Comprehensive community initiatives in education reform: The case of Say Yes to Education

David Osher, Lauren Amos, Wehmah Jones, Vanessa Coleman

American Institutes for Research, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Say Yes to Education is a national non-profit committed to dramatically increasing high school and college graduation rates for inner-city youth. An educational foundation equipped with resources and a vision of change, Say Yes is defining a different approach to city-wide turnaround, and youth developmental and achievement outcomes are the measures of success. The foundation has developed an education improvement model that involves community wide collaboration, incorporates curriculum, instruction, social emotional, and health supports into a coherent approach, and uses data to inform intervention and planning. Say Yes has been engaged in scaling implementation at the community level in two cities. These initiatives are unique ventures in the degree to which community stakeholders have organized around a single initiative, refocusing their resources to support Say Yes change strategies. This study attempts to understand both the local conditions necessary and the strategies used by Say Yes to engage community in youth-focused change.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Although K-16 academic attainment is often a prerequisite for attaining modest levels of economic security, opportunities to realize this success are often unavailable to economically disadvantaged students and students of color, particularly those who live in segregated and under-resourced neighborhoods and communities that place them at risk for developmental challenges and educational failure (Eccles, 2012). These children and youth are more likely to attend inadequately funded schools that have poor conditions for learning, including low quality of teaching and harsh discipline policies that aggravate the level of risk. (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000, 2004; Osher & Kendziora, 2010). In addition, these children and youth are more likely than their White and Asian peers to attend schools with inexperienced teachers and inadequate access to college preparatory math and science courses (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2014). Research suggests that adverse childhood experiences, unsafe neighborhoods, and poor conditions for learning in schools create barriers to academic achievement and to healthy child and adolescent development (Osher, Kendziora, Spier, & Garibaldi, 2014; Osher, Sidana, & Kelly, 2008; Rothstein, 2004). Addressing these barriers necessitates community-wide responses (Osher & Osher, 2002). Warren (2005) argues that, for urban school reform to succeed, efforts must concurrently seek to revitalize the communities in which schools are embedded.

This paper reflects on the efforts of Say Yes to Education (SYTE), a nonprofit organization based in New York City, seeking to catalyze economic, community, and school reform in Syracuse from 2008 to 2012 in response to rising unemployment, high poverty, low test scores, and declining graduation rates. An ambitious demonstration program that brought smaller SYTE efforts to scale, the Say Yes Syracuse initiative[1] represented the foundation's first efforts to implement a communitywide turnaround strategy (Maeroff, 2012). Say Yes Syracuse can be characterized as an evolution of the integrated student supports (ISS) approach—offering citywide scholarship incentives; wraparound services; the convening of major systems and stakeholders (public and private); targeted investments to offer immediate services to students and families; and an external, and therefore neutral, facilitator to foster local collaboration, collective ownership, shared decision making, and mutual transparency. Specifically, this study considers the successes and challenges of implementing the Say Yes Syracuse strategy with fidelity during the research and development phase of its design. We begin by situating Say Yes Syracuse as a communitywide ISS intervention. We then outline the conceptual framework and research questions that guided this qualitative study, describe our research methods, present our results, and conclude by discussing directions for future research.

Integrated student supports

ISS aims to address chronic disparities in educational access, opportunity, and attainment. ISS is a school-based approach to promoting student academic engagement and achievement by coordinating a system

---

E-mail address: dosher@air.org (D. Osher).

[1] Throughout this report, we refer to the Say Yes to Education Foundation as "SYTE" and the reform effort as "Say Yes Syracuse." This is to avoid confusion between SYTE actors and the reform itself, which is designed to transcend individual actors.

of wraparound supports for students and their families to eliminate nonacademic barriers to learning. Although the implementation of ISS models varies, providers tend to share five characteristics. They (a) conduct needs assessments to identify student, school, and community needs; (b) enable and coordinate academic and nonacademic supports for students and their families; (c) develop strong relationships with school personnel to ensure a seamless integration of these support services in schools; (d) develop community partnerships to facilitate service delivery; and (e) engage in data collection activities to monitor student and school progress over time (Moore et al., 2014). Moore and Emig's (2014) literature review identified 11 rigorous quasi-experimental studies that suggest that ISS can contribute to student academic progress as measured by decreases in grade retention and dropout as well as by increases in attendance, math achievement, reading and English Language Arts (ELA) achievement, and overall grade point average.

Say Yes Syracuse extends and refines the ISS model in a number of ways. First, Say Yes Syracuse is implemented at the city and district levels, providing services to all schools and balancing the collective mission and vision against the needs of individual schools.

