



Safety & Belonging Work Group

A Children & Youth Community Plan initiative





Table of Contents

Part I. Why We Are Here

- [Where We Are in the CYCP Process](#)
- [What is the CYCP?](#)
- [What is the Youth Needs Assessment?](#)
- [Purpose of the Safety & Belonging Work Group](#)

Part II. What We Learned

- [Youth Voice](#)
- [Data & Indicators](#)
- [The Story Behind the Curve](#)
- [Research on What Works](#)

Part III. What Already Exists

- [Ecosystem Mapping](#)

Part IV. What We Learned from Mapping

- [Synthesis Across Strategic Directions](#)
- [Strengthen Relationships](#)
- [Strengthen Skills](#)
- [Promote Mental Health](#)
- [Strengthen Opportunities](#)
- [Strengthen Systems](#)

Part V. Where We Go Next

- [Selecting a Strategic Direction](#)
- [Action Planning Questions](#)



Overview of How We Got Here - CYCP & Youth Needs Assessment Overview

Where We Are in the Planning Process

CYCP Development Journey

- ☒ Youth Needs Assessment
- ☒ Priority Selection
- ☒ Youth Validation & Solution-Shaping
- ☒ Strategy-Shaping with Partners (**We are here**)
- ☐ Action Planning
- ☐ Leadership Review
- ☐ City Council Approval





What is the CYCP?

- Community-wide plan for children, youth, and families
- Identifies shared priorities and coordinated actions
- Aligns efforts across schools, City departments, nonprofits, and community partners
- Focuses on what we can accomplish together

alexandriava.gov/YouthPlan





What this the Youth Needs Assessment?

- Community-wide snapshot of youth needs
- Designed to elevate the voices of young people, who are often underrepresented in community planning and absent from decision-making spaces, to identify system-level patterns and the issues most affecting their lives and the changes they want to see.
- Not a substitute for targeted outreach to specific high-risk populations, which require additional engagement strategies



DEPARTMENT OF
**COMMUNITY &
HUMAN SERVICES**



ALEXANDRIA **YOUTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT** 2025

The 2025 Youth Needs Assessment, developed by the City of Alexandria and Alexandria City Public Schools, centers youth voices to identify key needs, service gaps, and priorities.

ALEXANDRIA.GOV/DCHS



How We Identified Youth Needs & Priorities

The 2025 Youth Needs Assessment used a mixed-methods, youth-centered approach to understand what children and youth need to thrive and to inform the next Children & Youth Community Plan (CYCP).

Youth Voice

- 94 Youth Listening Sessions
- 1,144 middle and high school students in Round 1
- 500 high school students in Round 2 (validation and solution-building)
- 110 youth engaged through the Youth Speak Up event
- 3,800+ youth comments coded and analyzed using a structured codebook

Surveys & Community Engagement

- Youth Issues Survey
- Parent/Caregiver Listening Session (41 participants)
- Youth Speak Up community event
- Resident Surveys and other community engagement efforts

Quantitative Data

- Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)
- Developmental Assets Survey
- U.S. Census & American Community Survey
- ACPS and Virginia Department of Education data
- CYCP indicators and disparity data

Existing Reports & Assessments

- Community Health Assessment
- Out of School Time Programs Landscape Study
- Food Insecurity Report
- Resident Surveys
- Dying Too Soon Report
- Community Needs Assessments and other local studies

The Youth Needs Assessment centered youth voice while also drawing on surveys, community engagement, administrative data, and existing research to identify community-wide priorities.



From Identifying Needs to Developing Solutions

Civic Action Engagement & Follow-Up Youth Listening Sessions

After the Youth Needs Assessment findings were analyzed, over 700 Alexandria City High School & Middle School students participated in follow-up engagement.

Students:

- Reviewed and validated Youth Needs Assessment findings
- Prioritized issues they felt were most important and actionable
- Explored root causes of community challenges
- Developed and refined recommendations for the next Children & Youth Community Plan (CYCP)

Their input helped shape the strategic directions under the CYCP's three priority areas.





Purpose & Scope of this Work Group



Role of This Work Group

Youth voice helped identify the priority areas and strategic directions. This work group's role is to integrate youth perspectives with family experiences, practitioner expertise, research, data, existing plans, and implementation realities to develop feasible strategies and action plans.

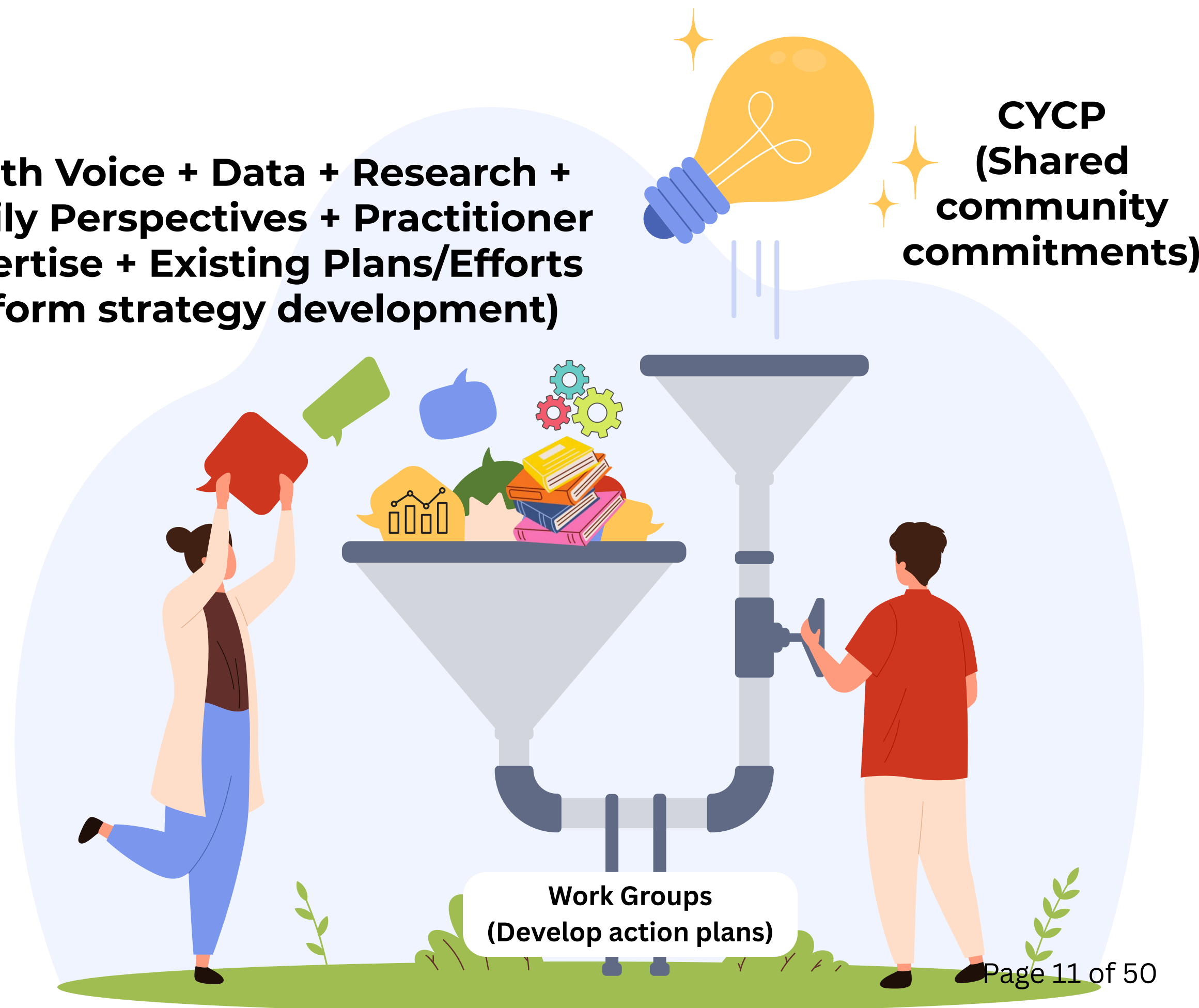
The work group's role is to identify where coordination, partnership, and collective action can strengthen existing efforts.



How the Plan is Developed

Youth Voice + Data + Research + Family Perspectives + Practitioner Expertise + Existing Plans/Efforts (Inform strategy development)

**CYCP
(Shared community commitments)**





What Is the Role of Work Group Members?

During the Planning Process, Members Are Asked To:

Help Shape the Plan

- Review materials before meetings
- Participate in discussions and decision-making
- Help refine strategies, actions, and measures

Serve as a Connector

- Bring perspectives from your organization and networks
- Identify partners who should be engaged
- Share information with relevant stakeholders & your organization/networks

Time Commitment

- Attend monthly work group meetings
- Review occasional pre-reading materials
- Participate in between-meeting follow-up as

Bring Your Expertise

- Share your knowledge, experience, and perspective
- Help interpret youth feedback, data, and research
- Identify opportunities, challenges, and unintended consequences

Connect the Dots

- Highlight existing programs, initiatives, and partnerships
- Identify opportunities for coordination and alignment
- Help ensure we build on what already exists



What we have done so far

Over the past two years we have:

- ☑ Engaged 1,800+ youth
- ☑ Reviewed local data
- ☑ Examined research on what works
- ☑ Mapped existing efforts
- ☑ Identified gaps, fragmentation, and opportunities

Now it's time to use all of that information & choose where coordinated action could make the biggest difference!



Executive Summary

Youth told us:

- They want safe spaces, trusted adults, belonging, and meaningful opportunities.

Data tell us:

- Some indicators are improving, but feelings of safety and belonging remain uneven.

Research tells us:

- Relationships, skills, opportunities, and supportive systems matter.

Ecosystem mapping showed:

- Alexandria has many strong efforts already underway.
- Gaps remain in access and awareness.
- Coordination is inconsistent.
- Many opportunities exist to strengthen existing work rather than create new programs.

Question for the Work Group:

Where can coordination and partnership make the biggest difference over the next five years?



