

Study Guide

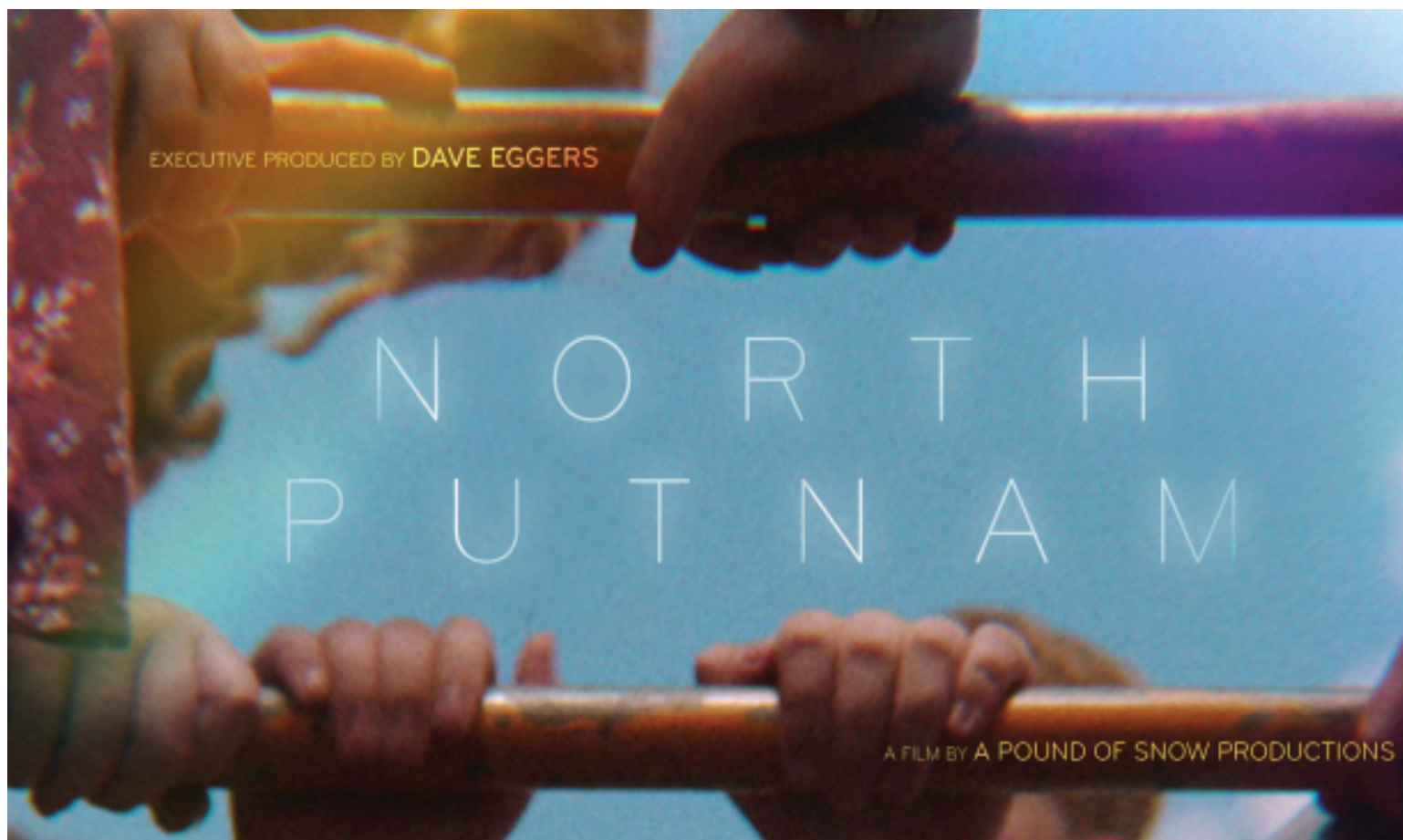


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“North Putnam” is a special initiative of [The Castle](#), a nonprofit organization in Putnam County, Indiana that partners with local schools to nurture a culture of creative, relevant, joyful, authentic learning. In Fall 2019, The Castle joined forces with award-winning director, Joel Fendelman, to make a film that would help audiences see the realities and challenges so many public schools experience. We decided to focus on North Putnam, one of The Castle's partners, because it is exemplary in its capacity to build an intentional culture of care while it serves as a microcosm for so many rural school districts across the country. For the next two years, we 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 in New York City. Before filming "North Putnam," I had never been to Indiana and, quite frankly, had a dismissive point of view of the communities that lived there. However, I strive to constantly challenge my biases through filmmaking. So, when I was presented with the opportunity to make a film about this rural agricultural community and its 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 an important way to invite viewers to the table—by giving them the tools to think for themselves, rather than telling them how to think. Films like "Hale County, This Morning, This Evening" by Ramell Ross or Frederick Wiseman's "Monrovia" were inspirational to my approach.

I was given extraordinary access to the schools and community. Most people, including myself, have never sat in a combine before 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 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 through the film, believing that sharing my own healing will spark empathy in the audiences that view it.

I learned so much about the dynamic, rich culture of North Putnam in the time I spent filming. My hope is that this film can act as a bridge in the midst of 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

About North Putnam School and Community



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
North Putnam School Corporation

Dan McMurtry
Guidance Counselor
Roachdale Elementary



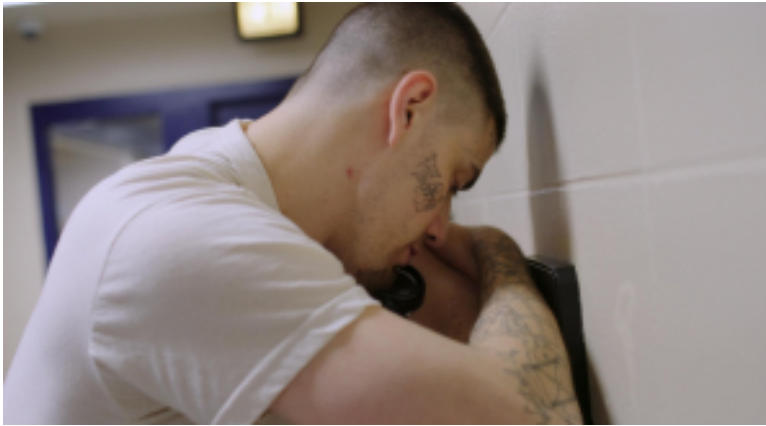
Jason Chew
Principal
North Putnam High School

Bucky Kramer
Principal
North Putnam Middle School



North Putnam

Some People We Meet in "North Putnam"



Tyler Kuras
Graduate of North Putnam, father of student at Roachdale Elementary, incarcerated for issues associated with substance use disorder

Chris South
Third generation farmer who graduated from North Putnam and whose grandson attends North Putnam Middle School



