

THE LEAP CASE STUDY – A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL

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Abstract

This is a successful case study that narrates an inspiring account that shows how one determined individual can make a profound difference in the lives of at risk children and their communities. It presents a model for how to build and sustained over a period of twenty years one of the best urban public schools in the nation, with 100 percent high school and college graduation rates during this period of time. It shares the challenges and obstacles, potential resources, and support of fellow professionals that moved the LEAP Academy from a smaller charter school to its top position today. It describes and analyzes the establishment of LEAP Academy in one of the Americas's poorest and most violent cities, Camden New Jersey. This is a unique university partnership that has transformed an entire city with a faculty member leading efforts and creating and bringing social capital to poor families and children.

There are four factors that make the model successful: The student factor; teacher development factor; Organizational factor and the Stakeholders /Alliance factors: Each of these factors are best practices and educational lessons learned in this model. It is a comprehensive and holistic model approach that has resulted in advances within individuals, families, and the entire community demonstrating evidence that new perspectives and strategies are needed, particularly in communities that are poor and disenfranchised like Camden city.

The challenges are formidable, and the degree of commitment required is significant in relation to improving educational systems. Regardless, the LEAP model has provided many insights into many best practices, which can be upscale within other community based educational models. When community resources are limited and the environments is antagonistic to student learning, implementing these practices is a means by which obstacles can be overcome. Likewise, these strategies and approaches are founded upon proven themes of engagement, empowerment, and accountability. Through these philosophies, students, families and community stakeholders participate toward a common goals and vision. Combining this with evidence based practices that have proven to be effective for the future of education. Despite numerous social, economic, and cultural barriers, the school has not only provided hundreds of children with a comprehensive education and access to tertiary educational opportunities, but it has also empowered them and their families as individuals. This holistic and comprehensive model has transformed and save thousands of lives and it has empowered an entire community to want to take charged of their own future. The school is the zone of practice for community transformation and innovation.

1 INTRODUCTION OF THE LEAP CASE STUDY

LEAP is a student-centered learning educational enterprise that supports underserved students in one of the poorest cities in the United States—Camden, New Jersey. With over 16 years of planning, implementation, refinement and expansion, the LEAP Academy University Charter School has produced 100 percent high school graduation and college placement rates since its first graduating class in 2005. This has been accomplished without any screening or “creaming” of students, but instead working with all students – and their parents and community – through a comprehensive support system and a pedagogy driven by student-centered learning. The experience of the LEAP Academy and its attainment of positive outcomes for low-income African American and Latino students provide a number of practices that are at the core of how to best develop educational structures and contexts that lead to high performance and college readiness for underserved minority students.

The LEAP (Leadership, Education and Partnership) Academy University Charter School is a comprehensive public charter school serving 1,400 students in grades PreK-12. The school provides a college preparatory education with an emphasis on the content areas of Science, Technology, Education and Mathematics (STEM), as well as specialized career academies in Business, Liberal

Studies and Social Sciences at the high school level. Developed in partnership with Rutgers University, the school also responds to the imperative for Institutions of Higher Education to be more accountable for and engaged with community development and school reform in ways that foster reciprocity and shared responsibility. The founding philosophy was one reflective of three inter-related components: student-centered and student-nurtured learning; parental empowerment; and community engagement.

LEAP Academy has developed a number of research-based approaches that have proven successful in increasing the preparation of minority students for post-secondary education and their attainment of positive educational outcomes, including: a virtual “pipeline” of learning from birth through college; college access for all; strong parental engagement that centers on inclusion, preparation and support; comprehensive, school-based health and wellness services; entrepreneurial governance focused on accountability and resources development; and support for educators anchored in collaboration and focused on strengthening teaching and learning. LEAP internal and external structures are all focused on preparing students to enter and succeed in college. College Access Centers provide direct services to students and teachers to ensure that every student keeps up with the academic rigor of a college preparatory curriculum, while also leveraging exposure and providing guidance, so that students can build the motivation, self-assurance and familiarity with college culture. Basically, LEAP works on building hard and soft skills that will make the transition to college meaningful and successful.

