

"THERE WAS NO ONE COMING WITH ENOUGH POWER TO SAVE US": WAITING FOR "SUPERMAN" AND THE RHETORIC OF THE NEW EDUCATION DOCUMENTARY

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*The critically acclaimed 2010 documentary film *Waiting for "Superman"* depicts American public education as a fundamentally flawed system and argues that privately managed charter schools are the best solution to our country's education crisis. This essay argues that *Waiting for "Superman"* is significant because of how successfully its argument for charter schools appealed to a broad and politically diverse audience. After tracing the rhetoric of contemporary pro-privatization education reform from the Reagan administration's 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report to current pro-charter-school reform efforts, this article aims to demonstrate how the film's populist overtones, packaged in a traditionally liberal medium, work to strategically conceal the filmmaker's neoliberal agenda.*

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The release of several documentary films about the declining quality of public education in the United States prompted *USA Today* columnist Greg Toppo to suggest that 2010 was “the year of the education documentary.”¹ While these films—*The Lottery*, directed by Madeleine Sackler, Bob Bowden’s *The Cartel*, Kelly Amis’s *Teached*, and Davis Guggenheim’s *Waiting for “Superman”*—address concerns about American public education from different perspectives, they ask the same questions: “Why do so many urban public schools do such a bad job—and what can be done to help kids trapped in them?”² They also reach a shared conclusion: that American workers are no longer competitive in the global economy and that deficient public schools are primarily responsible for the country’s economic decline. The filmmakers suggest that charter schools—publicly funded, privately managed institutions that operate under minimal bureaucratic oversight—are the most promising solution for improving the quality of the American education system.³

By far the most successful of these films, in terms of both critical acclaim and box office revenue, was *Waiting for “Superman.”* Directed by Guggenheim and produced by Lesley Chilcott, *Waiting for “Superman”* grossed nearly \$6.5 million in ticket sales during its theatrical run.⁴ Focusing on the stories of five children in Washington, D.C. and New York City who vie for coveted spots in privately managed charter schools, the film purports to expose the flaws of the public school system in the United States and the disproportionate effect its failings have on poor children in America’s inner cities. The tension hinges on whether the children featured in the film will be accepted to these charter schools via a lottery drawing or forced to attend inner-city public institutions. In addition to telling these students’ stories, Guggenheim interviews education reform activists like Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of Washington, D.C. public schools and founder of StudentsFirst, a lobbying organization dedicated to public school reform, and Geoffrey Canada, president and chief executive officer (CEO) of Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), a non-profit organization that runs three charter schools in New York City.

Waiting for “Superman” was greeted with nearly unanimous praise from film critics and journalists, earning a nomination for the Grand Jury Prize at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and winning the Sundance Audience Award for Best Documentary.⁵ The American Film Institute gave *Waiting*

for “*Superman*” a Special Award at the 2010 AFI Awards ceremony, praising Guggenheim’s use of “the documentary form to shine a bright light on the dark realities of the American public school system.”⁶ Joining a chorus of positive reviews, Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* wrote, “By showing how fiercely dedicated idealists are making a difference, [the film] is a call to arms.”⁷ Kyle Smith of the *New York Post* concluded his review of the film with a challenge for filmmakers: “Win glory for yourselves. Make a difference. Go to the poorest neighborhoods. Bribe kids to sneak cameras into school and capture bad teachers in the act. More charter schools are coming, but they can’t come fast enough.”⁸ In September 2010, Oprah Winfrey devoted an hour-long special of her afternoon talk show to a discussion of the film; a month later, President Barack Obama invited the children featured in the documentary to a special meeting at the White House.⁹

While *Waiting for “Superman”* was criticized by many—including the American Federation of Teachers, which published an open letter on its website asking if the country was “ready to settle for a good education—for the few,” and education policy analyst Diane Ravitch, who called it “the most important public-relations coup that the critics of public education have made so far”—the film addresses serious concerns, and recent studies seem to justify Guggenheim’s anxieties.¹⁰ A 2012 report published by Harvard University’s Program on Education Policy and Governance revealed that American students lag behind their international peers in nearly every subject, leading its authors to warn that “a country ignores the quality of its schools at its economic peril.”¹¹ According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 1.1 million American students drop out of public schools each year, and the dropout rate for African American and Hispanic students hovers around 40 percent.¹² The film’s actual effects on education policy are difficult to determine, but Guggenheim certainly draws his audience’s attention to some of the real problems plaguing American public education: high dropout rates, struggling students, strained teachers, and the tremendous gap in quality between school districts in rich and poor jurisdictions. But the film’s most significant feat is how successfully it filters the argument for charter schools into public discourse by using strategies to appeal to viewers who might not otherwise be amenable to Guggenheim’s message.

