

Belonging, Resilience, and Justice:

A Multi-Institutional Framework for Avoiding the School to Prison Pipeline



Applied Research
Center for Civility

UC San Diego



NATIONAL
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A Multi-Institutional Framework for Avoiding the School to Prison Pipeline

The National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC) builds belonging, resilience, and justice through support for youth, families, and communities across a spectrum of institutions and experiences. NCRC has developed programs that promote the important components of youth well-being across different contexts and with varied youth populations.

These programs include:

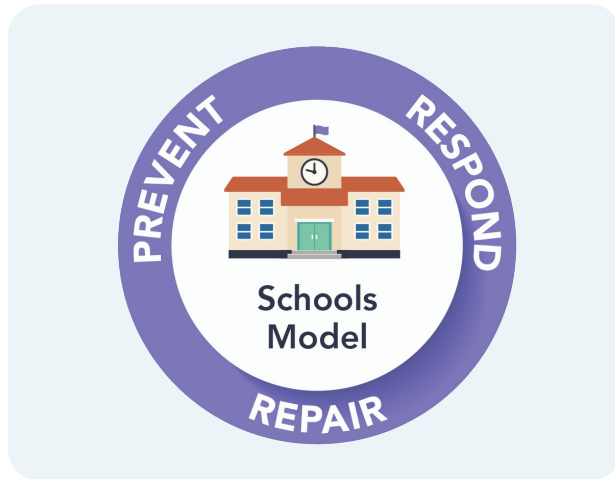
- A belonging and restorative practices program for schools.
- A juvenile diversion program operated in partnership with the San Diego County District Attorney's Office.
- A community-based post-diversion program for youth that need and/or want additional support.

NCRC's schools, diversion, and post-diversion programs constitute a multi-institutional framework for belonging, resilience, and justice that can reduce the risk that young people will encounter the criminal legal system while increasing their capacity to be healthy and productive members of more inclusive communities. Figure 1 illustrates how the institutions of schooling, juvenile justice, and community are linked through NCRC programs and contribute to positive social outcomes and **Just Futures**.

Figure 1. A Multi-Institutional Framework for Avoiding the School to Prison Pipeline



Schools Model: Prevent, Respond, Repair



The Schools Model is organized around three interconnected practices: preventing harm, responding effectively when conflict or harmful behavior occurs, and repairing its effects. The aim of the Schools Model is to strengthen belonging and create school environments in which harmful and exclusionary behavior is less likely to occur.

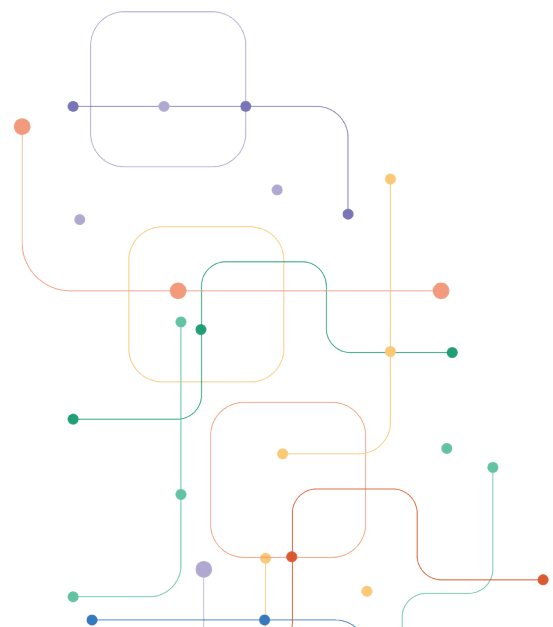
Prevention begins with training for school leaders, teachers, staff, and students who need concepts and skills for preventing harm and increasing belonging. Teaching students how to be upstanders rather than bystanders when they see something harmful happening or giving teachers the skills to run proactive restorative circles in their classroom can prevent harm and build belonging. These skills and concepts help to build a culture of belonging, which can prevent harmful and exclusionary actions from happening.

When an incident does occur, a clear and appropriate response is critical. Administrators, teachers, staff, and students each have different

roles to play, and everyone should understand what those roles are. The process for responding to harm should be clear and transparent so that it is predictable and builds trust that harm will be addressed. That includes well documented steps for administrators, teachers, and staff appropriate to their roles and actions students can take to care for themselves and others who have been harmed.

Repair should occur through a restorative process. This involves teachers or other school personnel using restorative questions to understand what happened and relying on restorative practices such as restorative conferences rather than exclusionary forms of discipline such as suspension. Consistent use of these approaches depends on a culture of being restorative where school personnel view restorative practices as supportive of school priorities and an appropriate way to hold individuals accountable.

These three elements reinforce one another. Effective responses should include opportunities for repair, while restorative responses can strengthen relationships and contribute to preventing future incidents. Prevent, respond, and repair is therefore not a simple linear sequence, but an interconnected cycle in which each practice supports the others and contributes to a stronger sense of belonging.



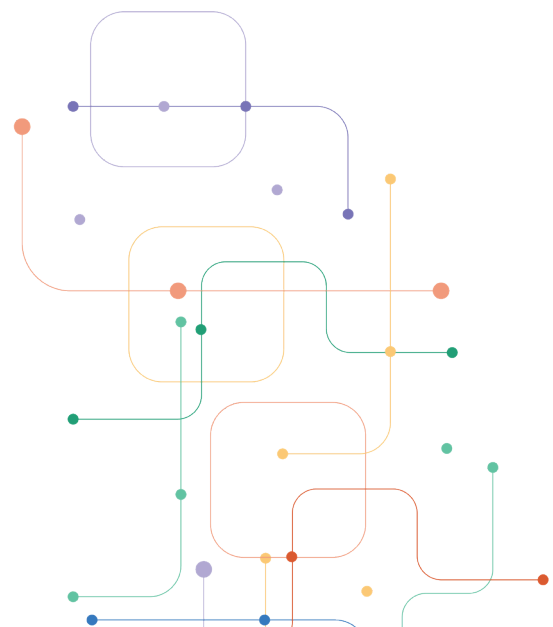
Justice System Model: Divert, Engage, Restore



The Justice System Model is built on diverting youth from the criminal legal system, engaging youth through supportive activities, and restoring the harm done to individuals and communities. The aim of the justice system model is to lower the risk of long-term harms from system impact and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. While diversion can happen along a spectrum from less to more formal, this model involves an intermediary organization that can receive diverted youth through a formal diversion process. The intermediary organization can assess risk and needs and develop a plan to ensure diverted youth meet the expectations of their diversion and have their cases closed without further justice system interaction. The formal diversion process is limited in duration to avoid over-exposure to and involvement in a diversion program.

Engagement addresses the risk factors and needs of diverted youth. This can involve mental health and substance use services, education advocacy, and pro-social activities. Engaging youth through these supports increases belong-

ing and resilience and reduces the likelihood of future justice system involvement. By engaging youth around their risk factors and needs, the justice system model aims to address the underlying causes of justice system involvement. Restoring justice is critical for accountability and repairing harm for individuals and communities. Persons harmed or surrogates are invited to participate in a restorative practice such as a restorative conference with the diverted youth. Persons harmed should never be required to participate in a restorative practice, and in some cases there will not be a person harmed or a surrogate who agrees to participate. Nevertheless, restorative justice is a necessary part of the justice system model.



Community Model: Connect, Goal Set, Activate

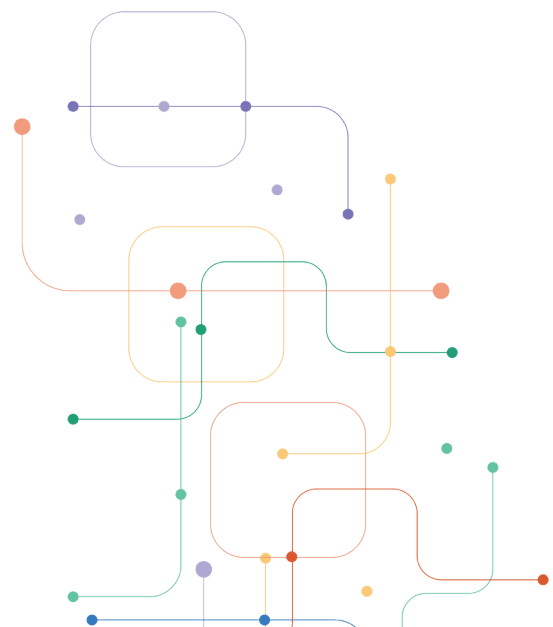


The Community Model is organized around building connections for youth, helping youth set goals for the near and distant future, and giving youth the tools to activate the skills and resources they have gained. The aim of the Community Model is to support youth who need or want to continue the engagement they received through the Justice System Model and increase their capacity to contribute to greater belonging in school and their broader communities.

Building and strengthening connection happens in several ways. One is through case workers who connect with youth to support them throughout the program. Another is through cohorts who create opportunities for peer connections. A third is connection between the program and caregivers who are engaged in support for youth, which supports greater connection between youth and their families. And lastly is the connection with community through pro-social activities, continuing and expanding the supports that youth receive through the Justice System Model.

Goal setting is part of a process of strengths-based coaching that helps youth with better understanding themselves and their interests so they can set goals that they can work toward in the short and long term. This approach to goal setting helps youth set goals that are self-selected, appropriate for their development, and consistent with the aim of staying out of the criminal legal system. Goal setting helps create a positive identity and sense of purpose.

The Community Model provides opportunities for youth to activate the skills and knowledge that they gain throughout the program. They receive support to work towards the goals that they set and build positive relationships with peers, caregivers, and other adults. Case workers help some youth find jobs and get drivers' licenses. Youth who finish the program have the option of returning and mentoring youth who are newer to the program. Activating what they learn builds resilience and reduces the likelihood of future justice system involvement.



Just Futures: Work, Learn, Serve



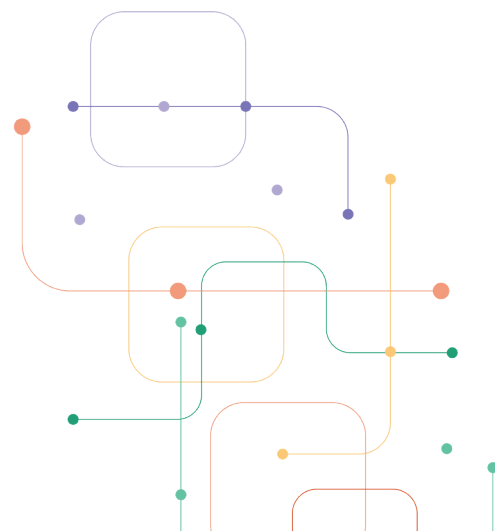
Increasing belonging, resilience, and justice expands young people's capacities to work, learn, and serve others as they enter adulthood. By strengthening the foundation for success across these criteria, the multi-institutional framework aims not only at reducing the likelihood of future justice system impacts but at increasing wellbeing for youths, their families, and their communities.

Preparing young people to get jobs and establish careers is critical for the successful transition to adulthood. For most people, work is a necessary condition of social belonging and meeting basic needs. Having the skills and knowledge to get a job and pursue a career is an important part of reducing involvement with the criminal legal system. Work gives young adults the financial and social resources to participate more fully in the life of their communities. While work is not the only or even the most important way to be a productive member of a community, it is an integral part of being in a community for many adults.

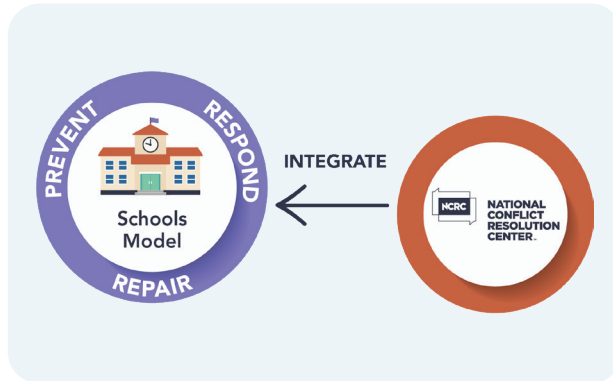
Many students will enroll in colleges and universities after they graduate from high school. Giving young people the skills and knowledge to pursue and succeed in higher education is critical for individual development, work and career attainment, and socio-economic outcomes. Capacities for lifelong learning open possibilities for young people as they enter and move through adulthood.

Instilling a commitment to serving others contributes to building belonging as young people enter adulthood. Service increases resilience by building the supportive networks that people need to handle adversity throughout their lives. It also strengthens pro-social attitudes and behaviors that reduce the likelihood of justice system impacts.

Working, learning, and serving are interconnected dimensions of a successful transition to adulthood. Education and lifelong learning expand young people's opportunities for meaningful work, while employment can provide the stability and resources needed to continue learning and participate more fully in community life. Both can also create opportunities to contribute to and support others. Together, these capacities help young people build meaningful roles and relationships, navigate challenges, and contribute to their communities - reinforcing the belonging, resilience, and justice that the framework seeks to foster.



Integrate, Collaborate, Lead



A multi-institutional framework with distinct but overlapping models of youth engagement requires different approaches to partnerships between an organization like NCRC and the institutions it supports. A community-based organization will take on different roles and develop different relationships as they work across schools, the justice system, and community. Integrating, collaborating, and leading are ways of engaging that show up in each of the models. However, each represents a dominant mode of engaging with a particular model.

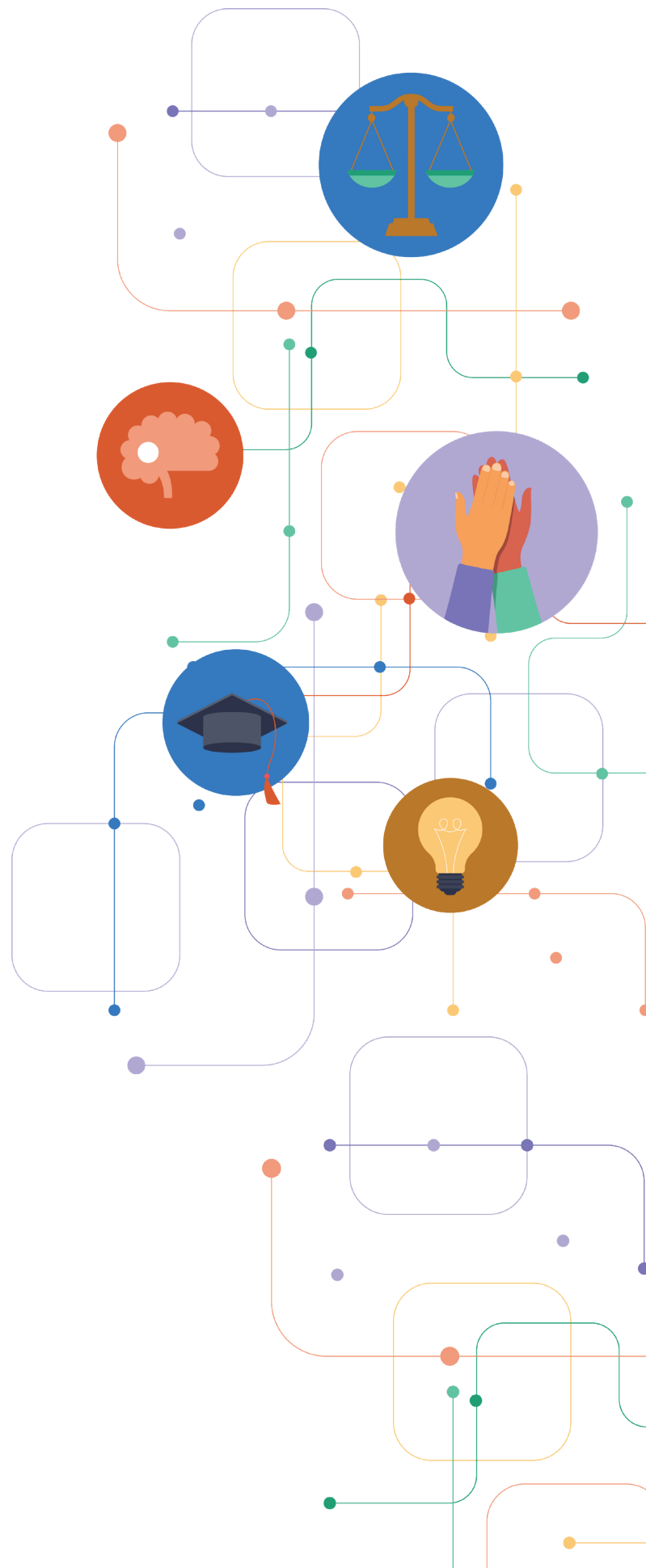
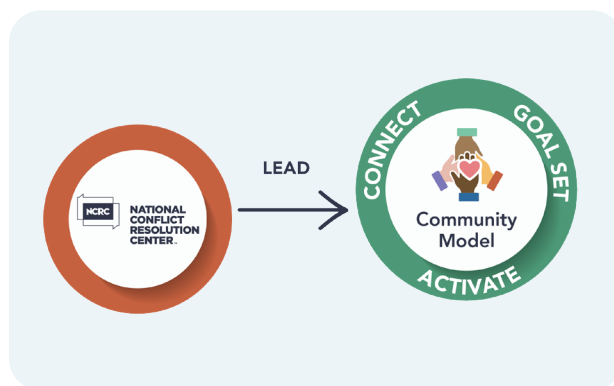
Community-based organizations should integrate their programming into schools. This means adapting programs to the specific school environment and ensuring that programs support school priorities. When programs are perceived as adding responsibilities or distracting from other demands, they may struggle to get buy in. Although changing school culture and behaviors is a goal of the Schools Model, these changes are most achievable when programs are integrated into the needs and day-to-day functioning of the school. Integrating the Schools Model into a specific school environment takes time and learning on the part of the organization supporting the school.

Community-based organizations that serve as intermediaries between the justice system and support services, families, and people harmed will collaborate with these different stakeholders. Rather than introduce programming to another setting, intermediary organizations work with them to meet their requirements or access their services. When working with the justice system, an intermediary organization will have to shape its programming to help youth satisfy the conditions imposed on them by the justice system. Collaboration with the justice system means not only adapting to the justice system but also helping the justice system understand how best to support diverted youth, hold them accountable, and restore harm. An intermediary organization must collaborate with community organizations to incorporate their expertise and resources into the diversion program and ensure they fulfill the program's aims.



The Community Model is distinguished from schools and the justice system by the absence of a formal system for a community-based organization to integrate or collaborate with.

This lack of a formal system gives organizations an opportunity to lead the development of a program that complements the other models. Leading program development means understanding the population of youth that need support such as youth who have completed a diversion program but can benefit from additional programming and understanding the specific needs of the youth that the organization serves such as mental health services or peer cohorts. Whereas integrating and collaborating require accommodating the goals of other institutions, leading entails identifying and dictating the goals of the program. Leading also involves challenges such as funding and staffing programs independently of other institutions that can provide money and people to implement programming. Despite these challenges, leading gives a community-based organization a level of flexibility and independence to meet the needs of young people.



Evaluation

The youth belonging, resilience, and justice framework is the result of a five-year evaluation of NCRC's youth programming and support programs. In 2021, the University of California San Diego Center for Research and Evaluation (CR+E) began a two-year evaluation of NCRC's restorative practices work with the Escondido Union High School District (EUHSD). During the same period, CR+E carried out an applied research project focused on community-led juvenile diversion in the United States. This project was supported by the Applied Research Center for Civility, a joint initiative of NCRC and the UC San Diego¹. As part of the research for this project, CR+E examined the San Diego County District Attorney's Office's Juvenile Diversion Initiative (JDI).

In July 2024, CR+E launched an evaluation of each of NCRC's programs focused on belonging, resilience, and justice. This included a continuation of the EUHSD restorative practices evaluation and an expanded evaluation of JDI. Additionally, CR+E began evaluating NCRC's Building Belonging program at San Dieguito Union High School District (SDUHSD) and NCRC's post-diversion program Thrive. The Just Futures evaluation concluded in June 2026.

Since 2021, there have been two separate evaluations covering NCRC's youth programming. First, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) was contracted by the San Diego County District Attorney's Office to conduct a program evaluation of JDI. SANDAG evaluated program data from July 2021 to October 2023 and focused on the characteristics of youth referred to the program, completion rates, program satisfaction, and recidivism. SANDAG

reported the results of the evaluation in two annual reports². The second evaluation was conducted by RAND and focused on NCRC's restorative practices program at EUHSD and JDI, the latter focusing more on NCRC's role than SANDAG had in its evaluation. RAND published the report by Catherine H. Augustine and colleagues in 2024³.

Data and Methods

The findings of CR+E's Just Futures evaluation are drawn from a wide variety of data sources. CR+E administered surveys, conducted interviews and focus groups, observed events and activities, and collected administrative data. Although the Just Futures evaluation covers the period from July 2024 through June 2026, we incorporate data gathered since 2021.

ESCONDIDO UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Between 2021 and 2026, CR+E evaluated the restorative practices programming at EUHSD, which is made up of five high schools. CR+E administered surveys to students and staff, conducted student focus groups, and interviewed administrators, teachers, and NCRC staff.

Surveys

Student surveys were administered in 2021, 2023, 2025, and 2026 at all five EUHSD schools. In 2023, CR+E added a Spanish version of the student survey. In total, 4,257 student surveys were completed across all four waves. Staff surveys were administered in 2021, 2023, and 2025. In 2023, CR+E also administered a survey to EUHSD staff focused on restorative conferencing. A total of 263 teacher surveys were completed along with 59 restorative conferencing surveys.

¹ This research culminated in the report, *Principles and Strategies for Community-Led Diversion in Juvenile Justice*. https://ncrconline.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Principles-and-Strategies-for-Community-Led-Diversion-in-Juvenile-Justice_ARCC_Full-Report.pdf

² SANDAG Criminal Justice Research Division. 2023. *San Diego County District Attorney Juvenile Diversion Initiative Annual Report 2022*. <https://www.sandag.org/-/media/SANDAG/Documents/PDF/data-and-research/criminal-justice-and-public-safety/evaluation-services/juveniles/jdi-annual-report-2022.pdf>; SANDAG Criminal Justice Research Division. 2024. *San Diego County District Attorney Juvenile Diversion Initiative Annual Report 2023*. <https://www.sandag.org/-/media/SANDAG/Documents/PDF/data-and-research/criminal-justice-and-public-safety/evaluation-services/juveniles/jdi-annual-report-2023.pdf>

³ Augustine, Catherine H., et al. 2024. *Restorative Practices in Educational Settings and a Youth Diversion Program: What We Can Learn from One Organization's Partnerships with the Community to Stem the School-to-Prison Pipeline*. RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3440-1.html

Focus Groups and Interviews

In 2023, CR+E conducted five focus groups at each of the five EUHSD high schools with between seven and 11 students per focus group. The same open-ended questions were sent via an online form to teachers, 17 of which completed the form. In spring 2025, CR+E interviewed the lead administrator implementing restorative practices across the district, four EUHSD principals, and an NCRC staff person who was placed at EUHSD to support implementation.

