

Inside S.A.F.E.: The adult-first framework behind sustainable school culture change

Why culture works, why it stalls, and how S.A.F.E. names the condition to strengthen next.



OBJECTIVES

Three takeaways

01

Why traditional culture and behavior initiatives stall

Examine the difference between managing behavior and changing the conditions that shape it: connection, belonging, safety, and adult capacity.

02

Why co-regulation is the foundation of lasting culture change

Recognize how a regulated adults shape interactions, environments, student behavior, and the climate of the school.

03

What we see in S.A.F.E. sites and schools that's different

Use the four conditions — Sustained Leadership, Attuned Adults, Fostering Community, Engaged Classrooms — to identify one area to strengthen.



Big Idea: A **co-regulating culture** creates safe, connected, problem-solving sites

WHERE WE START

**Do you believe the way we
are trying to improve our
community is shaping the
environment we are creating?**

IN THE CHAT

**When your school's culture feels
stressed, what do you notice first?**

Student behavior

Staff morale

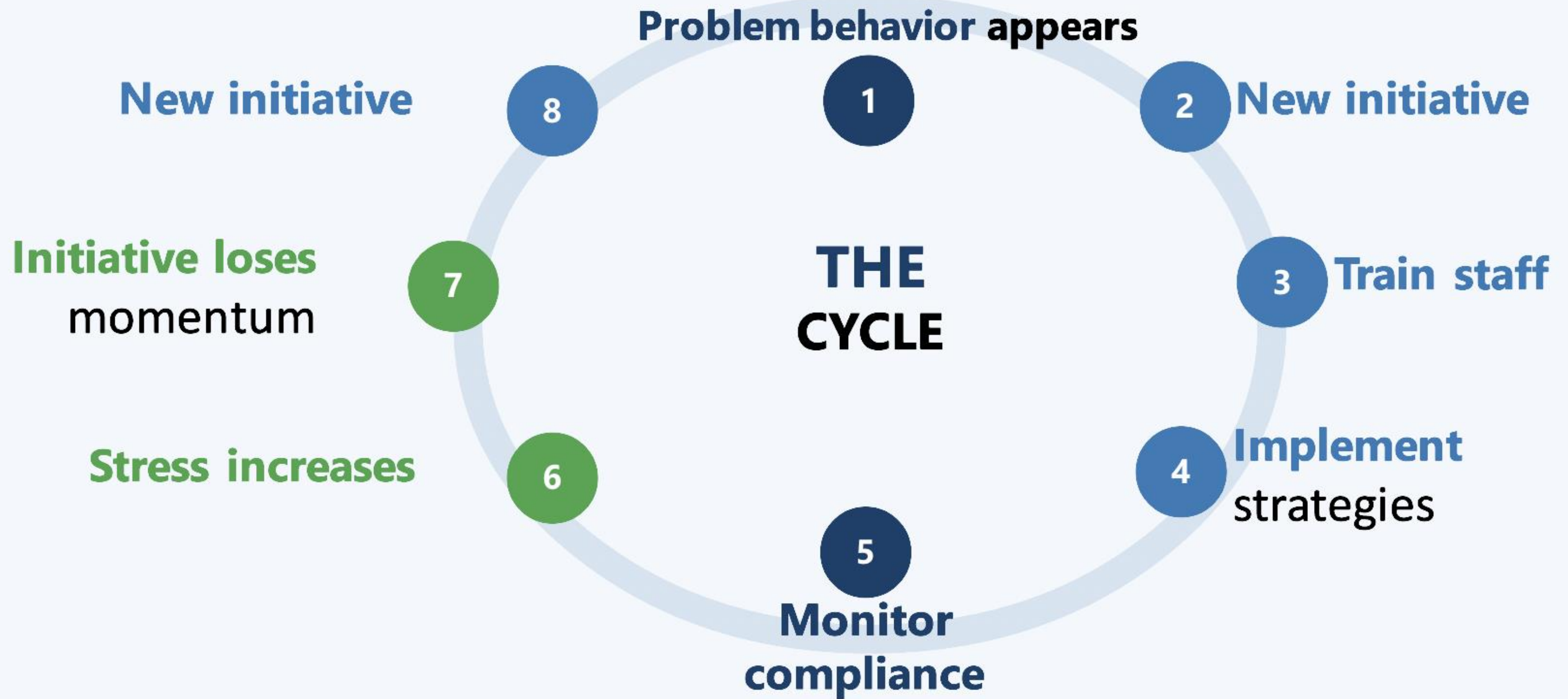
Communication

Relationships

Conflict

Adult overwhelm

Look beyond the most visible signal.

