

A Rhetorical Criticism of  
*Waiting for Superman*

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## **Introduction**

Education reform consistently remains at the forefront of our nation's political landscape. In 2001 the Bush administration launched the No Child Left Behind Act, which pushed standardized testing in an effort to measure improvement. The goal was to have all students perform at grade level on state tests by 2014. The Obama administration continued the push for educational progress with their Race to the Top initiative, which offered competitive grants to states pushing educational reform. However, even with these programs the United States continues to fall behind countries such as Canada, Finland and Japan in international tests such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Mehta). PISA measures higher order problem solving skills in math, reading, and science amongst fifteen year olds throughout the world. In 2012 Secretary of State Arne Duncan remarked that the United State's low scores must "serve as a wakeup call against educational complacency and low expectations" (Bidwell). Despite the concern, the most recently released PISA scores from 2015 show that the United States is still below the international average in math and only about average in reading (Kerr).

As the United States struggles to keep up with superior foreign education, public interest in the nation's school system has grown. In 2010 education reform went mainstream, with more than four documentaries released that year all tackling the subject of American education. One of the most acclaimed documentaries released was *Waiting for Superman* (hereafter *WFS*), directed by Davis Guggenheim. *WFS* explores public education in the United States and follows five students as they compete to get accepted to charter schools. Due to limited space in these charter schools, their acceptance is determined lottery style. The documentary gained nationwide success, winning the Audience Award for Best Documentary at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and Best Documentary Feature at the 2011 Critics Choice Movie Awards.

However, with success came criticism as teachers' unions slammed the documentary. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, writes that *WFS* "is a very simplistic movie that is factually wrong about who unions are, who we try to be, and has overly simplified the problem [...]" (Perry). In addition to resistance from teachers unions, many experts took issue with how *WFS* presents charter schools as the alternative to public schools. The idea for charter schools began in the 1970s when Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers, suggested that "local boards could charter an entire school with union and teacher approval" to explore new approaches in teaching (National Charter School Resource Center). Charter schools enter into a contract with an authorizing agency, which allows the school to make autonomous decisions regarding curriculum, personnel, and funding (National Charter School Resource Center). Although Guggenheim revealed he didn't want *WFS* to be viewed as solely a pro-charter narrative, it's difficult to ignore that each of the five children profiled in the film attempt to find educational solace by acceptance into a charter school.

*WFS* ignited a national discussion over public education in the United States. In order to better understand the influence of *WFS*, I will perform a close textual analysis of the documentary and explore the rhetorical strategies the film uses to persuade its audience. I will begin this paper by reviewing the relevant literature that pertains to the role of documentary in political and social movements. I will then describe the rhetorical situation surrounding *WFS*, as well as describe the method of close reading and reception studies. Through my analysis I argue that *WFS* employs rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos to successfully characterize the public school system as a failing institution. This failure is largely blamed on teachers unions who are vilified throughout the film and shown to be preventing progressive reforms from

passing. Lastly, through the use of identification *WFS* positions charter schools as the solution to overcome the failing public school system. The media success of *WFS* gave public education a powerful platform on which to be discussed. However, the narrative suggests a narrow view of public education that can be misleading for the general public.

### **Literature Review**

In his book *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols explored issues and concepts surrounding the genre of documentary. He makes a distinction between fiction and documentary explaining that instead of a story about the imaginary world, documentaries present an argument about the historical world (111). This distinction between an imaginary world and the real world is important because it shifts how the audience consumes information. Because documentaries give realistic representations of the world, it's tempting for the audience to believe the narrative at face value. However, Nichols explains that documentaries are not unbiased narratives and rather represent the views of individuals, groups, or agencies (111). In order to understand a documentary, one must first identify the different individuals, groups, or agencies that might have power over the film's narrative. Identifying outside biases will help the critic to understand possible political, social, or economic messages within a documentary.

Additionally, documentary is a popular medium to promote policies and social change. John Abraham Stover studied the role of documentary in portraying social movements. He spent two years in the field with New Day films, a cooperative film distribution company, and conducted media analyses, online surveys and interviews to understand how documentary functions in the social movement industry. Through his research Stover identifies that narratives remain a powerful artistic tool in successful documentaries. He states "activist filmmakers must

first and above all else provide audiences with compelling stories if their social and political messages are going to be received” (Stover 190). This is relevant to understanding the success of *Waiting for Superman*, since the film creates a compelling and emotional narrative built around personal anecdotes.

