

Buffalo, New York: Building Off a Breakthrough

A “New Buffalo” is emerging, and civic optimism is riding high these days in western New York. In 2014, with a surge of new immigrants and many former residents returning to Buffalo, the city and region marked the reversal of a 50-year decline in population.¹ For the first time in decades, cranes dotted the Buffalo skyline, a signal of new investment and development in the city’s downtown and neighborhoods. The region’s “Eds and Meds” recently coalesced around an expanded Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus corridor, netting 3,000 new jobs in health care, academia, and research. The largest production facility of photovoltaic panels in the Western Hemisphere, Solar City, is establishing its new permanent facility in the region, thus adding another 2,000 jobs.²

Looking to harness this momentum is the Buffalo Niagara Regional Workforce Coalition, a multiyear, multisector collective effort that has brought together key regional leaders from business, philanthropy, government, and education. The region’s major business leadership group, the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, seeded and now staffs the initial implementation of the Workforce Coalition’s work plan. The Workforce Coalition’s goal is to build a better, more rational workforce development system that meets the needs of growing businesses, creates economic opportunity for all residents, and pushes forward the two-county region’s renaissance. The Buffalo Niagara Regional Workforce

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Seek out “early-win” projects to ground effort, catalyze leadership, and build momentum for newly formed workforce development planning efforts.
- Leverage already proven models or efforts, rather than starting from scratch, to learn from on-the-ground, hard-won experience in collaborative leadership as well as to deepen and broaden impact.
- Make a clear link to the business case to ground business engagement in early-launch implementation.

Coalition, and local leaders involved in the Communities that Work Partnership (CTWP) have begun to pick a few efforts to implement as early-stage winning projects during their still-young collaborative process.

THE BUSINESS CASE AND EARLY WINS: LAUNCH OF SAY YES INTERNS

One of the early wins identified by Workforce Coalition leadership is the launch of a dynamic new internship program, Say Yes Interns. The program leverages and deepens an existing effort in the city called Say Yes to Education Buffalo.³ The Say Yes Buffalo effort combines comprehensive K-12 delivery of student support services with the incentive of locally

¹ Robert Shibley and Bradshaw Hovey with Rachel Teaman, “Buffalo Case Study,” in *Remaking Post-Industrial Cities: Lessons From North America and Europe*, ed. Donald K. Carter, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

² Interviews with city and regional leaders, December 2015.

³ Planning efforts to create what is now the Say Yes Buffalo partnership began in 2009. Leaders formally announced the program in December 2011, and operations began in 2012. Leaders say that the new alliance has been made easier because there is integrated membership among leaders of the Workforce Coalition and Say Yes Buffalo. Say Yes is represented on the Workforce Coalition’s leadership team, and representatives of the Workforce Coalition sit on Say Yes’ internship leadership group.

funded postsecondary tuition scholarships to get more Buffalo students into and through college. Its startup preceded the Workforce Coalition and has already dramatically improved Buffalo high school graduation rates [a 12 percentage point increase in three years] and college enrollment rates [a 10 percentage point increase in three years].⁴

Starting in the spring and summer of 2016, area businesses that are part of the Workforce Coalition are providing paid internships to Say Yes scholars who are current juniors and seniors in college. Businesses also offer job shadow days, tours, and career days to these and other students. Leaders of the Workforce Coalition also offer a five-day internship Boot Camp to help Say Yes scholars polish their business-oriented leadership and soft skills, acquire appropriate work attire, and prepare for employer-employee relationships. College partners play a supporting role by making

internship matches and assisting students in preparing for interviews.

The Workforce Coalition's decision to launch a new Say Yes Interns program with Say Yes Buffalo as an "early win" project is strategic in two ways. First, the partnership with Say Yes is purposely structured around internships to make a stronger link between Say Yes Buffalo and employment and college credential completion. Workforce Coalition leaders say that internships provide an opportunity for Say Yes scholars to apply their skills, demonstrate their abilities, and gain access to career opportunities with employers.⁵ These are opportunities to which Say Yes Buffalo scholars traditionally have not had access. Moreover, leaders of the Workforce Coalition say that internships give Say Yes scholars more opportunities to get experience in a workplace setting with college-educated professionals, an experience that most summer jobs (such as a

COMMUNITIES THAT WORK PARTNERSHIP

This report was prepared by the Aspen Institute using federal funds under award 99-07-13887 from the Economic Development Administration, US Department of Commerce. The grant award supported the implementation of the Communities that Work Partnership, which also received important matching support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and additional support from the Joyce Foundation. The authors are grateful to the Department of Commerce, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and the Joyce Foundation for their support. The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, the Economic Development Administration, or the US Department of Commerce.

