

# WAITING FOR "SUPERMAN"

Community Discussion Guide



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	Message from the Filmmakers
3	How To Use This Guide
4	Film Themes and Discussion Questions
7	Facts and Statistics
8	Discussion Starters: "In Their Own Words"
9	What We Can Do/Action Steps
13	Useful Definitions
15	Frequently Asked Questions
17	Resources
24	Acknowledgments

## Message from the Filmmakers

### Now is the Time

Every student, family and neighborhood deserves a great public school.

It's that simple principle – deeply held and yet unrealized in many of our communities – that led us to make *Waiting for "Superman"*.

Education is at the core of the American dream. It's a pathway to success and a key to a future of hope and opportunity. But for too many students and families, the dream remains elusive. We have the power to change the current reality and create and sustain great schools in every neighborhood. And each of us – parents, teachers, community members and elected officials – has a role to play in making it happen.

Reform will look different in each community, based on its unique strengths and challenges, but everywhere it will begin with a conversation. That's what *Waiting for "Superman"* and this guide are about – sparking the conversations and the action necessary to create and sustain great public schools.

We can't wait any longer to make this dream a reality. The stakes are too high. Join the conversation. Get involved. Together we can ensure a great public school for every student and every neighborhood.



Daisy (right) and her dad. Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to be a resource for communities interested in beginning or continuing a conversation about creating and sustaining great schools. By building on the themes raised in *Waiting for "Superman"*, we hope it will enable a broad cross-section of every community – parents, students, teachers, administrators, business and community leaders and elected officials – to explore a vision for ensuring that every student has the educational opportunities needed to graduate from high school prepared for college, career and life.

There are many facets to creating great schools for every student. This guide provides a framework for exploring what changes are necessary in your schools and district and for deeper examination of key components of great schools, including high standards, strong partnerships and prepared and effective teachers. The resources and examples provided in this guide are designed to support further exploration of these and other topics, both on your own and with others in your community.

## WHAT A FILM CAN DO

A thoughtfully planned screening of a strong film can serve as a powerful organizing opportunity. But simply showing a film without facilitation or follow-up is generally not enough to stimulate dialogue or meaningful action. The most effective screenings include opportunities for an audience to reflect and act on the issues raised in the film and introduce clear strategies on how to move forward.

We hope you will customize your screening in ways that help develop a shared vision for students and schools specific to your community and advance a plan that will translate that vision into advocacy and action.

When reviewing this guide in the planning process, please consider how best to build on the positive energy from your event and convert it to real and lasting change in your schools.

## Demand Great Schools

Join with others throughout the country in demanding great schools for all students. Send a letter to state and federal officials by going to:

[www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/page/innovativeschools](http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/page/innovativeschools)

## Film Themes and Discussion Questions

### EXCELLENT PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN ALL COMMUNITIES

- In *Waiting for "Superman"*, we travel with five families on their journey to enroll their children in public schools where students are challenged and supported in programs that prepare them for college. What is your vision of a great public school? What are the key characteristics of a great school?
- Who is responsible for creating and sustaining great public schools? What is your role – as a parent, teacher, student, administrator, community member, businessperson, city official or philanthropist? What needs to happen in *your* community to create more public ownership of your local public schools?
- In the film we see several examples of schools characterized by a culture of low expectations and low achievement. Are there schools in your community that fit this description? What do you believe are the root causes of these chronically low-performing schools? What is being done to improve them? What should be done?
- Research shows that what happens outside of school – such as neighborhood violence or inadequate health care or housing – has a significant impact on classroom learning and student achievement. In your experience, what is the relationship between neighborhood quality of life and student achievement?
- Public charter schools were first envisioned as laboratories of innovation, where new ideas and strategies could be tested and best practices then implemented more broadly in traditional public schools. Although some information sharing has occurred, it is not a widespread practice, due in part to the isolation and at times distrust that exists between charter schools and school districts. How can public charter and non-charter schools learn from each other so that successful programs, practices and strategies are shared and broadly implemented? What can you do to support information sharing and collaboration between public charter and non-charter schools in your school district?

## More Time for Learning

Innovative schools around the country, including several featured in *Waiting for "Superman"* are implementing a longer school day and school year as part of a strategic effort to close the achievement gap. The increased learning time enables schools to extend instruction in core subjects like language arts and math, without sacrificing enrichment courses and activities.

According to the National Center on Time and Learning,

there are several important benefits to having students spend more time in school. With increased learning time, students are able to engage in more hands-on learning, go deeper into issues and subjects being studied, and have more access to the arts and other enrichment classes. Other benefits include increased interaction and deeper relationships between students and teachers and additional

opportunities for collaboration and planning among teaching staff.

The Generation Schools Network ([www.generationschools.org](http://www.generationschools.org)) is one example of how educators are rethinking the school day and creating an innovative model that allows more time for student learning and teacher collaboration. At the Brooklyn Generation School in Flatbush, small classes and an unconventional schedule

allow teachers and students to engage in in-depth study and exploration. In addition to a full complement of what the school calls "foundation" courses in English/language arts, math and science, students take elective courses and two monthlong intensive courses that include both an academic component, as well as opportunities to explore potential career pathways.

Small class sizes, fewer

## GREAT TEACHERS FOR ALL STUDENTS

- School districts and states throughout the country are exploring new approaches to teacher pay that involve rewarding effectiveness, rather than focusing on a system based primarily on a teacher's length of service or educational attainment. A variety of measures can be used, including student academic growth, examples of student work, student and parent surveys and teacher participation in overall school improvement efforts (such as through coaching, mentoring or other leadership roles). What factors do you think should be taken into consideration when evaluating teacher performance and determining pay levels?
- In *Waiting for "Superman"*, Geoffrey Canada says it took five years to become a "master teacher." Research suggests that, in general, teachers become more effective after three or more years of classroom teaching experience, but many teachers – especially in schools serving low-income students of color – leave schools, districts and even the profession before they hit their stride as educators. Not only does this turnover create instability, it exacts a significant financial toll on districts. For example, in a 2007 study of five districts, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future found that it costs thousands of dollars to recruit, hire and train just one replacement teacher. How has your school or school district been affected by teacher turnover? How do we create the systems necessary to support teachers in their early years and enable good teachers to gain the confidence and experience to become great?
- Studies show that the quality of a student's teacher has more impact on his or her learning ability than any other factor within a school. Given the critical role teachers play in student success, teacher evaluation and tenure policies are receiving significant attention throughout the country. Districts and states are exploring how to evaluate a teacher's effectiveness before granting tenure and how to increase support for tenured teachers and create pathways for ineffective tenured teachers to leave the profession when they do not improve. How does your school or district evaluate teachers to determine who should receive tenure? What support systems are in place to assist struggling teachers and remove those who do not improve? If you don't know, how can you find out?

