



**Empowering one life at a time to reach, transform, and elevate their community through love and building character.**



## VISION

To inspire youth and families to be part of lasting community contributions. We want to create the momentum for lasting sustainable change in the way we develop our children and youth to redefine success as community contribution, where schools and youth organizations become places where an individual transformation leads to a stronger collective impact in their own communities.

## HISTORY

Established in 2007, Higher Ground emerged as a response to the challenges faced by youth in South Tucson. Jansen and Barbie Azarias-Suzumoto, as co-founders, volunteered as directors for three years, beginning our journey with 60 students. In 2011, our dedication was recognized when Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) partnered with Higher Ground, providing space at Valencia Middle School, which catalyzed our growth. We expanded our focus to encompass social and emotional wellness, alternative disciplinary systems, and whole school day structures. Over time, we collaborated with other districts, charter, and private schools in Arizona, introducing professional development, reimagining youth services, and spearheading the full-service community school model. Higher Ground's reach has grown nationally, partnering with organizations and experts from various disciplines. Currently, we serve over 2500+ students, 500+ families, and 300+ educators.

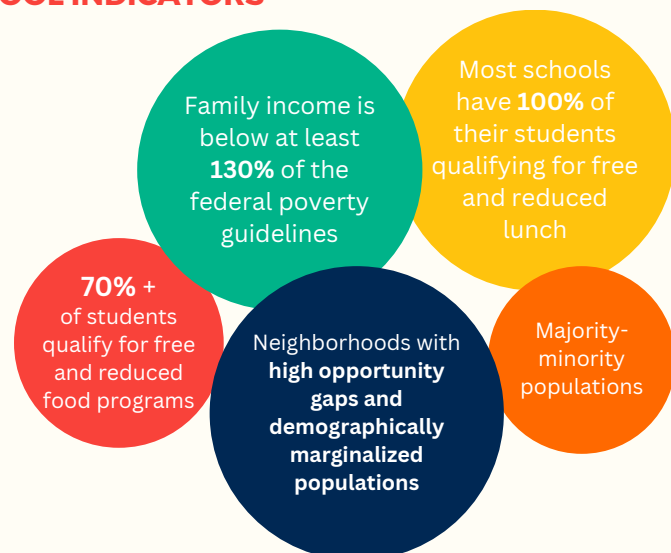
## CURRENT EFFORTS

This year, one of our most successful efforts has been our Restart SMART strategy deployment. Restart SMART is a community school strategy for organizing school and community resources around student and family success.

**Strategic Mindful Agile & Aware Resilient Trauma-Responsive**

We currently serve five sites within Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) and have multiple strategic alignment initiatives with TUSD. This strategy is also deployed at one school site in Sunnyside School District (SUSD), one in a charter school called Southside Community School, and our newest one is at Chandler Unified School District. At each Restart SMART site, we support the student and family's holistic wellness by providing wrap-around services and addressing all the non-academic needs that affect the school. While providing stabilization, we ensure that we are continually working on sustainability by ensuring that we build systems that ensure the community moves from stabilization to creating systems of support that then allow students and families to scaffold skills to become self-sustaining and increase their own agency. At the community level, we are beginning to build steering committees at some of the sites that consist of neighbors, school staff, community partners, and businesses that are learning the strategy to continue the effort and services we provide with local buy-in and effort.

