

The Program That's Turning Schools Around

The key to closing the achievement gap may lie outside the classroom

by Annie Lowrey, *The Atlantic*, January 28, 2026

ON A CHILLY DAY before Christmas, Teresa Rivas helped a tween boy pick out a new winter coat. “Get the bigger one, the one with the waterproof layer” she said, before helping him pull it onto his string-bean frame. Rivas provides guidance counseling at Owen Goodnight Middle School in San Marcos, Texas. She talks with students about their goals and helps if they’re struggling in class. She’s also a trained navigator placed there by a nonprofit called Communities in Schools.

The idea behind this and other “community school” programs is that students can’t succeed academically if they’re struggling at home. “Between kindergarten and 12th grade, kids spend only 20 percent of their time” in a classroom, Rob Watson, the executive director of the EdRedesign Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, told me. If America wants kids to thrive, he said, it has to consider the 80 percent. Educators and school administrators in San Marcos, a low-income community south of Austin, agreed. “Tests and academics are very important,” Joe Mitchell, the principal of Goodnight Middle School, told me. “But they are secondary sometimes, given what these kids’ lives are like away from here.”

Along with mediating conflicts and doing test prep, Rivas helps kids’ families sign up for public benefits. She arranges for the nonprofit to cover rent payments. She sets up medical appointments, and keeps refrigerators and gas tanks full.

A new study demonstrates that such efforts have long-term effects. Benjamin Goldman, an assistant professor of economics at Cornell, and Jamie Gracie, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard, evaluated data on more than 16 million Texas students over two decades. They found that the introduction of CIS led to higher test scores, lower truancy rates, and fewer suspensions in Texas schools. The program bumped up high-school graduation rates by 5.2 percent and matriculation rates at two-year colleges by 9.1 percent. At age 27, students who had attended a CIS school earned \$1,140 more a year than students who had not.

The study suggests that the United States could bolster achievement by providing more social support. “You could have the world’s greatest teacher,” Goldman told me. “It’s only going to matter so much if you’re not actually showing up to school.” Watson said he hoped the study would lead policy makers to finance community-school programs in every low-income neighborhood.

But the country is veering in the other direction. The White House has slashed hundreds of millions of dollars from a free-school-meal initiative, ended a \$1 billion grant covering mental-health counseling, and revoked \$170 million from the federal community-schools program, which helps cover the salaries of hundreds of workers like Rivas. Other whole-child initiatives might lose financing if they are found to fall under the Trump administration’s DEI rubric. At the same time, the White House is reducing financial support for low-income families, cutting more than \$1 trillion from SNAP and Medicaid.

Schools can act as a “great equalizer,” yet socioeconomic differences among students remain the central drivers of student outcomes. Community schools can’t prevent homelessness, pay for health insurance, or stop parents from getting deported; they cannot construct a strong safety net. Still, they can help to close the gap.