

**Testimony of Daniel J. Cardinali  
President**

**Communities In Schools, Inc.**

**Before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions  
Wednesday, March 28, 2007**

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**Introduction**

Chairman Kennedy, Ranking Member Enzi, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to testify today. So much of our national dialogue concerning our nation's epidemic dropout rate and persistent achievement gaps centers on the challenges we face and not the solutions that can meet those challenges. Today, I want to shift the discussion and focus to a proven solution—time-tested, research-based, scalable, and illustrated in the lives of millions of students every year. I want to talk about community-based, integrated student services and the need for federal policy to embrace this strategy among others being pursued to ensure educational success for all students. My name is Dan Cardinali and I am the President of Communities In Schools, the nation's largest dropout prevention organization.

For 30 years, Communities In Schools has worked to connect community resources with the students who need them most. Whether students need tutoring, homework help, eyeglasses, adults who believe in them, or just a safe place to be, Communities In Schools finds the resources and delivers them right inside the schools where young people spend their days. Communities In Schools reaches low performing students and students at risk of dropping out of school [collectively "at-risk students"] in 27 states and the District of Columbia in more than 3,250 schools. Our model, serving students through community-based, integrated student services, has proven to work for all types of communities—urban, rural, and suburban—and at all levels of the elementary and secondary pipeline. Eighty to 90 percent of our tracked students show improvement in academic performance, behavior, and attendance. During the school year, the number of suspensions among our tracked students is reduced, and the rate of promotion to the next grade level also increases.

Today, I'd like to address three points regarding this model of student and school support:

1. A description of the model—what it means operationally for schools, how it is implemented, and how it meets the needs of at-risk students.
2. The undisputed evidence that the model works—the national data, the educational research, and most importantly, the stories of success that illustrate how community-based, integrated student services actually make the difference in lives of students throughout our country.
3. The ways in which federal law should embrace this effort—integrating this proven strategy into the accountability requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act when that legislation is reauthorized.

I hope that when I conclude my remarks, the Committee will better understand the wisdom—educationally *and* fiscally—of making modest investments that have the power to transform students' and families' lives by *systemically* addressing our nation's dropout and achievement gap crises.

## **The Community-Based, Integrated Student Services Model**

Let me begin with a brief description of the community-based integrated student services model. Community-based, integrated student services are interventions that improve student achievement by connecting already existing resources in the community—such as mentoring, physical and mental health services, career and college guidance, service-learning, and after-school programs—with public schools to help meet the social, emotional, physical—as well as academic—needs of students. By bringing existing services, parents, and volunteers into schools to work with educators, student needs can be met on an individual, case-by-case basis and through school-wide programs. Through the efforts of a single point of contact (which we refer to as a school site coordinator), student needs are assessed, and research-based connections are made between students and targeted community resources.

If it's this simple, one might ask, "Why aren't all schools pursuing these resources and services?" In part, the answer lies in the fact that the existing resources in a community that are available to help students and schools are frequently in place, but they're in the wrong place. They are scattered all over town, difficult to access, and open for limited hours. Each support system—an afterschool program, a doctor's office, a mentoring program—has its independent bureaucracy, and requires its own paperwork and systems. Moreover, these systems aren't coordinated in a way to ensure that the delivery is coordinated and personalized to a student's specific needs. The community-based, integrated services model connects these services to schools and students in an organized way in order to assist students effectively and efficiently.

For example, consider Tara, an 11-year old struggling in middle school. She needs physical and mental health care, an afterschool program, and tutoring. She has a single mother who works for an hourly wage—meaning she doesn't get paid if she doesn't go to work—and doesn't own a car. To make all the appointments, Tara's mother has to take multiple days off work and some of the services from which her daughter could benefit aren't even possible to access, due to cost or distance from their home or public transportation. In short, getting her daughter access to needed services is frustrating and a serious financial hardship, not to mention a logistical nightmare. But in the community-based integrated services model, the school becomes the delivery point for all these services. What's more, there's a dedicated person whose job it is to ensure that services are delivered in a personal, accountable, and coordinated way. (A graphic in Appendix A illustrates how the model works.)