Although not examining documentaries specifically, John Blair expands on the ideas of narratives and the rhetoric of visual arguments within them. He writes, “because pictures, and especially films, both fictional and documentary, are wonderfully suited to telling believable stories, they provide an excellent medium for visual argument by means of narrative construction” (56). Visual elements in film give viewers a sense of truth, even if what they are watching is exaggerated half-truths or lies. Visual arguments can be more powerful than print or spoken arguments due to their evocative power (Blair 49). This explains some of the persuasive power behind documentaries and illustrates why people are inclined to trust documentaries.

Lastly, documentaries can be used to motivate action in response to social movements. In her dissertation “Documentary Film/Video and Social Change: A Rhetorical Investigation of Dissent,” Angela Aguayo explores how documentary films are used in social movements. She writes, “the activist documentary genre has the potential to be a vehicle of political agitation, a means to evoke political participation and grassroots spaces of resistance in the public sphere” (5). She outlines specific criteria for what constitutes activist documentary film: 1) it functions to open up a space for collective political action; 2) it is connected in some way to an action-focused social movement; 3) it intervenes in the process of social change by facilitating action beyond mere consumption and elaboration of identity; 4) activist texts get caught up into political discourse bigger than itself and circulate among a variety of mediums” (13). Aguayo argues that activist documentary film has rhetorical force in engaging with audiences interested

in social change. Her idea that cultural texts have the potential to be more than a sight of consumption and can prompt communicative production is helpful in understanding the role of documentaries in the public sphere. In the case of *WFS*, looking at the public's reaction to the film will allow us to understand how the film functions as a piece of rhetoric in the public sphere.

### **Rhetorical Situation**

*WFS* is not the first time the American public education system has been critiqued. In 1983 the Reagan administration released *A Nation at Risk*, a report that identified American schools were underperforming, thus preventing students from reaching their full potential. Released in the midst of the Cold War, the report utilizes militaristic language to describe the state of American education. According to the report, “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might as well have viewed it as an act of war” (*A Nation at Risk*). The report focused on the link between education and international economic competition, warning that for the United States to remain a competitive economic power, schools needed to improve. The report recommended strengthening high school graduation requirements and introducing more measurable standards to track student achievement. In the years that followed, numerous presidents tried to reform our education system with acts such as No Child Left Behind and the Race to the Top initiative. However, 27 years after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, *Waiting for Superman* continued the narrative that our education system is failing to prepare our students for success.

Davis Guggenheim, the director of *WFS*, is known for bringing controversial issues to the big screen. Most notably, Guggenheim also produced *An Inconvenient Truth*, which followed Al

Gore's campaign to end global warming. This film is often credited for bringing climate change to the forefront of American politics and for creating awareness about the environmental movement. Due to this past work, Paige Hermansen writes that, "liberal audiences had a reason to expect a liberal perspective from Guggenheim's films" (519). Guggenheim's past success made *WFS* an anticipated documentary.

The film revolves around two central narratives. The first storyline focuses on five students and their personal struggles with the public education system. The audience is first introduced to Anthony, a fifth grader from Washington D.C. Anthony lives with his grandmother since his parents are not in his life. Next is Daisy, a fifth grader from Los Angeles who has aspirations to go to medical school. Her father is unemployed, and she is surrounded by a struggling public school system. First-grader Francisco lives in the Bronx with his mother who constantly has to advocate for her son in a school that won't answer her questions. In Harlem, kindergartener Bianca lives with her mother who works multiple jobs in order to support Bianca's school tuition. Lastly, eighth grader Emily lives in Silicon Valley with her parents. Emily is the only Caucasian student to be featured and although her public school is not failing, she expresses a desire to attend her local charter school. In fact, the desire to attend a well-funded charter school is what connects all five kids. However, since charter schools have limited space, each family has to enter a lottery that will determine whether or not they are accepted. The narrative makes it clear that unless these kids are accepted, they will most likely be faced with a life of poor education and financial hardship (Trier 69).

