

# SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Community Needs Assessment



## Community Needs Assessment: School Environments

### Overview

The Pathways to a Safer Sitka Coalition is a group of local agencies and individuals working together to create a healthier, more equitable community. We aim to reduce negative health outcomes, such as domestic violence, substance use, and suicide by building equitable, accessible, and culturally-responsive services and systems. This Community Needs Assessment (CNA) was developed to compile current data regarding the health of the Sitka community to determine focus points for the Pathways Coalition moving forward within each of its goal areas: school environments, youth leadership, male engagement, family engagement, and community environments.

Data collection was a collaborative effort between coalition members. This involved several methods, including focused conversations with members in the Sitka Youth Leadership Committee (youth coalition), the Family Engagement Workgroup (subcommittee of the community coalition), and the Pathways Steering Committee (community prevention coalition). Additionally, seven members from the coalition worked together in a subcommittee to determine the secondary data needed, sources to review, and to divvy out roles for collecting, analyzing, and compiling this data. For additional context about Sitka, the methodology, and its limitations, please refer to [this document](#).

The focus in this section is school environments, which is reflective of Pathways' first goal: Sitka Schools have increased the extent to which they promote and foster healthy social-emotional environments.

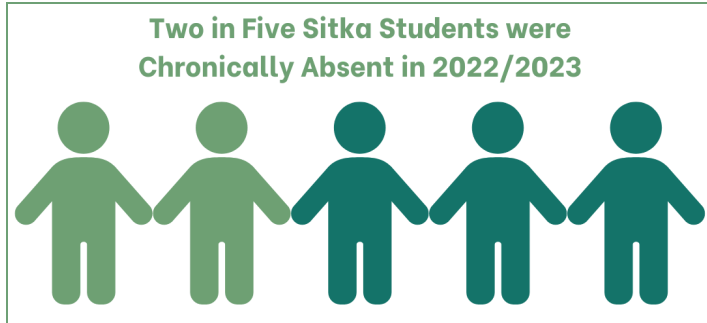
### Key Findings

The Pathways Coalition recognizes that a community's school system has a large impact on what the future will look like for both students and the larger community. Coalition members identified school climate as an area to collectively strengthen and created a goal in the Pathways strategic plan to increase the extent to which the Sitka schools promote and foster healthy social-emotional environments. A sense of belonging and connection among students, staff, and families within a school system are critical factors in an individual's ability to thrive and succeed academically. Without it, students not only struggle with their studies and/or their general enthusiasm about school, but they are also more at risk for other negative outcomes, such as suicide, interpersonal violence, and substance use. According to Kids Count 2024, Alaska is ranked forty-seven out of fifty in education, with lower scores than the national average in every category. These categories included percent of young children (ages 3 and 4) not in school, fourth graders not proficient in reading, eighth graders not proficient in math, and high school students not graduating on time.

In the Sitka School District (SSD), specifically since the COVID-19 pandemic, both graduation and attendance rates have decreased greatly with an average of 20% of students not graduating, and about 42% meeting the criteria for chronic



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absenteeism<sup>1</sup> during the 2022-2023 school year.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, students with disabilities, and those who are economically disadvantaged are graduating at lower rates, on average, every year. These marginalized populations are also dropping out at a higher rate and are more subject to chronic

absenteeism, as are American Indian/Alaska Native students (AI/AN) (DEED, 2023).

Disaggregating the graduation and dropout rate data, shows there are significant disparities between schools within the Sitka School District. For example, Pacific High School (PHS), Sitka's alternative high school, had a dropout rate of 14.58% in Spring 2023, whereas Sitka High School's was less than 1%<sup>3</sup> (DEED, 2023).

Additionally, Pacific High School's graduation rate that year was 45.45%, whereas Sitka High School's was 91%<sup>4</sup> (DEED, 2023). This coincides with the timing of the closure of Raven's Way in Sitka, a residential treatment program under the Sitka School District for adolescents offering experiential learning through outdoor and alternative education, resulting in lowered graduation rates for the district. Additionally, PHS's graduation rates are on track with national averages for alternative schools.

