RESEARCH for ACTION

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

Prepared by
Research for Action

Eva Gold, Ph.D.
Tracey Hartmann, Ph.D.
Kristine Lewis, Ph.D.

November 2005

Acknowledgements

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based, non-profit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with public school districts, educational institutions, and community organizations to improve the educational opportunities for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability.

Mission Statement
Through research and action, Research for Action seeks to improve the education opportunities and outcomes of urban youth by strengthening public schools and enriching the civic and community dialogue about public education. We share our research with educators, parent and community leaders, students, and policy makers with the goals of building a shared critique of educational inequality and strategizing about school reform that is socially just.

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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 volunteers, such as Experience Corps, that they arranged.

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 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.

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

Introduction

Say Yes to Education (Say Yes) 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 years. Begun in 1987 in Philadelphia, the program has adopted multiple cohorts of children, three in Philadelphia, and one each in Cambridge and Hartford. In fall 2005, Say Yes began work in Harlem in New York City. With each cohort, Say Yes has learned something about the types of supports children in low-resource environments need to succeed. Subsequent models of Say Yes have evolved to incorporate these lessons.

In fall 2002, Say Yes to Education invited Research for Action (RFA) to conduct an evaluation of the Philadelphia chapter's work with its most recent cohort of students, who had just entered third grade. The Philadelphia chapter's iteration of the model was unique in two respects: 1) the cohort was adopted from among a group of students who had attended the school's Head Start program, earlier than any previous group had entered the Say Yes program; and 2) for the first time, the program included supports for the educational advancement and involvement of the whole family. Parents[1] and siblings of each Say Yes child were offered scholarships to begin or complete their own educations. Parents were given a five-year window to attend a community college or trade school; siblings were promised $5,000 toward post-secondary education. The Say Yes staff wanted

not only an evaluation of the effects and outcomes of program supports on the children as of the end of third grade, but also a better understanding of the ways that parents value involvement in Say Yes, of the obstacles parents might encounter, and of the incentives that might help them take advantage of opportunities the program offers both them and their children.

The evaluation's start date in 2003 was significant because it marked a critical juncture for two groups within this Say Yes cohort. Having entered the Say Yes program in kindergarten, the children were now in the second half of third grade, which is widely regarded as a vital benchmark for achieving basic literacy and numeracy skills. At the same time, the parents of Say Yes children were mid-way through a five-year window for their completion of a post-secondary education program.

January 2003 also marked a crossroads of sorts for Say Yes. As RFA laid the groundwork for the evaluation in Philadelphia, the national Say Yes staff and board were preparing for significant programmatic expansion into five Harlem elementary schools, slated for September 2005. This expansion, to be undertaken in collaboration with Teachers College, related directly to the RFA evaluation, because the hope was that RFA's observations and findings would benefit not only the Philadelphia program, but also inform the work of the New York City chapter in launching the Harlem initiative.

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[1] The program guidelines refers to "parents" and "guardians" as caregivers. In this report we use parents in reference to both biological parents and guardians.

Chapter I: Background and Methodology

Say Yes began in 1987 with a cohort of students who had just completed sixth grade at a Philadelphia elementary school. Its initial model provided on-going mentoring and academic support for students, but made minimal efforts to involve parents and families.

In July 2000, the Say Yes Philadelphia chapter began to work with its third cohort of children. An experienced social worker, who also had a background in education and community activism, was hired as program manager. Her belief in the importance of strengthening communities led her to design and implement a program which focused on developing relationships with families and providing supports to address the needs of the entire family. In this iteration the program provided individualized reading support, after-school homework help, summer Freedom School, regular parent meetings and workshops, and a number of other activities. The extension of financial support and other program services to parents and siblings emerged from a growing recognition that the Say Yes child is part of a family system in which educational opportunities for parents and siblings can contribute to making education a family priority.

While continuing to support the individual child through tutoring and other direct services, Say Yes made several significant changes in identifying and working with this new cohort. First, the program began its work in kindergarten, with students who had attended the school's Head Start program.[2] Chapters in other cities had selected children in lower grades, but never earlier than third grade. This new strategy acknowledged that children's early learning sets the stage for future academic success. In the early grades of this new cohort, Say Yes now emphasized literacy skills in order to increase the chances that Say Yes students would be on grade level in reading and language arts by the beginning of fourth grade, the transitional year when the demands of school shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (Chall, Jacobs & Baldwin 1990). In response to the requests of parents, Say Yes also provided additional supports for mathematics learning.

Neighborhood context

The families in this study were from a low-income, working class African American community in which

the median income is $25,208 (2000 census) and only 35 percent of adults over the age of 25 have a high school diploma (Neighborhood Information Systems Database, 2005. www.cml.upenn.edu/nis/index.html). The neighborhood, as described by parents and children, ranges from intact, stable, and safe areas to blocks that are more transitional and susceptible to drug activity and violence. Some described their blocks as good places to live, where many long-time residents look out for one another; others said their blocks were unsafe and that they could not let their children go out unattended. Still others described both resources and risks on the same street. For example:

> Half of my block is clean, but if you go all the way to the corner there is a whole bunch of glass, trash and all that stuff. There are people smoking, hoodlums on the corner and other stuff.

Asked about resources in the neighborhood, some parents mentioned churches, local libraries, a dance studio and a recreation center. A few pointed to a local middle school that has a pool and other recreation facilities, but expressed concerns about safety. Many reported a dearth of city-sponsored programs and activities in their neighborhood. A number of parents identified the Say Yes program as the primary resource for children within their neighborhood.

School context

The Say Yes program's work with its third Philadelphia cohort began at a time of turbulence within the School District of Philadelphia. A persistent financial crisis coupled with low academic performance led to a state takeover of the system in 2001. The state takeover introduced the largest privatization of a public school district in American history—resulting in a "diverse provider model" that shifted partial control of 45 low-performing schools to a number of for-profit companies, nonprofit organizations, and local universities. The neighborhood school this cohort of Say Yes children attended, in which 71 percent of students were considered low-income, was among those identified as "low-performing" (School District of Philadelphia website, 2005. https://sdp-webprod.phila.k12.pa.us/school_profiles/servlet/), and as a result it was partnered with the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) as its manager. In addition, as part of the district's reform plan, the school was slated to expand from a K-6 to a K-8 school.

When the district assigned Penn to be the school's "manager," many teachers believed that Penn's

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[2] Say Yes accepted all the children in the Head Start program, but some families chose not to participate. The program then used a lottery throughout kindergarten and first grade to select children to fill the remaining slots.

management would result in a number of immediate benefits to themselves and to the school, based on their observation of Penn's partnership with the district to build and run another elementary school in the area. When the anticipated benefits of having Penn as a manager did not meet the teachers' expectations, they rebuffed the idea of the partnership. The combination of being labeled a low-performing school, along with the strained relationship with Penn, complicated Say Yes' relationship with the school. This situation, along with a turnover in principals during the program's earliest years and the strain of expanding from a K-6 to a K-8, undermined much of the good work Say Yes had done building a relationship with the school in its first year and it compromised the program's potential for contributing to the school's academic environment (Thomas-Reynolds 2005). The school has continued to struggle to improve academic performance and in 2004 the math and reading scores of its fifth graders on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) continued to be low, with 54 percent performing below basic in reading and 82 percent performing below basic in mathematics (School District of Philadelphia website, 2005. https://sdp-webprod.phila.k12.pa.us/school_profiles/servlet/).

Research questions and methodology

In the midst of tumultuous change within the District and school, and with the introduction of two significant expansions of the Say Yes model (reaching down to preschool for a cohort and reaching out to the family with extended supports), an evaluation of the Philadelphia model of Say Yes was indeed timely. RFA responded by developing a "mixed methods" research design. Qualitative data, including interviews and focus groups with staff, parents, children, and school personnel, as well as program observations, provided a picture of program processes and human dynamics. Quantitative analysis of student outcomes provided comparative measures of academic and behavioral progress between Say Yes students and other third graders. Researchers also reviewed previous reports and evaluations of Say Yes programs and other scholarship guarantee programs. Finally, RFA was able to draw on more than a decade of its own experience focusing on parent involvement and parent-community-school programs. (For a more detailed description of the research methodology, see Appendix A.)

Research questions that guided the study included:

1) What does parent and family engagement look like in the Say Yes program? What strategies have been most successful? What has been the impact of parent and family engagement on the Say Yes children?

2) What is the nature of the Say Yes program's relationship to the public school? What strategies does it use to build relationships with school personnel and faculty? What impact does it have on teaching and learning within the school? What role does it play between Say Yes families and the school?

3) What are the measurable outcomes and impacts for Say Yes students? What impacts and outcomes do parents and children describe for themselves? How do Say Yes students compare with a matched group of students on standardized test scores and behavioral outcomes?

Theory of action

Throughout 18 months of research, RFA has gathered a range of perspectives on the ways in which Say Yes works. We have used this data to construct a theory of action model (See Appendix B). Interestingly, our interviews with parents, children and school staff highlighted a less programmatic and visible—but nonetheless essential—dimension of the program: a strong relational base that built the trust necessary for parents to make the best use of the opportunities the Say Yes program offers. The theory of action model displays how the formal aspects of the program result in "relational action," such as the building of social networks or social capital between program staff and parents, which in turn results in the development of enhanced human capital (new knowledge and skills). Financial capital (scholarships, program resources) reinforce the attainability of support for educational advancement.

Although parents and staff also believed that the relational aspect of Say Yes would link the program and families to the school, this dynamic occurred with only a small group of teachers and therefore fell short of the goal of strengthening the school learning environment. Still, the new human, social, and financial capital that resulted from Say Yes activities was theorized to result in the desired outcomes: involved parents, academically successful children, and wider community benefits, all resulting in improved life chances and the successful attainment of a college degree or other post-secondary training for children in Say Yes to Education.

