Waiting for Superman

Responses to Preparing for the Film

1. Students’ responses to this question will vary, and some may be very personal. Students may describe overcrowding, where students compete for a desk or one of too few issued texts. They may describe discipline problems, where teachers spent as much time rounding up noisy cell phones or asking students to participate in the class as they did presenting material. Students may describe the frustrations of tracking, their being in the wrong section or one that was too demanding or not sufficiently challenging. They may describe a classroom without momentum, where instructors arrive late or who routinely have substitutes who don’t advance the curriculum. Students may describe their boredom with school, taking notes that aren’t meaningful or doing homework that is more rote than meaningful. Underprepared, unmotivated, or indifferent instructors may figure in their descriptions. Best experiences might describe the converse of all of the above, and many students will also describe motivating teachers and dynamic classrooms where everyone participated, felt challenged, but also felt valued as a part of an academic community.

2. Some students will have anecdotal experiences to share about private, charter, or home schooling programs. To focus on the film's subject matter, students should be asked if the admission standards were competitive, if any students were subjected to lotteries, and if their private schools offered extensive scholarships to students based on financial need.

3. Students may describe many changes they would like to see happen in the public schools, but having inspired and inspiring teachers will figure prominently in their wish for a stimulating experience in school. This desire will be underscored by the film which returns to the reality that a good classroom experience starts with a dedicated and perceptive teacher who helps students learn in an exciting, lively environment.

4. Most students will readily praise teachers who motivated them to excel, were passionate about their teaching, and engaged students in creative but productive activities.

5. Students may know that the United States ranks very low internationally in math and language proficiency scores. If they do not yet know this, the preparation question will be answered in the film, and students will be shocked and dismayed by the graphs that record American students’ abysmal test results.

Responses to Reflecting on the Film
1. The goal of the director in following specific students and their families is to engage the audience in a personal way, to create a bond between the young students and their families and the audience watching them struggle with the specific problems in their school districts. The audience cares about the failing schools in these students’ districts because we are personally attached to the individual children and their parents. We watch the lotteries that each student and parent is involved in with anxiety, hoping that each narrative will end well.

Anthony is a 5th grader who lives in Washington, DC. The film opens with the voice of director Davis Guggenheim asking him a math question that he answers correctly with evident pride. He admits that he was held back a year of school when he didn’t care about his classes and didn’t study. It was at this time that his father died of a drug overdose. His mother was never a part of his life. Gloria, his paternal grandmother, is raising him. Although she has not finished school herself—her mother died when Gloria was 8 and nobody was around to encourage her—she knows that she wants Anthony to finish school. After not winning an initial acceptance at the Seeds Boarding School, Anthony later makes it from the waiting list to a spot at the school. His face registers dismay that there are no TVs or games at this school, but he senses that it will be good for him. He takes the top bunk and immediately attaches to the wall a photograph of his father holding him when he was a baby.

Daisy is a 5th grader in an East Los Angeles school. When she grows up, she wants to be someone who will help others in need. Books that she has read in the library have helped her consider being in the medical profession—a doctor, surgeon, or veterinarian. She has already found a college she wants to attend and has written to the administration. She seems the most earnest of the students followed in the film, bright, ambitious, and determined. When asked what she would tell someone she thinks school is boring, she responds, "Pay attention instead of being bored" and make learning fun. To the question of whether school is boring, she replies that students ought to pay attention and make learning fun. Unfortunately, Daisy does not succeed in the lottery to get a spot at the Kipp LA Preparatory School where she has learned “they won’t let you fail.” Kipp has doubled the math and science scores of the neighborhood school Daisy will have to attend.

Francisco, a 1st grader living in the Bronx, has been struggling with learning to read. His teachers have not been responsive to his mother’s inquiries for a meeting to discuss her son’s lack of progress in reading and they are not sending his notebooks home for her review. Francisco’s teacher simply keeps reporting that he does not comprehend what he reads. His mother Maria is concerned about her son’s education and takes him to a special reading class at a local college. Maria enters Francisco in the Harlem Success School’s lottery but he does not win a spot at the school. Maria has wisely left Francisco at home that day so that he does not feel the pain of this loss, as she has, and she has a subway ride home to formulate how she will tell him the bad news.

