

B | BROWN CENTER on Education Policy at BROOKINGS

TO: President-elect Trump
FROM: Mary Walsh (Boston College)
Joan Wasser Gish (Boston College)
DATE: December 12, 2016
RE: Improving student achievement by meeting children's comprehensive needs

THE SITUATION

The confluence of your election, passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and emerging research presents an opportunity to more effectively and efficiently leverage existing school and community resources to improve the academic achievement and life chances of low-income children.

For over half a century, it has been understood that [contexts beyond school can account for up to two-thirds of the variance in student achievement](#). Developmental systems theories and neurobiological disciplines have more recently shed light on the [mechanisms that link socioeconomic challenges to inequality of educational outcomes](#). Children encounter risk and protective factors that can complement, overwhelm, or compensate for one another over time. Exposure to deprivations like persistent hunger or cold, pain due to untreated medical or dental needs, or traumatic stresses tied to abuse or domestic or neighborhood violence can [undermine](#) a child's working memory, attentiveness, and ability to develop the social-emotional and cognitive skills required for academic performance.

National trends

Today, [fifty-two percent](#) of the nation's public school students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. [Areas of concentrated poverty](#) continue to grow in small and large cities, while many suburban and rural communities are contending with an [increase in high-needs students](#). In parallel fashion, the achievement gap between low-income students

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Customized

Individualized – optimize each student’s healthy development and readiness to learn

Universal – assess each student’s strengths and needs

Comprehensive

“**Whole child**” – assess each student’s strengths and needs across all developmental domains: academic, social-emotional, health, and family

Multi-tiered – evaluate the intensity of support required in each domain, which may differ for each child in each domain

Coordinated

Intentional – in collaboration with teachers, students, and their families, match each student with resources and opportunities aligned with the domains and intensities of their individual needs to enhance protective factors and mitigate risk factors

Organized – collect and organize information about school- and community-based resources to increase efficiency and quality of match between child and resources and opportunities; establish ongoing, reciprocal communication

Continuous

Systemic – integrate this process into functioning of the school, creating a cyclical approach that responds to changes for each child over time

Accountable -- evaluate fidelity of implementation and impact

and their peers has grown by [40 percent](#) in a generation. The differences between higher- and lower-income children are even [starker](#) for students experiencing long-term poverty.

In response to persistent achievement gaps and intensifying need among students, comprehensive approaches to student support are proliferating. Alternately known as “wraparound,” “collective impact,” “community schools,” “comprehensive services,” “Promise Neighborhoods,” “Full-Service Schools,” or “integrated student supports,” efforts have taken root in hundreds of schools and communities including Cincinnati, Tulsa, Jennings (Missouri), New York, and Hartford. National networks like [Strive Together](#) and the [Campaign for Grade Level Reading](#), and programs like [City Connects](#), [Communities In Schools](#), and [Bright Futures](#) are responding, in widely varying ways, to urgent demand.

Evidence and principles of effective practice

New [evidence](#) demonstrates that when organizations implement [research-based](#) principles of effective practice, comprehensive approaches can cause positive student outcomes. The Boston College Lynch School of Education set out to assess the impact of these principles on student outcomes via an intervention called City Connects. City Connects creates, for each student in a school, a personalized network of resources and opportunities drawn from existing school- and community-based programs. A [study](#) of over 7,900 students in the Boston Public Schools attending City Connects elementary schools demonstrated better effort, grades, and [attendance](#) compared to peers who did not attend a City Connects school. When followed into eighth grade, these students [closed two-thirds of the achievement gap](#) in Math and half of the achievement gap in English relative to the average for all Massachusetts students. Students’ four-year high school [dropout rate was cut almost in half](#). [Positive impacts are evident](#) across communities, educational settings, and various subgroups of students including [immigrants](#), English language learners, and African-American and Latino boys.

An estimate of City Connects’ [return on investment](#) finds that the costs of implementation, including the external services and opportunities to which students and their

families are connected, can be outweighed three-to-one by the [benefits](#) to students, and to the nation.

Effective and cost-efficient approaches to intervention tailor to the differences across children and across time, particularly for those who are growing up disadvantaged. Therefore, the key is not merely the presence of resources or inconsistent deployment, but the ability to drive the right resources to the right child at the right time, over time. Providing a child food but not glasses so that she can see the blackboard, or offering after-school programs aimed at cultivating her talents in art and science but not asthma management so she can attend, does little to disrupt the circumstances inhibiting her learning.