PHS is essential for students who struggle in traditional education settings, providing an opportunity for students who may not otherwise receive a high school diploma. Students who face societal barriers, have experienced trauma, are neurodivergent, etc. can significantly benefit from alternative education options where smaller classrooms and hands-on learning are emphasized. It can be challenging to strike a balance between equal and equitable education in traditional school environments; meeting students' unique needs where they are at. While graduation and dropout rates are the compounded result of many external factors, such as coming out of a pandemic and decline in youth mental health, school districts have the power and influence to create educational environments that are safe and conducive to equitable learning for all its students. In the Sitka School District's Strategic Plan from 2021, a primary goal states "100% of our students will graduate" (SSD, 2021). While this is not the case at either high school yet, it is important to acknowledge the work that is happening to support increased graduation rates as well as examine the discrepancies between schools to identify where there are gaps in meeting students' needs.

Furthermore, research shows that both third grade reading and eighth grade math proficiency are indicators of future success (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013 & 2022). Although proficiency rates in Sitka have increased since the pandemic with

<sup>1</sup> A student is considered chronically absent if they miss more than ten percent of school days while being enrolled for at least half a year.

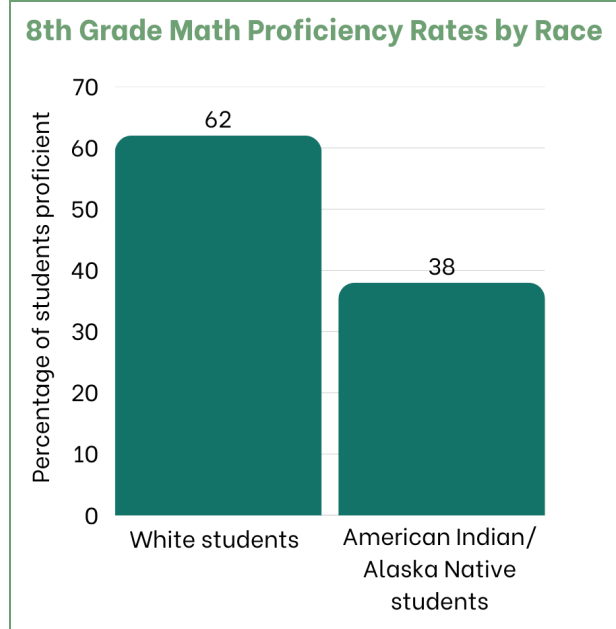
<sup>2</sup> Chronic absenteeism has decreased to 36% as of the 2023/2024 school year.

<sup>3</sup> As of Spring 2024, PHS's dropout rate is at 11%. SHS's is at 0%.

<sup>4</sup> As of Spring 2024, PHS's graduation rate is at 38%. SHS's is at 95.83%.

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52% of third graders proficient in reading as of 2022/2023<sup>5</sup>, large disparities still exist among students who identify as AK Native/American Indian, and/or who are economically disadvantaged compared to their white and/or not economically disadvantaged peers. For example, reading proficiency rates among white third grade students are about 65%, whereas only 31% of AN/AI third graders meet proficiency. Additionally, only 35% of economically disadvantaged third graders are proficient in reading, compared to 63% of those not economically disadvantaged. White students and those not economically disadvantaged therefore have nearly double the reading proficiency rates compared to their peers in third grade. Similar disparities appear in eighth grade math proficiency. Overall, about 51% of Sitka eighth graders are proficient in math as of 2022/2023; this includes 62% of white students, and only 38% of AN/AI students.<sup>6</sup> This is consistent with the gaps among students from families with lower income; those without economic disadvantages had over double the rates of proficiency as economically disadvantaged eighth graders<sup>7</sup> (DEED, 2023).



About 44% of the Sitka School District (SSD) graduates enrolled in post-secondary education for the academic year following graduation in 2023. The 2021, 2022, and 2023 school year rates of enrollment in post-secondary education show a significant decrease as compared to the years prior to COVID where over 50% of students went on to post-secondary education<sup>8</sup> (DEED, 2023). Mount Edgecumbe High School (MEHS), a public boarding school located in Sitka but separate from the Sitka School District, gives students, especially those in rural Alaska, the opportunity to get a high school education they might not otherwise be able to get. MEHS's graduation rates are 98% with attendance rates at 93%, while their dropout and chronic absenteeism rates are lower than the state average. In addition, 50% of MEHS graduates enrolled in post-secondary education for the academic year following graduation (DEED, 2023).