Youth Voice





What Youth Want vs. Experience

Youth Want

- Respect from adults
- Safe spaces to connect
- Support for mental health
- Fair responses to conflict

Youth Experience

- Bullying & peer conflict
- Trust gaps with adults
- Social media escalation
- Stress & emotional overload



Student Quotes

Youth Want:

"A lot of community events."

"More coaches and mentors."

"A community where disagreeing is okay with people in real life and on the internet."

"My ideal Alexandria is for bullying to be more of a concern so kids feel safer going to school."

"No crime."

"Safer crosswalks."

"More afterschool clubs so kids can be in a community and have a safe space."

"More safe spaces for queer/trans youth."

Youth Experience:

"Not enough after-school programming."

"Bus schedule leaves no time for after-school activities."

"I'm struggling making new friends."

"Kids can't be themselves without getting judged."

"There are almost no places for kids to hang out with friends."

"Many kids have depression due to not feeling like having a trusted adult."

"Bullying isn't taken seriously."

"People are sexually assaulted in bathrooms and cannot report."

"Security guards fighting with students."

What resonates? What feels new?



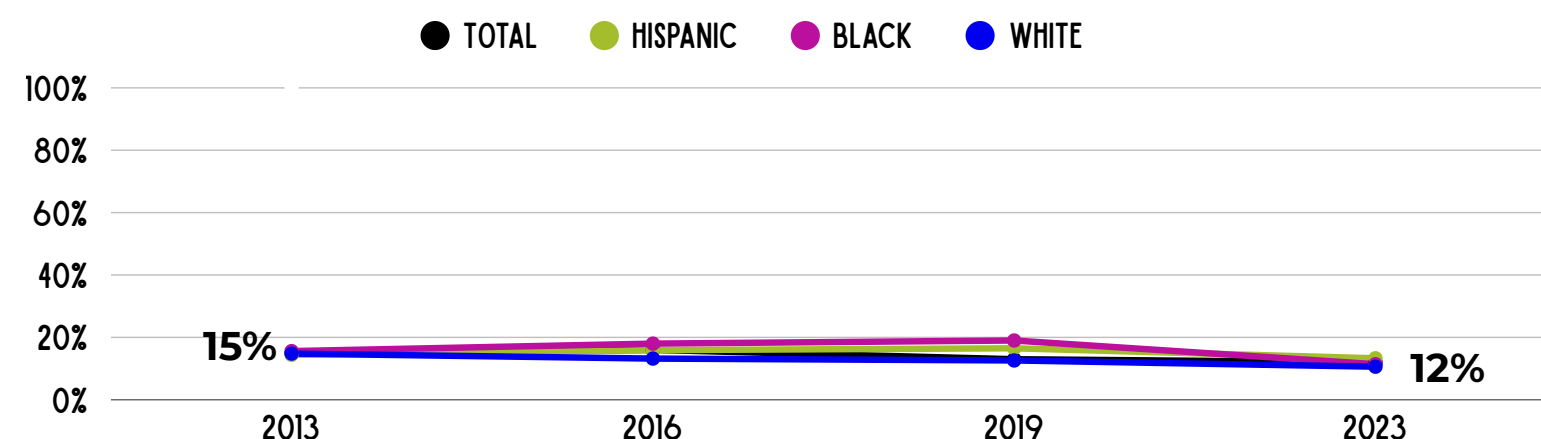
What the data say about how we are doing



How We are Doing (Behavior & Incidents)

Been in a physical fight in past 12 months

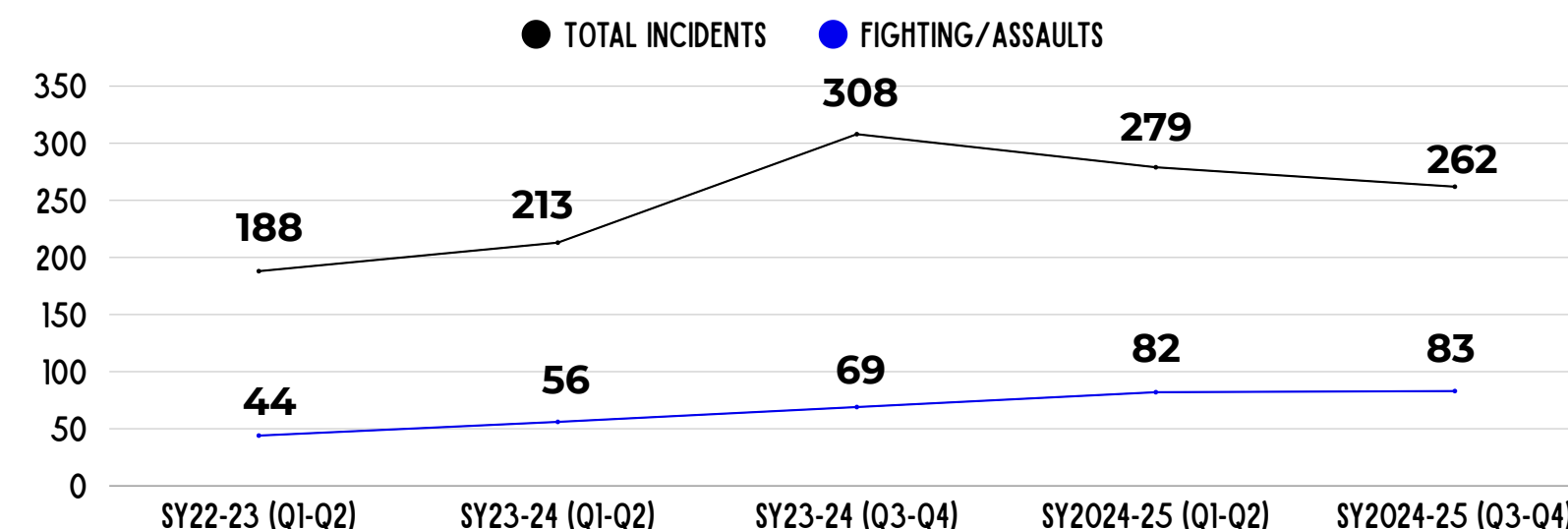
Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 10th & 12th Graders, 2013-2023
of Survey Respondents: 996



- Overall trends improved by 33%
- Fighting rates decreased for all groups from 2019 to 2023.
- Hispanic students report being involved in fights slightly more often (13%) than Black and White students (11%).

Incident Reports by Type (Fighting/Assaults)

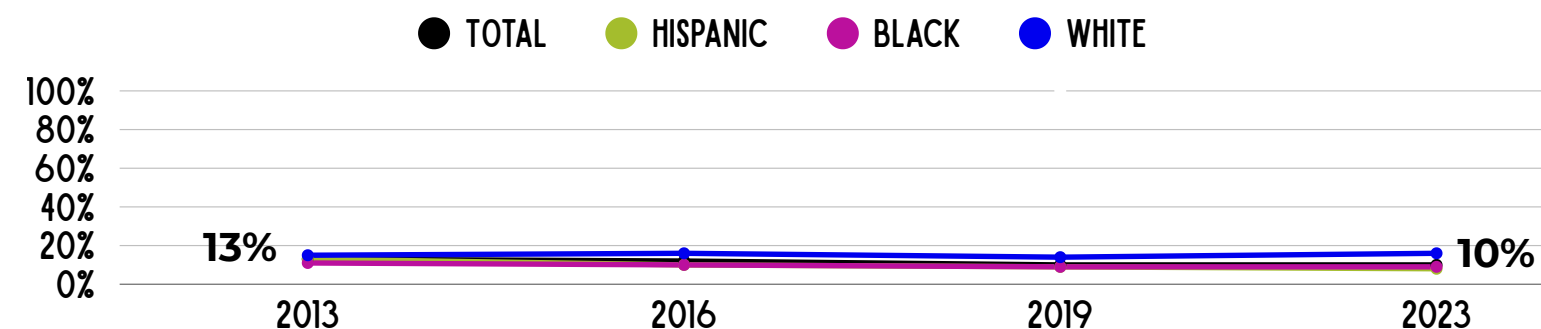
Source: ACPS School Safety Data Reports, 2022-2025



The data show **progress in reducing overall incidents** but a **persistent rise in interpersonal conflict**, highlighting the need for **prevention strategies** that address relationships, stress, and school climate, not only enforcement.

Bullied on school property in past 12 months by Race/Ethnicity

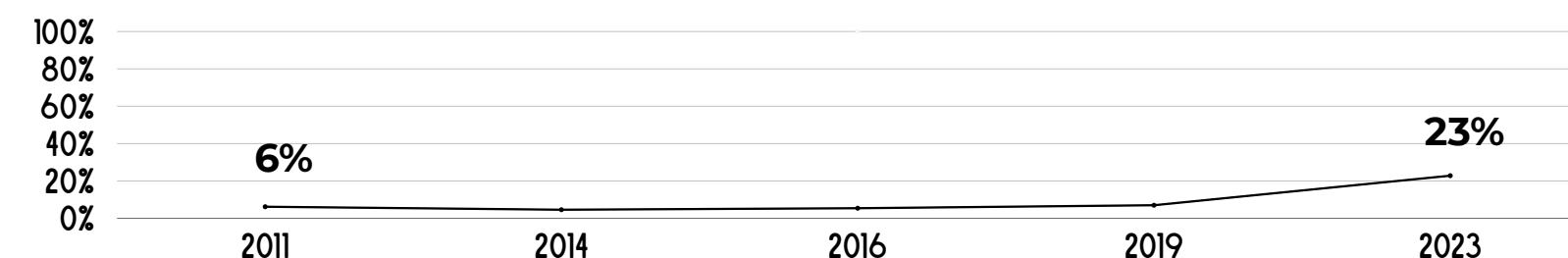
Source: YRBS, Alexandria, 2013-2023



- Overall trends improved by 23%.
- White students consistently report the highest rates.