LEAP Academy was one of the first 13 charter schools that opened in New Jersey in 1997 and the first in the City of Camden. Rutgers University played a leading role in developing and sustaining the school from its planning phase and has remained the school’s main partner. A cluster of Centers of Excellence to support the school’s work channel Rutgers’s resources and facilitate the opportunity for LEAP students to participate in dual high school/early college enrollment. The Rutgers Community Leadership Center, a research and practice based academic center, leads the partnership and sponsors a full service Early Learning Research Academy for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

From inception, LEAP Academy had a dual focus on closing the achievement gap and ensuring college preparation and completion between African American and Latino students who are poor and mostly first-generation college students. All stakeholders at LEAP have embraced the importance of placing college and career readiness at the center of its normative structure – one that promotes high expectations for every child, family engagement, high academic rigor, exposure and cultivation, consistent attention and intervention from birth through college and collective accountability for results.

Several elements have contributed to that success, including: (a) a focus on building an educational pipeline that sustains children – and involves parents – from infancy through college to ensure that academic and socio-emotional needs of children are addressed as early as possible and that children exit this pipeline ready for college and career; (b) a rigorous academic program that emphasizes the STEM disciplines and is grounded on rich experiences that focus on building mastery, fostering a love of learning and transitioning to college; (c) a systemic strategy for building capacity from within for a school that is grounded on performance based evaluation and the ongoing provision of professional development options aimed at guiding teachers to work differently in improving student learning and academic growth; (d) extended time to allow for expanded opportunities to engage in a variety of learning modalities that lead to better outcomes for children and increased engagement with families and community; (e) a college-going culture throughout all grade levels that integrates families, teachers and students and is sustained through college access centers at each school building and across grade levels; (f) a process for support and engagement of alumni as the educational pipeline extends to college and the school taps on the social capital that the alumni can generate to sustain the LEAP model and its impact; (g) establishment of strong and sustainable partnerships with local universities and organizations that provide resources to sustain and enrich the LEAP experience; (h) development of structures to strengthen parents’ capacity and self-sufficiency by keeping a two-generation focus that binds families and children together and transforms the school into a hub for services and support. Over the last 16 years, the integration of these strategies into a comprehensive model has proven to be successful in working with minority children and families. We believe that our experiences in building the LEAP model can be measured and become replicable and scaled up in other communities.

Since 1997 LEAP Academy has made important gains and established a strong educational foundation within the community of Camden. Despite numerous social, economic and cultural barriers, the LEAP school has not only provided hundreds of children with a comprehensive education and access to tertiary educational opportunities, but it has also empowered them and their families as individuals. This holistic, comprehensive approach has resulted in advances within individuals, families

and the community demonstrating evidence that new perspectives and strategies are needed particularly in communities such as Camden.

The challenges are formidable, and the degree of commitment required is significant in relation to improving educational systems. But LEAP has proven that when community resources are limited and the environment is antagonistic to student learning, implementing practices that are student-centered, engage families; collective sense of accountability, focus on development; and, build social capital, these obstacles can be overcome.

The best indicator of academic success for LEAP Academy students is its graduation and college placement rate. *LEAP graduates and places in college 100 percent of its students.* This places the LEAP Academy within the top performing schools in the state. Since LEAP is a K-12 system, the New Jersey Department of Education (DOE), beginning in the 3rd grade assesses students. Over the last few years, the school has seen a steady growth pattern in performance in the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) and the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), with the school meeting growth targets for every grade span. Another important observation shows that overall the longer a student stays enrolled at LEAP, the better the student performs. Another important factor is the college retention and graduation rates of LEAP alumni. Data provided by the DOE reports that 90 percent of LEAP graduates remain in college 16 months after high school graduation. The data is from the National Student Clearinghouse, which reports that it collects student-level enrollment data from 95 percent of Institutions of Higher Education nationwide. LEAP works closely with its alumni base and also collects information on a regular basis.

The LEAP Academy Case Study defines college access programs to be pre-college interventions that explicitly identify increasing college readiness and/or college enrollment as a primary goal of the school. It further examines additional best practices under four factors that have supported our successful college efforts – (1) Student; (2) Teacher Development; (3) Organizational; and, (4) Stakeholder Alliances which have been essential for the model effectiveness.

