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L.A. STORY

Can a Parent Revolution Change Urban Education's Power Structure?

by Joe Williams and Tom Mirga

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Education Sector is an independent education think tank based in Washington, D.C. It is a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization devoted to developing innovative solutions to the nation's most pressing educational problems. The organization seeks to be a dependable source of sound thinking on education policy and an honest broker of evidence in key education debates in Washington and nationally.

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In 1990 Steve Barr "rocked the vote" in America by helping to engineer an upswing in voting among 18- to 24-year-olds with the help of musicians and other pop culture icons. Now the 47-year-old political operative and education entrepreneur is tapping into the frustrations of working-class parents in Los Angeles to rock the city's public schools to their core.

Barr, the founder and chief executive of a nonprofit network of Los Angeles charter schools, is rallying thousands of mostly Latino parents to the cause of school reform and using that political clout to force changes in the 727,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the nation's second-largest school system.

In mid-July he sought California State Board of Education approval to open as many of the independent, innovative public schools as the state board thinks practical between 2007 and 2012—without interference from LAUSD, which normally plays a prominent role in the process. The state board, which has granted a charter school operator such sweeping freedom only once before, is expected to approve Barr's request in September.

Barr, however, claims that he will not use the power if he receives it, at least not immediately. Instead, he is using the threat to create new charter schools, publicly funded but largely autonomous elementary and secondary schools, to persuade the politicians, bureaucrats and union leaders who run LAUSD to reorient its 858 schools around six principles—small, safe schools with no more than 500 students, high expectations and a college-preparatory curriculum for all students, local control with extensive professional development and accountability, more dollars directed into the classroom, parent participation and keeping schools open later for community use. These are the guiding tenets of Barr's Green Dot charter network, which now numbers five high schools and will double to 10 this fall, bringing the total number of charter schools in the city to 105.

"It's just insurance," Barr said of his petition to the state board. "We will exhaust all efforts to work with the district but just in case we have this in our hip pocket."[1]

To drive the point home, Barr recently announced the formation of a "parents union" to press for change to better meet the needs of LAUSD's students, 70 percent of whom are Latino. Parents and others at the event to announce the group's formation were not shy about identifying the main focus of their ire—the powerful, 40,000-member United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA). As one Latino mother said at the press conference through a Spanish interpreter: "There are lots of good teachers in the district but there are more bad teachers. But we can't hold teachers accountable because they are so well protected by their union. … So we need a union to help us too."[2]

Angry parent groups are commonplace in American education. But most have parochial gripes—a school principal's irresponsiveness to families' wants and desires, a school district's teaching of a controversial course. It is far less typical for parents to rise en masse as they have in Los Angeles to challenge a vast school district's entire power structure and to demand changes in the school system's basic principles. And such "outsider" movements rarely have possessed an "insider" like Barr who can organize citizens, raise considerable sums of cash, keep its members focused on a single message, and enlist politically powerful backers to its cause.

Barr and his supporting cast have transformed Los Angeles into an educational drama that could have consequences far beyond the City of Angels. Events in the coming weeks and months will show whether a movement such as Barr's can not only achieve its immediate goals, but also become a lasting force for change and a model for parents in the nation's many other troubled, big-city school systems.

Fighting for Control

Barr and the parents have launched their revolution during one of the most tumultuous periods in LAUSD's history.

New mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Los Angeles' first Latino leader in more than a century, is fighting for control of the city's schools, just as school superintendent Roy Romer, a three-time former governor of Colorado and leading national voice on education policy, is retiring after six years on the job. The mayor recently agreed to give the city's elected school board a greater role under his still-evolving mayoral-control plan that's now before the state legislature. So it's unclear who will have a say on Romer's replacement in a reshuffled LAUSD power structure, which officials the new school chief would serve, and in what direction he or she would take the school district, especially given the local teacher union's strong influence over the elected board.

