



Expanding Integrated Student Supports through a Licensed Partnership: Success in West Virginia



Abstract

[Communities In Schools](#) (CIS™) and the West Virginia Department of Education created a partnership in 2018 to deliver the CIS model of Integrated student supports to some of the state’s most at-risk students. Rather than expand the presence of an affiliated CIS nonprofit organization, the partnership “licensed” the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) to train local practitioners to implement an evidence-based model and granted permission to use the CIS name and logo for fundraising and community visibility. WVDE began the project with a pilot in nine schools in school year 2018-2019. Finding success with students and support from local and political stakeholders, WVDE expanded the model to more than 110 schools serving approximately 50,000 students as of March 2021. Supported by training from CIS, WVDE sets baselines and targets to achieve in student outcomes such as attendance, behavior, and course performance. Staff at the state department coordinate with county contacts and provide grant funding to hire school-based site coordinators. (In West Virginia, counties and school districts include the same geographic area, so the term “county” refers to the district or local education agency.) Federal, state, and philanthropic funds are braided to ensure long-term sustainability. A three-year benchmark of program implementation indicates the evidence-based model is being implemented with fidelity and West Virginians have embraced the “secret sauce” of Integrated student supports: high quality relationships between adults and students served. Stakeholder cohesion and trust are reported to be high. Key takeaways gleaned from continuous learning indicate the licensed partnership model can be replicated in other states.

The Need Identified

When her husband became governor of West Virginia in 2017, Cathy Justice knew education would be her primary initiative as First Lady of the Mountain State. She and the Governor could see the dire need for bettering the lives of children. “All one needs to do is look around,” the First Lady remembers, recalling instances observed on the campaign trail in which children did not have proper healthcare, enough food or clothing, or even a warm bed in which to sleep. She knew that schools could be a place where access to services like these were coordinated for families in need.

The Justices believed it was their duty to improve opportunities for young people in a state where behavioral challenges complicated the work of teachers and principals, families were reeling from the scourge of opioids, and the foster care system was in crisis. “We knew we needed to think big. The Governor and I knew we needed an all-hands-on-deck approach...” Early in the Governor’s first term, Mrs. Justice called on then-State Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Steve Paine. And, with a marathon meeting at the Governor’s Mansion, the work to find a solution began.

The Approach

Both Mrs. Justice and Superintendent Paine were aware of CIS and its [model](#) of Integrated student supports from the work of the local CIS affiliate in Greenbrier, West Virginia. The First Lady’s involvement in Greenbrier began in 2004. Of particular interest was the success the local organization had demonstrated with high school graduation rates. Superintendent Paine shared the First Lady’s admiration for the work, having seen results in Greenbrier, but he knew more needed to be done throughout his state to tackle the issue of poverty. “Poverty is the enemy,” Paine says. Statewide, West Virginia [data](#) called for solutions like CIS offered.

It quickly became clear that the small Greenbrier affiliate, while achieving results with those students it was already serving, would be hard-pressed to grow at the rate and scale West Virginia required. At a meeting in the Governor’s Mansion and in subsequent conversations, state officials pressed staff from the CIS National Office for other options. CIS responded with a licensure pilot, a way to directly empower West Virginians with the training necessary to



carry out the CIS model of Integrated student supports. Establishing a new nonprofit would not be necessary; WVDE staff would direct public dollars to local schools, to employ school-based site coordinators who would identify students with the most challenges and assist them through case management and connection of community resources to the schools.

Governor Justice donated his state salary and Superintendent Paine identified funds through the WVDE. A part-time state coordinator was designated at the department, and a system of state grants to local counties (districts) was established. The counties of Berkeley, McDowell, and Wyoming were selected as pilots for school year 2018-19 to start small on the way to thinking big, adding nine new schools to the previous 10 schools served by the CIS of Greenbrier affiliate.

