



COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS NATIONAL REPORT

COMMUNITY MATTERS

FOCUS ON RURAL SCHOOLS



NEARLY 1 IN 7 STUDENTS IN AMERICA ATTEND RURAL SCHOOLS*





Message from the President & CEO

Families and children in rural America face deep and complex challenges. Lagging economic recovery and sharply limited job opportunities drive higher rates of poverty and hunger. Crisis levels in opioid use and suicide rates destroy individuals, families, and often entire communities.

The impact on rural schools' ability to help students achieve success is severe. A student population that arrives in class hungry and coping with a family member's opioid addiction requires a set of targeted supports that stretch rural schools' budgets, expertise, and staffing to the breaking point.

Communities In Schools (CIS™) was founded on the principle that student success requires support both in the classroom and beyond. We work directly inside schools to build relationships and connect students to the support they need most. We fill the gaps, so all students have an equitable opportunity to achieve their own success.

This report highlights the need for more urgent focus on the challenges in rural schools; perhaps even more so now in response to the devastating consequences of COVID-19. We offer an evidence-based model and effective approach that is adaptive to meet local challenges—integrated student supports. The report includes real-world examples from rural communities where educators, students, and civic leaders faced those deep and complex challenges and as a direct result of partnering with CIS™, created new connections to success.

With a focus on rural schools, this report represents our results and our commitment in 2,500 schools of all types—rural, urban, and suburban—across the country. **#AllinforKids**.

Rey Saldaña

President & CEO

COMMUNITY

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Photo left to right: GCSU student tutor Hope Williams, student Jayla Denson, GCSU student volunteer Emily Jackson, Communities In Schools of Milledgeville-Baldwin County, student Javorie Burke, Americorp tutor Sandra Flagg, student Alayah Clark, and Communities In Schools of Milledgeville-Baldwin County, site coordinator Sabrina Reid

ISSUE OVERVIEW

TIME TO RE-IMAGINE RURAL SCHOOLS

Perception

SMALL

A small number of schools and students

SAME

Students look the same, live in same kind of places

SIMPLE

Facing simple challenges

Reality

BIG

53% of U.S. school districts are rural¹

Nearly **9 million students** attend rural schools²

More students attend rural schools than the total of the nation's **85 largest school districts**³

97% of US land mass is rural⁴

DIVERSE

Rural/Urban is more of a continuum. Less binary.

Overall: Native American communities in AZ, towns in the hill country of TN, industrial cities in WV and OH, homes in Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, New England, Pacific Northwest, Great Plains, and more

Within schools: On average, students in rural schools are less diverse than peers in other types of districts

UNIQUELY CHALLENGED

1 in 6 students live below the poverty line⁵

Rural youth **more likely to abuse drugs** than urban or suburban counterparts⁶

Suicide rate is double for rural youth compared with urban counterparts

Lagging economic recovery—**only 0.8% of job growth**⁷

¹AASA, Rural Community Trust, Leveling the Playing Field for Rural Students, Nov 2017, p. 2

²CIS Rural Landscape Analysis, p.3., Showalter et al., 2019

³ibid

⁴US Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html>

⁵CIS Rural Landscape Analysis, p.3., Showalter et al., 2019

⁶CIS Rural Landscape Analysis, p.10, CDC, 2017; Curtis, Waters, & Brindis, 2010; Fontanella et al., 2015; Jameson, 2007; Reimer & Smink, 2007; Schroeder et al., 2006

⁷Bureau of Economic Analysis, analyzed by David Swenson at Iowa State University, Swenson, David, The Conversation, Most of America's Rural Areas are Doomed to Decline, May 7, 2019

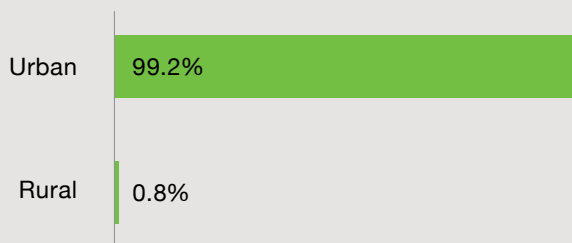
Economic Barriers: Higher and Harder

While much of the US has experienced economic recovery since the Great Recession of 2008, rural America has lagged behind, yet to realize the gains seen in urban and suburban areas. Rural communities' high poverty rates, limited job opportunities, and shrinking population have combined to create a particularly challenging environment in which families and students can thrive. Today, 1 in 6 students in rural communities lives below the poverty line and 1 in 5 rural children have limited, uncertain, or no access to nutritious food⁸.

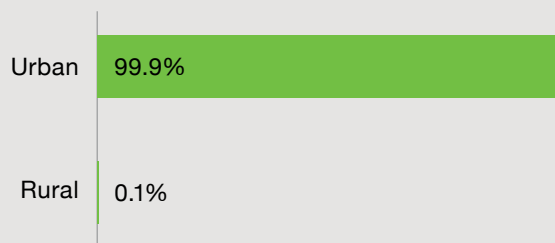
Employment for families in rural communities is a more difficult challenge than for peer families in urban communities. Rates of employment in rural counties decreased more than in urban communities during the Great Recession and subsequent job growth has been slower in rural areas than in metro areas.

Economics in Rural Communities⁹

Share of all job growth



Share of all population growth



An overall decline in population in rural counties compounds the challenge further. In rural areas, lower birth rates no longer offset increased out-migration.