Daisy. Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

courses taught and more common planning time allow teachers to tailor supports to the needs of individual students, work with colleagues to develop lessons and assessments and share practices and strategies for effective teaching. Teacher specialists teach the monthlong intensive courses, while their colleagues have three weeks off and participate in a week of intense professional development. The unique school was opened in partnership with

the school district and the teachers union and allows for 20 more school days each year than the New York City average.

For more examples of how schools and districts are extending learning time, visit the National Center on Time and Learning, [www.timeandlearning.org/](http://www.timeandlearning.org/).



## An Innovative Approach to School Design

In 1994, a collaboration between a city, a school district and a teachers union led to the creation of Boston Pilot Schools, district public schools that feature many of the autonomies of public charter schools. Like public charter schools, the Pilot Schools were created to provide families with more options and to provide models of innovative practices in urban public schools.

The experiment has paid off for Boston. Today, there are 21 Boston Pilot Schools serving students in preschool through grade 12. Each school has autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum and the school calendar. Pilot Schools are safe and challenging, and they foster high levels of personalization. They feature high attendance rates and have shown evidence of accelerated student achievement.

Building on the success of the Boston experience, parents and teachers brought the Pilot School model to Los Angeles in 2007 as part of the district’s effort to increase choice and transform its chronically low-performing schools. As of Fall 2010, there were 11 Pilot Schools in operation in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Recently, the St. Louis school district announced plans to open new schools based on the Boston Pilot School model.

## WORLD-CLASS STANDARDS

- *Waiting for “Superman”* illustrates the challenges of having each state set its own often-conflicting standards. The Common Core State Standards Initiative (a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers) establishes national standards for what K-12 students are expected to learn and be able to do in order to graduate from high school prepared for college and career. What do you think are the essential skills that a young person needs to prepare for a full and productive life after high school?
- Todd Dickson, the executive director of Summit Preparatory High School in Redwood City, California, explains that a college-preparatory curriculum is standard for all students at his school. “We think every kid should be able to get to the highest level of curriculum, so we want to hold them all to the same high standard,” he says. Do you think all students should take a college-preparatory curriculum? What supports need to be in place to ensure that students are successful?
- Throughout the country, schools and districts are working to link world-class academic instruction to their career and technical education programs, ensuring the same high-level standards across the curriculum and across program areas. This so-called Linked Learning approach provides students with strong academics and real-world experiences in a wide range of fields, preparing them for college and career. How are career technical education programs designed in your school or district? What changes should be made to ensure that students are engaged and prepared?

## LITERACY

- Many students enter kindergarten without the early literacy skills – such as knowledge of the letters of the alphabet and their sounds – necessary to be successful in school. Research shows that a high-quality preschool experience provides children with a strong start and prepares them for academic success. Not all families can afford a high-quality preschool for their children, however. Do you think universal preschool should be a priority for districts and states? How is your state supporting the availability of high-quality preschool opportunities for all children?
- Researchers have identified a strong link between school environment and student achievement. What can a school community do to create an environment that values and prioritizes reading? What is the role of parents, school staff and community members in fostering a culture of reading at school and at home? How might you foster a reading culture at your school?
- Many believe that the ability to speak, read and write in more than one language – or “biliteracy” – should be a goal for all students so that the United States can be competitive in a global marketplace. Yet only a small percentage of students graduate with dual-language skills. What is your school or district doing to promote these skills? Should the ability to read and write in more than one language be a standard for districts and states?

## Facts and Statistics

**Graduation Rates:** The graduation rate for the Class of 2007 (the most recent year for which data are available) was approximately 70%, according to *Education Week's* Diplomas Count 2010 report.

**Struggling Readers:** When eighth-graders across the country were tested for reading, most scored between 20 and 35 percent of grade level, according to a 2007 report from the National Center for Educational Statistics.

**Effective Teaching:** According to a 2007 report from McKinsey & Company, students with high-performing teachers progressed three times as fast as those with low-performing teachers.

**Lagging in Math and Science:** The U.S. continues to lag behind other countries in math and science education. According to the results of the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the U.S. ranks 25<sup>th</sup> in math and 17<sup>th</sup> in science among participating countries.

**Dropout Crisis:** Every 26 seconds a teen drops out of high school in the United States, resulting in an estimated 1.2 million dropouts each year, according to a 2007 report from the Alliance for Excellent Education.

**Shortage of Educated Workers:** A 2009 report from Edward Gordon found that by 2020, there will be an estimated 123 million high-paying and high-skilled jobs in the United States, but only 50 million people will be qualified to fill those positions.

**Parental Involvement:** Decades of research point to the benefits of parents and guardians being involved in their child's education, including improved attendance, academic achievement and motivation, higher self-esteem and more positive in-school behavior.



Geoffrey Canada (right) with students (left). Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

## Forging Partnerships Between Charter Schools and Districts

Nine school districts around the country have entered into formal partnerships with local public charter schools in an effort to advance best practices and improve student achievement.

Each of the participating districts signed collaboration compacts with area public charter schools, outlining specific areas for increased cooperation and information sharing. These efforts will focus on identifying ways to leverage the strengths of each of the partners to improve opportunities and outcomes for all students. The initiative is being supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Participating districts include Denver, Baltimore, Hartford, Connecticut, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Nashville, New Orleans, New York City and Rochester, New York.

**Classroom Supplies:** A 2010 study from the National School Supply and Equipment Association found that on average, teachers spend more than \$400 of their own money on supplies for their classroom.

**Transforming Low-performing Schools:** Researchers from the University of Chicago have identified five essentials for improving the country's highest-need elementary schools: strong leadership, parent and community ties, professional capacity of the faculty, a student-centered learning climate and instructional guidance (such as challenging and engaging curricula and tools for teachers).

**Teacher Retirements:** According to a 2009 study by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, more than half of all teachers are Baby Boomers, which suggests that as many as one-third of the country's educators will retire in the next four to five years.

**School Funding:** According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in Fiscal Year 2008, per-pupil spending in the 100 largest public school districts ranged from a low of approximately \$5,100 to a high of approximately \$20,300.

**Collaboration Matters:** Two-thirds of teachers (67%) responding to MetLife's 26<sup>th</sup> annual survey of U.S. teachers believe that greater collaboration among teachers and school leaders to share effective strategies would have a major impact on improving student achievement.

