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Say Yes Buffalo Partnership to expand efforts to increase college completion rates for Buffalo public school graduates

Buffalo, NY (July 11, 2019) – The Say Yes Buffalo Partnership, a nationally renowned community collective centered on removing barriers to high school graduation, college access and completion is expanding its groundbreaking work to improve outcomes for Buffalo students.

“Over the past six years the Say Yes Buffalo Partnership has worked tirelessly to improve outcomes for all Buffalo students, daring to believe in a shared vision for educational equity,” said David Rust, Executive Director of Say Yes Buffalo. We are excited about the potential this expanded work has to positively impact young people in Buffalo for years to come.”

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is providing a \$2.9M, 22-month investment to support the newly established Buffalo College Success Network and other efforts to help students, with special emphasis on those from communities of color and who are from low-income households, make successful transitions from high school to college and ultimately complete a postsecondary certificate or degree.

The yearlong grant proposal submission process engendered the Buffalo College Success Network, inclusive of Say Yes Buffalo, Buffalo Public Schools and the five local higher education institutions that admit the largest number of Buffalo students receiving tuition funding from Say Yes Buffalo: Buffalo State College, Medaille College, SUNY Erie, the University at Buffalo and Villa Maria College. Leaders from the aforementioned institutions worked collectively during the past 12 months to identify specific opportunities for investment that could further remove barriers to postsecondary completion for Buffalo students.

Priority outcomes for the grant include:

1. Increase postsecondary persistence of students who access the Buffalo College Success Network services
2. Increase postsecondary enrollment of Buffalo Public School students, and
3. Create a comprehensive data system allowing for cross system collaboration between the public school district and institutions of higher education.

The achievement of these priority outcomes will come to fruition through a variety of strategic efforts, including modelling best practices from Say Yes Buffalo's existing preventive services, mental health and mentoring initiatives:

- In Buffalo's public high school classrooms, near-peer mentors (recent high school graduates who have successfully transitioned to college) will be embedded to share their personal experiences with current high school students and provide advice on what to expect and how to prepare for college
- The Buffalo Public School District will adopt a college transition curriculum to be made mandatory for all students graduating high school
- Eleven new College Success Counselor positions will be created on the campuses of Buffalo State College, Medaille College, SUNY Erie and Villa Maria College; these individuals will work 1:1 with students to remove any barriers to their academic success
- Establishment of on-campus mental health clinics operated by licensed clinicians to support students dealing with social/emotional and/or traumatic challenges that could negatively impact their ability to complete a postsecondary degree

Say Yes Buffalo is optimistic about its ability to achieve the goals of this partnership because of its previous successes, which include:

- Established a nationally renowned collaborative governance structure comprised of parents, school district leaders, philanthropy, city, county and state officials, higher education and labor unions to manage day-to-day challenges and opportunities for our collective efforts
- 16 percentage-point increase in public high school graduates (2012=49%; 2017=65%)
- 10 percentage-point increase in number of students going to postsecondary institutions (2012=57%; 2017=67%)
- Over \$60 million raised toward postsecondary tuition scholarships (bringing us almost half-way to our goal of raising \$130 million, which would cover scholarships through our first 10 years in a \$30 million spend-down fund and in perpetuity through a \$100 million endowment fund)
- Expanded provision of on-site mental health clinics to all 55 Buffalo public schools
- Embedded free legal services across the district
- Coordinated creation of mobile health clinics, expanding access to health services for students at schools
- Provision of social service preventive specialists (Family Support Specialists) to all schools to address basic and long-term individual student needs
- Established Community Schools programming and Parent Centers to strengthen school district and family ties and facilitate supports outside traditional school day
- Created a mentoring program to help students transition from high school to postsecondary

- Established free community-based summer program for elementary students with focus on grade-level academics and enrichment
- Helped expand quality after-school programming to every P-12 school building
- Established internship and career pathways program to provide paid work experience and full-time employment opportunities for Say Yes Scholars
- Strengthened the school district's ability to screen and address developmental delays for its youngest learners in partnership with Help Me Grow
- Established "Breaking Barriers Buffalo," a nationally renowned Boys & Men of Color effort that focuses on elevating youth voice to address policies and systems negatively impacting young men of color and helps coordinate the city and school district's My Brother's Keeper initiatives

"The progress we've made since our launch was supported by hundreds of donors who matched their belief in our mission with financial investments to support our scholarship promise," said David Rust, Executive Director of Say Yes Buffalo. "Without their support, we would have never gotten to this point, and we are forever grateful to our Angel Donors."

Say Yes Buffalo shares the Foundation's belief that every student in the United States should have access to quality educational opportunities, from preschool to postsecondary completion. The Gates Foundation P – 16 Community Investment Team seeks to define exemplary P – 16 work and identify how the foundation can best impact the P – 16 field. Through the life of the investment, the Gates Foundation will provide guidance and thought partnership for implementation of the initiative. Additionally, the Buffalo College Success Network will be able to learn from the other P – 16 communities in a series of webinars and in-person learning sessions.

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About the Say Yes Buffalo Partnership

Launched in 2012, the Say Yes Buffalo partnership is a community collaboration dedicated to strengthening the city's public school system and increasing high school and postsecondary graduation rates. Comprised of the Buffalo Public School District, City of Buffalo, Erie County, the Buffalo Teachers Federation, the District Parent Coordinating Council and more than one-hundred other funders and community-based-organizations is made possible by the collaboration and generosity of Western New York individuals, families, businesses and organizations and Say Yes to Education. In 2019, the Say Yes Buffalo Partnership established the Buffalo College Success Network with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Buffalo College Success Network, inclusive of Say Yes Buffalo, Buffalo Public Schools, Buffalo State College, Medaille College, SUNY Erie, the University at Buffalo and Villa Maria College, works collectively to increase college completion rates for Buffalo public school graduates. More information at www.SayYesBuffalo.org.