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No quick fix: the school turnaround myth

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No quick fix: the school turnaround myth

By **Sharon McCloskey** - 9/8/2015 - in Education, Featured Articles  Print This Article



A conversation with Dale Russakoff, author of “The Prize: Who’s in Charge of America’s Schools?”

Five years ago, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, rising Democratic star and Newark mayor Cory Booker and aspiring presidential contender and New Jersey governor Chris Christie appeared together on the Oprah Winfrey show for a surprise announcement:

“We’re setting up a \$100 million challenge grant so that Mayor Booker and Governor Christie can have the flexibility they need to turn Newark into a symbol of educational excellence for the whole nation,” Zuckerberg told viewers.

Together with \$100 million in matching funds to be raised from local donors, Newark schools were set for a \$200 million infusion of cash.

By any measure, the city school district needed all the help it could get. At the time, more than 40 percent of Newark children lived below the poverty level and plenty were testing below grade-level. And the district had been operating under state control since 1995 and receiving court-ordered state aid that pushed its per student spending to beyond \$20,000 a year.

Less than half of that reached the schools though — the rest went to central bureaucracy — and the district couldn't pull its students out of a persistent, poverty-driven cycle of academic failure.

Fast-forward five years. Of the \$200 million committed, nearly \$90 million went towards teacher back-pay, staff incentives and buyouts, \$58 million towards the expansion of charter schools and \$21 million to consultants from what one teacher called the “school failure industry”— some charging \$1000 a day for so-called “systems change.”

But student performance remained stagnant if not down slightly on third through eighth grade standardized tests.

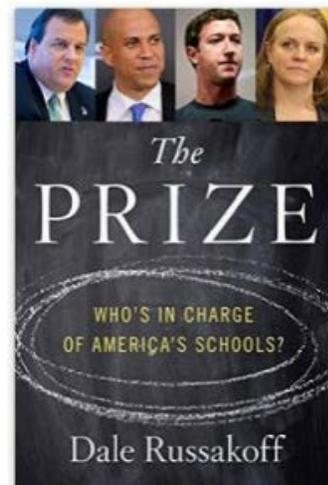
“Everyone’s getting paid,” said Vivian Cox Fraser, president of the Urban League of Essex County in Newark, “but Raheem still can’t read.”

What went wrong?

That’s the question longtime Washington Post reporter Dale Russakoff set out to answer in her new book, “The Prize: Who’s in Charge of America’s Schools?” – out in the stores today.

With behind-the-scenes reporting, observations in classrooms and conversations with teachers, parents, reformers, funders and others with a stake in Newark schools, Russakoff tells the tale of how moneyed outsiders failed in the end to turnaround a failing urban school district.

It was an effort doomed in equal parts by a failure to engage all involved stakeholders and a misdirection of funds away from places where they could have the most direct impact.



And though a Newark story, “The Prize” is just as much a cautionary tale for places like North Carolina, where decision-makers are dismantling public education in a seemingly short-sighted fashion.

“What’s important when you’re embracing a new approach to education, like charters and vouchers, is to think about how those impact all the children, not just those who get the vouchers or get into the charters,” Russakoff said.

Policy Watch spoke to Russakoff just a few days before the release of her book about what she learned in Newark and how those lessons apply here and elsewhere across the country.

NCPW: You’ve painted a complex portrait of reform efforts in urban districts, especially those plagued for years with high poverty and low achievement. Here you had \$200 million in philanthropy pouring in to “transform” Newark schools, yet that didn’t happen, by and large. Why?

Russakoff: Well, it was \$200 million over five years for a district that spends a billion dollars every year. So the hype that this was

going to transform the district was just way overstated. Much of the money was used to transform the systems that run education in Newark. Changing the incentives and changing the systems – the accountability system, the data system – those are all things that are very worthy things to do in the district, but those don't filter down all the way to the classroom, especially in a district where the issues the kids bring to the classroom are so extreme.

Many of these systems were changed. There is a new contract, a new evaluation system, new principals, a much better rubric for principals to guide teachers in the classroom – the kinds of internal things that change the way schools are run. The level of support in the classroom for teachers and kids didn't change, though, and in fact became strained because of the money that was flowing out of the district into charters.

The bottom line was that student performance on state standardized test in grades 3-8 went down over the five years.

Also, when formulating their plans, the reformers bypassed parents and the community in the belief that they (the reformers) knew what was best for the children, fueling a furious political backlash.

They spent more than \$20 million of the philanthropy on high-priced consultants, who have built something of an education industrial complex alongside the reform movement. But even under the best circumstances, the challenges of educating the country's poorest children are a lot bigger and more powerful than politicians and billionaires alone.

