LUMINA FOUNDATION

FOCUS™

Summer 2014

College-bound communities

The smartest cities make student success a shared mission

Editor's note: The three stories in this issue of *Focus* were reported and written by Steve Giegerich. Giegerich, a former education writer for the Associated Press and a onetime journalism instructor at Columbia University, is a staff writer for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

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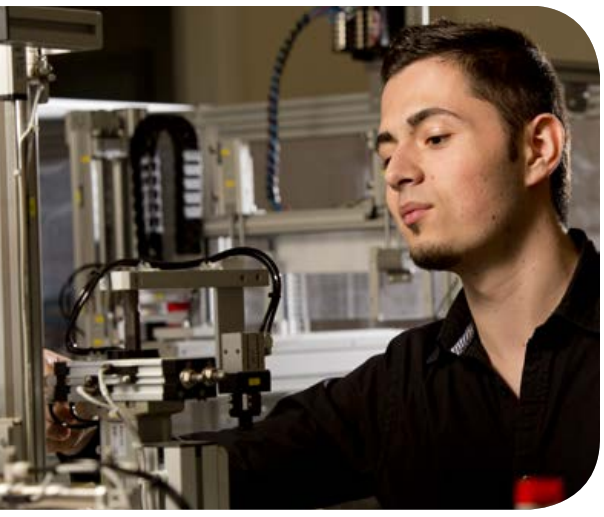

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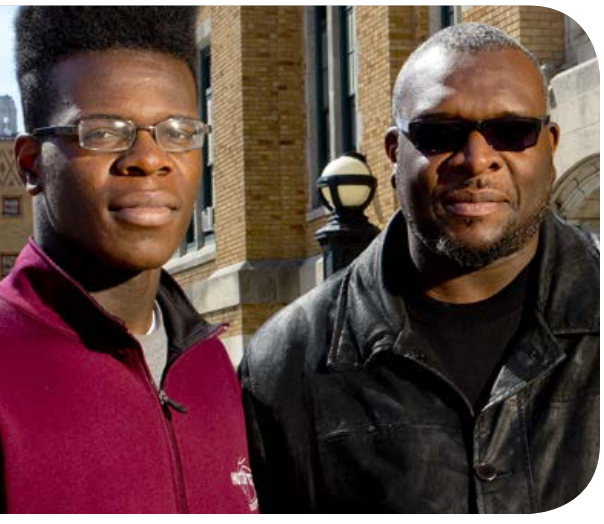

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On the cover: Fabien Cuen and Adriana Herrera work on a science experiment as part of the Anteater Academy program at Valley High School in Santa Ana, Calif. The program, named for the animal mascot at the University of California-Irvine, serves high-potential students who, without help, are unlikely to succeed in college.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Cities are a lot like people in that no two are alike. Each has its own personality, its own approach and attitude, its own sense of purpose and place. For all of their differences, however, cities are also like people because of what they have in common. All cities — like all people — strive for the same basic things: prosperity, security, a sense that the future holds promise.

Unfortunately, those basic needs often seem distant and elusive these days. In an era marked by rapid technological change and buffeted by the forces of the global economy, the path to a secure and promising future is rarely obvious and almost never straight.

And yet, there is one key to ensuring that promising future. That key factor is *talent*, the knowledge, skills and abilities that allow us to meet immediate challenges and continually respond to new ones. Without sufficient talent, no individual — and no city — will negotiate the path and thrive in today's competitive landscape.

This type of talent isn't inherent. No one is born with all of the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the modern world — and no city can simply bestow that type of talent on its residents. It must be fostered and developed. And the most efficient and effective way to do that is through high-quality postsecondary education.

Research shows a direct correlation between thriving cities and high levels of college-level learning. Regions with robust levels of educational attainment have stronger economies, greater individual earning power and better quality of life. Every community wants that, and we at Lumina are working to make it possible.

We see America's cities as powerful engines in the effort to reach Goal 2025 — that is, the national effort to ensure that 60 percent of Americans hold a high-quality postsecondary credential by 2025. Census figures show that more than 80 percent of Americans live in cities or suburbs. And with American society becoming increasingly urban, it is obvious that the nation must find effective strategies to increase college attainment in metropolitan regions.

What's more, we at Lumina believe the nation's cities are fertile ground for the types of community collaborations that can have significant impact on college attainment. That is why we are actively supporting large-scale efforts in 55 metro regions — to help adults return to higher education, to increase college access and attainment among Latino students, and to give all underserved populations a greater chance for postsecondary success.

This issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* explores the work under way in three of those 55 cities. You'll read about:

- Columbus, Ind., where the organizations comprising the Community Education Coalition have, for nearly two decades, served as a model of cooperation and efficiency in fostering education reform and improving college attainment.
- Buffalo, N.Y., where local leaders of all stripes have put aside their individual agendas to support and sustain a comprehensive package of reforms offered under the banner "Say Yes to Education."
- Santa Ana, Calif., where the city motto, "Education First," plays out all along the education pipeline — beginning with an annual outreach effort to kindergarteners on the campus of Santa Ana College.

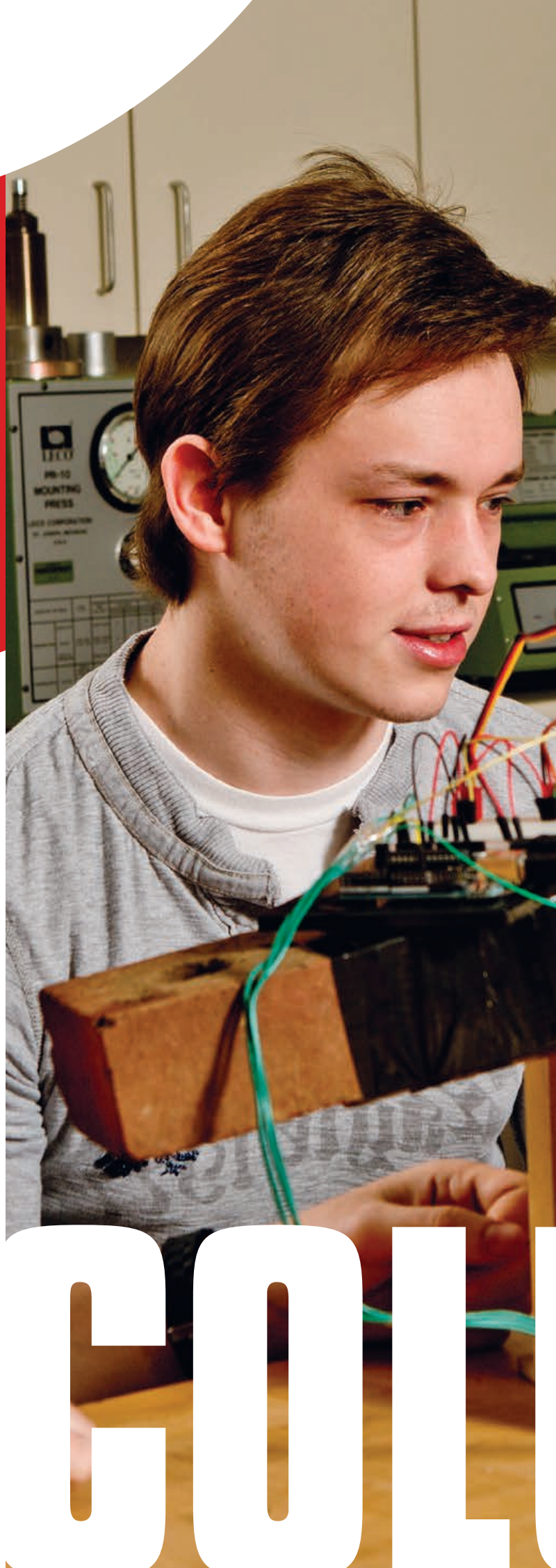
There's also a wealth of information on our website, *www.luminafoundation.org*, where *Focus* offers several extra features. Those "extras" include audio clips from students and community representatives, a story that explores the importance of committed leadership, and a photo slide show featuring Uriel Lopez of Columbus, Ind., a sophomore engineering student at Purdue Tech who also works full time as an apprentice draftsman at Cummins Inc.

