

Reviews and Analysis of *Waiting for Superman* Documentary

Folks, please note: even though the film and reviews here are little dated, the issues they raise are still very much with us today. So, read, digest, and ponder this question: What five things would you do to reform the educational system, if someone gave you a magic wand? Note, however, that this question is only asking you to look at the “educational” side of things and not at the “societal” side of things in a capitalist **democracy**. Schools do not exist in a vacuum! Therefore, as you think about these matters do not fall into the trap of scapegoating schools for the problems created by a **capitalist** society—which includes a working class that, in terms of **political consciousness**, has basically “checked out,” meaning it refuses to take responsibility for the need to create, through tough political work in the face of an ever virulent **class warfare** being waged against it by the capitalist class, a “socially responsible” capitalist system (while its waiting for the illusory revolution to come promised by pseudo-liberals and their allies, the **bourgeois** left!). (See the course glossary for definitions of bolded words.)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/24/movies/24waiting.html>

Movie Review | 'Waiting for Superman'

Waiting for 'Superman' (2010)

Students Caught in the School Squeeze

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

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“One of the saddest days of my life was when my mother told me ‘Superman’ did not exist,” the educational reformer [Geoffrey Canada](#) recalls in the opening moments of [“Waiting for ‘Superman.’”](#) a powerful and alarming documentary about America’s failing public school system. “She thought I was crying because it’s like Santa Claus is not real. I was crying because no one was coming with enough power to save us.”

If Mr. Canada, who was born in the South Bronx and grew up to be one of the country’s most [charismatic and inspiring educators](#), is not Superman, he must be a close relative. Those who have read Paul Tough’s book, “Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada’s Quest to Change Harlem and America,” will know that the 97-block Harlem Children’s Zone, which he founded and runs, is no miracle. The zone is astoundingly successful at getting children through high school and into college. But that success, largely dependent on private money, is a costly product of laborious trial and error.

Mr. Canada and Michelle A. Rhee, the chancellor of the Washington, D.C., public school system since 2007 (she is the seventh superintendent in 10 years), are the principal heroes of the film, directed and narrated by Davis Guggenheim (“An Inconvenient Truth”), who wrote it with Billy Kimball.

Ms. Rhee, who has stridently challenged Washington’s educational status quo, has closed ineffective schools and has stood up to the unions that have made it nearly impossible to fire a teacher, no matter how incompetent, once tenure has been granted. But the Washington Teachers’ Union refused to vote on a measure under which teachers would give up tenure in exchange for higher salaries based on merit. (Ms. Rhee’s status is now in jeopardy after one of her chief supporters, Mayor [Adrian M. Fenty](#), lost the Democratic primary election to [Vincent C. Gray](#), the chairman of the City Council. Ms. Rhee and Mr. Gray, who have sparred in recent years, met on Thursday.)

[“Waiting for ‘Superman.’”](#) is filled with disturbing statistics. In Illinois, where one in 57 doctors loses his medical license and one in 97 lawyers loses his law license, only one in 2,500 teachers loses his credentials, because of union rules. The film briefly visits a “rubber room” in New York City where idle teachers accused of misconduct wait months and sometimes years for hearings while drawing full salaries at an annual cost of \$65 million.

The resistance to change is personified by [Randi Weingarten](#), the fiery and articulate former head of the [United Federation of Teachers](#), who now runs the [American Federation of Teachers](#). Ms. Weingarten, who is somewhat demonized by the film, is the first to admit that public education is in crisis, but she represents thousands of teachers who depend on tenure.

Caught in the squeeze are students. The film’s most emotional moments revolve around five children whose futures depend on winning a lottery to a [charter school](#). Anthony, a Washington fifth grader raised by his grandmother in a bad neighborhood, is among 64 applicants

for 24 spots at the Seed School, a public charter school from which 9 out of 10 students go on to college. Francisco, a Bronx first grader, is among 792 applicants for 40 spots at the Harlem Success Academy. Applying to the same school, Bianca, a kindergartner, is one of 767 children competing for 35 spots. Daisy, a fifth grader in East Los Angeles who dreams of being doctor, is among 135 applicants for 10 spots at Kipp LA Prep.

Finally, there is Emily, an eighth grader in Silicon Valley, whose problems with math will place her on a lower academic track if she remains at the same high school in her affluent community. Her best hope is to be accepted at an even better charter school nearby where students aren't placed in such tracks.

In his low-key narration, Mr. Guggenheim acknowledges that charter schools have had mixed success in elevating academic standards and preparing children for college. But in the Harlem Children's Zone, the schools become involved with all aspects of the students' lives from a very young age.

Mr. Guggenheim calls dysfunctional schools "dropout factories." For children growing up in poor neighborhoods where parents lack the resources to send them to private schools, the consequences can be dire, not to mention economically wasteful.

Consider the following statistics cited in the film: the annual cost of prison for an inmate is more than double what is spent on an individual public school student. Eight years after Congress passed the [No Child Left Behind](#) act, with the goal of 100 percent proficiency in math and reading, most states hovered between 20 and 30 percent proficiency, and 70 percent of eighth graders could not read at grade level. By 2020, only an estimated 50 million Americans will be qualified to fill 123 million highly skilled, highly paid jobs. Among 30 developed countries, the United States ranks 25th in math and 21st in science.

"Waiting for 'Superman'" doesn't explore the deeper changes in American society that have led to this crisis: the widening gap between rich and poor, the loosening of the social contract, the coarsening of the culture and the despair of the underclass. By showing how fiercely dedicated idealists are making a difference, it is a call to arms.

The movie's happy-sad ending observes the moment of decision as the five children wait to learn if they have won the lotteries. It is sad that the direction of a young life depends on the dropping of a numbered ball from plexiglass box.

"Waiting for 'Superman'" is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested). It has mild language and incidental smoking.

Waiting for 'Superman'

Opens on Friday in New York and Los Angeles.

Directed by Davis Guggenheim; written by Mr. Guggenheim and Billy Kimball; director of photography, Erich Roland and Bob Richman; edited by Greg Finton, Jay Cassidy and Kim Roberts; original song "Shine" by John Legend; produced by Lesley Chilcott; released by Paramount Vantage. Running time: 1 hour 42 minutes.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/11/myth-charter-schools/>

The Myth of Charter Schools

[Diane Ravitch](#)

[November 11, 2010 Issue](#)

Waiting for "Superman" a film directed by Davis Guggenheim

Ordinarily, documentaries about education attract little attention, and seldom, if ever, reach neighborhood movie theaters. Davis Guggenheim's *Waiting for "Superman"* is different. It arrived in late September with the biggest publicity splash I have ever seen for a documentary. Not only was it the subject of major stories in *Time* and *New York*, but it was featured twice on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and was the centerpiece of several days of programming by NBC, including an interview with President Obama.

Two other films expounding the same arguments—*The Lottery* and *The Cartel*—were released in the late spring, but they received far less attention than Guggenheim's film. His reputation as the director of the Academy Award-winning *An Inconvenient Truth*, about global warming, contributed to the anticipation surrounding *Waiting for "Superman,"* but the media frenzy suggested something more. Guggenheim presents the popularized version of an account of American public education that is promoted by some of the nation's most powerful figures and institutions.

The message of these films has become alarmingly familiar: American public education is a failed enterprise. The problem is not money. Public schools already spend too much. Test scores are low because there are so many bad teachers, whose jobs are protected by powerful unions. Students drop out because the schools fail them, but they could accomplish practically anything if they were saved from bad teachers. They would get higher test scores if schools could fire more bad teachers and pay more to good ones. The only hope for the

future of our society, especially for poor black and Hispanic children, is escape from public schools, especially to charter schools, which are mostly funded by the government but controlled by private organizations, many of them operating to make a profit.

The Cartel maintains that we must not only create more charter schools, but provide vouchers so that children can flee incompetent public schools and attend private schools. There, we are led to believe, teachers will be caring and highly skilled (unlike the lazy dullards in public schools); the schools will have high expectations and test scores will soar; and all children will succeed academically, regardless of their circumstances. *The Lottery* echoes the main story line of *Waiting for "Superman"*: it is about children who are desperate to avoid the New York City public schools and eager to win a spot in a shiny new charter school in Harlem.

For many people, these arguments require a willing suspension of disbelief. Most Americans graduated from public schools, and most went from school to college or the workplace without thinking that their school had limited their life chances. There was a time—which now seems distant—when most people assumed that students' performance in school was largely determined by their own efforts and by the circumstances and support of their family, not by their teachers. There were good teachers and mediocre teachers, even bad teachers, but in the end, most public schools offered ample opportunity for education to those willing to pursue it. The annual Gallup poll about education shows that Americans are overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the quality of the nation's schools, but 77 percent of public school parents award their own child's public school a grade of A or B, the highest level of approval since the question was first asked in 1985.

Waiting for "Superman" and the other films appeal to a broad apprehension that the nation is falling behind in global competition. If the economy is a shambles, if poverty persists for significant segments of the population, if American kids are not as serious about their studies as their peers in other nations, the schools must be to blame. At last we have the culprit on which we can pin our anger, our palpable sense that something is very wrong with our society, that we are on the wrong track, and that America is losing the race for global dominance. It is not globalization or deindustrialization or poverty or our coarse popular culture or predatory financial practices that bear responsibility: it's the public schools, their teachers, and their unions.

The inspiration for *Waiting for "Superman"* began, Guggenheim explains, as he drove his own children to a private school, past the neighborhood schools with low test scores. He wondered about the fate of the children whose families did not have the choice of schools available to his own children. What was the quality of their education? He was sure it must be terrible. The press release for the film says that he wondered, "How heartsick and worried did *their* parents feel as they dropped their kids off this morning?" Guggenheim is a graduate of Sidwell Friends, the elite private school in Washington, D.C., where President Obama's daughters are enrolled. The public schools that he passed by each morning must have seemed as hopeless and dreadful to him as the public schools in Washington that his own parents had shunned.

Waiting for "Superman" tells the story of five children who enter a lottery to win a coveted place in a charter school. Four of them seek to escape the public schools; one was asked to leave a Catholic school because her mother couldn't afford the tuition. Four of the children are black or Hispanic and live in gritty neighborhoods, while the one white child lives in a leafy suburb. We come to know each of these children and their families; we learn about their dreams for the future; we see that they are lovable; and we identify with them. By the end of the film, we are rooting for them as the day of the lottery approaches.

In each of the schools to which they have applied, the odds against them are large. Anthony, a fifth-grader in Washington, D.C., applies to the SEED charter boarding school, where there are sixty-one applicants for twenty-four places. Francisco is a first-grade student in the Bronx whose mother (a social worker with a graduate degree) is desperate to get him out of the New York City public schools and into a charter school; she applies to Harlem Success Academy where he is one of 792 applicants for forty places. Bianca is the kindergarten student in Harlem whose mother cannot afford Catholic school tuition; she enters the lottery at another Harlem Success Academy, as one of 767 students competing for thirty-five openings. Daisy is a fifth-grade student in East Los Angeles whose parents hope she can win a spot at KIPP LA PREP, where 135 students have applied for ten places. Emily is an eighth-grade student in Silicon Valley, where the local high school has gorgeous facilities, high graduation rates, and impressive test scores, but her family worries that she will be assigned to a slow track because of her low test scores; so they enter the lottery for Summit Preparatory Charter High School, where she is one of 455 students competing for 110 places.

The stars of the film are Geoffrey Canada, the CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, which provides a broad variety of social services to families and children and runs two charter schools; Michelle Rhee, chancellor of the Washington, D.C., public school system, who closed schools, fired teachers and principals, and gained a national reputation for her tough policies; David Levin and Michael Feinberg, who have built a network of nearly one hundred high-performing KIPP charter schools over the past sixteen years; and Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who is cast in the role of chief villain. Other charter school leaders, like Steve Barr of the Green Dot chain in Los Angeles, do star turns, as does Bill Gates of Microsoft, whose foundation has invested many millions of dollars in expanding the number of charter schools. No successful public school teacher or principal or superintendent appears in the film; indeed there is no mention of any successful public school, only the incessant drumbeat on the theme of public school failure.

The situation is dire, the film warns us. We must act. But what must we do? The message of the film is clear. Public schools are bad, privately managed charter schools are good. Parents clamor to get their children out of the public schools in New York City (despite the claims by Mayor Michael Bloomberg that the city's schools are better than ever) and into the charters (the mayor also plans to double the number of charters, to help more families escape from the public schools that he controls). If we could fire the bottom 5 to 10 percent of the lowest-performing teachers every year, says Hoover Institution economist Eric Hanushek in the film, our national test scores would soon approach the top of international rankings in mathematics and science.

Some fact-checking is in order, and the place to start is with the film's quiet acknowledgment that only one in five charter schools is able to get the "amazing results" that it celebrates. Nothing more is said about this astonishing statistic. It is drawn from a national study of charter schools by Stanford economist Margaret Raymond (the wife of Hanushek). Known as the CREDO study, it evaluated student progress on math tests in half the nation's five thousand charter schools and concluded that 17 percent were superior to a matched traditional public school; 37 percent were worse than the public school; and the remaining 46 percent had academic gains no different from that of a similar public school. The proportion of charters that get amazing results is far smaller than 17 percent. Why did Davis Guggenheim pay no attention to the charter schools that are run by incompetent leaders or corporations mainly concerned to make money? Why propound to an unknowing public the myth that charter schools are the answer to our educational woes, when the filmmaker knows that there are twice as many failing charters as there are successful ones? Why not give an honest accounting?

The propagandistic nature of *Waiting for "Superman"* is revealed by Guggenheim's complete indifference to the wide variation among charter schools. There are excellent charter schools, just as there are excellent public schools. Why did he not also inquire into the charter chains that are mired in unsavory real estate deals, or take his camera to the charters where most students are getting lower scores than those in the neighborhood public schools? Why did he not report on the charter principals who have been indicted for embezzlement, or the charters that blur the line between church and state? Why did he not look into the charter schools whose leaders are paid \$300,000–\$400,000 a year to oversee small numbers of schools and students?

Guggenheim seems to believe that teachers alone can overcome the effects of student poverty, even though there are countless studies that demonstrate the link between income and test scores. He shows us footage of the pilot Chuck Yeager breaking the sound barrier, to the amazement of people who said it couldn't be done. Since Yeager broke the sound barrier, we should be prepared to believe that able teachers are all it takes to overcome the disadvantages of poverty, homelessness, joblessness, poor nutrition, absent parents, etc.