Didn't attend school due to feeling unsafe at school or on way there in past 30 days

Source: YRBS, 2011-2023



Overall trends increased by 283%

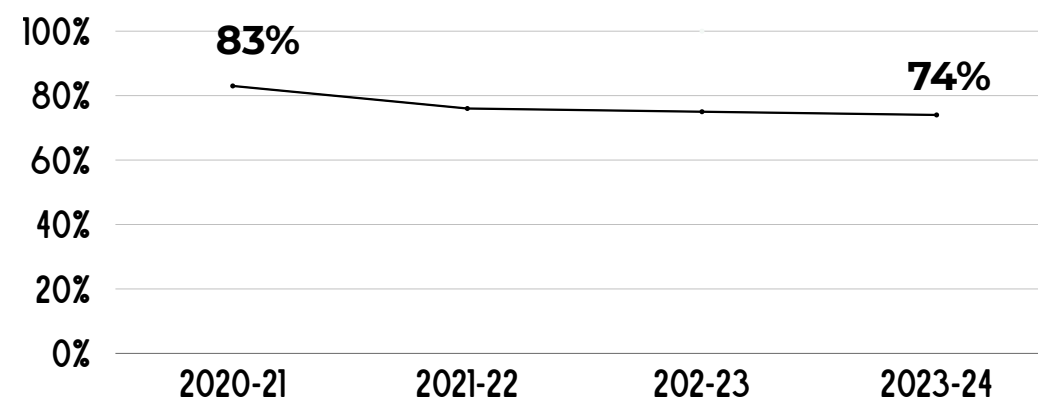


How We are Doing (Belonging & Climate)

ACHS Students Feel Welcome at School

Source: ACPS Climate Survey Dashboard, 2025

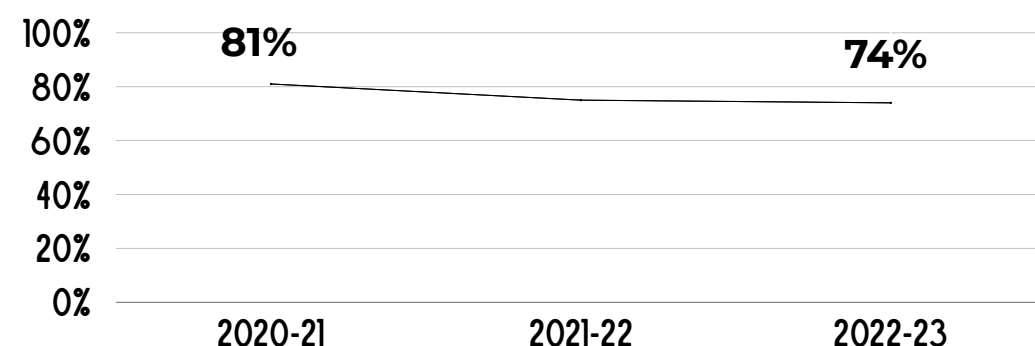
Overall trends declined by 11%



Adults at ACPS Care About All Students

Source: ACPS Climate Survey Dashboard, 2024

Overall trends declined by 10%

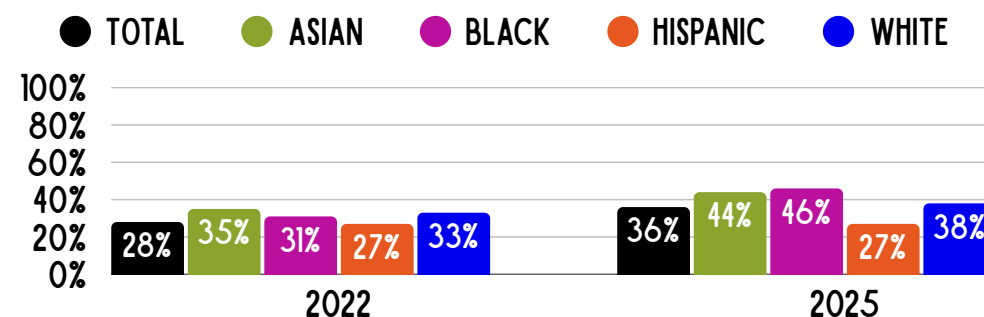


Caring School Climate By Race/Ethnicity

Source: Developmental Assets Survey, 2025

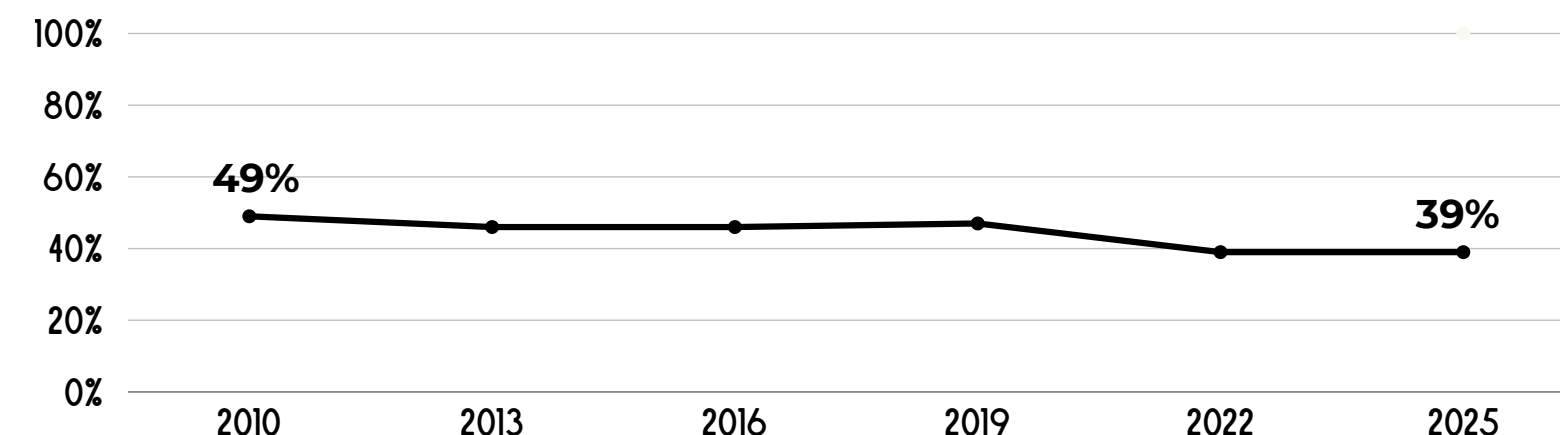
Overall trends improved by 29%

Hispanic students consistently report the lowest levels.



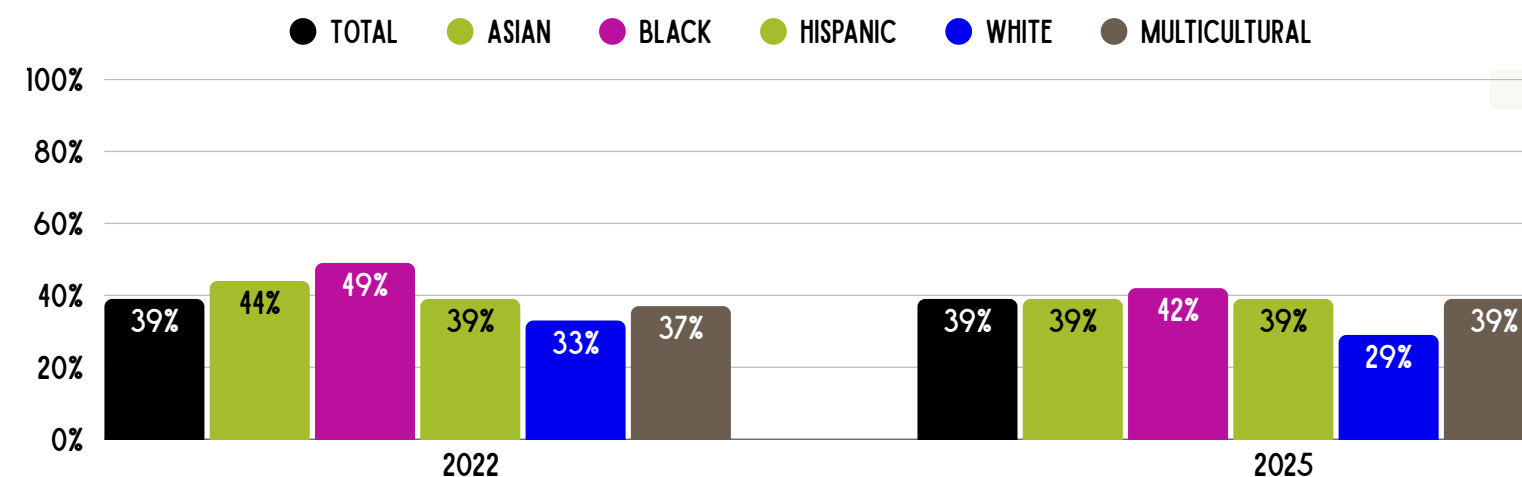
Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood

Source: Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth for ACPS© 2013-2025 by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN.

