There's been quite a bit of buzz about documentary films that take a look at issues within the American education system. Whether you agree with the point of view of any of these films or not, they are sure to get you thinking.

*Beyond Measure* (2014) follows three different sets of teachers and students as they grapple with the realities of public education and try to enact meaningful change in their own education communities. As in her previous film, the popular documentary *Race to Nowhere*, director Vicki Abeles focuses on the stress caused by high-stakes testing and how alternative teaching methods, such as project-based learning, can alleviate that stress. Find more information about the film and screenings in your area on the film's website. (Source: Beyond Measure website)

*Rich Hill* (2014) tells the story of three young boys growing up in a declining small town in America. Faced with poverty and family struggles, the boys struggle to stay in school and the future looks grim. A heartbreaking story with small glimmers of hope, the film raises important questions about the availability and equality of opportunities for poor children in America. The film won a grand jury prize at Sundance Film Festival, and has been widely reviewed as one of the best documentaries of 2014. *Rich Hill* is no longer in theatres, but you can find out more at the film's Facebook page. (Source: Rich Hill website)

*The Road to Teach* (2015) follows three young aspiring teachers as they embark on a cross-country road trip in an effort to learn about the state of education in America today. Along the way they interview current teachers about the challenges and rewards of the profession and speak to their own feelings about their future career choices. The film includes a Q&A with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. (Source: The Road to Teach website)

*Finding the Gold Within* (2014). Director Karina Epperlein follows six young black men from Akron, Ohio as they navigate the end of high school and their first two years of college. Working through a local character-education program called Alchemy, they struggle to balance the effects of their upbringing with their drive to succeed academically. This film is an introspective meditation on what it means to be young, black, and male in America. (Source: Finding the Gold Within website)

*Doing it for Me* (2013). Although the dropout rate is steadily declining, 7% of high school students dropped out in the year 2014. This student-produced film offers much-needed insight into how and why students leave school, and what might motivate them to stay. Over the course of one year, student co-directors Precious Lambert and Leah Edwards interviewed three of their friends about their lives after dropping out, bringing an important student voice component to the conversation around school retention. (Source: Meridian Hill Pictures website)

*The Homestretch* (2014), from directors Anne de Mare and Kirsten Kelly, chronicles the lives of three homeless teens as they fight to stay in high school and transition beyond graduation. In the process, this film encourages audiences to reexamine stereotypes about homelessness and consider the realities and challenges faced by homeless youth in America today. (Source: The Homestretch website)

*Most Likely to Succeed* (2015). Dissatisfied with his daughter’s schooling, director Greg Whitely documented his exploration of alternatives in this documentary about the project-based learning approach at High Tech High, a charter school in San Diego, California. Through interviews with students, parents,
and teachers, viewers are asked to consider what types of educational environments will best equip students to succeed in the 21st century. (Source: Most Likely to Succeed website)

The Address (2014). This documentary by Ken Burns provides a glimpse into an annual tradition at The Greenwood School, a tiny boarding school in Vermont that serves young men with learning differences and disabilities in grades 6-12. Each year, educators encourage students to study and memorize the Gettysburg Address in order to recite it publicly in front of parents and other community members. In the process, the boys learn lessons about courage and overcoming challenges. (Source: The Address website)

From directors Jean-Michel Dissard and Gitte Peng, I Learn America (2013) follows five students through one school year at International High School at Lafayette, a small, public, alternative high school in Brooklyn, New York, dedicated to teaching foreign-born, non-native English speakers who are newly arrived to the United States. Through their stories, viewers gain insight into situations and challenges faced by immigrant students and their families. (Source: I Learn America website)

Written and directed by Mary Mazzio, Underwater Dreams (2014) tells the story of four sons of undocumented Mexican immigrants and how they learned to build an underwater robot from Home Depot parts while still in high school, defeating college students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) at an underwater-robotics competition in the process. (Source: Underwater Dreams website)

The Rule (2014). Saint Benedict’s Preparatory School, a high school in Newark, New Jersey, run by the Benedictine monks of Newark Abbey, has recorded a near 100% college-acceptance rate for their predominantly African American and Latino young men -- a rate that soars well above the average for the city. Filmmakers Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno profile the school and the monks to learn how and why they achieve what they do. (Source: The Rule website)

