WAITING FOR “SUPERMAN”:
How We Can Save America’s Failing Public Schools

Edited by Karl Weber

Reviewed by Laura Howard‡

This collection of essays, edited by Karl Weber, serves as a companion to the highly acclaimed documentary *Waiting for “Superman,”* which debuted in January 2010. The book’s stated purpose is to contribute to the national education debate and examine in more depth the issues raised by the film. The essay authors paint a bleak picture of the public schools as a failing system that continues to deteriorate despite policy initiatives, federal commissions, new state and federal laws and programs, and billions of dollars devoted to the system’s development and improvement.

While compelling, this work misses the mark from a policy perspective. Many of the chapters incorporate grave statistics about the realities of public education in America, but the data source is rarely identified. Throughout the book, several contributors fail to provide support for their arguments, while making broad generalizations that gloss over the nuances of a system that employs more than 3.5 million teachers and serves over 56 million students, approximately one-fifth of the total US population. Furthermore, even when the authors present potential policy initiatives (for example, merit pay for

---


iii According to the US Census Bureau (http://www.census.gov/), the total US population is estimated at 308 million; students and teachers in American public schools total approximately 60 million, which is roughly 20 percent of the total population.

‡ Laura Howard is a Fellow in Duke University’s Program in Education. She holds a Bachelor’s degree in Public Policy Studies from Duke University and a Juris Doctor from Indiana University Maurer School of Law. Howard taught 1st, 5th, and 6th grades in the Chicago Public Schools and practiced school law at the law firm of Bose McKinney & Evans, LLP, in Indianapolis before returning to Duke fall of 2010.
Laura Howard

teachers based on student performance), they fail to provide a realistic plan for implementation. Overall, the book offers some insightful perspectives and even a few legitimate proposals for reform, but the lack of cohesion, empirical evidence and comprehensive analysis limit its effectiveness as an examination of education policy.

The book consists of fourteen chapters, all written by different stakeholders in the conversation about what is happening in our K-12 public schools. Contributors include Davis Guggenheim and Lesley Chilcott, producers of the Waiting for “Superman” documentary, and leaders in school reform like Michelle Rhee, Geoffrey Canada, and Bill and Melinda Gates. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, offers a response to the anti-union rhetoric that is often voiced in education reform debates. Eric Schwarz, CEO of Citizen Schools; Bill Strickland, founder of the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild; Eric Hanushek, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution; and Jay Matthews, education columnist at the Washington Post also contribute. In its final three chapters, the book provides steps that students, parents, educators and business leaders can take to get involved at the local, state and national level.

Although each writer brings his or her own agenda and experiences to the conversation, one theme that resonates from cover to cover is that the traditional public school model is broken. Several authors suggest that charter schools, which combine the benefits of public funding with the freedom to develop curricula and internal policy, are the only hope for children in the public schools. The message endorsed in the book, both implicitly and explicitly, is that public school children who do not get into a charter school—who do not win the school “lottery”—have no hope for a high-quality education, a good job, or a bright future. There are brief references to successful public schools, but these are presented as anomalies and are overshadowed by the focus on poorly performing schools. While this focus is understandable given the book’s objectives and the serious implications for children and communities when schools chronically underperform, the reluctance to acknowledge that children can get an excellent education at a traditional, non-charter public school is misleading and counterproductive.

The opening chapters written by Guggenheim and Chilcott explain the backstory, motivations, and objectives for the film. As they introduce the stories and issues that the proceeding chapters address, the producers refer to “failing
schools” and “good public schools,” “bad teachers” and “great results,” but do not define any of those terms or explain how they are measured. Chilcott does acknowledge, however, that “[p]ractically everyone who has attended school has an opinion about what is right and (more important) what is wrong with our educational system.” Acknowledging this facet of education policy subtly reminds the reader that Guggenheim and Chilcott have researched the issues extensively but are not educators or policy analysts.

Readers will find Michelle Rhee’s contribution to the book especially fascinating. She speaks to her experience as chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools and to the implications of policies put into place before and after her appointment. Rhee writes of low expectations, limited resources, and school violence, but also offers examples of positive change. Rhee tells how new principal Dwan Jordan turned around Sousa Middle School in Washington, DC, a high-poverty school with proficiency rates below 16 percent in reading and math. After the first year of Jordan’s tenure at Sousa, those proficiency rates (which represent the number of students at the school who score at or above grade level on standardized tests) nearly doubled in reading and nearly tripled in math. Rhee also writes of Brian Betts, principal of Shaw-Garnet-Patterson Middle School, whose belief that low-income students could and should go to college transformed a school and a community. Sousa and Shaw-Garnet-Patterson are traditional public schools, not charter schools. Their success was grounded in their focus on accountability and high expectations for all students, regardless of race, class or previous academic performance. While there is still progress to be made in these and other schools across the country, these stories give hope that we can provide a great education to all students, at every school, and in every district in the United States.

However, Rhee’s suggestion that more standardized testing is necessary to ensure student learning and teacher effectiveness is disconcerting. Given that state governments spent an estimated $1.1 billion in 2007-2008 on assessments—compared to $423 million spent in 2001, the year before No Child Left Behind was enacted—it stands to reason that additional testing will mean

---


v Ibid., 133-35.

vi While a portion of this increase may reflect a rise in general education expenditures, the increase in spending on assessments from 2001 to 2011 is not proportional to the increase in total expenditures. In 2001-2002, state governments spent $207.4 billion on education; in 2007-2008, state education spending increased 74 percent to $280.9 billion. US Census
less money set aside for construction and maintenance of school properties, fewer resources for the purchase of technology, textbooks, and other classroom supplies, and restricted funds to pay teacher salaries (or implement a performance-based salary structure, of which Rhee is a staunch supporter). The disconnect between policy proposals and practical implementation plans frustrates the reader throughout most of the book.

The strongest policy contribution to this compilation is written by Eric Hanushek, the Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University. Hanushek’s research focuses on economic analysis of education policy, and his subject area expertise is evident. His portion of the book defines effective teaching and how it can be measured, explains the implications for student learning when comparing effective teachers with ineffective teachers, and reveals the broader economic implications of current education policy and practice. He then proposes several policy solutions, providing comprehensive data and clear explanations to support his recommendations.

With its myriad of contributors and viewpoints, disjointed chapters, and overall deficiency of empirical evidence to support its claims, *Waiting for “Superman”* leaves readers who approach it from a policy standpoint dissatisfied. With the exception of Hanushek’s chapter, policy recommendations lack practical and realistic implementation plans, and contributors focus far too much on student “performance” or “achievement” rather than student learning and positive outcomes for children and families. Some will find the book interesting and, with any luck, will be inspired to become agents of change in their communities, but *Waiting for “Superman”* will leave many readers wanting, and waiting, for more.
