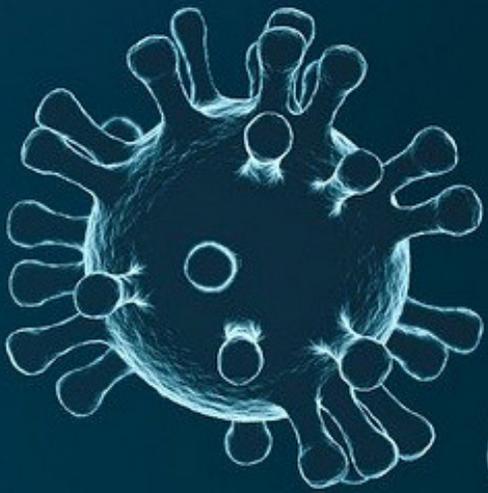


SUMMER 2020



# Communities In Schools

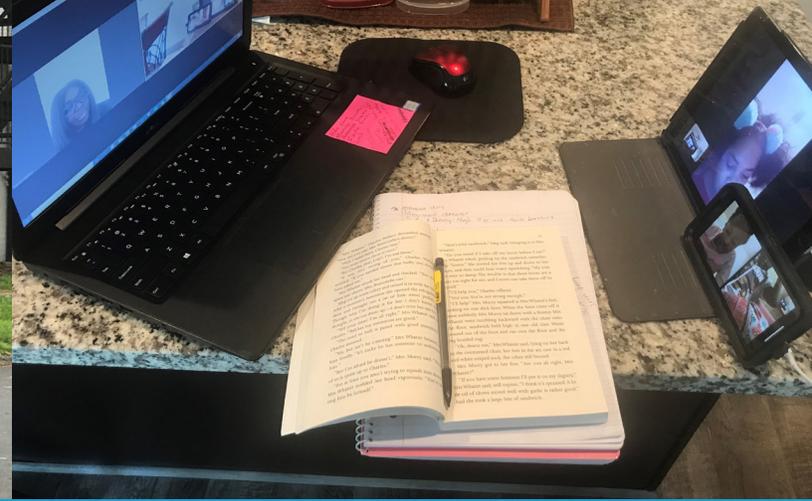
Tennessee



**Supporting Families  
Through a Global Pandemic**

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**We work to ensure students have holistic support, removing academic and nonacademic barriers to their success in school and in life.**



## Introduction

Public schools offer insight into the overall wellbeing of families and communities. They are an intersection, where a diverse public comes together on a more frequent and more personal basis than in any other government service. As a nonprofit provider embedded in public schools and focused on filling the basic needs of families — needs that, when left unmet, impede children’s ability to learn — Communities In Schools of Tennessee has unique insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Tennessee’s most vulnerable families. The wellbeing of these families impacts us all, most importantly, by setting the course for their children to become productive members of our communities. Our case management model also offers a framework for mitigating the long-term social, emotional and economic consequences of this collective trauma on the next generation of Tennesseans. By offering what we know and how we’re working to help during this time, we hope to strengthen and support the work of our government and nonprofit partners and rally additional collective action to take up this call.



*Our mission is to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life.*

## About Communities In Schools

Communities In Schools (CIS) is a national nonprofit recognized for its evidence-based model that ensures students have holistic support, removing academic and nonacademic barriers to their success in school. CIS uses a case manager, or coordinator, to work with individual students to keep them on track academically.

The support we offer is as varied as the students we serve, but can include connecting students to a mental health counselor, a clothing closet or a food pantry; helping families locate affordable housing, apply for health insurance or fill a prescription; or taking a student to a doctor's appointment. Our mission is to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life.

Research tells us that when children have a solid relationship with a caring adult, they are significantly more likely to have positive academic, behavioral and social emotional outcomes, preparing them for productive

adulthood.<sup>1</sup> This is why the centerpiece of the CIS model is our coordinator. CIS coordinators are trained professionals whose sole focus is the welfare of struggling students. They fill the role of cheerleader, nurturer and trusted adult whom students can turn to for help with a wide range of personal challenges.

Within partner schools, coordinators also work with the entire student body on issues such as improved attendance, character development and creating a positive school climate. An independent evaluation of CIS showed this intensive case management approach has produced the strongest reduction in dropout rates of any existing fully-scaled dropout prevention program that has been evaluated, and that the CIS model is effective across states, school settings (urban, suburban, rural), grade levels and student ethnicities.

