

The Billionaires' War Against Public Education

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By [Peter Dreier](#), [Truthout](#) | *Op-Ed*



Students during a meeting at the guidance office at Akins High School in Austin, Texas, April 4, 2013. (Photo: Ben Sklar / The New York Times)

In the battle over public education, the corporate foundations and right-wing billionaires who favor privatization, charters, and vouchers have funded and promoted several films, including "Waiting for Superman" and "Won't Back Down," as part of their propaganda campaign. Both view public schools as a total failure, beyond redemption and reform. A new documentary, "[Go Public: A Day in the Life of an American School District](#)", is a welcome antidote. "Go Public" celebrates public schools without ignoring their troubles.

Ever since the emergence of talking pictures, schools have been a major subject of both Hollywood movies and documentary films. One consistent theme of Hollywood portrayals of schools - from "Blackboard Jungle" (1955), "Up the Down Staircase" (1967) and "Stand and Deliver" (1988) to "Mr. Holland's Opus" (1995), "October Sky" (1999) and "Freedom Writers" (2007) - has been the idealistic teacher fighting to serve his and her students against overwhelming odds, including uncaring administrators, cynical colleagues, a stultifying required curriculum that crushes the spirit of teachers and students alike, dilapidated conditions, budget cuts, unruly and hostile students, or students suffering from the symptoms of poverty or neglect. The underlying message is that while occasionally a rare teacher can light a spark in a few students, our public schools are failing most of the students they are supposed to serve. Most

documentaries about education - from Frederick Wiseman's "High School" (1968) to Bill Moyers' "Children in America's Schools" (1996) - paint a similarly grim picture.

Grim, but not hopeless. All these films hold out the prospect that change is possible if society is willing to honestly confront the social, economic, and bureaucratic conditions that have made public education less effective than it could and should be.

In contrast, the two most recent high-profile films about public education - the documentary "Waiting for Superman" (2010) and Hollywood's "Won't Back Down" (2012), starring Maggie Gyllenhaal and Viola Davis - portray our public schools as beyond reform and redemption.

"Waiting for Superman" - directed by Davis Guggenheim, who made "An Inconvenient Truth" about Al Gore's environmental crusade - portrays the public school system as a total failure. It follows several students as they attempt to get into a private charter school that is superior in every way. Guggenheim skillfully tells the stories of these children and their families so that we can't help but root for them to win the lottery and get into the charter schools that, we're led to believe, will unleash their potential rather than stifle their creativity. The film boils down the problems facing public education as simply one of bad teachers, whose jobs are protected by corrupt unions. The film demonizes teachers' unions as the destroyer of public schools, while celebrating charters as the panacea for what ails American education. It reduces most teachers and their union leaders to one-dimensional, cartoon-like figures.

Not surprisingly, the film's villain is Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. One of its heroes is Geoffrey Canada, charismatic founder of the Harlem Children's Zone, which has raised millions of dollars from business, foundations and government to lavishly fund charter schools and social services in a small part of that New York neighborhood. Another hero is Michelle Rhee, who served for several years as the antiunion superintendent of Washington, DC,'s public schools and now runs StudentsFirst, which lobbies for the same free-market approach to education that "Waiting for Superman" extols.

In "Won't Back Down," Gyllenhaal portrays a working-class mother frustrated by her inner city public school's unwillingness to place her dyslexic daughter in a class with a teacher who can help her succeed despite her learning disability. Gyllenhall eventually leads a group of other frustrated parents to utilize a "parent trigger" law that allows parents to turn their "failing" public school into a privately-managed charter school. Their efforts are opposed by the teachers' union, which the film portrays as insensitive, thuggish, corrupt and the chief obstacle to successful schools.

In an [essay](#) in the New York Review of Books, educational historian Diane Ravitch summarized the major themes of "Waiting for Superman." This mantra, which could also apply to "Won't Back Down," includes the following:

"American public education is a failed enterprise. The problem is not money. Public schools already spend too much. Test scores are low because there are so many bad teachers, whose jobs are protected by powerful unions. Students drop out because the schools fail them, but they could accomplish practically anything if they were saved from bad teachers. They would get higher test scores if schools could fire more bad teachers and pay more to good ones. The only hope for the future of our society, especially for poor black and Hispanic children, is escape from public schools, especially to charter schools, which are mostly funded by the government, but controlled by private organizations, many of them operating to make a profit."