Whoever takes the helm at LAUSD clearly has his or her work cut out. Despite gains in student achievement since Romer took office, LAUSD remains plagued by a host of problems. Gary Orfield of the Harvard Civil Rights Project calls the city's high schools "dropout factories." He estimates that less than half of LAUSD's incoming freshmen graduate four years later. The Latino graduation rate is even worse: just 39 percent. And the newspaper *Education Week* recently published figures pegging the district graduation rate even lower than Orfield's. Moreover, an estimated three-quarters of LAUSD ninth-graders read below grade level, a clear indication of troubles in the district's elementary and middle schools.

Latino and other minority students bear the brunt of the system's problems. The University of California Los Angeles' Institute for Democracy, Education and Access, for example, found in 2004 that 60 percent of the city's schools with a majority Latino and black enrollment lacked qualified teachers. The comparable figure for majority-white schools was 25 percent.

Community activists also argue that the unreasonably small number of students who do graduate from high school have taken a watered-down curriculum that does not qualify them for admission to California's university system.

During their time in school students also endure severe overcrowding because of LAUSD's failure to build enough schools. Average class sizes in middle and high schools exceed 35. By one 2005 estimate, there were 165,000 more students in LAUSD schools than there were available seats. Many of the city's high schools are so overcrowded that they operate on staggered, year-round schedules, where students are divided into three groups, with only two groups in attendance at a time. To make this unhappy game of musical chairs work, the district must cut each group's school year by nearly 17 days and lengthen its school day by nearly 40 minutes.

As Villaraigosa remarked in his 2006 State of the City address:

> *"Unless we face the crisis in our schools, we will never truly hold ourselves to account. We can't be a great global city if we lose half of our work force before they graduate from high school. We'll never realize the promise of our people if we choose to remain a city where 81 percent of middle school students are trapped in failing schools. I believe we need to make our schools more accountable."*[3]

Villaraigosa symbolizes the Latino community's emergence as a political force. In 1993, when Richard Riordan was elected mayor, the Latino share of the electorate was just 10 percent. By last year's election, it had jumped to 25 percent.[4]

Exit polls showed that education was the top issue among all voters in last year's mayoral race, particularly among Latinos. Aides to Villaraigosa say Latinos are more likely than whites or African-Americans to support bold school reforms, not simply for their children's sake but also because they are less connected than whites or African-Americans to LAUSD through jobs or contracts.

"They [Latinos] overwhelmingly feel the system is broken," one aide said. "It's like, 'I don't care what it takes to fix it, but please do fix it.'"

Urban Crusader

Barr has made it his mission to see that their demands are met. A veteran of three Democratic presidential campaigns, Barr helped orchestrate efforts to pass the federal Motor Voter Bill in 1994 following his success with Rock The Vote in 1990. He then oversaw an Americorps after-school project in South Central and East Los Angeles focused on helping single mothers make the transition off welfare. A fundraiser for many Democratic and liberal causes, acquaintances say Barr is as comfortable with public housing residents as he is with power brokers.

In 1999 Barr had $100,000 in the bank. After his time working in some of Los Angeles' worst neighborhoods, he says he resolved to help fix the one public institution that he believes can make a difference for low-income Americans: public education.

A friend, Netflix-founder Reed Hastings, introduced Barr to the charter school concept. After consulting education professors at Loyola Marymount University, Barr spent his life savings to create Green Dot Public Schools in the fall of 2000, and it opened its first school, Animo Leadership Charter High School, in the Lennox School District near Los Angeles International Airport.

On paper, Barr's schools seem to be besting the local competition. His five existing schools outperform comparable ones on California's Academic Performance Indicators (API). In 2004, Green Dot students taking the California High School Exit Examination outscored those in nearby traditional public schools in reading and math but lagged behind statewide averages in both subjects.

Barr insisted that Green Dot's teachers unionize. But the Green Dot teachers do not belong to the UTLA. Instead, they have a separate bargaining unit affiliated with the powerful California Teachers Association (CTA). Critics say Barr has created a lapdog "company union." But Barr points out that Green Dot teachers earn more than UTLA members even though their schools receive less revenue per pupil than LAUSD schools. Furthermore, he adds, the competition brought by CTA ratchets up pressure on the UTLA to reform itself and the school district.