## SCHOOL INDICATORS

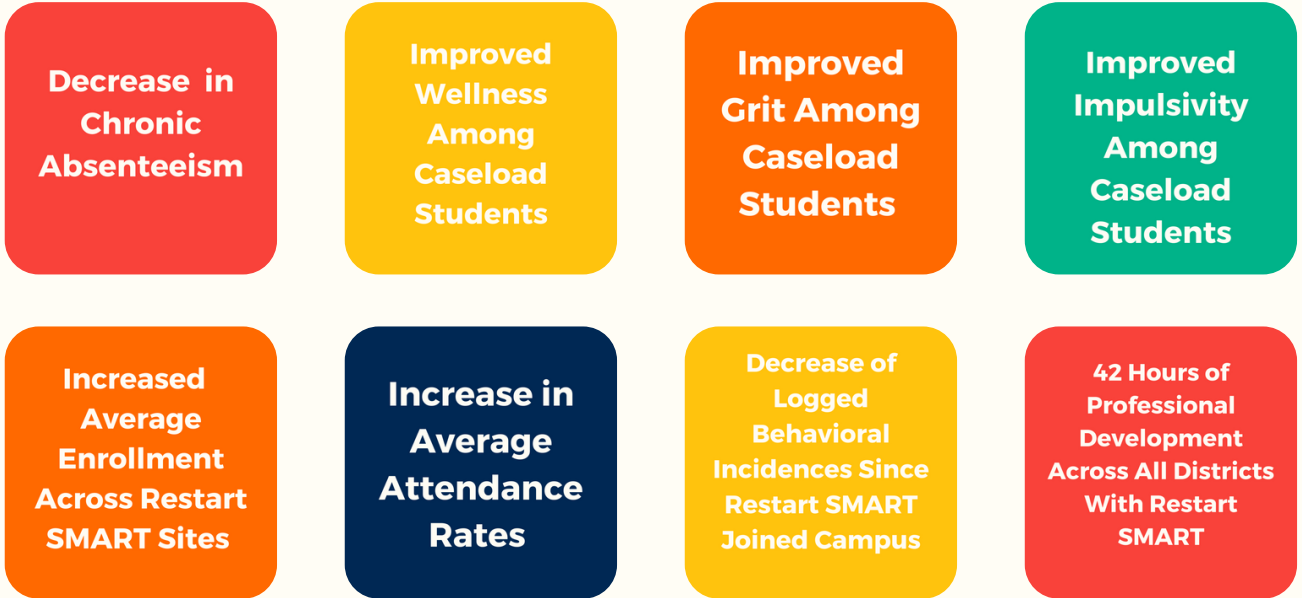




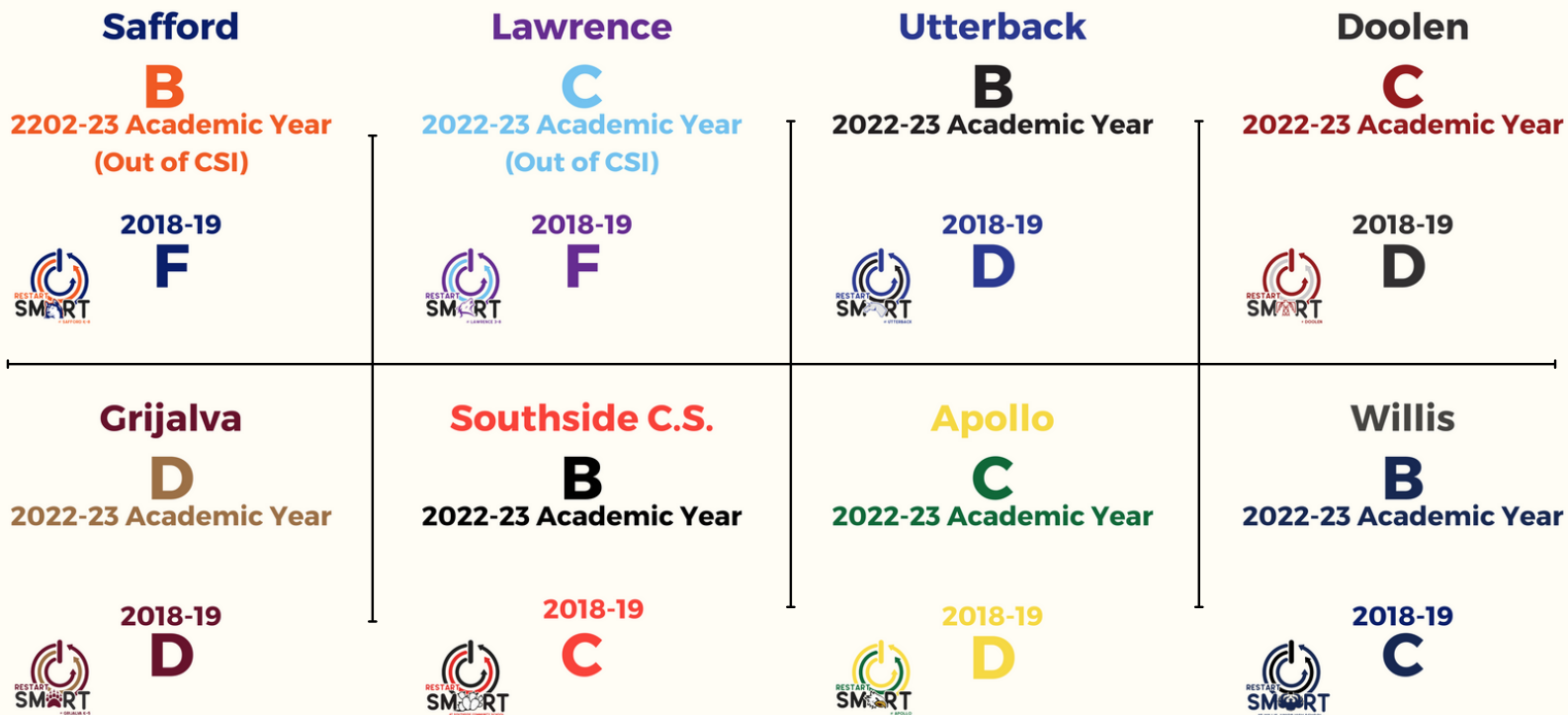
## RESTART SMART FOCUS

- 1) Student Stabilization and Skill Building:** We target students with attendance and behavioral challenges, helping them recognize root causes and develop positive behaviors. We believe honing executive skills like resilience and cognitive flexibility enhances overall school performance.
- 2) Family Wellness and Access to Resources:** Our family specialists work to ensure families' well-being, access to resources, and active contribution to their children's education. A healthy family is the foundation for a thriving student.
- 3) Community Development and Partnerships:** Our site directors prioritize community resources and partnerships. By enhancing the community's overall state, schools can achieve better outcomes. We focus on bridging the opportunity gap, rather than merely addressing the achievement gap.

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## PRELIMINARY SCHOOL LETTER GRADE TRENDS





# RESTART SMART TEAM ROLES

## Student Support Specialist



- One-on-One Coach-Mentoring with Students
- Facilitates Group Social & Behavioral Skill Builders
- Supports FSS & SD in Partnership Development
- Supports FSS & SD with Service Coordination for Student Needs

## Family Support Specialist



- Engages Parents in Services & Identifying Family Needs
- Supports SSS with Social & Behavioral Skill Builders
- Supports SD in Partnership Development
- Supports SD with Service Coordination for Family Needs
- Provides Coach-Mentoring with Parents based on Need

## Site Director



- Leads Service Integration & Partner Engagement
- Develops & Facilitates the Steering Committee
- Fosters Partnership with School Personnel
- Leads & Supervises SMART Team Members
- Responsible for Overall On-Site Service Coordination