Finally, it is important to recognize that the community-based, integrated student services model does not fundamentally represent yet another new program on top of others. Rather, the model coordinates *existing* resources in order to maximize their impact and create better outcomes for students. It takes services that often exist in silos, uncoordinated, and difficult to access and leverages them through connections to students in need. Critical to the success of this model are volunteers. For example, Communities In Schools' heavily engages volunteers—about 50,000 annually in recent years— as well as existing community-based service organizations. For this reason, these initiatives are extraordinarily cost-effective, typically requiring \$400 or less per year for each tracked student. In addition, each \$100 of public resources that Communities In Schools uses leverages \$82 of private resources! In short, it's not about how much money is spent; it's about leveraging and spending existing resources better.

### **The Proven Effectiveness of Community-Based Integrated Student Services**

Extensive research reflects that community-based, integrated student services are necessary components of effective, school-based efforts to increase graduation rates and improve student achievement. More than 70 percent of the students served by Communities In Schools are poor and of color—groups most at risk of dropping out. While the national dropout rate is 4.8 percent, the dropout rate for African-American and Latino students is between 6 and 7 percent. As we know, dropping out is not an isolated event. It is a cumulative process associated with well-recognized risk factors. Our research demonstrates that only 2 percent of students who were tracked as potential dropouts and provided community-based, integrated services actually dropped out of school, cutting in half the national dropout rate.<sup>1</sup> These services have been evaluated with respect to their impact on the risk factors most frequently associated with high school dropouts and significantly:

- Improve student attendance in school (in our study 82 percent of students had better attendance);
- Reduce behavior incidents (in our study 86 percent had improved behavior);
- Reduce incidents of suspension (in our study 85 percent had fewer suspensions);
- Improve academic achievement (in our study 89 percent improved academics);
- Improve school retention (in our study 98 percent remained in school); and
- Raise graduation rates (in our study 85 percent of eligible seniors graduated).<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, independent research has verified the effectiveness of the community-based, integrated student services model. For instance, a comprehensive evaluation of nine school sites in three New England states that participated in a community-based school environment education project showed growth in teacher enthusiasm and skill, increases in student engagement and learning, academic achievement, and knowledge about the social and natural environment.<sup>3</sup> Further, 92 percent of schools participating in a separate integrated learning environment program found that students academically outperformed their peers in traditional programs as measured by standardized tests, classroom behavior problems reduced by as much as 95 percent, and attendance increased.<sup>4</sup>

We also know that this model is grounded enough in research and theory, yet flexible enough, to work in diverse environments. Communities In Schools affiliates serve all types of students in all types of schools and communities—urban, suburban, and rural. Students in these programs range from native Alaskans to migrant children to disadvantaged youth and every type of child in between. In Alaska, our relatively new Communities In Schools affiliate works to serve more than 1,600 students in 19 schools of various sizes all across this vast state, from Juneau to Nome. In North Carolina, Communities In Schools affiliates make a difference for 80,000 students at

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<sup>1</sup> Extrapolated from findings of Communities In Schools, "Connecting Kids with Community Resources," 2004-2005 Results from the Network report. <http://www.cisnet.org/media/pubs.asp>

<sup>2</sup> Extrapolated from findings of Communities In Schools, "Connecting Kids With Community Resources," 2004-2005 Results From the Network report. <http://www.cisnet.org/media/pubs.asp>

<sup>3</sup> PEER Associates, "An Evaluation of Project Co-Seed: Community-Based School Environmental Project, 2003-2004" (Antioch New England Institute and the Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaborative, December 2004).

<sup>4</sup> The State Education and Environmental Roundtable (SEER). <http://www.seer.org/pages/research>. Cited in materials from the South Carolina EIC School Network.

411 school sites from Charlotte to Cape Fear. And in Texas, more than 440,000 students are directly connected with services in more than 630 school sites.