There are a lot of factors that go into whether or not a child will be successful in a school system (e.g., proficiency, graduation), but feeling safe and respected, as well as having the support of caring adults and access to social-emotional tools are

<sup>5</sup> As of 2023/2024, third grade reading proficiency rates have dropped again to about 41%; this includes 46% of white students and 29% of AN/AI students.

<sup>6</sup> As of 2023/2024, eighth grade math proficiency rates have improved to about 67%. The data also shows less of a gap between AN/AI students' and white students' proficiency rates.

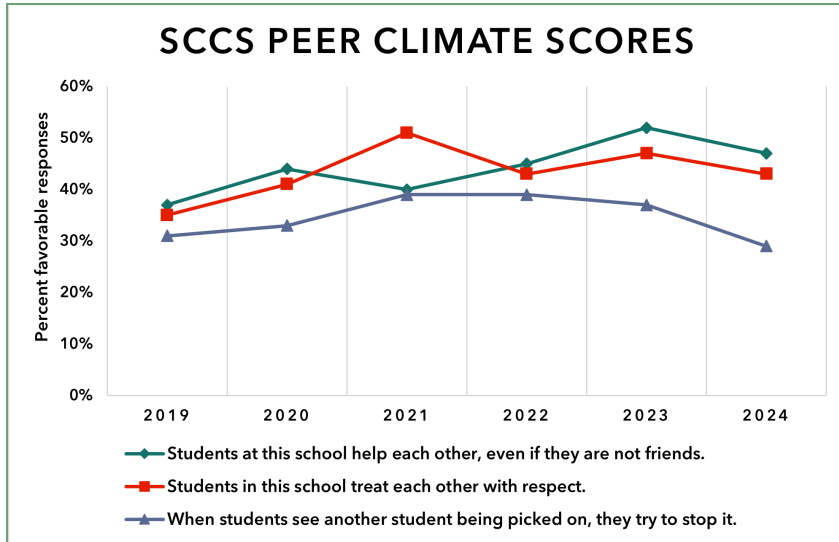
<sup>7</sup> As of 2023/2024, economically disadvantaged eighth graders' math proficiency rates are about 12% lower than not economically disadvantaged students.

<sup>8</sup> As of 2023/2024, post-secondary enrollment has increased to 47% of graduates.



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essential in creating an environment conducive to learning. In Sitka, 2 out of 3 third through fifth graders consistently felt safe at school during the last year. Among students in sixth through twelfth grade, 82% felt as though the teachers and staff treated them with respect, and 74% felt that they consistently had an adult at the school who they are comfortable going to when things are bothering them.



Additionally, a positive peer climate also contributes to a feeling of safety and respect among students within the school environment. However, students in both the elementary school and secondary school settings reported much lower rates of feeling respected by their peers than they did in regards to feeling respected and supported by the adults at their school. Only 1 out of 3 third through fifth graders

said they felt respected by their peers, while 63% reported that they *sometimes* felt respected by their peers. Within the secondary school setting, less than half of the students reported that students at their school treat each other with respect. Additionally, only 37% of students felt that students at their school intervene when they see a peer being picked on;<sup>9</sup> the lowest scoring question in the peer climate category (AASB, 2023). Furthermore, two parent focus groups were conducted by SSD in partnership with STA and SAFV in the fall of 2023, where bullying among students in the schools was named the top area of concern by a majority of parents in attendance.<sup>10</sup> So while student numbers are showing they feel connected to caring adults within their schools, the peer climate seems to be an area to address and strengthen within all the Sitka schools.

As students are struggling to navigate this post-pandemic world, which is noted in the Youth Leadership (YL) section of the CNA, so are teachers. Almost 70% of teachers and staff in SSD reported feeling worn out in their work in ways that interfere with other parts of their lives<sup>11</sup> (AASB, 2023). Additionally, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports that there has been a 25% increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide since the pandemic. This increase has coincided with severe disruptions to services, leaving huge gaps in care for those who need it

<sup>9</sup> As of 2023/2024, this has dropped to 29% of students who felt that students at their school intervene when they see a peer being picked on.

