

Stronger Together: Being Present at School to Support Students and Families

“Being present to me is being there for someone and being in their life,” said Takara Julian, a 10th grader at Kalamazoo Central High School.

We met with both Takara Julian and her mom, Regina Miller, to discuss their experience with the support they receive from Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS) and what being present means to them. “My fondest memory of CIS was at Hillside Middle School, visiting with Mrs. Sikkema [CIS site coordinator] and being in their after-school program,” says Takara, “Ms. Williamson [CIS after-school coordinator] and Mrs. Sikkema were always so nice and welcoming. They were the best!”

The value of community, support, connection, advocacy, and volunteerism is not foreign to Takara and Regina. As the Director of Corporate Operations at Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southwest Michigan, that is the core of Regina’s work: advocating for different organizations, being a reference, and ensuring that people know about the different supports available in Kalamazoo. “The investment that CIS is making in young people will have a lasting effect for generations to come,” says Regina, “CIS is there in schools providing support and resources—not limiting this to the students—but also having something for parents, like me, to be engaged.”

Kalamazoo is a special place to Regina. Not only is she deeply involved in the community, but she was also born and raised, and grew her family here. She wants others to have the same experience of a community that is present and believes that when families thrive, communities grow stronger. Regina says, “CIS doesn’t have a one-size fits all. They personalize to kids and parents. When I was in need, CIS was there. They are there



being supportive and meeting people where they are.”

One of the many ways that Regina gives back is by volunteering on the After-School Program Collaborative Advisory Committee. As her three children participated in the CIS After-School Program, Regina is a valued member who shares her experience and expertise for the betterment of the program. “Building trust, stability, and a real sense of belonging—that is why I am here—I want to make sure others have that same experience,” says Regina.

“The investment that CIS is making in young people will have a lasting effect for generations to come.”

- Regina Miller

This sense of community and caring was passed from Regina to her daughter, Takara. When asked who the caring adult in her life is, Takara said, “My mom. She is always there for me, supporting me, and making sure that I have everything that I need. I just love my mom.”

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Partner Highlight: America Reads/America Counts for Students

For over 15 years, our partnership with the Western Michigan University (WMU) America Reads/America Counts Program has been instrumental in supporting local elementary school students' educational growth. This initiative, offered through WMU's Career and Student Employment Services and Financial Aid, connects a dedicated group of student volunteers with local schools through CIS site coordinators.

The program focuses on improving students' reading and math skills while fostering a positive learning environment. WMU tutors collaborate with CIS site coordinators and teachers to develop creative educational activities that emphasize the joy of learning.

CIS of Kalamazoo Site Coordinator, Katrina White says, "In addition to dedicating hours to support students at Arcadia Elementary School, many of the WMU students attend training to maintain the highest standard of performance as tutors. They are also advocating on behalf of their students for supplies, daily plans, and anything that will help them be a better tutor."

Currently, eight student volunteers support students at Arcadia Elementary School, El Sol Elementary School, and Edison Academy and have dedicated 936 volunteer hours this year and counting.

We deeply value our partnership with WMU and appreciate their commitment to enhancing students' educational journeys. Together, we continue to make a meaningful impact in our community by promoting literacy, confidence, and lifelong learning.



Ny'elle, Preston, and Avi'Air reading together.

"I love these kids. It's been great to get to know them and watch them grow!"

**- Preston Zantello,
WMU student and tutor**

Stronger Together: Being Present at School to Support Students and Families (continued)

One such support is ensuring that her daughter is meeting with the CIS site coordinator regularly. "Ms. Emily [Ayers, CIS site coordinator at Kalamazoo Central High School] and I meet one-on-one to discuss classes and my grades, and she helps inspire

me to remain focused," says Takara, "She provides a sense of stability at the school for me."

Takara and Ms. Emily set short and long-term goals during their meetings. "I am proud that I am accomplishing my goal of keeping up my grades. I would like to go to Michigan State University after I graduate," says Takara, "Ms. Emily checks in with me and supports me to make sure that I have everything I need at school."

"She provides a sense of stability at school for me."
- Takara Julian

Having resources and people who care about families and students' well-being are essential for students to thrive. When we are present for students, we are being supportive of their needs and goals. With a community standing behind our students, there are no boundaries to what they can achieve—their potential is limitless.



Takara Julian at Kalamazoo Central High School.

