

feature

Home Is Where the Heart Is

Can
Cory Booker
Save
Newark's
Schools?



It's April 9 and the Mediterranean Manor is rocking. As a large bus outside the downtown Newark reception hall cranks out B-list disco hits, hundreds of low rollers coming to the \$50-a-plate Cory Booker fundraiser inch through a maze of velvet rope to sign in and pass before a pair of unidentified "consultants" standing at the door with a television camera. When asked by the campaign, "Who are you guys?" they just answer, "Security."

Inside, scores of waiters and busboys are setting up the buffets of macaroni salad, barbecued chicken, yellow rice, and other delectables. Within an hour the place is jammed well beyond capacity with supporters of Booker's mayoral bid lucklessly searching for open seats. Tables of elderly black matrons in their Sunday finest buzz with neighborhood gossip, while just a few feet away union reps pass the inexpensive red wine to their wives, and elsewhere unreserved

PHOTOS / WWW.CORYBOOKER.COM

BY DAVID SKINNER

tables of strangers make nice with college students, entrepreneurs, government workers—white, black, and Hispanic—all bonding over their common hopes for the city.

It seems more like a wedding banquet than a fundraiser, especially since the event will actually lose money. But this is Newark, New Jersey, once called “The Worst American City,” a city that has lost 36 percent of its population since 1930 (from 442,000 to 280,000) and is now more than half black and nearly 40 percent poor. It’s a city, reported the *New York Times*, where “budgeting is a Rube Goldberg morass with a deficit looming,” and where the school system, the state’s largest, with 43,000 students, was so bad that it was



***Born in a
New Jersey suburb,
Booker was a star
student at Northern
Valley Regional***

***High School in Old Tappan and
a high-school All-American football
player, known for being not the
most gifted athlete but the
most determined, one who never
choked under pressure.***

taken over by the state more than a decade ago. Today the schools are still a mess, with 70 percent of 11th graders and 65 percent of 8th graders unable to pass the state’s math tests. This is the Newark that Booker says needs more policing, more comprehensive child-welfare policies, school vouchers, and more charter schools.

Supporting charters was a relatively safe bet. Although the number of charters in New Jersey was declining at the end of the 1990s, due in part to the state takeover, the number in Newark was growing, to 10. In fact, according to a 2003

Rutgers University report, “Newark’s charter movement has flourished.” Today, 12 of the state’s 55 charter schools are in Newark.

Booker’s support for vouchers was not so assured. Indeed, he now says that vouchers are not a key part of his education plan. Still, he has not ruled them out. “My determination is to reform the public school system,” said candidate Booker, who was opposed by the state’s powerful teachers union, with 192,272 members, in part because of his support of vouchers. For many of the same reasons, state senator and mayoral opponent Ronald Rice called Booker a proxy for “ultra-white, ultra-conservative” outsiders.

Proxy or not, Booker defeated Rice and two other candidates by a healthy margin. And he now has the opportunity—some might call it the unenviable task—of effecting education overhaul in one of America’s most troubled and beleaguered cities. Can he succeed?

A Silver-Spoon Childhood

Many people thought that Cory Booker was too good to be true—especially for Newark. Booker pieced together an unusual but winning coalition of high society—Hollywood director Steven Spielberg, publisher David Bradley, and the Heinz family among them—and reform-minded Newarkers like those who turned out at the Mediterranean Manor with their \$50 and, after listening to a brief stump speech, rushed to the dance floor to do the electric slide.

Until now, Cory Booker was famous for being famous. A one-term Newark city councilman who made an impressive but finally unsuccessful bid for mayor in 2002, he nevertheless had the unmistakable air and bearing of someone ready for the big time. Friends are convinced he will be the first black

president of the United States. It’s characteristic of his well-publicized ascent through life that his one major political race—the 2002 attempt to be mayor—became the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary, *Street Fight*, directed by Marshall Curry. To persuade Booker to cooperate with the film project, Curry reportedly asked him, “What would it have been like if someone had filmed Bill Clinton’s first campaign?”

