



THEMES in the NEWS

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Trick or Trigger

By UCLA IDEA

Can parents, desperate because every day they must send children to a low-performing school, actually take matters into their own hands? Do something. Change the system. Parents want better schools *now*—not years from now. Sometimes steady parent organizing has built relationships and a powerbase that moves change along, but school improvement often happens slowly, if at all.

Some saw a glimmer of hope last year when California became the first state to pass a law that seemed to put power in parents' hands. With a majority vote, parents now can institute radical change at a low-performing school, including firing teachers and staff and converting the school to a charter. That's the appeal of the parent trigger: circulate the petition; get the signatures; change the school. Many other states are looking at or have passed legislation similar to California's "Trigger Law."

It is no wonder that such an idea, fraught with drama, citizens' overthrow of the establishment and parental devotion would pique Hollywood's interest. In September, 20th Century Fox will release *Won't Back Down*, starring Oscar-nominated Viola Davis and Maggie Gyllenhaal as a teacher and parent, trying to improve a school. The film is produced by Walden Media, the same company behind last year's *Waiting for Superman*.

And yet, as engaging as the movie might be, parent trigger has some serious shortcomings. Like some other reforms of late, it attributes school problems to individuals' shortcomings—particularly school personnel who are presented as incompetent, corrupt or just slackers. Fix those people, the argument goes, or get rid of them, and you've solved your education problem.

Like so much current reform thinking, parent trigger does not adequately address the systemic problems of inequality and lack of resources in public schools in poor neighborhoods. Almost by definition, systemic problems are extremely difficult for a single school or district to solve—problems such as a lack of highly qualified teachers, crowded classes, no supervised activity for children when they are not in school, and so forth.

The parent trigger has been invoked twice and has failed both times, including this week in the High Desert town of Adelanto. At Desert Trails Elementary in Adelanto, the parent's petition was rejected after the school district found insufficient signatures. Almost 100 signatures were thrown out because parents said they had been misled or were unsure of what they were signing. Parents said the confusion stemmed from a tactic that saw two petitions circulate, one calling for a charter and the other in support of general school reforms.

Adelanto is severely underfunded, receiving \$1,000 less than the average for California elementary schools (and thousands less than the U.S. average). Replacing faculties or leadership or governance structures could yet produce an occasional improvement in some locales. But circulating petitions school-by-school is hardly an education revolution. That only happens in the movies.