

**To:** State and District PTA Leaders  
**From:** National PTA  
**Re:** “Parent Trigger” and the Upcoming release of *Won’t Back Down* Movie  
**Date:** September 11, 2012

This document seeks to answer frequently asked questions (FAQs) concerning the issue of parent trigger as well as the upcoming release of *Won’t Back Down*, a full-length feature film that discusses parent involvement in education reform. State and district PTA leaders are encouraged to use this document to guide their responses to membership, partner organizations, and stakeholders concerning the topics discussed in the film. To ensure consistency, National PTA asks that all media inquiries pertaining to *Won’t Back Down* at the state, district, and unit level be forwarded to the National PTA for comment on behalf of the Association. All media inquiries should be sent to James Martinez, National PTA Senior Manager of Media Relations, at [jmartinez@pta.org](mailto:jmartinez@pta.org) / (571)329-9352.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is *Won’t Back Down*?

*Won’t Back Down* is a full-length feature film that will open in theaters nationwide on September 28, 2012. The film follows the story of two moms, Jamie (Maggie Gyllenhaal) and Nona (Viola Davis), as they attempt to mobilize parents in demand of reforms to improve a failing neighborhood elementary school. Jamie, a parent, and Nona, a parent and a teacher at the school, band together to buck the system by utilizing a state law that calls for school board review of community-supported interventions, so long as a majority of parents and a majority of school faculty petition on behalf of the interventions. Although the movie never uses the term “parent trigger,” the story is inspired by the parent trigger movement.

### Is *Won’t Back Down* a true story?

*Won’t Back Down* is a Hollywood dramatization. While the story is strongly influenced by true events, there are also differences to note. The story of Jamie and Nona is inspired by the story of McKinley Elementary School in Compton, California, where parents “pulled the trigger” in 2010. This highly publicized case remains stalled within the legal system, and thus the trigger has yet to be successfully pulled. Noted as the first instance of parent trigger law implementation, McKinley garnered a lot of attention for both good and bad aspects of the education reform process. While it was the McKinley trigger that largely informed plot development for *Won’t Back Down*, the film seeks to tell the story of “pulling the trigger” more broadly speaking.

The important distinctions between the case of McKinley Elementary School and *Won’t Back Down* are:

- *Won’t Back Down* maintains focus that the actions of Jamie and Nona to “trigger” improvement are wholly parent-driven and totally devoid of outside influences.
- The movie uses a fictional version of parent trigger that requires a majority of parents and a majority of school faculty to petition for interventions. Please note that, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, “*In some cases [for a school conversion], it is required to get signatures from a majority of parents and faculty, thereby showing community support. But these are not considered parent triggers. Parent triggers give parents the sole authority to*

*make structural changes in a school's operation."* Therefore, the process depicted in the film is different than the laws enacted to-date.

- The film depicts an improved school functioning with the full support and collaboration from parents as an outcome of the actions taken by Jamie and Nona and subsequent school board approval. It is important to note that to-date there is no instance in which a parent-approved intervention plan has been successfully implemented due to ongoing legal disputes.

### **What is "parent trigger"?**

The concept of parent trigger policy began in 2010 when California passed the nation's first parent trigger law. To date, this is a state-level policy proposal. The basic concept of the policy is that parents have the ability to intervene in their child's school if that school is performing poorly. This intervention comes in the form of signatures – by gaining enough signatures from parents (number of signatures needed depends on the law), actions can be taken against the low-performing school in question. Actions can include: charter school conversion, replacing some school administration and faculty, school closure, curriculum redesign, and other actions as specified in state statute.

While each state has taken a slightly different approach, there are some common provisions included by most states:

- A process by which parents of children attending a low-performing school can sign a petition that initiates an intervention in the operation of the school
- List of intervention options that are available to parents
- Description of the role of the state education agency in determining what happens to the school
- Appeal process for the school district overseeing the targeted school

### **Where is parent trigger being implemented? Does my state have one?**

As of July 2012, more than 20 states have considered parent trigger legislation. Seven states have enacted some version of a parent trigger including:

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|----------------|----------------|
| 1. California  | 5. Mississippi |
| 2. Connecticut | 6. Ohio        |
| 3. Indiana     | 7. Texas       |
| 4. Louisiana   |                |

It is likely that many more states will consider some form of "parent trigger" in 2013.

### **What are the arguments for and against parent trigger, generally speaking?**

Advocates of parent trigger claim that the traditional procedures for turning around low-performing schools are too slow and heavily influenced by political interests, not necessarily the students' interests. Proponents argue that parent trigger affords parents a more active role in how their child's school is managed. Supporters hope that the existence of a parent trigger law will encourage schools and districts to be more accountable to parents and the community and better communicate existing school improvement efforts in order to avoid having the parent trigger "pulled".

Opponents claim that there are mechanisms already in place to intervene in low-performing schools. They point to school accountability committees and local school boards as the existing means for

parents to be involved in the operation of their child's school. They also worry that parents may not be aware of the changes low-performing schools have already made such as hiring new administration and teachers. Some raise concerns that corporate charter school operators are using these laws to expand their business, an argument that some states look to address by prohibiting charter school operators from funding petition campaigns.

Opponents argue that should a trigger be pulled, parents are ill-equipped or prepared to actually operate and manage a school. Proponents claim that no parent-trigger legislation includes an independently parent-operated school as an available intervention. Instead, statute seeks to involve parents in decisions concerning school conversion and subsequent school operation, such as parent involvement in the development and judging of criteria upon which a competition for school management would be based.

### **Does PTA endorse *Won't Back Down*?**

PTA does not review or endorse films. *Won't Back Down* sheds light on the urgency for educational improvements that too many of today's families, students, and teachers are facing, and highlights community collaboration to benefit students and teachers. PTA encourages all PTA members to engage in an informed dialogue around this and other education reform issues.

### **Does PTA support or oppose parent trigger?**

National PTA has not taken a position in support of or opposition to any parent trigger legislation considered or enacted. National PTA supports legislation that empowers parents to be engaged in their child's education, is reflective of community interests, prioritizes student achievement and builds systemic and sustainable family-school partnerships.

### **But I've heard that PTA opposes parent trigger – why is this?**

National PTA consists of 54 PTA Congresses advocating to improve the lives of children in all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Department of Defense schools in Europe. The landscape of education reform varies from state to state, and state-level PTAs are best equipped to judge the merits of reform proposals in their respective states. State-level parent trigger legislation that has garnered formal PTA opposition to-date have been proposals that allow for-profit management and private tuition vouchers as possible actions resulting from a successful parent trigger.

### **Does PTA support teachers and teachers' unions?**

National PTA is an association of parents, teachers and citizens who wish to improve the education, health and safety of America's children and we have dedicated our work to that mission for more than 116 years. National PTA has no formal affiliation with education unions or other professional associations.

PTA leaders seeking additional information on parent trigger legislation should contact Elizabeth Rorick, Director of Government Affairs, at [erorick@pta.org](mailto:erorick@pta.org) (703)518-1219.