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## School troubles in Camden trigger a mini-exodus - Newly settled middle-class families are starting to quit the city for the suburbs.

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Anthony Mazzarelli and his wife, Joanne, invested \$200,000 almost two years ago to buy a house in Camden's newly refurbished Cooper Grant neighborhood.

Both are doctors, he in the emergency room in Camden's Cooper University Hospital and she at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. They were active in Camden, with Anthony serving on the Camden Redevelopment Agency.

Their neighborhood, an enclave between the city's redeveloped waterfront and Rutgers University, has been described by Philadelphia developer Carl Dranoff as "the Society Hill of Camden."

But now the Mazzarellis have moved out - joining a small exodus of five other young families - to Merchantville in search of quality schools.

Once touted as a mecca for young urban pioneers, Cooper Grant seems to be losing some of its magnetism for these hip young upscale families.

For the Mazzarellis, who left two months ago, the decision came when they began talking about having children.

"It was really the schools," said Mazzarelli, 31.

Crime and poverty have long been considered the primary obstacles to Camden's revitalization. But the recent scandal-ridden departure of Camden Schools Superintendent Annette D. Knox has triggered new alarms about the city's failing school system. Last fall, the state labeled Camden a failing district due to low test scores.

City leaders this week acknowledged that without decent public schools, the city cannot thrive.

"We can't build the city unless we have a good school system," said the city's state-appointed chief operating officer, Melvin R. "Randy" Primas Jr.

Camden physician and community activist Jeff Brenner has a 2-year-old and a baby on the way. He's staying, but he's worried that the school board lacks the expertise to hire a new superintendent. It's "critically important," he said, for Gov. Corzine to take control of the selection process.

"I have serious concerns about the ability of this school district to find the kind of leaders it's going to take to restore a sense of integrity to the school district," he said.

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Brenner, a board member at **CamConnect** - a nonprofit organization that collects data about Camden - and a member of a blue-ribbon panel appointed by the state attorney general to reorganize the Camden Police Department, said a blue-ribbon schools panel may also be needed.

The failure of the district to educate children adequately perpetuates a "cycle of poverty and chaos in Camden," he said.

Angel Cordero, 45, a Camden activist, shared that view, saying that he is living testament to the district's failure.

Cordero said he learned to read and write in prison, where he landed after getting caught up in the drug trade.

As an organizer for Excellent Education for Everyone, a school-choice group that is suing for the right to vouchers, Cordero said that vouchers would allow students to attend nearby private and public schools.

"When children don't have no hope, no light at the end of the tunnel . . . that's when they sell drugs," said Cordero.

Ivelisse Oquento, 37, of the Fairview section of the city, and her husband, Ernesto Lopez, 35, are among those who feel trapped in Camden.

"I'm a homeowner," said Oquento. "But I'm not in a position to move out. I don't think my kids are getting the education they should. I don't think the teachers care enough, and I don't think the Board of Education does enough when parents complain."

One of her three children attended H.B. Wilson Elementary School, which the state has been investigating since March, when *The Inquirer* raised questions about unusually high 2005 test scores. With state monitors watching the 2006 testing, scores for fourth-grade math plunged 77 percentage points.

The state has not yet said whether cheating occurred, but Oquento is convinced there were irregularities. "I feel they stole my child's education and her future by altering test scores."

Board President Philip E. Freeman defended the board, saying it acted to buy out Knox's contract after learning that she had received bonuses not approved by the board. He agrees that Knox's resignation won't solve the district's problems but sees it as a major step in the right direction.

"We have to continue in our efforts to recruit the best-quality personnel," said Freeman.

But, Freeman says, he's disappointed that the district hasn't been able to turn itself around, given the schools' importance to the city's revitalization.

The city's five-year multimillion-dollar recovery plan, known as the Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act, gave the state the power to oversee Camden's schools. It gave the governor veto power over board actions, and reorganized the nine-member board to include three elected members and six who are appointed - three by the mayor and three by the governor.

"It seems like the recovery act has not fulfilled expectations," Freeman said.

The district remains crippled by socio-economic problems that he said could have been moderated if there had been more coordination between the city and the schools.

In Philadelphia, leaders recognized the importance of making schools attractive to middle-class families, who - like their counterparts in Camden - seemed to leave the city when their children hit school age.

In addition to districtwide improvements, the Philadelphia School Reform Commission last year created a Center City district to appeal to new middle-class residents. The initiative

got a \$250,000 state grant and aid from the William Penn Foundation.

Residents get first preference on spruced-up elementary schools, and they can bid to send their children to magnet schools and high schools affiliated with community partners like the National Constitution Center and the Franklin Institute.

In Camden, the Newhalls lived in the Cooper Grant section for nine years before deciding last year to leave so their two teenagers could go to public school. They had been home-schooled and attended private school.

"I wanted desperately to stay in Camden. We loved the city," said Sandra Newhall, 37, now of Medford.

"It was heart-wrenching to leave. We were very close to the people in the community, and we're still optimistic about the city."

Tom Corcoran, who has spearheaded efforts to revitalize Camden's waterfront and neighborhoods as executive director of Cooper's Ferry Development Corp., said education is key to the city's future.

"Until Camden has a good-quality education system, we're not going to be able to attract families with school-age children back to the city," he said.

Without families, "you're left with retired couples and young professionals with no kids, and that's taking a big hunk of the market away."

Anthony Mazarrelli is holding onto his \$200,000 house in Cooper Grant and renting it out to Rutgers University students. He still has hope for the city but added: "As much as I love the city, it was not consistent with what we wanted to do. . . . It really was the schools."

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#### ONLINE EXTRA

For previous stories on the Camden schools, go to <http://go.philly.com/camdenscores>

#### **Caption:** PHOTO

SARAH J. GLOVER / Inquirer Staff Photographer Revisiting their old Cooper Grant neighborhood, Joanne and Anthony Mazarrelli say they miss city life. But they're planning a family, and they say they needed better schools. They moved to Merchantville.

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