



# **STRATEGIC PLAN FY 2021 - 2023**

*Broadening Our Impact Through  
Integrated Partnerships*

**June 30, 2021**

*Empowering one life at a time to REACH, TRANSFORM, and ELEVATE  
their community through love and building character.*

# HIGHER GROUND A RESOURCE CENTER STRATEGIC PLAN FY 2021 - 2023

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## BACKGROUND

For more than a decade Higher Ground has reached, transformed, and elevated thousands of lives of those Tucsonan youth growing up with the dual effects from trauma and poverty. This is important community work and our results speak for themselves.

Higher Ground is widely recognized as having the expertise, experience and methodology to create the much-needed change to the trajectory of the lives of our youth. Recently, we have taken steps to patent our proprietary life-mapping approach that is at the core of our success. We have worked hand-in-hand with our school districts to provide targeted interventions that support the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) that is so critical to these students.

Our prior strategic plan focused on dramatically increasing the number of youth we serve by evolving our processes and funding mechanisms. As part of our strategy, we focused on leveraging and championing what is known as the Community Schools Initiative – a nationwide initiative that has begun to take hold in Tucson. Our strategy also called for, and we have successfully completed, designing and implementing the processes and realignment of our staffing to effectively and efficiently increase our capacity. However, we have fallen short in generating the funding model to keep pace with the need and our commitment to our youth and community.

In 2019, Arizona dramatically changed its approach to funding the type of work we do and the Community School Initiative in Tucson has seen recent funding reductions. The prior fee-for-service that was the backbone of our funding in years past is no longer viable. As a result, Higher Ground has had to dramatically reduce the number of youth we serve. And it should be no surprise that the need for our services has increased with the COVID-19 pandemic shut down of schools beginning in March, 2020. The stability that school life brings to our youth as well as the familiar, community-based environment schools offer is a core enabling element to our success.

Fast forward to today, Higher Ground continues to work with our schools through our redesigned community schools initiative - Restart SMART. We recently launched this comprehensive strategy in collaboration with Tucson school districts in response to the challenges of reopening. The implementation is beginning in three schools, with a fourth being added soon. With the engaged dialog we've had with the school districts over the past year, our relationships have both deepened and broadened. We have brought in other community members to be part of a coalition committed to being a driving force for advocating expanded funding for the Community Schools Initiative.

A final goal of our prior strategic plan was to adapt our proprietary life-mapping method from a manual process to a computer-assisted one. The efficiencies and benefits of doing so are significant, and the goal was adopted to provide a tool to support our overall growth strategy. While we underestimated the skills, time and funds to move a manual process to a computer app, we have begun the beta testing of our app. The full version of the app as envisioned will eventually embed artificial intelligence to recommend evidence-based interventions from the thousands of data points in our database. While this full version is in the future, we continue to develop the app as a critical tool to anchor our ability to embed our methods in the schools we support.

### **A SHIFT IN STRATEGY - FROM “DOER” TO “ENABLER”**

In the past, Higher Ground was similar to many other nonprofit agencies in terms of designing and executing our programs – we sought to control and execute the entire process. Until now, the funding mechanisms for Higher Ground allowed this approach. After considerable evaluation we realize the current and expected future environment requires us to shift from being the “doer” to being the “enabler”. The need for our work is recognized by the school districts; we have developed an effective approach; and we have the requisite relationships and credibility with the Tucson-area districts. We seek to embed our processes along with supportive tools such that, over time, we enable the schools to become the driving force while we become the supporting force. We view this more as an “Integrated Partnership” instead of one where we coordinate our work with approval of the individual schools where we operate. This shift in strategy is grounded in our commitment to support thousands, not hundreds, of students impacted by the dual effects of trauma and poverty.

### **CARES ACT FUNDING - OUR WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY**

The Federal Cares Act funding, a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, is bringing millions of dollars to Tucson, a portion of which is allocated to education. With the funding, which has a two-year timeframe, school districts have discretionary funds available to support our “enabler” strategy. However, Higher Ground needs to demonstrate value and our effectiveness in addressing the needs of the schools and their students to secure funding. Our work over the past year in developing our Restart SMART strategy, building a coalition to be the driving force for advocating expanded funding for the Community Schools Initiative, and the early version of our life-mapping app gives us a very strong basis and belief that we will be successful.

### **OUR FY2021-23 STRATEGIC GOALS**

Many uncertainties surround the reopening of schools as the impact of the pandemic diminishes. As such, we have chosen to focus our strategy and resources for the limited, two-year period from July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2023. This will be a critical period for Higher Ground, and in developing our strategic plan we looked broadly and deeply at the many factors affecting the environment in which we operate.

