



Color Our World

If you're not particularly happy with the direction in which

New Jersey is moving, then CUPR's impact assessment of the state plan is a must read. *By Bill Glovin*

As the man behind a new study that will help determine the future of New Jersey, Robert Burchell often finds himself talking about alleviating chronic congestion and preserving open space in the Garden State. In meeting after meeting, he's heard a worn refrain: the state's problems are unsolvable.

But Burchell isn't buying any of it. After spending a good part of the last nine years gathering data and analyzing what might happen if the New Jersey State Plan were to be implemented, he should know. "For starters, New Jersey is one of only 14 states that has a plan to control growth," says Burchell, co-director of the Center of Urban Policy Research

(CUPR) at Rutgers' Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. "No state has ever tried to implement such a plan and, compared to other states, we're considered a land-use marvel. New Jersey has voter approval to buy one million acres of undeveloped land, we require that municipalities zone land for affordable housing, and we now have a plan that promotes smart growth."

Someone reading a recent report on density might be surprised to find that parts of New Jersey are as dense as Tokyo and Calcutta. Still, out of the five million total developable acres in the state, 1.9 million remain undeveloped. With the state slated to purchase one million of those acres as part of the open-space referendum, another 900,000 are up for grabs.

That's where the state plan comes in. By itself, the plan has no authority to block development. But it can influence the state and federal regulators who grant development permits, particularly in environmentally sensitive areas. Says Burchell, "The way to promote implementation is to put aside pots of money and say to municipalities, 'If you behave the way we want you to behave, then you can get access to this pot of money.'"

To help local planning boards and developers follow the plan, CUPR's impact assessment study includes a color-coded policy map divided into five areas—metropolitan, suburban, fringe, rural, and environmentally sensitive—and five center types—urban, regional, town, village, and hamlet. To create the map, the state's 21 counties and 566 municipalities reviewed their own land-use plans, ordinances, and regulations. Before they were finished, Burchell's team had negotiated more than 1,000 policy compromises and map changes between the State Planning Commission and local governments.

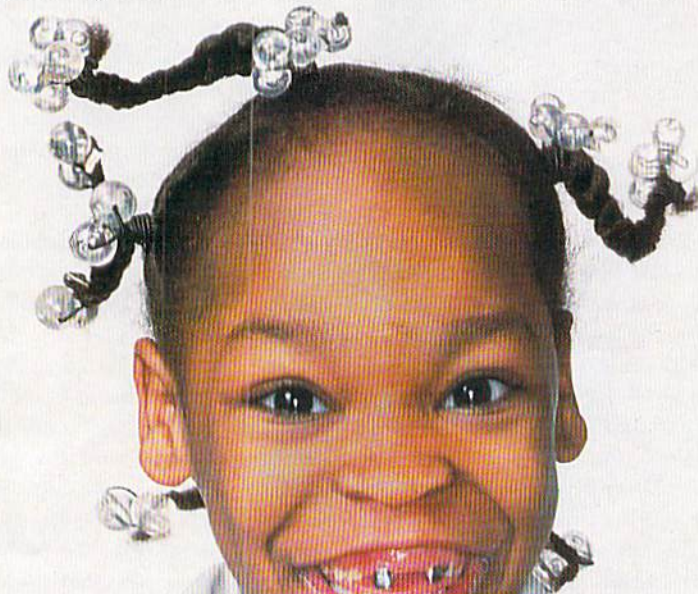
"Deep pink means the area has potential for development; light yellow is where development should not take place," says Burchell. "If Merrill

AP 10

Marie Green has a problem. Right in the middle of a

lesson on North American explorers, Green, a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher, discovers that her pupils don't know when

major historical events had taken place. At another school, Green might have had to sigh and move on to the next chapter in

