Rebuilding Communities: Education’s Central Role in Mobilizing Community Reform

Gene I. Maeroff
Syracuse, a post-industrial urban hub of 145,170 in central New York State, has placed an ambitious bet on its future. Unlike other locales where sparkling casinos and tax incentives for business represent the best hope for uplift, the gamble in Syracuse revolves around a hunch that sending its young people to college en masse will alter the city’s fortunes. At the heart of the multi-million-dollar wager is a guarantee that qualifying graduates of the city’s five public high schools will be eligible for free tuition at almost 100 colleges and universities in a Higher Education Compact. Getting students into college is the most costly but easiest part of the bargain; preparing them to succeed is the more challenging aspect.

The effort was initiated and carried out under the aegis of Say Yes to Education, Inc., based in New York City. The non-profit foundation has pursued similar ventures in other cities in the Northeast, but never to the extent of what it undertook in Syracuse, where it is attempting to reform an entire school system while transforming the economics of a beleaguered city.

Syracuse University, the second-largest employer and most influential institution in the city, is a key partner that Say Yes engaged early in creating Say Yes to Education in Syracuse. When Nancy Cantor, chancellor of the university, and Mary Anne Carey, former president of New American Schools, fell into a conversation at one of those Manhattan events attended by everyone who is anyone, Cantor asked Carey what she was doing as her latest project. As soon as Cantor heard that Carey, who had become head of Say Yes, was seeking a place in which to launch a district-wide school reform project, Cantor said, in effect: Have I got a city for you.

Say Yes began planning for its venture in Syracuse in 2007 and officially launched it in 2008, rolling it out in one of the school district’s four quadrants each fall thereafter. Say Yes officials knew that the program they took to Syracuse had to grow local roots, a tricky art of transplantation to lend the program the character of a native species. This meant cultivating support in places that would prop up the delicate seedling as soon as it went into the ground. Toward this end, leading figures in government, business, and education were courted as the original backers.
The effort excited a population that thought Syracuse, where the population peaked at 220,000 in the 1950s, could never reinvigorate itself. This once vibrant city thrived from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century. Its convenient location, first smack-dab on the Erie Canal, then on important railroad lines, and finally at the nexus of major highways attracted business and industry. But with suburbanization after World War II, Syracuse lost its hold as a center of commerce and by the 1970s, manufacturing faltered badly. Then, there was disinvestment in the city for more than two generations, impacting the public schools profoundly.

The marriage between school improvement and economic development consecrated by Say Yes is meant not only to bolster education but to fortify the tax base by making a once-proud small city a place that retains and draws middle-class families who select their living arrangements by the quality of the public schools. Say Yes’s approach amounts to a test of whether school improvement on a large scale can drive economic development. Everything is in play—the relationship of the educational quality to home prices, to property tax revenues, to the caliber of the local workforce, and to the strength of the city’s commercial base.

And so a vast partnership coalesced to provide financial assistance, influence, and expertise to Syracuse Say Yes. It includes not only government and business, but also the most important parts of the school system. The superintendent, the heads of the teacher and principal unions, and leadership teams of teachers in the city’s schools all assumed roles. Major businesses like SRC Corporation invested in specific aspects of Say Yes, as did foundations.

The former mayor and the current mayor, members of the Common Council, and the county executive all positioned themselves solidly behind Say Yes, a bulwark of local interests lending support to a newcomer while it was still taking baby steps. The business community sees the renewal of the schools as a device to attract companies and to solidify Syracuse’s fiscal underpinnings. The teacher union bought into the plan as a vehicle for unleashing the full potential of its members.

Everything points toward making postsecondary education a reality for the kinds of children who never before saw college as an option. The feature that initially got the most attention and continues as a significant selling point for Say Yes is the pledge to provide a tuition-free postsecondary education to high school graduates who qualify for specific institutions of higher education.

Even more than four years after the start of the program, some residents still do not understand that Say Yes is about a lot more than scholarships. The idea is not simply to make postsecondary education affordable, but to give students the grounding and aspiration to keep them there, once admitted, and to lead to completion of degrees. The program urged on the school system by Say Yes revolves around social workers, health clinics, and legal assistance for entire families, as well as a more rigorous and relevant school day and school year and beefed-up staff development for teachers.

“Syracuse was melancholy and felt like a dying city,” said Marie Perkins, a former principal in one of the city’s elementary schools and now a central administrator. “Then, you have something like this come in and—I hate to say it—it can keep us from dying.” The key missing piece in the puzzle was inserted in 2011, when—with the aid of Say Yes—a new superintendent, Sharon L. Contreras, was selected to lead the academic rebirth of the school system.

“What really drove me to come to a city with 180 inches of snow a year was learning of the collaborative governance and the Say Yes model,” said Contreras, who gave up the job of chief academic officer in Providence to make the shift. “Educators all over the country seek this kind of support. I never before saw anything like what’s here. I wouldn’t have come if not for Say Yes.” The magnitude of the cooperation impressed Contreras when she began considering a move to Syracuse. “I had never before seen a mayor, a higher education president, and others come together like that, problem-solving together in the same room,” she said. “It was quite remarkable.”
### BOX 1: Snapshot of Syracuse and Its School District

#### CITY
- Population: 145,170
- Demographics of citywide population:
  - White, 56%
  - African-American, 30%
  - Hispanic, 8%
  - Others, 6%
- Poverty rate:
  - Citywide, 34%
  - African-American, 44%
  - White, 26%
- Median household income: $30,031
- Median housing value: $89,900
- Founded: 1848
- Early Inhabitants: Onondaga Indian Tribe, part of the Iroquois Confederacy
- Area: 25.6 square miles
- Principal Employers: Education and Services
- Employers Being Cultivated: Energy and Environmental Sciences

#### DISTRICT
- Number of schools: 35
  - Elementary: 14
  - K – 8: 6
  - Middle: 6
  - High schools: 5
  - Alternative schools/programs: 4
- School Budget (2011-12): $334 million
  - Number of employees: 3,678
  - Number of teachers: 1,660
- Graduation rate: 50% of freshmen in 2006 graduated by Aug. 31, 2009
- Enrollment: 21,297, PreK – 12
  - White: 28%
  - African American: 53%
  - Hispanic: 12%
  - Asian: 6%
  - Native American: 1%
  - Free/Reduced Meals: 84%
  - Special education: 21%
  - ELL: 12%
REBUILDING COMMUNITIES: Education’s Central Role in Mobilizing Community Reform
Say Yes To Education

Say Yes spent more than 20 years rehearsing for its prime-time performance in Syracuse, running programs in four other cities for small groups of students in a few schools to make them college-ready and, then, to provide the wherewithal for higher education. But Say Yes, the brainchild of the University of Pennsylvania’s Norman Newberg and financier George S. Weiss, who remains a fiscal angel, never before climbed on the big stage to accept the challenge of remaking an entire urban school system.

The story of what amounts to a demonstration model in gritty Syracuse may serve as a blueprint for school renewal in old factory towns throughout America. Though the tale is still unfolding and the results have yet to be determined, lessons learned may instruct those who want to pursue similar goals. Say Yes in Syracuse provides a test of whether school improvement on a large scale can be wed to economic development.

Much of what Say Yes did before planting its flag in Syracuse prepared the organization for this task. Say Yes learned in working with smaller cohorts of students in urban settings about their needs and the efforts required to alter outcomes. The organization formulated a vision of reform and came to recognize that it had to start early in a youngster’s life and offer an array of supports for entire families. Say Yes also saw that it needed a carefully crafted financial plan to carry the program through its start-up years and to sustain it as the organization’s direct involvement waned. Toward those ends, Say Yes set out to accumulate pledges for tens of millions of dollars.

Previous Ventures

Say Yes seeks to increase high school and college graduation rates for students from the inner city. It has carried out projects with cohorts of students in Philadelphia; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Hartford, Connecticut; and in the Harlem section of New York City, at various times since 1987. Weiss launched the program when he promised to pay for the college education of 112 seventh graders from an impoverished neighborhood in Philadelphia. This experience led him to conclude that Say Yes must start working with children earlier in life, before they reach the upper elementary grades.

For Weiss, the early start is an initial step in a lengthy journey that he hopes will shatter barriers and lead to degrees for children of all backgrounds, not just for those who can afford it. Education is empowerment in his version of what it takes to succeed, a view shaped by personal experience. In the 1930s, Weiss’s father could no longer get a job in Vienna because he was Jewish. The family fled to the United States and his father’s words are indelibly printed on Weiss’s memory: “The Nazi’s could take everything you owned, but couldn’t take your brains.”

And so as the Weiss family struggled to build a new life amidst freedom even young George was sent out to work at the age of 11, becoming perhaps the youngest member of a labor union. By the time he attended Brookline High School near Boston, he waited tables at a hotel and received the advice that he should study business in college and go to the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School.

As a sophomore at Penn, Weiss played host at a party for some tough inner-city kids who were six or seven year younger than he. They belonged to a gang in South Philly and during the remainder of his undergraduate years Weiss kept in touch with them and learned about their older brothers who were in jail and their sisters who were pregnant. He encouraged the boys in their studies and they all finished high school, not wanting to disappoint him. George Weiss had found his calling. Even as he went on to be a stockbroker in Hartford and then to start his own business, George Weiss Associates, which manages more than $2 billion, he continued to dedicate himself to lifting the fortunes of needy young people.

Of the hundreds of children that Say Yes has served, 75 percent of those no longer in elementary or secondary school got a high school diploma and more than half received a postsecondary credential or are still enrolled. Other programs—the Harlem Children’s
Zone, I Have a Dream, and Project Grad, for instance—share characteristics with Say Yes, but none has attempted to change an entire school system.

The Say Yes approach, collaborating with partners, assists children on four fronts—academic readiness, social and emotional readiness, health and well-being, and financial resources—all of which contribute to educational success. With each attempt, Say Yes refined its strategies, producing increasingly better results. Say Yes entered Syracuse with an understanding that paying for a youngster’s education after high school is usually insufficient in the face of crushing needs.

So, the program retooled itself to reach the youngest schoolchildren and to bolster them as they advance through the grades by monitoring their progress, involving families, creating system-wide assistance, providing legal aid, coordinating services, and extending the hours, days, and weeks for learning. The research-driven nature of Say Yes means that the work in Syracuse employs the lessons of previous ventures.

Expanding the Vision

In the process of expanding Weiss’s vision, Say Yes seeks to make the impact of its intervention sustainable. What Say Yes accomplished for fewer than 400 children in Harlem, for example, had to be stretched to cover some 20,000 students in Syracuse. Say Yes had established 24 benchmarks for monitoring its progress in Harlem, specifying down to the tiniest level how much time representatives should devote to, say, a family interview.

Say Yes measures each student’s progress against these benchmarks across three domains—health and wellness, social emotional development, and academic achievement. The monitoring draws on information from student records, reports commissioned to gather data, and teacher and parent surveys. Say Yes streamlined the process in Syracuse and made it more efficient by scaling down the benchmarks from 24 to 13, each of which goes into greater depth than previously. This system seeks to ensure that every student remains on track to thrive and to be ready for college after high school.

It fell to Mary Anne Carey to start thinking about such matters as benchmarks when she joined Say Yes as president in early 2006. The idea of whole-system reform gestated for almost a year as she oversaw Say Yes’s national program and weighed how and where to take a giant leap into a place yet to be determined. Gradually, she and her colleagues set the following five non-negotiable criteria for the due diligence that would guide their investigation of what city best suited their proposed project:

1) Community willingness to set a goal of postsecondary completion
2) School district willingness to partner with higher education
3) School district willingness to partner with government and the private sector
4) Transparent accountability in which the school district uses data to discuss what works and does not work
5) Transparent and sustainable fiscal management that commits the locality to fully fund the program by the sixth year and beyond.

Say Yes knew it wanted to establish a demonstration model in New York State. The state’s highest court had ruled in 2003 in a suit brought by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) that the state did not fund the public schools of New York City adequately—given the poverty of its students—and that a new infusion of money was legally required. The state proposed to provide this assistance not only to New York City, but to upstate cities, as well. Say Yes viewed these funds as a potential reservoir from which its projected program could draw sustenance in one of New York’s beleaguered smaller cities. In Syracuse, for example, almost four out of five students qualify for federally subsidized lunches, while the rate is less than 3 percent in all but two of that city’s suburbs.

In applying its criteria of due diligence, Say Yes discovered that several potential locales did not have the kind of political and civic leadership that the organization deemed essential to the program. In some upstate cities, Say Yes could not even find the sort of leaders with whom to discuss such a program.

Talks began with officials in Governor Eliot Spitzer’s administration about creating such a demonstration program to drive the strategic deployment of these new CFE funds so as to ensure effective use and measurable educational and economic development outcomes. Say Yes pushed the notion of a pilot that it could replicate elsewhere. State officials eventually embraced the idea. As a result, Say Yes to Education in Syracuse is one of the lesser-known legacies of a Spitzer administration cut short by scandal. The governor’s office continued to back Say Yes through the Paterson and Cuomo administrations.
**BOX 2. The Essence of Say Yes to Education in Syracuse**

Say Yes to Education in Syracuse seeks to develop the full potential of every child, particularly low-income, urban youth, while addressing economic development in the city by improving its entire public school system. The program enhances outcomes for students, making the district’s schools more effective and more desirable. The program replicates and takes to scale efforts that the national Say Yes organization implemented during the last twenty years in a limited number of schools in four other locales. Say Yes carries out its work on four fronts that affect young people and their families—academic readiness, social and emotional readiness, health and well-being, and financial resources.

The program approaches educational improvement as a vehicle for transforming the city. By making the Syracuse public school more effective and more appealing, Say Yes assumes that homes will become more desirable, property taxes will rise, business and industry will be attracted to the city, and prosperity will ensue.

The school district, in conjunction with Say Yes, is making more time available for education, providing more professional development for staff, and embracing programs that build the social capital of youngsters by exposing them to experiences that they might not otherwise have and people they might not otherwise meet. Social and emotional needs of students get attention from an enlarged staff of social workers and outreach efforts that extend to families. Health clinics situated in the schools are being created and expanded to overcome some of the impediments to learning. Research and data influenced the program design and continue to figure in decision-making so that findings can lead to appropriate adjustments.

