WORKING DRAFT: NOT FOR CITATION OR DISSEMINATION

Finding a Middle Way? The Reform of Public Education in Camden

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I. Introduction

Camden, NJ, a small city of roughly 75,000 residents set along the Delaware River across from Philadelphia, has experienced substantial changes in its ecology of public education over the past ten years. The city motto of Camden, *In a Dream, I Saw a City Invincible*, reflects a community with pride and history, but alongside that pride and history are deep and longstanding challenges. A state takeover in 2013, which led to the appointment of a young outsider superintendent (Paymon Rouhanifard), began a process of introducing a broad set of changes. Rouhanifard's distinct approach sought to build relationships with a community that was skeptical about a leader that it did not select, and those efforts fostered direct communication and closer connection with families than seen in other cities with similar state-imposed leadership changes (Bulkley, Christman, & Gold, 2010).

Among the most significant changes was the opening of new, semi-autonomous, "Renaissance schools," a new model of publicly-funded schools that combined the substantial autonomy of charter schools with a closer tie to the district in which they sit in their role as neighborhood schools. By spring of 2019, three years after the opening of Renaissance schools, they served over 20% of students in the city. Other changes included a combination of reforms associated with the idea of "portfolio management," including school closures, management of schools by outside providers, and the introduction of a common enrollment system (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010; Hill, 1995; Hill, Campbell, & Gross, 2012). These changes, though, were coupled with a focus on building the quality of district run schools using strategies such as new leaders and additional training for those leaders, more staffing supports, and a concerted effort to reach out to and connect with the community of Camden.

In a short period of time, there were signs of improvement in areas including test scores and graduation rates (Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), 2019a). Coupled with these changes were major challenges faced by Rouhanifard and his team. These included layoffs and budget shortages within the Camden City School District (CCSD), linked to changing enrollment patterns between district-run and more autonomous schools. As well, while some within the community came to view the changes positively, others felt disconnected and voiceless not only in terms of changes in public schooling but broader changes within the city as well.

This combination of external actors, governance change, and struggles within a community is a familiar story to those studying urban system change. Yet, while it resonates with reform efforts seen elsewhere, the attempt to find a set of more pragmatic strategies and to build a sustainable coalition makes it notable. This paper discusses the approach followed by Rouhanifard and his colleagues, including two linked strategic plans that built on a 100-day "listening tour." In the sections that follow, we first describe the context of publicly-funded schools in Camden. This is followed by a description of the reforms implemented in Camden; woven into this discussion are some of the key factors shaping those changes, including state policy changes and new leadership. In addition, we offer a distinct section examining the political aspects surrounding the design and implementation of those reforms. The final section examines the (still early) data on student outcomes. In conclusion, we discuss the 2018 departure of Superintendent Rouhanifard and the efforts to sustain and build on the changes made during his tenure.

While seen as aligned with those seeking to reform education through the use of performance-based accountability, school autonomy, market-based ideas, and new organizations to operate schools, Rouhanifard was also a pragmatist who sought to work with the community and build a political coalition that combined building buy-in for support of state-driven reform ideas with addressing needs and concerns raised by those within the community (Hill & Jochim, 2018; Shapiro, 2018). This more nuanced approach, alongside the small scale of Camden relative to other cities undertaking dramatic system changes, opened the door to a less contentious (but still challenging) re-envisioning of the troubled district.

II. Setting the Stage for Change

A. The Camden Context

Like many cities, Camden has an educational system that has struggled for many years in a context in which many of the city's residents face challenges tied to poverty and low educational attainment. In 2017, the predominantly Black and Hispanic community (only 10% of residents are of either white non-Hispanic or Asian descent) had 37% of residents living in poverty. Of those residents, 68% of those 25 or older had graduated from high school and only 8% had a bachelor's degree or higher (https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/camdencitynewjersey).

In 2012, the year before the state takeover of the district, none of the 26 schools in the district met state standards, and 90% of those schools had student performance levels in the lowest 5% of schools in the state (Shapiro, 2018; Zubrzycki, 2013b). At the student level, fewer than 20% of students were passing the state math and language arts assessments, and high school graduation rates hovered around 50% (Calefati, 2013). Enrollment in district schools was also dropping alongside growth in charter school enrollment; just in the years immediately prior to the takeover, the charter sector grew from 17% of students in 2010-11 to 24% in 2013-14.

The challenges faced by Camden could be seen in the operations of the district and community engagement as well. While the school board was elected prior to the takeover, voting was overall minimal; although turnout for school board elections is often low, it was still notable that some candidates won elections with as few as 400 votes (Zernike, 2018). The board was critiqued as "disinterested," and the system overall was described in a school board commissioned needs analysis as one in which, "the policies, systems, processes, and structures needed to educate children in a mid-size urban district are loosely formulated, misaligned, poorly implemented, or simply non-existent" (quoted in Waters, 2018).

Not surprisingly, given the high superintendent turnover in urban school systems in general alongside the challenges found in Camden, district leadership was unstable, with 13 superintendents in the 16 years preceding the takeover (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Zernike, 2018). The superintendent immediately before the takeover, Bessie LeFra Young, was frequently absent and seemingly unengaged due to ongoing health issues (Vargas, 2012a). At her last board meeting, she cited inadequate support from the state as exacerbating the challenges of the position, describing a tense situation in which, "Every day was a struggle trying to work for the positive, yet working against those who are working against you" (quoted in Vargas, 2012a).