<sup>10</sup> Parent focus groups were composed of thirteen parents total, ages 31- 78, representing 34 children/grandchildren spanning pre-school through high school; all but one guardian identified as a tribal citizen or parents of tribal citizens.

<sup>11</sup> As of 2024, this rate has not improved, but rather worsened by 1%.



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most, particularly for young people who are more at risk for suicide and self-harming behaviors (WHO, 2022). The increase in need and gap in services can make it hard for teachers, who are also dealing with their own personal challenges, to show up fully for their students. Despite the district's efforts to provide Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and a school goal emphasizing 100% of its students will have access to mental health supports, COVID has increased the need for more universally offered, schoolwide supports, as well as more early intervention and targeted supports. With staff being over capacity since COVID, students are likely not getting the individualized support they need to manage their mental well-being. Mount Edgecumbe High School (MEHS) has additional supports in place, including a team of folks who make up the wellness team and are available to students who are struggling; this is likely because students live on campus, and staff are responsible for supporting their students' social-emotional needs inside and outside of the academic setting.<sup>12</sup> However, COVID has drastically increased the need for support there too as reported by MEHS youth in the Sitka Youth Leadership Committee. Capacity is certainly an issue everywhere, and with continuous cuts to education budgets, a school's ability to establish and sustain the necessary systems and structures of support for their students' wellbeing and academic success is even more challenging.

Student-led presentations on healthy relationships given by the Sitka Youth Leadership Committee's (SYLC) peer educators began again after the pandemic, in school year 2021-2022. With an increase in education and messaging in the school environment on this topic, youth and adult presenters have noticed an increase in teen disclosures about abuse. Open conversations in the classroom led by youth leaders have allowed for participants to take a deeper look at their own lives and identify when they've experienced harm done

by another; whether by a family member, friend, or partner. This realization has caused students to want to share their story with the adult presenter post-presentation. The adult being a mandatory reporter, would often have to make a report without knowing if there would be continuing support for the student once a report is made. Communication systems and school protocols were not always clear about *who* to connect the student with in the school environment to best support them as they navigate the legal system after a disclosure has occurred. On this note, the 2023 SCCS showed there was a decrease in SSD staff feeling as though there were support systems to respond to trauma experienced by their students in the past year, suggesting a need to put better school-wide structures, protocols, and communications systems in place that ensure a youth's emotional and physical safety, particularly when disclosures occur resulting in increased emotional distress for youth.

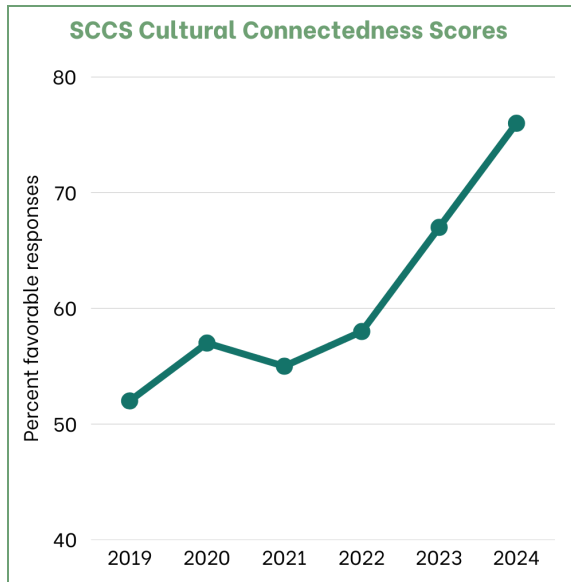
Additionally, feeling a sense of belonging, for both students and their families, is



<sup>12</sup> In the fall of 2025, significant budget cuts and admin turnover occurred at MEHS contributing to a number of challenging issues at the school including concerns about student safety. It is unclear if mental health supports are still in tact across the school.



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an important piece in creating a school environment where all students are able to reach their potential. According to the SSD SCCS, 84% of sixth–twelfth graders believed their school is a welcoming place for families like theirs, and 87% of sixth–twelfth graders agreed their school values and welcomes Elders. Family responses show similar results; 90% of families agreed their school is a welcoming place for families like theirs, and 85% agreed their school values and welcomes Elders. However, disaggregating the data tells a slightly different story, and those who are struggling economically as well as those who identify as Alaska Native responded less favorably by approximately 10%<sup>13</sup> (AASB, 2023).