2 BACKGROUND ABOUT CAMDEN

By the end of the 20th Century, Camden, New Jersey, was a ghost of its former self. In the 1930s, Camden represented 47 percent of the county's population and 55 percent of its tax base. But by 1990, these figures had fallen to 17 percent and 5 percent respectively¹. A variety of social, economic, political and environmental changes occurred within the second half of the century culminating in a vicious cycle leading to Camden's decline. As demographic changes occurred and socioeconomic conditions failed, Camden's educational system deteriorated progressively as well. To gain a better appreciation of how these factors interacted to result in the city's unfortunate condition, some understanding of Camden's background and history is important.

Many contributing factors resulted in the decline of Camden's educational system over several decades. However the most significant was the growth of the suburban sprawl after World War II, which occurred throughout the U.S. Perhaps more than any other phenomenon, this accounted for Camden's precipitous decline. Between 1945 and 1965, the Federal Housing Administration created attractive financing packages for race-restricted families in suburban areas to purchase homes. This prompted a migration of many middle class families away from urban regions like Camden. The development of more comprehensive highway systems, which facilitated suburban travel to and from cities further, facilitated this social migration². Of course, as the middle class vacated urban centers like Camden, small businesses found they had few customers remaining. As a result, small businesses soon followed; and seemingly overnight, many urban regions felt the void left by what was referred to as the "white flight"³. Over a few decades, a dramatic change in urban demographics occurred, and cities like Camden were particularly affected. By 1990, approximately 86 percent of Camden's residents were racial minorities, and the tax base for the city had dropped eleven-fold from pre-war periods⁴.

¹ Casey, Annie E. *A Path Forward for Camden*. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2001. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/a%20path%20forward%20for%20camden.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

In addition to the suburban migration, Camden suffered other major commercial setbacks. RCA, which employed around 18,000 workers at one time, was sold in the 1960s and eventually downsized in dramatic fashion. In 1967, the New York Ship Building Company closed which employed more than 35,000 local residents. And in 1980, substantial downsizing of the Campbell Soup manufacturing plant resulted in additional loss of jobs⁵. In 2000, Camden's unemployment rate was nearly three times the national average at 15.9 percent⁶. Between the loss of middle class citizens, small businesses and major manufacturing companies, Camden experienced a sudden and significant shift resulting in tremendous environmental pressures on the city's stability and ability to successfully function.

The loss of employers and the increasing cost of living in Camden soon led to social and economic declines subsequently. In 2000, over a third of Camden residents lived in poverty, and 27 percent depended upon public assistance. This latter figure compares to 14 percent in nearby Philadelphia. Likewise more than two-thirds of households were single parent households with more than half the population being under the age of 18 years⁷. Regarding public health, only one in six had some form of health insurance, and only a third of infants received routine prenatal care⁸. Crime, which had been a long-term problem for the city, also worsened with over 5,000 youth arrests annually in 2000. Homicide continued to be the number one cause of death for ages 15 to 24 years. Illicit drug trade was estimated to employ over 2000 Camden residents during this time with many workers being children. Higher wages within this illegal industry, which more than doubled traditional employment, was a powerful incentive for many⁹.

