EDUCATION

The Program That's Turning Schools Around

The key to closing the achievement gap may lie outside the classroom.

By Annie Lowrey

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On a chilly day before Christmas, Teresa Rivas helped a tween boy pick out a new winter coat. "Get the bigger one, the one with the waterproof layer, *mijo*," she said, before helping him pull it onto his string-bean frame. Rivas provides guidance counseling at Owen Goodnight Middle School in San Marcos, Texas. She talks with students about their goals and helps if they're struggling in class. She's also a trained navigator placed there by a nonprofit called Communities in Schools.

The idea behind CIS and other "community school" programs is that students can't succeed academically if they're struggling at home. "Between kindergarten and 12th grade, kids spend only 20 percent of their time" in a classroom, Rob Watson, the executive director of the EdRedesign Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, told me. If America wants kids to thrive, he said, it has to consider the 80 percent. Educators and school administrators in San Marcos, a low-income community south of Austin, agreed. "Tests and academics are very important," Joe Mitchell, the principal of Goodnight Middle School, told me. "But they are secondary sometimes, given what these kids' lives are like away from here."

Along with mediating conflicts and doing test prep, Rivas helps kids' families sign up for public benefits. She arranges for the nonprofit to cover rent payments. She sets up medical appointments, and keeps refrigerators and gas tanks full.

A new study demonstrates that such efforts have long-term effects. Benjamin Goldman, an assistant professor of economics at Cornell, and Jamie Gracie, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard, evaluated data on more than 16 million Texas students over two decades, examining data from the Census Bureau and IRS, as well as state records on academic outcomes. They found that the introduction of CIS led to higher test scores, lower truancy rates, and fewer suspensions in Texas schools. The program bumped up high-school graduation rates by 5.2 percent and matriculation rates at two-year colleges by 9.1 percent. At age 27, students who had attended a CIS school earned $1,140 more a year than students who had not.

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The program's impact is "quite big," Gracie told me: Spending $1,000 on CIS increased student earnings at age 27 by $400, whereas spending $1,000 on smaller class sizes increased student earnings by $40. The researchers estimated that every $3,000 in CIS investment would increase income-tax revenue by $7,000.

Although contemporary education policy has focused intently on standardized tests, student and teacher tracking, and other accountability measures, the CIS study suggests that the United States could bolster achievement by providing more social support too. "You could have the world's greatest teacher," Goldman told me. "It's only going to matter so much if you're not actually showing up to school." Watson said he hoped the study would lead policy makers to finance community-school programs in every low-income neighborhood. "If you care about morals and social justice, there's something here for you," he said. "If you care about good fiscal and economic policy, there's something here for you."

But the country is veering in the other direction. The White House has slashed hundreds of millions of dollars from a free-school-meal initiative, ended a $1 billion grant covering mental-health counseling, and revoked $170 million from the federal

community-schools program, which helps cover the salaries of hundreds of workers like Rivas. Other whole-child initiatives might lose financing if they are found to fall under the Trump administration's DEI rubric. At the same time, the White House is reducing financial support for low-income families, cutting more than $1 trillion from SNAP and Medicaid.

The United States wants schools to act as a "great equalizer," yet socioeconomic differences among students remain the central drivers of student outcomes. Community schools can't prevent homelessness, pay for health insurance, or stop parents from getting deported; they cannot construct a strong safety net. Still, they can help to close the gap.

A DECADE AGO, the San Marcos school district's dropout rate was higher than the state average, and its standardized-test scores lower. In 2016, Michael Cardona was named superintendent and tasked with a turnaround mission.

"We have great—amazing—kids," Cardona told me. But more than 100 students were homeless in the 8,000-student district. "That's a lot for a town with one high school," he said. Seven students had died by suicide in recent years. Students had been involved in 282 recorded incidents of domestic violence over an 18-month period. "Typically, it was mom trying to discipline the kid or grandma trying to discipline the kid, taking away the cellphone, then the kid beats up the family member and gets put in jail," Cardona said.

A visit to a fifth-grade gifted-and-talented classroom put the crisis into even sharper relief for him. Cardona asked the students a softball question: What could he do for them as superintendent? One asked if he could help keep their father out of prison. Another wondered if he could stop their mother from partying every weekend. Afterward, he sat in his truck and cried. "These are the students identified as the best of the best," he said. "We've got a mental-health issue in this district unlike anything we've ever seen."

Cardona decided to focus not only on test scores and remediation measures but also on social support. The district expanded its health-care and counseling initiatives, putting a focus on early intervention. And it reached out to CIS, which offered to place a navigator, such as Rivas, in every school.

CIS is a half century old and works with 2 million children in 26 states. (It's not a pilot, in other words; it's three times the size of Head Start.) The nonprofit has a few unusual qualities. For one, it doesn't apply rigid criteria or means tests in determining who gets help, and doesn't provide a set menu of benefits to students and families. The model is adaptable. In some districts, navigators focus on violence prevention or absenteeism. In San Marcos, they focus on behavioral health. Inside schools, CIS staff members created lamp-lit, womblike rooms, stocked with fidget toys and snacks,

where kids can calm down and talk about their feelings. Some middle-school girls told me that Rivas helped them with "drama and stuff"—meaning "girls fighting over boys." One boy who was having trouble sleeping and had a 69 average in math told me that Rivas was helping get his eyes shut and his grades up. "You only need one more point!" she said, beaming.

Idrees Kahloon: America is sliding toward illiteracy

CIS workers help families navigate existing public programs. "The traditional economist view would have been, *Just give people cash. They'll figure out what to do with it*," Goldman told me. But decades of studies have found that families in crisis don't know that help is out there, possess limited capacity to research complex social-safety-net initiatives, and are averse to signing up for benefits, given the stigma. Community schools take paperwork away from stressed-out families and put it on trained employees.

CIS workers also come with a pool of funds to distribute. A freshman named Valencia Ayub told me about a time when her mother had lost a job at Dollar Tree, and her father had lost his job as an electrician. She considered going "straight to work" to help her younger sisters, rather than applying to college. CIS sent two checks, one for $500 and one for $800, to cover the family's rent. School systems don't have to make these payments themselves; in general, CIS is inexpensive for school districts to offer because it uses a mix of public, private, and philanthropic funding.

These kinds of wraparound supports keep kids in class, reduce the number of behavioral incidents, and make sure students are capable of learning when they sit down at their desks; as Goldman and Gracie's study showed, they also have long-term effects. For those reasons, "there's been a significant expansion in terms of systematic initiatives and interventions," Anna Maier of the Learning Policy Institute told me; school districts, states, and individual institutions have built out their social-work capacity. Still, the country underinvests in kids and schools, creating achievement gaps that classroom teachers struggle to close and preventing children from reaching their full potential. The Trump administration's withdrawing community-school financing as it slashes the safety net stands to make the problem worse.

In San Marcos, at least, the school district is seeing improvements. Kids feel safer, and the number of violent incidents has fallen. "At the end of the day," Cardona told me, "that's what I look at."

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