

NOT Your Mother's



PTA

Advocacy groups raise money, voices, hopes

The organization that claims to represent the voice and interests of K–12 students and their parents is the Parent Teacher Association, widely known as the PTA.

The organization aims to provide “parents and families with a powerful voice to speak on behalf of every child while providing the best tools for parents to help their children be successful students.”

Founded in 1897 as the National Congress of Mothers, the PTA declared that it was “up to the mothers of the country to eliminate threats that endangered children.” Today, its goal is a “quality education and nurturing environment for every child.”

The PTA has worked to advance social changes that improved the lives of young people, including championing the creation of child labor laws, reorganizing the juvenile justice system, and improving a variety of children’s services. But today, its orientation to K–12 issues is most aptly described by education analyst Charlene Haar as an “echo...of the teachers unions.”

Moreover, it has fallen on hard times. For example, many PTAs have withdrawn from the national organization, forming local Parent Teacher Organizations that no longer send dues to the national PTA. Membership in the national organization declined from more than 12 million in 1965 to around 5 million in 2010.

Truth be told, few in today’s K–12 education reform movement look to the PTA to fight for dramatic change or engage in direct conflict with the public education establishment. Education historian William Cutler explains in *Parents and Schools* that “educators and most school board members prefer to think of the parent-teacher association as an extension of the educational establishment, ‘an auxiliary to the public school,’ as the Los Angeles County Board of Education put it in 1908.”

Among today’s advocates for young people are nonprofit insurgent groups that challenge the education establishment by organizing, educating, and mobilizing parents in a variety of roles and in different ways, empowering them to engage in K–12 reform efforts. This organizing generates collective,

By BRUNO V. MANNO



PHOTO / ACHIEVEMENT FIRST CHARTER SCHOOL STUDENTS PERFORM AT “BROOKLYN CHARTER SCHOOL NIGHT”

durable power that advances the interests of K–12 education consumers—especially parents—rather than education producers.

Some organizations direct their activities only to district and/or charter school issues, such as improving teacher quality and effectiveness, developing new public charter schools, or closing and transforming failing district schools to create new high-quality schools of choice. Other organizations focus on the private school sector and issues such as using taxpayer-funded scholarships, or vouchers, or tuition tax credits to enable children to attend private schools. Still other organizations undertake cross-sector approaches like educating and mobilizing parents so that they are empowered to choose a quality school for their child, whether it be district, charter, or private.

In short, these advocacy groups empower parents to make their voices and choices a primary catalyst of school reform.

This piece limits its focus to three organizations that use parent mobilization and advocacy to catalyze district sector and charter sector reform: Parent Revolution, Education Reform Now, and Stand for Children. I do not consider others engaged in private school parent mobilization and empowerment or those using other approaches to educate or mobilize parents, e.g., GreatSchools.org, which provides information to parents on school quality and rankings.

These three organizations are similar in many ways, but differences in their legal structures affect the scope of their parent mobilization and advocacy strategies, activities, and tactics. The piece closes by presenting a framework for thinking more generally—one might say strategically—about different operating models for parent advocacy and organizing and by raising some key questions about the future of these efforts.

Parent Revolution

When the California Parent Empowerment Act—known for its parent trigger provision—became law in 2010, the Los Angeles–based nonprofit Parent Revolution had achieved one of its key legislative goals. The act allows at least 51 percent of all

Three Types of Legal Organizations: A primer

- A 501(c)(3) is tax-exempt, donations to it are tax-deductible, and involvement in campaign activities and interventions is prohibited. Lobbying is limited, permissible under very specific circumstances.
- A 501(c)(4) has no limit on the amount of money that can be spent on lobbying for legislative initiatives. It may participate in political campaigns as long as campaigning is not the organization’s primary purpose. Donations are not tax-deductible.
- A political action committee or PAC is a private group organized for the specific purpose of electing or defeating a candidate or advancing the outcome of a political issue or legislation. Donations are not tax-deductible and are a matter of public record, published every few months, depending upon federal or state law.

parents whose children attend a failing California school to petition the local school board to undertake one of several reform options. Among the options are closing a school and reopening it as a charter school; bringing in new staff and then exercising some control over staffing and budgeting; keeping school staff but firing the principal; and closing the school and sending students to a better school. The president of the California Federation of Teachers, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, called the parent trigger a “lynch mob provision.”

