

# The Power of Connection in Schools for Engaging System-Involved Youth to Ensure Belonging, Wellbeing, and Success

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Santa Cruz County Superintendent of Schools

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Slides: [sccoe.link/cpoc](https://sccoe.link/cpoc)



# Our Focus



**Introduction**

**A Crisis of Hope**

**Engagement & Connection**

**Transformative Programs**

**Looking Forward**

# Who Said This? When?

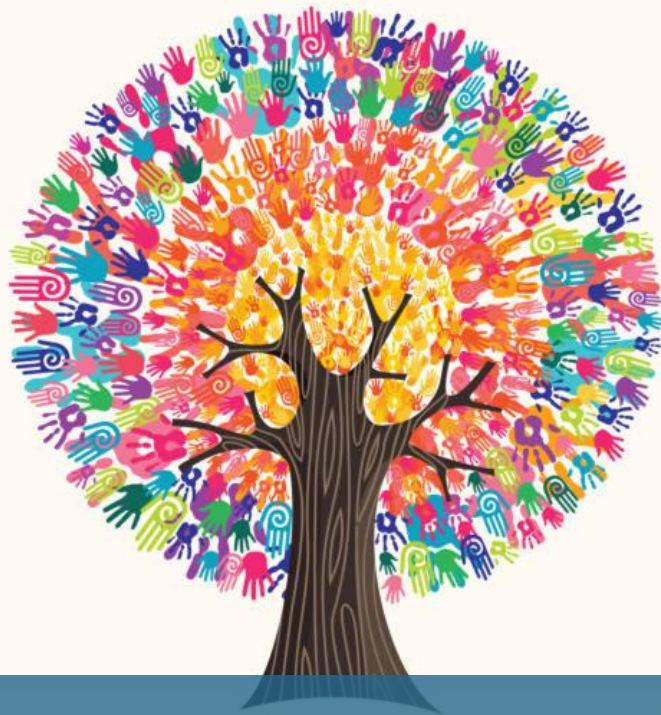
“

These children really don't have a lobby speaking for them and do not have parents that can be clamoring down here because they cannot afford to take the bus ride, or cannot afford to fly down here, and they are the ones who are of concern. They have been ignored in the past. We are fighting for them...but the fact is that we are just awakening to their needs. I think we have a special responsibility to those people who are less fortunate than we are, to make sure that the money that is being expended is going to be used so that the next generation will not have to have these kinds of hearings.

”

# A Crisis of Hope





**Hope in Connection**  
**Hope in Belonging**



# Our Why



# Amir

18% chance he is at grade  
level in language arts





# Amir

50% have endured four or more adverse childhood experiences







# Amir

16% chance that he is likely  
to consider suicide in the  
last 12 months  
(2.5x higher if LGBTQ+)





# Amir

36% chance that he  
experiences anxiety or  
depression





# Amir

32% chance that he feels  
sad or helpless every day





# Amir

37% chance he will qualify  
him for Special Education





# Amir

67% Chance he will  
graduate from high school





# Amir

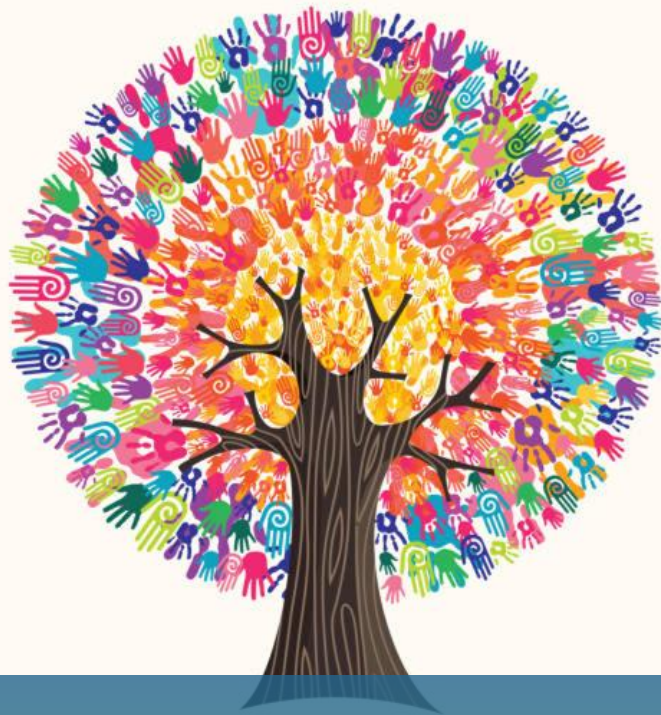
6% Chance he will graduate  
from a 4 year university





What these  
numbers tell us





**Hope in Connection**  
**Hope in Belonging**



# Our Why: Serving the Whole Child



Source: Collection of Results and Evidence Based Investments (CORE) 2022



## Student Voice

“

[My teacher] was basically my school. Waiting for me whenever I showed up...