B. State Intervention

As a state, New Jersey has a long and often contentious history that includes substantial efforts to address inequities and challenges in the highly segregated state (Education Law Center,

2019; Orfield, Ee, & Coughlan, 2017). While legal challenges have addressed funding inequities, state lawmakers have also sought to use state takeover as a tool for district improvement. In 1987, the state of New Jersey passed a law granting the governor the authority to takeover districts that were "unable or unwilling to correct serious problems that were identified by the certification process regarding governance, management, fiscal operations or educational programs in their schools" (Institute on Education Law & Policy, 2002, p. 1). Specifically, the state could intervene based on low test scores, specifically when a fiscal monitor was already in place. In the years following, the state took over several larger urban districts in predominantly low-income communities of color, starting in 1989, when it took over the Jersey City school district, followed by takeovers in Paterson (1991) and Newark (1995).

However, takeover as an intervention strategy had not been utilized for over 15 years when Governor Chris Christie, in concert with Education Commissioner Chris Cerf and Assistant Commissioner Andy Smerick, moved to take over Camden in 2013 (Institute on Education Law & Policy, 2002). Christie entered office expressing concerns around the quality and cost of the state's educational system, and he and Cerf quickly focused some of their attention on Camden specifically. In 2012, the state Department of Education released a report describing Camden as a "district in crisis." Specifically, state officials argued that Camden's central office was not meeting state expectations, as identified through the state's QSAC (Quality Single Accountability Continuum) process. The QSAC process, which combines district self-evaluation with state monitoring, gave the district failing grades in a report released in February of 2012 in areas including instruction and program, operations, personnel, and governance. The one area in which it was not failing on the QSAC was fiscal management, which state officials credited to the presence of a state-appointed monitor (Vargas, 2012b).

Accompanying the QSAC report were recommendations from the state alongside the statement that, if those recommendations weren't followed, then the state would have "'no choice but to more aggressively intervene'" (quoted in Vargas, 2012b). Recommendations in the report reflected many of the changes that were to come, such as hiring a "transformative" superintendent, creating *Renaissance schools* under the Urban Hope Act (see below), expanding/supporting charter schools, and revising personnel practices. At that time, even prior to the 2013 takeover, school board members were notified that they would not have the opportunity to make recommendations around the already underway process of selecting providers for Renaissance schools (Vargas, 2012b).

While the district did seek to make changes following the QSAC report, those changes were not viewed as adequate by the state and in the spring of 2013, amid budget problems that resulted in the layoffs of 200 district employees, the DOE started the process towards takeover (Zubrzycki, 2013a). The Camden school board opted not to resist the takeover, but to continue to operate in an advisory role, seemingly to maintain a community voice that exceeded that raised as problematic in order state takeovers in New Jersey. The takeover shifted the selection of the district's superintendent to the state, with the state gaining authority in areas tied to both that academic and fiscal components of district operations (Ly, 2013). While Governor Christie said that he had waited to do a takeover in the hope that it would be unnecessary, others argued that the writing on the wall was clearly visible before the official word came out (Ly, 2013; Weber, 2012).

On June 25, 2013, amid teacher protests and confused board members, the state of New Jersey took over the Camden School District (Vargas, 2013). At the core of this takeover was a

state commitment to bring in "transformative" new leadership alongside the development of Renaissance schools. As described below, Paymon Rouhanifard was selected to take on this challenging role. The decision to take over the Camden school district was not seen at the time as simply the state seeking more capable leadership, as had been the case in other districts that were taken over. Rather, in the words of Gordon MacInnes, an influential political and policy voice within New Jersey Democratic circles, the Christie administration had, "'a more agenda-driven partnership between the commissioner and superintendent than was true in any of the previous administrations'" (quoted in Zubrzycki, 2013a). Thus, the takeover was largely seen as an opportunity to expand on a broader political agenda around education reform, one that emphasized alternative providers of education and student choice.

C. The Urban Hope Act and Creation of Renaissance School Projects

The Urban Hope Act, passed by the New Jersey legislature in 2011, played an important role in the Camden story. Specifically, the bill enabled the identification of a small number of low-performing school districts (those in which 30% or more of students fell into the "partially proficient" range on state assessments) to be designated as *Renaissance Districts*. Renaissance districts would then be in a position to have Renaissance school projects, with Camden eligible for four such projects. These schools were to be "operated and managed by a nonprofit entity," nor charter schools, as they serve students within a specific attendance zone (The State of New Jersey, 2011) and would also benefit from greater public resources, relative to charter schools, receiving 95%, rather than 90%, of per pupil funding.

Renaissance school projects were to be a hybrid of district-run public schools and charter schools. As shown in Table 1, they share many characteristics with charter schools, including substantial autonomy (including from district-negotiated Collective Bargaining Agreements), periodic renewal based on school success, and a fair amount of distance from local school boards. However, in a notable divergence from charter schools, Renaissance schools were not designed to be predominantly schools of choice, as is the case with charter schools, and would instead be assigned a neighborhood catchment area much like district-run schools. Charter schools have long needed to balance accountability through markets (parental choice) with accountability through meeting of governmental expectations through charter contracts and legal compliance (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002; Finn, Bierlein, Manno, & Vanourek, 1997). This shift in the design of enrollment appears to move Renaissance schools more in the direction of focusing on meeting governmental expectations.

