



Two Thumbs Down: Education Documentaries Fictionalize Research

Key Takeaway: *Waiting for Superman*, *The Lottery* offer simplistic and misguided solutions for urban public education.

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BOULDER, CO (January 24, 2011) – They may be on some critics’ short lists for Oscar nominations to be released Tuesday, but two documentaries on education – *Waiting for Superman* and *The Lottery* – are rooted in fiction and are likely to set back the cause of real education reform.

That’s the conclusion of two education experts who examined the movies for reviews published today by the National Education Policy Center, housed at the University of Colorado at Boulder School of Education.

University of Colorado at Boulder professor Elizabeth Dutro reviewed Davis Guggenheim’s [Waiting for Superman](#). [The Lottery](#), a film by Madeline Sackler was reviewed by Washington University in St. Louis professor William Tate.

Given the hype, neither film was particularly successful at the box office, but together they became a focal point of education campaigns, making similar claims about education policy and practice. In their reviews, however, Dutro and Tate conclude that those claims rely on self-contradictory premises, distortions of the research evidence, and serious omissions of fact.

Waiting for Superman, writes Dutro, offers solutions that “ignore research evidence, and are too often built on false assumptions.” The result is that it glosses over the systemic inequities in American society that contribute



to the problems faced by impoverished students in urban schools, while also ignoring reform policies that don't fit its one-dimensional agenda.

In his review of *The Lottery*, Tate notes that the film's "zealous advocacy for charter schools fundamentally misdirects viewers away from the actual evidence about the mixed results that they have achieved."

Waiting for Superman takes its title from a story that Geoffrey Canada, founder of Harlem Children's Zone, tells the filmmakers about his upsetting discovery as a child that Superman was not real and would not save him or his friends from the poverty in which they were growing up. It follows the stories of five children and their families as they go through the lottery process to be admitted into charter schools.

"The film argues that heroic action, swift and sure, can be taken to fix what it portrays as the disaster of public schooling," Dutro writes in her review. "Unfortunately, this appearance of simplicity is only achieved through omissions and misrepresentations surrounding some of the film's key points of evidence for its claims."

Superman casts public school teachers unions as enemies of reform and protectors of bad teachers. One of its heroes is Canada. Yet the film downplays the scope of Canada's own Harlem Children's Zone's extensive services and ignores the \$100 million in funding it has received from private sources – funding that "simply cannot be broadly relied upon to create similar systemic change in all communities with underperforming schools," Dutro writes. Similarly, the film ignores the role of poverty in school performance as well as the "demonstrated relationship between financial resources and educational performance and opportunity" – and thus ignores anti-poverty measures as potential solutions to the problems that confront poor children and their families.

"While the movie asks viewers to focus on individual schools and heroic leaders," Dutro writes, "the reality is that the array of services provided by Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone actually supports a counter argument – that schools are only one key ingredient in a much larger mix of social services necessary to mitigate the impact of multi-generational poverty in some urban neighborhoods." The film also ignores real examples of successful neighborhood schools and committed urban teachers.

In his review, Tate compares *The Lottery* to a game of Three Card Monte – a street card game peddled by grifters. Like the con game, Tate writes, the film "relies far too much on skillful sleight of hand and misdirection" in order to put across its message.

"It is clear that the parents and children in this documentary have a burning desire to gain a meaningful and productive elementary education," Tate writes. The film passionately promotes the idea that attending a charter school represents the best chance these children have to get a high-quality education. According to Tate, *The Lottery* "implicitly but clearly defines the primary problems of public education as an inadequate provision of charter schooling, combined with a public school system that is rendered inefficient by a stifling bureaucracy and the self-serving demands of the teachers union. Given these problem definitions, the solution is obvious: create more charter schools and eliminate teachers unions."



As evidence for charter school superiority, the movie offers testimonials of a variety of elite leaders, who argue that charter schools are more accountable and more efficient than traditional public schools. It also presents descriptive statistics about the achievement gap between minority and low-income children on the one hand and high-income, majority children on the other.

As Tate points out, “The movie presents these descriptive statistics as if they were part of causal relationships that demonstrated associations between traditional public schools and the educational disparities and other social concerns.” Yet, Tate writes, *The Lottery* offers “no credible research evidence ... to support these contentions.” Indeed, when it comes to charter schools, Tate comments that “the filmmaker never presents an honest picture of the evidence.”

“The overall body of research evidence does not ... actually bolster the claims made about charters,” he writes. “In fact, no social science researchers with expertise on charter schools appear in the documentary. [Yet] In the world outside of *The Lottery* there is a growing body of research on charter schools – research with decidedly mixed findings.”

In the end, both films get a thumbs down from their respective viewers. In words that could just as easily apply to Tate’s view of *The Lottery*, Dutro sums up her assessment of *Waiting for Superman* this way: “The solutions offered by the film are simplified, ignore research evidence, and are too often built on false assumptions that undermine the need to examine the systemic inequities and consequential reforms and policies that surround schooling in the United States. These inconvenient truths are the kryptonite to Guggenheim’s *Superman*.”

Find Elizabeth Dutro’s review on the NEPC website at:
<http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-Waiting-Superman>.

Find William Tate’s review on the NEPC website at:
<http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-lottery>.

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