

THE STORY OF BOSTON'S HIGHER GROUND:

ACCOMPLISHMENTS,
CHALLENGES, and LESSONS



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Thank you to Professor James Jennings, Kadineyse Paz, and Lisette DeSouza for producing this important case study on Higher Ground's first decade. We have much to learn from this report as we chart Higher Ground's course for the next decade and beyond.

Thank you to all our partners, collaborators, funders, and generous individual donors that joined us in our journey over the past ten years. By definition, Higher Ground's model of serving as a connector and convener does not work unless there are collaborators willing to work together, bridge silos, and have greater impact through collective effort. Thank you to eight partners that helped launch the Family-Led Stability Pilot in 2018 to eliminate homelessness in Boston schools and to the 20 partners that formed the Resilient Families Surround Care School Community ("Surround Care") Coalition to improve children's health equity beginning with the children and families served by our local school partners.

Thank you to leaders, educators, and staff at our local schools. We appreciate the opportunity to work with you across the education, health, housing, and community development sectors to achieve better results for the children and families you serve. Together we are developing a network of local schools that serve as an excellent educational pathway for children a few weeks old through middle school and beyond. We have made a big difference in reducing homelessness and surrounding schools with academic enrichment and an array of services to help make the school hubs of community support and achieve a thriving community centered around the schools.

This report would not have been possible without the support and advice of Higher Ground's Board of Directors. We would also like to thank our staff, advisors, consultants, volunteers, and student interns who have shown dedication and grit in the face of operational, programmatic, and financial challenges to help develop a new model of a place-based, intermediary and accountability organization. Our success in working with dozens of organizations, sharing resources, and holding each other accountable for commitments to shared goals and outcomes holds a great deal of promise for the future of our children, families, and community.

We started this journey with the long term in mind and like our founder, Hubie Jones, we take pride in our relentless pursuit of equity and justice for the children and families in our community. We appreciate the trust that we have developed among our collaborators and partners and promise to build on that trust until together we achieve the thriving and just community we all desire and deserve.

Look forward to your continued support in the years ahead.

Charlie Titus

Chair, Board of Directors

Mossik Hacobian

Executive Director

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Story of Boston's *Higher Ground* (2010) is the report resulting from a case study of Higher Ground, a well-regarded nonprofit organization founded by Hubie Jones in response to what he describes as the need for a new approach to partnering with communities in Boston that he believed to be "resource rich, but impact poor." Higher Ground was therefore established with the goal of being "a catalyst for collective action that works with residents and partners to achieve excellent outcomes in education and to promote the health and well-being of children and families in Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan." In 2020, Higher Ground marked its milestone 10th year of operation. Over this ten-year period, the organization has collaborated with more than 65 partners to improve outcomes for children and families and organize parents into a strong coalition of engaged community voices.

In this case study the reader will receive a brief history of Higher Ground and its founder's vision for change, a description of the organization's strategy and model, and a review of key accomplishments, challenges, and lessons based on Higher Ground's first ten years. This report is not an evaluation of Higher Ground, but rather a review and assessment of its work and impacts over a ten-year period. The report can be useful as various sectors consider connections between communities, schools and nonprofits and the well-being of children and families. It shows the impacts of a catalyst organization that works collaboratively and within a framework of youth and family empowerment; and seeks to build bridges among service areas in housing, health, public schools but that heretofore have sometimes operated as islands, albeit with positive missions and intentions.

Higher Ground has demonstrated how resources can be focused through a place-based approach that takes each resident into account holistically as it seeks to improve opportunities for children and families in economically distressed neighborhood areas, borne of a history of racial and ethnic inequality and inequities, and institutional neglect. As a backbone organization Higher Ground is focused on improving the quality of schools in its impact area, strengthening the social and civic fabric of neighborhoods, and utilizing government and nonprofits as sustained, invested partners.

Key to note, the ecology of nonprofits in communities of color with a history of dealing with racial equities and inequalities is not necessarily a narrative of social justice or one of responding directly to racial and ethnic inequities. While unintentional, a cacophony of nonprofits can operate in ways which ignore the need to strengthen collective work and impact in these communities by focusing on the behavioral

manifestations of racial inequities, but not the root causes, or addressing systemic inequities. Understanding Higher Ground's ten-year history can help to highlight effective strategies to improve the quality of school and community-based partnerships; it can shed light on how to build and sustain collaborative work across service delivery areas; and it can provide insights about struggles against racism, poverty, and health inequities in communities that are economically distressed, but still hold impressive resources.

This report is timely as Higher Ground is being called upon to expand its reach and determine its path for the next ten years. The report examines the challenges facing Higher Ground, and recommends ways to learn from these challenges, sustain key program model and approach elements, and develop in areas that will support future growth for the organization and increased influence for community resident families.

Higher Ground has emerged as a leading voice in the need for, and on-the-ground illustration of, a paradigm shift in how services, resources, organizations, and residents need to be interlocked, especially in communities facing serious issues with the quality of housing, public health, and public schools. The report highlights the unique nature of Higher Ground's trust building and social capital with community resident families, school leaders and staff, partners and public institutions – and the way in which the evolution of its model can continue disrupting racial equities and inequalities in the city of Boston.

For Founder Hubie Jones, it was clear ten years ago that a new paradigm was needed in addressing unacceptable outcomes in health, education, and housing – this report demonstrates the ways in which Higher Ground has done just that through its “fierce collaboration” resulting in collective impact with undeniable momentum. There is a great deal of possibility in the Higher Ground model which is worth further exploration in regard to growth and scale.



April 2012: Higher Ground and Teen Empowerment board and staff members celebrate the opening of their shared offices at 384 Warren Street.

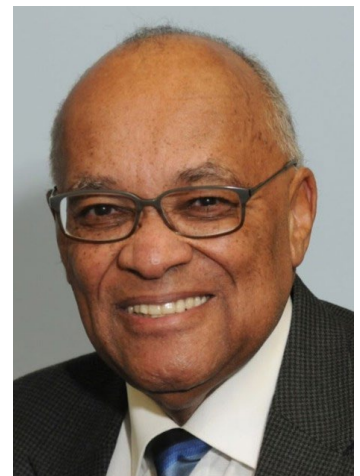
INTRODUCTION

Higher Ground is a nonprofit organization in Roxbury, Massachusetts founded in 2010 with the purpose of being “a catalyst for collective action that works with residents and partners to achieve excellent outcomes in education and to promote the health and well-being of children and families in Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan.”¹ Higher Ground marked its milestone 10th year of operation on July 15, 2020! Over this ten-year period this organization has served more than 1,300 students in the partner public schools, helped place families of almost 300 homeless children into homes, collaborated with more than 65 partners to increase impacts on the well-being of children and families; organized parents into an increasingly strong coalition; and continues to attract positive attention and funding from foundations and individuals.

Higher Ground’s mission is “to connect children, youth and families in Boston’s underserved communities to existing solutions and services that continue to improve, avoid duplication, and empower and transform lives from cradle to career by engaging community-based organizations and key stakeholders in an effective and efficient service delivery model.” The Higher Ground strategy falls into three main areas in which social, educational, and economic disparities are challenged: Schools, Health Equity, and Housing – referred to by staff as a “trilogy of distress.” Higher Ground acts as a catalyst to engage the numerous resources in the Dorchester and Roxbury neighborhoods of Boston, but with particular focus on an impact area centered on census tract 817 and surrounding areas that have gradually expanded since the organization’s founding.

The lead founder of Higher Ground is Hubie Jones, an eminent urbanist with prominence both locally and nationally, and with decades of civic contributions to Boston and Massachusetts. As he explained to the study team about Higher Ground’s beginnings:

In December 2008, I convened a meeting of nonprofit leaders in Roxbury and North Dorchester, elected political representatives, and foundation staff members, to talk about the crisis for many nonprofit organizations struggling with the Great Recession. Some of these organizations were in danger of collapsing. We concluded that these distressed neighborhoods were resource rich and impact poor. After a series of follow-up meetings, many of the leaders who stayed engaged concluded that this



¹ See <https://higherground-boston.org>.

unacceptable condition was due to a fragmented service delivery system created by solo behavior keeping agencies from collaboration with each other. Therefore, these agencies did not have enough power to achieve desperately needed positive outcomes for their clients. There was no chance of achieving collective impact for the community.

It was posited that one way out of this dilemma was to form an intermediary/backbone organization dedicated to forging collaboration between social agencies through the formation of strong partnerships. It was believed that such action would create greater social cohesion in the community and build a stronger social fabric. Essentially, the community needed to use a new organizational paradigm. Hence, Boston's Higher Ground, Inc. was incorporated in 2010.²

This case study, commissioned by the Executive Director and Board of Higher Ground, documents the work, and impacts of this backbone organization over a ten-year period working on a range of social, educational, health, and housing challenges in community settings, and many organizations. The study is based on review and analysis of archival documents; meetings and interviews; and a brief review of literature germane to nonprofits involved in place-based programming. The study begins with a short history of Higher Ground and then proceeds to a description of the organization's strategy and model. The last two sections include a review and discussion of key accomplishments as a community partner; community advocate; and facilitator of community resources.

This report is not an evaluation of Higher Ground, but rather a review and assessment of its work and impacts over a ten-year period. It describes Higher Ground's role as community partner, community advocate, and facilitator of community resources. The report can be useful as we think of connections between communities, schools and nonprofits and the well-being of children and families. It shows the impacts of a catalyst organization that works collaboratively and within a framework of youth and family empowerment; and seeks to build bridges among service areas in housing, health, public schools but that heretofore have sometimes operated as islands, albeit with positive missions and intentions. Many organizations are now emphasizing the importance of community-based nonprofits connecting better and substantively with public education. There is growing realization that holistic approaches, which value and include the voices of students and parents, and civic players, are crucial for the well-being of families.

A case study of Higher Ground's ten-year history can also help to highlight effective strategies to improve the quality of school and community-based partnerships; it can shed light on how to build and sustain collaborative work across service delivery

²Hubie Jones, "A Brief History of Higher Ground, Inc." Email correspondence with James Jennings and Mossik Hacobian, December 11, 2020; also see <https://higherground-boston.org>.

areas; and it can provide insights about struggles against racism, poverty, and health inequities in communities that are economically distressed, but still hold impressive resources. Schools need community-based organizations particularly to support the school's engagement of families/parents. Higher Ground is an asset to schools because they have authentic relationships with parents and have the experience of empowering parents to advocate for their children's schools.

A major accomplishment engineered by Higher Ground during this ten-year period is highlighting the need for accountability and the sustaining of positive impacts. This organization is now a leading voice in the need for a paradigm shift in how services, resources, organizations, and residents need to be interlocked, especially in communities facing serious issues with the quality of housing, public health, and public schools. But important to note, the ecology of nonprofits in communities of color with a history of dealing with racial equities and inequalities is not necessarily a narrative of social justice or one of responding directly to racial and ethnic inequities. While unintentional, a cacophony of nonprofits can operate in ways which ignore the need to strengthen collective work and impact in these communities by focusing on the behavioral manifestations of racial inequities, but not the root causes, or addressing systemic inequities.

Superintendent of Boston Public Schools, Dr. Brenda Cassellius, described how certain communities can experience a situation of “resource rich, impact poor.”³ Despite the number of nonprofits, including government, foundations, and research entities there remains what is referred to as ‘impact gaps’ in these places. In other words, a lot of services and attention exist in these areas, but the needle towards racial and economic justice, quality schools for everyone, the elimination of homelessness, and healthier air and communities, moves but slightly. In response to this, Higher Ground emerges as a civic channel to encourage collaboration among community-based entities and interests that serves to elevate their role as peers to other sectors. Again, in the words of Hubie Jones, this means that “It all boils down to not squandering economic and social power and holding everyone involved in serving communities of color accountable for keeping their commitments and fighting to achieve social justice and equity at every turn.”⁴

³ Acknowledgement of Higher Ground, Video, Higher Ground 10th Anniversary Celebration.

⁴ Hubie Jones, “On Intermediary/Backbone Organizations” Email correspondence with James Jennings (July 24, 2020).

A Place-based Backbone Organization

“Higher Ground is a place-based initiative with an initial primary target area consisting of census tract 817 in Boston’s Roxbury neighborhood and the long-term goal of extending the target area from Nubian Square (formerly Dudley Square) to Mattapan Square.”⁵ Here, the Higher Ground mission has facilitated the corralling of resources from institutional partners and coordinating services and resources in the areas of early childhood development, youth development, housing assistance, and health resources for the benefit of local schools. The mission is also aimed at building community strengths by working with and empowering parents and youth under a collaborative umbrella and in ways that link together, previously silo-based delivery of services in the areas of health, housing, and public education. Higher Ground is committed to supporting local public schools and early education and childcare centers to provide high-quality educational services and improve educational outcomes for children and families in Boston’s neighborhoods. As a catalyst, intermediary, and backbone organization, Higher Ground offers collaboration, technical assistance, information, advocacy, facilitation, capacity building along with the collection and sharing of data.⁶ Engaged partners include community-based organizations, health organizations, public schools, foundations, and government entities.



August 2015: Members of the Roxbury Dorchester Mattapan (RDM) Parent Coalition are joined by Higher Ground board and staff members in meeting with Superintendent Tommy Chang to advocate for their schools.

As an intermediary or backbone organization that is community-based, but working inter-sectoral, it can recruit individuals with a range of social and political capital to help lead it. This can lead to greater possibility of collaboration because participants are not silo oriented. Also, this could mean benefits in the areas of fundraising and

⁵ See Higher Ground’s Independent Accountants’ Review Report (June 30, 2020); also, James Jennings *Place-based Service Delivery & Strategic Collaboration in Boston’s Distressed Neighborhoods: Framework for Planning and Action*; the latter research report, commissioned by The Barr Foundation in 2009, provided a range of data pointing to the need of a place-based service and advocacy strategy in this part of Boston. The report can be accessed at: <https://sites.tufts.edu/jamesjennings/files/2018/06/reportsPlaceBased2009.pdf>; also see how this report was utilized: <https://higherground-boston.org>.

⁶ One writer describes this as a ‘quarterback’ organization, “important for guiding strategy. A coordinator can bring needed organization to a long-term comprehensive initiative, allowing each organization to play to its strengths, and weaving disparate funding sources and agendas into a coherent strategy.” Brett Theodis, “The Assumptions Behind Place-Based Programs Can Hinder Their Success” Shelterforce (May 5, 2018), at <https://shelterforce.org/2021/05/18/the-assumptions-behind-place-based-programs-can-hinder-their-success>.

raising accountability related to the collective impact of nonprofits. Backbone organizations can be very supportive of building community-wide agendas with strong resident participation. Higher Ground's work as a backbone organization is reflected thematically in terms of its *emphasis on intersectoral and place-based strategies; also, its role as a community partner, advocate, and facilitator of community resources; and its focus on parent engagement and empowerment; and, its growing work and impact in responding to, and reducing, family and school homelessness.*

A review and assessment of the Higher Ground story in its first ten years point to five important lessons related to the interrelated work in the areas of schools, health, and housing in economically challenged urban areas:

- 1 The lives of children and families living in economically distressed urban areas cannot be compartmentalized through silo-based service delivery lest impact is seriously compromised.
- 2 Higher Ground gained traction by knowing and respecting the community in sincere, fundamental, and sustained ways.
- 3 Strong engagement and empowerment, and respect of parents in substantial and sustained ways are critical in efforts to do collaborative work that is impactful.
- 4 Organizations seeking to replicate the Higher Ground model must be flexible with programming and in responding to immediate and unforeseen community issues and challenges.
- 5 In community settings with a plethora of nonprofits there is a need for an organization or process which can serve as a partner, advocate, and facilitator of resources, but in non-organizationally threatening ways; by setting an example and showing impacts such an organization can enhance community-wide calls for accountability. Higher Ground rejects the proposition that 'survival of the fittest' is an appropriate framework for working with nonprofits in communities facing challenges such as racism, poverty, and health inequities. Rather, a framework of collaboration, trust, and teamwork must be the driving force in resolving neighborhood challenges, many which have their roots at multiple government and societal levels. Related to this, collaboration and trust are not based or bounded by a do's and don'ts spreadsheet! They must be sincere and nurtured continuously.

There are numerous specific accomplishments attained by Higher Ground since 2010 that will be highlighted and described in [Section III: Higher Ground Accomplishments as Community Partner, Community Advocate, and Facilitator of Community Resources](#). And a more detailed history of Higher Ground's work and development is provided in [Section I: History of Higher Ground in Boston, Massachusetts](#). And an abbreviated Higher Ground timeline of activities and initiatives between 2010 and current year is presented in [Appendix D](#).

Summary of an Impactful Ten-Year History

In summary of this ten-year history, by 2011 Higher Ground begins to initiate community meetings in its original target area, Census Tract 817, one of the most economically distressed parts of Boston. In 2011-2013 Higher Ground embarks on building collaboration including assisting Families First to expand education and health supports for expectant parents and families. It establishes partnerships with Center for Teen Empowerment, ABCD, and America's Promise Alliance around youth development. The Warren Gardens Housing Cooperative invites Higher Ground as a community partner to improve safety and services in Warren Gardens. It locates in temporary offices sharing space with the Center for Teen Empowerment. Even at this early stage, Higher Ground works with Suffolk University and Northeastern University to begin laying a foundation for data collection and evaluations. It begins to connect 30 community organizations and nonprofits together with the launching of the Boston Unity Council. Higher Ground and the Center for Teen Empowerment move into newly renovated office space on Warren St. near the Roxbury YMCA.

During 2013-2015 the work of Higher Ground has expanded considerably. Higher Ground links a range of social, educational, health, and housing services with its partner schools, including the Higginson K-2; Higginson Lewis K-8 and David Ellis K-5 and begins its collaboration with Crispus Attucks Children's Center (CACC). It also organizes Parent Circles for more than 100 new and expectant parents. A scathing report about the status of Black and Brown boys in the BPS triggers another initiative, Change Circle, aimed at understanding the nature of this problem but also identifying resources needed to improve the quality of education and life for this group of youth.



Andrea Lee-Salley, parent of a 5-year old daughter Pyur who graduated from Crispus Attucks Children's Center in 2020 and herself graduated from Urban College of Boston in Spring 2020.

During this period, and sadly, the decades-old Roxbury Comprehensive Community Health Center goes into bankruptcy. Higher Ground works closely with the Court-appointed Receiver, Joseph D. Feaster, Jr., to build bridges with parents and local community groups. It also begins to house within its offices a WIC Program in response to the closing of RoxComp. Higher Ground begins to increasingly focus on homelessness during this period and especially as experienced by children attending the Boston public schools.

In 2016 Higher Ground helps to secure major funding for improving and expanding services at the Crispus Attucks Children's Center (CACC), which had been at risk of ceasing operations and denying much needed services to families in Boston's neighborhoods. It also establishes the Roxbury-Dorchester-Mattapan (RDM) Parent Coalition. Higher Ground also scales up its fundraising for community-based projects. It expands partnerships with higher education resulting in new resources targeted to Higher Ground's partner schools and CACC. Higher Ground continues to focus on the challenge of growing homelessness in the Boston public schools; it begins to explore and plan school-based access to affordable housing for homeless families and children in Boston schools.



Governor Baker at the Crispus Attucks Children's Center on August 15, 2018 to announce EEOST grants to child care centers including \$1 million to CACC for their capital improvements program.

In the 2017-2018 period Higher Ground works with the CACC to secure resources to undertake a long-delayed significant capital improvement project. Higher Ground also secured major funding to assist the Higginson K-2 school to design and build a new playground. It is in 2018 that the Family-Led Stability Pilot (FLSP) is established with Higher Ground evolving into the role of a backbone organization. This represents a significant and innovative collaborative pilot to eliminate homelessness in local schools. This is done while Higher Ground is continuing to work with its partners on earlier initiatives.

By 2019-2020, after ten years of collaborative work and building numerous partnerships between schools, public agencies, nonprofits, and higher education in the areas of health, housing, and education, the work and impacts of Higher Ground attract major attention. The latter allows expansion of programs like the FLSP, continuation of earlier ones such as the Parenting Circles now hosted at CACC and launch of its Summer Learning Academy (SLA). Higher Ground also emerges as a critical resource in Boston's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

in Black and Latinx communities, the hardest hit in terms of the deleterious health, housing, educational, and employment consequences, by facilitating remote learning for children and families by partnering with One Bead to launch a Tech Equity Pilot and with JFYNetWorks to offer a proven on-line platform for English and math. Higher Ground started community meetings to plan and implement the Resilient Families Surround Care Coalition (SCC). It has been successful in obtaining major funding for this initiative involving partner schools, CACC, nonprofits, and Boston Children's Hospital. Higher Ground commences meetings with BPS and foundations to consider how it can expand its models in coordination with the Boston Public Schools Hub-School initiative and to expand FLSP to other schools, and perhaps the entire city.

COVID-19 Highlights Importance of Backbone Organizations in Economically Distressed Neighborhoods

Although the case study focuses on Higher Ground's ten-year history in reflecting on these themes and lessons it is important to acknowledge the responsive role that this organization played in the recent COVID-19 pandemic in Boston's Black and Latinx neighborhood areas.

The latter included some of the hardest hit neighborhoods with concentrations of people with low incomes, high poverty rates, and with higher levels of health vulnerabilities. COVID-19 immediately exposed the short and long-term necessities to assist these places to be strengthened in terms of health, but also economically.