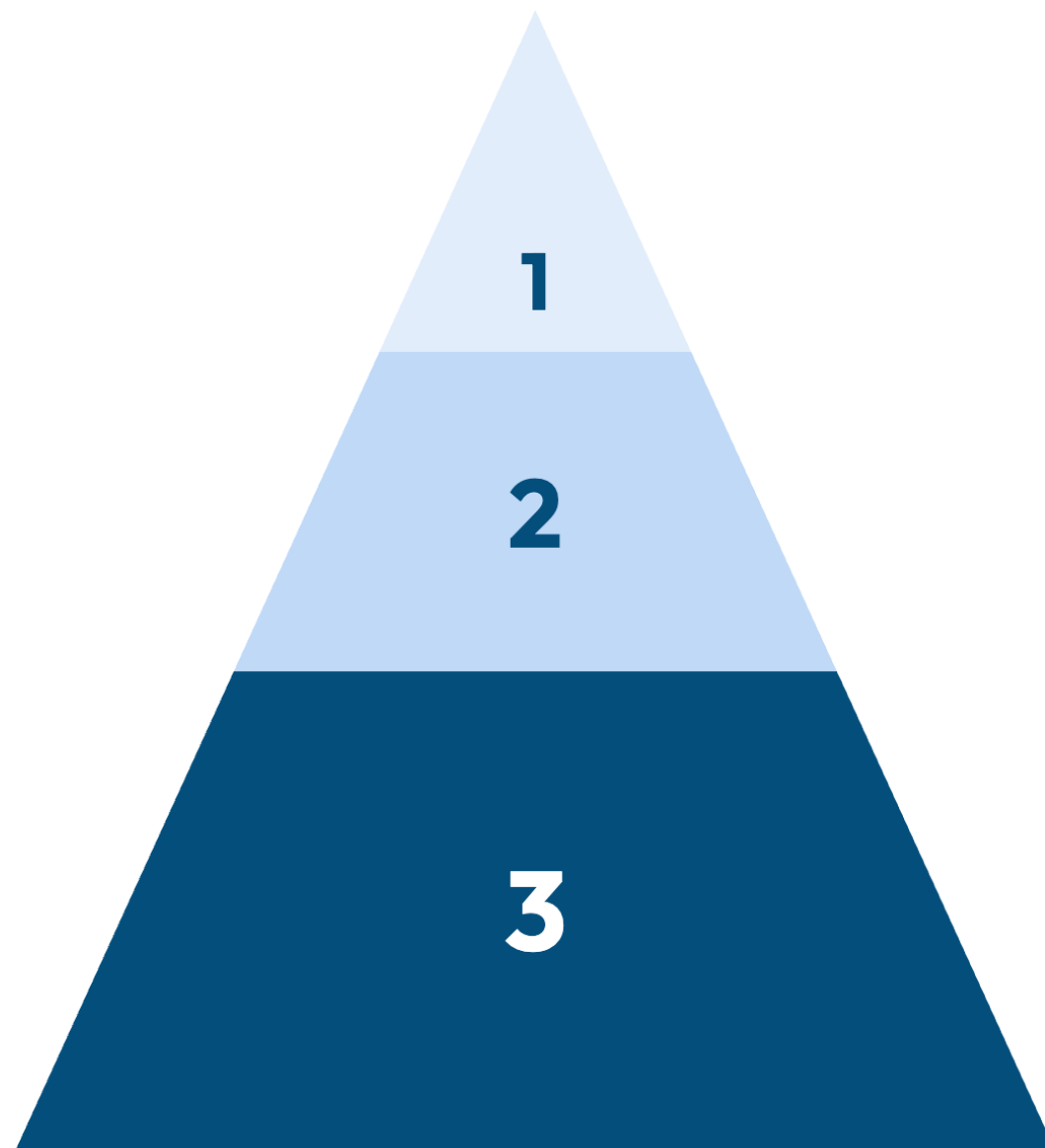


PART ONE

What stalls culture, behavior, and retention?