SAN DIEGUITO UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT BUILDING BELONGING

CR+E evaluated the Building Belonging program at SDUHSD from July 2024 through June 2026. SDUHSD consists of 10 high schools and middle schools. The evaluation included a staff survey, interviews with SDUHSD administrators and NCRC staff, observations of Building Belonging programs, and documents provided by SDUHSD and NCRC.

All-Staff Survey

In August 2024, CR+E administered a survey to all SDUHSD staff. Questions focused on attitudes and beliefs about belonging both generally and in relation to SDUHSD. A total of 205 staff members completed the full survey.

Interviews

CR+E conducted two interviews with the SDUHSD superintendent in fall 2024 and spring 2026. CR+E also conducted two interviews in fall 2024 and spring 2025 with the NCRC staff person who was placed at SDUHSD to support Building Belonging programming. In spring 2025, CR+E interviewed another NCRC staff person who took over as point person for Building Belonging programs during the 2025-2026 school year. Throughout the evaluation, CR+E frequently met with the NCRC staff placed at SDUHSD to receive updates.

Observations

CR+E observed two Building Belonging trainings for teachers and staff in fall 2024, an upstander training for middle school students in winter 2025, a student forum with district administrators in spring 2025, an online parent training in spring 2026, and a presentation about Building Belonging by the SDUHSD superintendent in spring 2026.

Building Belonging Documents

Documents provided to CR+E included information about the One San Dieguito Initiative, of which Building Belonging programming is part, impact sheets, and training and program descriptions. CR+E also analyzed notes created by students who participated in an upstander training.

JUVENILE DIVERSION INITIATIVE

CR+E first interviewed JDI staff in 2022 as part of the Applied Research Center for Civility community-led juvenile diversion project. CR+E's evaluation of JDI took place from July 2024 to June 2026 and included interviews with NCRC staff and partner organizations, programmatic data, risk assessment data, and secondary data. Access to data about JDI was governed by the partnership between NCRC and the District Attorney's Office, which limited CR+E's access to some data such as recidivism data.

Interviews

CR+E interviewed NCRC's Alternative Juvenile Justice program manager in 2022, 2024, and 2026 with less formal check ins throughout the evaluation period. CR+E also interviewed six other NCRC staff, including the director of community programs, and 14 community partners, including an educational advocate, an artist and educator who offers pottery classes to youth, and a youth development practitioner who specializes in personal growth activities.

Programmatic Data

NCRC provided aggregated data from July 2021 through May 2026 on case referrals and outcomes including the rate of participation and non-participation in JDI, reasons for non-participation, successful and unsuccessful completion for JDI participants, and reasons for unsuccessful completion of JDI.

Risk Assessment Data

NCRC provided data from San Diego Risk and Resiliency Checkup-II (SDRRC-II), an assessment tool that evaluates a youth's risk of recidivism, their strengths, and the risk and protective factors that they have in their life. NCRC calculates a protective score and risk score for each youth, a risk-to-protective ratio and a dynamic risk-to-protective ratio, a strengths index, and a risk-to-recidivate score.

Secondary Data

Data from the SANDAG and RAND reports are included to supplement the findings of CR+E's evaluation.

THRIVE

CR+E evaluated NCRC's Thrive program from July 2024 to June 2026. The evaluation included surveys of youth and their caregivers, focus groups and interviews with youth, interviews with Thrive staff, observations of Thrive activities, and goal setting and attainment data.

Surveys

CR+E developed three surveys for youth and caregivers. These included a pre-survey when youth first begin the Thrive program, a mid-point survey when they complete phase one of the Thrive program, and a post-survey when they complete the second and final phase of Thrive. Surveys were administered by Thrive staff. After cleaning and matching youth and caregiver responses across all three waves, 82

youth and 69 caregivers completed the pre-survey, 54 youth and 40 caregivers completed the mid-point survey, and 49 youth and 27 caregivers completed the post-survey.

Focus Groups and Interviews

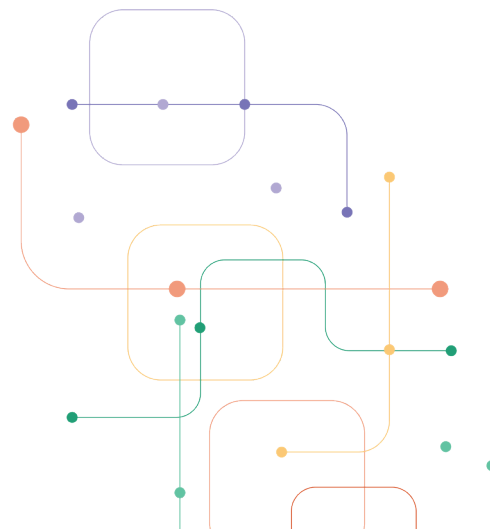
CR+E conducted five focus groups with youth who completed the Thrive program. Focus groups were held during their end of program event. Four of the focus groups were conducted at the Thrive community space and one was conducted at an outside barbecue where youth and caregivers celebrated their completion of Thrive. CR+E also conducted six interviews with youth who returned for a gathering of Thrive alumni. In addition to youth focus groups and interviews, CR+E interviewed the Thrive director and two case managers.

Observations

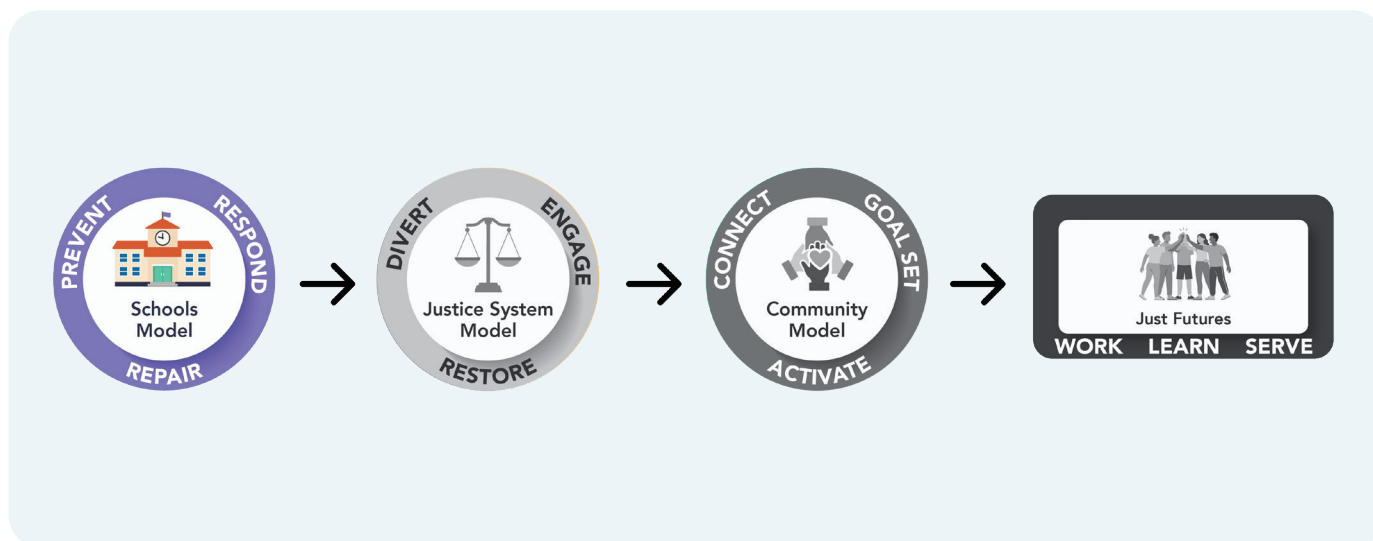
CR+E attended end of program events for 5 Thrive cohorts and an alumni reunion.

Goal Setting and Attainment Data

NCRC provided CR+E with an anonymized database of youth goals. This included the category selected by each youth (Live, Learn, Earn, Serve), a qualitative description of that goal, goal status, case status, and records to see if youth had gone through Thrive multiple times.



Prevent, Respond, Repair: A Model for Schools



The Schools Model: Prevent, Respond, Repair aims to strengthen belonging and create school environments in which harmful and exclusionary behavior is less likely to occur. Prevention focuses on equipping school leaders, teachers, staff, and students with the skills to build inclusive environments and intervene before harm occurs. When conflict or harmful behavior does occur, clear and effective responses help ensure that students understand how harm will be addressed and that adults have the tools to respond consistently. Repair centers restorative practices that hold individuals accountable while addressing harm and rebuilding relationships.

The Schools Model is derived from two programs in two districts: a restorative practices program in the Escondido Union High School District (EUHSD) and the Building Belonging initiative in the San Diego Union High School District (SDUHSD).

It is important to note that the districts vary in critical ways. For instance, SDUHSD has twice as many schools and approximately twice as many students. SDUHSD is predominantly white while EUHSD is majority Latino. At SDUHSD, less than five percent of families have incomes below the poverty line compared to 12 percent at EUHSD, and median household income at SDUHSD is more than double that at EUHSD.⁴

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, America's Public Schools. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>



Despite their significant differences, both school districts have experienced prominent bias incidents in recent years that have impacted belonging. In 2018, nine high school seniors in EUHSD took a photograph wearing t-shirts with letters on them that spelled out a racial slur when they lined up next to each other.⁵ In 2021 an EUHSD basketball team, comprised mostly of Latino students, had tortillas thrown at them by fans of the opposing team from a predominantly white high school.⁶ Between 2021 and 2023 there have been multiple instances of racist and homophobic graffiti found at SDUHSD schools.⁷ In 2022, an SDUHSD middle school history teacher displayed a Hitler portrait and made insensitive comments to a student.⁸

The benefit of evaluating programs across two districts with different student characteristics is that it allows us to observe the different ways that NCRC integrates into districts with different needs. Activities that are needed in one district may not be needed in another. The same can be true of schools within districts. Therefore, while the Schools Model involves more elements when looking across multiple districts, it is important to recognize that districts vary, and the model will necessarily have to be adapted to different contexts.

Escondido Union High School District Restorative Practices Program

In 2021, NCRC partnered with EUHSD to support and expand the district's restorative practices program. With funds from the San Diego County Office of Education and EUHSD, NCRC provided two support staff to work full time with the district.

According to one NCRC staff person, their role was to “implement restorative practices and support that practice to all members of the [school] community.” This meant not only training, but also creating a mindset within the school community to be able to be more restorative on campus, to be more inclusive to all community members and then when there's tension and harm done...repair the harm and create a more healthy environment, healthier relationships within the district, with the ultimate goal of helping the students have a better school experience.

NCRC staff were able to extend the district's capacity to not only train but to do the all-critical follow up with people to ensure that they put what they learned into practice.

⁵ Sanchez, R. (2018, October 1). California high school students line up to spell out racial slur at senior picnic. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/29/us/california-high-school-students-racial-slur-trnd/index.html>

⁶ Gros, C. (2021, June 24). Escondido Union HS District unanimously passes racism resolution after tortilla-throwing incident. CBS8. <https://www.cbs8.com/article/news/local/escondido-union-hs-district-to-pass-racism-resolution-after-basketball-incident/509-61eb955b-d374-4edb-b139-012d672620f8>

⁷ Taketa, K. (2023, October 12). Antisemitic graffiti painted on the Torrey Pines High School campus—again. The San Diego Union-Tribune. <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/education/story/2023-10-12/antisemitic-graffiti-swastika-torrey-pines-high-school-campus-again>

⁸ Gotfredson, D. (2022, October 4). Carmel Valley principal apologizes for Hitler portrait in classroom. CBS8. <https://www.cbs8.com/article/news/investigations/carmel-valley-principal-apologizes-hitler-portrait-in-classroom/509-21328c49-f0e3-4e4c-8259124c5bcd51d4>

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Affective statements: Statements using affective language to focus on feelings and impact (e.g., “It made me uneasy to hear you teasing him,” and “I am so proud of this class for working together so well.”).

Affective/Restorative questioning: Questions phrased to elicit affective statements to encourage reflection on feelings and impact, rather than justifications and rationalizations (e.g., “What did you think when you realized what happened?”, “What has been the hardest thing for you?”).
Relationship building: Building relationships is a crucial component of restorative practice. Better relationships allow for more successful outcomes.

Restorative circles: Participants sit in a circle and take turns answering a prompt from quotidian to serious including check-ins, academics, and behavior. The structure conveys values including equality, trust, responsibility, ownership, and connections.

- **Proactive circles:** Circles organized to build relationships and a more positive classroom environment (e.g., check-ins, discussions of academic content).
- **Reactive circles:** Circles organized when something negative happens. Encourages participants to discuss what happened, their role, and its impact.

Restorative conferences: Formal circles organized to respond to more serious harm. They include everyone that was impacted by that harm. These circles are organized in advance and led by a neutral facilitator. Discussions include coming to an understanding about how to make it right.

The lead administrator in charge of restorative practices adapted to having two experienced practitioners in the district. She “saw the value in sending them out” to serve as the point person at the schools. “Although we could each go to the sites and help and support 100%, it helped if one admin team had a point person who they were talking to.” As practitioners, the NCRC staff could serve as point people having those conversations on a day-to-day basis.

A point person can also help schools meet more context-specific needs. As a principal at one school explained, the NCRC staff person was able to “fill in the gaps of some other needs,” activities that “fall under the restorative umbrella but weren’t specific just to restorative practice.” He added that they “do a good job of kind of planning ahead and what are the needs of each site and try to have some specific things that can kind of flex what the needs are of the site.”

San Dieguito Union High School District Building Belonging Initiative

When the EUHSD superintendent moved to the San Dieguito Union High School District (SDUHSD), she brought the partnership with NCRC to support the One San Dieguito initiative. One San Dieguito was created in 2023 to help build a culture and practice of belonging in the San Dieguito Union High School District (SDUHSD).

The program emerged from two primary needs:

1. to support youth before they get into trouble that may eventually lead to criminal legal system involvement and
2. to build belonging and inclusivity in a district that had experienced serious incidents of bias.

NCRC worked with SDUHSD to develop and integrate the Building Belonging initiative into One San Dieguito.

AS NCRC PRESIDENT STEVE DINKIN EXPLAINED,

If we could create a sense of belonging in school to stop the bullying, to have bystander programs and change the culture of a school district, then kids would feel a stronger sense of connection and, hopefully, would be better connected, track better in school, not be suspended or expelled, and not get arrested.

NCRC received funding through California's Stop the Hate Program, which supported the effort to establish stronger social connections in schools before youth were put at greater risk of system involvement. Building Belonging includes training and support for restorative practices, "The Art of Inclusive Communication" workshops for students and school staff, "The Art and Science of High Performance Teams" for student athletes, and a "Culture, Communication, and Conflict" certificate program for administrative leaders. NCRC also developed two online workshops for SDUHSD parents and caregivers.

Over the first three years, the initiative evolved from building a common language and foundational skills to expanding student- and staff-led capacity and, ultimately, embedding more durable systems for responding to harm. The following illustrates the program's progression:

- **2023-2024:** focused on establishing a shared framework for belonging and restorative community.
- **2024-2025:** expanded training and student engagement across the district.
- **2025-2026:** shifted toward systems integration, including the RESPOND protocol and a full-time NCRC role embedded in the district.

“When a district has agreed to include the partner in district initiatives and run them as district initiatives, and especially with as much access as this district has given us as an organization, that level of access and level of oversight is extremely key to making an impact, or making change, or to understanding how change would need to be made in a structural but also...in an environmental way.”

**-NCRC STAFF MEMBER PLACED
AT SDUHSD**

Prevent

To increase belonging, resilience, and justice, schools can work to prevent the behaviors and exclusions that lead to harm and justice system impacts. The Schools Model focuses on building the skills, relationships, and shared expectations that can reduce the likelihood of harm occurring in the first place.

IMPLEMENTING RESTORATIVE PRACTICES FOR PREVENTION AT EUHSD

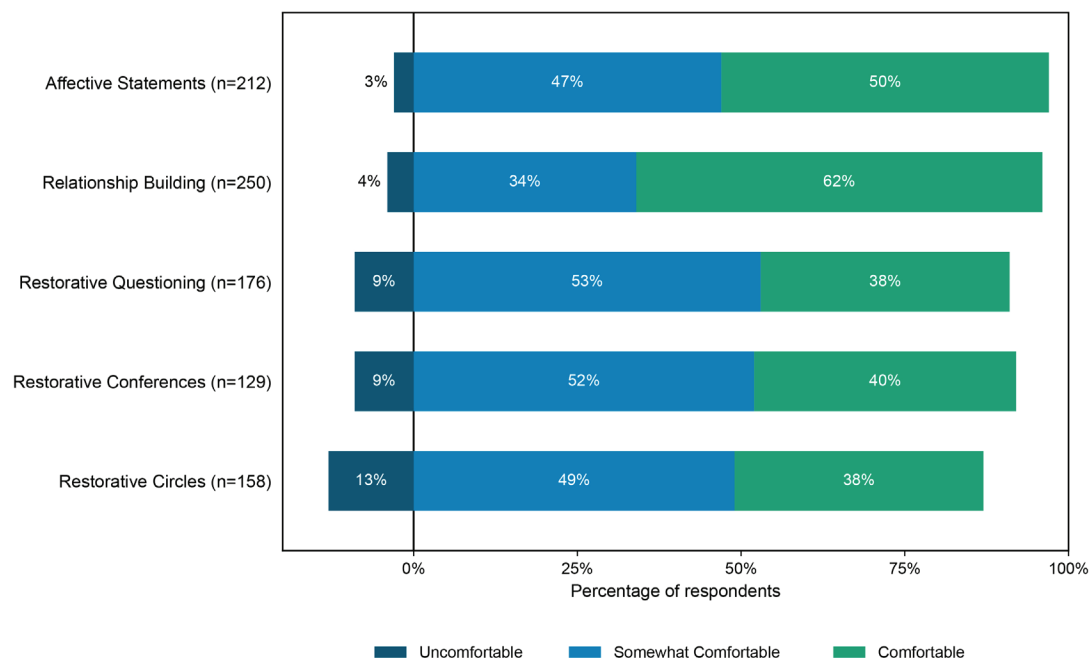
Implementing restorative practices at EUHSD meant training teachers in restorative practices like making affective statements and running proactive restorative circles in their classrooms. By 2025, all surveyed teachers and staff reported being trained in affective statements and relationship building, and 96 percent had been trained in restorative circles, which are predominately proactive circles organized to build relationships and a more positive classroom environment (Table 1).

Table 1. Proportion of teachers and staff trained in restorative practices by year (n=367)

	Affective statements	Restorative circles	Restorative questioning	Relationship building	Restorative conferences
2021	48%	49%	49%	60%	40%
2023	60%	73%	63%	70%	50%
2025	100%	96%	96%	100%	85%

Teachers and staff generally feel able to put these practices into use. Across all survey waves, most teachers and staff reported being at least somewhat comfortable using affective statements (97%), doing relationship building (96%), and running restorative circles (87%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Teacher and Staff Reported Comfort with Restorative Practices, 2021-2025



Regular practice was consistent with this growing capacity as 83 percent of teachers and staff reported using relationship building often, and 82 percent using affective statements (Figure 3). The somewhat lower comfort with restorative circles is reflected in only 34 percent of teachers and staff reporting that they run them often or very often. As some teachers explained, restorative circles take class time that can be used to cover academic material. When teachers can combine circles with academic content, they may see them less as a trade off and more supportive of their responsibilities as teachers.



Affective statements, relationship building, and restorative circles help prevent bias and harm from happening by building a more inclusive culture of belonging.

