



# Integrated Student Supports:

## A Summary of the Evidence Base for Policymakers



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Education remains the surest route to success in the United States. While education levels for many Americans have risen substantially in recent decades, there are still troubling disparities, especially for many minority and low-income students. Indeed, graduation rates among black and Hispanic youth continue to lag behind rates for white and Asian youth.

Closing educational achievement gaps is central to improving social mobility and increasing opportunity. As such, the education field continues to test a variety of approaches to promoting academic success, especially for disadvantaged students. Integrated student supports (ISS) is one promising approach taking hold in communities across the country, often in tandem with education reforms that focus on teacher quality and curricular improvements.

But what are integrated student supports, and are they effective at improving educational outcomes? This paper summarizes the results of a comprehensive examination by Child Trends<sup>1</sup> of the research and evidence base for ISS, and its potential to help a range of disadvantaged, marginalized, or struggling students.

### WHAT ARE INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS?

Integrated student supports (ISS) are a school-based approach to promoting students' academic success by developing or securing and coordinating supports that target academic and non-academic barriers to achievement. These resources range from traditional tutoring and mentoring to provision of a broader set of supports, such as linking students to physical and mental health care and connecting their families to parent education, family counseling, food banks, or employment assistance. While ISS programs take many forms, integration is key to the model—both integration of supports to meet individual students' needs and integration of the ISS program into the life of a school.



1. Child Trends is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research center focused exclusively on improving the lives of children and youth by conducting rigorous research and sharing the resulting knowledge with key stakeholders. For more than 30 years, Child Trends has been a trusted resource for policy makers, providers, foundations, and the media.

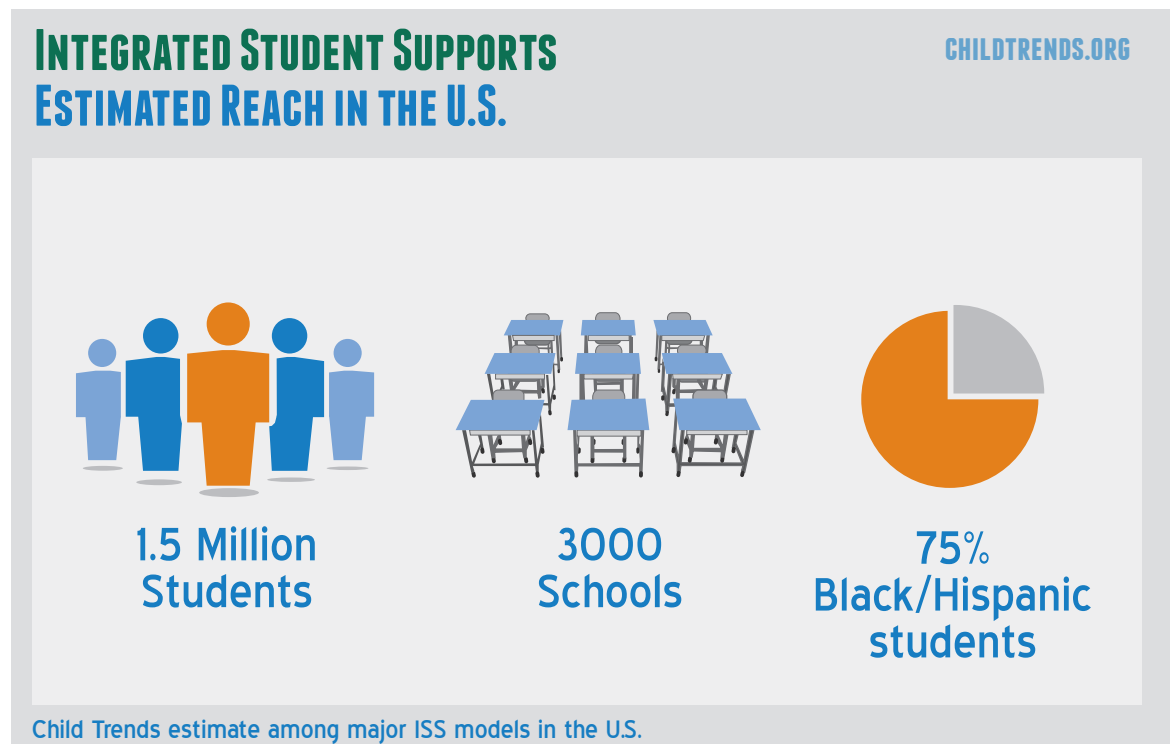
## THE REACH OF INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS PROVIDERS

Today, ISS programs serve more than 1.5 million students in nearly 3,000 elementary and high schools across the country. Nearly all of these programs target at-risk children. Child Trends estimates that Hispanic and black students account for more than 75 percent of the students enrolled in ISS programs. The major providers of ISS include (in alphabetical order): Beacon Initiative, Children’s Aid Society Community Schools, City Connects, Comer School Development Program, Communities In Schools, Elev8, Say Yes to Education, School of the 21st Century, Turnaround for Children, and University-Assisted Community Schools. Communities In Schools, operating in almost 2,200 schools, is the largest ISS provider.