The remainder of this report analyses the program and its outcomes for children. It is organized into the following major sections: Chapters 2-4 provide an account of how the program is working; Chapter 5 discusses the findings and places them in the broader context of research on parent involvement and educational achievement. Chapter 6 concludes the report with implications and questions for the future.

Chapter II: Engaging Children—Academic Achievement and Impact of Say Yes

In the context of No Child Left Behind, many schools are looking at how to boost children's reading and mathematics skills. The additional supports provided by schools often focus narrowly on basic skills. The Say Yes program, instead, suggests a holistic approach: Not only does it seek to strengthen a child's basic skills, but the program also works to enrich other integral settings—home and school—with additional educational resources and expertise. Research for Action has found evidence that this holistic approach is working, although its impact on test scores is not yet conclusive at this early stage.

The records of Say Yes students indicate an overall pattern of better school attendance and better behavior than their classmates or the previous year's third graders, a strong indicator that the program has traction. This pattern is important as well because of the presumed link between good school attendance and behavior with school achievement. Specifically, Say Yes students missed an average of three to four days in third grade, while their classmates averaged more than seven absences and the previous year's third grade students averaged nine absences. Say Yes students' behavior as a group also was rated better than their classmates and better than second graders[3] from the previous year (see Appendix C: Quantitative findings of test performance, attendance, and behavior, for a graphic representation of these findings). Parents saw the presence in the school of the Say Yes staff, other Say Yes parents and the program's resource room as helpful to their children in managing behavior. High levels of parent involvement have also been shown in other research to influence the behavioral performance of school children (McNeal 1999).

This chapter describes Say Yes' basic skills supports and shares some evidence that these supports are, in fact, filtering into the school, family, and peer contexts. The chapter ends with some evidence from the children themselves that the program is creating a culture among them that is focused on going to college.

Building literacy skills

Research clearly indicates that if children do not have sufficient reading skills by fourth grade, they begin to fall significantly behind their peers. In light of this, literacy has been a priority for Say Yes. The program experimented with a variety of literacy strategies in the first few years — strategies that were both individually focused and directed at enhancing reading instruction throughout the school.

Early strategies included bringing a teacher trained in Reading Recovery to the school and supporting a school-wide 100 Book Challenge program.[4] However, these supports fell short of the program's goal to accelerate the progress Say Yes children were making in learning to read. When the Say Yes children were in second grade, the program identified a reading specialist who used a guided reading approach (i.e., an approach in which students read in small groups at their instructional reading level; by comparison, the district emphasizes "shared reading," an approach in which all students read the same story on grade level—even if it is too difficult for them).

The guided reading approach became the primary reading support for students as they met with the reading specialist between two and five times each week (depending on their needs) in 45-minute sessions. In addition, Say Yes staff brought in the Experience Corps program, an AmeriCorps program for senior citizens, to tutor Say Yes and other children who needed even more help with reading. Both the reading specialist and the Experience Corps tutors worked with children during the school day, supplementing their regular classroom reading lessons. To bolster this growing academic focus, the after-school program incorporated additional reading and writing activities and the summer Freedom School incorporated one shared reading assignment each day, as well as small group guided reading instruction for children who were struggling.

Although the children were the primary focus of the Say Yes literacy initiatives, parents reported learning new strategies for supporting their children's learning at home through their contacts with the reading specialist. For example, one parent described how the specialist helped her discover her child's difficulty with reading comprehension. Thus

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[3] Only second grade behavior marks were available for the purposes of this analysis.

[4] Reading Recovery is a remedial reading program for the early grades that provides intensive individual reading instruction; the 100 Book Challenge program provides a wide array of books and other reading materials to schools, to motivate children to read at least 100 books a school year on their reading level in areas of personal interest.

informed, she was able to work with her child on that specific skill:

> *I've been working with her at home, me and her older sister. Like we read stories and then ask questions ... letting her understand it is more than just reading a book. You have to know what you are reading, not just read the words.*

Several parents also mentioned developing libraries as a result of books the Say Yes program gave away and their children's increased interest in buying books or taking books out of the public library.

Thus, even though many of the literacy initiatives were directed primarily at individual children, the literacy initiatives that reached the families found a receptive audience and many parents used the additional resources and knowledge they gained to help their children.

Say Yes staff also sought to strengthen the quality of classroom reading instruction. To support the implementation of a guided reading approach, the reading specialist offered informal mentoring and professional development for teachers, both through the Freedom School summer reading program, where they could work alongside her, and through resource sharing and coaching during the regular school year.

However, according to the reading specialist, this aspect of the program was difficult to implement. Just a few teachers took advantage of the opportunities provided by Say Yes. In addition, pressures from the school to adhere to the curriculum and focus on standardized testing discouraged teachers from using guided, instead of shared, reading. Thus, the school enrichment piece of the Say Yes reading program was only minimally implemented.

Conflicting evidence about progress in reading

Evidence to support the program's progress in improving literacy and reading skills is contradictory. Some children appear to have made dramatic gains, according to parents' observations and the assessments of the Say Yes reading specialist. In addition, as a group, Say Yes student outcomes on standardized tests are better than their peers at the school and in the District. Still, half of Say Yes students were reading below grade level in third grade, and, compared to similar students, show no unique impact from the Say Yes reading supports.

Report card and test data show the majority of Say Yes students were reading below the 50th percentile at the end of third grade. Nineteen of the 40 Say Yes students were reading on or above grade level; 20 were reading one or more grade levels behind. Six of

these 20 had been retained in second grade.[5] On the Terra Nova reading test, 36% of Say Yes students were at or above the 50th percentile nationally. This performance was only slightly better overall compared with peers in their school or third graders district wide (School District of Philadelphia website, 2005. https://sdp-webprod.phila.k12.pa.us/ school_profiles/servlet/).

Parents were more likely than teachers to credit the Say Yes literacy efforts with having an impact on their children. They reported dramatic changes in their children's attitude toward reading at home, and several parents commented that their children had more confidence and enjoyment in reading:

> *One thing that had a big impact on my son was the reading specialist ... his reading level went up tremendously and he gained confidence. Before he started taking it he used to say "I can't read." But now he has confidence where he would try ...and I like how they taught him to put the word down, and he can break it into parts by himself, and now he's excited. He knows he can read.*

Say Yes testing results (shared by the reading specialist) supported parents' anecdotal reporting of sizeable gains in reading, showing that some Say Yes students moved up several instructional levels in the third grade year. School teachers, by contrast, were disappointed. They appreciated the work involved, but given all the reading support children were getting, they did not see as much progress as they would have anticipated, especially in student gains on the standardized tests.

RFA did a comparison of Say Yes children to a similar group of students from the previous third grade at the school. The comparison group of students was selected to match the Say Yes students on gender, instructional reading level at the end of second grade, free lunch eligibility and whether they had attended a school district preschool program. The Say Yes student outcomes in reading did not differ significantly from the outcomes of this comparison group. However, it may be too early to detect the impact of the Say Yes program with statistical analysis. The small number of students involved in the comparison (only 34 Say Yes students were in third grade at this elementary school) makes it difficult to identify significant differences between groups; data available from the school district also limited our ability to make comparisons. The district changed the format for report cards right before the Say Yes students started

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[5] One student's instructional reading level was missing from the PSD records.

first grade, therefore we could not compare their instructional reading levels with the instructional reading levels of the students a year before them. This means that we were only able to test for improvements of Say Yes students from the end of second grade to the end of third grade (see Appendix A: Methodology for more details and Appendix C: Quantitative findings of test performance, attendance, and behavior).

Building math skills

While literacy efforts were primarily focused on the individual child, the Say Yes math efforts were family-oriented. This approach emerged, in part, because parents sought additional math help for their children. Parents with children who were struggling in math were frustrated by the lack of available supports, both through the school and Say Yes, and they were particularly concerned about the District's new math curriculum, Everyday Math, which approached mathematics in a way that was unfamiliar to most of them. Everyday Math focused primarily on mathematical concepts and problem-solving strategies rather than procedural knowledge. In addition, parents found the school particularly unresponsive to their requests for help (Jackson & Remillard, 2005).

In response to parents' concerns, Say Yes brought in math educators from the University Pennsylvania, who developed several programs for Say Yes, including a Family Math program that took place in the context of Say Yes's regular parent meetings. The math educators taught parents math games they could play with their children and prepared math kits for parents to take home. A Math for Parents program, which focused on developing the math content knowledge for parents, was offered every Saturday for several months in the spring of the children's third grade year, and throughout the fourth grade year. Attendance was sparse in the third grade but increased in fourth grade.

In this way, new math initiatives were embedded in the program's work with families. Several parents commented on the usefulness of the math workshops for their own understanding of math:

> The math program was really good. It was great…I learned a lot. Plus, it helped with [my older daughter's] math too because [her class] did a whole lot of different things that I really didn't understand….

Some evidence of progress in math

Evidence for progress in math is more encouraging. School staff observed that Say Yes students made progress in math and their observations are supported by student outcomes on standardized tests. One school staff member, for example, commented that the math support the children received in the summer Freedom School program had made a tremendous difference:

> Freedom School influenced their academic and social development. In the math groups, from what I saw [when they were] in third grade, there are some kids who seem to be blossoming in math during their fourth grade year. In my after-school program, what I see in the fourth grade students in math, it seems that it is a big leap in their skills. There are things that I didn't think I'd see them do [and] they are way beyond.

