

Executive Summary

TWO YEARS OF CASE MANAGEMENT

FINAL FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS
RANDOM ASSIGNMENT EVALUATION



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Overview

While high school graduation rates are on the rise nationwide, too many students still never reach that milestone, with 7,000 on average dropping out every day. Recognizing that many students need additional support to succeed in school, Communities In Schools (CIS) works to provide and connect students with integrated support services to keep them on a path to graduation. CIS makes some services broadly available to all students at a school, and provides individual case management to those deemed most at risk of dropping out.

This report presents the final implementation and impact findings from a two-year randomized controlled trial of CIS case management. This trial is half of a two-pronged national evaluation, the other half being a quasi-experimental study of the whole-school model. The report describes the implementation and effects of CIS case management in 24 mostly urban, low-income secondary schools in two states during the 2013-2014 school year. The study's implementation research finds:

- CIS site coordinators directly provide many services and also connect students with local partners and extant in-school services. While partner and in-school service providers help CIS meet students' needs, it is challenging to monitor and evaluate their services' quality.
- During the second year of the study, approximately 80 percent of the students assigned to case management received services. These students received services an average of 20 times, for an average of just over 18 hours. Students classified as being at high risk of dropping out received services at a lower rate than moderate-risk students.
- CIS case-managed students participated in support activities more frequently than non-case-managed students overall.

The study also estimated the effect of case management on students' nonacademic and more traditional school outcomes. After two years, the study found that case management had a positive effect on several nonacademic outcomes, including students' attitudes about school and their relationships with adults and peers. However, the study also found that case management did not improve students' school progress, achievement, attendance, or behavior.

The final chapter of this report includes implications for practice based on the evaluation findings: ensuring that high-risk students receive the most attention; keeping students engaged with services; monitoring and adjusting services over time; working to ensure the quality of services from partner organizations; and emphasizing students in transition grades. CIS's national office has already begun to implement changes based on the results of this evaluation.

The report concludes by considering the results of this random assignment study of case management together with the results of the quasi-experimental analysis of the whole-school model. Taken together, the results suggest that whole-school models of integrated student support offer the promise of positive effects. The results also indicate, however, some areas to which support providers may need to pay close attention, to ensure that students receive services that address their specific needs and that benefit them above and beyond the services already available.

Preface

Although graduation rates have increased in recent years, the fact is that too many young people — about one million of them — drop out of school each year. To make it through high school, many students, especially those growing up in low-income communities, require academic and social support services that go beyond the classroom. While services may be available in the school and community, they are often scattered across numerous government agencies and nonprofit organizations, which makes it difficult to coordinate them and difficult for at-risk students to use them. Integrating these services is therefore viewed as a promising way to help students stay on track to graduate.

Communities In Schools (CIS), a nonprofit organization with a national reach, offers a school-based model focused on organizing and supplementing the disparate services in a school and community. With a network of local affiliate offices in half the states in the nation (plus Washington, DC), CIS provides services of varying levels of intensity and duration based on students' levels of need. Some CIS services are broadly available to all students at a school and others are directed at those most at risk of dropping out. This report is the second of two that present the findings from an experimental evaluation of the most intensive component of the CIS model — individual case management. This study found that the case management CIS provides succeeded in getting targeted students into more support activities and improving several of their nonacademic outcomes. However, the study found that these services did not have a positive effect on students' attendance, academic performance, or behavior.

CIS has committed itself to being a learning organization, regularly evaluating aspects of its program in order to improve its work on behalf of students. For CIS, external evaluation is not an endpoint or “check-the-box” activity intended solely to assess effectiveness, but rather an independent source of information that can be used for program improvement. For example, after this evaluation found there was little differentiation in the type and amount of services provided to students receiving case management, CIS shifted from a two-tier to a three-tier model that specifies greater differentiation in services based on students' needs. In addition, CIS relies heavily on services provided by partner organizations, and this evaluation found that monitoring the quality of these services can be challenging. In response, CIS has developed tools and additional guidance to help its network engage partners, with a focus on high-quality, evidence-based interventions. During the course of this evaluation, CIS also increased its own internal research capabilities, so that in the future it can both generate its own information and collaborate even more effectively with independent research organizations.

