

# Public Schools, Private Agendas: Parent Revolution

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By [Gary Cohn](#), [Frying Pan News](#) | Report

At first glance, it is one of the nation's hottest new education-reform movements, a seemingly populist crusade to empower poor parents and fix failing public schools. But a closer examination reveals that the "parent-trigger" movement is being heavily financed by the conservative [Walton Family Foundation](#), one of the nation's largest and most strident anti-union organizations, a Frying Pan News investigation has shown.

Since 2009, the foundation has poured more than \$6.3 million into [Parent Revolution](#), a Los Angeles advocacy group that is in the forefront of the parent-trigger campaign in California and the nation. Its heavy reliance on Walton money, critics say, raises questions about the independence of Parent Revolution and the intentions of the Walton Family Foundation.

While Parent Revolution identifies the Walton Family Foundation as one of several donors on its Web site, the full extent of contributions from the Walton foundation and other donors hasn't been publicly known until now. Information supplied to Frying Pan News by Parent Revolution and publicly available tax records show that a total of 18 separate foundations have given more than \$14.8 million to the group since its founding in 2009.

Other multimillion dollar contributors include the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) (\$1.6 million); the [Laura and John Arnold Foundation](#) (\$1.5 million); the [Wasserman Foundation](#) (\$1.5 million); the [Broad Foundation](#) (\$1.45 million) and the [Emerson Collective Education Fund](#) (\$1.2 million), founded by Laurence Powell Jobs, the widow of former Apple CEO Steve Jobs.

But the Walton Family Foundation is by far Parent Revolution's largest benefactor, contributing 43 percent of the \$14.9 million total.

"Why is all this money coming in?" asks John Rogers, director of [UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access](#), who has studied the parent-trigger movement. "It doesn't seem to be about educational improvements . . . It seems to be about creating greater pressure to challenge teachers' unions rather than an authentic way to improve education opportunities." The parent-trigger law diminishes the influence of teachers' unions and it allows public schools to be turned into nonunion charters.

The Walton Family Foundation, which is run by the family of Walmart founder Sam Walton, is one of the nation's largest private donors to charter schools. The foundation has also used its money and clout to fund conservative research groups (including the Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation) whose analysts have then defended Walmart and its anti-union policies on newspaper opinion pages and in testimony to government committees. In education, it is a strong proponent of the expansion of charter schools, school voucher programs and other efforts to privatize public education. It also gives money to the influential trade publication Education Week to write about parent empowerment issues.

Another large donor to Parent Revolution, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation of Houston, Texas, supports charter schools and also has funded conservative efforts to overhaul and [limit pensions](#) in California, according to the Center for Investigative Reporting's California Watch. John Arnold is a billionaire former Enron trader who also founded a successful hedge fund.

The Broad Foundation, founded by Los Angeles billionaire Eli Broad and his wife, Edythe, and the Gates Foundation, also are big backers of charter schools and other market-driven education reforms, though their overall policies are far less conservative than the Walton Family Foundation.

"Everything the Walton foundation has done over the years is to support privatization and anti-union policies," Diane Ravitch, an education historian and former Assistant Secretary of Education under President George H.W. Bush, tells Frying Pan News. "They want privatization and Parent Revolution promotes their goals."

Ben Austin, Parent Revolution's chief executive, strongly denies that the contributions from the Walton Family Foundation and other donors influence his organization's stated mission.

"We've never had a funder call and intimate that we should do one thing and not another," Austin insists to Frying Pan News. "We make every decision through the lens of giving parents' power and helping parents to improve the outcome for their kids. What we are trying to do is give low-income parents a similar sense of power that middle class parents take for granted."

Yet questions persist about the symbiotic relationship between funder and funded. Parent Revolution is no ordinary reform group, but the spearhead of a movement that seeks to take control of failing public schools and turn them around through conversion to charter schools or in-district reforms — including staff and principal firings. Likewise, the Walton Family Foundation is no ordinary benefactor. Based in Bentonville, Arkansas and fed by the profits of the world's largest retail chain, it leaves a politically conservative mark on its favorite projects.

