Gown Towns:
A Case Study of Say Yes to Education

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6. Buffalo

After Syracuse, Say Yes moved next to Buffalo, NY. Almost from the beginning things went more smoothly, and to date, Buffalo has been counted as the most successful of the Say Yes sites; certainly in terms of getting closest to successfully implementing the core components of the approach. There also appear to have been some positive impacts on college-going rates, according to external academic reviews.

First we summarize the introduction of Say Yes into the city, before examining each of the four elements: the scholarship, governance, services, and data. We then present the results of our surveys, focus groups, and empirical analysis. Finally, we offer some reflections on the Say Yes experience in Buffalo.

6.1 Introduction

Buffalo has much in common with Syracuse: a city in the north of New York State, in economic distress, and with a struggling school system. Like Syracuse, too, many people were suffering from initiativitis. A common theme in our interviewees was that in the years before Say Yes was in operation, many people were weary of new programs promising to turn the city around.

> This community is model-weary," said one local stakeholder, "but this [Say Yes] is the exception." A Say Yes staffer said, "Anything in Buffalo is a hard sell, because it's a blue collar town and everyone is suspicious." A community organizer agreed: "Because people are so used to money coming and going in Buffalo—for the morale of the city, Say Yes has to be around in perpetuity." A local politician told us: "There was some skepticism. … It came from people who'd experienced other "it's too good to be true [schemes].

Even a former Say Yes staffer said, "I was a little suspicious, because people are always coming in and trying to 'fix' Buffalo." Her colleague added, "I was a little trepidatious, too like [his colleague quoted above].… 'Here we go another program'…. But then I saw a site facilitator, and she was like, 'You should apply,' I became a site facilitator, and a family support service provider. It felt good that I was helping prepare kids to actually be able to take advantage of the scholarship."

A number of factors helped to give Say Yes a strong start in Buffalo.

First, Say Yes arrived at a time when the city was starting to see some green shoots in terms of economic revitalization, and when other big investments were being made in the city. In 2012, the Governor of New York Andrew Cuomo announced the "Buffalo Billion," a significant investment in supporting business development in the city and its surroundings. The fruits of this investment, combined with an uptick in private business activity, coincided with the rollout of Say Yes.

As one Say Yes leader said: "Buffalo is rebranding. ... There are more cranes in the sky, the medical campus is expanding. ... We want everyone to participate in the revitalization. …. Say Yes is working on the social side [of the revitalization]." A political leader put it like this: "We are climbing out of the basement as it pertains to our economy." One of the reasons for the strong support of Say Yes was the strong and explicit connection made to economic revitalization. As one local leader said, "The more people realize that the city schools are getting stronger, the more they'll move back into the city. It'll help the kids get better jobs and earnings."

Second, Say Yes enjoyed strong support from key, powerful local leaders from both the philanthropic and public sectors. Clotilde Dedecker, President and CEO of the Greater Buffalo Community Foundation, was an important figure in bringing Say Yes to the city, and in securing support from key stakeholders. She flew to New York City to sell the

Quick Facts: Buffalo

City

Population	261,310

White alone	48%
Black alone	37%
Hispanic/Latino[1]	11%

Median household income	$33,119

Children under 18 in poverty	48%

Individuals over age 25 with at least a bachelor's degree	25%

Children under 18 in renter-occupied housing	67%

School District

Total enrollment in 2015-16	33,345

Expenditures per pupil in 2013-14	$25,579

Low-income[2]	44%
Medium-income	42%
High-income	15%

1   Hispanic/Latino ethnicity of any race
2   Population is children ages 0 to 17 enrolled in public school. Income is household income in 2015 inflation-adjusted dollars. Low: less than $25,000, Medium: $25,000 to $74,999, High: $75,000 or greater

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, and National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD) and Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE).

community to George Weiss and Say Yes national leadership. Alongside Alphonso O'Neil-White, chair of the Scholarship Board, Dedecker has been a powerful force for winning support, raising money, and allaying local concerns. As one local player put it: "Clotilde has community-wide respect, [as does] Alphonso. … People are a huge part of it." Byron Brown, Mayor of Buffalo since 2005, has been a staunch supporter of Say Yes from the outset.

Third, Say Yes recruited a very strong local executive director, David Rust, whose leadership style and deep roots in the community helped to alleviate concerns about outsiders coming in and taking control. At the same time, many stakeholders appreciated the expertise that was brought into the city, especially from Eugene Chasin. As one local stakeholder said: "Buffalo has a chip on its shoulder, so it helped to have someone of Gene's stature to come visit. Later, people started to take local ownership. There was a balance between national validations versus local leadership. Buffalonians are suspicious of people even from their own suburbs who say they want to come and help."

Say Yes Buffalo has also been highly successful in attracting positive attention and media notice. As one local politician pointed out: "Say Yes has done an exceptional job….bringing the press in…and I brag about it ad nauseam." That politician is not alone: sometimes it feels as if half the city is a Say Yes salesperson, from taxi drivers to state senators. Another community partner in Buffalo: "Say Yes is very adept at putting its name out and attracting positive publicity." Indeed, some of the Syracuse interviewees were rueful about the Say Yes Buffalo PR machine.

In Syracuse, Say Yes had relied on their community-based partners, especially Syracuse University, to help shape what a city-wide intervention would look like. Syracuse was, according to a former Say Yes Syracuse employee, the organization's "beta project." When the organization transplanted some of these Syracuse's strategies and services to Buffalo under the Say Yes banner, Syracuse partners were left feeling like their initiatives had been copied: "Say Yes instigated change, but we were able on our own to figure out a way to do it within the structures of existing partners. … And Say Yes brought that to Buffalo, then branded it Say Yes."

Buffalo stakeholders, however, were largely willing and eager to accept this branding and build upon it. As someone who had worked with Say Yes Syracuse said, "I think when Say Yes went to Buffalo, they probably said, here's how it's going to be, and Buffalo said okay. Say Yes wanted to brand everything Say Yes, and in Syracuse they said no. … I'm surprised they [Buffalo] don't have a Say Yes stadium yet."

6.2 Scholarship

Endowment

The scholarship had a mostly successful rollout in Buffalo. Alphonso O'Neil-White brought Steve Swift from BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York—a "numbers wiz" according to one observer—to lead the scholarship modeling, with support from Schoolhouse Partners. According to one close observer, Schoolhouse Partners helped to take the modeling "to another level." The scholarship's financial model depends on the number of students in the public school system; how many get Pell Grants and other financial aid; which postsecondary institutions they attend; and the cost of these colleges and universities. According to one Scholarship Board member, at the start it was "dart-throwing." But they went on: "We get more reliable modelling over time because we get trend data, and we collect more data." In fact, the modeling has been pretty accurate. The Board is now modelling 20-25 years out, accounting for economic growth and rising incomes. As one Board member said: "The idea of the scholarship as perpetual allows a generational perspective."

As well as modeling and audit, the Scholarship Board was created to help fundraise. The Board has expanded from 12 to 17 members and meets every 2 months. Board leaders are proud of the diversity and representativeness of the group, including in terms of race, gender, occupation and religion. The Board and many other stakeholders consciously adopt the language of "investment" in the community. As one leader put it: "We're investors, not donors."

The scholarship fund has now broken the $25 million dollar mark (of which $15 million is from the Say Yes national organization), with an additional $35 million committed. The long-term goal is an endowment of $100 million. An early obstacle to raising funds was considerable antipathy to the Buffalo Public School system, and in particular the School Board, and in some cases, to the teachers' union.

"We got some blowback early on," said one leader of the fundraising effort, "because investors would say, 'We're not gonna put money in BPS [Buffalo Public Schools].'"

Scholarship board members confirm that that the perceived poor state of the local educational establishment was a barrier to raising local funds. One said:

> "[There was] disgust with how dysfunctional the school board was. People would say, 'There's no way I could support that dysfunction.' So we distanced ourselves from that. ...That dysfunction still exists but Kriner Cash [new superintendent] has worked around it."

At the same time, there was a high rate of turnover of school district superintendents. A number of our interviewees described a "revolving door of superintendents," with differing levels of support for and engagement with Say Yes. Since the announcement of the Say Yes scholarship in late 2011, there have been six superintendents (including four interim leaders) since the long-standing James Williams stepped down in 2011.

In some ways, the dissatisfaction with the school district and the prevailing sense of crisis around education worked to the advantage of Say Yes in terms of funding the scholarship. A number of interviewees said that the business community, in particular, was more comfortable investing in Say Yes than directly in Buffalo Public Schools.

But these investors are also anxious to see results. As one business leader said: "There are a lot of 'show me' investors, who will invest after they see results. Now we're going back to these people with our results. We have got to keep hammering [this message that the results are there]." He said the three key ingredients of success were "need plus momentum plus results."

