

Gown Towns: A Case Study of Say Yes to Education

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Executive Summary

Postsecondary education is the entry ticket to the middle class. But for low-income Americans, college success is rare (Chapter 1). This report consists primarily of a case study of Say Yes to Education, based on interviews, site visits, focus groups, surveys, and empirical analysis (our methods are described in Chapter 2). The goal of our research was to extract lessons from the Say Yes experience for those engaged in similar efforts to boost postsecondary education outcomes through place-based initiatives.

After a history of supporting individual classes of students (Chapter 3), Say Yes has embarked on initiatives in Syracuse and Buffalo, New York, and Guilford County, North Carolina. Cleveland looks set to be the next Say Yes city. There is no single, fixed Say Yes “model.” Considerable variation can be seen across the sites. But the Say Yes approach consists of four principal components: a final-dollar college tuition scholarship funded from an endowment; a cross-sectoral collaborative governance structure; the provision of support services to boost college-readiness (e.g. summer schools, legal clinics, after-school learning); and a data-driven approach based on shared data, pathway metrics, and an individualized tracking system (Chapter 4).

We provide detailed case studies of the Say Yes experience in the three current sites. In each case, we describe the evolution of the Say Yes initiative, with a particular focus on each of the four core components in each site. We also report results from surveys and focus groups, and summarize the existing empirical research.

In Syracuse (Chapter 5), the scholarship endowment is fully funded at \$31 million, thanks in large part to a \$20 million contribution from the State of New York. As the first site where Say Yes implemented a community-wide approach, Syracuse encountered several challenges in implementing Say Yes’s “theory of change,” particularly when it came to

collaborating with the district and community-based organizations to provide a cohesive suite of wraparound services. Significant up-front investments from Say Yes (to the tune of \$36 million) initially helped to fund site directors in schools, after-school and summer programming, pro bono legal services, and other services in the community. Public school enrollment has risen, probably as a result of more affluent families moving into the city from the suburbs. No empirical study has yet been undertaken in Syracuse of the impact of Say Yes on high school graduation, college enrollment, or college completion.

Say Yes Buffalo (Chapter 6) has raised \$25 million (with an additional \$35 million committed) toward a scholarship endowment target of \$100 million, runs a wide range of services for K-12 students, and has established a strong collective governance structure. Overall, Buffalo provides the fullest expression to date of the Say Yes approach. Empirical research suggests positive impacts on public school enrollment, high school graduation, college matriculation, and college persistence following the introduction of Say Yes in Buffalo. Impacts on high school graduation and postsecondary persistence are particularly pronounced for black non-Hispanic students.

The newest Say Yes initiative in Guilford County (Chapter 7) has suffered two blows: the departure of a supportive school superintendent, and a \$5 million overspend in the scholarship's first year as a result of poor data and/or modeling errors. As a result, the universal scholarship has been abandoned. Eligibility is now contingent on a mix of household income and years of enrollment in public K-12 schools. No substantial services have been introduced.

In all three sites, the data-driven component of the Say Yes approach has remained largely on the drawing board. Challenges have included getting access to school district data; collecting survey data from other providers; and building a robust data platform. Say Yes is now investing much more heavily in specialist staff and external expertise. In all three sites, as of early 2018, more progress is beginning to be made on the data front. Cleveland is well advanced towards becoming a Say Yes city, with the goal of raising \$125 million for a scholarship endowment.

Say Yes has many features in common with other initiatives, and we conduct a literature review of studies relevant to each of the four main elements of the Say Yes approach (Chapter 8 and Appendix 3). There is a paucity of evidence generally on the effectiveness of place-based "promise"-style college scholarships. Services similar to those provided or facilitated by Say Yes have shown some positive impact, but the research literature is thin. Evaluating the impact of collective governance initiatives and data-driven approaches is necessarily difficult, but there is a qualitative literature focused on their creation and sustainability.

We draw some lessons for Say Yes specifically, as well as for reformers more generally (Chapter 9). The seven lessons for Say Yes are: prepare the ground; leverage community

assets; invest in models, metrics, and data; build in equity; localize leadership early; let others take credit; and transfer lessons learned. The four lessons for reformers more broadly are: collaboration needs strong local leadership; collective governance needs a powerful cabinet of decision makers; securing credible commitments is important for sustainability; and data is the single most important ingredient of reform.

It will not be possible to make serious progress in improving social mobility without meeting the challenge of improving educational outcomes for students from our poorest cities. Say Yes is one of many organizations trying to move the needle on education and has learned some hard lessons along the way. Our hope is that by sharing some of those lessons here, this report can make some contribution to this endeavor.

Introduction

Almost every young American foresees a BA after his or her name. Most high school freshmen, even those from lower-income and middle-income families, said in 2009 that they expected to get at least a four-year degree (NCES, 2009). Of course, these expectations are very often not met. But there is a huge class gap here. Most children from affluent, well-educated homes will in fact gain a four-year college degree; most of those from middle-class or poor homes will not.

Education has long been seen as a force for social mobility, inclusion, and equity. In the words of Horace Mann, the 19th-century reformer and inspiration behind the Common Schools movement, education is “the great equalizer...the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” But for education to perform this function as a “great equalizer,” the paths to a good education need to be available to all. Postsecondary education in particular is perhaps closer to what Georgetown scholar Anthony P. Carnevale calls an “inequality machine” (Fischer, 2016).

Education is the great equalizer in principle, but the great stratifier in practice. Boosting social mobility requires interventions that widen the doors to our colleges, and help more students to be ready to walk through those doors and succeed. In terms of public policy, this goal is being pursued at a federal, state, and local level. There are a growing number of initiatives, especially “Promise” scholarship programs, which are aimed at cities (or in some cases, counties). Say Yes to Education (Say Yes), the organization that is the focus of this study, works at a city level in Syracuse and Buffalo, New York, and a county level in Guilford County, North Carolina.

In this introductory chapter, we set the scene for the study by briefly describing the approach of Say Yes and summarizing the research literature on why college-going has become such a focus of policymakers’ attention. This first chapter then sets out the nature of the problem that Say Yes is attempting to solve. We show how a college education

matters for life chances, now more than ever, and then describe the wide inequalities in accessing, completing, and benefiting from postsecondary education.

1.1 What is Say Yes to Education?

Say Yes to Education was founded by George Weiss, a multi-millionaire hedge fund manager, in 1987. Weiss offered college scholarships to specific cohorts of students in selected schools in Boston, MA; Philadelphia, PA; Hartford, CT; and Harlem, NYC. (This first stage of Say Yes is summarized in Chapter 3.) But from the mid-2000s, Say Yes changed course. The narrow focus on specific cohorts of schoolchildren was replaced by a more ambitious, community-wide approach. Say Yes describes the decision to pivot to the new strategy as follows:

Decades spent in frustrated pursuit of quick, isolated fixes are beginning to drive the development of a new movement—one that understands that the most promising hope for shattering predictable barriers to academic achievement and positive life outcomes for students in America’s cities is a comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable community-wide approach (Our Strategy, 2018).

This new Say Yes approach would have four elements:

- Lowering the cost of college through a “final-dollar” scholarship
- Bringing key stakeholders together under a collaborative governance structure
- Improving college readiness through the provision of services, mostly as “wrap-around” to K-12 schools
- Use of data and analytics to track progress and align resources

The Say Yes “Theory of Action” emphasizes these elements as part of an overall place-based strategy. As the organization puts it: “Say Yes recognizes the critical roles of structures, strategies and culture in changing postsecondary completion outcomes—sustainably, and at scale.”

With the final-dollar scholarship as a “catalyst,” Say Yes seeks to bring stakeholders in a community to a shared commitment to improving postsecondary outcomes. By reducing or removing real or perceived financial barriers to entering college, while at the same time promoting college readiness through additional services in the K-12 years, the goal is to improve postsecondary outcomes. We discuss in Chapter 8 the extant literature on the significance of these barriers, and the potential for these particular kinds of investments.

Say Yes aims to bring together key players from across the community to invest in the scholarship fund and additional services. There are three existing Say Yes sites—Syracuse, NY (announced in 2009), Buffalo, NY (2011), and Guilford County, NC (2015)—plus one potential site in the preparatory stage, Cleveland, OH.

What is a universal final-dollar tuition scholarship?

A tuition scholarship is “universal” if it is available to all students graduating from high schools within each school district. Many scholarships base the value of the scholarship on the number of years a student has been enrolled in the public school system. A “final-dollar” scholarship bridges any gap between other financial aid available to a student and the full tuition cost. It is, then, the “final dollar” a student receives toward tuition, since the scholarship is awarded after federal, state, and institutional aid have already been applied.

In 2017, the spending on scholarships in each site (and the average individual scholarship payment in 2016-17) was \$1.3 million (\$2,700 per student) in Syracuse; \$2.7 million (\$3,400 per student) in Buffalo; and \$5.8 million (\$2,800 per student) in Guilford County. One of the goals of Say Yes is to create a scholarship endowment fund large enough to fund scholarships in perpetuity. By 2018, the endowment in Syracuse had reached a value of \$31 million; compared to \$25 million in Buffalo (with an additional \$35 million commitment); and \$9.2 million (of a total \$42 million commitment) in Guilford County—sizable investments, in each case.

As we show in this report, the operation, scope, history, and development of Say Yes varies greatly between each of the three existing sites as the table below shows:

Three Variants of Say Yes

How does the Say Yes approach differ between sites?

Background	Syracuse	Buffalo	Guilford
Year announced	2008	2011	2015
Current Say Yes local staff	3	20	7
Endowment as of March 2018	\$31 million	\$25 million	\$9.2 million
Additional commitments to endowment ¹		\$35 million	\$32.8 million
Reached endowment target	✓	✗	✗

Scholarship	Syracuse	Buffalo	Guilford
Final dollar	✓	✓	✓
Universal	✓	✓	✗
To receive full benefit, must enroll by	Grade 10	Kindergarten	Grade 9 ²
Scholarships paid in 2016-17	468	773	2,053
First Say Yes scholars entered college in	Fall 2009	Fall 2013	Fall 2016
Total scholarship spending in 2016-17	\$1.3 million	\$2.7 million	\$5.8 million
Average scholarship amount	\$2,717	\$3,442	\$2,803
Maximum choice grant	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000
Maximum opportunity grant	\$2,000	\$2,000	\$350

Governance	Syracuse	Buffalo	Guilford
Signed MOU with school district	✗	✓	✓
Existing MOU with district still in use	N/A ³	✓	✗
Operating committee	✓	✓	✓
Scholarship board	✓	✓	✓
Community leadership council	✗	✓	✗
Permanent executive director in post	✓	✓	✗

Services	Syracuse	Buffalo	Guilford
Family support specialists in schools	✓	✓	✗
Legal clinics	✓	✓	✗
Mental health clinics	~ ⁴	✓	✗
Out-of-school-time programs	~ ⁵	✓	✗
FAFSA assistance program	✓	✓	✓

Data	Syracuse	Buffalo	Guilford
Data-sharing agreement with district	✓	✓	✓
Postsecondary Planning System (PPS) piloted	✗	✓	✓
PPS operating across district	✗	✗	✗

1 We distinguish between promised contributions and amounts currently in each site's endowment. Commitments to the endowments in Buffalo and Guilford are not necessarily legally binding.

2 Eligibility criteria for Guilford vary by income group. Students from households making under \$40,000 are eligible for the full tuition scholarship if enrolled by grade 9. Higher-income students are not eligible for the full scholarship but may qualify for a partial scholarship depending upon their length of time in the district.

3 Say Yes Syracuse has not used MOUs to formalize its relationships with key partners.

4 While mental health clinics are available to students in Syracuse, these were primarily initiated by the county and are not generally associated with Say Yes.

5 During its early years, Say Yes Syracuse operated after-school and summer programs in partnership with Syracuse University. OST programs in the district are now overseen by community partners like the YMCA and Boys & Girls Club.

For example, while Say Yes Buffalo has 73 staff listed on its website, Syracuse has three staff. The scholarship is universal in Buffalo and Syracuse, but, as of 2017, is based on household income in Guilford County. Say Yes Syracuse does not have a Memorandum of Understanding with the school district; Guilford County does, but is requiring that a new one be signed. Students in Buffalo and Syracuse can get up to \$2,000 towards non-tuition costs; those in Guilford just \$350. The additional services made available in each site are also markedly different, in part a reflection of their different stages of development. The initial work in Cleveland differs from previous efforts in important ways, too. The main point here is that there is no Say Yes “model.” Rather, there is a broad “theory of change” that is applied very differently over time and across different sites.

The animating goal of Say Yes is to improve postsecondary outcomes for students in the host cities. The success of the Say Yes initiatives has to be judged against that yardstick. There are of course a series of milestones that have to be passed long before the K-12 years end: not least graduating from high school with the skills needed to flourish at the postsecondary level. But like many organizations, Say Yes focuses on postsecondary outcomes for two reasons. First, they have become more important. Second, they remain hard to access for less advantaged students.

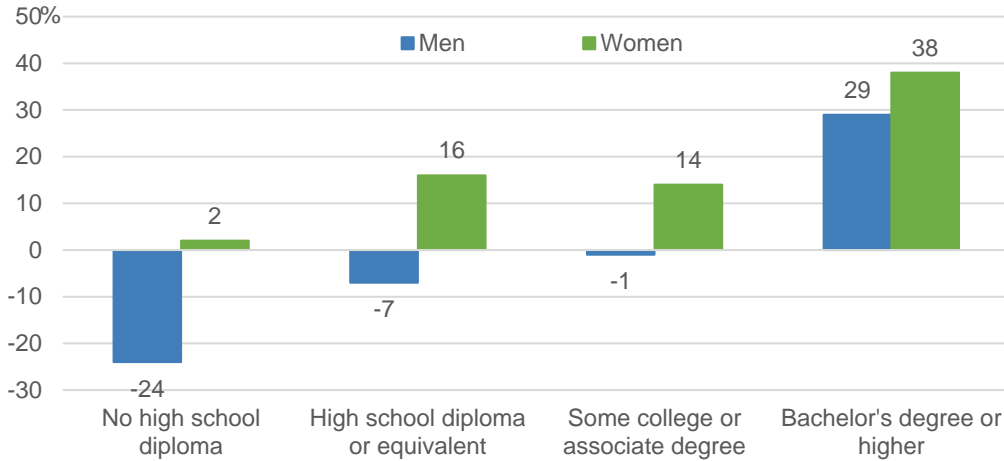
1.2 College matters

Postsecondary education credentials and skills are increasingly demanded by, and rewarded in, the labor market. The gaps between those with and without a college education, and especially a four-year college degree, are large and/or widening, in terms of wages, employment rates, household income, and upward mobility rates.

Figure 1.1 shows that real wage earnings for those with a BA or higher have increased by 29 percent for men and 38 percent for women since 1980. Earnings for men with less than a BA have actually declined over the period, especially for those without a high school diploma:

Figure 1.1: Real Earnings Have Increased for the Highly Educated

Percent change in median usual weekly earnings of wage and salary workers ages 25 and older employed full-time, 1980-2015

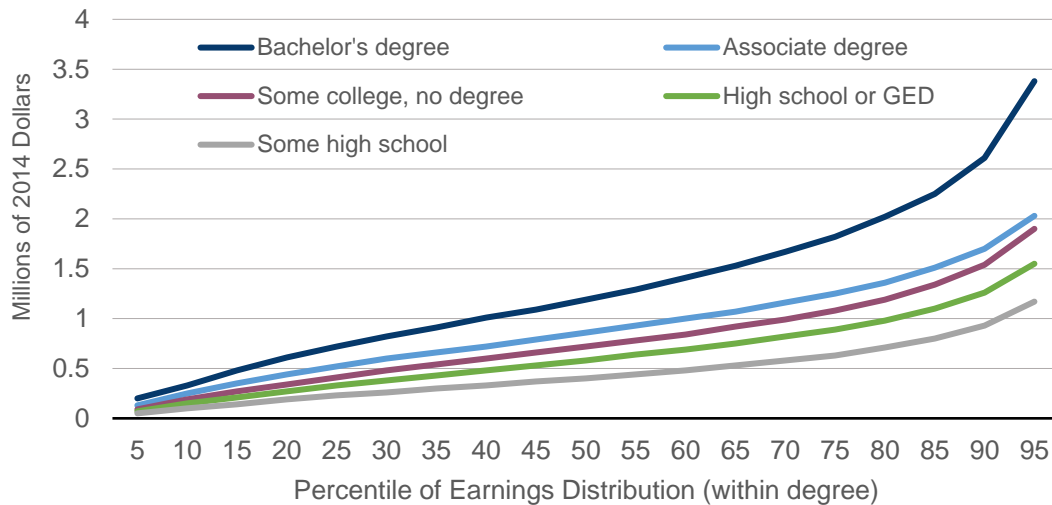


Source: Schanzenbach, Boddy, Mumford, and Nantz (2016), Figure 2

In 2016, the median female (male) four-year college graduate employed full-time earned \$60,060 (\$80,315) annually. The median female (male) high school graduate with no college experience earned \$31,541 (\$41,891) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). These gaps cumulate with age. The median college graduate earns about \$1.2 million over a lifetime—double the lifetime earnings of the median high school graduate:

Figure 1.2: Median BA Earns \$1.19 Over Lifetime

Distribution of present discounted value of lifetime earnings by degree, not including degrees beyond BAs



Source: *The Hamilton Project*, "Career Earnings by College Major," http://www.hamiltonproject.org/charts/career_earnings_by_college_major/

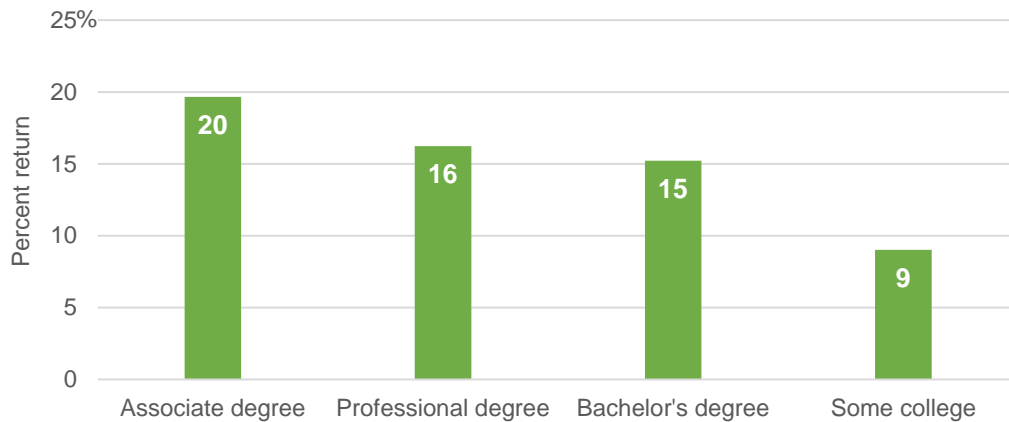
The median associate degree holder earns \$0.86 million over a lifetime, midway between the median high school graduate and the median four-year college graduate. Figure 1.1 shows that real earnings for men with associate degrees have been fairly stagnant since 1980, although earnings for women with associate degrees have grown by 14 percent (half the rate of growth for women with bachelor’s degrees or higher).¹

While an associate degree gives a much smaller bump to wages, it nonetheless represents a good investment, since it is relatively inexpensive. The rate of return on an associate degree is actually higher than the return to any other postsecondary degree:

...
¹ The gaps depicted in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 are among those who are employed. This will understate earning differences by education level, since individuals with higher levels of education are also more likely to be employed.

Figure 1.3: High Returns to Educational Investments

Average percent return to education for civilian, natural-born U.S. citizens using 2010-12 earnings and 2012-13 tuition costs



Source: Greenstone, Looney, Patashnik, and Yu (2013), Figure 11

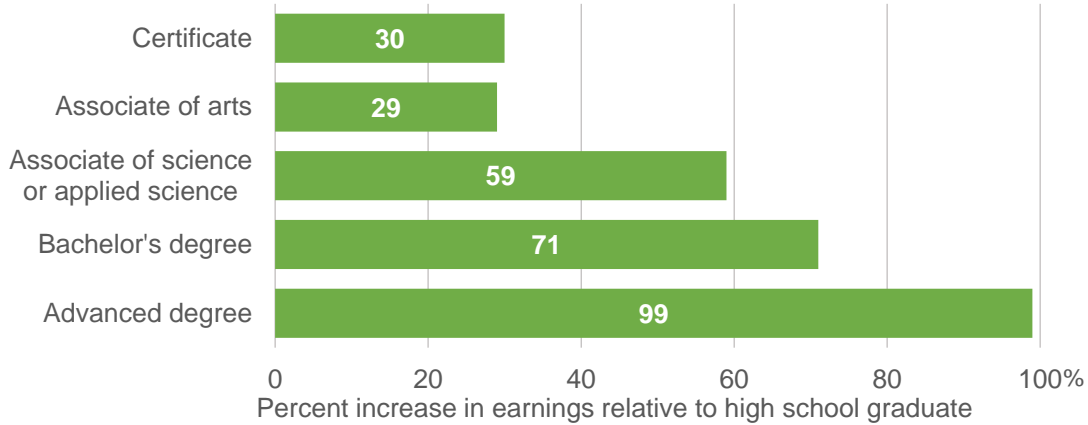
It is of course one thing to show that those with a college education have higher wages and quite another to prove a direct *causal* relationship. Perhaps the people who go to college were likely to succeed regardless of if they attained a college degree. Recent studies have found that earnings differences are actually fairly good approximations of the returns to education (Holzer & Baum, 2017; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). Drawing on administrative data from Florida, Holzer and Baum (2017) find that a BA raises quarterly earnings by 71 percent relative to a high school diploma, while an associate degree provides a 59 percent lift.²

...

² To identify a causal impact, Holzer and Baum control for gender, low-income family background, race, math scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, years of labor market experience, and tenure with the current employer.

Figure 1.4: The Causal Impact of Education on Earnings

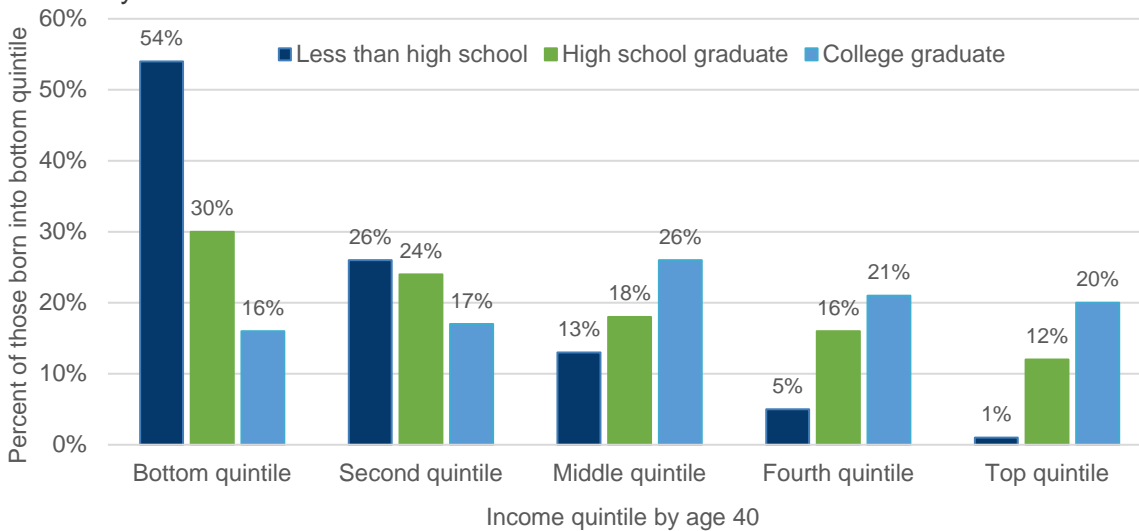
Results from regression estimates of returns to education credentials for young workers in Florida



Source: Holzer and Baum (2017)

Given the importance of education for earnings and income, it should come as no surprise that attaining higher education greatly increases one’s chances of upward economic mobility. For a child born into a poor household (i.e. the lowest income quintile), getting a college education, and especially a four-year degree, transforms their life chances. Among respondents in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) and the Children of the NLSY79 (C-NLSY), of individuals from poor families who received a BA, 41 percent rose into one of the top two quintiles, compared to just 28 percent of those with a high school diploma:

Figure 1.5: College Improves Social Mobility
 Intergenerational mobility of those born into the bottom quintile by education level

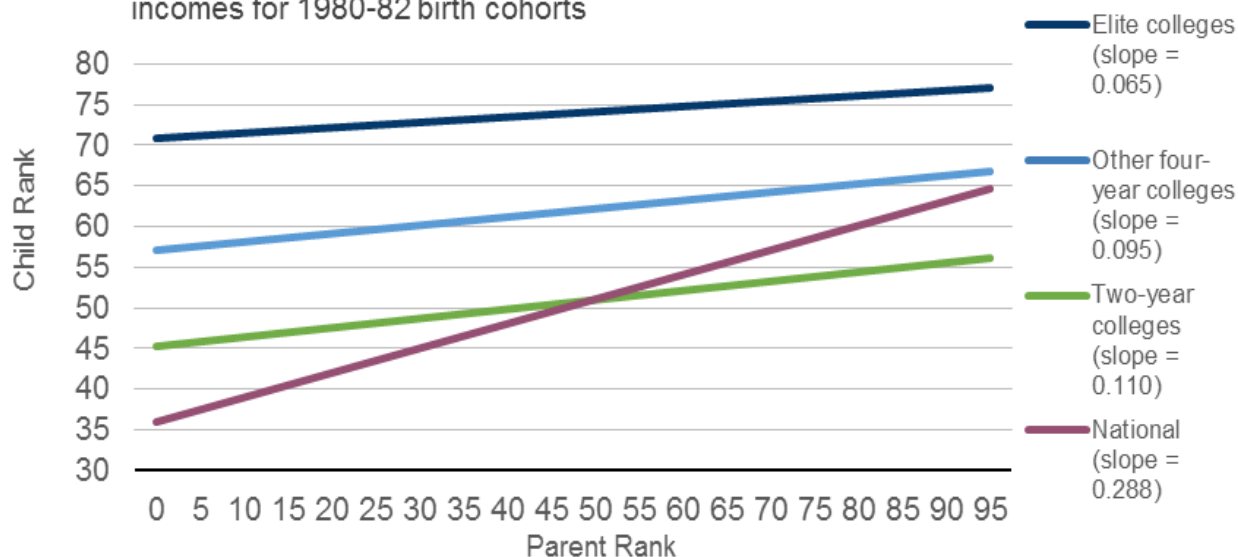


Source: Reeves 2014, author tabulations of NLSY79 and NLSY97

A college degree does not guarantee middle- or upper-middle-class status for those born to low-income parents, but it does increase their chances of being upwardly mobile very considerably. The mobility impact of a college education can also be seen in the relationship between the income rank of the parents of graduates and the income rank of the graduates themselves once they are established in the labor market. As work by Raj Chetty and his colleagues at the Equality of Opportunity Project shows (2017), the tight correlation between the incomes of parents and their adult children almost disappears among those who complete college:

Figure 1.6: College Weakens the Correlation Between Parent and Child Incomes

Lines of best fit from rank-rank correlations of parent and child incomes for 1980-82 birth cohorts



Source: Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, and Yagan (2017), Figure III B

1.3 But class gaps in college success remain very wide

So: college matters. The goal of Say Yes—to boost college-going, especially among students from lower-income backgrounds, and in specific cities—is consistent with a strategy to boost social mobility.

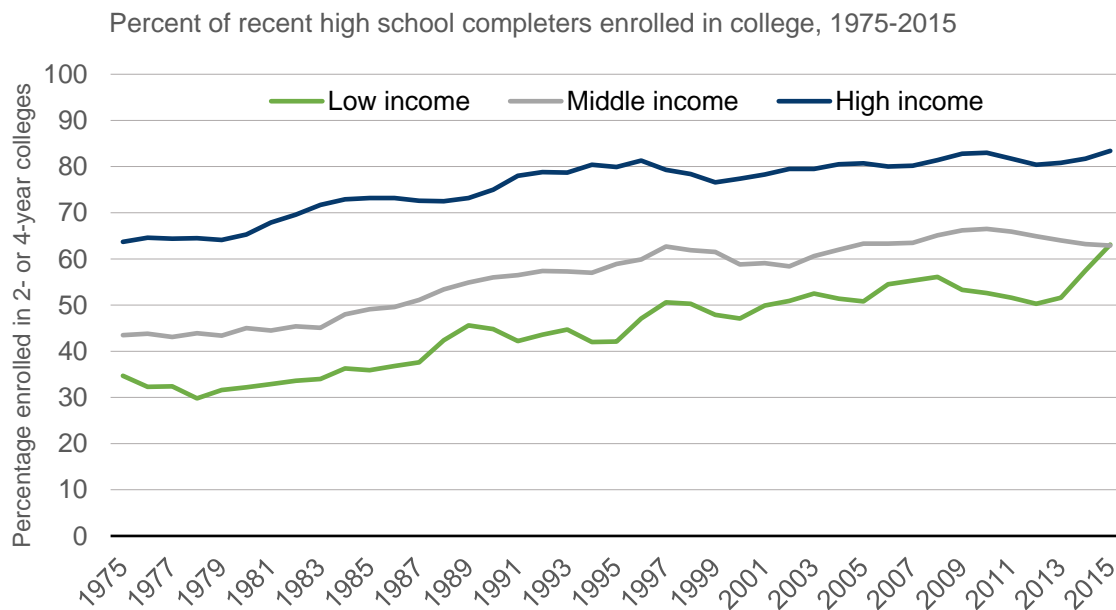
Postsecondary education boosts wages, wealth, household income, and rates of upward mobility. That is the good news. For children from poor families, getting to and through a good college massively enhances chances, choices, and outcomes.

Now for the bad: very few poor kids make it to and through college. As a result, postsecondary educational provisions tend at least as much to amplify as to ameliorate inequality. The philosopher Joseph Fishkin (2016) notes that college degrees act as “bottle-necks,” which he defines as opportunities or requirements (such as educational credentials) that are necessary to reach one’s ends. For instance, graduating from high school is usually a prerequisite for going to college, and as we saw in the last section, getting a college degree increases one’s chances for future success. High-income students are more likely to pass through each successive bottleneck than low-income students, giving them brighter prospects compared to their lower-income peers.

The Say Yes “pathway” has two final stages: college enrollment, and college completion. This is a critical distinction, and one that is vitally important for assessing the impact of initiatives like Say Yes. The worst outcome is for a student from a poor background to take on debt, often at high interest rates, and then end up with nothing to show for it in the labor market. The issue of student debt is often misframed as being about the high cost of the top colleges: in fact, most graduates from those institutions reap good returns in the form of much higher earnings. The real problems of debt and default are at the other end of the economic scale. According to Holzer and Baum (2017), the strongest predictor of default is failing to complete a degree—and completion rates are lower at less selective institutions like community colleges.

The good news is that the percentage of low-income students who are enrolled in four-year colleges has increased in recent years at a national level. Again, this overall rise in enrollment is important background for the study of Say Yes: the question is not whether college enrollment has risen in Say Yes sites (since it has gone up in most places), it is whether enrollment has gone up faster than it would have in the absence of Say Yes:

Figure 1.7: College Enrollment Rising, But Disparities Remain



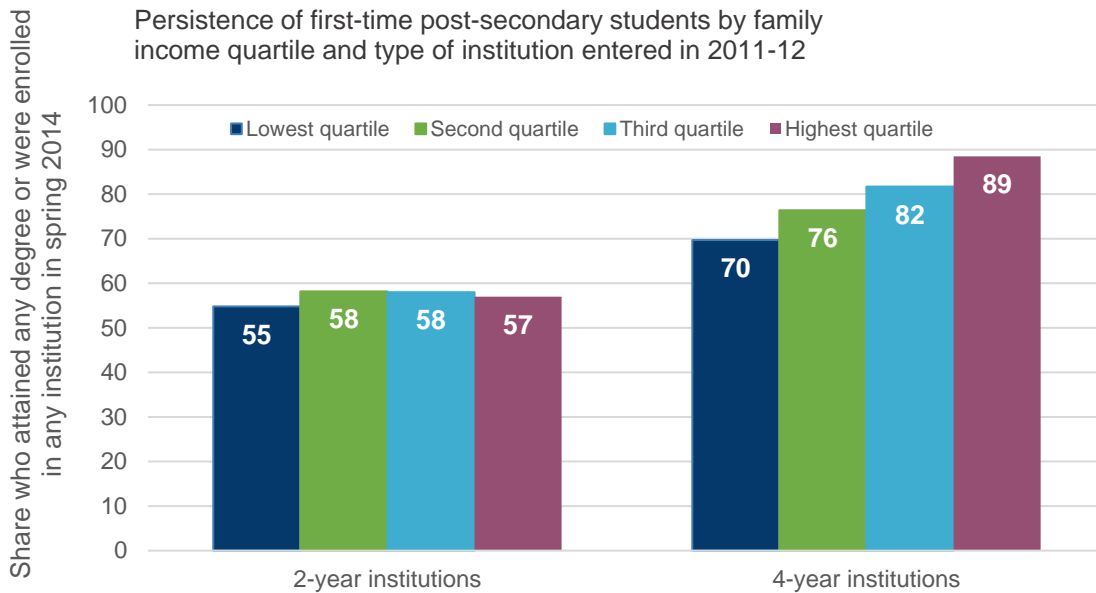
Source: NCES (2016), Table 302.30. Low income refers to the bottom 20 percent of all family incomes, high income refers to the top 20 percent of all family incomes, and middle income refers to the 60 percent in between.

The narrowing of the enrollment gap suggests a widening of at least one bottleneck. But as Holzer and Baum (2017) write, “The paths followed by disadvantaged students, who

are often first-generation college attendees, too often do not lead to college *attainment*—which requires both *enrollment* in a program and its *completion*—and to labor market success.”

Here, class gaps open up again. Of students who started at four-year institutions in 2011-12, almost ninety percent of those from the top quartile, but only seventy percent of those from the bottom quartile, were still enrolled or had obtained degrees by spring 2014:

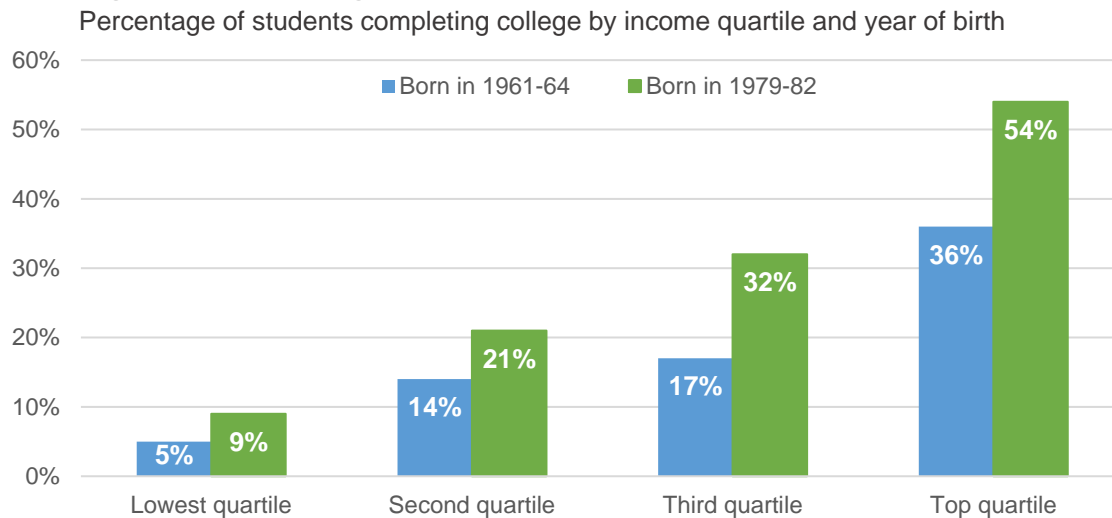
Figure 1.8: College Persistence Varies By Income and Institution Type



Source: NCES (2017), Table 326.50

Lower rates of both enrollment and persistence for students from lower-income families results inevitably in a large gap in rates of four-year college completion—and the gaps do not appear to be narrowing. Over half the children born in 1979-1982 and raised in the most affluent families went on to gain a four-year degree, compared to fewer than one in ten of those from the poorest quartile:

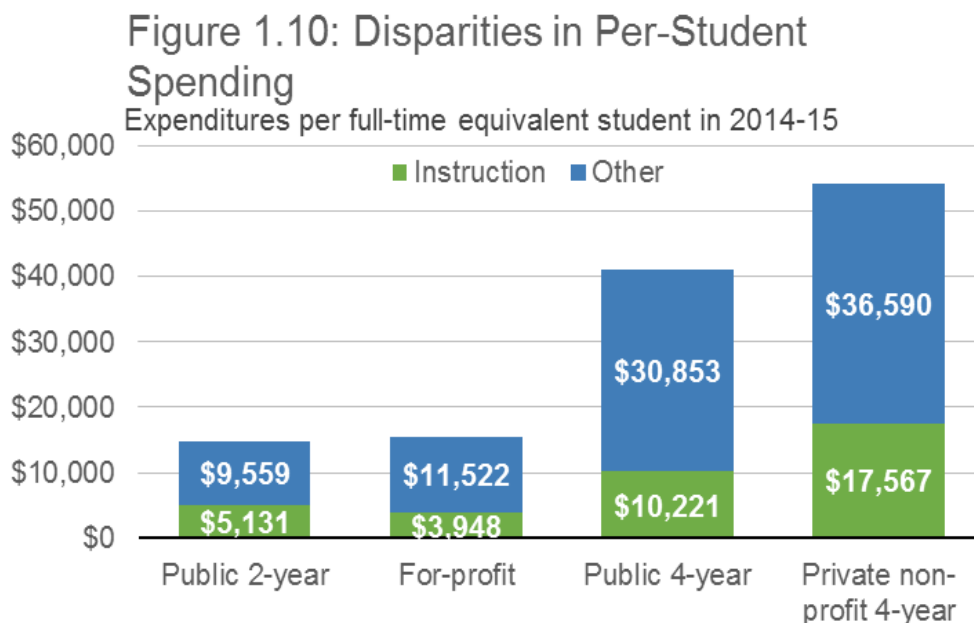
Figure 1.9: College Completion Gaps Have Widened



Source: Bailey and Dynarski (2011), Figure 3

Persistence, then, matters a great deal. Say Yes is attempting to track persistence rates of Say Yes scholars—but, as we will show in the next few chapters, it is too early to discern an impact.

The type of college attended matters as well. At more selective colleges, persistence rates are higher, and class gaps are much narrower, if they exist at all. Why? Clearly a range of factors are at work here, including differences in student characteristics and backgrounds. But Carnevale and Strohl suggest that resources are a big part of the story. Per-student spending at public and private nonprofit four-year colleges is two to three times greater than spending at public two-year and for-profit institutions:



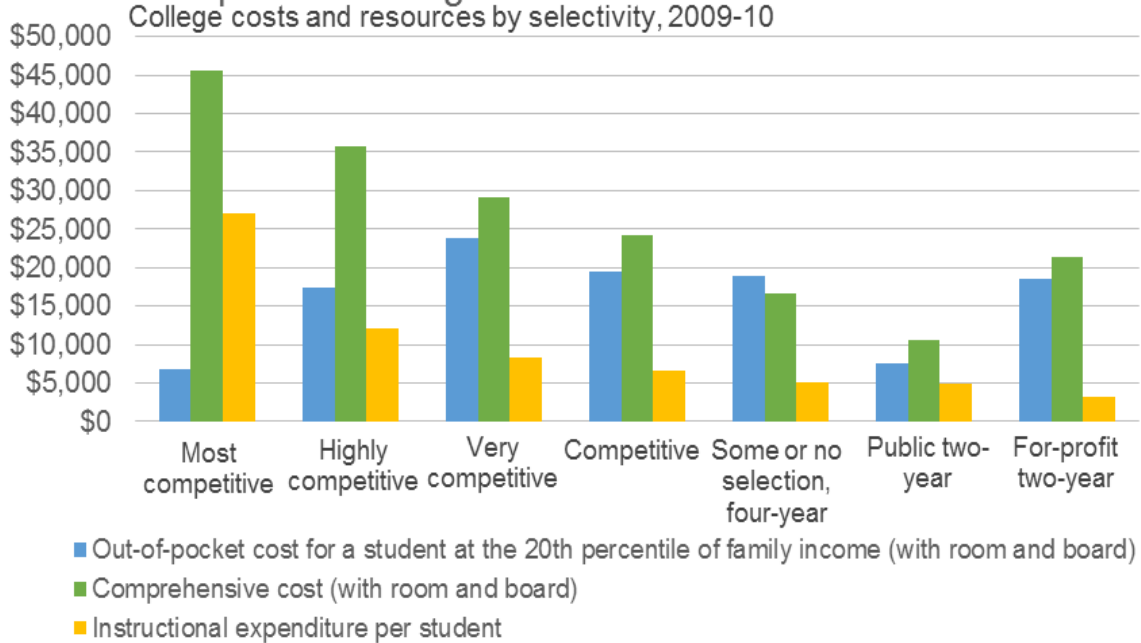
Source: NCES (2017), Table 334.10

As Carnevale and Strohl write, “Graduation rates are increasing at selective private four-year colleges and the public flagships, where resources and advantaged students are increasingly concentrated, and declining in non-selective four-year and two-year colleges, where the bulk of postsecondary students, especially less-advantaged students, are concentrated.”

The implication here is that Say Yes and similar initiatives may seek to improve the “matching” of lower-income students to more selective four-year colleges. This is where the Say Yes “Higher Education Compact”—a consortium of more than 100 private colleges and universities across the nation—may play a role by encouraging students to apply to selective institutions that they may not otherwise have considered (see [Appendix 4](#) for a list of institutions included in the Compact).

In fact, even leaving the Say Yes Compact aside, more selective colleges are typically less costly for poor students than other institutions. Out-of-pocket costs for students from households at or near the poverty line (20th percentile of family income) are lower at the most competitive colleges than at other institutions, though out-of-pocket costs are high at mid-range schools:

Figure 1.11: Low-Income Students Pay Least at Most Competitive Colleges



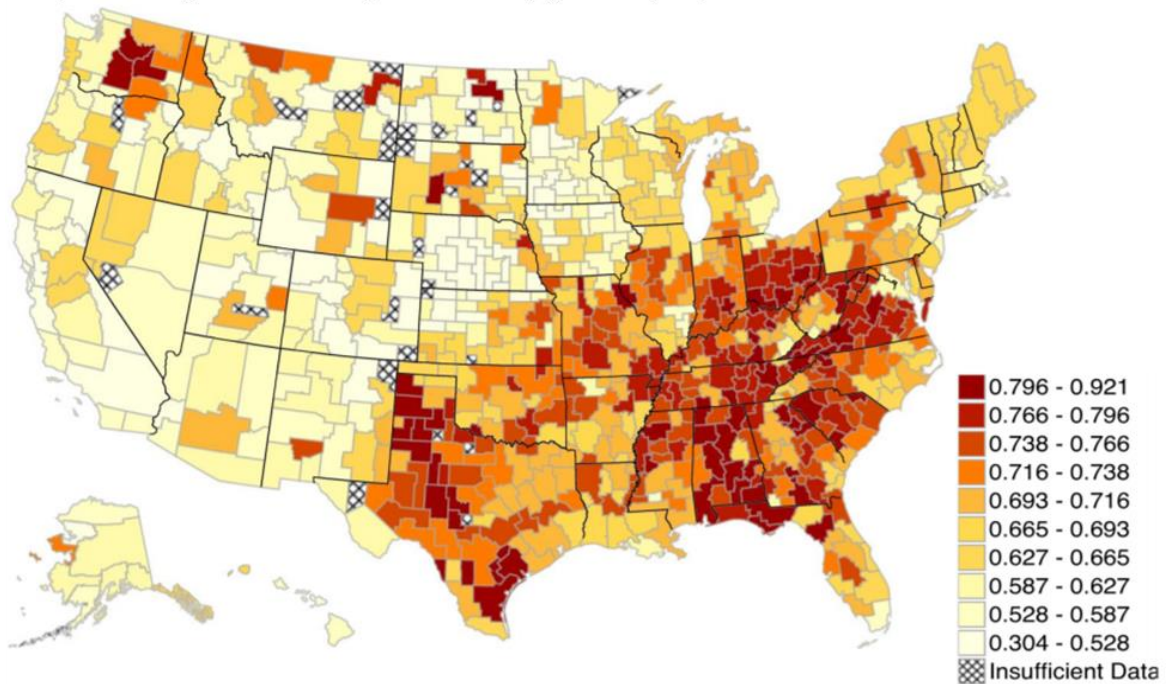
Source: Hoxby and Turner (2013), Figure 2, and Hoxby and Avery (2012), Table 1

But most high-achieving low-income students do not apply to selective colleges even when they would probably be admitted (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). This is where something like the Say Yes Compact may act as a signaling device, by helping to raise awareness of the possibility of aiming higher.

