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"[F]ilm, at its most compelling, lives in our mind somewhere between our memories and our dreams. ... At times, bullshit can only be countered with superior bullshit."

—Norman Mailer

One bright morning a five-year-old asked his mother, "Why do I take a 45-minute bus ride to go to school?" And she replied: "Because the schools in our city are broken." 40 years later, stuffing his kids into a minivan and shuffling them past three public schools to a private school, a haunted director, all grown up, pondered his privileged past which his children had become beneficiaries of. Thus he raised another question, this time to himself: "How can I make a movie that would make parents care about other people's children as much as we care about our own?"

But initial misgivings set in fast. "I don't think it can be done," he said. "It's a storytelling quagmire." With the blessings of financial backers and several school reform stallions, however, he embarked on a great journey which produced a documentary today the toast of liberal and conservative critics of the education system. (John Heilemann, "Schools: The Disaster Movie," *New York Magazine* (September 5, 2010)).

The motive for his handiwork was recounted at a Toronto International Film Festival press conference on September 11, 2010, two weeks before the New York and Los Angeles limited theater release, three weeks before the national release: "I'm trying to attack in this movie ... this mental block that a lot of Americans have—which is that the problem with our schools are too complex, they've been broken for too long: and it's impossible [to fix]." So he decided to simplify the truly complex and varied troubles threatening the futures of millions of kids locked into various levels of the school system. He found it best to simplify and edify with entertaining animation, so that the many who ordinarily would find no incentive in pausing their attention over local newspaper coverage of school board meetings or low test scores or high dropout rates or union grumblings or mass teacher layoffs—that they may be presented something visually engaging, with the "the tone of an op-ed," which explained in 102 minutes the problems and persons behind an education system badly trailing much of the Western world in Math and Science proficiency.

He not only knew who and what was at fault, he knew the fix. "What works is pragmatism. You go into a school, you hire good people, you have good leadership, and you fix it." And he knew that if successfully treated with parallel insight, his documentary, Paramount Pictures willing, would ratchet up an already convulsing conversation on the state of public schools. But, as always, misgivings returned. He reminisced about his most famous work, whose "chief obstacles" were "the environmentalists, who'd become smug and complacent and had no idea how to tell their own story." Of his latest, he feared: "It's the same with the education wonks. They're gonna pick apart this aspect and that aspect of the movie, and they're gonna totally miss the point."

His name is Davis Guggenheim, and he won an Academy Award for the 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, which with the help of former Vice President Al Gore helped resuscitate abandoned conversations on the melting of polar ice caps and

shrinking of the ozone layer. Two years later he helped the Democratic Party presidential nominee package a chilling infomercial, *Barack Obama: American Stories*, to offer one last push of the product and simultaneously, presumably, swiftly empty as many possible millions from a bloated campaign coffer. As such, Guggenheim, though also a movie and TV drama director, is best known for documentary work which, if evidence should stand tall, craftily manipulates emotivity to titillate the masses.

His latest, *Waiting for "Superman"*, far from the revolutionary-work-of-righteousness mainstream media reviews have unanimously lauded it to be, only stops an inch away from insisting upon total razing of the public school system. The premise is laid down with little substance—but, oh, much style and flash. Students who would rather attend Princeton than Prison seem to have only one option: escape whatever public schools neighboring their homes, win a lottery ticket into a charter school or private school at which Science and Math feature prominently, graduate, attend college, graduate, fall in line to compete in the global economy (possibly for non-existent jobs), reflect on a fulfilled life, and ultimately slip into a coffin.

The man and his material don't differ a dime. Guggenheim loves to chant corporate slogans of all inner-city schools being "dropout factories," as though teachers and principals and other employees work steadfastly—intentionally—to push students off the attendance list. Reform is needed, Guggenheim repeatedly insists, and thankfully, as he explained to *MTV News* on September 7 this year, the last decade has ushered in "a new generation of reformers who are doing an amazing job, in every city across the country. They're starting to break the code on how you can educate kids, even in the toughest neighborhoods. So there's a lot of hope if we focus on these reforms and smart reforms, and put away all the adult problems, we can actually start helping kids."

The adult problems of which the director speaks are mainly union-centered. The teachers' unions, his film tells us, are out to perform first-rate damage upon the lives of every public school child. They're evil, almost. They go to bat for "bad" teachers, they refuse reward systems for "good" teachers, they tirelessly antagonize charter school entrepreneurs who mean no harm, and, worse yet, they turn their backs—and urge their members accordingly—toward all forms of school reform.

