

Compendium of Research and Evaluation Resources

Evaluating the National Impact of Multi-Site, Multi-Strategy Community-School Partnership Initiatives on Attendance, Behavior, Achievement, Promotion Rate, Graduation Rate and Dropout Rate

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Communities In Schools (CIS) is a nationwide, community-based organization. CIS brings resources and services into the public schools for children who need extra help to succeed. Each of the nearly 200 local CIS programs in 31 states partners with schools, families, community leaders, businesses, governments, social service providers and volunteer groups to create a support system for students. They are supported in this effort by 13 state CIS offices and a national organization headquartered in Alexandria, VA. While all CIS programs across the country operate with the same model—assessing the needs of children in schools, identifying community assets, and connecting appropriate resources to address student needs—each program is unique.

This paper proposes a model for evaluating the impact of multi-site, community-school partnership initiatives, based on the experience of *Communities In Schools* (CIS). CIS local programs, state offices, and the national office have been working together to identify indications of CIS network success. Although each program has a unique approach to providing service within its community, all CIS programs operate with the same mission:

To champion the connection of needed community resources with schools to help young people successfully learn, stay in school, and prepare for life.

The national organization for Communities In Schools (CIS National) exists to provide support to the state offices and local programs in the CIS network. All training, technical assistance, research and evaluation, communications and other services provided by CIS National are designed for this purpose. One of these services is an annual survey and report of the operations and outcomes of the network as a whole. This national evaluation of the CIS network serves CIS National's goals on two levels: It provides internal guidance on how best to support the network, and it captures vital information of use to local programs, funders, and other stakeholders. The 2001-2002 Communities In Schools Network Report, "Personal, Accountable, and Coordinated," can be viewed on the CIS National website at www.cisnet.org.

The annual Network Report resulting from this survey assesses the network relative to two parts of the mission. The first part of the Communities In Schools mission—championing the connection of needed community resources with schools—reflects the CIS process, which can be demonstrated by the breadth and depth of resources (both financial and human) and the numbers of students and their families

who benefit from these resources. As evidence that Communities In Schools is indeed connecting resources with schools, the report documents growth in numbers of programs, school sites, partners, students and families served, and staff and volunteers. It also tracks funding sources, operating budgets, and types of services provided.

The second part of the mission—helping young people successfully learn, stay in school, and prepare for life—addresses actual outcomes for youth. Finding a credible way to report student outcomes has been more of a challenge. This requires the ability to aggregate student outcomes across 200 local programs, each with a unique approach to service provision and data collection. Local CIS programs create individual evaluation designs both to meet stakeholder requirements and to assess and improve their outcomes for youth. Their outcome evaluations look at the impact of specific interventions and services provided to CIS students and are, by necessity, tied to specific, predetermined outcomes. For example, a CIS program that provides sustained mentoring and tutoring to a specific group of high school students might measure academic improvement by changes in overall GPA. Another program might bring in a literacy initiative for grades 1-3 and would measure academic improvement by increases in the reading levels of these students. Each is assessing academic achievement based on unique initiatives. While these individual assessments are critical for local programs, they do not lend themselves to aggregating outcome information at the national level.

Several years ago, CIS National convened a group of network representatives to identify a baseline set of youth outcomes that all CIS programs should seek to achieve, regardless of the way they are individually measured. This committee identified improved attendance, fewer incidents of discipline, improved academic achievement, increased promotion and graduation rates, and a reduced dropout rate as national priorities. Every community served by CIS wants these outcomes for its young people, regardless of what other, additional goals (school safety, drug education, or service-learning, for instance) may be targeted. Striving to meet these overarching outcomes binds the CIS network to a common mission.

The challenge remained, however, of finding a common measure for aggregating data from multiple sites with diverse needs and intervention strategies. This was resolved by understanding the distinct reporting requirements of CIS National and the CIS local programs. While local programs need to report very specific outcomes for each intervention, the national evaluation seeks to identify the extent to which the CIS model results in *improved* outcomes for youth. The central question for the national evaluation then becomes “What percent of children who received services for one or more of the six outcomes *improved* their performance for that outcome?” This process focuses on improvement rather than specific results. Because each program has its own outcome measures, CIS programs were asked for data on the numbers of CIS students showing improvement in each outcome area, rather than for specific results. This allows information to be aggregated across the Network, without having to adjust for different scoring systems.

CIS programs limited their outcome reporting to those students for whom specific records were kept and who were tracked for progress towards specific goals. The 2001-2002 Network Report presented the following results:

- 97% of the 76,000 students receiving dropout prevention services were still in school at the end of the school year.
- 75% of the 46,000 students identified as having attendance problems improved their attendance.
- 81% of the 60,000 students tracked for discipline problems such as suspension and expulsion had fewer incidents of discipline.
- 78% of the 79,000 students who received services for academic achievement improved their performance.
- 95% of the 113,000 students identified for promotion risk were promoted to the next grade.
- 83% of the 7,000 CIS students at risk of failing to graduate, did graduate from high school.

Once the method for aggregating outcome information was established, CIS devoted a great deal of effort to ensuring the credibility of the self-reported data. The survey questions were refined over a three-year period. Training and technical assistance is provided to local programs throughout the year as they complete the survey and the information provided is confirmed once submitted. Great effort is put into maximizing the response rate so that the data is an accurate portrayal of the direction, successes and scope of the CIS network. For the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 reports, the data was based on 96% and 97% response rates, respectively. The final step in the process of ensuring the integrity of the data is to validate the collection instrument. A third-party evaluator has been contracted to do this validation study and will complete its assessment in early 2004.

The Communities In Schools method for evaluating the national impact of multi-site, multi-strategy, community-school partnership initiatives on attendance, behavior, achievement, promotion rate, graduation rate and dropout rate has already resulted in positive systems change. The number of local programs that track and report results for the six outcomes has increased, allowing these programs to make evidence-based program improvements and to verify their results to funders and other stakeholders. More local programs are recognizing the importance of evaluating their efforts and are seeking training, technical assistance, and consulting services to increase their level of sophistication. Originally somewhat resistant to providing outcome information, the programs in the CIS network are now asking CIS National to expand the national reporting to include school-level outcomes. The 2002-2003 survey, currently being completed, includes a new section to capture the impact of CIS interventions at the school level. Results will be reported in the 2002-2003 Network Report, to be published in spring 2004.

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