**Every dollar invested in CIS of Tennessee creates \$11.60 of economic benefit for the community.<sup>2</sup>**

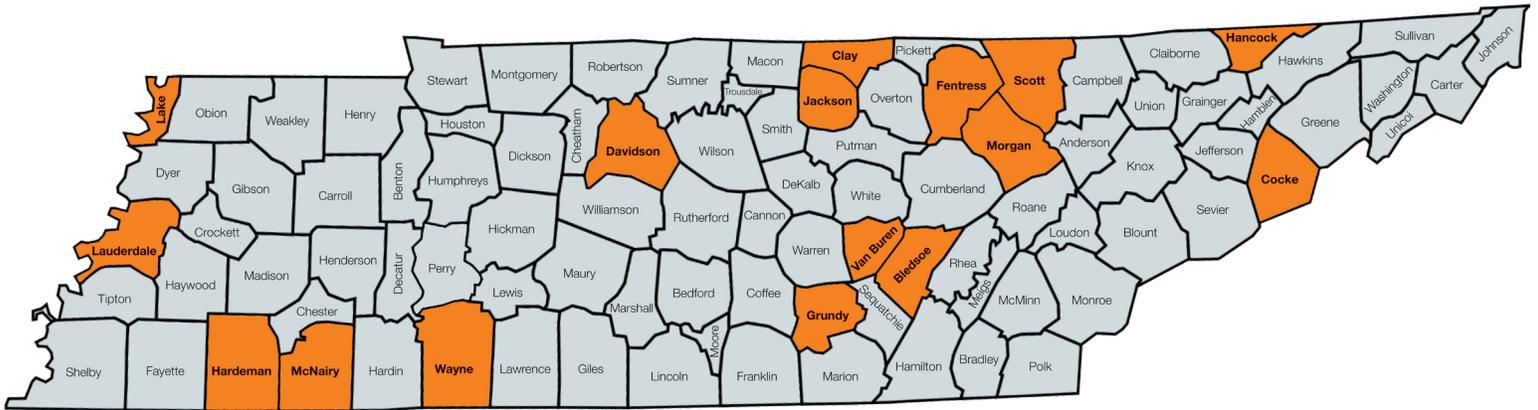


<sup>1</sup>Scales, P. C., & Leffert, N. (1999). Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development. Minneapolis: Search Institute. Rhodes, J., Ebert, L., & Fischer, K. (1992). Natural mentors: An overlooked resource in the social networks of young, African American mothers. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 20(4), 445-461.

<sup>2</sup>Economic Modeling Specialists Inc. (2011). *The Economic Impact of Communities in Schools*.

# Our Work in Tennessee & Response to COVID-19

There are few organizations whose work has gone unchanged during the global pandemic caused by COVID-19, and CIS-TN is no different. With a presence in 16 counties, we are supporting approximately 20,000 students in Tennessee this school year.



	Nashville	Rural
<b>Number of schools</b>	18	23
<b>Total number of students served</b>	8,400	12,000
<b>Number of case managed students</b>	680	715
<b>Grade level</b>	K-12	9-12
<b>Economically disadvantaged</b>	74%	75%
<b>White</b>	12%	81%
<b>African American</b>	60%	14%
<b>Hispanic</b>	20%	2.5%
<b>Other</b>	9%	2.5%

Before schools closed to reduce the spread of COVID-19, this work was based almost entirely in the school building — it’s where we made connections with our students, and where we determined what supports they needed in order to be successful. But when it became apparent schools would remain closed for an extended period of time, we had to quickly reimagine the structure of our work. Students are still “in school,” even though the physical buildings are closed, and it is still our job to help them succeed, despite these new and shifting challenges.

When schools across Tennessee began closing, our coordinators continued providing as much critical support as possible remotely. While doing so, coordinators were able to collect information about families’ needs through informal surveys conducted with students and families who are case managed by a CIS-TN coordinator. These assessments were conducted March 30 - April 10, 2020. In that time, our team conducted more than 900 surveys, primarily from the high-need families we serve through our case management model.

Most surveys completed in Nashville were done by talking with parents. However, many assessments in rural communities were completed directly with the student, since CIS-TN works only with high school students in those communities, and in many cases, they are easier to contact than their parents or caregivers. In some instances, families were unreachable after several attempts. In those cases, coordinators provided previously collected information to help inform our data collection.



## Our Mission in Action:

### Helping a Nashville Mom Through a Coronavirus Job Loss

Written by a CIS-TN Coordinator

Three years ago, Monica's sister passed away, leaving her suddenly to be the legal guardian and single parent to her two nieces and one nephew.