Say Yes gives special attention to early childhood initiatives; ongoing assessment of students; recruiting, preparing, and rewarding teachers; promoting innovation and excellence; and quality higher education. As a main goal, the program aims to prepare more of the city’s students to enter and achieve success in postsecondary education. Tuition scholarships make higher education more affordable for more students.

Local educators, including the school superintendent, and government officials, including the mayor and the county executive, were engaged early in the planning and continue to play major roles in the program. Syracuse University has contributed expertise, influence, and financial support to the program. The business sector recognizes and supports Say Yes as a crucial element in revitalizing the local economy. Say Yes raised and contributed $28,250,000 to help underwrite the additional demands placed on the Syracuse City School District by the program. An arrangement with New York State as the result of a court verdict generates revenues scheduled eventually to produce an extra $3,500 in support of each child. A carefully designed financial plan calls for city and the school district to gradually increase the local investment in public education so that it becomes self-sustaining by the sixth year of the program.
Preparation and Rollout

Say Yes and its potential partners recognized that success would rest on building a coalition, for the most part locally based, to endorse and advance systemic school reform. This meant enlisting the backing of key figures in government, the school system, and the business community. Say Yes wanted to reach out to members of the state legislature from the Syracuse area and even to officials at the federal level. Some of these individuals would ultimately become members of the Say Yes advisory committee and/or the Say Yes operating committee, keeping them engaged for the long run.

Command headquarters for coalition building was Syracuse University. A series of meetings on campus brought together potential partners to hear presentations and discuss the future of the project. These gatherings throughout 2007 and into 2008 produced agreements and pledges to assure Say Yes of a coalition to strive for the program’s success.

Looking back on this period, Carey observed that nine months would have been sufficient for laying the groundwork once Say Yes identified Syracuse as the laboratory for its experiment. Having 12 months was even better. She wanted time to build local buy-in. “There had to be elaborate collaboration across sectors,” said Chancellor Cantor, a social psychologist. “You can have great cooperation at the leadership level, but if the troops don’t roll up their sleeves and work together this won’t work.”

Leaders in Syracuse described the separateness of the various entities that Say Yes had to hitch together to pull as a team. It was not simply a matter of the many layers resisting alignment, but that habits of long-standing kept them apart. Each sector, in other words, operated mostly vertically—in its own silo—without connections to other sectors. The county’s budget for child services, for example, was twice as large as the school system’s and they did not work together to figure out how they could combine forces for the good of children.

Coalition Building

As word of Say Yes’s intentions spread, a citywide conversation developed and excitement grew. Syracuse is small enough that news of the contemplated venture, like a juicy rumor, rapidly permeated the community. The beauty of Say Yes is its role as a reliable outsider, independent of parochial interests.

Say Yes had to be perceived as an honest broker and facilitator, acting on behalf of the community and its children. It couldn’t be seen as a captive of any single entity. “We bring people together,” said Eugene S. Chasin, chief operating officer of Say Yes. “We are the conveners and bring people to the table. It is part of the capacity building, the kind of coordination that doesn’t normally go on.”

Daniel G. Lowengard, the then school superintendent, who retired in 2011, was among the most crucial of the original partners. The program could not realistically operate without his firm commitment, which required putting the fate of his superintendency on the line.

Much would depend on him and he, perhaps, had the most to lose personally if the program went belly-up.

Coalition-building sometimes must overcome previous divisions having nothing to do with the program at hand. In Syracuse, for instance, this meant getting past long-standing tensions between the school system and the Common Council, the body on which the public schools are financially dependent. The board of education has no tax-levying powers of its own. Some members of the Common Council did not condone the manner in which the school district spent the funds that the city provided for education.

The political leadership questioned the ability of Lowengard and the school board to operate within their budget, maintaining that there was not enough accountability. The State Comptroller had criticized the financial practices of the school system. He declared at one point that because of shoddy bookkeeping the city would not get $1.7 million that it was due to receive from New York State for the public schools. Relations were
so stressed that council members at first contacted the deputy superintendent instead of the superintendent when they delivered news that they were going to include $1 million for Say Yes in the city's budget.

As the summer of 2008 approached, Rachael Gazdick, whom Say Yes had appointed executive director of its Syracuse operation, was still the lone local employee. In Gazdick, Say Yes had a person who already was connected to a network and knew the players. Looking back, she said: “I can’t imagine someone not part of the university and part of the community structure being able to do this quickly. I know what it’s like to be a teacher, to run an after-school program, and I have the non-profit perspective.” She had an appointment at the university, where she was pursuing a doctorate in social sciences.

Ultimately, though, Say Yes determined that the executive director ought not be linked to the university and should be perceived as a more neutral arbiter, someone not burdened by institutional baggage. Gazdick continued her involvement with the program from her post at the university, but Say Yes tapped Patrick Driscoll to succeed her as executive director.

In Driscoll, Say Yes got someone with strong links to the larger community. He went through the city’s parochial schools and earned a degree in sociology in 1989 from St. Bonaventure University, south of Buffalo. He held jobs under three city governments in Syracuse, serving as parks commissioner for nine and a half years—including time under a mayor who was his cousin—before joining Say Yes. His three children attended the city’s public schools. “After I lost my dad at a very young age,” Driscoll recalled, “my mother showed a will and determination to keep us on track and to ensure that we got to college. I am sure there are parents within SCSD that have lived a similar experience. My hope is that Say Yes continues to open a door of hope to the future.”

Getting Into the Schools

Say Yes aimed to get into its first group of schools that autumn and devised a way to do this in rapid fashion. Syracuse naturally divides itself into four geographic quadrants, a tidy arrangement that lent a rationale to Say Yes’s approach. Each quadrant has a high school with a feeder system of elementary and middle schools. A fifth high school provides technical education for students throughout the city. Say Yes rolled out the program quadrant by quadrant, starting with the students in kindergarten through third grade in the first quadrant and adding a quadrant and the next grade level each year. This meant that in September 2011 the fourth and final quadrant joined the program.

A site director at each school represents Say Yes. The arrangement lets Say Yes receive a constant flow of inside information from the site directors, making the organization less reliant on others for keeping track of developments. For the first four years, Say Yes provided funds to put the site directors on the university payroll, thereby holding down the number of direct employees with whom Say Yes had to concern itself. In 2012, though, Say Yes moved them to the payroll of the Huntington Family Centers, underscoring their role in helping students and families obtain support services.

Say Yes in partnership with the school district also retained community-based organizations (CBOs) to oversee after-school programs. In contracting with these organizations, Say Yes not only got reliable partners to help run programs, but also cemented its connection to the city. When Say Yes launched the after-school program, such organizations as Boys and Girls Clubs and the YMCA—which had long offered similar programs on their own—were concerned about losing out. But Say Yes gave them a role.

A task force of CBOs that formed in conjunction with their work for Say Yes gave the groups a forum and a place to exchange ideas. “What’s different about Say Yes is that it is much more systematic and requires a more systematic response,” said Mike Melara of Catholic Charities, one of the CBOs. “I think the task force will be institutionalized with a focus on making sure that youngsters of greatest need graduate high school and get to college.”

While Say Yes focused on the elementary schools in the beginning, grants from the Ford Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation allowed officials to devise plans involving the secondary schools. Say Yes and the school system developed an approach that integrates preparation for college and career into the secondary school curriculum so that students have more time to prepare for their post-high school future.

Say Yes bases its theory of action, which culminates in postsecondary completion, on academic and personal readiness. Academic readiness rests on traditional in-school attributes—rigorous curriculum, high-quality instruction, and strong conditions for teaching and learning—and such out-of-school supports as tutoring,
summer programs, and talent development. Personal readiness involves supports for social, emotional, and healthful well being. Another side of personal readiness has to do with assistance in planning for and applying to college. Efforts to engage and support the student’s family underpin the theory of action.

Say Yes did not enter an entirely virgin land in Syracuse. The city and the school system already had an interest in addressing concentrated poverty in the most severely impacted neighborhoods and schools. The Westside Community School Strategy had established a process in certain schools to identify and link students and families to services so as to bolster achievement. The process included monitoring student progress, as Say Yes encourages. Say Yes absorbed the Westside Strategy and Monique R. Fletcher, the social worker who headed the program, became an associate director of Say Yes.

The committees on which community leaders sit are meant to bolster local commitment to Say Yes’s efforts and to tap into expertise. The advisory group sets overarching goals and identifies agencies’ policies that impede collaborative funding. The group also supports the development of sustainable solutions for making Say Yes a lasting program.

The operating group meets every other week to manage the program, overseeing on-going tasks and guiding Say Yes to full implementation. Its members come mostly from the five partner organizations behind the school reform—the school district, the university, the city, the county, and Say Yes itself. The group has fewer than a dozen members, though other people attend meetings as their input is needed. As it rolled out the program, Say Yes had to overcome the disbelief of people who felt that the organization couldn’t possibly fulfill its promises. People in Syracuse did not have to wait several years to see the impact of Say Yes. The quick payoff—college scholarships, after-school and summer programs, social workers, and other innovations—enhanced credibility and engendered good will. This strategy paid dividends. After three years, three-fourths of the residents of Syracuse knew of the existence of Say Yes, though only one-third knew someone who had benefited from the program.ii

One challenge was to enlist the support of faith-based groups and leaders of African American and Latino organizations. There was a tendency at the beginning to cultivate backing mainly from the power elite who could act most immediately to raise money and help Say Yes gain access to decision-makers. Gradually, Say Yes is reaching out to churches and minorities to give them a greater stake in the work.

Like a bank opening new branches, Say Yes is not demure when it comes to selling itself. Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., a Syracuse University law school graduate, and other distinguished visitors to the city were prepped to plug Say Yes. A citywide marketing campaign heightened awareness of Say Yes. Quadrant by quadrant, Say Yes branded itself, even resorting to billboards. Say Yes banners encircle the backboard posts in the arena at Syracuse University, where the nationally ranked basketball team has an avid following. Seldom did a school initiative fill a city so rapidly with its image and its promise.

---

**Achievement in Syracuse City School District, 2010-11**

These are the percentages of students who scored at or above Level 3 on the NY State assessments. A score at or above this level meets learning standards and demonstrates an understanding of the content expected in the subject at the grade level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English language arts</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 3 25%</td>
<td>Grade 3 25%</td>
<td>Grade 4 66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4 26%</td>
<td>Grade 4 32%</td>
<td>Grade 8 38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5 22%</td>
<td>Grade 5 29%</td>
<td>Secondary Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6 24%</td>
<td>Grade 6 22%</td>
<td>English 56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7 27%</td>
<td>Grade 7 28%</td>
<td>Math 55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8 20%</td>
<td>Grade 8 15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Syracuse University

Syracuse University is literally and figuratively the school on the hill so far as the rest of the city is concerned. It is the city’s intellectual and economic engine. The university, with a combined full-time and part-time enrollment of 20,407 degree-seeking students, operates on an annual budget of just over $1 billion. It employs a faculty of 955 full-time and 552 part-time and adjunct members, as well as a staff of 3,306 full-time and 370 part-time employees. It is the second largest job-provider in the city, behind the Upstate University Health System. The university has long-standing ties to the city’s public schools, but Say Yes linked the fortunes of the two as never before.

“We view ourselves as an anchor institution in Syracuse,” said Chancellor Cantor. “We are a place-based institution and our history and our future are wrapped up with where we are.” The university has pursued what it considers its responsibility to the city through projects in four major areas—environmental sustainability, the urban ecological system, inclusive urban education, and neighborhood entrepreneurship.

From the start of her chancellorship in 2004, Cantor put a high priority on the university’s relations with the school district. In so doing, she followed a pattern established by some other major universities. Cantor created the Partnership for Better Education in collaboration with other higher education institutions in the area to support improvement in the city's public schools.

University students and faculty members have long played roles in the city schools. The School of Education concentrated 60 percent of its teacher preparation placements in Syracuse. The university’s Center for Public and Community Service sent volunteers to schools and other local agencies. The arrival of Say Yes gave Cantor a wrench for tightening the connections. In taking a lead role in establishing Say Yes in Syracuse, the university drew on its strengths and traditions, according to Eric F. Spina, the vice chancellor and provost. “It advances us as a university,” he said. Syracuse University saw in Say Yes an opportunity to make its work in the public schools even more coherent and more effective.

“At one point, 28 full-time and one part-time employee of Say Yes were salaried through Syracuse University. The university also pays for 251 Say Yes tutors. Then, there is a multitude of volunteers from the university: 168 from Literacy Corps; 75 unpaid tutors; 135 volunteers from the public affairs courses; seven students from the law school to supplement instruction in the school system’s courses in social studies and related areas, and a pool of 218 others who signed up for various roles.

Another assist comes through the development office, where Sara Wason, executive director of foundation relations for the university, added fundraising for Say Yes to her portfolio. “I grew up in this community,” Wason said, “and I believe this is the game-changer for the city. Say Yes is one of the most galvanizing forces in our community, something everyone can get behind.” In addition, the university assigned another development specialist to work exclusively on raising money for Say Yes.

“Say Yes gives us a leadership model,” said Doug Biklen, dean of the School of Education. “For the first time, there is a program in the schools into which everything can flow.” As one might expect, the education school became the lead entity for the university’s involvement with Say Yes, but other schools and colleges within the university also joined the mix at the urging of Cantor and Biklen.

“Say Yes is one of the most galvanizing forces in our community, something everyone can get behind.”
REBUILDING COMMUNITIES: Education's Central Role in Mobilizing Community Reform
The Private Sector

Carey went to leaders of the Metropolitan Development Association (MDA), the local business and industry group, early in her search for allies. She projected a future in which the success of Say Yes would enhance property values, build a stronger tax base, and create a better work force. This argument comport ed with a report by the Washington-based Alliance for Excellent Education, which maintains that if urban school systems could halve their dropout rates it would have a positive effect on the economic, social, and civic health of their communities.iii

MDA, now called CenterState Corporation for Economic Development, serves a 12-county area in the middle of New York State. Headed by Robert M. Simpson, a former aide to West Virginia U.S. Senator John D. Rockefeller IV, the group is not your run-of-the-mill booster organization. It had secured three grants from the Ford Foundation to promote urban revitalization and it runs the largest annual business event in upstate New York.