Using Terra Nova scores from the end of third grade we can see that 52 percent of Say Yes children were at or above the 50th percentile nationally in math. This is compared to only 35 percent of their classmates at the school and 39 percent of the District's third graders (School District of Philadelphia website, 2005. https://sdp-webprod.phila.k12.pa.us/school_profiles/servlet/). When Say Yes children were matched with similar students in second grade (i.e., students who had attended pre-K, qualified for free lunch and were at similar reading levels in second grade), some evidence of the impact of Say Yes math supports was found. Students who were one year behind in reading actually scored 50 points higher on average on the Terra Nova math test than the comparison group who were at a similar reading level. This is a ***statistically significant difference*** (i.e., the probability that the two groups differed this much by chance is only 1%). Since we controlled for pre-existing characteristics of the two groups as much as possible, we can posit that Say Yes math supports were affecting this group (see Appendix C: Quantitative findings of test performance, attendance, and behavior).

Supporting a college going culture

The goal of providing Say Yes children with academic supports is to help prepare them for college or other post-secondary school options that can improve their life chances. Our research indicated that the program was having success in focusing the children on education and linking their educational experience to a future in which they imagined themselves as college bound. Overall, the children, were unanimously clear about the purposes of the Say Yes program. Said one:

Say Yes is a program that gives you an education and makes sure you go to college…We do educational things. We read a lot. We talk about education. We be serious, we try to do things where they help us to get through our life.

As might be expected of fourth graders, their perceptions about college, were not always directly connected to specific career goals. Several children, such as the ones quoted below, talked about feeling an obligation to use their scholarship and to meet the expectations of their Say Yes "family."

RFA: *Would you like to go to college?*

All together: *YES!*

Student 1: *Definitely!*

Student 2: *Also, we have a free education for college, so if we don't go there it's a waste of the Say Yes money, so we must go and support…*

Student 1: *[finishes the sentence] …our Say Yes family. Plus in college we can figure out what we want to be and we can learn about it and get our college degree, Ph.D. and other things.*

Other children felt going to college would help them to be able to help their families: "*I want to take care of my Mom because if she gets sick, I can't help her when I'm little.*" A few children also had some anxiety about college already. One boy stated:

It's going to take hard work, more hard work, because I already do hard work. I've got to keep myself healthy and honest…I'm a little scared, too, because some people might not like me and I might be in fights. Because, some people may say I'm not good enough.

Some of the children had a variety of career goals, not all which required college. And a majority of the boys talked about going to college so that they could become professional athletes. A handful of children expressed uncertainty altogether about their future. They were not sure if they wanted to go to college and, more significantly, they did not offer any imagined hopes or dreams for themselves. These children seemed to be from the same group that was struggling academically and socially.

Another way that Say Yes fostered a college going culture was by offering parents funding for their own post-secondary education. Parents were given a five year window during which time Say Yes would pay tuition for courses leading to an associate or technical degree. At the time of our study, approximately nine parents had taken advantage of this opportunity and reported that it had a significant impact on their relationships with their children (see next chapter). However, many parents were slow to take advantage of the credit. In our interviews and focus groups,

parents offered several reasons for not returning to school. Many cited the difficulty of attending school while working full-time and single-parenting. Several were also responsible for caring for sick relatives which left them with little free time. Parents with pre-school children and no extended family support talked about child care as an obstacle. Others talked about needing to do remedial work before returning to school and some were interested but had some general anxieties about returning to school. Finally, a few parents already had BAs.

Summary of findings

The Say Yes program takes a holistic approach to supporting and accelerating learning among the Say Yes children. The approach not only offers direct supports to build a child's basic skills, but also provides resources and training for parents and teachers to work more productively with children at home and in the classroom. Say Yes had more success influencing the family context than the school context, in which the pressures of NCLB and an emphasis on test preparation contributed to resistance to adopting a guided reading approach to instruction.

Parents report that students who were previously struggling in reading demonstrate a greater sense of confidence about reading and are more likely to do it at home. However, teachers did not see marked improvements and test scores show that 64 percent of Say Yes children have reading skills below the national average.

Teachers did see improvements in math, however, and test scores show that 52 percent of Say Yes children have math skills at or above the national average. In addition, for children struggling with math and reading, Say Yes supports have helped these children perform better in math.

The attention to academics supported by the Say Yes program had another payoff as well—the creation of a peer group among the Say Yes children who clearly connected their educational experiences to future possibilities. By and large, children in the program made a positive connection between their academic experiences and the possibility for a college education or other post-secondary training.

Chapter III: "We're a Family"—Relationships Among Say Yes Staff, Parents, and Children

The Say Yes program called for the involvement of all children's parents. For some, this was not a difficult request. Interviews with parents indicated that prior to their involvement with Say Yes a number of them already were proficient at identifying and securing resources for their children's education. Several mothers described, for example, their careful scrutiny of summer camps before enrolling their children; other parents reported arranging family time at the library; yet others told us that they worked several jobs to pay for their children to receive additional academic support services. As one mother commented:

> I was never a person that [waited] for parent-teacher night. I want to know when I want to know. I want to know before I see the report card. If there is a problem, we need to deal with it. ... Either me or my husband was up there [at the school] every day, saying, 'What happened today? What's going on?' every single day!

For others, the prerequisite of parental involvement presented significant challenges. Say Yes staff endeavored to build trusting and caring relationships even with the least involved parents—many of whom were difficult to reach—often working months to break through the parents' self-imposed isolation from the school. Sometimes this work paid off with great results. One Say Yes staff member reported that some of the difficult-to-reach parents "*are the ones who are volunteering now .... The children's attendance has increased. Their involvement has increased. They [parents] are talking about going back to school. We have to peel away that harsh [attitude] they had on them.*" When Say Yes staff did not succeed in reaching out to a parent, they tended to turn to the child and nurtured individual relationships, hoping it would eventually lead to a relationship with the parents.

Distance also posed an obstacle to parental involvement. Some families selected for Say Yes had moved away from the neighborhood before their child's eligibility for the program was announced. Nonetheless, a number of these parents turned to family members who still lived in the area so that their children could continue to attend the school and participate in the program. In some cases, extended kin—grandparents, aunts, uncles—participated in the required and voluntary Say Yes activities in lieu of the parents.

Our interviews with parents indicated that, for many of them, the effort they made to fulfill their obligation to be involved with the program was linked to their desire to take advantage of an opportunity that could bring them closer to fulfilling a dream for themselves, their families and their children: *the attainment of a college education*. Several parents characterized Say Yes as "*a blessing.*" Specifically, a number of parents were relieved that money would not be an obstacle to their children's college enrollment:

> I'm hard working but far from rich. Say Yes enables my children to be the best they can be..

> I keep thinking about the fact that maybe my child can go to college and I won't have to mortgage the house, and I'm being really serious, or sell my life insurance or eat peanut butter and jelly for dinner...I always said my child is going to go to college...I don't want it to be [because of a] lack of funds that my child can't go.

Building trust and strengthening bonds

Parents appreciated that the Say Yes staff were sensitive to the challenges that exist for families outside the school's walls and that Say Yes encouraged their children's cultural identification and development. Say Yes staff's implementation of African-centered curricula and enrichment activities[6] drew a great deal of praise from parents. As one mother shared: "*I think all of our kids are learning to be more positive African Americans by being part of Say Yes.*"

Say Yes staff also built trust by prioritizing the establishment of safe spaces for the children to retreat to when they faced challenges and difficulties in the school environment. One mother describes the haven Say Yes provides for her child:

> My child does not like to be around really wild children. He'll go into the Say Yes program

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[6] During the after-school program, Family Math nights, and Freedom School, Say Yes incorporated texts and activities that reflected and affirmed the African American legacy and heritage of the children and their families. Say Yes used books by black authors, facilitated a rites of passage program, and had classes in step dancing, traditional African dance, and hip hop. Moreover, Say Yes staff modeled and encouraged certain principles such as self-determination, unity, and collective work and responsibility.

around lunchtime because of how rough it is during recess. He'll go in there to read a book or play a game, just so he won't have to deal with all of the ruckus on the school yard.

Many parents appreciated the way that the Say Yes staff disciplined their children, and contrasted it with the practices of some of the teachers. One parent characterized the Say Yes philosophy of discipline as "*more family-based, more love-based*." Parents believed that Say Yes staff helped their children understand how their behaviors and actions impacted themselves and others. They also noted that Say Yes staff praised children when they behaved well. A parent observed: "*You have that family environment. You have people who are saying positive things to the children, and that's what they need.*"

Evolving parent-child relationships

In addition to caring for the children as a way to establish and maintain relationships with parents, RFA learned that Say Yes staff actively cared for parents, too. Parents said they felt "*at home*" and "*like family*" with program staff. Parent meetings were held at times that were convenient for most parents, with dinner provided for the children. Parents who could not attend the sessions received phone calls informing them of the meeting's content, as well as the next meeting date and time. Say Yes staff worked to keep parents up-to-date on happenings in the program and in the school, and they also welcomed extended family members who attended meetings. These meetings often included significant content that was relevant to parents' immediate needs, such as parenting education, tips on how to take better care of themselves and their families, and such "perks" as an occasional massage and relaxation session. Parents also appreciated discussions the Say Yes staff organized on how to communicate better with their children as they approach adolescence.

Say Yes staff's individual relationships with the parents and children indirectly impacted the relationships between parents and their children. Some children applied lessons learned from Say Yes programming to their interactions with family members. One parent observed that after a week-long study of family during the rites of passage program, she "*has no trouble whatsoever*" convincing her child to do household chores.

