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RESEARCH AND
POLICY BRIEF

The Benefits When Resources Meet Relationships for Children in High-Poverty Communities

By The EdRedesign Lab Team

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Children born into poverty face systemic barriers that create disparities long before they enter the workforce.

Implementing personalized supports nationwide in high-poverty schools has the potential to fundamentally alter life trajectories for children born into poverty, transforming educational and life outcomes while generating substantial returns through increased tax revenue and reduced income inequality.

While initiatives like improving teacher quality, reducing class sizes, and expanding tutoring have shown important benefits, many students living in low-income or impoverished circumstances face additional challenges that prevent them from fully engaging with these resources, including higher rates of chronic absenteeism and logistical hurdles to program participation. New research provides evidence for a solution that can help dismantle these barriers: pairing traditional school and community resources with relationship-based personalization.

The research from Opportunity Insights- and EdRedesign-affiliated scholars demonstrates the promise of relationship-based personalized supports in helping children from low-income families achieve upward mobility. In the study, *When Resources Meet Relationships: The Returns to Personalized Supports for Low-Income Students,* Benjamin Goldman and Jamie Gracie demonstrate the impact of one well-established model, Communities In Schools (CIS), which provides integrated student supports, a type of comprehensive, relationship-based, personalized, and whole-school support that meets students' academic and non-academic needs.

The results of this study are groundbreaking. For students who are struggling in high-poverty schools, exposure to personalized supports raises test scores, increases high school graduation rates by 3.4 percentage points (closing 13% of the achievement gap with their higher-performing peers), boosts two-year college attendance by 3 percentage points, and—most strikingly—raises adult earnings by $1,140 annually (4.3%).

These gains are concentrated among students most at risk of dropping out, particularly those living in low-income or impoverished circumstances, making personalized supports a powerful tool for economic mobility. The approach is also remarkably cost-effective: the effect of three years of CIS on adult earnings is estimated to increase lifetime earnings by $75,000 ($36,000 in present day value) and generate an additional $7,100 in federal income tax revenue per student. This is substantially higher than the estimated cost to CIS of $1,000 per student per year ($3,000 for the three years).

What Are Relationship-Based Personalized Supports?

Relationship-based personalized supports, what EdRedesign named Success Planning, is a comprehensive approach to addressing barriers to upward mobility by aligning academic, social, emotional, health, and out-of-school resources to meet the unique needs of every child. This approach often involves connecting young people to a range of supports and opportunities, including tutoring, mental and physical health services, nutrition services, family support, and out-of-school-time enrichment.

Several well-established models demonstrate the potential of this approach. Communities In Schools, the model studied in the research highlighted here, is one of the leading examples. CIS places trained coordinators in schools—caring adults who work directly with students to identify needs, connect them to supports, and ensure they remain engaged in school. Other examples that leverage this approach include City Connects and EdRedesign's Success Planning.

EdRedesign's Success Planning Strategy

At EdRedesign, providing personalized, relationship-based supports for children and youth is a critical strategy to create pathways to well-being, educational attainment, civic engagement, and upward mobility for all children and families. Our approach, which we term Success Planning, connects each child or youth to a caring adult (a Navigator), who co-creates a personalized plan for action in partnership with their families and other caring adults. The plan highlights the child's needs and strengths, and identifies supports, enrichments, and other resources to remove barriers, help them thrive, and support their goals. Through a whole-child approach, Success Planning provides a mechanism to ensure every child is known, seen, heard, and supported, has a positive connection to a caring adult, and has agency over their pathway to success.

We believe Success Planning, when integrated within a strong cross-sector cradle-to-career place-based strategy (such as Promise Neighborhoods, Full-Service Community Schools, Blue Meridian Partners Place Matters communities, and members of Partners for Rural Impact, Purpose Built Communities, StriveTogether, and William Julius Wilson Institute at Harlem Children's Zone networks, among other national and local strategies), has the potential to amplify impact and accelerate progress toward outcomes that support upward mobility for children and youth experiencing the impacts of intergenerational poverty. The invaluable data gathered from Success Planning creates opportunities for community, family, and youth engagement and a roadmap enabling key decision-makers to prioritize and address the unmet needs of children and youth, cradle to career. This leads to better alignment between community-wide efforts, more strategic resource allocation, the scaling of best practices, and policy and advocacy efforts that lead to systems change.

