

# RESEARCH BRIEF

## FEATURES

**About Communities In Schools and Integrated Student Supports**

**Introduction to Chronic Absenteeism**

**Strategies for Targeting Chronic Absenteeism: Communities In Schools of Tennessee at Memphis**

**Leveraging Evidence-Based Programming: Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg**

**Further Attendance Initiatives**

**References**

## Addressing the Problem of Chronic Absenteeism: A Promising School-Community Partnership

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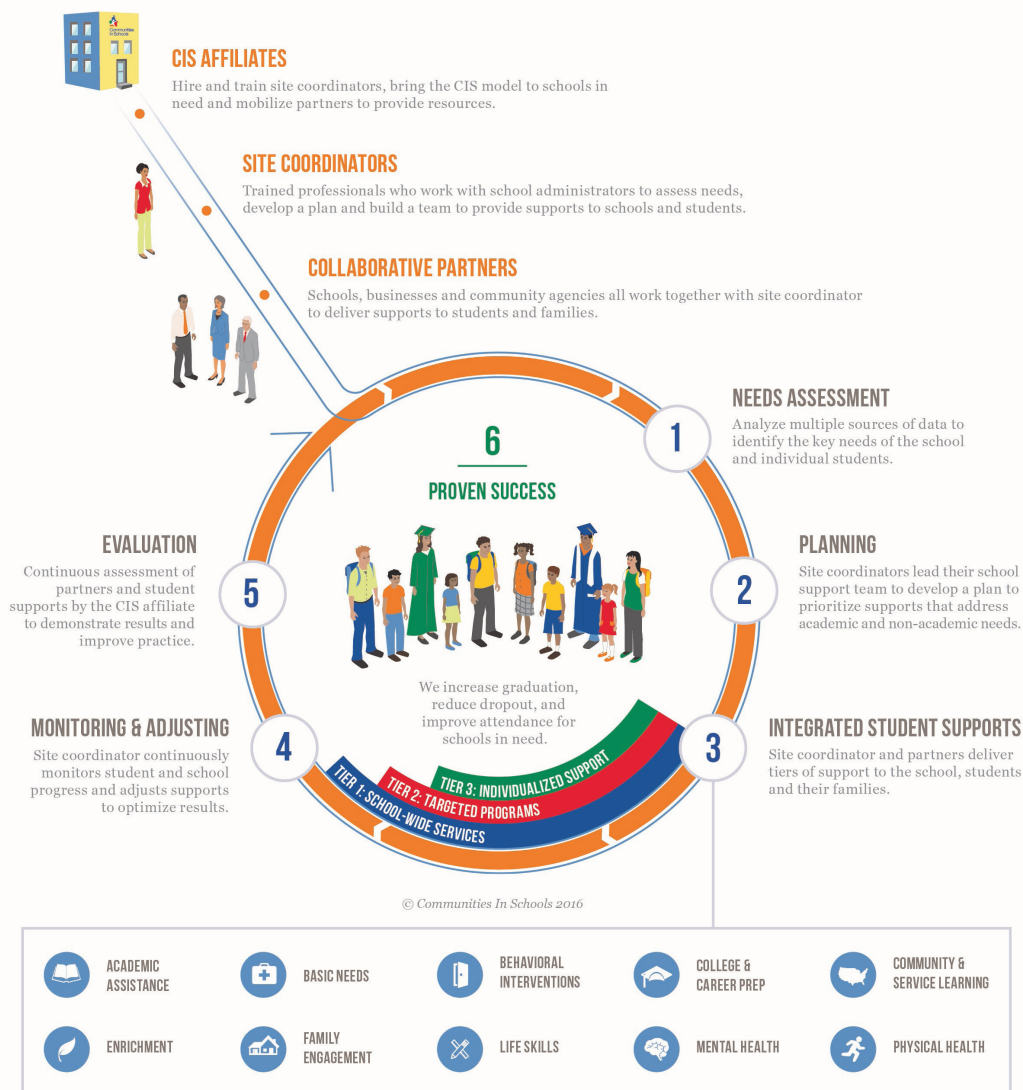


Communities  
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## ABOUT COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS AND INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS

Communities In Schools (CIS) is a national network of independent 501(c)(3) organizations working to keep students in school and on the path to graduation. Serving nearly 1.5 million students in over 2,300 schools in 25 states and the District of Columbia, CIS collaborates to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. In schools, site coordinators and other local affiliate-level staff are deployed to serve and connect at-risk students and families with resources via an evidence-based model of Integrated Student Supports (see below).

Integrated Student Supports are defined by Child Trends as “a school-based approach to promoting students’ academic success by coordinating a seamless system of wraparound supports for the child, the family, and schools, to target students’ academic and non-academic barriers to learning” (Moore K. A., 2014). Each year, CIS site coordinators conduct a comprehensive assessment in order to identify and prioritize risk factors, such as chronic absenteeism, teen pregnancy, trauma and violence, and poverty. Based on the results of the needs assessment, Communities In Schools focuses on 10 categories of support to best serve disadvantaged students across the United States.