However, the biggest impact seemed to be on parents. As a result of their attendance at parent meetings and their observations of Say Yes staff's interactions with children, some parents modified

their communication and disciplinary strategies with their children. One parent shared:

I can be hard on my children, and Say Yes has helped me to temper how I push the children. [Say Yes has] helped me to find the balance between being strict and disciplining them. They taught me to praise the good instead of just punishing them for the things they do wrong.

Several parents who took advantage of the scholarship benefit and returned to school described the impact of this experience on their relationship with their children, putting them in a position to model college-going behaviors for their children. As one mother explained: "*It's a chance for that parent to go and set an example for their child to go on to higher education.*" Other parents felt that it placed them in a better position to support and encourage their children. One mother reflected that her child believes college is possible because *she* is in college herself: "*Your child sees, 'Oh my mom is going back to school. Why can't I do it?'*" Another parent believed that by going to college a parent could gain the tools she would need to help her child as he progressed through school.

If you're educated and you've got a degree, then you can be more supportive and more help to your child. When your child [says], "Mom, what's this?" You can [say], "Oh well, let's figure this out together." I think that's more helpful to the parents and helpful to the kids.

In addition to supporting children's college aspirations, parents also felt encouraged by their children. Children's pride in their parents' accomplishments served as sources of motivation and inspiration for their parents' academic and professional pursuits. A powerful reciprocal relationship has emerged: Not only do parents serve as an inspiration for their children, but the children encourage and motivate their parents.

Building a village: Increasing parent efficacy and collective responsibility

As mentioned earlier, some Say Yes parents were already skilled at working with the school on behalf of their children. Other parents, though, were unsure of their rights and roles in their children's school experiences. Say Yes staff helped parents to assume a more active role, with increased confidence. One parent explained:

I would say that they've influenced us to be more of a part of our children's education. That we're partners, we're not on the sideline, that we're

major players and partners in our children's education.

Parents often became more active in helping their children with their homework and other learning activities:

Say Yes has shaped my involvement with my child. Before, I would come home and I wouldn't help her with her homework, but Say Yes showed me that I need to be more involved. I try my best to help her with her homework. My mom, sister and my nephew will help her.

Participation in the Say Yes program fostered a sense of community and collective responsibility among many of the families. Some parents described looking out for all children as if they were their own, including children who were not with Say Yes. Parents also described how they exchanged information and knowledge with one another, and supported one another both inside and outside of school.

As a result of their participation in Say Yes, these parents are actively building alliances with one another around and for their children:

I like the fact that we're a family. It's not just your child; they are Say Yes children. If any of them walk past, you can say, 'You know better. I can talk to your mom' ... It's a village.

Parents often repeated that "one parent's child was every parent's child," and they worked together creatively on behalf of their children, forming a parent committee to provide additional activities for the children and to purchase school supplies and personal hygiene items. In this nurturing environment, parents also took care of one another, such as when parents coordinated their schedules to care for the children of a parent who had an opportunity to study abroad.

Not every parent in Say Yes shared these sentiments. While these parents did not express feelings of

exclusion, they felt the term "family" was too strong to characterize their relationships with other Say Yes families. They acknowledged the support provided by Say Yes staff for themselves and their children, but did not feel closely aligned with other families in the program.

Summary of findings

Parental involvement is a prerequisite for participation in Say Yes. However, Say Yes staff did not rely on this mandate to ensure compliance. Say Yes staff embraced parents who were active early on, and reached out to parents who were more difficult to engage. With all parents, Say Yes staff established relationships with the children as a way to solidify bonds with the parents. The incorporation of an African–centered curriculum and activities, provision of a safe space, and enforcement of a care-based discipline endeared Say Yes staff to many parents.

The evolution of relationships among children, parents and staff of Say Yes influenced many parents' relationships with their children. Many modified their interactions with their children based on knowledge and strategies learned from their involvement with Say Yes. Parents who returned to school became models for their children, and the children became sources of motivation and inspiration for their parents.

Parents' aspirations for their children became attainable, not only from their involvement with Say Yes, but also from their expanded social networks. Say Yes staff facilitated a network of support among the families. Many parents felt like members of an extended family and, consequently, responsible for the care of children within Say Yes and the school. These multiple and intersecting layers of care surrounded and supported the children of Say Yes and facilitated deeper parent involvement in the education of their children.

Chapter IV: A Clash of Cultures—Relationships Among Say Yes Staff, Parents, and the School Faculty

It is not uncommon for external programs that enter schools with a distinct mission and organizational culture to be at odds with a school's culture. The relationship between the Say Yes program and the school was not an exception. The difficulty of melding different organizational cultures and norms was aggravated by limited teacher involvement in the program, turnover in school leadership during Say Yes' early years (three principals in two years) and the assignment of the University of Pennsylvania as school manager (Thomas-Reynolds 2005). Nonetheless, the Say Yes staff looked for ways to bridge the school-program divide. Despite their ongoing efforts, however, Say Yes did not experience measurable success.

RFA staff found that the persistence of the uneasy fit between the program and school limited the program's ability to enrich the school environment for all children. What follows is a closer look at the disparate opinions and goals of school staff, parents and Say Yes staff.

The problems of being "separate"

The school staff we talked with readily commented on the fact that the Say Yes program created a select group of children and parents within the school. The strongest negative point of view was expressed by school staff who complained that the most active Say Yes parents believed their group was exempt from school rules:

> The parents had been given so much power and rights … so much leeway and freedom. [They would] walk in ten minutes before the end of the day and take the child out. Disrespect for the procedures of the day. We had more than one negative experience. They felt that they didn't have to follow the rules. And [Say Yes] make[s] their children different from the regular school population. The parents felt that they could take over and not follow school rules.

Another problem—from the school's perspective—was that Say Yes had its own parent meetings and these meetings might, in Say Yes parents' minds, supersede the school-wide parent organization, the Home and School Association. One school staffer provided insight into the complexity of the challenge, suggesting that the Say Yes program needed to create in parents two coexisting, strong identities—as both parents within a school and within the program:

> Well, I think the tension has been that sometimes they see themselves as separate. I don't have an issue with that, because they are separate, in a way. But you have to be careful about making sure that… when you're separate, you're also a part. So you have to do a dual thing.

Say Yes attempted to overcome this divide by introducing programs and resources to benefit the larger school community, such as school-wide clothes donations, the 100 Book Challenge, and Say Yes staff presentations for all the classrooms. Say Yes also brought the Experience Corps[7] program to the school and welcomed non-Say Yes children in their literacy resource rooms and summer Freedom School. In addition, Say Yes compensated teachers who worked with Say Yes students for their participation in monthly meetings with Say Yes staff, hired teachers to work in the summer Freedom School and after-school programs[8] and funded school-wide professional development workshops and coaching opportunities. In its fourth year at the school, Say Yes staff held a special dinner for school staff to honor their role as educators.

In its first year, Say Yes organized a management team consisting of the principal, school counselor, reading specialist, area superintendent, a Penn professor, and Say Yes staff that met regularly to coordinate activities. However, these relationship building efforts were interrupted when the school principal left and the school was assigned to be managed by the University of Pennsylvania as a result of the state takeover of the District. The turbulence in the school and system over the next three years hampered Say Yes' ability to maintain and further develop strong relationships within the school, with the exception of a small group of teachers who were engaged with the program and over time became more positively inclined.

The Say Yes parents had their own strong sentiments about the relationship of the program to the school. They talked about problems both with school staff and with other families who wished they, too, were a part of the program. In the case of school personnel, some parents believed them to be hypercritical of the program:

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[7] Say Yes funded Experience Corps at the school for three years. The program was so popular that the school picked up funding for it after that time.
[8] Say Yes staff report that many more teachers than they needed wanted to work in the Freedom school and after-school program.

I really think [the school] really has something against Say Yes, because Say Yes is really for the kids. ... I don't like [the school]. They are not supportive of Say Yes. And, it's like anything [the Say Yes staff] does for the kids, in [the school's] book, is negative.

Others saw school staff believing that the Say Yes parents saw themselves as different from the other school families:

Some [school staff] look at [Say Yes families] like we are troublemakers, some look at [Say Yes] like Say Yes[parents] think they are better than the regular school district.

Yet another parent perspective was that the problem was in giving special status to one group of students and the inevitable intra-community resentment that stemmed from the extraordinary opportunities that Say Yes families received:

I say… [the relationship between Say Yes and the school] is okay. As in anything, when there's an organization inside of school, and it's only dealing with 50 children, as anything in anybody's family, there's always hate. There's always jealousy.

RFA researchers began its research following a disagreement between one teacher and a small group of Say Yes parents who clashed over discipline methods. Despite efforts by Say Yes staff to resolve this conflict, it was responsible for continued friction among the program, the school, and the parents long afterwards. For example, a number of teachers who were interviewed long after the incident expressed a belief that the Say Yes program had *"dangerously empowered"* the parents. One teacher, acting as a spokesperson for several colleagues, reported that parents were no longer acting together in a "healthy*"* way but were inappropriately interfering. Other teachers expressed the sentiment that parents were no longer "helping" in the classroom but were "spying" on the teachers. For their part, the parents believed that they, with the support of the Say Yes staff, were acting as parents should—as true advocates for their children, protecting them from a disrespectful and unjust teacher.

The distrust that became so salient following this clash cannot be totally attributed, however, to this one incident. As mentioned earlier, from the start, Say Yes staff had weak links to the school faculty, which compounded the already challenging task of building a positive relationship with the school community. One school staffer characterized the problem of the relationship as a history of "miscommunication."

Further complicating the relationship, several school staff believed that the occasions when the school had made a strong contribution to the program were undervalued, or even ignored. For example, a faculty member pointed out that while the program's staff is "diligent" about getting the data they need to help children, such data collection would not be possible without the cooperation of the teachers, counselor and others.

