

Study Guide

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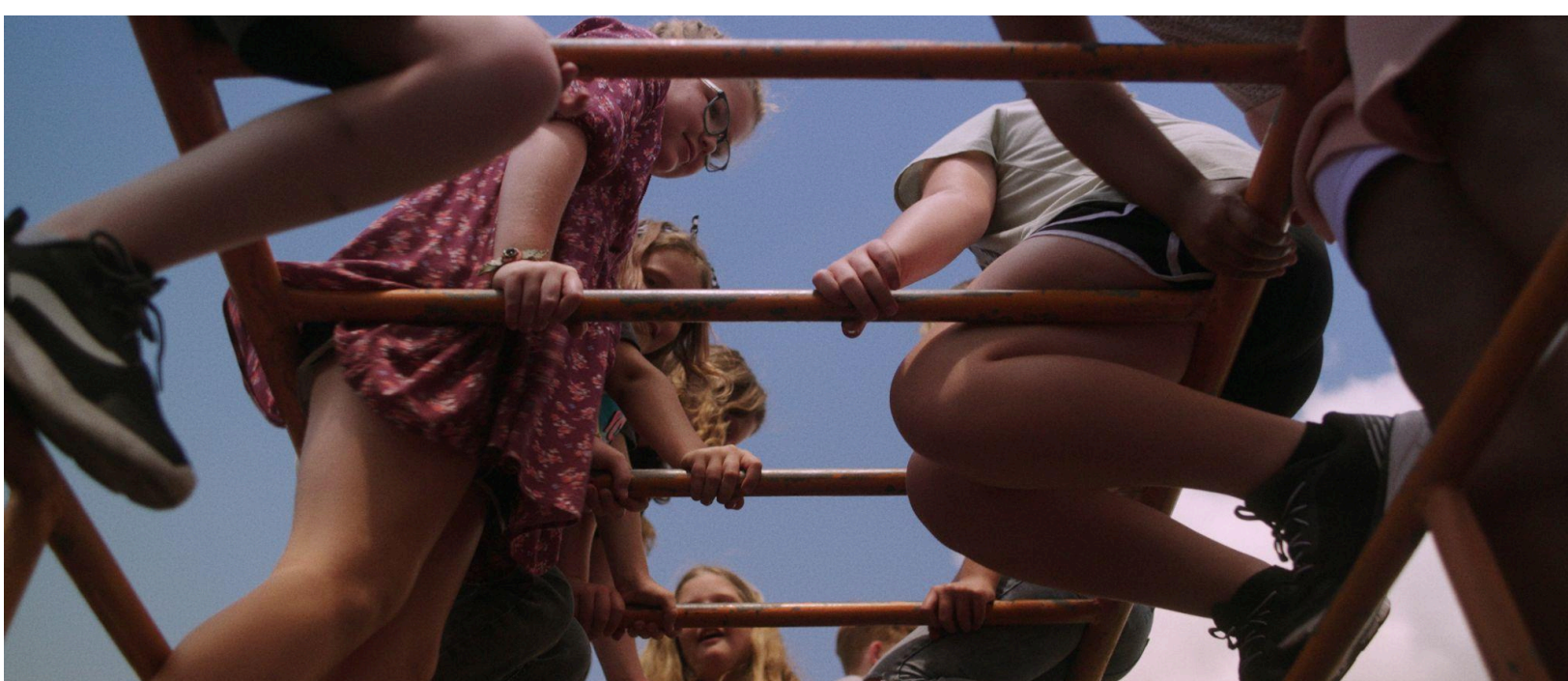
N O R T H P U T N A M

A FILM BY A POUND OF SNOW PRODUCTIONS

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“North Putnam” is a special initiative of [The Castle](#), a nonprofit organization in Putnam County, Indiana that partners with local schools to provide learning experiences for students where they feel seen, heard, valued and empowered, and to support teachers in their ability to create environments that spill over with joy, creativity, relevance, rigor and authenticity. In Fall 2019, The Castle joined forces with award-winning director, Joel Fendelman, to make a film that aims to create a conversation about public education as a vital component of a thriving democracy and to build bridges across divides. We decided to zero in on North Putnam, one of The Castle's partners, which is exemplary in its capacity to build an intentional culture of care at the same time that it serves as a microcosm for so many rural school districts across the country. For the next two years, we essentially became part of the fabric of the schools and community while we captured—fly-on-the-wall style—the daily rhythm of life. As such, it’s a quiet film, meant to provide an extended glimpse into a world and set of concerns that so many share but are often overlooked.

“North Putnam” depicts the larger context in which The Castle lives, the “why” behind the programs and partnerships it develops, the urgency we feel as an organization to nurture learning environments where kids and teachers feel connected to what they’re learning and to each other. It’s not overblown to say that our public education system is wracked with challenges that threaten to subsume it, and we don’t shy away from depicting these challenges in this film. But this is primarily a story of hope. We hope audiences come away feeling inspired by the administrators, teachers, students and community members of North Putnam and energized to develop impactful strategies for their own communities.



