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Grading 'Waiting for Superman'

Dana Goldstein | September 23, 2010

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The media excitement around the film "is beginning to open up an overdue public conversation," says Amy Wilkins, vice president at the Washington advocacy group Education Trust. "Do I think the coverage is always

elegant and superior and perfect? No. Of course there is going to be some bumbling and stumbling. But the fact that the film is provoking this conversation is really important for teachers and kids."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps the writer most associated with the teachers-unions-as-villains narrative is Brill, the Court TV founder cum promoter of micropayments for online news. In August 2009 *The New Yorker* published Brill's report on New York City's "rubber rooms," an exposé focused on the one-twentieth of 1 percent of the district's 80,000 public school teachers (about forty people) who had been removed from the classroom because of gross negligence, such as failing to teach at all or verbally harassing students. Nevertheless, because these teachers had been granted tenure by the district, their contracts—negotiated between the Education Department and their

union, the United Federation of Teachers—entitled them to a full salary until a due process hearing determined whether they would be fired or reassigned. While they awaited hearings, sometimes for as long as three years, the UFT portrayed some rubber room teachers as innocent victims of "seniority purges," ignoring evidence of incompetence including, in one case, alcohol abuse. (Many teachers, it turns out, are opposed to such efforts. According to a 2003 Public Agenda poll, 47 percent of them believe "the union sometimes fights to protect teachers who really should be out of the classroom.")

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

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

Neither article contains a single scene set in a competently managed public school classroom, nor a single interview with a respected, effective public or charter school teacher who appreciates his or her union representation. (There are many such people. A 2007 poll of teachers conducted by the think tank Education Sector found that only 11 percent believed a union was "something you could do without." A March 2010 Gates Foundation/Scholastic poll of 40,000 teachers found that on issues such as evaluation, pay and benefits, most are roughly in line with their unions.) Brill portrays the UFT as almost the sole force preventing Mayor Michael Bloomberg and schools chancellor Joel Klein from transforming the city's public schools, ignoring issues like segregation and poverty, as well as evidence that the higher graduation rates and test scores the Education Department advertises are the result of lower standards, narrowed curriculums and massaged data.

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

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

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

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

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

Thomas was referring to Rhee's July dismissal of 241 teachers, which the union contested. The AFT spent more than \$1 million in support of Fenty's opponent, City Council chair Vincent Gray, who ran on a platform of "one city," promising to push forward on school reform while working harder to collaborate with those angry about Rhee's teacher firings and school closings, and her perceived dismissive attitude toward the local black

communities who were losing jobs and institutions. (A typical Rhee comment: "Collaboration and consensus building are quite frankly overrated in my mind.")

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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