Say Yes to our kids

Editorial staff | Posted: Tuesday, January 27, 2015 12:00 am

Guilford County is winding up to deliver a huge push for education. Call it Say Yes.

It might not happen. It might be too costly, too complicated, too audacious. But if Guilford is chosen to run the third major Say Yes to Education program in the country, the impact could be transformational.

Say Yes traces its origin to financier George Weiss who, in 1987, promised 100 Philadelphia sixth-graders he would pay their college expenses if they graduated from high school. The organization now works in Harlem in addition to Philadelphia and has citywide programs in Syracuse and Buffalo. It plans to add at least one communitywide chapter outside New York State this year and is looking closely at Guilford County.

Guilford County Schools, the Guilford Education Alliance, the community foundations of both Greensboro and High Point and other groups have been quietly testing the idea and making plans.

The basic promise is to provide last-dollar tuition grants to public institutions for all students who graduate from public schools and qualify for college.

Set aside for a moment all the logistical questions. What would it mean for Guilford County if it guaranteed financial support for every high school graduate?

This isn’t just an education program. It’s an economic development program, said Nathan Duggins, a Greensboro lawyer and vice chairman of the Guilford Education Alliance, who has visited Syracuse and Buffalo to see the programs there. “It’s a benefit to live in a Say Yes community.”

It would distinguish Guilford County from communities that are less generous, making it more attractive to businesses considering a new location. It would appeal to families who would choose to live in Guilford County and send their children to Guilford County schools because of this extraordinary promise.

Of course, it’s a powerful education program. It raises expectations, said Winston McGregor, executive director of the Guilford Education Alliance. It creates an incentive for all children to work toward high school graduation and college acceptance.
Some students would need extra help. The schools must do their part, but other community resources also must be focused on giving children a better chance. Some need health services, or mental health assistance, or social services. Some need housing. Some need legal help. The Say Yes approach utilizes existing agencies to provide this assistance.

It all requires money — tens of millions of dollars. A community with vision recognizes that every dollar put into its young people represents an investment in the future. It will pay dividends in a better-educated population and workforce, which in turn will bring more employers to Guilford County. President Barack Obama sounded similar themes in his call for two years of free community college for students.

Guilford County Schools Chief of Staff Nora Carr posed a tough question in a meeting last week: “How do you get people to pay for other people’s kids?”

The answer is for a community to see them as our kids. And we all want to say yes to our kids.
Two N.Y. cities and a promise: Full college tuition covered for high school graduates

By Nick Anderson,
September 26, 2014

What if every student who graduated from a city’s public high schools were guaranteed the money needed to go to college?

An experiment like this is under way in Syracuse and Buffalo through the efforts of a New York foundation called Say Yes to Education. The Syracuse promise dates to 2008, and the Buffalo version to 2011. In all, the foundation has helped more than 3,600 graduates from the two New York cities — many of them from low-income families — go to college.

There are caveats and conditions. Perhaps the biggest is that the students themselves have to be admitted to a participating college. But still, the prospect of a full-ride guarantee is a radical and powerful motivator, not only for individual students but for civic leaders who want to improve their K-12 schools.

The foundation wants to spur others to follow suit.

“Our impact is going to be showing what’s possible and helping others replicate it,” Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey, the foundation’s president and chief executive, said in an interview in Indianapolis. “We hope we’re creating a movement.”

Schmitt-Carey and others from the foundation were in the Indiana capital to network with college officials at a convention of the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

On Sept. 19, the foundation announced that nine colleges and universities had joined its partnership: Stanford University, the University of Southern California and Texas Christian University, as well as Colorado, Davidson, Lycoming, Occidental, Pitzer and Franklin & Marshall colleges. In all, there are 69
participating private colleges and universities, among them Georgetown University in the District of Columbia. The initiative also includes public colleges in New York.

George Weiss, a money management executive from West Hartford, Conn., founded Say Yes in 1987. His philanthropic goal has evolved from helping a few hundred students — in Philadelphia; Hartford, Conn.; Cambridge, Mass.; and Harlem in New York City — to thousands in whole cities.

The foundation, Schmitt-Carey said, has net assets of about $48 million. That is a fairly modest sum for the philanthropic world. Its strategy has been to leverage public and private support, not only for financial aid for college-bound students but also for building the pipeline to college through improvements in local schools and various social services for youths.

The clearest example of its impact might be the relationship between Syracuse University, a private institution with about 21,000 students, and the city of Syracuse, which has a public school system with about 20,000 students. Four of every five students in the school system come from families poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches.

Annual tuition and fees at the university exceed $41,000. Students in need typically qualify for federal Pell grants and direct aid from the university itself, which is standard practice nationwide.

But exactly how much financial aid students are offered is, for many families, a make-or-break question.

The university’s arrangement with Say Yes is notable. It will ensure full coverage of tuition and fees for any graduate of Syracuse city schools who secures admission to the selective university after being enrolled in the school system for three straight years. That promise is not contingent on the income of the student’s family. (Typically, however, Say Yes scholarships at other private universities do take family income into account.)

Ryan Williams, the university’s associate vice president for enrollment management and director of financial aid and scholarship programs, said that more than 200 Say Yes scholars are enrolled at Syracuse. He said the university draws about 50 of these scholars a year.

Recently, there has been some debate on campus over plans to scale back Syracuse’s partnership with another group, known as the Posse Foundation, that also helps disadvantaged students from urban schools.

But Williams said the university is “very committed” to Say Yes. “No interest in lessening that commitment,” he said.

Donald Saleh, who recently retired as enrollment chief at Syracuse, said the university’s goal was not only to boost recruiting but also to help the central New York region. “As goes the city, so goes the university,” he said.

That message, of course, might apply not only in Syracuse but also in Washington and other cities that are home to major universities.

George Weiss' Say Yes Tackles the Biggest Test in Public Education

This story appears in the December 15, 2014 issue of Forbes

As he limps out of McKinley High School in Buffalo, N.Y., George Weiss is in pain. Over the last hour he has toured the school’s greenhouse and fish farm, answered a Q&A with 35 teenagers, held a 6-foot-long bull snake and sat in on an American history class, all with a fractured heel. “The doctors told me not to walk more than four blocks,” he says, easing his 6’1” frame into the passenger seat of a black SUV. “But what can you say to a principal who wants to show you her school?”

Weiss is not in the habit of saying no. His nonprofit, Say Yes to Education, is, as the name states, all about saying yes. Yes to after school tutoring, summer programs, mental health counseling and services for families. And yes, ultimately, to paying for college for any kid in its program who graduates from high school. To date 65,000 kids have gotten the Say Yes support-and-guarantee treatment in 106 schools in six cities. Thanks to its scholarship program, which offers free tuition to over 140 partnering colleges, more than 5,300 students have gone to college with Say Yes’ support.

George Weiss has helped thousands of underprivileged children get to college (Photo credit: Jonathan Kozowyk for Forbes)
That’s the return from roughly $265 million that Weiss, a 71-year-old fund manager, has given to this initiative over the past 27 years. But getting to play Santa Claus at individual schools, though satisfying, doesn’t really scale. So Weiss is funding one of the more interesting experiments in education right now: Can such a suite of interventions work if applied on a citywide basis?

