

Q1. What inspired you to make this film?

Well, we knew...we were aware that the education system in this country was perilous, that there are problems; there's no question about that. What got us involved in this... the idea started out actually as a series of mini documentaries that would simply highlight people who were having problems in their particular school district, who would talk about the way the system made things difficult.

However, as we started out, we ran across some people that weren't having problems—they were succeeding in this horrible climate and succeeding with incredible results, and the more we researched it, we found that there were quite a few of these people, that there were a number of exceptions to the rule. So, as we went out and started talking to these people, we found out that they had inspirational stories, and we realized that the answer to a lot of the problems we have today, the answer is not money, the answer is really held by these people. We don't need to put together a blue ribbon committee; we don't need to spend more money on it.

Q2. Sounds like you did a lot of research. Does anything stand out as a catalyst for all the work you did?

Yeah, we stumbled upon Coeur d'Alene Academy in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Someone who was familiar with what we were doing said, "you have to go see these people, they really are something else!" So we jumped on a plane and flew to Idaho, and we saw this amazing story of this little school that looks like any typical school from a middle class community. They were having amazing results. When you went in there, kids were working and they were taking Latin, advanced calculus, and things of this nature. It was so much different than your typical high school.

From that point, we did start doing quite a bit of research. We went through the newspapers; we talked to people from all over the country and tried to find situations where there had been an amazing turnaround, where there was a change, where somebody had really made a difference. And people just started popping up.

Q3. In the process of researching and filming, did you see lots of schools that are doing a better job? Do you see a trend in that direction, or are the great schools you found really exceptions to the rule?

Well, they are pretty much an exception. We don't see a growth of these, unfortunately, but they do pop up. With charter schools, you do see a little bit of

a rise, simply because charter schools allow the public school to take out some of the bureaucratic red tape and so forth, take the chains off, and really allow these strong leaders with vision the opportunity to make the changes necessary. So, in those cases, yes, you do have a little bit of a rise because as you get more charter schools, you're also getting more of these exceptional leaders in positions where they can really make a difference. Also, there are chains of these. For example, the KIPP Summit Academies across the nation that have had a real successful franchise.

Q4. Is there a big difference between the charter school-educated kids and the kids who are being educated in standard public schools?

The exit exams certainly say so. I'll give you an example. In the Oakland American Indian Public Charter School, the principal is Ben Chavis, one of our "All-Stars." Before he came on board, they were considered one of the worst schools in the Oakland School District, which was considered one of the worst school districts in California. Now, they are considered one of the top 1% of all schools in California and their numbers are through the roof. Their math scores are incredible. So obviously, in math and science, they've got high scores. They have people knocking on their door, recruiters from Oberlin, from Dartmouth, from a number of these great schools. Absolutely, their students right now are in a better position to compete in business and the global economy. Also, you're finding there are more options out there, more opportunities for some of the really bright kids to actually go further because they're not held back by the learning level of the classroom they have to be in. Be it home-schooling, virtual academies, or schools that specialize in some particular areas, they really allow those students to flourish and prepare themselves for the competitive world they are about to go into.

Q5. Did you apply any special techniques, or did you figure out any way to make this more compelling than the average documentary?

Yes, we did. We did a few things. First of all, we were determined we were going to entertain the audience as well as inform them. That involved getting recognizable music. We also have some comic relief in the film. We were able to get Joe Mantegna, which was great for us. He is a fantastic narrator. The other area was that we really went through a lot of people—we talked to a lot of different people in order to find the best. In the film, we only had the most compelling and the most compassionate people. These are really some of the great leaders and inspirational people. This isn't to say that there aren't many teachers and leaders across the country that are doing well in schools, but these

people in particular just seem to jump off the screen with their film presence, and their inspiration. They are determined to make a difference.

Q6. Many years ago, a documentary was something you watched on PBS or the History Channel. More recently, there has been a glut of them, some of which have found their way into the mainstream. Some would argue that Michael Moore helped play a role in that because of the success of his films *Fahrenheit 911* and *Bowling for Columbine*. If *Flunked* is successful, will you send Michael Moore flowers?

[Laughs]. I think it's great that he has brought attention to the genre of the documentary. While I agree with very little of his films from a philosophical view, he did make films that were entertaining. He could captivate an audience for a while. You're seeing more and more of that. Quite frankly, the television world has segmented from just a few networks to all sorts of specific areas of interest. I think documentaries are going to flourish because there are more choices: you can go and find what will interest you. I also think what Moore did was show how much attention you could bring to a particular topic, and the power of the documentary.

