

Mobilizing for ed reform

Rochester, Syracuse take different paths

James Goodman

Staff writer

SYRACUSE — Shaqulia Johnson remembers when, as a high school senior in Syracuse four years ago, she heard a speech that made college seem within financial reach.

“The message was that money would be given for college,” said Johnson, 21, about the talk given at her high school by a representative of the Say Yes to Education organization.

Say Yes, which has its headquarters in New York City, selected Syracuse to launch its first initiative in upstate New York in 2008 and is now in the process of launching a second one in Buffalo.

Johnson is one of more than 2,100 Syracuse students to receive scholarship funds with the help of the Say Yes program. She is now attending Monroe Community College and gives the Say Yes program a lot of credit for giving her direction and financial assistance.

But beyond the lure provided by scholarship money, Say Yes has a much more ambitious goal of providing expanded programs and services that involve the Syracuse community in better preparing students for college. And that’s where the bulk of the more than \$24 million that Say Yes national has spent in Syracuse has gone.

The scholarship money comes from private donors, who have established an endowment, and from about 25 private colleges — including several from the Rochester area — that have partnership agreements with Say Yes.

“What Say Yes has been able to do ... is really align resources and bring

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Shaqulia Johnson



Patrick Driscoll

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Say Yes

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partners to the table, so that they can provide the support necessary to ensure academic success,” said Patrick Driscoll, operations director for Say Yes in Syracuse.

Rochester was one of the metropolitan areas in the state invited to submit proposals that resulted in the selections of Syracuse and more recently Buffalo for Say Yes initiatives, but no proposals were submitted, said Gene Chasin, who is the chief operating officer for Say Yes national.

The attempt to mobilize the community around educational reform in Rochester is based on another model — Strive — that State University of New York Chancellor Nancy Zimpher was instrumental in starting when she was president of the University of Cincinnati.

While each of the five Strive sites in New York establishes priority issues, they share the goal of developing a “cradle to career” pipeline, identifying and addressing key problem areas that stand in the way of academic success. Bringing the community together to address third-grade literacy is the initial focus of the Strive initiative, known as ROC the Future here.

“When we look at where there are gaps in our community, it is certainly not in generating college scholarships. The work that is happening right now is how do we get enough students to the point where they are eligible for these scholarships,” said MCC President Anne Kress, who has helped organize the yearold Rochester initiative.

Early returns

Syracuse’s Say Yes to Education is still unfolding.

As one of the first students to benefit from Say Yes, Johnson has seen the program provide her a modest but helpful source of funding for college expenses as she struggled for a semester at Onondaga Community College but then blossomed academically at MCC, where she is within a semester of getting a degree with a B average. Since 2009, Johnson has received \$5,500 in Say Yes scholarship funds. As with many low-income students turning to Say Yes, grants from the state Tuition Assistance Program and federal Pell program have paid for her tuition. But the Say Yes opportunity scholarship grants that she has received — usually \$1,000 a semester — have helped cover college expenses, with more money possible if she needs it.

“As long as you academically succeed, Say Yes will make college affordable,” she said.

Students have received about \$3.5 million in scholarship funds from Say Yes in Syracuse. That money has been privately raised, with some of the funds coming from an endowment that has an estimated \$7 million pledged to it.

Partnership agreements between Say Yes and about 25 private colleges — including the University of Rochester, Rochester Institute of Technology and Hobart and William Smith Colleges — provide guarantees that Say Yes students from Syracuse can secure scholarship money if accepted to these schools.

For most of the partnering schools, the college will pay what is needed for tuition after it determines how much a student can get from TAP, Pell and other scholarships for families with incomes below \$75,000.

UR has accepted between 15 and 20 Say Yes students from Syracuse and usually has provided in the range of \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year to each of them in financial aid, said Jonathon Burdick, UR’s dean of admissions and financial aid. In some respects, the partnership that UR has with Say Yes is similar to UR’s Rochester Promise Scholarship program, which provides \$25,000 a year for graduates of the Rochester School District who are admitted to the college.

While there are some signs of progress, statistics suggest the jury is still out on how successful Say Yes Syracuse has been on the college-readiness end of the equation.

The percentage of Syracuse ninth-grade students who passed the algebra Regents exam increased significantly, far fewer students are dropping out after ninth grade, and the high school graduation rate in Syracuse has edged upward from 52 percent in 2008 to 53 percent in 2011.

But state tests measuring English and math proficiency for grades three through eight in Syracuse schools show a slight drop in English and a modest improvement in math over the past three school years.

Visions of reform

Say Yes to Education, with its main offices in New York City, was started in 1987 by financier George Weiss, who promised sixth-graders at a Philadelphia school that he would pay for their college costs.

Over time, programs — limited in scope — have been put in place elsewhere in Philadelphia; in Hartford, Conn.; Harlem; and

Cambridge, Mass.

Syracuse was the first Say Yes program that covers an entire school district.

Some of the \$24 million already spent has gone to participating local partners, such as Syracuse University, to help increase the college students who are mentors, and the Syracuse City School District, which has expanded its after-school programs and summer camp. Funds from Say Yes also have paid for more than two dozen Say Yes staff — many of them placed in Syracuse schools as service coordinators. In the coming school year, state funds will now pay for much of the staffing. The Strive model also stresses community involvement.

As president of the University of Cincinnati in 2006, Zimpher spearheaded the Strive community collaborative in Cincinnati and northern Kentucky school districts that has resulted in improvements in such key indicators as fourth-grade reading and math scores and high school graduation rates. Four other communities across the state also have adopted the Strive model, with each initiative having its own key issues. ROC the Future's initial focus is on improving literacy rates for third-graders in city schools, where only 22.6 percent of the students are reading at grade level. "There is not a one size fits all," said Johanna Duncan-Poitier, SUNY's senior vice chancellor for community colleges and the education pipeline.

ROC the Future, with the City School District, United Way of Greater Rochester and the Rochester Area Community Foundation among the participants, is completing the gathering of data about resources in the community that are addressing third-grade literacy in city schools and what are considered the best practices.

Once ROC the Future has mobilized the community around this issue, it will move on to another — yet to be designated — issue concerning college readiness.

But there seems to be a concerted effort not to take on too many issues at one time. "Folks want to avoid what they see as difficulties with past efforts," said Kress.

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Staff writer Tiffany Lankes contributed to this report.

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