

ICYMI: "Academic Improvement, Higher Standards For Students And Educators, Parent Empowerment Through School Choice Signal Hard-Won Cohesion For A Fractured District In A Fragmented State" - Laura Waters

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The Four Factors Behind Newark's Education Turnaround

Academic improvement, higher standards for students and educators, parent empowerment through school choice signal hard-won cohesion for a fractured district in a fragmented state

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NJ Spotlight

New Jersey is a fragmented and complicated state, splintered into 565 municipalities and even more school districts. Newark is its microcosm, a byzantine culture of powerful ward bosses who control every aspect of governance, including its school system. Although I've been writing about education in New Jersey for a decade, it wasn't until a few years ago that I started to understand Newark.

Given its history, the turnaround in New Jersey's largest district is nothing short of remarkable. After 22 years of state control with little change in student achievement — the school board is in the process of regaining complete governance — all of a sudden Newark Public Schools is boasting about its students' test scores and graduating seniors' college admissions.

This from a school system that the state described in 1993 as "flagrantly delinquent and at worst deceptive" in its mission of serving children; where one out of every two Newark students didn't graduate from high school and average SAT scores were 311 in verbal and 363 in math; a district that civil rights leader Robert Curvin described as "shortchang[ing] the overwhelming majority of children who enter its classrooms."

What happened?

It wasn't the still-operative culture of nepotistic ward bosses. It wasn't more money: the annual total cost per pupil here has long been high, as much as \$25,000 per pupil, although Mark Zuckerberg's \$100 million donation (matched with another \$100 million raised by then-mayor-now-U.S. Senator Cory Booker) invigorated reform efforts and empowered charter school parents. As an incurable data nerd, I understand the lure of relying on data to understand just about anything, but the fact is that the causes for the turnaround of Newark Public Schools won't be found on any spreadsheet.

So here's my take on four ways that Newark turned its schools around.

Hire educational leaders unafraid to buck the system

I'm referring, of course, to Cami Anderson. The state appointed her in June 2011, and by September she had replaced 17 principals, cut 120 central office positions, and closed six schools. One of her most important accomplishments was starting Newark's universal enrollment system, "Newark Enrolls," which allows families to rank public school choices in order of preference, including most of the city's popular charter-school sector. This collaborative approach has reduced the pro-charter/anti-charter tug-of-war that seizes many urban districts. It also has empowered parents who in times past had been afraid to voice their dissatisfaction with Newark's traditional educational offerings.

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Oh, it wasn't all sunshine and roses. Then-candidate-now-mayor Ras Baraka won his campaign by turning the election into a referendum on Anderson's personality. Teacher union leaders were irate and demanded her resignation. School board meetings, which Anderson started boycotting, were gladiatorial; the board gave her a vote of "no-confidence." In 2015 Anderson left and the state replaced her with its former Education Commissioner Chris Cerf, who deftly smoothed ruffled feathers while strengthening Anderson's reforms and adding some of his own. Very much like Michelle Rhee-Kaya Henderson in Washington, D.C. Hire a change-agent to serve as a lightning rod for pushback, then follow up with a unifier to buttress reforms and focus unyieldingly on student growth.

Strengthen teacher effectiveness

Uncompromising as Anderson was, she used diplomacy to win important changes to teacher evaluations. With support from the AFT's Randi Weingarten, she managed to allay teacher union leaders' fears and come to terms on an innovative contract that enables the district to retain 95 percent of effective teachers (partially through generous merit bonuses) and usher less effective ones out. It's worth noting that, of Zuckerberg's \$100 million, almost \$50 million went to teachers, both to settle up on retroactive pay and to award those bonuses.

Raise standards and expectations

Newark was an early-adopter of the Common Core and, unlike their richer suburban neighbors, parents adapted quickly to new aligned state tests called PARCC. I spend a lot of time talking to parents and am often struck by the lack of the "Honesty Gap" in Newark. In suburban communities it can be sacrilege to confess misgivings about student growth and achievement. But there's no pretense in Newark. Parents, many of whom graduated from Newark schools themselves, accept the need for change; if different ways of doing math and more rigorous annual tests move the needle, they're all in.

"I understand that sometimes testing is too much, I get all that. But we need to raise the bar," said Newark father Charles Love. "When I see PARCC, I see it as something that can level the playing field, that can give brown and black kids an opportunity to become a part of the American dream."

Embrace school choice

The city's charter-school sector, dominated by the high-performing KIPP and Uncommon networks, currently enrolls 34 percent of Newark's 50,000 students, with 12,000 on wait lists. During Newark Enrolls cycles, 50 percent of parents typically list charters as their first choice. No wonder. Stanford's CREDO reported that "on average, students in New Jersey charter schools learned significantly more than their virtual counterparts in reading and mathematics." Research conducted by the Center for Reinventing Public Education shows that among 50 cities studied, only eight percent of public schools "beat the odds," but in Newark that figure soared to 40 percent, solely due to the educational advantages afforded to charter-school students.

Another form of school choice is just as popular: Newark magnet schools. Unlike charters, Newark's magnets have restrictive admissions requirements, yet they enroll 37 percent of Newark students. This diversified landscape — magnets, traditionals, charters — encourages innovation and, at long last, the beginnings of collaboration: a new report from the New Jersey Charter School Association profiles Uncommon's North Star Academy, which, with a nudge from Superintendent Cerf, opened its professional development sessions to district teachers.

Here in Newark, school choice also promotes student achievement. (Warning: nerdiness ahead.) Newark's 2016-2017 PARCC scores reveal that proficiency rates have gone up significantly over the past five years, outpacing 37 other New Jersey districts with similar socio-demographics. Within this group, Newark rose from the 42nd percentile to the 83rd in math and from the 44th percentile to the 81st in English Language Arts. When the state first took over Newark in 1995, only 54 percent of high school students graduated; this year the graduation rate was 77 percent. Projections are that it will rise again this spring.

This good news — academic improvement after a century of failure, higher standards for students and educators, parent empowerment through public school choice — signals hard-won cohesion for a fractured district in a fragmented state. Can Newark continue the trend? All of us who closely follow this city are hopeful, of course, but much rides on the ability of the school board and other elected leaders to resist the pull of the past and preserve this new, child-centered culture of achievement that is driving Newark's reforms.

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