Our enthusiasm for our work is as great as ever, and one of our strategic goals seeks to embed this enthusiasm into a broad coalition to assist in achieving the positive impact we are committed to achieve.

Outlined in most of the goals are required milestones. As the majority of the goals are based on recent pivots and new strategies, we want to ensure we set an expectation of being able to achieve more effective strategies advancing towards our desired outcomes. These required milestones are measures of whether it is effective to continue investing energy, resources, and capital as we think through another organizational strategic plan in 24 months.

Our focus and commitment are articulated in the following five goals and associated milestones:

### **GOAL #1: Higher Ground leverages our Restart SMART program to successfully enable schools to embed our processes**

As Tucson area schools shut down as a result of the pandemic, Higher Ground's ability to deliver services was severely limited. Throughout this period, we continued our conversations with the school districts and developed a vision on how we can best support our target students as the impact of the pandemic subsides utilizing community schools model as the primary vehicle. We call this Restart SMART, and it has been enthusiastically welcomed by the school districts.

As we developed this strategic plan, we began delivering Restart SMART and are currently capacity-constrained to just four schools. However, this allows the day-to-day interaction with school personnel that is an essential factor in shifting leadership and methodologies from Higher Ground to the schools themselves.

The objectives below represent the milestones of our enabling strategy whereby the schools become the driving force in implementation with Higher Ground taking an increasingly limited, but supportive role:

#### **MILESTONES**

- a. By March 2022, have an effective Steering Committees with at least 1 student, 1 parent, 3 dimension of wellness, and 1 community representative at the initial Restart SMART sites that have been trained on school mapping and have established relationships with at least two organizations or individuals who bring critical community resources.
- b. By July 2022, achieve net positive community development metrics unique to each community that extends past school related outcomes and measures.
- c. By July 2022, achieve 40% progress towards the site specific goals and objectives outlined in the Restart SMART implementation plan ([Implementation Document for Restart SMART school sites.docx](#))
- d. By August 2022, secure legally-binding contracts with clear expectations with school districts for each Restart SMART site for at least 1 year with a renewable multi year agreement. (required metric/milestone)
- e. By May 2023, secure funding for implementation through federal grants, foundations, private funders, or district allocated funds at active school sites for an additional 2 years. (required metric/milestone)

- f. By July 2023, have at least one formalized discussion around school-level practice changes and district level conversations with superintendents and board members around policy / operational changes around Trauma, SEL, and/or Executive Functions.

## **GOAL #2: Our life-mapping app is the lead tool to embed our processes at the school level**

The core of our successful SEL program to provide targeted, individualized interventions is our patent-pending life-mapping method. The current form of this method has been years in the making and the expertise to fully understand its nuances as a diagnostic tool rests with just a couple of individuals within Higher Ground's staff.

As we emerge from COVID 19, there is considerable angst around challenges, and we will not be successful with eliminating or addressing the learning loss if students are not ready to come back to classrooms prepared to learn. According to experts, social and emotional skills, mental health wellness, access to resources addressing poverty, and trauma coping mechanisms are among the most important focus for youth to come back ready for school. We must have some scalable mechanism to provide services for the next few years as we continue to face the aftermath of this pandemic.

To address the need for rapid scalability and grow the number of students we can impact, the expertise of the current manual and time-consuming, iterative process is being computerized. This "app" acts as an interface that facilitates connections with students and resources while also supporting their social and emotional learning (SEL) growth that we know is important during their development.

The app collects information in an engaging manner and organizes the data into a format that allows trained individuals to empower students effectively in real-time as they encounter challenges. In doing this, we can empower students to build SEL skills and increase their network of supports that will serve them well as they transition into the workforce. If successful, we can replicate the success of our SEL programs and develop youth's grit, social capital, and other intangibles that will make them future successful professionals and community members as they transition out of the P-20 Education Pipeline - a youth's journey from Preschool to college and the workforce.

The "app" will provide a tool for trained, but not necessarily expert staff to drive implementation. The initial version of the app is being beta-tested in schools as part of Restart SMART and with it, we will have our lead tool to embed our processes at the school level. Continued development of the app will be required as we continue to transfer our expertise to the schools.

The following objectives represent the milestones we seek to ensure the life-mapping app is effective and can be successfully used by trained school staff:

## MILESTONES

- a. By December 2021, have a clear app-specific business plan with defined target clients and a marketing strategy to reach potential clients.
- b. By May 2022, document net positive impact for youth and family outcome measures, in groups of students that utilized the app, that can be quantified and marketed.
- c. By April 2022, have income-generating contracts totaling \$350,000.
- d. By December 2022, document a minimum 20% waste reduction in the following areas: mapping time, error rates, and data intervention time. (required metric/milestone)
- e. By July 2023, a minimum of 15% of youth are inputting at least 50% of the data-gathering section, and are completing goals and/or engaging in strategies allowing Higher Ground to define a clearer definition of "effective usage frequency." (required metric/milestone)
- f. By July 2023, have revenue streams that are at break-even on expenses related to continued app development and testing.