I’m Not a Racist . . . Am I? (2013). How will the next generation confront racism? This feature-length documentary, produced by Point Made Films in partnership with The Calhoun School, attempts to offer a roadmap through the story of 12 teens in New York City who come together for one school year to talk about race and privilege. (Source: I’m Not a Racist . . . Am I? website)

Produced by the National Black Programming Consortium (NBPC), 180 Days: A Year Inside an American High School (2013) tells the story of the first graduating class at Washington Metropolitan High School (DC Met), an alternative school for at-risk youth. 2 two-hour episodes follow the day-to-day lives of five students and the efforts of parents, teachers, and school leaders to help students stay on track to graduation. (Source: 180 Days website)

Who Cares About Kelsey? (2012). Kelsey Caroll, a high school senior, has one goal: graduation. But the road there has not been easy. She’s dealt with homelessness, abuse, and ADHD -- and attends a school with one of the highest dropout rates in New Hampshire. Filmmaker Dan Habib’s story of Kelsey’s transformation from a disruptive "problem student" to a motivated and self-confident young woman raises important questions about how to best support students with emotional and behavioral challenges and empower them to reach their goals. (Source: Who Cares About Kelsey? website)

Yuck: A 4th Grader’s Short Documentary About School Lunch (2012). Zachary Maxwell, a fourth grader at a New York City public elementary school, went on an undercover, six-month mission to capture video footage highlighting the discrepancies between school lunches as described by the official Department of Education lunch menu and the food actually being served in his elementary school lunchroom. The result is this short and spirited documentary about school lunch that has been discussed by numerous news outlets and featured in several film festivals. (Source: Yuck website)

Directed by Patrick Creadon and produced by Christine O’Malley and Neal Baer, If You Build It (2013) tells the story of designer Emily Pilloton, architect Matt Miller, and the students in their in-school design
and build class in Bertie County, the poorest county in North Carolina. Through the process of their year-long collaborative project, Pilloton’s and Miller’s students research, prototype, engineer, and build a farmer’s market pavilion, all the while discovering how design thinking can help them transform their community and reimagine what’s possible. (Source: *If You Build It* website)

*Listen* (2013). College student Ankur Singh spent the spring semester of his freshman year researching the flaws in the American education system from a student perspective; the result of these efforts is *Listen*, a film about public education in the United States by students, for students. (Source: *Listen* website)

From filmmaker Russell Long, the documentary *Room to Breathe* (2013) follows a group of seventh-grade students at San Francisco’s Marina Middle School -- a school with the highest number of disciplinary suspensions in its district -- as they learn mindfulness techniques through training conducted by Mindful Schools. Though the new strategies are not a panacea for all of their challenges, the film highlights the potential of mindfulness practices to help students combat distraction and develop the social and emotional skills they need to succeed. (Source: *Room to Breathe* website)

*GO PUBLIC: A Day in the Life of an American School District* (2012) is a 90-minute documentary that explores events during one day in the Pasadena Unified School District. For this unique film, fifty small camera crews followed teachers, students, principals, volunteers, and others across 28 public school campuses. The result is a compelling window into this district’s daily struggles and successes. Check out Edutopia’s *Five Minute Film Festival: A Day in the Life of a Public School District* for more information about the film and the filmmakers. (Source: *GO PUBLIC* website)

*American Promise* (2013), a film by Joe Brewster and Michèle Stephenson, captures the experiences of two middle-class African-American boys who enter a prestigious, historically white, private school in Manhattan. Recorded over 12 years of the boys’ journey from kindergarten through high school graduation, this film explores issues of race, class, and opportunity in America and raises provocative questions. (Source: *American Promise* POV page from PBS)

In *The Graduates/Los Graduados* (2013), a two-part bilingual film from Quiet Pictures, important educational issues are explored through the eyes of three Latino and three Latina students from across the United States. Their stories, which have a running theme of civic engagement, help the filmmakers explore issues and challenges facing Latino high school students and their families, educators, and community leaders. In "*The Graduates: Another Film That Shouldn't Be Missed*,” Edutopia blogger Mark Phillips shares why he was so inspired by this film. (Source: *The Graduates/Los Graduados* on the Independent Lens PBS page)