The benefits and challenges of being on-site

For the program's first four years at the school, Say Yes staff had a resource room for parents and children. In 2003-04, they also obtained a room in which the reading support teacher had additional resources to support literacy learning and could, together with her assistants; work with small groups of students and with individual children. Even though its on-site presence provided Say Yes staff with opportunities for planned and spontaneous interactions with school staff, parents and children, the program remained relatively isolated from the majority of school faculty. Furthermore, school staff and parents perceived the benefits and challenges of Say Yes' presence within the school very differently.

Parents saw a range of benefits: Say Yes staff made the school safer for their children both in the hallways and on the playground. A number of parents spoke of their comfort with Say Yes staff acting as a "guardian" or "spokesperson" who could "resolve whatever without me even having to come." They felt the Say Yes resource room gave them and their children a needed space for "respite" and reflection and sometimes gave their children a safe haven from peer pressure.

The parents also felt the presence of the Say Yes staff in the school meant that their children had an academic advocate working in-house. This was especially true for parents of children who were struggling academically and who needed special intervention. Several parents reported that the Say Yes staff fought for their children to get the kinds of diagnostic testing they needed:

My [child] was having problems with reading and the teacher felt he should go into special ed without testing. [The Say Yes staff person] was not having it and next thing I know there is a meeting and I was invited! Invited for my child! And [the Say Yes person] was there fussing and pushed them to test him and give him an IEP. So I would say [they are] an advocate for our children, a big one.

The Say Yes resource room seemed to be a special place for both the Say Yes parents and children, giving them a space within the school where they could talk with one another and be supported when they needed to process negative interactions with

school staff and develop procedures for resolving the issues that led to increased tensions.

The school staff, in contrast, had negative perceptions of the resource room.[9] The teachers described the room as a "social" place where parents talked among themselves and where small issues snowballed into major ones:

> There were more parents [in the school] when there was a room, but not in a productive sense. It was more of a social interaction. It could foster issues coming out and snowballing and becoming bigger than what it needed to be.

School personnel often identified the advocacy role of Say Yes staff as inappropriate intervention: "*Say Yes staff really put a wedge between themselves and the school. It really became uncomfortable for the faculty.*" Several teachers suggested that as a result, "*Fourth and fifth grade teachers do not want the [Say Yes] children because they do not want to deal with the parents.*"

In spring 2004, the principal announced that the school's expansion from a K-5 to a K-8 meant that there would no longer be enough space in the school to house the Say Yes resource room and that the literacy room would be reduced to half its size. The closing of the resource room—which many parents and even Say Yes staff associated with the tensions resulting from the parent-teacher clash earlier in the year—meant that the Say Yes staff most closely connected to the family outreach aspects of the program would no longer be on site. The room's closing in fall 2004 coincided with a drop in the number of Say Yes parents regularly in the school. Say Yes staff attributed the drop in parent presence to their absence from the school. Teachers did not simply attribute the reduction in the number of parents in the school to the closing of the resource room. They considered the decline a result of the children growing older (i.e., when children are in fourth grade, parents do not need to be present as often) and to parents not being able to help with more advanced school work.

For a handful of teachers Say Yes hired for the summer Freedom School and the after school program, the presence of Say Yes in the school created benefits. These teachers worked closely with the reading support teacher as part of the summer

academic program. The reading support teacher, in turn, coached them as they learned new teaching approaches while working with small groups of students. The teachers furthered their own learning through regular group reflection on the new practices.[10] Presumably, this professional development ultimately benefited all the children in the school. In addition, some of these teachers noted specific program benefits for the Say Yes children, including better homework and project completion than other children, accelerated performance in math in the fourth grade, and increased confidence and self-esteem as a result of one-on-one attention in reading. One teacher remarked that even after the closing of the resource room, Say Yes parents were more likely than other parents to come to the school to check how their child was doing.

Summary of findings

The qualitative data RFA collected about the complex Say Yes-school-parent dynamic reflected a persistent suspicion of the program among school staff. They perceived the program as foreign to the school's culture, especially in its establishment of a select group of students; and seemed threatened by parents' increased capacity to monitor their children's education and to act individually and collectively on behalf of their children.

The perspectives of the Say Yes staff and parents stood out in sharp contrast to the school staff's general attitude. Parents clearly believed that without the Say Yes staff the school environment would be a lot less caring for their children, that Say Yes staff provided a buffer for their children, making the school safer for them. In addition, they saw the Say Yes staff as advocates for their children, ensuring they received the academic supports they needed. Many parents seemed to correlate school staff distrust directly with largely positive intervention of Say Yes staff and parents on behalf of children.

Ironically, school staff believed that even as Say Yes successfully involved more parents in the school, adverse consequences emerged for the children. A number of staff interpreted the parents' presence as overprotective, hovering and interfering; a smaller group, however, saw the positive side of the program for children and themselves, including professional development opportunities that refreshed and enhanced their teaching practice.

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[9] When discussing the Say Yes presence in the school, the teachers' strong negative feelings were largely directed at what they believed was happening in the resource room. They did not comment as negatively about the literacy room where support for early reading occurred.

[10] For a full description of the summer professional development offered to teachers and their response, see Thomas-Reynolds 2005

Chapter V: Theory and Practice—Understanding and Comparing the Say Yes Approach

This chapter examines findings from the three previous data chapters, drawing on the literatures on parent involvement and student achievement; on child and adolescent development; and on the difficulties in building collaborations between schools and community/external organizations. In doing so, the goal is to articulate more effectively the Say Yes approach and to better understand the work of groups external to schools and the challenges they face in building a relationship with an established educational professional culture.

Caring connections

One important contributor to children's academic engagement is caring adult relationships. In fact, caring adult relationships are one of the most important factors in the development of children's sense of efficacy and in their engagement in learning (Masten 2001; Anderson et al. 2005). We believe that by constructing caring and trusting relationships with children and their parents, Say Yes staff built more comprehensive networks of support for the children. In addition, attendance (a behavioral indicator of student engagement) has also been shown to be consistently affected by parental involvement (McNeal 1999). Thus, it is not surprising that Say Yes children are absent fewer days and have better behavior marks than other children.

The math program, in particular, has made connections with families and this is the academic area where Say Yes children appear the strongest. With the weakest readers in particular, Say Yes supports were responsible for improving their math scores on standardized tests. Although it is not possible to discern the degree to which the parent involvement component of Say Yes by itself contributed to the improved math scores, other research has demonstrated that family math programs impact student achievement (Starkey & Klein 2000, cited in Henderson & Mapp 2002). In addition, Henderson & Mapp's (2002) review found that for parent and community involvement to have an impact on student learning, it had to be focused on specific knowledge and skills and to have a specific achievement focus.

Findings from this study show that by engaging parents in meaningful ways, expanding conceptualizations of parental involvement and facilitating bonds among parents, Say Yes staff was able to construct an intricate and multi-layered web of supportive adults who cared for the children of Say Yes and encouraged their learning.

Cultural bonding and social capital

For minority youth, cultural relevance is an important factor in school engagement (Ladson-Billings 1994), particularly as children approach adolescence, when racial identity issues become most salient (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams1990; Spencer & Dornbusch 1990; Spencer 1995; Tatum 1997). Even in elementary school, children have already developed an awareness of racial stereotypes and around fourth grade begin to develop a consistent sense of racial identity (review by Aboud 1988; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams 1990). Thus, the infusion of culturally relevant learning activities from an early age should provide important psychological buffers to the Say Yes children. The African-centric approach of Say Yes potentially protects and furthers the psychological connection between children's cultural identity and education.

An important aid to the forming of positive cultural identity is the presence of cross-generational role models. Morris (2004) synthesized findings from historical case studies of all-black segregated schools of the roles of black teachers and identified what he called "communally bonded" characteristics. These characteristics include: school personnel reaching out to families; intergenerational and cultural bonding; significant presence of black teachers, cultural and academic leaders, and pillars in the black community. He argues that the presence of these characteristics—which reflect the importance of access across generations to role models—is critical to the creation of successful urban schools serving African American children and families. Interviews with Say Yes parents indicated that parent involvement in Say Yes introduced the parents and children to elements analogous to Morris' communally bonded characteristics. Say Yes built close cross-generational ties within the program and introduced the children and parents to African American cultural and educational leaders through its programming, especially during the summer Freedom School.

In addition to reinforcing positive racial identity through its African-centric programming and leadership, Say Yes expanded the social networks of the Say Yes families. Research shows that, unlike their middle-class counterparts, low-income parents are more likely to have kinship ties than bonds with other parents in their children's schools (Horvat, Weineger and Lareau 2003). Say Yes, however, expanded the networks of parents of children in Say Yes beyond their circle of relatives. The Say Yes staff encouraged relationships among the parents in the program. As the parents began to know each other better, their children became friends outside of school as well as in school. As the bonds among the Say Yes children grew stronger, the relationships among the parents correspondingly grew stronger as well. Drawing on the African concepts of "it takes a village to raise a child" and "all children are my children," Say Yes staff encouraged parents to move even beyond the group of Say Yes families and to take collective responsibility for all children in the school.

Disparate agendas and lack of trust

While Say Yes experienced success in cultivating a community of parents and children, they struggled with their relationship to the school. Several factors contribute to the difficulty of building a working relationship between schools and other organizations. Often there are disparities between the agendas of the school and an external group (Dryfoos 1998; Jehl, Blank & McCloud 2001; Smylie 1998; Walker, Grossman, Raley, Fellerath & Holton 2001). In the case of Say Yes, this disparity was articulated by school staff through its critique of Say Yes' creation of a select group of students and parents within the school, in contrast to the school mission to serve all children equally.

