A Call to Action for Public Schools

Decades into America's fight over how to improve education, a new documentary makes a compelling case for urgent reform on behalf of kids. Why Waiting for "Superman" is not just a movie but a dispatch from a revolution

BY AMANDA RIPLEY

One Wednesday afternoon this summer, 55 young men and women filed into a dark movie theater for a private screening. Sundance this was not. There was no Robert Redford, no Diesel swag. But this audience had one important qualification: sometime recently, they had all dropped out of high school. So for a movie about America's malfunctioning education system, it was an unusually qualified focus group.

Waiting for "Superman" is a new film by Davis Guggenheim, the Academy Award–winning director of An Inconvenient Truth, a movie that took on another mind-numbingly complex issue and, confounding all logic, grossed $50 million worldwide—and changed the way many Americans think about climate change.

In anticipation of Superman's Sept. 24 release, screenings are being held all over.
New opportunity Kids like these in Los Angeles are starting the year with high hopes—and so are reformers.
the country for elite audiences—Bill Gates has become an evangelist for the film—and for education activists, including ones who help kids who have dropped out. So it was that Crystal Rojas, 19, sat down in the stadium seating in Chicago to watch a movie that might have been loosely based on her life. She nodded when she saw footage of things she recognized, like teachers reading newspapers in class. She raised her eyebrows when she saw how much America spends per pupil—far more than almost every country in the world does.

At the end, her eyes filled with tears. Rojas had long believed that her problems in school were all her fault. In fifth grade, her teacher told her that she wouldn't amount to much. "She said, 'It doesn't matter if you learn. Your future is determined.'" And for a while it seemed as if her teacher had been right. In sixth grade, Rojas tried to transfer to a charter school, but it was full. So she stayed in her neighborhood public school, where only 1 in 5 students was doing math at grade level. Then she went to a vocational high school where, she says, she spent almost three hours a day in a typing class. "I would just go there and feel like I was wasting space. So I thought, Why should I keep coming?" She dropped out two weeks into 10th grade.

Rojas has since earned her GED and is studying business administration at a community college. Her future is not certain, but nor is it lost. Watching the movie, she heard that teacher's voice in her head all over again. And she started to think that maybe there is a problem in America's schools, and that it is bigger than Crystal Rojas.

Waiting for "Superman" is a documentary that follows five kids and their parents as they try to escape their neighborhood public schools for higher-performing public charter schools. The movie serves up a lot of clarifying statistics about the problems facing education reform, explaining how it could be that the U.S. since 1971 has more than doubled the money it spends per pupil yet still trails most other rich nations in science and math scores. But the film succeeds because it also lays out the solutions, something no one could credibly attempt to do until very recently.

Today, several decades into America's long, tedious fight over how to upend the status quo in public education, three remarkable things are happening simultaneously. First, thanks partly to the blunt instruments of No Child Left Behind, we can now track how well individual students are doing from year to year—and figure out which schools are working and which are not. Most Americans think testing is a spurious trend; a new TIME poll found that only 1 out of 5 people surveyed felt that testing has had a positive effect in schools. But as the tests get better, we are starting to be able to see in the dark. We can track what works—and what
doesn't—in the classroom, something that had been for all of history a matter of conjecture and hearsay. And while the data isn't perfect, it's far better than any other yardstick we've ever had before.

Second, legions of public schools—some charters, some not—are succeeding while others flounder. These successful schools are altering fundamentals that were for so long untouchable, by insisting on great teachers, more class time and higher standards. We now know that it is possible to teach every kid, even poor kids with wretched home lives, to read, write and do math and science at respectable levels. In Harlem, low-income African-American students at these schools are performing on par with kids across New York City and the state. And the researchers studying their success have learned that what matters more than anything else in the school is the teacher, the one person in the building whose job has changed the least in the past half-century.

The third novelty is in Washington, where a Democratic President is standing up to his party's most dysfunctional long-term romantic interest, the teachers' unions. President Barack Obama and his Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, have dangled $4.35 billion in stimulus money in front of cash-strapped state legislatures to get them to rationalize their systems. Overnight, the White House has become the biggest benefactor in the education world, far surpassing the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The competition, known as Race to the Top, is pushing school districts to raise academic standards, to evaluate teachers based in part on how much their students are learning, to train teachers more effectively—and to remove those who are not cut out for the job.

In the states' response, we are witnessing what may be the beginning of a commonsense revolution. Seven states have enacted laws to remove firewalls between student achievement and teacher evaluations. At least 12 states have passed laws requiring student-progress data to be used in making teacher-evaluation or tenure decisions, a notion that would have been unimaginable five years ago. And 35 states and the District of Columbia have agreed to adopt common standards for what kids should learn at every grade level. Recently, officials from more than one European nation have contacted education reformers to learn how they could do something like Race to the Top in their own countries.

