



## COVID-19 Response: Communities In Schools is Bridging the Gap for Virginia's Vulnerable Students

Communities In Schools (CIS) of Virginia is embedded in 96 of the Commonwealth's most challenging schools operating under the philosophy of being "in schools to help kids stay in school." Now that school has become a virtual concept, CIS is pivoting to make sure the students who rely on our evidence-based program model for stability and resources don't fall through the cracks. **School might be closed, but CIS is very much open and bridging the gap in an unpredictable time.**

The shock to the public K-12 school system resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is, by all measures, unprecedented and will have lasting effect. Beyond the questions of grades, testing, and school-based activities, 40% (517,375) of students in Virginia live below the poverty line and are facing exponential factors of uncertainty that will have enormous ramifications on their mental and physical health. While school systems attempt to pivot learning to online and virtual formats, these solutions are likely to widen the equity gap experienced by low-income students and English learners as disparities in access, home environments, and comprehension are exacerbated. CIS of Virginia's six affiliates are committed to leveraging the trusting relationships built with schools, students and families to deliver supports that mitigate these disparities and provide tools to help kids stay on track to achieve when they return to school.

### Relationships Matter

In 14 of Virginia's most challenging school districts, CIS is a lifeline. CIS is centered on the philosophy of its founder, Bill Milliken, that "relationships, not programs, change lives." At the time of school closures, CIS was actively serving nearly 53,000 students across the Commonwealth with a tiered system of evidence-based school supports; 4,165 of the most vulnerable students in our schools have a one-on-one "case management" relationship with a CIS site coordinator. Site Coordinators build relationships with the students who need a trusted adult. They take this responsibility seriously and work tirelessly to connect their students to crucial social services, mentors, tutors, and mental health providers. As of March 13, our site coordinators had provided their case-managed students with **33,987 intensive, ongoing supports** ranging from counseling and attendance monitoring, to mentoring and academic assistance in the 2019-2020 school year. For many of these students, school is the anchor in a life of chaos and instability, as nearly all of them receive basic needs (food, clothing, hygiene items) and

individualized support on an ongoing basis. The relationship they have with their site coordinator is often the most reliable one in their life.

### **CIS of Virginia On the Front Line of Crisis Response**

Within the first 24 hours of school closures, our teams were not only fully engaged in basic needs support -- ensuring families had food, clothing and hygiene supplies -- but our site coordinators were diligently establishing contact with students and families and establishing plans for ongoing support. Their message: **school might be closed, but we will not leave you.** Over the course of the first two weeks of the school closure, our site coordinators moved quickly to successfully connect with over 2,000 of their students who were now at home. They also worked with schools and other community partners to engage in 192 basic needs distribution activities (an average of two initiatives per school). For many basic need and partner organizations, partnership with CIS elevates efficiency and deepens impact. There is trust that, by virtue of the strong relationships that site coordinators have made with their school communities, CIS will direct resources where they are needed most.

### **Delivering School Supports Beyond School Walls**

As our affiliate teams have tirelessly worked to find new ways to stay connected and provide wrap-around services to their students, never has the importance of CIS's relationship-based philosophy been more evident. Checking in with case-managed students and families weekly is top priority, but successfully making contact can take multiple attempts and be a time-consuming process. In the last 10 days, our site coordinators have documented 558 supports to their case-managed students, with many more yet to be tracked. The most frequent supports being delivered are supportive guidance and counseling, academic and literacy assistance and family advocacy (connecting families to resources in the community). Site coordinators are reporting that many check-ins are elevated in intensity as they help families navigate the uncertainty and stresses of job loss, child care, access to technology and more. Innovation and creativity will be necessary as the novelty of the closure wears off, but all affiliates of CIS of Virginia are committed to delivering supports such as:

- **Weekly check-ins** with case-managed students and families to provide emotional and academic support, as well as screen for any needed social services referrals.
- Continuity in **small-group supports** via the most accessible technology platform. Site coordinators are using school-based platforms like Google Classroom and Canvas, but also branching out to Instagram, Facetime and other comfortable spaces, particularly for middle school and high school students, to increase participation.
- Ongoing **individual support and counseling** to promote students' social-emotional health, mental engagement and enrichment, and feelings of connectedness to others who care about them

