



Communities
In Schools

A Community of Support for Every Child:

Our Policy Principles



Our Vision

As an organization with over 40 years of experience empowering young people to realize their full potential, Communities In Schools knows that every child holds tremendous promise. Working directly inside schools across the country, we connect youth to caring adults and community resources designed to help them succeed. For the nearly 1.6 million students we serve, these connections have the power to help them change the trajectory of their lives.

We envision a future in which every child in the United States has a community of support that enables them to reach their full potential. For this reason, we have laid out an ambitious five-year strategic plan that will make integrated student supports available to more students. Yet, in order to fully realize this goal, we must also look beyond our organizational footprint and embrace a comprehensive policy agenda that will promote the health and well-being of all children.

To achieve our vision, we must be bold. We must be relentless advocates for youth, drive the national conversation, reimagine the potential of education to transform lives, and change the widespread systems that hold young people back. It's not enough to help young people navigate the systemic and structural barriers that are obstacles to their success. Together, we must strive to eliminate these barriers permanently and create the conditions of equity young people need and deserve.

The Opportunity Gap

For too long, children of color and children living in poverty have been left behind by systems that were not designed for their success. Today, the life outcomes of a child can be predicted with astonishing accuracy based on the set of circumstances into which he or she is born. The neighborhood in which a child lives can have a devastating effect on upward mobility that impacts families for generations.¹ Unless we all work together to change the status quo, the stark reality is most students who start behind will always stay behind.

All children have the potential for greatness, but poverty can create overwhelming circumstances that can make it nearly impossible to concentrate on academics or personal achievement. Young people are incredibly resilient, and each individual child possesses a unique set of talents and skills to overcome any challenges they may face, but we should not expect them to do it alone. Children from low-income families—over half of our nation's students²—face very real problems associated with challenges such as food insecurity, housing instability, and parental incarceration. As adults, it is our job to offer support, address the systemic inequities that hold them back, and pave the way for their success.

It is also our responsibility to address the systemic inequities that intersect with poverty to amplify barriers for some students. Often, children from low-income families are also children from historically marginalized backgrounds who already face systemic and structural barriers that further exacerbate the challenges of living in poverty. They may face negative prejudgment and systemic oppression perpetuated by racism, classism, sexism, ableism, ageism, xenophobia, and homophobia. Thus, students may face discrimination in multiple areas at once, all while dealing with the challenges associated with poverty.



Photo: Communities In Schools Founder Bill Milliken and Communities In Schools alumni

Our History

Communities In Schools (CIS) is deeply committed to unlocking student potential. From the very beginning, public policy has been central to this mission.

Our founder, Bill Milliken, dedicated his life to serving as a tireless advocate for disenfranchised youth. In his book, *The Last Dropout*, Bill recounts how his work with the Carter, Reagan, H. W. Bush, and Clinton administrations helped to grow CIS into the national organization it is today. As he wisely writes: “Being nonpartisan is a precondition for scalability—the future of our children is not a partisan issue.”

With each new administration, Communities In Schools has successfully advocated for strong investments in our nation's young people. In December 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a major overhaul of the nation's federal education law. CIS made the case for our work to Congress and, as a result, the law specifically identifies integrated student supports as a program eligible for federal funding.

Our policy principles honor these roots, while recognizing that we must do more to address the systemic obstacles that marginalized children face. We are, at our core, an advocate for equity. In *The Last Dropout*, Bill set out “The Five Basics,” the things that every child needs and deserves. The Five Basics are:

- 1) A one-on-one relationship with a caring adult;
- 2) A safe place to learn and grow;
- 3) A healthy start and a healthy future;
- 4) A marketable skill to use upon graduation; and
- 5) A chance to give back to peers and community.

These Five Basics still guide our advocacy today.

Unfortunately, public education is among the systems where systemic inequities create obstacles for marginalized groups. In schools nationwide, the unequal distribution of resources, relationships, and opportunities undermines potential. The school districts serving large populations of low-income students and students of color receive significantly less funding than those serving white and more affluent students.³ As a result, schools in impoverished neighborhoods often lack tutors, computers, laboratories, after-school programs, and extracurricular activities. This disparity is widely known as the opportunity gap.