Understandably, her first year as a surrogate parent was overwhelming, and her nieces and nephews began missing school. The following year, CIS-TN began a partnership with the school and I began working with Monica's three children to support them socially and academically. I organized lunch buddies for the kids so they always had someone to eat with at lunch, and I coordinated after-school programs so they had a place to go while their aunt was working. I recruited other students who were strong readers to be their reading partner. Taken together, these steps dramatically improved their school attendance and their overall outlook.

Despite getting thrown quite suddenly into parenting, Monica has fully embraced her role as the guardian of her nieces and nephew, and she cares deeply about their education. If the students have any issues at school, Monica and I immediately swing into action together. I've been able to be a partner to her, as she navigates how to be a parent.

When Monica unexpectedly lost her job because of COVID-19, she was unsure how she would be able to pay her bills. Afraid and unsure of her next step, she asked me for guidance. I was able to help Monica find emergency assistance to pay the family's electric bill and file for unemployment. I also shared information with her about financial assistance for those impacted by COVID-19, as well as leads on some companies that were hiring. Monica and her children feel like they have a partner to navigate these tough times.

	Nashville	Rural	Total
<b>Assessments completed</b>	422	496	918
<b>Adults in household</b>	664	887	1,551
<b>Children in household</b>	1,065	1,090	2,155

## What We Found

Unsurprisingly, the social, emotional and physical needs of students that our work aims to address have not gone away because schools are closed. In fact, these needs have intensified as stay-at-home orders have added to the economic stress and lack of services that already challenged Tennessee's most vulnerable families.

In particular, our students and their families are struggling with issues of mental health and general wellbeing. In some cases, respondents cited excessive stress and emotional strain that kept them from wanting to participate in our needs survey at all.

Respondents told us that the adult stress in the home included chronic health issues, such as cancer and heart attacks; managing children and lack of childcare while attempting to work; and the very real threat of losing their job, which, in some cases, could lead to homelessness. Stressors for children included social isolation and existing mental health diagnoses; issues with receiving medication or managing addiction; anxiety about falling behind in school and failing to graduate or go on to higher education; and rural students voiced concerns about housing, due to caregiver instability caused by issues such as failing health, addiction or untreated mental health issues.

While finding and using educational resources made the top three in both of our geographies, we suspect that need will become less pressing as school systems build their virtual learning platforms. However, accessing virtual learning will continue to be a challenge due to internet and hardware limitations. Other needs seem to be dependent on geography. Those in Nashville cited food insecurity as a top three need, while those living in rural counties were more concerned with internet access. For families in Nashville and in our rural counties, the five needs cited most often were as follows:

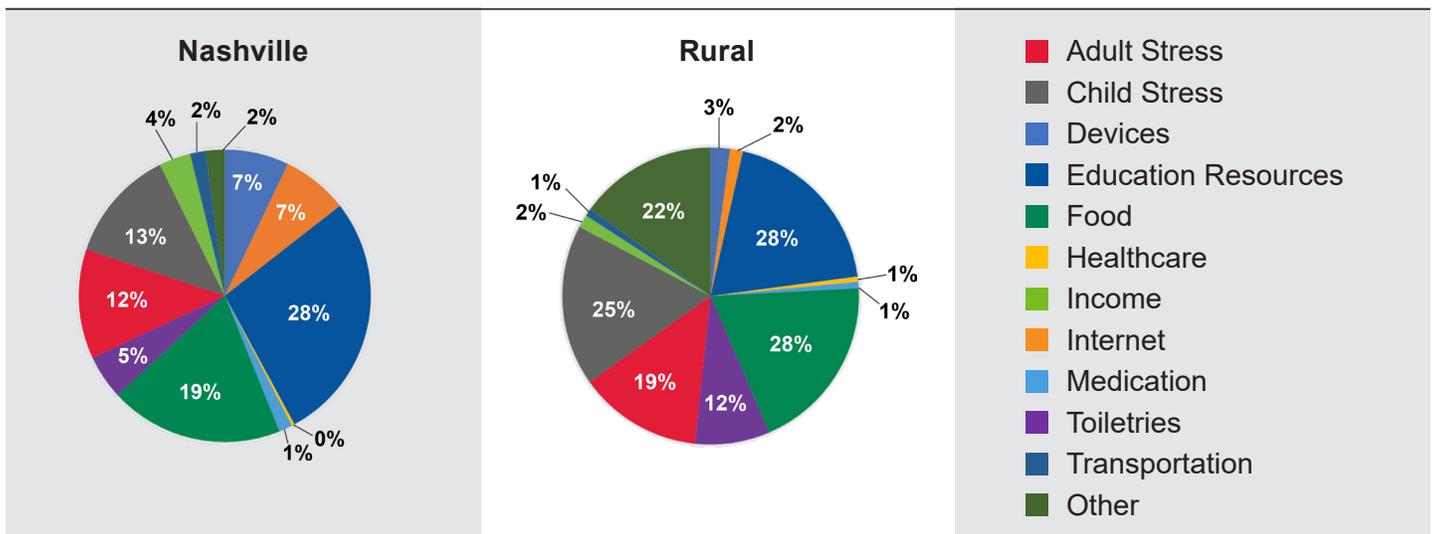
Nashville	Rural
1. Finding and using educational resources (61%)	1. Adult stress in the home (45%)
2. Adult stress in the home (51%)	2. Child stress in the home (42%)
3. Food (50%)	3. Finding and using educational resources (31%)
4. Child stress in the home (47%)	4. Employment/Income (31%)
5. Lack of devices (46%)	5. Internet accessibility (30%)

