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MISSING THE TARGET? THE PARENT TRIGGER AS A STRATEGY FOR PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT AND SCHOOL REFORM

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Executive Summary

The “parent trigger” has been promoted as a mechanism to increase parents’ empowerment over their local schools and over their children’s education. Trigger laws authorize parent referenda to decide whether to, for instance, turn over individual public

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schools to private operators or convert them to charter schools. Most of the discussion of this approach, however, has failed to consider relevant research evidence. While the newness of the approach prevents studies of parent trigger policies themselves, there is a broad research base on the constituent parts of parent trigger—charter schools and governance changes. That research indicates that “pulling the trigger” is not likely to yield any benefits. This is because opportunities to learn and authentic community involvement are not addressed or created by the approach. The parent trigger movement does not arise out of the effective-schools research; instead, it has been advanced by advocacy organizations and fueled by wealthy funders. While superficially appealing to democratic processes by “letting parents decide,” the emphasis of parent trigger advocates is on mounting a campaign to authorize the transfer of authority over schools from public to private governance. Accordingly, because it outsources school governance to Educational Management Organizations who have no obligation to (and often no physical presence in) the community, the parent trigger ultimately thwarts continued, sustained community and parental involvement.

Introduction

The parent trigger is a relatively new policy device, designed to sanction low-performing public schools and empower parents to force major changes to their neighborhood schools. Dramatically and disruptively, a majority of parents can trigger transformation of low-performing schools simply by signing petitions or voting. The transformative options vary by state, but always include conversion to charter school status. Triggers may also lead to school closure or removing the administration and school leaders, or the adoption and expansion of online schooling. In a nutshell, the idea is that parents should be allowed to upend their current school in hopes that what arises in its place is an improvement.

Portrayed in a new Hollywood film called *Won't Back Down*, and spearheaded by advocacy groups like Parent Revolution and the Heartland Institute, parent trigger laws are proliferating rapidly, having recently been passed or considered in nearly half the states. As of August 2012, seven states have enacted some version of trigger laws.

Advocates argue that parent trigger laws represent a powerful tool for school reform. The laws offer frustrated parents a way to take action when faced with what they consider to be unresponsive or ineffective schools. Upon securing majority support, dissatisfied parents wield substantial power to transform their children's school. Just the threat of reorganization, advocates claim, may spur some schools to improve.

Won't Back Down offers a fictional account of parents enabled through parent trigger legislation to take control of their children's school. It is a dramatization of a version of the parent trigger law in action, although specifics are changed in order to fit the filmmakers' story-telling needs (e.g., they add the requirement of a majority vote of the school's teachers — something that doesn't exist in current parent trigger laws). In the film,

determined parents battle the teachers union for control of an underperforming Pennsylvania school.

Even before its release, *Won't Back Down* generated considerable controversy, in part because of the agenda and past efforts of its backers. The production company, Walden Media, is owned by conservative activist Philip Anschutz and is the same production company that brought us *Waiting for Superman*, a provocative documentary celebrating charter schools as a solution to the problems of public schools. That film, like *Won't Back Down*, has a strong anti-union theme.

Evidence on Parent Trigger

Walden Media's choice of a fictionalization, rather than a documentary like *Waiting for Superman*, was likely due in part to the fact that there is no track record on parent trigger to document. The idea is recent, has not yet been fully enacted, and is thus untested and unproven. It is also, as discussed below and notwithstanding the "voting" by parents, somewhat undemocratic. Nevertheless, it is proving to be very popular with both Republican and Democratic lawmakers.

Indeed, although the idea of allowing parents to take over a failing school has great appeal, there is virtually no empirical basis for parent trigger itself, despite some advocates' claims.¹ There is, however, evidence—a research base—concerning the reform strategies, such as charter schooling, parent choices, and school governance, on which parent trigger is grounded. That empirical record is discussed briefly below.

Charter schools are publicly funded but independently operated schools, often run by large management organizations.² Trigger laws are crafted so that schools taken over by parents will not then be administered directly by those parents; rather, they will typically be converted to charter schools and run by these private management organizations.³ Indeed, these freshly empowered parents may find that they have fewer opportunities for input and participation in newly formed charter schools than in their conventional neighborhood public school.

