Waiting for “Superman” Talking Points

About Waiting for “Superman”

*Waiting for “Superman,”* a controversial film about education in American schools, opening in select theaters across the county on September 24, is beginning a series of highly touted premiers. The film’s creators have expressed the hope that it will engender healthy discussion about the state of education today and swift action to improve our schools. Many who have seen the film, however, express concern that the movie tells only a selective story and that all the facts are not on the table.

AASA and other local and national education associations are working together to offer ways for school leaders to create healthy and informed discussion about the issues raised in the film. These talking points are a first step.

Talking Points

AASA, in partnership with The Learning First Alliance ([http://www.learningfirst.org](http://www.learningfirst.org)), prepared the following talking points to help members respond to the documentary film *Waiting for “Superman”* ([http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/synopsis](http://www.waitingforsuperman.com/synopsis)).

*Waiting for “Superman”* is an emotional film that follows five public school students who compete in lotteries to attend public charter schools. It is produced by Participant Media, a mainstream production company that tends to produce documentaries with a left slant, including *An Inconvenient Truth, Charlie Wilson’s War, Syriana,* and *Fast Food Nation.* This film was made by *Inconvenient Truth* producer Davis Guggenheim.

*Waiting for “Superman”* has been screened at a variety of film festivals, including Sundance, and is scheduled for public release on September 24, 2010. The film’s promotional web site is found at [http://www.waitingforsuperman.com](http://www.waitingforsuperman.com).

These talking points can be used by school leaders to engage their school communities in discussions about their public schools.

General Comment

- *Waiting for “Superman”* is very moving. However, we must remember that it is ultimately entertainment. Before making any sweeping claims about policy, we must study the research.

- While it is important to examine the challenges that exist in the public education system, which this film does, we must not merely criticize the system. Rather, we must
use the challenges we find to begin a dialogue about how to ensure that every student can succeed.

Importance of Community Engagement in School Reform

• We commend the film’s call to action on behalf of our public schools. Community involvement in education reform is crucial to its success.

Importance of Collaboration in School Reform

• *Waiting for “Superman”* is well made and says important things about the challenges of the public education system. However, the reductive messaging—“charters are good” and “teachers unions are bad”—oversimplifies complicated issues and threatens to thwart thoughtful discussions about education reform. The “us” versus “them” mentality that the film promotes encourages division rather than collaboration, which few would dispute, is necessary for true change to occur.

Charter Schools and Systemic Reform

• The movie should serve as a call to ensure that every public school is successful. We must develop a system in which all kids can be winners. Not everyone can win in a charter school lottery, but everyone can win in a public school.

• Good charter schools exist. We need to look for elements of success in them and then apply what we learn to struggling schools. But we must remember, as this film briefly states, that only one in five charter schools outperform traditional public schools. We must also remember that two in five charter schools perform worse than traditional public schools, a fact that this film does not acknowledge.

• While great charter schools do exist, not every school can be a charter. Given that 90 percent of American students attend traditional public schools, change in a single classroom, school, or even district is not enough. We need replicable, scalable, effective ways to provide all children the education that they need. No solution is as scalable, accessible, or accountable as a great neighborhood school.

Successful Traditional Public Schools

• While there are struggling public schools, there are also public schools across the country that help children from all backgrounds reach great academic heights. In them, unheralded teachers are doing extraordinary things every day. Unfortunately, this film did not feature those schools or teachers. It was a missed opportunity to shed light on the good that is happening in the vast majority of our public schools.
- Viers Mill Elementary School in Silver Spring, Maryland—right outside of Washington, DC—serves a high-needs population. Many of its students speak a language other than English at home. Most receive free or reduced-price lunch. Yet the school consistently scores well on standardized assessments. In fact, in 2010, 100 percent of 5th graders met state reading standards, and 100 percent of 4th and 5th graders met state math standards. Combine that with an environment in which teachers have a real voice and every child feels valued, and you have an outstanding school. Learn more at http://bit.ly/cWzrli.

- Detroit’s Carstens Elementary School, where nearly 100 percent of students are African-American and over 90 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch, is a beacon of light for its surrounding community. Back in 1997, “student achievement was zero,” but today students thrive. One-hundred percent of 3rd and 4th graders met state standards in math in 2010. They also outperformed the state as a whole in reading. And in addition, students here are good citizens: Despite being disadvantaged themselves, they know the importance of donating to relief efforts in Haiti or to a canned food fundraiser. Staff work hard to meet all the needs of students, and they pride themselves on their shared leadership. Learn more at http://bit.ly/aUnhW3.

- While this film focuses only on the challenges of urban schools, we must not forget that there are significant challenges in educating rural and suburban students as well. In addition, there are significant challenges in working with certain student groups who were completely ignored in this film, such as students with disabilities. Yet there are great schools overcoming all those challenges every day.

- Consider Laurel Hill Elementary School in Laurel Hill, North Carolina. The school performs well above state averages on end-of-grade tests, despite the fact that over 70 percent of the student body receives free or reduced-price lunch. And students with disabilities perform particularly well at Laurel Hill compared to their peers statewide, thanks in part to a well-established inclusion system. The school also has the highest attendance rate in its district, no mean feat in a rural area where kids historically missed school frequently to hunt and fish. And the school’s teacher turnover rate is below that of the state and district, indicative of a teaching and learning environment where people want to work. Learn more at http://bit.ly/cWffAe.

Please visit http://www.aasa.org for additional information.