In one of the busiest times on record for education construction in Camden City, the Community Leadership Center at Rutgers–Camden and LEAP Academy University Charter School are adding two new learning facilities to the Education Corridor of Cooper Street.

In September, CLC officially opened its new John S. and James L. Knight Early Learning Research Academy (ELRA), an innovative service and research center for 126 infants, toddlers and preschoolers. The $3.9M Knight ELRA building was opened to the public on October 7, when 200 guests got a glimpse of the research and learning that will inform best practices in early childhood education.

Then on November 14, LEAP Academy officially began construction of its new science, technology, engineering and math campus at a groundbreaking ceremony. The STEM facility, scheduled to open in September 2012, will create state-of-the-art learning space for 540 students from preschool to grade 3 and grades 9 to 12.

Together, these two projects will greatly improve access to quality, research-based education for children and parents in the city and will strengthen the Rutgers/LEAP “Birth-to-College” pipeline, which provides an opportunity for students to be educated from infancy to graduate school on Cooper Street.
If you’ve taken a drive along Cooper Street recently you’ve seen that, block by block, the street is abuzz with new education construction projects. The projects range from early childhood to primary and secondary school to graduate housing and alumni spaces. Thanks to Rutgers University and LEAP Academy, with each new brick, Cooper Street and Camden City are slowly coming back to life.

CLC has been at the head of these building efforts, which are part of our Rutgers/LEAP “Birth-to-College” Pipeline. This semester, CLC and Rutgers—Camden opened the John S. and James L. Knight Early Learning Research Academy (ELRA) for 126 infants, toddlers and preschoolers in Camden. ELRA addresses the critical foundations of education and socio-emotional development for children from urban school districts and fills in the critical first piece of the pipeline.

Just weeks ago, LEAP Academy broke ground on its new STEM charter campus, the first new major school facility in New Jersey to be built exclusively for a science, technology, engineering and math program. STEM will provide the integrated labs and technology to prepare our students for college and careers in STEM and increase LEAP’s enrollment from 900 to 1,260 students.

These projects are happening because the children and families of Camden are demanding them. For too long, the city’s public education system has failed our students and parents. Families want more than Camden’s traditional public schools can offer—they want the LEAP model and the pipeline from birth to college. The pipeline we’ve been building is more than just an idea; it’s a secure and strategic pathway for Camden City children to successfully matriculate through early childhood, primary, secondary and higher education.

But today, LEAP cannot meet the demand of every family in the city. There are currently over 500 children on the waiting list for LEAP in grades K-6 alone, and the number of students and families seeking admission to LEAP continues to grow. That’s why we’re coming to Cramer Hill. CLC and LEAP have heard our parents and families and are vigorously pursuing plans to create and build a new environmental sciences school for 540 students in grades kindergarten to eight. This focus on STEM and environmental sciences is as much an economic strategy as an educational one. The most secure and highest-paying jobs of the 21st century will go to workers with a strong science and technology education and, most importantly, a college degree from the nation’s leading STEM universities.

But don’t be satisfied with only one new school. Talk to your neighbors and elected officials: tell them you want more charters in your communities. Tell them you want school choice; tell them you want equity in charter school funding; tell them the traditional system of educating our children doesn’t work today. We need new ideas and the Rutgers/LEAP birth to college pipeline is the answer.

For the twelfth year, CLC and LEAP Academy hosted the annual Rutgers/LEAP Alfredo Santiago Endowed Scholarship Fundraising Gala.

On Friday, December 2nd, The Mansion in Voorhees was filled by over 250 guests that gathered to recognize the legacy of success of LEAP Academy and the Community Leadership Center at Rutgers—Camden.

This year’s gala helped raise over $100,000 for the endowment, which has grown to over $1.25 million since 1999 and continues to support the financial need of dozens of LEAP Academy students attending Rutgers University. Over 30 scholarship recipients and LEAP alumni were in attendance, including all 10 LEAP graduates who received the scholarship and enrolled at Rutgers—Camden in 2011.

“This scholarship is critical to the success of LEAP Academy and Rutgers—Camden. Every year one hundred percent of our LEAP students graduate and go on to college and their preferred college is Rutgers University. The Scholarship is helping them afford to go to Rutgers and that wouldn’t be possible without the support of our funders and friends,” said CLC director Dr. Gloria Bonilla-Santiago.

