On October 3, 2012, A+ Schools, the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) and Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS), co-hosted a screening of the film “Won't Back Down.” Randy Testa Vice-President of Education and Professional Development at Walden Media provided opening remarks and joined Carey Harris of A+ Schools, Nina Esposito-Visgitis of the PFT and Dr. Linda Lane, Superintendent, in a panel discussion moderated by Rev. John C. Welch of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Below are responses to questions that were provided by the audience which our panelists, due to time constraints, were not able to answer. We hope you find their responses informative and we encourage you to continue the conversation by going to our facebook page ([http://www.facebook.com/aplusschoolsfans](http://www.facebook.com/aplusschoolsfans)) and posting your comments or questions.

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<th>Questions to entire panel</th>
<th>Carey Harris</th>
<th>Linda Lane</th>
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<td>The reality that parents faced in the movie with their school failing is the reality of a lot of parents in this district. Placing blame on a single person or entity doesn’t fix our schools – owning up to the problem and working on a solution does. What part of the problem do you take responsibility for? What part of the solution do you take responsibility for?</td>
<td>At A+ Schools, we take responsibility for working with parents, students and community partners to understand the challenges facing our schools and advocate for solutions that insure excellence and equity. For the past 8 years we have led dozens of community dialogues with thousands of participants annually to provide clear information to the public and to let that public's voice be heard to our school board and district.</td>
<td>As the Superintendent I take my full share of responsibility for the solutions while at the same time acknowledging that I cannot fix failing schools alone. I have to question the agenda when the adults devote more time and energy to taking sides and arguing with each other about whose plan will be implemented, rather than pitching in to work together toward success. We can accomplish so much more together.</td>
<td>The answer is that we all share responsibility to make sure all of our students receive a great education. Teachers, parents, the community, and lawmakers in Harrisburg all share that responsibility. Scapegoating teachers, parents, or any single group is counterproductive. We’ve had some success here in Pittsburgh transforming schools because we’ve worked together to solve problems rather than pointing fingers.</td>
<td>We take responsibility for producing a film that tells the story of a single mother, whose daughter is “getting crushed” in a failing public school, and who, in the course of trying to get her daughter into a better school, comes to see beyond her own child’s predicament and sees the ravages of a “system that’s broken,” a school that has “been failing for 19 years.” We take responsibility for producing a film that has served as a catalyst for trenchant discussion through the questions it raises. As I said in my introduction of the film, Chekhov said the function of art was not to offer solutions, but to correctly pose the questions.</td>
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**How can we work together to fight this movie – the horrible message of this film – which undermines the very notion of public education as a public good?**

The best way to fight for public education is to make sure it works for our all students. Let’s work together on closing achievement gaps in our schools by ensuring better supports for teachers so they can be effective in their classrooms, creating positive learning environments and advocating for the resources needed so that every student has the individual support they need to be successful.

I do not have the time or interest in a campaign to “fight the movie”; I see my job as the fight for the success of low-performing schools in our District. To be able to stand and say, “There are no parents in Pittsburgh who feel the way those parents in the movie felt about the schools their children attend,” is the victory I seek. There is more complexity to addressing the needs of low-performing schools in the real world as compared to the movie, but the feelings these parents exhibited are real and as educators we cannot ignore that. When we do, we undermine ourselves.

The best way to fight the message of this film is to keep on doing what we have been doing: collaborating to improve our schools and working together to provide great educational opportunities for all of our children. Frankly, most teachers and administrators I know don’t have time to fight about a movie—they’re too busy working hard on behalf of kids.

**Who made this film? How can we not be talking about Philip Anschutz and the ultra right agenda behind this movie?**

We’re not interested in Philip Anschutz or anyone’s right wing agenda. Let’s stay focused on doing better for our most vulnerable students and schools.

Anschutz' record speaks for itself. He bankrolled “Waiting for Superman” and champions anti-union, anti-public education causes. I think he'd admit that himself. Certainly the company he keeps and the causes he spends money on erase any doubt about what his beliefs are.

Waiting for ‘Superman’ was produced by three studios; we Walden were a third partner, behind Participant Media and Paramount Pictures. It wasn’t “bankrolled” by Walden. I find the comments about Mr. Anschutz both shrill -- and telling. When you vilify someone, you always want to know what’s behind such irrational rage.

