

April 29, 2020



To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is in support of Higher Ground's Restart S.M.A.R.T. post-pandemic strategy for schools.

I've had the privilege over the last four years to work on poverty issues for Pima County, but have many more years working intensively on the goal of poverty reduction. The evidence is clear that poverty negatively impacts learning. The sooner and the longer children are in poverty, the harder it is for them to get out. I often say we should treat poverty as an epidemic, but in truth we normalize and accommodate it.

Now that we have a true epidemic, poverty will widen and deepen. More children will be experiencing the complex and toxic mix of elements related to poverty: eviction, trauma, food insecurity, more neighborhood crime, more health problems, the digital divide, and parents with less ability to keep bad things away.

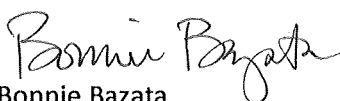
Jansen Azarias and Higher Ground know these dynamics well and for years have been leading efforts to address the impact of poverty for low-income families. They are experts in the application of the socioemotional learning (SEL), trauma-informed care strategies, and the Community School model, all of which they have integrated into the Restart S.M.A.R.T. proposal.

While most of us are dealing with the immediate impact of the covid19 pandemic in our communities, Jansen and his team are anticipating the critical next steps for recovery in our schools and for our children. He has laid out a path for how we can reopen our schools with the tools and teams to build resilience not only for our children and their families, but for staff as well. Building on his expertise, Jansen has sought and integrated input from key community leaders: School Superintendents, County Supervisors, political leaders, researchers, educators, and community practitioners like myself.

I believe that the Restart S.M.A.R.T. strategy systemically allows us to map a road to reopen schools after this pandemic. It is a blueprint to unify schools and school districts for a coordinated response. This initiative can be key in helping us to mitigate the effects of this pandemic and what will certainly be increasing gap in educational opportunities. Without an effective strategy, the long-term impact of this gap in education, along with the academic slide that this pandemic will trigger, has the potential to negatively impact not only our schools, but our economy and community health for decades to come.

We are excited to bring our Pima County resources to assist in this process, particularly around eviction prevention and helping families reconnect to jobs. We believe Arizona can be a leader for other states struggling with these same conditions. We look to our elected leadership to support this proposal with the needed political will and funding to help make this happen. Thank you for giving this proposal your serious consideration in order for Arizona's students, families and workforce to realize a better future.

Sincerely,



Bonnie Bazata

Ending Poverty Now Program Manager

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