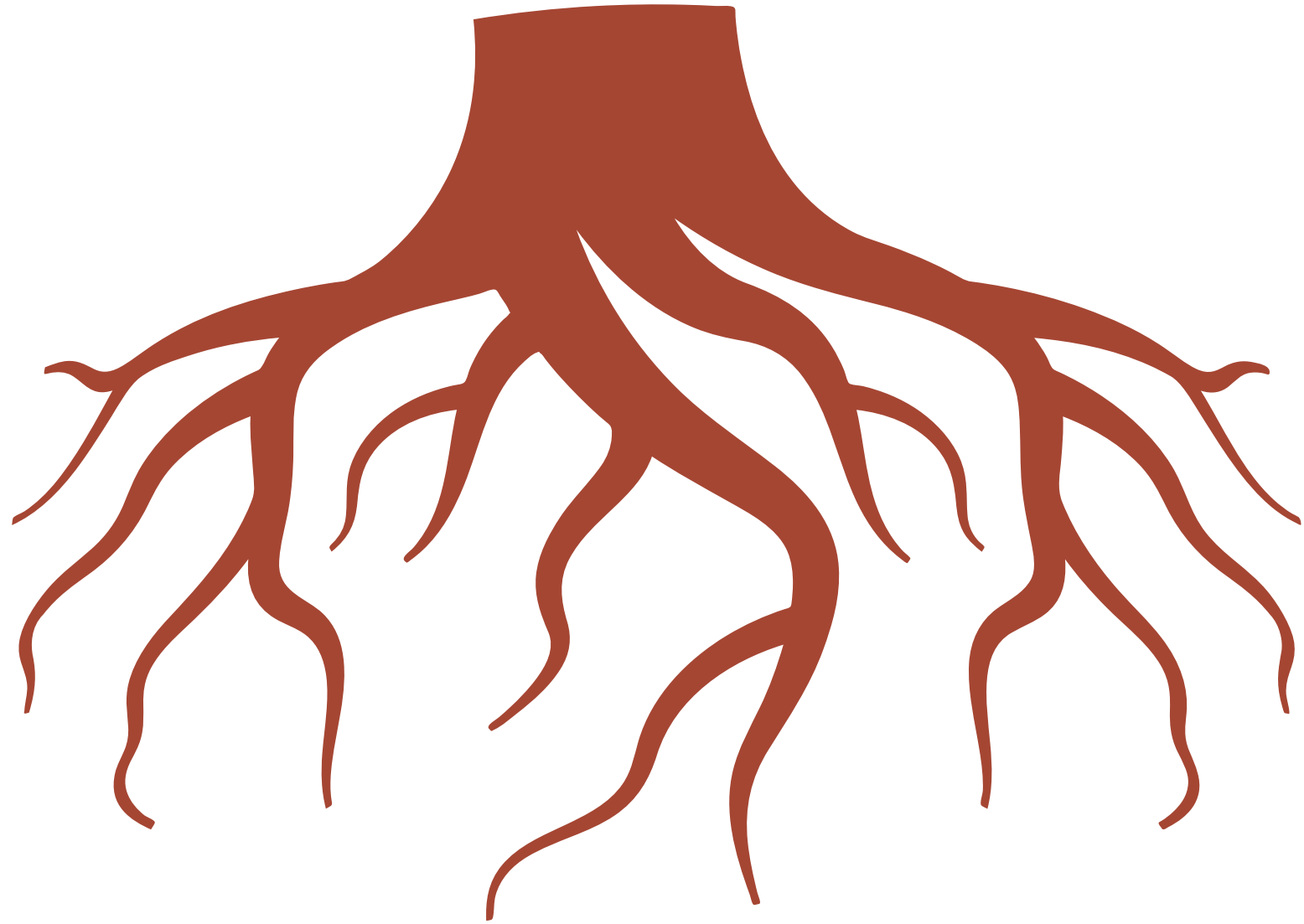


Overall trends declined by 20%

Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood By Race/Ethnicity, 2022 & 2025



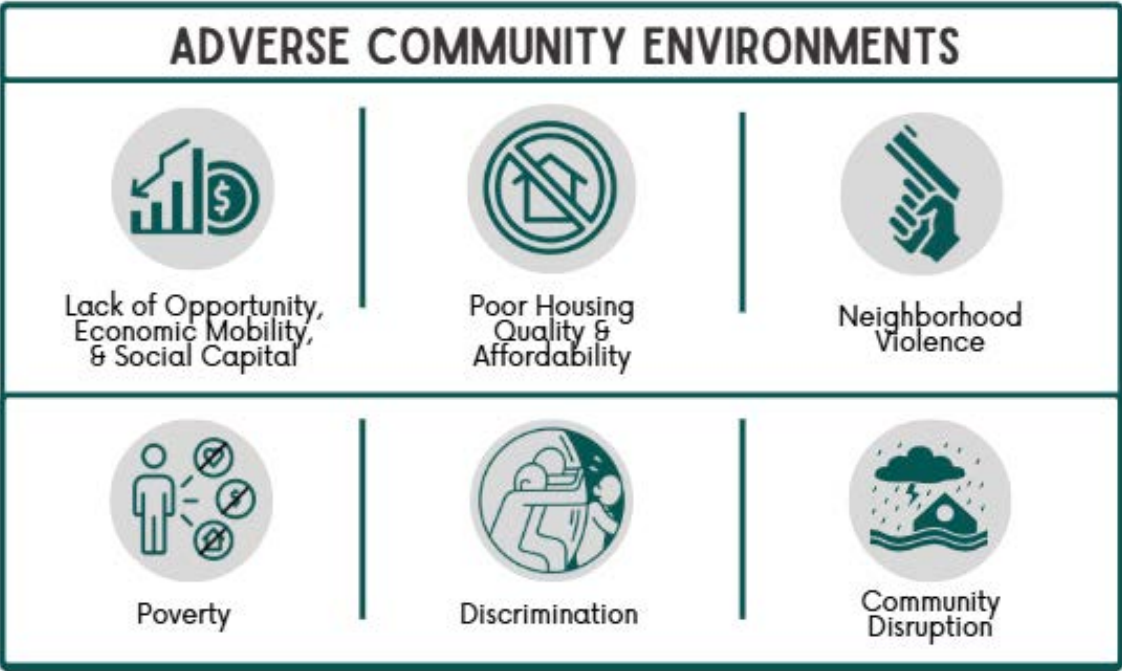
White students consistently report the lowest feelings of safety.



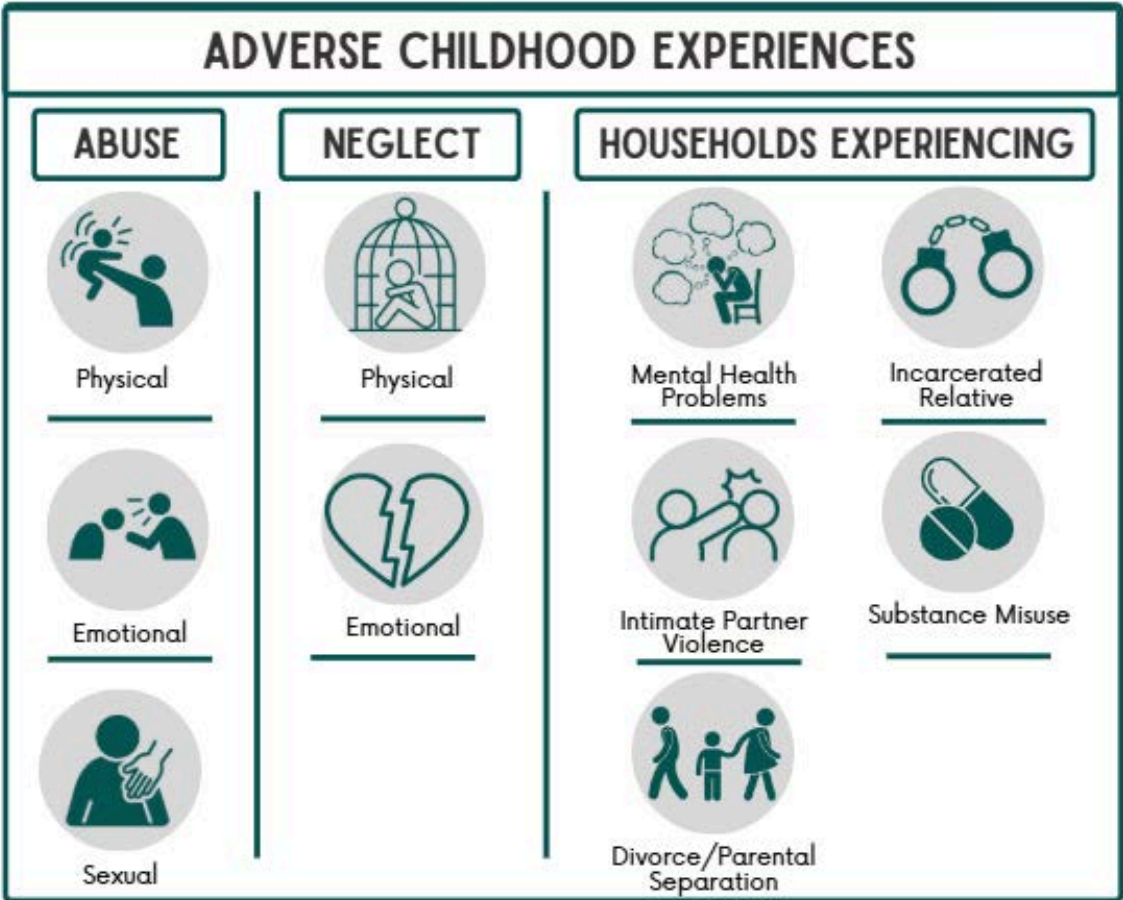
—

The Story Behind the Curve

Conditions That Contribute to Poor Outcomes



Create the conditions for...



which increase the
likelihood for...



Discussion: Where do we see these root causes show up here?

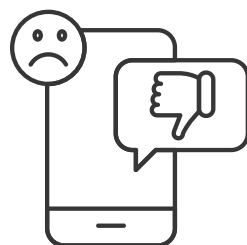


From Students' Perspectives: What's driving violence and conflict



Root Causes Named by Youth

Unaddressed trauma, weak relationships, and limited supports escalate conflict rather than prevent it.



Unmoderated peer conflict & online escalation



"Social media has a big contribution to fights."

