

# Newark's Fight for Local School Control



By Rebecca Nathanson

**O**n a sunny Wednesday morning at the start of the 2014-2015 school year, seven teenagers sat cross-legged in a line across Broad Street in Newark, New Jersey. PVC pipes locked them to one another, forcing the police to close the road for about eight hours. Behind them stood a crowd of their peers; in front of them, a series of banners.

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The teenagers were members of the Newark Student Union, a high school student union formed in 2012, and the banners illustrated their protest's goals. A small one said, "Cami Must Go," a reference to then-district Superintendent Cami Anderson. A much larger one read, "Full Local Control," with the word "Full" in bright red letters.

At the time, the students' demands seemed like a long shot. The state has

Newark's school system and turn the city into a model for large urban school districts across the country. They unveiled their plan on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2010. They brought along Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, who announced that he was donating \$100 million to support their efforts.

This collaboration is recounted in *The Prize: Who's in Charge of America's Schools?*, a new book by Dale

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run the Newark Public Schools since 1995, when it took over the district, citing poor student performance despite high spending per pupil.

In 1987, New Jersey became the first state to pass a law allowing state takeovers of underperforming public school districts. Twenty-eight other states have since followed New Jersey's lead, creating their own versions of state takeover laws.

Newark was the third district to be taken over by the state, after Jersey City in 1989 and Paterson in 1991. The state's law provided no details on how local districts could reclaim control.

In 2011, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie appointed a new superintendent. He selected Anderson, a former executive director of Teach for America who had previously been the senior superintendent of New York City's alternative schools. Cory Booker, then Newark's mayor and now a New Jersey Senator, supported this decision.

Christie and Booker had already hatched a plan to drastically remake

Russakoff, a former *Washington Post* reporter. As Russakoff recently reflected on National Public Radio, the goal was to dramatically expand charter schools and use evaluations to get rid of bad teachers and reward the good ones.

"Mark Zuckerberg's intent was to go to more and more cities with this model and use his philanthropy to basically solve the urban education crisis," Russakoff said. "He's not trying to do that anymore."

Last fall, Anderson created "One Newark," a far-reaching school restructuring plan that dissolved the city's long-standing neighborhood school system and enacted "universal enrollment," which places students at schools throughout the city. Its implementation was fraught with errors, contributing to local communities' distaste for Anderson.

One week into the 2014-2015 school year, families spoke of students still not assigned to schools, siblings placed in different schools, and unreliable transportation op-

tions for young children who now needed to traverse the city to reach their kindergarten classes. The plan also closed or re-sited some schools and converted others into publicly funded, privately run charter schools.

At the protest last September, students and parents were united in their opposition to One Newark, Anderson, and the state takeover that made it all possible. But while Anderson lacked the support of the city's new mayor, Ras Baraka, she still retained that of Governor Christie, who showed no sign of bowing to community pressure. The schools were under state control, and that was all that mattered.

**T**hat intransigence dissolved in a matter of days this summer. Cami Anderson resigned on June 22, eight months before her contract was due to expire. Four days later, Christie and Baraka issued a joint announcement: They were creating the Newark Educational Success Board, tasked with developing a clear path and timeline to returning the Newark schools to local control.

In July, the New Jersey Board of Education approved Chris Cerf, the former state education commissioner who first hired Anderson and a one-time member of the board of directors of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, as the city's new superintendent. He now serves on the Educational Success Board, along with four other Christie appointees and four people chosen by Mayor Baraka.

These developments came as a shock to many people in Newark, who are still parsing what it means.

"They're doing it because there is pressure to show that they're



doing something,” says Trina Scordo, executive director of New Jersey Communities United, a grassroots community organization. “Now, having said that, the onus is on us to keep pushing it so that it’s not just some board that gets set up out of a friendly political deal so that the governor gets to say, ‘Hey, I was able to do this in Newark.’ None of that is lost on us.”

Scordo’s mix of optimism and skepticism mirrors that of students and parents.

“I think there are a lot of people in the committee that really want this to pull through,” says high school senior José Leonardo, president of the Newark Student Union and one of Baraka’s appointees to the new state board. But, he continues, “There are a lot of questions that still need to be answered as to where we’re going.”

Among those unanswered questions: How, exactly, does the school district return to local control?

In 2005, the New Jersey state legislature adopted a law aimed at providing a more holistic way of monitoring school-district performance. That law specified that a district is ready to return to local control when it reaches a score of 80 out of 100 on an evaluation of five school functions: instruction and program, operations, governance, personnel, and fiscal management. However, the state education commissioner still has some discretion to decide exactly when that happens.

