



A Whole Child Approach to School Improvement Under ESSA: Support for Students in Low-Performing Schools

A growing body of research shows that students succeed when schools embrace a whole child perspective that integrates social, emotional, and academic development.¹ In schools nationwide, students face challenges, often associated with living in poverty or exposure to trauma, that can make it difficult to show up in the classroom ready to learn. Barriers such as food insecurity, inadequate physical and mental health care, exposure to violence, and lack of stable housing can hold students back from reaching their true potential. All young people have the ability to overcome the obstacles they may face, but we should not expect them to do it alone.

In a variety of school settings across the country, integrated student supports are being implemented to improve student outcomes. Integrated student supports are a school-based approach to promoting students' academic success by developing or securing and coordinating supports that target academic needs and other factors that contribute to student achievement.² Medical care, dental services, mental health supports, tutoring, mentoring, resources for families, housing assistance, and nutrition programs are all examples of integrated student supports.³ Research shows that students benefit from receiving these school-based interventions, but integrated student supports are particularly impactful for historically underserved students, many of whom attend low-performing schools designated for support and improvement under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and statewide accountability plans.⁴

Implementing a high-quality model of integrated student supports can complement school reform efforts and help school leaders better leverage community resources to address the interconnected challenges that affect student health and well-being. Implemented with fidelity, integrated student supports can contribute to improvements on a wide range of student- and school-level outcomes.⁵ Research shows that integrated student supports can improve school climate; increase student attendance, math achievement, and overall GPA; and decrease student grade retention and dropout rates.⁶ Depending on the school setting and local context, integrated student supports may be implemented as one pillar of a community school. (See "Integrated Student Supports Spotlight: Community Schools.")

Integrated Student Supports Spotlight: Community Schools

Integrated student supports are often implemented as one component of community schools, which represent a place-based strategy in which schools partner with community agencies and allocate resources to provide an “integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement.”⁷

Community schools vary in the programs they offer and the ways they operate, depending on their local context. However, four features—or pillars—appear in most community schools and support the conditions for teaching and learning found in high-quality schools. These pillars are:

1. Integrated Student Supports
2. Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities
3. Active Family and Community Engagement
4. Collaborative Leadership and Practice⁸

As a strategy to improve schools, provide more equitable opportunities, and prepare students for further success, community schools can serve as a structure for the delivery and implementation of integrated student supports. For example, a dedicated staff member can coordinate support programs to address out-of-school learning barriers for students and families, such as providing mental and physical health services that can support student success.⁹

Many schools do not have dedicated staff to help students and their families access and navigate the maze of public and private services that might be available in the community. Furthermore, many staff are not provided with training required to meet the diverse needs of their students. However, additional resources, including use of funding under ESSA’s Title I, Part A, 7% set-aside, can be used by schools to embed integrated student supports into the existing programs and structure of low-performing schools.¹⁰

The Role of Integrated Student Supports in a Whole Child Framework

A whole child approach takes into account research from the fields of neuroscience, human development, and the sciences of learning and development. This research shows that effective learning stems from “secure attachments; affirming relationships; rich, hands-on learning experiences; and explicit integration of social, emotional, and academic skills.”¹¹ To support the productive school environments needed to meet the needs of the whole child, research suggests that schools should attend to four major domains:

1. Building a positive school climate in both classrooms and the school as a whole
2. Shaping positive student behaviors through social and emotional learning
3. Developing productive instructional strategies that support motivation, competence, and self-directed learning
4. Creating individualized supports that address student needs, including the effects of trauma and adversity¹²

Policy strategies that contribute to a broader whole child framework include: (1) developing and assessing positive learning environments; (2) using school climate data to diagnose school needs; (3) helping schools improve climate and culture; (4) reducing rates of exclusionary discipline; (5) providing multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS); (6) investing in educator preparation and development; and (7) offering individualized supports.¹³ Individualized supports enable healthy student development, help educators meet student needs, and address learning barriers. Coordinated access to integrated student supports is one important aspect of serving students as part of a whole child framework. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1
A Framework for Whole Child Education



