

ENTERTAINMENT EVALUATION HIGHLIGHTS

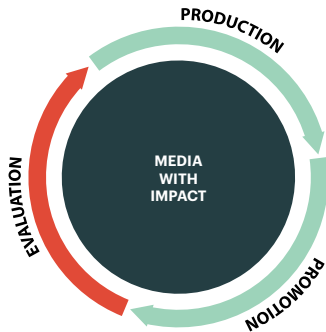
# Waiting for “Superman”

MAY 2011

HARMONY  
INSTITUTE

## Report Highlights Introduction

In the fall of 2010, the Ford Foundation commissioned the Harmony Institute (HI) to evaluate the impact and influence of the documentary *Waiting for “Superman,”* a feature-length depiction of the state of public education in the United States. This six-month evaluation examined the narrative influence of the film on audiences and institutions, and the degree to which *Waiting for “Superman”* impacted opinions and programs on education reform following its release.



The evaluation framework for the film was approached from two distinct, but congruent perspectives. First, with an understanding that storytelling has the power to move audiences, reframe, or expand the dialogue around a social issue, researchers attempted to answer questions relating to the film’s narrative influence. Central questions included asking whether the film changed general audience comprehension of the US education system, whether audience attitudes toward education and reform strategies were affected, and whether viewers responded by taking action after viewing *Waiting for “Superman.”*

Furthermore, the study focused on what aspects of the narrative impacted audiences perception. Researchers identified relevant metaphors and frames from *Waiting for “Superman”* that were significant or widely adopted by viewers.

Second, researchers determined the film’s ripple effect on policy, organizations, and communities. This included charting the impact of the film’s portrayal of teachers’ unions, charter schools, and other education groups. Researchers contacted affiliates, such as the United Way and DonorsChoose.org, to determine the significance of their participation in the film’s outreach campaign.

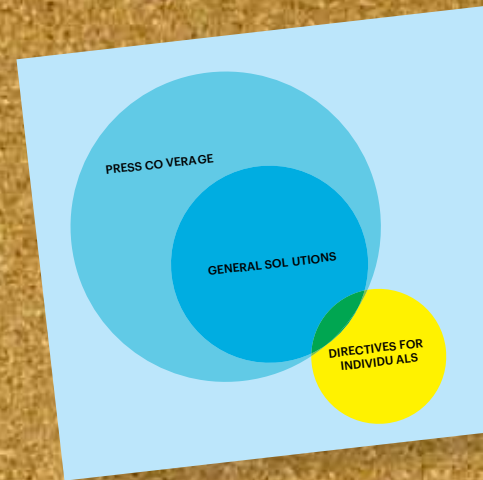
## Why Study *Waiting for “Superman”*?

At the time of this report, *Waiting for “Superman”* ranks 20th in all-time earnings among wide-releasing documentary films in the United States. *Waiting for “Superman”* grossed an estimated \$6.4 million in 2010 and cultivated 294,000 pledges from people vowing to see the film and to support education reform. Since its release, the film has been praised as “the most high-profile thing to happen to [education] in a very long time” by Virginia Edwards of *Education Week*.

Undoubtedly, the film has had an impact on the issue of education reform today. With a release comparable to many other contemporary documentaries, it is the scale of funding, partnerships, and programs for its public outreach that stands apart from other social-issue films. HI set out to assess the impact of *Waiting for “Superman”* in support of the Ford Foundation’s communication work on US education, and to develop methods for measuring the success of media beyond traditional indicators like box office earnings and Web site hits.

The following findings offer highlights from this groundbreaking research. They are drawn from a comprehensive 45-page companion report that offers an in-depth picture of the film’s narrative and social impact. Readers are encouraged to examine the full report for a detailed account of the study’s focus, methodology, and findings.

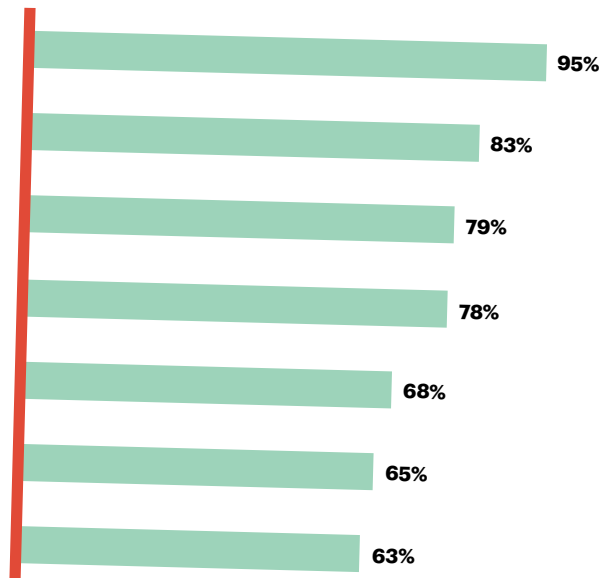
What impact did waiting for 'Superman' have on audience perception?



## COMPREHENSION

**THE FACTS FROM WAITING FOR "SUPERMAN" STUCK WITH AUDIENCES WEEKS AFTER VIEWING**  
 Below are percentages of viewers who remembered main points from the film.