The message from reports that MDA commissioned was that Syracuse should invest in people. The scenario put forward by Say Yes lent an opportunity to do so. Simpson and his group’s members readily saw Say Yes’s potential for transforming the community. Syracuse and Onondaga County are part of a region that contains 35 colleges and universities with 138,000 students and 65,000 employees. “We have always been interested in the role of education in economic development,” Simpson said.

Enthusiasm for Say Yes in the private sector could be seen in the messages tacked onto For Sale signs by some realtors: “This is a Say Yes House.” They hoped that the possibility of free college tuition would be a magnet to draw buyers into the city. Realtors even invited representatives of Say Yes to address their meetings.

Say Yes’s entry into Syracuse was fortuitous in that it came as the city was searching for ways to resuscitate itself. Some 80 leading citizens had gathered at the nearby Skyline Lodge in Highland Forest for a retreat. Though Say Yes was still so new that not everyone in this august group knew about it, some participants at the retreat kept mentioning Say Yes and its potential for stirring revitalization. Finally, someone asked Carey and Cantor to get up like a couple of students at show-and-tell and describe what Say Yes sought to accomplish.

The two-day retreat contained many breakout sessions and a member of each group reported out to the entire assemblage as the event drew to a close. One such person, Allen Galson, the retired founder of an industrial engineering company, felt that the proposals he heard were not sharply focused. So, he rose and announced that the only idea that had momentum, money, and enthusiasm behind it was Say Yes. He asked that everyone concentrate on that option and push it hard because that would make the greatest difference in Syracuse.

That moment marked a breakthrough and Say Yes did, indeed, continue to move ahead. But, as if to show that every good deed has its downside, some people resented Say Yes’s emergence as the darling of the capital and accused Say Yes of hijacking the retreat. For all the good will that came Say Yes’s way as a result of the retreat, the event engendered some defensiveness that took Say Yes a while to overcome.

Largesse can be in short supply in Syracuse. The city has few sizable local philanthropies other than the Central New York Community Foundation, which administers 500 funds. Syracuse is a proud place that delights in a rich architectural heritage that left its neighborhoods with an unusually large number of houses in the Queen Anne and Arts & Crafts styles and a downtown that boasts buildings designed by prominent architects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The city, in other words, is in some ways locked into an earlier era and lacks the dynamism that once produced captains of industry and eager philanthropists. Individual donors were slow to come to the aid of Say Yes. “There’s a dearth of capital here,” said Peter A. Dunn, head of the Community Foundation. Say Yes’s experience showed that such programs—even
when they represent a thrust toward economic development—cannot necessarily count on the private sector to keep them afloat.

Say Yes arrived in a Syracuse that was grasping for a fiscal lifeline. The tax base was stagnant and some residents worried that the city was fast becoming a financial ward of New York State. “The reality of our marketplace and our economy,” said Mayor Stephanie Miner, “is that students need a solid high school education and preparation beyond that. I was a labor lawyer, representing unions and employees. You can’t be a journeyman electrician if you can’t do math. All of the trades need a diploma to get in.”

In the long run, Say Yes wants to be measured not only in terms of the schools’ academic outcomes, but also by the significance of those achievements for the greater community. This would mean larger enrollments for the public schools if Syracuse becomes a more attractive place of residence, rising employment because of a more skilled workforce, less need to spend on social services, and a reduction in crime, reflecting a higher socio-economic standing in the city. It would be premature to give the credit to Say Yes, but the program’s backers took quiet satisfaction and kept their fingers crossed when statistics showed a 7 percent reduction in crime in Syracuse between 2010 and 2011.

While a reversal of economic fortunes in Syracuse will certainly take time, CenterState Corporation’s Simpson was able to say in early 2012 that the opportunity for college scholarships established by Say Yes figured in his talks with a financial services company that was considering creating several hundred jobs in the city. “They see a community that has made a long-term commitment to its workforce,” Simpson remarked. “My major point is that there remains a lot of enthusiasm for the Say Yes program.”

### BOX 3. Say Yes to Education in Syracuse Funds Received as of Dec. 31, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syracuse City</td>
<td>$2,600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onondaga County</td>
<td>$2,440,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York State</td>
<td>$1,350,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private Donors</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Say Yes to Education Foundation</td>
<td>$10,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Institutes for Research</td>
<td>$7,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wegman’s</td>
<td>$2,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syracuse University</td>
<td>$1,111,863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central New York Community Foundation</td>
<td>$1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syracuse Research Corporation</td>
<td>$750,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford Foundation</td>
<td>$300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JP Morgan Chase</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Pomfrey</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnick Family Foundation</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen’s Bank</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Bank</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| TOTAL                | $29,391,836    |
Say Yes was shrewd when it came to winning support from Syracuse’s Common Council, the mayor, the county, and the New York State Legislature. Influence and money were at stake. Even the federal government was party to the deliberations. Say Yes sought to persuade elected and appointed public officials to view its efforts in Syracuse not simply as an educational endeavor. Lawmakers could more readily justify extra funds for a pursuit in economic development than for education, which already consumed large portions of the city and state budgets.

The City

The subject of Say Yes came up at the Common Council for the first time in the spring of 2007 during a caucus meeting. There was little information available to council members except for the idea that the organization wanted to offer a program to allow graduates of Syracuse’s high schools to attend college tuition-free. Stephanie A. Miner, then chair of the education committee and now the city’s mayor, was as interested in talking to representatives of Say Yes as they were in speaking with her. “What really engaged me,” she recalled, “was the power of the idea; I saw the merit of it.”

Miner and William M. Ryan, another council member, met with Carey over a meal to gather more information. For a while, Miner and Ryan kept much of what they learned largely to themselves as they considered how to involve the rest of city government.

Carey and her Say Yes colleagues not only had to understand the workings of education in Syracuse. They had to sort out the even more arcane dynamics of the city’s politics and the rivalries that can lead to stillbirth for a project seeking the blessing of local government without giving power its due. The blossoming relationship between Say Yes and city government could not be divorced from the fact that some council members were jockeying for position to enter the race to succeed Mayor Matt Driscoll, who would leave the post in 2009. There was a perception that either Miner or Ryan hoped to use backing for Say Yes as a stepping stone of a mayoral campaign.

Miner, Ryan, and other sympathetic council members quietly considered ways in which the city could provide financial backing to Say Yes. They decided to propose that the city allocate $1 million from its reserve fund, a monumental commitment in a town scrounging for revenues. They put few restrictions on how Say Yes could spend the money, Carey having won their confidence as a reliable partner. Miner and Ryan invited Mayor Driscoll, a lame-duck who had not played a major role in the discussions with Say Yes, to join them in signaling endorsement of the program. He agreed.

The city reached into its dwindling fund balances to aid Say Yes. This remarkable act of generosity, which has continued through the years, has come during a period when the City of Syracuse’s revenues have often trailed its budgetary needs. The support has been a testament not only to the fine job that Say Yes did in making its case, but also to a deep desire to fuel the school system as an engine for economic development. The city went on to provide $1.125 million in 2010, $1 million in 2011, $1.23 million in 2012, and will give $1.75 million in 2013.

“It was unprecedented for city leadership to take $1 million from our reserves to give to Say Yes, a still fledgling program,” Miner said of the commitment. “We had to horse trade with other members of Council to do it.” Miner explained that the possibilities that she saw in Say Yes persuaded her of how essential it was for the program to “find one or two go-to people and to romance them.” She continued: “There have been other promises in the past and the people ask why this is any different. . . There is a lot of credibility to Say Yes. The foundations are involved and the chancellor [of Syracuse University] says it’s one of her priorities. She’s the 800-pound gorilla in this. Any mayor of any city has to talk about schools because they are at the root of everything.” Mayor Driscoll firmed up support for Say Yes throughout the remaining months of his term.
In Stephanie Miner, Say Yes found the ideal governmental partner—an up-and-coming politician with the hard-headed practicality of the former labor lawyer that she was and the heart of a do-gooder. Miner had wanted to do something for Syracuse’s troubled public schools for a long time as she watched ideas for educational improvement come and go. “I could list 10 education issues that have been the flavor of the month and then nothing happened with them,” she said. She apparently tasted something different in Say Yes. “For my first six years on council,” she said, “the only answer I heard for education’s problems was ‘more money.’ This was the first time that I saw a solution. My colleagues and I helped champion it.” Miner’s support and enthusiasm did not flag after she became mayor in 2010.

The County

Say Yes discovered another staunch friend in Joanne M. (Joanie) Mahoney, the Onondaga County Executive since January 2008 and a member of the Syracuse Common Council before that. She backed Say Yes when she was still a candidate for the position she now holds and before the program’s launch. “I’ve been a supporter since first I heard about it,” said Mahoney. “I saw the potential for education and, secondly, for economic development.” Say Yes, in effect, gave Mahoney the opportunity to do what she wanted to do anyway: help the Syracuse public schools. “The county should be more supportive of the city’s school kids,” she said. “If we don’t support them when they are young, they will be on the rolls forever.”

Mahoney presents her backing for Say Yes as a way to save money in the long run for the taxpayers of the county, which is much whiter and more affluent than Syracuse. A better school system in the city, according to this reasoning, will produce adults less likely to need public assistance, adults who can participate in and contribute to the local economy. Furthermore, if Syracuse becomes a more attractive place to live because of its public schools, then the county will spend less to support an infrastructure of sewers, roads, and services for people moving out of the city and into the far reaches of the county. “It is in our interest to bring people back to the core,” Mahoney said of the county legislature which her party, the Republicans, dominate by an 11 to 8 margin.

The county’s first funds for Say Yes, $550,000, came from a $7 million settlement of a law suit under the federal Clean Water Act over the pollution of Lake Onondaga and its tributaries. Based on societal considerations involved in the suit, residents of the affected Harbor Brook neighborhood asked that a portion of the money be invested in Say Yes’s endowment for the college scholarship program. The county also re-directed two state grants, one for $1.3 million and the other for $700,000, to Say Yes.

The county, not the city, is the main social service provider for schoolchildren in Syracuse. The emphasis by Say Yes on families and the social emotional development of youngsters is a comfortable fit with the county’s approach to social services. “The school district has the kids and the county has the resources,” said Ann Rooney, the deputy county executive for human services and a former city budget director.

The county demonstrated its involvement in social services for students, which existed on a more limited scale before the arrival of Say Yes, in such programs as one to help enroll eligible youngsters in subsidized health insurance programs. When it became clear during Say Yes’s second year in Syracuse that many eligible students did not receive the insurance, Say Yes organized the school district and the county to work together to help families through the application process. That collaboration led to 91 percent of eligible students at 16 schools getting services through either school-based or community-based health clinics, an illustration of Say Yes’s ability to help agencies overcome boundaries.

Another program provides referrals for mental health counseling to students in the city’s high schools. The counselors, formerly county employees, were eventually replaced by contract counselors from community-based organizations. The county picked up almost $700,000 of the cost and Say Yes paid a smaller share. This means that school principals may now supervise the counselors. Moreover, the work schedules of the counselors can be aligned with school schedules, which wasn’t possible with county employees.

The partnership between the county government and the school district that Say Yes facilitated is a model for delivering social services in ways that bridge divisions of the sort that exist in many places. Typically, county governments carry out activities separately from anything that the school system might do. Say Yes, with its emphasis on the well-being of children so that they have the wherewithal for success, blurred such distinctions. The county’s commissioner of public health and mental health, for instance, chairs the Say Yes health and wellness task force.
The State

An organization wanting to enlist the backing of elected officials needs muscle to push doors open to make the pitch. Carey, the daughter-in-law of a former New York governor, had family connections that eased the way to the state's political decision-makers. Once she presented the case for Say Yes to then Governor Spitzer's aides, they helped her gain access to legislative leaders. Carey described a replicable model to them. Her words proved prophetic in that Say Yes began in 2012 to pursue in Buffalo what it had begun in Syracuse.

Say Yes took two routes into the New York Legislature, using contacts made through the governor's staff and cultivating members of the Assembly and the Senate from the Syracuse area. William B. Magnarelli, one such Assemblyman, was not someone to whom Say Yes initially reached out, although it probably should have. He learned of Say Yes through the media when he heard of the scholarship program. He considered the news "stunning." By coincidence, he soon thereafter got a phone call from Syracuse University inviting him to meet Mary Anne Carey.

Magnarelli, a lawyer, went to the meeting with a degree of skepticism. He had encountered various ill-fated programs over the years that claimed to be able to improve the city's schools. He came out of this meeting, though, thinking that Say Yes would bring in resources and that the organization would carefully examine what works and what doesn't. "It was clear to me," he recalled, "that this was a very responsible program that would document and answer for what it was doing. This was a major difference with previous programs—people from the outside would tell us if it was working."

Say Yes asked him to be a point person in establishing a free-tuition program at the State University of New York and the City University of New York for Syracuse high school graduates. Magnarelli and other supporters rounded up a dozen and a half sponcers for a bill to do just that. He found resistance, though, from colleagues—including the Assembly speaker—who wondered why the body should support such a plan for Syracuse when a similar idea was not advanced for other constituents. It wasn't just legislators who had such reservations. Magnarelli's own brother, who lives just outside the city, had asked him: "What about North Syracuse?"

Say Yes's backers emphasized the economic development aspects of the bill to lawmakers. They maintained that young people who received the benefits of subsidized higher education would use their learning to contribute to the city's business and industry. While the legislature could not ultimately agree to support scholarships for the City of Syracuse, the state did agree to provide financial support to Say Yes. The legislature first gave Say Yes a grant of $1 million and then a grant of $350,000, indicating that success in Syracuse could lead to the creation of similar programs elsewhere in the state.

