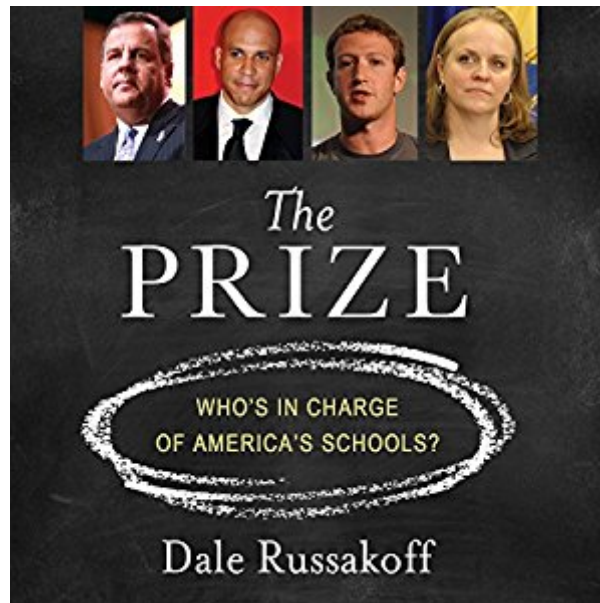




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The Prize: Who's In Charge Of America's Schools?



Synopsis

When Mark Zuckerberg announced in front of a cheering Oprah audience his \$100 million pledge to transform the Newark Schools - and to solve the education crisis in every city in America - it looked like a huge win for then-mayor Cory Booker and governor Chris Christie. But their plans soon ran into a constituency not so easily moved - Newark's key education players, fiercely protective of their billion-dollar-per-annum system. It's a prize that, for generations, has enriched seemingly everyone, except Newark's students. Expert journalist Dale Russakoff delivers a story of high ideals and hubris, good intentions and greed, celebrity and street smarts - as reformers face off against entrenched unions, skeptical parents, and bewildered students.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“The Prize” is control of the Newark School system with its one billion dollar budget and all the political patronage jobs and contracts that it implies. It is also the story of the attempt to reform an awful school system that has destroyed the promise of the future for thousands of poor children. American schools have now been in a state of “crisis” since 1983’s report entitled “A Nation at Risk”. Both political parties are divided on this issue: Republicans wanting charter schools and choice, yet opposing national standards; Democrats although wanting a better educational system for the poor, being unable to face-off against the unions and the loss of urban political patronage. This is an extremely well-written work that pulls no punches on the difficulty of reform. It is also the story of the attempts of Corey Booker (first mayor of Newark in 44 years not to

be indicted!), Governor Christie who technically ran the Newark school system, and wealthy philanthropists from Wall Street and Silicone Valley to change the system. In their attempts to accomplish this they ran into two incredibly powerful bodies: the teacher's union and the local system of political patronage; where the school system with its enormous budget was not only the largest employer, but also the employer of last resort. These two groups knew they could win by simply outlasting the outsiders; they would take the money, and then ignore, obstruct, and delay. They seem to have won this game, as the reformers eventually gave up and left.

Portions of this book were serialized in The New Yorker. It is, nevertheless, valuable to have the book as a book. The book should be of interest to people who want to arrive at a better understanding of what is at stake in the debates between those who want to fix problems in the schools, especially in poor urban areas like Newark, by cutting funding to 'failing' public schools (or closing them outright) and allocating (taxes and) resources to charter schools, and those who think that remedies that will actually work to improve educational outcomes and the well-being of students in distressed inner city districts need to be location-specific, and bottom up rather than top down. The debates are often rancorous, always political, heavily ideological, and generally not well-informed. The author's focus (and touchstone) is Newark, N.J., and her starting point is the 2010 pact between Cory Booker and Chris Christie, "Newark Schools--A Reform Plan," which called for imposing reform from the top down, and did not involve consultation with or input from those who actually taught in the Newark schools, or the parents of the students who went to them. One of Booker's and Christie's explicit objectives was to "make Newark the charter school capital of the nation." Russakoff contrasts this approach with the bottom up approach of the BRICK (Building Responsible, Intelligent, Creative Kids) team of Newark teachers and principals who "resolved to work in district schools" because (among other things) "they were convinced that charters didn't serve children from the most struggling families with the greatest learning needs," the very kind of children in their classrooms in Newark.

This is a sad cautionary tale about what happens when a billionaire, two ambitious and powerful politicians, a gaggle of consultants, and a self-serving teachers union decide to "fix" a large public school system. It turns out that a lot happens, but none of it is good for the kids. In 2010, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg decided to give \$100 million to the Newark, NJ, schools. He did so at the behest of then-mayor, now US senator Cory Booker and governor Chris Christie. During the announcement on the Oprah show, they explained that they intended to completely reform

Newark's failing schools and in the process create a reform model that could be employed nationwide. As they say, the devil is in the details, and the details were kept secret from everyone else, including the teachers and parents, until the last possible moment. The most important detail was that they intended Newark to become the primary showcase for charter schools in the nation, and that would happen at the expense of the neighborhood public schools. The book details what went wrong, and it's a long list. Most importantly, Christie and Booker were on the make; they were much more interested in their political futures than they were in the well being of the school kids. In addition, Zuckerberg assumed that having lots of money somehow gave him expertise in a field he knew absolutely nothing about. Finally, everyone involved in the project, most especially the teachers' union and a horde of educational consultants began thrashing around, desperate to get their hands on the prize referred to in the book's title, the \$1 billion Newark school budget and the \$100 million grant. In the end, the project failed.

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