From Pilot to Expansion

Early results, as well as community enthusiasm, were positive in the pilot counties and, by January 2019, Governor Justice was convinced the program would work at scale and thus merited additional resources. In his State of the State Address, the governor called for additional state funding; the legislature concurred. New stakeholders began to take notice. In May 2019, WVDE issued a detailed report after a community engagement and research effort called *West Virginia Voice*. It included data from over 20,000 interviews with West Virginians, and the report highlighted the shared goal of “social emotional supports” such as those offered through CIS: “Forum attendees overwhelmingly recognized a need for greater social-emotional supports for students. Additionally, the need to take significant action to address the heightened social-emotional issues facing students in West Virginia was expressed due to the effects of increased drug use, including the opioid crisis.”¹ Further, the report writers noted: “...stakeholder support for embedding social services in schools is widespread. Three-quarters (75%) of respondents to the Education Survey for Family and Community see embedded social services as a worthwhile investment of tax dollars. Nearly all (93%) of the 605 comment card respondents in 2019 agreed with the idea, including 78% who strongly agreed.”²

July saw the first Summer Institute training conference and the expansion of CIS to eight more counties³ (a total of 37 new schools) at the start of school year 2019-20. The three original pilot counties also deepened their program into an additional 16 schools, and others began to express interest. Superintendent Paine and his staff recall how the idea took hold with more and more counties.⁴ By January 2020, three additional counties with 10 schools joined the program and used their own resources to pay school-based personnel to fulfill the site coordinator role; when the pandemic hit in Spring 2020, a total of 14 West Virginia counties representing 72 schools were part of the CIS program under the WVDE.⁵ State financial support continued to grow, existing counties deepened their work in more schools, and by school year 2020-21 the program expanded again by adding eight additional counties.⁶ Braxton County also added schools using local dollars. Thus, grand totals in March 2021 represented 22 counties served in the licensed partnership, reaching over 110 schools, and nearly 50,000 students. The program is poised to expand again in school year 2021-22.

Governance and Fidelity

Building a statewide governance and implementation structure for the licensed partnership model was new territory for CIS. Both the CIS National Office and WVDE wanted to ensure fidelity to the model of Integrated student supports, while recognizing the local control nature of West Virginia schools. The original state coordinator was changed to a full-time position and a second state coordinator was added at the department as the program grew. Michele Blatt, the Assistant State Superintendent, stewarded the program from a policy and funding perspective.

Each participating county was required to designate a “county contact” at the district level to provide local guidance and oversight. Because all these individuals typically had existing responsibilities – meaning CIS was added to their plate – they served an important role of integration and coherence across district programs. County contacts now hold monthly meetings with the state coordinators. A memorandum of understanding is signed between the state, counties, and schools, with funding flowing from WVDE to the counties for distribution and use at school sites using the CIS model.

For more than forty years, the “secret sauce” of the CIS model has been school-based staff known as “site coordinators.” They manage the relationships with students, carry out the model in collaboration with community partners, and partner with families to surround the child with necessary supports to stay in school and on track to success; they also track and report all whole-school supports and case-management data. WVDE and CIS National have used data for program improvement

and targeting supports throughout this project. WVDE supported the counties in hiring full-time site coordinators for each school; only a handful of the smallest schools share site coordinators. A key learning from the initial pilot counties was the need for full-time site coordinators to ensure fidelity to the CIS model; a standard practices with the traditional CIS affiliate model. Onboarding and additional training are conducted by the WVDE state coordinators and CIS National staff to ensure a standard understanding of the CIS model, while the sharing of best practices through regular meetings and convenings ensures the program is tailored to local needs and resources and takes advantage of continuous learning from those closest to the students.

In the first years of the West Virginia program, state coordinators at WVDE were housed within School Support and Accountability, reporting to the Assistant Superintendent. Stakeholders note this focused the program on school improvement, a function that can be viewed by counties and schools as more of a compliance mandate than as a means of supporting students. A departmental reorganization subsequently placed WVDE's program oversight in the Office of Federal Programs and Support (within Student Supports and Well-Being) which strengthens the WVDE staff's ability to collaborate with guidance counseling, special education, and child nutrition professionals, among others. Stakeholders note this structure models the kind of student support teams often envisioned for CIS-served schools and provides an integrated, incentive-focused mindset to meeting the needs of the whole child.