Parent Revolution’s executive director is Ben Austin, former Los Angeles deputy mayor to Richard Riordan, senior advisor to Rob Reiner and First 5 California (the state’s comprehensive early-childhood initiative), aide to President Bill Clinton, and member of the California State Board of Education. Austin believes the parent trigger law “creates an entirely... new way of thinking about education reform. [It gives] parents the power to advocate for children.” These “new tools” no longer doom “parents to accept[ing] systemic failures for generations.” Parent Revolution is incorporated as a 501(c)(3). It has a small staff of around a dozen individuals, a mix of grassroots organizers and political activists.

Founded in January 2009, its mission is to “transform public education rooted in what’s good for kids—not grownups—by empowering parents to transform their own children’s low performing schools through community organizing.” Parent Revolution’s motivating belief is that power must be in the hands of the only people who do not have an inherent conflict of interest in education: parents. Other stakeholders have a natural and primary self-interest to pursue.



PHOTO / PARENT REVOLUTION

Parent Revolution supports parents in transforming their children’s schools through community organizing.



PHOTO / PARENT REVOLUTION

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Parent Revolution organized the first campaign to “pull” the parent trigger in a Los Angeles–area district, using its staff to work with a field team of parents under the banner of McKinley Parents for Change. These parents knocked on the doors of other parents living in the Compton school district, inviting them to sign a petition to convert McKinley Elementary School to a charter school.

The California Parent Empowerment Act—known for its parent trigger provision—allows at least 51 percent of parents whose children attend a failing school to petition the school board to undertake one of several reform options.

McKinley is a K–5 school serving nearly 500 students, 60 percent Hispanic and 40 percent African American. It is in the bottom 10 percent of schools statewide, having made adequate yearly progress only once since 2003 under the federal No

Child Left Behind Act. It scored 1 out of 10 on the California “similar schools” ranking, meaning that the school is worse than almost all similar California schools.

Although the group had signatures from 275 of 442 parents, 62 percent of those with children in the school, the Compton school board voted 5–1 against the McKinley charter proposal, citing a variety of technicalities. The matter sparked a lawsuit and precipitated the involvement of the California State Board of Education, which wrestled for months with the law’s implementation. Eventually, the board reached a consensus on many issues, including how to draw up petitions and verify signatures, satisfying groups as diverse as Parent Revolution and the California Teachers Association. As of July 2011, McKinley remains a low-performing district-run school.

Meanwhile, Los Angeles County education officials gave its approval for Celerity Educational Group (the nonprofit charter-management organization whose petition to reopen McKinley as a charter school the Compton board denied) to open a new K–12 charter-school campus for 220 children. The new school is housed at Compton’s Church of

the Redeemer, whose pastor, Kerry Allison, sees education reform as the civil rights movement of this century. One of Pastor Allison's colleagues—Pastor K. W. Tulloss of Weller Street Baptist Church in Los Angeles—is the board chair of Parent Revolution.

Despite widespread community support, especially from African American and Latino parents, Parent Revolution has harsh detractors. Journalist Robert Skeels called it “a poverty pimp and privatization pusher collecting a check from plutocrat foundations.” But Los Angeles schools superintendent John Deasy described the trigger to a group of young people as a sad commentary on the state of K–12 schools: “It is a big shame on us [school administrators]. If we're not going to do it [improve schools], they [parents] have to do it.”

Mississippi, Connecticut, and Ohio now have some form of a parent trigger law. Officials in at least a dozen states are interested in a version of a parent trigger, including Chicago's mayor, Rahm Emanuel.

The controversy surrounding enactment of the Connecticut law may prefigure the battle ahead for trigger advocates. An internal document prepared off the record



PHOTO / EDUCATION REFORM NOW

In New York, many charter supporters and advocacy organizations with diverse agendas united under the banner of Education Reform Now, headed by school reformer, Joe Williams.