The problem of “under-matching” is particularly acute in certain parts of the country, and certain cities. And place matters more generally for college-going, as data from the Equality of Opportunity Project shows. The chances of a young adult from a low-income family going to college varies significantly between different places:

Figure 1.12: Geography Matters for College Attendance and Economic Mobility

Slopes from regression of college attendance (age 18-21) on parental income rank



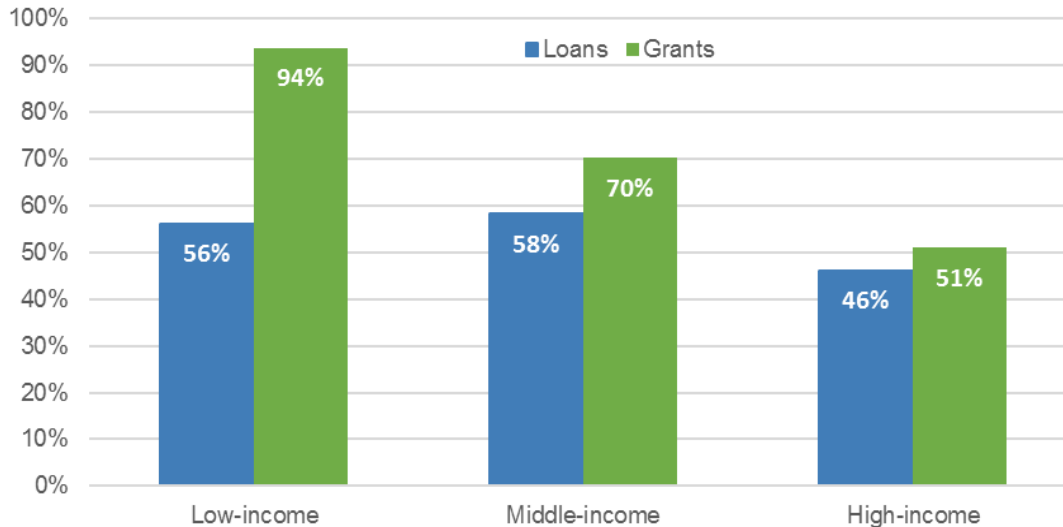
Corr. with baseline $\bar{y}_{100} - \bar{y}_0 = 0.68$ (unweighted), 0.72 (pop-weighted)

Source: Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez (2014), Online Appendix Figure VII

The signature of Say Yes is the offer of “free college”—specifically the provision of a final-dollar scholarship to cover tuition costs to all eligible students (although eligibility criteria vary and the universal offer has now been abandoned in Guilford County). By removing financial barriers—both real and perceived—the scholarship aims to incentivize students, parents, teachers, and policymakers. The cost and impact of the Say Yes scholarship offer will vary by place, as we will see. In part this is because of the differences in the proportion of students from different income backgrounds receiving different kinds of financial support:

Figure 1.13: How Students Pay for College

Percentage of full-time, full-year undergraduates receiving financial aid and average annual amount of aid by type, 2011-12 (dependent students only)



Source: NCES (2015), Table 331.35. Low-income students have family incomes below the 25th percentile, middle-income students have family incomes from the 25th to the 75th percentile, and high-income students have family incomes above the 75th percentile.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this section, failure to complete a degree is the strongest predictor of default. This is a particular concern given that low-income students are at a high risk of not completing their degrees. Taken together, inequalities in class, race, and place present serious obstacles to patterns of intergenerational mobility and to the ideal of equal opportunity. College attendance—and, even more so, college completion—has a big impact on the chances of upward social mobility. But success at getting into and through high-quality institutions, now the norm among the upper middle class, remains uncommon in poorer neighborhoods where Say Yes has focused its efforts.

We turn now to a description of our research questions and methods, and then to our detailed study of Say Yes. First, we trace the history and evolution of the initiative, then describe the current iteration of the Say Yes approach in the three sites: Syracuse, Buffalo, and Guilford.

Unsurprisingly, improving rates of college attendance and completion is a priority for policymakers at almost every level of government, and for nonprofit institutions and philanthropists across the nation. These entities spend billions of dollars each year, in part trying to make the benefits of college completion more widely shared. There are thousands of initiatives and interventions, big and small, aimed at boosting college-going. Many adopt one or more of the approaches that Say Yes has attempted to combine, in varying ways,

across three existing sites: place-based scholarships, collaborative governance structures, provision of extra “wraparound” services in the K-12 years to boost college readiness, and a strong data architecture.

2. Research Questions and Methods

The goal of this research project was to extract key lessons from the Say Yes to Education (Say Yes) experience for those engaged in similar efforts to boost postsecondary education outcomes through place-based initiatives. Our focus is on the three existing Say Yes sites in Syracuse, Buffalo, and Guilford County, though we have also studied Say Yes in earlier versions, and considered some early developments in Cleveland, tapped as the next likely site.

Specifically, we set out to answer the following questions, in relation to the listed dimensions:

- 1) Leadership and power: *who makes change happen?*
- 2) Governance: *how and where does collaboration occur?*
- 3) Data, metrics, and frameworks: *how is success measured and tracked?*
- 4) Incentives: *what drives individuals or institutions to change behavior?*
- 5) Commitment devices: *how can long-term commitment to change be secured?*

To that end, our research consisted of a case study of Say Yes, including the following main activities:

- Interviews with key stakeholders in the three Say Yes sites
- Observation of Operating Committees and other meetings
- Surveys of parents and teachers
- Focus groups of parents, students, and teachers

We endeavored to follow best case study practice by studying a clearly defined case (Say Yes and its operations), within a bounded system and specific contexts (the three sites), in depth, and drawing on multiple sources of evidence (Harrison, Birks, Franklins and Mills, 2017).

We also conducted a review of the related research literature in order to situate our study of Say Yes in the broader context of other similar reform efforts, and to inform our own collection and use of data from the case study itself.

Before proceeding to the main report, we summarize some of the components of our case study research.

2.1 Interviews

During the course of the study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 58 key stakeholders in each of the three sites and with Say Yes national staff. The interviewees were selected with the goal of collecting and triangulating data from multiple sources to generate a comprehensive understanding. In the three sites, and especially Buffalo where the Say Yes chapter is most developed, we sought interviewees who could provide multiple perspectives from key vantage points, especially: representatives of the education system (both on the political and administrative sides); community foundations; parent groups; teacher unions; members of the Operating Committee and Scholarship Board; and Say Yes staff and leaders. We sought to interview not only those currently occupying these roles, but where possible former occupants, in order to gain a longer view and greater diversity of perspectives.

A series of standard questions were asked of all interviewees, with additional questions pertinent to their role added as appropriate. (See Appendix 1 for a list of interviewees.) Questions asked of all interviewees were as follows: i) involvement with Say Yes, currently and in the past, ii) assessment of key strengths of the Say Yes approach, iii) assessment of the key weaknesses of the Say Yes approach, iv) identification of key components for success, v) lessons learned for Say Yes in future, and vi) lessons learned potentially applicable in other reform efforts. We also asked questions specific to the interviewee: for example, on the financing and modeling of the scholarship for those on the scholarship board, and so on.

Once interviews were completed, we examined the data for repeated patterns across the data, in order to draw out of key themes or common responses. In some cases we then selected a specific quote from an interviewee that captured these themes or responses.

Interviewees were given the opportunity to speak to us on the record or off the record, or a combination of both. The main purpose of these in-depth interviews was to gain an honest assessment of Say Yes; therefore, we have chosen to keep almost all quotes anonymous for the purposes of this report. We are grateful to all of our interview subjects for their time, candor, and thoughtfulness.

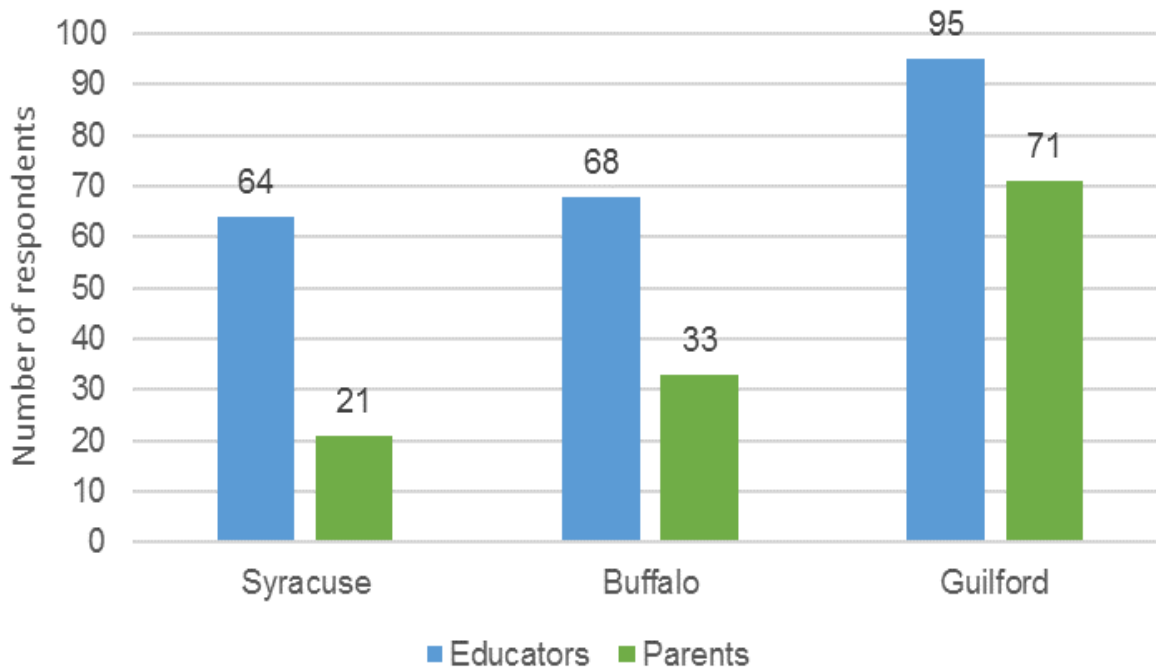
2.2 Observation

We also attended and made observational notes on a series of meetings in Say Yes sites, particularly Operating Committee meetings. These were private meetings, and our attendance was intended to deepen our understanding of Say Yes. Again, when we have drawn on comments made at these meetings in our report, we have kept them anonymous.

2.3 Surveys

In partnership with Drive Research, we surveyed parents, teachers, and guidance counselors from the Syracuse, Buffalo, and Guilford public school systems. The survey tool was a ten-question online survey linked through Facebook. The primary purpose of the survey was to recruit participants for focus groups (see below). To recruit additional educators, emails were also sent directly to teachers and counselors. We surveyed 237 teachers and counselors and 148 parents of high-school-age students across the three districts. Seven of the participants were both educators and parents, for a combined total of 378 participants. We eliminated 32 responses from parents or educators who worked or had children in schools that are not part of the public school system, leaving us with 346 total responses. Some participants skipped certain questions, particularly those that came later in the survey. The breakdown of respondents by district and audience is as follows:

Figure 2.1: Survey Participation by District



The sampling method is nonrandom, and we should stress that the results cannot be interpreted as representative of the Buffalo, Syracuse, or Guilford communities. Rather, the results are intended to supplement the qualitative data collected in our interviews, observational studies, and focus groups. (A full list of the survey questions is available in Appendix 2.)

2.4 Focus groups

In partnership with Drive Research, we also conducted three focus groups in each of the three Say Yes sites—one of students, one of parents, and one of teachers and guidance counselors. Each focus group involved 5 to 8 participants who were recruited through the online survey discussed above. Each individual received dinner and \$75 in exchange for participating in the group. Facilitators led participants through discussions of college access, students' needs, and the presence and impact of Say Yes on their community. Recordings of these conversations were transcribed for analysis, and the findings from each area are explored in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

2.5 Literature review

Say Yes has taken a different approach in each of the sites, partly in response to local circumstances. Nonetheless, there are four elements that characterize the Say Yes formula: place-based scholarships, wraparound services, system-wide change (or “collective impact”), and data-driven improvement. We therefore conducted a comprehensive literature review in each of these four areas, in order to situate the Say Yes experience in a broader research context. These reviews are summarized in Chapter 8, and provided in full in Appendix 3.

3. Say Yes to Education: Brief History

In this chapter we briefly summarize the evolution of Say Yes from its founding in 1987 to its shift toward a city-wide approach in the mid-2000s (which we describe and assess in Chapter 4). This history is important to understand the motivation for the shift from the original cohort-based approach, to a community-wide approach.

George Weiss is a multi-millionaire hedge fund manager who grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts and worked his way through the University of Pennsylvania. Inspired by Eugene Lang’s *I Have a Dream* program, Weiss founded Say Yes to Education in 1987. The name is Weiss’s positive variant of the public health campaigns around drug use at the time, which urged people to “Say No to Drugs.”

Weiss was part of a growing number of wealthy Americans who were surprising cohorts of students with pledges to pay for their college. The same year, two local businessmen sponsored two low-income cohorts of Chicago elementary students (Gottesman, 1993); the next year, two DC-area businessmen pledged to pay college costs for 59 Prince George’s County fifth graders (Schwartzman, 2011). Similar programs sprouted in Atlanta, Detroit, Cleveland, Dallas, and Los Angeles, among other places. Many, like Weiss, would find that tuition costs were far from the only barrier standing between low-income children and college.

Weiss sponsored 112 sixth grade students at Belmont Elementary in West Philadelphia, partly because of its proximity to the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education, which meant access to social and academic supports. He also offered them tutoring, family supports, and summer programs. What he did not realize, according to

the Philanthropy Roundtable, was that Belmont was a “regional center for special education students;” his class of 112 had 44 such children, and the principal had “promoted” some students from the grade below to get them the scholarship (Mezzacappa, 1999).

In other words, this was a particularly disadvantaged group. By 2007, the Philadelphia Inquirer reported (using Say Yes’ data) that of the 112 students in the cohort (Mezzacappa, 2007):

- 65 had a high school diploma;
- 5 earned a GED;
- 34 dropped out of high school;
- 30 became teen mothers;
- 20 became “juvenile delinquents;” and
- 7 died as a result of violence.

Of the 70 students who graduated or got a GED:

- 20 got a BA;
- 10 got an associate degree;
- 14 got a vocational certificate; and
- 26 did not earn another credential or degree after high school.

Context is vitally important here. A 63 percent high school completion rate seems low, especially by today’s standards. But the cohorts in the year ahead of and behind the Belmont 112 had graduation rates around 25 percent.

In 1990, Weiss partnered with a local homebuilding magnate, Robert Toll, to sponsor 58 third graders at West Philadelphia’s Harrity Elementary. Nearly three-quarters of these students lived in families receiving welfare assistance (Mezzacappa, 1999). Weiss and Toll hoped that reaching students at a younger age would allow for more time for them to become college-ready. He also expanded after-school tutoring and other supports, “increas[ing] the level of out-of-class activities, including summer field trips and more counseling and tutorial programs after school.” These changes seemed to help: the Harrity cohort had a 93 percent graduation rate, and only two students became teenage parents by their junior year of high school (Mezzacappa, 2004).

In the same year, 1990, Weiss sponsored a cohort of 76 fourth graders at Annie Fisher Elementary in Hartford, Connecticut (Maeroff, 2014), partnering with the University of Hartford, to offer scholarships to those who graduated from Hartford Public Schools (Coons, 1991). Sixty of the 76 (79 percent) completed high school, according to the program. Sixty enrolled in postsecondary education, 23 earned a bachelor’s degree, and 20 earned an associate degree or trade certificate.

In 1991, partnering with local Lesley University and the public school system, Weiss also sponsored 69 third graders at Harrington Elementary School in East Cambridge, Massachusetts, near his childhood home (Maeroff, 2014). Roughly 65 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a quarter were special education students, and 20 percent were ESL students (Coons, 1991). The *Boston Globe* reported that almost two-thirds of the students were Portuguese- or Creole-speaking Cape Verdeans (Ballou, 2008).

In Cambridge, Weiss continued to beef up student supports, offering “motivational counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and a summer school program, as well as free tuition.” Lesley faculty and students majoring in Education visited the children (Coons, 1991). “Lesley University has been integral in helping the students reach their goals, providing free use of its facilities in Cambridge and other resources,” the local program director told the *Boston Globe*. The Cambridge chapter of Say Yes officially closed in 2008, after the last cohort member earned a doctorate in pharmacy (Kelsey, 2008).

In 2000, Weiss returned to Philadelphia for a version of Say Yes that attempted to build on the lessons the organization learned elsewhere—in particular, starting earlier. He sponsored a cohort of roughly 50 kindergarteners at William C. Bryant Elementary. Unlike in past cohorts, these students had all attended a preschool program. As he told the *Penn Current*:

As we start with younger and younger kids, it’s proving to be more and more successful. The family structure, trying to improve and work with the whole family, hasn’t been as much a focus as the educational component [so far]. We’re trying to address the family structure even in a stronger way [with the current Bryant program]. The parent or parents have to do their share. If you raise the bar on education for yourselves, you’ll raise the bar for the kids (Marcus, 2000).

Weiss paid for a reading teacher and, in a new twist, offered students’ siblings last-dollar scholarships, as well as helped to finance parents’ GEDs and community college degrees. Say Yes expanded its programming, offering after-school activities, tutoring, summer school, and individualized counseling for students and their families. The organization was moving beyond the scholarship to the students’ social and academic development, the families’ wellbeing, and the health of the community at large.

Weiss’s last cohort-based initiative was offered to 384 kindergarteners at five Harlem elementary schools: Public Schools 57, 83, 161, 180, and 182 (Maeroff, 2014). Chancellor Joel Klein, Deputy Mayor Dennis Walcott, and Arthur Levine, the president of Columbia Teachers College, attended the announcement. Weiss pledged \$20 million but had to raise more than double that to cover the full cost. As the *New York Times* reported, “I.B.M. offered computer labs; the law firm of Bingham McCutchen offered free legal services to

the children's families for 15 years; and Harlem Hospital Center offered to provide all health care services...”

Each successive Say Yes to Education program has started with younger children and included more support services. In Harlem, siblings of the Say Yes children were eligible for smaller college scholarships, and their parents were eligible for continuing education programs and scholarships. An extra reading teacher and social worker were placed in each of the five schools (Gootman, 2004). The Harlem parents also had access to legal aid; their children had individualized education plans and access to physical and occupational therapy (Sherwood, 2007).

In the mid-2000s, Say Yes leaders started to think more systemically about how to get more kids through high school and into college. The leadership shifted their focus from specific cohorts of students at particular schools to entire school districts. This was the beginning of Say Yes’s city-wide efforts. As the organization itself reports, the goal became “extending its strategy across entire communities—at scale, and in a way that would be sustainable, year after year” (Our Strategy, 2018).

In 2006, Say Yes hired a president, Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey, who previously served as the head of New American Schools (NAS). NAS was a development corporation created by major American corporations in 1991 in response to George H. W. Bush’s “America 2000” school reform initiative. It sought to experiment with new, “whole-school” reforms, and help disseminate those reforms to schools seeking to transform themselves into more effective entities (Bodily, Purnell, Ramsey, & Keith, 1996).

Shortly thereafter, Say Yes also hired Gene Chasin, a former superintendent who directed the University of Connecticut’s Institute for Urban School Improvement. Chasin had previously been CEO of the National Center for Accelerated Schools, which researched and disseminated a relatively successful approach to school improvement that was rigorously evaluated (Bloom, Ham, Melton, & O’Brien, 2001). Among other things, the Accelerated Schools model emphasized increasing communication and collaborative decision-making between school faculty—elements that Say Yes would soon attempt to scale to entire districts. Schmitt-Carey and Chasin became the twin turbines of the national Say Yes organization (and remain so at the time of writing). The new Say Yes approach would have four elements:

- A universal, district-wide *scholarship*;
- Wraparound social and academic support *services* for students;
- Increased collaboration between local stakeholders to promote *system* change; and
- Use of data to track progress and align resources

Say Yes entered the business of improving entire school districts and communities. To do this, they would try to work with local school, city, and county officials; nonprofit and union leaders; parents; teachers; business owners; and civil society organizations.

In the next chapter, we describe the Say Yes city-wide approach, before turning in the subsequent three chapters to a detailed examination of each of the three sites.

4. Say Yes: Today

There is no Say Yes “model.” There is rather, to borrow some of the terms used by Say Yes staff and stakeholders, a Say Yes “theory of change,” or “strategy,” “approach,” “philosophy,” or “formula.” In each of the three Say Yes sites, the structure, evolution, and scope vary significantly. Say Yes leaders are open about the fact they have been “learning as [they] go” (as one put it to us) and attempting to apply the lessons learned in one site to another. (Note that we prefer the relatively neutral term “approach,” and will mostly be using that for the purposes of this report.)

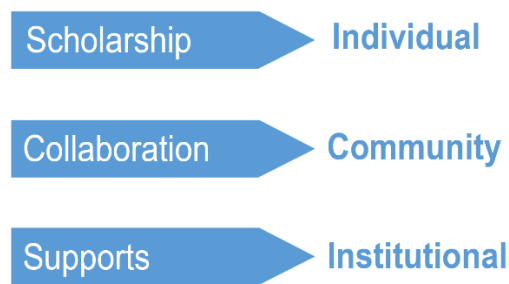
This is not simply a semantic point. Any attempt to draw conclusions from the Say Yes experience is hindered by the fact that “Say Yes” means something quite different in different places, and at different times. Any potential evaluator of Say Yes as a whole therefore faces a constantly moving target. This is less true for each specific Say Yes site, which is why scholarly and informal studies which have been conducted to date, both quantitative and qualitative, have focused on an individual city, specifically Syracuse or Buffalo. But even in these individual cases, the evolution of the Say Yes approach over time—for example the addition or removal of particular services—will make it extremely difficult to tease out cause and effect.

In the three chapters that follow this one, we will describe in detail how the Say Yes experiment has unfolded in each of the three sites. First, however, we will outline the core components of the Say Yes approach. Identifying these is harder than it sounds, because there are a number of iterations and versions of the Say Yes approach.

In the simplest version, taken here directly from the national Say Yes organization, there are three key elements: Scholarships, Collaboration, and Supports. In combination, the goal is for all three to lead to the end goal of postsecondary completion:



Each of these three elements of the Say Yes approach can be seen as operating at a different level:



Say Yes hopes that each of these will have a positive effect on educational outcomes, especially postsecondary completion. Scholarships might provide a strong additional incentive for students; but a college scholarship alone will have a limited impact if students are not ready for and guided toward colleges. Services to support students along the pathway toward the scholarship may be critical to boosting college-readiness. But the effective provision of services to the students who need them most, when they need them most, may require an alignment of resources and sharing of data among all the key stakeholders: reform at the system level, rather than just the individual or institutional one.

As one Say Yes leader put it to us in an interview:

One element that is unique [to the Say Yes citywide approach] is this recognition that the scholarship incentive in and of itself would be insufficient to drive the kind of transformational change for students for the most part. So there is this recognition that you have to address expectations, as well as proactively meet the needs and address the barriers to young people actually hitting the developmental milestones on that path.

The Say Yes chapters in the three sites—Syracuse, Buffalo and Guilford County—publicly highlight two of these elements: the Scholarship and Supports, since these are the elements most relevant to students, parents, and educators.

A somewhat broader description of the Say Yes approach (also provided by Say Yes national) highlights five key *principles*, as shown here:



Say Yes describes these five principles as “the critical pillars on which the Say Yes community-wide strategy is built.” The goal of postsecondary completion (or here, “Access and Success”) is the same. But there is now a clear distinction between the collaborative element (“Cross-Sector and Cross-Government Collaboration”) and the data element (“Date-Driven Continuous Improvement”). The “Pathway to Success” is largely an expression of the need for wraparound services, but also highlights some of the data architecture. The principle of “Scale and Sustainability” speaks to the city-wide, comprehensive nature of the Say Yes approach, as well as to the means by which Say Yes secures commitment from key stakeholders.

There are, in short, a variety of different ways to describe the core components or principles of the Say Yes approach. Indeed, Say Yes itself has a number of descriptions, depending in part on the intended audience.

In order to thoroughly describe and draw lessons from the Say Yes experience, it is important to isolate the key elements in a consistent manner. Based on our research and observations, it seems clear that there are in fact four key elements of the Say Yes approach:

- **Scholarship.** A final-dollar scholarship with sustainable endowment funding.
- **Governance.** Collaborative governance with genuine engagement and credible commitment from key stakeholders.
- **Services.** Support services (e.g. summer schools, legal clinics, after-school learning) to boost college-readiness.

- **Data.** An architecture (sometimes labelled a “Postsecondary Planning System” by Say Yes) to track individual and collective progress.

These four components will provide the framework for our study of each site in the next three chapters. Here we will provide an overview of the overarching Say Yes approach in each of these four areas, and variations over time and between places. This is to provide the background and context for the more detailed examination of Say Yes in each of the three sites.

4.1 Scholarship

The most eye-catching element of the Say Yes approach is the promise of attending college tuition-free, through a final-dollar scholarship. The Say Yes **Tuition Scholarship** covers tuition costs after state and federal aid, like Pell grants, for which Say Yes requires students to apply. The scholarship covers full tuition at in-state public schools. It applies solely to tuition, not room and board, fees, textbook costs, or other costs of attending college.

The animating idea of the tuition scholarship is universality. As a community-wide initiative, Say Yes offers scholarships of one kind or another to every student in the community. But the principle of universality has been lost in Guilford County, where the scholarship has been redesigned to be targeted at lower-income families. This followed a significant overspend on more affluent students in the first year, the result of a major error in the financial modeling of the scholarship. (We describe this unfortunate episode, and consider lessons learned, in Chapter 7.)

Eligibility for the scholarship is based on attendance at public schools in each district, but with some significant variations, which we will outline in the chapters on each site. But here are some illustrations:

1. In Guilford County, students graduating from charter schools are not automatically eligible.
2. In Syracuse, scholarship eligibility is determined simply through continuous enrollment from grades 10 through 12; in Guilford County, the enrollment requirements vary by household income; Say Yes Buffalo requires continuous enrollment from grades 9 through 12.
3. In Buffalo, the value of the scholarship is prorated based on years of enrollment, varying from 65% to 100%.
4. In Guilford County, the value of the scholarship is based both on years of enrollment *and* household income, with cash limits (e.g. of \$2,250 for applicants from families with incomes between \$75,000 and \$100,000).

Students who have all of their tuition covered by federal and state aid can also receive an **Opportunity Grant** of up to \$2,000 a year from Say Yes in Buffalo and Syracuse or \$350 in Guilford, to assist with other costs of attending college.

Say Yes also partners with a growing number of private colleges (102 at the time of writing) listed under a Higher Education Compact. Most of these institutions agree to cover full tuition costs for students with annual family incomes under \$75,000. For those from families above that income level who attend a private college in the Compact, Say Yes offers **Choice Grants** of up to \$5,000 a year (so long as they have been enrolled in local public school since at least 9th grade). As Schmitt-Carey explains, the Compact too can act as way to sustain commitment:

The Compact is an external commitment device that is...less powerful maybe than a local commitment device. But still very helpful. [A stakeholder] can say, 'Hey this is in the MOU [Memorandum of Understanding signed by Say Yes and local stakeholders], this is what we agreed to, and if we dismantle these things, we're gonna lose this private Higher Education Compact.' That's powerful.

It is important to note that many of these private colleges would offer similar levels of tuition assistance to any lower-income applicant, regardless of where they live. In other words, those applying from Say Yes communities are not necessarily receiving any special treatment. At the student level, the main value of the Compact—which may not be a trivial one—is to connect potential applicants to private colleges that they might never otherwise consider; effectively, to act as a broker between students in poor communities and private colleges anxious to widen their applicant pool. Much of the credit for creating the Compact goes to Nancy Cantor of Syracuse University (see Chapter 5). Say Yes sees the Compact as an important carrot or commitment device for communities, effectively acting as a gatekeeper to these opportunities but only so long as the community stakeholders meet and maintain their commitments.

Whether more students from Say Yes cities attend these colleges is an empirical question, to which we cannot provide an answer. We do know, however, that in Guilford County, enrollment rates at private and out-of-state colleges (i.e. those that could be members of the Compact) did not change, and even declined somewhat in the case of out-of-state colleges, following the introduction of the Say Yes scholarship (see Section 7.6 below).

As a result of a donation from Keybank, Say Yes now offers a scholarship for students enrolling at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). The scholarship is worth up to \$10,000 a year for up to five years, and can be used to cover not only remaining tuition costs but also other costs related to attending college. The **HBCU National Scholarship**, available from 2018, is not available to all. A “limited number” will be available in each Say Yes chapter. Recipients will be selected by a committee consisting of Say Yes

staff. Note that these scholarships are funded through Say Yes at the national level and determined by Say Yes staff (local and national).

The Say Yes approach is founded on building an endowment fund big enough to fund the scholarships in perpetuity. This involves considerable fundraising at the local level in order to finance the scholarship. The table on p.10 of this report shows the value of the endowment in each site at the time of writing.

According to Say Yes, 10,000 students have gone to college with the support of a Say Yes scholarship, most since 2013. Bear in mind that 2,000 of these students were from the first year of the Guilford County scholarship, and reflect the dramatic overspend in that year.

One of the challenges of a last-dollar scholarship is that since most of the students from the lowest-income families are eligible for generous financial aid, much of the additional assistance can flow to those from more affluent backgrounds. A number of interviewees used the phrase “scholarship for the middle class” either as a critique of the Say Yes scholarship, or at least as a cause for concern. The choice grants, for instance, can amount to \$20,000 per student for four years of study at a private college: this was a particular issue in Guilford County, as we will see.

4.2 Governance

The third element of the Say Yes approach is to build a governance structure that aims to build trust, secure commitment, and encourage the alignment of resources within a community, all in the service of the long-run goal of improving postsecondary educational outcomes. Governance here refers to structures and systems that provide accountability and facilitate programmatic decisions, as well as building collaboration and stakeholder commitment. Like many other organizations, Say Yes refers to its approach as “collaborative governance”, and we largely adopt this term. (We summarize the literature on the conceptual framing and empirical evaluations of collaborative governance below and in Appendix 3: Additional Research Resources).

As the Say Yes organization puts it on the front page of their website:

“What if an entire community came together to ensure that each of its children had the opportunity—and the support—to go to college?

That is the bold promise of Say Yes to Education.”

Say Yes aims not just to provide a scholarship, or services, or both, but to bring an “entire community together.” Say Yes seeks to become a catalyst for different stakeholders, each facing different incentives, funding constraints and political pressures, to share data, re-

sources and goals. While Say Yes eschews the language of “collective impact,” the organization’s approach can reasonably be seen as fitting into that loose definition (see Chapter 8 for a literature review).

As Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey, CEO of Say Yes, summarizes the approach:

It’s about cultural change, but structural change as well. What we have really tried to figure out, and then to hammer out, and then to adapt in different contexts, is how to institutionalize [the program] so that the community owns it and doesn’t want to go back to the old silos....It really is about fundamental political and structural and cultural reform.

Why does the Say Yes approach require this degree of commitment and collaboration? After all, the scholarship can stand alone—as it does, in effect, in Guilford. Even services could be provided without major changes in the investment or behavior of schools or social workers. The answer to this question is that Say Yes seeks to be much more than a scholarship or service provider.

Specifically, the Say Yes goals are to marshal the resources of a range of stakeholders in the service of the long-term goal to boost postsecondary success, to build a shared data platform that allows different agencies to track the progress of individual student, to target interventions and investments more effectively (i.e. for the right student at the right time), and to secure greater consistency in the provision of services.

The institution ecosystem in a given city includes a wide range of different stakeholders, including:

1. School district (including administration and board)
2. City government
3. County government
4. Foundations
5. Colleges and universities
6. Businesses
7. Trade unions
8. Community-based organizations (including churches, non-profits)

Say Yes describes the problem that their collaborative governance approach seeks to solve in the following terms:

Most strategies that have sought to improve urban schools have proved to be short-term and disjointed, lacking in infrastructure and administered in silos that do not connect the dots between developmental stages (such as early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary credentialing) or critical service areas (education, health, mental health).

Say Yes seeks then to increase collaboration across *sectors* (e.g. education and health); between agencies in different *stages* (e.g. K-12 and postsecondary). In addition, Say Yes seeks to help communities overcome short-termism: sustainability is, then, a core principle. As Schmitt-Carey puts it:

We built the strategy around a sustainable incentive that can ensure commitment to the strategy through predictable political transitions. [We have sought to] structure the scholarship governance to be completely owned by that community. This is really unique [and] a piece that was missing in earlier reform efforts..... There was never a strategy for how to get it sustainably funded. The scholarship incentive is a commitment device.

The scholarship is, in the words of one Say Yes leader, “both a carrot and, even more importantly, a stick.” It acts as an incentive to come to the table, and give up some power to the collective effort.

The scholarship acts as both an animating goal toward which resources and energy can be directed, and as a commitment device. Given the strong tendency toward inertia in existing systems, a powerful “pull” is often required. A high-profile promise of free college for all can act in this way: as a bright object, and galvanizer. But at the same time, the prospect of free college can act as a commitment device. As we heard repeatedly, nobody wants to be seen as the reason why this enticing offer could not be offered, or was withdrawn. Reputations are on the line. This means that even when Say Yes runs into serious trouble (the recent Guilford scholarship redesign for example), it can survive.

Of course, even if there are new and bigger incentives to collaborate, the idea of collaboration is hardly likely to be a novel one. Few leaders or organizations are likely to be against collaboration—at least in principle. There were many collaborative efforts already underway in the Say Yes communities. What, then, is the Say Yes approach, and how does it differ? One important distinction between Say Yes and other initiatives is in the emphasis placed by Say Yes on concrete governance structures, in particular a strong Operating Committee.

Say Yes brings money, reputation, and expertise to the table, helps to create the scholarship, and then expects others to join. Say Yes provides staffing support to the Operating Committee and other structures. A Say Yes staffer (typically the Executive Director of the local chapter) will chair and organize meetings. To borrow some terminology from the collective impact world, Say Yes seeks to provide the “backbone” organization to the collaborative community-wide effort. A number of Say Yes staff differentiate their approach as being “tougher”—more focused on metrics, with greater commitments from stakeholders (“skin in the game” is the most common metaphor we heard), and with the commit-

ment device (“carrot and stick”) of the scholarship, including the Higher Education Compact. Say Yes tries to make communities an offer that they can hardly refuse. Schmitt-Carey again, on what makes Say Yes unique:

The field needs to understand that the idea of collaboration or collective impact is not this kumbaya thing. There are technical, structural changes that have to take place in a community to...consistently provide the practical supports that help kids hit those milestones. It requires that political leaders actually give up some of their positional power, and that needs to be understood and get bought into. And you’re seeing the difference between where that’s working and where it’s not.

For Say Yes, collaboration is not seen as a soft endeavor. It needs a solid structure, hard metrics, and credible commitments. Perhaps the most obvious form of a formal commitment device is a contract, which legally binds two parties to a particular course of action. Say Yes makes use of contractual commitment devices, in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)—most importantly with the school board. This sets out the terms on which Say Yes can work with and within schools, data sharing, eligibility for the scholarship, and so on. The goal here is to formalize each organization’s commitment to continue to work together, even in the face of turbulence.

The aim here is for peer pressure to keep collaboration alive, with committed parties holding each other accountable. As a school leader in Buffalo said, “In human organizations, whether business or educational, you still have to formalize the relationships you’ve formed early on.”

It is important to note that Say Yes has few formal powers at all, especially in the very early stages of the process. It has no control over resources (except its own, of course), no say over appointments, and no access to public institutions. MoU’s have never been tested in court, and such a test would be a sign of a serious breakdown. Rather, Say Yes brings expertise around education, collaboration, and data, then attempts to focus the community on common objectives surrounding student development.

4.3 Services

Apart from the scholarship, the most visible element of Say Yes, at least in some places at some times, is the provision of services. The motivation here is to ensure that by the time they leave high school, students are academically and personally ready to take advantage of the scholarship.

As one Say Yes chapter staff member puts it, “The scholarship is the bright flashy movie poster, the sexy part of SYTE. But in some ways, it is the least significant thing that we do. What we are really working on is making sure that students are ready to actually make use of the scholarship one day.”

Arthur Levine, a member of the Say Yes board (and president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation) sees these supports as “amounting to an arm around each child” (Maeroff, 2014).

Assessing which services have been introduced as a direct result of Say Yes (or to put it differently, which would exist whether Say Yes was present or not) is not an easy undertaking. In part, this is because in any successful collaboration, credit and responsibility will be shared among different stakeholders. There are some services that can be directly linked to Say Yes, especially if they are staffed and/or funded by the Say Yes chapter. As the table on p.10 shows, however, there are big differences in the additional services available in each of the three sites, with by far the widest range of services—especially those delivered directly by Say Yes—developed in Buffalo.

The context within which learning takes place is most easily seen as an institutional setting of one kind or another (most obviously a school). The additional services are therefore sometimes described as “wraparound” services (see Chapter 8 for a literature review).

But other settings and contexts count for a great deal, as the growing literature on “developmental systems theories (DST)” shows. Cantor et al. (2017) describe development as an “ongoing, constructive enterprise between the individual and multiple biological, psychological, and sociocultural systems and agents overtime.”

As David Osher from the American Institutes of Research and a Say Yes adviser told us: “All of this depends on what happens with individual young people and how they interact with each other and with teachers and with parents.”

Against the background of DST thinking, Osher stresses the links between the different elements of the Say Yes approach. According to Osher, we have to think of the community as an ecosystem for learning, one that provides opportunities for each individual child to grow. As he puts it: “We have to understand it kid by kid, study individuals and then work up. It is a kid-by-kid model as well as being a community model.” In his own work, Osher emphasizes the *relational* aspects of development systems, and the role of relationships both in creating appropriate learning contexts, and in protecting against stress and adversity (2017).

4.4 Data

Say Yes promises a data-driven approach, with a whole series of frameworks and initiatives aimed at collecting and sharing data in support of the overall goal. This idea sounds deceptively simple. But in fact, getting agreement on the goal and indicators of success, accessing data on factors likely to influence the goal, and sharing data with other agencies—all of that is hard. Certainly it has proved one of the most difficult elements for Say

Yes to implement. As Schmitt-Carey says: “We have been working tirelessly on this for the last ten years. It is really hard, but we have made some big leaps.” The gap between the aspirations of Say Yes, and the reality on the ground, is very wide.

The first challenge is to get a clear sense of the many different ways in which data is used, and described, in the different Say Yes chapters and by Say Yes national, and at different points in the organization’s evolution. Getting a handle on this is a challenge. Certain terms are used differently by different stakeholders at particular times—for example, “pathway analytics,” “impact dashboard,” “developmental pathway,” “postsecondary planning system,” and so on.

Here we will attempt to clarify and outline the overall Say Yes approach to data, and progress to date. There are three main areas in which data collection comes into play in the Say Yes approach:

- Assessment of current educational spending in a community, in order to identify ways in which resources might be used more effectively. This process is usually described by Say Yes as **Fiscal Analytics**, funded by Say Yes national. The research is undertaken by a partner organization, Schoolhouse Partners.
- Measuring progress at a community-wide, or “top down” level toward key milestones with the goal of postsecondary completion. Many of these are captured in public-use datasets (e.g. high school graduation or FAFSA completion rates). These *aggregate* metrics are most often described as **Pathway Analytics**. These milestones have remained largely consistent over time, with 14 steps along the path towards postsecondary completion (see Table 2, below).
- Tracking the progress and challenges of *individual* students during the K-12 years via a **Postsecondary Planning System, or PPS** (previously the “Student Monitoring and Intervention System (SMIS)”). The idea of the PPS is to draw data on academic progress as well as social, health, and family issues onto a single, shared platform that can connect students and families to helpful resources (like the wraparound services discussed above) that are integrated into the system. Administrative data from the school district, county and/or city, and associated health providers would be combined with survey data collected from students, parents, and teachers.

There is an important distinction between the Pathway Analytics and Postsecondary Planning System. Gathering and presenting data on a school district as a whole is one thing: creating a wholly new platform with multiple data points on each individual student over time is quite another, as we will see.

We provide local context, where relevant, to each of the chapters on specific Say Yes sites. But first we will provide an overview of the “state of play” on data, and the challenges

that are common across Say Yes sites, and for Say Yes at the national level. For ease of understanding, we will use the three labels described above throughout, even when they do not perfectly align with the descriptions used by Say Yes.

Fiscal analytics

In the initial stages of working with a host city, Say Yes partners with a research organization to conduct an assessment of spending by the school district. The hope is that this work will help the district to “carry the resource burden” and to “make sure resource allocation is aligned with the district’s and Say Yes’s goals,” according to one stakeholder. Say Yes now sub-contracts this work to the well-respected strategic advisory organization Schoolhouse Partners, under the leadership of Managing General Partner Mark Strickland. The cost for this work ranges from \$100,000 to \$175,000 in each site. (This is part of a total of around \$1 million invested by Say Yes during the preparatory phase in each site.)

The fiscal analytics work can identify existing sources of financing for new services, or potential savings from cost-sharing. In Buffalo, for example, the work led to the city accessing federal money for mental health services, delivered through schools.

Inevitably, the process can create some tensions. In Syracuse, for example, the process backfired when educators and administrators felt threatened by what they saw as potential cuts (note that this was before Schoolhouse Partners were hired). One key stakeholder says of the process: “We weren’t going around saying ‘Aha! You guys are wasting money over here.’ It was more like, ‘we found some money over here, we think you would be better off allocating it here.’” Many of the stakeholders we interviewed pointed to the fiscal analytics work as a real value-added from the Say Yes initial investment, so long as there was sufficient trust and collaboration in the community to see the analysis as a resource, rather than as a threat.

Pathway analytics

The Say Yes “developmental pathway” consists of 14 key milestones from kindergarten readiness to postsecondary completion. The idea is to collect data on each of these milestones across the community, to gauge overall progress. Work on Pathway Analytics began in 2015 in Guilford County. For the most part, however, Say Yes chapters have only been able to collect and reproduce data that is already available from the New York State Education Department (NYSED), the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, or the National Student Clearinghouse, as the Pathway Analytics table below shows. The only exceptions are in Buffalo, where Say Yes now has data on FAFSA completion rates through a joint FAFSA Completion Project with the University of Buffalo, and Guilford County, where all indicators up to high school graduation, except for parent/guardian as-

pirations, students' plans to attend postsecondary programs by grade 9, and FAFSA completion, were available in a report prepared by Schoolhouse Partners in 2015. Kindergarten readiness was measured according to the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test administered by the school district.

Pathway Analytics

Who has data on Say Yes's 14 pathway metrics?

	Syracuse	Buffalo	Guilford
Kindergarten readiness	✗	✗	✗
Reading at grade level by end of grade 3 ¹	✓	✓	✓
High stakes proficiency (>75th percentile) in ELA and math by end of grade 5 ¹	✓	✓	✓
Parent/guardian aspiration of and information about postsecondary opportunities for child by grade 5	✗	✗	✗
Postsecondary prep course schedule entering grades 9, 10, 11, 12	✗	✗	✗
Plans to attend a postsecondary program at end of grade 9	✗	✗	✗
Complete the PSAT by end of grade 10	✗	✗	✗
Algebra I and Algebra II by end of grade 11 (grade C or better)	✗	✗	✗
AP test score of 3 or better	✗	✗	✗
SAT Score of 1550/ACT 23	✗	✗	✓ ³
Complete FAFSA and postsecondary program application by December of senior year	✗	✓	✗
High school completion ¹	✓	✓	✓
Enrollment in college ²	✓	✓	✓
Postsecondary persistence ²	✓	✓	✓
Postsecondary completion ²	N/A	N/A	✗

1 Public-use data available from state education department

2 Data available to Say Yes from National Student Clearinghouse. We have been unable to obtain data on postsecondary completion for Syracuse. It is too early to track completion for Buffalo and Guilford.

3 North Carolina requires that all 11th grade students take the ACT. The state provides data on the percentage of students in a given school or district who receive a composite score of 17 or above, not 23 or above.

In 2015, Say Yes in Guilford County initiated work on collecting the data required for the Pathway Analytics framework, but this effort then stalled. Indicators for the 2015 report by Schoolhouse Partners mentioned above were collected under an earlier data-sharing agreement that has since been replaced. On the ground, the closest any Say Yes chapter currently comes to a Pathway Analytics framework so far is Buffalo, which produces an “Impact Dashboard” using seven indicators.

The potential of the Pathway Analytics data is to help focus the attention of multiple stakeholders on agreed success metrics, and to evaluate programs and interventions against their potential for improvements against those metrics. The clarity of the milestones can help stakeholders and investors to focus on the data points that matter most (or at least, are reasonably assumed to matter most) for the long-run goal. As one district-level administrator puts it to us: “Prior to Say Yes, we were data-rich, but information-poor.”

Another potential benefit is to maintain momentum towards an unavoidably long-term goal of college completion. As one Say Yes chapter staff member puts it: “The focus is on college and that’s great, but we need intermediate victories to celebrate, too.”

Postsecondary Planning System

The Postsecondary Planning System (PPS) is the jewel in the crown of the Say Yes ambitions for a data-driven approach to education reform. The PPS, according to Say Yes Guilford, is “designed to connect students, and their families, to programs and services that can aid them on their path to high school and post-high school success.” Say Yes leaders place great weight on the PPS as an essential component of the Say Yes approach. “This is the key in driving the work of the school district,” said Gene Chasin, the chief operating officer of Say Yes, in 2014.

Writing for Grantmakers for Education in 2014, the late Gene Maeroff (who quoted Chasin) says it draws on “inputs from teachers, service providers, school-based Say Yes site facilitators, parents, and students to break down barriers to student success.” As Maeroff put it:

The Student Monitoring and Intervention System [previous name for the PPS] acts as both an early warning system and a tool for better coordination of services, tracking all of the district’s students across 13 indicators and 26 sub-indicators. Each student receives a continuously updated personalized “Growth Plan” that indicates whether he or she is on track to thrive on each of the indicators and sub-indicators. In the classroom, SMIS allows educators to think about students holistically. And because aggregate reports are derived for individual schools and for sub-groups across the district, it expands the identification and growth of the resources that exist across communities, providing insight into areas of greater need and areas of service delivery that require improvement.