Of course, the people and programs featured in this issue of the magazine represent the good work being done in just a few of the nation's cities. The Lumina-funded effort that includes these three cities is also at work in 52 *other* metro regions. And, of course, there are many more cities and regions that recognize the importance of increasing college attainment among their residents and are working to make that happen.

We applaud all of those efforts, and we hope the stories in this issue of *Focus* serve to inspire and inform even greater progress in postsecondary attainment — in every American city.

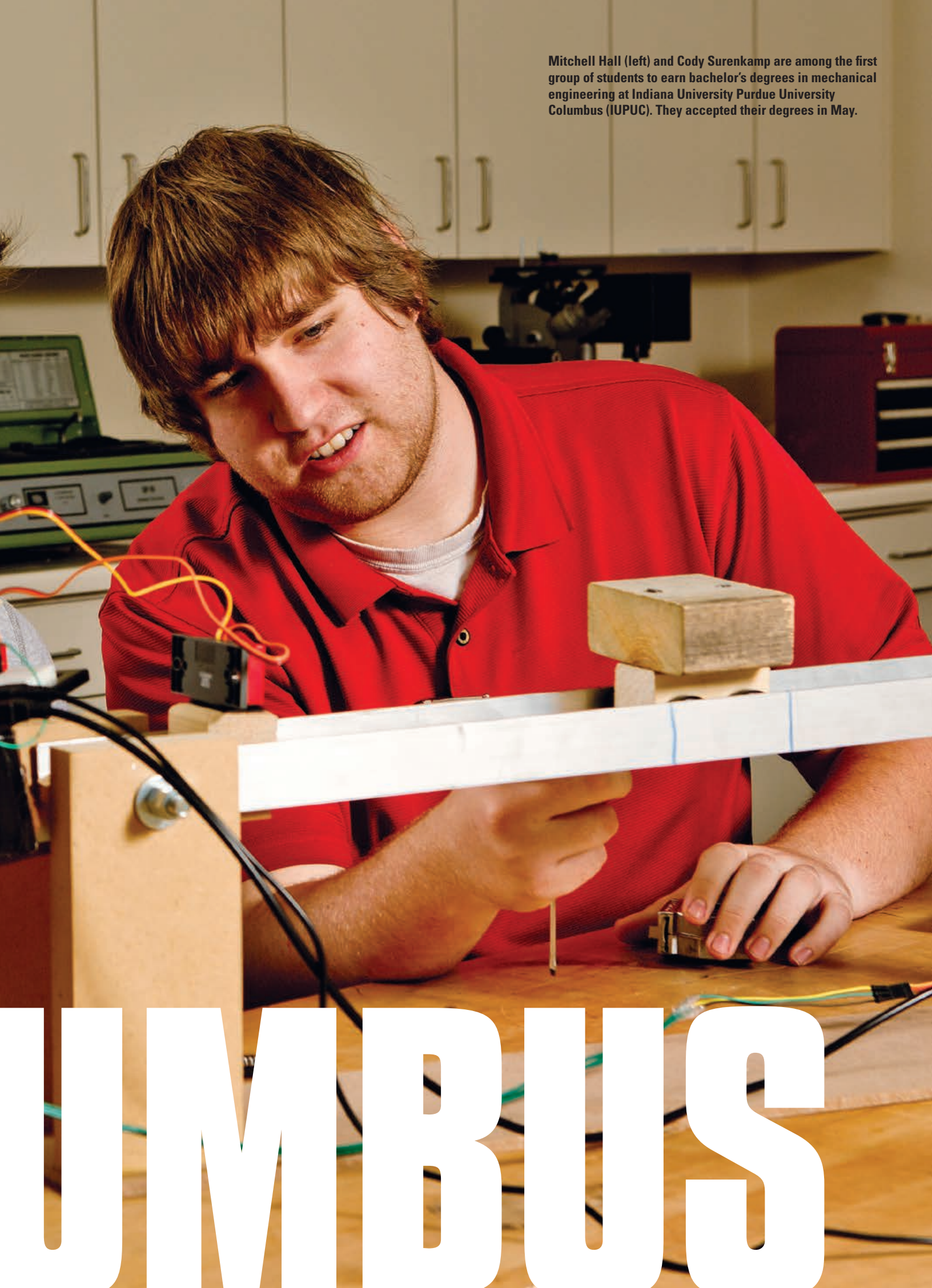
Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation

Engine-making city in southern Indiana boasts a diesel-powered partnership



Columbus, Ind. — Marwan Wafa thought he knew what lay ahead four years ago, when he was installed as vice chancellor and dean of Indiana University Purdue University Columbus (IUPUC).

And then he found himself in a room with a veritable Who's Who of this southeast Indiana city, attending his first meeting of the Columbus Community Education Coalition (CEC) governing board.



Mitchell Hall (left) and Cody Surenkamp are among the first group of students to earn bachelor's degrees in mechanical engineering at Indiana University Purdue University Columbus (IUPUC). They accepted their degrees in May.

UMBUS

Seated at the table were K-12 school superintendents, city officials, millionaire philanthropists, fellow higher education leaders and representatives of business interests large and small. Even the director of the Columbus Municipal Airport was on hand. Wafa, the newcomer, sat back and watched as this collection of potentially combustible egos set aside their individual agendas and worked together quickly and cooperatively. Their shared mission: fostering educational reform and improving college attainment in a region encompassing a large swath of southeastern Indiana.

In an academic career spanning three decades and a handful of Midwestern locales, Wafa had "never seen anything like it before."

Four years and scores of meetings later, Wafa now understands that the CEC measures success, not by board members' ability to play nice, but in outcomes that benefit the region's young people — students whom most board members will never even meet.

The Coalition's influence is evident all over this city. You can see it at Columbus East High School, where students once poised to drop out are now on the college track. It's demonstrated by the financial success of a newly minted IUPUC engineering graduate who, at age 23, was able to purchase his first home before earning his degree. And it's reflected in the innovative program that enables a Purdue College of Technology freshman to attend classes while drawing an annual salary of $35,000.

With a 16-year history of advancing education throughout the region, the Coalition is now a model of efficiency and harmony. But "it was not always like this," CEC Board Chairman Hutch Schumaker points out. He

Cooperative leadership is vital to the success of the Columbus coalition. Conferring here are (from left): Joe Fuehne, director of the Purdue College of Technology at Columbus; Steven Combs, interim chancellor of Ivy Tech Community College-Columbus; John Quick, superintendent of Bartholomew Consolidated School Corp.; Kathy Griffey, superintendent of Flat Rock-Hawcreek School Corp., and Marwan Wafa, vice chancellor and dean at IUPUC.

admits it took time and "a lot of hard work" for Coalition members — representing every corner of Columbus commerce and education — to forge a true partnership, one that acts collectively rather than in institutional self-interest.

"None of the things we do can be done alone," insists Schumaker, president of the local Coca-Cola Bottling Co. "It's a team sport, and we're all on the same team. We may not always agree on the plays that are called, but we all want to win." Faced with an educational conundrum, Columbus will "find a way to figure it out," agrees Mark Levett, chief executive officer of the Cummins Foundation.

