to harm vulnerable students and communities in which the local public school is often a key stabilizing force.
- While parents can “trigger” one of the pre-selected options, the law does not provide for meaningful parent involvement in developing research-based strategies to address the challenges their schools face.
- The Parent Trigger process pits parents against teachers and undermines home-school partnerships, which are critical to student success.
- Any “transformation” brought about by a Parent Trigger may have significant impact well beyond that individual school. For example, if parents at a school were to vote to close the school, neighboring schools could be severely affected through overcrowding.
- Finally, we see the parent trigger as a distraction from the real work our schools require – implementing proven, common-sense strategies for parent involvement and meaningful education reform.

The process must be rigorous, transparent and fair

The Parent Trigger as currently defined is not workable or effective. If such a process is to exist, it requires a broad set of safeguards.

- The reform strategy must be one that was devised at the school level – by the PTA, the local school council, Title One committee, or local governing group made up of parents at the school level – and they must have flexibility in developing the strategy that best suits the needs of their school.
- The law must require that any paid organizers publicly identify themselves and disclose their financial backers. Paid organizers must be supporting parents' interests, not acting on behalf of their own organizations or particular charter operators.
- The question of who will be eligible to vote must be specified clearly, and any vote should take place at the school site, supervised and with adequate oversight by district superintendents or their designees.
- The process must require adequate transparency and disclosure, allow equitable access for all parents, ensure that all options are presented to parents fairly and accurately, and clearly state which restructuring option is being proposed.
- Any change in school operation must include a guarantee that all existing students may stay at the school through graduation, and that high-need students will not be "counseled out."
- It must be clear which entity will oversee the entire process and ensure adherence to the law and proper procedures.

Conclusion: Creating rather than solving problems

California's Parent Empowerment Act, and the rush to emulate it in other states, raises deep concerns. As with other deceptively simple-sounding solutions, this law is likely to cause more problems than it solves.

We urge lawmakers to oppose proposals like the Parent Trigger that would exploit parents' legitimate concerns in order to hand public property over to private hands.

For more information on Parents Across America, check out our website at www.parentsacrossamerica.org or email us at info@parentsacrossamerica.org