Beyond the data points, the impact of these services can be most vividly seen in the lives of actual students. For instance:

- Martha is a current student in one of our affiliates in central Texas. She is 15 and is repeating the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Earlier in the year, she was debating dropping out of school and was failing all of her classes. But her problems weren't just academic. Martha had had a series of abusive relationships with boys and wasn't getting along socially with other students. She struggled at home, too, at one point even running away. After a referral by a teacher to Communities In Schools, a site coordinator in her school helped connect Martha with a tutor, arrange for a psychological evaluation in a timely way (the wait was usually 3 to 6 months), and, once she was diagnosed with depression, facilitate therapy for her and for her family. She also participated in a community organization, Safeplace, which offers a program for teens who had been in abusive relationships. With the help of these interventions and her caring site coordinator, Martha has undergone a 180-degree transformation. Today, she's working hard in school, at her family and personal relationships, and is on back on track.
- In Philadelphia, 22-year old Rasheedah Phillips is a graduate of Temple University and a law student. Rasheedah's journey has been characterized by her determination and the support she received from Communities In Schools. After becoming pregnant as a freshman in high school, Rasheedah was referred to Communities In Schools to participate in the Education Leading to Employment and Career Training, an initiative administered locally as a partnership between the School District of Philadelphia and Communities In Schools. She participated in the Teen Parent Classrooms program which provides pregnant and parenting teens with academic, health, and social service supports they need to complete their education and transition to work or post-secondary education. Through this program, Rasheedah drew on the support of staff members, counselors, and social workers who encouraged her and kept her and her daughter healthy and on track to graduate. Her daughter, now seven years old, has a mom who has completed her first year of law school.
- Acton Archie graduated with honors from North Carolina State and has a good job in the information technology field, but such a bright future was by no means guaranteed. Acton moved 12 times in 12 years and grew up in a rough neighborhood. His father had been murdered when he was five and his mother was a drug addict. Acton had already been in trouble when he became involved with Communities In Schools, where mentors helped Acton focus on improving academically. He participated in Communities In Schools' ThinkCOLLEGE program which helps students find scholarships and qualify for higher education. Acton won two scholarships that helped him to attend college. He now works as a business analyst.
- Robert Guy moved around a lot during his growing up years and struggled to find his place. In order to move forward in school and in life, he needed to focus on improving his grades and study skills. Communities In Schools helped him through its non-traditional high school, the Classic City Performance Learning Center in

Athens, Georgia. There, surrounded by supportive staff—including a learning facilitator and advisor—teachers, and other students, Robert thrived. He worked hard to improve his grades and study skills and became a leader in the school. In two years, his efforts helped him to win a scholarship to Morehouse College, where he is pursuing his undergraduate degree and on the Dean's list.

These are just four stories of the thousands that illustrate the way in which community-based, integrated student services can help students excel and achieve their dreams. For every student like Martha, Rasheedah, Acton, and Robert, however, there are thousands more who need that assistance.

It is, therefore, no surprise that the bipartisan Commission on No Child Left Behind in its recently released report, *Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to Our Nation's Children*, concluded:

We believe it is crucial to address students' behavioral and social needs in addition to their academic needs. Therefore, we recommend requiring schools to determine the availability of social services and mental health services for their students while developing the school's improvement plan. Schools...should fully understand all needs of their students and the resources to meet those needs. Academic interventions can be more effective when coupled with an assessment of the mental health and other needs of students.<sup>5</sup>

And, just last year, the Appleseed Foundation conducted a national study that involved a nine-month investigation in eighteen school districts in six states, where (among others) more than 100 school district and school leaders and teachers were interviewed and where nearly 30 parent focus groups were conducted. Appleseed concluded in one of its five recommendations that districts and schools "should leverage their own limited support by engaging community organizations." Specifically, Appleseed found:

[There is] nearly universal acknowledgement by educators, parent groups and community groups about the vital impact that supporting trusted community organizations can have in helping students and schools succeed.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the report recommended that districts and schools should:

- **Evaluate student needs and available resources...** The first step in leveraging community support is evaluating the needs of students and the kinds of resources that are available to meet them.
- **Ensure that staff are charged with making community connections...** Districts and schools should clearly designate individuals who are responsible for making the necessary connections between community resources and student/parent needs.

