



**A CITY INVINCIBLE:  
SCHOOL  
CHOICE  
AND  
HOPE  
IN CAMDEN**

**A JERSEYCAN REPORT**





# A CITY INVINCIBLE: SCHOOL CHOICE AND HOPE IN CAMDEN

This report was published  
in February 2016 by JerseyCAN:  
The New Jersey Campaign for  
Achievement Now.

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# Introduction

Camden is a community of promise. With its culturally diverse roots and rich history as a bustling hub of industry, our city has immense potential. It teems with life, and is home to so many people dedicated to enriching their community with dreams of success for their children.

Those dreams and dedication inspired the city's school district to introduce the Camden Commitment in 2014. Superintendent Paymon Rouhanifard and community stakeholders surveyed the state of Camden schools looking for the answer to two questions: how to best give every student the high-quality education they deserve, and how to do it now rather than later. The initiative that followed, the Camden Commitment, set out to achieve five fundamental goals:<sup>1</sup>

1. **Safer schools**
2. **Modern buildings**
3. **Excellent teaching and learning**
4. **Parent access**
5. **Central office effectiveness**

But, as Camden residents know, these ambitious outcomes can only be achieved if the entire community is engaged and committed to the plan. In 2014, four public schools began the transformation to provide students and teachers with excellence in teaching and learning and safer, more modern learning environments. These schools are now known as 'renaissance schools,' public schools governed by district-charter school collaboration. In the first year, close to 600 students enrolled in renaissance schools.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, Camden turned an additional five of its lowest performing schools into renaissance schools. All or parts of Bon-sall Family School, East Camden Middle, McGraw Elementary, Molina Elementary and Whittier Family School partnered with three of the highest-performing charter networks in the country: KIPP, Uncommon Schools and Mastery Charter Schools.

Making sure each and every child receives a high-quality education will undoubtedly take time, commitment and hard work from school leaders, community members and parents. And while renaissance schools only recently opened their doors in Camden, it is clear that they already hold great promise for the city's children.

This report aims to highlight that promise. We start by examining the education landscape in Camden to show readers where the city currently stands and where we see initial signs of progress. Then, we turn to Camden parents for their reflections on Camden's schools, their desires for their own children and the advice they have for other parents navigating Camden's evolving education system.

<sup>1</sup> "The Camden Commitment," Camden Public Schools (January 2014), accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.camden.k12.nj.us/pdf/Camden-StratPlan-Jan27.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "Renaissance Schools: Annual Reports," State of New Jersey Department of Education, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.state.nj.us/education/renaissance/ar/camden/15/>