This is clearly an attractive and inspiring vision. The problem is that the PPS did not exist in 2014, and it exists only in embryonic form in early 2018. Two Say Yes sites—Buffalo and Guilford County—are in the very early stages of piloting a version of the PPS, in mental health clinics and a sample of schools, respectively (see Chapters 6 and 7). As one Buffalo stakeholder put it to us in late 2017: “It didn’t exist until about two months ago.” Syracuse is in the preliminary stages of working with Schoolhouse Partners with a view to taking the first steps towards a data platform.

The hope is that the PPS will offer a way to identify which students are “on track to thrive,” “on track,” or “off track” across a series of academic, health, and social dimensions. Here is an example from one of the surveys that will soon be added to the ongoing pilot in Buffalo, from the “health” section, with the cut-off scores for each of the three potential outcomes (these are described as “algorithms”):

1.G. Healthy Body Weight

10. Describe your weight.

It is just right = 3

It is okay; maybe a little too thin or heavy = 2

It is much too thin or too heavy = 1

11. Do you exercise or play sports that make you sweat or breathe hard?

Almost every day = 3

On some days = 2

Rarely or never = 1

Algorithm

On Track to Thrive = 6

On Track = 4-5*

Off track = 2-3

*No score of 1 on Q10 or Q11

It is important to acknowledge that creating a system that could achieve the goals described by Say Yes and Maeroff is a huge undertaking. It requires that all the necessary data is collected, shared, aggregated, protected, updated, and shared back to stakeholders. Data-sharing agreements have to be signed between all the agencies that hold the data. Even more important, these agreements have to be honored by the signatories. A powerful platform has to be created to bring all the data together.

As one senior stakeholder, a partner and supporter of Say Yes, puts it: “I wouldn’t say we have come even close to the full potential of either the pathway or the Postsecondary Planning System.”

Much of the data on each individual student has to be provided by teachers, who are often time-poor, and resistant to additional paperwork. Indeed, the process of trying to get teachers to fill out surveys in an earlier attempted pilot in Buffalo backfired. Say Yes staff in schools were asked to urge teachers to comply with the request to fill out some fairly long surveys. As one Say Yes staffer puts it: “We got a huge backlash from the teachers, and it actually sort of destroyed some of our school-based relationships.”

Say Yes national leaders acknowledge that progress towards the creation of a data-driven approach has been limited. In part, this is the result of key stakeholders in the Say Yes cities not doing their part when it came to meeting the spirit of their data-sharing agreements. In Buffalo, one school superintendent who was opposed to the idea “basically just turned off the data,” according to one Say Yes staff member.

The problems faced by Say Yes are common to many attempts to share data (see Chapter 8), and can reflect a fear on the part of stakeholders that greater transparency in terms of data on outcomes can lead to greater scrutiny and accountability. As Schmitt-Carey says:

[There is] a culture of fear around data...versus seeing data as a tool to drive improvement. [We] need to understand that this work is being done in a policy environment where any kind of data tool, including any ‘newfangled data system’ is seen as a weapon. But if we can change the culture and build trust, they can be used in a way to nurture better outcomes for kids.

Say Yes also underestimated the need to invest in data platforms adequate to the task, and to work with specialists to create and populate these platforms, as senior leaders readily acknowledge.

A series of challenges have also damaged the strength of Say Yes’s reputation on the data front, from the backlash against the fiscal analytics in Syracuse to the scholarship modeling errors in Guilford. Say Yes is not always careful in its own collation and presentation of data. Gene Maeroff, whose reflections on Say Yes have been almost wholly positive, found some cause for concern on this front (2014). Following a *Buffalo News* article criticizing Say Yes for making exaggerated empirical claims about its impact in Syracuse:

I, too, found a tendency by Say Yes representatives sometimes to give the program credit for achievements in which its role was limited. Furthermore, as The Buffalo News said, the statistics that Say Yes cited as evidence of progress were occasionally a comparison of apples and oranges or, at least, Granny Smiths and McIntoshes. I discovered, for instance, a discrepancy between the less-than-stellar attendance statistics I obtained for the high schools and the more impressive numbers handed out by Say Yes.

For example, Say Yes frequently compares trends in Syracuse or Buffalo with national trends, which is not an informative comparison. Far better to compare trends with similar cities nearby. Say Yes will claim to have “leveraged” or “arranged” all the financial aid (e.g. Pell Grants) paid to Say Yes scholars, when in fact the large majority of them would have received that support in any case. Raw numbers are sometimes used to show trends (for example in college enrollment) rather than percentages, and so on.

Say Yes faces a tension familiar to almost every non-profit organization: between a desire to be objective, data-driven, and evidence-based; and the need to show impact in order to generate both political and financial support. But given the heavy emphasis that Say Yes places on the value of high-quality data, the organization has to work harder than most to remain credible and objective.

It is clear that since early 2017, much greater energy, investment, and attention has been devoted to the data component of the overall approach. In November 2016, Say Yes national hired Jerred Cook as Senior Vice President of Technology Solutions. In 2017, Felice Nudelman was hired as Executive Vice President of the Weiss Institute. Launched in April 2017, the Institute is a partnership between Say Yes and America’s Promise Alliance. Say Yes leaders have also entrusted her with the task of turning the PPS from promise to reality.

As Schmitt-Carey put it in January 2018:

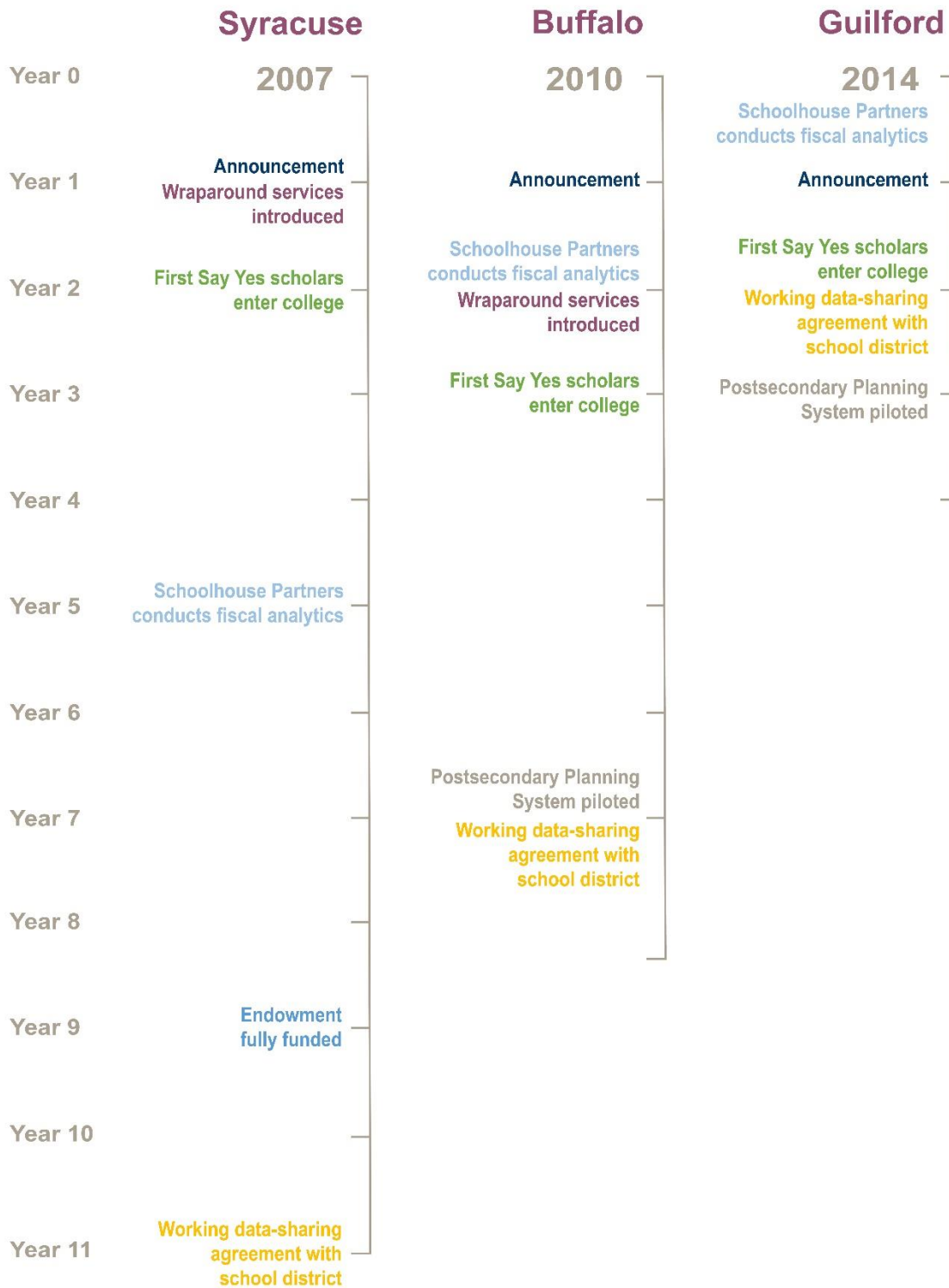
The best thing that I’ve done this past year is hire Felice, because she actually has expertise in building these systems and her presence is starting to kick this into a whole different gear.

As all the stakeholders readily admit, there is a very long way to go on this front.

In this chapter, we have provided an overview of the Say Yes community-wide approach, and identified some of the challenges faced in implementation. Next we turn to a description of each of the existing Say Yes sites.

Timeline

How has Say Yes evolved in each site?



5. Say Yes in Syracuse

In the next three chapters, we describe and assess the Say Yes experience in each of the three sites, starting with Syracuse, New York.

In each case, we first describe the initial Say Yes movement into the city, before describing the development of the four core components of the Say Yes approach: the scholarship, governance, services, and data. Then we describe some trends in educational outcomes, including any evidence of Say Yes impact, before summarizing the results of our survey and focus groups, conducted in partnership with Drive Research. Finally we offer some reflections on the Say Yes experience in the city. (Note that in Chapter 9, “Lessons for Reformers,” we bring together a series of lessons that can be drawn from our study of Say Yes.)

5.1 Introduction

Say Yes landed in Syracuse with a bang, and with a plenty of amount of publicity and goodwill. As Jaime Alicea, Syracuse City Schools Interim Superintendent, puts it:

When Say Yes first came to Syracuse, it was a great excitement for our students, our families, and our city because Say Yes was going to provide free college for all students in our district who want to go to college. The city all got engaged and there were signs put up, ‘Welcome to Syracuse, the first Say Yes city in the nation.’ People got excited about Say Yes... [and] the opportunity to transform the Syracuse City School District.

This was a view echoed in most of our interviews with stakeholders in Syracuse; in the first two or three years, there was a good deal of energy and collaboration around the Say Yes initiative. The national organization invested heavily in Syracuse, not only funding the

Quick Facts: Syracuse

City	
Population	144,350
White alone	55%
Black alone	29%
Hispanic/Latino ¹	9%
Median household income	\$32,704
Children under 18 in poverty	48%
Individuals over age 25 with at least a bachelor's degree	27%
Children under 18 in renter-occupied housing	72%
School District	
Total enrollment in 2015-16	20,934
Expenditures per pupil in 2013-14	\$20,115
Low-income ²	42%
Medium-income	45%
High-income	13%

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).

scholarships through 2017, but allocating sizable sums to the provision of services including after-school clubs and summer school. In the peak year of investment, FY 2010, Say Yes devoted over \$8 million to these services. By 2013, \$36 million had been spent by Say Yes in Syracuse: a sizable investment in a school district graduating around 900 students each year. It was, as Gene Maeroff wrote in his 2013 book *Reforming a School System, Reviving a City: The Promise of Say Yes to Education in Syracuse*, puts it, a “demonstration model” of the new Say Yes city-wide approach.

The initiative was strongly led at a local level by Nancy Cantor, then Chancellor of Syracuse University (SU). She was a galvanizing force in organizing community leaders to convince Say Yes that Syracuse had the community buy-in it took to become the first Say Yes site (Maeroff, 2013). Cantor also catalyzed the creation of what became known as the Higher Education Compact. As Maeroff writes:

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.

Maeroff’s book offers a useful and comprehensive overview of the history of Say Yes in Syracuse, albeit with a very positive gloss (as he says up front, his book was commissioned and funded by a consultancy working for Say Yes). In particular, Maeroff provides strong overview of the development of support services in the city.

Wraparound supports were largely tied to SU in the beginning as well: summer programs and after-school programs were staffed by SU faculty and students, and family support specialists were on SU’s payroll (though funded by Say Yes). The first Say Yes staffer was actually an SU PhD candidate. Our interviews confirmed that in the early years, many people in Syracuse did not distinguish much between Say Yes and SU. One said:

I think a lot of people initially thought that it was from SU, that Syracuse University was a part of it, and although they are a part of it, it’s not an SU program really. Since SU is such a big part of our city, people think—you know, it’s alliterative—Say Yes, SU, it must be an SU thing.

After an energetic start and establishment of the scholarship, funded by the Say Yes national organization, further progress came to a virtual standstill in 2011 and 2012. One important stakeholder and board member said: “The first two years I was on the board, board members were really informed and really involved, and we knew a lot about what was happening. After the initial two years, the meetings stopped.” Another local stakeholder used a marital metaphor: “Sometimes, you know, marriages start out great and everything’s fine and then sometimes marriages hit a rocky road. I think in Syracuse the marriage hit a rocky road. We never severed the marriage, but there was a breakdown.”

Various factors seem to have been at play:

1. Loss of some community support and especially the backing of the school district as a result of an insensitively handled fiscal analytics process by a group that was subsequently replaced by Schoolhouse Partners. “They weren’t sensitive enough to the school district,” says one pro-Say Yes stakeholder.
2. Confusion about the role and scope of newly appointed site directors: site directors employed initially by Syracuse University were placed in all elementary schools; over time funding for these positions shifted to the county and city, and the roles evolved into “family support specialists” to supplement the district’s social workers. There are now 55 of these specialists working in Syracuse schools.

As Maeroff writes, “A feeling arose that the role of the site directors was fuzzy. Some of them thought that they had been inserted in the schools as change agents, occupying a stratum equal to that of the principal. Others performed duties beyond their scope, and still others failed to render the services expected of them.”

3. A change in school superintendent: Sharon Contreras, who took over in 2011, was a less strong supporter of some aspects of the Say Yes approach. Asked what changed at this point in the evolution of Say Yes, one local stakeholder with close knowledge of events said plainly, “I think what changed is a new superintendent came in.”

One key senior stakeholder said of the period between 2011 and 2016, “I think that the missing link was the ongoing communication between administrations at the top level. ... At one time that communication was very minimal or almost nonexistent.”

4. Difficulties securing support from some stakeholders who reacted against what they saw as an incursion by a distant organization. As one stakeholder with a deep knowledge of the Say Yes history in Syracuse put it to us, “Say Yes went in really hot: lots of commitments and high expectations. They hadn’t learned how to meet a place where it is, and to build on what was already working rather than starting over.”

Syracuse was a proving ground for the Say Yes approach, and there were clear challenges and lessons learned. Following the change in school district leadership, Say Yes had “a very difficult time,” according to one senior stakeholder (and strong supporter).

One closely involved stakeholder in the early years of the Syracuse initiative said that the difficulties of the Say Yes initiative were potentially damaging to the reputation of the organization as a whole. While the scholarship was successfully implemented, most of

the elements of the Say Yes approach—services, governance, and data—were weakly and patchily implemented, as this chapter will show. As one key stakeholder with close knowledge of the early Say Yes experience put it:

Here’s what I can tell you. There was and still is some element in the city that feels that Say Yes did not deliver what they promised. Some of that is accurate, some of it is not accurate. There is this ongoing butting of heads, so to speak. I think there was a feeling...that Say Yes was riding in on this white horse with a magic wand and they were going to cure all ills in urban education; and quite frankly that is not Say Yes’s job. ... One thing that I think went a little sideways for Say Yes is when Say Yes got involved in the city school district budget process. ... Sometimes sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong creates a lot of animosity, and I think unfortunately Say Yes had to endure some of the brunt of that. I think intentions were good but it probably could have been done better strategically.

Another said of this period, “What people said was, Say Yes wasn’t something that was done for you, it was done to you.”

In recent years, however, some of the early energy has returned. Sharon Contreras has moved on (in a twist of fate, to the newest Say Yes site, Guilford County). A new Executive Director, Ahmeed Turner, was appointed in September 2017 after two years without a local director. Schoolhouse Partners is once again working with Say Yes, looking to improve the data platform. A data-sharing agreement is nearing completion. The interim school superintendent, Jaime Alicea, told us that the district is in the process of re-engaging with Say Yes: “Now we are back having the discussions, the board of education is committed to Say Yes, we want to continue that communication and support our students.”

Say Yes has had a storied history in Syracuse. But it looks like there are more chapters to be written.

5.2 Scholarship

Design and eligibility

The Syracuse Say Yes scholarship has a relatively simple set of eligibility criteria, which are as follows:

- Reside in Syracuse

- Continuously enroll in an Syracuse City School District (SCSD) high school or Syracuse Academy Science Charter School from 10th through 12th grades³
- Have graduated from a public high school in the city of Syracuse within the last 12 months
- Enroll full-time at a Say Yes Higher Education Compact Partner College skipping no more than one fall after high school graduation
- Apply and remain eligible for financial aid each year
- Maintain “satisfactory academic progress” at college (i.e. 12 credit hours per semester and GPA of 2.0)

The mainstay of the scholarship offer is the “finaldollar” tuition scholarship, available to eligible student who “enrolls at a Say Yes Higher Education Compact partner college in the SUNY/CUNY system and does not receive the full cost of tuition from the state, federal, and/or institutional grants and scholarships.” Say Yes provides a grant for the remaining tuition balance. The Say Yes Tuition Scholarship is available to all students, regardless of family income, at SUNY and CUNY colleges.

In addition, Say Yes Syracuse offers to connect applicants to the private colleges in the Higher Education Compact, and provides Opportunity Grants of up to \$2000 and Choice Grants of up to \$5,000 per annum (see Chapter 4 for full descriptions).

Endowment funding

The main challenge in Syracuse has been to raise the \$30 million needed to fund the scholarships in perpetuity. During the first eight years, the Syracuse scholarships were paid by the Say Yes national organization following the launch in 2008, but in 2015 Say Yes signaled that this support would cease in June 2017. At that point, the endowment contained just under \$10 million—a combined amount from local government and outside entities, including a \$400,000 donation from Syracuse Local Development Corporation and \$1 million from the Central New York Community Foundation.

Still, in late 2015, the future of the Say Yes Syracuse scholarship remained uncertain. As Peter Dunn, president of the Central New York Community Foundation, which manages the Say Yes endowment, said in early 2016, “If we don't have those funds, we would have to look into changes. If you don't have the resources you can't fund the scholarships.”

...
³ “(Or be legally designated as having refugee status on an Arrival-Departure Record (I-94) from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) or be an otherwise eligible noncitizen).”

But in March 2016 came the announcement that \$20 million would be provided to the scholarship fund by New York State, as part of the Upstate Revitalization Initiative. Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney said the money would “save” the scholarship program.

The money provided by the Say Yes national organization in the first eight years of the Syracuse scholarship was from philanthropic sources, the bulk of the endowment has since come from government agencies. (Note that the American Institutes for Research, who funded our research, is also a donor.) Since most of the funding is from public sources, it seems likely that Say Yes Syracuse will also face greater public scrutiny and accountability. The list of Scholarship Board members is not currently publicly available, but the names have been given to us by the Say Yes national office. Lee Davis, President of O’Brien and Gere is the Board Chair; Peter Dunn, the President and CEO of the Central New York Community Foundation is Treasurer. The Foundation is “the bank,” managing the endowment funds.

A big question facing Say Yes Syracuse (and Buffalo) is the impact of the new Excelsior Scholarship, a final-dollar scholarship for all students from families with family incomes of less than \$100,000 (rising to \$125,000 in 2019) attending CUNY or SUNY institutions.

Peter Dunn has speculated that the scholarship fund might be adapted to help cover non-tuition costs once the financial implications for the Say Yes offer are clearer. Some of the stakeholders we spoke to pointed in the same direction: boosting the Opportunity Grants that help with living and other costs of attending college. This may well be a sensible move; indeed, across all three sites, many stakeholders expressed a wish that Say Yes could help more with non-tuition costs. However this change would also represent a radical departure from the original design and intent of the Say Yes scholarships.

Either way, a very big question now faces Say Yes in both Syracuse and Buffalo: what is the future of a final-dollar scholarship in a city within a state that has just embarked on its own state-wide version?

5.3 Governance

Leadership

In early 2018, the Say Yes Syracuse Operating Committee (OC) had the following members: Syracuse City Schools Interim Superintendent Jaime Alicea; Syracuse Teachers Association President Karen Fruscello; Syracuse City Mayor Stephanie Minor; Onondaga County Executive Joanne Mahoney; CNY Community Foundation CEO Peter Dunn; Syracuse University School of Education Dean Joanna Masingila; Onondaga Community College President Casey Crabill; and Say Yes to Education Syracuse Executive Director Ahmeed Turner. On paper, there is also a Community Advisory Group, but it is dormant.

The OC meets six times a year. Unlike in Buffalo and Guilford, Say Yes has not used Memoranda of Understanding to formalize relationships between stakeholders in Syracuse. Even without MoUs, a number of stakeholders confirmed that the group operates effectively. Even in 2013, when relations between Say Yes and many local stakeholders were still bruised, there was a near consensus that Say Yes had spurred greater collaboration. In that year, Kevin Ahern, then the president of the Syracuse Teachers Association, said:

You've got everybody at the table with constituency groups that they're beholden to, but they've all managed to put that aside to try to improve outcomes for kids in the Syracuse City School District. I think that's an amazing achievement.

One of the most important local figures in the Say Yes Syracuse initiative confirmed the sustainability of some aspects of the Say Yes approach, as well as the critical role of Syracuse University, and the importance of local ownership:

This has been a very resilient enterprise from a collective impact perspective. When this started, Syracuse University was the backbone, and everything flowed through Syracuse University, especially the surround supports. ... Government stepped up, other partners stepped up, things have changed. ... Today, you still have the same primary actors getting together every other month to talk about where we are with respect to the surround supports and the scholarship. ... 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 also, you know, some things were difficult. A lot of it went through the University [and] the county was very entrepreneurial in understanding how to leverage different funding streams.

Say Yes leadership has been patchy at the local level. The first Operations Director employed by Say Yes was Patrick (Pat) Driscoll, recruited in 2011 from the Syracuse Parks and Recreation Department. In 2015, the Operations Director position was abolished, in line with the general winding down of investment by the Say Yes national office. Say Yes had offered to continue funding the position if the school district agreed to fully participate at the Operating Committee and to help build the data platform. Without this commitment, Say Yes ceased funding the Director position. Following the change in Superintendent, Say Yes is once again funding the position in Syracuse. In 2017, Scholarship Director Ahmeed Turner (who had previously been a site coordinator) was promoted to the position of Executive Director.

One representative of the Say Yes efforts says that it “has been a catalyst for the community to come together, stop operating in silos, and to be creative and start thinking about students and families differently and how to go about the business of supporting them in different ways.”

5.4 Services

Say Yes partnered with local entities—most notably Syracuse University, Syracuse City School District, Onondaga County, and various community-based organizations (CBOs)—to find funding for new services or use existing services more effectively. For instance, Say Yes is credited by local stakeholders with helping to enroll eligible students in subsidized health insurance programs offered through the county.

Still, over the course of six years, Say Yes spent \$36 million on its efforts in Syracuse. Of this sum, \$16.1 million went toward supporting the school district, either directly or through the hiring of consultants, and a total of \$830,000 went toward early college courses, support for community-based organizations, and family supports. This financial support was considered to be “seed funding”: the ultimate goal was for local partners to find sustainable funding sources for community services.

Say Yes introduced site directors and out-of-school-time programs in elementary schools in one quadrant of the school district in fall 2008. The organization entered an additional quadrant each year, so that all elementary schools in the district were included in the support service network by fall 2011. Maeroff writes that “Say Yes intended eventually to fully bring in the middle schools and high schools,” but as we mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, progress slowed and in some cases stalled over the next several years, and the Say Yes national organization began to reduce its presence in Syracuse. By 2015, responsibility for support services was fully vested in local partners.

Looking back on its peak years of involvement in Syracuse, Say Yes emphasizes seven elements of its support for the community: family support specialists in the schools, mental health clinics, extended day and extended year programming, pro bono legal clinics, retention programming in the community college, scholarship administration, and support for completing postsecondary financial aid applications. We discussed scholarship administration in the previous section; we explore the other six elements below.

For details about the implementation of support services, we rely heavily on Maeroff, who observed community services in Syracuse when they were still strongly associated with and facilitated by Say Yes. For descriptions of the services as they exist now, as well as for supplementary or alternative recollections of the implementation period, we turn to our own interviews with Syracuse stakeholders.

Family Support Specialists

One of the first and most enduring support services that Say Yes helped to create and fund are the Family Support Specialists operating out of Syracuse schools.

Support specialists evolved from Say Yes’s site directors, who were funded by Say Yes but employed by Syracuse University. Site directors were responsible for monitoring the

needs of students and families in order to connect them with services and evaluate gaps in the network of available services. The first site directors were placed in elementary schools in one quadrant of the city in 2008.

The politics in the placing of site coordinators in schools was initially difficult, and caused some damage to relationships between key stakeholders. Maeroff describes early tensions between site directors and other school-based personnel in a section of his book titled “The Issue with the Site Directors.” As one interviewee closely involved at the time told us:

When Say Yes first came onto the scene, the folks that were stationed in the school buildings were actually employees of Syracuse University, and there was the thought among many principals and teachers that, whether they were the site-based managers or program coordinators, they were going into the building and saying they didn’t know what they were doing. ‘You don’t know how to be a principal, you don’t know how to be a teacher.’ That didn’t play well with several schools to the point you had some district leadership saying, ‘Let’s just say no to Say Yes.’

According to Maeroff, site directors had also become increasingly tied to Syracuse University, “an arrangement that made Say Yes increasingly uneasy.” These concerns led Say Yes to adjust the site directors’ role. Maeroff writes,

Finally, during summer 2012, four years into the project, Say Yes ordered the 18 site directors to reapply for the positions and retained only half of them as student support specialists. In addition, Say Yes moved to appoint four more support specialists in anticipation of expanding into the middle schools.

As of 2018, the Syracuse City School District employs 55 support specialists. The staff now works for Coordinated Care Services on behalf of Onondaga County but with resources allocated from the county, city, state, and federal government. One stakeholder said:

The partners here did a really good job of thinking about their assets and realigning their resources. Those specialists are funded by [a variety of funding sources, county, state, local, philanthropic, local elected officials]. We’ve been able to use [those resources] to leverage federal funds for preventive services.

The job of these specialists is to “work with families, school personnel and community providers to identify and remove barriers impacting students’ performance in school.” The majority of schools have two support specialists, though schools with lower enrollment may have just one.

Mental Health Clinics

Early on, Say Yes partnered with Onondaga County to offer a program that refers students to mental health counselors who are retained by community-based organizations. According to Maeroff, “The county picked up almost \$700,000 of the cost, and Say Yes paid a smaller share.” The county also received federal funding to put mental health clinicians in schools as part of the Promise Zone program, of which Say Yes is a partner.

Given the county’s substantial role in these initiatives, it rubbed some local partners the wrong way when Say Yes Syracuse took part of the credit. One local stakeholder told us, “Say Yes made a ton of mistakes in the beginning. One of the things that happened here was Onondaga county was incredibly entrepreneurial in establishing surround supports [like increased mental health access]...that Say Yes has implemented in other communities” and “branded it Say Yes.” We discuss Syracuse stakeholders’ responses to Say Yes Buffalo’s “branding” in the next chapter. Say Yes has provided us with a letter signed by Ann Rooney, the Deputy County Executive of Human Services, confirming Say Yes’s involvement in mental health clinics and other services.

Extended Day and Extended Year Programming

Toward the end of 2008, Say Yes began offering a popular after-school program at six elementary schools in the first quadrant of the city. Students at these elementary schools were also able to participate in a summer program starting in 2009. The after-school and summer programs expanded into one additional quadrant each year.

According to Maeroff, one of the strengths of these programs was that Say Yes provided transportation for participants, enabling students with the greatest need for such programming to participate. However, since Say Yes did not initially involve some of the community-based organizations (CBOs) that had been providing out-of-school-time programs before Say Yes arrived, Say Yes’s programs were seen by some local stakeholders as encroaching on, rather than supplementing, these organizations’ efforts. One of the lessons Say Yes took to Buffalo was to involve CBOs early and often.

Say Yes responded to tensions in Syracuse by increasingly involving CBOs in after-school and summer programming. Maeroff contends that this partnership was positive from a collaborative governance perspective but may have come at the expense of program quality:

The role of the CBOs in the after-school program raises several questions about the best way to take advantage of this added time, issues that school districts everywhere must address as they, too, extend the school day. Say Yes’s approach in Syracuse puts some of the control of the time in the hands of noneducators. Also, in eliminating the role of the Say Yes site directors, who formerly

oversaw afterschool activities, Say Yes diminished its direct influence on the program. The partnership that Say Yes established with the CBOs had the effect of placating groups that might otherwise have resented Say Yes for usurping a portion of the day that was an important revenue source for them.

The involvement of non-educators did not go unnoticed in the community. One local stakeholder, who also happened to be a parent in the area, told us:

When Say Yes first came into Syracuse, one of their big pushes was to provide a lot of summer initiatives, which I think were great. They had summer bridge programs, and we all understand that keeping that learning going over the summer is important. However, after a while they started staffing those programs with college kids, who...are not educators. So that initiative kind of petered out. College kids are great at organizing activities and things like that, but they aren't teachers. It was disappointing that that did not get maintained with integrity.

Out-of-school-time (OST) programs in Syracuse are no longer operated by Say Yes, but each school has an after-school program run by community-based organizations like the YMCA and the Boys & Girls Club.

Pro Bono Legal Clinics

There are initiatives for which Say Yes often gets little credit, but where the organization's involvement and investment was decisive—in particular, the provision of legal assistance. The original Say Yes push for free legal clinics, and upfront funding for the salary of a director, has morphed in the Volunteer Lawyers Project, that now has an operating budget of \$1 million per year and provides free advice at clinics every day, and in schools, churches, and community organizations across the city.

One senior stakeholder points to this as an example of impact:

If kids are being evicted over and over again, they're less likely to learn. [It is now] funded on its own, but it was scaled up with Say Yes instigation. ... That's an example of something that Say Yes does not get credit for. It was a key insight here—it involved scaling up an existing source instead of establishing one-off legal clinics, which was the original idea.

According to Peter Dunn, who serves as the Treasurer on the project's Board of Directors, the Volunteer Lawyers Project now closes 3,000 cases a year.

Retention Programming in the Community College

In 2011, Say Yes partnered with Onondaga Community College (OCC) to offer a Summer Success Academy for incoming college students who had received a Say Yes tuition scholarship but had failed at least one of OCC's placement tests. The five-week academy offered students the opportunity to pass noncredit remedial classes over the summer so

that they could begin taking classes for credit in the fall. According to Maeroff, Say Yes ensured that students would be able to attend the program for free. In the program's first year, over 30 students attended the Academy.

The Summer Success Academy continues to serve Syracuse students, and Say Yes Syracuse is still involved in connecting students to the program, alongside partner organizations such as On Point for College and the Hillside Work Scholarship Program.

Support for Completing Postsecondary Financial Aid Applications

Since completing the FAFSA (as well as, for those attending college in New York, the TAP application) is a prerequisite for receiving a Say Yes tuition scholarship, helping families fill out financial aid applications is a key service offered in Say Yes sites. In Syracuse, Say Yes and the school district partnered with financial aid experts from Central New York colleges to start the Financial Aid Counseling Network. The FACN hosts financial aid application filing events as well as more general college information events.

Additionally, Say Yes Syracuse hosted college fairs in 2016 and 2017 to give students and families more information about their postsecondary options. According to Say Yes, about half of the more than 100 institutions in the Higher Education Compact sent representatives to these events.

There remain serious differences of opinion in Syracuse over the precise nature of the Say Yes contribution to the development of these services, though the scale of the investment from Say Yes is not in doubt. A separate question is the impact of these services on educational outcomes, particularly the primary Say Yes goal of boosting postsecondary completion. Here there is no hard evidence, in part because of issues around data collection and sharing, which we turn to next.

5.5 Data

One of the biggest disappointments for Say Yes was the failure to establish a data platform to track progress in Syracuse. This has hampered efforts to assess impact. As one interviewee told us:

I will hear word of mouth from people that because of the Say Yes scholarship, my daughter went to college and is now in law school.....But is there a metric we can look at?

The short answer: no. A key priority for the new ED, Ahmeed Turner, along with Schoolhouse Partners, is to make some progress on this front. A data-sharing agreement with the school district is “nearing the final hurdles of approval” according to one stakeholder. Then work can begin in earnest, albeit almost a decade later than hoped.

Some interviewees hold the school district responsible for the failure to move forward on the data front. The former head of the relevant department was seen as a particular roadblock. Others point out that the school district had essentially no capacity. As someone who works for the district told us:

It wasn't Sharon Contreras's fault. We had no data people in the district. When we had those conversations, we thought we could create a data department, but the person in charge of the department left, the new person who came in also left. It is hard to keep data people in Syracuse.

It is also clear, however, that Superintendent Contreras was lukewarm about sharing data, in large part it seems because of concerns about the legal issues involved. One lesson here is that establishing a clear, shared legal position on data sharing is an important precursor to any efforts in this direction. District staff from Syracuse have now been to Buffalo to learn from the Say Yes experience there. Another stakeholder pointed out that while the data component was important to Say Yes, it inevitably ranked much lower on the agenda of an embattled school district and its leaders:

What Sharon [Contreras] said was, 'Half my schools might be in receivership, I'm supposed to be implementing a data platform when I'm supposed to be reorganizing all these schools?'

Other interviewees pointed to the loss of trust as a result of the early Fiscal Analytics work, and a general breakdown in relationships between Say Yes and the school district. Sharing data requires a high degree of trust, which has been lacking in Syracuse. Whatever the cause, this key component of the Say Yes approach has been almost entirely absent from Syracuse.

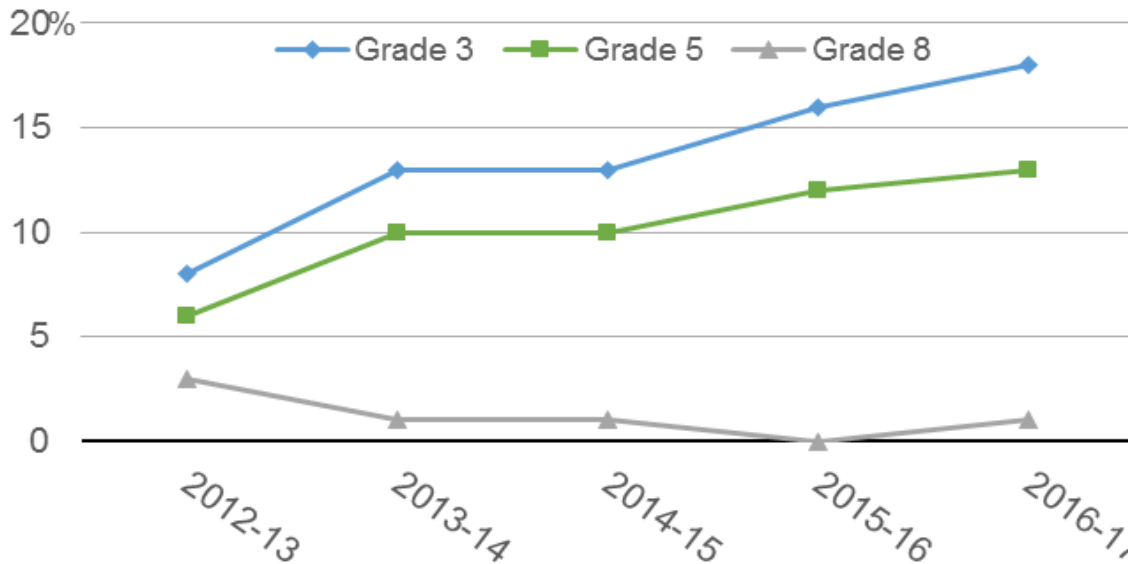
5.6 Trends

In this section, we provide an overview of recent trends in educational outcomes in Syracuse, and summarize the small empirical literature on the impact of Say Yes in the city. The general picture for outcomes at the K-12 level is of gradual improvement from a very low base.

Subject improvement

Improvements in math attainment in elementary school have not been reflected in trends in proficiency by Grade 8. Just one in every hundred 8th graders in Syracuse is proficient in math:⁴

Figure 5.1: Share of students proficient in math by grade level
Syracuse City School District

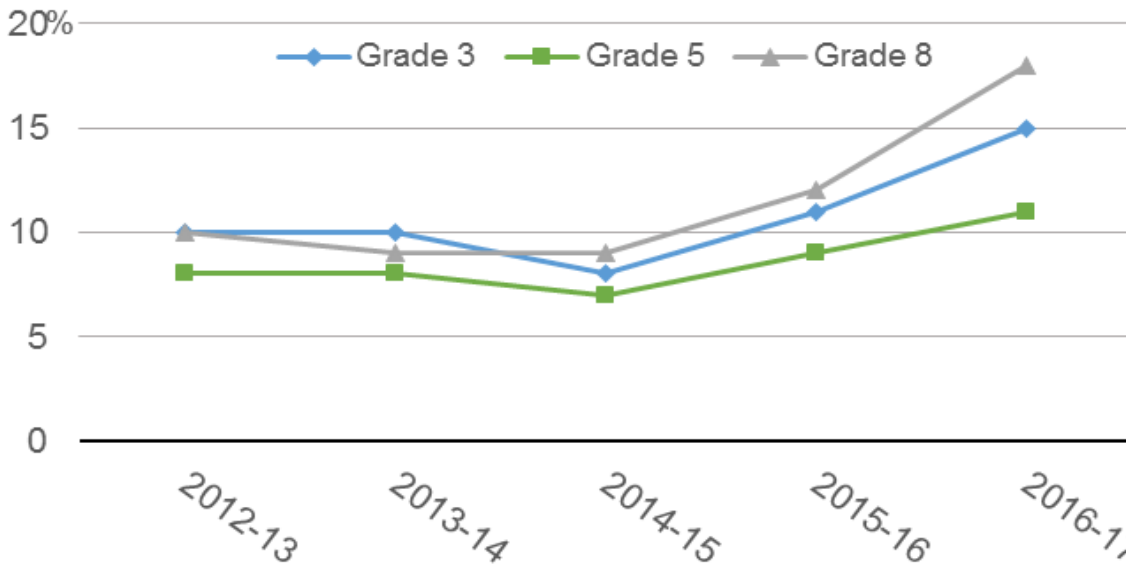


Source: New York State Education Department School Report Cards; proficiency defined as scoring at Level 3 (proficient) or 4 (excelling) on state assessment.

The trends in English are somewhat better, although the overall rates of proficiency remain low, with fewer than one in five 8th graders meeting the mark:

...
⁴ Recent years' test results cannot be compared to pre-2012 results because New York implemented Common Core testing standards in the 2012-13 school year. Testing also underwent a change in 2015-16, so caution is recommended when examining trends before and after 2015-16.

Figure 5.2: Share of students proficient in English Language Arts by grade level
Syracuse City School District



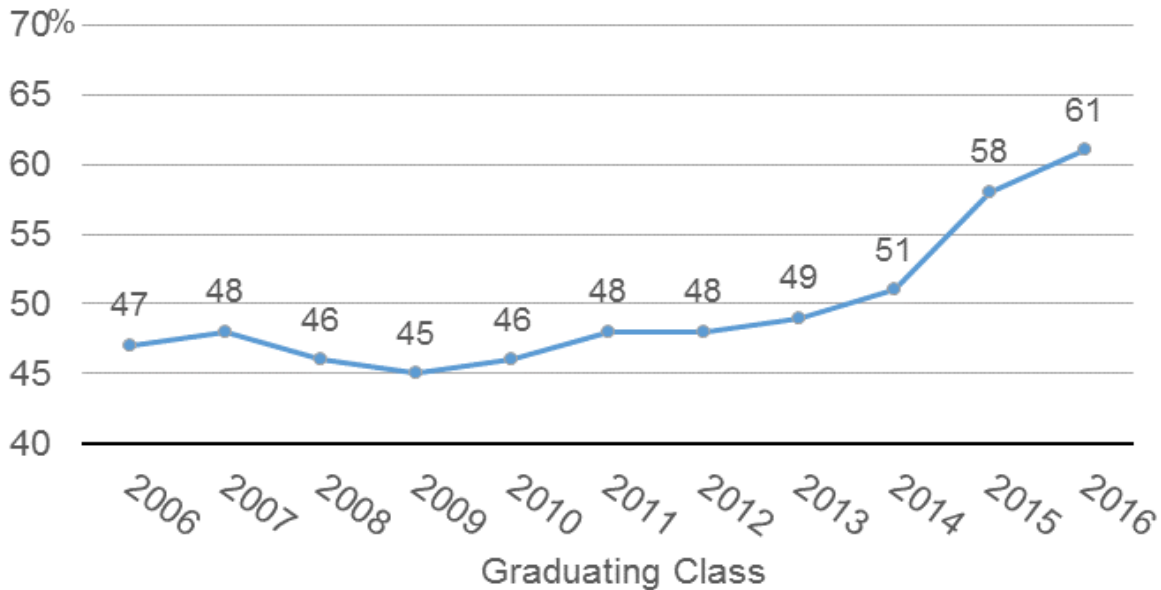
Source: New York State Education Department School Report Cards; proficiency defined as scoring at Level 3 (proficient) or 4 (excelling) on state assessment.

High school completion

There has been a steady increase in the proportion of students graduating from Syracuse public high schools, from 45 percent in 2009 to 61 percent in 2016. However, this increase cannot necessarily be attributed to Say Yes, since there have been similar increases in other comparable districts.

Figure 5.3: Four-year cohort high school graduation rate

Syracuse City School District, rates as of June



Source: New York State Education Department graduation rate databases

Postsecondary outcomes

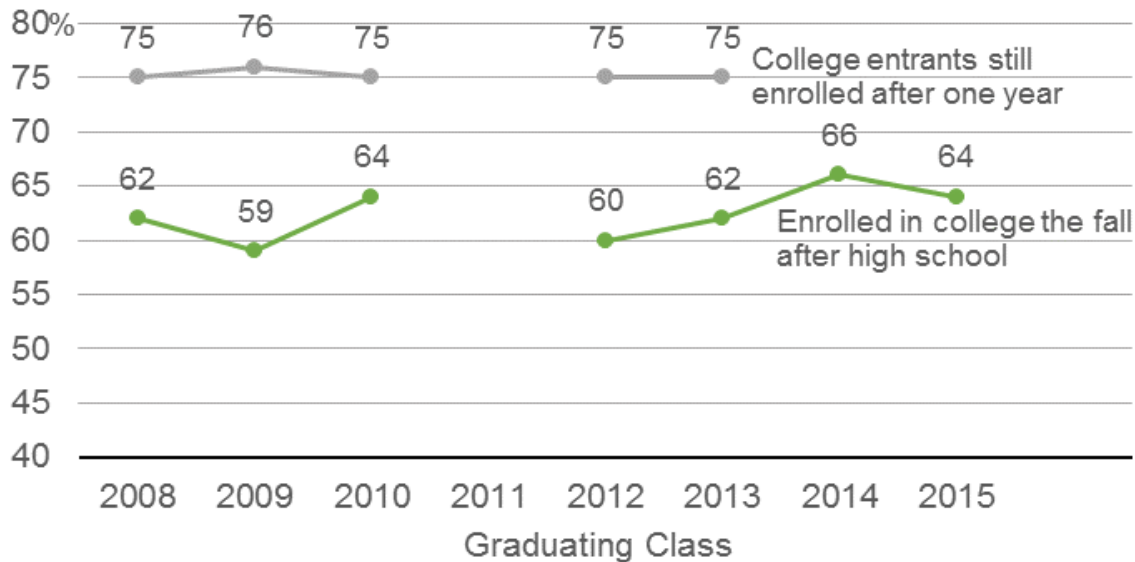
Say Yes has provided us with recent rates of postsecondary enrollment and first-to-second-year persistence for each district using data from the National Student Clearinghouse. Postsecondary enrollment is measured as the percentage of students in the graduating class who entered college in the fall immediately after high school. Persistence is measured as the percentage of these college entrants who were still enrolled in the second year after high school.

For Syracuse, data on postsecondary enrollment are available for the graduating classes of 2008 through 2015 (except for the class of 2011), and data on persistence are available for the classes of 2008 through 2013 (again, 2011 is missing).

College enrollment actually ticked down slightly for the graduating class of 2009 (the first Say Yes cohort). The enrollment rate has largely fluctuated between about 60 and 65 percent over the entire period. Meanwhile, first-to-second-year persistence rates have remained steady at about 75 percent:

Figure 5.4: Postsecondary enrollment and persistence

Among all graduates of the Syracuse City School District



Source: Data provided by Say Yes to Education from the National Student Clearinghouse

College enrollment is not the end goal of Say Yes initiatives, since students must complete their degrees to reap the benefits of postsecondary education. Nationally, only around 40 percent of bachelor’s-degree-seeking students who entered college in 2009 completed their degrees within four years; after six years, 59 percent had done so. The first Say Yes Syracuse scholars entered college in the fall of 2009, so those who were able to finish bachelor’s degrees in four years would have graduated in 2013. At the time of writing, no analysis has been undertaken of college graduation rates for Syracuse students using National Student Clearinghouse data. The Syracuse School District has now subscribed to the NSC, and so data should soon be available for analysis. There will now be a few years of relevant data for graduation rates, providing an important opportunity for rigorous evaluation of the first Say Yes city-wide site on the primary Say Yes goal of improving postsecondary outcomes.