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<sup>5</sup> The Commission on No Child Left Behind. *Beyond No Child Left Behind* (2007). [http://www.aspeninstitute.org/site/c.huLWJeMRKpH/b.938015/k.40DA/Commission\\_on\\_No\\_Child\\_Left\\_Behind.htm](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/site/c.huLWJeMRKpH/b.938015/k.40DA/Commission_on_No_Child_Left_Behind.htm), 94.

<sup>6</sup> Appleseed Foundation, "It Takes a Parent: Transforming Education in the Wake of the No Child Left Behind Act," (2006). <http://www.appleseednetwork.org/servlet/PublicationInfo?articleId=211>, 35.

- **Develop clear areas of responsibility and measure results...** [A]ny outreach and services coordination plan should be fully integrated and aligned with the district's overall accountability plan.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Imperative for Congressional Action**

This basic framework proposed by the Appleseed study, which is aligned with the theory and operation of the community-based integrated student services model, should therefore be at the forefront of conversations regarding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. With their passage over five years ago, the amendments to ESEA reflected in The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 focused on a number of core academic accountability measures, including the development of accountability systems with data transparency, more expansive use of standardized testing, and greater emphasis on teacher quality. However, while those areas of focus are vitally important, research and practice both tell us (as discussed above) that more is required to support students who are at significant risk of dropping out of school or not achieving academic success. And it is important to recognize that five years since the passage of No Child Left Behind, not only are the dropout crisis and achievement gap real, but they are, in the vast majority of cases, preventable. Thus, in short, federal law addresses a necessary but not sufficient set of conditions and challenges that must be addressed if the goal of leaving no child behind is to be realized.

On January 31, 2007, Communities In Schools presented to Congress our major recommendations regarding the reauthorization of ESEA that addresses that gap. (I have attached a copy of our policy brief and these recommendations as Appendix B in my testimony.) In summary, Communities In Schools recommends that federal law incorporate as a major element of reform community-based, integrated strategies in the three ways:

1. The establishment of school-based coordinators responsible for assessing and connecting student needs and community resources;
2. Expansion of the range of school improvement steps required of schools not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), including consideration of ways community-based integrated student services might be leveraged to support their efforts; and
3. Authorization of funding for a new national initiative that will establish and implement research- and evidence-based standards associated with community-based integrated student services in order to support the provision of systemic, replicable, and cost-effective services.

First, Congress should provide competitive grant funding for community-based, nonprofit organizations to provide integrated, school-based services to at-risk students with funding targeted toward support for dedicated staff in schools that can identify and match student needs and community resources to meet those needs. The effective and efficient delivery of community-based, integrated services to students depends upon this important staff foundation. This is why Communities in Schools is so pleased to support the legislation that Senator Kennedy has just authored, the Keeping PACE Act. For the first time in history, this legislation, if passed, would incorporate as part of ESEA key elements of a time-tested model to advance meaningful community and parental involvement in schools. Specifically, that legislation

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<sup>7</sup> Appleseed Foundation, "It Takes a Parent: Transforming Education in the Wake of the No Child Left Behind Act," (2006). <http://www.appleseednetwork.org/servlet/PublicationInfo?articleId=211>, 35.

recognizes the importance of dedicated staff who are charged with the responsibility of connecting community resources with students in need, as well as the wisdom of a federal investment in the community sector—all with key elements of accountability that would drive program operations and the evaluation of outcomes.

Second, Congress should expand the range of support for schools not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). In basic terms, we must move to a system of differentiated consequences for schools not making AYP, so that the support or intervention provided to those schools is directly aligned with and proportional to the actual schools' needs—and therefore more likely to help the school achieve its improvement goals. I know that you have heard from many charged with implementing federal law about the vital need to take this step, a point on which we concur.<sup>8</sup> Communities In Schools is asking that all schools be required to evaluate and, as appropriate, pursue the effective and efficient delivery of community-based, integrated student services when they do not meet state performance goals over time. This focus should be a central—and required—element of school improvement planning for schools that are struggling to meet the needs of their students.

