

The (Mis-)Use of Data in Dale Russakoff's *The Prize*

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Executive Summary

Dale Russakoff's *The Prize* is one of the most discussed books on education policy in recent memory. Russakoff tells the story of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's \$100 million donation toward education "reform" in Newark, NJ, and the subsequent changes in the city's schools.

Russakoff cites several data points in the course of the book in an effort to generalize the individual stories she recounts. Unfortunately, many of these points rely on proprietary data, rendering them unverifiable. Several are presented without proper context, creating a false picture of the reality of schooling in Newark. Others are contradicted by publicly available and uniformly reported sources.

Russakoff, for example, states that a single charter school has more social workers per pupil than a single NPS school. State data, however, shows Newark's public district schools have more educational support personnel of many types per student than Newark's charter schools. Russakoff also compares Newark's per pupil spending to that of entire states, without accounting for differences in student populations or regional wage differences.

A central theme of *The Prize* is that Newark's public district schools suffer from budgetary bloat; state data, however, shows that district schools spend less than charters on administration. Plant spending at district schools is not excessive compared to charters.

Russakoff does acknowledge differences in student population characteristics between district and charter schools. She does not adequately explore, however, how these differences, and differences in resources, affect student outcomes. She also repeats the contention of many of her book's protagonists that teacher quality is unduly poor in district schools without examining how teacher characteristics have changed in Newark during the last several years of "reform."

Policy makers should approach *The Prize* with caution: while an interesting and compelling narrative about the politics of school "reform," the book's misapplication of data to uphold its theses makes it an inadequate analysis of education policy in Newark and elsewhere.

Background

Dale Russakoff's *The Prize* has garnered a great deal of attention this year as a cautionary tale of "reform" in America's urban schools. The book has been reviewed by many major newspapers, and Russakoff has been interviewed many times in the media. *The Prize* has the potential to become one of the most important and cited books on education policy in recent history.

Russakoff's book is primarily a narrative: it tells the story of how Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, came to give a donation of \$100 million toward reforming Newark's schools, and the subsequent events that led to changes in the district. As a narrative, Russakoff relies on

interviews, observations, and other journalism techniques to provide the bulk of material for her book.

However, in an effort to generalize her observations, Russakoff also cites several statistics, both in the body of the text and in an appendix. Russakoff apparently hopes to demonstrate that her anecdotal reporting can be extrapolated to the entirety of the city's schools by citing this data.

It's here that *The Prize* comes up short. While Russakoff's stories are compelling, the data points she cites are often not relevant to making the case that what she observes is typical for Newark's schools.

Further, state-level data – the most relevant, complete, and uniformly reported data available on Newark's schools – often presents a very different picture than the one Russakoff tries to paint with her narratives. Russakoff never explains why she relies on proprietary data, much of it unavailable to the public, when state data is available that provides evidence to test her theses and the beliefs of the protagonists of her book.

In addition, when Russakoff does use publicly available data, she often uses it in ways that are, unfortunately, wholly inappropriate. Several of her comparisons, particularly regarding education spending, are simply not defensible.

This is especially problematic as prominent pundits are already using data points from *The Prize* in their commentary. Joe Nocera, columnist for *The New York Times*, cites spending figures from the book to make the case that the Newark Public Schools (NPS) has a "bloated bureaucracy."¹ *The Seventy Four's* Connor Williams claims the book contains "...countless other examples of the district's cost

overheads preventing resources from supporting quality instruction in classrooms."²

Close examination of relevant state data, however, contradicts these assertions when comparing district spending to the spending of Newark's charter schools.

In this brief, I examine several of Russakoff's data claims, assessing both their accuracy and their relevancy to Russakoff's theses. I take the following quotes directly from *The Prize* and contrast them with a more appropriate analysis of data from publicly available sources.

Claim #1: Education Support Personnel

"Principal Charity Haygood told the room that Avon had only one social worker for 650 students who lived in neighborhoods racked by poverty and violence." (p.64)

"For its 520 students, SPARK had two full-time social workers and a third who worked half-time – a stark contrast to larger district schools that had only one or sometimes two." (p.141)

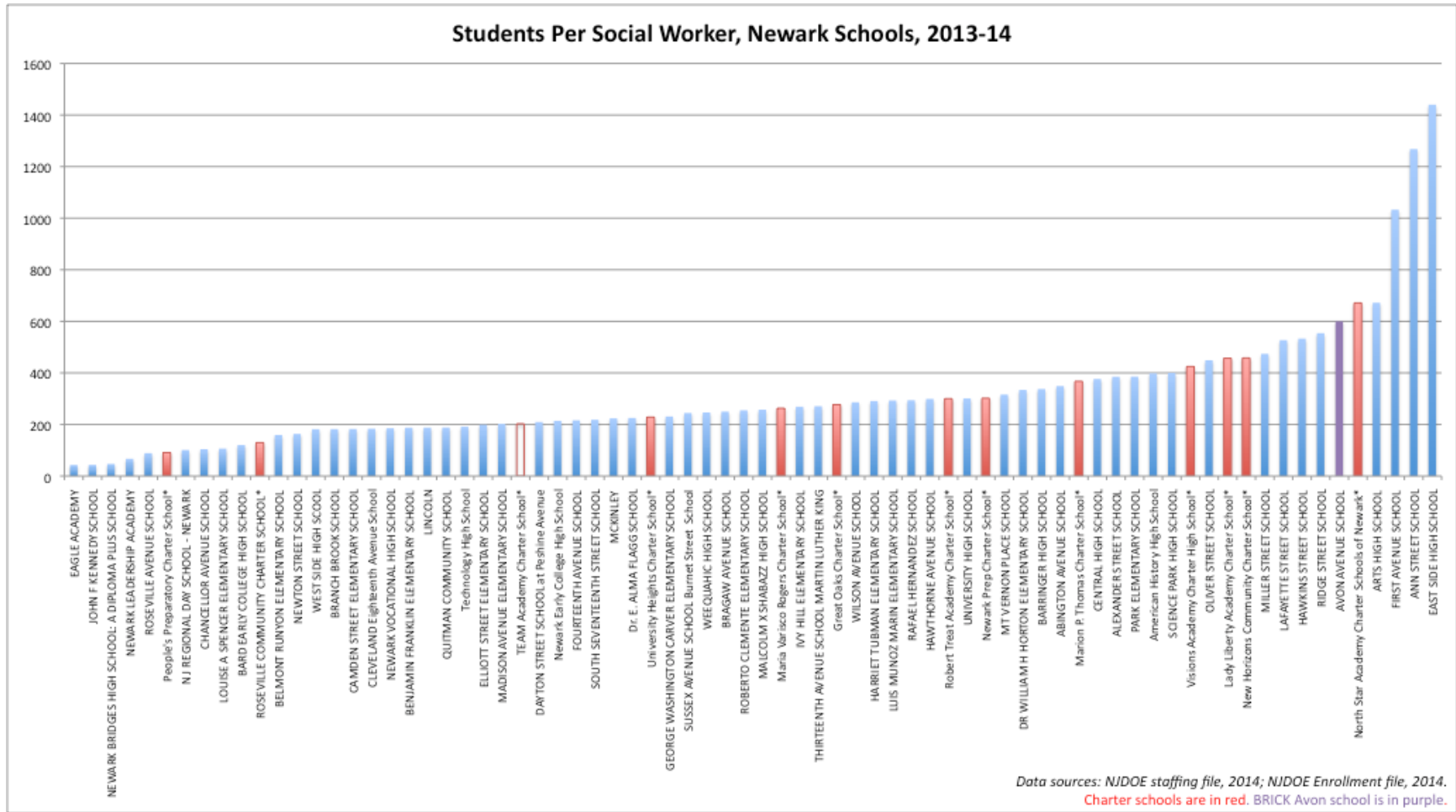
What the data really tell us:

- BRICK Avon is not a typical NPS school when it comes to numbers of social workers per student.
- BRICK Avon has other education support staff that SPARK does not.
- NPS has, on average, more instructional personnel and education support staff per pupil than TEAM/KIPP and most Newark charters.
- NPS has fewer administrators per pupil than TEAM/KIPP and most Newark charters.

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/08/opinion/joe-nocera-zuckerbergs-expensive-lesson.html? r=0>

² <https://www.the74million.org/article/review-in-dale-russakoffs-the-prize-an-urgent-education-catastrophe-overflowing-with-culprits-and-caveats>

Figure 1



Russakoff spends much of *The Prize* describing two Newark schools: BRICK Avon, a K-8 elementary school that is part of the Newark Public Schools (NPS), and SPARK Academy, one of the schools that is part of the TEAM/KIPP charter school network.

KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) is a national network of charter schools. In Newark, KIPP's schools are also known as TEAM Academy Charter Schools. State data does not recognize schools within TEAM/KIPP as separate entities; all data reporting is aggregated for every TEAM school in the city.

However, even though we can't make a direct comparison of the number of social workers assigned to SPARK and BRICK Avon, we can use state staffing files to compare both BRICK and TEAM to the other schools in the city. Figure 1 shows the number of students per social worker³ for all schools reporting social workers on staff in Newark for 2013-14⁴.

This graph casts serious doubt on the validity of using a BRICK-SPARK comparison to represent the differences between district and charter schools in Newark. BRICK Avon is clearly an outlier for NPS: only four other schools have fewer social workers assigned per student (and two of those are high schools). Further, TEAM has an unusually high number of social workers on staff for a Newark charter school.

In addition, staff files show BRICK Avon has a school psychologist and a school counselor on staff; TEAM has neither. While the functions of these jobs do differ, all are in service to students.

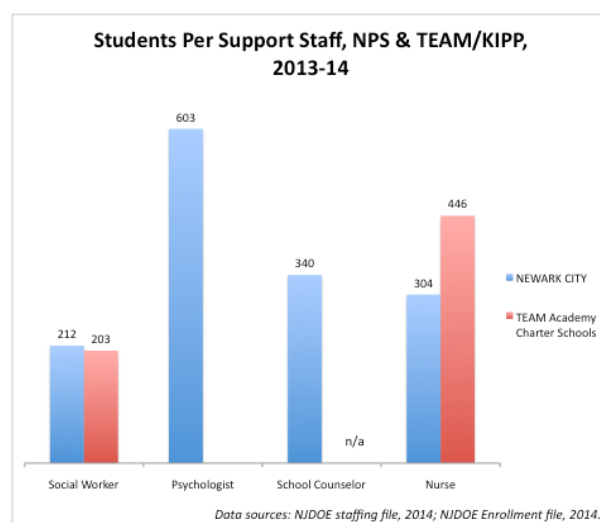
Finally, Newark lists 41 social workers as assigned to the central office. Central offices in a district like NPS may choose not to assign

certain staff to a particular school so those staff can be deployed as needed throughout the year. It is certainly possible that these social workers are available to BRICK Avon on a temporary or partial basis.