The movie asserts a central thesis in today's school reform discussion: the idea that teachers are the most important factor determining student achievement. But this proposition is false. Hanushek has released studies showing that teacher quality accounts for about 7.5–10 percent of student test score gains. Several other high-quality analyses echo this finding, and while estimates vary a bit, there is a relative consensus: teachers statistically account for around 10–20 percent of achievement outcomes. Teachers are the most important factor within schools.

But the same body of research shows that nonschool factors matter even more than teachers. According to University of Washington economist Dan Goldhaber, about 60 percent of achievement is explained by nonschool factors, such as family income. So while teachers are the most important factor within schools, their effects pale in comparison with those of students' backgrounds, families, and other factors beyond the control of schools and teachers. Teachers can have a profound effect on students, but it would be foolish to believe that teachers alone can undo the damage caused by poverty and its associated burdens.

Guggenheim skirts the issue of poverty by showing only families that are intact and dedicated to helping their children succeed. One of the children he follows is raised by a doting grandmother; two have single mothers who are relentless in seeking better education for them; two of them live with a mother and father. Nothing is said about children whose families are not available, for whatever reason, to support them, or about children who are homeless, or children with special needs. Nor is there any reference to the many charter schools that enroll disproportionately small numbers of children who are English-language learners or have disabilities.

The film never acknowledges that charter schools were created mainly at the instigation of Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers from 1974 to 1997. Shanker had the idea in 1988 that a group of public school teachers would ask their colleagues for permission to create a small school that would focus on the neediest students, those who had dropped out and those who were disengaged from school and likely to drop out. He sold the idea as a way to open schools that would collaborate with public schools and help motivate disengaged students. In 1993, Shanker turned against the charter school idea when he realized that for-profit organizations saw it as a business opportunity and were advancing an agenda of school privatization. Michelle Rhee gained her teaching experience in Baltimore as an employee of Education Alternatives, Inc., one of the first of the for-profit operations.

Today, charter schools are promoted not as ways to collaborate with public schools but as competitors that will force them to get better or go out of business. In fact, they have become the force for privatization that Shanker feared. Because of the high-stakes testing regime created by President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, charter schools compete to get higher test scores than regular public schools and thus have an incentive to avoid students who might pull down their scores. Under NCLB, low-performing schools may be closed, while high-performing ones may get bonuses. Some charter schools "counsel out" or expel students just before state testing day. Some have high attrition rates, especially among lower-performing students.

Perhaps the greatest distortion in this film is its misrepresentation of data about student academic performance. The film claims that 70 percent of eighth-grade students cannot read at grade level. This is flatly wrong. Guggenheim here relies on numbers drawn from the federally sponsored National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). I served as a member of the governing board for the national tests for seven years, and I know how misleading Guggenheim's figures are. NAEP doesn't measure performance in terms of grade-level achievement. The highest level of performance, "advanced," is equivalent to an A+, representing the highest possible academic performance. The next level, "proficient," is equivalent to an A or a very strong B. The next level is "basic," which probably translates into a C grade. The film assumes that any student below proficient is "below grade level." But it would be far more fitting to worry about students who are "below basic," who are 25 percent of the national sample, not 70 percent.

Guggenheim didn't bother to take a close look at the heroes of his documentary. Geoffrey Canada is justly celebrated for the creation of the Harlem Children's Zone, which not only runs two charter schools but surrounds children and their families with a broad array of social

and medical services. Canada has a board of wealthy philanthropists and a very successful fund-raising apparatus. With assets of more than \$200 million, his organization has no shortage of funds. Canada himself is currently paid \$400,000 annually. For Guggenheim to praise Canada while also claiming that public schools don't need any more money is bizarre. Canada's charter schools get better results than nearby public schools serving impoverished students. If all inner-city schools had the same resources as his, they might get the same good results.

But contrary to the myth that Guggenheim propounds about "amazing results," even Geoffrey Canada's schools have many students who are not proficient. On the 2010 state tests, 60 percent of the fourth-grade students in one of his charter schools were not proficient in reading, nor were 50 percent in the other. It should be noted—and Guggenheim didn't note it—that Canada kicked out his entire first class of middle school students when they didn't get good enough test scores to satisfy his board of trustees. This sad event was documented by Paul Tough in his laudatory account of Canada's Harlem Children's Zone, *Whatever It Takes* (2009). Contrary to Guggenheim's mythology, even the best-funded charters, with the finest services, can't completely negate the effects of poverty.

Guggenheim ignored other clues that might have gotten in the way of a good story. While blasting the teachers' unions, he points to Finland as a nation whose educational system the US should emulate, not bothering to explain that it has a completely unionized teaching force. His documentary showers praise on testing and accountability, yet he does not acknowledge that Finland seldom tests its students. Any Finnish educator will say that Finland improved its public education system not by privatizing its schools or constantly testing its students, but by investing in the preparation, support, and retention of excellent teachers. It achieved its present eminence not by systematically firing 5–10 percent of its teachers, but by patiently building for the future. Finland has a national curriculum, which is not restricted to the basic skills of reading and math, but includes the arts, sciences, history, foreign languages, and other subjects that are essential to a good, rounded education. Finland also strengthened its social welfare programs for children and families. Guggenheim simply ignores the realities of the Finnish system.

In any school reform proposal, the question of "scalability" always arises. Can reforms be reproduced on a broad scale? The fact that one school produces amazing results is not in itself a demonstration that every other school can do the same. For example, Guggenheim holds up Locke High School in Los Angeles, part of the Green Dot charter chain, as a success story but does not tell the whole story. With an infusion of \$15 million of mostly private funding, Green Dot produced a safer, cleaner campus, but no more than tiny improvements in its students' abysmal test scores. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the percentage of its students proficient in English rose from 13.7 percent in 2009 to 14.9 percent in 2010, while in math the proportion of proficient students grew from 4 percent to 6.7 percent. What can be learned from this small progress? Becoming a charter is no guarantee that a school serving a tough neighborhood will produce educational miracles.

Another highly praised school that is featured in the film is the SEED charter boarding school in Washington, D.C. SEED seems to deserve all the praise that it receives from Guggenheim, CBS's *60 Minutes*, and elsewhere. It has remarkable rates of graduation and college acceptance. But SEED spends \$35,000 per student, as compared to average current spending for public schools of about one third that amount. Is our society prepared to open boarding schools for tens of thousands of inner-city students and pay what it costs to copy the SEED model? Those who claim that better education for the neediest students won't require more money cannot use SEED to support their argument.

Guggenheim seems to demand that public schools start firing "bad" teachers so they can get the great results that one of every five charter schools gets. But he never explains how difficult it is to identify "bad" teachers. If one looks only at test scores, teachers in affluent suburbs get higher ones. If one uses student gains or losses as a general measure, then those who teach the neediest children—English-language learners, troubled students, autistic students—will see the smallest gains, and teachers will have an incentive to avoid districts and classes with large numbers of the neediest students.

Ultimately the job of hiring teachers, evaluating them, and deciding who should stay and who should go falls to administrators. We should be taking a close look at those who award due process rights (the accurate term for "tenure") to too many incompetent teachers. The best way to ensure that there are no bad or ineffective teachers in our public schools is to insist that we have principals and supervisors who are knowledgeable and experienced educators. Yet there is currently a vogue to recruit and train principals who have little or no education experience. (The George W. Bush Institute just announced its intention to train 50,000 new principals in the next decade and to recruit noneducators for this sensitive post.)

Waiting for "Superman" is the most important public-relations coup that the critics of public education have made so far. Their power is not to be underestimated. For years, right-wing critics demanded vouchers and got nowhere. Now, many of them are watching in amazement as their ineffectual attacks on "government schools" and their advocacy of privately managed schools with public funding have become the received wisdom among liberal elites. Despite their uneven record, charter schools have the enthusiastic endorsement of the Obama administration, the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and the Dell Foundation. In recent months, *The New York Times* has published three stories about how charter schools have become the favorite cause of hedge fund executives. According to the *Times*, when Andrew Cuomo wanted to tap into Wall Street money for his gubernatorial campaign, he had to meet with the executive director of Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), a pro-charter group.

Dominated by hedge fund managers who control billions of dollars, DFER has contributed heavily to political candidates for local and state offices who pledge to promote charter schools. (Its efforts to unseat incumbents in three predominantly black State Senate districts in New York City came to nothing; none of its hand-picked candidates received as much as 30 percent of the vote in the primary elections, even with the full-throated endorsement of the city's tabloids.) Despite the loss of local elections and the defeat of Washington, D.C.

Mayor Adrian Fenty (who had appointed the controversial schools chancellor Michelle Rhee), the combined clout of these groups, plus the enormous power of the federal government and the uncritical support of the major media, presents a serious challenge to the viability and future of public education.

It bears mentioning that nations with high-performing school systems—whether Korea, Singapore, Finland, or Japan—have succeeded not by privatizing their schools or closing those with low scores, but by strengthening the education profession. They also have less poverty than we do. Fewer than 5 percent of children in Finland live in poverty, as compared to 20 percent in the United States. Those who insist that poverty doesn't matter, that only teachers matter, prefer to ignore such contrasts.

If we are serious about improving our schools, we will take steps to improve our teacher force, as Finland and other nations have done. That would mean better screening to select the best candidates, higher salaries, better support and mentoring systems, and better working conditions. Guggenheim complains that only one in 2,500 teachers loses his or her teaching certificate, but fails to mention that 50 percent of those who enter teaching leave within five years, mostly because of poor working conditions, lack of adequate resources, and the stress of dealing with difficult children and disrespectful parents. Some who leave “fire themselves”; others were fired before they got tenure. We should also insist that only highly experienced teachers become principals (the “head teacher” in the school), not retired businessmen and military personnel. Every school should have a curriculum that includes a full range of studies, not just basic skills. And if we really are intent on school improvement, we must reduce the appalling rates of child poverty that impede success in school and in life.

There is a clash of ideas occurring in education right now between those who believe that public education is not only a fundamental right but a vital public service, akin to the public provision of police, fire protection, parks, and public libraries, and those who believe that the private sector is always superior to the public sector. *Waiting for “Superman”* is a powerful weapon on behalf of those championing the “free market” and privatization. It raises important questions, but all of the answers it offers require a transfer of public funds to the private sector. The stock market crash of 2008 should suffice to remind us that the managers of the private sector do not have a monopoly on success.

Public education is one of the cornerstones of American democracy. The public schools must accept everyone who appears at their doors, no matter their race, language, economic status, or disability. Like the huddled masses who arrived from Europe in years gone by, immigrants from across the world today turn to the public schools to learn what they need to know to become part of this society. The schools should be far better than they are now, but privatizing them is no solution.

In the final moments of *Waiting for “Superman,”* the children and their parents assemble in auditoriums in New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Silicon Valley, waiting nervously to see if they will win the lottery. As the camera pans the room, you see tears rolling down the cheeks of children and adults alike, all their hopes focused on a listing of numbers or names. Many people react to the scene with their own tears, sad for the children who lose. I had a different reaction. First, I thought to myself that the charter operators were cynically using children as political pawns in their own campaign to promote their cause. (Gail Collins in *The New York Times* had a similar reaction and wondered why they couldn't just send the families a letter in the mail instead of subjecting them to public rejection.) Second, I felt an immense sense of gratitude to the much-maligned American public education system, where no one has to win a lottery to gain admission.

<http://www.thenation.com/article/154986/grading-waiting-superman#>

Grading 'Waiting for Superman'

The celebrated film tells a familiar story about unions and schools—but misses what's new.

[Dana Goldstein](#)

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Here's what you see in *Waiting for Superman*, the new documentary that celebrates the charter school movement while blaming teachers unions for much of what ails American education: working- and middle-class parents desperate to get their charming, healthy, well-behaved children into successful public charter schools.

Here's what you don't see: the four out of five charters that are no better, on average, than traditional neighborhood public schools (and are sometimes much worse); charter school teachers, like those at the Green Dot schools in Los Angeles, who are unionized and like it that way; and noncharter neighborhood public schools, like PS 83 in East Harlem and the George Hall Elementary School in Mobile, Alabama, that are nationally recognized for successfully educating poor children.

You don't see teen moms, households without an adult English speaker or headed by a drug addict, or any of the millions of children who never have a chance to enter a charter school lottery (or get help with their homework or a nice breakfast) because adults simply aren't engaged in their education. These children, of course, are often the ones who are most difficult to educate, and the ones neighborhood public schools can't turn away.

You also don't learn that in the Finnish education system, much cited in the film as the best in the world, teachers are—gasp!—unionized and granted tenure, and families benefit from a cradle-to-grave social welfare system that includes universal daycare, preschool and healthcare, all of which are proven to help children achieve better results at school.

In other words, *Waiting for Superman* is a moving but vastly oversimplified brief on American educational [inequality](#). Nevertheless, it has been greeted by rapturous reviews.

"Can One Little Movie Save America's Schools?" asked the cover of *New York* magazine. On September 20 *The Oprah Winfrey Show* featured the film's director, Davis Guggenheim, of *An Inconvenient Truth*. Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* devoted a column to praising the film. *Time* published an education issue coinciding with the documentary's release and is planning a conference built in part around the school reform strategies the film endorses. NBC, too, will host an education reform conference in late September; *Waiting for Superman* will be screened and debated there, and many of the reformers involved in its production will be there. Katie Couric of *CBS Evening News* has promised a series of segments based on the movie.

Meanwhile, mega-philanthropist Bill Gates, who appears in *Waiting for Superman*, hit the road in early September to promote the film; while he was at it, he told an audience at the Toronto International Film Festival that school districts should cut pension payments for retired teachers. Other players in the free-market school reform movement, most of whom had seen the documentary at early screenings for opinion leaders and policy-makers, anticipated its September 24 release with cautious optimism.

The media excitement around the film "is beginning to open up an overdue public conversation," says Amy Wilkins, vice president at the Washington advocacy group Education Trust. "Do I think the coverage is always elegant and superior and perfect? No. Of course there is going to be some bumbling and stumbling. But the fact that the film is provoking this conversation is really important for teachers and kids."

Indeed, a tense public sparring match over the achievement gap, unions and the future of the teaching profession is already under way. In August the *Los Angeles Times* defied the protests of unions and many education policy experts by publishing a searchable online database of elementary school teachers' effectiveness rankings. The newspaper's calculations were made using a new statistical method called value-added measurement, which is based on children's standardized test scores and which social scientists across the political spectrum agree is volatile and often flawed.