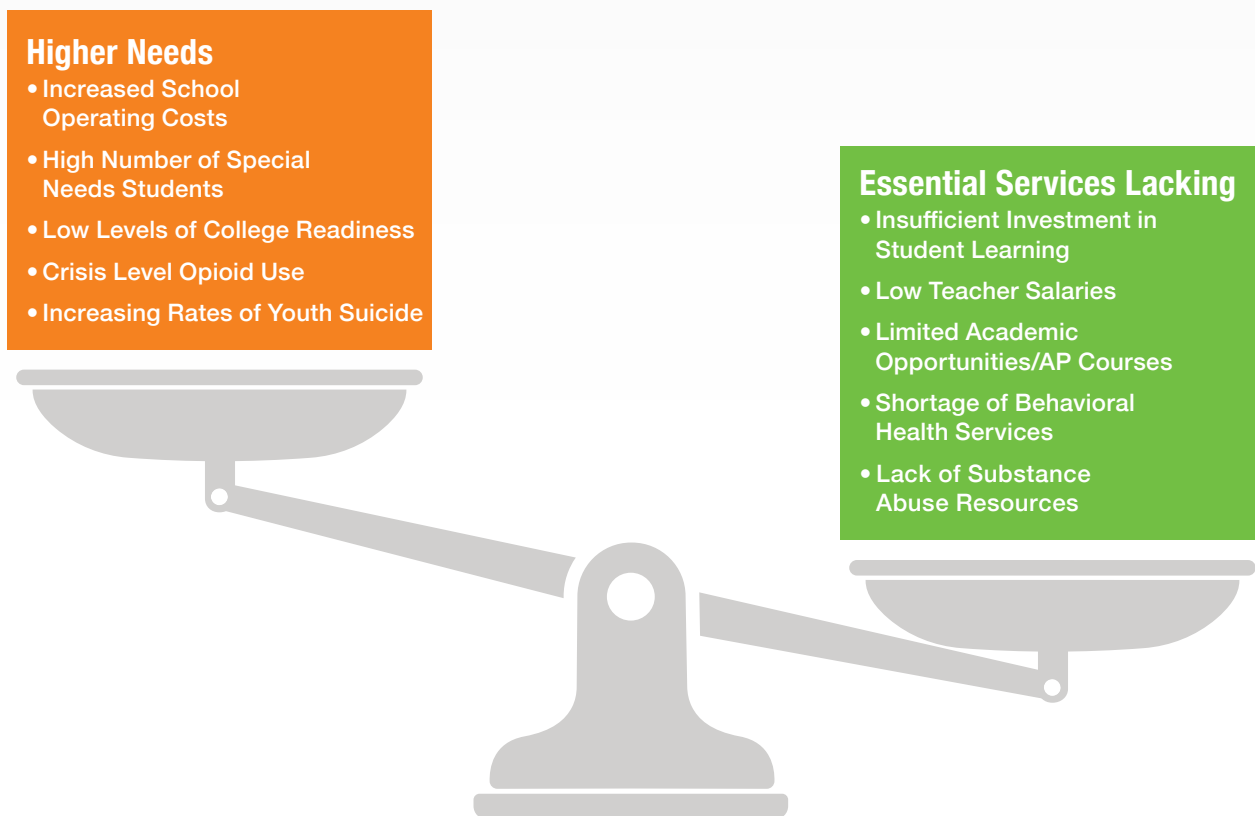
This web of factors creates a punishing cycle that is extremely challenging for rural communities to overcome. The fact that 95 percent of US counties that are classified as experiencing persistent poverty¹⁰ are in rural communities is strong and sobering evidence.

⁸ CIS Landscape Analysis, p. 9, Collins, Bronte-Tinkew, & Logan, 2008; Matsuyama, n.d.; Reimer and Smink, 2007; Showalter et al., 2019

⁹ Bureau of Economic Analysis, analyzed by David Swenson at Iowa State University, Swenson, David, The Conversation, Most of America's Rural Areas are Doomed to Decline, May 7, 2019

¹⁰ CIS Landscape Analysis, p. 9, Collins, Bronte-Tinkew, & Logan, 2008; Matsuyama, n.d.; Reimer and Smink, 2007; Showalter et al., 2019

Resource Scarcity: Urgent Need for Essential Services



The difficult economic realities in rural communities have significant impact on the ability of those communities to provide resources in health care, nutrition, civic and public goods, and most certainly, education. Rural school districts face unique obstacles that make it especially challenging for these districts to provide students with the essential services that support learning and help students achieve long-term success.

The lowest quartile of rural school districts invests almost 62 percent less per student on student instruction than the national average; \$6,800 per rural student on student instruction, compared to the national average of \$11,009.¹¹ In addition, teacher salaries are often lower in rural school districts.

Local and state funding sources are important challenges for rural school districts. Funding from local commercial and property tax revenue is typically lower in rural areas compared to urban and suburban areas. In addition, much of the agricultural or

forest lands in rural areas are not subject to taxation and do not serve as funding sources. Despite both the more limited local funding available and the higher costs of operating rural schools, on average, only 17 percent of state education funds go to rural schools.¹² Education funding varies from state to state and some states do invest heavily in rural schools. However, twelve states provide disproportionately less funding to rural districts—Nebraska has the greatest disparity, followed by Vermont, Connecticut, Iowa, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, Michigan, Massachusetts, California, Ohio, Minnesota, and New Jersey.¹³

This challenging environment for funding is compounded by rural schools' typically higher operating costs. Rural school districts often cover large areas requiring significant travel time and distance to/from school. This results in higher transportation and operating costs and stretches already scarce community resources further as they struggle to operate effectively over large areas.

¹¹ CIS Rural Landscape Analysis, Schwartzbec, n.d.; Showalter et al., 2019

¹² AASA, Rural Community Trust, Leveling the Playing Field for Rural Students, Nov 2017, p. 2

¹³ CIS Rural Landscape Analysis, p. 5 Showalter et al., 2019

Physical and Mental Health

Rural students in need of health care resources face barriers including scarcity, cost, insurance, transportation, and stigma. Rural counties continue to experience chronic shortages of mental health professionals, while suicide rates for rural youth are nearly double the rates of urban peers and increasing.¹⁴

Nationally, seven out of ten students receiving behavioral health services access them at school.¹⁵ But while rural students are more likely to rely on their schools for these services, rural schools are less likely to be able to provide them. For example, rural schools are nearly 2.5 times more likely than urban schools not to have a school nurse (24 percent of rural school districts have no school nurse compared to 10 percent of urban schools¹⁶).

Lacking Critical Resource for Student Success¹⁷

24% of rural schools have no nurse

65% of rural counties have no psychiatrist

47% of rural counties have no psychologist

81% of rural counties have no psychiatric nurse practitioner

¹⁴ CIS Rural Landscape Analysis p. 10, CDC, 2017; Curtis, Waters, & Brindis, 2010; Fontanella et al., 2015; Jameson, 2007; Reimer & Smink, 2007; Schroeder et al., 2006

¹⁵ AASA, Rural Community Trust, Leveling the Playing Field for Rural Students, Nov 2017, p. 6

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ American Journal of Preventive Medicine, Geographic Variation in Supply of Selected Behavioral Health Practitioners C. Holly A. Andrilla, MS Davis G. Patterson, PhD Lisa A. Garberson, PhD Cynthia Coulthard, MPH Eric H. Larson, PhD. Results; [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(18\)30005-9/fulltext](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(18)30005-9/fulltext)

Substance Abuse

In 2017, the US federal government declared opioid use a national public health emergency. The devastating effects of substance abuse on individuals, families, and communities have impacted rural America particularly hard.

The highest rates of drug overdose deaths are in rural areas and rural youth ages 12-17 are more likely than urban or suburban counterparts to use drugs.¹⁸ However, availability of substance abuse services in rural areas is lower. In the US, 91.9 percent of substance use treatment facilities are located in urban areas.¹⁹ Rural areas have fewer resources for inpatient and day treatment.

The lack of available resources can leave students alone to overcome issues related to substance abuse such as homelessness and financial insecurity. This increases pressure on schools to help address the crisis. Many evidence-based programs can be effectively delivered from school settings. With sufficient resources, schools can have a significant positive impact by identifying and mitigating the risk factors that lead to increasingly destructive behavior and connecting the highest need students to proven, evidence-based resources.

CHILDREN OF PARENTS WITH OPIOID ADDICTION STRUGGLE WITH HOMELESSNESS, FINANCIAL UNCERTAINTY AND STRESS THAT NO CHILD CAN MANAGE ALONE. THESE STUDENTS NEED SUPPORT BEYOND WHAT SCHOOLS TYPICALLY ARE ABLE TO PROVIDE.

