



THE COMMUNITY WISDOM PROJECT

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION POLICY FROM THE GROUND UP

The Problem

At the moment America needs schools most — when the market is demanding a different workforce, student needs are rising, and state and local responsibilities are growing — public satisfaction in education has collapsed to 35% (Gallup, 2025). The problem isn't resources alone. It's that policy too rarely reflects what communities already know about what works to help students succeed in school and achieve in life.

Our Opportunity

Our economy requires a new workforce and schools that can nurture it. Communities In Schools® (CIS®) has spent nearly 50 years building the relationship-based model that works — and groundbreaking research now proves it: integrated student supports (ISS) generate \$75,000 in lifetime earnings per student and a 2:1 return on federal investment. The evidence exists. Communities know the way. It's time to respond with policy that listens and validates solutions proven to change students' life trajectories.

Our Evidence: ISS Transforms Lives

Research validates CIS' consequential and distinctive impact:



Higher Academic Achievement

Significant increases in standardized test scores.



Increased Graduation Rates

Three years of CIS in middle school raises high risk students' graduation rates by **over 5%** and two-year college enrollment by **over 9%**.



Greater Economic Mobility

Lifetime earnings increase by **over \$75,000**.



Verified Return on Investment

\$2.36 return in terms of federal tax revenue for every dollar invested, generating **\$7,100 in additional tax revenue**.



Why isn't ISS embedded in every school across the country?

What if the obstacle isn't the evidence, but that current education policy doesn't sufficiently reflect what communities actually need?



Our Solution: A Dynamic Policy and Advocacy Engine

CIS' Community Wisdom Project (CWP) turns community stories into policy power.

Here's how it works:



From the spring of 2025 through winter 2026, ~175 students, families, alumni, and educators have contributed their “stories,” authentic personal experiences to the CWP in response to a simple prompt: “Tell us about a time when you (or your child/a student) needed support, inside or outside of school, and what happened.”

The patterns that emerged from the stories align with decades of research across disciplines, from education to neuroscience, and provide a clear picture of how CIS impacts students, families, and school communities.

But, these patterns are too rarely included in federal, state, or local policy frameworks.

The Patterns

The relationship is key.

Meaningful help comes from a trusted individual who is dependable and present, not from disembodied programs or systems.



Invest in people over systems to reach students.



I had a student who was extremely shy and needed emotional support... But what stood out to me wasn't a single breakthrough moment. It was the small changes over time. He started showing up consistently. He began asking questions... And now, anytime we pass in the hall, he has the biggest smile and he runs to hug me... But the impact went both ways. This student reminded me of why I do this work. He showed me that progress isn't always loud or fast, but it's real. Watching him grow more confident, more open, more hopeful reinforced something that I try to remember every day. Sometimes just being present and believing in a kid can change the way they see themselves in their future.

Anonymous Site Coordinator, CIS of the Gulf South

School attendance and academics are an afterthought until **basic needs are met.**



Invest in removing barriers to attendance as the first step to spurring achievement.



Through Communities In Schools, I make impact by making parent phone calls and daily check-ins that help me understand how families are genuinely doing. Those conversations uncover the root issues, food insecurity, unstable housing, lack of clothing or mental health needs, and they allow us to respond with real solutions... The impact is in the numbers, but it's also in the faces. It is the student who went from 15 absences to perfect attendance after we solved transportation issues. It is the eighth grader who joined football, found purpose and has had no suspensions this year... This work allows me to connect students with resources and the support they need to be successful inside and outside of the classroom. Every day I am reminded that when we remove barriers, scholars rise and it is an honor to be a part of that rise.

Ratiesha Edwards, Site Coordinator, CIS of Atlanta

While food and shelter can seem the most paramount, stories reveal the importance of **support across the hierarchy of needs** – safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.



Invest in integrated student supports to prepare students for the future.



One of my eleventh-grade students, [Student], had been struggling... He often shut down during literacy activities and rarely participated in class discussions. [Site Coordinator] noticed that his frustration was affecting not only his academic performance but also his confidence and interactions with peers. She started by building a trusting relationship with [Student]... Academically, she implemented targeted interventions... [Site Coordinator] collaborated with the school counselor to support [Student's] self-esteem and social skills... By the end of the semester, [Student] was not only reading at a higher level but also participating more confidently in class. He had formed stronger peer relationships and no longer hesitated to ask for help when needed.

Charles Cameron, Teacher, CIS of Indiana

Many stories reveal that not all support is created equally; help is most powerful when it is offered **proactively and with dignity**, especially for those who are often overlooked or ignored by society.



Invest in proactive solutions to keep challenges from becoming catastrophic and costly.



...imagine just losing everything, your house burning down, having no job, being left without clothes, nothing, on the street, and... in the middle of all that, someone comes and tells you, I'm going to give you a card so you can buy food, I have some jackets here, I'm going to get you shoes... when you have nothing, anything is good at this moment, any help, any support or any words of encouragement that they give you because you can't find them in yourself... it makes you so sad to have lost everything, you don't want to ask anyone because everyone has problems, but you also know that you need it, even the emotional support, being able to know that you can count on someone in those moments...

Anonymous Family Member, CIS of Benton Franklin
(translated from Spanish)

Meeting students' full range of needs isn't just about good feels; it leads to **academic achievement and opportunity** for individuals as well as broader community advancement.



Invest in student support to build workforce and advance community development.



A time I truly needed support was during my journey preparing for college and thinking about my future. Like many students my age, I had goals, but I didn't always know the exact steps to take to reach them... Through CIS, I was connected to opportunities that focused on leadership development, college readiness, and professional growth... Today I'm pursuing my degree, gaining professional experience and continuing to grow as a leader. Communities In Schools was a foundational part of that journey. My experience shows that when students are given access to guidance, opportunity, and people who genuinely care, it can completely change their trajectory. CIS doesn't just support students academically, they help develop confident, capable young adults ready to succeed.

Eric Carr, Alumnus, CIS of Charlotte-Mecklenburg

For more information, reach out to communitywisdomproject@cisconsultant.org