

Waiting for Superman

American liberalism spearheads the right-wing attack on public education

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Recent weeks have seen the release of several documentaries attacking public education in the United States, part of a broader campaign involving the corporate-controlled media and the Obama administration. These include *Teached*, directed by former Teach For America member Kelly Amis, *The Cartel*, which focuses on New Jersey public schools, and *The Lottery*, which supports the growing charter school movement.

Waiting for Superman, which might be better described as a pseudo-documentary, given its tendentious and false character, is the most heavily publicized of these efforts. Written and directed by Davis Guggenheim, producer of the Al Gore environmental film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Waiting for Superman* opens with an interview of Geoffrey Canada, CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, a network of charter schools in New York City.

Supplying the explanation of the film's title, Canada reminisces about his experience as a child of hoping that somehow, no matter how bad things got for him, Superman would come in to save the day, only to later have his hopes shattered once he finally realized that his comic book hero didn't actually exist. The conclusion is heavy-handed, but obvious: public education is as unreal as the costumed superhero.

Similarly nonsensical analogies can be found throughout the film, including a comparison between an unspecified group of skeptics who don't believe that poor children are capable of learning and a similarly unspecified group of engineers who didn't believe that the sound barrier could be broken before Chuck Yeager's historic flight.

At any rate, Canada's initial comments establish the premise of the film: the viewer is given multiple reasons why public education no longer has the right to exist and why the government should instead pour billions of dollars into the burgeoning charter school industry.

Guggenheim tracks several children in the Los Angeles, New York City, San Francisco Bay, and Washington, D.C. areas whose parents see no educational opportunities for their children except by entering charter schools. They can only win admission through a random lottery system, with the odds of success heavily stacked against them, considering the extremely small number of students actually allowed into the schools. The problems these students face, according to Guggenheim, are solely due to bad teachers and the tenure systems and Byzantine regulations which protect them from dismissal.

These parents are undoubtedly sincere, and the plight of their children is appalling. But the solution offered them is a false one. The socialist program for improving education starts with the transformation of the broader society, ending the stranglehold of the

financial elite to get the resources needed to abolish poverty, provide decent jobs for all, and greatly expand and improve public services. *Waiting for Superman* offers the pipedream of improving education while capitalist society plunges ever deeper into depression.

The director goes to great lengths to claim that the problems of public education are not due to lack of funding or socio-economic conditions. The director cites statistics showing increases in per-pupil spending in the country over the past several decades, which were largely the result of inflation. The argument is even less convincing when applied to low-performing schools or so-called dropout factories depicted in the documentary.

Guggenheim is compelled to acknowledge the abysmal state of these schools, many of which look unfit for human habitation, let alone as venues for providing a quality education. They are strained beyond capacity in the numbers of children they have to educate and care for. When visiting a public high school in Harlem between classes, for example, we see hallways in which virtually every square inch of space is occupied by students.

The filmmaker stops at the beginning of his investigation, however. He does not examine the society which produces both the harrowing conditions of life for millions of poor families, which includes, as one part, the poor quality of the schools their children attend. Instead, he imposes his own conclusion and reverses the causal connection, telling his audience, "Poor conditions of life do not lead to poor education, but it is poor education which leads to poor conditions of life."

Another insidious and related aspect of the documentary is its insistence that the crisis of unemployment in the US is due, and solely due, to an uneducated workforce. If only American children would improve their math and reading skills, there would be jobs for all. Such reactionary nonsense—with millions of US college graduates on the unemployment lines—is presumably expected to be taken seriously.

To that end, the services of Bill Gates are employed, lamenting the lack of qualified technology workers in America, in an interview the filmmaker was later to describe as "breathtaking." This term might apply to the Microsoft billionaire's bank account, but not to his depth of knowledge about education.

The film largely focuses on Michelle Rhee, the chancellor of the Washington, D.C. public school system, who has become an icon among both Democratic and Republican politicians for her attacks on the city's public school teachers. During her tenure, Rhee has fired more than 270 teachers, 30 school principals and has presented herself as a rather ruthless zealot in the attack on public education. Even in

the film itself, which attempts to portray her in the most positive light, Rhee is shown making disparaging and vulgar remarks about the teachers and administrators in her district.