Bianca, a kindergartner in Harlem, lives directly across the street from the Catholic school that her mother pays for her to attend. Ardently passionate that her daughter will get an education and go to college, Nikia struggles with the tuition bills at the school and when she misses payments because she is laid off from work, Bianca is unable to attend the graduation ceremony celebrating her promotion to first grade. The
audience is wrenched by the camera’s photographing the little girl looking out the window at her classmates entering the school for the ceremony and the audience is further pained when Bianca does not win a spot at the Harlem Success school’s lottery. Bianca’s life choices seem limited when it is clear that her mother’s unemployment complicates even her chance to attend the Catholic school.

Emily, an 8th grader at Woodside High School in Redwood City, California, seems to have choices that the other profiled students lack. She lives in a middle class, largely white suburban environment, and there is an assumption that youngsters going to the schools in the affluent suburbs must have advantages inner-city poor children do not have. Emily likes math and science, but she is not a good test taker. Her test scores are low, and at her local high school, she will be tracked and placed in low-achieving sections based on her mediocre scores. She will not graduate with scores and grades that will permit her to enter a California public university. Her goal is to win the lottery, ensuring her a spot at Summit Preparatory, a school where there is no tracking, all students take the same courses, and all are in college prep classes. The school administrators think that all students should get to the highest level of curriculum and take courses with the same high standards. At Summit, 96% of the students graduate with eligibility to enter a four-year college. Emily is fortunate to win one of the coveted spots in the lottery to attend Summit Preparatory.

Each of the students profiled in the film has a goal to be accepted at a school that has extraordinary teachers and high expectations for each student to succeed at the school, graduate, and go on to college. Only two of the five students profiled have achieved that initial goal by the end of the film.

2. Reflecting on the title of the film, Waiting for Superman, Educator Geoffrey Canada reveals, "One of the saddest days in my life was when my mother told me that Superman doesn't exist. Even in the depths of the ghetto, you just thought, 'He's coming, I just don't know when' because he always shows up and he saves all the good people. She thought I was crying because it's like Santa Claus is not real, but I was crying because there's no one coming with enough power to save us." Thematical, the film demonstrates the daunting failures of the education system in this country today and the pressing need to save and revitalize it. Rather than waiting for a super force to save us, viewers are urged to start taking small steps to improve education. After showing images of students who didn't win space in a charter school, we hear Geoffrey Canada assert, "We know we have the tools to save those kids." Rather than expecting an outside force to "save" us, viewers are urged to work hard and to support those who are changing the system from within. At the end of the film, viewers are reminded, "Our system is broken and it feels impossible to fix. But we can't wait. Great schools come from great people," rebuilding the system block by block in every city: "People are doing it every day."

3. The most prominent characteristic of failing schools is their drop-out rate; a significant percentage of the students at these schools has failed to graduate from high school. The schools are “failure factories” where students do not progress in their most important
reading and math courses. A huge percentage of students in the failing schools has grades that continue to drop as the student moves through the grades. Most are working at below grade level. Many of the high school students in failing schools have reading levels of first through third graders. Students who are not working at grade level perceive that they are unable to complete their courses and will not be able to graduate, so they drop out of school. These schools are drop-out factories with students who perceive that they have been given “the short end of the stick,” and who realize that they are going nowhere.

The film’s analysis is that failing schools create failing neighborhoods, and the children who are going nowhere end up unemployable, unskilled, and heading for prison. Failing schools have terrible teachers, the “lemons,” or “turkeys” sent from other schools in the district. Failing schools do not have winning teachers. High-performing teachers help create performing students who have confidence to learn and succeed.

4. When Film Director Davis Guggenheim made an earlier documentary The First Years in 1999, he spent an entire school year watching public school teachers "dedicate their lives to children. These teachers embodied a hope and carried with them a promise--that the idea of public school could work." However, Gugenheim admits, "Ten years later it was time to choose a school for my own children, and then reality set in. My feelings about public education didn't matter as much as my fear of sending them to a failing school. And so every morning, betraying the ideals I thought I lived by, I drive past 3 public schools as I take my kids to a private school." Guggenheim adds that he feels fortunate to have a choice and not to have to depend on winning a lottery so that his children attend a good school. Yet, he clearly feels that he is abandoning and "betraying" his own values and belief in public school education.