Table 1: Governance/Policy Contexts of District-Run, Renaissance, and Charter Schools

	District-Run Public Schools	Renaissance schools	New Jersey Charter Schools
Autonomy	Minimal formal autonomy, run by school districts and generally under Collective Bargaining Agreements	Substantial autonomy including around hiring, program, and union engagement	Substantial autonomy including around hiring, program, and union engagement
Oversight	Traditional oversight via state testing, QSAC (Quality Single	Evaluated for renewal by state after ten years, periodic interim reviews	Renewal by state every five years

	Accountability Continuum)		
State role	Only indirect	State approval of proposals after district board advisory process	Primary role in authorizing and oversight
Role of local school board	Substantial	Advisory, but clear process for offering board and public feedback on proposal	Only advisory around application approval
School location	Determined by school board	Determined by school board	Determined by school operator with no formal role for local school board
Enrollment	District-determined, usually based on attendance zones	District-determined attendance zone with potential of additional students via choice	Parental choice
Operator	School district	Nonprofit entity approved for an overall "Renaissance schools project"	Charter school applicant, may or may not have ties to a nonprofit operator

Renaissance schools were one of a number of efforts nationally to create school governance structures that sought to blend aspects of district-run and charter schools; these hybrid structures are sometimes described a "partnership" schools to indicate a closer alignment between district and school than found with charter schools (Gill & Campbell, 2017). For example, Colorado had "Innovation Schools," and by 2018, the Denver Public School District had used this structure to convert roughly a quarter of district-run schools to more autonomous Innovation Schools (this autonomy often includes a waiver from most or all aspects of the district's Collective Bargaining Agreement). However, New Jersey's Renaissance schools Projects are more clearly prescribed than Innovation Schools, as the Colorado structure leaves much of the specifics around issues of autonomy, accountability, and choice, to negotiations around the innovation plan for a specific school between individual schools and districts. Advocates of the Renaissance schools idea hoped that these schools would combine the perceived benefits of nonprofit organizations that could demonstrate a track record of success in serving students in low-income communities with a greater focus on developing strong connections to local neighborhoods.

One of the most influential actors behind the Urban Hope Act was George Norcross. Norcross was considered by many to be the most powerful Democrat in New Jersey politics and a key ally of Republican Governor Christie. Despite their party differences, Norcross gave "tacit support" to Christie's candidacy, which was "widely viewed as vital to his 2009 victory over then-Gov. Jon Corzine" (Associated Press, 2015). In 2012, Senator Donald Norcross, the bill's primary Senate sponsor and George Norcross's brother, argued that the legislation was urgently

needed because Governor Christie had ceased the work of the State's School Development Authority, which had been tasked with building and renovating schools in NJ's highest-poverty school districts including Camden (Rubin, 2014).

III. System Changes

Following the decision that the state would take over the Camden City School District, Governor Christie worked quickly to select and put into place a new leader that he hoped would enact substantial changes within the district. The person he selected, then 32-year-old Paymon Rouhanifard, officially took the position on September 9th, 2013. Rouhanifard, an Iranian immigrant who spent time in refugee camps as a young child, had taught in New York via Teach for America before leaving public education to work in the finance sector. He returned to the New York City schools a few years later, and quickly rose to an appointment as the CEO of the Office of Portfolio Management before taking a position in the Newark Public Schools (Zubrzycki, 2013c).

While not involved directly in his appointment, the president of the (now advisory – see below) Camden School Board, Kathryn Blackshear, expressed excitement about the selection, noting how the experiences of Rouhanifard and his family as immigrants who arrived not speaking English resonated with the challenges faced by many in the city; she said that his background, "'speaks right to Camden,'" going on to say that, "'What he went through and where he is now, it excited me'" (quoted in Terruso & Vargas, 2013). Others were more cautious, and raised concerns about Rouhanifard's relative lack of educational experience or connection with the city of Camden (Terruso & Vargas, 2013).

Aware of these concerns, Superintendent Rouhanifard's arrival in Camden began with a 100 day "listening tour," in which he and members of the advisory board visited schools, held town halls, and spoke with groups of local stakeholders. Based in part on these conversations, alongside his charge from the state, the new Superintendent released a strategic plan, the "Camden Commitment," in January of the following year. The Camden Commitment was designed around a series of "promises" to families and the community(Camden City School District, 2014):

- Promise 1: Safe Students, Safe Schools
- Promise 2: 21st Century School Buildings
- Promise 3: Excellent Schools – Student Support and Great Teaching and Learning
- Promise 4: Serving Parents
- Promise 5: Central Office Effectiveness

While Rouhanifard's charge from Governor Christie was more around system change, he chose to highlight an issue central to those in the community – safety – as the first pillar in his plan, which began with a focus on increasing students' sense of safety and reducing safety incidents. It also addressed a major concern within the community that many of the school facilities in the city had been neglected for years, arguing that this state of disrepair, "conveys to students that neither they nor the school community is valued" (Camden City School District, 2014, p. 11). Facilities were also a central aspect of the Urban Hope Act. Overall, the plan sought to balance issues raised by the community alongside reforms pushed by the state, incorporating, for example, Renaissance schools as a central aspect of developing "excellent" schools.

Embedded in the language of the strategic plan is rhetoric consistent with market-oriented reforms and the idea of a "portfolio management model" (PMM) in which the central office steps back from directly operating schools and shifts more towards holding those schools accountable for outcomes (Bulkley, Henig, et al., 2010; Hill, 1995; Hill et al., 2012). For example, the plan began with a focus on "options" and, consistent with rhetoric around "No Excuses" schools, a clear focus on school quality as the principle driver of student learning, stating that "All students can learn at high levels if given great educational options, and the children of Camden deserve no less" (Camden City School District, 2014, p. 4; Cheng, Hitt, Kisida, & Mills, 2017).

The release of the new strategic plan also matched the PMM language, as Rouhanifard said that, "'We should aim to build a rich tapestry of schools – district, charter and Renaissance -- where the goal is to hold all schools to the same high standard'" (quoted in Mooney, 2014c). Aspects of the plan were met with some enthusiasm at a community event, particularly when the discussions turned to issues that emerged from within the community such as career training and technical education as well as increasing access to preschool (Mooney, 2014c). However, the plan was also met with wariness, in part because it did not provide specifics around how some of the components of it would be paid for at a time when the school district was already facing a challenging budget situation and many employees were working under expired union contracts.