## DISCUSSION STARTERS: "IN THEIR OWN WORDS"

- **Daisy Esparza** wants to be a doctor or a veterinarian. Although she is only in the fifth grade, she's already written to college admissions offices. Her teacher and her father both believe unequivocally that Daisy can achieve her dreams, even though neither of her parents graduated from high school. Nakia Whitfield, Bianca's mom, says her daughter "will go to college." What role do high expectations of parents and of school staff play in student success?
- **Maria Regalado** says her son Francisco's elementary school is the third most overcrowded school in the Bronx. A security guard greets students, staff and parents at the front door each day. How does the physical environment affect school climate and student achievement? What responsibility do we have to provide students with clean, safe schools that are not overcrowded?
- **Bill Strickland** from Pittsburgh talks about how many of his buddies wound up in prison, where the state pays \$33,000 a year for each inmate – the majority of whom never graduated from high school. By comparison, the average amount spent per K-12 student in the U.S. is approximately \$10,000. What do you think would be the impact of spending more money to provide all students with preschool, longer school days or universal college-preparatory classes? How might this change the so-called cradle-to-prison pipeline?
- **Maria Regalado** says she is "stuck" because of where she lives and applies for the lottery in a school an hour away so her son Francisco will get a better education. **Gloria McGee** enrolls her grandson, Anthony, in a boarding school so he will receive a quality education. What do families and communities lose when students have to travel outside their neighborhood to attend a great school? What do we gain by providing families with high-quality public school choices in their immediate neighborhood?



Francisco (right) and his mom.  
Photo courtesy of  
Paramount Pictures.

## What We Can Do/Action Steps

### LOCALLY

#### Take Part in Creating and Sustaining Great Schools:

- Volunteer to be a coach or mentor.
- Advocate for stronger partnerships between local schools and the community.
- Attend school functions, even if you don't have a school-age child.
- Donate books and supplies.
- Organize with others in your community to identify, propose and implement programs and strategies to improve opportunities and outcomes for all students.
- Share stories of what's working in schools and encourage innovative practices.
- Join the letter-writing campaign in support of great schools on the *Waiting for "Superman"* web site, [www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/page/what-you-can-do](http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/page/what-you-can-do)

#### Support Great Teaching:

- Learn what your school and district is doing to recruit and retain prepared and effective teachers for all students.
- Demand clean, safe schools for students and school staff.
- Support efforts to respect and reward great teachers with leadership and professional development opportunities, financial compensation and public recognition.
- Advocate for high-quality professional development that is connected to teaching and learning goals. Visit the *Waiting for "Superman"* web site, [www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/page/write-your-schoolboard](http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/page/write-your-schoolboard), for a sample letter urging local schools to prioritize great teaching.

#### Educate Yourself About Your Local Schools and District:

- Get to know the qualifications and priorities of your local school board members.
- Learn about the strengths and challenges of your local school and district by reviewing data on student achievement, graduation and college-preparation rates, per-pupil funding, safety, and student, parent and teacher satisfaction.
- Learn about successful local programs and high-achieving schools to see what's working.

## Resources for Taking Action

### **Citizen Schools,** [www.citizenschools.org](http://www.citizenschools.org)

A growing national network of after-school education programs for middle-school students. Citizen School programs complement classroom learning by engaging students in after-school courses and projects led by adult volunteers and supported by professional educators.

### **City Year,** [www.cityyear.org](http://www.cityyear.org)

Through the City Year youth service corps, young people age 17 to 24 volunteer for a year of full-time community service, leadership development and civic engagement. City Year volunteers tutor and mentor school children, reclaim public spaces and organize after-school and other programs.

### **Communities for Excellent Public Schools,** [www.ceps-ourschools.org](http://www.ceps-ourschools.org)

A newly formed coalition supported by more than two dozen local, state and national parent and community organizing groups. In addition to members' local and state organizing work, CEPS has launched a national campaign to improve low-performing schools by emphasizing parent, student and community engagement and research-based educational practices.

### **Communities for Public Education Reform,** [www.communitiesforpubliceducationreform.org](http://www.communitiesforpubliceducationreform.org)

Supports the growing field of education organizing by providing grants and technical

assistance to community organizations working to ensure that parents and students have a strong voice in shaping policies that affect their public schools.

### **Donors Choose,** [www.donorschoose.org](http://www.donorschoose.org)

An online resource that connects individuals to teachers around the country in need of resources and materials to support classroom projects.

### **First Book,** [www.firstbook.org](http://www.firstbook.org)

Provides new books to children through schools and community programs. Since its founding more than 20 years ago, First Book has delivered more than 80 million books to programs serving children in need across the United States and Canada.

### **Jumpstart,** [www.jstart.org](http://www.jstart.org)

Started by two Yale University students in 1993, Jumpstart connects college students and community volunteers with opportunities to work with preschool children. Volunteers spend an average of 10 hours per week in preschool classrooms supporting language and literacy skills.

### **Mentor: National Mentoring Partnership,** [www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org)

National organization that works to develop and support high-quality mentoring programs through standards, cutting-edge research and the development of state of the art tools.

## AT A STATE LEVEL

### **Tell State Officials to Prioritize Education:**

- Advocate for increased learning time, prepared and effective teachers for every student, challenging and engaging curricula, and support for innovative schools and practices to meet the needs of all students.
- Demand adequate, equitable and stable funding for all public schools.

### **Champion Policies and Investments to Improve Achievement:**

- Support efforts to invest in high-quality data systems and use data to improve instruction and increase student achievement.
- Support the implementation of Common Core Standards to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and careers. Tell your governor to support this critical effort by sending a letter through the *Waiting for "Superman"* web site, [www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/take-action](http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/action/take-action).

**Public Education Network,**  
[www.publiceducation.org](http://www.publiceducation.org)

National association working to advance public school reform in low-income communities. PEN builds public demand and mobilizes resources for quality public education through a national constituency of local groups and individuals. Through its Give Kids Good Schools campaign, PEN is working to increase public engagement and provide tools to assist communities in their effort to improve schools for all children.

**Stand for Children,**  
[www.stand.org](http://www.stand.org)

Children's advocacy organization working nationally and in seven states. The Stand for Children Network organizes and trains parents, educators and community members and seeks to build support for public education, including securing adequate

funding and reforming policies and practices to increase educational opportunities for all children. Local Stand for Children affiliates have been key partners in convening local community conversations since the release of *Waiting for "Superman"*.

**United Way,** [www.liveunited.org](http://www.liveunited.org)

International organization that seeks to mobilize communities to advance the common good. In 2008, United Way initiated a 10-year program with key goals of improving education and reducing by half the number of high school dropouts. Local United Way organizations have been key partners in convening local community conversations since the release of *Waiting for "Superman"*.

Anthony (right) with his grandmother Gloria (left).  
 Photo courtesy of Wiley Foster.