The pace of change is, relatively speaking, breathtaking. A couple of weeks ago,
As tests get better, we're starting to be able to see in the dark. We can track what works—and what doesn't—in the classroom, instead of just guessing.

Getting it done In Harlem, Geoffrey Canada learned that the only way to fix schools is to upend assumptions and raise expectations. "If schools aren't working, it's the adults."
that 95% of them are poor. Then Guggenheim heard about charter-school lotteries, in which leaders of oversubscribed schools pull bouncing balls out of metal cages to determine which kids will get a coveted space.

"In the land where I have 14 choices of peanut butter," Chilcott says, "kids are entering a lottery to get into a decent school."

**Enough Power to Save Us**

**CHARTER SCHOOLS OPERATE OUTSIDE THE CONSTRAINTS OF REGULAR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.** They get public money, but in most cases, their teachers are not unionized. This freedom has allowed a minority of them to shine, building flexible, demanding programs that defy expectations. But only 1 in 6 charter schools significantly outperforms traditional counterparts. And more than a third underperform. In any case, charters now represent only 4% of schools, so they are not an option for the vast majority of kids.

Guggenheim insists he did not intend to make a pro-charter movie: "I know people will say this movie is anti-this or pro-that. But it really is all about families trying to find great schools." The film's title came from Canada, the CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, a 97-block area in New York City that includes two respected charter schools. As a kid in the Bronx, Canada recalls the crushing day he learned Superman does not exist. "Even in the depths of the ghetto, you just thought, He's coming." His mother thought he was crying the way a child cries when he discovers Santa Claus is not real. But no. "I was crying because no one was coming with enough power to save us."

When Guggenheim first approached Canada to be in the film, he blew him off. "I said, 'Nice to meet you. I know you're a tremendous filmmaker, but I don't think you're going to get Americans to care about this.'" Still, he invited Guggenheim to visit his charter schools. At these schools, the principals can hire their own staff. Teachers work longer days (and years) and often give out their cell-phone numbers should parents or students need to reach them after hours. If teachers consistently fail to help their students learn in ways that can be measured, they are asked to find another job.

At almost every other school in the country, such flexibility and professionalism are inconceivable because of teachers' union-negotiated contracts, long-standing education-culture norms or, in some cases, state law. Sometimes on purpose and sometimes by accident, teachers' unions have a long history of working against the interests of children in the name of job security for adults. And Democrats in particular have a history of facilitating this obstructionism in exchange for campaign donations and votes. Meanwhile, most schoolteachers work in isolation: they can get tenure after an average of just three years on the job, which means they likely have a job for life, but they very rarely get
meaningful evaluations or effective training to improve, either. Guggenheim, a Democrat and a member of the directors' union, agonized over his portrayal of the teachers' unions in the film. But eventually, he decided he would have to acknowledge these truths. "We have to change," he says. "The unions can't protect bad teachers. They have to start helping good teachers."

One of the darkest scenes in Superman is when schools chancellor Michelle Rhee is proposing a revolutionary new contract for teachers in Washington, D.C. They could choose to make up to $140,000 pegged to their effectiveness—in exchange for giving up tenure for one year. Or they could keep tenure and accept a smaller raise. For two and a half years the union argued with Rhee over the details. The film portrays the conflict as a tense and personal standoff between Rhee and Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and it makes, as a Variety review put it, "something of a foaming satanic beast out of Weingarten."

After a Superman screening this summer outside Washington, Rhee and Weingarten appeared on stage with Guggenheim. The tableau reflected this strange moment in the history of school battles. There was Guggenheim, in his horn-rimmed glasses and skinny black suit, sitting next to Weingarten, wearing sensible shoes and a blazer, next to Rhee, who was in a black, low-cut dress and strappy high-heeled sandals. About the only thing the women could agree on was that the film had made them both cry. "People ask me, Why do you do this?" Rhee said of her relentless campaign to transform D.C. schools without much regard for her sinking popularity among voters, who may oust her and the city's mayor this month. "This film answers that question. I can think of nothing more important than a group of people can be doing than to make sure this crazy injustice does not continue."

