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The Record: Newark's windfall

THE RECORD

HERE CAN be no question — we need to do better by children growing up in Newark. Compared to their well-to-do suburban neighbors, they are far more likely to live in poverty, be separated from one or both parents and enter the criminal justice system. These consistently poor odds are fundamentally unjust and a waste of the vast human capital in our state's biggest city.

The clear key to unlocking this potential is Newark's public education system, with 40,000 students in its care. Taxpayers invest more than \$20,000 per student every year in Newark public schools, where students are as likely to drop out as they are to graduate. Among those who do enter college, many have such poor skills they are shunted into dead-end remedial classes and soon drop out. And windows of opportunity close, and the cycle of poverty grinds on.

It is against this backdrop that Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has decided to donate \$100 million to Newark, in a challenge grant to create an education foundation that will underwrite innovative projects in the city's public schools. He was inspired to make his philanthropic mark in education by his girlfriend, a former Teach for America fellow, and was attracted to Newark after meeting Mayor Cory Booker. His commitment was solidified after meeting Governor Christie and studying the odd-couple political partnership of the GOP governor and inner-city mayor.

It is an overtly generous gesture, certain to attract attention — already, the announcement has landed Zuckerberg, Booker and Christie on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." And like all such supersized presents, it raises questions about the strings attached and the authority the recipient cedes when accepting such a gift.

Zuckerberg, Christie and Booker batted away such concerns on Friday, concentrating instead on their earnest intentions and commitment to enlist local community leaders to create and realize a vision of excellence in Newark schools.

Using private, not public, money to launch educational experiments seems reasonable, especially in the current budget environment — so long as core educational programs remain supported by public dollars. Details are limited as to what those experiments might be, though both Booker and Christie support charter schools and Zuckerberg mentioned merit pay in his remarks Friday. They also talked up teacher accountability and hinted at the possibility of closing failing schools.

More significantly, the agreement reached by Zuckerberg, Christie and Booker has done what years of educational interventions and billions in state aid could not: It is essentially ending state takeover in Newark, since Christie is granting Booker jurisdiction over the public schools. Under law, Christie remains the boss, but Booker — not the state Department of Education — will be leading community conversations over the next few months about how Newark schools should improve. Let's hope the conversation includes students and teachers.

We support experimenting with mayoral control in Newark, especially given Booker's stated goal of building community consensus for school improvement plans. But this plan has been hatched without public debate and was engineered, in part, by a private citizen with no publicly granted authority to do so. That raises a philosophical question about the role of private engagement in public schools, which is voluntary and often unstable, since it is subject to market forces and corporate whims.

Still. The status quo has hardly served Newark students well, despite New Jersey's willingness to open its wallet and adopt sweeping curriculum and management reforms. And high-profile interest in the city and its schools is worthy of applause. It is a rare and wonderful thing to hear a passionate mayor speak of the genius of Newark's children on "Oprah," much less hear a Republican governor acknowledge education as a "civil right" before members of the press. These are very good starting points.



Love fest on Oprah Winfrey set.

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