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This report is based on work supported by the Social Innovation Fund, a White House initiative and program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The Social Innovation Fund combines public and private resources with the goal of increasing the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the United States.

The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Social Innovation Fund includes support from CNCS and 15 private coinvestors: The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Duke Endowment, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The JPB Foundation, George Kaiser Family Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Open Society Foundations, The Penzance Foundation, The Samberg Family Foundation, The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Starr Foundation, Tipping Point Community, The Wallace Foundation, and the Weingart Foundation. The Wallace Foundation also provided additional support separate from its involvement with the Social Innovation Fund. This report would not have been possible without the support of these funders.

We owe special thanks to Communities In Schools (CIS) national and affiliate staff members for their support and cooperation throughout this study. At the national level, Gary Chapman, Heather Clawson, Dan Linton, and Kevin Leary provided support for the study. Heather was critical in providing important information about the organization throughout the course of the evaluation. She also coordinated with other national and affiliate staff members to obtain data about the schools in the study, and we are grateful to them for providing this information. Affiliate staff members and school-based site coordinators supplied vital information about their work locally, which helped shape communication and planning regarding several aspects of the study. Additionally, their efforts helped make all in-school data collection activities possible, and the research team is grateful for their support and cooperation. They also helped connect the team with school district staff members, who provided critical school records data used in the analyses herein.

The research team received useful responses throughout the evaluation and insightful comments on early findings and drafts of this report from many people outside of MDRC: Heather Clawson and Kevin Leary at CIS National; Gabriel Rhoads, Kelly Fitzsimmons, and Partheev Shah at The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, as well as members of the foundation's independent evaluation advisory committee; Hilary Rhodes and Dara Rose at The Wallace Foundation; and the reviewers at CNCS.

Survey Research Management (SRM) administered the student surveys that yielded data analyzed for this report. They formatted and produced the student surveys, administered them in the participating schools, executed the data entry, and produced the necessary data files for the research team. Linda Kuhn, Tony Lavender, Ashley Bronzan, Betsy Quicksall, and Rob Schroder led this work at SRM.

At MDRC, Leslyn Hall supported the design of student surveys, and Seth Muzzy and Nicole Morris helped manage communications between MDRC and SRM. Rachel Pedraza and Emily Pramik played roles as liaisons between the research team and local CIS and school staff members. Emily Pramik programmed and managed the online surveys administered to CIS site coordinators and school leaders. Nicholas Commins, Emily Pramik, and Kelly Quinn contributed to the processing and analysis of quantitative data, with Kelly leading the efforts at tracking and conducting many of the team's analyses during the second year of the study. Helen Chen Kingston and Rachel Pedraza contributed to the coding and analysis of qualitative data. Kelly Quinn was the fearless leader of the report production, with responsibilities that included producing exhibits and checking tables and text. Kelly's support, management, and encouragement were vital to the team's success in completing this report. Daphne Chen also supported the fact-checking of this report, which was critical in getting it completed.

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The Authors

Executive Summary

About one million students drop out of American high schools every year.¹ While graduation rates have increased over the last decade, one in five students still fail to graduate within four years. Compared with high school graduates, students who drop out are more likely to live in poverty, suffer from poor health, be involved in crime, and receive government assistance.² Many students at risk of dropping out need academic and social services and other forms of support to make it through high school. However, services are often scattered across numerous government agencies and nonprofit organizations, which makes it difficult to coordinate them and difficult for at-risk students to use them. Integrating these services is therefore viewed as a promising way to help students stay on track to graduate.³

This report presents the findings from a random assignment study of individual case management provided by Communities In Schools (CIS), a national nonprofit organization focused on reducing dropout rates by providing integrated support to at-risk students in the nation's poorest-performing schools. This study found that the case management CIS provides succeeded in getting targeted students into more support activities and improving several of their nonacademic outcomes. However, the study found that these services did not have a positive effect on students' attendance, academic performance, or behavior after two years.

