

# RESEARCH BRIEF

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Summary:  
Improving Attendance through the Never Been Absent (NBA) with Communities In Schools of the Big Country

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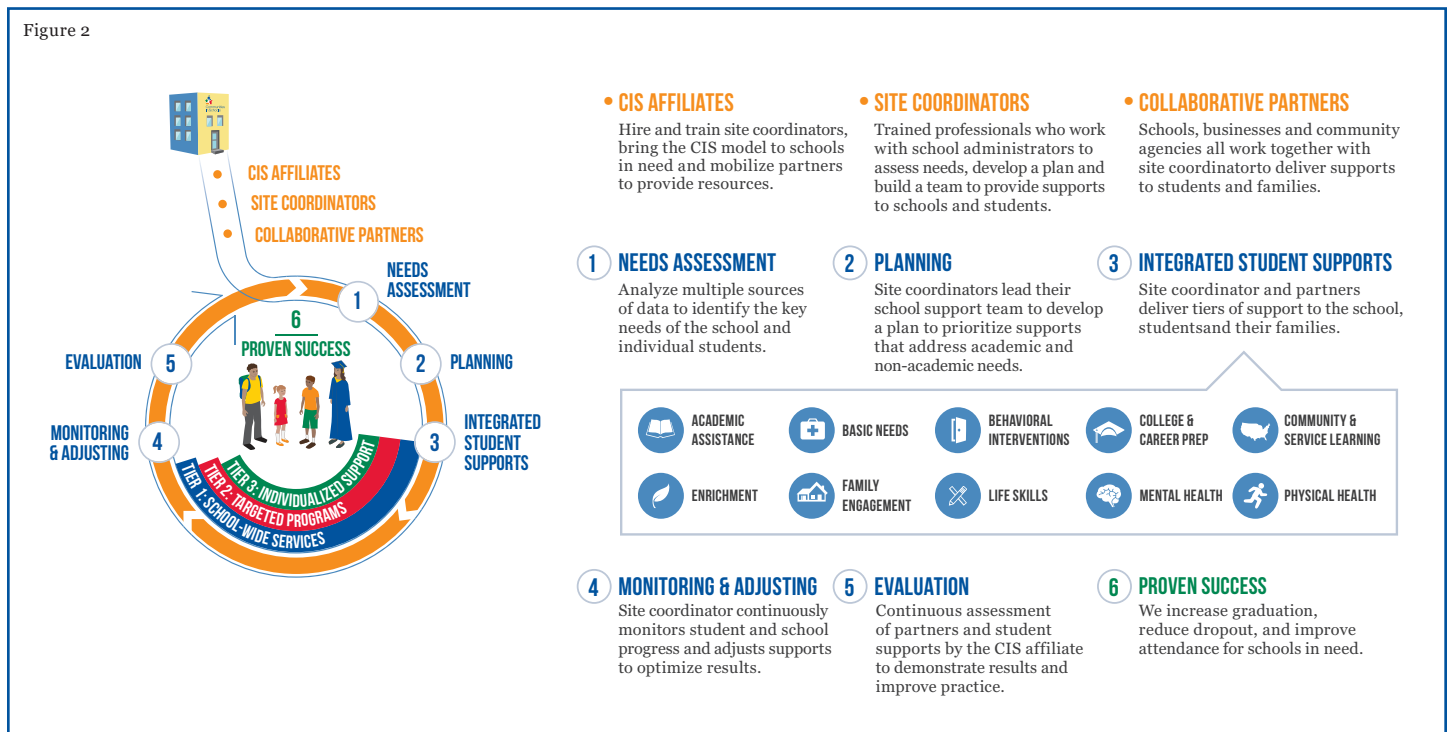
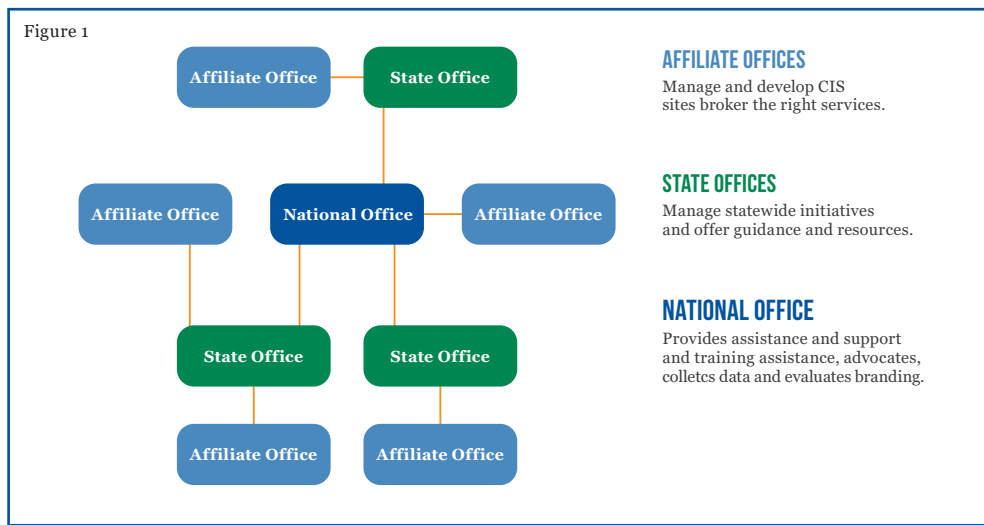


