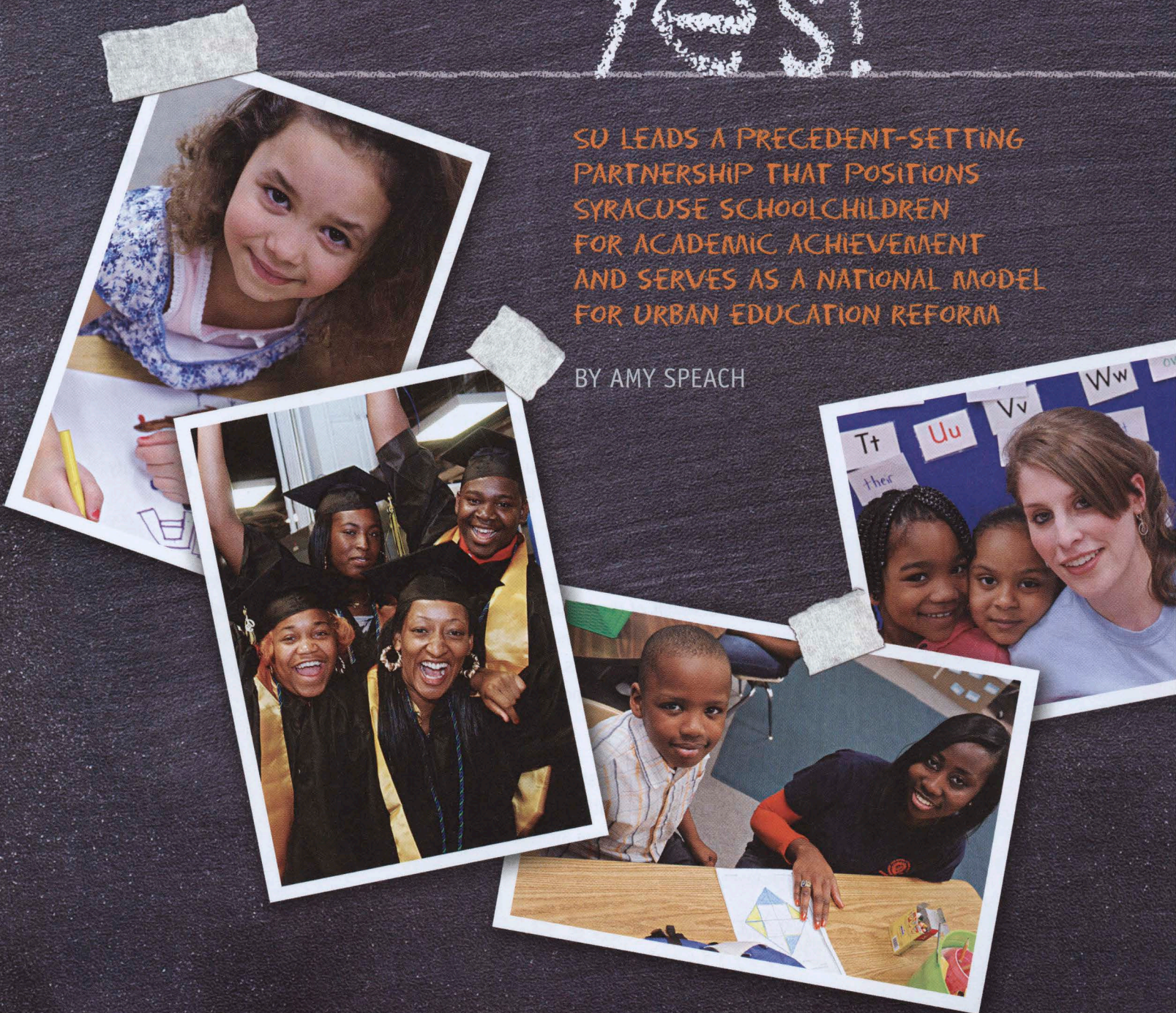


Saying Yes!

SU LEADS A PRECEDENT-SETTING PARTNERSHIP THAT POSITIONS SYRACUSE SCHOOLCHILDREN FOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SERVES AS A NATIONAL MODEL FOR URBAN EDUCATION REFORM

BY AMY SPEACH





Early education expert Asomgyee Pamoja, site director at Delaware Elementary School, describes his role in the Say Yes program as part coach, part cheerleader, and part motivator.

