A City-wide Turnaround Model for College and Career Success
Within Syracuse City School District, the majority of the 33 public schools are low performing. Twenty eight of the schools are Title I eligible. Eighteen schools are in some form of restructuring or corrective action and three have been deemed persistently low achieving.

The Need and Partners
For the 2008–09 school year, the average percent of Syracuse students scoring proficient or advanced on state English/Language Arts achievement tests was 53% (ranging from 41% proficient for students in grade 8 to 60% for grades 5 and 6); for Mathematics achievement the average percent of students scoring proficient was 58% (ranging from 35% proficient for students in grade 8 to 75% for students in grade 3). At the secondary level, 51% of students in Syracuse scored proficient on English achievement tests (compared to 77% of high school students statewide); for Mathematics achievement, only 47% of Syracuse students scored proficient or better (compared to 77% of students statewide). With this level of need, a systemic approach is required, prudent, and the most efficient and effective way to proceed. Data from the New York State Education Department further delineates the size and magnitude of the challenge for Syracuse. In Syracuse, 75% of students (14,851 students in 2008–09) qualified for the free or reduced price lunch program. Roughly half of students enrolled as freshmen graduate (51% in 2008–09). Although 93% of Syracuse’s 2010 seniors planned to attend college, of students graduating in 2008–09, only 66% were enrolled in college within a year. Of those students, a majority (56%) were enrolled in community colleges.

The debate over what it will take to enable such large numbers of high need, low-income and minority youth to prepare for and succeed at the postsecondary level is polarized. Many argue that better schools (or networks of schools) alone will achieve the goal. Others see school and governance redesign as an insufficient solution, particularly given the broader social, emotional, financial, and health barriers to college and career success experienced by many urban youth and the inability of the education community alone to solve such problems. Syracuse Say Yes partners believe success at scale is unlikely to be achieved unless we integrate these two approaches into a holistic and coherent model and fundamentally redesign how governments (county, city, and school system) coordinate their efforts across agencies and in collaboration with the private sector to set meaningful goals (e.g., postsecondary readiness and completion for all students) and then implement data- and research-driven strategies to achieve them.

Say Yes is a unique collaboration between Syracuse University, Syracuse City School District and Board (SCSD), Syracuse Teachers Association (STA), the City of Syracuse, Onondaga County, Say Yes to Education, Inc., the American Institutes for Research (AIR), and a diverse group of Syracuse-area corporate, non-profit, and philanthropic organizations. Together, we are working at the forefront of a movement to create a replicable model to efficiently and effectively organize people, time, and money to support breakthrough outcomes at the child, classroom, school, district, city, and county levels. At the student level, the Say Yes model has a proven track record of closing achievement gaps between white and minority students, decreasing drop-out rates, and increasing high school and college graduation rates for urban students (e.g.,
84% of Hartford Say Yes students were accepted to college compared to acceptance rates of 45% to 60% for graduating classes in other Hartford high schools. At the system level, Say Yes and its partners are demonstrating that it is possible to scale this model to impact every student within an entire municipal area.

There are five critical components to the Syracuse Say Yes model: 1) collection and use of objective data for continuous quality improvement at the student, school, district, agency, city, and county levels; 2) implementation of research-based whole school reform (WSR) programs that result in the delivery of rigorous and engaging college preparatory programming for all students; 3) effective and efficient delivery of comprehensive community services that are proven to minimize and/or remove the barriers to post-secondary access (e.g., extended day and year programs, physical and mental health, legal, family counseling, and social services); 4) creation and institutionalization of a new municipal governance structure that results in high levels of transparency and broad-based community and political commitment to sustain a universal college and career access agenda; and 5) availability of student-centered scholarship incentives and supports.

In the pages that follow, we outline in detail the five elements of a systematic process to support student growth and classroom, school, and system transformation. Syracuse Say Yes is moving to fully develop and successfully implement this unique and powerful model, which will result in cross government alignment of breakthrough goals, strategies, staffing, funding, and, ultimately, college access and economic development outcomes at scale.