Charter schools have generally been shown to have rather mediocre academic results—no better and often somewhat worse than the public schools in the same communities or with the same demographics, or both, according to large-scale, empirical analyses.⁴ Although there are some clear examples of charter school success,⁵ this merely reflects the broad distribution of schools that we also see with private schools and conventional public schools: there are low-achieving ones and there are high-achieving ones. In perhaps the most comprehensive and respected study, researchers at Stanford found that only about 17% of charter schools were achieving results that were significantly better than demographically comparable public schools; more than a third were significantly *underperforming* compared with matched public schools, and the rest were essentially similar in their outcomes.⁶ Thus, it is not at all clear that conversion to charter status will give trigger advocates or parents the academic results they desire.

Moreover, parents, teachers, and community members in many states, including California, already have the ability to apply to their school board or other chartering agency for charter school status should they wish to convert an existing school into a charter or start a new school. Indeed, what parent trigger laws distinctively offer is the ability for parents and organizers to bypass these existing governance mechanisms.

The Heartland Institute (which runs “theparenttrigger.com”) and other advocates of the parent trigger contend that parents are best positioned to advocate for their children’s education.⁷ Indeed, the idea of ***parent choice*** of schools is championed in *Won’t Back Down* as a key way to reform education. In this view, parents will make informed choices about different school options and thereby signal what sort of educational services should be provided within the market of educational services. Such contentions, however, are not necessarily supported by the research base, which raises serious concerns about this way of trying to improve schools. In particular, research has consistently shown that parents are often not provided with the information necessary to most effectively choose among various educational options, and parents with less wealth and less formal education are the least likely to have this information.⁸

Inasmuch as educational treatments and interventions depend on specialized knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy, lawmakers would be just as unfounded in expecting parents to be successful as sole decision-makers on behalf of their children’s schooling as they would be in other areas that require specialized knowledge, such as medical treatments. Indeed, while reformers assume that parents first and foremost seek academic quality in their children’s schooling, research has repeatedly shown that parents also pursue other, non-academic objectives, including proximity, extracurricular opportunities, racial or class makeup, and social comfort—factors that may undermine the push for academic quality.⁹ Ironically, while these reformers champion parental authority over education, they also tend to dismiss parent evaluations of education when those evaluations contradict their advocacy agenda. For instance, surveys consistently find that the majority of parents give high grades to their local public schools,¹⁰ but charter advocates have argued that parents are “misinformed” and don’t have accurate information.¹¹ While to some extent, this may be true, lawmakers and others should be concerned about this cafeteria approach to placing trust in parents’ unfettered judgment.

Parent trigger laws treat changes in ***governance***—“putting parents in charge”—as the key issue in improving schools. Yet we know from research that the type of governance scheme has relatively little to do with school success (or failure).¹² Instead, what matters for student success are opportunities to learn. These opportunities arise from such resources as access to highly trained and caring teachers in well-equipped, challenging and engaging classrooms of reasonable size. There is no reason to believe that these opportunities to learn will improve, and there is no mechanism for accomplishing such improvement, when parents use trigger mechanisms to change the governance of their children’s school. The core conditions for teaching and learning may indeed change following the trigger, but the change in these opportunities to learn is not direct, and there is no evidence-based reason to believe that any such change will be in a positive direction.

A case in point is Desert Trails Elementary School, the only example in the nation where parents “successfully” enacted the parent trigger. Located in California’s Mojave Desert, the school has experienced declining state funding while the community has had to cope with growing social needs during the recession. Desert Trails spends \$6,500 per student—several thousand less than the national average—and packs more than 30 students into elementary classrooms. Economic and demographic considerations have consistently been shown to be a very strong predictor of a school’s measured academic outcomes.¹³ These conditions are certainly devastating to the community, but they were apparently not caused by the school’s leadership team or governance structure, so there is no logical reason to think that changing these things will somehow address the engrained resource problems.

