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MOVIE REVIEW | 'WAITING FOR SUPERMAN'

## Students Caught in the School Squeeze

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

“One of the saddest days of my life was when my mother told me ‘Superman’ did not exist,” the educational reformer [Geoffrey Canada](#) recalls in the opening moments of [“Waiting for ‘Superman.’”](#) a powerful and alarming documentary about America’s failing public school system. “She thought I was crying because it’s like Santa Claus is not real. I was crying because no one was coming with enough power to save us.”

If Mr. Canada, who was born in the South Bronx and grew up to be one of the country’s most [charismatic and inspiring educators](#), is not Superman, he must be a close relative. Those who have read Paul Tough’s book, “Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada’s Quest to Change Harlem and America,” will know that the 97-block Harlem Children’s Zone, which he founded and runs, is no miracle. The zone is astoundingly successful at getting children through high school and into college. But that success, largely dependent on private money, is a costly product of laborious trial and error.

Mr. Canada and Michelle A. Rhee, the chancellor of the Washington, D.C., public school system since 2007 (she is the seventh superintendent in 10 years), are the principal heroes of the film, directed and narrated by Davis Guggenheim (“An Inconvenient Truth”), who wrote it with Billy Kimball.

Ms. Rhee, who has stridently challenged Washington’s educational status quo, has closed ineffective schools and has stood up to the unions that have made it nearly impossible to fire a teacher, no matter how incompetent, once tenure has been granted. But the Washington Teachers’ Union refused to vote on a measure under which teachers would give up tenure in exchange for higher salaries based on merit. (Ms. Rhee’s status is now in jeopardy after one of her chief supporters, Mayor [Adrian M. Fenty](#), lost the Democratic primary election to

[Vincent C. Gray](#), the chairman of the City Council. Ms. Rhee and Mr. Gray, who have sparred in recent years, met on Thursday.)

[“Waiting for ‘Superman’ ”](#) is filled with disturbing statistics. In Illinois, where one in 57 doctors loses his medical license and one in 97 lawyers loses his law license, only one in 2,500 teachers loses his credentials, because of union rules. The film briefly visits a “rubber room” in New York City where idle teachers accused of misconduct wait months and sometimes years for hearings while drawing full salaries at an annual cost of \$65 million.

The resistance to change is personified by [Randi Weingarten](#), the fiery and articulate former head of the [United Federation of Teachers](#), who now runs the [American Federation of Teachers](#). Ms. Weingarten, who is somewhat demonized by the film, is the first to admit that public education is in crisis, but she represents thousands of teachers who depend on tenure.

Caught in the squeeze are students. The film’s most emotional moments revolve around five children whose futures depend on winning a lottery to a [charter school](#). Anthony, a Washington fifth grader raised by his grandmother in a bad neighborhood, is among 64 applicants for 24 spots at the Seed School, a public charter school from which 9 out of 10 students go on to college. Francisco, a Bronx first grader, is among 792 applicants for 40 spots at the Harlem Success Academy. Applying to the same school, Bianca, a kindergartner, is one of 767 children competing for 35 spots. Daisy, a fifth grader in East Los Angeles who dreams of being doctor, is among 135 applicants for 10 spots at Kipp LA Prep.

Finally, there is Emily, an eighth grader in Silicon Valley, whose problems with math will place her on a lower academic track if she remains at the same high school in her affluent community. Her best hope is to be accepted at an even better charter school nearby where students aren’t placed in such tracks.

In his low-key narration, Mr. Guggenheim acknowledges that charter schools have had mixed success in elevating academic standards and preparing children for college. But in the Harlem Children’s Zone, the schools become involved with all aspects of the students’ lives from a very young age.

Mr. Guggenheim calls dysfunctional schools “dropout factories.” For children growing up in poor neighborhoods where parents lack the resources to send them to private schools, the consequences can be dire, not to mention economically wasteful.

Consider the following statistics cited in the film: the annual cost of prison for an inmate is more than double what is spent on an individual public school student. Eight years after Congress passed the [No Child Left Behind](#) act, with the goal of 100 percent proficiency in math and reading, most states hovered between 20 and 30 percent proficiency, and 70 percent of eighth graders could not read at grade level. By 2020, only an estimated 50 million Americans will be qualified to fill 123 million highly skilled, highly paid jobs. Among 30 developed countries, the United States ranks 25th in math and 21st in science.

“Waiting for ‘Superman’ ” doesn’t explore the deeper changes in American society that have led to this crisis: the widening gap between rich and poor, the loosening of the social contract, the coarsening of the culture and the despair of the underclass. By showing how fiercely dedicated idealists are making a difference, it is a call to arms.

The movie’s happy-sad ending observes the moment of decision as the five children wait to learn if they have won the lotteries. It is sad that the direction of a young life depends on the dropping of a numbered ball from plexiglass box.

*“Waiting for ‘Superman’ ” is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested). It has mild language and incidental smoking.*

### **Waiting for ‘Superman’**

Opens on Friday in New York and Los Angeles.

Directed by Davis Guggenheim; written by Mr. Guggenheim and Billy Kimball; director of photography, Erich Roland and Bob Richman; edited by Greg Finton, Jay Cassidy and Kim Roberts; original song “Shine” by John Legend; produced by Lesley Chilcott; released by Paramount Vantage. Running time: 1 hour 42 minutes.