



# Luck of the Draw

## *Charter school lottery brings joy and heartbreak*

### **The Lottery (2010)**

**Directed by Madeleine Sackler**

**As reviewed by Mark Bauerlein**

Charter schools don't play by union rules. So when Harlem Success Academy, a charter group in New York, proposed to take over P.S. 194's building after the school was shut down for poor performance, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the New York Civil Liberties Union took the obvious step: they filed a lawsuit claiming that the state pressed forward without proper consultation with local school boards.

Such resistance has dogged the school choice movement for years, producing a fog of politics cleared all too rarely by moments of forthrightness. Clearing some of the fog is *The Lottery*, a new documentary film by Madeleine Sackler that tracks four families hoping to enroll their kids in one of the Harlem Success charter schools. During the film's 79 minutes, we watch UFT president Randi Weingarten on the *Charlie Rose Show* blurt out "No!" to Rose's assertion that only 10 of 55,000 tenured teachers in the New York City school system were fired the previous year. (The U.S. Dept. of Education counts, precisely, 10.) We witness ACORN workers armed with megaphones fill the sidewalk outside a charter school meeting protesting the very existence of charters in the community. We hear again how the average black 12th grader performs as well as the average white 8th grader. On and on.

These familiar facts and events form a galling and sad backdrop for the real story of the film, parents desperate to find a better school. For them, it means a route away from poverty and despair, even prison. "I just want my daughter to have the best in life," signs a deaf mother who dropped out of high school to help her grandmother. One father sits in a cell serving 25 to life. Tears in his eyes, he moans that if only someone had entered his life early on and steered him toward college, or had just given him some faith in his own intellect, he wouldn't be there.

Harlem Success teachers do just that. That's why so many families show up for lottery day. More than 3,000

individuals apply for admission, but the schools offer only 475 slots. Ponder those odds in light of Weingarten's explanation to the *New York Times* for the P.S. 194 lawsuit blocking the expansion of Harlem Success: "Parents should have a voice when it comes to their children's education, and by eliminating community schools without public hearings, the D.O.E. is taking away that voice."

There you have the perverse logic of vested interests and power politics in public education. It would be laughable if it didn't produce actual perversities such as the annual rite of charter school lotteries, which offer pathetically low chances of winning. That's where *The Lottery* climaxes and where charter school advocates find their best persuasion. Observe these real people in tough circumstances attending the drawing with futures on the line. A little boy dons a shirt and tie, and his mother notes he looks like Barack Obama. "I feel a lot like him," he replies. Another child prays to be chosen. Anxious families line up all the way down the block and file inside for the proceedings. New York City Schools chancellor Joel Klein tells attendees, "Grow the options and let parents vote with their feet."

Harlem Success administrators and teachers take the stand and the selection begins. Names roll out—and the heartbreak begins. "If they don't call your name," one mother mumbles to her son partway through, "it's okay." A father and son stare at the screen where names appear as they are called, their faces growing stony as the minutes pass and spaces run out. At the end, the father mutters, "You're not in," then he hesitates. He looks around as if the outcome hasn't quite registered. "They didn't call your name." What else is there to say?

"Maybe my name's gonna come next time," the boy says.

"Yeah, next year. Not today. Next year."

Watch and weep.

*Mark Bauerlein is professor of English at Emory University.*