

Reform starts with appreciating good teachers

Published: Oct 29, 2010

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"Waiting for Superman," the documentary by director Davis Guggenheim, has the potential to galvanize the public around the crisis in public education the way Guggenheim's previous film, "An Inconvenient Truth," did with global climate change. Yet, will concerned citizens take away the most important message?

We were recently among 40 teachers invited to attend the New York premiere as part of NBC's televised Education Nation Summit. Before leaving for New York, we asked students, "What do policymakers need to know?" Their message was simple: We need great teachers, anything less is unfair. They wondered why their favorite teachers were laid off when the district downsized. The urgency was clear in their voices as they sent us off with their message.

In New York, we found their urgency matched by some of the leaders making the biggest impact in education reform today, such as Secretary of Education Arne Duncan; former Washington, D.C., chancellor of schools Michelle Rhee; and Geoffrey Canada of the Harlem Children's Zone. These leaders took the time to meet with our group of teachers. The common denominator of their education reform priorities was the need for every student to have a highly effective teacher, regardless of where they attend school.

The movie features charter schools as a key solution, but this is not a public school vs. charter school issue. This is a civil rights issue. All students deserve highly effective teachers. The film vividly illustrates that kids in most need of a great teacher are challenged by a system that often denies them this opportunity, while their more affluent peers have greater access to options.

Too often teachers are scapegoated as the problem rather than seen as the solution. While most teachers recognize the need to dismiss chronically ineffective colleagues, this will go only so far. The first priority of education reform must be attracting, developing and retaining the best teachers.

The movie reminds us that a low-performing teacher on average may bring only half of a year of academic growth to a student, while a high-performing teacher covers a year and a half worth of academic growth. This factor drives a sense of urgency as we realize that quality teachers are the solution to closing the achievement gap that plagues our nation. An ineffective teacher drastically widens this gap.

We report to work every day because we have seen the first hand results of our efforts. We have chosen to work on the front lines, even though it is at times exhausting. There is no time to wait for reform to happen; the time to act is now. We need the support of parents and the public to succeed. In the wealthiest nation in the world, it is unacceptable that entire schools are failing our children. A great school system cannot be built from a lottery, but must instead be built by comprehensive education reform that values teachers as the most crucial variable. This is the key message of this movie.

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