

## **An Educated Citizenry**

*Faster than a Speeding Bullet, More Powerful than a Locomotive, Able to Leap Tall Buildings in a Single Bound*

By Brian P. Cory

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If you have not already heard, there is a new movie headed to theaters tomorrow titled *Waiting For Superman*. Filmmaker Davis Guggenheim is trying to create a water-cooler buzz about education similar to that created about global warming with his previous documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Guggenheim's documentary adds to the growing list of recent films about education, including *The Cartel* and *The Lottery*.

Thomas Friedman, in his editorial titled [Steal This Movie, Too](#) (*New York Times*), wrote: "You have to look at America from the bottom up, not from the top (Washington) down. And what you'll see from down there is that there is a movement stirring in this country around education." Unfortunately, much of the rhetoric and headlines accompanying this movement are actually of the worn-out variety such as implementing merit pay, extending the school year/days, navigating unions, et al.

These worn-out *magic bullets* are now only trumped by the Shangri-la promised by charter schools. In 2009-2010, over 1.5 million students were served in more than 5,000 charter schools. Advocates of this relatively new dart thrown at the ol' bullseye are encouraged by charter school networks that have produced impressive results such as those listed by Marcus Winters in *The Examiner*: KIPP, Uncommon Schools, Democracy Prep, Achievement First, and DC Prep.

Charter Schools are drawing the attention of big-name supporters such as Oprah Winfrey. Winfrey's Angel Network recently gave \$1 million to six different charter school networks including the Aspire Public Schools (California), Denver School of Science & Technology, LEARN Charter School Network (Chicago), Mastery Charter Schools (Philadelphia), and New Orleans Charter Science and Math Academy – Sci Academy. This past Monday her syndicated talk show hosted a panel on education which included Guggenheim, Bill Gates, and Michelle Rhee (Chancellor of Washington, D.C.'s school district).

Our nation has transitioned from the NCLB era to the Race to the Top era; as the saying goes ~ follow the money. The good news is that more money is being spent in education today than ever before. The not so good news is that there are many strings attached to the money. For example, in order to have a chance at a portion of the \$4.3 billion Race to the Top bucks, states had to remove legal barriers preventing or limiting the expansion of charter schools. The guidelines made it clear that states were more likely to "win the

RttT lottery” if their applications included plans for directly connecting teacher evaluation with student performance.

As an educator in New Jersey, I cannot blame the State for believing in the “dollar and a dream” possibility. They completed the application but lost out to Ohio as the final state winner (due, in part, to a simple omission on the application), resulting in a net loss of \$400 million for NJ students. As I say every week when I check my lottery tickets, *maybe next time*.

Similar to our assessment of the NCLB era, I am afraid we will look back at the RttT era and shake our heads at the amount of wasted money. And more depressing, I am afraid students will still be waiting for Superman (and any other super-hero that they believe in) to come to the rescue.

Why am I so pessimistic? I like data. Margaret Raymond at Stanford University oversaw one of the few national studies of charter schools. The study found that only 17% of charters outperformed public schools with similar demographics. The other 83% proved to perform no better or performed worse. The Stanford study also found that 37% of charter school students scored significantly lower on state math assessments than their public school peers and 46% posted scores that were indistinguishable from their public school peers.

In another study, Mathematica Policy Research completed a large-scale trial of the effectiveness of charter schools. The evaluation, funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, covered 36 charter middle schools across 15 states. Following are a few of the findings posted on their website:

- On average, charter middle schools that hold lotteries are neither more nor less successful than traditional public schools in improving student achievement in reading and math.
- Study charter schools were more effective for lower income and lower achieving students and less effective for higher income and higher achieving students. In addition, charter schools in large urban areas had positive impacts on students’ achievement in math; those outside these large urban areas had negative impacts on achievement.
- Study charter schools did not significantly affect most of the other outcomes examined, including attendance, student behavior, and survey-based measures of student effort in school.

Further, the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School conducted an analysis of charter schools in the Twin Cities. Minnesota has one of the longest experiences with charter schools, opening its first one in 1991 and growing to 116 charter schools serving 22,500 students. From the report: “Despite nearly two decades of experience, charter schools in Minnesota still perform worse on average than comparable traditional public schools.” In addition to academic performance, this analysis looked closely at segregation rates. According to the report, the share of non-white segregated

charter schools increased from less than a third in 1995 to more than half in 2005 and remaining that way through 2008.

Chester Finn, a self-proclaimed booster and advocate of charter schools, concluded in his article All Aboard the Charters? The State of the Movement (*National Review Online*): “some are fantastic, some are abysmal, and many are hard to distinguish from the district schools to which they are meant to be alternatives.” Sounds like public schools to me. For me, this is where Mr. Guggenheim misses the mark. Guggenheim has suggested that *Waiting For Superman* is not a pro-charter movie, but I find it puzzling that he was unable to find one positive public school to showcase in his film.

While I admit that I probably recycle more nowadays than prior to viewing *An Inconvenient Truth*, this time around I am not sure I am buying what he is selling. Why? Well besides data, I like to ponder the big picture. For instance, how about areas beyond reading and math? I remain convinced that all schools must cultivate skills beyond which are measured on the latest batch of high-cost standardized tests; for example, skills in areas such as the arts, world languages, physical education, economics, green technologies, nanotechnologies, etc. I wonder how charter schools’ programs compare to programs in public schools in these areas.