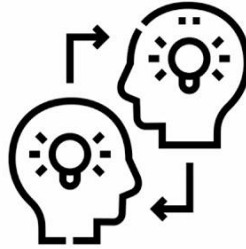
She's like, 'I'm so glad you're here. Let's get to learning.'... no matter how long I was gone... She would write up a new plan for me to graduate.

”

**Think**



**Pair**



**Share**



Turn to your partner and share  
what **Belonging** looks like for you



# What does belonging look like to you?



## Student Voice

“

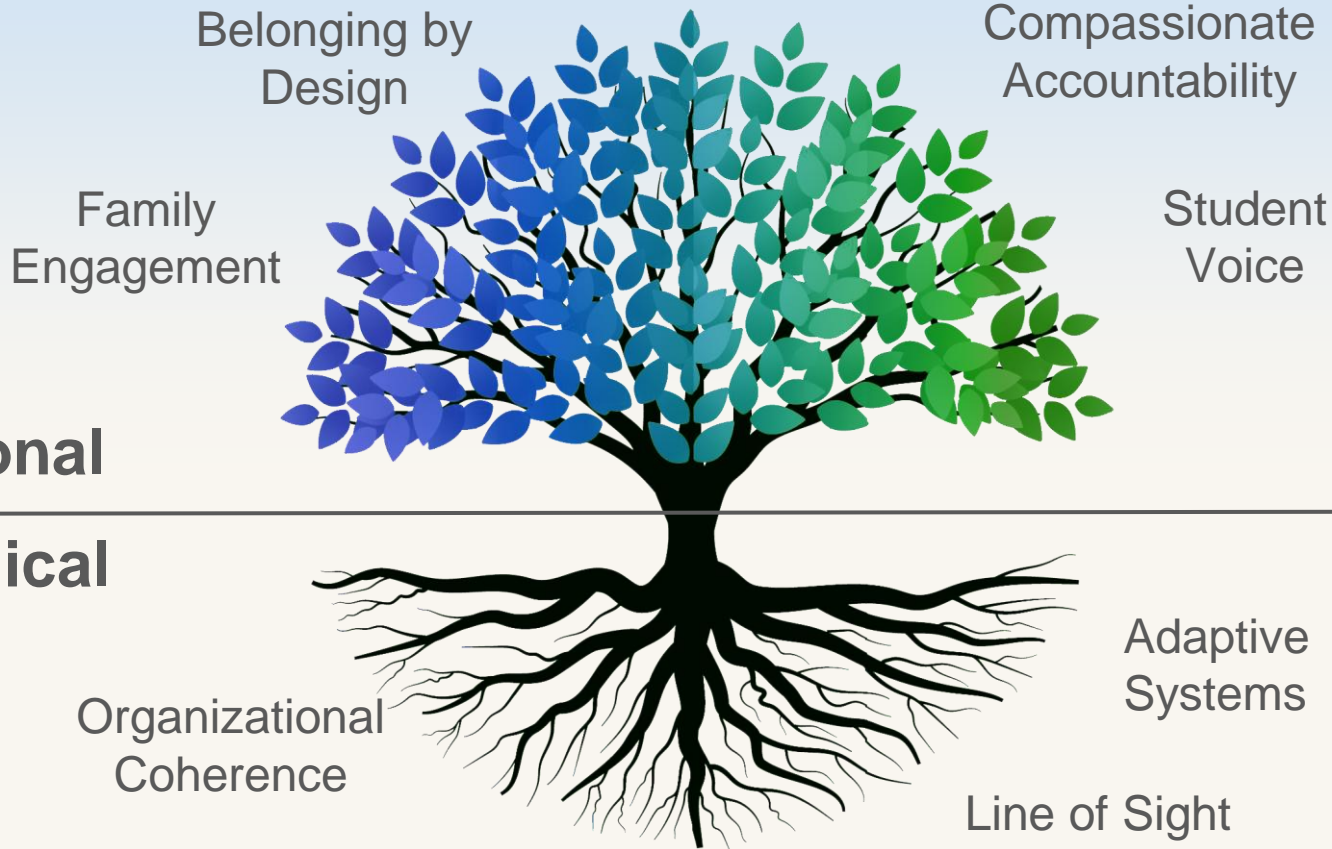
My teachers and friends were just always rooting for me and giving me their all the most they could do and I feel like that really helped me elevate myself too.