### Help Create and Sustain Great Schools:

- Learn more about the status of high schools in your state (check out the Resources and Frequently Asked Questions sections for guidance on where to find this information).
- Organize with other groups and individuals throughout the state to create positive change in schools.
- Join the debate about improving our schools by creating your own video, contributing to a web discussion or writing a letter to the editor or an op-ed for your local paper.
- Advocate for the recruitment, support and development of great teachers.
- Ask your elected representative to support a wide array of public school options for parents and students, including innovative school models -- both charter and non-charter.

Musician John Legend.  
 Photo courtesy of  
 Public Education Pictures.



## AT A NATIONAL LEVEL

### Tell Federal Officials to Prioritize Education:

- Write federal officials and tell them you support increased learning time, prepared and effective teachers for every student, challenging and engaging curricula and innovative schools and practices that meet the needs of all students.
- Demand adequate, equitable and stable funding for schools.

### Get Informed:

- Understand how federal policy affects local and state educational opportunities and decisions.
- Research how your senators and congressional representative vote on education issues.

### Be an Ambassador for Your School and Community:

- Invite your elected federal representatives to visit your local school or district to see the opportunities and challenges firsthand.
- Join the debate about schools by creating your own video, joining a web discussion or writing a letter to the editor or an op-ed for your local paper.

## A Model for Community-School Collaboration

Since the early 1990s, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) has been organizing residents on the northwest side of Chicago and developing programs and partnerships with area schools to leverage the talents and experience of the community and improve educational opportunities for students and their families.

LSNA began its efforts in response to severe overcrowding in neighborhood schools. It engaged local schools and parent and community members in an effort that led to the development of building additions and two new middle schools. Since then, LSNA has worked with the community and area schools to create and sustain an array of programs that both support the needs of area residents and benefit the students and schools by capitalizing on the time and talents of parents and community members.

The Parent Mentor Program, for example, trains and supports more than 120 parents, mostly mothers, who work as tutors

and mentors in seven schools serving kindergarten through eighth grade for two hours each day. Schools participating in the mentoring program report a more positive school climate and improved achievement, including significant gains on standardized tests. Since the program started in 1995, more than 1,300 parents have graduated from the mentor-training program, which has also served as a pathway for participants to explore a range of employment and educational opportunities, including teaching.

LSNA has also partnered in the development of five full-service community schools that are open from morning until night and provide a wide-range of programs and services for students and their parents, including wellness and tutoring services, GED and English language courses, peace circles to build relationships and ease tension, and more. The schools provide services and opportunities for hundreds of adults and young people each week and have become a model for the nation. More information about LSNA's activities and history is available on its web site, [www.lsna.net](http://www.lsna.net).

Anthony in *Waiting for "Superman"*.  
Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures.



## Useful Definitions

### Common Core Standards

This state-led effort establishes a shared set of educational standards for English/language arts and mathematics designed to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and careers. The standards were created with input from a cross-section of individuals and groups, including teachers, experts, parents, community members and school administrators. When fully implemented, they will provide students, parents and teachers with a common vision for what students need to know and be able to do in grades K-12 to ensure that they graduate from high school fully prepared. To date, more than 40 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the common core standards. To find out if your state has signed on, go to: [www.corestandards.org/in-the-states](http://www.corestandards.org/in-the-states).

### Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

First passed in 1965, ESEA is a comprehensive law governing federally funded educational programs, including Title I funding for schools serving high numbers or percentages of students in poverty. President George W. Bush led the last major overhaul of ESEA. The No Child Left Behind Act, as the 2001 initiative was called, included significant new accountability requirements, including annual assessments in reading and mathematics for students in grades 3-8, with specific student achievement targets and sanctions for schools failing to meet them. The law also required the disaggregation of student data by such factors as gender, race, ethnicity and socio-economic status, exposing the achievement gap that exists in schools and districts. ESEA was scheduled for reauthorization in 2007, but has not been reauthorized. President Obama released his administration's blueprint for reauthorization in March 2010.

### Public Magnet Schools

Magnet schools are elementary and secondary public schools of choice that offer a specialized curriculum, typically focused on specific themes, interests or instructional practices. In some cases (such as that of a school focused on the arts or sciences), a magnet school will hold auditions or require specific academic prerequisites or proficiency levels as a condition of acceptance. When interest exceeds capacity, schools typically hold a lottery to determine which eligible students will be offered admittance. Many school districts established magnet schools as part of their desegregation efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, creating specialized programs and curricula to entice families to send their students to schools outside their own neighborhood.

### Public Charter Schools

Charter schools are public elementary and secondary schools of choice that operate with freedom from some regulations that apply to traditional public schools (in such areas as hiring, curriculum and budgeting, for example). Charters are granted for a set period of time (typically by a local school board) and can be renewed or revoked based on the school's performance. When applications exceed the number of available spaces, charters typically hold a lottery to determine which students will be eligible to attend. Minnesota passed the first charter law in 1991. Today, 39 states and the District of Columbia have charter laws. Parents, teachers and community groups started many of the early charter schools. Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) now operate networks of charter schools based on a common educational program and philosophy.



Francisco (right) and his mom.  
Photo courtesy of  
Paramount Pictures.

### School Choice

School choice refers to a range of educational options for students and families – from vouchers to charter and magnet schools. The U.S. Department of Education identifies five forms of parental choice: open enrollment, which allows parents to choose from among schools in a single district or to choose among multiple districts; magnet schools, which are special-focus schools designed to attract students and integrate schools; alternative schools, designed for students whose needs are not being met by traditional high schools; concurrent enrollment, which enables high school students to attend college classes and receive both high school and college credit; and charter schools, run by an independent operator under the oversight of a chartering authority.

### Tenure

Begun in the 1920s to protect the then largely female teaching force from arbitrary, unfair and often discriminatory employment decisions, the granting of tenure provides teachers with the right to due process before they can be dismissed. Current tenure practices vary, with the majority of states granting tenure after three years. Many states are reviewing their tenure policies, with reform efforts focused on lengthening the time before teachers are eligible for tenure, improving the system by which teachers are evaluated prior to receiving tenure and eliminating barriers to removing ineffective tenured teachers.