THE POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF THE CHARTER SCHOOL ARGUMENT

While the debate about education reform cannot be reduced to two monolithic views, there is a clear and long-standing distinction between liberal and conservative attitudes toward charter schools. Traditionally, liberals believe that public schools are the most socially equitable and effective way to educate students and that more funds should be allocated to improving those schools. Although they acknowledge the reality that many of our nation's children attend failing public schools, liberals maintain the view that the "crisis" of failing public schools has been exaggerated to facilitate privatization efforts and that market-based solutions are not an appropriate approach to reform. In this liberal understanding, education's primary role is to help students become enlightened, empowered members of our representative form of democracy and, for the fulfillment of this mission, schools must be free of moneyed influences. Individuals who identify as politically liberal generally view public education far more favorably than their conservative counterparts and hold that the market-based competition created by vouchers and charter schools undermines the liberal goal of improving our existing public institutions.¹³

Conversely, the conservative (and, by extension, neoliberal economic) view holds that education should serve society by preparing citizens for productive participation in the workforce and that competition between private and public institutions enhances the quality of all schools.¹⁴ Conservatives favor the creation of charter schools because, education policy scholars Richard Mora and Mary Christianakis argue, these schools are in a position to operate "semi-autonomously from state educational mandates"; in the neoliberal understanding, public education is "as an economic drain linked to an unsustainable welfare state."¹⁵ From a market-oriented perspective, education is a commodity and should be traded in the free market. Because of this emphasis on competition, charter schools, which were originally envisioned in 1988 by University of Minnesota professor Ray Buddle and American Federation for Teachers president Albert Shanker as institutions where teachers would be free to use creative and innovative teaching strategies under minimal bureaucratic oversight, have become the linchpin of conservative approaches to education reform.¹⁶ Though the first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992, these institutions only began to proliferate in American cities after the passage of the No Child Left

Behind Act of 2001, which allocated federal funds and created tax incentives to ensure that charter schools could serve as alternatives to underperforming public schools.¹⁷

In recent years, however, support for charter schools among liberals has increased significantly. Polls reveal that self-identified liberals are now just as likely as conservatives to rate charter schools and private schools as providing better-quality education than public schools.¹⁸ *Waiting for “Superman”* and the other education documentaries of 2010 both reflected and intensified this shift toward a more widespread acceptance of the charter school argument by liberal audiences. As a major vehicle for filtering the argument for charter schools to a wide and diverse audience, *Waiting for “Superman”* bears closer scrutiny because it packaged the neoliberal narrative of the failure of public education and the need for market-based reform in the traditionally antiestablishment, left-leaning medium of documentary film.

With its seemingly uncontroversial concern for improving our nation’s public schools, *Waiting for “Superman”* makes the case for charter schools while concealing the political orientation of the market-based system it advocates. While portraying its agenda as a grassroots call to civic action—the film’s official website urges visitors to sign petitions and commit to “fixing our education system”—the film represents organizations that are beholden to significant corporate interests that stand to benefit from the implementation of charter schools. According to a 2010 *New York Times* article about HCZ, the nonprofit charter school organization featured in *Waiting for “Superman”* “ha[s] assets of nearly \$200 million, and the project’s operating budget this year is \$84 million, two-thirds of it from private donations.”¹⁹ In 2010, the Goldman Sachs Foundation donated \$20 million to HCZ for the construction of a new building.²⁰ StudentsFirst, the organization founded by Michelle Rhee (who features prominently in the film), has received millions of dollars from conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch and the Walton Family Foundation.²¹ Henry A. Giroux is direct in his criticism of *Waiting for “Superman”*: “On the surface, we see urgency, altruism, and political purity parading in a messianic language of educational reform and a politics of generosity. Underneath this discourse lie the same old and discredited neoliberal policies that cheerfully serve corporate interests.”²² While the corporate interests fueling the organizations in *Waiting for “Superman”* do not inherently undermine the argument for

charter schools, they can, as Ravitch argues, surrender those schools “to the whim of entrepreneurs and financiers” that support them, a notion that would likely alienate liberal audiences but is left unaddressed in Guggenheim’s film.²³

LATE-TWENTIETH-CENTURY PUBLIC POLICY AND EDUCATION REFORM

To understand the significance of *Waiting for “Superman”* in the current debate about education reform, we must view it as part of the broader trajectory of reform efforts, particularly those that emerged from the Reagan administration’s 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report. Education historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban view the history of school reform efforts as “an interaction of long-term institutional trends, transitions in society, and policy talk” that “do appear to cycle, sometimes with new labels but basically with recurrent messages.”²⁴ Indeed, many economists, scholars, and politicians have argued for market-based education reform over the past century.

In 1955, economist Milton Friedman, drawing on the ideas of economists such as Friedrich August Hayek and Simon Kuznets, argued that American education would be improved by limiting governmental involvement in the development and implementation of education policy and creating a system in which “educational services could be rendered by private enterprises operated for profit, or by nonprofit institutions of various kinds.”²⁵ Nearly three decades later, *A Nation at Risk* prompted widespread demand for the privatization of American schools and served as a rallying cry for market-based education reform initiatives, such as the implementation of charter school systems similar to the ones proposed by Friedman. According to education policy analyst Jal Mehta, the framing of American public education in *A Nation at Risk* “launched a national school reform movement,” “powerfully . . . framing an agenda” and “buil[ding] a new and much larger group of stakeholders” who would direct the report’s analysis.²⁶ The report effectively established the narrative of decline that drives *Waiting for “Superman”* and still dominates the rhetoric of education reform today. Unlike the arguments for market-based reform that preceded it, *A Nation at Risk* delivered a narrative that “stuck” with the American public.

