



BEING PRESENT MATTERS



When a Neighborhood Invests in Its Schools — And Schools Invest Back

How Growing Together, leveraging Communities In Schools, is Transforming Kendall-Whittier One Relationship at a Time

Just east of downtown Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Kendall-Whittier neighborhood has long been a community with deep roots, rich culture and resilience, but this community also has a history shaped by disinvestment and opportunity gaps. Like many urban neighborhoods, Kendall-Whittier families face barriers that show up not just in one corner of life—but everywhere: in school hallways and kitchen tables, in job searches and housing searches, in the early years of childhood and the precarious years of young adulthood.

Growing Together, a Tulsa-based nonprofit established in 2014, was built to meet those challenges head-on—and to do it differently.

WHAT IS PLACE-BASED COMMUNITY WORK?

Place-based organizations are built on a deceptively simple idea: where you live shapes how you live. Rather than addressing one problem at a time—a tutoring program here, a job training initiative there—place-based organizations coordinate multiple investments across housing, education, economic opportunity, and community wellness to change the underlying conditions of a neighborhood.

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As a Purpose Built Communities network organization, Growing Together plays what's known as the "community quarterback" role—a hyperlocal,

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neighborhood-based organization who works with neighborhood residents, stakeholders, and partners to create and bring a community's vision to life through a collective strategy and plan. Their work spans across mixed-

income housing development, inclusive economic development, cradle-to-career education, community leadership and vibrancy. These components come together within a neighborhood to generate the communities experiences and opportunities. Every component is connected. Every team member sees the full picture.

At the center of Growing Together's education component is their licensed partnership with Communities In Schools (CIS).

A COMMUNITY THAT REFUSED TO LOSE CIS

Before Growing Together became a CIS licensed partner, CIS was an instrumental partner that came into Tulsa to be part of the collective, place-based work with Growing Together- ensuring that high-quality, evidence-based partners were positioned to support academic and developmental growth in the neighborhood schools. This matured into a critical relationship between CIS and Growing Together



and the Kendall-Whittier community. Families knew what it meant to have a site coordinator: a trusted adult who knew their child's name, understood their circumstances, and connected them to real support without judgment.

So when the continuity of CIS services was threatened, the community made its voice heard. Parents, educators, and school staff rallied—not around test scores or program metrics, but around something more fundamental.

"It wasn't because a kid's reading score improved. It was because of the relationships." — Bree Decker, Program Director of Communities In Schools at Growing Together

When the community needed them most, Growing Together stepped in, first just to understand the impact of this possibility and bring feedback back to the school district on the risks of this decision. Executive Director Kaitlin Williams put it simply: "We often say this, but this is the time that we need to mean it - we'll do whatever it takes." What began as a community response became a full CIS licensed partnership—and something far more than an operational handoff.

WHY THE CIS NETWORK MATTERS

Growing Together could have kept the same staff and simply rebranded the work. They didn't—and that choice reflects a deeper commitment.

"What was important was ensuring we were centering on something that has proof points to actual positive life outcomes," Williams explains. The CIS national network brought what Growing Together, as a hyper-local community-based organization, couldn't build alone: a research-backed model with decades of evidence, a methodical framework for data-informed student support, and a national learning

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community that could guide how to adapt when circumstances shifted fast—as they so dramatically did when the pandemic arrived in 2020.

CIS provided the structure and rigor. Growing Together brought the neighborhood knowledge and a broader reach.

Together, they became something more powerful than either organization could on its own.

The results reflect that combination. In the 2023-2024 school year, Growing Together CIS site coordinators were scaled to serve students and families across ten Tulsa public schools, advocating and positioning the work to support other local place-based strategies. Ninety-percent of their schools reduced chronic absenteeism. Sixty-five students grew in social-emotional hope and resilience through the Hopeful Minds curriculum. And, consistent with the national CIS network's record, 99 percent of CIS students nationally stayed in school during the 2023–2024 school year.

WHEN SCHOOL WALLS AREN'T THE LIMIT

CIS site coordinators have always understood that a student's struggles don't begin at the school entrance, nor do they end at dismissal. At Growing Together, they don't have to pretend otherwise.