¹⁸ CIS Rural Landscape Analysis, p. 10 CDC, 2017; Curtis, Waters, & Brindis, 2010; Fontanella et al., 2015; Jameson, 2007; Reimer & Smink, 2007; Schroeder et al., 2006

¹⁹ National Rural Health Policy Brief, Treating the Rural Opioid Epidemic, p.2 February 2017, https://www.ruralhealthweb.org/NRHA/media/Emerge_NRHA/Advocacy/Policy%20documents/Treating-the-Rural-Opioid-Epidemic_Feb-2017_NRHA-Policy-Paper.pdf

Rural Innovation Q&A

Fostering Innovative Approaches to Supporting Students in Rural Communities

With more than a quarter million students being served by CIS™ in 20 percent of schools that make up our footprint across the country, it is time to zero in on how the CIS™ model of integrated student supports can best meet the needs of our rural communities. Chris Murray, Senior Principal of Innovation and Strategic Initiatives for Communities In Schools, describes a long-needed focus on our work in rural communities and the importance of empowering communities to create solutions that work for them.



Chris Murray, Senior Principal of Innovation and Strategic Initiatives for Communities In Schools

Q What are we learning about rural communities and rural education?

A We know one thing for sure: rural matters. Even while the national population becomes more and more urbanized, all the spaces in between express a critical part of what we are made of. The challenges we see within rural communities (graduation rates, economic mobility, poor health) are national problems. What we haven't quite figured out is how to create sustainable, long-lasting solutions. This requires community-based problem solving, coalition building and a deep integration into how our rural communities operate. Too often, support for rural communities is either insufficient or nonexistent because the return on investment is not considered impactful enough due to the small size of the communities and the lack of generalizability to other communities. Rural communities are not just distinct from urban or suburban ones, they are distinct from each other. Folks living in these communities have their own stories to tell and if we aren't listening and aren't including their voice in the process, we are going to fail.

Q What are some of the barriers to reaching rural communities with the supports they need?

A Where we see the biggest barriers to educational attainment and academic achievement within rural communities are places that have long been ignored or neglected. *The Rural School and Community Trust* highlights the urgency needed for states to reconsider how they fund rural education in their 2019 *Why Rural Matters* report. We should accept that it may cost more per student to reach them with the education and support resources they need and that these solutions will look different in each community. Secondly, so much of this is about access: access to educational opportunities and access to resources. This has a lot to do with geography and availability. When it's 50 miles to the nearest hospital or the high school offers limited AP courses, we need to be innovative about how we achieve access and pursue equitable outcomes for these students and their families. And lastly, the traditionally urban non-profit model needs to change. We need to be more thoughtful about the language we use, from whose perspective we are considering community needs, how inclusive we are of the rural voice and focusing on asset-based conversations.

Q What is CIS thinking about when it comes to supporting rural communities?

A We have an incredible opportunity in front of us to zoom in on rural populations and really test our model of integrated student supports in new and innovative ways. We are focused on making strategic investments into two rural approaches in the coming year. First, identifying specific place-based strategies that our rural affiliates can deploy locally to more effectively serve their communities. This could mean operating out of a community college system or focusing on community health factors or forming stronger partnerships with other agencies to achieve common goals. Second, we will develop and implement a national rural strategy that is aligned to, but separate and distinct from, our broader goals for changing the national education landscape. We will concentrate on identifying new opportunities for integrated student supports to become a core part of the rural educational model.

Q How does that translate into action?

A So much of what we see happening in our rural schools and communities reflects the impact of external factors on student achievement. National issues like the opioid crisis, shrinking industry and manufacturing, and lagging economic recovery have created and exacerbated systemic inequities. Schools, as mostly stable institutions in rural communities, can be centers of community engagement and impact in response to these issues. But first, positive school climate and strong school culture need to be a top priority. Without positive associations with a school, families, students and eventually school staff disengage. Building commitment to and understanding of the value of education can be addressed through the systems that CIS™ creates and facilitates in school buildings. Translate this into a broader community-based approach and CIS™ becomes a hub for integrating supports and resources into all aspects of rural life. We need to fit all those pieces together: transportation, drug abuse prevention, access to healthcare, addressing basic needs, breaking the cycle of poverty, equitable educational outcomes, etc., and do this in partnership with community members and leaders. This will create the sustainable systems to help us achieve long-term, positive outcomes, even if CIS itself is no longer in that community

Recommendations for Policy and Resource Allocation

What It Takes For Rural Schools to Provide Students With Equitable Opportunities to Achieve Success in School and in Life



Strengthen the ability of rural schools to address the urgent, unmet needs of their students

- Rural students face obstacles beyond the classroom that have disproportionate negative impacts on their ability to achieve success.
- Provide schools with access to integrated student supports (ISS). ISS identifies and prioritizes highest-need students and provides access to and delivery of the critical services to those students where and when they need it most.
- Utilize evidence-based models to ensure positive impact on students and effective use of scarce funds and resources.



Increase capacity to address health barriers to student success

- Increase availability and access to substance abuse services.
- Increase availability and access to behavioral health services.
- Coordinate these services with ISS in high-priority districts and schools.



Expand the pathways for rural students from high school to post-secondary education opportunities

- Strengthen coordination between K-12 and community colleges to increase the number and quality of opportunities for rural students to utilize community college offerings.



Expand connectivity and access to high-quality technology education tools and opportunities

- Expand support of K-12 school connectivity (e.g. E-Rate Program).
- Provide technology resources and professional development to increase the effective use of technology in learning, and expand access to opportunities to multiple rural schools and districts.
- Increased access to technology provides more equitable access to advanced coursework and high-quality instruction and contributes to more equitable educational outcomes for students.



