There is a clear consensus among principals, administrators, and teachers that helping students succeed requires more than academic support. But there is much less clarity on how schools can best deliver the wide range of services and expertise needed to address challenges such as a lack of secure housing, behavioral issues, and food insecurity.
Communities in Schools (CIS) works directly with 2,500 schools in 25 states and the District of Columbia, partnering with schools and communities to deliver an evidence-based model of integrated student supports (ISS) to about 1.6 million students. Focusing on integration, CIS works to translate a complex maze of services into a comprehensive, coherent system in its communities.

Schools that have implemented the ISS model have made significant improvements in their ability to provide students with the support they need to overcome the obstacles they face and achieve success. From attendance (99 percent of CIS students stayed in school), to graduation rates (93 percent of seniors in CIS schools graduated or received GEDs), to discipline challenges (90 percent of CIS students met or made progress toward their behavioral goals), CIS data offers a compelling case for integration.

To learn more about how CIS partners with schools, we interviewed two members of its leadership team: Heather J. Clawson, chief program and innovation officer, and Michael Huang, vice president of learning and practice.

How do you typically describe wraparound services, or as CIS calls them, integrated student supports (ISS), to educators?

Clawson: We think it’s important to stress that it’s more than just having services available for students. It’s really an intentional, systematic approach to delivering academic and social-emotional supports to ensure students have what they need to participate in learning and be successful academically. It’s having both a process and a person to lead the work in a way that ensures the right students are identified, connected to the right supports, and monitored for success. Ultimately, it’s all geared toward improving attendance, behavior, and course performance so students can be successful in school.

Huang: Intentionality is what makes ISS different. That’s what moves it from what the Children’s Aid Society calls “random acts of siloed programming” to a broader, strategic approach. It’s doing
it all in a very deliberate and systematic way—the planning to gain buy-in, the systems to monitor, and the data to demonstrate results. All of these build a wealth of support for the plan and a culture of integration and intention throughout the school.

Does that description change when talking with principals?

Clawson: For principals, ISS is a tool that helps them meet the goals they’ve set for the school. Specifically, CIS ensures more efficient access and use of school and community resources that address barriers to learning. Essentially, CIS ensures that available resources are, in fact, accessible to those who need them most. Focusing on these barriers means teachers can concentrate on teaching; they are not pulled away by more challenging behavioral issues. There’s someone else in the building focused on these issues—understanding their underlying causes and putting solutions in place.

Huang: I’d add that principals are freed up to lead. Our model recognizes a principal’s very real need for more capacity to deliver integrated supports and services. The CIS site coordinator acts

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as an additional set of hands—a person with a designated focus on integrating social and emotional supports and services. The approach and the person become fully integrated into how the school operates and how it helps students achieve success.

What is the role of the principal when a school makes the choice to implement ISS?

**Clawson:** It’s being the champion of educating the whole child. And this is asking a lot, but it really is putting the social and emotional needs of students on a par with academics. It’s being visibly engaged throughout the process: directing and shaping the effort, being part of the planning, setting goals, and staying informed throughout the school year.

**Huang:** The principal has to have the vision, bring the right people to the table, and set the expectation that these processes are going to happen. Most principals have the desire to provide vision and drive results but lack the time to do so because of the daily demands they face. So, he or she must also have a productive working relationship with a designated person—our site coordinator—who is in lockstep with the vision and can drive day-to-day results.

Are there certain types of schools in which ISS works better—rural, urban, etc.?

**Clawson:** It works in all types of schools. Through our research and third-party evaluations, we’ve been able to show this model works in grades pre-K–12, in schools in rural, urban, and suburban communities. While our process is standardized, it’s also adaptable to meet local needs and conditions. Our staff know how to maximize available supports and services to meet the greatest needs of a school and its students.

In your opinion, what are the key reasons the ISS model works?

**Clawson:** One of the keys to our success is that we’re driven by data. We use data throughout the process to understand what the problems are, to identify which students are most in need of supports, to provide access to effective supports and services, and to monitor what’s working and what’s not.

We begin with a thorough needs assessment, then develop plans that are aligned with those needs, then establish measurable goals. It isn’t just delivering outputs; it’s tracking measurable progress toward clear goals. At the core of our success, however, are relationships. Without positive, trusting relationships among adults and students within a school, the hard, yet critical, work can’t happen.

**Huang:** A big part of why the CIS model works is because we focus on ensuring there is buy-in from the outset. We build awareness and understanding. And then we back it all up with data and measures that create a school ecosystem.

Communities in Schools has a strong track record of success in ISS. In your opinion, why has it been successful?

**Huang:** We’ve been working with local communities and schools for more than 40 years. We’ve adapted our evidence-based model along the way, strengthening the process and collecting more data. But I’d also cite another reason for our success: We’ve always tried to bring an element of humility to how we work. We don’t walk into a school thinking nothing has been happening before. Listening to the community is the first step. Together with key stakeholders, we identify the unique needs of each individual community through a needs assessment. Those unique needs are always the basis of the plan that’s developed.

Steve Majors is vice president of branding and communications for Communities in Schools.