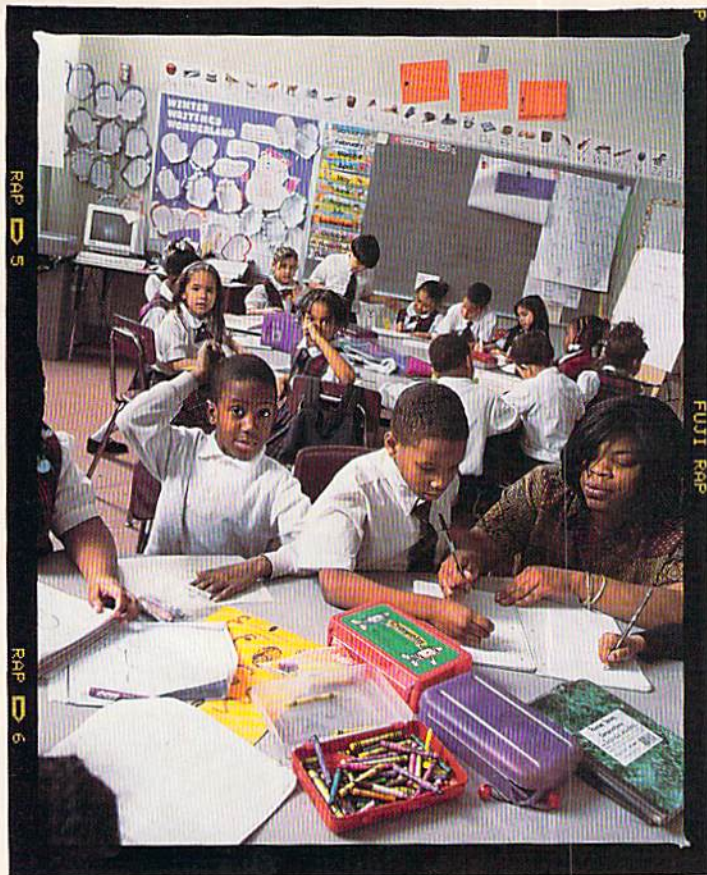


*Fly Girl:
The sky's the
limit for LEAP
Academy
first-grader
Chalaya Moye.*

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RAP 11



Teacher Malika MacKlim concentrates on helping LEAP Academy students with individual needs, not just on what the curriculum dictates.

a textbook. But as a teacher at the LEAP Academy, a Camden-based charter school, Green has the freedom to veer off course and address the issue.

Her solution is to ask her 19 students to drop everything and research history in books and on the Web, and then turn their findings into a brightly illustrated timeline. The end result, Green envisions, is one big chronology that will wrap all the way around her vividly decorated and immaculate classroom, and will show major events from A.D. 500 all the way through the 1600s.

That's why 12-year-old sixth-grader Tyreek Dixon is busy drawing a Native American duck decoy from A.D. 1000 onto a yellow card, and why, several desks away, fifth-grader Caprisha Pollitt and a fellow student, both wearing their required red-plaid jumpers, are checking the spelling on a short essay on the explorer Magellan. Not every student is working on the timeline—one boy who is a little behind in math is getting special help.

Such attentiveness to academic needs, clean and modern classrooms, and new computers are not what you'd expect to find in a school that overlooks the rough-and-tumble streets of Camden, where decades of closing factories, rampant political corruption, and high rates of drug abuse and teen pregnancy have created a pervasive sense of hopelessness.

But nowhere have the ills of the city taken root more deeply than in the public schools. With 19,000 students, Camden's public schools have been plagued with some of the lowest student test scores and highest dropout rates in New Jersey. The suspicion that some school officials have allegedly

misused district funds, sometimes for personal gain, has meant that authorities have repeatedly investigated the system's spending practices.

In such an environment, the obstacles to success would seem enormous. But the LEAP Academy—founded by Gloria Bonilla-Santiago, a professor of urban studies at Rutgers-Camden and head of the university's Center for Strategic Urban Community Leadership—is no ordinary school. It is a charter school—traditional in that it gets state funding, like a public school; nontraditional in that it has broad leeway in setting curriculum.

With some 460 kindergarten through eighth-grade students enrolled and 42 teachers under the leadership of Principal Iliana Okum, the LEAP Academy (its name stands for Leadership, Education, and Partnership) concentrates on math, science, and technology. Early indicators have been positive, especially among the youngest students. The greatest improvement in test scores so far has come in the first, second, and third grades, with these students scoring at or better than the national averages on the 1999-2000 Terra Nova tests that monitor student reading comprehension and math. Bonilla-Santiago believes that's because these students have been with the school since kindergarten.

Improvements in the upper grades have been harder to come by. While fourth graders, for example, have shown improvement on the statewide assessment test, they are still scoring below average.

Despite some disappointments, the LEAP Academy has become, in five short years, an oasis of hope in this city of 88,000. In the early 1990s, Bonilla-Santiago was one of the few people in Camden who thought things could improve. She becomes emotional when she talks about the city's slide. "Camden is an embarrassment to the world, to the state, and to its residents," she says, noting that four mayors have faced criminal charges. "Yet we have allowed this situation to go on."

Her frustration reached full boil at the right time. In 1992, the Los Angeles riots and the election of President Bill Clinton led to a new focus on the problems of inner cities. Charter schools surfaced as a solution—albeit a hotly debated one—to failed traditional schools: Less than a decade later, more than 1,500 charter schools have sprung up in 37 states. In Camden, demand for the LEAP Academy, which admits students by lottery, is high: The current waiting list has some 500 children, more than the school's entire enrollment.

Yet it is hardly, as Bonilla-Santiago quickly learned, a simple way to change things. From the very beginning, she has scrambled for funding. While the state pays 90 percent of the cost for student education at LEAP, it does not provide money for facilities. With a \$6.5 million, 30-year mortgage loan secured from the Delaware River Port Authority, Bonilla-Santiago arranged for the Academy to purchase and renovate a rundown, 1920s-era building—a former Camden County College building at Seventh and Cooper streets, a block away from the Rutgers-Camden campus. The port authority oversaw the building's makeover from what was little more than a shell into a clean, appealing school. To pay off the mortgage, Bonilla-Santiago uses funds from a local per-pupil levy.