Actually, Cory Booker probably had it much easier than Clinton, who was raised by his waitress mother after her husband

died in a car accident. Booker's parents were upper-class executives who, though they were civil rights activists, spent their careers working for IBM and looking after their two sons. Born in a New Jersey suburb, Booker was a star student at Northern Valley Regional High School in Old Tappan and a high-school All-American football player, known for being not the most gifted athlete but the most determined, one who never choked under pressure. He went to Stanford on a football scholarship and there became class president before winning a Rhodes scholarship to attend Oxford. An overachiever with what would seem to be a genuine heart of gold, he then enrolled in law school at Yale before moving to Newark in 1996 to become an advocate for housing for the poor.



Getting Gritty

As Booker tells the story, the inspiration to become a leader in Newark came the day he knocked on the door of Virginia Jones, head of the tenants' association at Brick Towers, one of the city's worst housing projects. Booker, then a tenants' rights lawyer for the Urban Justice Center in New York City, introduced himself and said he wanted to help. She told him to follow her. They went outside, to the street, and there Jones demanded to know what the young lawyer saw around him. Drug dealers, a crack house, rundown projects, responded Booker.

"Well, you can't help me," she said and started to walk away. Booker caught up with her and demanded an explanation.

As Booker would tell the story at the 2005 annual summit of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), a nonprofit that supports public school alternatives, Jones then said, "Boy, you need to learn something. The world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside of you. If you're one of those people who see problems, darkness, and despair, that's all there's ever going to be. But if you're one of those people who see hope, opportunity, love, and even the face of God, then you can help me."

Booker was so inspired by Jones that he moved in to Brick Towers determined to run for city council. His innate political gifts were obvious as he defeated a 16-year incumbent and, on taking office, refused the standing perk of a city car to drive him to council meetings. He also opposed generous pay raises for council members as well as the mayor. In 1998, he went on a hunger strike and lived in a tent outside the Garden Spires housing complex to draw attention to the flagrant open-air drug trade in the projects. He was the most visible of a handful of young Turks who dared to criticize Mayor Sharpe James and the city's system of financial cronyism.

A Call to Vouchers

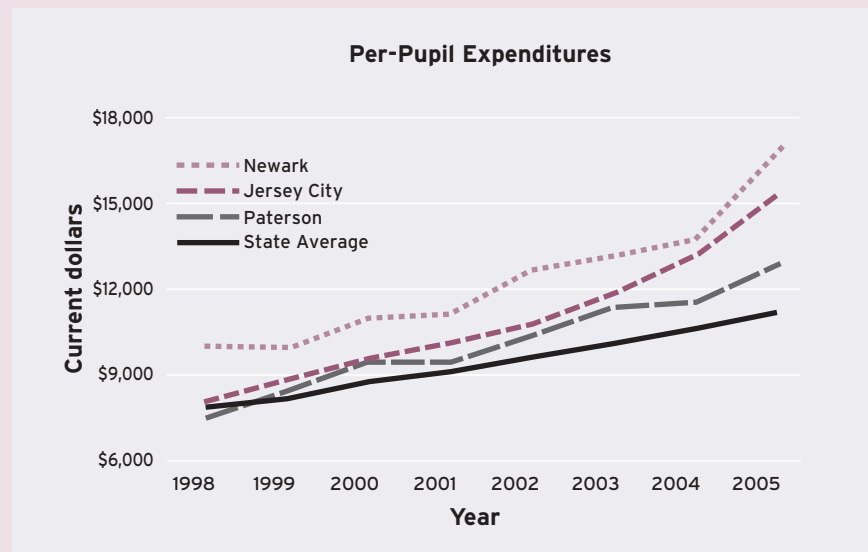
Though Mayor James called him "a grandstander," Booker proved to be that and more when he announced his support for school vouchers in 2001. Complaining about the shocking absence of fiscal accountability in Newark's well-funded but ill-managed school system, Booker told a Manhattan Institute audience that private and charter schools in Newark often spent half as much per pupil as traditional public schools, but were achieving much greater results.

