



Communities  
In Schools

Northeast Kansas

Testimony before the Joint Committee on Education

By

Brooke Miller, Site Coordinator

Communities In Schools of Kansas

Jan 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013

Dear Chairwoman and Chairman, and Members of the Committee,

I am Brooke Miller, a Site Coordinator for Communities In Schools of Kansas. I am very thankful for this opportunity today to tell you about the work I do with children and teens in Kansas.

We send our children to school to learn. To gain the knowledge and skills they need to grow into successful individuals with the ability to support themselves and contribute to society. However, there are certain things young people need in order to focus on their education and things that get in the way of learning. How can a student concentrate on what the teacher is saying if they have not eaten since lunchtime yesterday? How can they see the math problem on the board if they need glasses? How can a child walk to school in 20 degree weather without a coat? How can they complete homework with no school supplies? How can they focus on learning when they are sleep deprived and have no idea where they are going to sleep that night, because they are homeless? These are the problems that children and teens face while pursuing their education and these are the things I see every day. These are the barriers to education... And this is the work of Communities in Schools.

A CIS Site Coordinator works with students in need, students at risk, and students with infinite potential. We help students break down the barriers to their own education by empowering them to succeed. We look at each student as an individual, review their test scores, grades, attendance and behavior and then dig deeper to get to know them in order to understand what specific services or support they need to achieve success at school and in life. Once we have created their plan, we go to work implementing services and monitoring their progress. We broker partnerships with the community to bring the resources to the school. Often, all a child needs is someone who cares. They need someone to talk to, to encourage them, to check in on them and to hold them accountable for doing their homework, studying for tests and simply coming to school.

This is a typical day in the life of a Site Coordinator and these are all real things I have experienced within the last few months at my current site.

It is not quite 8 A.M. yet. Before I even get to my office, the school secretary stops me to let me know we have a new family transferring in. They have four boys from kindergarten to fifth grade. She asks me if I would get them school supplies because they all walked in that morning with absolutely nothing. Due to multiple donations and community partnerships, I have a well-stocked school supply closet that I manage. All four boys have brand-new backpacks and all the required school supplies before their first recess.

9 A.M. I finally get to my office and check my e-mail. Mrs. Jones, a second grade teacher has sent me a message about one of her students, Jeffrey that is chronically late. I check his attendance and he has 19 tardies. The first hour of the day is a reading block, which Jeffrey has now missed for the equivalent of a month. Mrs. Jones tried to speak with his mother; sent home notes, offered incentives, but nothing has worked. I call the mother and during the conversation she reveals that she has cancer and is suffering from several related physical ailments. She is a single mom, with no family and lives less than 2 miles from the school. Too close to qualify for bussing and too far for a seven year-old to walk alone every day. I contact the district and find someone who agrees to make an exception and provide special bussing for the rest of the school year.

It is now 10 A.M. As I'm walking down the hallway desperate for my morning cup of coffee, I notice Tatum, a fourth grader slip and fall in the hallway. I go to her to see if she is alright. She says yes and brushes herself off. Tatum is a quiet girl, who shies away from interacting with others or raising her hand in class. Her hair is disheveled; her clothes are tight and faded. She shows me that the soles of her shoes have completely come apart. I ask if these are her only pair and she says yes. Thanks to grant money secured by CIS, I had a Payless gift card and was able to purchase Tatum a new pair of shoes that day. If you could have been there to see the look on her face when she saw the shoes and put them on, you would have thought I'd gotten her a pony. It so perked up her spirit, that when I observed her a recess that afternoon she was running, jumping and playing with such enthusiasm, that I had to double check I was watching the right girl.

It is 11 A.M. Our community partner arrives with the delivery for Harvesters weekend food backpacks. I help him load in eight large boxes of pre-packed food and I'm ecstatic

to find out we have fresh apples to give our 40 students who participate in the program each week.

It is noon now and time to review Jessie's Individualized Student Plan and check her progress. Improving attendance is the primary goal we set out to work on together. Jessie had missed so many days of school last school year, she had become truant. Jessie's mother works overnight at a factory and usually gets home about 5 am. Although she is only nine years old, Jessie is responsible for getting herself dressed and off to school without any help. Jessie and I worked on strategies to get her to school. We reviewed her morning routine. I got her an alarm clock and we set incentives for her getting to school on time each day. After each week she meets her goal, I have lunch with Jessie. After a month, I give her five vouchers to spend at the school store. It is time for me to pay up.

1pm. A teacher stops me in the hallway. She tells me that a student of hers, Melanie seems to need glasses very badly. She squints constantly and although she is very bright, struggles to read accurately. I call her home and speak with her father. He is raising Melanie and her younger five year-old sister by himself. He was hurt in a construction accident several months prior and was out of work, with no health insurance and little money. Due to a partnership with a local agency, I am able to get Melanie an appointment for an exam and a voucher for free eye glasses. I even arrange for her transportation to and from the appointment, as her father does not have a vehicle. The next week, I pick up the new glasses and take them to Melanie while she is in class. She is bubbling with excitement as I let her try them on and explain how important it is to keep them in the case when she is not wearing them. Her teacher comments to me frequently how great Melanie is doing in reading now that she can see.

Twenty minutes before the bell rings for the end of the day, Mrs. Jackson is escorted to my office by the school counselor. The counselor explains that Mrs. Jackson needs some help finding resources. This is our code for, "this parent really needs help, work your magic". Mrs. Jackson and her three children were evicted from their home. Her husband went to jail a few months ago, and she has she has since been unable to pay the entire rent on her own. The sheriff came to her home a few hours ago, to enforce the eviction. Everything this family owns is now packed in the mother's car. I make several phone calls to find emergency placement for the family and enroll the children in the on-site after school program, so they have a safe place to stay after school and receive homework help.

This job is hard. This job is wonderful. It is humbling, frustrating and in the end, it is very important. The things I do for students and their families do not take a lot of money; it just takes time, effort and collaboration. Resources are available in the community. Volunteer agencies, health services, food banks and clothing closets,

tutoring and mentoring programs, they all already exist and all they need is someone to bring them to the school and connect them to the students who need them most. Please consider supporting Communities in Schools of Kansas. We are the missing piece to the education puzzle. By funding our organization, you are NOT just throwing money at the drop out problem. You are funding the time that someone like me spends finding solutions for student success through establishing community partnerships and hands on student support. Imagine someone like me in every school in a feeder system able to support students from elementary to middle to high school, then help transition them into college, trade school or the military.

Finally, "This is how CIS looks at an elementary school. As a Site Coordinator at Highland Park High School last year, my daily job looked much different. Daily grade and assignment checks, referring students for tutoring, making sure their credits were on track, looking into dual enrollment, getting them ready for college, finding scholarships and helping them fill out applications. It involves a great deal of motivating and sometimes hunting students down to get them to class or tutoring. We also deal with a lot of crises and family issues. The work that CIS does at each site is individualized to the grade levels and specific population at the school. We tailor services and school wide programs to fit the needs and fill the gaps that may exist."

Thank you for your time and consideration.