

Waiting for Superman – An Insult to Educators

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I am a UESF member and have worked for SFUSD for the last twenty years. I was going to films at the San Francisco International Film Fest recently and attended a film I was told was on the subject of Education called: *Waiting for Superman*, directed by Davis Guggenheim. I was completely insulted, appalled and angry about this film and even more horrified to learn that it won an audience award at the Sundance Film Festival and nearly won an audience award here in San Francisco. Our communities must be alerted about this film and the dangerous messages it sends.

The film has a very slick appearance and to an outsider, it may seem well researched. It also contains several, sentimental, personal stories concerning children of color and their struggling parents/families. But it completely oversimplifies all the issues and has a very one-sided, conservative slant. What did I find most disturbing about the film?

It is totally anti-teacher's union. It blames unions for the majority of the problems with public education and does not highlight one positive thing any teachers' union has ever done.

It vilifies both unions and public school teachers. Unions are shown as only standing in the way of bad teachers being fired, enabling lazy and incompetent teachers to go on spoiling children's educations for decades. The

only regular public school teachers shown in the film are those in that horrid "rubber room" in New York; teachers who are awaiting disciplinary hearings for various heinous charges including sexual and physical assault against students. The film instead makes charter schools and the staff who run them the heroes of education.

The film glorifies Washington, D.C. Superintendent Michelle Rhee, making her look like a heroine for cutting many jobs of principals in the area and pushing strongly for "merit pay" for the teachers whose students achieve higher test scores. As we all know though, the merit pay system furthers inequity because often the teachers who work with the most difficult and challenging students are punished while the teachers working with students who are more on grade level and who are better equipped are favored. This approach may make sense to an outsider but does not make sense at all to someone who has actually worked inside the system.

The film does not talk at all about the severe challenges many of our students and their families bring to public education (e.g., high rates of absences/tardiness, severe behavioral/emotional problems that constantly disrupt the learning environment, non English speaking children, children who come to school completely unprepared to be in school, health and safety concerns) and the lack of supports schools are given to deal with these challenges. The film does not

mention how charter schools can kick these students out, but how regular public schools can't. To ignore this fundamental difference is a major flaw of the film and seems to be almost purposely deceptive.

The film does not at all mention the other controversial things about charter schools – how their staff often have to work many extended hours, how there are sometimes no reasonable limits on class size, how teachers may not be required to teach to the same state standards, and how charter schools are paid with by public dollars and that they therefore take away from public schools that are already completely strapped for resources. There is no examination of how charter schools can serve to magnify and worsen the inequity in our schools.

The movie starts out right by showing the huge disparity between the amount we pay per prisoner and the amount we pay per student and the filmmaker argues that even if we paid for all students to go to private schools that would still be a lot less that how much we pay for prisons. The argument in my mind seems very clear then. Give more money to public education and programs that support students directly or just pay to send everyone to private schools.

I was so angry about this film that I almost walked out during the screening. But I sat through the whole thing, wanting to give the filmmaker the benefit of

the doubt, waiting for him to show other opinions on the issues and provide more information. This did not occur.

In summation, I'd just like to say, *Waiting for Superman* totally goes against everything I have ever experienced in my twenty-plus years of working with children and staff in regular public schools. The vast majority of other public school teachers I have had the honor to work with put in ten-plus hours/day on their job, work weekends, and spend thousands of dollars of their own money on school supplies/incentives for students. Despite being treated with very little respect and support and given very poor pay, they persevere because of their commitment to giving children the best education they can and because they want to battle against the inequalities inherent in our culture.

Without unions, we would never get pay increases and there would be many worker rights that would be infringed upon and violated. The children are not failing because of the teacher's unions or the teachers. They are failing because teachers and schools are not given the adequate supports they need to handle the challenging situations they have to deal with every day. Davis Guggenheim should hang his head in shame. I severely doubt he would feel this film had any merit if he himself taught in an inner city public school for six months. My only hope is that more intelligent and insightful films will be produced about public education in the future.

Remembering Luisa Ezquerro

Long-time teacher-leader Luisa Ezquerro passed away on Saturday, May 1st after a life of dedication to schools and community in San Francisco. Luisa was a member of the San Francisco Federation of Teachers and its successor, UESF, and served in leadership positions in both organizations. She was an advocate for bilingual education and a community organizer in the Mission District. Her fiery and passionate defense of the underserved and oppressed cast her as a model for some and a goad for others. Luisa Ezquerro was committed and valiant heroine of all the best qualities that teachers and the union movement stand for. We are all enriched by her example.



Professional Development

2009-2010 National Board Teachers

Congratulations to those SFUSD teachers who stepped up to the plate and passed their National Boards this school year:

- Gillian Bowley
- Jessica Cohen
- Ariane Cortes
- Brenda Douville
- Miranda Doyle
- Sara Dunn
- Christian Hollifield
- Eunice Nuval
- Catherine Salvin

- Elaha Shahideh
- Yvon Wu

Interested in taking the plunge? Program Coordinator Carrie Slaughter has a grant for those teachers who wish to take the first part for their National Board Certification. All you need is two other teachers from your site. For more information and to get started, send an email to Carrie at Nationalboard@sfusd.edu.