Vouchers, Booker argued, were a matter of civic empowerment. "Public education is the use of public dollars to educate our children at the schools that are best equipped to do so—public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, Baptist schools, Jewish schools, or other innovations in education. That is where public dollars should go." His one major caveat: vouchers can't be used as an excuse to pull funding from the public school system. Booker has since become associated with several prominent school-choice organizations, including the Newark-based E3 (Education Excellence for Everyone), as well as Clint Bolick's Alliance for School Choice and the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

Howard Fuller, the national board chair of BAEO, says he met Booker some seven years ago when he gave a talk at the North Star Academy charter school in Newark. (Booker is also on North Star's board of trustees.) Fuller says Booker's support of vouchers was highly significant to the school choice movement. "He's like a true Democrat, a young black Democrat who says, 'I'm a Democrat but I believe that vouchers and other forms of parental choice are very important for trying to make a difference for low-income parents of children who are not being well served by the current system.' The fact that he had the courage to do that meant a lot."

A Pretty Penny ... (Figure 1)

Newark continues to spend more per-pupil than both the New Jersey state average and other large urban school districts in New Jersey.



Note: Per-pupil expenditures are based on New Jersey's "Total Comparable Cost Per-Pupil."

SOURCE: New Jersey Department of Education

Taking on the Mayor

Controversial as it was, in Newark Booker's support for vouchers was not even a close second to the notoriety he invited by challenging four-term mayor James, a politician whose administration was equal parts charisma and corruption.

That mayoral battle showed America how the new politics of identity could be very much like the blood prejudices of old. Calling Booker a "carpetbagger," James systematically tried to strip Booker of his identity, questioning his blackness by calling him white, his Christianity by calling him Jewish, and his political affiliations by calling the Democratic Booker a Republican. And as if that weren't enough, the mayor accused his black challenger of being a tool of the Ku Klux Klan. As one Capitol Hill veteran said after watching the documentary about the battle, "*Street Fight?! That's putting it mildly!*" The James campaign succeeded in drowning out Booker's idealistic vision for the city and James earned a fifth term. The margin, however, 3,500 votes out of more than 50,000 cast, was slim enough to give James some doubts about the durability of his reign.

Two years later, about to turn 35, no longer on the city council but still living in the projects, Booker was taking a walk with his father near his tenement apartment when something happened that in almost any other city would have landed him on the front page of the local paper. As he told the story in a 2004 speech, he heard gunshots ring out and "saw a sea of kids running toward me." He raced past the children in the direction of the gunshots just in time to see a young man stumbling

off a set of stairs in a housing project. "I caught him from behind, laid him down, and looked onto his chest. And blood was just cascading and soaking his T-shirt." Booker put his hands to the boy's bloody chest and tried to speak as the youth coughed and gasped. "I felt for his pulse, his eyes started rolling back. His pulse got weaker and weaker. I tried to cover the holes in his chest. And eventually there was nothing."

Had this happened just a few miles away, in Manhattan, one could expect a photograph of the shocked politician, his shirt bloodied, on the cover of the *New York Post*. But in Newark, the *Star-Ledger* published a short article in the next day's edition on page 21. This was Newark.

But was this Cory Booker? A vegetarian teetotaler, an avid self-improver who exercises regularly and seems to read everything? His guilty pleasure, he once told the *New York Times*, is watching *Star Trek*. While the African American community struggles to come to terms with

its own overachievers, he is the epitome of "acting white."

Booker is also preternaturally polished. It is easy to picture him, with his athletic build and clean-shaven head, cast in bronze. His speaking style is a throwback to a golden-tongued politics of old. "You have to have poetry and prose," he says. "The prose is management, competence, doing the job of public administration. The poetry is inspiration, calling on people to achieve more, to love more, to be more."

"He Smells Like the Future"

Will this be Booker's formula for education reform in Newark? Successful leadership, he believes, depends on internal ideals so powerful that they make the leader see the world not as it is, but as he wishes it were.

Booker speaks extensively of what he calls "crazy love," the "unreasonable, irrational, impractical love that sustained African Americans through slavery, inequality, and the civil rights movement." And listening to his speeches, one can identify with the little girl shown in *Street Fight* who, after meeting Booker, acts as if she's just encountered a movie star. She smells her hand, which he has just shaken, and says, "He smells like the future." Indeed, it is an understatement to say that Cory Booker excels at the poetry part of politics.

