

Opinion: Parent revolution wants more say in education

By Jim Newton, Los Angeles Times

This is what the revolution looks like: It's a rally in Lynwood where parents demand the right to exercise their power to shape their children's future; it's a dozen residents in a South-Central apartment gathering to compare notes on the failing elementary school a few blocks away; it's parents comparing notes at a Pasadena community center and discovering that not a single one of that city's high schools scored a desired goal of 800 on California's Academic Performance Index. And it's lots and lots of T-shirts with messages.

Those scenes all were on display last week on a bus tour from San Diego to Sacramento led by Parent Revolution, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that is spearheading a historic challenge to the education status quo in California and beyond. The trip drew together far-flung activists, some unknown to one another but all united in the conviction that state's education system is letting down its children, and that parents need to assert their power over schools.

Parent Revolution, with the help of sympathetic legislators such as former state Sens. Gloria Romero and Richard Polanco – both of whom were along for sections of the tour – secured for parents that power with passage of a momentous piece of legislation in 2010. Known as the “parent trigger,” it allows parents at a failing school to band together. Now, by law, if a majority of parents sign a petition, they can demand that a charter operator take over the school, replace the school staff, remove the principal or close the school. That's not the power of persuasion; that's the power to change.

Parent trigger got its first workout last year in Compton,

where parents ran into a recalcitrant school board that deliberately set out to thwart the law. In the short run, the school board triumphed and prevented a clear majority of parents at McKinley Elementary School from getting the charter school they asked for. But Compton's victory was Pyrrhic. The charter operator that would have taken over McKinley opened a school down the street, and it quickly filled up. A second one is opening in the neighborhood. By this time next year, parents will have voted with their feet, and McKinley will be a ruin.

That experience has emboldened parents elsewhere, and the quiet stir of their revolution is as inspiring as the civil rights battles of modern times – the demand for racial equality in the South, the recognition of farmworkers' right to unionize, the right of same-sex couples to marry. This movement brings together parents of different ethnicities, races and ideologies, languages and backgrounds. They are fiercely intent on change.

Read the whole story