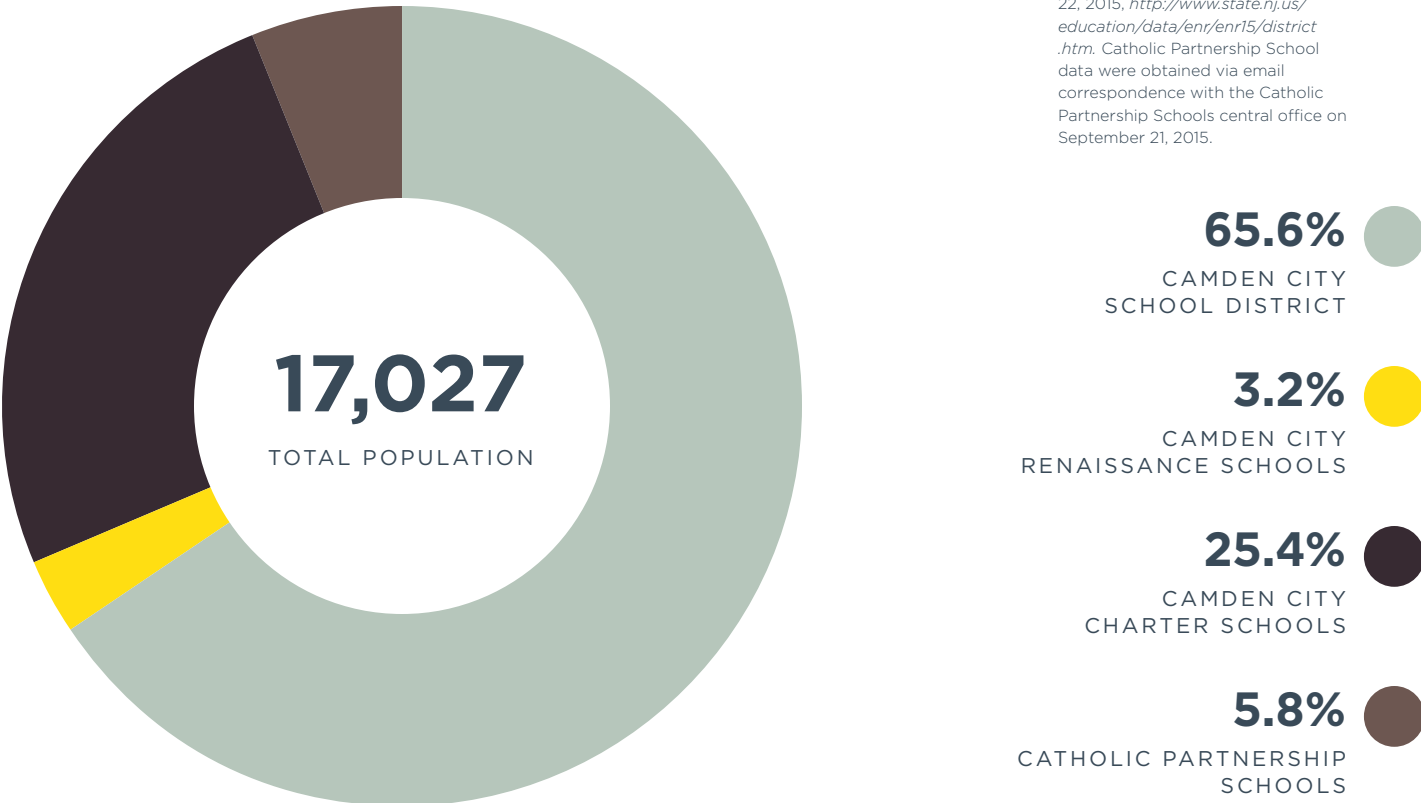
# Camden today

Camden consistently ranks among the country’s most economically challenged cities. As a result, the city’s student population is predominantly low-income. Camden schools also serve an ethnically and racially diverse population through a varied delivery system.

For example, close to half of Camden City School District students are African American, and over 50 percent are Hispanic. Nearly nine in ten are from low-income households, and one in ten are English-language learners. Renaissance schools serve an even higher percentage of students in poverty than other Camden schools; 93.4 percent of renaissance school students are from low-income households.

Approximately two-thirds of Camden students attend Camden City School District schools. The remaining students attend public charter schools (25.4 percent), Catholic Partnership schools (5.9 percent), and the new renaissance neighborhood schools (3.2 percent).

**FIGURE 1** Camden City student enrollment, 2014–2015<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Enrollment data for Camden City School District, Renaissance Schools, and charter schools were obtained from “DOE Data: 2014–2015 Enrollment,” New Jersey Department of Education, accessed September 22, 2015, <http://www.state.nj.us/education/data/enr/enr15/district.htm>. Catholic Partnership School data were obtained via email correspondence with the Catholic Partnership Schools central office on September 21, 2015.