The disparity between agendas is intensified by a professional culture that for decades has shunned relationships with groups perceived as external, including parent- and community-based groups (Jehl, Blank & McCloud 2001; Katz 1992; Sarason 1982; Tyack 1974). More recently, the acknowledgment that schools "cannot do it alone" has resulted in the recognition that the integration of school and the broader community is beneficial for students' academic development and well being (Dryfoos 1998). Furthermore, Michael Fullan (1999), an authority on school change, believes that for schools to improve there must be "deep internal collaboration" working in conjunction with "deep

outside collaboration." Regardless, making the boundaries of schools more permeable and establishing trusting and collaborative relationships remains a challenge.

The difficulty of establishing trusting and collaborative relationships is exacerbated by the high turnover rates of school principals, who are pivotal in positioning a new program within a school (Walker & Arbreton 2001). The Say Yes staff's initial interaction had been with the principal, who left after the first year. Several other principals came and left after that. Such constant administrative turnover creates the conditions where external programs working in a school are constantly losing momentum in building positive relations because they must start over again each year reconstructing key relationships. This Sisyphean enterprise typically results in the program developing a small core group of sympathetic and trusting school staff, but limited influence beyond that small core (Smylie 1998), a pattern that was repeated here.

Conflicting views on parent involvement

Many urban teachers and school personnel conceive of parental involvement in limited terms (Epstein 2001; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001). Their expectations are that parents will contribute to the education of their children in ways that facilitate the functioning of the school, such as volunteering in the classroom, chaperoning on field trips, and participating in the sanctioned parents' association (Epstein 2001). These traditional forms of parental involvement are school-centered, and while children may indirectly benefit from their parents' conformity to these practices, such involvement does not facilitate change that would serve the best interests of the children. Neither do staff members acknowledge or appreciate the actions of parents that fall outside of these constructs (Slaughter and Epps 1994; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001).

With the Say Yes program, trust was further disturbed by the program's success in creating an involved parent group. The program's goal was to engage parents and to make them "a part of the fabric of the school" (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis & George 2004, p. 6). From a parental perspective, increased presence in the school gives parents the opportunity to be a part of their children's learning by monitoring their progress and increasing observation of their children's teachers in order to mediate problems as they arise, a form of parent involvement

that is often not valued by school staff (Barton et al. 2004).

Although educators claim to value parental involvement and its role in promoting academic achievement, their perspective on legitimate roles for parents in schools is frequently more circumscribed than the role parents see for themselves, and certainly does not include sharing power and leadership (Nichols-Solomon 2000). In contrast, community-based organizations, such as Say Yes, often encourage parents to see themselves as leaders in the school. It is not unusual for this clash in perspective on parent involvement between school and community organizations to lead to discomfort and conflict (Jehl, Blank & McCloud 2001; Nichols-Solomon 2002). The Say Yes relationship with the school reflected these tensions, and as a result Say Yes was able to establish a cordial relationship with the school, but failed to develop a true collaboration.

Chapter VI: The Power and Promise of Say Yes

This report has suggested that the power of Say Yes lies in three interrelated characteristics: 1) its relational model of working with children and families, which builds caring and trusting connections; 2) its holistic approach to the child and family, which accounts for the social and cultural development of youngsters as well as their increased academic proficiency; and 3) its ecological vision of the child as embedded in multiple, connected learning contexts, namely, home, school and peer groups. Early evidence shows that these interrelated program aspects are expanding networks of support for the Say Yes families and that they tend to increase knowledge and skills in ways that can directly support the academic achievement of the students.

Research for Action hypothesizes that if the combined strengths of the program continue—providing Say Yes children with an education-oriented peer group as well as stronger family supports geared toward educational achievement—the chances are good that Say Yes children will be able to overcome many of the obstacles that low-income minority youngsters face as they make their way through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood. These same program strengths, coupled with caring and committed program staff, can also assist families and children as they attempt to navigate the school system to high school graduation and then post-secondary education or job training. Maintaining relationships will be a challenge, however, as the children move on from elementary school and families make different educational choices for their children. Thus far, a significant group (18 children) has chosen to go together to a charter school. For those who remain, or who have moved to other schools, the summer Freedom School has been one way that the program has provided cohesion for this Say Yes group.

Without a doubt, the delivery of the program is growing more complex as the children fan out to different schools. RFA believes it is especially important to continue to find ways to build peer support for those who are the most marginalized: children who are retained, remain at the original elementary school, or move on to other schools without some of their Say Yes peers.

The changing circumstances of Say Yes students raise the following questions: Will the Say Yes group be able to maintain its identity in the charter school? Will Freedom School, parent meetings and the after school program continue to play a unifying role? What adaptations must the program consider in order to sustain the strong individual **and** collective commitment to children's development and learning?

Despite the intentions and desires of Say Yes staff, relations with the school were cordial at best and contentious at worst, except for interactions with a small core of school staff who recognized the value of Say Yes for individual children, themselves and the school as a whole. Several of the school staff who had positive relationships with Say Yes offered some suggestions for the amelioration of tensions. First, include a school staff member—preferably one who was not a teacher of Say Yes children—as a Say Yes board member. This step, the staff believed, would provide a channel to all teachers in the school who genuinely wished to learn more about the program. Second, rather than principals or Say Yes staff selecting teachers to teach a Say Yes group, give the teachers a choice. This kind of self-determination would ensure that the program was working with a cooperative teacher who recognized the benefits of the program to Say Yes children, the other children in the classroom and himself/herself. Third, when Say Yes staff design "pull-out" programs, there should be careful coordination with the classroom teacher to ensure that class time is not interrupted. This consideration is particularly important for teachers in the current high-stakes testing environment, so that classroom teachers feel supported and respected for their roles in helping students get ready for these exams.

The kinds of tension between a school and an external program experienced by this Say Yes group are bound to arise even when there is a more positive sense of collaboration, or at least a more welcoming attitude toward the program and parents (this seems to be the case, to date, with the charter school and in the New York City schools). Nonetheless, there remain questions about how Say Yes can ensure cooperative and constructive relationships with school personnel. For example: How can the initial entry to a school build a base beyond the principal so that leadership turnover does not result in a loss of momentum in building trust within the school community? How will Say Yes prepare for the predictable tensions that result when parents gain confidence and begin to have an active presence in their child's school? What lessons have been learned about how Say Yes can use its resources—university partnerships included—to leverage improvement in the larger school context for all the children in the school?

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Appendix A: Methodology

Focus

Say Yes to Education asked Research for Action to conduct its evaluation with a focus on two programmatic elements: 1) families' experiences with and perspectives on the program; and 2) student outcomes at the end of third grade. This study was also viewed as the basis for a longitudinal study. The questions guiding the research were:

1) What does parent and family engagement look like in the Say Yes to Education program? What strategies have been most successful? What has been the impact of parent and family engagement on the Say Yes children?

2) What is the nature of the Say Yes program's relationship to the public school? What strategies does it use to build relationships with school personnel and faculty? What impact does it have on teaching and learning within the school? What role does it play between Say Yes families and the school?

3) What are the measurable outcomes and impacts for Say Yes students? What impacts and outcomes do parents and children describe for themselves? How do Say Yes students compare with a matched group of students on standardized test scores and behavioral outcomes?

Qualitative Data Collection

Interviews and Focus groups

RFA conducted interviews and focus groups with Say Yes staff, parents, children and school personnel. Individual interviews and focus groups averaged 60 minutes. They were recorded and then transcribed.

- *Say Yes Staff:* Seven Say Yes staff who were involved with the Philadelphia cohort were interviewed including the Executive Director, the Deputy Executive Director, the Program Manager, the Reading Support Specialist, the Freedom School director, the Administrative Assistant and the Administrative Coordinator.

- *Parents:* Thirty parents (out of 47) were interviewed or participated in focus groups. Nine parents consented to participate in interviews. Parents were selected to represent the range of parent involvement in the Say Yes program, as well as to balance gender of parents and students and to sample parents who had taken advantage of the education credit for parents. Say Yes staff determined the range of parent involvement using a list grouping parents in high, medium and low involvement categories. Several parents from each category were contacted for interviews until a sufficient cross section agreed to give interviews; as expected, parents in the low involvement category were difficult to reach. Nonetheless, six interviews with "difficult to reach" parents were conducted.[11] Fifteen parents also participated in focus groups during one of the mandatory parent meetings and six additional parents provided feedback on early findings from the research. Table 1 describes the parent sample.

- *Children:* Fourteen Say Yes children (seven girls and seven boys) participated in focus groups in spring 2005 during the time of the after-school program. The focus group participants were those whose parents had participated in either an interview or focus group and had given permission for their children to talk to research staff.

- *School personnel:* Seven faculty at the elementary school agreed to participate in an interview or focus group. RFA conducted a focus group with three school faculty. Four faculty were interviewed (including non-teaching professionals, administration, and a teacher), all familiar with the Say Yes program and Say Yes students and parents. In addition, RFA interviewed a Penn management representative. Although this sample group was small, they had substantial relationships relating directly to the program. The five teachers all had been or were currently teachers of Say Yes students, and some had participated in the summer Freedom School program and/or the after-school program.

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[11] Not all parents' descriptions of their involvement matched the perceptions of Say Yes staff. For example, parents who sent other family members to represent them at Say Yes meetings felt that they, by extension, were actively involved in the program.

