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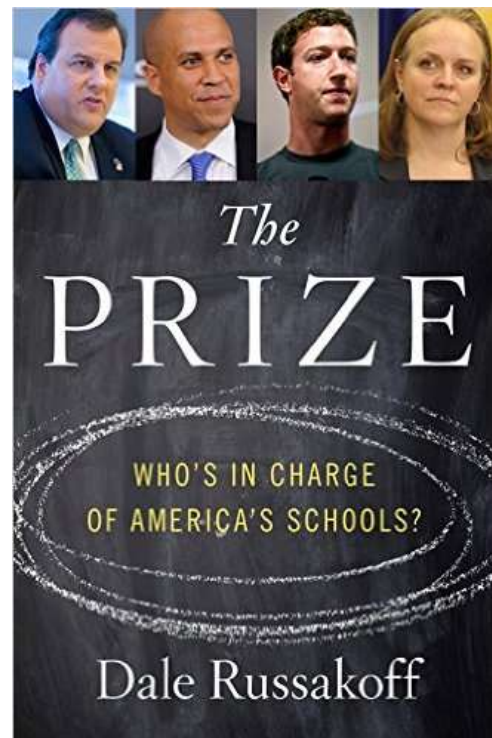
*Mercy College*

United States

**Betting on people: An essay review of Dale Russakoff's *The prize: Who's in charge of America's schools?***

The shape of public education in the United States is a source of enduring concern in the media as well as in some of the research and policy literature, particularly as far as our large urban school districts are concerned.

The gap in achievement between socio-economic groups has persisted over the years, in spite of the fact that eliminating it has been a long-standing priority in educational policy. This state of affairs has been the backdrop of the several district-level urban reform initiatives that have been launched of the past two-and-one-half decades. Russakoff's book describes a recent effort to reform the public school system of Newark, NJ, a district that had its share of the problems typically identified in the urban school context, such as low achievement, lack of evidence of teacher effectiveness and crumbling buildings and infrastructure. The book is part of a growing school reform literature that now includes published case studies of the districts of



Boston (Reville, 2007), Washington, DC (National Research Council, 2011), Milwaukee (Hess & Sattin-Bajaj, 2013), Austin (Cuban, 2010), Chicago (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Russo, 2004; Shipp, 2006), New York City (O'Day, Bitter, & Gomez, 2011), San Diego (Betts, Zau, & King, 2005), Philadelphia (Boyd & Christman, 2003), Baltimore (Cibulka, 2003; Orr, 1999), New Orleans (Mirón, Beabout, & Boselovic, 2015) and Seattle (Yee & McCloud, 2003).

The reform effort described in this book was initiated by a \$100 million gift by Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, to the Newark Public Schools (NPS) in 2010 to turn it into a high performing district that can serve as a model for the nation. Zuckerberg's gift is remarkable for its magnitude, as well as for the fact that it aims to support a large school system with few strings attached about how the money ought to be used. The gift was set up as a challenge grant that ultimately was successfully matched by another \$100 million from other sources. The story starts with a conversation in 2009 between New Jersey's State Governor-elect Chris Christie and the then mayor of Newark Cory Booker who came together around a shared sense of urgency about the need to transform Newark's schools, and create better learning environments for its students. An opportunity occurred to engage Zuckerberg in a conversation at a millionaires' retreat in Sun Valley, Idaho in July of 2010. As it happened, the executive had plans to make a big philanthropic move in education and this seemed to be the right occasion. The announcement of the gift on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was timed to coincide with the release of *Waiting for Superman*, the film that tells the story about five children's desperate attempt to flee the public school system that is not serving them adequately. When the announcement is made, a whooping Oprah and a standing ovation by the audience had Zuckerberg blushing. Prompted by Winfrey to explain why he picked Newark, Zuckerberg said: "Newark is really just because I believe

in these guys [Booker and Christie]. Running a company, the main thing that I have to do is find people who are going to be really great leaders and invest in them, and that is what we're doing here." (p. 35) Russakoff's book tells the story of how things went in the years that followed, and it tells the story well.

With respect to the Newark Public Schools, the reform effort triggered by Zuckerberg's gift is not the first attempt to respond to chronic academic underachievement in Newark's public schools by drastic measures. In April of 1995, a state judge ordered the State of New Jersey to take over the Newark Public School district, citing large-scale student academic failure and a lack of responsiveness of the school board to problems at the school building level (MacFarquhar, 1995). At the time, lawyers for the school district filed an appeal, which they lost in July of the same year, and the state appointed Beverly Hall to begin her duties as the new district superintendent that summer to oversee the transformation of the system. Newark became the third school district to be taken over by the state after Jersey City and Patterson. As of this writing, Newark remains under state governance, and it is impossible to imagine a reform effort of the scope, aggressiveness and centralized direction as the one described in this book, had the district been governed by local school boards.

