

Making the Grade: A Progress Report and Next Steps for Integrated Student Supports

Executive Summary

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Introduction

In recent years, the education field has come to recognize the role of schools in supporting student health, safety, and well-being by developing **integrated student support** initiatives. These offer specific services and supports to students and their families to build a foundation for academic success. These initiatives, referred to as community schools and wraparound supports as well as integrated student supports models, help schools connect struggling children with secure housing, medical care, food assistance, tutoring, and other critical supports. While they are understood to be vital components of community efforts on behalf of children and families, they also further our nation's collective efforts to close education opportunity gaps, raise graduation rates, and better compete on the international stage.



Child Trends evaluated these initiatives in a 2014 overview of the evidence regarding integrated student supports (ISS)—implementation models in which schools secure and deliver coordinated, school-based supports that target various barriers to student achievement.^a In general, ISS relies on five essential elements to support service delivery: community partnerships, student support coordination, integration into the school setting, needs assessments, and data tracking. The 2014 overview clarified that ISS was an emerging field of practice. With limited rigorous evaluations, Child Trends' researchers posited that ISS was a promising way to improve academic outcomes and see a substantial return on investment.

Since then, interest in ISS models has grown. Educational achievement remains a major vehicle for individual and family success. Although the high school graduation rate has risen over the past decade, the United States still lags behind other countries, and large disparities persist in academic outcomes. ISS models aim to bolster academic performance by recognizing the importance of addressing students' nonacademic needs. Indeed, the 2015 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA) encourages implementation of ISS for the first time. As written, ESSA now expressly permits schools and school districts to incorporate ISS into Title I targeted assistance programs for eligible students at risk of failing state academic achievement standards, and into Title VI, Part A activities that support student health and safety. Further, ESSA now makes available new federal formula dollars to states (under Title VI, Part A) to implement models that address student health, which could be utilized to support broader ISS models.

^a Moore, K.A., Caal, S., Carney, R., Lippman, L., Li, W., et al. (2014). *Making the Grade: Assessing the Evidence for Integrated Student Supports*. Child Trends. Bethesda, MD. Available at: <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/making-the-grade-assessing-the-evidence-for-integrated-student-supports/>.

With ISS now codified in federal law and expanding across the country, school districts and principals are in need of a more current review of the evidence to guide school implementation. To this end, Child Trends updated its review with a synthesis of findings from relevant resources—including evaluations, child development research and theory, implementation reports, interviews with principals, benefit/cost analyses, and analyses using the Social Genome Microsimulation model.

Key Findings

Based on this updated review, the authors are optimistic about the effectiveness of ISS. The report highlights a growing evidence base in support of ISS while serving as a reminder to the field that the evidence is not yet complete.

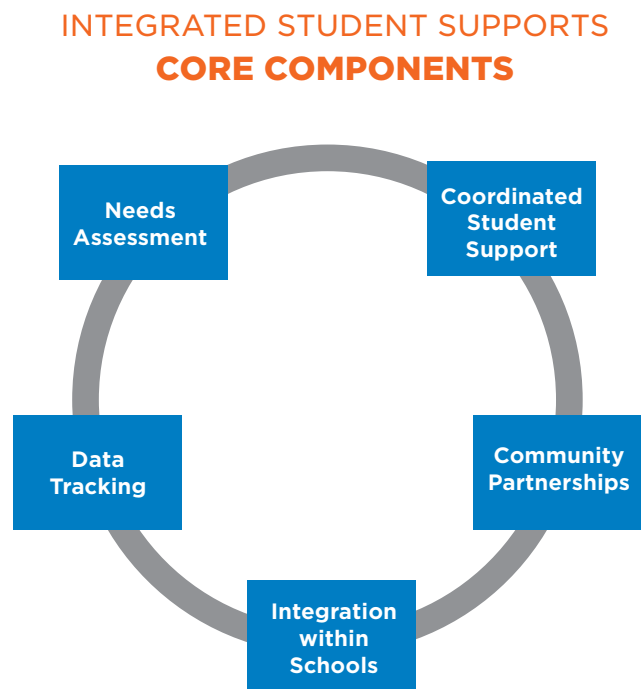
- Evaluation studies find a mix of positive and null (non-significant) findings, but there are virtually no negative effects across the evaluations.
- Several strong evaluations find support for particular ISS models, including City Connects, Communities in Schools in Chicago, the Harlem Children’s Zone’s Promise Academy, and Diplomas Now.
- New evidence from an application of a microsimulation model, which allows for a forecast of long-term outcomes—as well as evidence from four benefit/cost studies—finds that students’ participation in effective ISS interventions will have long-term benefits.
- In addition to this evidence, the ISS model continues to rest on a solid base of research and best practices from child development research and theory.
- While the five essential components of ISS models (Figure 1) continue to support service delivery, identification of the specific, concrete elements that comprise successful implementation of each ISS component—and how they are implemented—is evolving slowly among researchers and educators. This work represents the critical frontier for research and practice.
- High-quality program implementation is important and will require adequate resources.

