

Eight Cities

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Camden, New Jersey

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14 MINUTE READ

Urban Hope Act passed by NJ State Legislature allowing in-district charter schools (Renaissance schools) to take over low-performing neighborhood schools.

Launch of "Camden Commitment" plan, outlining district strategy and promises around safety, facilities, instruction, and educational support.

Renaissance schools approved in Camden.

Rouhanifard steps down as superintendent, replaced by Katrina McCombs.

2012

2014

2018

2013

2015

State takeover of district, Paymon Rouhanifard appointed Superintendent by governor.

Unified enrollment system introduced.

School Performance Frameworks

Performance Contracts

School Quality Oversight Bodies

School-Level Autonomy

New School Incubation

Talent Strategies

Unified Enrollment

Summary (2010-Present):

- Superintendent's community-based approach garners

Student Achievement Highlights

- From 2012 to 2018 the average four-year graduation rate in

Superintendent's community-based approach garners support

- Unique state policy catalyzes school improvement
- \$336 million in facilities funding attracts leaders and inspires families
- Top-flight school operators recruited to run neighborhood schools
- Unusual departure from performance management framework
- [2020 Camden Updates](#)

From 2012 to 2018 the average four-year graduation rate in Camden Public Schools increased 17 percentage points from 49% to 66%.

- Average student performance on state tests in Camden improved for all school types — district, charter, and Renaissance — between 2014 and 2017. Average reading proficiency improved from 7% in 2014 to 18% in 2017; math proficiency improved from 4% in 2014 to 13% in 2017.
- Test scores among Camden students in charter schools improved in reading and math at a faster rate than the state average in 2015, and kept pace with the state average improvement in 2016 and 2017.

When the New Jersey legislature passed the [Urban Hope Act \(UHA\)](#) in 2012, perhaps no city in the state was more in need of hope for educational improvement than Camden.

The once-booming home to Campbell's Soup, RCA Victor, and a robust shipbuilding industry, Camden's manufacturing prowess and working class pride was replaced with poverty, unemployment, and crime after the peak World War II manufacturing years and accelerated by riots in the late 1960s. As job opportunities decreased, many teachers were among the families who left the city. Schools, once the hub of the community, sank into decline. Surrounded with barbed wire fences and closed as soon as the school day ended, the buildings ceased to serve as community centers and playgrounds for neighborhood kids.

Bryan Morton, director of the nonprofit parent empowerment group Parents for Great Camden Schools, readily acknowledges that "a failed education system" has diminished life outcomes for many residents. By 2012, 23 of 26 schools in the district were on New Jersey's "worst schools" list, and less than one percent of Camden High School students graduated ready for college. Pervasive corruption and fraud at Camden's top high school came to light in 2006, adding to the community's deep-seated distrust of district administrators.

When the state took control of the district in 2013, Camden community members had more than enough reasons to be wary of new leadership.

As part of the state takeover, the school board relinquished its governance powers and became an advisory board. Governor Chris Christie appointed Paymon Rouhanifard to lead the charge after UHA's passage. But Rouhanifard started his new job by doing things differently than his predecessors. He spent his first hundred days not in the district office but out in the community. Even as a gubernatorial appointee, Rouhanifard saw listening to the community as an important part of his role. And he didn't wait for people to come to meetings — he talked to residents in their homes and neighborhoods, regularly attended high school sporting events, and eventually served as an assistant high school basketball coach.

Some skeptical Camden residents began to take notice. "I've lived in Camden for 45 years, and that was the first time a superintendent came to my door," Alicia Rivera said to The 74 Million. "He even gave me his number and everything. ... [I thought,] this is a good superintendent." Morton credits Rouhanifard's approach with community support for initiatives that advanced educational equity: "[It is] harder to oppose someone you know ... and trust, versus a boogeyman from the central office."



Contrary to narratives that position community engagement and ambitious progress for students as being in tension, Rouhanifard's community-oriented approach built trust and garnered results. Under his tenure, the number of failing schools reduced from 23 to eight, the district's graduation rate increased by 17 percent, the dropout rate was cut in half, and suspensions went down by 53 percent. Camden's proficiency rates on the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments are still unacceptably low — only 8.8 percent of students are proficient in math and only 12.2 percent are proficient in English language arts — but scores have been increasing at an impressive pace since 2014. The innovative UHA state law, relationships both inside and outside the city, newly recruited and top-flight school operators, and a willingness to try new approaches enabled many of these results.

