



# Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center

## Your Access to the Region

### FEATURE ARTICLE

#### ***Waiting for Superman: Insights and Oversights***

*By Marie Husby-Slater, Great Lakes West*

The documentary *Waiting for Superman* has created quite a stir in education circles across the country. Great Lakes West staff decided that we needed a better understanding of the film, knowing that it addresses some of the issues with which our state education agencies are grappling. At the end of October, Great Lakes West staff went to a viewing of *Waiting for Superman* as part of our annual staff meeting. Following the film, staff engaged in an open dialogue about what was presented and the issues involved.

*Waiting for Superman* is a documentary written by Davis Guggenheim and Billy Kimball and directed by Davis Guggenheim (director of the 2006 documentary hit *An Inconvenient Truth*). Guggenheim calls the film a documentary of “the failure of the American education system.” The film follows five students from urban school districts on the east and west coasts of the United States as they enter charter school lotteries. Time is split between the compelling stories of these students and their families and interviews with nationally recognized educators, researchers, and policymakers such as Michelle Rhee, Geoffrey Canada, Bill Gates, and Randi Weingarten. As the viewer gets to know each of the students and their families, facts and figures on the American education system are dispersed throughout. The film culminates with the students sitting at the lottery and waiting to have their names pulled out of a hat. The dramatic effect is palpable; sitting in the theater, you can almost hear the audience collectively holding its breath.

The media has jumped on *Waiting for Superman*, painting Guggenheim as either hero or demon. Many articles and reports have been written on the film and the “buzz” it has caused. One concern educators locally and nationally have regarding both the film and media attention is that the whole story is not being told or discussed. All viewers, whether they agree or disagree with the message of the film, have focused on the aspects that are most important, interesting, or controversial to them. Often, this means scolding teachers and teachers unions or praising charter schools. A full discussion of all the issues brought up in the film is beyond the scope of this article. However, using the issues discussed by Great Lakes West staff as a framework, this article considers some of the main topics that have received the most attention from *Waiting for Superman*.

#### **Teachers Unions**

Villain or hero, friend or foe, or something else altogether? Teachers unions are certainly one of the education issues presented in the film that has caused the most stir. Following the release of the film, teachers unions struck back at the negative light they (and the media) thought the film portrayed them in. Leaders of both major U.S. teachers unions spoke out against the film. To hear what they had to say,

read this [statement](#) from National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel and Huffington Post [article](#) by American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten.

### **“Count Us In” in Wisconsin**

At the end of 2009, Great Lakes West facilitated a meeting between Wisconsin DPI and the Wisconsin teachers union, the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC). The meeting was productive, and Wisconsin DPI continued to have similar meetings with other stakeholders throughout the spring and summer of 2010. The result is that both parties are in agreement on and fully support proposed changes to licensure requirements in Wisconsin. Following the announcement of DPI’s new education reform agenda, the president of WEAC said, “Count us in...we are ready to roll up our sleeves and work with others to be sure our state creates a meaningful system of teacher evaluation, aimed at supporting and improving instruction for students” (Bray, 2010).

One of the clearest criticisms of teachers unions in the film is that they stand in the way of reform. This is not a new charge; there has been ongoing dialogue about whether or not teachers unions support or stifle education reform for years. The film does, however, acknowledge that teachers unions were created for a reason. There was a historical impetus for creating unions. Employees all over the country—including the teaching workforce—were being taken advantage of by their employers. What would our education system look like today if someone had not stepped up to protect the interest of teachers? However, the industrial revolution is over, and the system that once required an outside enforcer has changed. Have teachers unions adjusted to current needs? Considering today’s climate, teachers unions receive plenty of media attention when contract negotiations are difficult or because a union refuses provisions that could lead to reform and innovation. But the truth is that unions operate very differently from each other, and there is a lot of variance in unions across the country. The film does acknowledge this variation and instances of unions and policymakers working together to improve education and solve problems. “Count Us In” in Wisconsin is one recent example of just that. See “‘Count Us In’ in Wisconsin” for more information.

