

Just Say Yes: The Promise of Post-Secondary Education



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Helping impoverished students earn college degrees requires the community to work together. The benefits extend beyond campus walls and across generations.

Higher education is the key to economic independence and stability. Yet there are hundreds of thousands of students in the United States who do not even consider pursuing a post-secondary education because the money is simply not there. We push a message of perseverance and independence, yet we fail to consider what happens when the road that leads to success is littered with obstacles that are woven into the fabric of generational poverty.

Almost 30 years ago, I told 112 sixth-graders at a Philadelphia public school that if they graduated from high school, I would pay for their college education. I called this initiative Say Yes to Education. Fulfilling their end of the bargain would be no easy task. Many of

them were impoverished, with no access to secure housing, decent meals, medical and mental health care, tutoring or so many of the other little things we consider essential for day-to-day life.

Getting urban students to matriculate – but, more important, to graduate from college – requires an enormous investment. There is the obvious financial commitment if they graduate from high school and are accepted into college. But fulfilling the promise also requires community buy-in, a willingness to believe that all children can succeed if they are given not only the right opportunities, but the social and emotional supports that are needed to rise above the headwaters of a life lived in poverty.

Creating partnerships that involve school districts, local governments and community-based organizations is key. Entire cities must come together and make the investment in their children – and make it sustainable. We know that in this nation, someone with a bachelor's degree will earn \$1 million more, on average, over a lifetime than the person who cannot pursue post-secondary credentials. In addition, an infusion of college graduates can have an enormous impact on a city, strengthening the economy and empowering future generations.

Say Yes to Education has moved beyond individual schools and is now supporting more than 65,000 students and has helped more than 5,000 attend college, most of them from the upstate New York cities of Syracuse and Buffalo.

SUPPORTED

65,000
students



5,000
attend college

This work has not been easy, and we have learned a few lessons along the way, including:

The value of gathering data on student outcomes

Say Yes has identified several key metrics that signal a student's readiness for success in college or other post-secondary program. Using those metrics, we have created a system that enables schools to chart students' progress and, more important, identify problem areas, making it possible for social service providers to intervene with targeted supports.

A unified, coherent approach is essential

All the major stakeholders in communities – city and school officials, parents, union and business leaders, representatives from faith-based and charitable organizations – must be on board. In Say Yes cities, this group has coalesced around an efficient and effective fiscal pro forma – one that aligns millions of dollars in existing resources (including investments from the schools and social service agencies) with new capital, all centered on the common goal of getting students to pursue and complete a post-secondary education.

Offering scholarships can be an incentive for change in the community

In addition to the 70 private colleges in the Say Yes Higher Education Compact that provide full scholarships, equally important, the key stakeholders in Buffalo and Syracuse have raised more than \$30 million to help fund the endowments that provide scholarships to students. Our partner cities have used Say Yes scholarship incentives as rallying points, allowing for a range of programming around college access that was previously not available to the targeted students.

This project designed to give hope to 112 students and their families can be turned to as a blueprint for anyone interested in helping shift the dial on higher education. Learn from our lessons. The need is great – and so is the opportunity.

