

INTERMEDIARY ORIGIN STORY

# SAY YES BUFFALO

Keys to Scale



**SAY YES**  
**BUFFALO**

**ESG**

Education  
Strategy  
Group

# Say Yes Buffalo

Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, The John R. Oishei Foundation, and local business leaders begin fundraising for Buffalo Promise

Say Yes Buffalo is selected to manage the community schools model in partnership with Buffalo Public Schools and continues to grow comprehensive programs and supports for students aged 3 through high school graduation. Begins with 13 Community Schools in 2016 and will grow to 23 Community Schools in 2023

Say Yes Buffalo transitions to local governance

Say Yes Buffalo launches Say Yes Little Scholars, three-year old instruction in Buffalo's Public Schools



2010

2011

2016

2018

2020

2022

2023

Buffalo is selected to become the second national Say Yes to Education city, which comes with \$15 million in seed capital; David Rust is hired as founding Executive Director; Operating committee established; Launch of comprehensive supports begins

Endowment campaign begins (\$65 million over six years)

Say Yes Buffalo launches CareerWise Greater Buffalo, an apprenticeship program for seniors in Buffalo Public Schools



# WHAT IS SAY YES BUFFALO?

Say Yes Buffalo (SYB) is an intermediary organization with approximately 200 employees focused on post-secondary access and attainment and access to good living wage jobs in the Buffalo region of New York state. Founding CEO David Rust considers SYB a collective impact partnership centered on racial equity and inclusion that combines the promise of providing postsecondary tuition with comprehensive support for children aged 3 through K-12 and postsecondary education.

While SYB started out with intentions to remove the barrier of college tuition for the young people of Buffalo, its story is one of cultural transformation. In little more than a decade, SYB has grown to provide programming and services to youth attending Buffalo Public Schools and established deep relationships with higher education institutions, local employers, and families. Say Yes Buffalo provides so many services to the people of Buffalo that it has grown to become what CEO David Rust calls an “Intermediary Plus” — a collaborative partner who listens to the stakeholders of the Buffalo community and develops and delivers programming in response.

**“Say Yes just continues to be that convener, that center of all of this activity that brings different resources and organizations and leaders together to say, if we work together, we can begin to unravel some of these systemic barriers that our young people and our families have.”**

Matthew Giordano  
President,  
Villa Maria College



## SYB'S APPROACH IS DESCRIBED AS:

- **Comprehensive:** Providing support for whole families and for students from “cradle to career”
- **Collaborative:** Convening stakeholders and treating them as full partners in its work
- **Responsive:** Pivoting to respond to new requests from partners and new evidence (stemming from its data collection efforts), as well as responding to disruptive events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the tragic mass shooting that occurred in Buffalo in 2022
- **Sustainable:** Developing programs that are sustainably funded for the long-term benefit of the Buffalo community

“I view Say Yes as a career springboard.... So we’ve got leaders... that have moved on to high-level jobs in philanthropy and government and other nonprofits. And that’s exactly what I’d like is people... to think big for themselves and move up and move out of the organization and move into other leadership roles. I mean, we’ve got a lot of challenges in Buffalo, and I think when we’ve got strong leaders in multiple organizations working across multiple sectors, we’ve got a chance to be our best as a community. So that’s the philosophy I’ve tried to lead with here.”

David Rust  
Founder and CEO,  
Say Yes Buffalo



# The Beginning

In 2009, a local group that included leaders from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, The John R. Oishei Foundation, and the local business community began discussing ideas for how they might work together to improve the local economy by improving educational outcomes for students from lower-income backgrounds. The graduation rate in Buffalo schools had been steadily falling. At the same time, a workforce cliff was on the horizon; estimates suggested that nearly two-thirds of the 165,000 open jobs would require a postsecondary credential in ten years.

By 2010, this group of leaders began raising money to establish Buffalo Promise. This citywide scholarship program sought to make higher education free for students who graduated from Buffalo Public Schools. As they fundraised to make Buffalo Promise a reality, it became clear that students would need additional support throughout their educational journeys in order to take advantage of free tuition upon graduating from high school.



**“And it has been very, very clear, and this goes back to Say Yes’s origins, that in order for Buffalo to again have the kind of economic comeback that we think is possible in this city, we have to turn on the young talent that exists within the city. We have to educate them, we have to prepare [them], we have to provide real pathways for them. And I think the Say Yes, first of all, has been leading that conversation, but secondly, is the organization that everyone’s turning to help be a part of figuring that out because we’ve seen how successful they’ve been at raising grad rates, raising college-going rates, and improving all of these other aspects of life for the students and families that are part of Buffalo Public Schools.”**

Matthew Giordano  
President,  
Villa Maria College



They looked to the success of the work that Say Yes to Education was doing in partnership with the Syracuse City School District, which combined a promise scholarship program with the creation of a comprehensive system of K-12 student and family support. Through a competitive RFP process in 2011, Buffalo was selected to become the second national Say Yes city, which came with \$15 million in seed capital, to seed the services and support that would help students graduate high school prepared and ready to go to college and take advantage of available scholarships. Locally, \$15 million was raised to establish a scholarship fund to pay for scholarships for the first ten years; \$29 million was ultimately raised to fund scholarships between 2013 and 2023.

