

## What the critics of ‘Won’t Back Down’ don’t understand

By: Andrew Coulson - October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012

---

*Andrew J. Coulson directs the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, and is author of the study: “Comparing public, private and market schools: the international evidence.”*

Angry at the status quo and tired of being powerless, the residents of a low-income community band together to seize control of an oppressive local institution. What sounds like a rehash of last year’s “occupy” movement is in fact the plot of a new feature film: *Won’t Back Down*. The twist? The protesters are parents, and they occupy their failing public school.

While film critics are mostly apoplectic — only a third give it a thumbs-up on RottenTomatoes.com — viewers differ, and are nearly twice as likely to have enjoyed it. Here’s what audiences get that many critics miss: attacking the system is not the same as attacking teachers.

The movie itself makes this obvious. Half of the failing school’s teachers join with parents in the attempt to take it over and turn it around. The state teachers’ union is the villain, with work rules stifling educators’ freedom and a leader who will do anything to stop the reformers because the transformed school would not be unionized.

Film critics had great difficulty grasping this distinction. At least one claimed that the film “demonizes” teachers, despite correctly identifying the union as the bad guy. But the movie depicts only a single teacher as cruelly indifferent to her students. The rest are either heroic figures, like the one played by co-star Viola Davis, or simply human beings, concerned about their livelihoods but also desperate to do right by the kids.

There was a time when the public saw little distinction between teachers as individuals and the public school employee unions; or between the ideals of public education and the institution of public schooling. As the more favorable audience reaction to *Won’t Back Down* reveals, that time is passing.

Americans have begun to realize that the structure of our education system often prevents teachers from fulfilling their potential. In other fields, hard work and excellence are recognized and rewarded. Brew a better cup of coffee, build a better cell phone, and the world beats a path to your door. But do a brilliant job teaching kids to read at your local public school and ... the system treats you pretty much the same way as it does your

least motivated, least effective colleague. Consequently, many of our brightest educational stars burn out and others leave the profession. Some are even pushed out.

Jaime Escalante, the brilliant public school math teacher celebrated by the 1988 movie *Stand and Deliver*, fell victim to a union-backed putsch. His offense? He couldn't bear to turn away kids, so his classes grew to 55 students. But the union had negotiated a 35-student limit, and Escalante's astonishing success undermined their bargaining position. So the union successfully campaigned to take away his chairmanship of Garfield High's math department.

Demoted and besieged by union opposition, Escalante left Garfield. At the height of his tenure, one out of every four Mexican Americans who passed Advanced Placement calculus nationwide attended Garfield High. After he left, the math program declined and has never recovered.

It's not surprising that the union found enough votes to oust Escalante. He expected excellence, and rising to meet his standards meant extra work for his colleagues — work for which the system offered none of the recognition or compensation that would accompany it in any other field. As *Won't Back Down* faithfully recounts, virtually all teachers do care about their students, but they're also human beings, and incentives matter.

Any system that ignores the performance of its workers and denies freedom of choice to its consumers is doomed to fail. On this point, *Won't Back Down* is unassailable. The particular solution the movie presents, parent/teacher takeovers, is another matter. As a pivotal character puts it: I don't know if this reform will work, but we have to start somewhere.

Fortunately, there's a better place to start: bring education back into the free enterprise system that drives excellence in almost every other aspect of our lives, and ensure that all families can afford to choose their children's schools, public or private. Educators must be freed from the bureaucratic red tape that currently stifles them, and entrepreneurs who replicate the best educational services and products on a global scale should be rewarded just as handsomely as those responsible for our cell phones or lattes.

Until we put in place the freedoms and incentives to consistently nurture excellence, our educational successes will remain isolated and fleeting.