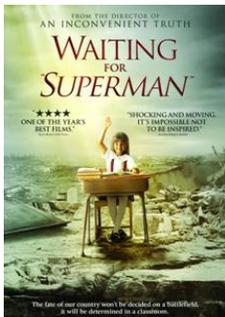

Film Review

Waiting for Superman (2010)

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Waiting for Superman



Waiting for Superman (2010) is a PG-rated documentary about the plight of American urban schools by the 2007 Academy Award winning filmmaker (*An Inconvenient Truth*), David Guggenheim. This is the second film in 10 years Guggenheim made about education after his Peabody Award winning, PBS TV documentary about the lives of new teachers entitled *The First Year* (2001). *Waiting for Superman*, a 102-minute-long film, presents an overview of urban education that is big on hyperbole but small on feasible solutions.

The film's title is based on a Harlem educator's shattered childhood dream that one day the comic book hero Superman would swoop down into the South Bronx and fix all that was wrong. The fourth grader's name was Geoffrey Canada, and he was waiting for Superman to rescue his neighborhood until his divorced mother told him the superhero was not real. Geoffrey cried because he felt all was lost. "One of the saddest days of my life was when my mother told me Superman did not exist. 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." There was no one who could save the people in the South Bronx from the "abandoned houses, crime, violence and an all-encompassing sense of chaos and disorder."



Canada survived his early education in the New York City public schools he calls failure factories. His mother sent him to live with his grandparents on



Long Island, New York, where he completed high school. He won a scholarship to Bowdoin College and completed a master's degree at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Geoffrey returned to Harlem to teach English and Social Studies. In 1990 he founded the Harlem Children's Zone, (<http://www.hcz.org/>), a non-profit organization for poverty-stricken children and families in need. The Harlem Children's Zone, under

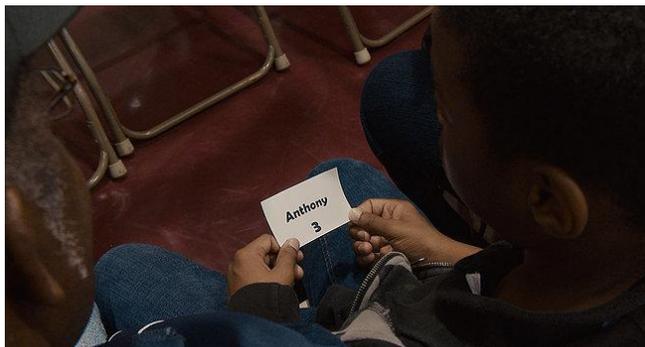
Canada's devoted leadership, provides free or low cost parenting workshops, a pre-school program, three public charter schools, college admissions/retention support, and health programs that serve 15,000 students and 7,000 adults in a 97-block zone. Canada has harsh words for urban school systems across America. He places much of the blame on an indifferent, self-serving administration and a bureaucracy that protects bad teachers from dismissal.

The highly emotional film is a cinéma vérité with three intertwined epic strands. The first strand traces the lives and struggles of five school children and their parents. The students, four of color and one White, attend urban schools in New York City, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles. Bianca, in kindergarten, and Francisco, a first-grader, live in the Bronx and are applying to the Harlem Success Academy. Bianca is one of 767 applicants for 35 spots, and Francisco is one of 792 students competing for 40 seats in the Academy. There are two fifth-graders. Anthony, who is being raised by his grandmother in Washington, D.C., is one of 64 students competing for 24 beds in the Seed School, a public charter resident facility where 9 out of 10 students go to college. Daisy lives in East Los Angeles and is one of 135 students competing for 10 openings in the KIP LA College Preparatory charter school. The fifth student is Emily, an eighth-grader in Silicon Valley (Redwood City, CA) who has problems with math and wants to attend the Summit School, where almost 100% of the graduating students are admitted to college.



At the end of the film, each of the five students participates in a nail-biting lottery that their parents believe will determine their future. Bianca's single

mother struggles to pay tuition in a parochial school. She believes a good school will give her daughter the skills to complete college and have a career instead of



a series of dead-end jobs. The process of selecting students to attend a charter school is a public event where randomized names or numbers are called out. It is a form of educational bingo where the losers and their families are traumatized and the winners ecstatic over the chance their children will be prepared for college. There is an inherent

belief that charter schools will make a significant difference in the lives of urban youth. However, current data indicate that only 17% of charter schools outperform their public schools peers; some 38% produce test scores which are lower, and the remaining 45% are no better or worse than public schools (http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf). Following the Superman-as-savior theme, Guggenheim's charter school silver bullet might contain Kryptonite.



