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LAUSD schools accountable to new law

By [Rachel Heller](#)

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Los Angeles public schools could be poised for revolution due to a controversial state law gaining momentum locally.

The landmark “Parent Trigger” law, passed by the California government in January 2010, grants parents at failing schools the power to force their district to make sweeping changes in a bid to improve school performance. Petitions are now under way at several Southland schools, but the law remains little known among many Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) families who could benefit from it most, according to Los Angeles education reform advocate Larry Sand.

To that end, a panel of education experts held a public discussion at the Skirball Cultural Center on March 21 to parse the merits of the law, which the Wall Street Journal recently dubbed “the radical school reform you’ve never heard of.” Moderated by Sand, president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, the talk provoked spirited conversation between parents, teachers and school reformers — all of whom agreed the current system is broken beyond repair.

“Our public schools are failing because they weren’t designed to succeed,” said Ben Austin, executive director of Parent Revolution, the L.A. advocacy group that lobbied for the law’s passage. “They were designed to serve the interests of adults, not kids. The goal of Parent Trigger is to make the conversation about kids.”

Under the law, families can “trigger” one of four overhaul models at failing schools if 51 percent of parents sign a petition. They can choose to hand over the school to a charter company, force the district to replace the principal, fire half the staff and restructure the administration, or even close the school.

Essentially, Parent Trigger gives parents the option to unionize and bargain collectively for the fate of their school.

Qualifying schools are those identified as third-year “program improvement” schools, meaning they have been failing by state standards for five consecutive years. Currently, about 1,500 of California’s 9,000 public schools are eligible.

Compton's McKinley Elementary School was the first to make headlines in December, when 62 percent of parents signed a petition to convert the school to a charter school. McKinley parents took the Compton Unified School District to L.A. Superior Court in February when the school board rejected the petition, claiming it didn't meet state requirements. A judge ruled March 21 that Compton Unified violated parents' First Amendment rights by imposing excessive demands on the parents to verify their signatures.

The California Board of Education is slated to meet April 21 to hammer out clearer rules for districts to implement Parent Trigger petitions.

Opponents of the law, including teachers unions, have said Parent Trigger is unnecessary because elected school board members should be able to handle parents' education concerns. Union officials have also said charter school companies stand to benefit unfairly from the law.

But parents at Lydia Grant's Mount Gleason Middle School in Sunland-Tujunga didn't want a charter school — they just wanted LAUSD to make good on neglected promises to shore up the school's safety and discipline policy. Now Grant, a mother of three, is organizing fed-up parents to petition for a transformation at the failing school.

“We don't want the sun, the moon and the stars — we just want a safe school for our children,” Grant said.

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