Weiss’ operation moved into Syracuse, N.Y. (pop. 145,000) in 2008, its first entire school district. Then to Buffalo (pop. 259,000), the fourth-poorest major city in the U.S., in 2012. Say Yes may soon add two more cities, which could raise the number of children in the program to some 200,000.

The key for Weiss is buy-in, or as he calls it, “no political bulls—t.” How it works: Before giving any money, Say Yes requires city, county, government, school boards, teachers unions and private donors to all work together. The local partnership then agrees to pay for a longer school day and for one social worker for every 250 students. Other services include free legal clinics inside the schools for families and college-admissions coaching. Say Yes also pays for an electronic student monitoring system to follow kids’ progress, making note of attendance, behavior and academic progress to ensure every student stays on track. Then comes the payoff. If you go to school in Syracuse or Buffalo and your parents earn less than $75,000, you are eligible for free tuition at most of the 70 private colleges—more than 30 added in the last 18 months—that have agreed to partner with Say Yes. Weiss and other local donors pay the tuition for any Say Yes student who goes to public university in New York State.

The son of Jewish immigrants who fled the Nazis for the U.S. in 1939, Weiss grew up poor in Brookline, Mass., bussing tables at age 11. He was working at a hotel coffee shop when a Boston University professor advised him to attend the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, which he did, paying his way with loans and savings.

It was at Penn that Weiss discovered his philanthropic inspiration. As a sophomore, his fraternity hosted a Christmas party for 12 underprivileged kids of Irish and Italian descent. Weiss befriended the gang, known as the 12 Apostles, by playing pool and basketball with them. After a few years as a Wall Street broker he returned to take them to lunch.

“We talked about their siblings in jail, sisters getting pregnant,” Weiss recalls. “Yet all 12 graduated high school. And one of the kids turned to me and said, ‘George, we couldn’t look you in the eye without graduating.’” The first school he adopted, of course, was in Philadelphia.
He now has entire cities of kids who must look him in the eye. So is it working? His myriad schools adopted since 1987 have shown consistent growth. At the original school he worked with, Belmont in West Philadelphia, 62% eventually graduated from high school—roughly double the rate before Say Yes got involved. Yet half of the female students became teen moms and 20 students altogether were convicted of felonies, more than graduated from four-year colleges. ("The drug dealers steal your best math kids because they can do the numbers," Weiss laments.)

Buffalo is beginning to see results: According to the New York State Department of Education, in 2013 the city’s high school graduation rate leapt to 56%, up 8.2 percentage points in one year. In 2012, 43% of Buffalo children achieved passing or advanced grades in the state’s integrated algebra Regents exam; by 2013 that number had risen to 49%. Before the first year of Say Yes college scholarships in 2013, just 57% enrolled in postsecondary education—now that figure is up to 66%. "With this great partnership, in this community there is no young person that can’t get a higher education," says Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, who has committed $1.3 million of city money to Say Yes.

In Syracuse there have been financial issues. Say Yes has spent more than $29 million there so far—or $1,380 per student—while the city, county and state pledged to basically match that. But that latter promise was strained by budget cuts in 2010, requiring local authorities to reallocate funds. Say Yes provided a consultant who developed budget recommendations to cut things like high school study halls and smaller class sizes but kept counseling and support initiatives.

Still, the kids seem to benefit. The high school graduation rate has gone from 49% in 2008–09 to 52.9% in 2013. Back in 2008 only 29% of Syracuse children achieved passing or advanced grades in its algebra Regents exam; by 2013 that number had risen to 50%.

Skeptics remain. "Has it turned our schools around? No, not at this point, and it’s far from a panacea," says Kevin Ahern, president of the Syracuse Teachers Association.

"The problem is, I can’t afford to do it all myself, even though my ex—wife thinks I have a huge amount of money," says Weiss, who provides the vast majority of Say Yes’ financing. At the end of the day, as his personal contribution approaches $300 million, he’s conducting an extremely expensive and important field test that ultimately will require others to apply the lessons nationwide. "I sometimes get up in the middle of the night," says Weiss, “because I still feel like I’m not doing enough."
After Years in the Trenches, Is This Ed Group Going to Break Out?

L.S. Hall

Say Yes to Education is one of the most interesting efforts underway to boost student achievement, so we make a point of keeping tabs on what it's up to. Its chief funder, the investment fund manager George Weiss, has poured more than $250 million into the organization's work since the late 1980s and, with the help of other funders, has expanded it from a few pilot efforts to a major operation now managing citywide efforts in Syracuse in Buffalo.

It's an impressive achievement, both for Weiss and the Say Yes team. Weiss has made a real mark in a difficult philanthropic space known for defeating even the wealthiest funders.

On the other hand, Say Yes is not exactly on a fast track to becoming the next big thing in national efforts to improve schools. It's been a long slog just to get fully up and running in two regional cities in New York. At this rate, it could be many years before Say Yes gets wide traction nationally (assuming that's a goal) or otherwise reaches a very large number of students.

And herein lies a common challenge for funders and nonprofits: It takes a lot of time to do things right and to test and scale a new approach to solving a problem. For every organization like Teach for America that catches fire and goes national, there are myriad smaller initiatives that struggle in the trenches for years, never quite breaking into the big time—and maybe missing their moments to do so.

What does the future hold for Say Yes?

As we've explained before, Say Yes to Education means saying yes to extended school days, afterschool tutoring, and summer school support. But Weiss recognizes that schools can't do it all. That's why his organization's approach also means saying yes to social work and psychological support, social support for families, and cooperation among cities, schools, higher education institutions, and other players.
In an era when debilitating education battles seem to be raging everywhere, Say Yes to Education starts from the assumption that collaboration among key stakeholders is a prerequisite for progress. Real partnership is required among city and county governments, school boards, teachers unions, and private donors. Among other things, that cooperation is needed to mobilize the needed resources for a longer school day, more social workers, college admissions counseling, and free legal clinics for families. The Say Yes model also funds computer-based monitoring of students' academic progress through elementary, middle, and high school, tracking grades, attendance, and behavior.

This is no small commitment, but for communities willing to say yes to these things—and to put some skin in the game—Weiss says yes to paying for college for low-income kids in the Say Yes to Education program who complete high school. The organization's scholarship program provides free tuition to more than 140 partner colleges and universities. Scholarships to in-state, public universities are paid from locally-funded scholarship programs; those to private college are largely covered by the institutions themselves.

Weiss knows the challenges facing disadvantaged urban youth. The son of Jewish immigrants who emigrated to the U.S. in 1939 to escape the Nazi regime, Weiss grew up poor in Brookline, MA, busing tables when he was as young as 11. While working in a hotel coffee shop, a Boston University professor advised him to attend the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, which he did.

It was there that the seeds of Weiss' philanthropy were planted. He befriended a gang of youths for whom his fraternity hosted a Christmas party. He reconnected with them in his early years as a Wall Street broker and heard stories of incarceration and teen pregnancy among their siblings, while they managed to complete high school—something for which they credited Weiss as an inspiration.

