

Determining Whether Wraparound Services Effectively Shape Educational Outcomes

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Abstract

Recently, wrap-around services have been proposed in New York as a strategy for improving educational outcomes for students. These services address non-academic barriers to learning, including housing insecurity, mental health, and lack of access to healthcare for both K-12 and postsecondary institutions. While some K-12 and postsecondary interventions have demonstrated measurable success, challenges remain in terms of implementation, scalability, and sustainability. This paper examined the impact of wrap-around services on student success to evaluate whether SUNY and CUNY Reconnect could improve student outcomes. The findings show that wrap-around supports must be paired with high-quality instruction and structural reform to yield long-term academic gains. Without structural alignment, wrap-around strategies risk falling short of their equity goals and could become a financial burden without significant gains.

Introduction

On July 1st, 2025, New York Governor Kathy Hochul held her State of the State, where she unveiled an expansion of the free community college program, SUNY and CUNY Reconnect. This program is part of an effort to make education more affordable and accessible for working-age adults within New York. The state aims to cover tuition, fees, books, and supplies for eligible students who are pursuing associate degrees in high-demand fields. While this assistance is impactful, what makes this program notable in the national context is the inclusion of robust retention supports, including academic advising, success coaching, and outreach, to help adult learners navigate the educational system and persist through completion. Governor Hochul went on to say that SUNY and CUNY Reconnect is a strategic deployment of wraparound services designed to ensure that students have both access and success in higher education (Hochul, 2025). This vision of access and support in public education reflects a growing sentiment that academic success is shaped not only by what happens in the classroom, but also by the support systems that surround students.

For students growing up in poverty, hunger, housing instability, trauma, and unmet mental health needs, these potentially compromise focus, attendance, and motivation. Students may arrive at school exhausted from a night in a shelter, anxious from witnessing domestic violence, or distracted by food insecurity; thus, it is understandable that their academic performance would suffer. Unfortunately, schools alone cannot address these challenges as teachers cannot be expected to serve simultaneously as counselors, case managers, and trauma specialists without institutional support. The need to provide more support to students has led to the creation of wrap-around services, which connect students and families to social, emotional, and academic supports within or near schools.

In theory, these interventions should enable students to come to school ‘ready to learn,’ thereby improving students’ academic outcomes. However, the relationship between wrap-around supports and educational outcomes is more complex than theory purports. While these services address essential student needs, the effectiveness of wrap-around services is varied. Therefore, this paper will analyze how wrap-around services and interventions influence educational outcomes for students.

Wrap-around Services and Community Schools

Wrap-around services aim to reduce the external burdens that interfere with learning by integrating mental health care, food programs, housing assistance, mentorship, and academic coaching into the school environment (Learning Policy Institute, 2020). The goal of providing wrap-around services is to meet students' immediate needs while also creating the conditions that make academic engagement possible (Education Finance Council, 2023).

Frequently, the delivery model of wrap-around support is in community schools. Community schools aim to integrate those services directly into the school context as an alternative to traditional schools with silo services across multiple agencies that families must navigate on their own. Community schools become hubs where families can access a range of supports through partnerships with local agencies, health providers, and community-based organizations. These partnerships allow schools to reduce the logistical and emotional burdens that underserved families often face when seeking support and allow students to focus on their learning (Learning Policy Institute, 2020).

K-12 Wrap-Around Intervention Case Studies

Research suggests that well-implemented wrap-around models improve educational outcomes for K-12 students, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds. The

Fostering Academic Success in Education (FASE) program was a pilot study in Southern California that delivered comprehensive onsite educational case management to 40 middle and high school foster youth. After one year in the program, students experienced statistically significant improvements in GPA, increasing from 2.38 to 2.80. Tardiness, unexcused absences, and mental health self-efficacy also improved in this time (Keeney et al., 2024). The educational social worker's role was pivotal to FASE's success as they served as the central coordinator for tutoring, mental health referrals, IEP advocacy, and basic needs such as clothing and transportation. For students in the program, they had a caring, consistent adult who made them feel seen and supported both academically and emotionally (Keeney et al., 2024). The inclusion of the educational social worker is based on the research that indicates that mentorship and sustained adult relationships are critical drivers of student belonging, well-being, and academic persistence for marginalized youth (Woodlon & Jeffries, 2024).

In New York City, a study of 250+ community schools noted improvements in student attendance, academic achievement, and overall well-being by leveraging partnerships with community-based organizations. These schools provided integrated services such as free vision screenings, access to teen health clinics, and virtual mental health counseling. (Learning Policy Institute, 2020). Within these community schools, students were more likely to progress to the next grade on time, accumulate more credits, and graduate from high school at higher rates.

Along with support structures, strong K–12 wrap-around models expand and enrich learning time, including after-school programming, summer learning, and enrichment experiences. Historically marginalized students often face limited access to extracurricular activities, academic support, and informal learning networks that build social capital. By providing these programs, community schools can create the conditions for deeper engagement,

stronger relationships with adults, and sustained academic growth (Learning Policy Institute, 2020).

Postsecondary Wrap-around Supports

In the postsecondary context, wrap-around supports can increase college persistence and completion for first-generation college attenders, students of color, and those from low-income households who often face challenges, including financial insecurity, food scarcity, and academic disorientation. Currently, 42% of undergraduates are students of color, 38% are enrolled part-time, and 56% are first-generation college students, and these percentages have increased from decades past. To provide support to their students, universities need to promote wrap-around services on their campuses.