Communities  
In Schools

## ABOUT COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS AND INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS

Communities In Schools (CIS) is a national network of independent 501(c)(3) organizations (see Figure 1) 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 (ISS - see Figure 2).

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

### Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism

A student's path to high school graduation and success in life depends in part on the student's presence in classrooms and at school. Students miss out on formative and significant learning experiences when they are absent from school or are tardy to class, which can have longstanding negative impacts on a student's life. Absences are detrimental to student academic success, particularly in the early years of schooling. Students who were chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade gained fewer literacy and mathematical skills, scoring lower on subsequent standardized tests (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Chronic absence is also a predictor of dropping out of school. Addressing attendance early and throughout a student's educational career can help to prevent high school dropout, which "reflects a long process of disengagement and withdrawal from schooling and educational institutions" (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Furthermore, students who are absent can become involved in potential delinquent and high-risk behaviors, "such as substance abuse, sexual activity, and other activities [...] within the legal system" (Kim & Streeter, 2016).

Low-income students are more likely to be chronically absent, and the negative impacts of absenteeism are more significant for students who live at or near poverty (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Chang & Romero, 2008). Low-income students and their families may have limited access to the resources needed to ensure that the children are either attending school and/or making up for lost time and learning experiences.

#### Absenteeism and ESSA

The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, was signed into law in December 2015. It reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and made further efforts to advance equity and made schools accountable for measures of school and student success other than academic scores. For more information, visit: <https://www.ed.gov/essa>.

Unfortunately, according to the Office of Civil Rights, during the 2013-2014 school year more than 6.8 million students in the U.S. were chronically absent (missing 15 or more days of the school year). This equates to about 14% - or 1 in 7 - of all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Educators, parents, school administrators, and educational leaders have increasingly come to understand poor attendance and absenteeism as barriers to student success. As research in the field of school attendance grows, the federal government has encouraged schools and districts to address chronic absenteeism. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that state education agencies report on schools' chronic absenteeism rates and provides an opportunity for states to choose chronic absence as a formal accountability measure (Attendance Works, 2015).

### CIS of the Big Country: Key Contextual Factors

CIS of the Big Country is an independent 501(c)(3) organization – an affiliate of the Communities In Schools national federated network. During the 2016-2017 school year, CIS of the Big Country served 10 campuses in three school districts in Texas: the Abilene, Wylie, and Snyder Independent School Districts. The Abilene Independent School District (AISD) set forth a district-wide goal and vision for targeting attendance issues. Additionally, the Texas Education Agency allocates funding to districts based on a refined calculation of Average Daily Attendance (Texas Education Agency, 2017), or ADA – the number of students present each day of the school year for the entire school year divided by the number of instructional days in the school year. As seen in Figure 3, this measure can "mask the problem with chronic absence" because it does not "reveal whether absences are spread evenly or whether they are concentrated, with a few students experiencing excessive absences" (Attendance Works, 2011b).