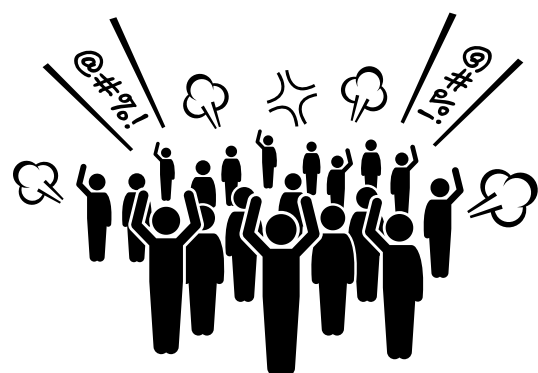


Unaddressed stress, trauma, and emotional overload

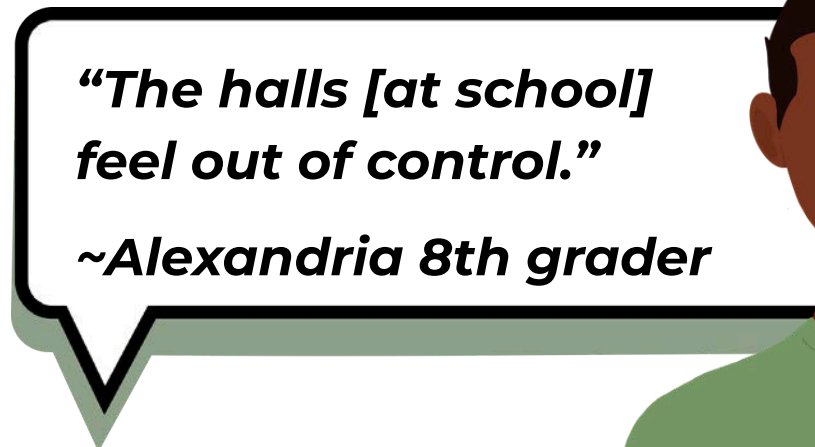


"May be bringing family violence to school. Doesn't help to punish but to try to understand where violence is coming from."

~Alexandria 12th grader

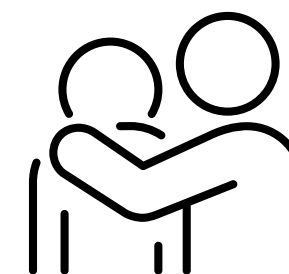


Environments that intensify conflict rather than prevent it



"The halls [at school] feel out of control."

~Alexandria 8th grader

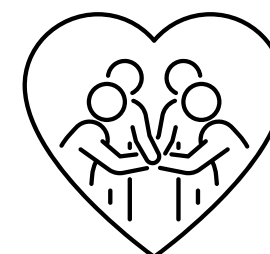


Lack of trust in adults and inconsistent system responses



"Students do not trust adults at school so they do not tell anyone about problems or conflict."

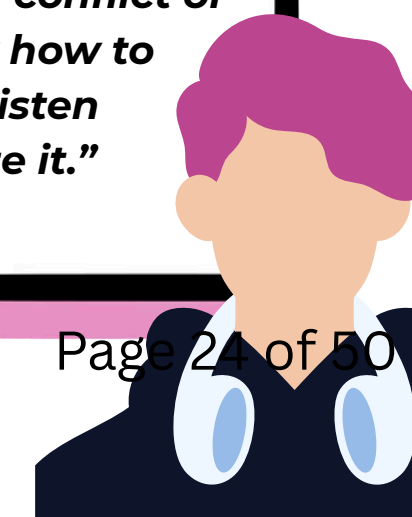
~Alexandria 12th grader



Limited opportunities for belonging, connection, and positive engagement

"Lack of access to support and lack of trust in adults mean that students have less ways to deal with conflict or people to talk to that know how to effectively help someone. Listen empathetically, not escalate it."

~Alexandria 12th grader





What Works

*Evidence-based approaches that
can guide strategy development*

Conditions That Promote Thriving Youth

EQUITABLE & TRAUMA-INFORMED SYSTEMS



Fair policing practices & restorative justice



Access to affordable & safe housing



Integrated Social Services



Community-driven policy decisions & practices



Economic Development



Health-Promoting Infrastructure



Equitably-Resourced Public Education

Create the conditions for...

RESILIENT COMMUNITIES



Safe & Stable Neighborhoods



Healthy & Supported Individuals & Families



Community Advocacy & Agency



Environments that Promote Social Connectedness



Social & Economic Mobility



High-Quality Education & Enrichment Opportunities

which increases the likelihood for...

THRIVING YOUTH



Experience School Success



Help Others Informally



Value Diversity



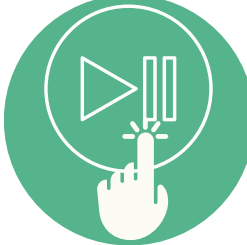
Maintain Good Personal Health



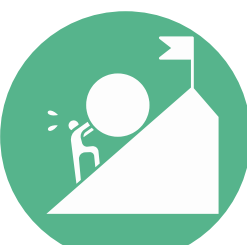
Exhibit Leadership



Resist Danger



Control Impulsive Behavior



Overcome Adversity

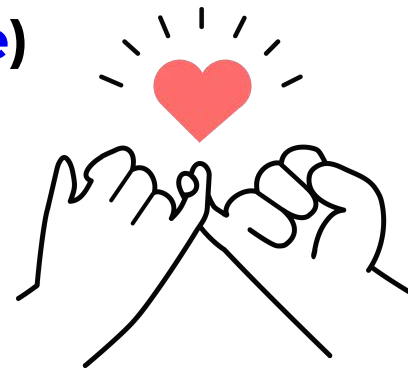
**Discussion: Which protective factors are strongest here?
Which need strengthening?**

What Works to Strengthen Youth Safety & Belonging in Other Communities

Research on youth development and violence prevention shows that effective community strategies typically focus on four interconnected areas:

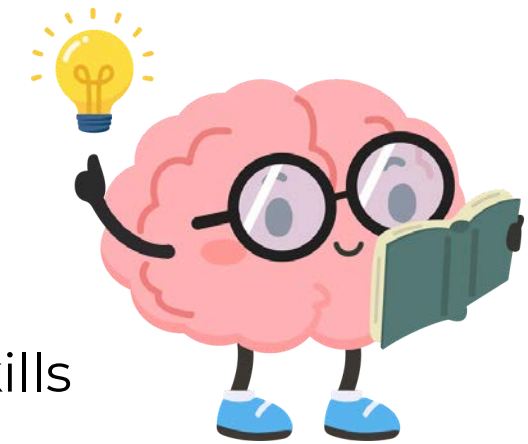
Strengthen Relationships (example)

- Mentoring programs
- Restorative practices
- Caring adult relationships
- Peer support systems



Strengthen Skills (example)

- Conflict resolution education
- Emotional regulation training
- Mental health literacy
- Communication and coping skills



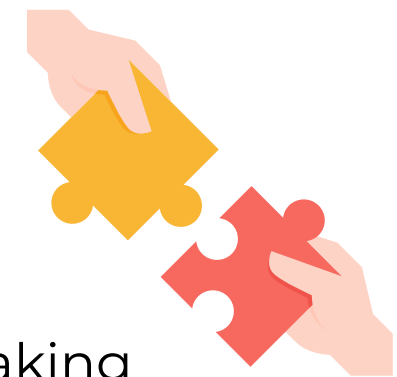
Strengthen Opportunities (example)

- Afterschool & enrichment programs
- Youth employment & leadership opportunities
- Arts, sports, & community activities



Strengthen Systems (example)

- Policies that prioritize prevention
- Community partnerships
- Staff trainings
- Youth engagement in decision-making



Prevention works when these strategies are combined. Communities across the country have implemented strategies that reduce youth violence and increase belonging. Let's take a look at some examples!

What Works in Other Communities



Strengthening Relationships: Mentoring & Supportive Adult Connections

Example: [Becoming a Man \(BAM\) Program](#) (Chicago, IL)

Chicago Public Schools partnered with the nonprofit Youth Guidance to implement BAM, a school-based mentoring and cognitive behavioral program for young men.

Results from a randomized study found:

- 45–50% reduction in violent crime arrests among participating youth
- Significant improvements in school engagement and attendance

The program focuses on mentoring relationships, emotional regulation, and decision-making skills.

Why it worked:

Students developed trusted relationships with adults and learned tools to manage conflict and stress.



What Works in Other Communities



Strengthening Skills: Conflict Resolution & Social Emotional Learning

Example: Restorative Justice in Schools (Oakland, California)

Oakland Unified School District implemented restorative justice practices across schools to address conflict and repair harm.

Results included:

- 87% reduction in suspensions at one high school
- Significant reductions in fights and classroom disruptions
- Improved student perceptions of fairness and belonging

Why it worked:

Students learned communication, accountability, and conflict resolution skills, while adults shifted away from punitive discipline.

Oakland Unified School District

restorative justice

implementation guide

A Whole School Approach



What Works in Other Communities



Strengthening Opportunities: Afterschool & Youth Development Programs

Example: **Boston After School & Beyond** (Boston, MA)

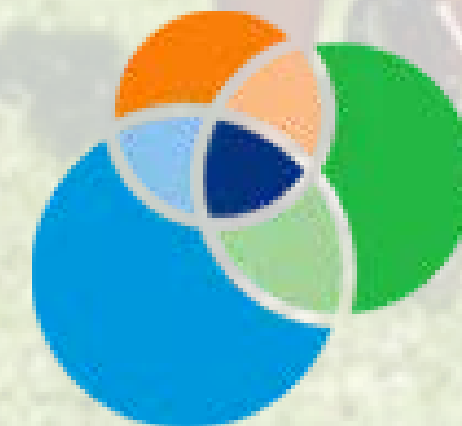
Boston invested in expanding structured afterschool programming and youth employment opportunities.

Results:

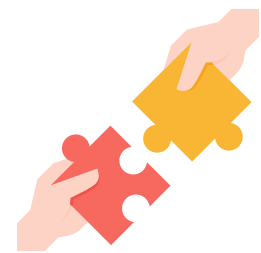
- Youth participating in structured programs were less likely to engage in violence or risky behaviors
- Higher school attendance and academic engagement
- Increased connection to supportive adults

Why it worked:

Programs created safe spaces, positive peer groups, and meaningful activities during high-risk hours.



**Boston
After School
& Beyond**



Strengthening Systems: Youth Leadership

Example: Minnesota Youth Congress (Statewide)

A statewide body of youth leaders (ages 13–19) who advise the Governor, legislature, and state agencies. Youth identify priorities, conduct outreach, and influence policy decisions affecting young people.

