

Attempted Neo-Colonialism by PowerPoint: Black Communities vs. Education Reform

guest editorial

by

Todd Steven Burroughs
toddpantner@gmail.com

Todd Steven Burroughs, an independent researcher and writer based in Newark, N.J., is the author of *Son-Shine on Cracked Sidewalks*, an audiobook on Amiri Baraka and Ras Baraka through the eyes of the 2014 Newark mayoral campaign. He is the co-editor, along with Jared Ball of *A Lie of Reinvention: Correcting Manning Marable's Malcolm X* and the co-author, with Herb Boyd of *Civil Rights: Yesterday & Today*.

The city of Newark, N.J., an old, struggling-against-decay, never-recovered-from-the-1967-rebellion ghetto that celebrates its 350th anniversary next year, is involved in a fight familiar to Black populations in Washington, D.C., Milwaukee and elsewhere. It goes like this: the corporate Powers That Be—defined in this case, the New York-based, greatly financed education reform movement—decide to experiment with Black and Brown communities. In 2015, the term “education reform” had come to mean turning a failing public school district into a privatized, charter school district. City officials sign on to the idea, and, if the reformer’s fight is successful, longtime Black educators—often members of a generation that began teaching during and/or after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, those finally in positions of relative power over their children’s education—get fired and try to fight back.

The nation’s capital played the story out live and in color in 2007. Back then, D.C.’s neo-liberal young Black mayor, Adrian Fenty, hired and empowered an outsider school commissioner named Michelle Rhee. Her mission? Slice through the red tape of community control and recreate the public school system in time for the new, gentrified District of Columbia. Unfortunately for Rhee and Fenty, significant blood was drawn from the city’s Black community. Rhee openly and unapologetically treated a significant part of D.C.’s longtime, established Black middle-class as second-class professionals under a microscope. So the community responded with voting Fenty out in 2010. Rhee, now nationally famous for the damage done, left D.C. shortly after.

While Rhee's political support was being cut from under her in the District of Columbia, education reform's next battle moved up highway I-95. It started in 2009 with Cory Booker—Newark's neo-liberal mayor, a contemporary of Fenty in age and ambition—and Chris Christie, the conservative governor of New Jersey. The duo secretly decided all by themselves in the backseat of a Chevy Tahoe that they alone would implement education reform in the city, whether it wants it or not. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, developed a political man-crush on Booker and signed on by 2011, pledging \$100 million (to be matched by other donors) to make New Jersey's largest city into a successful charter-school haven in five years, staffed by six-figure, non-unionized teachers and populated by test-passing students. Like the benevolent colonizers of old, all believed they would go in with good intentions: self-government by the dark, poor people has not worked in the internal colony, the reasoning went, or the state would not have taken over the school district back in 1995. The teacher's unions are stopping progress, the reformers argued to themselves, by making sure they tie the hand of local politicians and school board members. So, they privately reasoned, the only way to change the system is to overthrow it—to go past all the community obstacles. So with unaccountable foundation money, the reformers hired \$1,000-a-day consultants and got to work.

Playing the role of Michelle Rhee in Newark was Cami Anderson, a white woman of hippie background who was named the school's superintendent by Christie and Booker. Using the Rhee model, Anderson then sets out, from the community perspectives, to close as many schools and alienate every teacher and parent she can. Meanwhile and not coincidentally, charter schools, some rising out of the closed public ones, begin flourishing in the city, providing resources and specialized attention to small, selected groups of poor Black and Brown children the always-struggling public schools can't match. And the people of Newark could only protest, because they didn't have the power and influence to recall Christie and Booker before the philanthropic damage was done.

The story of this neo-colonial plan, and the city's rebellion against it, is told in the new book, *The Prize: Who's in Charge of America's Schools?* by Dale Russakoff (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 240 pp., ISBN-10: 0547840055). The book is the first full-length narrative on the topic of education reform in Newark. It premiered at No. 12 on *The York Times* best-seller list because it has all the ingredients of a powerful, painful, political yarn. Russakoff, a longtime *Washington Post* journalist and resident of Montclair, a middle class suburb of Newark, embedded herself with Christie, Booker and Anderson as she sat in on more than 100 school-related community meetings (there it was again: disrespect).

The word rose from conversations all over the auditorium” (178)), and the reporting not only shows, but shines. Her spectacular juggling act blames everybody but those whose demonstrated first commitment is to the students. In her telling, nearly everyone involved received something and/or learned something but the city’s least-of-these. She makes a clear observation that needs to be on T-shirts in the city: “For four years, the reformers never really tried to have a conversation with the people of Newark. Their target audience was always somewhere else, beyond the people whose children and grandchildren desperately needed to learn, and compete for a future” (209-210).

The book’s author carefully crafted work clearly documents that white supremacy’s psychotic historical urge to covertly or overtly experiment with the lives of poor Black people—whether medically, socially, economically or, in the case, educationally—is not some obscure 19th or 20th century Africana Studies classroom topic, but as current as the next awarded education grant. African-Americans used to be classified as sub-human, because of their three-fifth status under the U.S. Constitution. Then, after the Civil War, they became second-class citizens, because they didn’t have the right to vote or use public accommodations. In this updated 21st century form of pseudo-democracy, poor Black and Brown communities like Newark are filled with *sub-citizens*: those who have no input on their future, no matter how much taxes they pay and how often they vote. Christie and [especially] Booker should be ashamed of their public actions here, but who could, or would, succeed in shaming them that they would actually respect?

Russakoff documents in qualitative non-fiction narrative fashion how everyone in Newark flexed what political muscle they had. The teacher’s unions demanded their back pay as a condition to their negotiations with Booker and Anderson over being able to fire bad teachers and financially reward good ones, and got it. The money people got their calls answered from Booker, the celebrity mayor, who eventually used his Captain America persona to get elected to the U.S. Senate in 2013. Newark students organized and protested Anderson, with more than a little help from a well-known local name: Ras Baraka, a high-school principal and city councilman (and one of the sons of poet-activists Amiri and Amina Baraka). He seized the issue that got him elected mayor in 2014, defeating Newark school board president Shavar Jeffries, a Theo Huxtable-type candidate propped up by the education reform movement. “The festering resistance to Anderson, the backlash against [the top-down reforms], and the first mayoral campaign of the post-Booker era became one and the same” (206). (Postscript: In September 2015, as “The Prize” hit bookstores, Jeffries announced he was appointed president of Democrats for Education Reform, becoming one of the few African-Americans to lead an education reform organization.)

The Newark street protests grew so large and consistent that Christie—days away from announcing his Republican presidential nomination run this past summer—made a deal with newly-elected Mayor Baraka that, at this September 2015 writing, he may transfer city education power back to the people a year from now. A bewildered Anderson was sent packing, replaced, amazingly, by Christopher Cerf, a former state education commissioner who was one of the chief architects of the Christie-Booker-Zuckerberg neo-colonial plan! Whether the new school district superintendent cleans up his own mess, and whether Baraka and the citizens of Newark celebrate a victory a year from now, is this story's next chapter, to be written by today's journalists and tomorrow's historians.