

ON FUNDING
COMMUNITIES IN
SCHOOLS

QUESTIONS TO THE SENATE EDUCATION
COMMITTEE REGARDING THE
LONGITUDINAL STUDY PUBLISHED BY
COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS AND ICF
INTERNATIONAL AND PROPOSED ESEA
LEGISLATION

ANTHONY MICHAEL LAKE

WHO IS *COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS*?

COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS – A NATIONWIDE NONPROFIT

SCIENCE OR HYPE?

Communities In Schools(CIS) is a non-profit group claiming that a “scientific study proves” that their organization is not only effective in academic type interventions, but is in fact “our country’s leading dropout prevention organization, and the only one proven to significantly decrease dropout rates, increase graduation rates, and increase math and literacy proficiency.”¹

Communities In Schools basis its claims of proof on an ostensibly scientific study entitled “Communities In Schools National Evaluation Five Year Summary Report” conducted by a group known as ICF International (ICF). Normally, in academic and scientific circles, we speak in terms of correlation, statistical significance, and effect size. Rarely, if ever, do we hear the words “proof” and “scientific study” in the same sentence.

COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS CLAIMS THAT THE ICF REPORT PROVES THE FOLLOWING:

1. Employing Communities In Schools in your district will improve grades and standardized test scores.
2. Employing Communities In Schools in your district will decrease drop-out rates.
3. Employing Communities In Schools in your district will reduce absenteeism and tardiness rates.
4. Employing Communities In Schools in your district will reduce reported discipline incidents.

Can it possibly be true that after years of data collection across literally hundreds of millions of students that a single reproducible methodological approach to improve academics, decrease drop out rates, improve attendance, and decrease discipline incidents has been found?

WHO CONDUCTED THE LONGITUDINAL STUDY?

A group known as ICF INTERNATIONAL compiled the quasi-experimental data upon which the claims of proof of a methodological approach to improved academics were founded. According to ICF INTERNATIONAL’S web site, “ICF was founded in 1969 as the Inner City Fund, a venture capital firm established to finance inner-city businesses. Its first president was C. D. Lester, a former Tuskegee Airman, who was joined by three U.S. Department of Defense analysts.”² According to the

¹ Quoted from the Pittsburgh-Allegheny County Communities in Schools website - See <http://pittsburgh.cis-pa.org/>

² From ICF International – See <http://www.icfi.com/about/our-history>

same website, the ICF organization has as one of its primary goals to promote “responsible fatherhood”, “supportive housing”, “sustainable workforce development”, and “justice”.

It is highly unusual for a scientific organization to actively promote an agenda, or even admit that the organization has such an agenda. ICF’s primary markets are now Defense and community outreach type programs – another unusual combination. Still, an open bias SHOULD NOT automatically discredit the ICF longitudinal study, and suspiciousness cannot discredit true science. Yet, with all this in mind, it is prudent to examine the particular details of a report of this type issued by such an organization.

WHERE WAS THE STUDY PUBLISHED?

This question has a different answer depending upon to whom the question is posed. When scientists say “published”, they mean that the document was submitted to what is known as a peer-reviewed journal. At a peer-reviewed journal, several scientists read the study without knowing who the authors of the study are, or what the authors’ agenda is. If the reviewing scientists feel that a study is generally scientifically valid, the study will then be promoted to the editor of the journal for the final word on publication.

In what scientific journal was this five year long “scientific” study published?

The Communities In Schools/ICF International longitudinal study was not published in a peer reviewed scientific journal. *How is it possible that a five year long study which purports to “prove” a methodological approach which claims to lower the drop-out rate, improve attendance, raise grades, and reduce disciplinary problems works effectively would go unpublished?*

Let’s take a closer look at the document that was “published” by *Communities In Schools*. The very first thing we notice is that the document has both the *Communities In Schools* and *ICF International* corporate logos on its face. Inside the 34 page report, you will not find much “SPSS” data (SPSS is the software package with which scientific papers are typically prepared). The document is not formatted in the standard APA style typically associated with scientific studies. In fact, the study looks much like an advertisement for Communities In Schools, and perhaps ICF International itself.

WHAT ARE THE SPECIFIC CLAIMS OF THE STUDY?