While the model varies across providers, several characteristics are common to most ISS models:

- ISS staff conduct needs assessments, develop or locate needed supports in the community, and work with providers to coordinate those supports so that students receive a set of mutually reinforcing supports tailored to their individual needs.
- Supports address both academic and non-academic barriers to student success; these can include supports to a student’s family;
- ISS programs seek close partnerships with school leadership and staff to enhance program effectiveness, so ISS staff are usually based in schools, or at least within the school district;
- ISS staff are data-driven and track student needs and outcomes over time for the students they serve.

In sum, while individual programs vary somewhat in the ways they provide integrated student supports, all ISS providers employ common components (needs assessment, integration within schools, community partnerships, coordinated supports, and data tracking); all provide wrap-around supports to improve students’ academic achievement and educational attainment; and all embrace the premise that academic outcomes are a result of both academic and non-academic factors.



## DOES ISS WORK? ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE FOR INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS

Are integrated student supports effective at improving educational outcomes, especially for at-risk students? Is ISS a “proven” approach with a solid evidence base behind it? Or is it more accurately a “promising” but as yet unproven approach?

To answer these questions, Child Trends undertook a comprehensive and rigorous review of the theoretical, empirical, practice, and evaluation findings that underlie integrated student supports as an approach. We drew on research in child and youth development, examined the empirical research on the factors that affect school success, conducted additional quantitative analyses, examined existing program evaluations, and interviewed numerous leading practitioners in the ISS field. The key findings are summarized below, followed by a longer discussion of each finding and the implications for research and policy.

### KEY FINDINGS

**1. There is emerging evidence, especially from quasi-experimental studies, that ISS can contribute to student academic progress as measured by decreases in grade retention and dropout, and increases in attendance, math achievement, reading and ELA achievement, and overall GPA.** This finding is based on 11 rigorous evaluations completed to date. The evidence is stronger from quasi-experimental studies, however, than it is from more rigorous random assignment evaluations. Because the number of evaluations is limited (and only four were randomized-controlled trials), and because they assessed only three program models, we would characterize this as an emerging body of evidence and advocate for more evaluations to further build the evidence base.

**2. ISS, as a student-centered approach, is firmly grounded in the research on child and youth development.** Consistent with recommendations that stem from research and theory in child and youth development, ISS models embrace a “whole child” perspective that recognizes the importance of a child’s health and safety, socio-emotional development, behavior, and relationships to his or her educational success. ISS also recognizes that educational success is affected by multiple contexts, in and out of school. These represent important differences from some education initiatives that focus primarily on educational inputs. Research clearly indicates that the likelihood of academic success, especially for disadvantaged students, is enhanced by a more comprehensive set of supports.

**3. Integrated student supports are also aligned with empirical research on the varied factors that promote educational success.** A large body of empirical research, as well as new analyses by Child Trends, indicate that school success (or failure) is the product of multiple and varied factors at the individual, family, and school levels. This suggests that providing an array of academic and non-academic supports in a coordinated fashion, as ISS does, is a more effective strategy than focusing on one, or a small set of, supports.

**4. Preliminary studies find a positive return on investment in ISS.** To date, there have been three studies of the long-term payback for investments in ISS. While methodologies, assumptions, and the magnitude of the return varied across the studies, all of the studies found positive ROIs, ranging from more than \$4 saved for every \$1 invested to almost \$15 saved for every \$1 invested. These analyses also warrant further consideration and assessment, including the assumption that supports available in the community are not included as a cost; but it does appear that this approach yields a positive return on investment.

**5. Higher quality is related to the effectiveness of ISS programs.** This finding is consistent with others across the child-and youth-serving field, including those from studies of early childhood and after-school programs. High-quality implementation is key to achieving positive outcomes. However, evidence from ISS implementation evaluations about which specific practices and/or services contribute to better outcomes is mixed and inconclusive, warranting further study.

