

NYT August 24, 2010

Steal This Movie, Too

By **THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN**

While Washington is consumed with whether our president is secretly a Muslim, or born abroad, possibly in outer space, I'd like to talk about some good news. But to see it, you have to stand on your head.

You have to look at America from the bottom up, not from the top (Washington) down. And what you'll see from down there is that there is a movement stirring in this country around education. From the explosion of new charter schools to the new teachers' union contract in D.C., which will richly reward public school teachers who get their students to improve faster and weed out those who don't, Americans are finally taking their education crisis seriously. If you don't want to stand on your head, then just go to a theater near you after Sept. 24 and watch the new documentary "Waiting for Superman." You'll see just what I'm talking about.

Directed by Davis Guggenheim, who also directed Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth," "Waiting for Superman" takes its name from an opening interview with the remarkable Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children's Zone. HCZ has used a comprehensive strategy, including a prenatal Baby College, social service programs and longer days at its charter schools to forge a new highway to the future for one of New York's bleakest neighborhoods.

Canada's point is that the only way to fix our schools is not with a Superman or a super-theory. No, it's with supermen and superwomen pushing super-hard to assemble what we know works: better-trained teachers working with the best methods under the best principals supported by more involved parents.

"One of the saddest days of my life was when my mother told me Superman did not exist," Canada

says in the film. "I read comic books and I just loved 'em ...'cause even in the depths of the ghetto you just thought, 'He's coming, I just don't know when, because he always shows up and he saves all the good people.' "

Then when he was in fourth or fifth grade, he asked, "Ma, do you think Superman is actually [real]?" She told him the truth: " 'Superman is not real.' I was like: 'He's not? What do you mean he's not?' 'No, he's not real.' And she thought I was crying because it's like Santa Claus is not real. And I was crying because there was no one ... coming with enough power to save us."

"Waiting for Superman" follows five kids and their parents who aspire to obtain a decent public education but have to enter a bingo-like lottery to get into a good charter school, because their home schools are miserable failures.

Guggenheim kicks off the film explaining that he was all for sending kids to their local public schools until "it was time to choose a school for my own children, and then reality set in. My feelings about public education didn't matter as much as my fear of sending them to a failing school. And so every morning, betraying the ideals I thought I lived by, I drive past three public schools as I take my kids to a private school. But I'm lucky. I have a choice. Other families pin their hopes to a bouncing ball, a hand pulling a card from a box or a computer that generates numbers in random sequence. Because when there's a great public school there aren't enough spaces, and so we do what's fair. We place our children and their future in the hands of luck."

It is intolerable that in America today a bouncing bingo ball should determine a kid's educational future, especially when there are plenty of schools that work and even more that are getting better. This movie is about the people trying to change that. The film's core thesis is that for too long our public school system was built to serve adults, not kids. For too long we underpaid and undervalued our teachers and compensated them instead by giving them union perks. Over decades, though, those perks accumulated to prevent reform in too many districts. The best ones are now reforming, and the

worst are facing challenges from charters.

Although the movie makes the claim that the key to student achievement is putting a great teacher in every classroom, and it is critical of the teachers' unions and supportive of charters, it challenges *all* the adults who run our schools — teachers, union leaders, principals, parents, school boards, charter-founders, politicians — with one question: Are you putting kids and their education first?

Because we know what works, and it's not a miracle cure. It is the whatever-it-takes-tenacity of the Geoffrey Canadas; it is the no-excuses-seriousness of the KIPP school (Knowledge is Power Program) founders; it is the lead-follow-or-get-out-of-the-way ferocity of the Washington and New York City school chancellors, Michelle Rhee and Joel Klein.

And it is the quiet heroism of millions of public and charter school teachers and parents who do put kids first by implementing the best ideas, and in so doing make their schools just a little bit better and more accountable every day — so no Americans ever again have to play life bingo with their kids, or pray to be rescued by Superman.