*TEACH* (2013), a new film by *Waiting for Superman* director Davis Guggenheim, profiles four very different elementary, middle, and high school teachers and their public school classrooms. Filmed during the 2013 school year, this year-in-the-life story follows the struggles and achievements of these educators as they mentor their students to overcome challenges and do their best. (Source: *TEACH* website)

How do you reinvent urban education? *The New Public* (2012) is a documentary that takes a personal look into the lives of teachers, parents, and students who are part of a new high school community in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Through the story of their experiences, this film highlights some of the complexities faced by urban public schools and communities. (Source: *The New Public* website)

*Best Kept Secret* (2013). Administrators at John F. Kennedy High School, in Newark, N.J., a public school dedicated to students with special needs, answer the phone by saying, “This is John F. Kennedy High School, Newark’s Best Kept Secret.” Directed by Samantha Buck, *Best Kept Secret* tells the story of
three young men living with autism, their families, and the efforts of JFK High teacher Janet Mino to help her students transition into life beyond school. (Source: Best Kept Secret website)

*First Generation* (2011) tells the story of four high school students - an inner city athlete, a small town waitress, a Samoan warrior dancer, and the daughter of migrant field workers - who set out to break the cycle of poverty and bring hope to their families and communities by pursuing a college education. This documentary explores the problem of college access faced by first generation and low-income students and how their success has major implications for the future of our nation. (Source: First Generation website)

*Mitchell 20* (2011). This education reform documentary, produced and directed by Randy Murray and Andrew James Benson, follows twenty of the twenty-nine teachers at a Phoenix, Arizona public school who set out on a journey toward improving the quality of their teaching by attempting to achieve National Board Certification. You can request screenings or get a copy of the film on their website. (Source: Mitchell 20 website)

*Bully* (2011). Director Lee Hirsch's film follows young Americans across the US as they battle their way through the confusing terrain of the American school system. The powerful film gives voice to the 5 million kids who are bullied each year. (Source: Bully website) Check out Edutopia's roundup page "Resources to Fight Bullying and Harassment at School."

*The Teacher Salary Project* encompasses the feature-length documentary film *American Teacher* (2011), an interactive online resource, and a national outreach campaign that delves into the core of our educational crisis as seen through the eyes and experiences of our nation's teachers. Directed and produced by Vanessa Roth; and produced by Ninive Calegari and Dave Eggers, co-founders of the 826 National writing programs. Read an Edutopia review of the film. (Source: The Teacher Salary Project website)

*Project Happiness* (2011). With the unspoken epidemic of stress and depression infiltrating every community, how can kids (of all ages) learn to generate their own happiness regardless of the situations they face? Follow three groups of high school students from three continents on a quest to understand the nature of lasting happiness. Read the first blog in a series by filmmaker Randy Taran for Edutopia. (Source: Project Happiness website)

*Waiting for Superman* (2010). Filmmaker Davis Guggenheim follows a handful of promising kids through a system that he suggests inhibits, rather than encourages, academic growth. (Source: Waiting for Superman website)

*Race to Nowhere: The Dark Side of America's Achievement Culture* (2009). Director Vicki Abeles’ documentary is about the pressures faced by American schoolchildren and their teachers in a system and culture she describes as obsessed with the illusion of achievement, competition and the pressure to perform. (Source: Race to Nowhere website)

Madeleine Sackler's film *The Lottery* (2010) endeavors to uncover the failures of the traditional public school system by following four families from Harlem and the Bronx who have entered their children in a charter school lottery. (Source: The Lottery website)

*The Cartel* (2009) shows us our educational system like we've never seen it before. Balancing local storylines against interviews with education experts, this film explores what dedicated parents, committed teachers, clear-eyed officials, and tireless reformers are doing to make our schools better for our kids. (Source: The Cartel website)

http://www.edutopia.org/education-reform-documentaries