Russakoff's use of BRICK and TEAM to make the case that charters put more of their resources toward student needs, then, is faulty in several ways. First, BRICK Avon is not a typical NPS school in its number of social workers, and TEAM is not typical for the charter sector as a whole.

Next, concentrating only on social workers does not accurately describe how many staff NPS employs in student support positions relative to TEAM/KIPP. Figure 2 shows the number of students per social worker, psychologist, school counselor, and nurse throughout NPS and TEAM/KIPP. The average student load for a social worker in NPS and at TEAM/KIPP is fairly close; again, however, the district employs psychologists and school counselors TEAM/KIPP does not. And NPS nurses have a smaller student load than TEAM/KIPP nurses.

Figure 2



³ Staffing code 3117 "School Social Worker"

⁴ Staffing data was available for 2014-15; however, the file shows the same job code (1001) for every staff member of TEAM/KIPP, a clear data error.

How Do Newark's Charters Actually Compare to NPS in Deployment of Staff?

Russakoff's use of a single comparison doesn't answer a more basic question: how do Newark's charters differ from the district in how they deploy instructional and support staff?

In New Jersey, charter schools are, for all intents and purposes, their own districts. We can, therefore, validly compare how many different types of certificated staff there are per pupil in NPS and each of Newark's charters. If Russakoff's implication is correct, charters should have more instructional and support staff per pupil than NPS.

NJDOE staffing files list those personnel holding a wide variety of certifications. I have aggregated these positions into three categories: administrative, teaching, and educational services. The last category includes counselors, nurses, social workers, therapists, reading specialists, and other support staff.

A word of caution: not all charter schools educate a PreK through Grade 12 student population as NPS does.⁵ This difference, and other important differences in student populations, may impact how many staff members are needed to deliver an equivalent educational experience for the charter schools. That said, it is still instructive to look at how staff:student ratios differ across Newark when testing the assertion that charters enjoy an advantage over NPS in human resources.

Figure 3 shows the number of instructional staff per 100 pupils in NPS and Newark's charters. When comparing the overall numbers of these staff through both NPS and TEAM/KIPP, the district holds a slight advantage (8.5 teachers per 100 students at TEAM/KIPP;

8.9 at NPS). There are other charters that have more teachers per student than NPS; the majority of charters, however, have fewer teachers per pupil.

In addition, the district has more education service personnel per pupil than all but two Newark charters. Figure 4 shows that the number of these staff is greater at NPS (1.7 per 100 pupils) than at TEAM/KIPP (1.0).

I have shown in previous reports⁶ that NPS educates many more students on average with special education needs than Newark's charters, including TEAM/KIPP. These students tend to have more profound disabilities, likely necessitating that the district hire more support staff. It is an open question as to whether the district has enough of the personnel necessary to ensure an adequate education for its special education population; what is clear, however, is that NPS deploys more of these staff members per pupil than most charters in the city.

Figure 5 shows the number of Administrators per 100 pupils across Newark. In this case, NPS has a smaller staff:student ratio than TEAM/KIPP. The majority of Newark's charters have proportionally more administrators; as we shall see, they also have greater administration costs.

In summary: NPS, on average, has more social workers and other support staff per pupil than TEAM/KIPP and most Newark charter schools. The district also has more teachers per pupil than TEAM/KIPP and most charters, but fewer administrators.

Any implication, then, that TEAM/KIPP, or the entire Newark charter sector, provides more personnel than NPS toward student instruction and support is not supported by the evidence.

⁵ TEAM/KIPP, the charter Russakoff uses for comparison, does educate students from Grades K through 12.

⁶ <http://www.saveourschoolsnj.org/nj-charter-school-data/>

Figure 3

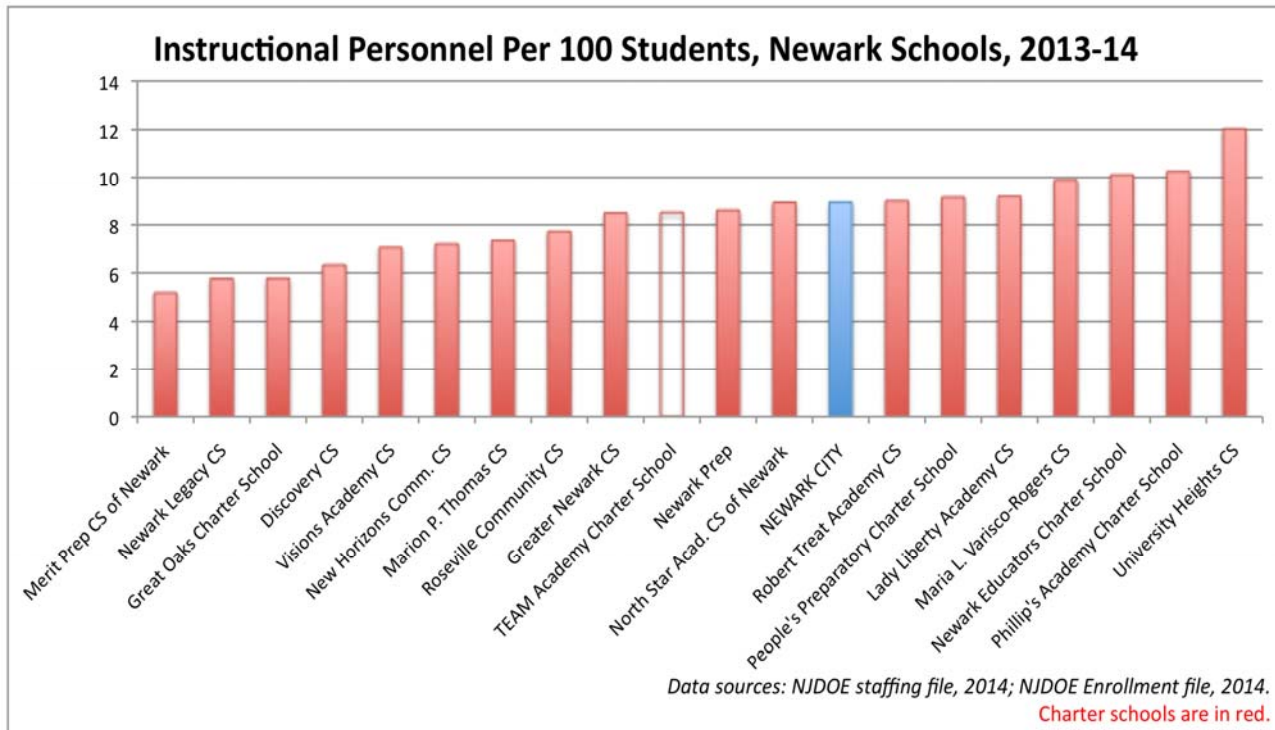


Figure 4

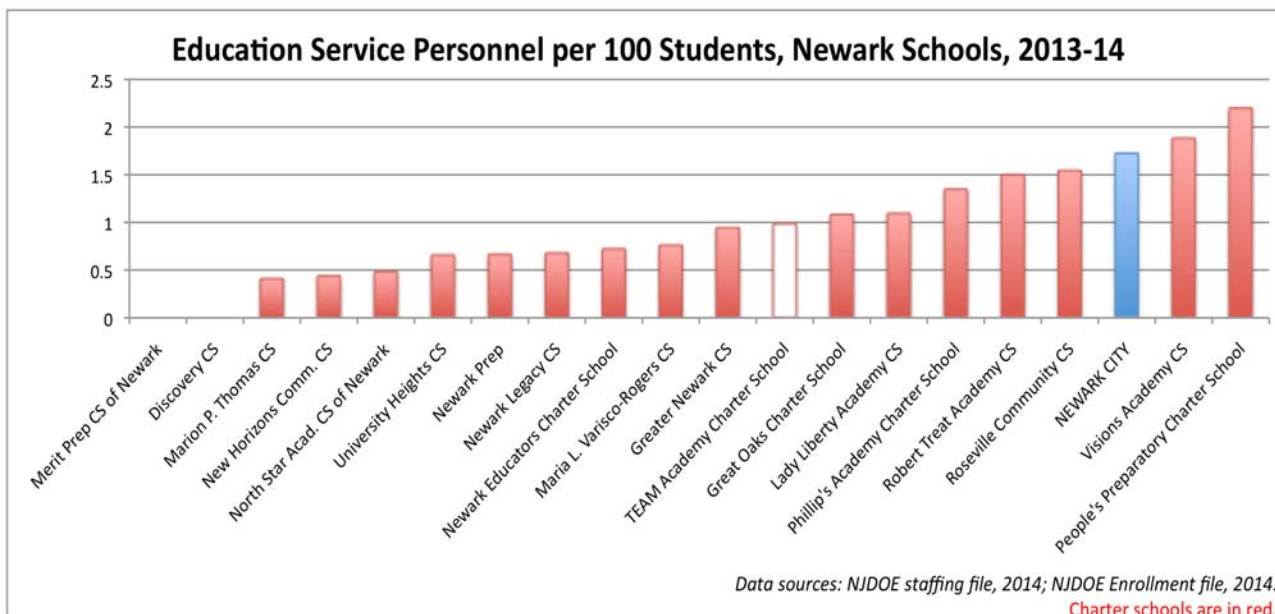
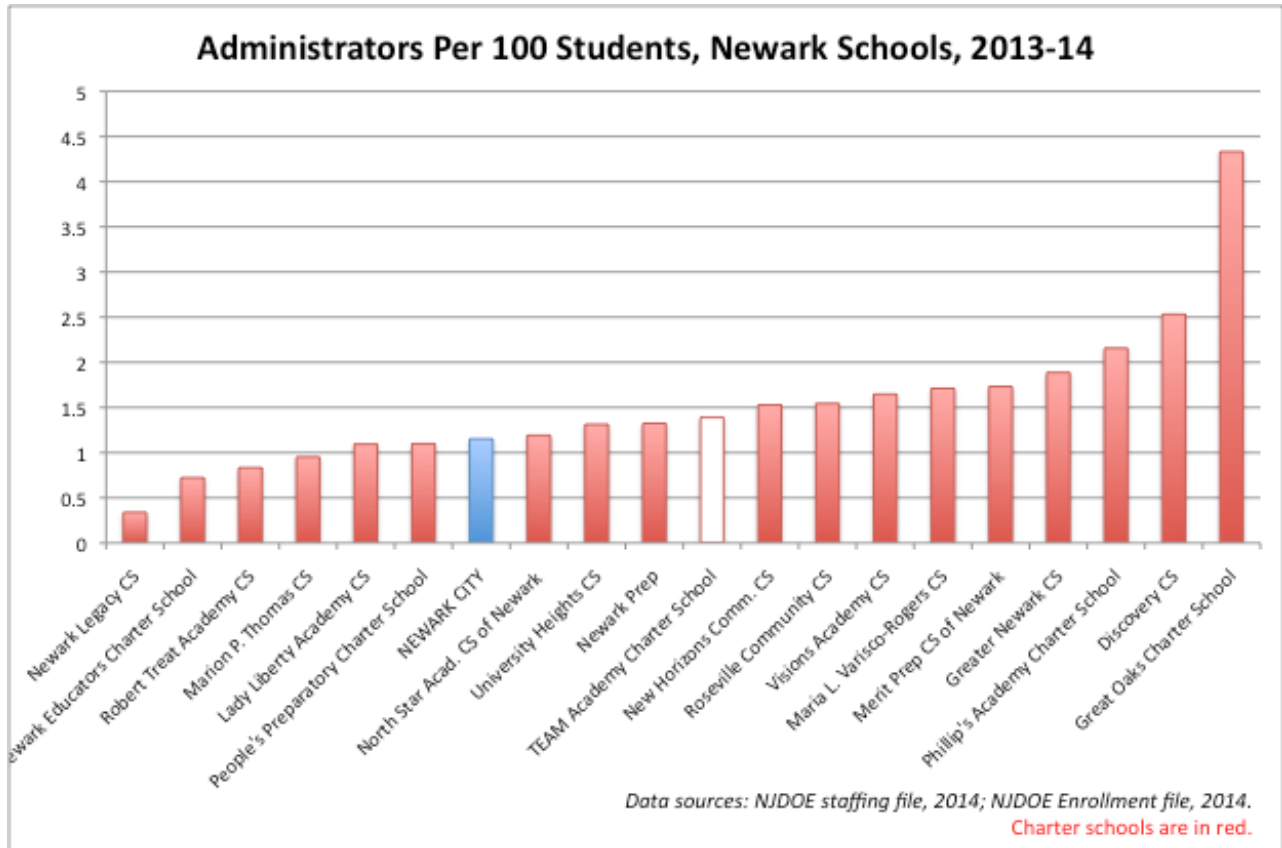


