



What Makes A School Great: A Call To Action for Public Schools



A powerful documentary argues that we have the data and the means to dramatically improve student performance. Now we need the will

By Amanda Ripley
September 23, 2010

One Wednesday afternoon this summer, 55 young men and women filed into a dark movie theater for a private screening. Sundance this was not. There was no Robert Redford, no Diesel swag. But this audience had one important qualification: sometime recently, they had all dropped out of high school. So for a movie about America's malfunctioning education system, it was an unusually qualified focus group.

Waiting for "Superman" is a new film by Davis Guggenheim, the Academy Award — winning director of *An Inconvenient Truth*, a movie that took on another mind-numbingly complex issue and, confounding all logic, grossed \$50 million worldwide — and changed the way many Americans think about climate change.

In anticipation of Superman's Sept. 24 release, screenings are being held all over the country for elite audiences — Bill Gates has become an evangelist for the film — and for education activists, including ones who help kids who have dropped out. So it was that Crystal Rojas, 19, sat down in the stadium seating in Chicago to watch a movie that might have been loosely based on her life. She nodded when she saw footage of things she recognized, like teachers reading newspapers in class. She raised her eyebrows when she saw how much America spends per pupil — far more than almost every country in the world does. ([See what you can do to help the education system.](#))

At the end, her eyes filled with tears. Rojas had long believed that her problems in school were all her fault. In fifth grade, her teacher told her that she wouldn't amount to much. "She said, 'It doesn't matter if you learn. Your future is determined.'" And for a while it seemed as if her teacher had been right. In sixth grade, Rojas tried to transfer to a charter school, but it was full. So she stayed in her neighborhood public school, where only 1 in 5 students was doing math at grade level. Then she went to a vocational high school where, she says, she spent almost three

hours a day in a typing class. "I would just go there and feel like I was wasting space. So I thought, Why should I keep coming?" She dropped out two weeks into 10th grade.

Rojas has since earned her GED and is studying business administration at a community college. Her future is not certain, but nor is it lost. Watching the movie, she heard that teacher's voice in her head all over again. And she started to think that maybe there is a problem in America's schools, and that it is bigger than Crystal Rojas.

Waiting for "Superman" is a documentary that follows five kids and their parents as they try to escape their neighborhood public schools for higher-performing public charter schools. The movie serves up a lot of clarifying statistics about the problems facing education reform, explaining how it could be that the U.S. since 1971 has more than doubled the money it spends per pupil yet still trails most other rich nations in science and math scores. But the film succeeds because it also lays out the solutions, something no one could credibly attempt to do until very recently. ([See 21 ways to serve America.](#))

Today, several decades into America's long, tedious fight over how to upend the status quo in public education, three remarkable things are happening simultaneously. First, thanks partly to the blunt instruments of No Child Left Behind, we can now track how well individual students are doing from year to year — and figure out which schools are working and which are not. Most Americans think testing is a spurious trend; a new TIME poll found that only 1 out of 5 people surveyed felt that testing has had a positive effect in schools. But as the tests get better, we are starting to be able to see in the dark. We can track what works — and what doesn't — in the classroom, something that had been for all of history a matter of conjecture and hearsay. And while the data isn't perfect, it's far better than any other yardstick we've ever had before.

Second, legions of public schools — some charters, some not — are succeeding while others flounder. These successful schools are altering fundamentals that were for so long untouchable, by insisting on great teachers, more class time and higher standards. We now know that it is possible to teach every kid, even poor kids with wretched home lives, to read, write and do math and science at respectable levels. In Harlem, low-income African-American students at these schools are performing on par with kids across New York City and the state. And the researchers studying their success have learned that what matters more than anything else in the school is the teacher, the one person in the building whose job has changed the least in the past half-century.

The third novelty is in Washington, where a Democratic President is standing up to his party's most dysfunctional long-term romantic interest, the teachers' unions. President Barack Obama and his Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, have dangled \$4.35 billion in stimulus money in front of cash-strapped state legislatures to get them to rationalize their systems. Overnight, the White House has become the biggest benefactor in the education world, far surpassing the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The competition, known as Race to the Top, is pushing school

districts to raise academic standards, to evaluate teachers based in part on how much their students are learning, to train teachers more effectively — and to remove those who are not cut out for the job.

