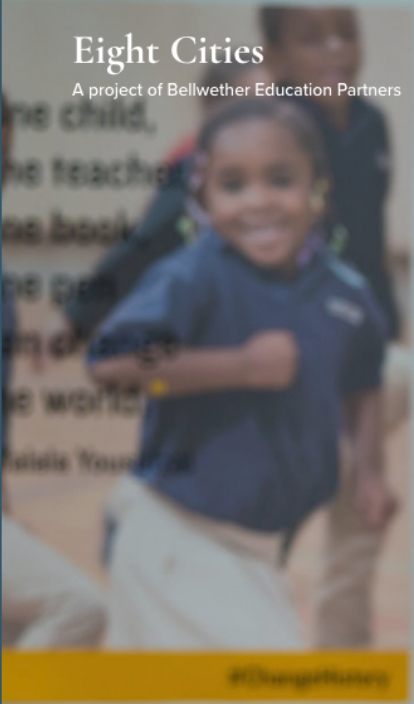


Eight Cities

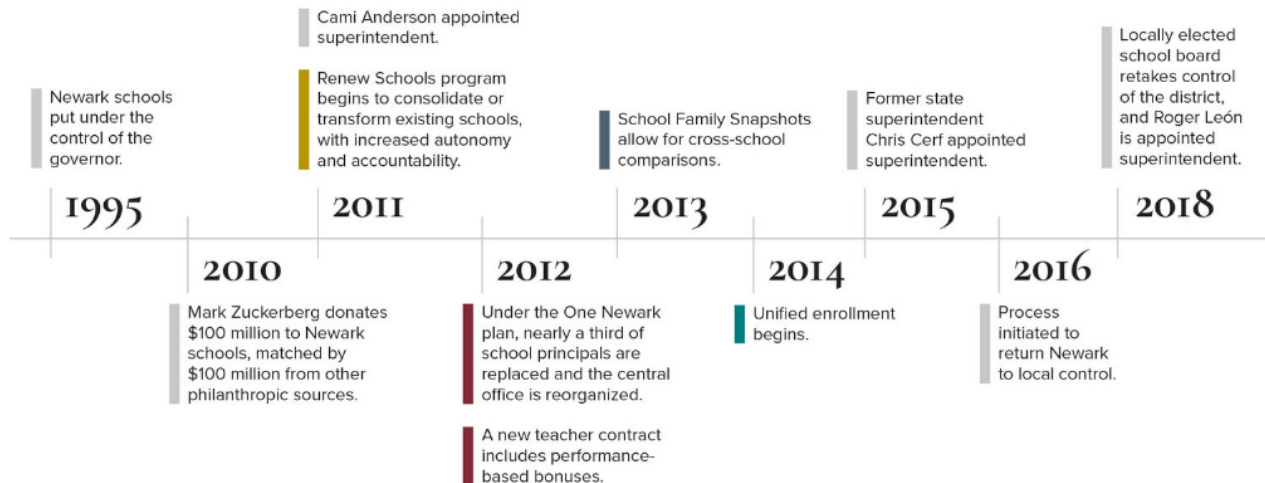
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Newark, New Jersey

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Summary (2010-Present):

- Skepticism of outside leaders and desire to regain local control
- Major philanthropic investments bring change — and distrust
- Investment in school principals as unit of change
- Measures to retain effective teachers
- Strong charter sector and district Renew Schools add high-quality options
- [2020 Newark Updates](#)