As a high school assistant principal, when comparing public schools to charter schools, I cannot help but think about other intangibles such as extra-curricular opportunities in athletics, music, or clubs. I wonder how the menus provided at charter schools for these opportunities compare with those traditionally provided at most public schools.

I wonder if there is any data on charter schools servicing special education or ELL populations or providing mental health services. When a student proves not to be a “fit” for a charter school, I wonder if the student is recorded as a drop-out when he/she is shipped back to their neighborhood public school. I wonder how the perception of public schools in Harlem might be different if they had, as Diane Ravitch referenced in her article titled Why I Changed My Mind (*The Nation*), a marketing budget of \$325,000 as does the charter chain in the area. (Then again, if they had an extra \$325,000 to allocate somewhere, I doubt they would spend it on marketing.) I wonder what public schools would look like and feel like for students if they were free, like charter schools, to operate without most of the requirements and regulations which currently burden them. I could go on and on. Step back from the rhetoric...the worn-out headlines...and the incomprehensible piles of money...afford yourself some quiet moments to think about what is happening here...I bet you too will begin to wonder about the ‘movement stirring in this country around education.’

I am not against charter schools. If charter schools can lift a pool of our students to higher levels of achievement and hence add to our educated citizenry, by all means “keep on keepin’ on.” I am, however, against painting a picture for hordes of moviegoers that our public schools are “dropout factories” while charter schools are the panacea for all related ills. Mr. Guggenheim might suggest that this is not the picture he intended to paint, but let us wait and see what the general response in the wake of the film hitting the

big screen. I do not need Superman's x-ray, heat-emitting, telescopic, infra-red, and microscopic vision to make a bold prediction about the likely response.

In my opinion, the movement Friedman wrote about is merely a swing on the pendulum that has plagued education for far too long. *Waiting For Superman* might spark discussions and maybe even a few practices, but I am not holding my breath. *An Inconvenient Truth* sparked such things but I see little evidence of our country – let alone the world – grabbing a hold of and addressing the core issues the documentary brought forth to any degree of significance. We remain *hot, flat, crowded*.....among other things (Mr. Friedman will like that line!). Call me cynical but after a handful of years following the release of *Waiting For Superman*, schools – like Mother Earth – will remain downtrodden by the very concerns that the film depicts. And Davis Guggenheim will be off to his next project.

If we are going to finally offer schools, educators, and students a new story, we need to bring forth new conversations and new ideas with a sense of urgency. We need to tap our creative, innovative, and wonder-filled spirits to ignite the future trajectory of education and that of our nation.

In March of 2009, Tenafly High School in Tenafly, New Jersey hosted a landmark event titled, “Dear Mr. President: Illuminating the Current Landscape of Education & Igniting its Future Trajectory.” The event convened some of the greatest thinkers in education to engage in a panel conversation aimed at making recommendations to then-newly elected President Obama for shaping the future of education.

The conversation and recommendations which emerged were inspiring and new. Complete video footage from the event is accessible at <http://www.librarymedia.net/dmp/video.html>. Video segments are presented in four categories: *Pathways & Delivery Systems of Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, *Beyond Linguistic & Logical/Mathematical Development*, *Why Has Change Not Happened?*, and *Tangible Tidbits for School Leaders*.

Common threads emerged from the panelists' individual recommendations which could be woven together to truly make a difference in our schools and for students such as:

- an education system which honors and cultivates strengths, passions, and creativity
- an educational landscape free of fears and quotas
- liberty for and practices of the customization of teaching and learning
- efforts to professionalize the teaching profession by recruiting, developing, and retaining the best and the brightest professionals
- rich environments designed to expand social, emotional, and intellectual abilities to prepare students for the test of life – not a life of tests
- assessments designed to assess what we value
- the updating of existing out-moded and hierarchical program of studies

These threads would serve public, charter, or private schools well.

If I win the next Powerball drawing, perhaps I could ask Mr. Guggenheim to touch-up our video footage! Maybe then we will garner Oprah's attention.

*Waiting For Superman* tells the stories of five students – Anthony, Francisco, Bianca, Daisy and Emily. There is no doubt in my mind that educators everywhere will connect with each story in some way. They will most likely think of a student with whom they have worked that reminds them of at least one of the five students in the film. They will think about that student and reflect on how they helped turn the tide for him/her. They will recall the countless tears, restless nights of sleep, and office hours invested along the journey. And then, they will smile as they realize that that student is the exact reason they chose to serve as an educator. They may not be celebrated in Mr. Guggenheim's film but they should know that they made more of a difference than *Waiting For Superman* ever will.

Here's to educators everywhere! – whether you are in public, charter, or private schools.

*Waiting For Superman* will remind you that your work is unfinished. The documentary will hopefully motivate you to try to reach that one student you have not yet been able to reach. The film in fact will remind you that there is unfortunately probably many more than one.

But fortunately there is you. Do not give up on any one student – not one of them. And certainly do not wait for Superman or anyone else to come to the rescue.

The rhetoric and worn-out headlines are the price you pay as an educator. But think about Bianca and all of her classmates. They are your reward.

In the end, your work will be measured by an educated citizenry.

You are the super-hero the world has been waiting for all along.