Shortly after his arrival, Rouhanifard unveiled his strategic plan, called *The Camden Commitment*, designed “to ensure that every student in the city is enrolled in an excellent school that meets his or her unique needs.” This plan outlined the steps the district would take to achieve this goal while addressing key promises focused around safety, facilities, educational supports, quality instruction, and central office effectiveness. It provided a written promise around which Camden could frame its reforms and rebuild trust after previous failed efforts.

Rouhanifard, who had previously worked with education leaders in *New York City* and *Newark, New Jersey*, recognized that some reforms yielding progress in these larger cities weren't an option in the smaller city of Camden. Because most Camden families are without a reliable family vehicle, the city itself lacks a comprehensive public transportation system, and residents experience what Rouhanifard describes as “significant public safety challenges,” Camden families felt safest with schools close to their homes. As a result, Rouhanifard's strategy needed to, in his words, “put a huge premium on the role of the neighborhood school.”

To merge neighborhood-centered education with quality school operators, the UHA created a new tool: renaissance schools. These schools would be managed and operated by nonprofit entities in new or substantially renovated facilities. While many high-performing charter schools prefer to grow by building a school a few grades at a time, the provisions of the UHA stipulated that operators take over an existing school and offer a seat to every enrolled student. This model provided what Christopher Cerf, former New Jersey State commissioner and Newark Schools superintendent, describes as “the melding of turnarounds and charters to help serve neighborhood kids.” For Camden, this approach avoided displacing large groups of students by instead turning around failing schools. Rouhanifard described the UHA as the “best piece of legislation” he had seen for school renewal.

Because the policy aimed to encourage whole school takeovers, which are more challenging, it also set a higher bar for prospective operators. The UHA provisions required new operators to have experience with “high-risk, low-income urban district[s].” Out of nearly a dozen operators who applied to run renaissance schools, the New Jersey Commissioner of Education selected KIPP Public Charter Schools, Mastery Charter Schools, and Uncommon Schools. In Morton's words, these schools were selected because of their ability “to manage the budget and serve students of all levels ... to have a track record of success.” These three CMOs were the only applicants deemed to have long-term, proven experience with improving student achievement in previously low-performing districts. Camden was fortunate that three nationally renowned CMOs operating in the nearby cities of Newark and Philadelphia were open to expanding to Camden. Cities without similar high-quality, “ready and able” CMOs will have to find other options for their improvement efforts.

Although KIPP, Mastery, or Uncommon had not operated charter schools in Camden before the UHA passed, the city did have an existing charter sector with a strong track record of performance. A 2016 report from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools *found* that while charter students accounted for only 31 percent of students tested in Camden, they represented 70 percent of those scoring proficient in the city. Most of these existing schools, however, had grown slowly, grade by grade, and lacked expertise in turning around low-performing schools.

Recognizing the challenges involved in turnarounds, the UHA legislation offered additional support and incentives for qualified operators. Each renaissance school is authorized for 10 years and subject to periodic reviews, a longer term than the standard four-year charter for newly approved New Jersey charter schools. This provides what Joe Ferguson, chief operating officer of Mastery Schools, describes as an “appropriate runway” to work through the



Paymon Rouhanifard

Pillars of the Urban Hope Act



Renaissance schools must be approved by the local board of education and the state.

an appropriate remedy to meet through the challenges of turning around low-performing schools in high-poverty neighborhoods.

Funding and access to facilities provided additional incentives to school operators. Under the UHA, renaissance schools receive funding at a per-pupil amount equal to 95 percent of the district's per-pupil revenue. This is higher than the per-pupil funding for typical charter schools, which is typically 90 percent of a district's per-pupil revenue. The legislation originally required the first facility of a renaissance school project to be a newly constructed school facility, but it was amended in 2014 to allow operators to start in temporary facilities while buildings are built or substantially reconstructed. And while it also stipulates that the nonprofits operating the renaissance school shoulder the cost for the new facility, it has provisions that make the acquisition of land and the financing of construction and renovation less burdensome. For instance, the UHA allows for districts and the state to easily convey land to the operator and allows operators to use state funds for a lease, debt service, or mortgage for any facility constructed or acquired. Increased funding and lower barriers to facility acquisition and financing make launching schools easier.

New schools and school buildings became a source of pride for Camden's students and communities.

Morton recalls the incredulous response of parents accustomed to poorly maintained facilities and buildings that were either far too cold or too hot. The idea of a new building, or even just renovated interiors and new technology, was a visual sign of the commitment to students. Ferguson recalls parents who walked in and said, "Wow, look what we've accomplished here."

