



Everything Jersey

## Camden announces new charter school to open in September

By [Jason Laday/South Jersey Times](#)

on March 21, 2013 at 5:58 PM, updated March 21, 2013 at 5:59 PM

[CAMDEN](#) — Officials on Thursday announced a newly approved public [charter school](#) in North Camden, scheduled to begin serving up to 300 elementary school students beginning as early as September.

Students at the new Camden Community Charter School — which will soon break ground at what has long been an empty lot near the intersection of 8th and Linden streets — will be provided with free laptops and at-home Internet access through a partnership between Comcast and a local charity.

Proponents of the plan said this will help address locally what has been dubbed the “digital divide.”

“It’s a situation of haves and have-nots, where one group has access to the Internet and all the information, education, the ability to search for jobs, news and entertainment that comes with it, and others do not,” said Comcast Executive Vice President David Cohen, addressing city and charter school officials Thursday at the ceremonial groundbreaking across the street from the construction site.

He gestured toward a U.S. Census map of Camden and its suburbs, which showed that the rate of home Internet access within the city ranges from zero to 20 percent. However, just miles away in places like Haddon Township and Moorestown, Internet access in the home ranges from 80 to 100 percent.

“This is intended to help level the playing field,” Cohen added.

The donation comes from the Vahan and Danielle Gureghian Foundation, formed by the husband and wife seven years ago to raise scholarship funds and other education initiatives. The charity will cover the \$150 cost for each laptop, as well as the \$9.95 per month for home Internet access for each student, all though Comcast’s “Internet Essential” program which the telecom giant has recently made available for low-income areas.

Cohen expects the program to spur interest in the charter school.

“I knew it was going to be hard to get into this school before,” said Cohen, “but I can’t imagine how many applications they’ll get now.”

The new charter school will be managed by CSMI Education Management LLC, which operates [Chester Community Charter School](#) in Pennsylvania, and whose founder and CEO,

Vahan Gureghian, is one half of the foundation providing the free laptops and Internet access to students. The other half, Danielle Gureghian, serves as executive vice president and general counsel for the group.

According to spokesmen with CSMI, initial enrollment will be 300 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, all chosen through a lottery. However, the school will eventually serve up to 900 students when it expands to cover grades six through eight.

"People will register and apply, and then there will be a lottery, and everyone after the 300 will go on the waiting list," said CSMI consultant Pat Yacovelli. "There will be a preference for Camden residents, and in the coming years there will be a preference for siblings of students already in the school."

However, the first enrolled student has already been chosen — 4-year-old Iyanna Negron, who lives with her guardian one block away from the charter school, donned a white construction helmet during the ceremonial groundbreaking.

Iyanna currently attends the Respond Inc. nursery school on North 9th Street, where Executive Director Wilbert Mitchell is also chairman of the city's Save Our Waterfront organization, and is involved in various community initiatives.

"We just went up to him and said we'd like to be the first ones to sign up," said Carmen Gonzalez, Iyanna's guardian. "It's great — something like this is exactly what we needed."

According to CSMI officials, Camden Community Charter School will span three buildings totaling more than 300,000 square feet, with an estimated construction cost between \$10 million and \$12 million. TN Ward Company, which has offices in Ardmore, Pa., and Atlantic City, has been named general contractor.

As a public charter school, the facility will be open to all for free. Funding for the school will be provided through New Jersey state aid, based on enrollment figures. CSMI officials declined to estimate what the average annual budget for the new charter school would total.

Camden Mayor Dana Redd said the charter school — which would be the seventh operating in the Camden area — will "help close the gaps in the education system."

"The power of a good education can make the difference between dropping out of high school and going to college, and between going to jail and graduating high school," she said. "It can also mean the difference between life and death."

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