In one scene, Rhee meets with a large group of teachers to introduce planned merit pay provisions which would, according to her, make it possible for some teachers to make more than \$100,000 a year in compensation if tenure and other job safeguards are removed. Teachers naturally saw this as a combination of bribery and blackmail, leaving the frustrated chancellor wondering what on Earth could be wrong with them.

The filmmaker thus claims that the teachers unions are to blame for the inability of these supposedly high-minded reformers to save public education, or more precisely, to destroy whatever safeguards remain to protect teachers against indiscriminate wage reductions and firings.

While there is no doubt that rank-and-file teachers oppose the destruction of gains won through several generations of bitter struggle, the NEA and AFT, the nation's two largest teachers unions, are not in the least bit opposed in principle to the destruction of school conditions and teachers' jobs.

For all the absurd claims of the documentary that the Democratic Party is owned by the teachers unions and therefore hamstrung in its efforts to improve public education, the unions support the Obama administration and the Democratic Party to the hilt. They will do nothing to oppose the mass introduction of charter schools, provided that they can reap the benefits of the implementation, as the United Teachers of Los Angeles has already done in the nation's second largest school district.

All in all, the arguments made by the filmmakers are extremely threadbare and crude. One can't help but note the irony of a documentary about education which sets out to systematically miseducate its audience about the nature of current social and political reality.

Such works, however, have a definite political role to play regardless of—or perhaps precisely because of—their complete lack of artistic and intellectual integrity. The fact that such a film is being released while the Obama administration mounts a nationwide campaign to lay off teachers and starve public schools of funding is no coincidence.

It premiered in late September in Manhattan and Hollywood, was given a glowing tribute by Oprah Winfrey, who dubbed it, “The Movie That Could Revolutionize Our Schools,” and favorable mention in a week-long “Education Nation” programming effort by NBC News.

The NBC broadcasts included a 30-minute White House interview with Obama by “Today” host Matt Lauer. Pointing to recent statistics showing American students lagging behind their counterparts in other industrial nations, the president promoted his anti-teacher agenda. He made clear he would not provide teachers with additional resources they need to address chronically underfunded and overcrowded schools, declaring, “Money without reform will not fix the problem.”

Referring to so-called low-performing schools Obama declared, “They are structures that don't work,” making it clear he would close them down or transform them into charters.

Lauer asked Obama about *Waiting for Superman's* criticism of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. “We have to help mediocre and poor teachers, and those we can't help we have to fire them,” he replied.

Guggenheim himself speaks for an affluent and complacent Hollywood layer which fully supports the Democratic Party, even as it

takes up the mantle of the most reactionary social politics which had previously been associated with the Bush and Reagan administrations in particular.

The director's own shift to the right can be seen in the transition from *An Inconvenient Truth*, with its mildly critical approach to the corporate role in destroying the environment, to his latest film, which portrays both the Bush administration and the Obama administration as making honest attempts to improve education.

The release of *Waiting for Superman* has also coincided with a flood of financial support for charter schools across the country. The Denver-based venture capital Charter School Growth Fund recently announced that it had secured \$100 million in charter school funding from various sources including the Walton Family Foundation while Oprah Winfrey announced that her Angel Network would donate \$6 million to six charter school organizations. Los Angeles billionaire Eli Broad recently announced that he would be giving \$700,000 in funding to 15 local charters schools while millions of additional dollars have been raised by the Dell Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Buffett Foundations to support charter schools across the country. *Waiting for Superman* itself was largely financed by Gates and Buffett.

The diversion of state funding from public schools to charters, which have no public oversight, no work protections or other safeguards for students and are not required to offer programs in special education, arts, physical education or practically anything else, represent an opportunity for windfall profits.

More fundamentally, the undermining of public education has a broad anti-democratic significance. The creation of public education was the product of egalitarian and democratic conceptions inspired by the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions. An educated populace capable of critical thought was necessary, not merely for business efficiency, but for democracy.

Such considerations have been largely excluded from the current education discussion, and entirely absent in *Waiting for Superman*.



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