



A film by  
Madeleine Sackler

Produced by  
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## SYNOPSIS

*The Lottery* is a feature-length documentary that explores the struggles and dreams of four families from Harlem and the Bronx in the months leading up to the lottery for Harlem Success Academy, one of the most successful schools in New York. The four families cast their lots in a high-stakes draw, where only a small minority of children emerges with a chance at a better future. The vast majority of hopefuls will be turned away.

Directed by Madeleine Sackler and shot by award-winning cinematographer Wolfgang Held (*Brüno*, *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*, *Children Underground*), *The Lottery* delves into the ferocious debate surrounding the education reform movement. Interviews with politicians and educators explain not only the crisis in public education, but also why it is fixable.

*The Lottery* interlaces the families' stories with the emotional and highly politicized battle over the future of American education. A call to action to avert a catastrophe in the education of American children, *The Lottery* makes the case that any child can succeed.

## PARTICIPANTS

**Geoffrey Canada** is the President and CEO of Harlem Children's Zone, which The New York Times Magazine called "one of the most ambitious social experiments of our time." In 2005, he was named one of "America's Best Leaders" by U.S. News and World Report.

**Cory Booker** is the mayor of Newark, New Jersey. He is a member of numerous boards and advisory committees that are committed to education including: Democrats for Education Reform, Columbia University Teachers' College Board of Trustees, and the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

**Candice Fryer** is a teacher at Harlem Success Academy 2.

**Betsy Gotbaum** was New York City's Public Advocate from 2001 to 2009.

**Meredith Gotlin** is the principal of PS29 in the Bronx.

**Joel Klein** has been the Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education since 2002. As Chancellor, he oversees 1.1 million students, the largest public school system in the country.

**Jim Manly** is the principal of Harlem Success Academy 2.

**Eva Moskowitz** is the founder and CEO of Success Charter Network, which runs the Harlem Success Academies. She served as the Chair of the Education Committee for New York's City Council from 2002 to 2005.

**Jessica Reid** is a teacher at Harlem Success Academy 2.

**Susan Taylor** was editor-in-chief of Essence Magazine from 1981 to 2000. Ms. Taylor was called "the most influential black woman in journalism today" by American Libraries in 1994. She founded the National CARES Mentoring Movement, whose goal is to recruit one million adult mentors.

**Dacia Toll** is the President and co-CEO of Achievement First, which runs seventeen charter schools in Connecticut and New York.

**Paul Tough** is an editor at the New York Times Magazine. He has written extensively on poverty, education, and the achievement gap. He is the author of *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America*.

## MAIN CREDITS

Directed and edited by Madeleine Sackler

Produced by Blake Ashman-Kipervaser, James Lawler, Madeleine Sackler

Co-Produced by Erin Lanuti

Associate Producer Todd Bartels

Director of Photography Wolfgang Held

Original Score by Tunde Adebimpe and Gerard Smith

Sound Recording Matt Sutton

Titles by Nunclé

Assistant Camera Daniel Carter

Additional Photography by Daniel Carter, Alan Jacobsen, Leila Kilbourn, Martina Radwan, Wayne de la Roche

Consulting Editor David Zieff

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In the spring of 2008, I saw news footage of Harlem Success Academy's lottery: 5,000 parents and children packed in the Harlem Armory hoping to win a spot at an elementary school. The parents who won were ecstatic, hugging each other and clapping as though they had won the jackpot in a cash lottery. The losers looked despondent. Unfortunately there were many more losers than winners; six out of seven children did not win a spot at Harlem Success that day.

After a little research, I learned why so many parents were at the Armory. Harlem Success and many other over-enrolled public charter schools in New York City were producing dramatically better academic results than the traditional public schools operating in the same districts. Many of these new charter schools were bringing 70% to 90% of their students to or above grade level achievement. In comparison, many of their district counterparts had fewer than 50%, even 20% of students at grade level. The winners at the Armory that night had hugely improved their chances of succeeding academically, attending college, and broadening their career opportunities. And thousands of parents, packed into the Harlem Armory on a cold spring night, knew it.

America is composed of communities that are often separated by income, race, and national origin, and the zip code we grow up in is unfortunately a very accurate predictor of academic success (or failure) and, consequently, of future economic status. After I learned that some schools were closing the academic achievement gap, I began asking people why they thought that this gap between the classes and races persisted. Their answers were consistent with published surveys. Most Americans believe that the academic achievement gap is the result of a lack of interest in education or a lack of family structure in low-income communities. They say that a student fails because of the stresses of poverty or because their parents don't emphasize how important education is. But the footage of those 5,000 people didn't fit with these commonly held beliefs. Instead, I saw thousands of parents who wanted a better education for their children. After one woman told me that the achievement gap doesn't matter because "we will always need shoe shiners," I began work on *The Lottery*. I wanted to tell the story of the families who are forced to rely on luck to win their children a great education. I wanted to share their perspective of the challenges of raising and educating their children, and their hopes for their children's future. I wanted to show that poverty and culture are not acceptable excuses for the achievement gap. Not only is it a moral question and a question of civil rights, but also it is stunting the economic future of the country and will prevent America from being competitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the achievement gap most severely affects disadvantaged children, the average American student isn't doing that well either. Out of 29 industrialized countries, American students rank 26<sup>th</sup>.