The second strand is a depressing tapestry woven from charts, graphs, cartoons, TV programs, research studies, and movie clips that illustrate how much the American public school system has declined in the last 50 years. Viewers are told the United States has some of the lowest math and science test scores within a group of 30 post-industrial nations. According to Canada, 40-to-50 years ago America had a decent school system, but it was never prepared for the total commitment by other nations to public education in a globalized economy. The 2003 OECD PISA Math test reported that the math skills of American students ranked last when compared to Korea, Japan, Canada, Australia, France, Germany and Spain (www.oecd.org/dataoecd/1/63/34002454.pdf). The only area where American students scored higher, in fact the highest score, was their delusional sense of self-confidence when 72% believed they did really well on the math test. As for America's best and brightest students, the top 5% ranked 23rd in math, science and reading scores, compared to our global competitors. A dubious future awaits these overconfident yet under-prepared high school graduates if and when they complete college. By the year 2020, the labor market will need candidates for 123 million positions who are highly skilled in math, science, and reading. American schools will have produced only 50 million qualified applicants. Will the United States import highly skilled employees using H-1B non-immigrant temporary work visas or will the positions be outsourced on the Internet? Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, makes a cameo appearance in the movie to warn how far behind Americans will be in science and engineering. Gates explained that the consequences of a bad

education system will be felt for the next 20 years. One of the promotional quotes in the film's movie poster is, "The fate of our country won't be decided on the battlefield, it will be determined in a classroom."

In the third strand the film provides questionable solutions for America's massive educational failures. A host of laws, standards, US Presidents, personalities, pledges, and regulations about education are criticized or praised. A good teacher is described as one who covers 150% of the year's curriculum while a bad teacher only presents 50% of the content. Unions are derided for defending tenure which protects teachers so incompetent that in many cities they are placed on administrative leave with pay and benefits for years while the allegations against them are investigated. Randi Weingarten, President of the 1.5-million-member American Federation of Teachers (<http://www.aft.org/>), is unfairly portrayed as resisting any change in the conditions of tenure and teacher



evaluations. Tenure is not a guarantee for life-long employment but a set of negotiated conditions for job performance, evaluation, retention, promotion, and dismissal. Recently a number of states, with the support of the American Federation of Teachers, are modifying tenure, seniority, and teacher evaluations. The general rule of "last hired, first fired" is being discontinued as the sole criterion when school districts are forced to reduce teaching staffs.

The four-year story of the trials and tribulations of Michele Rhee, the former crusading Chancellor (2007 to 2010) of the Washington, D.C. school district, transpires against the background of the teacher union (WTU) rejection of any changes in their tenure or working conditions. Rhee, who taught for three years and was never a school principal or superintendent, offered teachers who were willing to give up tenure annual merit-based salaries as high as \$122,000. She closed 23 under-performing schools, dismissed 241 teachers, and gave 737 others official warnings to improve in an attempt to raise standardized test scores in the District. Rhee believed students in the District, where only 12 % read at grade level (the lowest in the nation), were receiving an inferior education. Rhee explains in the film that most of the educational problems in the District resulted from a power struggle between adults who failed to do their job of educating children. After the film premiered, Rhee's merit-based salary system was approved by the Washington Teacher's Union. Rhee was forced to resign when her patron D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty lost the Democratic primary in September, 2010.



Conclusion

Waiting for Superman explained that urban school districts continue to fail for many diffuse and ephemeral reasons. These systemic failures have long-term consequences for the entire nation. The list of culpable villains runs the gamut from the U.S. Department of Education and bad classroom teachers to under-motivated, disinterested students whose families see little value in education. Guggenheim did a commendable job when he attempted to diagnose the causes of educational malpractice in the American public school system with its 14,500+ independent school districts, 3.2 million teachers, and an estimated annual expenditure of \$600 billion to educate 55 million K-12 students. Although *Waiting for Superman* failed to make a cohesive argument that charter schools are the educational panacea for blighted urban school districts, the film challenges the audience to think deeper to look for solutions for US education.

Photo Credit

Paramount Pictures (2010), 5555 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles, CA, 90038

Resources: Websites

Waiting for Superman

<http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/>

Charter Schools 2009:

http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf

District of Columbia Public Schools

<http://dcps.dc.gov/portal/site/DCPS/>

Los Angeles Unified School District:

http://notebook.lausd.net/portal/page?_pageid=33,47493&_dad=ptl&_schema=PTL_EP

New York City Public Schools

<http://schools.nyc.gov/>

PISA Test Results 2003

www.oecd.org/dataoecd/1/63/34002454.pdf