In this narrative, failing public schools are unable to prepare American children for the workforce, and bad teachers, teacher unions, and govern-

ment ineptitude are standing in the way of improving American education. As I will demonstrate in more detail later in this essay, the rhetorical strategies present in *A Nation at Risk*—its description of poorly performing American students as a danger to national security, its use of war metaphors, its appeal to nationalism and global competitiveness, and its enactment of free-market ideology—are also present in *Waiting for “Superman.”* The film is a continuation of the narrative of public education and the subsequent neoliberal education reform agenda that emerged from *A Nation at Risk*. *Waiting for “Superman”* suggests that public schools have more deeply entrenched economic inequality for low-income children by forcing them to attend failing schools and advocates market-based school choice and charter schools, which, in the neoliberal view, are necessary to create the competition that will improve the entire education system.²⁷

The goal of my analysis of the film is twofold: to examine the rhetorical strategies Guggenheim employs to make his argument for charter schools and to reveal the presence of neoliberal education reform rhetoric embedded in the film’s narrative. My argument is straightforward: Guggenheim obscures the political and financial interests supporting the charter schools he represents to appeal to a broad, bipartisan audience and endorses neoliberal education reform through a strategic performance of political agnosticism. First, I will briefly examine the recent use of documentary films to promote political agendas and introduce “the new education documentary,” my term for the films released in 2010 that, like *Waiting for “Superman,”* advocate privately funded charter schools. I will then discuss *A Nation at Risk* and the relationship between the narrative established in the report and the charter school movement. Next, through a narrative analysis of the film and its marketing materials and close readings of several scenes in the film, I will look at the ways Guggenheim structures his appeal.

DEFINING THE NEW EDUCATION DOCUMENTARY

Waiting for “Superman” and the other documentaries about public education released in 2010 join a long list of films that have addressed controversial social and political issues, particularly since the resurgence of the political documentary in 2004. The genre of documentary film was used as a tool for generating and shaping public discourse as early as the 1920s, when Russian filmmakers produced films that spread Marxist propaganda

and promoted the Communist state.²⁸ During World War II, many American filmmakers produced documentary films that chronicled military conflicts abroad and documented “the evolution of American society and culture” during wartime.²⁹ In the 1950s and 1960s, according to Thomas W. Benson and Brian J. Snee, “the cinema of social and political change” emerged, and filmmakers began to produce documentaries that examined a wide range of political and social issues with the intention of convincing audiences to question authority and promote activism.³⁰ These documentaries examined issues such as the Vietnam War and the feminist and civil rights movements.

Examining what they describe as “the reemergence of the feature-length documentary film as an outlet for partisan and political messages” during the 2004 presidential campaign, Benson and Snee identify films such as Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Robert Greenwald’s *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism* and *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* as belonging to a category they term “the new political documentary.”³¹ Benson and Snee characterize new political documentaries as the films released during the 2004 presidential campaign from both sides of the political divide that overtly endorse particular political ideologies while “experiment[ing] with a wide range of rhetorics.”³² In these films, policy issues are “framed within the narrative of a person, party, or administration,” not examined or discussed in the form of a reasoned debate.³³ While these films did not have a quantifiable effect on the outcome of the election, Benson and Snee argue that the new political documentaries effectively “shaped the discourse of the [2004 presidential] campaign.”³⁴

While the new political documentaries “do little to educate their own most partisan viewers and offer no sensible appeal to the neutral or skeptical viewer,” the education documentaries of 2010—which I will call “the new education documentaries”—employ very different persuasive strategies.³⁵ These films focus on the stories of individual children, all of whom live in poverty, most of whom represent racial minorities; the filmmakers present their arguments as grassroots calls to arms for education reform; the films suggests that public schools are, because of political and bureaucratic obstacles, unfixable; the filmmakers conclude that charter schools are the best solution to America’s educational crisis; and the films appeal to audiences by advocating the indisputable good of improving American education while concealing the political agendas of their filmmakers and the financial

forces supporting them. The new political documentaries do not concern themselves with winning over unreceptive audiences. The new education documentaries, however, make it a priority to appeal to anyone with a conscience.

Like the other filmmakers who produced the new education documentaries of 2010, Guggenheim understands his audience's expectations of the documentary film genre as a medium often used to challenge and critique powerful institutions and uses that expectation to rhetorically position *Waiting for "Superman"* as an insurrection against the status quo. In *Introduction to Documentary*, Bill Nichols argues that "introducing or promoting a film in a particular way can coach viewers to regard it one way rather than others," a practice that "can help filter out" competing interpretations.³⁶ Indeed, by the time *Waiting for "Superman"* was released, liberal audiences had a reason to expect a liberal perspective from Guggenheim's films. Guggenheim also directed the 2006 documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*, which presented former vice president Al Gore's educational campaign about the dangers of global warming. The theatrical poster for *Waiting for "Superman"* features, in large font, the line "From the Director of *An Inconvenient Truth*."³⁷ In a review of the film in the *New York Times*, columnist Tripp Gabriel calls Guggenheim a "self-described lefty."³⁸ Along with its ostensible concern with social justice, Guggenheim's conspicuous involvement in the film positioned *Waiting for "Superman"* as an argument intended to appeal to liberal viewers.