Source: Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Integrated student supports can be woven into existing school frameworks such as MTSS.¹⁴ For example, integrated student support models can be aligned with social and emotional learning strategies, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) programs, and other whole child initiatives.¹⁵

While the types of school-based supports vary depending on local needs, and can include a full-time staff member to coordinate services, they generally consist of five elements for effective delivery:

- **Needs and Strengths Assessment:** This includes a comprehensive assessment to develop a plan and select relevant programs and tiered supports that match the unique needs and strengths of each school and each of its students.
- **Coordinated Student Support:** This includes connecting students and families to the right supports and services in a seamless manner and ensuring delivery of differentiated or tiered supports to serve each student in a school while focusing attention on targeted students who have significant needs.
- **Community Partnerships:** This includes collaborating with existing providers and recruiting new partners to fulfill specific needs, strategically bringing additional resources into the school to build capacity without duplicating efforts.
- **Integration Within Schools:** This includes collaboration among school staff and service providers to ensure that systems of comprehensive supports are integrated within the daily functioning of the school; for example, monitoring student needs, adjusting interventions, and influencing school climate and schoolwide policies in collaboration with staff and leadership.
- **Data Tracking:** This includes ongoing data tracking and evaluation to ensure high-quality implementation and continuous improvement.¹⁶

School Improvement and Integrated Student Supports Under ESSA

Under ESSA, states must identify low-performing schools based on a comprehensive set of measures that may include student opportunities to learn and must include learning outcomes. This change in the law can help school leaders embrace a whole child approach to school improvement. A key component of ESSA is the requirement for states to identify schools for support and improvement at least once every 3 years. Schools are identified based on performance on academic indicators and at least one state-selected indicator of school quality and student success. Evidence-based indicators of school quality and student success include measures of college and career readiness, chronic absenteeism, school climate, and suspension rates.¹⁷ (See “Integrated Student Supports Spotlight: Eliminating Chronic Absenteeism.”)

Integrated Student Supports Spotlight: Eliminating Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism—often defined as missing 10% or more of the school year—negatively impacts students' school performance, high school graduation rates, and students' overall success in adulthood. For example, students who are chronically absent score lower on tests, on average, than students with better attendance, after controlling for race or socioeconomic status.¹⁸ ESSA requires all states to report student chronic absenteeism rates—and 37 states and the District of Columbia have chosen to include chronic absence as an indicator in their statewide accountability and improvement systems.¹⁹ This increased focus on chronic absenteeism is an opportunity for school leaders and teachers to think more broadly about school improvement and identify strategies that can help address issues of chronic absenteeism.

When it comes to making sure kids are in school, no one-size solution will meet the individual needs of students. Identifying attendance patterns early and providing timely and appropriate interventions can have lasting impacts throughout a student's academic journey and ultimately lead to graduation success.²⁰

For example, the Communities In Schools (CIS) model of integrated student supports is implemented in more than 2,300 schools across the country, serving nearly 1.6 million students. Studies show that the CIS model can increase daily attendance and help schools address high rates of absenteeism. Most recently, a 5-year evaluation of the CIS model conducted by MDRC found that elementary school students' attendance improved more in schools implementing the CIS model than it did in schools without CIS.²¹ Ensuring that all students receive the support they need to remain present and engaged in learning throughout their k–12 experience begins with obtaining an accurate picture of how much instructional time students are losing and why. CIS site coordinators look at school-level and individual student data to see if there is an attendance problem, how pervasive it is, and what percentage of students are chronically absent. They gather data to better understand the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism, then coordinate and align services and strategies to address the root causes at the right level for each school or student.

