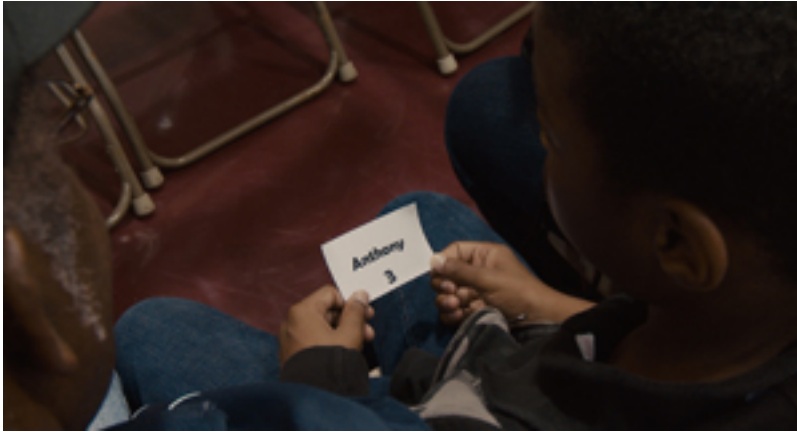


Waiting For Superman

Written by Alaina L. Lewis



With Minneapolis North community High School in line for a possible closing, more and more parents, community members and government officials are discussing a weighted question: is America's public school system *truly* failing our children?

Another important question is: What do this country's children need to cash in on their right to a proper education? According to Davis Guggenheim, maybe a hero like Superman is the one for the job!

In his latest documentary entitled *Waiting For "Superman,"* Guggenheim bravely vocalizes his stance on how public schools, inner city schools, teachers, and the government, are halting the success rate of our students. He follows the lives of five families, *all of which are minorities*, except for one, and their struggles to put their children in charter schools; schools that Guggenheim believes have the educational tools and the teachers necessary to prepare our children for a triumphant future.

With the help of Geoffrey Canada, a Harvard Graduate and President and CEO of *Harlem Children's Zone Charter School* in New York, Guggenheim cleverly projects not only the need for change, but a promising solution in the hopes that taking the proper actions will be next in line on the tier for exacting better educational circumstances for our progeny.

The film is a tear-jerker as well as an eye opener, that breathes a significant message relevant to many African American families here in Minnesota.

But quite like Superman, the seemingly fail proof charter schools have a bit of kryptonite gliding beside them. The downside Guggenheim presents about charter schools is their lottery ticket

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system. Sometimes, this becomes the only means for getting in to these schools.

Guggenheim has spent many years behind the lens, having won an Academy Award for his documentary, *The Inconvenient Truth*, and for directing several episodes of *NYPD Blue*, *ER*, and *24*.

Insight News sat down with Guggenheim while he was in Minneapolis for his films premiere at the First Annual Twin Cities Film Festival. Here is what this renegade had to say.

Insight News: What made you want to do documentaries?

Davis Guggenheim: My father made documentaries, and I was like, "I want none of that." I moved to Hollywood to be a big Hollywood director. The film I really wanted to make was the film *Training Day* with Denzel Washington. I convinced Warner Brothers to make the movie and even hire Denzel, and then he got me fired. So I was fired off that movie, and so angry that I bought a little camera and said, "I'm going to make a movie about people I like." And there were these teachers that were going into LA's toughest schools to become teachers, so my very first film was about public Eeducation. I fell in love with these teachers, and that sort of made me realize that first of all, you have to follow the things you love and the stories that are exciting for you. But also that when you spend time at these schools --and I spent everyday at these five schools-- that you really feel like there's life and death stakes in these neighborhoods. The teachers that are working in these schools are really changing kids' lives. The quality of our schools is the biggest civil rights issue of our time.

Insight News: I know that you had chosen 20 preliminary families to talk to before you started filming and then you narrowed it down to the five. Could you explain what the process?

Guggenheim: I had read about the lottery. This great editorial by Thomas Friedman about witnessing the Lottery in Baltimore schools and there were families that were winners, and families that were losers, and I was like: Wow, that's an incredible metaphor for the movie. So we found different lotteries that were all around the country. We found the schools, and we went to information sessions. Families would go in and learn about the school and we would meet the families and ask if they would be part of the movie. We followed 20 families for only about a couple of days, and then we weaned it down to about seven, and only five made it into the movie.