*The Lottery* follows four families in the three months leading up to the lottery. The four families in *The Lottery* reflect a range of circumstances: a two-parent family, a single mother and daughter, a father and son separated from the mother and brother by an immigration

issue, and a mother and son separated from a father by a prison sentence. Two of the families support themselves, and two are supported by public assistance. Most of the parents did not graduate from college, and some did not complete high school. But they all love their children, place great importance on education, and are frightened by the knowledge that no matter how hard they try, bad schools threaten their children's futures. Fortunately, high-performing schools like Harlem Success are being opened all over the country; unfortunately, this is very controversial.

Public education in America costs the nation about \$700 billion annually and employs millions of people – it's almost 5% of the U.S. economy. Because there are so many jobs at stake, and because public charter schools compete with district schools, charter schools challenge some of the country's most sophisticated and powerful political players. In cities, state houses, and at the federal level, a political battle is being waged between those who are in favor of school reform and those who want to preserve the status quo. There are many political weapons that are applied to slow or halt the expansion of public charter schools in particular in an attempt to preserve the traditional structure of public education. Caps on charter schools can limit the number of new schools that may be opened; caps on enrollment can limit the number of students that are allowed to attend charter schools; unequal funding ensures that charter schools receive less public funding than traditional public schools; denial of use of public buildings prevents charter schools from expanding or receiving available public space. Some states impose mandatory unionization once the charter school reaches a certain enrollment, and some states haven't passed laws allowing charters at all.

Despite the political controversy, whenever parents are given a choice of where to send their children to school, they flock to the higher performing choices. This demand for choice and for performance is taking hold in our national conversation, and one-by-one, politicians are revisiting their old positions. President Obama's outspoken support for public charter schools has accelerated this process, but there is still a long way to go before every child has access to a great school.

#### A NOTE ON WHAT MAKES A GREAT SCHOOL GREAT

All of the parents I met wanted to send their children to Harlem Success more than to the traditional public schools in the district for a simple reason: Harlem Success was a "better school." But most of them could not tell me *why* the school was better. My research and interviews have revealed that education experts generally agree: creating a great school is not luck or rocket science; it is the result of rigorously applying some commonsense principles. The dedication and quality of the school leadership and staff are paramount, and in great schools there is a tremendous investment in recruiting and training bright and motivated people who are open to change and continuous improvement. In great schools, "teaching" is not the isolated acts of lecturing and grading; it is the demonstrated transference of knowledge and skills to students. Studying student data enables teachers to individualize instruction to meet the needs of each child. It also helps school leaders to

guide professional development and to make decisions about principal and teacher retention or promotion. In great schools, administrators and teachers collaborate to design and execute programs that create a school culture of high achievement and to find ways to make every child a successful member of the school community. Build a great professional team, collect and respond to student performance data, and manage the school culture – in a nutshell, these are the three core characteristics shared by great schools.

Skeptics who argued that success could not be that simple have been surprised by the achievement of a number of public charter school organizations that, by following this formula, have been able to reliably produce great schools in America's poorest communities. The KIPP Academies, Achievement First, Uncommon Schools, Green Dot, Aspire, Harlem Children's Zone, and the Harlem Success Academies, are all examples of this phenomenon. Combined, these networks operate 160 successful schools in disadvantaged communities all over the country.

## PLAYING THE LOTTERY: WINNERS, LOSERS, AND THE POVERTY TRAP

The Harlem Success lottery, and the political struggle that Harlem Success faces as shown in *The Lottery*, is emblematic of a struggle that is being played out across the country. One-and-a-half million students attend public charter schools, and demand exceeds available spots by the hundreds of thousands. Some parents whose children don't win the lottery will home-school their children, and some will scrape together the money to send them to private school, but most of these parents will send their children to their assigned district school. Some of these district schools, often called "drop-out factories" or "pipelines to prison," have been consistently failing children for decades. Predictions for children who attend failing schools are not good. They are more likely to become parents as teenagers; they are more likely to end up unemployed and on welfare; they are more likely to go to prison; and they are more likely to raise children in poverty, perpetuating the cycle. This crisis is not new – the public education system has been declared to be in a state of crisis for decades. But when I saw the footage of the lottery in 2008, it occurred to me that the education system was, perhaps for the first time, poised for reform.

The 5,000 people at the lottery in 2008 made it clear that the demand exists: parents flock to lotteries hoping to win their children a ticket out of the abysmal statistics. And the success rate is real: studies by economists from Harvard and Stanford have confirmed that the difference in achievement has nothing to do with the nature of the students and everything to do with the schools themselves. So it seemed to me that despite the tragedy of so many children losing their shot at a better public education, these lotteries also represent hope for a better school system. In making *The Lottery*, I hope to show what leaders of great schools had learned: that the obstacles are not insurmountable. Given the right educational circumstance, all children can succeed. If we support reforms that enable more schools to adopt the factors that make a school great, we can inspire a systemic improvement and schools would succeed on a much larger scale. And hopefully, we would eliminate the need for lotteries all together. Instead of crossing their fingers at a lottery,

parents of all classes would have the opportunity to choose between several great schools. As Mayor Booker says in *The Lottery*, “There are schools in every community across the country where any child can learn at the highest imaginable levels...The question is, why aren’t there more of them?” This is the question I hope everyone will ask.

The four families in *The Lottery* are unique in the personal journeys that brought them to lottery day, but they all have the same goal for their children: a high-quality education that will provide them with the opportunity for a better future. This is the American Dream, and in this way, these four families represent every family. If we continue to be complacent about schools that are failing, and if we don’t make it possible for excellent schools to expand and flourish, we are not only sentencing the most disadvantaged in our communities to devastating consequences, we are putting the future of the country at risk.