Weiss' education philanthropy initially focused on individual schools, starting out in Philadelphia in the late 1980s. At the first school he worked with, the high school graduation rate nearly doubled. But the number of students who got pregnant or were convicted of felonies convinced Weiss that schools alone were not the answer. And his holistic approach was born.

Say Yes to Education's first citywide operation began in 2008 in Syracuse, NY, then added Buffalo a few years later. Say Yes to Education also has smaller chapters in New York City's
Harlem, Hartford, Philadelphia, and Cambridge. What’s more, *Forbes* magazine reported in a recent profile of Weiss that Say Yes may add two more cities. And even bigger plans are also afoot.

“Among the long-term goals of Say Yes is to develop a template for communities across the country to adapt and implement—whether in partnership with Say Yes, or on their own—as a pathway for getting graduates of their public schools to, and through college,” said Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey, the organization’s president. “A critical next step for Say Yes in meeting that goal will be to take our citywide strategy to a community or communities outside New York State, as well as the Northeast.”

So far, more than 5,000 students who participated in Say Yes’ program have gone off to college. Other results have been encouraging, as well. New York State education officials have reported higher high school graduation and college enrollment rates in Buffalo, as well as improved achievement on state Regents exams.

Weiss remains Say Yes to Education’s most significant funder, but the organization also has attracted support from the Ford, Wallace, and Carnegie foundations.

By many initial measures, then, Say Yes has been a smashing success: It’s helped pioneer a new model, won acceptance from a range of stakeholders, and drawn the support of major funders. Still, its reach remains limited in the grand scheme of things. And maybe that’s just fine for Weiss and others involved in the organization. But if Say Yes really *has* found the formula for improving student achievement—and also defusing the toxic ed wars—you can only hope that it will eventually take the country by storm.

One ingredient for major growth still missing is better evaluation of the Say Yes approach. And that’s now in the works. As we reported in July, Columbia University researchers, with support from the Wallace Foundation, are looking at how community stakeholders in cities where Say Yes to Education has chapters can collaborate to resolve not only education issues, but related social concerns that hamper student progress. This study will inform funders, educators, and other players regarding whether and to what extent collective impact makes a difference.

Initial findings are expected in late 2015 and could mean big things for Say Yes’s future.
School Improvement Is Citywide Effort in Syracuse

By Sarah D. Sparks

Syracuse, N.Y.

For Syracuse, N.Y., “educating the whole child” is not just a mantra for school improvement but a strategy to save a struggling urban community, too.

Five years ago, Syracuse became the first city to adopt, citywide, a national education partnership model called Say Yes to Education, which provides academic, legal, social, and health supports to families and students from preschool all the way through college, culminating in free tuition for any of the district’s 21,000 students who graduate from high school and want to attend college.

In the process, the Syracuse Say Yes initiative offers a rare look at what the popular push for holistic, community-centered education reform can look like in practice, both in the ongoing challenges of meeting students’ and families’ needs, and in the surprising effects on communities.

According to 2012 data from the Census Bureau, “for the first time in 50 years, the Syracuse population has stabilized,” said Ann Rooney, a member of the Say Yes task force and the deputy executive for human services for Onondaga County, which includes Syracuse. “That’s one thing we as a community all focus on.”

Syracuse’s struggles mirror those of post-industrial communities nationwide. The city of just more than 145,000 has steadily lost industry and residents over the years, and the remaining population—especially the public school population—is poor and diverse. The median household income is just over $30,000 a year, more than $20,000 below the state median. More than eight out of 10 students in the district qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Officials regularly point to the city’s beleaguered school system—19 of the district’s 32 schools have been designated as “priority schools” by the state for their persistently low academic performance, and seven are in some stage of turnaround—as a source of the problem and a potential solution.

“A city like this, a Rust Belt city, it’s taken decades to get to where it is, in terms of losing all its industry, people moving to different ways to make a living,” said
Kevin Ahern, the president of the Syracuse Teachers Association, which is affiliated with both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. "It's going to take a lot to turn around, but you've got to pay a lot of attention to your schools if you are going to do any of that."

Ms. Rooney echoed the sentiment: "In Onondaga County, we have 6,000 people on welfare. Only 37 of them have a college degree; only 27 percent had a high school diploma," she said. "Who's on welfare? It's often [people who as children] were not making the grade academically" in K-12. "If we can move the needle even a little, it makes a big difference."

**College Lure**

The potential for sending more students to college is what first drew city officials to the New York City-based Say Yes to Education Inc., which promised full tuition for all public high school graduates in return for the city implementing civic and education reforms.

"The public grabbed onto the idea of the [college] tuition as the centerpiece, and for the first couple of years, that's all they knew," said Douglas P. Biklen, the education dean at Syracuse University. "But we were getting students on health insurance, getting mental-health care, tutoring, a summer camp that didn't exist before. These are all part of this bigger model. It's a much more holistic approach than what you see in most district efforts."

Universal scholarship programs have been gaining in popularity in the past decade, as college costs soar and many school districts face dwindling enrollment. First and most notable among them is the Kalamazoo, Mich., "Promise Scholarship," in which anonymous donors pledged to pay all or nearly all of college tuition for students who attend the district schools from early grades through high school. The program sparked similar initiatives in cities such as Detroit and Denver and helped inspire Say Yes. However, later studies of the Kalamazoo project found that while it boosted district enrollment and graduation rates, half the scholarship students dropped out of college without completing a degree.

Say Yes Inc. has created Promise-style scholarships in communities such as Philadelphia and New York City's Harlem for more than 20 years, but Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey, the president of Say Yes, said she became convinced that the initiative would be more effective when integrated citywide.

**Web of Supports**

The cornerstones of the Say Yes to Education model are the academic, legal, social, and health services it provides to Syracuse families and students from preschool through college.
select group of students and parents in some of the public schools—found that over 18 months, participating 3rd graders had eight to 10 fewer missed days of school, better behavior, and significantly better math and reading performance than the school and district averages. However, during the same time, staff at the schools became mistrustful of the program, believing it created a separate group of students and parents who did not fit with the rest of the school culture, making it difficult to sustain local support for the program over time.

"After a lot of years of working on this, we were not seeing a breaking of the cycle of poverty," Ms. Schmitt-Carey said. Students who went to college on the scholarships weren't necessarily prepared to complete their postsecondary studies, for example. "We realized the scholarship alone was not going to be enough."

**Comprehensive Services**

In Syracuse, the group got a chance to try a much more comprehensive approach. Say Yes doesn't fund every aspect of Syracuse's initiative, but it coordinates services through a representative at each school and a biweekly task force of leaders from the district, the teachers' union, local universities, state and county social-services agencies, and mental- and physical-health offices.

"The discussion was initially around the benefit of the scholarship," recalled Ms. Rooney, "but it quickly turned into the benefit of the scholarship is no benefit if students are not able to get that [college] diploma."

The scope of the initiative quickly became more comprehensive, Mr. Biklen and others recalled. "We tried to think, what do the children of upper-middle-class families enjoy?" Mr. Biklen said. "Music lessons, camp, a lot of after-school enrichment provided for them. So we try to replicate that."