In the spring of 2019, the First Lady created a statewide advisory council to help unlock additional resources that counties and schools might need. The connection of this council with the state board of education is considered a key step taken by the First Lady; stakeholders note this is in keeping with the "all-hands-on-deck" approach desired by the Governor and First Lady from the outset and believe it has helped sustain political and community support. A nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization has since been formed to accept and distribute philanthropic support more easily.

Funding the Program

As the CIS licensed partnership has grown in West Virginia, it has become a leading example of braiding disparate funding streams to pay for the program in a sustainable manner. This has meant the use of designated or identified state funds, local general funds,⁷ eligible State Aid Formula dollars, allowable uses of federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funds, and local fundraising. Because WVDE holds the central role, it has allowed for clear and consistent communication about the possibility – and need – to braid State Aid Formula and Federal funds as follows:

1. State personnel communicate to the counties that State Aid can be used to offset the costs of a host of activities which may be provided by a CIS site coordinator, ranging from instructional supports to mental health services, or family engagement to school climate initiatives.
2. Guidance is also provided such that counties know they are able to use Federal funds from the following programs: Title I (disadvantaged students, typically low-income), Title II (high quality school personnel), Title III (language instruction), Title IV (support and enrichment), and Title V (rural schools).

Braided funding is the use of multiple sources of funding to achieve a common objective, fund a specific initiative, or pay for personnel; it typically refers to the use of federal, state, local, and/or private dollars in this way.

The initial deployment of grants to the counties using state-identified and legislatively approved special or earmarked funding is noted as an important ingredient to the program's success. These funds allow a county to get started and can later be augmented by local funds or other braided sources such as federal dollars. It should also be noted that as the program's population and outcomes grew, counties came to the table with their own general operating and federal dollars first, even without the state grants.

The Speed of Trust

CIS Founder Bill Milliken is fond of saying that relationships, not programs, make a difference in the lives of students. Those involved with the West Virginia licensed partnership have embraced this mantra. Michele Blatt and others note that the relationships between and among the adults stewarding the licensure work are every bit as important as the relationship between site coordinator and student.

West Virginians also believe the program has succeeded because of an acknowledgement that project implementation moves at the speed of trust. WVDE staff point to the CIS model as a framework that is the same across counties and schools, but that local practitioners have control over implementation. In a state which values local control of education, this framework for shared implementation has met with success. West Virginians at all levels of the project have been willing to learn from each other, and even from mistakes, continually improving the delivery of services to students and the way the work gets done effectively.

“Schools which had CIS facilitators in place had developed strong relationships with their students and the community and were better prepared to take care of their students during the pandemic.”

– Assistant Superintendent Michele Blatt

WVDE has been diligent in preparing documents clearly stating the roles and responsibilities of county and school staff. For example, the document for county contacts delineates a dozen roles and responsibilities; key among them are the following:

- Review and align CIS school support plans with school strategic plans,
- Identify community trends and needs and use this information to drive CIS’ work across campuses,
- Identify potential community partners and coordinate with other county contacts nearby that may support multiple schools, and
- Regularly monitor and analyze CIS data through the Communities In Schools Data Management System (CISDM).

Site coordinator position descriptions outline ten roles and responsibilities, including but not limited to:

- The creation of school support teams to implement all components of the CIS model,
- Needs assessment processes and school support planning,
- Case management of referred students, and
- The use of data and reporting.

Site coordinators throughout West Virginia receive high marks for their adherence to these roles and responsibilities, and for their ability to maintain supportive relationships with their students while identifying needed community resources that can make a critical difference in a student’s life.

