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The Myth of Charter Schools

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Waiting for "Superman"
a film directed by Davis Guggenheim

Paramount Pictures

Anthony, a fifth-grade student hoping to win a spot at the SEED charter boarding school in Washington, D.C.; from Davis Guggenheim's documentary Waiting for 'Superman'

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.

Paramount Pictures

Francisco, a first-grade student in the Bronx whose mother wants him to attend a charter school

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.