## **GOAL #3: Higher Ground broadens community-level implementation leadership and resources through coalition and network building**

Higher Ground can no longer expect to achieve the success we seek by ourselves. As part of our continued work during the pandemic-induced school closures, we formally began work on developing a community-wide coalition to advocate for expanded funding for the Community School Initiative to sustain our Restart SMART sites. We have been successful to date, but there is more work to do to make the coalition successful. Specifically, we need to broaden the leadership of the coalition away from Higher Ground and include implementation efforts and resources as part of the coalition's remit.

Below are the objectives we have identified to successfully achieve our vision of the coalition as well as expanding Higher Ground's network:

## MILESTONES

- a. By October 2021, the message of our Community Schools Initiative - Restart SMART is being amplified in multiple sectors namely, business, education, non-profit, healthcare, public health, government with at least 10 external stakeholders advocating for Restart SMART.
- b. By December 2021, at least 10 non-Higher Ground coalition members are actively working on projects to advance the coalition driving and amplifying the message and sustainability of the community schools model in Southern Arizona.
- c. By March 2022, have at least 2 active workgroups within the coalition working on specific community schools-related issues driven by data and voices of the Restart SMART sites.

- d. By May 2022, have a formal coalition with an identified backbone organization that is not Higher Ground responsible for overall strategic coherence, fiscal management, meeting convening, stakeholder engagement, communications, and day-to-day coalition operations with Higher Ground playing a leadership role in the coalition.
- e. By July 2023, have coalition-led active advocacy regarding funding of Community Schools at the state level around community schools which means there is an appropriations budgeting introduced at the state level - on the floor of the House or the Senate. (required metric/milestone)

#### **GOAL #4: Higher Ground's Social Emotional Learning (SEL) efforts anchors our mapping methods**

For years Higher Ground has operated our Student Wellness Center at the former Wakefield Middle School in South Tucson and SEL programs in school during the school day and after school hours. More recently, we have utilized the Community Schools Initiative to geographically broaden our reach by delivering services at multiple schools through the greater Tucson area.

Our SEL programs both at the wellness center and in schools continue to be the place where innovation and other programs are born. It allows us for more control of the variables in our trauma responsiveness, SEL implementation, multi-generational engagement, and commitment to measure our impact and outcomes. In addition, our Wellness Center at Wakefield is committed to preparing our South Tucson students to develop the skills needed for the future workforce in existing career pathways and careers yet imagined.

We are committed to growing the impact of our services at our SEL Programs as measured by the following objectives:

#### **MILESTONES**

- a. By December 2021, a sustainable operational structure is embedded into all SEL programs that allows for continuous improvement through the implementation of an evidence based program quality measurement tool.
- b. By March 2022, document a plan and defined strategy to maximize data gathering and further net positive impact with the families of attendees.
- c. By May of 2022, our SEL program attendance is at a consistent 60% of youth attend programs 3 times a week with 80% of families engaged weekly for locations that have family engagement as part of the design.
- d. By August 2022, have a sustainable science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) program available to all attendees of the wellness center at Wakefield.
- e. By August 2022, have alternative diversified sustainable funding sources to shift the dependency of the Wakefield Wellness Center away from fee-for-service behavioral health funding.

- f. By May 2023, establish a minimum of 3 new partnerships related to the P-20 Education Pipeline and further exposure to college, career, entrepreneurship, and post-secondary opportunities for students at the Wellness Center.
- g. By June 2023, create one new research-related partnership at the Wellness Center.

**GOAL #5: Our financial stability includes effective grant and donation funding**

While the Restart SMART program generates revenue from the schools and we will require contracts for our continued work very likely funded initially with CARES ACT funds, our past experience has taught us the harsh lesson that we need sustained revenue from foundation grants and individual donations.

The objectives below represent the milestones needed to ensure our future financial stability:

**MILESTONES**

- a. Beginning January 2022, Higher Ground will maintain a minimum of 60 days cash-on-hand for operational flexibility.
- b. By June 2022, Higher Ground Executive Board will have clear involvement and impact in fundraising efforts and individual donors with at least 5% of Higher Ground's FY 22-23 revenue coming directly from board efforts.
- c. By August 2022, Higher Ground have a grant and foundation research completed and have created an infrastructure that will allow us to hire a development director or development contract
- d. By May 2023, Higher Ground's revenue related to non-government grants and donations will account for 20% (currently at 10%) of total revenue.