

Durham's Communities in Schools helps student in class and at home

By Natasha Townsend

Carmen Settles remembers the first time she learned that college wasn't for everyone. She could take her own path and be successful.

Although she graduated from North Carolina Central University with a marketing degree, Settles owes her success to Communities in Schools (CIS), a nonprofit that focuses on improving students' academic, behavioral and home lives.

"From the time you start kindergarten, it's drilled that there's a certain path you have to take, but no one tells you to think outside the box," Settles said. "Or if you want to be creative, you can enter a field that lets you be creative."

CIS showed her that no matter what she wanted to do, there was a way to get it, she said. It also taught her about different jobs that she never considered.

Settles turned that advice into a catering business.

CIS for students and schools

CIS runs programs throughout the state, including in Durham. The program operates through a model of attendance, behavior, coursework and parenting, said executive director Kerry Raquel. The holistic approach helps students succeed amid the mitigating factors of family structure and socio-economic status, said Moné Smith, an after-school coordinator for E.K. Powe Elementary.

Six participating Durham schools, including four elementary schools, one middle school and one high school, are assigned to a site coordinator who supervises student activities such as tutoring, enrichment programs and literacy groups.

Teachers and school administrators refer students to the program, where site coordinators determine qualification through an interview and needs assessment. The program helps students improve attendance, raise test scores and decrease behavioral infractions.

CIS provides school assessments that identify improvement areas, said Nick Gagnon, a graduation coach at Durham Performance Learning Center.

After-school programs lead to success

A typical day for Moné Smith, E.K. Powe Elementary's coordinator, begins by preparing activities for the three-hour



"With CIS, I was able to work with students in a different way outside of the school system because I wanted to affect change in a different way," said Moné Smith, coordinator for E.K. Powe Elementary. Photo by Natasha Townsend.

program. CIS hires facilitators to write curriculums for different grade levels and schools that focus on Common Core standards. Smith distributes the activities among her students.

Smith gives students a chance to decompress after school in which younger students read for 20 minutes and older students complete writing assignments.

"This is a critical time where we are able to take extra time with students," Smith said.

NC LiteracyCorps volunteers lead groups during the after-school session, giving students one-on-one support that they may miss throughout the day. After tutoring, STEM-focused activities give students a break to have fun while learning.

A data management system tracks student progress to make sure they reach the goals set at the beginning of the year. The system tracks report card data, student tutoring hours and whether students complete their grade.

"With last year's data, students who increased in their ELA or math grade, they sustained that (progress) throughout the year," Smith said.

Carmen Settles takes CIS home

Settles' daughter, Marley, is in third grade at Eno Valley Elementary School.

Marley loves being in the after-school program, Settles said.

When Marley entered the after-school program in second grade, she was a good student with low confidence. She enjoyed school, but her teachers had to push her to reach her full potential, Settles said.

As a part of the program, Carmen joined Incredible Years, a group for parents to help their child succeed in school and reinforce a positive home environment that motivates children to do their homework while promoting academic, social and emotional skills.

Incredible Years helped Carmen get her daughter through bullying over her height.

Settles learned how to help her daughter through bullying. She spoke with Marley's teachers and told them that Marley could be sensitive, but she could be a leader if her teachers gave her the extra push she needed.

"After that conversation, I noticed a change in her and how she perceived herself," Settles said.

Marley used her increased confidence to start helping other students with their homework, and she isn't bullied as often.

Marley's recent progress report showed high scores.

"It takes a village to raise a child, and CIS is part of my village," Settles said.