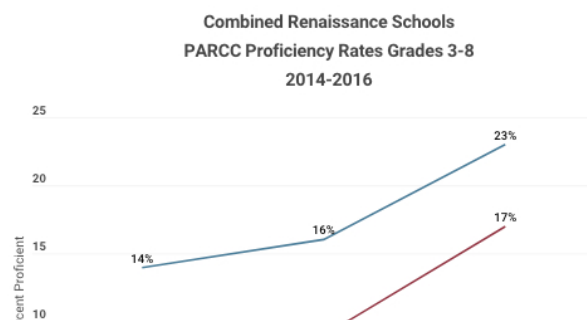
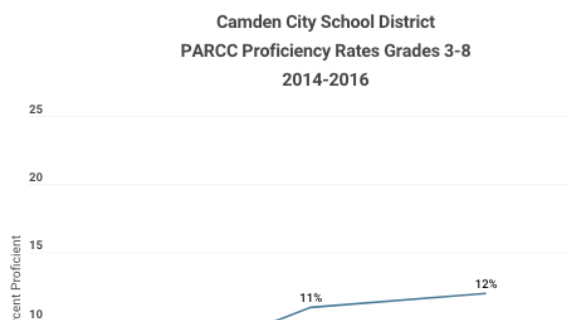
Increased funding and access to facilities are powerful tools to support creation of high-quality schools and incentivize quality operators. Mastery had previously considered applying to open a charter school in Camden, but the incentives provided by the UHA persuaded it to take the renaissance school route instead. Ferguson argues, "There [was] likely no other way we could have financed that [without the UHA]."

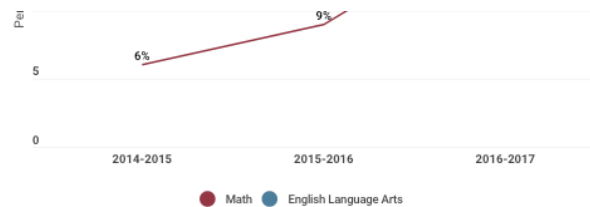
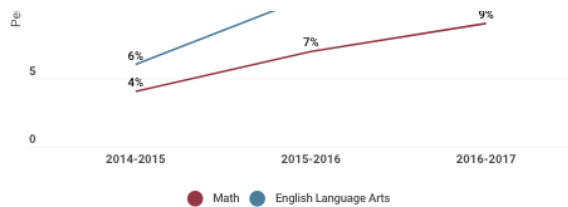
These incentives in turn meant operators invested in and got to know the Camden community. The UHA stipulated that school operator applications would be evaluated on a variety of measures, including the "strength of the support ... from the school district, Board of Education, and parents." Before KIPP, Mastery, and Uncommon were chosen, they worked to gain this support from parents in the neighborhoods they would serve. All three CMOs made themselves available for public forums, stepping in to answer questions, assuring parents that their child would have a seat, and pledging to minimize disruptions during the transitions. These operators provided parents with transportation to visit their existing schools in other cities. Seeing these attractive, well-run schools may have given parents a degree of trust and confidence. And these trips also connected CMO leaders to the communities and families they would soon be serving.

- Only nonprofit entities with experience operating a school in a high-risk, low-income urban district may operate renaissance schools.
- Renaissance schools must serve any student in their catchment area.
- Renaissance schools must build or substantially reconstruct a school facility.
- The state authorizes renaissance schools for 10 years and they are automatically renewed every five years, provided there's no breach of contract.

Since UHA passed in 2012 and the first renaissance schools opened in 2014, results have been impressive. At Uncommon Schools Camden Prep, 37.5 percent of students new to the school in 2017 who had not been proficient in either language arts or math gained proficiency after one year. Over that same year, Camden Prep's overall rate of math proficiency rose from 28.4 percent to 48.6 percent. Mastery Schools of Camden saw gains of 5 and 4.1 percentage points in math and language arts, respectively, in school years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017.

Together, the three renaissance school operators currently enroll just under 4,000 students, with contracts allowing them to eventually enroll over 9,000 students, or more than half of total district enrollment. As these schools have opened, traditional and renaissance test results have improved three years in a row on the PARCC assessment. Since the 2014-2015 school year, 3rd- through 8th-grade student scores in both math and English language arts have tripled, though district leaders emphasize more work must be done.





Note: Renaissance School operators include KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and Mastery.
Source: Camden City School District

Despite these results, some Camden education advocates did not support Rouhanifard's approach. Teachers' union president Keith Benson was quoted in the New York Times arguing that Rouhanifard spent "the bulk of his energy ... propping up renaissance schools," and not enough on the traditional schools. Benson and some other local critics viewed renaissance schools as takeovers rather than turnarounds because they replaced local administrators with outside operators.