What Is the CIS Model?

Founded in 1977 by children's advocate Bill Milliken, CIS works with K-12 schools in low-income communities that have many students at risk of failing or dropping out. CIS now serves nearly 1.5 million students and their families in 25 states and the District of Columbia. It is active in approximately 2,400 schools and 360 school districts.⁴

The ultimate goal of the CIS model is to reduce dropout rates by integrating community and school-based support services within schools. In the schools included in this evaluation,

¹National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 219.71: Population 16 to 24 Years Old and Number of 16- to 24-Year-Old High School Dropouts (Status Dropouts), by Sex and Race/Ethnicity: 1970 through 2014" (website: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_219.71.asp, 2015).

²Child Trends, *High School Dropout Rates: Indicators on Children and Youth* (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2015).

³Kristin Anderson Moore, *Making the Grade: Assessing the Evidence for Integrated Student Supports* (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2014).

⁴Communities In Schools, *2014 Annual Report* (Arlington, VA: Communities In Schools, 2014).

CIS works to accomplish this goal by providing what it calls “Level 1” and “Level 2” services.⁵ Level 1 services are broadly available to all students at a school and are usually short-term, low-intensity activities or services (for example, making clothing or school supplies available to students, organizing a school-wide career fair, or hosting a financial aid workshop for twelfth-graders). CIS’s internal standards say that a minimum of 75 percent of students at the school must be involved in at least one Level 1 service during the year. CIS site coordinators — those responsible for all CIS school-based operations — spend much of their time focused on more intensive Level 2 “case-managed” services, which they provide to a subset of students displaying one or more significant risk factors for dropping out, such as poor academic performance, a high absentee rate, or behavioral problems. In case management, site coordinators work with individual students to identify their needs, provide support directly and connect them with support in the school and community to address those needs, and regularly monitor their progress to ensure that their needs continue to be met.

Level 2 Case Management

This report focuses on the Level 2 case management component of the CIS model as implemented in middle and high schools.⁶ The CIS model posits that providing individual support to at-risk students will provide them with the skills and resources they need to succeed.

Through a review of data or because of a referral from an adult in the school, a site coordinator identifies a student as being at risk for eventually dropping out and seeks consent from a parent or guardian for the student to receive case management. The site coordinator assesses the student’s needs, develops an individual case plan, and sets goals with the student. Based on that plan, the site coordinator provides services appropriate to the student’s needs or connects the student to those services. The site coordinator monitors the student’s progress during the year and may adjust the plan based on changes in the student’s needs.

The case management activities are expected to affect nonacademic outcomes related to students’ attitudes, behaviors, and relationships. The services provided to a student are intended to foster supportive relationships with adults and peers, encourage greater engagement with school, stimulate greater effort to meet academic and behavioral expectations, and increase the value that students see in their schooling. Effects on these nonacademic outcomes are hypothesized to indirectly affect more traditional school outcomes, such as attendance, performance in

⁵As discussed below, CIS shifted from a two-tier model of services to a three-tier model after this study was completed.

⁶The comprehensive CIS model is implemented in elementary, middle, and high schools. This evaluation of case management focuses only on secondary schools.

class, and disruptive behavior in school. These traditional school outcomes, in turn, are believed to predict students' likelihood of eventually graduating from high school.⁷

How Was the CIS Model Evaluated?

In its ongoing commitment to continuous improvement, the CIS national office looks to external organizations to provide independent and objective research intended to help its staff understand how its model is being implemented in schools and what its effect is on schools and students. A previous evaluation by ICF International suggested that young people who receive CIS services are more likely to achieve a number of positive outcomes than those who do not.⁸ As part of its participation in the federal Social Innovation Fund (SIF) grant program, CIS selected MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, to conduct an independent, two-study evaluation funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, with additional funding provided by The Wallace Foundation.⁹

One of the studies in this latest evaluation examines whether introducing the model with all of its elements improves school graduation rates, dropout rates, attendance rates, and state test scores. This component of the evaluation uses a quasi-experimental comparative interrupted time series design to estimate the effect of the whole-school model.¹⁰