I grew up in Miami, Florida and spent most of my adult life living in New York City. I had never been to Indiana and quite frankly had a dismissive point of view of the communities that lived there. However, as a filmmaker our job is to constantly challenge our biases through film, as a way to bridge the gap between all of humanity. At least that is what I strive to do. So, when I was presented with the opportunity to make a film in this small rural agricultural community and its public school corporation, I jumped on it. In approaching this film, I decided to commit to a style of pure observational documentary filmmaking. I wanted to make a film that showed but didn't tell. I thought this was important so that audiences from all walks of life would feel invited to the table by not trying to tell them how to think but to give them the tools to think. Films like *Hale County, This Morning, This Evening* by Ramell Ross or Frederick Wiseman's films such as *Monrovia* were inspirational to this approach.

I was given extraordinary access to the school and its community. Most people, including myself, have never sat in a combine before (machine for harvesting corn) or remember what it was like to sit in a middle school classroom. Many people have never seen the inside of a county jail or have gotten to be a fly on the wall in an intimate family setting. But for me this is what I love about filmmaking, the camera offers a vehicle, a permission slip to be in these sometimes quiet private places and just observe. This requires extraordinary respect and humility from the filmmaker for the trust that has been given. After capturing the many hours of footage, my process is to sift through, finding the moments that speak volumes, the frames that flutter my insides and challenge me to be a better person. I then share that learning and newly found compassion with the world with the theory that by sharing my own healing through the film, that it will bring that empathy to the very audiences that view it.

I learned so much about the dynamism, rich culture and passion for humanity while spending time within the communities of North Putnam and my hope is that this film can also act as a bridge between our national partisan politics by showing that there really is little difference between us. I hope that someone who grew up in a big city can see a part of themselves in North Putnam and feel closer to a place that maybe they dismissed like I did but now see the underlying connection.



North Putnam School Corporation is a public school district in Putnam County, IN, a rural county with a population of approximately 38,000 people and a per capita income of \$24,627. One of four school corporations in the county, North Putnam serves approximately 1600 students in four schools (two elementary, one middle, one high) across a 208 square mile region that includes some of the most distressed towns in the county.

Recognizing the critical need to create a learning environment that maximizes community partnerships and that helps students envision and pursue new possibilities, the North Putnam School Corporation has taken a visionary and progressive approach to education with great success. A condensed version of the corporation's vision/mission statement bears out its central ethos and reads on the walls of the schools: "Every student, every day, whatever it takes."

North Putnam Some People We Meet in "North Putnam"



Dr. Nicole Allee - Superintendent for North Putnam School Corporation

Dan McMurtry - Counselor for the North Putnam Elementary School



Jason Chew - Principal for North Putnam High School

Bucky Kramer - Principal for North Putnam Middle School

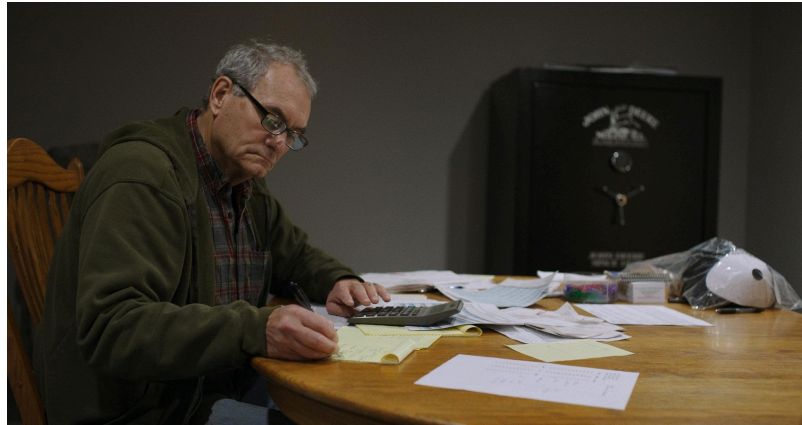


North Putnam Some People We Meet in "North Putnam"



Tyler Kuras - Graduate of North Putnam serving time for possession of Narcotics. Also father of Karman who attends Roachdale Elementary.

Chris South - 3rd generation farmer who graduated from North Putnam and whose grandson attends the middle school.



Joe Buser - Community activist trying to revitalize the town and North Putnam graduate.



Katie Payne - North Putnam High school student studying to be a counselor.



