



Background: “Waiting for Superman” and “Education Nation”

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Two late September events – the release of the documentary “Waiting for Superman” and NBC Universal’s “Education Nation” summit – have the potential to stain public schools and school boards.

WAITING FOR SUPERMAN (www.waitingforsuperman.com)

“Waiting for Superman,” which focuses on programs in five urban cities, is the highest profile of a spate of documentaries focusing on problems with public education that have been or will be released in the coming months. (See below for more details on other documentaries.) For the most part, the documentaries follow a familiar pattern: Public schools aren’t doing the job, especially in urban areas. Teacher unions and “entrenched bureaucracies” are to blame. Charter schools and choice are the answer.

Davis Guggenheim, the Academy Award-winning director of “An Inconvenient Truth,” undertakes an exhaustive review of public education” in this film. As one interviewee in the trailer claims, “either kids are getting stupider every year, or something is wrong in the education system.” The film follows five students who seek entry into charter schools, framed as their only hope for a quality education. Its highly emotional ending focuses on a drawing or lottery to select which students will be admitted. The film, which argues that charter schools/choice can be the way out for many students, won the Audience Award at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival.

Produced by a major studio (Paramount), “Waiting for Superman” was released in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 15 and is scheduled for release in New York and Los Angeles on Sept. 24, with a rollout across the nation in the fall.

EDUCATION NATION (www.educationnation.org)

On Sept. 28-29, NBC Universal will host its two-day “Education Nation” summit at Rockefeller Plaza in New York. NBC says it hopes to “open a national dialogue and address the gap between how we perceive education and the actual results we are producing.” Partners of “Education Nation” include The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, University of Phoenix, The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, American Express, Raytheon, Tishman Speyer, and Scholastic.

The event will be carried online, and is part of a week of programming concentrating on education issues on NBC News broadcasts such as “Today” and “Nightly News,” and the MSNBC, CNBC and Telemundo TV networks. According to NBC, the programming will highlight educational success stories, and “uncover staggering truths and myths about education and demonstrate how poor education cripples our economy and society.”

To date, confirmed participating speakers include:

- Maria Bartiromo: Anchor of CNBC’s “Closing Bell with Maria Bartiromo” and Anchor and Managing Editor of “Wall Street Journal Report with Maria Bartiromo”
- Michael Bloomberg: Mayor, City of New York
- Cory Booker: Mayor, City of Newark, New Jersey
- Phil Bredesen: Governor, State of Tennessee
- Steven Brill: Co-founder of Journalism Online
- Tom Brokaw: NBC News Special Correspondent
- Geoffrey Canada: CEO & President of Harlem Children’s Zone Project
- David Coleman: Founder & CEO, Student Achievement Partners; Contributing Author of the “Common Core Standards”
- Ann Curry: News Anchor, “Today” and Anchor, “Dateline NBC”

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- Arne Duncan: US Secretary of Education
- Byron Garrett: CEO of the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA)
- Allan Golston, President, US Program, The Gates Foundation
- Jennifer M. Granholm: Governor, State of Michigan
- David Gregory: Moderator, "Meet the Press"
- Reed Hastings: Founder & CEO of Netflix
- Lester Holt: Anchor, "NBC Nightly News," Weekend Edition and Co-Host, "Today" Weekend Edition
- Walter Isaacson: President & CEO of the Aspen Institute
- Joel Klein: Chancellor of New York City Schools
- Wendy Kopp: CEO and Founder of Teach for America
- John Legend: Musician; Founder of the Show Me Campaign
- Jack Markell: Governor, State of Delaware
- Gregory McGinity: Managing Director of Policy, The Broad Education Foundation
- Andrea Mitchell: NBC News Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent and Host, "Andrea Mitchell Reports"
- Janet Murguia: President & CEO of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR)
- Michael Nutter: Mayor, City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Bill Pepicello, Ph.D.: President of University of Phoenix
- Sally Ride: First Female Astronaut; Vice-chair of Change the Equation
- Michelle Rhee: Chancellor, District of Columbia Public School System of Washington, D.C.
- Edward Rust: Chairman & CEO of State Farm Insurance Companies
- Gwen Samuel, CT delegate to Mom Congress
- Barry Schuler: Former CEO of AOL
- Sterling Speirn: CEO, Kellogg Foundation
- Margaret Spellings: Former US Secretary of Education
- Antonio Villaraigosa: Mayor, City of Los Angeles, California
- Randi Weingarten: President of American Federation of Teachers (AFT-CLO)
- Brian Williams: Anchor and Managing Editor "NBC Nightly News"

Confirmed sessions at "Education Nation" include:

- Job One: Preparing America's students to compete in the global economy
- The Innovation Gap: Bringing the technology revolution to the schoolhouse
- Change Agents: How do we reinvent the status quo at all levels?
- The Path to the American Dream: A survey on post-secondary education
- Kids Can't Vote: How can the politics of education put students first?
- Educating the Digital Generation: What are the roles and responsibilities of media in learning?

