

What are parent trigger laws?

Parent trigger laws allow parents to intervene in their child's school if it is persistently performing poorly, generally by the standards outlined in No Child Left Behind. With a majority of parent signatures, parents can petition for one of several turnaround measures to occur. These actions include:

- Converting the school into a publicly funded charter school
- Replacing a substantial portion of the school administration and faculty
- Closing the school
- Offering affected students vouchers to attend private schools

Where have parent trigger laws been enacted?

In January 2010, California became the first state to pass parent trigger laws. By March 2013, nearly 25 states had considered parent trigger legislation. A total of seven states have enacted some version of the law: California, Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas. Of the states that have enacted parent trigger laws, most include the following:

- A process by which parents can sign a petition to initiate a change in the school's operation
- The intervention options available to parents
- A description of the role of the state education agency in determining the outcome of the school
- An appeal process for the school district that manages the targeted school

How do parent trigger laws work?

States rely heavily upon test scores to measure a school's performance even though research shows that community poverty influences test scores more than any other factor. In California, for example, there are no failing affluent schools. Parent trigger laws ignore the underlying issue of community poverty and its effects on education. Furthermore, when schools are graded solely upon test scores, other measures, such as how well a school prepares graduating seniors for college, are overlooked. Also, in 2011, an analysis of California schools revealed that schools are often be mislabeled as failing due to a flawed assessment methodology. (See Silicon Valley Education Foundation, A Hardly 'Persistently Lowest List.')

Parent trigger laws do not promote parent involvement. Generally, parents are not given a list of turnaround options prior to the petition. Therefore, they are forced to agree solely to the terms stated in the petition. Parents can also be misled about the petition's true purpose (see the examples on page 3). Often times the group responsible for organizing the turnaround campaign seeks to hide their efforts from parents who are actively involved with the school, leaving individuals to question their true motives.

The solutions do not address the root causes of underperformance, nor do they increase the likelihood of success. Parent trigger laws do not make an effort to evaluate the reasons for continuous low performance. Even if the root causes could be identified, the legislation does not authorize individuals to address those issues. Instead, parents are forced to choose from limited options that do not provide students with a better chance of success. In truth, the conversion of some schools to charter schools has produced the same results of underperformance. According to studies conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), there is no evidence that educational performance in charter schools is superior to traditional public schools.

What are the negative consequences of parent trigger laws?

Parents are sometimes harassed or deceived into signing petitions. In 2010, McKinley Elementary School, a low-performing school in Compton, California, became the target of a petition fighting for a charter conversion. Some parents reported that Parent Revolution, the nonprofit group based in Los Angeles that was responsible for organizing the petition drive, used intimidation tactics to garner parent signatures. Many were told that the petition aimed to beautify the school or improve traffic safety in the area. When discovering the real purpose of the petition, a significant portion of parents chose to withdraw their support.

The legislation encourages a combative “us” versus “them” strategy. The process leads to increased tension between potential allies. It does not foster efforts among parents and schools to work together in developing solutions for improving education.

Parent trigger laws provide charter school operators with an incentive to target communities with underperforming schools. As a result, charter schools conversions could reduce the number of traditional public schools. In the case of the Compton elementary school, Parent Revolution decided that the petition would specifically aim for a charter conversion. The group also pre-selected Celerity Education Group, a charter management organization (CMO) to serve as the charter operator. Parentrevolution.org states the following about the campaign: “We came to the parents with a pre-packaged solution already available—charter conversion with a very high-quality school operator—rather than helping them devise their own solution from the ground up. And the vast majority of the signatures gathered were ultimately gathered by our organizers, not by the parents themselves.”

The process threatens the careers of competent school faculty members. In May 2013, the respected principal of Weigand Avenue Elementary School in the Watts area of Los Angeles, California was removed from her position after a petition drive organized by Parent Revolution. Upset over the loss of their esteemed leader, 21 of the 22 teachers have requested transfers to other schools. The district instructional director working with Weigand Avenue argues that it could take nearly three years to build a new team and get the school back on track.

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“Misfired” triggers

Compton, California

Upon discovering that the true intent of the petition aimed to convert McKinley Elementary School into a charter, many parents withdrew their support. Parent Revolution no longer had the number of parent signatures required to support their efforts. As a result, McKinley was not converted into a charter. However, the Compton district allowed Celerity Educational Group to open up another charter school. McKinley only experienced a 13% drop in student enrollment, proving that families in the area were not demanding a charter option.

Adelanto, California

When Parent Revolution targeted Desert Trails Elementary School, parents were asked to sign two petitions. The first one asked for a list of items that could improve the school. The second one called for a charter conversion. Parents were told that the second petition would only be used as leverage to gain the demands listed in the first petition. However, the organization only presented the petition seeking to convert the elementary school into a charter. Outraged at the deception, parents asked to rescind their signatures, arguing that they did not support the charter conversion. However, once the case came to court, parents lost all power when the judge ruled that their signatures could not be withdrawn. As the process continued, parents were asked to vote among the two or three charter operators bidding for the school. In a school with a student population greater than 600, only 53 parents voted. The parents chose an operator that also runs a school in the greater area, but has no experience running a school like Desert Trails. Against the wishes of parents, the charter operator will take over beginning in the 2013-2014 school year.

Parent Involvement Can Help Schools

In challenging economic times, schools are operating under extremely demanding circumstances. Parent trigger laws exacerbate an already stressful situation by increasing the tension between parents and school staff. Instead, true parent engagement can be a tremendously beneficial support to schools. Forming coalitions among parents, teachers, and administrators is a better way to develop solutions for improving schools. Volunteering in the classroom, joining the National Parent Teacher Association, and collaborating with the community to promote programs that support school administration are just some of the many ways that parents can become active participants in their child’s school.

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