Figure 3 - Attendance Data of School Districts served by CIS of the Big Country

Student Population	Average Daily Attendance <sup>1</sup>	% Chronically Absent <sup>2</sup>
Abilene ISD	95.4%	12.7%
Snyder ISD	95.9%	15.2%
Wylie ISD	96.7%	30.2%

There were also recent changes to Texas truancy laws that posed challenges for school districts and their efforts in improving attendance. These circumstances provided a unique opportunity to for CIS of the Big Country to further partner with AISD to improve attendance through the Never Been Absent (NBA) program. The NBA program was developed by a CIS Student Success Coach and was incorporated into CIS of the Big Country's core programming for all campuses for the 2016-2017 school year, including four middle and two high schools in the Abilene Independent School District. Given the growing emphasis on addressing attendance in schools, CIS of the Big Country and the CIS national office partnered on a Research to Practice (R2P) grant project to learn more about the NBA program.

#### Methodology

A member of the Research, Learning, and Accreditation (RLA) team from the CIS national office visited CIS of the Big Country to conduct interviews and focus groups with CIS of the Big Country affiliate management and site staff, students, parents, principals, and school district stakeholders. RLA team members then analyzed qualitative interview data and quantitative attendance data and reviewed and updated relevant documents to produce the findings in this brief

<sup>1</sup> Data source: 2013-2014 from the Texas Education Agency: <https://rptsrv1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2015/srch.html?srch=D>

<sup>2</sup> Data source: 2013-2014 from the Office of Civil Rights, who defines chronic absence by 15 or more absences for a school year.

## THE NEVER BEEN ABSENT (NBA) PROGRAM: AN OVERVIEW

### Program Goals

In addition to supporting the AISD goals of raising overall attendance rates at the campus and district levels, the NBA program plays a part in changing the culture around attendance at each campus and across the school district. NBA is also a specific intervention for students with attendance needs who are case-managed by CIS of the Big Country. The aim of the NBA program is to maximize instructional time (or “seat time”) by encouraging and incentivizing students to go to school.

Research recommends that attendance programs “provide a continuum of supports to students, including meaningful incentives and consequences. Supports should include academic (e.g. tutoring, after-school programs, creating smaller learning communities), behavioral (e.g., mentoring, group or individual counseling), family, and health (e.g., drug and alcohol rehabilitation)” (Railsback, 2004).

## Key Implementation Components of the NBA Program

### Use of Incentives

The NBA program utilizes whole-school (Tier I) and individual (Tier III) incentives to reward attendance:

- A district-wide competition, where participating schools compete for the highest ADA rate over a 6-week period, and the district winner receives a reward and an NBA banner hung at their school campus
- A school-wide competition between grade levels for best attendance
- School- and district-wide drawings for students with perfect attendance for the school year
- Individual incentives for students case-managed by CIS of the Big Country, given when students meet their individual attendance goals

Attendance Works, a national organization that provides resources and “promotes better policy and practice around school attendance” recommends using incentives or positive rewards to promote attendance, stating that “attendance incentives are most effective when part of a comprehensive approach” (2011a).

### Relationship with Student Success Coach

CIS of the Big Country Student Success Coaches work with case-managed students to set attendance goals by considering unique student needs and determining what improvement looks like for each student’s situation.

*“When kids feel like someone cares about them at school, they’ll come... No significant learning happens without [a] significant relationship.”*

– an AISD campus principal

### Visuals and Images

The NBA program spreads awareness about attendance through visuals:

- NBA banners at each campus
- NBA program flyers in hallways and classrooms
- A visual for case-managed students to track their individual attendance goals (see below)

Figure 4 - Sample NBA Visual for Case-Managed Student Goals



### Collaboration with the School District

AISD and individual school campuses displayed a high level of buy-in for the NBA program. CIS of the Big Country has been able to collaborate with key individuals, such as AISD attendance officers and the Executive Director of Instructional Support. CIS of the Big Country also leverages other AISD initiatives to support students who struggle with absenteeism, such as Saturday School and lunch detentions for students to make up missed work.