Three levels of school culture

Adapted from Edgar Schein's model of organizational culture. What we can see is the smallest part of what shapes it.



What we see

Schedules, posted rules, hallway displays, referral data, and how adults respond in the moment.



What we say we believe

Our mission, our agreements, and our stated priorities — the reasons we give for how we do things here.



What we truly believe

Unspoken assumptions about children, behavior, and adults that drive what we do under stress — and shape everything above them.

Artifacts

Espoused Values

Underlying Assumptions

Culture change that only touches the top of the pyramid does not last.

Adapted from Schein/MIT (2010)

The leadership ripple effect

	WHEN THE LEADER IS DYSREGULATED	WHEN THE LEADER STAYS REGULATED
Leader's state	Feels threatened	Remains regulated
Leader's behavior	Becomes controlling or short	Pauses, listens, clarifies
Staff state	Feel unsafe	Feel safe enough to think
Leader distribution	Less communication, more disconnection	More ownership and problem-solving
Culture outcome	Lower trust and collective efficacy	Stronger connection, greater collective efficacy

 **Big Idea:** Site **leaders create psychological safety and model** the practices adults imitate (Leithwood 2012)

We often try to change student behavior first

INSTEAD OF

How do we get students to behave differently?

How do we stop the behavior?

How do we make staff implement this?

What is wrong with this child?

TRY

What conditions are contributing to the behavior we are seeing?

What is the behavior communicating?

What do adults need in order to implement it successfully?

What is happening for this child, and what conditions will help?

 **Big Idea:** Regulated adults

BRAIN-BASED

Learning isn't possible when dysregulated

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CONSISTENCY

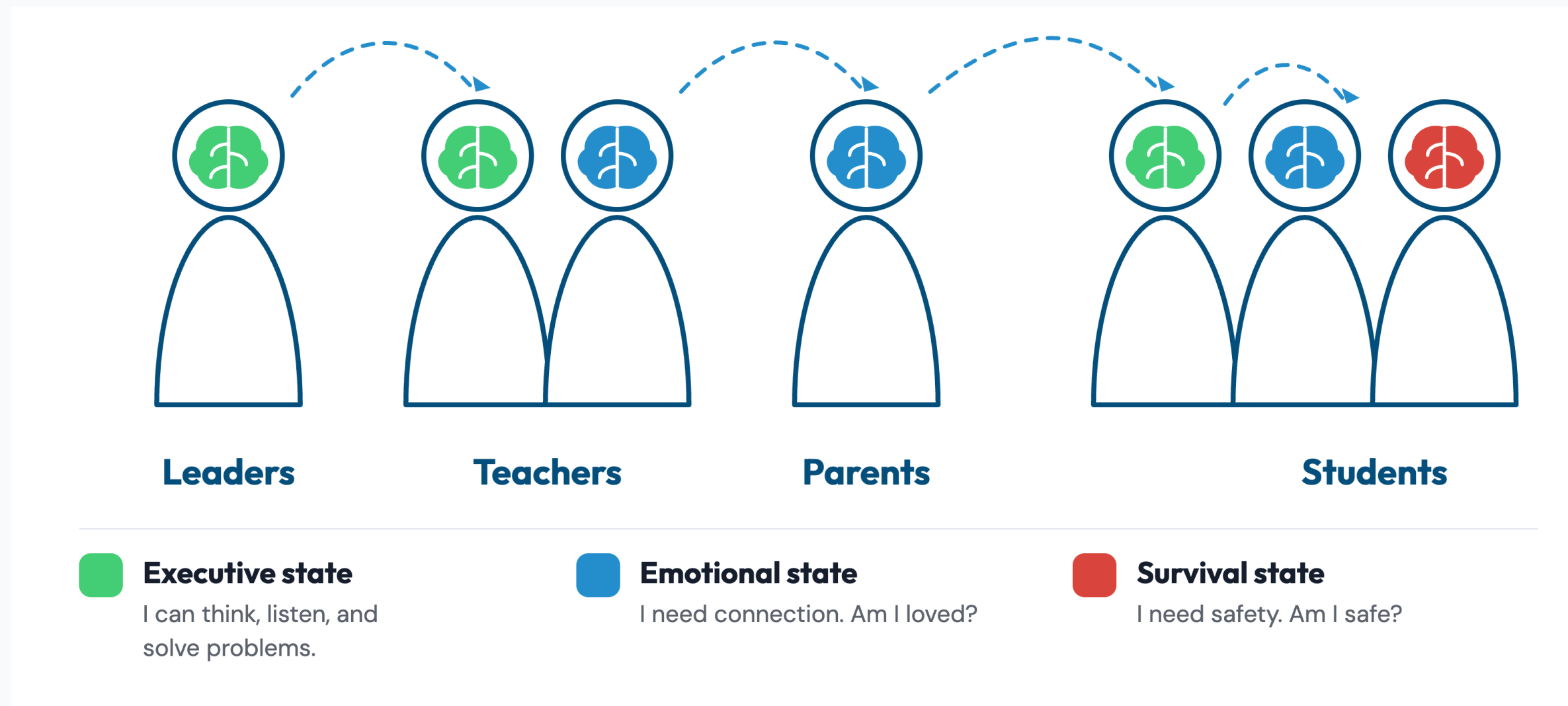
Belonging is left to heroics...