”



# Organizational Coherence

# Ecosystem of Connection



Adapted from Dalmau Consulting. (2016). "Six Circle Model". <http://www.dalmau.com/six-circle-model>

# What is our not-so-Secret Sauce?



## Adaptability

- Build programs around student need
- Different modalities of learning



## Compassionate Accountability

- Clear expectations
- Multiple pathways to success
- Expect follow through from staff and students



## Belonging by Design

- Environmental factors
- Transition support
- Trauma informed Care

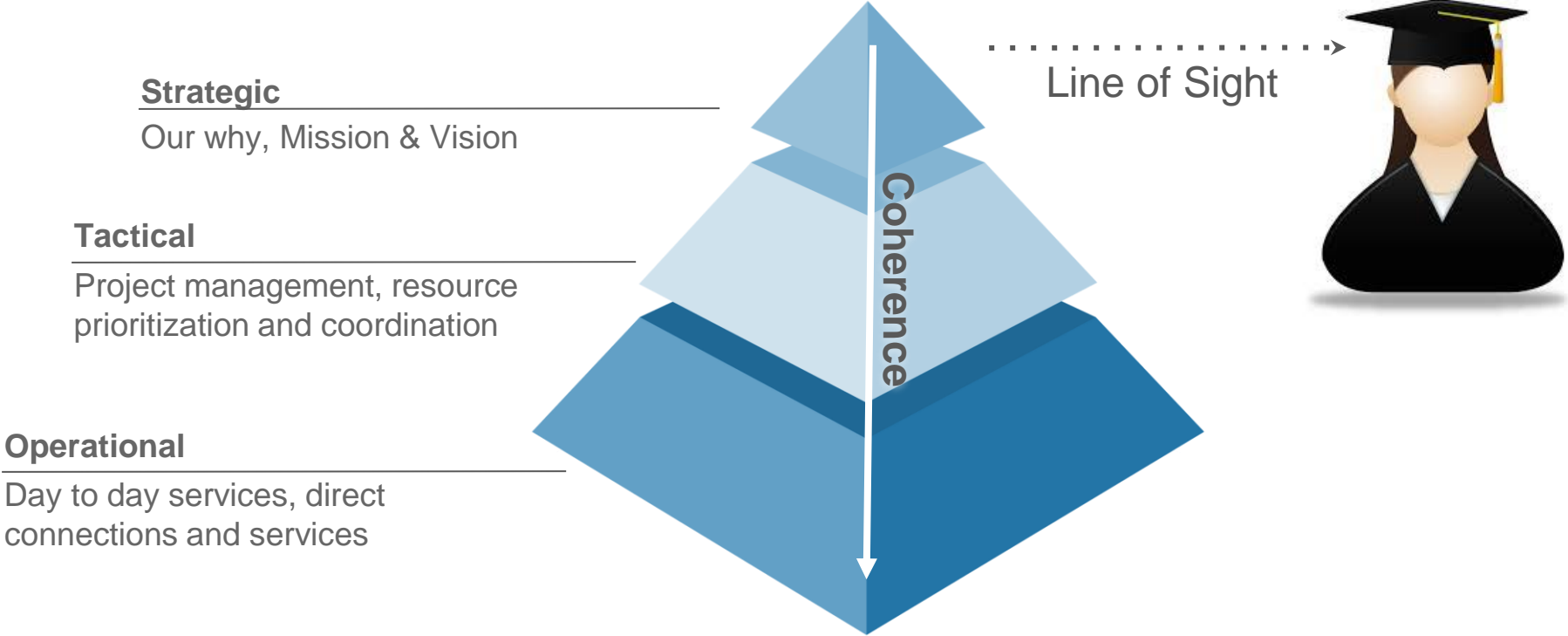


## Organizational Coherence

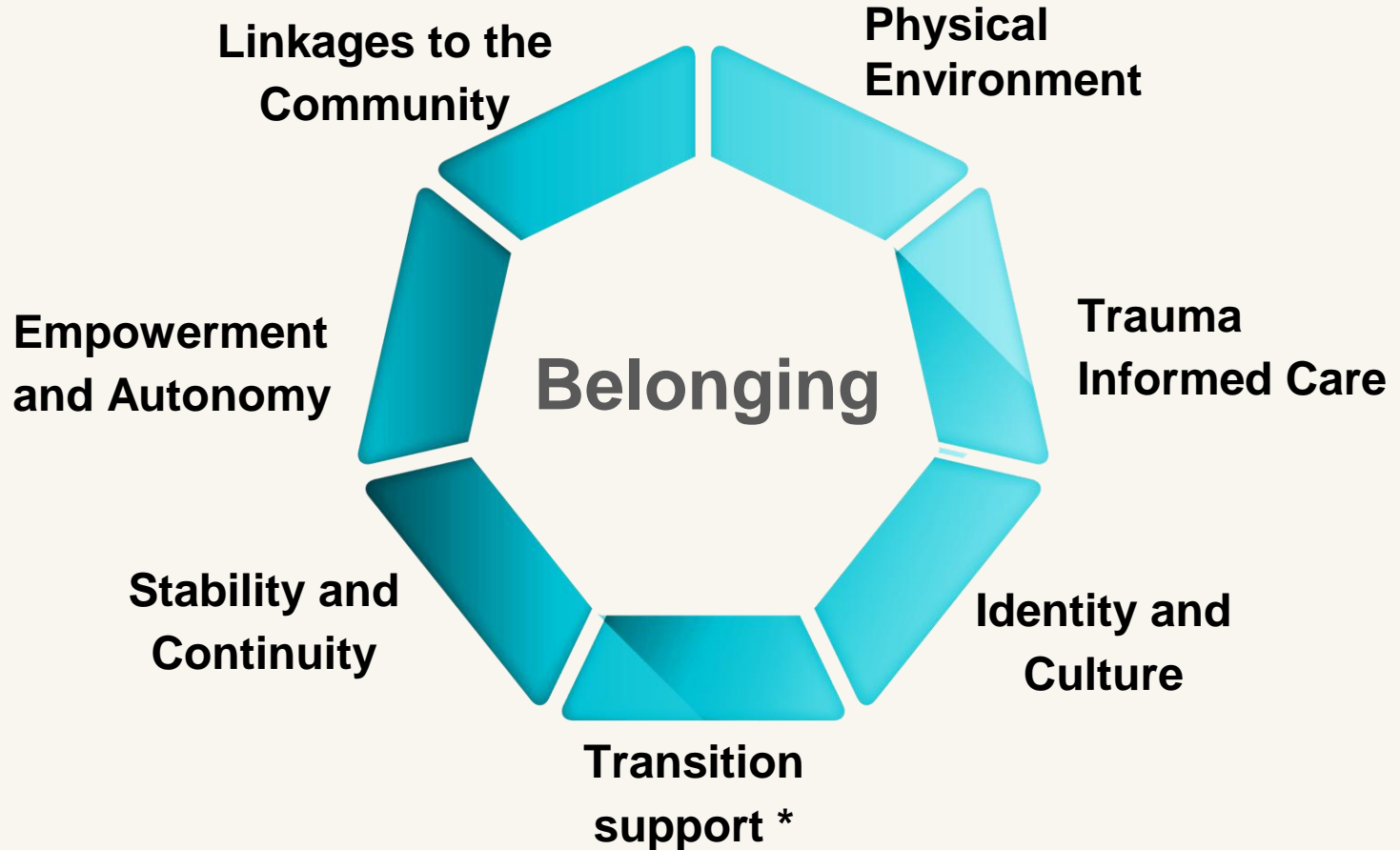
- Alignment From Mission to actions
- Line of Sight



# Organizational Coherence



# Belonging by Design





## Student Voice

“

The programs gave me a lot of support. As soon as I was terminated, I felt like I lost my community. I went back to my old friends and I spiraled.

”



# Case Studies

# Case Study: FosterEd

**FosterEd** provides every student in foster care with wrap-around support and a clear path toward academic success.

Launched in 2013 in partnership with National Center for Youth Law as the first demonstration site in CA, our model prioritizes stability, belonging, and achievement through structured, trauma-informed support and strong interagency partnerships.