During this crisis Higher Ground showed the critical importance of 'speaking' across silos of service delivery spaces. As noted by the Vice Chair of the Board (and first Board Chair between 2010 and 2013) and one of the founding board members Charlotte Golar Richie, "The work that Higher Ground is doing reflects our understanding that residents, students, and their families, are grappling with issues of poverty, racism, issues relative to neighborhood violence, trauma, and lack of access to resources, and suffering from marginalization. COVID-19 has worsened those circumstances, highlighted them and brought them to high view."⁷ Effective responses to COVID-19 could not be based on compartmentalized distribution of assistance and resources. Children and families, and neighborhoods heavily impacted by COVID-19 could not be helped in separate boxes, the virus just did not manifest itself as such. Despite the growth of many nonprofits as silos, Higher Ground (and a few other nonprofits) showed that areas such as housing, health, and education had to be approached holistically to provide effective responses. Examples of this work include distributing gift cards to meet material needs but also facilitating remote learning for children and their families.

⁷ Interview, November 21, 2020.

HISTORY OF HIGHER GROUND IN BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS⁸

Neighborhoods that are economically distressed as a result of racism and continuing poverty, and an afterthought in economic decision-making, need “the BACKBONE to get and use the social and economic resources they need, for essential institutions to be effective and for residents to have decent life chances. It all boils down to not squandering economic and social power and holding everyone involved in serving communities of color accountable for keeping their commitments and fighting to achieve social justice and equity at every turn.”

Hubie Jones, July 23, 2020

Boston’s Higher Ground was spearheaded in 2010 by long-time Boston community leader and social activist Hubie Jones, whose work on building and strengthening community institutions for more than half a century, and mentoring of many progressive community activists, provided a foundation for his work with this initiative. He brought together more than three dozen community, government, and philanthropic leaders to explore reasons for lack of improvement in health and educational outcomes for children and families in Boston’s neighborhoods despite the wealth of resources available in the city.⁹ He also helped to organize visits to other cities where place-based, intersectoral initiatives were associated with backbone organizations. Hubie called upon Tulaine Montgomery – community organizer, social entrepreneur, and non-profit consultant – to convene founding board and other stakeholder group meetings. A major concern raised in community meetings and by the above network was the lack of coordination across service areas inhibiting the potential impact that these services could have on improving living conditions for residents.¹⁰



⁸ Also see <https://higherground-boston.org>.

⁹ See [Appendix B](#) for a list of current and past Board members and staff, and the Board of Advisors.

¹⁰ Jennings, op cit.

The activities pursued by Higher Ground over the years are aimed at connecting resources and best practices across a trilogy of distress in education, health, and housing. According to Hubie Jones the Higher Ground model was inspired in part by the Harlem Children's Zone, a place-based strategy that also corralled various types of resources for the educational benefit of children in an economically distressed part of New York City. But Higher Ground is different in that it is not an organization which primarily provides services, but rather it ensures that existing services are interconnected and implemented within a framework seeking to strengthen neighborhood organizations and schools. It connects organizations and thereby strengthens the neighborhood's social and civic infrastructure. At the same time Higher Ground represents a collective voice that serves to ensure that new social initiatives, or existing services, reflect the civic well-being of residents as defined by residents.

Since its initial years, emphasizing a collaborative umbrella has facilitated the role of Higher Ground as community partner, community advocate, and community resource in challenging inequities faced by children and families in the neighborhoods served. All Higher Ground's work falls under this umbrella. As noted, Bill Pinakiewicz, one of the founding Board members and Senior Strategic Advisor to the Nonprofit Finance Fund, "In order to address community wide equity issues you can't play whack-a-mole. You have to do all those things in ways that make sense and are connected to each other. Their [Higher Ground] ability to build networks among organizations but also to build networks among services themselves is important. They recognize that you have to pull all of those things together and integrate them."

In its ten-year history, Higher Ground has closely examined its model twice, a model that continues to evolve to this day. With guidance from Next Street Financial, Higher Ground established its original model and operating structure in 2010 and then refined this model in 2014 to focus more closely on school partnerships as the lever for community support. (See [Appendix D](#) for a list of all Higher Ground funders).


Higher Ground plays a role of community organizer by building advocacy, building, and sustaining partnerships, and facilitating the equitable distribution of resources, both public and private.

Today, the Higher Ground team consists of five full-time and one part-time staff members*, two consultants and volunteers. In addition, Higher Ground has recruited graduate interns to assist with programs. It is governed by a 17-member** Board, which is highly active and involved in strategies and program implementation. The Board assists in connecting with the community and other institutional partners. The Board is respected in community circles by its diversity and individual and

*Recently updated to nine full-time staff members.

** Recently updated to a 20-member Board.

collective experiences working in the community. The Board is represented by people who have a range of organizational and fiscal skills, but who also have made major community contributions in working with nonprofits; community-based organizations; faith-based organizations; educational institutions; and working with youth and families.



A good deal of Higher Ground's success can and should be attributed to its highly engaged board. We have founding board members that have actively stayed the course for the ten years. Our board members are fully engaged in all aspects of the operation, including program review and planning, strategy development, financial management and financial support by 100% of our members, unwavering support of the Executive Director and his team and more. The members are fully committed to the vision and mission of the organization and model collaborative effort and collective impact at the board level. Success starts at the highest level.

– Charlie Titus, Higher Ground Board Chair

As a formal organization Higher Ground has an infrastructure like others including a Board of Directors, an Executive Committee, and Executive Director.¹¹ As is typical with other nonprofits its Board works with sub-committees in programmatic areas, and in the areas of finance, governance, and fundraising. Given its mission and work Higher Ground also includes targeted subcommittees which assist with evaluation of major initiatives such as the Family-Led Stability Program (FLSP) and the Resilient Families Surround Care Coalition (SCC), described more fully in the following section of this report. FLSP in turn has a Leadership Team that meets monthly to oversee the implementation of the initiative and plan to take it to scale. And SCC also has weekly Core Group meetings, monthly Parent Teacher Advisory Group (PTAG) and full Coalition meetings and regular meetings with school leaders and leadership of Boston Public Schools and Boston Teachers Union to ensure transparency, communication and alignment of effort.

Part-time personnel (and volunteers) are assigned to help lead and coordinate activities around strategic planning and operations, development, education, health, and data and evaluation. Higher Ground is 'volunteer-rich' not necessarily in terms of numbers, but in how they are integrated with staff and the Board. Several former volunteers have served in both capacities. And, in some cases volunteers have taken different roles as new initiatives emerge. For example, a retired pediatrician who initially was a volunteer working with Higher Ground's Health Committee in earlier years, currently is an active member of the evaluation teams for the FLSP and SCC.

¹¹ See Higher Ground Organization Chart Draft, May 2021.

Parent organizers and advocates work directly with schools, and Higher Ground's major initiatives are also part of its organizational infrastructure. To assist with strategic planning and networking Higher Ground also recruited a Board of Advisors in 2020, representing a range of urban expertise in all the areas that this organization is involved with, including housing, education, community development, health, and youth. The Board of Advisors is composed of leaders and key voices in education, health, law, housing, social services, non-profit organizations, faith institutions, and business and help to advise Higher Ground's strategic plans and initiatives. Since July 2020, another three individuals were invited and accepted membership on the Advisory Board.



RDM Parent Coalition members and children at one of the early game nights that brought families together.



Spring 2017 – Children's Chorus at the David Ellis School supported by Foundation for Small Voices.



Since its founding Higher Ground has strategized in developing close relationships with some local public and charter schools, as well community organizations and public agencies, in seeking to expand its model and approach to service delivery. (More specific information about this is discussed in the next section). Along with the Crispus Attucks Children's Center (CACC), the initial partner schools include:

- > David A. Ellis Elementary
- > Henry L. Higginson Inclusion (K0-2)
- > Higginson-Lewis 3-8 Inclusion

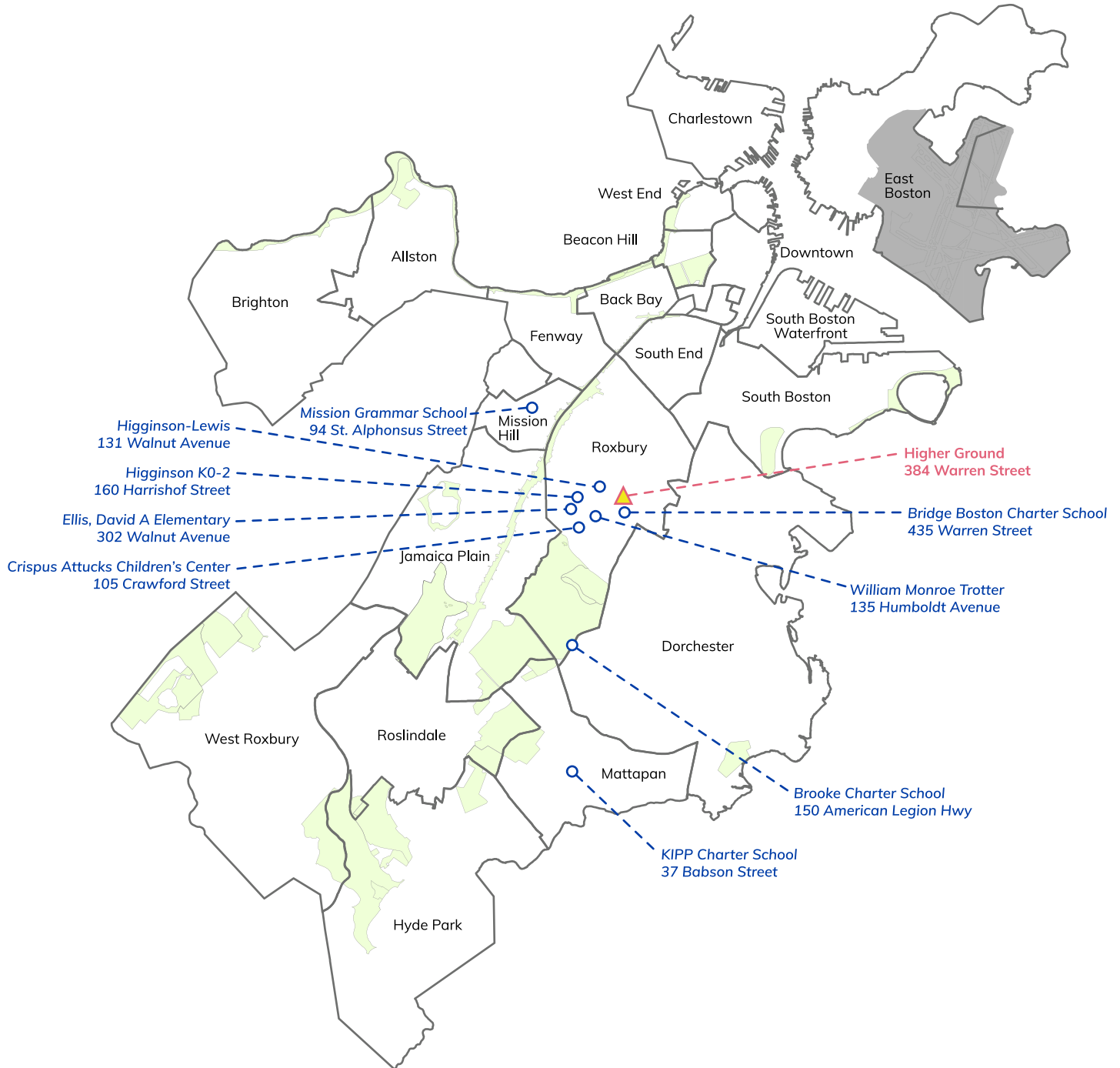
The three schools above are part of the SCC as well as FLSP. In addition, William Monroe Trotter K-8 School is a fourth school that Higher Ground supports through FLSP.

Parents from the four schools above are joined by parents from charter and parochial schools listed below as the core membership of the Roxbury-Dorchester-Mattapan (RDM) Parent Coalition that also draws parents from other schools.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| > Bridge Boston Charter School | > Brooke Charter School |
| > KIPP Charter School | > Mission Grammar Schools |

The following map shows that these school partners and the CACC are in geographic proximity to each other enabling greater potential for collaboration.

Map 1: Locations of Higher Ground, Partner Schools, and Crispus Attucks Children's Center (CACC)



The following Table 1 shows enrollment information pertaining to the first wave of partner schools and CACC.

Table 1: Partner Schools by Enrollment and Race

School Name	Address	Grades Offered	Enrollment	% African American	% Asian	% Hispanic	% Native American	% White	% Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic
Ellis, David A Elementary	302 Walnut Ave.	K1-5	362	37.6	0	58.6	0	2.2	1.7
Higginson K0-2	160 Harrishof St.	K0-2	134	41	.07	56	.7	.7	.7
Higginson-Lewis	131 Walnut Ave.	3-8	219	43.3	1.4	47.9	0	2.3	5.0
Crispus Attucks Children's Center	105 Crawford St.	Infant -PK	~200						
Bridge Boston Charter School	435 Warren St.	PK-8	338	66.6	0	26	0	3	3.3
KIPP Charter	384 Warren St.	K-8	613	64.6	0	33.6	.3	.5	1
Brooke Charter School	150 American Legion Hwy	K-12	2053	52.8	1.8	38.8	.2	4.1	2.3
Mission Grammar School	94 St. Alphonsus St.	K0-6	--	59		28			
William Monroe Trotter School	135 Humboldt Ave.	K-8	380	54.5	1.3	38.4	.3	1.1	3.2

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu>; Data from SY2021/ Mission Grammar approximate data from, <https://www.missiongrammar.org>.

Higher Ground is involved with many community-based organizations and nonprofits to connect services and resources benefitting youth and families, and schools, in the impact area. The interactions between Higher Ground and its partner schools are not one-time activities but reflect a continuum and are multi-layered. At one school the interactions support instructional leadership (fiscal and non-fiscal); assistance with organizing and supporting parents; assistance with connecting the schools with community resources and nonprofits. The nonprofits that



Resilient Families Surround Care School Community Coalition "Surround Care"

Resilient and thriving families, excellent surround care community hub schools, parents and teachers collaborating and supported by a strong network of community organizations and service providers.

are linked to the schools bring external resources for children and families. Examples of these nonprofits include City Year, JFYNetWorks, One Bead, Shelter Music (Grade 3), O2 For Life, Thompson Island, Friends of the Children, Generations Inc., Families First, and institutions of higher education. Leadership at the various schools are also appreciative of how Higher Ground has encouraged and supported collaboration with nearby schools, and with BPS leadership. Higher Ground has helped the schools in attracting education supports in the form of student teachers and social work interns. (See [Appendix E](#) for other nonprofits and institutions working with Higher Ground and the partner public schools both past and present).

The Community Context

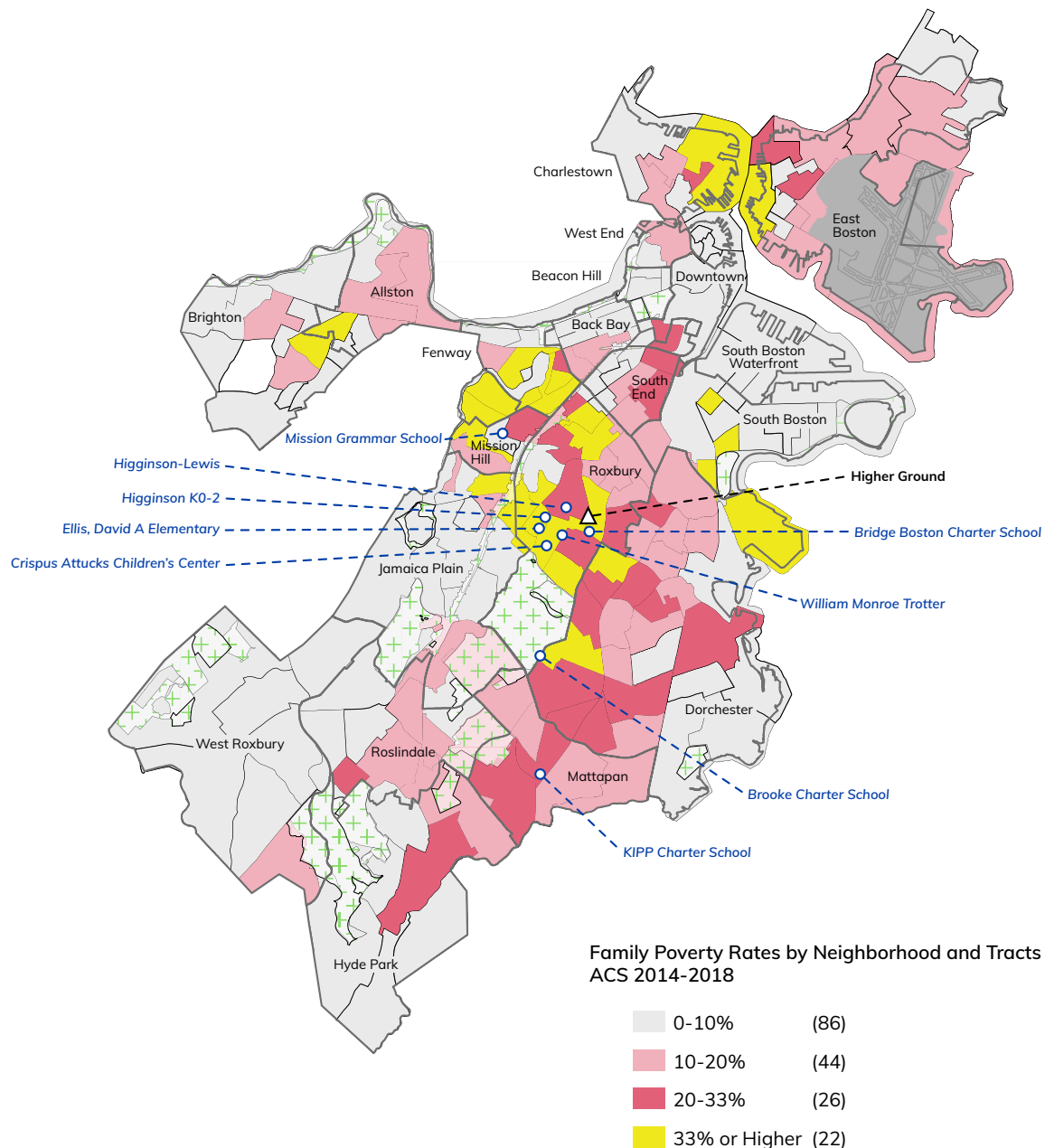
As a place-based initiative Higher Ground sought early to define a potential impact area that would be conducive to collaboration based on a range of neighborhood challenges. Initially its work targeted census tract 817 as the catchment area for attention. The next map shows the initial neighborhood area (encompassing census tract 817) that Higher Ground sought to work in, but this area was expanded as dictated by needs of youth and families. This was also determined by the fact that this and surrounding areas are experiencing major growth in the number of youths currently and projected into the future.

Map 2: Original Higher Ground Primary Impact Area – Census Tract 817, Roxbury, and Target Schools



The poverty rate for Boston was reported at 20.3% in the American Community Survey, 2014 – 2018. The Higher Ground impact area remains economically challenged with a poverty rate of 31% and where 38% of all households reported less than \$25,000 in household income. The unemployment rate in the impact area for all persons 16 years and older is 12%, 41% are not in the labor force, and the homeownership rate is 24%.¹² The next map shows that most of the partner schools and the CACC are in places where the family poverty rate is 33% or higher; that is one third or more of families residing in a census tract are impoverished based on the ACS 2014-2018.