CIS Alumni Spotlight: Assia Watson, A Passionate Advocate for Kids and Education



Assia Watson is a licensed cosmetologist with a heart for helping others. She is passionate about working with children, especially those with invisible disabilities, and has been deeply involved in her mother's nonprofit.

"I love working with the kids in the CIS after-school program. Every day is different, and they keep me on my toes," says Assia Watson.

Assia was born and raised in Kalamazoo. She attended Spring Valley Center for Exploration, Hillside Middle School, and

graduated from Kalamazoo Central High School in 2018. Her connection with CIS started in 1st grade working with Mrs. [Martha] Serio, the CIS site coordinator at Spring Valley Center for Exploration. Then, she connected with Mrs. [Deborah] Yarbrough at Kalamazoo Central High School.

Currently, while attending college, Assia has joined the CIS team as a Youth Development Coach at Lincoln International Studies School. For Assia, CIS has become her "second home," shaping her path and reinforcing her commitment to making a difference in children's lives.

Who, or what inspires you to work with students at Lincoln International Studies School?

"My mom inspires me. She was a teacher for a while, worked at the YMCA, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and now CIS. I always watched how she worked with kids. She's my biggest inspiration."

Why did you decide to join the Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo team as a Youth Development Coach?

"I used to go to the Boys and Girls Club and liked to support students. I also wanted to be a positive role model for them."

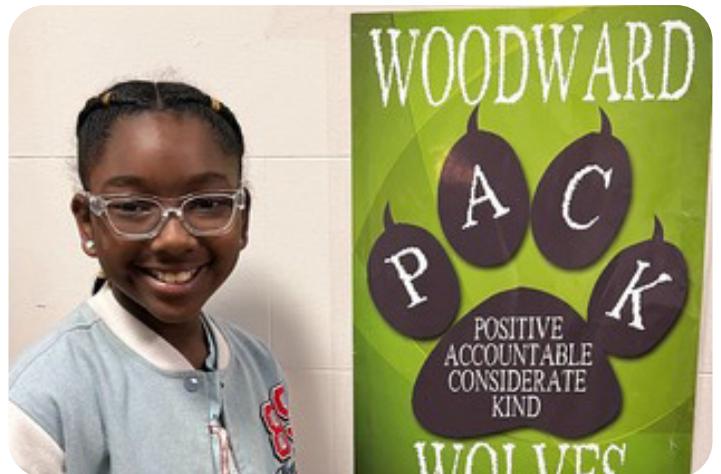
What does being present for students mean to you?

"Showing up every day and being consistent, building relationships, and walking around to observe and support students in what they are doing."

Empowering Future Leaders: Audrey's Role as an Always In For Kids Ambassador

Introducing Audrey, a 5th-grade student at Woodward Elementary, who is wholeheartedly embracing her new role as our student ambassador for Always In For Kids. Audrey is recognized for her vibrant personality, her kindness towards others, and her enthusiasm for learning. As a natural leader, she is passionate about making Woodward a supportive environment for those around her. She is excited to represent her peers and work toward positive change within her school community.

CIS site coordinators provide a steady presence for Kalamazoo students, from kindergarten through high school graduation. You, too, can be a steady source of support for students by joining our monthly giving program, Always In For Kids. Your participation will allow us to make a lasting difference by funding vital resources and opportunities for students to thrive. Always In For Kids ensures consistent support for students and keeps participants very connected to our mission through



Audrey, 5th grader at Woodward School.

monthly communications from our ambassador, Audrey! Together, we can inspire success, uplift our community, and empower leaders like Audrey to make an even greater impact.

Learn more about Audrey and join the dozens of others in our community who are providing consistent support to students by joining Always In For Kids today! Scan the QR code to the right.





Na'Viah, 4th grader at Northglade Montessori Magnet School

Student Spotlight

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART OF SCHOOL?

Na'Viah: "Getting to see my friends."

Greyson: "Art."

Jazariah: "Going to Orchestra. I play the violin."

WHY DO YOU THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE PRESENT AT SCHOOL EVERY DAY?

Na'Viah: "When we grow up, we can know all the things that we have to do for our jobs."

Greyson: "Because you get to learn more."

Jazariah: "To get your education so you can find a job or go to college."



Greyson, 3rd grader at Northglade Montessori Magnet School

HOW HAS CIS HELPED YOU?

