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Why Is Public Television Against Public Schools?

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You'd think that that public television would support public education, but you'd be wrong. The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) has gotten in bed with the billionaires and conservatives who want to privatize our public schools. PBS has nary a word to say about the big money -- from folks like the Walton family (Walmart), Microsoft founder Bill Gates, Eli Broad, business titan and former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, media mogul Rupert Murdoch, Joel Klein (former NYC schools chancellor and now a Murdoch employee), and their ilk -- that has been funding the attack on public schools and teachers unions. They've donated big bucks to advocacy groups, think tanks, and candidates for school boards who echo the their party line.

PBS and its local stations have fallen all over themselves to promote "Waiting for Superman," a documentary film that could easily be mistaken for a commercial on behalf of charter schools. In contrast, missing from the lineups on most PBS affiliates is a remarkable new documentary film, "Go Public," about the day in the life of a public school system in California. The film celebrates public schools without ignoring their troubles. Americans who care about public schools should contact their local PBS affiliates and urge them to broadcast "Go Public."



50 filmmakers, 50 subjects
28 schools, 1 day

GO PUBLIC
A Day in the Life of an American School District

Click to view the trailer for
the feature documentary film

The graphic features a yellow school bus on the left, with a group of stylized human figures in black and white below it, appearing to support the bus. To the right of the bus, the text '50 filmmakers, 50 subjects' and '28 schools, 1 day' is written in orange. Below that, 'GO PUBLIC' is written in large green and black letters, followed by 'A Day in the Life of an American School District' in orange. At the bottom right, a button with a white background and black border contains the text 'Click to view the trailer for the feature documentary film'.

On PBS, there's a virtual broadcast blackout of major critics of this assault on public education. One of them is historian Diane Ravitch, author of ten books about education, including *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010) and *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (2013). As Assistant Secretary of Education in the administration of President George H.W. Bush, she was a fan of charters and vouchers, but has since recanted her support. Ravitch got a few minutes on the "Charlie Rose Show" last year

but has otherwise been persona-non-grata on PBS. (Bill Moyers, whose show is independently produced but which is broadcast on many of PBS affiliates, interviewed Ravitch several weeks ago in a segment called "[Public Schools for Sale?](#)").

PBS has failed to report on, much less investigate, one of the most well-funded political campaigns in the last few decades -- the propaganda crusade to disparage public schools and public school teachers. Across the country, a handful of billionaires, most of them with no experience as school teachers or administrators, have orchestrated a powerful crusade to persuade the public and elected officials that public education is a failure.

Their solution includes charter schools, vouchers (frequently called "opportunity scholarships"), business-style management, high-stakes testing to evaluate both students and teachers, weakened teachers unions, and the "parent trigger" law that California and several other states have adopted to allow disgruntled parents to turn public schools into privately-run charter schools, typically with the support of corporate-funded front groups, like Parent Revolution.

The billionaires supply the money but others do most of the talking. The chief cheerleaders include Michelle Rhee (former Washington, D.C. school chief who now runs Schools First, a corporate-funded lobby group), Wendy Kopp (founder of Teach for America), Geoffrey Canada (founder of Harlem Children's Zone), Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and Klein. They routinely get to spew their propaganda on PBS. In 2007, for example, PBS included a glowing profile of Rhee in its 12-part series on education and she's been a PBS favorite ever since. In 2008 and 2009, the Broad Foundation -- one of the biggest backers of school privatization -- provided Rose's show with funding to conduct a series of interviews about education; it included full-hour conversations with Kopp, Rhee, and Duncan. Rhee appeared on Rose's show last year, too.

A year ago, PBS broadcast an hour-long documentary by its education correspondent John Merrow, "Rebirth: New Orleans," about the state's takeover of that city's public schools after Hurricane Katrina, transforming an unprecedented number of them into charter schools. The documentary -- which relied primarily on interviews with pro-charter advocates and a handful of critics -- concluded that privatizing New Orleans' public schools was a good idea.