Third, Congress should authorize funding for a new initiative that will establish and implement a national framework for research- and evidence-based criteria to guide the provision of systemic, scalable, cost-effective, and educationally sound services. The delivery of community-based, integrated student services in schools nationwide should be guided by criteria and standards that govern the delivery of training, technical assistance, certification, and evaluation services for community-based organizations that provide integrated student services to at-risk youth. For the purposes of educational effectiveness and fiscal efficiency, we believe that Congress should authorize a national initiative that:

- Establishes systemic, replicable, and research-based support for the local provision of community-based, integrated student services;
- Ensures that the federal investment adheres to well-developed, research-and evidence-based models, and that students are receiving high-quality, effective, and cost-efficient services and interventions;
- Provides school coordinators, who play a critical role in making connections between community resources and students in need, access to high-quality technical assistance and training; and
- Evaluates programs based on national standards.

## **Conclusion**

The role of community organizations in schools offers tremendous potential to improve the lives of students *and* to leverage the public's current investment in education. Strategies to integrate student services are effective ways of reaching students and helping them to achieve their fullest

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<sup>8</sup> See *Recommendations to Reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, Council of Chief State School Officers (2007), "The reauthorized ESEA should encourage a full range of rewards and consequences for districts and schools that differ appropriately in nature and degree, based, for example, on whether schools miss AYP by a little versus a lot. CCSSO urges Congress to amend NCLB Section 1116 to permit states to exercise appropriate judgment and differentiate both accountability determinations and consequences based on sound evidence. This includes targeting interventions to the lowest performing students/subgroups that do not meet AYP and maintaining consequences (without escalation) where schools are demonstrating significant plans and progress in addressing identified underperformance." [www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/ESEA\\_rec\\_final.pdf](http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/ESEA_rec_final.pdf), 4.

potential. Given the private sector volunteer commitment associated with these services, those strategies are also fiscally smart. Congress should, therefore, take action by providing systemic funding and structure to ensure that community-based student services can effectively leverage and maximize the impact of other federal investments in education.

Indeed, the cost of inaction is very high. If we fail to address the dropout epidemic and achievement gaps, the consequences will affect not only individual students, but also our nation's economic prosperity and national security interests. The American Youth Policy Forum estimates that "[i]ncreasing the high school completion rate by 1 percent for all men ages 20-60 would save the United States \$1.4 billion annually in reduced costs associated with crime." In addition, "dropouts are also substantially more likely to rely on public assistance. The estimated lifetime revenue loss for male dropouts ages 25-34 is \$944 billion. The cost to the public of their crime and welfare benefits is estimated to total \$24 billion annually."<sup>9</sup>

The simple truth is that many students who are at risk of dropping out or failing to achieve their highest potential have the talent, intelligence, and potential to achieve, but they need assistance to address challenges that stand in their way. And this assistance extends beyond the classroom. This is why federal law should include systemic support for comprehensive reform strategies that include community-based, integrated student services.

Let me conclude by quoting Heather Weiss, the Director of the Harvard Family Research Project, who has said: "The question we must ask is, in addition to quality schools, what nonschool learning resources should we invest in and scale up to improve educational outcomes, narrow achievement gaps, and equip our children with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the complex and global 21<sup>st</sup> century?" Disadvantaged students often need more than the best teachers or the most rigorous curriculum in order to succeed—they need additional supports that will reinforce and leverage the investments of educators in our schools."<sup>10</sup> I hope that Congress and this Administration will conclude, as Ms. Weiss has, that "[n]ow is the time...[for] action."

I want to thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today. Senator Kennedy and Senator Isakson, I want to thank each of you for your support in this vital sector. I look forward to answering any questions that you might have.

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<sup>9</sup> American Youth Policy Forum, "Every Nine Seconds in America a Student Becomes a Dropout," Excerpted from *Whatever it Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth* (2006). <http://www.aypf.org/publications/EveryNineSeconds.pdf>, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Heather Weiss, "From the Director's Desk," *The Evaluation Exchange*, 10 (1), (2005). <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue29/director.html>, 1.