- Nonacademic outcomes are rarely measured as part of the evaluations, even though they are central to the conceptual model, which limits our understanding of the mechanisms driving ISS success.

What Are Integrated Student Supports?

ISS models recognize that students’ unmet nonacademic needs can undermine their academic success. However, the types of nonacademic needs addressed vary across programs and across evaluations. In general, the supports provided under ISS models can include academic supports, housing assistance and food supplies, medical care, and mental and behavioral health services, and may go beyond student needs to provide critical services to parents and families. Moreover, the lack of consistency in the language used to describe ISS makes it challenging to discern which core services are necessary to make the ISS approach effective. Nevertheless, whatever the terminology, there is now widespread recognition that positive investments to address nonacademic needs are essential to student success.

Figure 1. Core Components of Integrated Student Supports



Expansion of ISS Models Across the United States

Every state in the country now has schools that use ISS models. Formal programs—such as Communities in Schools, City Connects, or community schools more broadly—have contributed to the rapid nationwide expansion of ISS models in the last decade. However, ISS models have also expanded informally, school by school, because experienced principals and staff who work directly in schools recognize the importance of supporting students' nonacademic needs in structured and systematic ways. While academic success remains the primary goal of educators, they recognize (based on their on-the-ground experience) that addressing both academic and nonacademic needs is necessary to reach this goal. Because ISS programs are most likely to operate in schools that serve large numbers of low-income students and students of color, they have the potential to reduce disparities by improving the academic outcomes of some of the most vulnerable students.

Key Findings Explained

Evaluation studies find a mix of positive and null (non-significant) findings, but there are virtually no negative effects across the evaluations.

The evidence base for ISS grew from approximately 11 rigorous evaluation studies (either randomized control trial or quasi-experimental design studies) in the 2014 review to a total of 19 in this 2017 update. The evaluation findings are promising and suggest that the ISS model is tipping results in the right direction. Specifically, this updated review of evaluation studies indicates that ISS interventions have mostly positive or null (statistically non-significant) results, and that negative findings are rare. There were only two negative outcomes among these 19 rigorous evaluations. Positive results can be seen across the studies for a variety of outcomes, including attendance, grades, test scores, graduation, and GPAs. Additionally, we continue to see positive results when different measures are used to examine similar outcomes, suggesting that these results can withstand varied types of measurement. However, these positive results are interspersed with numerous null results, suggesting that ISS is a promising but not yet proven approach.

Several strong evaluations find support for particular ISS models.

The evaluation studies with the strongest methodologies find more consistently positive impacts, including the evaluations from CIS in Chicago, City Connects, Diplomas Now, and the Harlem Children's Zone's Promise Academy. This likely reflects both the strength of these programs and the choice of an appropriate evaluation design. A lack of positive results in an evaluation, either negative or null, could mean that the program was not effective or was poorly implemented, or that the evaluation was inappropriately designed. Examples of poor design include studies that did not include enough participants to measure change, outcomes that were inappropriate for the inputs of the program, or a comparison group that was not truly similar.

New evidence from an application of a microsimulation model, which forecasts long-term outcomes—and evidence from four benefit/cost studies—finds that students' participation in effective ISS interventions will have long-term benefits.

