

**To:** *Rethinking Schools*

**FROM THE DESK OF:** Lois Lane, reporter, *Daily Planet*

**DATE:** November 1, 2010

# From the Cutting Room Floor

**A**s soon as I heard about the film *Waiting for Superman*, I knew I had to chat with Clark's foster mother. I called her in Kansas: "Mrs. Kent, you must be so proud that Clark is a Hollywood star, the champion of public education. What do you think of the film?"

*"Lois, actually the film is very disturbing to me. As you know Clark suffered from a severe personality disorder; it was more debilitating than kryptonite. His savior fantasy was relentless. He would sneak out of the house and slip into tights and a cape in phone booths and then insist that the people need to be rescued from evil and removed from their communities for their own protection..."*

A few weeks later, I attended a preview of *Waiting for Superman*, followed by a panel discussion with Lesley Chilcott, the producer. I was hoping to get a scoop for the *Daily Planet*. Echoes of this salvation narrative filled the auditorium. *We* (reformers) are saving the (mostly Black and Brown) *children* from *them* (teacher unions, public schools). Audience members asked why there was no discussion of how disinvestment and inequitable school funding had ravaged communities of color; why there was no mention of the substantial private sector dollars that have been contributed to charter schools or the Harlem Children's Zone; why good public (non-charter) schools were left out of the story; why powerful community organizing in urban communities across the nation was nowhere to be found in the film; why schools in states without teacher unions weren't doing so well.

Chilcott responded, "This is just a film. A film can't do everything and can't contain all of the stories. We needed to tell a strong narrative about the crisis in public education and why we need to save these children. We couldn't dig deeply into other issues like finances or race."

I worry about salvation stories from people who argue that the public only understands simple narratives. Public education has historically betrayed, and miseducated, poor communities and communities of color. But *how* we tell that story matters. Like cutting out construction

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paper figures, film edits are strategic and political—not idiosyncratic or accidental. *Waiting for Superman*'s racialized drama and affect animates the “crisis” of public education by bleaching out histories of racism and class exploitation, inequality gaps, finance inequities and the privatization of the public sphere. Chilcott told the audience: “We chose the lottery as the spine of the film because it was the cruelest metaphor we could find to represent the crisis in public education.”

I turned to the person next to me, “Did she say cruelest or coolest?” *Cruelest*. Unions are blamed for the sadism of the lottery, while charter schools, laminated from critique, save the day.

**“I worry about salvation stories from people who argue that the public only understands simple narratives.”**

**“I don’t have x-ray vision but it wasn’t hard to see through some of this smokescreen.”**

I let my mind wander into the editing room where *Waiting* was produced, to imagine what else was excised from the film. I don’t have x-ray vision, but it wasn’t hard to see through some of this smokescreen. The missing stories and context were endless, but four *stories not told* may suffice: questions of money, charters’ real performance, communities enraged and yet held hostage by corporate takeover of public institutions, and the unanswered question of who is responsible for the public good when privatization fails.

## **Money**

Questions of money haunt this film—largely for the mute button pressed when fiscal matters arise. Critical aspects of financing are aggressively neglected. First, the grotesque, cumulative consequences of *finance inequity* in low-income communities of color are never mentioned—the unpaid “educational debt” that Gloria Ladson Billings has so eloquently described. The decay of urban education is represented as an inevitable consequence of being public and unionized—no mention that these schools have been starved for resources for decades.

Thus it is curious—to the point of falsification—that the economics behind the Harlem Children’s Zone, for instance, are not explained in the film. HCZ outspends local schools at \$16,000 per child in the classroom annually, and thousands more in out-of-class spending. This highly praised model for reform—now being exported to England and Europe—receives two-thirds of its funding from private sources. Indeed, HCZ received over \$50,000,000 last year in private contributions and recently celebrated a grant from Goldman Sachs for \$20,000,000. These investments may support good programs, but private contributions cannot replace public investment. Left behind are questions of sustainability, equity, what happens to the schools and community-based organizations outside the promise zone, and the democratic control of public institutions.

Second, and in contrast, the film makes no mention of the stunning evidence that is accumulating that *strategic public investment matters*. It would have been easy, and ethical, to include the remarkable academic gains accomplished through finance equity funding in New Jersey, or examples of high-quality traditional public schools in low-income communities. As David Sciarra of the Education Law Center in Newark, NJ, pointed out in response to Mark Zuckerberg’s \$100 million Facebook pledge: “The state cut \$42 million from the Newark schools this year, resulting in a loss of 500 teachers and staff. The Zuckerberg pledge—\$20 million per year over five years—comes at an opportune time. But it cannot replace fair state funding, sustained on an annual basis.”

Third, and perhaps most occluded, are questions about *who is subsidizing the production of demand*—who are the 21<sup>st</sup> century “Mad Men” behind this campaign? Who is making money in the rush to charter, who is spending money to fuel the unrelenting narrative of public education

as a failure and who is subsidizing the popular clamor—both real and manufactured—for alternatives? How is power being reconstituted out of the hands of communities and into the pockets of an elite financial sector whom Diane Ravitch has called “the billionaires boys club”? How are pain and profit braided?

