

PRESS KIT: BACKPACK FULL OF CASH

Message from the Filmmakers

by Director/Co-Producer Sarah Mondale and Producer/Co-Editor Vera Aronow

We both grew up with a deep respect for public education—we were taught that it was a cornerstone of American democracy, on par with the Declaration of Independence.

Sarah: My grandmother taught music in a one-room schoolhouse. My mother taught English to adult immigrants. I myself am a former teacher. My father, a marvelous historian, loved to tell me about this country's long-standing respect for public education. "Just look at the Northwest Ordinance," he would say. "When we were barely even a country, all the new states had to set aside land for public universities and 'forever encourage schools.'"

Vera: I grew up in the Philadelphia metro area and had so many family members involved in public schools it was hard to keep track of them all—nurses, librarians, teachers and of course, students. My recently deceased mother went to school in West Philadelphia and in her later years, in her nineties, she could not believe the devastating budget cuts.

As the attacks on public schools and teachers increased in recent years, we became worried. We decided to do something about it.

It took us five years to make BACKPACK FULL OF CASH, and our fundamental concern has not changed: Why dismantle our public school system? Instead, why not make it work for every child?"

The election of Donald Trump and the appointment of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos have left us -- and many other U.S. voters -- deeply concerned. They seem to challenge public education at every turn. And yet, while making this film and speaking to audiences at screenings across the country, we have met so many students, teachers, and activists who have inspired us and given us hope.

We hope you find them inspiring too, and take action to strengthen—not abandon—our system of public education.

Sarah Mondale, Director/Producer
Vera Aronow, Producer/Editor

BACKPACK SCREENINGS AND HONORS

BACKPACK has been supported by grants from The Ford Foundation, JustFilms, The Open Society Foundations, The Schott Foundation for Public Education and others, including hundreds of individuals who contributed to our Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign.

An early version of BACKPACK FULL OF CASH screened at the 2016 Philadelphia International Film Festival where it won Honorable Mention - Best Local Feature and Honorable Mention - Audience Award/Greater Filmadelphia. Following screenings of the final 96-minute version of the film at the [Nashville International Film Festival](#) and [FilmFestDC](#) (the Washington, DC International Film Festival) in April 2017 where the film was Runner-Up Audience Award - Best Documentary, the filmmakers travelled to Alberta, Canada to show “Backpack”, followed by screenings at the [Seattle Film Festival](#), [the Macon Film Festival](#) in Macon, Georgia, the Heartland Film Festival in Indianapolis, and the Zagrebdox Film Festival in Croatia where the film attracted a sold-out crowd.

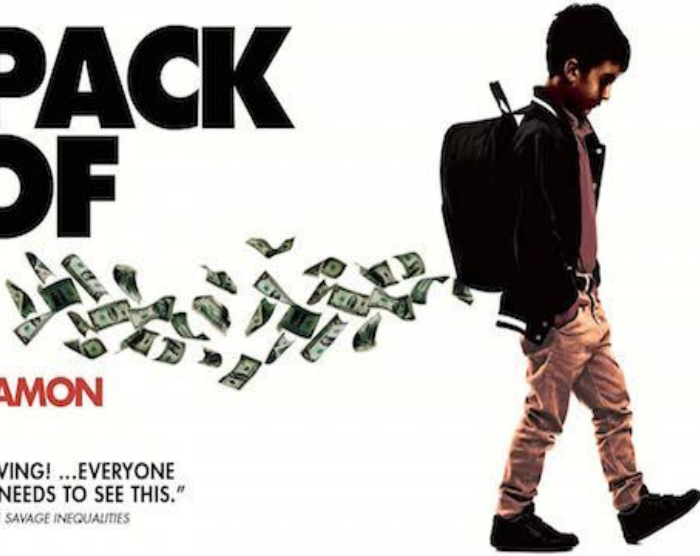
The community screening campaign has brought “Backpack” to more than 360 events in 39 states and 9 countries so far, including Greece, South Africa, Ireland and most recently Australia where the filmmakers travelled to four cities to participate in lively discussions about public education. It has been an incredible journey for Mondale and Aronow, who have had the privilege of interacting directly with audiences in a range of settings – from school auditoriums to community centers, churches, college campuses and movie theaters.

A FILM EXPLORING THE REAL COST OF PRIVATIZING
AMERICA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BACKPACK FULL OF CASH

NARRATED BY MATT DAMON

"A BEAUTIFUL FILM—TREMENDOUSLY MOVING! ...EVERYONE
WHO VALUES DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION NEEDS TO SEE THIS."
— JONATHAN KOZOL, ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND AUTHOR OF SAVAGE INEQUALITIES



FAST FACTS AND STATISTICS

CHARTER SCHOOLS, VOUCHERS AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

• Public Schools

There are [more than](#) 13,500 public school districts, serving over 50 million students in the United States. Around 90% of American students attend public schools. Public schools represent a huge block of government spending, totaling [over \\$600 billion yearly](#).

