NON-TECHNICAL RESEARCH SUMMARY
DECEMBER 2025

When Resources Meet Relationships: The Returns to Personalized Supports for Low-Income Students

BENJAMIN GOLDMAN, CORNELL UNIVERSITY, THE EDREDESIGN LAB & OPPORTUNITY INSIGHTS
JAMIE GRACIE, HARVARD UNIVERSITY & THE EDREDESIGN LAB

Providing struggling students with navigators who connect them to personalized supports—such as tutoring, food assistance, and housing—significantly boosts short-run academic performance and long-run earnings. These gains are driven by improvements in both test scores and non-cognitive measures like attendance and behavior.

Disparities between children from high- and low-income families emerge long before they enter the workforce. As early as grade school, low-income students have lower standardized test scores. Later on, they are less likely to graduate high school and go on to college. Addressing these disparities while students are in school can improve their long-term outcomes, ultimately helping more children from low-income families achieve upward income mobility.

One approach to address these disparities is to increase resources and programs in high-poverty schools. Initiatives like improving teacher quality, reducing class sizes, and expanding tutoring have all shown important benefits. For many low-income students, however, fully engaging with these opportunities is challenging. Low-income students are more likely to miss school, face logistical hurdles to participating in programs, and contend with unstable home environments that complicate classroom learning.

Recent evidence from other domains, such as housing and higher education, points to a promising solution: pairing traditional resources with personalized supports that help students navigate challenges and connect to services. These interventions rely on a trusted adult who can coordinate services and advocate for participants.

In a new study (Goldman, Gracie), we evaluate Communities In Schools (CIS), a program that places a "site coordinator" in high-poverty schools to connect struggling students, with both in-school supports (such as tutoring and mentoring) and out-of-school resources (including food assistance, housing support, and health

KEY FINDINGS

- Middle schools with Communities in Schools (CIS) see improvements in standardized math scores for struggling students, increasing scores by 0.11 standard deviations.
- Students receiving three years of CIS during middle school are 5.2% more likely to graduate high school, 9.1% more likely to enroll in two-year college, and earn about 4.3% more annually at age 27.
- CIS students' short-run improvements in test scores, attendance, and discipline predict long-run gains in graduation, with noncognitive outcomes playing a central role as only about half of the impact is explained by test scores alone.
- Students receive different services tailored to their challenges, yet achieve similar long-run gains—suggesting that the personalization at the core of the CIS model is efficient.
- CIS delivers strong returns per dollar spent. Three years of CIS—an upfront cost to CIS of about $3,000 per student—is estimated to increase a student's lifetime earnings by $36,000 in present day value.

Photo courtesy of Communities in Schools

services). From among these services, site coordinators design personalized service portfolios to address each student's needs. CIS is the largest integrated student support program in the United States, serving nearly 2 million students across more than 3,000 schools each year. This scale is unusual for a privately run program funded largely by private philanthropy, school districts, and local governments rather than federal appropriations. For context, it is nearly three times the size of Head Start.

We use anonymized administrative data—including Census and federal tax records for children born between 1978 and 1992 and K–12 education records from Texas, where nearly half of CIS schools are located. Our analysis examines whether CIS improves short-run academic outcomes such as test scores, attendance, and discipline, as well as long-run outcomes including high school graduation, college enrollment, and earnings in adulthood. We focus on CIS programs in middle schools (grades 6-8) that were introduced between 1998 and 2016, leveraging the staggered rollout of the program across schools to identify its effects.

FINDING 1

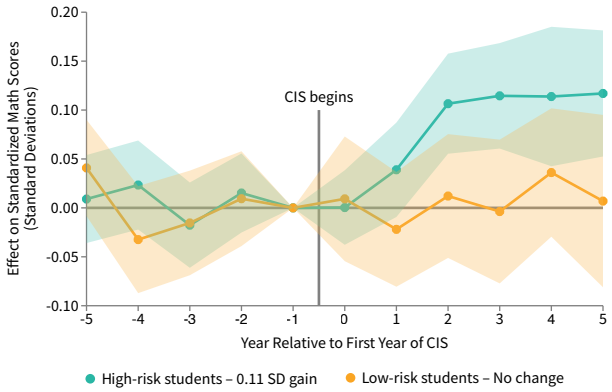
Middle schools with Communities in Schools (CIS) see improvements in standardized math scores for struggling students, increasing scores by 0.11 standard deviations

We identify "high-risk" students as those most likely to receive CIS services based on early warning signs such as low test scores, poor attendance, and disciplinary incidents. Three to five years after CIS enters a school, high-risk students' test scores increase by 0.11 standard deviations (Figure 1).