The Results

WVDE and CIS National have worked throughout the partnership to align priorities across the two organizations. The licensed partnership was not just about getting students to stay in school and on track to graduation, but also getting them to what West Virginia calls the three Es: Employment, Enlistment, or Education after graduation. This has helped align the work toward shared goals, with common metrics.

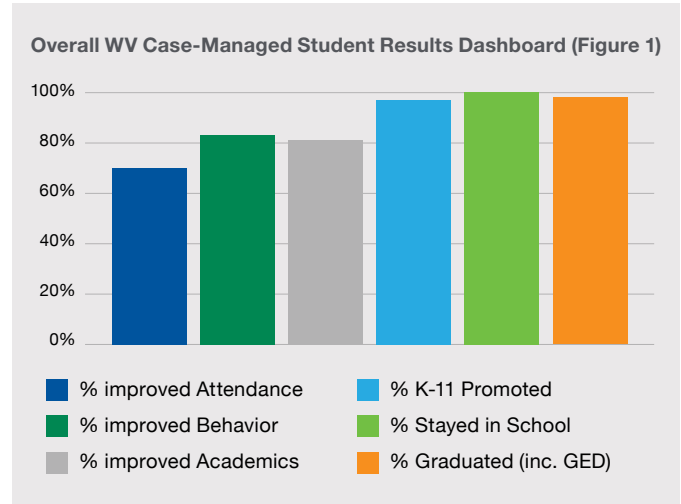
State Baselines and Targets

WVDE has helped keep counties and schools focused on shared outcomes by instituting a framework for the CIS program. While allowing for local control and targeted interventions based on student needs, the state framework ensures that data are collected in a consistent manner and that the program is delivering on state priorities. Stakeholders acknowledge this has been key in communicating with the state legislature and Governor, who must consider efficacy as well as community support. The state’s framework, organized by school grade level (elementary, middle, high) establishes requirements for setting baselines

and targets in attendance, behavior, and course performance. Guidance is provided by course type (Math, ELA, etc.) in measuring both grades and standardized test scores. Rates of improvement or decline, as appropriate, are called for in the areas of attendance and behavior. The framework includes an acknowledgement that students in crisis may require a “maintain” approach rather than growth in certain areas, a recognition of the challenges that so many students face.

Student Outcomes

While an initial appeal of CIS centered on improved high school graduation rates, it quickly became clear that students in elementary and middle school also had critical needs, often based on the barriers of poverty, and that other metrics would be required; only two pilot schools were high schools. Given the nature of trauma related to poverty – and ultimately to the pandemic (see below), social-emotional supports were highlighted as critical for the success of students. As noted above, the state’s framework helped align reporting for attendance, behavior, and course performance as well. An example of the type of data shared in a standard dashboard to monitor student success is shown in Figure 1.