The parent trigger approach also challenges the democratic underpinnings of public education, temporarily empowering the majority of parents currently using a school but disenfranchising the broader community, including the taxpayers funding the school and parents whose children would subsequently attend the school. This is a startlingly unique and odd approach to improving a public institution.¹⁴ It would be like turning over control of a public transit system exclusively to a majority vote of the people who happened to be riding the bus on a given day; or handing control of the library to 51% of the people who have currently checked out books; or asking parents of college students (or perhaps those students themselves) to vote to assume governance control of a university. There is some logic to such moves, but it’s not a particularly compelling logic.

Political and Financial Supporters of Parent Trigger Laws

The policy debates about parent trigger laws have largely been framed in terms of parental empowerment. In contrast, little consideration has been given to the financial and political advocacy of think tanks and foundations that have shaped the policy options available to parents.¹⁵ Consider again the presentation in *Won’t Back Down*. The film’s premise is that parent trigger laws permit parents and teachers in under-performing schools to come together to lead radical changes in governance, thereby providing parents with control and power over unresponsive bureaucracies. As noted earlier, one obvious distinction between this storyline and the reality of parent trigger laws is that teachers’ voices are not included in the real-world version. But the parent empowerment storyline is also problematic. Contrary to this depiction, the financial underpinnings and political advocacy in support of parent trigger laws do not come *primarily* from local parents, civil rights groups, or grassroots community organizations. This undoubtedly helps to explain why the transformation options in these laws favor charter schools run by external Education Management Organizations rather than schools responsive to ongoing input from local communities.

Consider the advocacy group Parent Revolution, which successfully advanced the first parent trigger law in California. Parent Revolution has received over \$1 million dollars in support from the Broad Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and the Walton Foundation,

among other donors. Its leader, Ben Austin, worked as a consultant for the Green Dot Charter Management Organization, which has, in turn, received substantial support from these same funders.¹⁶ Mr. Austin has, it should be noted, stated his apolitical intentions, asserting that his group's work is based on community organizing to improve schools. Yet as explained below, the parent trigger approach differs fundamentally from grassroots organizing.

Moreover, we think it difficult to ignore the powerful role played by people and groups far outside the affected communities. In addition to the advocacy funders, major political players actively push parent triggers. This includes the corporate-supported American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which has drafted model legislation for lawmakers and advocacy groups seeking to enact vouchers and parent trigger laws. Further, as noted above, organizations like the big-oil-funded, climate-change-denying Heartland Institute have joined in the promotion of parent trigger laws.¹⁷ The political support also includes leadership of major cities, with a unanimous vote endorsing the legislation taking place at the June 2012 meeting of the Orlando meeting of the U.S. Council of Mayors—many of whom are prominent Democrats.¹⁸

Further support for parent trigger laws comes from recently formed educational reform organizations, many of the funders of which are the same as those noted above. The organizations' goals include expanding school choice, diminishing the size and influence of teachers unions, and expanding the disproven approach of using students' test scores to drive financial incentives and job security for teachers. These groups include Democrats for Educational Reform (DfER), Stand for Children, and StudentsFirst, headed by Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of the Washington, D.C., schools. A hallmark of the media strategies employed by parent trigger advocates is to evocatively display the stories and struggles of poor parents, parents of disabled students, or parents of color. These stories are real, and the schools serving their communities are often inadequate—sometimes shockingly so. But the strategy is not to contend that the needs should be directly addressed. Rather, it is to market these stories to policymakers and suggest the (cost-free) parent trigger remedy. For example, DfER, Parent Revolution, and StudentsFirst will co-host screenings of *Won't Back Down* at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions.¹⁹

There is another disconnect between the parent trigger advocacy and the attempt to frame this approach as grassroots reform: the staff, boards of directors, and funders of the advocacy groups, foundations, and think tanks advancing parent trigger laws and similar market-based school reforms do not generally come from the communities on whose behalf they claim to speak or represent the views of those communities. While Parent Revolution has employed a diverse set of organizers and parents, its mission prevents the inclusion of parents opposed to the use of parent trigger.²⁰ In efforts to enact parent trigger takeovers of schools, the primary source of engagement with local communities is through paying local parents to organize other parents to take over the schools. Moreover, the strategies used by Parent Revolution and other supporters to persuade parents to vote for school takeovers have been controversial, with opponents of the group claiming that

parents received misinformation about the nature of what they were signing as well as the implications of taking over schools.²¹