Creating a new school type was not the only unusual — and, at times, unpopular — strategy in Camden. Rouhanifard also did away with the old school performance management system because he thought it put too much emphasis on end-of-year test scores and other short-term results, leading to unnecessary churn in the portfolio of school operators. Unlike some other system leaders who view school closures as a key tool for improving system results, Rouhanifard believes the "collateral damage" caused by ruthless accountability and annual school closures has the potential to supersede any academic gains.

Rather than focus on closing low-performing schools, Rouhanifard sought to "play the long game," in his words. He gave schools time to improve and relegated school closures to rare occurrences driven by low enrollment and fiscal pressures. Rouhanifard explains, "Let's have a zoomed-out conversation on how trauma impacts cognitive learning, the 30-million word gap, the lack of social networks and social capital our kids have, all of which are born out of poverty rooted in centuries of injustice. Maybe all those things speak to things so profound that we shouldn't be targeting an end-of-year test, which may not ever illustrate the beauty and intelligence and potential of a kid ... with challenges born out of his or her circumstances."

The district still pays attention to assessments and student performance but no longer uses the kind of school performance framework found in some other cities. Instead, parents can review information about a school's academic performance (including measures of student growth, proficiency, and graduation rates) through the Camden Enrollment website. This universal enrollment system is operated by an independent nonprofit and coordinates enrollment for all of Camden's schools: district, charter, and renaissance. Only one school in the city has opted out of the system. The equity of universal enrollment is one more way to provide the "continuity and stability" Rouhanifard says is central to Camden's strategy.

Will this more patient and less stringent approach reduce school churn and provide time for reforms to work, or will it simply remove the district's ability to intervene or close schools that fail to improve? Nearly all districts working toward strategic system improvement have created or are working to create a school performance framework, such as the ones in Denver and Chicago. Camden's approach may provide a counter-narrative or a cautionary tale, depending on how student achievement trends evolve over the coming years.

Rouhanifard resigned in 2018, placing the district in the hands of interim superintendent Katrina McCombs, a Camden native, dedicated educator, and former school principal who kicked off her leadership with a summer listening tour. In an interview with the Courier-Post, McCombs stated her priorities: "Continuing to boost student proficiency; recruiting and retaining highly trained, skilled and engaged teachers; and improving more of the district's aging school buildings." These echo Rouhanifard's approach, suggesting some degree of continuity.

Camden's reform history started more recently than Oakland, New Orleans, or Chicago, and as a result, leaders could learn from the experience of other cities and make different decisions in some key respects. But this also means the full impacts of these decisions and strategies have not yet fully played out.

Over the next few years, Camden's leaders will play an important role in determining whether progress continues, and whoever ultimately assumes the superintendent role will face a series of strategic questions. Will renaissance schools, established by legislation, continue to perform and expand as predicted? And will district leadership continue to meaningfully reach out to individuals in the community as reforms are pushed through? Can a small-city district stabilize or grow its school-age population and meet the demands of a high-poverty city? For the moment, Camden is moving forward with small-city strength, neighborhood pride, and increased educational opportunity.

"We shouldn't be targeting an end-of-year test, which may not ever illustrate the beauty and intelligence and potential of a kid ... with challenges born out of his or her circumstances."

March 2020 Update

Camden native Katrina McCombs was officially appointed Camden's superintendent in 2019 after serving in an acting capacity since 2018. In 2019 the city held local elections for three seats on an advisory school board, which is one of the steps toward a transition back to local control. The state is also under new leadership since 2018 with Governor Phil Murphy and Education Commissioner Lamont

Repollet. Under its newest strategic plan, Camden has not made significant changes in its implementation of the strategic pillars, notably its autonomous schools strategy via the Renewal Schools and unified enrollment system.

An end to state control is conditional on continued improvements in Camden's test scores, which McCombs has stated is her goal. Recent test scores and graduation rates point in a positive direction. Additionally, the district is increasing its emphasis on family and community involvement in district decisions, with new initiatives such as a monthly parent roundtable.

The biggest continuing challenges for Camden's schools are financial. In 2019, the state's budget increased education spending overall by over \$209 million and reallocated the balance of state aid in ways that could benefit Camden. Even still, the district faced a budget deficit of nearly \$30 million, driving leaders to close an elementary school (and convert it to an early childhood center) and lay off approximately 50 staff. An underenrolled high school narrowly avoided closure after receiving emergency aid from the state, but its facilities are still in need of repair. The long-term impacts of changes to the state's education budget are still unfolding

The following organizations are or were clients or funders of Bellwether: The 74 Million, Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, Mastery Charter Schools, and National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Bellwether authors maintained editorial control of these stories.



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