

An inconvenient truthiness.

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Education Column

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Here's what you need to know about [Waiting for "Superman."](#) It's not a film—it's a propaganda campaign.

That's not necessarily a bad thing.

The term "propaganda" has gotten a bad rap, ever since its association with 20th-century totalitarian governments promoting troubling political objectives. But there is a long and honorable tradition of propaganda in the genre of documentary films. In its original formulation, "propaganda" is simply a deliberate effort to change what people know, understand and value, for a particular purpose. Propaganda can rely on many different media and symbols to carry its message. Documentary films have often sought to activate a sense of urgency about a social problem or condition that needs our attention. The medium of film is especially powerful because propaganda often appeals to emotion as much as reason, and film is very effective at evoking an emotional response. Much better than, say, a speech by Al Gore, Arne Duncan or Bill Gates.

I had the opportunity to view *Waiting for "Superman,"* the new documentary by Academy Award-winning filmmaker [Davis Guggenheim](#), at a [pre-release screening](#) at [Teachers College](#) in New York City on September 17th. Based on the early buzz from proponents and detractors alike, I expected to see a film that lived up to its billing as "stirring" or "moving."

Although Guggenheim, who also directed [An Inconvenient Truth](#), is a skilled filmmaker, I didn't enjoy the film as an aesthetic experience. But that's because I found myself second-guessing the director's choices. The audience at Teachers College, which was quite diverse, seemed to like the movie, laughing at predictable times but growing silent as the film built to the climactic scenes in which five children's futures were portrayed as riding on the outcome of charter-school lotteries.

Over the course of 100 minutes, *Waiting for "Superman"* follows the fortunes of five families who believe that their children are trapped in an educational system that fails to meet their needs. The film features two prominent and colorful actors on the contemporary education scene whose fortunes have diverged dramatically in the past week: [Geoffrey Canada](#), whose [Harlem Children's Zone](#) (HCZ) just received [a \\$20 million gift from Goldman Sachs Gives](#) to expand its operations, and Washington, D.C. Schools Chancellor [Michelle Rhee](#), who, on the heels of the defeat of D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty in the Democratic primary on September 14th, is widely expected to step down after a tumultuous three years in office.

Canada and Rhee are vivid figures, but neither has shunned the media spotlight nor is new to national media attention. Rhee, for example, has [appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine wielding a broom](#), and allowed herself to be filmed firing a school principal in what would have otherwise been a private meeting—if the cameras weren't present. (The film clip is reprised in the film.) And HCZ, with Canada as its founder, spokesman and chief fundraiser, has received plenty of national attention—and deservedly so, because it's an innovative model for human development in blighted urban areas, even if we don't yet know its eventual success. It is an open question whether ubiquitous figures such as Canada and Rhee will be new to the intended audience of the film.

To return to the theme of a propaganda campaign: There is an inherent contradiction in propaganda as simultaneously broadening and narrowing. On the one hand, it seeks to open the minds of audience members to new ideas and information. But on the other, it seeks to lead an audience to a particular conclusion. *Waiting for "Superman"* may well broaden public understanding of the condition of public schooling in America. But it is far less successful in communicating a clear vision of why so few American students are achieving at high levels, and in creating momentum for collective action by the film's audience.

A lot of the film reduces to a morality play that pits the good-guy reformers and charter-school leaders (e.g., Canada, Rhee) against the bad-guy unions, without taking into account the broader political and social context in the U.S that should frame the debate. The film gives no sense of the complexity of our goals for public education, reducing outcomes to test scores (and maybe going to college). Even the film's animation—far less incisive than some past *Simpsons* episodes covering education, to be honest—contributes to the oversimplification. Virtually the only portrayal of classroom teaching and learning in *Waiting for "Superman"* consists of an animated teacher opening up a child's head and dumping "knowledge"—an alphabet soup of letters and numbers—into it. What does that say about the nature of teaching, learning and curriculum? Perhaps that test scores are a good measure of what schooling is all about?

And this brings me to another central criticism of the film. All documentary film-makers must make choices, since what appears on the screen can only be a representation of the world that they perceive. The film portrays the voices of parents and children who feel let down by the educational system as well as those campaigning to upend the current educational system. But there is a conspicuous silence. The film and [book](#) (yes, there's a tie-in book, published before the movie's release) ignore the voices of teachers talking about their day-to-day work. Had Guggenheim chosen to include teachers talking about classroom teaching, he might have further illuminated some of the contextual factors that make urban schools a problem—concentrated urban poverty; communities segregated by race, ethnicity and social class; the lack of high-quality programs for infants and young children; and families that lack the resources to support their children's schooling, to name a few. But the narrative would have become less tidy.

