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Editorial: Help from Communities in Schools

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Another day, another flood of problems at a hard-knocks elementary school.

A second-grader is burning with fever, but no one can find a parent. Freddie is embarrassed to turn in homework. Luis won't leave after school because someone will beat him up – again. Yolanda's parents didn't show for a teacher conference – again. Two brothers don't have heat at home, and their grades have nose-dived.

Classroom teachers have their hands full just trying to get through the curriculum, and straggler students are often academic casualties. Educators can find themselves helpless to solve the complex problems that sabotage education; backup support is a godsend.

A recent state report on the group Communities in Schools, which specializes in intervention, documents the success of casework at stepping in and rescuing students. Hired by the Texas Education Agency, a consultant concluded that CIS helps by fostering teamwork among parents, educators and other professionals. Results include better grades and lower dropout rates.

By invitation, CIS has placed its professional caseworkers in Dallas-area schools for 24 years to attack social, behavioral and academic problems that hold kids back. This year, the group is assisting at least 10 local districts on more than 60 campuses at all levels. More than 10,000 students benefited last year.

Districts likely achieve similar results through their own anti-dropout programs, according to the study for the TEA. Either way, the effort takes money, and CIS helps those dollars go farther because it shares costs with the district. The group is supported by donations and grants.

Parents and educators ought to take notice. With at-risk students nearing half the public school enrollment in Dallas County, there are plenty of campuses where caseworkers would have no trouble finding dire need. Principals should investigate the outside help if their districts have been hard-pressed to fund ambitious in-house intervention programs.

This year might present a new opportunity to pay for that help. Hundreds of millions of federal stimulus dollars are flowing to Texas to help economically disadvantaged students. We hope districts can have the latitude to fund successful intervention programs for at-risk students.

Educators who find themselves overwhelmed by the problems these students face should not have to go it alone.