

Waiting for “Superman” (DC in the Movies)

Educational reform, an issue which has reached a critical mass nationally, is the subject of the provocative new documentary “Waiting for “Superman,”” written and directed by Davis Guggenheim. Appropriately, the film features the much-lamented DC public school system and its much publicized chancellor, Michelle Rhee. Not surprisingly, the film outlines a grim and sober overview of our public schools, yet it offers, too, glimmers of hope in the persons of public school kids themselves.

Davis Guggenheim comes to his new film nicely credentialed from his last effort on an equally daunting subject: the Oscar-winning “An Inconvenient Truth” (2006). Filmmaking may reside in his DNA, he being the son of the late Charles Guggenheim, a prominent Washington director of campaign films and political documentaries (e.g., “Robert Kennedy Remembered”). Guggenheim the younger was apparently not eager to take on the subject of US public education when the subject was broached to him, but he admits that he took it on in part because of guilt, which he sensed when, driving his own kids to private school in Los Angeles, he passed three age-appropriate public schools where he did NOT send his children.

Much of what “Superman” describes about our educational morass will be familiar to anyone interested in the state of our schools: the paltry test scores of students at many levels, especially at urban schools (DC’s scores being the worst), the relative demise of US educational achievement compared to other countries, a doubling of expenses per student which does not translate into classroom achievement, the rampant lack of discipline in our schools and the genuine scariness of some, the presence of too many incompetent and time-serving teachers and staffers, the chaotic mélange of educational jurisdictions and boards which makes coherent reform improbable, etc., etc. All of these inadequacies are pithily underscored with a sad and sardonic montage Guggenheim mounts of every president since Kennedy promising to be some version of the “education president.” Time to shake your head.

All of the above maladies are well documented in Guggenheim’s earnest plaint. The usual numbers and graphs are displayed, the reformers and protestors interviewed, the shabby schools themselves depicted. In this context, Ms. Rhee is given considerable screen time and comes off as one of the film’s heroes, her cause against a stodgy bureaucracy and recalcitrant teachers’ union sympathetically told. Her relative lack of teaching experience is deemed no handicap as is her frank admission of having no long-term ambitions in education and her refreshing candor (she states that DC school kids “are getting a crappy education.”). A missing piece of the story, however, is that the film was in the can before Rhee DID cut a deal with the local teachers’ union—basically on her terms—and the fact that the film arrives exactly at the moment when the chancellor may lose her job.

Other reformers are featured, like Geoffrey Canada, CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone (whose early belief in a Superman to change his fate offers the film’s title), Bill Strickland, an educational reformer in Pittsburgh, and David Levin and Mike Feinberg, the founders of the KIPP schools. The closest to a villain, if there is one, is Randi Weingarten, head of the American Federation of Teachers, who may have good

arguments on her side but who appears to be strident and defensive in making them, arguing more about the “adults” in our educational scheme than about the children they are supposed to serve.

And it’s specific children that finally claim one’s attention in “Waiting for ‘Superman.’” Five public school kids from across the country are followed, all endearing and yearning, with families who so want them to succeed. There is sweet Bianca, a kindergartener living with her strong single mom, who goes to a parochial school in Harlem; sad-eyed Daisy living in an LA slum, daughter of a striving Latino couple, who wants to be a doctor; angelic Francisco in the Bronx, a first-grader of a single mom, working doggedly to improve his reading; and Emily, a middle-class eight-grader from Redwood City, CA, who wants to be a teacher but has been “tracked” in her school and needs more academic challenges.

Finally, there is Anthony who lives in Southeast DC, goes to Kimball School, deemed a mess, and scheduled to go on to Sousa Middle School, deemed an “academic sinkhole.” He lives with his grandmother Gloria (his father died and his mother is out of the picture). Anthony, in the fifth grade, talks to interviewer Guggenheim with an open, hopeful face topped by enormous eyes. He’s a good kid who has the chance to do better than his forebears, to break through with an education.

All these five kids are shown on the verge of attempting to move on to a better school, one more academically or monetarily endowed. Bianca hopes to win a spot at a city charter school, Francisco looks to move to a better class, Daisy to a KIPP charter school (charters and their potential for some kids are strongly and positively featured in the film), Emily to a more-challenging academic high school, and Anthony, to an ambitious SEED school in Anacostia. The final intercut scenes of the film, with each child and his family on tenterhooks, are riveting, reminiscent of the tension built up in other documentaries featuring children, like “Spellbound” or “Mad Hot Ballroom.” In this film, however, the payoff means much more than such competitions, and the filmgoer agonizes and rejoices with them in Guggenheim’s carefully calibrated finale.

Still, that finale, with some kids “making it” and some not, raises “Waiting for ‘Superman’s” most disturbing question: must the future of so many of our precious kids be determined by the bouncing of lottery balls?

(The film runs 111 min. and is rated “PG.”)

(October 2010)