About Communities in Schools

Communities In Schools (CIS) is the nation's largest integrated student supports program (a form of relationship-based personalized supports), operating since 1977 and working with 3,590 schools and community sites across 29 states and Washington, DC, serving over two million students in the 2023-24 school year.

CIS's evidence-based model is a whole-school approach to deliver tiered supports that best meet the needs of the school, including those of individual students. Site coordinators work daily inside CIS partner schools to implement the CIS model of integrated student supports. Through conversations with teachers and students—alongside robust data analysis—CIS site coordinators identify the biggest challenges facing schools and individual students.

CIS site coordinators work with school administrators and educators to develop a plan that prioritizes the various academic and non-academic supports that meet students' needs. Partnering with parents, educators, community-based organizations, and school and district leaders, this network of support is intended to motivate and encourage students to stay on a path to graduation and to achieve in life.

Key Results

In *When Resources Meet Relationships: The Returns to Personalized Supports for Low-Income Students,* Goldman and Gracie examine data on public school students in Texas to evaluate how CIS improves students' short-run academic outcomes, including test scores, absences, and suspensions, as well as their long-run outcomes, including high school graduation, college attendance, and, ultimately, earnings. They find the following:

FINDING 1

Integrated student supports have a causal impact on economic mobility.

Students who receive CIS's integrated student supports in middle school earn roughly $1,140 more per year as adults. Three years of exposure to CIS increases students' earnings at age 27 by approximately $1,140, or 4.3%. These effects are larger for students exposed to more years of CIS and persist well into adulthood.

CIS is effective in helping students avoid the worst outcomes in the labor market. Rather than ending up at the bottom of the adult income distribution, which is largely comprised of unemployed individuals, CIS students are more likely to secure stable jobs between the 25th percentile and median of the income distribution (earning $15k–$30k annually).

Effects of CIS Exposure on Adult Earnings by Birth Cohort

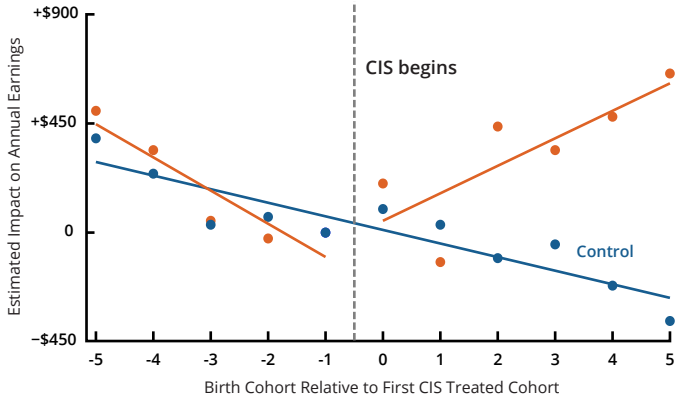

FIGURE 1: This figure shows the estimated impact of exposure to CIS in middle school on annual earnings in early adulthood. Each point represents a birth cohort's difference in earnings between students in CIS-treated schools and comparison schools, measured relative to the first cohort exposed to CIS. The lines summarize the average trend for treated and control cohorts before and after CIS implementation.

FINDING 2

CIS delivers gains per dollar spent that compare favorably to reducing class size.

Scaling the earnings impacts by the cost of the program, the researchers find that each $1,000 invested in CIS raises adult earnings by $406, compared to roughly $40 for a $1,000 investment in class-size reductions in the Tennessee STAR experiment, a well-studied randomized control trial shown to improve outcomes for students in school and beyond.

FINDING 3

CIS's integrated student supports produce substantial gains for struggling students across test scores, high school graduation, and college enrollment.

The researchers identify "high-risk" students as those most likely to receive CIS supports based on early warning signs such as low test scores, poor attendance, and disciplinary incidents.

Test score gains: Three years of access to CIS increases high-risk students' math test scores by 0.18 (.11 unscaled) standard deviations. This effect is comparable to reducing class sizes in the Tennessee STAR experiment.