John Burnett, who serves as CEO of the Coalition, is often asked why collaboration, a concept that eludes so many other communities, plays out so well in Columbus.

"It's in our DNA," says Burnett, a former executive with Cummins Inc., Columbus' largest employer and a major funder of the CEC. The outside queries grew so numerous that the Coalition launched a study a few years ago to better understand why the "Columbus Way" works where similar efforts fail. The CEC issued its findings in a detailed report published by its partner, the Institute for Coalition Building, titled: *Start Small. Think Big. Aim High.*

Reduced to its essence, Columbus' collaborative model is best defined as a high-functioning alliance bound by a single purpose: supporting Columbus-area children from pre-kindergarten through college graduation.

That comprehensive approach has certainly worked for Columbus East High School students Rico Lewis and Brooke Tames.

"I used to talk to teachers real rude," confesses Lewis, a tenth-grade lineman on the Olympians football team. The disrespect was evident on Lewis' report cards. "F's all day," he laments.

Tames' record was little better. "I hated school, hated learning," recalls the ninth-grader. "I was a troubled kid."

It's telling that Lewis and Tames refer to their academic and behavioral troubles in the past tense. The fact is, the 2013-14 school year was one in which both teenagers demonstrated dramatic turnarounds in performance and attitude.

Much of the credit for the transformation goes to iGrad, an enhanced counseling program that tackles the social, academic and attitudinal problems that can cause troubled students to give up and drop out. The program, a joint venture of Ivy Tech Community College-Columbus and Bartholomew (County) Consolidated School Corp., reaches 10 percent of the students in the city's two high schools.

At East High, 44 seniors signed on in 2012, the first semester iGrad was offered. The following spring, 42 of them received their diplomas. Thirty-three then went on to college. The early promise of iGrad in Columbus inspired Cummins Inc. to launch similar programs in a British town where the company, the world's largest independent manufacturer of diesel engines, has a presence.

A lesson in leadership

Strong leadership is a critical component in any city's effort to improve education outcomes and increase college attainment among its residents. Experts cite several qualities that mark an effective local leader, including:

Patience: It takes time and effort to foster true collaboration among multiple entities. A smart leader embraces the long haul.

An innovative spirit: Jeff Edmondson, managing director of Strive Together, says a good leader values creativity and urges partners to "think differently about what needs to be done to put (students) at the center."

An evidence-based approach: Decisions and actions must address actual facts — as reflected in the student attainment data from the partnership's service area. A good leader always puts data "at the center of the discussion," Edmondson says.

Flexibility: Sharing power is vital. As Wallace Foundation President Will Miller says: A good leader can't be "in love with his (own) strategies to the exclusion of others."

The iGrad program is strictly voluntary. Enrollees can leave of their own volition, though most choose to stay. The program requires students to supplement a normal class schedule with intensive personal and academic counseling. The counseling is provided by a professional staff supported by a corps of student peer and community volunteers — 162 of them at East High alone.

"We want to save them all, but the reality is we can't," says Cathy Jackson, an iGrad team leader at East High. "But every kid we do save is a kid that now has a chance."

This past year, Tames and Lewis moved decisively into the "saved" category. Report cards that once reflected a steady beat of failure are now filled with A's and B's. And two teens who didn't figure to make it past tenth grade are now pondering college choices and potential majors.

The difference, Lewis said, nodding toward iGrad Coach Sara Donathen-Smith, "is having all these extra moms around. It makes me feel *real* good."

As with all CEC initiatives, the program that put Lewis and Tames on a new course began at a regular meeting of the group that surprised IUPUC Vice Chancellor Wafa four years ago. The CEC board meets every other month in the Columbus Learning Center, a 130,000-square-foot structure that literally bridges the three higher-ed campuses serving Columbus: IUPUC to the north, Ivy Tech-Columbus to the south, and the Purdue College of Technology to the east.

Each school in this triangle is a satellite campus. Or, as Purdue Tech Director Joseph Fuehne puts it: "We each have our holy lands." Fuehne's Mecca is West Lafayette, home of Purdue University. IUPUC is an extension of Purdue and Indiana University-Bloomington. Ivy Tech-Columbus is one of 31 campuses in the state's community college system.

The lines separating the three institutions are blurred on this tri-campus, where 10,000 students share library facilities, common areas and classroom space. Administrative offices for all three schools — including one for each institution's leader — are even housed under the same Learning Center roof.

The comity is evident in the structured yet free exchange of ideas at the bimonthly meetings of the CEC board. And the communication pipeline flows in both directions: Board members representing business and commerce don't just seek to improve outcomes for students and schools; they also advertise the credentials they are seeking in employees — present and future. The educators on the board respond by tweaking curricula to deliver a workforce that is job-ready at graduation. "We can keep working backward until we get to pre-kindergarten," says Fuehne.

Hutch Schumaker (left) is the board chairman for the Columbus Community Education Coalition, and John Burnett serves as its CEO. Burnett, a former executive with Cummins Inc., says the Coalition is successful because the spirit of collaboration is "in our DNA."

Sara Donathen-Smith, an iGrad coach at Columbus East High School, works with students Brooke Tames and Rico Lewis. Both teens admit they were struggling before their involvement with iGrad, an enhanced counseling program that tackles the social, academic and attitudinal problems that often cause students to drop out.

Whenever possible, the two-way pipeline focuses on preparing students in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields — thanks largely to the Cummins influence. In addition to being the area's top employer, the Fortune 500 company makes it possible for Columbus to boast more engineers per capita than any other city in the nation: 21 for every 1,000 residents.

"You can't swing a dead cat in Columbus without hitting a mechanical engineer," quips John Quick, superintendent of Bartholomew Consolidated Schools.

If that's the case, 23-year-old Cody Surenkamp would be wise to duck.

Surenkamp started thinking about a career in engineering while growing up in Seymour, an hour south of Columbus. Except for a brief flirtation with the idea of working in motor sports, Surenkamp has stuck with engineering ever since.

Not only did he know what he wanted to do when he grew up, Surenkamp knew precisely where he wanted to do it: at Cummins. With friends and relatives among the 7,500 Columbus-area residents drawing a Cummins paycheck, he understood that "if you go to school to be an engineer, you're a lock to get in."

Still, a nearby option for a Columbus-area kid eyeing an undergraduate degree in engineering didn't exist until IUPUC offered the major in 2011. That opportunity convinced Surenkamp to transfer from the motor sports program at the Indiana-Purdue campus in Indianapolis.

IUPUC subsequently enrolled Surenkamp in a Coalition-supported school-to-work program that translated into a full-time position in Cummins' high-horsepower laboratory. A flexible IUPUC schedule, an integral part of the school-to-work initiative, allowed Surenkamp to balance the demands of work and study. "If the classes overlapped, they let me work around my work schedule," he says.

Better yet, the Cummins salary pared his college debt to $20,000. This comparatively light burden (according to the *Wall Street Journal*, 2014 college graduates face an average debt of $33,000), served Surenkamp well when he went shopping for his first home. At first, he worried that student debt might make him a bad risk for a mortgage. But those fears were quickly dispelled when the mortgage broker exclaimed: "$20,000? That's nothing."

April 25, the day he signed those mortgage papers, touched off a quick series of life-altering events for Surenkamp. At commencement exercises three weeks later, he and two classmates became the first students in IUPUC history to receive undergraduate degrees in mechanical engineering. Then, on June 7, Surenkamp completed his rite-of-passage trifecta when he and

fiancée Emily Foust tied the knot at the Garden City Church of Christ.