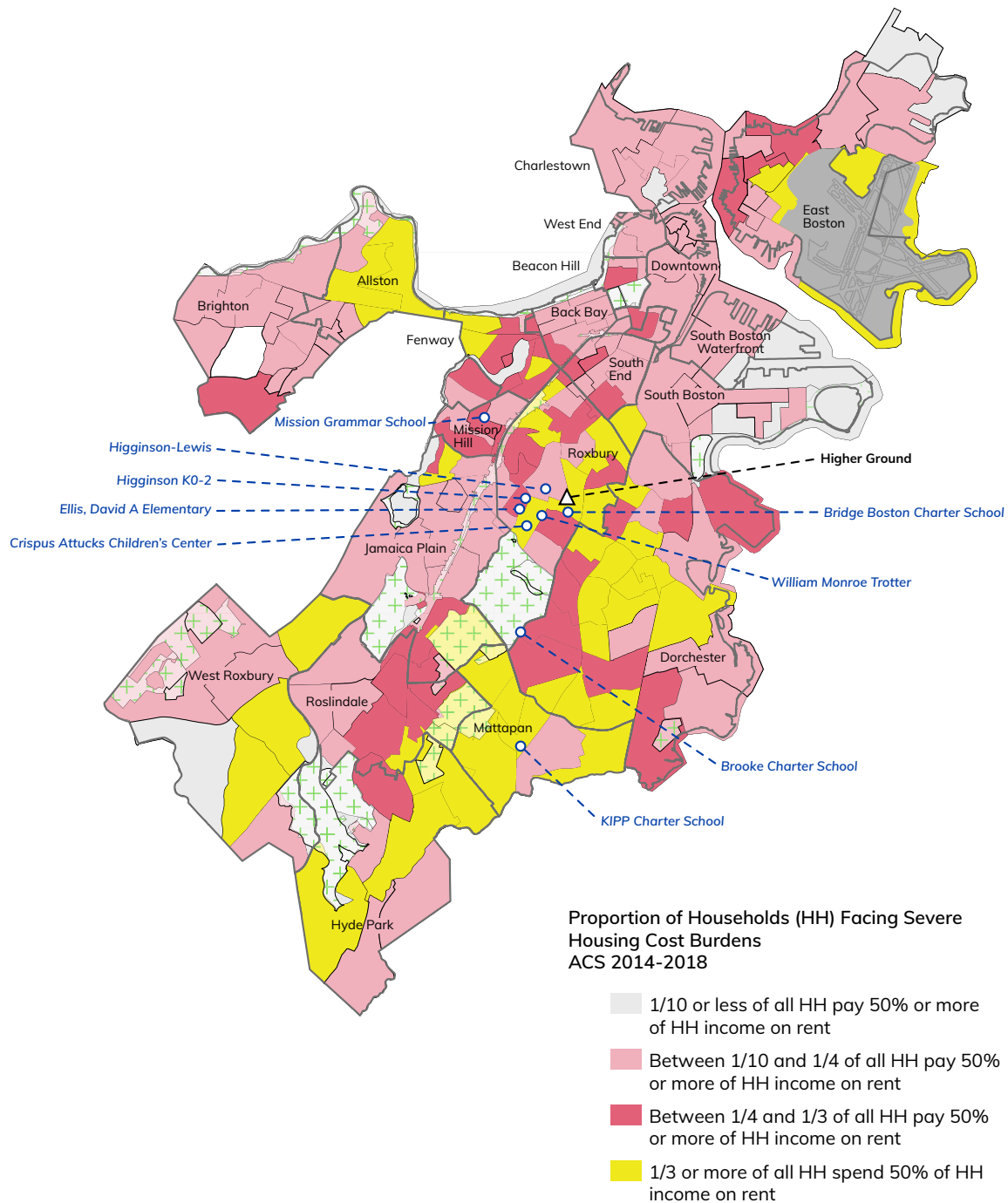
Map 3: Family Poverty Rates by Tracts, Neighborhoods, and Partner Schools



¹² American Community Survey 2014-2018 5 Year Estimates.

The next map shows the location of partner schools in terms of the proportion of households facing extremely severe housing costs burdens. In some parts of the city more than half of all households spend 50% or more of their household income on rents. These are areas where in combination with other economic distress factors, severe housing cost burdens can be associated with housing insecurity.

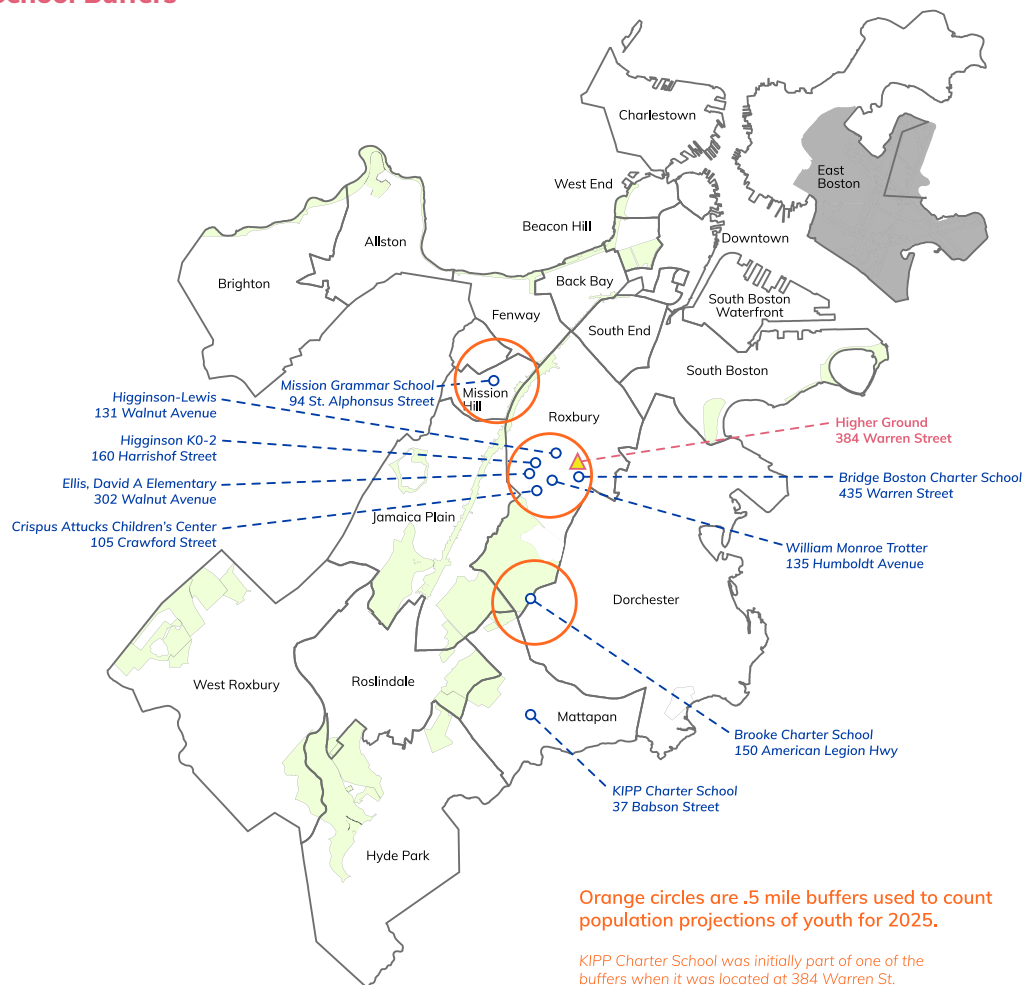
Map 4: Severe Housing Cost Burden by Tracts, Neighborhoods, and Partner Schools



Associated with a trilogy of distress, areas served by Higher Ground and its partner schools reflect significant growth in the number of youth (0 to 17 years). This growth is projected to continue into future years. As shown in Table 2 the overall population associated with these buffers grew significantly between the 2010 decennial count and the estimated population for 2020. This growth is projected to continue to 2025.

Table 2 indicates that the population growth will be more explosive for children and young people (0 to 17 years) in these same neighborhood areas.¹³ Furthermore, children and young people are projected to comprise between one fifth and one quarter of all persons in these areas. Higher Ground is serving an area, in other words, where potential school enrollment will be increasing rather than declining as in other parts of Boston. The next map and Table 3 are based on .5 mile buffers drawn around the Higher Ground partners.

Map 5: Population Projections for Youth (0-17 Years), 2025 by Partner School Buffers



¹³ Source of population estimates and projections reported here are based on census data extrapolated for census tracts and block groups by Geolytics; see "Methodology – Population, Housing, and Income Estimates" at <https://www.geolytics.com>. James Jennings utilized GIS software to determine how the estimates and projections are distributed by the .5 mile buffers (polygons) based on a Block Prorating methodology; see PCensus-USA User's Guide Version 10.0, Appendix 3, Tetrad Computer Applications (Vancouver, BC).

Table 2: Total Population Change, 2010, Estimated 2020, Projected 2025 Higher Ground Partner .5 Mile Buffers

	Total Population in 2010	Estimated Population in 2020	Projected Population by 2025	% Change Total Population between 2010 and 2025 Projection
H-HL-E-K-Br-CA .5-mile Buffer	14,782	15,543	16,008	7.7%
Mission Grammar .5-mile Buffer	21,735	27,456	29,940	27.4%
Brooke .5-mile Buffer	11,125	11,963	12,572	11.5%

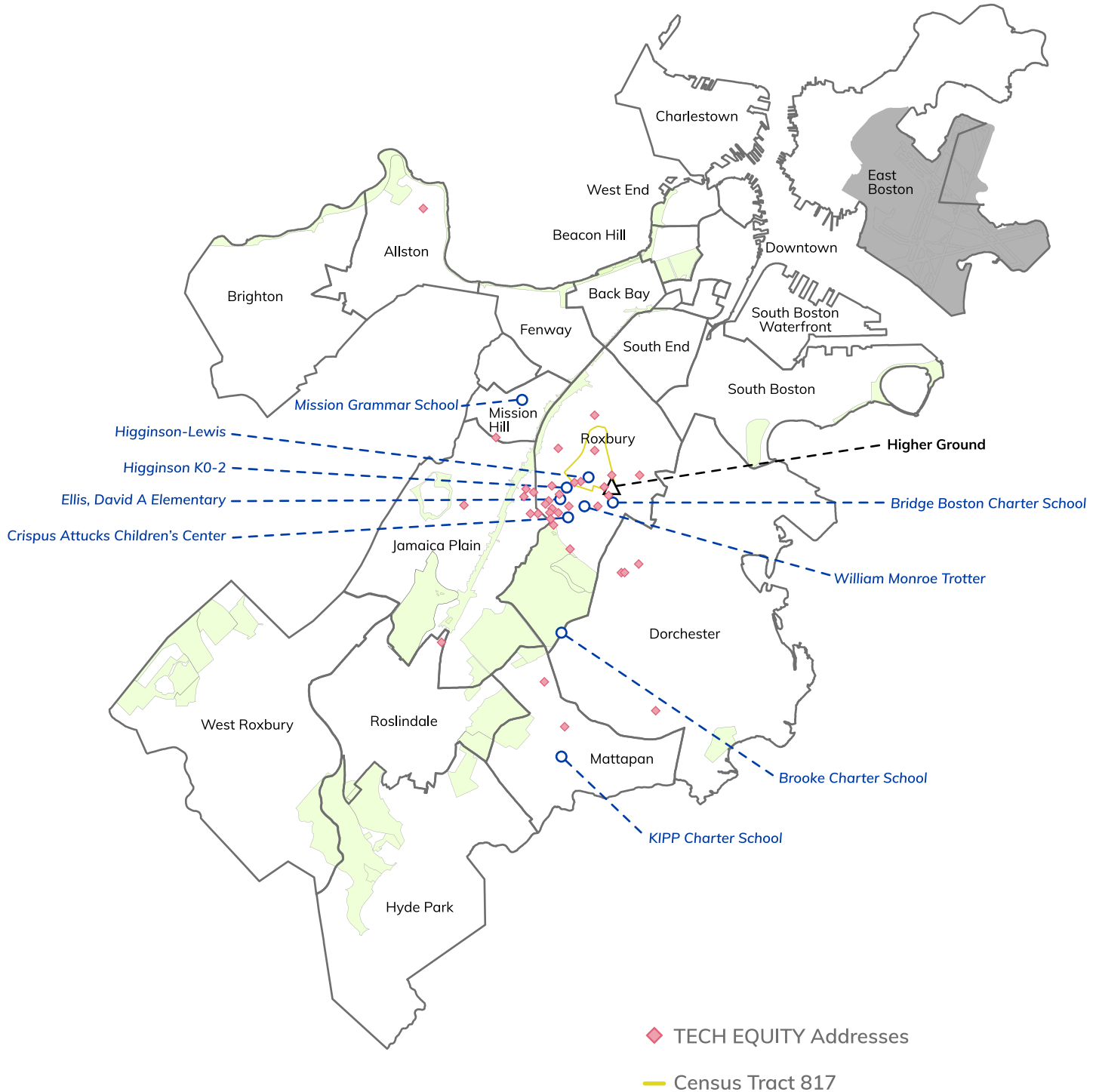
Table 3: Youth Population 2010, Estimated 2020, Projected 2025, and Proportion of Youth in Total Population Projected, 2025 by Higher Ground Partner .5 Mile Buffers

	Population 0 to 17 Years in 2010	Estimated Population 0 to 17 Years in 2020	Projected Population 0 to 17 Years in 2025	% Change Total Population 0 to 17 years between 2010 and 2025 Projection	Proportion of 0 to 17 Years in Total Population Projected 2025
H-HL-E-K-Br-CA .5-mile Buffer	2,771	4,201	4,130	32.9%	25.8%
Mission Grammar .5-mile Buffer	1,525	5,441	5,699	73.2%	19.0%
Brooke .5-mile Buffer	2,488	3,538	3,498	28.9%	27.8%

Although Higher Ground is a comprehensive, place-based strategic organization, unlike the Harlem Children's Zone, or the earlier Boston Empowerment Zone, it does not confine services strictly to the children and families in the original catchment area. The approach is consistent with the reality that children and families experiencing economic distress are not neatly confined to one neighborhood area. Higher Ground's reach is reflected in the next four maps showing the location of children receiving services under its various initiatives.

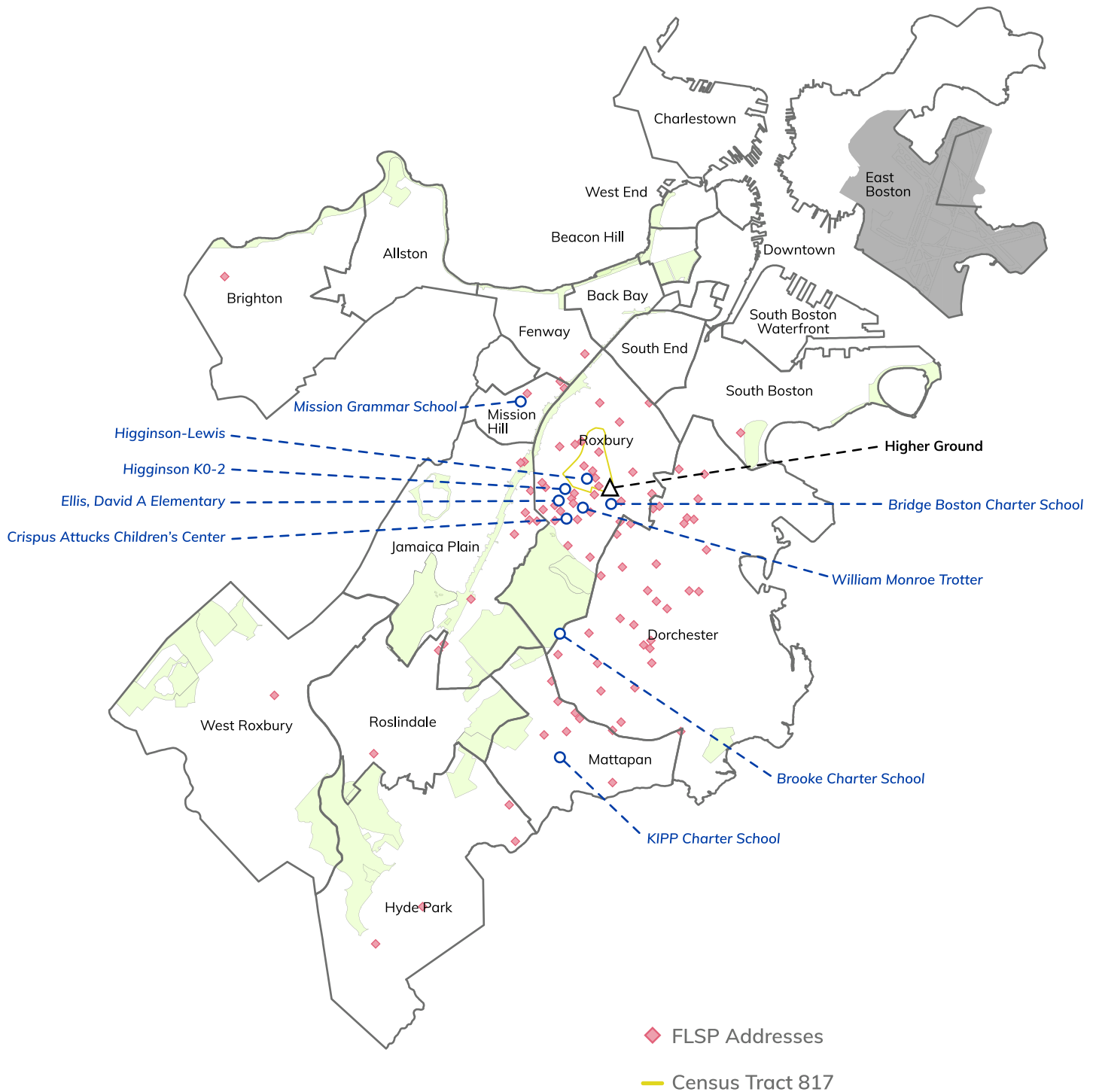
The following map shows the location of children and youth participating in the TECH EQUITY program as of May 2021.

Map 6: Location of Children and Youth Participating in TECH EQUITY and Partner Schools



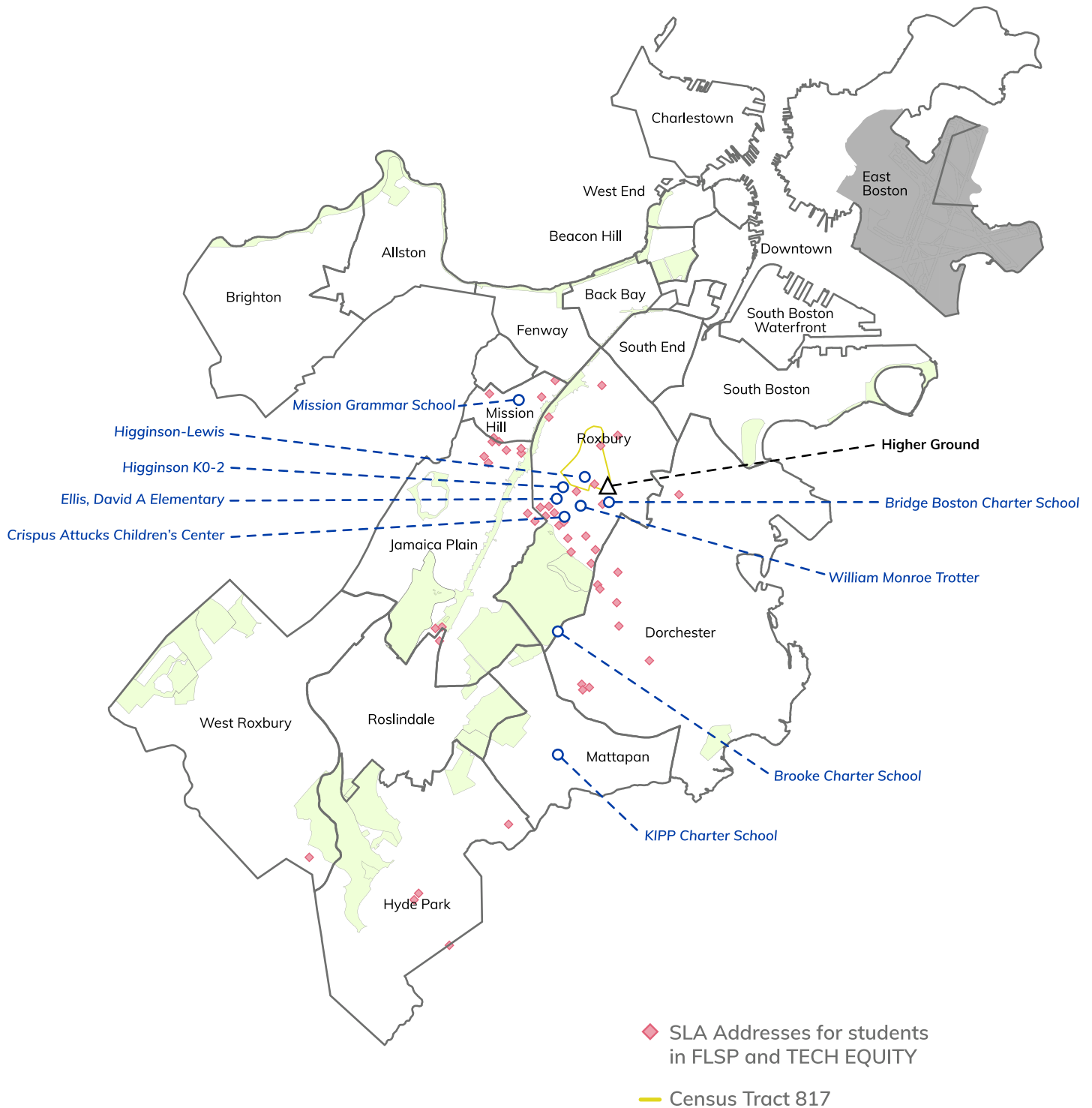
The next map also shows that while there is a concentration of students served under the FLSP initiative with addresses among the partner schools, the students are dispersed over several neighborhood areas. (May 2021)

Map 7: Location of Children and Youth Participating in the FLSP and Partner Schools

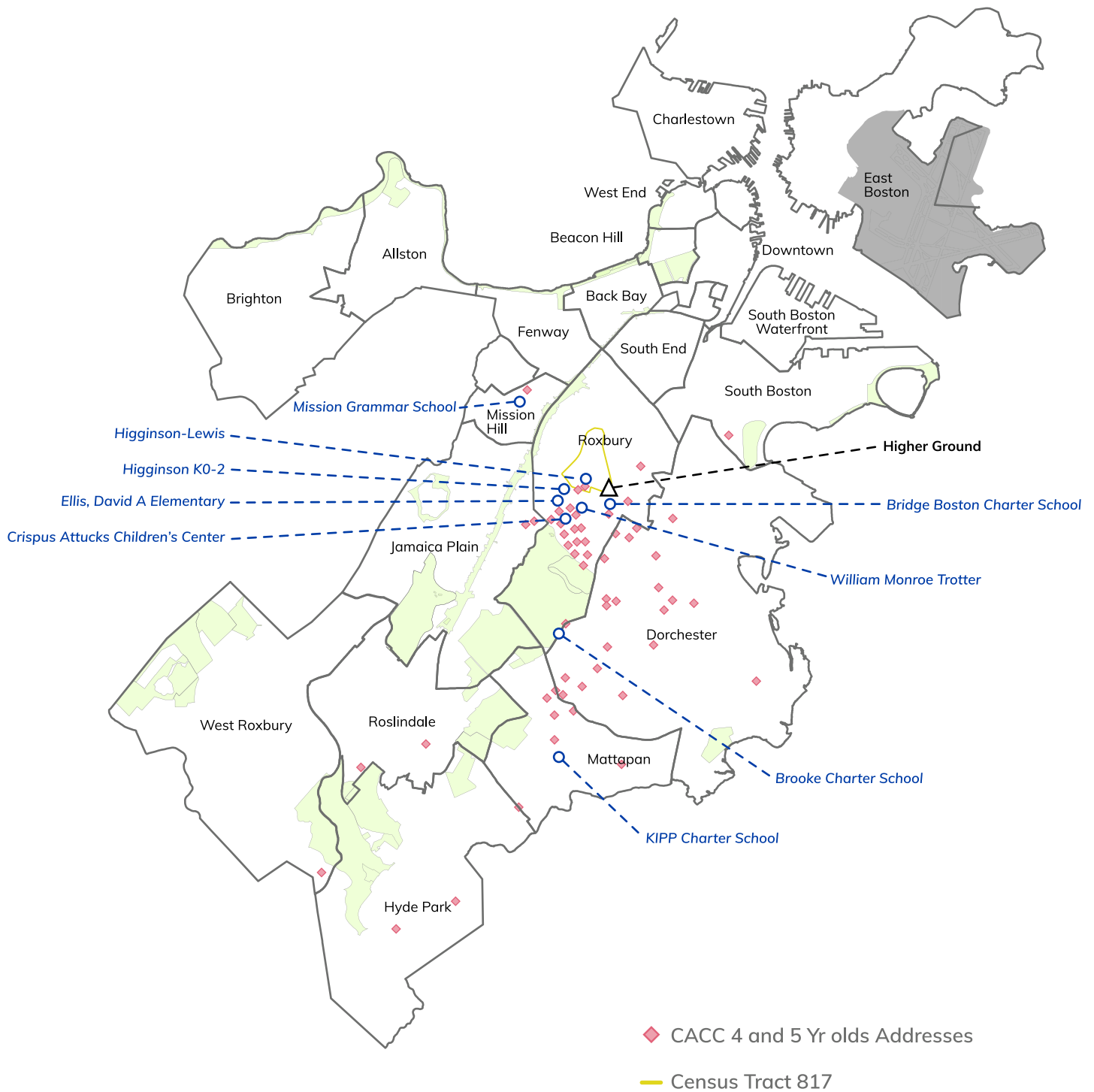


Map 8 shows children and youth who participated in TECH EQUITY and FLSP and who attended the Summer Learning Academy started in 2020.