Amid these threads of consistency in program delivery, creativity is already emerging as site coordinators seek solutions. For example:

- Sydney, a CIS of Hampton Roads site coordinator, created a dedicated Instagram page to connect with her students. She posts regular creative mental health “check ins” and follows up via video chat with any student who indicates they are struggling.
- CIS of Chesterfield started a pen-pal system to help continue a robust county-wide mentoring program that provides positive role models to hundreds of students.
- CIS of Northern Virginia is continuing with planned career exposure panels with community business representatives over video conference to ensure students remain engaged in their long-term goals.

Over the course of only three weeks of school closure, the challenges facing our families have already shifted multiple times. The initial basic needs response quickly shifted to helping establish access to community resources and academic tools, with an increased need for family advocacy interventions. It is difficult for our teams to predict how the needs will continue to evolve as the pandemic impact reaches its peak and the toll of extended restrictions become more evident. Our affiliates will be required to remain nimble as they face ever-changing circumstances to ensure students are not lost amid the lengthy disruption in structure.

### **Measuring our Impact**

Data collection and evaluation are cornerstones of the CIS model and engrained in our organizational culture. Our proprietary data management system (CIS Data Management, “CISDM”) was designed to track all actions and supports provided by site coordinators and measure the effectiveness of our program. However, the abrupt school closures have challenged us to modify our data collection practices and measure site coordination in a new way. Once seemingly straightforward face-to-face supports like attendance check-ins or mentoring are now obsolete as staff have to learn to interact with students remotely. Communication barriers like access to cell phones, email, internet and social media make contacting case-managed students that much more challenging. Still, CIS site coordinators have risen to the challenge and quickly adapted their usual support entry to tracking variables like “outreach attempt”, “successful contact and check-in”, connecting students to technology, or holding an online counseling session. They have also created separate tracking logs to quickly annotate status updates with families and report out on these changes on a weekly basis before entering them into CISDM. The data provided by our staff revealed that in just 10 school days, our site coordinators not only successfully contacted 2,394 students, but also provided individualized academic and social-emotional supports to 443 of them. These individualized supports do not include the basic needs resources that have been provided to thousands of non-case-managed students in our schools. This timely data collection and tracking has helped us understand just how vital our site coordinators are to their students, schools, and communities, and will help us document important information about how needs shift during times of crisis. In this time of uncertainty and change, we feel equipped and confident in our

ability to adequately capture the “who, what, where, when, and how” of the supports the CIS network is providing students during this tenuous time.

### **Bridging the Gap**

The goal of these ongoing supports is not just safety and support during the school closure. The paramount goal is bridging the indefinite span of time until students return to school, and ensuring that when they can go back, they are ready. Without continuity in the supportive relationships that have been developed between CIS site coordinators and their case-managed students, many CIS students will experience academic, social and behavioral setbacks that will be detrimental to their own success as well as the school climate once school is back in session. Research shows that a student who is chronically absent (10% or more of school days) any year between eighth and twelfth grade is over seven times more likely to drop out. Translated to this situation where a student must not only choose to engage but possess the capability to engage, layered with numerous factors outside of a student’s control, like increased economic instability or illness, and the risk is even greater. **CIS is positioned to mitigate that risk.** During school closures, site coordinators will focus on building resiliency and reinforce developmental skills that can help students emerge from a challenging time stronger and even more prepared to achieve in school and in life. Affiliate leaders work in constant partnership with school system leaders and principals in order to provide real-time information to CIS students and align with the specific needs of each individual school community.

### **CIS of Virginia is Providing Relief Across Virginia**

It is incumbent upon CIS of Virginia to ensure that relationships with our vulnerable students are not just maintained but are strengthened during a time when confusion and uncertainty are added burdens, and when access to essential resources is difficult. The wide-ranging economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic will be felt by our network of independent nonprofit affiliates. The role of CIS of Virginia is to ensure sustainability through this crisis and to protect their ability to provide continuity of the full spectrum of support -- helping put food on the table, connecting with students academically and emotionally, and ensuring no family is without services and support available in the community.