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## Freedom in Film: *Won't Back Down* (2012)

By Kathryn Hickok

[Social problem films](#) are not generally “feel-good” movies, in the sense that viewers feel comfortable with their feet up, eating popcorn, laughing with the heroes, and hoping for happily ever after. *Won't Back Down* (2012) is a bit different. The film makes clear the near-impossibility of a desperate single mother getting her small daughter out of the worst public school in town; but it maintains a buoyant, upbeat vibe.

[Here is what Cascade's Steve Buckstein said](#) about *Won't Back Down* when it opened in theaters:

It's not often that a Hollywood movie both entertains and helps parents learn about another option to improve their children's education. The film [Won't Back Down](#)...does both.

Inspired by actual events, it's the story of a third-grade student trapped in a failing public school. Unable to afford a private education, her mother, played by actress Maggie Gyllenhaal, learns about [parent trigger laws](#), now the reality in seven states, which allow [parents to take control](#) of such schools and institute improvements.

Gyllenhaal enlists the help of a dedicated teacher in her daughter's school, played by actress Viola Davis, to jump through the myriad of hoops put in their way. Together, they learn how to fight not only the bureaucracy, but the powerful teachers union, personified by actress Holly Hunter.

The film explores the complex relationships among good teachers, bad teachers, and a union whose leader once famously said he'd represent the interests of schoolchildren when they started paying union dues. Poor parents who want the best for their children are given a glimpse of the educational choices that those with political power are able to make.

Surprisingly, the good guys aren't all good, and the bad guys aren't all bad, in this multi-layered drama....

*Won't Back Down* was criticized by some as “anti-union” or even “anti-teacher.” But it is actually a relatively gentle take on union/parent/teacher conflicts. The film takes extra care to present the concerns and fears of lifelong public school teachers and union members with sympathy and understanding. The characters are lovable, and the drama is human.

The takeaway can be summed up by the school board member who, casting the decisive vote, says....Well, you'll have to see the movie to find out.

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