Table 1: Demographics of Say Yes to Education Parent Group

Parent	Age	Relationship Status	Education	Employment	Ed. benefit	Role
A	27	Married	Some college	Provider Service Rep.	Yes	Mother
B	NA	Never married	Some college	After school program	No	Mother
C	29	Never married	Vocational cert.	Collections	No	Mother
D	NA	Other	HS	Housekeeping	Yes	Father
E	24	Never married	HS	Teacher	Yes	Mother
F	47	Other	Some college	Certified Nurse aide	No	Mother
G	31	Never married	Some college	Admin. Asst.	Yes	Mother
H	45	Never married	HS	Food prep	No	Mother
I	39	NA	HS	Painter	No	Father
J	42	LTR	Some voc. Ed.	Tax Professional	No	Grandmother
K	50	Married	Some college	Painter	No	Father
L	25	Engaged	Voc. Cert.	Medical asst.	No	Mother
M	27	Never married	BA	Social worker	Yes	Mother
N	26	Married	HS	Housewife	Yes	Mother
O	30	Never married	HS	Food service manager	Yes	Mother
P	36	Married	AA	Copier tech	No	Mother
Q	37	Married	HS	Nursing asst.	No	Mother
R	25	Never married	Trade school	Medical tech	Yes	Mother
S	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	Caseworker
T	37	Never married	Some voc. ed.	Clerk	No	Mother
U	33	Married	HS	Driver	No	Father
V	45	Married	BA	Manager	No	Mother
W	33	Married	AA	NA	No	Mother

Note: 24 parents were interviewed or participated in focus groups. One of these parents did not provide any demographic information.

Program Observations

Thirty-six hours of program observation were conducted. Observations included program activities in the Literacy Support room, Parents' Meetings, the After-School program, and Freedom School summer program. In addition, RFA conducted observations of key interactions among the school staff/leadership and Say Yes at events in which both participated, including a dinner Say Yes hosted for staff, several school leadership meetings, Freedom School classes, the After-School program and a year-end teacher/program staff review of the progress of one class of Say Yes third graders.

Process of Qualitative Data Collection

The initial phase of research had dual goals: to immerse RFA staff in the program in order to gain a thorough understanding of Say Yes and to inform RFA's conceptual model of the program, which was discussed and revised through the first formative feedback session with Say Yes staff in the fall of 2004. RFA began interviews with

parents in fall 2004, based on recommendations of Say Yes staff (see above). The initial research design called for longitudinal case studies of ten families. However, after a second formative feedback session to the Say Yes board in December 2004, it was decided that a broader perspective on the program would be useful. The interview sample was expanded through focus groups. Focus groups took place in the spring of 2005 and it is noteworthy that the subjects of these subsequent focus groups included parents who "self-selected" themselves after being approached in the context of a parent meeting. Not all parents at the meeting stayed for focus groups. The group included parents whose children attended other schools. Children's focus groups occurred in May 2005 after the parent focus groups had taken place. This was to obtain permission for children's participation in the focus groups. Therefore, only children of parents who participated in interview or focus groups were interviewed.

RFA provided another formative feedback session based on parent interview data and student outcomes data to Say Yes parents in spring 2005. An additional six parents who had not participated in interviews or focus groups were present to give reactions and feedback to the findings. A final formative feedback session was conducted in the spring of 2005 for Say Yes Philadelphia and New York City staff. This presentation not only discussed findings from the Philadelphia research but used the research findings to begin discussion of a larger longitudinal evaluation of Philadelphia and New York chapters.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data were first analyzed within group (Say Yes staff, parents, children and school staff) and coded into broad descriptive categories using Atlas.ti. Descriptive codes were then analyzed and analytic memos were written based on the themes that emerged within codes. The parent data was considered central to the analysis. Themes from the parent data were used to guide the review of data from other sources. Analytic memos were written to describe themes emerging from intersections of the data, i.e., the intersections of parent-Say Yes-school, parent-Say Yes-child, and child-Say Yes-school-parent. These analytic memos were developed into chapters of early drafts of the report.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data on student outcomes was obtained and analyzed at the end of students' third-grade year. Data were obtained from the Philadelphia School District data base and included grades, instructional reading levels,[12] attendance, previous participation in a pre-K program, qualification for the free lunch program (an indicator of socio-economic status), behavior marks[13] and Terra Nova math and reading test scores.

The Say Yes sample was N = 34 (while there are 47 students in this Say Yes program, six retained in earlier grades and seven who transferred out of the school were not included in this analysis).

Quantitative Research Design

The Say Yes student outcomes data were compared to a group of students (N= 34) who had completed third grade one year before the Say Yes students. This previous cohort was selected for comparison, because they had experienced the same school/neighborhood context and had similar demographic characteristics. In addition, their exposure to the Say Yes program was less than that of the non-Say Yes students in the same grade as the Say Yes cohort.

The comparison group was intended to resemble the Say Yes students in male/female ratio, instructional reading levels in second grade, free lunch eligibility and pre-K experience. Instructional reading level was suggested as an important matching variable because the School District of Philadelphia's Research Office reported this variable as highly predictive of future performance. An initial plan to match the students on their first grade instructional

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[12] Instructional reading levels are determined by teacher assessments.

[13] Behavior marks were given by teachers across eleven behavioral categories. Marks in each category ranged from one to three with one representing the lowest grade. RFA summed marks across all categories to create a composite behavior grade. The composite behavior marks had a minimum of eleven and a maximum of thirty-three.
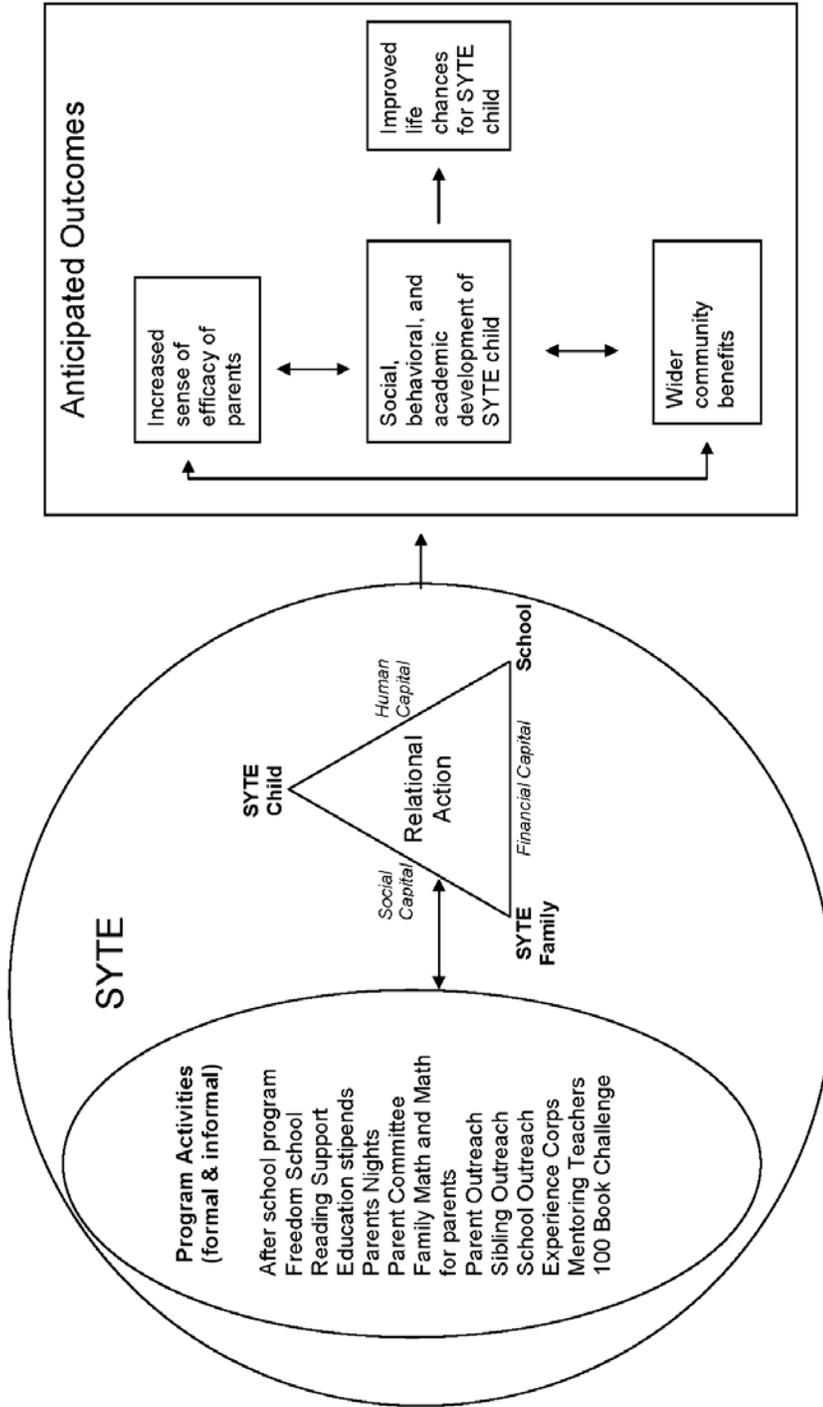
reading levels was not feasible because of a change in the School District's reporting format for reading between the two cohorts.

However, finding an equivalent group of students from the previous cohort proved difficult. More Say Yes students were reading at higher reading levels in second grade than the previous cohort and many more had attended pre-K. Therefore, an alternative method for equating the groups, "propensity scoring" was used. "Propensity scoring," is a statistical technique for equating groups when random assignment is not possible (Rosenbaum & Rubin 1983). Propensity-scoring controls for pre-existing differences between the two groups. This statistical technique creates a variable, a "propensity score," which represents the difference between individuals in the two groups and is then used in further analysis to control for these differences. Of course, the propensity score only controls for variables on which information is available.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS software. "Univariate Analysis of Variance" was used to compare the Say Yes group and comparison group on Terra Nova math and reading tests, attendance and behavior (while controlling for the propensity score). The analysis also looked at differences on Terra Nova third grade math and reading scores according to the Instructional Reading levels of students in the third grade.

