

COMMENT: MEGAN BEHRENT

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Still waiting for the truth about teachers

New York City public school teacher **Megan Behrent** has a few thoughts about the film *Waiting for Superman* and its blame-the-teachers-and-their-unions message.

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IF YOU read the news, listen to the radio, watch TV or just happen to live in the United States, it is pretty clear, the pundits agree, that the biggest obstacle standing in the way of education today is...teachers.

That's right, teachers--the one group of people who have actually chosen to devote their lives to education is, we're told, the reason for the failure of our schools.

And, of course, their crazy unions.

The final episode of *Law & Order* titled "The Rubber Room"--based on the now-defunct reassignment centers where teachers await due process and a chance to defend themselves against accusations, many of which turn out to be false--is a good example of this.

While the episode shows some sympathy for teachers, it notably features a union representative whose vehement adherence to the contract prevents him (at least initially) from helping to prevent the massacre of children in a school. Literally.

While disaster is ultimately averted, the message is clear: Teachers unions are hazardous to the health of children.

The latest to jump on this teacher- and union-bashing bandwagon--and now leading it--is Davis Guggenheim, whose "documentary" *Waiting for Superman* purports to take on the hard questions in public education by joining the chorus of those who say that teachers are the problem, and charter schools are the solution.

MOST OF us didn't become teachers because we wanted to prevent our students from learning. So it can be a little disconcerting to suddenly be told that *you're*

the problem.

It's disconcerting and enraging--especially since it's blatantly untrue. The lie that has been repeated so often now that it is accepted as absolute truth is that the biggest variable in a child's learning and success in school is "teacher quality."

This has no basis in fact at all. This isn't to say that there aren't bad teachers or to diminish what we do, but the biggest predictor of a child's future is what their parents do--which has everything to do with class and growing economic inequality in the U.S. Despite all the diversions in the media, the profound inequality in funding that plagues our schools is still at the root of the problems we face in our schools today.

Indeed, in terms of established studies, the reforms that have shown the most significant improvement in learning are class size reduction (when lowered significantly) and the expansion of early child education--despite all claims to the contrary.

In fact, even a report by the U.S. Department of Education on the use of test scores to evaluate teachers argues, "More than 90 percent of the variation in student gain scores is due to the variation in *student-level* factors that are not under control of the teacher."

Most studies cited in defense of the "teacher quality" argument that measure the "value added" by teachers--itself a disturbing way of thinking about learning--don't isolate other factors outside of the school that might influence learning over the period of the study.

In addition, the results from these types of statistical models have proven to be extremely flawed, and fluctuate widely from year to year. The report cited above notes: "Studies from a wide set of districts and states have found that one-half to two-thirds of teachers in the top quintile or quartile of performance from a particular year drop below that category in the subsequent year."

Even with three years of data for each individual teacher, there is an error rate of 26 percent--by any standard a capricious measure for making high-stakes decisions about teachers and their "effectiveness" in a classroom.

The fact that these performance results--like those that were published in the *Los Angeles Times* last month--bear strong correlations to race and class inequalities that plague our school system further undermines their validity.

As a teacher in Los Angeles discovered after analyzing the scores in more detail, the 25 schools deemed "least effective" schools were those in which African

American and Latino students accounted for an average of 91 percent of the student population, while 84 percent qualified for free or reduced student lunch. In the 25 schools deemed most effective, however, African American and Latino students made up 59 percent of the population, and only 62 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch.

That a school's "effectiveness" is so strongly correlated with the racial makeup and economic status of its student population suggests that racism and poverty is what keeps our schools unequal. Not teachers.

While value-added models hold little credibility among any serious education researchers, their impact on teachers can be devastating. The witch-hunt launched by the *Los Angeles Times*, which published a database of teachers and their "effectiveness" based on this flawed model, has perhaps already claimed its first victim: Rigoberto Ruelas, a 14-year teacher in Los Angeles who went missing after the reports came out and was recently found dead, with suicide suspected.

While details have yet to emerge in the case, we have to very clear about the responsibility the *LA Times* and its cohorts bear for the destructive (and even deadly) impact of their all-out assault on teachers.

If we really want to talk about "teacher quality," the questions we should be asking are: What makes a good teacher? And how can we provide support to teachers to that end? Why is the turnover rate so high? How does harassing teachers and denying them tenure help them become better teachers? And can anyone be the best teacher that they could be with 170 students a day?

In fact, research does show that experienced teachers make a difference in our schools. But despite the claims of movies like *Waiting for Superman* that teaching in a public school is so easy that you can "breathe" and get tenure, almost 45 percent of teachers leave within the first four years in New York City.

In my experience, not a single teacher leaves because of the students. It is the lack of support, the impossible workload, the over-reliance on testing and the constant barrage of new initiatives that hold us accountable for forces beyond our control, while those who run the system are never held accountable for anything.

It's worth remembering that tenure and the right to due process protects not only teachers but students from the whims and vagaries of those who determine educational policy, regardless of educational merit (and frequently with zero educational training or experience themselves).

Instead, we're told that charter schools are the panacea for all our educational system's ills. Once again, this flies in the face of existing research, such as the

largest comparative study of charter schools conducted by Stanford University, which demonstrated that most charter schools do no better than public schools, and plenty actually do worse.

According to the study, only 17 percent of charter schools do better than public schools, while 37 percent perform worse. But Guggenheim doesn't let facts like these get in the way of his *Waiting for Superman* narrative. He also ignores the fact that charter schools have a far higher turnover rate than public schools. The "all-public-school-teachers-bad, all-charter-school-teachers-good" makes for a much better script.

