

## **Waiting for Superman...Some Thoughts...Dr. James Fitzpatrick**

I had a chance to see the much heralded documentary *Waiting for Superman* by Davis Guggenheim that is being shown at selected theaters. As advertised Guggenheim as he did in his Oscar winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* about climate change, brilliantly evokes the emotions of the audience in depicting some heart wrenching realities surrounding public education in our country.

The documentary tracks the plight of five impoverished children raised by parent(s) or grandparents in their quest to escape poor performing and criminally underfunded neighborhood schools to get into desirable charter schools. Their hopes rest on a lottery, with their dreams held in the balance as numbers are called out in a scene you can't wait to see end as you watch this movie.

One cannot help but come away inspired by the success of the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) Charter School founded in the late 1990's by charismatic Geoffrey Canada, a gifted educator who has been featured on *Sixty Minutes*, *Oprah*, and in many print publications. His resolve is uplifting as documented in his book *Whatever it Takes*, where we learn that children in HCZ go to school for longer hours each day and attend on Saturdays. What is not mentioned is the tremendous amount of private money that has been poured into this charter school.

Teacher Unions are criticized as a hindrance to school improvement as played out in the standoff between former Washington DC Chancellor Michelle Rhee and the Teacher's Union. Rhee aggressively sought to remove tenure and weed out poor teachers and administrators as measured by poor test scores. The documentary leads the viewer to believe that a tenured or non-probationary teacher cannot be fired. While this may be true in some places, my experience is that it is the teachers themselves who are most upset when someone on a faculty is not doing a good job.

In our learning community the most important evaluation we ever make is when we hire! If someone is deemed qualified to be selected on our educational team, then I believe it is the role of leadership to help teachers and staff grow in their positions. This calls for effective staff development, caring and effective supervision, and coaching. Sometimes this coaching calls for re-directing, and establishing plans of improvement. If that fails, separation may be the only option. Terminating an educator should be an involved process, and while it can be arduous it certainly is not insurmountable. We have done it, and these are sad developments but in the best interest of students, you do it when it is necessary! In *Waiting for Superman* there is a segment shown on camera where incompetent teachers who have been removed from the classroom, report to what is called a "rubber room." They literally do nothing all day, yet receive their full compensation, wasting millions of dollars in New York City.

Public education certainly has its challenges and this documentary illuminates them. We have to work continuously to improve our schools and transform ourselves in preparing our students with the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills they will need to succeed. However, conspicuously absent in this expose is a deeper explanation of the plight of families living in neighborhoods where they lack jobs, health care, decent housing, and a living wage, where many underfunded schools exist in our urban and poor rural areas. There are stories of heroism that need to be told here as well, where selfless educators, day in day out fight the good fight in championing the cause of underprivileged youth. They are the last bastion of hope carrying out their efforts without the funding and support of a well endowed private or public chartered school.

In closing, I shared with my staff a quote from Geoffrey Canada in this movie where he says “*observing a great teacher is like observing a great artist or a great musician, or athlete.*” We are blessed to have great teachers in our learning community very dedicated to their craft and devoted to our students. In many ways they are like Superman. I think this documentary was timely as all children deserve to be educated by highly qualified teachers in well equipped, clean, and safe schools. No child’s education and future should be decided by a lottery. America is better than that! .