Four benefit/cost studies have been conducted to date. Although all four studies used very different approaches and estimation methods, each shows strong returns on investment (ROI). Based on these studies, ROI estimates range from \$3 to more than \$14; that is, for every dollar invested, a return of at least \$3 and up to \$14 can be anticipated.

Child Trends augmented findings from these benefit/cost studies with analyses from microsimulations that use the Social Genome Model (SGM) (developed by the Brookings Institution with input from Child Trends, and now managed by Child Trends and the Urban Institute). Results from rigorous evaluations were incorporated into the SGM to assess whether and how ISS enhances income at age 29. These analyses suggest modest but real improvements in the estimated incomes of individuals in their late twenties, due to better math scores, higher graduation rates, lower rates of incarceration, and a lower incidence of teen pregnancy.

The ISS model reflects principles and best practices from child development research and theory.

One last key finding about the approach overall highlights what we already know about ISS

models: they are aligned with widely accepted child development research and theory. For example, ISS models align well with the following bodies of research and theory:

- *Whole child model:* Health, behavior, emotional, and academic factors are all recognized as important for children’s development.
 - *Ecological approach:* ISS is consistent with models that acknowledge the unique ways in which child-, family-, school-, and community-level factors contribute to each student’s academic success.
 - *Life course perspective:* ISS recognizes that earlier education experiences, including academic and nonacademic school experiences, affect later accomplishments.
 - *Child-centered:* ISS recognizes that programs should focus on students’ needs (rather than those of the school or adults), and acknowledges the value of tailoring interventions and approaches to the needs of each individual child.
 - *Social determinants of health:* ISS acknowledges how contextual inequities can drive health inequities because the environment, services, and people surrounding a child can impact their health.
- *Social and emotional competencies:* ISS recognizes that students’ social-emotional skills affect their academic success.
 - *Soft skills:* ISS can support the delivery of services to build interpersonal and intrapersonal skills (like effective communication or conflict management), and recognizes their importance to success in work and life.
 - *Positive Youth Development (PYD):* ISS is consistent with models that emphasize supportive approaches over punitive or didactic approaches, and acknowledges their added effectiveness in engaging students and helping them achieve their goals.

The next three key findings focus on questions that remain to be answered by future research. Answers to these questions will allow ISS models to more strongly impact students’ academic and nonacademic outcomes.

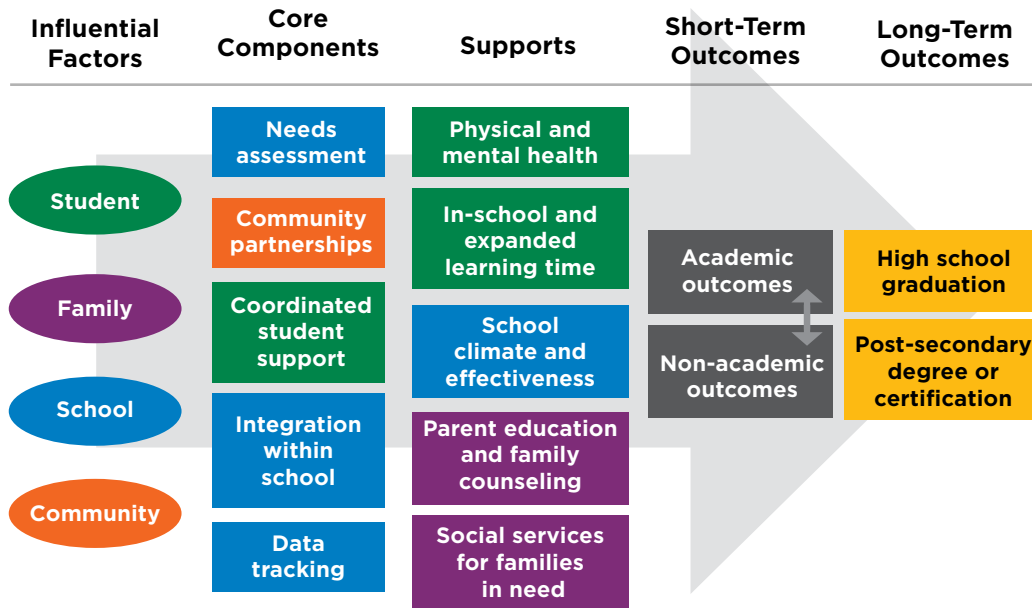
While the five essential components of ISS models (Figure 1) continue to support service delivery, identification of the specific, concrete elements that comprise each component—and how they are implemented—is evolving slowly among researchers and educators. This work represents the critical frontier for research and practice.