The city launched a 3,000-student summer camp, including academic enrichment and creative arts. More than 100 local college students are hired as counselors and mentors, some of them Say Yes scholars themselves.

For the district, Say Yes paid for a curriculum and funding audit, which showed little link between the district's curriculum and New York state's college-readiness standards. It helped the district plan a curriculum overhaul and add two additional hours a week of class as well as after-school programs in

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**Lauren Brush**

*Graduated from New York University in May with a bachelor's degree in classical voice*

"My older sisters weren't interested, but going into high school, I was really motivated for school; I always wanted to go to college. But we are a working-class family, and my mom lost her job while I was in high school. It was really hard to even think about going to college when you know your family is struggling financially." Because of the scholarship, Ms. Brush was able to study opera at college, both in the city and as a part of a study-abroad program in Prague. "And it's funny, when I went to school, it kind of motivated my mom to go to school. So, even though she wasn't a beneficiary of the scholarship, because she didn't have to pay for my schooling, that opened the door for her to go. So, technically I'm a
kindergarten through 5th grades, with more planned for middle school in coming years.

Syracuse University also now provides free teacher training to launch more Advanced Placement courses, as well as summer teacher professional-development institutes in writing, mathematics, and science. The university also created a special education training program with two schools.

"There is a laserlike focus on the needs of students, but not just the academic needs you see in some districts," said Syracuse schools Superintendent Sharon L. Contreras. The district implemented a student-monitoring system, which includes 15 K-12 indicators in the categories of academic progress, social-emotional development, and physical and mental health.

"We look at disciplinary referrals," she said, "but we also look at health. A sick child has difficulty learning, a child with dental problems has difficulty sitting in class."

Six schools now have full-service dental and physical-health clinics, with screening available in all schools and health-insurance support available for families who don't have it.

The state's office of mental health partnered with Say Yes to provide mental-health clinics in 23 of the 32 district schools so far, as well as social workers to help individual families and provide home visits, according to Jennifer Parmelee, the director of child and youth services for Onondaga County's office of mental health and coordinator of its community promise-zone project. Through the school clinics, the county has begun training staff at 14 schools in problem-solving protocols such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

**Clearing Distractions**

The local bar association also created legal clinics in several high-need schools and community centers, where lawyers volunteer their time to help students and their parents with any problem that could affect students' schooling, from immigration to visitation and custody disputes to landlord-tenant problems.

"When you look at the array of services, it allows the district to concentrate on learning," said Kim S. Bradley, the chief of staff for the Syracuse district.

After high school graduation, Say Yes scholars can participate in a six-week college-preparation session, including academic support to help them test out of remedial classes, financial planning, filling out forms, gathering supplies, and packing for school—even a ride to move onto campus for students who don't have one. This spring, as the first Say Yes class of four-year college students graduated, Say Yes also launched job shadowing and internship help, as well as résumé workshops.

"People are more open to partnership, and we see first-generation college student, but now she's gone to Onondaga Community College for health technology," completing an associate degree in 2012—a year before Ms. Bush graduated.

*Photo by Heather Ainsworth for Education Week*

**Alex Minnoe**

*Studying physical education at the State University of New York at Brockport*

Mr. Minnoe said he always knew he wanted to teach physical education, but "having the opportunity for [Say Yes] to pay my tuition was huge." For the past three summers, he has been a youth-enrichment-services counselor for the Say Yes summer camp and said it's "a great experience, because I'm an education
ourselves as more of a continuum than all these individual players doing their own stuff,” said Monique R. Fletcher, the community executive director of Say Yes to Education in Syracuse.

The effects so far have been positive. Since the initiative began in the 2008-09 school year, the 9th grade dropout rate has fallen by nearly half, to 281 students; high school graduation rates have risen 10 percent, to 55 percent in 2011; and college certification and degree earning grew by a third, from 451 students to 579 in 2012. Those numbers still fall well below most federal and state progress targets for the school district, however.

**Impact Beyond Schools**

Outside of school, juvenile crime rates also fell from 580 arrests a year to 398 between 2008 and 2012, and housing prices in the city have risen 6.4 percent, according to the Trulia Real Estate website. While many factors likely contribute to the city’s improving real estate market—not the least of which is the gradual improvement in the economy overall—Don Radke, the owner of FM Realty Group in Syracuse and the former president of the Greater Syracuse Association of Realtors, credits the promise of universal college scholarships as being a draw for families with school-age children.

More than 100 colleges and universities in the state now offer free tuition for Say Yes scholars, and dozens of private universities, including the University of Notre Dame, Duke University, and Georgetown University, have pledged substantially reduced tuition, Mr. Biklen said.

Say Yes Inc. has been steadily drawing down its start-up support in Syracuse, which has six years to make the program self-sufficient. Cities like nearby Buffalo, which are also trying to launch citywide Say Yes initiatives, are watching Syracuse’s fate closely.

The city has already passed its first test: The mayor, school superintendent, and teachers’ union president have all turned over since the initiative began, and their successors have bought into the strategy.

“The biggest thing, I think, is we’ve seen a dramatic change in the culture of the city, in terms of the leadership of the city being all on the same page,” the teachers’ union’s Mr. Ahern said. “In urban districts like this, we tend to churn programs, chase grant money for a few years, and then do something else. Over the years, we have faced a lot of challenges as a district, … but we’ve all stayed together despite that and figured ways to do things to make it sustainable.”

Political and financial sustainability, Superintendent Contreras said, “still is a huge problem and keeps me up at night.”

She pointed to state budget cuts that forced the district to eliminate 1,000 staff positions in the past five years, just as it was working to roll out the new Say Yes services and monitoring. “But at least we’re able to advocate together,” she said. “The other key people don’t say, ‘Well, the school district has a

**Photo by Heather Ainsworth for Education Week**

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problem' and leave me hanging. The city has never backed down from this. That's key to the success and sustainability."

For example, Huntington Family Centers, a social-services provider in the city, hired school social workers that the district had to lay off and was able to continue services to students.

"Many of the families may never know how richly the Say Yes model supported them, but their students are graduating because of the support system," Ms. Contreras said.

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Making College Access a Reality One City at a Time

By George Weiss & Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey

How can a medium-size American city with its fair share of economic struggles drive a 9-percentage-point increase in the number of public high school graduates going on to enroll in college—in just one year?

The Buffalo school district in upstate New York announced earlier this year that it had experienced that very uptick in college matriculation in the fall of 2013, when compared with a year earlier. Specifically, 98 percent of the 2013 Buffalo high school graduating class enrolled in a two- or four-year college, compared with 87 percent in 2012, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.

How did this happen? What lessons can be learned from Buffalo’s success, and how might they be relevant to other cities and school districts seeking to encourage college-going and college-completion for all students?

A program in Buffalo is working across the community to encourage college-going and college-completion for all students. The city works with local partners and community-based organizations to provide resources and support for students and families. They have created a college-going coach program, provided scholarships and grants, and increased access to college counseling services.