According to one local stakeholder, Say Yes Buffalo started with "a very small nucleus of funders at the beginning….A couple dozen." An innovation was to recruit a founding group of "angel" donors, who had to commit their funds by a certain date in order to quality for this label.

A Say Yes national staffer explains: "There was a deadline by which you had to donate to be considered an 'angel' donor. We had different tiers around asks." In the end, there were more than 350 angel donors, according to Say Yes Buffalo, a combination of individuals, organizations, and businesses.

Eligibility

The Buffalo scholarship has been described by some as less generous than the Syracuse scholarship due to stricter eligibility requirements on length of time in the school district. The full tuition scholarship is available only to those who have been enrolled in Buffalo Public Schools (including charter schools) since kindergarten. The scholarship covers 95 percent of tuition for those who enter the district by third grade, 80 percent for those who enter by sixth grade, and 65 percent for those who enter by ninth grade.

As in other Say Yes sites and for other organizations offering a final-dollar scholarship, communicating how the scholarship works, and what it covers and does not cover, is an ongoing challenge.

As a local Say Yes staffer explains: "Two thirds of students don't get money directly from us. We try to explain the last-dollar scholarship idea, and have been for five years. The message is: we're going to make sure you can access college. This messaging is complicated and important."

Another said:

> The majority of Buffalo students are receiving full FAFSA [we assume they meant Pell] and TAP [the New York State financial aid]. They [Say Yes] publicized it as 'full tuition scholarship' in the beginning, but we had to go back and clarify all that— I started with seniors and juniors, but we needed to start earlier, and that's what we started to do. Families saw the scholarship, but I tried to let them know about the services, too.

The Opportunity Grant of $2000 to help low-income students with the non-tuition costs of college is seen as an increasingly important part of the Say Yes—almost every person we spoke to wanted these grants to be more generous. Local colleges have become more aware of the financial barriers faced outside of tuition costs. At Buffalo State, the Chemistry 111 course replaced a $300 textbook with an open source textbook. Colleges are hoping that with tuition covered, they can convince donors to fund textbooks, housing, and other needs.

Overall, the response of local higher education institutions to Say Yes has been positive. As one leader told us: "Say Yes makes Buffalo State more of a public good, because everyone can afford it now."

Villa Maria College now enrolls many Say Yes students who have needs beyond what the tuition assistance scholarship (provided by the college through the Higher Education Compact) provides. One interviewee from the college said: "Since Say Yes our enrollment has grown almost 100 percent from about 350 to 600." But as another told us: "Say Yes students come to us unprepared for college-level work." To help these students, the college has strengthened its student success center: "You have to hold their hands."

A college staffer said that Say Yes had been responsive to their concerns about readiness: "We've had issues and gone to Dave Rust [Say Yes Executive Director]. We said these kids don't even know how to get a schedule or how to show up to class—really basic stuff."

In response to this feedback from colleges, Say Yes created a two-day summer pre-orientation boot camp. The college staffers said: "We definitely saw a difference between cohorts 1 and 2 [following Say Yes launch] and cohorts 3 and 4. Services made a difference. The latter were more prepared."

Local higher education institutions also report that they are having to deal with more issues like homelessness, transportation, and food insecurity. Without diminishing the challenges, this is indirect evidence that students who would not otherwise have attended these institutions are now doing so in greater numbers.

With the introduction of the New York State Excelsior Scholarship, Say Yes Buffalo, like Syracuse, might start helping with other costs of college above and beyond tuition. One staffer told us: "If Cuomo's Excelsior Scholarship [succeeds] it will be hard to continue with the existing scholarship format. But we could then do a better job of covering room and board." This would of course represent a fundamental shift in the design of the scholarship.

6.3 Governance

Say Yes Buffalo makes even stronger claims about the importance of its governance structure than the Say Yes national office. As Say Yes Buffalo puts it:

"The breakthrough component of Say Yes Buffalo is the transparent, collaborative governance structure that guides all efforts and reports on progress to the public at large. This collaborative approach recognizes that Erie County, the City of Buffalo, and the Buffalo Public School District all hold pieces of the puzzle, that the solutions reside between and among these systems, and that improving academic outcomes for urban youth with scale demands a cross-sector, cross-government approach."

Here we examine the relationships as they developed between local stakeholders and Say Yes (as well as with each other); the role of local Say Yes leadership; and the functioning of the Operating Committee.

Local stakeholders

The overwhelming reports from Buffalo are of highly functional relationships between key stakeholders, facilitated in part and supported by Say Yes.

One ongoing challenge has been to keep the school district leadership on board, especially given the turnover of superintendents. The district was initially a little wary of Say Yes, but the incentive was too great to turn down. One senior district staffer (admitting a change of heart himself) said:

> Our district reflected many other districts. We had a sense of propriety: students and anything related to education belongs solely to them; the school district had the look and feel of a political organization. Although in 2011 we were better than most school districts, the district was mixed. Some people were not interested in working with Say Yes. Others were like me and thought, 'We can do this alone.' But after the initiative got rolling, the benefits were just so tangible, that you'd be irresponsible not to work with Say Yes.

Say Yes has learned, sometimes from mistakes, how to strike the right tone with school district stakeholders. One example is that they quickly realized that the apparently neutral word "reform" was one that generated suspicion and defensiveness. Say Yes now speaks

in the language not of reform, but of "partnership." Another lesson learned was to be careful not to appear to be exerting too much power over the public school system. Concerns were raised when it became known that Say Yes paid for the search for a new school superintendent in 2012. One Say Yes staffer acknowledged that "it didn't look good. It wasn't very politically astute." (Note that this was prior to the appointment of Dave Rust as executive director).

The lack of stability in school leadership has brought both advantages and disadvantages for Say Yes. While on the one hand, some joint enterprises (like data sharing, which we discuss below) have suffered from the instability, it has also provided Say Yes with an opportunity to provide consistency and a long-term focus, which many local stakeholders recognized. As one School Board member in Buffalo told us:

> Often when that change in leadership has occurred, there's been some setback in movement, but also some opportunity for Say Yes to provide some stability.

As one stakeholder explained, "We had stability on the mayor, Dave [Rust], and the county, even as supers changed. It does suck the air out of the room—we lost momentum. One of the supers was not very helpful or supportive. Another followed that had all sort of duplicitous practices. But there was a strategy to not let this [the Say Yes work] get lost. We were in some ways more credible than the district. 'How do we keep this fresh, how do we keep this moving, and not get sucked into that black hole over there?'"

Equally, however, the growing influence and credibility of Say Yes has troubled others, especially with regard to the running of the public school system. Some interviewees have used the phrase "shadow government" to describe Say Yes. (High praise, in one sense.)

The new superintendent, Kriner Cash, is charismatic, energetic, and broadly supportive of Say Yes as part of the "education bargain" he is attempting to strike in Buffalo.[5] Cash says: "Without Say Yes we'd be overwhelmed and understaffed to do our new education bargain." Local leaders are hopeful that with Cash in post, the school system will see faster improvements. As one interviewee said:

> The combination of Say Yes with a visionary super, that was a difference maker…there's hope that they [BPS] can change with the right leadership [but] they're not out of the woods yet.

The Say Yes initiative has strengthened relationships across a number of boundaries, according our interviewees: between the school district and school board (which has a fractious history); between the union and parents' organizations; and between the K-12 system and postsecondary institutions.

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[5] See Cash's New Education Bargain here: https://www.buffaloschools.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=18&dataid=27&FileName=neb%20parent%20hand-out%20revised1.pdf.

One of the main barriers to greater investment in services in schools, for example, can be the resistances of teachers, unions, and administrators, as a paper by Robert Crowson and William Boyd shows (Crowson & Boyd, 1993). But Phil Rumore, the formidable veteran head of the Buffalo school union, sits on the Operating Committee and is a strong supporter of Say Yes.

An interviewee from Buffalo State said, "Say Yes has solidified our partnership with K-12 in ways that go beyond our school of education."

None of this is easy. As a leading light of the Buffalo community put it: "Collaboration is an unnatural act performed by consenting adults."

But one important contribution made by Say Yes has been to provide some third-party objectivity, according to most of the stakeholders we spoke to. "In this town," one Buffalo stakeholder said, "everyone's on a side," but the Say Yes national staff "stayed objective."

Another said it has been invaluable to get "a third-party perspective [on issues here]...yet [Say Yes staff are also] complete experts on how the district operates." One stakeholder said that part of the value-added was bringing a fresh, impartial, yet informed perspective to local events:

> I understand it now. …They came in and were an honest broker. [They had] credibility in that they brought in national [expertise]. … They had objective people come in and [offer] objective analysis.