The initial *Camden Commitment* plan was intended to identify issues that were to be addressed quickly by the new leadership team. Eighteen month later, a follow up to that plan, designed as the continuation and expansion of the original strategic plan, focused on the same broad areas and touted successes as well as future proposals. As did the previous plan, the language of *All Schools Rise: Phase Two of the Camden Commitment,* echoed the idea of a PMM, talking about Camden becoming a "system of schools" that included the Renaissance project schools "led by high-achieving non-profit organizations" (Camden City School District, 2015a, pp. 5, 4). While the Camden Commitment, and Rouhanifard's efforts overall, addressed a broad range of challenges facing the district, we highlight two broad issues: changes in the "portfolio" (the set of publicly funded schools) within the city, and strategies to enhance connections to the Camden Community.

A. A Changing Portfolio

By the time of Rouhanifard's departure in 2018, three types of publicly funded schools were operating in Camden: district-run schools, charter schools, and Renaissance schools. As the newest component of the portfolio, we begin our discussion with Renaissance schools, and then shift to discuss changes connected with the other two categories of schools. As Figures 1-3 demonstrate, there were slow shifts in enrollment between the categories of schools prior to the takeover, but those shifts accelerated substantially in the years following 2013. Overall, enrollment in Renaissance schools increased dramatically, enrollment in charter schools maintained a relatively steady increase, and enrollment in district-run schools dropped from 83% in 2011-12 to 49% seven years later.

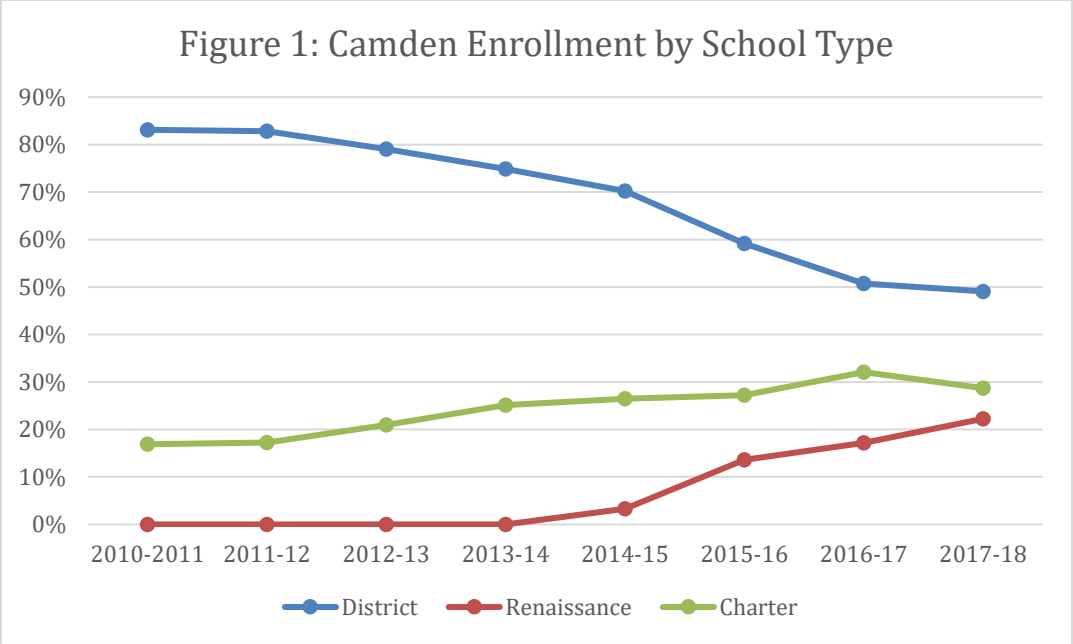


Figure 1: Camden Enrollment by School Type
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
2010-2011
2011-12
2012-13
2013-14
2014-15
2015-16
2016-17
2017-18
District
Renaissance
Charter