Nationwide, efforts such as those underway in Buffalo, where every public school student who wishes to attend a two- or four-year college might have the support and wherewithal to achieve that goal, are inspiring similar initiatives in other communities. For example, the nonprofit organization Say Yes to Education has implemented similar programs in other cities, including New York City, where it has supported efforts to increase college enrollment and success rates.

In Buffalo, the Say Yes initiative has expanded to include partnerships with local businesses, community organizations, and higher education institutions. These partnerships have helped to reduce the barriers to college attendance, such as financial aid and access to college completion programs.

For cities and districts seeking to make a college-bound culture a communitywide priority, we offer four steps we consider critical for achieving success:

1. **The convening of a common table**: Bringing together all stakeholders—educators, business leaders, community members, and policymakers—to discuss and agree on a common vision for college access and success.

2. **The creation of a comprehensive, coordinated system of supports**: Building a network of resources and services that supports students throughout their college journey, including mental health services, financial aid assistance, and academic support.

3. **The installation of new data systems**: Implementing new technology and data systems to track college readiness, college enrollment, and student success, to enable local leaders to make informed decisions.

4. **The creation of a culture of college-going**: Changing attitudes and beliefs about college to create a community culture that values education and supports all students in pursuing higher education.

By committing to these steps and strategies, cities and districts can work to create a more equitable and inclusive college-going culture for all students.
and use such data to tailor supports like tutoring, counseling, and medical care for students (and families) in need.

- The adoption of creative funding strategies that leverage financial resources from a variety of sources—such as from city and county budgets, as well as those from the district and community organizations—to deliver comprehensive scholarships and a broader set of academic, social, and health supports. In Buffalo, for example, a $4.5 million public-private partnership with the county government has allowed a family-support specialist to be embedded in each of the 55 Buffalo public school buildings, with a mandate to integrate social-service delivery and help remove nonacademic barriers to student success.

- The fostering of a new approach to engage teachers, counselors, and others at the school level on questions of how a community might best prepare its students to get to college and succeed once there. One fairly straightforward project would be to draw on expertise within school walls, as well as in the greater community, to help families complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA.

A growing sheaf of evidence suggests the effectiveness of integrated, school-based supports like those we outline above.

In February, the research organization Child Trends documented instances in which such programs were directly responsible for academic achievement and generating a positive “return on investment.” In another report a few weeks later, Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor of the Center for Mental Health in Schools, at the University of California, Los Angeles, declared “connecting school-home-community” to be “essential to the well-being of children and youth and to enhancing equity of opportunity for them to succeed at school and beyond.”

And in an Education Week essay in April, Paul Reville, the Harvard education researcher and former Massachusetts secretary of education, argued for a national competition to design a school system where “physical-health, mental-health, and human-service supports would need to be more fully integrated into the functioning of the educational system.”

We at Say Yes are eager to answer such calls. We would welcome joining with researchers, government leaders, policymakers, and others doing work in this arena to develop a strategy and plan of execution to bring such supports to scale nationally, and help identify those questions still in need of further research. These might include whether some supports are more effective than others in driving college readiness and matriculation.

Such a coalition would also serve as an ideal forum to bring to scale what is learned from that research in ways that would forever change how wraparound supports are installed and delivered across American public schools.

The ultimate goal: preparing students to access and complete a vocational, associate’s, bachelor’s, or other postsecondary program.

Say Yes looks forward to sitting at this table.

GEORGE WEISS is the chief executive officer of Weiss Multi-Strategy Advisers, a money-management firm, and the founder and chairman of Say Yes to Education, both of which have offices in New York City. MARY ANNE SCHMITT-CAREY is the president of Say Yes to Education and a member of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s Education Reform Commission.
Say Yes helps Buffalo students achieve a big increase in college enrollment

There was some very good news out of the Buffalo School District last week, with the announcement that 66 percent of graduating seniors enrolled in college last fall, the highest percentage in at least seven years. Questions abound, but the basic news represents a heartening development.

Much of the credit must go to Say Yes to Education, the nonprofit organization that partnered with Buffalo Public Schools two years ago. Part of the deal is that it promises to ensure that all graduating students who want to attend college will have the money to do so.

Buffalo Superintendent Pamela C. Brown also claimed a share of the credit, noting that the district’s preliminary graduation rate for 2013 was 54 percent, a notable increase over the previous year’s dismal 47 percent. If those rates hold up upon review – the district’s numbers are still being audited by the state – then she certainly deserves some of the glory.

There appears to be no doubt about the percentage of students going on to college. The data were provided by the National Student Clearinghouse, which reports that the highest previous percentage in the past six years was 61 percent. Older data has been requested to determine when, if ever, a greater share of Buffalo’s graduating students went on to college.

This development doesn’t signal the end of concerns about moving Buffalo’s students into post-secondary education. Many more should be encouraged to attend college and, across the country, colleges are finding that many high school graduates aren’t prepared for the rigors of higher education. It would be strange, indeed, if Buffalo weren’t overrepresented in that group.

Nevertheless, something fundamental is happening here. 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.

Plainly, though, there is much more work to do. It’s heartening that 66 percent of graduates enrolled in either a two- or four-year college or a post-secondary career program, but the number still leaves out the other 34 percent of Buffalo graduates. The goal must be to continue increasing that number year after year.

The goal also must be to increase the number of students graduating. Say Yes helps with that, but if administrators, teachers and parents aren’t continually improving their performance, then the task becomes very difficult.

And, clearly, it is important to ensure that the students who do graduate are prepared for the demands of higher education. More than half of the 352 Buffalo graduates who enrolled in Erie Community College this year needed at least one remedial course. There can be little more discouraging than for a new freshman to show up for college only to learn, in a particularly painful way, that he doesn’t have the skills necessary.

But Buffalo has made a start and, for today, that’s worth celebrating. Maybe the ship is starting to turn.
OBAMA SAYS ‘YES’

PRESIDENT, BOOSTING HIGHER EDUCATION, CALLS SYRACUSE AN EXAMPLE FOR OTHER CITIES

By Douglas Dowty

President Barack Obama, speaking Thursday evening inside Hendricks Chapel in Syracuse, praised the city’s role in expanding access to higher education and called it a model for other cities.

"I am going to give the people of this city the opportunity to do something that I didn’t have a chance to do," Obama said. "I am going to give the people of this city the opportunity to make a difference."

Obama said that the city's commitment to education is a model for other communities around the country.

"We have to make sure that the people who live here have the opportunity to succeed," Obama said. "We have to make sure that the people who live here have the opportunity to learn something, to learn something new, to learn something that will help them make a difference."

President Obama, left, looks out at the faces of people who wanted to shake hands or take his photograph after he concluded his speech. (Daily News/John Hickey)

COVERING THE PRESIDENT’S VISIT

Reporters and photographers from The Post-Standard and Syracuse.com were on hand at the conclusion of President Obama’s visit Thursday, Sept. 23 in Auburn. You can help us cover it.

• If you are anywhere near the president or just stuck in traffic, shoot us your photos.

