What I’ve Learned About Great Teachers
The PARADE interview by Paul Tough

"In almost every area of human endeavor, the practice improves over time," says Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates. "That hasn’t been the case for teaching." This month, Gates is sounding the alarm about public education in Waiting for "Superman," a new documentary from An Inconvenient Truth’s Davis Guggenheim. "He has this amazing capacity to drill really, really deep," Guggenheim says of Gates. "He has an infectious curiosity." PARADE sat down with the software mogul turned philanthropist to talk about the movie, the American education system, and his own school days.

PARADE: Why did you decide to appear in Waiting for "Superman"?
BG: Our foundation has picked education as a priority in the United States, and we’ve spent over $4 billion on various projects. So when I heard that somebody who’s done great documentaries was doing one on education, my interest was to share some thoughts and say, "Hey, don’t get too depressed."

PARADE: Depressed? Do you think people will find the film pessimistic?
BG: Most people don’t realize how bad the situation really has become. They think, Geez, if half the kids in the inner city were really dropping out, wouldn’t somebody declare a crisis? The movie shows how bad the system is, and that’s a downer. But you also see that there are great schools, and kids in the inner city can succeed. So that’s a very hopeful thing.

PARADE: In the documentary, experts say there are too many bad teachers in America and not enough great ones. Why is that?
BG: Very little is invested in understanding great teaching. We’ve never had a meaningful evaluation system that identifies the dimensions of great teachers so we can transfer the skills to others. The Gates Foundation has learned that two questions can predict how much kids learn: "Does your teacher use class time well?" and "When you’re confused, does your teacher help you get straightened out?"

PARADE: As a student, did you have one teacher who really influenced you?
BG: I went to a public school through sixth grade, and being good at tests wasn’t cool. Then my parents switched me to Lakeside School [a private school in Seattle]. A teacher there, Mr. Anderson, was pairing people up by ability for a geography quiz, and he put me with this kid I didn’t think was very clever. I thought, Wait, he thinks I’m the same as this kid? Man, oh, man, there’s something wrong.

PARADE: How did you turn yourself into a different kind of student?
BG: When I was in eighth grade, I scored the best in the state on a math exam. After that, my math teacher let me go off and do independent study and computer stuff. I also became good at relating to adults. When I’d meet a teacher, I’d say, “Hey, tell me your 10 favorite books.” I’d read them, and then I could talk to the teachers about something they knew a lot about.

PARADE: You and Melinda have three school-age kids. Are you involved in their education?
BG: Last year our family traveled for three months, and we did some homeschooling. I taught math and science. We went to the Large Hadron Collider, the giant particle accelerator in Switzerland. We went to a toilet-paper factory, a garbage dump, an aircraft carrier, and a coal plant. I also found great educational material on the Web, including short videos at Khanacademy.org.

PARADE: What did you learn from working with your kids?
BG: Teaching’s hard! You need different skills: positive reinforcement, keeping students from getting bored, commanding their attention in a certain way. I’d be better at teaching the college-level stuff.

PARADE: Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, has criticized Waiting for "Superman" for focusing too much on charter schools as a solution. What do you think?
BG: She points out that, on average, charter schools don’t do better than other...