Figure 5



Claim #2: NPS's Comparative Spending

"In decrying the failure of the Newark schools, Christie regularly highlighted the vast amount of money spent on them, three-quarters of it provided by the state's taxpayers. The governor put the figure at \$24,000 per student; in fact, it was closer to \$20,000, still an extraordinary sum in national terms. California spent \$9,139 per student in 2011, Texas spent \$8,671 and almost half of all states spent under \$10,000. (p. 135)

What the data really tell us:

- Comparing a school district's spending to an aggregated figure for a large state like California or Texas is wholly inappropriate.
- Previous research by Dr. Bruce Baker has shown that while NPS is a relatively high-spending district it is not a large outlier when accounting for differences in student poverty and regional wages.

Russakoff gives two sources for her state-level per pupil spending figures.⁷ Both sources rely on annual collections of education spending data by the U.S. Census Bureau. While the reports she cites do not give a specific per pupil spending figure for Newark, Census Bureau data for 2011⁸ does show a per pupil spending figure for elementary and secondary education of \$19,699.

Comparing this number, however, to a similar figure for California or Texas is highly

⁷ Cornman, S.Q. (2015) *Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2011–12 (Fiscal Year 2012) First Look.*

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014301.pdf>

Dixon, M. (2014) *Public Education Finances: 2012 2012 Census of Governments.*

<http://www2.census.gov/govs/school/12f33pub.pdf>

⁸ http://www.census.gov/govs/school/historical_data_2011.html

problematic. Both states are very large with a wide variety of school systems, serving very different student populations. Aggregate figures for states will include rural and suburban districts with completely different costs and student needs than Newark's. Wage market differences and student poverty rates in particular need to be accounted for in any comparison of school district spending.

In 2010, Dr. Bruce Baker⁹ analyzed the relative per pupil spending of NPS with controls for differences in wage costs and poverty. Newark is ranked at the 8.5 percentile nationally, and at the 12.4 percentile in New Jersey.

While admittedly high, Newark's school spending is hardly, as Russakoff puts it, "*an extraordinary sum in national terms.*"

Claim #3: NPS vs. TEAM/KIPP Spending Priorities

"SPARK Academy, the KIPP charter school that Booker had visited with philanthropist Cari Tuna, provided a striking illustration of what the district's money and staff could have been doing for children. According to financial documents from Newark's KIPP schools, the charter network sent \$12,664 per child to SPARK Academy, while the Newark Public Schools sent only \$7,597 per child to BRICK Avon." (p.137)

"SPENDING PER PUPIL, 2014-15

- Newark District Schools: \$19,650 (This amount represents remaining per-pupil sum after payments to charters and pre-K are subtracted; of the \$19,650, an average of \$9,604 per pupil reaches schools.)

⁹ <https://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2010/10/06/spending-factiness/>

- Newark charter schools: \$16,400 (There is no available data on the average amount reaching charter school classrooms. According to Newark's KIPP schools, \$12,664 reaches its SPARK Academy elementary school.)" (p. 288, Appendix II)

What the data really tell us:

- Russakoff's focus on how much money "reaches schools" tells us nothing about how that money is actually spent.
- According to state data, NPS's budgetary per pupil spending is high, but three other charters' spending is higher.
- NPS spends far more per pupil on education support services than any Newark charter school.
- NPS has a lower per pupil administrative cost than any charter school in the city.

Russakoff puts great weight on the amount of money that "reaches schools"; what she never explains is why this particular measure is important.

Again, a district like NPS may choose to provide services out of its central office as a cost savings measure. While NPS does use school-based budgeting, many of the core functions of the district are not included in individual school budgets. Russakoff makes no attempt to determine if individual NPS schools have the same responsibilities under their own budgets as SPARK has under its budget.

The more relevant question is how NPS and Newark's charters spend the money they have. The best available source for making these comparisons is NJDOE's "Taxpayers' Guide to Education Spending."¹⁰ The state explains that the TGES "...provides officials and the public the opportunity to view and compare

¹⁰ <http://www.nj.gov/education/guide/>

all dollars spent on the students enrolled in the public school system."¹¹

Figure 6 shows the Budgetary Per Pupil Costs for NPS and Newark's charter schools for 2013-14. As NJDOE explains: "Generally, the BPP measures the annual costs incurred for students educated within district schools, using local taxes and state aid. These costs are considered to be more comparable among districts, and may be useful for budget considerations."¹²

NPS's BPP Cost is \$17,296. Three other charter schools have higher BPPs; TEAM/KIPP's is \$16,490. Why are these numbers closer than Russakoff's figures? BPP does not include costs for transportation, food services, tuition payments for out-of-district payments, debt service, and so forth. Many of these expenses are not incurred by charter schools, as they rely on their host districts to provide the services aligned with those costs.

It is, therefore, perhaps more instructive to look at differences in spending on individual budget categories. Figure 7 shows differences in spending on instruction; this is the money that "goes into the classroom" and includes teacher salaries. TEAM/KIPP's \$8,318 figure is nearly identical to NPS's figure of \$8,438.

The largest differences between TEAM/KIPP and NPS can be found in spending on support and administration. Figure 8 shows the per pupil costs for educational support services. Newark spends \$3,911 per pupil on these services, which include social work, guidance, health, child study team, library, and other services.

¹¹ <http://www.nj.gov/education/guide/2015/intro.pdf>

¹² Ibid.