Figure 3. Teacher and Staff Reported Use of Each Restorative Practice, 2023-2025

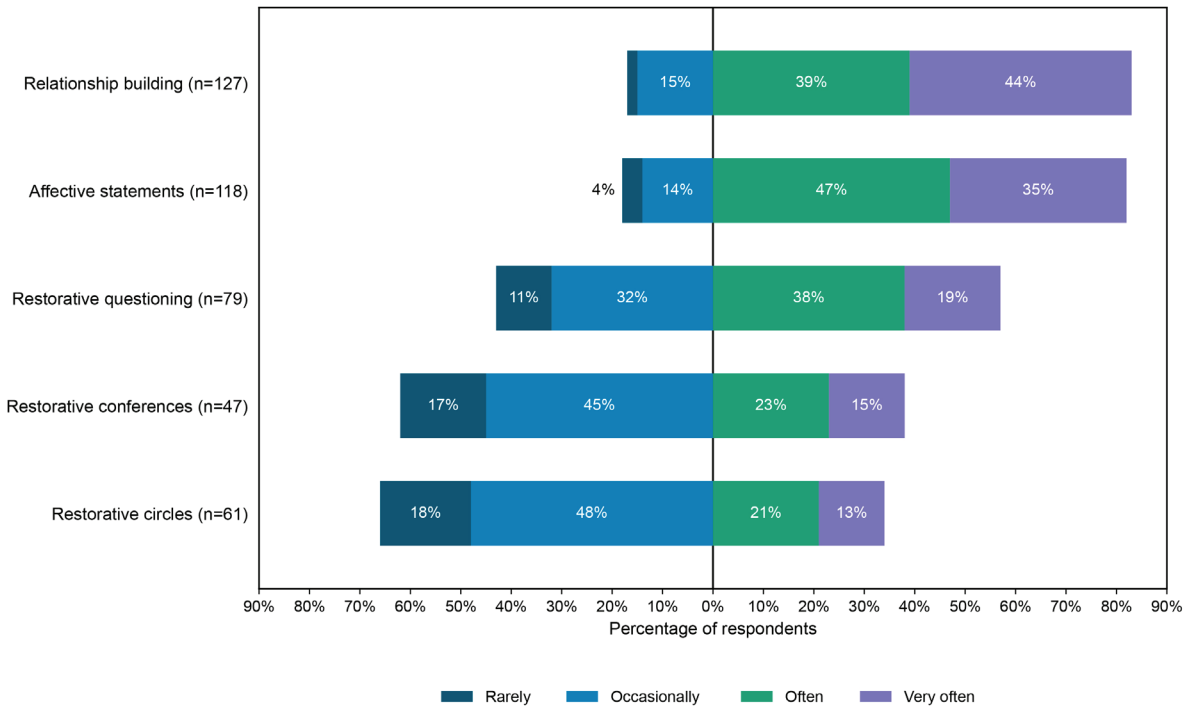
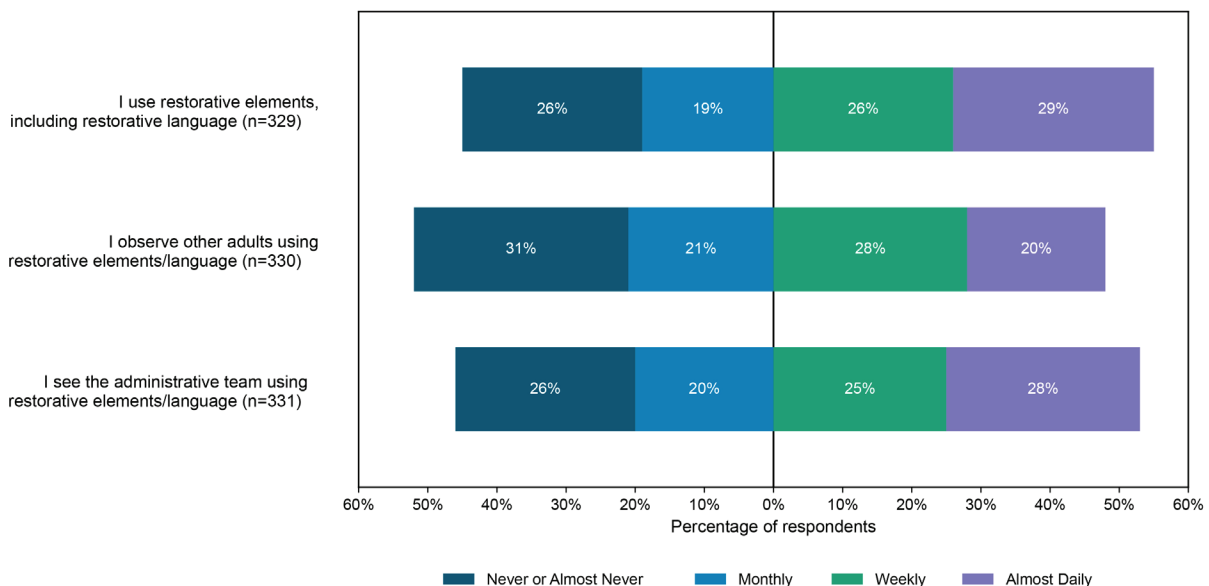


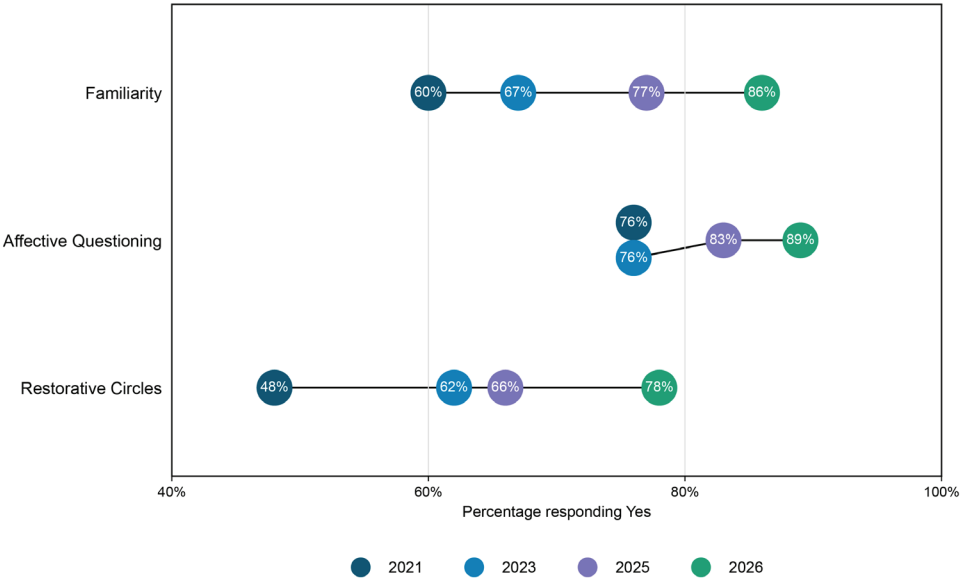
Figure 4 suggests that restorative practices are becoming part of the broader school culture in Escondido. More than half of teachers and staff reported using restorative elements or language at least weekly (55%), while nearly half reported observing other adults doing so at least weekly (48%). Just over half also reported seeing their administrative team use restorative elements or language at least weekly (53%). These patterns matter because they indicate that staff are encountering restorative practices across multiple relationships and levels of the school environment. As restorative language and approaches become visible not only in educators' own practice but also in the behavior of colleagues and administrators, they have greater potential to become shared norms rather than practices dependent on any one trained individual.

Figure 4. Teacher and Staff Reported and Observed Use of Restorative Practices, 2021-2025



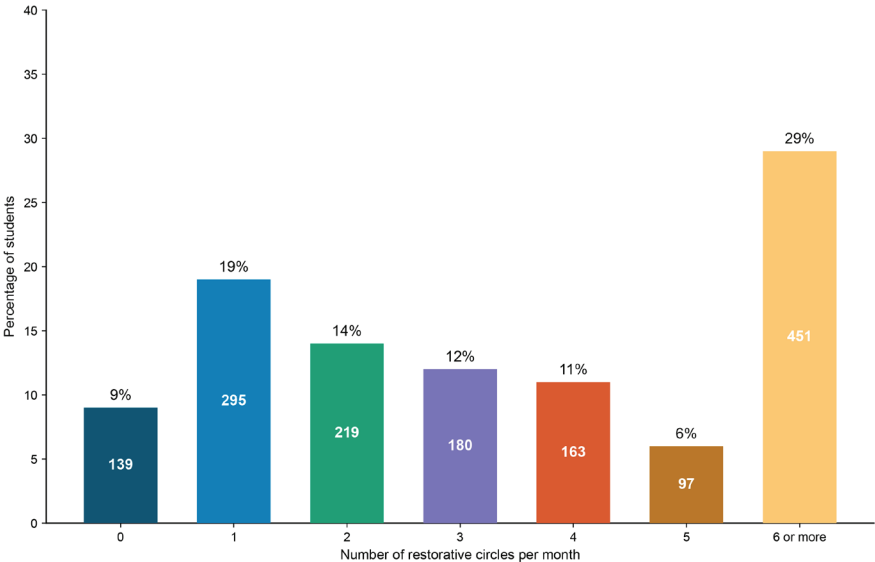
Similarly, students’ familiarity with restorative practices at EUHSD has increased since 2021 as growing numbers of teachers and staff have been trained and incorporated these practices. As Figure 5 shows, familiarity increased from 60 percent of student survey respondents in 2021 to 86 percent in 2026, with 89 percent of surveyed students in 2026 reporting they were familiar with affective questioning. Although fewer students reported being familiar with restorative circles in 2026, this percentage grew the most since 2021 from 48 percent to 78 percent.

Figure 5. Student Familiarity with and Exposure to Restorative Practices, 2021-2026 (n=4014)



Students’ experiences with restorative circles provide another indication that these practices have become embedded in the school environment. Since 2021, 91 percent of surveyed students participated in at least one restorative circle per month with 29 percent reporting they participated in six or more per month (Figure 6). These numbers suggest that familiarity with restorative circles is higher than reported.

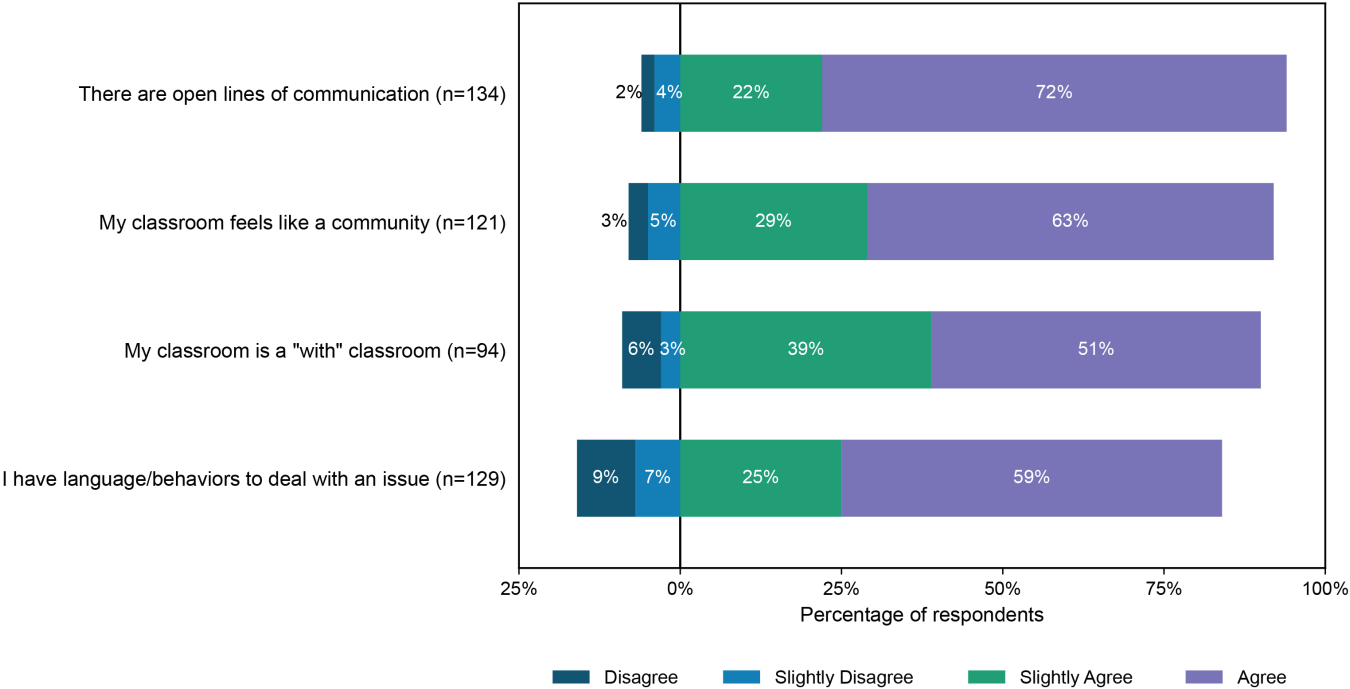
Figure 6. Student Participation in Restorative Circles, 2021-2026 (n=1544)



BUILDING BELONGING THROUGH RESTORATIVE PRACTICES AT EUHSD

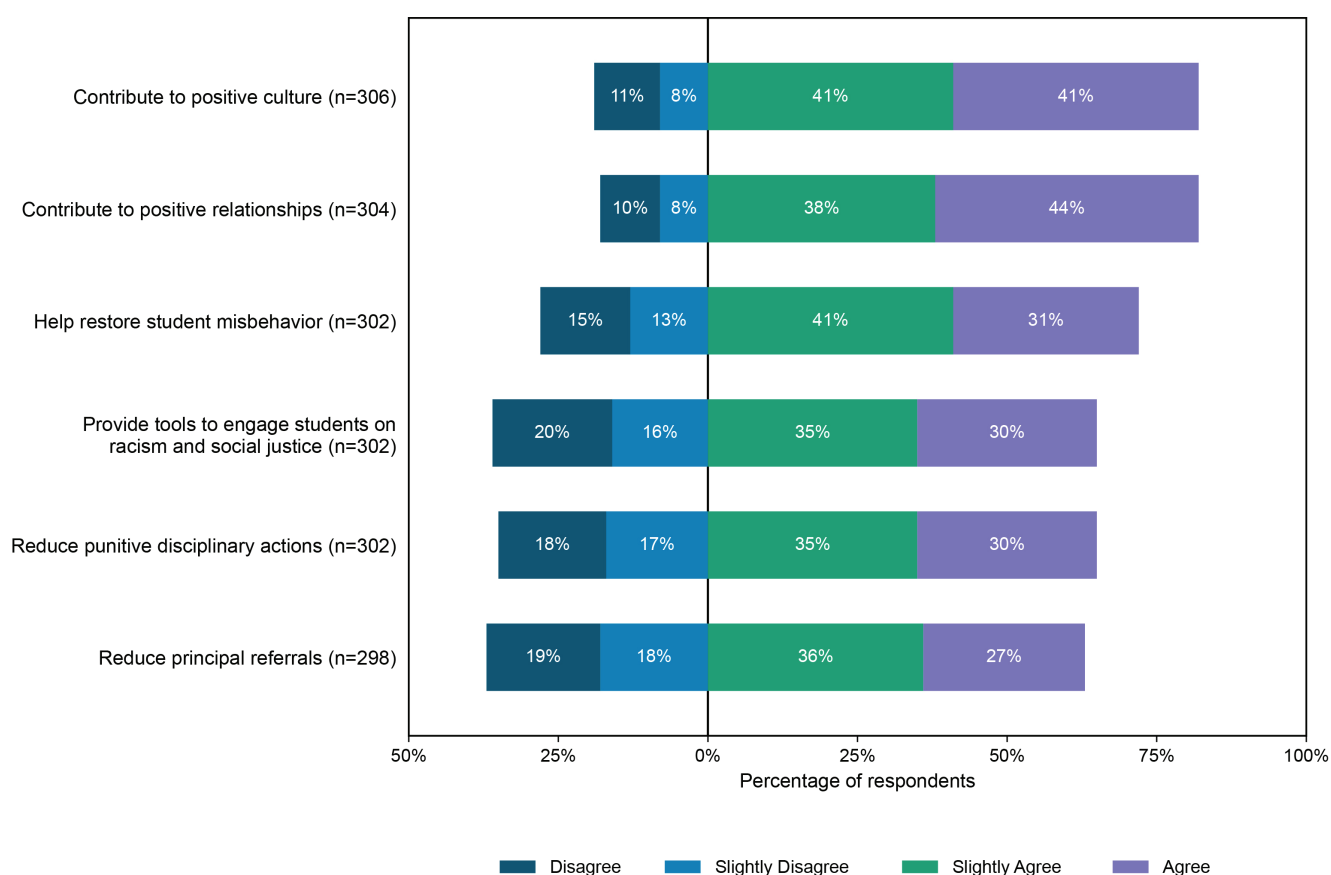
EUHSD teachers and staff described classroom environments that reflect the use of key elements of restorative practice (Figure 7). Nearly all surveyed teachers and staff reported that their classrooms feature open lines of communication (94%) and feel like a community (92%). **These findings suggest that restorative practices are shaping the everyday relationships and communication that structure classroom life in ways that increase inclusion and belonging.**

Figure 7. Perceived Quality of Teachers’ Classroom Environment, 2023-2025



Teachers and staff also reported that restorative practices had a positive impact on school culture, more broadly. For instance, 82 percent either slightly agreed or agreed that restorative practices contribute to a positive culture and positive relationships, while 65 percent reported that they provide tools to engage students on racism and social justice (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Perceived Impact of Restorative Practices on School Climate and Discipline, 2021-2025



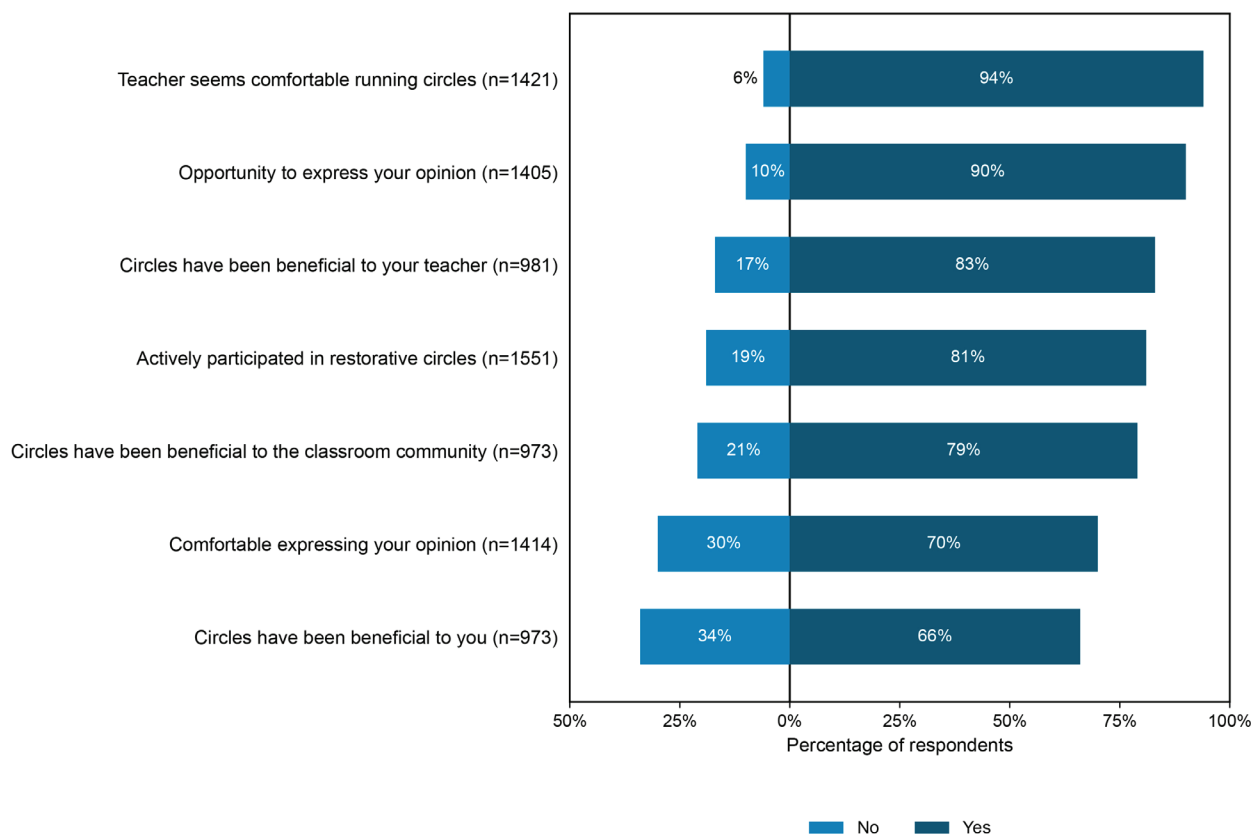
Students generally described their experiences with restorative practices positively, including 90 percent who reported having an opportunity to express their opinion during circles, 81 percent who said they actively participated, and 70 percent who felt comfortable expressing their opinion (Figure 9). Overall, 66 percent said circles had been beneficial to them personally. Circles that allow for more meaningful discussion have the potential to be more impactful.

AS ONE STUDENT EXPLAINED,

I think, just like some students don't have that support at school, at home, or like, have that family time. So I feel like when you come to school, you really can get things off your chest, or like, talk to other people and make you feel like you're being heard. But then also like, some people don't have friends. And like, they feel welcome.

Students also saw benefits beyond their own participation. For instance, 83 percent said they had benefited their teacher and 79 percent reported that circles had benefited the classroom community.

Figure 9. Student Experiences with Restorative Circles, 2021-2026



Perceptions of school climate are impacted by exposure to restorative practices. As Figure 10 demonstrates, students who reported that their teachers ran restorative circles and used affective language were more likely to rate school climate more positively on a scale from one to five. Additionally, more positive assessments of school climate were associated with frequency of participating in restorative circles (Figure 11). Students who reported participating in none or only one circle each month rated school climate lowest on average (3.09) on a scale from one to five while students who reported six or more circles each month rated school climate highest (3.37).

Figure 10. Impact of Restorative Practices on Student Perceptions of School Climate, 2021-2026 (n=2654, 3270)

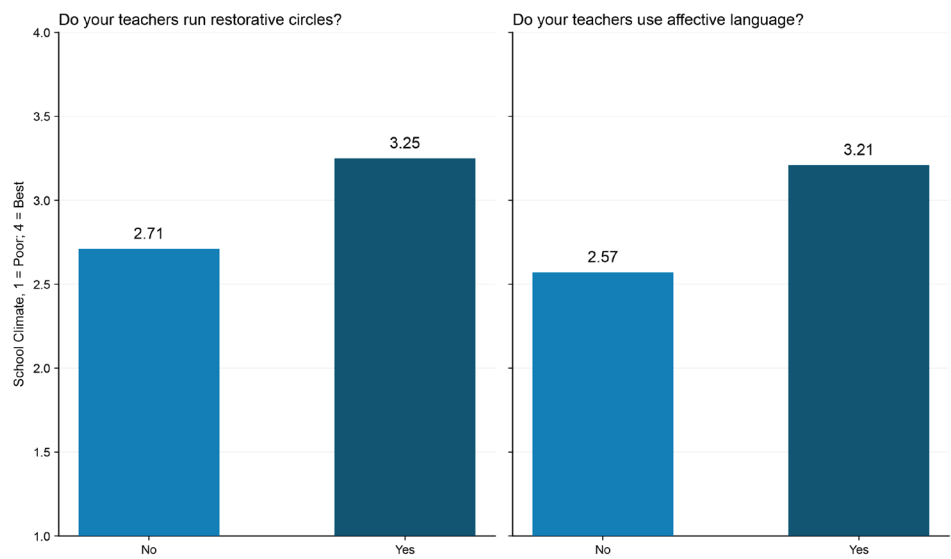
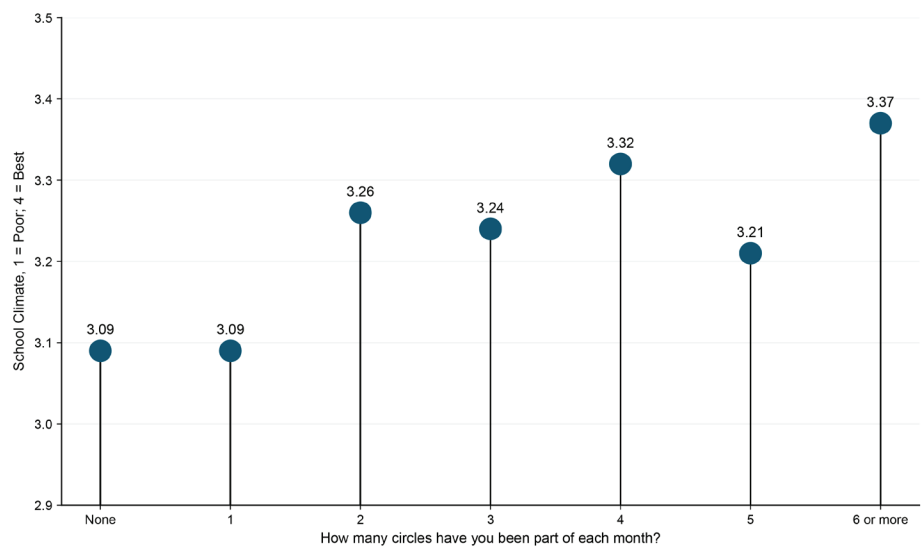


Figure 11. Impact of Number of Restorative Circles Participated in Each Month on Student Perception of School Climate, 2021-2026 (n=1521)



Together, these findings show how restorative practices can move from staff training into everyday classroom experience, creating regular opportunities for student voice, participation, and community building.