The tragic thing is that it's not hard to find families that are desperate for a good school. They're struggling, and have to take part in this heartbreaking process where they have to win the game of luck to get a great school, which to me is cruel and heartbreaking.

Insight News: You said that the film came together rather quickly. Does that surprise you? If you had more time, how would you add to the film or make it different?

Guggenheim: Well I'm always sort of re-cutting the movie in my head. I'm not sure it came around quickly. I'd originally said no to it because I just thought it was impossible. And then I sort of had the breakthrough of telling it through a personal point-of-view because I'd made the first documentary --I have my own kids, and I had the point of view of a parent. I'm learning stuff everyday about public education and the controversy that's swirling around it. I guess there was no way to avoid the controversy. My strong feeling was that there are these taboos about school, and our school system that you're not allowed to talk about. But my feeling was that if you don't talk about it, we're never going to fix our schools. Talking about the unions, the political parties that take money, talking about people like me that send their kids to private school- those are taboos and we need to talk about them. Our schools won't be fixed until we talk about this issue.

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Insight News: Your film would be considered a call to action. Do you really believe that something is going to change now that you've created this piece?

Guggenheim: I actually feel very hopeful. Last week was sort of education nation in New York and Mayor Bloomberg gave a speech and the first thing he mentioned was *Waiting for 'Superman,'* and the next thing he mentioned was how they're going to reform tenure in New York, which is a key piece to reform. President Barack Obama said he saw the film and found it powerful and talked about how we need more school days, which is a key piece to the film.

People are coming together, watching the film and having these really intense discussions. I'm very hopeful. Having been apart of *Inconvenient Truth*, where that film really changed the conversation, I'm very hopeful. It's not going to be easy. It's a long road and I don't think our schools are going to be fixed overnight, but the types of reforms that are happening make me very hopeful.

Insight News: Can you talk a little about your own personal experiences at school, and how that background sort of formed you?

Guggenheim: After my first day of school when I was five-years-old in 1968, I came home and I asked my mom: 'Why do I take a school bus from Washington, DC into Virginia?' That was 40 minutes to go to school, when there's a school down the street. She said, 'Because the schools

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in Washington, DC are broken.' And they were broken.

That was more than 40 years ago, and now I've got my own kids, and I'm looking around my neighborhood, and the schools in Los Angeles are Because of that personal experience and also feeling like I'm part of the problem I pulled my kids out of the system. I take care of my own kids. What a lot of people do is they stick their head in the sand and hope that the schools will sort of change on their own. That sort of frustration and outrage pushed me to make the film and hopefully help change our schools.

Insight News: I know a lot of public school teachers are upset with the film. When you were going to research and get information for the film, were people forthcoming with helping you on your quest to make this movie?

Guggenheim: I've screened this film in more than 20 cities and the audience is usually 15 to 20 teachers, and most teachers get this film. Most teachers embrace the film. Most teachers say, 'Thank you for making this movie,' because they get it. A really good, effective teacher feels all the problems in the movie everyday. They see the problems of the city, the problems of tenure, the lack of support and assessment. Most teachers who have seen this movie are behind it. There's always going to be a small percent that feel threatened and defensive. That's understandable. I hope the ones that are criticizing the movie actually see the movie. I talk much more about how teachers are a work of art, and how it's the hardest job that anyone can do, and how it's the most noble job anyone can do. And I make this really important point that teachers are the solution, but often their union is an obstacle to change. It's an important distinction for people to make. Also, I will say, that I believe in unions. I'm a member of a good union, and it supports me. I think the Teachers Union should continue, it just shouldn't be a barrier to change. It shouldn't be an obstacle to reform.

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Insight News: Did you feel some sort of responsibility to the kids that you'd chronicled in the film now that you've watched them go and battle the system? Are you interested in doing a follow-up piece? I'm sure a lot of people are wondering what the kids are doing now.

Guggenheim: Most importantly we want to make sure the kids are okay. We have a relationship with them and we're certain to be with them long term to help them as much as we can. We also want to respect their privacy so that we're not sort of revealing what's going on with them now because they're kids. They have a normal life. We're very personally invested. We love these kids, and want to see them succeed. Maybe down the road their stories will be interesting to continue to tell.