This report addresses the second study in the evaluation, which focuses on CIS Level 2 case management, examining service provision, student experiences, and student outcomes in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years. This study relies on a random assignment research

⁷Allensworth and Easton indicate that earning course credits and not failing core courses in ninth grade predicts eventual graduation. See Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton, *The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2005). Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver have also found that as early as the sixth grade, 50 percent of future school dropouts in high-poverty schools show signs of falling off track: poor attendance, poor behavior, or poor course performance (that is, course failure). See Robert Balfanz, Liza Herzog, and Douglas MacIver, "Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions," *Educational Psychologist* 42, 4 (2007): 223-235.

⁸ICF International, *CIS National Evaluation: Five Year Summary Report* (Fairfax, VA: ICF International, 2010); Allan Porowski and Aikaterini Passa, "The Effect of CIS on High School Dropout and Graduation Rates: Results From a Multiyear, School-Level Quasi-Experimental Study," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* 16, 1 (2011): 24-37.

⁹The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) received a SIF grant from the federal Corporation for National and Community Service. CIS is a subgrantee to EMCF within the SIF program. Thus, while CIS was interested in continuing to evaluate its model, this evaluation is also being conducted as one of the required activities of the SIF grant program. It also aligns with EMCF's interest in supporting organizations that are participating in evidence-generating research.

¹⁰For an explanation of this quasi-experimental design, see Marie-Andrée Somers and Zeest Haider, *A Tiered Approach to Dropout Prevention: A Quasi-Experimental Evaluation of Communities In Schools* (New York: MDRC, 2017).

design. The middle schools and high schools that underwent random assignment for this study had more eligible students — those facing challenges that threatened to impede their progress toward graduation — than could be included on site coordinators’ caseloads.¹¹ These students were randomly assigned to join site coordinators’ caseloads (the *case-managed* group) or to continue with business as usual, with access to whatever other forms of support were available, including CIS Level 1 services (the *non-case-managed* group). Since random assignment created two comparable groups and the sample is large, students’ individual characteristics are, on average, the same in both groups, and any differences that emerge over time between these two groups can be attributed to CIS case management. The strength of the causal inference made possible by random assignment is why it is considered the gold standard of evaluation design.

What Did the Study of CIS Level 2 Case Management Find?

MDRC previously published an interim report after students had received case management for one year.¹² The current report focuses on 14 middle schools and 10 high schools in the second year of the study. In this second year the research team conducted additional implementation research and followed both the case-managed and non-case-managed students for another year of services.¹³ The findings are consistent with the results found after one year.

Two-Year Implementation Findings

This report presents information about the CIS services available in study schools, provides details about how CIS works in schools, and describes the amounts and types of support received by case-managed and non-case-managed students. Most schools in the study are located in or around large or midsize cities, serve predominantly black and Hispanic students, and serve low-income populations.

Services Available in CIS Schools

The study team learned that students in study schools have available to them a variety of support services from a variety of service providers. The services include Level 1 whole-

¹¹The quasi-experimental and random assignment components of the evaluation did not include any of the same schools.

¹²William Corrin, Leigh Parise, Oscar Cerna, Zeest Haider, and Marie-Andrée Somers, *Case Management for Students at Risk of Dropping Out: Implementation and Interim Impact Findings from the Communities In Schools Evaluation* (New York: MDRC, 2015).

¹³Students in the comparison group continued not to receive case management during the second year of the study. One affiliate, with four study schools, opted not to continue in the study for the second year so that it could serve the students in the comparison group during that year.

school services provided by CIS site coordinators; school leaders reported that CIS is an important provider of many services, including mentoring, links to providers of basic necessities, college and career preparation activities, and family-engagement activities.

Working with Schools and Partners to Support Case-Managed Students

CIS site coordinators provide many Level 2 services, and they also connect case-managed students with local partners and extant in-school services. When CIS staff members connect case-managed students to services provided by school staff members, those services “count” as Level 2 case-managed services. These services are often also available to non-case-managed students, which may mean that case-managed and non-case-managed students are sometimes receiving similar forms of support. The study team learned that one component of site coordinators’ roles is to act as advocates for their case-managed students, both by making sure students take advantage of services in their schools (which they might not do otherwise) and by checking with school staff members about students’ academic and behavioral progress.