The second storyline focuses on the politics of education reform in the United States. Bold graphics and animation accompany this storyline in order to illustrate the statistics that are discussed. The audience is first introduced to big name education advocates such as Geoffrey

Canada, president and CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone charter school. Canada is passionate about education reform and throughout the film recounts the obstacles he's faced in his attempts to enact change. Another prominent figure is Michelle Rhee, chancellor of Washington D.C school districts when *WFS* was filmed. Rhee's involvement with education reform on a political level is an extremely important element within this second storyline. As Rhee struggles to reform the D.C school system, the audience watches as she is faced with strong opposition from teachers' unions and organizations that make reform an almost impossible task. Lastly, this storyline heavily explores how tenured teachers affect the quality of education in America. The film illustrates how bad teachers get stuck in the system due to their inability to be fired. It argues that these types of teacher contracts are preventing educational progress. Together, these two integrated narratives shed light on the public school system at the macro and micro level to make an overall argument that the educational system is not working.

It's not surprising that the film caused much controversy upon release. Education is something many people take personally and have a direct investment in. In 2011 the Grassroots Education Movement, led by New York teachers Norm Scott and Julie Cavanagh, released a 65-minute film titled, "The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman." The film refutes many of the claims made in Guggenheim's *WFS*. Specifically, it argues that the corporate reform movement won't improve education, that charter schools aren't a silver bullet, and that teacher and union safeguards also protect children (Bruhn 49). It then describes the type of actual reform needed to help public education, such as smaller class sizes and equitable funding. "The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman" gave a voice to those who were underrepresented in Guggenheim's film.

## Methodological Discussion

In order to identify the rhetorical strategies utilized in *WFS* I will first perform a close textual analysis of the documentary. Carl Burgchart defines close textual analysis as a method that “studies the relationship between the inner workings of public discourse and its historical context in order to discover what makes the particular text function persuasively” (199). Rhetoricians engaging in close textual analysis focus on individual aspects of a text such as syntax, diction, format, and other stylistic features in order to understand the rhetorical effect the text has on an audience. Once this is achieved, Michael Leff explains, “the critic must move away from something that is given in the text to something that they themselves produce—an account of the rhetorical dynamics implicit within it” (378). In other words, once a critic performs a close reading of a text, they must find meaning within the patterns they’ve identified. In her book *Shaping Science with Rhetoric*, Leah Ceccarelli explains that close textual analysis is used to “explain how a text was constructed to invite a particular response in a particular audience” (6). Performing a close textual analysis allows a critic to focus exclusively on the text at hand and derive meaning from the implicit details within.

However, Ceccarelli also identifies some limitations with close textual analysis. Her concern is that by focusing so heavily on the internal elements of a text the critic forgets to explore the external influence a text had on its audience. She writes that “without looking beyond the text itself a close textual critic can make no confident claims” about the connection between a text and its function (7). In order to combat this limitation she suggests adding reception studies to close textual analysis. Reception studies encourages critics to supplement their analysis by also performing a close-textual analysis of the material audience members produce in response to the original text. Responses can be found in the form of books, peer reviews, social media posts

and more. By looking at the reception to a text, critics are able to better understand the influence of that particular artifact.

For this paper I will perform a close textual analysis on *Waiting for Superman* focused on tracing the lines of argument the film constructs. In the following sections I will explore how *WFS* uses common rhetorical appeals to argue that public schools in America are failing. I will then look at how the film characterizes teachers' unions and tenured teachers as the broken link that's causing the system to fail. Lastly I will discuss how *WFS* positions charter schools as the progressive solution to public schools.

## **Analysis**

The first argument introduced in *WFS* is that the public education system is failing. This is a foundational argument for the film to set up because every point to follow will revolve around this being true. In order to illustrate how the public education system is failing, *WFS* utilizes the common rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos. The film begins by making an ethical appeal. In the opening scene of *WFS* Guggenheim, who is both narrator and director, establishes himself as someone the audience can trust. He achieves this by building his ethos through his personal experience with public schools. Guggenheim recounts how in 1999 he produced a documentary about public school teachers and spent the entire year watching these teachers dedicate themselves to children. He states how these teachers "embodied a hope and carried with them a promise that the idea of public school could work." Here, Guggenheim positions himself as someone with prior knowledge on the topic of public education. He proves to the audience that he has spent enough time in public schools to know how they work and why the system is broken. This primes the audience to view him as a credible source and accept his point of view throughout the rest of the film. Furthermore, by saying that the teachers he worked