But it will take more than poetry to fix Newark's schools. The district is a classic example of well-funded failure. According to the New Jersey D.O.E., the city's public school

district spent almost \$17,000 per pupil in 2005, while the rest of the state spent about than \$11,000 (see Figure 1). And it still lagged far behind the state's average academic outcomes. Fifty-three percent of Newark's 4th graders are proficient in English and 43 percent are proficient in math, while the state boasts proficiency percentages of 78 and 68, respectively. Newark's 8th graders do even worse (see Figure 2).

In 2005, more than 60 percent of 11th graders failed the state math test. In 2003, 28 percent of seniors failed to graduate, while 42 percent graduated with only an alternative diploma. And all this is *after* being under state control for ten years. Back then, in 1995, Newark schools ranked second among 30 special-needs districts in teacher pay, and second to last in the percentage of 11th graders passing the high-school proficiency test. Questionable hiring practices were prevalent, and it was discovered in 1993, during an external review by a team appointed by the state commissioner of education, that the district was siphoning off "a significant portion of its resources into noninstructional personnel to provide employment to many Newark citizens."

The state's final comprehensive study of the district leading up to takeover found that it had been "at best flagrantly delinquent or at worst deceptive in discharging its responsibilities to its students." School buildings were "filthy, unsafe, and in disrepair." Public transportation was "hazardous." Schools lacked decent food service and "sufficient, appropriate instructional materials." Wilbur Rich, who studied Newark for his book *Black Mayors and School Politics*, called it "the strangest system I ever investigated." Some schools lacked even chalk, while all the money went to teachers' salaries and the school board operated as "a patronage-dispensing system."

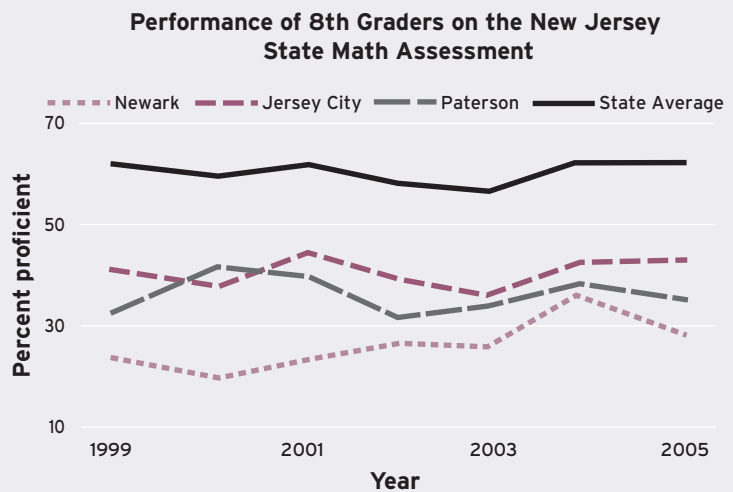
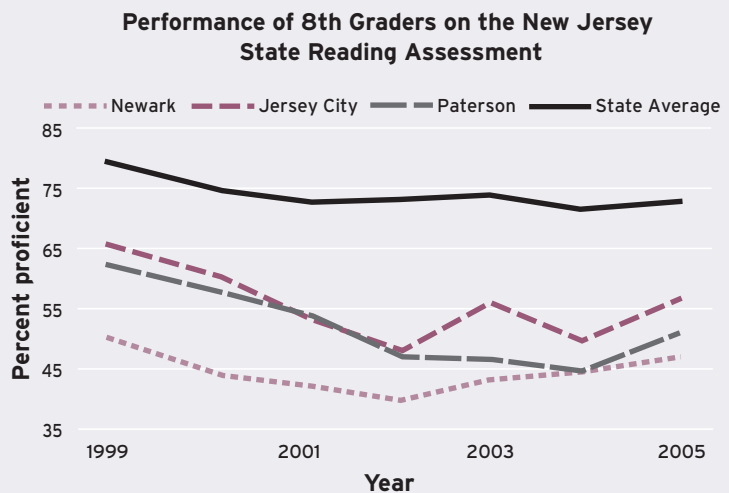
According to the state, the political system running the show smacked of corruption and self-dealing. "Uncovered in the district were conflicts of interest, falsification of reports, willful violation of New Jersey's election and bidding laws, misused and mismanaged federal, local, and state monies, mismanaged personnel matters, loose control over cash...."