Because Growing Together operates across other systems like housing, economic development, and community vibrancy, CIS site coordinators have a connective thread to resources and opportunities



many school-based programs can only wish for. The results are sometimes direct—and sometimes take paths no one could have planned.

During the pandemic, a site coordinator was supporting a family whose mother had lost her job and was struggling to navigate virtual learning for her children. Around the same time, Growing Together was creating a community navigator program. The site coordinator made a connection to her colleague who was looking to hire resource navigators for the other project. The mother—with no prior employment in this field—was trained, supported, and placed. She learned computer skills from scratch, mastered a new system, secured steady income for her family, and now continues to use these skills today as one of the top bilingual resource navigators in another organization. A connection that started inside a school through a service became a pathway to stability that extended well beyond it.

Another path started with a local Latino entrepreneur who provided food through Growing Together's community initiatives during the pandemic, providing food to students and their families on a weekly basis. Throughout that time, they also connected this local business owner with their sister non-profit, Avanzando Juntos, who was created under Growing Together to offer on-going technical assistance and low-barrier capital access to the community's Latino entrepreneurs to help them build, stabilize or grow their business. Additionally, they discovered that his daughter's children were enrolled in one of their target neighborhood schools, offering CIS. The site coordinator built a relationship, and that family became deeply embedded in the school community—volunteering, participating in teacher appreciation events, and contributing to the life of the school in ways that ripple outward.

Growing Together is also planning ahead. In the upcoming years, they expect to open over 50 units of affordable rental housing in Kendall-Whittier,

with a target focus on Tulsa Public Schools families experiencing housing instability. This strengthens the resources available to their community while also having more connective tissue to the CIS work: now ensuring that some of the most challenged students can get access to case management and intentional resources both at home and in school.

THE RESEARCH IS CLEAR: CIS CHANGES LIFE TRAJECTORIES

Place-based organizations like Growing Together exist for one fundamental reason: to open pathways to economic opportunity for families who have been systematically cut off from them. That's what makes a landmark 2025 study from Opportunity Insights and Harvard's EdRedesign Lab so significant for organizations leading this work.



The research, which evaluated the long-term impact of the CIS model, found that three years of CIS exposure raises high school graduation rates by 5.2% and two-year college enrollment by 9.1%. But the findings that speak most directly to the economic mobility

mission of place-based work are these: three years of CIS support increases earnings at age 27 by 4.3% — translating to more than \$75,000 in additional lifetime earnings, adjusted for present value.

“Pairing social supports with traditional financial investments is key to driving impact. Combining integrated student services and navigation with public school funding delivered substantial and lasting gains in both educational success and economic mobility.”
— Raj Chetty, Director, Opportunity Insights, Harvard University”

For a place-based organization like Growing Together, this is not abstract validation. It is proof that the school-based work their CIS team does every day — the relationships built with students, the careful matching of families to resources, the consistent presence of a trusted adult—is one of the most powerful levers available for changing the economic trajectory of a neighborhood.

WHY PLACE-BASED ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD LOOK TO CIS—AND TO GROWING TOGETHER

Place-based organizations across the country are doing the patient, long-term work of coordinating housing, economic development, and community wellbeing to create opportunity where it has long been scarce. They already hold the trust of families. They already see the full picture. And they already know that a student’s future is inseparable from whether her family has stable housing, whether her parents have living-wage work, and whether her neighborhood is investing in her.

This Economic Mobility Study adds a powerful dimension to that understanding: integrated student supports, delivered through the CIS model, are not just a school-level intervention. They are an economic mobility strategy. They generate measurable returns in earnings, in college enrollment, and in lifetime opportunity—exactly what place-based work is designed to create.

Growing Together demonstrates what it looks like when these strategies are woven together. CIS brings the evidence base, the model, and a national network of peers learning alongside each other. Growing Together brings the neighborhood infrastructure, the community relationships, and the reach that extends support far beyond the school day. The result is a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

For communities across the country asking how to build something that actually lasts—and that actually moves the needle on economic opportunity—Growing Together’s partnership with CIS is a model worth following.

To learn more about Growing Together and their work in Kendall-Whittier, visit gttulsa.org

To learn more about becoming a CIS licensed partner or exploring how CIS can support place-based community strategies in your community, visit communitiesinschools.org