Student Achievement Highlights

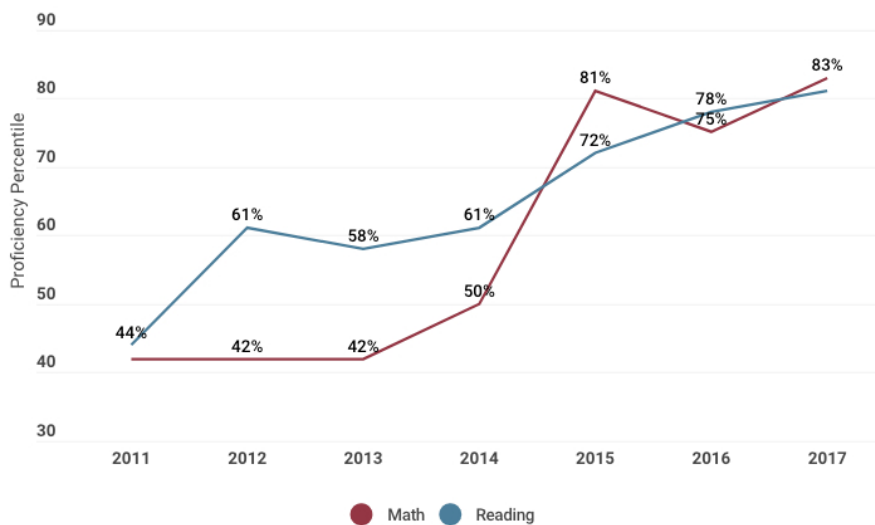
- Both district and charter school students in Newark showed consistent improvement in [average scores](#) on standardized tests from 2010 to 2014.
- Students in Newark charter schools from 2006 to 2012 [outperformed](#) peers attending district schools in Newark on average in reading and math, with 69% of Newark charter schools outperforming nearby district schools in reading, and 77% of Newark charter schools outperforming nearby district schools in math.
- The [proportion](#) of black students in Newark attending a school with average test scores that were higher than the state average increased from 9% in 2009 to 27% in 2017.

When Newark selected Roger León as its new superintendent in May 2018, it was a historic moment. León is the first Newark Public Schools (NPS) superintendent to serve alongside a locally elected school board after nearly a quarter-century of state control.

NPS was long seen as the poster child for district mismanagement, so New Jersey’s Department of Education took control of the district’s finances in 1993 and, later, of the district itself. While the district fought to remain independent, a detailed [report](#) from the state attorney general’s office made a strong case for state control. The document detailed “two different worlds” of Newark schools: The first involved students in “substandard facilities and poorly equipped classrooms and libraries,” while the second world for members of the Board of Education involved lavish vacations, fine restaurant meals, and new cars.

Since then, several state-appointed superintendents struggled to improve the district, weathering additional scandals and controversies but also implementing successful reforms that research shows have yielded transformative results for students.

Most notably, the tenure of superintendent Cami Anderson, beginning in 2011, resulted in dramatic improvements in student achievement. Her team’s bold and sometimes unpopular reforms were enough to prepare the district’s return to local control under her successor, Christopher Cerf. One study by MarGrady Research [found](#) that “in grades 3-8, Newark schools made significant strides in closing the achievement gap with the state and improved relative to similar high-need districts.” Another study at Harvard [found](#) that between 2011 and 2016, “Newark [schools] overall saw statistically significant and educationally meaningful improvements in English achievement growth” — and that much of the improvement was due to “shifting enrollment from lower- to higher-achievement growth [district and charter] schools.”



Note: Includes both district and charter schools
 Source: [Newark Public Schools](#)

Now emerging from over two decades of state control, Newark schools are vastly improved. A strong charter sector serves over 30 percent of Newark students, and district and Renew Schools have improved neighborhood offerings. In the past decade, NPS has addressed lack of public trust, personnel issues, central office reorganization, and school openings and closings, all while creating a better, leaner system of schools united by universal enrollment. Newark illustrates the impact that philanthropic funding and decisive action by bold leaders can have.

But Newark also illustrates the challenges behind the very same factors. The loss of local control and the failures of previously appointed superintendents meant many residents were leery of yet another string of reforms at their children's schools. Anderson and Cerf — and the philanthropists who invested in Newark during their tenures — were viewed as outsiders. The Newark story is more complicated than the one often told, which focuses on political upheaval and district controversies while overlooking student gains.