Interviews with principals across the country highlight that the core components identified in 2014 (Figure 1) continue to describe the ISS model’s approach.^b However, an understanding of the concrete elements and strategies that effectively translate ISS models from theory to practice is evolving slowly. This involves an understanding of the critical elements that must be present in every model (so that fidelity can be defined), and of how high-quality implementation of these elements affects student success.



^b This model was developed in 2014 based on reviews of existing programs and input from stakeholders.

Figure 2. Logic Model of the Five Core Components of ISS Models



Unfortunately, the ideal process for implementation of ISS programs is not yet clear. In a time of limited budgets, schools want to know which practices are essential and which are not: are certain key elements required for ISS models to be successful? For example, do children need to have a positive relationship with a teacher in the school building for any of the other elements to work? Is one relationship enough? Do schools need to have a full-time ISS coordinator on-site? Interviews with principals suggest that having a coordinator dedicated to integration and coordination can make the difference between high and low impact for an ISS model in a school. However, these questions remain unanswered quantitatively because most evaluations do not include variables in their analyses about the specific mechanisms at work.

One factor that undermines high-quality implementation in schools is insufficient understanding of the essential elements for each of the five components. The other factor is a lack of awareness of what “quality” means for the core components and their constituent elements. As shown in Figure 2, the conceptual model relies on the expectation that the intermediate factors (nonacademic outcomes) will improve, and that these improvements will lead to better academic outcomes. However, poor or inconsistent program implementation may explain why some schools see results and others do not.

Accordingly, the educational field must discuss how to build a stronger body of research. Importantly, which elements are critical for a high-quality ISS implementation that ensures more consistently positive effects? This work represents a vital frontier for research and practice.

High-quality program implementation is important and will require adequate resources.

Studies of early childhood and youth development programs consistently demonstrate that high-quality implementation is associated with more positive outcomes. One Communities in Schools study that examined this topic continues to stand out, finding that a poorly implemented ISS program was no better than no program at all. Interestingly, each of the six implementation studies reviewed here highlighted different aspects of implementation, ranging from higher teacher-to-student ratios, to fidelity to the defined model, to a focus on specific outcomes identified in the organization’s theory of change. The programs reviewed here for their implementation of various ISS models augmented our understanding of which key program parts are important for positive outcomes. However, as noted above, the key elements of quality are only beginning to be defined and examined.

For example, adequate resources are clearly required to carry out implementation tasks: a

needs assessment, coordination, data collection, programming to meet needs unaddressed elsewhere, etc. School staff and principals may move forward with this work out of necessity, but doing it well over time will require dedicated ISS staff. In large schools, more than one staff person may be needed. Without staff who can dedicate their time to this work, these models are difficult to build and sustain.

Other critical elements may include staff who are committed to the ISS student-centered approach, the use of data to identify needs and monitor progress, a supportive and violence-free school, and the provision of services to students (and even to families) when barriers undermine learning. However, these elements must reflect current hypotheses based on the broader research literature, and they must be empirically tested.

Nonacademic outcomes are part of the conceptual model but are rarely measured in evaluations, which limits understanding of the mechanisms that drive ISS success.

While evaluations increasingly suggest that ISS may have positive impacts on academic outcomes, most evaluations included in this study did not examine *nonacademic* outcomes with much depth or nuance. While it is critical to monitor academic outcomes, some evaluations focus on these almost exclusively, which limits our understanding of the impact of ISS programs on nonacademic well-being. This is problematic because it is necessary to specify, measure, assess, and analyze data on nonacademic competencies to understand the critical mechanisms that lead to academic success. Are social skills the critical mechanism improved by ISS models, leading in turn to improvements in academic outcomes? Alternately, is the critical mechanism a student's concept of self, or their persistence or grit? This relative neglect of nonacademic outcomes is beginning to change, but there is still little consistency across studies regarding the competencies that are assessed or how they are measured when included. These nonacademic outcomes are part of the theory of change for ISS models (Figure 2), but until evaluations assess them fully and with consistency, there is insufficient evidence that the theory is wholly or partially correct. Most importantly, policymakers, principals, and school

staff lack evidence-based information about the concrete practices to be implemented.