• Charters:

Charter schools are publicly funded but most are privately run. In 2017-18, more than [7,000 charter schools enrolled nearly 3.2 million students or more than 6 percent](#) of the nation's public schools students, according to the National Alliance for Charter Schools, a charter advocacy group. Charters are [especially strong](#) in urban areas. Philadelphia, whose struggle is highlighted in *Backpack Full of Cash*, had 86 charter schools in 2013-14.

• Vouchers

Vouchers use taxpayer dollars to pay tuition at private, mostly religious schools. [More than half of the states offer families vouchers](#), tax credit “scholarships”, education savings accounts, or individual tax deductions or credits, according to EdChoice, a voucher advocacy group. [Florida](#) just signed its FIFTH private school choice plan into law.

• Selective student bodies

Concern has grown over charter schools that erect barriers to enrollment, such as selective marketing or limited time frames. At [one Philadelphia charter school](#), applications were available only one day a year, to families attending an open house at a suburban golf club.

• Test scores

Studies consistently note that, overall, test scores are *not* significantly different in voucher, charter and public schools.

• School funding

Around 20 states provide LESS funding per student than before the 2008 Recession, according to [a recent study](#) by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Charters and private school vouchers leave even less money for public schools which the vast majority of children – including the most vulnerable – depend on.

• School privatization at the national level

In his [2020 budget proposal](#), President Trump called for a federal tax credit for donations to private school scholarships, increasing federal charter school grants by \$60 million, and gutting the Education Department's budget by 10 percent. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is a longtime advocate of vouchers and charters, including those run by for-profit companies.

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS FROM “BACKPACK FULL OF CASH”

Every one of our children should have a backpack full of cash, strapped on their back, and the schools should vie for the privilege of educating our kids and having that backpack turned over to them. -- **JEANNE ALLEN, Center for Education Reform (helped to develop the charter school movement)**

Whether you're home-schooled, whether you go to online school, whether you go to a charter school, a traditional public school...We want the dollars to follow the student so that it's no longer a monopoly. -- **BOBBY JINDAL, former Governor of Louisiana (R)**

Test scores today are the highest they've ever been in American history. They're the highest ever for white kids, black kids, Hispanic kids and Asian kids. And the dropout rates are the lowest they've ever been. And people are shocked to hear this because there's been this constant din of failure, failure, decline, decline. --**DIANE RAVITCH, Historian and Author: *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education***

I wanted to be a teacher and a coach. I wanted to be thought of well and do a job that's honorable. But in the last 25, 30 years the narrative has been teachers are selfish and people believe that. -- **JIM GIFFORD, Tennessee High School English Teacher**

The vision of American education that made this a distinctive place...the school that would be open to the rich and poor alike...that institution is endangered in many places. And in some places it seems almost irreparably lost. -- **DAVID KIRP, Writer, *Improbable Scholars: The Rebirth of a Great American School System and a Strategy for America's Schools***

You go into a wealthy community. You won't see charter schools. Why don't they have charter schools? They don't need them. They're happy with their public schools. WHY? Because they're well funded. -- **RHONDA BROWNSTEIN, Education Law Center (legal advocates for Pennsylvania children and quality public schools)**

People shouldn't be confused whether it's called a scholarship or some other name they invent for it, it is still a voucher. Your tax dollars are being used to pay for private education. --**KARRAN HARPER ROYAL, New Orleans parent and public school advocate**

We do believe in creationism... that literally all of mankind came from what's now right in the middle of Iraq, the Tigris and Euphrates River where the Garden of Eden was. We do teach them the theory of evolution and why we believe that that is not true. -- **JOSH LESAGE, Headmaster in 2014, Hosanna Christian Academy (Baton Rouge, LA school where most students pay tuition with vouchers)**

If you don't educate properly all the people then what is a democracy except a place where those with the money and the power determine the outcomes for everybody else?

-- **WENDY FORTUNATO, Philadelphia School Counselor and activist**

We have 3 elevators, the last of which stopped working about a month ago. And the school district said, we don't have money to fix it right now. To me it's just like this sort of perfect metaphor for what's going on. There's a lot of broken elevators in the system right now and there's no money to fix them. —**DR. MARK WILKENS, Philadelphia Public School Social Studies Teacher**

How are we gonna learn how to draw if we don't have art class, how are we gonna learn how to sing if we don't have music? -- **BENNY RAMOS, Philadelphia student activist**

When people remain in that vicious cycle of poverty, how do they really become contributing and productive citizens? It all comes down to citizenship. If you want to have a stronger country, then you create stronger citizens. To do that, you create stronger public schools.

-- **OTIS HACKNEY, Former Philadelphia High School Principal, Chief Education Officer, City of Philadelphia**

One of the ways that you exhibit as a government and a society your love for children is in the institutions you build around them and one of the most central of them is the public school.

-- **HELEN GYM, Parents United for Public Education, Philadelphia City Council member**

When I'm president, I'm going to try to open many more schools and I'm going to try to build more schools. -- **BORIS Zhinin - 4th grader whose public school was one of 24 closed in Philadelphia in June 2013**

For more information, downloadable photos, trailer and other resources, please visit our website at www.BackpackFullofCash.com