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## Effort to convert Compton school to charter draws fire

*Some are withdrawing signatures given under the 'parent-trigger' law to make school a charter, saying they were intimidated or misled.*

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Tempers flared Friday over the fate of a low-performing Compton elementary school that has become the first target of a new law allowing parents to mandate school shutdowns or charter-school conversions through a petition drive.

Some parents are rescinding their signatures to convert McKinley Elementary into a charter school that would operate outside the direct control of the Compton Unified School District. Under the state's new "parent-trigger" law, which is being scrutinized nationwide, the signatures of at least half the parents at a campus are required in order to launch the changes.

But that 50% threshold could be at risk at McKinley. Opponents say that 50 to 60 parents already have withdrawn their support, which could push the total close to the minimum level required.

"They told me the petition was to beautify the school," said Karla Garcia, whose two children attend McKinley. "They are misinforming the parents, so I revoked my signature."

Garcia is part of a growing countermovement that began with the delivery on Tuesday of the parent-trigger petition at Compton Unified headquarters.

Parent Revolution, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit group that organized the petition drive, denied any wrongdoing. Organizers said they had collected signatures representing 62% of McKinley's 438 students. Initially, media coverage focused almost exclusively on dissatisfied parents relating grievances against McKinley, where test scores rank in the state's lowest 10% of schools, even when compared with schools that serve students from similar backgrounds.

The school's Parent Teacher Assn. held two meetings Thursday in which parents said they had been harassed or deceived into signing.

On Friday, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a supporter of the parent-trigger effort, took the other side, condemning alleged "intimidation tactics" by charter opponents at McKinley.

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa weighed in with similar views. The mayor was flanked by parents and petition organizers Friday as he visited the home of a Compton petition signer to praise the effort and condemn what he described as harassment by opponents.

"It's particularly alarming to see these parents resort to the kind of intimidation, the kind of smear campaigning, the kind of rumor-mongering that is all too reminiscent of the way bad employers try to intimidate working people," Villaraigosa said.

Parent Revolution, which is led by state Board of Education member Ben Austin, had arranged for Villaraigosa's appearance. But the visit sparked angry reactions from about two dozen parents and Compton leaders. Some demonstrators chanted "No charter school!" and carried signs reading, "Our Kids Are Not for Sale" outside the home where the mayor spoke.

Parent Revolution had targeted Compton and McKinley for its first organizing effort. The group also decided that the petition would stipulate a charter conversion and it selected the charter operator, Celerity Educational Group.

"I am highly offended by an outsider coming in telling people here how to handle my children or handle my school," said Lee Finnie, a pastor and parent of three McKinley students.

Finnie and other petition opponents cited McKinley's recent progress, noting its rising test scores and new principal. The school's 77-point two-year rise on the state Academic Performance Index puts it among the most rapidly improving schools in the state.

"Why blow up something that's improving?" Finnie said. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

The school has made "excellent progress," said Olivia Fuentes, a specialist in the division for school improvement with the Los Angeles County Office of Education.

The school's defenders said the petition organizers had failed to acknowledge the school's gains.

Jessy Herrera, an active member of McKinley's PTA and school site council, complained that organizers had followed parents to worksites, laundromats and restaurants, and repeatedly visited and called homes, even after parents declined to sign on. Other parents said they were told if they didn't sign, the school would close or they would be deported.

But Austin dismissed the charges as familiar tactics used to discredit attempts to bring charters onto traditional campuses.

His group also claimed deportation threats from charter opponents. And he accused McKinley teachers of threatening fights, badmouthing petition supporters in front of their children and urging parents to rescind their signatures to preserve teacher jobs.

Oralia Velasquez, mother of a fifth-grade McKinley student, said she was among those who continued to support the charter conversion.

McKinley test scores are still dismally low, she said, and her research into Celerity showed an impressive program. "They've had years of opportunity to make a difference and they haven't," she said. "I'm tired of it. This is my opportunity to make my voice heard and make a change."

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