On September 23, when *CBS News* host Katie Couric raised the issue of critics who've pinned down his claims of a delusionary-evil-conspiracy by the unions to murder the darling dreams of reformists, Guggenheim, twitchy and half-way coherent, shot back, sputtering: "I'm a big believer in unions. I think the teacher's union should be alive for a long time." He explained his union, the Directors Guild of America, sternly protects his rights and keeps him in good financial shape; but, with the teachers' unions, "contracts have become so stringent, that they've gotten in the way of running a school." Called for at this precipice of history are "unions that are flexible," union leaders obediently "rethinking things like tenure, and rethinking things like how ... you assess and evaluate teachers."

Five days later, this man, who hails George Bush's No Child Left Behind Act because "you can actually go on and learn the scores of your school," picked up with PBS host Tavis Smiley, scolding the unions mercilessly for "trying to keep charters down and keeping the school day shorter and protecting bad teachers."

A day before his interview with Couric, ABC's *Good Morning America* co-anchor George Stephanopoulos, no Trotskyite, had stunned Guggenheim's hitherto flawless basic cable promotional rounds, swinging at him with queries about the failed promises of merit pay for teachers and the "awful lot of evidence out there that charter schools do no better than most public schools." A flustered Guggenheim, against the ropes, could only admit that, yes, "only one in five [charters] are successful."

Yet *Waiting for "Superman"* would be nothing without its featured charter schools, which the main subjects, five children, all but one from low-income neighborhoods, could only enter via a lottery system where balls are bounced and numbers are called and dreams are dashed and lives are lost. And the result, a climax of dreams and disappointments smashing together, has earned Guggenheim hero status among many around the country, rich and poor, some of whom confronted him with teary eyes earlier in January at Sundance Festival, where his documentary earned the audience award, pleading, "I want to reform my district" and "I want to help this one kid, I want to pay for their private school."

Bianca is a kindergartener living in Harlem, New York, with her mother, Nakia, a receptionist who has thus far done well in scraping away \$500 monthly for Bianca to attend a private school which academically towers over all local public schools. But when suddenly her hours are cut short, and the tuition money has to attend other graver expenses, Bianca is disallowed from attending graduation. At Harlem Success Academy, Bianca wouldn't have to face tuition issues, for it is a charter school taken care of by tax payers and private donations; but as one of 767 students pinching against probability for an open 35 spots, hope is the last string left to grapple onto.

Francisco is a first grader living in the Bronx whose mother, Maria, first in her family to attend college, enrolled him in two after-school reading programs at a local city college. Maria wants best for her son, so she's sent applications to seven charter schools, all of which have turned him down. Fortunately, Harlem Success Academy, a 45-minute commute from home, can help save this little man; but among 792 applicants vying for an open 40 slots, mother and son are living on a prayer.

Anthony is a 5th grader who lives in Washington, D.C. in a poor crime-riddled neighborhood and is, as odds would deal him, also stuck in a "bad" school. He lost his father to drugs and cannot identify his mother if she called his name. His academic career was rocked when he repeated 2nd grade, but ever since a studious Anthony has recovered and is destined to charge the storm and overcome it. His chance, however, can *only* be prospered with the help of SEED Charter School, where 9 out of 10 students go on to college. But as one of 61 applicants, with only 24 open spots, his chances are slim.

Daisy, a 5th grader, lives in East Los Angeles, where 6 of every 10 kids in her neighborhood don't graduate high school. She's soon to enter one of the worst performing middle schools in Los Angeles, and if somehow prized to go the full length would be first in her family to graduate high school. KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) LA PREP, with the seventh highest Academic Performance Index score of all district middle schools, can rescue her. But to get in, Daisy must count among the 10 chosen from 135 applicants.

Emily is an 8th grader living in a California wealthy suburb. Her problems differ from the other subjects, for she is white and well-to-do, but trouble came one day when she discovered her local high school—which features water polo and state-of-the-art drama theater—tracks students, and as a self-proclaimed "smart" and "intellectual" student who doesn't fit firmly into the narrow prisms of testing standards, Emily is almost certain she would be cast among classmates of inferior intellect who spend their class time with their heads bowed against the table while teachers of short fuses and shoddy temperament drone on without a care. But Summit Preparatory Charter High School doesn't track its students, for everyone is held to equally high standards and giving equal encouragement to attend college. Emily would be freed from the shackles of a public-school-tracking-system if she can only best 454 other students for a slot among the 110 chosen.

