

Children and Families First: An Evaluation of the Philadelphia Say Yes to Education Program

– Executive Summary –

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Say Yes to Education is a scholarship guarantee program that pledges to young children and their families a fully paid, post-secondary education along with academic and social supports that follow children throughout their elementary and high school careers. Since its inception in 1987, the Say Yes to Education program has “adopted” cohorts of students in Philadelphia, Hartford and Cambridge.

In fall 2002, Say Yes to Education (Say Yes) invited Research for Action (RFA) to conduct an evaluation of its Philadelphia chapter’s work. The Philadelphia chapter’s current cohort was unique in two respects: 1) the children were selected from Head Start programs, thus becoming the youngest Say Yes students ever, and 2) significant supports (scholarships for parents and siblings) were promised to families of Say Yes students. This holistic approach emerged from a growing recognition that each Say Yes student is part of a unique family system in which educational opportunities for all can contribute to making education a family priority.

The Say Yes staff wanted an evaluation of the effects and outcomes of the program on children and their families. They also wanted to better understand the values parents placed on involvement in Say Yes, the obstacles they encountered, and the incentives that supported their taking advantage of the opportunities afforded to them and their children. This cohort (N=47) started kindergarten as Say Yes students; all but a few were in third grade when the evaluation began.

At the conclusion of 18 months of research, RFA found that this cohort of Say Yes students was performing better than their peers—both in their school and in the District—on standardized tests in math and reading and on other important indicators such as attendance and behavior. The following outcomes demonstrate their achievement:

- **52% of Say Yes third grade students were doing math on or above the national average** on the Terra Nova as compared to 39% of third graders in the District and 37% of their classmates at the school.

- **36% of Say Yes third grade students were reading above the national average** on the Terra Nova as compared to 31% of third graders in the District and at the school.
- Say Yes third grade students **had 8-10 fewer absences during the 2003-2004** school term than their third grade classmates.
- Teachers rated Say Yes students’ **behavior** in second grade (the only year behavior data was available) **significantly better** than their peers or the previous year’s second graders.
- **Say Yes parents reported that their children read with more frequency and confidence** as a result of the individual time and attention invested by Say Yes staff and Experience Corps volunteers.

In addition, our research indicated that the attention by program staff and parents to academics was resulting in an emergent peer culture among Say Yes children that linked their educational experience to a future in which they imagined themselves as bound for college or other post-secondary training.

The many year-round academic supports provided by Say Yes may be one factor in the academic progress of the students. Say Yes provided supplemental reading support during the school day, Family Math Nights and a “Math for Parents” program, homework help and tutoring in the after-school program and the Freedom School summer camp which incorporated reading and math within an Afro-centric curriculum that also included a variety of cultural enrichment activities.

The success Say Yes experienced in engaging with families is another factor that may be contributing to students’ academic progress. Interviews and focus groups with 30 Say Yes parents suggest that Say Yes has expanded families’ involvement in their children’s education as a whole and influenced their relationships with their children. While some parents were already involved in their children’s education prior to their involvement in Say Yes, many parents reported becoming more involved in their children’s academic lives as a result of the program. They described engaging in more educational moments (i.e.,

homework help, reading together, doing math activities) at home.

Parents who took advantage of the educational scholarship by enrolling in a community college or technical school felt in a position to model college-going behavior for their children. In addition, some parents modified how they communicate with and discipline their children based on knowledge and strategies learned from Say Yes.

During the period of our research, Say Yes parents were a visible presence within the school—visiting the Say Yes room in the school and their child’s classroom during the school day, as well as volunteering in the school. Parents are also a visible and consistent presence in all Say Yes activities. Our observations documented 25-30 parents in regular attendance at parents’ meetings during the school year and an even greater number of Say Yes and other parents participating in the summer.

Say Yes staff approached parent engagement as a relational rather than a programmatic activity. The program director, a seasoned social worker, spent many months getting to know parents and their children and endeavoring to build trusting and caring relationships. Relationships between parents and program staff were furthered as parents observed the genuine care staff displayed toward their children, the safe spaces they created within the school for their children, and the positive cultural identity Say Yes incorporated into all their activities.

Say Yes staff also facilitated a network of relationships among Say Yes parents which many welcomed as an “extended family.” The Freedom School program was particularly important in creating a space for the sense of extended family to emerge. The sense of “extended family” meant that parents felt more collective responsibility for each other’s children and were more likely to help each other outside of the Say Yes to Education program.

The Say Yes program was also positioned as a bridge between Say Yes families and the school. The staff facilitated the involvement of parents in the life of the school and also worked with parents to advocate for their children’s needs within the school. Parents viewed Say Yes as an on-site “guardian” during the school day and felt the program’s presence in the school made the school a safer place for their children. The Say Yes room in the school was described by parents as a place where parents and children could be

supported as they processed negative interactions with school staff and developed strategies for resolving their tensions with the school.

Say Yes hoped its efforts would complement and strengthen the work of the beleaguered Philadelphia elementary school the children attended. However, turbulence in the school and District, beginning the second year of the program, interrupted much of the relationship building work Say Yes accomplished with the school staff during its first year. As a result, school staff perceived the program to be foreign to the school’s culture, especially in its establishment of a select group of students. As Say Yes parents expanded their capacity to monitor their children’s education and to act individually and collectively on behalf of their children, faculty became increasingly mistrustful of their actions and expressed concern that Say Yes had “dangerously empowered” parents.

In conclusion, this report suggests that Say Yes derives its power to improve children’s lives through three interrelated traits: 1) a relational model of working with children and families to build caring and trusting connections; 2) a holistic approach to the family that increases academic proficiency; and 3) an ecological vision of the child as embedded in the spheres of home and school. The track record of Say Yes staff in building and maintaining strong relationships with parents and children is impressive, and could serve as a model for many urban teachers and school personnel.

Our qualitative analysis is based on 18 months of data collection and our quantitative analysis on only one year of performance data, making it difficult to definitively conclude that the outcomes listed above are a direct result of the program’s interventions. Further research following students’ academic progress over time should clarify the ways in which Say Yes supports contribute to students’ academic gains.

By the time these Say Yes students completed fourth grade, many parents and staff believed it was time to leave the current school, even though grades five through eight were housed in the building. Most transferred their children to other schools in the region, including a Philadelphia charter school and several magnet and private schools. This move will challenge Say Yes to maintain the sense of caring and extended family that parents treasured in the primary grades. Further research will explore whether the solid social and academic foundation laid in these early years helps students to weather this transition and future ones as they move into high school and beyond.