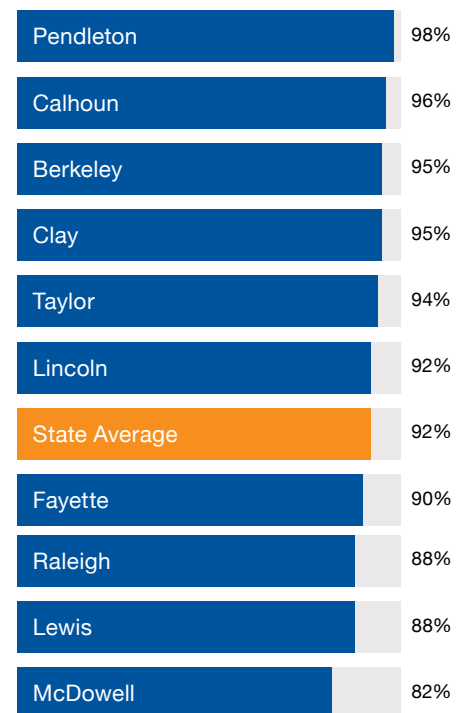
Pandemic Preparedness

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically affected West Virginia schools, just as it did schools across the globe. With buildings closed and educational personnel unable to reach families and students, CIS site coordinators filled the gap and, in fact, are credited by WVDE personnel with driving more positive outcomes than were found in other schools which did not have CIS. This state of preparedness, afforded by the engagement and relationships inherent in the CIS model, is highlighted as an unforeseen positive outcome of the project, and has spurred leaders in other counties and schools to express an interest in the model as they rethink how educating the whole child appears in a post-pandemic world. In addition, the state framework for baselines and targets noted above focused on Family Engagement as the state headed into school year 2020-21. This, added to the focus on student engagement and graduation, helped the counties and schools pivot to the most meaningful work during the pandemic crisis, a testament to both the WVDE implementation structure and the nimble nature of the CIS model.

The True Success

As is so often the case with CIS, every stakeholder interviewed for this case study pointed to stories of individual students who exemplify the program’s success. First Lady Cathy Justice was no exception. “The true success of our CIS program lies in our students and what they have been able to achieve,” she says. “Two high school seniors come to mind. They both overcame great difficulties to graduate last year and are in college now here in West Virginia. They are studying computer technology and nursing, and both have promising careers ahead of them. Another touching story concerns a bright elementary student who was being raised by a foster family. She was having trouble adjusting and was not engaged in school at all. Her site coordinator recognized that the little girl was enthusiastic about gymnastics. She enrolled the young student in an after-school gymnastics program, and everything changed! The youngster gained confidence and began getting excited about coming to school. Finding that one passionate interest of the student was a game-changer in getting her involved in school and interested in learning. That is what success looks like to me.”

Counties with CIS in High Schools: 4-year Cohort Graduation Rates



Key Learnings & Implementation Takeaways

1. The West Virginia licensed partnership succeeded in part because of a continuous learning approach that relied on data analysis and recalibration of implementation steps as needed.
2. The WVDE had a vision for integrated student supports that was formed by the First Lady, its own work, and its community engagement and outreach efforts. This state-level vision ensured that the CIS model is implemented with fidelity and it is also adapted to West Virginia's unique needs and assets.
3. Having full-time staff at the state and school levels proved invaluable. Staffing selection at the school site and the state department is critical to success.
4. Placing the CIS state coordinators in the WVDE Office of Student Supports alongside WVDE staff dedicated to other student supports (e.g., counseling, McKinney-Vento, 21st Century After-School program, nurses), has been key to cross-collaboration and partnership at the state and local levels.
5. Districts will find resources to braid funding streams necessary to the long-term sustainability, but an initial investment from the state or philanthropy is critical in the first three years.
6. State-established frameworks, baselines, and targets give the districts and schools the necessary guidance to ensure fidelity and prepare critical reports and evaluations, while allowing for locally driven implementation and student-centric case management.
7. The staffing structure of state-district-school, with CIS National Office support, ensured training could be standardized, reporting was uniform, and funding flowed appropriately. The individual providing support and oversight of site coordinators at the county level is a linchpin to the successful implementation of the CIS model.
8. Executive sponsorship from the Governor and First Lady elevated the program's visibility and community support.
9. The formation of the Advisory Council has ensured community stakeholders provide ongoing input and oversight to CIS regarding program accountability and connections to state resources outside of the WVDE reach.
10. The governance structure and implementation processes established in West Virginia could be replicated by other state departments of education and/or governors' offices.

References

- 1 West Virginia Voice, Final Report, May 2019, pages 22-23.
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Cabell, Calhoun, Clay, Fayette, Hardy, Lincoln, Pendleton, Raleigh
- 4 Braxton, Lewis, Taylor
- 5 Note that the CIS of Greenbrier affiliate-served schools are not included in these totals.
- 6 Brooke, Jackson, Kanawha, Mercer, Mingo, Pocahontas, Upshur, Wayne
- 7 For example, Governor Justice's donated salary, or funds appropriated by the legislature specifically for this purpose, as in the case of state surplus dollars used in the 2019 expansion.