TRAINING TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND FAMILIES TO PREVENT HARM AT SDUHSD

In August 2024, 89 percent of surveyed teachers and staff at SDUHSD reported that they believe student belonging is an area that could use improvement at their school (Figure 12), that it is important for SDUHSD to support student belonging with trainings and workshops (Figure 13), and providing staff with knowledge and skills to address student belonging will have a positive impact (Figure 14).

Figure 12. SDUHSD Teacher and Staff Perceptions of the Need to Improve Student Belonging (n=207)

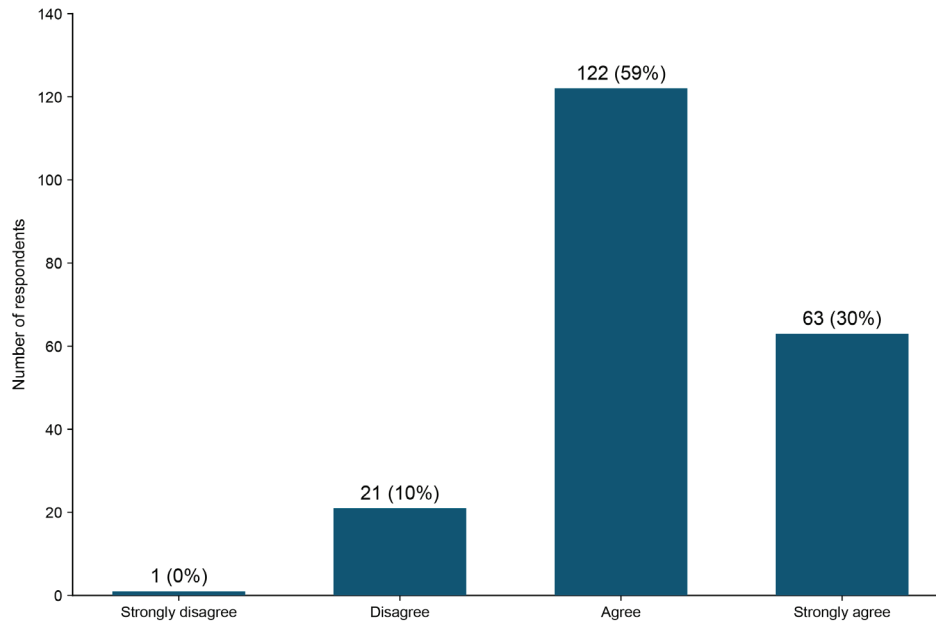


Figure 13. SDUHSD Teacher and Staff Agreement on the Importance of Supporting Student Belonging Through Programs and Trainings (n=198)

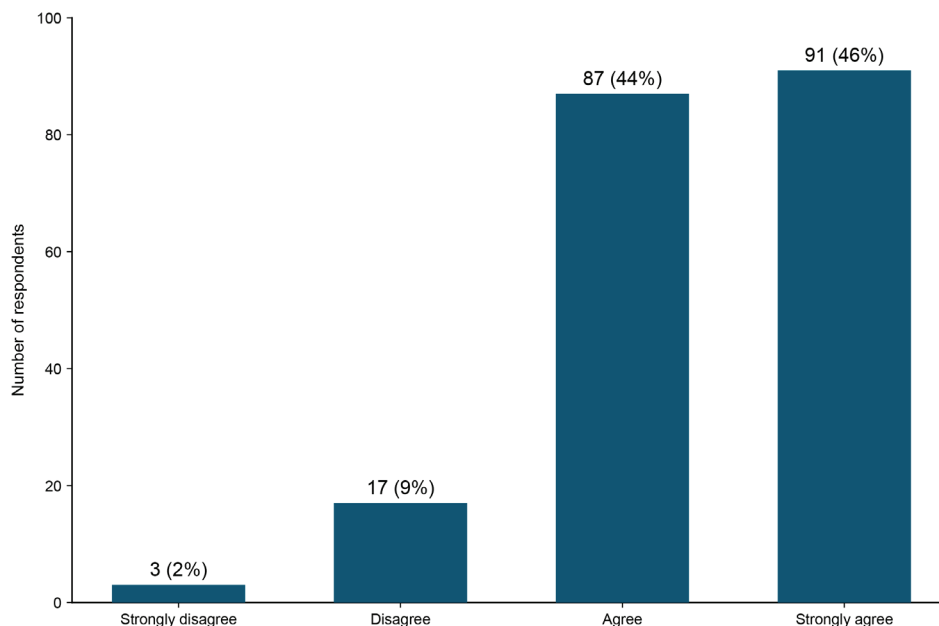
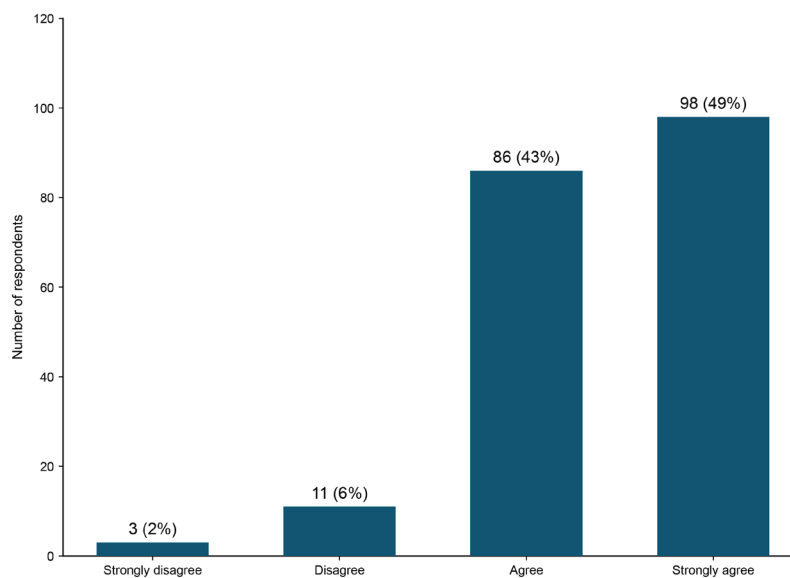


Figure 14. SDUHSD Teacher and Staff Agreement That Building Staff Knowledge and Skills Will Positively Impact Student Belonging (n=198)



In spring 2024, the Building Belonging initiative began with The Art and Science of High Performing Teams, a communication training for student athletes across various campuses. The initiative began with student athletes because they tend to be leaders and have a disproportionate impact on campus culture.

Over 17 training sessions, NCRC trained 545 students. This was followed by four training sessions for district leadership during the summer where 82 district employees received the four-part certificate series, Culture, Communication, and Conflict. The training covered how to handle challenging conversations, lead collaborative conflict resolution processes, embrace and promote inclusivity, and be thoughtful upstanders. Starting with more narrowly bounded groups allowed NCRC to better align their existing program with the groups' needs. Moreover, as an NCRC staff member explained, district leaders "set the stage for the culture of the district and...have the biggest influence as to how the schools operate."

In fall 2024, NCRC expanded their training to include hundreds of district staff across the district. NCRC began Art of Inclusive Communication trainings at all ten schools, conducting 45 trainings for 650 teachers and staff. At one representative training at a middle school, 25 staff

members assembled in the multi-purpose room decorated with a banner reading "No Place for Hate" where they spent an hour focused on inclusive language and how to build belonging. For the most part, the material was not new to the group, and they were fairly adept at discussing the nuances of inclusive language. As an NCRC staff member explained, the schools are "already tasked with a lot of training as it relates to belonging, as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion...this has risen as a priority in all schools, all districts." By the start of the Building Belonging initiative, many schools had already invested considerable time and resources into making their campuses more inclusive. As a result, the Art of Inclusive Communication training was more reinforcement or reintroduction than introducing new concepts and strategies. The trainings were, however, an opportunity to learn what SDUHSD staff needed and pointed to the importance of identifying the staff's experience with, knowledge of, and need for specific belonging concepts and practices.

NCRC also began training seventh and eighth grade students through NCRC's Bystander Challenge. The challenge helps students think through how they might respond when they witness someone else being harmed. As an NCRC staff member described it, students will initially express a common fear that intervening would make them "the next target." During the training, students are asked what skills they need in order to become an upstander. Common responses include bravery, courage, respect, and confidence. At the end of the training, students are asked to identify situations in which they would be willing to stand up for someone else. Their responses often include intervening when someone makes a mean joke, if their friends were being made fun of, or if they see someone being judged or bullied. Going from identifying fears to making specific commitments to intervene is an important outcome of the training. During the 2025-2026 school year, 2,000 8th graders completed the Bystander Challenge.

Building Belonging also extended prevention programming to seventh graders through the BELONG and STAND frameworks, which provide age-appropriate tools for interrupting social harm and building inclusive daily habits. This extends prevention work across grade levels by giving younger students concrete strategies for recognizing and interrupting harmful behavior.

Prevention also included sustained presence outside formal training sessions. During 2024-2025, NCRC maintained 18 consecutive weeks of on-site presence across all district campuses, observing student dynamics during unstructured periods such as lunch and passing periods to identify and address "othering" in real time. This gave NCRC opportunities to see how belonging and exclusion played out in everyday school interactions, not only in formal training sessions.

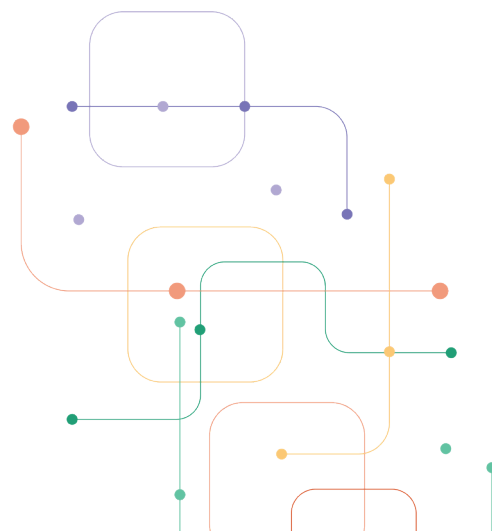
Lastly, NCRC offered four educational parent and family webinars on the topics of navigating

difficult conversations with children. The first was Dialogue in Divisive Times, which focused on how adult family members can talk to their teenagers and with other families in their community when there are disagreements. The second training, The Artful Conversation, focused on skills adults need to have sensitive conversations with young people. However, the structure of the trainings – conducted over Zoom – made it difficult to assess their effectiveness. Participants were not visible to each other and could not leave public comments or ask questions that were visible to the whole group.

By training school personnel, students, and family members, the Building Belonging initiative laid a foundation for prevention across the district. Providing language, skills, and actions everyone can take aims at preventing harm from happening.

Respond

When an incident happens, it is not only critical that there is a response but also that the response is appropriate, helps build belonging, and contributes to prevention of future incidents.



RESTORATIVE PRACTICES FOR RESPONDING AT EUHSD

Eighty-four percent of EUHSD teachers and staff that completed a survey slightly agreed (25%) or agreed (59%) that they have language and/or behaviors to deal with an issue (see Figure 7 above). One type of language and behavior is to use restorative questioning. Restorative questions are phrased to elicit affective statements to encourage reflection on feelings and impact rather than justifications and rationalizations.

For example, a teacher might ask,

1. What did you think when you realized what happened?
2. Who has been affected by what you have done?
3. What do you think you need to do to make things right?

Among surveyed teachers and staff, 91 percent were somewhat comfortable (53%) or comfortable (38%) with restorative questioning (see Figure 2 above). At the same time, only 57 percent of respondents reported using restorative questioning often (38%) or very often (19%) (see Figure 3 above). This may reflect their differential exposure to harmful incidents but could also mean that teachers and staff are comfortable with restorative questioning but resort to non-restorative responses when an incident occurs.

Understanding when to use restorative practices and making restorative practices a first resort when an incident happens takes time and is fostered through reflection and encouragement from more experienced practitioners.

AS THE LEAD ADMINISTRATOR FOR RESTORATIVE PRACTICES AT EUHSD SAID,

The most important piece is you have to be on site with admin teams. You can't send them an email. You can't just say, 'Hey, call me if you need me.' You've gotta sit at the school and be present and just talk about, 'Hey, what did you guys deal with today?' 'Oh, I had this referral and that referral.' 'Oh, that sounds like a good opportunity for restoring.' We really had to insert ourselves into those situations. And we still do, right?

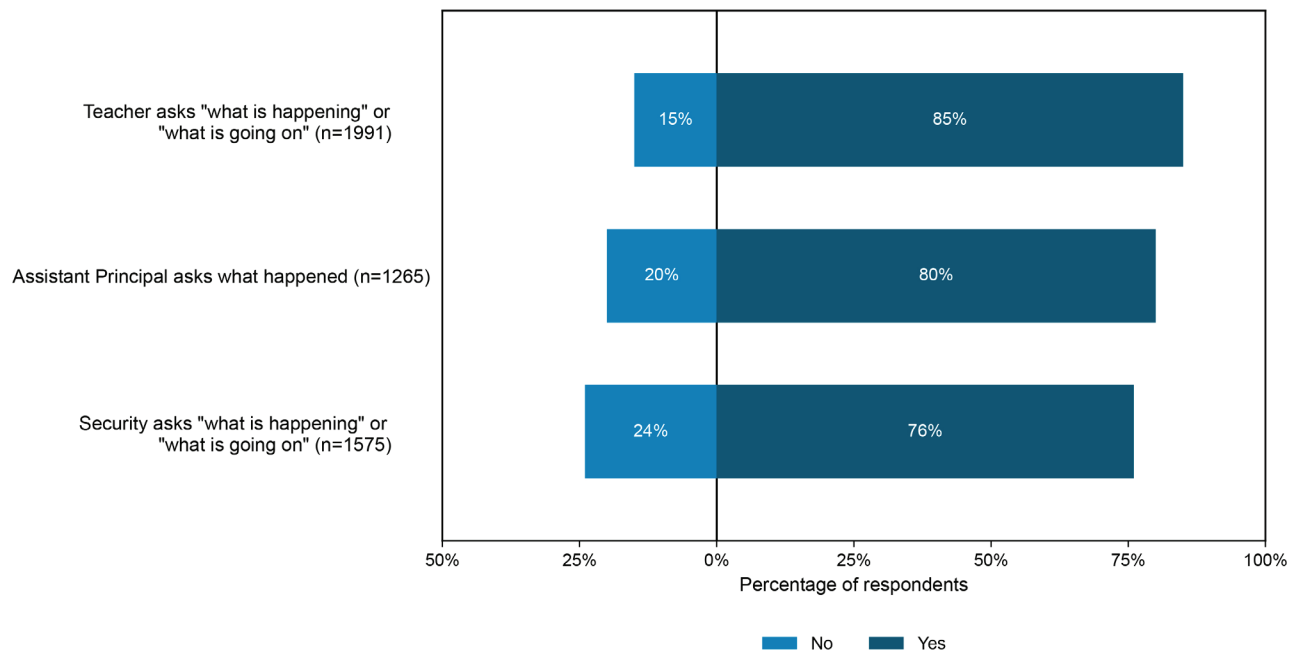
The EUHSD administrator lamented that, "People don't just pick it up and run with it...if you're really not in their face all the time, it's not their first go to...it's a lot easier to just give a kid a detention." Nevertheless, many teachers and staff slightly agree or agree that restorative practices reduce punitive disciplinary actions (65%) and reduce principal referrals (61%) (see Figure 8 above).

A point person on campus can help to build the culture of restorative practices as a first resort or introduce a restorative response after punitive steps have been taken. The lead restorative practices administrator gave an example of an NCRC staff person introducing a restorative approach after an incident between a student and a teacher.

He would sit in the chairs of the kids who got in trouble so when they got sent up, they'd have to sit next to him, and he would just start kind of restoring them right there, like, 'Hey, man, what's going on? Hey, it looks like you like cars. I like cars.' And he would just start relationships with kids, right? And so when it got to the restorative piece, he was halfway there, so then it was just a matter of bringing the teacher in and letting [the NCRC staff person] repair that relationship with the teacher and kid.

Students reported that school personnel do tend to use restorative questioning (Figure 15). For instance, 85 percent of students answered that teachers ask, "what is happening?" or "what is going on?" and 80 percent of assistant principals ask what happened. According to students, security is least likely to use restorative questioning with 76 percent of students reporting that security asks, "what is happening?" or "what is going on?"

Figure 15. Student Responses to Whether School Personnel Use Restorative Questioning, 2021-2026



A PROTOCOL FOR RESPONDING TO INCIDENTS AT SDUHSD

Responding to an incident in a way that builds belonging can be done through a conversation or it can be a multi-step process. To help ensure that everyone in a school district knows how to respond, NCRC worked with SDUHSD to develop a set of steps for addressing harm, culminating in the Respond Protocol. The Protocol was designed to operate at multiple levels of the school system, with versions tailored to administrators, teachers, staff, and students. District and school personnel would follow role-specific steps for contacting the appropriate people and addressing an incident. For students, the Respond Protocol focused on how young people could support peers and stand up for themselves. By 2025-2026, the protocol had been developed as a seven-step, trauma-informed framework rolled out across 10 school sites. It was accompanied by an Administrator Toolkit, Staff Explainer, Severity Rubric, Trusted Adult Guide, and Parent Communication Scripts.

AS THE NCRC STAFF PERSON AT SDUHSD EXPLAINED,

So when a call comes into the district, then they know to go A through Z in order to contact the right people, take the right steps. The administrators, the same thing, but it's administrator appropriate. Teachers, it's the same exact thing, but teacher appropriate, so it escalates. The only thing, the only place that it really differs is for students, because all of this is about student care.

Responding to harm in consistent and predictable ways is part of prevention. **When students and adults know that harmful behavior will be addressed and understand what that response will look like, the resulting predictability can build trust and reduce fear.** The Respond Protocol means that people do not have to "recreat[e] the wheel" each time an incident occurs, producing different responses depending on the circumstances or the people involved. The Respond Protocol was intended to create a common process that could be used across incidents, including situations in which the person responsible for the harm was unknown. For example, the protocol for teachers includes a script that teachers can use to speak with their classes after incidents such as the appearance of racist graffiti or vandalism. This allows the school to acknowledge and address the harm even when disciplinary action against a particular student is not possible.

Bridging School Policy and Restorative Practice

- An important feature of the Respond Protocol is that it does not treat restorative practices as a substitute for school policy. Instead, it is a way to bring formal school procedures and restorative responses together. Schools still follow existing policies when harm occurs, but the Respond Protocol provides a consistent pathway through those requirements while incorporating opportunities for restorative repair.



CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO BE HEARD

At SDUHSD, the district administration worked with NCRC to respond to students who had experienced bias or struggled with belonging. They organized a student forum as an opportunity for students from each school in SDUHSD to share their experiences of belonging with district leaders, including the superintendent. Thirty students attended the student forum.

AS THE NCRC STAFF PERSON WHO RECRUITED THEM FOR THE FORUM EXPLAINED,

Those are mainly the kids who I know some of their stories and I know their interaction with the school system, and I've asked them, based on the grade level, to see if they would be willing to be a representative of their grade level to speak to the district about their sense of belonging, and maybe their peer group, how they feel in terms of how they belong and what that's been like for them based on their age and some other identities.

SDUHSD had organized student forums in the past, but this time they were more intentional about who was being given a platform to discuss belonging. These were students who “might be the most marginalized in the district, might be multilingual learners or students who have been suspended or have had a history of behavioral issues with the district and for one reason or another may not feel like they belong because of

one of their identities and how that identity interacts with the school system.” They were also students who might have experienced some form of bias or othering that was not fully addressed and the student forum “was an opportunity for to try to restore what had happened by giving them a voice to speak on it.”

It is critical to be intentional about giving marginalized students a forum because, as the NCRC staff person explained, leaders tend to understand well the dominant culture of their school or district but have fewer opportunities to hear from marginalized communities. This is because the dominant culture is communicated through individuals, families, and groups that make up the most vocal part of the community, including students who are comfortable communicating their needs to adults in school.

To ensure the students participating in the student forum were comfortable and prepared to share their stories in this open forum with district leaders, the questions they would ask the students were shared ahead of time so they could work through how they wanted to respond, “so they can put it in a more public light without bringing any shame or harsh light to themselves,” the NCRC staff person explained. The forum was organized so that the discussion would get progressively challenging so the students could build confidence throughout the session and “be more able to speak to the things that they [SDUHSD] need to work on because that's what they need to hear most.” Students also had the opportunity to record video testimonials to make sure they expressed themselves how they wanted.

The students represented every school and grade in the district. They were organized in small groups sat around tables throughout the SDUHSD conference room. At each table, which was covered with paper for students to write their thoughts, an administrator or two sat with the students listening, asking questions, and

taking notes. The superintendent told the students, “we’re shoulder to shoulder with you, as friends,” and asked them not to hold back.

Throughout the morning, the room would erupt with conversation before being brought together to share what they had discussed. After the students summarized their discussion with occasional help from the adults at their table, the NCRC staff person would restate what they said. This simultaneously demonstrated that the students had been heard and helped reframe what they said in terms of belonging and how the schools and district can better understand their experiences and needs. For each successive discussion, the administrators changed tables to engage with a different group of students while the NCRC staff person floated around the room helping students understand the prompts and focus their responses.

The first discussion focused on what the students’ schools were doing well. The second, on what schools can be doing better to promote inclusivity, and the third on students’ dreams for the future. As the morning progressed, students grew more confident sharing their experiences with and feelings about belonging.

The initiative also created a more durable structure for student participation. SDUHSD launched a Student Advisory Board to formalize student voice and give students an ongoing role in influencing district culture.