In the states' response, we are witnessing what may be the beginning of a commonsense revolution. Seven states have enacted laws to remove firewalls between student achievement and teacher evaluations. At least 12 states have passed laws requiring student-progress data to be used in making teacher-evaluation or tenure decisions, a notion that would have been unimaginable five years ago. And 35 states and the District of Columbia have agreed to adopt common standards for what kids should learn at every grade level. Recently, officials from more than one European nation have contacted education reformers to learn how they could do something like *Race to the Top* in their own countries. ([See 25 responsibility pioneers.](#))

The pace of change is, relatively speaking, breathtaking. A couple of weeks ago, the *Los Angeles Times* released a searchable database of 6,000 teachers, ranked by their effectiveness on the basis of how much their students had improved on standardized tests during a year in their classrooms. The newspaper got access to the data through California's Public Records Act — and hired a seasoned education analyst to crunch the numbers. The charts reveal huge disparities among teachers in the same buildings, disparities that in many cases hold up over seven years of data. The response started out predictably. The local teachers' union called for a boycott of the paper. But more than 1,100 teachers also answered the paper's invitation to see their data before it came out. And in a startling sign of the times, a Democratic Education Secretary offered his cautious support. "Why, in education, are we scared to talk about what success looks like?" Duncan asked in a speech. He acknowledged that a newspaper was not the ideal forum for teachers to get performance feedback, but he stressed a more important question: Why did it take a newspaper to do what the school district should have done years ago? "The fact that teachers did not have this information is ridiculous." Days later, the Los Angeles School Board endorsed using the data as part of teacher evaluations. Now the district must negotiate with the union to see if they can agree on a way to do so. ([See the case for national service.](#))

It's worth noting that these are early days. The vast majority of American kids have yet to be affected by any of these changes. But the drumbeat is hard to ignore. Instead of continuing to rely on tradition and interest groups to set education policy, which is like using astrology to design a space program, we may be on the cusp of running schools — brace yourself — according to what actually works. "Little by little, the curtain is being peeled back," says Charles Barone of Democrats for Education Reform. "It's going to create a lot of discomfort and some upheaval. But you can't keep a lid on it."

Caught in the Matrix

When Davis Guggenheim got a call from a studio executive in 2007 asking him to make a movie about public schools, he said no. He was on vacation, having just ridden a heady wave of publicity from the success of *An Inconvenient Truth*. He said, "I don't know if you can go there because it's just so complicated." (Apparently, you can ask a man to make a movie about Al Gore, a slideshow and global warming, but if you want him to get people to pay attention to education reform, well, sir, now you've gone too far.)

Nearly every President since John F. Kennedy has vowed to be the "education President," to finally lift our schools to a level befitting the richest nation in the world. But since the early 1970s, high schoolers' math and reading scores have barely budged. We have the smallest elementary class sizes we've had in 45 years, and yet our kids — even more affluent, suburban kids — perform worse than kids in comparable nations. Teenagers are now less likely to graduate from high school than their parents were. ([See how to recruit better teachers.](#))

In all this time, we have made many earnest changes — from school uniforms to phonics to new textbooks. And yet we have hardly touched the fundamentals. "It is unbelievable how little has changed since I went to school," says Geoffrey Canada, a veteran education reformer in Harlem who is 58. "And for generations, it has not worked. It's like we're caught in the Matrix."

By now, we're all exhausted by the cycles of crisis and stasis. It's part of what makes education reform so grueling: education policy is made at the local level, so the opinions of parents, community leaders and the rest of the public matter enormously, but the public has lost faith in the exercise. The Time poll suggests that Americans have gotten more pessimistic about schools than they were just four years ago. Of those surveyed, 65% said our schools are not preparing kids well for the challenges ahead.

At first, the thought of making a movie about this quagmire filled Guggenheim with dread. But a month later — while driving his kids past three public schools to get to their private school in Los Angeles — he felt the one sensation that is, at least to a documentary filmmaker, more powerful than dread. He felt guilt.