**TABLE 1** Camden City student enrollment, 2014–2015<sup>4</sup>

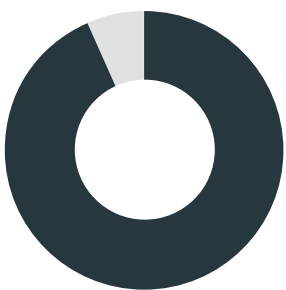
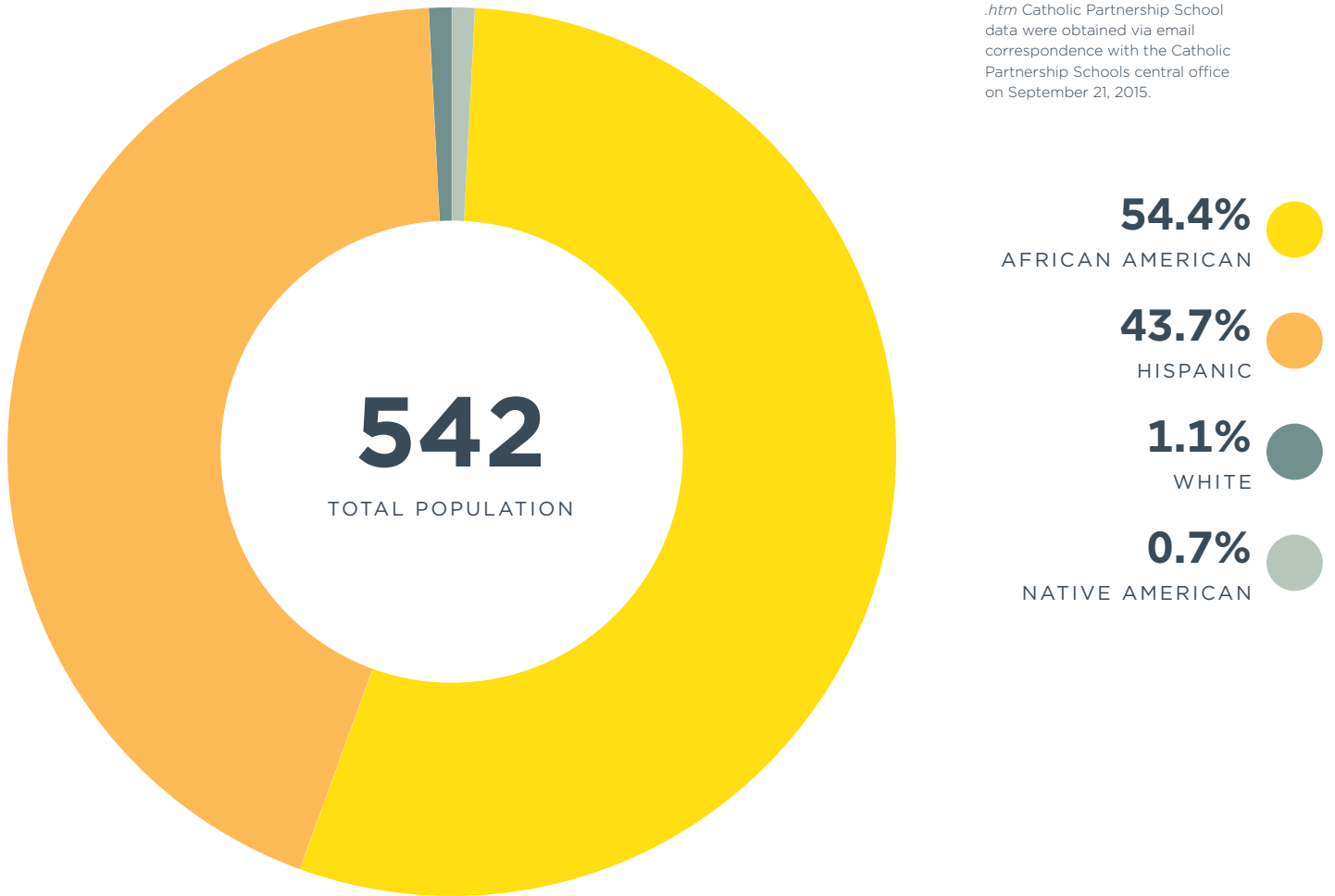
<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "2014 District Classification Rates, Ages 3-21," New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, accessed September 22, 2015, <http://www.state.nj.us/education/specialed/data/2014.htm>

SUBGROUP	CAMDEN CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	CAMDEN CITY RENAISSANCE SCHOOLS	CAMDEN CITY CHARTER SCHOOLS	CATHOLIC PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS
White	0.6%	1.1%	0.4%	1.2%
Black	46.8%	54.4%	43.2%	26.0%
Hispanic	51.7%	43.7%	55.1%	63.3%
Asian	0.9%	0%	0.8%	6.4%
Native American	0.04%	0.7%	0.1%	n/a
Hawaiian Native	0.03%	0%	0%	n/a
Two or more races	0%	0%	0.3%	1.6%
Other/ unknown	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.5%
Free/ reduced-price lunch eligible	89.2%	93.4%	89.2%	88.0%
Limited English proficiency	10.4%	6.8%	4.2%	15.0%
Special education <sup>5</sup>	20.2%	15.7%	8.4%	14.0%

**FIGURE 2** Camden City Renaissance Schools student enrollment, 2014–2015<sup>6</sup>

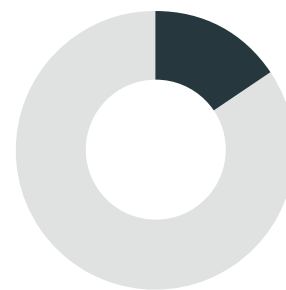
<sup>6</sup> Enrollment data for Camden City School District, Renaissance Schools, and charter schools were obtained from “DOE Data: 2014–2015 Enrollment,” New Jersey Department of Education, accessed September 22, 2015, <http://www.state.nj.us/education/data/enr/enr15/district.htm> Catholic Partnership School data were obtained via email correspondence with the Catholic Partnership Schools central office on September 21, 2015.