Across these examples, an effective response to harm is not defined simply by whether a school addresses an incident, but by **how it responds and what that response makes possible afterward**. Restorative questioning can help repair relationships in the immediate aftermath of harm, a clear protocol can make responses more consistent and predictable, and opportunities for students to share their experiences can help

schools recognize and respond to harms that may otherwise go unseen. These approaches aim to build trust, strengthen relationships, and signal to students that their experiences matter.

Repair

Responding to an incident or to more persistent issues is the first step in repairing harm and building a greater sense of belonging. Restorative practices are essential to repairing harm. People need restorative skills and schools need a culture of restorative justice to ensure that people and communities harmed are repaired and the person or people who cause harm are held accountable. Restorative practices can take more effort than more exclusionary forms of discipline. Even for teachers and staff who are bought in to using restorative practices, it can be easier to resort to detentions or suspensions. Yet repairing harm is critical to belonging, resilience, and justice in schools.

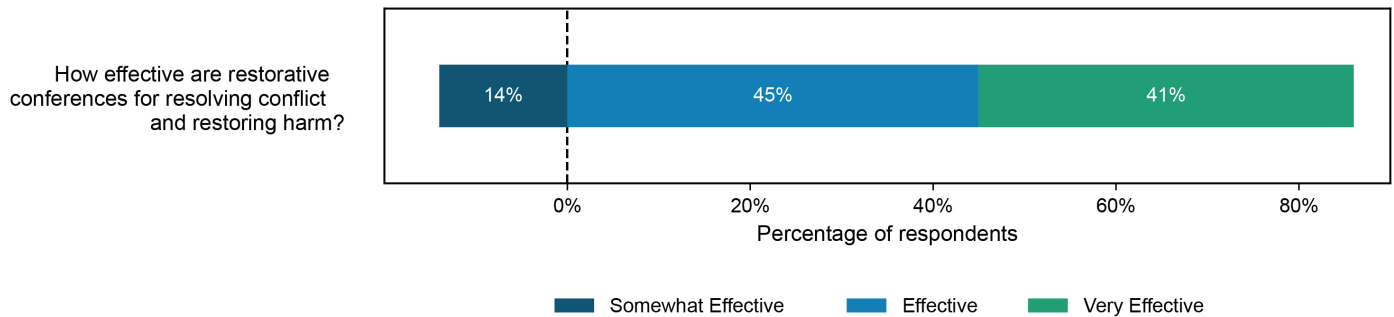
RESTORATIVE CONFERENCING AT EUHSD

Of the more than 300 teachers and staff at EUHSD who completed a survey, 72 percent either slightly agree (41%) or agree (31%) that restorative practices help restore student misbehavior (see Figure 8 above). By 2025, 85 percent had been trained in restorative conferencing (see Table 1 above). Similar to other restorative practices, respondents were comfortable with restorative conferences (see Figure 2 above), even if they infrequently participateded in them (see Figure 3 above).

Restorative Conferences: Formal circles organized to respond to more serious harm. They can include everyone that was impacted by that harm and are organized in advance and led by a neutral facilitator. The discussion includes coming to an understanding about how to repair the harm and restore the victim or victims.

In a separate survey of 42 administrators, teachers, and staff focused on restorative conferencing, 22 (52%) respondents had facilitated restorative conferences, and 86 percent of those thought that they were either effective (45%) or very effective (41%) (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Perceived Efficacy of Restorative Conferencing for Reducing Conflict and Restoring Harm (n=22)



In addition to the restorative conferencing survey, 17 teachers provided written responses to open-ended interview questions. Twelve reported participating in one or more restorative conference. According to one teacher, it was “Very, very helpful. It allowed both the teacher and student to come to an understanding of how they can improve.” According to another teacher, restorative conferencing was “absolutely better than just having a scholar show back up in class, gives closure and restores community.”

Several teachers were ambivalent or had mixed experiences. As one teacher explained, “Yes and No... a few times it changed behavior... a few times it did not.” Another said, “Some are helpful. Some are mis-used.”

A THIRD TEACHER SAID,

In some cases yes and others no. If the scholar experienced true remorse and empathy, I would say the change of heart and actions were helpful for all involved. If the scholar did not share or show any remorse or empathy, their words and actions did not produce change and for those who were hurt by them the lack of sincerity only adds to the hurt and distrust in the process.

Finally, one teacher was clear that the restorative conference they participated in was not helpful.

AS THEY EXPLAINED,

I don't know if it was implemented correctly. It was very short and didn't give myself or the student time to process much of anything. I was never able to share my side of the story so the student continued to remain angry with me and failed to show remorse for his behavior. He was never in a place to hear the other side and take time to reflect to see if his understanding of things would change.

Making sure that restorative conferences are run by experienced staff is important to repairing harm, since there is a risk that the person harmed can leave feeling unsupported and not made whole.

In focus groups, several students discussed participating in restorative conferences as a result of conflicts with other students. In general, these students found the process helpful. As one student explained, "I think it was helpful because we got to see like, we got to talk it out and we didn't just let it, like, keep going. So we talked it out and, like, resolved the issue." Another student described how the restorative conference transformed their relationship with the person they had a conflict with. As they said, "there was a kid I was fighting with at the beginning of the

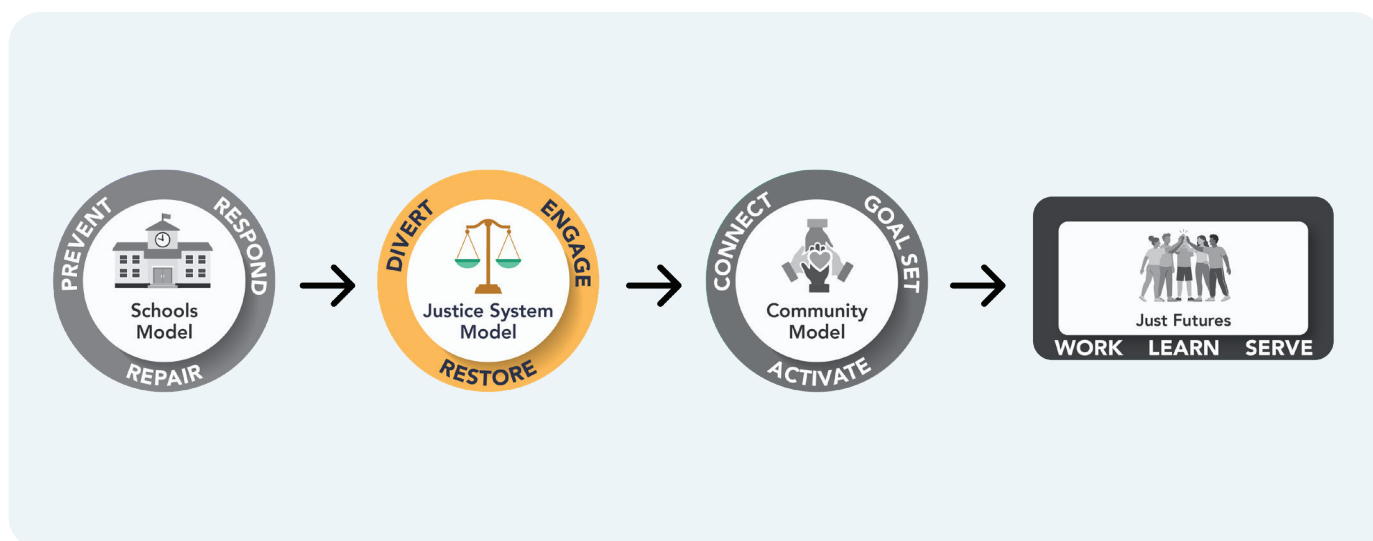
year and we're cool now. After we had the conference, we kind of stayed away from each other for a while and then just kind of, like, 'how are you doing?'" Not all conferences led to a noticeable change, however. Another student said that while they "got to see his [the other person's] side of the story" it "didn't change much."

RESTORATIVE RESPONSE AND REPAIR AT SDUHSD

At SDUHSD, repair has taken several forms beyond formal restorative conferences. During 2024-2025, NCRC provided direct conflict resolution in response to incidents involving racial prejudice and staff-level professional disagreements and facilitated restorative meetings that brought families, counselors, and staff together. In 2025-2026, NCRC also conducted a workplace safety assessment and restorative intervention with the Maintenance Department and facilitated separate parent and staff listening sessions following a significant incident at San Dieguito Academy. These examples illustrate how an embedded restorative partner can help a district address harm at multiple levels, from conflicts between individuals to incidents affecting a broader school or workplace community.

Repairing harm requires people with the skill and dedication to restorative practices to help ensure that restorative conferences have a positive outcome for the person harmed and accountability for the person who caused the harm. When harm is repaired, it contributes to greater belonging, resilience, and justice in the school. An organization like NCRC has the capacity to support the restorative process, and can help build the capacity of schools to be restorative places.

Divert, Engage, Restore: A Model for the Justice System



When a young person enters the criminal legal system, the Justice System Model: Divert, Engage, Restore reduces the likelihood of future encounters and the long-term harm of exposure by diverting eligible youth from formal justice-system involvement, engaging them in individualized community-based supports, and restoring harm through restorative practices. The Justice System Model is designed to address the circumstances and factors that contributed to a youth's referral while strengthening protective factors and supporting the needs of people who have been harmed. The aim is to hold youth accountable in ways that help them grow, build stronger connections to their families and communities, avoid deeper involvement in the criminal legal system and restore people and communities.

Since 2021, NCRC has collaborated with the San Diego County District Attorney's (SDCDA) Office through the Juvenile Diversion Initiative (JDI). JDI is an early intervention diversion program run by the SDCDA. Incorporating restorative justice principles, the goal of the program is to keep youth out of the criminal justice system while addressing the circumstances, needs, and underlying factors that contributed to their referral. Instead of filing criminal charges against youth who commit misdemeanors and many felony offenses, youth have the option to participate in the JDI program with their family or caregiver.⁹ Lasting up to six months, youth are provided with "therapeutic services, pro-social skill building opportunities, education support as well as restorative justice community conferencing to ensure participants are supported and the needs of victims are addressed."¹⁰ Youth participation is voluntary, and if they complete the program, they have the option to seal their arrest records. SDCDA collaborated with the National Conflict Resolution Center to facilitate the process of engaging diverted youth and supporting them through the program.

⁹ Examples of offenses that may be eligible for JDI include certain forms of burglary, theft, vandalism, and vehicle theft, which may be charged as felonies depending on the circumstances. Certain serious or violent felony offenses are not eligible for JDI, including offenses listed under California Welfare and Institutions § Code 707(b), felony sex offenses, human trafficking offenses, and other felonies determined to pose a serious risk to public safety.

¹⁰ <https://ncrconline.com/mediation-conflict-resolution/community-services-san-diego/restorative-practices/district-attorney-juvenile-diversion-initiative/>

Divert

NCRC receives referrals from the SDCDA and assigns case managers to each youth. Case managers then contact the youth and their families to discuss JDI and gauge their interest in participating. From July 2, 2021 to May 31, 2026, 2589 cases have been referred to NCRC from SDCDA. Of these, 2070 (80%) agreed to participate in JDI. As of October 31, 2023, the majority of youth referred to JDI were Hispanic and male, and the most common offense was battery.¹¹

Interested youth and families meet with the case manager for an intake appointment where they discuss the referral and complete the San Diego Risk and Resiliency Checkup-II (SDRRC-II), an assessment tool that evaluates a youth's risk of recidivism alongside the strengths and protective factors in their life.

The assessment tool gauges items related to:

- Education
- Employment
- Peer relationships
- Substance abuse behaviors
- Recreation/community engagement
- Social support
- Family functioning
- Attitudes and beliefs
- Social connection
- History of anti-social behavior

Based on the assessment, each youth receives a protective score reflecting strengths and supports in their life and a risk score reflecting factors associated with a greater likelihood of future justice system involvement. These scores are used to calculate a risk to protective ratio, with a higher ratio indicating greater risk relative to the protective factors in a youth's life. Some

factors are outside a youth's control, such as a family member or caregiver with a substance abuse problem. Therefore, the assessment also produces a dynamic risk to protective ratio, which focuses on factors that can change over time and therefore may be addressed through JDI services and supports. Changes in this ratio can therefore help case managers identify areas for support and track whether risks are decreasing, protective factors are increasing, or both.

What do risk and protective factors look like? The SDRRC-II looks at both challenges in a young person's life and the strengths that may help them succeed.

Protective factors can include things like strong family support or positive relationships with peers.

Risk factors can include challenges like substance use or difficulties managing anger.

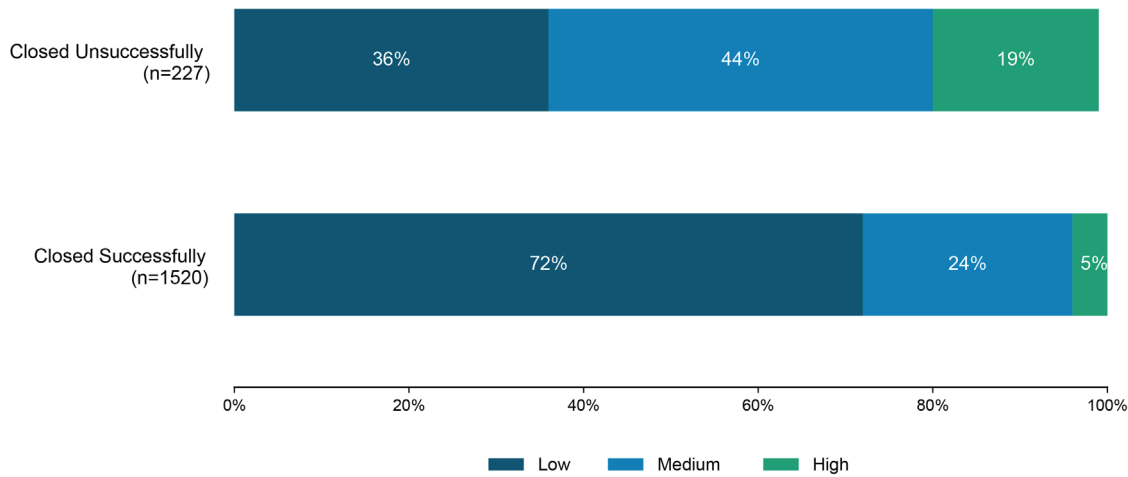
A dynamic risk to protective ratio focuses on the factors that can be changed through supportive intervention.

Case managers also calculate a youth's strengths index, which captures strengths and skills such as setting goals, exhibiting self-control, handling stress, and solving problems. The goal is for a youth's strengths index score to increase over the course of the JDI program (see Engage section below for data related to changes in strengths index scores). Finally, diverted youth are assigned a "risk to recidivate" level – designated as low, medium, or high – which reflects their assessed risk of future justice-system involvement.

Among youth with closed cases that exited JDI successfully from October 2021 through March 2026, 72 percent were scored low risk and 24 percent were scored medium risk (Figure 17). By comparison, unsuccessful youth tended to have higher risk with 19 percent being assessed as high risk and 44 percent as medium risk.

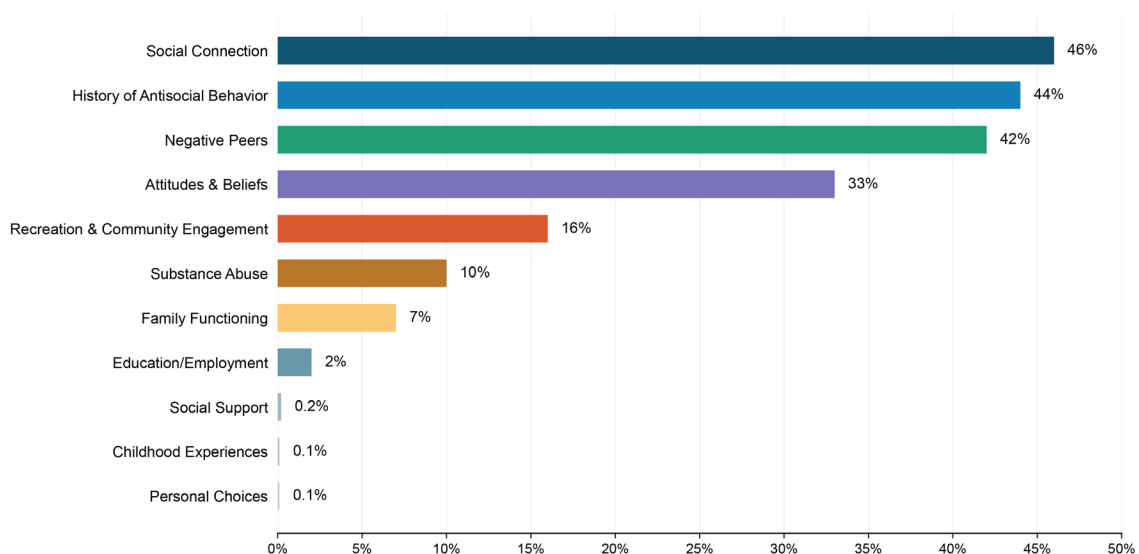
¹¹ SANDAG Criminal Justice Research Division. 2024. San Diego County District Attorney Juvenile Diversion Initiative Annual Report 2023. <https://www.sandag.org/-/media/SANDAG/Documents/PDF/data-and-research/criminal-justice-and-public-safety/evaluation-services/juveniles/jdi-annual-report-2023.pdf>. The 2023 data in the SANDAG report is the most recent demographic and offense data that CR+E had access to for this evaluation.

Figure 17. SDRRC-II risk Pre-Assessment for JDI Youth that Exited the Program, October 2021 – March 2026 (n=1747)



The assessment process helps case managers understand each youth’s needs, strengths, and areas where additional support may be useful. In its evaluation of the early stages of JDI, CRE identified the kinds of needs most commonly surfaced during the assessment process. Among JDI youth included in the assessment analysis, the most common areas of need were social connection (46%), a history of antisocial behavior (44%), negative peer relationships (42%), and attitudes and beliefs (33%) (Figure 18). These findings then inform the development of an individualized JDI case plan and the specific goals and activities the youth will work toward during the program.

Figure 18. Top Assessment Needs of JDI Youth that Exited the Program, October 2021 – March 2026 (n=1,732)



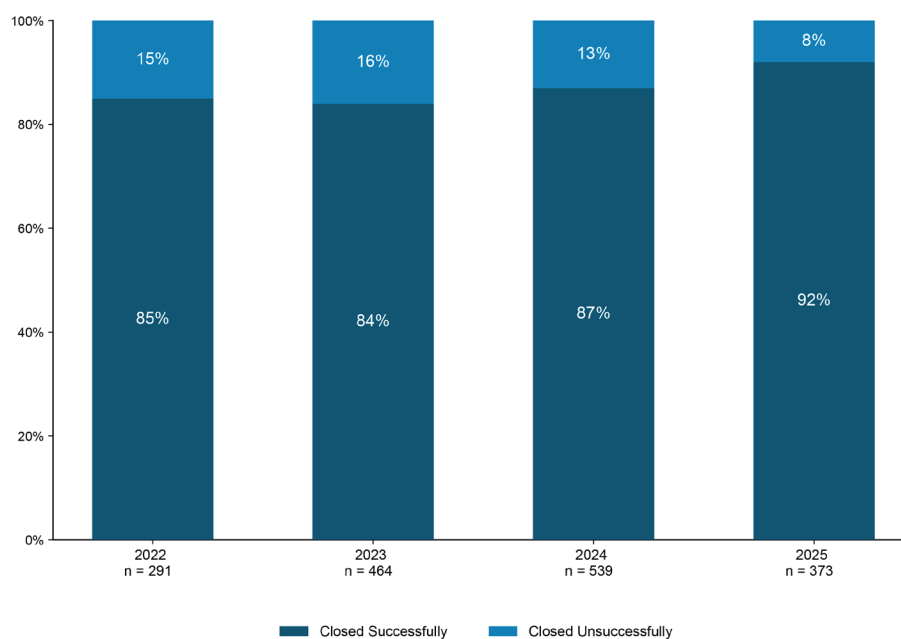
Note: Cases with missing information not included. Percentages do not equal to 100% as youth can have multiple needs.

More broadly, the intake appointment serves as the starting point for the relationship between the youth, their family, and the case manager. Case managers explain the referral and the diversion process, answer questions, and begin learning about the youth's circumstances and interests. Youth and their families can then decide whether they want to participate in JDI. For those who enroll, the information gathered during the intake provides the foundation for connecting them to the supports and community-based programming.

As of May 2026, 1,916 of the 2,070 who agreed to participate in JDI had their case closed while 154 cases were still active. Eighty-five percent of closed cases (1,626) were closed successfully, meaning they met all requirements of their diversion while 15 percent (290) of cases were unsuccessful. The most common reason a case was unsuccessful was that there was a new filed petition or complaint (32%) followed by failing to attend scheduled diversion appointments (30%). In approximately 15 percent of cases (42), either the caregiver or the youth withdrew consent, and just over 10 percent of youth had needs that exceeded JDI capabilities.

Across four full years of available data (2022-2025), the success rate increased over time (Figure 19). In 2022, 85 percent of cases closed successfully, a proportion that remained relatively stable in 2023 (84%) before increasing to 87 percent in 2024 and 92 percent in 2025. Correspondingly, the share of cases that closed unsuccessfully declined from 15 percent in 2022 to 8 percent in 2025. **These findings demonstrate that successful case closure remained consistently high and improved in the two most recent complete years of data.**¹²

Figure 19. JDI Case Closure Outcomes, 2022–2025 (n=1,667)



¹² Data from 2021 and 2026 are excluded from the figure because they represent partial years and are therefore not directly comparable to the full-year data presented here.

Engage

Helping youth successfully close their cases means engaging them in ways that address their needs. Engagement requires planning and coordination, collaboration with community partners that can provide the necessary services, and working with schools to ensure youth can get or stay on track.

ENGAGEMENT PLANNING AND COORDINATION

Once a youth enrolls and begins carrying out their case plan, a Case Plan Coordinator helps manage many of the logistical and communication tasks required to keep the plan moving forward. NCRC created the coordinator positions in response to the considerable number of responsibilities case managers were managing alongside their direct work with youth. The coordinators send reminders, arrange transportation and food, communicate with parents and caregivers, troubleshoot participation barriers, and coordinate with community partners. There are currently two Case Plan Coordinators, one serving Central San Diego and one serving North County San Diego.

