



IT SHOULDN'T TAKE A LOTTERY FIFTH GRADER ANTHONY BLACK (RIGHT) IN WAITING FOR SUPERMAN.

WHAT PARENTS REALLY WANT

IT'S NOT ABOUT CHARTERS VS. PUBLIC SCHOOLS. THE DIRECTOR OF 'WAITING FOR SUPERMAN' EXPLAINS WHY.

BY DAVIS GUGGENHEIM

IF YOU READ THE PAPER, THERE ARE A LOT of confusing facts and opinions about education. The latest debate is about charters vs. mainstream public schools. Now the debates are part of the essential process of hammering out our differences and testing our ideas. But too often pundits focus on labels and rhetoric while forgetting about what really matters: families and their kids.

If you are a parent, thinking about the beginning of school, the debate in the local paper is not the essential truth you have to confront. I have three kids, and this week I am not thinking about educational policy. I'm hoping—no, praying—that each of my kids gets a good teacher; that the school is safe; that the principal has high expectations for every kid. And frankly, what the school is called—“charter,” “private,” “public”—is irrelevant.

I saw this with other parents when I was making my latest documentary, *Waiting for Superman*. I spent two years talking to families in different cities and towns across the country. And it didn't matter what their ethnicity was or how much money they had. Every parent looks for the telltale signs: Is the teacher

bright and focused? Are kids walking to class with a sense of purpose? Is there an excitement for learning?

In fact, of all the parents I interviewed, at kitchen tables or in minivans, not one used the word “charter,” or any other hot-button words. Parents know that all these debates boil down to a relationship between a child and a teacher, and that relationship has the power to instill a love of learning.

Last year I got excited about a great choice for my 12-year-old. It's not a char-

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ter, but a mainstream, magnet, public school, 30 minutes from my home in Los Angeles. It's called LACES, and it's ranked (in this magazine) as one of the top high schools in the country. Other parents told me the teachers are amazing; the student population is diverse. So I called the school and spoke to a very kind woman in admissions who told me that if I wanted my son to go to LACES, I should have started five years ago! And—get this—I should have applied to other schools that I knew my son was *not* going

to get into. And if, and only if, my son *didn't* get in, every year for five years in a row, I would accumulate 20 total points (four per year). Having “won” these 20 points, I could enter the LACES lottery, where I would have a good but not great chance to win a spot in the school. Since I didn't have any points, my son had zero chance of getting into LACES.

This blew my mind. Why should any parent have to work the system in such an insidious way? It's not the school's fault. It's required by law to have a lottery, and it participates in this strange lose-to-win point system to do what's “fair” and give every kid a “chance.” But what are the real chances a kid has of getting a great education? In Los Angeles, there are a few schools doing an amazing job, and many more individual teachers, scattered in different schools, who are reaching kids every day with their passion and expertise. But the system is failing too many kids. In 2007 the high-school graduation rate for Los Angeles was less than 41 percent—that's hundreds of thousands of kids without a diploma.

I am lucky: I can afford to send my children to private schools. But what about those who can't? The parents I've met will try any option. But the landscape is bleak. There are some great district public schools, but if you don't live in the right neighborhood, your children cannot enroll. There are a few great magnets and charters, but if you don't win the lottery, you are out of luck.

I think most parents would say, with a clarity that would be hard to ignore, that it's time to stop arguing and start doing the hard work to create more great schools. Any kind: mainstream schools, magnet schools, and charters. Parents and kids don't care what the school is called, they just want a great school. Every child deserves an excellent education, and no family should have to play bingo with their children's future.

GUGGENHEIM is the director of *Waiting for Superman*, a film about the American educational system.