Nobody claims that Say Yes single-handedly boosted collaboration. A number of other interviewees, including strong Say Yes supporters or leaders, pointed out that Say Yes came in at a time of growing collaboration in Buffalo and the surrounding region:

> If you zoom out a little bit, you can see Say Yes happening in the context of a resurgence in Western New York. You were seeing partnerships start to emerge at the same time that Say Yes entered the area, like back to 2011, the Governor started the regional economic development councils, which forced us to take a broader view. The Governor appointed a wide variety of people to those councils, who came up with an award-winning plan for economic development.

Pinning down how far collaboration takes place on the ground, as opposed to in rhetoric of stakeholders, is a difficult task. Small examples of practical collaboration speak more to this question than dozens of speeches. One data point that struck us was that in late 2017, the head of IT for the Buffalo school district provided login credentials and passwords to staff managed by Say Yes working in BPS schools so that they could log onto the district network in the same way teachers did. In itself this may seem a small detail, but it seems to us to be a striking sign of the degree of trust that has developed in Buffalo.

Another data point is the resilience of the Memoranda of Understanding signed at the outset. These act as commitment devices to the Say Yes initiative, but as Say Yes discovered in Guilford County, these agreements only really count when relationships remain strong. As a Say Yes leader in Buffalo points out, "We're still using the original MOU. It was evergreened. We have separate MOUs for each party or program area. … We have seven or eight now and we're drawing up one for community schools."

Say Yes leadership

One of the most striking themes of the Buffalo interviews is the high emphasis placed on the quality of Say Yes leadership at the local level. Multiple stakeholders reported that the leadership of Executive Director David Rust was central to the initiative's success thus far. They said he has "created a joint problem solving culture that's about building not fixing," and that his work and his hiring decisions are a big reason why community leaders are bought in, and "not just a face-saving way." One person said Rust was "a gem of a leader," and that Say Yes will "never make such a good hire again."

Looking through our notes of all our interviews, we can barely find one that does not reference Rust's leadership:

> I cannot say enough about him.

> David Rust is the kind of person who listens.

> When problems arise I make sure teachers call me and I'll call David.

The school superintendent praised Rust's "temperament," adding, "We work together very well." Say Yes Staff said they would "follow him anywhere," that "his door is always open," and that "he wants others to shine."

David Rust works effectively to deflect credit for achievements away from himself and toward other member of the OC or community or to his own staff. We saw or heard him do this time and time again in a wholly authentic way. He does not seek to burnish his own personal reputation, or to become the most important or powerful person in the room.

Say Yes national leaders see Rust as a good example of a "humble servant leader that people trust, believe in, and don't feel threatened by." But humility should not be mistaken for weakness:

> You need strength, but humble servants make the elected leadership feel good about their positions but trust this person and hand over some authority to this person….Where this can't go to is ending up with a weak leader that really is just controlled by one or multiple of the silos. If somebody presents this humble servant but then they're really just a lapdog… Facilitating tough conversations to get to actions, helping people to see the powerful outcomes so that it reinforces that this

is the right way to do this—that's what Dave is doing, and it [doesn't happen] without the right executive director.

Rust has also been seen to assemble a high-quality, diverse, and committed staff. One partner emphasized the importance of straightforward professional competence: "There aren't that many partners of the quality/high-performance like Say Yes here—that's huge. They've assembled a team that's so competent."

One of the factors that seems to have helped build trust, and therefore more effective collaboration in Buffalo, has been an intentional effort to ensure that the Say Yes team is representative of the community. Two out of three of the Say Yes Buffalo team are people of color, including many senior staff. Many of our interviewees pointed to this as an important element in building relationships, trust, and respect in the community. For frontline workers, having a similar background to many of the young people they are supporting has also been useful. As one Say Yes staff member told us,

> The support services staff look like the students—that matters—and the staff don't just provide the services, they push the scholarship. That the Say Yes staff look like Buffalo at large is huge—a big reason for success. I'm a fifth-generation west-sider and people connect with that.

Operating committee

At the heart of the Say Yes governance model in Buffalo is the Operating Committee. Almost every interviewee pointed to the Say Yes Operating Committee as the most important body.

One stakeholder from the school district said:

> [The OC is] a comprehensive assembly of leaders… it really does behave like a governing body. The OC is key because it helps leaders assure their constituencies. Bringing together the community leaders who will support and speak in favor of, and a have some skin in the game, and will provide funding [is critical]. Without that I don't see it as sustainable.

Many people we talked to in Buffalo pointed to the crucial role of the OC in creating local accountability and transparency. The committee was where grievances could be aired, budgets discussed, and debates held.

One OC member said, "If we don't like anything, we tell them [Say Yes]. The important thing is at least having a seat at the table.

When it works well, the Operating Committee creates a sense of democratic legitimacy among local elites, while the relationships forged on the Committee become the soft tissue that helps hold the initiative together.

A major philanthropic figure said: "The OC is a table of trust. There is nothing that the group can't do. And the other thing that's powerful is that the community can see it."

A senior figure involved from the outset said, "These people had never been in a room together, and we're now meeting every other week. That built relationships. The OC is an organizational feature/structure that builds relationships, which is a big part of what makes this work. The OC became a team. The OC is hardwired now and that's key."

We could fill a few more pages with similar quotes. Having attended OC meetings, the impression was confirmed. Attendance is good, conversations are open and frank, decisions are made, and attention is paid. They feel like real meetings. There are also quarterly meetings of the Community Leadership Council, which are used to share messages and build support. While these meetings are seen as valuable, it is clear that the power lies with the OC.

The Operating Committee can help bring partner organizations together, because the face time "gives you a common way to talk about the issues," says one Buffalo stakeholder. "Sometimes you can be talking about the same thing but using different vocabulary and language. One of the things the OC does [is it] helps us refine how we talk about these issues. … You stop pointing fingers [and start to ask] how do we work together? ... What's unique about this is the continuity—the sustainable connection we have here."

Members of the OC who are adversaries outside the room told us that they were able to work together here. Here's a concrete example. The parent group used to "butt heads" with the teachers union and school board over the quality of schooling: there was even a "parents' strike" on May 15th 2011, to protest unresponsiveness. But the OC forced the different parties to sit down together and view each other as human beings. As a parent leader told us:

> The only time we [the union and us] were talking was when we were arguing. But then we were forced to sit down every week and listen to the other side at the Operating Committee meetings. It's harder to just see them [the union] one-dimensionally [now]. [They] went from an enemy to [someone] at least I respect...They're right from their perspective.... it's not an "either/or," it's a "both/and." Both voices are necessary if we're going to get better and grow. … And that's what Say Yes was doing the whole time... [In the OC], we got to this place where everybody's voice was valued.

David Rust, ED of Say Yes Buffalo, has a closed-door meeting with the school superintendent every month—and nobody seems to bat an eyelid. People trust him to report the views of the OC and to report back. The bottom line is that trusting relationships, built up in the context of a collaborative governance structure, protect against unnecessary politicization and conflict, and open up further doors to collaboration.

6.4 Services

Buffalo is the only Say Yes site with a reasonably well-developed suite of additional services to be provided under a Say Yes banner. (In Syracuse they have mostly been absorbed into other local agencies and organizations.)

In this section we discuss the evolution of these services, and some of the challenges faced along the way. We then summarize perspectives on some of the particular services. The services provided or facilitated by Say Yes in Buffalo include:

i. Family support specialists
ii. Summer camps
iii. Community Schools and Parent Centers
iv. Health services
v. Legal clinics
vi. FAFSA Completion Project
vii. College readiness programs
viii. Career development for Say Yes scholars

Many stakeholders believe that the services are more important, even in terms of boosting postsecondary success, than the scholarship. As a philanthropic leader in Buffalo told us, "It just makes me crazy every time it's announced as a scholarship program. ... It's a community-wide effort. [We have] 200 partners right now, coalescing around the city as the unit of change." One senior staffer said, "It's hard for us to keep track of all these programs." In terms of services provided through schools and in partnership with Say Yes, there is really no comparison to Syracuse or Guilford County.

In the early stages of service development in Buffalo, while some learning was brought over from Syracuse (the legal clinics are a good example), there was no fixed "blueprint" for wraparound services, according those who were involved from the outset. One staffer said: "There were no blueprints for anything, even for legal clinics, which were the most developed idea from Syracuse."

Instead, Say Yes attempted to be responsive to local needs, demands, and opportunities. But service provision followed quickly on the heels of the scholarship announcement. As one senior staffer said, "We're realizing the vision of the 'model,' but as it fits the specific needs of this community."

An inevitable tension arose over the division of responsibilities between existing staff, including social workers, and new Say Yes staff, especially family support specialists. One school board member said that when Say Yes Buffalo first started adding supports, the district was concerned that Say Yes staff would overlap with the district's social workers.

