



Beltway Reformers' Won't Back Down Problem

By: RiShawn Biddle - October 13, 2012

Last month, your editor hit upon the penchant among factions in the school reform movement to hold myopic (and often limited) views on school choice (and by extension, Parent Power) that fail to embrace the need to expand high-quality opportunities for all children. Another strange penchant is the failure, especially among Beltway reformers, to embrace new voices in the movement who don't come out of the confines of think tanks and policy circles, one that in some cases, verges on jealousy over big-named actors and writers stepping onto what they consider to be their own precious turf. This especially comes out in the form of obtuseness about the concept of film-making and writing for the public — including American Enterprise Institute education czar Rick Hess' wrongheaded critique of *Waiting For 'Superman'?*, and the array of Beltway types heaping scorn on *Class Warfare*, Stephen Brill's coverage of the battles between reformers and traditionalists over transforming American public education.

The latest example of this comes courtesy of *Won't Back Down*, the flick about a collection of families and reform-minded teachers taking over a failure mill from a district (and the teachers' union affiliates that has it under thumb). As one would expect, the very existence of the film (and that Oscar nominees Viola Davis and Maggie Gyllenhall have dared to star in it, and defend its message) has traditionalists into hysterics. The American Federation of Teachers and its president, Randi Weingarten, have subjected *Won't Back Down* to the kind of class warfare rhetoric the union usually reserves for its usual reform opponents (including a major ad blitz by its New York City affiliate), while once-respectable education historian Diane Ravitch proclaims falsely on Twitter that the film has only gained positive reviews from the New York Post, the paper owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. [There is strong divide between critic views of the film and that of the audience, which is not surprising given that the progressive and pro-union tendencies of many among the former (as well as the penchant among them for art house fare) versus the more-skeptical views of the latter.] But then, who wouldn't expect disingenuous statements from Ravitch or AFT flunkies?

But it is the reaction from Beltway reform types to *Won't Back Down* that is truly curious. While some, such as Andy Rotherham and even the otherwise less-than-thoughtful Andrew Coulson of the Cato Institute, understand the importance of the film in showing how the school reform movement's messages are resonating beyond the motley crew of young urban liberals, conservatives, urban minority families, and centrist Democrat and Republican political leaders who have been at the heart of it. But others in the Beltway crowd are criticizing it for lacking the nuance of public policy tomes. One typical example is Andrew Kelly of AEI, who recently co-authored a report on Parent Power efforts, dismisses the film because he thinks it "may lead audiences to imagine that line-dancing, hand-holding parent-teacher collaboration will be enough to transform awful schools". From where he sits, *Won't Back Down* should have laid out more of the complexities of systemic reform than it did. That the film doesn't fully lay out the details of launching a Parent Trigger effort.

This frustration among Beltway types over the lack of academic nuance that they prefer is not surprising; after all, admitting ambiguity is expected in the think tank and policy worlds. The fact that Parent Trigger laws, which are a subject of *Won't Back Down*, are as disfavored by many Beltway types as by traditionalist opponents, largely because they don't think that families are equipped to play powerful roles in overhauling schools, and don't like the messiness that comes with the process, also plays a part in their disdain. [One can easily imagine dismay among some of them over yesterday's news that families in Adelanto, Calif., have managed to score another court victory against the school district in order to take control of Desert Trails Elementary School, because it means that more families will seek to embrace the message of *Won't Back Down* and push to overhaul the governance and operations of failing schools in their neighborhoods.]

But one would think that they would have picked up a copy of the legendary David Mamet's *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* after *Waiting for 'Superman'*? to learn that mass media cannot do what 100-page policy tomes read only by wonks, researchers, and reporters. Filmmaking is a form of communication in which images are more-important than turns of phrase. This means scenes of unemployment lines in rural South Carolina, images of teachers working heroically in charter schools, and even a menacing sound bite from Karen Lewis in front of a black background. It is also a medium in which dialogue as to be far tighter than a policy brief — one single page must equal a minute of dialogue — and little room for nuance beyond what is involved in driving the narrative. Since all film tells a story, narratives must have plot twists, should feature struggles between opposing forces who disagree, offer characters whose back-stories must be developed expeditiously, and provide viewers with endings either happy, heroic endings, or dark and pessimistic conclusions. In short, you can't judge a *Won't Back Down* on the same terms as the latest Thomas B. Fordham Institute report — and shouldn't be subjected to such level of scrutiny.

This isn't to say that *Won't Back Down* isn't flawed as a film. The more-dispassionate of movie critics out there who have no interest in education (and thus, little concern for the role it plays in school reform discussions) think that the flick is a tad formulaic. Your editor thinks in terms of entertainment value, *Won't Back Down* isn't in the same class as any Whit Stillman flick, but it is definitely better than the average Tyler Perry film featuring the clownish Madea, making it worth a date night. Meanwhile David Poland of the influential *Movie City News*, who has no general views of the film (and according to him, wasn't even invited to a screening) has hinted at how the film could have gotten a wider audience (and better than its low-yet-respectable box office estimates thus far) if it were marketed as an ode to feminism with women doing it for themselves. Given the reality of movie studio accounting means that nobody really knows how well films are doing — and that most films never make money anyway because of the marketing and distribution costs that can be double the actual production costs of films — no one will really know how well *Won't Back Down* is doing.

But at the end of the day, none of that matters. The role *Won't Back Down* plays in shaping the discussion about the role of families in overhauling American public education — and the overall battle over reforming American public education — is far larger than its role as entertainment. This is important to remember. As I mentioned two years ago, the fact that voices outside of traditional reform circles such as the Tony-winning and Oscar-nominated Davis are speaking out for school choice and Parent Power is another sign of how important discussions about education have become. No longer do we have just an occasional *Stand and Deliver* or a rare write-up in *Time*. From athletes such as Deon Sanders and Andre Agassi launching charter schools, to media types such as CNN commentator Roland Martin serving on the board of StudentsFirst, more Americans are engaged in the most-important conversation about how to ensure that the nation continues to bend the arc of political and social history towards progress. Beltway reformers should embrace more voices playing their part in supporting this movement — especially those expressed through flicks such as *Won't Back Down*. It is key to ensuring that the efforts they undertake actually succeed in the real world outside of both Hollywood and K Street.