



Ryan Riley's Testimony
presented to the
Senate Education Committee
June 12, 2019

Chairman Langerholc and members of the Senate Education Committee: thank you for the invitation to testify. This morning, I'm thrilled to share the important impact that Communities In Schools has made across the Commonwealth.

The Communities In Schools model focuses on both the academic and nonacademic barriers to learning, to meet the basic needs of students in order to allow children to focus on learning.

The key to this work is an individual, called a site coordinator, placed inside schools to coordinate wraparound services and attract external partners. The site coordinator conducts a needs assessment of the school to help identify where the challenges exist and designs strategies and partnerships to alleviate the issues students face when coming to school. By partnering with local businesses, social service agencies, health care providers, volunteers and more, our site staff can provide students with exactly what they need. Whether it's food, school supplies, health care, counseling, academic assistance or simply a role model.

The site coordinator provides these supports to students in three different tiers: Tier 1 services are building wide services; Tier 2 services are for small groups of students with a common issue; and Tier 3 services are case-management-level support provided to approximately 10% of the student population based on enrollment. Our site coordinators are SAP trained and are proficient in trauma-informed care.

A unique feature of our program is our case management support. Working with the student's parents and teacher, the site coordinator completes a comprehensive student support plan. This tool captures strengths, weaknesses, and risk factors, as well as a baseline for their academic achievement. The site coordinator then connects the student to the necessary resources that will support the student in achieving their goals, makes the arrangements for any service delivery and monitors the student's progress. The site coordinator also makes plan adjustments as needed.

Here in Pennsylvania, the state of Communities In Schools and our work in Community Schools are stronger than ever. Our program allows building principals to lead, teachers to teach and students to thrive. We do this in more than 75 schools serving thousands of students. In recent years, we have partnered with more than 900 organizations that bring resources and services to thousands of students. All of which have resulted in leveraged resources exceeding millions of dollars of support

for our students. Our work creates empowered schools that harness evidence-based strategies to level the playing field for students in communities that are living in poverty.

Over half the students enrolled in K-12 schools in Pennsylvania qualify for free and reduced price lunch. In other words, they live in poverty. That's right—more than half of our school-aged students live in poverty. It's grown by more than 10% in the last ten years. Furthermore, 88% of teachers believe that student poverty is the number one barrier to effective learning. Students living in poverty are more likely to experience both acute and chronic stressors, which can influence their psychological development and result in social and emotional difficulties. Children may forget at a young age what happens to them, but their subconscious does not.

Mental health has affected the day-to-day operations of our schools. Mental health is also a reminder of the violence that has plagued our schools. It has created vulnerability and stress, but school safety is more than unwelcome intruders—the second leading cause of death for young people (age 10-24) is suicide.

Arguably one of the most over-stressed elements of our education system are guidance counselors. When the required and state-mandated aspects include state testing, graduation requirements, college and career preparation, scheduling, record management and addressing the ever-growing IEP population, there can be no proactive approach at addressing the basic needs of students, consistent parent participation, and community engagement.

The student to guidance counselor ratio is not just reserved for rural schools. It is similar for our urban and suburban schools.

According to an independent evaluation from MDRC, guidance counselors' impressions were that Communities In Schools Site Coordinators had the time to engage students in more personal interactions that were not solely focused on administrative tasks or required constraints.

At Communities In Schools, we find early engagement creates long-term success for both the student and the system. Moreover, because each school we work in is a reflection of the community needs—we design custom fit solutions around local need and resources. We attract and support health clinics, and provide access to medical treatment, dental care, career planning, and for parent employment. Although different everywhere, what remains the same is our model, which is based in evidence, with fidelity and a lead site coordinator.

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Innovation school legislation would enable our model to be used statewide with the creation of a grant program. We believe that our model can help provide assistance to schools that need additional support for mental health services and overall student wellness. I hope that you and your Education Committee Colleagues will consider supporting this important initiative because I believe that we all share the same goal: helping students achieve their full potential.

At the end of today—what we are seeking are resources to grow and sustain this work in communities most in need. Two national studies prove that investment in this work pays a significant dividend. In 2012 a study by EMSI, one the nation's leading economic modeling firms showed that for each dollar invested in Communities In Schools, there is a return investment of \$11.60 to the community. More recently, a study by The Finance Project shows stronger results, with the return being close to \$15 for each dollar invested.

Communities In Schools is fortunate to have so many advocates for our work, but more important are those success stories in places like Allentown, Easton, York, and Lancaster, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and now Johnstown. Nothing is more deserving of your consideration than an idea whose time has come. It's time to invest in what works and we thank you for working with us to support students across the Commonwealth.