**84**

**FosterEd Students  
including 9 non-minor  
dependents (2024-25)**

**37%**

**Foster Students with an  
IEP (2023-24)**

**33%**

**Chronically Absent  
Foster Students (2023-  
24)**

On average, 6 adults are on each FosterEd student's support team.

Social worker, CASA, therapist, school staff, bio parents, resource parents, ILP coordinator



Long-term caregiver, often biological parent

A **dedicated education liaison** facilitating meeting coordination and advocacy

An **education case plan** driven by team collaboration.

<b>Technical</b>	<b>Relational</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Education liaison assigned to every foster youth	Relationship-based support through consistent adult advocates	82% of students improved attendance in 2023-24
Education case plans developed via interagency team meetings	Collaborative teaming that includes caregivers, school staff, and system partners	95% of students met at least one education goal; 68% met all
Cross-system coordination: schools, FCS, CASA, courts, ILP, behavioral health	Ongoing communication with families throughout the education journey	Graduation rate increase from 55.6% (2022-23) to 66.7% (2023-24)
Countywide model ensuring all districts receive guidance and support	Students are supported by an average of six adults per education team	School stability rate improved from 46.5% to 58.6%

# Case Study: Alternative Education

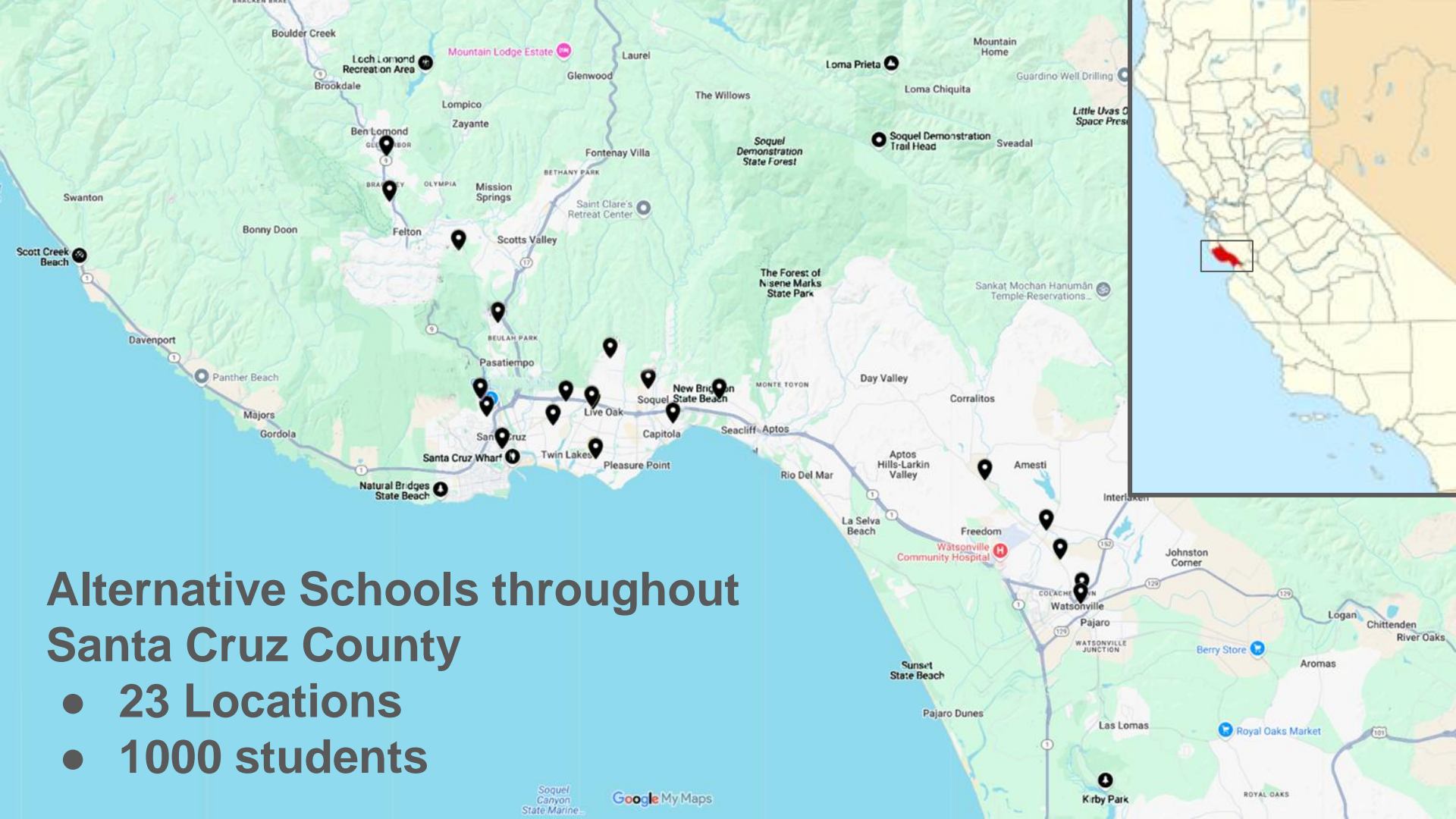
**Overview:** The Santa Cruz County Alternative Education Department is California's **3rd largest** alt. ed. program, serving more than 1,000 students each year.