What appears to be a grassroots movement of public school parents is actually a top-down corporate-funded lobbying initiative. Last month, for example, Families for Excellent Schools -- a pro-charter school group funded by the Walton family (Walmart heirs) and Wall Street financiers -- spent \$3.6 million on TV ads over a three-week period to [attack New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio](#) for his opposition to giving charter schools free space in the city's public schools. The ringleader of this business-funded lobby is Eva Moskowitz, a former NYC councilwoman who operates 22 city charter schools with millions of dollars in assets and earns a \$475,000 salary.

The corporate big-wigs are part of an effort that they and the media misleadingly call "school reform." What they're really after is not "reform" (improving our schools for the sake of students) but "privatization" (business control of public education). They think public schools should be run like corporations, with teachers as

compliant workers, students as products, and the school budget as a source of profitable contracts and subsidies for textbook companies, consultants, and others engaged in the big business of education.

Not surprisingly, this education agenda bears a striking resemblance to the broader corporate and conservative attack on government in general, particularly taxes on business and the rich and regulations that protect workers, consumers and the environment.

PBS once received a significant amount of money from the federal government. But conservatives saw to it that Washington gradually slashed much of that subsidy from what used to be called "educational television." To keep going, PBS stations around the country have relied more and more on financial support not only from "viewers like you" but also from big corporations and their foundations. The people chosen to run PBS and many of its local affiliates are no longer experienced broadcasters but sycophantic fundraisers.

So when it comes to assigning reporters and camerapersons to poke behind the wall of billionaire backing for school privatization, public TV has been, for the most part, missing-in-action.

Perhaps the most egregious example of PBS's unfair and unbalanced approach to public schools is its hyper-support of "Waiting for Superman."

The film portrays the public school system as a total failure, beyond redemption or reform. It follows several students as they attempt to get into a private charter school that is portrayed as superior in every way. Director Davis Guggenheim skillfully tells the stories of these children and their families so that we can't help but root for them to win the lottery and get into the charter schools that, we're led to believe, will unleash their potential rather than stifle their creativity. The film boils down the problems facing public education as simply one of bad teachers, whose jobs are protected by corrupt unions. The film demonizes teachers' unions as the destroyer of public schools, while celebrating charters as the panacea for what ails American education. It reduces most teachers and their union leaders to one-dimensional, cartoon-like figures.

Not surprisingly, the film's villain is Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. One of its heroes is Geoffrey Canada, charismatic founder of the Harlem Children's Zone, which has raised millions of dollars from business, foundations and government to lavishly fund charter schools and social services in a small part of that New York neighborhood. Another hero is Michelle Rhee, who served for several years as the antiunion superintendent of Washington, DC,'s public schools and now runs StudentsFirst, which is funded by the same billionaires and which lobbies for the same free-market approach to education that "Waiting for Superman" extols.

"Waiting for Superman" was produced by Walden Media, which is owned by Phil Anschutz, a right-wing businessman who owns two of the nation's premier conservative publications (the Weekly Standard and the Washington Examiner) and whose foundation has donated \$210,000 to the antiunion National Right to Work Legal Defense Fund. Anschutz is also a backer of Americans for Prosperity, the political war chest founded by the right-wing Koch brothers and has donated to Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, who has made dismantling labor

unions a key part of his policy agenda. Anschutz also spent \$10,000 in 1992 to promote Colorado's Proposition 2, which let private property owners discriminate against gays and lesbians, \$150,000 to the Mission America Foundation, which condemns homosexuality as "deviance," and \$70,000 to the Discovery Institute, which attacks the idea of evolution and proclaims that "Darwinism is false."

In an essay in the *New York Review of Books*, called "[The Myth of Charter Schools](#)," Ravitch summarized the major themes of "Waiting for Superman."

"American public education is a failed enterprise. The problem is not money. Public schools already spend too much. Test scores are low because there are so many bad teachers, whose jobs are protected by powerful unions. Students drop out because the schools fail them, but they could accomplish practically anything if they were saved from bad teachers. They would get higher test scores if schools could fire more bad teachers and pay more to good ones. The only hope for the future of our society, especially for poor black and Hispanic children, is escape from public schools, especially to charter schools, which are mostly funded by the government, but controlled by private organizations, many of them operating to make a profit."

