

March 2016

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Recommended Citation

Pulley, T., & Jackson, M. (2017). Book Review: The Prize: Who's in Charge of America's Schools? By Dale Russakoff. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 15 (1). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.15.1.12>

Book Review

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

By Dale Russakoff

Reviewed by Tifanie Pulley & Melinda Jackson

Dale Russakoff's *The Prize: Who's In Charge of America's Schools?* is nothing short of a sensational journalistic lens to America's education system in keeping with her more than 28 years of experience as a reporter at the *Washington Post*. Russakoff's stake in this timely piece is owed to her work as a journalist and the public policy developments surrounding a troubled and failing Newark Public School system. While recognizing the author's ability to keep the reader engaged with provocative chapter titles and thick descriptions of the major players within the Newark Public Schools, this book provides a very salient description of America's commodification of education. Russakoff does a phenomenal job in unmasking the Education Reform Industry (ERI) as she invites the readers to see what happens when Republican Governor Chris Christie and Democratic mayor Corey Booker make a *pact* for the "Reform Plan" of Newark's Public Schools.

Central to this entire work is the omnipresence of the state's power. Despite a billion dollar bounty controlled by the state to operate Newark's schools, troubles with failing test scores, violence, dilapidated building structures, ineffective teachers, corrupt school board members persisted. Clearly, the explicit nature of Newark's problems rests within monetary gain as "the problem of education" is framed as the lack of students' ability to perform. Arguably, the lack of performance conceals the exploitation of the urban poor. Remove all things equal to value and create the inverse effect of social, cultural, human, and economic capital. Newark Public Schools represented "all things reform" according to Ivy League educated Newark mayor Corey Booker. The author provides a consistent ebb and flow of one of the most elusive school reform plans to hit a national stage infused with more than \$200 million dollars' worth of philanthropic support.

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Russakoff spends an extensive amount of time throughout the entire book identifying the who's who of philanthropic support linked to school reform. Chapter 2: "Seduction in Sun Valley" gives us the entrée of this commitment as the author places her audience at the scene of a ritual mixing at Sun Valley Resort. At the ritual, Booker had his attention set on twenty-six-year-old Mark Zuckerberg to fund his and Christie's strategy to reform Newark schools. Russakoff offers a close-up view of Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, as they decide to fund the \$100 million dollar pledge with hopes of making teaching in urban schools one of the most important jobs in America. Whether a scholar is reading this story or someone with a general interest in public policy and education, Russakoff's strength is in constantly questioning, "Is the aim for the children or a well thought out plan for a young mayor to catapult himself to the forefront at the expense of the poorest and most underserved children in Newark?" Furthermore, the behind the scenes power plays "overshadow" the message of truly saving the kids. Money, reform, who's in leadership, who will be the next big thing in "education reform" are the prescriptive for serious ideological and pedagogical strategies of how to better serve America's poor, notwithstanding the Newark Public Schools debacle.

Another important strength of the book is its ability to place the reader with contrasting ideas or a different perspective to the normal shared narrative. Chapter 3: "The View from Avon Avenue" is the reverse of the big business and pleasure demonstrated at Sun Valley. Russakoff's takes the readers to the site of Avon Avenue, which is one of the worst schools in Newark's poorest neighborhoods. An important feature of Russakoff's work is her use of the testimonies of the protagonists, of the teachers, children, and parents, principals, from district and charter schools, which turns the narration of education reform into a vivid description of facts. The contrast that is demonstrated throughout these narratives further strengthens the need to have a conversation that bridges the gap between top-down and bottom-up resolutions to failing schools; overhaul, tear them down, close them, and start new ones, is not the answer.

The book does suffer from some weakness. It focuses on the top-down structures, almost to the exclusion of the strength of those from the bottom-up. On the one hand, the author does identify prominent leaders of color, women, and community activists, but always preceded with their lineage of education and family background in contrast to their perceived opponents on the side of the Christie, Booker, and Zuckerberg reform plan. On a more practical note, the presence of one chapter dedicated to one case study to illustrate the power of teaching and support of a chronically failing student is a major omission. Statistics followed in the end, but no resolution emerged amidst all the infusion of philanthropic support. The author leaves the reader with a narrative of a fragmented school district filled with hybrid schools clearly delineated by economic, social, cultural, and human capital. The children remain in the balance as education is commodified within a free-market system.