**Our Process:** We build strong, personal relationships with each student and their family, meeting them where they are, recognizing their strengths, and holding them to high expectations through consistent support.

## Pathways for All Learners:

- **Classroom Daily Programs:** Structured full-day, on-site instruction.
- **Personalized Learning Communities:** Hybrid learning with part-time on-site sessions and flexible independent study.
- **Independent Studies:** Primarily off-site learning model with weekly check-ins and academic support from assigned teachers.





# Alternative Schools throughout Santa Cruz County

- 23 Locations
- 1000 students

## Student Voice

“

Because of my social anxiety, I needed to have an independent [studies] program. Later I started coming in to class 2 days a week. By the end I was in class full time at Cabrillo [Community College]

”

# Robert A. Hartman School at Juvenile Hall



Technical	Relational	Outcome
<p><b>Multiple pathways:</b> Independent Study, TK–Young Adult, and hybrid models</p>	<p>Student-centered culture that affirms individual strengths and lived experiences</p>	<p>86% of students report having a trusted adult who they can talk to at school</p>
<p>Collaborative campus model with embedded probation supports (Hartman)</p>	<p>Consistent staff-student connections grounded in trust and mutual respect</p>	<p>94.9% of families report they can reach staff when needed</p>
<p>Flexible credit recovery and postsecondary prep programs</p>	<p>Culture of shared accountability through supportive relationships</p>	<p>84.5% of students report access to individualized support for community college enrollment</p>
<p>Strong partnerships with CBOs: Food What, Arts Council, YMCA, etc.</p>	<p>Ongoing collaboration between staff, families, and students to support holistic development</p>	<p>87% of students report feeling safe at school</p>

# Case Study: Student Success Project

**Overview:** Launched in 2018 by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education and Probation, SSP supports students at risk of justice involvement by fostering connection, stability, and school success.

- Serves about 70 youth annually across 7 South County school sites, with a focus on credit recovery, graduation readiness, and SEL supports
- Responds to youth needs through community-based, culturally rooted care
- Nearly all students are Latinx, many from Spanish-speaking homes

Technical	Relational	Outcome
Teacher/staff referral system with immediate needs assessments	Individualized student support from embedded specialists and probation staff	62% increase in credit accrual during pilot phase
Embedded school-based teams at 7 sites including middle schools	Proactive family engagement through CAB-led support and regular check-ins	Fewer than 10% of participants had further justice system contact
Partnerships with probation, CAB, COE, PVUSD, and Sheriff's Office	Programs rooted in cultural responsiveness and trauma-informed care	Improved attendance and engagement reported by schools and families
Wraparound services: academic, behavioral, employment, pro-social supports	Collaborative service coordination supports long-term trust-building with students and families	Families report increased connection to school and positive shifts in student confidence

# Case Study: Project ASCEND

Project ASCEND launches **today** as Santa Cruz County's newest multi-agency effort to prevent deeper system involvement for at-promise youth.

Inspired by the success of Caminos Hacia el Éxito (91% success rate), Project ASCEND builds on that model to offer:

- Diversion instead of formal charges
- Trauma-informed support and accountability
- A focus on culturally competent care and family engagement

Funded through a BSCC Prop 47 grant, ASCEND represents the next step in our work to ensure youth are seen, supported, and successful.