Graduation gains: Three years of middle school CIS exposure increases high school graduation by 3.4 percentage points, a 5.2% increase over the baseline rate of 65% for high-risk students, closing 13% of the pre-treatment graduation gap between high- and low-risk students.

College attendance gains: CIS also raises college attendance for high-risk students by 2.9 percentage points (9.1%), driven entirely by two-year college enrollment.

Effect of CIS on Standardized Math Scores

(Relative to Control Schools)

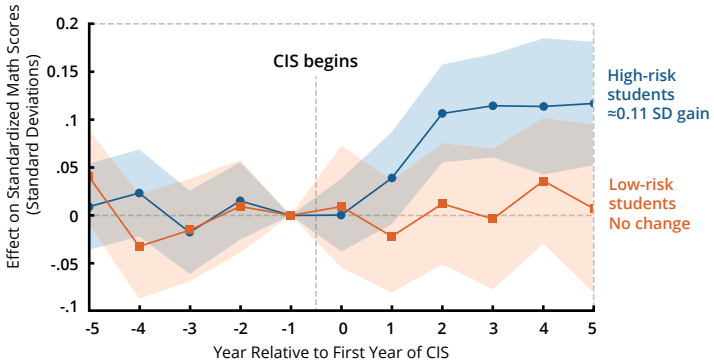

FIGURE 2: This figure shows how standardized math scores change before and after CIS enters a school for high- and low-risk students. Points show the estimated test-score effects in each year relative to CIS adoption; shaded bands show 95% confidence intervals. High-risk students experience clear academic gains after CIS begins, while low-risk students see little change.

Coordinators efficiently match services to students' underlying challenges, yielding long-term gains through different pathways.

FINDING 4

CIS coordinators efficiently personalize services to student needs, generating comparable long-run gains across different types of challenges.

Students who struggle academically in elementary school receive more tutoring and academic interventions from CIS in middle school, while students whose challenges are behavioral or attendance-related receive supports targeted at their engagement and conduct.

This personalization is effective in the short run. Students with primarily academic needs (defined as those with below-median elementary school test scores) saw test score gains nearly twice as large as students with primarily non-academic needs (0.10 vs. 0.06 standard deviations).

Despite these differences in services received and short-run impacts, long-run effects are nearly identical. CIS increases high school graduation rates by 2.8 percentage points for students with primarily academic needs and 2.9 percentage points for students with primarily non-academic needs. This suggests that coordinators efficiently match services to students' underlying challenges, yielding long-term gains through different pathways.

Effects of CIS on Graduation for High-Risk Students

(True vs. Predicted)

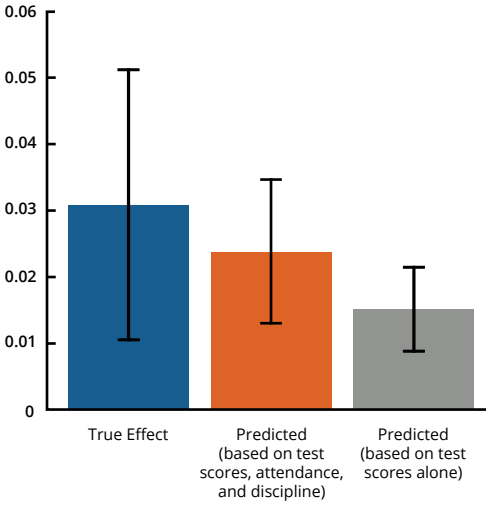

FIGURE 3: This figure compares the true effect of CIS on high school graduation for high-risk students to the effect predicted from middle-school outcomes. The first predicted estimate uses test scores, attendance, and disciplinary records; the second uses test scores alone. Predicted effects capture most of the true long-run impact, indicating that short-run improvements in academic and behavioral outcomes provide a reliable early signal of later graduation gains.

FINDING 5

Test score gains predict half of CIS's graduation impact, while attendance and behavior improvements account for the rest.

The impact of CIS results from a combination of academic and non-academic benefits. The researchers find that improvements in attendance and behavior are just as important as test scores for explaining the long-run effects on high school graduation.

Using only test score gains, one would predict that CIS increases graduation rates by 1.3 percentage points. When accounting for better attendance and fewer disciplinary incidents, the predicted effect jumps to 2.4 percentage points—much closer to the actual impact of 3.1 percentage points.