A school is identified for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) when it falls into at least the lowest-performing 5% of all schools. In addition, high schools with 4-year graduation rates at or below 67% are identified for CSI. A school is identified for targeted support and improvement (TSI) when it has consistently underperforming subgroups of students. After a school is identified for CSI, it must implement a school-specific comprehensive intervention plan that is developed by the district and approved and overseen by the state. Similarly, after a school is identified for TSI, it must develop an improvement plan that is approved and overseen by the district.²² Further, ESSA requires community engagement when school improvement plans are being developed, providing parents and community-based organizations the opportunity to weigh in on the plan.²³

ESSA also requires states to set aside up to 7% of funding under Title I, Part A, to support schools identified for CSI and TSI.²⁴ Schools must use these funds to support evidence-based school improvement strategies and interventions. Proposals for CSI must be based on a school-level needs assessment and include a plan to address resource inequities.

Meeting ESSA's Evidence-Based Standard

ESSA requires that Title I, Part A–funded interventions for low-performing schools be supported by evidence.²⁵ Several studies show that integrated student supports meet ESSA's evidence-based requirements.²⁶ Studies also show that well-implemented integrated student support models contribute to increased student attendance, math achievement, and overall GPA, and decreased student grade retention and dropout rates.²⁷

Integrated student supports can influence student success by focusing on students' social and emotional development as well as their academic learning, which often reinforce one another throughout a student's academic career.²⁸ For example, students are more likely to participate in classes when they are adequately fed, in good health, and given opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. Students become more engaged in their studies when their needs are met, which makes improvements in school climate and academic gains more likely to occur.²⁹ These benefits result from integrated student support approaches that reflect principles and best practices from child development research and theory, including whole child and social and emotional learning frameworks.

Positive results were also found in studies that looked at the costs and benefits of the following four models that offer integrated student supports: City Connects,³⁰ Communities In Schools,³¹ Children's Aid Society,³² and Elev8.³³ (See "Integrated Student Supports Spotlight: Communities In Schools.") These analyses reveal a return of \$3 to \$14 for every dollar invested in integrated student support programs and community schools. Simulations suggest that participation in effective integrated student supports interventions can increase students' estimated incomes into their late 20s.³⁴

Integrated Student Supports Spotlight: Communities In Schools

Struggling students and their families can have a hard time accessing and navigating the maze of public and private services available to them. There may be ample resources in a community, but rarely is there someone on the ground who is able to connect these resources with the schools and students that need them most.

Through a school-based site coordinator, Communities In Schools (CIS) implements an integrated student support model that keeps children on a path to graduation. The site coordinator fills a pivotal role as the single point of contact working inside the school to coordinate and provide integrated student supports. They work with school leadership and staff to connect students and families with community resources that help to address both academic and nonacademic needs, allowing students to show up healthy, safe, and prepared to learn.

The site coordinator starts by conducting a comprehensive needs assessment identifying key needs of the school and individual students. Next, they lead their school student support team to develop a plan to prioritize academic needs and other factors that contribute to student achievement. Site coordinators and partners deliver tiers of support to the school, students, and families. Consistent monitoring, adjusting, and evaluation optimize results.

Rigorous third-party evaluations show some positive benefits associated with the CIS model, including attendance and graduation gains. A 2008 evaluation of CIS indicated that CIS schools across seven states made statistically significant gains in attendance and 4th-grade mathematics, compared to

demographically similar non-CIS schools. Schools in this study that were fully implementing the CIS model also showed statistically significant improvements in graduation and dropout rates.³⁵ A similarly constructed evaluation released in 2017 showed that CIS elementary schools significantly improved their attendance rates in comparison to non-CIS schools.³⁶

In addition, while two other third-party evaluations found that middle and high school students randomly assigned to receive intensive case management services did not differ significantly from other students at CIS schools in terms of academic achievement and attendance, these studies did show that case-managed students participated in more meetings with adults in school to discuss academics and personal goals, and were more likely to meet with mentors, receive tutoring, and participate in career planning activities. These same students also reported doing better on outcomes that contribute to academic achievement, including having a caring adult in their lives, developing high-quality peer relationships, and maintaining positive educational attitudes.³⁷