A flagship initiative to provide wrap-around support to college students is the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP). CUNY ASAP combined academic advising, career counseling, financial support, and proactive scheduling guidance to create a holistic strategy. The resulted showcased that CUNY ASAP students were more likely to enroll full time, accumulate more credits, and graduate at significantly higher rates than their peers not in the program. This program provided evidence that intentional, coordinated supports can counteract the fragmentation that often characterizes the college experience for nontraditional students. Other, smaller-scale interventions that have been successful include a one-on-one coaching initiative at a Midwest community college, which increased retention by 18 percent. The most significant gains were observed among Black students, part-time students, and those enrolled in developmental education (Education Finance Council, 2023).

For students, the complexities of applying for aid, registering for classes, or transferring credits can be as discouraging as the academic demands themselves; thus, coaching needs to be used as a support. An example of this is found in the Class of 2023, which had over 1.6 million high school graduates who did not complete the FAFSA, despite 792,000 of them potentially being eligible for Pell Grants. This resulted in approximately \$4 billion in unclaimed aid, which would have been avoided with more targeted guidance to assist students in navigating administrative hurdles (Education Finance Council, 2023).

Postsecondary wrap-around supports must also address students' basic needs of food and housing. A nationally representative survey found that almost a quarter of undergraduates experienced food insecurity, while many who were eligible for SNAP benefits did not receive them. (Education Finance Council, 2023). Housing and food make up about 20 percent of the total cost of attendance at a private institution, and between 40 and 50 percent at a public institution. Postsecondary institutions can proactively address these realities and improve student wellness through expanded access and awareness of these housing aid and food security resources. More students are eligible for SNAP or housing aid than actually access them due to stigma, a lack of knowledge, or bureaucratic hurdles. These barriers persist even when services are available, suggesting that availability does not equate to accessibility. As seen with FAFSA, students need to be eligible for support, but must also be aware of it and be able to access it easily for wrap-around services to be effective in providing equitable postsecondary opportunity.

Challenges and Limitations of Wrap-around Supports

Wrap-around supports alone are insufficient to drive sustained academic improvement, even though they play a critical role in mitigating the effects of socioeconomic factors on students. Paul Hill (2016) argued that the link between even the most intensive wrap-around

services and improved learning outcomes is tenuous unless they are paired with rigorous instructional reform. Hill cited Cincinnati's Oyler School, which was a national model for integrated supports, to illustrate this point. Even though Oyler provided full-service dental clinics, mental health counseling, and meal access to students, the school still struggled with stagnant test scores. The wrap-around services improved students' readiness to learn, but unless the quality of teaching and leadership within the building can improve their outcomes, the test scores will stay stagnant. While addressing students' out-of-school challenges is essential for student well-being, wrap-around services cannot substitute for high-quality instruction if the goal is to improve educational outcomes. Therefore, if wrap-around initiatives are not tightly coupled with efforts to strengthen teacher professional development, curriculum, and leadership, their impact will remain limited. Hill (2016) warned of an additional concern: if student outcomes don't improve with these wrap-around services, a diffusion of accountability and an illusion of progress without any gains in achievement may occur.

In addition to their instructional dependency, the implementation and scalability of wrap-around services are persistent roadblocks. By design, community schools are resource-intensive. They require funding for services, infrastructure upgrades, staffing, and coordination among several partnerships. For instance, the Oyler model benefited from philanthropic investment and a university hospital partnership, both of which are rarely available to traditional public schools. Without significant and sustained funding from local, state, or federal sources, most districts cannot replicate the efforts from the Oyler model (Hill, 2016). Even in instances where funding is available, the sustainability of the services is not guaranteed, as they are dependent on grant cycles or community partnerships, which may change or end while services are provided.

At the postsecondary level, the challenges similar to interventions like academic coaching and mentorship require long-term staffing commitments, cultural responsiveness training, and ongoing program evaluation. However, institutions often face staffing shortages, competing budgetary demands, and restrictive federal policies. For instance, current regulations governing preferred lender lists prevent nonprofit and state-based organizations from providing critical financial counseling on college campuses. (Education Finance Council, 2023). This fragmentation of support delivery impedes the very coordination that makes wrap-around services effective.

Conclusion

Wraparound services can improve student well-being and academic success, but only when designed and implemented within a broader framework of educational equity and instructional excellence. Successful models like CUNY ASAP, New York's Community Schools, and the FASE program demonstrated that interventions that pair social support with mentorship, academic advising, and community partnerships can meaningfully shift outcomes for students historically underserved by our education systems. However, these gains are inconsequential when services are underfunded, disconnected from instructional improvement, or treated as standalone fixes. Governor Hochul's SUNY and CUNY Reconnect initiative offers a blueprint for how states can provide students with affordability, access, and support to build a more inclusive postsecondary pipeline. By embedding academic coaching, advising, and basic needs assistance into the core of the community college experience, New York is signaling that student success is determined by their persistence and completion. Ultimately, wraparound services can help transform schools and colleges into institutions that truly meet students where they are and carry them forward to where they want to be.

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