Results:

- Youth-informed legislation and policy recommendations
- Increased visibility of youth priorities
- Strengthened civic engagement and leadership among youth
- Ongoing mechanism for youth voice in government decision-making

Why it worked:

Youth are embedded in formal decision-making structures, collaborating directly with policymakers while building skills in advocacy, research, and public speaking



Prevention Pyramid

Prevention Happens at Multiple Levels

Effective systems invest across all three levels.

Tier 3: Intervention

*for youth already involved
in violence or serious
conflict*

Examples:

- diversion programs
- therapeutic supports
- reentry supports
- intensive mentoring

Tier 2: Targeted Prevention

*for youth who are
at elevated risk*

Examples:

- mentoring
- conflict mediation
- violence interruption
- restorative practices
- case management

Tier 1: Universal Prevention

for all youth

Examples:

- school climate initiatives
- youth development programs
- afterschool programs
- social emotional learning



Recommended Strategies from Youth



Strategies Youth Suggested

for more details, see “Youth Strategy Brief on Safety & Belonging”



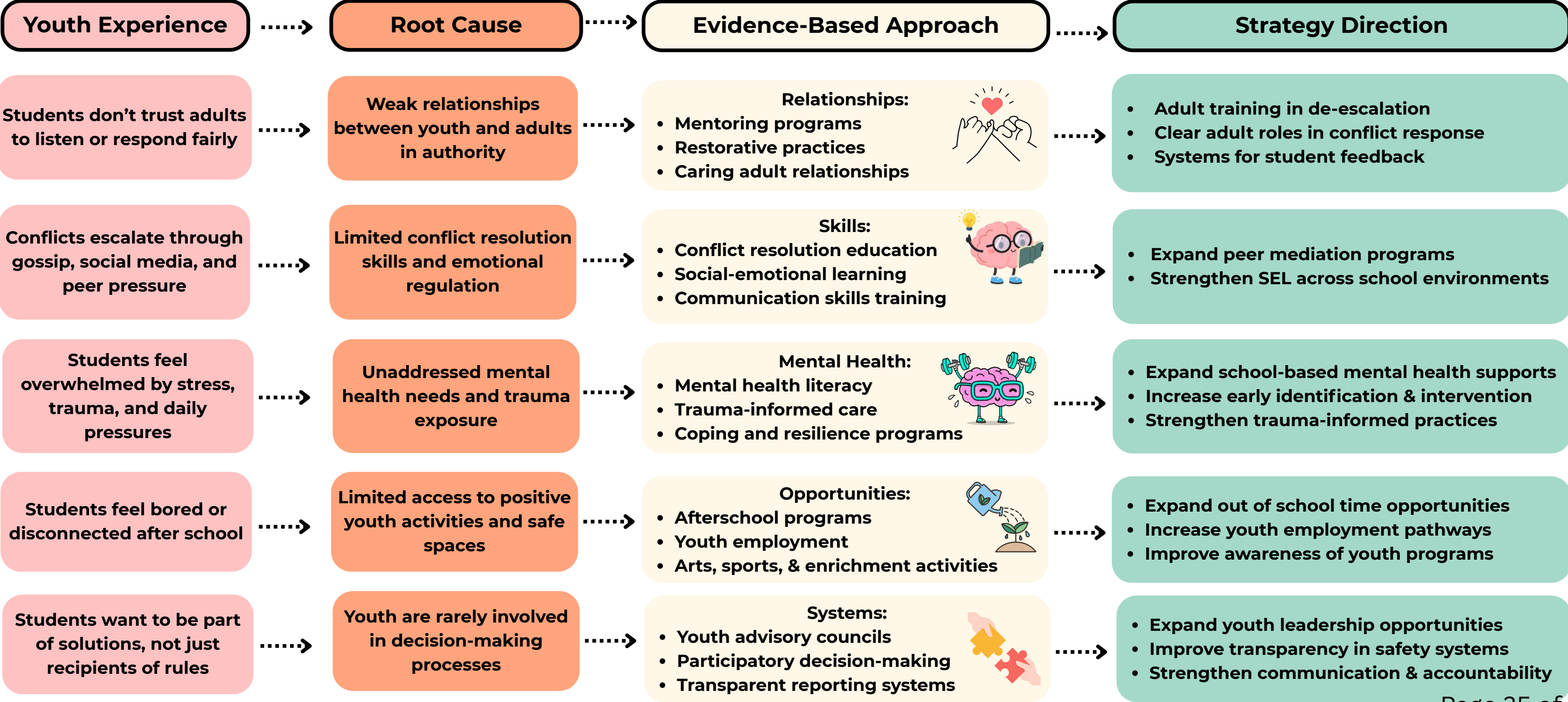
Community-Based

- Strengthen adult roles, training & accountability
- Expand access to safe afterschool and enrichment opportunities
- Improve community-level safety conditions
- Expand mental health and therapeutic supports
- Build students' conflict-resolution and coping skills
- Expand youth leadership and peer-led solutions

School-Based (mostly)

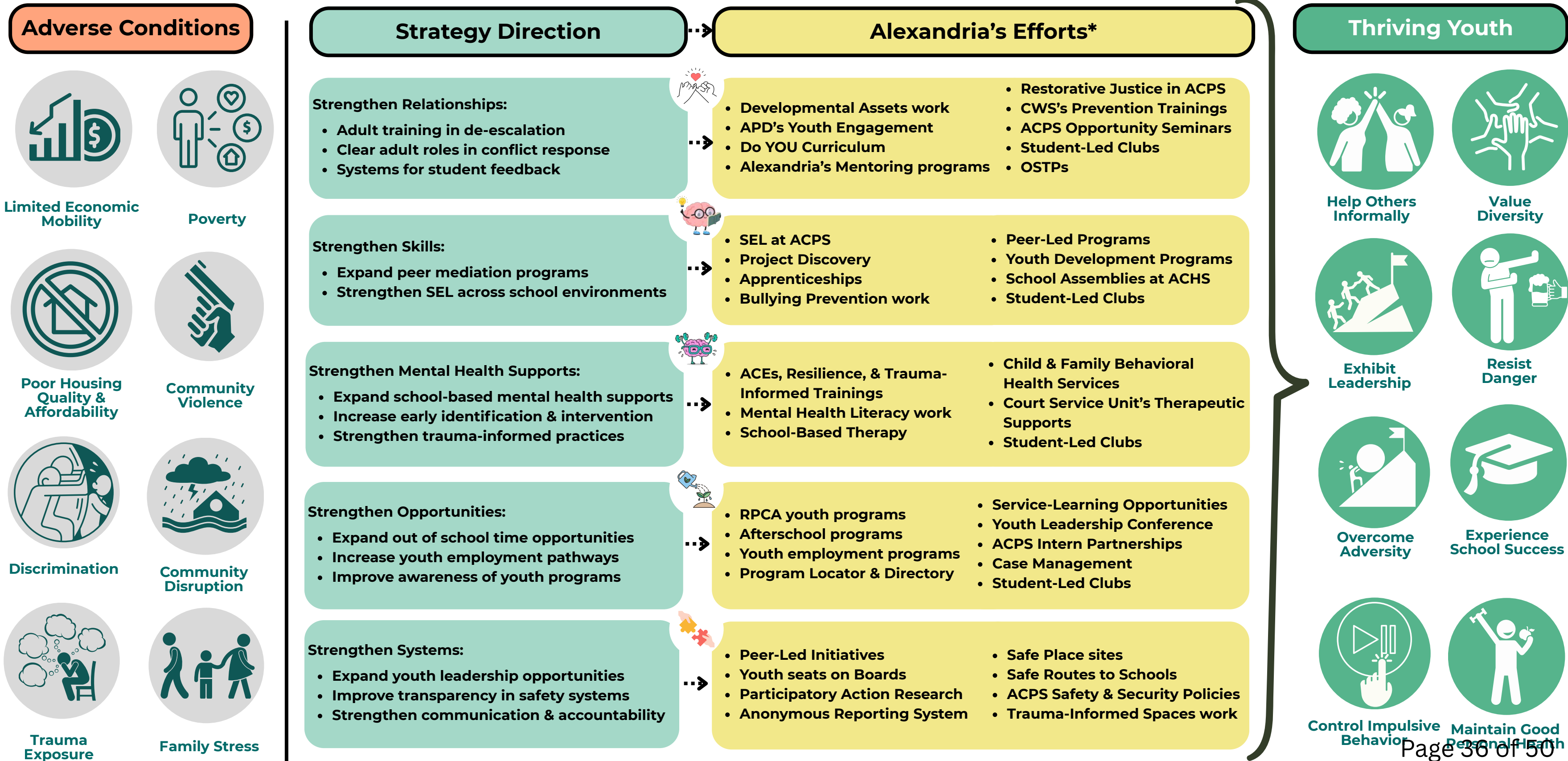
- Strengthen reporting systems and follow-through
- Improve transparency and communication across systems
- Refine security and enforcement systems
- Improve security staffing, training, and oversight
- Use surveillance and technology strategically to improve weapons prevention and detection

Connecting Youth Voice to Solutions



Alexandria Prevention System Map

This view shows how efforts are distributed across prevention levels and strategy areas.



