



BEING PRESENT MATTERS

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Testimony of Rey Saldaña, President and CEO, Communities in Schools, Prepared for U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education

Chair Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the FY 2026 Labor, HHS, Education Appropriations bill.

I am Rey Saldaña, President and CEO of Communities In Schools (CIS). I stand before you not just as the leader of CIS, but as living proof of what integrated student supports can accomplish. Growing up in San Antonio, Texas, CIS coordinators helped me overcome barriers to become the first in my family to attend college. That journey shapes my conviction in this work every day.

Today, CIS works inside 3,571 schools in 29 states across the country, connecting 2 million students to resources that help them overcome barriers to success. Our evidence-based model, validated by multiple third-party evaluations, places a dedicated "site coordinator" inside each school to serve as the vital link between students and the resources they need.

In education, we've tried program after program to help students reach their God-given potential. What you should know is that integrated student supports, or ISS, isn't another program – it's the operating system that makes all other programs and funding streams work efficiently.

Think of ISS as air traffic control for student success – coordinating federal, state, and local resources already paid for but often sitting in silos. While teachers focus on classroom instruction, our coordinators tackle what derails learning: chronic absenteeism, mental health concerns, and basic needs, like transportation and nutrition. This coordination changes outcomes – and lives – dramatically.

At CIS, we've proven that being present matters – it's the foundation of everything we do. Indeed, the proof is in our results: 99% of students in CIS schools show up and make academic and behavioral strides year after year. Our seniors graduate at a 96% rate, representing for each graduate at least \$250,000 in lifetime tax contributions and cost savings, according to the National Institutes for Health. That's not just statistics, but real children with futures secured.

These outcomes aren't accidental. Federal dollars are the crucial catalyst in our integrated student support ecosystem. Core ESEA investments like Title I and Title IV not only underwrite direct services but also unlock additional investment through the evidence-based designation that ESSA provides. For every federal dollar that supports ISS, we leverage an additional four dollars from state, local, and private sources – a multiplier effect uniquely enabled by federal leadership.



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The strategic architecture of federal education funding matters tremendously. When Title I schools implement ISS, they optimize their per-pupil allocations by addressing non-academic barriers that would otherwise consume classroom resources. Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants become exponentially more effective when delivered through an ISS framework – turning what might be siloed programs into coordinated interventions that move school-level metrics. Similarly, ISS enables AmeriCorps and WIOA dollars to achieve cross-sector outcomes, simultaneously advancing education, workforce development, and economic mobility goals.

Throughout this work, parents remain central. They are the primary education decision-makers, period. Our site coordinators work directly with 360,000 families annually, ensuring their voice drives the support their children receive. This parent-centered approach ensures solutions reflect family values and community needs.

This respect extends to local governance as well. ISS honors local control by strengthening what communities are already doing, implementing locally-determined solutions with proven results.

We see this success in communities across the country. In rural Jackson County, North Carolina, Smokey Mountain Elementary faced 36% chronic absenteeism among its student population, with 67% economically disadvantaged students and a "Recurring Low Performing" designation. CIS Student Support Specialist David Cauley created the "Tarheel Charm Challenge," which is improving attendance rates and driving academic progress, helping Principal Kurr fulfill his mission to remove the school from the state's low-performing list, proving once again that being present matters for student success.

In rural Indiana, coordinator Kelley Miller of City Connects, another proven provider of integrated student supports, creates job shadowing opportunities at Greene County Hospital and connects students with career fairs, helping rural students envision successful futures beyond graduation.

In Louisiana, federal dollars provide about 50% of funding for CIS of Gulf South's work with schools, powering comprehensive attendance management and workforce readiness efforts. Site coordinators serve as attendance directors, dedicating over 1,000 hours to prevention through awards ceremonies, parent education, and home visits, while partnering with juvenile courts for early intervention. Their re-engagement team addresses attendance issues when schools have exhausted resources, with 85% of students meeting behavior goals. Simultaneously, CIS prepares students for Louisiana's economy through financial literacy partnerships – for instance, site coordinator Kylan Dawson's mentoring program, which builds workplace skills like culinary arts and restaurant etiquette – essential preparation for a state reliant on hospitality workers.

Our successes build on a foundation of bipartisan cooperation. Congress showed remarkable foresight when it recognized integrated student supports in the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. That inclusion wasn't simply policy language – it created a federal



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validation mechanism that enables states and districts to confidently direct resources toward evidence-based approaches. Schools implementing evidence-based ISS are seeing dramatic improvements in attendance, behavior, coursework, and graduation rates.

The versatility of integrated student supports is one of its greatest strengths. ISS serves as both a proven standalone approach and a foundational pillar for more comprehensive models, including community schools. In fact, when implemented as one of the core components of locally-driven, community school approaches to student success and parent empowerment, ISS provides the critical infrastructure that ensures schools can function effectively. The beauty of ISS is its flexibility – rural, suburban, and urban communities tailoring implementation to fit their specific needs, values, and existing education frameworks while maintaining the evidence-based core that drives results. This adaptability is why ISS has garnered such broad bipartisan support – it strengthens whatever educational approach a community has chosen, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all solution.

The urgency of this work cannot be overstated. Today, as 15 million classroom seats sit empty across America, these strategic appropriations aren't merely line items – they're investments in an evidence-based operating system that delivers \$11 for every \$1 invested. They represent the smart fiscal stewardship that taxpayers deserve and that our children need.

I urge Congress to protect and strengthen core federal investments that support integrated student supports. Specifically:

- Title I funding, which acts as the foundation for quality education but delivers optimal returns only when non-academic barriers are addressed through ISS
- Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants, which provide flexible funding that, when channeled through evidence-based ISS frameworks, produce measurable improvements in attendance and achievement
- Full-Service Community Schools and 21st Century Learning Centers allocations, which will generate necessary infrastructure for community partnerships that ISS coordinates
- Project AWARE grants, which become transformative when mental health services are integrated with academic supports
- AmeriCorps funding, which multiplies impact when students are involved in national service projects
- WIOA investments, which create stronger workforce pipelines of much-needed student support specialists

Our children deserve nothing less than this fiscally responsible approach to education. When we give students the support they need, they show up for school today – and ultimately, they show up for America tomorrow.

Thank you.