**Do you know of any union contract in this country that prohibits teachers from staying after school to help students?**

We do not have an exhaustive inventory of collective bargaining agreements. We hope we never find an agreement that prohibits teachers from doing whatever it takes to support their students’ learning.

No. AFT researched all of its contracts across the entire nation and found no such language anywhere. This is what is sometimes called an urban myth. It is circulated by people who clearly don’t spend much time inside schools. Walk into any neighborhood school and you’ll see teachers not just after school, but before school, helping students, working with colleagues, or working on lesson plans.

We made a drama, not a documentary.

**Aren’t the problems with schools based on curriculum and policy failures more so than union policy? Charter schools, like this movie, are funded by right-wing dollars that benefit the failures of schools and profit from them, keeping us fighting amongst each other instead of targeting the real culprit – a government that is run by corporate agendas.**

Responsibility for the failure of our public schools to educate all students is shared by unions, districts, elected officials and the people who vote for them, and even some of us parents. Let’s each take responsibility for what we can do and focus on solutions. By the way, charter schools in Pittsburgh are funded predominantly by public dollars.

The simple fact is that in Pittsburgh and other districts that have embraced collaboration, student performance rose steadily when adequate resources were provided. When programs and personnel were cut, test scores dipped. We know what works in education. What we lack is the political willpower to commit adequate resources to it.
The man from Walden Media began with speaking about A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, which is one of my favorite books. However he brought up about the school Francie was in (bad neighborhood school) and that her father got her into the better school (better neighborhood). I remember in the book that Francie’s neighborhood school was over crowded and in the so called “bad” neighborhood. However, what I remember from the book that is was a focus on poverty and how that affects a family—not on a school. Finland is rated as one of the best school systems in the world. As a developed country they have the least amount of children living in poverty. The USA as a developed nation has one of the highest amounts of children living in poverty. How can we not take a serious look at how poverty is affecting our children in schools—and equal funding for the neighborhood schools that are being affected by poverty?

In our District the schools in neighborhoods affected by poverty are funded at higher levels on a per student basis than those which are not. There is a “high needs” formula that sends more funds per student to the schools impacted by poverty. In addition to this Title I funds are higher on a per student basis for schools with high levels of poverty. Some may say that even this additional funding is not enough. The fact is that neighborhood struggles impact families and children.

We cannot use poverty as an excuse, but we cannot ignore it, either. All kids can learn, but some kids need more resources than others to be successful, whether it’s smaller class sizes or additional instructional time. Once again, we know what works with children in poverty. We as a society have yet to commit the resources needed to help all children be successful.

I’d suggest re-reading A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN. Betty Smith was prescient in that she did not blame the poverty of the Nolans or those like her, she blamed what the teachers did and their attitudes toward their poor children. And the schools’ attitude towards its poor children. Smith lays out the psychology of the teachers in no uncertain terms and it’s worth a re-read.

As I said that night, this is an American story, and an old American story—the story of parents who are determined to get their children a better education.
Questions/comments addressed to Linda Lane

Said, not mad, just sad.

To introduce more African American students to a gifted and talented education, Pittsburgh Public allowed more students to be recommended and enter the CAS classes. Before this, all CAS classes were limited to 18 students. No CAS teacher could teach more than 4 classes total if they were CAS. So before the gifted model was changed, students starting in the 1st grade were given enrichment and limited class sizes. Now that students are allowed into the gifted and talented model I have 30 students in that model, teach 5 science classes one with 38 students and another with 36. I’m not complaining this year. I’m just confused. We allow more minorities in classes and then remove class size restrictions.

I would like to clarify that the class size restrictions you are referencing were not “removed”; these classes had just always included just students with a gifted individual educational plan (GIEP). That said, 38 is pretty high, and I wonder if balancing can take place to help, but I expect that your principal has considered that already. You may want to ask about that possibility for second semester. We are opening Center for Advanced Studies (CAS) classes to students of all races who meet the qualifications, not just “minorities.” Thanks for not complaining!

I’ve seen the frustrated looks of parents. I’ve seen a mother cry because her son thinks he is slow. My question is how long will it take for teachers and parents to become partners for educating our students without fighting each other? Can the district step looking at parents as customers and start looking at us as partners?