Not surprisingly, "Waiting for Superman" fails to point out that teachers' unions have been the strongest advocate for more public school funding, smaller class sizes and improved facilities and resources. Nor does it note charter schools' uneven track record. A [2009 study](#) by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University discovered that only 17 percent of charter schools provided a better education than traditional public schools. Thirty-seven percent actually offered children a worse education. In other words, on balance, charters make things worse, even though many of those schools "cream" the best students from regular public schools. The same Stanford center recently released a study that called for stronger monitoring and review processes for charter schools. Other research confirms that charters rarely deliver on the promises their backers make.

Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates -- America's richest man, who has donated a substantial part of his fortune to various efforts to privatize public schools and appears in "Waiting for Superman" -- helped fund the film and sang its praises at various film festivals. Discussing the film at the Toronto International Film Festival, he said that school districts should cut pension payments for retired teachers. The national PTA, which is supposed to be an advocate for public schools, has shown "Waiting for Superman" at its national convention and at its state and local meetings. Some have wondered if its decision to promote the film has anything to do with its receipt of a \$1 million donation from the Gates Foundation.

A few years ago PBS broadcast an interview with "Waiting for Superman" director Guggenheim. In its promotion for the interview, the PBS websites said that "[t]he movie is about the sad state of public education." In describing the film, PBS website explained: "It follows five elementary school students trying to get a better education by winning lottery spots at high performing public charter schools."

In other words, PBS accepted Guggenheim's perspective as a fact rather than a point-of-view. This is just another example of PBS' blatant bias.

But my faith in democracy and grassroots activism has been partly restored by the groundswell of support for "Go Public," which in the world of documentaries about education is like "the little engine that could." Produced on a bare-bones budget without any major corporation or foundation backing, "Go Public" has nevertheless gradually become a contender in the fight for Americans' hearts and minds regarding public schools. It has and a growing following around the country among parents and other public school advocates.

Made by Jim and Dawn O'Keeffe, documentary filmmakers from Pasadena, California, "Go Public" has been gaining visibility and acclaim from educators around the country for its honest portrayal of public schools. From the outset, the scrappy O'Keefes were willing to go almost anywhere to show the film, including churches and synagogues, colleges, and even living rooms. Mostly through word of mouth and social media, the film has gotten more attention, and earned enthusiastic [reviews](#). It has been screened and won awards at film festivals. Edutopia named "Go Public" one of the five best educational documentaries of the past two years.

The O'Keefes have been invited to show the film at educational conferences. They now have an 18-month contract with [Tugg](#) for theatrical screenings anywhere across the U.S.

And -- lo and behold! -- last month the filmmakers signed a three-year contract with the National Educational Television Association, which is a distributor for PBS. The film uploads on April 28, making it available to all PBS stations across the country.

But that doesn't mean that local PBS affiliates will broadcast the film. It simply means that it will soon be available to all these stations. It will require local viewers -- including organizations that support public education -- to contact their local PBS stations and encourage them to show "Go Public." This has already happened in a handful of cities. For example, [KLCS](#) in Los Angeles has scheduled its broadcast of "Go Public" for April 29 at 9:30pm.

The film deserves a large audience.

"We've seen a stream of films promoting the school reform agenda, but here's a piece about a different kind of movie, one that actually celebrates public education," wrote Valerie Strauss, the *Washington Post's* education columnist.

"I drove 65 miles to Pasadena expecting a political message. Instead I saw a human portrait of the good we do in public schools," tweeted someone who came to one of the O'Keeffe's community screenings.

Stephen Schroth, a professor of education at Knox College, called "Go Public" "perhaps the finest film ever made about the challenges and successes of public education in the United States."

Bill Sherwood, a school board member in Davenport, Iowa, said:

"Anyone who has worked inside our schools will find much that is familiar and for those who have not had the honor to participate in the wonderful enterprise of public education this film will open your eyes. Unlike "Waiting for Superman" that focused on a very narrow segment of public schools this film captures the essence of what occurs in the vast majority of our districts. This is not to say that we are perfect, we are not, and we have some very difficult issues that we are, and must take on, but wonderful things are happening in our schools and we should not let some self serving legislator, talking head, or corporate boss tell us they are not."

