



Charlotte

Integrated student support makes a difference

By Frank Walter

North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District faces many of the same challenges as other urban districts. More than half of its students are considered economically disadvantaged, many of its neighborhoods have experienced a dramatic rise in concentrated poverty, and the region has seen a large influx of immigrant children. Despite these challenges, however, graduation rates for students from low-income families have grown to 85.2% in 2016 from just 52% in 2009.

Then-Supt. Ann Clark attributes the gains to a district-wide focus on working with individual students to make sure they have a plan for life after high school and a course load that will get them there (Helms, 2016). "This has truly been a village effort," Clark said.

The district also relies on a long-standing partnership with Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, a nonprofit organization providing integrated student supports to 7,000 students in 45 elementary, middle, and high schools. More than two-thirds of the students enrolled in the CIS program come from poverty or low-income families. CIS takes a case-management approach to working with individual students and their families to address emotional, behavioral, and academic concerns, providing a wide range of supports such as academic tutoring, career counseling, enrichment activities, and referrals to community organizations for health services.

Central to the success of CIS is its ability to tap into a vast network of community partnerships to help students and families. Partners include organizations such as United Way, faith-based organizations, civic groups, philanthropic, and corporate organizations, and relationships with hundreds of volunteers. CIS in Charlotte-Mecklenburg has an annual budget of \$7.5 million and is funded by the school district as well as county, state, and federal governments, corporations, foundations, and individuals.

Targeting student supports

Over the past few years, CIS has redoubled its efforts to meet the needs of students who have the highest risk of educational failure. These include students who experience incarceration, pregnancy, and high exposure



Site coordinator Clay Freeman enjoys a break with some of his Communities In Schools students from Berryhill School, Charlotte, N.C. Photo by May Johnston.

to the many kinds of trauma associated with living in areas of concentrated poverty or coming to a new city as an unaccompanied minor.

"We know living and learning in high-poverty environments can add more stress to students' lives and lead to more traumatic events," said Molly Shaw, executive director of CIS Charlotte-Mecklenburg. "We work with the schools to identify students based on their unique challenges and then to offer them the right support, in the right amount, and at the right time."

To provide these intensive supports, CIS has developed a tiered case-management approach for its site coordinators. For example, a site coordinator working with high-need students is assigned 20 to 30 students while other site coordinators serve many more students. This approach is proving effective. In the 2015-16 school year, CIS reported that among the students enrolled in its program, 99% stayed in school, and 96% were promoted to the next grade.

"I see CIS as being the wind beneath the wings of a kid," Clark said. "Many of our kids are beating their wings pretty hard every day to stay in the air, and CIS comes along and takes care of the nonacademic barriers to a student's successful flight. It's thrilling to see what this organization has done for our community." **◀**

Reference

Helms, A.D. (2016, September 2). CMS ratings: Confusing, contradictory, and cause for pride. *Charlotte Observer*.