As Surenkamp becomes a homeowner, college graduate, husband and in all likelihood a lifetime Cummins employee, another generation of Columbus-area kids are inching through the Coalition pipeline. Among them is another budding engineer, though this one took a roundabout route to Columbus.

Uriel Lopez and his two siblings spent their formative years following their parents to jobs in New Mexico, Chicago, Indianapolis and, finally, Mexico. In 2010, an opportunity to work in a Columbus factory brought the family to southeastern Indiana.

Through all of his travels, one thing remained constant with Uriel Lopez: He loved taking things apart and putting them back together. And the move to Indiana serendipitously matched Lopez with the perfect school: Columbus Signature Academy, a "new tech" magnet where students learn from laptops rather than books.

Within days of his arrival, the 16-year-old junior had his eyes opened by an introductory engineering course. "I didn't know what engineering was, to be honest with you, until I got to high school," he says.

The Academy staff encouraged Lopez to take the next step by participating in the dual-enrollment program at Purdue Tech — college-level courses that introduced Lopez to yet another new universe.

"I didn't know what a bachelor's degree was — or a master's or a doctorate. I just didn't know about degrees. I was learning along the way," he says.

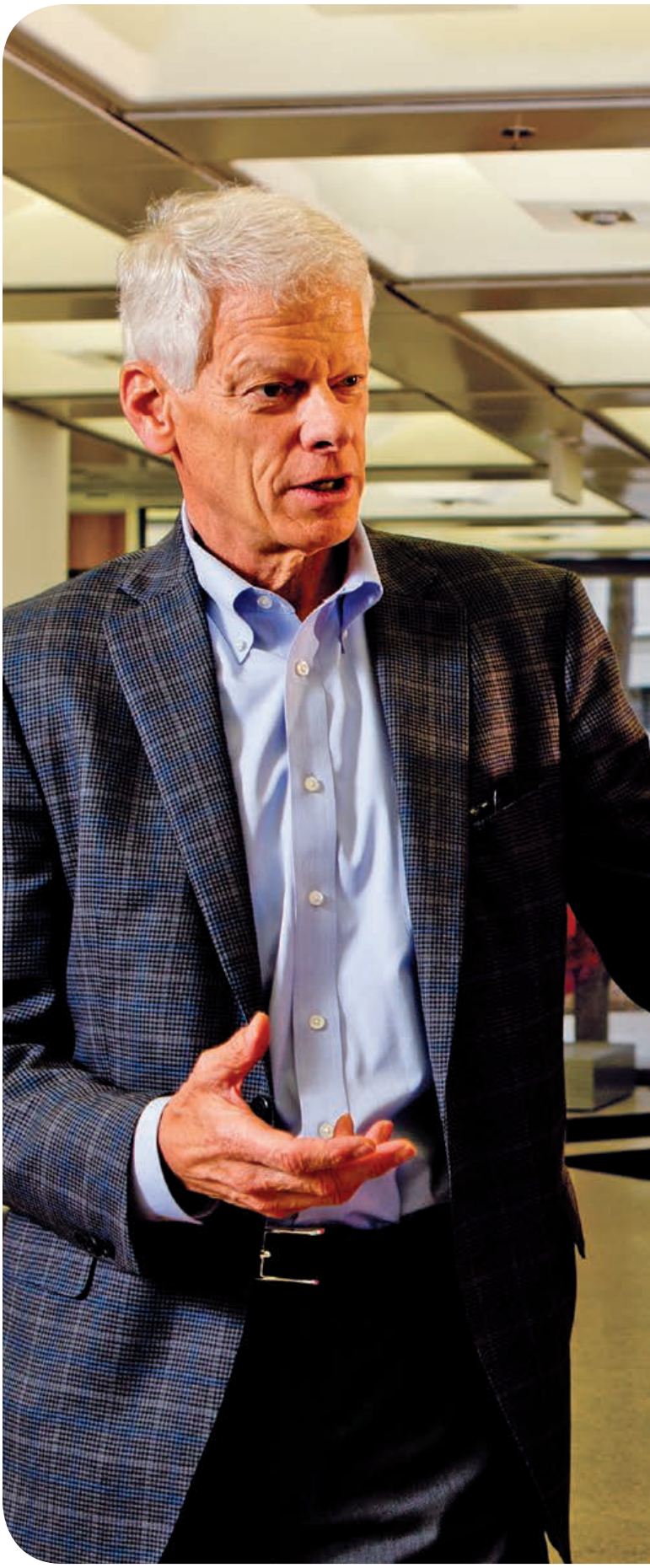
Lopez caught on quickly and, in 2013, he became the first in his family to attend college when he entered the Purdue Tech Mechanical Engineering Technology degree program.

His freshman year was anything but typical. Even when he wasn't in class or studying, Lopez was still learning — and *earning*. Working full time, he was pulling down $17 an hour — more than $35,000 annually — as an apprentice draftsman at Cummins. The company also covers $7,000 of his annual educational expenses.

Between the job and a full course load, Lopez had very little spare time during his first year in college. Still, he managed to scrape together a few hours for visits to his alma mater — to encourage Academy underclassmen to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Community Education Coalition.

Lopez shrugs off these additions to his already demanding schedule. "I'm blessed," he says, "so I always give back."

His adopted hometown should find nothing unusual in that. After all, it's in the DNA. ●



Mark Levett, chief executive officer of the Cummins Foundation, talks with budding engineer Uriel Lopez. Lopez, a graduate of the Columbus Signature Academy, is now enrolled in the Purdue Tech Mechanical Engineering Technology program and also works full time as an apprentice draftsman at Cummins Inc.

Rust Belt city at Niagara's foot 'Says Yes' to a brighter future

Buffalo, N.Y. — When he heard that every student in Buffalo Public Schools might soon qualify for a no-strings-attached college scholarship, Sam Radford's reaction was predictable. "No way," thought Radford, president of the school district's Parenting Coordinating Council.

The students who caught the formal announcement on a live feed into the East High School auditorium weren't buying it either.

EAD

Sam Radford, president of the Buffalo Public Schools' Parenting Coordinating Council, with his son, Aymanuel Radford. The elder Radford recalls the city's less cooperative days. "Before," he says, "it was everybody in their camp, everybody operating from their silo."

"They told us, 'OK, you're going to get free tuition,'" recalls Dennis Blakely, then an East High junior. "I thought they were joking."

Blakely, today a sophomore at Medaille College, is now a believer, as are a large majority of the residents in this Rust Belt city. As the third-poorest city in the nation, Buffalo, N.Y., has seen any number of pipe dreams come and go. It's no wonder that skepticism was rampant when the nonprofit organization Say Yes to Education insisted that college was possible for every young person in the city.

"I don't hear 'It's too good to be true' much anymore," admits David Rust, executive director of the local Say Yes effort. But that phrase has been uttered countless times since 2011, when Say Yes made Buffalo its second site for a community-wide effort to eradicate poverty through education. In the intervening years, doubt has given way, not just to hope, but to real optimism.

"Say Yes has created the courage for us to meet our own challenges," says Will Keresztes, interim superintendent of Buffalo Public Schools.

Much of the credit, Buffalo residents agree, goes to Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, president and CEO of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo — and a civic leader who refuses to take no for an answer. It was Dedecker who, in 2011, teamed up with Blythe Merrill of the John R. Oishei Foundation to nominate Buffalo when Say Yes expressed interest in supporting a district-wide scholarship program in a second city. (Syracuse was first.)

Say Yes traces its roots to a 1987 pledge by Hartford, Conn., money manager George Weiss to 112 sixth-graders in a Philadelphia neighborhood near his alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. Complete high school, Weiss told the students, and I will cover the cost of your college education.