One of the goals of the second year of the study was to learn more about CIS partners’ role in supporting case-managed students. CIS’s partners provide many important services to case-managed students, especially mentoring, academic assistance, and family-engagement activities. However, some partners work more closely with site coordinators to plan services than others. It can be challenging in any case for CIS to monitor and evaluate the quality of the services partners provide, and that problem may be exacerbated when site coordinators and partners are not working together closely.

Services Received by Case-Managed and Non-Case-Managed Students

During the second year of the study, approximately 80 percent of the students in the CIS case-managed group received services.¹⁴ Students received services as a result of case management an average of 20 times per year, totaling an average of just over 18 hours. One of the implementation findings from the first year of the study was that “high-risk” students received services as a result of case management about as many times and for about as many hours as lower-risk students.¹⁵ In the second year, however, high-risk students received significantly different amounts of services than moderate-risk students. Specifically, 75 percent of high-risk case-managed students received services during the second year of the study, compared with 85 percent of moderate-risk students. This pattern held true for most of the catego-

¹⁴The 20 percent of students who did not receive services were still in the schools, as they were present to take the student survey in the spring of the second study year.

¹⁵“High-risk” students were those who in the year before the study began had failed a course, been chronically absent, or been suspended. A student is considered chronically absent if he or she has an attendance rate below 90 percent.

ries of services provided to case-managed students: A greater proportion of moderate-risk students received services than did high-risk students.

CIS case-managed students reported participating in more support activities than non-case-managed students, suggesting that CIS case management is providing something more than what students otherwise receive. Case-managed students reported higher levels of participation in meetings with adults at school, meetings with mentors, tutoring, and career planning activities. For example, 39 percent of case-managed students participated in mentoring, compared with 27 percent of non-case-managed students; 75 percent of the case-managed students had one-on-one meetings with adults about academics, compared with 64 percent of non-case-managed students. Case-managed students also participated in support activities more times per year than non-case-managed students.

Two-Year Impact Findings

Level 2 case management is intended to advance CIS's larger goal of improving students' school progress. That is, CIS seeks to reduce the number of dropouts from a school and to increase its number of graduates. Because this study lasted only two years, it was not possible to track students through high school graduation. The study therefore examines nonacademic mediating outcomes and more traditional school outcomes.

Nonacademic Outcomes

These outcomes are behaviors and attitudes believed to precede students' improved success in school. CIS case management had a positive and statistically significant effect on the rate at which students reported having a caring adult at home, at school, and outside of home and school, and on the quality of their peer relationships. Case management also had positive and statistically significant effects on students' engagement with school, their educational attitudes, and their belief that education has value for their lives. However, there was no difference between case-managed and non-case-managed students in participation in school- and non-school-sponsored extracurricular activities, or in educational goals and expectations.

Traditional School Outcomes

CIS case management did not have an effect on students' traditional school outcomes. Students in the case-managed and non-case-managed groups had similar rates of chronic absenteeism, attendance, core course failure, and credit accumulation, and similar course marks. However, case-managed students had more suspensions, on average, than non-case-managed students and this difference was statistically significant. Thus, it cannot be concluded that CIS case management improved students' attendance, course performance, or behavior.

What Conclusions Can Be Drawn from MDRC’s Evaluation?

While this study did not find that CIS case management had effects on students’ school outcomes, it did gather a great deal of information about CIS case management and the whole-school model. This information can help CIS improve case management practices and provide insight into how CIS might contribute to whole-school improvements.

Considerations for CIS Case Management

The evaluation findings suggest some areas where the CIS national office might consider providing more or different guidance and support to the affiliates and schools in its network, with the goal of affecting case-managed students’ school outcomes. They also offer some lessons for other integrated student-support organizations. The national office has already begun to implement some of these changes based on results from the evaluation.