Map 8: Locations and Addresses of Students in the Summer Learning Academy (2020)



Map 9: Location and Addresses of Children 4 and 5 Years Enrolled in CACC



The next section provides greater detail about the Higher Ground Model.


THE HIGHER GROUND MODEL

“Imagine if this were happening in every neighborhood...”

Nikki Tabron Vice President of Education
Thompson Island Outward Bound¹⁴

Higher Ground is described as a connector, a catalyst, a collaborator, a backbone organization. Part of the genesis for Higher Ground was the report *Place-based Service Delivery & Strategic Collaboration in Boston’s Distressed Neighborhoods: Framework for Planning and Action* prepared for The Barr Foundation.¹⁵ The theme highlighted in this report based on a range of quantitative and qualitative data was that a “corridor approach” could offer a model for significant changes in service delivery. A corridor approach puts community as the unit of analysis rather than individual actors or populations, or problems. This approach is counter to a silo service-delivery model in that it crosses boundaries associated with social, economic, education, and health sectors. This report also described how smaller and community-based nonprofits could be key actors in a corridor approach, but also that community organizing must be part of an effective strategy for community change.

Higher Ground leverages existing resources in the community so that complex and persistent issues associated with poverty can be addressed. As noted by a founder and current board member, Shirley Carrington:




Our concern was that Boston, primarily its communities of color, were not achieving the success that we thought we should be receiving for our children, despite the fact that there were hundreds of social service agencies in the communities of Color (Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan) ...The focus on Education, Housing and Health are the critical pieces of the organization’s work. Higher Ground is a great convener, the organization is able to organize, bring people together and work on the critical pieces. Higher Ground has also assisted several major community-based organizations in rebuilding and sustaining their organizations.

¹⁴ Participant in Video, Higher Ground 10th Anniversary Celebration (April 2021).

¹⁵ See <https://sites.tufts.edu/jamesjennings/files/2018/06/reportsPlaceBased2009.pdf>.

Backbone Organization and Trust


As a catalyst, or backbone, or boundary-spanning organization Higher Ground is positioned to quickly share information about resources and help related to knowledge about accessing resources. This is facilitated due to community trust in the leadership and work of Higher Ground. As explained by Vice Chair Charlotte Richie Golar:



During Higher Ground's early years, we worked closely with the residents of the Warren Gardens cooperative. In fact, Higher Ground was invited into the neighborhood by one of the leaders. In 2021, Higher Ground received an award for our efforts to address the residents housing-related issues, including concerns about security and crime...[In] 2013, after the Roxbury Comprehensive Health Center was deemed to be dysfunctional and a receiver was appointed to handle the wind-down of services, that receiver engaged Higher Ground to provide outreach to the community.

This interaction is consistent with another study about Latinx nonprofits in Boston: "People will respond more passionately and prominently with calls for action and involvement made by organizations with long roots in working with people and that have not approached them in silos, but rather in more holistic ways connecting their lives and struggles to each other and to their community's well-being."¹⁶


Underlying this trust was ten years of hard work in being a collaborative partner for many advocacy issues and within a framework of youth and family empowerment. The latter include spaces for residents not just to voice concerns but also be part of decision-making. Again, Charlotte Golar Richie:



It helps to be invited into the community — not to just "helicopter in," even if you believe you have answers to address the pressing issues that residents are facing. It helps to have "street cred," as a longtime resident or someone who has worked in the community for years, so that intentions hopefully will not be questioned or criticized. It helps to enter partnerships and collaborations with a willingness to listen to others, and to refrain from dictating what others should do. And it's important to get some early wins — tangible gains that the community will value, and funders will back.

¹⁶ James Jennings, Jen Douglas, and Miren Uriarte, *Latinx-Led Nonprofits In Boston Today: Contributions, Challenges, and Lessons Learned*, Report, Greater Boston Latino Network (October 2020), p.35.


Higher Ground does not seek to replace or outgrow existing community-based organizations or nonprofits. Turahn Dorsey, who worked closely with Higher Ground as the former Education Chief for Boston, observed that:



Higher Ground takes a holistic, networked, and inclusive approach to meeting the educational and socio-economic needs of young people and families in the Grove Hall neighborhood...the neighborhood is rich with social service agencies and educational supports, including schools. However, limited or uneven impact over time suggests that the efforts of these neighborhood-based institutions and organizations don't add up to the sum of their parts. Higher Ground, modeled in many ways on the Harlem Children's Zone, seeks to better organize, connect, and integrate neighborhood assets to provide more effective support for children and families.

Bill Pinakiewicz, a former board member and current member of the Higher Ground Advisory Board made a point of emphasizing an ethos of collaboration in the work of this organization: "The ethos that they bring to working with the community, invited collaboration, making available a platform for advocacy, agency, and voice. [They are] advancing equity in communities in the right sort of way..."

The above is summarized in Suffolk University's case narrative about the role of Higher Ground in the community response to the closing of the Roxbury Comprehensive Community Health Center. The latter study described Higher Ground in the following way:

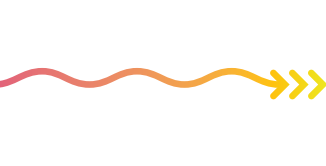


Rather than creating new service programs from scratch, Higher Ground has successfully leveraged existing high-quality service providers in the Boston Neighborhoods, and in the process has improved the outcomes for youth and families residing there. This has resulted in extensive networking facilitation activity rather than a duplication of services of approximately 37 organizations, agencies, and service-providers in the impact zone and beyond. However, Higher Ground's connection to 1,000 families and its networked organizations do not operate independently of one another. In fact, Higher Ground has created a sustainable ecosystem of broader and deeper collaboration, partnerships, and a day-to-day operation of working with families directly to navigate the services of Higher Ground's strategic partners. From the start, Higher Ground's intention was not to parachute services or programs into an area or neighborhood, rather it was to respond to the voices of the community and engage the capacity of existing services effectively and in a transparent way. This has ultimately fostered an environment in which families define their community's needs, bolster their strengths, and exercise their voices effectively to mobilize, and hold accountable, existing resources in their community.¹⁷

¹⁷ Leigh Handschuh and Nicole Rivers, *Boston's Higher Ground: A Stabilizing Force in the Aftermath of the Roxbury Comprehensive Health Center (RoxComp) Closure*, Suffolk University, Sawyer Business School, Moakley Center for Public Management (2013).

Strengthening Community Infrastructure

The Higher Ground approach and work are framed by a need to strengthen community infrastructure, nonprofits, health organizations, and public schools because this would only make collaborative work more effective and impactful in responding to long-standing racial and ethnic inequalities, including reducing poverty. Collaborative initiatives, activities, and partnerships demonstrate Higher Ground's ability as a connector and transformer in generating greater sharing and linking of resources across institutional partners. This has resulted in increased attention and funding over the years on the part of other nonprofits and foundations. Board member Wayne Ysaguirre, Vice Chair of the Higher Ground Board, describes the organization's role as a connector and collaborator:



It is rare to find an organization whose vision is broad enough to imagine both what is possible and what is needed, whose strategies are honest enough to recognize the interconnectedness necessary to achieve the possible, and whose relationships are deep enough to lead when needed, follow when appropriate and partner at all times.

As noted above a key part of the organization is to work across existing silos, avoid duplication of efforts, but very importantly, to train and work with residents and children's families so that they become more effective advocates and organizers on behalf of their interests. Higher Ground offers workshops that train its families on advocacy skills, grow their confidence to co-facilitate committee meetings with other families, and provide opportunities to offer testimony. Higher Ground also offered popular computer classes through the Tech Equity Pilot Program, as well as positive parenting workshops in partnership with Families First.

Higher Ground has adopted the Collective Impact Framework to give structure to their collaborative work. Collective Impact refers to a cross-sector strategy for large-scale social change and involves five conditions: common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support.¹⁸ The role of these kinds of organizations is essentially to “knit ...organizations together to achieve collective impact,” and as intermediary or backbone organizations they can generate better and expanded impact results across siloed nonprofits. This also elevates the political and economic power of the communities in which they work, according to Hubie Jones.¹⁹ As he observes,

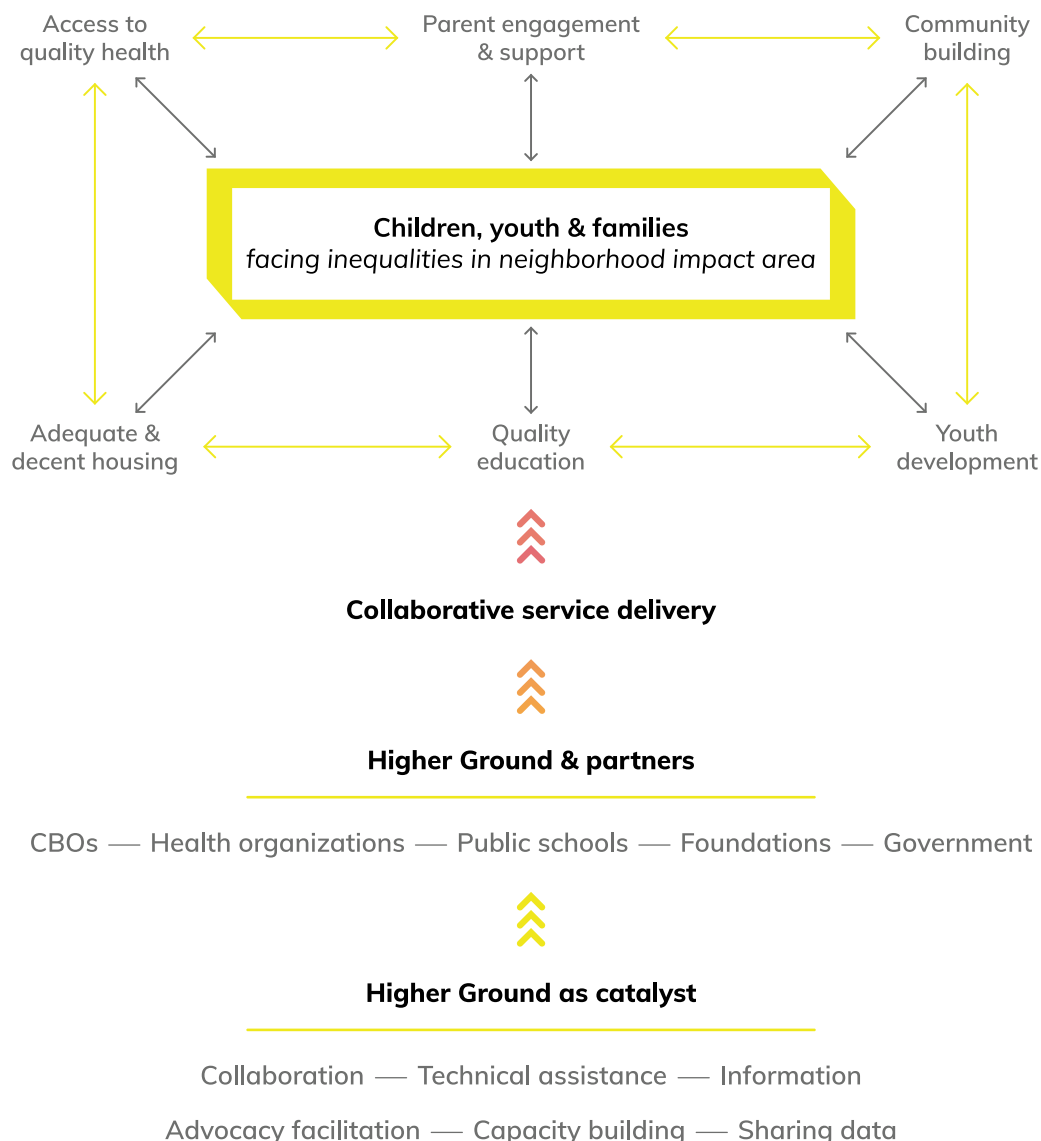
¹⁸ Kania & Kramer, 2011, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact.

¹⁹ Email correspondence with James Jennings, July 23, 2020.

...*(R)esidents in distressed neighborhoods are very dependent on nonprofit service organizations for employment and a range of human services. Therefore, these organizations are essential to the creation and maintenance of strong social fabrics in these urban neighborhoods. It is imperative that these service organizations have strong collaborative working relationships with each other, which is not usually the case...no joint planning, no joint professional development, no joint purchasing of goods and services and lacked integration of their services. Therefore, the potential social and economic power of this sector was greatly compromised...*

Connecting Pieces

The following chart illustrates Higher Ground's overall collaborative strategy and model.



This model makes Higher Ground unique in some ways. Children and families are facing enormous inequalities in the neighborhood target area. Higher Ground is focusing on strategic responses influencing access to quality health, adequate and decent housing, quality education, youth development, community building, and parent engagement and support. As it stands now, it would be difficult for one organization to provide service deliveries across all these areas. But a backbone, or intermediary organization like Higher Ground coordinates these services together to create a web of support for children and families within a holistic framework.

Higher Ground's approach allows it organizational flexibility to respond to community challenges that can be directly or indirectly problematic for strategic responses to the trilogy of distress. For example, initially invited by one of the Warren Gardens Resident Association leaders, and supported by the resident members, and Housing Cooperative Board, Higher Ground was asked for technical assistance related to capital needs and Board relationships among residents and management company. In another example and as explained by Shirley Carrington, "When Roxbury Comprehensive Health Center was on the brink of closing, staff was not being paid and no one seemed to know what was happening, Boston's Higher Ground intervened and convened staff, residents, and community organizations to appoint a Receiver to manage the situation. This Receiver managed the entire process from beginning to end which included getting the staff paid and managing the resources of the building including selling the building." Higher Ground also served as the connector between former RoxComp staff who were owed back pay and the Receiver who had the resources from the sale of the property.

Comparisons to Other Place-based Initiatives

When describing Higher Ground's role as a backbone/intermediary, Hubie Jones indicates that intermediaries have a role in holding nonprofits and other entities accountable to communities of color. Higher Ground coordinates across entities and are investing in making sure these entities do right by residents in Roxbury and Dorchester. This accountability is a key part of their overall strategy. Higher Ground's work over the last ten years reflects best practices that have been identified as key for Collective Impact approaches: Shared vision; Partner commitment; Data use; Partnership action, capacity, communication, and structure; Practice change; and Community engagement.²⁰ Higher Ground is exemplary in that it focuses on parent empowerment and grassroots organizing in addition to coordinating agencies and institutions. Higher Ground is a collaborator; but in the case of this organization this does not simply mean bringing organizations together on behalf of common goals.²¹

²⁰ See https://ssir.org/articles/entry/filling_the_gaps_in_collective_impact.

²¹ For an overview of collaboration models among nonprofits see https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mark_Hager3/publication/275109770_Models_of_Collaboration_between_Nonprofit_Organizations/links/59b-c2e2a0f7e9b48a28e21c3/Models-of-Collaboration-between-Nonprofit-Organizations.pdf.

Its collaborative work is founded on collective action with deep commitments to partner organizations working on behalf of children and families in the areas of health, education, and housing.

Higher Ground is also different than other collective impact organizations due to its genesis in community engagement and sustained pursuit of equity in process and outcomes. Whereas other organizations might integrate these pieces into their work after engaging stakeholders which may represent more status quo organizations, Higher Ground has cultivated diverse community partners from the beginning with an umbrella of pursuing equity for Black and Latinx families in the neighborhood. Higher Ground has an organizing component that is centrally focused on the grassroots and bringing resident perspectives into the front of the action.

There are some organizations and initiatives across the country with missions to corral resources and services to focus on distressed communities.²² For example, the federal Promise Neighborhoods Initiative focused on organizing and delivering cradle to career services in comprehensive ways in impoverished areas.²³ As stated earlier, before it was started officially, Higher Ground founders visited the Harlem Children's Zone to learn about place-based strategies. There are also important local place-based efforts that have sought collective impact in communities. One of the most prominent in Boston is the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI). This organization is a collaborator in the Higher Ground network. DSNI focuses on early education through a School Readiness Roundtable, they support school partnerships by supporting school plans, expanded learning opportunities, and advocating for quality education. They support youth college and careers through mentoring and organizing and offer a youth committee. Activities supporting strong and healthy families include economic development, financial literacy, and housing support.

Another organization in Boston is Vital Village, a network whose mission is to maximize child, family, and community wellbeing with a focus on prenatal and early childhood.²⁴ This network is administered by Boston Medical Center, and Boston University. Their work is place-based in Nubian (formerly Dudley), Mattapan, and Codman Square. Their four objectives are vital concept (cultivate community settings which protect children from violence and support their well-being), vital signs (improve quality of data/tools), vital connections (cultivate social networks), village prosperity (peer to peer advocacy models to address social/material hardship). They offer several research-based projects and trainings. Trainings involve community advocacy, mediation. They offer prenatal support for parents, and training of teachers for trauma informed practices.

²² Information reviewed in this section comes from the websites of these organizations. Inferences made from this relatively surface review might not reflect the nuances of these programs, or recent actions of these programs. Interpretation of similarities and differences should be considered general.


²³ See <https://promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov/>; also see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/purpromneig.pdf>.

²⁴ See <https://www.vitalvillage.org/about>.

There are many organizations nationally which have adopted a Collective Impact approach to their work. Some of these can be identified through the Collective Impact Forum's initiative directory. Based on using this tool it seems that only a few such initiatives have a focus on homelessness or housing as part of their strategy.²⁵ Some organizations attempting collective impact across the nation can reflect a lack of attention to shifting or challenging power structures. This is identified as a weakness according to Christens and Tran Inzeo who recommend that these kinds of initiatives take lessons from grassroots organizing to inform their strategy and programs.²⁶ In a review of research about collective impact initiatives Stachowiak and Gase (2018) describe how equity has manifested in some cases.²⁷ Collective impact initiatives assessed tend to value equity but are limited in their ability to “develop their capacity, target their actions, and authentically engage and shift power to communities”, and most did not begin this work with an equity lens. Higher Ground has emphasized equity and including parent voices in decision-making and participation in implementation of services.

Parent Voices as Key

Charlotte Golar Richie notes the critical importance of engaging parents in the work of Higher Ground:



We were working with families first on a parent engagement initiative. The goal was to get residents engaged and young parents or expecting parents into a cohort of residents and families to receive the support they needed and to connect them to resources to strengthen their parenting skills. We had a dynamic cohort of parents involved...Families that needed support around school programs, advocacy, policy making...We helped lift up the voices of parents to advocate effectively for the needs of their children.