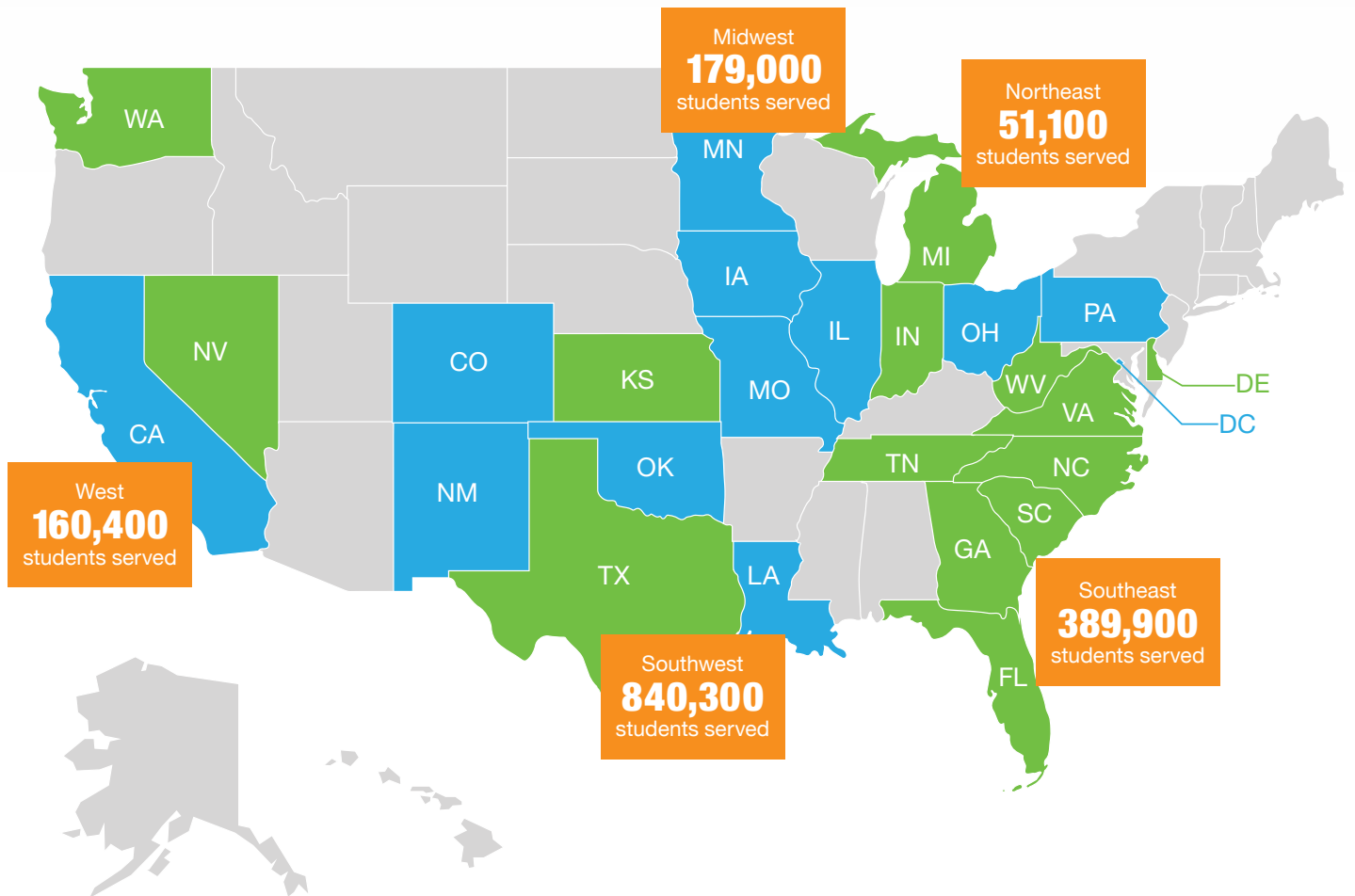
Increase access to Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs

- Support programs to provide training and skill development that lead to sustainable employment.

Our Community Footprint

In 2018-2019, Communities In Schools operated in 25 states and the District of Columbia. CIS™ served 1.62 million students in 2,500 schools and 370 school districts across the country. There are 128 organizations in the CIS™ Network, including state offices and licensed partners; one-third of those organizations are located in rural communities.

While our footprint is geographically diverse, approximately 20 percent of the schools and students we serve represent rural locations. The greatest number of rural communities served by CIS™ are designated in green in the map below.



- States with Communities In Schools presence during the 2018-2019 school year
- States with Communities In Schools presence in rural communities during the 2018-2019 school year

COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS

INTEGRATION. PARTNERSHIP. SUCCESS.

Our 40 years of work in schools is based on a simple fact; student success is decided by more than what happens in the classroom. Beyond the school walls, many students must also overcome hunger, homelessness, and more. This is especially true for rural students, who face higher rates of poverty, substance abuse, and food insecurity.

And it's especially true for rural schools that struggle with fewer resources and often lack the capacity and expertise to identify and connect students to the resources they need.

That's why collaboration with Communities In Schools is an effective solution. Through the CIS™ model of integrated student supports, we partner with state education agencies, school districts, and community-based organizations to coordinate the services and resources students need to ensure that all students can thrive in and beyond the classroom.

“We’ve seen our students get connected to the right resources.”

