



How Building a Charter School Has Drawn Parents, Poor Neighborhoods, and Rutgers-Camden University into a Transformative Partnership

Gloria Bonilla Santiago, Rutgers University-Camden

In the 1990s parents, students, faculty and staff at the Rutgers Camden Campus set out to launch a unique community development experiment, the Community Learning Center, intended to enhance education and improve supports for a community development and capacity building effort. A sixty-five person Working Group Committee, composed of parents, faculty, staff, community partners put together a strategic plan to transform the school district. Today the Community Leadership Center at Rutgers Camden New Jersey is home to the Leadership, Education and Partnership (or “LEAP”) Academy University Charter School, which includes three academies focused on math and science, business, and liberal arts. Organizing parents has been a big strength of this charter school. Parents learn how to build capacity for the school, while the school leadership team builds new schools, rehabs old housing, and develops a comprehensive approach for reforming schools in need of improvement.

For nearly two decades, this collaboration has served as a model for community resource sharing and capacity-building. Many educational programs have been established, and community development efforts have transformed an entire neighborhood known as “North Vietnam.” Local parents refer to community improvements as the “Miracle of Cooper Street”.

How Cooperation Grew in Camden

Marginalized communities such as Camden city struggle with loss of manufacturing jobs, racial discrimination, poor schools, and newly arrived immigrants without skills – and must meet these challenges amidst public and private disinvestment. The city was essentially abandoned by government and private sector businesses, leaving people in the community without many job opportunities. To make progress and get access to new resources, Camden needed its institutions of higher education to help people leverage social network and individual skills to improve schools and foster community development.

Rutgers Camden Community Learning Center started the Parent Academy for School Reform and trained a group of parents who successfully advocated for the passage in 1997 of the first charter school law in New Jersey. In addition, the Community Learning Center brought together undergraduate and graduate students, university stakeholders, community experts, clergy, school teachers, parents, children, local schools, and business to draw a strategic plan for the new school and its vision. This led to the opening of the first and most successful charter school in Camden, a school that is unique in that it includes programs for infants all the way through school to college admission (at Rutgers Camden or other universities). Since 2005, the school has sustained a 100% graduation rate and has placed all of its graduates in colleges (where 90% stay enrolled and do not drop out). Many Camden charter school graduates are returning to the city to work and teach at

the school. All parents have gotten involved with their children's education, and some fifteen thousand families have gotten involved in advocating for improvements.

This work has depended on an understanding that enhanced civic capacity is one of the most important and tangible results of effective efforts to address local problems like poverty and social marginality. Civic capacity grows when business leaders, parents, educators, state and local stakeholders, non-profit groups, and others all come together to tackle issues of community-wide importance – in this case the challenge of building an excellent charter school with strong community engagement.. Camden was struggling with resource deficits and losses, and those who launched this project had to work together to marshal the wherewithal to get parents involved despite poverty and a sense of marginality. As people came together, they found ways to leverage resources and influence policy beyond the local level. This was part of the strategy to get the school built. In the process, participants in this collaboration also found ways to improve the wellbeing of parents through informal efforts and organized programs supported by the Rutgers Community Learning Center staff. As more people got involved to further their own interests, they learned the power of cooperation to leverage resources for the new charter school district that transformed Cooper Street. Many elements – visionary leadership, community engagement, and partnerships with the university – helped the project to succeed.

Larger Lessons from a Model Project

The Camden experiment holds a number of lessons for projects of this sort:

- Public charters schools can drive neighborhood revitalization. When university experts and reformers work at the same time for educational improvements and community revitalization, they can foster stronger relationships with local people and work with them to leverage new resources from government and private elites. Building anchor institutions like charter schools enhances neighborhood improvement efforts and helps to connect young people to constructive norms and life choices. Supporting and mobilizing parents are key steps, because parents can become anchors and leaders in distressed areas where resources are scarce yet the need for quality schools is greatest.
- Building the charter school engaged and inspired university staff, faculty, and students – helping them all learn to cooperate with parents and others in the surrounding community. University programs were enlivened through seminars focused on the local community and ways to support it. University administrative officials devised incentives to encourage faculty to become more engaged in community research and development.
- Both the university and the community have benefitted and learned from the Camden project. University faculty and students carried lessons they learned in the surrounding community back into classrooms. Multidisciplinary teams helped to design community interventions – and then learn from them. In turn, Camden children and families gain from collaboration with the university, not just from efforts to improve the surrounding community, but also from dual enrollment arrangements between the charter school to the college and from improved access to college for local students.

Hopefully, other universities and communities can take inspiration from the Camden model to launch or improve their own collaborative efforts to marry educational improvements to community development.