Another way for families and students to feel a sense of belonging in the schools is by involving parents/families in the academic setting in some way. Though 85% of families agreed their school involves parents/families in most school events or activities, only 54% agreed the school involves parents/families in making important decisions (e.g., curriculum changes, school policies, dress code). This percentage is even lower among AK Native families at 43%. In addition, when staff were asked how often they provide opportunities for families to give input on decisions for their classrooms or school, only 39% of staff responded favorably.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps more intentionally involving parents/families in decisions that affect their child’s learning and overall sense of belonging would instill a sense of empowerment as well as ownership among parents, resulting not only in students/families feeling more connected to school, but improving proficiency rates as well. Additionally, only 66% of parents/families reported that the school regularly shares ideas with them on what they can do at home to support their child’s learning; 55% of parents/families reported that the schools ask them how to help their child do well in school (AASB, 2023). Strengthening family/school partnerships could be an area to focus on going forward as families’ involvement with a child’s learning shows significant improvements in the academic success of young people.

Enhancing a school’s environment to be more culturally reflective of the community is an effective way to improve academic success as well as ensure students and families feel a sense of well-being and connectedness to the school. There are many ways for educational institutions to become culturally responsive, whether it be by adapting instructional materials to be more place-based, creating spaces for students to share and learn about their heritage, or by visually representing the

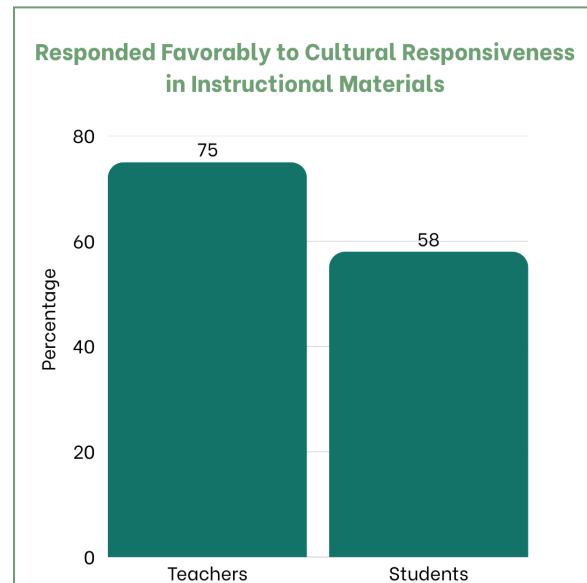
<sup>13</sup> As of 2024 SCCS data, there is not a notable discrepancy between favorable responses among white families and Alaska Native families.

<sup>14</sup> As of 2024, this rate is down 17%, with only 22% of teachers responding favorably. In addition, only 39% of staff felt their school provides training on how to effectively partner with families according to 2024 data.



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diversity of the student body around the school. Working with the Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA) and through the Sitka Native Education Program, the Sitka School District has prioritized Culturally Responsive Embedded Social and Emotional Learning (CRESEL) within the educational system for many years. While the rates of cultural connectedness amongst students have steadily increased over the years in Sitka, likely due to the efforts of CRESEL, Alaska Native students, Black/African American students, and students of 2 or more races (not including Alaska Native), are still reporting lower rates of cultural connectedness. Only 55% of students responded favorably that their teachers make an effort to represent their culture in class. Additionally, only 58% of students and 67% of families see their family's culture represented in class lessons, materials, posters, and art around the school, etc.<sup>15</sup> In fact, in the same fall 2023 parent focus group as mentioned above, a lack of cultural reflection in instructional material was also named a primary topic of concern for parents. Interestingly, staff perceptions of cultural connectedness differ greatly from the student and family responses with a 17% difference between what teachers believe they are doing to reflect their students' culture and ethnicity in instructional materials, and what their students perceive. However, the majority of families, students, and teachers all responded favorably to the survey question, "This school values the language and culture of its students and families," indicating that teachers *value* culturally responsive education, but are still trying to learn what that looks like in terms of their teaching materials. As the CRESEL work continues and becomes more central in the school district, there will likely continue to be increases in cultural connectedness amongst teachers, students, and families (AASB, 2023).