One

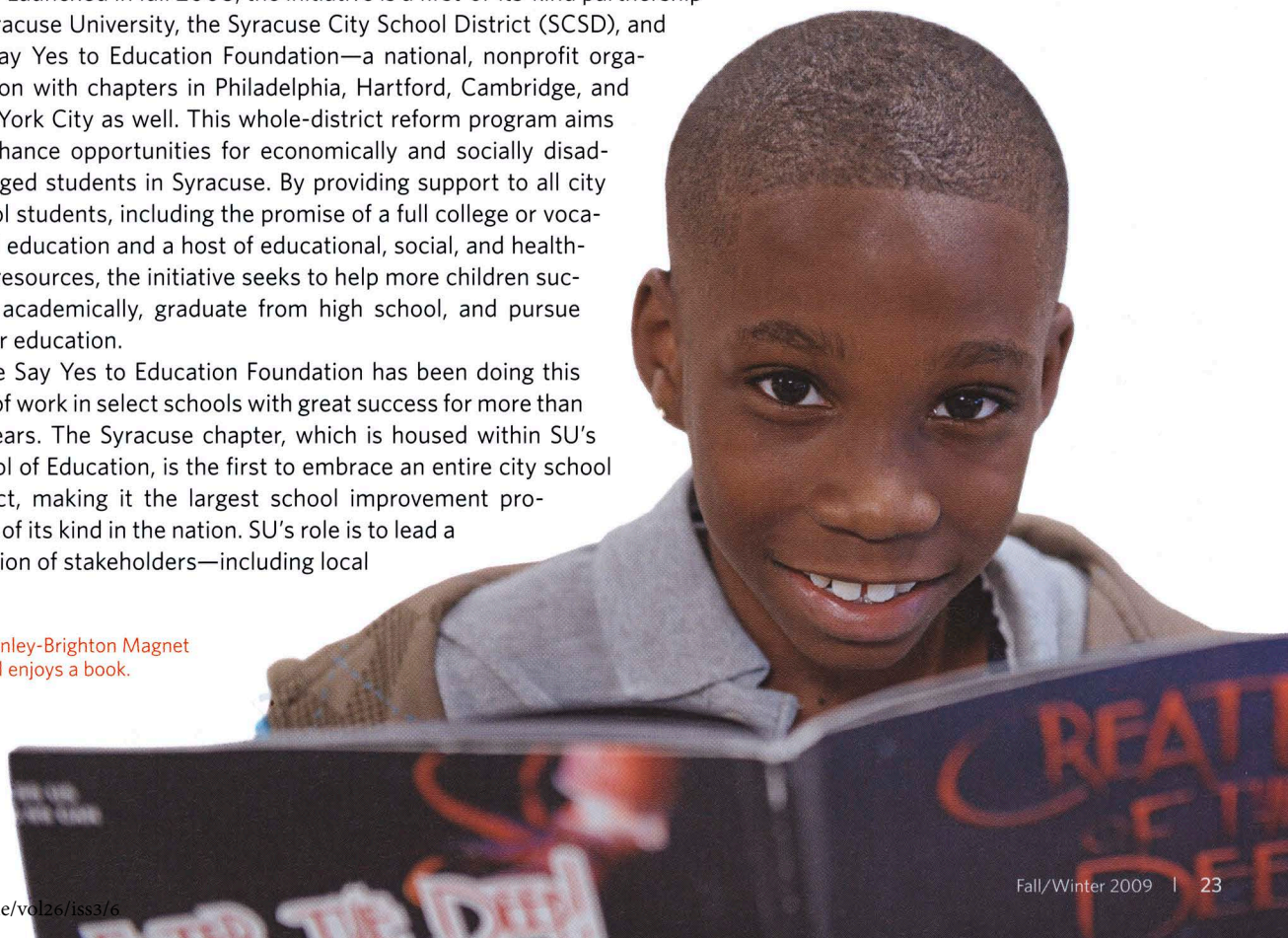
sunny day just after school started in September, Jessica Early sat with elementary kids in the lunchroom at the Roberts School in Syracuse, inviting their ideas for interesting and fun after-school programs. Early, a program coordinator for Say Yes to Education—a national initiative aimed at improving student achievement in city schools—was bombarded with imaginative suggestions ranging from science experiments to cooking classes. Later that week, in another part of town, Say Yes site director Asomgyee Pamoja met with teachers at Delaware Elementary, recruiting them to teach in the school’s end-of-day sessions and share with students their passion for such pastimes as scrapbooking and long-distance running. Similar planning and staffing activities took place at schools across the city in the early fall, marking the enthusiastic and optimistic start of the second year of a community-wide collaboration focused on improving education in the Syracuse City School District. “We love to engage the kids as we are planning after-school programming,” says Early, who returned to her hometown of Syracuse to work with Say Yes after 10 years of human rights and anti-poverty work in New York City. “We value their opinions and want them to enjoy everything we do. Letting the voice of the community lead our work is a very high priority for us.”