with believed the “idea of public school could work” Guggenheim characterizes public schools as an “idea” rather than a reality. The scene continues as Guggenheim describes the process of choosing a school for his own children. He states that his feelings about public education didn’t matter as much compared to his fear of sending his kids to a failing school. Guggenheim admits “every morning, betraying the ideals I thought I lived by, I drive by three public schools as I take my kids to a private school.” This insight into Guggenheim’s personal life characterizes him as someone who understands the plight of public school education and has a personal investment in the system. Building his own ethos in the beginning of the film allows Guggenheim to gain the audience’s trust. Not only is he a professional filmmaker who has relevant subject matter knowledge, he is also a parent with whom the audience can identify. By creating this connection in the beginning of the film the audience will more likely accept the future arguments that Guggenheim presents.

With his credibility established, Guggenheim turns to the stories of five inner-city school students in order to appeal to the audience’s emotions. This narrative is most explicitly highlighted through the story of second grader Daisy. We are first introduced to Daisy as she sits on her bed and tells the camera about her dreams to be a doctor and a nurse and a veterinarian. The film positions her in the foreground of the camera, creating an intimate moment between her and the audience. It’s heartwarming to watch a child believe wholeheartedly in their potential and as a result we want to see Daisy succeed. Daisy later explains she wants to go to medical or veterinary school. As we watch Daisy and her classmates race each other on the playground, Guggenheim narrates what Daisy’s educational journey will look like:

*“Daisy’s path to medical school begins with 8<sup>th</sup> grade algebra, which she’ll need to take when she moves up to Stevenson middle school. By the time she graduates middle school*

*only 13% of her classmates will be proficient in math. Stevenson, feeds into Roosevelt, one of the worst performing high schools in Los Angeles [...] Only 3 out of 100 students at Roosevelt will graduate with the classes necessary for admission to a four year university and 57% of Daisy's classmates won't graduate"*

As we watch Daisy and her classmates race towards the finish line on the playground, it becomes apparent that this image is a metaphor meant to represent their race towards an unlikely educational finish line. This metaphorical image is powerful in evoking emotion from the audience. The juxtaposition between Daisy's dreams and her reality illustrates that even motivated, passionate students might not make it through the public education system. Daisy's story makes an emotional appeal to audience members who have an interest in her future success. It's easy for the audience to believe that public schools are failing because they watch the system fail Daisy.

The last rhetorical appeal in *WFS*'s argument about the failures of public education is an appeal to logos. Throughout the film statistics are presented through animations to further characterize the state of the public education system. As previously discussed, visuals in documentary are a powerful tool because they provide viewers with a sense of truth and make concepts more tangible. By presenting statistics through animation Guggenheim dramatizes his facts. In one example Guggenheim narrates over an animated map of the United States. In a rapid fire list Guggenheim describes the number of 8<sup>th</sup> graders proficient in math per state: "New Jersey 40%, Connecticut 35%, New York, 30%, Arizona 26%." The animation zooms in on each state until almost the entire United States is covered with percentages. These low numbers contribute to the exigency that public schools are failing. How is America supposed to remain a global competitor if across the country the majority of students aren't testing at proficient levels?

Later in the movie Guggenheim addresses how American schools compare on a global platform stating, “among 30 developed countries we rank 25<sup>th</sup> in math and 21<sup>st</sup> in science.” These statistics are jarring and act to persuade the audience with logic that there is a problem with public education on a national level. This is troubling for a nation that often thinks of themselves as a global leader. Together, these rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos work to characterize the public education system as a system that needs to be fixed.