The very medium of documentary film, which has traditionally been associated with antiestablishment perspectives, helps the filmmakers obscure the pro-privatization bent of the film. As Jennifer L. Borda argues, the medium of documentary film "has long been the purview of leftist filmmakers" and audiences expect such films to "provide a critique of dominant institutions."³⁹ Such genre conventions, and implicit expectations, of the documentary allow Guggenheim to cast the public school system as the institution that must be confronted and disrupted by antiestablishment activism. In the film's official trailer, the father of a public school student in Harlem is seen marching down the street in protest holding a sign that bears the words "Status Quo" struck through with a red diagonal line.⁴⁰ Nichols argues that documentary films are especially convincing to audiences because the discourses within such films "regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, and transparent"; images, Nichols argues, are compelling

to audiences not because those images inherently claim “unassailable authenticity” but because they convey “the impression of authenticity” to the viewer.⁴¹ Guggenheim uses both the documentary film’s antiestablishment legacy and the medium’s projection of apparent authenticity to make the narrative of neoliberal education reform, a narrative that began with *A Nation at Risk*, more palatable to a wider audience.

A NATION AT RISK AND THE NARRATIVE OF NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION REFORM

As was the case when the new education documentaries of 2010 were released, the early 1980s were a time of economic crisis in the United States: the country was in the midst of a deep economic recession, state budgets were slashed, and Americans faced surging unemployment rates. In 1981, at the request of President Ronald Reagan, Secretary of Education Terrel Bell—who, according to Mehta, was initially tasked with “find[ing] a way to eliminate his own department”—formed the National Commission on Excellence in Education to assess the quality of American education and set an agenda for improving it.⁴² Bell appointed university faculty members and administrators, state school board personnel, and other educators and policymakers to hold meetings with teachers, employers, parents, and politicians and conduct extensive research. In 1983, the “bold and ominous” report released by the commission “assailed the nation’s poor educational performance” and warned that American students would no longer be competitive in the global economy without drastic changes to the system.⁴³ According to Holly McIntush, the report claims that “the supply of skilled workers is not keeping up with market demands” and “labels as ‘superfluous’ those courses that are not directly related to the development of these ‘marketable’ skills,” such as courses in math and science.⁴⁴

Robert Asen notes that *A Nation at Risk*, though officially a commission report, “read as a public document aimed at a wide audience.”⁴⁵ The Reagan administration used the *A Nation at Risk* report, which recommended significant changes to the American public school system—longer school days, higher college admissions standards, more testing for students, and “higher standards for entry into the profession” of teaching—as the justification for suggesting that the United States end the “‘federal intrusion’ into education.”⁴⁶ McIntush argues that the report has shaped public discourse

about education and has “set the agenda for education policy in the United States” since its publication.⁴⁷

Most significantly, Asen argues, *A Nation at Risk* casts student performance as a marketable commodity, a “situated education in the context of a competitive individualism.”⁴⁸ Straying from previous characterizations of education that emphasized the needs of individual students, Asen writes, the rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk* “exhibit[ed] an economic frame” and created “an emergent economic discourse enabling standards and outcomes” as the mechanism for gauging the effectiveness of public schools.⁴⁹ Once *A Nation at Risk* and its portentous findings about American public education filtered through the Reagan administration and the media and, ultimately, into public discourse, a new narrative about public education emerged. As education policy analyst Mehta asserts, the report “holds that educational success is central to national, state, and individual economic success; that American schools across the board are substantially underperforming and in need of reform; that schools rather than social forces should be held responsible for academic outcomes; and that success should be measured by externally verifiable tests.”⁵⁰ The principles set forth in *A Nation at Risk* have, Mehta argues, “directed the school reform movement over the last 25 years, producing a variety of policy efforts that are consistent with its tenets, including charter schools, public school choice, vouchers, and . . . the growth of state and federal efforts to impose standards.”⁵¹ The report also prompted policymakers to seek ways to demand accountability from public school teachers and administrators.⁵² The Reagan administration’s interpretation of *A Nation at Risk* paved the way for assessment-driven education policies such as President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which mandated that each state establish assessment criteria for its schools and impose rigorous standardized testing for its students, and President Obama’s Race to the Top program, a Department of Education initiative created in 2009 that rewards schools whose students receive high scores on standardized tests and encourages states to ease restrictions on private charter schools.⁵³ Because of the paradigm established by *A Nation at Risk* and subsequent policies based on its principles, current education reform efforts reflect an unprecedented acceptance of charter schools. Mora and Christianakis call Obama’s Race to the Top initiative “the most far-reaching presidential policy enacted on behalf of charter schools.”⁵⁴

A productive analysis of *Waiting for "Superman"* must follow its relationship with the rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk* and the narrative of public education that emerged from the report. Walter R. Fisher argues that in public discourse, "knowledge is ultimately configured narratively, as a component in a larger story implying the being of a certain kind of person, a person with a particular worldview, with a specific self-concept, and with characteristic ways of relating to others."⁵⁵ Narratives, then, are "moral constructs"; as Hayden White wrote in "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," "where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too."⁵⁶ Thus, essential to narrative criticism is an inquiry into motivation and the "moral impulse" that prompts persuasive public discourse. Narrative rationality, Fisher argues, is based on "the values of coherence, truthfulness, wisdom, and humane action" instead of expertise and technical logic.⁵⁷ As opposed to other rhetorical logics, which are inherently exclusive because they create a "hierarchy based on the assumption that some people are qualified to be rational and others are not," the narrative paradigm holds that "the people" judge the stories that are told for and about them and that they have a rational capacity to make such judgments."⁵⁸ People have a natural capacity for understanding narrative constructions and "a natural tendency to prefer what they perceive as the true and the just."⁵⁹ Fisher specifies narrative rationality as essentially "descriptive," since it "offers an account, an understanding, of any instance of human choice and action."⁶⁰ Given this innate human ability to distinguish between plausible and implausible stories, the narrative paradigm has obvious democratizing implications for public discourse.