By taking responsibility for much of the program's day-to-day coordination, the **Case Plan Coordinators give case managers more time to mentor youth, respond to their individual needs, and build relationships with them.** As one Case Plan Coordinator explained, "I try to take as much off of their plate as I physically and legally can." The coordinator noted that reducing the time case managers spend on administrative tasks such as arranging rides and entering receipts allows them to focus on "addressing... the youth, what resources they're needing, and sometimes behavior."

According to SANDAG, 98 percent of surveyed youth who completed JDI rated case management as very helpful (75%) or helpful (23%).¹³

The coordinator also gives youth and families another person they can turn to. If they cannot reach the case manager, they can contact the coordinator for help with rides, reminders, scheduling, or other issues that could keep the youth from participating. This gives families more consistent support and helps youth stay engaged in the program.

To ensure they are able to provide individualized support for youth, **NCRC staff endeavor to maintain caseloads of 15-20 youth per case manager.** This gives case managers ample time to build rapport, provide mentorship, and respond to each youth's specific needs. Looking only at the number of cases, however, does not always capture the true intensity of a case manager's workload. According to NCRC's Director of Community Programs, "You can have three low needs, high strength kids that take up as much time as one high needs, low strengths index kid." Although it is difficult to predict the intensity of incoming cases, maintaining stable average caseloads helps ensure that staff have the flexibility to respond when individual youth require additional time and support.

Recognizing that youth cannot benefit from programming they cannot reach, **NCRC offers dedicated funding for transportation.** Transportation had been one of the most significant barriers preventing youth from consistently attending activities, particularly when families do not have access to a vehicle or cannot transport

¹³ Ibid.

youth because of work and other responsibilities. The dedicated funding allows NCRC to arrange rides for youth and, when necessary, their family members at no cost. This practical support helps ensure that the activities included in a youth's case plan are genuinely accessible rather than simply available on paper.

NCRC also provides a flexible spending allocation that allows case managers to spend time with youth outside of required meetings, such as sharing a meal or participating in an activity together. This allocation came about in response to feedback that youth sometimes felt they only saw their case managers when a formal requirement had to be completed. Providing resources for more informal interactions gives case managers additional opportunities to learn about youths' interests, establish trust, and demonstrate that their involvement extends beyond monitoring compliance with the case plan.

These interactions can also help case managers identify barriers or needs that may not surface during a formal appointment. A conversation over food or a shared activity may make it easier for a youth to discuss what is happening at school, at home, or within their peer relationships. The flexible funding therefore supports both rapport-building and more responsive case management.

Together, these supports make it easier for youth to stay engaged and for case managers to focus on building relationships and responding to individual needs. With these logistics in place, youth are better able to participate in the community-based activities that make up much of their case plan.

COMMUNITY PARTNER PROGRAMMING

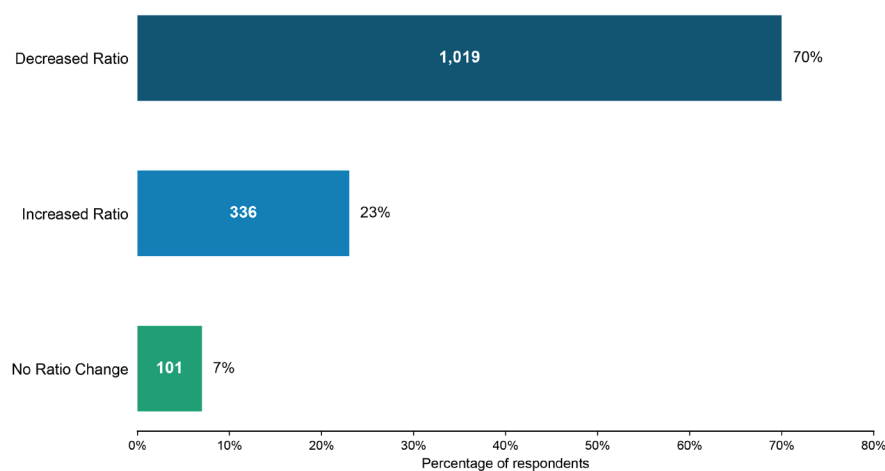
As part of the diversion program, youth complete programming with community partners that fits within three goal categories: 1) wellness, 2) pro-social, and 3) educational advocacy. Community partners provide services such as job readiness training, mentorship, substance use treatment, behavior modification therapy, digital media workshops, boxing classes, and ceramics classes. Each youth must complete one wellness component and one pro-social component, with a restorative component added when there is a person harmed.

When youth participate in wellness and pro-social programming with community partners, they do more than just the activities themselves. **The activities are an opportunity to receive mentorship from a trusted community member and to practice constructive skills and behaviors in welcoming and supportive environments.** For instance, Jonas Royster, Chief Executive Officer of Hood Proverbz, does role playing activities so youth can experiment reacting differently in difficult situations. According to Royster, "It's really to get them to understand consequences right when things happen." These experiences are an opportunity to try new activities and experience learning and growth in new environments.

Maggie Shen offers pottery classes for JDI youth, drawing on her art therapy background to use tactile, hands-on activities as a way to help youth engage and connect with others. Shen's goal is that youth "can have a different relationship with adults...be allies instead of enemies." Together, these programs help youth build trust, strengthen emotional and relational skills, and imagine new ways of responding to challenges with support from adults who see their potential.

These kinds of experiences are intended to strengthen the protective factors in youths' lives while addressing risks that can change with support and intervention. **Among youth with both pre- and post-assessment data, 70 percent ended JDI with a lower Dynamic Risk to Protective Ratio** (Figure 20), meaning that their changeable risk factors had decreased relative to their protective factors.

Figure 20. Dynamic Risk to Protective Ratio Among JDI Youth (n=1,456)



Through wellness and prosocial programming, youth are encouraged to take ownership of their experiences. Royster is very open that his space is one without judgment. To help youth let their guard down, Royster is honest about his own past experiences, which he says helps the youth to “step into their full self.” For others, simply showing up is a sign of ownership. Shen says, “they can choose to stay at home and get high...but each time they show up...that says something.” In this way, participation itself becomes a meaningful step toward agency, as youth make choices to engage, reflect, and practice seeing themselves differently.

These experiences appear to resonate with youth beyond the individual activities themselves. In SANDAG's survey of JDI completers, 86% said the program had positively affected their ability to deal with conflict and 82% reported a positive impact on their self-respect.¹⁴

Measuring Growth in Youth Strengths - These changes are also reflected in the strengths index, which captures skills that youth gain through their work with community partners, like as goal setting, self-control, stress management, and problem-solving. Among youth with both pre- and post-assessment scores, 67% increased their strengths index score over the course of JDI, with an average increase of 6.7 points.

¹⁴ Ibid.

EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY

In addition to wellness and prosocial activities, JDI can provide educational advocacy if NCRC identifies school support as a need and the caregiver consents. **The education advocate plays a critical role in helping youth remain connected to school, access needed supports, and avoid educational exclusion.** Education advocacy begins with a close review of students' educational records to identify unmet needs that may be contributing to behavioral or academic challenges, including undiagnosed disabilities such as autism, ADHD, or dyslexia. Michelle McGowan, an education advocate, noted that approximately one in seven students referred to them has been diagnosed with autism, suggesting that many students may be experiencing school discipline because their social, emotional, communication, or learning needs have not been recognized or supported.

The advocate attends Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, helps families understand assessments and special education processes, ensures that appropriate supports and services are in place, and addresses issues such as suspensions, expulsions, alternative placements, missing credits, and credit recovery. The advocate also helps shift the relationship between families and schools to be more collaborative by bringing parents to the table, helping them better understand their child's needs, and giving students and families "somebody in their corner" who can fight for them. McGowan emphasized that schools also view the advocate as a partner, particularly for students who are among the hardest to serve, because the advocate can help bridge communication gaps, engage families, and intervene early when a student is at risk of further discipline. In this way, education advocacy supports both immediate educational stability and longer-term success by helping students receive appropriate accommodations, remain in school, recover credits, and stay on track academically.

COMMUNITY PARTNER COLLABORATION

To offer this suite of programming, NCRC collaborates with over 60 community partners. NCRC staff feel that this strong partner network allows for many options and flexibility when developing a plan for each individual youth. The program manager at NCRC, says **the community partners "are also the community...the program doesn't run without community partners."** NCRC does regular check-ins with community partners to ensure that youth plans remain responsive and coordinated. In addition, they maintain this strong partner network through quarterly and annual gatherings. These events are an opportunity for all community partners to gather, share best practices, and learn from one another. Several community partners described a sense of camaraderie they feel through these gatherings. McGowan said it's not just about hearing others' successes and challenges, but "knowing that you're not in this fight alone... that we're all working for the common good." Community partners get exposed to different ways to help the youth and will sometimes discuss shared cases and how to support individual youth in their programming.

Shen noted how these gatherings are especially useful for new subcontractors supporting JDI youth. For instance, NCRC may contract with a group that has a background in dancing or yoga, but they do not have experience with this type of youth population. Shen says that through the convenings that NCRC organizes, these new subcontractors can "have a better picture of how things work and how they can better help the kids."

Beyond having a sense of shared goals and problem solving, the convenings are also an opportunity for subcontractors to share back information with NCRC case managers who can modify/adjust programming for youth. Royster shared a hypothetical scenario where a youth

may express an interest in mechanics, and then Royster can share that information back with the NCRC case manager who can identify new or existing subcontractors and continue to customize the youth's programming, further contributing to their growth. Subcontractors describe a very open and collaborative style of engagement with NCRC. Case managers help subcontractors by giving them background information and context on the youth. Described as a "study guide" by one contractor, it furthers their work as they are able to customize their activities based on feedback and guidance from NCRC.

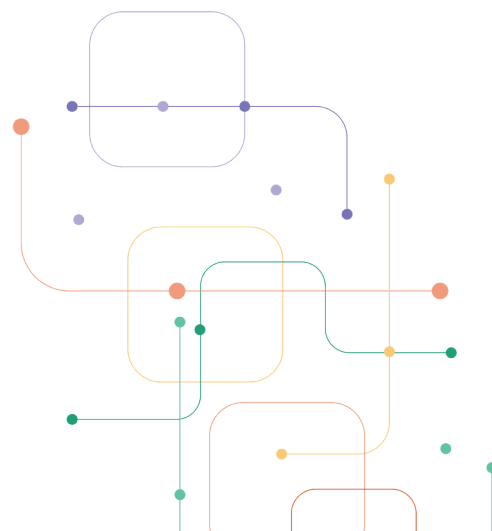
Restore

Because JDI is a pre-file diversion program grounded in restorative justice principles, the program considers the needs of the person harmed alongside those of the youth referred to diversion. In the words of an NCRC employee, "restorative justice is really just as much for the person harmed as the youth that caused the harm." NCRC has a dedicated Victim Outreach Coordinator to reach out to the person harmed early in the JDI process to explain the program, ask about any out-of-pocket expenses resulting from the incident, and gauge their interest in participating in a restorative justice conference. In a JDI case where the person harmed is a juvenile, they can also receive services based on mini-case plans, if they wish to do so, including pro-social or wellness activities, counseling, and educational support.

When there is an identifiable person harmed, a restorative component is incorporated into the youth's case plan. A restorative conference can bring together the youth, the person harmed, and, when appropriate, their families to discuss what happened and what is needed to address the harm. However, a conference does not take place in every case. There may be no identifiable

person harmed, the person may not be located, or they may choose not to participate. When a conference is not something the person harmed wants, NCRC works with them to identify other ways the harm might be addressed. An NCRC staff person gave examples such as an apology letter or a payment plan when the incident resulted in financial losses. As she explained, the goal is to ask the person harmed, "What would work for you? What do you want?"

SANDAG highlighted both the challenge and the promise of this restorative approach. According to SANDAG, more than half of persons harmed in eligible cases declined to participate in a conference. Among those who did participate, however, the restorative elements of the process were highly valued. For instance, 94 percent identified the youth accepting responsibility, 92 percent having a voice in the process, and 90 percent acknowledgment of harm as very important to establishing justice.¹⁵ These findings underscore the potential of a restorative approach to create meaningful opportunities for accountability, voice, and repair for the people most directly affected by an incident.



¹⁵ Ibid.

Connect, Goal Set, Activate: A Model for Community

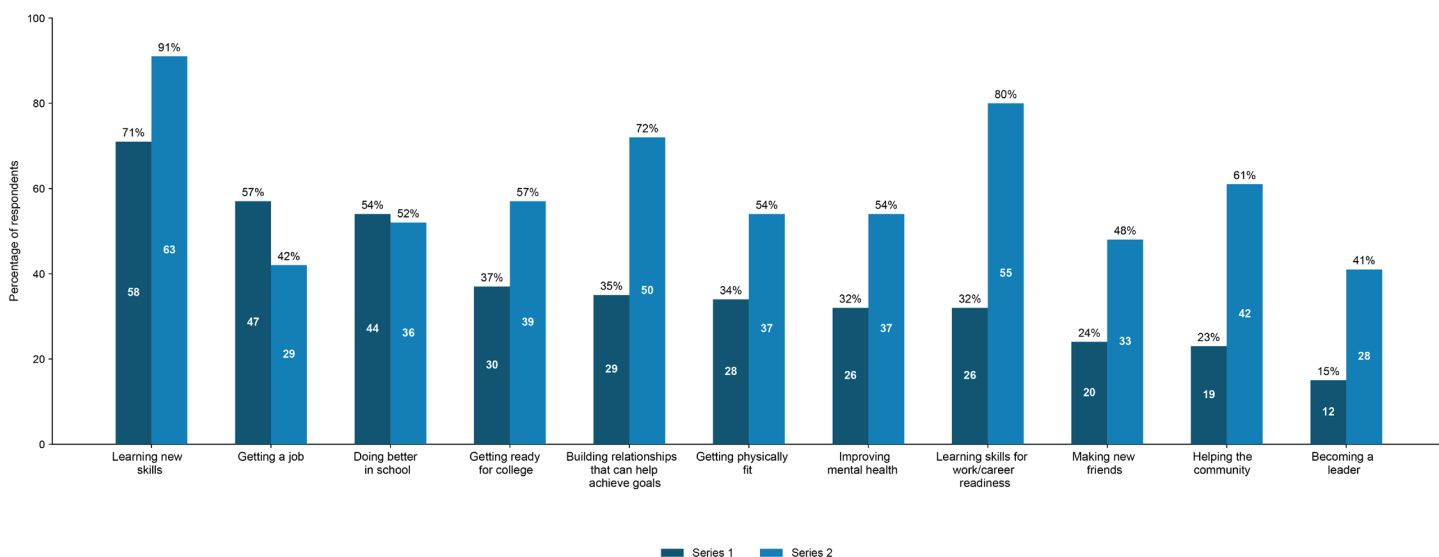


The **Community Model: Connect, Goal Set, Activate** extends support beyond diversion through relationship-building, individualized goal setting, and concrete action. The model is designed to help youth identify what matters to them, strengthen relationships and resources, and take purposeful steps toward goals related to their health and well-being, education, careers, and communities. The purpose is to help youth build confidence, skills, and social capital to navigate challenges, pursue meaningful opportunities, and continue thriving after their involvement with JDI ends. The Community Model provides sustained commitment to young people's well-being that will further decrease the likelihood of entering the criminal legal system and grow their capacity for being healthy and happy members of an inclusive school environment and wider society.

NCRC developed Thrive as a voluntary next step for youth who successfully complete JDI. Before beginning the program, youth complete a pre-survey in which they're asked how much they know about the Thrive program, their expectations from the program, and how they feel about goal setting. Learning new skills was the most commonly selected anticipated benefit, identified by 71% of youth and 91% of caregivers (Figure 21).¹⁶ Youth also frequently identified getting a job (57%) and doing better in school (54%) as areas where they expected Thrive to help. Caregivers were especially likely to identify learning skills for work/career readiness (80%) and building relationships that could help youth achieve their goals (72%). Youth entered Thrive with high expectations but varying levels of readiness. 80% thought the program would be very helpful, while 56% said they felt very ready to begin.

¹⁶ Sample sizes vary by question and survey wave. Unless a result is specifically identified as paired, pre-survey, Phase 1, and Phase 2 results reflect respondents at each wave and should be read as descriptive comparisons rather than individual-level change. For figures from the earlier six-month model, Phase 1 refers to the three-month survey and Phase 2 refers to the six-month/end-of-program survey.

Figure 21. Where Youth and Caregivers Expect Thrive to Be Most Helpful Youth Pre-Survey, n=82; Caregivers Pre-Survey, n=69



Connect

Thrive combines a cohort-based curriculum with individual case management, peer support, and community resources. Originally structured as a six-month program, the current iteration is designed for youth to complete a 13-sequence curriculum in three and a half months, while receiving case management support at the same time.

CONNECTING WITH CASE MANAGERS

Connection begins during the transition from JDI to Thrive. As youth near the end of JDI, their JDI case managers begin introducing Thrive as an optional next step. Because the JDI and Thrive teams work in the same office, youth have the opportunity to connect with Thrive staff before completing JDI. Thrive staff also attend JDI graduations, where they explain the program and share more information with youth and caregivers.

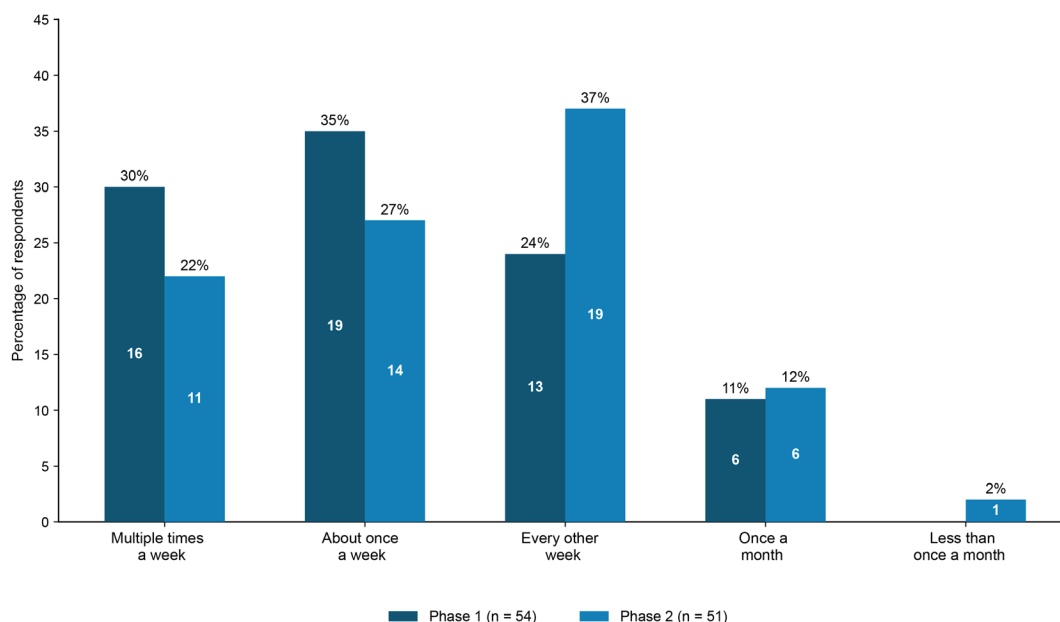
However, the cohort model can create logistical challenges when Thrive does not have space to enroll youth soon after they complete JDI. A long wait between referral and the start of a new cohort can cause youth to disengage before the program begins. NCRC has explored offering interim case management

to maintain contact, but staff have found it difficult to build a new relationship without the structure and shared purpose of an active program. Youth are also being asked to transition from a trusted JDI case manager to a Thrive case manager they do not yet know. The experience highlights the importance of minimizing gaps between programs or creating a structured bridge that gives youth a clear reason to remain engaged while they wait.

After a youth completes JDI, select information (name, caregiver contact information, and JDI case manager) is automatically transferred into a separate Thrive database.¹⁷ A Thrive case manager then contacts the family to schedule an intake meeting. During this meeting, Thrive staff explain how the program works, discuss attendance expectations, and obtain consent for participation from the youth and caregiver.

These relationships are central to the Thrive model. As with JDI, youth receive one-on-one support from a case manager, and survey data reflect regular contact; 89 percent of youth at Phase 1 (three-month mark) and 86 percent at Phase 2 (six-month mark) reported connecting with their case manager at least every other week (Figure 22).

Figure 22. How Often Youth Connected with their Thrive Case Manager?

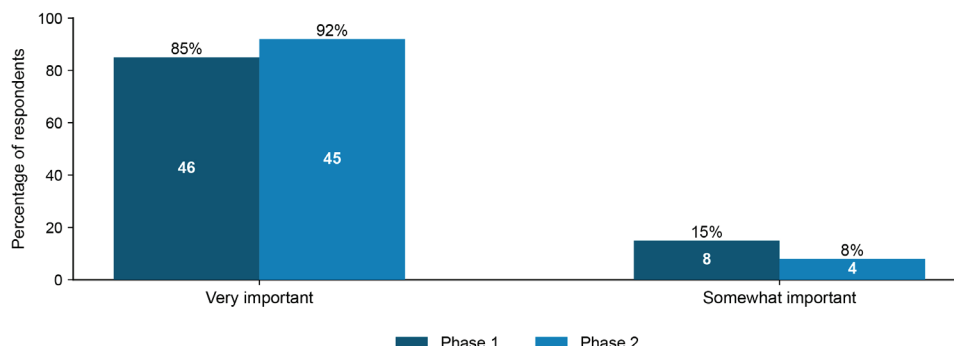


The Thrive director is clear that this relationship is not therapy. Instead, case managers use a coaching approach and treat youth as “the experts in their lives.” Many participants come from environments where adults frequently tell them what to do or where they may not feel valued. Thrive case managers instead encourage youth to identify and build on their own strengths, including through curriculum activities such as “Finding My Voice and Telling My Story.”

¹⁷ Information about the offense and JDI case plan does not transfer because the youth’s JDI record is sealed after successful completion.