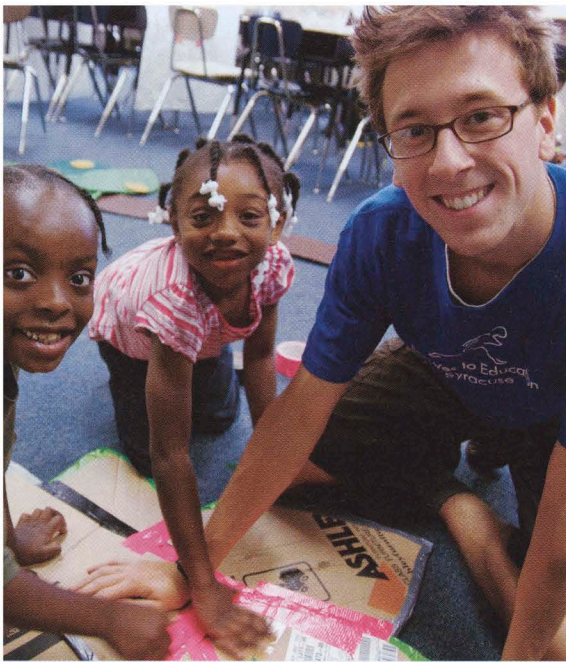
Innovative after-school enrichment classes are just one aspect of the comprehensive Say Yes to Education and Economic Development Syracuse Demonstration Program. Launched in fall 2008, the initiative is a first-of-its-kind partnership of Syracuse University, the Syracuse City School District (SCSD), and the Say Yes to Education Foundation—a national, nonprofit organization with chapters in Philadelphia, Hartford, Cambridge, and New York City as well. This whole-district reform program aims to enhance opportunities for economically and socially disadvantaged students in Syracuse. By providing support to all city school students, including the promise of a full college or vocational education and a host of educational, social, and health-care resources, the initiative seeks to help more children succeed academically, graduate from high school, and pursue higher education.

The Say Yes to Education Foundation has been doing this kind of work in select schools with great success for more than 20 years. The Syracuse chapter, which is housed within SU’s School of Education, is the first to embrace an entire city school district, making it the largest school improvement program of its kind in the nation. SU’s role is to lead a coalition of stakeholders—including local

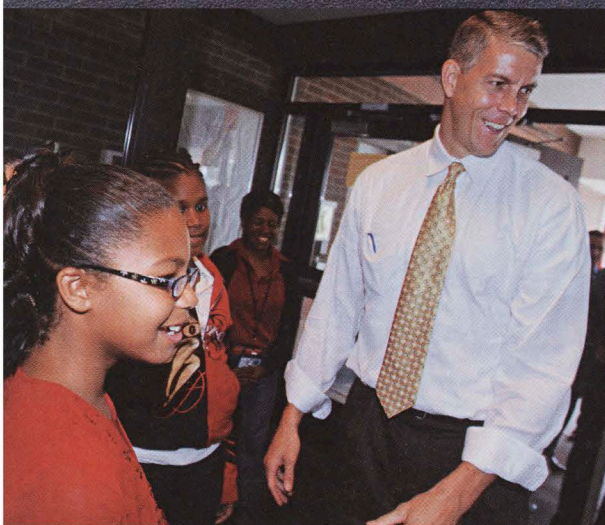
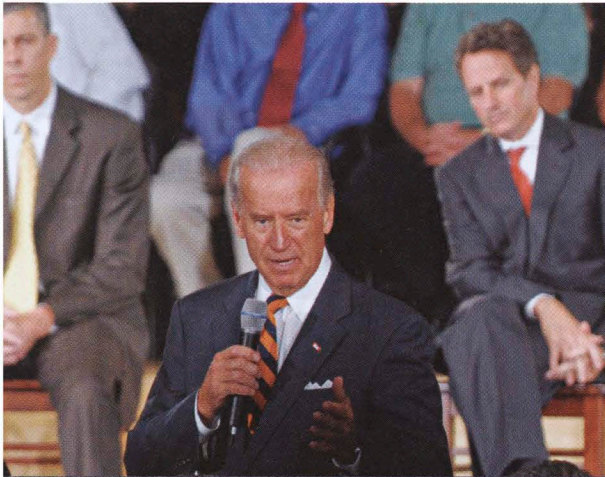