When Say Yes Buffalo was launched in 2011, David Rust, then working at the local county government, was recruited to become SYB's founding (and still current) Executive Director (now CEO). At the same time, the burgeoning organization established an operating committee. During those founding years, this committee met biweekly with interested citywide stakeholders in attendance. The committee included leadership from the Mayor's office in the City of Buffalo, the

Erie County Executive's office, the Buffalo Public Schools Superintendent, Board of Education, and union leadership, parents, youth, institutions of higher education, foundations, and representatives from the elected state membership bodies.

Rust attributes much of SYB's success to this operating committee, which continues to provide a forum for ongoing collaboration and perspective sharing among institutions and groups of people who often operate in silos. SYB's strategy has always involved the community — especially those community members who are sometimes imperfectly or chronically underrepresented by education and workforce institutions. Through committee meetings, relationships have been forged, visions have aligned, and the inevitable challenges that have arisen have been addressed collectively. Rust explains, "We work to be a listening organization, so as new partners step in, it's important that we understand what they want, how they work, what they would like to see, how to say yes. And you can get it right, or you can be right. And our philosophy is always to try and get it right, and that takes listening and being a good partner."

**“[The operating committee]... is truly representative. So on the same committee, you have college presidents, you have parent representatives from the families in BPS, you have student voices, you have elected officials, you have the head of the teachers union, you have some Say Yes staff members, and everyone is treated respectfully and equally. So it's fairly unique in my experience, at least in Western New York, where you've got such a wide range of different stakeholders represented often by people at the highest levels of their organizations. And it is so collegial and cooperative.”**

**Matthew Giordano**  
President,  
Villa Maria College



# Responsive Expansion

The story of Say Yes Buffalo's success is a story of continuous strategic and sustainable expansion. While the promise of free postsecondary education mobilized an initial group of local leaders, it was clear that Buffalo students' needs were not simple. Buffalo youth and families faced tremendous systemic barriers that often stood in the way of young people's education and preparation for higher education. SYB acted as a convener, bringing disparate organizations and leaders together to generate resources, align on goals, and discuss shared strategies for addressing these barriers.

## Supporting K-12 Students and Families

Through mechanisms like the operating committee, the specific needs of Buffalo's youth were identified, and appropriate responses were piloted and expanded. Because students and families face more than one barrier to a successful education, SYB provides

comprehensive services within school buildings. Students can get tutoring, food, clothes, and mental health services within the school building and be connected to partners in the community for other needs like shelter. As the superintendent of schools, Dr. Tonja Williams, explains, with Rust and Say Yes Buffalo, the answer is "never a no," and always a "let's figure out how to get it done together."

To fully support students, Say Yes Buffalo recognized that it needed to provide resources for families as well. In addition to a mental health clinic in every public school building, they have civil legal clinics and parent centers available for families.

**"[Rust] had a vision for Say Yes, that they would partner with our district and in different quadrants of the city. We would have rooms in some of our schools that would be decorated very comfortably. There would be computers that parents could come in and access. They'd be open in the evenings. We could have guest speakers come in, we'd have food and say, yes, we'll provide staff to staff these rooms. Phenomenal. These schools then became the hub of communities, and they're still going on today."**

Dr. Tonja Williams,  
Superintendent,  
Buffalo Public Schools





## Supporting Students to Pursue Postsecondary Education

In 2019, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided a \$2.9 million, 22-month grant to support the newly established Buffalo College Success Network. This network helps students, with special emphasis on those from communities of color and low-income households, make successful transitions from high school to college and ultimately complete a postsecondary certificate or degree.

For students who attend college, SYB helps students to develop the skills, experiences, and connections necessary to transition to careers by helping them land paid internship opportunities. Available for all students who are rising sophomores and older, these internships help students gain practical experience and explore potential career pathways. SYB supports interns with a Professional Skills Seminar that gives students a jump start by providing the knowledge, skills, and resources to successfully complete their internship. Throughout the internships, students are given individual support by SYB's Internship and Career Pathways Program Supervisor, who offers coaching to every intern.



## Expanding Pathway Choices

Over the past decade, SYB has started to reflect on the ways they can build pathway opportunities for students who cannot or do not wish to pursue a full-time college experience. With funding from the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation and after completing an assessment of the labor market, SYB sought to build a pathway for students who will enter the workforce directly from high school. In 2022, Say Yes Buffalo and local partners launched CareerWise Greater Buffalo, an apprenticeship program in which eligible seniors from participating Buffalo Public Schools can earn a family-supporting wage while working alongside seasoned professionals and receiving classroom instruction. Upon completion of the program, apprentices are ready to step into full-time roles in high-demand industries: Advanced Manufacturing, Business Operations, and Information Technology.

All of SYB's resources and programs in BPS are there to ensure that students can take advantage of the scholarships that await them. Key to the SYB scholarship program is student choice. Having postsecondary options that best meet the needs and interests of Buffalo's students is the priority.