Ensuring that high-risk students receive the most attention. This study found that students potentially at higher risk for dropping out did not receive more services than those who may have been at less risk. After the first evaluation report, which included the finding that high-risk students did not receive meaningfully different services than moderate-risk students, CIS began moving beyond the two-level model implemented by the schools in this study. Its new *three-tiered* model is intended to provide more intensive support to the students with the greatest need. Further, CIS has begun classifying students based on their level of risk or need, and is focusing on providing more differentiated forms of support to meet students’ needs.¹⁶ CIS should continue to pay attention to this issue, and collect data to monitor whether the three-tiered model delivers more appropriate services to students with greater needs.

Keeping students engaged. About 80 percent of the case-managed student sample received case management in the second study year. While keeping a large majority of students engaged for multiple years is a noteworthy accomplishment, it seems especially challenging to provide continuous services to high-risk students, as the percentage of those students who received case management declined substantially from the first to second year of the study. Other research has suggested that it may take at least two years for intensive case management to generate effects on students’ outcomes,¹⁷ so CIS site coordinators and practitioners might

¹⁶These adjustments to the model occurred after this study, and thus this study’s results do not capture the effect of the changes.

¹⁷Maynard, Kjellstrand, and Thompson reported that the evaluations of the Check & Connect dropout prevention program that found positive effects on attendance and behavior were those that evaluated the program when implemented for at least two years. See Brandy R. Maynard, Elizabeth K. Kjellstrand, and Aaron M. Thompson, “Effects of Check and Connect on Attendance, Behavior, and Academics: A Randomized Effectiveness Trial,” *Research on Social Work Practice* 24, 3 (2014): 296-309.

benefit from additional guidance about how to keep students engaged, particularly higher-risk students.

Monitoring and adjusting services over time. During both years of the random assignment study, there was variation in the extent to which site coordinators monitored the outcomes of case-managed students against their case plans, and revised those case plans and service provision to meet ongoing or changing student needs. Other researchers studying case management programs have emphasized the importance of carefully assessing students' needs and meeting those needs with specific services.¹⁸ One of the recent changes CIS has made is to expect a minimum number of check-ins per student, and to provide guidance to site coordinators about what should happen during the check-ins. CIS site coordinators and other staff members providing integrated support services may also benefit from guidance regarding how to monitor and adjust services, including the development of or training in systems intended to help them stay current about students' needs.

Working to ensure the quality of services from partner organizations. Finally, it can be inherently challenging for integrated student support organizations like CIS to monitor the quality of services provided by different organizations and individuals. Case-managed students in this study did receive more services than non-case-managed students, but they did not have different school outcomes. It may be that the services they received did not align with their most critical needs, or it may be that not all of the extra services they received were of high quality, in which case site coordinators could benefit from additional support to ensure their quality in the future. (Or both things could be true.) Site coordinators provide some services directly, but also rely heavily on school and community partners to provide others. CIS could help school-level and affiliate staff members make decisions about which partners and practices to bring into schools and about which in-school services to draw upon by helping them assess the existing evidence about the effectiveness of these partners or practices, and by identifying evidence-based practices or organizations that might be a fit in their schools. The CIS national office has already begun moving in this direction by developing tools for its network regarding partnership engagement, with a focus on high-quality, evidence-based providers.

Working with students beginning in transition grades. Subgroup analyses for this study suggest that CIS case management may have the greatest potential to improve the outcomes of students who begin receiving it when they first enter middle or high school (that is, sixth- and ninth-graders). CIS site coordinators in secondary schools typically bring new students onto their caseloads when they are in those transition grades, and continuing this practice may help maximize the effects of case management on those students.

¹⁸Allen Schirm, Elizabeth Stuart, and Allison McKie, *The Quantum Opportunity Demonstration: Final Impacts* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, 2006).

