



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of July 23-27, 2012

## Parents Took Over. Now, Show Them the Money.

by UCLA IDEA

Families in the San Bernardino County city of Adelanto are experiencing economic stress that is not so different from that of many communities in California and across the country. The High Desert community of 31,000 has 13 percent unemployment and most students in its public schools come from low-income families.

But unlike similar towns, Adelanto parents have been in the national news. A Superior Court judge ruled earlier this week that Desert Trails Elementary School could become the first school in the nation to enact a "parent trigger" to change the organization, structure and public accountability of an existing school. The parents' changes, which could include seeking a charter for the 2013-14 school year, will be unveiled today.

Early this year some Adelanto parents circulated a trigger petition, but in February, the Adelanto Elementary School District board rejected it because of failure to meet the 50-percent threshold. More than 100 parents had rescinded their signatures claiming they were misled by the petitions and petitioners. In his ruling, Judge Steve Malone said those rescissions were improper and he qualified the petition.

Some parents rejoiced at the news: "My daughter is going to have a shot at something good. She's not going to be failing; she's going to be able to apply for college," Cynthia Ramirez said.

Others worried that school improvement plans already in place would be wasted: "The trigger in this case was pulled in haste because they didn't allow anything to get started. All our ducks were in a row. But if you shoot them all, nothing will flourish," Lori Yuan said.

What played out in the Mojave Desert is part of a larger movement—not so much initiated by local groups of organized parents but spearheaded by large foundations with highly refined strategies for replacing existing public schools. Pouring millions of dollars into their efforts, some of these foundations seek to privatize elements (and in some cases, the entirety) of the public education system.

The Los Angeles-based, Parent Revolution, was deeply behind Adelanto's petition to convert the school to a charter. The organization's leadership and donors have many critics among reformers who are working for long-term school improvement. These analysts worry that the main factors that led to Adelanto's school problems cannot possibly be addressed simply by changing the governance structure or organization the school.

So, what will be the chances of Ramirez's daughter and a substantial number of other children having a much better shot at "something good" and at going college? The root of Adelanto's poor test scores

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and low statewide rankings lies with the district's severe underfunding. And if, by chance, years from now the students at Desert Trails Elementary are doing as well as their advantaged peers across the state, imagine how superior they might do if their school had a fair shot at school funding.

During the 2010-11 school year, Adelanto Elementary School District received 79 cents on the dollar compared to the statewide average. Compared to the national average, Adelanto schools receive \$4,000 less per student. If foundation donors wanted to make a real difference in Adelanto, they would need to come up with \$2.8 million each year to bring Desert Trails up to the national average. They could also become outspoken leaders and sponsors of a statewide movement to bring fair and adequate funding to all public schools.

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