- US standardized test scores have fallen behind those from many European and Asian countries since 1970
- It is more expensive to send an adult to prison for four years than it is to send a child to a typical private school for thirteen years
- Charter schools are allowed to have longer school days and school years than other public schools
- The "achievement gap" refers to the difference in test scores between rich and poor school districts in the US
- American students are the most confident in the world
- Students from poor districts are not just as likely as students from rich districts to perform well on standardized tests
- "Breaking the sound barrier" refers to overcoming the difference in test scores between poor and rich school districts



Of those who **WATCHED**  
 Waiting for "Superman"

**80%**  
 REMEMBERED  
 KEY FACTS

### DIFFERENCES IN DEMOGRAPHICS

General audiences highly approved of the film ★★★★★, while teachers were more critical ★★☆☆☆.



## ATTITUDE



# SOLUTIONS & RESPONSE

Half of the film's press coverage presented general solutions.

Yet, when solutions were raised in the film, viewers felt there were few clear directives for individuals.

## DONORSCHOOSE.ORG

DonorsChoose.org helped raise \$2.4 million in support of a gift card campaign linked to *Waiting for "Superman."* The partnership led to 75,000 new people donating on its site. New marketing and program areas are being created to support face-to-face opportunities among users.



## FILM VIEWERS STATED:

- I am likely to learn more about the education reform debate 66%
- I am likely to vote for a politician because of his or her position on education reform 64%
- I am likely to volunteer at an education-related organization 46%
- I am likely to donate to an education nonprofit or charity 42%
- I am likely to contact my local Congressional representative about education issues 31%

*"We knew that people would come out of the theater outraged and inspired about changing our public schools and would need a simple first step that they could take... something that they could go home and do that very afternoon."*

— CHARLES BEST, FOUNDER & CEO, DONORSCHOOSE.ORG

*"[an] excellent ... depiction of the state of US schools, offering explanations of the causes, but fell short on proposing solutions."* — SURVEY RESPONSE



# NARRATIVE INFLUENCE

## SOME OF THE FILM'S FRAMES AND METAPHORS SUPPORTED AUDIENCE UNDERSTANDING, WHILE OTHERS MISSED THE MARK

Percentage (%) of press coverage that mentioned:

- Lottery
- 'Achievement gap'
- 'Dropout factory'
- 'Dance of the lemons'
- 'Breaking the sound barrier'
- 'Academic sinkhole'

38

16

9

4

0.7

1.4

\* Based on 2010 press coverage of the film.



## AFFILIATE ORGANIZATIONS



"I think the movie definitely contributed to pushing us beyond our traditional relationship with the National Education Association. They were the first to sign on as a national partner for our [new] campaign, and we were among the first to sign on to support [theirs]."

— PETER HAHN, VP OF NATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

THE FILM WAS DISCUSSED EXTENSIVELY IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES FOCUSED ON EDUCATION, BUT RECEIVED LITTLE ATTENTION IN THOSE PRIMARILY CONCERNED WITH PARENTING OR ENTERTAINMENT.



## CHARTER SCHOOLS

**AUDIENCES DID NOT LEAVE THEATERS ANTI-UNION — AND INSTEAD, WALKED AWAY WITH A MORE MODERATE VIEW ON TEACHERS' UNIONS.**

**AUDIENCES LEFT THEATERS WITH AN OPTIMISTIC OUTLOOK ON CHARTER SCHOOLS, BUT FELT THE FILM OVEREMPHASIZED AND OVERSIMPLIFIED THEIR ROLE.**



## TEACHERS' UNIONS

*"They pointed out some things that need to be changed ... but I didn't come out with the mentality that we need to scrap unions."*

— FOCUS GROUP RESPONSE

*"I think [the film] was realistic, but ... those [charter] schools are the exceptions. There are charter schools that aren't doing so well."*

— FOCUS GROUP RESPONSE

## About this Report

This report is one of the first of its kind to measure the effects social-issue entertainment can have on audiences and institutions. The partnership between the Ford Foundation and the Harmony Institute (HI), and the framework for this evaluation, were formed one month prior to the film's national release and built on the premise that an experimental study of this kind will provide vital information on future assessment strategies.

## About the Harmony Institute

The Harmony Institute, a nonprofit research center founded in 2007, employs an innovative approach to assessment. By combining tools from the academic, nonprofit, and commercial worlds, HI's research illuminates for media creators and funders the reach and influence of social-issue entertainment, and its immediate and distant outcomes. This methodology is a critical component of HI's mission to increase awareness of the role media can play in addressing pressing social concerns.



See the full story in the Entertainment Evaluation Report: *Waiting for "Superman"*.

## Harmony Institute Evaluation Methodology

The HI Evaluation Methodology is built on a multi-method approach that surveys the needs of media creators and their partners, and then develops tools and methods that assist in answering the pressing questions of impact assessment. Before researchers at HI begin their work, they choose a research focus and locate indicators related to the scope of a film's desired impact, and then determine the most appropriate way for measuring these indicators. The *Waiting for "Superman"* Evaluation Study illustrates this multi-method approach.

Content and sentiment analysis of press coverage, focus groups composed of the film's audience, an online survey, online trending reports, and in-depth interviews with leaders from the field of education were the primary sources that informed the conclusions presented. The diverse findings from these methods were cross-referenced to offer the broadest view of impact. Additional information on the study's framework can be found in the full companion report.

## Looking Forward

The Harmony Institute works with its partners (including media makers, issue-advocates, and media funders, among others) to create a framework that is both customizable and scalable, depending on the specific needs of each evaluation. This report serves as a case study of the power of entertainment evaluation to aid in future story creation and offers recommendations for how to craft narratives that affect audiences and transform discussions around a social issue. Coming to a deeper understanding of what does and does not work in narrative media is a vital step toward producing future projects that create lasting change.