However, we do know that 437 of the students who graduated from Syracuse high schools in 2009 enrolled in college that year. Say Yes Syracuse has also published the following figure: “In spring 2013, 93 SCSD graduates who received the Say Yes tuition guarantee and who entered college in fall 2009 earned degrees from a four-year college or university”. The question is whether this completion rate is higher than it would have been in the absence of the Say Yes scholarship; and to answer that question requires more data, and more research.

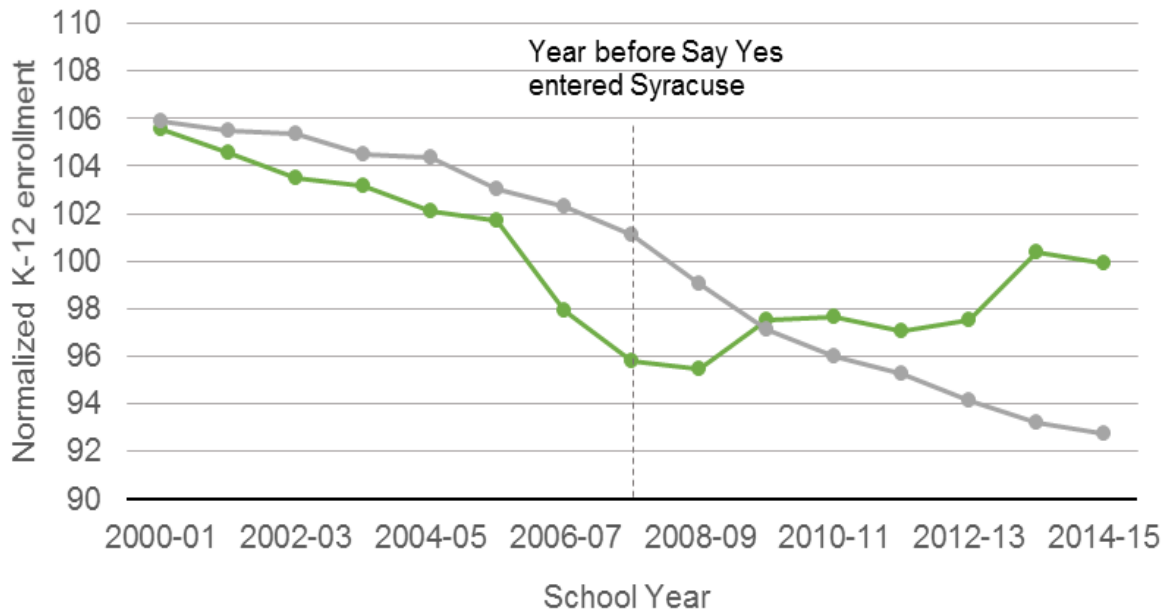
Other evaluations

The impact of Say Yes has been a contested issue locally. In 2013, the *Syracuse Post-Standard* ran a retrospective series on the program called, “Say Yes at 5.” While praising the community efforts of Say Yes, the series suggested that the impact of Say Yes had been underwhelming. Say Yes pointed to its own numbers, like more families getting legal aid and social services, and improvements in algebra Regents scores. To some extent, it seemed as if the impact of Say Yes could have been varying from school to school, depending on the building's leadership. The *Post-Standard* piece profiled the principal of McKinley elementary, who demonstrated strong leadership around the initiative, holding weekly meetings between her building's Say Yes staff, teachers, and the school's “community partner,” the YMCA. What was lacking at this point was any careful empirical research.

There is now, however, some good-quality empirical research on trends in certain key outcomes, led by researchers from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University (Bifulco acknowledges financial support, of \$550,000 up to 2016, from the Say Yes to Education Foundation). Bifulco et al. (2017) examine the impact of Say Yes on enrollment and housing prices both Syracuse and Buffalo (we turn to the Buffalo findings in the next chapter). Their research design is strong, with appropriate data, controls, and estimates.

While enrollment rates continued to drop in neighboring schools districts, they stabilized and rose in the Syracuse school district following the introduction of the Say Yes scholarship:

Figure 5.5: Enrollment trends in Syracuse before and after Say Yes

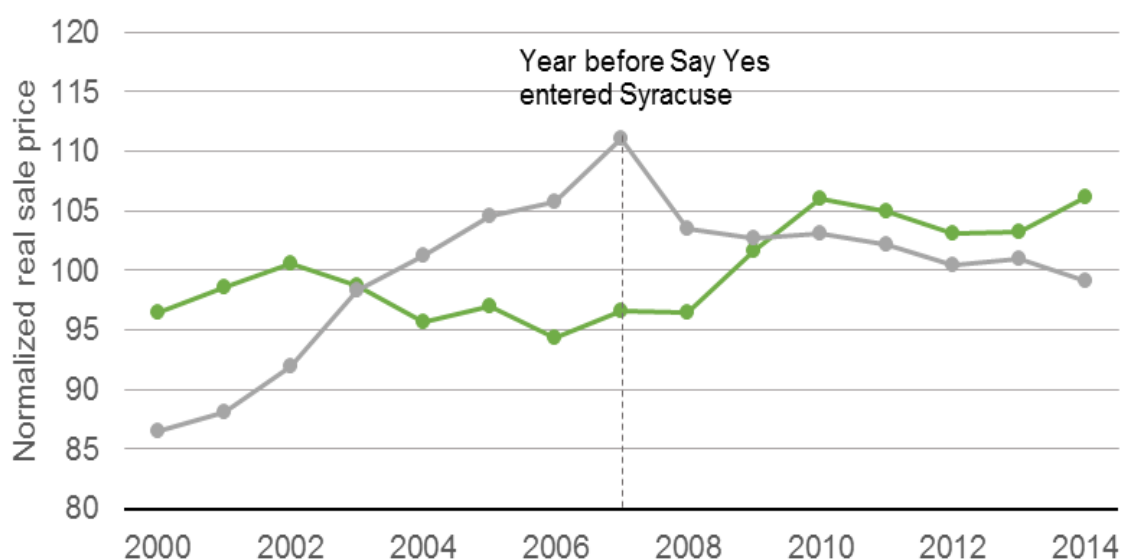


Source: Bifulco, Rubenstein, Sohn, and Murchie, 2016

In Syracuse, the researchers estimate that public school enrollment rates were between 4 and 9 percent higher than projected trends, following the introduction of Say Yes, and depending on how many previous years are used for comparison (i.e. between four and eight years of pre-Say Yes trends).

The main driver of the stronger enrollment numbers seems to have been local movement from surrounding suburbs into the city by families eager to make use of the scholarship. Home values offer an important clue here. As Bifulco and his coauthors put it: “Three years after the adoption of Say Yes in Syracuse, property values in the suburbs decreased between 7 and 9 percent, relative to the projection of pre-existing trends and controlling for deviations from projected trends observed in the Rochester and Buffalo suburbs during the same time period.”

Figure 5.6: Median housing values in Syracuse before and after Say Yes



Source: Bifulco, Rubenstein, Sohn, and Murchie, 2016

The results indicate that the announcement of Say Yes was associated with both increases in property values in the city and decreases in property values in the surrounding suburbs, which is consistent with the idea of people who might otherwise have lived in the suburbs moving to or remaining in the city.

This means that the increased enrollment in Syracuse should be seen as a shift in where students are enrolling rather than in overall enrollment numbers. Or as Bifulco and his coauthors explain:

It [the estimate] should be interpreted as indicator of whether or not Say Yes may have contributed to a divergence (or convergence) in enrollments between the city where it was adopted and its surrounding suburbs.

Additionally, the increase in public school enrollment appears to have been concentrated in better-performing elementary schools in the district. Bifulco and his colleagues split the Syracuse schools into three groups (high, medium, low) based on test score performance. Of course, these are relative groupings in a school district facing significant challenges.

Finally, increases in enrollment numbers were explained by changes in white enrollment, and specifically the slowing down of “white flight” from the city:

Year-to-year decreases in white enrollment averaged 6.4 percent over the ten years preceding Say Yes. In the first three years following Say Yes, decreases in white enrollments slowed to an average of 2.9 percent per year.

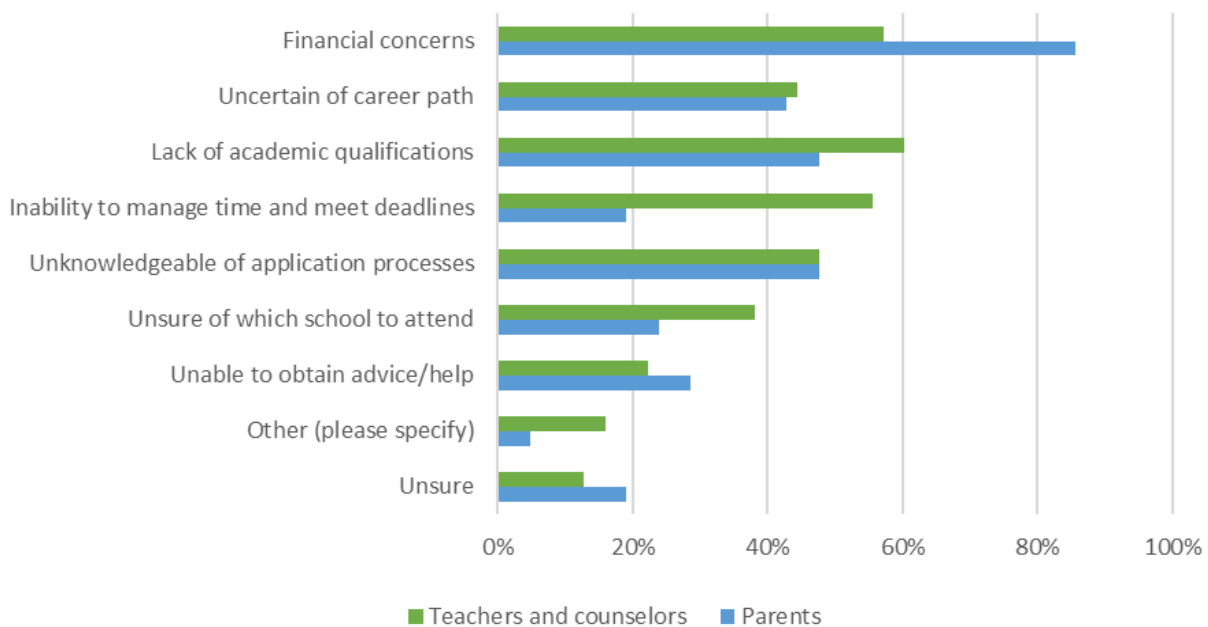
The story on public school enrollment in Syracuse seems then to be that Say Yes may have encouraged some families to move into the city from the nearby suburbs, and enroll their children in the better-performing public schools. In a similar study (but this time using a synthetic district as the control), Bifulco, Rubenstein and Sohn (2017) find similar results in terms of enrollment. More research is needed, however, on Syracuse specifically, not least since it is the only Say Yes city where the scholarship has been in place long enough for researchers to assess any impact on postsecondary completion rates.

5.7 Survey results

We surveyed 64 educators and 21 parents of high school students in Syracuse. Parents in Syracuse were more likely than educators to see financial concerns as a major barrier to postsecondary education (86 percent versus 57 percent). While the small sample size of parents in Syracuse makes these estimates noisy, parents were more concerned than educators about financial barriers to college in all three Say Yes sites, not just Syracuse. As in other sites, educators tended to emphasize academic qualifications and time management more than parents did.

Figure 5.7: Greatest barriers to postsecondary education

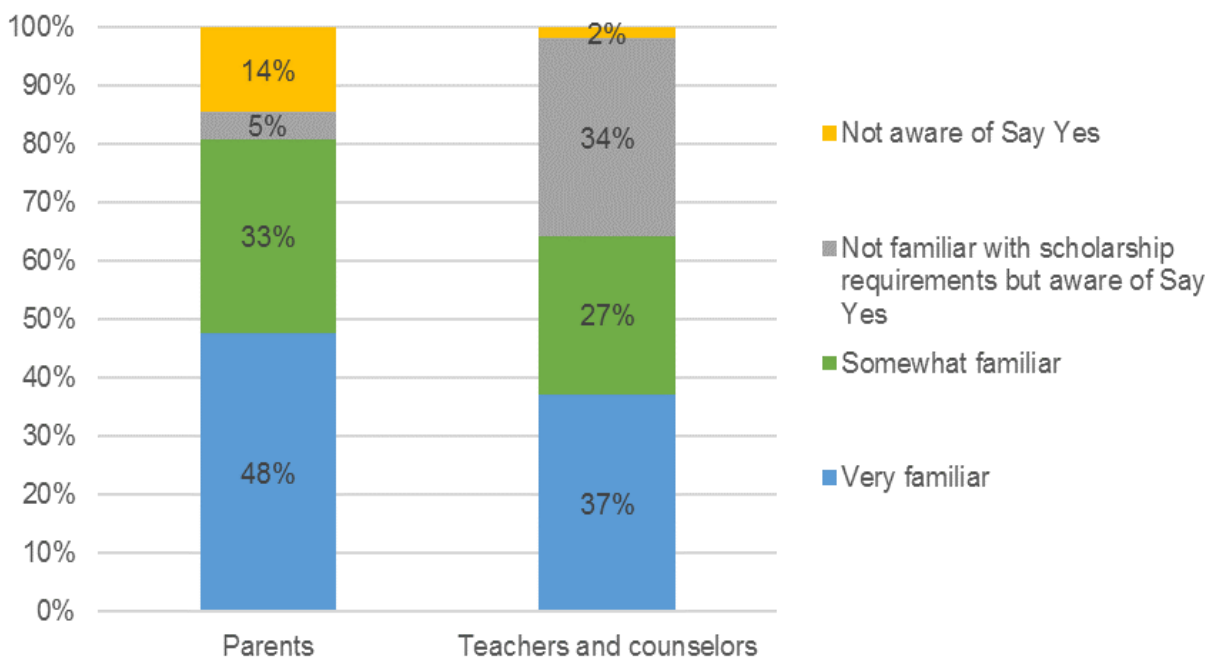
Syracuse survey responses



Ten Syracuse educators volunteered other barriers to postsecondary education access on their survey. Four of these further emphasized academic qualifications, time management, motivation, and/or discipline. A guidance counselor noted the “gap in financial aid when residing on campus, even for state schools.” One teacher pointed to a lack of support at home, and another to a lack of support from guidance counselors. Six parents offered alternative barriers, including medical issues, anxiety, poverty and homelessness, and lack of initiative.

Most parents (86 percent) and almost all teachers (98 percent) were aware of Say Yes in their community. Participants who were aware of Say Yes were also asked to assess their familiarity with the scholarship requirements. About four out of five parents were at least somewhat familiar with qualifications for the scholarship. Teachers were less aware of the requirements, but this is to be expected given that parents are more likely to be directly involved in helping their students apply for the Say Yes scholarship and other forms of financial aid.

Figure 5.8: Awareness of Say Yes
Syracuse survey responses



Participants who were aware of Say Yes were then asked to participate in a paid focus group. Parents who agreed to participate in a focus group were asked if their children would be willing to participate as well. We turn to the results of these focus groups next.

5.8 Focus group findings

Parent focus group

There were six participants in the parent focus group in Syracuse. All had children currently enrolled in high school, though a few also had children in postsecondary programs. All but one participant said that they were “somewhat familiar” with Say Yes. Most had learned about Say Yes when their children were exposed to support services in elementary or middle school. Parents repeatedly referred to their children as having “been in” Say Yes, by which they meant that their children had participated in summer programs and/or after-school programs:

They'll help with the afterschool education and helping kids get caught up, they have people volunteering or college kids coming in, or they have teachers and stuff like that.

The summer camps are fabulous.

Participants disagreed about whether after-school and summer programs were still being offered by Say Yes, and at which schools. Those who did not think Say Yes was still offering these programs seemed interested in utilizing such resources—to “keep them safe,” as one parent said. Several participants also said that they had attended parent workshops, which continue to be offered.

One participant had no experience with the support services but said that after she and her husband divorced when their son was in the fifth grade, her decision to stay in the city was influenced by the Say Yes scholarship. Another parent later echoed the sentiment that Say Yes kept people in Syracuse:

The plus side of living in the city, that's why you live in the city, is for the Say Yes [scholarship]. Cause I think we would have moved out a long time ago if it wasn't for the Say Yes.

As these statements suggest, parents' feelings toward Say Yes were generally positive. Several agreed with one parent's statement that Say Yes “kind of levels the playing field a bit” and that because of Say Yes, “there's kids out there that are going to college that would never have had that opportunity.” If anything, they wished that the program were as robust as it had been several years ago and provided them with more information about options to prepare for their children's postsecondary education. Of the parents who had looked into the scholarship for their children, all had found their information online on the Say Yes website. There was general agreement that information about Say Yes was more difficult to find now than in the past, largely because its presence in Syracuse had dwindled. Four parents offered the following perspectives:

I actually work for the mayor, so I used to be able to get more information just in my daily work. Like people would talk about, oh, the Say Yes program is doing this now, the Say Yes program is doing that. But that is when they had more of a central...I mean, now it's just that they have a director, but they don't really have a huge presence here anymore. So, I think that I used to hear more when there were more people working there and I'd run into people and meet people who worked there and actually had the information. And now that we don't have that anymore.

I think when they initially promoted it, they pushed it hard and there was a lot of information. And I think now, the more people that take advantage of it, I think there's getting less [speaker was interrupted].

Yeah, when my kids were little it was like [inaudible] and now I feel like you have to go digging to try to find any information. Like, you have to have a pickaxe.

Yeah, that's [the Say Yes website] where I found it too, it was just digging. I was up at four o'clock in the morning, couldn't sleep, so you know, go online. And just reading as much as I possibly could about that information because my daughter is knocking on colleges' doors right now, and okay, where are we going to be paying for, what are we going to be paying for, how are we gonna get money from different things, different scholarship options, different whatever.

Another parent said that Say Yes and/or guidance counselors and social workers in schools “need to step up” to provide information to parents. Frustration with a lack of information not only about Say Yes, but about financing postsecondary education in general were a theme throughout the conversation. Participants agreed that money was the number one barrier to postsecondary access, but they also discussed the need to have better, more easily accessible information about how to solve financial barriers.

One participant had a son with a disability who attends a postsecondary program for disabled adults nearby. She said her son's high school brought the program to her attention. Another participant said she wanted someone to publish a list of “what programs are available out there for our children to go to, or scholarships, or stuff like that, that can help our tuition costs.”

Other participants added that information was available, but only if they made an effort to seek it out themselves. One parent, who described herself as “proactive” about her children's schooling, said that she had received plenty of information by “engaging with the people at the school, the guidance counselors, the principals, the vice principals, and asking, what do you know about [programs and scholarships].” One parent said that this was difficult for her as a working mother:

You have a lot of parents that's out there that's working different hours, crazy hours, and is not able to get to PTO meetings, or is not able to get to parent-teacher

conferences, and stuff like that. And because we can't make it to those particular meetings or conferences, we are failing to know what's out there for our children.

Two parents who had already helped their students apply for the Say Yes scholarship expressed that they had been surprised or confused at some point during the application process about what the scholarship would cover:

So my son graduated last year, they told them at their initial senior meeting of how to fill out the forms. I didn't even know you had to go on and register, and do all that, and how to get the money. And they don't really tell you clearly on how the money dispersed. Even [at Onondaga Community College], majority Say Yes doesn't pay for because normally the TAP and Pell, that already kicks in and that takes it. And then they don't use Say Yes. Say Yes is the last dollar. Which they don't explain, they don't tell you that.

I just read that if you go to a private school, Say Yes will pay for tuition, but not room and board. So if you go to a SUNY or CUNY school, it will pay for tuition. I think it will pay for all of it if you do the SUNY and CUNY. But if you do a private, it's different.

While all but one parent expressed a desire for more information, almost all parents agreed that Say Yes had impacted students' college decisions, though some said that the program only played a small role in their children's decisions. One parent with a daughter hoping to attend a four-year college said,

I planned it in such a way that barring wanting to go to Cornell or something for four years, they were gonna be able to do that. It's been hard work. I've kind of looked at the Say Yes program kind of the same way I've looked at Social Security. By the time I get there and need it, is it still going to be there?

Overall, parents were positive about Say Yes, both in terms of the support services they have been exposed to, and the scholarship. The main request of parents is for more information, and more easily accessible information, especially with regard to the scholarships. This reinforces the point made by many Say Yes staff: It is almost impossible to over-communicate.

Student focus group

The six children of the participants from the parent focus group participated in the student focus group. About half of participants said that they were very familiar with Say Yes, and the rest said that they were somewhat familiar with Say Yes. Those who were very familiar with Say Yes had participated in out-of-school-time programs in elementary or middle school. These students had positive things to say about their experiences but said that they were mostly for younger students.

Students seemed to associate Say Yes more with wraparound services than with the scholarship. When the moderator asked what they thought of when they heard “Say Yes,” only one student mentioned the scholarship:

I'd say it [Say Yes] gives more opportunities to like get scholarships and find colleges that they can go to.

A few others said:

It just like helps you with your school work and stuff, I mean, a lot of people couldn't better their selves at school.

They help you so you can build your skills and prepare for college.

When asked specifically about the scholarship, two sophomores said they had not thought much about it. Another sophomore was under the impression that the scholarship had a minimum GPA requirement and said she may not qualify. The same student complained that the private college she hoped to attend would not accept Say Yes (in fact, the college she named is part of the Say Yes Higher Education Compact):

Not to put a downer but I feel like it is limiting us because not every college would accept the Say Yes grant or anything like that. ... What if that school we choose, of our choice, is not accepting Say Yes? So then we're left by ourselves, not to say we can't get in, because there's other programs that we could have done that could have gave us that money that helped or anything like that.

The same student indicated that she thought participating in a Say Yes out-of-school-time program was a prerequisite for receiving the scholarship. However, she added that participating in these programs was “motivational” for her:

I did this [Say Yes after-school program] when I was way younger but I was the laziest child you could find. I would not do nothing and get passed right along. Then it came to fourth grade, I had this one teacher, I can't remember who he was but I remember. I don't remember the class either, but it was a Say Yes class and he was like, no you can't do that no more, you've gotta grow up and you've gotta do this and do that cause they're passing you along and once you get to high school that is over. He was right. And I'm glad I listened to him and I actually started doing something because it made, not to say it made it easier in high school but it made the transition ... the transition is still hard but it made it a lot simpler because I had stopped that in fourth grade.

An older student said that he didn't think his postsecondary program would qualify since he was planning on training to become a firefighter. Only one student indicated that she had looked into utilizing the scholarship, partly because she has seen her older sister

struggle with student debt. The student's mother enrolled her in a public school instead of a private school so that she would qualify for Say Yes:

Because I used to go to Catholic schools up until ninth grade and I was gonna go to another Catholic school but my mom introduced Say Yes to me and pretty much said if you got good grades and went to a city school from like tenth to twelfth or ninth to twelfth or whatever you would get like a scholarship to help you out. ... I know my sister is like paying off her student debt and she has like a ton. My mom was saying that she, my sister, had a lot more than she originally did so like she studies [inaudible] but her student debt keeps getting higher and higher. So why wouldn't you take advantage of that to pay as little debt as you need to.

The same student said that she participated in free SAT prep courses at Syracuse University and utilized her school's student support center to get information about college. A few other students said that they would be interested in these sorts of programs if "schools like actually tell the students about it." This echoed what their parents said in the parent focus group: Students and parents would like to have more easily accessible information about available programs to prepare for college. One student said Say Yes should "bring back" its "office in the school." The student was probably talking about family support specialists.

Again, the main themes here are a desire for more information. The universal nature of the scholarship does not seem to be understood by all students, including those who are struggling academically. But again, the overall impression of Say Yes is strongly positive.

Educator focus group

Six high school teachers and counselors participated in the educator focus group. One teacher had experience with Say Yes as both a Say Yes scholar and a summer program counselor but said he has not heard much about the program since becoming an educator (consistent with the programs shift away from direct provision of support services). Another teacher said he has looked into Say Yes for his own children but added, "In my opinion, it hasn't been infiltrated into the school at all. I don't hear about it at school. Not once has it been mentioned at school."

A teacher who has been in the district for many years discussed how Say Yes's presence in the district has changed since it first came to the district:

In the beginning we were flooded with information, when the program first started. And a lot of it came from the media, and then it trickled down to the actual buildings, and personnel started finding out about it, but as the years went on, we hear less and less about it. Because I have a son that went through the Say Yes Program, I worked with the Say Yes program, but I'm talking to other parents, they don't have

an understanding of what exactly the Say Yes program is about. ... This information, it's not being put out there, and it's only then put out there if, when the parents actually say, "Okay, my child is going to school now. I don't have to pay any tuition," and then that's when the reality hits, "Oh, I need to pay tuition. I gotta pay for books. I gotta pay for room and board." And that information is not being given out, in a timely manner where everybody knows this upfront, before so that's it.

Multiple teachers expressed that they believed the scholarship once covered room and board. One commented that "what was put out as the message so many years ago" was not free tuition, but "free college." Three teachers offered the following thoughts about coverage for room and board:

I feel like it hasn't necessarily been clarified as well. And I feel like when you hear free money, that's what you hold on to. And so people that are coming up with, maybe they had like a four-year-old at that time, but now have a ninth-grader, are like, 'All right sweet, so now you get free money, get free college.' And it hasn't necessarily been clarified that the, maybe the denominations, or the tuition has changed to free room and board, so I don't know if there's a want to come out and say, 'Hey, well it isn't necessarily, or maybe it never was this.' Or that clarification because it's gonna be political.

I'm kind of realistic with [students] about the debt that I'm still in, even though I had my tuition paid for. Even after my four years that I spent in [a four-year college], I was \$30,000 in debt. Like yeah, it covers tuition, which is a good \$7,000 every year, but room and board itself is at least 11, it might be more now since I've graduated. And then everything else on top. It still is costly. College is not cheap regardless.

I think when students come to me and ask, "Oh, that means I can go to SU," we said no, room and board is not covered. And that's something there is a lot of misinformation about, you know.

Other teachers had more positive experiences with Say Yes and thought it had an impact on students' college decisions:

I know specific students that I can look to that because of the opportunities that Say Yes provided them, they were able to go to schools that they would not have been able to go to. Specifically a student that I remember from a couple of years ago, that went to school in California. Because they were on the Say Yes list, we went through the Say Yes list on the website, and go to college in ... but that's where you go, because it was a Say Yes school. So it opens doors for some students that know that those doors can be opened.

Another teacher mentioned that she did not understand why her grandson did not receive money from Say Yes:

He went to Le Moyne College, but he was in the school district for those four years, he was supposed to be there four years and we applied for, he didn't get anything. (Note that Le Moyne takes a maximum of 10 Say Yes scholars, but now has its own Promise program.)

Several participants were aware that Say Yes used to be involved in out-of-school-time programs, and a few were aware that these were now run by community-based organizations. One of the more knowledgeable teachers said that she was aware of out-of-school-time programs and legal services but that information about these services was not accessible:

All this information was just flooded in the community in the beginning. But now that year seven, eight and it's not there. I mean the information is posted, but it's not made publicized like it was flooded into the community like it was in the beginning.

Others emphasized that their students could use greater mental health services and that if these services were available, it would help to make this information more available to teachers. Educators' concerns about a lack of information about available resources were remarkably consistent with those discussed in the parent focus group. One teacher said that students at her school had a different guidance counselor every year, making it difficult for counselors to get to know students:

It's not a functional system. And what happens is nobody knows the student's goals, you know. "What are your goals? What are you looking at?" If you have a relationship with a counselor that you follow 9, 10, 11, 12, and that is your counselor, you need that stability, I think. And we don't have that.

Another added that students without support at home had a strong need for support at school:

The kids that need those resources are the ones that have no clue what's going on, and don't have the parents at home who understand the system that can navigate them. ... There's never enough support so that kids can actually seek it out, and that sucks.

A few educators said that their schools were working to provide more support for students in need. One mentioned Syracuse University's Liberty Partnerships Program (LPP), which existed in Syracuse before Say Yes and provides various enrichment activities to at-risk or underprivileged students. Another mentioned the Building Men program, which provides educational and character-building activities for male students in middle and

high school. One teacher said that she started a college expo program at her school that takes students on college tours at Syracuse University, SUNY colleges, and other institutions in Upstate New York. Teachers also discussed On Point for College, which launched in Syracuse in 1999 to help students apply to and enroll in colleges. Of these programs, only LPP was mentioned in the parent or student sessions.

Overall, it seems that while community resources exist in Syracuse to help students access postsecondary opportunities, connections between these resources and the students they are supposed to serve remain underdeveloped. In some instances, communication and connection seem to be as much of a problem as the provision of the support itself.

5.9 Reflections

The Say Yes experience in Syracuse has provided some important lessons, both to Say Yes and other stakeholders. We turn to lessons learned from the overall Say Yes experience in Chapter 9. But first a few points specific to Syracuse are worth highlighting.

The funding of an endowment large enough for final-dollar scholarships is an achievement in such an economically distressed city, even if most of the money is from public sources. Under the management of the CNY Community Foundation, the scholarship fund seems to have been well managed. A big question now is how the funds will be used in the future as many potential recipients take up Excelsior scholarships instead. Say Yes believes that the GPA requirements of the Excelsior will disqualify many of the students supported by Say Yes. One of the arguments made for an endowment-funded scholarship scheme is that it will be insulated from swings in state, local or national policy.

The support of high-profile, powerful local stakeholders was critical. Nancy Cantor at Syracuse University played a vital role. A resilient governance structure was created, in the shape of the Operating Committee. But the strong relationships of trust needed for the sharing of data, power, and credit were not created. There was in fact plenty of ill-will in some of the years following the initial excitement, despite sizable financial investments by Say Yes. A change in district leadership exposed the fragility of the enterprise. One important lesson, echoed by many stakeholders, is the need to allow local ownership to flourish, and for Say Yes to feel locally-driven rather than imposed from outside. As one stakeholder said:

The lesson learned from Syracuse it seems...is that, being behind the scenes [is important], but it's really more of local ownership so that everyone can share in the accomplishments. That partnership, so that everyone can share in the accomplishments, is key because then we can celebrate together.

A related theme is the need to do considerable preparatory work in a community, less in terms of the Fiscal Analytics piece, and more in terms of building relationships, including with teachers, and understanding the work of existing local organizations. One interviewee said:

I really do think when they go into a new community they really have to do a lot of groundwork. They need to make the different agencies and elected officials understand what they're trying to do. And they need to spend some time with teachers. I think teachers were very confused.

Say Yes invested a huge amount of money, time, and energy into its first city-wide initiative. Nobody, even some of the skeptics, doubted the commitment and sacrifice made by Say Yes staff, especially Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey, who personally led the effort for some time, bolstered by Gene Chasin. To their credit, Say Yes leaders are forthright about many of the difficulties faced in Syracuse. As one senior Syracuse stakeholder told us:

My experience has been that Say Yes nationally has been pretty open about being a learning organization and that if Mary Anne comes here she will be very forthright about things they learned. ... That humility is really important. It's disarming, and it shows hey, we're really trying to find the best formula. I think that's really important.

Say Yes took some of the lessons learned in Syracuse and attempted to apply them in the next city to be selected for a district-wide Say Yes initiative, just 150 miles to the West: Buffalo, New York.

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.”

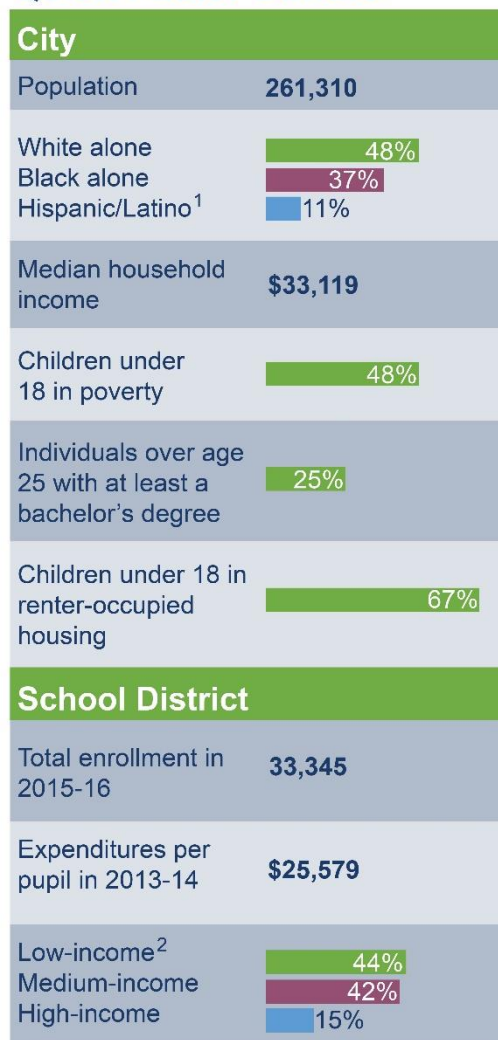
A number of factors helped to give Say Yes a strong start in Buffalo.

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



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 qualify 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 front-line 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 westsider 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 to 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.

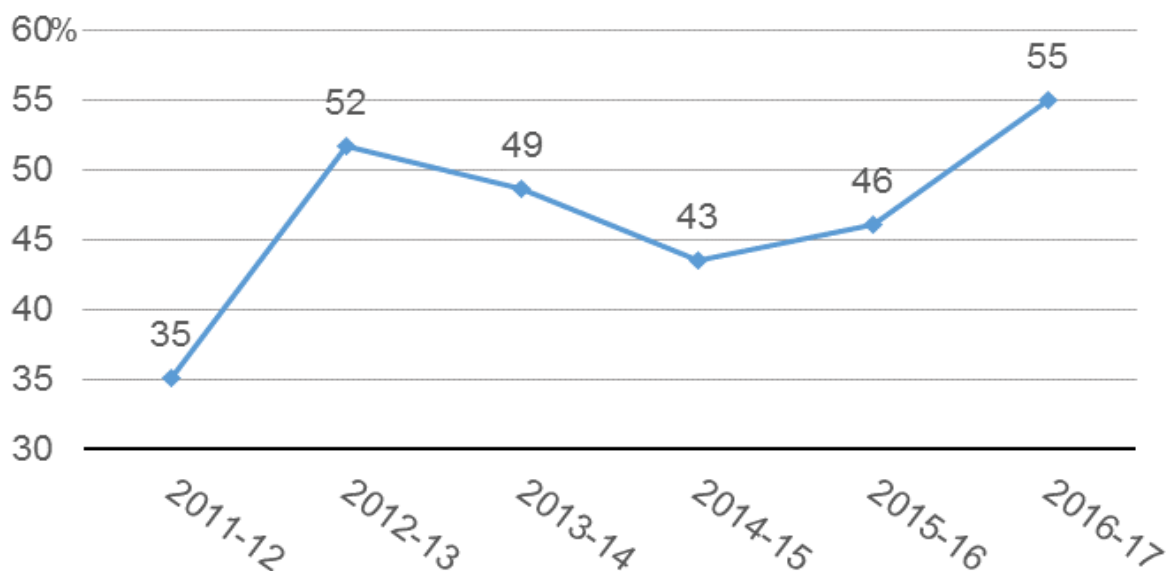
Figure 6.1 shows the percentage of students in each twelfth-grade cohort who completed the FAFSA.⁶ While we do not have data prior to 2011-12, it does appear that FAFSA completions spiked in the first year the program was offered (2013). The completion rate then declined slightly before peaking in 2016-17.

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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.”

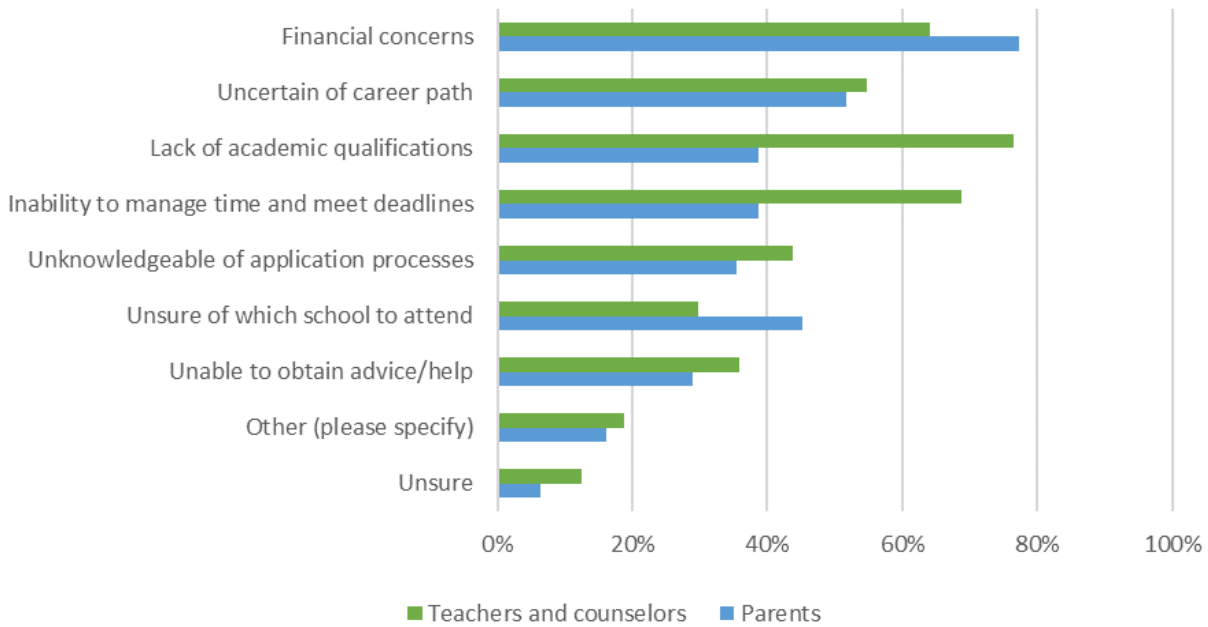
In sum, Bifulco et al. find strong evidence that Say Yes contributed to an increase in enrollment in Buffalo Public Schools, likely fueled by parents moving their children from private to public schools to qualify for at least part of the scholarship (recall that the full scholarship is available only 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

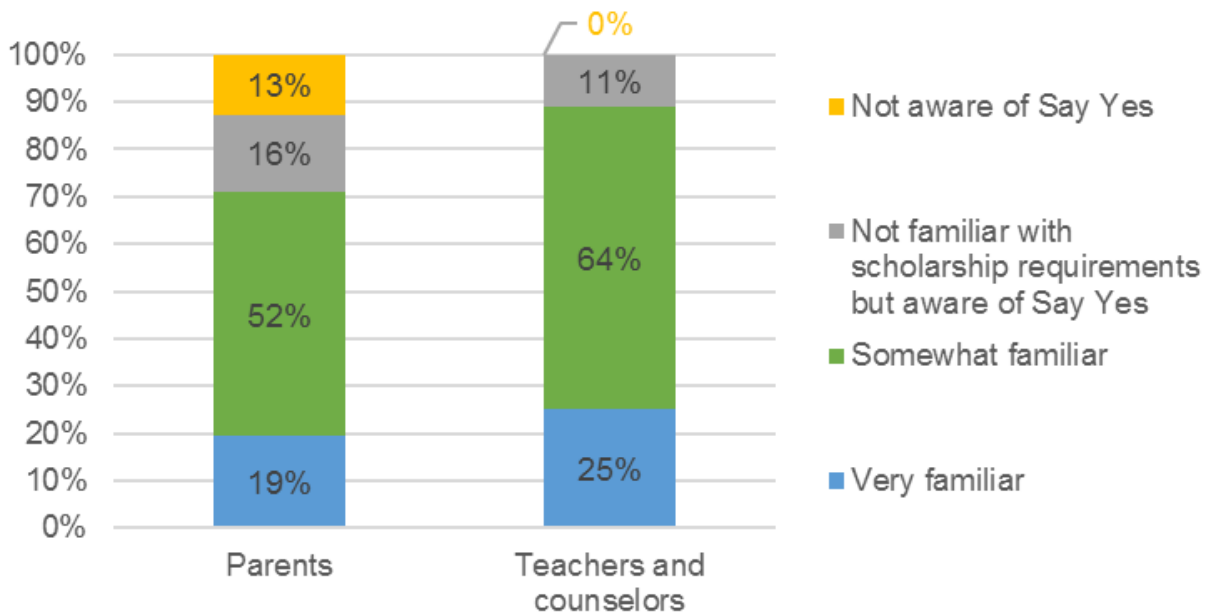
Buffalo survey responses



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 wrap-around 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 yourself 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.)

7. Guilford County

7.1 Introduction

Third time around, Say Yes made two significant departures from the previous two sites. First, they ventured outside New York State to a very different political environment in North Carolina. Second, they adopted a large county-wide school district rather than a smaller urban one.

Like Syracuse, the Guilford County initiative was launched with a significant amount of enthusiasm and energy. Some endowment money was raised at a relatively quick pace. Say Yes decided to push ahead quickly with the scholarship piece in order to keep up the momentum and generate further support.

With the strong backing of a school superintendent, Guilford’s Say Yes had moved quickly; but too many, too quickly. Even senior Say Yes national staff said the “runway was too short.”

Two of our interviewees said that staff were hired in a rush. One claimed that there were barely people ready to answer the phones in September 2015. Several sources used the same analogy of “building the airplane as they flew it” (aeronautical metaphors are popular in North Carolina).

One local stakeholder said that in September of 2015, “a question we’d asked for months” suddenly came center stage: “Who’s gonna answer the phones on September 21st? ... What’s the local staff?”

As in Syracuse, problems began to emerge following a change of leadership in the school district. At the end of 2015, Mo Green, a charismatic and highly supportive school superintendent, left his post. In an unlikely coincidence, he was replaced by Sharon Contreras, former superintendent of the Syracuse

Quick Facts: Guilford

County	
Population	488,406
White alone	59%
Black alone	35%
Hispanic/Latino ¹	8%
Median household income	\$46,896
Children under 18 in poverty	25%
Individuals over age 25 with at least a bachelor’s degree	34%
Children under 18 in renter-occupied housing	45%
School District	
Total enrollment in 2015-16	73,151
Expenditures per pupil in 2013-14	\$10,627
Low-income ²	23%
Medium-income	44%
High-income	33%

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).

City School District. Say Yes staff say that support from the district fell away sharply after this change in leadership, with fallout in plans to bring new services and share data. Local Say Yes leadership faltered while the Operating Committee struggled to gel.

Finally, a modeling error led to a very serious overspend (almost \$6 million rather than the \$1 million that had been projected) in the first year of scholarship funding in 2016-17, especially as a result of high levels of support to relatively affluent students. This in turn led to a redesign of the scholarship in 2017 (driven by local stakeholders) and abandonment of a universal offer. Say Yes staff blame the school district for providing faulty data on which the modeling was based. District staff and some other stakeholders believe the Say Yes model was too crude. Certainly, the episode has damaged the reputation of Say Yes in the county.

At the time of writing in early 2018, Say Yes was seeking new signatures on Memoranda of Understanding with local stakeholders, especially the school district. Local Say Yes staff believe that unless the new MoUs are signed, the national office will withdraw from Guilford County.

5.2 Scholarship

Say Yes national staff acknowledge that the scholarship in Guilford County was ushered in more quickly than Buffalo and Syracuse. As one said in the middle of 2016: “We didn’t roll out scholarships until 18 months after the announcement in Buffalo. But we’re moving much, much quicker in Guilford.”

Design and eligibility

The scholarship in Guilford County was made available for students matriculating in the fall of 2016, with the same essential features as in Syracuse and Buffalo. But scholarship payments dramatically exceeded predictions in the first year (to the tune of \$5 million), with much of the money going to less needy students. The Scholarship Board determined in early 2016 that annual payments of above \$5 million were “not fiscally sustainable” given projected revenues. The Scholarship Board estimated that sustaining scholarship payments at that level would require an endowment of at least \$450 million dollars. As the chair of the board, Chuck Cornelio, said at the announcement, this was “a bridge too far.”

Local stakeholders, including many donors, were also concerned that money they had given seemed not to be offering much help to less advantaged students but instead to be giving a boost to affluent ones. As one donor put it: “I knew we were in trouble when

friends were coming up to me at the country club and saying, “Hey, thanks for the scholarship help for my child.”

Even one high schooler working in a local grocery store told us she wished there was more help for “kids who really needed it. ... A lot of privileged kids are getting help and they might not really need it.”

Since then, the Guilford scholarship scheme has been significantly altered. Following an announcement by the Scholarship Board in March 2017, only those from households with incomes under \$40,000 receive a full final-dollar scholarship, and those with more than \$100,000 are ineligible. (They can, however, still claim up to a \$5,000 annual scholarship if they attend a college in the Higher Education Compact). Children in more affluent families are also required to have been enrolled in Guilford County public school at an earlier age:



Household Income	\$40,000 & Under	\$40,001-\$75,000	\$75,001-\$100,000	Above \$100,000
Continuous Enrollment	Must be enrolled by 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8 or 9	Must be enrolled by 1,2,3,4,5 or 6	Must be enrolled by 1,2,3 or 4	N/A
Tuition Cap (after Pell, State & Institutional Aid)	Full Tuition Balance is Paid after Pell, State & Institutional Aid	Up to \$4,500 toward remaining tuition balance after Pell, State & Institutional Aid	Up to \$2,250 toward remaining tuition balance after Pell, State & Institutional Aid	No Say Yes tuition award at NC public institutions.

The change impacts not only students enrolling for the first time in 2017 or thereafter, but also the cohort who matriculated in 2016. Most of the Say Yes scholars from that first cohort will see their scholarship reduced or removed for the remainder of their college years – and for some, this will be a college they would not otherwise have selected. An unknown number of students clearly chose to enroll at a North Carolina public college, in preference to another institution, because of the scholarship offer, only to find that offer removed after their first year.