• Send your travel with presidential history to cnynews@syracuse.com or write obama@nytimes.com or tag photos on Instagram

Syracuse University's sports administration has jumped up to a 1-0 lead in the Big East Thursday night and announced its second straight conference opponent.

SU Athletics and Student Services have announced a deal with the Big East Conference. The deal will keep SU in the Big East for at least four years.

The deal includes a $1 million fee per year for SU to maintain its presence in the Big East. SU will face a worthy foe in its second conference game against the University of Connecticut.

SPRUCE MILLER/STAFF

INSIDE ON A-5

About 100 people with tickets were lined up.

A local activist hosted the president and was removed.

The town who heard Obama's words in the eyes.

A step in Sensea Falls and an oversight in Saturday.

International Baccalaureate Program for high-school-aged students.

"I am the Syracuse city school board," Obama said, "and I am the head of this school district.

"I am the one who proposed this program, and I am the one who will implement it."

Obama said that the program is funded by a $5 million grant from the federal government.

"The program is designed to help students who are at risk of dropping out of high school," Obama said. "It is designed to help students who are at risk of being left behind in their education."

President Obama, left, looks out at the faces of people who wanted to shake his hand or take his photograph after he concluded his speech. (Daily News/John Hickey)

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SPRUCE MILLER/STAFF
Buffalo, N.Y. —

When he heard that every student in Buffalo Public Schools might soon qualify for a no-strings-attached college scholarship, Sam Radford's reaction was predictable. "No way," thought Radford, president of the school district's Parenting Coordinating Council.

The students who caught the formal announcement on a live feed into the East High School auditorium weren't buying it either.
Sam Radford, president of the Buffalo Public Schools' Parenting Coordinating Council, with his son, Aymanuel Radford. The elder Radford recalls the city's less cooperative days. “Before,” he says, “it was everybody in their camp, everybody operating from their silo.”
"They told us, 'OK, you're going to get free tuition,'" recalls Dennis Blakely, then an East High junior. "I thought they were joking."

Blakely, today a sophomore at Medaille College, is now a believer, as are a large majority of the residents in this Rust Belt city. As the third-poorest city in the nation, Buffalo, N.Y., has seen any number of pipe dreams come and go. It's no wonder that skepticism was rampant when the nonprofit organization Say Yes to Education insisted that college was possible for every young person in the city.

"I don't hear 'It's too good to be true' much anymore," admits David Rust, executive director of the local Say Yes effort. But that phrase has been uttered countless times since 2011, when Say Yes made Buffalo its second site for a community-wide effort to eradicate poverty through education. In the intervening years, doubt has given way, not just to hope, but to real optimism.

"Say Yes has created the courage for us to meet our own challenges," says Will Keresztes, interim superintendent of Buffalo Public Schools.

Much of the credit, Buffalo residents agree, goes to Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, president and CEO of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo — and a civic leader who refuses to take no for an answer. It was Dedecker who, in 2011, teamed up with Blythe Merrill of the John R. Oishei Foundation to nominate Buffalo when Say Yes expressed interest in supporting a district-wide scholarship program in a second city. (Syracuse was first.)

Say Yes traces its roots to a 1987 pledge by Hartford, Conn., money manager George Weiss to 112 sixth-graders in a Philadelphia neighborhood near his alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. Complete high school, Weiss told the students, and I will cover the cost of your college education.

Over the next 20 years, Say Yes added neighborhood chapters in Hartford, Cambridge, Mass., and Harlem — along with a second Philadelphia program. The non-

Gene Chasin (left), a former teacher and school administrator, is now the chief operating officer of the Buffalo chapter of Say Yes to Education; David Rust (right) serves as its executive director.
profit moved to the next level in 2008, choosing the Syracuse City School District as the site for a comprehensive program that supplements academics with “wraparound” programs to address social needs, enhanced scholastic initiatives and a promise of free college to the district’s 23,000 students.

By now, Say Yes knows exactly what it needs in a city-wide partner. “We’re looking for cities committed to the core elements of philanthropy, educational reform, transparency and community partnerships,” says Gene Chasin, a onetime teacher, principal and superintendent who now serves as the chief operating officer of Say Yes.

Dedecker was confident that Buffalo could meet the first three stipulations. In a city where “all the macro indicators were on a downward trend,” she figured the business community would be open to philanthropy. She knew school leaders were open to reform efforts — even eager for them, since more than half of the district’s ninth-graders were ending up as dropouts rather than high school graduates. Finally, as head of an ambitious nonprofit, Dedecker knew a thing or two about transparency.

The key, she knew, was to knit the school district, the teachers union, parents, social service agencies, the City of Buffalo, Erie County and Buffalo business leaders into a cohesive, goal-oriented unit. And within those entities loomed the most formidable challenge. Philip Rumore, longtime head of the Buffalo Teachers Federation. Rumore, a polarizing figure and an outspoken regular on Buffalo news channels, elicited displeasure — sometimes even contempt — in many quarters of the city.

Alfonso O’Neill-White, former CEO of Buffalo Blue Cross/Blue Shield, recalls the first reaction of a fellow businessman from whom he sought financial support for the Say Yes effort: “Don’t even talk to me until you get rid of that (Rumore) guy.” Even Dedecker, the eternal optimist, knew that Rumore could bring the Say Yes proposal to a screeching halt. “As I was waiting to talk to him, I thought, ‘This is where it all goes to hell in a handbasket.’”

Instead, to the surprise of nearly everyone, Rumore signed on — eagerly. After 30-plus years watching one attempt after another fail to reverse the decline of the public schools, Rumore was game for anything that might restore hope to Buffalo and its children. If that required regular attendance at meetings with his foes, so be it.

In Rumore’s opinion, the Say Yes proposition was a great chance for Buffalo parents and students to hit the reset button on possibility — to recalibrate their measurements of success. “People here will say, ‘When I was a kid, I didn’t do drugs.’ Or, ‘I didn’t get a girl pregnant.’ Or, ‘I didn’t wind up in jail.’ That was what they considered progress.”

With Rumore aboard, the Say Yes calculus quickly fell into place. The flow of donations began — from corporations, local governments, individuals, foundations and academic institutions. The scholarship fund eventually totaled more than $19 million. Say Yes supplemented the local funding with a “frontloaded” commitment of $15 million. That money all went to create a system that would address, not just academics, but the broader social issues that too often prevent underserved students from learning.

Phil Rumore has become a mainstay of Say Yes operating committee meetings. He and other committee members — parents, business people, educators, philanthropists, government and labor leaders — gather every Thursday, and they all follow Dedecker’s edict: “We tell them to leave whatever differences we have at the door. The focus here is on Say Yes and the kids.”
"Before, it was everybody in their camp, everybody operating from their silo," recalls Sam Radford. "It would be rare if we all came together once a year before 2011. Then, all of a sudden, all the stakeholders were at the table at the same time."

And the effort’s most fervent cheerleader? Phil Rumore. "In my opinion this is the best thing that has ever happened to this district," he says.

If timing is everything, then Say Yes’s entry into Buffalo couldn’t have been more serendipitous. The organization arrived on the heels of a presentation from regional business and civic leaders that had just convinced New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo to award western New York a $1 billion training grant to rejuvenate its battered industrial economy.

