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Charter Schools: A Yes, But…System

 Charter schools are a controversial topic among educators and politicians, who often have different views on the topic. The documentary film *Waiting for Superman* and the rebuttal film *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman* portray charter schools in opposing ways. *Waiting for Superman* implies that charter schools are the future of education and a solution to failing education systems. *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman* counters that charter schools may cause more problems for education and do not have much success besting public schools. Both documentaries have fair points regarding charter schools and, of course, both have some bias on the topic. Ultimately, I have come to the conclusion that charter schools are fine if they do not displace public school students, are well managed, show significant gains in improvement, and take and treat students equally.

 *Waiting for Superman* focuses on personal testimonies from five children, Anthony, Bianca, Daisy, Emily, and Francisco as they describe their negative experiences with their previous schools and their hopes to get into the much better charter schools. Some of the children “win” the lottery and get into their ideal charter schools, while those that do not get in must return to the public schools. The film presents charter schools as a wonderful alternative to public schools, as they provide more privatized education. Charter schools are shown as superior to public schools and a shining example of the how education is supposed to work. To make its points, the filmmakers outline data that may be deceptive and places blame on teachers rather than on the environments of the students.

Some of the data in *Waiting for Superman* claims that charters schools such as KIPP have better proficiency than local public schools and that, in one KIPP school case, have closed the achievement gap. *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman* presents charts that show many charter schools have only shown student improvement after they continue to lose students. As the improvement scores go up, the number of attending students goes down. Many of the students that leave are students with special needs and low performing students that are, essentially, forced out of the charter schools through strict rules and policies. As for the claims that charter schools out perform public schools, author Diane Ravitch writes about a study, known as CREDO, that “evaluated student progress on math tests in half the nation’s five thousand charter schools and concluded that 17 percent were superior to a matched traditional public school; 37 percent were worse than the public school; and the remaining 46 percent had academic gains no different from that of a similar public school” (“The Myth of Charter Schools”). Even the claim of a closed achievement gap is ridiculous considering, as Ravitch writes in another article, “we have heard… charter schools will close the achievement gap. This is not happening, at least not yet” (“Obama and Duncan Are Wrong About Charters”). The documentary’s data seems skewed at best and deceitful at worst.

The documentary also emphasizes that bad teachers, tenure, and teachers unions are the main problems with public education and are the reasons for the lack of advancement or improvement of the education in the United States, not the environment and socio-economic status of the students. “According to University of Washington economist Dan Goldhaber, about 60 percent of achievement is explained by (non-school) factors, such as family income,” meaning that family and environment affect students’ success more than the quality of the teacher (Ravitch, “The Myth”). While teachers have the most influence in schools, “teachers alone can [not] undo the damage caused by poverty and its associated burdens” (“The Myth”). The film “shows little respect for [public school] teachers’ intelligence, integrity, or creativity,” while lauding the charter school teachers as innovators of education and fantastic educators who connect with their students, including a teacher who raps to help children remember a subject (Barbieri). Teacher Maureen Barbieri notes, “For every dedicated educator shown in the film who is working at a charter or private schools in New York, there are thousands of equally committed and creative teachers working within the public school system” (“A Teacher Reviews *Waiting for Superman*”). Firing teachers and closing schools should not be the focus of improving education, rather, as *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman* tells, the focus should be on “excellent community public schools for ALL children…more teaching-less testing…and qualified educators to educate our children and run our school systems.”

For *Waiting for Superman*, I agree that some schools are performing poorly and, for some students, attending charter schools is a much better alternative. However, I cannot overlook the fact that the documentary focused on mostly low income areas and minorities students to give a general sentence of failing to the entire public education system. The film seems to side with the Republican view that a privatized education is a better education, with which I do not necessarily agree. I am pro unions, unlike the film which portrays unions as groups that limit the education system’s changes and theorized improvements. I feel unions provide a proper and necessary support to educators and give them a security in their sometimes cantankerous profession. I do agree with the filmmakers that tenure can allow for teachers to become lazy in their teachings and allow for some bad teachers to stay employed because they cannot be fired. However, I do not think merit pay is a better alternative/ motivator for teachers, as merit pay has not shown significant improvement in teachers’ quality. I also do not agree with closing failing schools and firing bad teachers rather than supporting and helping the schools and providing development programs for the teachers. I feel that closing failing schools does not solve the problem of needing better schools in certain areas. Rather, the closing of schools could lead to overcrowding other schools and more strain for communities. The assumption made in *Waiting for Superman* that failing schools equals failing neighborhoods is incorrect. I feel that the reverse is true: failing neighborhoods can lead to failing schools because of lower funding and higher environmental stresses for the students. I found there were few things I truly or deeply agreed with in this documentary.

For *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman*, I found more agreement with its views and my opinions. Perhaps I agree more with this documentary because two educators made it, but I digress. I definitely side with the film on the reality of colocation between charter and public schools. I found the idea astonishing as students in public schools were being displaced to make room for privately owned charter schools to be located in the same building. I also agree with the points that rather than investing more money into charter schools, the government should invest that money into schools that desperately need money. Of the ten points listed at the end of the film, I agree with nine of them. I am not quite sure the film can thoroughly justify saying that some recent education policies are racist. While the film focused only on New York, I feel it did a great job at giving different examples of some of the problems with charter schools in the way they negatively affect public schools.

After watching both films, reading numerous articles, and hearing from Kenneth J. Furrier from Dohn Community High School, I have personally concluded that I am for charter schools if they show and do certain things. Charter schools should have their own buildings separate from the public schools as being in a public school only causes a displacement of students and animosity between the local school and the charter school. The charters should be financially well managed and fairly funded because of the charter schools that have closed “41 percent closed because of financial deficiencies caused by either low enrollment or inequitable funding…[and] 27 percent for mismanagement” (Guilfoyle). As Furrier mentioned, charter schools should continue to be audited every year to keep note of funds and spending.

I do not like charter schools that are used to push political agendas to “prove” that privatized education is better; I feel that charter schools should be used as a last resort alternative for students not achieving in public schools. I also think charter schools should be held to similar standards as public schools, such as publically reporting how money is spent and the schools’ proficiency scores. Significant improvement should be shown for a charter school to continue to get major funding. This improvement should be based off not only individual student improvement, but also in comparison to individuals at the public schools. Finally, charter schools should take as many students as they have appropriate room for. Technically, they already legally have to, but, as Furrier stated, some charter schools will attempt to sway away any student they feel will not succeed and, therefore, lower their proficiency scores. While come charter schools cater to more minority students, students in poverty, and students on IEPS (Furrier), they may also attempt to have these traditionally lower performing students removed from the school so that the schools’ scores go up. For me to accept charter schools, this process would have to be removed as I feel it treats students as unwanted statistics rather than as people.

While both *Waiting for Superman* and *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman* make strong cases for and against charter schools, respectively, I feel that a medium between the two documentaries would be better for education as a whole. Rather than pushing for more charter schools at the cost of closing more public schools, charters should be a final alternative for so far unsuccessful students. On the other side, rather than berating charter schools, communities and teachers should understand the merits the charter schools can bring to some students. Charter schools are not evil nor are they perfect, but they could be complementary to the modern public education system and should not be completely discounted.

Works Cited

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