



The Tucson Educators Association is committed to public school advocacy and enhancing the quality of life for all community members within Tucson Unified School District. Over the years, TUSD has suffered a number of bad marks in the realm of diversity and understanding the needs of our Students and Staff of Color. Higher Ground has been there to support those students along with us, through solutions to conflict both academic and policy driven. We have witnessed the support that Higher Ground provides to our educators and families in TUSD and their approach to youth and family engagement has proven a necessary service at all our schools.

The COVID -19 pandemic has amplified the inequities that have been inherent in public schools for decades, particularly for Families of Color. When low income parents were faced with the choice of staying home with their young children or getting a paycheck, Higher Ground created a plan to help them. When students who live in remote or rural areas were unable to access their lessons digitally or only for limited amounts of time each day due to one shared device or limited bandwidth or no access to internet; Higher Ground recognized the need and sought ways to assist. It is now more important than ever to support and engage students and families to provide the resources they need to succeed. Higher Ground's work through its effective Community Schools initiative – Restart SMART – provides a unique framework of support to empower youth, families, and the surrounding community, by using the school as a hub of youth and family stabilization.

Public schools still have the potential to be the community hub; a place where students grow and learn but also a location for civic events and information. Schools already service communities with clothing banks and food service even when schools are not in session, but at a cost to the school in funding and personnel. Higher Ground's model represents a shift from the overburdening of school personnel to a system of partnerships, needs assessments for students, families, and the school community to effectively assist where needed while allowing teachers to concentrate on education.

Many students had a difficult time transitioning to online and asynchronous learning and even attending classes due to the inconsistencies and resulting emotional toll the pandemic has had on our country. Data driven assessments have lost their meaning and families are no longer motivated to sustain their existence or question the accuracy of the results. Higher Ground's evidence-based outcomes show this system can improve attendance and educational attainment. The community school model has been tested and proven in dozens of cities and states. When it is implemented effectively, the model improves outcomes for students, families, and the surrounding community by providing a system of support, and empowerment.

We highly recommend Higher Ground's application for the Community Schools Grant from NEA.

Sincerely,

Margaret Chaney, President

Tucson Education Association