“We were having a discussion about the (jobs) pipeline precisely when Say Yes materialized, recalls Christina Orsi who, as a director with Empire State Development, heads up the state’s economic-development efforts in western New York. “We thought, ‘Perfect, this is our solution.’” Since then, she says, Say Yes “has become a pillar of our overall strategic plan.”

Funding from Say Yes helped Empire State link Buffalo’s Burgard Vocational High School with Alfred State College in a dual-enrollment program. The program awards associate degrees in auto technology and other advanced skills to Burgard graduates within a year of earning their high school diplomas.

Truth be told, Greater Buffalo was overdue a break. The steel and chemical plants originally drawn to the cheap electricity generated by the falling water of Niagara Falls kept Buffalo and Erie County among the nation’s top economic regions for the first half of the 20th century. The good times persisted until, buffeted by foreign competition, Bethlehem Steel Corp. began to cut production at its massive Lackawanna mills south of the city. By 1984, what was once the world’s fourth-largest steel-making plant stood silent, and 6,000 good jobs were gone.

As Buffalo’s industrial base shrank, so, too, did its population — going from a half million in the 1950s to the 300,000 people who now call the city home. The metropolitan area today supports 55,000 manufacturing jobs, most with chemical firms and family-owned suppliers. More than 17,000 of these positions are held by older workers on track to retire before 2020 — with few replacements in sight.

“We don’t have the feeder stock coming out of high school” to fill the positions, says Deputy Erie County Executive Richard Tobe. He is equally troubled by the “big skills gap,” pointing out that, in a region in which 41,000 people are looking for work, some 1,000 positions in advanced manufacturing remain unfilled because employers can’t find qualified applicants. That’s one reason Tobe praises Say Yes for offering scholarships to career-focused students in trade schools and community college certificate programs.

“There has been a prejudice across this city, this county and in fact across the country against blue-collar
Under the supervision of Buffalo City Schools teacher Shanada Davis, third-grader Ryana Flores participates in an academic enrichment program supported by Say Yes. The after-school program, which seeks to enhance pupils' math and English skills, is operated through a private-public partnership with the YMCA of Buffalo Niagara.
jobs," Tope insists. "Everybody says, 'Get a degree, get a white-collar job.' Parents who were laid off by Bethlehem maybe want their kids to get a degree to avoid what happened to them. But pushing all kids to college is bad policy. It's forcing a lot of round holes into square pegs."

The three-campus Erie Community College (ECC) system, which has enrolled 350 of the first Say Yes scholarship recipients to graduate from the Buffalo Public Schools, is working aggressively to close the skills gap. And the students are responding.

For example, a Visual Communication Technology certificate course in 3D printer operation has proven so popular that ECC now offers it seven days a week. Job placement at the end of the 10-week course is 100 percent.

Say Yes supporters appreciate the program's commitment to broad-based education, beginning with Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, who calls the effort a "seismic change that is transforming the city."

When it comes to supporting public education, Brown regularly puts his — or rather, the city's — money where his mouth is. Each year the city deposits $70.3 million in the Buffalo schools' bank account, including a $500,000 allocation for Say Yes scholarships that Mayor Brown pushed through city council.

The triumvirate behind Say Yes — Executive Director Rust, COO Chasin and Community Foundation President Dedecker — are encouraged by the progress they've seen. Still, they say, much work lies ahead before Buffalo can realize the transformation cited by the mayor.

The heavy lifting began last year in elementary, middle and high schools across the city. And the bulk of it, by necessity, is directed at poverty, crime and neglect.

"A lot of kids in the Buffalo schools don't have a prayer," says Jack Quinn, president of Erie Community College and a former six-term Republican member of Congress. "How are you supposed to learn times tables on Tuesday when your dad was beating the hell out of your mom on Monday night?"

Officials in Buffalo schools are well aware of the social problems that infiltrate their classrooms, and they've moved to address those problems. Years ago, the district installed a program coordinated by the United Way and Catholic Charities of Buffalo to help mitigate the educational disruptions caused by poverty and its resultant social and familial woes.

The schools followed up with in 2007 by assigning Keresztes, then an associate superintendent, to oversee social services. Whip-smart, reform-minded and unflinchingly honest, Keresztes knows the system is ill-equipped to deal with the most pressing issue facing urban districts.

"Public education is not wired to understand social learning needs," he says. "Public education knows we need better teachers, knows we need to remove failing teachers, to improve teaching, learning and retention. But public education is not wired to talk about the elephants in the room. Nor will people in power talk about them. But we can't keep waiting for county government, city government, the district and the churches to step up. We need to address the social needs of students."

For Keresztes, the arrival of Say Yes was a turning point in a personal and professional struggle to put Buffalo kids on equal footing with their more privileged peers in non-urban districts. He calls the program "an almost-overnight presence that focused our online student support services like never before. It's the first time I've seen a partner that is completely serious instead of tinkering around the edges," says Keresztes.

Say Yes has helped Keresztes fulfill a longtime objective: combining an array of discrete programs offering psychological counseling, family support, parent mentoring and after-school programs into a coordinated, wraparound effort. That effort is credited with, among other things, bumping the high school graduation rate from 48 percent to 54 percent in just one year. The next step is the rollout of on-site legal assistance, health and mental health clinics in schools throughout the district.

"The social services stuff that is getting taken care of — stuff that wasn't taken care of before — is giving these kids a better chance to be successful," says ECC's Quinn.

To attack the impediments blocking the progress of Buffalo's kids, Say Yes and the district have enlisted foot soldiers dubbed "site facilitators." They are stationed in 35 buildings to catch and address the "stuff" that Quinn refers to — problems that used to routinely fall through the cracks: The kid whose sleep is interrupted by gunfire ... the single parent juggling two jobs while her children struggle with homework ... the pupil who can't focus
because she's hungry. The district will soon add free services to assist parents with the legal issues that interfere with the education of their children.

Nor is the district ignoring the academic imperatives. On a Friday last fall, as the start date for the after-school program neared, Principal Geneive Jones-Johnson and her staff at Dr. George E. Blackman Elementary sent each of the school's 540 pupils home with an application form and a memo. The memo informed parents that, beginning in November, they could opt to keep their children in school an additional two hours for supplemental math and literature classes. At first, Jones-Johnson worried that she'd acted prematurely.

"Friday is normally a bad day to send things home because things tend to get misplaced over the weekend," she explains. "You never get papers back on a Monday."

Well, almost never. The following Monday, students returned with 135 completed applications for the after-school academic enrichment program operated through a private-public partnership with the YMCA of Buffalo Niagara. By mid-year, fully half of the Blackman student body had enrolled in the program, it provides two days each of extra instruction in math and literature, with Fridays set aside for "fun."

The after-school initiative has proven so successful that Say Yes volunteered to pay to make it available to every Blackman student for the remainder of the year. And in February, the after-school kids showed the wisdom of that investment: In the first learning assessments since the program was introduced, every grade level demonstrated marked progress in both subject areas (save one grade level in math).

