

Why the “parent trigger” is Essential to Promoting Excellence in Urban Schools?

Prepared by

Marlon C. James, Ph.D.
University of Connecticut
Neag School of Education
Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership

An analysis of scale scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress reveals that the average African and Latino American student in Connecticut has remained below basic in all core subjects from 1990-2009. The CMT results for 2009 revealed at least a 30-percentage point gap between minority students (African and Latino American) and White Americans in every subject and across all grade levels. The widespread and persistent nature of underachievement in urban schools across Connecticut is well established and necessitates several proactive measures to disrupt ineffective educational thought and practice.

The so-called “parent trigger” is a central measure needed to empower communities negatively impacted by decades of ineffective teaching, leadership and school reform. It, along with other measures will create urgency within the educational community to address the collective indifference in school cultures that expect and accept failure as the norm. The push for the “parent trigger” signifies an evolving level engagement within the African American and Hispanic communities. This movement further affirms that parents in urban Connecticut truly care for their children. Yet, after a half-century of failed policy and reform efforts parents are now organizing for a formal voice in the school improvement process.

This voice is routinely exercised by suburban parents, whose combined economic and educational power make it difficult for schools to ignore the best practices that promote the academic, social and emotional development of learners. This responsiveness to these needs motivates parents to stay engaged with local schools to ensure accountability, and to provide the parental support that every school needs. This cycle of support and success does not directly apply in urban communities, because: (1) parents lack the combined economic and educational power to hold schools accountable; (2) urban schools as a whole have not effectively responded to needs of learners and communities; (3) the widespread and persistent failure in schools along racial and social class lines contributes to parental disappointment and disengagement.

The purposed “parent trigger” along with other measures will provide a level of power to communities needed to promote the responsiveness of schools. Transforming how teachers and school leaders are prepared to meet the needs of urban learners will increase schools’ responsiveness. Lastly, a Community Empowerment Plan will formally organize parents and the community in structured support of urban schools and learners.

Community Empowerment Plan

Mutual Accountability Plan

1. Call for Transformation "parent trigger"
2. Community Advisory & Reform Counsel (majority parents, chaired by PTO president)
3. PTO's with 51% participation in school related activities

Family-Teacher Partnership Plan

1. Expectations Plan
2. Two P/T conferences
3. Family Communication Plan each family
4. Behavioral Plan each student

Faith, Community & School Based Initiatives

1. Mentoring
2. Tutoring
3. Homework Clubs
4. Community Education