	WHEN CONNECTION IS LEFT TO CHANCE	WHEN CONNECTION IS A RITUAL
Arrival	Get to class and get started	Every child greeted by name, every day
Shared spaces	Hallways and cafeteria run on rules	Routines are taught and rehearsed, not assumed
Adults with adults	Doors closed, struggle stays private	Asking for help is normal and safe
Families	Contacted when something goes wrong	Partners who know the same language
Culture outcome	Belonging depends on which room you are in	A visitor sees the same culture in every room

WHY IT MATTERS

Co-Regulation = Collective efficacy

The shared belief among educators that their combined efforts can positively affect student learning.



Adult safety is not a side benefit of culture work. It is the mechanism. mechanism.

Staff who feel safe enough to think bring ownership and problem-solving to the same problems that used to produce silence.

THE RESEARCH

Classroom environment impacts outcomes.

Following kindergarteners to adulthood, each one-point increase in a kindergarten teacher's rating of class environment was associated with **double the odds of completing college** and a **40 percent reduction in the odds of adult arrest** ([Jones, Greenberg & Crowley, 2015, American Journal of Public Health, 105\(11\), 2283-2290](#)).

Adult environment shapes retention.

About 16 percent of the teaching workforce turns over annually. Among those leaving the, **55 percent cited dissatisfaction**, and within that group the leading specific drivers were **behavior** and accountability pressures (25 percent) and **lack of administrative support (21 percent)** ([Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, LPI](#)).

Leadership is gone before change sticks.

Nationally, average principal tenure is **four years**, annual turnover is about **18 percent**, rising to **21 percent in high-poverty schools**, and 35 percent of principals have been in their school fewer than two years. Turnover "often result[s] in higher teacher turnover and, ultimately, lower gains in student achievement," and that relationship is stronger in high-poverty, low-achieving schools ([Levin & Bradley, 2019, NASSP / Learning Policy Institute](#)).

Culture is not a soft add-on to academic improvement, it is a driver of it.

Schools strong on clusters of the five essential supports were **10 times more likely to improve** in reading and mathematics than weak schools. "Student-centered learning climate" is one of the five ([Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010, Organizing Schools for Improvement; 10x figure](#)). In the 212-school analysis, **not a single school weak on most supports improved in mathematics**.

PART TWO

What actually builds sustainable culture?

