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Waiting for "Superman" Davis Guggenheim (Director) Paramount Vantage and Participant Media, in association with Walden Media. Documentary film. 102 minutes. Released fall 2010.

In recent months, significant media attention has focused on a new wave of school reformers who, in line with many of the requirements of Race to the Top federal incentives, promote more stringent accountability for teachers and charter schools as the solution to America's educational crisis. Best known for *An Inconvenient Truth*, Academy Award-winning director Davis Guggenheim offers in *Waiting for "Superman"* a disappointingly one-sided view of controversial reformers and their solutions to low-performing urban schools.

The film's premise is simple. It follows five students navigating the public school system and then interviews prominent educational reformers about how to improve the educational system. Over the course of 102 minutes, Guggenheim quicksteps us through an abbreviated version of American educational history and alerts us to an array of complex, multilayered, and persistent historical and societal problems. Given the enormity of challenges that American schools face, where Guggenheim chooses to go next is surprising. From the host of problems presented, he subtly guides the viewer toward what he perceives as the real problem of education: bad teachers and the unions that protect them. His solution, what the film presents as hope for salvation for all five children and their families: charter schools.

Perhaps to seem unbiased, Guggenheim concedes that only one in five charter schools produces exceptional results. But any limitations are quickly overshadowed by his adoring portrayal of the exceptions, specifically the Harlem Children Zone's Promise Academy, KIPP's Los Angeles Prep, and Harlem Success Academy. Children in brightly colored, collared shirts eagerly raise their hands and boast of the number of books they've read. Focusing on a few exceptional schools as if they are typical, Guggenheim has found his superheroes and touts their successes with unrestrained zeal and an uncritical lens.

Of course, every superhero needs a nemesis, and Guggenheim wastes no time in identifying the perpetrators responsible for America's educational failure. To him, it's the teachers unions. The protected, tenured teacher waiting to collect her pension is the reason why America's children don't have a high-quality education. For example, the viewer sees footage from the early 1990s of a teacher reading a newspaper while his students sit listless at their desks. This level of neglect is what Guggenheim argues is happening in all neighborhood public schools. Frustrated that her son is trapped in an overcrowded school in the Bronx, which we are left to assume is filled with apathetic and disengaged teachers, one mother applies to a charter school believing, "If he doesn't get in, he doesn't have a chance."

Guggenheim capitalizes on the fears and hopes of these families, as evidenced in the final scene when we experience, alongside the children, the spectacle and theater of five charter school lotteries. Counting down the dwindling number of spaces left in the bottom corner of the screen, the shot zooms in on the heartbreak as four out of five students are denied enrollment. We are meant to feel outrage and grief. Yet, while Guggenheim capitalizes on the melodrama, the viewer feels emotionally manipulated; it seems that these children have been cruelly tricked into putting their unconditional faith in charter schools, only to be turned away, and we feel as if we were somehow in on it.

For all of the glossing-over of facts, the incomplete or misleading statistics, and the unsupported claims, Guggenheim's biggest sins are those of omission. In this film, we never hear the voice of a single teacher. Simultaneously touted as both the problem and the solution, teachers are never given the opportunity to offer their views on "the problem" or "the answer." What's worse is that Guggenheim lumps together and deems as failures the teachers who work in traditional public schools. According to the *2009 Digest of Education Statistics*, these teachers work with 98 percent of the children in America who attend public schools. Nonetheless, if we are looking for committed teachers with high expectations and innovative ways of helping students learn, we needn't bother looking in public schools, Guggenheim seems to argue. Moreover, by portraying only families interested in pursuing space in charter schools, he seems to suggest that these are the parents who are committed to their children's education, while parents keeping their children in public schools are a part of the broken system.

Waiting for "Superman" offers a solution for education that suggests that bad teachers and the unions that protect them are the source of systemic failure. What could be Guggenheim's aim in excluding the vast majority of America's teachers, students, and parents in his portrayal of American education? If political will and public conversation are his goals, then Guggenheim might have interviewed one parent or student group organizing to improve their neighborhood schools. Guggenheim patronizes viewers by suggesting that "problems in education are complex, but we have the answers." For those in education who would rather engage in finding solutions, *Waiting for "Superman"* feels like precious time lost.

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