Weingarten, meanwhile, said the film was powerful but misleading. It had glorified charter schools and demonized teachers. Later, she told me that she agrees that quality teachers are important, but she stressed that more social services are needed to complement the work they do. At the union's annual convention in July, she denounced Superman as part of a broader scapegoating of teachers that she says has "horrified" her. She did, however, agree to write a chapter for the companion book that will accompany the film. In it, she makes the point that the AFT, the country's

TIME Poll. We asked Americans what they think of the current state of public education. Their response: it's a quagmire, but it can be fixed

**How can policy be changed to make the public-education system better?**

- **64%** believe student standardized-test scores should play a role in teacher-performance evaluations
- **71%** support merit pay (paying teachers on the basis of their effectiveness)
- **28%** support the current system of tenure for teachers, which makes it difficult to remove them from their jobs
- **56%** think tenured, long-time teachers are not motivated to work hard

**Not surprisingly, money matters**

- **61%** think teachers are underpaid
- **76%** think many of the smartest people in society choose not to go into teaching because it doesn't pay enough
- **56%** are willing to pay higher taxes to improve schools

This TIME poll was conducted by telephone Aug. 17-19, 2010, among a national random sample of 1,000 Americans ages 18 and older. The margin of error for the entire sample is ±3 percentage points. The margin of error is larger for subgroups. Source: Joel Kaji, Andy Borinson, Abt SBRI
We're at a time of amazing opportunity but also extraordinary risk.
—ARNE DUNCAN, EDUCATION SECRETARY, IN CHARGE OF DOLING OUT AN UNPRECEDENTED $4.35 BILLION TO SCHOOL SYSTEMS THAT INNOVATE

We're at a time of amazing opportunity but also extraordinary risk, according to Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education in the United States. Duncan has worked to make teacher evaluations more rigorous in more than 50 districts.

Weingarten walks a tightrope between alienating her base of more than 1.5 million members and losing credibility among the new generation of reformers. After the Los Angeles Times announced its database project, she pleaded with the paper not to publish the teachers' names and defended a teacher with subpar data. That was the old-school union line. And in the next breath, she conceded that parents have a right to know if their children's teachers were rated as satisfactory by their supervisors, provided the evaluations are more holistic than test-score data alone. This was the union of the future.

An Army of Regular Americans

ONE OF WEINGARTEN'S MOST VALID CRITICISMS of the film is that Guggenheim did not update it to reflect the progress that has been made since he finished shooting. In the spring, she, other union officials and Rhee finally agreed to a groundbreaking new contract for all D.C. teachers. They are set to earn large raises and can make even more money, depending on their effectiveness. D.C. teachers are evaluated according to a comprehensive rubric that includes five classroom observations and data about how much their students' scores have improved compared with those of other kids performing at similar levels. Teachers rated as ineffective will be let go. In July, Rhee dismissed 127 teachers—and placed 737 on notice that they must improve or face removal next year.

In the film, Sousa Middle School in Washington is portrayed as one of the abysmal schools that kids are trying to escape. But since Guggenheim visited, an aggressive new principal has transformed the place. In two years, the number of kids doing math at grade level has shot up 30 percentage points to 46%. Principal Dwan Jordon says there is no secret to the success. "It's just hard work. And an environment where everyone believes we can do it. There are no excuses." The Washington Post once called Sousa an "academic sinkhole." The other day, it featured Jordon in a glowing front-page profile.

In June, New York City closed its so-called rubber rooms, notorious warehouses for some 700 teachers and administrators accused of misconduct. The city still pays these employees—who, until now, had to wait an average of three years to go through a byzantine disciplinary process—at a cost of more than $30 million a year, but the rooms themselves no longer exist.

In August, the Obama Administration announced the winners of its Race to the Top competition—a list that now includes 12 states, from New York to Hawaii, plus D.C. But in some of the states that did not get grants, critics are already calling for the repeal of reforms that had been passed to win favor with the Administration. Duncan is aware that the progress is tenuous. "We're at a time of amazing opportunity but also extraordinary risk," he has said. For next year's budget, he has already requested $1.35 billion to continue the competition.

Waiting for "Superman" is hoping to recruit an army of regular Americans to keep the momentum going. The movie's website features a letter-writing tool for people to urge their governors to adopt and implement the common standards. The site also lets people look up school ratings and find volunteer options and other data in one place. The idea is to give people something useful to do with the outrage generated by the film.

This January, Guggenheim flew to Seattle to screen the movie for Bill Gates, whom he interviewed for the film. The whole family, including Melinda, the children and Bill's father, gathered to watch. At that critical moment, Guggenheim couldn't get the DVD he had brought to work. He was forced to show them a lower-quality backup of the film with a "Not for Distribution" watermark running along the bottom of the screen. "It was a nightmare," he says. But Gates loved it. "I was really amazed," says Gates, "that he had both connected with the viewers and hadn't left out some of the confusing things about [education policy]." Soon afterward, the film was acquired by Paramount.

Meanwhile, back in Harlem, Canada still had low expectations. "I've been talking to America about these children," he says, "and no one seems to get very outraged." Then he watched the film. When he got to the lottery scenes at the end, in which mothers weep and children cross their fingers in hopes of a brighter future, he lost it. "The rawness of the emotions of the parents gets to me—that unbelievable, desperate hope," Canada says. "I thought then, 'Davis has done it. I think he made people care about these kids.'"

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