

The Grassroots route to growth. It is not the charter, it's the grassroots and the persistence to burn (restructure) everything but the roots.

Tom Wolfgram 2-10-2011

Calif. parents reclaim a failing school - and make history *By Arnold Schwarzenegger*

Thursday, December 16, 2010

History is usually made by a small group of passionate people. On Dec. 7, history was made by a small group of parents in Compton, Calif.

Their children attend McKinley Elementary School - a school that has been defined as failing for the past 10 years. Using a new power known as the "parent trigger," which I fought for and state legislators approved last year, these Compton parents banded together to demand change. The legislation allows parents of students at troubled schools to demand such significant reforms as closing a school, replacing a school's management or most of its staff, or reorganizing a school into a charter, if 51 percent of parents sign a petition.

McKinley Elementary is being reorganized and will soon be transformed into a charter school run by Celerity Educational Group, which is successfully operating three other schools in California.

Some have called this action "the shot heard across the country" - and they're not overstating the case.

To get some perspective of the scope of this new power, consider the heartwrenching stories brought to public attention this year in the documentary "Waiting for Superman," which focuses on the failures of our public education system.

Without the power of the trigger legislation, parents whose children are in what the documentary and others call "dropout factories" have only one avenue to save their children. They must win a lottery to get them into a highly performing charter school.

Across the country, millions of families' prayers go unanswered. These parents are left to face the bleak reality that their child will be forever stuck in a failing school and a failing system. The exit doors may as well be chained.

For millions of low-income families, this means that their child is doomed to a life of unrealized potential.

For millions of California families, this is the shattering of the American dream.

Now, however, for the first time in California history, these historically underserved parents have new power and new choice.

The package of reforms I signed in January gives parents significant options for changing their child's school as well as the freedom to leave failing schools or send their child to a new school or even a new district. Schools are eligible for the 51 percent trigger if they have been judged under state standards to have shown no progress for three consecutive years.

While leaders of the State Teachers Union have threatened legal action to try to stop parents from using this groundbreaking power, I am confident that if they try to thwart the public, the courts will end up upholding this important bipartisan legislation. Changes such as replacing a school's principal and staff do not come unless there have been continued years of failure and a majority of parents banding together and signing a petition.

This sort of majority-demanded restructuring is exactly what just happened at McKinley Elementary School. More than 60 percent of McKinley parents signed a petition and chose to convert to a charter school.

Throughout history, all great movements have started at the grass-roots level, with ordinary citizens and communities rising up to demand change.

In California, like in many other states, our public education system is not based on merit or holding the adults in whose care we have placed our children accountable. Some students get a good education, but others do not, and report after report reaches the same conclusion: No matter how much money we throw at the problem, unless the school is fundamentally fixed, we will not get the results in student performance we all deserve.

Giving parents the power to hold their schools accountable is a giant step forward, and I believe that what happened in Compton is the beginning of a movement that will sweep the nation.

The writer, a Republican, is governor of California.