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Parents Rebel Against School

Petition Drive Under California Law Could Lead to Mass Firings or Charter Shift

By [STEPHANIE BANCHERO](#)

Fed-up parents of students attending a low-performing school in Southern California aim to use the power given to them by the state to take an unusual step: fire the school.

This power, called a Parent Trigger, was passed into law in California in 2010, but parents are attempting for only the second time to use it at Desert Trails Elementary outside Los Angeles. Their effort to force Adelanto Elementary School District to overhaul the school, or turn it into a charter school run by the parents themselves, is expected to be closely watched across the nation.

Parents Try to Enact Trigger Law



David McNew for The Wall Street Journal

Parent Revolution organizers Alfonso Flores and Maria Alvarado, top left and center, gather petition signatures from parents Thursday at a park next to Desert Trails Elementary school in Adelanto, Calif.

[More photos and interactive graphics](#)

Similar legislation passed in Texas and Mississippi last year and is under consideration in Florida, Pennsylvania and Indiana this year.

The parents group has gathered the signatures of 70% of the parents at the school and plans to deliver a petition to school district officials on Thursday. Under the law, parents can force a district to close a school, convert it to a charter or replace the principal and the teachers if at least 50% of them sign a petition. Last year, parents in Compton tried to trigger such a change, but their petition has been tied up in a lengthy court battle with the school district.

"We've been complaining for years that our school needs some help and nobody was listening, so we are taking it into our own hands," said Doreen Diaz, who has a fifth-grade daughter at the Desert Trails school and spearheaded the petition drive.

Officials of the school district say some overhauls sought by parents would be costly and difficult to implement.

Parent Trigger laws like the one in California are at the vanguard of the fight over fixing the nation's lowest-achieving schools and the power struggle over who will make those fixes. The nation's teachers unions have generally opposed the trigger laws, arguing that they focus on closing schools or firing staff, instead of bringing more resources to troubled campuses.

The unions note that, in California at least, the effort has been coordinated by Parent Revolution, a nonprofit funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, which support big school

overhauls and have been critical of teachers unions. Parent Revolution helped organize parents in Compton and at Desert Trails.

'Parent Trigger' Law Passed in 2010

If at least 50% of parents at a chronically low-performing school sign a petition, they can force a school district to make one of four overhauls:

Turnaround: replace the principal and at least half of the teachers.

Restart: convert to a charter school, a public school run by an outside group.

Transformation: replace the principal and adopt a policy to evaluate teachers using student test scores.

Alternative Governance: restructure the school governance so that fundamental overhauls can be made, such as hiring a new teaching staff.

"Our concern with the Parent Trigger law is it assumes that the problem at these schools is the teaching staff or the leadership," said Frank Wells, spokesman for the California Teachers Association. "Then it suggests changes that might not be the panacea for what is keeping a school down, such as extreme poverty or student transiency."

Parent Revolution sees the law—and the parent organizations they help form—as a counterweight to the unions and the school districts. "Right now, we have a duopoly that hasn't served kids," said Gabe Rose, deputy director of the nonprofit. "Parents are the third leg to the stool."

Desert Trails, which sits in an arid stretch of land about 90 miles northeast of Los Angeles, is a mainly Latino, low-income school that has burned through three principals in five years.

Last year, two-thirds of students failed the state language arts exam, 56% failed math and 80% failed science.

Parents said they complained to administrators for years about bullying; poor classroom instruction; a lack of arts, music or science courses; and uncommunicative teachers. Frustrated by inaction, they reached out to Parent Revolution last summer.

A core of about a dozen parents, mostly moms, spent the summer staging meetings in their homes and in nearby parks to craft a list of demands. They asked for more control over which teachers get hired and fired, smaller class sizes, the power to control the school budget and after-school programs. They presented the list to district officials in October, who declined to adopt them.

"They told us that if they agreed to all our demands, they'd be hurting the other schools," said Cynthia Ramirez, who has a second-grade daughter at the school and joined the parents' group. "We don't want to be selfish, but we have a kids-first agenda and that's what they should be focused on."

Ross Swearingen, assistant superintendent at Adelanto Elementary School District, said officials wanted to work with parents to make changes, and planned to meet with them Friday. "We understand that parents are a key component of a successful school and, whatever transpired before to make them feel disenfranchised, we hope to overcome that," he said. But he also noted that some of the demands—such as evaluating teachers based on student test scores—could be difficult if not impossible to adopt.

The district has 45 days to come up with a plan to fix the school that satisfies parents, close the school or convert it into a charter school.

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