Joe Buser and Joanie Knapp
North Putnam graduates and members of community revitalization commission

Katie Payne
North Putnam High School student with a dream to become a counselor



Note to teachers and administrators: In this guide, we've separated out questions and activities for specific audiences, but the hope is that each audience will adapt the material in each section for their own unique contexts and objectives. We encourage you to adapt student and community questions and activities for professional development purposes in ways that will enrich your conversations with colleagues.

For Students

Questions for Discussion or Personal Reflection*:

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. Consider the variety of ways that students and teachers/administrators interact in the film. Do you see your own learning style/preferences represented there? How would you describe your learning style/preferences? What does your "dream classroom" look like?
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?

**Some students may not feel comfortable discussing these topics in front of their peers or teachers. We encourage schools using "North Putnam" to create systems where students will have the opportunity to reflect on these questions and to share their insights and feedback anonymously with teachers and administrators.*

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 the 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 brainstorms: 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. In small groups, list the conditions you think need to be present in schools to make them places where people feel valued and heard. Come back to the larger group and co-create a “manifesto” addressed to teachers and administrators laying out your ideas.

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.

4. Imagine your class is the staff of the school paper and you’ve been asked to cover the School Board meeting we see in the film (where they discuss the policy for overnight field trips). In groups, come up with a pitch for how you’re going to tell the story. In your pitch, include the headline, story arc (what’s the main story your article will tell? What do you want your audience to come away with? What elements need to be present to tell it?), point of view/style (is this an editorial, an observational piece, scene-

writing, persuasive? Is it first, second or third person narrative or a combination of perspectives?). Now, choose one member from each group to join the paper's "editorial board." Each group will then pitch their angle for the article to the board. The board is then tasked to choose one pitch or think about what a hybrid approach could look like.