**93.4%**  
FREE/ REDUCED-PRICE  
LUNCH ELIGIBLE



**6.8%**  
LIMITED ENGLISH  
PROFICIENCY



**15.7%**  
SPECIAL  
EDUCATION

How are students performing in Camden’s traditional district schools?<sup>7</sup> During the 2013-2014 school year, only 18.3 percent of Camden City School District fourth-graders achieved proficiency on the state assessment in reading. That same year, only 19.4 percent of eighth-graders achieved proficiency in math. Achievement isn’t much better in high school. Just 25.2 percent of eleventh-grade students were proficient in math and 57.1 percent in Language Arts Literacy.

Only about 60 percent of Camden City School District students graduated on time in 2014.<sup>8</sup> Even fewer students enrolled in college.<sup>9</sup> Low graduation and college-going rates are certainly problematic, but Camden has struggled greatly just to get students to that point. Only 25 percent of students who enter Camden schools in kindergarten make it to the 12th grade.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Please note: At the time this report was written, scores from New Jersey’s new statewide standardized assessment, PARCC, were not fully available to the public. Therefore, we report data from the NJASK and HSPA.

<sup>8</sup> “2014 Graduation Rates,” State of New Jersey Department of Education, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.state.nj.us/education/data/grate/2014/>

<sup>9</sup> “Camden City High School Guide,” Camden City School District, accessed February 1, 2016, [http://www.camden.k12.nj.us/ourpages/auto/2015/4/22/50434202/Camden-High\\_School\\_Guide\\_English%20FINAL%20041515.pdf](http://www.camden.k12.nj.us/ourpages/auto/2015/4/22/50434202/Camden-High_School_Guide_English%20FINAL%20041515.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> “The Camden Commitment,” Camden City Schools, p. 7, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.camden.k12.nj.us/pdf/Camden-StratPlan-Jan27.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> “Grade 4 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge Spring 2014: NJASK 2014 State Summary,” New Jersey Department of Education, accessed September 22, 2015, <http://www.nj.gov/education/schools/achievement/14/njask4/>

**TABLE 2** New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) proficiency rates: 4th grade<sup>11</sup>

Percentage of Camden City School District 4th-graders scoring proficient or advanced, spring 2014

SUBGROUP	MATH		READING (ELA)	
	PROFICIENT	ADVANCED	PROFICIENT	ADVANCED
All students	27.2%	6.3%	18.2%	0.1%
Male	26.5%	6.0%	15.6%	0.2%
Female	27.8%	6.4%	21.1%	0%
Black	27.5%	5.1%	17.0%	0.2%
Hispanic	26.1%	6.3%	18.8%	0%
Asian	53.3%	26.7%	26.7%	0%
English-language learner	24.3%	5.4%	n/a	n/a
Special education	12.4%	1.0%	n/a	n/a
Economically disadvantaged	27.2%	6.4%	18.2%	0.1%
Not economically disadvantaged	29.4%	2.9%	20.6%	0%

**NOTE:** Demographic categories are labeled here as reported by the state. The following subgroups were eliminated from Tables 2, 3 and 4 because they were either too small to publicly report data due to privacy restrictions (or there are no students in the subgroup): “White” in Table 2;

“White,” “Asian,” “English-language learner,” “Special education” and “Not economically disadvantaged” in Table 3; “White,” “Asian,” “English-language learner,” “Special education,” and “Not economically disadvantaged” in Table 4.