A student at McKinley-Brighton Magnet Elementary School enjoys a book.





David Meinhart '11 (above left), an English major in the College of Arts and Sciences, loves the enthusiasm of the kids he meets while teaching in Say Yes after-school and summer programs. Elementary school students (above right) practice yoga, one of many Say Yes after-school activities.



Vice President Joe Biden, L'68 fields a question while on campus in September. (top photo) Secretary of Education Arne Duncan greets students at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet Elementary School. (bottom photo)

BIDEN LEADS Middle Class Task Force Meeting at SU

THANKS TO THE UNIVERSITY'S commitment to the critical issues of college access and affordability, and the Syracuse community's collective work on the Syracuse Say Yes to Education initiative, Syracuse was chosen to host a meeting of the White House Task Force on Middle Class Families. Held on campus in September, the event was led by U.S. Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. L'68, who was joined by Secretary of Treasury Timothy Geithner and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. More than 1,000 people attended the event, which focused on higher education.

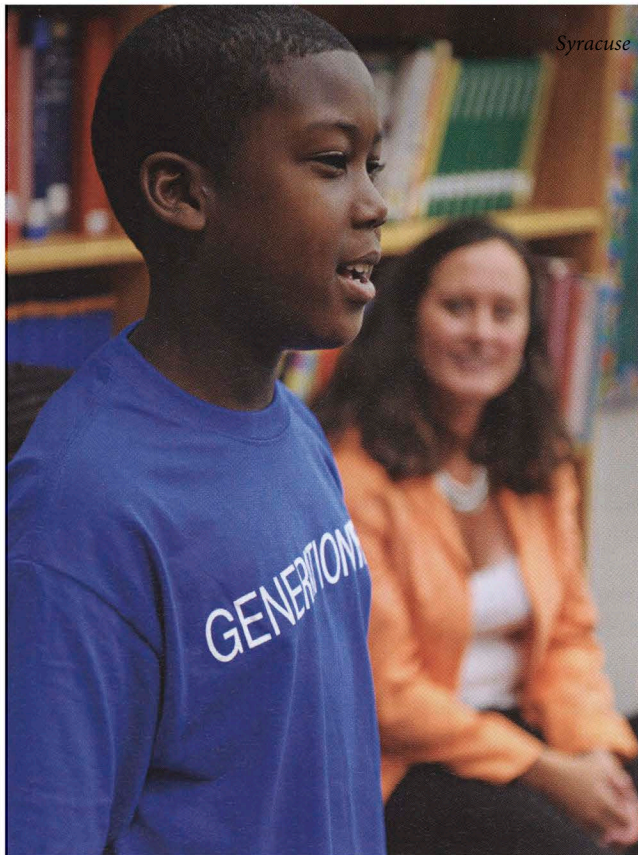
Biden complimented the University and the entire Syracuse community on the initiative, pointing out that it addresses two major obstacles to attending college: preparation and cost. "The president and I believe there is no better ticket to the middle class than a college education," Biden said. "In order for Americans to compete in the world, in order for us to lead in the 21st century in the world as we did in the 20th century, we need more students leaving college campuses with diplomas."

Following the task force meeting,

which concluded with a question-and-answer session with community members, Duncan visited Syracuse's Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet Elementary School to learn more about the Say Yes program and witness the ways it is making a difference there. "What you're doing—not just for your 12th-graders, but also for your kindergartners and first-graders—has profound national implications," he said. "We have a chance to fundamentally break through as a country at every level in education."