Figure 6

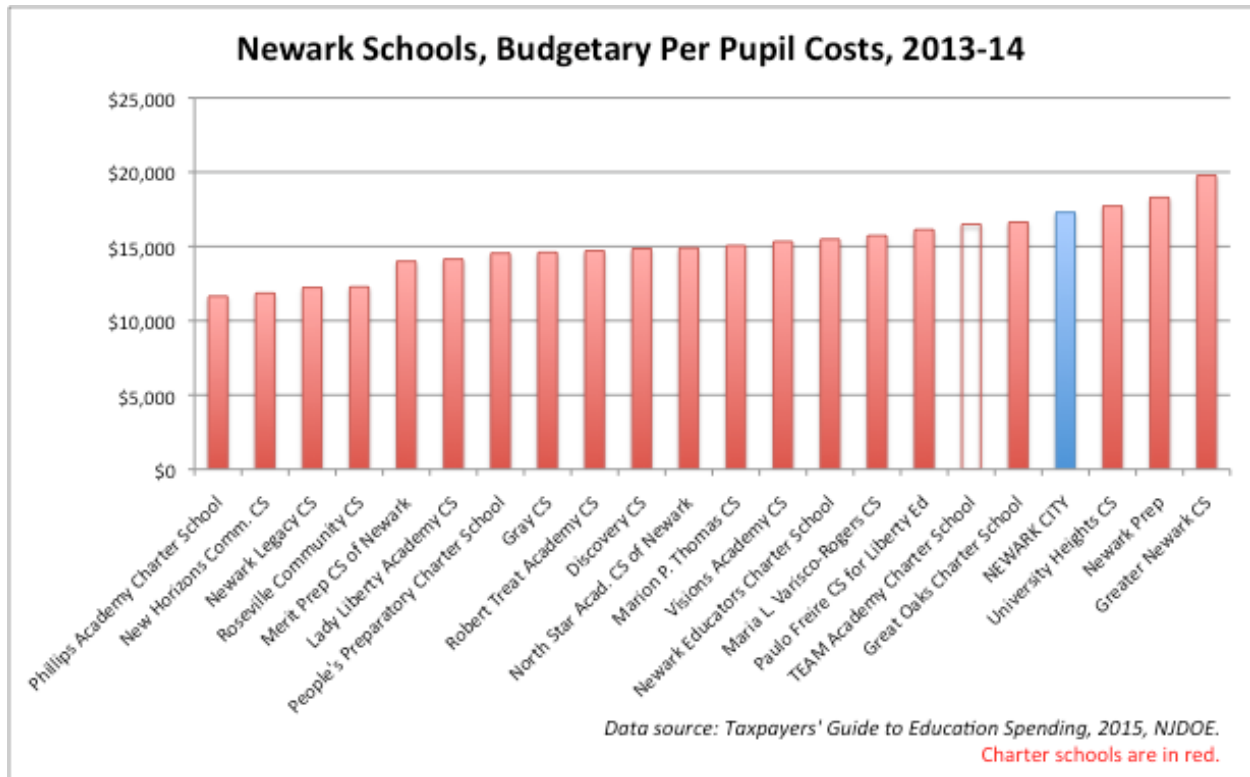


Figure 7

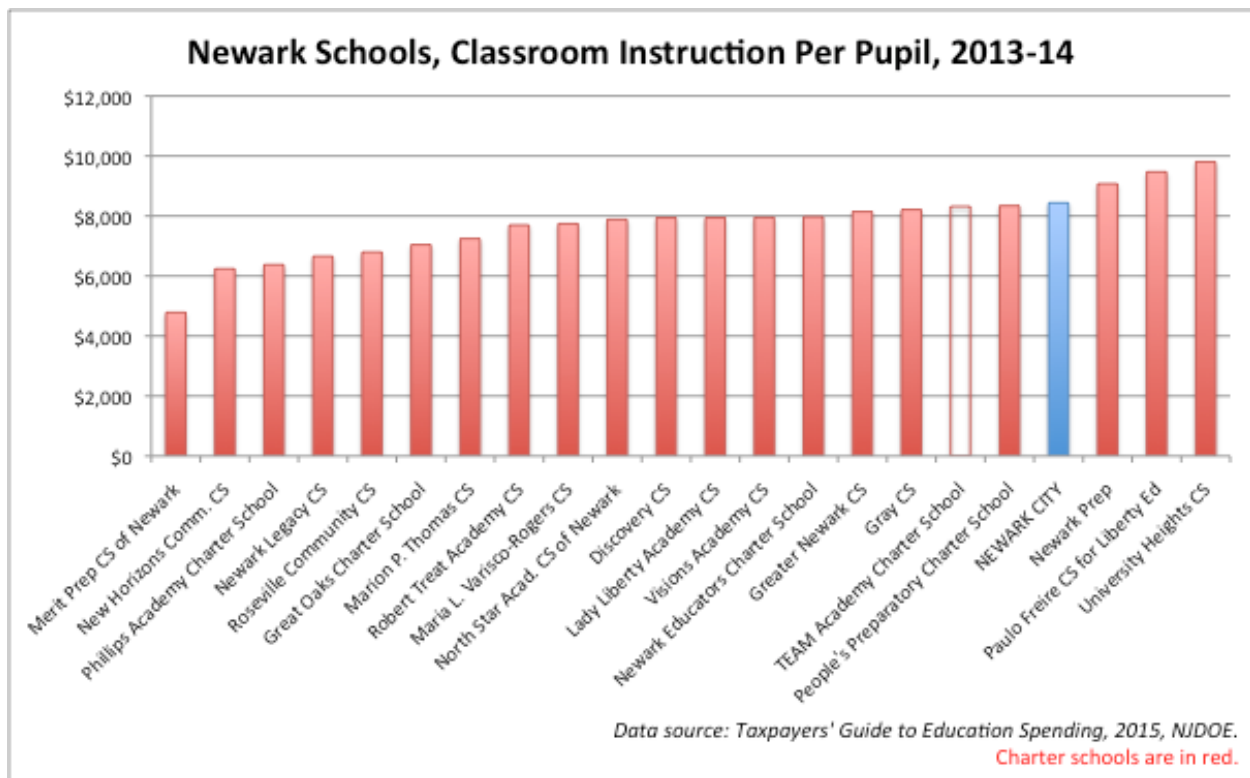


Figure 8

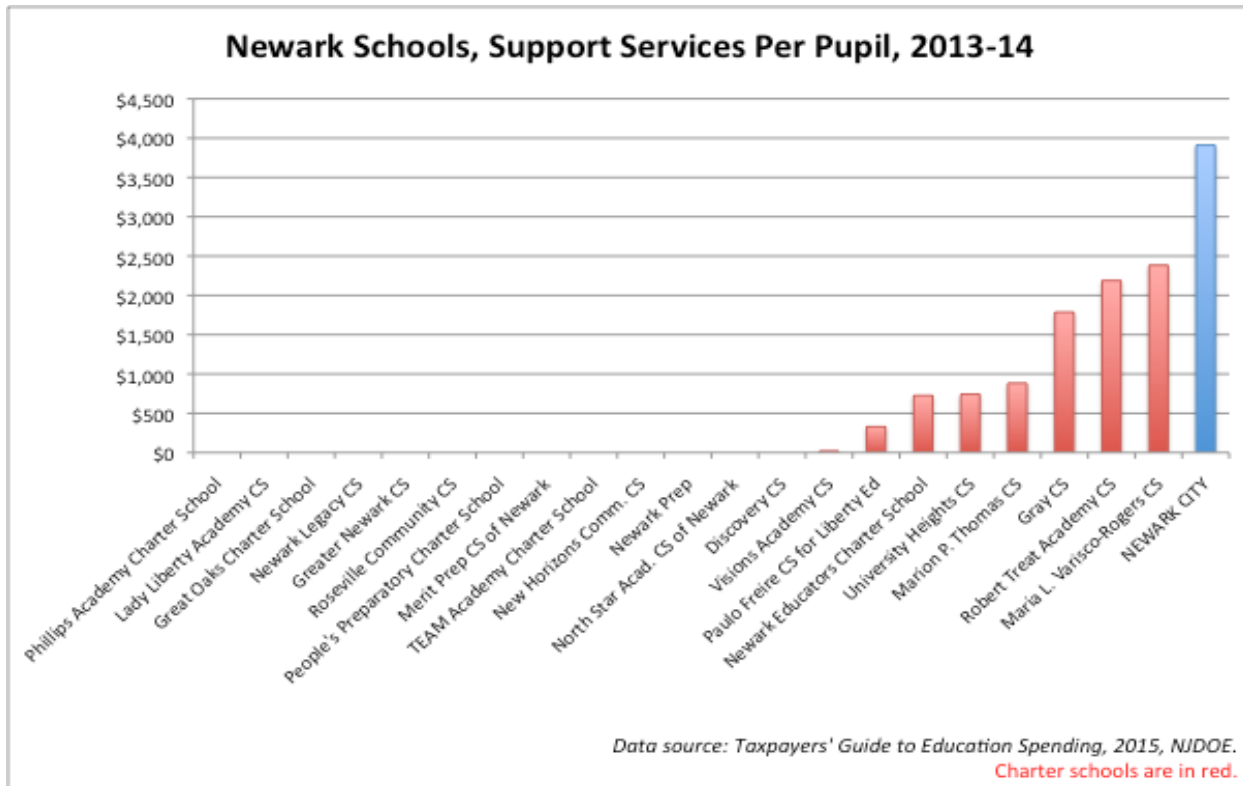


Figure 9

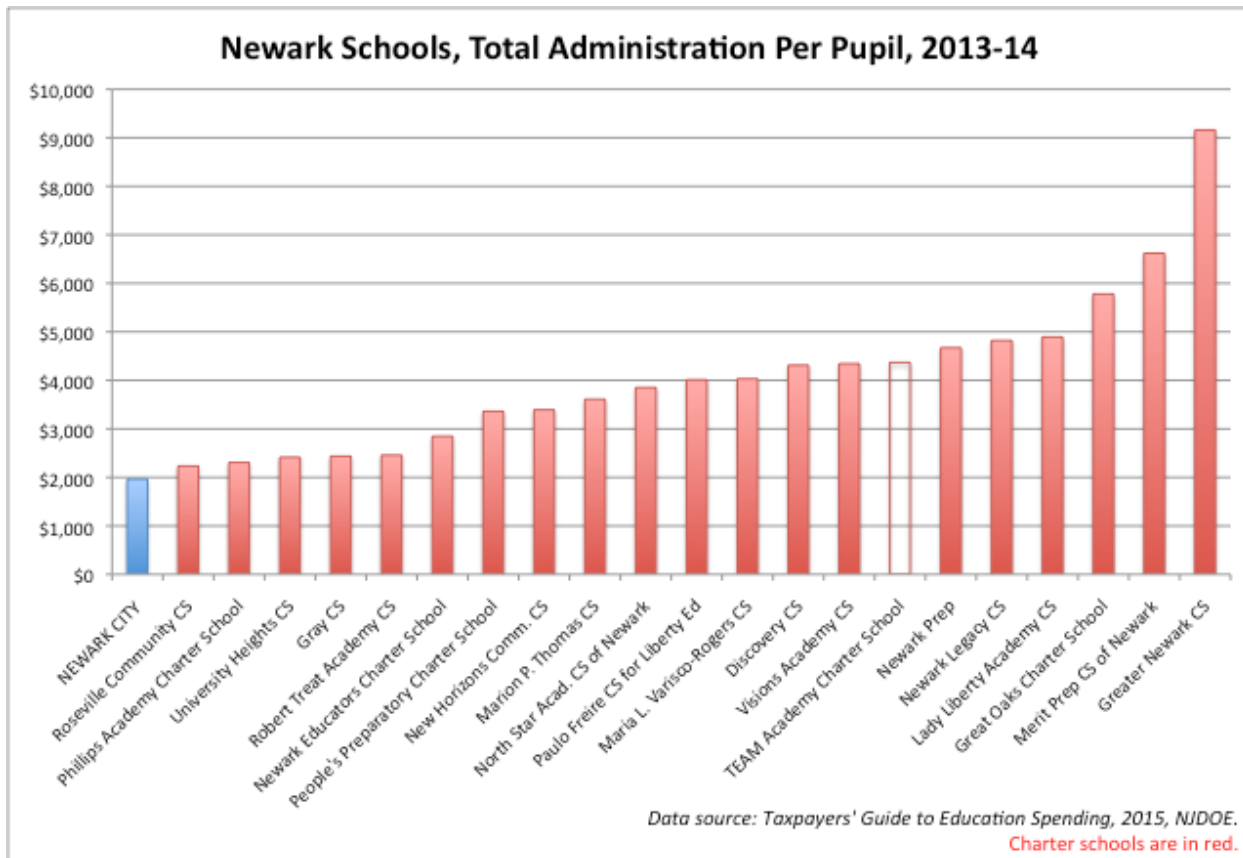
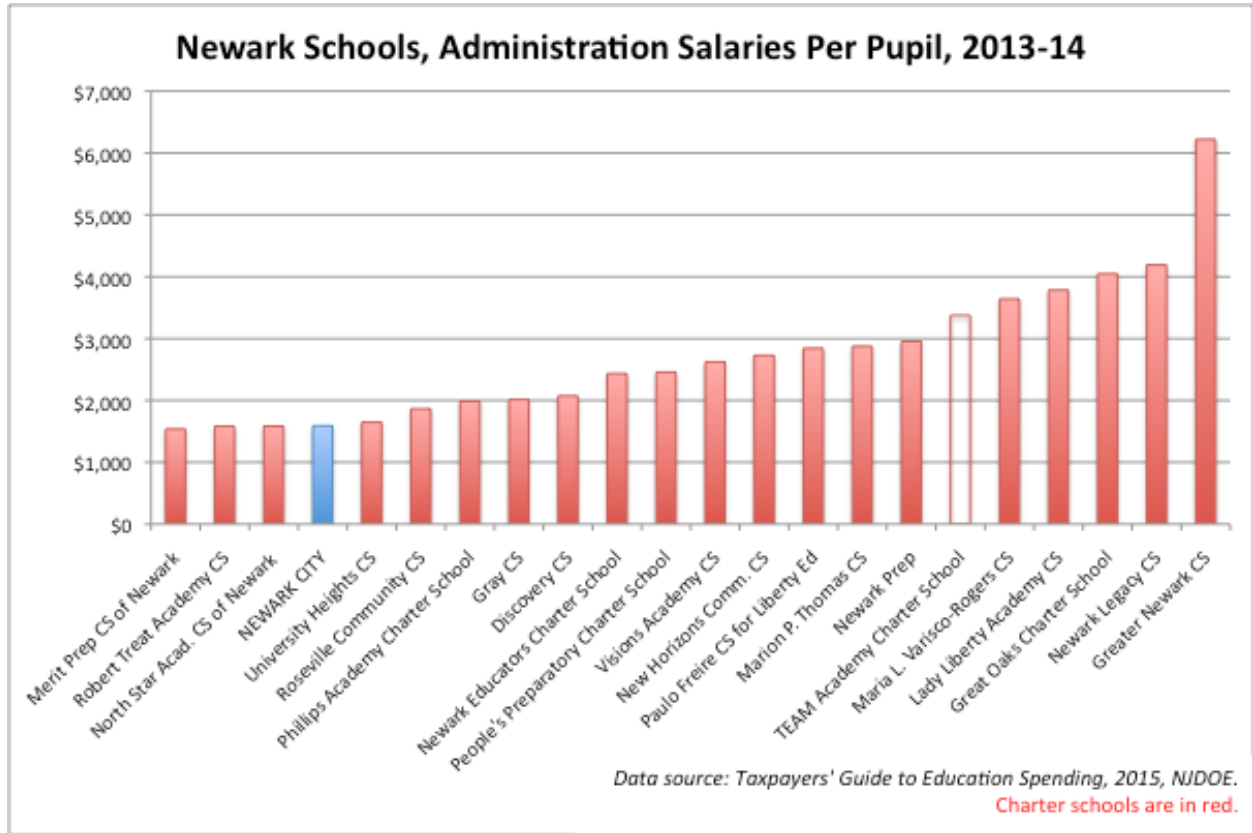