An article by Juan Gonzalez, writer for the *Daily News*, sheds some light on the cost of marketing charter schools in New York City, in this case, the Harlem Success Academy:

*In the two-year period between July 2007 and June 2009, Harlem Success spent \$1.3 million to market itself to the Harlem community, the group’s most recent financial filings show. Of that total, more than \$1 million was spent directly on student recruitment. The campaign included posters at bus stops, internet and radio ads, mass mailings of glossy brochures to tens of thousands of public school parents in upper Manhattan and the Bronx, and the hiring of up to 50 community residents part-time to go door-to-door in Harlem soliciting applicants. All of this was done to fill a mere 900 seats.*

The cruel lottery was, after all, a well-financed advertising campaign mobilized to produce a public performance of desperation and demand. Many public schools are over-subscribed and by law use a lottery, but send a letter in the mail—without staging a high drama auction for admission.

Fourth, we hear little of the irony that the very people who are celebrating Facebook, hedge fund, Gates, Broad and Walton investments in charters are the very people who object to tax reform and advocate radical cuts in public education budgets. This shameful parody could be no more apparent than in Newark. Imagine a cartoon showing New Jersey Governor Chris shaking hands with Facebook’s Zuckerberg. The caption could read, “Manhattan was purchased for \$24 in 1626; Newark was purchased for \$100,000,000 in 2010.” *Priceless*, with a smiling Mayor Corey Booker in the background.

## **Who Needs Evidence?**

If issues of money are silenced in the film, empirical evidence on the well-studied impact of charters is severely distorted.

Late last night, with the help of Jimmy Olson, I snuck back into the editing room of the movie and almost slipped on a simple thank-you note:

*“Thanks for not mentioning our test scores or attrition rates or percentage of English language learners, students in special education and teacher turnover. We owe you.”*

Indeed.

The best national data, published in the CREDO study by Stanford University researchers, suggest that 17% of charters outperform neighboring schools, and the New York City data are somewhat better than national averages. National and small local studies consistently document that charters tend to be more segregated than neighboring

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schools, exacerbate local patterns of segregation, under-enroll English language learners and special education students and have high attrition or charter leakage/push-out rates.

I’ve attached a compilation of charter impact studies cataloguing the empirical evidence in terms of student achievement, equity, charters’ impact on segregation/integration, levels of parent engagement, experience of educators and levels of innovation and innovation contagion to neighboring schools. Needless to say, the empirical story revealed in these studies—by charter supporters, critics and agnostics—is far more complex than the Hollywood narrative.

Now, I have nothing against individual charter schools. Most of my grandchildren are working in them, for a pittance I might add, and long hours, because they can’t get jobs anywhere else. But it seems clear that charters alone—enrolling 3% of all students—can’t save public education. And they just might be swept into efforts to dismantle it.

### **A Nation Seduced/a Nation Enraged**

The film advertises well the “demand” for charters, but fails to document the equally powerful community protests mobilized across the country, in response to what many consider a “charter invasion.” In many communities one can find *desire* for education alternatives braided with a double-edged *outrage*. Outrage is rightly targeted at the traditional public school system which hasn’t delivered quality, equity, sustainability or democratic schooling, but outrage is increasingly directed at a charter movement that has made and broken promises to local communities, while colonizing schools no longer accessible as local public institutions.

A quick glance at another piece by Juan Gonzalez gives us a sense of the disruption and inequities experienced, for instance, during co-location of charters in existing public school buildings:

*No one was expecting the moving men when they arrived Thursday morning at PS 123 in Harlem. Not Principal Beverly Lewis, nor any of her staff, nor any of the school’s parent leaders.*

*“These strangers suddenly appeared, went up to the third floor, removed the cylinder locks from a bunch of classroom doors and started moving out all the furniture and computers, and piling everything up in the gym,” said one teacher who was conducting a summer school class when the men arrived.*

*The tense confrontation that followed reveals why Harlem has become Ground Zero in a growing neighborhood resistance to mayoral control of schools. It is a wakeup call to the politicians in Albany not to give Mayor Bloomberg a blank check to run roughshod over parents and teachers. The moving men claimed they had orders to empty and refurbish all the school’s third-floor rooms to make way for an expansion of the Harlem Success Academy.*

Thus, back on the editing room floor, I was intrigued to find a multi-volume collection of articles about parents in Washington, DC,

casting their votes against the Michelle Rhee regime, youth in Newark demanding quality schools in their communities, grandmothers and mothers in Chicago sitting in to protect a local school from closing, educators and students in Cleveland and Watts seeking educational justice, teachers and community members throughout Harlem, the Bronx and Red Hook in Brooklyn protesting the closing of schools, the testing fiascos, the opening of charters, the abuses of mayoral control, the alienation of parents and community, the privatized, elite occupation of their public schools.