This finding underscores that CIS works through multiple channels. By addressing both academic struggles and the behavioral challenges that often accompany them, the program creates comprehensive and lasting change in school and beyond.

The fact that long-run program impacts can be reliably forecast using short-run administrative data on both test scores and outcomes like attendance and discipline offers promise for evaluating interventions in real time. In this case, the researchers could have forecast the substantial majority of the impact on high school graduation using comprehensive, contemporaneous data without needing to wait several years for those students to complete high school.

Personalized Academic Supports and Long-Run Outcomes

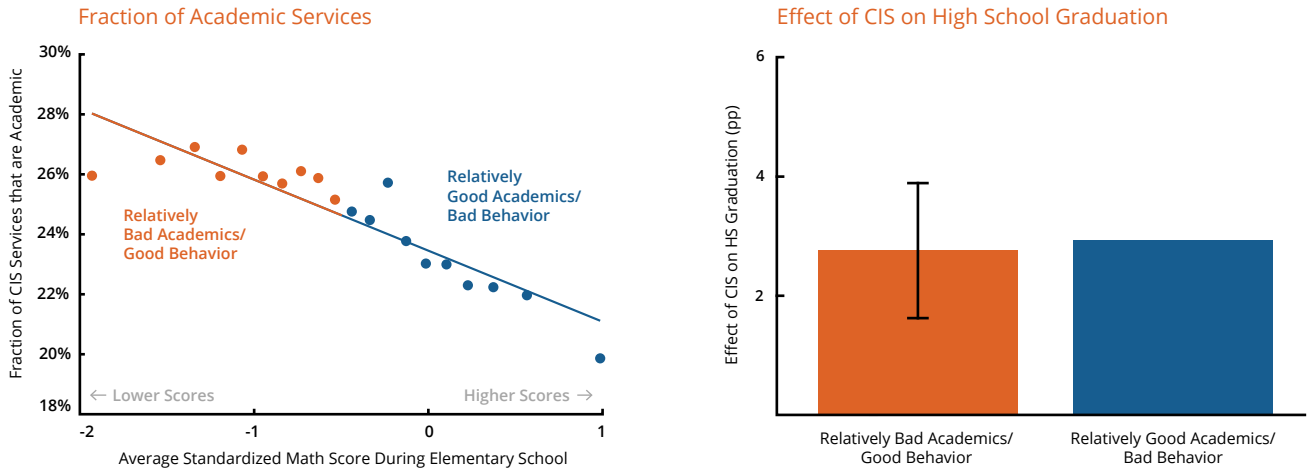

FIGURE 4: The left panel shows the share of CIS services that are academic for case-managed students, plotted against their average math score in elementary school. Students with lower prior scores receive a higher fraction of academic supports. The right panel shows that both lower- and higher-performing students experience similar improvements in high school graduation. Error bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

Policy Implications

For the first time, we have long-term evidence that leverages the power of big data to demonstrate the impact of relationship-based personalized supports to enhance attendance, academic performance, and economic outcomes for children and families.

The results contribute to a growing body of evidence showing that social ties and relationships not only promote economic mobility directly but also amplify the impact of investments in college access programs, emergency rent assistance, housing vouchers, and job training when those investments are paired with relationship-based supports. The childhood focus of this research underscores that relationships are not only powerful for adults but can also alter life trajectories from an early age.

Investing in Personalized Support Models

Given these significant findings from the research, federal, state, and local governments should prioritize investments in personalized supports such as Communities In Schools, Success Planning, City Connects, and other place-based approaches leveraging personalized supports, as there's evidence they will likely have a strong return on investment.

CIS delivers significant benefits to students relative to the costs that CIS incurs. The costs of CIS are primarily the salary of the site coordinator and administrative overhead costs, which are estimated at approximately $1,000 per student per year. Notably, three years of CIS increases lifetime federal income tax contributions by approximately $7,100 per student, effectively offsetting the program's costs and highlighting its strong return on investment.

The research shows that CIS middle schools are the most effective for the students who struggled the most in elementary school. While CIS now serves over 2 million students nationwide, benefits are concentrated among the most disadvantaged students, while effects are minimal for their more advantaged peers. This pattern suggests future expansions should prioritize schools with the largest concentrations of high-risk students.

