SAY YES TO EDUCATION:
Getting a Community’s Students To and Through College

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sayyeseducation.org
WHAT IF...

...an entire community came together to ensure that each of its children had the opportunity to go to college?
THAT IS THE PROMISE OF SAY YES TO EDUCATION.

Say Yes was founded in 1987 by money manager George Weiss, who boldly promised more than 100 sixth graders at a Philadelphia public school that he would pay to send them to college if they graduated from high school.

In the years since, Say Yes has evolved into a national nonprofit that organizes and galvanizes whole cities around the goals of every public school student graduating from high school — and then being able to attain, afford and complete a post-secondary education.

The Say Yes citywide strategy is an innovative and comprehensive response to a national crisis: upwards of one of every three students in many of the nation’s low-income school districts leaves high school before graduating. And of those who do earn diplomas and enroll in a four-year college or university, nearly 40 percent do not graduate from that institution in six years, let alone four.

Say Yes believes that regardless of economic circumstance or social standing, every child can achieve a post-secondary education and go on to be an actively contributing member of his or her community, if given the proper opportunities and support.

The organization currently works with nearly 65,000 public school students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12. Most are in citywide chapters in the upstate New York cities of Syracuse (since 2008) and Buffalo (2012). The organization has smaller chapters in Harlem and Philadelphia, and expects to add at least one community, outside of New York State, in 2015.
At the heart of the Say Yes program is a powerful financial incentive for families and communities alike: the prospect of free college tuition. Through fundraising, Say Yes and its local partners make it possible for a community’s public high school graduates to receive full tuition scholarships to any in-state public college and university — regardless of family income. As a “last dollar” scholarship, Say Yes awards are made after Pell grants and other outside financial aid have been taken into account. Most Say Yes Scholars are also eligible (based on family income, and upon admission) for free tuition from the 70 private colleges and universities that comprise the Say Yes Higher Education Compact.

A group of Say Yes Buffalo Scholars gather wearing t-shirts from the colleges and universities they will attend as freshmen in the fall of 2014.
In less than two years, Say Yes Buffalo has raised more than $20 million from the local community to support college scholarships. Over that time, the number of city high school graduates enrolling in college increased by 9 percentage points.
Say Yes brings together every stakeholder in a community — city and county government; the school district; parents; teachers; businesses; unions; philanthropic and faith-based organizations; colleges and universities — and arms that coalition with the tools to boost post-secondary participation and success. Say Yes also works in close partnership with leading educational and business management experts, as well as some of the nation’s most prestigious foundations.

“Say Yes injects a feeling of instant opportunity and hope. Say Yes then empowers the community by gathering together every leader and stakeholder around a common table. When they came to me, it was so clear this would help our children in Buffalo. I saw it instantly. I signed up as a supporter right on the spot.”

— THE HONORABLE BYRON W. BROWN, Mayor of the City of Buffalo

Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey, the president and chief executive of Say Yes, speaks with leaders in Buffalo.
For less than what it costs the community to house a teenager for two nights in a Buffalo juvenile detention center — nearly $1,700 — Say Yes can give a student a year of after-school programming (2 hours per day, 5 days per week).

“Both of my parents are physically disabled and not working. If there wasn’t a Say Yes, I couldn’t pay for college. If there wasn’t a Say Yes, I don’t think I would be in college.”

— TILA RIZAL, A SAY YES SYRACUSE SCHOLAR STUDYING MATHEMATICS AT LE MOYNE COLLEGE

THE SUPPORTS
Say Yes and its partners ensure that students and their families have the resources outside the classroom — tutoring; after-school and summer programs; medical care; counseling and legal help — to clear the path to academic success. The organization’s work is rigorous and based on research. Students’ progress toward college readiness is tracked through the Say Yes Student Monitoring and Intervention System, through which social service agencies and other partner organizations are able to provide particular resources to children and families in need of assistance. This support and enrichment can help give students from all backgrounds the educational experiences and positive outcomes that more affluent communities demand.
The Economic Impact

Armed by Say Yes with a postsecondary degree or certificate, the program’s scholars will enter the local (and national) workforce with the qualifications to excel in a range of occupations, including those crucial to the growth of a 21st Century economy. Investing in our scholars now will yield a rich dividend in the future — not only for them but by relieving the strain on social services. In the process, your investment can serve to break the cycle of poverty and help revitalize the communities in which Say Yes is a partner.

Americans with bachelor’s degrees earn, on average, 63 percent more each year than those with only high school diplomas; those with high school diplomas are unemployed at a rate more than double those with at least a bachelor’s degree.

“Say Yes starts with helping a child in Buffalo achieve the dream of a college education. But Say Yes also provides economic benefits to the city, including increasing the skill of the labor force. Affordable education also creates a strong incentive for people to move into the city. That improves the tax base, property market and private demand for services, including from parents who seize the opportunity of Say Yes for their children. This in turn should attract even more residents and private business. Say Yes starts a virtuous cycle of economic development and growth.”

— Daniel Lewis, Buffalo native, Say Yes National board member, and Co-Founder and Managing Partner of Orange Capital, an investment fund based in New York City
After six years of close collaboration with the national Say Yes organization, each Say Yes city must take ownership of the effort — assuming local responsibility for sustaining the scholarship endowment, and for providing other supports to students and their families.

While the Say Yes imprimatur remains, as does the community’s access to the scholarships from the private colleges and universities of the Say Yes Higher Education Compact, the role of the national organization transitions to that of a guide and resource.

Among the broader, long-term goals of Say Yes to Education is to develop a template for communities around the nation to adapt and implement as a pathway for getting graduates of their public schools to, and through, college — either with direct support from Say Yes or by following the organization’s lead.

It is in this regard that Say Yes sees itself as much more than a strategy — it is a movement.
Expectations are rising. Students and their parents are lifting their sights. They are starting to understand that their possibilities are far greater than they had counted on. A larger world is opening up. That’s magical. And it’s a standard that, properly nourished, can be passed on from generation to generation. That’s the real promise of Say Yes to Education.

— Editorial Board of the BUFFALO NEWS, March 9, 2014