**Taken as a whole, Child Trends concludes that there is an emerging evidence base to support the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of integrated student supports in improving educational outcomes.** To test this evidence base further, we recommend additional evaluations, especially randomized-controlled trials (RCTs). Fortunately, at least six additional evaluations are underway now, including two RCTs.

To build the field further, Child Trends also recommends additional studies to identify the key program components that drive positive outcomes, as well as the conditions under which ISS is most likely to contribute to better student outcomes.

For the remainder of this white paper, we discuss each finding in more detail and explore relevant policy implications.



**Finding 1: There is emerging evidence, especially from quasi-experimental studies, that ISS can contribute to student academic progress—as measured by decreases in grade retention and dropout, and increases in attendance, math achievement, reading and ELA achievement, and overall GPA.**

However, Child Trends' evidence review is based on a limited number of evaluations (11 total),

that assessed only three ISS models, posing a significant limitation. Four of the evaluations were randomized-controlled trials (RCTs)—the “gold standard” of evaluation—and seven were quasi-experimental studies (QEDs).<sup>2</sup>

Overall, effects on academic outcomes are promising, with QED studies yielding more promising findings than RCT studies. Specifically, QED findings indicated significant, positive effects on student progress (for 3 out of 4 evaluations), school attendance (3 out of 3 evaluations), math achievement (4 out of 6 evaluations), and overall grade point average, or GPA (2 out of 2 evaluations), and reading achievement (4 out of 6 evaluations).

In contrast, RCT findings were less consistent. For math achievement, 1 out of 4 evaluations had at least one significant impact. Impacts on other outcomes were also found to be sparse, with significant impacts found for zero out of 2 evaluations of student progress, 1 out of 4 evaluations of school attendance, zero of 3 evaluations of reading achievement, and zero out of 4 evaluations of overall grade point average.

Because the number of evaluations to date is relatively small, we would say that they provide initial or emerging evidence of the effectiveness of ISS for improving academic outcomes. This evidence suggests that the ISS approach may promote positive academic outcomes, including decreases in grade retention, dropout, and absenteeism and increases in attendance rates, math achievement, and English/reading achievement.

Fortunately, several additional outcome evaluations are in process. Four ISS models<sup>3</sup> are currently being evaluated in quasi-experimental studies. Two random-assignment evaluations and one quasi-experimental evaluation, all involving Communities in Schools, are also under way. One RCT is part of an i3 evaluation; the other is part of a Social Innovation Fund evaluation.



**Finding 2: ISS, as a student-centered approach, is firmly grounded in the research on child and youth development.**

Hundreds of research studies have identified a number of tenets about the development of children and youth that are widely accepted across disciplines. These include:

- The whole child perspective, recognizing that children's development includes multiple domains, including health, educational achievement and cognitive attainment, social and emotional outcomes, and behavior. Problems in one outcome domain often spill over into other domains, while success in one domain can enhance development in another.
- A child-centered focus. Each individual child has unique developmental needs, interests and accomplishments. Regimented approaches that treat all children uniformly cannot meet these individual needs; but a tiered approach that provides additional supports to students who have greater needs can be helpful, as can having additional staff in a school building who are attentive to the needs and concerns of specific students.

<sup>2</sup> The RCT evaluations summarized for this review include one 1999 evaluation of the full Comer SDP model, conducted in Prince George's County, Md., and three 2005 evaluations of the partial CIS model, or case-managed services component of the CIS model, resulting from a multi-site evaluation conducted in Austin, Texas, Wichita, Kan., and Jacksonville, Fl. The QED evaluations summarized findings from a 2011 national, multi-site evaluation of the CIS model; a 2000 evaluation of the full Comer SDP model in Chicago; and 5 evaluations of the full City Connects model (4 of which employ propensity score analyses).

<sup>3</sup> Beacons, Elev8, Say Yes to Education, and University Assisted Community Schools.

- A life-course perspective. Experiences that occur at an earlier life-cycle stage are regularly found to affect development and well-being in subsequent life-cycle stages. This implies the value of a strong, stable, ongoing program that supports children across the stages of development.
- The ecological model. A child's development is affected by a range of influences, beginning with the child's own biology and temperament but including family, peers, school, neighborhood, community, and the larger society. These influences interact; for example, the implications of experiencing toxic stress in the family can vary depending upon the characteristics of the school.
- The importance of families. Children's family experiences are a strong and continuing influence at every developmental stage. Not surprisingly, then, family factors are critical to children's happiness and attainment.
- Positive youth development. Programs that invest in children and youth to support them and work with them to develop positively have shown much greater success than programs focused on didactic education and scare tactics.
- Relationships matter. The quality and continuity of positive relationships, and the detrimental effect of negative and turbulent relationships, have been repeatedly documented.