Four Key Areas for Further Research

First, evaluation methodology impacts researchers' ability to state conclusions.

Decisions about evaluation design, comparison or control groups, measurement, length of implementation or follow-up for the study, and statistical analyses affect the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn. Some null findings likely stem from the inadequate methodologies used for analyses.^c (Evaluation methodologies must be appropriate for each program in terms of timing, types of data, outcomes, etc.) Using different approaches in future evaluations may allow researchers to tease apart small but significant effects in a way that current studies were unable to do.

Second, many evaluations continue to use slightly (or very) different measures of outcomes,

and measures may be obtained from different sources (e.g., student reports versus school records). When results differ with different measures, it is difficult to disentangle whether there is truly an effect or whether the effect is specific to certain outcomes. Encouraging greater use of the same measure or measures across studies would allow findings to be comparable.

Third, studies tend to examine each outcome in isolation.

Researchers may control for confounding factors but infrequently conduct analyses that examine the unfolding process by which ISS models may affect outcomes. Structural equation models, for example, would allow analysis of intermediate/mediating nonacademic variables and how they relate to longer-term academic outcomes. It is essential to include and study these nonacademic outcomes, as they will improve our understanding of whether various ISS models work as theorized.

Finally, if these models do work as theorized, what explains the difference between successful and unsuccessful programs? To answer some of the remaining questions about ISS, **more focus will be needed on program implementation.** Specifically, what explains success in some schools but not others that use the same approach? Are some implementation strategies more likely to result in better outcomes? We

^c Tables with the full findings can be found in chapter 4 of the report as well as in the appendices.

need to better understand implementation approaches and quality to identify critical factors and support achievement of higher-quality implementation by principals and teachers.

Key Takeaways for Stakeholders

Policymakers

Federal, state, tribal, and local policymakers can implement policies that are supportive of ISS. At the local, state, and tribal levels, policymakers can **provide resources for school-based coordinators**, help **develop lists of services** available in different communities, or require that schools **plan for integrated and coordinated supports** to students. Their state mandates can also explicitly emphasize the importance of integrated nonacademic supports in schools.

Federal agencies can support implementation of ISS provisions by providing **technical assistance products and services** that explain best ISS practices, aligning implementation with other popular student support frameworks and programs (e.g., Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Social and Emotional Learning), and ensuring fiscal support for ISS implementation under federal formula programs. Further, such entities can **support research that might answer remaining questions**, and provide discretionary grant dollars to **states and districts to develop and sustain integrated models**.

Additionally, federal and state policymakers can make it easier to **link or braid funding streams** in schools—such as Medicaid, housing support, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families—to meet the needs of students and their families. Some states are considering innovative ways to braid funding so that people in different fields (housing, healthcare, schooling, juvenile justice, etc.) can more easily work together.

Practitioners

Practitioners include teachers, principals, school staff, and staff in departments of education. Based on this updated review, principals and teachers now have further evidence that ISS models can be effective. In addition, **ISS aligns with research and theories on child development**. Using these theories to develop an integrated and coordinated support system for students in schools will likely result in better outcomes for children and their families.

Principals and teachers should explore ways to **align student support initiatives** meant to improve student development, health, and safety. Efforts to implement ISS need not compete with other models or programs that they employ or have heard about, such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Rather, these approaches can build on one another, and educators can plan ways to pursue implementation as a single cohesive system.



Principals and teachers need to **collect data** to monitor the effect of ISS models on their schools and students. This would allow them to know that students are being reached and supported and can help the field identify the essential elements for a successful ISS school.

Experience on the ground suggests the **importance of having an ISS coordinator** in the school. Principals and teachers already work long hours, and few can assume the demands of building an integrated model that performs a needs assessment, develops community partnerships, coordinates student supports, integrates services within the school, and monitors progress for individual students and the school. While a coordinator would require funding, our interviews with principals suggest that it is crucial to successful implementation.

