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To: TUSD Board Members
Tucson Unified School District
1010 E. Tenth Street
Tucson, AZ 85719

Dear respected TUSD Board Members,

For the past 5 years, Higher Ground and TUSD have created a successful partnership that has served families free of charge. This last school year, we were located at Valencia Middle School and served 130 K – 12th grade TUSD student everyday with strong academic and recreational programming.

Higher Ground would like TUSD to allow us to lease Wakefield Middle School Facilities and remain a vital partner. Higher Ground will be responsible for the costs involved in the building, including, but is not limited to, repair and maintenance, upkeep, and insurance. However, we are requesting that TUSD cover the utility cost, even for just the first year, in order to allow our organization to transform this building into a community resource center for TUSD families. We are requesting that this lease involves a 3 year commitment with the agreement reviewed at the end of the 3 years.

Higher Ground is proposing the following use for the building:

- A youth center will serve up to 350 TUSD students daily within 3 years. This youth center will have an academic focus with math and reading tutoring for all grade levels that has been proven to help increase letter grade and school attendance. It will have recreational activities to build positive identity and leadership skills with the youth being served.
- Building A will be used to house jujutsu, boxing, dance, art, and music classes. It will also include programs for high-school internships, college and career preparation, leadership classes, and financial literacy, along with other programming for our students.
- Use of the existing park and locker rooms on building A to continue our middle school tackle football program.
- Use of building B to house the academic center of Higher Ground youth center. It will have computer labs, science labs, homework rooms and mini libraries. In addition, some of the family education classes such as parenting, financial, single parenting, and other issues will be held in this building.

Included is a more detailed proposal of how Higher Ground intends to use Wakefield Middle School facilities. Along with the proposal, we have several letters of support, success stories, and other documentation that shows the success and impact of Higher Ground. We have also included our partners services and background.

Higher Ground Resource Center at Wakefield will be a joint project that will benefit the community and continue TUSD's mission of delivering excellence in education everyday while extending Higher Ground's reach and services.

Reaching a Higher Ground Together,

Jansen Azarias
Executive Director

About Higher Ground:

Higher Ground started 6 years ago in my living room. Jansen Azarias, the founder, was 19 years old when he first met a divorced woman who had a 10 year old son named Timothy, who was extremely smart yet completely failing in school. He started tutoring him due to his mom's inability because of her work schedule. Pretty soon, he began inviting his friends and Jansen was tutoring over 10 kids daily at my apartment and teaching them wrestling or playing sports in the park. Their inability to understand their homework stemmed from a simple reality that these students at 5th grade did not have the reading and arithmetic ability of a 2nd grade and couldn't catch up with school.

In addition, they all had another thing in common. They all had their stories -- divorced parents, single moms, incarcerated family members, gangs, drug or alcohol abuse, poverty, abusive homes and a combination of other things. At the age of 10, they all felt defeated in life and considered their potential to be nothing. Academic success became even more challenging as the myriad of at-risk issues and their defeated attitude was prevalent. He began to find out that this defeated attitude is prevalent in our southwest side of Tucson due to our community risk factors. The stories of the youth in my living room was the story of majority of the youth in South side Tucson – broken families, gang affiliations, crime environment, drug and substance abuse, incarcerated parents, poverty, and lack of support.

Eventually after marrying Timothy's mom, Barbara, he decided to do something about the youth and our education issues. He talked to a local church, The Well Worship Center, then called Mission View Assembly, and Pistor Middle School. And in 2007, Higher Ground Youth Center was born. We offered our services free of charge after seeing the community unable to afford a small service fee. The result was overwhelming. Within 2 years we quickly outgrew the church facility we were using and had 60 students every day. In addition we had 30 – 50 students in our waiting list without advertising any of our services. Due to this overwhelming waiting list, Higher Ground reached out to the Pima County Parks and Recreation in late 2010 to propose building a youth center at one of the local parks. This prompted us to become a 501c3 organization and meet with different community leaders.

We soon met with Mr. James Fish and some of the leaders of TUSD. TUSD offered a strong partnership that will provide 6 classrooms from one of the brand new wings at Valencia Middle School in the school year of 2011-2012. Immediately our program grew from 60 students to 130 students with over 40 students in the waiting list. We maxed out our space and still remained free of charge to the community. We also expanded our program to provide homework tutoring, math and reading programs, tackle football for our middle school students, a dedicated boxing team, dance, art, choir, high-school career internships, character development for boys and girls, jujutsu and financial literacy.

For the past 2 years at Valencia Middle School we have served 130 K – 12th grade students with a waiting list of approximately about 50 students. This is all without any advertising or anything spent or marketing. Most of our students came by way of teacher/councilor referrals or from other parents. Over the past 2 years, Higher Ground has won the Expect More Arizona Spotlight of Excellence People's choice award and also was awarded by United Way as Quality After School in Tucson. Higher Ground has been featured in the news for its impact to students and community two times during the course of five years.

Our Achievements

In the past 4 school years, we have seen the following improvements to our students:

- Reading is a key factor in students' learning. If students are not in their reading level and are not interested to read by 4th grade, it is already too late to catch them up. 93% of the parents saw positive improvement in their child's interest in reading and reading level. 80% of our elementary students who participated in our reading program increased their interest in reading

books. And 80% of our students increased their reading level by at least one grade.

- The number one factor for dropping out is a negative attitude and a lack of interest in school. At Higher Ground, 87% of our parents saw an improvement in their child's interest in school and attendance in school, and saw improvement attitude towards academics drastically reducing the risk of students dropping out of school.
- 100% of our students feel that attending Higher Ground has helped them perform better at school.
- 86% of our students feel that we have helped them effectively with their homework.
- 86% of the parents strongly agreed that their students showed great improvement in their academic performance upon attending Higher Ground.
- 100% of the parents stated that their child learned to have positive attitude and behavior towards school and life in general upon attending Higher Ground.
- 93% of parents feel that attending Higher Ground has increased their child's potential success for their future.
- 90% of our students enjoy coming to the Youth Center.
- 90% of the students who attend our program increase their grades and school attendance compared to the school year prior to attending our program.
- 60% of our students become honor rolls students for the 1st time
- We have helped several students get over their anger, anxiety, depression, and other behavioral and emotional related issues without using medication. In some of these students, years of counseling and therapy has failed to resolve it.
- Successfully pulled out students out of special education in just one year of attending our services.
- Students in Higher Ground participate in Reading Programs, Mandatory Homework Tutoring, Backpack checks and organizations, UofA tours, and Field Trips. They also participate in fun recreational activities that they love such as football, boxing, arts and theater, dance, and computers, careers, and technology. These allow the students to be engaged and look forward to something positive in their daily lives.