Higher Ground has helped to support coalition parent leaders from the three district schools, three local charter schools, KIPP Public Charter School, Brooke Charter School and Bridge Boston Charter School, and the Mission Grammar Catholic School. This parents' group meets regularly to plan collective actions for the children in these schools. One related initiative is the Parent Circle, started in 2012 with workshops at Higher Ground's offices, which benefitted from connections with the WIC program also housed at Higher Ground. Following the WIC Program's

²⁵ Based on a search of the Collective Impact forum's database <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/resources/> (June 2021).

²⁶ Christens, B. D., & Inzeo, P. T. (2015). Widening the view: Situating collective impact among frameworks for community-led change. *Community Development*, 46(4), 420-435.

²⁷ Stachowiak, S., & Gase, L. (2018). Does collective impact really make an impact. *Stanf. Soc. Innov. Rev.*

relocation to its permanent location nearby, Parenting Circles moved in 2018 to CACC aligned with the early childhood development programs offered there. This helps to facilitate connections between the childcare center organizations and the other Higher Ground partner schools.

A critical component of involving parents is raising the expectations of parents and residents regarding the quality of the work of nonprofits and government agencies. As noted by Hubie Jones, “Higher Ground has operated in the education and equity space. Its mission is to empower residents, mainly of color, to change unacceptable conditions and demand excellent services. It has helped residents make clear that they expect their service organizations to effectively collaborate with each other to the benefit of residents.”²⁸ Many more parents today understand better the operations of nonprofits in their neighborhoods and how service delivery can be assessed in terms of information but also its impacts.

An earlier effort, started in 2016, was the Roxbury Dorchester Mattapan (RDM) Parent Coalition with the goal, “to support parents in quality community engagement and advocate for improved education in Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan neighborhoods.”²⁹ This group, which was composed of parents with children and youth in public schools, district schools, charter schools, and a Catholic school, called upon Boston “to embrace an agenda for our public schools, which bridges the district-charter school divide and focuses on student achievement and success, regardless of the school model, taking the best from the district and charter experiences, and ensuring that adequate resources are provided for both.”³⁰ The RDM Parent Coalition insisted that pedagogy and school policies be based on addressing the whole child, including attention to social and emotional needs.

Higher Ground is helping to enhance parent engagement at the CACC and its three partner public elementary schools: the Higginson, Higginson Lewis, and David Ellis. Through the FLSP project they also support children at the Trotter School, Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School, Dearborn STEM Academy and Orchard Gardens. At these schools Higher Ground engages and organizes partners to support student success (e.g., City Year, Friends of the Children) and to advocate for environmental improvements. Higher Ground introduces parents to many supportive nonprofits, including City Year, Friends of the Children, Center for Teen Empowerment, Families First, and ABCD.

This organization uses several approaches to mobilize parents to raise their voices about school matters, and to address community issues and concerns. Higher Ground supports parent groups whose meetings function as workshops that train families

²⁸ Hubie Jones email correspondence, January 15, 2021.


²⁹ See <https://higherground-boston.org>.

³⁰ See Statement, *Higher Ground and Roxbury Dorchester Mattapan (RDM) Parent Coalition Position*, re: Boston Public District and Charter Schools (May 2016).

on advocacy, grow their confidence to co-facilitate committee meetings with other families, and provide opportunities for parents to offer testimony. Higher Ground also has offered technology support through the Tech Equity Pilot Program, as well as positive parenting workshops in partnership with Families First. This includes facilitating Teachers/Parents serving on advisory committees; family training and advocacy; mobilizing parents in terms of obtaining greater levels of quality health services; and directly supporting families experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. Higher Ground is showing how a backbone organization can work with public schools so that they are more community-oriented, connected to external resources, and responsive to the needs and desires of parents. It works with parents as an important linkage. This expands the scope of school leadership without adding undue burdens on their time and staff.

Through its navigating role Higher Ground has introduced resources to its partner schools that previously were absent, for the most part. In this vein Higher Ground has also triggered and enhanced community and information sharing among its partner organizations. It has initiated conversations about potential collaborative efforts among the principals and staff of the Higginson-Lewis, David Ellis, Higginson K-2, Bridge Boston, Brooke and KIPP Charter schools, and the Mission Grammar School. Some of the organizations and specific resources tapped and introduced to these schools include work with City Year; Boston Architectural College Gateway Program (BAC); Community Rowing; Program in Education Afterschool and Resiliency (PEAR Institute); Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center; Generations Inc. recruiting local seniors; 3Point Foundation; Friends of the Children mentoring for at risk students; Families First. Higher Ground also assisted with community outreach to facilitate the Bridge Boston Charter School move to the RoxComp Health Center property.


Higher Ground has assisted the partner schools with personnel issues in terms of identifying candidates for various positions. For example, it aided the recruitment of a Finance Director for CACC a few years ago. Higher Ground has also recruited interns who help to meet the social and health needs of children and their families. Its targeting of health resources has helped schools to service children and youth as the 'whole child'. One Higher Ground intern became member of Higher Ground's staff and is now the Transformation Social Worker at one of the partner schools. Beyond this it is important to note that Higher Ground represents a value add in terms of resources which directly or indirectly can impact academic achievement. Board member Wayne Ysaguirre discusses Higher Ground's role in establishing the foundation for learning,



Higher Ground understands that for any child to thrive in schools they need a strong start, strong families and nurturing communities. Early childhood is the time in a child's and a young family's life when brains are being built, and relationships are being forged. Linking both the young child's and parent's early experience to later success in school seems obvious and yet Higher Ground is almost unique in building the pipeline of children learning and pipeline of parent leadership and interconnectedness into a cohesive strategy.

Dr. Brenda Casellius highlighted this point in a recent statement "Higher Ground has positioned itself as a conduit of hope, resilience and advocacy for the advancement of equitable access to education."³¹


A major illustration showing how parent organizing was pursued is Higher Ground's response to the closing of a major neighborhood-based health facility in the neighborhood, the Roxbury Comprehensive Community Health Center (RoxComp). Higher Ground has provided supports to parents at the same time assisting with expanding their organizing capacity. Services were sometimes framed with parent circles as described by one parent (Sylvia Smith):



...we have a lot of parent circles, and training for all ages about how to raise your child. Tips and strategies that you can use...Parents and students would get together, and Higher Ground would help students and tutor them while families were in meetings. They had Teen Empowerment getting students jobs. Music, rapping, singing, and poetry programs to get students involved in good activities/after school programs. Certain programs would give out stipends to help families with bills, or things children needed. The computer classes for parents were awesome, showing them how to use google [classroom], class dojo, and seesaw, etc., all of these resources were bilingual. Higher Ground also helped with the tablets from schools. I got a lot of feedback from parents, especially Spanish speakers and they found it [computer classes] really helpful, and Higher Ground helped pay for 12 months of internet access, which was helpful. For the meetings they provided all of the food and beverages as well. Everyone loved that! You got to take food home, so you don't have to cook the next day. There was always something to do with your child during the weekdays and the summer...

³¹ Higher Ground 10th Anniversary Celebration, can be accessed at: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=8zIM998ogxg>.

Again, parent activist, Sylvia Smith, found that information and activities related to child development were extremely helpful:




...The impact for me was the added information on how to raise a child, get resources, and hear from other parents and learn from each other. Learn strategies, and learn how to come to the child's level, especially strategies that are age appropriate. Some of the classes had homework and you can see the difference. We need those classes back. They ended about 3-4 years ago. That class was amazing, I got a lot out of that class.

In the spirit of collaboration and community empowerment parents are also encouraged to organize across schools, regardless of public, charter, or private, as well as in different parts of the neighborhoods. Under the Surround Care Coalition Teacher Advisory Group, for example, Smith notes that parents “discuss what is going on at the schools. You have knowledge from what teachers and families know and discuss what’s missing and we strive to be the same at all schools. BPS is singled out and doesn’t have the same [resources] as the METCO schools, and we can advocate for the funding for all the schools instead of just one. We piggyback off everyone, I think it’s a great meeting, and I hope that it continues. I plan on continuing to be there even if she’s [my daughter] not in that school because it’s very helpful. I like the fact that we spoke at City Hall and we got the park at the Higginson, that was crucial. That says it all, the parents and teachers got together, fought, and rallied, and we got the park. The work is continuing on.”

Felicia Leaston, another parent, described concrete victories that resulted from this approach to parent organizing and advocacy. One had to do with pushing back against the “lay off of the vice-principal because of budget cuts, the parents and school were very upset, because they needed someone who spoke Spanish, they came together to make calls, send emails, and were wired to get the vice-principal reinstated.”

Corey Harris, Chief of Schools for BPS, further describes how Higher Ground works to empower parents as learning partners to their children and to teachers:



It is through school staff, and some of our teachers and administrators participate in those meetings. My understanding is that they occur at our school sites which makes it easier to draw out parents, our school leaders collaborate on communication efforts. Higher Ground will generate the communication and the school-based staff will help to circulate that, so parents are aware. Higher Ground also does surveys, and they gather data, our school leaders support that effort, and HG hosts 2 network nights at the campuses they support to inform parents of the different services and supports that are available.

Harris also points out that as a backbone organization Higher Ground provides stabilization services for families experiencing homelessness through finding housing; credit counseling; information and support in obtaining GEDs or other post-secondary training; assistance in finding employment; engaging in family advocacy and case management. These tools serve to empower parents in the partner schools since serving the ‘whole child’ means serving the parents.

Coordination and Collaboration, and Strategic Decision-making

There are several guides which frame Higher Ground’s emphasis on strengthening coordination and collaboration. For example, in pursuing ‘fierce’ collaboration to enhance the quality and impact of services for residents Higher Ground’s decision-making strategy includes involving stakeholders in the community gluing together various interests through advocacy. But Higher Ground brings stakeholders together not simply to share resources, though important. Partner organizations can include nonprofits and institutions of higher education that are not necessarily part of the community but whose resources are critical for residents. Advocacy of issues and resolutions of community problems is what keeps stakeholders engaged and to continue working together.

Higher Ground does not seek to be duplicative of ongoing human services delivery in the impact area, but rather to corral resources. The ability and capacity to coordinate the work and service delivery of a range of organizations focusing on a community challenge requires the building of trust between Higher Ground, partner organizations, and community residents. An earlier assessment based on Higher Ground’s “Cradle to Career Business Model” also led to ways of enhancing coordination around a range of services for residents. *Boston’s Higher Ground: A Stabilizing Force in the Aftermath of the Roxbury Comprehensive Health Center (RoxComp) Closure* also provided important feedback about Higher Ground’s ability to build and expand its bridging initiatives to connect organizations and partners.³²

Higher Ground has integrated research and data into its approach and strategy. Beginning in 2014 Higher Ground started to work with Suffolk University to plan and evaluate a data tracking system so that its work can be measured in terms of effective outreach and impact. Nicole Rivers, Associate Director Center for Public Management at Suffolk University notes that this kind of work can be time-consuming and expensive and therefore it is important to build a robust data collection and tracking system, something which Suffolk University is working on with Higher Ground. Along this line Higher Ground has incorporated a “Backbone Organization Effectiveness Self-Assessment” tool to survey staff, board, and collaborators. This provided insights and

³² Handschuh and Rivers, op cit.

recommendations about how Higher Ground operates as a backbone organization, and how it could be more effective. The major recommendations from this report were to work on a shared data system and mobilize funding, build staff capacity to strengthen characteristics as a backbone organization, and connect with board members and agency partners from Mattapan.

Higher Ground taps community input and participation to inform decision making in several ways. In July 2020, a Board of Advisors was formed with 17 civic and community leaders agreeing to serve, and periodically provide feedback and observations to Higher Ground regarding its mission and work. In August 2020, as a response to community outrage regarding the unequal treatment of Black and Brown people relative to public safety, criminal justice and health care, Higher Ground Board Chair Charlie Titus, Board Vice Chair Charlotte Golar Richie and Executive Director Mossik Hacobian took action by joining with the Commonwealth Seminar, led by Higher Ground Board Member Leverett Wing, and NAACP Boston Branch, led by its President Tanisha Sullivan, in hosting monthly dialogues on race. The goal of these “Commonwealth Crossover Dialogues” is to promote greater understanding of the history, cultural experiences and challenges of Boston’s diverse communities.

Making Connections with Higher Education

Higher Ground has also connected institutions of higher education with partner schools and community organizations serving families and children. This is not simply an organizational connection, however. Higher Ground provides a framework where the research and service of higher education is applied in direct help as defined by community interests. As explained by Charlie Titus, Founding Board Member and current Board Chair of Higher Ground, “People don’t want to be researched, they want to be helped.” Higher Ground is a bridge linking higher education with the interests of families; its response is comprehensive and multi-layered. In other words, the connections do not reflect a top-down research or service paradigm that sometimes approach distressed communities as laboratories.

Relationships cultivated by Higher Ground with institutions of higher education have produced a range of direct benefits for youth and families. For example, Boston College School of Social Work interns work in Higher Ground partner schools. The interns bring a wealth of resources based on their own experiences with AmeriCorps, Juvenile Justice Workforce Partners, and Bridge Over Troubled Waters. Very importantly, the interns assist with identifying and supporting children and families facing housing insecurity. The interns also meet and interview parents living in shelters about the challenges they are facing. They have designed referral forms that teachers can use to share information about families struggling with or in danger of housing instability.

In the spring of 2017 Wheelock College started collaborating with Higher Ground and the Aspire Institute at Wheelock matched new teachers in mentoring relationships with retired BPS principals and teachers. Higher Ground discussed a potential agreement with UMass Boston's School of Education in recruiting student teachers for the Higginson, Higginson/Lewis, and Ellis schools. Partnerships were also explored with Emmanuel College, Lesley University, Cambridge College, Boston University and Northeastern University to place student teachers at the Ellis, Higginson, and Higginson/Lewis schools.

Collaborations were explored with Harvard University's Phillips Brooks House linking college students with children at the Ellis School after school through the former's Stage Program and were explored with Massachusetts Institute of Technology offering activities from its K-12 Video Program to the Higginson/Lewis School.

Higher Ground also facilitated a relationship between the BPS CARES program and Boston University's School of Social Work, Boston College, and Simmons College. This program is aimed at supporting children and families who have faced trauma; it uses student social workers from the latter two institutions.

HIGHER GROUND ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS COMMUNITY PARTNER, COMMUNITY ADVOCATE, AND FACILITATOR OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES

It's taken the organization 10 years, but the good work of the organization speaks for itself. Higher Ground can, as it's done in the past with several organizations mentioned, serve as a resource in a consulting role to help community organizations strengthen and build their organization. We can demonstrate the value of collaborating and coordinating to provide effective services to our mutual constituencies. Other community-based organizations are gradually seeing the impact of the work. The 3 C's (Communication, Coordination and Collaboration) have been wonderfully demonstrated by Higher Ground.

Shirley Carrington

Founding and Current Board Member

Higher Ground's overall work is framed by interrelated themes as described in the archival materials and reported in the interviews: coordination; resource sharing; collaboration; and network utilization. This framework represents a glue in enhancing the possibility and quality of coordination across different service areas. From its beginning stages, Higher Ground initiatives were aimed at working with partner organizations to deliver human services to the community in holistic and effective ways. The latter was accomplished by Higher Ground playing the role of organizational partner; advocate; and as a reliable community resource. As explained by Charlotte Golar Richie:

(W)e have advocated for residents – and facilitated their own advocacy – and helped them navigate through the maze of existing programs and services to improve life in their communities. And we've supported community-based organizations and educational institutions in a variety of ways, so that they can serve the community at the highest level.

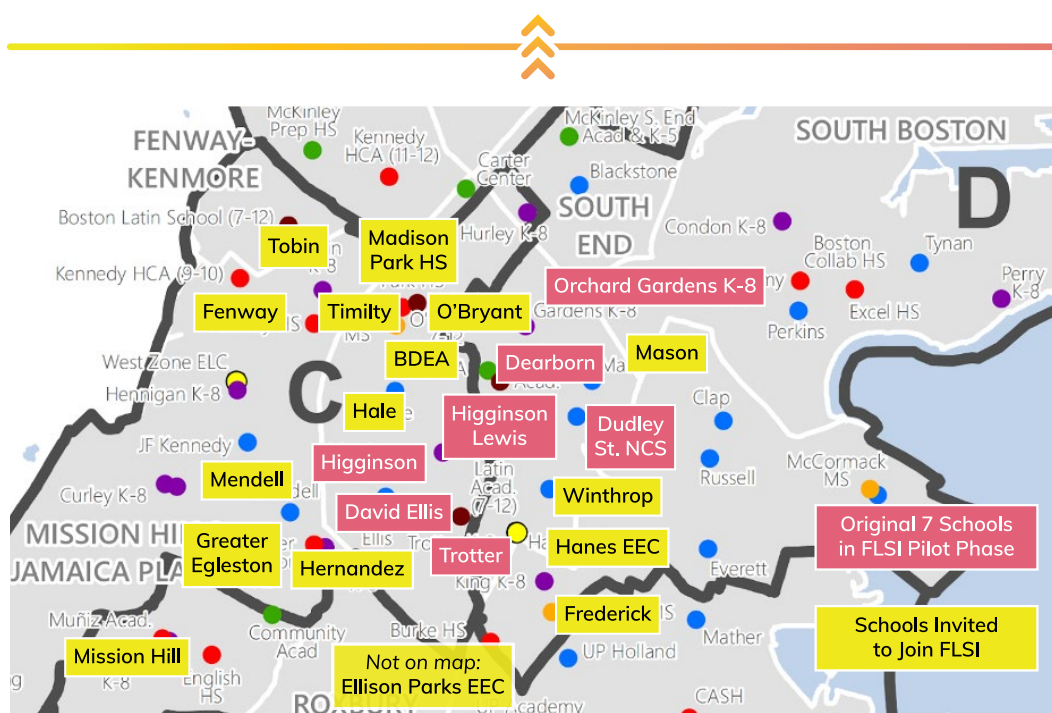
In its advocate role Higher Ground has successfully steered critical resources and benefits to children and youth and their families, public schools, and to the community.

Before providing specific examples describing Higher Ground's role as a partner, advocate, facilitator of resources, two major accomplishments are described: the Family Led Stability Project and the Resilient Families Surround-Care Coalition.

The Family Led Stability Pilot

Work with parents was expanded considerably with the initiation of the Family Led Stability Pilot (FLSP). The FLSP started as “A collaborative of four nonprofit organizations and five public sector partners launched the Family-Led Stability Pilot (FLSP) program to address the growing challenge of youth homelessness in Boston schools and demonstrate the positive impact of stable housing on educational outcomes.”³³

The objectives included identification of vulnerable students and their families in the target schools; matching family needs with housing opportunities; providing follow-up support to students and their caregivers. Launched in 2018 the effort resulted in housing as of May 2021, 197 families with 283 children attending seven BPS schools and 40 siblings attending other schools.³⁴ Higher Ground is showing how government, medical institutions, parents, public schools, and community organizations can work together for major impact.



Family-Led Stability Initiative is scaling from seven schools during its pilot phase 2018-2021 to 20 schools 2022-2025 and planning to scale to address student homelessness in all Boston schools.

³³ See <https://higherground-boston.org>.

³⁴ Ibid.

As the FLSP Project Manager, Higher Ground is providing a collaborative network involving nonprofit organizations, public agencies and the BPS, and preparing to scale up the initiative to include 20 schools. The city's former Education Chief Turahn Dorsey, Chair of City Council Committees on Education and Homelessness, played important roles in this collaboration. FLSP is organized to identify homeless families with children attending the Higher Ground partner schools. The participating schools include Henry L. Higginson Inclusion School; Higginson Lewis 3-8 Inclusion School; David A. Ellis Elementary School; William Monroe Trotter K-8 School; Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School; and the Dearborn STEM Academy, with DSNi and Project Hope providing services to the last three schools and Higher Ground focused on the first four schools.

With the assistance of family outreach counselors and Homelessness Liaisons, families in need are identified based on BPS data as well as on the ground information from teachers, staff outreach, but also self-identified parents. Initial indications pointed to approximately 400 students who have experienced homelessness in the 13 schools considering participating in the scaled initiative. The families of these students are connected with case managers at Higher Ground, Project Hope and shelters, and they are provided with information about available housing resources. Providing decent stable housing, and counseling for families results in educational and health benefits for all children in the participating schools. This means improved attendance; enhancing the educational experiences in the school; parents become more engaged and emerge as learning partners with teachers; and teachers can focus more effectively on pedagogy versus behavioral issues or trauma caused by homelessness.

In addition to providing housing the FLSP will help to improve educational outcomes for children and support families' own social and economic goals. The FLSP provides housing and case management to individual families. It also supports educational readiness through increasing attendance, and improved behavior and other education outcomes such as improved material understanding and retention through academic tutoring. Consistent with its interconnecting theory of action, housing is also connected to empowering families to meet financial and economic goals.

Resilient Families Surround-Care Coalition

The FLSP led to another ambitious collaborative undertaking coordinated by Higher Ground. The "Resilient Families Surround Care-Coalition" or simply as the Surround-Care Coalition (SCC) is focused on community, family, and child resilience by helping to ensure the availability and access to primary care, mental health services, and opportunity for access and participation with healthy physical activities. As stated on

its website, the SCC “consists of thirteen non-profit organizations, three neighborhood schools – the Higginson K0-2 Full Inclusion, Higginson-Lewis, and David Ellis – and Crispus Attucks Children’s Center (CACC).”³⁵ Higher Ground served as the backbone organization for a core group of organizations who met weekly during 2019 and 2020 who engaged in preliminary planning for the SCC.