In Washington, Mayor Adrian Fenty lost his re-election bid in part because of black voters' skepticism toward his aggressive school reform efforts, led by lightning-rod schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, who pursued an agenda of closing troubled neighborhood schools, instituting a privately funded merit-pay program for teachers and firing teachers and principals deemed ineffective. And at the federal level, President Obama's signature education program, the Race to the Top grant competition, pressures states to implement many of the most controversial teacher reforms, including merit pay based on value-added measurement.

Yet under the radar of this polarized debate, union affiliates across the country are coming to the table to talk about effective teaching in a more meaningful way than they ever have before. These stories of cooperation, from Pittsburgh to Memphis, are rarely being told, in part because national union leaders are worried about vocally stepping out beyond their members, and in part because of the media's tendency to finger-point at organized [labor](#).

As in the work of influential magazine writer Steven Brill, this intra-union ferment is ignored in *Waiting for Superman*. The film presents teachers unions as the villains in the struggle to close the achievement gap, despite their long history of advocating for more school funding, smaller class sizes and better school resources and facilities. Guggenheim represents the unions through Randi Weingarten, president of the 1.5 million-member American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Ominous music plays during some of her interviews, which are presented alongside footage of Harlem Children's Zone founder Geoffrey Canada and former Milwaukee superintendent and school-voucher proponent Howard Fuller complaining that union contracts protect bad teachers.

But in real life, Weingarten is the union leader most credited by even free-market education reformers with being committed to retooling the teaching profession to better emphasize professional excellence and student achievement.

"The education landscape has changed pretty profoundly, and the unions have to adapt," says Tim Daly, president of the New Teacher Project, a Teach for America (TFA) offshoot often seen as a counterweight to the power of unions and teachers colleges. "It's no longer just school districts they're dealing with but charter schools, accountability measures that flow from Washington and new governance structures such as mayoral control and state takeovers.

"Teachers unions have really struggled over the last two decades to recruit good, visionary new leadership prepared to help the unions navigate this," Daly continues. "There are exceptions. The most glaring, notable exception is Randi. She has a long career ahead of her."

In the *Waiting for Superman* companion book, Guggenheim writes about his struggle, as a lifelong liberal, over how to present teachers unions in the film. "Their role in education is not a black-and-white one," he admits. "I've gotten to know union leaders who I think understand that the reforms we need will mean some serious adjustments on the part of their members, and that we need to rethink the rigid systems we've gotten locked into since the New Deal era. At the same time, these progressive union leaders can't get too far ahead of their members. And they understandably don't want to give aid and comfort to some politicians who are in fact anti-worker and are at least as interested in undermining the power of [labor](#) as they are in improving our schools."

The movie, though, does not attempt any such balancing act. It presents Rhee as a heroine whose hands are tied by the union. Yet in April, after Rhee's administration finally collaborated with education experts and the union to create a new, detailed teacher evaluation system tied

to the district's curriculum, the Washington Teachers Union and AFT agreed to a contract that includes many of Rhee's priorities, including her merit-pay plan and an unprecedented weakening of tenure protections.

The film doesn't acknowledge that Bill Gates, who began his philanthropic career deeply skeptical of teachers unions, has lately embraced them as essential players in the fight for school improvement. His foundation finances a program in Boston called Turnaround Teacher Teams, which works with the district and its teachers union to move cohorts of experienced, highly rated instructors into high-needs schools, while giving them extra training and support.

In July Gates spoke at the American Federation of Teachers convention in Seattle, saying, "If reforms aren't shaped by teachers' knowledge and experience, they're not going to succeed." A few protesters booed, but he received several standing ovations. Members of the Gates Foundation staff later met with AFT executives, and the two teams discussed ways to collaborate, despite lingering differences on issues like teacher pensions.

When I spoke with Weingarten in late August at her office on Capitol Hill, she was livid about *Waiting for Superman*, referring to its charter school triumphalism as an example of "magic dust." "There's always pressure to find the one thing that's going to be the shortcut," she said. But she was ecstatic about improved relations with Gates and angry that, in her view, the mainstream media have ignored the news of their rapprochement. "The media want conflict," she said. "They don't let us tell our story."

Younger teachers are often the driving force behind union-backed reforms. In Denver in 2008, a group of them launched Denver Teachers for Change, which grew into a 350-member coalition dedicated to supporting performance pay and other student achievement-focused reforms while preserving organized labor's voice at the negotiating table. In Colorado earlier this year, the AFT state affiliate signed on to the state's Race to the Top application, which promised to make student achievement data count for up to 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation score, potentially totally reforming the process by which tenure is granted.

In Memphis the teachers union has worked alongside the New Teacher Project to move some of the best teachers into the highest-poverty schools. The Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers agreed to a performance-pay system for all new hires and to adding a year to the tenure-granting process. In the small city of Evansville, Indiana, the local affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA) worked with the superintendent to craft a turnaround model for three low-performing schools that includes a longer school year and a professional development academy for teachers working with high-poverty kids.

Weingarten admits that because systemic school reform is often about boring topics such as the scalability and sustainability of success in a field "littered with pilot programs," it can be difficult to add complexity to the media war over teaching. "We've never figured out how to tell that story in a compelling way," she says.

The unions are also hurt by public frustration with teacher tenure, a level of job security inconceivable to most American workers, who are barely hanging on during a recession with a nearly 10 percent unemployment rate.

"Only 7 percent of American workers are in unions," Weingarten says, adding matter-of-factly, "America looks at us as islands of privilege."

* * *

It's true that nobody loves a good fight more than a journalist; after all, a story with a bad guy is much more interesting than one in which it is unclear exactly whom to blame for what went wrong.

Perhaps the writer most associated with the teachers-unions-as-villains narrative is Brill, the Court TV founder cum promoter of micropayments for online news. In August 2009 *The New Yorker* published Brill's report on New York City's "rubber rooms," an exposé focused on the one-twentieth of 1 percent of the district's 80,000 public school teachers (about forty people) who had been removed from the classroom because of gross negligence, such as failing to teach at all or verbally harassing students. Nevertheless, because these teachers had been granted tenure by the district, their contracts—negotiated between the Education Department and their union, the United Federation of Teachers—entitled them to a full salary until a due process hearing determined whether they would be fired or reassigned. While they awaited hearings, sometimes for as long as three years, the UFT portrayed some rubber room teachers as innocent victims of "seniority purges," ignoring evidence of incompetence including, in one case, alcohol abuse. (Many teachers, it turns out, are opposed to such efforts. According to a 2003 Public Agenda poll, 47 percent of them believe "the union sometimes fights to protect teachers who really should be out of the classroom.")

In part because of the outcry generated by the *New Yorker* piece among the city's elite—many of whom do not send their children to public schools and are ignorant of the system's inner workings—the Education Department and the UFT have phased out rubber rooms.

Brill's crusade continued in a May *New York Times Magazine* feature called "The Teachers' Unions' Last Stand," which praised the Obama administration's attempt to tie teacher evaluations to children's standardized test scores, a policy the UFT opposed until recently. In one section of the article, Brill visits the building on 118th Street in Harlem that houses both PS 149 and the Harlem Success Academy, a charter school known for its tough discipline, rigid test prep and high scores. He praises the charter school's longer day, uniforms and involved teachers, and criticizes the public school for showing students a film during the school day and providing its employees with a more generous pension plan.

Neither article contains a single scene set in a competently managed public school classroom, nor a single interview with a respected, effective public or charter school teacher who appreciates his or her union representation. (There are many such people. A 2007 poll of

teachers conducted by the think tank Education Sector found that only 11 percent believed a union was "something you could do without." A March 2010 Gates Foundation/Scholastic poll of 40,000 teachers found that on issues such as evaluation, pay and benefits, most are roughly in line with their unions.) Brill portrays the UFT as almost the sole force preventing Mayor Michael Bloomberg and schools chancellor Joel Klein from transforming the city's public schools, ignoring issues like segregation and poverty, as well as evidence that the higher graduation rates and test scores the Education Department advertises are the result of lower standards, narrowed curriculums and massaged data.

Brill is working on a book about education reform, to be published by Simon and Schuster. His first book, *Teamsters*, was released in 1978 and told the story of internal corruption and reform within that union.

Despite their one-sidedness, the influential Brill pieces, followed by the much-hyped release of *Waiting for Superman*, present a public relations crisis for the two national teachers unions, the AFT and the larger NEA, which has 3.2 million members.

In Washington in August, I had coffee with a lanky 25-year-old Teach for America veteran named Dustin Thomas, who had ascended from teaching high school social studies to a district office job recruiting preschoolers for early intervention programs. Thomas, who founded the group Educators for Fenty, is exactly the sort of young, politically active education reformer teachers unions will need to engage to stay relevant. He grew up in Dallas, attended the University of Oklahoma and decided to pursue a career in education after a friend was killed in gun violence.

"The person who pulled the trigger could have used someone like my friend in his life," said Thomas, who sometimes sounds exactly like a committed union leader. "The amount of work that teachers put into bringing results for our kids is not represented in the picture of us," he complained. "The paycheck is not the motivation."

Yet Thomas became visibly uncomfortable when I brought up the Washington Teachers Union or teacher unionism in general. He avoided even saying the word "union," finally telling me, after a long pause, "I had some incredible veteran teachers around me. But we saw teachers in the school who were so far removed from making sure kids were learning, it was shocking. People are glad there's a process now."

Thomas was referring to Rhee's July dismissal of 241 teachers, which the union contested. The AFT spent more than \$1 million in support of Fenty's opponent, City Council chair Vincent Gray, who ran on a platform of "one city," promising to push forward on school reform while working harder to collaborate with those angry about Rhee's teacher firings and school closings, and her perceived dismissive attitude toward the local black communities who were losing jobs and institutions. (A typical Rhee comment: "Collaboration and consensus building are quite frankly overrated in my mind.")

It's unclear now what will happen to Thomas's job working for Rhee, or whether the election results will lead him to reconsider his skeptical stance toward unions, which remain powerful across the country. Thomas's attitude is the kind that frustrates Alex Caputo-Pearl, an eighteen-year veteran of the Los Angeles public schools and member of Progressive Educators for Action (PEAC), which works for reform from within the United Teachers of Los Angeles.

In 1990 Caputo-Pearl graduated from Brown and became part of the first class of TFA recruits. Since then, his opinions on school reform have diverged significantly from those of TFA and many of its alums. He believes that teaching is a kind of community organizing and has worked with parents, for example, to bring more computers into high-poverty Crenshaw High School and to advocate for a more culturally relevant curriculum for students of color. (As a reward for his efforts, the district branded him a troublemaker in 2006 and transferred him to a school across town. Students and parents protested, and he was reinstated. Without tenure, he might have been fired.)

Caputo-Pearl sees unionization as key to this work. "What we're promoting is the idea that teachers unions need to become social justice unions," he says. "There certainly are parts of the union leadership and bureaucracy across the country that would argue the public schools are basically doing what they need to do right now and there's not a need for basic reform within the system, other than more funding. PEAC has never believed that is the case, especially in communities of color, and has been in the lead of trying to promote reform models, whether it be around small learning communities or around schools partnering with trusted outside organizations to have more autonomy."

For Caputo-Pearl, the *Los Angeles Times* teacher rankings are a distraction from what he calls "real school reform." "Data! There's a good term out there," he says with a laugh. "There are all sorts of problems with standardized tests, but that doesn't mean you don't look at them as one small tool to inform instruction. You do. The problem with value-added, on top of its severe lack of reliability and validity, is that if you use it in a high-stakes way where teachers are constantly thinking about it in relationship to their evaluations, you will smother a lot of the beautiful instincts that drive the inside of a school, with teachers talking to each other, collaborating and teaming up to support students."

That message is part of Weingarten's strategy for how to hit back against *Waiting for Superman*. She has been telling the press that teaching is more an art than a science, and quoting Einstein: "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." She's also planning a new proposal for fighting the high school dropout crisis and says she's going to "stay positive and focus on how you invest in kids."

Dennis van Roekel, Weingarten's counterpart at the NEA, is also worried about the documentary. His media strategy for the year is to launch a "commission on quality teaching" made up of "teachers of the year," he says. The idea is to amplify teachers' voices in debates about the future of the profession.

Ultimately, though, a new generation of educators, more and more of whom, like Dustin Thomas, have come up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed through alternative certification programs like TFA, will judge teachers unions on whether they share the commitment that motivates many of the best teachers to enter the profession: a drive toward eradicating the achievement gap. Unions will need to make the case through actions and words, not least because of a hostile media climate that stacks the deck against them.

"If teachers unions don't make a turn toward the social justice union model, along with fighting for more funding, it's going to mean not just a fundamental weakening of the union but frankly a real possibility of unions passing into history," says Caputo-Pearl. "It's a necessity to fight with and for a broad sector of society that includes teachers, but also the families and the kids we serve. Otherwise, unions, and more significantly, truly public, accessible and equitable education, will go out of existence."

Also by the Author

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<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2010/10/16/910716/-This-teacher-reacts-to-seeing-Waiting-for-Superman#>

Fri Oct 15, 2010 at 09:04 PM PDT

[This teacher reacts to seeing "Waiting for Superman"](#)

By [teacherken](#)

Friday schools across Maryland were closed, so I went to the first show at Noon.

On the way home I thought long and hard about what I would say.

No matter how I parse it, my reaction has two key points.

1. Davis Guggenheim feels guilty about not sending his kids to public schools, and the result is a film which basically trashes public schools, public school teachers, teachers unions, while unjustly glorifying Geoffrey Canada, Michelle Rhee, charters, Kipp, and union busting.
2. The film is intellectually dishonest, so much so it is laughable.

I will explain my reactions below the fold.

Guggenheim admits his sense of guilt. He talks about his admiration for teachers. He reminds us of his 1999 film "First Year" about dedicated teachers. He shows us video of driving past four public schools to take his child to a PRIVATE school (note, NOT a charter school). But we never are given any specifics. We are not even told if any of those is the public school his child would have attended. He uses his skill with films to have us infer that none of the four does a decent job of instructing kids, and that his child would have to attend one of them. But we are given NO data to support such an inference.

The film focuses on children trying to get into charter schools via lotteries. Yet at the end, in the text after all the emotion has been wrung out of the viewing audience, Guggenheim is at least honest enough to tell us that lotteries are not the answer. If they are not, why not show us schools that are? Why is not a single successful public school shown? Might that undermine the propaganda that is being put out to manipulate the viewer in a particular direction? Might that make the viewer less likely to text in support of the agenda that Guggenheim puts forth?