Later, Governor Andrew Cuomo commended plans submitted by groups in both central and western New York State for the inclusion of Say Yes as a driver of long-term academic and economic development outcomes. Efforts are now under way in Buffalo to include Say Yes as a strategic initiative aligned with the core goal of workforce readiness in the Cuomo Buffalo Billion strategy.

The Federal Government

In the fall of 2008, once there was an operating program to talk about, Say Yes contacted members of the congressional delegation from central New York, the state's two U.S. senators, and administration officials in Washington. Arne Duncan, the U.S. Secretary of Education, and Vice President Biden, as mentioned earlier, got talking points to praise Say Yes during visits to Syracuse. U.S. Senator Kirsten E. Gillibrand presided at a Say Yes event. Say Yes also met with federal urban affairs specialists, once again emphasizing that the venture was in essence an attempt to trigger economic revitalization.

Say Yes continues to hope that Washington will recognize its work in Syracuse and Buffalo as demonstration models for projects in America's small- and medium-size, post-industrial cities. The new Promise Neighborhoods program of the U.S. Department of Education could be a conduit for funding Say Yes over the long haul. "We have a foot in the door," said Carey, who hopes eventually for a grant in the $15-million range per city as an incentive to selected cities committed to the goal of postsecondary completion for all students.

She also wants to see a transparent process implemented to provide comprehensive supports in behalf of that goal. The grant, as Carey sees it, would inspire matching funds for scholarships. The money would also be used to develop the data systems and collaborative infrastructure to sustain cooperation between levels of government and the school district, a crucial step for economic renewal.

In the meantime, the program received $400,000 from Congress through an earmark grant. But the recession mostly thwarted Say Yes's hopes for further earmarks and for other immediate funding from the federal government. In 2012, though, there was reason to believe that the Syracuse City School District would eventually benefit from Washington's Race to the Top grant to New York State.
Paying the Bills

Say Yes envisioned Syracuse as a model to show the possibilities of agencies working together at various levels to drive large-scale improvement in a school system. It is a model that reaches beyond government to enlist community-based organizations, business, philanthropy, and the entire private sector. No longer, under this approach, do the schools stand alone, cut off from entities that, ideally, could emerge from their own isolation to act in concert with the district to leverage resources for students. Furthermore, the model ultimately boosts the fortunes of the city itself.

From the start, Say Yes knew it wanted a program that would eventually sustain itself and which the school system—with the support of its community—could institutionalize so as to outlast the midwives who brought it into the world.

Much of the money spent for expenses outside the school system could, with a different mindset, be shifted to ease Say Yes to the border of the picture and relieve the district of some of its financial burdens. The county government in Onondaga County, among other agencies, quickly recognized these possibilities. And so it was, for example, that with just a little ingenuity county expenditures for mental health were harnessed to the needs of the Syracuse school district’s children and their families.

This move and others like it should be seen as simply a start in building a collaborative model. Schools employ nurses, but so do county governments. Schools employ security personnel, but so do police departments. Schools remove trash and maintain grounds, but so do cities. Schools fund after-school and summer programs for students, but so do philanthropies. Say Yes sought to get people to consider more creative ways of supporting education.

And so it is that in leveraging more funds to hire mental health counselors for high school students through an organization known as Contact Community Services, Say Yes pays 38 percent of the cost and the county government covers the other 62 percent with funds from New York State’s Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services. This is the pattern in the fiscal year 2012 budget as Say Yes tries to get local entities in Syracuse to take on an increasing portion of the expenses for services to schoolchildren.

Say Yes’s fiscal year 2012 budget, for instance, allocates $830,308 to pay the site facilitators—formerly known as site directors—at the individual schools. Huntington Family Centers provides the personnel and a contract with Onondaga County’s Department of Social Services calls for that agency to pay $642,613 of the cost. Say Yes bears the remainder of the expense, using its own funds and grant money it receives through a Promise Zone grant from the State of New York.

Under a similar arrangement, Syracuse University provides counselors for the summer program in the schools, with the county’s Department of Social Services paying the bulk of the $556,913 expense and Say Yes covering the remainder. In total, Say Yes is paying $1,188,803 in matching funds during 2012 to comply with various contracts with the Department of Social Services.

Say Yes, holding to its goal of sustainability and striving to get the community to assume more fiscal responsibility, has covered a decreasing percentage of the costs since 2008, when it provided all $1,754,465 of the revenues. In 2011, Say Yes was the source of $6,739,793 of the $17,473,858 in program revenues. Amounts of more than a million dollars each came from the school district’s general fund, the county, the federal government, and the city. The program has received more than $47 million in operating funds from the time it started in 2008 through 2012, including $17,963,297 from Say Yes, Inc. Skillful leveraging has garnered substantial revenues over the years from the Syracuse City School District, Onondaga County, federal grants, the City of Syracuse, and the State of New York.
Issues of cost were paramount as Say Yes mounted the program. Increases in state aid scheduled for Syracuse to receive over a four-year phase-in period as a result of New York State’s Campaign for Fiscal Equity case amounted to approximately $3,500 per student. Coincidentally, Say Yes projected the same cost per child for its program. The state and Say Yes were clearly reading from the same page.

Say Yes assumed the extra costs initially and proceeded on the premise that the portion of added expense taken on by the school district and its allies would gradually increase by 20 percent annually for five years starting in 2009-10—so that by 2013-14 the district, using the state’s Fiscal Equity funds and money from other sources, would cover the full cost of the enhancements introduced by Say Yes. In the meantime, Say Yes set out to raise the money needed to plug the gap while the state’s contribution mounted.

The recession intruded on these plans, interrupting the state’s anticipated funding levels after the second year of the program. This led the district to implement cutbacks of various kinds and to borrow against future budgets. Say Yes hired Education Resource Strategies to give advice for balancing the budget in 2011-12, focusing specifically on the instructional core and strategies to right-size an overstaffed and under-programmed district.

Most funding for Syracuse’s public schools comes to the city from New York State, which is mired in its own perilous fiscal difficulties. Say Yes hoped nevertheless that the program will remain on track. Say Yes projected the cost of each aspect of the program—outlays for summer school, for instance, would grow from $738,003 to $3,939,592—and what it would mean in 2013-14.

Hardship has left the school system struggling to continue its investment in the program. The district even cut student assistance counselors from its staff and depended on Say Yes and its partners to fill the void. In 2012, budgetary reductions led to a loss of employees in the schools and in the administration. The portion of the budget devoted to core instruction declined from 56.8 percent to 54.5 percent. The school system’s 2012-13 general fund budget totals $359,391,575 million, which works out to $18,224 per pupil, an increase of 7.57 percent over the previous budget, according to figures posted at the SCSD website.

After an exhaustive review of the system’s budget, Schoolhouse Partners, a consultant engaged by Say Yes, recommended that strategic reallocations could achieve further savings. For example, eliminating high school study halls, which are duty periods for teachers, and moving students into classes and assigning one more class to each teacher could mean a reallocation of some $2 to $3 million. The consultant also proposed combining smaller, less cost-effective high school classes in the same subject. Other expenditures, as well, appeared to Schoolhouse to be poorly planned. Spending on clerical staff, for instance, varied from .45 percent to 4.43 percent in the budgets of individual schools. Uneven spending patterns were reflected in average per student expenditures, which varied from $8,827 in the Henninger quadrant to more than $12,600 percent in the Fowler and Nottingham quadrants.

This is a school system in which a study commissioned by Say Yes revealed that the information technology department had 97 employees and received additional services from another seven people listed on the city’s payroll. This was an unusually large IT staff for a district the size of Syracuse. The study said that eliminating and combining positions and turning over some work to vendors could save money. Furthermore, a surplus of managers in IT created a ratio of one per 5.3 staff members, a number that could easily be raised to one per 8 staff members by cutting some managerial positions, according to Schoolhouse Partners.

The audits commissioned by Say Yes pointed the school system in a more viable direction. Gradually, the system has adopted recommendations coming out of these audits and, while financial pressures remain enormous, agencies in Syracuse have been learning that the synergy resulting from collaboration gives promise of better days ahead.
Introducing Academic Improvements in a Time of Scarcity

The following section summarizes an upcoming report that Michael A. Rebell, executive director of the Campaign for Educational Equity, and Professor of Law and Educational Practice at Teachers College, Columbia University, prepared for Say Yes to Education. This identifies how the Syracuse Public Schools produced significant internal cost savings while launching ambitious efforts to bolster services for students and strengthen its instructional program.

The Syracuse City School District at the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year was faced with a critical decision: could they initiate needed instructional improvements and maintain and continue the scheduled expansion of the full range of comprehensive services they had implemented in the schools despite a massive $35 million budget gap. Determined not to abandon or defer the pioneering urban reform program they had begun, Say Yes and school district leadership committed themselves to continue implementation of the full Say Yes program and necessary instructional improvements by undertaking a thorough-going cost efficiency and cost-effectiveness program that might allow them to meet the students' extensive needs with a substantially reduced budget.

Say Yes brought in Education Resource Strategies (ERS), a leading national nonprofit consulting firm that specializes in analyzing school district spending and promoting cost effectiveness, to help shape its program and budget for 2011-2012. Working with community leaders, ERS recommended and the district undertook a series of significant cost savings efforts, including:

- $7.5-million in savings on special education expenses in 2011-2012 by better monitoring special education referrals and lowering referral rate to closer to national norms, reducing the number of special education teaching assistants by 26 percent, and reducing the number of special education teachers, physical/occupational therapists, and speech pathologists.
- $4-million in savings from reducing the number of teaching assistants to similar proportions to that of comparison school districts.
- Reducing the number of psychologists and social workers by 30 percent and custodial services by 5 percent, and security services by 46 percent to keep the schools in line with comparison districts.

Additional state cuts for the 2011-2012 school year meant that substantial additional staff reductions also had to be taken that led to an 8 percent cut in the teaching force as well as reduction in art, music, and physical education programs, instructional coaches, and administrators and supervisors. The number of positions eliminated would have been substantially higher if administrators had not agreed to accept a wage freeze and the teachers’ union had not acquiesced in reducing a scheduled pay raise.

The next year, faced with continuing constraints on state aid, Say Yes commissioned Schoolhouse Partners, a national consulting group, to undertake a more forward-looking strategic budget analysis and recommend additional cost efficiency and cost effectiveness changes. The study was aimed to allow the district to maintain necessary service levels and also to begin to phase-in priority instructional improvements that the Superintendent considered essential to provide students a meaningful opportunity to meet the more rigorous state proficiency and graduation standards, and implement a new teacher evaluation system, despite continuing state funding constraints.

The instructional improvements proposed by Cross & Joftus and Collier Education Consulting, would require about $44 million in additional spending over the next few years. Their recommendations focused on:

- Introducing curriculum alignment to Regents standards and provide literacy coaches in every building ($11.5 million)
- Implementing the new state-mandated APPR evaluation system, upgrading the capacity of the human resources department to improve the teacher recruitment and retention processes, revamping current approaches to professional development and teacher mentoring, and creating a new innovation zone for low performing students ($21 million)
- Introducing social-emotional and supplemental support services consistent with the Say Yes comprehensive services program ($11.8 million)

Schoolhouse Partners found that the district could obtain about $15 million from efficiencies and re-allocations in present spending in a number of key areas. The district quickly acted upon their recommendations by re-organizing high school teacher assignments to reduce duty periods and increase instructional periods, resulting in increased instructional capacity equivalent to the hiring of 28 new teachers; eliminating certain teaching assistant assignments, standardizing the assignment of clerical personnel to schools and departments, re-organizing the instructional technology department, and re-allocating approximately $4-million in curriculum department expenditures.

Additional savings were made by eliminating 46 teaching positions, thereby pushing class sizes up to contractual maximums, dropping further custodial and clerical positions and closing one elementary school. Despite all of these efforts, mandatory increases in health and pension costs, debt service and other unavoidable increases left the district with a $17.4 million funding gap for 2012-2013.

Determined to move forward with both the critical instructional improvements and implementation of the Say Yes program the district decided to take advantage of legislation that allows school districts to borrow against their next year’s state aid. Syracuse had never exercised this option in the past. The only available alternative course, eliminating an additional 350 positions, would have totally devastated the district’s instructional program. The district is banking on a lessening of costly state mandates and/or increases in state aid to continue its progress into the future.

Say Yes Syracuse’s cost efficiency and cost effectiveness initiatives have tempered the impact of the major cuts in state aid that the district has experienced in recent years. Substantially adopting the restructuring and cost savings plans developed by ERS and Schoolhouse Partners, the district has eliminated a large number of nonessential positions, revamped the special education referral process, and strengthened many of its programmatic structures. Guided by the other expert consultant recommendations, Syracuse has been able to promote necessary instructional improvements, maintain the critical Say Yes comprehensive urban reform programs, begin to implement properly the rigorous common core standards and substantially improve teacher effectiveness.
In the Classroom

After four years, the part of the structure most in need of shoring up remained teaching and learning. Most aspects of instruction were still essentially the same as what Say Yes encountered when it arrived, though signs of change appeared. Ultimately, it falls to the school system, not Say Yes, to address fundamental issues affecting the classroom. “Say Yes is a program and it’s not the district,” said Nader Maroun, education committee chairman of the Common Council, which must approve the system’s over all budget. “The district needs to take the leadership role.”

When schoolhouse doors opened in the fall of 2011, Sharon Contreras, the new superintendent, recognized the critical need for a rigorous curriculum, better professional development, appropriate instructional technology, and a comprehensive system of assessment. “Teachers are doing the best job that they can, but they don’t have the tools,” she said. “We are fully committed to putting the elements in place. In time, we will see whole-system transformation, but not until the academic piece is better designed and implemented.”

Kevin Ahern of the teacher union acknowledged that “entrenched structures” were obstacles to reform. “This is not a nimble system and it is not set up for quick change,” he said. “Some things have not changed as a result of Say Yes. We find ourselves year after year with inadequate funding from the state [$290 million of the school district’s revenues originate with New York State]. Every year, we struggle mightily. We don’t have a systematic goal for utilizing resources. We have built a system around grant money.”