Ten Thousand Signatures

Barr's first major battle with LAUSD revolved around Thomas Jefferson High School in South Los Angeles. In May 2005, the 2,500-student school suffered a series of fights between African-American and Latino pupils that had to be quelled by police in riot gear. Barr subsequently called on LAUSD to hand Jefferson over to Green Dot, which would break up the school into six smaller and better charters.

Superintendent Romer, who pressed for and signed one of the nation's first charter laws as governor of Colorado, rebuffed the Green Dot bid as a "hostile takeover." But Barr was undeterred. "Over time, we are going to change this school, one way or another," he declared.[5]

Working with community groups including Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles and the Hispanic Clergy Council, Barr set up an office in a housing project across the street from the school. He and his allies handed out coffee and explained their position to teachers on their way to work. They also canvassed the neighborhood and encouraged parents and teachers who joined them to recruit others to the cause.

"The people in this community have been BS'ed, photo-op'ed and handled to death—and we hit a nerve," Barr said. "This concept resonated with people."

Barr and his allies had clearly touched a nerve in Los Angeles' Latino community. By November 2005 they had collected 10,000 signatures on a petition supporting Green Dot's takeover bid. In a show of force, he organized a two-mile "parents march" that ended with a protest rally in front of LAUSD's Beaudry Avenue headquarters.

"We are not here to point fingers at people," Barr declared at the rally. "We are here to bring hope, to bring a model that works—to make Jefferson High School the best high school in the city."[6]

Romer greeted the energetic crowd and acknowledged its concerns but refused to turn over the campus. Instead, he used the event to announce a plan to send 800 Jefferson students to four other neighborhood schools to relieve overcrowding. He also pledged to divide Jefferson into six smaller "learning communities."

But Barr and his army of parents persisted, and eventually Romer and the school board relented and let Green Dot open five charter schools in the neighborhood surrounding Jefferson. This fall those schools will compete head-to-head against the troubled school that Barr and his allies had hoped to take over.

To prepare for the schools' opening, Barr's Green Dot sent out thousands of mailings and held dozens of community meetings and persuaded Romer to lease school district property for two of the five schools. The Los Angeles-based Wasserman Foundation also gave the group a $6 million grant to help open the schools on time for the 2006–07 school year. And in May 2006 several hundred parents crammed inside Victory Baptist Church for the schools' lottery to select students: More than 1,000 students applied for the 640 seats in the schools' freshman class.

UTLA president A.J. Duffy dismissed the scene at the church as a publicity stunt. "All it shows is that Steve Barr is a good salesman," Duffy told the *Los Angeles Times*. "He knows how to sell his product. And Jefferson, which is making strides, is not."[7]

Many LAUSD educators apparently disagree with Duffy, however, and are voting with their feet. All but one of the 10 principals and assistant principals Green Dot hired to lead the five new schools were recruited from LAUSD. Those administrators, in turn, hired most of their 35 teachers from the district.

One new Green Dot teacher, Yadira Funes, was a Jefferson graduate who went on to teach math there for four years. "My plans had always been to stay at Jefferson," she said. "I thought it was the best way to help my community. But throughout these years, it's become clear that it is not possible. The school district isn't giving us the support we need."[8]

Front-Burner Issue

Last year's fight over Jefferson's future occurred during one of the most momentous mayoral races in the city's history.

Initially, public education was a minor issue in the campaign. As a *Los Angeles Times* article put it, "education has not been a front-burner issue for the major candidates in this year's race for mayor, an office that has no jurisdiction over the schools."[9]

Barr and his compatriots sought to change that. They created a group called the Small Schools Alliance (SSA) to press the candidates to adopt Green Dot's six guiding principles as the basis for their education platforms. In February 2005, the group began spending $1.5 million in donated funds on television ads promoting education reform in the months leading up to the election. "We decided we were going to be the Swift Boat Vets of the mayor's race," Barr said.