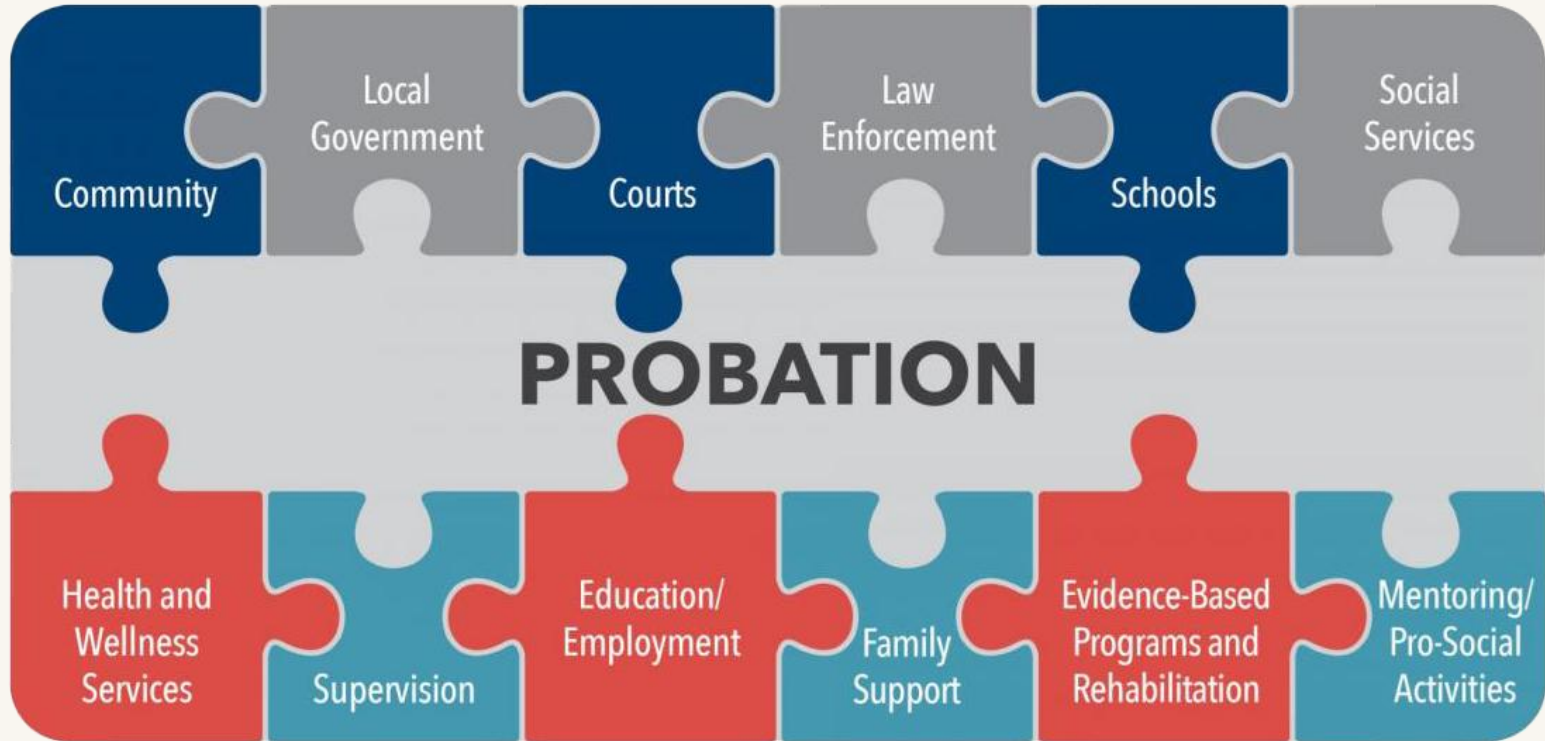
<b>Technical</b>	<b>Relational</b>	<b>Goals</b>
Countywide pre-filing diversion infrastructure	Youth Specialists trained in trauma-informed, culturally responsive engagement	Reduced juvenile filings and system involvement
Funded by Prop 47 (BSCC) through March 2028	Emphasis on building early trust with youth and families during diversion process	Increased youth engagement in mental health and pro-social supports
Quarterly operations and leadership teams to guide implementation	Service design includes bilingual and community-rooted therapeutic providers	Improved family stabilization and connections across systems
Structured referral systems and data tracking protocols in development	Cross-agency collaboration ensures continuity and shared accountability	Ongoing outcomes evaluation through multi-agency data review





