

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Not Waiting for Superman

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In July, seven civil rights organizations declared, “reservations about the overrepresentation of charter schools in low-income and predominantly minority communities. There is no evidence that charter operators are systematically more effective in creating higher student outcomes... And there is even less evidence that charters accept, consistently serve, and accommodate the needs of the full range of students... While some charters can and do work for some students, they are not a universal solution...”

(<http://www.otlcampaign.org>)

I agree. I am therefore troubled by the hype surrounding *Waiting for Superman*, a Hollywood documentary that presents charter schools as the solution for poor children. Today charters serve only 4 percent of American students. Scaling them up for all 50 million students would take 150 years, even at the rapid, annual 22 percent rate of charterization in New York City. Stanford University reports that only 17 percent of charters are better than comparable public schools.

“Waiting for Superman” contributes to the perception of public school crisis, fed for ten years by the No Child Left Behind Act, that labels schools “failures” when they cannot quickly raise test scores. Congress has punished these schools without providing enough help. Neither has Congress created incentives for states to equalize school funding. Instead we are immersed in a sea of blame, perhaps the reason we can be beguiled by a film that denigrates school teachers. “Waiting for Superman” presents stock characters in a drama of good and evil.

Geoffrey Canada (Harlem Children’s Zone) is presented as a hero. Mr. Canada is a wonderful, hard working guy, but his program can’t save all of Harlem’s children, and we know that scaling it up nationally isn’t possible.

Michelle Rhee (Washington, DC school superintendent) is portrayed as a heroine. The Bible tells us to pray for those who persecute us. I also pray for those who persecute teachers and principals by firing them without due process.

Randi Weingarten (President, American Federation of Teachers) is the movie’s villain, and the only character—a tough but friendly woman—I have actually met. All of my own children’s teachers belong to Ms. Weingarten’s union. Instead of waiting for Superman, maybe I should consult these people I know and trust. Maybe I should reflect on reform at my church’s partnership school, where 300 additional children were just transferred from a so-called “failing” school.

As you watch “Waiting for Superman,” remember that education is a civil right requiring systemic reform. New Jersey has invested on this scale, because the *Abbott* Decision directed additional funds to poor districts and required preschool, challenging curriculum, technology, well equipped science labs and small classes. In that state the graduation rate and test scores have risen significantly.

Of course if you advocate “merely” improving public schools, you might be accused by today’s “reformers” of settling for the status quo. I therefore suggest you proclaim these words from Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond: “To survive and prosper, our society must finally renounce its obstinate commitment to educational inequality and embrace full and ambitious opportunities to learn for all of our children.”

We are the only ones who can create political will for something so radical. Superman cannot help us here.

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