

In Newark, a Gift Wasted?

That depends on what happens next

The Prize: Who's in Charge of America's Schools?

by Dale Russakoff

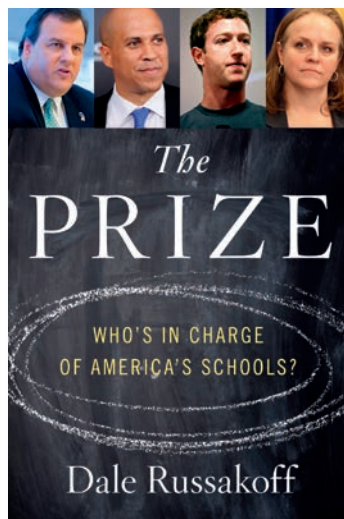
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015,
\$27; 256 pages.

As reviewed by David Steiner

Some district schools [in Newark] have improved on state tests in grades three to eight, but the district's overall passing rates remained roughly flat over the five years ending in spring 2014, and even dipped in some grades. In fifth grade, for example, state data showed only 29% of children were proficient in language arts. The district touts other gains, however, such as more children attending public preschool and graduating.

—“Newark’s \$100 Million Education Debate,” Wall Street Journal, September 8, 2015

Few *Education Next* readers will arrive innocently at this review: the coverage of Dale Russakoff’s wonderfully written *The Prize*, an account of recent education policy in Newark, has been extensive. The combination of an extraordinary (and perhaps extraordinarily naive) 2010 donation of \$100 million from Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, the high-octane political antics of Mayor Cory Booker, and the very dedicated but consultant-reliant and at times tone-deaf district leadership of Cami Anderson converge to create an education drama of the first order. The meme picked up in many reviews is clear: writing in the *New York Times*, Alex Kotlowitz argues that the book “serves as a kind of corrective to the dominant narrative of school reformers across the country.” The suggestion is



that “school reformers,” understood as those committed to teacher accountability and merit pay, principal autonomy, and the extensive use of data analysis to support school-level change, should eat a good portion of humble pie. Larger-than-life figures who claimed to have all the answers emerged with egg on their faces. Their efforts to reform education “from the top down” are revealed as an embarrassing fiasco.

There is some truth to this reading. But stubborn facts, duly recorded in this compellingly readable book, complicate this conclusion out of all recognition.

First, the story’s heroes—public school teachers who kept their heads down and did wonderful work in their classroom—don’t quite behave as we might expect from those critical of the reformers’ agenda. Rather, such teachers

took it upon themselves to glean many lessons from the city’s best charter schools, and found charter school leaders eager to help. They organized themselves as a nonprofit agency through which they raised private money to purchase the rigorous, early-literacy program, developed at

the University of Chicago for kindergarten through third grade, that was used in the two leading charter networks—the TEAM schools of the national KIPP organization and North Star Academy, a subsidiary of Uncommon Schools.

Ras Baraka, now mayor of Newark but at the time a school principal and leader of the opposition to the new strategies, was an unusual kind of opponent to the reform movement:

In his first two years as principal, Central had such abysmal scores on the state proficiency exam given annually to juniors that it was in danger of being closed under the federal No Child Left Behind law. Baraka mounted an aggressive turnaround strategy, using some of the instructional techniques pioneered by the reform movement. He said he was particularly influenced by a superintendent in a high-poverty district in Colorado who was trained by philanthropist Eli Broad’s leadership academy—an arm of the “conspiracy” Baraka the politician inveighed against.... In addition to English and math, the test-prep classes at Central High included a heavy dose of motivation. Teachers told students over and over: You *can* pass this test. You *must* pass it—for yourself, your school, your community. Baraka scheduled a school-wide pep rally on the day before testing.

In short, arguing that the book damns the education reformers’ agenda is to misread it.

One of the most cherished elements on the reform agenda never got off the ground in Newark, namely, the right of school principals to override the job protection of long-serving teachers.