Note: this activity can extend into two days, with students co-writing the article that the "editorial board" chooses on the second day.

For Teachers and Administrators

Questions for discussion:

1. What is the existing environment and/or culture at your school? Does it feel learner-centered, security-centered, teacher-centered, etc.? Are there ways you can make your classroom or school more learner-centered? Share tips and best practices for learner-centered spaces. Was there a tool or idea in the film that could work well or be adapted to your learning space?
2. "North Putnam" showcases multiple effective leadership styles. What makes someone a good leader? What leadership qualities do you value? Which of these do you see in yourself? Which of these do you see in colleagues? What are some effective ways to provide feedback to leadership so that you can be supported more effectively?
3. What is the existing culture at your school and/or in your district regarding teacher-administration/school board relationships? What are the positives? What are areas of growth? How can those growth areas be presented to leadership and/or the school board? What are the top 3 changes that would make a difference for you as an educator?
4. "North Putnam" follows one storyline of a team-taught general education classroom, a strategy that met with resistance from other teachers despite the growth students demonstrated. Where do you think this resistance is coming from? Do you see similar areas of resistance in your school? What are strategies to effectively navigate resistance that allow for everyone's voice to be heard and that prioritize student growth?
5. "North Putnam" takes audiences into the homes of Dr. Allee (the superintendent), Dan McMurtry (the guidance counselor) and Katie Payne (a high school student). What do these glimpses into the home lives of these characters contribute to the overall story? What are your thoughts about how to create a classroom culture that values everyone's lived experiences, but doesn't place a burden or expectation on students to share anything they feel don't comfortable sharing?

Activities:

1. Expanding on the first discussion question regarding creating learner-centered classroom, in small groups, compile a list of the best practices, shared tips, tools and ideas that resonated most with you from that discussion. Come back to the larger group and co-create a “toolkit” for teachers and administrators aiming to build a learning-centered culture in their schools. Bonus points for charting out what you believe would be the most effective process of introducing and implementing this culture to a school that is starting from scratch!
2. In one scene of “North Putnam,” a parent—claiming to speak for a large group—expresses anger and discomfort about a prompt that an English teacher gives to students that asks them to unpack the various layers of their identity (what doesn't come out in the film is that this assignment is in preparation for reading *Huckleberry Finn*). Imagine that the parent has come to you with a similar set of concerns about something in your class. In groups, consider how you would respond to the parent. What are your priorities/goals in the way you choose to respond?
3. In another scene of “North Putnam,” several contenders for the School Board express their feeling that the main concern of public school should be “reading, writing and arithmetic.” In a follow-up scene, the current and former high school principals express their own feeling that the purpose of public education should be for students to have a safe space to learn about themselves and the world. In the current political climate, these two points of view are sometimes presented as if they were diametrically opposed to one another. But what if they’re not? In small groups, conduct a “character sketch” or profile of each perspective, charting out the internal logic of each. What are the values, priorities and assumptions behind each perspective? Now, create a Venn diagram of the areas of overlap between these perspectives. Come back to the big group for a brainstorming session: what could a shared vision for public education look like? If politics weren’t an issue, what would it look like to implement this shared vision?

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?

Activity:

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 do you 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.



[8 Small Ways Educators Can Make a Big Difference for School Culture - Edutopia](#)

[Advancing Social and Emotional Learning - Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning](#)

[Cultivating a Positive School Culture - Strobel Education](#)

[Effective School Leadership for Supporting Students' Mental Health - National Library of Medicine](#)

[Evaluating Your School's Culture and Climate - Edutopia](#)

[Improving School Culture for a Better Learning Environment - American University School of Education](#)

[Leading by Influence, Not Authority - Edutopia](#)

[SEL Learning Lesson Plans and Resources - Share My Lesson](#)

[Shared Equity Leadership Toolkit - American Council on Education](#)

[Social and Emotional Learning Toolkit - Edutopia](#)

[Today's News, Tomorrow's Lesson - Share My Lesson](#)

[Trauma Informed Workplace Toolkit - Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice](#)

[Why Rural Matters \(2023 Report\) - National Rural Education Association](#)