It is no accident that both films promote similar themes. Both were produced by Walden Media, which is owned by Phil Anschutz, a right-wing businessman who owns two of the nation's premier conservative publications (the Weekly Standard and the Washington Examiner) and whose foundation has donated \$210,000 to the antiunion National Right to Work Legal Defense Fund. Anschutz is also a backer of Americans for Prosperity, the political war chest founded by the right-wing Koch brothers and has donated

to Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, who has made dismantling labor unions a key part of his policy agenda. Anschutz also spent \$10,000 in 1992 to promote Colorado's Proposition 2, which let private property owners discriminate against gays and lesbians, \$150,000 to the Mission America Foundation, which condemns homosexuality as "deviance," and \$70,000 to the Discovery Institute, which attacks the idea of evolution and proclaims that "Darwinism is false."

Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates - America's richest man, who has donated a substantial part of his fortune to various efforts to privatize public schools and appears in "Waiting for Superman" - helped fund the film and sang its praises at various film festivals. Discussing the film at the Toronto International Film Festival, he said that school districts should cut pension payments for retired teachers. The national PTA, which is supposed to be an advocate for public schools, has shown "Waiting for Superman" at its national convention and at its state and local meetings. Some have wondered if its decision to promote the film has anything to do with its receipt of a \$1 million donation from the Gates Foundation.

"Waiting for Superman," a slick and emotionally uplifting film, was praised by most movie critics as well as Oprah Winfrey and President Obama, whose education secretary, Arne Duncan (former Chicago school superintendent) has promoted an education reform agenda that aligns perfectly with "Waiting for Superman" and its conservative backers. (A similar documentary, "The Lottery," released in 2010, paints an adoring portrait of a group of New York City charter schools founded by a former City Council member.)

"Won't Back Down" was distributed by 20th Century Fox, which is owned by media mogul Rupert Murdoch, whose News Corporation owns Fox News, the Wall Street Journal and the New York Post. News Corporation also owns Wireless Generation, a for-profit online education, software and testing corporation, recently rebranded as Amplify. Murdoch has long hoped to get a piece of the education system, which he once described as a "\$500 billion sector in the US alone that is waiting desperately to be transformed." To help Murdoch get a piece of that money, he hired Joel Klein, the former New York City school chancellor who runs Amplify. (Klein also is on the board of Michelle Rhee's StudentsFirst.)

"Won't Back Down" was heavily promoted by conservative groups, including the Heritage Foundation, Freedom Works (which has close ties to the Tea Party), the corporate-(and Murdoch-)funded American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC, a major backer of parent trigger laws), and the Chamber of Commerce. The chamber sponsored a national six-month tour of the film in major cities, including Albany, NY, Indianapolis, Phoenix and San Diego, screening it for business groups and legislators to garner support for the parent trigger law and other conservative educational changes. Rhee hosted screenings of "Won't Back Down" at both the Republican and Democratic conventions last year.

Both films were heavily promoted by the growing chorus of corporate foundations and conservative billionaires behind a particular version of school "reform" that emphasizes privatization - charters, vouchers, business-style management, high-stakes testing to evaluate both students and teachers, weakened teachers unions, and the "parent trigger" law that California and several other states have adopted that allows disgruntled parents to turn public schools into privately-run charter schools, typically with the support of corporate-funded front groups, like Parent Revolution. The films' zeitgeist is part of a broader corporate and conservative attack on government in general, particularly taxes on business and the rich, reductions in subsidies to corporations and regulations that protect workers, consumers and the environment.

Not surprisingly, in both films, teachers are portrayed, with a few exceptions, as uncaring, unqualified, or simply burned out and their unions as too powerful and resistant to change, primarily a protection racket for uninspiring educators. The films' mantra is that salvation is only possible by enlightened teachers and parents abandoning the desert of public education for the promised land of private charter schools.

Neither film points out that teachers' unions have been the strongest advocate for more public school funding, smaller class sizes and improved facilities and resources. Nor do they point out charter schools' uneven track record. A [2009 study](#) by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford

University discovered that only 17 percent of charter schools provided a better education than traditional public schools. Thirty-seven percent actually offered children a worse education. In other words, on balance, charters make things worse, even though many of those schools "cream" the best students from regular public schools. The same Stanford center recently released a study that called for stronger monitoring and review processes for charter schools. Other research confirms that charters rarely deliver on the promises their backers make.

