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Power to the Parents
by Jordan Cash

When people think of educational choice, they often think of charter schools, voucher programs, homeschooling, and other policies based on the idea of giving parents more options in education. But a new idea in school choice is emerging across the country, and it presents an opportunity for Nebraska to take a step forward in this regard-the "parent trigger."

Five states currently have parent trigger laws-California, Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Connecticut-and the measure has been introduced in over 20 additional states.[1] While parent trigger laws vary by state, the basic concept is when a school is failing consistently the parents have the option to sign a petition forcing the school to be reorganized.[2] How the reorganization takes place also varies by state, but it nearly always results in replacing the administration and staff of the failing school. The school is then either given new administration by the local district or may be converted into a charter school. Connecticut has a slight variation that forms parent councils to help administer the school, while Texas allows for parents to either transform the school or move the students en masse to another, better performing school.[3]

Parent trigger empowers parents by giving them the opportunity to hold teachers and administrators accountable for outcomes in education. Nebraska does not allow for educational choice options -no charter schools, no vouchers, etc.-leaving parents with limited options. Many families do not have the resources to move their child to another school or send their child to private school, but parent trigger gives those parents a voice to improve education outcomes for their child. One notable case of parent trigger is in Compton, California, where 22.8 percent of the population is below the poverty line, 7.7 percent higher than the national average of 15.1 percent, and 9.1 percent higher than California's 13.7 percent rate.[4]

Because Nebraska does not provide for charter schools, a failing public school could not be turned into a charter by the parents; however, parent trigger would allow parents to give what is a effectively a "vote of no confidence" against the school administration and demand something better, a decision the district would be bound to respect. The threat of parents reorganizing the school would encourage districts to work to improve failing schools. This would help low-income schools the most and ensure administrators and teachers will listen to their concerns. School administrators and teachers would have incentive to improve when they know parents have the ability to replace them if their children are not learning.[5]

Parent trigger is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but it does give parents a tool to ensure a quality public education for their kids. There are some fundamental problems with the way parent trigger

has been set up in the past. In California, for example, a simple majority can trigger reform for the school - meaning 49 percent of parents may not have wanted to take such a drastic measure. Forcing reform on a school where barely a majority support it could set parents against each other, as well as set parents against teachers and administrators, causing more division than meaningful reform. For a measure like parent trigger, the bar should be set high, to indicate that it is the will of the parents that the school be overhauled. Setting the number of required signatures for a parent trigger petition at two-thirds or even three-fourths of the parents would leave no doubt about the need for improved educational outcomes.[6]

Parent trigger is just one tool, and should not replace substantial educational reform like charter schools, vouchers, digital education, among others. Parent trigger is a step in the right direction to give parents-particularly low-income parents-the opportunity to influence education outcomes.

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[1] Lee Cowan, "'Trigger law' put to the test in Compton, Calif." *NBC News*, September 26, 2011. Accessed May 18, 2012: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/44671945/ns/nbcnightlynews/t/trigger-law-put-test-compton-calif/#.T6qplXLMDcs; Sarah Carr, "Will Louisiana's new parent trigger law actually make a difference?" *The Hechinger Report*, May 4, 2012. Accessed May 18, 2012: http://hechingerreport.org/content/will-louisianas-new-parent-trigger-law-actually-make-a-difference_8515/.

[2] Parent Revolution, "Model Legislation." Accessed May 18, 2012: http://parentrevolution.org/content/model-legislation.

[3] Mark Philips, "Parent trigger laws: Part of school reform's 'silly season,'" *Washington Post*, October 12, 2011. Accessed May 18, 2012: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/parent-trigger-laws-part-of-school-reforms-silly-season/2011/10/09/gIQAFKEmdL_blog.html.

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[5] Veronique de Rugy, "Losing the Brains Race," *Reason Foundation*, February 22, 2011. Accessed May 18, 2012: http://reason.org/news/printer/losing-the-brains-race.

[6] Adam Emerson, "It SHOULD be hard to pull the parent trigger," *Thomas B. Fordham Institute*, February 22, 2012. Accessed May 18, 2012: http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/choice-words/2012/it-should-be-hard-to-pull-the-parent-trigger.html.