THE SEQUENCE

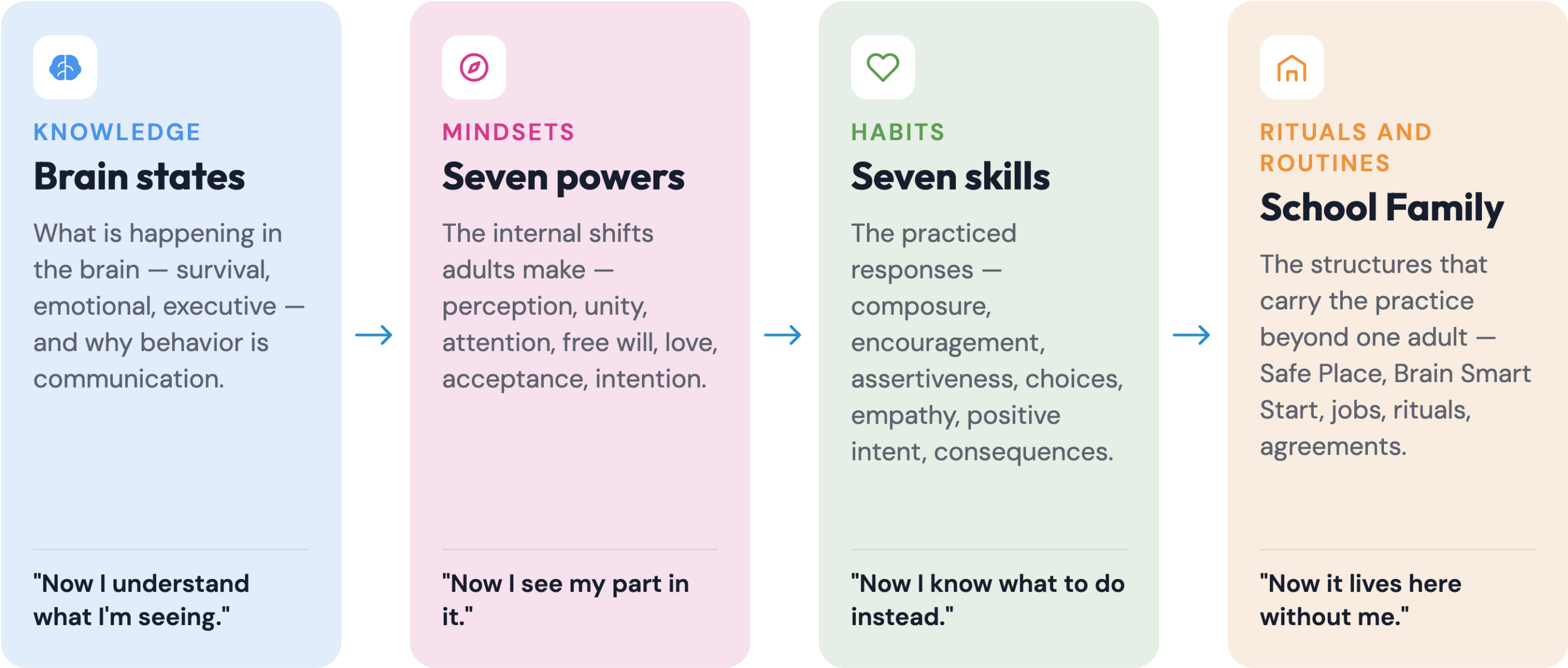
Culture change “Starts with us”

- 01 Regulated adults create **safety**
- 02 Safety creates **connection**
- 03 Connection creates **belonging**
- 04 Belonging creates the conditions for **engagement**
- 05 Engagement builds problem solving and **learning**
- 06 And repeated experiences and beliefs become **culture**

THE CORE OF WHAT WE TEACH

What every adult learns, and what makes it stick

Knowledge alone does not change a school. Conscious Discipline builds knowledge into mindsets, mindsets into habits, and habits into rituals the whole community shares.