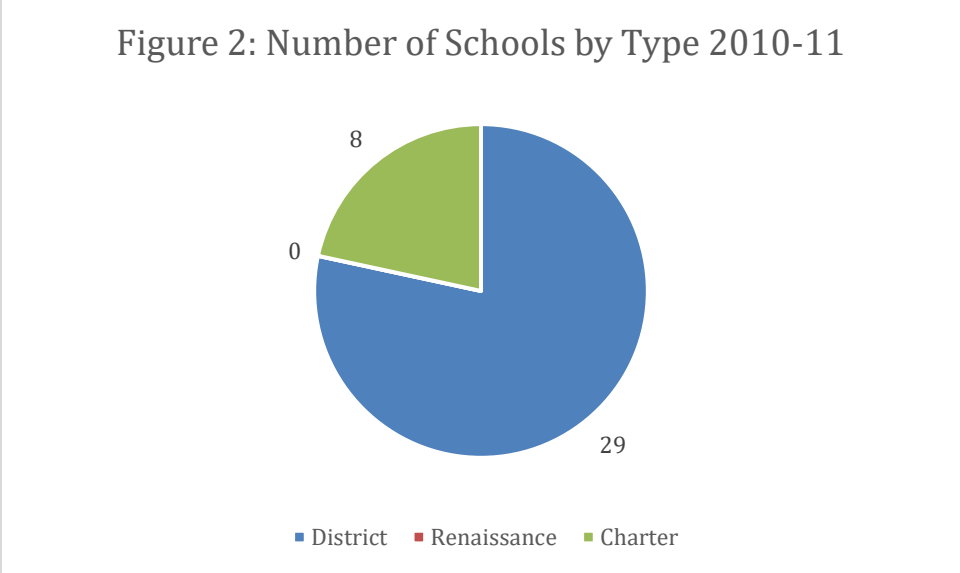
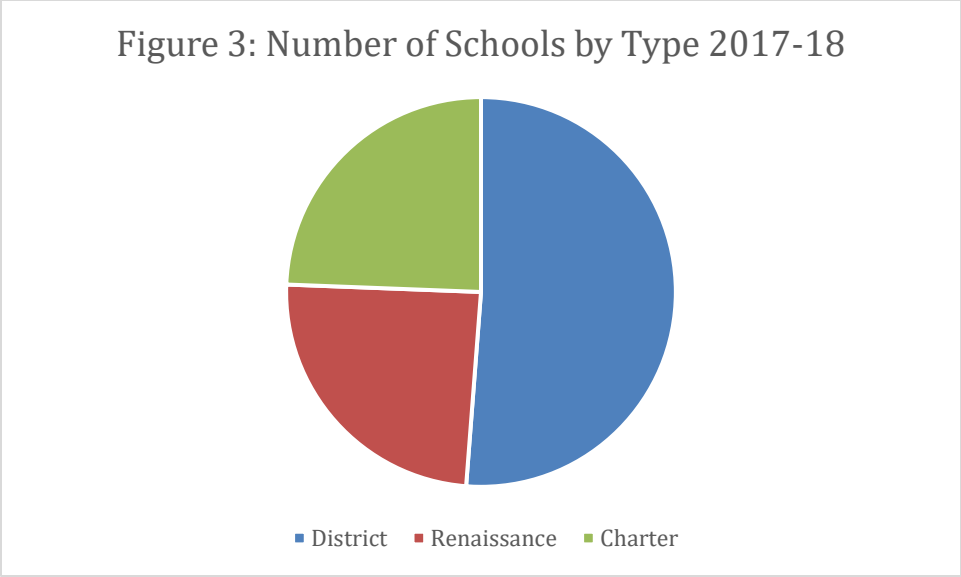


Figure 2: Number of Schools by Type 2010-11
8
0
29
District
Renaissance
Charter



1. Renaissance Schools: A Hybrid Approach

The rollout of the first Renaissance schools project (KIPP Norcross Academies, which had partnered with the Norcross Foundation and had the political support of the powerful Norcoss family) was in its infancy when Paymon Rouhanifard stepped into his new role. KIPP Academies had been approved by the school board and Commissioner Cerf prior to the takeover and was already at work developing the KIPP Cooper Norcross Academy. The school was to be located across from Cooper University Hospital, which also had ties to the Norcross family. As detailed in a profile of Rouhanifard written at the time he stepped down from the superintendency, he took a pragmatic political approach of developing a strong relationship with George Norcoss; Norcross became an important supporter of Rouhanifard's appointment and efforts (Shapiro, 2018).

In January of 2014, in conjunction with the state, Superintendent Rouhanifard identified two additional organizations – experienced school management organizations Mastery Charter Schools and Uncommon Schools –to develop Renaissance school projects within Camden. Mastery, which emerged in Philadelphia, focused on "turnarounds" of existing public schools, while Uncommon was a charter management organization. While all three organizations had experience and encouraging results around working with low-income students of color, Uncommon Schools and KIPP focused on operating charter schools and were hesitant to tackle the management of schools to which students were assigned rather than there by choice. While the Renaissance schools had much of the autonomy found in charter schools, this approach to student assignment was substantially different (Shapiro, 2018).

Despite the identification of Mastery and Uncommon, as well as the previously approved KIPP network, there were few specifics at that time around how many schools each would operate (new or takeover), where they would be located, or a timeline for the new schools. By April of that year, the two networks offered plans to open in temporary facilities for the 2014-15 school year while building new facilities for K-12 schools in different sections of the city. A revision to the Urban Hope Act in June of 2014 added a year to the timeline for organizations to submit applications to operate Renaissance schools and pushed back the expectation that organizations must build new schools as part of opening them (Mooney, 2014a).

Amid tensions and critiques of the Camden changes (see below), by the fall of 2014, four Renaissance school project buildings were in operation and, by the end of that school year, they were serving 572 students in the city of Camden). Both the number of schools and students quickly grew, as shown in Table 2, and included some of the promised new and renovated facilities. Early signs around student learning are discussed below.

Table 2: Renaissance school Projects Growth

Renaissance School Project Org.	Number of Buildings				Enrollment (Final day of school)			
	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
KIPP Cooper Norcross	1	2	3	3	105	497	841	1,121
Camden Prep (Uncommon)	1	1	1	2	64	315	395	574
Mastery Schools of Camden	2	5	5	5	403	1,363	1,624	2,041
Totals	**4**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**572**	**2,175**	**2,860**	**3,736**