*First Annual Surround Care Coalition Educator Appreciation Event
September 27, 2019, Thompson Island*

The partner organizations include BPS, CACC, three partner schools (Higginson Lewis; Higginson K0-2 Full Inclusion; and David Ellis Elementary School), Boston Children’s Chorus (BCC), Center for Teen Empowerment, DocWayne, Elizabeth Stone House, Families First, JFYNetWorks, KeySteps, Mass. Advocates for Children (MAC), OneBead, PEAR, Room to Grow, Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center (TIOBEC), Union Capital Boston, and Higher Ground. The Moakley Center for Public Management at Suffolk University leads the data management and evaluation effort for the Coalition.

Major funding in the form of a three-year \$1 million grant from the Boston Children’s Hospital and \$2 million in commitment of resources by the partner organizations and plans to collectively raise an additional \$1.5 million made it possible for this initiative to target approximately 1,200 children in these schools and CACC. However, this initiative is open to all children in the surrounding areas.³⁶ Under this initiative, health is conceptualized within a theory of social determinants and includes work to enhance family stability by addressing issues related to affordable housing and family engagement with schools and communities. The main components of this initiative include family health and wellbeing and physical health involving increased

³⁵ <https://higherground-boston.org>.

³⁶ This included a \$150,000 planning grant; \$1 million grant from the Boston Children’s Hospital; and pledges of approximately \$2 to 2.5 million from the Ludcke Foundation, Liberty Mutual Foundation, Oak Foundation, New Commonwealth Racial Equity and Social Justice Fund.

access to primary care and mental health services, as well as greater opportunities for participation in physical activities; family housing stability through access to affordable housing and family engagement in school and community events; and youth engagement via community activities and events.

In a major development in the Spring 2021 Higher Ground is planning to sign a five-year Memorandum of Understanding with the Boston Public Schools commencing in July 2021 to expand efforts under both initiatives. The continual implementation of SCC will include 13 nonprofit partners, BPS, and partner schools linked through services with the Boston Children's Hospital Effective July 2021. A plan will be designed to add an additional 13 schools to the Family-Led Stability Pilot. Resources and collaborative activities will be aimed at substantially improving academic outcomes and transformation of lower-performing schools. A social, support, and education pipeline for infants and children served by programs at the CACC will be established to connect through middle school years significantly increasing the supports for greater parent engagement; and work will be undertaken to develop an effective hub-school network linked to strong community partnerships.

These plans and activities would be aligned with the BPS Five-Year Strategic Priorities and establish a foundation for future planning to expand the FLSP model to all Boston schools. BPS is committed to regular meetings with Higher Ground and other partners; providing supports for parents and teachers to participate in Coalition meetings; support for surveys and data collection related to measuring impact; communication and meetings with parents to share information about activities and progress; and to facilitate assessment of progress to allow "access to all data for students and families served by the schools including names, addresses, student ID numbers, attendance, grades, test scores, behavior, and special needs and assessments."³⁷

The following describes Higher Ground activities pursued over the years in its role as community partner, community advocate, and facilitator of community resources. The brief description of activities serves to highlight how linkages between education, health and housing, the trilogy of distress, were initiated and sustained by Higher Ground.³⁸ There is overlap among the three categories, but this only reflects the nature of Higher Ground's work described earlier in this report.

Higher Ground as Community Partner

Higher Ground partnered and assisted the Higginson-Lewis (K-8) school in obtaining resources to improve education for its students. This role was also key in the attraction of major funding for the FLSP in 2019 and 2020.

³⁷ Boston's Higher Ground Proposed MOA with BPS (March 2021).

³⁸ Also see <https://higherground-boston.org>.

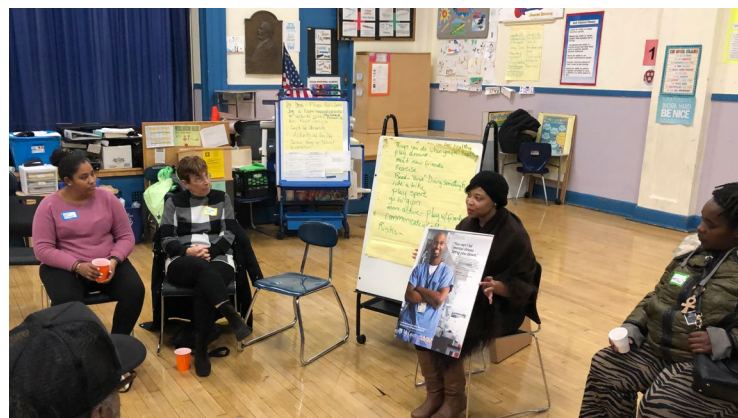
Higher Ground began supporting the Crispus Attucks Children Center in 2015. Assisted with fundraising and organizational development and substantially increase enrollment closer to capacity at the largest single – site provider of infant toddler care in the heart of the city of Boston. In just six years Higher Ground's backbone involvement has facilitated the attraction of major funding for the Center, including a \$1 million grant for planning and implementing substantial physical improvements (Massachusetts Early Education and Out of School Time Fund). It connected the Center with the Boston Architectural College (BAC) Gateway Team to assess facilities and design family friendly spaces. And Higher Ground helped to secure a \$3.67 million grants, equity investment and financing to renovate the physical plant of the Center. In 2019-2020 it worked with the Center in becoming an official Boston Universal Pre-Kindergarten site to serve greater numbers of children.³⁹ Higher Ground, working with the Crispus Attucks Children's Center, completed the capital improvement project in 2020 that will enable the Center to continue to serve families of more than 200 children.

The Office of Field Placement at UMass Boston's School of Education has formed a partnership with Higher Ground to recruit student teachers for the Higginson, Higginson /Lewis, and David Ellis schools. Higher Ground arranges visits for prospective teachers to the schools and supports them once they are placed.

Higher Ground connected KIPP Academy Boston to the 3Point Foundation's innovative math and basketball program for 5th and 6th grade boys.

It also explored developing partnerships with Emmanuel College, Lesley University, Cambridge College, Boston University and Northeastern University to place student teachers at the Ellis, Higginson, and Higginson/ Lewis Schools.

Higher Ground has partnered with Union Capital Boston to offer incentives to parents and area residents to support the education of their children and engage in civic and community activities. Union Capital Boston is responsible for running Network Nights and family engagement programs.



Higher Ground Board Member Ericka Florence conducting one of the Network Nights conversations about mental health, Nov. 18, 2019, an issue that became more urgent after COVID-19.

³⁹ See <https://higherground-boston.org>.

Higher Ground explored connection between the Boston Public Schools' CARES program and the Schools of Social Work at Boston University and Simmons College to place student social workers in the BPS program to support children and families who have experienced trauma.

Higher Ground brought together principals and leaders of Higginson Lewis, David Ellis and Higginson K-2 district schools and Bridge Boston, Brooke and KIPP Charter Schools and Mission Grammar Catholic School to explore potential collaboration and mutual support for families in general, but not overlooking the needs of families experiencing or facing the prospect of homelessness.

Higher Ground co-located on Warren Street with Center for Teen Empowerment, a leading youth development organization in the region, offering employment, organizing and leadership skills to local youth, organizing dialogues with the police and community and fighting for safety.

Higher Ground launched a program in collaboration with Families First to support expectant parents and families with education and health needs. During this period Higher Ground increased its partnerships to assist families, and also promoted youth leadership development. The partner organizations included the Center for Teen Empowerment; ABCD; and America's Promise Alliance to promote youth leadership development.

Higher Ground has accepted an invitation to join the Thriving Families Leverage Team of Open Opportunities – Massachusetts and to serve as a backbone of the Thriving Families Lever in Boston. This connection was made by Wayne Ysaguirre the Vice Chair of the Higher Ground Board, Founder and Executive Director of the CARE Institute, and former President and CEO of Nurtury, New England's first and largest nonprofit early education and care provider.

During the last six years, Higher Ground has co-led the effort to address the problem of homelessness among families whose children attend BPS by advocating for school-based access to affordable housing. As a partner with BPS, Higher Ground supported improvements to the process of tracking and reporting the number of homeless students in BPS. In the spring 2014, BPS reported 1,700 homeless students; that number increased to 3,155 by the spring of 2016. In 2020 it was estimated that 3,900 BPS students were homeless.

Early collaborative work heightened the need to work on the problem of homelessness facing many of the students in the partner schools. Higher Ground identified resources and encouraged inter-organizational and inter-sector connected work to expand a network focused on homelessness. With the City of Boston and other nonprofits,

and its partner schools, Higher Ground launched a pilot program with the goal of housing homeless families with children in the partner schools, the *Family Led Stability Pilot Program* (FLSP) described earlier in this case study. This also led to a major initiative attracting increasing attention, the *Resilient Families Surround-Care School Coalition* (SCC).

Higher Ground continues to house Whittier Street Health Center's federal WIC Program within its offices, thereby enabling this important Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children to remain in operation in this Roxbury neighborhood, following the closing of RoxComp.

Higher Ground as Community Advocate

Higher Ground supported parent leaders from the seven district, charter, and Catholic schools as they formed themselves into the Roxbury-Dorchester-Mattapan (RDM) Parent Coalition and continued building a strong network of parent leaders interested in supporting all the schools that teach the children of the neighborhood. It supported RDM Parent Coalition in meetings with former Boston Public Schools Superintendent Tommy Chang and Education Chief Turahn Dorsey. It worked with the RDM Parent Coalition – which Higher Ground helped to establish and support – to urge the Governor, Mayor, and legislative leaders to provide the necessary resources to meet the educational needs of all children regardless of the school system they attend. This was important in ensuring that public schools and charter schools work together in the target area for the educational benefit of children and families.

Higher Ground helped launch and serves as co-leader for the education-focused Change Circle. This initiative was started after the release of the fall 2014 report on disparity of outcomes for Black and Brown boys in Boston schools. The purpose of Change Circle was to organize stakeholders in identifying resources to improve the status of boys and young men in the BPS. After several meetings participants decided to focus on homelessness and early childhood development. This effort led to the launching of the FLSP in 2018 and the collaboration with CACC.

Higher Ground assisted Bridge Boston Charter School with community outreach as the school proceeded with efforts to acquire the former RoxComp Health Center property and renovate it for its permanent home.

As stated above, Higher Ground advocates on behalf of homeless families with children who attend Boston schools – which increased by 76% from 1,700 in May 2014 to 3,000 in May 2015, and by 129% to 3,900 by May 2021. By bringing together providers and policy makers, Higher Ground helped establish a new and more efficient process of school-based access to affordable housing for these vulnerable families.

Higher Ground helped organize meetings of advocates, providers and agency officials including Boston's Directors of Housing, Education, Health and Human Services and Office of New Bostonians to develop policy recommendations to address this growing challenge.

Higher Ground participates in the *Mass Education Equity Partnership (MEEP)*. This statewide coalition of civil rights, social justice and education advocates work towards promoting education equity for historically underserved students in Massachusetts.

Higher Ground assisted the Henry Higginson K-2 School to receive \$500,000 to build a playground. Higher Ground helped to organize parents, teachers, and students at five consecutive School Committee meetings featuring playground design and messages prepared by the students. Recently, two non-partner public schools have approached Higher Ground for assistance in building playgrounds.

At the Higginson K-2, School Friends of the Children mentors are working with 12 at-risk students starting in kindergarten and will support them through high schools. Additionally, Families First has included the school in a four-school BPS family engagement pilot program.

More than 100 parents of young children have shared and improved parenting skills in workshops in collaboration with Families First and Crispus Attucks Children's Center.

25 organizations including BPS came together to form the High Ground Promise Neighborhood Coalition and coordinate their efforts across several Boston neighborhoods and applied for a federal Promise Neighborhood grant. Although the effort did not result in securing federal grants after two attempts, the relationships continued to serve as foundations for FLSP and SCC.



Mayor Walsh and Superintendent Cassellius join students, parents, teachers, school leadership and Higher Ground staff at Nov. 5, 2019 ribbon cutting celebration of new playground at Higginson Full Inclusion School.



Higher Ground supported parent leaders from the seven district, charter, and Catholic schools as they formed themselves into the Roxbury-Dorchester-Mattapan (RDM) Parent Coalition and continued building a strong network of parent leaders interested in supporting all the schools that teach the children of the neighborhood.

In 2016 Higher Ground engaged with other organizational partners and Fresh Truck in submitting a \$400,000 4-year grant proposal to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Community Food Initiative designed to increase access to Boston's inner-city residents to fresh fruits, vegetables and other nutritious food products using schools as a major point of contact. Higher Ground briefly explored expansion of the Fresh Truck program to provide fresh produce and nutrition information to the families whose children attend Higginson K-2, Higginson/Lewis, and David Ellis K-5 School. The grant was not awarded and Higher Ground did not pursue the initiative further.

Participation in the *Community Crossover Dialogues* started in August 2020. This involved a monthly seminar in partnership with the Boston NAACP and Commonwealth Seminars and focusing on race and diversity in Boston. Black, Latinx, Asian and Native-American community leaders and activists participated in the dialogues. These dialogues have helped to expand communication and potential collaboration across neighborhoods.

Higher Ground worked with the Court appointed Receiver Joseph D. Feaster, Jr., Esq., to manage and oversee the closing of the Roxbury Comprehensive Community Health Center (RoxComp). It assisted the Receiver in connecting with former employees and clients and marketing the facility. The latter resulted in its acquisition and development by the Bridge Boston Public Charter School.

Higher Ground worked with the Warren Gardens Resident Association and Housing Cooperative Board to resolve issues related to finances, governance, and capital needs of their development. At the invitation of the Warren Gardens Housing Cooperative neighborhood resident leaders are working with Higher Ground to improve safety and services at Warren Gardens. Higher Ground monitored and offered support to residents as they transitioned to a new management company. However, following a decision by HUD directing the Housing Co-op Board to change its management agent as advocated by Higher Ground, the Housing Board discontinued its collaboration with Higher Ground. While Higher Ground saw this as trying to hold the development's leadership accountable for serving all the residents, the development leadership saw this as Higher Ground meddling in its internal affairs.

Higher Ground as Facilitator of Community Resources

Higher Ground attempted to facilitate connections between the Boston Public Schools' CARES program and the Schools of Social Work at Boston University, Boston College and Simmons College. Student social workers were placed in the BPS program

to support children and families who have experienced trauma. It also initiated conversations to bring Program in Education, Afterschool and Resiliency (PEAR) and Boston Scholar Athletes (BSA) to Higginson Lewis and 3Point Foundation to David Ellis, Higginson Lewis district schools and KIPP charter school.

Higher Ground has culled relationships with higher education and other sectors to bring institutional resources into the community. For example, Harvard University's Phillips Brooks House has agreed to bring its Stage program to the Ellis school. Harvard students will engage in theater activities in the Ellis after school program; The MIT K-12 Video Program offered to bring its activities to the Higginson/Lewis School. In the program, MIT students would have worked with middle school students to make videos about science topics. Unfortunately, neither program was implemented. Also, through the auspices of Higher Ground, three social work graduate students from Boston College and Simmons College supervised by licensed social workers have continue to provide support to families of 30 homeless students.

The Higher Ground staff teamed up with JFYNetWorks to provide remote learning in math and English Language Arts at the Higginson Lewis School. They collaborated with One Bead to implement a Tech-Equity Pilot Project at the David Ellis and Higginson Lewis Schools to ensure high quality access to the internet to enable remote learning. And they are seeking resources to bring the Phalen Leadership Academy's SCORE program to Higginson Lewis School in the fall and the David Ellis School the following year subject to interest of the school leadership and teachers.

In 2020 Higher Ground launched a new summer pilot program for youth: Summer Learning Academy (SLA). It recruited local teachers and is working with students in reading and literacy skills at the David Ellis K-5 School /Generations Inc. Higher Ground connected the KIPP Academy Boston to the 3Point Foundation's innovative math and basketball program for upper grade boys. Higher Ground utilized initial collaborative activities to expand resources available to the community. Enrollment at Higher Ground's 2020 Summer Learning Academy was 75 with 50 students attending one or more sessions during the 25-day program. Enrollment applications for the 2021 Summer Learning Academy has topped 120 and Higher Ground is in the final stages of planning for the program with the expectation of regular participation by 75 students. Higher Ground is seeking resources to extend the 2021 SLA from five weeks to eight weeks, as well as continuing to provide online academic and enrichment programs.

Higher Ground has helped launch an innovative collaborative pilot to eliminate homelessness in local schools. The Family-Led Stability Pilot (FLSP) started in January 2018 with founding partners BPS, the Education Cabinet of former Boston Mayor Martin Walsh, Boston Housing Authority (BHA), Department of Neighborhood Development (DND), Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), Project Hope and

New Lease for Homeless Families. This initiative was highlighted by the Mayor of Boston on January 15, 2021, through a press release where it was reported that vouchers would be targeted for 1000 families, including 1,700 children facing the potential or actuality of homelessness. As stated by Mayor Walsh, “Also benefiting was the Family Led Stability Pilot (FLSP), a collaborative of four nonprofit organizations and five public sector partners launched in 2018 to address the growing challenge of youth homelessness in Boston schools and demonstrate the positive impact of stable housing on educational outcomes, starting with families connected to seven key BPS schools.”⁴⁰

As of May 2021, Higher Ground and the FLSP partners had housed 197 families including 283 students in seven local schools. This means that the partnership is currently 79% towards the goal of housing all homeless students in the seven schools and on track to house the remaining 44 families and 73 students in the coming year. In 2020 Higher Ground distributed \$100 gift cards to 100 homeless and recently housed families with children attending four local schools participating in FLSP.

Higher Ground is helping to change service-delivery paradigms in Boston. Another similar effort, the Grove Hall Alliance emerged recently as a cooperative network of the following schools: Haynes Early Education Center, The William Monroe Trotter K-8; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. K-8; Lila G. Frederick Pilot Middle School; and the Burke High School. This alliance is focusing on ensuring quality summer schooling for children and youth attending these schools. As greater attention is paid to the potential impacts of these kinds of coalitions and networks Higher Ground and its impact strategy emerges as a critical resource in supporting and sustaining these developments.

⁴⁰ City of Boston, Office of The Mayor, Press Release MAYOR WALSH ANNOUNCES CITY HOUSES 1,700 CHILDREN EXPERIENCING HOUSING INSTABILITY THROUGH BOSTON HOUSING AUTHORITY VOUCHERS (January 15, 2021).

HIGHER GROUND: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

Higher Ground and others have a tough leadership role to play in helping us to understand the contemporary importance of place, how place becomes a lever for equity in a growing unequal economy and how we get more out of Boston's rich nonprofit infrastructure than we've gotten in the past.

Turahh Dorsey

Former Chief for Education in the City of Boston
Boston, Massachusetts

Higher Ground is helping to establish an understanding of the value of a backbone organization in developing solutions to some of Boston's neighborhood inequalities and inequities. While ten years might be considered a short period for many nonprofits based in community settings this boundary spanning organization has contributed much towards improving living conditions for children and families in its catchment area. Some of these accomplishments have been discussed earlier, but what lessons can be culled from the work and impact of Higher Ground, 2010 to 2020? The lessons assist in answering two big-picture questions: how can the story about Higher Ground help push thinking about best practices? And what is the ideal synergy or relationship between community-based organizations and schools and families, as well as public agencies and foundations, based on the work of Higher Ground for raising service impacts on racial and neighborhood inequalities and inequities?

The challenges and lessons discussed below also lay a groundwork for considering how Higher Ground can become more scalable with its approach towards improving the lives of children, families, and residents in parts of the city facing the trilogy of distress?

Seven Challenges

Higher Ground's ten years of successful work has shed light on challenges as it seeks to increase impacts in the neighborhood areas. Challenges are listed below in two categories, "Continue and Sustain" and "Develop and Build":

Continue and Sustain:

1. Brand Recognition:

One is certainly to promote increased recognition of Higher Ground's impacts and work with its partner schools and organizations. Higher Ground has helped to build an understanding of how to empower communities faced by a host of social, health, housing, and economic distresses. But this accomplishment must be packaged and shared with foundations, businesses, and government not just in Boston but throughout Massachusetts and across the nation. A recommendation made by a few stakeholder interviewees calls for BPS and the District Partnership Office to utilize and expand Higher Ground and its strategy in connecting parents, schools, and communities about challenges that need to be identified and overcome, including homelessness.

There is now a strong foundation to embark upon this challenge. Executive Director Mossik Hacobian notes: "While we aren't very public, nor have a media campaign yet, our work is beginning to speak for itself and everyone is noticing, and the effectiveness of partnering with us."

One reflection of this is how leadership of the partner schools is highlighting and sharing their partnership work with others.

Recently there have been several requests from other public schools and parent councils inquiring about the possibility of also establishing partnerships with Higher Ground. The Boston Teachers Union has also queried about how it can be helpful in expanding Higher Ground's work.

Another example is Higher Ground's selection to participate in the Open Opportunity Massachusetts (OOMA) initiative. Higher Ground is partnering with Lawrence Community Works in Lawrence, Massachusetts to share ideas and information about expanding efforts along four dimensions: Thriving Families, Educating the Whole Child, Empower Educators, and Shift the Public Narrative regarding educational equity statewide.