A second piece of relevant historical background is the *Abbott v. Burke* case, a complaint brought by the Education Law Center on behalf of 20 public school attendees to New Jersey's Superior Court in 1981. The complaint challenged New Jersey's system for financing public education by noting the disparities in funding between districts serving poor and wealthy areas – school financing in New Jersey was tied to revenue from property taxes. Their claim was that these disparities favor schools in wealthy areas, and therefore violate the state's constitutional requirement that it provides a "thorough and efficient system of free public schools for the instruction of all children."

Litigants argued that doing so requires the provision of equal opportunity for all students to a good education. The court ruled the State's school funding mechanism unconstitutional as applied to the poorer urban districts, and ordered the implementation of a more equitable distribution formula. Thirty-one low-wealth urban school districts were designated as Abbott Districts, Newark being one of them (Education Law Center, 2015). Compliance with the Abbott ruling remains a central component to the financing of those 31 districts, resulting in per pupil spending that ranks among the highest in the nation.

To spearhead the latest round of reforms, Christopher Cerf was hired to become education commissioner under Christie, and he, in turn, hired Cami Anderson as superintendent to the district. Cerf and Anderson both worked under Joel Klein to oversee the transformation of New York City's public school system, and they brought an abrasive top-down leadership style to NPS that included the formation of charter schools and the closing of underperforming schools, as well as a new collective bargaining agreement with the teachers with bonuses for good performance and a new teacher evaluation system. They conducted a string of rowdy and turbulent meetings with parents and other stakeholders in the local community to outline their plans. As described here, these meetings clearly bring into focus the depth of the divide between theory and practice when making these kinds of reforms. Worried parents were poorly informed about what went on, the theory of change that guided the effort had no role assigned to them, and the creation of charter schools to serve some students while others remain in regular public schools created a rift in the community that played itself out in an 'us versus them' dynamic, that got readily exploited in at least one of those meetings by hecklers and other vested interests of the local political

establishment (community activism, organized labor).

One of Anderson's first moves as a superintendent was to close 12 of the lowest performing schools in the district and consolidate them into eight "Renew Schools". Anderson's presentation of this plan in a community hearing fell apart as she was shouted down. The school closings generated considerable fear and uncertainty among parents who often live in neighborhoods that are unsafe, may not own a car, had not been notified about any transportation arrangements for their children, and may have liked their children's teachers. The incongruity of the implementation model with the perceptions of the community is thrown into sharp relief in a conversation between Robert Curvin, political scientist and life-long Newark resident, and Superintendent Anderson:

Curvin: "I urge you to back up and think about implanting a deeper understanding .... This is Newark .... There is a lot of history ... [and] deep anger about what the school closings mean."

Anderson: "I get it.... But there's a real tension between talking about it and doing it. This requires a leap of faith and moving faster than is comfortable."

Curvin: "Leaps of faith are not possible under these conditions. You have to be very concrete."

Anderson: "I hear you, but I lose sleep over kids stuck in a school where they are losing ground." (p. 181)

Consistent with a top-down implementation model being followed, there was no transparency about how the gift and its matching grants were spent, nor about who made the critical spending decisions in the first place. Since the money came from private sources, none of such was required. Perhaps

more importantly, there also was a lack of transparency about what the reform agenda actually came down to. Community activists who could relate to Booker's promise to initiate bottom-up teacher driven sustainable reforms in the schools, got involved without being cognizant about that fact that a major component of the reform agenda was the creation of charter schools, an approach to which they may not necessarily have been sympathetic. It did not help matters that many of the consultants who were hired to assist with the reform efforts were not from the Newark community, or that the face of the reform effort was a white leadership team brought in to transform a school district serving a predominantly African American community. Obviously, none of these decisions are inherently problematic, but they did reinforce perceptions in the community about being short-changed once again in its dealings with the establishment.

The book includes vivid case material from two NPS schools in particular: Avon Avenue School, a regular public school where teachers and school administrators responded to the abysmal student achievement record of the school by developing a mechanism for identifying and sharing effective practices, and The SPARK Academy, one of Newark's new charter schools, part of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) network, where school personnel faced the reality of working in urban areas by making a concerted effort to go after students who won admission to the school in the lottery, but missed the enrollment deadlines at the beginning of the school year. Their stories are significant in that they illustrate the indispensability of the on-the-ground work and its relatively small victories to the larger reform effort.