As a parent, I’ve experienced firsthand how the union protects “bad teachers.” What is the process of ridding our district of BAD teachers?

As we publicly debated the furlough issue this summer with the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, their leadership pointed out that, as a District we needed to focus on using the improvement process in place to address teacher quality, rather than implementing performance-based furloughs. Unlike the movie, we do have a more rigorous evaluation process for our teachers and it is possible to end the employment relationship with a tenured teacher, it’s just not quick or easy. We must be fair, letting teachers know what needs to improve, giving them time and offering support to improve, monitoring improvement or lack thereof, and letting teachers know how they are doing. Since the more rigorous evaluation process began in 2009-2010, 148 teachers have ended employment with Pittsburgh Public Schools for performance reasons as compared to four in 2008-2009, proof that this new method is effective and works.

Questions/comments addressed to Nina Esposito-Visgitis

My union has stopped me from working hard to help my students.

There are no union rules preventing teachers from helping students. With my colleagues, teaching is a mission more than it is a job. The teachers I know will do anything they can to help kids succeed. If you look at the PFT’s record on reform, you will see that the initiatives we have pushed forward or embraced are about improving education and improving schools.

One of the critiques of the films is that the union limits a teacher’s ability in providing the necessary services to support their students. How does the union educate against that? How, with specific examples, do they work together with district and parents?

PFT has been reaching out to the community more than ever. We will soon have a “town hall meeting” with parents and community leaders to have a real discussion about the next steps we all have to take to keep our schools moving in the right direction. This is a PFT initiative—it simply would not be happening had the union not taken the lead.

Mrs. Esposito – This year 170 teachers were furloughed with no regard to quality or progress being made by teachers which means we just handed some of our most talented teachers over to charter or private schools. These are the very schools that drain our district of dollars and students. What can be done to keep our most talented teachers at all costs, even if there has to be another wave of furloughs?

The conversation should always be, how can we recruit and retain good teachers, rather than who can we lay off or furlough? I’m not sure our most talented teachers go to charter schools, but charter schools certainly are a drain on public school resources, and that makes it harder to attract and keep good teachers. If there is another wave of furloughs, teachers will be furloughed by seniority; it is the only fair way to do it. It seems that education is the only field in which experience is not valued. But again, the question should be how do we avoid furloughs, not who do we get rid of.

Based on the movie, school improvement came from understanding effective teaching is more important than seniority. Why won’t the union work with the district to come up with a plan that uses multiple measures to ensure we have the best teachers in front of our children?

Seniority is simply a proxy for fairness. We have a robust evaluation system that offers teachers the chance to improve throughout their careers. Those who can’t cut it are ushered out of the profession. With such a system in place, issues like seniority and tenure become moot. And it’s a system that will ensure that the very best teachers are in front of our children.
| Questions/comments addressed to Randy Testa | Randy Testa  
Walden Media |
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<td>Understand why you chose to film the movie in Pittsburgh, but why did you choose Pittsburgh as the setting?</td>
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<td>In the beginning, prior to the movie, there was a beautiful metaphor made about art teaching us lessons. Historically, art has been commissioned by wealthy patrons, reflecting what patrons wish to portray. How would you answer the critique that this movie, along with Walden Media, is support thus reflect the agenda of those who wish to make a profit in education?</td>
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<td>In the movie, it is constantly said that teachers cannot help or tutor students due to constraints of a union contract. Exactly where does this happen as this is not a stipulation in any contract I ever read in 20 years?</td>
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<td>I have never heard of any teacher contracts that forbid teachers from tutoring or giving students extra help. Can you cite any examples?</td>
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<td>I know you explained why the movie was shot here. Many, many movies are shot here that don’t explicitly say it is Pittsburgh. You mentioned screening it for the Gates Foundation. Was that connected in any way to their funding work on teacher evaluation in Pittsburgh? Where is there a union that doesn’t allow teachers to stay afterschool with students? It was mentioned so often in the movie.</td>
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<td>Why use so many lies about teachers and unions to make a point about our common goal—student success?</td>
<td>This isn't really a question, it's a statement.</td>
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