

***The Prize: Who's in Charge of America's Schools?*****Dale Russakoff****Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016****246 pages****\$15.95 (paper)****ISBN: 9780544810907****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v4i1.113>**

“Driving through Newark was like touring archaeological layers of despair and hope.” That is how Dale Russakoff describes Newark, New Jersey at the beginning of *The Prize*. Indeed, by 2009, the point when Russakoff’s book begins, the city had accumulated a complex history whose layers include an industrial past; the migration of black southerners and immigrants; white flight; an uprising against police brutality and racism; and catastrophic urban renewal programs. Russakoff sees Newark as “an extreme example of the country’s increasing economic and racial segregation.” Any number of stories connected to Newark’s layers of “despair” and “hope” could be turned into gripping reading material in Russakoff’s hands. But it was a \$100 million-dollar donation to jump start school reform that hooked her attention and resulted in an arresting account of a recent chapter in Newark’s history.

Russakoff’s book chronicles the consequences of Facebook mogul Mark Zuckerberg’s gift, and Mayor Cory Booker’s and Governor Chris Christie’s joint reform scheme on the city’s schools. The struggling school district has been controlled by the state since 1995, a result of corruption in its bureaucratic ranks. Fifteen years later, Newark’s students—a population who is mostly black, Latino, and disproportionately poor—continued to perform below grade level on standardized tests. The stakes were high, and Russakoff explains that the trio’s reform mission took on national significance, in part, because it was announced on the *Oprah* show—a proclamation timed so that it coincided with the release of *Waiting for Superman*, a documentary about America’s troubled schools. But, that is not the only reason their mission landed in the spotlight. Newark schools

became stand-ins for all of the nation's failing urban schools, institutions that seemed resistant to rehabilitation: "What Booker, Christie, and Zuckerberg set out to achieve in Newark had not been accomplished in modern times—turning a failing urban school district into one of universally high achievement."

Russakoff is at her best when she tracks the behind-the-scenes maneuvers, deals, and pitfalls that ultimately doomed the reform project. Russakoff expertly details the slippery nature of this top-down reform mission born from an alliance between two politicians with national political ambitions and a philanthropist—a mission that side-stepped the community and local educators, and looked to a more flexible teachers' contract, charter schools, and other alternative designs to resolve decade's old school dysfunction. Russakoff's reporting makes clear that whatever benefits the Booker, Christie, and Zuckerberg plan might yield were undercut by the crisis it caused. Russakoff finds misguided education reformers, high-priced consultants, and the embattled state-appointed superintendent Cami Anderson at the helm of what became a disastrous campaign. Their reform strategies created many problems, among them was the fact that charter schools threatened to completely drain the district's traditional schools of state dollars and students: schools facing dwindling enrollments closed which created a costly surplus of unassigned tenured teachers. A budget crisis was imminent, and actual "reform" remained elusive.

The brightest glimmer of hope in *The Prize*—the community—shined through in bits and parts of the book. Booker touted the reform as the "people's project," but Newark's residents, parents of the city's school children, and local educators were, at every turn, alienated and effectively barred from lending their vision to the reform program. The stories of several of the city's vulnerable students, parents, community activists, and home-grown educators/reformers are woven into Russakoff's narrative. But, her powerful reporting would have been even more

compelling if the community voices who shouted down Anderson at meetings; and those who decried what they believed was a conspiracy to privatize their schools; and those belonging to the students who marched out of classrooms in protest; were more audible in the book. After all, the city's residents are the stakeholders with the greatest investment in Newark's schools. It was Newark's residents, and the dedicated educators who served them, who kept their eyes on the *prize* when Booker and Christie turned their attention to their national political careers, and when all of Zuckerberg's money was spent or committed.

Russakoff's book ends at the start of a new phase for Newark's schools. Ras Baraka's mayoral victory and his call for the return of local control of the city's schools signals a new episode in this old American drama, and a new struggle for Newark's "tattered" prize.

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