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# Guest Commentary: 'The Prize' is a cautionary tale we might learn from in working to improve Louisville's public schools

By **GUEST AUTHOR** | May 20, 2016 9:00 am

By **David Jones Jr. | JCPS Board Chairman**

Over the past year or so I've found time to read some thoughtful, provocative books about education amidst the daily flood of news and real-time journalism. Several of these influenced my thinking about Louisville's public schools, but Dale Russakoff's "**The Prize: Who's in Charge of America's Schools?**" (2015) was my best, most thought-provoking read of 2015.



David Jones Jr.

"The Prize" tells the story of the attempt, beginning in 2010, to transform the school system of Newark, New Jersey, fueled by a \$100 million grant from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and the political muscle of then-rock star Newark Mayor Cory Booker and

outspoken New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie. Longtime Washington Post education reporter Dale Russakoff is an able guide through this contentious maze.

If ever a school system needed fresh eyes and outside help it was Newark. Student demographics reflected the deeply impoverished city, where only 12.5 percent of adults had college degrees (compared to Louisville's current 42 percent). New Jersey is one of America's wealthiest states, but 88 percent of Newark's students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (compared to 64 percent of JCPS students). Newark's high school graduation rate was 54 percent (vs. JCPS's current 79 percent), and of graduates who went on to the local community college, more than 90 percent required remedial classes (vs. our 49.5 percent). New Jersey, like Kentucky, has a mostly white population, but only 5 percent of Newark's students were white; in Jefferson County, the nation's shift to "majority minority" population is reflected in our public schools' roughly equal white and nonwhite student populations.

And none of Newark's problems were new. The state had seized control of Newark's schools in 1995 from the local political structure after finding that "the longer children remain in the Newark public schools, the less likely they are to succeed academically." But after 15 years of state management, less than 40 percent of third through eighth graders were reading or doing math at grade level.

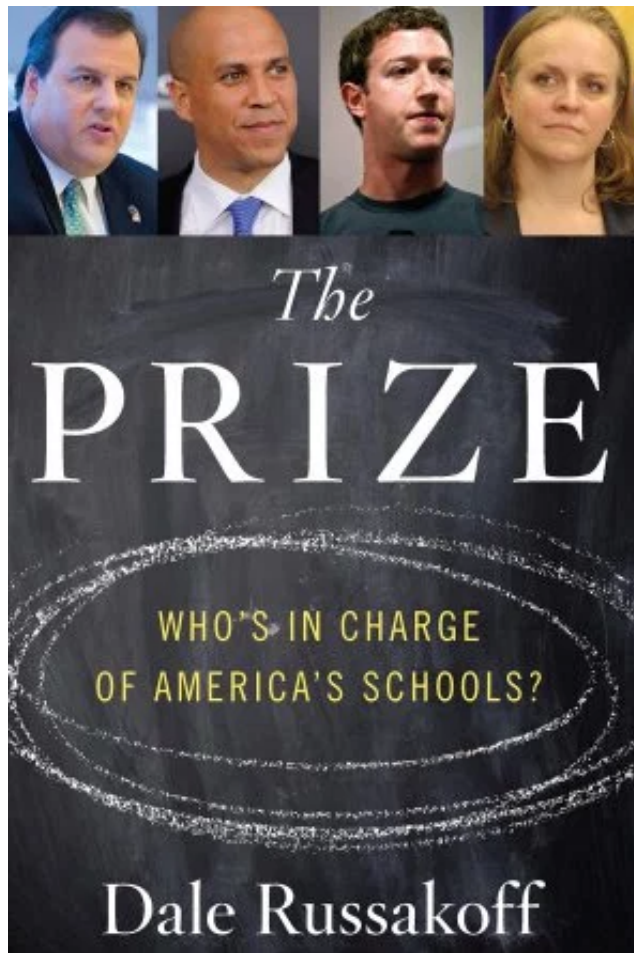
So the reformers picked a worthy target – but the punchline of Russakoff's story is that neither money nor political clout led to improvement. Most of Zuckerberg's gift, along with another \$100 million of matching funds from other wealthy individuals and foundations, was spent without lasting impact. Mistrust between the mostly white, all economically prospering, globally networked donors, consultants and education administrators, and the deeply impoverished, isolated community of Newark, ran high and became explosive.

Eventually the politicians moved on to other projects or distractions – in Booker’s case, the U.S. Senate, and in Christie’s, the bridge scandal and his recently ended campaign for president. Zuckerberg seems to have learned lessons as a young philanthropist that may make future grants more effective, but one of these lessons was not to pour more money into Newark.

How did things go so wrong? The short answer is politics. There was a huge clash over system direction between well-meaning but non-local reformers, locals whose livelihood or prestige depended on the status quo, activists with a range of interests far beyond student learning, and school system executives. This clash made coherent execution of new plans impossible. For example, Superintendent Cami Anderson was recruited to use the new resources to drive change and improvement. She hit the accelerator hard – and was then hobbled from all sides for doing things differently, too fast, and without including the status quo defenders in her planning.

“The Prize” is a cautionary tale – one we might learn from as we work to improve our public schools here in Louisville. At the most basic level, a city’s economic and social collapse comes to school with its students. As Louisvillians, we have to keep our city vibrant for our schools and our children to have a chance – obviously a circular thought, since vibrant schools are a key to any economy.

But we also have to keep our eye on *the real prize*: our students, in whose young hearts and minds all future value lies. In Newark, the



“Prize” from which Russakoff took her title was the term state and local politicians used to refer to the value of Newark’s school system in political plunder: patronage, juicy contracts (New Jersey today spends almost twice as much per student as Kentucky), and community prestige. Less dramatically, in a city with a moribund economy, jobs in the school system could not be easily replaced and were clung to tenaciously.

My main takeaways from “The Prize” are, first, that in a collapsed city where schools served as lifeboats for more adults than they could hold, no one knew how to turn them into engines to propel poor children to better lives without endangering adult welfare. So the adults cancelled each other out, and the donors, reformers and upwardly mobile politicians gave up and moved on. My second learning is more obvious: Money matters but doesn’t solve problems on its own.

And perhaps another lesson for Louisville is that four years wasn’t enough time; that schools move more at the pace of children’s development; and that all of us have to keep our shoulders to the wheel, pushing our children forward even as we squabble and bicker over the details of how to improve the vehicle.

If you’re passionate about improving Louisville’s schools, read “**The Prize**.”

**About the Author:** *David A. Jones Jr. is chairman of the Jefferson County Board of Education. This article was adapted from a series of education focused book reviews currently being published on his blog:*

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**Disclosure:** *The author also is an investor in Insider Louisville.*