5. The film focuses on the teachers’ unions because they are perceived by Guggenheim to be the most obvious embodiment of the bureaucracies that plague progress in education. Administrators who try to remove incompetent, indifferent, or predatory teachers are frustrated by the unions’ protection of their members. Even when hidden cameras vividly document the abuses of teachers, the administrators of their schools could not have them permanently removed. The film gives a brief history of unions, showing the early years when unions protected teachers, secured them a living wage, and granted women the same contracts and earning power as male teachers. The tenure system, which in universities is earned over years of observations, student evaluations, and success in research or publishing, is automatically a function of longevity in public schools. It is a lifetime protection that is given, not earned. Even when administrators know they have terrible teachers, they can’t remove these teachers because their union contracts protect them. The film shows how one administrator, Michelle Rhee, Chancellor of the Washington DC Public Schools, designed a plan to reward excellent teachers with generous remuneration, in exchange for removing tenure in her district, but the unions refused to even vote on the initiative so the tenure system has remained in place. Many people acknowledge that the single most powerful impediment to recognizing and rewarding good teaching is the unions who protect incompetent members. Students may
see advantages of unions protecting their members from the abuses of irrational administrators or the exigencies of a district’s political decisions. They may see the value of pay increases and health and retirement benefits that have been negotiated by unions.

Students may also be aware of the history of unions working for smaller class sizes, increased school funding, and better school facilities. Students may value the clout that unions have in influencing political races—analogous to that of other special interest groups like the NRA or the Teamsters. Students may even believe that the unions will one day implement research studies that will lead to school reforms and progress in education. The film does not take that hopeful stance and, in fact, regards unions as the single most obvious impediment to quality education in the United States.

6. It is ironic that although U.S. schools "have failed to keep pace with the rest of the world" and have fallen behind in nearly every category, the one category that U.S. students rank #1 in is "confidence"—they seem convinced that they have done well even though they haven't. This study suggests that many U.S. students have an inflated sense of their skills. Such an unrealistic self-image may be keeping these students from working harder and may be setting them up for disappointment and failure when their scores don't match their expectations of being accepted in a four-year school.

7. Michelle Rhee was the 7th Superintendent of Schools to be hired in ten years in the District of Columbia schools. When the film was made, she was a thirty-seven-year-old woman without a PhD who had only taught for three years. Because she did not see herself on a career path as a superintendent of schools, she thought herself singularly in the right position to get rid of "crappy educators" and "turn schools around" without fear of reprisal. She exposed the vast bureaucracy that had no accountability for students' lack of success and that lack of accountability helped explain the abysmal test scores and failures of schools and students in Washington, DC. In her stay as Superintendent of Schools, she shifted resources and power to individual schools, closed 23 schools, and was known as the “Hatchet lady” who cut 100 jobs, firing principals as well as teachers. The more she shifted power, the more resistance she had. The unions fought her stance on ending tenure and recognizing and rewarding superior teachers. The unions would not even vote on her plan to implement merit pay in place of tenured positions because they were so threatened by her proposals. In spite of the fact that in her short employment test scores were up across the city, Rhee had too much resistance from the unions to implement changes she wanted to make, like extending the school day. Rhee perceived that teachers in the district have the mentality that they have the right to their jobs. She believed that this mind set needed to be changed so that teachers realized that their educating children is a privilege, not a job guaranteed by the union. Rhee felt that there is a willingness to turn a blind eye to the injustices done to children in schools in the name of “harmony” for adults. Viewers may perceive Rhee as brash, offensive in word choice ("crappy," "pissing off"), and too overt to make lasting changes in a conservative, union-protected environment. At the end of the film, Michelle Rhee looks years older and far less energetic than she did at the beginning of her job as Superintendent of Schools.