The five are pitted against a lottery system built out of necessity, Guggenheim's documentary suggests, since American public schools have just about thrown their

hands in the air in surrender to the academic dominance of rival nations. And at a moment of feverish political intervention into the education quagmire, it was inevitable *Waiting for "Superman"* would generate traction of massive measures. It is, after all, the season of education reform, a time when the current administration is bullying its base to rally around unpopular measures like a corporate health insurance legislation and a Wall Street-friendly financial reform package and an education agenda which, with its sick semantics, "Race to the Top," and its seductive schemes, more signifies a Las Vegas casino-jackpot style of governance. *Waiting for "Superman"* also cascades into public consciousness amidst the release of other education-centered documentaries like *The Lottery*, *Race to Nowhere*, and *August to June*—most of similar convictions. And, yes, in this age of reform, ideas and opinions number like tin cups at a beggar's side.

David Gregory, host of NBC's prestigious long-running *Meet the Press*, dropped a suggestion on the air during his network's late September "Education Nation" Week, a charade of pathetic pandering to the non-educators currently running the show. Gregory, sounding the call for Supermen in the tradition of the documentary, advised: "If you drive by a public school, even if your kids don't go there, walk in and ask how you can help."

Four months prior, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie was confronted at a town hall by a teacher who complained: "You're not compensating me for my education, and you're not compensating me for my experience." Christie shot back: "Well then, you know what, you don't have to do it." Returning to the microphone in stronger stride, she chided him: "Teachers do it because they love it. That's the only reason I do it." He clapped back: "And teachers go into it knowing what the pay scale is."

The two men above—one a pundit, the other a politician—mark nothing less than the latest log to a long trail of trivialization, which lines the chambers of congress, the West Wing of the White House, and the sunny hills of Hollywood, California. Screenwriters and filmmakers and directors have always felt burdened with the desire to revisit and investigate their childhoods and the schools which formed them. In 1968, when Frederick Wiseman's *High School* meditated gracefully on the national tradition of education in an age of shifting sensibilities of youthhood, the road was paved right. But modern cinema has since made fine fetish of mostly inner-city high schools, where students of color feature strong as wild beasts to be tamed by omniscient White saviors. *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *High School High* (1996), *Sunset Park* (1996), and *Freedom Writers* (2007) are but a few examples. And recent happenings only predict greater participation from the movie set educators.

Actress Jessica Alba, co-chair of 1GOAL: Education for All, "a campaign seizing the power of football to ensure that education for all is a lasting impact of the 2010 FIFA World Cup," stepped to the *Huffington Post* on November 16, 2009, to register her charge to help push the "75 million children currently out of school into a classroom." Upon heeling through the hollow halls of Washington to salute the services of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Senator Isakson, all of whom believe "education is a powerful tool to expand opportunities for women and fight extremism," Alba concluded that 2010 would form "the year for a breakthrough on global education." The "stage" is "set" for "America to be a leader and convener, with an opportunity for President Obama to pledge to achieve education for all children and also call on other governments to do their fair share through joint funding and shared approaches." For research on the implications in the dark continent, who better than Lawrence Summers to consult, whose "own research showed that in Africa, children of mothers who receive five years of primary education are 40 percent more likely to live beyond the age of 5." 20 years ago, as chief economist of the World Bank, Summers argued arduously in Africa's interest, confessing: "I've always thought that under-populated countries in Africa are vastly UNDER-polluted, their air quality is probably

vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City.” (Jim Vallette, “Larry Summers’ War Against the Earth,” *International Trade Information Service*, May 13, 1999.)

Actor Mark Wahlberg preferred to tackle a project of lighter weight when in June of this year he forged a two-year partnership between the Taco Bell Foundation for Teens and the Mark Wahlberg Youth Foundation “to address America’s teen graduation crisis, where one in three students drops out of high school without receiving a diploma.” And in a national TV ad campaign, Wahlberg ambles through high school hallways, tips off a basketball game, and circles around a classroom, examining the works of various students. “It takes just one dollar to help create a lasting change in a teen’s life,” he says. And it only takes one person to drop off one dollar at participating Taco Bell restaurants to “help empower those teens with the skills necessary to reach graduation. That’s what one person can do.” The aim: “to stay in school, to get an education, to graduate.”

Last fall, another actor, Tony Danza, began filming a reality show for A&E network at the 3,400-student Northeastern High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. “Teach: Tony Danza” would follow him as teacher for a school year. Danza, who holds a bachelor’s in History Education, always wanted to be a teacher but found the screen life more appealing. With no prior teaching experience—but, mind you, weeks of preparation and new-teacher orientation—he was granted permission to explore this dream and head a 10th grade English class, filled with 26 students, in back-to-back 45-minute sessions. In the promo for the show, which premiered October 1, an excited Danza confesses: “I want to be Mr. D—you know, they remember you.” And on the A&E website, viewers are instructed to “Make a pledge to see *WAITING FOR ‘SUPERMAN’*, a must-see film about the current state of public education in the U.S. and how it is affecting our children.”

