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ZEEST HAIDER  
LEIGH PARISE

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# RECONNECTING STUDENTS TO EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

## Learning from the Communities In Schools Reengagement Coordinator Initiative

**W**hen students drop out of high school there are substantial social and economic consequences that can persist throughout their lives. They are more likely to be unemployed, to become teenage parents, to become involved in the criminal justice system, and to suffer a lifetime of low wages.<sup>1</sup> Dropout rates soared during the COVID-19 pandemic as schools struggled to adapt and keep students engaged.<sup>2</sup> Virtual classes, hybrid learning options, and unexpected closures characterized the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years, and complicated an unprecedented and unpredictable period. For many students who were on the cusp of completing high school, that milestone was suddenly out of reach due to missed school, failing grades, and the dual pressures and trauma of the pandemic and the economic downturn. While the pandemic brought greater attention to the need to provide support to disengaged students, school systems have long struggled to reconnect with students who are not regularly attending school or who drop out.<sup>3</sup>

During the 2021–2022 school year, Communities In Schools® (CIS®) introduced the Reengagement Coordinator (RC) Initiative, with the goal of reengaging high school students (particularly eleventh and twelfth grade students) who did not reenroll in school or were chronically absent. The CIS mission is to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. CIS is a national network of independent organizations and partners that connects 1.8 million students with caring adults and resources designed to help students succeed. The CIS network includes 114 affiliated organizations and licensed partnerships working in 3,270 sites across 25 states and the District of Columbia. Each CIS affiliate is an independent, local nonprofit organ-

ization that implements the evidence-based CIS model to meet the unique needs of their community. The affiliates play an important role in connecting students, schools, and families with local partners and organizations. The RC Initiative focuses on reconnecting and supporting students on a pathway toward completing their education with a plan for a successful future. Data from CIS show that, on average in the affiliates participating in the RC Initiative, almost 100 students per school (6,905 students from 71 schools served by CIS) were disengaged at the start of the 2021–2022 school year.

CIS partnered with MDRC in 2021 to conduct a qualitative evaluation of the implementation of the RC Initiative. The evaluation set out to answer key questions related to the reasons for students' disengagement, how RCs identified students, which strategies were most effective, and the potential pathways for reengagement. Data were collected through interviews and focus groups with 14 program managers (PMs) in 11 CIS affiliates, and with 34 RCs in 19 CIS affiliates. As part of their managerial role at their affiliates, PMs oversaw and managed the RCs; they were not involved in providing direct services to students.

In addition, the study used data collected by CIS National from RCs through specific outreach trackers and the CIS data management system. This information was tracked in a specific reengagement intake form completed for each student on an RC's caseload, as well as information about the specific milestones for students' chosen reengagement pathways.

This brief summarizes the main findings and shares takeaways and considerations for practitioners in schools and other organizations who are looking to work with and reengage disengaged students or create a dedicated position to reengage students.

## **WHY WERE STUDENTS DISENGAGED?**

During the interviews conducted by the research team, as well as student data collected by RCs, there were three main reasons cited for student disengagement from high school:

### **1** Loss of motivation

- RCs reported 75 percent of the students they contacted had lost motivation to engage further in their education.
- Trauma from school disciplinary measures made students uninterested in returning to the same environment.
- Students were anxious about returning to in-person learning, especially as some had fallen further behind in their education during remote schooling and felt that catching up would be too challenging.

## 2 Supporting family

- Many students had to stay home as caregivers to younger siblings (20 percent of students on RCs' caseloads).
- Students were employed, earning money to financially support themselves and their families (15 percent of students on RCs' caseloads).

## 3 Mental health challenges

- RCs reported that many of their students had mental health concerns or needed mental health supports (23 percent of students on RCs' caseloads).
- RCs shared that fallout from after the pandemic and issues at home (like illnesses and deaths in families) and inconsistency in how students participated in school instilled "severe anxiety in a lot of students about returning to school."