Seven regional teams were selected competitively in July 2015. Teams comprised three to four leaders and, importantly, included a private industry partner representing employer voice. The regional team in Buffalo, New York, included the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, National Grid, Erie County, and the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. The partners collaborated to advance industry-led workforce development strategies in their region. AspenWSI and a core management team facilitated peer learning and leadership development for the Communities that Work Partnership and documented their efforts in order to accelerate learning in the field. The seven Partnership Briefs are part of a package of learning materials to be released in the fall of 2016, available at as.pn/communitiesthatwork.

⁴ "Community Leadership Council Meeting," presentation, data cited from NYSED Buffalo City School District Report Cards and National Student Clearinghouse, Say Yes to Buffalo Education, May 4, 2016.

⁵ For additional work exploring the role of internships, see: Association of American Colleges & Universities, "New Research on Internships and Experiential Learning Programs," Peer Review, Fall 2010, Vol. 12, No. 4; Phil Gardner, "Framing Internships From an Employers' Perspective: Length, Number, and Relevancy," CERl Research Brief 6, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich., Collegiate Employment Research Institute, 2013; Pathways to Prosperity, "Guidance, Handbooks and Tools for Supporting Employer Engagement and Structuring Work-Based Learning," Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2014; John T. Rigsby, Noel Addy, Clyde Herring, Donna Polledo, "An Examination of Internships and Job Opportunities," Journal of Applied Business Research, July/August 2013, Vol. 29, No. 4.

summer retail employment] might not provide. Leaders also believe that this professional workplace environment experience builds motivation among students who can better see a place for themselves in a well-paid professional business setting and that it crystalizes their understanding of how finishing a college program can provide long-term economic benefits.

Companies have other interests in participating. One is that Say Yes Interns allow companies to build their future workforce by screening employees and hiring the best and brightest Say Yes Buffalo graduates. Company leaders note that the Say Yes Interns program will help build and retain local talent, and give them a new option for local hiring rather than recruiting from outside the area.⁶ They also anticipate that, as a program connected to college-going students, the internship program will become a platform that helps build stronger labor market relevancy into the curriculum of area colleges.

The Workforce Coalition's decision to launch a new Say Yes Interns program has a second strategic purpose. As the Workforce Coalition gets its multiyear planning and implementation efforts underway, it needs to cultivate trust among partners, disprove early critics with demonstrated success, and inspire others to become involved and support the coalition. The alliance with Say Yes Buffalo helps with all of these needs; in part because Say Yes

The Buffalo Niagara Regional Workforce Coalition initially convened in 2015 and is progressing from planning to implementation



VISION: An inclusive workforce system driven by employer needs that prepares all members of the community for high-quality careers.

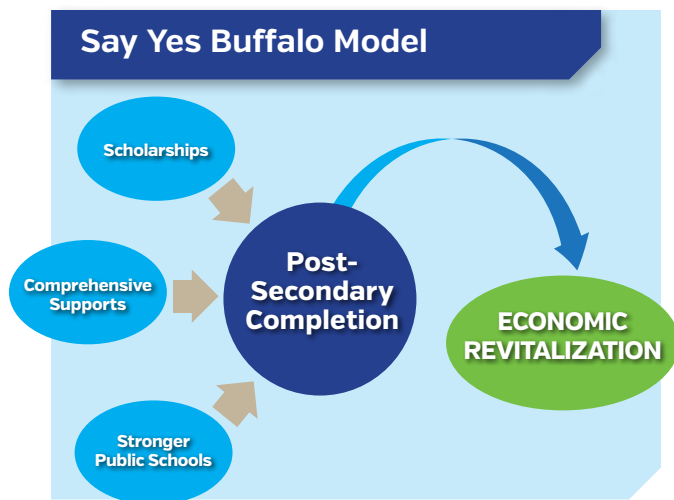
MISSION: Establish an integrated education and workforce development system aligned with employer job opportunities with a focus on key sectors to create a stronger, more inclusive workforce.

