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NEPC Review: The Lottery

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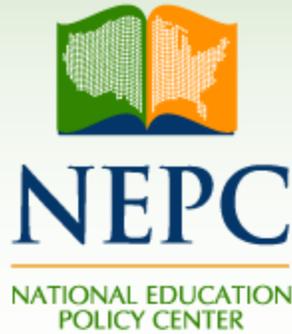


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REVIEW OF *THE LOTTERY*

Reviewed By

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January 2011

Summary of Review

The documentary film *The Lottery* focuses on the battle between advocates for a New York City charter school provider, Harlem Success Academy Charter Schools (HSA), and those presented as charter school opponents. It uses the struggle of four students who hope to get into a charter school as a vehicle to examine how difficult it is for poor children to receive a high-quality education in America's large urban districts. Unfortunately, while there is much that is very real and poignant about this film, its zealous advocacy for charter schools fundamentally misdirects viewers away from the actual evidence about the mixed results that they have achieved.



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REVIEW OF *THE LOTTERY*

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One etymology of the English word “lottery” stems from the Dutch word “loterij,” which is derived from the Dutch noun “lot,” meaning fate.² *The Lottery*, a documentary directed by Madeline Sackler, focuses on the battle between advocates for a New York City charter school provider, Harlem Success Academy Charter Schools (HSA), and those presented as charter school opponents. The movie chronicles the fate of four students who hope to get into a charter school; the struggle of the students and their families is the vehicle for examining how difficult it is for poor children to receive a high-quality education in America’s large urban districts (in this case, New York City). The use of a lottery to secure student assignment to HSA is not surprising. The lottery as a tool to distribute a scarce good or service is perceived by many as transparent and fair. The dramatic tension in the movie is provided by the build up to the lottery drawing as the viewer learns more and more about the desperate circumstances of the featured families. The lottery embodies the apportionment of life chances. So far, so good.

Unfortunately, in terms of substantiating its narrative argument, *The Lottery* is at times more like another game of chance—three-card monte—in that it relies far too much on skillful sleight of hand and misdirection. While there is much that is very real and poignant about this film, it fundamentally misdirects viewers away from the actual evidence about the results achieved by charter schools.

It is clear that the parents and children in this documentary have a burning desire to gain a meaningful and productive elementary education. Their thoughts about education are a reminder of the dreams and hopes of all parents and children. The parents articulate a desire for their children to have better schooling opportunities than they had and to attain higher levels of education. Their discussions illustrate the power of the American Dream, even in underserved urban neighborhoods. The movie elaborates on this narrative, using the Harlem Success Academy charter school as the money card in the three-card monte game. The traditional public school represents a losing pick. The film thus implicitly but clearly defines the primary problems of public education as an inadequate provision of charter schooling, combined with a public school system that is rendered inefficient by a stifling bureaucracy and the self-serving demands of the teachers union. Given these problem definitions, the solution is obvious: create more charter schools and eliminate teachers unions.

In a three-card monte game, the marks are typically drawn in by watching others play. The other players are often confederates of the dealer, and they pretend to play in order to give the impression of participating in an honest game of chance. The film uses a similar device. Throughout the documentary, the showcased leaders—including Geoffrey Canada (President and Executive Director of Harlem Children’s Zone), Newark Mayor Cory Booker, and (now-

former) New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein—all tout the virtues of charter schools while lamenting the losing battle in traditional public schools due to teachers unions and the lack of autonomy in school decision-making. They argue that charter schools are more accountable than traditional public schools because low-performing charters can be closed. Further, they assert that charter schools are more efficient, because they have the power to terminate teachers without “due process” protections and can thus create more effective learning environments than what is offered in traditional public schools.

However, these are merely the testimonials of confidants; no research evidence is offered to validate their claims. Nor are the claims framed as specific to New York City, thus leaving the impression that if the assertions are true they are also general in nature and the prescriptions offered can be applied elsewhere. While no studies are presented in the documentary, there are plenty of descriptive statistics tossed about—without attribution, context, or even links to further information at the movie’s website (<http://thelotteryfilm.com/>). The descriptive statistics

Any balanced presentation of the evidence on these issues must include both the positive and negative outcomes described in the charter school literature; The Lottery fails to do that.

mentioned in the film concern matters such as rates of incarceration, illiteracy, and graduation of selected racial minority and low-income groups as well as an estimated cost of the achievement gap between low-income and high-income students. The movie presents these descriptive statistics as if they were part of causal relationships that demonstrated associations between traditional public schools and the educational disparities and other social concerns. Again, no credible research evidence is presented to support these contentions.

Similarly, no information is provided about charter school research or evaluation studies. However, the tossing about of statistical claims throughout the movie creates an aura of social scientific legitimacy, and this is despite the fact that the overall body of research evidence does not, as noted below, actually bolster the claims made about charters. In fact, no social science researchers with expertise on charter schools appear in the documentary.