According to Chancellor Nancy Cantor, the day's events presented extraordinary opportunities for discussing college access. "All of Central New York should be proud that this opportunity was made possible because we are a national leader in addressing these critical issues right here in Syracuse," she said. "The University's and community's work on the Syracuse Say Yes to Education initiative is working to change the lives of 21,000 students and their families in every school in the district."

A recorded webcast of the meeting is available at <http://biden.syr.edu>.



Say Yes executive director Rachael Gazdick '93 looks on as a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet Elementary School student shares his experiences in the program.

elected officials, the school board and teachers' union, business and local philanthropic leaders, clergy, and parents—in a common strategy toward a shared goal: transforming the fortunes of SCSD students, and with them, the future of the city itself. The University manages an ongoing student assessment and planning system, and heads up the hiring and training of Say Yes staff members assigned to each school in the district, where they collaborate with administrators and teachers to develop supports for student success. SU has also enlisted a network of private universities and colleges that promise free tuition to Say Yes graduates, and oversees internships for SU students across all disciplines to participate in such areas as after-school and summer academic enrichment programs, tutoring, and mentoring. "This is not so much a program as a movement," says executive director Rachael Gazdick '93. "It is a sustainable model, in which private and public partnerships come together in relationship with the schools and the community, making connections and creating high standards for academic achievement." For SCSD children and their families, this means a whole community of caring experts is joining forces to give them what they need to succeed—in school and in life. As Gazdick puts it, "It really takes an entire city to put its arms around its children to ensure their academic success."

Achieving Potential

Research shows that the primary obstacles to post-secondary access for low-income students fall into four main categories—social and emotional, health and wellness, financial,

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—EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RACHAEL GAZDICK '93

and academic—all of which are addressed through Say Yes initiatives, beginning when a child enters kindergarten and continuing through high school graduation. "We have multiple task forces around the city to remove barriers for kids in each of those areas," Gazdick says. "So, for example, if a child is not seeing a doctor on a regular basis, or hasn't been to a dentist, we ask, 'How do we get resources to our young people to remove those barriers?' If they are struggling to make good grades, we want to know, 'How do we create tutorial programs and align them with after-school time, to ensure all our kids are thriving academically?'"

The Syracuse initiative's four-year rollout began last fall with the six elementary schools that feed into Corcoran High School. During this first phase, each of those schools was staffed with a Say Yes site director and a program coordinator. They work as a team with the school's faculty, staff, and principal to implement the Say Yes model, coordinating community-based organizations and resources and overseeing after-school and summer programs. "Working with the schools to create curriculum, we have very high expectations for our students, and we know they can reach them if we set that bar," Gazdick says. More than 800 K-3 students participated in the Say Yes after-school and summer camp programs last year, and 600 SCSD seniors became Say Yes graduates, eligible for free tuition through the Higher Education Compact (see "The Promise," page 27). This fall, in the rollout's second phase, Corcoran programs were expanded to serve grades K-4, and new programs were launched for K-3 students in the Fowler High School feeders.

Another important Say Yes resource for SCSD children and families is the Legal Support Program, led by Tony Marshall of Syracuse law firm Harris Beach. It brings together nonprofit service providers and local law firms to provide pro bono legal services at four elementary schools. At these clinics, attorneys and paralegals provide families with advice and referrals relating to legal matters that may interfere with a child's ability to succeed in school, such as custody and housing issues. "The clinics are very good at engaging the community in ways that are appropriate to a school's specific culture, taking into account the differences in a family's perspective of life in Syracuse depending on their neighborhood, socioeconomic status, and oral history," says Pamoja, an early childhood education expert who brings nearly 20 years of professional teaching experience to his role as site director.



Say Yes summer camp staff members gather on the steps of Hendricks Chapel on the last day of the Summer Institute, a two-week intensive training session.



At a March luncheon welcoming Say Yes founder George Weiss, Rachael Gazdick '93 visits with Jacquar Sampson, a Nottingham High School graduate now attending Medaille College in Buffalo on a Say Yes scholarship.