The new design is a significant departure from a core element of the Say Yes approach: a universal final-dollar scholarship. It remains to be seen what impact the change of course will have over the coming years.

The process of revising the scholarship offer was understandably a difficult one. Say Yes leaders at the national level were deeply reluctant to change the scholarship. In part this may have been because the suggestion to alter the scholarship offer coincided with some

of the tension that seemed to occur during the district's leadership change. Local stakeholders felt that the national Say Yes office was somewhere between unhelpful and hostile when it came to reforming the scholarship design. One local stakeholder with close knowledge of the history said:

I think the national office was very concerned about losing the universal aspect of the scholarship because again the formula that had always worked was offering it as a universal thing for, if you were eligible as a high school graduate, you qualified more or less. There was a point in time where national had to do some soul-searching. There was some gnashing of teeth over changes to the scholarship. ... My impression is that the local scholarship board are really the ones who said, 'This is not sustainable, we've got to change this.'

Other interviewees with close knowledge of the process confirmed that there was considerable disagreement between local stakeholders and the Say Yes national team. Such strong feelings came through many in interviews. One interviewee closely involved at a senior level in Guilford County expressed particular disappointment that when it came to the vote to change the scholarship model, the two Scholarship Board members from Say Yes national office chose to abstain. Say Yes national leaders feel however that given the resources for the scholarship are raised and spent locally, it would have been inappropriate for them to cast a vote.

Nobody denies the negative impact of the change; few doubt that it was necessary given the huge overspend in the first year of the scholarship.

The scholarship overspend

So what went wrong? Why were the estimates so badly awry? This is a difficult knot to untangle. We have access to neither the model nor the data that was used.

Announcing the changes to the scholarship, Chuck Cornelio (Board Chair) said that the take up of the scholarship had "greatly exceeded" expectations. Citing National Student Clearinghouse data, Cornelio went on to say that the proportion of high school graduates enrolling in college in 2016 had increased by three percent, compared to the previous year. This however is a small increase: certainly not enough to explain a four-fold difference between projected and actual spending. As Cornelio went on to explain, the real difference was not in the *number* of college-going students but in the *amount* paid to each of those students: four times as much per student as had been estimated.

Cornelio said at the public announcement:

We didn't have a lot of actual data about the census and cohorts of Guilford County kids that actually went to college. So we started with the national model from Say Yes, we tried to apply some assumptions to bake in what we thought we knew

about which Guilford County kids would go to college and would require assistance.

One analyst who works closely with Say Yes at the national level pointed to the fact that while Syracuse and Buffalo were largely poor or at least low-income city school districts, Guilford had a more diverse economic community:

The more affluent segments are more expensive to serve [in terms of the scholarship, since] they matriculate at college at very different rates. Where you have a small, contained urban district with no economic diversity, the monolithic structure works better. ... You can go to more diverse settings [but only if] you're more nuanced about how you build the scholarship up.

The model used to estimate costs was based on, the interviewee said, averages for college matriculation rates, and were using free/reduced lunch proportions as representative of the student body. In response to our queries, Say Yes national staff tell us that "free and reduced K-12 lunch (FRPL) numbers were used to determine income bands." How this determination was made remains unclear: FRPL numbers are an acceptable proxy for the number of low-income families, but reveal almost nothing about how many *higher*-income students are in the school system—which is where the problem lay.

A common theme in our interviews with those involved, both at a national and local level, was "we just didn't have the data" or that the error was caused by "bad data". What this seems to mean is that accurate data on the distribution of household incomes for families in Guilford County was lacking. This data could have allowed for more precise estimates of college enrollment figures to be generated, since rates of college matriculation, in particular at four-year colleges (which are much more expensive) are highly correlated with parental income (as we showed in Chapter 3).

One senior local stakeholder told us: "If you're providing a universal last-dollar scholarship, that's only going to work if a considerable part of the money is coming from other sources." Federal, state, and institutional aid must make up the difference, and many Guilford students don't qualify for this. As they said:

Part of the problem was also local. We didn't have the data. We didn't know about the economic cohorts. ... So we had to apply other data. We had to substitute what we knew, which was that 65 percent of the kids in the school system were on free and reduced lunch.

Some senior Say Yes staff even suggest that they were intentionally provided with bad data in order to undermine the scholarship. Others blame the North Carolina colleges for reducing their provision of institutional aid, knowing that the Say Yes scholarship would cover any gaps left in tuition costs.

Certainly, there are strong feelings on this issue, as might be expected given the magnitude and impact of the error. But pinning down what actually happened is impossible without more information than we have been able to gather.

The “missing data” narrative only goes so far in terms of explaining the wildly inaccurate forecasting. Our own sense is that simply analyzing the demographics of Guilford County using published census data, and assuming similar college-going rates by income as in national datasets, would have generated much more accurate figures. The proportion of families with incomes of more than \$75,000 is 30 percent in Guilford County, compared to 20 percent in Buffalo and 20 percent in Syracuse. Guilford County is also much bigger, with over 70,000 students in the public school system, compared to 33,000 in Buffalo and just 20,000 in Syracuse.

We tested our own basic “model” of scholarship spending, using only public data, to produce estimates for Syracuse, Buffalo, and Guilford County.⁹ Our approach was to simply combine public data on the incomes of families in each district with national probabilities of college attendance and estimates of tuition costs by income background and institution type. Our approach assumes that all 12th-grade students have been enrolled in the district long enough to be eligible for the scholarship in each district, and that every student with household income under \$15,000 attending a public 2- or 4-year institution is eligible for the opportunity grant offered in his or her local Say Yes site (\$2,000 in Buffalo and Syracuse and previously \$1,000 in Guilford). Still, our numbers end up in same ballparks as the actual annual spending in those cities. Since the next Say Yes community-wide site is likely to be Cleveland, we also ran the numbers for that city (assuming an Opportunity Grant of \$2,000, as in Syracuse and Buffalo):

Table 7.1: Estimated and Actual Spending

	Our estimate: Total expenses (2016)	Actual expenses (2017)
SYRACUSE	\$1,294,813	\$1,271,710
BUFFALO	\$1,970,552	\$2,661,302
GUILFORD	\$7,124,709	\$5,797,667
CLEVELAND	\$2,674,734	

We are not claiming very much for our model, and certainly not suggesting that it substitute for the careful financial modeling that is required for investments of this magnitude and importance. The point is simply that the misstep on this in Guilford County is almost inexplicable. The majority of the variation in spending is simply the product of the sizes of

...

⁹ We have data on actual expenses for 2017, but we estimate expenses for 2016, the first year of scholarship spending in Guilford.

the school districts: 12th-grade enrollment in Syracuse and Buffalo public schools is regularly about 1,500 and 2,000, respectively, compared to 5,000 or more in Guilford County.

The episode has clearly damaged some relationships. One senior local stakeholder who had worked closely with Say Yes reports that he has lost all confidence in the organization.

It appears that Schoolhouse Partners, the well-respected firm that partners with Say Yes, was not closely involved in the process of producing the final financial models for the scholarship. It has proved difficult to ascertain in detail what data was included in the model, and why the numbers were so awry. But Say Yes, which identifies itself strongly as a “learning organization,” should conduct a forensic analysis of what can be learned, especially to help with future scholarship offers, including Cleveland. As a result of the lessons learned in Guilford County, Say Yes is moving much more carefully in Cleveland, including a year’s “trial run” to collect fuller financial information before rolling out the full scholarship.

Local Say Yes stakeholders claim that the scholarship is a victim of its own success. One told us:

I think we did too good of a job in 2016 of promoting our scholarship and talking about the benefits the scholarship were going to bring to families. Obviously hindsight is 2020, but we didn’t know what we didn’t know at that point. We didn’t know that we were going to miss the target on scholarship funding at that point, we didn’t know that so many of our higher income families were going to [be the ones taking advantage of it.] ... You can look at it all now and say, well gosh, we should have known those things, but we didn’t. I think what we have learned through that process is that our scholarship board did the right thing and made the best decisions it could with the information it had.

The interviewee went on:

Obviously it’s disappointed a lot of families. Our higher income families were our greatest champions in the community because they were getting the highest benefit from us. So we immediately cut off our greatest community ambassadors at the neck. ... But the spirit of Say Yes, the focus of that scholarship incentive on helping the families that need it the most and the students who need it the most. That is unwavering. And I feel like there are stories still to be told there about the way our scholarship is going to get students through college. ... The way we’re going to move that needle is not by sending our higher income students to college. .. It’s by sending students to college who are in fifth and sixth grade right now and who don’t know college is an option. ... [the challenge now] Is the nay-saying in the community now among the families who feel there was a bait and switch...? It’s been a difficult PR challenge, to say the least.

Another close observer told us: “If you had gone into Guilford County and announced the scholarship that’s here now, there would have been universal delight. But now it’s the opposite.”

Currently, the scholarship endowment fund has \$42 million committed, but only \$9.2 million in the bank. Donors to the scholarship were partly motivated by the prospect of new support services and a data architecture, which haven’t come through.

One Say Yes staffer said: “Without services, we can’t raise money for scholarships.” Other local stakeholders agree:

The people who donated to the scholarship were motivated in large part by these services. I think there’s going to be a huge amount of breakage of commitments. If you’re not going to have those wraparound services any time soon, I think a lot of those people who made pledges...probably won’t make their payments. If you are no longer working toward the same set of objectives, it’s pretty easy to say, this isn’t what I committed to. It’s not a big community, and the community organizations need these donors for a lot of other things.

7.3 Governance

Leadership

Maurice “Mo” Green’s departure as school superintendent caused immediate concern among Say Yes staff. As one said at the time: “Mo was a real leader. He was doing a good job of keeping all the parties on board. In his absence, no one’s stepping up.” Green was also a huge asset in terms of fundraising, devoting personal time and energy to get foundations to support the initiative. Nobody anticipated Green’s departure. If he had remained in post, things might look very different. Green was evangelical for Say Yes; Contreras might be fairly described as agnostic.

Unsurprisingly, tensions arising from the failure of the scholarship model bled into relationships with community partners. Say Yes blamed the school district for failing to provide sufficient data for the model to work, while local stakeholders blamed Say Yes for relying on an overly simplistic model and for resisting efforts to course-correct by revising the eligibility requirements. This resentment, coupled with leadership turnover in both the district and the local Say Yes office, stunted the growth of a collaborative governance structure that the local office is now trying to rebuild on a stronger foundation.

One stakeholder said that the buzz in the community around the scholarships meant that scholarship rollout dominated the operating committee, and “bogged us down.” According to him, there were many misconceptions among parents. A common one: students who graduated early could receive their scholarship early if they went to college in the spring.

While Say Yes is, in the word of one Guilford supporter, “designed to not be dependent on any individual,” the loss of such a key figure was bound to be disruptive. Green’s departure was a test of the ability of Say Yes to flourish despite turnover of key staff, as it managed to in Buffalo.

Like many others, Green emphasized to us that a Say Yes executive director needed to be able to do the behind-the-scenes work of listening to community partners and “massaging egos.” In fact, Green himself did most of this work in Guilford. This became all too apparent when his departure left Say Yes struggling to forge and maintain community relationships. Say Yes Guilford’s executive director was, according to one sympathetic local stakeholder, not well suited for the task at hand.

As though the loss of Mo Green was not enough to destabilize Say Yes Guilford, his replacement was none other than Sharon Contreras, a previous superintendent of the Syracuse City School District who, according to most of those we interviewed, had clashed with Say Yes in the past.

Say Yes stakeholders have criticized Contreras for her style of leadership in Syracuse and believe she is at fault for cutting off communication between Say Yes and the school district. In Guilford, however, Contreras has gained both staunch support and criticism.

One person from the school district called her a “warrior for equity,” while a member of the Board of Education was recently found to have sent an email advocating for the termination of Contreras’s contract (and encouraging the recipient to delete the email, which is against public records law). A coalition of civil rights and education organizations have defended Contreras and called for the board member’s resignation (Pounds, 2017).

Wherever the fault lies for broken connections in Syracuse, the news of Contreras’s appointment in Guilford likely “had a much more serious impact on Say Yes’s attitude [toward the district] than anyone understood,” according to a source who observed the hiring process. Say Yes had not recommended Contreras to Guilford County Schools and was not otherwise involved in the search for a new superintendent. The source added, “I think they were starting to look for a way out not long after Sharon was hired.”

Many of those we interviewed said that Vigue had been given an almost impossible task, expected to get Say Yes up and running “with no staff, no phones, and no offices.” As already noted, many stakeholders used the “building the airplane as we [they] flew it” metaphor.

During this period, as Say Yes sought to build collaboration and networks, and began to plan a creation of task forces to examine specific challenges, some local organizations felt that they were not involved in local hiring decisions. There were also some bumps along the road for existing stakeholders. According to one local interviewee, Say Yes

“slapped out GPA’s (Guilford Parent Academy’s) phone number on their FAQ sheets at the rollout [of the scholarships] with 24 hours notice” given to the Academy itself.

In February 2017, the month before the scholarship board announced changes to the eligibility requirements, Say Yes executive director Mary Vigue announced that she would step down from her post. Say Yes temporarily appointed its own National Program Director, Nadia Del Valle, to fill the position while the organization searched for a permanent replacement. A local stakeholder observed that Del Valle helped to bring the Say Yes “vision” from Buffalo to Guilford and to clarify how they could operationalize that vision through wraparound services in addition to the scholarship. However useful, this New York perspective also made her an outsider:

Ultimately, with Nadia, where she struggled was being accepted as a local leader. Regardless of how she tried to collaborate, she was always seen as temporary and someone from the New York office.

Indeed, Del Valle’s appointment was supposed to be temporary: even while serving as Guilford’s executive director, she was still filling her role as National Program Director. In September, she handed the interim executive directorship to Donnie Turlington, the long-time communications director of Say Yes Guilford. Turlington is still serving as both interim executive director and communications director as of January 2018. Turlington’s first order of business has been to rebuild relationships with community partners.

Operating committee

In the first year after launch, many of our interviewees in Guilford County commented on the lack of coordination between different institutions and groups. As one supporter of Say Yes told us in 2016:

The governance is the weak point. It’s an awkward governance structure. There’s not really any local ownership. Right now, it feels like Say Yes gives local control lip service, but there’s no meat to it.

Some local stakeholders were opposed to the degree of control being exerted by Say Yes national. As in other sites, the Executive Director reports to the national office. But given local tensions, Say Yes staff supported a degree of separation from Guilford stakeholders, since it meant they “can be honest with them.”

At an early 2017 meeting where the sparse attendance at both the Guilford County OC and other task force meetings was discussed, one member of the OC said:

But the meetings have to be worth attending, and it feels like often they are not. Things are being decided outside the formal governance structure. We may need to revisit that.

One important stakeholder told us: “The pre-launch felt community-led, but since then it’s been Say Yes-led. ... The operating committee should be doing the leading.” Another stakeholder said:

One of the things we never got across to Say Yes in New York was that some of the work they had to do in other communities was already done in Guilford. ... You had people saying, ‘We’ve had people doing this for years. You should be relying on local people more, which is what you said you would do.’

For example, Guilford already has a coalition known as the Guilford Education Alliance (GEA) that seeks to bring local stakeholders around common goals related to public education.

Despite these challenges, most of the people we spoke with in Guilford County did believe that at least some extra collaboration had been galvanized, especially between the County Commissioners and school district, and between stakeholders in Greensboro and High Point, the twin poles of the county. As one said: “It’s like when you’re stuck in a sibling rivalry and your cousin shows up. It changes the dynamic.”

Language and tone matter here, too. As one person said, people get defensive if Say Yes staff preface their statements with phrases like, “Are you ready for a new era of collaboration?”

It was interesting for us to see that a common Say Yes self-definition of “an honest broker” seemed to ruffle no feathers in Buffalo, but had clearly put off a number of people in Guilford County. As one stakeholder put it, both in a meeting and in a subsequent interview, “I don’t like the phrase ‘honest broker’ because it implies that the rest of us are not honest.” Similarly, some stakeholders bristle at the language of a “turnaround,” given the implied criticism of the current institutions and structures.

Say Yes staff themselves are candid about the depths of the challenge. One told us: “The fact of the matter is that we have been going through some trying and difficult times here in Guilford County just trying to get our local partners all in alignment.”

The result of some of these challenges, according to some stakeholders, was that Say Yes was “duplicating efforts” or “reinventing the wheel.” A particular issue, mentioned by a number of interviewees, was the initial failure to engage with the Parent Academy.

On the Say Yes side, many interviews pointed to the rivalries between existing organizations, and an elitist, micromanaging, and overbearing attitude from many of the philanthropic organizations who were supporting Say Yes. One even wanted to choose the office furniture that the Say Yes would order for their office, according to one interviewee.

One Say Yes staff member told us of the collaboration failures occurring because “there’s not a lot of trust in this community.” On one reading, Say Yes fell victim to local politics

and division, and was unable therefore to be inclusive, which caused a backlash. “Local philanthropy wanted the thing to be run by a handful of old white guys,” one senior Say Yes staffer said.

Donnie Turlington told us that he was focused on rebuilding some relationships and the governance of Say Yes Guilford:

One of the things I’ve tried to do these past couple months [we spoke to him in December 2017] is put authority back in the hands of the operating committee. Out of necessity, we were way too staff-led and we needed the operating committee to get back to a place where it felt it had a stake in what we’re trying to accomplish...So far the early implications are it really seems like people are starting to buy in.

Having learned from the challenges of collaborative governance in Syracuse and the value of written commitments in Buffalo, Say Yes negotiated memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with the school district and other key stakeholders even before officially announcing that Guilford would become the next Say Yes site. But it became clear that while an MoU is a useful way to formalize expectations, it relies on a degree of trust and collaboration that cannot be captured on a piece of paper. Say Yes is in fact asking for fresh signatures on the MoUs, especially with the school district, with the addition of some specific goals over the next year.

What was wrong with the original MoUs? One Say Yes leader explains:

Effectively there’s nothing wrong with the first one. In a sense what we’re doing is we’re amending the first one through formal codification of these twelve-month goals. These twelve month goals are specific requirements for our county-wide partners.

The idea of the revised MoUs is effectively to secure a renewed commitment that key partners will be active on leadership council, and the county and school board will work together and with Say Yes on shared services, a data platform, and so on.

As one Say Yes staffer explains:

Essentially the first MoUs said, hey, we’re all going to work together. What we are proposing now is the *how* are we all going to work together. ... It’s spelled out very clearly in the MoU. [T]he school system is complying with the things that are in the twelve-month goals. ... While we may not get signatures on the MoU, we are getting the buy in and the commitment that is in the MoU.

The language in Guilford County now, following the scholarship shift and leadership turnover, is of a “reset.” One Say Yes interviewee says:

There is some inherent pressure being put on our collaborative members that they are feeling personally. I think what I'm starting to sense is there are several who felt like in 2015 and 2016 they stuck their necks out for Say Yes whether it was through fundraising or whether it was through community advocacy. ...They have some skin in the game, their personal reputations are at stake, and they want this organization to succeed. It's a shame that it took the organization having to reset for them to get to a place where they were willing to work hard for us [but]...The folks who are in it to win it here in Guilford County are ready to roll up their sleeves and get it done, what we're trying to do.

Despite the initial failure to build an effective collaborative governance structure, a key component of the Say Yes approach, the commitment device provided by the scholarship may yet hold, even after such as dramatic revision in its design.

As one leader from the philanthropic community in Guilford County said, "People have put \$42 million into this. We're not going to walk away from 75,000 kids. The endowment is there."

7.4 Services

The fourth element of the Say Yes approach is the provision of support services to bolster college readiness. These remain on the drawing board in Guilford, in part because of some of the challenges around collaborative governance described earlier. Plans to hire 12 family support specialists and have them in place in GCS schools by the end of the 2016/2017 school year remain on hold.¹⁰

So what happened?

The 12 pilots were being spearheaded by Tony Watlington (central region superintendent), and the pilot school principals. As one leader told us in 2016:

The school district folks are a big player here. There are three pilot schools per region. Mo Green said 'you have to go slow to go fast'. There's no hard deadline for the services rollout.

A number of interviewees suggested that Say Yes would have been wiser to make more progress on the provision of services before moving too quickly on the scholarship. One described the services as seeming like "an afterthought." This would of course have required very different staffing levels and more upfront investment. But it may have helped

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¹⁰ The schools slated to get specialists were: Fairview Elementary, High Point Central High, Ferndale Middle, Northern Elementary, Northern Middle, Northern Guilford High, Eastern Guilford Middle, Eastern Guilford, McLeansville Elementary, Wiley Elementary, Jackson Middle and Smith High.

build more support for the Say Yes initiative, especially among lower-income families. One local stakeholder said, “Many parents would say things like, ‘this sounds great but I don’t get any scholarship because of the Pell grant, and the services aren’t rolled out yet.’”

Another stakeholder closely involved in the Say Yes early years said that a second year of planning would have given more time to plan the services rollout. He said that schools are not used to fundraising, and foundations are not used to sitting on money so it was challenging for both of them to wait. But he also pointed out that if they had waited to rollout the scholarship, they might have lost momentum and some of their ability to fund-raise.

One local educational leader said, “For me it was the services.... That’s what prepares the kids.... For the parents it was the scholarships.... [but] I see that as the icing on the cake.”

Another senior local figure, closely involved with Say Yes, said:

I would say, while the big headline was the scholarship, for the community, the most important parts were these wraparound services. Say Yes, in one of the iterations of what it said it would do, was have staff on the ground in every school and then set up this technology they had, or at least, said they had.

A strong message from many Say Yes staffers, not only in Guilford but in other chapters and at the national level, is that while the scholarship acts a “bright shiny object,” it is the services that move the needle. But so far, only the scholarship exists in Guilford. This provides a potential research opportunity, of course: if the scholarship (albeit redesigned) remains, but without extra services, it may be possible to see if there is a “scholarship only” effect.

The best case scenario now is that a dozen family support specialists will start the pilot at the beginning of the 2018-19 school year. In January 2017, Say Yes began data collection through a series of surveys with parents and guardians, teachers, and students themselves. The idea was to gauge the need for services. But the surveys and plans were put on ice again in the summer of 2017 as part of the “reset” and setting of goals for the following years. The problem right now, as Donnie Turlington points out, is securing funding before committing to long-term services. There is an understandable fear now of launching a service only to have to alter or reduce it again. As Say Yes staff explains, “The operating committee wants to make sure there is a two-year sustainable funding plan in place before those positions are hired.”

There has been one bright spot for Say Yes Guilford: a big rise in completion rates of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Among Guilford County Schools' seniors in the Class of 2017, 66 percent completed a FAFSA, up from 52 percent in the Class of 2015.

As a result, in September 2017, the National College Access Network (NCAN) and the Kresge Foundation awarded Say Yes Guilford the top prize in their FAFSA Completion Challenge— \$75,000. NCAN and Kresge had previously provided \$55,000 to the University of North Carolina Greensboro to boost FAFSA rates in the two years leading up to 2017. Say Yes reports that they worked with Guilford County Schools' guidance counselors and college advisors to boost awareness of the FAFSA. In addition, reports Say Yes, they:

Established FAFSA completion events at Guilford Technical Community College each month throughout the school year, and initiated an in-school challenge among Guilford County Schools' high schools. From January through March 2017, Say Yes hosted competitions in two separate categories through traditional high schools and academy/early/middle colleges. The five schools with the highest level of FAFSA completion increase were awarded \$5 per senior.

Since FAFSA completion is a requirement for receipt of a Say Yes scholarship, the increase in completion rates is to be expected, above and beyond national upward trends. In this sense, comparing a city which introduced a final-dollar scholarship contingent on FAFSA completion during the challenge period left the other cities at a disadvantage. But the rise is striking nonetheless. What is not clear from the headline figures is how far the rise took place among lower-income students who may not otherwise have completed the FAFSA (or potentially enrolled in college) as opposed to more affluent students who were unlikely eligible for financial aid, but completed the FAFSA in order to access the Say Yes scholarship.¹¹

7.5 Data

As discussed above, in early 2017 Say Yes Guilford began to collect survey data in 12 pilot schools. In part this was to inform the potential services that might be provided. But it was also a small step towards collecting the kind of data that could feed into a Postsecondary Planning System. There is something of a chicken-and-egg problem here: much of the data needed has to be collected by those working in support services (especially family support specialists), but those services do not yet exist.

Say Yes's latest data-sharing agreement with Guilford County Schools was signed in 2016, superseding an early 2014 agreement, which was signed as a one-year agreement.

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¹¹ We are currently conducting a study on FAFSA completion which may cast some light on this question.

Reports from local Say Yes staff are that in terms of data-sharing, relations with the school district are “in a very good place now... we’re able to access information that we need [for] our Postsecondary Planning System.”

Local Say Yes reports that in the 12 “launch” schools where the intent is to pilot the PSP, 30 percent of families in those 12 schools have opted into our system, and roughly speaking about 28 percent of families have completed the survey: “So we now have data on our students. What we don’t yet have are service providers built into that system [because they have not been introduced yet]”. In October 2015, Say Yes presented a version of the Pathway Analytics to the GCS School Board, drawing on school district data for the year 2013-2014, and public North Carolina data (on kindergarten readiness) from the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year. Say Yes national officers report that this was followed by “presentations in community-wide meetings.”

There is some local discontent about lack of progress on the data front, in part because of a sense that Say Yes “oversold” the data piece when they came into the County. As one senior stakeholder told us:

In theory, what they [Say Yes] brought is a couple things. One was this idea that frankly people could probably have thought of on their own, was this scholarship, this final-dollar scholarship, and the other was the expertise...along with this piece of technology they claimed to own [the Postsecondary Planning System]...The theory being, get kids ready to achieve by tracking them individually. Get them ready to succeed not by paying for that, but by tracking it.

According to Say Yes national staff, data-sharing started happening for real in the spring of 2017. One local Say Yes staff member said:

There’s a concerted effort in our county and our community to break down the data silos. To begin to work together to bring our data in a way that we can all share it, that it can be complementary.

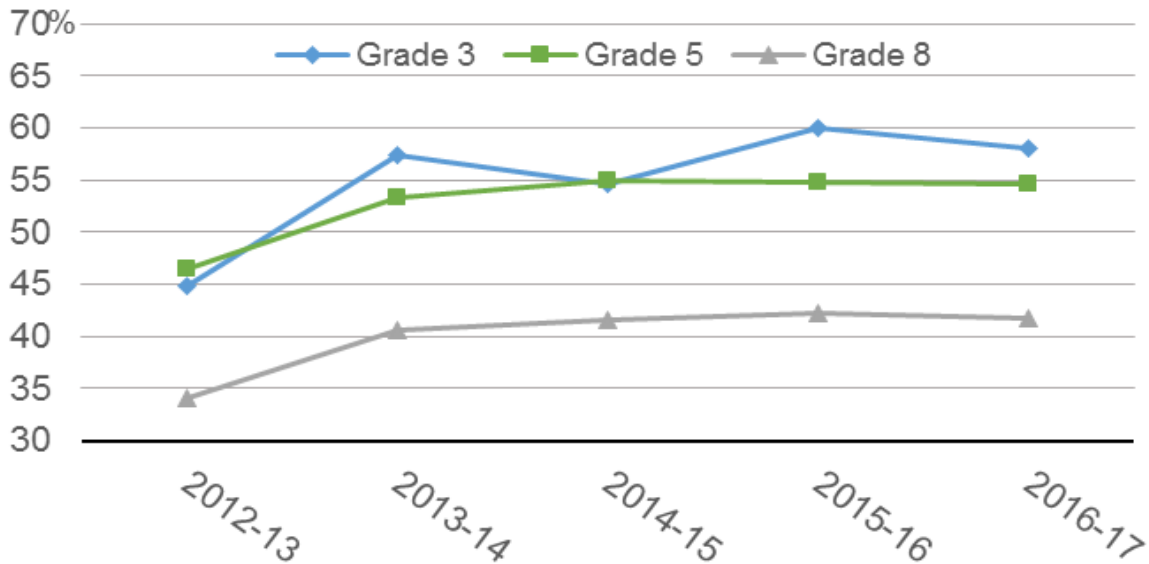
7.6 Trends

Students in Guilford County have attainment levels well above those in Syracuse and Buffalo, in part a reflection of the much more socioeconomically diverse population, and also a sign that the sense of near-crisis that many education leaders had to face in the two New York cities. (Note that the trends are not precisely comparable, since North Carolina and New York use different standards; but the gaps are very wide). This is not to say Guilford County does not have problems, of course, including very wide gaps in outcomes by race, class, and geography. It is simply a reminder that the background conditions for Say Yes in the third site are very different.

Subject improvement

Math proficiency rates are above 50 percent in Grades 3 and 5, and around the 50 percent at all grades in English:

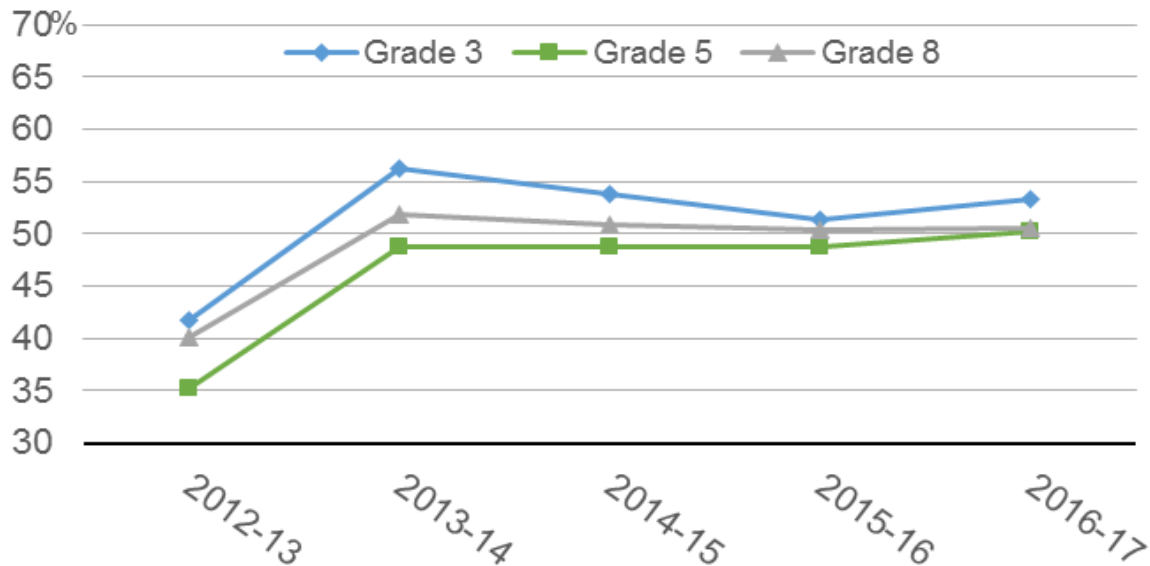
Figure 7.1: Share of students proficient in math by grade level
 Guilford County Schools



Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Accountability and Testing Results; proficiency defined as scoring at or above proficient level on end-of-grade

Figure 7.2: Share of students proficient in reading by grade level

Guilford County Schools



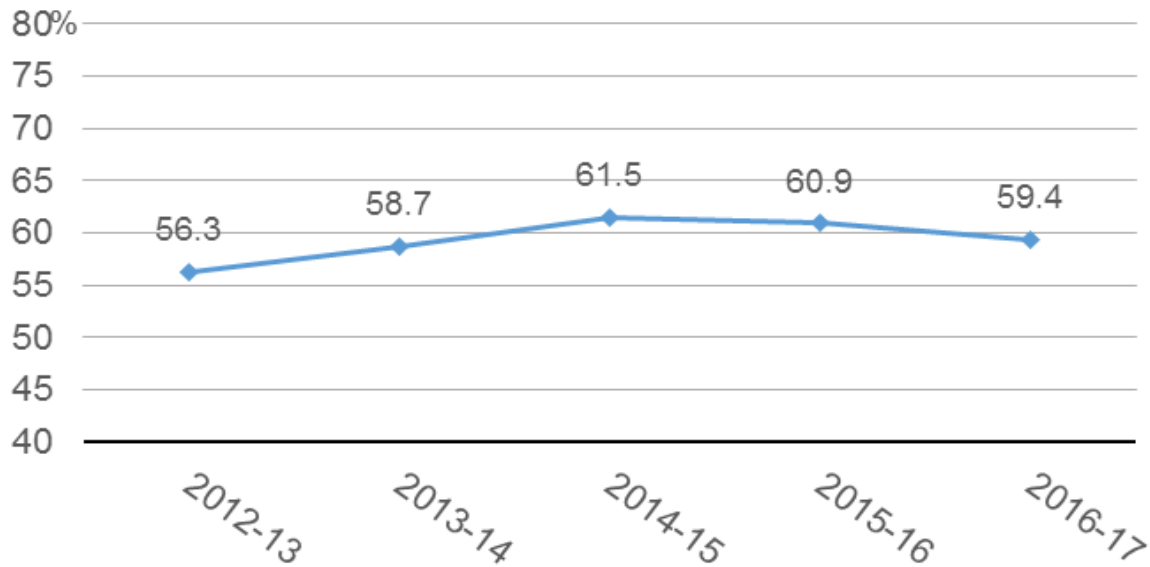
Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Accountability and Testing Results; proficiency defined as scoring at or above proficient level on end-of-grade

Standardized testing

One of the milestones in the Say Yes Pathway Analytics is the share of students taking the ACT or SAT. However, North Carolina actually requires students to take the ACT in eleventh grade. It is more instructive to look at the share who scored at a college-ready level (above 17 on the ACT). This looks relatively constant over past several years:

Figure 7.3: Share of students scoring at college-ready level on ACT

Guilford County Schools



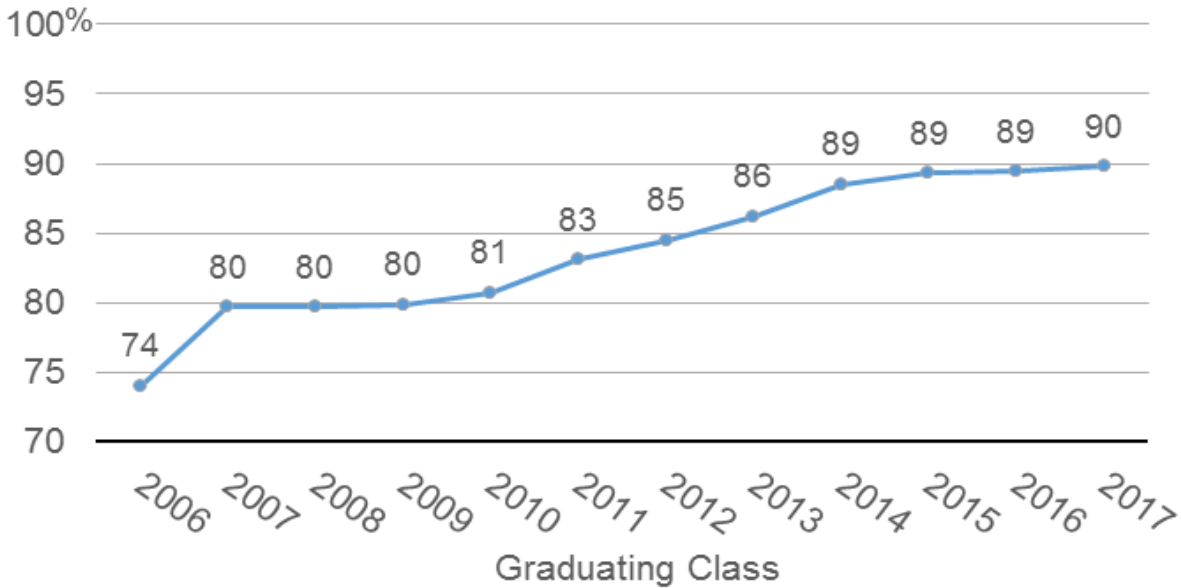
Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Accountability and Testing Results; college-ready level defined as composite score of 17 or above

High school completion

The high school graduation rate in GCS is 90 percent, compared to 61 percent and 62 percent in Syracuse and Buffalo.

Figure 7.4: Four-year cohort high school graduation rate

Guilford County Schools

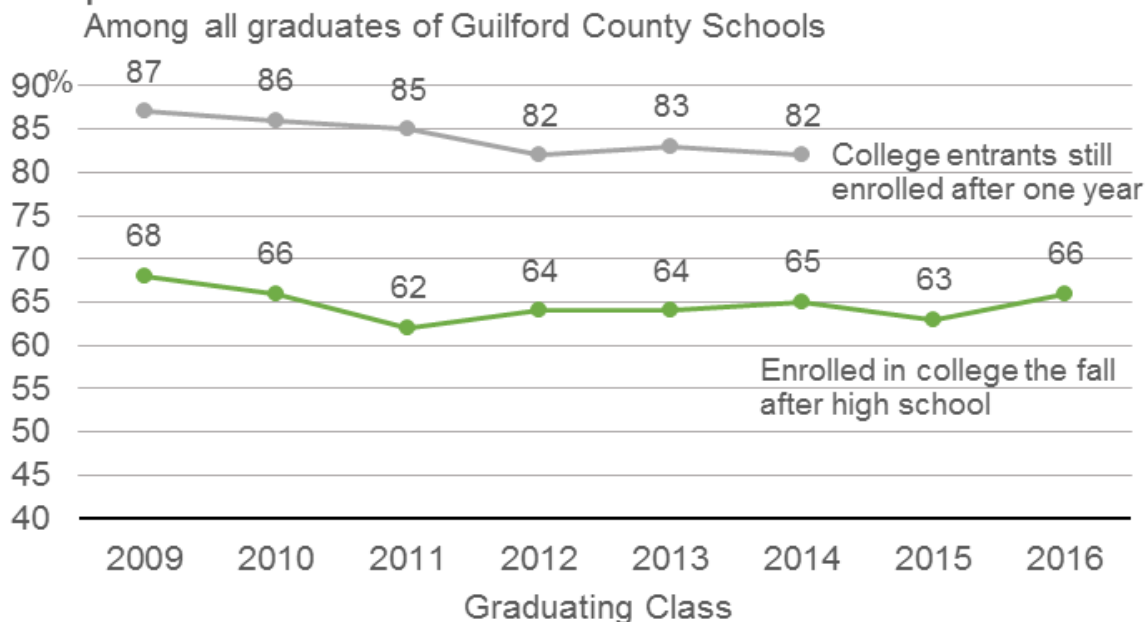


Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

Postsecondary outcomes

Postsecondary enrollment and persistence rates are also relatively high. Two out of three (66 percent) graduating high school seniors were enrolled in college in the fall of 2016 (the year the Say Yes scholarship was introduced), very slightly up on the previous year (63 percent):

Figure 7.5: Postsecondary enrollment and persistence



Source: Data provided by Say Yes to Education from the National Student Clearinghouse

One point worth making however, in light of the very significant overspend on the scholarship, is that overall college enrollment rates in that year were broadly consistent with prior years. The increase of three percentage points in the enrollment rate is modest, but there were some potentially important changes in institutional destinations. This may help to explain some of the overspend, as we argue above. If the scholarship encouraged more students to attend in-state public institutions, especially those headed to four-year college and/or from more affluent families, this could have significantly inflated the scholarship payouts. (We have not been provided with either the scholarship model or the data used to estimate spending.)

As the Table 7.2 below shows, while there was no increase in enrollment rates at 2-year colleges, there was an increase in enrollment rates at 4-year institutions:

Table 7.2: Guilford Students Enrolling in Postsecondary Institutions as Percentage of All Students in High School Class (number of enrollees in italics)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Four-Year	45% <i>2110</i>	45% <i>2165</i>	43% <i>2165</i>	44% <i>2204</i>	45% <i>2340</i>	46% <i>2414</i>	46% <i>2445</i>	50% <i>2725</i>
Two-Year	23% <i>1080</i>	21% <i>1041</i>	19% <i>949</i>	20% <i>1005</i>	18% <i>941</i>	19% <i>1008</i>	17% <i>916</i>	17% <i>919</i>
Public	60% <i>2832</i>	57% <i>2762</i>	53% <i>2675</i>	53% <i>2685</i>	53% <i>2739</i>	54% <i>2875</i>	53% <i>2814</i>	56% <i>3073</i>

Private	8%	9%	9%	10%	11%	11%	10%	10%
	358	444	439	524	542	565	547	571
In-State	63%	60%	56%	56%	56%	58%	56%	61%
	2955	2889	2796	2835	2911	3075	3004	3338
Out-of-State	5%	7%	6%	7%	7%	7%	7%	6%
	235	317	318	374	370	347	357	306

Say Yes national leaders point to this as “the very shift in enrollment the strategy is supposed to effect, and it did so in the first year of scholarships being rolled out.” As far as we are aware, no explicit priority has been given by Say Yes to four-year degree completion. The final success metric on the “Pathway Analytics” is simply postsecondary completion, at either a two-year or four-year institution. If this enrollment shift from two-year to four-year institutions is a specific goal of Say Yes, it would be good to make this explicit, not least to the two-year institutions partnering with Say Yes.

Note too that there was essentially no change in the rate of enrollment at private colleges and a slight decline in enrollment at out-of-state colleges. This does suggest that, perhaps unsurprisingly, some students may have opted to remain in North Carolina and attend a public institution as a result of the scholarship. Many of these students have now had the scholarship removed since the removal of the universal offer following the scholarship overspend. The trends in enrollment rates at private and out-of-state colleges also suggest a limited influence here of the Higher Education Compact (see p.37), at least in terms of actual enrollment numbers.

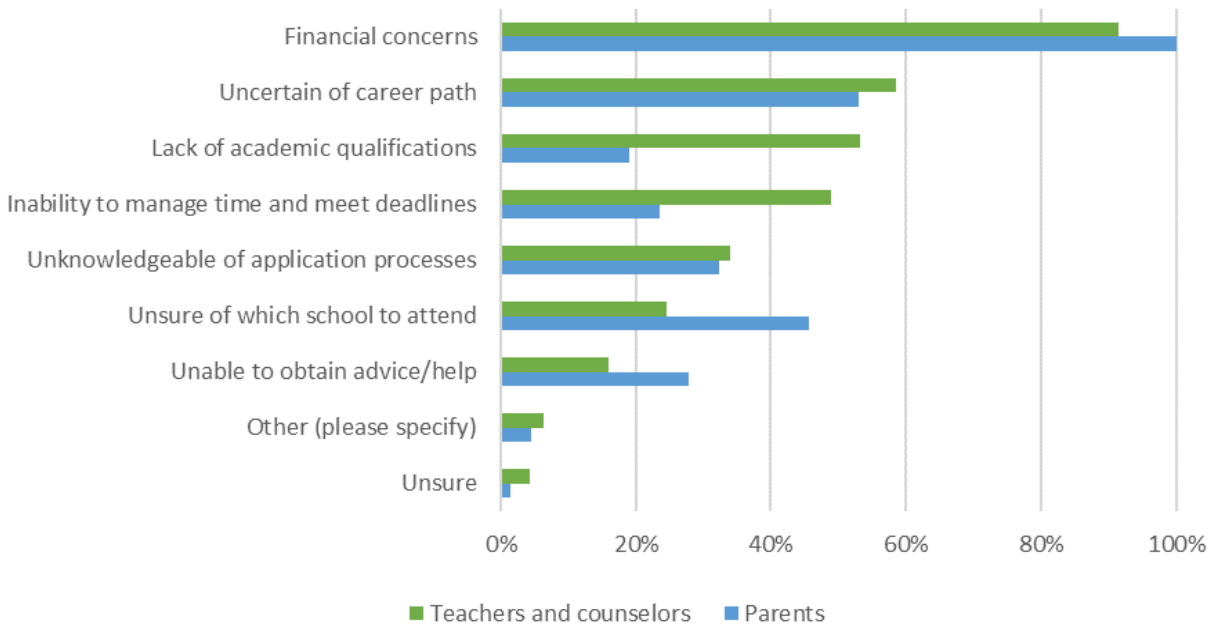
Since there are no Say Yes services in Guilford County, and the scholarship is only in Year 2, these trends should be seen as simply providing some broader context, rather than any commentary on the impact or otherwise of Say Yes.

7.7 Survey

We surveyed 95 educators and 71 parents of high school students in Guilford. This sample is larger than the samples in Buffalo and Syracuse, since Guilford County is considerably larger than either of the other two districts. As in the New York sites, parents considered the greatest barriers to college access to be financial concerns, while teachers saw academic qualifications and time management skills as more prohibitive than parents.