Over the next 20 years, Say Yes added neighborhood chapters in Hartford; Cambridge, Mass., and Harlem — along with a second Philadelphia program. The non-

Gene Chasin (left), a former teacher and school administrator, is now the chief operating officer of the Buffalo chapter of Say Yes to Education; David Rust (right) serves as its executive director.

Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, president and CEO of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo.

profit moved to the next level in 2008, choosing the Syracuse City School District as the site for a comprehensive program that supplements academics with "wraparound" programs to address social needs, enhanced scholastic initiatives and a promise of free college to the district's 22,000 students.

By now, Say Yes knows exactly what it needs in a city-wide partner. "We're looking for cities committed to the core elements of philanthropy, educational reform, transparency and community partnerships," says Gene Chasin, a onetime teacher, principal and superintendent who now serves as the chief operating officer of Say Yes.

Dedecker was confident that Buffalo could meet the first three stipulations. In a city where "all the macro indicators were on a downward trend," she figured the business community would be open to philanthropy. She know school leaders were open to reform efforts — even eager for them, since more than half of the district's ninth-graders were ending up as dropouts rather than high school graduates. Finally, as head of an ambitious nonprofit, Dedecker knew a thing or two about transparency.

The key, she knew, was to knit the school district, the teachers union, parents, social service agencies, the City of Buffalo, Erie County and Buffalo business leaders into a cohesive, goal-oriented unit. And within those entities loomed the most formidable challenge: Philip Rumore, longtime head of the Buffalo Teachers Federation. Rumore, a polarizing figure and an outspoken regular on Buffalo news channels, elicited displeasure — sometimes even contempt — in many quarters of the city.

Alfonso O'Neil-White, former CEO of Buffalo Blue Cross/Blue Shield, recalls the first reaction of a fellow businessman from whom he sought financial support for the Say Yes effort: "Don't even talk to me until you get rid of that (Rumore) guy." Even Dedecker, the eternal optimist, knew that Rumore could bring the Say Yes proposal to a screeching halt. "As I was waiting to talk to him, I thought, 'This is where it all goes to hell in a handbasket.'"

Instead, to the surprise of nearly everyone, Rumore signed on — eagerly. After 30-plus years watching one attempt after another fail to reverse the decline of the public schools, Rumore was game for anything that might restore hope to Buffalo and its children. If that required regular attendance at meetings with his foes, so be it.

In Rumore's opinion, the Say Yes proposition was a great chance for Buffalo parents and students to hit the reset button on possibility — to recalibrate their measurements of success. "People here will say, 'When I was a kid, I didn't do drugs.' Or, 'I didn't get a girl pregnant.' Or, 'I didn't wind up in jail.' *That* was what they considered progress."

With Rumore aboard, the Say Yes calculus quickly fell into place. The flow of donations began — from corporations, local governments, individuals, foundations and academic institutions. The scholarship fund eventually totaled more than $19 million. Say Yes supplemented the local funding with a "frontloaded" commitment of $15 million. That money all went to create a system that would address, not just academics, but the broader social issues that too often prevent underserved students from learning.

Phil Rumore has become a mainstay of Say Yes operating committee meetings. He and other committee members — parents, business people, educators, philanthropists, government and labor leaders — gather every Thursday, and they all follow Dedecker's edict: "We tell them to leave whatever differences we have at the door. The focus here is on Say Yes and the kids."

Philip Rumore, president of the Buffalo Teachers Federation.


TO THE PROMISE OF COLL
TO A FULFILLING CAREER.
TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE.
TO A BETTER EDUCATION

Will Keresztes, interim superintendent of Buffalo Public Schools, has high praise for the Say Yes effort. "It's the first time I've seen a partner that is completely serious instead of tinkering around the edges," he says, adding that the program "has created the courage for us to meet our own challenges."

"Before, it was everybody in their camp, everybody operating from their silo," recalls Sam Radford. "It would be rare if we all came together once a year before 2011. Then, all of a sudden, all the stakeholders were at the table at the same time."

And the effort's most fervent cheerleader? Phil Rumore. "In my opinion this is the best thing that has ever happened to this district," he says.

If timing is everything, then Say Yes's entry into Buffalo couldn't have been more serendipitous. The organization arrived on the heels of a presentation from regional business and civic leaders that had just convinced New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo to award western New York a $1 billion training grant to rejuvenate its battered industrial economy.

"We were having a discussion about the (jobs) pipeline" precisely when Say Yes materialized, recalls Christina Orsi who, as a director with Empire State Development, heads up the state's economic-development efforts in western New York. "We thought, 'Perfect, this is our solution.'" Since then, she says, Say Yes "has become a pillar of our overall strategic plan."

Funding from Say Yes helped Empire State link Buffalo's Burgard Vocational High School with Alfred State College in a dual-enrollment program. The program awards associate degrees in auto technology and other advanced skills to Burgard graduates within a year of earning their high school diplomas.

Truth be told, Greater Buffalo was overdue a break. The steel and chemical plants originally drawn to the cheap electricity generated by the falling water of Niagara Falls kept Buffalo and Erie County among the nation's top economic regions for the first half of the 20th century. The good times persisted until, buffeted by foreign competition, Bethlehem Steel Corp. began to cut production at its massive Lackawanna mills south of the city. By 1984, what was once the world's fourth-largest steel-making plant stood silent, and 6,000 good jobs were gone.

As Buffalo's industrial base shrank, so, too, did its population — going from a half million in the 1950s to the 300,000 people who now call the city home. The metropolitan area today supports 55,000 manufacturing jobs, most with chemical firms and family-owned suppliers. More than 17,000 of these positions are held by older workers on track to retire before 2020 — with few replacements in sight.

"We don't have the feeder stock coming out of high school" to fill the positions, says Deputy Erie County Executive Richard Tobe. He is equally troubled by the "big skills gap," pointing out that, in a region in which 41,000 people are looking for work, some 1,000 positions in advanced manufacturing remain unfilled because employers can't find qualified applicants. That's one reason Tobe praises Say Yes for offering scholarships to career-focused students in trade schools and community college certificate programs.

"There has been a prejudice across this city, this county and in fact across the country against blue-collar

Under the supervision of Buffalo City Schools teacher Shanoda Davis, third-grader Ryana Flores participates in an academic enrichment program supported by Say Yes. The after-school program, which seeks to enhance pupils' math and English skills, is operated through a private-public partnership with the YMCA of Buffalo Niagara.

jobs," Tobe insists. "Everybody says, 'Get a degree, get a white-collar job.' Parents who were laid off by Bethlehem maybe want their kids to get a degree to avoid what happened to them. But pushing all kids to college is bad policy. It's forcing a lot of round holes into square pegs."

The three-campus Erie Community College (ECC) system, which has enrolled 350 of the first Say Yes scholarship recipients to graduate from the Buffalo Public Schools, is working aggressively to close the skills gap. And the students are responding.

For example, a Visual Communication Technology certificate course in 3D printer operation has proven so popular that ECC now offers it seven days a week. Job placement at the end of the 10-week course is 100 percent.

Say Yes supporters appreciate the program's commitment to broad-based education, beginning with Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, who calls the effort a "seismic change that is transforming the city." When it comes to supporting public education, Brown regularly puts his — or rather, the city's — money where his mouth is. Each year the city deposits $70.3 million in the Buffalo schools' bank account, including a $500,000 allocation for Say Yes scholarships that Mayor Brown pushed through city council.

Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown calls the Say Yes effort a "seismic change that is transforming the city." He and other city officials are certainly part of that transformation, each year allocating $500,000 of city funds to support the Say Yes scholarships.

