

What are parent trigger laws?

Parent trigger laws allow parents to intervene in their child’s school if it is deemed failing by the standards outlined in No Child Left Behind. A total of seven states have enacted some version of the law, including California, Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas.

With a majority of parent support, parents can petition for one of several “turnaround” options to occur:

- Convert the school into a publicly funded charter school
- Replace a substantial portion of the school administration and faculty
- Close the school
- Offer affected students vouchers to attend private schools

Parent trigger laws are a poor mechanism for school reform.

We cannot identify with enough precision schools that are performing poorly. States rely upon test scores to measure a school’s performance, despite research that proves that community poverty influences test scores more than any other factor. Parent trigger laws ignore the underlying issue of community poverty and its effects on education.

Parent trigger laws do not promote parent involvement. Since parents are generally not given a list of turnaround options prior to the petition, they are forced to agree solely to the terms outlined in the petition. In previous trigger attempts, parents were misled about the petition’s true purpose.

The options 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. Instead, parents are forced to choose from limited options that do not provide students with a better chance of success. 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.

Negative consequences of parent trigger laws:

- Parents are sometimes harassed or deceived into signing petitions.
- The legislation encourages a combative “us” versus “them” strategy. Instead of fostering efforts among parents and schools to work together in developing solutions for improving education, it leads to increased tension between potential allies.
- It provides charter school operators with an incentive to target communities with underperforming schools. As a result of charter conversions, the number of traditional public schools could decrease.
- The process threatens the careers of competent school faculty members.

“Misfired” triggers

McKinley Elementary School in Compton, California

In 2010, McKinley Elementary School in Compton, California became the target of a petition fighting for a charter conversion. Parent Revolution, a nonprofit group based in Los Angeles, was responsible for organizing the petition drive. Some parents reported that the organization used intimidation tactics to garner parent signatures. 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, a non-profit charter management organization, to open up a charter school. McKinley only experienced a 13% drop in student enrollment, proving that families in the area were not demanding a charter option.

Desert Trails Elementary School in 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, while 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 for a charter conversion. When parents asked to rescind their signatures, arguing that they did not support the charter conversion, a judge ruled that their signatures could not be withdrawn. In a school with a student population greater than 600, only 53 parents voted among the charter operators bidding for the school. The charter operator will take over beginning in the 2013-2014 school year.

Parent Involvement Can Help Schools

True parent engagement can be a tremendously beneficial support to schools. Forming coalitions between parents, teachers, and administrators is a better way to develop solutions for improving schools.

- Volunteer in the classroom
- Join your local Parent Teacher Association
- Collaborate with the community to promote programs that support school administration
- Participate in school board elections
- Vote for public officials who support public education

*Source: Please see “Facts on Parent Trigger Laws” on our website for more research, citations and information on this topic.
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