

# HOW TO LEVERAGE THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

August 2017



Communities  
In Schools

As communities across the country prepare for the beginning of a new school year, the stark reality is that more than **6.5 million**<sup>1</sup> students are likely to be absent often enough that it could have a significant impact on their academic performance.<sup>1</sup> **Chronic absenteeism**, often defined as missing 10 percent or more school days per year, occurs at every grade level and in schools nationwide. The problem is particularly acute for students who face the most significant barriers, including students from low-income families, students of color, and students with disabilities.

The prevalence of chronic absenteeism is a national crisis, and disparities among student groups underscore the need to better support all students to attend school. The way forward will require schools and districts to help young people overcome the varied and complex barriers that keep them from attending school regularly.

**The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** provides states and local education leaders with the opportunity to reimagine the potential of our education system, address chronic absenteeism, and make bold changes to ensure that more young people are prepared for the workforce and on a path to success in life. The law provides the necessary flexibility for states and local education agencies to implement more comprehensive strategies that reflect and meet the needs of students and their communities to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Fourteen of the 17 state consolidated plans submitted to the U.S. Department of Education for review in April and May 2017 included chronic absenteeism as an accountability indicator.<sup>2</sup> It is highly likely that many more states will follow when the remainder of plans are submitted in September 2017. This is an important first step, the beginning of a coordinated response to this crisis.

## The Way Forward

Many students, especially those living in poverty, face barriers to regular attendance that few school districts are equipped to resolve alone. While the necessary resources may already exist in communities, most schools lack an official mechanism for connecting students and families with the right supports. This presents a clear need for a systemic shift in the way education leaders think about the role of schools in the communities they serve.

Integrated Student Supports (ISS) is a **student-centered approach**<sup>3</sup> that can help schools identify risk factors early and implement appropriate interventions to address chronic absenteeism under ESSA. In this brief, Communities In Schools—the nation’s largest ISS provider—makes recommendations for state and local education agencies to advance ISS, identifies opportunities for funding, and makes the case for this kind of student focus.

## Chronic Absenteeism at a Glance

According to national data, chronic absenteeism affects a staggering 14 percent of students across the country. The disparities between demographic groups underscore the need to better support all students, especially those most at risk:

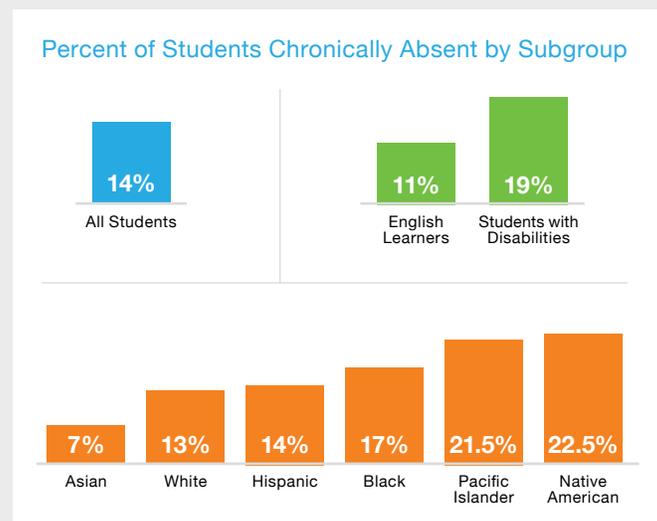


Figure 1. Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, 2013-14

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the research demonstrating the specific negative effects of chronic absenteeism, including lower academic performance and higher rates of dropout, see: Making the Case for Tracking Chronic Absence (Attendance Works, 2010), <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Chronic-Absence-Research-Summary-1-pager-2.19.14withlinks.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> State ESSA plans require approval by the US Department of Education. As of August 11, 2017 state ESSA plans from Delaware, New Mexico, New Jersey, and Nevada have been approved.

<sup>3</sup> As described by Kristin Anderson Moore, *Making The Grade: Assessing the Evidence for Integrated Student Supports* (Child Trends, 2014), <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014-07ISSPaper2.pdf>

## Recommendations for State Education Agencies

### Require school districts to include a non-academic needs assessment in Comprehensive Support and Improvement plans.

Under ESSA, school districts must develop and implement plans for Comprehensive Support and Improvement<sup>4</sup> that, among other things, are based on a school-level needs assessment.<sup>ii</sup> To be most impactful, this needs assessment should examine both the academic and non-academic needs of the school. For example, the non-academic needs assessment can examine schoolwide metrics, such as chronic absenteeism rates, suspension and expulsion rates, a survey of in-school service providers, and an existing school and community resource assessment. Requiring a non-academic needs assessment as part of school improvement planning will enhance an existing assessment and fill gaps in support, providing students with more opportunities to thrive academically.