The alignment of ISS with these foundational tenets of child and youth development is impressive. Integrated student supports place the child—the whole child—at the center of a model that incorporates the school, the family, and the larger community. Students are served over time in a context that recognizes the importance of relationships.



**Finding 3: Integrated student supports are also aligned with research on the varied factors that promote educational success.** Empirical research identifies many factors at the individual, family, school, community, and policy levels that influence student success. Educators have used this research to target interventions to specific factors. For example, a program might focus on improving teacher effectiveness or parent engagement, or preventing teen parenthood.

Very few studies have looked simultaneously across a broad array of factors. Instead, the vast majority focus on single influences rather than scanning across contexts. To address this gap, Child Trends conducted new analyses

that cut across contexts and domains of development to predict educational success. By including many variables representing various contexts into a single model, we attempted to model educational success in a realistic developmental setting.

This broader analysis identified many predictors of high school completion and post-secondary enrollment that span developmental contexts. But most of these predictors have small effect sizes once all other factors are taken into account. Thus, while each factor contributes to educational outcomes, research finds that each factor alone is a small piece of the puzzle and is unlikely on its own to drive significant improvement.

However, of those factors that had larger effect sizes, many were non-academic (for example, not having a child in 10th grade was a strong predictor of high school graduation).

Whether we examine factors individually or simultaneously, the conclusion remains that multiple factors across multiple domains affect educational attainment. These findings suggest that interventions like ISS that address a wide array of academic and non-academic needs across a variety of contexts (individual, family, school) are more likely to be successful than are interventions that focus on single factors in isolation.



**Finding 4: Preliminary studies find a positive return on investment in ISS.** Estimating the cost effectiveness of social interventions is a recent, rapidly-evolving field. Three cost-effectiveness studies of integrated student supports' models have been identified—Communities in Schools, the Children's Aid Society, and Elev8. While these studies differ in a number of ways, all three find integrated student supports to have a very positive return on investment (ROI). The payback takes some time to accrue; but the benefits relative to the costs are large enough that, even if they are overestimated in some ways, it seems clear that a dollar invested in an integrated school model has a significant return.

- “The Economic Impact of Communities in Schools,” completed in 2012 by Economic Modeling Specialists Inc., estimated a return of \$11.60 for every \$1 invested in a CIS program, over 53 years. The investment is estimated to reach a break-even point after nine years.
- “Measuring Social Return on Investment for Community Schools—A Practical Guide,” completed in 2013 by The Finance Project, provides a case study of the Children's Aid Society's community school. It estimates a social return on investment of \$10.30 for an elementary school and \$14.80 for a middle school.
- “Oakland Community School Costs and Benefits: Making Dollars and Cents of the Research”, prepared by the Bright Research Group in 2013, provides two distinct ROI estimates of Elev8. Considering all investments made in the program, not just the initial foundation investment, the return on investment is \$4.39.

The precise assumptions made in these studies and the specific methods differ, and there would be value to the field in visiting these models and discussing the assumptions jointly. In the absence of data on program impacts from a random-assignment experimental evaluation, it is also a challenge to ascertain how much of any measured improvements are due to the program.

Additionally, all three studies assume that the costs of implementing an ISS model include the coordination work and the services and supports provided to students by the ISS program, but not the supports provided to students that are available in the community. This decision is well aligned with the conceptual model underlying integrated student supports—that supports are available in the community that can be accessed to benefit students, and therefore the cost of these supports should not be counted as a program cost. It bears asking, though, whether communities actually have unused capacity that can be accessed by ISS programs. Are there truly no incremental costs to the larger community, or to taxpayers? Alternatively, is the ISS model a more efficient service delivery mechanism? Since benefits to the community in terms of reduced crime and increased tax revenue are included in the estimation, the field should carefully consider whether, and how, and how much the cost of community supports should be incorporated. Also, new sites need to consider whether adequate supports are available in their local communities to implement an ISS model by accessing available supports.





**Finding 5: Higher quality is related to the effectiveness of ISS programs.** Initial findings from a limited set of studies strongly suggest that high-quality implementation appears to be key to program success; one study found that low-quality or partial implementation is no different than no program at all. In fact, in this study of CIS, students receiving supports from low-quality ISS programs fared no better than students who received no supports at all. These findings echo previous findings on the importance of implementation quality in early childhood education and out-of-school time programming.