Data from: https://www.nj.gov/education/Renaissance/ar/camden/

2. District-Run Schools – Supports and Challenges

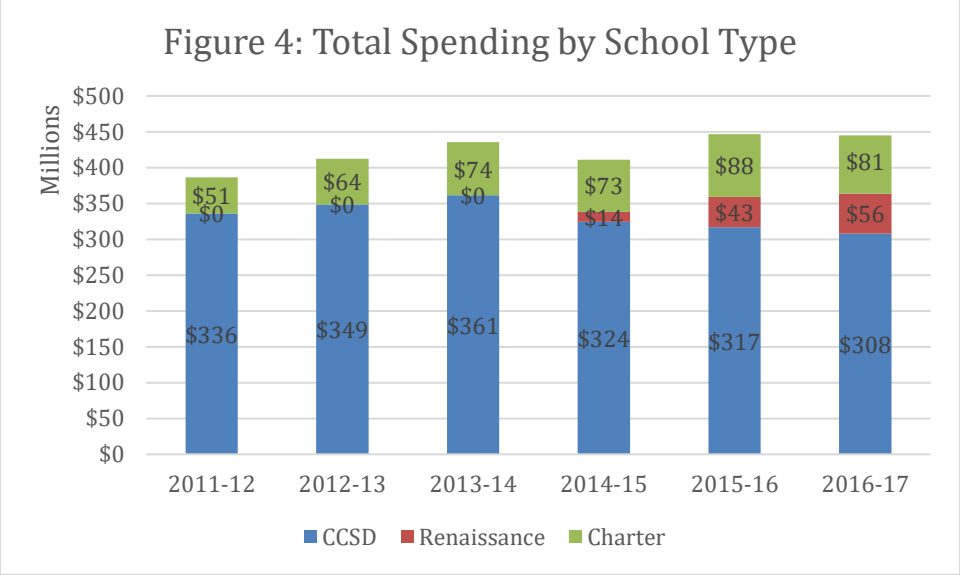
Consistent with his approach as a pragmatist who sought to focus on all publicly-funded schools in the district, Rouhanifard also worked to address concerns within district-run schools. Efforts included enhancing the quality of feedback and support for teachers and leaders. This included having virtually all school leaders participate in training offered by the charter-linked Relay Graduate School of Education. One principal credited the value of the Relay work, telling the New York Times that he was "upset we didn't have this years ago" (Zernike, 2018). The district also sought to expand pre-school enrollment and offer more school-based supports, including providing schools with additional non-teaching supports such as family coordinators and operations managers (Shapiro, 2018).

3. A Shifting Charter Sector – Closure of charters, opening of new schools

In New Jersey, the only charter school authorizer is the New Jersey Department of Education and local districts have little formal influence over approval and location decisions around charter schools. In addition, unlike places such as New Orleans (where the state had, until recently, authorized a large number of charter schools As described above, the overall growth of charters remained relatively steady. However those numbers mask some important changes in the sector. Four new charter schools opened between 2012 and 2013, and three closed by 2017 (including two of the schools that had recently opened, Camden Community Charter School and City Invincible Charter School). In addition, more substantial growth in some charters led to expanded or new facilities. While formally outside of the Camden City School District (unlike Renaissance schools, which are more closely tied to the district), Rouhanifard sought to more clearly incorporate them into how people in the community thought about public schooling. One notable strategy for this was the inclusion of charter schools in *Camden Enrollment*, the common enrollment system rolled out in 2016 and discussed below.

4. Budgeting Amid a Shifting Portfolio

In preparation for the opening of Renaissance school projects in the fall of 2014, which would not be required to employ existing district staff, Rouhanifard found himself facing a troubling fiscal situation. As shown in Figure 4, the overall budget for public schooling both the total budget for Camden public schools and the CCSD budget dropped from 2013-14 to 2014-15, with the most precipitous drop for CCSD (from $361 to $324 million). After that year, the total spending for CCSD, Renaissance school projects, and charter schools located in Camden rose. However, while CCSD's per pupil spending rose (see Figure 5), CCSD's budget continued to fall.[1]



[2]

Due to the budget shifts, May of 2014 found Rouhanifard announcing wide-spread layoffs including 201 teachers and the elimination of 94 central office staff positions (Mooney, 2014b). While Rouhanifard and others had considered challenging a state law requiring that layoffs be done by reverse seniority, a position popular with many educational reformers, he decided not to go in this direction in order to minimize a potentially contentious relationship with the New Jersey Education Association (Shapiro, 2018). Not surprisingly, Rouhanifard found his announcement met with anger and disbelief among the community and district staff (Mooney, 2014b). Another painful round of layoffs followed in May 2015, triggered by declining enrollment in district-run schools (Steele, 2015) and even more in the year that followed, when 230 district employees lost their positions due to both budget-based layoffs and issues around individual performance (Burney, 2016).

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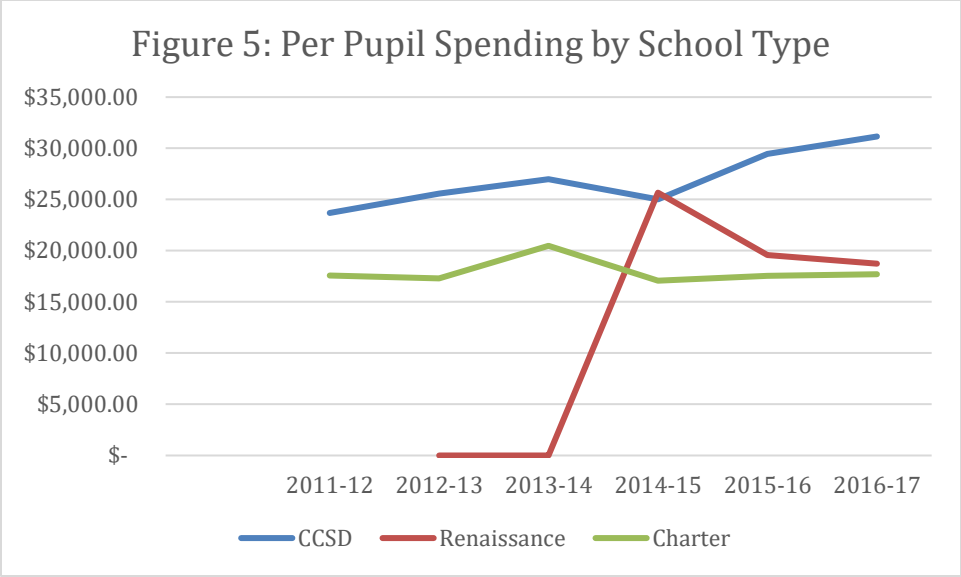
[1] The numbers provided here are raw spending numbers for CCSD, Renaissance school projects, and charter schools located within the city of Camden. They do not account for potentially important variations in spending based on student needs. For example, other analyses show that CCSD was disproportionately responsible for funding the education of students with IEPs that required particularly high-cost accommodations and for students in the most extreme poverty (those who qualified for free lunch) (Weber & Rubin, 2018). In addition, we were unable to identify the number of students from outside of Camden who attend charter schools within the city or the number of Camden students that attend charter schools outside of the city.

