Movie review of: *Why Jonny Cant Reed* (*Liberty,* May 2010, pp. 44-45.)

**“The Cartel,” directed by Bob Bowden. Moving Picture Institute, 2009, 90 minutes.**

Playing recently in film festivals is a powerful and provocative documentary about the sorry state of American education. The film, called “The Cartel,” is also available for a modest donation to the estimable Moving Picture Institute.

Written, directed, and produced by Bob Bowden, “The Cartel” explores the many problems of the New Jersey public school system. Bowden is a reporter and news-anchor in New Jersey, so he is very familiar with state news and politics. The film has caused quite a stir, prompting attacks from the New Jersey Educational Association (NJEA) in particular. This highly organized and powerful group of rent-seekers called it “an orchestrated attack against public schools and the New Jersey Educational Association.”

But the film has also garnered considerable grassroots audience support, winning “Best of the Festival” at its debut at the 2009 Hoboken International Film Festival.

The film asks the pertinent question, “How has the richest and most innovative society on earth suddenly lost the ability to teach its children at a level that other modern countries consider ‘basic’?” It is unabashed in pointing to school choice — as opposed to endlessly increasing public school funding — as the solution.

The movie starts with well-known political commentators from Right to Left saying that the American public school system is in crisis. It reviews the dismal performance of American students on both international and U.S. tests. For example, only 23% of American high-school students score a “proficient” in math. We fall below two dozen other countries, including many that are considerably poorer than we are. But we outspend all other countries by far. The top spending state is New Jersey, where only 39% of eighth graders are “proficient” in math, and only 40% in reading.

Bowden conducts man-on-the-street interviews revealing that the average New Jersey residents grossly underestimate the true amount their state spends per classroom. Average folk estimate it at about $80,000; in reality it ranges from $300,000 to nearly $450,000.

Teachers in New Jersey average about $55,000 in annual pay, so the waste incurred by overhead expenses is enormous. Many school custodians earn six-figure incomes. In Newark, over 400 administrators earn over $100,000 per year. At one high school (Malcolm X. Shabazz High School), the school district spent $30 million on an athletic field. One administrator got a $700,000 severance package on top of an annual retirement pension of $120,000. Another fellow received nearly a half million dollars when he was fired.

New Jersey school districts are typically bloated with huge numbers of staff. One cute part of the movie involves sending the camera to administrators’ parking lots and counting the Mercedes, Lexus, and other luxury cars in each.

Corruption is rampant as well. The movie explores the Schools Construction Corporation, a state outfit established to build schools, and notes that a billion dollars disappeared shortly after its creation. We see a parade of headlines about endless school corruption, including numerous school board members busted for taking bribes.

The NJEA runs numerous ads boasting about how well teachers and schools are doing; this film rebuts that boast. One damaging statistic: during a four-year period, only one of 3,850 tenured teachers — 0.03%! — was fired.

This leads to the funniest moment in the film, an interview with the president of the NJEA, Joyce Powell, in which she smarmily denies that her union protects the incompetent. When asked if it was believable that 99.97% of all teachers were doing a good job, she says that not only is that correct, but it is a fact that should be celebrated.

The film also discusses the extensive patronage system, with administrators related to other administrators in a giant, swirling morass of cronyism.

What to do? Bowden does an outstanding job explaining the voucher system, and other forms of school choice such as charter schools. He interviews several articulate proponents of choice, such as Clint Bolick, former president of the Alliance for School Choice; Chester Finn, the much published advocate of school reform; and Gerard Robinson, president of the Black Alliance for Educational Options. He also shows how unions have systematically opposed and frustrated school choice. For example, the union-controlled Department of Education denied 21 of 22 recent applications for charter schools, including one rejected on transparently flimsy grounds.

The discussion of charter schools provides the most moving part of the film. We witness a lottery in which parents and their children wait to find out whether they are among the lucky few to be liberated from the regular schools by being selected for a charter school. We see the tears of joy and prayers of thanks of those accepted, and the bitter tears of disappointment of those who aren’t. When you watch the disappointed lottery participants’ faces, and compare their expressions with the asinine, complacent smirk on NJEA president Powell’s face as she says how great the public schools are, you are likely to feel physically ill.

Don’t miss this tremendous film.

**Gary James Jason**