



# *Is this documentary rotten to the core?*

An open letter to Davis Guggenheim, director of *Waiting for "Superman"*

Dear Mr. Guggenheim:

I found it prudent to give myself a cooling-off period before crafting a response to *Waiting for "Superman."* While some of my fellow theatergoers audibly gasped in horror at the anecdotes and carefully selected data you chose to share, I found myself astonished at the film's generalizations and emotionally charged language (e.g., "dropout factories," "failure factories," "academic sinkholes," etc.). Forty minutes into the film, I wrote "Where are the teachers' voices?" in my notebook, and I left the theater wondering why you chose Bart Simpson's teacher and Jack Black's character in *School of Rock* as your examples of public school teachers—thereby giving millions of dedicated educators no more voice than the teachers in a *Peanuts* cartoon.

But after giving myself some time to reflect, I see that *Waiting for "Superman"*—as one-sided and slick as I personally find it—is producing a positive outcome. It's driving people to have important conversations about our schools and what students deserve. In fact, several of us here at ATPE recently spent some time discussing the movie and the issues it raises. The conversation was fascinating. The group included education lobbyists, former teachers and a former principal as well as communications staff members, and we all had different takes on the message you delivered. Some of us focused on the desperation expressed by the children and parents you featured. Others argued that you ignored the noble truths of the public schools, which offer services to every child, regardless of test scores or family means. And still others wondered how you could glaze over the role of parental involvement in education.

Then we began to discuss the circumstances you depict and whether Texas schools reflect them. One problem with *Waiting for "Superman"* is that it—as a colleague quipped—casts teachers' unions as the Lex Luthor of public education without acknowledging the situation in Texas and other right-to-work states, where teachers' unions lack monopolizing power. As you develop ideas for a sequel to *Waiting for "Superman,"* I urge you to visit some Texas schools. The success of ATPE—the largest educators' association in Texas and the largest independent, non-union educators' association in the United States—is proof that not all public school educators believe in the us-vs.-them values of a union.

I also recommend that you take a look at ATPE's 2010 teacher quality study. The study was released at roughly the same time *Waiting for "Superman"* began playing, and I found myself thinking of the study's results as I watched the documentary. For instance, when Harlem Children's Zone CEO Geoffrey Canada said in the documentary that he wasn't a "good" teacher during his first few years in the classroom, I thought about the importance of teacher retention and mentoring efforts in public schools. Those would be excellent topics for a sequel.

Finally, I suggest you take another look at one of the most indelible images in your film—not the children and parents crying when they didn't "win" the charter school lottery (though I won't soon forget that), but the video of the Houston ISD teacher who inspired the founders of the KIPP charter schools. The video shows the teacher as she puts math concepts into a medium her students connect with: a rap song. This veteran educator had the experience, pedagogical expertise, confidence, administrative support and flexibility required to adapt the curriculum in order to reach her students. And to think: She was a *public school* teacher!

Thanks for getting us talking, Mr. Guggenheim.

Sincerely,

*Kate Johanns*

Kate Johanns,  
Editor of *ATPE News*—and a proud product of Texas public schools

## WHAT DID YOU THINK?

*ATPE News* has presented one reaction to the controversial documentary *Waiting for "Superman."* Now we'd like to hear what you think. Send your reactions to the documentary (and to our open letter) to [comm@atpe.org](mailto:comm@atpe.org).