He called Participant Media back to say he'd reconsidered. Along with Lesley Chilcott, a producer he had collaborated with on *An Inconvenient Truth*, he immersed himself in education research and quickly became overwhelmed — by the infighting, confusion and emotion. "This is the hardest movie we've made, by a factor of 10," he says. But there was one thing education reformers had that environmentalists did not: an alternate universe where things worked the way they should. Chilcott and Guggenheim visited the KIPP LA Prep school in Los Angeles, where eighth graders are outperforming their peers across the city and the state in all subjects, despite the fact that 95% of them are poor. Then Guggenheim heard about charter-school lotteries, in which leaders of oversubscribed schools pull bouncing balls out of metal cages to determine which kids will get a coveted space. "In the land where I have 14 choices of peanut butter," Chilcott says, "kids are entering a lottery to get into a decent school." ([See what you can do to help the education system.](#))

Enough Power to Save Us

Charter Schools operate outside the constraints of regular public schools. They get public money, but in most cases, their teachers are not unionized. This freedom has allowed a minority of them to shine, building flexible, demanding programs that defy expectations. But only 1 in 6 charter schools significantly outperforms traditional counterparts. And more than a third underperform. In any case, charters now represent only 4% of schools, so they are not an option for the vast majority of kids.

Guggenheim insists he did not intend to make a pro-charter movie: "I know people will say this movie is anti-this or pro-that. But it really is all about families trying to find great schools." The film's title came from Canada, the CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, a 97-block area in New York City that includes two respected charter schools. As a kid in the Bronx, Canada recalls the crushing day he learned Superman does not exist. "Even in the depths of the ghetto, you just thought, He's coming." His mother thought he was crying the way a child cries when he discovers Santa Claus is not real. But no. "I was crying because no one was coming with enough power to save us."

When Guggenheim first approached Canada to be in the film, he blew him off. "I said, 'Nice to meet you. I know you're a tremendous filmmaker, but I don't think you're going to get Americans to care about this.'" Still, he invited Guggenheim to visit his charter schools. At these schools, the principals can hire their own staff. Teachers work longer days (and years) and often give out their cell-phone numbers should parents or students need to reach them after hours. If teachers consistently fail to help their students learn in ways that can be measured, they are asked to find another job. ([Read an essay by Caroline Kennedy "Making a Difference at Home."](#))

At almost every other school in the country, such flexibility and professionalism are inconceivable because of teachers' union-negotiated contracts, long-standing education-culture norms or, in some cases, state law. Sometimes on purpose and sometimes by accident, teachers' unions have a long history of working against the interests of children in the name of job security for adults. And Democrats in particular have a history of facilitating this obstructionism in exchange for campaign donations and votes. Meanwhile, most schoolteachers work in isolation: they can get tenure after an average of just three years on the job, which means they likely have a job for life, but they very rarely get meaningful evaluations or effective training to improve, either. Guggenheim, a Democrat and a member of the directors' union, agonized over his portrayal of the teachers' unions in the film. But eventually, he decided he would have to acknowledge these truths. "We have to change," he says. "The unions can't protect bad teachers. They have to start helping good teachers."

One of the darkest scenes in *Superman* is when schools chancellor Michelle Rhee is proposing a revolutionary new contract for teachers in Washington, D.C. They could choose to make up to \$140,000 pegged to their effectiveness — in exchange for giving up tenure for one year. Or they could keep tenure and accept a smaller raise. For two and a half years the union argued with Rhee over the details. The film portrays the conflict as a tense and personal standoff between Rhee and Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and it makes, as a *Variety* review put it, "something of a foaming satanic beast out of Weingarten." ([See 25 responsibility pioneers.](#))

After a *Superman* screening this summer outside Washington, Rhee and Weingarten appeared on stage with Guggenheim. The tableau reflected this strange moment in the history of school battles. There was Guggenheim, in his horn-rimmed glasses and skinny black suit, sitting next to Weingarten, wearing sensible shoes and a blazer, next to Rhee, who was in a black, low-cut dress and strappy high-heeled sandals. About the only thing the women could agree on was that the film had made them both cry. "People ask me, Why do you do this?" Rhee said of her relentless campaign to transform D.C. schools without much regard for her sinking popularity among voters, who may oust her and the city's mayor this month. "This film answers that question. I can

think of nothing more important than a group of people can be doing than to make sure this crazy injustice does not continue."

