



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Sept. 27-Oct. 1, 2010

Waiting for Superman: Even Heroes Need Money

By UCLA IDEA

The education world has been abuzz with talk, tears and anger since the release of the much-anticipated movie, *Waiting for Superman*. The film's director Davis Guggenheim, famed for his Oscar-winning *An Inconvenient Truth*, has protested, perhaps too much, that the film's critics are missing his true intentions—that he didn't mean that teachers' unions were the main obstacle to improving schools or that charter schools are a simple solution to fix the nation's education problems.

And yet, that is the message that many teachers and many strong advocates of public schools feel the movie sends. Indeed, using the same data and the same narratives of young children and their parents grasping for better educational opportunities, a very different story about schools could be told. Adding just a few examples of stellar teaching in non-charter schools, or examples of balanced and humane student-selection processes (instead of cruel public lotteries) might have helped education along a straighter path to reform.

Equally damning, the film perpetuates the myth that when it comes to good schools, money doesn't matter. Early in the film an expert notes that per-pupil spending has increased enormously over the decades while academic progress has stalled. The inescapable conclusion is that non-monetary factors are schools' real problem, and much of the blame (in the film) lands on self-interested or unmotivated adults. Picking up on the money point this week, Pres. Obama said, as if anyone would disagree, that money alone would not fix our schools.

Does money matter? The film seems to argue against it. Over the past thirty years spending on schools has increased dramatically. But there is no mention in the film that schools have taken on wide and costly new responsibilities. Roughly half as many parents expected their children to go to college three decades ago as do today. And, school budgets have grown as schools have become more inclusive. Schools have scrambled to keep up with the needs of special education students, students in poverty, and English learners. Of course, this increase in spending has been inadequate and many districts have had to poach money from core programs to spread their resources in order to serve all the children in their communities.

The film's title clearly is intended to caution against hoping for Superman, a super-powered hero, to step in with magical solutions to fix schools. So, it is with much irony that the film offers a number of heroic figures. These heroes have different attributes and accomplishments, but one thing they have in common—what is only hinted at in the film—is that their access to funding exceeds, by far, what is available to most public schools. Washington, D.C.'s much-heralded superintendent Michelle Rhee could not have done her work without millions in private dollars. Money, it seems, matters to some heroes.

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The film has been lauded by President Obama and his education secretary, by Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, California political candidates, influential members of the media and countless others. It's important to consider that these and other high-profile and very powerful individuals don't necessarily have deep or broad backgrounds to challenge the information, tone, and conclusions of the film. More likely, they are learning about American schools as they watch. And as they watch, they learn, and many weep. Let's hope the film is a first step to learning a fuller, accurate depiction of schools' conditions and needs. Now that schools have their attention, let's hope they will look beyond the heroes and silver bullets.

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