Key to program success is implementation design and support. Research shows that quality implementation is critical to achieving the long-term student outcomes associated with integrated student supports.³⁸ State education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) can improve integrated student support implementation by encouraging partnerships and removing bureaucratic barriers. SEAs can provide technical assistance, create hubs for identifying community resources, build data infrastructure for tracking progress on a variety of leading and lagging indicators, align state and local resources, and foster shared accountability.³⁹ For example, the Washington State Legislature created the Washington Integrated Student Supports Protocol (WISSP). WISSP consists of a framework with a needs assessment, community partnerships, coordination of supports, integration within schools, and a data-driven approach. (See “Integrated Student Supports Spotlight: Washington State Protocol.”) The components of WISSP are just one interdependent strategy for closing educational opportunity gaps. Similar student support frameworks include Response to Intervention (RTI), PBIS, Interconnected Systems Frameworks (ISF), and MTSS. When these efforts are grounded in the sciences of effective practice, they can help ensure high-quality implementation.⁴⁰

Integrated Student Supports Spotlight: Washington State Protocol

In 2016, the Washington State Legislature directed the education department to establish a statewide protocol for integrated student supports. The Washington State Integrated Student Supports Protocol defines the key components of integrated student supports and outlines essential practices linked to each component to ensure high-quality implementation.⁴¹

Education leaders posit that the protocol will:

- support a school-based approach to promoting the success of all students;
- fulfill a vision of public education in which educators focus on education, students focus on learning, and auxiliary supports enable teaching and learning to occur unimpeded;
- encourage the creation, expansion, and quality improvement of community-based supports that can be integrated into the academic environment of schools and school districts;

- increase public awareness of the evidence showing that academic outcomes are a result of both academic and nonacademic factors; and
- support statewide and local organizations in their efforts to provide leadership, coordination, technical assistance, professional development, and advocacy to implement high-quality, evidence-based, student-centered, coordinated approaches throughout the state.

Recommendations for State and Local Education Agencies

ESSA's school improvement requirements provide an opportunity for state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) to ensure that all students have access to supports that will help them succeed.

SEAs and LEAs can take a number of steps to strengthen the implementation of integrated student supports, including by:

1. **SEAs supporting LEAs in conducting a needs assessment of factors that contribute to academic performance, such as opportunities to learn and out-of-school risk factors.** ESSA requires LEAs to develop and implement improvement plans for schools identified for CSI that, among other things, are based on a school-level needs assessment. To be most impactful, this needs assessment should examine the needs of the whole child and the comprehensive set of factors that contribute to academic success, including existing partnerships and resources available to address those needs. Successful implementation of integrated student supports at all schools starts with an inclusive and collaborative process for engaging students and families in identifying needs and assets and then using this information to develop the appropriate partnerships.⁴² SEAs can provide LEAs with guidance, technical assistance, and tools to help them ensure that the integrated student supports selected are tailored to meet the needs of students, parents, and communities. LEAs can provide schools with an analysis of school-level data. Although ESSA does not require that schools identified for TSI and other low-performing schools perform a needs assessment each year, SEA and LEA support should be available to these schools for this purpose.
2. **SEAs helping LEAs and LEAs helping schools partner with the appropriate agencies and state-approved integrated student support providers.** ESSA requires districts to implement evidence-based interventions, such as integrated student supports. LEAs can bring expertise and capacity to improve the implementation of such strategies by partnering with providers of physical health, mental health, social, and other community services. The state could provide a list of state-approved evidence-based integrated student support providers, which can be compiled through a request for proposal process and informed by the ongoing monitoring and evaluation that is already required under ESSA. Lists should be updated at least once annually to add or remove providers. Under some circumstances an intermediary organization (such as the Children's Aid Society, Communities In Schools, Elev8, Say Yes to Education, Turnaround for Children, and University-Assisted Community

Schools) can be helpful—either at the local, regional, or state level—to help coordinate these services or provide technical assistance to school personnel on how to access and use them. Intermediary organizations can also make it less burdensome for LEAs to identify and partner with a provider that draws upon research and engages in evaluation activities to implement a high-quality model.