The triumvirate behind Say Yes — Executive Director Rust, COO Chasin and Community Foundation President Dedecker — are encouraged by the progress they've seen. Still, they say, much work lies ahead before Buffalo can realize the transformation cited by the mayor.

The heavy lifting began last year in elementary, middle and high schools across the city. And the bulk of it, by necessity, is directed at poverty, crime and neglect.

"A lot of kids in the Buffalo schools don't have a prayer," says Jack Quinn, president of Erie Community College and a former six-term Republican member of Congress. "How are you supposed to learn times tables on Tuesday when your dad was beating the hell out of your mom on Monday night?"

Officials in Buffalo schools are well aware of the social problems that infiltrate their classrooms, and they've moved to address those problems. Years ago, the district installed a program coordinated by the United Way and Catholic Charities of Buffalo to help mitigate the educational disruptions caused by poverty and its resultant social and familial woes.

The schools followed up with in 2007 by assigning Keresztes, then an associate superintendent, to oversee social services. Whip-smart, reform-minded and unflinchingly honest, Keresztes knows the system is ill-equipped to deal with the most pressing issue facing urban districts.

"Public education is not wired to understand social learning needs," he says. "Public education knows we need better teachers, knows we need to remove failing teachers, to improve teaching, learning and retention. But public education is not wired to talk about the elephants in the room. Nor will people in power talk about them. But we can't keep waiting for county government, city government, the district and the churches to step up. We need to address the social needs of students."

For Keresztes, the arrival of Say Yes was a turning point in a personal and professional struggle to put Buffalo kids on equal footing with their more privileged peers in non-urban districts. He calls the program "an almost-overnight presence that focused our online student support services like never before. It's the first time I've seen a partner that is completely serious instead of tinkering around the edges," says Keresztes.

Say Yes has helped Keresztes fulfill a longtime objective: combining an array of discrete programs offering psychological counseling, family support, parent mentoring and after-school programs into a coordinated, wraparound effort. That effort is credited with, among other things, bumping the high school graduation rate from 48 percent to 54 percent in just one year. The next step is the rollout of on-site legal assistance, health and mental health clinics in schools throughout the district.

"The social services stuff that is getting taken care of — stuff that wasn't taken care of before — is giving these kids a better chance to be successful," says ECC's Quinn.

To attack the impediments blocking the progress of Buffalo's kids, Say Yes and the district have enlisted foot soldiers dubbed "site facilitators." They are stationed in 55 buildings to catch and address the "stuff" that Quinn refers to — problems that used to routinely fall through the cracks: The kid whose sleep is interrupted by gunfire … the single parent juggling two jobs while her children struggle with homework ... the pupil who can't focus

because she's hungry. The district will soon add free services to assist parents with the legal issues that interfere with the education of their children.

Nor is the district ignoring the academic imperatives. On a Friday last fall, as the start date for the after-school program neared, Principal Geneive Jones-Johnson and her staff at Dr. George E. Blackman Elementary sent each of the school's 540 pupils home with an application form and a memo. The memo informed parents that, beginning in November, they could opt to keep their children in school an additional two hours for supplemental math and literature classes. At first, Jones-Johnson worried that she'd acted prematurely.

"Friday is normally a bad day to send things home because things tend to get misplaced over the weekend," she explains. "You *never* get papers back on a Monday."

Well, almost never. The following Monday, students returned with 135 completed applications for the after-school academic enrichment program operated through a private-public partnership with the YMCA of Buffalo Niagara. By mid-year, fully half of the Blackman student body had enrolled in the program; it provides two days each of extra instruction in math and literature, with Fridays set aside for "fun."

The after-school initiative has proven so successful that Say Yes volunteered to pay to make it available to every Blackman student for the remainder of the year. And in February, the after-school kids showed the wisdom of that investment: In the first learning assessments since the program was introduced, every grade level demonstrated marked progress in both subject areas (save one grade level in math).

"Our mantra here is nothing happens in isolation," says Jones-Johnson. "(The after-school program) gives us the opportunity to groom children so that when we send them to middle school, where there is a huge dropout rate, they have a strong start and can handle what's ahead."

And a bit further ahead — beyond middle school — that's where the crown jewel of the Say Yes program shines brightest. "None of this works without the college scholarship piece," says Chasin. "That's the driver."

The success of Say Yes in Buffalo is not yet complete, since the high school class of 2013 represents the first group of scholarship recipients. But the program already has

Empire State Development Director Christina Orsi, who heads up the state's economic-development efforts in western New York, says Say Yes is a vital component of efforts to retool the region's workforce. She calls it "a pillar of our overall strategic plan."

Dennis Blakely and Amber Gray are students at Medaille College in Buffalo, and both say their Say Yes scholarships made college possible. Gray, a pre-veterinary student who seriously considered moving away from Buffalo, now plans to remain in the area.

impressed Richard Jurasek, president of Medaille College.

"This college has always been Buffalo-centric and, as a result, has always been a fairly accurate mirror of the city demographic," says Jurasek, head of the private, 3,000-student college since 2007. "We basically teach the underclass, working-class, aspiring middle class more than ever. And we like that just fine."

More than 130 city school graduates, members of the first Say Yes commencement class, enrolled in Medaille last September — a 57 percent increase over the previous year. Of those incoming Buffalo students, only 17 percent failed to return for the second semester in January; the previous year, 23 percent of Buffalo-educated students left for good at the end of the first semester. That improvement in first- to second-semester retention — a key early indicator of college completion — leads Jurasek to proclaim that Say Yes "is the perfect marriage for us. It couldn't be better."

For a private institution such as Medaille, the marriage can be an expensive proposition. Federal grants and the Say Yes scholarship cover approximately half of the $23,000 tuition (Say Yes also subsidizes a portion of room and board for residential students). The remainder, nearly $10,000 per Say Yes student, is drawn from Medaille's endowment and other sources. So the college's investment is substantial.

But consider the return on that investment. Think about Amber Gray, who most certainly would not be studying pre-veterinary medicine at Medaille without the matching financial aid from the school and, chiefly, the Say Yes scholarship. Gray flirted with the idea of leaving Buffalo before Say Yes made it possible for her to attend Medaille, a college with a solid reputation for training future veterinarians.

She, along with thousands of others on the Lake Erie shore, has since started to view Buffalo differently. Instead of fleeing, Gray now plans to remain in the city that put a college degree within her reach — a city that she believes will do the same for her own children at some point.

Dedecker isn't surprised by Gray's story. Belief, she says, is what drives all of the work behind Say Yes. Ultimately, it's what the entire program is all about.

"This is a game-changer," she says. "It is reaching into the future of this community in ways we can only imagine. It has ignited hope that we can rebuild this region on the potential of our people." ●

From kindergarten to college campus, SoCal city smooths pupils' pathways

Santa Ana, Calif. — Time will tell if Shayleene Barrera actually launched a career in science on the morning she arrived for orientation at Santa Ana College — 40 minutes south of Los Angeles. Early indicators certainly point in that direction.

By lunchtime, Shayleene had honked the horn of a UPS delivery van, listened to her heart through a stethoscope and paraded through campus to a pep rally with 1,200 fellow students. Shayleene is 5 years old.

Kindergartener Shayleene Barrera, 5, listens to her heartbeat as she and her classmates attend the annual Kinder Caminata ("path from kindergarten") event at Santa Ana College. Over two decades, Kinder Caminata has introduced thousands of underserved students in Santa Ana schools – and their families – to the campus and the college-going culture.

TA ANA

Kids start preparing for college early in Santa Ana, a community where the commitment to learning is pervasive and public: "Education First" is posted on the city limit signs.

