

Adelanto, California: Parents defeat effort to privatize local school

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Parents in Adelanto, California, recently experienced the consequences of the state's so-called "parent trigger" law, which allows public schools to be changed to charters on the initiative of parents. As events in Adelanto demonstrate, this law is susceptible to systematic abuse by advocates of privatized education.

The Adelanto Elementary School District board of education voted at the beginning of March to deny a petition to transform Desert Trails Elementary school into a charter. Petitioners, backed by an organization calling itself Parent Revolution, claim to have gathered signatures from the parents of 70 percent of Desert Trails students. Opponents of Parent Revolution claim that many of the signatures were gathered under false pretenses.

Upon review, the school board has determined that the petitioners were well short of their 70 percent claim, and even fell short of the simple majority needed to transform the school to a charter. Several parents rescinded their signatures, claiming they had been misled by Parent Revolution about the nature of the petition. Once these names were removed, and others for procedural reasons, Parent Revolution only mustered the support of 48 percent of parents.

The parental trigger option became law in 2010 as part of state Education Code 53300. Under this measure, a majority of parents at a given public school can vote to close the school, compel major staffing cuts or convert the school into a charter.

Parent Revolution, a nominally grassroots organization, lobbied to get the California state legislature to pass the parental trigger law and has been leading the charge to transform "failing" schools throughout the state. In December 2010, McKinley Elementary in Compton became the first school to be

targeted by Parent Revolution (see "Los Angeles area teachers, parents fight charter school takeover"). The organization failed to generate enough parental support to push through the change. This year, they have focused their efforts on Desert Trails.

Far from being a grassroots organization, Parent Revolution receives massive amounts of funding from foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation and the Broad Foundation, named after billionaire Los Angeles developer Eli Broad. The parental trigger option is subject to systematic abuse by these private interests whose primary objective in pushing charters is to hire non-unionized teachers, at a fraction of the cost, who are held accountable for failing test scores.

Lori Yuan, a Desert Trails elementary parent, spoke to the WSWs. She reported that Parent Revolution has used deceitful tactics to push through what she describes as their "master plan." Yuan first noticed petitioners in blue shirts on Desert Trails' campus in June of 2011. Initially, they did not identify themselves as members of Parent Revolution.

Parent Revolution first approached Yuan in September of this academic year at a public meeting to give parents an opportunity to meet the new principal. Yuan refused to sign the petition, telling the petitioner, "We just got a new principal, let's at least give him some time to turn things around." After that meeting, Yuan noticed Parent Revolution ramping up their efforts. Petitioners stood out on the sidewalks in front of the school gathering signatures every day. Yuan described it as a "school jacking," adding, "There was nothing we could do but watch it happen."

According to Yuan, Parent Revolution has set out to deliberately mislead parents into signing the petitions. "They tried to mislead me," says Yuan. "They didn't

tell me it was a petition to turn Desert Trails into a charter school. They just said they wanted to make things better for the school.”

Yuan opposes the idea of transforming Desert Trails into a charter, which she considers more suited for “higher levels of education, such as high schools.” Yuan said parents in the area witnessed Adelanto Charter Academy, a charter school in the area, “go up in flames of corruption.” She says charters are primarily about creating opportunities to profit off education and are susceptible to possible future embezzlement.

Moreover, Yuan rejects charters’ efforts to hold teachers accountable for below-average student test scores. Far from failing the students, Yuan says many teachers at Desert Trails have put in herculean efforts. “Several teachers stay after hours and during their lunch breaks to tutor the kids. I don’t understand this current ‘parents against teachers’ mentality. I don’t know when that came about.”

The battle over the fate of Desert Trails has drawn a significant amount of media attention. Both the openly right-wing press, like the *Wall Street Journal*, and liberal publications like Huffington Post, portray the conflict as a battle between the teachers’ union, the California Teachers Association (CTA), and parent groups funded by those promoting school “reform.”

The CTA has, however, long since adapted itself to charter schools, as long as they maintain a role for the union to collect dues from teachers or participate in the administering of the schools. According to the union, “CTA believes that charters have a role in California’s education system by providing students, parents and teachers with educational opportunities in the public school setting.”

In accepting that charters provide “educational opportunities,” the CTA has embraced the free market ideology driving privatization of education throughout California and the entire country. Charters receive public funding, but are usually owned and operated by companies, known as Education Management Organizations, seeking a profit. Since charters cannot charge tuition, they make profits for their corporate owners by driving down the cost of education. According to the theory, this creates a competitive environment for providing quality education at the least cost to society.

The reality is much different. Because of their private ownership, charters are not obligated to disclose everything about their operating costs. A study by Western Michigan University, however, revealed that charters spend more on administration salaries at the expense of education. Schools owned by the charter organization Green Dot, affiliated with Parent Revolution in California, have consistently scored below the state median on standardized test scores.

Charters are thus a way to allow private companies to profit from education without providing the increase in quality of education that is, at least nominally, their purpose. Most of the decrease in operating costs comes at the expense of teachers. Many charters do not hire unionized teachers, allowing them to pay less in salaries and benefits than public schools that employ organized teachers.

By supporting charters, the CTA and teachers’ unions throughout the country have betrayed their membership to push through the right-wing policy agenda of the Democratic Party. In 2010, Obama’s Race To The Top (RTTP) initiative promised to provide a limited amount of federal funds to school districts throughout the country. Under RTTP, schools were forced to compete for money by complying with the standards of Obama’s national program for education, which largely consisted of standardized testing, holding teachers accountable and expanding opportunities for charter schools.



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