

Pro-charter school organization attempts public school takeovers in Los Angeles

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The organization known as Parent Revolution is attempting to convert the struggling 24th Street Elementary School in Los Angeles into a charter school. The pro-charter organization is pursuing its agenda by utilizing provisions of the state's "Parent Trigger" law, under which drastic changes can be made to the operation of a public school if more than 50 percent of the student body's parents agree to the change. No such legislation exists for charter or other privately-run schools.

The law has been invoked on two previous occasions, the first at McKinley Elementary in the city of Compton and the second at Desert Trails Elementary in the Mojave Desert. In each of these two cases, dozens of parents claimed that their petition signatures—required to constitute a majority—were gathered under false pretenses. This resulted in court and school district challenges to the takeover at both schools, with the charter schools emerging successful in the case of Desert Trails.

The Parent Trigger law itself is a creation of the Green Dot charter school company and the state's Democratic Party. It is a tool by which foes of public education, backed by ultra-wealthy "venture philanthropists," exploit the fears and dissatisfaction of parents in order to dismantle public education. Schools that achieve a score of 800 or less (out of 1,000) on the state's Academic Performance Index are eligible for the Parent Trigger.

Once the schools are handed over to private charter operators, parents, including those future parents who had no say in the school's conversion, are unable to make similar reforms to the newly chartered school.

Significant are the recent remarks of former Democratic State Senator Gloria Romero, who introduced the Parent Trigger legislation in on the

senate floor in 2009. "I never intended for parents to run the school," she said. "The law is precise, the law is concise; it's about action."

The undemocratic character of the parent trigger law has become quite obvious to many parents across the state. At McKinley Elementary, parents were told that the petition they were signing would be used simply to make positive changes of an unspecified character at the school. Parents later challenged the charter school conversions, reversing the decision in the case of McKinley. The outcome of that attempt to charterize the school explains the speed with which the 24th Street Elementary takeover is proceeding.

The court ruling in the case of Desert Trails Elementary, which opponents of the charterization eventually lost, revealed the complete collusion between the state, the courts and the charter organizations. Parent Revolution initially gathered signatures representing some 70 percent of the student body's parents. Then support for the parent trigger action dropped below the required 50 percent when 90 parents said they had been misled about the purpose of the petition and demanded that their signatures be rescinded.

The parents' challenge to the charter school conversion was rejected on the grounds that, under the provisions of the parent trigger law, parents are not allowed to rescind their signatures even if they were led to sign under false pretenses. San Bernardino County Superior Court Judge Steve Malone ruled that the Adelanto School Board improperly allowed parents to rescind their signatures when the law itself does not allow it.

In essence, the state has made clear that charter school conversions will take place whether the public likes it or not.

The *San Bernardino Sentinel* recently reported that whereas 466 parents at Desert Trails signed the petition to move forward with the parent trigger process in late 2011 and early 2012, at a “parent union” meeting held in October 2012 to determine which charter organization would take over the school, only 53 parents voted.

In spite of these developments, the announcement of the 24th Street Elementary charter school conversion met with nearly universal approval on the part of the district and teachers union at the Los Angeles Unified School District. After the district accepted Parent Revolution’s petitions, the group released the following statement: “We hope Superintendent Deasy and the LAUSD School Board will now move quickly and collaborate with us on transforming our school. We were very encouraged by Superintendent Deasy’s supportive words to us yesterday when he received our petitions, and we were glad that UTLA President Warren Fletcher has also indicated an interest in finding a collaborative solution.”

Less than two weeks after the district received the petitions, Parent Revolution received Letters of Intent from eight charter organizations.

The Parent Revolution group’s statement emphasized the need for the district to “move quickly” with the proposed charter takeover to take place in the 2013-2014 academic year, that is, less than 8 months from today. The timing of the initiative is also significant as it takes place two months after the announcement that 24th Street Elementary was selected for the fourth round of the districts Public School Choice initiative.

Under the terms of the Public School Choice Initiative, schools deemed under-performing by the district are opened up to applications by outside operators, the majority of which have been taken over by the United Teachers of Los Angeles under its so-called Pilot School program, which gives the union authority to hire and fire its own membership.

Late last year, however, the district excluded several private charter operators from the Public School Choice process, making them resort to the parent trigger law to take over those schools.

Many private charter organizations enjoy intimate ties with the California Democratic Party. For example, Ben Austin, the head of both Parent Revolution and

the Green Dot schools—one of the largest charter operators in the state—was until recently the state’s Secretary of Education. Prior to holding this position, Austin was coordinator for the Democratic National Convention and deputy mayor of Los Angeles.

The current mayor of Los Angeles, Democrat Antonio Villaraigosa, operates his own organization of charter schools. As far as the parent trigger is concerned, the mayor has given the initiative his full support. “Since day one, I have supported the Parent Trigger as a grassroots effort that brings communities together in support of strong schools,” Villaraigosa said. “This law empowers parents and gives them a voice and a vote to demand better.”

With such forces arrayed against parents and teachers, the defense of public education requires a complete break with these individuals and institutions and the profit system which they defend. The defense of public education and meaningful culture for youth is an urgent political task.



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