

# What 'Superman' got wrong, point by point <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Ayers, Rick

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## AVAILABILITY

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Full blog post <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

While the education film *Waiting For Superman* has moving profiles of students struggling to succeed under difficult circumstances, it puts forward a sometimes misleading and other times dishonest account of the roots of the problem and possible solutions.

The amped-up rhetoric of crisis and failure everywhere is being used to promote business-model reforms that are destabilizing even in successful schools and districts. A panel at NBC's Education Nation Summit, taking place in New York today and tomorrow, was originally titled "Does Education Need a Katrina?" Such disgraceful rhetoric undermines reasonable debate.

Let's examine these issues, one by one:

- *Waiting for Superman* says that lack of money is not the problem in education.

Yet the exclusive charter schools featured in the film receive large private subsidies. Two-thirds of Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone funding comes from private sources, effectively making the charter school he runs in the zone a highly resourced private school. Promise Academy is in many ways an excellent school, but it is dishonest for the filmmakers to say nothing about the funds it took to create it and the extensive social supports including free medical care and counseling provided by the zone.

In New Jersey, where court decisions mandated similar programs, such as high quality pre-kindergarten classes and extended school days and social services in the poorest urban districts, achievement and graduation rates increased while gaps started to close. But public funding for those programs is now being cut and progress is being eroded. Money matters! Of course, money will not solve all problems (because the problems are more systemic than the resources of any given school) -- but the off-handed rejection of a discussion of resources is misleading.

- *Waiting for Superman* implies that standardized testing is a reasonable way to assess student progress.

The debate of "how to raise test scores" strangles and distorts strong education. Most test score differences stubbornly continue to reflect parental income and neighborhood/zip codes, not what schools do. As opportunity, health and family wealth increase, so do test scores.

This is not the fault of schools but the inaccuracy, and the internal bias, in the tests themselves.

Moreover, the tests are too narrow (on only certain subjects with only certain measurement tools). When schools focus exclusively on boosting scores on standardized tests, they reduce teachers to test-prep clerks, ignore important subject areas and critical thinking skills, dumb down the curriculum and leave children less prepared for the future. We need much more authentic assessment to know if schools are doing well and to help them improve.

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**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** public opinion <sup>[4]</sup>

school system <sup>[5]</sup>

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