



Position Paper

The Empowerment Parents Want: A Real, Effective Voice in our Children's Education

As corporate efforts to privatize and capitalize on public education are increasingly being exposed as ineffective and damaging, the wealthy sponsors of these controversial strategies – e.g. school closings, turnarounds, charter school expansion – have been attempting to re-brand them as “parent empowerment.”

Last year, for example, Congress passed the “Empowering Parents Through Quality Charter Schools Act” on a strong bipartisan vote despite the lackluster outcomes of most of the nation's charter schools.

This year, the big push is for so-called “parent trigger” laws, which would allow 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.

PAA opposes both the House charter expansion bill and the parent trigger process.* We believe that adding more charter schools simply offers parents a more dizzying array of unknown and unreliable options, often at the expense of equity, quality, parental rights, and accountability. 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 research-supported best practices for parent involvement from the ground up.

We know that these strategies do not reflect what most parents actually want, or what works for children and schools. A 2010 Phi Delta Kappa poll found that 54 percent of Americans think the best thing to do about low-performing schools is to keep the school open with the same staff and give it more support. Only 17 percent wanted to close the school and reopen it with a new principal, and just 13 percent wanted to replace it with a charter school.

Even strong charter school proponent Ben Austin, of the Parent Revolution, recently said that parents at most of the schools his organization is working with are not interested in turning their school into a charter school, but rather want to focus on improving their existing schools (EdSource Extra, 1/12/12).

It's not that parents aren't concerned about bad schools. We are. But, as explained in a recent report from Public Agenda, "What's Trust Got to do with it?," parents and community members give tremendous value to their local public schools. Closing their schools feels like a body blow – as though the community itself is being written off.

Parents also doubt the ability of elected officials and district leaders to make the right intervention and policy decisions; in fact, Public Agenda found that a strong majority of the public trusts the judgment of parents and teachers far more.

This lack of trust is reinforced when public officials cozy up to wealthy hedge fund operators, venture philanthropists, and school privatizers, take their marching orders from astroturf advocacy groups, or "rent" supporters, as recently happened during school closing hearings in Chicago.

Rather than requiring parents to "trigger" a restrictive, damaging set of reforms or shop around among wildly divergent charter schools, PAA supports the kind of empowerment which involves parents authentically at the ground level and in district-, state-, and nationwide policy discussions about how to improve schools.

Chicago's local school councils – real parent empowerment

Chicago's local school councils (LSCs) offer a successful model of the kind of meaningful, effective parent empowerment that parents actually want. LSCs were created by state law in 1988 in response to frustration with the lack of progress and accountability in Chicago's public schools. Here are some key elements of the LSC's structure and operations that PAA supports:

- Membership is predominantly parents; the chairperson must be a parent.
- Other stakeholders including teachers, non-teaching staff, community and students are also represented but may not run for a parent seat.
- LSCs have real authority in the school, not just an advisory role.
- LSCs hire the principal and may choose not to renew his/her contract; principals have a right to an independent review of that decision.
- Elections are monitored, uniform, and by secret ballot.

There is strong evidence over the years that LSCs have been a successful element of effective school reform.**

PAA understands that parent involvement and the LSC model are not magic bullets. Chicago's schools, for example, continue to struggle despite the best efforts of LSCs.

However, the research-based LSC model is a vastly superior "choice" for involving parents when included in a comprehensive set of proven reforms including equitable and sufficient funding, pre-K programs, full-day Kindergarten, small classes, strong, experienced teachers, a well-rounded curriculum and evaluation systems that go beyond test scores.* We believe that parents are empowered, and children better educated, only when parents are full partners in education policy making.

*Please see our position papers

- PAA on charter schools (<http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/HR2218positionfinal7-5-111.pdf>)
- PAA on the parent trigger (http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/PAA_Parent_Trigger-position-final.pdf).
- PAA on Reforming ESEA (<http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/ESEApositionFINAL4-20-11.pdf>)

**See PAA fact sheet, *"Research Shows that Local School Councils Improve Schools!* http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-admin/media.php?attachment_id=3293&action=edit

Also LSC FAQ, http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-admin/media.php?attachment_id=3294&action=edit).

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