### Tracking

Tracking is the practice by which students are placed in courses based on test scores, prior academic performance or an educator's assessment of a student's potential. Students in the same grade and attending the same school can have vastly different educational experiences and opportunities upon graduation, based on their course grouping. Higher-ability tracks tend to focus on critical thinking and problem-solving skills, while tracks for students with perceived lower abilities may focus more on rote memorization and fill-in-the-blank type activities. Historically, students of color have been over-represented in low academic tracks, resulting in fewer opportunities to participate in classes with challenging and engaging curricula or to graduate from high school with the courses and credits necessary to attend a four-year college or university. Recognizing this inequity, some schools and school districts are implementing a mandatory college-preparatory curriculum for all students. (See box, page 20)

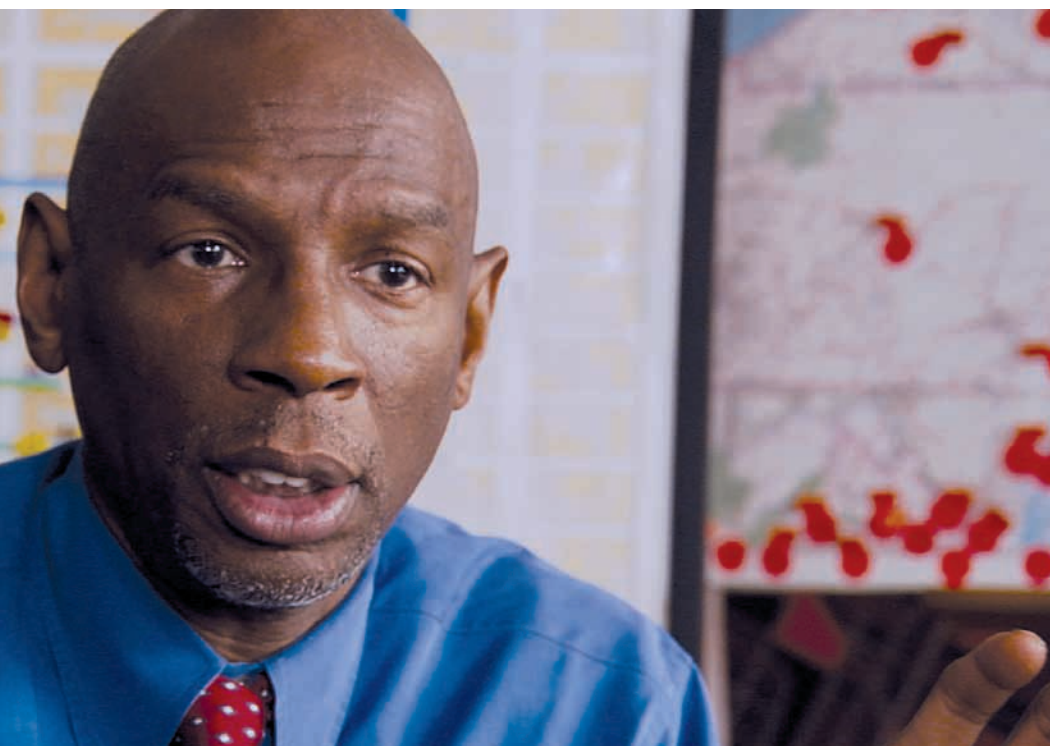
## Frequently Asked Questions

### Who sets education policies?

States have primary responsibility for K-12 education, including typically setting standards for students and teachers, approving textbooks and curricula and determining funding levels. Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), however, the federal government has played an increasingly activist role in education policy. The No Child Left Behind Act, for example, required states to conduct annual testing of students. More recently, under the Obama Administration's Race to the Top program, states were required to enact policies related to teacher data systems, improving low-performing schools and expanding charter schools as a condition of eligibility for federal funds. Local school districts (and in some cases, mayors) have responsibility for determining budgets and expenditures, deciding personnel issues and implementing new initiatives, including raising local revenue and transforming struggling schools.

### How are public schools funded?

Public schools receive their funding from local, state and federal sources. Funding systems and levels vary widely across and within states and districts, often resulting in inequities. Federal funding accounts for 10 percent of school funding; state funding and local funding account for most of the remaining 90 percent. Increasingly, many schools and districts rely on private funding through foundations and local fundraising efforts to augment shrinking education dollars. Although schools are typically funded on a flat per-pupil basis, some districts are moving to a Weighted Student Formula (WSF) model of funding, in which funding levels are based on the learning needs and characteristics of the students.



Geoffrey Canada in  
*Waiting for "Superman"*.  
Photo courtesy of  
Paramount Pictures.

### How do public charter schools differ from traditional public schools?

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that operate with certain autonomies not typical of traditional public schools, including autonomy over hiring, the budget, the length of day and school week, and curriculum. Charters are authorized for set periods (typically 3 to 5 years), after which time the charter is reviewed and renewed or revoked based on the school’s ability to meet the academic standards set by the state and the goals outlined in its charter. Charter schools serve students outside a single neighborhood and sometimes outside a single district. When applications exceed enrollment capacity, charter schools hold a lottery to determine which students will be able to attend. Charter policies vary among the 39 states with charter school laws. Charter schools must have open enrollment policies. They are not allowed to charge tuition and must comply with state and federal accountability programs.

### Who tracks dropout and graduation rates?

Every state collects information about dropout and graduation rates and makes this data available by school and by district on its department of education web site. Historically, dropout and graduation rate statistics were estimates; they typically underrepresented the number of students who were not graduating. Investments in longitudinal data systems that track students over time have begun to enable more accurate reporting. Independent groups also track dropout and graduation rate data. For more information, see The Alliance for Education ([http://www.all4ed.org/about\\_the\\_crisis/schools/map](http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/schools/map)) and the Schott Foundation’s 50 States Report on Black Males ([www.blackboysreport.org](http://www.blackboysreport.org)).

### How do I find out how my child’s school compares with other schools in the district or state?

As with graduation rates, states are required to collect and report achievement data, as well as information on spending levels, teacher qualifications and school safety. Districts must report this information annually in school report cards, which are typically available on the school or district web site. Many schools and districts also regularly survey parents, students and educators and post the results on their web sites. Great Schools ([www.greatschools.org](http://www.greatschools.org)) provides qualitative ratings and quantitative information about schools and districts, including test scores, student and teacher demographics and spending information.

## Whole-School Transformation

As schools and districts around the country focus unprecedented attention and resources on improving their lowest-performing schools, the transformation of a small school in Oakland, California illustrates what’s possible when a school and community come together to create positive change for students.

For years, Whittier Elementary School was viewed as unsafe and was plagued by low student achievement and distrust among teachers, parents and school administration. But through a yearlong design process that engaged the entire school community, a new school –

Greenleaf Elementary – was created. The school, which serves the neighborhood’s low-income Latino and African American students, reopened in Fall 2007 based on a shared vision for student success and is now a source of pride for the community and the district.

In addition to their core academic subjects, students at Greenleaf take music, art and PE classes. The school partners with local community-based organizations that provide a range of supplemental programs and services for students and families, including counseling,

dental screening, and English and computer classes. Parents are respected leaders and partners in the school. Teachers collaborate with their colleagues and receive support and guidance from coaches.