The LEAP Academy story originates as a result of a major debate about how to best address inequality in education and improve low performing schools in Camden City. It is within this context that LEAP emerges as an option to curve low attainment and substandard education for children and their parents in Camden. The city has a long history of challenges on all fronts—absence of a local economy that produces jobs and a tax base to sustain city government; a dysfunctional city government that is overly dependent on state aid to provide the most basic services to its residents; a staggering rate of violence mostly related to drug trafficking and gang activity; a chronic underperforming school system with students failing in almost every educational indicator and dropping out of school; a physical environment characterized by decaying housing, abandoned neighborhoods, and a lack of safe public spaces; and a history of political corruption and dysfunction. (Gillette, 2009; Nowak, 2009, Casey Foundation, 2001). Today, Camden is known for its designation as America's second poorest city with 45 percent of its families living below the poverty line with children carrying the biggest burdens. Most Camden families (72 percent) are headed by a single parent and often this parent is young, uneducated and has been raised in poverty. Single-headed households are also more likely to be in government assistance, do not own a home and tend to be very mobile. What is alarming is that these families are the product of multi-generational poverty that traps them in poverty cycles. The fact that Camden is so young, with 35 percent of its population under 19 years, creates an opportunity and a challenge as to how best to educate the next generation. Camden has historically failed in this battle and today has some of the worst public schools in the state of New Jersey. As of 2010, only 6.8 percent of the city population graduated from college and in contrast, 73.3 percent remain in the category of not having any college preparation. This results in young people that are unprepared for the demands of the changing labor market, therefore reducing their capacity for being able to accomplish critical steps to a better quality of life that can take them out of poverty—meaningful employment, capacity to own a home, capacity to have credit and a lower dependency in government assistance. In 2011-2012, high school graduation rates plummeted by 7 percentage points to 49.3 percent, down from 56.9 percent the year before. The graduation rate statewide is 86 percent, according to the New Jersey Department of Education. Three of Camden's schools are the lowest performing in the state, and 90 percent are in the bottom 5 percent. Less than 20 percent of fourth-graders are proficient in language arts literacy, and just 28 percent of 11th-graders are proficient in math. In 2013, the 13,700-student Camden school district became the fourth school system to come under New Jersey state control.

For example, the Rutgers Community Leadership Center (CLC) provides oversight and support to LEAP Academy allowing the Centers of Excellence to serve as a foundation for the LEAP Academy's

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

mission to provide students and their family's support for lifelong educational learning. CLC support represents a major channel through which Rutgers University provides additional resources. The College Access Center, Human and Health Services Center, the Law Clinic, the Parents Academy and the Early Childhood Program are just a few of these centers where Rutgers University is able to support ongoing school operations. Thus the interrelation between the organizational structure, the governance structure, facilities infrastructure, and operational components all complement the LEAP Academy's overall objectives.

3 COMMUNITY IMPACT

LEAP Academy was designed as part of a community development initiative for children and families to become effective participants in the learning process through civic participation aimed at empowering their own community. LEAP emerged as part of the independent schools' movement focused on efforts to socially and educationally empower impoverished and low-income communities. The community approach was concerned with building the necessary social capital to facilitate success among families and children in both education and life.

One can argue that the majority of the schools, where students have high academic performance, rely on the social capital of their students and families rather than on the internal capacity of the schools themselves. Children raised in affluent communities frequently have parents with strong education and high expectations. They benefit from private tutoring, recreational outlets, and college-related stories from friends and neighbors. These resources are rather scarce in many economically distressed cities like Camden.

Providing education that strengthens the communities simultaneously offers reciprocal benefits. Building partnerships with universities and community organizations to provide support and services to families and children establishes a foundation for young people to succeed academically. Accountability is then shared by numerous stakeholders on academic outcomes rather than on the school alone. LEAP Academy has instituted a number of practices to help youth, teachers, staff and parents understand what it means to be accountable toward the pursuit of quality education. Similarly, efforts have occurred to influence government and public agencies, institutions of higher education, and the business sector toward a greater understanding of their roles and responsibilities regarding educational accountability.

Through this framework, integration of educational concerns has occurred within the family and community of students. The school represents a hub for family services, gatherings, and community events. Families support each other and work in partnership with the school to ensure academic accountability and school excellence. Children are beacons of hope, and families have become the tools of change within their community. The integration of social support services into the school setting allows for family preservation, support, interventions and problem solving efforts.

In the context of school improvement in urban America, LEAP sought to create sustainable change in a poor city. The desired change focused on three challenges arising from the presence of structural inequalities in U.S. society. First, a lack of preparation and quality of educational options exist in many students as a result of economically depressed neighborhoods and poor preparation for education during preschool years. Second, a lack of connection exists between schools and communities contribute to a range of insufficiencies in human and supportive services. Third, a lack of information about resources and advocacy opportunities exist within these same areas. Each of these influenced the approach taken by LEAP in addressing community needs.