Q7. Was there anything else, other than the discovery of these inspirational stories...were there other external influences that prompted you to start making the film? Or, did you learn anything during production that caused you to change direction at all?

My home base right now is Washington State. In Washington State, there are very little options in the public education world. So, as we went out and saw things in other states, we wanted to learn about what other options were out there. We knew it was important to tell people in states such as ours, people who don't even know these exist, to realize that there are many different ways to educate students. Another big inspiration in this film was the inner cities. East Los Angeles, Oakland, Watts, Harlem. We talked to many frustrated people who had lived with decades of failure in their public school; we talked to parents who were willing to do anything they could to get their kids in other schools, because they knew if they go to "that" school, their life would be over. You can feel their frustration, these people are begging for help. Anything we can do to help erase that cycle of despair and educational failure, we should do.

Q8: This speaks to a disconnect that your movie seems to point out, that some of what the public is told about what is going on in education, by

policy makers and educators, is a bit different than the reality. Do you have an explanation for this disconnect, this discrepancy?

I think the education system has built itself up over the years to a huge bureaucracy. When bureaucracy gets that big, the goal is to maintain and increase the size of its bureaucracy, so any change to the existing system is a threat. This is really a big problem. The film is hoping to have an open dialogue and to have suggestions thrown into the political dialogue and public debate. The problem is that the people running the schools and the system itself really don't want any change. They see it as a threat. That's the problem.

Q9: While you were in the midst of production, was there anything that you found that was more challenging than you expected, or anything that surprised you?

The biggest surprise was when we went to these schools where we heard these incredible turnaround stories, that you would have thought that they had weeded out the troublemakers, and just left the very best students, to make the place look good...but these are the same kids from the other schools. The difference is that these kids have bought into the system of success. They believe. That's why I was so impressed with these "All-Stars"; they got their students to believe that success was possible; in fact, it was probable if you followed the system that was set up. You could see it. I thought it was really inspirational that kids we had met were literally gang members just two or three years before, and they had decided this was a much better way to be successful. They are actually bringing in some of the skills they had from organizing gangs into the education system. It's a great change.

Q10: It's also a great change to have a documentary that covers both public policy issues *and* gives them a personal touch. What you just said is an incredibly compelling personal story. Did you actually set out to combine those things to try to create something that had both a public policy point of view and also a bit of a compelling personal flair to it?

Not really! What we really tried to do was...this is by no means a full primer on the educational reform system, or what needs to be done; this is really an overview and a show of hope that great change is possible, right now. That is what we really wanted to show. We wanted to give people hope, and give people the feeling that these solutions are out there and if they demand them, they can have them. There is no reason to wait 20 years and lose a generation of kids when these successes are available in schools today.

Q11: It sounds like you're saying that you plan to make more of these; that this is an overview—that it might be an introduction to perhaps a series of films?

We would love to do that. Our next goal is to do the follow-up with a series of chapters. That way, we can cover one particular topic at a time and get into a little more depth.

Q12: My last question—is there a quick way that you can sum up the effects that you would like this *Flunked* project to have on public education, on a nationwide level?

What we'd really like to do on a nationwide level is open up the debate. Since 1957, really, probably even before that, the discussions have been "Oh my gosh, our education system is in trouble, we're not competing with the rest of the world, what are we going to do?" And again, what has always been the case, in fact, from the executive level on down—every couple of years there are these new programs with many different goals and objectives and so forth, and a lot more money goes into it. Two years later, we are back basically changing the wording of the goals and objectives, and just asking for more money. It's time to change that. More money is just simply not the answer. There may be isolated instances, where that may be a necessity, but in reality, it goes much deeper than funding. It goes to a real commitment of leadership of teachers and really, finding the most efficient way to educate our children.

I want people to realize that we don't have to have a system that's simply made up of buildings down the street to which a child goes based solely on his geographical location. We have to think about this completely different—out of the box—and see the possibilities and realize that kids learn differently. We need to address that and when we see successes, we need to find out why they were successful and implement those strategies that work. It only makes sense.

Sounds like *Flunked* is the opening salvo, the introduction to what hopes to be an ongoing and important debate. Thank you very much, Steven Maggi.

Thank you!