Student test scores are one measure of the redesign’s success. In 2005, prior to the school redesign, only 14 percent of students were proficient in English/language arts and just 25 percent were proficient in math. Four years later, those numbers have more than doubled. By the close of the 2009-10 school year, 53 percent of students were proficient in English and 76 percent were proficient in math.

Greenleaf is one of many Oakland schools that have been redesigned as part of a district-wide reform model developed in partnership with Oakland Community Organizations, a local community organizing group. Oakland’s community-based approach to school transformation is featured in the documentary, *A Community Concern* ([www.acommunityconcern.org](http://www.acommunityconcern.org)) and in “Building A District-Wide Small Schools Movement,” a study by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University ([www.annenberginstitute.org](http://www.annenberginstitute.org)).



The lottery process in *Waiting for "Superman"*.  
Photo courtesy of  
Paramount Pictures.

## Resources

In addition to the resources listed below, visit the *Waiting for "Superman"* web site ([www.waitingforsuperman.com/action](http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/action)) for information about local school improvement activities in cities around the country, links to partner organizations and other local, state and national resources, and additional ideas on action steps and practices for improving educational opportunities and outcomes for all students.

### SCHOOLS FEATURED IN WAITING FOR "SUPERMAN"

#### **KIPP: Knowledge is Power Program, [www.kipp.org](http://www.kipp.org)**

A national network of college-preparatory public schools founded in 1994 by two classroom teachers. KIPP schools are now located in 20 states and the District of Columbia and are focused on five core pillars: high expectations, choice and commitment, more time, power to lead and a focus on results.

#### **Harlem Children's Zone, [www.hcz.org](http://www.hcz.org)**

A comprehensive system of programs and services for children and families living in a 100-block area of Central Harlem. The network includes in-school, after-school, social-service, health and community-building programs. The U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhood Initiative is modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone.

#### **Harlem Success Academy, [www.harlemsuccess.org](http://www.harlemsuccess.org)**

A network of seven public charter schools serving students in Harlem and the Bronx. Teachers use a balanced-literacy framework to create a reading culture at home and at schools. Harlem Success schools employ an expanded school day and longer school year.

#### **Summit Preparatory High School, [www.summitprep.net](http://www.summitprep.net)**

A public charter high school in Redwood City, California, that provides every student with a college-preparatory education as part of its standard curriculum. Each student has a personalized learning plan and is assigned a teacher advisor who serves as a counselor, mentor and champion throughout his or her four years of high school.

#### **The SEED School of Washington, D.C., [www.seedschooldc.org](http://www.seedschooldc.org)**

A public charter college-preparatory boarding school serving students in grades 6-12 in Washington, D.C. Ninety-six percent of all SEED graduates have been accepted to four-year colleges and universities. A second SEED School opened in Baltimore in 2008. More schools are planned through the SEED Foundation.

## OTHER INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS AND SCHOOL MODELS

### **826 National, [www.826national.org](http://www.826national.org)**

A network of nine nonprofit organizations working with students to improve their expository and creative writing skills. Each chapter offers after-school tutoring, field trips, workshops and in-school programs for individual children, classes and schools. 826 also supports teachers, provides services and resources for English language learners and publishes student work.

### **Big Picture Learning, [www.bigpicture.org](http://www.bigpicture.org)**

A network of more than 60 public high schools in the United States based on a model first developed at the Met Center of Providence, Rhode Island, in 1995. Big Picture Schools are public college-preparatory high schools (both charter and non-charter) that are distinguished by their focus on personalization and close student-teacher relationships. All students engage in internships related to their area of interest as part of their school week.

### **Boston Pilot Schools, [www.bostonpublicschools.org/node/20](http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/node/20)**

Created in 1994 through a partnership of the mayor, the districts and the teachers union. Pilot schools are part of the school district but have autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum/assessment and the calendar to better meet the needs of students and families.

### **Citizen Schools, [www.citizenschools.org](http://www.citizenschools.org)**

A growing national network of after-school education programs for middle-school students. Citizen School programs complement classroom learning by engaging students in after-school courses and projects led by adult volunteers and supported by professional educators.

### **Early College High School Initiative, [www.earlycolleges.org](http://www.earlycolleges.org)**

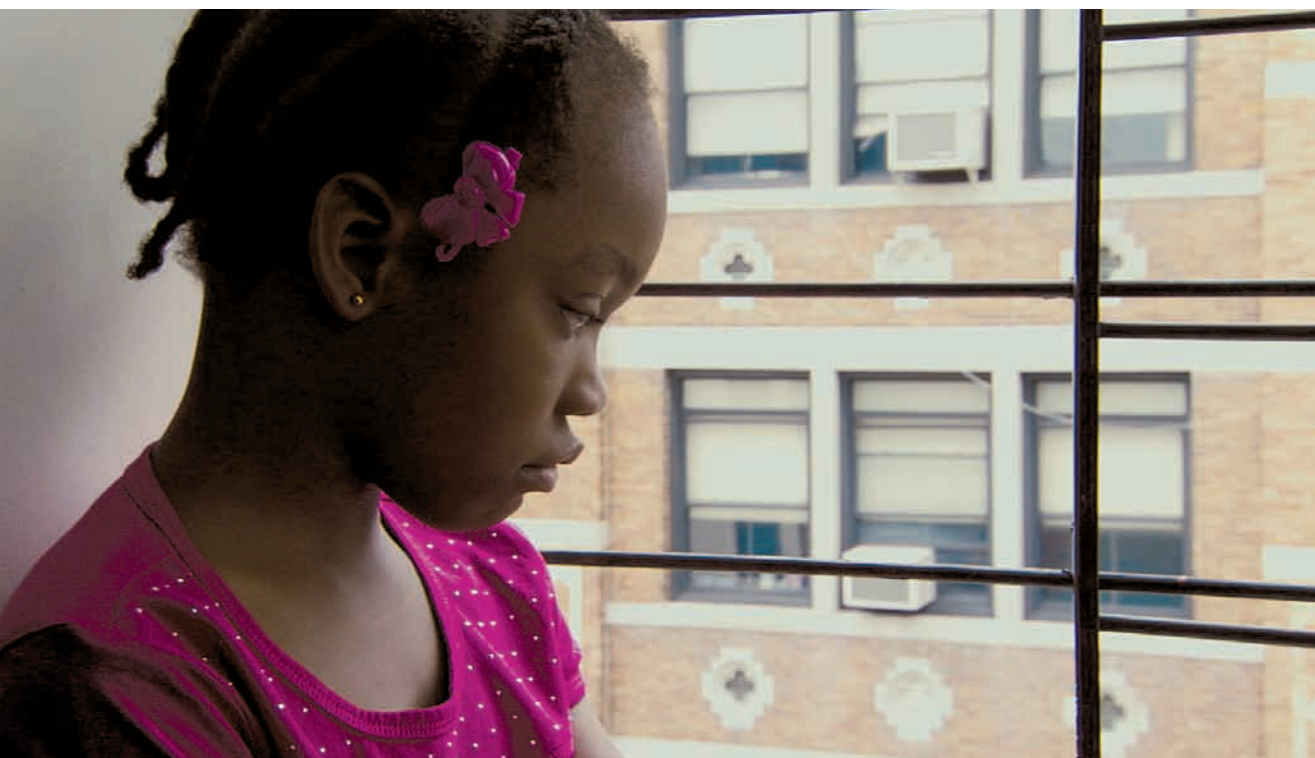
Early college high schools blend high school and college in a rigorous and supportive program, compressing the time it takes to earn a high school diploma and complete the first two years of college. Since 2002, partner organizations of the Early College High School Initiative have started or redesigned more than 200 schools in 24 states and the District of Columbia.

