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## California Board of Education seeks probe of Compton charter campaign

*The board will ask the state attorney general to examine charges of misconduct in a petition drive to convert McKinley Elementary into a charter school.*

December 16, 2010 | By Teresa Watanabe, Los Angeles Times

The state Board of Education will ask the attorney general to investigate complaints of misconduct surrounding a parent petition drive to turn over a struggling Compton elementary school to a charter school operation, the board president said Wednesday.

The petition drive at McKinley Elementary School, the state's first test of a new law that empowers parents to make sweeping changes at low-performing schools, has been mired in charges and countercharges of deceit and intimidation since signatures, said to represent 62% of the school's parents, were submitted to the Compton Unified School District last week.

Those charges resurfaced this week. At a Compton school board meeting Tuesday evening, which drew a crowd of nearly 200 people, several McKinley parents drew cheers as they praised their school's progress and alleged that petition organizers used misleading claims and stealth tactics to gather signatures.

Parent Revolution, the Los Angeles nonprofit that targeted McKinley for its first petition drive, chose a charter conversion as one of four options for change and selected Celerity Educational Group as the charter operator. The group chose not to speak Tuesday evening. Nor did parents supportive of the petition.

But many opponents lined up to voice complaints about the petition process. One parent said she thought she was signing a petition to beautify the school while PTA President Cynthia Martinez complained she was not allowed access to all Parent Revolution gatherings. Last week, for instance, Parent Revolution moved a news conference featuring Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa from public space outside McKinley to a private residence. Some anti-petition parents said they were denied entry.

Karen Frison, Compton's acting superintendent, said Wednesday that the district would launch a new "parent empowerment initiative" of its own that will include a "robust community conversation" about the new law and the petition process in Compton. Test scores at McKinley have increased by 77 points in the last two years but the school remains in the lowest 10% of all California elementary schools.

"The parent-trigger law presents more than one option.... Our parents and guardians deserve to discuss these options in an open and transparent manner," Frison wrote in a letter to The Times.

Paulette Gipson, of the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People's Compton office, also said the organization would seek to host a town hall to fully discuss the issue. The group supports the parent-trigger law but not the process used to gather signatures in Compton, she said.

Pastor Lee Finnie, whose three children attend McKinley, said the school's PTA planned to create a website to publicize concerns about the petition-gathering process.

"We're going to let the state of California know that when you hear Parent Revolution, you'll smell a rat a mile away and lock the doors and run," he said.

For their part, pro-petition parents and organizers spoke at the state education board meeting Wednesday with passionate pleas for better schools. McKinley parents Shemika Murphy and Ismenia Guzman, for instance, said they were grateful to Parent Revolution for informing them about their rights to demand a better education for their children under the new parent-trigger law.

Gabe Rose of Parent Revolution told board members that his group has documented threats against pro-petition parents and would welcome a state investigation into them. The group, for instance, produced written remarks by a McKinley teacher falsely claiming that Celerity would not accept special-needs children; state law requires that any charter operator taking over a district school must accept all students in the attendance boundaries.

Charter schools are independently run and publicly financed.

Board President Ted Mitchell said he would ask the state attorney general to investigate the numerous allegations on both sides, acting on a request by board member Alan Arkatov.

In other developments, the Compton school district clarified Tuesday that no action or recommendation has ever been made to shut down McKinley, a claim some parents said persuaded them to sign the petition.

A scenario to shut down McKinley and consolidate it with another school is one of six options the board is considering to save money. But no decision will be made until the district holds several public hearings on all options next month.

In Sacramento, the state education board voted to start a 15-day period for public comment on regulations to implement the parent-trigger law.

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