[2] See previous footnote.



At the same time that Rouhanifard's team sought to support the district's direct-run schools, they were also faced with addressing significant fiscal changes amid the enrollment shifts shown above. These included overseeing the closure of eight of those schools (seven of which became Renaissance schools and another which merged with a magnet school) (Shapiro, 2018). The closure of schools with a particularly high percentage of Black certificated staff members echoed of the challenges in New Orleans after the dismissal of many of the Black teachers in the city following Hurricane Katrina (the percent of Black teachers in New Orleans dropped from 71% in 2004-5 to 49% in 2013-14) (Barrett & Harris, 2015; Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015; Weber, 2015).

B. Connecting to the Community

School systems in which organizations from outside play a major role within the city's schools can sometimes struggle with a lack of a sense of community connection to those schools (Bulkley & Henig, 2015). In Camden, Rouhanifard and community leaders sought to address some of this potential disconnect in a variety of ways. As described above, Rouhanifard and others engaged in an extensive "listening tour" that included visits to every school in Camden, with the purpose of both hearing from the community and demonstrating a commitment to engaging the community and responding to the concerns raised there such as around school safety.

In the context of school choice, the new district leadership sought to meet the needs of the community through strategies including improving parental information about options in ways similar to those seen in Denver, New Orleans, Washington, DC, and Newark, NJ. In addition, there was an effort to support hiring from within the community through Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs). A central component of the initial *Camden Commitment* and the follow-up *All Schools Rise* was a focus on these elements of the system that would facilitate parental choice, including expanding on the "School Information Cards" developed in the initial phase and building a unified enrollment system for schools within the district (Camden City School District, 2014, 2015a). In preparing for the enrollment system and seeking to gain a thorough understanding of community needs and preferences, the central office reported that staff from the "Family Information Center," connected to the Camden Commitment, made over

1,000 home visits and 1,300 phone calls to inform families of the new plans for the struggling schools that would be "turned around" as Renaissance schools (Camden City School District, 2015b).

The new enrollment system (Camden Enrollment) included a single process and deadline for the 38 publicly-funded schools (district-run, charter, and Renaissance) in the city alongside expanded efforts to help families in the enrollment process (District, 2015). The unified enrollment system went into effect for the 2016-17 school year, by which time enrollment was split roughly equality between district-run schools and more autonomous Renaissance and charter schools (Hanna, 2018).

Seeking to learn from a difficult rollout of a common enrollment system in Newark, Superintendent Rouhanifard and the central office described developing a system that was both simple and responsive to community preferences (Mooney, 2015). For example, there were minimal criteria in the system, with families given preferences only for their neighborhood schools and when siblings were already attending a school. His decision not to delay the introduction of the system was one way in which he sought to be sensitive to community concerns; Dana Redd, the Camden mayor with whom Rouhanifard worked closely, said that, "'We really tried to work with the community on the front end…There were definitely detractors, but we continued to invite them in and give them the information that they could research on their own. We began to build a community support system that you are now seeing'" (quoted in Mooney, 2015).

As in other cities that have focused on portfolio style reforms, external funding has supported change. For example, the enrollment system received a substantial boost through a grant from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, which funded other organizations in the city as well (Hanna, 2018). In August 2017, Camden Enrollment became a nonprofit organization, separate from both city and district governance, with a board comprised of representatives from the different types of schools in the system (district-run, charter, and Renaissance) (Eells, 2019).

The shift to greater choice raised heightened concerns around already troubling issues of student safety when going to and from school. In response, the rollout of Camden Enrollment expanded access to district school buses in grades K-8 and NJ Transit bus passes for high school students living more two miles from any publicly-funded schools. In previous years, such transportation was available to those attending charter or Renaissance schools but not to those in district-run schools outside their neighborhoods (Camden City School District, 2016b).

Another effort to assure the community of Camden that reform efforts were focused on their interests was through CBAs between leaders of Renaissance school projects and community groups. These agreements included commitments to interviewing qualified city residents for open positions and offering free courses to community members (Camden City School District, 2016a). While recognized by community organizations as a positive step, some felt that they did not go far enough. For example, Rutgers-Camden professor Stephen Danley raised concerns that the district was more centrally engaged in these agreements than community organizations, and thus that "calling these CBAs a 'negotiation' between community, school and district is a bit of an exaggeration" (https://danley.camden.rutgers.edu/2016/02/24/its-community-benefit-agreements-week-in-camden/). Danley also highlights the lack of specificity in these agreements, such as commitments to interview but not to hire local residents.

Overall, Rouhanifard and his team sought to be aware of the many complicated challenges around working with communities faced in other cities undergoing major governance changes. Some progress was made on these issues, such as in the relatively calm introduction of the common enrollment system. In other areas, as discussed below, the complex politics of Camden and the state of New Jersey required Superintendent Rouhanifard to walk a very careful line as he sought to build the political capital needed to engage in the work without alienating those in the schools and broader community.

IV. The Politics of System Change

A number of elements that have driven the changes in Camden are addressed earlier, including the critical role of the state takeover, the passage and implementation of the Urban Hope Act, and the appointment of Superintendent Paymon Rouhanifard. In this section, we touch on the complex political situation and the challenges raised by some in the community. These challenges are tied in with longstanding questions of power, particularly for low-income communities of color.