Figure 10



Many charter schools, including TEAM/KIPP, do not report *any* spending on these services. It is possible that this spending is placed under other categories; however, even those charters that do report spending on these services do not come anywhere close to spending as much as NPS.

Figure 9 shows the figures for spending on administration; NPS spends less than any charter school in Newark. TEAM/KIPP spends \$2,406 more per pupil on these costs than NPS.

Again, it is possible that spending put under the administration category for NPS is found under other categories in the charter schools. Figure 10, however, shows that the differences in administration spending are largely driven by differences in salaries. NPS spends \$1,784 less on administrative salaries per pupil than TEAM/KIPP, which doesn't even have the highest costs for these salaries out of all of Newark's charters.

These figures clearly show that NPS spends more on student support and less on administration than either TEAM/KIPP or the Newark charter sector as a whole. Again: this is not to say that Newark has adequate funds to meet the needs of all of its students. The critical point here – which seems to be lost on Russakoff when she discusses the funds that “reach schools” – is that the state data does not provide evidence for any claim that NPS diverts an inordinate amount of its funds away from spending that directly supports student learning.

Claim #4: NPS vs. TEAM/KIPP Spending Priorities

“Christie had not funded the full formula since taking office, citing the state fiscal crisis, but the allocation was still equivalent to about \$20,000 per student. Less than half of this, though, reached district schools to pay teachers, social workers, counselors, classroom aides, secretaries, and administrators – the

people who actually delivered education to children. For example, the district calculated that it spent \$1,200 a year per student on Avon's janitorial services; BRICK founder Dominique Lee researched the cost on the private market and found it was close to \$400 per student.” (p.135)

What the data really tell us:

- Comparing school custodial services to those in the private sector is not relevant to this argument.
- BRICK Avon's own budget calls into question the \$1,200 figure.
- NJDOE data shows NPS's per pupil spending on its plant is less than TEAM/KIPP's and at the median when compared to all of Newark's charters.

A running theme of *The Prize* is that a large portion of an urban school district's budget goes towards patronage employment, which leads to “bloated payrolls” (p. 6) that divert funds away from instruction. Russakoff's example here is clearly intended to provide evidence that NPS is overpaying for the maintenance of its physical plant.

But a comparison of the costs of custodial services for a school and a privately owned building are not germane. School custodians may have a host of responsibilities aside from cleaning, some requiring specific licenses.¹³ Schools are not designed like office buildings, and have needs specific to their mission of educating children.

According to NPS school budget documents¹⁴, BRICK Avon budgeted \$114,947 for custodian salaries in 2014-15, which comes

¹³ “Black seal” licenses, for example, are required to maintain a school's boiler:
<http://lwd.dol.state.nj.us/labor/lsse/content/bbpvc.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.nps.k12.nj.us/blog/mdocs-posts/avonave/> See p. 11, line 501...

to \$225 per pupil. In order for Russakoff's figure from NPS to be correct, the school would have to spend roughly an additional \$1,000 per pupil on janitorial services. This seems very unlikely; unfortunately, Russakoff gives no publicly available figures to back her claim.

Rather than making unsourced comparisons between BRICK Avon's janitorial budget and that of the private sector, a better comparison would be between NPS and the city's charter schools in how much they spend on maintaining their physical plants. Figure 11 shows total plant spending per pupil figures from the TGES. Even though, as Russakoff notes, NPS is saddled with an aging infrastructure, it still spends \$1,114 less on its physical plant than TEAM/KIPP.

The notion that inordinately high salaries due to patronage keep plant costs high is contradicted by the fact that NPS's plant expenses are right at the median when compared to Newark's charter schools. It is true that NPS does spend more of its plant budget on salaries than the charters; Figure 12 shows that NPS has the highest plant salary costs in the city. But it may be that the charters are outsourcing their plant maintenance, bringing their salary costs in some cases down to nothing. Newark Prep, for example, has the second highest plant costs in the city, yet reports no spending on plant salaries.

There may, in fact, still be bloat in the NPS budget due to patronage. But Russakoff's example does not demonstrate this; further, state data suggests that excessive physical plant expenses may be a larger problem for Newark's charter schools.

Claim #5: Academic Performance of NPS and Charter Students

"North Star had by far the highest student test scores in Newark, followed by a number of individual charter schools. TEAM's schools ranked sixth among charters in a 2012

analysis by district consultants. A Stanford University study in the same year found that Newark children in charter schools gained an extra seven and a half months of reading skills and nine months in math."(p.138)

What the data really tell us:

- The study cited by Russakoff has several significant methodological problems that she ignores.
- While Russakoff acknowledges that differences in student populations might account for different outcomes, she does not consider the effects of differences in resources.
- When accounting for resource and student population characteristic differences, TEAM/KIPP is quite average in its growth measures.
- North Star Academy has large rates of student cohort attrition.

To her credit, Russakoff does acknowledge that Newark's charters serve a significantly different student population than NPS. But her exploration of how these differences might impact test-based outcomes is cursory at best.

The "Stanford University study" Russakoff cites is from the Center For Research On Education Outcomes (CREDO)¹⁵. This 2012 study found gains of about one-quarter of a standard deviation on state tests for Newark charter students compared to their matched peers.

¹⁵ http://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/nj_state_report_2012_FINAL11272012_000.pdf

