

# Los Angeles area teachers, parents fight charter school takeover

**D. Lencho, Kevin Martinez**  
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On December 8, petitions were delivered to Acting Superintendent of the Compton Unified School District, Karen Frison, authorizing McKinley Elementary to be converted from a public into a charter school. If the signatures are approved, McKinley will be taken over by the Celerity Educational Group, a private entity, which will run the school using funds from the public education budget.

Even though there are widespread complaints that petitioners used deception and intimidation to gather their signatures—McKinley is on track to become the first public school in the state of California to be converted to a charter under what has become known as the parental trigger option. The measure, which was part of the recently passed state Education Code 53300, allows a majority of parents at a given public school to vote to either close it, enact major staffing cuts or convert the school to a charter.

The code was passed, in part, as part of the state's bid to receive federal money offered under the Obama administration's "Race to the Top" initiative—which the White House has used to impose punitive measures on teachers and advance its privatization agenda. The code remains in effect despite the fact that state failed to qualify for any of the \$4.2 billion offered under the RTTT program.

McKinley has become a battleground between opponents and supporters of the charter school movement. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, a Democrat and former organizer for the teachers union, organized a press conference at the school to support the petition drive. "I have supported the parent petition since its inception, because it is a significant school reform measure that puts power back in the hands of our most important stakeholders: students and their families. I commend this group of Compton parents for taking corrective action on a pressing issue."

Opponents of the conversion have noted that the school is among the most rapidly improving in the state with 77-point increase in a two-year period on the state Academic Performance Index.

Parents and teachers who wish McKinley to remain public have charged that signatures were gathered under false pretenses with forms asking parents to sign on to an initiative which would "beautify" the school.

The Parent Revolution group—which backed the petition drive—was founded by Ben Austin—a state board of education member and a former political aide to ex-President Bill Clinton and Richard Riordan, the former Republican mayor of Los Angeles. The group is backed by billionaire financier Eli Broad and other wealthy opponents of public education.

Parent Revolution claims 62 percent of McKinley parents support the conversion. At a recent PTA meeting, however, the organization was denounced for its intimidating methods.

Jessy Herrera, an active McKinley PTA member, told the meeting how parents were followed by petitioners to their workplaces, laundromats and restaurants. Many parents complained they were repeatedly called and visited at their own homes after refusing to sign. According to reports, others were told the school would be closed or that they would be deported if they didn't sign in the case of immigrant parents.

Amid these revelations and with at least 50 parents asking that their signatures be removed, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger intervened, turning reality on its head by denouncing the "intimidation tactics" of those who opposed Parent Revolution's efforts to privatize the school. This was echoed by Mayor Villaraigosa who told the *Los Angeles Times*, "It's particularly alarming to see these parents resort to the kind of intimidation, the kind of smear campaigning, the kind of rumor-mongering that is all too reminiscent of the way bad employers try to intimidate working people."

In point of fact, it is charter school proponents who utilize "smear campaigns" by scapegoating teachers for the crisis in the public schools, which is the result of decades of budget cuts and layoffs carried out by both corporate-backed parties.

Far from providing any solution, major corporate and financial interests are seeking to exploit the legitimate concerns of parents for reactionary, self-serving purposes. These include drastically reducing their tax outlays through the gutting of public education funding, while pushing privatization schemes to profit from the multi-billion dollar "education market."

In the Los Angeles and throughout the country, these forces have orchestrated extensive media campaigns to shut down so-called failing schools while destroying the jobs, living

standards and working conditions of tens of thousands of public school personnel.

Villaraigosa's appearance outside the home of a Compton petition signer last week was met by angry parents and demonstrators who held up signs that read, "Our kids are not for sale!" and chanted, "No charter school."

At the behest of Parent Revolution and Governor Schwarzenegger, the State Board of Education, which includes members of Parent Revolution like Austin, has appealed to Attorney General Jerry Brown to launch an investigation into "threats and intimidation" against charter school petitioners.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to several parents at McKinley Elementary. Joyce Alonso, a mother of two children, one in McKinley and one in preschool, told the WWS, "Someone came to my house and they told me that they really wanted to change the school to a charter school because of low grades and I was like 'sure' so I signed the petition. When I found out later they told me they were going to fire half the staff and get a new principal, I didn't know. At school they had a list about taking off your name so I signed to take it off."

Karla Garcia, a mother of two elementary school children, told the WWS how Parent Revolution petitioners approached her. "They came to me telling me they were for McKinley Elementary and that's why I signed the petition. They lied to me. I revoked my signature. I don't think it's right for them to go door by door lying to the parents, saying, 'we come from your school,' getting our signatures, and then it's for something else."

Lee Finnie, a PTA member and parent of three elementary school students, said, "The first issue of inconsistency is when the young lady basically said she was a parent in the community and had kids here. We found out she wasn't a parent in Compton and didn't have any children in McKinley; she actually lives in Boyle Heights and is a paid employee of Parent Revolution. If you look on their web site you see she's what's called a 'lead organizer'."

Regarding Villaraigosa's accusation that people were intimidating Parent Revolution petitioners, Finnie said, "Untrue. As a parent, why would I intimidate somebody? You're allowed to have your opinion. The only issue we have is they are not presenting accurate facts. They were intimidating people, especially the non-English-speaking residents who have kids in this area. That's my only issue, just the lack of integrity with the way they started it. We're not dumb as they think. We've done research and found enough to know that PR isn't the way to go, that Celerity is not the way to go."

Finnie explained that her oldest son, a special needs student, was removed from the Barack Obama charter school. "They did an SST (Social Skills Training) on him and said, 'There's nothing we could do for him.' So we got kicked out of the charter school because they weren't able to handle his behavior

modification and ended up here (McKinley Elementary) because this is where we live. They welcomed us with open arms. With the principal's help they guided us in the right direction concerning our child and his educational future. My child was not the first child kicked out of a charter school for behavior issues or special needs issues and won't be the last kid, so this school takes them in and does a great job with them."

Finnie also commented on the differences between charter and public schools, "They say, by law and they have propaganda printed to where they accept all kids. Even with Celerity if you look at Celerity's web site, they *outsource* or contract out their special needs kids. This means they're bringing them in but they're sending them out the back door. They're still a Celerity kid, but they are paying somebody else to tend to those needs. So if they're the kid at McKinley, where they don't have the infrastructure to take care of him, your kid could be waking up at 6:00 in the morning to catch a bus to go to Culver City, to go to South Los Angeles, to go to Torrance, wherever this contract is. So there's no guarantee that they'll be literally able to take you in locally."

On the broader attacks on public education, Finnie commented, "you have Schwarzenegger, you have Villaraigosa, you have Ben Austin, all these political heavy hitters, targeting public schools but they're the reason why the schools are in trouble. They're the ones who make the decisions about the budget. Schwarzenegger's the one who's taken the money from the schools, but he's the same one who's actually advocating an outside entity to do a coup attempt over a school! What part of democracy is that? How dare he say, 'Good job, parents,' when the parents are complaining because of your lack of funds they've sent to us. Austin's also on the board of education for the state. He's part of the reason we are where we are. Isn't that a conflict of interest? They have the political power and PR departments and money. We're fighting a million-dollar well-oiled machine, with nothing but PTA funds. So it's an uphill battle but we're still going to fight."



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