Consistent and receptive leadership is critical in closing the gaps within a school system and carrying out a district's strategic plan. At the start of COVID, the Sitka School District had several key administrative positions turn over at the district office. In the school year 2022/2023, after filling the superintendent position, staff reported that they did not feel as though district leadership was open to feedback and input from staff. Furthermore, that same year, there was a decrease in staff believing that district leadership supports efforts to improve school climate (AASB, 2023). During the Pathways' focused conversation in June 2023, school representatives shared that turnover with the superintendent role contributed to much of the discontentment from staff. Additionally, they also shared turnover added to delays in progressing with the

<sup>15</sup> This has increased to 77% of families as of 2024; however, this still means nearly a quarter of families do not see their culture represented.



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strategic plan, which includes goals and objectives centered on closing the learning gap, strengthening culturally responsive programming, building up mental health supports, and strengthening community partnerships. However, at the start of the 2023/2024 school year, the district office stabilized, filling key administrative roles. Then, in the fall of 2024, SSD secured resources and hired a full-time assistant superintendent position. Consistent leadership with the right people is showing an improvement in staff morale and making it more possible to move forward with their strategic plan.<sup>16</sup>

### Recommendations

There are a number of concerns surfacing in each of the Pathways goal areas through this Community Needs Assessment (CNA) process, with many of the concerns cutting across multiple goals, particularly the school climate, youth leadership, and family engagement focus areas. In general, it seems there is a lack of coordination among schools and community partners which, if more intentionally established, could help bolster the efforts of the district to successfully address the gaps already identified in their strategic plan and echoed in this CNA. Secondary data confirms what many community partners, parents/guardians, and youth participants have shared anecdotally for years. Some significant areas of concern are the mental health status of young people and the lack of resources and support systems available to them in our community (see [SYLC's Mental Health Is Health Campaign](#) below).

In this post-pandemic era, students have shared how much they are struggling

### SYLC's Mental Health is Health Campaign Posters



with their mental health and feeling hopeless about accessing the help they need. Working together as a community, bringing schools, parents, community partners, and youth together to establish systems and structures that allow for increased visibility, accessibility, and availability to mental health resources is a potential solution. Youth feel isolated and alone, and are often left to cope with their circumstances without

<sup>16</sup> As of 2024 data, about three quarters of staff now believe district leadership is open to input & supporting efforts to improve school climate.

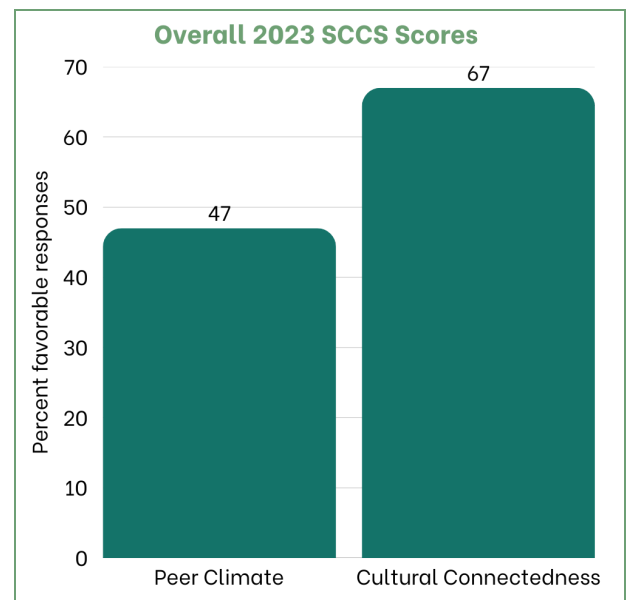


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tools and little guidance from adults. They are often told by adults to “push through.” Offering ongoing trainings for adults to become more equipped with knowledge/tools to better recognize when a youth needs mental health support and provide the necessary help could help bridge the gap in mental health services in Sitka.<sup>17</sup>

A more coordinated approach to providing wrap-around services to students who disclose abuse and improving communication systems and protocols across partners is needed, as there has been a steady increase in disclosures during the youth-led presentations provided by SYLC’s Peer Education program. Considering the high prevalence of teen dating violence nationally, this increase was not surprising. As teens become more aware of what an unhealthy relationship is, they begin to recognize when they have experienced it personally or when it has happened to someone close to them. There were more disclosures among teens during classroom presentations in 2022/2023 than in previous years combined, making it even more important for schools and partners to establish concrete systems of support that are trauma-informed and ensure a student’s emotional and physical safety.