**TABLE 3** New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) proficiency rates: 8th grade<sup>12</sup>

Percentage of Camden City School District 8th-graders scoring proficient or advanced, spring 2014

<sup>12</sup> "Grade 8 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge Spring 2014: NJASK 2014 State Summary," New Jersey Department of Education, accessed September 22, 2015, <http://www.nj.gov/education/schools/achievement/14/njask8/>

SUBGROUP	MATH		READING (ELA)	
	PROFICIENT	ADVANCED	PROFICIENT	ADVANCED
All students	17.3%	2.1%	31.6%	0.4%
Male	17.5%	3.1%	28.3%	0.2%
Female	17.3%	1.0%	35.4%	0.5%
Black	15.0%	0.8%	31.4%	0.3%
Hispanic	18.8%	2.7%	30.7%	0.2%
Economically disadvantaged	16.4%	2.0%	30.8%	0.4%

**TABLE 4** High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) proficiency rates<sup>13</sup>

Percentage of Camden City School District 11th-graders scoring proficient or advanced, spring 2014

<sup>13</sup> "High School Proficiency Assessment: NJ HSPA 2014 State Summary," New Jersey Department of Education, accessed September 22, 2015, <http://www.nj.gov/education/schools/achievement/14/hspa/>

SUBGROUP	MATH		LANGUAGE ARTS LITERACY	
	PROFICIENT	ADVANCED	PROFICIENT	ADVANCED
All students	23.6%	1.6%	54.5%	2.6%
Male	20.3%	1.8%	43.4%	2.7%
Female	26.5%	1.3%	65.0%	2.6%
Black	24.7%	1.8%	61.4%	4.2%
Hispanic	21.8%	1.0%	45.5%	1.0%
Economically disadvantaged	23.3%	1.6%	54.8%	2.7%

Despite the challenges students face, the tides are beginning to turn in Camden. Although only a little more than 60 percent of Camden City School District students graduated in 2014, this was a significant improvement compared to the previous year's rate of 53.4 percent.<sup>14</sup>

Internal assessments at renaissance schools are also encouraging.<sup>15</sup> At the time this report was written, renaissance schools did not yet have statewide assessment data available, so we took a look at annual reports submitted to the State. Uncommon's Camden Prep is starting to see results following a longer school year filled with extended school days. Kids in these schools are beginning to hit grade-level benchmarks: STEP reading assessments reveal that while just 19 percent of students entering in the fall hit literacy benchmarks, by June, 90 percent of students were at or above the end-of-year benchmark. Internal assessments also reveal that while just 36 percent of students scored proficient in math at the beginning of the year, by the spring, 84 percent were proficient.<sup>16</sup>

Now that's progress.

**14** "2013 Graduation Rates," State of New Jersey Department of Education, accessed February 12, 2016, <http://www.state.nj.us/education/data/grate/2013/>

**15** "Renaissance Schools: Annual Reports," State of New Jersey Department of Education, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.nj.gov/education/renaissance/ar/camden/15/>

**16** "Uncommon Schools Camden Prep Annual Report," State of New Jersey Department of Education (July 31, 2015), p. 9, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.nj.gov/education/renaissance/ar/camden/15/CamdenPrep.pdf>

**17** All interviews were conducted by JerseyCAN staff on July 21, 2015.

## What Camden parents are saying<sup>17</sup>

Since the introduction of the Camden Commitment, many parents, including the six introduced below, have capitalized on the opportunity to enroll their children in new schools, whether charter, renaissance or otherwise. Students are educated in safer, recently renovated or altogether new buildings. Schools have seen leadership changes. Most importantly, families have shown a groundswell of involvement in every aspect of their children's academic lives.

Parents know what works best for their children and have invested in their children's futures by exercising their ability to choose better, safer, more rigorous academic environments for their sons and daughters. The following stories confirm what many of us already know.

Renaissance schools are a part of the change Camden has been waiting for.

As a community, Camden shows extraordinary perseverance and determination in the face of daily adversity. The city's residents have seen riots break out in schools, endured police misconduct and brutality, and forgone their own opportunities to care for younger siblings. Still, they remain hopeful.



**ZULAY AGUILAR**

Puerto Rico native who moved to Camden in elementary school. Graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School in 1997 and attended Camden County College. Daughter Lailany is 9-years-old; started 5th grade at a Mastery School in Pyne Poynt this school year.

**QIANA MORTON**

North Camden resident. Attended Camden public schools, including high school at Woodrow Wilson High School; earned her GED in 2009 and attended Camden County College for a year. Has three children; one who attends Camden Community College, an 11-year-old who is attending Mastery this year, and another child who attends KIPP in the Lanning Square neighborhood.

**VANESA SERRANO**

Camden resident for over 20 years. Stopped going to Camden High School in 11th grade; received GED two years ago. Has two children at Camden Community Charter School; 13-year-old son, Antonio, is in 7th grade, and daughter Shayln, who has ADHD, is in 2nd grade.