Waiting for "Superman" and its tie-in are shot through with contradictions. Teachers are, in the words of *Newsweek* editor [Jonathan Alter](#), a "great, a national treasure"—except when they're being lampooned as "lemons," "turkeys" or "trash." (And, apparently, they hire themselves, and give themselves tenure. Or maybe the teachers' unions do that; the film isn't clear.) Winning a charter-school lottery is the only route to success—but only one in five charter schools is

achieving “amazing results.” Fixing failing schools is offered as the key to fixing failing communities—but, as my colleague [Jeff Henig](#) pointed out at the screening, two of the initiatives featured in the film (the Harlem Children’s Zone and the [SEED school](#) in Washington, D.C.) take very seriously the primacy of community, either by seeking to transform a community through the provision of social services to families, in the case of HCZ, or by removing children from troubled communities, in the case of the SEED school.

Money isn’t a problem, Guggenheim avers, because the U.S. has higher per-capita spending on education than ever—but the *Waiting for “Superman”* website invites visitors to make a contribution to [DonorsChoose.org](#) to support the work of teachers who cannot receive the resources they need from their school districts, and the tie-in book includes a \$15 gift card from DonorsChoose.org to give to “a classroom in need.” The movie and book tell us that the main problem for Francisco, a first-grader from the Bronx, is that his school is overcrowded and his teacher is “overworked with too many students”—two conditions that go unremarked-upon for the remainder of the film.

Filmmaker Davis Guggenheim was [quoted by](#) *New York Magazine* writer John Heilemann as saying, “Here’s what I’m scared of: that the movie will be misperceived as a pro-charter, anti-union piece.” He must be disingenuous or stupid, and I doubt he’s stupid. How much screen-time is devoted to positive portrayals of charter schools? How much to positive portrayals of successful traditional public schools? (Spoiler alert: a lot, and none, respectively.) If only 20 percent of charter schools are producing “amazing results,” what about the charter schools that are no better, or worse, than the traditional public schools that are the site for educating the vast majority of students in the U.S.? Similarly, is the portrayal of teachers’ unions one-sided or balanced?

Having seen the film and bought the book, I’m skeptical that the *Waiting for “Superman”* propaganda campaign is going to have much impact on education policy, despite all of the buzz for and against the film. Although a few documentaries or biopics have succeeded in getting viewers to think differently about their subjects, I don’t think that films in general have demonstrated much potential for moving people to action; and *Waiting for “Superman”* doesn’t really lead the viewer to take a particular action. “We know what works,” “Text this number to help” and “Get involved” are exhortations that confront the viewer at the film’s conclusion—but they’re hopelessly vague.

And even if one accepts the premise that the message of the film is to support expanding charter schools, or make teachers more accountable for how their students perform, the likelihood of the film actually provoking movement on these objectives is muted by the fact that the nation just went through a [Race to the Top competition](#) in which precisely these goals were rewarded. As many states have just passed laws supporting these things, it’s hard to imagine much pressure for even more.

The *Waiting for “Superman”* website has [city-specific websites](#) with local “campaign managers” whose job, apparently, is to channel audience sentiment into action. What’s on the [New York City page](#)? An invitation to write the candidates for governor to demand “world-class standards” for all students in New York. “The Common Core Standards will help better prepare students for

college and the workplace,” the site asserts. (Ahem: No one knows if that’s true, of course; the [Common Core Standards](#) have yet to be implemented anywhere, and standards are but one piece of a complex system that hinges on curriculum and assessments that don’t exist yet.) But New York’s State Board of Regents already adopted the Common Core Standards for math and English language arts in July 2010! This is a call to action?

The other key initiative is to “support efforts to keep the most effective teachers.” Here, the link is to a May 2010 column entitled [“We’re Firing the Wrong Teachers.”](#) published on The Daily Beast, by New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein. In it, Klein complains that the \$500 million state budget cut facing the city will oblige him to lay off teachers according to the rules he negotiated in a collective bargaining agreement in 2005. (But remember, *money is not the problem.*)

Next up for me: reviewing *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. But, given the corporate support for the key figures in *Waiting for “Superman,”* some might say that I already have ...