The most serious challenge to the community in Camden however remains. Crime indices for the city region are high for both violent crimes and for property crimes. And children continue to represent a significant proportion of the Camden population, which places them at significant risk. Such challenges represent both threats as well as opportunities. The LEAP community has fought against violence and crime by partnering with the city and university police. Likewise, the school community is very active in protecting the neighborhood and the surrounding school area. The Rutgers Camden University police patrol program is one of the most visible and active forces against crime in the region, and they partner with LEAP Academy to provide programs for children as well as parents in enhancing community safety and security. To compliment these programs, the school operates character education campaigns programs for children and families recently receiving a mayoral award for community safety. By being a catalyst, LEAP Academy has served to empower the community as a whole to make large strides to improve the overall environment.

Baseline requirements for attending LEAP Academy include several parental commitments as part of the Parent Commitment Contract. This contract is signed by all parents of LEAP Academy students, and the contract requires a dedicated commitment of 40 hours of volunteer service at the school. In addition to this level of involvement, the LEAP Academy has trained over 5,000 parents through the Parent Partner Training program, which also involves 100 percent of all parents who have a student, enrolled at LEAP Academy. In addition, over 300 parents have received certification to become trainers at the Parent Partner Training program as well. These programs and contracts establish a foundation of commitment and involvement of parents, which in turn affect the community in many positive ways.

LEAP Academy has invested heavily in the community in several ways. The largest financial investment involved a \$40 million investment in capital buildings along Cooper Street. Additionally, the various Centers of Excellence and their associated programs have perhaps had the largest impact on the community of Camden. Statistics demonstrate that over 1,000 members have been enrolled in the Health and Wellness Center, which provides health services to the uninsured and underinsured. Likewise, more than 210 undocumented immigrant families have increased their ability to read and write through the Health Education Literacy Project (HELP). Programs also serve to train individuals on community leadership; and since LEAP Academy opened, over 1,000 community leaders have completed this leadership training.

Parents and individuals participating in these Centers of Excellence report several other secondary benefits related to the community outside the LEAP Academy or its programs. Of parents surveyed, more than half reported increased participation and volunteerism with community organizations and neighborhood groups. An increased ability to appreciate various family resources were reported by 57.3 percent, while 60.9 percent described the acquisition of enhanced self-advocacy skills. Educational programs through the Centers of Excellence also accounted for 50 percent of survey participants reporting improved job-seeking abilities and employment skills. And 52.8 percent reported enhanced decision-making abilities in all areas of their lives. Given this data, the community outreach programs demonstrate positive community impact in a wide variety of areas. Parental engagement in educational activities establishes a foundation of involvement, which serves to strengthen families while focusing priorities on academic achievement. However, additional support programs through LEAP Academy takes it a step further by providing social support systems which increase chances for student, family and community success.

4 PARTNERSHIP IMPACT

The underlying premise for LEAP Academy's mission supports the need for involvement among many stakeholders within the community in order to provide students with the greatest academic opportunities. This premise was incorporated into the strategic plans in the school's development, and it has remained a central concept during the growth and advancement of the LEAP Academy since 1997. Numerous governors and their administrations have been involved in supporting the LEAP Charter school trajectory efforts, including Governors Jim Florio, Christie Whitman, Jim McGreevy, Jon Corzine and, now, Chris Christie. The Rutgers Board of Governors and Delaware River Port Authority likewise played an important role in supporting the school's mission and accomplishments. Parents represent one of the most significant partners in this educational endeavor, and results related to increased parental engagement have been reported previously. This section will address ongoing support from other community partners since the school's inception as well as the reciprocal effects LEAP Academy has had on our partners and affiliates.

Rutgers University has been a cornerstone of support both during the formation of LEAP Academy and throughout its tenure as a charter school. Leadership support and the provision of resources from Rutgers were essential in establishing LEAP Academy; but since that time, a further strengthening of a partnership relationship has evolved. This relationship is noted in LEAP Academy's Centers of Excellence, which demonstrate mutual benefits to both the university and the charter school. For example, Rutgers' students have ample opportunities for research, observation, tutoring and learning through direct participation within the centers. Law students participate in providing community services through the law clinic while gaining valuable education and direction. The Health and Wellness Center offers similar opportunities for nursing students, students studying social work curricula, and medical students in the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. A LEAP Educational Fellowship program is available for prospective education students who wish to experience hands-on education through student instruction at LEAP Academy. A Rutgers Camden Master's Program in Educational Policy and Leadership was also created to develop new school leaders for LEAP

Academy and other Camden schools. Opportunities thus exist for Rutgers students to expand their education through practical experiences, which not only provide skills and knowledge development but also likewise meet community needs.