Appendix B: Model of theory in use

Anticipated Outcomes

Increased sense of efficacy of parents

Social, behavioral, and academic development of SYTE child

Improved life chances for SYTE child

Wider community benefits

SYTE

SYTE Child

Human Capital

Relational Action

Social Capital

Financial Capital

SYTE Family

School

Program Activities (formal & informal)

After school program
Freedom School
Reading Support
Education stipends
Parents Nights
Parent Committee
Family Math and Math for parents
Parent Outreach
Sibling Outreach
School Outreach
Experience Corps
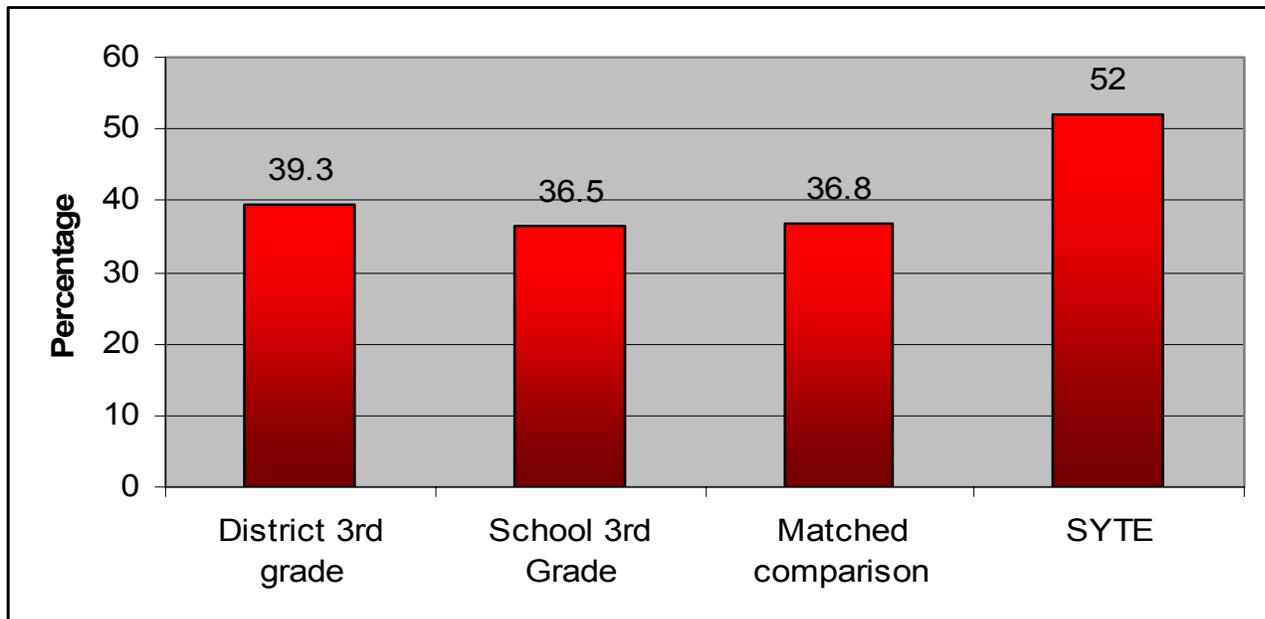Mentoring Teachers
100 Book Challenge

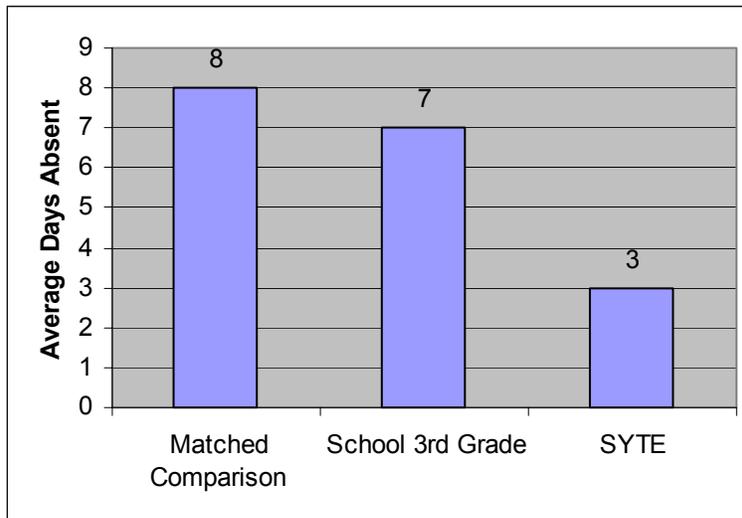# Appendix C: Quantitative findings of test performance, attendance, and behavior

Percentage of students scoring at or above the 50th percentile
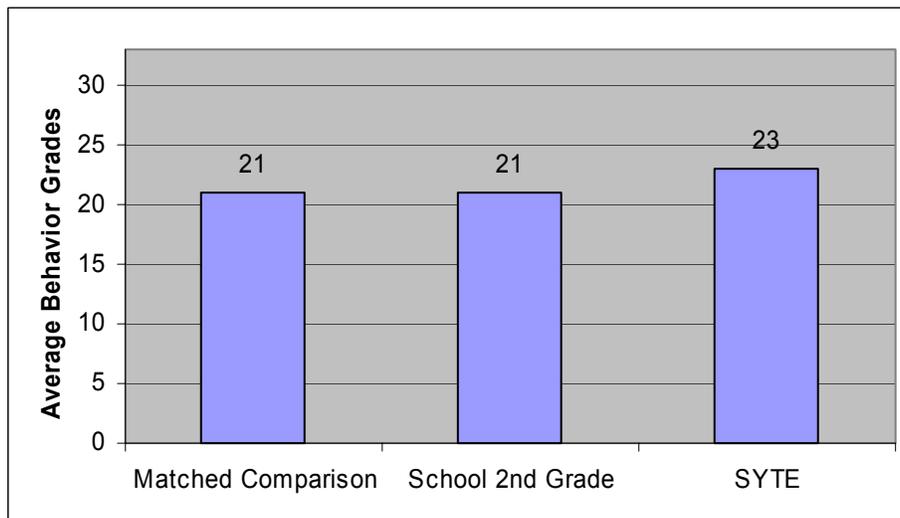On the 3rd grade Terra Nova Reading Test
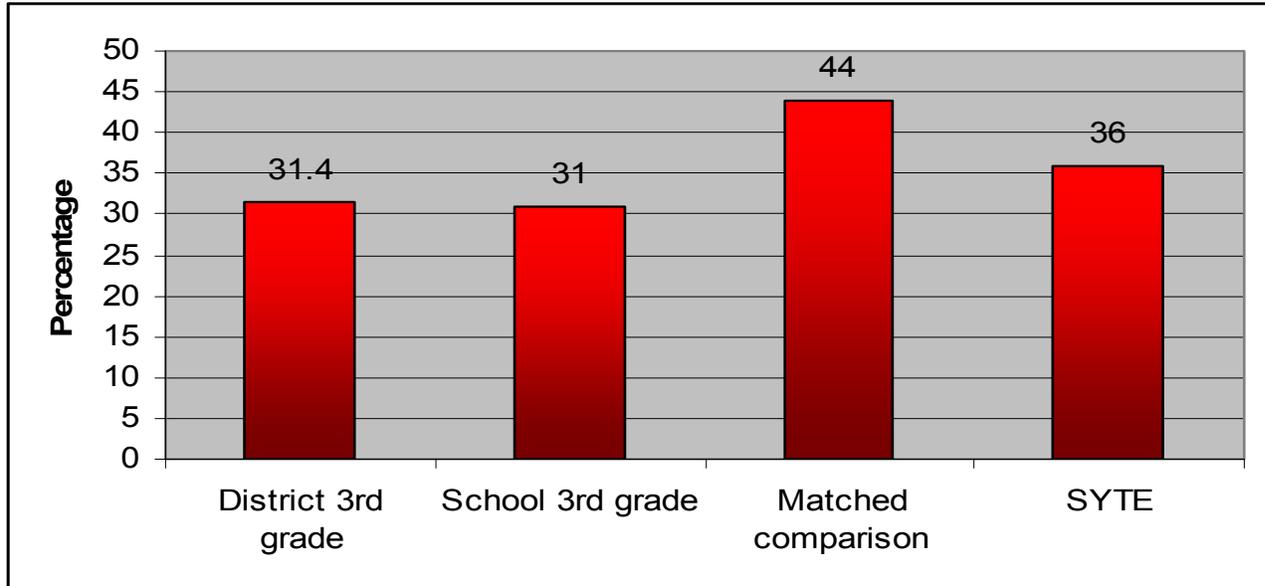
Percentage of students scoring at or above the 50th percentile
On the 3rd grade Terra Nova Math Test

Average number of days absent from school in third grade

Average behavior grades in second grade

* Behavior grades ranging from one (poor) to three (excellent) were given by teachers across eleven behavioral categories. These were summed by RFA to develop a composite behavior score. The individual behavior scores had a range of 11-33.

About the Authors

Eva Gold is a Principal of Research for Action. She has served as primary investigator for numerous local and national studies examining the dynamics of parent, community, school relations. In addition to her interest in parent, community, school dynamics, her research interests include the role of community organizing in school reform, home and school literacies, and the politics of urban education. Eva is a Guest Lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania where she teaches a course in the Urban Studies Program on Community Activism and School Reform and at the Graduate School of Education on Data Analysis and Reporting.

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