These kinds of efforts are very important, as noted by Hubie Jones, to "truly invest in intermediary/backbone organizations. Continued successes in Higher Ground's work should help this condition to happen. We are a long way from the endzone."⁴¹ Media exposure about the work of Higher Ground can help raise awareness about the work that Higher Ground does and its importance in the community. News and popular media coverage can highlight how Higher Ground is laying the groundwork for a paradigm shift demonstrating the value of individual schools becoming

⁴¹ Hubie Jones email correspondence January 15, 2021.

inter-connected to better serve students and to work with the community to systematically reduce or eliminate homelessness through coordinated and sustained partnerships across the fields of housing, health, and public schools.

2. Trust Building:

Another challenge, but in which Higher Ground has made important progress and impacts, relates to the building of trust across service sectors, and with residents. Shirley Carrington explains that,



It takes time to build relationships; they don't happen overnight. The organization needs to stay the course and continue to work on strengthening its relationships with stakeholder, community-based organizations, City and State government to move programs to scale. A good example of how effective Higher Ground has been in building relationship across the board is its work on bringing the homeless program to scale. Unfortunately, the recent change in City Government leadership might slow that process. Hopefully, we will not have to totally reinvent the wheel.

Based on a review of geographic mobility changes reported in the American Community Survey 2015-2019, most of the partner schools (except for the Mission Graham School, Brooke Charter School and KIPP Academy) are in census tracts where 90% or more of the residents reported living in the same house a year earlier, inevitably a range of neighborhood changes will occur. This suggests some residential stability in terms of geographic mobility, currently. Higher Ground, however, must be ahead of the curve of potential and actual changes, demographic or otherwise, so that it can continually nurture and sustain relationships that it has established since its founding.

3. Collaboration:

A related challenge is that collaboration is not easy. It must be continually worked at, even in the face of setbacks, disappointments, or multiple and conflicting ideas about how to move forward. This was highlighted by Dr. Phillip Clay, a former Board member and now current member of Advisory Committee noted that the call for collaboration and a connecting role for Higher Ground was not necessarily easy or without some problems. As he observed: "The original mission is correct, but it's fair to say that agencies don't like to be forced into collaboration. That is hard and will be a continuing strategy. It would be better to get agencies to acknowledge the need and to collaborate."⁴²

⁴² Interview, November 6, 2020.

Sincere trust and collaboration between Higher Ground and other organizations did begin to take place in building relationships with residents of the Warren Gardens housing complex in Roxbury. Though in great need residents were not generally aware of resources that could be tapped for their families and their housing complex. This represented a vacuum in which Higher Ground could assist with a coordinating role to bring organizations together to provide resources and to make residents aware of such. Most important in building trust was that Higher Ground did not seek to start yet another organization focused on a silo-ed delivery service, or one that would be competitive with others doing important work. Higher Ground was able to find a niche in the comprehensive map of other service organizations. Again, Dr. Clay: “Relationships are hard to do. [The] challenge of an organization where other organizations exist is to find a niche, and Higher Ground has been doing this.”

It did take years to build trust among all the partners. Higher Ground and people involved with this effort have come to realize that ‘trust’ is a civic and political resource that cannot be ignored or overlooked; it must be seeded and nurtured based on the voices and experiences of residents, youth, and families. Focusing on trust as a key community resource means that the Higher Ground network is now more effective in identifying and sustaining collaborative strategies – neighborhood and resident based – needed to tackle wicked issues associated with poverty, inequality, and a history of disinvestment, or lack of investment in many Boston neighborhoods.

4. Responsiveness to Community Needs:


Another challenge is that given the mission of Higher Ground, it must remain flexible in its responses to community problems and needs. What Higher Ground does especially well is to remain nimble to challenges that come up in the community; this organization has a strong track record in this regard. As Higher Ground seeks scale, it should not lose sight of this key quality.

Develop and Build:

5. Endowment and Assets:

Higher Ground does not have an endowment or investments in real estate that could be used as a foundation for fiscal growth. The procuring of resources can always be a challenge. As founder Hubie Jones shared, “During the formation stage for Higher Ground (2009-2010), founding board members realized there would be a huge challenge to get traditional funders to make sizable grants because they would not fully understand the value of an intermediary/backbone organization.”

Higher Ground is working with Advisory Board member Bill Pinakiewicz, former Senior Strategic Advisor to the Nonprofit Finance Fund, to build a business plan aimed at scaling up the work and impact of Higher Ground. He acknowledged this potential concern, which prospective funders may view as the organization's "Achilles' heel,":



Higher Ground functions very effectively as a facilitator, integrator, and intermediary... [Higher Ground's] role in invited collaboration is an important piece to push equity in the community. Funders don't appreciate or understand it. They understand services...

Yet, the social and economic inequities and educational crisis facing the residents and families of distressed neighborhoods like Roxbury convinced Board members that their collaborative strategies with residents must be the foundation in the seeking of external resources. Higher Ground had to build a community understanding of what it was trying to do in responding to the trilogy of distress, first; and then it used this foundation to explore potential partnerships with external organizations both working in the community as well as foundations.

Charlie Titus, Chair of the Higher Ground Board, also pointed out the challenge is making a case for infrastructure support.

COVID-19 highlighted what has been an issue for a while. Most foundations want the money to go to programs instead of operations and infrastructure, but if you don't have operations and infrastructure then you can't implement programs. Funding helps the quality of programs that can be improved and enhanced. Higher Ground finds it has been easier to get program dollars than operational dollars. Which is difficult, it does not work unless you have the infrastructure in place to make it happen.

6. Data:

Identifying the quantitative and qualitative data to measure progress and impacts of its collaborative initiatives can be difficult. It is much easier to collect and analyze data generated in service delivery silos. But Higher Ground is doing inter-sectoral work with strong community input requiring multi-layers of data and information that is inter-sectoral. This encourages greater attention on the possibility of 'shared measurement' approaches where future data collection and management systems could be engaged in ways to support documentation of outcomes across organizations.⁴³

7. Leadership Transitions & Scaling:

Higher Ground must also pay attention to planning for board and staff transitions to ensure that its collaborative umbrella continues with new faces. This is an issue related to any scalability plans for Higher Ground. In addition to staff transitions, scalability that is not strategic nor based on the Higher Ground history could also be problematic. Further, substantial rapid growth can produce goal displacement by virtue of an expansive bureaucracy.

Higher Ground is beginning to attract increasing attention on the part of foundations and large health organizations based on its collaborative work. Some of these points are summarized by Bill Pinakiewicz noting that, "Historically, organizations that have scaled and replicated have generally run into a roadblock when they become too dogmatic, fidelity to the model, but instead there is a core that needs to be brought from one place to another. Each community needs to add its own things and build around the core."

⁴³ Regarding the problem of homelessness Hubie Jones has proposed ten key questions that could be researched and analyzed through a 'shared measurement' approach; these queries and others include: 1. Who are the homeless residents in the Boston region: the demography – their race, ethnicity, ages, and socio-economic status; 2. Where do the homeless live throughout the region and in what numbers? 3. How many have lived in public housing, shelters, subsidized housing, and private market rate housing with aid of government vouchers? 4. What is the status of the housing supply chain in terms of environmental quality (cleanliness, safety, repairs, and access to support services)? 5. What are the major gaps in housing supply that should be remedied? 6. How many additional governmental housing vouchers at adequate financial levels are now needed? 7. What economic factors drive up the cost of housing beyond the reach of poor and near poor residents? 8. What impacts do college students' occupancy of rental housing have on the high costs of rents in the Boston region? 9. What impacts do the decisions of the Boston Planning and Development Agency have on the cost of housing in the private market? 10. What negative impacts are caused by the substantial growth in the technology sector that provides its educated employees with high salaries so they can afford increased rent payments in distressed neighborhoods? 11. What are the negative impacts of homelessness on public and charter schools, health care institutions, social service institutions, crime control, and stability in neighborhoods? How can these negative impacts be reversed? As part of a shared measurement strategy the authors of this case study would add some detailed sub-queries focusing on the Higher Ground impacts; for example, how is Higher Ground documenting challenges and context of homelessness for families they serve? What will be the baseline for tracking outcomes? How are families provided secure housing and how does this impact students' well being and school experiences? What types of housing access promotes better security for families?

This process is also described by Edgar S. Cahn when he suggests that small grassroots organizations can lose their effectiveness if they grow and begin to look like bigger and more silo-ed organizations; in which case, they may not be able to “mobilize the energy of the community.”⁴⁴ This is because people “will respond more passionately and prominently with calls for action and involvement made by organizations with long roots in working with people and that have not approached them in silos, but rather in more holistic ways connecting their lives and struggles to each other and to their community’s well-being.”⁴⁵

Five Lessons


- 1 One lesson is that the lives of children and families living in economically distressed urban areas cannot be compartmentalized through silo-based service delivery lest impact is seriously compromised. But the burden of linking service delivery in a seamless web should not fall on the very people who need coordinated service approaches. As stated by one interviewee, “We see ourselves as Navigator advocates. Navigate the maze of services and resources.” Given the complex and multi-layered dimensions of delivering quality services in the areas of health, public education, and housing it is a significant burden and for many, a barrier, to expect such navigation from the recipients of services. Higher Ground responded to this need with a model that possibly could mean greater collaboration in service delivery in the long run and in an area faced with great need because of racism, poverty, and health inequities.
- 2 Higher Ground brought organizations together based on the fundamental reality that lives in the areas of housing, health, and education cannot be silo-ed via services. Higher Ground was able to work with many groups in raising and supporting this reality by knowing and respecting the community in various ways. Members of Higher Ground were seasoned community leaders and activists who had already been involved in community building and improving public schools in Boston. The enormous credibility of the board members is a significant asset and key element of the organization’s success. This familiarity alerted residents and others that this new organization was not simply ‘helicoptering’ into the community. Important to note is that many people interviewed for this study commented on Mossik Hacobian’s herculean outreach and efforts. This was critical for Higher Ground’s success in meeting its mission and continually building trust.

⁴⁴ Edgar S. Cahn, *No More Throw Away People: The Co-Production Imperative* (Washington D.C.: Essential Books, 2004), p. 83.

⁴⁵ James Jennings, Jen Douglas, Melissa Colon, and Miren Uriarte, *Latinix-Led Nonprofits in Boston Today: Contributions, Challenges, and Lessons Learned*, Greater Boston Latino Network, Boston, Ma. (October 2020), p.35.

3 Involving parents and grandparents, and other caregivers, in substantial and sustained ways is critical in efforts to do collaborative work that is impactful. In many instances parents are the missing learning partners in the overall education of their children. And too many times this potential role is overlooked, or paid lip-service. But to make this proposition real parents must be given the tools and the platform to successfully advocate for their children and their communities and be equipped to carry out planned actions. Charlotte Golar Richie notes that “For 10 years Higher Ground has facilitated [and] supported parent engagement and advocacy in our partner schools. We supported the organization of a parent coalition, and parent advocacy at the State House, City Hall and Boston School Committee hearings and meetings.” Commitment to parents on the part of leadership must be concrete and daily.

Former employee, and now board member and parent activist, Erika Florence, credited Mossik Hacobian’s leadership in helping to ensure the organization’s commitment to parents: “He turned (Higher Ground) into an advocate. Because of the way Boston is set up, oftentimes families need guidance but also advocates to help them get access to services.” Erika emphasized how parents were equipped and supported to become advocates for their children and schools. The voices of parent power have been elevated by the work of Higher Ground. Erika also explained,



We’ve been in circles they probably never would have been in had it not been for Higher Ground, members learned to confidently express their concerns and needs, to get stuff done (raising money, supporting a school, getting help for special needs students) there were various levels of advocacy that Higher Ground trained parents on.

Parents have praised the approach and style of Higher Ground leadership in working with parents. Specifically, with Higher Ground, there are no presumptions about deficits but much recognition about the potential power of parents being organized and advocating across traditional silos of service delivery. Parents have been impressed that Higher Ground goes to them, not simply to issue a hollow welcome and then wait for parents to show up somewhere. As Erika Florence explained, “It is different when the service is brought to your door.” She added: “Everyone should be able to get what they need regardless of their appearance, level of education or other types of biases. Some people get prioritized over others because of these biases.”

4 Organizations seeking to replicate the Higher Ground model must be flexible with programming and responding to immediate and unforeseen community issues. An example of the necessity to reflect flexibility in its work was highlighted when it became obviously clear that there existed a serious digital technology racial/ethnic divide. As described by Board Member Erika Florence: “The pandemic highlighted the inequity and that the resources are there, only certain students had access to it...It has been a huge topic of conversation in various circles within the community...”

In response to this community challenge, Higher Ground was able to help establish the TECH EQUITY Pilot program. Features of this program include one-on-one coaching of parents with a tech coach. One parent activist gave this assessment about this program: “It was an awesome program, and I learned a lot, things that I can use at work and that I didn't know. How to copy and paste and check email. I've asked to take it again because I want more.” This initiative probably would not have been possible if Higher Ground simply operated as a traditional nonprofit focusing on its own specialized silo.

5 Higher Ground rejects the proposition that ‘survival of the fittest’ is an appropriate framework for working with nonprofits in communities facing challenges such as racism and poverty, and health inequities. These kinds of wicked issues will not be overcome with ideas simply suggesting that ‘bigger is better’ or that bigger is more efficient than smaller community-based nonprofits.⁴⁶ In fact, by utilizing a racial equity and social justice lens, Higher Ground’s leadership seeks to strengthen and expand the impact of a range of community-based organizations. The Board and its leadership have played an important role in building bridges across communities of color ensuring racial and ethnic divisions or misunderstandings do not arise as potential obstacles.

⁴⁶ “Wicked” issues refers to challenges and problems such as gentrification/displacement, poverty, academic achievement gaps, and others that cannot be resolved through “silo” approaches but require comprehensive and systemic approaches. See Paul Williams, “The Competent Boundary Spanner.” *Public Administration*, Vol. 80 No. 1 (2002).

Next Steps

Higher Ground has identified the following four priorities that must be the focus of its work going forward:


1. Collaborate with BPS and partner schools to help the schools' transformation to Level 1 schools.
2. Expand FLSP to up to 20 schools and set the stage to support and partner with the entire school district.
3. Develop scale plan for expansion of the Higher Ground model both in depth and breadth within Boston and beyond.
4. Develop and implement board and staff leadership transition plan.

Higher Ground demonstrates how resources can be focused through a place-based approach that takes each resident into account holistically as it seeks to improve opportunities for children and families in economically distressed neighborhood areas, borne of a history of racial and ethnic inequality and inequities, and institutional neglect. This backbone organization is building a strategy and model to not only turn schools in these areas towards higher performing possibilities, but also in ways that strengthen the social and civic fabric of neighborhoods and with government as a sustained partner. Some public agencies became involved in various ways with Higher Ground and its work. Partnerships between Higher Ground and government entities should be expanded but Higher Ground should continue its efforts to move beyond silo-approaches. Government policies and programs can focus on one area isolated from other relevant areas of activities. For this reason, Higher Ground can serve as a critical bridge between public agencies.

The devastation of COVID-19 has shed light on the limitations of silo-ed public policies and government work; this is an opportunity for Higher Ground to work with large public agencies such as BPS and BHA to expand their own impacts on the well-being of residents. Some of this is already taking place as described earlier in this case study. Higher Ground could serve as a bridge between agencies like the BPS and BHA in helping to support their delivery services to shared constituents with greater coordination and impact. Discussions about collaboration between the city's two largest agencies, given their work in the same communities, has been raised periodically by BPS and BHA leadership, but Higher Ground is re-triggering these kinds of conversations.⁴⁷ Given its organizational mission and work Higher Ground can emerge as the missing link in solidifying and expanding collaborative possibilities.

⁴⁷ James Jennings, with Nanina Gaeta Coletta and Ann Jankie, *Boston Housing Authority and Boston Public Schools: Exploring Academic Collaboration* (October 2012); <https://sites.tufts.edu/jamesjennings/files/2018/06/reportsBostonHousingAuthority2012.pdf>.

Corey Harris, BPS Chief of Schools, provides a most succinct statement about one key facet of this emerging strategy in response to a question about how Higher Ground can inform the work of BPS as it seeks to reduce and eliminate the racial/ethnic opportunity and achievement gaps that has been a challenge for the BPS for such a long period of time. As he states further, BPS policy is that "... every child in every classroom is entitled to an equitable world class, high-quality education, and every student should have the same unfettered access to every conceivable resource to unlock the greatness within them." He adds:



HG is showing us ways that we can engage with our families, broader community, and partner community agencies towards improving educational outcomes for our kids. A number of our schools have partners, but where is the evidence of outcome? We are resource rich but impact poor. There are more resources in this city than I have ever seen, this is the 7th district I've worked in all in different states. You'd think that with all of the resources and partners, regardless of race, ethnicity, linguistic diversity, etc. we would be doing better...Higher Ground is helping us to be more strategic with how our partners impact the bottom line which is to improve student outcomes. They are also showing us ways that we can strategically work with multiple partners, so instead of folks working in silos how do you do that in a coordinated fashion where they complement each other. Showing us how to support families in ways that we are meaningful to the family. We often provide resources, but it might not be the thing that moves them toward stability or what they need. Higher Ground makes sure that kids have a well-rounded academic experience. School is about more than literacy, math, and social studies, you want to make sure that students have robust exposure to arts, STEM, sports, language, etc. and more enriching experiences, all those things that make for a global ready citizen.

This observation explains one impact of Higher Ground's work, but also points to the possibility of scalability to other neighborhoods and schools. Nikki Tabron, Vice President of Education at Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center, asks this question, "What if this were occurring in every neighborhood?"

Finally, scalability for Higher Ground is not necessarily organizational scalability, but rather growth of community buy-in of its strategy to serve as a collaborative umbrella, a backbone organization. As Higher Ground grows it must remain true to itself as a 'community trust' model. It must continually develop initiatives that are built on its role as community partner, community advocate, and facilitator of community resources within its collaborative umbrella and driven by its fight against inequities and the

three pillars of distress. It must remain as a community-based organization composed of professionals and residents with equal power and say over organizational decisions. This has been an extraordinary contribution of the work of Higher Ground over its first ten years, and this must not be forgotten or minimized as more and more residents look towards Higher Ground as a community-based model for movement forward along many fronts. ♦

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

The case study is based on a review of all Higher Ground programs, activities and initiatives as documented in reports and studies provided by the organization. This review covered a period of ten years of Higher Ground activities. Fifteen interviews and several meetings with Higher Ground staff, board, advisors, partners, and collaborators were conducted by phone, Zoom, and email between October 2020 and May 2021. Key questions guided the interviews and meetings during a first and early wave:

- > How did you become involved with Higher Ground?
- > What are the critical pieces in the work of Higher Ground?
- > Major accomplishments and challenges in the last 10 years?
- > The mission of Higher Ground reflects, in part, the need to build holistic relationships regarding the housing, health, and education needs of youth and families in the community: are there some basic steps that are necessary to move towards these kinds of relationships?
- > Are there policies, or government practices that can assist in the building of the Higher Ground model, and what might be some obstacles in this area (policies and government practices)? How do you see Higher Ground adapting to changes that are occurring in education, housing and health or expected to happen because of COVID-19?
- > How do you believe Higher Ground can serve as a resource to other community-based organizations? What lessons might you want to share with other community-based organizations about the challenges faced by Higher Ground?
- > How can the Higher Ground model, its work and accomplishments offer lessons learned for advancing racial equity and strengthening communities in Boston?

A second wave of interviews were conducted to raise specific clarifying questions about the information collected in the initial interviews. Responses to these queries were descriptively coded and analyzed thematically.

The study team also searched for nonprofit organizations with similar missions, specifically playing roles of coordinator or facilitator of services, or what has been described as backbone organizations focused on collective impact. Information was gathered from the websites of organizations who were founded with similar missions and have a reputation for place-based change strategies in Boston. Data was also gathered about the schools of focus in Higher Ground's catchment area. Public and charter school data was accessed from the Massachusetts Department of Education's publicly available data, and private school data was pulled from the school website if available.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWEES

- > Shirley Carrington, Board Member*
- > Dr. Phil Clay, Former Board Member, Current member, Advisory Board
- > Turahn Dorsey, Former Chief of Education for Boston
- > Hubie Jones, Higher Ground Founder
- > Darlene G. Ratliff, Principal, Higginson-Lewis K-8
- > Charlotte Golar Richie, Board Member
- > Ericka Florence, Higher Ground former employee, current Board Member
- > Felicia Leaston, Parent Activist
- > Sylvia Smith, Parent Activist
- > Maritza Juliao, Crispus Attucks Children's Center
- > Bill Pinakiewicz, Former Founding Board Member, Current member, Advisory Board
- > Mossik Hacobian, Executive Director, Higher Ground
- > Charlie Titus, Chair of Board, Higher Ground
- > Corey Harris, Chief of Schools, BPS
- > Nicole Rivers, Associate Director, Center for Public Management, Suffolk University

* Term ended January 2022.

