

# The fate of Zuckerberg's "gift" to Newark schools

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Five years ago, Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg decided to promote "school reform" by making an unprecedented \$100 million gift to the single school system of Newark, New Jersey. A real media event, the announcement was made on a wildly popular national television program, "The Oprah Winfrey Show." It was also timed as a one-two punch to coincide with the release of the documentary film *Waiting for Superman*, funded by school privatization advocates, which provided an idyllic portrait of charter schools.

The Zuckerberg gift was hailed, not just as a boon to the impoverished city, but as a turning point for public education in America. His philanthropic experiment aimed—with more than a touch of hubris—to show "how to flip a city and take it from very, very poor schools and poor performance of children to...a model of educational excellence," in the words of Newark Democratic Mayor Cory Booker, a longtime advocate for dismantling public education and a major co-leader of the city initiative, together with New Jersey Republican Governor Chris Christie.

The recently released book "The Prize: Who's in Charge of America's Schools?" tells the story of the bequest and its failure to deliver on its promises. Dale Russakoff, a former *Washington Post* writer, has received much critical acclaim for her exposure of the mechanics of philanthropic school reform, the roles of Booker and Christie and following the lucrative money trail.

But it must be said that on the fundamental issue of the political and economic nature of the "school reform" movement, Russakoff waffles if not capitulates. Despite her critical approach, she is inconsistent, embracing "good" charters, agreeing with some attacks on teachers' rights, and in general having no answer to the problem of getting more resources to schools and students. Nonetheless, despite its limitations, the book's detailed account of the events of the past five years in Newark reveals much about the bipartisan attack on public education.

The book's importance is in its depiction of the ill-fated nature of this political project—the legacy of the "prize" is the fact that one-third of the city's children now attend charter schools, thousands of students were forced to transfer from their home schools, 1,000 teachers and more than 800 support staff were eliminated, neighborhood schools were destroyed and a system of "school choice" was imposed that determined children's schools with algorithms. These attacks sparked "venomous" public outrage.

Booker's goal—that Newark should become "the charter school capital of the nation"—has not been achieved. That statistical place belongs to New Orleans, with 91 percent in charter schools, followed by Detroit at 55 percent. Newark, with 30 percent charters, now joins many other US cities with a hybrid school system: District of Columbia, Flint, Michigan, Cleveland, Ohio, Gary, Indiana, Kansas City, Missouri, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and so on. It is noteworthy, however, that the Newark initiative made huge inroads and played a big role in the ongoing national drive for privatization of education.

As the WSWs predicted at the time, Zuckerberg's "money will have no

measurable impact on America's crumbling infrastructure." We cautioned, "The latter requires the application of a massive, coordinated social effort, involving the expenditure of trillions of dollars, which will be possible only as the result of radical wealth redistribution and changes in social policy."

On this point, Russakoff's book eloquently demonstrates the relationship between poverty and education in a whole series of statistics. For example, Newark's high school graduation rate in 2010 was 54 percent. Only 12.5 percent of the city's adult population had graduated from college, about one-third the statewide rate. These figures reflect poverty figures: 71 percent of Newark households are headed by a single parent, and 42 percent of children in the city live below the poverty level. Such devastating numbers, now commonplace, follow decades of deindustrialization in the US, savage budget cuts and population loss. Newark's population fell from a high of 442,000 in the 1930 census to 277,000 in 2010.

Seizing on such symptoms of the capitalist crisis, hedge fund billionaires and foundations controlled by figures such as Eli Broad and Bill Gates have lavishly funded the attacks on public education in order to open the \$600 billion "education market" to private, for-profit concerns. This has been a completely bipartisan campaign, backed by the major sections of both Republican and Democratic Parties. The Bush Administration promoted it in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and Obama followed with Race to the Top, enacted in 2009.

The alliance of the Republican Governor Christie and Democratic Mayor Booker was a particular selling point for the reform plan deceptively dubbed "One Newark." As demonstrated in "The Prize," they were anything but an odd couple. The governor was already known as a loudmouthed right-wing demagogue, much in the style of former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Christie had made a name for himself through law-and-order tirades and also his attacks on public employees, teachers in particular.

