

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

Dale Russakoff

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On September 24, 2010, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg went on the *The Oprah Winfrey Show* with New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and Newark Mayor Cory Booker. There, Zuckerberg announced that he was pledging \$100 million dollars toward the public school system in Newark, NJ. Zuckerberg, Christie, and Booker's collective aim was to bring public school teachers' contracts more in line with typical private sector contracts in order to incentivize good performance and penalize bad performance.

Five years later, the Newark school system had little to show for Zuckerberg's (and other venture philanthropists') donations. The number of charters did expand, but any moderate success they achieved was offset by a diminution of quality in the public schools. Public school teachers' contracts went through minor changes by way of some increased accountability measures, but their structure (and bloat) remained largely intact. Cory Booker left for the U.S. Senate, replaced as mayor by Ras Baraka, who won largely due to his opposition to Booker's educational plan. Chris Christie lost interest and turned his attention toward the U.S. presidency. Zuckerberg moved on to other philanthropic pursuits.

Dale Russakoff tells the story of what happened between the Oprah announcement and late 2014 in her book *The Prize*. "The prize" refers to a name that, according to Russakoff, "numerous politicians had actually taken to calling the district budget," which was built "around unions and large public bureaucracies [that reformers like Zuckerberg believed] were themselves an obstacle to learning." Make positive change in Newark, the idea was, and you can prove that positive change can happen anywhere. Zuckerberg and others were moved by the idea that, to see the kind of dynamic results his own company and those like it achieved, the school system had to allow for innovative schools—charters—that were largely free to operate the way they saw fit, and that teacher contracts had to be written in a way that would attract talented teachers and dissuade bad teachers. But, as *The Prize* demonstrates, Zuckerberg and other reformers may have overestimated how amenable the public education system would be to their desired reforms.

The story focuses primarily on Christie and Booker's attempts (as partly funded by Zuckerberg and other venture philanthropists) to bring charter schools into Newark. In 2011, Chris Christie brought in Christopher Cerf as New Jersey's education commissioner with a plan to "drastically reduce the size of the centralized school district and create a 'portfolio' of schools." Cory Booker also appointed Cami Anderson as the superintendent of Newark Public Schools in order to bring stronger accountability measures to the public schools. A significant part of Russakoff's account involves the conflicts of interest that emerged between Cerf and Anderson, where Cerf's expansion of more charters in Newark generally necessitated consolidations and closings of public schools. While Russakoff acknowledges that charters tended to outperform public schools, the zero-sum nature of the battle for resources between charter and public schools strengthened the anti-charter sentiment among many Newark residents. As Russakoff puts it, "Charters were under the control of Cerf, not Anderson. They drew from the same student population as the school districts, but the state alone decided whether and how much they would expand and whether to close those that performed poorly. The local superintendent's only role was to react." Charters and (traditional) public schools became engaged in a zero-sum struggle over "the prize," igniting political tensions between entrenched special interests on both sides.

Another focus of Russakoff's story is the reformers' desire to revamp the existing structure of public school teachers' contracts. When Zuckerberg gave \$100 million dollars to the Newark schools, he wanted much of that money to go toward reorganizing teacher contracts to more closely resemble contracts in the private sector, with things like generous merit bonuses to high achieving teachers and promotions based on something other than seniority and educational attainment. This meant often-tense negotiations with the powerful Newark Teachers Union. With a good amount of Zuckerberg's donation paying for those merit bonuses and retroactive raises for teachers, the resulting changes in teachers' contracts were marginal. The union agreed to some of the changes, "but the fine print in the contracts revealed that many of the more costly perks remained securely in place, such as fifteen paid sick days and three personal days" per teacher per academic year. Despite the money spent in this area, political inertia limited the amount of change even Zuckerberg's money could affect.

Russakoff does an admirable job refraining from editorializing, especially in an area as politicized as education reform. She doesn't appear to have a particular dog in the fight other than to tell a story about a particularly large and intricate reform effort. But it is probably unavoidable that she couches her story in some sort of interpretive framework. In her book, Russakoff profiles two sets of reformers: one, the Zuckerberg camp, which sought to create a more flexible education system with some modicum of choice, and the other (like future Newark mayor Ras Baraka), which wanted to change the public school system in ways that worked within the existing structure of public schools. Russakoff suggests that these reformers “shared the same end goal—to reverse the damaging tide of poverty that robbed the poorest children of their potential. The big difference lay in where they started: from the top down or the bottom up.”

There is some truth to this depiction, but it is also a bit misleading. Christie, Booker, and Zuckerberg's plan was “top down” in the sense that decisions were made largely politically about which charters would operate and where, with little effort to get input from the localities that would be affected. The other set of reformers, including Cory Booker's ultimate successor, Ras Baraka, did seek to bring some control of the public schools to a more local level; for instance, by allowing schools to determine how their budgets would be allocated and the ability to hire the teachers they (rather than the district office) chose.

Yet, Russakoff's depiction of the battle between top-down and bottom-up reformers has its limits. True, decisions about which charters would operate and where is ultimately a political decision, but charters are also an attempt at decentralization in that charter schools are afforded the kind of latitude to make their own decisions (about such things as hiring and instructional approach) that public schools are not. Conversely, those reformers working within the public school system may have the goal of restoring more decisions to the local level, but doing so means working within a very centralized decision-making system.

It is my hope that classically liberal and libertarian readers come away with an appreciation of just how limited charter schools are as any kind of market-based reform; decisions from who will be granted charters to where charters will operate to when a charter will be revoked are all firmly political decisions. Charters may be a way to

allow some flexibility within a public school system, but, as *The Prize* demonstrates, charters are quite dependent on politics, and this may affect both how they are perceived in the communities they serve and how effective they can truly be.

Whatever its very mild limitations, *The Prize* is a fascinating and informative account of the political machinations of education reform. The attempt to remake the Newark, New Jersey, public school system provides an excellent case study of how and why educational reform efforts often fail.

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Disinherited: How Washington Is Betraying America's Young

Diana Furchtgott-Roth and Jared Meyer

New York: Encounter, 2015, 130 pp.

Diana Furchtgott-Roth and Jared Meyer have written a concise book that is important for both the young and old. *Disinherited: How Washington is Betraying America's Young* is a clear and effective case for an end to Washington's harmful policies holding back America's youth. The authors pleasingly weave rational, empirical evidence with the first-hand testimonies of a number of American youths whose lives have been negatively affected by Washington's failed policies. This blend of cold, hard facts and eye-opening personal accounts makes for an enlightening and well-grounded read.

As a former chief economist at the U.S. Department of Labor, Furchtgott-Roth naturally has a firm command of the facts and statistics. I recently saw Meyer speak on a panel at the American Action Forum, and he likewise impressed me with his command of the material. Furchtgott-Roth and Meyer tackle the issues that inhibit the young from achieving their full potential, including health care, primary and secondary schooling, college debt, occupational licensing, and the minimum wage.

The authors first address the problem of the young paying for the services of the old through entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare. The authors point out that "Social Security and Medicare account for 40 percent of federal spending in 2014 and that young people and their employers continue to pay a combined