Researchers/evaluators

Several findings are relevant to researchers/evaluators. Researchers should prioritize understanding the **key mechanisms** that



drive ISS models' success in the design of future evaluations. Using the **same outcomes across studies** would advance the field because researchers could more easily make comparisons. Many outcomes (both academic and nonacademic) in the various studies differ, making cross-evaluation comparisons difficult.

To advance the field, it is essential that researchers use the **most rigorous appropriate design** (given the timing of the study, data available, and program design constraints). A rigorous study design with data that do not match the program can result in null findings, which does a disservice to the program and the field.

Researchers and evaluators are learning the importance of **building school-level capacity** by helping schools conduct needs assessments, develop data systems, and identify ways to use performance management data to monitor student performance and identify ways to improve outcomes. Once these practices are in place, impact or outcome evaluations may be more productive.

Finally, there is a need to conduct quantitative studies (quite limited to date) that explore mechanisms of success with depth and nuance. Rigorous qualitative work also has much to add to the research literature on key ways in which ISS works.

Funders

This review suggests that funders should support evaluations that are **appropriately designed to accurately measure results**. Conducting a randomized control trial prematurely, or with methods or measures that do not align with critical questions, is not useful to programs or to the field. It would be more useful to conduct implementation or outcome evaluations that identify the critical mechanisms that make the ISS approach effective. Funders should not rush to randomized studies if the timing, available data, or study design is not conducive to a rigorous, quantitative study design. Answers to any remaining questions about process, implementation, and qualitative findings are also needed and could be supported prior to a randomized control trial.

Achieving results **can take time**. Funders must invest in developing good programs, recognizing that both effective implementation and thoughtful evaluation take time. Changes in educational outcomes will not happen within a year of changing systems and practices within schools. Ideally, funders will support schools in conducting needs assessments, coordinating student supports, developing community partnerships, integrating student services, and using data to monitor progress.

Funders may seek to support a **consortium of researchers and practitioners to work together to identify critical constructs** for future evaluations, and provide a common set of measures for the field.

Conclusion

As a result of Child Trends' review of integrated student support models, the authors are cautiously optimistic about the potential for this approach to improve student outcomes, especially in schools with concentrations of at-risk students. Our caution is based on the large number of null findings, as well as the lack of evidence regarding the concrete elements that make different models successful or how they must be implemented.

With these cautions in mind, we nevertheless find that ISS models represent a promising

approach to supporting students that aligns existing knowledge about child development with additional insight from dedicated, experienced practitioners. Moreover, as the knowledge base accumulates, positive or null findings are common, with rare negative findings. ISS interventions combine research-based learning with practitioner wisdom: they are student-centered, address the whole child in a positive way, develop students' soft and hard skills alike, and acknowledge both the struggles and the resilience seen in families, schools, and communities. Implementation of ISS models should remain flexible to changing needs, identify services and supports within the community, use data to identify needs and monitor progress, and conduct rigorous evaluations when appropriate.

Reports of this depth and length do not happen without the help of innumerable individuals. Though we cannot call out the principals and schools that participated by name, their insights and time were invaluable. The work they do daily as they commit to serving children with kindness, intention, and purpose inspires us.

While we worked on this report, we also worked with a team in the Center for the Improvement of Student Learning (CISL) at the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to support the development of an integrated student supports protocol for the state of Washington. Their exciting work is available on their website. Our conversations with the team in Washington – Andrea Cobb, Kelcey Schmitz, and Amber Palmer – helped shape our thinking about the questions remaining around ISS implementation and their insights and questions were greatly appreciated.

In addition, the report was reviewed by several key stakeholders both in and outside of Child Trends. We thank our Child Trends colleagues – Carol Emig, Kristen Harper, Deb Temkin, Alicia Torres, and Brent Franklin – who reviewed the report. The report was also reviewed by several colleagues outside Child Trends, including Rueben Jacobson at the Coalition for Community Schools, Heather Clawson at Communities in Schools, Betina Jean-Louis at Harlem Children's Zone, and Erin Sibley and Mary Walsh at City Connects. All of their insights and feedback were thoughtful, helpful, and made the report stronger.

Finally, we thank AT&T for its generous support for this study.