**Looking Forward**

# Power of Partnership



# What would it take?



## Adaptability

- Build programs around student need
- Different modalities of learning



## Compassionate Accountability

- Clear expectations
- Multiple pathways to success
- Expect follow through from staff and students



## Belonging by Design

- Environmental factors
- Transition support
- Trauma informed Care



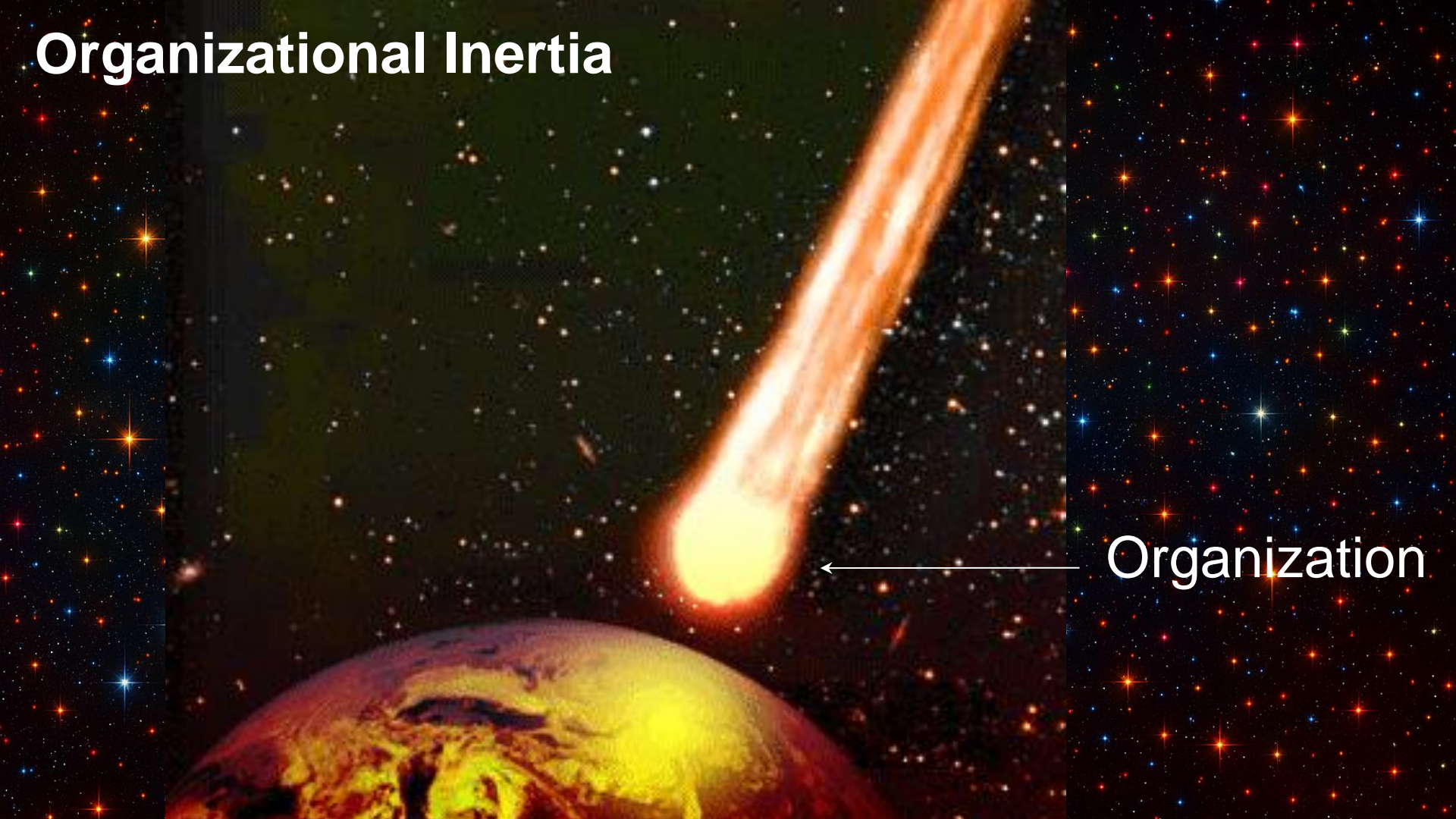
## Organizational Coherence

- Alignment From Mission to actions
- Line of Sight

**What is Inertia?**

# Organizational Inertia

Organization





**Thank you for what you do**