Ava Montgomery, Deputy Superintendent, Alief Independent School District Texas

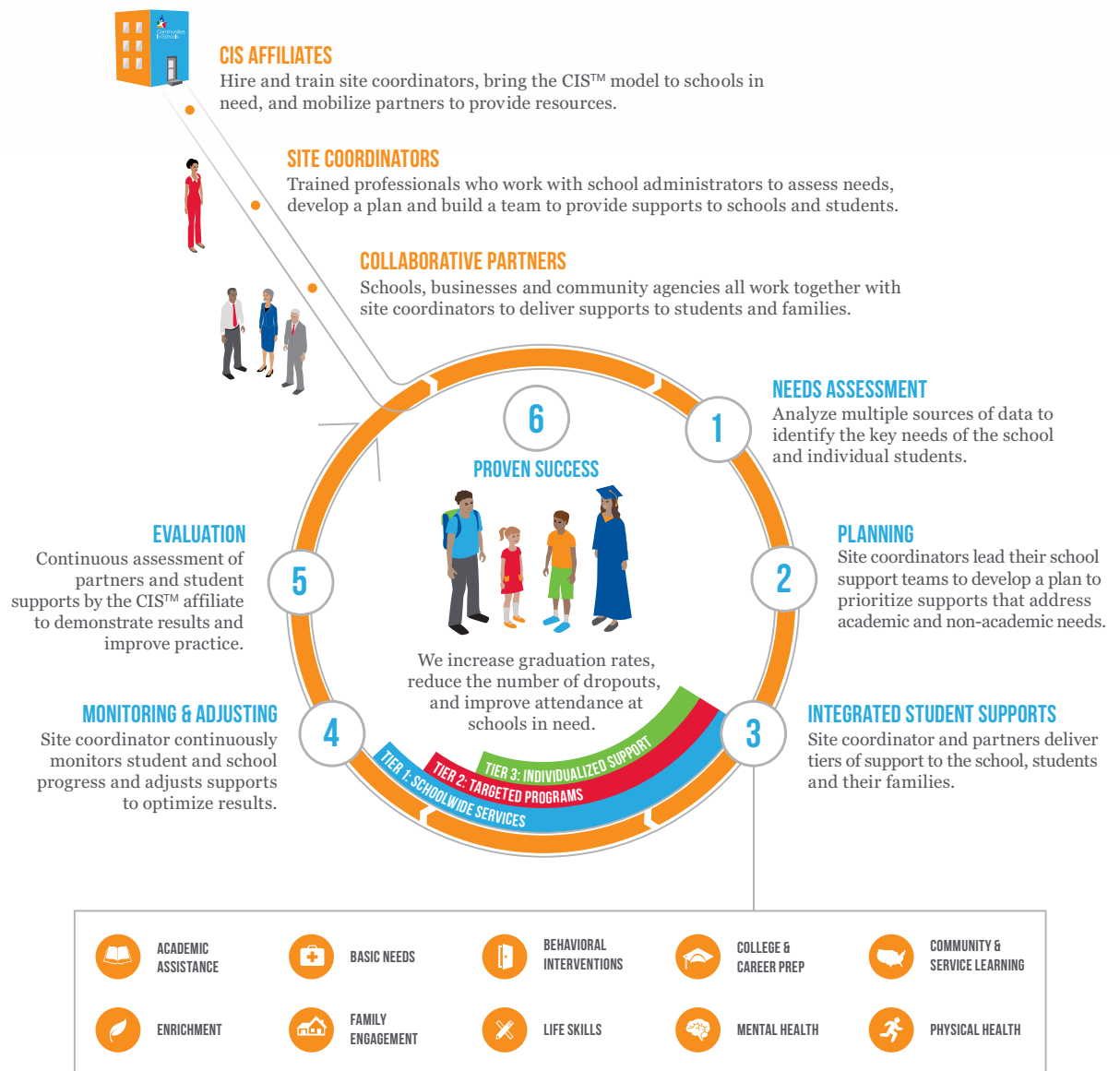
Our Community-Based Approach

How Integrated Student Supports Delivers Key Gains for Rural Schools

Communities In Schools site coordinators work directly inside K-12 public schools to assess student needs, identify supports required, and connect students with the appropriate supports when they need them.

Site coordinators are trained to broker and manage key resource partnerships and deliver important gains for students and schools. Students gain a new, trusted relationship with a caring adult in the school. Schools gain additional capacity and expertise that fills the gap in providing critically important student supports outside the school.

CIS™ works together with the school and the community to do whatever it takes to ensure our students are successful in school and in life.



Bringing New Partners, Adding New Services

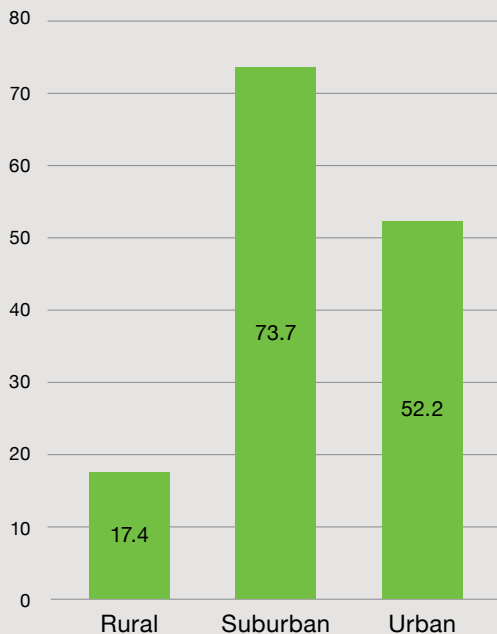
CIS™ Fills Critical Resource Gaps for Rural Schools

Building effective partnerships with service providers requires time, effort, and expertise. Rural schools in particular, have little of any of these to spare. School budgets are already stretched thin by higher operating costs. Staff efforts consume scarce capacity and are frequently undone by chronic shortages of services in rural areas that result in change and uncertainty.

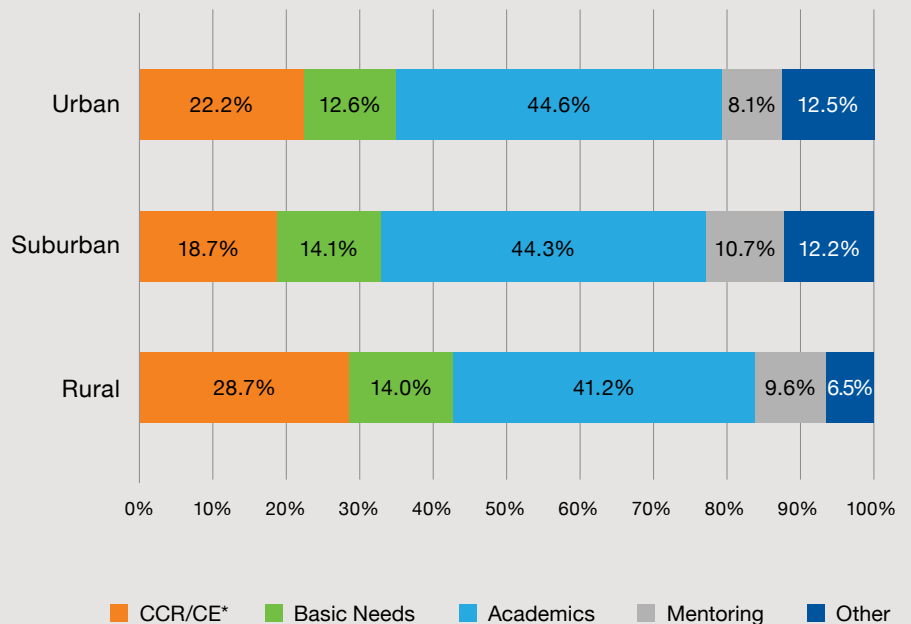
CIS™ brings new, incremental capacities, extensive, proven expertise, and a network of partners and relationships. But the most important partnerships we build are in the school with teachers, students, and administrators. We work alongside the existing school team to identify, deliver, and manage the partnerships that each individual school requires to deliver the supports that will have the most impact for that school's students.

While there are significantly fewer partners to engage in rural communities, CIS™ is effective at connecting the right partners to each school to meet priority needs. For rural schools, partners providing academic enrichment, college and career readiness assistance, civic engagement opportunities, and basic needs are most represented. These include community colleges, retired teachers as tutors, faith-based organizations, service organizations like Rotary clubs, Kiwanis, Junior League, local businesses, and volunteers.

Average Number of Partners Per Affiliate, by Geography



Types of Partners Per Affiliate, by Geography



*College and Career Readiness/Civic Engagement

West Virginia: A Case Study in What's Possible

Achieving Student Success Amidst Crisis-Level Obstacles

The state of West Virginia is a positive example of what can happen when you confront extraordinary challenges with dedicated resources and proven solutions. It has the highest rate of drug overdose deaths in the country, almost three times the national average. In some West Virginia school districts, administrators estimate that roughly half of students live with someone other than their parents. A teacher's typical classroom is full of students living through traumas including parents imprisoned or suffering from drug abuse, homelessness, hunger, poverty, and more.

But, West Virginia has faced these challenges head on and is a powerful example of the extraordinary success rural students can achieve when integrated student supports are available to them. Since 2004, Communities In Schools of Greenbrier County (CISGC) has been working in schools to support students and families wrestling with the effects of poverty, and most recently, the effects of the opioid crisis.