### Prioritize funds under the mandatory Title I, Part A 7 percent set aside for schools implementing ISS.

Of the 17 states that submitted ESSA state plans, all of them have selected one or more of the following indicators as their additional accountability measure: chronic absenteeism, college and career readiness, early warning measures, school discipline, school climate, dropout rates, or student engagement. ISS has an impact on each of these measures and meets the conditions of school support and improvement under ESSA as an **evidence-based intervention** that can help schools meet their accountability goals. To help ensure that the state-selected goals for accountability are met, Communities In Schools (CIS) recommends that states prioritize funds under Title I, Part A for school districts and schools that plan to implement ISS as part of their Comprehensive and Targeted Support Improvement Plans. Please see page 4 for more information about the Title I, Part A 7 percent set aside.

### Utilize the 3 percent optional Direct Student Services set aside for ISS.

States should develop applications for Direct Student Services funds that prioritize evidence-based services and encourage local education agencies to consider whether ISS is a good fit. See page 4 for more information about Direct Student Services.

## Recommendations for State and Local Education Agencies

### Require or support schools in conducting a non-academic needs assessment for Targeted Support and Improvement plans.

ESSA does not require that schools identified for Targeted Support and Improvement<sup>5</sup> perform a needs assessment. Therefore, CIS recommends states and districts require schools to conduct a needs assessment, in partnership with school-

based educators, that examines data based on academic and non-academic factors. This needs assessment will help schools identified for Targeted Support and Improvement to select evidence-based interventions that are closely aligned with the school's need. In places where state-level requirements are prohibited, states should encourage school districts and schools to conduct a non-academic needs assessment. In either instance, states should issue guidance and provide a non-academic needs assessment template for all schools. This is especially important because 87 percent of educators report that their students face non-academic barriers to learning often associated with poverty or trauma.<sup>iii</sup>

### Partner with an ISS provider.

In schools that have a need for ISS, form public-private partnerships with evidence-based providers and implement a well-evaluated model. Such organizations can bring partnerships and resources to build the capacity of a school, creating more opportunity for teachers and school leaders to focus on their core mission. Several programs authorized in ESSA can be leveraged to create these partnerships, including Title I and Title IV funds.

### Apply the evidence-based standard to both academic and non-academic interventions.

Emphasis on the use of evidence to drive strong outcomes for students is a central component of ESSA. Requirements in ESSA for evidence-based interventions vary according to funding source, but initiatives in low-performing schools are required to adhere to the law's highest standards for evidence of effectiveness. When this standard is applied with intentionality to both academic and nonacademic interventions, student outcomes are more likely to improve and the return on investment is likely to be higher.

### Leverage a Title I schoolwide program.

Where applicable, a Title I schoolwide program<sup>6</sup> should be used to build the capacity of a Title I school in support of a more comprehensive reform strategy. In qualifying schools, schoolwide Title I can be used to enhance the entire education program in a school through a tiered system, like ISS, that can target and raise the achievement of the lowest-performing students. Please see page 4 for more information about Title I schoolwide programs.

### Leverage multiple public funding streams.

Federal and state budgets are tight, but schools and districts still will be required to address resource inequities and meet the needs of vulnerable children. States, districts, and schools should think out of the box when looking for ways to pay for ISS to reduce chronic absenteeism rates. In addition to utilizing ESSA, they should explore non-traditional funding sources, such as the Corporation for National and Community Service, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or Medicaid, to address various needs and support students.

<sup>4</sup> Under ESSA, states must identify schools for Comprehensive Support and Improvement, including the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, high schools with graduation rates less than 67 percent, and schools in which at least one subgroup is consistently underperforming. Districts will be responsible for developing plans to improve student outcomes in the identified schools, which must then be approved by the state.

<sup>5</sup> Under ESSA, schools will be identified for Targeted Support and Improvement when subgroups of students are significantly and consistently low-performing, as defined by the state. Schools will develop plans to improve the outcomes of low-performing students, which must be approved by the district.

<sup>6</sup> In qualifying schools, the Title I schoolwide program allows education leaders to use Title I funds in support of schoolwide reform, rather than for targeted assistance. A school may operate a schoolwide program if more than 40% of students attending a school live in poverty or the school receives a waiver from the state. For more information, see: Communities In Schools, Leveraging Title I Schoolwide Programs, (2017), <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/our-data/publications/publication/leveraging-title-i-schoolwide-programs>

## Funding Integrated Student Supports under ESSA

States, school districts, and schools that want to implement ISS to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism should explore multiple provisions in ESSA. Opportunities in ESSA include:

### School Support and Improvement.

States are required to reserve 7 percent of their Title I allocations and identify underperforming schools for Comprehensive Support and Improvement or Targeted Support and Improvement.