### **Talent Development Program and Schools, [web.jhu.edu/CSOS](http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS)**

Comprehensive programs for middle grades and high schools that combine research, a standards-based curriculum and extensive professional development to create positive and challenging learning environments. Both programs are run out of the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University.



Geoffrey Canada (standing) with students. Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures.



Bianca in *Waiting for "Superman"*.  
Photo courtesy of  
Paramount Pictures.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING

### **America's Promise Alliance, [www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org)**

Partnership of corporations, nonprofits, faith-based organizations and advocacy groups focused on ensuring that all young people graduate from high school ready for college, work and life. Activities focus on "Five Promises" that groups identify as key to student success: caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, an effective education and opportunities to help others.

### **America Diploma Project, [www.achieve.org/ADPNetwork](http://www.achieve.org/ADPNetwork)**

Initiative involving 35 states that have made the commitment to ensuring that every high school graduate is prepared for college or careers. Areas of focus include the development of rigorous high school standards, assessments and curriculum, and aligning expectations for high school graduates with the demands of postsecondary education and careers.

### **Common Core, State Standards Initiative, [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)**

State-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers to develop in all states common standards that will prepare students for college and careers.

### **ConnectEd, [www.connected.org](http://www.connected.org)**

California-based organization that advances practice, policy and research aimed at helping students prepare for both college and career through Linked Learning, an approach to high school instruction that combines strong academics with real-world experience in a wide range of fields, such as engineering, arts and media, and biomedical and health sciences.

### **Education Equality Project, [www.educationequalityproject.org](http://www.educationequalityproject.org)**

A national advocacy group founded in 2008 that is focused on closing the achievement gap in education through research dissemination and the promotion of local, state and national fiscal and regulatory policy changes.

### Education Trust, [www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)

Advocacy and research organization that promotes high academic achievement for all students, with an emphasis on closing the racial and socio-economic achievement gap. Activities include state and federal policy research and advocacy, development of resources for parents and community members and technical support for school districts.

### Edutopia, [www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org)

Web site of the George Lucas Educational Foundation, featuring articles, short documentaries and other resources on innovative schools and programs, classroom tips and recommendations for achieving district-wide change.

### National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, [www.publiccharters.org](http://www.publiccharters.org)

Provides research and advocacy in support of the development of high-quality public charter schools. Web site includes resources, data and information about charter schools and charter school policies by state and by school district.

### National Center on Time and Learning, [www.timeandlearning.org](http://www.timeandlearning.org)

Organization committed to expanding learning time to eliminate the achievement gap and provide a well-rounded education for children in high-poverty schools. Activities include research, policy advocacy and providing direct technical assistance to states, districts and schools.

### Project Grad, [www.projectgrad.org](http://www.projectgrad.org)

Based on a model first developed in Houston, Project Grad partners with schools and districts to increase academic achievement by working with a high school and its “feeder” elementary and middle schools with a focus on math instruction, literacy, classroom management and connecting students and parents to a range of supports and services.

## College Prep for All

In *Waiting for “Superman”*, Ann Jones was concerned that her daughter Emily was going to be “tracked out” of college-preparatory courses at the local high school, so she applied to Summit Preparatory High School, a public charter school in Redwood City, California, where all students graduate with the courses and skills necessary for acceptance to a four-year college or university.

In California and throughout the country, the majority of students graduate from high school without having taken a college-preparatory curriculum.

Low-income students of color in particular are often tracked into less challenging and engaging courses and graduate without the skills or the transcripts necessary for college success.

Like Summit Prep, a growing number of school districts in California are recognizing the inequities of the current system. They’re creating new pathways to college by making a college-prep curriculum standard for all students. In 1998, the San Jose Unified School District became the first in California

to require students to take the full college-prep sequence in order to earn their diploma. Although skeptics argued that the increased rigor would lead to adverse consequences, including lower grades and increased dropouts, this has not been the case. Instead, there has been a steady increase in student achievement and a narrowing of the achievement gap between Latino and white students at both the elementary and the high school level.

Several other districts in California have followed San

Jose’s lead, including Los Angeles Unified, whose decision to adopt a mandatory college-prep curriculum was the result of a multi-year effort led by a coalition of grassroots community groups. A case study detailing the San Jose Unified story is available on the Education Trust-West web site ([www.edtrust.org/west](http://www.edtrust.org/west)) and in *Diploma Matters*, a forthcoming book by former Superintendent Dr. Linda Murray, Education Trust-West’s Superintendent-in-Residence.

## DATA AND RESEARCH

### Great Schools, [www.greatschools.org](http://www.greatschools.org)

Web site includes test scores, teacher and student demographic data and parent ratings and reviews for 200,000 public and private schools, from preschool through 12th grade.

### National Center for Educational Statistics, [www.nces.ed.gov](http://www.nces.ed.gov)

Primary federal source for collecting and analyzing data related to education in the U.S. and other nations. Web site includes a Fast Facts section featuring information on trends in assessment and early childhood, elementary and secondary education.

### Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)

An international standardized assessment administered to 15-year-olds in 65 countries. Since 2000, assessments have been administered every three years to between 4,500 and 10,000 students in participating countries. The most recent assessment, conducted in 2009, covered reading, mathematics and science.

### National Student Clearinghouse, [www.studentclearinghouse.org](http://www.studentclearinghouse.org)

Provides participating high schools and school districts with information about the college attendance, persistence and degree attainments of their graduates. Database includes information on more than 3,300 college and universities.

## PARENT, STUDENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

### Alliance for Educational Justice, [www.allianceforeducationaljustice.org](http://www.allianceforeducationaljustice.org)

A new national alliance of youth-organizing and intergenerational groups focused on federal education policy reform. Priority issues include improving college access, advocating for youth voices in school governance and presenting alternatives to punitive school discipline policies.

