

The Real Facts About Waiting for Superman

Waiting for Superman may be good melodrama, but the movie fails the test of accuracy, and its purported solutions will not improve education.

We agree: Too many young people, mostly low-income, do not graduate from high school or get a strong education. The questions are why, and what can be done about it. *Waiting for Superman* and its unprecedented hype risk leading us dangerously astray from real solutions to real problems by making a number of misleading or factually incorrect claims in a number of important areas:

Public school quality: The most recent Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll found that 77% of Americans would give the public school their oldest child attends an A or a B. Does this suggest our public schools are failing across the board, as *WFS* says? In international comparisons, most of our middle class schools do well. Under resourced schools that serve low-income kids who are disproportionately African American, Latino, or recent immigrants, do far less well. However, they face challenges that schools, alone, can never address adequately. Improving schools is part of the solution - but the changes must help *all* children obtain a high-quality education.

Poverty: Poverty matters a lot – and the movie shows that it does, even while trying to tell us it does not. The Harlem Children’s Zone spends heavily to provide services to needy children and their families, services the government does not provide. Two-thirds of HCZ funding is private, not public – making it like a well-funded private school. Who will pay for these services for all the children who need them?

Unions: States with the most unionized teachers do better than states with weaker or fewer unions, and countries with strong educational systems mostly have strong teacher unions. *WSF*’s demonization of unions ignores the real evidence.

Tenure: Tenure says you cannot be fired without due process and a good reason: you can’t be fired because the boss wants to hire his cousin, or because you are gay (or black or...), or because you take an unpopular position on a public issue outside of school. A recent survey found that most principals agreed they could fire if they needed to. While *WSF* may have its own opinions on the value of tenure, it may not have its own facts.

Charter schools: Charter schools get public money but are run by private groups, which means there is less public oversight. The most extensive national study found that 46% of charters did about the same as regular public schools, 37% did worse, and only 17% did better. Meanwhile, charters routinely accept fewer students with disabilities and fewer English language learners. Since charters only serve 4% of the nation's K-12 students, they represent a distraction and a drain from the focused work needed to renew quality schools for all children. They are not a solution.

Using standardized tests like MCAS to evaluate teachers: The National Research Council and many other researchers say that evaluating teachers based on student test scores is inaccurate and unfair. Several reports found that some 20-25% of teachers in the bottom groups one year are in the top groups the next - and vice versa. This is because many more things affect student learning or teacher's rankings than just the teacher's own efforts.

Using standardized tests to tell us if schools are successful: Most test score differences are not due to what schools do, but to the kids' ZIP codes. As opportunity, health and family wealth increase, so do test scores. When schools focus on boosting scores on tests like MCAS, they ignore important subject areas and teach to the test, leaving children less prepared for the future. We need a lot more than test scores to know if schools are doing well and to help schools improve.

How students learn: Most people know what science confirmed years ago: learning is an active process. Pouring disconnected information into kids' heads, as the movie shows, has no lasting value, and it does not educate students for citizenship, college, lifelong learning or employment. Why didn't the movie show us what excellent teaching looks like?

Competition: There is no evidence for the claim that competition will improve education. Teachers competing against each other will endanger cooperation among teachers and reduce their ability to help children most in need.

Since No Child Left Behind, the rate of school improvement has declined! This film pushes for another generation of failed reforms.

Don't wait for Superman. Take the time to inform yourself, to find out the real stories from teachers, parents and principals. Get the real facts on which to base your opinion, and consider how you can make a difference by doing what is right and good for children, not what "Superman" tells you to do.

Citizens for Public Schools and FairTest

For more information and genuine ways to improve schools, see <http://www.fairtest.org> and <http://www.citizensforpublicschools.org>; for more on WfS, see <http://www.NOTwaitingforsuperman.org>.