Welcome Antidote to Billionaire Boys' Club Movies

["Go Public: A Day in the Life of an American School District,"](#) by veteran documentary filmmakers Jim and Dawn O'Keeffe, is a welcome antidote to the bleak and misleading message of "Waiting for Superman" and "Won't Back Down." "Go Public" celebrates public schools without ignoring their troubles. It 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 O'Keeffes 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 trained the student crews, over two semesters, in conjunction with their media classes in documentary cinema verité techniques. Film industry professionals, as well as professors and recent graduates from the University of Southern California film program (where Jim O'Keeffe teaches cinematography) and Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara participated as directors and crew. USC and Brooks Institute also donated equipment to the student crews. Recent graduates served as mentors.

The O'Keeffes raised initial funds from friends, family and community members, and \$25,000 from a Kickstarter campaign, to help meet their \$150,000 production budget, but they are still raising funds for distribution, marketing and educational outreach. In contrast, "Waiting for Superman" and "Won't Back Down" had big budgets funded by their billionaire backers.

The result of the O'Keeffes' effort is a remarkable 90-minute film that examines the daily realities of an urban public school system - the Pasadena (California) Unified School District (PUSD), where two-thirds of the 18,000 students come from low-income families, where 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.

"Go Public" celebrates the small and large miracles that happen in PUSD 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.

The film shows us students participating in a pioneering middle-school robotics program. An elementary school teacher gets students excited about science by explaining how blood flows through arteries that keep their hearts beating. A music teacher instructs a jazz band at a high school where parents have to hold fund-raisers to pay for instruments. An elementary school teacher instructs students to play part of the Brandenburg concerto on their violins.

We see a teacher patiently, persistently and lovingly instruct students with autism and Down's syndrome. Special needs students, who require smaller classrooms and specially-trained teachers, but whose cost is not fully reimbursed by the state government, comprise a significant portion of PUSD's student body.

We witness a third-grader speaking Mandarin in one of the district's innovative dual-language program, where students become bilingual. At the end of the day, the Anglo father of another student in the dual-language Spanish program asks his son, "How do I say, 'How was school?' in Spanish. The boy replies without hesitation: "Como esta la escuela?"

We see a security officer at a middle school who also leads the school's drum corps and choir, conducts the strings orchestra and sets up a mentoring program where high schoolers help younger students. In a middle school class, an English teacher compares the romantic feelings of a Shakespeare character with a Taylor Swift song. Later in the day, she teaches a drama class with kindergartners, encouraging them to use their imaginations to melt like snowmen and grow like flowers.

We see students rehearsing for a musical play, learning to play guitars, painting and practicing a choral number during lunch break. After school is over, we watch parents juggling making dinner and helping their kids with homework, kids explaining their homework to their parents who don't speak English and a music teacher taking time out from preparing for the next day's classes to feed his infant. On a bus on the way to a game, the coach of a racially-diverse high school girls' softball team reminds them to avoid "mental mistakes." A high school girl who won a state oratory contest gives her speech at a school board meeting, explaining that she wants to become a chemical engineer, "a field bereft of African American women."

The film shows Superintendent Jon Gundry visiting a class where students are designing rockets in conjunction with scientists from the nearby Jet Propulsion Lab, run by NASA. That night, Gundry is the subject of a protest by teachers, secretaries, custodians and librarians at a school board meeting, angry about pending layoffs.

A teacher in the district's culinary arts and hospitality academy shows students how to make chicken cordon bleu. A middle school assistant principal mediates a conflict between two girls. A teacher in an "alternative" high school for high-risk students meets one-on-one to help a student with his homework. A social worker at an elementary school works with low-income Latino/a parents to train them to help their children with homework. In a crowded high school biology lab, a teacher trains the next generation of scientists, one of whom might invent a cure for cancer or a way to bring clean water to remote villages.

A teacher describes how he spends most of his lunch breaks working individually with students who seek his help. Then we see him talking to a high-schooler who had been in prison but now wants to improve his grades so he can attend college. We cheer for him, even though the odds are long. In a school district where each high school guidance counselor is responsible for 450 students, we see one of them meeting with a mother and her twin daughters to plan their schedules so they'll have the right courses to apply to college.