"Our mantra here is nothing happens in isolation," says Jones-Johnson. "(The after-school program) gives us the opportunity to groom children so that when we send them to middle school, where there is a huge dropout rate, they have a strong start and can handle what's ahead."

And a bit further ahead — beyond middle school — that's where the crown jewel of the Say Yes program shines brightest. "None of this works without the college scholarship piece," says Chasin. "That's the driver."

The success of Say Yes in Buffalo is not yet complete, since the high school class of 2013 represents the first group of scholarship recipients. But the program already has

Empire State Development Director Christina Orsi, who heads up the state's economic-development efforts in western New York, says Say Yes is a vital component of efforts to retool the region's workforce. She calls it "a pillar of our overall strategic plan."
impressed Richard Jurasek, president of Medaille College.

"This college has always been Buffalo-centric and, as a result, has always been a fairly accurate mirror of the city demographic," says Jurasek, head of the private, 3,000-student college since 2007. "We basically teach the underclass, working-class, aspiring middle class more than ever. And we like that just fine."

More than 130 city school graduates, members of the first Say Yes commencement class, enrolled in Medaille last September — a 57 percent increase over the previous year. Of those incoming Buffalo students, only 17 percent failed to return for the second semester in January; the previous year, 23 percent of Buffalo-educated students left for good at the end of the first semester. That improvement in first- to second-semester retention — a key early indicator of college completion — leads Jurasek to proclaim that Say Yes "is the perfect marriage for us. It couldn't be better."

For a private institution such as Medaille, the marriage can be an expensive proposition. Federal grants and the Say Yes scholarship cover approximately half of the $23,000 tuition (Say Yes also subsidizes a portion of room and board for residential students). The remainder, nearly $10,000 per Say Yes student, is drawn from Medaille’s endowment and other sources. So the college’s investment is substantial.

But consider the return on that investment. Think about Amber Gray, who most certainly would not be studying pre-veterinary medicine at Medaille without the matching financial aid from the school and, chiefly, the Say Yes scholarship. Gray flirted with the idea of leaving Buffalo before Say Yes made it possible for her to attend Medaille, a college with a solid reputation for training future veterinarians.

She, along with thousands of others on the Lake Erie shore, has since started to view Buffalo differently. Instead of fleeing, Gray now plans to remain in the city that put a college degree within her reach — a city that she believes will do the same for her own children at some point.

Dedecker isn't surprised by Gray's story. Belief, she says, is what drives all of the work behind Say Yes. Ultimately, it's what the entire program is all about.

"This is a game-changer," she says. "It is reaching into the future of this community in ways we can only imagine. It has ignited hope that we can rebuild this region on the potential of our people."
Higher Education Compact

Students served by Say Yes to Education have the opportunity to receive full-tuition scholarships to a range of public and private institutions – including the 70 private colleges and universities that are members of the Say Yes Higher Education Compact (full roster listed below).

The Compact, which was begun in 2008 in partnership with Dr. Nancy Cantor, then the Chancellor of Syracuse University, has grown rapidly in recent years – adding more than 25 private colleges and universities to its ranks in 2013 alone.

Say Yes’ private college and university partners are located in 17 states and the District of Columbia, and offer the organization’s students a broad array of academic opportunities and campus experiences, from small liberal arts colleges to big research universities.

Say Yes’ tuition benefits and other supports (which may include tutoring, after-school services, counseling and legal assistance) are available to the families of nearly 65,000 students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 in every public school in Buffalo and Syracuse, New York – where Say Yes’ two city-wide programs are located. The organization expects to expand to additional cities in the coming years.

Public College and University Tuition Commitment
In Syracuse and Buffalo, graduates of the cities’ public high schools are eligible, regardless of family income, for up to 100 percent of the tuition needed to attend any public two- or four-year college or university in New York State to which they are accepted. The public scholarships (including additional grants to help cover part of the cost of college housing, for those living on campus) are funded by local donors – including individuals, families, foundations and businesses – in Syracuse and Buffalo.

Private College and University Tuition Commitment
In joining the Say Yes Higher Education Compact, private colleges and universities agree to ensure that students whose annual family income is at or below $75,000 are typically eligible, at a
minimum, to attend tuition-free, provided they successfully navigate the institution’s regular admission process.

Say Yes students whose family income is above $75,000 and who are enrolled in a Compact institution are eligible to receive annual grants, from the organization itself, of up to $5,000. While Say Yes adopted a citywide approach in 2008, college scholarships are still available to several hundred students in the organization’s earlier chapters in Harlem in New York City; Philadelphia, and Hartford, Conn.

NOTE: The private colleges and universities that are the members of the Say Yes Higher Education Compact are the primary source of funding to Say Yes students attending their institutions. While all of the member colleges have agreed to the basic conditions of the Say Yes program, the institutions may have policies and restrictions that are unique – including policies that may take into account a family’s assets when considering Say Yes awards.

Parents and students seeking more information on the specific financial aid policies of members of the Say Yes Compact should consult the websites of Say Yes Buffalo and Say Yes Syracuse, as well as the member institutions themselves.

Transportation to and from Say Yes Higher Education Compact institutions

In some instances, Say Yes may be able to arrange air travel for a prospective student (and a parent or guardian) to visit a member institution of the Say Yes Higher Education Compact – via vouchers provided to the organization through its partnership with Southwest Airlines. Vouchers may also be available to students enrolled at Compact institutions for their first visit home, or to interview for an internship. Such requests should be made directly to the directors of the Say Yes programs in Buffalo and Syracuse.

Institutions seeking further information on the Say Yes Higher Education Compact should contact:

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SVP Higher Education and Communications
jsteinberg@sayyestoeducation.org
212 415 7163 (w)
917 847 3684 (m)

Nov. 25, 2014
Say Yes Higher Education Compact Members

Private Colleges and Universities

Brown University
Bryant & Stratton College (Syracuse)
Canisius College
Clarkson University
Colgate University
Colorado College*
Columbia University
Cooper Union
Cornell University
Crouse Hospital College of Nursing
Daemen College
Dartmouth College
Davidson College*
Denison University
Drexel University
Duke University
D'Youville College
Franklin & Marshall College*
Georgetown University
Goodwin College
Hamilton College
Harvard College
Hilbert College
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Houghton College
Kenyon College
Le Moyne College
Lesley University
Lycoming College*
Marist College
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Medaille College
Molloy College
Monroe College

Muhlenberg College
New York Institute of Technology
Niagara University
Northeastern University
Northwestern University
Notre Dame
Occidental College*
Pitzer College*
Pomona College
Paul Smith's College
Princeton University
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Rhodes College
Rice University
Rochester Institute of Technology
Sarah Lawrence College
Sewanee: University of the South
Smith College
St. Bonaventure University
St. Joseph's College of Nursing
Stanford University*
Syracuse University
Texas Christian University*
Trinity College
Trocaire College
Tulane University*
Tufts University
University of Pennsylvania
University of Rochester
University of Southern California*
Vanderbilt University
Vassar College
Villa Maria College
Washington University in St. Louis
Williams College
Yale University

*Denotes New Partners for 2014-15