

POLICY BRIEF

Improving Student Achievement by Meeting Children's Comprehensive Needs: State Policy Options

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Trends

Today, fifty-two percent¹ of the nation's public school students are eligible for free or reduced lunch with some states like Texas, New Mexico, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Georgia reaching sixty percent or higher². Areas of concentrated poverty³ continue to grow in small and large cities, while many suburban and rural communities are contending with an increase in high-needs students⁴. In parallel fashion, the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers has grown by 40 percent⁵ in a generation.

In response to persistent achievement gaps and intensifying need among students, comprehensive approaches to student support are proliferating. Alternately known as "wraparound," "collective impact," "comprehensive services," "Promise Neighborhoods," "Full-Service Schools," "community schools," or "integrated student supports," efforts have taken root in hundreds of schools and communities including Cincinnati, Tulsa, Oakland, New York, and Hartford. National networks like Strive Together⁶, and programs like City Connects⁷, Communities In Schools⁸, and Bright Futures⁹ are responding, in widely varying ways, to urgent demand.

Science

For over half a century, it has been understood that contexts beyond school can explain up to two-thirds of the differences in student achievement¹⁰. Child development theories and neurobiological disciplines have more recently shed light on the link between socioeconomic challenges and the inequality of educational

outcomes¹¹. In brief, the sciences explain that children encounter risk and protective factors that can complement, overwhelm, or compensate for one another over time. Exposure to deprivations like persistent hunger or cold, pain due to untreated medical or dental needs, or traumatic stresses tied to abuse or domestic or neighborhood violence can undermine a child's working memory, attentiveness, and ability to develop the social-emotional and cognitive skills required for academic performance¹². It is, however, possible to intervene and positively effect children's developmental trajectories.

Evidence and Principles of Effective Practice

Meeting students' comprehensive needs so they are ready to learn and engage in school has a strong theoretical foundation. But does it work? The current evidence base points to a general, but not consistent, trend of positive learning outcomes for approaches to comprehensive student support. A 2014 national research review looked at evidence emanating from three programs focused on integrating comprehensive student supports, finding "there is emerging evidence... that integrated student supports can contribute to student academic progress as measured by decreases in grade retention and dropout, and increases in attendance, math achievement, reading and ELA [English Language Arts] achievement, and overall GPA."¹³

New evidence¹⁴ demonstrates that when organizations implement research-based principles of effective practice, comprehensive approaches can produce positive student outcomes¹⁵. The

Boston College Lynch School of Education incubates City Connects, a program that creates for each student in a school, a personalized network of resources and opportunities drawn from existing school- and community-based programs. A study¹⁶ of over 7,900 Boston Public School students attending City Connects elementary schools demonstrated better effort, grades, and attendance compared to peers who did not attend a City Connects school¹⁷. When followed into eighth grade, these students closed two-thirds of the achievement gap in Math and half of the achievement gap in English relative to the average for all Massachusetts students¹⁸. Students' four-year high school dropout rate was cut almost in half¹⁹. Positive impacts are evident across communities²⁰, educational settings, and various subgroups of students including immigrants²¹, English language learners, and African-American and Latino boys²².

An estimate of City Connects' return on investment²³ finds that the costs of implementation, including the costs of social services, after school and mentoring programs, health and mental health resources, to which students and their families are connected, can be outweighed three-to-one by the benefits to students, and to the state²⁴. This evidence base yields principles of effective practice (see graphic) that can provide policymakers important levers to improve program implementation and utilization of state and federal funds to benefit children and families.

Customized

- **Individualized:** Optimize each student's healthy development and readiness to learn
- **Universal:** Assess each student's strengths and needs

Comprehensive

- **Whole child:** Assess each student's strengths and needs across all developmental domains – academic, social-emotional, health, and family.
- **Multi-tiered:** Evaluate the intensity of support required in each domain – from preventive to intensive – which may differ for each child in each domain.

Coordinated

- **Intentional:** Through a culturally sensitive lens, and in collaboration with teachers, students, and their families, match each student with resources and opportunities aligned with the domains and intensities of their individual needs and strengths in order to enhance protective factors and mitigate risk factors. Because of the diversity of student needs and strengths, high quality matches likely require connections to resources located in the school and in the community.
- **Organized:** Collect and organize information about school- and community-based resources to increase efficiency and quality of match between child and resources and opportunities. Establish ongoing, reciprocal communication and information sharing, consistent with privacy laws, regarding student needs and progress.

Continuous

- **Systemic:** Integrate this process into the functioning of the school, creating a cyclical approach that allows for follow-up and responds to changes for each child over time.
- **Accountable:** Evaluate fidelity of implementation and impact. Use this information to improve quality and efficacy of implementation.

Policy Options

Select federal policies have long reflected an assumption that systemic, comprehensive approaches could drive student achievement. The National Research Council has found that the availability of academic, social-emotional, health, and mental health supports is predictive of students' success as adults²⁵, and since 1998 the Centers for Disease Control has recommended that schools foster healthy child development²⁶ by implementing a comprehensive, coordinated approach to the needs of students. Programs like Full-Service Community Schools Grants, and wraparound components included in 21st Century Community Learning Centers are guided by an understanding that interconnected challenges require interconnected solutions.

State policymakers can support children's healthy development and learning, narrow achievement gaps, reduce dropout rates, and make it possible for communities to more efficiently use existing resources by:

Including comprehensive approaches to student support in school improvement strategies.

In 2013, New Mexico enacted HB 0542²⁷ as a school improvement measure "to provide a strategy to organize the resources of a community to ensure student success while addressing the needs of the whole student; to partner federal, state and local entities with private community-based organizations to improve the coordination, delivery, effectiveness and efficiency of services provided to children and families; and to coordinate resources, in order to align and leverage community resources and integrate funding streams." Under consideration in Texas is SB193, which lists "community schools" as a strategy that can be implemented in low-performing schools. And the Tennessee State Plan²⁸ submitted under ESSA identifies evidence-based levers for district and school improvement plans, including student supports: strong family engagement, safe and secure school and learning environment, student physical and mental health, and community support.

Ensuring school districts are informed about any state funding and federal Title I and Medicaid funding to support screening, information and referral, resource coordination, and health services.

In 2016, Maryland passed HB1139²⁹ requiring the state department of education to notify school districts that federal Title I funds may be used for expenses associated with "community school coordinators" and for the coordination of school and community resources.

Emphasizing the principles of effective practice for integrating student supports.

In light of the evidence base, Massachusetts³⁰ has directed via its FY18 appropriations act that its Safe and Supportive Schools Commission incorporate "principles of effective practice for integrating student supports" into its tools for districts.

Removing barriers to resource integration for students.

For example, the Virginia Comprehensive Services Act³¹ provides for the pooling of eight funding streams to support services for high-risk youth. Others are exploring ways to diminish CHIP/Medicaid bureaucratic complexities to make it easier for schools to integrate screening, information and referral, and health services.

Building state-level infrastructure to create efficiencies and support effective practices.

States can play a vital role in supporting the development of systems to facilitate integrated student support in communities serving children with complex barriers to learning. At the Boston College Lynch School of Education, we are generating some of these resources and providing technical assistance to multiple state-level entities working towards statewide infrastructure building.

Conclusions

The research and policy options outlined above illuminate a pivotal opportunity to ensure effective, feasible, cost-efficient approaches to meeting the comprehensive needs of students. Evidence demonstrates that integrated approaches to student support, when implemented with adherence to principles of effective practice, can significantly narrow achievement gaps and improve dropout rates for the growing numbers of students living in disadvantaged circumstances.

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