Buffalo already has years of implementation that has demonstrated results—three years of data show widely lauded improvements in high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment among city students.⁷

Workforce Coalition leaders also recognize that Say Yes Buffalo brings to their team five years of on-the-ground, hard-won experience in collaborative leadership. Local leaders say the breakthrough component of Say Yes Buffalo is the transparent, collaborative governance structure that guides all efforts and builds solutions between and among many partners, including business, philanthropy, education, and government. The Workforce Coalition is able to leverage the communitywide trust and demonstrated success already built by Say Yes.

⁶ For example, research shows that students who intern with a local employer are more likely to stay in a state or region after graduation. See Collegiate Employment Research Institute, "Brief 6: Internships and Co-ops: The Key to Talent," Recruiting Trends 2015-2016 45th Edition, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich., 2016.

⁷ For example, data collected by Say Yes Buffalo from the National Student Clearinghouse show that Buffalo Public Schools fall enrollment in postsecondary education immediately after graduation from high school increased from 57 percent in 2012 (pre-Say Yes Buffalo) to 67 percent in 2015. In 2014, the national average for postsecondary enrollment was 61 percent.



LEVERAGE AND LEARN FROM PROVEN MODELS

The decision of the Workforce Coalition to leverage and learn from Say Yes Buffalo’s experience and demonstrated success has already provided dividends. Consider how the Workforce Coalition adjusted its early expectations for the startup of Say Yes Interns. Some leaders pushed the Workforce Coalition to be ambitious and create quick impact when selecting early goals to secure and implement internships in the first year of operation. These leaders suggested securing hundreds of internships from businesses right away. It seemed like a reasonable goal; a way to achieve scale as soon possible. However, counsel from other leaders, affirmed by Say Yes experience, suggested that a more gradual, phased buildup of internships was advisable. That would give the new program more time to work out relationships, secure commitments, and refine and test the design before scaling rollout.

As Say Yes experience showed, the scaled-back approach was right. Even with ample planning time, Workforce Coalition leaders found it difficult to secure even a small number of internships for a first-year launch. One reason was that targeted businesses initially shied away from committing to internships because of unknown costs incurred through wages paid to interns, insurance increases, or staff time needed to mentor interns. Another reason was that businesses wanted to make sure they offered interns a rich experience, more than a “paper-pushing” job. These businesses were

unclear on how to structure learning objectives and build a rewarding staff mentorship experience without some guidance.

For their part, Say Yes scholars were surprisingly reluctant to sign up for the internships at established corporations. For example, some scholars were more comfortable with their summer retail employment, even though it paid less money and was less connected to their educational program of study. The main reason for the reluctance, it turns out, was that most scholars were unfamiliar with and disconnected from working in a more formal, “buttoned-down” corporate culture.

It took some time to discover and then work through these temporary challenges to get businesses and Say Yes scholars to sign up in the first year. That meant the Workforce Coalition and Say Yes Buffalo leadership were right to look at the Say Yes Buffalo experience and scale their launch to a more manageable 20 internships.

MOVING FORWARD

A next step is to scale the internships to even more Say Yes scholars and businesses. Plans are to do just that starting in the fall of 2016, with initial plans to implement an online portal to identify positions, facilitate matching, and automate some of the supports. This will include posting summer 2017 internship opportunities even earlier—in fall 2016 and early winter 2017—so that students have time to sign up and businesses have time to plan. Leaders of the Workforce Coalition and Say Yes Buffalo also plan to get students ready to apply for the internships much earlier, and spend more time giving them guidance and support. This will happen through much more intentional work to build on-campus peer-to-peer mentoring relationships, resume and interview preparation, and employer presentations—all earlier in the process. Their goal in this early launch is to reach and sign up many more scholars and build relationships with businesses and educational institutions that will deepen the benefits gained by the scholars, employers, educational institutions, and economy.