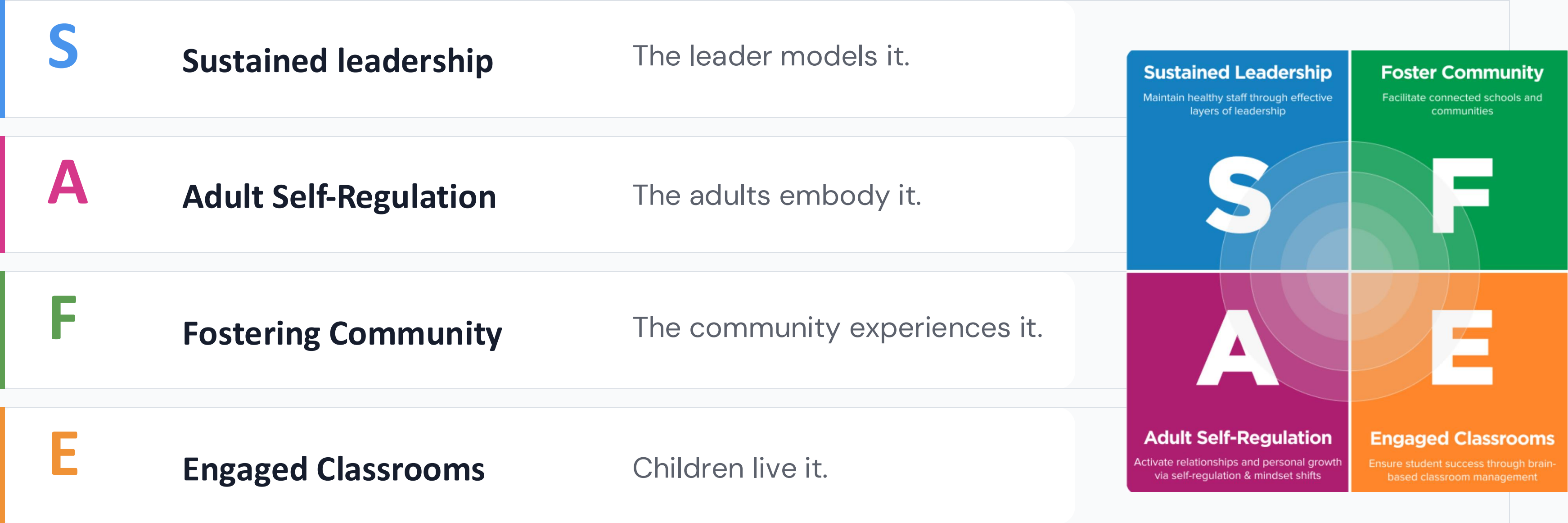


TRANSFER AND STICK Knowledge becomes mindset, mindset becomes habit, habit becomes ritual — and ritual is what a new adult walks into and a child can count on.

THE FRAMEWORK

S.A.F.E. Starts with Us

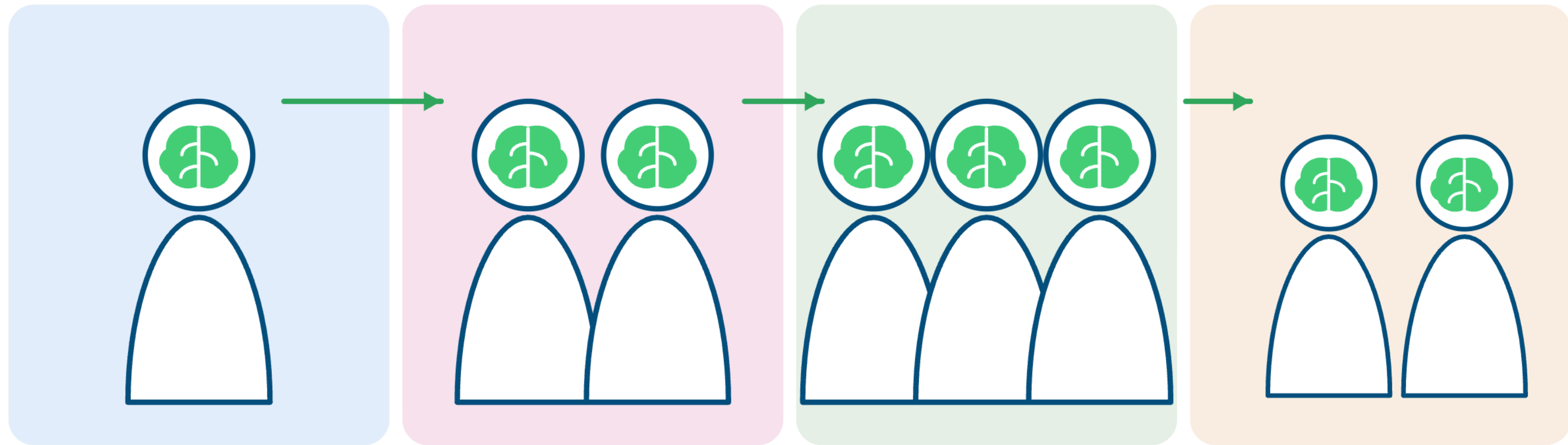
Culture is created when these conditions are experienced consistently.