LEAP Academy has emerged as an important resource for undergraduate and graduate students in college interested in urban learning issues as well. LEAP has been utilized for student internships and for various course requirements at Rutgers University. The benefits of a university–charter school partnership are reciprocal. Rutgers considers LEAP a strategic partner for building pre-college pipelines for recruitment of minority students. LEAP also provides the university with valuable opportunities for experiential learning for students as well as research opportunities for faculty. LEAP students appreciate the proximity to a university campus and the ability to interact with university students and faculty. Teachers at LEAP also appreciate the accessible academic resources provided by the university.

This partnership holds several lessons for other institutions of higher education seeking to build stronger bridges and communication with strategic partners. The Rutgers/LEAP partnership through the solidarity of school and community exhibits innovative ways in educating students while providing support. Through restructuring, strengthening, and revamping undergraduate and graduate programs, students become better prepared to address real life problems and to attend higher educational institutions. This partnership also enhances opportunities for students to engage university faculty steering away from the “Ivory Tower” stigma that is so prevalent in higher education. Ultimately this has resulted in increased numbers of students enrolling in the university upon graduation from LEAP.

Since 1997, over 1,000 members have been enrolled in the Health and Wellness Center at LEAP Academy. In addition to the partnership associated with Rutgers University, community partners such as Cooper Family Medicine have also provided support. The Robert Wood Johnson foundation, as the biggest supporter, provided millions of dollars to support the Health Clinic at the school. The Fund for New Jersey, Geraldine Dodge Foundation, ATT Foundation and Verizon Foundation also funded planning efforts for the Rutgers Centers of Excellence. As a result of the positive impacts on students, their families and community at large, partnership relationships for support have continued to expand during the course of LEAP Academy’s existence.

Community partners have also been instrumental in the development and growth of the Early Learning Research Academy (ELRA), which provides education to children between birth and age five. In 2005, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation provided a \$1 million grant to support training and research related to early learning. And in 2007, the foundation funded a \$2 million grant in capital support for a new ELRA building. This ELRA facility now serves 126 toddlers and preschoolers in a dual language capacity. During this same time, the New Jersey Economic Development Recovery Act program donated another \$1 million toward the ELRA facility, while the Kresge Foundation funded a major effort in a community campaign to generate support for the ELRA project. This effort brought local banks, businesses, entrepreneurs, families and other key stakeholders together in support of ELRA. Through these partnerships, as well as with the professional guidance and contributions of Rutgers University, ELRA has flourished and become established as an important Early Learning Research Academy to promote quality early learning for minority children in the city and has become a strategy learning site for the city. As previously noted, the Prudential Insurance Company provided an initial grant to establish the Parent Academy at LEAP. Since that time, thousands of parents have participated in this training, and more than half of the parents at LEAP report an increase in community activism since their child attended the school. In 1999, the William Penn Foundation contributed another \$330,000 toward the Parent Academy, and in 2004 awarded the LEAP Academy a grant for \$693,000 for the Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership (CSUCL). These partnerships have made a significant impact on the Camden area with more than 1,000 community leaders having been trained through the CSUCL. Resource opportunities have been identified for these community efforts, and programs have been well supported based on the positive intentions and results of the programs themselves.

In addition to direct improvements to the Camden community at large, there has been reciprocity of benefits enjoyed more directly in specific circumstances. In particular, this involves tertiary educational enrollment among LEAP Academy graduates. Between 2005 and 2010, a majority of students enrolled in local college centers. Specifically, 20 percent attended Rutgers University, 10 percent attended Rowan University, and 31 percent attended Camden County College. In 2010, 92 percent of the graduates from LEAP Academy enrolled in colleges within the state of New Jersey. These statistics demonstrate a direct return on investment for these institutions from student enrollment in addition to

the more indirect community benefits described. Such benefits serve to strengthen partnership relations due to their reciprocal nature of benefit.

Exhibit: IV. Networks and Stakeholders (Working Group).