Weingarten, meanwhile, said the film was powerful but misleading. It had glorified charter schools and demonized teachers. Later, she told me that she agrees that quality teachers are important, but she stressed that more social services are needed to complement the work they do. At the union's annual convention in July, she denounced *Superman* as part of a broader scapegoating of teachers that she says has "horrified" her. She did, however, agree to write a chapter for the companion book that will accompany the film. In it, she makes the point that the AFT, the country's second largest teachers' union, has worked to make teacher evaluations more rigorous in more than 50 districts.

Weingarten walks a tightrope between alienating her base of more than 1.5 million members and losing credibility among the new generation of reformers. After the Los Angeles *Times* announced its database project, she pleaded with the paper not to publish the teachers' names and defended a teacher with subpar data. That was the old-school union line. And in the next breath, she conceded that parents have a right to know if their children's teachers were rated as satisfactory by their supervisors, provided the evaluations are more holistic than test-score data alone. This was the union of the future. ([See how to recruit better teachers.](#))

An Army of Regular Americans

One of Weingarten's most valid criticisms of the film is that Guggenheim did not update it to reflect the progress that has been made since he finished shooting. In the spring, she, other union officials and Rhee finally agreed to a groundbreaking new contract for all D.C. teachers. They are set to earn large raises and can make even more money, depending on their effectiveness. D.C. teachers are evaluated according to a comprehensive rubric that includes five classroom observations and data about how much their students' scores have improved compared with those of other kids performing at similar levels. Teachers rated as ineffective will be let go. In July, Rhee dismissed 127 teachers — and placed 737 on notice that they must improve or face removal next year.

In the film, Sousa Middle School in Washington is portrayed as one of the abysmal schools that kids are trying to escape. But since Guggenheim visited, an aggressive new principal has transformed the place. In two years, the number of kids doing math at grade level has shot up 30 percentage points to 46%. Principal Dwan Jordon says there is no secret to the success. "It's just hard work. And an environment where everyone believes we can do it. There are no excuses." The Washington Post once called Sousa an "academic sinkhole." The other day, it featured Jordon in a glowing front-page profile.

In June, New York City closed its so-called rubber rooms, notorious warehouses for some 700 teachers and administrators accused of misconduct. The city still pays these employees — who, until now, had to wait an average of three years to go through a byzantine disciplinary process — at a cost of more than \$30 million a year, but the rooms themselves no longer exist. ([See what you can do to help the education system.](#))

In August, the Obama Administration announced the winners of its Race to the Top competition — a list that now includes 12 states, from New York to Hawaii, plus D.C. But in some of the states that did not get grants, critics are already calling for the repeal of reforms that had been passed to win favor with the Administration. Duncan is aware that the progress is tenuous. "We're at a time of amazing opportunity but also extraordinary risk," he has said. For next year's budget, he has already requested \$1.35 billion to continue the competition.

Waiting for "Superman" is hoping to recruit an army of regular Americans to keep the momentum going. The movie's website features a letter-writing tool for people to urge their governors to adopt and implement the common standards. The site also lets people look up school ratings and find volunteer options and other data in one place. The idea is to give people something useful to do with the outrage generated by the film.

This January, Guggenheim flew to Seattle to screen the movie for Bill Gates, whom he interviewed for the film. The whole family, including Melinda, the children and Bill's father, gathered to watch. At that critical moment, Guggenheim couldn't get the DVD he had brought to work. He was forced to show them a lower-quality backup of the film with a "Not for Distribution" watermark running along the bottom of the screen. "It was a nightmare," he says. But Gates loved it. "I was really amazed," says Gates, "that he had both connected with the viewers and hadn't left out some of the confusing things about [education policy]." Soon afterward, the film was acquired by Paramount.

Meanwhile, back in Harlem, Canada still had low expectations. "I've been talking to America about these children," he says, "and no one seems to get very outraged." Then he watched the film. When he got to the lottery scenes at the end, in which mothers weep and children cross their fingers in hopes of a brighter future, he lost it. "The rawness of the emotions of the parents gets to me — that unbelievable, desperate hope," Canada says. "I thought then, 'Davis has done it. I think he made people care about these kids.'"

Ripley is a Bernard L. Schwartz Fellow at the New America Foundation