Based on their fieldwork experiences, many researchers (myself included), can attest to instances of excellent instruction taking place in schools that are nonetheless unable to produce convincing student learning outcomes at the level of group averages. Avon Avenue is a case in point. While on paper, the

school appeared to be in compliance with all accountability requirements, the academic achievement record was so awful that some were doubtful whether intentional instructional efforts were made at all. In that environment, Princess Williams, a lead kindergarten teacher with an understanding of the challenge of widening the horizon of students growing up in poverty, infused the idea of striving for excellence on an ongoing basis in her classrooms rewarding students displaying deliberate efforts to do so. Would this work in other classrooms too? In an attempt to raise the quality of instruction, four colleagues, including Ms. Williams, organized themselves to create a support structure called Building Responsible, Intelligent, Creative Kids, or BRICK. They gathered evidence of effective practices from Charter schools, and on that basis instated a new K-3 literacy program as well as individualized learning plans and a culture of collaborative exchange between new and experienced teachers. The commitment of the BRICK team was to making these improvements to the educational process within the public school context, rather than *first* transforming the governance structure and *then* implementing these changes. It is helpful to remember in this context that the crux of the educational process is the interaction between teachers and students around learning content (Elmore, 2004). Teachers are more knowledgeable than policy makers about this crucial aspect of the educational endeavor, and a strict top-down implementation style is not set up to take advantage of this knowledge.

Previous urban reform efforts, such as those in San Diego, leave little doubt that teachers' unions are a major factor in any reform agenda. A central part of NPS' reform in response to Zuckerberg's gift was the design and ratification of a transformative teaching contract. The preliminary conversations between Governor Christie and Randy Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, were congenial

enough. The rubber hit the road, however, when the New Jersey Education Association became engaged. As a precondition for taking his seat at the bargaining table, its president Joseph Del Grosso, succeeded in extracting \$31 million in back pay for the two years that Newark's approximately 3,600 teaching staff had been working without a pay raise. The contract that resulted from these negotiations included a mechanism for stripping tenure from teachers with two years of consecutive poor performance, as well as pay incentives, but seniority provisions (last in, first out) remained in place and excess teachers were to be kept on the payroll. Also left standing were the 15 paid sick days per annum. In terms of the budget allocations reported in this book for the \$200 million figure, labor costs were projected to take up 44.6% of the total amount, cancelling out the projected financial support for other initiatives such as community organizing and early childhood programs.

Where this book differs from many other accounts of urban school reform, is its due consideration of the personal background of those who are among the major players, and how their points of view about school improvement are informed by those backgrounds. Cory Booker was a bright student who grew up in New Jersey's suburbs with a deep personal and professional commitment to the furtherance of social justice. Chris Christie's parents fled Newark when he was a boy and he saw school reform as a central policy imperative to make it a better place to live. Christopher Cerf, the no nonsense 'transformation chief' from New York City acted out of a fierce conviction that a top-down reform model is the only way to be able to do what it takes to give our children the education they are entitled to. Cami Anderson's advocacy for the interests of others started with her own siblings and friends when she was a girl growing up in California. Princess Williams, the Avon Avenue School teacher grew up in Newark

under conditions that are similarly adverse as those of her students, and she was determined to use her teaching skills to help her students pull themselves out. Alif Beyah was a struggling fifth-grade reader facing a lack of understanding at home and at school of his failure to grasp the fundamentals, and as a result, he was extremely dependent on teachers' readiness to go the extra mile with him. Alif's story highlights the magnitude of the challenge of doing reform one student at a time, as opposed to implementing new governance models.

The book vividly describes how Anderson, on one of her first days on the job, visited a summer school in session to be received by a handful of particularly lethargic students in the company of a very indifferent teacher. The system for assigning students to summer schools based on academic need was essentially not working and as a result, no one was sure whether the neediest ones were the ones receiving services, nor was it clear exactly what services they should be receiving. It is telling that one of Anderson's major accomplishments in her first few months was that by the beginning of the 2011-12 school year, all instruction commenced on time with the students in their seats. This episode brings to mind an important point about reform, namely that at least in part, deciding whether it is successful lies in the implementation story, which may include such things as adequately targeting students for support services, maintaining stable school attendance rates, codified processes of constructive professional feedback for teachers, as well as the creation and maintenance of physical and social surroundings that are conducive to learning. It may also include the adequacy of the governance structures and their ability to adapt to changing needs and circumstances, such as, for instance, budgets that fluctuate with student enrollment.