### Coalition for Community Schools, [www.communityschools.org](http://www.communityschools.org)

Alliance of local, state and national organizations involved in the development and implementation of community schools. Focus includes fostering strong partnerships, sharing accountability for results, setting high expectations, building on the community's strengths and embracing diversity and innovative solutions.

### Communities for Excellent Public Schools, [www.ceps-ourschools.org](http://www.ceps-ourschools.org)

A newly formed coalition supported by more than two dozen local, state and national parent and community organizing groups. In addition to members' local and state organizing work, CEPS has launched a national campaign calling for dramatic action to improve low-performing schools by emphasizing parent, student and community engagement and research-based educational practices.

### Communities for Public Education Reform, [www.communitiesforpubliceducationreform.org](http://www.communitiesforpubliceducationreform.org)

Supports the growing field of education organizing by providing grants and technical assistance to community organizations working to ensure that parents and students have a strong voice in shaping policies that affect their public schools.

Emily (right) in  
Waiting for "Superman".  
Photo courtesy of  
Paramount Pictures



## Teacher Evaluation and Support: The Rochester Story

Teacher evaluation and support have taken center stage in districts throughout the country as part of a national focus on ensuring that every student is taught by a qualified and effective teacher.

For more than two decades, the Rochester City School District has partnered with the local teachers association on its Career in Teaching (CIT) Program, a model for supporting and evaluating new teachers and providing voluntary and required intervention and support for experienced but struggling teachers.

Established in 1987, CIT includes both a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) component, as well as a comprehensive program for supporting beginning teachers. Both programs match experienced teachers (those who have earned the Lead Teacher status) with colleagues. These lead teacher/mentors continue to teach while typically working with one or two peers, often in the same school to maximize opportunities for interaction and support.

The program provides a career ladder for experienced teachers, who receive additional compensation for serving as mentors and are energized by the opportunity and challenge of becoming an instructional leader. It's paid off for the district as well. It has perhaps been most effective at addressing the revolving door that plagues many urban school districts. Rochester boasts an 88 percent retention rate among new teachers. Twelve percent of new teachers resign or are deemed ineffective and are not rehired.

### Family Involvement Network of Educators,

[www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/fine-family-involvement-network-of-educators](http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/fine-family-involvement-network-of-educators)

A community of thousands of educators, practitioners, policy makers and researchers focused on strengthening family-school-community partnerships. FINE works to improve family involvement practices, promote evaluation and advance professional development in family involvement.

### National PTA, [www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org)

The country's largest volunteer child advocacy association working at the local, state and national level. PTA's mission is to serve as a powerful voice for all children, provide relevant resources for families and communities and serve as an advocate for the education and well-being of every child.

### Parent Teacher Home Visit Project, [www.pthvp.org](http://www.pthvp.org)

Partnership that provides training and support for implementation of parent-teacher home visits. This nationally recognized model for parent engagement is designed to build trust and accountability among parents and educators.

### Public Education Network, [www.publiceducation.org](http://www.publiceducation.org)

National association working to advance public school reform in low-income communities. PEN builds public demand and mobilizes resources for quality public education through a national constituency of local groups and individuals. Through its Give Kids Good Schools campaign, PEN is working to increase public engagement and provide tools to assist communities in their effort to improve schools for all children.

### Stand for Children, [www.stand.org](http://www.stand.org)

Children's advocacy organization working nationally and in seven states. The Stand for Children Network organizes and trains parents, educators and community members and seeks to build support for public education, including securing adequate funding and reforming educational policies and practices to increase educational opportunities for all children. Local Stand for Children affiliates have been key partners in convening local community conversations since the release of *Waiting for "Superman"*.

## VOLUNTEER AND SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

### Boys and Girls Club of America, [www.bgca.org](http://www.bgca.org)

One of the largest youth development organizations in the world, the Boys and Girls Club of America has 4,000 sites across the country that provide a safe place for young people to learn and grow. In 2010, the Boys and Girls Club released a white paper (available on its web site, [www.bgca.org/whywecare/Pages/EducationCrisis.aspx](http://www.bgca.org/whywecare/Pages/EducationCrisis.aspx)) detailing the role of community organizations in addressing the nation's dropout crisis.

### City Year, [www.cityyear.org](http://www.cityyear.org)

Through the City Year youth service corps, young people age 17 to 24 volunteer for a year of full-time community service, leadership development and civic engagement. City Year volunteers tutor and mentor school children, reclaim public spaces and organize after-school and other programs.

**Donors Choose, [www.donorschoose.org](http://www.donorschoose.org)**

An online resource that connects individuals to teachers around the country in need of resources and materials to support classroom projects.

**First Book, [www.firstbook.org](http://www.firstbook.org)**

Provides new books to children through schools and community programs. Since its founding more than 20 years ago, First Book has delivered more than 80 million books to programs serving children in need across the United States and Canada.

**Jumpstart, [www.jstart.org](http://www.jstart.org)**

Started by two Yale University students in 1993, Jumpstart connects college students and community volunteers with opportunities to work with preschool children. Volunteers spend an average of 10 hours per week in preschool classrooms supporting language and literacy skills.

**Mentor: National Mentoring Partnership, [www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org)**

National organization that works to develop and support high-quality mentoring programs through standards, cutting-edge research and the development of state of the art tools.

**United Way, [www.liveunited.org](http://www.liveunited.org)**

International organization that seeks to mobilize communities to advance the common good. In 2008, United Way initiated a 10-year program with key goals of improving education and reducing by half the number of high school dropouts. Local United Way organizations have been key partners in convening local community conversations since the release of *Waiting for "Superman"*.

Anthony. Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures.



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## Participant Media Staff

**John Schreiber**  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT,  
SOCIAL ACTION & ADVOCACY

**Liana Schwarz**  
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT,  
SOCIAL ACTION & ADVOCACY

**Jeff Sakson**  
VICE PRESIDENT, PUBLICITY

**Christina Lindstrom**  
DIRECTOR,  
SOCIAL ACTION & ADVOCACY

**Sarah Newman**  
RESEARCH MANAGER,  
SOCIAL ACTION & ADVOCACY

## Active Voice Staff

**Ellen Schneider**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**Shaady Salehi**  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR

**Daniel Moretti**  
OPERATIONS DIRECTOR

**Betsey Zeiger**  
ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATOR

## Walden Media

**Michael Flaherty**  
PRESIDENT

## Guide Contributors

**Roberta Furger**  
GUIDE WRITER

**Zaldy Serrano**  
DESIGN

**Heidi Swillinger,**  
**San Francisco Study Center**  
COPY EDITOR



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