National attention focused on Newark after political leaders from different sides of the aisle formed an unusual alliance. Democratic Mayor Cory Booker and Republican Governor Chris Christie had known each other since the early 2000s, when Christie served as U.S. attorney for New Jersey. Sharing a commitment to Newark and public education, they secured an investment from Facebook Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg. In 2010, the three announced a \$100 million challenge grant to improve education in Newark. Other foundations met the challenge grant amount, eventually pledging a total of \$200 million to Newark schools.

While the public attention was notable, the \$200 million comprised only 4 percent of NPS' \$5 billion budget over the following five years. Booker's former chief policy advisor, De'Shawn Wright, assessed the grant's initial impact, saying, "\$100 million anywhere draws attention. As a Newarker, [it means] there are more people in this city who know about education, know who their superintendent is ... and are having a conversation, and for Newark, that is a good thing."



De'Shawn Wright

Then-Superintendent Clifford Janey resigned in early 2011 and was replaced by Christie's appointee, Cami Anderson. Anderson served as New York City's superintendent of alternative high schools and programs, where she oversaw services for students in suspension centers, drug treatment facilities, and correctional facilities, and had received national attention and local acclaim for getting results and disrupting the status quo for some of the city's hardest-to-serve students. Anderson stated the clear vision and philosophy she brought to her work: "Remember who you work for — you work for kids and ... you have to have the moral clarity and honesty to do what's best for [them]." Just as she experienced in *New York City* working under Joel Klein's Children First initiative, Anderson refocused her district on students' needs rather than adult interests. This core belief drove many of her decisions when politics got rough.

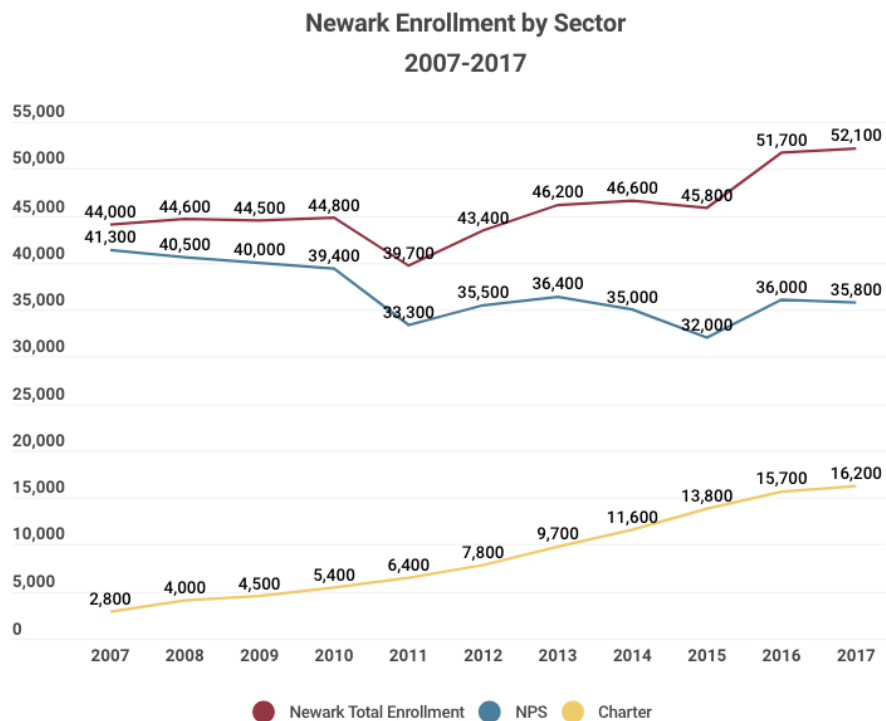
Anderson entered into a complex political environment during a fraught period of time. In addition to the distrust of outside philanthropy and despair about losing local control, some detractors mistrusted an outsider appointed by a white, Republican governor. Others bridled at what they perceived as Anderson's support for charter schools, which had grown steadily since 2004 and sparked contentious debates about their impact on existing neighborhood schools. But other community members welcomed her, noting that she came from a multiracial family and had deep relationships in Newark.