Specifically, the report claims that, amongst all schools utilizing CIS, dropouts were reduced, attendance across all grade levels was improved, math scores across all grade levels improved, and that reading scores across all grade levels were neutral or declined. Yet, analyzing the table on page 8 of the report demonstrates that, across all CIS model schools, none of the so-called “improvements” were substantively meaningful.³ The following chart is reprinted here from the report:

³ See page 8 of the Communities In Schools/ICF International report entitled “Communities In Schools National Evaluation Summary Report”

**Exhibit 4: Summary of Effects From the School-level
Quasi-Experimental Study: Effectiveness of the CIS Model**

Outcome	High Implementers	All CIS Schools
Dropout and Completion		
Dropout Rate	▲	⬆
Graduation Rate	▲	⬆
Attendance		
Attendance: Elementary	▲	⬆
Attendance: Middle	⬆	⬆
Attendance: High	⬆	⬆
Academics		
Elementary School Math	⬆	⬆
Elementary School Reading	⬆	---
Middle School Math	▲	⬆
Middle School Reading	▲	---
High School Math	⬆	⬆
High School Reading	---	---

▲	Demonstrated a substantively important positive effect (effect size greater than .25)
⬆	Demonstrated a positive effect (effect size between .01 and .25)
---	Demonstrated a neutral or negative effect

Note that, according to the legend, only the filled upward pointing arrows have any substantively meaningful positive effect. The dashed lines may or may not be substantively meaningful negative effects. The empty upward pointing arrows indicate either an effect size too small or correlation too statistically insignificant to be evaluated against the variable of CIS’s presence on campus. In other words, the primary finding of the report in regards to CIS across all schools (the column on the right), so widely touted as proof that CIS is effective, is that there is no meaningful effect of having CIS in schools, except for an apparent decrease in reading scores.

However, the authors of the report claim that amongst schools which are “high implementers” of the CIS model, dropout rates did improve in a meaningful way, so did elementary school attendance, and middle school math and reading scores (but there was still a depressive effect on high school reading scores). Problematically, the ICF study operationally defined “high implementers” thusly: “those CIS schools that implemented the model with fidelity. We developed a scoring rubric which was field-tested and validated, that measured implementation in four domains: planning, needs assessment, service delivery, and monitoring and adjustment.”⁴ Unfortunately, what exactly “service delivery” is remains undefined. In other words, the definition is tautological. Schools

⁴ From the CIS/ICF International Report, page 4, section 1.3, “Exploratory Data Analysis”

that performed well were defined as high implementers, and vice versa. *The “high implementers” are merely those CIS schools who happened to have a better outcome, chosen “cherry picking” style from the total population.*

The study expands upon certain cohorts, and even though this piece reads more like an advertisement than a scientific study, the numbers clearly indicate that even the hand-picked data is not good. For instance, the Wichita cohort had negative effects on nearly every rubric measured, where it had any effect at all.

One of the few seemingly positive data items in the cherry-picked list was that overall GPA had improved in the Austin cohort. Unfortunately, the longitudinal study coincided precisely with the height of the Texas school cheating scandals. Unfortunately, this GPA correlation implies a correlation between CIS and grade cheating scandals. Of course, correlation is not causation.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

The ICF/CIS study indicates that schools are spending “under \$200 per pupil” for over 1.2 million pupils. This gives a rough calculation of around \$200,000,000 per year. With no statistically significant meaningful results (with an appreciable effect size), that means taxpayers and funding stakeholders are spending two hundred million dollars per year on a program whose only actually meaningful effect is to suppress reading grades. *Yet, in peer reviewed studies showing real correlations between any independent variable and improved academics, almost unilaterally the “intervention” technique is early and frequent home visits by teachers in the case of three or more absences. The cost associated with this credible and quantifiable improvement is typically zero.* Reiterating, training existing educators to make early and frequent home visits in the case of three or more absences is an effective strategy, and has little or no associated cost.

But what if the author’s interpretation of the CIS/ICF report is incorrect? Concerned lawmakers and administrators must still ask the question “Is it worthwhile to spend \$200,000,000 for the results, even if they were as fantastic as CIS purports?” Sadly, the clear answer is “No, because no-cost strategies with real science behind them can be implemented more easily and more effectively.” And because CIS is providing no service that school nurses, social workers, head start workers, teachers, and psychologists are or should already be doing. Furthermore, and even more condemningly, CIS itself provides *none* of the services it directs people to. CIS only connects people to already existing resources, such as food stamps, grief counseling, etc. Certainly, perhaps there are some exceptionally talented CIS workers who are good-hearted and well-meaning, and perhaps actually produce quantifiably positive results, but overall CIS is but a prohibitively expensive additional bureaucratic layer between the consumer and the provider, ultimately competing for the resources that already exist. CIS is a parasitic consumer of resources already available to the community – the only difference is that now the cost burden has been increased to the tune of a quarter of a billion dollars a year, removed from direct control of the local school district and placed directly into the hands of corporate sponsors like Pepsi and Procter and Gamble, and on the backs of federal taxpayers.

The author of this study is a member of AmeriCorps, and currently serves for Communities In Schools of Arizona. These questions about the Communities In Schools/ICF International five year longitudinal study are presented neither as a proponent for, nor crusader against Communities In Schools (CIS) and ICF International. Truth and advantageousness for students is the only goal.