

CAITLIN HOLLISTER AND WENDY SOREF

Don't wait for Superman — focus on teachers

By Caitlin Hollister and Wendy Soref | October 12, 2010

IN THE new documentary “Waiting For Superman,” we see an old “Superman” film clip that shows our hero rescuing a school bus full of children from near disaster. Too many schoolchildren, director Davis Guggenheim reminds us, are waiting for such a savior to swoop in and give them a better shot at success. The voices in the film — parents, policy leaders, and philanthropists — highlight an undeniable crisis in public education and offer their recipes for change. But a critical voice is absent from the film — the voice of teachers.

As public school teachers in Boston, we recognized familiar frustrations with a dysfunctional system. Still, the policy solutions implied in the film — getting rid of bad teachers and expanding charter schools — will not go far enough to counter educational inequity. Guggenheim repeatedly emphasizes how only an effective, committed teaching force will improve our schools. The film fails to explore, however, what makes some teachers successful and what conditions within schools support that success.

Much of the film involves interviews with policymakers who make a compelling case for firing chronically ineffective teachers. Removing the worst teachers is imperative, but it does not solve our most urgent need: making good teachers great.

Ask many teachers about their job and you're likely to hear, “I'm doing the best I can, but I know it's not enough.” If we want to create dramatic improvements in student learning and keep these educators from giving up, we must ensure that teachers have the opportunity and support to improve. So how do good teachers become great?

First, good teachers need to receive regular feedback from experienced supervisors and colleagues. This process isn't quick, and it isn't cheap, but we know firsthand that it works. Our own teaching practice has improved most dramatically when colleagues have observed us and offered specific strategies to reach our students more effectively.

Second, no one becomes a great teacher alone. As teachers we must open our doors, collaborate with our colleagues, connect meaningfully with families, and take shared responsibility for the success of every student in our schools.

Finally, we need achievement data we can use. Most test scores only tell us who's struggling (and this usually isn't a surprise). Good teachers need to learn how to efficiently analyze tests and apply this information in the classroom.

As the film closes, Guggenheim reminds the audience, “The one thing those who work in the trenches know is that you can’t have a great school without great teachers . . . Look past all the noise and the debate and it’s easy to see: Nothing will change without them.”

On this point, we are in absolute agreement.

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