School and community partnerships could also help curb the concerning peer climate numbers, which paint a grim picture about the way students in the school environment are treating each other. The overall peer climate scores are 47% and which is the lowest scoring category in the 2023 SCCS; these scores are 20% lower than the second lowest scoring category, cultural connectedness.<sup>18</sup> These low scores have been fairly consistent the last five years, suggesting a clear area of concern. Creating a sense of belonging, safety, and a respectful school environment is crucial in setting students up for success both academically as well as in life. Partners could be more coordinated in working together to ensure there are opportunities built into the school day to enhance connectedness and respect among students. Perhaps providing teachers with bystander intervention tools or selecting a school-wide bullying prevention program could help shift the peer climate to be one that is more supportive and uplifting. The thirteen parents/guardians who participated in the fall 2023 parent focus group also echoed these sentiments. Additionally, streamlining strategies across classroom and afterschool settings so similar messages are reiterated across settings could help with shifting the climate.



<sup>17</sup> All Sitka High teachers and many SSD staff, as well as some community partners were trained in Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) during the school year 2023/2024; two community partners were trained as trainers for teen Mental Health First Aid (tMHFA) in Spring 2024 and trained 11 teens in tMHFA in Spring 2025.

<sup>18</sup> According to most recent data, peer climate has dropped to 39% favorable responses, which is nearly 30% lower than the second lowest scoring category on the 2024 SCCS.

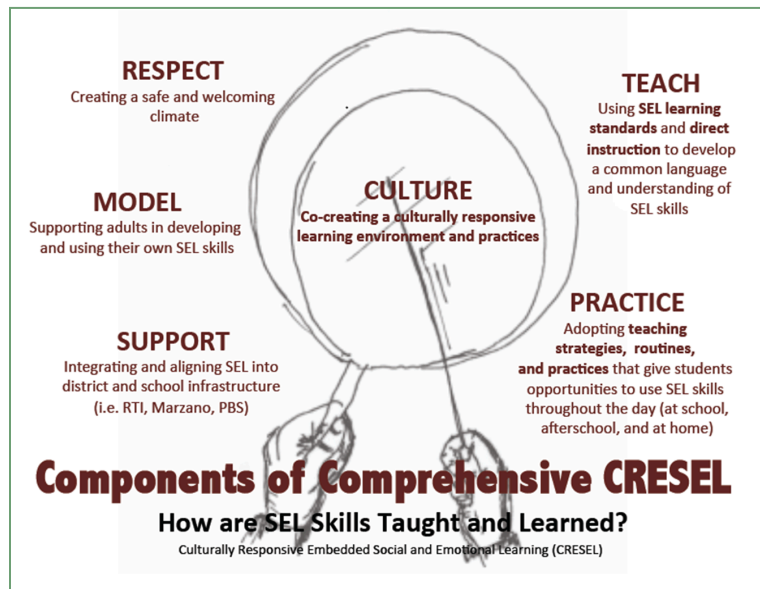


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Strengthening school and family partnerships could also result in positive student outcomes not only in regards to peer climate, but also with academic achievement and enrolling in post-secondary opportunities. Parents and families play a vital role in their child's development and influence how serious their children are about their education, as well as role model behaviors for how to treat others. Providing resources to families through the school district's channels to help support a child's learning, encouraging conversations in the home about post-secondary opportunities, as well as providing information about how to talk to their children about important developmentally appropriate topics (e.g., relationships, problem-solving, mental health) could help improve overall student outcomes. These resources could be compiled collectively by schools and community partners. Additionally, involving parents/families in decisions about the school, whether that be about how to address the peer climate, or informing curriculum - particularly around integrating culture - could help parents feel a sense of ownership both in regards to supporting their child's learning as well as setting expectations about behaviors at school. The school being a major communication channel for reaching parents, could be better utilized by both school staff and community partners as another vehicle for disseminating relevant and helpful resources to parents/families.