The view of the schools from inside the classrooms was just as troubling. In her

book *Ghetto Schooling*, Jean Anyon, former chairperson of the education department at Rutgers University–Newark, describes administrators at a typical school in 1992 and 1993 as buck-passing incompetents and teachers as tough and resentful of outsiders (especially white ones) looking to tell them how to do their jobs. Anyon's analysis went far beyond her own impressionistic reporting, but no part of her socio-cultural analysis spoke as loudly as the teachers she quoted, one telling a student her breath "smells like dog [expletive],"

... For Dismal Results (Figure 2)

Newark students score poorly on the state assessments compared to the other large districts, and markedly so when compared with the state average.



SOURCE: New Jersey Department of Education

another telling a student her mother was “a [expletive],” and one 5th-grade teacher saying to his class, “If I had a gun, I’d kill you. You’re all hoodlums.” To repeat: this was a typical Newark school.

A Practical Politician to the Rescue?

In an interview with *Education Next* during the closing weeks of the campaign, Booker said he wanted to improve relations between the mayor’s office and the state-appointed superin-



Booker says he will also pursue mayoral control of the school system after

the state returns control of the schools to Newark in 2007. And with a new slate of Booker-friendly members elected to the city council—“Team Booker” won all nine seats—he will have a good chance of getting it.

tendent when he became the city’s chief executive. But he also said that his first priority would be to make the schools safe, an uncontroversial but essential promise. Citing a newspaper article that described children being afraid to stay for after-school programs, Booker says, “We’re going to come in immediately and secure all of our school zones and put in whatever necessary personnel in and around our schools to protect [children as they travel] to and from school.”

He also hopes to expand tutoring and afterschool programs and create more “linkages” between students and potential employers. Health, well-being, nutrition, and early child development are other areas where he sees possibilities

for mayoral leadership. “We want to make sure that every child, by the time they’re six years old, arrives in school healthy and ready to learn.”

Booker says he will also pursue mayoral control of the school system after the state returns control of the schools to Newark in 2007. And with a new slate of Booker-friendly members elected to the city council—“Team Booker” won all nine seats—he will have a good chance of getting it. He is critical of “school boards that are elected with a fraction of the vote in voter turnout” and “special-interest groups” that lack a “unifying vision” to reform the system. “To really leverage change,” says Booker, it is necessary to “centralize control under one person.” This is something Anyon and other local education experts oppose, so it will be interesting to watch the new mayor maneuver his way through this minefield.

An Agenda for Reform

The question of vouchers will also surely resurface, but it will not be one of Booker’s top priorities. Candidate Booker created the Institute for Urban Excellence, a nonprofit whose sole mission has been to develop a report of best urban practices to guide policy in post-Sharpe James Newark. And it has been soliciting advice from education researchers on a reform package. In March, Bo Kemp, director of the institute, met with Alan Sadovnik, the current head of the education department at Rutgers–Newark, and others from the Institute on Education Law and Policy, also at Rut-

gers–Newark. Says Sadovnik: “We advised caution with regard to the issue of vouchers. It is not in our view the primary or most important thing the new mayor should do in Newark.” Vouchers may even “detract” from plans to improve the public schools, says Sadovnik, given the limited capacity of private and Catholic schools in the city.

Did Booker listen? During a candidates’ debate in April he seemed to, saying that vouchers had nothing to do with his education plan for Newark. Yet, when asked a week earlier if he had experienced a change of heart on vouchers, Booker denied it. He supports, he says, “any kind of choice programs that are targeted toward poor children who are trapped in failing schools.”

He called it “morally wrong” for “the connected, the elected, the privileged,” who send their kids to private schools, “not to favor a system that creates options for parents that are now being enjoyed by those privileged elites in urban communities around our nation.”