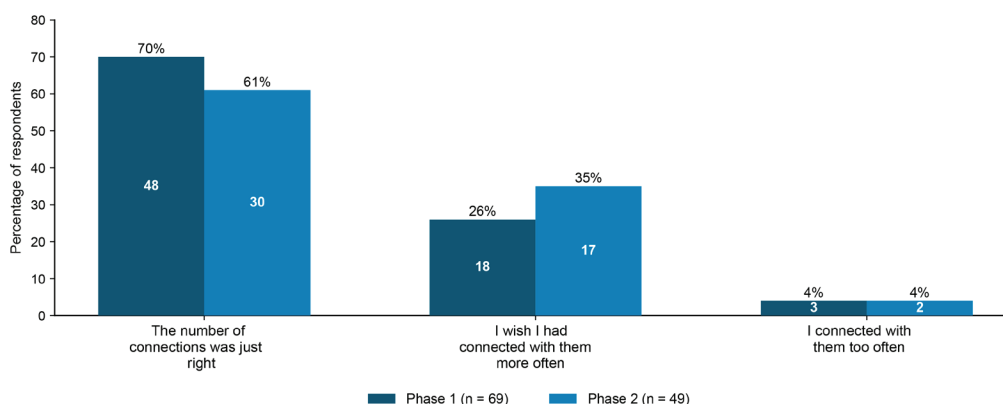
By positioning youth as capable decision-makers rather than problems to be fixed, Thrive helps them build the confidence and self-understanding needed to shape their own paths forward. At the end of Phase 1, 85 percent of youth report that their Thrive case manager has been very important in helping them succeed in the program, with that percentage increasing to 92 percent by the end of the program (Figure 23).

Figure 23. Youth Perceptions of Case Manager Importance



Youth interviews show how these relationships with case managers can support personal growth. One youth described lacking the right vocabulary for expressing their emotions. With the support of Thrive case managers, they feel they are now able to open up more. This particular youth shared how case managers “treat us with so much respect...they just related to me as if I’ve known them forever...and honestly, I didn’t expect myself to grow.” This individual has since chosen to come back and do an additional round of Thrive because of the close connection they felt with the staff. Other youth expressed gratitude for the open lines of communication fostered by Thrive staff. As one participant noted, “when I felt sad or anything, I just text one of the case managers, and they were always down to help me.” Feeling like someone else can carry their burdens with them and work collaboratively on identifying solutions made the youth feel like they were not alone in fulfilling their goals and had the support of case managers to see them to fruition. Compared to the mid-point of the program, youth are more likely to wish they had connected with their case manager more by the end of phase two (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Youth Feeling about the Number of Times that they Connected with Their Case Manager?



A key lesson that the Thrive team learned was that, in some cases, building a relationship requires pausing the goal-setting curriculum of the program, and focusing instead on stabilizing the youth and building a meaningful connection.

AS ONE OF THE THRIVE CASE MANAGERS EXPLAINED, USING THE EXAMPLE OF A RECENT GRADUATE FROM THE PROGRAM,

When [one of the youth] first joined the program, I couldn't get a single word out of him... and, you know, slowly but surely, the more I met with him, the more we started talking, the more that I realized that he was hurting, like mentally... [When I asked him about it, he] was like, 'Okay, like, this guy is really trying to be my friend. You know? He really cares about my wellbeing. He's not even asking me about goals at this point. He's just asking me how I'm doing....' Now it becomes easier for them to be like, 'you know, what? I'm ready to do this. I'm ready to do boxing, I'm ready to do ceramics. I'm ready to start my drivers ed course,' you know?"

While the curriculum is a helpful grounding tool to guide youth, case managers are trained to identify when youth need additional support and course correct to help them resolve their particular circumstance and get back on track towards their goals.

CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

In addition to helping youth identify goals and aspirations, **case managers also connect individual youth with community partners** who can help make their goals a reality. When youth have already formed a useful relationship with a mentor or service provider during JDI, Thrive tries to help them continue that relationship rather than requiring them to start over. Because information from the youth's JDI case plan does not transfer into Thrive, case managers learn about these relationships from the youth and caregiver and rebuild that network of support with them. These community resources range from work preparedness programs to additional help in school, to fitness programs. For example, a case manager helped a youth interested in becoming an artist connect with a community museum to meet local artists, while for another youth, the case manager introduced them to a real estate agent to learn more about that field. Case managers work hard to find resources and opportunities for youth, regardless of what their interests might be.

CONNECTING IN COHORTS

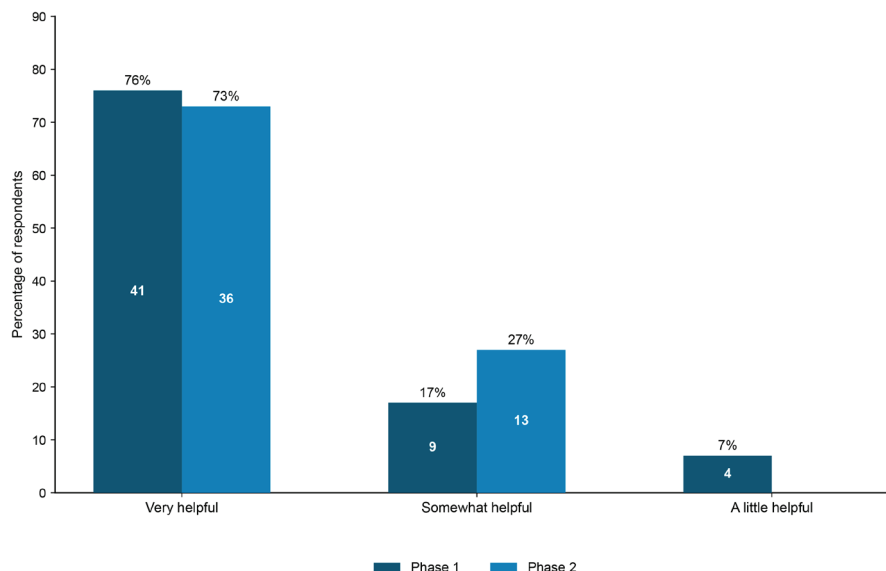
Thrive uses **regular cohort meetings** to help youth build relationships with peers. Cohorts generally aim to include about 15 youth, although size varies. During most of the period covered by this evaluation, youth attended cohort meetings every other week and met with a case manager on alternating weeks. NCRC is now shifting to weekly cohort meetings and

twice-monthly case management, with one case management meeting held in person and one virtually. Community building is explicit from the first curriculum session, when youth explore what makes them feel supported, how they see themselves, what they want others to understand about them, and what dreams or goals inspire them, then reflect on what they share with other cohort members and what is unique.

Although sessions follow a structured curriculum, they also give youth a consistent space to learn about one another, discuss shared challenges, and recognize that they are not pursuing change alone. Later, a relationship-focused session asks youth to map important people in their lives, distinguish healthy from unhealthy relationship patterns, and identify how existing and new connections can support their goals. As one youth remarked about an activity designed to encourage connection, '[case managers] try to make it inclusive for everybody, like they have a ball and they throw it to other people. You shout their names, their age, what they're going through mentally...it's really to open up, so there won't really be anything to hide.' By acknowledging individual struggles, youth can see themselves as part of a shared process of growth.

Figure 25 reflects responses from youth who participated in the earlier model that spanned six months, in which they were asked at the three-month mark (Phase 1) and the six-month mark (Phase 2) about their opinion on the helpfulness of cohort meetings. After three months, 76 percent of youth shared that cohort meetings were very helpful, and 73 percent of youth shared the same sentiment at the six-month mark.

Figure 25. Helpfulness of Cohort Meetings



Connection Helps with Motivation: Multiple touchpoints may be especially important because 67% of youth said before starting Thrive that staying motivated would be their biggest challenge to doing well in the program.

These relationships give youth more than access to services. They create the trust, stability, and sense of belonging youth need to imagine a different future and take responsibility for shaping it. In the Thrive model, connection is foundational for goal setting. It gives youth the confidence and support to identify goals that reflect their own aspirations and begin taking concrete steps toward them.

Across case management, community partnerships, and cohort meetings, Thrive works to ensure that youth are not pursuing their goals alone. By Phase two, 74 percent of youth reported having an adult at Thrive who supported and cared about them (Figure 26), and 67 percent said someone at Thrive helped them reach their goals (Figure 27). What the findings illustrate is that by the end of the program, many youth could identify someone within Thrive who was in their corner. Alongside the support youth identified at home, school, and in their communities, Thrive provides another layer of relationships they can draw on as they work toward their goals and navigate challenges beyond the program.

Figure 26. Sources of Adult Support in Youths' Lives

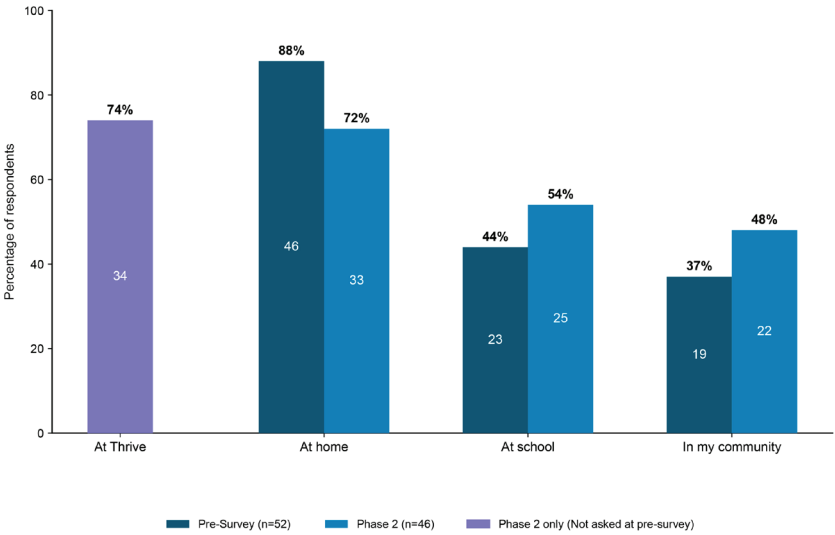
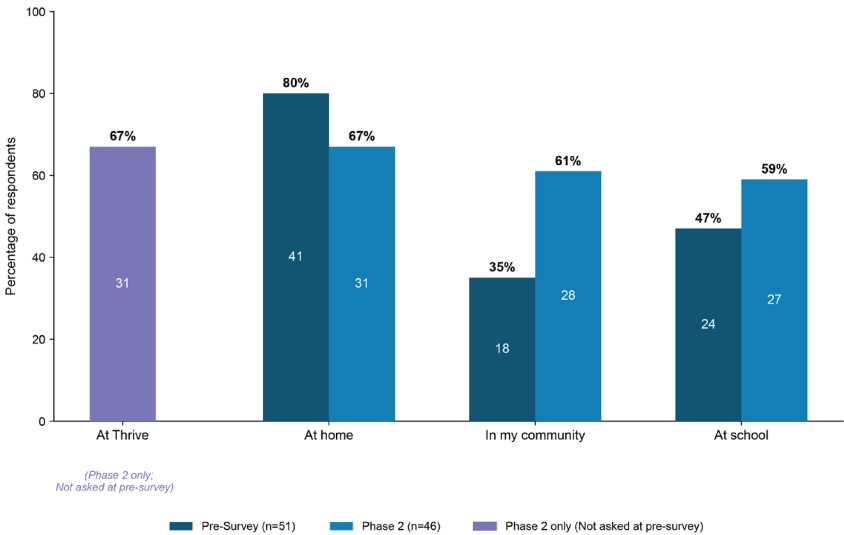


Figure 27. Sources of Support for Youth Goal Attainment



Goal Set

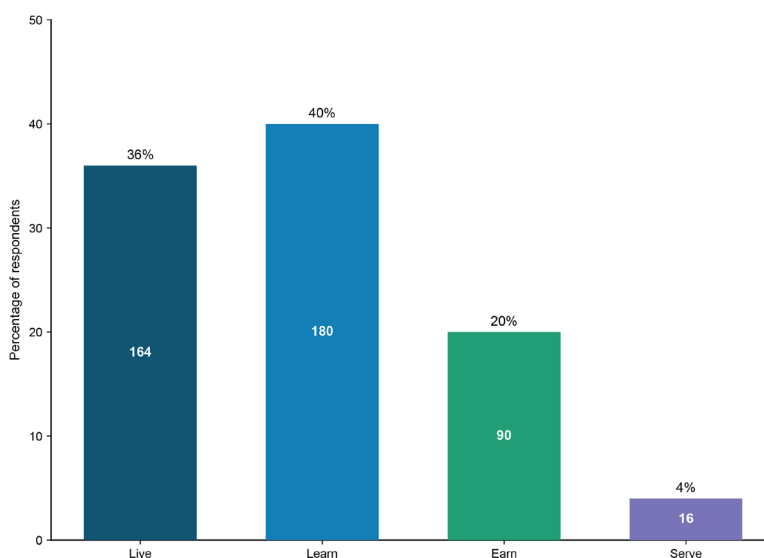
Before asking youth to formally set goals, Thrive uses a sequence of reflection activities to help them consider who they are, what matters to them, what they need, and what they want their lives to look like. The opening curriculum sessions move from identifying personal strengths and positive identity to clarifying values and dreams, then to examining needs and emotions. Youth are asked questions such as: Who are you now? What do you care about? Where do you want to be? Who do you want to become? Activities include strengths exercises, a life map or letter to a future self, and guided reflection on what thriving could look and feel like. This process is intended to help youth choose goals that carry personal meaning rather than simply meeting an expectation set by an adult.

Youth then learn about Thrive's four Pathways to Thriving: Live, Learn, Earn, and Serve.

- **Live:** health, wellness, safety, belonging, relationships, and self-care;
- **Learn:** academics, life skills, growth, and learning;
- **Earn:** work and career readiness, independence, and using strengths productively; and
- **Serve:** community engagement, leadership, meaning, and contribution.

Figure 28 shows a distribution of youth goals across the four areas.¹⁸ Youth rate how each area is going, identify where they have the greatest needs, and select the pathway or pathways they most want to explore. A guided visioning exercise and creative collage help them picture what thriving would look like before they translate that vision into specific goals. Survey data reflects this growing sense of direction; the share of youth who gave the highest rating to their confidence in identifying the resources and relationships needed to achieve their goals was 53 percent in the pre-survey and 67 and percent by phase two. One youth described Thrive as “more respectful” and “more open” than many other spaces in their life and said, “it teaches me to actually use what I’ve learned.” The goal-setting process therefore starts with helping youth identify what matters to them and where they want to go.

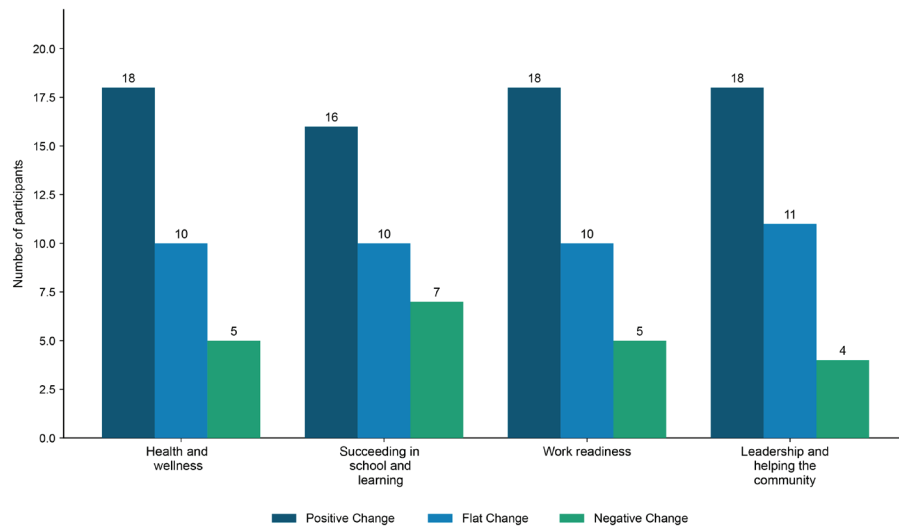
Figure 28. Distribution of Goals Youth Work on in Thrive



¹⁸ Youth can select multiple goals to work on in Thrive, and can revisit those same goals and/or select new ones if they choose to participate in Thrive multiple times.

Figure 29 demonstrates changes in youths' knowledge across the four focus areas of health and wellness, succeeding in school and learning, work readiness, and leadership and helping the community. As the figure shows, youth, across the board, increased in their knowledge of these subject areas over the course of their Thrive participation.

Figure 29. Changes in Youth Knowledge Across Four Pathways to Thriving (Paired Pre-Survey and Phase 2, n=33)



Similarly, the share of caregivers giving youth one of the two highest ratings increased from 33 percent to 74 percent for health and wellness, from 30 percent to 74 percent for succeeding in school and learning, from 11 percent to 45 percent for work readiness, and from 18 percent to 63 percent for leadership and helping the community (Figures 30 and 31). Across all four areas, the average share of caregivers giving youth one of the two highest ratings increased from 23 percent in the pre-survey to 64 percent at phase two.

Figure 30. Caregiver Ratings of Youth Knowledge Across Four Pathways to Thriving (Pre-Survey, n=69)

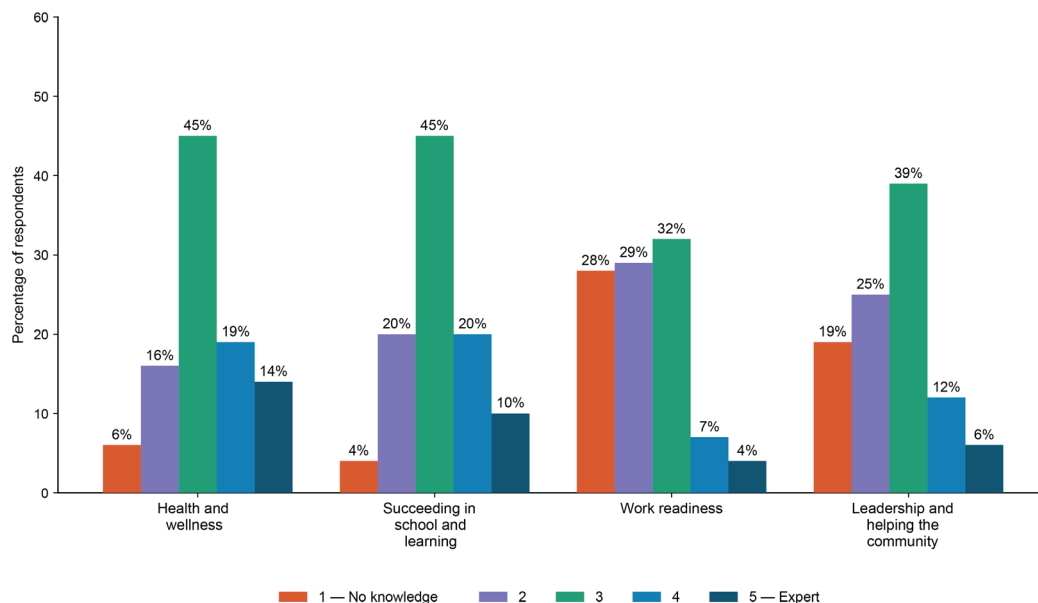
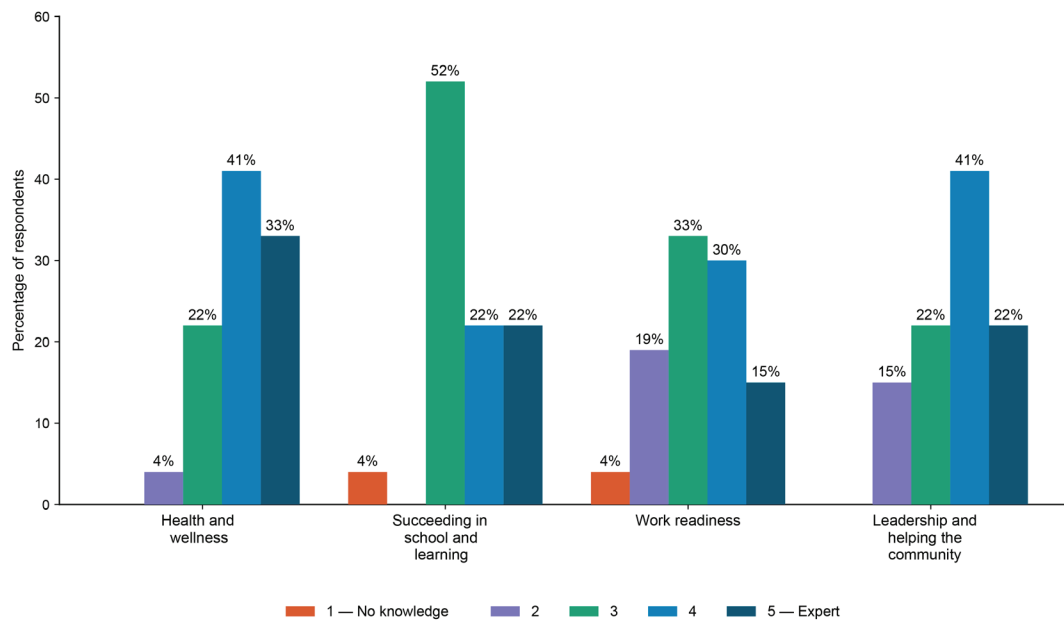


Figure 31. Caregiver Ratings of Youth Knowledge Across Four Pathways to Thriving (Phase 2, n=27)



With support from case managers, youth turn a broad aspiration into a workable plan. The curriculum introduces SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely) and asks youth to reverse-engineer a larger dream into a first actionable step. Before beginning Thrive, 40 percent of youth report that they are completely confident in their ability to set a SMART goal, with this percentage increasing to 62 percent after they complete Thrive. The next session introduces Thrive’s four “Rs”: Reflection, Resources, Relationships, and Routines. Youth identify internal and external resources, map the people and networks that can help them, and choose daily, weekly, or monthly routines that can keep them on track. They then pull these pieces together into an “empowerment statement.” Subsequent sessions revisit the same framework when youth encounter barriers: the Live pathway includes work on setbacks, stress responses, self-care, and healthy relationships, while later Learn, Earn, and Serve sessions are planned with community partners based on youths’ needs and interests. This structure makes goal setting an iterative process rather than a one-time exercise.

Building Change From the Inside Out: Jonas Royster, a community partner, leads a workshop with Thrive youth centered on what he calls, “mirror work,” which is “talking about the importance of loving ourselves and affirmations, and what does that actually look like in real life, and being okay with forgiving ourselves and putting ourselves first.” The workshop reflects Thrive’s effort to pair concrete goals with the internal work of building self-worth and a sense of possibility.

The survey suggests that youth left Thrive feeling more capable of handling challenges and shaping their own futures. By phase two, youth were more likely to say they could solve tough problems, bounce back from setbacks, manage stress, and figure out what they wanted to do with their lives. Across 10 questions that captured these kinds of skills and beliefs, the average share of youth choosing the strongest response (“very like me”) rose from 28 percent at the start of Thrive to 42 percent at phase two (Figure 32 and 33).