The public's general tendency to prefer "the true and the just" narratives, however, does not preclude the possibility that dominant groups can systematically promulgate certain narratives over sustained periods of time, thus influencing the direction of public discourse about particular issues. If a narrative is judged by the public as true by virtue of its perceived soundness, then authorship of the narrative can eventually be shifted away from those who created it. In *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling*, Jal Mehta argues that *A Nation at Risk* significantly influenced public discourse because it "[told] a powerful story of decline that resonated with policymakers and the public."⁶¹ While other reports about the state of public education

merely presented data, *A Nation at Risk* “contained an identifiable narrative arc that made it . . . memorable . . . a story of decline and fall.”⁶² Opposing views never gained comparable traction with the public, Mehta writes, because “critics were never able to offer an equally convincing counternarrative that would tie together their assorted criticisms into a compelling story.”⁶³ The report’s narrative of decline still serves as the framework for market-based education reform arguments.

Waiting for “Superman,” a significant contribution to the argument for charter schools, presents four topoi that reflect its embedded neoliberal narrative about public education, all of which also appear in *A Nation at Risk*: (1) the suggestion that public schools have already failed and cannot be fixed; (2) the use of war metaphors, warnings of an impending national crisis, and appeals to American nationalism; (3) the use of free-market rhetoric; and (4) an emphasis on America’s inability to compete with students from other countries.

THE FOREGONE FAILURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In 1993, John Hood of the Foundation for Economic Education—which calls itself “one of the oldest free-market organizations in the United States”—made a decisive declaration: “Public education is itself a failure.”⁶⁴ The argument that public schools have already failed and that the system must be uprooted and replaced with market-based alternatives is a central component of neoliberal education policies. In his 1983 essay “A Neoliberal’s Manifesto,” Charles Peters argued that “urban public schools have in fact become the principal instrument of class oppression in America,” forcing low-income families to send their children to failing public schools while “the upper class sends its children to private schools.”⁶⁵ During his 1984 State of the Union address, Reagan said, “Just as more incentives are needed within our schools, greater competition is needed among our schools. Without standards and competition, there can be no champions, no records broken, no excellence in education or any other walk of life.”⁶⁶ A nonmarket-based education system is, in the neoliberal view, incapable of creating the competition necessary for good schools to thrive.

That inner-city public schools have failed is, at the outset of *Waiting for “Superman,”* a foregone conclusion. In the film’s opening scene, Guggen-

heim interviews Anthony, an African American student in the fifth grade at an unnamed public school in Washington, D.C. Anthony sits on his bed while Guggenheim, who is off camera, asks him a math question: “If I have four cookies and I ate two of them, what portion did I eat?”⁶⁷ Anthony struggles to answer: “You have four cookies and you ate two, and then you got to cross-multiply that. Four, two . . . Wait.” He looks into the distance and draws numbers in the air with his finger. “Four, two, four, twenty . . . You ate . . . You ate fifty percent of your cookies.”⁶⁸ Anthony has answered Guggenheim’s question correctly but with too much difficulty. As he smiles proudly, melancholy music swells and the scene fades to footage from the 1950s television show *Adventures of Superman* in which actor George Reeves, dressed as the superhero, stands resolutely before a waving American flag. Over this image, Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of HCZ, narrates:

One of the saddest days of my life was when my mother told me Superman did not exist. I was a comic book reader . . . cause even in the depths of the ghetto, you just thought, He’s coming, I just don’t know when, because he always shows up, and he saves all the good people, and they never end up . . . I was reading, I don’t know, maybe I was in the fourth grade, fifth grade, my mother, I was like, You know, Ma, you think Superman is up there? She said, “Superman’s not real” . . . And I was crying because there was no one coming with enough power to save us.⁶⁹

As Canada speaks, the image of Superman switches, again, to footage of a decrepit street in Harlem and then to a photograph of Canada as a young boy in which he looks strikingly similar to young Anthony. We then see Canada seated at the front of what appears to be a classroom. The caption that identifies him reads: “Geoffrey Canada—Educator.”⁷⁰ We then see a brief, slow-motion scene of George Reeves, as Superman, striking a man in the face with his fist.

Within these scenes—which comprise the first two minutes of the film—Guggenheim establishes the moral exigency of education reform. A young African American boy, alone in his room so as to appear abandoned, struggles to solve a simple math problem. Superman, a nostalgic symbol of American power, then appears as a stand-in for whatever interests could save Anthony from his hardship. Canada is identified only as an “educator”

who, like Anthony, is African American and grew up in an economically underprivileged neighborhood. Only later in the film does the audience learn that Canada is involved in HCZ. Guggenheim does not address the relationship between HCZ and pro-privatization education reformers. Guggenheim's decision to introduce Canada only as an "educator" during the film's introduction has a strategic function: Canada's credibility is based on the parallel between his life and Anthony's, which means he can speak about poverty and the state of public education with authority.