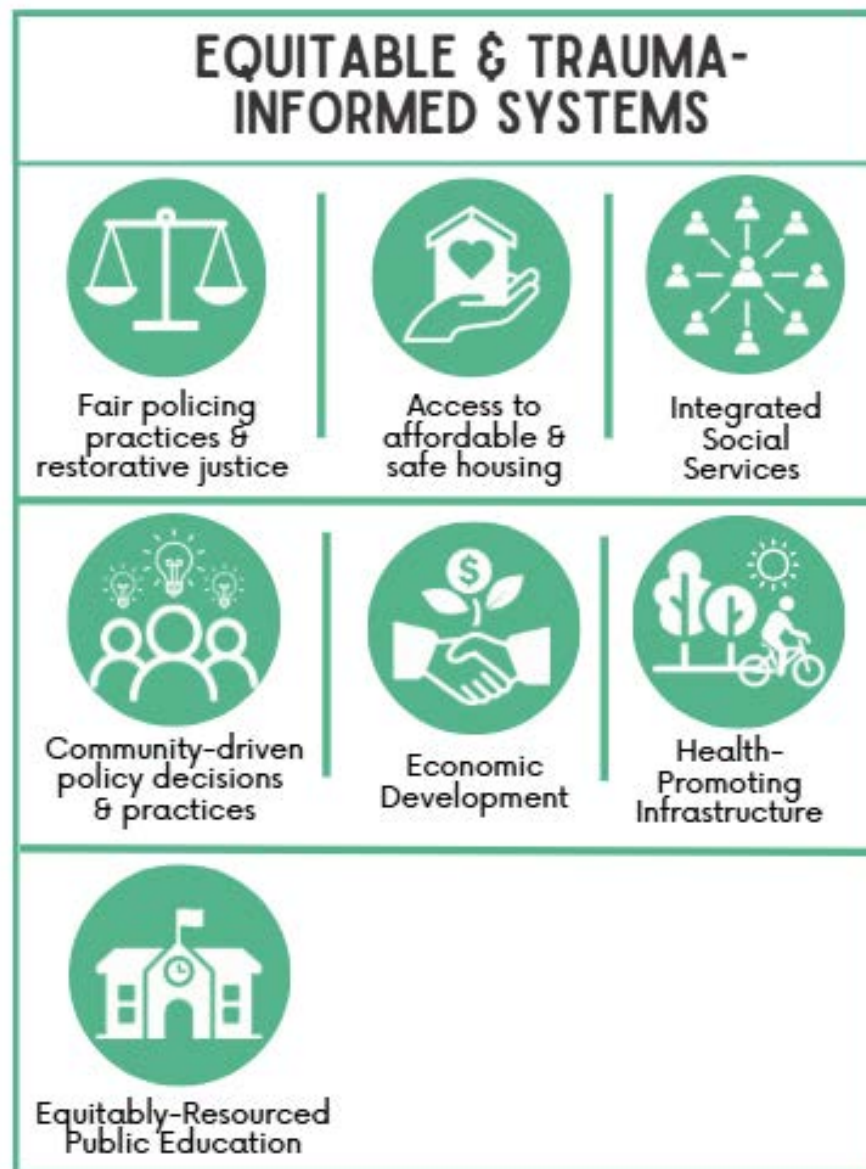


Partners



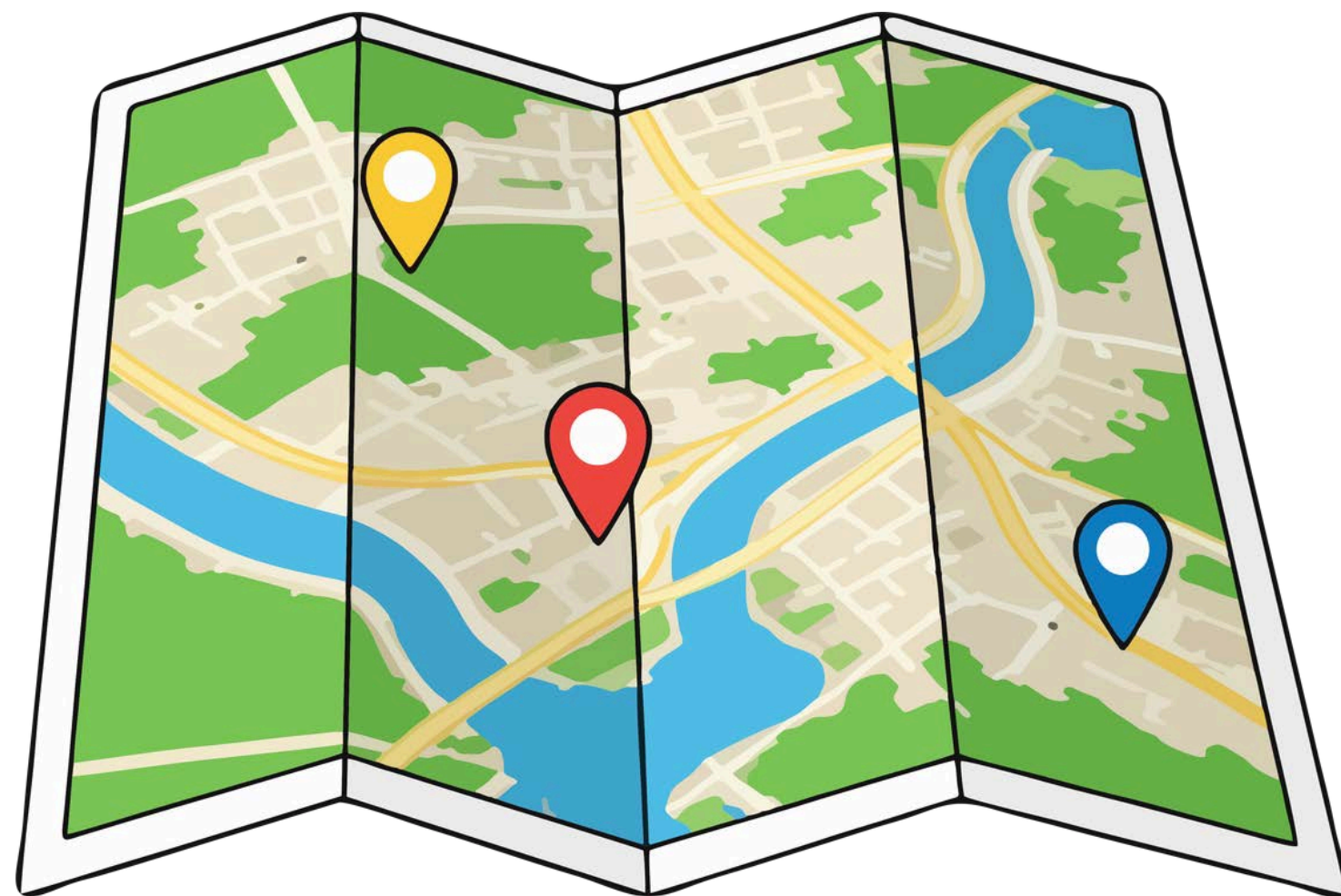
Who Has a Role to Play?

Who are we missing? What partners or existing efforts should we connect with?



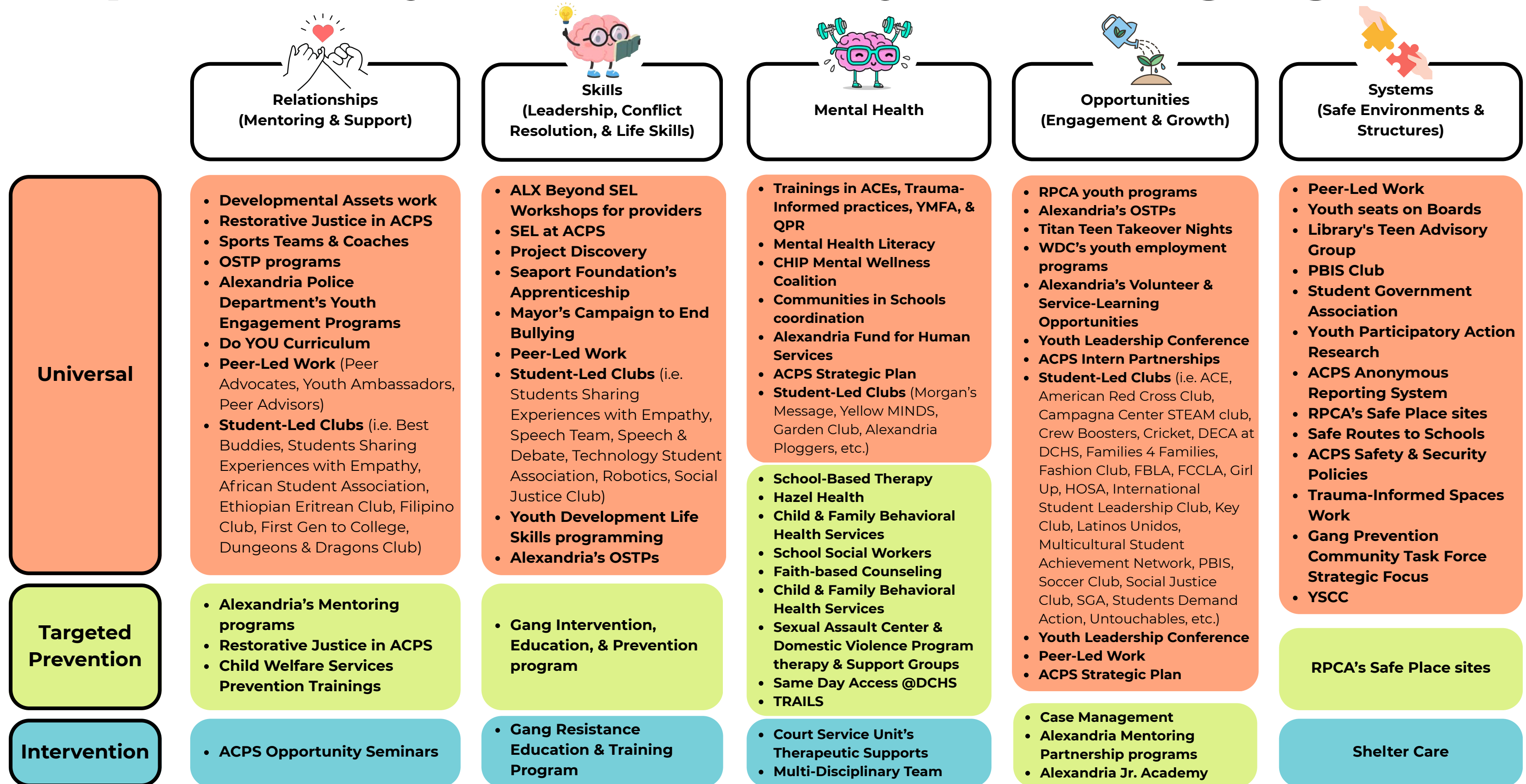
Community-Based Recommendations from youth:

- Train adults
- Expand access to OSTP
- Improve community safety
- Expand mental health supports
- Build conflict-resolution and coping skills
- Expand youth leadership



Ecosystem Mapping Findings

Map of Ecosystem of Safety & Belonging Efforts*





What Are We Learning Across the Entire Safety & Belonging Ecosystem?