Figure 11

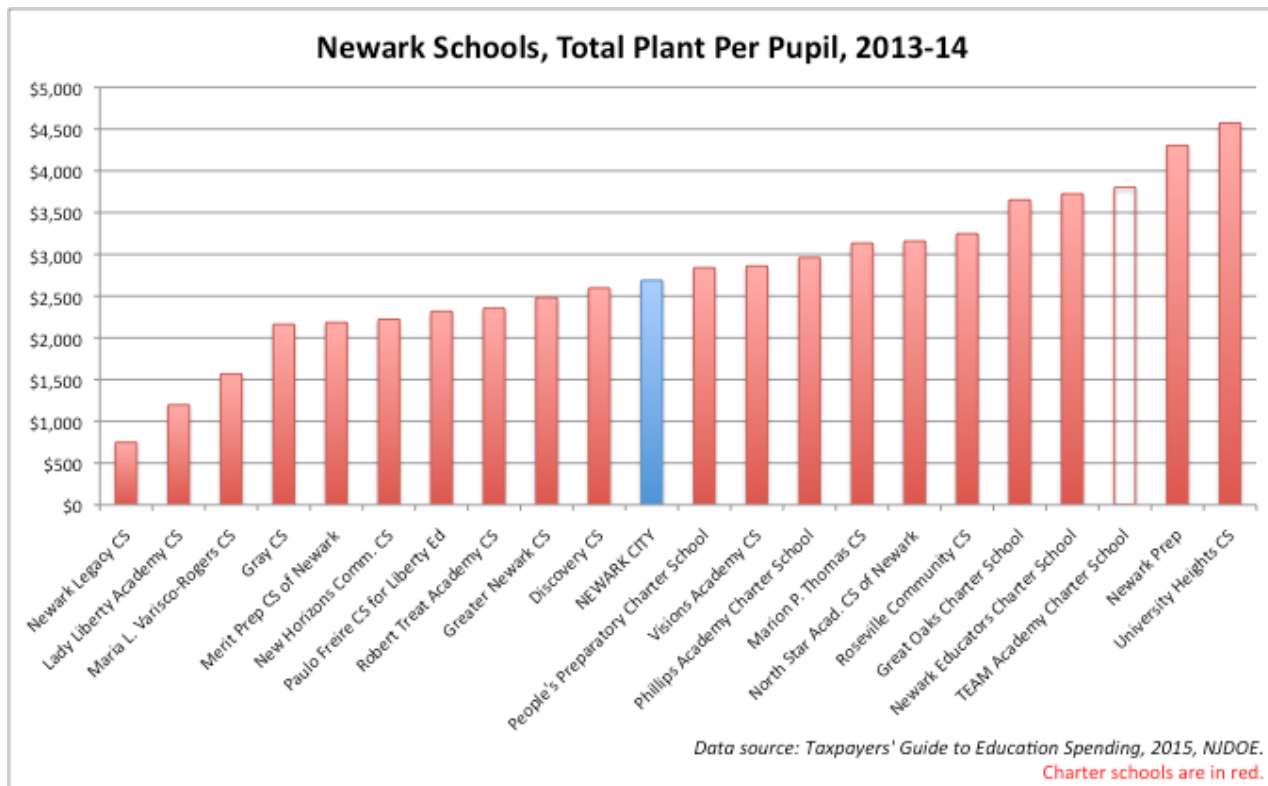
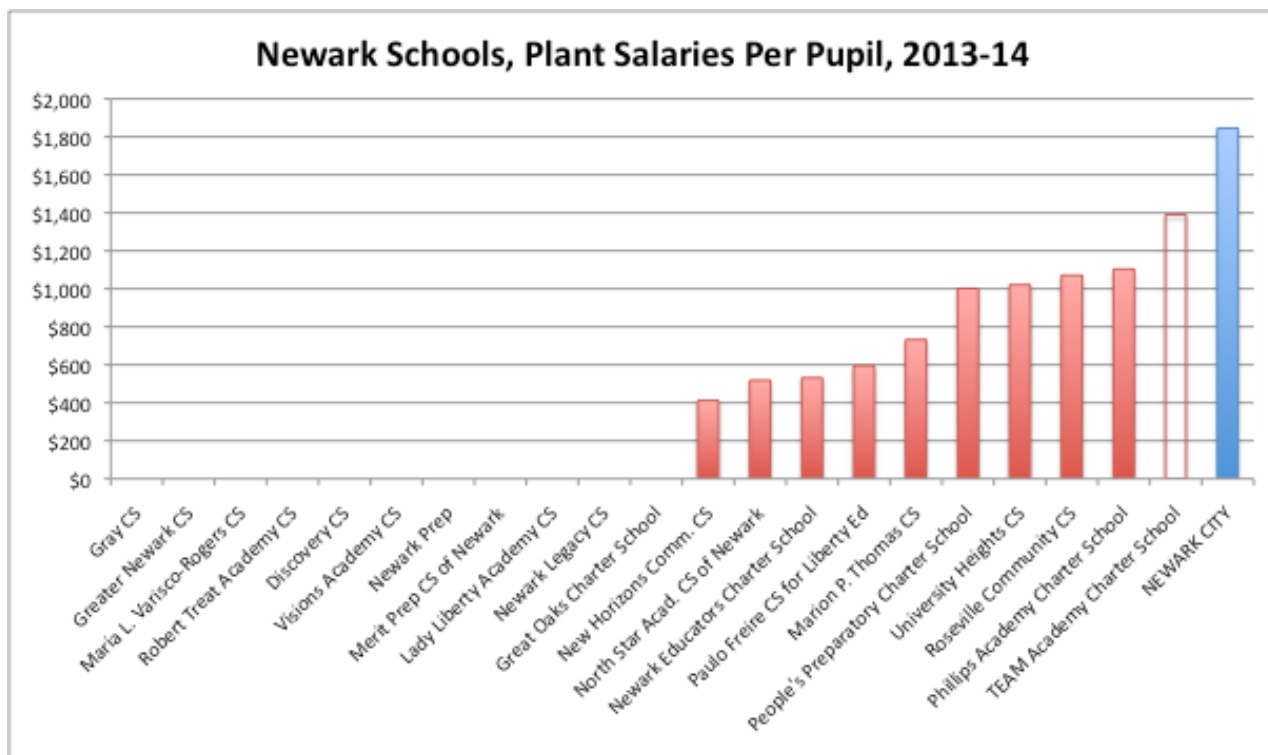


Figure 12



Yet while the CREDO study attempts to account for differences in student populations, its methodologies fall short in three ways.¹⁶ First, the data it uses to match students to their peers is not disaggregated appropriately. Students eligible for free lunch are compared to students eligible for reduced-price lunch, even though free lunch eligibility is a deeper level of economic disadvantage.¹⁷ Special education students are bundled together, meaning those with more profound disabilities may be matched for comparison to those with relatively simple speech impediments. These differences can significantly affect test-based outcomes, giving charters an advantage over their “feeder” district schools.

Second, the CREDO study matches students; it does not match student *populations*. Peer effects will not be accounted for when comparing matched students; these effects have been shown to have meaningful impacts on test scores.

Third, the CREDO study did not take into account differences in resources. If a charter school has a resource advantage – gained by either procuring more revenues, or by enrolling lower-cost students, such as those without special education needs – it may be able to provide more hours of instruction, which would lead to better test outcomes.

Baker designed a method to gauge school “effectiveness” by accounting for both differences in resources and in student

populations, then applied this method to Newark’s charter schools.¹⁸ I reported his findings in testimony before the NJ Legislature’s Joint Committee on the Public Schools (JCPS) in 2015¹⁹; Figure 13 is a slide from my testimony. In this analysis, TEAM/KIPP is actually quite average in its growth outcomes.

Another factor affecting test-based outcomes is student cohort attrition; in other words, how many students in a “class” leave a school year-to-years. North Star Academy, in particular, sees a substantial drop in the size of its cohorts as its students pass from grade to grade. Figure 14, also from my testimony, shows how this attrition may affect test scores: as North Star’s cohorts shrink, the gap between their test scores and NPS’s grows.

Throughout her book, Russakoff does make the case that resources can make a difference in the academic achievement of children. But when discussing test scores, Russakoff avoids any mention of peer effects or cohort attrition; her discussion is, therefore, incomplete.

Claim #6: Identifying the “Lowest-Performing” Schools

“She [State Superintendent Cami Anderson] would consolidate the district’s twelve lowest-performing kindergarten through eighth-grade schools into eight “Renew schools...” (p.175)

“Anderson did manage to get through some of her talk, including a recitation of dismal student test scores at the twelve schools she had targeted... In some of them, only twenty percent of students were reading at their grade level.” (p. 176)

¹⁶ For a longer discussion of the limits of the CREDO study, see:

<https://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2012/11/27/the-secrets-to-charter-school-success-in-newark-comments-on-the-nj-credo-report/> and <https://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2012/12/03/when-dummy-variables-arent-smart-enough-more-comments-on-the-nj-credo-study/>

¹⁷ For a discussion of the impact disaggregating free and reduced-price lunch data on test scores, see: <http://www.saveourschoolsnj.org/nj-charter-school-data/> p. 27

¹⁸ <https://njedpolicy.wordpress.com/2015/01/13/research-note-resource-equity-student-sorting-across-newark-district-charter-schools/>

¹⁹ <https://njedpolicy.wordpress.com/2015/03/12/empirical-critique-of-one-newark-first-year-update/>

Figure 13

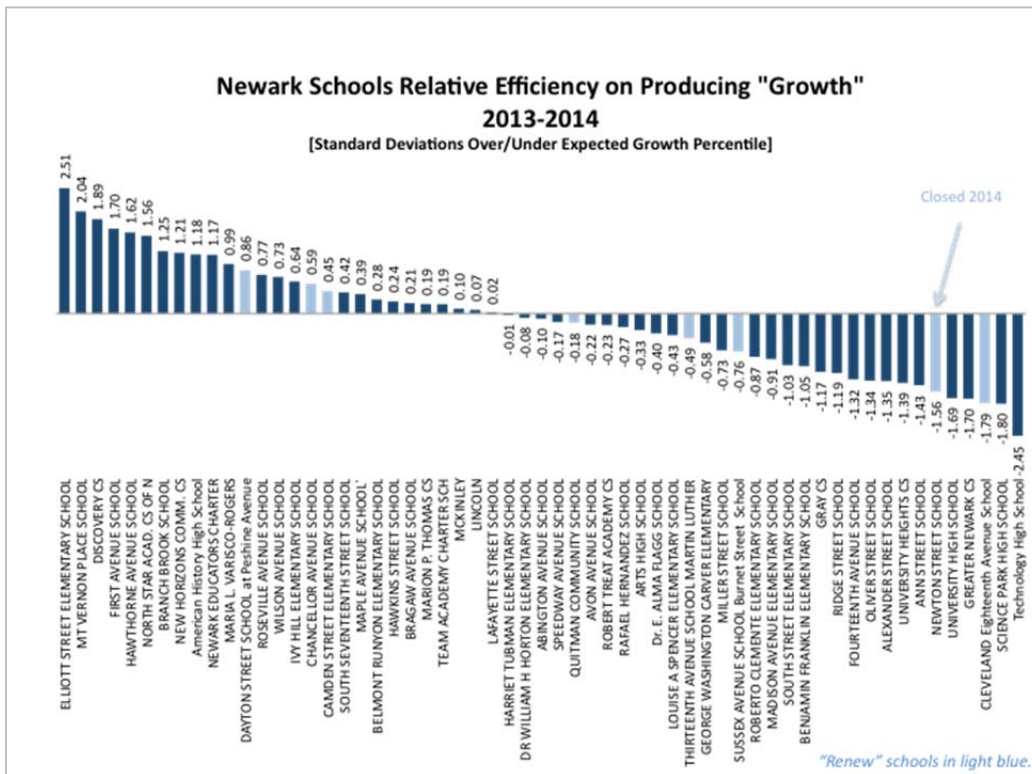
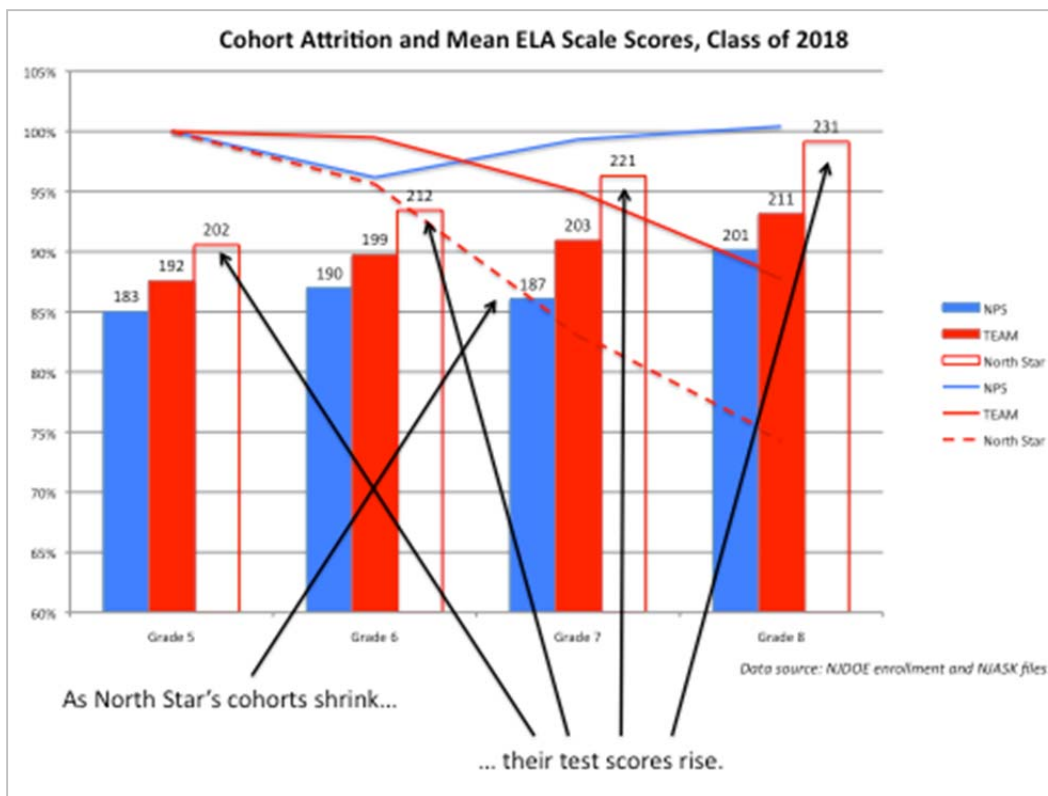


