



Week of Sept. 12-16, 2011

Mobilizing and Organizing for Better Schools

By UCLA IDEA

In this era of competing school reforms, all sides want public support. Typically, reformers insist that parents have an important role in making their reform a success. And yet, not all parent engagement looks the same, and neither does it serve the same purpose.

For example, Parent Revolution, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit advocacy organization, was instrumental in lobbying for the nation's first Parent Trigger law—a legal mechanism that allows parents to petition for a drastic change in their school.

Last year, Parent Revolution led an effort to transform a Compton elementary school into a charter school. This week the group led a two-day, nine-city bus tour from San Diego to Sacramento that showcased different communities considering using the parent trigger law. But do Parent Revolution and California's Parent Trigger law actually expand parents' meaningful engagement in school reform? Or does the trigger law simply give parents a 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*.

A cursory look at dictionary definitions distinguishes 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."

Parent Revolution, using the trigger law as leverage, mobilizes parents, school-by-school, to vote for one of four reform efforts—firing staff, replacing the principal, closing the school or converting to a charter. Once such a change is made, there is no mechanism for parents to be *organized* for sustained, long-term action to improve their local schools and communities. 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.

The Compton experience and others across the country reflect parents' real frustrations with their schools. However, the four trigger choices don't address much of what upsets parents most—lack of attention from teachers, canceled programs, old textbooks and learning materials, and poor, rundown facilities. In short, the trigger solution seeks changes in governance and organizational structure without addressing key problems ailing struggling schools.

There are times when it is important to mobilize parents for a just cause. But mobilizing alone can heighten frustration and create friction without making schools better or more equitable. Research shows that there is nothing magical about reorganizing a school unless the new organization builds a

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greater sense of inclusion and social trust among different members of the community—including administrators, teachers, parents and students (Bryk and Schneider). A national study recently found that when community organizing groups work on education reform, they build the social trust necessary for school improvement (Mediratta, Shah and McAlister).

Washington Post education columnist Jay Mathews recently challenged his readers to send him examples of successful parent “coups” or “rebellions.” But rebellions (political, educational, or both) don’t necessarily result in increased educational or civic improvement or self-determination. They may only serve the narrow interests of one group or another. It would be better for Mathews to ask for examples of schools in which parents have organized to build their own and the entire school community’s capacity for sustaining high-quality schools. Examples of such organizing abound and we encourage people to send their nominations.

Share your ideas with Jay Mathews at mathewsj@washpost.com and us at idea@ucla.edu.

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