

# The Washington Post

Answer Sheet

## Finally, a film that celebrates public education

BY VALERIE STRAUSS July 21, 2013

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. This was written by Peter Dreier, professor of politics and chair of the Urban and Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His latest book, "[The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame](#)," was published last year. He is also co-author of "Place Matters: Metropolitix for the 21st Century," and "The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City." His children attended the Pasadena public schools, the focus of the film "Go Public" about which he writes. He wrote at greater length on this subject [in this post at truthout.org](#).

By Peter Dreier

Harvard political scientist Marshall Ganz's book, "Why David Sometimes Wins," uses the Biblical David vs. Goliath story as a metaphor about the battle for social justice. Once in a while, writes Ganz, a long-time union organizer, the have-nots conquer the haves, but they have to be more clever and resourceful.

I recently saw a documentary film, "Go Public: A Day in the Life of an American School District," that is like the slingshot in the ongoing war over public education. This scrappy documentary celebrates public schools without ignoring its problems. It is an antidote to misleading films like "[Waiting for Superman](#)" and "[Won't Back Down](#)," which view

traditional public schools as failures and charter schools and corporate-oriented “privatization” as the solution to what ails public education.

Not surprisingly, “Waiting for Superman” and “Won’t Back Down” were funded and promoted by the same right-wing billionaires and corporate foundations that have been waging war against public schools. Those two films are part of the propaganda and political arsenal assembled by what Diane Ravitch calls the “[Billionaires Boys Club](#).” By contrast, “Go Public” has no ideological axe to grind other than to present a balanced exploration into the lives of the teachers, students, parents, and others who populate a typical urban public school system.

(You can read more about “Go Public” [in an essay](#) I wrote for Truthout, in which I discuss the film in the context of the wider war on public schools waged by billionaire reformers.)

“Go Public” focuses on the Pasadena Unified School District, where two-thirds of the 18,000 students come from low-income families. 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. It will interest people no matter where they live because the challenges and the accomplishments aren’t confined to one school district.

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 filmmakers, Jim and Dawn O’Keeffe – whose own children recently attended the Pasadena public schools – 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, who teaches cinematography at the University of Southern California, trained the student crews, over two semesters, in conjunction with their media classes in documentary cinema verité techniques.

“Go Public” celebrates the small and large miracles that happen in Pasadena 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. As you watch the students, teachers, parents, and others in the film, you will no doubt think about your own experiences with and stereotypes about public schools. Whether or not you or your children went (or go) to public school, we all have a stake in the quality of our public schools.

The O’Keeffes are currently submitting “Go Public” to film festivals, so it is not yet in commercial distribution. But all of the short films that their teams made following the teachers, parents, students, and others – the raw material from which they assembled “Go Public” – are available on [the “Go Public” website](#) and are fascinating to see. The O’Keeffe’s hope to soon make the film available on an on-line platform, in order to begin pre-orders of the DVD. And they told me that they are happy to arrange screenings for

community groups, PTAs, colleges, and others. You can contact them at:

[gopublicproject@gmail.com](mailto:gopublicproject@gmail.com)