

Building Systems of Integrated Student Support

A Policy Brief for Federal Leaders

Integrated student support is a strategy for “promoting students’ academic success by securing and coordinating supports that target academic and non-academic barriers to achievement” in order to improve student outcomes.

Introduction

The tidal wave of need that regularly lights up the phone lines, inboxes, and calendars of federal leaders is a relentless feature of the COVID-19 pandemic. From wealthy suburbs to poor inner cities and rural areas, [businesses](#) are struggling and [food lines](#) are long. The funds flowing through the stimulus packages seem big on paper in Washington and paltry on the ground, in district.

When leaders turn to the regular federal budget and survey the existing labyrinth of programs, services, agencies, and funding streams designed to reach children, youth, and families across education, social services, agriculture, youth development, health and mental health services—there are sizable investments. But when understood in the context of historic and pandemic-driven increases in [child poverty](#), [hunger](#), [trauma](#), [academic learning loss](#), and limited opportunities, ways to ensure those services are delivered effectively and efficiently to our youngest Americans seem both urgent and hard to identify.

They are urgent because the impacts of poverty—or a pandemic—are understood to have negative impacts on healthy child development, learning, and life-long opportunity. Research building on the theories of Nobel Prize winning economist [Gary Becker](#) finds that children growing up in poverty, or during COVID-19, have less access to the type of resources and experiences that promote learning, and are more likely to experience prolonged periods of [toxic stress](#) that can disrupt healthy brain development and readiness to gain academic and social-emotional skills. For many Black and Latino families, the compounding [effects](#) of systemic racism add to the stresses and deprivations of poverty and the pandemic.

Over the last fifteen years, however, [effective and cost-efficient](#) systems of support for children and families have been honed by insights from the sciences of learning and child development, and experimentation in communities, to point towards an effective strategy suited to the challenges of the pandemic and the longer-term: integrated student support.

This brief is a companion piece to one published for [local and state leaders](#) in partnership with the Center for Promise and America’s Promise Alliance in 2019. It reproduces and expands on this previously published content.



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Integrated student support is a “whole child” approach that addresses students’ strengths and needs across all developmental domains, such as academics, social-emotional-behavioral, physical health, and family. It leverages the resources available in schools and the surrounding community to connect the right set of resources, supports, and opportunities with the right student and family at the right time. When well-implemented, it boosts students’ **academic** and **life** outcomes and **saves taxpayers** money by efficiently directing existing services and towards the wellbeing of students.

The idea of addressing students’ comprehensive needs is not new. Examples are in countless communities and a number of federal programs are predicated on the idea that systemic challenges need systemic solutions, including **Full Service Community Schools**, **21st Century Community Learning Centers**, and **Promise Neighborhoods**. What integrated student support demonstrates is the importance of going the last mile: ensuring that resources available in a community or in a school get to the right child, at the right time, over time. And it provides a roadmap for transforming broken and inequitable systems into powerful, effective, and cost-efficient engines of opportunity.

This brief distills insights from the sciences and lessons learned from practitioners to provide leaders at the federal level with policy recommendations and guidance to advance effective systems of integrated student support that transform disjointed and siloed resources for children, youth, and families into a coherent and potent system that supports healthy child development and learning.

Especially now, effectively serving children and families is a challenge to the nation, the states, and the communities within them. Annual budget allocations, specialized agencies and nonprofits, dedicated and compassionate service providers, and committed leadership have not yet lived up to their potential to be powerful enough engines of opportunity for the next generation—particularly against the headwinds of COVID-19, economic upheaval, and systemic racism. There is now clear **evidence** that earlier interventions and comprehensive approaches will make a significant difference for students who are facing complex learning and life challenges. More recent research, and insights from schools and communities serving children and families, give us a road map to help disrupt the relationship between adversity and lowered life chances—and to create systems of opportunity to help all children develop, learn, and thrive.

INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORT IN ACTION

Fifth grader, Maya C.* walked into school crying. She was being bullied on the bus because she was picked up outside a homeless shelter, she explained to Mr. Williams*, a school staff member.

In some schools the conversation would stop there: bullies admonished, tears dried, and into the classroom, just another child who is part of a mounting wave of **students experiencing homelessness**.

But in a growing number of places, Maya’s tears activate a web of support. The staff person turns to an on-site coordinator who does daily check ins with Maya, helps her to talk with her teachers, reaches out to her family, and discovers that Maya and her three siblings lost everything and are in need of clothing, shoes, and basic school supplies. The coordinator also learned that the mother not only needs to find stable housing, but is now in an unfamiliar neighborhood and needs to know where to find food, a church, and transportation to her job.

The coordinator, who is the hub of a system of integrated support for children like Maya, will bring together the resources of the school and the resources of agencies and nonprofits across the city to help Maya’s family, and keep Maya on track to succeed in school.

The coordinator will do this for each and every child in the school, year-in and year-out, because Maya and her siblings are not alone.

*Names have been changed for this report.

The Science: In Brief

Over the last few decades, practitioners and policymakers have learned a great deal from scientific research about what all children need to be successful in school and in life. Neuroscientists can show [dramatic differences in brain structure](#) between children who grow up with the supports and basic resources that all children need, and those who do not. Researchers in developmental psychology and cognitive science have illuminated how various contexts and risk factors can impact how children develop and learn. This leads to a deepened appreciation of the importance of simultaneously supporting development across the social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and language domains.

The link between socioeconomic challenges and the inequality of educational and life outcomes is also becoming increasingly understood. Research finds that a student's low academic performance is connected to having less access to developmentally stimulating resources, opportunities, and relationships in the home or in the community. Low academic performance is also connected to exposure to high-stress situations such as abuse or witnessing violence which may interfere with skill development. The [impacts of poverty and adversities](#) like trauma can produce "toxic stress," which impairs working memory, the ability to organize information, regulate behavior, and form positive adult and peer relationships. The science makes clear that academic performance and student experiences related to health, social-emotional wellbeing, family, and community are deeply intertwined. These seemingly "nonacademic" factors account for approximately two thirds of the variance in student achievement.

Although many children and youth encounter risks like persistent hunger or cold, pain due to untreated medical or dental needs, or traumatic stresses tied to abuse or domestic or neighborhood violence, these adversities can be surmounted. As children grow up, they experience interacting risk and protective factors that support or challenge healthy development. Protective factors like positive adult and peer relationships, opportunities to build skills and self-confidence, access to adequate food, clothing, social services, education, internships and networks that build social connections, can all help children and youth to grow amidst challenges.

The exact mix of risk and protective factors varies from child to child and changes over time. The same bad experience, such as the incarceration of a parent, can have vastly different impacts. For one child, with a quick smile, strong friendships, and an engaged family, it might constitute a difficult bump in the road. For another who is more introverted and living in already chaotic circumstances, it might be overwhelming. But the sciences also tell us that intervention is possible, and that children and youth facing challenges can, if connected to the right systems of support, learn and thrive.

The science is clear: intervening in a child's developmental trajectory can have profound positive consequences. Insights from the sciences give us a road map to help tip the scales in favor of healthy development, learning, and opportunity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATION

A key to making a difference in student outcomes seems to be in how schools design the integration of comprehensive services to address out-of-school factors. Co-locating services or offering wraparound services with outside providers in a modular "add-on" fashion may not be enough to help low-income students succeed. Integrated student support models show us that schools can be inexpensively designed—with a school counselor who serves as a coordinator or via a teacher team—to enable a system of support that is integrated into the functioning of the school and provides for the integration of resources, services, and relationships at the level of each student.¹⁷

Impact of Integrated Student Support

Evidence demonstrates that [integrated student support](#) approaches can contribute to academic progress. Mounting evidence shows that students who receive effective integrated student support demonstrate:

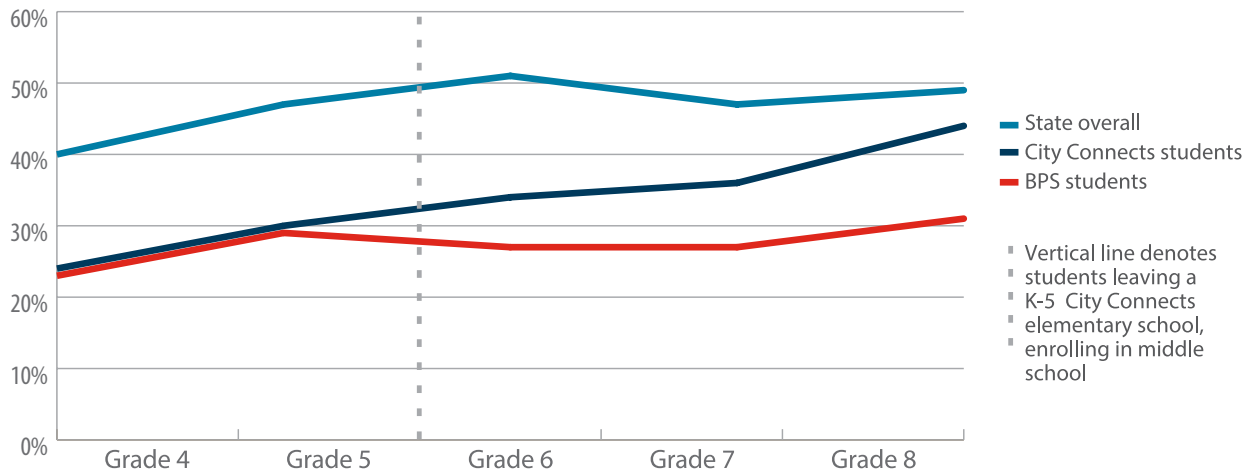
- improved attendance, effort, and engagement;
- higher academic achievement;
- reduced high school dropout rates; and
- better social and emotional outcomes.

For example, two national research reviews by Child Trends and a separate evaluation by American Institutes for Research (AIR) examined the evidence base emerging from interventions such as the City Connects, Communities In Schools in Chicago, and Diplomas Now, and the BARR model, respectively. Findings from a subset of these programs show that implementation of scientifically-based effective practices significantly improve student outcomes. They are described below.

The **Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR)** model provides schools with a comprehensive approach to meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of all students. The BARR model relies on eight interconnected strategies to bolster students' strengths and address their needs through a holistic approach to child development that includes restructuring high school schedules, creating cohorts of students served by teacher teams, providing professional development, conducting regular risk reviews, fostering social and emotional learning through [BARR's I-Time curriculum](#), and engaging families and administrators in student learning. Most commonly implemented at the ninth grade level, BARR is beginning to be introduced in middle school and continued throughout high school. Research shows that over the course of three years, the BARR model is effective in reducing course failure rates by an average of 40 percent in large urban schools and 29 percent in smaller rural schools. Additional research shows that the [BARR model](#) has a positive, statistically significant impact on math and reading scores while improving student experience and teacher satisfaction.

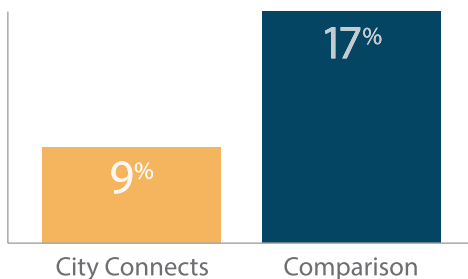
City Connects is an intervention that creates a personalized network of resources and opportunities for each student in a school by coordinating student supports drawn from existing school- and community-based services. In 2017-18, [City Connects](#) worked in schools in five states serving 26,000 children in Pre-K through 8th grade. School coordinators developed an individualized plan of support and opportunity for each student in consultation with teachers, staff, and families. They fulfilled these plans by connecting students to more than 261,000 services from over 1,200 unique community-based organizations. Grounded in the science of child development and integrated into 100 schools, multiple peer-reviewed studies show that students who received these tailored integrated supports during elementary school demonstrated better effort, grades, and attendance, and went on to significantly narrow achievement gaps and were half as likely to drop out during high school. Several of these findings hold for important subgroups including African-American and Latino boys, immigrant students, and students learning English. Here are results of peer-reviewed studies of City Connects students in the Boston Public Schools:

Percentage of students scoring at proficient or above, Massachusetts State Test (MCAS) Math



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Dropout rates



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Additional research shows that benefits of integrated student support also redound to:

- teachers, who say they are more available to focus on instruction and have more **empathy** for their students;
- schools, which show **improving climate and culture**;
- society, which could triple the **beneficial impacts of resources** we already spend on children and families across the sectors of education, social services, youth development, health and mental health.

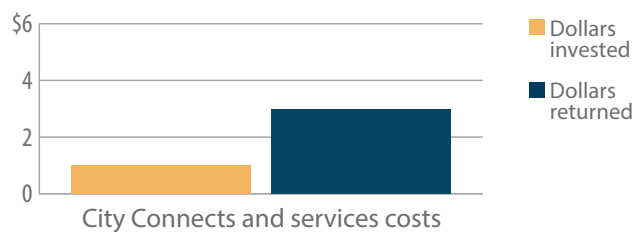
The Business Case for Integrated Student Support

With competing priorities and limited resources, federal, state, and local leaders seek to invest in programs and approaches that have a strong return on investment. Columbia University economists assessed the costs and benefits of the City Connects model of integrated student support. Including the cost of implementing City Connects and the costs of the comprehensive services to which children and families get connected—such as food, clothing, after school programs, medical care, mental health counseling, and family services—researchers found that it produces \$3 in benefits for every \$1 invested across all sectors. If effective systems of integrated student support were widely implemented, existing investments in children and families could be producing triple the benefits. Moreover, taking into account what schools typically spend on student support without a resource-coordination model, researchers find that costs of “business as usual” student support are not much less than a more effective integrated student support approach.

The researchers note in [Prevention Science](#), that effective approaches to integrated student support, like City Connects, are “a sound investment and should be considered an option to address the needs of students and to prevent future crises from disrupting their learning.” This builds on earlier [cost-effectiveness](#) research which found that for every dollar invested in programs and services for children and their families, effective coordination resulted in a societal return of \$3 for every \$1 spent.

In other words, a small investment to enable schools to effectively coordinate comprehensive services for students can produce both short- and long-term efficiencies as well as better outcomes, tripling the beneficial impacts of dollars across numerous segments of the federal (state, and local) budget.

Cost compared to benefit



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Leading for Change at the Federal Level

The current landscape

Across the country, states and municipalities have been taking steps in this direction. Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Washington State have passed integrated student support legislation. Massachusetts and Washington have adopted [research-informed protocols](#) for integrated student support. States like Indiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and West Virginia have included evidence-based integrated student support programs, like [Communities In Schools](#) and [City Connects](#), in their budgets. Communities like [Springfield](#) and [Salem](#), Massachusetts and [Hamilton County, Tennessee](#) have embarked on transforming the resources and services available across their cities into well-honed delivery systems that can meet the needs of students and families to support healthy child development, learning, and thriving.

In Congress too, integrated student support, alone and as a pillar of community schools, is emerging as a strategy. Building on long standing policies that supposed comprehensive approaches could drive student achievement and opportunity, the Every Student Succeeds Act made integrated student support an allowable use of Title I and Title IV funds. Currently, there is integrated student support (or “integrated student services”) language in the House Labor-HHS FY21 Budget Report, and it is an allowable or mandatory use of funds in a handful of recent [bills](#). It is also increasingly identified as an approach to component of, community schools, including in the Full Service Community School Expansion Act (S.4865 116th), and is advanced by organizations like the [Learning Policy Institute](#), the [Sciences of Learning and Development \(SoLD\) alliance](#), and the [Partnership for the Future of Learning](#).