Armed no less with suggestions is the Springfield, Ohio-born popular singer John Legend, six-time Grammy Award winner. Homeschooled until high school, where he took AP classes and was tracked into higher stratum which enabled an Ivy League education, Legend has been rounding up media appearances with the makers and financiers of *Waiting for “Superman”*, plus performing at concerts the songs he penned in its honor, one of which recycles a 1975 Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes hit, “Wake Up Everybody”, emphasizing the lines:

*Wake up, all the teachers  
Time to teach a new way  
Maybe then they’ll listen  
To what you have to say*

On October 4, 2010, Legend took up *Huffington Post*, where Alba made her debut, to blare a call: “Wake Up! We Know How to Fix Our Schools.” Who the we are hardly saw explaining, and how this we stumbled upon the panacea never saw a letter of revelation, but citing the much-ballyhooed statistics, banded recklessly by charter fanatics, of a nation left behind in Math and Science test performance, Legend proclaimed: “We cannot stand idly by and allow this institutionalized inequality to continue.” And though not “proposing that every public school should become a charter school ... we’d be crazy not to try to replicate the conditions that make great charter schools work.” *We* mustn’t collapse into the charter school vs. public school dichotomy, he further warned, pointing out that, instead, this emerging band of superheroes must be willing “to experiment—free of traditional bureaucracy—and figure out what works.” Refusing to give critics an opening, he pressed: “we cannot turn our backs on failing public schools and just hope they will be taken over by high performing charter school organizations,” as such

measure “would require time and money we don’t have.” Charter schools don’t hold the last key, “but the strategies that have been proven in charter schools are the solution—solutions that can be replicated in all schools using existing funds. Let’s not allow the contrived charter versus public school argument distract us from providing quality schools for all children.” Legend landed his logic upon “five universal, research-based, successful school strategies” that make charters work—the brain babies of Roland Fryer, a neoliberal economist and CEO of the Harvard-based Education Innovation Laboratory, a research agency hoping to “transform education by using the power of the scientific method” with sound business concepts inspired by “Nike, Motorola, MTV.” The five strategies:

1. Effective Principals and Teachers in Every School (while getting rid of the ineffective ones).
2. More Instructional Time (An extended school day and year).
3. Use of Data to Drive Instruction (Always be aware of students’ strengths and weaknesses, and when the students don’t learn it, re-teach!).
4. High-dosage, Individualized Tutoring (so every child in the classroom can learn).
5. A Culture of High Expectations for All (no excuses for failure).

Fryer, subject of a *New York Times Magazine* profile and the youngest ever tenured Harvard Black professor, confessed his dilemma in March 2005: “I basically want to figure out where blacks went wrong.” Unfortunately, “As soon as you say something like, ‘Well, could the black-white test-score gap be genetics?’ everybody gets tensed up. But why shouldn’t that be on the table?” he wondered. Also among Fryer’s unanswered inquiries, as documented in a July 2003 paper, “The Causes and Consequences of Distinctively Black Names,” co-authored with fellow economist Steven D. Levitt, is whether ethnic-heavy names like “DeShawn, Tyrone, Reginald, Shanice, Precious, Kiara, and Deja” hinder Black kids from more prosperous futures. Better luck with “Connor, Cody, Jake, Molly, Emily, Abigail, and Caitlin,” he hints.

And this is in whom the singer has found intellectual solace. Too bad John Legend can be quoted at a screening party bemoaning a punishment-paranoid society—“We spend so much of our energy and money punishing the results of our bad school system. Now we have an over-incarcerated and under-educated society”—and yet fail to line the dots on how a charter school frenzy inevitably opens greater ground for larger swaths of rejected and neglected kids to be swallowed into.

Two weeks before entering his blog post, Legend stopped by the landmark NBC show *Oprah*, to declare in bold speech: “I believe in social justice.” Also present was the director, Davis Guggenheim, to forewarn that unless something strong happened soon, “We are not going to be able to compete in a global economy. They’re getting better and we’re getting worse.”

The billionaire mogul host opened with a searing monologue which certainly chilled the spines of any conscientious thinker: “I was stunned,” she admitted, speaking of the documentary. “It is so hard to believe this is happening here in America. But it is every day. ... Now, how far will Bill Gates go to fix it?” Bill Gates, mega-billionaire who in recent years has ascended the throne of education reform, and whose voice (and vision) in *Waiting for “Superman”* is as strong as any other, seemed to Ms. Winfrey the perfect candidate to kick in the door and “start a revolution.”