Na'Viah: "Bonding with different people from other classes and making friends with people that I might not normally talk to."

Greyson: "They helped me by making school a better place for people."

Jazariah: "They have helped me with my classwork and making new friends."



Jazariah, 8th grader at Milwood Magnet School

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR SITE COORDINATOR IN ONE WORD?

Na'Viah: "Nice."

Greyson: "Fantastic."

Jazariah: "Helpful."

CIS News and updates

CHAMPS CELEBRATION

April 30, 2025

Save the date for the 18th Annual Champs Celebration at the Radisson Plaza Hotel.

VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION MONTH

April is volunteer appreciation month. Thank you to our many volunteers who are present for kids!

WALKING WITH PURPOSE

October 2025

It's never too early to start thinking about walking with us in October. Start building your team today!

Sign up for our CIS e-newsletter!



Always In For Kids

STUDENT SUCCESS LASTS A LIFETIME

Join our recurring giving program and know your support will always be there for kids in Kalamazoo.

Scan to learn more today!



Mid-Year Impact Statement

(2024-2025 School Year, thru December 2024)

CIS works to improve outcomes for students who have challenges with academics, attendance, behavior, and/or SEL (social emotional learning) so that they can succeed in school, graduate, and be prepared for life.

Case Managed Support (daytime)



26,308 hours supporting students by CIS site coordinators, volunteers, and partners

19,900 CIS site coordinators
5,186 Volunteers
1,222 Partners



1,054 case-managed students

546 Elementary (15 buildings)
508 Secondary (8 buildings)

After-School Support



379 students receive sustained academic and social and emotional learning support in our after-school program.

92%

of caseload students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

We connect students to caring adults and community resources that help them overcome the barriers that stand between them and a bright future. By embedding site coordinators in 23 Kalamazoo school buildings, we establish a multi-tier model of support to help empower students to stay in school and achieve in life.

370 CIS volunteers supported students, providing over 5,186 hours of support.

31 students received vision support from the CIS Vision Fund in the form of a visit to the eye doctor, and/or glasses purchased.

1,099 mental health sessions were received by students.

7,369 food packs have been distributed to elementary students.

10,422 items from CIS Kids' Closet were distributed to students.

5,374 visits made to 11 food pantries supported students and their families.

Our Unique Model

Supports Include:

- Academic Assistance
- Basic Needs
- Behavioral Intervention
- College and Career Prep
- Community and Service Learning
- Enrichment
- Family Engagement
- Life Skills
- Mental Health
- Physical Health





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VOLUNTEER

Change a child's life, and yours as well!



DONATE

Invest in the future of our community.
\$1,500 supports a student for a year.

From our Executive Director

When students are more present in school, what will they find? The answer to this question is important because encouraging students to be present comes with the unspoken promise that caring adults will also be present when they arrive. That's why Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS) is intentional about being present for kids – as evidenced by our *visibility, consistency and dependability*.

Visibility: Because CIS is IN schools, we are seen and easily accessible to students and families. CIS site coordinators have dedicated offices/rooms in all 23 schools that we serve. They are present in the hallways, in the lunchrooms, and outside when students arrive and leave for the day.

Consistency: While each school has a unique culture, students have access to a consistent suite of CIS services throughout the day: a Kids' Closet that offers essential needs items like school supplies and clothing; coordination of schoolwide supports like academic tutors and health services; and an additional caring adult who regularly

checks in to support their sense of belonging.

Dependability: In 21+ years of reliably providing visible and consistent supports to students, CIS has become a trusted resource to kids and families and a trusted partner for teachers, support staff and school administrators. Children and adults alike come to CIS for support because they know they can depend on us to meet their needs.

In a similar fashion, we also take this moment to thank our donors, volunteers and partners for providing visible, consistent and dependable support to our CIS team and the students that we support. You always show up for us, so that we are always present for kids.

James Devers, Executive Director

If you believe in our efforts to ensure that ALL kids stay in school and achieve in life, please visit www.ciskalamazoo.org or call 269.337.1601 for more details on getting involved with CIS.

The work of Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo is supported by the Kalamazoo Public Schools, the City of Kalamazoo, the Michigan Department of Education (21st Century Community Learning Centers), Paramount Charter Academy, local foundations, and donors like you.

Photos in this newsletter were taken by contributing CIS staff, unless otherwise noted.