This past year, parent trigger advocates made a strong push for the law to be adopted in Florida, but a coalition of groups successfully opposed the effort. That coalition included national and local teachers unions as well as national community and parental advocacy groups such as Save Our Schools, Parents Across America, and—notably—the state’s Parent Teacher Associations, the most common voice of involved parents. Of concern to these groups has been the loss of the public nature of public schools. They have been concerned about the extent to which parent trigger laws facilitate the further privatization of public education by giving control of schools to for-profit, online learning companies, as well as to charter school management organizations

Interestingly, a vibrant grassroots advocacy network has long been in place in many of the school districts where parent trigger devices are being tested. As a rule, their voices have not been welcomed into the parent trigger discussion. Not only do these organizing groups lack access to the funding support and to politicians enjoyed by Parent Revolution and its supporters, these groups are also rarely mentioned in “reformer” educational circles.²² Parent trigger laws, therefore, represent a broader effort to redefine parental engagement in marketized ways, with parents portrayed as consumers choosing among a variety of private sector school providers. In addition, under the parent trigger framework, parent involvement is narrowed to expressing preferences through petition and voting, rather than by participating in changing the ways schools operate through deliberation and broader expressions about their children’s schools. As discussed below, it is this latter form of community-based parental engagement that holds promise for democratic and equitable schooling.

Parental Empowerment That Works

Parent trigger legislation appears to build on a growing consensus about the value of parental engagement in promoting school improvement.²³ But do parent trigger laws actually expand parents’ meaningful engagement in school reform? Or do these laws simply give parents a narrow, one-time choice between the status quo and an alternative crafted by a well-funded political organization that has little to do with school improvement or empowering communities? The answer may lie in recognizing key differences between mobilizing and organizing. *Mobilize* means “to assemble and make ready for war duty; to marshal (as resource) for action.” *Organize* means “to cause to develop an organic structure; to form into a coherent unity or functioning whole; to arrange by systematic planning and united effort.”²⁴

Advocacy organizations such as Parent Revolution have used the trigger law to mobilize parents to vote (or petition) for one of a handful of reform efforts—firing staff, replacing the principal, closing the school or converting to a charter. Yet, once such a change is made, there is no mechanism to organize parents for sustained, long-term action to

improve their local schools and communities. Further, mobilizing alone can heighten frustration and create friction without making schools better or more equitable. In addition, the proposed closure of schools and conversion of such schools to charter school status or to be run by private managers are highly disruptive proposals that stand to further destabilize community connections with local schools.²⁵ No magical results can be expected from reorganizing a school unless the new organization provides greater opportunities to learn or builds a greater sense of inclusion and social trust among different members of the community—including administrators, teachers, parents, and students.²⁶

Grassroots organizing groups offer a powerful alternative for improving schools and enhancing civic capacity. Grounded in local communities, members *and* leaders of these groups collectively identify shared problems and work collaboratively to address them. Organizing, in this sense, is an ongoing process that develops the capacity of its own members and uses the power of their experiences and numbers to effect change. Community organizing efforts in several cities have brought about improvement in learning conditions.²⁷ Further, a national study recently found that when community organizing groups work on education reform, they build the social trust necessary for school improvement.²⁸

Conclusion

The parent trigger approach and the story told in *Won't Back Down* contain an essential truth: parents should indeed be able to act to improve their children's schools. The phrase "trapped in a failing school" should hit each of us in the gut and make us want to take action. But wise, effective action must have at least three elements that are missing from parent trigger: (1) it must genuinely arise from deliberation and organization within the affected community, not through external advocacy groups using these communities to advance their own agendas; (2) it must be evidence-based in the sense that the intervention is likely to yield benefits, as contrasted with appealing yet ineffective and "no cost" alternatives; and (3) it must be built on the core reality that students learn when they have opportunities to learn: governance changes might play a minor role, but they can't sensibly be at the center.

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