

What Works
Keeping Kids in School
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Keeping Kids in School

With hard data and soft skills, Communities in Schools fine-tunes its model to reduce dropout rates. **BY SUZIE BOSS**

WHEN THE SCHOOL DAY BEGINS at Rainier Beach High School in Seattle, Dalisha Phillips settles into her customary spot in the welcome room. It's a mandatory first stop for latecomers, but the vibe is anything but punitive. Phillips, site coordinator for a dropout prevention organization called Communities in Schools (CIS, formerly known as Cities in Schools), is here to hold stragglers accountable, not bust their chops.

"We do a reflection together, plan what students can do differently in the future, and talk about what the school can do to support them," she explains. Then Phillips works the phones to check in with parents. A chat about a pattern of tardies may open a conversation about a family in distress. If Phillips detects that they're short of food or unable to make the rent—all-too-common situations in schools that serve high-poverty populations—she gets busy connecting families with local resources. "You can't fix everything," Phillips admits, "but just knowing is a good step in the direction of being able to help."

With gestures large and small, CIS is finding ways to improve high school graduation rates. The Arlington, Va.-based organization partners with public schools facing the greatest challenges—the nation's so-called "dropout factories"—and then surrounds the students most at risk with a range of services to help them stay in school. On a typical day, that might mean offering intensive case management, academic help, mentoring, clean clothes, or just a kind word to a kid whose day got off to a rocky start.

Together with the people skills that staffers like Phillips bring to this work, CIS applies a rigorous approach to research, evaluation, staff training, and ongoing improvement. This combination of soft skills and hard data adds up to a highly effective model for dropout prevention that yields results in urban, rural, and suburban settings. Of the 1.25 million students served annually by CIS, 97 percent of potential dropouts stay enrolled and 88 percent of seniors graduate on time. That's a big improvement over national trends: only 75 percent of students currently earn high school diplomas; rates drop to 63.5 percent for Hispanic youth and 61.5 percent for African American students, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education. Dropouts pay for their decision to leave school with a lifetime of diminished opportunities and low wages.

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By leveraging existing resources, CIS achieves its life-changing results at an average cost of \$200 per student per year. "Their return on investment is staggering," says longtime education researcher Mariana

Haynes of the Alliance for Excellent Education. For every \$1 spent on CIS programming, a community can expect to see more than \$11 in benefits, according to an economic study by Economic Modeling Specialists Intl. released in 2012.

Such evidence has prompted the Social Impact 100, an index of effective nonprofits, to call Communities in Schools "the nation's leading dropout prevention program." Kelly Fitzsimmons, chief program and strategy officer of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, praises CIS for doing "whatever it takes to make a meaningful difference in the lives of young people and help stop students from dropping out."

Yet despite its demonstrated effectiveness, CIS battles a perception problem. In conversations about education reform, student support "tends to be seen as a 'nice-to-have' rather than a critical component," says CIS President Daniel Cardinali. He estimates that 25,000 public schools across the country would benefit from featuring an integrated student services strategy in their plan for school improvement. "We're in about 10 percent of these schools now, and it's taken us 35 years to get there," he says.

A Communities in Schools staff member works to bring integrated support services to a school in New Orleans.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Throughout its 35-year history, CIS has kept a laser-like focus on dropout prevention. The mission hasn't changed under the leadership of Cardinali, who became president in 2004, but the methods have become more analytical. Cardinali joined the organization 14 years ago when founder Bill Milliken was still in charge. Drawing on his background in community organizing, Cardinali took time to listen to stakeholders from the then-fragmented network of CIS affiliates, each an independent nonprofit with its own approach to programming. To identify what was working, the national office invited external evaluation. Research confirmed a set of best practices, leading CIS to introduce a training and certification process for site coordinators.

"As long as I could show Bill [Milliken] we were moving the organization forward—and the more analytical we got, the better I could do that—the better he felt about where we were going," Cardinali says. In an unusual twist on leadership transition, the founder stayed on for eight years *after* Cardinali took the helm.