Figure 14



What the data really tell us:

- Russakoff does not challenge Anderson’s claim that these were, indeed, the lowest performing schools in Newark.
- The district has shown repeatedly that it does not account for student population differences when determining whether a school is “low performing.”
- When accounting for student differences, NPS’s classifications of its schools’ effectiveness appears arbitrary.

In her recounting of the efforts of State Superintendent Cami Anderson to improve a number of selected schools, Russakoff never challenges the notion that the schools Anderson targeted were, in fact, the “lowest performing” ones. In fact, Russakoff appears to agree with Anderson that her “Renew” schools were all poor performers and among the very worst in the city.

When NPS released its list of schools slated for “renewal” or closure in 2013, Baker and I published a report²⁰ analyzing NPS’s selection process. We found that when student population characteristics were taken into account, test-based outcomes did not predict whether or not a school would be “renewed.”

When NPS rebutted our findings, we published another analysis²¹ that showed the district had engaged in poor statistical practices that created an unfair advantage for both TEAM/KIPP and North Star Academy.

When NPS rated schools for its universal enrollment system, I analyzed those

ratings²² and found that, when accounting for student population differences, the ratings were arbitrary. Figure 15 is from my brief; several schools rated “Great” by NPS perform below prediction, while several other schools rated “Falling Behind” actually perform above prediction.

When Russakoff states that the schools Anderson targeted had “dismal student test scores,” she neglects to check whether this is an indication of student characteristics or poor school quality. This difference is at the heart of the debate over school “reform”: school effectiveness cannot be properly assessed without controlling for student population differences.

²⁰ <https://njedpolicy.wordpress.com/2014/01/24/new-report-an-empirical-critique-of-one-newark/>

²¹ <https://njedpolicy.wordpress.com/2014/03/24/a-response-to-correcting-the-facts-about-the-one-newark-plan-a-strategic-approach-to-100-excellent-schools/>

²² <https://njedpolicy.wordpress.com/2014/05/23/buyer-beware-one-newark-and-the-market-for-lemons/>

Figure 15

Difference From Prediction, Average LAL Scale Scores, Newark Schools (NPS & Charters), 2013

One Newark Application Ratings:

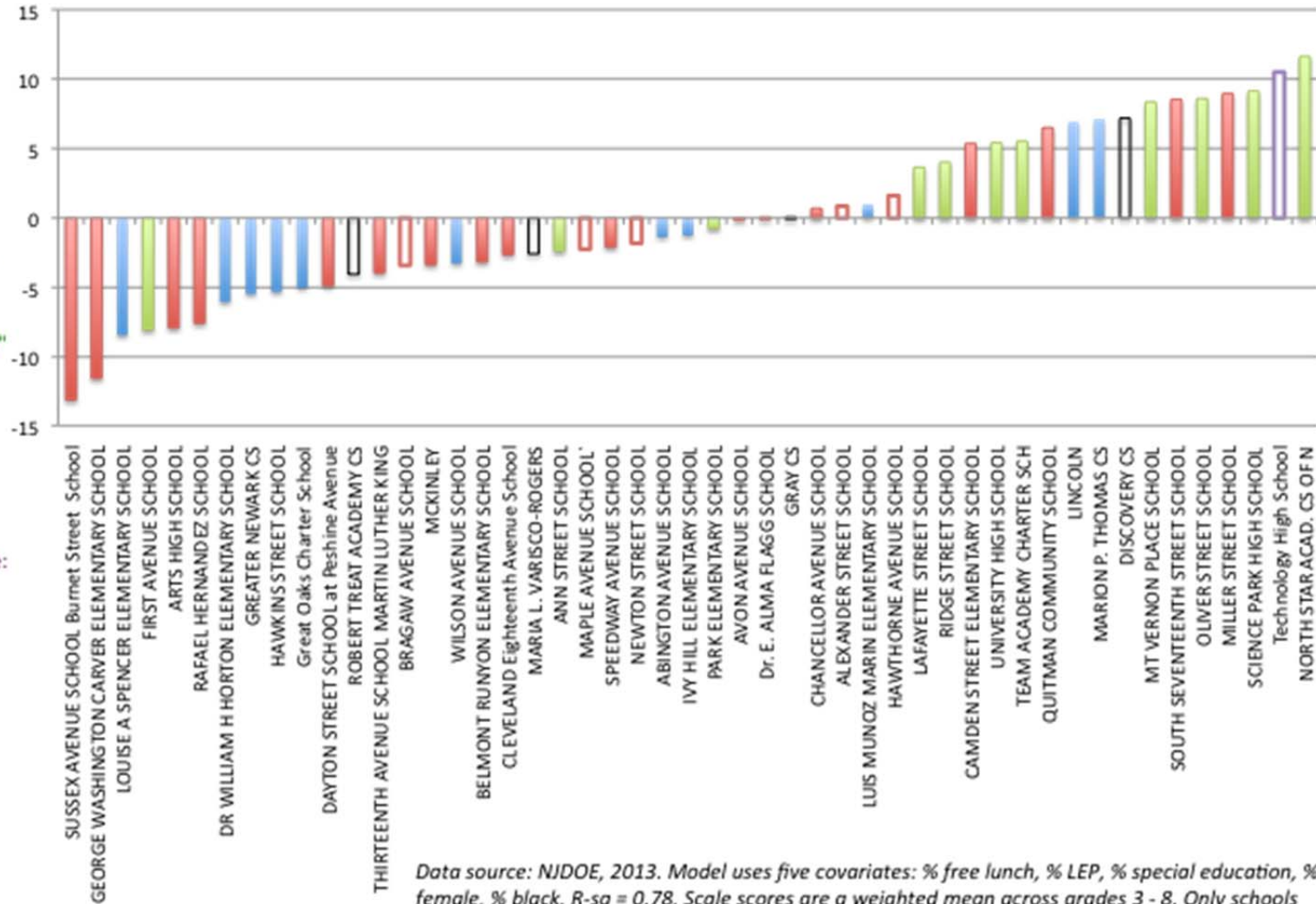
Red: "Falling Behind"
Red Outline: Closure/Charter Takeover

Blue: "On The Move"

Green: "Great"

Black Outline: Charters Not Rated in One Newark Application

Purple Outline: NPS School rating not in One Newark Application



Data source: NJDOE, 2013. Model uses five covariates: % free lunch, % LEP, % special education, % female, % black. R-sq = 0.78. Scale scores are a weighted mean across grades 3 - 8. Only schools reporting a Grade 8 scale score are included.

Claim #7: The Quality of NPS Teachers

“One problem was that the quality of teachers at Renew schools was mixed.” (p.188)

What the data really tell us:

- There is no evidence the quality of teachers at the “Renewal” schools was worse than any other school in Newark, charter or district.
- After “renewal,” the staffs of the targeted schools were less experienced and more white than before.

In the same way that NPS never presented any evidence the “Renew” schools were poor performers after accounting for student population characteristics, the district never presented evidence that teacher quality was any worse at “Renew” schools compared to the rest of the district.

Many of the protagonists in *The Prize* believe that NPS schools suffer from poor teacher quality. Russakoff dutifully reports their misgivings; what she doesn’t do is challenge them to show that the poorest performing schools in the system have the weakest teachers. Nor does she explore how teacher characteristics changed following Anderson’s “Renewal” plan.

In my 2015 testimony to the JCPS, I presented evidence on how the teaching staffs at the “Renew” schools had changed following their reconstitution. Figures 16 and 17 are from that presentation: they show that the staffs had become less experienced and had fewer black members following “renewal.”

Both teacher experience²³ and teacher-student racial alignment (particularly for racial

minority students)²⁴ have been found to be beneficial for student achievement outcomes. As if to illustrate this, Figure 18 shows the average growth percentiles in math for the year before and two years immediately after reconstitution for the “Renew” schools. Growth scores drop significantly following “renewal” and the subsequent changes in staff characteristics. The scores likely only bounce back in the second year because the new comparison groups for students at the schools have lower scores.²⁵ Growth percentiles in language arts follow a similar trend.

Teacher quality is a central theme of *The Prize*, yet Russakoff spends little time exploring how teaching staffs have changed in Newark under the reforms brought about by the Zuckerberg donation. The changes may well have meaningful effects in the district’s student outcomes.

²³ <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/how-teaching-experience-makes-a-difference/>

²⁴ Cann, C.N. (2015). “What School Movies and TFA Teach Us About Who Should Teach Urban Youth: Dominant Narratives as Public Pedagogy.” *Urban Education*, 50(3) 288–315.

Egalite, A.J., Kisida, B. & Winters, M.A. (2015). “Representation in the classroom: The effect of own-race teachers on student achievement.” *Economics of Education Review*, 45, 44–52.

