



Waiting For “Superman” Discussion Guide

Director: Davis Guggenheim

Year: 2010

Time: 111 min.a

You might know this director from:

Teach (2013)

It Might Get Loud (2008)

An Inconvenient Truth (2006)

FILM SUMMARY

With passion and urgency, *WAITING FOR “SUPERMAN”* advocates for the educational welfare of America’s children in a public school system that is severely troubled and, in many ways, broken. An increasing number of students have limited access to schools and teachers who can prepare them for higher learning. Instead, they are doomed to problematic schools known as “dropout factories.” Filmmaker Davis Guggenheim focuses on five children—Anthony, Bianca, Daisy, Emily, and Francisco—who vie for places in coveted charter schools through lotteries. Only a few spots are available to the great many who apply. Rather than upholding the charter model as the definite solution (only 1 in 5 charter schools is successful), the film shows how desperate the situation is for many children who cannot rely on their local public schools for the stable environment and comprehensive education they need in order to build their futures.

The film focuses its eye on a few shocking symptoms of a diseased education system—the tenure system and teachers unions, and how these institutions can lead to complacency, negligence, and failure to dismiss inadequate teachers. *WAITING FOR “SUPERMAN”* evokes and elicits great compassion and righteous fury, while instigating plenty of controversy and also reminding viewers that what’s at stake is both our children’s future and the nation as a whole. Ultimately, the film’s provocative stance aims to spur conversation that can lead to viable solutions for true educational reform.

FILM THEMES

Davis Guggenheim focuses on a few of the myriad issues plaguing the American education system, namely the tenure system and teachers unions, in order to spark debate on solutions and reform.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Because schools are funded by property taxes, those living in affluent neighborhoods with more expensive properties have schools with more funding and resources. Accordingly, those living in neighborhoods with cheaper properties have schools with less funding and resources. This gap in educational attainment translates into an ever-widening rift in economic potential. What may further exacerbate this inequality is the effect wrought on public schools when parents who have the financial means send their children to private schools instead.

“DROPOUT FACTORIES”

“Dropout factories” refer to high schools in which 60% or less of the freshmen who enter complete their education and graduate. An estimated 25% of students in the U.S. do not graduate from high school. The film highlights how underperforming middle schools can feed these “dropout factories.” Even at a middle school level, deficient schools can restrict a child’s education and future because of the district they live in. Improving middle school education is crucial, and many experts also argue for earlier opportunities such as pre-kindergarten classes.

TENURE AND UNIONS

Tenure laws were put in place to protect teachers from being fired for political or personal reasons at a time when there were no laws against job discrimination. The film contends that the tenure system, as well as unions, make it difficult and costly to remove poorly performing teachers. Thus many school administrators end up retaining inadequate teachers. The film also argues that the tenure system encourages complacency among teachers who have no fear of losing their jobs. Unions are depicted as being too powerful and mired in bureaucracy.

STANDARDIZED TESTING

Under the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, all schools receiving federal funding must administer state standardized tests to students each year. Schools that miss their targets must undergo improvements by providing tutoring, replacing staff, or even closing the school. Supporters say the act increases accountability among schools and teachers, and provides an adequate assessment of performance. However, Diane Ravitch, who once supported the act, changed her mind in 2009, saying, “I never imagined that the test would someday be turned into a blunt instrument to close schools—or to say whether teachers are good teachers or not—because I always knew children’s test scores are far more complicated than the way they’re being received today.”

“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”

Benjamin Franklin

“We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn.”

Peter Drucker

“There’s nothing more worthwhile than fighting for children.”

Michelle Rhee

FILM FACTS:

- The PISA 2009 results show that the US ranked 14th in reading, 17th in science, and 25th in math. For PISA 2012, the US ranked 17th in reading, 21st in science, and 26th in math.
- California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger called for a special election in 2005 that included Proposition 74, which would extend the time for teachers to gain tenure from 2 to 5 years. The California Teachers Association raised \$50 million to fight Proposition 74. The proposition failed, receiving only 45% of the vote.
- On June 28, 2010, New York City closed its “rubber rooms,” where approximately 600 tenured teachers accused of incompetence and wrongdoing received their full salaries just to sit in a room and do nothing.
- According to a September 2010 poll, 86% of education professors favor “making it easier to terminate unmotivated or incompetent teachers—even if they are tenured.”
- In high schools that serve students with low socio-economic status, the students are 77% more likely than their more affluent peers to be taught by teachers without degrees in the subject they were teaching.
- A TIME poll found that only 1 out of 5 people surveyed believe that standardized tests have a positive effect in schools.
- Growing numbers of school districts employ full-time police officers or school resource officers to patrol school hallways. Without any training in working with youth, these officers approach youth as they would adult delinquents on the street—rather than as school children.
- A study conducted by the Journal of Public Economics found that schools gave longer suspensions to students who performed poorly on standardized tests than to high-performing students for similar offenses. This punishment gap grew substantially during the period when standardized tests were administered—indicating that schools may use selective discipline to keep low-performing students out of school during testing days.
- At least 11% of detained youth are identified as having post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- There is a growing interest in alternative schools. In 2013, TED Prize winner, Sugata Mitra, was honored for his unique approach, supporting children to tap into their innate sense of wonder and work together. He is using the award to build the School in the Cloud, a learning lab in India.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others a chance to understand what is happening in Americas schools, and why.
2. Join the [Parent Revolution](#) or a similar organisation and sign a petition to demand world-class standards for all students.
3. Talk to your school board. Call your school board. Attend a board meeting. Vote for school board members. Every citizen has the task of participating and influencing education.
4. Mentor. Developing a consistent, one-on-one relationship with a young person is the greatest, most everlasting gift you can ever give them. You can begin a mentoring relationship through organizations like [Big Brothers Big Sisters](#) or other organizations in your country.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.