

# VINEYARD GAZETTE

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## **An Inconvenient Truth for Schools Debuts on Island**

By MIKE SECCOMBE

Waiting for Superman is the new documentary by the same people who made An Inconvenient Truth, and this film sets out to do with regard to public education in America what its predecessor did with regard to climate and energy policy.

That is, to expose the manifest failings of the system, point to the culprits for those failings and, finally, to suggest remedies.

Making the case that the American education system is failing is probably the least contentious part of that process. The statistics on American educational underachievement are far less disputed than those on global warming. And the movie duly quotes them.

“Among 30 developed countries, we rate 25th in math and 21st in science. In almost every category we’ve fallen behind,” the narrator intones in the movie’s trailer.

(Note: Neither the Gazette nor the organizers of the Martha’s Vineyard Film Festival, who will screen the film next Wednesday, have been given advance access to the whole movie.)

More controversial is the filmmakers’ apportionment of blame for this underachievement, and their suggestion for a remedy. Blame is heavily laid on teachers’ unions, and the solution is a big expansion of charter schools.

Some of those who have had the privilege of seeing the whole movie went so far as to suggest this was simplistic; it’s a complex problem.

If international comparisons are being made, for example, why not look at rates of unionization? Some of those countries which rate ahead of America also have highly-unionized teachers. Then there is the matter of income and wealth inequality, which is far greater in America than in the great majority of the countries which do better in educational outcomes. The same correlation, incidentally, can be found between income inequality and health outcomes.

Then there is the example of our own state. When he spoke to the Gazette this week, Massachusetts' Secretary of Education, Paul Reville — who will be part of a discussion panel after the film screens in Chilmark on Wednesday night — pointed out salient facts which speak to the film's thesis.

First, about the role of teachers' unions.

"We're in a highly-unionized state here in Massachusetts," he said, "yet we lead the nation in educational performance.

"We're first in virtually every category and every indicator you could imagine. So obviously unions don't necessarily impede progress towards high achievement."

That was not to say there were not "instances in which unions, in representing members' interests, have a different view of how change should go forward than policy makers might have or than management might have.

"There are frequent complex and extended conversations about things. For example, recently we've been working hard on the matter of teacher evaluation, and how do we do a better job of evaluating teachers," he said.

No doubt teachers' associations were sensitive about how the issue was handled. No doubt either that policy makers like him were concerned that there has been not nearly enough high quality evaluation of teacher performance and its link to student performance in the classroom.

"Management sometimes is lax in teacher evaluation," he said. "We just had a study recently in Boston showing some teachers were going three, four or more years without having any evaluation whatsoever, never mind the quality."

So he is working on that. But in general, he said: "I'm not one who subscribes to the view that the unions are the problem, although we get into problematic situations from time to time.

"Ultimately you're going to have to do reform with people who work with students, rather than do it to them. I think they have to be careful that those [unions] don't become an impediment to reform, but I think on the whole, they need to be part of the solution rather than be identified as the problem."

Next, the matter of charter schools; a central motif of the movie is the distress of some kids who miss out in a lottery for charter schooling and are condemned to the dysfunctional public system.

First point, Mr. Reville noted, is that charter schools are public schools, only "a different form of public schools." In this state, they educate only about three per cent of all students.

“The track record of charter schools is uneven, and on average, nationally, they perform about at the same level as other schools that serve the same populations,” Mr. Reville said. “We’ve got some few exceptionally successful charter schools and we are at work trying to grow them and create more of them here in Massachusetts.

“But they are not the silver bullet. They are part of the solution. And it’s impossible to generalize about charter schools, because they are quite different, one from the other,” he said.

So, wherein lies the clue to why Massachusetts is leading the nation, if it is not to do with the level of unionization or the types of schools?

Well, he said, this state has among the nation’s highest standards, and measures progress regularly. There is greater accountability for students, teachers and schools.

But a lot of it comes down to money.

“We haven’t just set a higher goal and assumed that educators could get there, but have put strong financial support into our lowest-achieving schools and those with the highest concentrations of low-income youngsters,” he said.