Cardinali likens the program model, now used by all 183 local affiliates in 27 states and the District of Columbia, to a "general operating system." Consistent features include

- Buy-in from school district leadership to partner with CIS.
- A dedicated CIS site coordinator, trained in providing integrated student support and assigned to a specific school.
- Services based on a school needs assessment and identification of local resources.
- Individual and school-wide data collected and used throughout the school year to adjust service delivery.

Within this framework, there's still room to customize how the program looks at the local level—and how it works with each student.

Having an evidence-based model "has given us a language," says Susan Richards, director of CIS for Washington state and former director of a CIS affiliate in Renton, Wash. "The national evaluation helped show that, if we do these specific things, these kinds of gains will happen and students will be better served."

The best model for CIS may be that of public health. "We have trained our site coordinators the way you'd train a doctor as a diagnostician," Cardinali explains, "to work on both prevention and intervention." Prevention efforts help keep the whole school healthier; intervention brings intensive, individualized case management to students most at risk of dropping out.

Instead of trying to deliver every service itself, CIS coordinates existing local resources to meet student needs. "We use the best organizations in the community to do what they're intended to do," Cardinali says. "These assets are already available but disconnected." By connecting critical services strategically, CIS aims to be "an accelerator" of school change, Cardinali says.

FACING OVERWHELMING DEMANDS

For children growing up in extreme poverty, change can't happen fast enough. "Something is structurally broken in public education," Cardinali says. "Poor kids are routinely set up to fail."

Robert Balfanz, co-director of the Everyone Graduates Center and research scientist at the Center for Social Organization of

Schools, Johns Hopkins University, is a national authority on the dropout crisis. All students, he says, "need to be able to attend school on a regular basis, stay out of trouble, complete their assignments, and try hard to succeed. Poverty impacts students' ability to do all of these." If most students in a school are growing up in poverty, the problems are compounded.

Wraparound supports like those that CIS provides "help solve the problems that undermine students' ability to attend, behave, and try," Balfanz explains. He notes that schools aren't funded "by the degree of difficulty they face," and that the demand for extra help in high-poverty schools "overwhelms existing staff."

That's why it makes sense to have a site coordinator on hand to serve as case manager for the students who are most at risk. "It's not enough to just make a referral and hope it works," Balfanz says. "Someone has to check: Did the student go? Did it work? And if not, what is plan B?"

AN OPEN-SOURCE SOLUTION

Experts familiar with the complexities of the dropout crisis praise CIS for "filling a critical need and filling it in a way that makes sense," says Haynes of the Alliance for Excellent Education. The way that CIS uses data to track outcomes "is unprecedented" in the education field, she adds. "They're the gold standard for how this work should be done." So why isn't this work being done everywhere? Despite its track record, CIS "flies a little bit under the radar," Haynes says.

Cardinali acknowledges that his organization can't expand fast enough to reach every student who needs help to stay in school. It takes time to establish new affiliates, which have to find their own funding sources and build local partnerships. Instead of trying to scale up through affiliates alone, CIS is moving toward an open-source solution. By sharing what it has learned about integrated student services with the broader nonprofit marketplace, CIS wants to help other organizations adopt the "whatever it takes" model to enable more students to succeed.

In the near term, that means CIS will

- Be a proof point. "We will continue to provide an irrefutable mountain of evidence," Cardinali says, about the value of integrated student services to alleviate the dropout crisis.
- Work on field-building to make student support an essential component of education reform. "The only way it's going to be lifted up is if it's not solely associated with CIS," Cardinali says. What's important isn't who provides wraparound services but, rather, making sure students get all the help they need.
- Make the policy case. "At the local, state, and federal level, we have to create a policy case to say: You've got to integrate student support. You've got to do it at scale. And here are the non-negotiables that need to be part of student support strategy based on best evidence out there," Cardinali says.

Meanwhile, site coordinators like Phillips continue to work their quiet magic. The daily challenge of confronting the dropout crisis is daunting, she admits, "but the best thing I can do if I feel anxious is go where the kids are, hand out high-fives, and say, 'Thank you for being here today.'" ■