Booker had a somewhat different style but the same agenda. He endeared himself to the corporate establishment as a smooth-talking and ambitious young African-American politician with a talent for self-promotion. He advertised himself as a black Democrat who was willing to take on the teachers and other sections of the working class. Russakoff reports that Booker himself believes that his national reputation was launched by a speech he gave in 2000 to the right wing Manhattan Institute, in which he referred to the "repugnant" school system.

The enemies of public services and advocates of their wholesale privatization found Booker an attractive messenger for their cause. He joined Democrats for Education Reform, where he hobnobbed with hedge fund managers and advocates of privatization. Russakoff quotes a Democratic operative about this process. "As young finance people, they looked at a guy like Cory at this stage as if they were buying Google at seventy-five dollars a share. They were talking about him being the first black president before he even got elected to the city council, and they all

wanted to be part of that ride...”

Barack Obama got the job of White House front man for the financial oligarchy before Booker, slightly complicating the younger man’s political future. But there was plenty of room for him at the big business trough. He became Newark mayor in 2006, and then moved up to the US Senate in 2013.

Following the initial fanfare over Zuckerberg’s bequest, Booker launched what Russakoff describes as a “community engagement campaign”—the attempt to win local support for charter schools, attacks on teachers, and short-changing the public schools even more than in the past.

This campaign, eventually consuming almost \$2 million of the Zuckerberg donation, went to a firm headed by Bradley Tusk, an indication of the filthy incestuous nature of the “education reform” milieu. Tusk’s resume included managing New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s reelection effort as well as an adviser to the notorious anti-teacher privatizer Michelle Rhee.

“The Prize” explains how a network of consultants worked to redesign Newark’s schools. The consultants “ran communications campaigns...analyzed test scores, taught principals how to train and evaluate teachers, rewrote tenure laws...advised labor negotiations.” For these services “the going rate” was \$1,000 a day. Expenditures for consultants ate up another \$20 million of the total philanthropic outlay of \$200 million projected for the Newark schools. All of this, needless to say, had no direct impact on teaching, class size, computers or other teaching tools.

Russakoff believes the often outrageous details of the Newark “reform” campaign can be traced first and foremost to well-meaning ignorance on the part of those running it. She emphasizes that the campaign was “top-down” and the community was not involved, as the mayor had promised it would be. This is no explanation. It is true that Booker and figures like Cerf were tone deaf to the concerns of parents and teachers, but this was not some grievous “mistake” on their part. It was the inevitable product of a program that targeted the living standards and basic social rights of the working class. The policy dictated the methods, not the other way around.

Russakoff never seriously discusses these issues. While noting the controversies over charters and mandatory school testing, she incredibly credits the good intentions of Booker, Christie and the billionaires who stand behind them. In an interview subsequent to the book publication, Russakoff notes, “I think that charter schools are just an illustration of what that money could be doing if it were spent differently. The problem is, of course, that, you know, you run up into, you know, union protections and civil service protections and political organizations that have a real stake in keeping things the way they are.”

Russakoff’s narrative on school reform is ambivalent, evincing either naive underestimation of the financial interests involved in the charter school movement, or political blinders. Either way, her viewpoint does not serve the reader in understanding the forces at work.

So let us be clear: the charter movement, and “school reform” more broadly, has several interrelated goals. First of all, it is profit—the privatization of education and the creation of business opportunities. “The Prize” provides much proof of this. In Newark, Christopher Cerf, the state education commissioner who was the former president of Edison Schools, one of the first for-profit networks of charter schools, was running the Newark schools under state receivership. After securing the huge growth of the charters under “One Newark,” Cerf left to join Joel Klein (who as New York schools chancellor closed over 90 schools based on test scores) in the education technology business that is part of ultra-right billionaire Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. It should also be noted that much of the \$20 million in consultant fees financed by Zuckerberg went to firms associated with Joel Klein, Teach for America or school systems financed by Race to the Top or venture capitalists.

Secondly, it aims to destroy the gains of teachers and school workers: jobs, tenure, wage standards, pensions and health care, as a major part of the social counterrevolution against the rights of workers nationally. As the book explains, fully half of the Zuckerberg funding was ear-marked for revising contracts to cut wages, implementing merit pay and firing “underperforming” teachers; in the end, this would amount to a staggering \$89.2 million spent on “labor and contract costs.” Clearly the scapegoating and impoverishing of teachers was a far higher priority than putting resources into the public schools!