Reflections Encompassing Both Studies

This evaluation included two studies, as mentioned above, and it is important to consider what has been learned from both of them together. This study found that CIS case management succeeded in getting secondary school students into more support activities and improving several of their nonacademic outcomes, but that it did not have a positive effect on their more traditional school outcomes. Meanwhile, the quasi-experimental study examined the CIS model as a whole in elementary, middle, and high schools. That whole-school study found that after three years of implementation, on-time graduation rates improved by a statistically significant amount in the CIS high schools, relative to what would have been expected given those schools' baseline trends. Graduation rates also improved in the comparison schools used in the study, and it is unclear whether the CIS model was *more* effective than the strategies used by the comparison schools. However, the findings do suggest that the model may be at least as effective as these other approaches. At the middle school level, ELA test scores did not improve in schools implementing the CIS model, whereas they did significantly improve for a group of similar comparison middle schools. At the elementary school level, attendance rates improved in schools implementing the CIS model more than they improved in a group of similar comparison schools.

What sense can be made of the two studies' findings taken together? While the whole-school study suggested that schools implementing the CIS model experienced improved graduation and dropout rates — and that CIS may be at least as effective as other approaches — the study of case management found that case management does not improve student outcomes thought to predict graduation within two years, though it does get students into more support activities and improves their nonacademic outcomes.

There are several possible explanations for this combination of findings. It may be that having a CIS site coordinator who works closely with a group of case-managed students allows *other* support staff members, such as guidance counselors and social workers, to work more with the non-case-managed students than they would have otherwise. If that were true, the school as a whole might improve because of CIS's presence, even though the students receiving case management did not improve more than students randomly assigned to the non-case-managed group. The non-case-managed students would then have benefited indirectly from the presence of a CIS site coordinator practicing case management.

A second possibility is that the Level 1 services CIS provides, which are accessible to the majority of students in a school, may change school-wide outcomes more than case management can, with its focus on a small minority of targeted students. This notion is supported by school leaders' reports that CIS is an important part of their schools and that CIS is an essential provider of support services.

Finally, while previous research indicates that attendance, behavior, and course performance are correlated with graduation, it may be that this study was not able to track case-managed students for long enough to see effects on these outcomes, or that these outcomes might not be the only factors that predict graduation. It is possible that over time, the positive effects of case management on students' nonacademic outcomes would translate into positive effects on their more traditional school outcomes. As indicated above, previous research suggests that case management can take at least two years to affect students' attendance and behavior. Alternatively, it may be that those nonacademic improvements could end up making a difference in keeping students in school, even though they do not alter the traditional school outcomes tracked in this study.

It remains uncertain, however, whether CIS's model makes a bigger difference than alternative approaches to school improvement. A random assignment study of the whole-school model may be the next step that would provide the most information about the model's effect relative to that of other programs and strategies. If an evaluation included a cost study on the implementation of the CIS model, along with cost data on the strategies and interventions used by the control schools, it could also determine the CIS model's relative cost-effectiveness, which would ultimately provide the most useful decision-making information for school and district leaders.

As CIS and other integrated student support organizations continue to work toward addressing students' needs, they can learn from both completed and ongoing research to refine their models. While graduation rates have risen in the last decade, it remains the case that far too many students drop out of school — roughly 7,000 every day.¹⁹ This evaluation suggests that whole-school models of integrated student support services do offer the promise of positive effects. However, in the actual implementation of tiered-support models, it appears to be important to pay close attention to how that tiered support might improve conditions for students above and beyond the kinds of support already available in a school. As CIS and other similar organizations continue to refine their models, they should pay particular attention to reaching the students who are most in need of support and to connecting students with high-quality services. In addition, they may want to target schools for CIS implementation that do not already provide a broad range of services for students, or where service provision is particularly fragmented, as these may be the schools where they would have the most to offer.

¹⁹National Center for Education Statistics (2015).

Earlier MDRC Publications on Communities In Schools

*Case Management for Students at Risk of Dropping Out
Implementation and Interim Impact Findings from the Communities In Schools Evaluation*
2015. William Corrin, Leigh Parise, Oscar Cerna, Zeest Haider, and Marie-Andrée Somers.

*Using Integrated Student Supports to Keep Kids in School
A Quasi-Experimental Evaluation of Communities In Schools*
2017. Marie-Andrée Somers and Zeest Haider.

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MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

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