

Local News Philadelphia & the Region

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Annette John-Hall

Where children are left behind

From my seat next to hers, I could hear her. Just barely, but the sentiment was as honest as the documentary we were watching.

That would be the sound of Lisa Nutter quietly sighing.

The sigh that says, "I'm ticked off." That all-purpose expression of anger, frustration — sometimes, even sadness.

Her reaction didn't surprise me. Besides being Mayor Nutter's wife, Lisa Nutter is an educator who runs Philadelphia Academies Inc., a non-profit that works with the Philadelphia School District and local businesses to help prepare high school students for college or a career.

She works in the trenches every day.

So the real-life stories in *First Person* — teacher-turned-filmmaker Benjamin Herold's hopeful, yet heartbreaking look at the lives of six Philadelphia high school students struggling to make it to college — were indicative of cases she sees all the time.

We Americans can get worked up about lapel pins and whether a candidate ate a cheesesteak while passing through, but can ignore alarming threats to our future — and especially that of our children — even when the damage confronts us every day.

Like, for example, the impending implosion delivered in last week's America's Promise Alliance report.

In the nation's 50 largest cities, including Philadelphia, only about half the students graduated from high school in June 2004.

Talk about the fierce urgency of now.

Pilly no better

Philadelphia ranked a dismal 34th, graduating only 49.6 percent of its seniors.

By anybody's estimation, Democrat or Republican, black or white, man or woman, 1.2 million high school dropouts a year is more than a crisis.

"It's a catastrophe," says Colin Powell, the America's Promise Alliance founder, in the report's summary.

No Child Left Behind, the fail-proof law that his former boss, President Bush, engineered, has failed miserably.

And the plan from our future president to win this war on inferior education? None of the potentials has raised a hand to answer that question first.

Not Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama on the endless stump, not John McCain on his Service to America tour.

Sure, you hear a lot of talking points about important issues like what it will take to equip middle-class parents to send their kids to college. But when it comes to a plan for kids graduating from high school? Not a peep.

"That report should have rocked America," an incredulous Lisa Nutter said last week. "And the fact that the candidates are not talking about this issue with some urgency is pretty astounding."

Her husband can't be blamed for not trying. Mayor Nutter has called for the candidates to hold a national forum on urban issues right here in Philly, before the Pennsylvania Democratic primary on April 22. We'll see.

Starts with education

Somehow, so many think the failures of these kids — and the millions like them — are their own. But in *First Person*, screened as part of the Philadelphia Film Festival, we see that dodging overwhelming daily dysfunction in their lives relegates education to just another thing to do, not a means to an end.

We all need to care. Our nation's health depends on it.

Powell, the former secretary of state, stresses that an undereducated work force not only hurts our children, it damages our economy and weakens our national security.

Nutter's organization focuses on giving students life-skills training. I call it home training — how to speak and dress professionally, how put together a resumé and college application, how to sustain a relationship with an adult that may open the door to a career down the road.

Social networking, she said, "is how society hums. ... We are not operating in a meritocracy, I don't care how smart you are."

But sometimes, even the wide-See **EDUCATION** on B4

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Still far too many children left behind

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spread safety net comes with a gaping hole.

That's apparent in the *First Person* story of Malikka, a thoughtful and resilient senior at Girls High and an aspiring nurse who managed to navigate the college applications process, thanks in part to her own support network of strong Muslim women.

We root for Malikka and celebrate with her as she reads her acceptance letter from Drexel — she's happily shocked that she actually got in.

But that proud moment is fleeting. We learn that her mother cannot afford to send her. Reluctantly, Malikka settles for community college. A year later, cash-strapped, she leaves school — and leaves

behind her dream.

Today, none of the students in the film is in college. Two never even graduated.

"It breaks my heart," said Nutter. "We can't wait for the calvary."

"We as a city have got to give kids what they deserve. We have to make sure we're giving them hope and backing it up."

It starts with a nation that cares.

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To read her recent work: <http://go.philly.com/annette>.

A second showing of "First Person" will be at 4:30 p.m. Sunday at the International House, 3701 Chestnut St.