Incentivizing Personalized Supports Strategies in Community Initiatives

Community leaders and organizations that are seeking to implement or strengthen cross-sector initiatives to improve academic and life outcomes for their children and families should embed relationship-based personalized supports within their broader strategies to enhance their efforts. Integrating these approaches has the potential to amplify impact and accelerate progress toward outcomes that have particular power to support upward mobility for low-income children. Federal, state, and local governments should incentivize communities to provide these supports in place-based strategies, community schools, and similar approaches.

Addressing the Attendance Crisis

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, over 25% of students nationwide were chronically absent, missing more than 10% of school days during the 2022-23 school year, amplifying the urgency to act. Personalized supports strategies that aim to improve attendance by addressing students' broader challenges offer a promising solution to mitigate these long-term impacts and support recovery efforts. Targeted expansions could meaningfully raise high school graduation rates among at-risk students.

Leveraging Big Data to Study the Effectiveness of Interventions on Economic Mobility through Research-Practice Partnerships

This study was made possible through a research-practice partnership that brought together the right researchers, willing partners, and robust data infrastructure. EdRedesign introduced economics researchers Benjamin Goldman and Jamie Gracie to CIS during their Linda G. Hammett Ory Fellowship. Through collaboration with the Texas Education Research Center, whose longitudinal data system tracks students from elementary school through college and into the labor market, and access to federal tax records from the IRS and Census Bureau, the researchers were able to follow children into adulthood and measure earnings outcomes.

This methodological approach is distinct from standard return-on-investment studies and represents the cutting edge of economic mobility research. It allows researchers to observe real-world impacts at scale, providing unusually robust evidence on what works.

Forecasting long-run program impacts reliably using short-run administrative data on both test scores and non-cognitive outcomes like attendance and discipline also offers promise for evaluating interventions in real time by looking beyond test scores to capture the full dimensions of student development that programs affect.

At EdRedesign, our goal is to ensure that these types of cutting-edge collaborations happen more systematically. There is ample opportunity for deeper engagement between the nation's leading economic mobility researchers and place-based practitioners to work together to study promising interventions, understand what works, and build a long-term evidence base along the cradle-to-career continuum.

Conclusion

Providing relationship-based personalized supports in high-poverty schools can improve outcomes for struggling students, both in the classroom and over the long run. CIS raises test scores, boosts high school graduation, and improves early-career earnings. These results offer a compelling validation for EdRedesign's theory of change that pairing relationship-based personalized, comprehensive supports and opportunities with cross-sector cradle-to-career collaborative action can change the school and life trajectories of children growing up in poverty. EdRedesign will continue to build the evidence base for the outcomes of personalized supports and the mechanisms that drive those outcomes, providing usable knowledge on effective strategies to get all kids on a path to economic and social mobility.

About the Researchers

Jamie Gracie is a Postdoctoral Fellow with EdRedesign at Harvard Graduate School of Education and an Affiliate of Opportunity Insights. Her research is in labor and public economics, with a focus on economic mobility. She received her Ph.D. and M.A. in Economics from Harvard University and her B.A. in Economics and Spanish from Amherst College.

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Several EdRedesign team members contributed to this policy and research brief, including: Julie Allen, Senior Director of Strategic Communications, Development, and Operations; Abby Hiller; Research and Communications Consultant; Tauheedah Jackson, Deputy Director and Director of the Institute for Success Planning; Lynne Sacks, Research Director; and Rob Watson, Executive Director of EdRedesign, Lecturer on Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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Photos provided courtesy of Communities In Schools.

About EdRedesign

Founded in 2014 by Paul Reville, Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, EdRedesign provides catalytic support to the cradle-to-career place-based partnership field to drive systems-level change and open personalized pathways to well-being, educational attainment, civic engagement, and upward mobility. To support this growing field to effect transformational change that serves the needs and talents of individual children and youth, our work focuses on talent development, actionable research, our Institute for Success Planning, and our By All Means initiatives. Our mission is to ensure the social, emotional, physical, and academic development and well-being of all children and youth, especially those affected by racism, poverty, and disinvestment.