Some of the biggest changes were in feeling able to solve tough problems (from 28% to 50%), handle whatever comes their way (from 23% to 41%), bounce back after setbacks (from 26% to 43%), and know what they want to do with their life and believe they can do it (from 36% to 54%). These measures align closely with the curriculum’s emphasis on working through setbacks, managing stress, and building outcomes and relationships that support progress.

Figure 32. Youth Confidence, Coping, and Resilience at Program Entry (Pre-Survey, n=53)

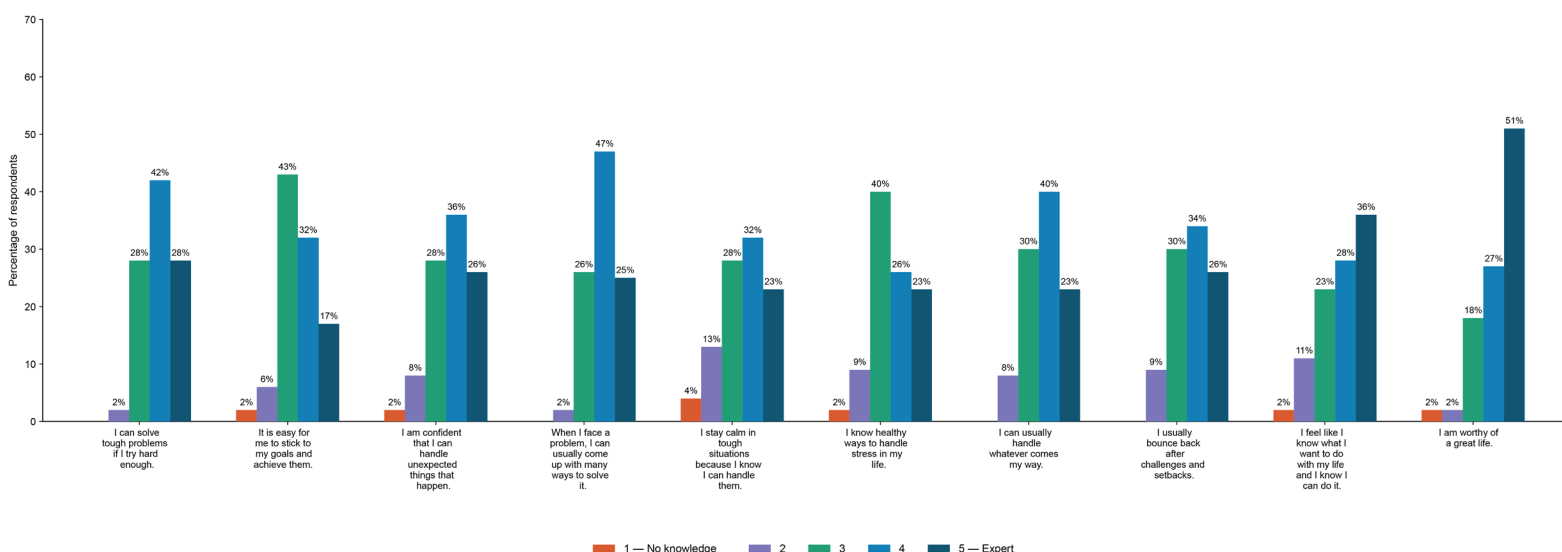
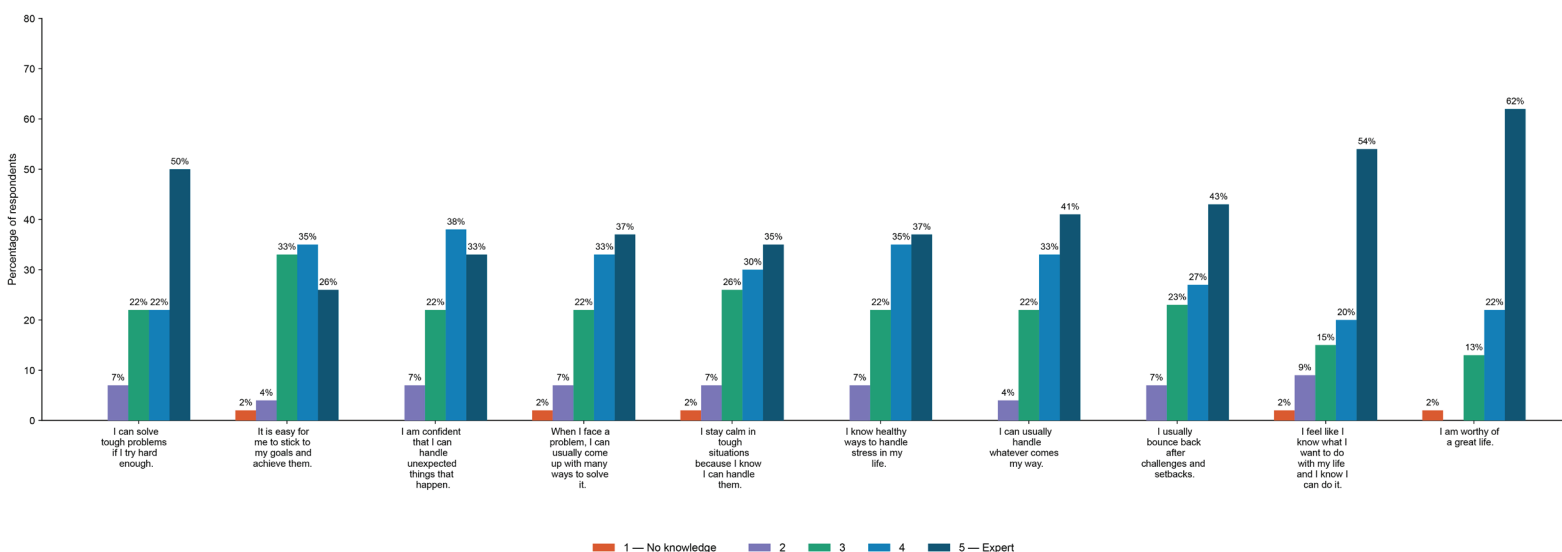


Figure 33. Youth Confidence, Coping, and Resilience at Program Completion (Phase 2, n=46)



Thrive is intentionally youth-centered, and that means **being flexible with the goal setting process**. For some youth, this may be the first time they're given agency over their goals and plans. Setting goals and discussing what their interests are is a milestone in and of itself. One youth discussed how they did not see their goals to completion and they shared, "I didn't complete all of them, but I tried to, [and] that's what mattered." Thrive case managers celebrate this with the youth and are aware that this step is an important part of developing agency, confidence, and a sense of personal self.

Knowing that youth may need extra time to fulfill their goals, youth are given the option to go through the Thrive program more than once. As the director of Thrive explained, many youth and "vulnerable teens, especially, have a very disempowered experience." They enter their first cycle with little experience exercising agency or imagining that they can create change in their own lives. During the first cycle, they may remain quiet, inwardly focused, or unsure how to use the program. During a second cycle, youth often begin to set more intentional goals, make larger strides, and connect with other participants. By a third cycle, some begin to see themselves as people who can contribute, support newer participants, and assume leadership roles.

Youth Express Desire to Stay Connected to Thrive

– At the end of the program, 69 percent of youth said they would be interested in continuing with Thrive through alumni or leadership opportunities, and another 31 percent said they might be interested. Each cycle therefore offers not only more time to work toward individual goals, but also an opportunity for youth to approach the process with greater confidence, experience, and clarity. And for some, to begin seeing themselves as leaders within the Thrive community.

For some youth, participating in Thrive more than once may also reinforce that they have an active role in shaping what happens next. Staff can provide support, resources, and connections, but youth still have to decide how they will use them. As one youth who completed several rounds of Thrive advised an incoming participant, 'If they're gonna come, like put in the work too, you know, [what] you put in is what you're gonna get back.' Over time, the process can help youth see that they can make choices, influence their circumstances, and take meaningful steps toward a future they define for themselves.

Activate

Once youth identify a goal, Thrive helps them move from intention to action. Cohort sessions teach youth to translate goals into steps and identify the resources, relationships, and routines that can support follow-through, while individual meetings allow youth and case managers to review progress, respond to obstacles, and identify the support needed for the next step. Nearly every curriculum session closes by prompting youth to schedule their next one-on-one meeting with a case manager, reinforcing the link between group learning and individualized follow-through. A case manager might help a youth complete an application, locate a program, communicate with an organization, or break a larger task into more manageable parts. Activation therefore involves more than referring youth to a service; it is an ongoing process of helping them use available resources and continue moving forward if and when challenges arise.

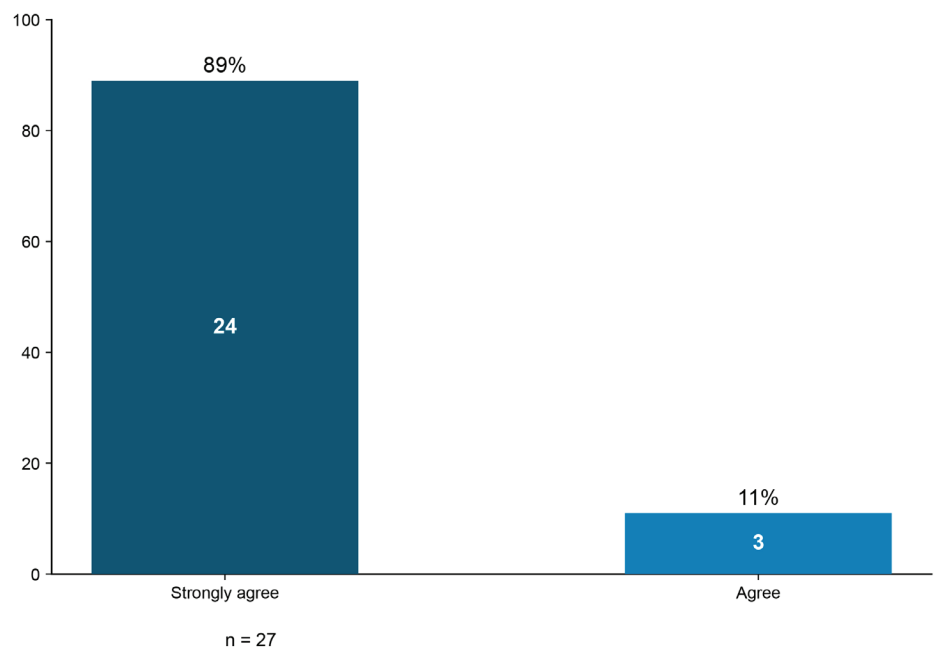
The actions youth take vary according to their goals and circumstances. Participants have enrolled in driver's education, joined gyms, taken boxing or ceramics classes, participated

in work-readiness and financial-literacy programs, received academic support, and engaged in community service or counseling. Some youth continue working with providers they first met through JDI, while Thrive case managers help others establish new relationships in the community. These experiences give youth opportunities to practice following through on a plan while building skills and relationships that can support them beyond Thrive.

Transportation and Food Are Key: Organizing logistical details are critical components of the program. Besides staffing, Thrive’s biggest expenses are the transportation and food they provide to youth participants. As the director of Thrive noted, these “really tangible things make a huge difference in whether youth are going to be successful.” By tending to basic needs, youth can stay focused on working towards their goals.

Thrive’s support also extends to the adults helping youth outside of the program. The curriculum creates formal opportunities for connecting with youths’ support networks. Families, supporters, community partners, and JDI case managers are invited to a midpoint Community Check-In where youth reflect on how far they have come, what they have struggled with, what comes next, and what support they need from their community. Families and supporters are also invited to graduation. At the end of phase two, 89 percent of caregivers strongly agreed that they had the resources they needed to support their youth throughout Thrive, while the remaining 11 percent agreed (Figure 34). This reflects an important part of Thrive’s approach, in that helping youth take action also means making sure the people around them have what they need to support that progress.

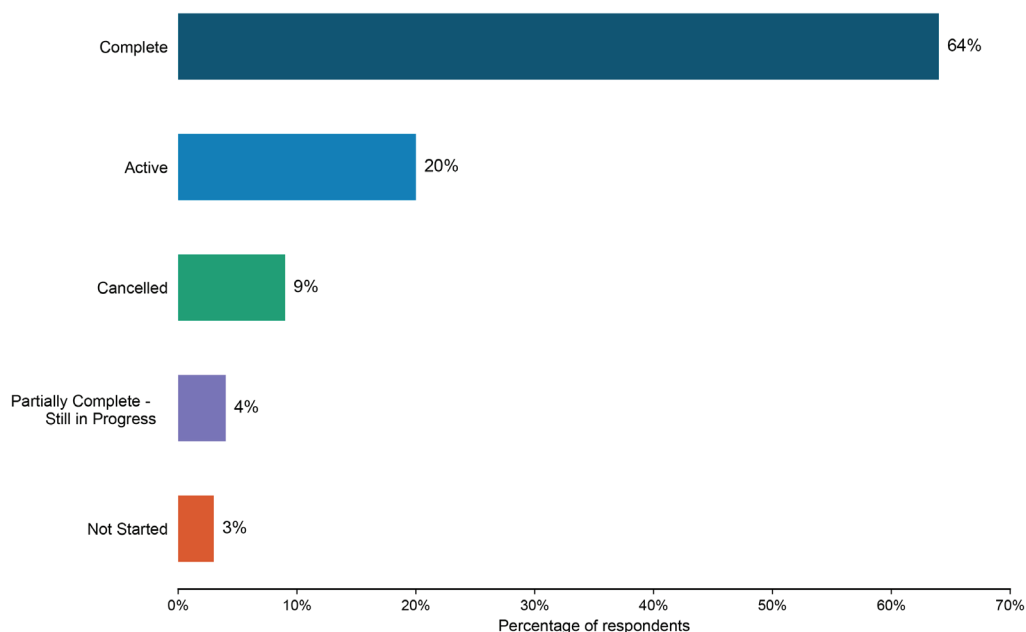
Figure 34. Caregiver Agreement that they had the Resources Needed to Support their Youth throughout the Thrive Program. (Phase 2, n=27)



At the end of the program, the Thrive team collaborates with the participating youth to put together “Impact Sheets,” highlighting their successes. The curriculum places this work in the final preparation session. Youth revisit an earlier letter to their future self or life map, reflect on who they are now and where they are going next, and use those reflections with case managers to build their graduation materials. The accomplishments that youth highlight in these include educational achievements like “Got straight A’s on his report card” and “Re-enrolled in high school.” They also include work achievements like “Developed strategies to grow my nail business” and “Completed CPR class for babysitting business.” Some of the most common achievements cited were related to personal growth. These included things like “Fixed my mindset in a positive way” and “I’m keeping myself busy and not letting my problems lead to negative actions/reactions.” At graduation, youth share their Impact Statements with family teams and staff, and the curriculum directs case managers to use the final one-on-one meeting to create an exit plan. Together, the Impact Sheets capture both concrete achievements and changes in motivation and confidence that can help youth beyond a single goal.

The progress reflected in the Impact Sheets is also evident in youths’ formal goal completion. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Thrive goals were marked complete, while another 20% remained active and 4% were partially complete and still in progress (Figure 35). By contrast, nine percent were cancelled and just three percent had not been started. These data reinforce that the goals youth develop through Thrive are not simply planning exercises. Rather, most are either achieved or actively being pursued, providing a concrete measure of the progress youth make alongside the personal growth and increased confidence captured in their Impact Sheets.

Figure 35. Thrive Goal Progress (n=92)



Creating the Conditions for Success: One Thrive youth's experience illustrates the dual lens of success. This particular youth entered Thrive while living with his father in an RV and moving between parks. Before he could consider a longer-term goal, his case manager helped him address his immediate circumstances. They worked together to get access to resources by applying for welfare benefits and connecting them to a community partner who could pay the youth for taking a financial literacy course. Then they helped him apply and get into college, where they are now currently working on their degree.

AS THE CASE MANAGER EXPLAINED,

[When he came in, he] didn't know what to do with his life. He wanted to give up, wanted to just not try to fight. And now, seeing him the way he carries himself, the way he is passing his classes at school, getting his financial aid, being able to drive... seeing them happy, seeing them in a better place, mentally... seeing how far he came, seeing his growth, seeing our conversations now, is just like, wow, you know? I did my best with him, and it shows because he's doing it.

His experience shows why Thrive's work often begins with creating the conditions that allow a young person to move forward. Addressing emotional needs can open the door to a longer-term goal, while successfully taking intermediate steps can build confidence and independence along the way.

Youth interviews provide further insight into how these less visible changes shape daily behavior. Participants described learning how to organize themselves, make plans, regulate their emotions, ask questions, and seek help when they need it. One youth who had stopped attending school reported returning, earning good grades, and preparing to graduate early. The youth said, "[Thrive] taught me how to structure myself more...this place taught me how to ask questions. Honestly, I was always closed off, man...I learned that it's okay to ask for help." Other participants described becoming more respectful toward teachers, managing their reactions more productively, focusing on their mental health, and making decisions based on what was good for them rather than simply following what others expected. Although these changes may not appear as completed activities, they strengthen youths' ability to sustain progress toward their goals.

The survey results reinforce these individual stories. At phase two, 79 percent of youth strongly agreed that Thrive had made a positive difference in their lives, and the remaining 21 percent agreed (Figure 36). Caregivers were similarly positive with 86 percent strongly agreeing that Thrive had made a positive difference in their youth's life, while the remaining 14% agreed (Figure 37). These findings suggest that the value of Thrive is not limited to completing a particular activity or goal. As Thrive's director emphasized, returning to school, finding work, or completing a program matter, but so do becoming more confident, knowing when to ask for help, and making more thoughtful choices. These are skills youth can continue to use as they pursue new goals after Thrive ends.

Figure 36. Youths' Belief that Thrive Made a Positive Difference in Their Life. (Phase 2, n=48)

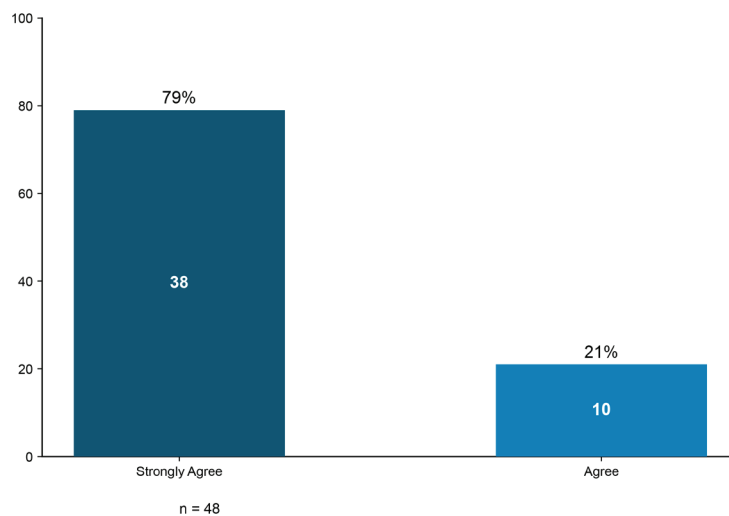
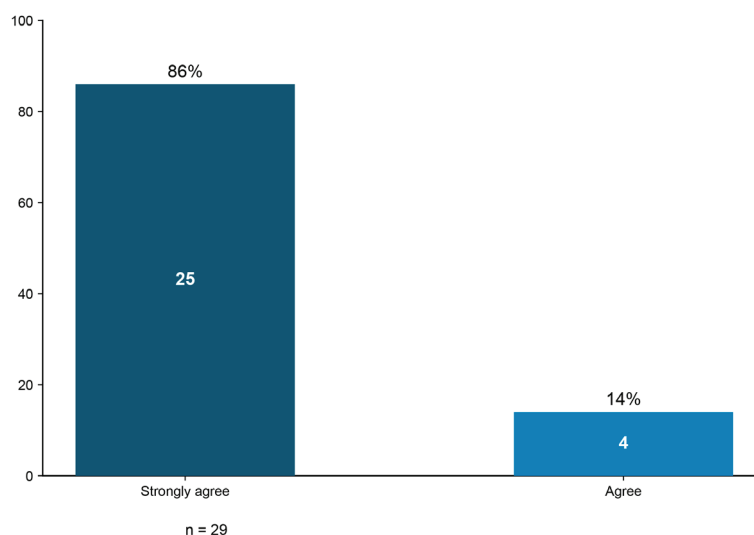


Figure 37. Caregivers' Belief that Thrive Made a Positive Difference in their Youth's Life. (Phase 2, n=29)



Just Futures



Youth well-being depends on a sense of **belonging, resilience, and justice**. When young people have the support and opportunities they need to thrive, they are better positioned to contribute to their communities. And in turn, strong communities create the conditions that help young people thrive.

A strong sense of belonging is associated with greater academic motivation, higher self-esteem, and increased academic achievement as well as a lower likelihood of engaging in risky, antisocial, and school avoiding behaviors that may lead to legal system involvement. Resilience is the ability to adapt well and persevere through adversity, trauma, or tough obstacles in one's life. Supportive relationships, skill-building opportunities, and coping skill development are key factors that help a youth develop resilience. Finally, justice contributes to youth well-being by ensuring young people experience fairness, accountability, and meaningful opportunities for repair when harm occurs. Young people's experiences are shaped not only by their immediate relationships but also by how institutions and systems respond to conflict, wrongdoing, and harm.

Belonging, resilience, and restorative approaches to justice position youth well-being as both individual and collective. Young people are influenced by the relationships, institutions, and communities that surround them, while simultaneously helping to shape those environments. This perspective underlies NCRC's interconnected work across schools, the justice system, and community. NCRC works to prevent and respond to harm, repair relationships, connect young people to supportive people and opportunities, and create avenues for them to learn, engage, and contribute.

The multi-institutional framework developed by NCRC is aimed at disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and setting all youth up to thrive as they enter adulthood. NCRC integrates its programs and staff into school systems to support efforts to prevent harm, respond when harm occurs, and repair the harm to individuals and community. NCRC collaborates with the justice system to help divert youth, engage them in supportive activities, and restore harm. Finally, NCRC leads in the community by connecting youth to people and supports, helping youth to set goals, and providing youth opportunities to act on the skills and knowledge they gain through the program.

Greater belonging and resilience can disrupt the school to prison pipeline. When young people are supported in their schools and communities, they are not only less likely to be caught up in the criminal legal system but they are set up to thrive as they enter adulthood. Just futures means that all youth have the capacity and opportunity to work, learn, and serve their communities. Preparing young people to thrive requires a multi-institutional approach that provides the resources and supports they need at every step of the way.