An elementary school principal calls the school custodian "the hardest working guy on this campus," praising him for advising students and helping them get to class on time as well as keeping the school clean. A high school baseball coach, watering the infield with a hand-held hose after school hours, tells the camera: "I love my job. You'll never be a millionaire, but you'll be happy every day. I'll take that." A high school boy admits that sometimes he falls asleep if his teacher turns off the lights to show slides in class. Two boys walking home from high school debate the meaning of the word "ghetto."

We watch a maintenance man repair the wiring in a light fixture while explaining that the school district has only four electricians for 39 buildings. Thanks to a \$100 donation from the PTA, an elementary school teacher works with students to plant a garden, where they can learn where their food comes from. We see a high school principal fixing an ancient copying machine. Later we see him talking to a teacher about complying with the state's disciplinary policies while, simultaneously, talking on both his cellphone and his office phone.

A middle schooler puts up a sign, "Save Our School Library," which is targeted for closure due to budget cuts. She explains that the school library is "the only place where I can have an educated conversation with my friends."

We know that a significant number of PUSD students will drop out before graduating from high school. We know that many of these students face violence in their neighborhoods and/or at home, a situation that,

similar to combat, we would expect to result in students exhibiting the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The O'Keeffes don't downplay these harsh realities. In one scene in "Go Public," teachers, librarians, school counselors and their parent supporters appear at a school board meeting to protest yet another wave of layoff notices. Since 2007, the district has been forced to make about \$50 million in budget cuts due to declining state funding. It fired dozens of teachers, librarians and security guards. Earlier this year, after the film was completed, 48 people - including a middle school librarian who appears in "Go Public" - were laid off. Even so, you can't watch this film without feeling hopeful about public schools and the students and teachers that populate them.

There is no narrator to offer hints about what we're seeing and what we should think about it. The O'Keeffes have no axe to grind other than to present a balanced exploration into the lives of these families and educators. The filmmakers know all the pitfalls and problems that confront public schools. They sent their own four children to PUSD schools - three graduated in recent years and went to college. One will be a high school senior in the fall. It was not always an easy road for the family, but they persevered during frequent budget cuts, teacher layoffs, inadequate funding for the arts and sports, the revolving door of superintendents and top administrators, and the ideological and personal battles among school board members.

In 2010, the O'Keeffes worked hard - alongside their friends, neighbors, fellow church congregants, teachers, and other PUSD parents - to persuade local voters to pass Measure CC, a \$120 a year (per property) tax increase to increase funding for PUSD in the wake of state budget cuts. The measure received 54 percent of the vote, a victory in most elections, but far short of the 66.6 percent needed in California to pass an increase in local taxes. The outcome deeply disappointed and saddened the O'Keeffes, who believed that many of the voters - particularly middle-class families who sent their children to private school or whose grown-up children were no longer in school - fell for misleading stereotypes about public schools in general and PUSD in particular. It galvanized them to begin the journey that led to "Go Public."

If Pasadena's voters harbor misguided views about public schools - that they waste tax dollars, or that they do a lousy job of educating students, or that they serve students whose parents didn't care enough to help their children succeed in school - that is certainly understandable. For years, the local daily newspaper, the Pasadena Star-News, fed readers a steady diet of negative stories about the schools, often initiated by right-wing public school bashers, while failing to report on the trends revealing significant improvements, including steadily rising test scores and national awards for some teachers, or to publish stories about the academic, athletic and artistic accomplishments of many PUSD students.

But it wouldn't be fair simply to blame the Star-News for typecasting PUSD as a failure. That same misleading message has emanated from many of the nation's most prominent politicians, business leaders, philanthropists and educators, and has been reflected in media coverage of public education. Indeed, America's public schools have been under attack for more than two decades by education "reformers" who think that our nation's education system is broken and needs a major overhaul.

In this way, "Go Public" challenges the growing chorus of hostility to public schools reflected in "Waiting for Superman" and "Won't Back Down" and pushed by the corporate-funded advocates of school privatization.

Addressing the "Achievement Gap"

Almost 90 percent of American K-12 students attend public schools. Reports about the "failure" of public schools don't focus much attention on schools that serve middle-class children. Our public schools generally do a good job of preparing these students for college and/or the job market. (Although our business and political leaders do a lousy job of providing enough jobs for those high school and college graduates). Middle-class parents generally believe that their kids' schools are effective.