It seems to be important to define those positions early, so there is less tension between staff members. One school district staff, a supporter of Say Yes, said:

> We tried to get staff not to be afraid of job displacement, but that's just hard. We added 12 social workers in 2011-2012. Eventually people started to see that "there's plenty of work for all of us." School officials need to reassure staff, who are rightly suspicious, leery of people in power's maneuvering (staff are suspicious of the "people that control the money.)" But part of what helps is that grievances can be aired on the OC. That way leaders can go back to their constituencies and say 'we're working on it.'...it's a beautiful thing.

A Say Yes staffer said: "The support of the union is critical. BPS social workers, Say Yes family support specialists, and mental health clinicians, who provide treatment to students—they all have to be clear about their role. We have to ensure that BPS workers don't think we're replacing them."

Again, the relationship with David Rust and the functionality of the OC were important factors. As a union leader told us, when issues arose: "All I have to do is call Dave up and he'll go [to the Say Yes staff] in the problem school building, and tell them they need to meet with the school staff to clear things up. …The key is to have an open line of communication between Say Yes and the union and to say, 'How do we solve the problem?'"

i) Family support specialists

Family Support Specialists (FSS) are school staff managed by (but not employed by) Say Yes, located at all 55 Buffalo Public Schools. In partnership with Erie County's Department of Social Services, they are, according to Say Yes, "responsible for working with students who demonstrate poor attendance or behavior problems to help them get back on track."

This can include connecting students and their families to mental health providers or after-school and basic needs programs, providing individual and group mentoring for the student and/or family, and assisting families with navigating school processes including registration, enrollment and parent-teacher conferences. One of the primary goals of this program is to increase student attendance. Say Yes claims a five-percentage-point increase in attendance for those students engaged in the program; and in addition, that the program successfully diverted 400 students from entering the juvenile justice or child welfare systems (2016-17 Report to the Community).

As discussed above, the role of these specialists (most of whom are trained social workers) in relation to existing staff, including social workers on the district payroll, has to be managed carefully. But as one Say Yes staff based in a school put it: "In a city this poor and segregated, there are plenty of people that need services—so people welcome the help."

ii) Summer camps

In partnership with the school district, the city, and various community-based organizations, Say Yes Buffalo began offering free summer camps for K-6 students in 2015. By the summer of 2016, the programs had expanded from 4 to 6 weeks and the number of children served had increased from 1,500 to 2,400. As Say Yes describes these, "A typical camp day consists of an academic component that reinforces school-year lessons plus an enrichment component to expand students' exposure to leadership, arts, culture and other activities" (2016-17 Report to the community).

In previous years, Say Yes also partnered with Buffalo Public Schools to provide after-school classes or "extended learning time." Some interviewees saw this as one of the biggest impacts of Say Yes, but these programs are now "on hold." A senior local stakeholder said, "Extended day programs hit a wall," in part because of the turnover of superintendents. Say Yes has offered to pay for some of the extended day programming, and that "greased the wheels" in terms of rebuilding relationships—or as one interviewee put it, "threw some meat before the lion."

iii) Community schools and parent centers

Interest in extended learning time appears to have been funneled into Say Yes's Community Schools. These are large, relatively disadvantaged public schools in the district that house additional Say Yes staff and offer extra classes and activities to the community outside of school hours. According to Say Yes, there are now 15 Community Schools.

Weekly Saturday Academies are currently being offered at 9 of the schools from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. Several are offering a health class that offers instruction on stress management, nutrition, exercise, and other health topics. A few schools are offering a College Simulation Experience for students and parents. Several of the schools offer regular fitness classes for children and adults.

Say Yes has ten Community School Navigators working in 11 of these schools (one navigator covers two schools). In order to help ensure that the navigators are well-integrated in Community Schools, staff and principals were involved in their selection. As one said, "They trust us because they picked us."

There are also Parent Centers in four of the Community Schools. These are run by Say Yes under contract with the district and offer workshops on topics like home loans and helping students transition to college.

One parent said that prior to Say Yes, "Nobody [was] considering the parent experience." Parent Centers are an attempt to create two-generation solutions by involving the whole family—an approach that is consistent with the new superintendent's "education bargain," which focuses heavily on parental responsibility.

iv) Health services

Say Yes identified a need for greater preventive care early on in its work in Buffalo. In Syracuse, Onondaga County had found funding to put mental health professionals in schools. Say Yes brought this idea to Buffalo and worked with local mental health providers, Buffalo Public Schools, and Erie County to implement school-based mental health clinics. Services are billed to the student's health insurance, and the Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo provides bridge funding.

During the 2016-2017 school year, more than 4,000 students received services through these mental health clinics. According to Say Yes, a clinic will be operating in every school by early 2018.

Say Yes has acted as the connective tissue in this initiative, linking schools to providers and, crucially, to the county, which becomes involved in the cases of particularly at-risk students. As one individual from the county government said:

> I've been here 30 years and I haven't seen this kind of communication [between Erie County and Buffalo Public Schools]. It's because the groundwork was laid by Say Yes. ... We try to connect with the school system on issues like abuse and neglect early, and Say Yes has helped with that. … We can help alert BPS about children returning from the CPS [Child Protective Services] system and reentering school. Likewise they can early alert us about kids that are missing school.

Recently, Say Yes has sought to increase access to primary care services through the Health in Motion program. Piloted in June of 2017, the program delivers health care to schools through mobile units that can see eight to 10 students per visit. Health in Motion is a joint effort by Say Yes, Buffalo Public Schools, the Community Health Center of Buffalo, Neighborhood Health Center, and Planned Parenthood of Central and Western New York. The Community Health Center received a $281,000 federal grant to purchase its vehicle, and the program will receive structural funds from Say Yes as well as $150,000 annually from the district (Drury, 2017).

v) Legal clinics

Another idea transplanted from Syracuse to Buffalo: free legal clinics, which in Buffalo are operated by the Erie County Bar Association Volunteer Lawyers Project. Volunteer lawyers provide free legal advice on non-criminal matters to students and families. Following advice from Syracuse, the Say Yes Buffalo team initially approached large firms to recruit volunteers and partner firms.

Buffalo's legal clinics were first offered in 2013. Services are available at six school-based legal clinics, which are open four days per week during the school year, and at two locations that are open two days per week during the summer. Once individuals are in the door, they might be referred to a lawyer or firm to handle their case.

Say Yes reports that about 1,100 family members received help from 100 volunteer lawyers in 2016-17 (2016-17 Report to the Community). Most cases have to do with custody/visitation, divorce, housing, or debt.

One school district official said the schools "could never have afforded legal clinics" without Say Yes and the Volunteer Lawyers Project.

vi) FAFSA Completion Project

Students must complete the FAFSA to be considered for the Say Yes scholarship, but applying for financial aid can be a daunting process for many families. In 2013, the University at Buffalo partnered with Buffalo Public Schools and Say Yes to place volunteer financial aid experts in every public high school in Buffalo, including charters. Though the program is known as the FAFSA Completion Project, volunteers also help with applications for the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Say Yes scholarship application.

Figure 6.1 shows the percentage of students in each twelfth-grade cohort who completed the FAFSA.[6] While we do not have data prior to 2011-12, it does appear that FAFSA completions spiked in the first year the program was offered (2013). The completion rate then declined slightly before peaking in 2016-17.

. . .

[6] Say Yes provided us with the project's data on the number of FAFSA completions in each year. To obtain approximate rates, we divided the number of FAFSA completions by the number of students in each 12th-grade cohort using data from the NYSED School Report Cards.

Figure 6.1: Share of high school seniors completing FAFSA
Buffalo Public Schools
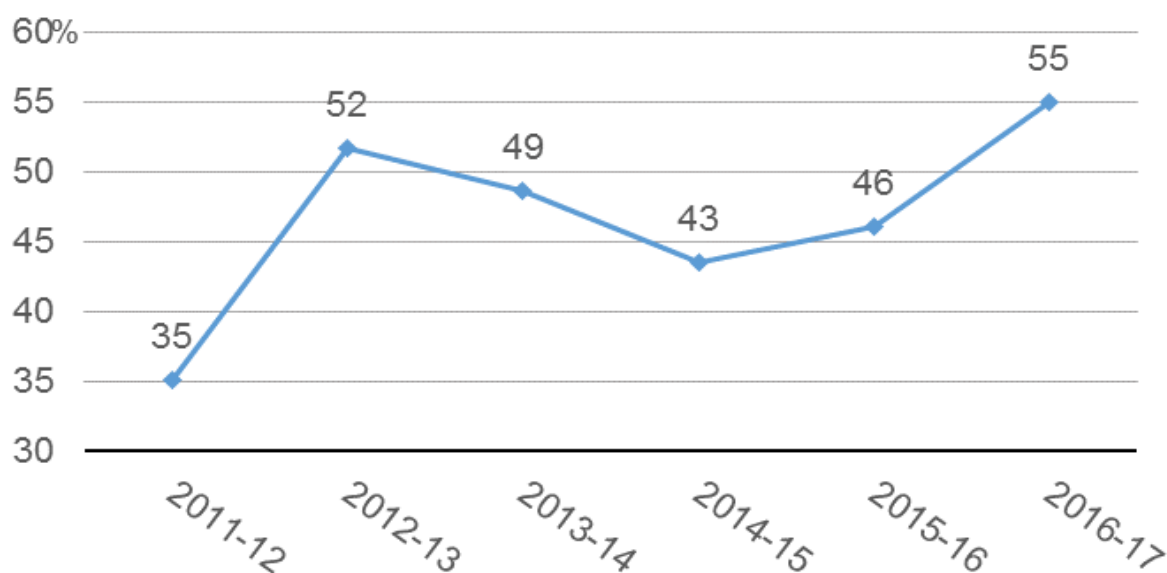
Source: FAFSA numbers from Dr. Nathan Daun-Barnett & Say Yes Buffalo/University at Buffalo FAFSA Completion Project; enrollment counts from NYSED School Report Cards

vii) College readiness programs

To prepare Say Yes scholars to succeed in college, Say Yes Buffalo has partnered with a variety of community organizations and postsecondary institutions to offer the following programs:

1. **NYGEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs)**: This federally funded program is led by the University at Buffalo Graduate School of Education. Volunteers at ten BPS schools offer parent workshops, college tours, tutoring, and other college-readiness activities to eighth-grade students.

2. **Say Yes to College Workshop Series:** Say Yes staff and representatives from the organization's higher-education partners lead monthly workshops aimed at helping students transition to college. Workshops cover topics like the College Application Process, Essay Writing, Standardized Tests, Financial Aid, and Self-Advocacy Skills.

3. **Summer Success Academies:** Say Yes has partnered with Erie Community College, Buffalo State College, and Medaille College to offer summer programs for

students matriculating at those three institutions. Programs are intended to address challenges that may arise during the first semester of college. According to Say Yes, about 300 students have participated in these programs to date.

4. **Scholar Mentoring Program:** Say Yes works with Compeer of Greater Buffalo to match high school seniors and Say Yes scholars with volunteer mentors. Volunteers commit to being in contact with their mentees four times a month, with the aim of easing students' transition into college. Since the program launched in January 2015, about 100 students have participated.

viii) Career development

One of Say Yes Buffalo's most recent initiatives is a paid internship program for Say Yes scholars. Internships are offered in partnership with the Buffalo Niagara Partnership and the Western New York Association of College Career Centers.

Local employers hire interns for a minimum of 10 weeks at 20 hours per week and pay $10 per hour.

The program launched in the summer of 2016, managing to place 13 interns with 8 local employers. The following summer, the number of interns increased to 16. In October 2017, Say Yes received $250,000 from the Citi Foundation to expand the program. Say Yes hopes to use the funds to employ 50 interns (Rey 2017).

Say Yes Buffalo also offers a leadership program, or "Ambassador Program," to a limited number of Say Yes scholars in each cohort. Student ambassadors participate in workshops on topics like public speaking and represent Say Yes at community events and on their college campuses. There are 24 ambassadors in the 2016-17 cohort.

6.5 Data

The fourth element of the Say Yes approach is the creation of a data platform to guide investments and interventions, as well as to measure progress toward educational goals.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Say Yes conducted a thorough Fiscal Analytics study in Buffalo, identifying potential savings through a reduction in the number of small classes, streamlining the HR function, reducing management layers, and reducing transportation costs, among other recommendations.

In terms of the Pathway Analytics and Postsecondary Planning System, Buffalo is a little further ahead than the other sites, largely as result of recent developments. Say Yes Buffalo had already developed an "Impact Dashboard" that measured outcomes like high school graduation and college enrollment, many of which overlap with the Pathway metrics that were released later. But while the Impact Dashboard figures are derived from

aggregate (school- and district-level) NYSED data, the complete Pathway Analytics require data on several metrics that are not reported by the state (see table on p.46).

Much of the difficulty lies in obtaining a functional—not just nominal—data-sharing agreement. The school district has its own student information system, which currently remains entirely separate from the Say Yes data. Parents can see a "parent portal" showing grades, attendance, notes for events, and so on. These are not updated regularly: they are more like termly report cards.

The district has challenges getting teachers to update information even on their own system. One staff member said: "We're trying to get teachers to update this information more frequently. Teachers have their own systems they love using. But I'm saying, 'This will increase parent engagement, which you as a teacher want.' Also, at the end of the day this is a management priority."

The current superintendent, Kriner Cash, is "excited" about the potential of the postsecondary planning system and intends to support the initiative: "[A] data system is only going to be as good as the data we give them, and our data is not that good. … We need about twenty to twenty-five really good metrics. … Complex organizations have a tendency to over collect data and under use what they've got. I need 7 on a daily basis: what does red, yellow, green mean [i.e. traffic-light-style signs of who is on or off track]?"

Say Yes Buffalo had a data-sharing agreement with Pam Brown in 2012-13, but as discussed in Chapter 4, it is the spirit rather than words of a data-sharing agreement that really counts. As a Say Yes staffer said, "We had one bad superintendent that wouldn't share data. When the superintendent doesn't support the partnership, his team doesn't support it."

In theory, Say Yes could try testing a data-sharing agreement in court. But nobody thinks this is a realistic possibility. The lesson learned here is that even when formalized as an MoU or data-sharing agreement, a commitment device will not necessarily survive personnel changes if it cannot be (or will not be) enforced.

Buffalo is right at the beginning of the process of creating a Postsecondary Planning System (PPS). As one staff member said of the PPS in late 2017: "It didn't exist until about two months ago."

The new staff members at Say Yes national are having an impact on capacity, and the attempt to create a data platform has been revived. Rather than in schools, the PPS will be piloted in the mental health clinics.

Surveys will be launched in earnest in early 2018. As discussed in Chapter 4, the process of conducting surveys was previously halted after a backlash from teachers. This time around, teacher surveys are not being built into the system. The plan now is to involve

teachers only when other data points suggest that a student is at risk of going off track, and even then only if teacher input would be helpful.

Say Yes does plan to survey parents. Parent surveys were also piloted in the early stages before work on the PPS was essentially halted. Some interviewees said that the surveys may have confused parents a bit at first, and some parents appeared to pick up on the reluctance of teachers to share data.

The Buffalo team is also working on developing ways to measure some of the more loosely defined pathway metrics, like "kindergarten readiness." They are collaborating with the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation and an organization called Help Me Grow to develop and track measures of kindergarten readiness among all 3- to 5-year-olds entering the district. Help Me Grow is a national organization that uses an "Ages and Stages" questionnaire to offer developmental screenings. Say Yes Buffalo is also working with the school district to implement surveys to gather information about metrics like parent aspirations for students' postsecondary attainment. These surveys were scheduled to be piloted in January 2018.

6.6 Empirical study

In 2014, the Say Yes to Education Foundation engaged researchers from Syracuse University's Maxwell School to conduct a three-year empirical evaluation of Say Yes in Buffalo. The resulting report was published by Say Yes in April 2018. Below, we describe the study's findings on enrollment, housing prices, test scores, high school graduation, and postsecondary matriculation and persistence.

Enrollment

In the eight years prior to the announcement of Say Yes in each district, public school enrollment declined at an average annual rate of 1.4 percent in Syracuse and 1.7 percent in Buffalo.[7] Declines in the enrollment of white students were particularly precipitous, averaging 6.4 percent annually in Syracuse and 4.6 percent annually in Buffalo in the ten years prior to Say Yes. Overall enrollment began to increase following the adoption of Say Yes—first in Syracuse, then in Buffalo. This reversal of enrollment trends did not occur in surrounding suburban districts.

To identify a causal impact of Say Yes, the authors use enrollment trends prior to the intervention to predict what enrollment would have looked like in the absence of changes that occurred during the post-Say Yes period. They compare differences between actual and expected enrollment across the Syracuse, Buffalo, and Rochester school districts.

. . .

[7] Public school enrollment includes students enrolled in charter schools, who are eligible for the scholarship in Buffalo and Syracuse.

Rochester is demographically similar to Syracuse and Buffalo and experienced similar enrollment declines in the pre-Say Yes period but did not receive the Say Yes intervention. Rochester thus serves as a control for shocks that may have impacted urban areas in Upstate New York.[8] In an alternative specification, they compare Syracuse and Buffalo each district's surrounding metropolitan areas to control for localized shocks. The authors note, however, that Say Yes may have impacted enrollment trends in the cities' suburbs (particularly in Syracuse, a finding we discussed in the previous chapter).