I said the film is intellectually dishonest. I will not go through all the examples I could cite: I do come to this "review" late, and many others have dissected the various problems with the film.

Let me cite several. Jay Mathews advocates for KIPP on the basis of the raise in the percentiles on reading scores. Yet that ignores a chunk of data. First, those being tested do not include all those who entered KIPP schools - at least a portion of KIPP schools have an unfortunate tendency to "counsel out" students who would not score well. Second, it is not yet clear that the gains in test scores that are reported persist further up the educational ladder when the students leave KIPP. Finally, the independent study (by Mathematica) that

Kipp likes to cite says only 10% of KIPP schools perform better than the public schools from which they draw. That is actually a worse percentage than charter schools as a whole, as was seen in the CREDO study, where 17% of charter schools performed better but 37% performed worse.

From Canada we constantly heard that the system was broken, and on the whole we were intended to draw the conclusion that public schools are not working. Yet even Eric Hanushek is quoted in the film as saying something quite different: that if we could replace the worst performing 5 to 10 % of teachers, our schools would be performing at the same level as Finland, the highest scoring nation in the world. Finland, however, has a far lower rate of children in poverty than does the US, and that difference accounts for much of the difference in performance. But Finland also has a 100% unionized teaching force, which seems relevant to mention if Finland is supposed to be the standard by which we judge our performance, especially when we are constantly bombarded with "facts" about how unions are the problem.

Consider - we are given comparative statistics for lifting of licenses for doctors and lawyers versus only 1 in 2,500 Illinois teachers losing their teaching certificates. But that totally ignores the large number of teachers who leave before they get tenure, many of whom are low performers. Why go to the expense of legally lifting a certificate when the person is no longer teaching? We lose almost half of teachers in the first 5 years. If only 1/2 of those are substandard teachers, then the rate of substandard teachers leaving is higher than the 5-10% Hanushek says is necessary to replace, and not only 1 in 2,500. And by the way, Hanushek never gives any evidence that the replacements would be any better.

That raises another interesting point. By his own admission in the film, Geoffrey Canada was NOT even a satisfactory teacher his first two years. He said he didn't begin to hit his stride until his 3rd year. Elsewhere, but not in the film, Michelle Rhee has acknowledged that she was a horrible teacher her first year and half. She came out of Teach for America. Both of these people, offered as models for what we should be doing about education, demonstrate something very well known - that as a nation we do a poor job of preparing our teachers and inducting them - bringing them into the classroom. Finland does so over several years with decreasing amounts of supervision and increasing levels of individual responsibility for the new teachers. Finland offers a model which works. Teach for America, by the words of Rhee and Canada, is not what we should depend upon. And if we were to summarily fire 5-10% of teachers only to replace them with additional novices, there is no evidence this will improve student performance.

Let me also note what I consider the most disturbing image in the film. It is used as a set-up to bash teachers. We see a teacher peeling back skulls and pouring knowledge into the heads of students. Later, as the words we hear are bashing unions and union rules, we again see the teacher pouring, only this time she - and it is a she - is pouring her "knowledge" onto the floor, somehow missing the open minds of the students.

This is a horrible model of education. It may work for drill and kill to raise test scores. It does not result in meaningful long-term learning or the development of an ability to continue learning independently. It may not be intellectually dishonest, but it is a distorted understanding of teaching and learning.

What is intellectually dishonest is what the film says about tenure. The film somewhat misrepresents the development of tenure in post-secondary institutions. It is totally wrong when it describes tenure for public school teachers as a life-time guarantee of a job. All tenure does is require due process according to contract rules mutually agreed to by unions and school boards. Note the two parts to this: due process, and mutually agreed to. The portion of the film with Jason Kamrad is used to imply that it is almost impossible to dismiss a tenured teacher. In fact it is not, rubber rooms notwithstanding, if administrators follow the rules and document. This is no more difficult that convicting criminal wrongdoers in the justice system when the police and the prosecution follow the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Petty dictators and inexperienced leaders might not like following the rules. Michelle Rhee dismissed a batch of teachers ostensibly because the city could not afford them, but replaced some with people from Teach for America. When she got caught she talked about a handful who rightfully should have been dismissed (although that could easily have been done under proper procedures) while implying that all of the dismissed teachers had similar problems. That was not honest.

Her track record also is not as rosy as the film portrays, although on this I would refrain from accusing that portion of intellectual dishonesty, because the inconsistency of score performance became publicly apparent only after the film was in editing. Still, questions had been raised about the performance at the time Mayor Fenty and Chancellor Rhee were touting the scores as proof that their approach was working.

Perhaps the most intellectually dishonest portion of the film is the presentation of Geoffrey Canada. Let me be clear: I believe Canada is absolutely correct in providing what are known as wrap-around services, including medical and tutoring and family support. What the film implies is that Canada is obtaining better results applying the same or similar resources, and somehow if others would take his approach, which includes his insistence on no union and the ability to fire any teacher, all would be well.

Let's try the reality. As it happens, on this the New York Times has a recent piece that is quite appropriate, about which many have now commented. Titled [Lauded Harlem Schools Have Their Own Problems](#), the piece appeared on October 12. In it we learn that the schools in Harlem Children's Village have per pupil expenditures of \$16,000 in the classroom and thousands more outside the classroom. The average class size in the Promise Academy High school is about 15, with two licensed teachers per class. Stop right there, and think about the image of most urban schools: how often do you see as few as 20 students per class? How rarely are there two adults to deal with what is often 30 or more students?

Despite that, Canada's track record is spotty. In the film we hear about the commitment he makes to the parents, which in the Times piece is framed as "We start with children from birth and stay with them until they graduate." Perhaps we should read about the first cohort of Promise Academy I, which opened in 2004:

The school, which opened in 2004 in a gleaming new building on 125th Street, should have had a senior class by now, but the batch of students that started then, as sixth graders, was dismissed by the board en masse before reaching the ninth grade after it judged the students' performance too weak to found a high school on. Mr. Canada called the dismissal "a tragedy."

Somehow dismissing an entire cohort does not bespeak a model that I would want to emulate. Nor does it demonstrate that Mr. Canada is the sparkling example the movie would have you believe. Allow me to quote what Walt Gardner posted about Promise Academy I in [this blog at Education Week](#):

Even now, most of its seventh graders are still behind. Only 15 percent passed the state's English test. Their failure to perform resulted in the firing of several teachers and the reassignment of others. Although 38 percent of children in third through sixth grade passed the English test under the state's new guidelines, their performance placed them in the lower half of charter schools in the city and below the city's overall passing rate of 42 percent.

As a piece of propaganda pushing a flawed vision of education, "Waiting for Superman" is brilliant - it manipulates emotions, it takes facts out of context, it misrepresents much of the data it uses and is less than accurate in its portrayal of key figures, most especially in its portrayal of Canada.

I have not yet cited the biggest example of its intellectual dishonesty. That would be what is NOT in the film. There is not a single example of a successful traditional public school, whether in troubled neighborhoods - and they do exist - or in places like suburbs where many of our schools perform at levels as high as in any place in the world. Instead it allows Canada to paint with a broad brush, saying "the system is broken" and implying that ALL of American education is failing.

It is not. Even by the flawed measure of test scores, the current administration wants to target 5% of American schools. Not all schools are dropout factories.

Too many are. They are for the reasons they have often been - they teach other people's children, the children of the poor, those of color, those who do not speak English at home.

It does not have to be this way.

The film is wrong when it wants you to believe this is a new phenomenon. There was no idyllic time in inner city schools, certainly not in the 1970s, which is again an impression the films wants to give you. After all, it was because children of the poor were being systematically deprived of the right to an education that Lyndon Johnson pushed for and signed the first version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in the mid 1960s. That had not magically changed things within the next five to ten years.

At the end of the film the text that appears on the screen says we know what to do, then offers the usual bromides of so-called reformers of more accountability, more assessment, higher standards, and the like. This has been the pattern at least since the Reagan administration. If this were the correct path, why a quarter century after *A Nation At Risk* are we hearing the same things, only more so?

Let's be clear. Raising the bar of 'standards' will do nothing to improve the educational performance of a child not achieving the current, apparently too-low standards. It may in fact merely increase the number of drop-outs.

If Geoffrey Canada can, with foundation money, provide all those wonderful trips for his students, plus teacher-student ratios in the classroom of better than 1-8, perhaps we might consider what we need to do to provide for the students in our regular public schools, who are often at a classroom ratio of better than 30-1, who do not have foundation and hedge-funds paying for their field trips. Canada has a spanking new building, modern, fully equipped. Many of our young people are in buildings more than half a century old, with leaking roofs, with no doors on bathroom stalls, sometimes with no toilet paper unless they bring it themselves. Just the difference in externals like this delivers a powerful message about which kids we really care about, and they know it.

If you knew nothing about American education except what you gleaned from watching "Waiting for Superman," you would have a totally distorted understanding both of the status of American public education and of what really makes a difference for young people. That inevitably distorts the public discourse on this important national issue. Of course, the intent of propaganda is to drive discussion in a pre-decided direction, whether or not that direction is either necessary or justified by the real facts on the ground.

The film is intellectually dishonest. Most of those who know about education, especially those who know the reality of what has worked and can be scaled up, have increasingly been speaking out and writing against the glorification of the film, and the vision it pushes, and those it attempts to lionize.

And Davis Guggenheim? He admits his sense of guilt. On that he is at least partially honest. What he has done in this film should not, however, allow him to feel as if he has expiated his sense of guilt, for this film has done real damage to the public discourse over education, and made it harder to get to the kinds of real reform necessary so that none of our children are left in failing schools. I long for such a day that all experience fully the right, the opportunity to learn. That will not happen by busting unions, propagating charters, all the while we ignore the increasing economic disparity, and the unfortunate reappearance of racism. Couple this with the attitude of some of an

unwillingness to pay for public services for which they do not personally benefit and you will see an increase in the number of students who are not well served by our public schools - we will damage many that are currently working.

As bad as it may be now, things like "Waiting for Superman" merely make it harder to move towards the changes we truly need. I fear that will be its legacy, and that would truly be tragic.

<http://www.notwaitingforsuperman.org/Articles/20101020-MinerUltimateSuperpower>

Ultimate Superpower: Supersized dollars drive “Waiting for Superman” agenda

- Wednesday, October 20, 2010 by Barbara Miner

This article, written expressly for NOTwaitingforsuperman.org, explores the money behind the movie, its promoters, and those who will benefit from the movie. As author Barbara Miner writes, “In education, as in so many other aspects of society, money is being used to squeeze out democracy.” After examining the role of hedge funds, foundations and other players, she asks, “Should the American people put their faith in a white billionaires boys’ club to lead the revolution on behalf of poor people of color?”

In 1972, two young *Washington Post* reporters were investigating a low-level burglary at the Watergate Hotel and stumbled upon a host of unexplained coincidences and connections that reached to the White House.

One of the reporters, Bob Woodward, went to a high-level government source and complained: “The story is dry. All we’ve got are pieces. We can’t seem to figure out what the puzzle is supposed to look like.”

To which the infamous Deep Throat replied: “Follow the money. Always follow the money.”¹

For nearly 40 years, “Follow the money” has been an axiom in both journalism and politics—although, as Shakespeare might complain, one “More honor’d in the breach than the observance.”

It is useful to resurrect the axiom in analyzing the multimedia buzz and policy debates swirling around the movie *Waiting for Superman*.

This year’s must-see documentary, *Waiting for Superman* is an emotional, painful look at the U.S. educational system, especially the bleak options for poor children in inner cities. Even its critics admit that it shines a light on educational disparities. At the same time, its admirers concede the film oversimplifies complicated issues, uncritically hypes charter schools and vilifies teacher unions.

What’s less obvious is how the film serves a coordinated and well-funded intervention in a polarized national debate over educational policy. What’s at stake is not just whether this debate will lead to better schools. More fundamentally, it involves public control and oversight of a vital public institution.

In education, as in so many other aspects of society, money is being used to squeeze out democracy.

Squeezing democracy

Waiting for Superman and its surrounding campaign reflect an influential trend that has proven adept at dominating education policy in both Republican and Democratic administrations. This bipartisan alliance unites 20th Century conservatives closely aligned with the Republican Party who made the bulk of their money before the dawn of the digital era, and 21st Century billionaires more loosely aligned with the Democratic Party who generally made their fortunes through digitally based technology. (These two groups can loosely be described as analog conservatives and digital billionaires.)

Despite their differences, both groups embrace market-based reforms, entrepreneurial initiatives, deregulation and data-driven/test-based accountability as the pillars of educational change. Under the banner of challenging bureaucracy and promoting innovation, both groups chafe at public oversight and collective bargaining agreements. Above all, both rely on money to get their way.

Waiting for Superman and its accompanying campaign are part of a coordinated and well-funded intervention in a polarized national debate over educational policy.

Two decades ago, challenges to public schools were spearheaded by groups such as the Christian Coalition, a grassroots, church-based phenomenon that sought to abolish the U.S. Department of Education and to elect religious conservatives who could take over local and state school boards. Today’s bipartisan corporate reformers tend to sidestep democracy altogether by abolishing school boards, promoting mayoral control, and hiring corporate-style CEO’s who answer to a city’s power elite. No longer preoccupied with abolishing the U.S. Department of Education, they instead use their wealth to effectively control it and to dictate reform.

This developing alliance is evident in *Waiting for Superman*.

Paramount, Participant and Walden

First, the alliance involves the movie's backers—listed in the film credits as Paramount Vantage and Participant Media, in association with Walden Media.

Paramount Vantage is the specialty film division of Paramount Pictures, which in turn is owned by Viacom—the international media conglomerate that has gobbled up huge chunks of television and film, from Nickelodeon, to MTV, to BET, to Comedy Central. For Paramount, *Waiting for Superman* exists primarily for one reason: to make money. (This is one possible explanation of the movie's heroes/villains dramatic narrative; Hollywood has never been fond of complexity.) At the same time, in 2009 Viacom launched the project Get Schooled in conjunction with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Get Schooled, with a focus and graphic design in sync with the MTV generation, is designed to “leverage consumer-oriented media and brands” to raise awareness about the education crisis, with the goal of supporting the work “of the broader education reform community by leveraging the creative talent, digital and media assets and resources of the country's top media and consumer brands.” Exactly what this buzzword-laden description ultimately means is unclear, although *Waiting for Superman* and Davis Guggenheim, the film's director and co-writer, are featured on the group's homepage.²

The involvement of Participant and Walden is more overtly ideological, and also more clearly shows the alliance between the analog conservatives and digital billionaires.