WHAT MAKES INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORT EFFECTIVE?

Federal policymakers can create the conditions for successful implementation at the local level, and realize long-term benefits to children, families, and taxpayers. Key to efficacy seems to be integration of a customized set of supports at the level of the child and family, employing best practices:

Customized: each student receives a customized set of supports and opportunities designed to address their specific strengths and needs. This universal approach draws on public health and the prevention sciences, and helps to avoid or mitigate the impacts of life’s punches on children and families.

Comprehensive: Because children develop simultaneously across all domains of development, it is important to support their strengths and needs in a coherent and comprehensive way to ensure a stable foundation for growth. For one student, that may include literacy support in school, participation in an after school baseball program, access to food and clothing, and assistance to the family to apply for unemployment insurance. For another student, that may include a visit to a pediatrician, a vision check, a mentor, and connection to a theater group.

Coordinated: A point person in the school ensures coordination of services with the family, school, and community-based organizations. This reduces duplication and allows for support in problem solving around issues like language barriers, transportation, and accountability.

Continuous: Effective approaches are ongoing and systematic, so that support is not a matter of luck but a regular and sustained component that helps to respond to changes over time. This is especially important now during COVID-19, as many families are suddenly shaken by illness, job loss, eviction, and other disruptions.

Data-informed: Use of data to inform decisions about how to make schools and communities more responsive to the real-time, actual needs of children and families can yield both greater impact and improved efficiency.

RECOMMENDATIONS for Federal Leaders

The following are recommendations that federal leaders can use to guide implementation of community-wide systems that support healthy child development, learning, and thriving.

Elevate the importance of addressing students' comprehensive needs so that they can develop, learn, and thrive. Highlight the opportunity to more effectively and cost-efficiently integrate comprehensive services for each student and their family, boosting student outcomes and benefiting taxpayers.

Increase funding for ESSA Title I and Title IV Part A and include language advancing best practices. These funding streams are vital to districts aiming to provide well-rounded education, and safe and healthy school environments, to low-income students. Legislators can strengthen budget language and administrators can bolster guidance to encourage best practices. Sample language is provided in this [Policy Toolkit](#) for legislators and executive branch administrators.

- **Support and incentivize schools to create individualized plans for every child and family.** Support schools, via school-based coordinators if possible, to create individualized plans for every student and family. Plans should be: comprehensive and address all domains of development; designed to cultivate student strengths as well as address needs; and account for the intensity of need or risk that the student may be experiencing in any domain.
- **Provide funding to districts specifically to hire on-site student support coordinators, school counselors, and mental health providers.** Ensure that student support personnel are empowered to engage in best practices for integrated student support. Every student needs support to succeed in school and in life.

Reintroduce, refine, and fund bills advancing community schools

Reintroduce and pass the Full-Service Community School Expansion Act (S.4865 116th). The legislation assists schools and districts by providing supports—including medical, mental, and nutrition health services, mentoring and youth development programs, technical assistance, and continuing education courses—to serve students, families, and communities. It also provides essential resources for school districts to plan for, implement, and expand community schools, and would further develop the infrastructure to support these schools. Similarly, the Communities Serving Schools Act (HR 8126) emphasizes the importance of needs assessments, on site coordinators, and community partnerships. In addition, consider opportunities to:

- **Include language** that emphasizes student outcomes, family engagement, coordination of comprehensive services, and systematicity of student support. One recent state example is bill language: “**establishing full-service community schools to improve student outcomes through a systematic effort designed to coordinate educational programs with essential health, mental health and enrichment services and facilitate parental involvement in their children’s education.**”
- **Incentivize states** to adopt research-informed standards, [protocols](#), and to support effective implementation through scaled dissemination of professional development, technology tools, and resources. For more on best practices and practical know-how, see this action guide on [The Whole Child: Building Systems of Integrated Student Support During and After COVID-19](#). As noted above, 13 states are at some stage of policymaking to advance integrated student support strategies. In Texas, the focus is on [expansion of the Communities In Schools program](#) to serve additional students. In Massachusetts, the state is supporting modification of existing approaches to student support. School districts can opt into an “[academy](#)” or [learning network](#) comprised of about 15 urban, suburban and rural communities. Participants are determining how to shift existing student support structures, personnel, programs, partnerships, and resources to become more consistent with best practices for integrated student support. Some Massachusetts communities like [Springfield](#) and [Salem](#) are implementing City Connects, an evidence-based approach to integrated student support, citywide.

Support states and municipalities to develop low-cost infrastructure to facilitate resource coordination. As information from research and practice grows, and evidence-based practices are identified, schools and districts may need support to identify their current needs and assets, and implement effective practices. While the precise constellation of assets and needs varies from school to school and community to community, there are common needs across sites implementing integrated student support strategies. Many of these needs can be efficiently addressed via the creation of a shared infrastructure. This may include decisions to:

- develop policies and funding streams that facilitate local capacity to deliver effective integrated student support.
- provide professional development and coaching to support implementation aligned with best practices.
- connect technology to allow for school-based coordinators to see certain child-level data, create individualized plans, and rapidly understand the resources available in the school and community.
- create a management structure, ideally within the school district, that allows for management, alignment with district priorities, joint problem solving, and oversight.

Invest in comprehensive services to benefit child and family wellbeing

The impacts of the pandemic heighten the need for continued investment in federal programs that provide comprehensive student and family supports.

Improve students' access to food. Remove the reduced-price category for school meals and expand the eligibility threshold for free school meals to 200 percent of poverty. Mandate breakfast after the bell in all high-poverty schools (where at least 60% of all students qualify for free or reduced-price meals) and provide start-up funding to help schools make the transition. Allow schools to serve three meals per day (breakfast, lunch, after-school snack or supper) year-round through one set of regulations. Lower the area-eligibility threshold from 50% to 40% for afterschool meals. This would parallel the 21st Century Community Learning Center funding distribution formula and would better serve children and ease the administrative burdens of programs seeking funding streams with incompatible area eligibility tests.

Increase local capacity to address childhood trauma and mental health. Increase funding for the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). This will support efforts to bring much-needed trauma-informed supports to more communities. Increase funding for Project AWARE. Project AWARE assists schools to implement trauma-informed initiatives and mental health supports for students. Increase funding for grants authorized to local education agencies and Head start Providers under the Support for Patients and Communities Act. The grants expand evidence-based trauma support services in schools, by linking educational agencies with mental health systems to increase student access to services.

Increase funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers to support before- and afterschool and summer programming, as well as wrap-around services that address academic and non-academic barriers to success.

Close the homework gap by funding the FCC's E-Rate program to substantially increase online K-12 learning access for millions of students during the pandemic in the Emergency Educational Connections Act. Make funds available for home internet access and connected devices.

Expand the Child Tax Credit and make it fully refundable. These measures reduce poverty and better equip families to make needed investments in child wellbeing. As the economic impacts of the pandemic persist, reducing child poverty takes on greater urgency.

Expand and improve federal housing programs to create more stable conditions for students and their families.

Fully fund and expand the Child Care Development Block Grant in support of early education and after school program access and quality.

Encourage federal coordination of comprehensive services for children and youth.

Support the Biden-Harris Administration's establishment of a White House Office on Children and Youth and a White House Conference on Children and Youth to elevate the needs of children, youth and their families and allow the federal government to reimagine our systems for students' optimal education, health, well-being and development.



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