SSA sent letters to all of the candidates asking them to sign a pledge of support for Green Dot's tenets. Incumbent Mayor James Hahn was the first to sign. Villaraigosa, a city councilman and former state Assembly speaker who soon emerged as Hahn's chief competitor, signed shortly after Hahn publicly challenged him to do so. Barr recalled a pasta dinner he had with Villaraigosa days before he signed the pledge. "He said nothing in the city is going to change unless there is a widespread parental revolt," Barr recalled. "I don't know if he was saying that to get rid of us, but he was right."

Soon the two candidates began trying to outdo one another with the boldest school reform plan. At an April 2005 SSA event, Hahn pledged to seek the power to select three of the LAUSD board's seven members, to launch five new charter schools a year directly from the mayor's office and to pay teachers $15,000 bonuses to work in the city's toughest schools.

Villaraigosa upped the ante two days later. At an event at a Green Dot school sponsored by the SSA, he stunned even some of his own aides by calling for a total mayoral takeover of the school system. "I think there is a critical mass of support out there where people want to see one person accountable," Villaraigosa said. "I think that should be the mayor."[10]

Villaraigosa went on to win the May 2005 election in no small part due to that promise. He unveiled portions of his plan in his 2006 State of the City address, including smaller schools, more charter schools and a longer school day and year. But his concept of broad mayoral power over the schools similar to that enjoyed by the mayor of Chicago soon began to unravel, even before the plan was formally introduced in the state legislature. Officials of the other 26 cities that make up LAUSD objected, and the UTLA and CTA recoiled at the idea of a disempowered LAUSD board, over which they hold strong influence, and lobbied strenuously and effectively against Villaraigosa in Sacramento, the state capital.

In June 2006, Villaraigosa went to Sacramento to renegotiate the terms of his initiative with UTLA and CTA officials. Under the new plan, which was formally introduced in the state legislature and quickly passed by the Senate Education Committee, the LAUSD board would remain an elected body and retain considerable authority over teacher contracts, budgets and the selection and dismissal of principals. The mayors of the 27 cities served by LAUSD would collectively hold veto power over the board's nominee for superintendent, with the Los Angeles mayor exerting ultimate veto authority. The bill, which Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has pledged

to sign, now faces a vote in the Senate Appropriations Committee. To strengthen his hand in Sacramento, Villaraigosa in late July named Ramon Cortines, a highly regarded former LAUSD superintendent, as deputy mayor for education, youth, and families.

Barr's efforts to make public education a central issue in the 2005 mayoral campaign and keep it on the front burner during Villaraigosa's first year in office has made his relationship to the mayor one of the most important in the Los Angeles story. Barr claims that Villaraigosa, who once worked as an organizer for the UTLA and whose wife is a public school teacher, has promised to go along with his plan to transform LAUSD. The mayor, in turn, has kind words for Barr's Green Dot schools, but the exact nature and strength of their relationship is unclear.

Coffee Talks

When Barr traveled to Sacramento in June 2006, for a hearing on the mayor's reform plan, he was baffled by the presence of 50 parents bused to the capital by LAUSD to speak on behalf of the district's parents.

"I thought, that's a sham," he said. "Nobody's organized parents in a real way. When I saw the parents, they were not the parents I knew. And I don't know what they do. They seem to speak for I don't know who and I don't know what for. They seemingly speak in unison with those who protect the status quo, like the teachers union and the LAUSD bureaucracy."[11]

Barr returned to Los Angeles and sprang into action, quickly announcing the creation of the nonprofit Los Angeles Parents Union. He was accompanied at a press conference by about 70 parents, each of whom pledged to recruit three or four others until the group achieves critical mass in the political arena.

"I think it's time for parents to say 'Enough,' for us to be united, to claim our rights and our benefits," said parent Ignacio Garcia, whose three children attended Thomas Jefferson High School.[12]

The group, which sponsored "teach-ins" and "coffee talks" for parents across Los Angeles in July, aims to counterbalance the UTLA and other vested interests, Barr said, and the group will move quickly to influence the legislation sought by Villaraigosa. Its long-term objective, however, is to fundamentally reorder LAUSD's priorities.