Participant has a dual strategy: make commercially viable films and use the movies to promote a political/social agenda.³ Its liberal credentials include films such as *Syriana*, *Food, Inc.*, and *An Inconvenient Truth*. The company was founded in 2004 by Jeff Skoll, using the billions he earned when he cashed out his stock in eBay (Skoll is #400 on Forbes current list of billionaires, with a net worth of around \$2.5 billion). Skoll, meanwhile, has gone on to found a foundation noted for its emphasis on social entrepreneurship as the best way to make change.

Participant's CEO is Jim Berk, who before joining Participant in 2006 was chair and CEO of Gryphon Colleges Corporation, a for-profit chain of post-secondary schools. At Gryphon, Berk was responsible “for the formation, platform acquisition and establishment” of the for-profit schools.⁴ (For-profit colleges, meanwhile, are currently the focus of Senate hearings following a report by the Government Accountability Office on misleading, unethical and sometimes illegal practices to lure students to the schools. The for-profit schools, charges Sen. Tom Harkin [D-Iowa], have abnormally high failure rates for the students while enjoying abnormally high profit margins. “There's irrefutable evidence now that something's gone wrong with this industry,” Harkin says.⁵)

Under Berk's leadership, Participant has become “an integrated media entity.” Two years ago, for instance, Participant received \$250 million in financing from Imagenation, owned by the government of the oil-rich Emirate of Abu Dhabi, which is focused on transforming the country into a cultural and financial hub.

Participant has also launched TakePart.com, a “social action website” that, in its education initiatives, bemoans teacher tenure, promotes Teach for America, and idealizes charter schools as the Promised Land: “Maybe the public school in your area stinks. Maybe it's a dropout factory staffed by burned-out teachers and you're looking for an alternative.... What you're looking for is a charter school.”⁶

With its roots in the eBay empire, its socially conscious films, its global connections and its promotion of charter schools, Participant is a good example of the bipartisan digital billionaires.

Walden Media, on the other hand, is a classic example of old-fashioned, pro-Republican conservatives.

Walden Media is owned by Anschutz Film Group, which in turn is owned by Anschutz Entertainment Group, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Anschutz Company. One way or another, it all reaches back to Denver billionaire Philip Anschutz, who made his first fortune as an oil wildcatter and who has moved on to real estate, movie theaters, professional sports and the media. (*Fortune* once called him America's “greediest executive.”)

The business website Portfolio.com described Anschutz this way in a 2009 profile, “Who is Philip Anschutz?”:

More than just a businessman, that's for sure. He's active in Christian fundamentalist and Conservative political causes, including funding a campaign to support Amendment 2, Colorado's 2006 ballot initiative to overturn gay rights, the Institute for American Values, the Center for Marriage and Families, and Morality in Media.

Invariably described as “secretive” or “reclusive” in the press, he is nonetheless involved in media. He just bought the *Weekly Standard* for a reported \$1 million from Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which funded the small—but for a time, highly influential—conservative magazine since 1995. Add this to his other conservative media holdings, which include the *Washington Examiner*, a free tabloid, and the 101 locally targeted *Examiner*-branded sub-sites and it's no wonder *Forbes* described Anschutz as “the Stealth Media Mogul.”⁷

Fortune also did a fascinating profile on Anschutz in 2006 (Anschutz has not spoken to a reporter since 1974). The article describes how Anschutz morally objected to much of Hollywood's fare, and that he argued “there was more money to be made in ‘uplifting’ family films that could be marketed through grassroots campaigns to teachers, librarians, and church groups.”⁸

In education, as in so many other aspects of society, money is being used to squeeze out democracy.

Anschutz often targets his movies to evangelical Christians. Through films such as the 2005 release *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, he perfected his approach: know your target audience, provide advance screenings to interested groups, and have them encourage their members to see the film. In many ways, Anschutz sketched out the roadmap for the campaign around *Waiting for Superman*.

An old-fashioned economic and social conservative, Anschutz holds little faith in science. He is a major supporter of The Discovery Institute, which challenges Darwin's theory of evolution and promotes a theory of intelligent design.⁹

Hedge Funds Bullish On Charter Schools

Two of the organizations most prominently featured in *Waiting for Superman* are Harlem Children's Zone and Success Charter Network, also focused on Harlem. The movie's central narrative metaphor—highly emotional public lotteries—turns out to have been perfected during a political strategy and public relations campaign engineered by Success Charter Network and Democrats for Education Reform, a national political action committee that promotes charter and other “school choice” options. Add the fact that Manhattan is the country's media and financial capital, and it becomes apparent that investigating the relationship between hedge funds and charters in New York City helps unravel the puzzle of who stands to financially gain from the charter movement in general and the movie in particular. (An important caveat: there is a difference between charter schools faithful to the original concept, and the pro-market orientation of the charter school movement that now dominates.)¹⁰

But first about hedge funds — those masters of the universe known for their financial speculation and insane levels of compensation. (The top 25 hedge fund managers took in an average of \$1 billion each in 2009 — enough to pay for 658,000 entry-level teachers.)¹¹

Encompassing the lower and east side of Manhattan and extending north to Greenwich, Connecticut, is a kingdom that *New York* magazine has dubbed “Greater Hedgistan.” Of the world's hedge funds with more than \$1 billion in assets, a significant majority is based in Greater Hedgistan.¹²

Smack dab in the middle of Greater Hedgistan is Harlem.

These two worlds—one rich, white and powerful, the other poor, Black and Latino but located on prime real estate— meet in the charter school world, although not as equal partners.

“Charters have attracted benefactors from many fields,” a *New York Times* article noted almost a year ago. “But it is impossible to ignore that in New York, hedge funds are at the movement's epicenter.”¹³

Charters are edging out traditional public schools in Harlem and other poor neighborhoods —and the charters are overwhelmingly controlled by hedge fund directors and finance capitalists who sit on the boards of directors that are legally responsible for running a charter and establishing its financial, educational and personnel policies. (There is a more than a little irony that New York, home to one of the fiercest battles for community control of schools in the 1960s, is now a prime example of rich white billionaires controlling the education of low-income children of color.)

Take the board of trustees of the Success Charter Network. Of its nine members, seven are involved in hedge funds or investment companies. The eighth is CEO of the Institute for Student Achievement, and the ninth is a managing partner at the NewSchoolsVenture Fund, involved in both for-profit and non-profit charters across the country. No community, parent or teacher representatives sit on the Success Charter Network board of trustees (see sidebar).¹⁴

There is no single reason why charter schools have become the must-be-involved cause among the hedge fund and finance capital crowd.

Real estate obviously plays a role, as Harlem and the South Bronx are the poor neighborhoods most ripe for gentrification now that so much of Brooklyn has come under the reach of condos, trendy restaurants, Trader Joe's and Ikea. (In New York City, no deal ever goes down that doesn't involve real estate.) And, just as clearly, there's old-fashioned altruism and missionary zeal at work. “What you're seeing is for the under-40 set, education reform is what feeding kids in Africa was in 1980,” an education reformer said in explaining Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's \$100 million donation to the Newark public schools in September.

Another explanation is that the hedge fund crowd is comfortable with the charter way of doing business—overwhelmingly non-union, which means that management gets to call all the shots; a guaranteed cash flow in the form of public dollars per student; minimal public oversight; lots of data and test scores; and an educational ideology based on a free-market model of schooling.

The minimal public transparency and oversight of charters is particularly in sync with the hedge fund culture. Infamous for their secrecy, hedge funds operate largely beyond public scrutiny. Their securities tend to be issued in “private offerings” that are not registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission, whose regulations were established in 1933 during the banking crises of the Great Depression. Nor are they required to make periodic reports under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934. And, to play the game, you have to be rich, with millions of dollars to invest.¹⁵

Charter schools are the type of entrepreneurial initiative that “electrifies” hedge fund managers, according to Whitney Tilson, a finance capitalist, founding member of Teach for America and board member of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). “With the state providing so much of the money, outside contributions are insanely well leveraged,” he told the *New York Times*.¹⁶

Ravenel Boykin Curry IV of the money management firm Eagle Capital Management and who helped found the Girls Prep charter schools in New York, told the *Times* that charter schools are “exactly the kind of investment people in our industry spend our days trying to stumble on, with incredible cash flow, even if in this case we don't ourselves get any of it.”¹⁷

Charter schools have also become a way to network and hobnob with elite powerbrokers and celebrities (who knows what deal might emerge from such networking)—all in the name of helping poor people.

One of the best ways to hobnob is at the annual fundraiser by the Robin Hood Foundation. Founded in 1988 by hedge fund manager Paul Tudor Jones, the foundation considers charter schools “right there at the top of our list of priorities,” according to a spokesperson.¹⁸ Last May at the fundraiser—Wall Street’s biggest of the year—the foundation called upon the more than 3,000 people gathered and raised more than \$88 million in one night. Sting sang at the event, comedy routines featured Jimmy Fallon and Saturday Night Live writers, and NBC anchor Brian Williams hosted the festivities.

Should the American people put their faith in a white billionaire boys club to lead the revolution on behalf of poor people of color?

“Robin Hood is like the cool table in the high school cafeteria,” one benefactor said of the foundation.¹⁹

And, in addition to being cool, the foundation’s supporters are rich, with the board “a blue-chip collection of Who’s Who in business and media.”²⁰

While hedge funds dominate the New York charter school movement, old money and traditional conservatives are more than welcome. The Robin Hood gala last May, for instance, was chaired by the heads of Maverick Capital and the uber-digital Google but also of JP Morgan Chase—whose legacy, according to its website, “reaches back more than 200 years with the founding of its earlier predecessor in 1799.”

And, of course, there is money to be made. And it cuts both ways.

Harlem Children’s Zone, for instance, is one of the most financially well-endowed education reform efforts in the country. Following *Waiting for Superman*, where its founder Geoffrey Canada emerged as the most charismatic and eloquent of those featured, Harlem Children’s Zone received millions—including \$20 million from Goldman Sachs in mid-September. New York City is also contributing \$60 million toward a \$100 million new school.

But there are also those who will make money off of Harlem Children’s Zone.

The organization had net assets of \$194 million listed on its 2008 nonprofit tax report. Almost \$15 million was in savings and temporary investments, and another \$128 million was invested at a hedge fund. Given that most hedge funds operate on what is known as a 2–20 fee structure (a 2 percent management fee and a 20 percent take of any profits), some lucky hedge fund will make millions of dollars off of Harlem Children’s Zone in any given year.

Meanwhile, the boards of directors of charter schools pay their charter managers extremely well. At least three charter school leaders make more than New York City’s Schools Chancellor—with Deborah Kenny of the Village Academies Network leading the way with \$442,000 in compensation in 2008, according to the group’s 990 tax form.

A considerable gap between management and workers’ salaries is common in charter schools across the country, according to a recent study out of Western Michigan University. Overall, charters spend less on teacher salaries and instruction and more on management and administration than traditional public schools.²¹

Politics and Profits Make Reliable Bedfellows

Do an internet search beyond the first few results, dig into the inner-workings of a website and, if you’re lucky, you’ll find connections that even a court of law would question as merely coincidental.

Hedge funds, for instance, are targeting not just charter schools but also the for-profit college market. As an article this June on *hedgetracker.com* noted, “Hedge funds have been circling for new carrion to devour in the next economic slowdown and have found a big fat target in the for-profit educational sector. The industry is ripe for the taking. For two decades, for-profit schools have lured gullible students with inflated promises of impressive sounding degrees which they pay exorbitant tuition to obtain.”²²

The minimal public transparency and oversight of charters is in sync with hedge fund culture. Infamous for their secrecy, hedge funds operate largely beyond public scrutiny.

The article goes on to call the phenomenon “education’s version of the subprime crisis” because so many of the students at the for-profits default on their federal student loans. Despite their educational downsides, for-profits now account for 10% of all higher education enrollments in the country, “and the profits that have poured in have been absolutely massive.” While for-profit charters have not yet reached a similar market share in the K-12 educational sector, in the last decade they have made significant inroads. In the 2008–09 school year, there were more than 725 for-profit charter schools in 31 states.²³

And, it turns out, one of the hedge funds most involved in post-secondary education is Maverick Capital—whose founder chaired the Robin Hood Foundation fundraiser. What’s more, the same hedge fund is involved in Education Reform Now, the nonprofit arm of Democrats for Education Reform, the PAC that routinely hits up Wall Street for contributions to promote charter schools, mayoral control, and voucher programs that provide public dollars to private and religious schools and that, in essence, serves as the political arm of the pro-corporate education reformers. The group is involved in elections and campaigns across the country, with branches in eight states: Colorado, Michigan, Missouri, New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Rhode Island and Wisconsin.

The Education Reform Now and Democrats for Education Reform joint effort represents a skilled blending of old-fashioned conservatives and 21st Century billionaires—and an equally impressive obfuscation that the groups embrace both Republican and Democrats.

Historically, charter and voucher initiatives have received their most consistent support from pro-Republican traditional conservatives such as the Walton Foundation of Wal-Mart fame and the Bradley Foundation based on the fortune of the Allen-Bradley Corporation in Milwaukee. This was especially true under the Reagan and both Bush administrations, when vouchers for private schools seemed the stronger of the voucher/charter “school choice” reforms. Vouchers were never popular with voters, however, and so much of the emphasis shifted to the more politically palatable charter reform—with corporate-oriented Democrats and digital billionaires jumping onto the school choice/charter bandwagon.

Hedge fund managers have been especially involved, as the board of directors of Education Reform Now makes clear. The five board members are: Sidney Hawkins Gargiulo of Hawkshaw Capital; John Petry (chair) of Gotham Capital; John Sabat of SAC Capital; Joe Williams, head of Democrats for Education Reform (DFER); and Brian Zied of Maverick Capital.

If some of the names sound familiar, that’s not a coincidence. A surprising number of people sit on multiple boards associated with charter school initiatives, in what is best explained as the nonprofit equivalent of interlocking directorates. Indeed, one of the advantages of money is that one can set up new groups and websites to give an appearance of breadth and depth. Take away the Gates, Walton and Broad Foundations, Teach for America alumni, DFER, and a few essential hedge fund and investment managers, and the pro-corporate charter movement would shrink significantly.