Strengths



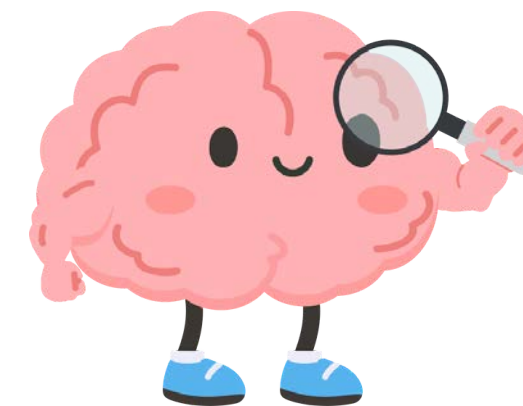
- Alexandria has extensive youth-serving infrastructure
- Strong partnerships and leadership structures exist
- Many youth-led opportunities already exist
- Multiple initiatives are already working toward similar goals

Challenges

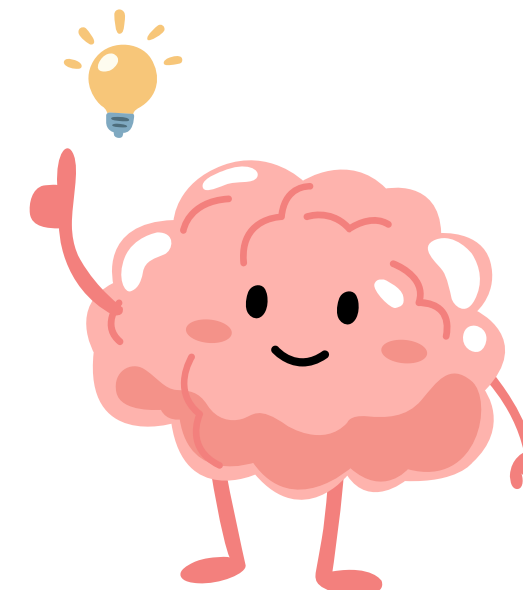


- Youth and families still experience the system as fragmented
- Navigation depends heavily on trusted adults and informal relationships
- Awareness and transportation barriers limit participation
- Access is uneven across schools, neighborhoods, and populations

Cross-Cutting Themes



- Trusted adults matter
- Coordination matters as much as creating new programs
- Many opportunities involve connecting existing efforts rather than creating new ones



Emerging Opportunity

- Move from isolated programs to connected pathways.



Analysis of our Map: Strengthening Relationships

Youth need more intentional pathways connecting them to caring adults and opportunities over time

What we have (areas of alignment)

- Lots of adults who care about young people.
- Mentors, coaches, club advisors, teachers, youth workers, and peer leaders.
- Many opportunities for youth to connect and belong.

What's getting in the way (Gaps & Fragmentation)

- Some youth have many connections while others have very few.
- Youth often need an adult to help them find opportunities.
- Programs aren't always connected to one another.

What we could do (Opportunities)

- Make it easier for youth to move from one supportive relationship or program to another.
- Help trusted adults connect youth to additional opportunities.
- Build a stronger "web of support" around youth.



Analysis of our Map: Strengthening Skills

We're teaching similar skills in many places, but we're not always reinforcing them together.

What we have (areas of alignment)

- Schools, clubs, mentoring programs, and prevention programs all teach important life skills.
- Youth have many chances to learn communication, leadership, and conflict resolution.

What's getting in the way (Gaps & Fragmentation)

- Different programs teach these skills differently.
- What youth learn in one setting may not be reinforced elsewhere.
- Online conflict is growing faster than our prevention efforts.

What we could do (Opportunities)

- Use more shared language and approaches.
- Expand peer-to-peer leadership and prevention efforts.
- Help adults reinforce the same skills across settings.



Analysis of our Map: Promoting Mental Health

Mental health supports exist, but finding the right supports can be confusing

What we have (areas of alignment)

- A lot of mental health resources.
- Strong school and community partnerships.
- Growing awareness of mental wellness.

What's getting in the way (Gaps & Fragmentation)

- Youth and families often don't know where to go.
- Services can feel overwhelming or hard to access.
- Stigma, transportation, language, and cultural barriers still exist.

What we could do (Opportunities)

- Make the system easier to understand.
- Strengthen referrals and warm handoffs.
- Invest more in prevention, belonging, and connection—not just crisis response.



Analysis of our Ecosystem: Strengthening Opportunities

Alexandria has a lot of opportunities, but access depends too heavily on awareness, transportation, and adult connectors

What we have (areas of alignment)

- Clubs.
- Sports.
- Jobs.
- Leadership programs.
- Mentoring and volunteer opportunities.

What's getting in the way (Gaps & Fragmentation)

- Youth can't participate in opportunities they don't know about.
- Transportation remains a major barrier.
- Access often depends on whether an adult helps make the connection.

What we could do (Opportunities)

- Improve outreach and awareness.
- Make opportunities easier to find.
- Create clearer pathways from one opportunity to the next.
- Support ALX Beyond's existing work.



Analysis of our Ecosystem: Strengthening Systems

We have many bodies that meet and talk well, but coordinating action together is still hard.

What we have (areas of alignment)

- Strong partnerships.
- Many groups focused on youth well-being.
- Growing commitment to prevention and youth voice.

What's getting in the way (Gaps & Fragmentation)

- Coordination doesn't always lead to action.
- Systems still rely heavily on individual champions.
- Youth and families often experience services as disconnected.

What we could do (Opportunities)

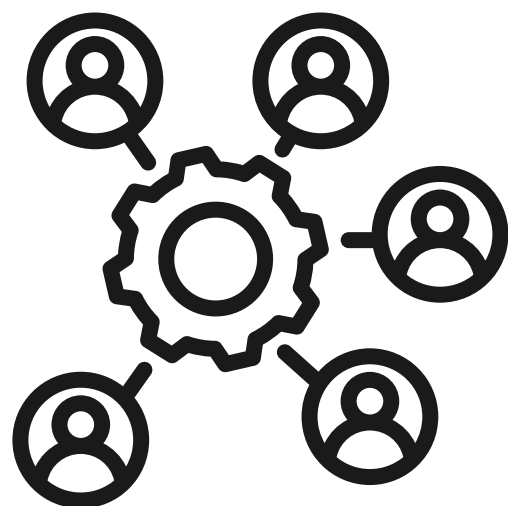
- Strengthen communication and referrals across organizations.
- Build more consistent ways of working together.
- Focus on connecting existing efforts instead of creating new ones.



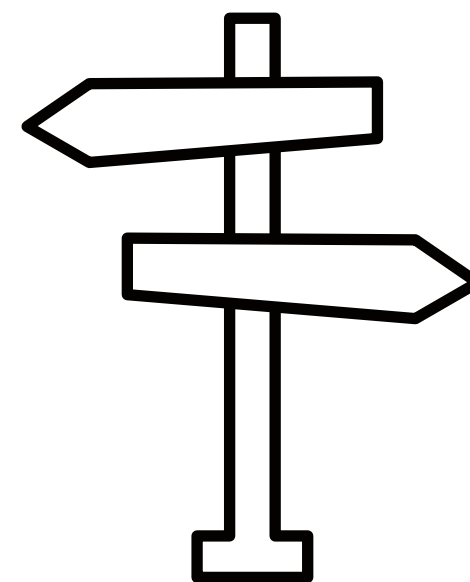
Patterns Appearing Across All Five Strategic Directions



Alexandria has many programs, partnerships, youth leaders, and caring adults.

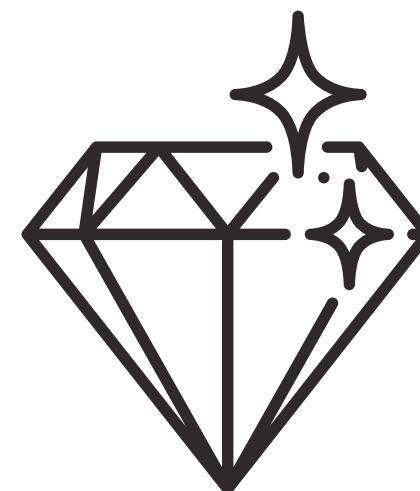


Our challenge is helping youth and families experience our efforts as a connected system rather than a collection of separate opportunities.



We struggle with:

- Navigation
- Awareness
- Referrals
- Transportation
- Consistent implementation
- Cross-system coordination



CYCP's greatest value may be helping existing efforts become more connected, coordinated, and easier for youth and families to navigate



How CYCP Partners Can Support ALX Beyond

Improve Awareness & Navigation

- Promote Program Locator
- Share opportunities through existing networks
- Strengthen school/community communication channels

Strengthen Workforce Development

- Expand trauma-informed training
- Share professional learning opportunities
- Facilitate peer learning across providers

Improve Coordination

- Bring OSTP opportunities into existing coordination structures
- Align communications efforts

Advocate for System-Level Supports

- Shared-use agreements
- Funding
- Transportation solutions
- Equity-focused expansion

Questions:

- What would you add?
- Where do you see your organization contributing?



What are we going to do?

Selecting a direction & building an action plan



Where can this group make the greatest contribution over the next year?

The CYCP is intended to align, coordinate, and strengthen community efforts, not solve every problem in Alexandria.

01

Feasibility: Which strategic direction is most ready for coordinated action? and what role could your organization play?

02

Impact: Which strategic direction could have the greatest impact on youth safety and belonging?

03

Equity: Which strategic direction would most improve outcomes for youth and families who currently face the greatest barriers?

04

Systems Change: Where could better coordination make the biggest difference?