The challenge did not deter Anderson, who found serving in a smaller district appealing. After her time in New York City, she thought

NPS' 100 schools seemed like a manageable number for system-wide changes. She and her team began her tenure with a fact-finding mission — they visited schools and reviewed the data to assess whether “the schools [were] healthy.” The answer? In her words, “The level of failure was profound.” Of 15 K-8 schools in Newark’s South Ward, Anderson recalls “none with more than a quarter of students above proficiency in reading and math.”

Based on their inventory of NPS schools, Anderson’s team launched a strategic plan called *One Newark*, “a community-wide agenda to ensure all students are in excellent schools and thriving communities and are on the path to excel in college and 21st century careers.” One Newark aimed to improve talent within the district, move students into better schools, and leverage philanthropic dollars in key areas, including curriculum.

One Newark’s combined plan included closing, consolidating, and chartering schools and a multifaceted turnaround strategy to create Renew Schools. The ultimate goals were to increase student achievement and get the district back on solid financial footing. Between 2011 and 2015, Anderson closed 11 K-8 schools and consolidated or transformed existing schools into 16 K-8 Renew Schools through a combination of vision setting, strong school leadership, high-quality instruction, an expanded school day, additional resources, and family engagement. NPS also opened seven new district schools and closed three charter schools due to poor performance during this time. All these actions, though tumultuous, fundamentally changed Newark’s school landscape, especially for students who had gone to historically underperforming schools.



Source: *Moving Up Progress in Newark’s Schools From 2010 to 2017*

Anderson understood that finding top-notch principals to lead Renew Schools was key to success. Her strategy invested in “training, coaching, supporting, pushing, and empowering [principals],” seeing building leaders as key to the theory of change. She placed these “high skill, high will” principals in the Renew Schools, prioritizing longtime Newark leaders and residents. Of the eight principals selected, all came from within the NPS system, although only four had previously served as principals. This cohort was allowed greater autonomy over areas like budget and staffing, and received regular support, including monthly meetings with Anderson.

In addition to training principals, Anderson took an unusual step in 2014 by asking Uncommon Schools — a successful Newark-based charter management organization (CMO) that also operated schools in New York and Massachusetts — to take over and improve Alexander Street Elementary School, then one of the lowest-performing schools in the entire state. Under the terms of its agreement with NPS, Uncommon took over the operation of the entire school with the existing students rather than slowly building their enrollment by adding one or two grades per year, as many charter operators prefer to do. Within one year, students who couldn’t read, write, or do math on level were “outscored the students in the wealthiest suburbs.” By 2017, the campus had students exceeding the state average in both English language arts (ELA) and math by huge margins.



These dramatic results reflect a strong CMO willing to accept a challenge, leverage its experience, and mobilize talented educators to drive student improvement. After Alexander Street, Newark enlisted three other CMOs to turn around Madison Avenue, Bragaw Avenue, and Hawthorne Avenue schools and operate them as charter schools. Gabrielle Wvatt.



Gabrielle Wyatt

former executive director of strategy for NPS, notes that autonomies around “budget, staff, and curriculum under a nonprofit governance model” also played a crucial role. In many ways, this approach mirrored the creation of renaissance schools in Camden, but it was done through district leadership rather than special legislation and did not include Camden’s facility funding and longer time frame given to schools to develop.