As befitting hedge fund managers, some of DFER’s members hedge their political bets as well as their financial investments. Take the case of Steven Klinsky, CEO and founder of New Mountain Capital. While he gave \$5,000 to DFER in 2010, the maximum allowed, most of his campaign donations went to Republicans, including \$10,000 each to National Republican Congressional Committee and the Republican Campaign Committee of New York.²⁴

A look at DFER and its relationship to Success Charter Network uncovers how the politics of charters operate in the real world rather than in the sanitized Hollywood version.

First, there are the personal connections—privileged rich people rarely leave their fate up to ping-pong balls and lotteries. John Petry, for instance, is on boards of DFER, of its nonprofit arm Educators for Reform, and of the Success Charter Network. Joel Greenblatt is on the DFER Board of Advisors, and is chair of the Success Charter Network board.

More interesting are the joint political workings of the organizations, of such as the 2008 effort “Flooding the Zone: How an intense, focused ‘school choice’ campaign in Harlem increased support for reform.”²⁵

The campaign makes clear that the charter lotteries have more to do with political propagandizing than with serving the needs of children and families. (The “flooding” reference is just one of several examples of charter forces cavalierly using Hurricane Katrina to promote disaster-based reform. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan went so far as to call Katrina the “best thing to happen” to New Orleans schools, and as recently as September NBC’s “Education Nation” event included a session entitled “Does education need a Katrina?” The latest DFER report, interestingly, is called “Bursting the Dam.”)

Flooding the Zone, Bamboozling the Media

The “Flooding the Zone” campaign was jointly decided upon by the leaders of Success Charter Network and DFER (and, allegedly, a group of parent activists which appears to be moribund now that this year’s lottery is over). The campaign’s purpose was to “go ‘on offense’ to provide political cover” to increase the number of charters in Harlem, create a hospitable climate for charters to take over space in public schools, and promote the concept of parent choice.

The strategy to do so was to create a groundswell of publicity for the charter lotteries and to “flood the zone” in Harlem with pro-school choice messages. No effort was spared, with hundreds of thousands of leaflets, multiple mailings to families, ads at bus stops, posters and literature drops. Lacking a membership base, DFER used “an army of field workers, many high school students who were hired to blanket the neighborhood with materials.”²⁶ Success Charter Network coordinated the information and DFER coordinated the political rally.

The paper does not provide figures on the campaign costs. But a recent article in the *Daily News* reported that Success Charter Network spent \$1.3 million on marketing between 2007 and 2009, with most of that going to the leaflets, posters and mailings that were part of the “Flooding the Zone” campaign.²⁷

“Flooding the Zone” makes clear how the Success Charter School lottery was a very conscious public relations effort. Given the political and economic clout behind DFER and Success Charter Network, and the inherent drama of a winner-take-all lottery, it’s not surprising that *Waiting for Superman* used the lottery as its dramatic heart.

DFER’s “Done Waiting” campaign, meanwhile, is a partner in *Waiting for Superman*’s social action campaign, along with a who’s who of traditional conservatives and digital-age billionaires including the Walton Family Foundation, the Broad Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (On the local level, more politically diffuse groups such as the United Way and Stand for Children are coordinating efforts.) The “Done Waiting” partners, meanwhile, include not just charter organizations but groups focused on vouchers for private and religious schools.

DFER prefers to play a behind-the-scenes role. The same is not true of the foundations that have emerged as the forces behind the corporate reform agenda that now dominates education policy discussions.

While names like Rockefeller, Ford, Annenberg, and Carnegie traditionally have dominated foundation-funded education reform, in recent years a new group of foundations has emerged—Gates, Walton, and Broad, in particular. And all three are deeply involved in campaigns

promoting the educational perspectives of *Waiting for Superman*. (Gates is featured as an education “expert” in the film, which conversely does not include an interview with a single public school teacher.)

Gates—whose education grants in the last decade approach the \$3 billion mark—has been so dominant that he has been dubbed the country’s education czar.²⁸ Given the imperial nature of foundation-driven reform, the czar moniker is particularly appropriate. (Gates, with a net worth of about \$53 billion, saw his worth increase by \$13 billion alone last year, according to Forbes magazine.) Foundations, although benefiting from their status as nonprofits and thus essentially subsidized by U.S. taxpayers, are private institutions with private boards, able to make behind-the-scenes decisions and sidestep public accountability for the success or failure of their programs.

Given the realities of school funding, with public dollars focused on essential services, schools and districts—and even the U.S. Department of Education—often look to foundations to fund new initiatives. Add in grants to organizations such as Teach for America or the Charter School Growth Fund (which received \$12 million from Gates this July), and the foundations have inordinate power in determining the future of public education.

“What we’ve done is create a new nobility, where basically the lords and ladies decide who gets the money,” argues Barbara Dudley, head of the Veatch Foundation in the early 1990s, former director of Greenpeace, former president of the National Lawyers Guild, and currently an adjunct professor at Portland State University.²⁹ “It is not democratic and you can’t pretend that it is.”

Education’s role in strengthening our democratic institutions is a long-standing tradition in this country; it isn’t a mistake that the right to a free public education is enshrined in every single state constitution in the country. Yet many charter school promoters don’t even feel the need to make a rhetorical nod toward democratic concerns.

The NewSchools Venture Fund, for instance, issued a 10-year report on its \$100 million investment in nonprofit and for-profit initiatives and called the report “Investing in a Revolution.” While the words “entrepreneur,” “entrepreneurs” or “entrepreneurial” shows up 84 times in the report, the words “democracy” or “democratic” do not appear even once.

Which leads to a fundamental and unaddressed question. Should the American people put their faith in a white billionaire boys club to lead the revolution on behalf of poor people of color?

As educational historian Diane Ravitch notes, the corporate-based reform agenda undermines community and democracy and is subject “to the whim of entrepreneurs and financiers.” The obsession with schools as a business, she notes, “threatens to destroy public education.”

“Who will stand up to the tycoons and politicians and tell them so?”³⁰

¹ Based on dialogue from the 1976 film *All the President’s Men*. (↑)

² <http://www.gettschooled.com/> (↑)

³ Ann Hornaday, “For the studio behind *Waiting for Superman*, movies are a tool for change,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 3, 2010, E01. (↑)

⁴ Participant Media website (www.participantmedia.com), “Our Team.” Berk also oversaw Participant’s investment in Summit Entertainment, a worldwide film financing, production and distribution company known for its *Twilight* series. (↑)

⁵ <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/10/01/hearing> (↑)

⁶ TakePart website: www.takepart.com/issues/charter-schools/13785 (↑)

⁷ <http://www.portfolio.com/companies-executives/2009/08/07/who-is-philip-anschutz-and-why-is-he-in-business-with-michael-jackson-and-the-weekly-standard/> (↑)

⁸ http://money.cnn.com/2006/04/17/magazines/fortune/waldenmedia_fortune_050106/ (↑)

⁹ Jodi Wilgoren, “Politicized Scholars Put Evolution on the Defensive,” *New York Times*, Aug. 21, 2005. (↑)

¹⁰ The charter school reform emerged in part out of progressive efforts to promote innovation that could be used to improve all public schools, and to open up discussion on the relationship between school and community, particularly in urban areas. At the same time, the charter concept appealed to reformers wedded to a free-market, privatization agenda. In the past decade, these privatizers have come to dominate the charter school movement. For a further exploration of these contradictions, see the Rethinking Schools book *Keeping the Promise? The Debate Over Charter Schools*, 2008, Rethinking Schools. (↑)

¹¹ Les Leopold, “Why Do We Save Billionaires But Not Teachers?” *The Huffington Post*, April 30, 2010. www.huffingtonpost.com/les-leopold/why-do-we-save-billionaire_b_558213.html (↑)

¹² Daniel Gross, “The Kingdom of Hedgistan,” *New York* magazine, April 9, 2007. (↑)

¹³ Nancy Hass, “Scholarly Investments,” *New York Times*, Dec. 6, 2009. (↑)

¹⁴ See sidebar article outlining the boards of trustees of Success Charter Network and the Harlem Children’s Zone. (↑)

- ¹⁵ Zuckerberg's \$100 million "gift" to Newark is in the form of such private stock, raising numerous issues of financial disclosure. <http://blogs.forbes.com/stevenbertoni/2010/09/23/how-will-newark-turn-zuckerbergs-100-million-worth-of-facebook-shares-into-cash/> (↑)
- ¹⁶ Nancy Hass, "Scholarly Investments," New York Times, Dec. 6, 2009. (↑)
- ¹⁷ *ibid.* (↑)
- ¹⁸ *ibid.* (↑)
- ¹⁹ Andy Serwer, "The legend of Robin Hood," *Fortune*, Sept. 8, 2006. (↑)
- ²⁰ *ibid.* (↑)
- ²¹ Miron, G. & Urschel, J.L. (2010). "Equal or fair? A study of revenues and expenditures in American charter schools." Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. (↑)
- ²² "Hedge Funds Are Now Targeting For-Profit Education," June 2, 2010, www.hedgetracker.com (↑)
- ²³ Miron, G. & Urschel, J.L. (2010). (↑)
- ²⁴ Information from the website DFERWatch, which provides detailed information on the organization (www.dferwatch.wordpress.com). (↑)
- ²⁵ The position paper, written by Democrats for Education Reform, is available at <http://www.edreformnow.org/Flooding%20The%20Zone.pdf>. (↑)
- ²⁶ "Flooding the Zone," p. 4. (↑)
- ²⁷ Juan Gonzalez, "Local charter schools like Harlem Success is big business as millions are poured into marketing," *Daily News*, Oct. 1, 2010. (↑)
- ²⁸ Historian Diane Ravitch reports that Gates spent about \$2 billion on its campaign from 2000 to 2008 to make small schools the driving reform for high schools, a campaign it dropped when results hovered between abysmal and mediocre. *The Washington Post* reports Gates has spent about \$650 million from 2008 to July 2010 on education reform, mostly on teacher evaluation and performance pay. Nick Anderson, "Gates Foundation playing pivotal role in changes for education system," *Washington Post*, July 12, 2010. (↑)
- ²⁹ Barbara Miner, "Who's Behind the Money," *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 19 No. 4. (↑)
- ³⁰ Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 222. (↑)
- Barbara Miner is a journalist based in Milwaukee and former managing editor of *Rethinking Schools*. (This article was written for NOTwaitingforsuperman.org, initiated by Rethinking Schools.)

<http://www.notwaitingforsuperman.org/Articles/20100927-RAyersWashPost>

What "Superman" got wrong, point by point

- Monday, September 27, 2010

By Rick Ayers

Waiting for Superman: Approach it with a critical eye — Some of the evidence, some of the common sense that the film left out

Washington Post Educational Blog

While the education film Waiting for Superman (WFS) has moving profiles of students struggling to succeed under difficult circumstances, it puts forward a sometimes misleading and other times dishonest account of the roots of the problem and possible solutions.

The amped up rhetoric of crisis and failure everywhere is being used to promote business model reforms that are destabilizing even successful schools and districts. A panel at NBC's Education Nation event was originally titled "Does Education Need a Katrina?" Such disgraceful rhetoric undermines reasonable debate.

Let's examine these issues.

- **WFS says that lack of money is not the problem in education.** Yet the exclusive charter schools featured in the film receive large private subsidies. Two-thirds of Geoffrey [Canada's Harlem Children's Zone](#) funding comes from private sources, effectively making it a highly resourced private school. [Promise Academy](#), the Harlem Children's Zone charter school, is in many ways an excellent school, but it is dishonest for the filmmakers to say nothing about the funds it took to create it and the extensive social supports including free medical care and counseling provided by the Harlem Children's Zone.

In New Jersey, where court decisions mandated similar programs, such as high quality pre-Kindergarten classes and extended school days and social services in the poorest urban districts, achievement and graduation rates increased while gaps started to close. But public funding for those programs is now being cut and progress is being eroded. Money matters! Of course, money will not solve all problems (because the problems are more systemic than the resources of any given school) – but the off-handed rejection of a discussion of resources is misleading.

- **WFS implies that testing is a reasonable way to assess student progress.** The debate of “how to raise test scores” strangles and distorts strong education. Most test score differences stubbornly continue to reflect parental income and neighborhood/zip codes, not what schools do. As opportunity, health and family wealth increase, so do [test scores](#).

This is not the fault of schools but the inaccuracy, and the internal bias, in the tests themselves. Moreover, the tests are too narrow (on only certain subjects with only certain measurement tools). When schools focus exclusively on boosting scores on standardized tests, they reduce teachers to test-prep clerks, ignore important subject areas and critical thinking skills, dumb down the curriculum and leave children less prepared for the future. We need much more authentic assessment to know if schools are doing well and to help them improve.

- **WFS ignores overall problems of poverty.** Schools must be made into sites of opportunity, not places for the rejection and failure of millions of African American, Chicano Latino, Native American, and immigrant students. But schools and teachers take the blame for huge social inequities in housing, health care, and income.

Income disparities between the richest and poorest in US society have reached record levels between 1970 and today. Poor communities suffer extensive traumas and dislocations. Homelessness, the exploitation of immigrants, and the closing of community health and counseling clinics, are all factors that penetrate our school communities. Solutions that punish schools without addressing these conditions only increase the marginalization of poor children.

- **WFS says teachers' unions are the problem.** Of course unions need to be improved – more transparent, more accountable, more democratic and participatory – but before teachers unionized, the disparity in pay between men and women was disgraceful and the arbitrary power of school boards to dismiss teachers or raise class size without any resistance was endemic.

Unions have historically played leading roles in improving public education, and most nations with strong public educational systems have strong teacher unions.

In the Finnish education system, much cited in the film as the best in the world, teachers are – gasp! – unionized and granted tenure, and families benefit from a cradle-to-grave social welfare system that includes universal daycare, preschool and healthcare, all of which are proven to help children achieve better results in school. In fact, even student teachers have a union in Finland and, overall, nearly 90% of the Finnish labor force is unionized.

[The demonization of unions](#) ignores the real evidence.

- **WFS says teacher education is useless.** The movie touts the benefits of fast track and direct entry to teaching programs like [Teach for America](#), but the country with the highest achieving students, Finland, also has highly educated teachers.

A 1970 reform of Finland's education system mandated that all teachers above the kindergarten level have at least a master's degree. Today that country's students have the highest math and science literacy, as measured by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), of all the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) (OECD) member countries.

- **WFS decries tenure as a drag on teacher improvement.** Tenured teachers cannot be fired without due process and a good reason: they can't be fired because the boss wants to hire his cousin, or because the teacher is gay (or black or...), or because they take an unpopular position on a public issue outside of school.