3. **SEAs considering providing statewide guidance and technical assistance to enhance and support the high-quality implementation of integrated student supports.** Research shows that the quality of implementation is critical to promoting long-term student outcomes.⁴³ SEAs can issue guidance that provides LEAs with a sample protocol for service delivery that is grounded in the sciences of effective practice and closely linked to improved student outcomes. Such protocols (e.g., Washington Integrated Student Supports Protocol) can define the key components of integrated student supports and provide suggested guardrails that will ensure effective implementation at the local level.
4. **Facilitating the blending and braiding of multiple funding streams at the SEA level to support integrated student services.** Research shows that effective outcomes result from high-quality implementation and adequate resources.⁴⁴ SEAs can support this facilitation by coordinating funding and related requirements across their agencies and funding streams in efficient and effective ways. In addition to the 7% set-aside under Title I, Part A, of ESSA, federal funding under Title II can be used to support professional development, and funding under Title IV can be used to supplement broader integrated student support implementation.⁴⁵ Title II funds help to prepare, train, and recruit high-quality teachers, principals, or other school leaders, and Title IV funds can go to a wide range of programs that support students and provide opportunities for academic enrichment. To support integrated student support implementation, SEAs, including in collaboration with other SEAs, can provide guidance to LEAs on blending and braiding funds to sustain grants. In addition to federal funds, SEAs and LEAs can draw from other public and not-for-profit sectors, such as housing, physical health, mental health, nutrition, community development, and children and family services, to provide integrated student supports.⁴⁶
5. **LEAs offering high-quality professional development for practitioners focused on strengthening student outcomes.** Implementation of integrated student supports or similar student support frameworks—such as Response to Intervention (RTI), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Interconnected Systems Frameworks (ISF), and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)—benefit from professional development.⁴⁷ Further, LEAs can support professional development that is focused on improving school climate, teaching conditions, and learning environments schoolwide and providing ways to support the removal of barriers to learning. Best practices include collaborative approaches to professional development for educators and school leaders. Professional development opportunities can also include the elements of integrated student supports, assessing school needs, and creating a strategic plan; the use of data to identify and track nonacademic needs; and the development and management of effective community partnerships.

6. **SEAs selecting and using the appropriate leading indicators to measure progress.** Leading indicators such as student attendance, discipline rates, and credit accumulation (which in high schools can be part of an on-track-to-graduate indicator) are likely to improve before lagging indicators such as graduation rates, test scores, and GPA.⁴⁸ By monitoring these leading and lagging indicators of success, SEAs and LEAs can assess progress and determine whether the integrated student supports provided need to be changed in any way.⁴⁹
7. **SEAs allowing sufficient time for effective implementation and sustainability when making grants.** Grants pursuant to ESSA’s Title I, Part A, 7% set-aside should allow sufficient time for school improvement to occur. ESSA allows SEAs to make grants for a period of up to 4 years. Longer grant periods allow grantees to create sustainable programs and states to collect information on relevant indicators of progress in the interim, including the leading indicators mentioned in the previous recommendation (Recommendation 6).

Conclusion

In schools nationwide, integrated student supports are being used as an evidence-based approach to school improvement that provides benefits for all students, especially those in underserved communities. ESSA provides school leaders, educators, and state and local policymakers opportunities to support whole child approaches and drive school improvement. It is important to note that integrated student supports should accompany other efforts to improve instruction and other factors that influence achievement in the school. To meet the needs of the whole child, students need positive school environments that support students’ unique strengths and interests.⁵⁰ By using integrated student supports as one component of a comprehensive approach designed to foster school environments in which all students are engaged and supported in learning, school leaders and community partners can support a system of continuous school improvement.

Endnotes

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