Each partnered school is supported by a dedicated Restart SMART team comprising a Student Support Specialist, Family Support Specialist, and Site Director. These specialists undergo extensive training to ensure research-backed and best-practice methods when working with youth, families, schools, and community partners. In addition, the Restart SMART Strategy prioritizes the intentional selection of staff to match the unique needs of each school community, recognizing and addressing long-lasting impacts of trauma and systemic inequities.



Day-to-day, Student Support Specialists support the school's overall social and behavioral environments while helping students build long-term skills and executive functions. They meet individually with youth, employing a strategic life-coaching technology that documents their strengths, triggers, goals, and struggles. Family Support Specialists meet with families to help identify needs, potential service coordination, and mentoring based on need. At the same time, Site Directors partner with school administrators and community members to coordinate on-site services. Through these one-on-one meetings, the team helps identify gaps, needs, and potential local resources. After the team assesses foundational needs, they collaborate with local organizations to address the diverse wellness dimensions of students, families, and school professionals.



Their collaboration catalyzes significant individual and community change by helping individuals understand obstacles, access community resources, and achieve self-driven goals. The team will eventually transition to a locally-led steering committee.



# SCHOOL HIGHLIGHTS

## Safford K-8:

With the entire school from School Year 21-22 to 22-23, we saw:

Increased use and stabilization of data literacy practices & documentation

Removal from Federal & AZ State School Improvement Status

Letter Grade Improvement from F to B

2% increase in average attendance rate

5% increase in enrollment

7% reduction in chronically absent students

Of the students that Higher Ground worked directly, in comparison from SY 21-22 to 22-23, we saw:

51% improved attendance

Of these students, they improved by an average of 11%

68% decreased # of discipline incidents

Of these students, they decreased by an average of 2.5 incidents

71% showed improvement in wellness

76% improved their resilience (aka grit)