In ISS programs, and within the broader child/youth supports field, evidence is mounting that fidelity to a proven model and quality implementation are essential elements of successful programs. However, evaluation evidence from implementation evaluations about whether and which specific practices and services contribute to better outcomes for ISS is mixed and inconclusive. Since this is also a gap in terms of basic research, the need for research and evaluation evidence on the value of particular practices is especially noteworthy.

It may be that ISS models should offer certain specific mandatory supports plus an array of optional supports. Alternatively, perhaps a fixed set of supports is necessary. Or it may be that it isn't so much the specific supports that are offered as it is the use of a clear set of best practices for delivering supports and working with students that is critical. Most likely, a hybrid is required. For ISS to become a coherent and consistently effective model, though, such questions need to be addressed.

## RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

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While the emerging body of research is encouraging, it could be strengthened in a number of ways. In particular, it is important to understand which elements of the ISS model represent core components and which are adaptable. In addition, there is a need for a carefully-validated quality rubric, one that, presumably, addresses both program structure and services, as well as processes of delivery and practice. Approaches to estimation of return on investment would also benefit from a crosswalk of the assumptions and methods that are and can be employed. In addition, more assessment of the implications of the ISS approach for varied subgroups of students is needed. And, of course, additional experimental evaluations of the impact of the ISS model compared with business-as-usual models are needed.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Research in child and youth development clearly indicates that success in school (and in life) is more likely when young people's well-being is met across multiple domains—in other words, when their health, safety, social/emotional, and cognitive needs are consistently met. Yet this fundamental principle is not central to many education discussions today. Education reform has largely focused on academic factors (improving teacher quality, strengthening curricula, school choice, etc.), and assessments of students' needs and strengths have been largely limited to academic measures. An integrated student supports approach offers an opportunity to broaden the focus of education initiatives and funding, recognizing that student success is driven by multiple academic and non-academic factors. Initial evidence suggests that ISS' more comprehensive approach has merit.

Our review of the evidence related to integrated student supports suggests several policy implications:

**ISS seems appropriate for a variety of "at-risk" students.** Because integrated student supports are child-centered rather than school-centered, the specific mix of supports varies depending on a specific child's needs and circumstances. For example, in the ISS model, children with mental health needs receive a different set of supports than children whose families have become homeless. For children in the child welfare or juvenile justice system, ISS staff can coordinate with agency caseworkers to supplement and align supports. Because ISS programs rely on and coordinate with community-based supports and service providers, they are more likely to deliver a system of supports that are culturally appropriate to minority populations.

**ISS complements other school reforms.** Integrated student supports focus on the very important challenge of ensuring that students are ready, every day, to do their best in school. They do not focus on whether schools are ready, every day, to do their best for students. So it may be that students will do best when they attend schools that provide both integrated student supports and reforms focused on curriculum, teaching, and assessment. They are complementary approaches.

**ISS aligns with other developments in the education field:**

- Social-emotional learning—the notion that the best learning occurs in the context of supportive relationship that help students manage their emotions and set and achieve goals.
- Growing knowledge of the profound negative effects of trauma on children—including the trauma of sustained poverty and family turbulence—and the need to design and implement interventions to address the causes and effects of trauma.
- Increased recognition of the value of quality early childhood programs—programs that prepare “at-risk” children for school. These programs have been proven to offer educational and economic benefits well into adulthood. Quality early childhood programs are steeped in the “whole-child” approach, addressing children’s needs across all domains of development, and offering a valuable lesson to the K-12 system.

**The ISS approach should also appeal to other child/youth-serving fields.** For example, the child welfare field is focusing intensively on strategies to improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care. The focus of the ISS model on coordinating a range of supports to meet the specific needs of specific students would fit well with this population of students. Since having a child by the 10th grade was found empirically to be strongly associated with high school dropout, integrating teen pregnancy prevention into ISS models should be appealing strategy, along with strategies to keep teen parents in school.

**Well-implemented ISS programs meet policymakers’ and funders’ desire for approaches that are research-based, data-driven, cost-effective, and powered by local communities.** Fortunately, the leading practitioners in the field have demonstrated their commitment to a rigorous approach through outcome evaluations, gathering and tracking data on student performance, quality assessments, and calculations of their return on investment. Additionally, community partnerships and integration into local schools and school districts are core components of ISS, necessary to its success. They help tether ISS programs tightly to the communities they serve and give communities a sizable stake in the success of a program.

In sum, while the evidence base is still emerging, the fact that this approach is solidly based in the literature on child and youth development, practitioner experience, and studies of education represents a critical asset. Integrated student supports are a promising approach for helping more disadvantaged children and youth improve in school and have a brighter path in life.

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