

From Place to Promise: How United Way Quad Cities and Communities In Schools Are Changing the Odds—Together

In the Quad Cities region along the Illinois and Iowa border, children grow up in neighborhoods that shape what's possible long before they step into a classroom. By age nine, trajectories are already taking form—often influenced by access to stable housing, health care, literacy, and trusted relationships. For too many families, those supports have been fragmented or out of reach.

At the same time, schools are being asked to carry more than ever. Coming out of the pandemic, educators were not only responsible for academic recovery, but also for addressing the unmet health, social, and emotional needs showing up in their classrooms every day.

As Rene Gellerman, President and CEO of United Way Quad Cities, reflected:

“During the pandemic, many tried to step in to help. But what we saw was support coming into schools from every direction, without a way to bring it together. It became difficult for educators to manage it all while staying focused on what matters most—teaching students.”

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For United Way Quad Cities—a place-based organization deeply rooted in neighborhoods—this moment called for a strategic shift. Not another program. A posture. One that could bring existing relationships, services, and funding into alignment—inside schools, at the student level, every day.

That shift found its match in Communities In Schools (CIS).

A SHARED UNDERSTANDING: PLACE WITHOUT STRUCTURE ISN'T ENOUGH—AND STRUCTURE WITHOUT PLACE CAN'T SCALE

United Way Quad Cities had already committed to a long-term, regional strategy focused on three community conditions: **education, financial security, and health**. Every investment was aligned toward measurable outcomes—like having 80% of third graders reading on grade level and ensuring families can access routine healthcare.

What was missing was an evidence-based way to translate that place-based strategy into consistent, daily impact inside school buildings.

For Rene, CIS stood out immediately—not because it was new, but because it was disciplined.

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CIS brought what place-based organizations often need most: **a clear, proven structure** for coordinating resources around students—anchored by site coordinators embedded

inside schools, focused on attendance, behavior, and coursework. This structure is built through training and support to site coordinators who build powerful relationships with students in schools.

United Way brought what national models often cannot: **trust, relationships, convening power, and flexible capital**—already rooted in neighborhoods.

Together, they saw the opportunity to change how support shows up for kids.

“This wasn’t about adding another program,” Rene explained. “It was about building something that could leverage what already existed and accelerate our partnerships faster.”



UNITED FOR SCHOOLS: TURNING PLACE-BASED STRATEGY INTO DAILY ACTION

That alignment became **United for Schools**—a place-based initiative that embeds CIS site coordinators in schools while surrounding them with United Way Quad Cities’ full ecosystem of partners, donors, volunteers, and services.

As Ragan Baker, Student Success Director at United Way Quad Cities, described it:

“United for Schools is a place based initiative that allows us to focus on our three pillars—income, health, and education—and start making headway on real community goals.”

Today, United for Schools operates across six schools in four districts—impacting nearly 1,850 students—while staying anchored to long-term community goals.

Those goals are bold because the need is urgent:

- By 2030, **80% of third graders reading on grade level**
- **60% of adults earning a living wage**
- **95% of residents with access to routine healthcare**

When supports are coordinated—housing, nutrition, healthcare, learning—students are twice as likely to graduate. Trajectory changes when the right resources converge in the right place at the right time.

As Ragan put it:

“United for Schools gives us access not just to students, but to families in some of our most marginalized neighborhoods. That’s how impact moves beyond the school walls.”

WHY HOUSING THE CIS MODEL AT UNITED WAY WORKS

Placing CIS site coordinators within United Way Quad Cities was a strategic decision—one that unlocked flexibility schools often don't have.

"There are stipulations if funding flows through school districts that limit how families can be supported. Under United Way, our site coordinators can respond to immediate needs in ways schools often can't."

That flexibility matters in moments that can't be planned.

When students needed dental care, one call to a community partner met the need. When families faced food insecurity, United Way's existing network filled the gap. When schools needed mentors, volunteers, or school-wide events, coordination happened quickly—without adding burden to educators.

"If a site coordinator needs something," Rene explained, "we can unlock it fast. That allows them to stay focused on what matters most—students."

This structure removes friction from schools and allows principals to lead, teachers to teach, and students to feel supported.

WHAT IMPACT LOOKS LIKE

The value of this structure is often seen in moments that cannot be planned.

Rene shared one example:

"We had kids at one school who needed dental care. We called a partner, and they provided dental care for all the families who needed it. A student cannot learn if they're in pain."

That presence also changes school culture.

"Having someone who can solely focus on

students who need the most support allows teachers to teach and principals to be principals," Rene added. "It lightens the burden for everyone."

A STRATEGIC BET ON RELEVANCE, IMPACT, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Becoming the employer of site coordinators was not the easiest path—but it was an intentional one.

"It's a higher-risk model," Rene said. "You're investing directly in people. But it's also how you build relevance and sustainability. And our donors responded—we've raised new money because they can see it working."

United for Schools grew from two sites to six—then paused to ensure quality.

"Now we're stacking the CIS model with United Way assets," Rene explained. "We're getting it right—so we can go faster later."



United for Schools demonstrates how place-based organizations can pair what they already have—relationships, credibility, and reach—with a disciplined, evidence-based school model to change outcomes permanently.

Place-based strategy isn't about scale for scale's sake. It's about visible, measurable impact that builds trust—with schools, families, and funders alike.

A REPLICABLE PATH FORWARD

While every community looks different, the lesson from United Way Quad Cities is clear:

"You don't have to do this exactly how we did it. There are parts of this that can be adapted by United Ways and communities of all sizes – because it builds on assets most already have."

United for Schools demonstrates how place-based organizations can pair what they already have—relationships, credibility, and reach—with a disciplined, evidence-based school model to change outcomes permanently.

As Ragan emphasized:

"We want other communities—especially smaller or rural United Ways—to see themselves in this work."

A SHARED PROMISE TO CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES

Today, United Way Quad Cities and Communities In Schools are focused on sustainability—blending philanthropic, school, and public funding so this work is deeply embedded for the long term.

"We want this to be part of our community—

not just a three-year effort," Ragan said.

Because when place-based organizations and Communities In Schools work together, impact is no longer fragmented.

It's coordinated.

It's visible.

And it shows up every day—in classrooms, families, and neighborhoods—changing the odds for a generation of kids.