In addition to the data surrounding families needs, our coordinators uncovered some additional trends relevant to our work:

1. The contact information for many of our students and their families can change frequently due to high mobility and the common use of prepaid cell phones.
2. Because many families depend on prepaid cell phones or phone plans with limited minutes, they are forced to be highly selective with the calls they place or answer.
3. In some cases, they also tend to have limited or no access to devices with internet access, such as smartphones.
4. When communicating remotely over the phone, it can be especially challenging to support families who have limited English language proficiency.

## How We've Helped

*Types of Support Given to Families During the COVID-19 Health Crisis*



Similar to the way we operate in schools, CIS-TN has continued to address families' needs during this pandemic through a combination of directly providing support and connecting families to existing resources. We are focusing most of our collective energy on resources for our families' top three most frequently mentioned concerns: Child and adult stress, educational resources and food insecurity. Our support has ranged from ensuring families know the schedule and location of food sites; delivering food, toiletries and school supplies to homes; locating assistance to pay utility and grocery bills; helping families navigate unemployment benefits and prescription refills; as well as connecting them with mental health care providers and being a listening ear for caregivers and students alike to discuss the stress and worry they are feeling.

### **Child and Adult Stress**

This is the issue we believe will become more challenging, even as the pandemic wanes. There is no question that all families are currently experiencing the stress of ongoing stay-at-home orders and social distancing, but it is especially hard for vulnerable families who daily contend with many other critical stressors.

When we talk with caregivers, we learn that students' mental health struggles are exacerbated by a lack of medications and available counseling, as well as not having the daily structure and socialization that school provides. When we talk with older students, we learn about the addiction, domestic violence and other mental health strains happening in the home.

In all cases, students and families are traumatized and research tells us that living with a constant level of heightened stress can become toxic, which can impede students' ability to learn and have lifelong negative consequences on their physical and mental health.<sup>3</sup> CIS-TN is supporting families by connecting them with mental health care providers where available, getting medications refilled, learning about and sharing resources on self-care, and most importantly, listening.

### **Educational Resources**

There are two issues with educational resources: Knowing which resources to use and how they work, and having the technology and other materials necessary to access them. Coordinators have worked with families to make sure they know where to access the online resources created for them by schools and districts, and have also helped families enroll in free internet service when available. To ensure students have basic materials at home, coordinators have mailed or delivered care packages of pencils, books and school materials, or partnered with other local providers, such as PENCIL, to provide these resources.

One significant and ongoing challenge that CIS has not had the resources to address, is limited access to laptops and other electronic devices for online learning. Coordinators are ensuring families know how to check out devices as individual schools make them available, but the supply cannot keep up with the demand. We anticipate a sustained need for devices into this fall as COVID-19 will likely lead to some amount of distance learning during the 2020-21 school year.

### **Food Insecurity**

School districts and food pantries in Nashville and across the state have done an incredible job of quickly mobilizing to ensure that students and their families have food, in the wake of not only the pandemic, but also the deadly tornadoes. To address food insecurity among our families, CIS-TN has made sure families know the locations, dates and times of food pickup sites, delivered food to homes, and occasionally ordering staple items and having them delivered through Amazon, InstaCart and other grocery delivery services.

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<sup>3</sup>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2008). The Effects of Childhood Stress on Health Across the Lifespan.

## Roadmap for the Future

While we have felt this pull for some time, CIS-TN believes the far-reaching impact of this global health crisis emphasizes the need for greater collaboration among Tennessee's nonprofits and school service providers, in order to more efficiently and effectively help Tennessee students and their families who are in need. This collaboration can take many forms, but ideally, would include data sharing in order to identify gaps in service and avoid duplicative support as well as ensure that all providers working with a student are continuously communicating and delivering support in a holistic or comprehensive manner. Many of the families we work with, for instance, receive help from other nonprofit service providers, but often we aren't aware of this in time to coordinate or align our support, which would ultimately better ensure students are receiving what they need, when they need it, in the way they need it so as to ensure current and future success. This is especially true for providers in different but overlapping fields. In order to ensure educational success, we have to be in sync with the housing, financial, workforce development, food, health and other services that address the underlying obstacles to student and family stability and are critical to educational attainment.