At the event, Rutgers and LEAP honored five local, regional and international business leaders from corporate and non-profit organizations:

José E. Fernández Bjer, Omega Enterprises, Inc; Angelo J. Genova, Genova, Burns & Gianmatosi; Hernán Guaracao, AL DÍA; J. Michael Schweder, AT&T; and Alan F. Stein, Rotary International.

All five honorees were introduced by LEAP Academy seniors and each spoke about the importance of increasing college access for minority youth in Camden City and the United States. Their support, along with past and present funders during the last 12 years, has provided financial assistance to more than 40 LEAP Academy students in college.

In addition to the awards and dinner, guests had the opportunity to participate in the gala silent auction and a live auction, which offered items like Philadelphia Phillies autographed memorabilia, vacation packages, golf foursomes, jewelry and original artwork from LEAP Academy student artists.

Even though this year’s gala is over, the scholarship is still accepting holiday donations.

To learn how you can contribute, please contact Aaron Cohen at aaron.cohen@rutgers.edu or (856) 225-2922.
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According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services and the Foundation for Child Development,
research shows infants and toddlers in low-income
communities are exposed to one-third the number of words
as children in more affluent areas.
Ten years after creating Rutgers University–Camden’s
first ever early learning preschool program in 2001, the
Community Leadership Center opened the doors to its
new 12,000 square-foot John S. and James L. Knight Early
Learning Research Academy on September 7.
Early that morning, 66 infants, toddlers and preschoolers
(aged eight weeks to five years old) arrived at the new Knight
ELRA building at 501 Cooper to begin their long journey to
high school graduation and college admission.
Over the next several years, CLC’s ELRA program will
provide these children with strong foundations in literacy
and math along with the social skills and healthy routines to
successfully transition to kindergarten and beyond.
"ELRA is a critical intervention strategy to decrease the
educational deficits of our youngest learners and to bridge
the achievement gap for young Latino and African-American
students. Kindergarten is too late to erase these deficits for
minority children because the challenges begin at birth and
grow exponentially over time. It’s no surprise then that these
language and literacy deficits are difficult for most students
to overcome," said Dr. Gloria Bonilla-Santiago, Rutgers Board
of Governors Distinguished Service Professor and Director of
CLC.
The achievement gap begins early on. According to a study
by James Heckman, Nobel Laureate of Economics, half of
the achievement gap between white and African American
children in twelfth grade is already present among the
same children before they reach kindergarten. Furthermore,
research shows infants and toddlers in low-income
communities are exposed to one-third the number of words
as children in more affluent areas.
On November 14 in front of a crowd of 250 people, LEAP
Academy University Charter School broke ground on its
new $12.5M Science, Technology, Engineering and Math
(STEM) campus in Camden City.
The new 39,000 square-foot campus will provide state-of-the-art learning space for 540 LEAP Academy
students divided between a primary grade K-to-3 building
and secondary grade 9-to-12 building. The campus will
also provide classrooms for 60 preschoolers in Rutgers–
Camden’s Early Learning Research Academy, bringing the
total number of Camden City students served to 540.
"Increased focus on math and science education is
essential to the success of public education and we must
improve access to STEM careers for students of color.
LEAP’s STEM campus is a critical first step to providing
the advanced curriculum and resources that will allow
our students to someday compete at top colleges and
businesses,” said Dr. Gloria Bonilla-Santiago, founder and
board chair of LEAP Academy and director of CLC.
At the groundbreaking, distinguished public officials from
the state and city remarked on the promise that the new
building will provide to students, including Camden City
Mayor Dana Redd. “I’ve seen the potential that resides in
our young people—we just need to give them the
opportunity to unleash that potential and to become the
leaders of our great city,” said Mayor Redd. Immediately
after the groundbreaking, guests were treated to a LEAP
science exhibition, where all 120 students in the STEM
program displayed recent projects in chemistry, physics and
robotics.
Construction on the STEM campus began earlier this year at
528-532 Cooper Street and is on schedule to be completed in
August, in time for LEAP’s 2012 school year. The campus
will be equipped with state-of-the-art technology, classroom space,
science laboratories and a 150-seat lecture hall. The site will also be
home to a new Center for Industrial Arts and Innovation. The Center
will be a design and fabrication space for students, parents and
community members to create and market industrial projects.
LEAP’s new STEM campus is timely. Over the past 10 years, growth in
STEM jobs was three times as fast as growth in non-STEM jobs. STEM
workers are also less likely to experience joblessness than
non-STEM workers, according to a report by the U.S. Department of
Commerce’s Economics and Statistics Administration. According to
the same report, STEM jobs are projected to grow by 17.0 percent
from 2008 to 2018, nearly double the 9.8 percent projected growth of
non-STEM jobs for that same time period.
"The future of the U.S. economy is rooted in STEM. This program will
make it possible for us to recruit the best STEM teachers and will
put LEAP students in the best position to find profitable, secure and
rewarding employment," Dr. Santiago said.
Continuing its mission to advance the university’s scholarship in public policy and also its global research partnerships, CLC and Rutgers–Camden hosted an educational dialogue by Cuban scholar Mario Coyula-Cowley. Dr. Coyula is an internationally-recognized architect and urban planner who has designed some of Havana, Cuba’s most important cultural landmarks.