In 2010, the O'Keeffes worked hard -- alongside their friends, neighbors, fellow church congregants, teachers, and other public school parents in Pasadena, California -- to persuade local voters to pass Measure CC, a \$120 a year (per property) tax increase to increase funding for PUSD in the wake of state budget cuts. The measure received 54 percent of the vote, a victory in most elections, but far short of the 66.6 percent needed in California to pass an increase in local taxes.

The outcome deeply disappointed and saddened the O'Keeffes, who believed that many of the voters -- particularly middle-class families who sent their children to private school or whose grown-up children were no longer in school -- fell for misleading stereotypes about public schools in general and PUSD in particular. It galvanized them to begin the journey that led to "Go Public."

"Go Public" is a remarkable 90-minute film that examines the daily realities of an urban public school system -- the Pasadena (California) Unified School District (PUSD), where two-thirds of the 18,000 students come from low-income families, where many parents are jobless, where many students live in homes where Spanish is the first (and in some cases only) language, and in a state where per-student funding ranks 47th in the country.

The film follows 50 people in 28 schools -- teachers, students, parents, a school board member, principals, a baseball coach, librarians, a school psychologist, volunteers, and the district superintendent -- during one day (May 8, 2012), from the time they wake up until the time they go to bed.

The O'Keeffes spent over a year assembling 50 teams of filmmakers, each of which followed one person. They included 10 student film crews (mostly high school students but also a sixth-grader) and 40 professional crews. Jim O'Keeffe trained the student crews, over two semesters, in conjunction with their media classes in documentary cinema verité techniques. Film industry professionals, as well as professors and recent graduates from the University of Southern California film program (where Jim O'Keeffe teaches cinematography) and Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara participated as directors and crew. USC and Brooks Institute also donated equipment to the student crews. Recent graduates served as mentors.

The O'Keeffes raised initial funds from friends, family and community members, and \$25,000 from a Kickstarter campaign, to help meet their \$150,000 production budget.

"Go Public" celebrates the small and large miracles that happen in PUSD classrooms every day. We see overcrowded classrooms, but we also see an elementary teacher who greets each student with a special word of support as he or she arrives in her classroom.

- The film shows us students participating in a pioneering middle-school robotics program. An elementary school teacher gets students excited about science by explaining how blood flows through arteries that keep their hearts beating. A music teacher instructs a jazz band at a high school where parents have to hold fund-raisers to pay for instruments. An elementary school teacher instructs students to play part of the Brandenburg concerto on their violins.
- We see a teacher patiently, persistently and lovingly instruct students with autism and Down's syndrome. Special needs students, who require smaller classrooms and specially-trained teachers, but whose cost is not fully reimbursed by the state government, comprise a significant portion of PUSD's student body.
- We witness a third-grader speaking Mandarin in one of the district's innovative dual-language program, where students become bilingual. At the end of the day, the Anglo father of another student in the dual-language Spanish program asks his son, "How do I say, 'How was school?' in Spanish. The boy replies without hesitation: "Como esta la escuela?"
- We see a security officer at a middle school who also leads the school's drum corps and choir, conducts the strings orchestra and sets up a mentoring program where high schoolers help younger students. In a middle school class, an English teacher compares the romantic feelings of a Shakespeare character with a Taylor Swift song. Later in the day, she teaches a drama class with kindergartners, encouraging them to use their imaginations to melt like snowmen and grow like flowers.
- We see students rehearsing for a musical play, learning to play guitars, painting and practicing a choral number during lunch break. After school is over, we watch parents juggling making dinner and helping their kids with homework, kids explaining their homework to their parents who don't speak English and a music teacher taking time out from preparing for the next day's classes to feed his infant. On a bus on the way to a game, the coach of a racially-diverse high school girls' softball team reminds them to avoid "mental mistakes." A high school girl who won a state oratory contest gives her speech at a school board meeting, explaining that she wants to become a chemical engineer, "a field bereft of African American women."
- The film shows Superintendent Jon Gundry visiting a class where students are designing rockets in conjunction with scientists from the nearby Jet Propulsion Lab, run by NASA. That night, Gundry is the subject of a protest by teachers, secretaries, custodians and librarians at a school board meeting, angry about pending layoffs.
- A teacher in the district's culinary arts and hospitality academy shows students how to make chicken cordon bleu. A middle school assistant principal mediates a conflict between two girls. A teacher in an "alternative" high school for high-risk students meets one-on-one to help a student with his homework. A social worker at an elementary school works with low-income Latino/a parents to train them to help their children with homework. In a crowded high school biology lab, a teacher trains the next generation of scientists, one of whom might invent a cure for cancer or a way to bring clean water to remote villages.
- A teacher describes how he spends most of his lunch breaks working individually with students who seek his help. Then we see him talking to a high-schooler who had been in prison but now wants to improve his grades so he can attend college. We cheer for him, even though the odds are long.
- In a school district where each high school guidance counselor is responsible for 450 students, we see one of them her devotion when meeting with a mother and her twin daughters to plan their schedules so they'll have the right courses to apply to college.