The success CISGC achieved has been, in fact, extraordinary. Across eight schools in the county, results have included: 67 percent improvement in attendance; 80 percent improvement in academics; 92 percent grade promotion; and 100 percent participant graduation.²⁰

West Virginia Governor Jim Justice and First Lady Cathy Justice recognized the impact the CIS™ model could have if it reached more students. With their leadership and support, the West Virginia Department of Education secured funding to expand



Photo left to right: Communities In Schools Founder and Vice Chairman Bill Milliken, First Lady Cathy Justice, and Communities In Schools Chairman Elaine Wynn

CIS™ throughout the state. In the school year 2018-2019, students in nine schools across three counties that would benefit the most—selected by the state Department of Education—began receiving the support they needed. Promising results led to an unprecedented expansion of the model to 79 schools and 15 counties in school year 2019-2020.

CIS™ success in West Virginia is a case study in possibility. It's concrete evidence of what's possible when schools, communities, and civic leaders collaborate to embrace integrated student supports and ensure a successful implementation.

In School Year 2018-2019, West Virginia Saw These Promising Results:



79%
improvement
in academics



93%
grade
promotion



98%
stayed
in school



100%
participant
graduation

²⁰West Virginia Department of Education, <https://wvde.us/cis/>

Local Spotlights

GEORGIA: Creating the Connections for Student Success

For over a decade, Communities In Schools has partnered with the Baldwin County School District to support students in rural Georgia impacted by poverty. 83 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals and attend Title I schools.

PARTNER

Milledgeville Baldwin County School District and
Communities In Schools of Milledgeville-Baldwin County

SUPPORT

Academic and non-academic supports for students and families –from providing uniforms and stocking school supply closets, to managing tutoring programs and seeking family mental health support services.

“Every student needs to feel connected ... we got to know every student in our schools.”

Noris Price, Ed.D, Superintendent



All 8 public schools in the county



4,271 total students served
443 students receiving case-managed support



graduation rate went from
60% to **92%**





Photo left to right: Communities In Schools partner Volunteers of America North Louisiana tutor, Martha Sugar and CIS™ student.

LOUISIANA: Evidence-Based Model Delivers Data-Driven Success

Caddo Parish covers 900 square miles including Shreveport and surrounding rural areas. 90 percent of students served live in poverty and attend school while struggling to meet basic needs for food, clothing, and housing.

PARTNERS

Caddo Parish Public Schools and Volunteers of America

SUPPORT

CIS™ provides training and technical assistance support to Volunteers of America North Louisiana (VOA). As a licensed partner, VOA provides leadership, fundraises and hires site coordinators to implement CIS™ evidence-based model of integrated student supports. Under VOA, site coordinators provide and broker tiered supports to students and partner with the school district to ensure community resources reach students in schools.

“Everything CIS™ does is based on data ... We know it works, the data are strong ...”

Chuck Meehan, President,
Volunteers of America North Louisiana



6 schools receive ISS support



3,400 total students served
330 students receiving case-managed support



72% of students met academic goals
69% of students met attendance goals

OUTCOMES

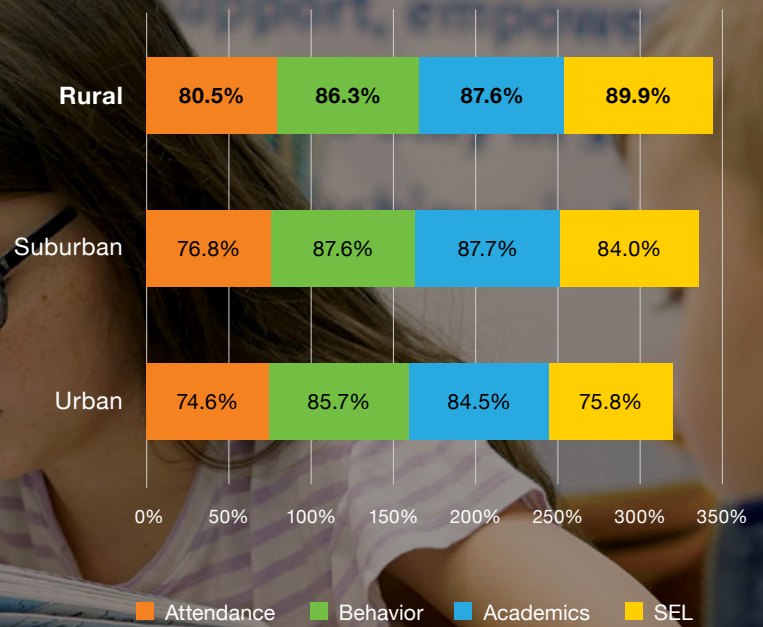
CIS IN RURAL SCHOOLS: STUDENT SUCCESS AND RESOURCE EFFICIENCY

CIS rural affiliates operate with less budget and staff but achieve outcomes similar to and even greater than non-rural peers.

Every school works to achieve student success, but rural schools must do it with fewer resources and higher operating costs. It's the simple, harsh reality for these schools and their students. So, the success of any rural school program is a direct result of how well it is designed and built for that reality. Programs based on theoretical models or representative schools fare poorly.

That's why the CIS™ model works for rural schools. We begin with a needs assessment to understand the unique needs and real-world challenges for the school and individual students. We then work together to identify, develop, and deliver the supports that are most needed and will be most effective and efficient for that school. Together with school staff, we continually monitor, adjust, and evaluate to maximize impact on key measures including attendance, behavior, academics, and SEL. The CIS™ model helps rural students achieve success and rural schools maximize efficiency.

Case-Managed Student Goal Achievement



Getting to Results

CIS in Action in Rural Communities

For many rural communities, the local CIS™ affiliate serves as the “go-to” provider for meeting the needs of students and families. Whether through direct services or connecting to other community and faith-based organizations, CIS™ is there to meet basic needs (e.g., clothing, school supplies, hygiene products), assist with medical, eye, and dental appointments, provide access to mentors and tutors, and offer social and emotional supports to students. CIS™ has responded to the unique challenges of rural communities with promising solutions.

Using Technology to Connect Students to Counseling Services

Since 2007, CIS™ of Northeastern Nevada has worked with the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and its Partnership for Research, Assessment, Counseling, Therapy and Innovative Clinical Education (PRACTICE), a community mental health-training clinic. This partnership is unique to the Elko County area and brings a much-needed resource in rural communities—free counseling to students delivered during the school day. Using technology, the tele-counseling program eliminates both cost and transportation barriers for students aged 12 and older enrolled in the Elko County School District and Great Basin College.

CIS™ of Northeastern Nevada has structured this school-based tele-counseling program in the following way: 1) Students are referred for services by a school counselor, parent/guardian, etc.; 2) CIS™ obtains required HIPPA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) compliant permission forms; 3) Permission forms are faxed to UNLV for assignment to a counselor; 4) CIS™ sets up interactive video appointments at the student’s school; 5) Student attends sessions as set in their treatment plan; and finally, 6) CIS™ is responsible for on-going coordination of appointments for the duration of the student’s treatment. During the 2018-2019 school year, 57 unique clients participated in the UNLV tele-counseling program, attending 590 counseling sessions.