The opportunity gap has a devastating effect on life outcomes, perpetuates the cycle of poverty, and hurts communities. It leads to disparities in achievement between subgroups of students across a variety of measures such as standardized tests scores and graduation rates. On the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), students of color tested an average of more than 25 test-score points behind their white peers in both math and reading.⁴ A similar average gap of 24 test-score points exists between students who qualify for free- or reduced- price lunch and their wealthier peers.⁵ That's a difference of about two grade levels.⁶

When the opportunity gap holds students back, it affects us all. Following the 2016-17 school year, the U.S. celebrated an all-time high graduation rate of 84.6 percent.⁷ Yet even as the overall graduation rate is on the rise, gaps in graduation rates by race and income-level persist. Students from low-income families are still two times more likely to drop out than their higher-income peers.⁸ Young adults who drop out of school are far more likely to experience reduced job and income opportunities, chronic unemployment, incarceration, or require government assistance than the rest of the population.⁹

Community by community, school by school, and child by child, we are all in this together. Alone, school professionals simply do not have the time and resources required to address the wide range of needs that students bring into the classroom. Everyone—school and district leaders, teachers, families, non-profits, community leaders, businesses and policymakers, and students themselves—has a role and must work together for student success.

Greatness exists in all children and each individual achievement can add up to the kind of change that will support schools and strengthen communities. The U.S. is one of the wealthiest nations in the world and can support all students. That's why it is our responsibility to work together to lift all students and close the opportunity gap. We must dismantle the systemic barriers that hold young people back, prevent bias in decision-making, and extend opportunities to marginalized groups.

This document explains in detail how we build the pathway to our vision for a country in which all children have access to a strong foundation for success. We advocate for policies that deliver these five essentials:

- 1) A one-on-one relationship with a caring adult;
- 2) A safe place to learn and grow;
- 3) A healthy start and a healthy future;
- 4) A marketable skill to use upon graduation; and
- 5) A chance to give back to peers and community.



Photo: Communities In Schools of Austin students Genesis, Sylvia, Stefanie, Lorne, and Yaniecia

Each of these elements represents an essential component of the community of support every child deserves. In every step we take together, we will help students find the strength and confidence to look within and see what we see—a bright future that's theirs for the taking.

Equitable Opportunities

Communities In Schools developed this policy agenda as a framework for an education system that works for all students. We aim to create better outcomes and empower students to be the next generation of leaders. We believe in a ripple effect, and we know one life can change countless others. To set the stage for student success, we advocate for legislative changes that ensure equity is a through-line in all public policymaking across all policy areas outlined in this paper.

Together with our partners, we urge federal and state policymakers to invest in education and related programs that support the health and wellness of young people. State and federal education dollars are intended to supplement local funds in districts that lack the resources to provide additional services for students living in poverty. Therefore, we weigh in when these resources are inadequate or distributed inequitably. *Communities In Schools advocates that additional resources be made available to strengthen community development efforts and provide support to communities struggling to respond to crises such as the opioid epidemic, issues of school safety, and other traumatic events.*

We also know it matters how public funds are spent and we encourage policymakers to invest in what works. To that end, we support the use of data and evidence in policymaking and encourage lawmakers to prioritize funding for evidence-based programs, so we can make sure these resources are invested wisely. When government leaders invest in evidence-based programs, we can improve outcomes for all students while being good stewards of public dollars.

Finally, we leverage our influence to amplify the voices of our students and their communities. As an organization that supports children and families, most from traditionally marginalized groups, we must recognize the negative impact that some public policy decisions or major events can have on our students and schools. When we have a unified voice and can contribute meaningfully to a national dialogue, one important way we can support our students is by speaking out via press releases and social media statements. From time to time, when it is appropriate, we lend our name in support of policy that is in the best interest of our students and their families, even if it is not directly related to these five policy principles.

Our Policy Principles

Our vision is that every child in the U.S. will be surrounded by a community of support to unlock their full potential. In this section, each policy principle represents a critical component of the network of support all children need and deserve.

Closing the Relationship Gap: A One-on-One Relationship with a Caring Adult

Trusting, caring, and supportive relationships with adults are foundational to childhood development. Studies show students who experience strong developmental relationships show more robust social-emotional skills, resilience in the face of trauma and other adversity, and other indicators of general health and well-being.¹⁰ Strong relationships are also key to building a positive school environment and can help educators gain insight into the individual strengths and needs of students.

We must work together to boost access to developmental relationships and help all young people build the social capital needed for success. Research shows that youth from marginalized communities often form fewer developmental relationships.¹¹ Developmental relationships are close connections with adults that help young people overcome the stresses, challenges, and barriers they face. Ultimately, these types of strong relationships and other connections become social capital—a driving force that can help young people navigate toward a successful future. Communities In Schools site coordinators and other youth mentors are in schools nationwide helping students form these connections, but through effective policymaking we know we can do more.