Because not all students receive three full years of the program (some transfer schools or a CIS program begins in their school when they're already in 7th or 8th grade) we scale this estimate to account for actual participation. Students who participate in CIS for a full three years see test score gains of 0.18 standard deviations, an impact comparable to the result found in the Tennessee STAR experiment, a well studied RCT designed to study the effect of smaller class sizes.

Low-risk students, by contrast, see essentially no change in test scores, confirming that CIS benefits the students it is designed to serve. These findings hold when we compare CIS schools to those that received the program later, restrict comparisons to schools within the same city, allow trends to vary by demographic group, and test whether higher-achieving students selectively enroll in CIS schools.

Figure 1: CIS Improves Standardized Test Scores for High-Risk Students Without Impacting the Performance of Low-Risk Students



This figure shows how standardized math scores change before and after CIS enters a school for high- and low-risk students. Points show the estimated test-score effects in each year relative to CIS adoption; shaded bands show 95% confidence intervals. High-risk students experience clear academic gains after CIS begins, while low-risk students see little change. Download Figure

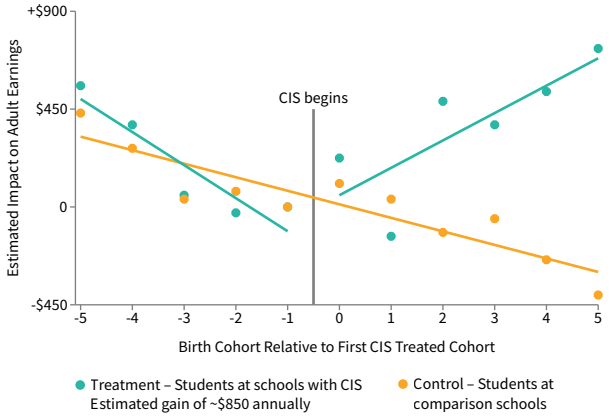
FINDING 2

Students receiving three years of CIS during middle school are 5.2% more likely to graduate high school, 9.1% more likely to enroll in two-year college, and earn about 4.3% more annually at age 27

Three years of middle school CIS exposure increases high school graduation by 3.4 percentage points, a 5.2% increase over the baseline rate of 65% for high-risk students, closing 13% of the pre-treatment graduation gap between high- and low-risk students. CIS also raises college attendance by 2.9 percentage points (9.1%), driven entirely by two-year college enrollment. For low-risk students, we find no corresponding increases in graduation rates or college attendance, consistent with the short-run results.

Using linked Census and IRS data, we estimate that three to five years after a CIS program begins in a school, students earn about $850 more per year at age 27 compared to a pre-program average income of $26,270 (Figure 2). For students who participate in all three years of CIS during middle school, earnings at age 27 increase by 1.54 percentile ranks—equivalent to roughly $1,140 per year, or a 4.3% gain. The effects are concentrated among children from

Figure 2: Exposure to CIS Support Services Improves Adulthood Earnings



This figure shows the estimated impact of exposure to CIS in middle school on annual earnings in early adulthood. Each point represents a birth cohort's difference in earnings between students in CIS-treated schools and comparison schools, measured relative to the first cohort exposed to CIS. The lines summarize the average trend for treated and control cohorts before and after CIS implementation. Download Figure

low-income families and driven primarily by greater employment rather than higher wages conditional on working. Consistent with CIS's description as the nation's "leading dropout prevention organization," the evidence suggests that CIS helps students avoid adverse, or "left-tail" outcomes, such as dropping out of school or being unemployed as an adult.

We project that three years of CIS exposure increases lifetime earnings by more than $36,000 and generates approximately $7,100 in future federal tax revenue per student (present value).

FINDING 3

CIS students' short-run improvements in test scores, attendance, and discipline predict long-run gains in graduation, with noncognitive outcomes playing a central role as only about half of the impact is explained by test scores alone

CIS's long-run effects can be forecast from short-run outcomes. Using students' middle school test scores, attendance, and discipline records, we predict future effects on high school graduation rates and compare them to actual changes in graduation rates. The predictions capture nearly 80% of the true impact on graduation.

Notably, a model using only test scores predicts just 43% of the true effect on graduation. The remaining gains come from improvements in attendance and discipline, showing that noncognitive outcomes capture dimensions of student development that test scores miss but that matter critically for long-run success. Identifying the channels through which CIS is effective makes this finding practically useful: it shows that long-term impacts of future expansions can be predicted using immediate academic and behavioral outcomes