Like Gates, Oprah Winfrey, a high school honor student who later earned a full scholarship to Tennessee State University where she studied Speech and Drama, has dabbled in education issues lately, opening in South Africa, on January 2, 2007, a \$40 million private girls-only boarding school, whose 150 7th and 8th grade students she

handpicked. Together they formed the first batch of the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls.

Bill Gates, the fixer, spoke primly of “taking what some teachers do very, very well, and picking the other teachers who are willing to learn that, putting them in a system of high expectations, longer school days.” Only such policies, he said, “would keep America at the forefront.” Asked by Winfrey whether he thought the current evaluation methods for teachers are appropriate and adequate, Gates ruptured: “Absolutely not. In many cases you can hardly call it evaluation at all. They are not told what they need to do better; they are not shown the best example.” But hope cometh, for “We”—common parlance among reformists—“see that when they are put into the right environments—charter schools often can create that—they’re able to take *all* the kids and give them a fantastic education.”

Oprah puzzled the term “charter schools,” asking the other multimillionaire of its origin, which he cheerily traced to the ‘90s with enormous expansion through the last decade—but easily defined as schools which don’t operate under the “union rules or the district rules,” with “the good ones” committed to “longer school days” and bolstered by “high expectations.” He rested his case with a coy smile as if to ask—guess who helped father this other great invention? Later on he declared that true reform is “easier to start from scratch.”

Also among Oprah’s guests was Michelle Rhee—“warrior woman for our side!”—the District of Columbia Public Schools chancellor, who in her three-year tenure has closed down dozens of schools and fired over 1000 teachers. Rhee concurred that “good” teachers demand “time and resources to professionally develop,” and, to the aghast of the studio audience and her host, she told the story of a teacher who was “AWOL,” who frequently slept in class, who swore at parents during meetings, and whom she attempted firing but could only suspend following strong opposition from the teachers’ union. And only after 10 years was the sleepy, foul-tongued teacher finally terminated. Students, she said, are labored over like “guinea pigs” for teachers-in-development—the “bad” ones the unions line up defensively.

In Winfrey’s audience that day, front row, was present Emily, the 8th grader from the wealthy California suburb who feared being tracked, and as the host and billionaire and director and warrior watched, she said, when asked to tell her story: “I’m very smart and intellectual, but I don’t test well. And if I had gone to my neighborhood school, I would have been put in the low classes with the teachers who have their tenures, so they’re protected, but they’re not that really excited to teach you. I’d be with the kids who wouldn’t be willing to learn. ... I’d be on the road to failure.” Winfrey, gleeful, swiftly patted her head: “You articulated that so well.”

Winfrey’s education visions were betrayed that day—of schools where teachers stay up till 11:00 at night to help students with homework, schools where students describe their environment like a “second family.” And as evidence, in a musical montage of charter schools working magic, she featured Aspire Public Schools, California, described by its “CEO” as a “non-profit organization whose mission is to create new small schools in over-crowded, under-performing communities, mostly urban communities in California,” with a goal of “sending 100%” of its kids to college and “seeing them earn the college diploma.” Also featured was LEARN Charter School Network, Chicago, which operates under “longer school days, and each of our teachers receive cell phones; and students can call up to 10:30, 11 o’clock at night—if they have questions about homework ... or just need help and support.” Also among the chosen was: Denver School of Science and Technology; Mastery Charter Schools (Philadelphia); New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy—Sci Academy; and YES Prep Public Schools (Houston).

“Well, this is exactly why so many really smart people feel that highly performing charter schools are a big key to turning this mess of a system around,” Winfrey announced to cheers and claps. “And even though all of them don’t work, many of them do, and we should follow the examples of those that do.”

Capping off, she announced a final offering from her Angel Network charity, which in recognition was donating \$1 million to each of the six schools, featured as wielding the code-breaking formula for turning around a system clogged by impoverished and understaffed and under-funded and under-furnished and under-performing public schools. “I know that thousands of kids, for you guys, are waiting to get into your schools,” Winfrey said to the dozen or so founders, principals, and teachers of these “groundbreaking” schools lined up on the main stage; and at once, whipping out six large checks, she began depositing into their hands, chanting all the way: “A million dollars for you. A million dollars for you...” Glorious music played, as the studio audience’s applause ratcheted, as tears flushed down the faces of these fortunate founders, principals, and teachers. Missing were magicians, belly dancers, cheap candy, and elephants trained to stand on two feet, trunks trumpeting “The Viper’s Drag.”