



Saving our schools: 'Superman' or real solutions?

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

IF YOU'RE LIKE MANY of the teachers I know, you might relate to this version of "How I Spent My Summer Vacation." You spent lazy summer days—polishing lesson plans. You went on vacation—with the curriculum frameworks you'll teach this year. You used your artistic talents and brute strength—getting your classroom ready.

All this attests to how teachers put their hearts and souls into their work, even in the "off" hours away from their classrooms. Yet, while teachers are busily preparing for a productive school year, a publicity machine is gearing up for the release of a documentary film about public education in America that is selective, sensational, outdated and, frankly, misleading.

Coming soon to a theater near you is a documentary called "Waiting for 'Superman.'" The film, by director Davis Guggenheim, shows how tragically far we are from the great American ideal of providing all children with the excellent education they need and deserve. Don't get me wrong. One can't help but share Guggenheim's concern for children, particularly these kids. That's our life's work. But we do take issue with his incomplete portrayal of America's public schools.

The film casts two outliers in starring roles—the "bad" teacher as villain, and charter schools as heroes ready to save the day. The problem, of course, is that these caricatures are more fictional than factual.

It is insulting and counterproductive to suggest, as the film does, that the deplorable behavior of one or two teachers is representative of all public school teachers. It's these sorts of sensational portrayals that sap the morale of dedicated teachers while doing

nothing to address the actual struggles confronting our students and schools.

"Waiting for 'Superman'" also promotes the theory that charter schools are the solution to the shortcomings in our education system. To this end, the film highlights several "boutique" schools—small islands of success, including schools that benefit from huge amounts of outside funding and intensive wraparound services, such as after-school, extended day, nutrition, health and early childhood programs. Indeed, it confuses Geoffrey Canada's excellent work promoting these services in the Harlem Children's Zone with his charter school work.

Charter schools can hold an important place in public education. I've helped start three charter schools, and the AFT represents teachers in 150 charter schools. But there is nothing magic about putting a "Charter" sign above a schoolhouse door. Despite the fact that many of these schools are selective in their enrollment, most perform worse than or only about as well as regular public schools.

This film misses a crucial point: We think about all kids, not only some of them. And reforms that affect small numbers of students, even when they live up to their promise, still leave that promise unfulfilled for others. Every child should have access to a great education—not by chance, not even by choice, but by right.

We know that right is denied too many children, an injustice grippingly portrayed in "Waiting for 'Superman.'" But, in the end,

nothing is as scalable, sustainable or accountable as a great neighborhood public school. I've seen such success stories across the country. The solutions aren't the stuff of action flicks—it's things like great curriculum, extra help for students who start or fall behind, and supports and development for teachers—but they work.

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Imagine a sequel to "Waiting for 'Superman,'" released a few years from now. Would we rather stick to the cinematic model of providing an escape hatch—sometimes superior, most often inferior—to a handful of students? Or offer a model in which we had summoned the will to do the hard, but effective and far-reaching, work to make meaningful changes to entire school systems, providing all children with the best possible choice—a highly effective neighborhood school?

Movies like this grip us to the core. They may even call much-needed attention to the challenges confronting many students and schools. But the attention will be misplaced if it centers on off-base solutions and has the effect of denigrating good teachers. As educators start this school year ready to help their students reach new heights, they deserve better than mass-marketed movies that focus more on box office receipts and film festival awards than on how to really change classroom realities.



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