Two appendices to the book provide numerical information, and they are worth taking a look at. The first appendix concerns

the allotment of the \$200 million to support the reforms. In these budget allocations, the bulk of the money will be spent on infrastructure, including labor and contract costs (\$89.2M), the maintenance and expansion of a charter school system (\$57.6M), as well as a whole range of consulting services to improve communications, data systems, strategic planning, etc. (\$21M). Allotments for the identification and dissemination of innovations and effective practices in particular schools and classrooms are a small fraction by comparison. The professional support network BRICK Avon, the highly promising professional support initiative described above, gets \$500,000. It is surely to Zuckerberg's credit that he was prepared to throw the lion's share of his support to such unglamorous aspects of school improvement. One can empathize, on the other hand, with those philanthropists, and there are many, who prefer to have a greater influence over the way their money gets spent. In the case of Newark, several donors, such as the New Schools Venture Fund, and the Walton, Fisher and Robertson Foundations did engage with NPS independently, but were only willing to make financial commitments to charter schools, where a greater proportion of the expenses typically supports instructional activities and services to students rather than salaries and administration.

The second appendix contains basic city demographics as well as information about declining enrollment in the traditional district schools, and increasing enrollment in charter schools, indicating that as of now, such schools are a fully integrated component of the public school system in Newark, as is also the case, for instance, in Washington, DC, and New Orleans. The creation of charter schools to serve a growing number of students is one of the most tangible results of Newark's reform reported in this book. Whether this is a sign that the reform will be successful remains to be seen. By using a lottery system, these schools screen out those parents who do not bother to participate in it,

thus creating a selection factor that is likely to favor better academic outcomes. Moreover, in the private sphere, individuals and organizations have the option of retreating from unpromising business propositions such as educating the most needy students, which raises the question who picks up the remainder of the students, including many of those that are now served by regular district schools. Likewise, their greater leverage than the district hiring and firing teachers probably gives them a competitive advantage in the quality of instruction. The problem with the viewpoint, frequently held in reform circles, that charter schools can be a vehicle for demonstrating effective practices that can then be emulated by regular public schools is that they tend to ignore the influence of student selection dynamics on achievement outcomes. With regards to the Newark Public Schools, then, the question is whether their charter schools would retain their edge in the absence of the aforementioned choice dynamics.

The title of the book offers two pointers to the complexity of NPS's story. *The Prize* is a cynical long-standing reference to NPS' annual budget, approximately to the tune of \$1 billion, and the opportunities it provides for patronage, a reminder of how much there is to education other than learning and instruction. The troubling question who is in charge of America's schools lies at the heart of this account. The situation at NPS is atypical because of the takeover by the state, but the larger questions are the same as elsewhere. How much can philanthropists and policy makers influence what goes on in these districts, and to what extent are performance based accountability models helping us? Zuckerberg's gift was an endorsement of Booker and Christie's potential as individuals to create change at NPS, but their role in the process ultimately turned out to be the enforcement of a business model that included market-based reforms and systemic changes in the accountability structure, without offering much prescription with

regards to instructional or school building leadership practices.

The events described here do not offer a great deal of reassurance for Cerf's observation that: "You have no chance of giving these kids the lives they deserve if you don't essentially override the local political infrastructure." (p. 211). Howard Fuller, former superintendent at the Milwaukee Public Schools, who was deeply involved in their attempts at reform takes an opposite perspective, based on his experiences there: "I think a lot of us education reformers – and I include myself – have been too arrogant. ... It is not even what you do sometimes. It's the way you treat people in the process of doing it. (p. 210)" And he goes on to predict that even if educational change is accomplished without community resistance, changes will not be sustainable in the long run if community engagement is not part of the history of the reform process. Zuckerberg drew a similar lesson from his experience at NPS, and decided to redirect his philanthropic work in education towards an understanding of the needs of the community in the San Francisco Bay area, close to where he lives. Hopefully, the extensive body of literature on urban reform initiatives, to which this book usefully contributes, will in the end permit us to develop a shared point of view about what the main ingredients are of effective reform, including whether it can succeed without the buy-in of teachers and the engagement of the

parents to whom the school system ultimately owes its accountability. Perhaps this literature might also inform us about the ways in which parents and the community can be instrumental to its success regardless of whether the mandate for changes comes from the top or not.

Early in the book, Booker recounts how one of his early career mentors told him: "Investors bet on people, not business models, because they know successful people find a way to be successful." (p. 11). The story of NPS as it is told here qualifies that statement by showing the limits of the extent to which individuals, philanthropists included, can rise above the larger battles in which our public schools are entrenched: poverty and inequality, organized labor, local politics, instructional autonomy and support, as well as the mobilization of resources, monetary and otherwise, to effectively educate students with a wide range of needs in very large numbers. Issues, in other words, that people cannot effectively address without the benefit of good implementation models.

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