The results for Buffalo suggest that Say Yes had a positive impact on enrollment in the public school system—of the order of a 6 to 8 percent increase over projected trends within three years of Say Yes entering the city. There is some evidence that increases in enrollment were concentrated in middle- and high-performing schools, where performance is based on average math and English language test scores. Most of the estimates are statistically significant, the exception being a model that includes surrounding suburban school districts and that begins eight rather than four years prior to the arrival of Say Yes. (The authors argue in favor of the four-year measure, on the grounds that Buffalo experienced rapid charter school expansion in the early 2000s, which may have influenced enrollment in those years.)

Given that public school enrollment appears to have increased, Bifulco et al. attempt to identify where the new students have come from. Possible sources include local private schools, suburban public schools, and schools outside of the Buffalo or Syracuse metropolitan areas. In Buffalo, increases in public school enrollment coincided with decreasing enrollment in local private schools (again, relative to projected trends), but not with decreasing enrollment in suburban districts around Buffalo. This implies that families who had formerly enrolled their children in private schools switched to public schools in order to qualify for the Say Yes scholarship.

According to the authors, an analysis of private school enrollment in Buffalo is complicated by the fact that several of the area's private schools closed in the years leading up to Say Yes, though the bulk of the closures occurred prior to the period under study. Additionally, the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo closed ten schools in 2014-15, the third year after the announcement of Say Yes. Nevertheless, the authors conclude, "While it is possible that the threat of closures led some families to choose other schools, there is no evidence to suggest they would have chosen Buffalo public schools in the absence of Say Yes."

Housing Prices

As we discussed in the previous chapter, Bifulco et al. find evidence of an increase in home prices in Syracuse that is consistent with movement from the suburbs to the city.

. . .

[8] Additionally, Buffalo is used as a control for Syracuse in the years before Say Yes entered Buffalo.

By contrast, if additional students in Buffalo were drawn from local private schools rather than from surrounding school districts, it is unlikely that shifts in enrollment will be reflected in increased demand for housing. Indeed, using a difference-in-differences model that is similar to their model for enrollment, the authors find no evidence of housing price increases in Buffalo relative to projected trends after the start of Say Yes.

Test Scores

Buffalo Public Schools provided Bifulco et al. with longitudinal data on students enrolled in grades 3-8 for the years 2008-09 through 2014-15. This allows the authors to measure changes in an individual student's performance on standardized tests before and after the student was exposed to Say Yes. They thus avoid problems arising from changes in the composition of the student body.

Because this student-level dataset is available only for Buffalo, the authors cannot use other school districts as controls for events unrelated to Say Yes that may have impacted test scores in Buffalo and similar school districts, like Syracuse and Rochester. They can, however, use district-level data to observe general trends. They point out that Syracuse and Rochester did not experience the same increase in math scores that Buffalo did following the start of Say Yes in Buffalo, but they cannot show any causal connection.

The authors also point out that in Say Yes's first year in Buffalo, New York State adopted the Common Core standards and implemented new standardized tests, prompting a non-trivial drop in test scores across the state. To address this issue, individual test scores are measured as z-scores rather than raw scores, meaning that each score is the number of standard deviations a student placed above or below the statewide average.

Results from a regression analysis are consistent with the descriptive trends: math scores rose significantly in the second and third years of Say Yes, but ELA scores fell significantly in the first year of Say Yes. It is of course highly unlikely that Say Yes caused a drop in ELA scores. More likely, the model is picking up the effects of concurrent changes in Buffalo and/or statewide; this means, of course, that any causal claims about the impact of Say Yes on math scores must be tentative at best. Nevertheless, the authors' subgroup findings are of particular interest. While math scores for both black and white students rose in years 2 and 3, the rise for white students was much more substantial than for black students in year 3 (10.3 versus 5.4 standard deviations), and the decline in ELA scores was more statistically significant and greater in magnitude for black students. Interestingly, the impact on outcomes was however greater for black than for white students, as we discuss below.

High School Graduation, College Matriculation, and College Persistence

According to the authors' data, rates of high school graduation and college matriculation declined in the year or two prior to Say Yes but recovered in 2012-13. Meanwhile, first-

to-second-year persistence among students who matriculate into college has remained fairly steady over the entire period. To estimate the effect of Say Yes on these trends, Bifulco et al. combine records from Buffalo Public Schools with National Student Clearinghouse data to identify all 12th-graders who attended public school in the district from the 2007-08 to 2014-15 school years and track these students' postsecondary outcomes.

The authors use two models to assess high school graduation and postsecondary outcomes. The first model compares cohorts of Buffalo students before and after Say Yes. The identifying assumption here is that cohorts do not differ systematically before and after Say Yes. The authors use covariate balancing tests to show that there are no significant differences between the pre- and post-Say Yes cohorts in terms of observable characteristics, which include age, gender, race, ethnicity, English proficiency, and having repeated a grade.

The results of the cross-cohort model suggest that Say Yes increased the likelihood that black students graduate from high school by 8.7 percentage points. Additionally, there is evidence of a positive effect on college matriculation among high school graduates—an increase of 5.7 percentage points for black students and 13.2 percentage points for white students—as well as on college persistence among black students (6.8 percentage points). The results for Hispanic students are not statistically significant. Black students increasingly matriculated at both two- and four-year institutions, while the increase in matriculation for white students appeared to be concentrated at four-year institutions. These findings suggest that black students in particular were more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and remain in college in the years after Say Yes entered Buffalo.

The second model is a difference-in-differences (DD) model that compares students in the 2012-13 cohort who were eligible for the Say Yes scholarship (enrolled in BPS by the ninth grade) to students in the 2012-13 cohort who were not eligible for the scholarship (enrolled in BPS after ninth grade). This is one strategy employed by Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska (2015) to study the Kalamazoo Promise. The DD analysis may capture the effects of the Say Yes scholarship but not necessarily of the wraparound services, which may often be available to the control group of students who do not end up being eligible for the scholarship. Additionally, the report shows that ineligible students are more likely to be Asian or Hispanic, have limited English proficiency, and to have enrolled late in their 12th-grade year.

Without a control group, the cross-cohort analysis relies on the assumption that the introduction of Say Yes was the *only* event in Buffalo Public Schools that may have influenced secondary and postsecondary outcomes at this time. The comparison of trends among eligible and ineligible students does help to isolate the effect of the Say Yes scholarship from concurrent changes that could be confused with the Say Yes effect, however.

The results of the DD model are consistent with the cross-cohort model in showing an increase in all three outcomes in the pipeline for eligible students. Strangely, the results show a strongly statistically significant *decrease* in college-matriculation among graduates who are not eligible for the scholarship. This is an odd result that may be worthy of further investigation. It seems implausible that Say Yes would be directly and negatively influencing outcomes for students who were not eligible for the scholarship – especially since they would have had access to the wraparound services.

The authors write: "In the absence of an underlying causal model we would hesitate to characterize the negative matriculation estimate as a program effect, though it is possible that non-eligible students were crowded out at some institutions by the increase in scholarship students, or suffered a demoralization effect from not receiving the scholarships."

In sum, Bifulco et al. find strong evidence that Say Yes contributed to an increase in enrollment in Buffalo Public Schools, likely fueled by parents moving their children from private to public schools to qualify for at least part of the scholarship (recall that the full scholarship is available only to those enrolled since kindergarten). Findings of an impact on test scores are less conclusive, but there is some evidence of improvement in students' math scores—though more for white students than for black students. In terms of college-going, there was an increase in rates of college matriculation, especially for white students; by contrast, the biggest improvements in terms of high school graduation rates and for college persistence were among black students. Overall, a mostly positive picture emerges, with some interesting differences in the impact on different groups, and plenty of pointers for more research. The overall goal of Say Yes, of course, is to increase post-secondary completion rates: for that evidence, we will need to wait for the data.