Later in the film, Canada explains his experiences with education and his reasons for becoming involved in education reform. He tells Guggenheim, "Now, I grew up in the South Bronx in the '50s. The school that I was supposed to go to was Morris High School [a public school]. If I had gone to Morris High School, I would not be sitting here today. It was a horrible school. It was a failure factory."⁷¹ Canada does not go into any more detail about the "failure factory" he narrowly avoided attending, though Morris High School counts former Secretary of State Colin Powell and civil rights activist and scholar Vincent Harding among its alumni.⁷² He then explains that he attended the Harvard Graduate School of Education and decided, after graduation, "to straighten out education in the nation."⁷³ He continues: "I read the papers. I understood, you know, what was going on. . . . I figured I'd have this whole thing straightened out. And then I ran into this system. . . . You could not find the sort of architects of why this thing was as bad as it was, and yet nobody seemed to be willing to really look at this and say, 'This thing is an utter failure.'"⁷⁴ Canada, without explaining his contempt for Morris High School or the education system, labels the "system"—a nebulous term rendered even more abstract by his use of referents like "this" and "this thing"—an "utter failure." Within the logic of neoliberal education reform arguments, Canada's assertion needs no justification.

Guggenheim's treatment of public schools, in which he does not specify what suggests that public schools are failing and avoids details about the schools themselves, continues when he introduces Francisco, a first-grade student at an unidentified public school in Bronx, New York. Guggenheim asks Francisco's mother, Maria, to describe the public school her son attends. She replies: "Um, walking in, you'll see a desk with a security guard. That's it. You can't go no further than that."⁷⁵ As Maria speaks, we see Francisco walking down the hallways of his school. "They're in the district that's the third-largest overcrowded school in the Bronx."⁷⁶ We then see

Francisco drawing pictures while seated on the floor in a squalid, otherwise-empty classroom while Maria narrates, “Public education, you know, that’s the only option we have.”⁷⁷

These are the first images we see of public schools in the film. The school is crowded with children in the first image, and Francisco looks pitiable and neglected in the second. Guggenheim represents the school so selectively and gives the audience such scant information about it that the implicit narrative of the decline of public schools becomes the vehicle for Francisco’s story. Viewers do not see the bad teacher, but they can assume his or her presence; viewers do not see the union supporting that bad teacher, but they can assume its influence; viewers do not hear the lessons given during Francisco’s classes, but they can assume those lessons lack rigor and substance.

Guggenheim—in apt capitalist terms—leverages the narrative of decline against the assumed egalitarian values of socially progressive liberal viewers. Early in the film, Guggenheim frames his contention that public schools have failed with claims about his own belief in the system’s value and potential. He narrates over images of students eating breakfast and heading to school: “Every morning, it’s the same. Juice, shoes, backpack. The morning ritual. And with it comes the uneasy feeling: No matter who we are, or what neighborhood we live in, each morning, wanting to believe in our schools, we take a leap of faith.”⁷⁸ He then explains that, in 1999, he made a documentary film (*The First Year*) about public school teachers who “embodied a hope and carried with them a promise that the idea of public school could work.”⁷⁹ But when it was time for him to choose a school for his own children, he says, “Reality set in. My feelings about public education didn’t matter as much as my fear of sending them to a failing school.”⁸⁰ As Guggenheim narrates, we see him behind the wheel of his car. “So every morning . . . I drive past three public schools as I take my kids to a private school. But I’m lucky. I have a choice.”⁸¹ From inside Guggenheim’s car, the audience sees housing projects and impoverished inner-city neighborhoods.

As Robert E. Terrill writes, viewers of documentary films are expected to “attend to rational assertions” while viewing “aesthetic resources designed to provoke emotional response.”⁸² Documentary films, he argues, rely “on an audience who is actively engaged in judgment and action”; the audience is “encouraged . . . to assess possibilities of action and judgment . . .

through interpretive work.”⁸³ Such is the case in the opening scenes of *Waiting for “Superman,”* during which audiences must interpret the relationship between the characters Guggenheim introduces, the story he tells, and the images he presents. Guggenheim explicitly characterizes his understanding of education as “reality” and, as Nichols argues, images in documentary films lend the “impression of authenticity.”⁸⁴ Thus, Guggenheim does not persuade the audience to accept the idea that public schools have failed; rather, these scenes summon the neoliberal narrative of education and its concomitant framing of public education as a failed system. In case his audience is resistant to that idea, Guggenheim appeals to his belief in the “promise that public school could work.” Guggenheim can advocate charter schools to liberal audiences by admitting that he must abandon his own ideals about public education to accept that the charter school system is a last resort. With a crisis this urgent, Guggenheim argues, viewers simply cannot afford to cling to ideals. Rather, his audience must consider what will *work*.

WAR METAPHORS AND NATIONALISM

Central to the narrative of public education’s decline are fears about the standing of the United States in the global economy and the ability of our students to compete with students from other countries. McIntush notes that from the opening page of the report *A Nation at Risk*, the narrative “is filled with war metaphors which tap into the audience’s fear of war and sense of competitive nationalism.”⁸⁵ Citing George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By*, McIntush argues that metaphors function persuasively by “providing a focus and perspective” and giving us “a way to understand our world.”⁸⁶ She gives several examples from *A Nation at Risk*: the authors of the report argue that, had “an *unfriendly foreign power . . .* attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an *act of war*.”⁸⁷ By allowing a substandard education system to exist in the United States, the authors argue, the United States is jeopardizing its economic and political dominance in the global economy, “committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational *disarmament*,” and, thus, endangering the safety of its citizens; in this configuration, asserts McIntush, “a poor education system is literally

imperiling national security.”⁸⁸ This strategy helped charter school advocates establish moral exigency for their agenda of freeing education from oppressive bureaucratic oversight.