The Walton foundation, for example, wholeheartedly embraces all state parent-trigger laws, whose language stems from model legislation crafted by the [American Leadership Exchange Council](#) (ALEC) — a corporate-controlled generator of far-right legislation, including Florida's controversial Stand Your Ground gun law and the recent statute that made Michigan a right-to-work state.

A 2012 Education Week article described how, in 2010, the [Heartland Institute](#), an ultra-conservative Chicago think tank, borrowed Parent Revolution's new idea and took it to ALEC.

"Heartland put together a parent-trigger policy proposal and presented it to ALEC, which [created model legislation](#), [that,] . . . sometimes with variations, ended up appearing in about 10 to 15 states," reported Education Week.

The man whose concept of parent triggers so impressed the Heartland Institute is Parent Revolution's Austin, a former state school board member and Los Angeles deputy mayor under Richard Riordan. Just as Parent Revolution has become the leading player of the parent-trigger movement, so has Austin become Parent Revolution's national face. As his group's executive director, Austin received a total compensation of \$239,451 in 2011, according to the organization's latest available tax filing.

California became the first state to pass a parent-trigger law in 2010. The law allows systemically struggling schools to be taken over if parent activists are able to get 51 percent of a failed school's parents to sign a petition. The movement received a big boost from Hollywood last year with the release of the film *Won't Back Down*, which tells the story of two parents (one a teacher) who use a parent-trigger type law to take over their children's failing school in a poor Pittsburgh neighborhood. The movie largely depicts the teachers' union and school bureaucracy as opponents of change. It was produced and funded by Walden Media, which is owned by billionaire Philip Anschutz, a longtime champion of hard-right causes.

[Michelle Rhee](#), whose group StudentsFirst is one of the nation's leading proponents of parent-trigger laws and other efforts to privatize public education, sponsored a series of screenings and hosted panel discussions to promote the film and its message. Panelists included former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Parent Revolution's Austin.

While advocates claim parent triggers are intended to empower parents, critics charge that they target schools in the poorest areas with high immigrant neighborhoods, populations that are particularly vulnerable and susceptible to manipulation. The critics contend that parents may lose power once a school is converted to a charter.

"Parents get the idea they will have a say in how a [charter] school is run," says Brian Hayes, a former English teacher who has taught in both traditional and charter schools in Los Angeles. "In many cases the parents are shunted aside when an outside charter organization takes over a school."

Diane Ravitch, an outspoken opponent of parent triggers, points out that alternatives to privatization include reducing class sizes and working to solve specific problems in public schools — if, say, a school has a large number of Latino students who speak only limited English, one way to improve the school would be to send in more Spanish-speaking teachers.

In a recent interview with Frying Pan News, Austin vehemently disputed the notion that his organization is pushing for privatization of schools or that it blindly follows its funders' agendas. Austin, who was joined by Patrick DeTemple, Parent Revolution's senior strategist, spoke at the group's downtown headquarters. The ambience was more Google campus than corporate: Austin and DeTemple sat on big floor cushions in a meeting room, while a large foosball table and a couple of swings dominated the main corridor of the office.

As one indication of his group's autonomy, Austin points to Parent Revolution's opposition last year to a proposed Arizona parent-trigger proposal that would have allowed for the use of "empowerment accounts" (in effect, school vouchers), even though its biggest funder, the Walton Family Foundation, has long been an advocate of vouchers. He also wrote an op-ed in the Detroit Free Press last year in which he generally supported a Michigan parent-trigger bill, but opposed a provision that would have allowed for conversion of public schools to for-profit charters, as opposed to non-profits.

"We have the freedom to take these positions," Austin says. "Our funders fund us because they believe in parent empowerment. If they disagree they don't have to fund us."