As has been the case in other contexts, the state of New Jersey has only opted to take over districts that serve a predominantly low-income, Black, and Hispanic, community. Christopher Irving, then president of the Paterson school board, commented at the time of the takeover that this focus on takeovers for low-income communities of color wasn't necessary as, "'There are low-performing districts that aren't predominantly black and brown" (quoted in Zubrzycki, 2013a). Superintendent Rouhanifard made a concerted effort to connect with that community with the goal of doing "with" the community rather than doing "to" it. However, long-standing local feelings of exclusion and alienation from political decision-making coupled with Rouhanifard's need to develop critical relationships with powerful figures in order to move his agenda forward made this aspect of change particularly difficult.

Several accounts have lauded Superintendent Rouhanifard as being particularly skillful in his approach to the political challenges of the work, with one account describing him as developing a "centrist coalition of civic, business, religious, and neighborhood leaders along with traditional political 'kingmakers'" (Hill & Jochim, 2018, p. 9). At the time of his departure, another account argued that, "Rouhanifard is one the few school superintendents in the country who is ending his tenure with more allies than when he began" (Shapiro, 2018, p. 2).

While acknowledging Rouhanifard's political efforts, some observers and participants – consistent with challenges to efforts at reform in cities such as New Orleans and Chicago – raised concerns about the authenticity of community engagement and the motivations of those seeking change. Most notable were tensions around the implementation of Renaissance schools. For example, Keith Benson, a Camden educator and doctoral student at Rutgers University who was then elected to lead the Camden Education Association in 2017, argued in his dissertation that Camden residents were skeptical that Renaissance schools were created to benefit Camden children. Participants in his study reported believing that the powerful leaders in the state, especially those tied to George Norcross, were making decisions about Camden without truly attending to the needs of those in the community. According to Benson's analysis, residents argued that the primary beneficiary of a host of educational as well as changes in policies around developmental changes in Camden was Norcross, who could potentially profit from these policies.

Others raised concerns that the introduction of Renaissance schools was a means to move Camden towards a New Orleans style all-charter district and that the few remaining district-run schools that would then be tasked with educating children with the greater challenges (Rubin, 2014). One resident in Benson's study went so far as to argue that, "Camden is an oligarchy where only a small group of powerful people run the government and what happens in it" (Benson, 2016, p. 133).

V. Hints of Improvement

As seen earlier, by the 2017-18 school year, there had been a dramatic shift in the kinds of schools attended by Camden students. In this section, we consider the early data on the impact of these changes on quantifiable measures of student outcomes.

A. Changing Outcomes

In September of 2018, state test score data offered some hints of improvement, within increases in both math and English language arts in grades 3-8 and evidence of improvement among both district-run and Renaissance schools. By that year, only eight Camden schools were designated as "Priority Schools," down from 23 prior to the state takeover (Waters, 2018). A comprehensive analysis of student test scores by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found that overall student learning gains in reading from 2014-15 to 2016-17 were modestly weaker in Camden than the rest of New Jersey, while gains were largely on par with the state in the later years of the analysis in mathematics (Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), 2019b). Within this broad finding, CREDO researchers found evidence of greater gains within both the charter sector and the Renaissance schools than in the city's traditional public schools.

Progress in other areas, such as reducing student suspensions and dropout rates alongside improving graduation rates saw some initial improvement, but have proved uneven in more recent years; in some cases, they suggest the need for a closer look and potential concern. For example, data from 2015-16 suggested that students attending schools operated by two of the Renaissance School projects (Mastery Schools and KIPP Norcross Academy) were more likely to be suspended than those attending district-run schools (ProPublica, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

VI. Moving Forward

In June of 2018, Paymon Rouhanifard stepped down after five years in the grueling Camden superintendency. New Jersey Commissioner of Education Lamont Repollet appointed long-standing Camden educator and Rouhanifard's Deputy Superintendent, Katrina McCombs, to serve first as interim superintendent and then, in April of 2019, as the permanent superintendent. The shift to a leader who had substantial history in the district was welcomed by district residents, although they varied in terms of seeing her appointment as a continuity with or a departure from Rouhanifard's approach (Trethan, 2018). In deciding to leave, Rouhanifard publicly supported the appointment of Camden native McCombs, stating that, "'I will always be the face of a state takeover for many people… I don't believe staying on is right for the community'" (quoted in Zernike, 2018).

While he still had his critics, Rouhanifard's staying power in the superintendency and his ability to build and maintain a coalition and overall community support, were notable considering the turmoil that often surrounds urban superintendencies (Hess, 1998). While many factors contributed to his longevity, including insulation from an elected school board, his

balancing of state interests with those of the local community were likely a significant component.

The new leadership in the district, whether McCombs or an alternative permanent superintendent, will be working in a district that has both important differences and similar challenges as the one that the state took over in 2013. The changed structure of the district, with the substantial number of students in both charter and Renaissance schools alongside enhanced parental choice and common enrollment, creates a different context for change. So, too, does the design of choice that is more closely coupled to neighborhood schools than is seen in other contexts that place a strong emphasis on choice.

Despite hints of progress, the district still is far below the expectations set by the state's Quality Single Accountability Continuum (QSAC) process (19-1-17). While Rouhanifard was described as believing that "the city is positioned to win back local control of its schools" at the time of his departure (Zernike, 2018), substantial more improvement on QSAC will be needed before the Camden community once again has the opportunity to select the leaders of its school system directly. In addition, many of the challenges faced by the Camden community prior to the reforms, including issues of poverty and violence, remain and continue to create a difficult context for sustained improvement.

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