Barr is far from the only person—and his group is far from the only one—working to improve education and life outcomes for Los Angeles' disadvantaged. Others, for instance, led recent efforts to prod LAUSD to build the first new high school in East Los Angeles in 80 years and to guarantee all high school students access to college-track courses.

Romer, meanwhile, can justifiably claim that the district began moving in the right direction during his tenure. Test scores are up in all grade levels and growing at a faster rate than the statewide average. In the next few years LAUSD will also complete one of the most ambitious school construction plans in the nation's history. This simply is not the time, he says, to jettison reforms that have helped the district turn a corner.

"This is not a failing district," Romer declared in a stinging rebuke of the mayor's takeover campaign during a State of the Schools address in July. "This is a district that has had more success than any other metropolitan district in California in the last six years."[13]

UTLA president Duffy offered a different assessment. "Everything is about education now for politicians, because we're an easy whipping boy," he said. "Public education in Los Angeles is, in fact, succeeding. The Los Angeles Unified School District is getting better. With all due respect, I want to tell politicians and newspaper reporters 'Go to hell, we're doing it'."[14]

School Board president Marlene Canter, meanwhile, has expressed concerns that Barr's parents union is too connected to Villaraigosa's political agenda and notes that there are already many independent parent groups in the city.

Others in the city with a stake in LAUSD question whether Barr's group will help bring about meaningful reform. "I see it, quite frankly, as a lot of noise," said Daniel Katzir, managing director of the Broad Foundation, one of the city's leading education philanthropies.* "My sense is that

*The Broad Foundation is also an Education Sector funder.

it is not actually moving toward a productive end." Mayor Villaraigosa's recent pledge to roll back his demands for unilateral authority over the city's schools and instead share power with the city's elected school board—a move prompted by signals from influential lawmakers in Sacramento that in the face of intense teacher union lobbying the mayor didn't have the votes for a complete take-over—suggests the magnitude of Barr's challenge.

For his part, the Broad Foundation's influential benefactor, Eli Broad, a strong proponent of mayoral control in education, was so frustrated by the reversal of Villariagosa's fortunes—and the prospect that Villariagosa's compromise might undermine efforts to give mayors more authority in education—that he recently sent Villaraigosa an open letter suggesting that the city would perhaps be better off if the power-sharing plan now pending in Sacramento didn't pass.[15]

But Barr is convinced that parental discontent can drive school reform in Los Angeles and beyond. "There are a lot of parents [at the parents union meetings] who are in communities that are coming to Green Dot and asking them to open charter schools in their neighborhood out of desperation," Barr said. "What we're saying to them is, 'Hey, forget opening charter schools in your neighborhoods. Let's organize and take over the existing schools and demand that all schools have the same values as our charter schools.'"[16]

The new parents union intends to be a force in electoral politics, Barr declared. "If people get in the way, we may need to replace them. When there's only 10,000 to 20,000 votes in a school district board election, and you're organizing parents by the thousands, they're going to have a say."[17]

Barr himself could be a candidate in one of those elections. Though he says he's happy with the current mayor, "In the future I would consider running if I felt I could get to systematic change faster…. I don't think we can get to the vision of where I want the public education system to be without stepping up and running. And, yes, mayor would be one of those positions."

Endnotes

[1] Naush Boghossian, "Charter Operator May Get Own Say," Los Angeles *Daily News*, July 11, 2007.

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[6] R.W. Dellinger, "Parents March to Break Up Jefferson High School," *Tidings*, Nov. 25, 2005.

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[12] *Ibid*.

[13] Joel Rubin and Duke Helfand, "Superintendent Romer Lashes Out at Villaraigosa for Criticism" *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 2006.

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[15] Duke Helfand and Joel Rubin, "Broad Attacks Villaraigosa's Plan for Schools," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 2006.

[16] Alison Hewitt, "LAUSD Parents Demand Changes," *The Daily Breeze*, July 7, 2006.

[17] *Ibid*.