It is the schools that serve poor children that come in for most of the criticism and prescriptions for change. The major concern is how to close the "achievement gap" - the huge differences in test scores, graduation rates, college attendance, and other indicators of educational outcomes - between middle-income and low-income students, with the latter group comprised disproportionately of Black and Latino students in urban school districts, like PUSD.

In fact, we already know what is needed to raise the educational performance of most low-income students.

- High-quality early childhood care and education (from birth to age 3), along with universal preschool (from ages 3 to 6), where students can develop the vocabulary and thinking skills, and self-confidence, that will prepare them to do well once they reach kindergarten.
- High-quality summer arts, athletic and writing programs so that low-income children can have experiences similar to those that most middle-class children take for granted.
- Much smaller teacher-student ratios in classrooms with low-income students, which research documents makes a significant difference in learning outcomes for low-income students in primary grades.
- More ongoing professional training for teachers so they can expand their knowledge of the subjects they teach, improve classroom skills (including learning to keep up with changes in computer and other technologies), develop new curricular ideas and get re-energized for what is one of the toughest jobs around.
- Investment in a major upgrade of school facilities, especially in urban districts that too often include old buildings with leaky roofs, broken windows and outdated heating systems, and in up-to-date libraries, computers and science labs.
- Restoring and expanding those parts of the curriculum - particularly sports, school newspapers, music, and arts - that have been slashed over the past two decades in response to budget cuts.

Of course, all this costs money. Many school districts that serve the poor spend much of their budgets on transportation, breakfast and lunch programs and other ancillary efforts. Compared with middle-income districts, they also spend a disproportionate amount on students with special needs and learning disabilities. But when you look at how much they spend for instruction - for teachers, books, libraries, computers, and labs - the figures are woefully inadequate compared to what is needed to help low-income kids overcome the obstacles they face to fulfill their potential and help them contribute to the nation's overall well-being and prosperity.

The United States has over 13,000 local school districts, often dozens of them in the same metropolitan areas. But within those metropolitan regions, students in well-off suburbs get a much different - and better - educational experience than those who live only a few miles away but who may as well be living on a different planet when it comes to public education. In wealthier districts, parents and other residents often supplement state school funds with private donations or additional local taxes, a luxury unavailable to poorer school districts.

Increasingly, local school district budgets depend on funding from state governments - which typically allocate money based on a per-student formula. The federal government allocates about 5 percent of all K-12 education funding, much of it targeted to schools with high numbers of low-income students. But spending in these schools is still woefully inadequate in terms of what is needed to overcome the well-documented disadvantages their students bring with them to schools.

In recent decades, as middle-class families have faced a severe economic squeeze while prices of basic necessities (housing, medical care, transportation, clothing) grow much faster than incomes, they are less willing to help pay for the education of the children of the poor.

So rather than do what's obviously needed - mainly, improve the social and economic conditions that now bring children to school unprepared to take advantage of what schools have to offer, and then tax ourselves enough to spend to adequately educate low-income students - a growing chorus of corporate-oriented

school "reformers" has crafted an agenda that says we can fix public schools and help students overcome the disadvantages of poverty, without spending more money. Of course, the billionaires and other affluent advocates of this view don't think twice about spending \$25,000 to \$50,000 a year to send their own children to private schools.

In "The Death and Life of the Great American School System," Ravitch calls this group "The Billionaire Boys Club," an interconnected network of wealthy corporate leaders and philanthropists who've joined forces to promote market-driven school changes. This educational ruling class is used to getting what it wants in business and politics, and they've created a web of organizations designed to persuade the public, other business folks and politicians that running school districts like corporations is the way to go. They've poured hundreds of millions of dollars into think tanks, advocacy groups and political campaigns to get their way. In Los Angeles, for example, the billionaires have bankrolled the Coalition for School Reform, LA's Promise, Parent Revolution and the Los Angeles Fund for Public Education - all front groups designed to sell their version of "school reform." Many in the media echo have become transmission belts for the corporate agenda. The Los Angeles Times editorial writers, for example, routinely call the billionaires, foundations, administrators and politicians who promote this agenda "reformers," in contrast to the teachers' union and its political allies.