THIS SCRIPT is particularly useful to the corporate education "deformers," whose interest in education reform is rooted in neoliberalism, not pedagogy.

Neoliberalism is a set of economic policies that insist all problems can be solved by the privatization of sectors of the economy once thought to be the domain of the public sector, deregulation of markets, reductions in government spending and promotion of anti-union "flexible" labor policies that make it easier for employers to depress wages and fire workers at will.

Thus, the people who did such a great job with the housing industry, health care, banking and the airlines now want to do the same thing to education.

For them, education is a multibillion-dollar industry. The fact that teachers are still one of the professions with a high unionization rate is a problem for them. They need to bust our unions to get their hands on schools and transform them based on a corporate model.

But don't trust me on this. Instead, read what a report put out by Merrill Lynch, "The Book of Knowledge: Investing in the Growing Education and Training Industry," has to say:

A new mindset is necessary, one that views families as customers, schools as "retail outlets" where educational services are received, and the school board as a customer service department that hears and addresses parental concerns. As a near monopoly, schools escape the strongest incentives to respond to their customers. And what is the strongest incentive? The discipline of the market.

Or read the free-market champions of the Cato Institute and their study called "The New Trend in Education: For-Profit Schools": "Increasingly, entrepreneurs recognize that the public's dissatisfaction with one-size-fits-all schools is more

than just fodder for political debates. It is a tremendous business opportunity."

If you want to know why people like Bill Gates, Eli Broad and the Waltons are involved in public education, this is why. "Failing" schools for them are seen as a business opportunity.

The problem, of course, is that learning is not a product that can be sold to pliable consumers. Nor can it be turned into chunks of data, to be easily measured on bubble tests. And we all know that when banks fail, they get bailouts and their CEOs amply rewarded--whereas when schools fail, teachers get the blame--closely followed by parents and students--and increasingly are threatened with harsh disciplinary measures.

The teachers at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island found this out when they were fired en masse--with the approval of the president of the United States, no less. Clearly, teachers were to blame for the crisis--not the fact that this was the poorest and smallest high school in the state, in a district where 29 percent of residents live beneath the already woefully low federal poverty line.

The blame-the-teacher rhetoric that is so popular in *Waiting for Superman*, on Oprah and in the mainstream media is ultimately a diversion from the real problems in education today--the systematic underfunding of our neediest schools; the continued and increased segregation of schools; and the growing gap between rich and poor that leaves all poor children behind.

This is the biggest problem with the Superman theory of education. It relies on an image of teachers as self-sacrificing martyrs who can single-handedly overcome the vast inequalities that plague our society, and go on to nurture every student to their full potential, even if they lack health care, housing or adequate food.

This mythic teacher superhero should work 15 hours a day without ever tiring or wanting anything else from life. They can never have health care problems of their own, nor a family that might take time away from teaching--and certainly not anything resembling a social life or interests that can't be contained within the four walls of a classroom.

This conception of teaching is inherently unsustainable, unhealthy and impossible. It is a recipe for a revolving door of teachers who are used up and spit out--which has disastrous consequences for the neediest schools that need experienced teachers.

FAR FROM standing in the way of education reform, teachers are on the front

lines. It is teachers, along with parents and community activists, who are fighting for smaller class sizes, more funding for our schools, expanded early education and health care and enrichment programs. Teachers want to end the test-and-punish regime that flattens education and robs students of valuable time and energy--and which teaches them that learning is limited to a right or wrong answer on a standardized test.

These are the issues that the media and documentary-makers *should* take up.

I'd like to see a film trailer that begins with a shot of Sidwell Friends Academy, where Barack Obama's children go to school. The camera pans across the elementary school's five-acre campus and its two playground areas, complete with climbing equipment.

Cut to a chart that contains the school's stats--1,109 students on two campuses, 147 teachers. Overall student/teacher ratio: 7.5 to 1. Class size: from 10 in lower grades to no more than 16 in high school.

Cut to a shot of the middle school building, with a voiceover that explains this is a green middle school, where students study wetlands and engage in environmental projects and research by studying their immediate environment. All middle-schoolers get laptops.

As the camera pans across the 15-acre high school and middle school campus, with three athletic buildings, five tennis courts and a six-lane track, the voiceover explains that there is no "ranking" of students, as this goes against the philosophy of the school which promotes equality and community and focuses on the whole child. Tuition ranges from \$28,000 to \$30,000 a year.

The segment ends with a close up of Sasha and Malia Obama smiling as they enter the campus.

Cut to a different school: A large building in Brooklyn. We see students entering the building and having their ID cards scanned. Cut to a chart of the school's stats--3,500 students, 190 teachers. Average student/teacher ratio: 19 to 1. The building is at 130 percent capacity. Class sizes are capped at 34, except physical education and music, which go up to 50.

Cut to shots of overcrowded classrooms. A voiceover explains that the school's population is largely English language learners who come from over 70 countries. Across the screen flashes the word: "Failing."

But the real question is: Who's failing whom? If their children are worth \$30,000 a year, why aren't ours? If their children learn best in an environment that

encourages collaboration, creativity and personal expression, why should our children be expected to meet the same "standards," with none of the same freedom or genuine opportunities for exploration and learning?

If, as Obama argues, "the most important factor" in a student's "success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents," but "the teacher standing at the front of the classroom," then why do his children enter a school with tennis courts, wetlands and playgrounds, whereas ours find metal detectors, overcrowded classrooms and buildings that are often literally falling apart?

We don't need to wait for Superman. What we do need is a fighting movement of teachers, parents and students that can tear the cloak off the fake education "reformers"--and build a movement for real education reform that demands quality public education for all, not just a few.

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