

Newsletter

WINTER 2026

Embraced by the Community: One Student's Journey Toward Success

For many college students, the path to a degree is shaped by long nights and hard work. For Kalea Barnes, however, that journey began long before she set foot on a college campus. With early support from a strong community of supporters, the foundation for her success was built brick by brick, relationship by relationship. We are excited to introduce Kalea Barnes and share her story in her own words.

Dear Communities In Schools family,

When I sit down and think about what helped shape me the most growing up, my mind doesn't go straight to lessons or report cards, it's the people who showed up, time and time again, simply because they cared. I can picture one afternoon. I was sitting at a desk, frustrated with a math worksheet that just didn't make sense. Everyone else finished and I felt that lump of defeat in my chest. My CIS site coordinator noticed and sat down next to me. She didn't rush me or make me feel behind. Instead, she patiently helped me work through each problem, cheering me on when I got one right. When I finally finished, she said, "See? You've got this, I'll be here if you need more assistance." I'll never forget that. That small moment taught me that belief from others can help me find belief in myself.

That's what Communities In Schools was for me - a constant, steady reminder that I mattered. From those early days all the way through graduation, CIS was like a thread running through my life, connecting one stage to the next. It wasn't just a place to do homework or hang out after class; it was a community that made me feel seen. The coordinators and staff weren't there just to help me get through school; they were there to help me grow through it.

As I got older, the lessons I learned with my coordinator started to shift. It wasn't just about encouragement anymore;



Kalea reuniting with her CIS Site Coordinator Jenna Cooperrider.

it became about trust, responsibility, and learning how to follow through. The people around me started challenging me in the best ways, helping me set goals and stick to them. They didn't just tell me what I could do; they showed me how to get there. I then began to understand that real support isn't about doing things for you, it's about walking with you while you figure it all out. And as graduation got closer, the conversations changed again. They became discussions about life, college, purpose, and what comes next after graduation. There were afternoons filled with planning and dreaming, and moments of uncertainty where I would be reminded that it was okay to not have it all figured out yet. CIS became a place where I learned to think beyond the present moment but to see a future that felt real and attainable. Now, as an alum, I carry those lessons with me every day. The same encouragement, accountability, and care that were once given to me have helped shape how I move through the world. I've learned that the smallest acts of consistency such as kind words, patient listening, and a gentle nudge forward can make a huge difference. Because that's what CIS does. It changes lives not just through grand gestures, but through genuine relationships built one moment at a time.

Continued on next page



Kalea at high school graduation.

To the students who are part of CIS right now, hold on to this community. You are surrounded by people who see your potential, even on the days you can't see it

yourself. They're helping you build your long-term future goals. Alongside my coordinator at CIS, I was also supported by many individuals, organizations and programs, including Merze Tate Explorers, my mentor Nicole Parker at Sisters in Business, Big Brothers Big Sisters, KRESA Culinary Arts Chef Kharen and Chef Hayley, and many others. I was surrounded by people who cared about my education, my well-being, and my future.

Above all, none of this would be possible without my mom, Kalinda Williams. She was my constant support long before I understood what support really meant. She advocated for me when I couldn't advocate for myself, checked in on me even when I said I was "fine," and made sure I never walked through challenges alone. She believed in my potential on the days I doubted it and reminded me of my strength when I felt tired or discouraged. Her love, sacrifice, and unwavering presence are the foundation beneath every milestone I reach. I carry her lessons with me in everything I do, and I am endlessly grateful for the role she has played in shaping who I am today.

What began as simple encouragement during my school

years has shaped the direction of my life. I am finishing up my college journey, building and running my own small business, and proudly serving my country in the Army. Beyond my personal goals, I remain deeply involved in my community, giving back in the same ways others once poured into me. In a true full-circle moment, I am now in my second year as an intern with the same nonprofit organization that supported me throughout my educational journey. CIS helped shape not just what I do, but who I am: someone who follows through, leads with purpose, and believes in the power of showing up for others. The support I received growing up laid the groundwork for a life rooted in service, accountability, and growth.

What you do doesn't fade after graduation; it carries over into every choice, every goal, and every dream we continue to chase.

Sincerely,

Kalea Barnes



Kalea with her mentor Nicole Parker



Kalea with her mom Kalinda Williams

School-Wide Attendance at Woods Lake Elementary

Staff and students at Woods Lake Elementary School are once again participating in the school's popular, school-wide attendance initiative—facilitated by CIS Site Coordinator Dana Flynn—and the excitement is already building. After an impressive increase in student attendance last year, bringing the initiative back for a second year was an easy decision.

"I'm happy that our principal wanted this program to return," said Dana Flynn. "The students really get excited about the initiative, and I truly believe it has helped increase attendance at our school."

This fun, friendly competition encourages all classrooms to participate while motivating students to show up every day eager to see how their class is doing. Attendance is tracked weekly and displayed on a bulletin board outside the CIS office, where total classroom attendance percentages are posted for everyone to see.

Classrooms that achieve 90% attendance or higher earn an entry into a monthly pizza party drawing, with the top five classrooms receiving an additional entry. To keep the momentum going, the classroom with the highest attendance each month is also rewarded with popsicles.

In January, we celebrated the Ms. Almy's class with a pizza party, and it was a joy to see all the smiles on students' faces. As the initiative continues, staff and students alike are excited to see the positive impact it will make and are hopeful it will once again lead to increased student attendance in another school year.



