

Waiting for Superman: Strong Data, Great Stories, Wrong Conclusions

Waiting for Superman is a compelling, well-crafted film that animates tragic data, revealing the vast failure of schools to serve their students. But the film's five core stories engender an emotional attachment to its fine young characters that leads many viewers to think that finding more places in charter schools will solve our complex crisis. After a brave start, this film leads viewers to unsupported conclusions.

On one hand, we don't just need more charter schools, most charter schools are not effective, and even if we added charter schools at NYC's 22% highest charter growth rate in the nation, given that only 4% of students attend charter schools now, it would take 150 years to reach all students. Any solution must address more students sooner.

Further, while the introductory data is real, serious, and calls for urgent action, the five stories represent the gist of the school situation for a small fraction of our children, the children in the film each have personal champions. Having a personal champion in itself is the most important foundation for success.

What about the majority of children whose parents are not motivated to get them to a better school? Life is more dire for most children who do not have personal champions than it is for the children who are in the film but do not get into their dream school.

The children who "lose" in the film are lucky compared to the children whose parents don't know the children's school is not performing well, or don't know the importance of the school experience for their children, or don't care.

How can we ensure that all children, including the children of parents who are unaware or uncaring, will be supported to develop their talents and skills and love of learning? This question goes far beyond the minority of students competing to enter charter schools and extends to all children, most of whom will be served by traditional public schools. To develop policies, programs, and personnel which can deliver quality attention and education to *each* child is our challenge. Charter schools have a role in that larger challenge.

Waiting for Superman makes real and important data comprehensible to the public, but that data is not the whole picture. And some of the data is posited and then ignored, such as "only 1 of 5 charter schools are effective".

Waiting for Superman grabs our attention because we care about the characters - students and parents, Davis Guggenheim is an academy award-winning producer, knows how to craft good stories and how to find and present data to engage. His work is a big success and a tremendous contribution to the education crisis. However, the view limited and even misleading. Guggenheim has presented a good preface (data) and one thorny chapter (competition for charter schools) in the big encyclopedia of "how education is".

Some of us in the trenches worry that caring viewers might assume that making more charter schools will solve the problem or that teachers unions are responsible for the problems we face, both of which are only very partially correct.

Harlem Children Zone (HCZ) and Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools are probably among the most effective charter schools. Yet a Brookings Institute report questions the success of the hope-filled HCZ story. Others point to the skill and drill approach of the KIPP schools as failing to develop students' 21st century thinking needed in upper grades, college and work. But there is plenty of proof that these schools are working for many students, and better than the traditional school alternatives, even if not all of the test score studies show it. Perhaps the most magnificent commitment of HCZ is to prove to kids that they are valued, that adults have hopes for them. And KIPP shows kids that adults want to invest longer days and Saturdays and high expectations in them. These are important breakthroughs, they should be supported, fine-tuned, and multiplied.

Great Parents

We are touched by the story of the girl whose father believes she can become a veterinarian. We love his faith which is mana for her soul and steroids for her brain. And she has the odds in her favor because of her father and mother, in spite of not being having the lucky number to get into the good school. She may fall behind in school, but she will likely have the confidence to take a constructive role in society. We cry because the hopes are poignant and we know her father's confidence will be a large part of her success.

How can we create hope, focus, confidence millions of students whose parents may not be as supportive, loving, and determined for their children to realize their potential? Community programs, parent education and support, parent job training and placement, social services, churches, and camps can help with that vast goal of great parents for all children, but that goal is even more challenging than education reform.

For immediate support to the children, the main distribution network will be our schools. We can expand our schools and partner with them to bring community services in. And we should do that. We should volunteer at school to help. We should extend the school day and provide year round school. The children are not needed on the farm in the summer and indolence is a bad teacher.

Great Teachers

The surest medium-term solution will be to give more respect to teachers, to begin to understand the challenges they face. The unions founded to protect them were needed and are needed. But the unions will only serve the teachers well if they can now transform. Unions have a duty to represent teacher interests and to inform teachers to redefine their interest, and need time and space to work with their legion members to transform their role and expectations for the future. It would be disrespectful and ignorant not to recognize the positive role the teachers unions have played that has enabled us to retain our 3.6m strong teacher workforce in spite of poor working conditions and relatively low salaries.

The thorniest issue for administrators, teacher unions, and teachers is how to evaluate teachers fairly and effectively. Tenure was implemented to protect teachers who could be unfairly evaluated and dismissed without cause. We know now that we cannot afford to keep poor teachers in their jobs, alternatives to tenure are needed. Now we have the knowledge, technology, and experience to create meaningful and fair evaluation systems. Teachers unions have joined with districts to create new assessments for teachers and students that use the tools of our time. Since 1987, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has been providing an exemplary advanced credential program integrating advanced assessments. Additionally the Department of Education, Stanford University, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), and the Council of Chief State School Officers are all engaged in multi-year efforts to develop useful teacher assessments which can create confidence in teachers, administrators, parents and students that teachers are fairly evaluated, effectively supported in their professional development to enable effective management of a professional teaching force with out the hand-cuffs of tenure.

Waiting for Superman points to student test score gains as proof of school effectiveness. Yet these tests are not designed for school evaluation, only measure student knowledge of certain learning objectives, and do not measure many other important student learning, teacher and school elements. One of the negative effects of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was the increase in time spent testing and "teaching to tests". The Department of Education, Race to the Top and i-3 grant programs, the Gates and other foundations, universities, and education publishers aim to develop and test assessment that can be delivered online all year without interrupting instruction, delivering results to help students while they learn; can be designed to be learning experiences in themselves; can include authentic work in portfolios and essays (using computer-scoring) in addition to objective items.

Great School-Student Matches

What school qualities are important for a given child?

What school will work for what child?

How can we best listen to each child to learn their needs?

What is the environment for the child outside of school, how does that effect their needs in school?

What are the child's hopes and dreams?

What would the child's hopes and dreams be IF we listen to them closely and if they see us listen to them.

Where will their minds and hearts go IF we give them time, our time, and our focus?

While it is shocking for the US to have fallen from first place in K-12 education to 21st and 25th in math and science, evaluating the quality of education of each US child according to what is done in other countries rather than find more advanced educational goals that leverage the newest understandings of brain function, global environmental, economic and peace needs. We won't get to peace and prosperity focusing on raising our U.S. children's' test scores from 25th place to 6th, or even to first, on a scale defined by old metrics, measuring certain skills and not others, without regard for the glorious differences of individuals and the creativity and innovation now requisite for progress and success.

To create a peaceful world and a growing economy, our attention and student work will be needed not just in charter schools but in all public schools, and not just in reading and math, but in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), in 21st century learning skills, philosophy, the history of religions, art, physical education, dance and theatre. Deep and broad cross-curricular learning that shows clear linkage to today's real world will be needed to engage all of our children in the work needed to sustain our U.S. and world cultures, economies, and civilization.

This type of learning is growing in some schools and homes—charter and traditional, site-based and online. Technology and assessment advances, together with achievements in media and the arts make new, rigorous, authentic, individualized learning possible.

To speed effective education to students, we must focus on how to create the best learning opportunities and how to support the most effective teachers without getting diverted into endless debates on charter vs. traditional public, or teacher unions vs no teacher unions.

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