The Say Yes History and Approach
Say Yes is a national, non-profit foundation with a 23-year track record of dramatically increasing high school and college graduation rates for selected cohorts of urban youth (www.sayyestoeducation.org). Say Yes has identified, assessed, and refined the supports that enable low-income and minority children to overcome the academic, social-emotional, health, and financial barriers to college and career access and productive citizenship. By initiating powerful public-private partnerships that deliver resources to students in four core areas – educational support, social-emotional counsel, health care assistance, and financial aid – Say Yes is helping to institutionalize the incentives, supports, and accountability necessary to create a college- and career-bound environment for all students.

Three years ago, Say Yes targeted New York State based on New York’s commitment to the Campaign for Fiscal Equity and the court-mandated decision to allocate an additional $3,500 per student through Contracts for Excellence. Say Yes utilized a structured due diligence process to identify the first city in the country that would implement the Say Yes model system-wide, utilizing a combination of whole school reform (WSR) and targeted (e.g., extended day and year programming, comprehensive supports, and college pathways) approaches.

Say Yes City Due Diligence Criteria
Five explicit due diligence criteria were used to assess the level of interest and readiness of the city to meet the needs of all students: (1) Postsecondary Completion Goal: Community willingness to set the goal of postsecondary completion (rather than K—12 incremental test score improvements alone) as the standard upon which progress would be measured, and the willingness of the entire city to commit to accomplish this goal with an organized coalition and collaborative process, including the teachers’ and administrators’ unions; (2) Partnership with Higher Education: School district, school board, and union willingness to partner with higher education to implement the comprehensive Say Yes Student Monitoring System; to develop and implement a range of college preparatory academic and youth development programs; and to
mobilize the entire community around a program of high expectations and outcomes for all students; (3) **Public-Private Partnerships**: School, district, government, and private sector readiness to acknowledge and act on the fact that they independently cannot meet the intense needs of urban youth, and willingness to objectively review community-based organizations and build sustainable partnerships to scale and sustain needed social, health, legal, family counseling, and academic (e.g., pre-school).

At the conclusion of a six-month due diligence process, the city of Syracuse was selected as the first Say Yes City. services system-wide; (4) **Transparent Accountability**: School district willingness to engage in a public dialogue, with third-party validated data, about what is working and not working with the goal of developing and implementing comprehensive programming that, over time, effectively meets the needs of all students. District willingness also to implement teacher evaluation systems that include the use of student performance data; and (5) **Transparent and Sustainable Fiscal Management**: City-wide willingness to commit to a rigorous third-party fiscal audit and a long-term fiscal pro forma that results (by year six of the program) in full funding of a comprehensive set of evidence-based programs (e.g., school day, after school, summer camp, tutoring, mentoring, social work, health, and legal services, as well as college access and family counseling supports) through the core operating budgets of the school system, city, and county.

**The Say Yes City-wide Turnaround Program**

The Say Yes Program offers a clear path to college, career, and productive citizenship for over 20,000 students in Syracuse, NY. Syracuse was a natural first partner for this initiative. It had a high-need school district, senior leadership committed to fundamental change, and a strong higher education partner, Syracuse University (SU), with a visionary leader (Dr. Nancy Cantor). SU had the institutional capacity and commitment to support the development of data- and results-driven Pre-K—16 pathways to college and career success for all students. SCSD also had an established New York State Contract for Excellence Funding Plan and a sense of urgency regarding the fact that less than 50 percent of entering kindergarten students graduate from high school 13 years later.

Over two decades, Say Yes has learned that there is no single, isolated silver bullet that ensures postsecondary success. Rather, fieldwork and research has proven that a coherent, integrated set of supports are the key drivers of postsecondary outcomes.

**Say Yes System Model**

As mentioned earlier, the focus of Syracuse Say Yes is not only on low performing schools, but the entire low-performing district. In urban schools it tends not to be individual schools, but rather the district as a whole which has problems that consistently lead to low expectations and low performance. Over a four-year period of time, a comprehensive assessment system (school and student) and aligned college-preparatory programming are being rolled out across the entire city. The program is currently beginning the third year of supports and serving students across three of the four school quadrants, which are organized as pathways to four of the five high schools. The Say Yes approach and collaboration in Syracuse includes evidence-based and coherent strategies and programs that are designed to turn around low-performing schools at scale.