Communities In Schools advocates for policies that create, reinforce, and strengthen opportunities for young people to build developmental relationships with caring adults. We support evidence-based approaches, like integrated student supports, that are grounded in youth development research and the science of brain development. To that end, we encourage policymakers to invest in high-quality in-service professional development related to trauma-informed care, the elements of a developmental relationship, and social-emotional skill building. We also know there are opportunities for policymakers to work with colleges of education to integrate and strengthen instruction in these areas. Therefore, we work with partners who are experts in this area to advocate for high-quality professional training that will help teachers identify trauma and make referrals.

We know state and federal policymakers can play an important role in supporting, encouraging and, funding strategies that bring caring adults into schools—such as youth mentoring and



Photo: Communities In Schools of Bay Area site coordinator Priscilla Munoz and student Kaylie

tutoring programs—that provide young people with positive role models and much-needed individualized attention. We also advocate for policies that support school-led efforts to strengthen caring relationships within families. Therefore, we encourage the use of evidence-based family engagement strategies and initiatives to ensure the school is a welcoming community for caregivers of all backgrounds.

Improving School Climate: A Safe Place to Learn and Grow

Young people need and deserve a safe and supportive learning environment. Research shows that attending a school with a positive climate contributes to the well-being of students and improves academic outcomes and graduation rates.¹² Students are more likely to succeed in schools that build a cohesive culture by teaching social and emotional skills, setting high expectations for student achievement and behavior, and fostering supportive relationships between adults and students.¹³

Yet, for many students, school is still not a welcoming place. Students face daily safety challenges, such as the threat of violence in the community or unsafe school buildings. For children of color and children with disabilities, high rates of exclusionary discipline and removal from the classroom disproportionately affect their ability to learn.¹⁴ While efforts to improve school safety and implement restorative justice practices are underway in schools nationwide, more can be done to ensure success and bring these efforts to scale.

Students may also face challenges associated with bullying and cyberbullying, a complex problem that is one of several risk factors linked to an increase in suicide death rates among young people.¹⁵ Research shows that there are clear connections between bullying and negative outcomes that include depression, anxiety, and poor school performance.¹⁶ Both youth who are frequently

bullied and youth who participate in bullying behavior are at an increased risk for these negative outcomes, including suicide-related behavior. Schools can play an important role in boosting protective factors and addressing risk factors. For example, students who feel connected to their school are less likely to engage in suicide-related behaviors.¹⁷

Furthermore, new studies demonstrate the need for schools to address student mental health and respond to the widespread prevalence of trauma and its impact on student learning. In the U.S., one quarter of all young people will experience at least one potentially traumatic event before they turn four.¹⁸ Marginalized groups are at an even higher risk for trauma, including students with disabilities, homeless youth, and LGBTQ youth.¹⁹ Students who are undocumented immigrants are frequently subject to traumatic experiences related to discrimination, immigration raids in their communities, and/or the threat of family separation.²⁰ Without the right education and training, well-intentioned adults and students can unintentionally re-traumatize children and create a negative learning environment. Schools can help by providing the appropriate trauma-informed care and mental health supports to help children cope.

Communities In Schools advocates for strong investments in positive school climates from all levels of government.

Policymakers should invest in school-based staff, like school site coordinators, who can foster a supportive learning environment by managing critical steps like the planning and integration of programming and resources. It is also critical that federal and state policymakers invest in funding for student mental health supports, including through Medicaid in schools, and other initiatives to boost protective factors against bullying. And because social and emotional skills empower students with positive connections that improve the school environment, thereby unlocking the door for their academic learning, we advocate that schools expand their focus to include social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD).

We encourage state leaders to include an indicator of school climate in the accountability systems mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to monitor growth and identify areas for improvement. We are committed to ensuring that the federal government continues to support state and local efforts to prevent discrimination and holds schools accountable for disparities in the use of school discipline. We will continue to work with policymakers and our partners to ensure that we create the conditions for success.

Promoting Health Equity: A Healthy Start and a Healthy Future

Basic health and human services are essential for every child. Children can't concentrate on school work if they are hungry, cold, in need of medical or dental care, or have trouble seeing. They deserve a healthy start in life, which means access to health care, vision and dental exams, healthy foods, mental health services, safe and stable housing, and physical education programs.

