

Resources and Relationships: Community Leader Spotlight with Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg

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Molly Shaw serves as executive director of Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, an affiliate of the national Communities In Schools (CIS) network, an organization dedicated to keeping kids in school and helping them succeed in life. America's Promise talked to Shaw about what she is most passionate about in her community and the most challenging aspect of her work. Take a look at her answers below.

How does your work help create a GradNation for all?

At Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, we have been studying for over 30 years what it takes for kids to succeed. There are a lot of ingredients, but we keep coming back to three things:

First, every kid needs to be connected to resources—resources that are personalized just for them (from basic things like food, clothing and housing to opportunities and experiences like watching the symphony, attending a science camp, or visiting a college).



Second, every kid needs to know that their decisions have consequences and their choices influence their future.

Third, kids need to know that they matter, that they are loved, that someone is in their corner.

Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg employs 80 Site Coordinators, professionals who are “all in for kids.” They work full-time IN schools every day. They have extraordinary insight, and the ability to identify challenges, secure resources, inspire kids, and illuminate a path forward. Their job is to ensure each student receives the right kind of support, in the right amount, at the right time. This year we will connect resources to 30,000 students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools and we will case-manage approximately 7,000 students.

What successes in your community are you most proud of?

Through intentional community partnership and commitment, our school district's graduation rate has risen 18 percentage points since 2010 and, together, our community has reduced the number of students dropping out of high school by more than 1,000 children per year.

Hundreds of Communities In Schools students graduate every year from Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, each one having been supported and inspired by a caring CIS Site Coordinator. That inspiration travels far. In fact, we have had multiple Communities In Schools alumni complete college and return to our team as Site Coordinators themselves. We are creating cycles of generational success.

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What's the most challenging aspect of your work?



We see firsthand the negative effects of our nation's increasing poverty epidemic. Over the last 10 years, the number of people living in poverty in Charlotte-Mecklenburg has doubled. Perhaps more significant, the number of people living in already poor areas has tripled—three times the number of people are living in the same square footage. So poverty has increased AND it has gotten more concentrated.

Additionally, as our neighborhoods have changed, so have our schools. Fifteen years ago, we had roughly a dozen high poverty schools. Today, we have almost eighty. So our kids are now living and learning in high-density poverty environments. There is also a strong disconnection between our young people and our communities.

When 56 percent of our community's middle schoolers feel they have experienced bullying and 23 percent report having seriously considered suicide, it is even more critical for our students to have positive, intentional relationships with caring adults.

What principles guide your work in education and youth development?

Our founder, Bill Milliken is known for his statement, "It's relationships, not programs, that change children." We build on his words as we also strive to demonstrate that not all relationships are created equal. Trained professionals who know how to develop, connect, inspire and empower students are imperative to the equation for success.

Additionally, we define success not only through traditional indicators like academic achievement, but we also care deeply about our role in helping students develop social-emotional skills (like managing their emotions, developing healthy relationships, and making responsible decisions). We are committed to unlocking the potential of the "whole child."

Finally, we are fortunate that Charlotte-Mecklenburg is home to many individuals committed to improving economic mobility for our kids. As a primary connector in the community, we have a responsibility to share our expertise, help citizens connect across social-economic divides, and provide opportunities for social capital exchange.

Describe what makes your work unique in three words or phrases.

- Placing professional life navigators in schools.
- Meeting student and family needs through community partnership.
- Capitalizing on the strength of every student.

<http://www.americaspromise.org/news/resources-and-relationships-community-leader-spotlight-communities-schools-charlotte>