Education Reform Now outspent the teachers union in lobbying expenses, which along with other activities helped win the fight to raise the New York charter cap.

for American Federation of Teachers union activists and accidentally posted online explains how union lobbying in Connecticut worked to undermine a full version of the trigger. Plan A was “Kill Mode” and Plan B was “Engage the Opposition.” Since the union could not kill the bill, they worked to dilute it. The new law eliminates parent petition drives, creating instead school governance councils with parent, teacher, and community representation that provide advice only and have no governing authority to trigger a takeover. In the words of the *Wall Street Journal*, “Engagement meant pressuring legislators vulnerable to union muscle. That's most of them—and the AFT's muscle worked.”

Education Reform Now

In January 2010, the New York State legislature rejected legislation that would have lifted the cap of 200 charter schools allowed in the state. The action was part of several being considered by the legislature as it tried to improve the state's chances of receiving \$700 million in federal funds under the Obama administration's Race to the Top competition (RttT). Opposed to lifting the cap was the United Federation of Teachers, the New York City union affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers. In a blunt assessment of the union's role in dooming New York's initial RttT application, the *New York*

Daily News headlined, “They damned the kids: Teachers' union and its lackeys sank bid for federal funds.”

A second round of RttT competition with a June 1, 2010, deadline provided an opportunity to target the legislature with a campaign to lift the cap. The strategy was straightforward but would be difficult to execute. One individual involved with the campaign explained, “Until the charter movement began to develop its own political operation and build a counterweight to the teachers' union, it could never be successful in Albany, regardless of the results the schools produced.”

While many charter support and advocacy organizations in New York City and state had diverse agendas and perspectives, one campaign would need to unite them all, with one organization leading and executing the campaign. After much discussion, all the parties agreed that Education Reform Now (ERN) would be that lead organization, working with the New York Charter School Association, the New York City Charter School Center, and

several charter management organizations.

ERN is a national organization founded in 2006, with state affiliates in California, Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin. It has a national board overseeing state affiliates, a strong donor base, both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) structures, and a political action committee (PAC) called Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), with a separate board but shared staff with its related organizations. ERN's mission is to orchestrate “a powerful chorus of voices within the education policy debate advancing a true agenda of reform [that includes]...every child having...a quality public education.”

The individual coordinating the overall effort was Joe Williams, executive director of DFER. The *New York Times* recounts an incident involving Williams when Democratic gubernatorial candidate Andrew M. Cuomo was seeking donors from “certain members of the hedge fund crowd... what he heard was this: Talk to Joe. That would be Joe Williams, executive director of a political action committee that advances... a favorite cause of many of the wealthy founders of New York hedge funds: charter schools.”

The plan to raise the cap had four components: paid media, free media, field and grassroots organizing, and a strong lobbying effort in Albany. Joe Williams hired as campaign director Bradley Tusk, who managed Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s 2009 reelection campaign.

A key aspect of the grassroots campaign involved organizing the parents of the 40,000 children in charter schools as well as the 40,000 on charter school waiting lists. ERN built a field operation similar to a political campaign. It hired a staff that developed a canvassing and phone system and set up e-mail and fax capabilities along with an issue visibility program. The field plan included daily targets for parent visits, parent recruitment, parent activities, education events, lobbying, and an advertising and social media campaign.

Charter-school financial supporters were willing to fund the campaign and ask friends for additional support. An article in the *New York Times* reported, “Hedge fund executives are thus emerging as perhaps the first significant political counterweight to the powerful teachers unions.... They have been contributing generously to... a multimillion dollar war chest to lobby... for a bill to raise [the cap].”

Boykin Curry, a partner in Eagle Capital Management and founder of two New York charter schools, commented on the change in mind-set among his colleagues, “A lot of hedge fund and finance people in New York had decided that politics was too dirty and focused on their philanthropy. I think there’s an awakening now that we can be a force in Albany, but we’ve got to play a tougher game than before.”

Passing the bill entailed working first in the state senate with Senate Democratic conference leader John Sampson. After the bill to raise the cap to 460 schools from 200 passed by a margin of 45–15, attention focused on the state assembly. Speaker Sheldon Silver, an ally of the teachers union, vehemently opposed the bill. The ERN strategy was to frame the issue as an effort by teachers unions to keep New York from winning RttT rather than targeting specific members in a negative way.

Over the course of the campaign, the phone and canvass program reached legislators in multiple ways: nearly

9,000 postcards were sent, more than 16,000 voice mails were left, and 23 face-to-face visits were logged. A concerted editorial-board campaign targeted major newspapers along with media buys to educate the public and state legislators, focusing almost exclusively on New York City and Albany. High-profile supporters were recruited, including former president Bill Clinton, candidate and now governor Andrew Cuomo, the Reverend Al Sharpton, and U.S. secretary of education Arne Duncan.