“If you feel your child needs help in a particular area, if their current school can’t give it to them, then it’s up to you to find a school that can.”

—QIANA MORTON

Many parents seek out a better path for their kids because they believe a piece of the American dream still belongs to them. Empowered by the Camden Commitment, the six parents in this report each took different paths towards selecting the best education for their child.

They share only one thing in common: the power to choose.

Whether enrolling their children in renaissance or charter schools, or putting them in different traditional public schools, these parents have exercised their right to make the best decision for their families. Many parents shared that it has been a difficult journey, but one that has already shown incredible results. In fact, all six families shared that their children are now more engaged, mature, academically inclined, and genuinely eager to attend school.



**JULIO MONTANEZ**

North Camden resident. Attended public school at Cooper’s Poynt, and then attended a Camden County vocational high school, Pennsauken Technical. Has two daughters, a 6th grader and a 2nd grader, who both attend Cooper’s Poynt School.

**ALICIA RIVIERA**

North Camden resident for over 25 years. Attended Woodrow Wilson High School until 10th grade. Has three daughters; one graduated from Chestnut Hill College, one is special needs, graduated from Camden Promise and attends Camden County College, and the youngest has down syndrome and attends East Camden Middle School, now a Mastery renaissance school.

**TAMIA INGALLS**

North Camden resident. 18-year-old daughter recently graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School; 13-year-old attends Cooper’s Poynt School. Has been a vocal advocate for improved school safety.

Their stories are proof that when empowered to take advantage of new opportunities in their communities, parents can and do seek out success for their children. Here’s what we learned from these inspiring mothers and fathers.

***Resilience.***

The parents we spoke with hail from a long line of Camden residents who did not graduate high school on time, if at all. They have struggled without a high school diploma, gone through temporary employment services, and worked part-time jobs. But with the support of family, friends and community members, they have earned GEDs or been certified for a vocational profession.

They are proud of where they came from and the education they have received – both in the classroom and at home. Camden has given them opportunities. It has given them the space to grow.

Now, they want even more for their children. These parents are eager to make use of the growing number of new school options in Camden. With the introduction of new renaissance and charter schools, the Camden Commitment is striving to make good on its promises to provide an excellent education for every child. As Qiana Morton sees it,

more Camden families are putting their children in these schools because second-, third- and fourth-generation parents want something different for their children than what they grew up with.

***Desire.***

For many parents, the quality school choices that followed the Camden Commitment offered a sharp contrast to how challenging things had been for their children. When Vanesa Serrano, a mother of three, learned her eleven-year-old son Antonio was being bullied, it wasn't because the teachers or principal at the district elementary school he attended informed her. It was only when her son's younger cousin told her how bad it was that she knew something was wrong.

When Alicia Riviera's oldest daughter, a special needs student, was bullied and denied access to the resources she needed, she was handed off to another public school, and then another, and then another, until their services ran out.

These parents know what they want in a good school. They want strong communication between teachers and families. They want a safe, supportive learning environment for their children. But that is not always the environment their children have been in.

Tamia Ingalls, a long-time Camden resident and mother of two, remembers, in vivid detail, the year her daughter was attacked at school for 20 minutes before a teacher or security guard ever came.

She is not alone.

Alicia, Vanesa and Zulay Aguilar all described instances when their

“There *are* good schools out there, you just have to get in there and fight for your kids. If you don't fight for your kids, who will?”

—ALICIA RIVIERA

children faced danger at school. When another student hit Zulay's daughter in the face during recess, Zulay was not immediately notified.

Parents like Tamia and Zulay want increased security and safety for their children. They want new buildings, safer grounds, modern technology and an end to bullying. They want to rest easy knowing their children are safe.

They also want better communication between teachers and parents. They want more after-school activities, better counseling and higher-quality services for English-language learners and special needs students.

But more than anything, parents want their kids to have a better shot at success than they did. They want to see their kids graduate on time, get accepted into college and be as ready as possible when that first day of college comes. They want learning guided by passions and interests and individualized student attention. They want teachers and school administrators who show that they care.

And with the chance to send their children to schools backed by the Camden Commitment, they are starting to get what they want.

### **Outcomes.**

“This teacher actually understands where I’m coming from.”