DeTemple stressed that turning schools over to charter operators was only one of the options available under California's parent-trigger law. "We're agnostic on the question of whether parents choose a charter school or a non-charter school [option]," DeTemple says. "There aren't enough [top quality] charters. The only real path must involve transformation of district school systems. The charter path [alone] does not get you to that goal."

So far, however, parent trigger has only been successfully used in one instance – and in that case, a public school is being converted to a charter. It occurred in Adelanto, a blue-collar town tucked onto San Bernardino County's High Desert. After a bitter, bruising fight that split the community and ended up in court, the Adelanto school board voted in January to convert its struggling Desert Trails Elementary School to a charter, beginning next fall.

Opponents, including Desert Trails parent Lori Yuan, say that this parent-trigger effort was controlled by organizers brought in by Parent Revolution, and that they tricked the community into believing this was simply an effort to improve conditions at the school, not to give it over to a private charter operator. Parent Revolution officials, in turn, say that their opposition used unethical tactics in contesting the petitions.

"Our community was misled," recalls Yuan, who has two children at the school. "Parents didn't know they were signing for a charter takeover."

Shelly Whitfield, who has five children at Desert Trails Elementary, says she was repeatedly approached at home and school to sign a petition. "They came to my door several times and said they were going to get computers and help get the kids better lunches," she remembers. She says she is strongly opposed to the end result – the conversion of the school to a charter operation.

Cynthia Ramirez, one of the parents behind the parent-trigger efforts in Adelanto, says that at first the parents tried to work with school officials to make changes.

"At the beginning, nobody was considering a charter," she recalls. But Ramirez says district officials repeatedly rebuffed and disrespected efforts by the parent group to bring about changes. Among other things, she says parents were seeking a voice in picking a new principal and continuous say in how the school would be run. "We wanted to have some kind of power, to be involved," she says.

Ramirez, who has a daughter at the school, says wasn't satisfied with the quality of education at the school. Homework was too easy, kids weren't being challenged, she says.

Parent Revolution provided help in many ways. It rented a house for the Desert Trails' activist parents to use as a headquarters, provided a full-time organizer to work with them, and also sent in experts to train and advise parents on everything from strategy on dealing with the school board to writing letters to help in researching potential charter schools, Ramirez and others say. It even provided T-shirts.

"They've been providing everything we asked for," says Ramirez, adding that Parent Revolution left all final decisions up to the local parents.

Yuan and other parents had contested the signatures gathered by parent-trigger advocates, but their challenge was rejected by a San Bernardino County Superior Court judge. In the end, only 53 of the 466 original signers would vote in an election to determine the school's future. The bad feelings in the community over the battle for charter conversion have continued to this day.

"This was a true test of the mettle of empowered parents," trumpeted [FreedomWorks](#), a prime force in the Tea Party movement.

Yuan disagrees: "We've known all along this wasn't a grassroots movement."

The focus of Parent Revolution has lately shifted to the city of Los Angeles. In February, the city's board of education approved the first use of the parent-trigger law at the West Adams District's 24th Street Elementary School. It's still not clear exactly what changes will take place at the school, or whether it will be given over to a charter operator. Other struggling Los Angeles schools, including Weigand Avenue Elementary in Watts, are also likely to consider or adopt parent-trigger takeovers in the months ahead.

Adelanto, meanwhile, represents the application of Parent Revolutionary theory into practice, with school children as the experiment's key ingredients. The school, whose students are predominantly Latino and black, won't become a charter until August, but will be operated by [LaVerne Elementary Preparatory Academy](#), a high test-scoring nonprofit school whose "back to basics" curriculum includes classes in Latin and classical literature.

Whitfield, however, won't be sending her children to LaVerne in the fall.

"My kids are not going to go there," she says. "They're taking away all the teachers my kids have been around for years. They took over our school, and I don't think it's fair. They're not for the kids."

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