

## Heroes and Villains

In 1999, Davis Guggenheim directed a documentary called *The First Year* where he followed teachers for an entire school year. Of that film, he says “these teachers embodied a hope and carried with them a promise that the idea of public school could work”. Yet 10 years after that film he says, “it was time to choose a school for my own children. Then reality set in. My feelings about public education didn’t matter as much as my fear of sending them to a failing school. So every morning, betraying the ideals I try to live my life by, I drive past 3 public schools as I take my kids to a private school. But I’m lucky, I have a choice”. In his film, *Waiting for Superman*, he shares this experience with us and sets out to uncover the real story of why our public schools are failing in America. He also shows us one of the choices people who can’t afford private schools do have for a better education. That choice is to enter a lottery for the chance to attend a charter school. *Waiting for Superman* is a brilliant documentary complete with victims, heroes and even villains.

The film’s greatest hero is Geoffrey Canada. He sets the stage for the movie with a story from his childhood growing up in the South Bronx. When Canada was just a boy, his mom told him there was no superman. This upset him because he felt that even in the depths of the ghetto, superman had the power to save people. He worried there was no one to save them. Although he doesn’t tell us how he got to Harvard, he does share with us his ambitious goal upon graduating from school. Canada went into public education with the plan to fix the system in two and a half to three years! He soon discovered it wasn’t going to be as easy as he thought. Here lies the struggle for our heroes of the film. How to change a failing school?

How can it be known America’s public educational system is failing? Guggenheim uses easy to understand graphics and illustrations to show us numbers and statistics throughout the

film. For instance, to demonstrate 8<sup>th</sup> graders proficiency in math a map of the United States is shown with numbers that pop up for each state. 18% of Alabama 8<sup>th</sup> graders are proficient in math, 30% of New York, 24% of California. For reading, most states have 20-35% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders proficient at grade level reading.

Numbers and graphs are not the only persuasive material the director uses. The most compelling parts of the film are personal stories. One example is Daisy from Los Angeles, her father is out of work and her mother, who doesn't speak English, has a cleaning job at a hospital. Daisy has hopes of being a surgeon when she grows up. She wants to help people and animals in need. It's obvious that although young and sweet, she is beyond her years in intelligence. Her father is full of pride and has no doubt she will reach her potential, but Daisy is destined to go to what the film calls a "drop out factory". Drop out factories are high schools where 40% or more of students don't graduate on time.

Anthony, from Washington, D.C., is another poignant story. This adorable boy tells his own story of being held back in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade because he wasn't studying. When asked why, he says his father died of drugs. Anthony doesn't know his mother. His grandmother, Gloria, is his guardian. Anthony is now studying and doing better in school. Gloria admits she made a lot of mistakes when she was younger and seems determined to help Anthony do better. In the film, Anthony is shown eagerly raising his hand in class to answer math problems. He will have to go to a middle school the "Washington Post called an academic sink hole". If he goes to that school "the odds are he will enter high school 3-4 years behind". Gloria enters him into a lottery for SEED, a charter school.

There are three other stories of children trying to improve their lives through education. All choose to enter lotteries for charter schools. These children are the damsels in distress that

move the viewer to be personally invested. But who are the villains? The main villains, but certainly not the only ones in this film, are teachers unions that work tirelessly to keep teachers from being fired, even the bad ones. Again, Guggenheim uses compelling examples to illustrate his point. One such is told by another hero, Howard Fuller, who was the superintendent of the Milwaukee School District when reporters revealed hidden footage of teachers not doing their jobs; one even stuck a student's head in a toilet. When Fuller fired the worst of the teachers, he "was forced to rehire them with a year's back pay" because of tenure. Fuller says he knew he was sending kids to schools where they wouldn't learn.

Very creative animation is used to show the viewer what schools do with bad teachers. In Milwaukee, it is called "the dance of the lemons". Bad teachers, or lemons, are exchanged between schools in hopes that the next principal might squeeze out lemonade. In another state it is called "pass the trash" and in another it is called "the turkey trot". In New York they do something different. Bad teachers are sent to reassignment centers, known as rubber rooms, where they sit in a room for 7 hours in order to collect their pay. This costs New York 100 million dollars a year. These teachers are shown sitting in a large room reading or sleeping at desks. *Waiting for Superman* informs us that each year in our country 1 out of 57 medical doctors loses their licenses, 1 out of 97 lawyers are disbarred, but only 1 out of 2500 teachers is ever fired.

According to *Waiting for Superman*, the solution is to get rid of bad teachers, reward good teachers, and help new teachers become masters. That is what the charter schools highlighted in this film do. I love the use of analogy in this film. One of my favorite is when old footage of Chuck Yeager from the U.S. Air Force is shown. At a time when many felt the sound barrier could not be broken he proved them wrong. His plane did not fall apart or disintegrate as

many of the top engineers and scientists believed back in 1947. This is likened to the popular belief that bad neighborhoods produce bad schools. Through the use of animation, a plane is shown traveling up a graph as the narrator explains that top charter schools are sending 90 percent of their graduates to 4 year colleges. The charter school KIPP, located in The Bronx, was rated the highest in that area for 1998. There are 82 KIPP charter schools across the nation in low income neighborhoods. They score 68 percentile in the country for reading and 82 percentile for math. There is now evidence that kids in low income areas can learn and even score higher than the rest of the nation. According to the film, reformers now believe bad schools produce bad neighborhoods.

In his film, *Waiting for Superman*, Guggenheim effortlessly weaves us in and out, back and forth, through the stories, statistics, original animation as well as popular culture to help us understand and stay committed to his narrative. The best use of this is at the end when we see a clip of the 1950's Superman show, Superman is flying in to save a school bus out of control. We are taken back and forth from the old clip to the heroes of this documentary as they talk of changing the school system to save our children. When superman finally stops the bus and assures Lois Lane the children will be okay, Lois asks about the driver and Superman replies "someone destroyed his ability to think". This scene sums up the movie beautifully.

#### Works Cited

*Waiting for Superman*. Dir. Davis Guggenheim. Paramount Vantage, 2010. Film