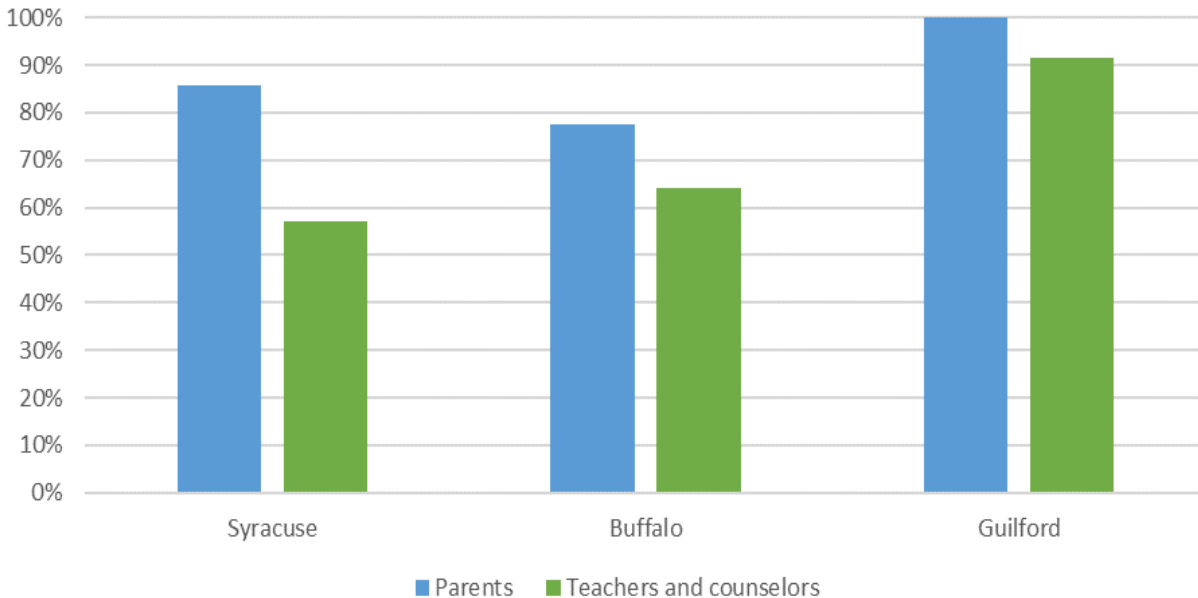
Figure 7.6: Greatest barriers to postsecondary education

Guilford survey responses



Parents and educators in Guilford were more likely than their Syracuse and Buffalo counterparts to report that financial concerns were a major barrier to postsecondary education. In fact, *every parent surveyed in Guilford* agreed that financial concerns were a major barrier. It is possible that the difference in the assessment of financial barriers between the New York sites and Guilford reflects the former's greater experience with and trust in the Say Yes scholarship, but there are other possible explanations abound: for instance, differences in the generosity of state and institutional aid between the two markets and in the types of colleges respondents' students planned to attend (e.g. two-year versus four-year, in-state versus out-of-state). Analysis of the focus group discussions helps to clarify respondents' concerns.

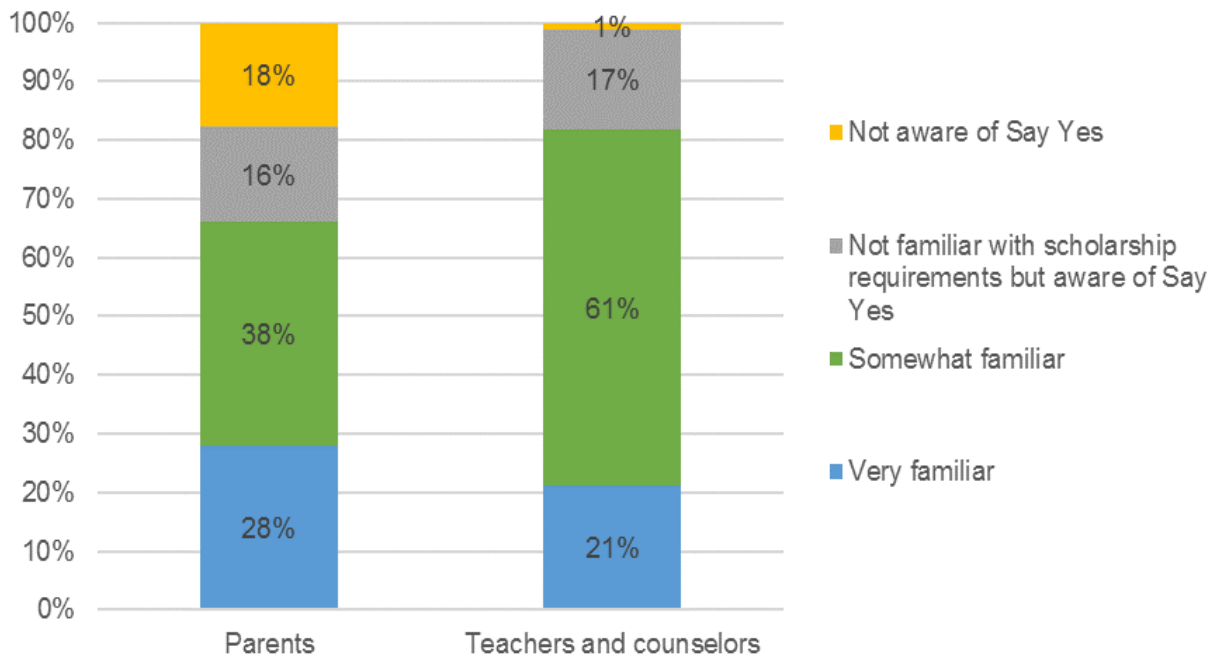
Figure 7.7: Percentage reporting that financial concerns are major barriers to postsecondary education
Survey responses



In response to an open question, Guilford educators also added some other barriers, including not wanting to attend college, family obligations, and not being a U.S. citizen as barriers to postsecondary education. One teacher blamed “[i]nability to predict Say Yes Funding” that “closed doors for so many.” Parents mentioned “lack of mentors to guide the pathway to college” and “difficulty managing daily life enough to plan for self/children’s future.”

Parents in Guilford were slightly less likely to be aware of Say Yes than parents in the other sites: 11 parents (18 percent of those who answered the question) said that they were not aware of Say Yes to Education, compared to 5 (13 percent) in Buffalo and 3 (14 percent) in Syracuse, though smaller sample sizes in the New York sites make this measure noisy. This likely reflects how long the scholarship has been in place. Only 1 percent of educators were unaware of Say Yes, and most respondents were at least somewhat familiar with the requirements of the scholarship. Parents and educators in Guilford were about as likely as those in Buffalo to report that they were very, somewhat, or not at all familiar with the scholarship requirements.

Figure 7.8: Awareness of Say Yes
Buffalo survey responses



7.8 Focus groups

Parent focus group

The parent focus group comprised five parents of high school students in Guilford County Schools. All were aware of Say Yes Guilford and had looked into using the scholarship for their children, but only one parent said that she thought her high school student would qualify for and intended to use the scholarship. The comments of the participants suggested that one parent in the group was low-income, two or three were roughly middle-class, and at least one seemed to be high-income (more than \$100,000 in annual household income).

The Guilford focus groups spoke primarily about the scholarship because Guilford does not yet have wraparound service supports. However, Nicole¹² had a student at one of the twelve schools selected for the pilot of Say Yes Guilford’s wraparound services. While the pilot of the wraparound services has not begun, Say Yes has had a fairly consistent presence in its launch schools to gather information and lay the groundwork for support services. (According to Executive Director Donnie Turlington, the scholarship director periodically visits with high school students and guidance counselors at the launch schools

...
¹² Name has been changed for privacy purposes.

to answer questions.) Say Yes Guilford also offers parent and senior information sessions at these high schools during the school year.

Nicole had attended at least one of these sessions and said that her daughter had received support from Say Yes staff. In the student focus group, Heather's daughter (Tess¹³) was the only student to say that she had met with anyone from Say Yes. Nicole had only positive things to say about Say Yes and suggested that other parents advocate to have Say Yes representatives visit their schools as well.

Apart from Nicole, the general consensus in the group was that Say Yes had performed a kind of bait-and-switch in the community by renegeing on the (perceived) promise of free college for all. One parent said that while the scholarship as it was originally advertised "did sound too good to be true," she believed in Say Yes because it seemed to have succeeded elsewhere:

They said, well they're also doing it in New York and wherever else...and they explained how it worked with, here's the money's invested, and here's how they're making money from this initial amount of money, or whatever.

She implied that her student would qualify for a capped amount of tuition assistance from Say Yes, which would make her family middle-class (since Guilford families making between \$40,000 and \$100,000 are eligible for tuition assistance but are not guaranteed full tuition coverage). She said her excitement waned when the scholarship requirements changed:

When I first heard about it, I think I first heard about it maybe on the news and read something on the internet about it. And then, I went to the website and read more about it. I was trying to find out everything about it, because I thought it was really exciting, I thought it sounded like the greatest thing ever, and I was telling people about it. And then, I was really disappointed a lot later when it changed from they're gonna to cover everything that financial aid doesn't cover to, oh no, we're only going to give you X amount of dollars.

Another parent said her family would qualify for some financial assistance but not enough to avoid student loans. She has one son who entered college just before Say Yes entered Guilford who is working part-time and taking out loans to pay for his education. She was an early supporter of the program but has soured on Say Yes after she heard from "other parents that had gone through the process who were disappointed." She added, "And when I said, 'I gotta go, I gotta go to a meeting about Say Yes,' there a general groan. 'Argh.'"

...

¹³ Name has been changed for privacy purposes.

The only father in the group said that he had always been skeptical of Say Yes but that his wife had “got more excited about it and dug into it and was then also very disappointed.”

Another parent’s eldest child was in the first cohort covered by the Say Yes scholarship (entering college in the fall of 2016), but at the time, her family was confused about what colleges her daughter could attend to receive the scholarship and felt that they had received conflicting information. The change in requirements means that her son, who is in high school and plans to attend an in-state public school, will be ineligible. Despite this, this mother in particular was supportive of efforts to make college more accessible to low-income students. She said that when she first heard about Say Yes, she did not think it would apply to her family:

I was hoping it would encourage people that couldn't afford to go to school, would then go to college. That was my big thing. I wasn't worried about my kid, but other kids that say I can't afford to go to college.

When another parent said that she thought Say Yes had done just that in her daughter’s school, the mother replied, “That’s what I want to hear. That’s a good thing.

But she also pointed to the difficulty of being asked to choose between what is best for one’s own child and what is best for other people’s children. She supports need-based scholarships for less advantaged children but laments that her son will likely need to take out loans:

It's one of those hard things where you sit there and mull this, it's like, 'Yeah, but would you trade places with somebody that needs that scholarship?' I'm like, 'No, of course not.' But it is frustrating when you see your child who has worked so, so hard and they don't qualify for any of those scholarships out there except for the few totally merit-based ones at the school [that are awarded to] just the very, very, very, very top [students]. And they're just scrapping for those. And yeah, it's fair, it [Say Yes assistance] goes to the kids that it's meant to help. The ones that that's the only way they get to college. But you know, when they put that income thing in you're like, 'There goes something else.'

If there was resentment in the group toward Say Yes, it was not because they were upset that the scholarship was not universal, but rather because it *had been* universal at some point. It is easy to imagine these parents praising Say Yes for its work to help low-income students if only the organization had never promised that the scholarship would be universal. Instead, several parents expressed that Say Yes had gotten their hopes up only to leave them “disappointed.” As the father in the group said, “Even if the only thing they’re doing is helping out certain number of very low income kids, that’s a good thing.”

He added that where Say Yes was previously “over-promoting,” it has now “just sort of fallen off the radar.” Two other parents agreed and seemed eager for more information:

Are they still trying to raise money, are they asking for big contributors, what's happening? There's no, I don't hear anything anymore. So, I hope that it doesn't go away, or that at some point they will be able to cover everybody's total tuition. But I'm just wondering what they're even doing.

I haven't heard anything about fundraising, or anything more about it. What are they doing? Is anybody trying to raise money, why am I hearing nothing about anything? What's happening?

Say Yes has also lost credibility since overcommitting to scholarships:

It sort of, unfortunately, became a laughingstock that, my gosh, they messed up their numbers by that much? I mean, they didn't have any idea that—to be off by a little bit is one thing, but to be off by whatever it was, four times their budget? I mean, how can you be off by that much? It was kind of a, how can you screw it up that badly?

Parents were receptive to the idea of wraparound supports, especially in the form of a kind of supplemental guidance counselor - much like the family support specialists that Say Yes Guilford's operating committee hopes to hire in the coming years. When other parents heard Nicole discuss her school's experience with Say Yes, two other parents expressed interest in having Say Yes representatives take more active roles in their schools to help students plan for college. But first, Say Yes Guilford will have to remake a place for itself in the community after backtracking from its original promises. The organization's tarnished reputation will likely make it difficult to rally the community around a new Say Yes initiative.

Student focus group

The student focus group contained six high school students. Five of the students' parents also participated in the parent focus group. When asked what they knew about Say Yes, participants associated Say Yes only with the scholarship, so the moderator did not ask about wraparound services or other components.

One student, Tess¹⁴, attended one of Say Yes's launch schools, where the organization is planning to pilot wraparound services. Tess was the only student who had met with someone from Say Yes. Others had learned about Say Yes on the internet, from their parents, or from “the commercial stuff.” Tess explained her experiences with the program:

...

¹⁴ Nicole's daughter (names have been changed)

At the beginning of the school year we had a senior meeting. Each grade has a meeting at the beginning of every year, and we go first. So we had a meeting and there was a representative from Say Yes who came to talk to us about it. Then a couple weeks later we had senior-parent night and he talked about it again with the parents.

Other students were somewhat familiar with Say Yes but thought that the program either never really took hold in the district or had largely disappeared in the past year:

A few years ago after it started, it was talked about a lot. Everyone was excited for it. It sort of went away over the years.

I think when it first came out everyone was losing their mind. It was like, 'Oh my gosh, this is going to be this great awesome thing. It's going to help everyone.' But now it's just kind of like, oh you know about it, but it doesn't really mean anything. Like no one really knows exactly what it is.

It's changed. I know the first year, because like everybody was talking about it, like "We're going to give money to everybody and it's going to be great." And then it sort of like manipulated because they started running out of money.

Most students had thought at length about how to secure scholarships, and many had filled out the FAFSA. One student said that he woke his father up at 6 a.m. on October 1 (the day the form became available) so they could submit it as soon as possible.

However, only one student was optimistic that Say Yes would have an impact on her: Tess said that she expects Say Yes will help her go to college because her family's income is under \$30,000, meaning that she will qualify for full tuition coverage after other forms of aid. Two students said that they expect to get some money from Say Yes but did not think it would play a major role in their college decisions. Another expressed that he was discouraged after attempting to apply for other scholarships:

I never really saw it as an option because I just didn't think they had money for me. ... Every time I tried to apply for anything it would just come back as nothing.

Tess was the most knowledgeable of any student or parent about who would qualify for assistance from Say Yes, though she was under the impression that the scholarship covered tuition, fees, room, and board. Other students said they thought the scholarship only covered tuition but seemed to decide that Tess was the authority on the subject. Some students said after they heard Tess talk that they wished Say Yes had a presence at their schools to provide more information about scholarship options:

Let it be more known in school. Like what happened at her [Tess's] school, people come and talk about it and let everyone know what it's about.

I never hear anything about it except for some teachers occasionally complaining. Maybe if they got different people to manage this. They're just complaining about. I never actually hear like who it affects, what it's about even. They don't provide us with the information.

I think if they made sure people who are juniors, sophomores, and freshmen, kind of know about it so they can be more prepared, I think that would probably help.

Students were very aware of Say Yes Guilford's financial troubles and even brainstormed together about where the program could raise enough money make the scholarship universal. During this conversation, two students drew attention to the need for greater visibility:

And also advertising outside of the school, getting the word out to other businesses and people who would be interested in financing it and fundraising and figuring out how to earn money for it.

I'll kind of agree with what he said about people coming to the schools. It would be nice to put some actual people to the program. There's posters around school and I see their Instagram stuff but I never ... I don't know who the head of Say Yes is, or people that actually work for it. Knowing that there's people out there like doing their actual jobs with Say Yes, that would be nice.

Overall, students were not as ready as their parents to accept a less-than-universal scholarship. The one student who is likely to qualify for the full scholarship was optimistic about Say Yes, but she was under the impression that the scholarship would also cover room and board and may not receive as much assistance as she originally expected. Students also seemed to express greater anxiety than their parents about the cost of college and were more interested in receiving information about how they could obtain the Say Yes scholarship than in receiving general guidance about postsecondary education.

Educator focus group

Seven educators from Guilford County Schools participated in the focus group. One teacher, Jenna¹⁵, came from the same high school as Nicole (parent) and Tess (student) from the earlier focus groups. Another worked at a different launch school.

...

¹⁵ Name has been changed for privacy purposes.

Educators agreed that money was a significant barrier for their students but disagreed about whether students were motivated to seek out scholarships. Jenna said her students were highly motivated but lacked help with scholarship applications at home:

We have 100% free and reduced lunch at [her school]. So all of our kids are pretty much economically disadvantaged and they want to be able to do all the paper-work. They'll bring their parents' tax information into school. Their parents will give it to them. These are parents who don't know what to do with it and so the kids will come in and they're like handing me their parents' social security number cause they don't know what to do and they can't do it. We have two different translators at [the high school], one who's Spanish/Portuguese and one who is Vietnamese and Cambodian and they run financial aid workshops with the students because a lot of our kids literally have to do everything. Their parents can't do it. Their parents don't speak English.

An educator from another school added,

I find that parental support is a big thing, so if their parents are completely aware of the process and they're active in it, the kids are either going to have a very easy time applying and/or applying for certain scholarships, like aware of them. If their parents aren't necessarily able to support them, whether that's like financially or they're just not aware of, they don't know what to do with their tax forms, the kids are as equally clueless and so whatever resources they have to be at school.

When asked what programs were helping students address barriers to postsecondary education, respondents mentioned service learning programs at some schools and a new program known as the Guilford Apprenticeship Program (GAP). When prompted specifically about Say Yes, most said that they had heard little about the program in recent months. One teacher, who works at a launch school, said that Say Yes has come to her school on at least one occasion but that teachers “haven't really heard from them since their issue with no longer being able to provide funding for all students.”

Jenna thought Say Yes had been more visible at her school but had left students thinking that room and board would also be covered. She also worries about students of hers who are not citizens who were under the impression that they could receive the scholarship even if they were not eligible for federal or state aid. Additionally, she said that because Say Yes was talked up so much during its first year in Guilford:

A lot of my students didn't apply for other scholarships because they were hearing full tuition. ... We heard a lot of, everyone's gonna get money. School's gonna be great. But like, the details of it, like the pretty spreadsheets, we didn't get the how it was gonna happen but we just believed.

Afterward, she said:

The information just sputtered out and it was we're gonna redo the formula and then even last year, we didn't really know what that formula was gonna be. ... My seniors have almost just like—they don't even mention the Say Yes. They just don't think it's gonna be worth it and they don't go for it. ... That first year, I felt like they bought into it more so when we got into the college research, they were more apt to look at colleges because they knew that there was a possibility of money whereas this year, they feel the door has been slammed in their face and they're back to thinking, 'I'm not gonna get any money. I'm not gonna be able to pay for this. It's gonna be two-year or I'm just not gonna go.'

When prompted, only two of seven participants said that Say Yes had impacted their students' college decision-making. One of those two said that guidance counselors who knew students well could help to determine if a student was likely to qualify, avoiding the disappointments that Jenna mentioned. Others implied that while Say Yes may have been less important to their students than other forms of aid, any little bit helped—but most thought that the new scholarship model did not do enough to help middle-class families. Several vocally agreed with the following comment:

Realistically, middle class can't afford to pay the amount of college cost that it does. I had a friend just the other day. He's got two in, he's a teacher. Wife works as well, \$8000 per student he supposed to also contribute. It's not realistic. And most likely, he now no longer qualifies for Say Yes. His son got some the first year but I would guess that they probably do not now and again, so I think that the qualifications, if they truly want to help, I get it because a lot of the lower economic, socioeconomics can get FAFSA and some of those things to help, the federal aid and I'm not saying they shouldn't be helped but if they truly want to help that middle group where we really, truly have a lot of kids who are struggling or parents can't help even though they say that they can help, it's just not realistic and so those guidelines are too low.

Jenna in particular was downbeat about changes to the scholarship model because it struck her as a sign that Say Yes had not understood how much need there was in Guilford:

I think that the people at the top [of Say Yes] including like the two people I know who are donors, I feel like they do live in a bubble. They are extremely wealthy. I mean private jet wealthy. The kind of wealthy like I'm just like I can't even believe I know you. I don't think that they have any concept of the amount of poverty that truly exists outside of their bubble and I think that when they went in, like we're gonna do this. This is a great program cause I mean it is, I just don't think they had any concept of the number of students who have need and they just couldn't, when it came down to it and they saw how many people applied, I think they were just

truly shocked. Like, oh my god, really, this many people are poor. Yes, yes, we are.

The overspend in Guilford was actually due in large part to an unexpectedly large number of more affluent students who did not qualify for other need-based aid and so received much of their tuition coverage from Say Yes. Misunderstanding aside, it is clear that alterations to the model have left some educators (including at least one in a Say Yes's launch school) with feelings of mistrust or resentment. This could prove to be a hurdle when Say Yes Guilford attempts to launch wraparound services since Say Yes staff would need to collaborate with teachers and counselors.

7.9 Reflections

We will turn to the lessons learned from the Say Yes experience in Chapter 9. But a few points are worth making on the difficulties faced by Say Yes in Guilford.

First, it seems clear that Mo Green was a big factor in both attracting Say Yes to the county and to the speed and energy with which the initiative was launched. His departure was a body blow, and a sign that, at least in this case, the initiative was heavily reliant on a particular individual. Once Sharon Contreras was appointed, Say Yes effectively went into a holding pattern.

There were clearly bumps in the road during the early years and challenges with securing both local leadership and local buy-in. But the scholarship overspend and resulting blame game have been very damaging. Combined with the lack of new service provisions and inability to progress in terms of a new data architecture, there is a strong sense of disappointment and even anger among local stakeholders.

At the same time, the scholarship still stands and - if the financial commitments are forthcoming - may remain so. Say Yes leaders point to the difficult local politics of the county, a lack of support from the school district after Green's departure, and an unwillingness on the part of organizations to share power and build more inclusive governance structures. They also acknowledge that the focus on a quick launch of the scholarship weakened efforts on other fronts, including service development, data collection, and the establishment of a functional Operating Committee. Efforts are underway now to rebuild the Committee, as well as many of the key relationships.

8. Scholarships, Services, Governance, Data: A Review of Research Literature

8.1 Introduction

As earlier chapters have shown, the goal of Say Yes—to improve educational outcomes for less advantaged young Americans—is a key contributor to helping boost rates of upward social mobility. Say Yes is of course just one initiative among the thousands that exist to achieve this goal; as the previous three chapters have shown, the challenges are formidable.

In the final chapter, we turn to the lessons learned from the Say Yes experience. But it is important not to look at Say Yes in isolation, or as if nothing else were known about the effectiveness and implementation of the four principal components of the Say Yes approach. These are, as a reminder:

- **Scholarships.** “Promise”-style, place-based scholarships, which allow certain students to attend college without paying for tuition, have been proliferating in recent years. At last count there were 82 across the U.S. (including the three Say Yes sites).
- **Services.** There are a myriad of additional support services being provided to students in the K-12 system in order to improve outcomes. In this review, we focus here on those that are provided in a “wraparound” fashion (typically around a school institution), and those that match most closely the Say Yes offerings.
- **Governance.** Say Yes is an example of a community-level initiative that attempts to align the goals and resources of multiple stakeholders in a particular community. Now frequently (and often unhelpfully) bracketed under the “collective impact” heading, these place-based approaches seek to channel existing resources more effectively. Say Yes places heavy emphasis on a collective governance” structure called Cross-Government & Sector Collaboration.
- **Data.** Say Yes strives for “Data-Driven, Continuous Improvement” as one of its core principles. This requires the collection, sharing, analysis, and effective use of data at the level of communities, institutions or service providers, and community-wide. This in turn requires the building of a data platform that is powerful and focused while ensuring the protection of private data.

Below we summarize the extant research literature that bears on each of these four components. Additional material is also contained in Appendix 3. Clearly this is not a comprehensive review. We encourage readers to pursue the references in each of these areas.

In particular, we recommend Michelle Miller-Adams book, *Promise Nation* (2015); a working paper on evaluation of scholarship programs by Swanson et al. (2016); a paper from Colin Jones of the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center on wraparound services (2014); a meta-analysis of studies of these services by Suter and Burns (2009); a review of collective impact models from Henig et al. of Columbia Teachers College (2015); and a paper from Fantuzzo and colleagues at the on integrated data systems (2017).

8.2 Scholarships

What one interviewee described as the “movie poster” element of Say Yes is the final-dollar scholarship. Say Yes is an example of the growing movement of “Promise” scholarships in one form or another. There is very little evidence, so far, on the impact of the Say Yes scholarships: but that is also true for almost all of 82 programs in existence. The only program that has been evaluated in any depth is the Kalamazoo Promise; as a result this single scholarship offer dominates the academic literature.

Evaluating a scholarship offer requires clarity about the goal or goals of the initiative. In a comprehensive review of place-based scholarships, and drawing on Miller-Adams (2015), Swanson et al. summarize the goals of the programs they study as follows:

- *Increase student access to postsecondary education* by providing partial or complete financial assistance, thus relaxing or removing a major barrier to degree attainment...
- *Build a college-going culture and improve academic rigor at all levels of the educational community* and community at large, as parents and students learn more, and earlier, about what it takes to go to college...
- *Spur community and economic development* with the rationale that as word of the Promise Program spreads, families who desire to participate in the program will either move to or stay in the area...

These are distinct, even if related, goals. But they do come very close to the stated goals of Say Yes. Assessing the impact of a scholarship against these goals requires the collection and presentation of appropriate data. Some are easier to measure than others, of course (though note that descriptive statistics provide only weak evidence of actual impact). Enrollment and completion rates at the postsecondary level are relatively easy to track; a “college-going culture” much less so. And in every case, very careful research design and ample data is required in order to make even tentative claims of causal effects.

In this section we describe the rise and reach of place-based college scholarships in the U.S.; summarize evaluation studies of the Kalamazoo Promise (where the most detailed evaluations have been undertaken); and finally, summarize evaluation studies of other scholarship programs.

In recent decades, there has been an increase in the number of college scholarship programs focusing on specific towns, cities, or communities. Place-based scholarships in America go back at least to the 1920s when philanthropist Bernard Daly started awarding them to select groups of “worthy and ambitious” high school graduates in Lake County, Oregon (Unknown, 2015). In 1959, logging magnates Rex and Ethel Clemens pioneered a universal, place-based scholarship funding college for all high school graduates from Philomath, Oregon. The program was scaled back to focus on “second generation” Philomathians in the 2000s partly because the trustees did not like the cultural shifts that were occurring in the town and the schools, which some residents saw as a drift to “political correctness” (Tomsho, 2002). For similar reasons, the foundation finally shut down the scholarship.

In 1913, the New York Regents College Scholarship Program became the first general state scholarship (Allen et al., 1962). Shortly after World War I, Pennsylvania created a program whereby state senators chose scholarship awardees. By 1955, roughly half of states offered potential college-goers some form of aid.

Towards the end of the century, philanthropists were once again leading the charge.

In 1981, multi-millionaire tech investor Eugene Lang launched the *I Have a Dream* program (Mezzacappa, 1999), which first offered free college tuition to 61 students at the elementary school Lang attended in East Harlem (Neff, 1990), PS 121, before expanding to more than 200 other programs in 28 states and New Zealand (Our history, 2018). Realizing that the students would need more social support to become college-ready, Lang went on to fund college visits, a youth counselor, and tutors (Neff, 1990). After visiting the schools, observers noted anecdotally that the students raised their aspirations, and their teachers and families raised their expectations (Geist, 1985).

Other philanthropists followed Lang’s lead, as a 1987 *New York Times* profile of Lang reported (Perlez, 1987):

Since 1981, Mr. Lang's idea...has spread nationwide. More than 100 classes of underprivileged students in 15 cities have been adopted by wealthy individuals or others who, modeling their programs after Mr. Lang's, raise the money necessary for guiding a class through high school and for paying for college tuition. The money is invested in an annuity.

Just Friday, the wife of a wealthy stockbroker stunned 116 mostly poor sixth-grade students gathered in a Philadelphia auditorium by promising them that she and her husband would guarantee their college tuition.

As alert readers will likely have guessed, that “wealthy stockbroker” was in fact George Weiss, the founder of Say Yes to Education.¹⁶ In 1993, Harris Rosen similarly promised to send Tangelo Park, Florida children to in-state college for free (Promise scholarship, 2016).

More recently, government policy makers have also begun to introduce financial inducements. In 2015, Tennessee started covering tuition and fees at in-state community colleges for all Tennessee high school graduates (About Tennessee promise, 2018). Oregon started a similar program in 2016, albeit with a merit requirement (Oregon promise updates, 2018). In January 2017, Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York proposed to make public college education tuition-free for most students in the state. Governor Gina Raimondo has proposed a similar plan for Rhode Island. These proposals have drawn both praise and criticism.

Our focus here, however, is not on large, statewide public programs but on place-based scholarships, i.e., those that focus on a particular town or community. According to a 2016 survey by the W.E. Upjohn Institute, there are 85 of these scholarships in the U.S. (Using a slightly different definition, other researchers find similar numbers). Thirty-seven are broadly universal or “promise” programs, while 48 are “targeted” scholarships, with some income and/or merit requirements (Promise Scholarship, 2016).

These schemes vary significantly from one another, along a number of dimensions, including:

- **First-dollar vs. last-dollar.** A key distinction is between “first-dollar” schemes, which pay without regard to other potential sources of support, and “final-dollar” programs, which bridge the gap between existing support and total costs. The Kalamazoo Promise in Michigan is a first-dollar scholarship (About the Kalamazoo promise, 2018). Started in 2006, this Promise originally covered tuition for all district graduates at public, in-state institutions, but has since expanded to also cover private, in-state institutions. First-dollar programs are relatively simple to administer, since no one has to ensure students complete the FAFSA or track their other scholarships. But the costs are necessarily much higher. Say Yes to Education is an example of last-dollar scholarship (Common questions, 2018): students must first apply for state and federal aid, after which Say Yes covers any shortfall. This entails more administrative work, but allows the program to save money by leveraging existing programs, such as Pell.
- **Tuition vs. all costs.** The Kalamazoo Promise covers both students’ tuition and their fees. Say Yes covers tuition, with fixed-quantity grants available to assist Pell-eligible students with non-tuition costs. Covering only tuition keeps costs under

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¹⁶ It was actually 112 pupils not 116.

control. But in many institutions, non-tuition costs are rising; and for many students the associated costs of college above and beyond tuition can be a barrier to access and/or persistence.

- **Prorated vs. first year.** Almost all place-based, universal scholarships require that students either live in the area and/or attend local schools (usually public schools) in order to be eligible. Say Yes and the Kalamazoo Promise, for example, both require that students attend district public schools for a certain number of years, and their scholarship amounts are prorated based on how long each student has been in the system (not in Syracuse). Other schemes, often operated by specific community colleges, have less stringent residency requirements.¹⁷
- **In-state vs. out-of-state.** Most scholarships are not only place-based in terms of individual eligibility, but also in terms of which colleges are covered. Some are tied to specific institutions. The Kalamazoo Promise, like many others, can only be used at in-state institutions. Say Yes is a little unusual in that, as an alternative to attending local colleges (public or private), students can use its “college compact” to attend out-of-state private institutions. One reason many scholarship initiatives limit eligibility to local institutions is to encourage recipients to stay and contribute to the local economy and civic life.
- **Universal vs. targeted by income.** A major difference among place-based scholarships is between those that are available to all, and those that target certain students. In Buffalo and Syracuse, Say Yes awards scholarships to anyone who graduates high school. Others, like the approach taken by the Denver Scholarship Foundation, and now Say Yes in Guilford County, have income limits—children from wealthier families are ineligible, or receive smaller grants (Eligibility, 2018). Setting income limits saves the scholarship program money and helps focus resources on the most underprivileged students. Universal scholarships, on the other hand, may create more broad-based buy-in and political support for the program, which could help ensure its long-term survival.¹⁸
- **Universal vs. targeted by merit.** While many scholarships are available to all high school graduates (from certain schools), some have merit requirements, like a minimum GPA. The Shoreline Scholars program in Seattle, for example, requires students to finish high school with at least a 3.0 GPA (Frequently asked questions, 2018). These constraints might ensure that scholarship dollars go to more college-

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¹⁷ The Skyline Promise in San Bruno, CA, offers full support to any high school graduate that applies there; the Tulsa Achieves program aids students enrolled since 9th grade, and offers some scholarship dollars even to students who lived in the county only during their last year of high school.

¹⁸ Some scholarships have tried to incentivize behavioral changes among parents. The College Bound program in Hammond, Indiana, limits scholarships to children of local homeowners—an attempt to promote homeownership.

ready students, but without an income limit, they could also bias scholarships towards wealthier students and make many lower-income students ineligible. Many scholarship programs also require minimum performance requirements in college. Say Yes, for example, asks that students maintain a 2.0 in college to retain their scholarship.

Place-based scholarships have developed in different ways in different places. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. But the broad goal of the programs is the same: to improve the number of young adults, especially those from less advantaged backgrounds, getting to and through college. Do they work?

The Kalamazoo Promise

Some of the best research on the impact of a universal, place-based scholarship has been undertaken by the W.E. Upjohn Institute which has been examining the Kalamazoo Promise since its inception in 2005.¹⁹ (For a more comprehensive overview of these studies see Appendix 3.) The Kalamazoo Promise and several similar programs started, for the most part, by only offering scholarships. This means that researchers can more confidently attribute any impacts to the scholarships themselves.

In a 2016 paper, Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the Kalamazoo Promise. They base their analysis on the program's effects on degree attainment, on the scholarship's costs, and on the projected future earnings of the students. Overall, they find that the Promise has a positive return on investment of 11 percent. But the rate differs across student groups, partly because of the different achievement effects they documented for different student subgroups in their 2015 paper. While low-income and better-off students post similar rates of return, for example, the rate of return for white students is only 1.9 percent, versus 12.4 percent for students of color.

Similarly, boys' scholarships don't seem to pass their cost-benefit test, while girls post a 12.2 percent rate of return. In fact, Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska find stark differences by gender in almost all their analyses, an area worthy of deeper investigation. As they report:

For men, [under our preferred scenario], the Promise has no positive earnings benefits: the program does not improve educational attainment for men, and thus provides no earnings increase, but it has large costs because of the high baseline number of men attending college and getting degrees.

¹⁹ In a January 2008 working paper, Gary Miron and Stephanie Evergreen lay out a "logic model" about how the Kalamazoo Promise might change student achievement, teaching, the school district, the local labor market, and housing conditions, among other factors. It's a good place to start when considering a universal, place-based scholarship's potential effects. Subsequent papers investigated many of the effects they posited.

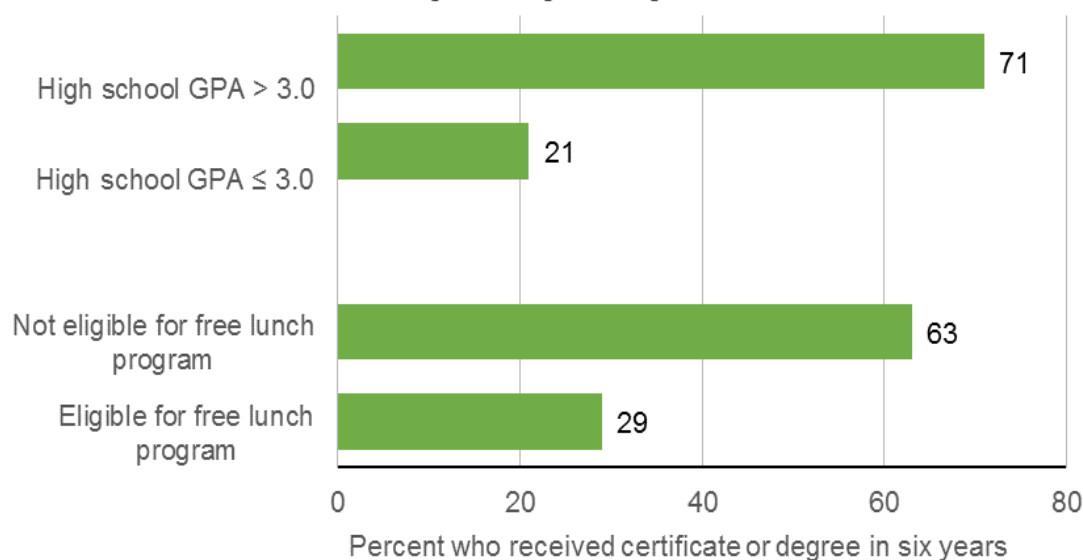
The Upjohn team speculates that the differential impact on certain groups could influence the scope of place-based scholarship programs, especially in terms of the balance between universality and targeting:

Our findings might be used to rationalize scholarship programs that are ‘universal’ in that they target all students in a school district, but ‘targeted’ on school districts that have a high percentage of non-white or low-income students.

Nonetheless, a major challenge is to boost not only enrollment but completion rates, especially for those from poorer backgrounds and/or with lower levels of academic readiness. In an update to his 2015 paper with Bartik and Lachowska, Brad Hershbein (2015) reports that rates of completion for these groups remain much lower, in spite of the Promise:

Figure 8.1: Completion rates vary among Kalamazoo Promise students

Six-year completion rates of Kalamazoo Promise students who enrolled in college within six months of graduating from high school, classes of 2006-2008



Source: Unreported tabulations from Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska (2015)

As Hershbein concludes:

The barriers to completion extend far beyond a lack of money to pay for college. In addition to poor academic preparation of students, scholars point to insufficient resources at the college level—students cannot always get into required classes and they forget certain deadlines when they have no one to help them. Poorer

students are also disproportionately affected by family and other obligations. Indeed, *these issues often become more salient when the initial hurdle of money for tuition is lowered*, and students who otherwise may never have even applied enroll in college [our italics].

Evaluations of other “promise” programs

Swanson et al. conclude their review as follows:

Although we find positive effects of Promise Programs, studies of the Kalamazoo Promise are heavily represented in the literature, and limit the generalizability of this finding. More research on a variety of Promise Programs is needed to fully understand the effects of Promise Programs on our outcomes of interest.

Of course it is hardly uncommon for scholars to say that “more research is needed.” But in this case the call is entirely justified. Outside of Kalamazoo, we know next to nothing about the impact of place-based college scholarship programs. Here we offer a few highlights; again, for a fuller overview of those studies that do exist, see Appendix 3. The main results on academic attainment are as follows:

- A 9 percent increase in public school enrollment and an improvement in math test scores (especially among black and low-income students) in El Dorado, Arkansas (Ritter & Ash, 2016).
- An increase in community college enrollment rates in Knox County, Tennessee following introduction of a final-dollar scholarship for those attending a community college (Carruthers & Fox, 2016).
- A shift to enrollment from private to public schools as a result of the New Haven Promise (Daugherty & Gonzales, 2016).
- A slight increase in attendance at four-year colleges (instead of community colleges) following introduction of the Pittsburgh Promise (Bozick, Gonzalez, & Engeberg, 2015).

Two studies have attempted to gather data from a wide range of Promise programs, rather than focusing on one program alone. In a 2014 NBER working paper, Michael LeGower and Randall Walsh use a difference-in-difference approach to compare Promise scholarship areas to surrounding areas before and after program announcement. They find that:

- Scholarships increase public school enrollment;

- Universal scholarships that apply to many colleges create bigger effects (8 percent), while similar programs with merit requirements or a more narrow selection of participating colleges produce half that effect.

Importantly, trend data tell us nothing in themselves about the impact of the scholarships. There have been increases in college enrollment across the board, as well as in high school graduation and other factors. Trend data alone cannot separate the effects of other changes from scholarship effects. For an in-depth review of Promise program evaluations, including more studies with null results, see a 2016 working paper, *Promises Fulfilled? A Systematic Review of the Impacts of Promise Programs*, by Elise Swanson, Angela Watson, Gary W. Ritter, and Malachi Nichols.

What about other effects of place-based scholarships, for instance on house prices or local economies? Here, the evidence is even sparser. Some findings are as follows:

- There are some positive effects on home prices (7 to 12 percent) in Promise areas. But these effects are concentrated in neighborhoods “in the upper half of the housing price distribution,” with high-performing schools (Walsh & LeGower, 2014).
- Promise areas, on average, had lower out-migration rates in the three years after announcement, with the largest effects among families with children (Bartik & Sotherland, 2015).

One lesson echoed by many scholars working on the impact of Promise programs is the need to supplement financial support with other programs to increase college-readiness and persistence. As Michelle Miller-Adams notes in her book, *Promise Nation*, many places that started universal scholarships came to realize that improvements in services were needed (2015):

The process has played out in similar ways in multiple communities—the creation of place-based scholarship programs immediately highlights the need for better academic and social preparedness for high school graduates...There is real uncertainty about whether a place-based scholarship can have a major effect on a community in the absence of the deep alignment characteristic of the best collective impact efforts. It is arguable that *the most important function of a Promise scholarship program is in fact to serve as a catalyst for a more integrated web of support that serves young people from birth through the K–12 system, then through college and into the workforce.* (Our italics)

8.3 Services

Lowering the financial barriers to college is only part of the story. Improving the capacity of students to learn and become ready for college is often a necessary complement—and might, in fact, have a bigger impact on college outcomes. A scholarship might be the

“bright light” or “movie poster” or “hook” that draws attention to the importance of education and improves incentives for teachers and students. But much of the real work takes place long before students fill out their college applications. This is especially the case for those from poorer backgrounds. Indeed, unless steps are taken to narrow college-readiness gaps, the danger is that scholarship offers may simply end up helping students who may have been headed for college anyway.

For these reasons, many interventions, including Say Yes, combine a scholarship with services. Very often these are provided in what it seems is labeled a “wraparound” model, i.e. within, through, or alongside existing institutions and providers (in this case, mostly those involved in the K-12 system). In theory, this provides students and families with a “one stop shop,” making it easier for them to access services like academic tutoring or legal counsel.

We look first at four specific kinds of social interventions closely overlapping with the Say Yes approach, and the evidence for their individual effectiveness, before looking for evidence on the value of providing these kinds of services together, through a wraparound model.

Specifically, we examine:

- Out-of-school time (OST) programs: evening and summer time enrichment;
- Social and emotional curriculum and supports;
- Help with college aid forms; and
- College counseling.

This list isn’t meant to be exhaustive, of course, but to provide more information on some fairly typical programs, not just for Say Yes, but more broadly.

Out-of-school time (OST) programs: Evening and summer time enrichment

One of most important educational resources is simply time. This is why many schools and districts offer after-school learning or activities, Saturday classes, and summer schools. Buffalo public schools, working in partnership with Say Yes, offer a good example. Summer schools and after-school activities are already on the menu in many schools, and included in the district’s “New Education Bargain” as the following:

Commit to a plan for extended learning excellence for all our students which includes re-vamped after school, summer school, Saturday school, alternative education, technology-based learning, the arts and athletics.

So: What evidence is there for the effectiveness of extended learning?

Higher Achievement is a program that works with “academically motivated but underserved” 5th through 8th graders. The program is demanding, and has been described as a “Cadillac” intervention. It includes an after school academy that runs from 3:30 to 8:00 p.m. three days a week and a summer academy that runs from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. five days a week, for six weeks. The program is open only to “highly motivated” students and parents.

Poverty Action Lab researchers Leigh Linden, Carla Herrera, and Jean Grossman (2011) conducted an RCT of the program. After null academic effects in year one, the scores of the treatment group students rose 0.09 standard deviations in reading and 0.12 standard deviations in problem solving by year two. The authors also find that Higher Achievement students were more interested in competitive high schools. These are relatively modest effects, however, given the intensity of the program.

Knopf et al. (2015) conducted a literature review on OST programs, including both after-school and summer programs. They winnowed down thousands of research papers to just the strongest 5. They find “strong evidence that reading-focused OST programs are effective in improving the reading achievement of academically at-risk students in grades K-3.” They also find that math OST programs can raise student achievement, as can general academic programs, though the effects of those programs tended to be smaller.

One theme in several of the studies reviewed was that student attendance posed a challenge. The treatment “compliers” (those who showed up for the program) often had much larger effects than the overall average for the treatment program group, which raises the specter of selection effects. Model fidelity—how closely the tutors, teachers, and administrators actually adhered to the programming—was also an issue in some of the OST programs studied.²⁰

Jason Snipes, Chun-Wei Huang, Karina Jaquet, and Neal Finkelstein (2015) conducted an RCT evaluation of the Elevate Math summer program and found that even a 19-day program before 8th grade could have positive effects. Treatment group students scored 0.7 standard deviations higher on a test of algebra readiness. They were also “more likely (29 percent versus 12 percent) to reach achievement thresholds associated with success in algebra I.” That said, “only 29 percent of students in the treatment group reached an achievement level that would predict a better than 50 percent chance of succeeding in an algebra I course.” So, while the program improved math achievement, it wasn’t enough to bring many students up to speed for the regular school year.

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²⁰ The Midwest Regional Educational Laboratory, affiliated with AIR, also put out a brief collection of studies, many of which finds positive effects for OST programs.

Social and emotional curriculum and supports

There is some evidence that programs focused on improving social and emotional skills (also referred to as “soft” skills) can improve outcomes if designed correctly. The Becoming a Man program, for example, lowered violent crime arrests and raised school engagement (including attendance and GPA) among teenage boys in Chicago (Harms, 2012).

A team of researchers evaluated First Step to Success, an intervention for elementary students with behavior issues (Walker et al., 2009). The authors’ RCT evaluation find some positive effects of First Step over “usual care”: both teacher and parent ratings of student behavior rose. Academic effects were modest; students showed improvements on the academic sections of the Social Skills Rating System, but not on more direct tests, like word identification. The authors note that their four-month follow-up may miss longer term positive effects. A pair of recently published RCT evaluations of First Step find positive effects on both behavioral and academic metrics although the gains eroded over time (Sumi et al., 2012; Woodbridge et al., 2014).²¹

The 4Rs Program is a school-level curriculum designed to help elementary students develop social and emotional skills (like reflecting on their emotions or resolving disputes) (4Rs Program, 2018). Stephanie Jones, Joshua Brown, Wendy Hoggund, and Lawrence Aber (2010a) conducted an RCT evaluation of the program. After a year, the authors find effects on two of thirteen outcomes for third graders: “hostile attributional biases” and depression. The biggest effects were for students whom teachers identified as aggressive at the baseline, on measures such as reading achievement and attendance. Follow-up work also finds positive impacts at three years on math and reading for those children that were rated as more aggressive at baseline (Jones et al., 2010b).