CIS Site Coordinator Dana Flynn in front of the attendance board.

Strengthening School Attendance through Collaboration

Student success is shaped not only by what happens in the classroom, but also by the support systems surrounding each child. When a school welcomes Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS) into its buildings, it signals a powerful commitment to wraparound care that meets students where they are—academically, emotionally, and personally.

This collaboration plays a critical role in improving student attendance. Attendance has long been recognized as a key factor in student success. However, following COVID19 related closures and extended periods of virtual learning, schools locally and nationally have seen significant declines in attendance. As a result, renewed and expanded initiatives focused on reengaging students have become more important than ever.

KPS Superintendent, Dr. Darrin Slade, highlighted the district’s efforts. “We developed a new attendance policy and communicated it widely with parents and students. We hired a truancy officer to help address attendance issues. We created school attendance committees to review data every two weeks and make referrals. The combined efforts have helped make strides in reducing chronic absenteeism.”

CIS site coordinators serve as a vital bridge between schools, families, and community resources. Embedded within school buildings, they provide an added layer of support that directly addresses the barriers preventing students from attending regularly. Sometimes, it can be as simple as knowing there is an additional person in the building who cares and is encouraging them to be present. This coordinated approach

ensures attendance is not treated as an isolated issue, but as part of a broader strategy to support the whole child.

Through ongoing communication and shared goals, school staff and CIS site coordinators align their efforts, track progress, and respond quickly to student needs. Site coordinators help maintain consistency, follow up with families, and reinforce the importance of daily attendance in a supportive, non-punitive way.

CIS Executive Director, James Devers says, “KPS has done an amazing job of elevating the importance of regular attendance for students and increasing related supports, which has resulted in great gains. CIS staff regularly work in partnership with KPS attendance teams to mutually support students and families to overcome barriers and increase attendance.”

As a result of this joint effort, schools have seen meaningful progress. Last year, 70% of CIS-supported students met or made progress toward their attendance goals, and 99% of CIS-supported students remained in school through the end of the academic year. When comparing the numbers at this time last year, we are already seeing a 4% increase this year. “Consistent attendance is the foundation for every student’s future. We are pleased that our chronic absenteeism rate has decreased by 15% over the past two years,” said Slade.

The future of students in Kalamazoo depends on strong, collaborative partnerships throughout the community. Together, we are showing up for students—consistently, compassionately, and impactfully.

Student Spotlight:

A’Niylah, 1st grade at Arcadia Elementary School

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART OF SCHOOL?

“Recess and lunch.”

HOW HAS CIS HELPED YOU?

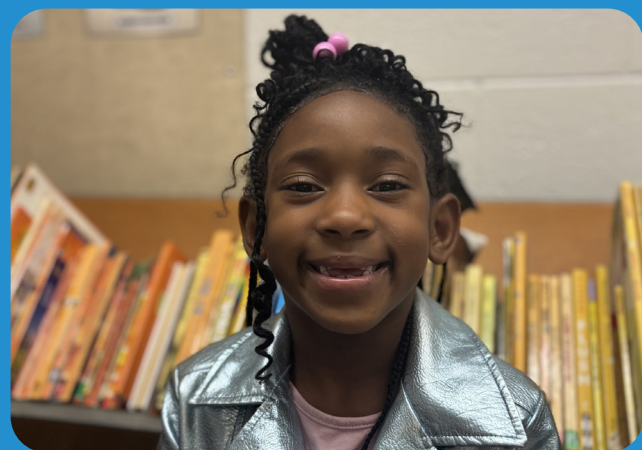
“Ms. Katrina helps me be kind and nice.”

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR SITE COORDINATOR IN ONE WORD?

“Nice.”

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

“So you can learn and be taught!”



A’Niylah, 1st grade student at Arcadia Elementary

BEING PRESENT MATTERS



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From our Executive Director

"Good, better, best. Never let it rest. 'Til your good is better and your better is best." - St. Jerome

This simple, yet profound statement does an amazing job of encapsulating the current mindset of the Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS) team.

As an organization, we are extremely proud of the good work we've consistently done for more than 20 years. We know that we've made documented, positive impacts on thousands of students over those years. Yet we also know that we can do better.

CIS recently embarked on a strategic mapping process that required us to take a deep look at our operations, our culture, and our impact on student outcomes. We received input from a wide variety of stakeholders - students, parents, community partners, school staff, donors, volunteers, and CIS staff. That feedback affirmed that we are doing good work but also revealed opportunities for us to be better.

We are excited to have clarity on how to become a better organization that produces the best outcomes for our students. We landed on a "north star"

that focuses on outcomes over outputs. Yes, we serve 1,600 students annually on a sustained basis across 23 school buildings. Yes, we distribute over 50,000 clothing, food, school supplies, and hygiene items annually. Yes, we connect our students with over 100,000 hours of supports annually – academic, physical health, mental health, enrichment, afterschool programming, etc. But the most important numbers are those related to our student improvement goals.

We are determined by 2028 (a 3-year journey) to achieve 90% success on our student progress goals in academics, attendance, and behavior or social-emotional learning. Reaching that outcome goal has required us to take a deep look at our policies/procedures, training plans, service delivery, resource cultivation and budget to align them toward becoming the very best version of CIS.

Thank you for your support on this journey.

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.

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