When Shayleene receives her undergraduate degree in 2030, she probably won't remember this first brush with the higher-ed system. But her participation in Kinder Caminata ("the path from kindergarten") surely set the stage. For 20 years, Kinder Caminata has planted the idea of a college education in the minds of thousands of underserved kindergarteners in the Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD). And to the 330,000 residents of Santa Ana, the program is one of many ways that this Orange County community proves that "Education First" is much more than a platitude plastered on a street sign.

It's an enterprise that spools from kindergarten through middle school, high school, Santa Ana College and the campuses of California State University-Fullerton and the University of California-Irvine. The catalyst is the Santa Ana Partnership, a national model for collaboration that touches nearly every facet of education in an Orange County community where learning often runs head on into poverty.

In the years ahead, Shayleene stands to benefit from any number of Partnership initiatives. Perhaps it will be the early education research program that once showed an uncertain fourth-grader named Juan Alcocer that anything is possible. Or maybe a volunteer in the parent mentoring group, Padres Promotores de la Educacion, will help Shayleene and her family navigate the college admissions process. Or perhaps she'll benefit from a free college education promised by the partnership's most ambitious initiative to date: Santa Ana Adelante!

"There are certain parts of the world where you can

Holding the banner and leading the 2014 Kinder Caminata parade are (from left): Raúl Rodriguez, chancellor of the Rancho Santiago Community College District (RSCC); Rick Miller, superintendent of the Santa Ana Unified School District; U.S. Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-Calif.); José Solorio, president of the RSCC board of trustees, and Jorge Sandoval, student government president at Santa Ana College.

Alexandro Jose Gradilla, assistant professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies at California State University-Fullerton, talks with student Ashley Adams. Gradilla volunteers in the Summer Scholars Program, which eases the transfer of Santa Ana College graduates to four-year institutions.

throw a seed in the ground and it will grow. That's (the Santa Ana Partnership)," says Alexandro Jose Gradilla, assistant professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies at Cal State-Fullerton. He speaks glowingly of a comprehensive community effort, one that "taps into existing resources and makes it high-octane."

The main source of that motive power is undeniable. It's the force of nature known as Sara Lundquist, the nominal leader of a movement which features thousands of integral, integrated parts.

"Anyplace else the person making the decisions would be called the director," Lundquist says. "And if you ask who leads the Partnership, people will say it's me. But if you ask for my business card, it says nothing about the Partnership. It says: 'Vice President of Student Services, Santa Ana College.' The end."

The end? Hardly.

Lundquist begins each morning with a run. But in her capacity as partnership director, she's always running. In addition to her duties at Santa Ana College, Lundquist's days are a blur of visits to one or more Santa Ana schools — not to mention consultations with faculty and staff at Cal State-Fullerton or UC-Irvine and meetings with business and civic leaders who help make this effort a true public-private partnership.

As she strolled through Kinder Caminata, Lundquist couldn't walk 10 steps without a teacher, a city official or a colleague calling her by name and stopping her for a hug and a chat.

"Sara could easily stay in the office. But the fact is, she is out there — and that makes all the difference with these programs," says Gradilla, a volunteer in the Summer Scholars Program, which eases the transfer of Santa Ana College graduates to four-year institutions.

The task of coordinating efforts that stretch from kindergarten through college may appear daunting. But Lundquist is proud to note that the Partnership vision follows the same guiding principle that inspired its inception three decades ago: "It's basically the job of all four segments of public education to get the students in, to get the students through and to get students to the next level."

Cristina Flores is one of scores, if not hundreds, of young Santa Ana residents who personify the mission. Born in California, Flores moved with her family to Mexico as a child before returning to the Golden State, and Santa Ana, at age 16. "I was always passionate about learning," she says. "But I didn't understand what college was." That didn't stop Flores from what she called "going through the motions. Every time someone put an application in front of me, I'd fill it out and hope for the best."

From high school, Flores went to Santa Ana College, where she continued to avail herself of Partnership initiatives. It was in one of those, the 2006 Summer Scholars Program that prepared her for transfer to UC-Irvine, that Flores met the role model who became a lifelong mentor and friend: Jeanett Castellanos, a lecturer in UC's social sciences department.

UC-Irvine graduate student Cristina Flores (right) owes a lot to her friend and mentor Jeanett Castellanos, a lecturer in the university's social sciences department. The two met during the 2006 Summer Scholars Program, when Flores says Castellanos taught her the "inside game" of higher education.

"When you look at the communities we come from, we don't have access to a lot of college professionals," says Flores, who earned a psychology degree from UC-Irvine in 2009. "In my case, my mother is a housecleaner, and my dad is a landscaper. The mentors help you with the inside game because, in order to thrive at these institutions, you have to know what goes on behind closed doors — what it means to be a professional, what it means to have a career and what it means to pursue a post-graduate degree."

Today, Flores is helping others with that inside game. As a counselor with the UC-Irvine Early Academic Outreach team, she assists students at eight Orange County high schools. Her own story serves as a powerful example to her charges — and leading by example is a central tenet of the Partnership.

For more evidence of that, visit Valley High School and meet Jennifer Harrizon, a Valley High grad, a single mother, and a counselor in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program.

"To give something back to the place I came from is such an honor," Harrizon says. Well aware of her standing, Harrizon never hesitates to tell Valley High students: "I'm like you. I'm Mexican, I'm Latina. I started like you; I didn't know a lot about college."

Harrizon herself was aided by an extraordinary role model: the coordinator of Padres Promotores de la Educacion (Parents Promoting Education), her mother, Rosa Harrizon. The elder Harrizon, a mother of two, is the first to admit she's an unlikely candidate to oversee an educational program credited with placing thousands of Santa Ana young people in college classrooms. "I never thought I'd be involved in the community the way I am," she says.

That insecurity comes naturally, through personal experience: Rosa Harrizon, an honor student, dropped out of a Mexican high school at the behest of an uncompromising father steeped in the belief that a young woman's first and only obligation was to her family. Harrizon saw little choice but to follow the house rules until the family relocated to California where, as an 18-year-old, she started to mend the hole in her education. A high school

equivalency diploma led to community college courses and, following the births of daughters Jennifer and Emily, to entry-level academic positions as a preschool aide and pre-kindergarten teacher.

In 2000, the classroom work brought Rosa Harrizon to the attention of the Partnership as it prepared to launch a three-year pilot to bolster parent involvement. The program targeted parents who were disconnected from their kids' learning for several reasons, including the language barrier, fear of deportation, time constraints and a basic misunderstanding of the education system.

Fourteen years later, largely through Harrizon's leadership, the Partnership considers parent-to-parent counseling one of its signature initiatives. In any given year, the 40 parent volunteers on Harrizon's team visit 2,000 Santa Ana homes to discuss academics, college preparation and, with it, the wall separating the school district's students from higher education.

"Economics is always a major problem," says Harrizon, particularly among members of low-income, undocumented Hispanic families who assume that the cost of a college education is out of reach.

Undocumented students are, in fact, ineligible for federal financial aid such as Pell Grants. But one of the messages delivered by Padres Promotores de la Educacion volunteers is that qualified students *are* eligible for state funding: Cal Grants that can provide up to $12,192 in aid each year.

To Maricela Reyes, the Padres Promotores program is the reason her son, Valley High graduate Jonathan Garcia, will start an engineering program this fall at Santa Ana College. Jonathan's parents have provided unwavering support since he decided to pursue a career as an engineer. Nothing unusual about that; after all, what parent wouldn't want a child to pursue his or her dream? There, however, the college path of the Reyes/Garcia family diverged from that of most American households. Jonathan's parents and their four children migrated to Santa Ana from Mexico 12 years ago. They are not fluent in English. An even bigger complication: The family is undocumented.