Improvement at schools everywhere often depends on teachers receiving the staff development required to carry out certain tasks. In Syracuse, the school system has a history of not providing educators with adequate training. The need for staff development was illustrated by the fact that some teachers with electronic white boards in their classrooms did not use them as intended because they had not been prepared to do so.

No coherent strategy existed to help educators grow to their full potential. Interviews by Cross & Joftus, another consultant, found a perception among district educators that staff development was not aligned to any larger strategy of teaching and learning. Contreras, as one of her first acts, ferreted out extra money in the budget for staff development and identified four days during which teachers would start getting at least some of the kind of training lacking in the past.

She deplored the district’s shortcomings at one of her first school board meetings as superintendent, calling the situation “unacceptable.” She said the district had to be accountable for producing better outcomes. A reporter approached her after the meeting, telling Contreras that she had never before heard anything like this in Syracuse—a declaration from a top school official that the district was supposed to ensure that students learned.

The new superintendent showed her determination by boldly taking responsibility publicly for student achievement. She said that poverty would no longer be an excuse for low scores and declared that students in Syracuse could learn on the level of peers in surrounding suburbs. She went on a local radio program to respond to critics who took exception when Contreras said poverty and dysfunction could not be excuses for low achievement.

The release of state assessment results in the fall of 2011 underscored the weakness of the academic program. Three out of four elementary pupils in Syracuse scored at the two lowest of four possible levels in English language arts. The numbers were slightly better in mathematics. Experience around the country shows students unlikely to achieve on grade level in secondary school if they trail badly in elementary school. The statistics led some people to pronounce Say Yes a failure. This attitude reflected an unrealistic feeling in some sectors that the mere presence of Say Yes would automatically improve test scores and a lack of understanding that the school system had to manage its own destiny.
Say Yes envisioned six primary roles for the Syracuse schools so far as the classroom was concerned:

- Monitoring individual student progress
- Fostering teacher/staff ownership of the school improvement process
- Customizing support systems for individual students
- Extending learning time
- Conducting evidence-based academic planning and improvement
- Setting expected outcomes

It is not as if there was no progress during the early years of Say Yes’s involvement. The number of high school students dropping out, being incarcerated, or transferring decreased from 505 in 2009 to 281 in 2010. Sometimes progress was uneven, as in algebra. Ninth grade passing rates in algebra, which were 39.6 percent in 2008-09, dropped to 37.5 percent in 2009-10, rose to 47.7 percent in 2010-11, and fell back to 42.4 percent in 2011-12. Graduation rates inched up from 45.2 percent in 2009, to 45.9 percent in 2010, to 48.4 percent in 2011. The 2011 rate represented those who entered ninth grade in 2007 and ended up getting diplomas with their class in June four years later.

Progress in achievement was helped by the short-term impact of such initiatives as Talent Development, International Baccalaureate, increased Advanced Placement offerings, the High School Planning Toolkit, more counselors, after-school tutoring, and extended learning time.

**Acting to Improve the Situation**

To instill instant momentum and foster a can-do culture right from the start, Contreras, assisted by a Say Yes consultant, began her tenure by requesting that teams at individual schools and district-wide teams carry out Rapid Results projects over her first 100 days. Mostly aimed at increasing educational outcomes, these projects were designed to generate insights into longer-term goals.

Contreras also announced at the outset of her superintendency that she would report to the community after 100 days in the post. She held back little when December 2011 came around. Based on many meetings, visits to more than 200 classrooms, and the findings of consultants retained by Say Yes, she said that the school system was unclear in its priorities, lacked curricular alignment from grade to grade, gave too little attention to planning, and was inconsistent in programming for its growing population of English language learners. It all added up, she said, to a district in which spending and organization did not regard the needs of students as paramount.

Like a general assuming leadership of an army already in the field, Contreras wasted no time in launching major initiatives to address deficiencies. The district began to align the curriculum with the state’s core standards in English and mathematics, started to create a staff development plan for its educators, launched a year-long study of academic rigor, laid plans for Reading Academies for teachers, and started to design a compensation system to take cognizance of student outcomes and professional growth.

In the summer of 2012, preceding her second full year on the job, Contreras unveiled a five-year strategic plan, “Great Expectations,” that she developed around five goals:

1) To provide all students with equitable access to rigorous curriculum with aligned instructional materials and assessments in all subjects at all grade levels

2) To recruit, develop, support, and retain effective teachers and school leaders

3) To develop infrastructure to support student success

4) To build a district culture based on high expectations, respect, and co-accountability for performance that recognizes and rewards excellence at all levels of the organization

5) To communicate effectively with all district stakeholders

The report sets a timeline for implementing features meant to achieve each goal. It also identifies measures of progress and promises to report annually on student outcomes. “Lack of improvement,” the report said, “would indicate the need for better execution, refined processes, or a new strategy.”

Paul G. Tremont, president SRC Corporation, a major company in the city and one of the most important financial supporters for Say Yes in Syracuse, was willing to wait for results in the classroom. “I’m not yet concerned,” he said midway through the 2011-12 school year. “It takes time. In SRC, when we start a strategic plan, the results are three, four, five, six years out. Math and English scores can’t be impacted in a year or two.”
Student Monitoring

Getting on track and staying on track means the equivalent of painstakingly building a proper rail bed and ensuring that the trains remain in good repair so that they may maintain the right speed. Say Yes tries to leave little to chance. Thus, the organization proposes that the district use an assessment system to monitor student progress.

The American Institutes for Research, a key partner to Say Yes, assembled indicators and benchmarks in a host of areas against which to measure youngsters as they move through the grades. These are grouped under four domains—health, social, academic, and background factors, which includes such areas as family and community.

Each domain looks at a host of areas. For example, the social domain includes social capital, cultural capital, social emotional learning, behavior, citizenship, peers, and home factors. Depending on the category, the benchmarks may remain the same as a student advances through the grades or may differ at various grade levels. The indicators and benchmarks proposed for measuring student progress in Syracuse are research-based and formulated from a careful reading of the literature pertaining to what it takes for students to thrive. They appear in a 72-page report in which one-third of the pages list articles and books that formed the basis for the monitoring system.iii

But educational innovations are of little value without implementation. Furthermore, any use of a monitoring system has to show fidelity to the carefully written recipe book. Otherwise, the stew lacks flavor and nutrients. Somehow, during Say Yes’s first four years in Syracuse, the book remained on the shelf, largely serving no greater purpose than a dusty encyclopedia that nobody consults.

School system officials were either too busy or not sufficiently committed to the idea of monitoring and Say Yes officials did not do enough to prod the district to incorporate this pivotal part of the Say Yes mission into the instructional program. The bottom line was that Syracuse students probably didn’t make as much academic progress as they should have during this period. Say Yes officials learned a big-time lesson here and were not apt to make the same mistake in Buffalo or anywhere else that they took their program.

Special Education

Special education is a pivotal area that Syracuse has to address if it hopes to become “the most improved urban school district in America,” as Contreras describes her vision. With one of every five students classified for special education—a level that the superintendent called “excessive,” the school system couldn’t make the sort of progress that it desires without changes in this area.

Challenges revolve around not only the high number of youngsters classified as disabled and the expense of the program but the questionable quality of the instruction they receive. A report, paid for by Say Yes, cited shortcomings specific to special education. These included a lack of effective and sustained implementation strategies, limited staff development opportunities, inadequate staffing levels, and poor student attendance levels. Most significantly, the district has “high rates of referral to and eligibility for special education.”

On the positive side, the same report identified some existing initiatives and practices that Contreras could build upon. Among these are a strong leadership team for early childhood programs, an emergent consultant teacher model to help with inclusion, strides in controlling special education costs, and fiscal and personnel support for implementing a federal program known as Positive Behavior Intervention and Support.iv

The administration took steps in 2011-12 to remedy the heavy referral rate for special education. The school board was told that the district would institute a system of re-evaluation reviews on referrals and that there would be more professional development for staff involved in formulating individualized education plans for disabled children. By the end of the school year, the district had reduced the number of children receiving special education services by 8 percent from where it had been three years earlier.

The struggle that the school system faces can be seen in the fact that some parents oppose efforts to reduce referrals into the program. These parents apparently believe that such a move represents an attempt to deny their children needed services. On the other hand, those familiar with the self-contained classes in which some disabled students spend most of their day contend that expectations are so low that the children cover only a portion of the required curriculum, depriving them of the background to succeed on state tests.
## Rigor at the High School Level

Say Yes recognized that Syracuse needs greater rigor throughout the grades in order to turn out more graduates prepared to take full advantage of the tuition scholarships. Ultimately, this will depend on strengthening the curriculum, providing better instruction, and measuring student assessment.

One step toward ratcheting up expectations is the International Baccalaureate (IB) program introduced in 2005 at Corcoran High School. IB enrolls 976,000 students in 141 countries and offers courses in six subject areas that lead to final examinations and an extended written essay. Corcoran also began a pre-IB program for ninth and tenth graders to prepare them for the demands of the diploma program. In 2011, a total of 685 of the high school's students took at least one of the courses associated with the program. About three or four dozen juniors and seniors actively pursue the IB diploma, which about a dozen attain each year.

IB bolstered the academic culture in the school. Brian Nolan, the former principal who brought the program to Corcoran and became the district's director of high schools, said teachers told him that the staff development to provide IB instruction was the best that they had ever had. It imbued them with a sense of collegiality. The program also raised expectations for teachers, who "knew that they had to deliver," according to Nolan and for students, who wanted to rise to the challenge of the courses.

Other possible routes to rigor are the Early College programs at Nottingham High School and at ITC, the district-wide, technology-oriented high school. Early College, a nationwide approach that provides a combination of courses at the high school and college levels, gives students an early introduction to higher education and tries to lift their aspirations by putting them on a college campus part of the school day.

The pursuit of better preparation takes many forms in Syracuse. Corcoran and Henninger high schools implemented study tables for student-athletes that met for 40 minutes daily at the end of the regular school day. The coaching staff hoped that Say Yes would provide tutors, but when this assistance did not materialize the coaches themselves took on the tutoring and delayed the start of practice for athletes whose sports were in season.

When Say Yes arrived in Syracuse, it drove change in a school system in which few seemed to have any idea of how to make change occur. With the passage of time and the hiring of a highly regarded superintendent, the moment was at hand for Say Yes to adapt itself to a new role as a facilitator of change and let Sharon Contreras take over the driver's seat, as she appeared more than willing to do.

### BOX 4. Say Yes Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Previous Say Yes programs Begin in Philadelphia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Planning begins to embark on whole-district reform in a place to be identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Due diligence criteria applied to potential cities in NY State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>Planning for implementation in Syracuse Coalition-building starts Financial partners identified and solicited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 (Spring, Summer)</td>
<td>Institutions recruited to participate in Say Yes Higher Education Compact Staff assembled for Say Yes to Education in Syracuse School district signs contract with teachers who incorporate aspects of Say Yes plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 (Fall)</td>
<td>Implementation of program begins in grades K-3 in schools in first of four quadrants of Syracuse City School District Research begins to analyze the operations of individual schools (“gap analysis”) and their ability to meet academic and social-health needs of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 (Fall)</td>
<td>Implementation of program begins in grades K-3 in a second quadrant and moves up through grade 4 in first quadrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 (Fall)</td>
<td>Implementation begins in grades K-3 in the third quadrant and moves up through grade 4 in the second quadrant and grade 5 in the first quadrant A collaboration between Say Yes and Cascade Consulting is selected to facilitate SCSD superintendent search Education Resource Strategies continues a review of SCSD resources Schaffer Consulting continues “work out” using ERS data to inform development of SCSD budget proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 (Spring)</td>
<td>Sharon Contreras selected as SCSD superintendent Operating director hired to provide local leadership and reduce dependence on Say Yes national leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 (Fall)</td>
<td>Implementation begins in grades K-3 in the fourth quadrant and moves up a grade in each of three earlier quadrants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Unions

Any school system with a collective bargaining contract that embarks on a mission of educational improvement flirts with failure if it does not bring unions into the discussion as full partners early on. Say Yes’s recognition of the vital role of the teacher union was critical to the reform effort. Teachers in Syracuse realized, by and large, that it was in their interest to get better at what they did in order to offer the best possible instruction.

A promising sign in this regard was the contract that the school system signed with the Syracuse Teachers Association in 2008. The stars were in alignment, illuminating the first steps along the path toward much needed change and helping the then superintendent, Dan Lowengard, meld his goals with those of Say Yes. The agreement broke new ground with an appendix to the contract, creating what was called an Urban Teacher Calendar, an unofficial extension of the school year into the summer.

An extra 20 days, running five hours a day through July, gave students more time for instruction. A team of teacher-leaders in each elementary school tailored a summer program to meet the needs of both students and teachers. Teachers new to the district had to participate and veteran teachers participated voluntarily—with the consent of their principals—by making a five-year commitment to the program. The added pay for the extra 100 hours reached more than $4,400 in the summer of 2012.

The union also consented in a memorandum to add 30 minutes to the workday of elementary teachers during the regular school year, freeing up time for collaboration and joint planning. Various innovations in the contract, while not explicitly dictated by Say Yes, were inspired by the group’s efforts. “A culture of self-improvement is hard to create, but essential,” Lowengard said. “Teachers have to start to meet the needs that they feel they are not equipped to do. We’ve built the structure, but have yet to build the climate. Effective practice can’t be optional. It has to exist in every single classroom.”

Even with concessions calling for teachers to put in more time, the district has more progress to make. School hours in the high schools run from 7:50 a.m. to 2:05 p.m., a total of six hours and 15 minutes per day, and the school day consists of six hours in elementary schools. These are relatively short days by comparison with some systems. It is fine for Syracuse to extend learning into the summer, but it appears that the
district would do well to contract with the unions for a longer basic school day and school year, objectives that Superintendent Contreras has been discussing with the teacher union.