## HOW DID REENGAGEMENT COORDINATORS IDENTIFY AND LEARN ABOUT STUDENTS NEEDING REENGAGEMENT SUPPORTS?

To identify students who might need their support, RCs received lists of students for outreach from different sources. Some lists came directly from the district, while other lists were generated by administrative staff at the school where the RC was located. Generally, the list consisted of students who were absent from school for a notable period of time. In addition to using the lists generated by schools and districts when contacting students, RCs followed requests from the schools, depending on the school's larger goals for reengaging students. For example, some RCs reported that their school administration wanted the RC to focus on reengaging students who were coming to school but not attending classes. In other instances, schools prioritized RCs' engaging students who needed to make up missed credits to be able to graduate or be on track to graduate. See Box 1 for a tip on creating a list of disengaged students.

### BOX 1

#### CONSIDER THIS!

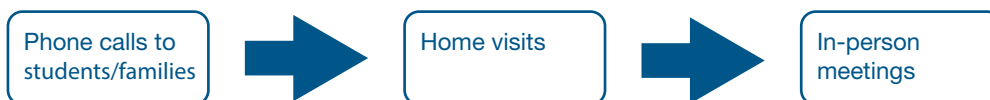
##### Create a List of Disengaged Students

If you are a school administrator creating a list of disengaged students, it is important to have a clear definition of what it means for a student to be disengaged from your school. This will help you create a targeted list of students for outreach and set you up to create a precise outreach plan.

### WHAT STRATEGIES WORKED TO REENGAGE STUDENTS?

RCs broadly agreed that the most effective way to engage students was through in-person contact. Before making these contacts, many RCs connected with social workers or counselors who had previous contacts with their students to learn more and then build a plan for outreach. Generally, RCs across affiliates reported using a similar approach, shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Steps for Student Outreach**



RCs reported that students often preferred in-person contacts outside of school, as many students had previous negative interactions at their assigned schools. Meeting outside of the school in an environment that was comfortable for the student was usually the first step toward engaging students. See Box 2 for tips on learning about disengaged students and the importance of early intervention.

**BOX 2**

**CONSIDER THIS!**

**Learn More About Disengaged Students**

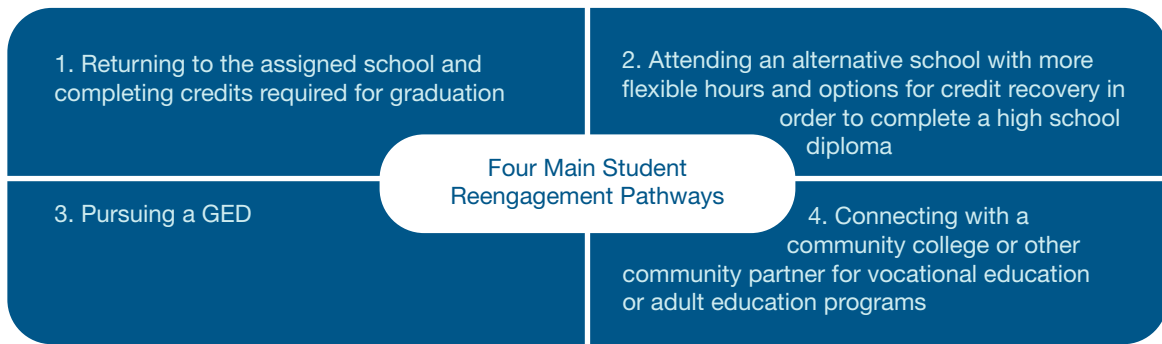
- Reengaging students can be time-consuming, but the more information that can be gathered about students and their history at the school from various sources (for example, counselors, friends, and teachers), the easier it will be to reengage them using strategies that are targeted and individualized to their needs.
- Early intervention is key. In high schools it is crucial to work with students in the early grades. Doing so will allow for intervention earlier in the process of disengagement and provides more opportunities for students to reengage in and return to school.

