

Newark Mayor Cory Booker's school reforms may not improve student performance, study says

Published: Tuesday, October 12, 2010, 6:15 AM Updated: Tuesday, October 12, 2010, 10:04 AM

Jessica Calefati/The Star-Ledger



(Aristide Economopoulos/The Star-LedgerNewark Mayor Cory Booker, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and NJ Gov. Chris Christie make their official announcement of the Facebook deal at Robert Treat Hotel.)

NEWARK — Newark Mayor Cory Booker's commitment to reform his city's struggling schools may not help increase students' performance in the classroom, according to research being presented today by the Institute on Education Law and Policy at Rutgers-Newark.

The study's authors examined public school governance models in nine cities demographically and politically similar to New Jersey's state-controlled school districts and

found "no conclusive evidence" that greater mayoral participation in their governance led to improved student test scores.

"Student achievement has been the toughest nut to crack," the report says. "While school leaders tout many improvements in test scores, attendance and graduation rates, in fact we were unable to establish conclusively that the change in governance had any causal relationship to improved performance."

The study, produced by Rutgers staff with specialties ranging from economics to education law, is the latest in a series of national reports to review the effect of mayoral control over a large urban district. It was produced for the state education department as it develops a plan to have local municipalities regain control over schools in Newark, Paterson and Jersey City — three urban districts that are operated by the state.

The study looks at districts in Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, Hartford, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.

Paul Tractenberg, a Rutgers law professor and a principal author of the study, said the investigators who produced the study concluded that mayoral control is not the "magic bullet" for urban school reform it's sometimes portrayed to be. The process also leaves parents and community groups complaining that they are left out of the policy-making process.

PREVIOUS COVERAGE:

- **N.J. law may bar Gov. Christie, Mayor Booker from taking active role in \$100M Newark schools grant**
- **Newark Mayor Booker says Facebook CEO's \$100M donation will not be used for private-school vouchers**
- **Newark residents sound off on how to improve city's school system**
- **Gov. Christie, on eve of Oprah appearance, says Newark schools 'in dire need'**

- **Complete coverage of Facebook CEO donating \$100M to Newark schools**

Researchers did, however, find that mayoral control brought stability, greater attention and increased public and private funding to the districts examined.

"Mayoral involvement, if not control, should at the very least be considered as part of an overall district improvement strategy," the report says.

The study's findings are particularly relevant to Newark, where Booker has formed a partnership with Gov. Chris Christie and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg in an attempt to transform Newark's failing schools. The trio appeared on the "Oprah Winfrey Show" three weeks ago to announce Zuckerberg's donation of a \$100 million challenge grant to jump-start the effort.

While Zuckerberg made his high-profile pledge under the expectation that Booker would lead the district's reformation, and Christie authorized the mayor to develop a reform plan with input from the community, Booker has no legal authority to fix any part of his city's broken school system.

David Sciarra, executive director of the Education Law Center in Newark, has threatened to sue the state if Booker makes any decisions about the Newark schools.

In response to the Rutgers report, a spokeswoman for Newark said city officials realize it takes multiple forces, not just leadership, to improve the public school system.

"The reform initiative we will pursue does not include a formal change to school governance as it is explored in the Rutgers report, but is rather a community-driven effort that will solicit the voices of all Newarkers — students, parents, teachers, local leaders and concerned citizens alike — to shape a shared vision for how best to improve our public schools," Esmeralda Diaz Cameron said.

"We recognize that no single governance structure or individual will transform our school district; it will take the collective action and participation of our entire community to ensure that every Newark child has access to a high quality education," she added.

Past research on the efficacy of mayoral control is mixed. Kenneth Wong, an education policy professor at Brown University, studied five years of student achievement data and 10 years of spending data in a dozen urban school districts with mayoral control, and found they outperformed their counterparts controlled by school boards.

"Mayoral control systems do indeed perform better than their peers," said Wong, author of "The Education Mayor," a book that details his findings. "The education mayors were not spending more than their urban peers to achieve success — they were spending differently, like routing more money toward instructional purposes."

Fredrick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., drew different conclusions in a policy paper on mayoral control.

"For all the optimism that Boston and New York City have engendered, there is remarkably little evidence that mayors or appointed boards are more effective at governing schools than elected boards," Hess wrote in his 2008 report, "Assessing the Case for Mayoral Control of Urban Schools."

When asked about what effect, if any, Booker's involvement in the Newark schools might yield, Hess said Booker could successfully push the system if he chooses to move aggressively, even if his official authority is limited.

"No one should interpret Booker's involvement as a guarantee of anything," Hess said, "but if he's smart about it, he will have a better chance of improving Newark's schools than the current arrangement does."