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The Star-Ledger (Newark, New Jersey)

October 11, 2010 Monday
STATE/ROP EDITION

SECTION: EDITORIAL/OPINION; Pg. 009

LENGTH: 612 words

HEADLINE: No more waiting for Superman

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BODY:

Davis Guggenheim believes in an ideal. As he says at the outset of his powerful new documentary "Waiting for Superman," " he believes in public schooling. It's not good enough, though, for his child, whom he guiltily sends to a private school. It's the education problem in microcosm: Schooling is the one area in which Americans believe in socialism, but freedom remains essential to success.

Guggenheim is not alone in his public-schooling adoration. In 2001, political scientist Terry Moe reported that 31 percent of parents "believe in public education and " wouldn't feel right putting [their] kids in private or parochial school." Sixty-eight percent of parents agreed that "the public schools deserve our support even if they are performing poorly."

Why this love? There are many reasons, but no doubt a major one is the belief that public schools, as political scientist Benjamin Barber has written, are the "bedrock of our democracy."

But this is not reality. For much of American history, education was primarily the domain of families, churches and civil society, not government. Once government did take over, it wasn't long before the warm imagery of town-meeting "democracy" gave way to the cold reality of bureaucratic, scientific control of the schools. And of course for decades, there were many Americans that public schools just wouldn't accommodate, including Roman Catholics and African-Americans.

Today, as Guggenheim's film spotlights, the ruin wreaked by socialized education is everywhere. Our best students do poorly compared to children in other developed nations -- countries which, by the way, often embrace school choice. Worse, poor children are frequently locked into intellectual dungeons because their families are unable to afford a private school, or a house in a better district.

What can be done?

Guggenheim touts charter schools -- public schools intended to be independent, innovative and chosen -- and many children are indeed better off thanks to the desperately needed options those provide. But because charters are public schools dependent on government for their very existence, they are often hamstrung by the districts with which they compete, as well as politically powerful teacher unions that, as Guggenheim brilliantly depicts, fight anything that could diminish their power.

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The ultimate hopelessness of relying on government for good education is driven home by the charter lotteries that form the denouement of "Waiting for Superman." "Where we let freedom work, we have affordable abundance: from food, to iPods to automobiles. To get access to a decent school, in contrast, we force children to swarm around Bingo hoppers and pray that theirs will be among the few numbers called.

After witnessing all of this, one is left asking if Guggenheim will eventually demand what his film screams out for: giving parents control of education money and empowering them to choose good schools for their children and hold bad ones accountable. Will he demand educational freedom?

The answer, sadly, is no. Guggenheim ends his otherwise terrific film limply, mainly nudging viewers to work for change within the public schooling framework.

Like so many Americans, Guggenheim ultimately cannot let go of his emotional belief that education must be supplied by government. He cannot accept that we must no longer force parents to wait for Superman, or anyone else, to save their kids.

Neal McCluskey is associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and author of the book "Feds in the Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples, and Compromises American Education." Share your thoughts at njvoices.com.

LOAD-DATE: October 11, 2010