Second, at the helm of any community coalition is a backbone organization that plays a mediational role from the formation to institutionalization stages of coalition development by recruiting and convening core constituents into a partnership team or governing body; facilitating or leading needs assessment activities, action planning, and strategy implementation; mobilizing and pooling human, material, and financial resources; and monitoring progress toward coalition goals and evaluating coalition outcomes (Butterfoss & Kegler, 2009). SYTE served this role in Syracuse. Specifically, SYTE operated as an "honest broker," an external and politically neutral party that facilitates the development of citywide collaborations, promotes transparency and accountability among partners, and initiates ongoing conversations among partners about achieving common goals. The success of the honest broker depends on partners and other stakeholders viewing the broker as an impartial party acting on behalf of the community and its children. Consistent with guidance from research (Osher & Osher, 2002; Sanders, 2003), in this capacity, SYTE sought to develop interagency collaborations (e.g., addressing rivalries among groups as well as differences in processes and procedures) to build a shared understanding and acceptance of its model. In addition to facilitating communication between groups, brokering may also involve balancing inequities among stakeholders (e.g., inequities in power, information, expertise, and funds) and streamlining existing initiatives that are operating in silos and making competing demands on limited resources (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010). This role is critical, because establishing effective collaboration across multiple groups is a complex task that must take into account the historical and contextual factors not always apparent at the onset of the initiative. The broker is especially important when incentives to collaborate are weak, power and resources among groups are unevenly distributed, a history of conflict exists, and trust among stakeholders is low (Ansell & Gash, 2007).

Third, Say Yes Syracuse was, at least at the leadership levels, broader than other ISS efforts. The partnership includes a school district, a flagship university and other institutions of higher education, the business community, the city, the county, organized labor, several research institutions, and many community-based organizations (CBOs). The partners came together to commit to common goals and measurable outcomes from which each would benefit. For example, the business community made a financial commitment to the initiative, while simultaneously anticipating that Say Yes Syracuse would lead to community revitalization and future business development in Syracuse. Furthermore, the Say Yes Syracuse initiative was designed to create schools that provide social and health services for students and families that would lead to improved educational outcomes. In the elementary schools, Say Yes Syracuse provided each school with a site director responsible for connecting the school with community organizations and families as well as social workers who support students' and families' socio-emotional needs.

Fourth and finally, SYTE's work in Syracuse shares some characteristics of a venture philanthropy approach (Gray & Stephens, 2014). Venture philanthropy makes strategic investments designed to support growth and establish expectations for returns on investment (Sievers, 2001). Venture philanthropists are comparatively ambitious in their goals. They support projects aimed at providing solutions to major social problems, and have begun to focus as much on diversifying the recipients of investments as on building the capacity of the investee organizations (Herr, 2007, February 28). SYTE thus served as a core, long-term investor (for 5 years), bringing unparalleled resources to the initiative both in terms of financial support and support for improvement in critical areas such as high school restructuring, social–emotional support, youth development, and financial assistance—most notably in the form of a permanent higher education scholarship fund.

Say Yes Syracuse: The design of the citywide turnaround strategy

Say Yes Syracuse aimed to (a) dramatically increase high school and postsecondary graduation rates and career readiness for youth in Syracuse, and ensure that students become productive, contributing members of society; (b) help students and families overcome academic, social–emotional, health, and financial barriers to postsecondary access and responsible citizenship; and (c) ensure that the influences of family, school, and community are powerful and positive for SYTE children (Say Yes to Education, 2012). Initially, SYTE's efforts in Syracuse were guided by three strategic drivers for change: (a) a place-based scholarship fund that offers last-dollar scholarships for all qualifying students in the Syracuse City School District (strategic investments); (b) a collaborative citywide infrastructure to provide and monitor effective wraparound academic, social–emotional, and health supports for students (alignment of goals and resources through collaboration); and (c) the collection and use of accurate data for planning, monitoring, collaboration, continuous improvement, and public accountability. During the course of implementation in Syracuse, and based on early experiences, the drivers have been further clarified by SYTE, and the resulting change agents are now articulated as five Core Principles.

Say Yes to Education Core Principles

The SYTE model delineates five Core Principles that are essential to all phases of change targeted by the citywide turnaround strategy. SYTE believes that a site's commitment to these principles is critical to success and therefore considers these principles to be "nonnegotiables."

Core Principle 1: Postsecondary completion goal

This principle refers to partner commitment to the common goal of universal postsecondary completion (4-year college, 2-year college, and trade school degrees) and a shared vision of how to achieve it. Accomplishing this goal requires the commitment of the entire city, including the teachers' and administrators' unions, to forming an organized coalition and engaging in a collaborative process.

Core Principle 2: Partnership with higher education

This principle refers to school district, school board, and union willingness to partner with higher education in and around the city to provide the supports and interventions needed to ensure students' success across the K-16 continuum. This partnership involves the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of activities that improve students' academic achievement and improve academic and enrichment services.

Core Principle 3: Transparent accountability

This principle refers to the requirement that all key partners report and engage in discussions about data pertaining to citywide programs,