Health disparities result when children lack access to healthy environments and regular health care. Many young people face serious, chronic, health-related issues, such as asthma, obesity, and poor dental health, that can go unaddressed when families



Photo: Communities In Schools of the Charleston Area site coordinator Andy Casson and student Joseph

cannot afford regular physical examinations.²¹ Lack of quality, stable housing also affects health outcomes. Children who live in impoverished neighborhoods have less access to fresh, healthy foods and safe places to play, which can lead to poor nutrition and a lack of regular exercise.²² More must be done to promote the physical health of all youth.

In addition to improving the overall safety and climate of a school, as previously discussed, access to mental health and counseling services is important for the health and wellness of individual students. Forty-six percent of all children living in the U.S. have been exposed to at least one potentially stressful or traumatic event known as an adverse childhood experience (ACE).²³ Without proper care, exposure to ACEs can impact social, emotional, and mental health and impair the ability to learn and control behavior.²⁴ Trauma-informed care focused on building protective factors can improve overall well-being and prevent a wide-range of negative outcomes, including substance abuse and disconnection from school.²⁵ For low-income students who face emotional, behavioral, and mental health challenges, cost can be a barrier to receiving appropriate care from a licensed professional. Yet in many schools, the number of school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors available is far below the recommended ratio.

Schools can have an important role in identifying and meeting the health needs of students and families. Afterschool and summer programs encourage, among other things, physical activity, healthy eating, and time outdoors.²⁶ School-based health centers are emerging as an innovative way to make sure that all students have access to the high-quality health care they need. Policy changes, such as high standards for school, means that all students have access to at least one healthy meal each day are also important.²⁷ School breakfast, summer meals, and weekend backpack programs can further increase access to healthy food, providing nourishment during times when students cannot depend on school lunch.

Communities In Schools advocates for state and federal policies that support and encourage the coordination and integration of school-based services that keep students physically and mentally healthy. We work with policymakers to ensure that communities have access to the resources they need to implement strategies like after-school programs, community schools, and healthy meal programs. We support strong investments in the social safety net and in the basic health and human services that are essential for every child, including improvements to existing ratios of school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors.

Fostering College and Career Readiness: A Marketable Skill to Use Upon Graduation

Young people deserve to graduate from high school prepared to achieve their individual aspirations, whether they choose to attend college, enlist in military service, or enter the workforce. Employers, college admissions counselors, and military recruiters want candidates who have the necessary technical skills, academic aptitude, and interpersonal skills to be successful.²⁸ Interpersonal skills are taught through social emotional skill-building, and they include problem solving, creativity, communication, teamwork, and collaboration. Whichever path students choose, schools must equally prepare them for the jobs of the future.

Exciting progress has been made toward increasing the high school graduation rate, but unfortunately all diplomas are not created equally. One study found that less than half of the high school diplomas offered in the U.S. prepare students for success in college and career.²⁹ Traditionally underserved students are less likely to graduate with a college and career-ready diploma than their peers, and in most states the gap for African American students is the largest.³⁰ These gaps deepen inequity and perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

All students deserve access to a well-rounded education that builds that skills and awareness needed for postsecondary success, including social emotional learning, opportunities to explore music and the arts, civics education, financial literacy and planning, and other life skills. Students also need better information, tools, skill development, and support services if they are to be more prepared for life after high school. A recent survey found that only one in four adults believe most high school graduates are prepared for either college or career.³¹ These concerns about preparedness were consistent across all demographics, but young adults were the most likely to report that graduates are unprepared. Participants identified social and life skills, financial planning, and job shadowing and internships as some of the most critical supports that students need to access.

Communities In Schools advocates for job training, college exploration and persistence, and workplace learning opportunities for all students. Through apprenticeships, internships, programs that support college persistence and completion, and high-quality career and technical education programs aligned to industry demands so that students can build the skills they need for success after graduation. We encourage state and federal policymakers to improve access to college and career exploration programs in earlier grades so that all students can start high school with a plan for the future. In addition, we encourage the integration of social, emotional, and academic instruction in schools so that students can learn the interpersonal skills needed for success after graduation.



Photo: Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg alumnus Jamal Tate

Inspiring Civic Engagement: A Chance to Give Back to Peers and Community

Every child should have a chance to give back. Research demonstrates the extensive benefits that individuals gain from volunteering. Volunteers report increases in self-esteem, new skills and capabilities, and improvements in physical and mental health.³² Studies also show that service can help young people to develop social capital and build connections with peers.³³ Finally, volunteering can strengthen civic engagement when young people realize the real impact of their work on their communities.