Recognizing the fiscal pressures on the school district at a time that it was struggling to make unprecedented progress, the union agreed to reopen its contract in 2011 and let the school board reduce a scheduled 4 percent increase for 2011-12 to 2.25 percent. In return, the board extended the contract through June 2014 with two percent increases in the final two years.

Thus, Contreras inherited a more manageable fiscal situation to take her through her first three years as superintendent and the teachers got the security of guaranteed growth in their salaries no matter how much the economy continued to falter. In 2013-14, the starting salary will be $42,052 for a teacher with a bachelor's degree and no advanced credits. Salaries will range from $71,430 to $76,830 for teachers with 25 years of experience and varying amounts of advanced credits.

Members of the teacher union and others in Syracuse recognize that students desperately need a sturdier foundation for learning to increase their chances for success in the upper grades. The district stepped up its focus on early learning. Of the 1,600 pupils who entered kindergarten one recent fall, 1,200 had attended either half-day or full-day pre-kindergarten. Say Yes and the school district not only aim to see all three- and four-year-olds in pre-kindergarten, but want those classes to be of a full day's duration. Say Yes got the city to contribute $250,000 toward the expansion of pre-kindergarten, which already served children with disabilities, as federal law mandates. The number attending full-day pre-kindergarten rose from 300 to 400 in a single year and the district sought to have 1,000 children in full-day classes within three years.

The Syracuse Teachers Association is affiliated with both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and both bought into the promise of Say Yes, welcoming an infusion of outside aid. Dennis Van Roekel, the NEA president, visited Syracuse during Say Yes's first year in the district. “I believe you will get results because the plan will change the system for every child in Syracuse,” he declared. “I want this to work because I want there to be a model for every child.”

Various representatives of the AFT and New York State United Teachers, its statewide organization, bestowed similar blessings on Say Yes. Randi Weingarten, the AFT president, said: “By working with the district, unions, higher education and local and state governments, Say Yes serves as a model for rethinking our approach to education and ensuring that every child has an opportunity for success. If we had more good programs like Say Yes, we'd have more children prepared to succeed in school, work, and life.”

What Say Yes can't readily control is the fact that teachers in Syracuse—like colleagues across the country—remember programs introduced to great fanfare only to fail or to be abandoned. So, like other reformers seeking the support of teachers, Say Yes encountered some degree of cynicism. “We will have these kids even if the program leaves,” said one teacher, invoking the permanence of the faculty, which—like the sturdy, venerable buildings in which they work—had endured many efforts to “save” the city’s public school system.

Say Yes has to constantly reassure people inside and outside the school system that its program and the improvements that it is fostering are in place for the long haul. Some parents worry that the college scholarships will dry up and that their children will not reap the benefits of the program. It is this very concern that Say Yes is addressing in building an endowment for the scholarships. Sharon Contreras has spoken of Say Yes being around for at least a generation.

The principals, members of a separate union, are the workhorses upon whose compliant shoulders the initiatives were introduced in each building. They received no commensurate increase in pay at the outset for the extra time they spent in their schools. They had to be instructional leaders; they had to make sure that staff members did the jobs expected of them. Some principals routinely found themselves working from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. under a more demanding regime. Possible staff development for principals and the extra demands placed on their time did not receive sufficient attention at the outset.
Governance

A local school board, as the district’s governing body, sets policies and oversees the budget. These functions go a long way toward determining possibilities for improvement. In the eyes of many, including some of its members, the school board in Syracuse was dysfunctional. It tended to immerse itself in a sea of minutia. It tried to micromanage.

Moreover, the school board did not have the confidence of the Common Council, the body that controls the allocation of funds to the school board. The difficulties with the Council can be appreciated in the context of a situation in which the public schools consume about two-thirds of the city’s property tax levy revenues. “How do you justify the portion spent on the schools without knowing what you are getting for your money?” asked Ryan McMahon, a member of City Council whose wife taught fifth grade in the system. Like most others on the nine-member body, he felt that the budget that the school board expected the Council to fund was opaque under the previous superintendent.

School board members were not among the leaders whose support Say Yes solicited early. Say Yes treated the board as a kind of junior partner, a tacit commentary on its perceived lack of clout. But the school board didn’t balk and adopted a resolution accepting the reform when Say Yes finally came calling. Say Yes’s role in the district became a topic in school board elections. Most board candidates praised the organization and promised to back its efforts. Bill Bullen, elected to the board in 2011, for example, said: “Say Yes shows us that it is smarter to work closer with juvenile justice, public health organizations, and family services . . . I agree with Sharon Contreras with her assessment that Say Yes is a partnership and irrespective of the support that Say Yes provides, if the school system is not providing the very best educational program the results or benefits of Say Yes won’t be realized.”

When Lowengard announced his retirement as superintendent, the school board commissioned Cascade Consulting Group to conduct a national search for his successor. The search produced a list of 16 semi-finalists, mostly recruited by Say Yes through its extensive connections and then vetted by Cascade. The board made the final selection.

Contreras impressed Council members and they entered 2012 with confidence in her ability and her willingness to engage them as partners. Richard Strong, a lawyer and a former school board president, thought Contreras was prepared to deal with the school system’s most pressing issues. “Part of the reason the superintendent was hired was to address teaching and learning,” he said. “I had three children go through the system recently. I know the struggles. This superintendent has identified the needs.”
REBUILDING COMMUNITIES: Education’s Central Role in Mobilizing Community Reform
Extended Time

Given the high rate of poverty in Syracuse and the fact that so many children enter school lagging behind their more advantaged peers, Say Yes—at the core of its program—sought the school system’s commitment to extend the school day and the school year, as well as an assurance of funding. The goal is to widen and deepen the experiences that youngsters have beyond the normal school day. Both the after-school and summer programs endeavor to inculcate cognitive enrichment and to yoke themselves to the curriculum.

A grant from The Wallace Foundation is designed to assist Say Yes in its efforts to extend time. It sets separate participation goals for students in elementary, middle, and high schools. For the last 20 years, some of the nation’s educators have urged schools to find more time for learning. The federal government sponsored a commission that in 1994 issued an early report on the topic, “Prisoners of Time.” Other groups released reports in subsequent years. Despite the flurry of interest, though, by 2011 only about 2,000 of the nation’s schools had added or were experimenting with school days at least 10 to 60 percent longer and school years of up to 30 days longer.

Say Yes launched an after-school program in six elementary schools for pupils in kindergarten through third grade in the first quadrant in December 2008, just months after it began operating in Syracuse. The program expanded as Say Yes reached into the other quadrants. A summer program for the same target group started in 2009. Say Yes provided transportation for students in both programs, a mundane but vital feature to encourage families to let children participate. Without access to buses, participation in extended learning time programs can languish. Some of the city’s school families, for example, could not attend a celebratory barbeque one year for lack of transportation. “The transportation piece is critical,” said Debra Schoening, supervising director of school improvement for the district.

After School

Syracuse’s after-school program runs for two hours each afternoon, Monday through Thursday in the elementary schools for all grade levels. Teachers devote the first hour to academics, extending the content subjects of the school day. Sometimes, teachers tutor children and other times they help with homework. Teachers are not required to remain for this portion of the day, but if they do, they receive extra pay. This is different from a formal extension of the school day and has the character of an add-on.

During the second hour, the program focuses on enrichment, offering everything from dance to art to music to creative writing. Students produce work about which they feel a sense of growth and achievement by, say, exhibiting it or making presentations. The program tries to follow a widely-used model originally employed for gifted children that seeks to develop children’s talents and creativity. Some regular teachers stay for the second hour, but many of those who lead the students during this time are teaching assistants and representatives of community-based organizations.

The building principal and the Say Yes site director oversee the after-school program, collaborating with representatives of the community-based organizations that are contracted to operate the second hour of the program. The after-school program is voluntary for students, who pay nothing to enroll. Somewhat more than half of the elementary school youngsters join. Teachers worry that some children who have the most to gain do not enroll. Say Yes pays for an extra bus run late in the afternoon for the participants.
**Summer**

The summer program for elementary pupils presents academics in the morning, preparing children for the classroom work that they will face in the fall. Regular teachers lead the sessions. The afternoon offers recreation and enrichment, featuring experiential learning. Undergraduates and graduate students from Syracuse University receive stipends to serve as counselors. Attendance during the summer has risen each year.

The morning portion of the program in the summer of 2012 had the feel—in the most positive sense—of the normal school year. No-nonsense teachers from the regular faculty met with students in classrooms, in which, until a few weeks earlier, the students had sat for regular classes. There were few concessions to the season. In one of the rooms, 14 students due to enter fifth grade in the fall practiced their reading. Elana Stroman, a teacher with an authoritative voice that projected to the far reaches of the classroom, asked the children to read to each other. A cacophony of voices filled the room as she directed them to see how many words they could read aloud in one minute, warning them: “Don’t just focus on how fast you read. I’ll be looking for comprehension.”

The program ran for six weeks when Say Yes started it in 2009 and was later shortened to four weeks to save money. Moreover, it has been consolidated into just a few schools instead of using the many neighborhood schools that had been sites for the program. The importance of continuing learning into the summer is seen in the fact that the average student loses about one month of academic knowledge and content between the end of one school year and the start of the next one. The losses are worse for low-income students. The right kind of summer program can help compensate for what experts call summer-learning loss.

Eventually, the district hopes to offer a program extending through most of the summer so that parents and students will regard it as a seamless extension of the school year. Unfortunately, few systems in the country have been able to do this. It usually takes a change in the teacher contract and larger financial outlays to do so. An element of the $4.2 million Wallace grant includes money to pilot, evaluate, and refine extended learning time. These efforts could, presumably, set the stage for a longer school year in Syracuse.
Social and Emotional Factors

Social and health needs tend to get overlooked in school reform. Say Yes, though, proceeds on the assumption that children do not readily learn when they are hungry, homeless, or living in dysfunctional settings. The climate for learning can be undermined by what occurs outside the school building.

A place like Syracuse’s Fowler High School, with its more than 1,100 students, illustrates just what is at stake in attempts to change outcomes. Up to half of the ninth graders disappeared by the middle of the 10th grade one recent year, dropping out for many reasons that became obstacles to getting educated. More than 85 students were pregnant or already mothers midway through the school year.

“Students come with needs we can’t always address in the classroom,” said Anne Marie Voutsinas, a former president of the Syracuse Teachers Association. Altogether, Say Yes, working with the school district, supports the services of social workers, mental health specialists, lawyers, and others whose intervention helps clear away barriers to learning and allows educators to focus as much as possible on instruction.

For example, families with ready access to legal assistance can, like a driver with a GPS device, better navigate the system. Thus, Say Yes helped establish seven legal clinics, situated mostly in schools. Lawyers who are volunteers steer parents of schoolchildren to nonprofit legal services and take on about 15 to 20 percent of the cases themselves on a pro bono basis when no referral is possible. The fact that many lawyers prefer to volunteer during the day and many clients want services in the evening complicates efforts. Thus, two of the clinics have evening hours.

Someone in each of the city’s larger law firms acts as a Say Yes coordinator, rounding up colleagues to volunteer for the clinics. The greatest demand for legal help by parents of schoolchildren involves family law—child custody, child support, child abuse, and divorce—and housing law, including tenant issues, substandard accommodations, mortgages, and foreclosures. The clinics struggle to get families to avail themselves of free legal services and to get parents, especially immigrants, to understand that the lawyers are their advocates, not law enforcement officials.
Putting Effective Resources Closer to Children

As recently as the early spring of 2010, interviews conducted on behalf of the Onondaga County Department of Mental Health, the school district, and Say Yes showed that despite a high level of commitment, there were not uniform district-wide systems to identify and support students in dire need. Also, the district had no behavioral-emotional crisis procedures, no integration of child-serving agencies with the schools, and often lacked policies for mental health providers working with schools.

The report, based on the interviews, went on to say that principals should better understand how to deal with high-needs students, and that teachers required better classroom management skills to handle disruptions. It found that Say Yes site directors had no clear-cut priorities in this regard. Also, it maintained that university interns in social work, psychology, and counseling needed more training and coordination in conjunction with placements in public schools. Access to care for students was also found wanting.

These findings provided a clarion call for action. Say Yes set a goal of situating resources closer to children and families so as to provide easier access to services. Each of the 19 elementary schools had a social worker.

The Promise Zone

New York State supports another initiative, the Promise Zone, with federal funds from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration that flow through the county and into the schools. The program puts mental health clinicians in the schools to provide children with counseling not available through school social workers. Say Yes promoted this approach, which aims to have mental health clinics in 25 of the 32 schools by 2013. Previously, a youngster had to travel to a distant site to receive such services.

Clinicians in schools function as part of a student support team that includes the Say Yes school support specialist, a social worker, a psychologist, and a building administrator. Teams meet to discuss the needs of individual youngsters. A team might decide, for instance, whether a child’s issue is truly a matter of mental health or the result of some occurrence in the family. That way, in a sort of triage approach, the district funnels scarce mental health services to students most in need of services.

A student’s mental health profoundly influences his or her learning, which can easily fall into a sinkhole of misconduct. The challenges in Syracuse’s secondary schools are particularly acute. Forty-eight percent of students at this level, compared with 18 percent in elementary schools, rate their schools as in need of improvement when Say Yes arrived and the organization arranged for a second social worker in each elementary school, striving toward a ratio of 250 pupils per social worker. The ratio was threatened by cutbacks, but Say Yes was able to get the jobs restored. The social workers have flexible schedules. If, say, a home visit is in order and no adult could see the social worker until 6 p.m., then the social worker goes to the home at that time and simply arrives at school later the next morning.

If it turns out that a family needs more regular home visits—something neither of the two social workers in the school can afford the time to do—one of them refers the case to Huntington Family Centers, which is paid through funding from the state. Huntington links families to community resources, advocates for children, and assists in developing effective relationships between school and home. Hillside Children’s Center is another agency that the school social workers may summon. Representatives from Hillside meet with students in small-group settings on a regular basis during the after-school program to provide academic advisement, to monitor progress, and to speak to students about completing their work in timely fashion.
interventions without great success. Say Yes school support specialists help facilitate these services throughout the school year. They also seek to extend the services, when possible, into the after-school and summer programs.