**WHAT WERE THE PATHWAYS FOR REENGAGEMENT?**

Once RCs were successfully able to connect with students, they began the process of setting goals and selecting pathways. The majority of RCs participating in focus groups described four main pathways for student reengagement (shown in Figure 2). Typically, larger affiliates (generally those with schools in urban settings) were able to leverage more options for students to reengage in various pathways, including vocational programs, connections with community colleges, and dual enrollment programs, which allow students to take college courses while still in high school. Staff in smaller or more rural districts cited that coming back to the local or assigned high school was really the only option for their students.<sup>4</sup>

Many students wanted flexibility to make up missed credits due to other commitments (including jobs, obligations to provide care for family members, or hesitation to return to their local or assigned school due to previous negative experiences). For example, one focus group participant remarked that “A lot of [disengaged students]...have to work to help provide for their family. So, in the evening, we offer classes that are completely online.” Many RCs spoke about alternative schools that can provide flexible options for students, such as afternoon or evening hours, virtual classes, and quarter versus semester systems (which allow students to take more credits over a shorter amount of time), among

**Figure 2. Student Reengagement Pathways**



others. Apart from bringing students back to their local schools or connecting them to other credit recovery pathways, focus group participants noted that CIS is also well positioned to create community connections and partnerships for student reengagement because it is able to build on existing connections in the larger community and schools in which its affiliates operate. One CIS staff member stated,

We've also, really, in the beginning, focused on getting out into the community and making connections with other nonprofits that are doing different programming where the students can go receive a stipend during the day while they finish their diploma, and then get a certification of some type. I'm thinking, in particular, there's one where they can get a department management certification while finishing the GED, and then have some job placement opportunities there.

See Box 3 on tips for creating a new reengagement coordinator position and using this position to foster positive community and school relations.

**BOX 3**

**CONSIDER THIS!**

**Hiring a Dedicated Person to Work With Disengaged Students**

- Choose someone who is deeply connected to the local community and has or can create relationships with community partners, opening up avenues for students to reengage.
- Integrate new hires into the school setting such that they work closely with the Communities In Schools site coordinator or other support staff to ensure they are connected to school administration and relevant resources.
- Create a resource map for reengagement coordinators that lists the various options for student reengagement within the district and local community, including colleges and employers that can assist with reengagement pathways.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Overall, the RC Initiative was important in reengaging students who otherwise may not have returned to school, even with existing school-level supports. See Box 4 for reflections about the role from RCs. The type of time-intensive outreach and relationship building that RCs did was simply not possible for existing school staff members to undertake. The RC Initiative was successful in establishing a position at the school level that provided outreach and supports to those students who were completely disengaged from school. RCs connected with students, opened various pathways for them to pursue and then maintained contact, and continued to provide support to ensure student success. This particular initiative identified important lessons regarding the kinds of challenges students face that result in disengagement from school, and ways in which the already overburdened school systems are or are not set up to address some of those challenges. The findings underscore the importance of CIS supports that are focused on meeting the needs of students and trying to identify the full set of community supports to address those needs.

### BOX 4

#### THOUGHTS FROM REENGAGEMENT COORDINATORS

- “The things we’re seeing, we’re just seeing it tenfold I think because of COVID, but those situations have been there forever. And I think that’s going to continue, so I think this reengagement coordinator role is a vital piece to address all of them.”
- “We only have one social worker in the school. And then we have four academic counselors. The counselors are so overwhelmed with the number of students on their caseloads...so a lot of students just kind of fall through the cracks and no one really knows what is going on with them.”

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 U.S. Department of Education. *Bringing Students Back to the Center. A Resource Guide for Implementing and Enhancing Re-Engagement Centers for Out-of-School Youth* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2014).
- 2 Bryan Anderson, “More than 10,000 North Carolina students unaccounted for,” Associated Press, website: <https://apnews.com> (December 31, 2020); Sandy Addis and Ray McNulty, “The Pandemic’s Impact on At-Risk Students, Schools, and Graduation Rates” (Anderson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center, 2021).
- 3 U.S. Department of Education (2014).
- 4 CIS collected data to monitor students on their selected pathways (n = 1,124). Of the students that chose the various pathways, RCs reported the following proportions of students either completed or made progress on those pathways: Career: 82 percent; Education (high school diploma, GED, or professional certification): 85 percent; or Post-secondary education enrollment: 75 percent.

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NEW YORK  
200 Vesey Street, 23rd Flr., New York, NY 10281  
Tel: 212 532 3200

OAKLAND  
475 14th Street, Suite 750, Oakland, CA 94612  
Tel: 510 663 6372

WASHINGTON, DC  
750 17th Street, NW, Suite 501  
Washington, DC 20006

LOS ANGELES  
11965 Venice Boulevard, Suite 402  
Los Angeles, CA 90066