“It could be a quick process if the state wanted it to be,” says Theresa Luhm, managing director of the Education Law Center, a New Jersey advocacy group. “But, unfortunately, the law isn’t really explicit about those timelines.”

Newark reached the eighty-point threshold for operations in 2007 and fiscal management in 2014, and those areas were put back into the hands of the Newark School Advisory Board. But without local control

## **As public schools become private and resources dry up, the restorative power of local control could be weakening, but it still means a greater sense of community control and local input.**

of governance, the state-appointed superintendent can overrule any decisions that the elected advisory board makes, rendering it symbolic even in the areas where it has met the requirements for local control.

**P**ublic school systems operate under state control in cities including Philadelphia, Detroit, and New Orleans. In each, a discussion about returning to local control is now taking place. Every city faces a different situation—a different reason for the initial takeover, a different process for determining when the city can regain control—but the underlying debates are the same.

Pennsylvania took over the Philadelphia school system in 2001, creating the School Reform Commission to run the district, which was in the midst of a fiscal crisis. This past May, voters approved a nonbinding ballot question asking to dissolve the commission and return the schools to local control.

In Detroit, the state first took over the public schools in 1999, only to return them to the city in 2005. Since 2009, however, a state-appointed emergency manager has run the dis-

trict. Its financial situation has only worsened under state management as the city has faced the realities of bankruptcy. It had a \$238 million deficit for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2015.

By next summer, officials predict the Detroit district could have an accumulated deficit of more than \$335 million. In April, Michigan’s governor suggested splitting the district into two entities: one that would pay off the debt and one that would educate students. The proposal includes appointing a school board that would eventually transition into an elected board, although the state would still oversee the system’s finances until its debt is paid off.

New Orleans presents a more peculiar situation. In 2003, Louisiana allowed the state to remove schools deemed “failing” from the control of the city’s Orleans Parish School Board and place them under state control. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the state made this easier to do, taking over 107 schools in the process. Each has since been either closed or converted to a charter school, making New Orleans the nation’s first all-charter district.

A bill requiring the state to return schools that are no longer failing to the Orleans Parish School Board was approved by the Louisiana House Education Committee in March, but failed to pass the full legislature.



In Newark, where a majority of students still attend district schools, a return to local control after two decades will have a tangible impact.

“Our community knows what’s best for our community,” says student Leonardo. “We’ve had people come in and out and with all these plans and things, and they always fall through. Until we have the right to really fix this problem, the problem’s just going to continue, and we’re at a point where we can’t wait anymore.”

And yet, local control itself will not solve the city’s array of education troubles: school closings, budget cuts, and an increasing percentage of children enrolling in charter schools. With money following students, this trend means public funding flows into charters while district schools face ever-declining resources. An elected school board with governance powers can only go so far when facing down a budget deficit of \$15 to \$20 million.

“My main question is what good is local control if we can’t have public schools, neighborhood schools, that are still open to govern?” asks Tanaisa Brown, a high school senior and vice-president of the Newark Student Union. “So we still shouldn’t lose focus on what’s going on in the current scenario, what’s going on every day in Newark public schools, how kids still need resources.”

Veronica Branch, a parent of two Newark public school students, echoes Brown’s concerns. “People are under the impression that if we get local control, we’ll be able to do whatever we want and run the schools how we want,” she says. “That’s not necessarily true.” The district still needs funding “to restore a lot of the things that we lost.”

As for the city’s ballooning charter school industry, it’s less certain that local control will have any impact on it at all.

“The school district has no say over the charter schools anyway,” says Russakoff. “It’s almost like you have two completely separately operating districts who answer to different masters in the same city. So charter schools answer to the state, and they can only be chartered or have their charter revoked by the state. The only thing the district can do is to make the district schools attractive enough with services that are meaningful enough to the kids and the people in the neighborhood, I think, to maybe slow the exodus of kids to charters.”

As public schools become private and resources dry up, the restor-

ative power of local control could be weakening, but it still means a greater sense of community control and local input. And for some, its importance is less in its tangible effects than its political ones.

“Local control and democratic control over our public schools is not a radical idea. It’s not a militant idea. In fact, it’s really the gold standard for most school districts around the country,” says Paul Karr, a spokesman for New Jersey Communities United. “Where we see that’s not the standard, they’re largely in urban communities of color. And so, by demanding local control, all we’re looking to do is to exercise our basic right that most other communities have over their schools: the resources, the curriculum, the direction, the vision.” ♦

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