FINDING 4

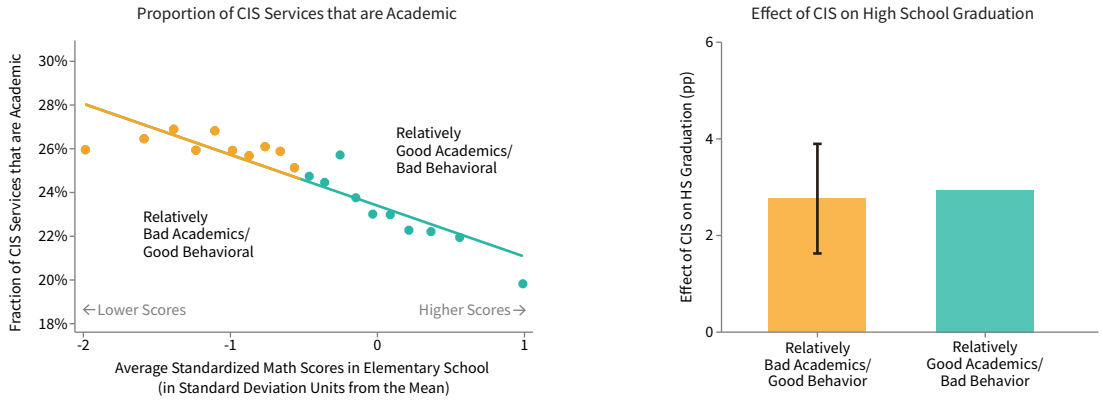
Students receive different services tailored to their challenges, yet achieve similar long-run gains—suggesting that the personalization at the core of the CIS model is efficient

We next turn to the role of personalization, a cornerstone of the CIS model, with site coordinators tailoring support for each student's particular circumstances. We first show that students who struggle academically indeed receive substantially more tutoring and academic interventions, while students whose challenges are behavioral or attendance-related receive supports targeted at their engagement and conduct.

We next show that this personalization is effective in the short run. Students with primarily academic needs (defined as those with below-median elementary school test scores) see test score gains nearly twice as large as students with primarily non-academic needs (0.10 vs. 0.06 standard deviations).

Despite these differences in services received and short-run impacts, long-run effects are nearly identical. CIS increases high school graduation rates by 2.8 percentage points for students with academic needs and 2.9 percentage points for students with primarily non-academic needs. This suggests that coordinators efficiently match services to students' underlying challenges, yielding long-term gains through different pathways.

Figure 3: Students Facing Different Challenges Received Different Services, But Experience Similar Long Term Outcomes



The left panel shows the share of CIS services that are academic for case-managed students, plotted against their average math score in elementary school. Students with lower prior scores receive a higher fraction of academic supports. The right panel shows that both lower- and higher-performing students experience similar improvements in high school graduation. Error bars show 95 percent confidence intervals. Download Figure

FINDING 5

CIS delivers strong returns per dollar spent. Three years of CIS—an upfront cost to CIS of about $3,000 per student—is estimated to increase a student's lifetime earnings by $36,000 in present day value

Each $1,000 invested in CIS raises adult earnings by $406, compared with roughly $40 for class-size reductions. While CIS now serves over 2 million students nationwide, benefits are concentrated among the most disadvantaged students while effects are minimal for their more advantaged peers. This pattern suggests future expansions should prioritize schools with the largest concentrations of high-risk students.

Simulations show that while CIS programs currently reach about 20% of middle school students in Texas, the current allocation captures only 60% of the potential impact achievable at that coverage level. Expanding to 40% coverage, while focusing on the next-highest-need schools, could achieve 92% of the maximum attainable impact on high-risk students' graduation rates.

Conclusion

This research shows that providing personalized, coordinated supports in high-poverty schools can improve outcomes for struggling students, both in the classroom and over the long run. CIS raises test scores, boosts high school graduation, and improves early-career earnings. These impacts are not driven by a single academic channel, but by improvements in both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes.

The findings demonstrate that it is possible to expand economic opportunity not just by addressing gaps in resources, but through expanding social and personalized support that helps students access and benefit from those resources. The results add to growing evidence that social ties and personalized support amplify the impact of traditional interventions, extending findings from adult contexts to children and schools.

Finally, we find that long-run program impacts can be reliably forecast using short-run administrative data on both test scores and non-cognitive outcomes like attendance and discipline. This approach offers promise for evaluating interventions in real time by looking beyond test scores to capture the full dimensions of student development that programs affect.

Want to learn more?

Read the Paper ↗ See Presentation Slides ↗ Download Figures from this Summary ↗

All materials are freely available for use with citation

OPPORTUNITY INSIGHTS

Based at Harvard University, **Opportunity Insights** identifies barriers to economic opportunity and develops scalable solutions that will empower families throughout the United States to rise out of poverty. **opportunityinsights.org**

EdRedesign
OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

The **EdRedesign Lab** at Harvard Graduate School of Education provides catalytic support to the cradle-to-career place-based partnership field to drive systems-level change and open personalized pathways to well-being, academic achievement, civic engagement, and upward mobility for all. **EdRedesign.org**