CIS-TN is already involved with relevant service partnerships that we hope will address some of these sectorwide issues. For example, we are proud to be part of such collaboratives as the recently formed Education Task Force in Nashville, focused on equitably supporting students in Metro Nashville Public Schools during this time and in the coming months; the Blueprint for Early Childhood Success, focused on increasing third-grade reading proficiency in Nashville; and the national Success360° initiative. However, we are committed to looking for additional ways to work together with Tennessee organizations focused on student and family wellbeing. We encourage other city- and statewide nonprofits to do the same.

Additionally, we believe that our case management delivery model is well positioned to serve our state during this unprecedented time of need. Student success has always been dependent on more than simply attendance and test scores. However, the additional emotional and economic stress this pandemic has placed on students and families who were already vulnerable presents a real risk of creating additional barriers for academic success, and ultimately, widening achievement gaps in Tennessee. CIS-TN is committed, now more than ever, to utilize this proven delivery model to provide and coordinate holistic support to students and their families. We hope the communities we serve will recognize and prioritize this need and facilitate deeper partnerships with the nonprofit sector as a whole to improve the wellbeing of families hardest hit by this crisis.

We plan to continue tracking this data through the end of the school year to see the ways in which our families' needs may be shifting, and the extent to which we have been able to help meet those needs. None of us knows exactly when Tennessee's public schools will reopen or what that will look like, so we look forward to using this information to guide our work for the foreseeable future.

**To learn more about the work we do for Tennessee students and their families, visit <https://www.cistn.org>.**

## Our Mission in Action:

### Giving a Wayne County High Schooler a Fresh Start

Written by a CIS-TN Coordinator

*Kara, a high school freshman, lives with her parents and two teenage siblings. For many years, her family lived in significant poverty; they had difficulty meeting basic needs, moved frequently, and ultimately, they became homeless. Shortly before Christmas 2019, Kara's older sister informed a teacher that their family was in need of food, and the teacher connected their family to Communities In Schools.*

When I first met with Kara, she told me that her family's struggles had led her to attendance issues in the past, but her goal was to have perfect attendance for the 2019-2020 school year. After identifying the biggest barriers she faced, I was able to partner with local community organizations to get Kara's family housed in a local motel.

When I met with Kara's parents, they spoke with me about budgeting and goal setting. We worked hard to find them acceptance into public housing, but they were repeatedly denied due to a recent eviction. The little income their family did receive was spent quickly to keep them afloat in the motel, and their financial goals felt out of reach. On the day that schools let out due to COVID-19, Kara's family, unable to pay for their motel room, was informed they had to leave the next day by 11:00 a.m. They had little money, no place to go, and the closest available homeless shelter was in Nashville, where facilities were already at or over capacity, following the recent deadly tornado and COVID-19.

Kara's family planned to sleep in their car that night, but CIS-TN quickly mobilized. **In less than 24 hours, we were able to work with First United Methodist Church to find a rental home for Kara's family, as well as the funding for the first month's rent and utilities.** Once we had a roof over their heads, I reached out to school personnel and community members, and we were able to provide them with mattresses, beds, small appliances and household items, cleaning supplies and food for the family all in that same day. With this community partnership and assistance in getting a fresh start, Kara's family is capable of sustaining this housing and are on the road to improving their circumstances more over time.

During the time we were helping Kara's family get back on their feet, I got to know Kara very well. When I first met her, she barely spoke a word unless she was around a group of friends. She was not completing classwork, she was constantly interrupting class by joking around with others and often ended up receiving an in-school suspension. I began meeting with Kara more individually, discussing character development, asking her about her interests and skills and simply paying attention to her. **I wanted Kara to believe in herself, so I told her repeatedly that she had the power to break the cycle of poverty and chaos that had been her reality for most of her life.** Slowly but surely, she began to ask if she could stay after-school to help with projects, organize the food pantry and participate in various school groups. Today, she is a different person: she is opening doors for others, showing respect to adults and looking for ways to be helpful.

The youngest of her siblings, I have no doubt that Kara has just been waiting for someone to see her in the midst of this chaotic world. I'd like to think that as much as we have done to help her family find stability over these months, **the most important thing that we have done is to help her feel seen.**