

Critique of Waiting for "Superman"

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Have you ever wondered what makes some schools better than others? Perhaps, you've even drawn the conclusion that the "best" schools are in the "best" neighborhoods. This seems to be the fundamental question that drove Davis Guggenheim to create his documentary on the state of American education and Karl Weber to edit his book, *Waiting for "Superman": How We Can Save America's Failing Public Schools (A Participants Media Guide)*. Guggenheim, who drives past three public schools to take his children to private school, wrestled with his ideals about education and found that it was necessary to shed light on the educational system for families that do not have the option to send their children to a better school.

Guggenheim's first documentary, *The First Year*, chronicled the lives of five first year Teach for America teachers and their commitment to change youths' lives. Guggenheim was inspired by Wendy Kopp's Teach for American program and was moved to show audiences that the idealism, hope and commitment to teaching and learning was still alive. However, *Waiting for "Superman"* was not as deliberate a project as *The First Year* for Guggenheim. In fact, *Waiting for "Superman"* was two completely separate films, *Other People's Children* and *The Folly of Adults*, until a few weeks before it debuted at the Sundance Film Festival. He "decided to make two different movies, oppositional in nature, looking at the school system from two very different angles, and then combine them (Weber, 2010). *Other People's Children* told the stories of kids and their families, and their desire to attend better schools, but whose educational fate would be determined by a lottery. *The Folly of Adults* focused on the

historical and statistical context of our educational system as well as the dysfunctionality or “uncomfortable truths” as Guggenheim refers to them.

The book is organized into 7 parts, with each part engaging the audience with an emotional personal narrative and an informative insight into the concerns and issues that plague the education of these children. The book consists of informational commentaries from many different people such as Leslie Chilcott, the film’s producer, Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools, and Bill and Melinda Gates, co-chairs of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The fact that some schools are graduating 100% of their students and 95% of those students attend college is extraordinary, particularly when there are schools a few miles away from the aforementioned schools that are not nearly as successful in student achievement. This provides evidence to the notion that there are change agents that have the answers to the educational problems our nation faces, which is a major theme in *Waiting for “Superman.”* There are reform models and charter schools that are effectively educating students, and we must research and explore the practices, methodologies and ways of “doing school” that set these schools apart. While Guggenheim does not appear to be promoting charter schools or rejecting the work of all public schools, he does provide an outlook into the practices of public education that hinder many students from achieving, such as teacher quality, lotteries and inequitable resources. Geoffrey Canada, the President and Chief Executive Officer for Harlem Children’s Zone, is a proponent of educational reform and believes that in order to drastically change the situations of large numbers of children in poor communities, we

must change the practices of the traditional public school. He even believes that charter schools can serve as the model for this change because they are able to experiment with different approaches to meet the needs of all students.

Another note worthy emerging theme from the book is based on the fact that “U.S. students rank far behind other advanced nations in academic achievement – ranked in the twenties in such subjects as math and science” (Weber, 2010). Firstly, this disheartening statistic has major implications for education. If overall America ranks low in the area of education, then that is an indication that systematically education is suffering and major reform needs to occur, but not reform in the federal No Child Left Behind sense, but reform in the “do what works” sense. As an emergent educational leader, it is my responsibility to provide the highest quality of education to all students. In order to do this, educational leaders must research and explore effective schools and implement similar practices in their own schools.

“Research shows...that the single most important factor in improving student achievement is great teaching” (Weber, 2010). In my opinion, the need for quality teachers was a major theme in *Waiting for "Superman."* Personally, I believe effective teachers are those “Supermen” and “Superwomen” that we are waiting for to change education. Bill and Melinda Gates believe in this solution so much that, in 2009, they launched Intensive Partnerships for Effective Teaching, which provides support and resources to school districts in recruiting, rewarding and retaining effective teachers. Atlanta Public Schools is one school district that has collaborated with their foundation, and together they are improving the teacher evaluation system and transitioning to a pay

for performance model in their Effective Teacher in Every Classroom (ETEC) initiative. *Waiting for "Superman"* also criticizes the role of teacher tenure and teacher unions in that those practices allow poor teachers to continue to educate students and perpetuate the problem of education in America.

As with Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers, the challenges illustrated in *Waiting for "Superman"* powerfully hit home for me, especially the issue of teacher quality. As a high school teacher, every day I battle with maintaining high expectations and student accountability mostly due to the lack of educator accountability. At first my students criticized me for "being too hard" and would say things like, "You're the only one that gives us homework", or "Why can't we watch movies like we do in Ms. Mitchell's class?" That frustrates me tremendously because I expect to have to motivate and inspire my students, but never imagined that as an educational leader, I would have to engage teachers in the learning process. Now, my students appreciate the structure and say things like, "I learn something new every day in your class, Ms. Glover." One would think that comments like that would be rewarding, but they actually break my heart. As I sit here holding back tears, I'm saddened to think that there are teachers killing our children's future in exchange for a salary and job security. Unfortunately, I work with many teachers who are committing educational genocide on a daily basis. After watching and reading *Waiting for "Superman"*, I feel empowered and optimistic that there are people in this country doing what is necessary to unveil the "uncomfortable truths" in order to save our children.

I found each informative commentary in *Waiting for "Superman"* to be very interesting and I agreed with most of what was stated. However, I found Randi Weingarten's "Five Foundations for Student Success" to be the most solution-oriented and directly addressed the question of how to promote student success. She discusses that while we wait for "Superman", we owe it to millions of our children to provide them with opportunities to be successful in order to produce high quality learning outcomes. According to Weingarten, the "Five Foundations of Success" consist of: 1) Good teachers supported by good leaders 2) A good curriculum 3) an environment that eliminates barriers to student success 4) Shared responsibility and mutual accountability. 5) Collaboration, not competition or combativeness.

In conclusion, *"Waiting for "Superman"*, was an extraordinary work because it provided mainstream America with a deep insight and solution-based approach to addressing Education. It told the story that many educators are well aware of, but do not have the means to change. *Waiting for "Superman"* revealed to the country what I have known for the 6 years I have been teaching – Our education system needs to change because we are not reaching all students; we're not even reaching most students. We, as a society, need to stop trying to save adults (poor teachers, politicians, teacher unions), and start saving children.

### References

Weber, K. (2010). *Waiting for "Superman": how we can save America's failing public schools*.

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