39% improved self-control

98% show improvement in at least 1 of our success indicators

## Lawrence 3-8:

With the entire school from School Year 21-22 to 22-23, we saw:

Increased tenure and highly skilled staff, data literacy practices, and time on proper documentation

Increased time and capacity to document in higher fidelity

Letter Grade Improvement from F to C

3% increase in average attendance rate

19% increase in enrollment

6% reduction in chronically absent students

Of the students that Higher Ground worked directly, in comparison from SY 21-22 to 22-23, we saw:

51% improved attendance

Of these students, they improved by an average of 8%

40% decreased # of discipline incidents

Of these students, they decreased by an average of 1.5 incidents

43% showed improvement in wellness

85% improved their resilience (aka grit)

45% improved self-control

77% show improvement in at least 1 of our success indicators





# SCHOOL HIGHLIGHTS

## Utterback Middle School:

With the entire school from School Year 21-22 to 22-23, we saw:

29% decrease in logged discipline incidents

Letter Grade Improvement from D to B

4% increase in average attendance rate

6% increase in enrollment

19.5% reduction in chronically absent students

Of the students that Higher Ground worked directly, in comparison from SY 21-22 to 22-23, we saw:

46% improved attendance  
Of these students, they improved by an average of 6%

75% decreased # of discipline incidents  
Of these students, they decreased by an average of 1.6 incidents

82% showed improvement in wellness

55% improved their resilience (aka grit)

43% improved self-control

76% show improvement in at least 1 of our success indicators

## Grijalva Elementary:

With the entire school from School Year 21-22 to 22-23, we saw:

89% decrease in logged discipline incidents

no change in letter grade

2% increase in average attendance rate

no change in enrollment

12% reduction in chronically absent students

Of the students that Higher Ground worked directly, in comparison from SY 21-22 to 22-23, we saw:

63% improved attendance  
Of these students, they improved by an average of 6%

92% decreased # of discipline incidents  
Of these students, they decreased by an average of 4 incidents

61% showed improvement in wellness

68% improved their resilience (aka grit)

50% improved self-control

96% show improvement in at least 1 of our success indicators

## Apollo Middle School:

With the entire school from School Year 21-22 to 22-23, we saw:

12% decrease in logged discipline incidents

Letter Grade Improvement from D to C

1% increase in average attendance rate

no change in enrollment

6% increase in chronically absent students

Of the students that Higher Ground worked directly, in comparison from SY 21-22 to 22-23, we saw:

54% improved attendance  
Of these students, they improved by an average of 6%

44% decreased # of discipline incidents  
Of these students, they decreased by an average of 2.3 incidents

67% showed improvement in wellness

63% improved their resilience (aka grit)

67% improved self-control

78% show improvement in at least 1 of our success indicators



# SCHOOL HIGHLIGHTS

## NEXT STEPS

Several more key indicators showed the impact of our work both with the overall systems and culture of the school and the students and families we directly work with. In each school, our teams can maximize the efforts and effectiveness of the teachers and partners to ensure increased family and community engagement in each of the schools.

As a result, with some of the school districts, we work at district-level strategic planning, professional development for all teachers, and supporting systems for school support staff such as counselors, monitors, and social workers.

With the success of our model, we have attracted statewide and national attention. However, to maintain quality and maximum impact at our current community school sites, we have committed to implementing this model in no more than 10 school sites at a time. With 8 current school sites and 2 more sites currently being discussed, the demand for our model has increased and requires that we have a strategy in place to bring this much-needed type of impact to many communities.

In the next phase of our growth, our intention is to be recognized as the leading resource for those working to transform culture and systems across communities in Arizona by the end of 2027. Based on the success and key lessons learned from our previous strategic plan, our strategy is to enable other changemakers, providing them with insights, resources, innovative tools, strategies, and connections to various thought leaders. Concurrently, we will continue to develop and deliver high-quality services, build strong relationships with key stakeholders, and empower our current communities. We will achieve this through five main strategic goals:

## 2024-2027 STRATEGIC GOALS

**Develop clear communications to advance our strategies and create statewide buy-in.**

**Develop a scalable scope and sequence for data-powered life coaching and Higher Ground strategies.**

**Fine-tune and improve our data-powered life coaching system and BeMapt™ technology.**

**Establish a statewide alliance of community school educational innovators in Arizona that will collaborate with other states to share best practices and resources.**

**Establish sustainable sources of funding to support our mission.**