Culturally responsive education has been prioritized as a goal in the district's strategic plan and though numbers across students, families, and staff show the Sitka School District values the language and culture of its students and families, adapting instructional materials to be more culturally reflective, or representing the diversity of students around school is still an area to strengthen. Seeing one's culture represented in the schools increases the likelihood of connectedness and belonging, helping students feel seen and valued for who they are. These are simple strategies for building a respectful and inclusive environment, which could help students feel more excited about going to school and enthusiastic about learning. Perhaps providing more tools/training for teachers, as well as setting a district-wide expectation would improve efforts around integrating culturally responsive strategies into the learning environment, and could lead to better attendance, graduation rates, and overall academic achievement.

More coordination and collaboration between schools, partners, and families is recommended. As stated in the Key Findings section, there has been significant turnover at the district office resulting in delays to moving the district's strategic plan forward. Pathways partners agree that working more in partnership with the district to



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put their key strategies into motion would be the best way forward as the SSD strategic plan already includes goals and strategies that align with the work of the Pathways Coalition (e.g., establishing mental health supports, strengthening culturally responsive programming, closing the achievement gap, providing professional development and trainings to staff, removing barriers for students, and strengthening community partnerships).

The recommendations coming out of this CNA align with previous conversations among key stakeholders, including the tribe, the school district, and other social service agencies. Conversations surrounding these topics date back to 2016, with both Sitka Tribe of Alaska and the Sitka School District expressing a need for more coordinated and comprehensive student support via a conversation co-facilitated by First Alaskans Institute (FAI) and the Association of Alaska School Boards. In this conversation, stakeholders identified needs for the following: more integration of cultural programs in schools, increasing AK Native representation in schools via teachers and elders, Lingít language classes for all ages, increasing identity and belonging among students, educators trained in how to reverently incorporate culture and language into their teaching, honest conversations about high drop out rates and low graduation rates, and increased respect for traditional family structures and knowledge (AASB et al., 2016).

More recently, the Sitka Native Education Program (SNEP) established goals for its “SNEP in Schools” program and reported back on their progress. These goals include the following: 1) Increase awareness of cultural career pathways; 2) Adoption of a revised culturally relevant curriculum; and 3) Enhance professional learning among educators and staff. According to SNEP’s 2024–2025 Impact Report, initial concerns aligned with the needs outlined above. To address these, SNEP has begun implementing a variety of strategies. Because cultural implementation has been largely teacher-driven without district-wide mandates, SNEP hired a full-time curriculum developer with Lingít language expertise to develop and standardize lessons into an accessible digital format. Additionally, SNEP collaborates with organizations such as the Sitka Sound Science Center and Sitka Conservation Society, as well as PHS’s and SHS’s science and math departments to develop experiential learning that meets Science, Social Studies, and ELA standards, as well as afterschool activities. For professional development, educators engage in Lingít language learning via emailed lessons and in-person workshops, as well as hands-on and co-teaching work among SNEP staff. As mentioned, stronger family engagement is a major determinant in sustainability of strategies such as these, which is why SNEP has begun implementing a Home-School Connection piece to their new curriculum units (SNEP & SSD, 2025).

The SNEP model certainly marks progress towards these culturally responsive education goals; however, there must be a concerted and sustained effort district-wide. In their FY21 Strategic Plan, the Sitka School District identified the need for embedding culturally responsive lessons and social-emotional learning into its schools and providing professional development for staff, as well as increasing partnerships to continue this work (SSD, 2021). As shown through the First Alaskans Institute facilitated community conversation, SNEP Impact Report, and SSD’s Strategic Plan, as well as secondary data, all key stakeholders are saying the same thing: that implementing CRESEL is critical for increasing students’ sense of belonging. And while

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there has been notable progress in these goal areas since that 2016 conversation, this is still an urgent priority. It is a district-wide responsibility to support students holistically; coordinated and attentive responses to these needs are critical so that every student is supported and feels that they belong. As noted, these suggested changes are a culmination of conversations among key stakeholders across the community over several years, and therefore, highlight a pressing and urgent need in our community.

### **Needs Statement**

Goal 1. School Environments - *Establish a more coordinated approach between the school district, community partners, and families to support and carry out the district's strategic plan which already includes objectives around culturally responsive education and mental health supports, priorities the coalition has identified as a need to ensure a positive school environment.*



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