



The Children are the Heroes of 'Waiting for Superman'

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Waiting for Superman begins with a simple question:
What's four minus two?



The answer takes achingly long for Anthony, an elementary school student in inner-city Washington. Anthony isn't dumb; he's more thoughtful than just about any child you'll meet. He's simply applying what he learned in public school. Which isn't much.

That's the overarching theme of [Davis Guggenheim](#)'s masterful picture, which vaults itself among the year's best films.

TRAILER: [Get a peek of 'Waiting for Superman'](#)

And while Guggenheim's point — that public schools are failing our children — may not be an earth-shaker, remember: This is the guy who won an Oscar for turning a PowerPoint presentation into [An Inconvenient Truth](#).

He works some of the same magic here, but by essentially making a reverse image of Truth. Where Guggenheim stoked political friction with [Al Gore](#) as Truth's tempest, he mostly steers clear of politics here in favor of the children's stories.

It's a brilliant move, because you won't find more compelling stories than Anthony's, Bianca's in [Harlem](#) and Daisy's in Los Angeles, among others.

These are kids who not only want a tougher education, they're gambling on one. The families in Waiting have entered a lottery whose winners get to leave their substandard schools for a mediocre one. The final 10 minutes, as the kids await word if their numbers were called, is as compelling as any feature film.

When Guggenheim asks the boy what a better school would mean for him, Anthony answers quickly: more homework, less television, less playtime.

Does he want to get in? You bet. Asked why: "So my kids have a better future than I did." It's hard to argue that he, like all kids in the film, isn't profoundly teachable, and that's Guggenheim's real mission: to put a face on an intractable debate.

The director does get a little heated in his attack on the teachers union, which he accuses of putting politics ahead of pupils. Instead of wading into Michael Moore-like diatribes, though, Guggenheim deflates the tension with a confession: He drives by public schools every morning to take his kids to private schools.

Guggenheim does his homework, including statistics on the success of the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools to counter assertions that poor neighborhoods produce poor institutions. And there are startling images of "problem teachers" sent to a professional detention.

The title comes from Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone. He explains he once saw Superman on TV and thought [George Reeves](#) would one day swoop in to save him and his classmates.

It's an apt title. As divisive as the issue has become, it's hard to deny the power of Guggenheim's lingering shots on these children, waiting on a superhero who isn't going to come.