In June 2017, the Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse listed 16 different behavioral interventions with “positive or potentially positive effects” on a range of outcomes, from academic achievement to social skills.

Help with college aid forms

The bureaucratic hurdles to accessing financial aid can lower rates of college enrollment. Eric Bettinger, Bridget Terry Long, Philip Oreopoulos, and Lisa Sanbonmatsu (2012) used an RCT to evaluate two ways to help low- to moderate-income families complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). In the first, tax professionals helped families complete the form, estimated the aid they might receive, and provided information about local colleges. The second group received personalized information about their aid eligibility, but no help completing their FAFSA.

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²¹ For a review of six studies of First Step, see the Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse.

The first group, which received the treatment, was “substantially more likely to submit the aid application, enroll in college the following fall, and receive more financial aid.” Those who only received aid eligibility information, however, were no more likely to submit a FAFSA. As discussed in the last Chapter on Guilford County, a “challenge” style program seemed to increase FAFSA completion rates in 22 communities; but there has been no independent evaluation.

College counseling

The uAspire program is a 2-3 hour summer college counseling program for “college-intending” high schoolers. Using a series of RCTs, Benjamin Castleman, Lindsay Page, and Korynn Schooley (2014) find that the program boosted college enrollment by 3 percentage points, and by 8 to 12 percentage points for low-income students. The program “has lasting impacts on persistence several semesters into college,” they report. The cost is modest: between \$100 and \$200 per student.

Similarly, a 2014 College Board research brief summarized several RCTs that find positive effects for college counseling programs on FAFSA completion, enrollment, and students’ propensity to choose more selective colleges (Avery, Howell, & Page, 2014).

Eric Bettinger and Rachel Baker (2014) analyzed a randomized trial of InsideTrack, a program that helped predominantly “non-traditional” college students with time-management and study skills. At both six and twelve months, they found that “coached” students were roughly 5 percentage points more likely to still be enrolled than the control group. Even after two years, the effect was still a statistically significant 3.4 percentage point “treatment effect from the coaching.”

There is some suggestive evidence, then, that individual programs have in some cases been shown to improve outcomes. But often families have trouble navigating the dizzying web of services provided by nonprofits, community groups, and government. Students and families may be unaware of all the resources at their disposal, and miss tools they could use. So-called “wraparound” services are intended to improve both access and coordination.

There is no single definition of this approach; different professions tend to have slightly varying definitions. The overview of wraparound service models by the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center usefully defines “wraparound services” as “student and family supports integrated with and often delivered directly within schools [which] help schools address social and non-academic barriers to student learning” (Jones, 2014).

What supports? The range is broad, and varied. But it may cover, for example:

- Health, dental, and vision care
- Mental health services

- Behavioral health, nutrition, and wellness
- Adult education, such as classes on child development, GED, or ESOL
- Legal services
- Social work and family crisis response

A challenge is to position services in a way that integrates services with schools while also allowing a broad range of providers to work with each other. As Colin Jones of the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center writes:

Well-designed wraparound programs provide some services directly within schools while providing others through careful coordination with external agencies. This is an important balance to strike. Providing comprehensive services inside schools may be logistically challenging or duplicative of existing programs. However, merely referring students and families to outside providers may not meet immediate or ongoing needs as effectively as offering services in the schools that see kids and families on a daily basis (Jones, 2014).

Say Yes to Education strives for a wraparound approach, especially in mature sites like Buffalo, where there is significant investment in social workers in schools, and legal clinics, for example.

It may therefore be important to assess not only the potential impact of specific interventions, but of this manner of provision. Unfortunately, it is hard to point to robust research evidence here, for at least three reasons. First, it is hard to establish causal pathways, since creating a control group is challenging. Second, there are often very high rates of attrition, as participants drop out or move away. Third, those studies that have been undertaken tend to focus on interventions for children with serious behavioral challenges or those involved in the juvenile justice system. These studies tend therefore to focus on the potential impact of wraparound social worker interventions, many of which are housed in foster care or court systems rather than schools.

Communities in Schools (CIS) is one well-known model with wraparound service elements. CIS started in the 1970s, and is currently used in schools across roughly half of the U.S. Unlike many of the programs detailed above, however, CIS works with a broad swath of children, not just those in extremely challenging situations like foster care. The model involves “level one” services for entire schools, as well as “level two” services for particular students in need of more intensive care through case management. In Jacksonville, for example, “case managers are conducting home visits, having individual discussions with students, holding group sessions with students, and addressing individual problems with students throughout the year.”

CIS focuses on what it calls the “five basics” (Communities in Schools, 2013). These range from food, shelter, and clothing, to healthcare, “a marketable skill to use upon graduation,” one-on-one mentoring, and “a chance to give back to peers and community.” A series of RCTs conducted by ICF (2010), a consulting firm, find that the program’s “level two” case management approach improved academic achievement, attendance, and retention, although the size and significance of the effects varied across sites. Quasi-experimental evidence also suggests that the “level one” school supports, when well implemented, might have had a positive impact on academic achievement and graduation.²² MDRC also conducted an evaluation of the model, finding mixed results (Communities in Schools, 2018). There was quasi-experimental evidence of a positive effect of the school-wide programming on high school graduation. There was no evidence of effectiveness of CIS case management on traditional school outcomes, although the study finds some positive effects on student attitudes and relationships.

In short, there is some evidence, albeit extremely limited, that well-designed and implemented wraparound programs can help children learn and develop.

8.4 Governance

Often labeled “collective impact,” certain initiatives aim to align policy, programming, and funding at the community level. In this chapter we briefly outline the history and theory behind system-wide reform initiatives; describe some examples from practice; and examine key challenges and criticisms.

The idea of fostering collaboration among local groups and creating a common set of metrics and data infrastructure is hardly new. Academics and implementers have been interested in collaboration for decades, in contexts ranging from community organizing and collaboration between nonprofits to government social service provision and education, as Jeffrey Henig, Carolyn Riehl, Michael Rebell, and Jessica Wolff (2015) of Columbia Teachers College show in a comprehensive literature review, *Putting collective impact in context*.

In 2011, John Kania and Mark Kramer, consultants from the firm FSG, surveyed the history and research of place-based collaborative efforts and coined a term that quickly came to dominate the field: “collective impact” (CI). In their influential Stanford Social Innovation Review article, they listed “five conditions” for successful collective impact—which their website defines as a “powerful new approach to cross-sector collaboration that is achieving measurable effects on major social issues.”

Collective impact can be loosely defined as organizations working better together to create change at the community level. The “five conditions,” is a distillation of lessons from

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²² The researchers used propensity score matching to compare CIS-school children to non-CIS-school children.

past attempts by government, nonprofits, and other community organizations to collaborate:

FSG's Model of Collective Impact

Five Key Elements

Common agenda: All members of the coalition need a shared understanding of the problem and an agreed-upon approach to solving it.

Shared measurement systems: For alignment and accountability purposes, all actors need to agree on common measures of success.

Mutually reinforcing activities: Participant activities need to be coordinated to avoid overlap and gaps.

Continuous communication: In order to build trust, establish common objectives, and build and maintain motivation, participants need to be in consistent contact with one another.

Backbone support organization: A separate organization is required to provide the administrative, logistical, and coordinating support necessary to create and sustain a successful partnership.

Three Preconditions

An influential champion who is capable of bringing together executive-level leaders across sectors.

Funder(s) willing to provide adequate financial resources for a minimum of two or three years.

Perception of crisis: Widespread sense that the problem has reached a point at which an entirely new approach is necessary.

Three Phases

Initiate action: The project should focus on identifying the key players and existing work in the policy area, collect baseline data from which they can later measure progress, and form the initial governance structure.

Organize for impact: The project should create the backbone organization, establish common goals and shared measures, and align the participating organizations around those goals and measures.

Sustain action and impact: This phase includes the systematic collection of data, the prioritization of specific action areas, and continual course correction.

Source: Henig, 2015.

Inevitably, any framework that aims to simplify a large, diverse, long-standing research field will lose a great deal of nuance along the way. But the collective impact approach has two virtues for our purposes here. First, it distills some of the main themes of the literature. Second, it closely mirrors the Say Yes approach.

FSG points to a number of case studies in collective impact, including:

- The E3 Alliance, a central Texas initiative started in 2006 to boost academic achievement (FSG, 2013a);
- The Road Map Project, a collaboration started in 2010 aiming to boost college degree attainment in South Seattle (FSG, 2013b);
- Shape Up Somerville, a community health initiative in Massachusetts (FSG, 2013c);
- Opportunity Chicago, focused on helping public housing residents find jobs (FSG, 2013d); and
- Strive Together, a Cincinnati cradle-to-career initiative (Every child, 2018).

Details on each of these, along with a more comprehensive review of the strengths and challenges of CI-style initiatives, can be found in Appendix 3. But as one of the best (if skeptical views) for the Teachers College notes, many collaborative efforts lacked one or more of the following:

- Evidence on the long-term sustainability of the initiatives;
- Research on how, specifically, collaboration can break down in CI initiatives;

- Clear guidance on how CI initiatives should engage or refrain from changing public policy;
- Consideration of how “national offices” relate to local staff and community partners;
- Clear guidance about how, exactly, funding should be reallocated;
- Plans for sharing data effectively with the community;
- Data tied to specific points in the theory of action plan; and
- Guidance on how to use data to hold individual partners accountable for specific goals.

In short, the review criticizes CI proponents’ lack of specific advice on how to solve the challenges that implementers will face. Often, implementers are only given “frameworks” or “guidelines.”

In addition, local stakeholders are also often competing for scarce resources, and may have different goals, cultures, and approaches, all of which are challenged by the demands of collaboration. There are, then, some real disincentives for actors to commit resources to collaboration. Many of the challenges faced by Say Yes echo this challenge. This is especially the case when the costs of collaboration are immediate, but the benefits will only come in the future. As the Community College Research Center writes:

The immediate and tangible disincentives for focusing on collective impact work, such as the competing need to secure funding and maintain the organizational mission, often outweighed the loftier but less concrete incentives for collective impact... In the absence of more concrete incentives, collective impact efforts run the risk of being subsumed by the everyday responsibilities of organizational stakeholders (Karp & Lundy-Wagner, 2016).

Shifting towards a new model can also represent an implicit critique of the key organizations (like a school system); after all, there would be no need for change otherwise. Remember that one of the preconditions for a successful CI program, according to Kania and Kramer, is a “perception of crisis.”

8.5 Data

Data can be dangerous. As Campbell’s Law reminds us, any metrics can be gamed or used to distort decision-making: “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.”

Most collaborations at least pay lip service to the importance of good data and metrics, especially those following the CI mold. Here we'll look at research on how to build, maintain, and use an infrastructure for data. The challenge, as Sacha Litman (2015) writes, is creating data sets “that are granular enough to facilitate program decisions, broad enough to address complex issues, and comprehensive enough to enable an accurate estimate of social impact.”

Litman highlighted the data requirements of a West Dallas “cradle to career” anti-poverty initiative. Getting parents to approve this kind of data collection is not easy. They need to be shown how sharing data could benefit their child. Partner organizations also need to see how data collection could help them further their own missions. Litman suggests beta testing: building the data system iteratively, starting with a small pilot and growing outwards from there. Through her experience in Dallas, she finds that organizations didn't need to have a single data system, as the CI framework might lead one to believe. She suggests that things work better if everyone still maintains their own data systems, while also contributing to a common system. In Dallas, this required local universities to help build nonprofits' data capacity.

Brookings researchers Stuart Butler and Jonathan Grabinsky (2015) wrote a case study about the Briya/Mary's Center partnership in Washington, DC. Briya is a charter school, and Mary's Center is a community health clinic. They call their partnership and colocation the “hub” approach—similar to Communities in Schools or the Harlem Children's Zone. They note several challenges to data collection for the Briya/Mary's Center:

- Getting financial support for data collection and evaluation. Donors would rather fund services than analysis.
- Inter-connected or wraparound approaches are hard to evaluate. For this reason, they stress the importance of mixed methods approaches, like the national five-year evaluation of the Communities in Schools model.
- Individual level data can be hard to acquire because of HIPAA and FERPA guidelines. It is hard to follow individuals who have left school or graduated. However, “data intermediaries” like the DC Health Matters initiative and Neighborhood Info DC are helping organizations share data within existing constraints imposed by HIPAA and FERPA. And the promise of “hub” approaches is that the hub can consolidate data about many aspects of children's lives under their roof.

Dennis Culhane and John Fantuzzo, principal investigators at Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy, describe the necessary ingredients for “integrated data systems.” They stress the importance of institutionalizing data collection in local government, which (ideally) has the funding and stability to ensure the system endures. The most successful

initiatives, they say, “are always focused on the sustainability of their [integrated data system] across changes in political leadership and fluctuations in the economy.”

But finding local funding to sustain data management is hard, and requires explaining why data collection matters:

[T]hese sites are constantly looking to develop sustainable funding sources and to make sure that they develop diverse means of communicating to their leadership and the public that their services substantially contribute to improving services and cutting costs. Government-based sites are usually better and more securely funded, whereas universities often have to seek grants to stay operational. However, university-based sites are less influenced by the ebb and flow of the internal political agendas of executive administrations (Butler & Grabinsky, 2016).

Culhane and Fantuzzo therefore also stress the importance of a “forum to address the needs and ethical issues of all participating agencies.” But one of the advantages of integrated data systems is that partners only have to negotiate a few data-sharing agreements, rather than renegotiating new contracts every time a new need arises.

The Actionable Intelligence team points to several examples of integrated data systems in Los Angeles, Miami, New York, and South Carolina. In each city, integrated data systems helped governments gain a deeper understanding of the social problems they face (Examples of IDS, 2018); in particular, data helped government agencies identify small shares of their service population that accounted for a disproportionate share of their costs.²³

Good data then is vital for effective, goal-focused collaboration; along with a strong backbone organization; representative governance; transparency and communication; a clear recognition of costs to stakeholders; and, perhaps above all, a clear overarching objective.

So: where does this leave us? It seems clear that place-based collaborative efforts, along CI lines, will continue to play an important role in attempts to improve communities, including through education. Given the long history of these sorts of initiatives, collective impact and other related models have the feel of old wine in new bottles. If the new bottles are easier to sell, that’s something (assuming of course that they work). But there is also a danger that the labels of CI or collaboration are applied to initiatives that are nothing of the kind: as little more than window-dressing. It is essential to look beyond the packaging to see what is actually happening on the ground.

...

²³ In Los Angeles, for example, “The Chief Executive Office’s Research and Evaluation Services unit analyses show that 5 percent of single adults experiencing homelessness in the County – roughly 1 out of every 20 – consume 40 cents of every dollar spent on the full population.”

But there are also some new, substantive developments in the field. Four in particular stand out.

First, the focus on the need for a clear backbone organization, notwithstanding the criticisms, is a welcome recognition that the “shared good” of the administration and coordination needed for successful collaboration will likely be underprovided by network members simply left to their own devices.

Second, there are signs that collaborative efforts are improving representation of public agencies. As Henig, Houston and Lyon (2016) point out, a potentially promising aspect of newer collaborations is that “municipal and school district officials are more strongly represented on their governing boards...Such developments may help set the stage for more effective and sustainable reform.”

Third, there are also signs that many city-level efforts are more strongly linked together through national networks like StriveTogether and Alignment USA, as well as Say Yes.

Fourth, there is a growing commitment to the importance of data, and a growing awareness of the potential of technology to improve the collection, sharing and use of data.

9. Key Lessons from the Say Yes Experience

Throughout this report, we have attempted to illuminate aspects of the Say Yes experience that may offer some lessons for the future. In this final chapter, we draw together some of these lessons learned. In the first section, we highlight some key lessons specific to Say Yes, which we hope will be helpful in the existing three sites as well as in potential future sites, especially Cleveland, where Say Yes is currently in the preparatory stage of operations. We should stress too that Say Yes is already applying many of these lessons.

While these are tied quite closely to our analysis of Say Yes, we hope that some of the lessons described will be useful to others too. But in the second section, we widen our lens and attempt to extract lessons for all those engaged in similar or related reform efforts. Here we draw on the case studies of Say Yes, but also on the broader research literature.

9.1 Seven lessons for Say Yes

We offer seven lessons specifically to Say Yes:

1. Prepare the ground
2. Leverage community assets
3. Invest in models, metrics, and data
4. Build in equity

5. Localize leadership early
6. Let others take credit
7. Transfer lessons learned

1. Prepare the ground

Social reformers are understandably and preternaturally disposed to want to get things done, quickly. That comes with the territory. Given the scale of the challenges faced in the Say Yes cities, a sense of urgency is warranted, especially when every year counts in a child's education. On the other hand, unless a new initiative has been sufficiently planned, communicated, resourced, and rooted in a community, it is at a high risk of failing, or at least falling short. The literature from the collective impact field demonstrates the need to build relationships of trust before putting those relationships under pressure.

This is a lesson that the Say Yes experience illuminates strongly. After “going in hot” in Syracuse, much more time was taken in Buffalo and more positive results were produced. In part, time is needed to evaluate the power relations, resources, and specific institutional architecture of each place.

No theory wholly survives contact with reality. This means that organizations coming into a community have to be acutely sensitive to the local political and institutional topography. In Buffalo, there was an 18-month period between announcements and rollout of the scholarships; in Guilford County, that time was cut by more than half.

As we noted in Chapter 7, a metaphor that was used by multiple observers and participants in Guilford County, including from the Say Yes team, was of “building the airplane as we/they flew it.”

Even leaving aside the specific challenges resulting from a change in school leadership, the Say Yes experience in Guilford County is a reminder that in reform, as in many other areas of life, slow and steady often wins the race.

These are lessons which, drawing on the experience in Syracuse and Guilford County, Say Yes is applying in Cleveland, which was announced as the next potential Say Yes city in May 2017. There is an 18-month preparatory phase, which will include fundraising, data-sharing, and other critical benchmarks.

To be clear: much of the pressure to move quickly comes from community stakeholders. There is already pressure in Cleveland to move more quickly. At one meeting we attended, an important stakeholder said:

My worry is that we're losing time and people's goodwill, and momentum, if we don't get people doing concrete things quickly. We have to capitalize on people's...urgency to act—to ‘strike while the iron is hot.

Herein lies the challenge: maintain energy and momentum, while allowing enough time to ensure the foundation is being laid. In the meantime, concerted efforts also appear to be being made in Cleveland to reach all the key stakeholders, as an initial step toward the creation of an effective governance structure.

2. Leveraging community assets

For any organization that enters a community, a big challenge is to learn the local institutional culture. Even the most disadvantaged communities have a wide range of social and economic assets. Conducting a thorough review of existing capacities and assets reduces the risk of duplicating efforts and/or creating resistance from existing groups. This is of course a difficult balance, since even if Say Yes is not trying to replace existing capacity, it is often seeking to improve it. Many existing organizations might be failing rather badly.

There was a particular flashpoint over the role of the Guilford Parent Academy (GPA), which was already providing many of the services Say Yes started to introduce, without any effective coordination. This generated some bad blood that otherwise could have been avoided. Again, this partly reflects the pace of events. “They were duplicating efforts, and reinventing the wheel,” said one source. “They didn’t reach out to GPA initially, until it became a bit of a conflict. It was a little tone deaf.”

But it also seems that other institutions, including philanthropic organizations, had wanted to keep GPA out of the mix, because they had historically been “a thorn in the side” of establishment institutions.

One education expert who has worked closely with Say Yes warned that the organization faces the challenge of “meeting a place where it is.” Another observer likened some of the teething difficulties to the Affordable Care Act (shortly after issues with the ACA’s website had been so much in the news).

3. Invest in models, metrics and data

As we have discussed, Say Yes falls short of its ambition to be a “data-driven” organization. The brighter spots here are provided by the Fiscal Analytics, which provided useful data and frameworks for local decision-makers. But the Pathway Analytics and Postsecondary Planning System remain largely at the planning phase. In part this reflects a paucity of quality data readily available many cities; and in part a reluctance to share what data does exist. When survey data is needed, there are inevitably difficulties in getting responses, especially from busy professionals or skeptical parents. Finally, any system coming close to the promise of the PPS will need a powerful data platform. Even when data is relatively easily available on specific outcome measures for Say Yes, it is not

consistently collected and/or reported: college completion rates in Syracuse are a particular case in point. Ensuring the capacity to at least make use of existing administrative data ought to be seen as a minimum requirement.

The gap between rhetoric and reality on the data front has become apparent to some stakeholders in the Say Yes cities, and in some cases has meant some reputational damage to the organization. At the same time, Say Yes has sometimes been careless in the presentation of data, which has also dented its reputation. This seemed to have been a particular concern in Syracuse. Using raw numbers instead of percentages, or not presenting the most recent year of data when showing trends, expose the organization to accusations of cherry-picking data-points. As Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey told the Syracuse media, Say Yes needs to be “above reproach” when it comes to the presentation of data. This is especially true given how strongly Say Yes identifies itself as an organization that values data, research, and evidence.

Say Yes leaders, as shown in Chapter 4, have learned the hard way that building data systems is perhaps the most challenging task of all. Investing in data and metrics means investing in the right staff. Up until 2017, there was a severe lack of internal capacity on data analysis and data platform-building. At a national level, Say Yes now has two senior, experienced data professionals.

The scholarship is the most visible and expensive component of the Say Yes approach. In total there is now close to \$100 million in the scholarship endowments in all three cities. Ensuring that this money is spent correctly and effectively is a high priority. We observed a contrast between some careful modeling in Buffalo, and some unsuccessful modeling based on crude assumptions and/or faulty data in Guilford County. Inevitably, there are tensions caused by a \$5 million overspend in a single year: failure is, as almost always, an orphan. To an external observer, it is not clear how the modeling went so badly wrong. What is clear is that an error of this magnitude by an organization that prides itself on analytic precision was highly damaging.

Again, Say Yes has learned an important lesson here and is treading with very great care in Cleveland. There will be a “trial run year” in which small payments will be made to students in exchange for sharing data, not least on household income. This should make for an accurate picture of likely scholarship financing; but we would also urge Say Yes to make full use of existing data from the Census Bureau and National Student Clearinghouse.

4. Build in equity

The Say Yes scholarship will tend to provide more financial assistance to more affluent students. This is not a bug, it is a feature: by definition, final-dollar scholarships do not funnel money to the poorest students, who qualify for the most financial aid. We heard

the phrase “a middle class scholarship” from many interviewees across all three sites. On the other hand, there are many students from families who are not sufficiently poor to qualify for very much financial aid, but a long way from having the resources to fund college easily. And Say Yes services, where they exist, tend to be explicitly aimed at the neediest students.

But one lesson is that building an explicit equity focus in from the outset can help to focus resources and attention. First, putting race equity front and center from the beginning helps to build support especially in cities with large black and/or Hispanic populations. One troubling finding from the research literature is that place-based scholarships can sometimes help white students more than students of color, and thereby actually widen race gaps. Acknowledging this challenge from the outset could be important.

The selection of which communities to invest by Say Yes has had an explicit equity focus. Syracuse and Buffalo, especially, are economically distressed cities with poor educational outcomes. New initiatives may be more readily received in places where there is a shared agreement on the depth of local problems, especially if the equity focus is explicitly built in from the outset. In Buffalo, leaders of almost every stakeholder institution we interviewed described the city and/or school as being “in crisis” in the years up to the involvement of Say Yes. One philanthropic leader told us that there was “a general recognition that the problem was so severe.” In Guilford County, by contrast, many pointed to the relative strength of at least parts of the school system.

Note that in this regard, Cleveland seems to track more closely to Buffalo and Syracuse. In 2017, the Cleveland school district received an “F” grade from the state on all but one measure (a “C” for helping struggling young readers). And in Cleveland, Say Yes is working with the Race Equity Project to try to build in this focus on race gaps from the outset. The school CEO, Eric Gordon, is a strong supporter of the Say Yes approach, and has highlighted the importance of closing race gaps.

The equity focus may also influence the design and marketing of the scholarship, too. A number of stakeholders told us that if the Guilford County scholarship had been designed from the outset to give the most help to the poorest students, there would have been huge political support. Easy in hindsight, of course. On the other hand, this would have required Say Yes to treat the universality of the scholarship as an optional extra rather than a central design feature.

5. Localize leadership early

Say Yes ran into problems when it was perceived locally as being driven from the national office. In the initial phases, many stakeholders welcomed the energy, expertise and of course money from outside the community. But by a certain point it seems to be important for Say Yes to become locally owned and led. Having an executive director with local

roots goes a long way to help overcome this “not made here” problem. David Rust is Buffalo born and bred, and proud to be so. He talks constantly about Buffalo being “my city.” Even a highly talented and qualified person will have a hard time winning over the hearts and minds of key figures and the community when he or she is known as an “outsider.” The U.S. remains, in this sense, a very local nation.

A Say Yes leader from Guilford County agrees:

I think that the person who sits in this position [of executive director] needs to be someone who truly understands that local context. who has a vision that includes both the Say Yes national... formula, but also understands how to apply that formula locally and work through the different nuances of the ways things work in each respective community.

The executive director must understand local context, have local connections—but also balance that with Say Yes national as a “bridge,” in another staffer’s terms. The right leader can help to assuage concerns about a distant, national organization exerting too much local control.

The initiative also takes root more effectively when other leaders from the community, including from business, philanthropy, government, and the school system, come to feel that Say Yes is “their” initiative, rather than, as one put it, being “something that is done to [them].”

A weak local director inhibits the development of all the other elements of success: collaborative governance, data-sharing, and commitment. This was an issue in Guilford, where the director was let go in 2017, to be replaced at least in the interim by a respected member of the Say Yes national team, and then by another interim director. We are not suggesting that it is easy to find the right person. (We lost count of the number of people who said “If only we could clone Dave Rust”). Say Yes has struggled to attract candidates in Guilford County. We are simply suggesting that without the right person leading the effort on the ground, the odds of success are massively reduced.

6. Let others take credit

Organizations like Say Yes should take heed of the saying attributed to Harry Truman: “It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.” As discussed in this report, this is easy to say but hard to do, especially for an organization that relies heavily on its ability to fundraise. Donors want to support organizations that are making a difference. Say Yes, then, must strike a balance between humility and braggadocio. While making exaggerated claims or stealing credit not fully earned can boost PR, it can also damage community relationships in the long run.

One seasoned observer of Say Yes in both Syracuse and Buffalo said that the organization “takes credit for improvements that have nothing to do with them.” Even admirers of Say Yes like Gene Maeroff reported a similar tendency (in that case in Syracuse). The temptation to over-claim success may be especially great for an organization with a model like Say Yes, with the energy and focus moving on from one city to the next. Equally, the Say Yes brand around data and evidence makes it even more important to be restrained about claims of impact.

7. Transfer lessons learned

Say Yes prides itself on being a learning organization, admitting mistakes and learning from them. We have seen some evidence of this during our study: witness the different approach being taken in Cleveland. On the other hand, some lessons did not seem to be transferred from one site to the next: on the need for adequate preparation time from Syracuse to Guilford County, for example.

One potential strength of the Say Yes model is the chance to share learning and experience across sites, and again we saw some evidence of this: Syracuse school officials heading to Buffalo to learn more about data sharing, for example. But there also appear to have been missed opportunities as well. Why was the scholarship modeling expertise acquired in Buffalo not applied in Guilford County, for example? There are missed opportunities for learning from and sharing research, too. Syracuse is the longest-standing Say Yes site; but Robert Bifulco of Syracuse University is being funded to evaluate the impact of Say Yes in Buffalo. The Syracuse numbers need to be crunched.

Say Yes could consider formal processes through which lessons learned in one site could be captured and codified, for potential application elsewhere. A combination of stakeholder interviews, workshops, and focus groups could be help. Mistakes made could be owned and analyzed. The outputs from these exercises - call them Learning Analytics - could be written up and shared with other sites, and other reformers. Say Yes leaders stress that theirs is a learning organization, one that learns from its mistakes.

Say Yes leaders are quite open about the fact that they are constantly “learning as we go.” But much of that learning remains tacit, held in the heads and memories of those who have been on the journey. Making that knowledge explicit and transparent would help with the transfer of learning, from one site to the next and from the Say Yes sites to other cities. Extracting some deep learning from the vastly diverse experiences will also be important for the development of the newly-founded Weiss Institute (a joint effort from Say Yes and America’s Promise Alliance). The Institute is an “applied research and technical assistance center” with a primary goal to “bring together the best thinking, latest research and community-tested strategies for the benefit of communities seeking to help more students get on a path to adult success.”

9.2 Four lessons for reformers

As we said earlier, while these seven lessons for Say Yes have a specific audience in mind, we hope they will have some value to others too. But there are also some more general lessons, gleaned not just from our study of Say Yes but also of the related research and evaluation literature. The list will not surprise many readers. There are no stunning revelations here. The challenge is moving from rhetoric to reality. Anyone involved in reform effort knows that perhaps the hardest task is deciding each day which of the list of 1,000 potential activities should be focused on. It is in that spirit that we offer here four lessons for reformers. This is not intended as an exhaustive list. A reform effort will require very much more than these four, not least resources of one kind or another. But for a community-wide effort focused on a long-term goal, these four are essential. We don't claim then that they are sufficient: but we do believe they are necessary.

1. Collaboration needs strong local **leadership**
2. Collective governance needs a powerful **cabinet** of decision makers
3. Securing credible **commitments** is important for sustainability
4. **Data** is the single most important ingredient of reform

1. Collaboration depends on strong local leadership

The idea that collaboration requires strong leadership may sound like a contradiction. But in fact, effective leadership seems to be vital to the creation of genuine collaboration between stakeholders. The leader of a collaborative effort must ease local players through the challenging process of realigning their resources, which can involve shifting money, staff, and workplace expectations. They must also navigate the inherent tension between democratic values and institutions, and technocratic stakeholders and approaches.

As a Say Yes leader said to us:

The field needs to understand that the idea of collaboration or collective impact is not this 'kumbaya' thing. There are technical, structural changes that have to take place in a community to ...consistently provide the practical supports that help kids hit those milestones. It requires that political leaders actually give up some of their positional power, and that needs to be understood and get bought into.

Collective impact, collective governance, comprehensive community, community-led: these are phrases that pepper the rhetoric of the reform community. But close examination of any successful community-wide effort usually reveals that at the center stands a

strong, trusted, local leader. You might think of Geoffrey Canada in the Harlem Children's Zone, the exceptional teachers at Perry Preschool, or countless other examples.

Just as individual teachers are hugely important for student learning, individual leaders turn out to be hugely important for the success or failure of their initiatives. This point may seem obvious, even banal. But it is too often forgotten by analysts of reform. And this personal factor poses challenges for replicability, of course. Short of cloning the outstanding leaders, the next best thing is to spend a great deal of time, energy, and money finding the right people or person.

A leader is not to be confused with a coordinator or convener. The leader has to be someone who, to quote one of interviewees in Buffalo, "proactively and tirelessly reaches out to members of the community [and is] really leading, not just pushing the work forward, but also rallying our forces effectively." The local leader of the effort (in the Say Yes case, the executive director) has to successfully bring the key stakeholders together; but that is just the first step. The local leader's role is also deeply political, and requires deft navigation of local sensibilities. This is because he or she must ease local players through the difficult process of realigning their resources, which can involve shifting money, staff, and workplace expectations.

Trust is critical. Leading a collaborative effort requires the leader to be seen by all as genuinely independent, rather than acting more on behalf of one of the stakeholders around the table. Trust comes from transparency and communication. Over and over again we heard that things go awry when key stakeholders are caught unawares. The monthly private meeting between David Rust, ED Buffalo and Kriner Cash, the school superintendent, is a case in point. Everybody knows about it; Rust takes input from Operating Committee members before, and reports back afterwards. If such meetings happen without communication, trust and confidence can quickly be lost. One Say Yes staffer in Guilford County described the key to success as "relationships, relationships, relationships, communication, communication, communication. You have to build a rapport. You can't ask someone to buy into something without their trust." That trust proved difficult to secure in Guilford County, as discussed in Chapter 7.

While the leader should be independent, it is also important—almost necessary, it seems—for them to have deep local roots, too. No matter how well-meaning, an outsider is always an outsider; especially is they are also a temporary resident. Community stakeholders, reasonably enough, want a long-term, community-wide effort to be led by someone who is sticking around.

The style of leadership required is what more than one interviewee described as "humble" or "humble servant." Collaborative efforts only succeed with the commitment and buy-in of powerful local stakeholders and organizations. Stakeholders and organizations have

reputations, egos, and needs. This is where “ego massaging,” as one stakeholder put it, comes into play.

As Frederick Hess of AEI puts it, “Formal policy is often no match for the countervailing pressures of localized incentives, institutional cultures, situational imperatives, and internalized obstacles.” There is little point engaging in collaborative efforts under the assumption that human frailties or institutional incentives will simply dissolve with the application of the right rhetoric. Rather than hoarding credit, local leaders need to continuously and intentionally allow others to take it, especially in public.

2. *Collective governance needs a powerful “cabinet” of decision makers*

Say Yes Buffalo explicitly says: “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.”

Note: not just one component, but the *breakthrough* component. Initially, we considered this statement to be hyperbole. But we have come to see the *governance structures* and *governance culture* of Say Yes Buffalo as one of the most important factors behind whatever success it has enjoyed.

Many initiatives fall victim to the “not made here” problem. Buy-in and ownership at the community level are crucial. This is a leadership, culture, and communication challenge. But it is also a governance question. *How, where, and by whom*, decisions are made matters, especially in terms of resource allocation. “Donut meetings” between stakeholders are easy to arrange, but have little impact (people eat donuts, swap pleasantries and banalities, and then leave).

The importance of the Operating Committee or a similar body emerged strongly from our review of the collective impact literature, and is confirmed by our detailed study of Say Yes. In the end, this is about power. Who is wielding it? Over whom? Who is power shared with? How openly is power used? If these questions do not have clear answers, the whole enterprise is in peril.

While there may be a series of different taskforces, networks, and committees, there needs to be one “cabinet,” a group where the big decisions are made.²⁴ The Say Yes Operating Committee in Buffalo was described variously as a “table of trust”, a place where “a comprehensive assembly of leaders” came together and “became a team.” It provides a space where “you stop pointing fingers [and start to ask] how do we work

...
²⁴ In our use of the word cabinet we are of course thinking of something more like the British cabinet than the U.S. one.

together?” The Committee was described as “hardwired now.” As a school leader in Buffalo said, “In human organizations, whether business or educational, you still have to formalize the relationships you’ve formed early on.”

Again, actions speak louder than words. Economists call it “revealed preference”; others call it “voting with your feet.” In Guilford County, it proved difficult to secure the regular attendance of key stakeholders and leader at committee meetings. In Syracuse, meetings are now irregular (in part because the only real topic for discussion is the scholarship), and some members told us that while the meetings were “active discussions”, they felt that attendance was optional. At the end of 2017, one member told us: “Last year, I went every other month. This year I’ve actually not attended a meeting yet. They’ve either been canceled or I couldn’t get there.”

There is either a vicious or virtuous circle at work here. The cabinet (OC or equivalent) can only exercise power if the people with power are at the table; equally if it does not feel as if the meetings are where the real decisions are made (as reported in Guilford County), they may not turn up. Or will turn up just for the donuts.

3. *Securing credible commitments is important for sustainability*

Education initiatives tend to have a built-in half-life, especially those that are based on resources or expertise from outside a particular community. Some of the earlier lessons, especially with regard to ownership and commitment, relate to this challenge of longevity. This is partly why, for example, big city superintendents, who often hop from one school district to another in quick succession, sometimes bring lots of flash and less substance.

In his book *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform* (1998), Hess traced some of the transitory and shallow nature of urban school reform to leadership turnover, particularly to big-city superintendents who—because they know that micromanaging school boards will provide them little prospect of serving long tenures—have an incentive to start new and flashy initiatives to build their reputations as innovators and increase their career prospects while avoiding the harder and longer-term work of improving core instruction.

The rate of turnover in school district leadership, both on the administrative side and on school boards, makes it both harder and more important to build collaborative efforts that will stick, rather than fade away like so many “school reform” efforts. One of the most striking aspects of the Say Yes approach is the explicit effort to secure commitments that will provide for sustainability.

Part of the secret is ensuring that each local player makes an effective, *credible commitment* to remain engaged. A credible commitment is one that it will be painful to break. Agreements without exit costs are just aspirations. Economists Steffen Brunner, Christian Flachsland, and Robert Marschinski define credible commitments as follows:

A commitment is motivationally credible if the observable gain from deviation from it is below the observable gain from compliance. While motivational commitment devices do not rule out deviation per se, they introduce additional costs for potential defectors, making deviation less profitable and hence less likely.²⁵

In short, there need to be exit costs. The benefits of remaining engaged in the collaboration need to outweigh the costs of dropping out. Various commitment devices can be deployed, in one of three broad categories: contractual (or quasi-contractual), reputational and financial. Say Yes provides examples of each.

Contractual

Say Yes makes use of contractual commitment devices, in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs)—most importantly with the school board. These MoUs set out the terms on which Say Yes can work with and within schools, data sharing, eligibility for the scholarship, and so on.

These MoUs can act as commitment devices. Even if there is a change in leadership at a critical agency, such as the school district, Say Yes can point to the commitments contained in the MoU. It is also clear, however, that short of litigation it is all but impossible to enforce a MoU in the absence of a trusting relationship (witness the attempt to “renew vows”, or re-sign MoUs, in Guilford County).

Reputational

A second form of commitment device is for stakeholders to publicly commit themselves to an enterprise, investment, or set of actions. An organization or leader makes a public promise to do something, and a failure to do so will be noticed and will likely damage the reputation of that institution or individual. Here for Say Yes the scholarship offer plays an important role. It is a carrot bringing stakeholders to the table, but also a stick keeping them there due to the publicity. Once the initiative starts, as one major player says, “we can’t be the ones to walk away and damage this thing,” while another said they felt like their organization was “being forced to do things [we don’t] want to do because Say Yes knows [we] can’t back out now.” This individual went on to say that they would remain on board, partly because if anyone jumped ship, there would be “lots of explaining to do.”

Local players acknowledged this carrot-and-stick arrangement, and though they are not always comfortable with it, they say it is relatively effective at keeping people together. Unless cooperation is forthcoming, the resources made available by Say Yes may not

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²⁵ Credible commitment in carbon policy (2011) Steffen Brunner, Christian Flachsland, Robert Marschinski, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research Telegraphenberg, Potsdam 14412, Germany.

continue to be available. This “stick” is then an important part of ensuring ongoing collaboration. In addition, when a strong “cabinet” is operating, peer pressure then helps to keep collaboration alive, with committed parties holding each other accountable.

Financial

The most obvious way in which an individual or organization has “skin in the game” is by investing money. If a community foundation, or government agency, or individual has spent money on a particular initiative, they clearly have a strong incentive to help that initiative to succeed. Otherwise they will have to explain to their board or voters why they wasted their money. One problem with this incentive is that it can lead to the production of overly optimistic assessments of progress, since there are many powerful players who want to hear good news. This can lead to policy-based evidence-making, rather than evidence-based policy-making. On the other hand, the commitment of money may lead to other kinds of commitment too—of time, energy, public support, for example—that improve the overall chances of an initiative’s success. The almost \$100 million raised for scholarship endowments across the three Say Yes sites amounts to a sizable commitment of public, philanthropic, and corporate money. There are then many stakeholders with a strong commitment to seeing that money help to achieve the goals for which it was spent, namely improving postsecondary outcomes.

4. Data is the single most important ingredient of reform

Without accurate data, reformers are like lost travelers. We need data to understand the nature of the problem we are trying to address. We need data to see if it being addressed. We need data to evaluate what works, and what doesn’t. The Say Yes emphasis on being a “data-driven” organization is welcome. But as Say Yes has learned, it is much easier to talk about data than it is to collect, share, analyze, and produce it. A common problem facing place-based initiatives is a lack of data availability, at least of sufficient quality and for the specific geographical area.

The Fiscal Analytics work undertaken by Say Yes and Schoolhouse Partners in the preparatory stage was frequently mentioned a strong “value add” to the community in question, especially in Buffalo. Local players appreciated the analytical capacity being brought to bear. As one stakeholder put it: “Are we all funding the same thing? [The data could tell us] where things are being funded that don’t need to be, and where are things aren’t being funded that need to be.”

What this demonstrates is that in many cities and communities, the capacity of local institutions, public or private, to collect and appropriately analyze data is often extremely limited. External organizations can support local efforts by bringing research capacity to bear. It is striking how often even relatively easily accessible data is very often not put to use in specific communities; for example from the Census Bureau, National Student

Clearinghouse, National College Access Project, Equality of Opportunity Project, and so on.

Good data can provide an important foundation even before an initiative gets underway. It can then be used to create clear success metrics, along the lines of the Pathway Analytics proposed by Say Yes. More ambitiously, the potential of a data platform that can bring together data on individual students from different sources, along the lines of the Postsecondary Planning System, is clearly very great. Last but not least, data can be used to assess the impact of an intervention, both in the short term and over the long run.

However, making effective use of data is a labor-intensive, long-term undertaking. It cannot be undertaken as a side project, or an afterthought. It requires hiring experience data analysts, as well experts in the creation of technologically sound data platforms. It means starting almost immediately on the onerous task of getting access to administrative datasets, so that they can be cleaned and analyzed with sufficient rigor.

Of course, data does not in itself bring about change. But it does allow stakeholders to see what changes are taking place on key measures. More robust data collection allows the players to see where their approach needs to be tweaked: where gaps should be plugged, programs reworked, or new resources tapped. At the school level, individual student data should allow teachers, site facilitators, and social workers to catch kids before they slip through academic cracks. The Say Yes experience on data is hardly unusual. It is very rare for the promise of a “data-driven” approach to be realized.

9.3 Conclusion

There are few tasks that are as important, and as challenging, as narrowing gaps in educational outcomes. In many cases, both K-12 and postsecondary educational provision not only reflect underlying social and economic inequalities, but amplify them. In the K-12 system, inequities in funding, economic segregation of schools and districts, and the location of the highest-quality teachers combine to create structural barriers to educational equity. The postsecondary sector magnifies the inequalities generated by the end of high school. Similar issues of unequal funding between selective four-year colleges and non-selective four-year or community colleges apply here as well. Admissions policies can exacerbate the class divide.

All of this is to say that any attempts to improve educational outcomes for poorer students, or to narrow class gaps in outcomes, are working against the grain. Unless accompanied by deeper reform of the education system as a whole, and of the inequality underlying it, even the most ambitious, innovative, and sustained efforts will have, at best, modest results. It is, in short, very hard to move this needle. We should be modest in our expectations of dramatic alterations.

As one interviewee, in support of Say Yes, told us: “Even after decades of education reforms...the conversation hasn’t changed. Foundations are still putting in dollars, and teachers are still teaching. But we’re not changing the support systems in schools. Our fundamental model, our approach to education, hasn’t changed.”

It will not be possible to make serious progress in improving social mobility without meeting the challenge of improving educational outcomes for students from our poorest cities. Say Yes is one of many organizations trying to move the needle on education, and has learned some hard lessons along the way. Our hope is that by sharing some of those lessons here, this report can play some part in this endeavor.

