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Waiting for Superman: Part 1

October 6th, 2010 by John LaPlante



Public schools are facing “an inconvenient truth” in the form of a movie produced by the man behind Al Gore’s eco-disaster movie. Will it save the fate of America’s children? I’ve just returned from seeing it, and I have one word of advice: **Go.** Uptown Landmark theater. This week.

[Waiting for Superman](#) is a documentary about some horrible public schools and several children who attend them—and are trying to get out. The children, human faces behind the education statistics, want a good education, but face very long odds if they attend the school assigned to them by the political establishment. Most if not all are destined for high schools dubbed “failure factories.” They are waiting for a superman to deliver them from what would otherwise be a disastrous school experience.

For these students, as for others across the country, Superman comes in the form of a charter school. Some charters have done so well as to send nearly all of their students—uniformly from low-income families—to college. For other families, the chance to send their children to a *safe* school, let alone a high-achieving one, is a blessing.

Charter schools, contrary to much misunderstanding, are public schools. They are free of much of the red tape that entangles public schools, and have more freedom to experiment with curriculum, pedagogy, and other factors. Almost without exception they are also non-union schools, which is one reason that teacher union officials [have launched demonstrations](#) outside some theaters that have shown the movie.

Charter schools have their challenges, including the fact that they're hard, in the jargon of business, to "scale up." State laws generally prohibit them from tapping into public bonding authority to pay for new buildings, though Minnesota charter schools do have something called "lease aid" available. (Even that, though, has come under fire lately.) The result of meager financing possibilities and burgeoning parental interest is that some charter schools have an extensive waiting list. In Harlem alone, 11,000 students want to get into a charter school but can't, for lack of space. Nationwide, some 440,000 students are on waiting lists. It's not just a problem for inner city populations. Here in Minnesota, the [Paideia Academy](#) in Apple Valley has a waiting list for most grades.

When faced with overwhelming demand for seats, charter schools often conduct a lottery. Sometimes it's done in private, sometimes, as in the movie, in public. The public lotteries are gripping affairs to watch. Not being picked is a crushing defeat for those families who cannot afford private school tuition or to move to a neighborhood zoned for a better school.

Nationally, charter schools reach over 1 million out of some 45 million students. Not all charter schools are good, but as one father of a Harlem child puts it, "The reason there's such a gravitational pull is not because they love charter schools. [It's because they're the only game in town.](#)"

[Neal McCluskey](#) of the Cato Institute criticizes the film for advocating national curriculum standards and saying nothing about vouchers or tax credits that would let parents enroll their children in any school, including private schools. I share his objections to national standards, and will have more to say about that topic another day.

I'm with him that children ought to have a full range of options. In the ideal world, we would give parents \$X thousand dollars and say, "Good luck with that, now go find a school that is suitable for your child." We're not there, and for now, charter schools are the most visible and largest form of tax-funded school choice. (The homeschooling phenomenon may actually be larger.)

Hillary Clinton has been mocked and criticized for saying "it takes a village to raise a child," but there's a kernel of truth in there. Providing widespread opportunities for educational success requires the action of lots of different people. President Obama, for one, could save the educational futures of some children in the District of Columbia by sticking up for a voucher program (one of the few in the country) that offers a lifeline.

Here's a snippet from the William McGurn of the Wall Street Journal on [what the president can do](#) about DC schools:

"No one in Washington has more political capital than Barack Obama," says Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, a Washington D.C., nonprofit that advocates for changes in public K-12 education. "All he has to do is to say two simple sentences. First, 'I support anyone who gives D.C. parents more options and more accountability.' Second, 'We need to keep D.C. on the path of reform with a schools chancellor like Michelle Rhee.'"

For more on President Obama and the Washington DC schools, see [Nick Gillespie](#).

State legislators can play a part, too. Ten states lack charter school legislation of any sort, and others have laws so onerous that they are next to worthless. Even in Minnesota, the home to the charter school idea, charter schools must deal with opposition.

Charter schools aren't the only way to expand educational opportunities. Some states, such as Arizona and Florida, have substantial tax-credit programs that put Minnesota's meager efforts to shame. Virtual schools are coming on strong, too.

But charter schools and tax credits help students leave traditional schools. What about those who remain? There many paths open to us: move towards weighted student funding, restore some modicum of the teacher's authority in the classroom, and rethink our personnel policies governing teachers. Michelle Rhee was, who plays a prominent role in the movie, was a teacher in [Teach for America](#), a program that offers an alternative to ed schools for people who want to teach. Then she started the [New Teacher Project](#), which along with the [National Council for Teacher Quality](#), has focused the spotlight on the need for tenure reform and some sort of merit pay. In time she became the chancellor of the DC Public Schools, where, among other things, she found a way to fire teachers who [needed to be fired](#).

The challenges to good public schools are many. Some are a matter of science: getting merit pay right is difficult, and it shouldn't be the only or even the most important factor in teacher pay. Some are a matter of politics: teacher unions routinely kill plans for vouchers or alternative certification programs. Political machinations in Detroit prevented a business leader from spending \$200 million on new charter schools in what is by many measures the worst school district in the country. Voters in Washington DC "thanked" her for her reforms by defeating the mayor who has served as her patron. Now it's widely expected [she will get the boot](#).

There's also complacency. In general, people think public schools are in trouble, but the ones near them are doing just fine. But as one institute pointed out about schools in California middle-class schools are often [not as good as you think](#).

If there's a weakness in the film for those of us in the Midwest, it's that it doesn't challenge us with examples of students here who need help. The film doesn't follow anyone from Detroit, Chicago, or even the Twin Cities, which has some of the highest achievement gaps in the country. So filmgoers here might be tempted to say "Oh, it isn't that bad here," when in fact, we have our own disasters, one child at a time. Of course, as national citizens, we also ought to care what happens in New York, LA, and the slums of the District of Columbia. I will address other issues with the movie in my next post.

Children all over the country, and here in Minnesota, are waiting for Superman. Will you be one?

Start by watching Waiting for Superman. There's only one spot to see Waiting for Superman in the Twin Cities: The [Landmark Uptown](#). Check it out.

[Click here](#) to see part 2 of this review, which gives more attention to the movie itself.

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