A recent survey found that most principals agreed that they had the authority to fire a teacher if they needed to. It is interesting to note that when teachers are evaluated through a union-sanctioned peer process, more teachers are put into retraining programs and dismissed than through administration-only review programs. Overwhelmingly teachers want students to have outstanding and positive experiences in schools.

- **WFS says charter schools allow choice and better educational innovation.** Charters were first proposed by the teachers' unions to allow committed parents and teachers to create schools that were free of administrative bureaucracy and open to experimentation and innovation, and some excellent charters have set examples. But thousands of hustlers and snake oil salesmen have also jumped in. While teacher unions are vilified in the film, there is no mention of charter corruption or profiteering. A recent national study by [CREDO, The Center for Research on Education Outcomes](#) at Stanford, concludes that only 17% of charter schools have better test scores than traditional public schools, 46% had

gains that were no different than their public counterparts, and 37% were significantly worse.

While a better measure of school success is needed, even by their own measure, the project has not succeeded. The recent [Mathematica Policy Research](#) study comes to similar conclusions. See <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2010/0629/Study-On-average-charter-schools-do-no-better-than-public-schools>. The Institute of Education Sciences - [The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts \(pdf download\)](#) concludes, “On average, charter middle schools that hold lotteries are neither more nor less successful than traditional public schools in improving student achievement, behavior, and school progress.”

Some fantastic education is happening in charter schools, especially those initiated by communities and led by teachers and community members. But the use of charters as a battering ram for those who would outsource and privatize education in the name of “reform” is sheer political opportunism.

- **WFS glorifies lotteries for admission to highly selective and subsidized charter schools as evidence of the need for more of them.** If we understand education as a civil right, even a human right as defined by the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), we know it can't be distributed by a lottery.

We must guarantee all students access to high quality early education, highly effective teachers, college and work-preparatory curricula and equitable instructional resources like good school libraries and small classes. A right without a clear map of what that right protects is an empty statement.

It is not a sustainable public policy to allow more and more public school funding to be diverted to privately subsidized charters while public schools become the schools of last resort for children with the greatest educational needs. In *WFS*, families are cruelly paraded in front of the cameras as they wait for an admission lottery in an auditorium where the winners' names are pulled from a hat and read aloud, while the losing families trudge out in tears with cameras looming in their faces – in what amounts to family and child abuse.

- **WFS says competition is the best way to improve learning.** Too many people involved in education policy are dazzled by the idea of “market forces” improving schools. By setting up systems of competition, Social Darwinist struggles between students, between teachers, and between schools, these education policy works are distorting the educational process.

Teachers will be motivated to gather the most promising students, to hide curriculum strategies from peers, and to cheat; principals have already been caught cheating in a desperate attempt to boost test scores. And children are worn out in a sink-or-swim atmosphere that threatens them with dire life outcomes if they are not climbing to the top of the heap.

In spite of the many millions poured into expounding the theory of paying teachers for higher student test scores (sometimes mislabeled as ‘merit pay’), a recent [study by Vanderbilt University's National Center on Performance Incentives](#) found that the use of merit pay for teachers in the Nashville school district produced no difference even according to their measure, test outcomes for students.

- **WFS says good teachers are key to successful education.** We agree. But *WFS* only contributes to the teacher-bashing culture which discourages talented college graduates from considering teaching and drives people out of the profession. According to the United States Department of Education, the country will need 1.6 million new teachers in the next five years. Retention of talented teachers is one key. Good teaching is about making connections to students, about connecting what they learn to the world in which they live, and this only happens if teachers have history and roots in the communities where they teach.

But a recent [report by the nonprofit National Commission on Teaching and America's Future](#) says that “approximately a third of America's new teachers leave teaching sometime during their first three years of teaching; almost half leave during the first five years. In many cases, keeping our schools supplied with qualified teachers is comparable to trying to fill a bucket with a huge hole in the bottom.”

Check out the reasons teachers are being driven out in Katy Farber's book [Why Great Teachers Quit: And How We Might Stop the Exodus](#) (Corwin Press).

- **WFS says “we're not producing large numbers of scientists and doctors in this country anymore... This means we are not only less educated, but also less economically competitive.”** But [Business Week \(10/28/09\)](#) reports “U.S. colleges and universities are graduating as many scientists and engineers as ever,” yet “the highest performing students are choosing careers in other fields.” In particular, the study found, “many of the top students have been lured to careers in finance and consulting.” It's the market, and the disproportionately high salaries paid to finance specialists, that is misdirecting human resources, not schools.
- **WFS promotes a nutty theory of learning: that teaching is a matter of pouring information into children's heads.** In one of its many little cartoon segments, *WFS* purports to show how kids learn. The top of a child's head is cut open and a jumble of factoids is poured in. Ouch! Oh, and then the evil teacher union and regulations stop this productive pouring project.

The film-makers betray no understanding of how people actually learn, the active and engaged participation of students in the learning process. They ignore the social construction of knowledge, the difference between deep learning and rote memorization.

The movie would have done a service by showing us what excellent teaching looks like, and addressing the valuable role that teacher education plays in preparing educators to practice the kind of targeted teaching that reaches all students. It should have let teachers' voices be heard.

- **WFS promotes the idea that we are in a dire war for US dominance in the world.** The poster advertising the film shows a nightmarish battlefield in stark grey, with a little white girl sitting at a desk in the midst of it. The text: "The fate of our country won't be decided on a battlefield. It will be determined in a classroom."

This is a common theme of the so-called reformers: we are at war with India and China and we have to out-math them and crush them so that we can remain rich and they can stay in the sweatshops.

But really, who declared this war? When did I as a teacher sign up as an officer in this war? And when did that 4th grade girl become a soldier in it? Instead of this new educational Cold War, perhaps we should be helping kids imagine a world of global cooperation, sustainable economics, and equity.

- **WFS says federal "Race to the Top" education funds are being focused to support students who are not being served in other ways.** According to [a study](#) by Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights under Law, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., and others, Race to the Top funds are benefiting affluent or well-to-do, white, and "abled" students. So the outcome of No Child Left Behind and [Race to the Top](#) has been more funding for schools that are doing well and more discipline and narrow test-preparation for the poorest schools.
- **WFS suggests that teacher improvement is a matter of increased control and discipline over teachers.** Dan Brown, a teacher in the [SEED charter school](#) featured in the film, points out that successful schools involve teachers in strong collegial conversations. Teachers need to be accountable to a strong educational plan, without being terrorized. Good teachers, which is the vast majority of them, [are seeking this kind of support](#) from their administration.
- **WFS proposes a reform "solution" that exploits the feminization of the field of teaching; it proposes that teachers just need a few good men with hedge funds (plus Michelle Rhee with a broom) to come to the rescue.** Teaching has been historically devalued – teachers are less well compensated and have less control of their working conditions than other professionals – *because* of its associations with women.

For example, 97% of pre-school and kindergarten teachers are women, and this is also the least well-compensated sector of teaching – [in 2009, the lowest 10% earned](#) \$30,970 to \$34,280; the top 10% earned \$75,190 to \$80,970. By comparison the top 25 hedge fund managers took in \$25 billion in 2009, enough to hire 658,000 new teachers. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/les-leopold/why-do-we-save-billionaire_b_558213.html

Waiting for Superman could and should have been an inspiring call for improvement in education, a call we desperately need to mobilize behind.

That's why it is so shocking that the message was hijacked by a narrow agenda that undermines strong education. It is stuck in a framework that says that reform and leadership means doing things, like firing a bunch of people (Michelle Rhee) or "turning around" schools (Arne Duncan) despite the fact that there's no research to suggest that these would have worked, and there's now evidence to show that they haven't.

Reform must be guided by community empowerment and strong evidence, not by ideological warriors or romanticized images of leaders acting like they're doing something, anything. *WFS* has ignored deep historical and systemic problems in education such as segregation, property-tax based funding formulas, centralized textbook production, lack of local autonomy and shared governance, deprofessionalization, inadequate special education supports, differential discipline patterns, and the list goes on and on.

People seeing *Waiting for Superman* should be mobilized to improve education. They just need to be willing to think outside of the narrow box the film-makers have constructed to define what needs to be done.

Thanks for ideas and some content from many teacher publications, and especially from Monty Neill, Jim Horn Lisa Guisbond, Stan Karp, Erica Meiners, Kevin Kumashiro, Ilene Abrams, Bill Ayers, and Therese Quinn.

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<http://www.ruthlessreviews.com/11464/waiting-for-superman-the-worst-film-of-2010/>

WAITING FOR SUPERMAN: DEBUNKING ONE OF THE WORST FILMS EVER MADE

by [Plexico Gingrich](#) on May 17, 2011

Here's a red flag for you. I became aware of *Waiting For Superman* because I saw episodes of Oprah and Larry King about the film when those programs floated up at work. I saw Oprah first and, without audio, it was just this machine processing deep-fried Faberge eggs into tears in a way that seemed to eventually benefit a disadvantaged little girl who had been flown in for the occasion, so I thought that it must be OK. I didn't completely realize how fortunate I was that the sound was off until I caught the lies and stupidity at full volume, tugging the standards of Larry King Live even further beneath the earth's crust, which, by the way, is where they found that Piers Morgan guy. It was one of the most disturbing discussions I've seen on cable news, and I've never seen one that wasn't at least troubling.

The main panel consisted of Ben Stein, Michelle Rhee, one of the films "stars," and a reform-minded D.C. Superintendent, singer John Legend and Steve Perry, not the singer, but a "straight talker" who contributes to CNN on the subject of education. Really, they put this on TV. The latter three were there to argue that the plight of the struggling underclass in the United States is due to the greatest device for human cruelty ever conceived: a free public education. Largely to blame were the teachers. I swear to God, Ben Stein found himself in the position of having to defend public education and teachers. Ben Stein. I swear to God. Ben Stein. Ben Stein. I had to dredge up the transcript because I knew you would be skeptical, no matter how many times I said it.

One thing I noticed from this discussion endlessly is we blame the teachers, blame the teachers, blame the teachers, and I'm sure many of them deserve blame, but we don't ever say, why don't the kids wake up and smell the coffee and say, look, it's up to us to do some work?

- Ben Stein

Meanwhile, Perry the lesser, Rhee and *Legend* presented a *reductio ad absurdum* of thoughtless pseudo-leftism. As we already know, the poor, especially if they are not white, never have culpability for anything. How did so many of the parents at poorly performing schools get kids they can't support, for example? Whenever you notice something like that, a wizard did it. If some urban schools are graduating less than 50% of their kids, it is entirely the fault of schools and teachers because, obviously, it is a total coincidence that those families happen to be living in a ghetto and that the parents could easily be mistaken for the students' older siblings. Certainly, cultural or personal shortcomings played no role in creating the situation. If certain classes of poor people are always completely blameless, the only option is the left's version of blaming the victim, which is blaming the helper. The mechanisms that might help one out of poverty are the reason for poverty. A free education from college trained professionals is the reason for poor education.

Perry made one argument on King that evidenced a special kind of stupidity, even for a mass media chatter-clown. It's hinted at in the film when a vacuous, wealthy, white mom is unable able to help her daughter with chemistry homework, even after investing almost ten seconds of effort and almost being late for a spa treatment.

Parents have an important role. But the parents are often blamed for that which the school is responsible for.

I have a son. I have two sons and they play the piano. And I don't know how to play the piano. If my piano teacher ever came to our home and said, you know what, if you were a better pianist, your sons would be better piano — players, I'd fire him so quick he'd forget he ever taught my sons to play.

I paid that man to do this. We are asking parents who in some cases haven't taken chemistry either in 12, 15, 20 years or if ever, to help a child with chemistry homework.

—Steve Perry The Lesser

So it is unfair of schools to demand that education begin at home, because parents often lack knowledge of the subjects at hand. If you hired a private piano teacher, you wouldn't expect that they ask *you* to teach the piano to your kids, right? Well, in reality, they probably would ask *you* to oversee practice sessions, but never mind reality. Reality has nothing to do with this film and the views it advocates. It's so much easier to point out that most of us don't know high school chemistry. So how could parents possibly have a role in educating their children? It is the ever appealing political philosophy of Homer Simpson: Can't someone else do it?

Anybody who has spent time around public schools should smell the bullshit from miles out. I was a sub in The Los Angeles Unified School District for a couple years, which is long enough to ascertain that the chief obstacle to learning in the home for most students is not the fact that their parents lack a working knowledge of chemistry.

One of the most difficult schools I worked at had 45% of students in foster care. That isn't the kids' fault, of course, but it isn't the fault of the teachers either. In schools like this, it is not uncommon to send a student to the dean or vice principal and have them sent back minutes later because the disciplinary load is so overwhelming that there is physically no room for them. This doesn't happen because the guardians or parents don't know chemistry. It's because they don't care if their kids get into fights, never mind learn to read properly, never mind do any homework at all, never mind learn chemistry.

I know a full time teacher at a LAUSD school that is relatively lower-middle class. Students there often complain of being hungry in class. The school had to implement a "second chance," free breakfast. Yes, there is a free breakfast in the morning. But it turns out that many of the parents in the area, on top of supposedly being unable to afford generic cereal, bread, beans and rice or eggs, also can't be bothered to get their kids to school on time to eat for free. This was, of course, determined to be the school's fault, so it was up to the school to adjust by adding a disruptive "second chance," free breakfast to the schedule. But realistically, what do you expect a teacher to do with a kid whose parents cannot be bothered to feed their children, even when someone else is paying? Of course, many of these kids have overextended young single mothers, and one might question whether having kids you couldn't afford to feed was such a great choice, or, since the historically disadvantaged cannot be held responsible for anything, maybe even blame the lack of access to family planning and

birth control in certain neighborhoods instead of blaming the teachers, but that would only serve as a distraction from the indisputable fact that a wizard did it.

Here's the most extreme case I encountered. None of this is exaggerated. I turned a student over to security because he punched another student. He wasn't horsing around, it was a real, malicious punch in the face. I told the security guy what happened and that I didn't want to see the kid for the rest of the day. He was back at the door less than five minutes later. Of course, I wasn't allowed to touch him, so I just played offensive lineman and physically blocked him from walking through the door as he shoved me and threatened to kill me (he was only fourteen, and I am tall and a big fatso, so this was merely annoying) until I was able to flag down another staff member. She got the same security guy and I tried not to yell as I explained again what I meant when I said the student had punched another kid in the face and that there was no circumstance in which he and I would be in the same classroom for the rest of the day. I later learned that the boy's single father ignored all reports of problems at school. It's about as hard to expel a kid as it is to fire a tenured teacher. Therefore, the disciplinary apparatus of the school was pretty much helpless until he seriously hurt someone. Thanks to *Waiting For Superman*, I now realize this was all my fault. The reason this kid thought it was OK to go around punching people is that I expected his parents to teach him advanced chemistry. Maybe a little piano.