Going Where the Students Are

In the mountains of rural northwest North Carolina, newcomer families from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador live in a single mobile home park to work at the nearby poultry plant. CIS™ of Northwest North Carolina site coordinator Sarah Webster is in the mobile home park, too—in a small, bright mobile unit called La Escuelita (the “little school”) where kids and families gather after school. Sarah serves Moravian Falls Elementary, where 74 percent of her caseload live in this community. In La Escuelita, Sarah hosts regular parent nights to break down barriers between the community and the school. She helps parents navigate challenges from ABCs to housing discrimination, and encourages students to use creative expression to explore emotions and tell their stories.



Photo: Communities In Schools of Northwest North Carolina, La Escuelita



Photo: Communities In Schools of Northeast Texas student Mariah Coleman



Photo: Nursing Instructor from Northeast Texas Community College (NTCC), Lisa McCuller and Communities In Schools of Northeast Texas students

Leveraging An Often Overlooked Rural Asset: The Community College

Located within the Division of Student and Outreach Services of Northeast Texas Community College (NTCC), CIST™ of Northeast Texas provides supports to students and families in 30 schools across 10 districts and 5 rural counties. Beginning in early elementary school, the possibility of college is planted in the minds of students and families by site coordinators. Enrichment opportunities, such as college visits, the Certificate and Professional Programs Exploration Day (CAPPED) program, and plays and other performances offered on the NTCC campus are just a few examples of how CIST™ of Northeast Texas helps create a college-going culture for rural students and their families. CAPPED brings seniors from area high schools to the campus of NTCC to learn about programs available to expedite their entry into a professional career. Students who attend CAPPED are seniors without existing plans to pursue higher education. Throughout the day, college faculty discuss options for seniors, including access to certificate and professional programs offered by NTCC and other colleges. Students also participate in breakout sessions that focus on the college application process, financial aid, and scholarships available to help them attend college.

Supporting Students Beyond High School

In rural communities served by CIST™, 97 percent of case-managed seniors graduate with a high school diploma or GED, yet only 65 percent, on average, report plans to pursue a post-secondary education. While some affiliates, like CIST™ of Northeast Texas are helping to increase this number with early exposure to college and access to information about continuing education opportunities other than a traditional four-year degree, others are ensuring students have the information and supports needed to be successful in their pursuit of a post-secondary education. For CIST™ of Mid-America, the work of CIST™ continues beyond high school. CIST™ of Mid-America, a regional affiliate serving rural communities in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri, has expanded its Alumni Allies Network to provide post-secondary supports for their students. With many rural high schoolers remaining close to home after graduation, the connection made with Alumni Allies before they graduate positions them to remain in relationship with CIST™ during their post-secondary years, and if they wish, receive ongoing supports and access to resources, tools, and peer mentors during their college journey. CIST™ case-managed students are also eligible for the \$500 Tyler Gerhardt Memorial Scholarship available to students demonstrating hard work, ambition, and determination. The scholarship can be used towards tuition and fees, books, and housing.

James Rivera: CIS™ Alumnus Profile

A New Relationship With the Future

James Rivera says, “the future of America is decided in our schools.”

He cites a favorite quote to emphasize the point: “The philosophy in the classroom of this generation will be the philosophy of government in the next.” But James doesn’t just believe this. He’s proving it. And he’s working to make it a central part of his future.

James was born and raised in Lufkin; a small, rural community deep in East Texas. “When people ask me, ‘What city is that near?’ I have to say, well, it’s not really close to anything,” he says with a smile. His mother raised him and three older brothers. “She did it all,” he recalls, “held multiple jobs as a counselor, cashier at the roller rink and the bank, moved us around Lufkin a lot. Whatever she had to do.”

James attended Lufkin’s only middle school and high school. “I was an introvert, mostly kept to myself, with a small group of friends,” he says, “but it was a closed group.” Looking back now, it’s clear to James that his view of himself and his idea of what was possible for his future were being limited. “At the time,” he says, “I didn’t even understand what college meant, how a college education could be for me.”

That’s about when he developed a new relationship—a relationship of trust with a caring adult. Ms. Dolores Perez was the Communities In Schools site coordinator at James’ school. “Ordinary school counselors often focus more on academic progression, but Ms. Perez’s office was a place for me to be myself,” he says. “I could go to her in confidence, talk just between us about what I was wrestling with: Is college really for me? My brothers didn’t do it, so why should I? Am I smart enough? In a small town, where everyone knows everyone else, there really wasn’t any other place to have those conversations.”

CIS™ took James on his first college tour and helped him make his own choice. “Communities In Schools provided resources my school just couldn’t provide,” he says. “Rural schools across the country are in trouble—they’re losing funding and resources.” For James, CIS™ filled the gap and helped him make his own decision. “CIS™ doesn’t tell you what path to choose. They help you decide, but it’s your choice. Once you decide, they help you along by providing resources to guide you on the path to success,” he says.

James chose college. He enrolled in the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) to study Criminal Justice and Public Administration, and successfully navigated his path from 20-person classrooms in a rural high school to 350-person lecture halls on a campus of 30,000 students. In May 2018, he became the first person in his family to earn a college degree.



Photo: Communities In Schools of East Texas alumnus James Rivera

He was chosen for the highly competitive Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute’s Internship Program and is currently serving as an aide in the Office of County Judge in Bexar County, San Antonio. This fall, he’ll attend graduate school to earn his master’s degree in Public Administration from UTSA.

James’ story is vivid proof of his belief that schools decide America’s future.

“Without CIS™, who knows where I’d be” he says. In fact, it’s not hard to know the likely outcome. We know very well what happens to students like James when their limited view of themselves and their possibilities is never impacted by resources like CIS™. The data on graduation rates, college attendance, and substance abuse among students in under-resourced rural schools is brutally clear.

But James’ outcome is different. His view of himself and his idea of what’s possible in his life are anything but limited. Spend just a few minutes with him and you can’t help but be impressed by his genuine optimism, informed perspective, and deep conviction. A conversation about his future includes aspirations like becoming Secretary of Education—and even Governor of Texas.

The future of James Rivera was clearly decided in his school. And it is very bright.

COVID-19 AND IMPACTS

The spread of COVID-19 in the United States presents an unprecedented challenge to all communities. Rural communities are going to be uniquely impacted in three primary ways. The first is economic vulnerability, particularly as it relates to lagging recovery from the 2008-2009 recession. The Economic Innovation Group reports that in 2016, which saw the largest post-recession increase in number of new businesses established, urban areas saw an average growth of 760 new businesses whereas exurbs (semi-rural communities connected to urban centers) saw an average of 72 and truly rural communities (not economically tied to urban centers) saw an average of 3 new businesses established. A lagging recovery has led to uncertainty about if and how these communities weather another economic set-back. The second factor is access to healthcare. Pew Research reports that on average, rural Americans live about twice as far from hospitals (10.5 miles) than their urban (4.4 miles) and suburban (5.6 miles) counterparts. Rural communities have the largest discrepancy between those living closest and farthest to hospitals (6 minutes vs. 34 minutes on average). In a time of strained healthcare resources, rural residents may experience delays and high costs associated with treatment and prevention. And lastly, rural communities experience persistent levels of poverty which put a strain on the infrastructure supporting vulnerable populations. More than one-third of low wage workers (likely hourly) live in rural communities according to the Urban Institute. This increases to close to 40 percent when accounting for those living at 200 percent or less of the federal poverty level.