On other matters, the book presents a still stronger endorsement of reform. It hammers home the positive attributes of charter schools in Newark and the recalcitrance of the traditional school district. Stanford University researchers completed a review of New Jersey charter schools in 2012 (the CREDO report), finding that compared to their peers in traditional public schools, “charter students in Newark gain an additional seven and a half months in reading and nine months in math” per year of schooling. One can only conclude that the growth of the charter sector represented a major advance for the students lucky enough to win lottery-generated spaces in those schools. On the other side of the ledger, the book strongly supports the argument that the very structure of the traditional public-school district in Newark drained funds and support from the frontline of the classroom.

In the end, one of the most cherished elements on the reform agenda never got off the ground, namely, the right of school principals to override the job protection of long-serving teachers. The single greatest expenditure from the almost \$200 million that was raised for Newark’s school system went to a new teachers’ contract. The new superintendent, Cami Anderson, “estimated the total cost of the labor agreements at \$100 million.” Despite the money, New Jersey state law assured the protection of veteran teachers irrespective of their effectiveness in the classroom. While the Newark charter schools were recruiting from all over the country, the Newark school district “had to choose mostly from Newark’s existing supply, since leftover teachers in the excess pool already were bursting the budget.”

The Prize gives us three very important warnings: First, education reform can be undermined by failing to engage seriously with the community in question. There was, as Russakoff demonstrates, a fundamental reluctance to engage with the parents of Newark in any serious or sustained way. Second, state and local circumstances must be very carefully considered in advance of introducing changes. Blithe assertions that state law

around collective bargaining would be done away with remained just that—assertions. Finally, just as absolute power can corrupt absolutely, so the lure of vast funds, and the pressure to show quick and major results, can produce very damaging behavior. Page after page evidences massive grandstanding (in part to secure the necessary matching funds to lock down the Zuckerberg millions), and a constant overselling of progress made.

But one should be careful in drawing broader conclusions about education reform from *The Prize*. On the one hand, there can be no conclusion that the “education reformers” have a monopoly on ideas that work to improve education for students. Not all urban public-school districts are as broken or inflexible as Newark was both before and during the interventions described. A typically thought-provoking and painful passage from Russakoff illustrates the perspective of a Newark public-school parent:

[Selta] Carter viewed dysfunction as a given in the Newark schools, and she spent her social capital shielding her daughter from it. The same was true for most of the two dozen other parents at the meeting. Among hundreds of Thirteenth Avenue School parents, they were the small core investing time and energy in classrooms. When they had concerns, administrators tended to

listen. This was their definition of school choice: the ability to maneuver a child out of the path of inevitable disaster.

There are public school districts across the country that have engaged in innovative contracts between teachers and the central office, and there are multiple models of educational interventions, including at the curricular level, that show real promise and do not depend on wholesale structural reform.

At the same time, while Dale Russakoff is a superb narrator, she is not always a reliable guide to national education policy. Her brief treatment of the major reforms in New Orleans and Washington, D.C., is confusing, mixing data with generalizations that do not follow. The treatment of charter schools, most especially, moves uneasily from individual portraits of attentiveness and effective support for children to generalizations about the weakness of the sector. It should be said simply: to date, charter schools are the success story in Newark.

Thus the final work is left to the reader. For those who are committed to reforming public education from within and who are resistant to charter schools, vouchers, or tax credits, the challenge is to suggest a way forward when so much funding disappears into the central office, when funding itself is limited by our byzantine school-financing structures, and when it remains so difficult to replace weak teachers with stronger ones. For the reformers, the challenge is no less urgent: thanks to Zuckerberg, funds poured into the Newark charter schools. According to the CREDO report, they were already performing better than charters in other New Jersey cities. As has been the case in Boston, New York, and New Orleans, high-profile Newark charter schools became a magnet for talent. Can the model be sustained and nationalized without loss of quality?

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