The second argument *WFS* advances is that teachers’ unions and the concept of tenure are preventing the type of reform needed to improve the public education system. The film argues this by creating a hero-villain dichotomy between education reformers and teachers unions. One of the clear heroes in the film is Geoffrey Canada, a respected education reformer who founded the Harlem Children’s Zone charter school. In an interview, Canada first addresses the concept of tenure, explaining in public schools “you can get tenure, basically, if you continue to breathe for two years [...] and once you get tenure we cannot get rid of you.” To expand on this point, Guggenheim narrates over an animated image of Illinois. He explains that in Illinois there are 876 schools districts, but only 61 have attempted to fire a tenured teacher and only 31 have been successful. Firing a tenured teacher has become an almost impossible task under the current system. With no authority to kick them out, bad teachers become stuck in the system dragging quality education down with them. The film portrays unions and their contracts as the villain in the battle for better education. However, the danger in characterizing unions this way is that by extension, unionized teachers are vilified as well. This characterization is troubling since teachers are at the forefront of education, regardless of their union affiliation, and their voices can’t be dismissed from the conversation.

Another prominent hero in the film is Michelle Rhee, chancellor of the Washington D.C school district. Rhee is passionate about turning the D.C school district around and wastes no time closing schools, firing principals, and attempting to reorganize what had been named one of the worst performing school districts. The film recounts how in the summer of 2008 Rhee put forth a proposal that would change the terms of tenure in D.C. Teachers could either chose to keep tenure and get a modest raise or give up tenure and potentially earn twice as much on merit pay. However, much like Canada, Rhee faced opposition from unions. Local union leaders in D.C found Rhee's proposal so threatening that it didn't even go to the ballots. As Rhee drives away with the capitol in her rearview mirror, the audience is invited to share in her disappointment. Once again an educational advocate was shut down by the system.

The last argument this paper will explore is how *WFS* positions charter schools as the solution to failing public schools. This is achieved primarily through the use of identification with the five children profiled and their parents. Identification is a rhetorical concept put forth by Kenneth Burke. According to Burke, you can persuade a man "only insofar as you can talk his language, by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (55). Moreover, we are more easily persuaded when we can identify with the speaker. Identification can be achieved through different literary devices and rhetorical appeals that serve to connect the text to the audience. *WFS* creates identification between the audience and the children by focusing on universal emotions such as hope and desperation. It relies on the fact that many people value the idea that knowledge is a right and will sympathize with these children stuck in failing schools. While charter schools are never explicitly stated as the solution to failing public schools, all five children profiled are connected by their desire to attend a charter school. For each child, charter schools are presented as a better alternative than their current school.

Francisco is in first grade and falling behind at his overcrowded public school. The audience watches his mother travel 45 minutes to tour Harlem Success Academy, a potential charter school for Francisco. As she tours Harlem Success Academy we see a bright classroom and engaged students who receive one on one tutoring if they fall behind. This is a stark contrast to Francisco's current school where there are metal detectors at the front and little parent teacher communication. These contrasting images characterize Harlem Success Academy as the superior school and illustrate the power of visual rhetoric. Harlem Success Academy is presented as Francisco's way out of the public education system and gives the audience hope for Francisco's educational future. His mother tells the camera "this is Francisco's last chance." However, at the end of this scene we see that Harlem Success Academy will only take 40 second graders out of 792 applicants. This is a crushing realization for the audience who now has to accept that Francisco will most likely remain at his public school. Similarly, kindergartener Bianca is also trying to gain admission into Harlem Success Academy. She is currently in parochial school but her mother, Nakia, is struggling to make the \$500 a month tuition. Regardless, Nakia is passionate about keeping her daughter out the failing public schools in their neighborhood, explaining, "I don't care what I have to do, I don't care how many jobs I have to obtain, but she will go to college." Unfortunately, much like Francisco, Bianca's chances of getting in to Harlem Success are slim. There are 40 spots available and 767 applicants for Bianca's grade that will be distributed lottery style. When Nakia and Bianca attend the lottery, Bianca asks her mom, "why don't they say me?" curious as to why her number isn't being called. The audience once again experiences a moment of desperation as they watch another child's educational potential slip through the system. Because the audience emotionally identifies with the educational plight of these families, they naturally support the better school. The narrative constructed through these

stories positions charter schools as the only option to overcome an underfunded and underperforming public school system. This is significant because it implies one must leave the public education system to find better educational opportunities. The audience is left without options or tangible solutions for improving public education. Instead, they are given a way to escape the system, which is not a realistic option for the majority of American students and their families. In order to further understand the implications of the arguments constructed throughout *WFS*, we can turn to reception studies and explore how the film was received amongst the public. *Reception*. *WFS* created a powerful narrative that resonated deeply with mainstream media. However, experts in the field of education seemed to have a more critical and defensive reaction to the film. By contrasting the reception between the mainstream media and the academic community we can better understand how *WFS* functions in the public sphere. Paige Hermansen describes some of the media notoriety that the film received upon its release:

Joining a chorus of positive reviews, Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* wrote, ‘By showing how fiercely dedicated idealists are making a difference, [the film] is a call to arms.’ . . . In September 2010, Oprah Winfrey devoted an hour-long special of her afternoon talk show to a discussion of the film; a month later, President Barack Obama invited the children featured in the documentary to a special meeting at the White House (512-513).