NCPW: A sizable amount of the money went towards charter school expansion, to the point that now 40 percent of Newark students are in charters. How has that impacted the district as a whole?

Russakoff: Charter schools are as good as the people who run them and teach in them. They are much better structured to get dollars into classrooms than an urban school district is, though. The well-run charters in Newark have two teachers in each kindergarten class, and in every Math and English class through grade three, while the district only has one. They also have more social workers, more academic interventionists, and lots more support when a child's family is in crisis.

It's hard for district schools to compete with that, so they continue to lose students. As children leave district schools for charters, state dollars follow them. To make ends meet, school districts in Newark and other cities where charters are growing fast have to continually to close schools, cut programs, lay off teachers, and reshuffle students. The district schools still enroll a majority of Newark children, including a higher percentage of those living in extreme poverty or with learning disabilities, but now they're less equipped to serve them. This is a big problem for reformers, school districts and state governments should address together.

NCPW: In the book you detail several instances of the reformers failing to engage the Newark community in the planning process. How did this air of arrogance and secrecy ultimately backfire?

Russakoff: The secrecy with which this all unfolded had a huge negative impact. Just the fact that it was announced on the Oprah show to a national television audience, before the people of Newark were even told about it, was a setback. I was struck by how people responded – just talking to them on the streets, asking how they felt about the \$100 million grant, and they'd say “This is all about our mayor, this isn't about us. What do these billionaires want with the mayor of Newark?” That was the perception – that this was about people with agendas.

Then the district held ten public meetings – put together by consultants who were paid roughly \$2 million — supposedly to get input. But it turned out that there already was a plan on how to spend the money, despite those meetings.

Someone in the schools leaked a document to the local press that had been assembled by consultants, listing which district schools would be closed and which charter schools would be placed in district schools. So people found out in their newspaper that their children's schools were closing and a charter would be put in their place. None of this had been discussed in the ten public forums that had been held with great fanfare.

There was so much distrust in the community about what was going on.

NCPW: Does that say something about whether systemic reform by outsiders can work?

Russakoff: I think so. I don't think that it means that philanthropists can't support or even catalyze reform in communities, but there was at least in Newark thinking that people in the community weren't capable of leading the reform process. But there were and are numerous excellent educators, principals, and people on the ground who know the system like the back of their hands and want it to improve. Had those people been in the forefront of this process, the community might have responded differently.

They could have had community conversations about finding ways to get money to the schools and students directly, like many charters are able to do. There would have been a broad base of people who would have said, "Let's make this a community project, let's decide what kind of tough decisions we can make and get more of this money to the kids."

NCPW: North Carolina is in the midst of a sea change in public education – some have called it an attack on public schools. After your reporting, what would you say to the decision makers here about shifting the focus and funds to alternatives like charter schools, vouchers and achievement school districts?

Russakoff: What's important when you're embracing a new approach to education, like charters and vouchers, is to think about how those impact all the children, not just those who get the vouchers or get into the charters.

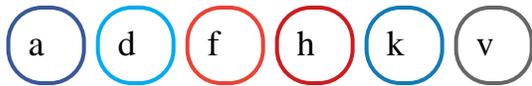
The reformers say "we've done a great thing, we've got 8000 kids in charters," and yes, that might be a great thing for those 8000 kids. But what was the plan for the kids who weren't going to charters, for all of the kids to be sure that their schooling would be stable and positive? There wasn't the same focus at all on this. I actually interviewed very respected people in the reform movement who said that unfortunately this was not part of their thinking.

Another key thing is making sure there is a truly inclusive process in which the families affected know what the thinking is. If they're not involved, you're going to have huge mistakes. For example, in Newark – where schools have historically been neighborhood schools and there's little if any busing — they broke up K-8 schools into K-4 schools and sent the older kids away. It turned out that with the older siblings going elsewhere, the younger kids had no one to walk them to school. So that was something the parents considered a deal breaker.

NCPW: One hot button issue here, as lawmakers continue to negotiate the budget, is the possible elimination of funding for TAs. What did your reporting in Newark reveal about the need for those positions?

Russakoff: In a low-income district like Newark, there's a tremendous need for more support in the classroom. Kids come in very far behind from where they're supposed to be and go through so many things over the course of a year — that really complicates their ability to learn. In some charter schools, they had two teachers in a classroom, a tutor for every grade, three social workers instead of one – all of these people were very involved in seeing that kids don't fall off track.

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Sharon McCloskey

Sharon McCloskey, former *Courts, Law and Democracy Reporter* for N.C. Policy Watch, writes about the courts and decisions that impact North Carolina residents. McCloskey also wrote for *Lawyers Weekly* and practiced law for more than 20 years.

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