APPENDIX C: BOARD MEMBERS AND BOARD OF ADVISORS

Board Members[†]

1. **Charlie Titus**, *Chair*
2. **Charlotte Golar Richie**, *Vice Chair*
3. **Wayne Ysaguirre**, *Vice Chair*
4. **Randall Davis**, *Treasurer*
5. **Clara Arroyo**, *Treasurer*
6. **Arthur Choo**, *Clerk*
7. **Shirley Carrington**, *Chair, Governance Committee**
8. **Hubie Jones**, *Founder & Chair Resource Development Committee*
9. **Gerard Cox**, *Chair, Health Committee*
10. **Rona Kiley**, *Chair, Education Committee**
11. **Sophia Bishop-Rice**, *Board Member*
12. **Ericka Florence**, *Board Member*
13. **Matthew Cammack**, *Board Member*
14. **Rev. Arthur Gerald**, *Board Member*
15. **Carol Miranda**, *Board Member*
16. **Renee Simmons**, *Board Member*
17. **Leverett Wing**, *Board Member*

Board of Advisors

1. **Adina Astor**, *Founder & Principal, Adina Astor Consulting*
2. **Carroll Blake**, *former Executive Director of BPS Opportunity & Achievement Gap Task Force and current member of the Task Force*
3. **Pablo Calderon**, *former Manager MBTA Community Relations & Construction Affairs*
4. **Shirley Carrington**, *former Higher Ground Board member*
5. **Cassandra Clay**, *Empower Success Corps*

[†] New members in 2022 include: Ron Bell, Richard Chang, Jeffrey Edwards, Jose Lopez, and Jason Perry.

* Term ended January 2022.

6. **Phil Clay**, Professor Emeritus, MIT
7. **John Drew**, President/CEO, ABCD
8. **Kathy Drew**, Former Higher Ground Education Advisor/Advocate,
Retired Teacher, Cambridge, MA
9. **Abigail Forrester**, Executive Director of Center for Teen Empowerment
10. **Tom Glynn**, former CEO, Harvard Allston Land Company, Lecturer, Urban
Planning & Design, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University
11. **James Jennings**, Professor Emeritus, Tufts University
12. **Cassandra Johns**, Instructional Support Leader and Assistant Principal,
Providence, R.I. School District
13. **Rona Kiley**, former Higher Ground Board member
14. **Brandon Lopez**, Social Worker, Higginson Lewis School
15. **Tulaine Montgomery**, Managing Partner, New Profit
16. **Keith Motley**, Consultant President/CEO, Urban League of Eastern MA
17. **Jerry Mogul**, former Executive Director of MA Advocates for Children
18. **Elaine Ng**, Executive Director, Third Sector New England
19. **Alexandra Oliver Davila**, Executive Director, Sociedad Latina
20. **Arthur Pearson**, President/CEO, Thompson Island Outward Bound
Education Center
21. **Bill Pinakiewicz**, Senior Strategic Advisor, Nonprofit Finance Fund
22. **Charlie Rose**, Senior Vice President & Dean, City Year
23. **Sharon Scott-Chandler**, Executive Vice President/COO, ABCD
24. **Monalisa Smith**, Founder, President/CEO, Mothers for Justice & Equality
25. **Rev. Liz Walker**, Senior Pastor, Roxbury Presbyterian Church

APPENDIX D: HIGHER GROUND BOARD AND STAFF MEMBERS 2010-2021

Board Members	Staff, Advisors, Volunteers, Consultants
2010	2010
Charlie Titus, 2010-2021	James Jennings, 2010-2021
Charlotte Golar-Richie, 2020-2021	Tulaine Montgomery, 2010-2011
Shirley Carrington, 2020-2021	Emily York McConarty, 2010-2021
Hubie Jones, Founder, 2010-2021	2011
Rona Kiley, 2010-2021	Mossik Hacobian, 2011-2021
Hortensia Amaro, 2010-2011	Shirley Kimbrough, 2011-2012
Pablo Calderon, 2010-2014	Ericka Florence, 2011-2014
Phil Clay, 2010-2011	Donna Gittens, 2011-2012
Clarence Cooper, 2010-2016	Sorie Kaba, AAF CPAs, 2011-2021
Michael Curry, 2010-2014	Brian Kindorf, NPCM, 2011-2021
William Pinakiewicz, 2010-2014	Nicole Rivers, 2011-2021
Monalisa Smith, 2010-2014	Pablo Rovelo, 2011-2014
2011	Ben Siegel, 2010-2021
Arthur Choo, 2011-2021	2012
Jerry Cox, 2011-2021	Maria Choi Fernandopulle 2012-2021
Randall Davis, 2011-2021	Kim Janey, MAC, 2012
Rev. Arthur Gerald 2011-2021	2013
Leverett Wing, 2011-2021	Yahfreicir Delcarmen, 2013
Sonya Alleyne, 2011-2012	2014
2012	Kevin Andrews, 2014-2021
Matthew Cammack, 2012-2021	Nigelia Dixon, 2013-2014
Mike Miles, 2013	2017
Tulaine Montgomery, 2012-2018	Carol Miranda, 2017-2018
2013	Kathy Drew 2017-2021
Renee Simmons, 2013-2021	Katy Fazio, NPCM, 2017-2021
Dolores Calaf, 2013	Tom O'Toole, 2017-2021
2014	2018
Alejandra St. Guillen, 2014-2018	Brandon Lopez, 2018-2020
Rodney Henry, 2012-2014	Idonia Gaede, 2018-2021

Board Members	Staff, Advisors, Volunteers, Consultants
Donna Thomas-Martinez, 2013-2014	2019
Kathy Traylor, 2014-2015	Caitlyn Vogt
2018	Barry Kahn, 2019-2020
Sophia Bishop-Rice, 2018-2021	2020
Ericka Florence, 2018-2021	Candice Harding, 2020-2021
Carol Miranda, 2018-2021	Jokaimy Caceres, 2020-2021
2019	Danny LaMack, 2020-2021
Wayne Ysaguirre, 2019-2021	2021
2021	Tiana Bonner
Clara Arroyo	Meredith Donaldson, NPCM
2022	Jennifer Saldana, NPCM
Ron Bell	Laura Watkins, NPCM
Richard Chang	2022
Jeffrey Edwards	Brandy Brooks
Jose Lopez	Kadineyse Paz
Jason Perry	Tre Walton

APPENDIX E: HIGHER GROUND FUNDERS

Funding for Higher Ground in its first few years was provided by:

- > Barr Foundation
- > Anita & Joshua Beckenstein*
- > The Boston Foundation (TBF)
- > Boston Rising
- > Brigham & Women's Hospital
- > Cabot Family Charitable Trust
- > Citizens Bank
- > Hyams Foundation
- > Carolyn Mugar*
- > Partners Health Care
- > Riley Foundation
- > Sovereign Bank
- > United Way of Mass. Bay and Merrimack Valley
- > Anne Lovett & Stephen Woodsum*

Recent and current funders and supporters:

- > ABCD
- > Anonymous
- > Barbara and Amos Hostetter
- > Barr Foundation
- > Boston After School and Beyond
- > Boston Children's Hospital
- > The Boston Foundation (TBF)
- > Boston Public Schools
- > Cabot Family Charitable Trust
- > The Chirag Foundation
- > Foley Hoag Foundation
- > Hazeldean Foundation
- > Liberty Mutual Foundation
- > Ludcke Foundation
- > Mass. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- > Miller Innovation Fund
- > New Commonwealth Racial Equity and Social Justice Fund
- > Oak Foundation
- > Open Opportunity Mass.
- > Tufts Health Plan Foundation
- > United Way of Mass. Bay and Merrimack Valley
- > Wild Geese Foundation

* Donation for Hubie Jones' 80th Birthday Celebration supporting Higher Ground, City Year, and Boston Children's Chorus.

APPENDIX F: HIGHER GROUND PARTNERS

1. ABCD
2. America's Promise Alliance (2010-2012)
3. Barr Foundation
4. Boston Children's Chorus
5. Boston Children's Hospital
6. Boston College
7. The Boston Foundation (TBF)
8. Boston Housing Authority (BHA)
9. Boston Department of Neighborhood Development (DND, also Mayor's Office of Housing)
10. Boston Public Schools
11. Boston Rising (2011-2014)
12. Boston University School of Social Work and Wheelock College of Education and Human Development Aspire Institute
13. Bridge Boston Charter School
14. Brigham & Women's Hospital Passageway Domestic Violence Program (2012-2015)
15. Brooke Boston Charter School
16. Center for Teen Empowerment
17. City Year
18. Communities in Schools
19. Community Rowing
20. Crispus Attucks Children's Center (CACC)
21. David A. Ellis Elementary School
22. Doc Wayne Youth Services
23. Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI)
24. Elizabeth Stone House
25. Families First Parenting Programs
26. Friends of the Children
27. Foundation for Small Voices
28. Generations Inc.
29. Henry L. Higginson Inclusion School
30. Higginson Lewis 3-8 Inclusion School
31. Italian Home for Children
32. JFYNetWorks
33. KeySteps
34. KIPP Charter School
35. Liberty Mutual Foundation
36. Massachusetts Advocates for Children
37. Mission Grammar School
38. Moakley Center for Public Management, Suffolk University
39. New Lease for Homeless Families
40. Nurtury
41. OneBead
42. PEAR
43. 3Point Foundation
44. Project Hope
45. Room to Grow

- 46. Roxbury YMCA
- 47. Simmons College
- 48. Smart from the Start
- 49. Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center
- 50. Thrive in 5
- 51. Tufts Health Plan Foundation
- 52. Twelfth Baptist Church
- 53. Union Capital Boston
- 54. Urban Edge
- 55. Warren Gardens Housing Cooperative
- 56. Warren Gardens Resident Association
- 57. Whittier Street Health Center and the WIC Program
- 58. William Monroe Trotter K-8 School

APPENDIX G: HIGHER GROUND TIMELINE AND KEY EVENTS (2010-2021)

This timeline is based on a review of Higher Ground reports, newsletters, and funding documents. The items are organized by cluster-ed years to show when major events were occurring. Some bulleted items are not presented with exact dates because this information may not have been available in the documents reviewed by the study team.

2009

- > Higher Ground Boston first phase: The concept behind Higher Ground's mission and work was developed in 2009, after Boston civic leaders took an inspiring trip to New York City to visit the famed Harlem Children's Zone.
- > James Jennings' *Place-based Service Delivery & Strategic Collaboration in Boston's Distressed Neighborhoods: Framework for Planning and Action* (June 2009), commissioned by The Barr Foundation is utilized to begin strategy planning about what a corridor approach might look like, organizationally.

2010

- > Higher Ground Boston was founded: Boston's Higher Ground was founded following two years of meetings convened by long-time Boston community leader and social activist Hubie Jones who had brought together more than three dozen community, government, and philanthropic leaders to explore reasons for lack of improvement in health and educational outcomes for children and families in Boston's neighborhoods despite the wealth of resources available in the city.

2011

- > Higher Ground Boston begins operations: HIGHER GROUND began operations in June 2011 in its first impact area in a section of Roxbury that includes all census tract 817.
- > Higher Ground relocates on Warren Street with Center for Teen Empowerment, a leading youth development organization in the region, offering employment, organizing and leadership skills to local youth, organizing dialogues with the police and community and fighting for safety.

2012-2014

- > Higher Ground Launched program in collaboration with Family First: In March 2012 Higher Ground launched a program with Families First that supports expectant parents and families in education and health. (March 2012)
- > Higher Ground Partner List increases: Higher Ground partners with Center for Teen empowerment, ABCD, and America's Promise Alliance to promote youth leadership development.
- > Higher Ground Helped Launch Boston's Unity Council: The Boston Unity council consisted of more than 30 non-profit organizations serving Higher Ground's target area.
- > Higher Ground Supports the Court-Appointed Receiver: Higher Ground served as the community outreach support for the court-appointed receiver following the closing of the Roxbury Comprehensive Community Health Center (RoxComp) and assisted the receiver to connect with former employees and clients, and market the facility resulting in its acquisition and development by the Bridge Boston Public Charter School.
- > Higher Ground opened new, renovated Office on Warren Street across from the Roxbury YMCA.
- > Higher Ground worked to Develop an Evaluation and Data Tracker System: Working with Suffolk University and Northeastern University Higher Ground developed an evaluation and data tracking system to ensure that Higher Ground can track measurable and desirable outcomes.
- > Higher Ground assisted the Higginson-Lewis in obtaining resources to improve education for its students.

2015

- > At Higginson K-2 School: Friends of the Children mentors are working with 12 at-risk students starting in kindergarten and will support them through high schools.
- > Families First has included the school in a four - school BPS family engagement pilot program.
- > At David Ellis K-5 School: Generations Inc. recruited local seniors and is working with students in reading and literacy skills.
- > Families First was engaged to conduct Parenting Circles for more than 100 new and expectant parents over three years.

- > Whittier Street Health Center's WIC Program: Higher Ground continues to house within its offices this important service for families after the program was displaced due to the closing of RoxComp. Higher Ground advocates on behalf of homeless families with children who attend Boston schools – which increased by 76% from 1,700 in May 2014 to 3,000 in May 2015 – by bringing together providers and policy makers to agree on a new and more efficient process of school-based access to affordable housing for these vulnerable families.
- > Higher Ground helped launch and serves as co-leader for the education-focused Change Circle, formed following the release of the fall 2014 report on disparity of outcomes for Black and Brown boys in Boston schools.
- > Higher Ground initiated conversations to bring Program in Education, Afterschool and Resiliency (PEAR Institute) and Boston Scholar Athletes (BSA) to Higginson Lewis and 3Point Foundation to David Ellis, Higginson Lewis district schools and KIPP charter school.
- > Higher Ground has partnered with Union Capital Boston to offer incentive to parents and area residents to support the education of their children and engage in civic and community activities.
- > Having been invited to the Warren Gardens Housing Cooperative neighborhood by resident leaders there and concerned about improvement in safety and services at Warren Gardens, Higher Ground monitored and offered support to residents as they transitioned to a new management company.

2016

- > Supported the Crispus Attucks Children's Center in a major recapitalization plan including an application for a \$1 million grant from the Mass. Early Education and Out of School Time (EEOST) Fund, a \$1.1 million refinancing application with Boston Community Capital and exploration of private equity investment using New Market Tax Credits (NMTC) that enabled the Center to implement a substantial physical improvement of the Center's facilities completed in 2020.
- > Brought together principals and leaders of Higginson Lewis, David Ellis and Higginson K-2 district schools and Bridge Boston, Brooke and KIPP Charter Schools and Mission Grammar Catholic School to explore potential collaboration and mutual support.
- > Supported parent leaders from the seven district, charter, and Catholic schools as they formed themselves into the Roxbury Dorchester Mattapan (RDM) Parent Coalition and continued building a strong network of parent leaders interested in supporting all the schools that teach the children of the neighborhood.

- > Supported RDM Parent Coalition in meetings with Boston Public Schools Superintendent Tommy Chang and Education Chief Turahn Dorsey. Higher Ground and the RDM Parent Coalition issued a joint statement on education policy and advocated with the Governor, Mayor and Legislative Leaders to provide the necessary resources to meet the educational needs of all children regardless of the school system they attend.
- > Higher Ground joined Nurtury and ABCD and played a leadership role in bringing together 21 partners including the Boston Public Schools (BPS) and submitted a \$30 million 5-year Promise Neighborhood proposal for Boston to the US Department of Education (DOE). Although DOE did not select Higher Ground's proposal for funding, both BPS and the Mayor's Office have indicated that such a partnership is important to the city and have offered to assist the High Ground Promise Neighborhood Coalition in securing the needed resources to implement the Coalition's plans.
- > Higher Ground engaged with other Coalition members and Fresh Truck and submitted a \$400,000 4 - year grant proposal to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Community Food Initiative designed to increase access to Boston's inner-city residents to fresh fruits, vegetables and other nutritious food products using schools as a major point of contact. The grant was not approved and Higher Ground did not pursue the initiative further.
- > Assisted Bridge Boston Charter School with community outreach as the school proceeded with efforts to acquire the former RoxComp Health Center property and renovate it for its permanent home.
- > Connected KIPP Academy Boston to the 3Point Foundation's innovative math and basketball program for 5th and 6th grade boys.
- > Addressing a growing problem of homelessness among families whose children attend Boston public schools – up from 1,700 in the spring of 2014 to 3,155 in the spring of 2016 – by advocating for school-based access to affordable housing for homeless families with children in Boston schools. Higher Ground has been an active member of a working group including officials at the city of Boston Education Cabinet, Department Neighborhood Development, Boston Public School's Office of Social Emotional Learning and Wellness, Boston Housing Authority and others engaged in developing a pilot program to address this growing challenge to be implemented during the 2016-2017 school year.
- > The Office of Field Placement at UMass Boston's School of Education formed a partnership with Higher Ground to recruit student teachers for the Higginson, Higginson/Lewis, and Ellis schools. Higher Ground arranged visits for prospective teachers to the schools and supports them once they are placed. This agreement was not implemented.

- > Harvard University's Phillips Brooks House had agreed to bring its Stage program to the Ellis school. Harvard students would have engaged in theater activities in the Ellis after school program. This program was not implemented.
- > The MIT K-12 Video Program had offered to bring its activities to the Higginson/Lewis School. In the program, MIT students would have worked with middle school students to make videos about science topics. This program was not implemented.
- > Facilitated a connection between the Boston Public Schools' CARES program and the Schools of Social Work at Boston University and Simmons College. Student social workers will be placed in the BPS program to support children and families who have experienced trauma.
- > Developing partnerships with Emmanuel College, Lesley University, Cambridge College, Boston University and Northeastern University to place student teachers at the Ellis, Higginson, and Higginson/ Lewis Schools.
- > Explored a potential connection between Boston Bikes and the Higginson School. The Bikes program can provide bicycles and instructors to work with children at recess.
- > Higher Ground has explored an expansion of the Fresh Truck program to provide fresh produce and nutrition information to the families whose children attend Higginson K-2, Higginson/Lewis, and David Ellis K-5 School.
- > Collaborating with Crispus Attucks Children's Center to assist with fundraising and organizational development and substantially increase enrollment closer to capacity at the largest single - site provider of infant toddler care in the heart of the city of Boston.
- > The Henry Higginson K-2 School has been awarded \$500,000 to build a playground; Parents from district, charter and Catholic schools have come together to form the Roxbury Dorchester Mattapan (RDM) Parent Coalition and advocate together for improved educational services for all children regardless of the school they attend.

2017-2018

- > Higher Ground helped launch an innovative collaborative pilot to eliminate homelessness in local schools. The Family - Led Stability Pilot (FLSP) formally launched in January 2018 with founding partners BPS, Mayor's Walsh's Education Cabinet, BHA, DND, City Councilor Essaibi-George, DSNI, Project Hope and New Lease for Homeless Families.

- > Crispus Attucks Children's Center is embarking on a major capital improvement project that will enable the Center to continue to serve families of more than 200 children.
- > More than 40 parents of young children have shared and improved parenting skills in workshops in collaboration with Families First and Crispus Attucks Children's Center; 25 organizations including BPS have come together to form the High Ground Promise Neighborhood Coalition and coordinate their efforts across several Boston neighborhoods.
- > Higher Ground Assists Warren Gardens Residents: Assisted the Warren Gardens Resident Association and Housing Cooperative Board to resolve issues related to finances, governance, and capital needs of their development.
- > Secured \$500,000 to build a playground at the Higginson K-2 School following testimony by parents, teachers, and students at five consecutive School Committee meetings featuring playground design and messages prepared by the students.
- > Supported parents at local schools to establish the Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan (RDM) Parent Coalition to empower parents to advocate for the needs of their children in local district and charter schools.

2019-2020

- > Starting the convening of a new Board of Advisors.
- > Higher Ground has accepted an invitation to join the Thriving Families Leverage Team of Open Opportunities – Massachusetts and to serve as backbone of the Thriving Families Lever in Boston.
- > Enrollment at Higher Ground's 2020 Summer Learning Academy was 75 with 50 students attending one or more sessions during the 25-day program. Enrollment applications for the 2021 Summer Learning Academy has topped 120 and Higher Ground is in the final stages of planning for the program with expectation of regular participation by 75 students. Higher Ground is seeking resources to extend the 2021 SLA from five weeks to 8 weeks, as well as continuing to provide online academic and enrichment programs.
- > Family Led Stability Pilot: As of May 2021, we and our FLSP partners had housed 197 families including 283 students in seven local schools. That means that the partnership is currently 79% toward our goal of housing all the homeless students in the seven schools and on track to house the remaining 44 families and 73 students in the coming year. In 2020 Higher Ground distributed \$100 gift cards to 100 homeless and recently housed families with children attending four local schools participating in FLSP.

- > Higher Ground teamed up with JFYNetWorks to provide remote learning in math and English Language Arts at the Higginson Lewis School.
- > Higher Ground collaborated with One Bead to implement a Tech-Equity pilot project at the David Ellis School to ensure high quality access to the internet to enable remote learning.
- > Higher Ground is seeking resources to bring the Phalen Leadership Academy's SCORE program to Higginson Lewis School in the fall and the David Ellis School the following year subject to interest of school leaders and teachers.
- > Three social work graduate students from Boston College and Simmons College supervised by licensed social workers have continued to provide support to families of 30 homeless students.
- > Higher Ground started community meetings to plan and implement the Resilient Families Surround Care Coalition. Successful in obtaining major funding for this initiative involving partner schools, CACC, nonprofits, and Boston Children's Hospital.
- > Higher Ground commences meetings with BPS and foundations to consider how it can expand its models to other schools, and perhaps the entire City. Some foundations are encouraging major scalability of Higher Ground's model and work.

higherground-boston.org