Additionally, Huntington Family Centers—an organization dedicated to the preservation and strengthening of individuals and families in Onondaga County—has partnered with Say Yes to provide Family Support, a voluntary parent-driven program that connects families with community resources, addressing child behavior or attendance issues, and encouraging supportive relationships between families and school

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staff. In addition, a health and wellness task force has been established, with the goal of enrolling approximately 7,000 SCSD students without health coverage. The Say Yes K-12 support program also provides access to tutoring and mentoring, social work services, and financial aid and college selection counseling.

Why Syracuse?

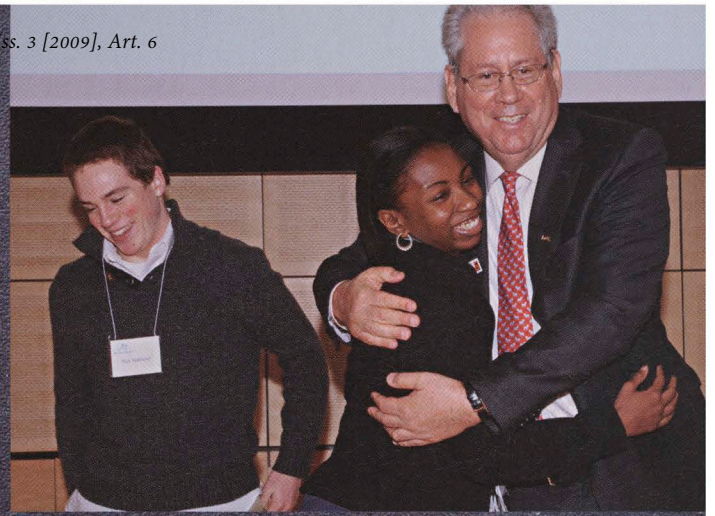
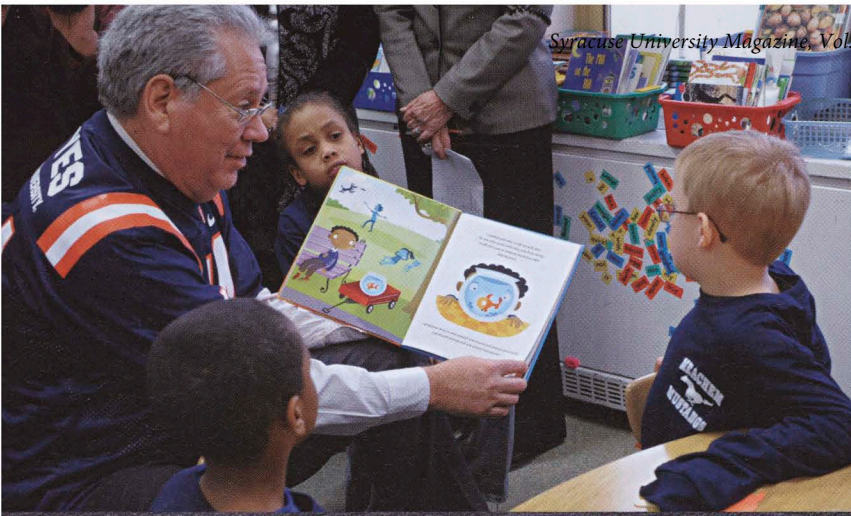
Say Yes to Education was founded in 1987 by George A. Weiss, president of George Weiss Associates, a money management firm in Hartford, Connecticut, out of a desire to give back to disadvantaged urban youth. "It was built on his belief that if you could create hope through the establishment of a scholarship and align that to comprehensive support, similar to the support he was providing to his own children, you really could level the playing field," says Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey, the foundation's president. "At its core, Say Yes is still about that."

Two years ago, the foundation reflected on its work in four American cities, noting significant improvements in high school and college graduation rates, particularly in those areas that provided early interventions for children. After con-

ducting a study to determine the feasibility and cost of extending the program to encompass an entire school district, the foundation began searching for a demonstration city in which to launch the new model. "We were interested in finding a city that was inspired by our work and wanted to implement it as a whole city strategy," Schmitt-Carey says. "We were also interested in committing to a strategic partnership with a higher education institution that would provide expert support on the development of academic, socio-emotional, and health support programs. It was clear to us that taking this to scale required thinking differently about public/private partnerships and meant developing relationships with the school district, city and county governments and agencies, and faith-based community organizations. We wanted to know that the city we partnered with was committed to that conceptually, and would work with us to put it together at the very practical level."