A favorable sign that something seems to be working to the benefit of both children and families is the fact that the Department of Social Services has found it necessary to place few youngsters into foster care and out-of-home care since the advent of Say Yes. There were no such placements during the first nine months of 2012.

Other Social Emotional Measures

There were already county-funded health clinics in a few of the public schools when Say Yes arrived and formulated plans to locate even more health clinics in each quadrant. More than 7,000 students were not enrolled to receive the insurance for health services and most were probably eligible for subsidized programs. As mentioned earlier, Say Yes coordinated efforts to identify and help them with a part-time facilitated enroller provided by the Salvation Army.

When a grant was about to expire, Say Yes devoted more than a half-hour at one of its operating committee meetings to a discussion of how to replace the enroller. The conversation involved officials from Say Yes, the school administration, the teacher union, the county’s social services department, and others. Seldom do most school systems have so many high-powered folks jointly focusing on such a topic and almost certainly it wouldn’t have occurred if not for the Say Yes program.

David Sutkowy, the county’s social services commissioner, was part of the group and remarked upon the need to get systems talking to one another to overcome the complications of annual renewals of children’s eligibility for health services. “Their families are not invisible to other providers;” he said. “We can do a better job of sharing information about cases.”

Say Yes got similarly involved when it grew apparent that young mothers faced obstacles in trying to continue in high school. Many were late to school or altogether missed classes as they spent hours each morning using public transportation to take their children to day care. “A lot of students have dropped out or are barely hanging on,” said Debra Schoening, the system’s go-between with Say Yes. Thus, Say Yes and its allies began exploring ways that the district, working with various agencies, might better serve young mothers and pregnant students who sought to remain enrolled.

Brian Nolan, director of high schools, welcomed the various added services for students as a result of Say Yes’s intervention and he hopes that it will lead to higher achievement. “I’m a big supporter of Say Yes,” he said. “Their supports and resources are ones that we can’t provide. Say Yes eliminates barriers. Then, the real focus can be on classroom instruction.”

Related to the social emotional activities are behavioral planning and support provided through the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) approach promulgated by the U.S. Department of Education. PBIS is a tool in Syracuse that schools may use to identify, adapt, and sustain productive discipline practices. School leaders set expectations for an entire school building, recognizing and rewarding good conduct. Ideally, outcomes can be measured in terms of academics. Fletcher concedes, though: “Expectations don’t mean it’s always happening.”
Say Yes to Education:
www.sayyestoeducation.org

Rebuilding Communities: Education's Central Role in Mobilizing Community Reform
College

The lure of free college tuition was the flashing neon sign that first drew attention to Say Yes in Syracuse. Some people, focusing on the attraction of the tuition offer, were blinded to the essence of the program, which seeks to boost aspirations and underscore the importance of hard work in elementary and secondary school. Say Yes wants the program to lead students to prepare better for college and to persevere until receiving degrees.

Chancellor Cantor of Syracuse University worked the phones like a political operative to create what became known as the Higher Education Compact portion of Say Yes. Using influence and persuasion, she and others assembled a roster of colleges and universities, including almost two dozen private institutions, that agreed to award financial aid to cover tuition costs for Syracuse’s high school graduates. The imperative for lifting hopes and dreams is seen in figures showing that almost half the students who enter the city’s public high schools drop out.

Syracuse is not the first city to develop such a program. The Kalamazoo Promise and the Pittsburgh Promise are similar in purpose. Only Syracuse, though, with the carefully crafted plans of Say Yes, does so much to link the promise of reform of the entire school system to building a new relationship between the schools and the rest of the community.

The five public high schools in Syracuse sent 501 students to colleges and universities in the fall of 2009, the first year that the city benefited from the Say Yes scholarship program. The number, cumulatively, grew to 930 in fall of 2010, and 1,241 in the fall of 2011. An estimated 10 percent of the students had failed out or withdrawn from college by the spring of 2012, a surprisingly low figure that may attest to the role that affordability plays in determining who remains enrolled. Say Yes invested $1,168,629 in the scholarships during this time. Figures for 2012-13 are not yet available.

Free Tuition

The free-tuition provision initially covered all of the school system’s graduates—regardless of financial circumstances—who spend tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades in the city’s public high schools and graduated. Say Yes sought to build an economic development program for the city within its educational efforts. This meant making the Syracuse City School District attractive to the middle class. What better way to draw and retain those families than through the offer of free college tuition for their children?

There is a reciprocal quality to this approach. If families want to live somewhere because of the public schools, they will pay for the privilege in the property they acquire. If the residential tax base thrives then public schools can count on a healthy source of revenues.

Free college tuition, though, was a gift horse that had cynics peering into its mouth with suspicion. Some minority members in Syracuse scoffed at the offer, figuring the program was meant primarily to benefit affluent white kids who would go to college in any event. It became clear as acceptance of the free-tuition offer spread that children from Syracuse’s lower-income families would gain from it. Eventually, the prospect of postsecondary education altered the nature of conversations in schools and at dinner tables. College attendance, once as far out of sight as a distant planet, took on a virtual presence in the minds of students and parents.

But as the public came to regard the prospect of free tuition less warily, a crisis ensued. On a Friday night, at the beginning of a fall weekend in 2009, shortly before the mayoral election, members of the Common Council heard that eligibility for free tuition would be capped. Youngsters from families with incomes greater than $75,000 would no longer be eligible for the offer at private institutions. Most private colleges and universities in the compact felt they could no longer justify awarding scholarships to students from more affluent families, especially in light of a tightening economy and falling endowments. The news media commented sarcastically that Say Yes had become Say Maybe.
Worst of all, Say Yes leaders had known of the looming tuition cap for at least a month without telling elected officials of the policy change, an omission that turned out to be a matter of negligence rather than deviousness. Syracuse University and Cooper Union in New York City were the only private institutions that did not impose the cap.

All was not lost. The private institutions of higher education—including such schools as Columbia, the University of Pennsylvania, and Tufts—continued their offers of free tuition to students from families with annual incomes below $75,000. Many such schools want to diversify their enrollments and find it difficult to recruit students from urban areas like Syracuse, where the names of these institutions are as unfamiliar as the capitals of Balkan countries.

Furthermore, Say Yes kept raising funds to retain the offer for families at all income levels whose students attend the State University of New York (SUNY), the City University of New York (CUNY), and various community colleges. These publicly supported members of Say Yes’s Higher Education Compact greatly appeal to Syracuse’s high school graduates. In an effort to maintain good faith with families with annual incomes of more than $75,000—and whose children are thereby ineligible for the regular scholarships—Say Yes created Choice Scholarships. Students from this higher-income group who attend private institutions are eligible for grants of up to $5,000 a year.

Say Yes wants to build a $20 million endowment to underwrite the tuition scholarships in perpetuity. Near the end of 2012, donors had pledged more than $7 million to the fund. “We need to raise a lot of money in a relatively short period of time,” Carey said. “This is about our ability to deliver on a promise to kids.” The most generous promise is $5 million from SRC, a company that deals mostly with environmental and intelligence issues, principally through contracts with the federal government. SRC’s Paul Tremont deliberately made his company’s pledge a matching grant to inspire another $5 million in gifts.

Tremont, who grew up in Syracuse, watched the start and stop of previous ventures that had been heralded as boons to the public schools. He views Say Yes as different, a vehicle to eventually make the public school system a supplier of future employees for his company and future leaders for the city. In addition to giving financial backing, SRC participates in the Leadership Council of Say Yes and its employees perform as volunteers in various aspects of the program. SRC became the first official member of the Say Yes Corporate Compact with its commitment to a three-pronged approach of scholarship endowment support, volunteerism, and the establishment of internships and apprenticeships for Say Yes students in Syracuse.

Building an Infrastructure to Support Enrollment and Completion

Say Yes hired Christopher Walsh, a former financial aid dean at Syracuse University, as the first director of the Compact. Walsh developed a pilot program for Say Yes that high schools throughout central New York State could use to coach and counsel students and their families through the circuitous search for financial aid. This program tacitly acknowledges that high school counselors, who ordinarily deal with scheduling, issues of conduct, and other burdens, have little time remaining to guide students applying to college.

At one point, the Syracuse district and Say Yes sought additional help via a grant from the state’s Higher Education Services Corporation, which rejected the request. This money would have been spent to hire an extra counselor for each high school to coordinate all activities dealing with college access, particularly scholarships through the Compact program. The situation that Say Yes wanted to remedy in Syracuse is not unusual. A study by Public Agenda found that 62 percent of young adults feel that the advice dispensed by high school guidance counselors about higher education is poor or fair, at best.44

The Financial Aid Counseling Network, a partnership between Syracuse city schools and Say Yes, engages financial aid personnel from institutions of higher education to serve as sponsors to postsecondary counselors at the high schools. The sponsors guide the counselors who, in turn, coach students as they deal with the dreaded Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The sponsors give the coaches a step-by-step process to try to ensure that they will handle every facet of the intricacies of the complicated aid application. This effort by Say Yes is a huge boost for students and their families. Research shows that providing direct help with applications makes students more likely to enroll in college and to receive needs-based aid.45

It fell to Walsh, as well, to establish an opportunity grant program so that Say Yes could provide $2,000 toward room and board for its students living on campus. He wanted to make the support more all-encompassing, especially at costly private colleges and universities. This sort of assistance cushions the overall financial burden of college attendance for students from low-income families.
Say Yes also invested in the work of On Point for College, a non-profit program already operating in the school district. It provides personnel to hold the hands of students—often the first college-bound members of their families—through the entire application process and after acceptance. On Point offers personal assistance to students, even transporting them to and from campus once enrolled. The group’s aid goes so far as setting up a student’s dorm room with linens and other supplies and, as its final form of help, sending someone to witness a student’s commencement if no family member plans to attend.

**Getting Them Ready**

Ultimately, financial aid for college is not sufficient if students are unprepared and lack the resilience to overcome the setbacks that so frequently discourage young people from persevering. On New York’s Regents Exam, a proxy for college preparation, only one of Syracuse’s four neighborhood high schools, Corcoran, had scores to match high schools across the state. Henninger fell below but close to state averages, and Fowler and Nottingham trailed state averages by considerable margins. Thus, Say Yes established a Collegiate Preparatory Academy to help get students ready for college.

The Academy went into full operation during the 2011-12 school year with 50 students from each of the city’s public high schools for a total of 250 in all. School counselors chose participants from among those nominated by teachers and others. Scores on New York State Regents tests, willingness to participate, and commitment to attend college were also considerations.

At the heart of the Academy are two-hour tutoring sessions four afternoons a week. Students go to the Say Yes headquarters and gather around study tables devoted to each major subject area. Moreover, for each subject at each grade level there are three separate study tables—for struggling students, for intermediate students who need more support to reach mastery, and for advanced students who can handle difficult content. Undergraduates and graduate students from Syracuse University receive stipends to tutor them. Instructor-coordinators who attend the university’s graduate and professional schools oversee the tutoring. They meet with the high school department chairs to learn about the content of the high school courses and to plan the scope of the tutoring.

Students who are tutored also participate in community events and perform service in conjunction with Syracuse University programs. The goal is not only to immerse them in activities, but to put them in contact with university students, staff, and faculty members with whom they can network. Also, project-based learning during the afternoons and on Saturdays exposes the high school students to possible careers, linking their studies to goals involving an eventual livelihood.

SAT coaching sessions, carried out in partnership with the Syracuse chapter of 100 Black Men, meet for four hours on Saturdays. One aim of boosting scores is to make more youngsters acceptable to highly selective colleges. SAT coaching is open not only to students in the city, but to some in suburbs and parochial schools, as well. Participating students receive Blackboard accounts so that they may access the tutoring online when unable to attend in person.

**Other Kinds of Support for College Success**

Say Yes increasingly delves into activities meant to increase retention once students reach college. In 2011, Say Yes mounted a free program called the Summer Success Academy in collaboration with Onondaga Community College. Students attend classes for five weeks in reading, composition, and math in the mornings from Monday through Thursday. A study-skills class meets on Friday mornings and OCC faculty members are tutors to the students each afternoon.

Say Yes plans to continue the Academy each summer, hoping to expand it to other community colleges that attract sizable numbers of graduates of Syracuse’s public high schools. Community colleges figure prominently in Say Yes’s attempt to expand college-going rates. Sixty-three percent of the Syracuse graduates who entered higher education from the Class of 2010 went to two-year institutions, and of all those who matriculated at such schools, three out of four attended Onondaga Community College, just outside the city.

Though the scholarship program began during Say Yes’s first year in the district, Say Yes expects the main impact at the secondary level to come as children in elementary schools work their way up through the grades. Thus, it will take some time before the reforms supported by Say Yes and the school administration spread through the entire system. When that occurs, Say Yes hopes that more students will consistently emerge from high school ready for college.
Summing Up and Looking Ahead

Carey and her lieutenants largely understood the challenges of trying to change a school system to serve as a demonstration model for other cities. Most of their steps were sure-footed and carried them forward with distinction. Occasionally, they stumbled. Carey conceded that “the community took a calculated risk” in giving entrée to Say Yes. Mostly, though, Say Yes acknowledges its mistakes and learns from them. Say Yes applied the lessons when it moved on to replicate its work in Buffalo in 2012.

This does not mean that Say Yes’s approach is the only one possible. Surely, there are other ways to embark on this journey of whole-district improvement and some observers may decide that Say Yes’s methods could have been different. Make no mistake, though. However matters turn out in Syracuse, Say Yes attempted something unprecedented, and those who want to see a better future for America’s urban children should study the work of Say Yes to Education in Syracuse.

Laying the Groundwork for Community Support

Sometimes a community can be sensitive to perceived slights from newcomers who may forget that the path of good intentions exists simply because countless others have trod the same route. In such an effort as Say Yes undertook in Syracuse in conjunction with the university, there was an ever-present danger of being seen as trying to play big brother to those who wanted to be equal members of the family. “We’ve always had this thing with Syracuse University,” said an educator in the city, “that they will come down and fix us. We don’t need to be fixed. We need to work collaboratively—the staff of the Syracuse City School District and the university.”

