

New Jersey's Urban Hope Act



What is the Urban Hope Act?

The Urban Hope Act was originally signed into law in 2012 and was amended in 2013 and 2014. It allows certain public school districts to contract with nonprofit entities, including charter management organizations, to build or substantially reconstruct and then operate new public schools known as renaissance schools.

Who does the Urban Hope Act affect?

The Urban Hope Act originally applied to three failing school districts, as defined in statute: Newark, Trenton and Camden. Currently, only the Camden City School District has moved forward with renaissance school projects. The Camden City School District has partnered with three nonprofit charter networks, Uncommon Schools, Mastery and KIPP, to create new renaissance schools in Camden. Based on the dates in the original Urban Hope Act, as of January 2015, the window to create renaissance schools in Newark and Trenton has expired. However, a 2014 amendment to the Urban Hope Act extended the deadline for applications in Camden to January 2016.

What does the Urban Hope Act do?

Under the Act, the impacted local school districts may issue a request for proposal for a renaissance school project. Only nonprofit entities with experience operating a school in a high-risk, low-income urban district may submit proposals. The nonprofit must commit to building a new school facility or substantially reconstructing an existing school facility and then operating a new public school in that facility (it may contract with a for-profit company to build or reconstruct the facility). The proposal is then reviewed by the local school district, and, if the district accepts the proposal, it is then jointly submitted to the state Commissioner of Education for final approval.

What exactly is a renaissance school and how is it different from a charter school?

- **Authorization.** Unlike charter schools, renaissance schools must be approved by the local board of education, although in the case of districts run by the state, such as Camden, only the superintendent must approve. Please note that in Camden, the local advisory school board did vote to approve the renaissance schools.

- **Guaranteed Seats.** Renaissance schools also must serve their catchment area, the geographic area from which traditional neighborhood schools draw their student populations. This means that unlike charter schools, local neighborhoods within the school zone boundaries get first priority in renaissance school admissions. If there are additional spots available, a lottery is held for other students in the district. This requirement is relaxed if the school is built on non-public land; in this case, the renaissance school project must specify in its application to the commissioner the geographic area it will serve, and the commissioner must approve.
- **Governance.** Unlike charters, renaissance schools in Camden have a contract with the district that mandates whole-child learning, wraparound services, and community partnerships. The terms of the contract require renaissance schools to include community health centers and partner with local organizations that focus on the physical and emotional well-being of students.¹
- **Funding.** Renaissance schools are funded at 95 percent of the traditional school district's per-pupil cost, compared to 90 percent² for charter schools.
- **Facilities.** Renaissance schools must build or substantially reconstruct a school facility, which is not required of charter schools. The 2014 Urban Hope Act amendments allow renaissance school projects to use temporary facilities for up to three years while they are building or substantially reconstructing permanent facilities.

Are renaissance school teachers unionized?

Renaissance school teachers have the option of organizing themselves into a union if they choose to do so, but they are not automatically enrolled in a union.

¹ "The Camden Commitment January 2014," Camden Public Schools, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.camden.k12.nj.us/pdf/Camden-StratPlan-Jan27.pdf>.

² On average, New Jersey charter schools actually receive closer to 70 to 80 percent of the per-pupil funding that traditional schools receive for their students. The School Funding Reform Act of 2008 did not allow charter schools in New Jersey to receive several types of funding sources, the largest of which being adjustment aid, a special category of funding that was established to prevent districts from experiencing significant funding drops once the new funding formula went into effect. The fact that charter schools do not receive adjustment aid appears to have been an oversight in the School Funding Reform Act given that charters need access to these funds to sustain the programs and services needed for their students. It is also important to note the 95 percent per-pupil budget for renaissance school students does include access to adjustment aid, according to N.J.S.A. 18A:36C-7.e.