Guggenheim uses a similar technique in *Waiting for “Superman,”* in which war metaphors are invoked and images of poverty-stricken inner cities represent the economic failure that will befall the whole country if reform is not achieved. The theatrical poster for the film features a young girl dressed in a school uniform and seated at a desk, raising her hand and smiling eagerly. She is bathed in the warm, orange glow of a spotlight, but her desk sits amid a hellish, postapocalyptic wasteland littered with fractured chalkboards, chunks of concrete, and snarls of rusted rebar. The tagline reads: “The fate of our country won’t be decided on a battlefield, [*sic*] it will be determined in a classroom.” The militaristic tenor of the film’s marketing continued when Michelle Rhee appeared on *Oprah* in September 2010: the show’s producers introduced Rhee as “the warrior woman [who] won’t back down.”⁸⁹ In a way that evokes what McIntush calls the “aura of impending doom” of *A Nation at Risk* that “gave education reform extreme urgency,” the trailer for *Waiting for “Superman”* uses title cards to describe the film as one that reveals “A system that’s broken/ The people trying to fix it/ And the kids . . . / Whose lives hang in the balance.”⁹⁰ The struggle for school reform is described as “a fight” and “a battle,” and, as the film’s title suggests, children in public schools are the refugees of this conflict. Guggenheim portrays urban neighborhoods as the site of this “battle”; we do not see public schools themselves, but images of the poverty-stricken, neglected urban wasteland from which poor children must be rescued. The shots of Harlem in the film include images of abandoned, crumbling government housing projects that resemble the aftermath of war. These images of poverty also represent the economic collapse that will befall the country if our education system is allowed to fail. Again, Guggenheim’s message is that the crisis is so immediate and so dire that it would be dangerous to cling to ideals instead of exploring solutions.

INVESTMENTS AND RESULTS: THE RHETORIC OF THE FREE MARKET

Guggenheim, viewing education through the same economic frame as the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, emphasizes the importance of student achieve-

ment because of education's market value. The narrative of education and our understanding of its role have shifted dramatically throughout our nation's history. According to McIntush, education has been viewed as "a tool for nation-building, the incorporation of new citizens, international competition, and as a civil right," depending upon the sociopolitical climate of the times. In essence, public education is a screen onto which our national priorities are projected.⁹¹ As Tyack and Cuban note, "For over a century and a half, Americans have translated their cultural anxieties and hopes into dramatic demands for educational reform."⁹² *A Nation at Risk* and the new education documentaries were produced during economic recessions and reflect national anxieties about the American economy. Thus, the report and the films cast education as both the scapegoat and the potential panacea for economic crisis.

In *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness*, James Arnt Aune outlines the rhetorical strategies that enable free-market advocates to frame issues of public policy in economic terms: defining people, institutions, and relationships as commodities; foregrounding the failure of well-intentioned social programs; and enacting "a sense of disinterested objectivity."⁹³ Guggenheim uses these strategies in the film to argue that our nation's financial investment in public education has yielded disappointing results. Immediately following Geoffrey Canada's aforementioned claim that the public education system "is an utter failure," Guggenheim presents a montage, accompanied by upbeat, playful music, of former American presidents—Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, Lyndon Johnson, George W. Bush, and Gerald Ford—making speeches about their commitment to improving education in the United States. The montage implies that these politicians—who, significantly, represent both sides of the political aisle—left their promises unfulfilled. He then explains that government spending on education has skyrocketed over the past 30 years, but that the increased expenditure is "worth it if we're producing better results. Unfortunately, we're not."⁹⁴ To support this contention, Guggenheim explains that test scores have either leveled off or declined since the 1970s; he presents a chart labeled "Student Scores" to illustrate this point. What remains unspecified, though, is any salient information about the scores the chart represents: what test the data refer to, what students and schools were represented in the sample, or which subjects were tested. The scores are attributed to the

U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences and are said to refer to "average 17-year-old scale scores."

More significant than the vagueness of the chart, though, is Guggenheim's use of test scores as his sole barometer for measuring "results." In arguments for privatization, the terms "results" and "performance" often serve as the crux of calls for reform, but what they refer to in the context of education is unclear. While the use of standardized tests and other measurable, quantitative data as the criteria for judging the performance of schools is outside of the purview of this analysis, the language used to deliver the neoliberal argument for reform is relevant to an understanding of *Waiting for "Superman."* The free-market rhetoric Aune describes is present in Guggenheim's discussion of test scores. Guggenheim foregrounds the failed institution of public education and the apparent ineffectiveness of government-based initiatives without scrutinizing the basis on which those initiatives have been determined as failures. Further, Guggenheim commodifies the social institution of public schools by directly invoking the language and logic of the free market in his critique through words such as "investment" and "results." As John Weathers contends, neoliberal calls for education reform often absorb the vocabulary of the free market; the "discursive moves employed by the individual representing the pro-privatization view go beyond attempts to improve school efficiency and performance to the colonization of democratic discourse, infiltrating it with the relatively simple logic of the marketplace."⁹⁵ Education is expressed in the practical terms of its economic utility, which reduces a conversation about an extremely complex and nuanced issue to a straightforward cost-benefit analysis. Taxpayers' collective "investment" in education, Guggenheim argues, is so significant that education should yield tangible, measurable benefits. Even the "Student Test Scores" graphic, with its snaking green and blue lines, resembles a stock chart demonstrating the stagnant value of a commodity. Once Guggenheim renders the apparent failure of public schools as a quantifiable certainty, his audience is more receptive to the idea of a simple, market-based solution.