Some of America's most powerful corporate plutocrats - including Bill Gates, Michael Bloomberg, Eli Broad and the Walton family (heirs to the Walmart fortune) - have invested heavily in this war on public schools. As Ravitch notes in her latest book, and as Joanne Barkan brilliantly dissects in her article, ["Got Dough? How Billionaires Rule Our Schools"](#) in the Winter 2011 issue of Dissent magazine, what they're really after is not "reform" (improving our schools for the sake of students) but "privatization" (business control of public education). They think public schools should be run like corporations, with teachers as compliant workers, students as products and the school budget as a source of profitable contracts and subsidies for textbook companies, consultants and others engaged in the big business of education.

They want is to turn public schools into educational Walmarts run on the same model of corporate-style "efficiency." They want to expand charter schools that compete with each other and with public schools in an educational "market place." They want to evaluate teachers and students like they evaluate new products - in this case, using the bottom-line of standardized test scores. Most teachers will tell you that over-emphasis on standardized testing turns the classroom into an assembly line, where teachers are pressured to "teach to the test," and students are taught, robot-like, to define success as answering multiple-choice tests. Not surprisingly, the billionaires want their employees - teachers - to do what they're told, without having much of a voice in how their workplace functions. That means destroying the teachers' main line of defense against arbitrary management - their union. Rather than treat teachers like professionals, they view them as the hired help.

Much of the billionaires' schools agenda is driven by ideology and hubris. They honestly believe, like the Divine Right of Kings, that their success in the corporate world entitles them to restructure our public schools. They think that making profits in corporate board rooms gives them credentials to make changes in classrooms.

For some of them, however, school "reform" is simply another version of old-fashioned corporate cronyism, sometimes called conflicts of interest. For example, Joel Klein, the former head of the New York City school system, now works for media titan Rupert Murdoch's Amplify corporation. That's the company that under its former name, Wireless Generation, created DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) - a student assessment tool - that has huge contracts with school districts. Is it any wonder that part of the corporate-backed school "reform" agenda is hyper-emphasis on standardized testing?

Michelle Rhee has become the public face and top salesperson of the growing corporate-backed effort to privatize America's public schools. She seems to be everywhere - speaking at education conferences, profiled on television and in magazines (including devastating profiles by [Nicholas Lemann](#) and [John](#)

[Merrow](#)), and appearing in "Waiting for Superman". Rhee's tempestuous tenure as head of the DC schools between 2007 and 2010 left behind a legacy of cheating on standardized tests, a demoralized teaching staff with high turnover and an increased achievement gap between low- and upper-income children. Soon after she left that job, she started StudentsFirst, which is now based in Sacramento (where she lives with her husband, the city's mayor), and has operations in 18 states. Earlier this year, the Walton Family Foundation, led by heirs to the Walmart fortune, announced an \$8 million grant to StudentsFirst. This grant came on top of the \$3 million the foundation had already donated to the group since 2010. StudentsFirst recently donated \$350,000 to LAUSD school board races, backing candidates who support its agenda of high-stakes testing, private charter schools and vouchers.

The Walton family became America's richest family by creating a retail model built on ruthless cost-cutting, low wages and few benefits. So, it isn't surprising that some studies show that charter school teachers are paid less than teachers at traditional public schools and have fewer years of education on average. Is this the right model for our schools?

Many studies show that parents' own educational attainment is the best predictor of students' academic performance, which results in a wide "achievement gap" between affluent and low-income students. Walmart contributes to this gap. It is not only the nation's largest private employer, with well over one million employees, but it also has the largest number of poverty-level jobs in the country. If the Waltons, who still own half of Walmart, really wanted to do something to help improve schools, they could start by paying their employees a living wage. And if they really want to change Americans' thinking about public schools, they could send DVDs of "Go Public" to all of Walmart's more than one million employees in the United States.

"We want the film to trigger a discussion about the value of public schools. That's where most of the next generation of workers, citizens, business leaders, volunteer soccer coaches and politicians will be educated," said Dawn O'Keeffe. "Public schools are required to serve everyone. That's a blessing, but also raises challenges. Public schools can and do work, but only if the entire community - and the whole country - is behind them. Even families who send their kids to private schools, or don't have kids at all, have a stake in successful public schools. We have to overcome the pervasive cynicism about public education that we see every day in the media. Our schools need advocacy, commitment, compassion - and adequate funding."

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