### Data Use

Additionally, CIS of the Big Country collaborates with AISD to access and collect relevant data. Attendance data is crucial for identifying students, tracking and analyzing student progress, and monitoring academic grades to see if absences have a negative impact on student coursework. The Tier I support component of NBA necessitates access to district- and school-level data – specifically campus comparisons of Average Daily Attendance – in order to properly reward and implement incentives.

## SUCCESS FACTORS

In interviews, stakeholders described key success factors of the NBA program. The following themes were represented in their responses, from highest to lowest frequency.

### Engaging Students

The AISD Executive Director of Instructional Support and CIS site and affiliate staff reported that students are enthusiastic about and engaged with the competition component of NBA. Students are learning how to advocate for themselves, monitor their goals, and take active steps to make up schoolwork when they have been absent.

### Communicating with a Common Language

Stakeholders explained that the NBA program provides a language and framework for communicating the importance of achieving attendance goals. Through the NBA program, CIS of the Big Country has a way to describe how they are addressing attendance, and AISD can articulate how they are partnering to achieve district attendance objectives.

*“...attendance is sort of an abstract thing to talk about with an entire school building, but NBA [...] gives it a foundation and a framework”*

– an AISD campus principal

### Building Collaborative Relationships

Stakeholders attribute much of the program success to the collaborative spirit and commitment between various groups and people:

1. **Abilene Independent School District** – successful partnership in referring students, sharing and reviewing data, and gaining district-wide buy-in
2. **Parents** – gratitude for CIS Student Success Coaches, who provide support and gain trust while working with students and families

3. **School Administrations & Teachers** – school-level partnership to easily integrate the NBA program into the school day and communicate about specific students
4. **CIS of the Big Country Staff** – opportunity for CIS of the Big Country site-level staff to share ideas, troubleshoot issues, and train and support one another

### Enhancing Visibility

The NBA program successfully leverages visuals, marketing, and announcements to surround students with an attendance-promoting culture. Flyers, banners, boards, and announcements surround and encourage students with reminders about attending school.

### Caring for Students

Though a one-on-one relationship with a caring adult is at the core of the CIS model, this relationship is key to the success of the NBA program. NBA serves students with less serious truancy issues who oftentimes lack a connection to the school and need an extra push in the form of a caring relationship.

### Leveraging Data

School district and CIS of the Big Country stakeholders are pleased with initial data indicators after the first year (2016-2017 school year) of implementing the NBA program across AISD (see Figure 5).

## CONCLUSION

The NBA program represents a collaborative partnership based on CIS of the Big Country’s commitment to serve students and AISD’s emphasis on addressing attendance. Through the model of Integrated Student Supports, local CIS organizations can work alongside school districts and administrators to holistically target and address any barriers that students may face when trying to attend school.

Figure 5 - Outcomes of Case-Managed Students in the NBA Program for the 2016-2017 School Year

AISD School	Number of Students in the NBA Program	% Improved on Attendance Goals	% Improved/Consistent on Coursework Goals	% Passed All Classes
Abilene High School	24	83%	87%	96%
Cooper High School	3	100%	66%	100%
Clack Middle School	15	80%	94%	100%
Craig Middle School	10	100%	70%	100%
Madison Middle School	16	50%	69%	75%
Mann Middle School	14	79%	93%	64%

## FURTHER RESOURCES

- **[Improving Attendance In Our Schools](#)** - a national review of the issues and a look at interventions from Communities In Schools
- **[Addressing the Problem of Chronic Absenteeism: A Promising School-Community Partnership](#)** - an overview of Communities In Schools affiliate organizations partnering with schools to bring holistic solutions to absenteeism.
- **[The Civil Rights Data Collection](#)** includes data (beyond chronic absenteeism) from US public schools, which can be further explored by school and district.
- **[Attendance Works](#)**
  - **[Chronic Absence Story Map](#)** – presents data about districts with high rates of chronic absence.
  - **[Tools for Calculating Chronic Absence](#)**
  - **[Bringing Attendance Home: Engaging Parents in Preventing Chronic Absence](#)**
- **[U.S. Department of Education](#)**
  - **[An interactive website](#)** about chronic absenteeism in public schools
  - **[Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism](#)** – a collaborative toolkit with the U.S. Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development

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