“I hasten to add we’re first in the nation but we’re by no means done. We have some large, persistent achievement gaps. You find them with English language learners, with children with disabilities, with students of color. There’s still a very close correlation between the socioeconomic status of a child and his family and educational attainment.

One of the problems in the American funding system is that it is heavily reliant on local area funding. Poor communities raise less in property taxes, so have less to put into their schools, thus reinforcing disadvantage.

“We have the system that we have because of the nature and origin of our school system. It was essentially a creature of local communities ... in pre-Revolutionary America, and our finance system was built on that, going forward. I don’t think we’re in an ideal situation.

“In Massachusetts we’ve worked very hard at correcting some of the inequities that arise from a system that’s heavily reliant on property taxes,” Mr. Reville said.

“We now spend on average, some \$1,300 more per student in the 25 per cent least affluent communities than in the most affluent communities. We are one of the very few states that has what they call a negative equity gap.”

Apart from funding, though, there are all sorts of other variables which can play into education outcomes.

To cite just one: school hours.

“We have essentially a 19th century agrarian system,” he said.

“Back then it was based on the need for kids to come home and do chores on the farm, and to be around in the summertime when the harvest came in,” he said.

“Now less than two per cent of our population is engaged in agriculture and it really doesn’t fit. We still send kids to school for six hours in the morning and the early part of the afternoon and then send them home, often to empty homes.

“And times are undifferentiated. We have one size fits all — though all kids don’t require the same quantity of education when they come to school — irrespective of the different assets and deficits they bring with them.

A growing body of research indicates that adolescents, in particular, perform significantly better simply for starting the school day later.

“The research tells us that next to infants, adolescents need more sleep than any other group. And typically they go to bed late at night, so it would make sense to start them later in the day.

“Then we get into these exigencies that shape our schedules, like sports that happen immediately after school, like the fact that in wintertime we don’t want to have younger students out waiting for buses in the darkness. So we have a system where they pick up the secondary school students first.

“Those traditions get in the way of a more rational approach, particularly where districts are spending a great deal of money on busing. All too often that dictates the educational policy.”

The state was now experimenting with variations in school hours, he said. A number of schools had been given resources to extend their school time somewhere between 25 and 33 per cent, some using different calendars and schedules. Some charter schools also were [doing trials of] different ways of scheduling.

“So there is some experimentation going on, but it’s difficult because we are very conservative when it comes to education,” he said.

“In some respects, schooling is an anchor for a lot of us, sentimentally, against all the changes that have occurred in virtually every other walk of life; the roles of men and women, the economy, the role of spiritual life in communities, the

nature of jobs that people have, the media and everything else, have all changed so much. Yet schools work still substantially the way they did 50 or 100 years ago.”

When it came to considering the forces that lock the status quo in place, Mr. Reville said, you had to consider many more factors than just union intransigence.

“Actually,” he said, “the greatest way to get a big attendance at a school committee meeting is to threaten to change the schedule by a half-hour, or eliminate a vacation that doesn’t make any sense. Then you get a massive number of people who’ll turn out to tell you you can’t do it.”

Mr. Reville has not seen *Waiting for Superman* either, so he won’t pass any judgment before Wednesday night.

“I gather this is an exposé-type film, which points at some of the weak spots in the public education system. We know that we’ve got weaknesses in public education. We know that we’ve got achievement gaps, that we’re not doing as well by all of our children as we need to.

“And that’s part of the work of education reform and that’s work I’ve been engaged in for decades.

“I don’t feel the need to be a defender of public education per se. On the other hand, we want responsible criticism and not stereotyping of the system based on a few egregious incidents,” he said.

And, for the record, his own children attend public school, in Worcester.

“I believe in urban public education and I’ve got my children being educated there, and I believe they’re getting a first-class education,” he said.

*Waiting for Superman*, directed by Davis Guggenheim, will screen on Wednesday at the Chilmark Community Center, as part of the Martha’s Vineyard Film Festival beginning at 8 p.m.

Joining Mr. Reville on the discussion panel afterwards will be the Martha’s Vineyard superintendent of schools, James Weiss, and the development director of the Martha’s Vineyard Public Charter School, Paul Karasik.