

# A Bold Vision

An Interview with **The Honorable Cory A. Booker, Mayor of Newark, New Jersey**



Hon. Cory A. Booker

**EDITORS' NOTE** In July 2006, Cory Booker took the oath of office as Mayor of New Jersey's largest city and was reelected to a second term in May 2010. His political career began in 1998, after serving as Staff Attorney for the Urban Justice Center in Newark. Booker rose to prominence as Newark's Central Ward Councilman and served from 1998 to 2002. In April of 2011, TIME named Mayor Cory A. Booker to the 2011 TIME 100, the magazine's annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world. He is a member of Democrats for Education Reform, Columbia University Teachers College Board of Trustees, and the Black Alliance for Educational Options. Booker received his B.A. and M.A. from Stanford University, a B.A. in Modern History at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, and completed his law degree at Yale University.

**How have you been able to implement such major changes in Newark and convince people in the city and government that the change is real?**

The world outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside of you. If you see hope every time you open your eyes, then you can help, but if all you see are problems, that's all there will ever be. That is the truth about Newark.

When I became Mayor, I felt all the pieces were here for significant change. The toughest task was getting people to see it in the same compelling way we did after so many years of having focused on the negative.

So we did things early on that seemed to work and excited people's imaginations about what was possible in our city. We promoted our public safety by my running around on the streets of Newark until 4 AM, which captured the attention of a lot of our police force who were getting lulled by the challenges facing them. We went to people with outrageous, ambitious visions, like doing the biggest parks expansion in our city in a century. Creating a bold vision helped us get everyone pulling in the same direction.

**When you're looking for that kind of change, does your vision need to be focused or broad enough to drastically shake things up?**

You need to drastically shake things up. We're a city and a nation that has been dampened by low expectations for too long. I'd rather reach for the brass ring and lose than not stretch at all.

Incremental changes are important – you want to give people a feeling of momentum. But you also want people to believe we're called on in life to do the things others say are impossible.

We have an amazing network of reentry programs and we have invented things that were new in this country, like the first ever pro bono legal service project to help those coming out of the prison system clean up their records and open up economic opportunity. That came from our vision but also required that we not allow the times we stumbled or got bad press to undermine our loyalty to our calling as a community.

**How has your perspective been different from that of other leaders trying to bring about major change?**

I try to be sophisticated enough to recognize that we have real problems inherent in our federal legislature, but that I don't have the same parameters undermining my ability to reach across aisles to create coalitions.

Our federal government is currently set up in a way that has created very safe districts that pull people to the right or left in their primaries that has led to a bifurcated Congress that is getting more ideological on both sides and more base driven as opposed to being pragmatically driven towards the center, which is where most Americans are.

I'm blessed. I didn't get into office through a partisan election – Newark's elections are nonpartisan. I'm fortunate to have about a third of my national support coming from people who view themselves as conservative or Republican. So I have freedom in this job to be entrepreneurial, to be driven not by politics or an ideology but by pragmatism and a data driven analysis of facts, and that aids me in uniting people toward a common goal.

**You have taken a lead in education reform in Newark. How patient have you needed to be in dealing with this issue?**

We need to be powerfully impatient, while also recognizing that there is no easy answer. We have decided to exploit those areas where we can make quick changes in the lives of hundreds of kids. We saw there were certain providers in our city that were high achieving and decided to expand their footprint in Newark, so we raised the nation's largest charter school fund at that time – \$20 million – to source the expansion of our high performing charter schools.

We also saw there were a bunch of kids not being well served by our traditional public schools. So we again raised capital to seed schools for disaffected youth who were falling through the cracks.

We've created hundreds more high quality educational opportunities for our kids but we have to figure out how to get our entire system of 45,000 kids turned around. We've had some great ideas but they won't result in immediate, transformative change.

We know that kids who go to school for longer hours generally do better than kids who go to school for a shorter time. So in 2011, we started 15 schools on longer school days. That won't turn those schools around overnight, but those kids will benefit, especially those in the early grades.

**Is there a better understanding of the change taking place in Newark and the direction it's headed?**

We have a battle to fight in terms of perception as a city. But I now have the data showing that it is changing. Newark's population is growing dramatically for the first time in decades and businesses are coming into, instead of leaving, the city for the first time in decades. So there is a lot of hope in the city, but it's a long game.

**What have you accomplished in terms of the budget deficit and addressing fiscal challenges in the city?**

We've had to not just get more efficient and effective, but also to make the difficult choices to do the right thing by our taxpayers. So we have cut 20 percent of our city government employees and dramatically reorganized our city hall and city departments to get better at doing more while spending less.

These tasks take discipline and commitment, but they're a necessary transition that America as a whole will have to face up to because we can no longer continue to run government as we do now – we can't afford it.

You have to be creative in how you approach this but also fiercely loyal to your community in telling them the truth and helping them understand the difficult choices.

**Is it tough to remain upbeat when you're dealing with such significant challenges?**

As a leader, I can't reflect the vicissitudes of the daily temperature; I have to set the temperature through my attitude. Some days it takes more effort than others. ●