The point of the anecdotes is that, while the film blames educators and schools, we're never given an even vaguely realistic picture of what they face. It's like watching the CNN coverage of the first Gulf War and wondering why veterans have problems. Didn't they just push buttons and make those cool smart bomb videos? It was just a big video game, right? In *Superman*, we meet about half a dozen great kids with active parents. That is 100% of the depiction of the students and parents in poorly performing schools. So teaching in poor, urban areas means dealing with bright, eager students and parents who can't do enough to help, right?

What about the student who punches kids in the face, but can't be expelled and doesn't care if he's suspended? What are teachers to do when they threaten to call home and a student can truthfully say, "they don't care." And yes, I've actually heard that exchange more than once. What about kids who are not only sent to school hungry, but arrive too late for the free food? Do you think that they received adequate stimulation in early childhood? Do you think that they received proper nutrition in the womb and early childhood? Do you think their mothers abstained from smoking, drinking and drugs during pregnancy? Do you think kids subjected to that kind of development resemble the kids highlighted in this film? Where were the gang bangers? Where were the parents who are gang bangers? The parents who despise learning? The neglectful foster parents, or overwhelmed grandparents? When dealing with parents who do not value education, don't make their kids do homework and who don't respect authority themselves, the teachers are supposed to wave a magic wand and fix it all, but the film never presents any of the actual problems teachers face and it certainly never explains how magic wands work. It just asserts that a free education is not an opportunity of which you take advantage. Rather, it's an entitlement that should be bestowed upon you, with no effort on your part, even if you actively resist it.

The truth is that teachers aren't really supposed to deal with many of these issues, but they do anyway. At least in LAUSD, teachers are not theoretically in charge of serious discipline. But in reality, if the student hasn't committed a felony, the dean is too busy and the everyday teachers, as opposed to subs like me, are expected to call home and talk to parents (or whoever) about behavioral problems. This is not part of their job description, but they do it anyway. It's quite common that the parent's reaction will be one of anger towards the teacher. So, put yourself in that position. You teach a class of 30 that is disrupted by a few students. You send them to the dean and they are sent back. You go beyond the call of duty and call the parents (or whoever) to discuss the problem and they say, "why the fuck you calling me about this bullshit?" And here comes some idiot with a camera to tell you that it's all your fault.

The film? I'm not sure what there is to review. The technique is average, if unoriginal. I think the trick of using outdated educational films as a humorous way to make your point is outdated. Though the film is not nearly as thoughtful as *Football In The Groin*, it leans heavily on "Simpsons" clips. It has original animation and I guess if there was any substance, it would go down smoother than an episode of "Bill Nye The Science Guy." Instead, the lies and distortions come so fast and thick, I'm not sure how to categorize the film, since, it strains the definition of the word, "documentary." I can't believe that intelligent people of any political persuasion found it possible to overlook the direct contradictions, even in the film's narration. Within the space of a few minutes, the narrator explains that public school funding per student has doubled in recent decades. Then he says the No Child Left Behind Act seemingly signaled the end of "years of empty lip service." Obviously, he never really thought that No Child Left Behind was the solution. He is just pretending that he thought so, in order to create a narrative in which he is continually disappointed by our efforts at improving education. He never explains how doubling funding to education is "empty lip service." I think it is possible that he does not know the meaning of that phrase. Mendacity or stupidity: who cares which?

I'm not a parent, and yet I've felt like one ever since I started making *Waiting for "Superman."* Until now, I don't think I've read sixteen books on any single subject *ever*...

– Lesley Chilcott, producer of *Waiting For Superman* blogging for CNN

In the same span, the narrator decries our level test scores in reading and math. On its face, it's another piece of political thinking from a Simpsons character. Presumably, he believes test scores should always be on the rise because... I don't know. Are people getting smarter every year? As always when discussing test scores, the fact that white and Asian American students test well compared to students in all other countries, and that our averages are dragged down almost entirely by the scores of black and Hispanic students (as I learned from the noted arch-conservative site Salon.com), is tiptoed around as testing data are chopped and sliced to disguise that truth without mentioning it.

For example, the film points out that our top 5% of test results is worse than the top 5% of students in most other rich countries. It's a way for the film to deflect us from the actual test results of various ethnic groups without dirtying itself by ever mentioning the facts. We are left to assume that our top 5% excludes poor, urban students. So then it must be a direct comparison of our top white and Asian students against the top students in countries that are almost all white or Asian. This leads to the argument that even schools in affluent areas are failing. This is when we meet the affluent housewife who "can't" help her daughter with chemistry.

Well, why not just skip all of that and present the top scores of white and Asian students? Let's think it through. Countries like Finland and Japan have more homogeneous populations. We have large black and Hispanic populations and it is among these large groups that we see a dramatic fall off of test scores. So, while our top 5% will be predominantly white and Asian, it is still the result for the top 5% of the *overall pool* of students, so the scores are still diluted. The top 5% of *just* our white and Asian students would certainly test much closer to the top 5% of whites or Asians in predominantly white/Asian countries. I base this, again, on the fact that American whites and Asians, overall, test well compared to their counterparts abroad. If you still have trouble seeing this, imagine that you measured the test scores of the top 5% of Japanese students. Then, you injected a few million economic refugees from Mexico, and their children, into the Japanese system. Then you did a second study that measured the top 5% of the new pool, including the new students. Clearly the second set of test results would be lower, but the actual students included in the first top 5% would be just as smart and educated as they were before. If you consider that, you might wonder if level math and reading scores here in the US with the influx of millions of illegal immigrants and children of illegal immigrants into the system might actually be a pretty respectable result.

Regardless of what you do with the disparate results among American students, if you pretend the gap between racial groups isn't there, you are not discussing reality. Or in the case of the film, you are trying to hide reality. Are the disparate test results due to white racism? Are they because whites (and Asians) are the master race? Is it the will of Xenu? I don't propose to solve the problem here, but that *is* the problem. Education isn't failing. The education of specific minorities, particularly poor members of those minorities is failing horribly. It is a very real problem. Too bad nobody is interested in discussing it.

Since much of the film is an attempt to misrepresent the problem it is ostensibly discussing, it doesn't have any value. It's like a movie about homelessness that treats the occasional instance of mental illness among the homeless as a coincidence. "Why are so many of these homeless people mentally ill?" you might wonder. The film would never address it, but it would include some mentally healthy homeless as subjects and play statistical shell games to conceal the rate of mental illness among the homeless. Well, what would be the point of that? How would it be in anyway helpful in addressing the problem? There would be no legitimate point and the film would be detrimental to the discussion of homelessness.

The hook of *Superman* is the lottery system by which some students get into exceptional, innovative, and demanding public schools. Mysteriously absent from the film are the parents who sell drugs out of their homes. None yell profanities at teachers who use their free time to call home about discipline. In the world of this film, Hispanic immigrants value higher education above all else, especially for their daughters. These handpicked parents are devoted to their kids' educations and the absurd reverence this inspires in the filmmakers is condescending and embarrassing. The film kind of shoots itself in the foot here because the unintentional indication is that the norm is something less. Otherwise, why get so misty-eyed about the fact that *these* parents and students want a good education? One mom says that she will work multiple jobs to see that her daughter has the chance to go to college. Great. That's called being a reasonably decent parent. But good for her. I can't say I'd be so committed myself, which is one reason I don't have kids (also, the wizard never gave me any, thank goodness!). Another mom in the film begs a lazy teacher for a conference. My friend teaches in a mostly minority community, though a more solidly working class one than those in the film. Most of those parents don't turn up for parent teacher night, never mind PTA meetings. The turnout shrinks every year. I believe the scene in the film happened. I believe that there was one interested parent who could not arrange a conference with one lazy teacher. I also know that parent/teacher night turnouts can be well under 20%. So, which scenario do you think happens more often? By a factor of what? Go ahead and take a guess, because you won't learn the answer from the film.

Another mom talks about how if the filmmakers were to visit her daughter's school, they'd be unable to get past the security desk. We're meant to stroke our chins and go, "wow man. Wow." But, wait a sec. Particularly if your kid went to school in Harlem, would you want adults to roam in and out of the school at will? Even if your kid went to school in Beverly Hills, would you want the school to allow people to come in off the street and film them? When I was a sub I heard about a recent fight on campus. Two girls had gotten into it and when their moms showed up to take them home, they got into it. The mom fight started with extensions being pulled out and tossed to the ground and culminated with attempted murder by SUV in that parking lot. I know what I was thinking when I heard that story. "This school should really cut back on security." Also, "well, the obvious problem here is the teachers."

The pain continues. Who would have guessed that a nation of 300 million people would have complicated school funding and bureaucracy? The film drops facts like, "there are more than 14,000 autonomous school boards." Yeah... that sounds about right. It uses such "grass is green" observations as "evidence" that the system is broken and that failure becomes unaccountable. Do problems exist? Everyone knows they do to some degree. How is that related to the fact that there are 14,000 school districts? I don't know. I guess bigger things are harder to manage, but I was already pretty sure that the United States was a large country before the film explained it. Would more charter schools and weaker unions change that? I'm really not sure why this information is in the film. I guess it just makes schools look bad.

Look how terrible this gets. Here is a direct quote from the film.

TAKEN TOGETHER, the **TWO** biggest teachers unions, the NEA and the AFT are the largest campaign contributors in the country. Over the last 20 years, they've given over \$55 million to federal candidates and their parties. More than the teamsters, the NRA or any other **INDIVIDUAL** organization.

Even if you are deluded enough to believe that trade unions bend Washington to the nefarious whims of the working man while corporate interests look on in envy, all you really need to look at here are the phrases "taken together, the two.." and "any other individual organization." I don't know how to characterize such a brazen manipulation. Is it even propaganda? If I were to sincerely argue to you that Los Angeles is superior to New York because, taken together, two Angelinos have twice the IQ of the average New Yorker, taken individually, I sincerely hope that you would murder me on the spot.

Moreover, if you pay attention to these things even a little bit, \$55 million in campaign contributions over 20 years probably doesn't seem like all that much to you. There's a good explanation for that: it isn't all that much. Since 1999, the financial sector, for example, has contributed \$1.8 billion to federal campaigns and spent about twice that on lobbying. But we are to believe that the real muscle lies with \$55 million contributed over twice that amount of time by teachers unions. The extent of misinformation and manipulation here renders the film useless, regardless of your views. It might as well be set in the world of *Starship Troopers*. It's the bugs who are undermining education!

Similarly, the film's discussion of charter schools just has nothing to do with earth, where there is a reasonable debate to be had on the subject. The film presents the top charter schools as models for success. It completely ignores the top traditional schools. It completely ignores the vast majority of charter schools, which don't perform better than traditional schools. Amazingly enough, it *provides no overview of charter school vs. traditional school performance*. Not only that, it conceals the extent to which the top public charters depend on heavy private subsidies. We do learn that one school asks parents to contribute \$500 a month and the fact that people like Bill Gates contribute to these schools is established, largely for the purpose of squeezing Gates into the film. But to watch the film, you'd never guess that the justly celebrated Harlem Children's Zone receives *two-thirds* of its funding from private sources. So they have triple the money to work with. That's got to come in handy. Do you think there's a small sampling bias when the top charters have students and parents who are deeply motivated to do well as evidenced by them bothering to enter these lotteries in the first place? Do the charter schools have a big advantage in being able to simply kick out any problem students, whereas their traditional counterparts just have to deal with them? Go ahead and guess again, because the film won't address these questions either.

I was prepared to grapple with the film's anti-union stance, but there is almost no substance to take on. There's nothing here but a horrible movie that will leave you less informed than before you watched it. Cheap shots, emotional condescension, manipulated statistics, fallacies and other bad reasoning, almost non-stop. A lot of narrative techniques are clumsily lifted from Michael Moore, but we're not meant to take it as a polemic or a satire. *Waiting for Superman* is meant to be taken seriously, but it can't be, any more than a Michael Savage book or a teenage anarchist's fanzine. At its best, it is completely obvious. Wouldn't we prefer to spend prison money on education? Yes! That's one of the oldest sales tricks in the book, by the way. Get them agreeing with you off the bat, then slip in your dubious wares. Don't you hate child molesters? Yes! Do you like cake? Yes! Do you want to buy a dishwasher? Yes, yes, yes! Er... wait a sec.

Do I hope the profiled kids do well in life? Yes. Are there very badly run schools? I know it all too well. Are there terrible, stupid and lazy teachers. Yes (even in wealthy white suburbs). Wouldn't it be great if every school was like the most outstanding schools and every teacher was a cross between John Wooden and Richard Feynman? Yes! Aren't bad students entirely the fault of educators? Yes! Er... wait a sec.

Amidst the "don't you like cake?" questions, here are some questions that the film completely disregards during its two hours, some of which I'm reiterating. Given that their degrees and work experience don't translate well to other fields, if teachers lose their high job security, what will happen to the pool of applicants? If top charter schools are so rare and difficult to get into, what does that mean in terms of the quality of students and parents they deal with, in contrast to a traditional public school that must take everyone? What disciplinary options, expulsion in particular, are more readily available in charter schools? What general measures are charters allowed to take with their students that parents in a regular school would never allow? What are educators to do with problem students who have indifferent guardians or parents? How much of the difficulty faced by the bright and eager students, or even merely average students, is due to the fact that they have to share a classroom with so many students who are not there to learn? What effect does it have on the motivations of an average kid when the standards for passing are lowered to accommodate students who will barely learn to read, no matter what anybody does with them? How much of their superior resources do these top charter schools expend on autistic, retarded, physically handicapped, psychologically disturbed and/or non-English speaking children?

The film does find several minutes to draw a tremendously strained comparison between the achievement of succeeding with disadvantaged kids and Chuck Yeager breaking the sound barrier. They are similar, you see, because in both cases some experts said it couldn't be done. That just goes to show you what so-called experts know, amiright?! When the graph of test scores was overlaid with a jet, *Waiting For Superman* crossed a barrier as well. It clearly became one of the five worst films I've ever seen. It might be saved from the very bottom slot by the fact that the drama of the drawings to get into the top schools is powerful, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the filmmakers paid someone off to make sure that that the cutest kid was rejected. Even Oprah should be embarrassed.