6.7 Survey Results

We surveyed 68 educators and 33 parents of high school students in Buffalo. As in other sites, parents were most concerned about financial barriers to college. Teachers and guidance counselors were particularly concerned about students' academic qualifications and time management skills:

Figure 6.6: Greatest barriers to postsecondary education
Buffalo survey responses

■ Teachers and counselors ■ Parents
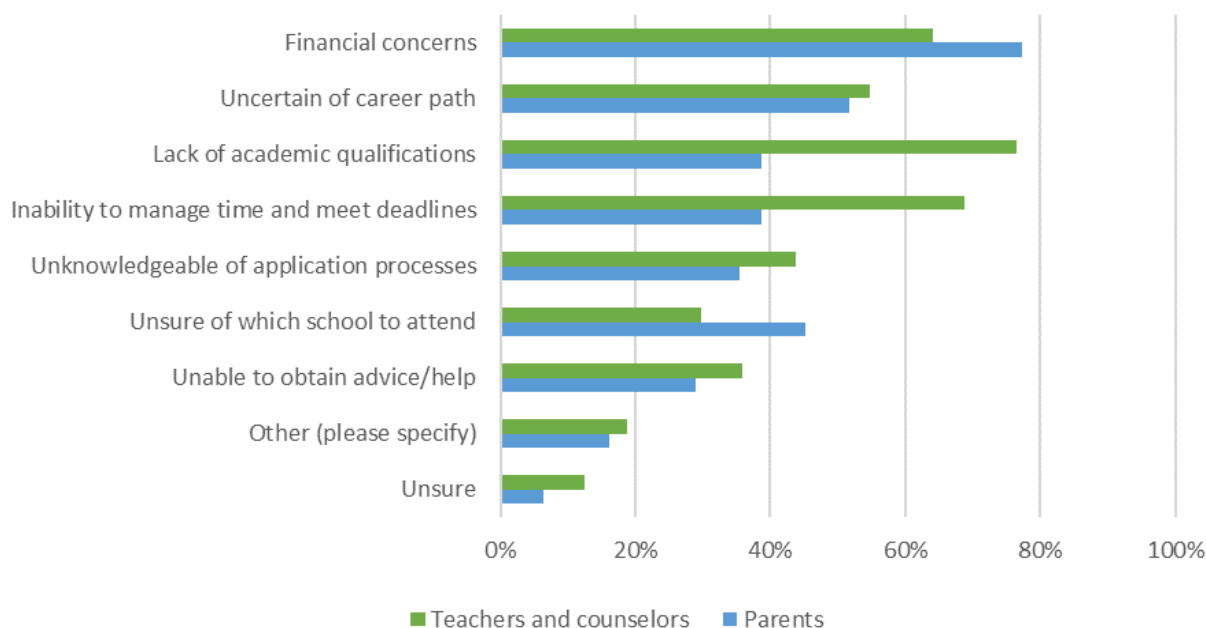
Twelve educators offered alternative barriers to education, including poor attendance, lack of realistic expectations about college acceptances, lack of support from adults in their lives, needing to work to support a family, "lack of rigorous education to survive college classes," and not wanting to go to college or "not fully understanding the connection between education and future earning potential." Parents pointed to "difficulty managing daily life enough to plan for self/children's future" and "lack of mentors to guide the pathway to college."

Every educator and 87 percent of parents were aware of Say Yes. Of those, most were at least somewhat familiar with the steps to obtain the scholarship.

Figure 6.7: Awareness of Say Yes
Buffalo survey responses
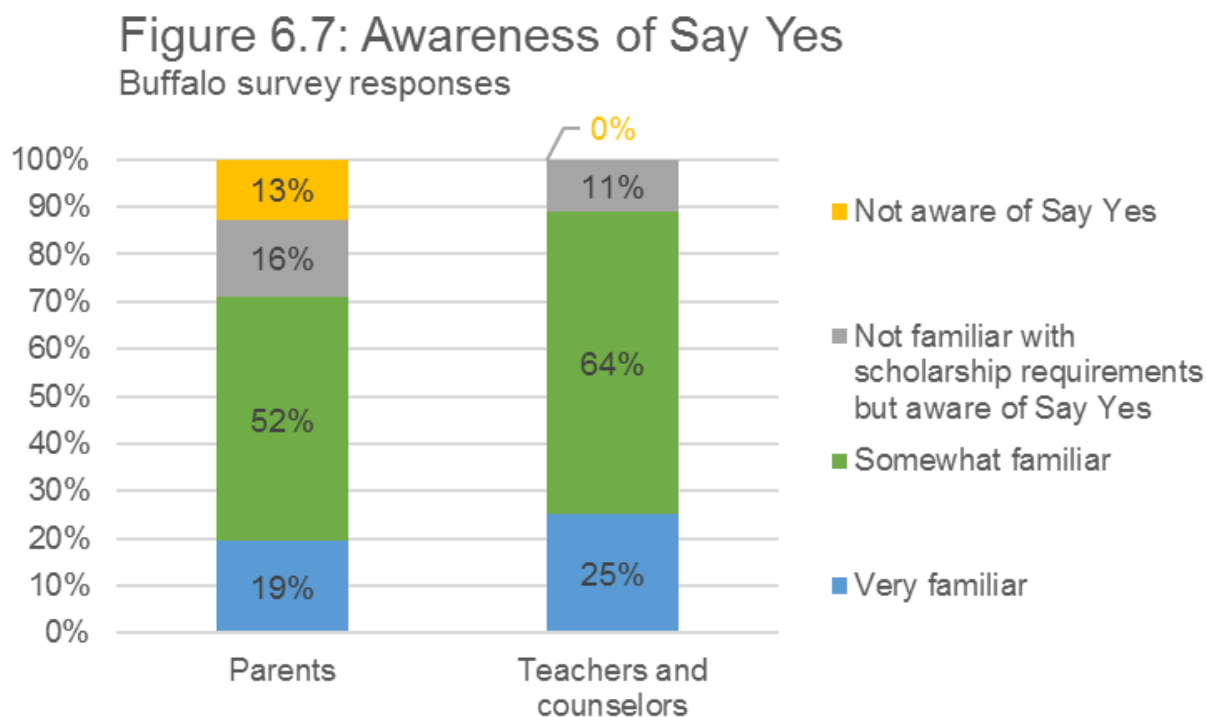
6.8 Focus groups

Parent focus groups

Seven parents participated in a focus group. All were at least somewhat familiar with Say Yes. Two who were very familiar with Say Yes learned about the program while they were working in the school system:

> I used to be a school nurse, so I worked very closely with the Say Yes staff, because they were also a part of the student support team and crisis response, so we worked closely together with that. And I also helped do a mentoring program in the community, called Emerging Leaders, and we had people who run the mentoring program at Say Yes also do training for our mentors. We actually have some of those people who work with Say Yes come up through our mentoring process, so we just do a lot of networking and information sharing and stuff like that.

> I used to be a parent facilitator for my son's school, so I was in the school building regularly, and I was getting a lot of the information that some kids may not bring home. … And I'm a Buffalo Public School teacher assistant, so I'm in the schools, and I work closely with the Say Yes people at my school and the programs that they do there. So yeah, I know a lot about Say Yes.

Another participant learned about Say Yes because the organization helped to provide an after-school program in her daughters' community center.

When prompted, one parent said that the name Say Yes first brought to mind "things that Say Yes does on the day-to-day to remove some of the barriers to education, like support services." Other parents associated Say Yes more with the scholarship than with wraparound services. One said, "The majority of parents that I know of, you hear Say Yes program, you hear tuition for college. I don't think they advertise enough of the smaller programs or services that they do have for parents."

Respondents who had worked for the school district discussed a kind of "disconnect" between the schools, where Say Yes is fairly entrenched, and the community, where people are often unaware of the services Say Yes offers. Only a few parents said that they knew of the Say Yes representative (or support specialist) at their child's school. Parents suggested that there should be ways to get information to parents who are unable to get to the school for events:

> There needs to be a better way to advertise. There shouldn't have to be any more incentive than millions of free dollars of tuition, but I think that if it were more of a Facebook or Twitter thing that us and our students can follow, we could keep up with these updates and everything that's offered as they come.

When it came to the scholarship, participants were generally familiar with what the scholarship covered, including differences between in-state private schools and private schools in the Higher Education Compact. A few were still under the impression that room and board was covered. Most also said that their primary source of information about the scholarship was the Say Yes website.

Most agreed that the scholarship has influenced students' postsecondary decisions and had positive feelings toward Say Yes:

> I think it gives more hope to especially the lower income families in the area, because growing up in a household [inaudible] you only get like 30 grand a year to live off of for houses like that. And as a parent, you're thinking, I'm never going to be able to afford to send my child to college. Now they have, the students and the parents, they have that hope that their children don't have to suffer through their own financial troubles, whatever they may be. We have a lot of single moms, single dads out there that have to bear all of the financial burden. Sometimes these kids have to leave school early and go to work. Now they have programs that are offering to send them to college for free. ... I think it leaves a lot of hope.

> I see it as help, because without it I wouldn't be able to provide education for my daughter financially.

> First thing I think of is literally what it says, Say Yes to Education, instead of saying no. It's an opportunity to actually say yes to an education.

Two parents did not think their students would use the scholarship. One said that her son is "dead set" on going to a public school in another state where his father lives, though she has tried to convince him to stay in New York: "I'm like, 'Dude, there's free money out here for you to go to school. Why are you going to pay all this money?'"

Regardless of whether their student planned to use the scholarship, every participant affirmed that Say Yes was having an impact in their community. Much of this sentiment was driven by their experiences with wraparound services like summer programs, backpack and winter coat drives, and mental health services. They were also supportive of other community resources such as Upward Bound. The group tended to be satisfied with the services available in their community, but wanted better information about and access to those services. Multiple parents expressed an interest in learning more about available programs or otherwise "getting involved."

Aside from communication, all but one participant agreed that the program was working for Buffalo. As one parent put it, "I think that they offer more than our city has ever been offered in all of the generations. It's just a matter of getting the word out there." The only parent who disagreed said that she was not convinced that there had been a "spike in graduation."