Say Yes and Syracuse University sometimes had to cope with the perception that they sought to take over the school system—as, for instance, during a two-day retreat at the teacher center. Some teachers and principals at the event did not feel that they were equal partners. “The intent was right,” said one participant. “The problem was that they talked at us rather than all of us talking together.”

Say Yes thought at the outset that its role in Syracuse as an honest broker would be less crucial after the project established itself. Mary Anne Carey and Gene Chasin each spent several days a week in Syracuse, functioning as long-distance commuters, to ensure that a neutral party with no entanglements was on the scene to stand above the fray, whatever arose.

They eventually became aware, though, that someone who represented Say Yes exclusively would have to remain in Syracuse as the two of them disengaged. Chasin felt the pressure of this need as one person after another continually sought him out to act as “counselor” when sticky issues arose. Thus, Say Yes began looking for a person from the outside to hire as a permanent facilitator for Say Yes, separate from those with links to the university, or the school system, or government, or any other entity. Patrick Driscoll became this person.

The prospect of blazing a trail to postsecondary education for students who feel dispossessed and awarding them tuition scholarships right from the beginning was both shrewd and logical. This program, after all, strives to change life outcomes, and it probably would have been unreasonable to ask Syracuse to wait until third graders finished high school before implementing the tuition guarantee.
Following Through

The goal of transparency was sometimes elusive, given the swiftness and complexity of what Say Yes set out to accomplish and the many people it tried to have in the loop. How can any program keep everyone informed when there are so many separate gatherings with shifting casts of characters? “They talked about transparency, but I’m not sure it was all that transparent in the beginning,” the principal union’s Brian Nolan observed.

A good communications strategy is essential when an organization undertakes reform on this scale. Say Yes tried to keep policymakers and the public at large aware of the twists and turns as it worked its way around a mountain of demands. Nonetheless, there were still complaints even after the fourth year of operations that not enough was done to inform the public about the evolving nature of the program. It is important, for instance, for people to know that Say Yes wants to develop a funding stream to institutionalize the program and make it self-sufficient.

Bill Ryan, who worked at the Syracuse Fire Department Federal Credit Union and was a member of the Common Council when Say Yes arrived, fretted about the extra funding that the school system needed in order to deliver a better education. “Continued funding is vital and we don’t know with any degree of certainty that this will be funded in the way it needs to be for the period required,” he said The recession that began shortly after Say Yes conceived of its Syracuse program put sustainability at peril.

Nancy Cantor and Mary Anne Carey along with Mayor Miner, County Executive Mahoney, and Superintendent Contreras were the mighty dynamos generating a considerable amount of the energy for Say Yes in Syracuse. Any discussion of sustainability leads inevitably to the issue of how the program can operate without them. A question that former New York State Education Commissioner David Steiner posed during a visit was: “To what degree does it depend on extraordinary leadership?” There is no doubt that the leadership was extraordinary, yet Say Yes premised its efforts on the idea that carefully constructed scaffolding would sustain the program when inevitable changes in leadership occur.

The first major change was the retirement of Dan Lowengard as school superintendent. He observed in retrospect that the institutional transformation that Say Yes sought could not rely in the long run on the personalities who were originally in place, and that eventually they would all pass from the scene. And, in fact, a huge change will happen in 2014, the year in which Cantor has announced that she will step down from her post at the university.

From the beginning, Say Yes itself had to win public confidence. Some supporters felt betrayed when Say Yes capped the scholarship plan. The value of Say Yes’s role was called into question when test scores were slow to rise. Critics felt that the outcomes were predetermined by Say Yes when reviews it commissioned of the district’s finances, special education, and other areas pointed to problems. All in all, Syracuse had been conditioned to skepticism by previous interventions that promised the stars and delivered barely a twinkle.

Any such program as Say Yes pursued must strike a delicate balance between instilling confidence and over-promising, the same challenge facing a coach who takes over a losing team and wants fans to support it, but hopes not to raise expectations to an unattainable level. It’s a matter of managing expectations and cultivating patience.

Two wild cards complicated and impeded how Say Yes could play its hand. As an external group intervening in the school system, Say Yes had limited control over the way the deck was dealt once the players sat down at the table. The school board controls governance. The superintendent holds several aces and works only for the board, not for the outside organization. Thus, plans for reform usually depend on the school board and the superintendent conceding that their efforts up to that point have not been sufficient to cope with the challenges.

Many aspects of Say Yes’s program are research-driven, and that proved an attraction to a number of supporters inside and outside the school system. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) lent its prestige and $10 million in pro bono research and development support to Say Yes in a close relationship that the two groups forged. This was not a seat-of-the-pants operation like so much that occurs in the name of school reform. AIR reviewed individual schools and, to the extent practical, Say Yes wanted to see the findings drive change.

The huge role filled by Syracuse University raises the question of the degree to which such a program requires a single major local institution as a key player. In a twist on the advertisement for the now-defunct Paine Webber brokerage house, one might say: “When Syracuse University talks, people in Syracuse listen.” Engaging such a partner for a venture of this kind can be crucial. Resources, personnel, and influence flow from the arrangement.

But there came points at which representatives of Say Yes and the university could not agree on who should have the greater say in this or that matter. It was probably inevitable that strains would develop in the relationship. Say Yes and the university share many objectives and, by and large, work well together. Yet, despite an abundance of good will, their operational approaches and their goals can’t possibly mesh all the time.
Shuffling Off to Buffalo

Say Yes had eyes on other places even as it refined its venture in Syracuse. There was a sense that what it had in mind for one city could also be tailored to suit another locale. Quietly, the search for a second city was under way.

The grant from Wallace contained almost a half-million dollars for work that Say Yes would initiate in Buffalo. Drawing on experiences in Syracuse, Say Yes prepared to undertake some initiatives earlier in the process the second time around. Say Yes used what it learned in Syracuse to place some of the work on a faster track in Buffalo.

In January of 2012, for instance, just weeks after publicly announcing the move into Buffalo, Say Yes—in collaboration with the Buffalo Public Schools and with the aid of consultants—began a fiscal review of the school system, as well as reviews of the district’s curriculum, information technology, and mental health programs.

At that time, Say Yes also established a due-diligence process with the aid of the American Institutes for Research to identify community-based organizations to bring into the program as partners, taking this step earlier in the process than it had in Syracuse. CBos weren’t identified as partners in Syracuse until after Say Yes had launched its services to students. Say Yes didn’t even have a fully developed framework for its after-school offerings in Syracuse when they began. By comparison, the planning for the after-school program in Buffalo occurred before the rollout.

In February and March, Say Yes hired an operating director and staff for Buffalo, developed a student-monitoring system and a plan for rolling it out, and conducted due-diligence reviews of the specific community-based organizations identified by the process just two months earlier. Say Yes had letters of commitment in hand from the city, county, school district, and teacher union before it even announced its program for Buffalo. In Syracuse, most such commitments did not come until after the program started.

The student monitoring system is supposed to play a major role in ensuring that students remain on track to benefit from the college scholarships. The monitoring system was mostly in place when school opened in Buffalo in September 2012. It took Say Yes four years to get the public schools in Syracuse to implement the monitoring system, and even then it was not fully operative.

Say Yes entered Buffalo with $15 million already pledged toward a projected capital need of approximately $100 million in support of its free-tuition program, beginning this fundraising earlier than it did in Syracuse. There was also news that the federal government would award Buffalo a grant from its Promise Neighborhood program. This effort would dovetail with Say Yes’s work by making funds available for a specific neighborhood in the city to engage families and communities in efforts to prepare young people for higher education.

The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo assumed a major responsibility for raising money for Say Yes’s efforts in the city. “We’re trying to impact an entire generation,” said Alphonso O’Neil-White, chairman of the community foundation. He told the Buffalo News that up until that point no potential donor had turned down a request for a donation."
BOX 5. Lessons Learned for Pursuing Whole-District Reform

- Gain experience mounting a program in a smaller, more limited setting.
- It is acceptable even in whole-district reform to start small and build up.
- Plan, plan, plan.
- Have a core staff of smart, dedicated people who will go the extra mile no matter how inconvenient and uncomfortable it may be.
- Do due diligence.
- Pay attention to research and evidence.
- Have short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals.
- View goals in terms of the larger context, recognizing and saying that better schools mean a better community, especially in terms of its economic profile.
- Help residents see links between effective public schools and the prosperity of a community.
- Identify and work closely with key institutions of good standing in the community.
- Identify and work closely with key local individuals whose influence can help immeasurably.
- Work as closely as possible with all levels of government and encourage them to collaborate.
- Don’t forget what business and industry can do for you if you find the right leaders.
- Cultivate the private-sector and philanthropic groups, but don’t count on them, as they may be under financial pressure and/or have other priorities.
- You can never have too many allies.
- Build a coalition of supporters and create committees on which they can serve and stay involved, creating roles for local stakeholders.
- Create a task force of local colleges and universities at the outset to work closely with the project in a real way.
- Be an honest, independent broker whom people can trust and look to as acting on behalf of the community and its children, not as an advocate for any one organization or governmental unit.
- Seek and hire local people who know the territory if they have track records and are qualified.
- Plan for sustainability right from the start.
- Recognize that any community has existing tensions and rivalries among its institutions and its leaders that have nothing to do with your program.
- Ultimately, teaching and learning will count most.
- The clock and the calendar for teaching and learning are not immutable.
- Respect collective bargaining agreements that affect the schools and work closely with the unions.
- Monitor student progress and be ready to support interventions.
- Don’t forget that social, emotional, and health issues affect academic outcomes.
- Put everything in place to promote readiness for and completion of postsecondary education.
- Don’t assume that implementation has happened.
- Be as transparent as possible.
- Be humble and be ready to admit mistakes and change directions.
- Monitor and assess, particularly student achievement, as the program goes along.
- Remember: It’s all about the children.
Next Steps

Syracuse and its school system—and even Buffalo—are just about the right size for Say Yes’s venture: the sort of fit that Baby Bear’s bed was for Goldilocks. There is also the matter of need, which made the advent of Say Yes compelling to the locals in both cities. The other side of the coin, though, is that in such places—small- and medium-size post-industrial urban areas—finances these days are typically unstable. The very reasons that make such spots attractive proving grounds can cause the experiment to blow up. “The outlook was good on paper and all of the assumptions had real substance but the world has changed and that’s the most precarious part,” said Syracuse’s Mayor Miner.

As noted, the classroom is the cockpit in which Say Yes does not have its hands on the controls. Some teachers and principals worry that scholastic achievement in Syracuse, especially among low-income students and English language learners, is so deficient that even the extra resources and new approaches encouraged by Say Yes might not be up to the enormity of the task. Then there is the perception among the system’s educators that some students seem to shut down their aptitude for learning once they reach middle school.

What Say Yes assumed would happen in the schools did not always happen, especially in the beginning. One level sometimes did not disseminate goals and expectations down to the next level. No one necessarily monitored results. Frequently, there was little accountability for actions not taken, for outcomes not attained. Unimplemented plans for school improvement, in Syracuse or anywhere else, have no more effect than pennies flipped into a wishing well.

It may be a harsh observation, but the Syracuse Public Schools have been mired in low expectations for years. Many students are bereft of the kinds of experiences that enhance academic achievement. It need not follow, though, that this fact must become a self-fulfilling prophesy of failure. The school system needs a cultural shift and this means expecting more of its students and teachers and providing the tools to help them.

Say Yes was aware of the challenges. Before the second year had ended, the analyses conducted by the American Institutes for Research in the system’s 32 schools had identified at least three areas of priority in which the district urgently needed help to improve instruction: the teaching of math, differentiation of instructional approaches, and the creation of multiple pathways through a rigorous curriculum that can send graduates in various directions.

The district, according to this report, had to work more assiduously to give students a mathematical foundation for such courses as algebra that push open the gate to success in high school and beyond. Teachers were said to need more support to tailor instruction to individual students in all areas of the curriculum. Finally, AIR found that the secondary curriculum did not contain the requisite rigor. Students must be better prepared to choose among a variety of paths through high school, whether they want to attend two-year colleges, four-year colleges, vocational schools, or go directly to work.

Results on state assessments gave promise of better preparation in the future. Statistics made available by the district showed improved scores in both language arts and math in 2011-12, Contreras’s first year as superintendent, although proficiency still settled in the 20 to 30 percent range and the annual gains were small. A report noted that these gains coincided with stronger implementation of many Say Yes components that had been delayed or only partially implemented in prior years.xx

Say Yes’s goal for students is not simply higher test scores, but postsecondary completion. That dictates a laser-like focus by teachers and a greater willingness by students to work diligently. The implications for staff development are enormous and potentially costly.

Given Say Yes’s accomplishments in Syracuse so far, one hesitates to quibble. Say Yes gained a following in a community looking for a “game changer,” as people in the city tend to put it. The kind of good will generated by Say Yes extended beyond the movers and shakers. When Dan Trivison, a school custodian, went on jury duty, he and his fellow jurors were confronted by a case involving a juvenile offender. Trivison used the occasion to assure his fellow jurors that with Say Yes in Syracuse, people would see a decline in juvenile delinquency. That is the sort of confidence and hope that the program inspired.
Endnotes


viii Say Yes has substantially expanded its volunteer and tutor training programs. This year, it recruited an additional 200 corporate, community, and local college student volunteers, including 176 volunteers from Syracuse University. Syracuse University is training the Say Yes volunteers and mentors and working to create more sustained faculty involvement with the local school district. The University is expanding summer math courses for public school students interested in STEM fields; increasing site visits of public school students to the university; offering monthly college knowledge programs at Nottingham Early College High school, and increasing faculty-teacher exchanges in the arts and other fields at Nottingham.


Support for this report was provided by the Ford Foundation

Editorial Oversight: Cross & Joftus

Graphics and Production: Michael Molanphy, CommunicationWorks