Communities in Schools' Performance Learning Centers:
Utilizing Student Supports and Alternative Settings for Dropout Prevention

For more than thirty years, Communities in Schools (CIS) has been dedicated to giving every child a chance to graduate by targeting those factors that are most likely to cause a student to drop out, and providing what it sees as the "five basics" for student achievement: a caring relationship with an adult; a safe place to learn and grow; a healthy start and a healthy future; a marketable skill to use upon graduation; and a chance to give back to peers and community. As part of this far-reaching effort, CIS developed Performance Learning Centers (PLC), an innovative alternative high school model that focuses on providing the five basics to struggling students within a nontraditional learning environment, as opposed to a traditional high school setting.

The goal of the program is to reach students who are at risk of dropping out but are still motivated to succeed, pairing rigorous, self-paced academics with comprehensive student supports and community-based learning and service opportunities. The PLC model's "4 Rs"—relationships that motivate, relevant instruction, rigorous academics, and results—are all intended to increase students' chances to graduate with a diploma that guarantees that they are well equipped with the skills necessary to succeed in college or a career after high school.

Developed and pioneered by CIS of Georgia—one of CIS's twenty-seven state affiliates—in response to Georgia's high dropout rate, the first PLCs were implemented in the state in 2002 to engage students who were at risk for dropping out. With support from private foundations, CIS of Georgia launched two PLCs in its initial pilot program. After the successful pilot, it received additional support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as from state and local supporters and the Georgia Department of Education. With these funds, more PLCs were opened in Georgia, and their substantial early success led other CIS state affiliates to open their own. At the start of the 2008–09 school year, thirty-five PLCs were operating in six states. Twenty-eight of these schools are located in Georgia. What's more, a number of the districts with PLC sites are already showing promising results, such as improving graduation and dropout rates.[1]

CIS and District Partnership

PLCs are each a part of a local public school district, and serve as a recuperative option for districts that have high numbers of students at risk for dropping out and are looking for a way to get those students back on track toward a diploma. PLC students are still accountable to the same state academic standards required in traditional high schools, receive a diploma from their original high school, and may graduate with their original class if they satisfy graduation requirements on time.

In order to open and run a PLC, CIS state and local affiliates partner with a local school district. The district provides the facility for the PLC, either in a separate building housed on a wing of an alternative school building, or at a technical college. Local districts also provide staffing: principals, known in PLCs as academic coordinators, and teachers, or learning facilitators, are all district employees. While start-up funds typically come from private foundations or state grants, most of the operational funds necessary to run a PLC come directly from the district budget.

CIS state and local affiliates bring to the partnership many of PLCs' essential components. The local affiliate provides an on-site service coordinator who addresses the nonacademic issues that may affect a student's ability to succeed in school, and reports to both the academic coordinator and the executive director of the local CIS affiliate. Service coordinators are a key PLC element that significantly drives the success of the model.[2] CIS state affiliates also offer necessary support for PLCs, including technical assistance, a summer training session for PLC staff in addition to other professional development opportunities, and curriculum support. CIS affiliates also work to secure private and public funding to supplement district funds in order to sustain the comprehensive supports and community-based opportunities that are offered to students.

PLC Students

PLCs specifically target high school students who have a strong desire to graduate high school and are self-disciplined and motivated but who may be in danger of not graduating on time due to any number of reasons: they have home or social issues that require flexible school schedules; are detached from the school environment; are chronically late or absent; or are struggling with the pace of their traditional high school. These students may be referred to the PLC in their district by their schools or administrators, their parents, or even themselves.

As part of the PLC acceptance process, students must provide recommendation forms from parents and school administrators, take a standardized assessment to ensure they are at least at the sixth-grade reading and math level, and go through an interview process. Once accepted, students and their parents must sign a contract pledging their commitment to success and their acknowledgment of the high expectations to which PLC students are held. Students can only pass lessons with a minimum 80 percent grade, rather than the 70 percent accepted in regular high schools. Upon entry, each student receives guidance in creating an Independent Development Plan (IDP) that engages them in career and college exploration and helps them identify their postsecondary goals. These IDPs then outline course and credit needs as they align to each student's goals, and map out a plan for reaching those goals.

PLC Design

To work toward completing their Individual Development Plan, PLC students take courses that include a combination of computer- and project-based learning opportunities. Most students begin with the classes they have previously failed and may be offered extra time, if necessary, to focus on subjects that are more difficult for them. Where necessary, this flexibility is made possible by state-level seat time requirement waivers. Because the emphasis for learning new material is on mastery of a subject rather than the time it takes to complete the course, PLCs offer these under-credited students a way to earn credits without losing additional time, and the length of time students stay at PLCs to complete their graduation requirements varies according to their needs.