This focus on strong leadership spread across fewer schools resulted in an initial decline in student performance but ultimately accelerated school improvement and resulted in better schools for more

kids. The Harvard study speculated the initial declines may have been due to a combination of factors, including new curriculum, new teachers, and student transitions to new schools. However, it also found that, over time, “much of the net change in achievement growth in Newark was driven by shifts in enrollment due to school closures, new school openings, and student choice.” Between 2011 and 2015, the study noted, “State and district leaders also facilitated the movement of students from less effective schools toward schools with faster rates of achievement growth” by closing 11 district and three charter schools and moving those students to Renew, district, or charter schools. This study confirms the importance of having better schools available to students displaced by school closings.

Newark’s charter sector also offered better performing options for some students. According to a 2012 Stanford Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) report, between 2008 and 2011, charter students in Newark gained an additional seven and a half months in reading and nine months in math over students in similar settings. An additional study by CREDO in 2015 found that students in Newark’s charter schools performed 77 percent better in math and 69 percent better in reading compared with their peers in traditional district schools. Because of results like these, parent demand for charters rose, and Newark’s charter sector grew alongside NPS reforms, serving 31 percent of Newark’s students by 2017.

The rapid growth in the number of charter schools didn’t come without challenges, however. The same CREDO report noted that Newark charter schools served 5 percent fewer special education students and 4 percent fewer English language learners (ELLs) than NPS (though nearly the same percentage of students in poverty), a disparity larger than many other cities in the study. Critics seized on the equity issue and raised concerns that district schools would become backstops for high-need students. Although the special education gap has narrowed over time, the ELL gap persists, and leaders in Newark are still grappling with these equity issues today.

Improvements in Newark have not been limited to the charter sector, however. MarGrady research found “the educational reforms over the past seven years have led to real improvement in the quality of public education in Newark.” Using a variety of analytic approaches, the study found positive growth in Newark’s 3rd- through 8th-grade students, and “for the city of Newark as a whole — including both district and charter schools — [there are] consistent gains going back to 2010.”

Given One Newark’s focus on improving talent within the district, it was vital that schools were staffed with high-quality principals and teachers. Anderson prioritized the stalled-out negotiations with Newark Teachers Union (NTU), whose members had worked two years without a contract. In 2012, Anderson negotiated a new contract, the first to include bonus pay based on classroom performance, offering “a 13.9 percent salary increase over three years for those rated ‘effective,’ [and] additional merit bonuses for those rated ‘highly effective.’” This contract funded back pay in the form of bonuses for the two years teachers worked without a contract, introduced peer review as part of teacher evaluations, and established incentive pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and subjects. Philanthropic funding, including nearly \$50 million of the Zuckerberg money, helped cover the costs of some of these provisions.

Still, the new contract did not offer a solution to “educators without placement,” teachers who receive full pay and benefits while not actively working. This phenomenon of “educators without placement” resulted from a variety of factors, including school closures or decreased enrollment, teachers’ reluctance to meet the increased demand of Renew Schools, and other teachers’ poor performance reviews. During her tenure, Anderson had to leave these teachers on the payroll because if layoffs occurred, seniority rules protected some of these ineffective educators over effective teachers who were still in classrooms.

On the positive side, the new evaluation system improved retention of effective teachers. One study found results suggesting “that teachers who are rated more effective under the new teacher evaluation system are retained at higher rates than teachers who receive lower ratings.” Creating a good environment for teachers using supportive measures such as peer review and incentive pay helped retain Newark’s best educators, and cities involved in reform should take note.

To ensure equity and access for students across a growing number of school types and options, Newark created a universal enrollment system, now known as Newark Enrolls. Wyatt helped implement this universal enrollment system for all Newark schools — traditional, Renew, and charter. The charter schools had to opt in to participate, and almost all of them did. The result was, according to Wyatt, “A more fair and transparent system for all families: one application, one enrollment cycle, and kids receiving their single-best offer.”

Juliana Worrell, Chief Schools Officer K-8 for Uncommon Schools, believes the universal enrollment system both benefited schools and increased competitive pressures on them by making it easier for parents to exercise choice. She says school operators recognize they “have to have a program parents want and will choose.” Cerf notes that “if parents aren’t choosing to go to a school, it becomes economically unsustainable.” In addition to the oversight of an authorizer, charter schools have the added pressure of attracting enough parents to stay open and thrive.