In the world outside of *The Lottery* there is a growing body of research on charter schools—research with decidedly mixed findings.³ For example, a study published in June 2009 by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found wide variation in charter school performance.⁴ The study analyzed data from charter schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia—amounting to 70% of U.S. charter school students. Nearly 50% of the charter schools showed results no different from those of matched (similar) local public schools, while 37% deliver results significantly worse than students would have attained (on average) had they remained in traditional public schools. Only 17% had results that were significantly better. A study by Mathematica Policy Research, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, reached similar findings: “On average, charter middle schools that hold lotteries are neither more nor less successful than traditional public schools in improving student achievement, behavior, and school progress; however, impacts varied widely across schools.”⁵ The Mathematica Policy Research and CREDO studies are just two of many—although

they are among the strongest in terms of data and design—but any balanced presentation of the evidence on these issues must include both the positive and negative outcomes described in the charter school literature; *The Lottery* fails to do that.

As mentioned above, lottery hopefuls in the film sought admission to the HSA schools. It is taken as a given that this is the first step on the road to educational redemption. To frame the question of the HSA's quality, the documentary relies on the opinions of the school's own administrators and teachers, individual parents, and a few policy makers, unleavened by any reference to the results of independent research. Personal impressions are woven throughout the film, without a single reference to what has been learned from careful evaluations of the schools. There is no attempt to provide a formal status report of student achievement or other important performance measures in the HSA schools. Yet, the unquestioned assumption throughout the film is that those schools are a uniquely positive school venture.

In fact, we know very little—from a research perspective—about Harlem Success Academy Charter Schools. A search turned up one independent study: after the film was completed, a preliminary evaluation report showing positive results from the HSA schools was posted on the University of Pennsylvania website by a Penn professor and doctoral student.⁶ They analyzed the performance of HSA 2008-9 third-grade students on the New York State Test in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Both analyses indicated that HSA students performed statistically significantly better than comparison groups—a randomized comparison group and a group of students in demographically similar schools. This preliminary study was, however,

Personal impressions are woven throughout the film, without a single reference to what has been learned from careful evaluations of the schools.

limited to the third grade and offered no information on the relative levels of autonomy in HSA charters and the comparison schools. Perhaps more importantly, neither this study nor the film provides a complete picture of the relevant resources associated with HSA compared with New York City district public schools serving comparable students. Although the filmmaker apparently believes that it is the governance or organization or union-less-ness of HSA that should be scaled up, any policy implications about the potential for such charter schools to rescue urban education must certainly start with a sound understanding of inputs.

Finally, while Canada, Booker, Klein and other commentators invested in the expansion of charter schools give their opinions on the topic, nowhere in their commentary do any of them offer a clear rationale for how a school's freedom from external bureaucratic control and the creation of a non-union teaching force actually fosters higher levels of student performance. Instead, we get the black-box, three-mile high version of school reform that treats the specifics of actual classroom learning as an afterthought.⁷

Despite the lack of evidence, the movie carefully frames “winning” as being allowed to attend one of the two Harlem Success Academy schools shown to viewers. Even if the film did provide research evidence to support the conclusion that HSA provides a superior education to that offered in district public schools, it is unclear both from the film and from scholarship whether

its success is related to better instructional practices or better school culture or perhaps to greater resources or to a selection- or attrition-bias (e.g., resulting in many fewer high-needs special education or English learner students). Answers to those questions will be needed before policy makers can learn whether any successes can be duplicated elsewhere so that the dreams of more than a handful of the families could be made a reality.

The movie suggests that anyone not provided with the Harlem Success Academy experience, or with another charter school option, is likely to lose out on a real opportunity to learn. If this premise is accepted, the ability to duplicate the alleged success of these schools becomes vital. Curiously, beyond charter expansions and heroic leaders, the movie offers no hint as to how more successful schools can be created. This omission is all the more glaring because, for example, in the Harlem Children's Zone model (run by Geoffrey Canada, who is interviewed in the film) charter schools are embedded in a network of additional social support programs.⁸ In *The Lottery*, however, school reform is decoupled from other social services. It is not clear what is being proposed in the movie—stand alone charter schools or charter schools coupled with social services. The difference in terms of vision and scale is significant, though research support for either option is limited.

In three-card monte games, it is not unusual for the dealer and his confederates to flee the scene of the game rather than paying a mark. Ultimately, dreams of winning are shattered when the illusion conjured by the dealer evaporates along with the mark's money. There are millions of children and families in urban America seeking a quality education. Is it reasonable to believe that Harlem Success Academy and other charter school organizations can provide models of quality education that can be widely emulated? Despite a lack of evidence in either the film or the policy literature, *The Lottery* suggests that the fate of millions depends on it, but the filmmaker never presents an honest picture of the evidence. Anyone interested in a little three-card monte?

Notes and References

1 I would like to thank Edna Cash, Brittni Jones, Christopher Hamilton, William B. Robertson, and Elizabeth Thorne-Wallington for their comments on draft versions of this review. The opinions expressed here are those of the author.

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FILM REVIEWED:

The Lottery

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