**“....students can attend any public college in New York state and 100 private colleges around the country. So it's built so that there is access for all and choice. And by choice, I mean if you want to get a quick phlebotomy certificate, great. If you want to take a modern youth apprenticeship three-year program in accounting and work at a bank, we fund that. If you want to go pre-med or electrical engineering, we fund that.”**

David Rust  
Founder and CEO,  
Say Yes Buffalo



# Building Buffalo

Even as it has grown, Say Yes Buffalo has been intentional about grounding its activities deeply in Buffalo soil. As Villa Maria College's president, Matthew Giordano, said, SYB is "not just for the community, but of the community."

70 percent of Say Yes Buffalo's employees are people of color, from the senior leadership to individual contributors. Programs are led by people who are representative of the students who attend Buffalo Public Schools; many of SYB's staff grew up in Buffalo, went to Buffalo Public Schools and continue to live in the city.

**"What I love about Say Yes is it's not business as usual. It's very personal. They're very intentional about who they hire. They make sure that there's diversity... so we're able to get professionals that look like the children that are trained... it's a win-win."**

Dr. Tonja Williams  
Superintendent,  
Buffalo Public Schools



## Sustainability

SYB has strategically planned its expansion so that it is sustainable in the long term. For example, staff positions for SYB's Family Support Specialist (FSS) program were seeded through a Say Yes to Education philanthropic grant, and they are now entirely funded by Erie County, the City of Buffalo for Social Service Family Support Specialists, and Medicaid for Health Family Support Specialists.

A key moment of Say Yes Buffalo's evolution was its transition to local governance. By 2020, Say Yes Buffalo had expanded to hundreds of employees, and in order to develop the appropriate infrastructure to support those employees and to manage all of the work it was doing, it needed to transition to be a local organization. Where previously Rust had a dual reporting line to Say Yes Buffalo's board of directors and to the national Say Yes office, the SYB Buffalo board assumed full operations and governance of the organization in 2020.

SYB has been careful to develop formal systems to ensure the longevity of its impact and to develop future leaders within the organization. Rust points to the fact that 90 percent of promotions since they launched, have been internal and describes a robust professional development budget designed to develop its employees into leaders. Treating SYB as a training ground for producing future leaders for Buffalo is all a part of the long-term plan:

In July 2024, SYB will conclude a six-year and \$65 million endowment campaign. The campaign was seeded by a long-time supporter with a \$15 million dollar anonymous investment. The endowment will be housed at the Community Foundation in Buffalo. It will support apprenticeships, certificates, two-year degrees, and four-year degrees for students in the city of Buffalo well into the future.

**“We try not to launch a service unless we have a sustainable plan on the backend. We don't want people to get used to the work we're doing and have it go away. So almost all our models try to use philanthropic dollars as seed capital that are sustained elsewhere.”**

David Rust  
Founder and CEO,  
Say Yes Buffalo



# Impact

**“I think Say Yes has done a really incredible job of helping Buffalo really believe in itself. I think 10 years ago, 15 years ago, Buffalo was at a point of really questioning whether it was ever going to rebound from the fallout of all the steel manufacturers and other types of working-class businesses leaving the city. And I think part of what has been so great about Say Yes is that Dave and his team showed the city that working together, we could create really positive change and see our city reverse some very negative trends and start to tap into economically the potential that we have right here in our backyard with these young people. And the way they did it was through collaboration. So I think actually one of their biggest outcomes, the biggest impacts that they’ve had has been to lead the way in showing us as a community what we’re really capable of and how to do it, how to make it happen.”**

**Matthew Giordano  
President,  
Villa Maria College**

The expansion of services has been possible because Say Yes Buffalo has made a quantifiable and demonstrable impact on its city. In total, Say Yes Buffalo currently has 4,000+ alums, and another 2,400 students in the higher education pipeline. Since its launch, Buffalo has seen a 30 percentage point increase in high school graduation rates, a 17 percent increase in postsecondary entrance, and a 14 percent increase in post-secondary completion. These results have increased buy-in among key stakeholders and generated interest among potential partners, including employers.

SYB’s biggest impact, however, is that SYB is helping Buffalo develop a new identity for itself.

**30%**

point increase in high school graduation rates

**17%**

increase postsecondary entrance

**14%**

increase in post-secondary completion



# Looking Ahead

Despite all the work SYB does to support students throughout their school journey, Rust believes they could be doing more. Building the assets to have an endowed scholarship is an incredible achievement, but Rust wants to double down on providing support to students.

SYB's committed efforts, collaborative mindset, and successes have set it up well for the future. Its partners are confident that SYB will be around for the long term.

Its footprint may also continue to grow. Say Yes Buffalo is in initial talks to expand into its sister city of Niagara Falls, 20 miles away. Rust believes a regional approach would enable Buffalo and Niagara to maximize regional assets. A new endowed fund would need to be established, and the systems that have already been developed in Buffalo could be scaled.

**“...The next phase of our work is having an asset base and putting it to really good work. So more caseworkers on the campuses, more connections with students, linkages as they need them. Doing a lot of that work in the public school system. We've got great higher ed partners we lean on. They could use a capacity boost on their campuses to help support our students, and we owe it to them.”**

David Rust  
Founder and CEO,  
Say Yes Buffalo