Dr. Coyula, who is a visiting scholar at Harvard University’s David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, visited Rutgers on November 4 and delivered an insightful presentation about the history and evolution of Havana’s architecture since the city’s founding in the 16th century.

His presentation, La Habana: Colonía, República y Revolución, took guests on a virtual tour of “The Great White City” as he traced the historical development of public and private architecture, including many of his own projects. Coyula and colleagues were commissioned to design two memorials dedicated to citizens who fought and died in the Revolution: Mausoiole Héroes del 13 de Marzo and the Parque-Monumento Mártires Universitarios.

Dr. Coyula also dispelled notions about the cessation of innovative architecture since the 1958-1961 Cuban Revolution, adding that the 1959-1976 project built in 1961 in eastern Havana may be “the best designed complex of buildings in the city.” “Good modern architecture did not stop with the triumph of the Revolution; it continued,” said Dr. Coyula, who said his favorite period of Havana architecture is the 1950s and 60s.

February 9: College Students to Share College Experiences, Help Leap Kids to Aspire

CLC’s ASPIRE project is inviting college students from Rutgers–Camden and other universities to participate in a college mentoring panel to speak with 180 high school students from LEAP Academy.

The panel will take place on February 9 from 4:00pm to 5:30pm at LEAP Academy where they will meet with students in grades 8-10 and speak about their own experiences in college. Panelists will share important information about admissions, internships, scholarships, academic and social management and how to adjust to living on college campuses.

“Our students sometimes struggle to understand the importance of what they are learning in their classes, how it relates to the real world and how it prepares them for college. But this panel will really bring it home for them,” said Jennifer Tuter, CLC’s Associate Director for Special Projects. “Students will be able to relate to the panelists as they share their experiences and motivate our students to achieve in high school so that they can excel in college.”

National studies have shown that students in 8th to 10th-grades are the most likely to drop out of school, with more than one-third of all high school dropouts in 9th-grade. ASPIRE provides mentoring experiences for LEAP students to help them develop academically and socially throughout high school. It recruits college students to work with mentors and frequently hosts events to inspire and ASPIRE students to excel in school and pursue their college dreams. ASPIRE is funded by a grant from the AT&T Foundation.

“This is an incredibly important time in these students’ lives and every positive academic interaction they have will increase their motivation for college,” said Atnre Alleyne, a doctoral student at the University of Delaware who has volunteered for the panel. Mr. Alleyne founded his own youth leadership program, TeenSHARP, and said young students need to understand that every grade matters. “How they perform academically today absolutely matters when they apply to college. Their college applications begin now.”

For information on how you can support ASPIRE and help every LEAP child graduate high school and go to college, please contact Jenna Tuter at 856-225-2871.
The Community Leadership Center has been awarded a two-year $108,000 grant from the Kinesis Foundation to create a rigorous SAT training program for 270 LEAP Academy students. The new Bright Stars Initiative at LEAP will work in collaboration with The Princeton Review, which will administer its high-quality SAT prep program to help students make gains in their scores.

Beginning this semester, SAT training will be offered to 135 LEAP Academy juniors and sophomores. An additional 135 students will receive the training in 2013. The program will be led by CLC’s Center for College Access, which has forged important partnerships to help 100% of LEAP graduates gain admission to college.

Kinesis, based in San Juan, Puerto Rico, has made SAT preparation and college scholarships available for hundreds of Puerto Rican students. Kinesis has partnered with LEAP because youth in Camden and San Juan face many of the same challenges in access to college.

"Through these funds given to the LEAP Academy, we value the efforts of those students who deserve the merit; and thus, offer them the opportunity to implement themselves as professionals of society to work for a greater good," said José E. Fernandez, president of the Kinesis. "Hopefully, this is the beginning of a long and prosperous relationship between both of our communities, who strive for the wellbeing of society."