Where schools and communities endeavor to provide systemic approaches to student support that unevenly employ principles of effective practice, the current evidence base points to a general, but not consistent, trend of positive learning outcomes. Direct comparisons, and therefore hard conclusions, cannot be drawn against varied interventions studied with wide-ranging goals and degrees of sophistication. To date, the impacts of comprehensive services on student achievement via place-based initiatives like the [Harlem Children's Zone](#) and [Promise Neighborhoods](#) are unclear, and further study is required in ESSA Title IV (s.4625)(f). Attending Community Schools in [Ohio](#) has, however, correlated with disproportionate gains in student achievement. Other studies looking across [Community Schools](#) have found that enrollment is associated with [improved student behavior, attendance, and achievement](#). A 2014 [national research review](#) looked at evidence emanating from three programs focused on integrating comprehensive student supports, finding “there is emerging evidence...that integrated student supports can contribute to student academic progress as measured by decreases in grade retention and dropout, and increases in attendance, math achievement, reading and ELA [English Language Arts] achievement, and overall GPA.”

In sum, this emergent evidence base supports the strong theoretical underpinnings for integrated student support as a driver of academic achievement. Together, these yield principles of effective practice that permit improved implementation of federal programs and utilization of federal funds to benefit children and families across the nation.

Federal policy

Select federal policies have long reflected an assumption that systemic, comprehensive approaches could drive student achievement. Programs like Promise Neighborhoods, Full-Service Community Schools Grants, and wraparound components included in 21st Century Community Learning Centers are guided by an understanding that interconnected challenges require interconnected solutions. The National Research Council has found that the availability of academic, social-emotional, health, and mental health supports is [predictive of students' success as adults](#), and since 1998 the Centers for Disease Control has recommended that schools foster [healthy child development](#) by implementing a comprehensive, coordinated approach to the needs of students. Building on these insights, ESSA appropriately takes a broad view of the learning supports, resources, and strategies that may be needed to help disadvantaged students surmount

barriers to achievement. Among these strategies is an emphasis on comprehensive integrated student support throughout Titles I and IV.

Federal policy can incentivize and improve the efficacy of investments designed to meet the comprehensive needs of students and their families. Under ESSA, your administration can leverage research on effective practices and support technology and related infrastructure building, thereby setting the stage for states, schools, and communities to use existing resources more efficiently, close achievement gaps, reduce dropout rates, and enhance educational opportunity for all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Your administration could, in the first 100 days and throughout your term, take steps to help support children’s healthy development and learning, narrow achievement gaps, and reduce dropout rates by (1) supporting systemic approaches tied to effective practices; and (2) improving the context for effective implementation of integrated student support strategies. We respectfully submit the following recommendations for your consideration.

1. Support systemic approaches tied to effective practices.

a. Leverage ESSA implementation to disseminate effective practices.

- State and district plans
 - Clarify to states that comprehensive integrated student support qualifies as evidence-based “school support and improvement activities.”
 - Include approaches to integrated student support consistent with effective practices in [“evidence-based strategies”](#) permitted to local districts under Title I.
- Grants
 - Grants issued under the Federal Full-Service Community Schools Program, Promise Neighborhoods, School Improvement Grants, Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers could incentivize prospective grantees to support students and their families in a manner that is customized, comprehensive, coordinated, and continuous. Allow funding to support technical assistance, accountability for implementation, and a set-aside for evaluation.
 - McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and ESSA provide for an in-district liaison (ESSA, Title I (1114)(C)) to coordinate

in- and out-of-district resources for homeless students. In guidance to states, seek implementation of effective practices.

- Budget

- Include in your annual budget request to Congress for Department of Education Discretionary Appropriations language that requires grantees under the Federal Full-Service Community Schools Program, Promise Neighborhoods, School Improvement Grants, Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers to implement effective practices.

- b. Invest in state-level infrastructures to create efficiencies and support effective practices.

As many local efforts and national programs can attest, a technology infrastructure, complemented by [technical assistance](#), is imperative for integrating information, identifying resources, connecting students to a tailored set of services and opportunities, fostering accountability, and tracking progress on student achievement and related outcomes. It is also the key to augmenting limited school capacity, creating service delivery efficiencies, and making comprehensive approaches to student support cost-effective and possible at scale.