- Good Apples: How do we keep good teachers, throw out bad ones, and put a new shine on the profession?
- A Fresh Start: Leveling the playing field before school begins
- Shrinking the Achievement Gap: Is education the civil rights issue of our time?
- Study Abroad: What can we learn from the global leaders in education?
- The Parent and the Village: Fostering a learning culture in our communities

NBC News' "Education Nation" will launch Sunday, Sept. 26 on "Meet the Press." Additional news coverage and programming airing across all NBC News programs and platforms will extend beyond the two-day Summit. For the entire week of Sept. 27, material will air on "Nightly News," "Today," "Your Business," MSNBC, CNBC, Telemundo, msnbc.com and nbclearn.com. For more information visit EducationNation.com.

Additional documentaries

Below is information on additional documentaries now or soon to be released. The summaries were edited from materials provided by the Learning First Alliance.

RACE TO NOWHERE (www.racetonowhere.com), has been screened in some locations. Wide release: Fall 2010

This film shows American schools as pressure-cookers, where students are overscheduled, overworked, unhealthy and constantly evaluated, but rarely given the time to think deeply or relax. As one interviewed woman states in the trailer, "our students are pressured to perform. They're not necessarily pressured to learn – especially learn deeply and conceptually." The film sheds light on the "dark side" of the American achievement culture: "We need to redefine success for kids."

According to the Huffington Post, the film "presents some compelling arguments against the emphasis on test scores that increased exponentially with the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (it should be called the Almost Every Child Left Behind Act, given its abysmal record in raising test scores or graduation rates, much less actually educating children)."

THE CARTEL (www.thecartelmovie.com), premiered in Los Angeles and New York City April 16, most other cities April 30.

This film highlights the wastes of the New Jersey public school system, saying that billions of dollars are going unaccounted for and students are still graduating from high school in some districts unable to read. "Schools of choice" are touted as the solution to this embarrassment. The film was produced, directed and financed by former TV news personality Bob Bowdon, whose mother was a public school teacher. One critic described the movie as "a full-frontal assault, almost three years in the making, on the teacher unions and administrators whom Bowdon sees as stubborn stranglers of innovation. In his view, tenure often trumps learning, and the amalgamation of power can be a union's top priority."

THE LOTTERY (<http://thelotteryfilm.com/>), still screening in some cities.

"The Lottery," produced by 27-year-old Madeleine Sackler, follows four families who have entered their children in the lottery to attend the Harlem Success Academy. The trailer claims that "the problem is a system that protects academic failure," and that efforts to stem charter expansion are unjust for children. The film was an official selection at the Tribeca Film Festival, as well as other film festivals nationwide. *The New York Times* called the film "a passionate positioning of charter schools as the saviors of public education."

TEACHED (www.loudspeakerfilms.com/), currently in production

This film is essentially an attack on teacher tenure and the "anti-child work rules [that] permeate every district in America." It seems to be focused on Washington, D.C. The film shows teacher tenure and disparities in teacher quality as a civil rights crisis.

A RIGHT DENIED (www.2mminutes.com/films/a-right-denied.asp), 2010

This DVD, produced by Whitney Tilson (on the KIPP board and a founder of Teach for America), chronicles the problems of "twin achievement gaps" – America vs. other countries, and the achievement gap within our borders – and advances "solutions" to those problems.

THE RUBBER ROOM (www.rubberroommovie.com/), in production

This film exposes "rubber rooms" in New York City, where tenured teachers who have been accused of some infraction must spend their days. Unlike other films, this doesn't seem to solely portray rubber rooms as an example of wasted money, and does not seem to seriously attack teachers' unions on tenure issues (based on the trailer). Produced by an "ex-teacher" who was in the rubber room.

THE WAR ON KIDS

(www.thewaronkids.com/MAIN.html), released in 2009

Cevin Solis portrays public schools as prisons, where educating students is subsidiary to controlling and policing them. The film also focuses on hyper-pathologization of student behaviors. The War on Kids won the award for "Best Educational Documentary" at the New York International Independent Film & Video Festival.

TWO MILLION MINUTES (www.2mminutes.com/), 2007/2009

A 2007 documentary comparing the high school experiences of six students: two Americans, two from India and two Chinese students. The Indian and Chinese students seem very focused and concerned about their education and career futures, while "Americans don't know they are competing with Indians and Chinese." A 2009 sequel continues on this theme, but focuses on one charter school in Arizona as a model for how American schools can be competitive.