

Randi Weingarten, AFT President: Response to "Waiting for Superman"

Is America ready to settle for a good education-for the few? That's the unfortunate takeaway from a soon-to-be released documentary film, "Waiting for 'Superman.'" The film, by 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. Yet, despite Guggenheim's unquestionably good intentions, "Waiting for 'Superman'" is inaccurate, inconsistent and incomplete-and misses what could have been a unique opportunity to portray the full and accurate story of our public schools. "Waiting for 'Superman'" has been screened by private audiences throughout the country and will be released for the general public on Sept. 24. In the event that you write about the film, I wanted to share my thoughts directly with you about it.

One can't help but be moved by the stories of the five children and their families Guggenheim follows as they encounter a lottery system for admission to the schools upon which they are pinning their hopes for a good education. Their stories, in a very real and emotional way, drive home the point that the opportunity for a great public education should come not by chance, but by right.

But the filmmaker's storytelling falters in other key areas. The film casts several outliers in starring roles-for example, "bad" teachers and teachers unions as the villains, and charter schools as heroes ready to save the day. The problem is that these caricatures are more fictional than factual.

There are more than 3 million teachers working in our 130,000 public schools. Are there bad teachers? Of course there are, just as there are bad accountants, and lawyers, and actors. I wish there were none. There also are countless good, great and exceptional teachers working in our public schools every day in neighborhoods across the country-although for this film, they apparently ended up on the cutting room floor. It is shameful to suggest, as the film does, that the deplorable behavior of one or two teachers (including an example more than two decades old) is representative of all public school teachers.

Guggenheim has found ways to make facts and data interesting, even entertaining. But, when certain facts don't advance his story line, he makes them disappear. The treatment of charter schools is one of the most glaring inconsistencies in "Waiting for 'Superman.'" Guggenheim makes only glancing reference to the poor achievement of most charter schools, despite the abundance of independent research showing that most charter schools perform worse than or only about as well as comparable regular public schools. Nevertheless, he illogically holds them up as the ticket to a good education for disadvantaged students.

I wish all schools had the wealth of resources enjoyed by the charter schools featured in the film, which are part of the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ). The charter schools in the HCZ have what we should be fighting to have in every public school-services that help eradicate the barriers to academic success, and funding to ensure that students and teachers have the tools they need to succeed. HCZ schools receive two-thirds of their funding from private sources and one-third from the government. This private money funds staff and curriculum, as well as extensive medical, dental and tutorial services. We know kids' needs are met when these wraparound services are combined with high-quality instructional programs. In the end, funding these programs will make a fundamental difference for all children.

"Waiting for 'Superman'" misses two crucial points. First, we have to be committed to supporting a public school system that provides all our children with access to a great education. And second, we must focus our efforts on the most promising and proven approaches-those great neighborhood public schools that work. I've seen such success stories across the country in schools that reduce barriers to academic success, as is done in the HCZ schools; schools that offer great curriculum, extra help for students who start or fall behind, and supports for teachers. Where the system has failed is to not take these proven models and scale them up. The solutions aren't the stuff of action flicks, but they work.

Films like "Waiting for 'Superman'" are gripping for a reason: They connect us to real life struggles. 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 denigrating good teachers rather than on what works to improve our schools.

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 would we offer a model in which we had summoned the will to do the hard but effective and far-reaching work required to make meaningful changes to entire school systems, providing all children with the best possible choice-a highly effective neighborhood school?

The most effective solutions didn't make it into the film. In other words, Guggenheim ignored what works: developing and supporting great teachers; implementing valid and comprehensive evaluation systems that inform teaching and learning; creating great curriculum and the conditions that promote learning for all kids; and insisting on shared responsibility and mutual accountability that hold everyone, not just teachers, responsible for ensuring that all our children receive a great education.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further. To learn more about the AFT's work to improve teaching and learning, and about public schools that help students succeed despite great challenges, please contact Michael Powell, the assistant to the president for communications, at 202/879-4458, or go to AFT.org.