

# Great Ideas for Great Public Schools

## NEW YORK

### Providing support that encourages kids to pursue higher education

The **Say Yes to Education** initiative makes a simple but powerful promise to students in the high-need, urban Syracuse, New York, school district: Every student who meets college entrance requirements is guaranteed a free college or vocational education. The initiative is doing its part to turn that vision into reality by providing high-quality and sustained academic, social, emotional, health, and family support for students at all grade levels. The Say Yes Foundation has the research and a 23-year track record to prove that when schools and communities actively support and nurture students in need, they can significantly alter the course of their lives. An added benefit: increasing high school and college graduation rates builds the local economy.

#### Broad range of supports

- Students attend innovative afterschool and summer camp programs that blend academic and enrichment activities.
- Syracuse University students tutor high school students and serve as summer camp counselors.
- Family needs are addressed with wraparound services that include family outreach and engagement, counseling services, financial aid counseling, access to high-quality health care, and free legal assistance.

#### Community shares responsibility

- The premise of the program is that the community shares responsibility for student success.
- Supporters include the school district, the mayor's office, the county executive's office, the Syracuse Teachers Association (STA), community organizations, health care providers and insurance companies, local businesses, Syracuse University, the American Institutes for Research, and more.
- The union has provided leadership and support from the start. Teachers have designed a summer school program that reaches more students and includes professional development for teachers.
- The union signed a memorandum of understanding to provide flexible schedules for social workers.

- The union president attends biweekly meetings of the interagency operations committee and serves on a working group that is grappling with a potential \$50 million district budget deficit.

#### Early signs of success

- This is only the second year of the district-wide initiative—it now covers three of the district's four quadrants. To date, the emphasis has been on elementary grades.
- While there has been a slight uptick in the high school graduation rate, Gene Chasin, senior vice president for the Say Yes Foundation, says there are other signs of success. One is the unprecedented level of community buy-in for the project. Another is that last year, for the first time in more than a decade, student enrollment went up (by 400 students).
- District property values have either held steady or risen slightly (about 5 percent).
- Many consider the fact that hundreds of students have access to health care to be the biggest success to date. STA president Kevin Ahern says that from teachers' perspective, "That's a real game changer" because healthy students can take advantage of what is offered in the classroom.

**For more information:** Kevin Ahern, president, Syracuse Teachers Association, 315-472-6374



*Great Public Schools for Every Student*