North Putnam

Key Issues/Disciplines & Recommended Readings/Resources



American Studies

Education — Policy, Advocacy, Leadership, Culture-building, Social and emotional learning

Community building and economic development

Rural studies

Sociology

Anthropology

[Why Rural Matters](#) 2023 Report by the National Rural Education Association

[Center on Rural Innovation](#)

The Aspen Institute on [Education](#) and [Rural Economic Development](#)

For the Classroom

Questions For Discussion:

1. What are your impressions of public education? What do you think is/should be the purpose of public education? Where do you think we're fulfilling and falling short of that purpose?
2. Based on the film and your experiences, what do you think it takes to create a school culture that meets kids where they are and helps them to develop skills they're going to need to be successful?
3. Where in the film do you see moments of intersection between the schools and community? How would you describe the nature of that intersection? Where do you see intersections in your own community? What might be ways to enhance those intersections?
4. Do you think a community should be obligated to take care of its members? If so, what should that "taking care" look like?
5. The film uses an observational, "fly-on-the-wall" approach. Why do you think it takes this approach? How would the film change if it were to make use of devices like voice-overs or interviews?

Activities:

Note: each activity is designed to take a full class period.

1. "North Putnam" takes a kind of collage approach in the way it presents narratives of characters that eventually intertwine. Start with an independent free-write: which character most resonates with you? Then chart out the narrative arc of that character from the beginning to the end of the film. How does this character's story unfold, in other words?

Next, in small groups, create a diagram/visual image that depicts the ways these stories come together. Then unpack the image, creating a list of experiences/challenges/feelings that you think these characters share. What are the biggest surprises? What patterns are you seeing?

Bring this discussion to the larger group and conduct a series of brainstorm: What do you make of the fact that there are patterns across so many different sectors of the community? Where do you see existing initiatives in the community that address these patterns? Where do you see gaps/opportunities for new initiatives? What might those new initiatives look like?

2. Think about an experience you had at school where you felt dismissed/minimized/unheard. Write about it. In small groups, share what you've written and discuss your experiences. What do you think could have been done differently? Come back to the larger group and together brainstorm a kind of "manifesto" for the conditions you think need to be present in schools to make them places where people feel valued and heard.
3. In one scene in the film, Jason Chew (principal of North Putnam High School) holds a meeting with the entire sophomore class to get their feedback on what areas most need to be addressed in the school. Imagine your principal comes to you with the same set of questions, with the intention of creating a task force to act on student suggestions. In small groups, first identify a problem or issue that you think most needs to be addressed and then come up with a plan for how to address it.

Then, hold a round-robin pitch session for each group's idea, with the goal of getting people to buy into your idea. After each group pitches, people will "vote with their feet" (as individuals) for the idea they feel most connected to, literally placing themselves with other people who "voted" for that idea. After groups re-assemble with their adherents, groups will spend the rest of the session fleshing out action plans to bring their ideas to life.

Note: this activity can be split into two days, with the first day ending with the re-assembly of the groups, and the second dedicated to fleshing out action plans and bringing them to the larger group to make as concrete as possible.

For the Community

Questions For Discussion:

1. What are your impressions of public education? What do you think is/should be the purpose of public education? Where do you think we're fulfilling and falling short of that purpose?
2. How do you define community development? How about community engagement? In many communities, especially rural communities, there are small groups of people/organizations—the "usual suspects"—that do a large majority of the work. What sorts of strategies do you think work best to bring as many people to the table as possible? How do you help people to see themselves as stakeholders in a community?

3. How important do you think consensus-building is to the work of community development? Can shared vision coexist with conflicting opinions/ideologies? What would that look like in practice?
4. Do you think a community should be obligated to take care of its members? If so, what should that “taking care” look like?
5. What do you think a thriving community looks like? What conditions need to be met/what services need to be offered/what kind of interpersonal dynamics need to be in play to be able to call a community “thriving”?
6. The film uses an observational, “fly-on-the-wall” approach. Why do you think it takes this approach? How would the film change if it were to make use of devices like voice-overs or interviews?

Activities:

In the larger group, first brainstorm a list of areas of greatest need in your community (perceived and actual, making sure to indicate where you think perception is misaligned with the actual). In small groups, zero in on one or two of the areas and create a list of existing community resources/organizations that address this need. On large post-it-notes, paste your list on the wall, with a description of these resources/organizations.

Now, do an independent “gallery walk,” looking carefully at each group’s list and identifying areas of intersection between these community resources as you go.

Come back to the larger group and conduct a group brainstorm: where are you seeing the most palpable intersections? Where are there opportunities for collaboration? What do you think is missing from the lists you created? How to maximize quality/depth/reach of service and minimize competition for human and financial resources?

Note: If the session can be extended another day, on day two participants will create groups based on the areas identified as “missing” in the brainstorm the previous day that most resonate with them. In these groups, people will flesh out an action plan for how to address the missing area, thinking as collaboratively as possible. How to build on existing coalitions/partnerships in such a way to maximize the impact? Groups will pitch their ideas to the larger group and choose the initiative(s) they believe they can most realistically bring to life, then commit to a course of action.



"North Putnam" is distributed by New Day Films for educational use.

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