8. Although the film acknowledges that "only one in five charter schools are producing amazing results," charter schools are often appealing because they don't "track" students and they offer an alternative to traditional public schools. Some charter schools offer additional classroom time in math and sciences or in improving students' reading scores.
Charter schools have eliminated "tracking" which is separating students according to academic ability within a school. In a tracking system, the pupils attend classes with those whose overall skills are similar to their own. Students who don't do well on standardized tests may be assigned a lower track with lower expectations and with poorer teachers. According to the film, those students assigned to lower tracks "often find that they are running fast and falling behind" or are not properly prepared. By eliminating tracking, the charter schools claim that every student "should be able to get to the highest level of curriculum" and be held to the same "high standard." Without tracking, students may feel that they are treated equally and have more opportunities.

9. Geoffrey Canada founded the Harlem Children’s Zone, Baby College, and the Harlem Success Academy, schools for students who live in 97 blocks of Harlem with the highest rate of unemployment in the city. These are the blocks where most of the students who would attend his schools live. He promised the students and their families that the school would stay with their children from the moment they entered until they graduated from college. There would be no failures. He increased the hours of the school day, implemented a relentless emphasis on achievement, emphasized the path to college, and employed teachers and staff that care about student success. The top charter schools under Geoffrey Canada’s guidance are sending 90% of their students to college. His teachers help each other out. Kipp Schools are in low-income neighborhoods where Geoffrey Canada has shattered the myth that children of low-income families can’t learn.

10. To engage students from low-income areas, some teachers such as those at Kipp Academies, are using the students' enjoyment of rap music by turning required memory work into a rap song. Veteran teacher Harriet Ball noticed that her students had trouble learning math terms but could memorize rap songs. By turning the multiplication tables and other memorization work into catchy tunes, which she refers to as "disposable crutches," she realized that students "could learn these basics in an enjoyable way and then could move on to the next step." This teaching strategy was a revelation for the founders of Kipp Academy, which has been named "the highest performing middle school in the entire Bronx. Sixteen years later, there are 82 Kipp schools across the country, each in low-income, under-performing neighborhoods, including Kipp LA Prep." Education Reporter Jay Mathews for The Washington Post notes: "You can't beat their data. We have now data from the first thousand kids who have gone through four years of Kipp. Those kids have gone from the 32nd to the 60th percentile in reading and from the 40th to the 80th percentile in math. We have never had those kinds of gains for low-income kids." These results have convinced educators that disadvantaged students can learn and can make dramatic progress. As Jonathan Alter, Senior Editor at Newsweek, reports, "The students at Kipp and in Geoffrey Canada's schools don't just do better than other poor kids; they do better than everyone, closing the achievement gap and shattering the myth that those kids can't learn." Such results are drawing more students to these charter schools but are also making it difficult for students to find space in these schools.
11. Disheartening realities are apparent throughout this film. While it is clear that all parents want an education that is best for their children, there are too few good schools available for all students to attend. Regardless of parental and student determination to attend a good school, a lottery—chance—may decide acceptance in a better school. Districts are powerless to permanently dismiss incompetent or abusive teachers. The film perceives powerful unions as protective of administrative bureaucracies and incompetent teachers and as impediments to effective changes in education. Unions exist in all public school districts. Good neighborhoods are not guarantees of a good school. Even schools in affluent, middle class suburbs have weak teachers and can’t guarantee their students will have the grades or test scores to get into college. Public schools are being replaced by charter schools, magnet schools, and private schools that are more successful in motivating students to work hard, study, learn, and get into college. The failure of the public schools may be seen as a failure of a significant democratic institution.

12. Although the education "problem is complex," the film suggests some simple steps that viewers "like you" can take to create successful schools. "We know what works: quality teachers, more classroom time, world class standards, high expectations, and real accountability." By focusing on these mandates, the film tries to avoid distractions and to keep the steps manageable: "It starts with teachers becoming the very best, leaders removing the barriers, neighbors committed to their school, and you willing to act." Above all, the film attempts to get people involved and engaged in improving education rather than expecting someone else to do it. "Great schools won't come from winning the lottery. They won't come from 'Superman.' They will come from you." The film concludes with a compelling graphic of homes, schools, and trees expanding and thriving everywhere and of John Legend and The Roots band performing "Wake Up, Everybody."