The bill finally passed the assembly 91–43 and was signed by Governor David Paterson on May 28, in time



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for the RttT application deadline of June 1. On August 24, U.S. secretary of education Arne Duncan announced that New York was among the 10 finalists to win the competition, receiving \$700 million in funding. Secretary Duncan credited the legislature’s lifting the cap with helping to secure the award.

In 2010, ERN reported spending \$6.6 million in lobbying expenses in New York State, split almost evenly between its (c)(3) and (c)(4), with another \$41 million in (c)(3) expenditures directed to organizing and polling expenses, which the state does not consider lobbying. During that same time period, the New York State United Teachers reported \$4.9 million in lobbying expenses. For the first time, ERN outspent the teachers union in lobbying expenses, which along with other activities helped win the fight to raise the New York charter cap.



PHOTO / STAND FOR CHILDREN

Stand for Children organized a blue umbrella rally for a rainy day fund in 2010. The organization trains "everyday people" to become leaders who unite to improve programming for children, especially in the K-12 arena.

Stand for Children

June 1, 1996—Stand for Children Day—marked what its organizers claim is the largest rally for children in U.S. history, in Washington, D.C., at the Lincoln Memorial, with around 300,000 participants. Stand for Children now has national offices in Portland, Oregon, and Waltham, Massachusetts, and state affiliates in Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington.

Stand's CEO is Jonah Edelman, who along with Eliza Leighton cofounded the organization after Edelman studied different community-organizing and -advocacy organizations, moving to Oregon to test and further develop the Stand approach. (Leighton eventually left Stand to complete a law degree at Yale and works as director of strategic initiatives for Casa de Maryland, a Latino advocacy and assistance organization.)

Edelman considers himself a second-generation civil rights leader "who grew up with these incredible parents who had been public servants all their lives." Marian Wright Edelman, his mother, was the first African American woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar and is president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund. His father, Peter Edelman,

clerked for former Supreme Court justice Arthur Goldberg, was a close aide to Robert F. Kennedy, and served as a senior official in the Clinton administration until resigning over differences with the administration on the 1996 welfare reforms.

Stand is legally incorporated nationally as a 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4), with each organization having its own board and each state affiliate also having its own PAC. Affiliates are under the legal umbrella of the national organization and its respective boards, though each has advisory and other groups that provide counsel on specific issues.

Its (c)(3) is called Stand for Children Leadership Center and trains "everyday people" to become leaders who unite to win

Stand for Children's lobbyists and cash "were making a clear statement that 'If you were not willing to stand with the children, they would find somebody who would.'"

improvements in children's programs, especially in the K–12 arena. The center's web site contains resources on how to turn out individuals for meetings, plan effective community forums, choose a winning issue, educate decisionmakers, engage in lobbying to elicit a commitment from a legislator, and so forth. Its (c)(4) is a membership organization called Stand for Children, which uses grassroots action to convince elected officials (and voters) of the merits of specific legislation or policy.

Stand's 2010 and 2011 work in Illinois on teacher effectiveness illustrates how the three distinct legal entities inform, educate, and advocate for specific legislative proposals. The (c)(3) organized and trained community members, educating them, policymakers, and the general public on school reform and teacher effectiveness issues. The (c)(4) targeted mainly legislators, although efforts were also made to convince voters to get their representatives to support the legislation. The PAC raised \$3.5 million in 2010 and judiciously spent about \$600,000 in support of state lawmakers running for office who would help forge the bipartisan consensus that led to the passage of the legislation. Stand leveraged its resources and activities through a partnership with Advance Illinois, a statewide 501(c)(3) K–12 education-reform advocacy organization. Other state and local organizations also joined the partnership.

Edelman characterizes Stand's strategy by saying, "We go in...for the long term." In Illinois, Chicago teachers union president Karen Lewis called the work of Stand—especially its PAC funds—as "pretty much union busting." Chicago Democratic state senator Kwame Raoul commented that Stand's cadre of lobbyists and cash "were making a clear statement that 'If you were not willing to stand with the children, they would find somebody who would.'"