During our discussion on teachers unions, one of the most interesting points that was mentioned was one that Michelle Rhee brings up in the film about whom teachers unions serve. It is an important distinction. Often problems in education reform are caused by adults who are looking out for their own concerns rather than those of students. In an interview with Bill Gates following the release of *Waiting for Superman*, he said, “say there was a students’ union. Might they ask that the dropout rate be lowered? Might they stay at the negotiating table until it was below 50 percent? We ought to ask kids whether they think the status quo is working” (Tough, 2010).

### **Teachers**

The film does little to acknowledge the hard work and challenges that teachers face or the good work and innovation that some teachers are doing (particularly outside of charter schools). In addition, it does little to acknowledge that what teachers do inside the classroom is drastically affected by factors outside the classroom. Comparing education to economics, classroom education is like microeconomics, and local and state-level systems are like macroeconomics. Similar to economics, local and state systems influence what teachers do (consider any decisions you have made based on the current recession). *Superman* considers the immediate “micro” level without entering into a discussion of the “macro” system or how the two interact. The discussion with Michelle Rhee is the only segment that considers the larger local system that exists outside the classroom; here, the film admits that what happens at the macro level influences what happens at the micro level but fails to build the connections between the two and does little to explore how the macro system affects the micro classroom.

Teachers have the most immediate impact on student learning and possibly the greatest impact within schools. *Waiting for Superman* does address the need to improve teacher effectiveness in the classroom and place more great teachers in classrooms in the future. In the film, Eric Hanushek argues that by removing the worst 6-10 percent of teachers, we could see the U.S. jump from the middle of the pack internationally to the top 10. The problem comes in determining who makes up the lowest 10 percent. What factors are considered? How are teachers compared across schools, districts, and states? Ideas like merit pay and tying teacher evaluation to student performance have been controversial, and we do not have evidence or research that strongly supports their use yet. Without having the same measures, which could be used to identify the worst teachers, it is also difficult to identify and reward the best teachers.

### **Finland as a Model of Success**

The major difference in education between the U.S. and Finland: in Finland, teachers are considered one of education's greatest assets. Teaching is a well-respected career, and Finland recruits from the top college graduates. Also, in the 1960s, Finland began building consensus among all groups and organizations that reform was needed. Reform did not become the politically driven issue that it is in the United States.

View a short [video](#) from the BBC on why Finland consistently scores at the top of developed nations.

Finland (as the video points out) has a very small immigration rate, which means most Finnish students start, complete, and spend every grade in between in Finland, and almost no students have to learn another language to successfully participate in school. That is just one challenge the United States faces that many other top-competing nations do not.

The film also compares the United States to other top-performing nations like Finland. A recent report from McKinsey begins by noting that top-performing countries (e.g., Finland, Singapore, and South Korea) recruit 100 percent of their teaching force from the top third of college graduates, but that in the United States, only 23 percent of new teachers come from the top third of college graduates, and only 14 percent in high-poverty schools (Auguste, Kihn, & Miller, 2010).

Recruitment, retention, and treatment of teachers is not the only difference among the American education system and those of other developed nations. *Superman* compares U.S. education to these other countries without acknowledging many of the differences among the United States and many other top-performing nations. See "Finland as a Model of Success" for more information about some of these differences.

### **Charter Schools**

One thing that *Waiting for Superman* does very well is highlight innovative and successful charter schools. However, the narrator mentions in passing that only about 1 in 5 charter schools outperform their traditional school counterparts. This has possibly been the most criticized aspect of the film; it was certainly pointed out by Randi Weingarten and Dennis Van Roekel in their previously cited articles, as well as the much discussed [critical response](#) by Diane Ravitch.

In an [interview](#), Guggenheim claims that the reason for focusing on charter schools is that these high-performing charters are "An incubator for good ideas," and that he is not promoting charters as the answer. Educators watching the film have asked, "What about high-performing traditional public schools?" The film does not acknowledge or discuss any successful traditional public schools that might also be doing great things and "incubating great ideas." So viewers are left to decide for themselves whether or not Guggenheim's defense of the film is well-founded or whether the critics are right to point out the lack of overwhelming success in charters. If high-performing charter schools are, in fact, the incubators that Guggenheim claims they are, how are those innovations and effective practices being shared? See "National Charter School Resource Center" to learn more about how these best practices are shared.