By assigning projects and giving students autonomy to work at their own pace, PLCs are more like a professional work environment and less like a traditional classroom.[3] Through projects, students not only increase their knowledge of a subject but also develop research, writing, teamwork, technology, and presentation skills—key components of college and career success. All students are required to complete a PLC Senior Project, which further drives the professional environment, requiring students to engage in projects that mimic a real work experience, including presentations, portfolio work, and, in some cases, internships. This unique academic structure transforms the role of the teacher so that learning facilitators guide students through a multitude of courses and levels of mastery at any one time, facilitating their progress by answering individual questions and offering guidance on online and project components.

CIS strives to give every PLC student access to a one-on-one relationship with a caring adult, and learning facilitators play a key role in reaching that goal. In addition to fostering students' academic achievement, learning facilitators also serve as advisers and guidance and career counselors for students. The low student-to-teacher ratios and small school size (about 75 to 150 students) make that possible. The CIS services coordinator also works to connect each student to an external mentor from the community with whom they can explore career and college options.

Connecting students to the community and involving parents and other caring adults is an important component in the PLC design. In addition to facilitating the mentoring program, the services coordinator at each site works within the community to develop opportunities for students to be involved, such as academic service learning opportunities, internships, and job-shadowing experiences. The services coordinator also leverages community and family support to help a student with social and personal needs. Parents are an integral part of the PLC design, and services coordinators work to engage them through phone calls, newsletters, conferences, and home visits in order to pull them into their child's PLC experience.

PLCs are also unique in the *sense* that a high school diploma is not seen as the end goal, but as a springboard for success in life beyond high school. In addition to the career-building opportunities described above, eligible students also have an option to dual-enroll at a local community college or university. These options are designed to help students recognize the importance of a high school diploma as a crucial step in the process toward postsecondary success, and their Independent Development Plans are intended to assist them in making tangible plans for their futures.

PLC Design

After seven years, PLCs have helped more than 3,200 students graduate from high school.[4] While PLCs in other states are too new to glean definitive outcomes, the indications of success from CIS of Georgia's PLCs are impressive.

In 2009, an independent research firm completed an evaluation of Georgia's PLCs and found that PLCs have a significant impact on the districts in which they are located. For districts in which PLCs had been opened, graduation rates after two years of PLC implementation improved by 6 percentage points more than comparison districts without PLCs.[5] PLC districts also had a net reduction in dropout rates of 1.5 percentage points after two years of PLC implementation.[6] The study pointed to the

services coordinator, the academic and life skills coaching, individualized attention, and student connections to the community as key factors in the success of the model.[7] Moreover, PLC students were overrepresented in the number of diplomas awarded in Georgia in 2008,[8] despite the fact that these students were at high risk for dropping out prior to enrolling in the schools.

Other data on PLCs have echoed these findings at the individual level, demonstrating that they help students get back on track and excel in school. CIS of Georgia reports that during the 2007–08 school year, 80 percent of students improved their overall academic performance while attending PLCs and typically improved their academic average by more than 11 percent.[9] Students have fewer behavior problems at PLCs, too—during the 2007–08 school year, students who would later become PLC students averaged more than seven suspensions per year while in a traditional school setting, but that number dropped to just 1.4 per year while they were enrolled in PLCs.[10] Students' attendance, a key measure of student engagement, also improved upon entering PLCs. On average, students missed almost thirteen days a year prior to enrolling in PLCs, but after transferring missed about half as many days—just over seven per year.[11]

Even more importantly, PLCs tend to improve students' attitudes about school and their ability to succeed. In a recent CIS survey of PLC students, 93 percent say they are able to accomplish more at a PLC, 90 percent feel that teachers care about them, and 97 percent believe they can be successful at a PLC.[12]

The Future of PLCs

Due to the success of Georgia's PLCs and the high demand for this type of high school option in districts across the country, more and more district leaders are looking to partner with CIS to provide their struggling students with the comprehensive support and professional environment that many need to graduate. Thus, the number of PLC sites continues to expand, with several CIS state affiliates planning on opening new PLC sites for the 2009–10 school year.[13]

Endnotes

[1] ICF International, "Evaluation of Georgia's Performance Learning Centers Final Report: Volume I," March 2009, http://www.cisga.org//plc/documents/PLC_Volume_I.pdf (accessed March 30, 2009).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Communities in Schools, "Expanding Performance Learning Centers to Prevent Dropout" (Alexandria, VA: Communities in Schools, February 2008).

[4] Linda Kelley, personal communication, March 20, 2009.

[5] ICF International, "Evaluation of Georgia's Performance Learning Centers Final Report: Volume I."

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] L. Kelley, personal communication.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Communities in Schools, "CIS Small Schools Model Promoting Graduation and College Readiness," marketing materials.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.