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Appendix 1: List of Interviewees

Vanessa Coleman, American Institutes for Research

Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey, Chief Executive Officer of Say Yes to Education

Mark Strickland, Schoolhouse Partners

Buffalo

Esther Annan, Say Yes Buffalo

Betsy Behrend, Say Yes Buffalo

Anne Botechelli, Chief Academic Officer, Buffalo Public Schools

Kriner Cash, Superintendent of Buffalo Public Schools

Katherine Conway-Turner, President of Buffalo State College

Clotilde Dedecker, Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo

Al Dirschberger, Erie County Health Commissioner

Brian Emerson, Villa Maria College, vice president of enrollment and student services

Joshua Feinstein, Hodgson Russ LLP

Dottie Gallagher-Cohen, Buffalo Niagara Partnership

Sister Marcella Marie Garus, President of Villa Maria College

Matthew Giordano, Villa Maria College, vice president of academic services

Wil Green, community schools leader, Say Yes Buffalo

Bill Joyce, vice chair of scholarship board

Tim Kennedy, New York Senator

Will Kerestes, Buffalo Public Schools liaison to Say Yes

Carol Maurer, Say Yes Buffalo

David Mauricio, Buffalo Public Schools Chief of Strategic Alignment and Innovation

Blythe Merrill, John R. Oishei Foundation

Gayle Murphy, Volunteer Lawyers Project in Buffalo

Barbara Nevergold, President of Board of Education in Buffalo

Allison D. Newman, Scholarship Director of Say Yes Buffalo

Cyrstal Peoples-Stokes, New York State Assembly 141st District

Sam Radford, President of Parent Coordinating Council

Michael Rainey, Commissioner of Mental Health in Erie County

Daniel Robertson, Say Yes Buffalo

Rev. Rachelle Robinson, scholarship board member

Talia Rodriguez, community schools leader, Say Yes Buffalo

Daphne Ross, Say Yes Buffalo

Phil Rumore, Buffalo Teachers Association

David Rust, Say Yes Buffalo

Gellena Smallwood, parent center coordinator, Say Yes Buffalo

Steve Swift, CFO/COO of BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York

Maria Whyte, Deputy County Executive for Erie County

Emily Wyckoff, Say Yes Buffalo

Guilford

Felicia Andrews, Say Yes Guilford, community relations and outreach

Nora Carr, chief of staff for Guilford County Schools

Sharon Contreras, Superintendent of Guilford County Schools

Charles Cornelio, Chair of Board of Directors of Guilford Education Alliance and previous chair of Say Yes scholarship board

Kinsley Fraser, Say Yes Guilford, scholarship coordinator

Mo Green, former superintendent of Guilford County Schools

Angel Guerrero, Guilford parent who did outreach work for Say Yes

Alan Parker, former school principal involved on Say Yes Guilford planning committee

Keith Pemberton, Say Yes Guilford, student and faculty engagement coordinator

Mark Seagraves, principal of Southeast Guilford High School, and Ms. Colson, Southeast Guilford guidance counselor

Donnie Turlington, Say Yes Guilford, Interim Executive Director

Mary Vigue, former Executive Director of Say Yes Guilford

Tony Watlington, Guilford County Schools, Strategic Planning and Project Management Officer

Lindsay Whitley, Guilford Parent Academy

Syracuse

Jaime Alicea, Superintendent of Syracuse City School District

Pat Body, Vice President of Syracuse Board of Education

Pat Driscoll, previous operating director of Say Yes Syracuse

Peter Dunn, CEO of Central New York Community Foundation

Megan Root, President of Syracuse Teachers Association

Ahmeed Turner, Executive Director of Say Yes Syracuse

Appendix 2: List of Survey Questions

1. Which of the following best applies to you? **Select one.**
 - a. I teach high school students
 - b. I am a parent or guardian of a high school student
 - c. None of the above

2. In which of the following geographies do you reside? **Select one.**
 - a. Onondaga County (NY)
 - b. Erie County (NY)
 - c. Guilford County (NC)
 - d. None of the above **[SKIP TO END PAGE]**

3. **[IF TEACHER]** In which of the following do you currently work? **Select one.**
 - a. A public high school in the city limits of Syracuse, NY

- b. A public high school in in the city limits of Buffalo, NY
 - c. A public high school in Guilford County, NC
 - d. None of the above
4. **[IF PARENT OR GUARDIAN]** Do you have a child or children currently attending one of the following? **Select one.**
- a. A public high school in the city limits of Syracuse, NY
 - b. A public high school in the city limits of Buffalo, NY
 - c. A public high school in Guilford County, NC
 - d. None of the above
5. What are the largest barriers facing high school students when it comes to pursuing postsecondary education at a college or university? **Select all that apply; Randomize.**
- a. Uncertain of career path
 - b. Unsure of which school to attend
 - c. Financial concerns
 - d. Unknowledgeable of application processes
 - e. Lack of academic qualifications
 - f. Inability to manage time and meet deadlines
 - g. Unable to obtain advice/help
 - h. Other(s) **(please specify)**
6. How knowledgeable are high school students of all potential scholarships available to them to continue their postsecondary education at a college or university? **Select a rating.**
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|--|-------------------------|
| Not at all knowl-
edgeable | | | | | Very knowledg-
eable |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | 5 |
7. Are you aware of the Say Yes to Education program available to high school students pursuing postsecondary education at a college or university? **Select one.**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
8. **[IF AWARE]** How familiar are you with the program requirements to participate in/qualify for the Say Yes to Education scholarship in your school district? **Select one.**

- a. Very familiar
 - b. Somewhat familiar
 - c. Not at all familiar
9. Which of the following best categorizes your age group? **Select all that apply.**
- a. Under 25
 - b. 25 to 34
 - c. 35 to 44
 - d. 45 to 54
 - e. 55 to 64
 - f. 65 to 74
 - g. 75 or older
10. Which of the following genders do you most identify with? **Select all that apply.**
- a. Male
 - b. Female
11. Which of the following best describes your total annual household income? **Select one.**
- a. Less than \$30,000
 - b. \$30,000 to \$49,999
 - c. \$50,000 to \$74,999
 - d. \$75,000 to \$99,999
 - e. \$100,000 to \$149,999
 - f. \$150,000 or more
 - g. Refused
12. **[IF TEACHER/PARENT AND IN TARGET GEO]** Are you interested in participating in a 1-hour follow-up \$75 paid focus group session with 5 to 8 other individuals to discuss how to improve information around student resources and scholarships to assist with postsecondary choices? **Select one.**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
13. **[IF PARENT OR GUARDIAN]** Would your child in high school be interested in participating in a similar 1-hour paid focus group discussion on the same evening with you? In addition to your \$75, the high school student would also be paid \$75, for a total of \$150. **Select one.**

- a. Yes
- b. No

14. Are you interested in entering for a chance to win 1 of 5 \$50 Amazon gift cards as a thank you for completing this survey? **Select one.**

- a. Yes
- b. No

15. **[IF YES TO FOCUS GROUPS OR GIFT CARDS]** Please enter the following information. Your personal information will not be used for anything other than the reasons you chose in prior questions. **Open-ended comment boxes.**

a. First Name	
b. Last Name	
c. Email	
d. Confirm Email	
e. Telephone Number (XXX-XXX-XXXX)	

This

completes our survey! On behalf of Drive Research and the Brookings Institution, thank you for your time!

[END]

Appendix 3: Additional Research Resources

Here we provide some more detail on some aspect of the research literature, namely:

1. Financial barriers to college-going
2. The Kalamazoo Promise
3. Other Promise Programs
4. Wraparound Services
5. Collaborative Governance

Financial barriers to college-going

Given ongoing, heated debates over college costs, it might seem obvious that providing more financial assistance to students will improve outcomes. But there are multiple barriers - social, academic, and logistical - to college entry and success. A simple scholarship will not solve those problems. Nor is it clear, given the composition of the college population, that lowering the cost of college, most dramatically by promising “free college,” will help lower-income students the most (Scott-Clayton, 2017).

But there is some evidence that enhanced financial support does improve college enrollment and persistence for students from low-income backgrounds. In a 2016 paper, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Douglas N. Harris, Robert Kelchen, and James Benson investigate the effect of aid on college persistence. In particular, they look at the Wisconsin Scholars Grant (WSG), a privately funded program that randomly distributed financial aid to low-income students in Wisconsin public, postsecondary institutions. The grants paid out \$3,500 a year, which amounted on average to 85 percent of the remaining costs of attendance (i.e., after taking into account the aid they were already eligible for, such as Pell Grants).²⁶ The WSG had modest GPA conditions, similar to the Pell grant, and several other eligibility requirements. As the authors write:

Students were eligible for the WSG if they were Wisconsin residents who attended and graduated from a state public high school within three years of matriculating to one of the state’s 13 public universities, where they enrolled for at least 12 credits (full-time), completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and qualified for a federal Pell Grant, while still possessing unmet need (excluding loans) of at least \$1.

...
²⁶ The \$3,500 was equivalent to 20% of the total cost of attendance, according to the authors. Federal regulations prohibit the Wisconsin program, and other aid programs, from giving students more aid than their financial “need.” However, “need” is defined according to the calculations on the FAFSA, which can omit costs like childcare or gas.

The study finds positive effects. In their first cohort, only 16 percent of non-WSG grant students completed a BA in four years, versus 21 percent of WSG students. The program boosted retention rates by 0.1 to 0.3 standard deviations per term, and slightly raised student GPA and credits earned (although those effects seemed to fade halfway through college). WSG students in the second and third cohorts were about 3 percentage points more likely to make “satisfactory academic progress” every semester—and therefore keep their Pell grants, too. Students with larger out-of-pocket costs enjoyed more proportional benefits (in terms of persistence).

An analysis of a Nebraska scheme adds a little more to the evidence base. Josh Angrist, David Autor, Sally Hudson, and Amanda Pallais (2016) used a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to examine the impact of the Susan Thompson Buffett college scholarship in Nebraska. The scholarship applies to public institutions in the state and is unusually generous (up to \$70,000 over five years). Students need a 2.5 high school GPA to qualify. There is an income cut-off above the eligibility ceiling for Pell Grants; the maximum expected family contribution was \$15,000 for the Buffett program in 2012, while the Pell cutoff was roughly \$5,000. Through the program’s Learning Communities element, some of the students also received mentoring support and other services during their first two years of college (TSLC, 2017).

The Buffett scholarship increased the share of students that entered college immediately after high school and led more of them to enter four-year institutions. Persistence rates were higher: recipients that started in two-year colleges were nearly twice as likely to still be in school after three years. Race gaps also narrowed: “Four years out, awards narrowed the race gap in enrollment from twelve points to just seven,” the authors report.²⁷

Some students were randomly assigned into a “financial aid only” group, omitting the Learning Communities element. In general, the “aid only” approach seemed to have similar, positive effects on enrollment as the combined approach—with some important exceptions. At one of the three colleges they looked at, the lack of extra support may have lowered students’ persistence.²⁸ There is also some evidence that the Learning Communities elements were more helpful to students who were less academically prepared (with below-median high school GPAs). Similar results can be seen in an evaluation of CUNY’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), which provides developmental students with extra tutoring and advice on top of a “last-dollar” tuition waiver and other financial supports. ASAP doubled graduation rates for this group, according to a high-quality MDRC study (Scrivener et al., 2015). It is hard to know how much of that was driven by

...

²⁷ Where this likelihood is predicted by parental education, family income, GPA, race, and gender.

²⁸ The three University of Nebraska campuses were Lincoln, Omaha, and Kearney. At Omaha, students in the “aid-only” group had lower average persistence rates.

the financial aid elements and how much by the programming elements, but the answer is likely “some of both.”

The Kalamazoo Promise

In a November 2008 working paper, Jeffery Jones, Gary Miron, and Allison Kelaher-Young report findings gleaned from interviews of teachers, principals, counselors, and students in Kalamazoo. Both administrators and students said that many teachers raised their expectations after the program started. Students said that teachers would often remind students that college had become a real option, making school work more salient to students. Some said they received more homework, but also more teacher support.

In a similar vein, many teachers described a sense of “excitement and renewal” that accompanied the scholarship announcement; their comments suggested higher “self-esteem, efficacy, and confidence.” The authors also conducted a large survey of the students in all three local high schools and two of the three local middle schools. In line with existing literature on teacher expectations (Teacher expectations, 2012), females (Spiegel, 2012), non-FRPL (Kahlenberg, 2000), and white students reported higher teacher expectations than other students (Rosen, 2016).

In a 2011 paper in *Education Policy Analysis*, Miron, Jones, and Kelaher-Young dive deeper into the 2008 Kalamazoo student surveys. A limitation of their analysis is that they have no baseline survey; the students were asked to reflect on changes in the district after the announcement. Nevertheless, students reported improvements in “school climate” between 2008 and the previous year. Students also reported better relationships with teachers and peers in interviews, and a more focused academic environment.

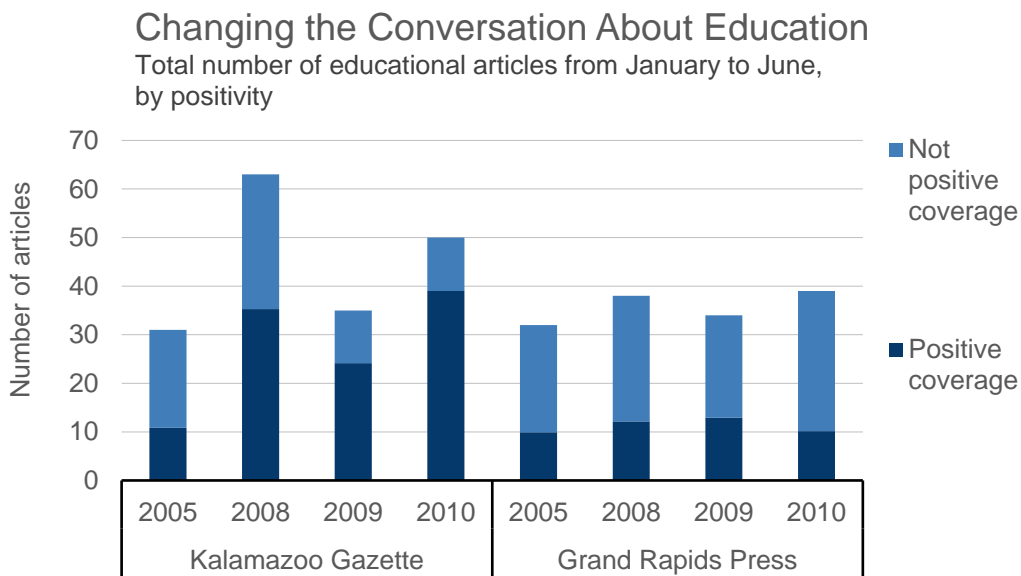
Timothy Bartik, Randall Eberts, and Wei-Jang Huang (2010) find that the announcement of the Promise was followed by a reversal of Kalamazoo’s long-running trend in enrollment declines. After an initial one-year surge in school-district entry rates (likely the result of publicity around the promise), much of the enrollment rebound was due to lower exit rates. They also find that the racial composition of the district stabilized: fewer white students left the district after the announcement.

Michelle Miller-Adams, in a 2010 conference paper, describes potential beneficial second-order effects of the Promise. Shortly after the announcement, voters approved an \$85 million new school bond, and between 2008 and 2010 the district was able to build two new schools (Mack, 2009). It was the first time in more than 30 years that Kalamazoo had built a new school, but since the announcement voters have repeatedly agreed to finance further improvements—in 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013 (Mack, 2015; Kalamazoo region, 2011; Mack, 2012; Kalamazoo Public School, 2013). The school district used rebounding enrollment rates as an opportunity to build new schools and reallocate students to achieve greater economic integration.

Miller-Adams also describes how the Promise was followed by greater investment in Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS), including “dramatically expanded tutoring and mentoring programs, and a higher rate of volunteerism in the public schools...the development of support systems at the local community college and university, as well as the creation of new internship and employment programs aimed at retaining graduates from these institutions.”

The Promise began purely as a scholarship program, but it also sparked a local movement towards greater student support and greater collaboration among the school district and nonprofits. Miller-Adams writes that the Promise program focused local organizations on a shared goal (college matriculation and completion) and helped organize local efforts around that goal. She quotes a former Kalamazoo superintendent and head of the Promise program: “Forty-nine percent of the work is the funding and fifty-one percent is the community engagement and alignment.”

There is other evidence of this “focusing the mind” effect. Miller-Adams and Jenna Fiore (2013) find that the announcement of the Promise in 2005 also changed how the local media covered the school system. Between 2008 and 2010, coverage of KPS increased and became more positive. Meanwhile, coverage of the local school system in Grand Rapids stayed about the same, suggesting that the change was particular to Kalamazoo.



Source: Miller-Adams, Michelle, and Fiore (2013)

Quasi-experimental evaluations, meanwhile, show positive effects on a range of student outcomes, but large gaps remain by income background.

Rodney Andrews, Stephen DesJardins, and Vimal Ranchod (2009) use ACT data to look at which colleges Kalamazoo students want to attend. They use a differences-in-differences approach that compares Kalamazoo students' choices before and after the announcement to other public school student choices around Michigan. They find that Kalamazoo students became more likely to express interest in Michigan's flagship, public universities. Using a triple-differences approach, they also find that local students from families earning less than \$50,000 annually became more likely to consider higher-priced, more selective public institutions in Michigan. The authors point to prior research by Jeffrey Groen and Michelle White (2003) which suggests that students educated at public colleges are more likely to remain in the state. This, Andrews, Desjardins, and Ranchod suggest, could mean that more Kalamazoo students will remain nearby, helping to fulfill the Promise's economic development goal.

Bartik and Marta Lachowska (2017) estimate the effect of the program on short-term outcomes including high school suspension, detention, GPA, and credit attainment, using two difference-in-difference approaches:

1. Between earlier and later grades for each student
2. Between students who, upon the announcement, found themselves eligible for scholarships, and those students who were not eligible due to lack of time in the district

The authors find that the Promise lowers suspensions by about one day a year, and increases the probability that students earn any credits by about 9 percent. There was no overall impact on GPA; black students who were Promise-eligible posted between a 0.17 and 0.6 standard deviation increase. In the 2007-08 school year, this group also posted a three-day per-year decrease in suspensions.

Using a similar difference-in-difference approach, Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska look at longer-term effects in a 2015 paper. They find an 8 percentage point increase, from a base rate of about 60 percent of students in postsecondary enrollment rates within 6 months of high school graduation, and an 18 percentage point increase in the share of students applying to Promise-eligible schools in particular, especially Michigan four-year public schools (the base rate was 47 percent). Postsecondary degree attainment after 6 years rose between 9 and 13 percentage points.

Once in college, Promise students attempt 13 to 15 percent more credits (about one class after the first two years out of high school). This effect persists through college such that "after the equivalent of eight semesters, treated students took an additional two to three classes." These effects, they suggest, occur both along the extensive margin (more students go to college) and the intensive margin (students in college take more classes).

In terms of college completion, the Upjohn researchers find that most of the impact is on the chances of getting a bachelor's degree: "Specifically, the share of Promise-eligible high school grads earning a bachelor's degree within six years rose from 30 percent to 37 percent" (Hershbein, 2015).

Lower-income students and students of color enjoy similar percentage point boosts in enrollment to their peers. But relative to their respective baseline rates, their gains are much larger. Lower-income students' attendance at four-year colleges, for example, jumps by more than 50 percent. The percentage increase for black students is twice that for whites (from a lower base). Finally, there are different effects for men and women. For example, the authors write, "The Promise boosts women's attainment by 13.3 percentage points (45 percent), while men seem to experience zero benefit" (Bartik, Hershbein, & Lachowska, 2012).

Other Promise Programs

For a good overview and typology of Promise programs, see Perna & Leigh (2018). The El Dorado Promise program began in 2007 in El Dorado, Arkansas and provides a scholarship that is prorated based on students' time in the district. It is a first-dollar scholarship that applies to both tuition and fees, and supports students attending any public or private school in the nation (though the annual amount is capped at the cost of Arkansas' most expensive public institution). Jennifer Ash and Gary Ritter (2016) find that the El Dorado public school enrollment increased 9 percent above trend after the Promise was announced while enrollment continued to fall in surrounding Union County. They also find that the share of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch stabilized.

Jennifer Ash (2015) went on to examine the impact of the El Dorado Promise on performance in elementary, middle, and high school by matching district students to similar students outside the school district. She finds positive effects on math and literacy test scores in grades three through eight, but only the math results holds up under a placebo test. Ash also finds larger positive effects for African Americans, lower-income students, and students who are in the top half of the test score distribution.²⁹ There were no positive effects, however, on high school graduation likely due to the smaller sample size.

Knox Achieves is a last-dollar program started in Knox County, Tennessee, in 2009 (Carruthers & Fox, 2016). The program was universally available for those attending a community college in the state. The program helped to inspire Tennessee's 2015 move to make community college free for all high school graduates. Celeste Carruthers and William Fox used a propensity score matching approach to compare students eligible for

...
²⁹ As Ash reports, "[the overall math impact was] .134 z-score units, the impact was .155 for economically disadvantaged students, .150 for African American students, .197 for students in the top half of the class, and a large .203 for the super subgroup of students who were both in the top half of the class and from a disadvantaged background."

Knox Achieves to those who were in nearby counties and ineligible, and to look at the eligible group before and after the 2009 program rollout. They find:

- An increase in high school graduation (3.4 percentage points);
- Higher enrollment in college within 9 months of graduation (24.2 percentage points);
- An increase in enrollment in community college by 3.1 to 4.9 percentage points, or 11 to 17 percent;
- Most of these students would not have attended college otherwise, but a minority switched to community college instead of heading immediately to a four-year college.

The New Haven Promise is a last-dollar scholarship started in 2010. Eligible students can attend any Connecticut institution, although the amount has an annual cap of \$2,500 for private institutions. The scholarship has fairly strict conditions attached, with students needing to:

- Live in New Haven
- Have attended New Haven public schools since at least the 9th grade
- Have no expulsions
- Complete 40 hours of community service in high school
- Have an attendance rate above 90 percent
- Graduate with a 3.0 GPA

Partly because of these requirements, less than a third of New Haven high school graduates are eligible for the Promise (Daugherty & Gonzales, 2016).

Unlike many of the other programs, the New Haven Promise was accompanied from the beginning by a specific effort to improve K-12 schools. New Haven introduced a host of new teacher and student supports, as well as parent outreach programming.

Lindsay Daugherty and Gabriella Gonzalez evaluate the impact of the various initiatives in a 2016 working paper. Using the 3.0 GPA cutoff to conduct a regression discontinuity design—comparing later outcomes for students just above and below that mark—they find that the program increased enrollment at public colleges among Promise-eligible students by between 8 and 14 percentage points. They find no significant effects on overall likelihood of college enrollment, or on persistence.³⁰ In other words, the main impact seems to have been to redirect students from private to public colleges. But the authors are quick to point out that data constraints could explain these null results, and note that

...
³⁰ The authors note that there are research design problems related to the separation of “treatment” from “control” students using only GPA. Since the program has other conditions for eligibility, their “treatment” group includes students who were not actually eligible. This could bias effect sizes downward.

the absence of evidence of an effect here does not mean evidence that such effects are necessarily absent.

The Pittsburgh Promise, introduced in December 2006, is a last-dollar scholarship that applies to accredited 2- and 4-year institutions. Students must live in Pittsburgh and attend its public schools since at least 9th grade (the scholarship amount is prorated based on students' time in the local public schools), and maintain at least a 2.5 GPA and 90 percent attendance record. The maximum award amount is \$7,500 annually, up from \$5,000 initially. The program says that the Pittsburgh public school graduation rate has jumped roughly 10 percentage points since the start of the program. A 2011 paper by Gabriella Gonzalez, Robert Bozick, Shannah Tharp-Taylor, and Andrea Phillips (sponsored by the program) suggests that public school enrollment in the district seemed to stabilize afterward. They suggest that college enrollment and persistence may have increased for some students, but note that their methodology does not allow them to attribute the changes to the Promise program.

Using a difference-in-difference approach similar to the one used by the Upjohn researchers, Robert Bozick, Gabriella Gonzalez, and John Engberg (2015) evaluate the effect of the Pittsburgh Promise. They find that the program had no direct discernable effect on overall college enrollment rates, at least at their chosen level of statistical significance. But they find some evidence that it increased the share of students that chose four-year colleges over community colleges.

Two studies have attempted to gather data from a wide range of Promise programs, rather than focusing on one program alone. In a 2014 NBER working paper, Michael LeGower and Randall Walsh use a difference-in-difference approach to compare Promise scholarship areas to surrounding areas before and after program announcement. They find that:

- The scholarships increase public school enrollment;
- Universal scholarships that apply to many colleges create bigger effects (8 percent), while similar programs with merit requirements or a more narrow selection of participating colleges produce half that effect. Merit scholarships that apply only to a few schools produce no significant effects; and
- Merit-based scholarships increase white enrollment and decrease enrollment among students of color.

In assessing the impact of place-based scholarships, a key lesson is to treat raw trend data with great care. For example, the Denver Scholarship Foundation points out that between 2006 and 2012, "DPS graduates have experienced an increase of 14.5 percentage points in the number of students either retained in college or completing a post-sec-

ondary credential.” A report commissioned by the Foundation (Investing in Denver’s workforce, 2015) discusses how Denver’s on-time graduation rate rose 20 percentage points over that period.

In 2014 Gabriella Gonzalez, Robert Bozick, Lindsay Daugherty, Ethan Scherer, Reema Singh, Mónica Jacobo Suárez, and Sarah Ryan also conducted an analysis of the New Haven Promise, as well as the district’s broader school improvement efforts. They find that after the rollout of the initiative, college enrollment ticked upward. They also find that the share of students eligible for the Promise increased (based on GPA and attendance).

But these trend data tell us nothing in themselves about the impact of the scholarships themselves. There have been increases in college enrollment across the board, as well as in high school graduation and other factors. Trend data alone cannot separate the effects of other changes from scholarship effects. For an in-depth review of Promise program evaluations, including more studies with null results, see a 2016 working paper, *Promises Fulfilled? A Systematic Review of the Impacts of Promise Programs*, by Elise Swanson, Angela Watson, Gary W. Ritter, and Malachi Nichols.

Wraparound Services

Eric Bruns et al, in a 2010 paper, define the wraparound approach as “an individualized, team-based service planning and care coordination process intended to improve outcomes for youth with complex behavioral health challenges and their families.”

In the 1990s, Clark et al. followed 54 foster children in a wraparound program for children with emotional and behavioral problems. Compared to the children in “standard practice foster care,” the wraparound group children had more stable housing situations: they had fewer placement changes and spent fewer days as runaways and incarcerated.

In 2009, Jesse Suter and Eric Burns conducted a meta-analysis of wraparound evaluations. They eventually winnowed down their pool of studies covering interventions for mental health, juvenile justice, and child welfare to just seven high-quality papers: three experiments and four quasi-experiments published between 1986 and 2008. They find positive meta-analytic effects, with an overall mean effect of 0.33 standard deviations, and significant positive effects on particular outcomes, like “youth functioning” in school and the justice system, and mental health.

They conclude:

Though the published wraparound research base is expanding and findings are largely positive, it continues to be in a preliminary state of development...there

are insufficient data to support calls for wraparound's acceptance or dismissal based on the strength of existing studies.³¹

The University of Kansas' School of Social Welfare released "Best Practices in Wraparound: A Review of the National Literature" in 2008 (Walter). Similarly, UC Davis' Center for Human Services conducted a literature review of wraparound programs in 2010. These reviews list a host of positive effects, although only a handful of the included studies were RCTs. And the UC Davis review notes that some of the evaluations suffered from a lack of model fidelity.

The Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse contains a handful of randomized controlled trials examining "Early Risers" (2012), which seeks to help elementary students with disruptive behaviors. The program contains a wraparound service element for participating families, although it has other components, too, like a social development curriculum for the children. Because the comparison group didn't have access to any of these aids, it's hard to tease out the effects of the wraparound services in particular. That said, the Early Risers program seemed to raise academic achievement for treatment group children, reduce behavioral issues, and increase social functioning.

Collaborative Governance

Henig et al. point out that:

defined loosely, cross-sector collaboration around education happens all the time. A high school principal [for example] reaches out to a nearby health clinic for an expert to meet regularly at the school as part of a program to reduce teen pregnancies.

Modest "cross-sector collaborations" happen in schools everywhere today: most schools have at least a part-time nurse (Mithers, 2011); students get affordable meals; some receive counseling from social workers. This is the result of past efforts to bring community resources into schools.

The authors describe an ebb and flow of activity around collaborative anti-poverty efforts, which coincide with periods of economic distress and waves of heightened public concern about poverty. They point to the "community schools" efforts of John Dewey during the 1910s and Charles Mott during the Great Depression.

...
³¹ The medical world also offers some evidence in support of "wraparound" approaches. A 2015 meta-analysis of wraparound RCTs in JAMA finds generally positive effects for wraparound services, or "collaborative care models," compared to "usual pediatric primary care." The authors write, "integrating care for mental health problems into primary medical care for children and adolescents leads to significant improvements in child and adolescent mental health."

These schools served as hubs of community activity after hours, offering health and social services (Campbell-Allen, Shah, Sullender, & Zazove, 2009). In language that might sound familiar to today's CI boosters, Eleanor Roosevelt called a Mott-inspired "community school" a "remarkable...community plan by which they coordinate all the various community forces—industrial, social, philanthropic, recreational and educational."

Parts of these earlier initiatives became woven into the fabric of schools. The elements of collective impact efforts that did not stick (a significant portion of these historical collective impact efforts) faded due to social entropy, or because a sense of public urgency around poverty subsided.

During the Great Society era, the number of social programs ballooned. The multiplying number of federal grants to states, counties, cities, and nonprofits increased the complexity of provision and the need for collaboration. The federal government tried to improve coordination through initiatives such as "community action agencies" or the "model cities" program. These had limited success, partly because competition for funding from a galaxy of different sources still pitted organizations against one another and undermined collaborative efforts.

The 1990s saw another wave of interest in CI-like programs. The Clinton administration, with its focus on streamlining government, started "empowerment zones" (similar to the Obama administration's subsequent "promise zones") and "enterprise communities." Unlike some of the 1970s era initiatives, the 1990s efforts listened better to the communities they tried to work with. As researchers at the Aspen Institute noted, "community change initiatives" (one type of collaborative body to come out of the 90s) often strengthened local leadership within neighborhoods, even if they didn't bring about systemic change (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010). Often, this meant local leaders were better able to raise funds or advocate for political change. But most community change initiatives ultimately failed to lower poverty rates or move the needle in other domains:

As it has turned out, alignment has been harder to achieve than was anticipated. It does not automatically result from a one-time community planning process or from a foundation-sponsored initiative.

As the Teachers College scholars report (Henig et al., 2015), many collaborative efforts continued to run aground on:

resource constraints, turf battles, institutional capacity deficiencies, bureaucratic inflexibility, leadership problems, confidentiality and other legal issues, communication gaps, authority questions, professional culture and training differences, and wavering political support."

Most programs had hazy measures of success. Few could get busy teachers and principals on board as full partners in collaboration, or coordinate city, county, and school services. Data sharing between schools and social service organizations was also problematic (Crowson & Boyd, 1994).

Another lesson from the 1990s wave of initiatives was that initiatives that sought only to coordinate existing resources often failed, for the simple reason that the resources available in many inner-city communities were insufficient. There were some bright spots: programs like the SEED School, Briya-Mary's Center, and the Harlem Children's Zone found some success during the 1990s and continue to this day, but all of these involved substantial additional investments. A 2010 literature review by Child Trends finds that "community school" approaches, like the Comer model, City Connects, and Communities in Schools, all had evidence of effectiveness. These tended to offer substantial new resources and support as well.

One way in which CI initiatives differ from previous efforts is in their scope. The unit of change for settlement houses is a neighborhood; for "community schools," it is a single school. Many CI initiatives take on entire cities or counties at once, often by combining many other existing efforts within a given city.

Central to the collective impact model is what the FSG authors label the "backbone organization," which is supposed to facilitate information sharing within the collaboration:

When supported by an effective backbone and shared measurement system, the cascading levels of collaboration creates a high degree of transparency among all organizations and levels involved in the work. [I]nformation flows both from the top down and from the bottom up. Vision and oversight are centralized through a steering committee, but also decentralized through multiple working groups that focus on different levers for change (Kania & Kramer, 2013).

As they tell it, CI is a process, rather than a set of programmatic solutions. The process involves bringing the right people around the same table, and letting them hash out a solution to a given problem, rather than having one player dictate solutions.

As the FSG authors write, "[The] solutions and resources are quite often not known in advance. They are typically emergent, arising over time through collective vigilance, learning, and action that result from careful structuring of the effort." The idea is that everyone is on the same page of the same book, written in the same language: no small feat.

As discussed in Chapter 8, FSG points to a number of case studies in collective impact, including:

- The E3 Alliance, a central Texas initiative started in 2006 to boost academic achievement;
- The Road Map Project, a collaboration started in 2010 aiming to boost college degree attainment in South Seattle;
- Shape Up Somerville, a community health initiative in Massachusetts;
- Opportunity Chicago, focused on helping public housing residents find jobs; and
- Strive Together, a Cincinnati cradle-to-career initiative.

Each of these initiatives has a backbone, administrative organization, and most have some kind of data sharing. But the intensity of the collaboration varies. We briefly describe each of them here, before turning to some criticisms of CI-type approaches.

E3 hosts annual summits with data to create “blueprints,” and then to find resources and work out solutions in smaller groups (Ricke, 2017). Those smaller task forces meet more frequently. E3 has come up with a rubric to more effectively teach English Language Learners, and then spread it to schools in the area; they have also beefed up STEM curricula, and increased enrollment (Central Texas ELL, 2010). E3 seemed to run into hot water a few times when dealing with potential member organizations. As Hannah Gourgey (n.d.), one of their lead staff members writes:

CI requires that the backbone organization engage many stakeholders across the community, and at times, some stakeholders are not motivated to participate. If it is a critical stakeholder, a school district, college or community organization, how do we know when to “push” them and when not—particularly since backbone organizations rarely have institutional or structural authority?...I’ve learned that they can be persuaded through peer pressure from within the stakeholder group. We have also enlisted the support of funding entities/or opportunities and respected business champions to encourage participation. Finally, when leadership remains tentative, we have met with long-term success by engaging at the practitioner level for specific initiatives, and praised the heck out of the participants to influence reluctant leadership.

Gourgey also shares some of the harder lessons that E3 has learned:

There are a couple of cautionary tales, too. E3 has learned not to publicly share organization-specific data to “strong arm” participation, unless there are alternative partners who can and are willing to do the work. We also found that we should be prudent when engaging local public officials such as school boards or city councils to help persuade, largely because of the partisan-tone often used and the perceived “power play” such engagement suggests.

(We should note in passing how rare and valuable it is for these kinds of hard-learned lessons to be shared publicly).

Unlike many CI initiatives, the Road Map Project has a detailed data dashboard, with data disaggregated by school and student demographics. And by 2013, the group secured Race to the Top funding and raised the share of students applying for the program's "College Bound Scholarship" from 53 percent in 2010 to 94 percent (The road map, 2018).

Shape up Somerville (FSG, 2013c), another FSG case study, is unusual because of its robust data collection and focus on specific, numerical, and scientific metrics centered on child obesity: energy expenditure, body mass index, and weight. The program, a joint project involving the Centers for Disease Control, academic researchers, and the city, aimed to get the Somerville residents eating healthier and exercising more. Unlike many CI initiatives, Shape Up Somerville was largely spearheaded by the city. But, like many (including Say Yes to Education), it has a "steering committee" with representation from local groups.

Tufts researchers find that in the first two years of the program, "schoolchildren gained less weight and were less likely to be obese or overweight than schoolchildren in two similar control communities" (Coffield, Nihiser, Sherry, & Economos, 2014). They also find that parents' BMI fell. And according to *The Boston Globe*, the initiative has had some long term impacts on the way residents and businesses think about health:

City decisions about roads, bridges, other transportation projects, real estate development, and parks include an analysis of how the plans might affect residents' physical activity or ability to shop for healthy food...Restaurants that meet specific nutrition standards win a Shape Up Somerville sign for their door and campaign logo to display on the menu items that pass muster. So far 40 of the city's 200 eateries have notched that distinction.

There has been no follow-up studies so far, so it is hard to know what the long-term impact is, although there is some descriptive survey data. Local blood pressure and cholesterol readings have not followed a worsening statewide trend; the share of Somerville residents who reported regular exercise increased, and children report drinking fewer sugary beverages. According to the FSG case-study (2013c), schools also "increased the amount of healthy fruits and vegetables...and eliminated unhealthy options like ice-cream," while bolstering school clinical staff capacity to diagnose obesity. And the city added four new parks, although that may have happened anyway.

Opportunity Chicago (FSG, 2013d) was an initiative to place 5,000 public housing residents in jobs between 2006 and 2010. The program brought together government agencies, like the housing authority, with work-placement nonprofits, as well as employers. In effect, it was an intensive case management approach, with shared data and wraparound supports, narrowly focused on a well-defined group of people (Parkes, Holt, Lee, Theodore, & Cook, 2012). The goal was reached, but there has been no rigorous evaluation (there was no control group).

A final example is Strive Together, a cradle-to-career initiative started in Cincinnati in 2006 (The network, 2018). The Strive framework involves a “civic infrastructure assessment” that helps tally local resources so people can see where there are gaps or redundancies. Their “cradle to career” model has since spread to more than 30 states (Every child, 2018) where it is implemented with varying degrees of fidelity. Strive has a somewhat complex “theory of action” with almost three dozen separate steps.

Many of these CI initiatives predate the CI label: the Teachers College study finds that about 60 percent of the 182 “collective impact” initiatives they reviewed in 2016 predated the 2011 article (Henig et al., 2016); and almost 20 percent started before 2000. (Even so, some of the older initiatives rebranded themselves as “collective impact” after 2011, as the label gained popularity). Of the 100 largest metro areas in their review, 58 were home to at least one of these 182 initiatives; most had multiple CI efforts.

However, the geographical scope varied. Just over half of the CI initiatives aimed to bring about change within a county or the region; 14 percent focused on schools, neighborhoods, or sub-city areas; and about 10 percent focused on a school district. Almost half of the initiatives were affiliated with a national umbrella organization; nine in ten of these initiatives had leadership with business, school districts, or higher education representatives; and about eight in ten had social services representatives. Only about one in ten had teacher’s union representation.

CI-type interventions face a number of steep challenges. Few are able to meet all the criteria that are considered essential for success. There are then frequent concerns about model fidelity. But there are also concerns about the model itself. It is important to distinguish between criticisms based on a failure to *implement* CI correctly, and those which are aimed at fundamental elements of the CI approach. We start with model-fidelity criticisms before moving on to deeper concerns with the model.

In a 2014 follow-up article, John Kania and Mark Kramer (the FSG authors) shared their own frustrations with how some initiatives had interpreted their broad, 2011 framework. In particular, they were concerned that:

- Important groups still were not brought to the table in many collaborative efforts. Too many, they said, “still omit critical partners in government and the nonprofit, corporate, and philanthropic sectors, as well as people with lived experience of the issue...In addition to engaging the formal sectors, we have learned the importance of working with people who have lived experience.”
- Initiatives were neglecting relationship building: “Lack of personal relationships, as well as the presence of strong egos and difficult historical interactions, can impede collective impact efforts...Collective impact can succeed only when the process attends to *both* the use of evidence and the strengthening of relationships.”

- A related issue was the desire for organizations to claim credit of successes, which they called “one of the biggest barriers” facing CI initiatives.

They also expressed frustration with how “collective impact” has become “a buzzword that is often used to describe collaborations of all types.” Indeed, different organizations took “collective impact” to mean slightly different things, usually closer to what they were already doing. One interpretation was basically: “grantmakers coordinating their grant-writing” (Bartczak, 2014).

Similar criticisms come from a review prepared by Melinda Mechur Karp & Valerie Lundy-Wagner (2016) for the Community College Research Center. Karp and Lundy-Wagner note that different groups understand collective impact as a way to coordinate efforts toward a common goal, they have often “defined its core components differently, use different terminology, or defined key concepts such as ‘collaboration’ in different ways.”

There is often confusion about whether collective impact is a top-down process, or a bottom-up process. Participants are often uncertain about who was supposed to be driving the initiative (i.e. the “backbone” organization,” a steering committee, or some other group), and “reluctant to dilute or shift their organizational mission” by aligning resources.

Although “shared measurement systems” is one of the five key elements of the CI model, a recurrent weakness of the initiatives is the lack of data collection, sharing, and publication. While many of these initiatives pay lip service to informed use of data, only a handful actually have robust, time trend data disaggregated by race and income. Fewer still make summary data on life-stage outcomes publicly available. For this reason, it is hard to gauge their successes and/or failings.

For some critics, the problem is not that the CI model is being implemented poorly but that the model itself is flawed. The three biggest concerns with the whole approach are that it is *top-down* rather than community based; it is *undemocratic*; and that it imposes *costs on organizations*, for uncertain returns.

The requirement for a strong “backbone” organization in the CI model has led to criticisms that many initiatives impose a set of goals and frameworks onto communities, rather than communities themselves making the decisions.

Because there are many different funding streams with many different agendas flowing into given communities, CI initiatives are always fighting against centripetal forces and entropy. The backbone organization helps to maintain focus and momentum. Big funders have the clout to play that role—whether it’s an anti-nuclear proliferation nonprofit like the Ploughshares Fund or Say Yes to Education (Jordan & Loehrke, 2016). Without this strong center, collaborative efforts can lack traction. But CI also requires some willingness

among the smaller entities to work on a common project, and they may be reluctant to do so if they feel as if they are taking orders from above.

The downsides of the grasstops approach may be greatest when it is not made explicit. When the governance model is opaque, the motives of the major players can appear sinister or covert. Is there a clear leader, or do all the partners make decisions democratically? If there is a clear leader, do they “steer” the network, or “command and control” it? As the Teachers College researchers write:

[The urban renewal and Model Cities programs] struggled to find the right balance between providing their partners enough autonomy and influence to attract their participation, and retaining enough central and government control to ensure that the goals defined by nationally elected leaders were not ignored, redirected, or flouted by private entities more concerned with their own economic interests or organizational needs.

The need for a strong backbone organization, and for some centralization of power, can lead to or exacerbate other problems, too. One is the perception of “outsiders” meddling in school systems and communities.

Paul Schmitz, CEO of Leading Inside Out and a Senior Advisor to The Collective Impact Forum, also worries about inclusivity. As one less-powerful community member said to him, “They don’t invite people like me to their tables. I went to a meeting and it was all clearly dominated by the same folks who have all the resources and don’t know our community” (Schmitz, 2014).

A second criticism leveled at CI-type interventions is that they undermine existing democratic structures, draining power away from the people who have been elected to wield it. As the Teachers College authors note (Henig et al., 2015), many of these collaborations blur the line between democratic governance and private sector management of public policy and administration:

In the past, the making of high level policy and planning decisions was conceptually and pragmatically separated from the management of implementation...policy decisions formerly in the hands of the public and its elected representatives often have been handed over to private agents acting with less direct accountability to the public... [This] threatens the participatory underpinnings of democracy.

Citing research by Theda Skocpol, Karl Rethemeyer, and Deneen Hatmaker (2007), the authors claim that “citizen interests are [increasingly] represented by organizational actors instead of direct action politics.”

It is important to keep a sense of scale here: spending by nonprofit education funds amount to less than one-third of a percent of total public dollars (\$2 billion vs. \$600 billion annually). That's partly why nonprofit-driven CI initiatives seek to leverage public dollars.

Tom Wolff, a consultant who helps organize collaborations, criticizes the CI approach for being ahistorical, leading to a number of mistakes:³²

- Collective impact does not place enough emphasis on grassroots community involvement. “Coalitions without the grassroots voice,” he says, “are very likely to create solutions that do not meet the needs of the people most affected and denigrate them in the process.” Wolff says that one of the major benefits of collaboration should be that the most powerful come in direct contact with the least powerful, affected groups. But CI initiatives aren't necessarily doing that.
- Collective impact initiatives generally place too little emphasis on policy change.
- The backbone organizations in CI initiatives are given too much power and responsibility, when they should be building power and sharing responsibility with the organizational partners. Wolff suggests that part of the appeal of CI for large nonprofits is that it leaves them in a position of power, or increases their power.

Rich Harwood (2014), another organizing consultant, also thinks collective impact would benefit from focusing more on “community ownership” and a “shared narrative.” As he told an Aspen Institute roundtable (Barnes et al., 2014):

A danger with collective impact is that it becomes like a social erector set. We think that if we just put the right pieces together and get the right nuts and bolts in the correct order, then somehow this organic system we call community will go along our nice linear path. We need the humility to confront the actual conditions in communities and begin where the community is, not with our erector set. If we don't get this right, all the stuff that follows will not matter.³³

...

³² As Henig et al note, many collaborative initiatives “rebranded” themselves using CI language after 2011. Many organizations that weren't really undertaking CI initiatives did the same, because of its popularity. The rise of CI also coincided with large philanthropic organizations' move towards for “results based accountability,” and a desire to get more directly involved in operations, rather than just grant writing. The United Way is one example: its strategic plans emphasize “coordination” and partnership with other nonprofits and government, as opposed to just fundraising and disbursement.

³³ As Philip K Howard argues, no quantity of rules can replace a culture of trust and accountability in an organization. The same is likely true of collective impact initiatives: legal agreements and mission statements are not enough to ensure group functioning. See also the criticism from Paul Schmitz, an advisor to the Collective Impact Forum, who worries that CI initiatives take too much of a service-oriented approach. That, he says, leads them to overlook how the actual community is doing, and to underestimate the importance relationship building, which holds collaborations together. “[M]any Collective Impact efforts are still all about institutions and organizations doing things to communities, not with communities... Collective Impact efforts need to explore how members of the community are engaged not as focus group participants or token representatives but as active leaders and producers of service that will create and sustain long-term change.”

CI initiatives exist within “market oriented” approaches to community uplift, according to Kimberly LeChasseur. In a 2016 paper, she argues that CI approaches perpetuate power relationships between social service providers and citizens. LeChasseur contrasts this with “grassroots” community organizing, which places a greater emphasis on listening to and empowering affected individuals themselves, allowing them to create solutions.

The third main criticism of CI-style initiatives is that they underestimate or understate the costs and risks of collaboration, instead of simply assuming that collaboration is intrinsically valuable. In fact, collaboration implies costs and sacrifice from members, most obviously in terms of time and resources. These costs often differ in magnitude for different members, depending on their size and capacity.

Appendix 4: National Private Colleges and Universities in the Say Yes Higher Education Compact

Bates College	Hobart and William Smith Colleges	Simmons College of Kentucky
Bates College	Ithaca College	Smith College
Bennett College	John Wesley University	Springfield College
Boston University	Johns Hopkins University	St. Olaf College
Bowdoin College	Kenyon College	Stanford University
Brown University	Lehigh University	Swarthmore College
Bucknell University	LeMoyne College	Syracuse University
California Institute of Technology	Lesley University	Texas Christian University
Carleton College	Lycoming College	The University of Chicago
Case Western Reserve University	Marist College	Trinity College
Claremont McKenna College	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	Trocaire College
Colby College	Medaille College	Tufts University
Colgate University	Monroe College	Tulane University
Colorado College	Muhlenberg College	Union College
Columbia University	New York Institute of Technology	University of Notre Dame
Cooper Union	Northeastern University	University of Pennsylvania
Cornell University	Northwestern University	University of Rochester
Dartmouth College	Oberlin College	University of San Diego
Davidson College	Occidental College	University of Southern California
Denison University	Paul Smith's College	Vanderbilt University
Dickinson College	Pitzer College	Vassar College
Drew University	Pomona College	Wake Forest University
Drexel University	Princeton University	Washington and Lee University
Duke University	Providence College	Washington University in St. Louis
Franklin & Marshall College	Reed College	Wellesley College
George Washington University	Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	Wesleyan University
Georgetown University	Rhodes College	Williams College
Goodwin College	Rice University	Yale University
Greensboro College	Rochester Institute of Technology	
Guilford College	Salem College	
Hamilton College	Sarah Lawrence College	
Harvard University	Scripps College	
Harvey Mudd	Sewanee – University of the South	

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