ISS should be included in both Comprehensive and Targeted School Improvement plans, particularly in states that have elected to be accountable for additional metrics influenced by ISS, such as chronic absenteeism. ISS meets the conditions of school support and improvement under ESSA as an evidence-based intervention that can help schools meet goals for reducing rates of chronic absenteeism. Schools and districts can strengthen their support plans and improve outcomes for students by including ISS as part of a comprehensive reform strategy. ISS meets the core requirements of these proposals, which, in Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools, must include a needs assessment, at least one evidence-based intervention, and a plan to address resource inequities.

### Direct Student Services.

States have an option to reserve up to another 3 percent of Title I funds for “direct student services.” States that elect to reserve these funds have significant flexibility to set priorities for student services, and can set aside funds to address chronic absenteeism or fund ISS, particularly for districts with significant proportions of schools identified for support and improvement. States can set priorities through the application process that encourage the adoption of evidence-based services and prompt local education agencies to consider whether ISS is a good fit.

### Title I Schoolwide Programs.

Qualifying schools receiving Title I funds will have the option of operating schoolwide programs that permit the braiding of designated federal funding streams at the local level. In schools that elect to operate a schoolwide program, school leaders can leverage Title I funds to improve the academic achievement of all students in a school, while still targeting the most at-risk.<sup>7</sup>

A Title I schoolwide program can build the capacity of a Title I school to implement a more comprehensive reform strategy. Models of ISS that provide both universal (school-wide) and targeted supports fit well within this framing because they deliver programs and supports that are relevant to all students and individualized supports to at-risk students.

## Chronic Absenteeism and the Every Student Succeeds Act

ESSA is an opportunity for state and local education leaders to address barriers that students face to consistent attendance in a more systemic way. New flexibility afforded to states allows the incorporation of chronic absenteeism into accountability systems and allows education leaders to consider locally-driven, evidence-based interventions to improve outcomes. Under ESSA:

- State accountability systems must include at least one indicator of school quality or student success (in addition to measures of academic achievement), but states have new flexibility to select the indicator of their choosing. Measures of chronic absenteeism meet the law’s requirements that the indicator be valid, reliable, meaningfully differentiate, and be available statewide.<sup>iii</sup>
- The additional indicator must measure and report results for all students and each student group. All accountability measures must be disaggregated by subgroups defined as economically disadvantaged students, major ethnic and racial groups, students with disabilities and English learners.
- The selected indicator must be calculated in a standardized way for simple comparison among groups, schools, and districts.
- States must set “ambitious” long-term goals for improvement and include short-term benchmarks to demonstrate movement toward these goals.<sup>i</sup>

The first round of ESSA submissions was due in April 2017, and 14 of 17 states opted to include a measure of chronic absenteeism in accountability systems. Most states combine chronic absenteeism with other measures, including college and career-readiness, an “early warning” measure, a climate survey, or dropout rate.

### Title III, Part A English Language Acquisition and Language Enhancement Grants.

Schools can now reserve a portion of their Title III Part A funds to address the non-academic needs of English learners. A new provision added to Title III, Part A requires grantees to implement activities that enhance or supplement the academic and language instruction of English learners.<sup>8</sup> This carries a significant amount of flexibility for school leaders to consider new, whole-child strategies to support English learners, such as ISS.

### Title IV Grants.

Education leaders can work with ISS providers to apply for Title IV competitive grants. Grants in ESSA, such as *Student Success and Academic Enrichment Grants*, *Education Innovation and Research Grants*, *Full-Service Community Schools*, and *21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers*, encourage schools to address persistent challenges through partnerships with community organizations, such as nonprofits, or by implementing evidence-based programs.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see: Communities In Schools, Leveraging Title I Schoolwide Programs, (2017), <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/our-data/publications/publication/leveraging-title-i-schoolwide-programs>

<sup>8</sup> For more information, see: Communities In Schools, Supporting English Learners Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, (2017), <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/our-data/publications/publication/supporting-english-learners-under-essa>

## Background: How Integrated Student Supports Can Reduce Chronic Absence

States and school districts need not engage in guesswork when taking the steps outlined above. A case can be—and has been—made for ISS as a viable, evidence-based intervention. In an ISS model implemented by CIS (Figure 2), a site coordinator is positioned in the school to work with administrators, assess needs and existing resources, and connect vulnerable young people with the appropriate support systems to address both academic and non-academic barriers.

Examples of common supports include basic needs (e.g. housing, clothing, food), mental health services, academic enrichment, and mentoring. Supports can be differentiated based on a tiered system, which allows site coordinators to serve most students in a school while focusing attention on targeted students who have significant needs.