### **National Charter School Resource Center**

One new center funded by the U.S. Department of Education has initiated efforts to share best practices of successful charter schools. As part of its mission, the National Charter School Resource Center strives to “disseminate information about successful practices in charter schools.” This fall, the Resource Center took one of its first steps in achieving that goal by hosting a webinar titled *Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: Lessons Learned From Charter Restarts*. Going back to the micro- and macroeconomics comparison, the Resource Center has “Support for State Agencies” as a priority. By focusing on both the larger system and the local building, the Resource Center is able to help educators make connections between the two.

### **Scalability**

One of the educators featured in *Waiting for Superman* is Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ). HCZ has sought to rejuvenate 97 blocks of Harlem and provide cradle-to-college support to all students there. This effort includes several charter schools, the Harlem Promise Academies, which are highlighted in the film. However, HCZ is a comprehensive and expensive endeavor, and a lottery is not an effective way to provide all students with a quality education (which is the point of the film), which leads to what might be the most important question from Great Lakes West staff members’ discussion of the film: How can we scale-up reforms? Solitary classrooms or schools that are the “incubators for success” do not reach out to the whole system. To have a real impact, reform needs to be transferable to other situations and scalable to meet a larger portion of the education audience.

What Geoffrey Canada has done with the HCZ is commendable, and the national “Promise Neighborhoods” initiative was modeled after it to dramatically improve the lives of children in underserved areas. But, Canada secures large amounts of funding from private sources, 62 percent in 2003 (Harlem Children’s Zone, 2003). The Promise Neighborhoods initiative provided grants to 21 organizations—out of the more than 300 that applied (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b). Only 7 percent of applicants received funding, numbers that are not that different from

some of the charter school lotteries in the film. The Race to the Top competition early this year had 12 winners out of 46 states and the District of Columbia (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a), and most states applied more than once. In the first round, two out of the 46 applicants received an award (4 percent of applicants).

States and districts are struggling under the current recession and simply cannot afford expensive reforms, and they cannot just wait for the financial situation to get better. The challenge before us is using the resources we have better, supporting our teachers better, and asking the right (and often difficult) questions without anyone to tell us for sure when we have the right answer or giving us a gold star. *Superman* did not tell us how to take what is already available and make it scalable, or how to innovate new and promising practices, or how to make more with less, or the right questions to ask to get the research and resources to support effective, positive change.

### **Continuing the Conversation**

*Superman* is out of theaters, and the hype that it caused this fall seems to have died down for the most part, which leaves concerned people and educators asking, now what?

Guggenheim intended the film to “renew a sense of what is possible.” The most important outcome of *Waiting for Superman* was the spark it provided to initiate conversation. Now that spark is about to go out, and the filmmakers are not going to step in to give it another boost. It is up to the rest of us to make sure that the flame catches.

If we want a national commitment for change, then we need to take this opportunity to learn about the issues and start a dialogue. We need to be informed citizens; we cannot claim to champion an issue

without hearing all sides and deciding for ourselves. Use *Waiting for Superman* as a tool to reach out to others and ask them, “what did you think about the issues raised in the film?” Take the opportunity to listen to how the film—and experiences with the education system—touched and influenced others, and be willing to have a discussion about it.

Continuing the conversation cannot fall only to individuals and the community; organizations like Great Lakes West also have to actively engage in discussion with clients and peers. Great Lakes West is committed to fostering this conversation in our states and ensuring opportunities to bring the attention that is deserved to education issues. What can Great Lakes West do to help further this discussion and champion education change? [Send](#) us your ideas.

*Waiting for Superman* will be available on DVD and BluRay Disc in February 2011. Two other education documentaries that were released in early 2010, *The Cartel* and *The Lottery*, are currently available.

## References

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