## INTRODUCTION TO CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

The U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data shows that over 6 million students were chronically absent in 2013-14. That equates to 14 percent of the student population or about 1 in 7 students. Defined by most as missing 10 percent or more of school, the problem of chronic absenteeism in our schools has brought attention to a growing body of research that demonstrates a direct link between chronic absenteeism and poor academic performance; in particular, classroom disruption, poor grades, failure to graduate and increased likelihood of dropping out of school (Rogers, Duncan, Wolford, Ternovski, Subramayam, & Reitano, 2017; Balfanz & Byrne, 2012; Chang & Romero, 2008). By offering a tiered approach of whole-school; targeted, small-group; **and** intensive, individualized supports and interventions, CIS affiliates across the country are partnering with districts and charter schools to tackle the problem of chronic absenteeism at multiple levels with great promise.

## STRATEGIES FOR TARGETING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS OF TENNESSEE AT MEMPHIS

In Communities In Schools of Tennessee at Memphis, CIS site coordinators work closely with their principals across 19 schools in Achieve School District (ASD) and Shelby County Schools (SCS) to address the problem of chronic absenteeism. While each individual school sets its own goals toward reducing chronic absenteeism, the overall or aggregate goal is to reduce chronic absenteeism by 23% across the 19 schools. In school year 2015-2016, 32% of students across the 19 schools were chronically absent. By the end of school year 2016-17, the average dropped to 23%. While not yet at the target, the schools are well on their way. In fact, at the end of school year 2016-17, 13 of the 19 schools had chronic absenteeism rates lower than their baseline and met their specific reduction target identified in their school support plan. Three schools have lowered their chronic absenteeism rate but have not yet met their target and only 3 of the 19 schools saw an increase in their schoolwide chronic absenteeism rate compared to their baseline measure. Additionally, of the 803 case-managed students with identified goals for improving attendance, 83% met or exceeded their goal.

So how did they do it? Interviews with site coordinators and a review of service data suggests that a combination of providing attendance initiatives (e.g., incentives, campaigns), attendance monitoring, behavior interventions, and social and emotional development supports at both the whole-school and student level were part of the success. Additionally, providing timely and constant communication with parents and guardians - including praise and progress, not just to discuss challenges or issues - was an important strategy. This engaged the parent/guardian often in a new way and provided an opportunity for

them to seek support and guidance on how to best address potential attendance issues before they escalated. Connecting with students experiencing problems with attendance was also a promising practice. Being available for students as a sounding board and offering them a "cooling off" place helped to deescalate problems and avoid disciplinary actions that may have resulted in missed days at school and falling behind. Working closely with school leadership and personnel to match initiatives and interventions with school climate and population was also a critical part of the process and attributed to the reductions in chronic absenteeism across schools.

A recent third-party comparative interrupted time series (CITS) study found that high schools and elementary schools had better rates of average daily attendance after implementing the CIS model of integrated student supports than they were predicted to achieve without the CIS model. Additionally, elementary schools that implemented the CIS model showed greater gains in attendance than similar schools that did not implement CIS (Somers & Haider, 2017).

## LEVERAGING EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMMING: COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS OF CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG

In North Carolina, Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg partnered with Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District beginning in school year 2015-16 to pilot a new approach to case management using the evidence-based Check and Connect (C&C) program in a six-school cohort (four elementary, one middle and one high school). The evidence-based C&C program provides a standardized approach to implementation and monitoring across grade levels. In elementary schools, C&C is being used to support students with attendance problems; specifically, students with 20 or more absences. At every age, there are different barriers to attending school regularly. At the elementary school level, CIS site coordinators are using the C&C program to engage students and parents in ways that improve regular attendance patterns.

Caregivers are often elementary students' primary transportation to school each day. Thus, site coordinators actively involve caregivers as a partner in the initial attendance goal-setting process. A trusting relationship with families is an essential foundation for the ongoing work with students. Often caregivers do not understand the importance of regular attendance at young ages. Site coordinators help parents understand how attending school each day provides students with the foundational academics skills that they need, as well as establishes the habit of regular attendance for later years. In addition to the initial relationship building and goal setting with parents, the site coordinators maintain ongoing, supportive communication



with the families. Coordinators share student successes and positive accomplishments, which often strengthen the relationship with parents, who frequently share that they are used to only hearing about their child's negative behavior in school. When a student is absent, coordinators immediately contact parents directly to determine why the child is not at school. Coordinators do not assign blame or assume negative intentions about the student's absence, but instead try to problem-solve with the parent to see if there are ways for the child to attend the remainder of the day, or ways to avoid future absences. Other ways site coordinators involve parents in regular communication include hosting parent education workshops; connecting parents with needed community resources; and sending home newsletters with upcoming dates of school events, homework tips, or new ideas such as creative questions to replace the standard "how was school today?"

