



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Dec. 6-10, 2010

Enragement to Engagement: Towards Sustained Parent Power

By UCLA IDEA

This week, hundreds of parents whose children attend McKinley Elementary School in Compton petitioned the Compton Unified School District to convert their neighborhood school into a charter. This petition represents the first use of California's new "Parent Trigger" law through which a majority of parents can force a district to dramatically change a "persistently" low-achieving school—by converting it to a charter, firing its principal, replacing its staff, or closing the school outright.

The Compton action was supported by the nonprofit Parent Revolution, an organization originally created by the Charter Management Organization, Green Dot Public Schools. Over the last several months, staff from the Parent Revolution has supported the campaign for change at McKinley Elementary. Together, Parent Revolution staff and McKinley parent leaders gathered signatures from more than 60 percent of the school's nearly 500 parents. Critics have said that some parents signed the petition without full knowledge of the consequences or the ability to weigh all available options.

The Compton parents and the "Parent Trigger" law have served a valuable purpose in focusing public attention on the meaning of "empowered parents" within education reform. But many questions remain. For example, will these parental actions accomplish something more than a singular and maybe temporary change in the structure of their local school? Will all of McKinley's students—including English Language learners and special education students—be fully welcomed in the new charter school? Will the hundreds of parents who signed the petition be provided with an ongoing role in shaping the work of the new school? Will they be able to galvanize their community into securing the additional public resources that are needed to realize quality education in their neighborhood schools?

Over the past decades, we've heard much about parents' and the public's *voice*. Reformers have spoken of *participation*, *involvement*, and *choice* to evoke the power of democratic action to achieve just, equitable, and excellent schools. And yet, in spite of countless community and parent efforts to reform some of the country's lowest performing schools, these schools remain, on average, stuck at the bottom and concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods.

A recently released book co-edited by IDEA Director John Rogers and Brown University Political Science Professor Marion Orr addresses this dilemma. In "Public Engagement for Public Education: Joining Forces to Revitalize Democracy and Equalize Schools," chapter authors identify *public engagement* as a necessary condition for accomplishing meaningful and sustainable school change:

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Public engagement cannot be reduced to individual acts such as voting, speaking with a teacher, or choosing a school. Public engagement emerges as parents, community members, and others identify common educational problems and work together to address them. Public engagement both builds on and seeks to foster interdependence. (Preface xiii)

Without these ties of interdependence, local reforms such as Compton's may be isolated and may not outlive the enthusiasm and relationships of those who currently drive the reform. The book provides examples that argue for three practices of effective engagement: "First, community members join together in response to shared problems. Second, they investigate these problems and learn about possible responses. Third, they act in concert with others to address the problems and build more inclusive, participatory, and powerful publics."

A "powerful public" builds civic capacity, bringing new resources to schools, students, and the community as a whole. Public engagement includes but is broader than simply mobilizing parents to protest or "trigger" a change. Public engagement describes a democratic and interdependent environment in which activists' daily and yearly victories grow, influence, and merge with community-wide goals and interests. That is the test for parent mobilization in Compton and communities across California.

*For more information on "Public Engagement for Public Education: Joining Forces to Revitalize Democracy and Equalize Schools," visit Stanford University Press's website at www.sup.org/book.cgi?id=17518.

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