Lagging Recovery, Now a Crisis

While the country overall, prior to the current crisis, has seen extended economic growth since the Great Recession, rural communities have lagged in areas of wage growth, available jobs and achieving individual or family-based financial security. Some communities have begun experiencing economic growth on par with non-rural areas, but the foundations of economic mobility aren't as strong or durable. With businesses shut down or reducing productivity over the course of the pandemic, those foundations are likely to weaken further, deepening and lengthening the economic impacts to rural communities.

This economic instability extends well beyond employment and mobility. Healthcare, community-based organizations and school systems are under-resourced and unfunded. This will exacerbate the two-pronged impact of the pandemic: the financial stability and health of individual households. It goes without saying that

we understand how this affects the academic success of students, their social and emotional wellness and long-term prospects for academic achievement and career success.

Access Issues

We should consider the unique characteristics of rural communities when designing and implementing current responses to these challenges. Reaching the top of this list are the natural barriers to resource access present in these communities including access to testing, healthcare and basic needs made difficult by proximity and availability. Organizations like CIS™ are well-positioned to address these barriers and help bring about change within their communities, both for this current crisis and for strong foundations in the future. Coordinating supports such as telehealth, transportation and information sharing will help to strengthen a community's response, relief and recovery efforts.



Photo left to right: Communities In Schools of the Big Country
Director of Programs Justin Whiteley, Executive Director Paul
Wallace, MSW Intern Morgan Patillo, Director of Operations
Christian Clyburn, and Abilene ISD Homeless Liaison Darrin Cox



Photo: Communities In Schools of Northwest Michigan
Program Assistant Lisa Schepperley

ON RURAL COMMUNITIES

“CIS has built such great relationships with families and school staff that schools are relying on us to do what we do best: reaching families and filling needs. We anticipate new needs will arise as this situation evolves, and we’ll be there to step in, changing what we do every day.”

Amy Burk, Executive Director, CIS™ of Northwest Michigan

Focus on Families

As CIS™ organizations, we understand the way a student shows up at school is reflective of what is happening at home. The employment status of parents, the availability of parents or guardians to be fully present in their child’s lives, the need to care for siblings or other younger household members, and access to basic needs impact how well a student takes advantage of educational opportunities. We should assume all those factors are exacerbated right now and connections to families are that much more critical. The CIS™ network has acted quickly and we are seeing needs assessments shifting toward a focus on the entire family. Our site coordinators have pivoted toward reaching into the home to provide support in safe and effective ways. This includes check-ins with the entire family, ensuring safety and security in the home, accessing partners to respond quickly to a family in need, such as one unable to afford utility costs or transportation, and providing a strong set of social and emotional supports that are established for families. To “get in the door”, CIS™ is reaching out to help with basic needs to address critical areas such as food insecurity. These entry points into the home help us to understand the bigger picture and engage the community in wrapping around the family. The work of several affiliates in response to COVID-19 is featured here.

CIS™ of Northwest Michigan

CIS™ of Northwest Michigan is responding to a critical issue for rural families right now: food insecurity. With schools closed, the CIS™ team has added logistics to its long list of job responsibilities. CIS™ delivers meals to students on behalf of local food banks and the school districts. In one district this amounts to 350 deliveries (one-third of the student population), three days a week. To meet the need, CIS™ staff at all levels map out the delivery routes each day, fill a bus with food and coordinate delivery as efficiently as possible. And when the school district needed to get learning packets to students unable to access online resources, CIS™ added those to its delivery route. Because CIS™ knows these families, filling this role is a great benefit to the school system and keeping families engaged.

CIS™ of the Big Country

CIS™ of the Big Country, Texas staff are using virtual platforms to reach students with social and emotional learning supports. In middle schools, coaches are using art activities to help students share their feelings over Google Classroom. In high schools, CIS™ staff are sharing videos on resiliency skills and using the time to discuss the students’ reactions to the films. This has also included weekly “Wellness Wednesdays” focusing on students’ mental health and wellness with mindfulness activities. Mental-health resources are available in an online platform that CIS™ has created so that students can access help when they need it, especially now that meeting with CIS™ staff during the school day is more difficult. By creating new environments to reach students, CIS™ of the Big Country can maintain continued services to students and focus on the deep impacts of this crisis on student well-being.

CIS™ of Tennessee

Site coordinators with CIS™ of Tennessee have been working with rural families, helping them navigate and support themselves during this difficult time. This has included helping grandparents raising a teenage student to navigate the IRS website to receive their stimulus money under the CARES Act. Staying in touch with graduating seniors has also been critical, facilitating the college entry process, navigating access to scholarships and supporting transitions into careers. With wide-spread unemployment, site coordinators are learning to and helping parents and guardians navigate verifying and applying for unemployment benefits. Making sure students are not derailed in their academic progress has been just as critical as maintaining a sense of normalcy. This means things like celebrating birthdays and “drive-by” graduation parties as well as navigating internet access issues for residents in more remote areas. Site coordinators are responding to the individual needs of families across this region of rural Tennessee, providing support for a new normal.

LOOKING AHEAD

WHAT'S NEXT **FOR COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS**

Communities In Schools will continue to connect students to the people and support they need to overcome the systemic issues and obstacles they face. Nowhere are those systemic issues and obstacles more challenging than in rural communities.

So, we will strengthen and grow our presence in rural schools. We'll focus on meeting the unique challenges rural schools face, including filling critical gaps in services—and doing it with urgency and efficiency. CIS™ rural affiliates have demonstrated their ability to help more rural students achieve success—and do it with the limited budgets and staff that rural schools demand.

CIS™ will also remain committed to expanding our impact in all schools, for all students—rural, urban, and suburban. To accomplish this, we'll focus on our strategic priorities, including maintaining excellence in our data gathering and analysis, and using that data for the ongoing improvement of our evidence-based model of integrated student supports. We'll continue to build a healthy, thriving network of committed, well-trained professionals. We will work with education leaders and policy makers to advance the understanding and practice of ISS across the country.

And, most importantly, we'll still be grounded in the insight of our founder, Bill Milliken. “Programs don't change people. Relationships do.”

Learn more about our work at CommunitiesInSchools.org.



WHAT WE ARE MADE OF



To explore students' stories using augmented reality, scan the QR code with your camera to download the Communities In Schools app. Then, use the app to scan the large portraits.



This vibrant collection of student portraits provides a multidimensional view of the challenges and triumphs students across America experience every day. Through these powerful stories, learn how Communities In Schools empowers young people to reach their full potential both in and out of the classroom.

Visit [CommunitiesInSchools.org](https://www.CommunitiesInSchools.org) to explore the other student stories featured in this collection.

