

memorandum

Date: 2.25.09 | **From:** REL West at WestEd
Re: Social Support Strategies

Request >>

What are the most important considerations when implementing social support strategies to increase access to academically rigorous coursework?

Requestor: Woodrow Wilson Foundation

Response

Nationwide, educators are struggling to understand why so many students are still performing below grade-level, failing to graduate high school college-ready—or graduate high school at all—despite implementation of numerous academic supports and strategies. A growing body of research indicates that in addition to academic supports, students need social supports to “address the health, developmental, and other noncognitive barriers to learning.”¹

Identifying social supports that best meet the needs of the school

Communities In Schools, Inc. - <http://www.cisnet.org/> (CIS) is the nation’s largest dropout prevention organization. For over 30 years, CIS has coordinated community-based services and, when not available locally, provided direct services to over 1.2 million students at 3,250 schools in 27 states. The CIS model highlights the importance of identifying, delivering, and integrating a *combination* of social and academic support services for students most at risk.

A longitudinal evaluation² of over 1,700 CIS schools suggests that the following combined elements offer the most effective strategy for improving student academic outcomes:³

- Having an on-site coordinator who oversees the integration and delivery of social support programs
- Conducting school and student-level needs assessments to identify the most appropriate prevention and intervention services
- Identifying community partners
- Delivering a range of services to support the whole school and targeting strategies for individual students most at risk
- Collecting data and evaluating efforts over time
- Re-visiting plans on an annual basis and modifying these as needed

Further research identified the social supports provided with greatest frequency in CIS schools (between 75 and 90 percent of school sites):⁴

1. Mentoring
 2. Tutoring/academic support/homework assistance
 3. Dropout prevention
 4. Personal, social, and life skills development
 5. Speakers/workshops/events/clubs
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Sources and methods used for this memo:

We conducted electronic searches on Google, Google Scholar, ERIC, and ProQuest using combinations of key terms including “social supports,” “learning supports,” and “academic supports.” We spoke with Susan Siegel, (siegels@cisnet.org) Vice President of Research, Evaluation and Training at CIS to gain first-hand information about the program. Additional consultants for this memo include BethAnn Berliner, Senior Research Associate at WestEd; Dr. Gregory Austin, Director of the Health & Human Development Program at WestEd; and Bonnie Bernard, Senior Program Associate at WestEd.

Endnotes

- 1 “Addressing the need to improve academic achievement among California students through learning supports.” A Brief from the California Educational Supports Project WestEd, University of California, San Francisco, Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies. Not yet published.
- 2 Preliminary results from an independent, third-party evaluation by ICF International including an in-depth analysis of 1,766 CIS schools and comparative analysis of outcomes for approximately 1,200 CIS (implementing the model with low fidelity) and non-CIS comparative schools.
- 3 CIS, Inc. (2008). Communities in Schools and the Model of Integrated Student Services: A Proven Solution to America’s Drop-out Epidemic. <http://www.cisnet.org/about/NationalEvaluation/Normal.asp?Segment=2.1>. Last accessed 2/17/2009.
- 4 [2006-2007 Results from the CIS Network](http://www.cisnet.org/media/pubs.asp) <http://www.cisnet.org/media/pubs.asp>

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