The Oprah Winfrey show was an extremely influential platform for the film to be featured on. In 2010 *Forbes* named Winfrey the number one most powerful celebrity (Pomerantz and Rose). While on air her show had an estimated 48 million viewers per week and was shown in 150 countries (Jacobsen). Winfrey is also known as an advocate for education and used her public charity, the Angel Network, to build schools and fund education projects. In the hour-long

special on *WFS*, Winfrey interviewed Davis Guggenheim along with guests from the film such as Bill Gates, Michelle Rhee and some of the children. They discuss many of the points from the film such as problems with tenure, how Rhee has worked to improve D.C schools, and the importance of education in general. Winfrey encourages her audience to go see the film themselves. Later Winfrey invites on stage the founders and teachers of six successful charter schools who she calls “the real life superheroes of education.” Oprah tells these founders “I know that thousands of kids are waiting to get in to your schools, and I value nothing more in the world than education. So, the Angel Network is giving each of your charter school networks \$1 million!” (The Shocking State of Our Schools). Through this gesture Winfrey strengthens the film’s position that charter schools are the future of education in America. The Oprah Winfrey show gave *WFS* recognition amongst a new audience and helped the debate over public schools remain relevant within the public sphere.

In contrast, teachers and unions took issue with how they were depicted in the film. Diane Ravitch, and educational policy analysis, wrote an article about *WFS* in the New York Times Review titled, “The Myth of Charter Schools.” In her article she draws attention to the many arguments overlooked or omitted from the film’s narrative. She points out that the film hardly addresses the fact that only one in five charter schools are better than traditional public schools. She also calls attention to the fact that *WFS* positions teachers as the most important factor in determining student achievement. However, factors such as a student’s family life or financial situation are proven to be more influential in determining student success. Ravitch believes that while *WFS* raises important questions, the solutions it presents are unrealistic.

Maureen Barberi, a retired teacher and principal, expresses similar thoughts to Ravitch. She wrote a blog post about *WFS* on The Stenhouse Blog, a platform that publishes professional

development content for teachers. Barberi credits Guggenheim for shedding light on the public school system but believes the film ignored the social inequalities that influence students and by extension their teachers. She writes, “the stakes are too high here to allow the nation’s attention to be hijacked by such a narrow, simplistic agenda as the film advances” (A Teacher Reviews “Waiting for Superman”).

By looking at the different responses to *WFS* we see how polarizing the film’s narrative was. Mainstream media responded positively to the emotionally riveting storyline put forth by *WFS*. However, education professionals, such as Ravitch and Barberi, examined the film through a critical lens to expose where the film’s narrative went wrong. Regardless of the type of response, it’s clear that *WFS* sparked tremendous discussion about the public education system. Next, I will explore the implications of *WFS*’s narrative on public perception surrounding education reform and further identify the cultural importance of this artifact.

## **Evaluation**

After analyzing *WFS*, it’s clear that the success of this film lies in its emotive power. Guggenheim expertly intertwines personal anecdotes, compelling animation, and dramatic statistics to persuade the audience that public education is failing our students and consequently our nation. Regardless of one’s stance on public education, there’s no denying that the United States is struggling to keep up academically on an international level. The film allowed education reform to be discussed on a national platform and created an exigence for better education in the United States. According to Participant Media, the company that produced *WFS*, the film “helped 2.8 million students through donations and attracted 10,000 participants to town

hall meetings and online screenings of the film” (Russo). For a brief moment in time the film catapulted education to the forefront of the public agenda.