## **The Mo(u)rning After Privatization?**

For more than a century, scholars, writers and educators, including Carter Woodson, W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, and many since, have published scathing critiques of racial (in)justice and public education. But these same writers have always insisted that democracy requires a well-financed and equitable public education system. Given the sustained historic commitment in the African American community for quality education, it is a perverse irony that Black and Latino pain have become the sexy lubricant for selling the privatization of education; and as infuriating that the very Wall Street hedge fund managers who got us into our current financial mess are now redesigning schools in these neighborhoods.

The ideological twinning of charter branding with public sector assault seems particularly insidious. One could imagine that the former project—the campaign for charters—wouldn't need to simultaneously attack the very base of public education. And yet although many charters began as social justice alternatives, the charter campaign has been conjoined with the hollowing and gentrification of the public sector. What began as a model of educational innovation, *initiated by teacher unions*, has been coopted, under corporate leadership, into national policies for deregulation and “free enterprise”—with no safety net for youth or communities.

So it occurred to me that perhaps we need to anticipate what happens after this round of reforms—if public systems are dismantled and privatization doesn't quite work out. I imagined asking Colin Powell to comment on questions of domestic occupation and exit, as he has on global occupations and exit strategies. I conjured his response to be something like:

*When you declare war, even on public education, you need a strategic vision and also a plan for sustainability or else you render everyone vulnerable—soldiers, educators, parents, concerned citizens, children. You can't take people out on a limb, destroy their local institutions and then say, 'Oops, sorry, it didn't work out.' This is a great American tragedy we keep repeating.*

When privatization fails, what is our exit strategy? Will we be able to rebuild public education after we have destroyed the infrastructure,

**What began as a model of educational innovation, initiated by teacher unions, has been co-opted, under corporate leadership, into national policies for deregulation and ‘free enterprise’—with NO safety net for youth or communities.**

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smothered community passions, wiped out the innovation and dedication of educators, after we have curdled the desires of children?

*Waiting for Superman* circulates a dangerous narrative, one more damaging for what is excluded than what is contained. We might just have to resurrect an online version of the *Daily Planet* to get a more complex story out, one that takes seriously the deep inequities that have historically scarred our public education system, the desires and outrage of communities seeking the best for their children, the strategic investments that would matter for all. Or perhaps we could federally subsidize mass subscriptions to *Rethinking Schools*.

Thanks for launching this discussion,

*Lois Lane (aka Michelle Fine)*

P.S. To set the record straight (so to speak): It’s true that 60 years ago I was head over heels in love with Superman. It was the 1950s and heteronormativity was the rage.

Today, I’m no longer waiting for Superman. I’m dating Zelda from the *Dobie Gillis* show.

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## THE PROMISE

### Student Achievement:

To what extent do charters improve student achievement in terms of:

Reading

Math

Graduation

Drop-out/Push-out

College Going

### Editor's note:

*These charts summarize the research on charter school impact on student achievement, equity, parent engagement, teacher quality and turnover, and innovation. Forthcoming from Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine, Teachers College Press.*

## EVIDENCE

The best evidence comes from the CREDO study; most studies suggest that most charters do as well as or less well than traditional public schools on achievement tests; 17% outperform local schools.

There are studies reviewing the same database with conflicting results (Hoxby vs. Reardon; Hoxby vs. Roy and Mischel).

There is some evidence on the positive impact of NYC charters but underenrollment of ELL and special education students makes the comparisons to local schools difficult.

There are very few studies of charter attrition rates, studies of drop-out or push-out, graduation rates or college going, although substantial anecdotal information about high turnover/push-out rates; shifting class size across grade levels; concern voiced by parents that youth are being sent “back” to public schools mid-semester.

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## THE PROMISE

### Equity:

To what extent do charters implement equitable admissions policies?

Access for English language learners

Access for special education students

Segregation

## EVIDENCE

Every published study of charter admissions and recruitment documents underenrollment of English language learners and students in special education.

Studies from Detroit and Minneapolis indicate that charters are more racially segregated than other public schools.

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## THE PROMISE

### Parent Engagement:

Democratic engagement of parents and community

Parental satisfaction

Parental satisfaction over time

## EVIDENCE

Some individual schools appear to be quite committed to parental engagement, particularly in campaigns for charter support.

Some evidence of higher levels of parental satisfaction, diminishing over time.

Anecdotal evidence on communities and parents voicing concern about their exclusion from decisions about school closings, charter openings and charter governance.

New York State Charter Association is expressing reservations about requiring Parent Councils.

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### Experience, Quality and Retention of Educators:

Experience

Turnover

Charter educators tend to be less experienced, less qualified and less well-paid than traditional school educators.

Charter schools have higher teacher turnover than traditional schools.

Darling-Hammond (2010)  
Dingerson, Miner, Peterson and Walters (2008)

Henig (2008)

Stuit and Smith (2009)

Wells (2008)

### Innovation:

To what extent do charter schools inspire innovation within traditional local schools?

and

To what extent do charter schools reflect innovative practices?

No evidence of innovation contagion in neighborhood schools.

Some studies point to a draining of motivated students, families and/or faculty.

Anecdotal evidence points to conflicts between charters and traditional schools that are co-located in the same building.

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