—VANESA SERRANO

It doesn’t take long when speaking with these parents to see just how dramatic the change has been for them and their children. Since putting their kids in new Mastery and Uncommon schools, some parents have seen turnarounds better than they could have imagined. Teachers are more involved. Students are more engaged. Parents stay more informed.

The structural and academic advancements these schools offer, such as full-day learning and built-in parent involvement, have driven student success and student happiness. Parents say their children come home from school excited to share stories from their day. They feel adequately challenged by lessons and can communicate their needs better. Parents say their kids are able to better interact with their peers and their parents. Zulay Aguilar noticed changes in her own daughter after just a short time in a Mastery summer program. “She was very close-minded, and now she’s open to new possibilities.”

Before enrolling in Camden Community Charter School, Vanesa Serrano’s son struggled in class and hid his challenges from his mom. Now, he comes home saying he wants to go to college. For Vanesa, the changes she has seen in her son can be summed up in two words: “He blossomed.” For parents who may not have earned high school diplomas themselves, hearing their children share dreams of going to college is the exact expression of hope that Camden promises.

Hope persists for students with special needs, as well. Parents said

# “He blossomed.”

—VANESA SERRANO

the teachers at renaissance and charter schools are attuned to their students’ needs and are communicative with parents about how to meet them. Vanesa’s daughter, a second-grader at Camden Community Charter School, has struggled with ADHD for years. When her new teacher saw how hard she was working to keep up with the rest of the class, she began giving her one-on-one attention. But her teacher didn’t stop there. She reached out to an overwhelmed Vanesa with a hug and helpful suggestions for how to continue the progress made in the classroom at home. Thanks to their shared efforts, Vanesa’s daughter now laughs, talks and goes to school with a smile on her face. As Vanesa puts it, “This teacher actually understands where I’m coming from.”

Parents have seen higher scores, better behavior, improved relationships with teachers and administrators and a newfound appreciation for learning. By taking a chance on a new school, these parents have seen real changes in their students and a real sense of hope for their future.

## ***Advice.***

When asked what advice these parents had for other families facing the same challenges, they all had the same thing to say: get more involved.

Julio, Tamia and Zulay attend school board meetings. Vanesa volunteers for Camden’s little league. Alicia goes to PTA meetings. These parents have seen the improvements that come when they get involved and stay actively engaged in their child’s learning.

The parents we spoke with also stressed their role as advocates. To them, that includes ensuring their child’s scholastic needs are met, regularly investigating how their child is doing, engaging administrators and teachers and setting a good example. As Qiana explained, “If you feel your child needs help in a particular area, if their current school can’t give it to them, then it’s up to you to find a school that can.”

Vanesa shared similar thoughts. “It’s up to you to actually make a change. Take a chance on your child’s life and make sure it’s completely good for them and for you. Make sure you know that they’re going to be on the right path and that they’re in the right school.”

Alicia added, “There are good schools out there, you just have to get in there and fight for your kids. If you don’t fight for your kids, who will?”

# Conclusion

Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, Camden has struggled with its share of challenges, from a history of segregation and systemic inequity to debilitating poverty and crime. While some of these problems still linger, the city is on the brink of a rebirth. It's a promise that the best years are still to come.

At the center of that promise lies high-quality school options. We have seen successes for families who are empowered to enroll their children in schools of their choice across the city. And we have begun to see progress when the community collectively comes together in support of renaissance schools. We know that educational success for all of Camden cannot work in isolation. It will take time, commitment and grit.

But if all parents believe in Camden like Alicia Riviera does, the future will be even brighter in the years to come. "I'm teaching my kids to give back to Camden," Riviera said, "because if Camden gave to them, why can't they come back and give to other kids by teaching them?"

Hope is on the horizon. Schools in Camden and committed adults have already proven what is possible on a small scale. Now is the time to build upon that early success and ensure that each and every student in Camden is provided with a quality education and a chance at a brighter future.



# About JerseyCAN

JerseyCAN: The New Jersey Campaign for Achievement Now launched in the spring of 2013 as an education research and advocacy organization that brings together education leaders from across the state and arms them with top-notch education research and policy analysis to enact smart education policy. We believe every New Jersey child should have access to a great public school, because great schools change everything. We are a branch of 50CAN: The 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now, a growing national network of state-based education reform advocacy groups with campaigns in Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island based on the groundbreaking model developed by ConnCAN in Connecticut.

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