Engaging students in the goal-setting process is also important for student success. Individualized attendance goals could include: achieving one month of perfect attendance, being on time to school each day, or having one less absence this week than in the previous week. Site coordinators engage elementary students in goal-setting and goal-monitoring through a variety of activities, including: vision boards, signing attendance pledges, and CIS Passports where students receive stamps or stickers as they achieve goals. Rewarding students for small as well as big successes can reinforce positive patterns once established.

A key component of C&C is student check-ins. Regularly meeting one-on-one with students at least once every week is an essential component to fidelity, and ultimately success. Check-ins are semi-structured time when site coordinators are reviewing student's attendance, behavior, and coursework data. For students who are struggling, site coordinators spend the check-in time discussing any barriers and problem-solving. While check-ins assist with ensuring better student outcomes, the regular meetings help strengthen the supportive relationship between the site coordinator and their students.

Finally, critical to the success of the attendance work in elementary schools is the buy-in and support of school leadership. From the outset, Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District has been supportive of CIS and the C&C program. To promote principal buy-in, CIS Charlotte-Mecklenburg provided principals with several opportunities to learn about C&C before implementation. It was important for school leadership to agree that there was alignment between the C&C model and the school's goals; in particular, goals related to attendance. School leadership support was also essential to ensuring site coordinators had access to the data needed for early identification of students with attendance challenges and frequent monitoring of attendance data. To keep school leadership informed, ongoing reports are provided to the principal and the school support

team to keep everyone up to date on progress. The ongoing support of school leadership has also been essential when barriers have arisen regarding access to students or the need for additional support for parent engagement initiatives.

While still in the early phases of piloting, preliminary results are promising. At one elementary school, 100% of C&C students who were chronically absent in the previous year were no longer chronically absent in school year 2016-17. Similarly, several of the C&C pilot schools have more students with improved attendance (fewer total absences than the previous year) than elementary schools without the C&C program. CIS Charlotte-Mecklenburg continues to monitor implementation fidelity so that promising results can be replicated as the program is introduced at other schools. This new approach to case management has provided a great framework for site coordinators to deliver supports to their case-managed students struggling with regular school attendance and has demonstrated its value in helping site coordinators engage students and parents in ways that improve attendance patterns.

A crosswalk of promising interventions for addressing attendance problems (Railsback, 2004; Kearney & Diliberto, 2014; Kim & Streeter, 2016; McLean 2016) with the work of CIS reveal significant overlap. Many of the interventions and supports that CIS helps deliver in partnerships with district and charter schools include:

- Attendance incentives/rewards
- Attendance monitoring/conferences with students and parents/guardians
- Social, emotional and academic supports
- Consistent interactions with a one-on-one relationship with a caring adult
- Access to basic needs, including food, shelter, clothing
- Referrals for healthcare and mental health services

## FURTHER ATTENDANCE INITIATIVES

Other affiliates across the Communities In Schools network are also partnering with their districts and schools to find solutions to their local attendance problems. In Abilene, Texas, Communities In Schools of the Big Country has partnered with Abilene Independent School District (AISD) for the Never Been Absent (NBA) initiative designed to foster an attendance-friendly school culture and provide chronically absent students with individual attendance-related supports. Under the NBA, CIS Student Success Coaches foster friendly attendance competition between 6 school campuses (4 middle and 2 high schools) and encourage and support individual students to meet their attendance goals. Through a collaboration with AISD, the NBA program leverages school-wide and personalized incentives, goals tailored to individual students, a one-on-one relationship with a CIS staff member, engaging visuals and materials, and

the use of relevant student and school data to monitor progress and track success. In the 2016-17 pilot year of implementation, 82 students were case-managed by CIS as part of the NBA program, with 78% of those students making notable progress on their individual attendance goals. For more information on this attendance initiative, see the [Summary: Improving Attendance through the Never Been Absent \(NBA\) Program with Communities In Schools of the Big Country](#).

And finally, many affiliates continue to participate in the Get Schooled Challenge each year. As part of the Challenge, CIS site coordinators work with their schools to develop whole-school efforts to create an engaging environment that encourages students to regularly attend school. Key to the success of these initiatives was the inclusion of student voice. A group of students from each school were identified as ambassadors to help plan creative ways to get more students to school. Activities included: rallies in the school cafeterias, welcoming fellow students into the building each day, schoolwide announcements to encourage regular attendance, and awarding prizes to students and classrooms that were the winners of daily and weekly challenges. In one middle school in San Antonio, the principal requested that CIS include students with attendance issues to be among the group of ambassadors. This served as a motivator and significant incentive for those students. Across the board, schools participating in the Get Schooled Challenge improved their overall attendance rate by 2% with some increases as high as 13%.

It will continue to take the collective efforts of schools, community partners, businesses, parents, and students to effectively address the problem of low attendance and chronic absenteeism in our country. If students are not attending and are disengaged from school, it makes learning difficult, if not impossible. But getting students to school is only part of the solution. Because the underlying reasons for why a student is not attending school can range from transportation issues to illness to bullying to disengagement and many other factors, the response need to be just as diverse as the causes. Communities In Schools is just one example of the type of community partner that can work collaboratively with our schools to help bring holistic solutions to the challenge.

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