The federal government can play a vital role in supporting development of innovative infrastructure systems to facilitate integrated student support in communities serving students with complex barriers to learning. Technology backbone systems could be designed for large municipal or regional areas, or statewide, where many relevant building blocks reside, and facilitate the relatively rapid creation of local systems. A well-designed statewide infrastructure would function well in a broad array of school districts, leverage existing data building blocks, capitalize on existing school- and community-based resources, support effective and accountable practices, create service delivery efficiencies, identify gaps in available resources, and provide policymakers aggregate data. Technical assistance to support state and local implementation and capacity building should be a key part of the infrastructure needed to support effective implementation at scale. Early work to develop such a [system](#), informed by evidence-based models, is underway in Massachusetts. This initiative is also receiving inquiries from several other states led by both Democratic and Republican governors.

- Budget
 - Establish competitive planning and implementation grants to states or to states in partnership with a private non-profit or university. Support the time-intensive work of bringing stakeholders together to develop and implement a functional infrastructure that facilitates the creation of local systems supporting the integration of education with social services, youth development, and health and mental health resources for children and families.

- Convene
 - Follow up on the [2014 White House National Policy Forum on Integrated Student Supports](#) by emphasizing effective practices and systems to improve efficiency.
 - Create a bipartisan commission on the state of integrated student support approaches and ask the commission to review evidence, assess the role of technology, and make policy recommendations.

2. Improve the context for effective implementation of integrated student support strategies.

- a. Request studies to deepen research and improve the policy climate for effective implementation of integrated student support.

The role of comprehensive services in education has significant public policy implications, shaping our understanding of effective school reform and affecting public and private investments in social services, health care, mental health counseling, housing, afterschool, summer, and early education, or any line item impacting children and families. We therefore recommend further study that aims at enhancing the nation’s understanding of the evidence, and its implications for practice and policy. For example, you could:

- Seek a National Academy of Sciences report that synthesizes interdisciplinary research in order to (a) identify open research questions and make recommendations to the White House to strategically address knowledge gaps through education, health, and social services agency research grants; (b) further refine effective practices; and (c) make policy recommendations for federal, state, and local decisionmakers.

- Create a National Commission or Center for Integrated Student Support that can serve as a hub for interdisciplinary research and

multi-sector expertise developed across the academy, across communities, and across national programs. Seek research-based guidance to inform improvements to federal programs including Early Head Start, Head Start, Wraparound, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Promise Neighborhoods, Special Education, Medicaid, and Housing and Urban Development programs that integrate services for residents, including children and their families.

b. Remove barriers to resource integration for students.

The premise of integrated student support, Full-Service Schools, Promise Neighborhoods, and “wraparound” is that students are ready to learn and succeed when the needs of the “whole child” are addressed. The ability to meet the full complement of need is predicated on the availability of non-academic services and supports on site, in the surrounding community, or online. In many communities, this can be done successfully within existing resource and bureaucratic constraints. However, areas of the law are ripe for alignment and simplification in order to ease the bureaucratic and cost burdens on schools; and continued and strategic expanded investments in children and families would increase the odds of successfully closing achievement gaps and improving educational opportunity. Consistent with cross-disciplinary research on effective policies, we respectfully recommend that you also consider improvements to:

- CHIP/Medicaid/IDEA/ESSA
 - Diminish bureaucratic complexities to make it easier for schools to integrate screening, information and referral, and health services.
 - Support enhanced federal reimbursement to encourage CHIP expansion.
 - Study communities where the [state](#) requires that pass-through Medicaid reimbursement funds go directly to school districts and charter schools. Evaluate the impact of these laws on children’s access to appropriate services and continuity of care.
- Education
 - Prioritize investments that contribute to effective instruction and safe and supportive school environments. Comprehensive, integrated student support can boost, but not substitute for, educational quality.
- Early education and after school

- Pursue full funding of authorized discretionary appropriations for the Child Care Development Block Grant and Head Start Act. Access to programs providing high quality [early childhood education](#) and [after-school](#) often include some comprehensive services, and can be vital supports to students' readiness to learn and engage in school.
- Child Tax Credit
 - Propose that the Child Tax Credit be fully refundable and indexed to inflation. Improved [academic performance](#) and child well-being [result](#) when families can provide food, shelter, clothing, and books, and experience reduced economic stress.

CONCLUSION

The research and recommendations outlined above illuminate a pivotal opportunity to ensure effective, feasible, cost-efficient approaches to meeting the comprehensive needs of students. Evidence demonstrates that integrated approaches to student support, when implemented with adherence to principles of effective practice, can significantly narrow achievement gaps and improve dropout rates for the nation's growing numbers of students living in low-income and disadvantaged circumstances.

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