Schmitt-Carey says Syracuse distinguished itself immediately, thanks largely to the leadership of Chancellor Nancy Cantor in bringing key players to the table early in the discussion, including SCSD superintendent Daniel Lowengard '72, G'73 and city and county government representatives. "As a result, we selected Syracuse as the first city and started working with the first set of schools in September 2008," Schmitt-Carey says. "I'll always remember being blown away by that first meeting. We thought it would be just the beginning of an extended conversation to try to convince people this was the right thing to do. But they were ready to go. And the process of implementation has been equally robust and swift." Say Yes's founder is similarly impressed with how the City of Syracuse has moved forward with the project. "What amazes me about the Syracuse initiative is the level of broad-based commitments in the entire city to do what's right for every child," Weiss says, "and to come together and put aside political differences and institutional boundaries in order to enable the development and implementation of this holistic support program."

Gazdick, too, believes the City of Syracuse has reason to



THE PROMISE: Removing financial barriers to higher education

AS A FIRST-YEAR STUDENT IN THE College of Arts and Sciences, Nathan Heffron has a lot on his mind, whether it's keeping up with assignments for his favorite classes in economics and sociology, considering possible majors and career paths, or exploring such extracurricular activities as joining the tennis club or writing for *The Daily Orange*. But thanks to the Say Yes Higher Education Compact, the one thing he doesn't have to think about is how to pay for his SU education. A lifelong Syracuse resident, Heffron was one of 600 high school graduates in the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) who became eligible for free college tuition at a number of institutions through the Syracuse Say Yes to Education Scholarship Promise. "My time at SU has been great so far," says Heffron, one of 37 Say Yes students enrolled at SU. "I love everything about this place. The Say Yes program gave me the financial aid that made it possible for me to come here, and I know that will benefit me well into the future."

The cornerstone of the Say Yes program, the Higher Education Compact eliminates the most significant obsta-

cle faced by low-income families—the high cost of a quality post-secondary education—by guaranteeing that eligible graduates of the four SCSD high schools receive scholarships to pay for tuition. A newly established special opportunity grant also assists high-need students with costs beyond tuition.

Say Yes and Syracuse University have recruited an unprecedented network of 23 private institutions committed to funding Say Yes students, and expect to add at least five colleges and universities to the roster in 2010. Many of the participating private institutions promise free tuition only to students from families with an annual income of less than \$75,000. This income cap allows more schools to participate. Students who are outside the qualifying income range may still be considered for financial assistance, but it is not guaranteed. SU does not have income caps, nor do any of the 75 State University of New York (SUNY) or City University of New York (CUNY) institutions in the compact. (For a complete list, go to www.sayyessyracuse.org.)

Say Yes, SU, and the partnership's supporters, including the Central New

York Community Foundation, continue to work with the New York State government and private sources to secure funding for future years. It is expected that scholarship numbers will increase with each successive class of students, eventually achieving college matriculation rates comparable to those in the suburbs. "One of the biggest barriers to higher education for students and families with low incomes is the perceived cost of higher education," says Christopher Walsh, director of the Higher Education Compact Program and former dean of financial aid and scholarship programs. "Families without financial means may opt out of the college preparation process relatively early, even though they may be eligible for financial aid. Hopefully, the incentive and encouragement provided by the Say Yes scholarship guarantee will enable students to achieve at much higher levels, so when it comes time to graduate, they are prepared for success."

Say Yes founder George Weiss reads to children at Meachem Elementary School (above left) and congratulates Corcoran High School graduates Nick Makhlof, now enrolled at SU, and Tamara Rowser, who attends SUNY Oswego.

be proud of its efforts on behalf of its children. "In one way or another, I have been part of the movement to improve urban education for 20 years, and I've never seen an entire city come together like this in such deep and meaningful ways," she says. "I've been very moved by it." To fundamentally change urban schools, Gazdick says, requires collaborative leadership at every level. "Working collectively is the key to

our success," she says. "Everyone who is part of this recognizes how critical it is that we do this together. So we have a lot of people working really hard to make that happen. It doesn't happen overnight. But as long as we keep pulling together, there is no reason we cannot have the best urban school district in the country. As we make that happen, I think the nation is going to be watching."