Finally, “school reform” seeks to exacerbate the trend towards an ever more class-based system of education. To the extent that it holds out the promise of any educational improvement, it is only for a very small minority. The emphasis on school choice is designed to appeal to a small fraction of parents, who are told that the future of their children lies in successfully competing for a limited number of spots in improved schools, at the expense of the majority of students left behind. The public schools face additional drains on their resources, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of failing urban schools in need of “rescue” by charters.

The grooming of the small minority of parents is bound up as well with the development of a political base among a layer with petty bourgeois aspirations. It is a new variety of “affirmative action,” in this case cynically using the needs of schoolchildren in order to drive a wedge, not only between black and white workers, but among African-American workers as well. Those who “prove themselves,” who navigate the difficult system to obtain a coveted spot in a charter school, are the latest incarnation of the “deserving poor.” The majority are “undeserving,” and are left to their fate.

The attacks on public education have, in general, met growing resistance among teachers, parents and other working people. In Newark it did not take long for opposition to surface. Russakoff reports on an advisory school board meeting early in 2011 at which officials were stunned when they saw that “more than 600 parents and activists had converged, raging against what one after another saw as an obvious conspiracy of rich outsiders to make a killing off the Newark schools.”

But Russakoff later equates the deeply felt anger of workers struggling to defend their living standards and win a future for their children with the cynical calculations of Democratic Party politicians like current Newark Mayor Ras Baraka and union executives like Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. She writes: “...education reform inevitably involve[s] a prizefight between two powerful forces in America [sic] politics: muscular and monied teachers’ unions with old-guard political patrons on one side and, on the other, an ascendant alliance of recently elected officials backed by education reform financiers.” Such false identities lead to nothing but hopelessness, demoralization and prostration before the powers that be.

The incorporation into the narrative of the stories of several teachers and students, including some who have their hopes set on “reform” and are disappointed, only reveals even more sharply the gulf between the working class and the upper middle class elements who seek to direct its anger into the safe channels of Democratic Party politics.

As far as the union, the AFT, like its counterparts everywhere, only wants “a seat at the table.” It is eager to demonstrate that the various attacks on teachers and on public education can best be implemented with the help of the union itself.

Several passages in the book illustrate this point. “[Christopher] Cerf and Weingarten had developed a cordial relationship when he was Klein’s deputy in New York and she was president of the city’s AFT local,” Russakoff writes. Weingarten viewed this longtime backer of charter and for-profit schools as an “honest broker.”

The author uses similar language to describe the Christie-Weingarten relationship. Russakoff writes of a “chance encounter” between them at a ceremony on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, a meeting “that

made [Weingarten] think perhaps they could do business.”

The Newark Teachers Union, the AFT local, agreed to a contract in 2012 that included drastic concessions. Local president Joe Del Grosso, “with Weingarten’s blessing, agreed to Cerf and Anderson’s demand that [Newark teachers] no longer would get pay raises unless they were rated effective or better under a new and much more rigorous evaluation system.” The union also agreed for the first time to the use of merit pay, driving a further wedge among teachers and accepting the premise that they were henceforth to be held responsible for the social conditions created by decaying capitalism.

As Russakoff explains, the concessions contract only passed because the original ratification vote was canceled by Hurricane Sandy and then rescheduled two weeks later, when large numbers of teachers were facing thousands of dollars in storm-related losses.

Five years after Zuckerberg’s bequest was announced, almost all of the money has been spent, with no improvement in Newark’s schools. Despite the intense opposition to the expansion of charters at the expense of the public schools, almost 30 percent of the \$100 million total went toward the growth of charters, which now enroll more than one-third of Newark’s schoolchildren.

Russakoff is aware that poverty and the crisis of urban education are inextricably connected. But what flows from that conclusion? Fifty years after the War on Poverty of the 1960s, inequality reaches new extremes with every passing year. It is impossible to fight poverty, much less eliminate it, without fighting capitalism. The basic right to a free quality education can only be secured as part of a socialist program, and this requires a break from the big business Democratic Party and its trade union allies.



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