Jennifer Harrizon (left) with her 5-year-old son Elijah and her mother, Rosa Harrizon. Both women are higher-education advocates in Santa Ana. Jennifer Harrizon is a counselor in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, and her mother is coordinator of Padres Promotores de la Educacion (Parents Promoting Education).

Sure that her children have what it takes to succeed in college, Reyes turned to the parent partnership for guidance. That assistance led to the Cal Grants and other aid that helped Jonathan get to college. "If it wasn't for the program, Jonathan wouldn't be able to visualize his future," Reyes, now a parent volunteer herself, said through an interpreter.

As illustrated by Reyes, poverty and uncertainty make it difficult for many families to visualize the future — or even next week. That is particularly the case in Santa Ana, a community that, according to Valley High School officials, is the nation's No. 1 destination for immigrants from Central and South America. During any given month, the number of students welcomed by Valley High — 30 — is matched by the number who simply disappear. The school began the 2013-14 academic year with 2,400 students. By March, enrollment had dwindled to 2,208.

"This is a launching pad," says counselor Javier Valdez, himself the product of the Partnership's programs. "They go from here to other places in California, Texas, Phoenix. We see a kid at the beginning of the year. Three months later, they go bye-bye, and we have no idea where they've gone."

The environment demands that Valley High act quickly and decisively on behalf of promising students. The commitment is most evident in a Partnership-supported, advanced placement program: Anteater Academy. The academy, named for UC-Irvine's animal mascot, occupies a separate suite of classrooms on the Valley High campus. It was launched in 2011 and has added a new class of 30 students each year since. In 2012, Adriana Herrera and Fabian Cuen were two of those students: high-potential teens who, without help, are unlikely to stay on the college track.

"We're kind of like guinea pigs," says Herrera. "We're here to show people we can do it."

Cuen was a third-grader the first time a teacher raised the possibility of college. It took time for this son of a construction worker and housekeeper to see the value in his teacher's vision. "They tell you that you have all this potential," he says. "And when you start to believe it, you begin to achieve."

Herrera's potential was also evident early, even though she came to kindergarten unable to speak English. By middle school she was earning exemplary grades in math and science. Still, wary of Valley High's reputation for fighting and teen pregnancy, Herrera initially balked when her teachers urged her to enroll in Anteater Academy.

Herrera relented when she recognized that the Anteater standard of academic excellence jibed with her own — a decision reinforced by the 4.8 grade-point average that Herrera carried into the final months of her sophomore year. Her better-than-straight-A GPA — a score bolstered by her success in Advanced Placement courses — was duplicated by Cuen.

Their participation in the academy does not obligate Cuen and Herrera to attend UC-Irvine. Still, as they

Juan Carlos Alcocer (left) and Rodrigo Marcos Ramirez are now students at UC-Irvine, but neither of them could see a clear path to college during their younger years. The Santa Ana Partnership helped clear the path for both. "Nobody in my family ever graduated from high school," Alcocer says, "but I jumped through all these obstacles, and here I am."

move toward their shared goal of pursuing engineering degrees, they may indeed take that route. If so, they will retrace the Partnership footprints left by Juan Carlos Alcocer and Rodrigo Marcos Ramirez.

Say this for Ramirez: His academic record from kindergarten through eighth grade showed remarkable consistency. "Every report card said 'in danger of failing,'" he recalls. The game-changer for the undocumented and rebellious Ramirez came in ninth grade, when he was admitted to the e-Business Academy at Santa Ana Century High School, a program that promotes learning at the confluence of commerce and technology.

A little encouragement from the instructors in that program drove home a point that teachers and family had been making all along: Ramirez had the potential to attend and succeed in college — if only he could find a way to pay for it.

Financial woes were about to push Ramirez away from college classrooms and into the workaday world when, toward the end of his senior year at Century High, word came that his family had been granted permanent residency. Free to submit the FAFSA and apply for federal grants and scholarships, Ramirez secured aid and enrolled in Santa Ana College. Two years later, he transferred to UC-Irvine, where he majored in social ecology, a hybrid of urban planning, criminal justice and psychology.

Unlike his classmate Ramirez, Alcocer didn't need the high-school-based e-Business Academy to inspire academic aspirations. "Even (in elementary school) I knew I wanted to be a doctor," Alcocer says. "I just didn't know the steps to get there."

The Santa Ana Partnership helped show him those steps, beginning with an academic research program between fourth and fifth grades. That program showed him what it would take to move upward from the ground floor. Still, despite consistent academic excellence, Alcocer feared that, as an undocumented resident, he could only go so far.

As his senior year inched closer, he and his mother shared their concerns with advisers at college workshops aligned with the Partnership. The consultations clarified that Alcocer, while ineligible for federal aid, qualified for state grants through the California Dream Act, as well as any scholarship funds he could muster.

Alcocer subsequently broke two barriers: He became the first in his family to earn a high school diploma and, by enrolling at Santa Ana College, the first to pursue a college degree. In 2013 he transferred to UC-Irvine, where he spent the second half of his junior year

Sara Lundquist, vice president of student services at Santa Ana College, is the recognized leader of the Santa Ana Partnership. Here, she talks with Javier Valdez, a counselor at Valley High School.

Maricela Reyes with her son, Jonathan Garcia, who will be a freshman this fall at Santa Ana College. Reyes credits the Padres Promotores program for showing Jonathan the way to realize his dream of becoming an engineer. "If it wasn't for the program, Jonathan wouldn't be able to visualize his future," insists Reyes, who now serves as a parent volunteer herself.

preparing for the Medical College Admissions Test, a prelude to a dream harbored since childhood.

"I can't believe I'm already there," Alcocer says. "Nobody in my family ever graduated from high school, but I jumped through all these obstacles and here I am; I'm now a year away from entering medical school. It's really crazy."

More than three decades after its formation, the Santa Ana Partnership has helped write academic success stories in every corner of Orange County. The latest chapter opened three years ago, when the Partnership rolled out Santa Ana Adelante! The program promises a tuition-free education at Santa Ana College and transfer admission to either Cal State-Fullerton or UC-Irvine to every student in the district who meets the academic and conduct requirements spelled out in a sixth-grade College Going Pledge.

"Students are going to come up from primary to secondary with a different sense of their future," says Partnership leader Sara Lundquist, a 2011 appointee to President Obama's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. "And this is how we do it: We tell them, 'This is your chair. This is yours. It is promised to you. It is yours to sit in or give away. This is not in a special admissions program. You have to meet the academic requirements. You have to apply on time. You have to get super-good grades.' The idea is to counteract the idea that 'I can't get to the university; they don't have room for me.'"

Jennifer Harrizon didn't enjoy the luxury of free tuition when she went from Valley High to Santa Ana and on to Cal State-Fullerton. Still, she's grateful for the advantages that came her way because she grew up in a city that puts education first. "If it wasn't for (the Partnership), I wouldn't be here," the Valley High staffer says. Her path had plenty of barriers. During her final year at Santa Ana College, Harrizon learned she was pregnant. She took a semester off, placed her 6-month-old son in a Santa Ana College daycare center ("I didn't want to leave him, but I needed to get things done"), and forged ahead by earning an undergraduate degree at Cal State-Fullerton.

Son Elijah Harrizon is now 5. In September he'll begin kindergarten. And come next March, Elijah will board a bus bound for Santa Ana College and Kinder Caminata. There, he'll honk the horn on a UPS delivery van, listen to his heart through a stethoscope and take the first steps along a path traveled by his mother and countless other Santa Ana kids before him. ●

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