ISS can improve attendance by helping school leaders identify both the academic and non-academic barriers that keep students away from school. By working with an ISS provider, schools can intervene early and intensively through case management. This integrated and comprehensive approach helps students stay in school and graduate. According to CIS 2016-17 data, 80 percent of the students case managed by CIS improved attendance.<sup>iv</sup>

The most comprehensive study of ISS to date analyzed eleven evaluations of three different providers. This analysis found that, when implemented with fidelity to a high-quality model, ISS can improve course performance and attendance. The study concluded that ISS led to decreased grade retention and dropout rates.<sup>v</sup>

A recent five-year evaluation of the CIS model conducted by MDRC and an earlier one conducted by ICF International found that elementary school students' attendance improved more in schools implementing the CIS whole-school model than it did in schools without CIS. Both studies also found that high schools implementing CIS whole-school services increased their graduation rates.<sup>vi</sup>

Interim findings from an MDRC evaluation of Diplomas Now, an innovative school reform model that incorporates ISS, showed that the program had a positive and statistically significant impact on the percentage of students with no early warning indicators. In other words, the program increased the number of students who maintained an 85 percent attendance rate or better, were suspended fewer than three days, and passed English language arts and math. Students were also more likely to report a positive relationship with a caring adult.<sup>vii</sup>

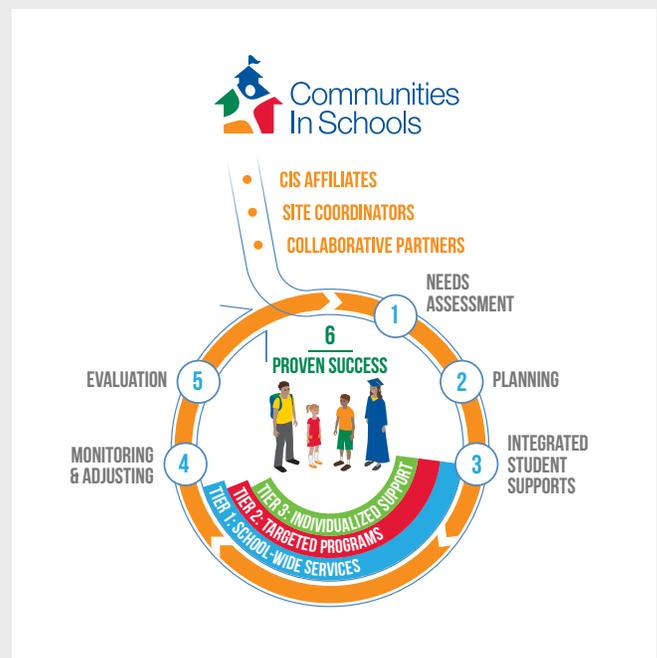


Figure 2

## Conclusion

The flexibility provided under ESSA is an opportunity for state and local education agencies to rethink their educational plans, implementing programs that are aligned with the needs of students and communities. New data reporting requirements will empower school leaders with the information necessary to address inequities and improve achievement overall, including by decreasing chronic absenteeism. ISS providers can help school leaders maximize these opportunities by providing resources and partnership, helping schools and districts to take advantage of new provisions in the law that make funding available for evidence-based strategies. To learn more about how ISS can reduce chronic absenteeism rates and increase attendance, please visit [CommunitiesInSchools.org/Attendance](https://CommunitiesInSchools.org/Attendance).

## References

- <sup>i</sup> *Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools* (US Department of Education, 2016), <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>
- <sup>ii</sup> *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015*, Pub. L. No. 114-95 § 114 Stat. 1177. <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/essa-act-of-1965.pdf>
- <sup>iv</sup> Communities In Schools. All In for Students 2017 National Impact Report. (2017) <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/our-data/publications/publication/2017-national-impact-report>
- <sup>v</sup> Kristin Anderson Moore, *Making The Grade: Assessing the Evidence for Integrated Student Supports* (Child Trends, 2014), <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014-07ISSPaper2.pdf>
- <sup>vi</sup> ICF Consulting, *Communities in Schools National Evaluation: Five Year Executive Summary* (2010), <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/our-data/publications/publication/five-year-national-evaluation-executive-summary>; MDRC, *Using Research Evidence to Strengthen Support for At-Risk Students*, (2017), <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/our-data/publications/publication/mdrc-issue-focus-brief-case-study-cis-continuous-l>
- <sup>vii</sup> MDRC, *Addressing Early Warning Indicators: Interim Impact Findings from the Investing in Innovation (i3) Evaluation of DIPLOMAS NOW* <http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/DiplomasNow%203rd%202016.pdf>

