School Reform Hits the Big Screen

Why 2010 is a banner year for the education documentary

BY MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

Waiting for Superman. The Cartel. Teached. The Lottery. Welcome to the latest genre in documentary film: education reform.

Even to the casual observer, this sudden celluloid absorption with schools seems less than serendipitous. Surely, there's a master strategy at work? A clique of wealthy funders who have decided that reaching the masses through film is the next arrow in the school reform quiver? Clear evidence from other documentary successes, like Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, that the movies are a great way to change public opinion?

So this intrepid analyst surmised, until I started digging into the back stories of these documentaries and found that what drove their development wasn't a strategic plan but something much simpler: the creative impulses of the filmmakers themselves.

Film can reach new audiences beyond the policy elite—and with emotional storytelling that is much more powerful than anything on the printed page.

Take Kelly Amis, the writer, director, producer, and sometimes videographer of *Teached*, a forthcoming film about inequities in education. A former Teach For America corps member, Amis has spent most of her career in the education reform world, including a stint overseeing policy and research at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (one of the sponsors of *Education Next* and my employer). She wrote her documentary six years ago, "just had it on the shelf," she told me. "Just over a year ago, the stars aligned."

What motivated her was a fervent belief that film could reach new audiences beyond the policy elite—and with emotional storytelling that would be much more powerful than anything written on the printed page. "The information we know in the education policy world gets stuck in ivory towers. Even the way we discuss it keeps it in ivory towers."

A similar sentiment drove Bob Bowdon, the writer, director, producer, and financier of *The Cartel*, an exposé of the teachers unions and other special interests in education. A television reporter-turned-filmmaker, he relayed moviegoers' reactions to his film. "People all the time come to screenings and thank me. They tell me that everyone is afraid to say these things. 'I had no idea that a janitor could make six figures. That superintendents could make 470K. Thirty-million-dollar football fields.' Or, 'really, there's a teacher that reads on a 4th-grade level but worked for 17 years? I had no idea this could happen!' It feels like I'm changing minds."

Yet convincing reform-oriented foundations that moviemaking is a worthy investment has been a tough nut to crack. Bowdon shot his whole film, entered a festival, and even won an award before getting a dime of outside help. Amis managed to raise a modest amount to help cover her direct expenses, but has volunteered her own time for the better part of a year.

But the reason that these funding woes haven't been deal breakers is because the cost of shooting a documentary has plummeted in recent years. "The quality of high-def video cameras has gone up as fast as the prices have gone down," Bowdon said. But that's not all. "When I first got into TV, people would rent these editing rooms with big leather couches and fancy equipment. Nowadays you can find college kids who sit in apartments and work on laptops and edit films. That has changed the gatekeeping equation such that the quality of an idea is the determiner of a project rather than fundraising ability."

But even though the funders weren't enthusiastic supporters of projects like Bowdon's at the outset, they are starting to climb on board. The Gleason Family Foundation, for instance, is now helping to distribute *The Cartel* nationally. Tracy Gleason explained that movies fit well with her

foundation's focus on marketing school choice. "This is a very neglected area of the movement. We have no trouble connecting with the elites. But with average people we are sort of pathetic."

Education Reform Now, a spin-off of the well-funded Democrats for Education Reform, has also seen the light (of the theater projector). It's currently helping to promote *The Lottery*, which follows four families as they try to get their kids into one of the Harlem Success charter schools (see "Luck of the Draw," *cultured*, page 81), with special screenings for targeted audiences. (It will likely do the same for *Waiting for Superman*, a big-budget documentary by *An Inconvenient Truth* director Davis Guggenheim.) Van Schoales, the group's executive director, reiterated the potential for reaching beyond the "usual suspects." His group will aim for "low-income families that are most affected by terrible urban schools, suburban/urban (mostly moms) that are for the most part satisfied with their schools, and, finally, business leaders," he said. "Each of these audiences will be critical in building a broader-based education reform movement that goes beyond the wonks, advocacy groups, and charter folks." Plus, as he pointed out, documentaries like these will soon be available to tens of millions of home viewers through various on-demand services.

But for all this enthusiasm for transcending the "echo chamber," what's the evidence that movies can actually do so? Everyone points to the success of *An Inconvenient Truth* in creating a sense of urgency around the global warming issue. But, as Rick Hess (an executive editor of this journal) wrote on his blog recently, that film had little long-term impact on public opinion. NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* polls found that about one-quarter of respondents in 1999 agreed that "Global climate change has been established as a serious problem, and immediate action is necessary." It went up to about one-third of respondents after the film came out in 2006, but returned to one-quarter by 2009.

Still, with the expense of producing full-length documentaries at a fraction of the cost of sophisticated research studies, expect to see more philanthropic support for these efforts in coming years. They might not transform public opinion writ large, but even if they energize a few thousand activists, they will be worthwhile investments. ❖