Juliana Worrell

Newark Enrolls focuses on increasing equity by creating a system all families can easily navigate. The system uses an algorithm to match students to schools based on a series of considerations such as ranked choices, siblings in that school, special needs, and high poverty rates, as well as whether the applicant comes from a school that was closing. The universal enrollment system makes it easier for families to decide among dozens of school choices so that students attend the one that best fits their needs. One researcher [cited Newark Enrolls](#) as a key reform behind NPS' improvements.

Anderson's reform efforts in Newark were made possible by strong political support from Booker and Christie, but over time, reliance on that support would prove a liability. In 2015, Booker left Newark to become a United States Senator. Christie, meanwhile, faced a political scandal. After months of [intense criticism](#) over One Newark from some community members and political leaders, Anderson chose to resign, even though the state had already renewed her contract.

In July 2015, the New Jersey Board of Education appointed former New Jersey Education Commissioner Christopher Cerf as the new NPS superintendent. He quickly set out to build on the groundwork laid by Anderson with the explicit goal of returning Newark to local control, which, he notes, "[was] the condition upon which I took the job." With universal enrollment established, his administration continued to focus on empowering Newark parents and students by providing and improving district choices while never wavering on the promise to return school control to the people of Newark.

In December 2017, Cerf announced he would resign on Feb. 1, 2018, the same day the Newark Board of Education assumed full authority of Newark's schools. In a press release announcing the official transition, Cerf [credited](#) the "collective focus by thousands of individuals" for creating "momentum in our schools and the undeniable progress being made by Newark students." In May 2018, after a national search, Newark's elected school board appointed Roger León, a Newark native, graduate of NPS, and longtime NPS administrator, as superintendent.



Christopher Cerf

León held a high-energy rally for nearly 7,000 NPS staff and teachers in late August at the Prudential Center. On stage, his image projected on Jumbotron, he said, "We're going to get someplace incredible; we're going to get there fast," as reported in [Chalkbeat](#).

While controversies and perceived political backlash in Newark have drawn a lot of national attention, this shouldn't distract from the evidence that Newark has, in fact, made major gains as a result of aggressive changes. Newark's experience shows that closing or replacing low-performing schools, retaining high-quality teachers, cultivating effective school-level leaders, and helping families transition from lower- to better-performing schools — whether district-run or charter — can generate meaningful improvements for students. As León moves into his new role, retaining what has worked in Newark will be important to drive continued progress.

Sen. Cory Booker's presidential campaign brought renewed national attention and scrutiny to Newark's reforms, and the extent to which the city's strategy has changed in recent years. In the short time since Roger León became Newark's first locally appointed superintendent in over 20 years, he has advanced large shifts in district policy and strategy. Newark voters approved the district's budget by a landslide, and León unveiled a strategic plan focused on community engagement and opposed to expansion in charter schools. At the end of 2019, León called for the closure of four charter schools up for renewal by the state, one of which was recommended for closure by the state school quality oversight body in accordance with its performance contract. In another big talent strategy shift, a new teachers contract ends performance-based bonuses while raising teacher pay, reverting to a traditional pay system that rewards advanced degrees.

Mayor Ras Baraka, who was reelected in 2018 to a four-year term, also called on the state to halt charter school expansion, while at the same time recognizing how many Newark students and families currently attend and advocate for charter schools. The era of rapid charter school expansion in Newark may be at an end, but existing schools are not stopping their work. In 2019 the Charter School Fund closed out its work, noting in its closing report that 33% of Newark students now attend one of 46 charter school campuses across the city.

Even as tides have shifted in Newark education, key legacies of earlier reforms remain in place, including increased test scores, graduation rates, and growth rates in both district and charter schools, supported by a unified enrollment system and a community that embraces its diverse array of schools.



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