However, while *WFS* shed light on an important social issue, there are moments of misinformation throughout the narrative that are potentially misleading for an audience. One of these moments happens when the film makes an analogy between the United States and Finland. Economist Eric Hanushek is interviewed in the film and explains that if the United States were to eliminate the bottom 6-10% of their underperforming teachers, and replace them with an average teacher, they could bring the average US student up to the level of Finland. This is significant given that the Finnish education system is one of the best in the world and is a top scorer on the Program for International Student Assessment (Mehta). However, this comparison is extremely problematic given that the Finnish education system is completely unionized and teachers are granted tenure (Goldstein 20). Diane Ravitch writes that Finland improved its schools “not by firing 5-10 percent of its teachers” but by investing in national curriculum, teacher education, and social welfare programs (*The Myth of Charter Schools*). Audiences who are greatly informed on the politics behind unions will be able to identify this weakness in the film’s argument. However, much of the general public will not understand the irony of wanting to emulate Finland since they are not familiar with the Finish education system. It’s counterintuitive for the film to cite a successful education system that’s unionized when the majority of the narrative explores problems with union contracts.

Another misleading element in *WFS* is that the narrative only profiles high performing charter schools. This leaves the audience slightly misinformed on the success of the charter school system. The film focuses on charter schools such as KIPP LA and the Harlem Success Academy charter network. Both of these schools are heavily supported by private donors and

have had great success in educating inner city students. Specifically, the Harlem Success Academy network has “scored amongst the highest performing schools in New York State” for the past eight years (2016 Results). These schools are great examples of the success that charter schools can achieve in inner city neighborhoods. However, by only focusing on top performing schools the film skews the public’s view of the charter system. It’s easy to make a system look successful when you only focus on top performing examples. The reality of the situation is that only one out of five charter schools outperform public schools (Goldstein 20). This means that while charter schools are a great alternative for some students, the system as a whole isn’t successful enough to become the solution to America’s struggling education system.

These moments of misinformation in *WFS* are important to address because they allow misleading information to circulate amongst the public. Everyday viewers don’t have the context needed to identify the ambiguous elements within these arguments. As a result, the film leaves viewers with a distorted understanding of the American education system. By critically examining the arguments constructed throughout *WFS*, we see how the popular narratives that make documentaries so successful often don’t accurately represent reality. These moments of misinformation demonstrate why we should evaluate documentary narratives through a critical lens. Specifically, it reinforces the importance of treating documentaries as arguments rather than factual representations of the world (Nichols 111). When we forget that documentaries represent a specific point of view and function as a form of rhetoric, we become vulnerable to believing misinformation. In order to be conscious consumers of documentaries we must actively question a film’s validity rather than passively consume the narrative.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, *WFS* successfully highlights the need for better education in America. The film's emotional narrative was powerful in creating urgency around the public school system. The film expertly personifies the education system through the emotional stories of Anthony, Daisy, Francisco, Bianca, and Emily. Through their stories, and the use of rhetorical appeals, *WFS* successfully characterizes the public education system as a failing institution. If there is one thing that audiences will take away from this film, it's that public schools are letting America's children slip through the system. The film largely blames the failing public school system on teachers unions and union contracts through the use of a hero-villain dichotomy. High profile education reformers are commended while union leaders are vilified. By using this binary to discuss education reform, the film prevents the voices of America's teachers from being included in the narrative. Lastly, through the use of identification *WFS* positions charter schools as the solution to overcome the failing public school system. The film profiles high performing charter schools that the audience will want to support. All of these arguments work together to persuade the audience that education in America needs to change. However, the danger in letting these narratives drive the discussion surrounding education reform is that there is a lot of omitted information. The moments of misinformation in the film promote a narrow view of education that is misleading for the public.

In the years following *WFS*, education reform has remained a topic of debate. We continue to see reform that is grounded in standardized testing and focused on ways to measure success. Films such as *WFS* tend to glamourize the educational system through cinematic storytelling. The reality of reform however, is that Americans are fundamentally conservative when it comes to their schools, thus making change popular in theory but controversial in

practice (Rotherham). Most recently, Betsy DeVos was elected as the United State's new Secretary of Education. Her election was one of the most controversial elections the United States has ever seen for this position. Once again, education reform and the future of America's schools remain at the forefront of our nation's political landscape. As we wait to see what the future of education reform will bring, one thing remains certain: America's schools are still waiting for Superman.

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