Despite the benefits for individuals and communities, only one in four Americans is able to spend time volunteering.³⁴ Schools can help encourage volunteerism by offering opportunities for service and setting clear expectations for student participation, including through service learning or work study programs. By partnering with organizations that offer service positions funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, schools can connect students with opportunities to serve on a wide range of projects that offer a stipend for living expenses.

Schools can also help prepare students for life in our democracy with opportunities for high-quality civics education that model the democratic process of participation in civic life. This includes discussions of current events and news literacy, as well as field trips and simulations of democratic process and procedures. Formal coursework can and should include opportunities for students to engage in community and national issues so that students are equipped to better understand the tools available to them.

Communities In Schools advocates for policies that encourage volunteering, help young people set aside the time to serve others, and boost civic engagement. We encourage policymakers to create opportunities for students, both in and out of school, for high-quality civics education with participatory experiences. We support opportunities to engage student voice and participation in decision-making through student councils and peer networks. Finally, we advocate for strong investments in national service programs, such as AmeriCorps, which compensate members for special projects and empower young people with critical skills they can use in a career.

The Every Student Succeeds Act

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the nation's largest and most comprehensive law governing K-12 education. It was signed in 2015 to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, an important civil rights and equity measure that dates back to the War on Poverty. The new law provides federal resources with the necessary flexibility for state and local education agencies to make bold changes to the education system that reflect and meet the needs of students and their communities.

ESSA includes Title I funds, which are allocated to schools and districts across the country that serve a disproportionately large share of students from low-income families. In ESSA, Congress recognized that integrated student supports are an effective strategy for school improvement and included it as an allowable use of Title I funds. States and districts also can reserve school improvement funds for the lowest-performing schools in need of integrated student supports. As ESSA implementation begins, we will continue to advocate that state and local leaders should adopt integrated student supports as a strategy for school improvement.

ESSA brings a renewed focus to the development of the whole child. For example, a new federal program, called the Student Support and Academic Enrichment grant, which combined a number of existing, smaller grant programs into a large block grant that school districts can use to implement activities across three categories: safe and healthy students, well-rounded education, and effective use of technology. ESSA also broadens the scope of teacher professional development, shifting from "core academic subjects" to a "well-rounded education." And schools that receive English Language Acquisition and Language Enhancement grants are now required to implement activities that enhance or supplement the academic and language instruction of English learners.³⁵ Together, these changes make it easier for schools to provide services that support young people with the Five Basics and the CIS Model of integrated student supports.

Thanks to the flexibility of ESSA, many states have elected to include chronic absenteeism rates and school climate in their accountability systems for the first time. This is an important step toward improving school environments and addressing the national crisis of high absenteeism.³⁶ Three states will measure school climate. States must set ambitious long-term goals and short-term benchmarks designed to demonstrate improvements. As implementation of these plans begins, we will continue to support and work with states toward achieving these goals.

Each year since the law was enacted, we have fought alongside other education leaders to make sure that Congress invests in important ESSA programs such as the Full-Service Community Schools Grant, Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers. These programs are designed to help under-resourced schools educate young people and provide the Five Basics. In the coming years, we will continue to advocate for increased investments in these critical funding streams.

The Communities In Schools Model

Integrated student supports are a school-based approach to addressing the academic and non-academic barriers that keep students from reaching success in school and in life. Research shows that this approach can lead to decreases in grade retention and dropout, and increases in attendance, math achievement, and overall GPA.³⁷

At Communities In Schools, we position a site coordinator in each school to assess the needs of students in that school. The site coordinator then identifies and connects students to resources that meet these needs.

Through strategic partnerships with local providers, our site coordinators bring together various community supports to provide integrated services benefiting an entire student body (Tier I).

Simultaneously, site coordinators work with school leaders to identify a subset of the most at-risk students, who then receive targeted and/or individualized interventions (Tiers II and III) based on their identified needs.



Conclusion

This policy platform is about driving change alongside young people and their communities. This document is meant to be evergreen and it will serve as a guide for our policy advocacy. These principles are operationalized through an accompanying legislative agenda that will be updated for each new Congress. For over 40 years, Communities In Schools has shown up in schools for our students, and we stay by them as they lead the way to stronger communities for generations to come. As the nation's largest organization dedicated to empowering at-risk students to stay in school and on a path to a brighter future, advocacy is just one way that we will ensure that all kids have the tools to realize their potential.

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