Guggenheim furthers this characterization of public education as a mismanaged economic commodity later in the film when he interviews Nakia, the mother of a Harlem kindergarten student named Bianca. Nakia explains that she works several jobs to ensure that she can pay Bianca's \$500-a-

month private-school tuition: “I don’t care what I have to do. I don’t care how many jobs I have to obtain, but [Bianca] will go to college. And there’s just no second-guessing on that one.”⁹⁶ Soon after, we see Bianca reading aloud from Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*: “Take my apples, boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy.”⁹⁷ The excerpt that Bianca reads is telling: Nakia’s concerns about Bianca suggest that her daughter would be unable to attend college and pursue a well-paying job if she were enrolled in a public school. Bianca’s education, in the analogy Guggenheim creates, is the commodity that could be “sold”; if her education is of high enough quality, we assume, then someday Bianca “will have money and [she] will be happy.”

The object of this analysis is not to question, undermine, or dismiss the aspirations of parents like Nakia to secure a path toward higher education for their children. The aim here is to draw attention to the axiom Guggenheim invokes through Bianca’s narrative: public schools deprive poor and minority students of the ability to attend college and, by extension, to have careers. Instead of a discussion about what other social and economic obstacles might prevent Bianca from being successful, the film offers conjecture: because Bianca attends a private school, she will be successful in the future. The type of school that Bianca attends is advanced as the only variable that will affect her success.

GLOBAL COMPETITION

The configuration of education as a market-based problem is also influenced by the idea that American students are no longer competitive in the global economy because of the downfall of American public education. In *Waiting for “Superman,”* Guggenheim discusses young Daisy’s “path to medical school” and the rigorous academic road that lies before her. While the audience sees aerial images of downtown Los Angeles, Guggenheim narrates, “Stevenson feeds into Roosevelt, one of the worst performing high schools in Los Angeles.”⁹⁸ We then see Lester Garcia, the executive director of the Boyle Heights Learning Collaborative, who says, “The way that the California public university system is set up is there’s a set of, uh, fifteen courses called the A through G that you have to meet to be accepted into a four-year university.”⁹⁹ Guggenheim adds, “Only three out

of a hundred students at Roosevelt will graduate with the classes necessary for admission to a four-year university. And 57 percent of Daisy's classmates won't graduate."¹⁰⁰ As Guggenheim speaks, we see images of Daisy and her classmates racing toward the finish line: a rope held up by an adult's hand.

Guggenheim presents Daisy's narrative in a way that the audience is assumed to know what the outcome of her story will be if she attends public schools: she will underperform in math and science at Stevenson, attend Roosevelt, be unable to attend a public university in California, and her future failures can be pinned on the deficient public school system. The audience is left to assume that the rope that Daisy and her classmates run toward, which represents the indeterminate "finish line" of education, will never be reached; moreover, as the neoliberal reform narrative emphasizes, these children will undoubtedly be "outrun" by more competitive students from foreign countries in the global economy. The film makes frequent references to the idea that American students are consistently "outperformed" by students from other countries.

CONCLUSION

Mark Hlavacik, in his analysis of Margaret Haley's 1904 speech "Why Teachers Should Organize"—the address that was "the first call for a national effort to unionize U.S. classroom teachers"—notes that Haley built her argument for teacher unions upon the tenets of the progressive labor movement and the Deweyan idea that "the relationship between democracy and education is the core justification for public education in the United States."¹⁰¹ Public education, in this view, bears the responsibility of "publicly uphold[ing] the 'democratic ideal.'"¹⁰² Haley, an organizer and activist, identified "democracy as her guiding social ethic" and emphasized the "indispensable role of democracy in education."¹⁰³ Current education reform efforts reflect a very different understanding of the role of education: to prepare students to represent the United States as it competes with other nations for dominance of the global economy.

If *A Nation at Risk* effectively defined public education as a time bomb, we can still hear it ticking in current reform efforts. *Waiting for "Superman"* and the other new education documentaries of 2010 demonstrate not only the remarkable potency and longevity of the report's narrative but the way

in which reform efforts—which are political by nature—are now camouflaged as urgent, apolitical cries for social justice. The growing enthusiasm about charter schools from the political left stems, in part, from arguments for market-based reform that are delivered to liberal audiences through popular culture. As a result, charter schools are now endorsed by groups on both sides of the political aisle; the system appeals to liberal audiences because of its ostensible concern for equality and social justice and to conservative audiences because of its seemingly logical goal of market-based competition.

Defenders of public education who oppose market-oriented reform efforts are now drowned out by the false consensus projected in both political discourse and popular culture. Within this consensus, free-market rhetoric and ideology are cloaked in the discourse of social justice and equality. As the education reform debate is increasingly informed by pro-privatization documentary films like *Waiting for “Superman”* and recent books like director M. Night Shyamalan’s *I Got Schooled: The Unlikely Story of How a Moonlighting Movie Maker Learned the Five Keys to Closing America’s Education Gap* (2013) that advocate the creation of charter schools, we must more closely examine the rhetoric of popular texts and their influence on public discourse. To further guard ourselves from the facile representations that the “new education documentaries” have contributed to the complex issue of public education, rhetorical analyses of popular texts about education should be scrutinized with the political and economic agendas of their authors in mind.

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