- An elementary school principal calls the school custodian "the hardest working guy on this campus," praising him for advising students and helping them get to class on time as well as keeping the school clean. A high school baseball coach, watering the infield with a hand-held hose after school hours, tells the camera: "I love my job. You'll never be a millionaire, but you'll be happy every day. I'll take that." A high school boy admits that sometimes he falls asleep if his teacher turns off the lights to show slides in class. Two boys walking home from high school debate the meaning of the word "ghetto."
- We watch a maintenance man repair the wiring in a light fixture while explaining that the school district has only four electricians for 39 buildings. Thanks to a \$100 donation from the PTA, an elementary school teacher works with students to plant a garden, where they can learn where their food comes from. We see a high school principal fixing an ancient copying machine. Later we see him talking to a teacher about complying with the state's disciplinary policies while, simultaneously, talking on both his cellphone and his office phone.
- A middle schooler puts up a sign, "Save Our School Library," which is targeted for closure due to budget cuts. She explains that the school library is "the only place where I can have an educated conversation with my friends."
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We know that a significant number of PUSD students will drop out before graduating from high school. We know that many of these students face violence in their neighborhoods and/or at home, a situation that, similar to combat, we would expect to result in students exhibiting the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The O'Keeffes don't downplay these harsh realities. In one scene in "Go Public," teachers, librarians, school counselors and their parent supporters appear at a school board meeting to protest yet another wave of layoff notices. Since 2007, the district has been forced to make about \$50 million in budget cuts due to declining state funding. It fired dozens of teachers, librarians and security guards. Last year, after the film was completed, 48 people -- including a middle school librarian who appears in "Go Public" -- were laid off. Even so, you can't watch this film without feeling hopeful about public schools and the students and teachers that populate them.

There is no narrator to offer hints about what we're seeing and what we should think about it. The O'Keeffes have no axe to grind other than to present a balanced exploration into the lives of these families and educators. The filmmakers know all the pitfalls and problems that confront public schools. They sent their own four children to PUSD schools -- three graduated in recent years and went to college. One is now a high school senior. It was not always an easy road for the family, but they persevered during frequent budget cuts, teacher layoffs, inadequate funding for the arts and sports, the revolving door of superintendents and top administrators, and the ideological and personal battles among school board members.

Although the film focuses on one school district, it could be about almost any public school system anywhere in the United States. This is what accounts for the film's enormously positive reception among parents, teachers, administrators, and public school advocates in inner cities, affluent suburbs, and rural towns.

Few documentaries make their way in commercial theaters. But almost everyone has access to a local PBS affiliate. Contact your local station and tell them that it is time for public television to "Go Public."

Peter Dreier teaches Politics and chairs the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His latest book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books, 2012).

Follow Peter Dreier on Twitter: www.twitter.com/peterdreier