Student focus group

Eight students in their freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior year of high school participated in the student focus group. On a scale of one to five (five being the most familiar), every student rated his or her familiarity with Say Yes as either a three or a four. Most had heard of Say Yes through parents, teachers, and administrators.

One student had experience with a Say Yes staff member at his school:

> When I was in eighth grade, it was this lady who worked at the school. She worked with Say Yes. She would really help you look at—just help you figure out what you wanted to do when you get into high school, and had to go through all that.

The same student said that "the Say Yes lady...used to send home food with kids." Others said they were familiar with prep courses and a few family services, such as mental health and legal clinics, but had not used these resources themselves.

When the moderator asked, "When you think about the Say Yes program, does that impact how you guys think about making a decision for college?", every student said that it did, though younger students amended that they hadn't thought much about college yet. One of the main benefits was a reduction in anxiety about the financial aspects of going

to college, which allowed them to focus on other barriers to getting into college. One particularly vocal senior volunteered,

> My big reason about Say Yes is because of what they represent. If it's free college, I know it comes at a cost. It gives you that opportunity to look at more colleges that gonna cost you a little bit more money. You know what I'm saying? Because if I know I have a safety net, and that's the coolest part to have when you're looking for college is a safety net. Something that you know you guaranteed you can get it. You can reach out to them higher opportunity schools, sometimes like Stanford and stuff like that where it's really hard to get into. Cause admissions is not easy, so it's very good to have a safety net.

The student said that he thought Say Yes covered tuition, room, and board, but he also said that he was not planning to use the Say Yes scholarship because he was going to a highly selective private four-year college. (In fact, the college he mentioned is one in the Say Yes Higher Education Compact.) A few others said they thought the scholarship only covered tuition.

Other students added:

> It's something to help us. If it's going to be easier for us to—I feel like they want to make it easier, so we can actually pursue going to college. Because people say, 'Oh, I'm going to go to college and I'm going to do this after college,' but they never end up going.

> When you relieve the stress of having to pay for everything, you can put more focus into doing your school work and managing your time. Rather than trying to manage working enough to pay it off when you're done, you can kind of give your-self that free time to actually put the time aside for school.

When the moderator asked if Say Yes was working for their community, most students agreed or were unsure. One student said he would like to see "statistics" about "how many people actually go to college off of the Say Yes program." Another added, "And how many people finish college with the Say Yes program." Some said that they were interested in hearing from people who had "gone through the program" about whether there is a "catch." Many seemed skeptical about the concept of "free money."

Even so, all students expressed at some point during the focus group that they planned to go to college. It is unclear how many of them would have attended college without the scholarship: a few said that if their school of choice was not a Say Yes partner, they would apply for other forms of financial aid to make up the difference. While the group agreed that money was a major barrier to postsecondary education, they also seemed optimistic about finding resources to help them pay for college.

Educator focus group

The educator focus group was comprised of eight teachers (no guidance counselors participated). Several teachers mentioned that they tried to instill a college-going culture in their classrooms, but that this was not always enough to make up for a lack of support or knowledge at home. When asked about major barriers to college access, three teachers said:

> Not having parents who attended college and not knowing where to even start, for a lot of our kids. I teach seniors, and I ask the kids at the beginning of the year, "How many of you have gone on a college visit?" I might get three or four kids who have actually started to think about doing something like, and then I have kids that come to me or to the guidance counselors with absolutely no clue where to start.

> For one reason or another, they don't know. Maybe mom and dad didn't go, or they can't afford to go on 10 different visits, or even just one, outside of [Erie Community College]. I think family's huge. Plus the parents who haven't gone to college don't know how long it takes to do everything, and they don't appreciate the fact that you start September of senior year, you're going to miss all the early applications. You're going to miss all that stuff. And at that point, they have no choice.

> I also wanted to note most of my students are English language learners. So not only did their parents not attend school in America, but also they have difficulties with information that is in English and filling out forms like FAFSA forms.

Educators mentioned two initiatives that were helping to solve these problems. The first are college tours led by guidance counselors, though teachers said that it was unfortunate that these tours could only take fifteen to twenty students at a time. Another are "FAFSA nights" or—even better, participants said—FAFSA sessions during the school day, where students get help applying for financial aid.

One of the complaints that arose during the parent session was that parents did not know where to go to get information about available services. Unprompted by the moderator, an educator offered an observation from the other side of the communication divide:

> That's really more of just kind of an all-around community outreach thing that my school's been involved in. I feel like, hopefully, that's helping, but...it feels like there's a few of these things that we're putting out there that, for whatever reasons, we can't get the kind of response that you would hope you can get. So maybe there's a bit of frustration with how many community members actually take advantage of these things.

Teachers generally knew of their school's Say Yes facilitator, but expressed that they "don't know exactly what she [or he] does." Two said that they hoped guidance counselors were more familiar with the program and were having conversations with students about it. One teacher in particular described Say Yes with an air of mystery, adding that Say Yes's presence appeared to have dwindled over the last few years:

> I just feel like what Say Yes is, it's like a mystery, like what are they. They have this Illuminati persona. We know that they're there in the buildings, but you're not quite sure what their presence really means. I don't know if that makes sense, but I think that there's a prevailing consensus that it's a worthwhile organization, that there's a benefit, but you're not quite sure what is the benefit. Are you helping me fill out my FAFSA form, or is there truly a scholarship? And what are the requirements to maintain scholarship compared to, let's say, would a student make it on their own accord, or through the new Excelsior Scholarship? … Three years ago it was amazing and wonderful and wow, and now, it's just kind of that extra thing that we talk about while we fill out your applications. I don't think it's prioritized at all.

This teacher added that his school had 1,200 students, and "one person cannot service the needs of all those students."

Three teachers agreed with the speaker's sentiment that Say Yes had become less tangible to them over the past several years. Both seemed to associate Say Yes primarily with the scholarship. One said, "I feel like I've not been told anything more about Say Yes since three years ago. You know what I mean? About what it does, other than and literally what I remember from what we were told is they will pay for you to go to college." Another teacher said that information was out there, but only to those who searched for it. She suggested that this may have been the result of turf wars between Say Yes and school district staff:

> My experience, the reason I found out so much about [Say Yes]...is because I was seeking out information and went there for a college essay workshop with my kids and brought other kids in to go to them. They were free. They were at their location, very cool, but you had to seek out the information. And when I sought it out to our localized kids at two different Buffalo public schools, I sought both of those people out, and they were having difficulty communicating with the counselors in the building because the counselors were feeling threatened, probably, because they didn't have a lot of information was my guess. So I felt like that was an obstacle in getting more information as a parent and as kids to get them.

One teacher had used his school's Say Yes staff member as a resource, largely because the representative had made an effort to reach out to teachers:

> In my building, the last counselors we had was actually, when she started, wrote an introductory letter. It included all the resources. Originally, I thought Say Yes was just college funding, but then I realized about how much they do with Family Services, interventions, and all the stuff prior to just college. I'd get desperate, and I would talk to her with regards to some of my students. It was more about the social-emotional help that they needed, family support, than the actual college end of it because they have so much more prevalent need in their life.

He added, though, that a lack of continuity in Say Yes staffing made it difficult to connect kids with resources because "there's nobody there to go to or follow up with" when a staff member leaves. Other participants agreed that while they wanted to connect their students with resources, frequent turnover of Say Yes personnel disrupted relationships between teachers and resources. One teacher said, "I have students who came to me last week and asked me a question about Say Yes, and I was like, 'Okay, go talk to Mr. ... the new guy.' … I didn't know the name."

Another teacher attributed Say Yes employees' outsider status in part to the expectation that these staff members were only temporary: "I think where a lot of teachers are so standoffish is that, "All right, they're going to be here for a couple months. I'm never going to see them again anyway. So what's the point?"

Teachers suggested that it would help to have a website where parents and teachers could go to see what resources were available to their students. They complained that "the district has an awful school-by-school [web]site setup." Another said that his daughter's school did a much better job of putting "everything online," and that he could "see exactly where she should be in the process, what resources are available." What he described sounds similar to the Postsecondary Planning System that Say Yes hopes to implement in Buffalo in the next few years.

Unprompted by the moderator, a few teachers also expressed an interest in the types of statistics that are supposed to be part of Say Yes's Pathway Analytics: "Maybe it would be interesting to see what the numbers really are, like who's benefiting? A few years in, are these students still enrolled?"

Another added, "They're so 'data, data, data', but I haven't seen any data."

Teachers were supportive of the Say Yes mission, and eager for more information. But there remain concerns about overlap between Say Yes staff and district employees, and an appetite for more data. (Remember, however, that teacher resistance to surveys hindered earlier data collection efforts.)

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