

Collaborative Solutions for Reaching the Whole Child: The State of the Research on Integrated Student Supports

The Every Student Succeeds Act was codified into federal law in 2015 and it became clear that an updated review of the evidence on Integrated Student Support (ISS) models was necessary. We draw on child development research and theory, evaluations, implementation reports, interviews with principals, benefit/cost analyses, and analyses using a microsimulation model. Synthesizing across these sources, we conclude that the growing evidence base is promisingly positive.

The ISS model reflects principles and best practices from child development research and theory.

ISS models remain aligned with research and theory about child development, as well as multiple theoretical models:

- *Whole child model*: health, behavior, emotional and academic factors are recognized as important,
- *Ecological model*: the child, family, school, and community are all understood to affect the student's academic success,
- *Life course perspective*: early experiences affect later accomplishments,
- *Child-centered*: programs are about students, not the school or the adult staff,
- *Social determinants of health*: contextual inequities can drive health inequities,
- *Social and emotional learning (SEL)*: student's SEL learning affects their academic success,
- *Soft skills*: interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are important to success in work and life, and
- *Positive Youth Development (PYD)*: supportive (rather than punitive or didactic) approaches are likely to be effective in reaching and engaging students.

Evaluation studies find mostly a mix of positive and null (non-significant) findings.

Evaluation findings are promising—suggesting the ISS model is positively tipping results. This review indicates that ISS interventions have mostly positive or null results; negative findings are rare. We see positive results for a variety of outcomes, including attendance, grades, test scores, graduation, and GPAs. Additionally, we see positive results with different measures used to examine similar outcomes, suggesting these results withstand varied types of measurement. However, positive results are mixed in with numerous null results, leading us to conclude this is a promising approach.

Non-academic outcomes are part of the conceptual model but are rarely measured in the evaluations, limiting our understanding of the mechanisms driving ISS success.

While the evaluations suggest that ISS may have positive impacts, most of the evaluations did not examine non-academic outcomes with depth or nuance. It is critical to monitor academic outcomes; but the focus of evaluations is almost exclusively on these outcomes, limiting our understanding of the impact of ISS programs on non-academic well-being. This is problematic because non-academic

outcomes are part of the theory of change but also, policy makers, principals, and school staff do not have evidence-based information about the concrete practices to be implemented.

New evidence using a microsimulation model as well as evidence from benefit/costs studies finds that students' participation in effective ISS interventions will have long term benefits

Four benefit/cost studies have been conducted to date. While using different approaches and estimation methods, these studies show strong returns on investment. Their estimates find that for every dollar invested, a return of at least \$3 and up to \$14 can be anticipated. Child Trends augmented these four studies with analyses from a microsimulation model (the Social Genome Model – SGM, developed by the Brookings Institute with input from Child Trends and now managed by Child Trends and the Urban Institute). Incorporating results from evaluations into the SGM to estimate income at age 29 suggests modest improvements in the incomes of individuals in their late twenties, due to better math scores, higher graduation rates, lower rates of incarceration, and a lower incidence of teen pregnancy.

Several strong evaluations are finding support for particular ISS models.

Importantly, some of the evaluation studies with the strongest methodologies find more consistently positive impacts. This likely reflects both the strength of the programs as well as the choice of an appropriate evaluation design. A lack of positive results in an evaluation, either negative or null, could mean that the program was not effective/poorly implemented, or it could mean that the evaluation was inappropriately designed (i.e. studies that did not include enough participants to measure change).

High quality program implementation is key and requires resources.

Existing studies on implementation consistently tell us that high-quality implementation is associated with more positive outcomes. Each of the implementation studies reviewed here highlighted different components of implementation: higher teacher:student ratios, fidelity to definitions of support, a focus on specific outcomes that were identified in the organization's theory of change. These programs add to our understanding of what key parts of a program are most important for positive outcomes.

Doing this work well, however, requires resources to carry out implementation tasks: needs assessments, coordination, data collection, programming to meet needs that are unaddressed elsewhere, etc. School staff and principals may move forward out of necessity, but doing it well requires dedicated ISS staff.

Beyond the critical question of resources, many elements stand out across programs. These include staff who are committed to the student-centered approach, the use of data to identify needs and monitor progress, maintaining a supportive and violence-free school, and providing services to students and families when barriers undermine learning. However, it is essential to note that these reflect hypotheses based on the broader research literature, and how these pieces impact outcomes needs to be empirically tested. One Communities in Schools study stands out, and found that a poorly implemented ISS program was no better than no program at all.

While the five elements in the ISS model continue to describe programs, understanding of the concrete elements that comprise successful implementation of ISS is evolving slowly; this work represents the critical frontier for research and practice.

Interviews we conducted with principals across the country highlighted that the model developed in 2014 continues to encompass the elements of integrated student support models.¹ However, our understanding of the concrete elements that make ISS models effective is evolving. We need to understand both what the critical components need to be in every model as well as how the quality of implementing these key components affects student success. Unfortunately, the implementation recipe for ISS programs is not yet clear. In a time of limited budgets, schools want to know which practices are essential. Interviews with principals suggest that having a coordinator whose job is integration and coordination can make the difference between high and low impact of an ISS model in a school. However, these questions remain unanswered quantitatively because most of the evaluations do not include variables in their analyses about the specific mechanisms at work.

¹ This model was developed in 2014 based on reviews of existing programs and input from stakeholders.