²⁵ For a longer discussion, see: <https://njedpolicy.wordpress.com/2015/03/12/empirical-critique-of-one-newark-first-year-update/>

Figure 16

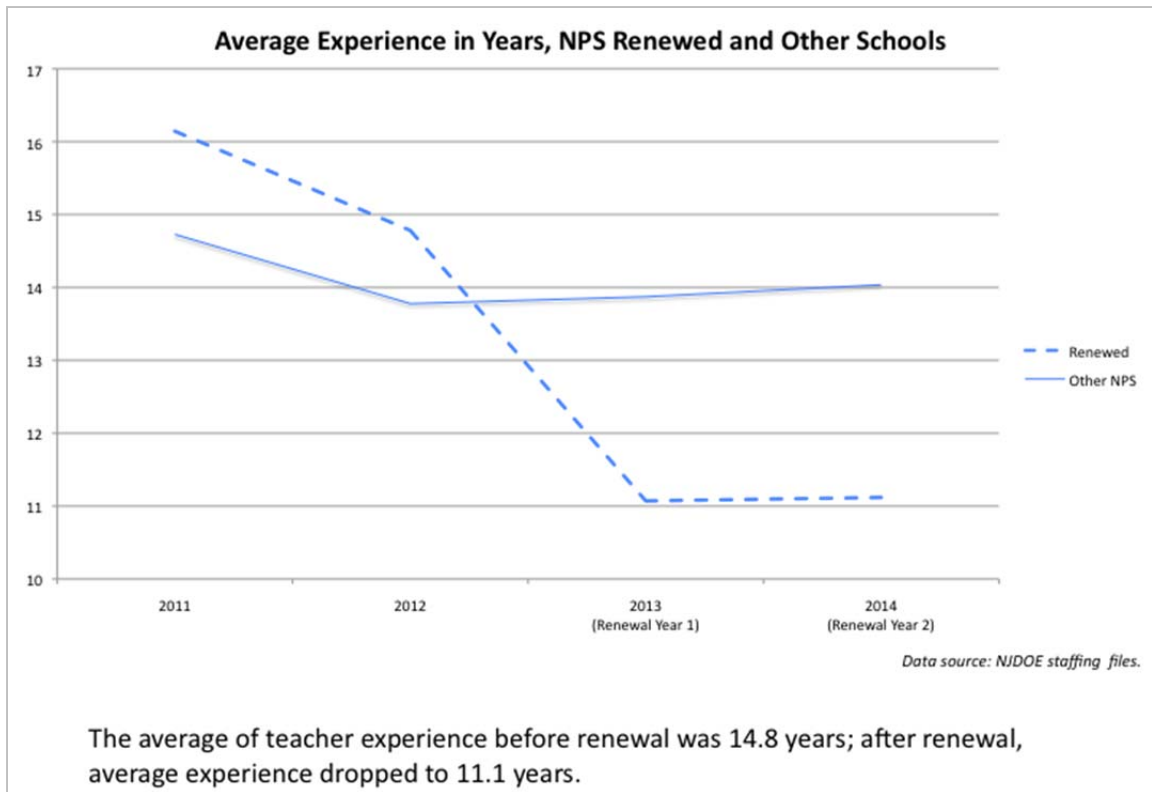


Figure 17

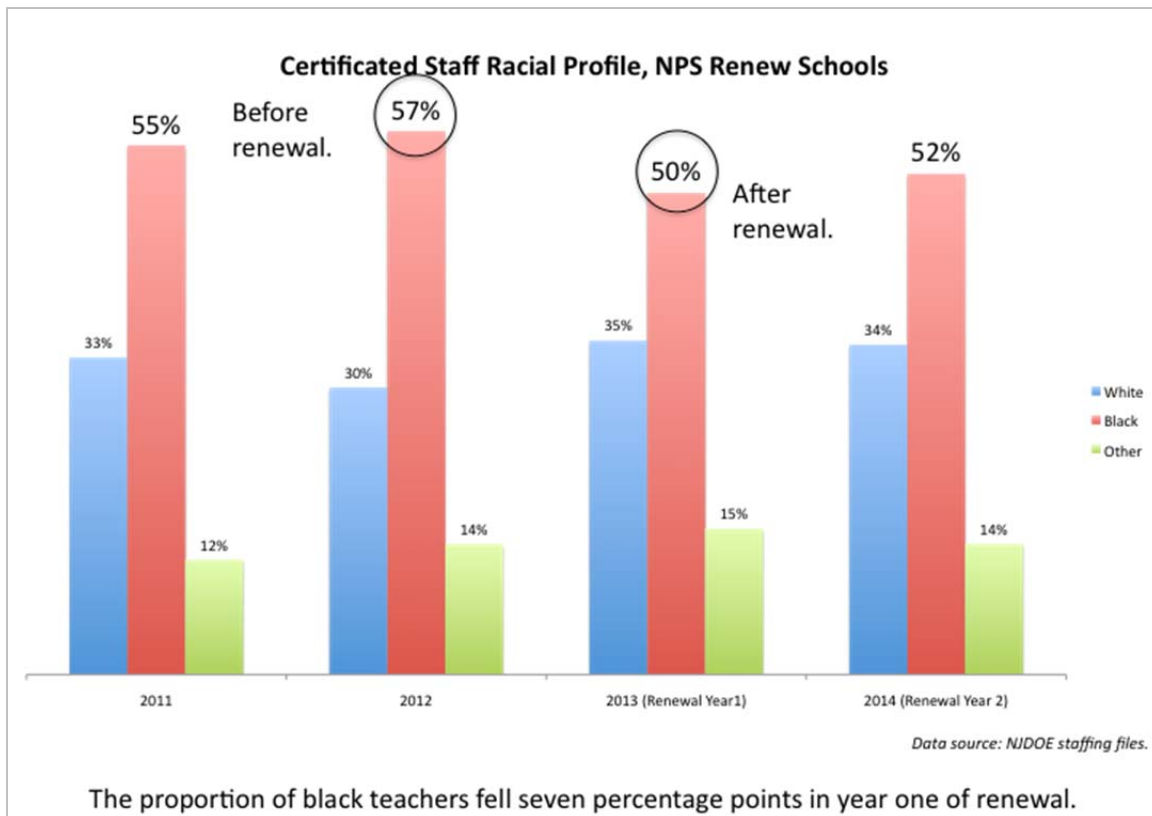
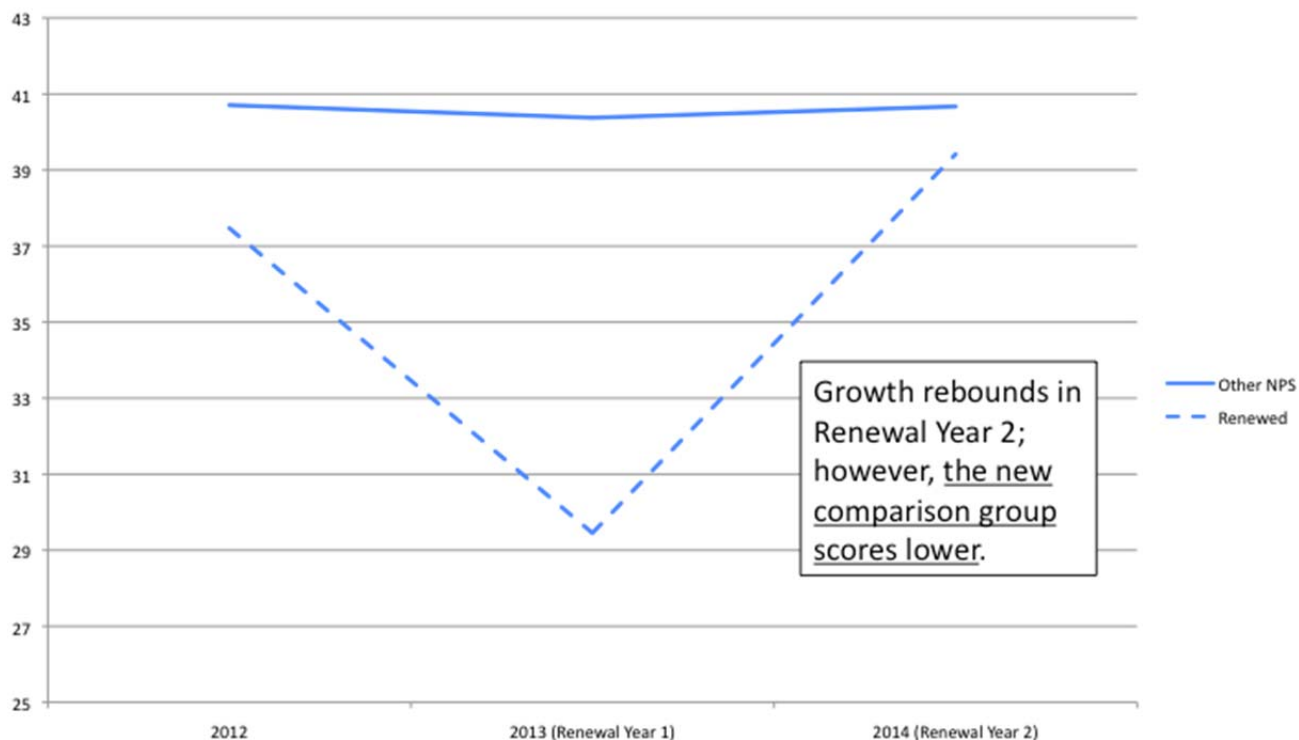


Figure 18

Math SGP, Renewed & Other NPS Schools



Data source: NJDOE School Performance Report files.

Summary

As a literary work, I enjoyed *The Prize*. Dale Russakoff is a fine writer, and her detailing of the politics behind the effort to reform Newark's schools is compelling and important.

But as a source for data points about Newark's schools and the results of those reform efforts, *The Prize* comes up short. Russakoff presents too many figures out of their proper context. She relies on single comparisons rather than looking at the entirety of the city's public district schools and its charter sector. Her use of proprietary data that cannot be vetted is unwarranted, especially when public data is available. And she does not adequately challenge the assertions of the "reformers" in her story, potentially leading her readers to conclusions that are not borne out by the available evidence.

Some of the data points Russakoff cites have already found their way into the mainstream media. This is unfortunate; the notions that NPS is an unusually bloated system, or that charter schools divert significantly more funds toward student instruction, or that Newark's "reformers" have accurately identified its poorest-performing schools, are simply not supported by the evidence.

Policy makers who read *The Prize* may be tempted to use Russakoff's book as a primary source for information about Newark's schools and education reform in general. They should resist that temptation; while *The Prize* is a worthy read for its political narrative, its misapplication of data renders it inadequate as an analysis of education policy.