One reason for the ambiguity may be that Booker’s position on vouchers has always been a practical one. “I don’t think he has any orthodox views either way,” says Howard Fuller of BAEO. “He’s not an ideologue on vouchers. He sees that as something that may be useful, but he sees other things. To me, what Cory would probably do as mayor is figure out what would work and what is politically possible to try to make a difference for the children in his city. And I personally would not expect him or want him to do anything but what he thinks is right and would make a difference.”

In any case, says Paul Hill, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, it takes more than a few vouchers or mayoral control to turn around a failing school system. “The hard part,” says Hill, “is finding a way to dispossess” all the groups, from teacher unions to local churches to political clubs, that have “embedded relationships” in the school system. “When mayors take over schools, they think they can just manage the same system.”

But what they need to do is change the system itself, by closing schools, opening new ones, and finding ways to bring in new teachers to get around the “generations of bad hires” that plague failing schools. “As somebody who believes in school choice and vouchers,” says Hill, “I think believing in them in a simple-minded way is worse than being against them.” Hill points to the Expect Success program in the Oakland, California, public schools as a “tremendous example” of what might be done in Newark if Mayor Booker pursues fundamental reform of the school system.

Wilbur Rich seconds this opinion, saying the “entrenched relationships” of the system’s employees will become the biggest stumbling block for a mayor bent on reinventing the system. Rich says he likes Booker, a lot even, but that “this guy is so smooth and so optimistic, almost to the point of being naive.”

Booker doesn’t seem to mind that kind of criticism. “Another big thing for us is helping charter schools,” he says, noting that the “biggest impediment to charter school expansion in Newark is often having the facilities to do so.” He wants the city to be in partnership with charter schools, helping them find facilities in order to build on the success of existing Newark charter schools like the Knowledge Is Power Program and North Star academies.

Booker says he will also focus on improving financial accountability to make sure “the money being spent is actually getting to the classroom and empowering young people as opposed to being sucked up by bureaucracies.” He wants the schools to do more to protect students from the culture

of failure, which, he says, may involve extending the school day and implementing weekend and summer programs.

Booker as a “Post-Racial” Leader

In the end, Cory Booker may not be as liberal as some educators in Newark hope, nor as conservative as others fear. He is an explicitly religious, anti-bureaucracy politician who, when asked for his position on affirmative action, says, “there is still a place for it.” He praises the Supreme Court’s decision upholding the University of Michigan’s right to evaluate “the totality of an application” and consider a student applicant’s race as “a valuable informative tool.” If affirmative action is a racial identity litmus test, Booker passes.

But now that he is mayor, he begins the arduous task of making his wish list of education reforms a reality. Should he have even moderate success, it seems likely he will be in line to become a national figure representing the new generation of black leadership in America, a leadership that does not abandon race matters altogether, but seems less angry than previous generations and more in tune with the America of Tiger Woods, Barack Obama, and Oprah Winfrey.

Howard Fuller, when asked what it might mean for Booker to replace a man like Sharpe James, whom Booker has called “a race-based mayor,” says that “Cory understands how race works in America, but he also understands the class dimension to the problems in a city like Newark. So the solutions can’t be solely based on race. There are other dimensions to the problems that impact poor black people more than just race. And I don’t think Cory’s going to be the kind of person who’s going to shy away from dealing with things that are racial. But at the same time he’s not going to play the race card every time something happens, whether race is the basis for it or not.”

A “post-racial” black leader, an inspirational figure, a reforming, anti-corruption mayor? Cory Booker may prove to be all these. He will have to be, as he tries to save the children of Newark from ending up like the teenager who died in his arms. Or he may not. A few of his admirers worry that upon taking office he will “go native” in this city of the political machine. One of Booker’s ward captains expresses a version of this concern when she says her greatest hope for Mayor Booker is that he remain “unbought and unbossed.”

When asked if he’s already an insider, Booker laughs and says, “The short answer is no.” He insists that he won this election by convincing Sharpe James that he could not prevail again. Only then did the endorsements roll in, with the unions, developers, and everyone else around town trying to get in on the act. But he welcomes the newcomers, and says, “We’re leveraging that support for our agenda of reform and not for any agendas that are contrary to that.”

David Skinner is an assistant managing editor at the Weekly Standard and editor of Doublethink magazine.