In 2011, *Time* magazine named Edelman one of the nation's 11 most influential education activists, "poised to shake things up," commenting further that with "formidable political fundraising prowess, Stand for Children is delivering results and changing how politicians think about grass roots education reform."

Dimensions of K–12 Advocacy

Unlike the PTA, Parent Revolution, Education Reform Now, and Stand for Children are insurgent organizations that exist to challenge the conventional power arrangements of the K–12 public education system, organizing parents at the grassroots level to advance a school reform agenda. Thus far, all three organizations have been successful in raising funds to support their efforts. As

More Organizations That Support Parent Advocacy and Organizing

American Federation for Children, affiliated with the American Federation for Children PAC and its educational partner, the Alliance for School Choice: www.federationforchildren.com

Black Alliance for Educational Options: www.baeo.org

DC School Reform Now: www.dcschoolreform.org

Excellent Education for Everyone: www.nje3.org

Families Empowered: www.familiesempowered.org

Families That Can: www.familiesthatcan.org

50CAN: www.50can.org

Georgia Parent Advocacy Network: www.gacharters.org/contact/georgia-parent-advocacy-network

Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options:
<http://www.hcreo.com>

New York City Charter School Center—Charter Parent Action Network:
<http://www.nyccharterschools.org/act/for-parents/charter-parent-advocacy-network>

PICO National Network: <http://www.piconetwork.org/issues/school>

StudentsFirst: www.studentsfirst.org

Texas Charter Schools Association—Communities United:
<http://www.txcharterschools.org/advocacy/regional-coordinators>

501(c)(3) entities, these organizations derive a significant portion of their revenue from foundations and individual donors. In addition, Stand has a fee-for-service arrangement for training state affiliates, which are responsible for raising their own operating funds. Both Stand and ERN raise their (c)(4) and PAC money from individual donors, who do not receive a tax deduction for contributions. Stand projects its 2011 budget will be around \$22 million, nearly double its 2010 budget. Though the long-term financial outlook for the three organizations is difficult to predict, there are no immediate threats to their revenue sources.

While differences in the organizations' legal structures have implications for their strategies, activities, and programs, more important are the key elements they hold in common: a value proposition, civic mobilization, and coordinated action. Each parent advocacy organization seeks to build a cohesive group of parents and families who support a stated mission and will fight to achieve and defend it. Each group mobilizes supporters to create a tightly knit and inclusive network of like-minded activists. Supporters build relationships with allies or partner organizations to broaden support. The organization and its partners undertake on-the-ground activity aimed at altering existing power relationships



PHOTO / STAND FOR CHILDREN

Stand for Children exists to challenge the conventional power arrangements of the K-12 public education system, organizing parents at the grassroots level to advance a school reform agenda.

that express themselves in policies and practices that are the target of reform and change.

Insurgent organizations like the ones described here seem to hold significant promise for mobilizing parents to advance an agenda that goes far beyond today’s PTA, whose critics, in the words of William Cutler, describe it “as a company union—part of the problem, not the solution. [It gives]...the illusion of parental influence, while discouraging the formation of community groups that might be more aggressive about the need for change.”

Ironically, the advocacy and organizing approach of these organizations mirrors the early work of the PTA, which was part of a nascent progressive political reform movement that changed the world of child welfare and children’s education programs. Are these groups heirs to that tradition?

And there are other questions to be answered.

- How will opponents reorient their organizing prowess and financial resources to strike back against reform-oriented parent mobilization efforts?
- Will K–12 education philanthropy continue to support reform-oriented advocacy organizations or move to support some new reform du jour?
- Will the national organizations with state affiliates begin to step on each other’s toes or work directly at cross-purposes,

and will competition for philanthropic resources constrain their effectiveness and impact?

- Will tensions and conflicts emerge between those groups focused more on micro issues, like cultivating savvy consumers of choice, and those focused on macro issues, like legislation and electoral politics?
- Will organizations working in the charter and district sectors become openly hostile to those working in the private school sector, with its emphasis on vouchers and tax credits?
- Or will a “grand agreement” unite them under a banner of parent empowerment that places family educational choice at the core of K–12 reform, regardless of what educational option a parent chooses for a child—district, charter, or private?

Only time will tell.

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