Big Idea: Long time partners...you may have chosen CD for the 'E'...what's missing?

What a co-regulating culture looks like

Regulation is not one adult's good day. It passes from leaders to adults to the whole community, until children live inside it.



S

Sustained leadership

Leaders stay regulated first, so staff feel safe enough to think.

A

Attuned adults

Adults notice their own state and return to composure on purpose.

F

Fostering community

Rituals carry connection across every room, hallway, and family.

E

Engaged classrooms

Children borrow the calm until the skills become their own.

THE FRAMEWORK

S.A.F.E. Starts with Us

S

Sustained leadership

Leaders create the psychological safety that lets every adult grow, and hold the work in systems rather than personalities.

Produces: distributed ownership that survives staff and leadership transitions.

SIX SHIFTS

Compliance-based leadership	→	Connection-based leadership
Top-down, positional authority	→	Distributed, shared leadership
Assumed safety, fear-based culture	→	Intentional psychological safety
Program or initiative mindset	→	Embedded, systemic culture
Champion-dependent implementation	→	Sustainable, role-based systems
Data as accountability	→	Data as reflection and growth

A key indicator: meetings open with connection rituals and Brain Smart Starts.



Big Idea: When Conscious Discipline is the **way we do culture** VS an initiative to lead

S.A.F.E. Starts with Us

A

Adult self-regulation

Composure is treated as a professional discipline, and behavior is understood as a signal of brain state.

Produces: staff who can name their own brain state and serve as the nervous-system anchor children need.

SIX SHIFTS

Managing children's behavior first	→	Adult self-regulation first
Reacting to upset	→	Composure as a practiced discipline
Emotions as disruptions	→	Understanding brain states
Conflict is a negative	→	Conflict is when we grow and learn
Composure as a private trait	→	Composure as a shared practice
Judging behavior	→	Noticing our own and others' state

A key indicator: S.T.A.R. and active-calming strategies are visible and used by adults.



Big Idea: Regulated adults win back instructional time, problem solve, and innovate

THE FRAMEWORK

S.A.F.E. Starts with Us

F

Foster community

Belonging, connection, consistency, and rituals across the whole site and with families.

Produces: a site-wide sense of safety and belonging, carried by consistent rituals. The CDAT's primary focus area.

SIX SHIFTS

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Classroom-by-classroom practice | → | Site-wide consistency |
| Rules and mandates | → | Rituals and School Family |
| Belonging that must be earned | → | Unconditional belonging |
| Isolated adults | → | A connected staff culture |
| Families as recipients | → | Families as partners |
| Transitions as logistics | → | Rehearsed rituals in shared spaces |

A key indicator: a visitor sees the same culture in every room.



Big Idea: Hallways, cafeterias, and pick up/drop off **can reinforce culture** more than most

S.A.F.E. Starts with Us

E

Engaged classrooms

CD structures live in daily routines and relationships, scaffolding the executive skills students are still developing.

Produces: students who self-regulate, solve problems, and take ownership because the structures teach the skills.

SIX SHIFTS

Teacher-controlled compliance	→	Student ownership and self-regulation
Punishment and exclusion	→	Teaching the missing skills
Independence and digital	→	Connection, collaboration, and community
Behavior as good or bad	→	Behavior as executive-skill development
Extrinsic rewards	→	Intrinsic motivation and contribution
One-size instruction	→	Structures as the external prefrontal lobe

A key indicator: students use Safe Place, jobs, and problem-solving independently.

MEASUREMENT

The levels of adoption

1

Awareness

Knows the shift exists and can describe it. The language is present; practice is not yet consistent.

2

Acceptance

Believes in and values the shift, and is willing to change. Buy-in is present and growing.

3

Application

Actively tries and uses the practices. Implementation is emerging and may still be inconsistent.

4

Integration

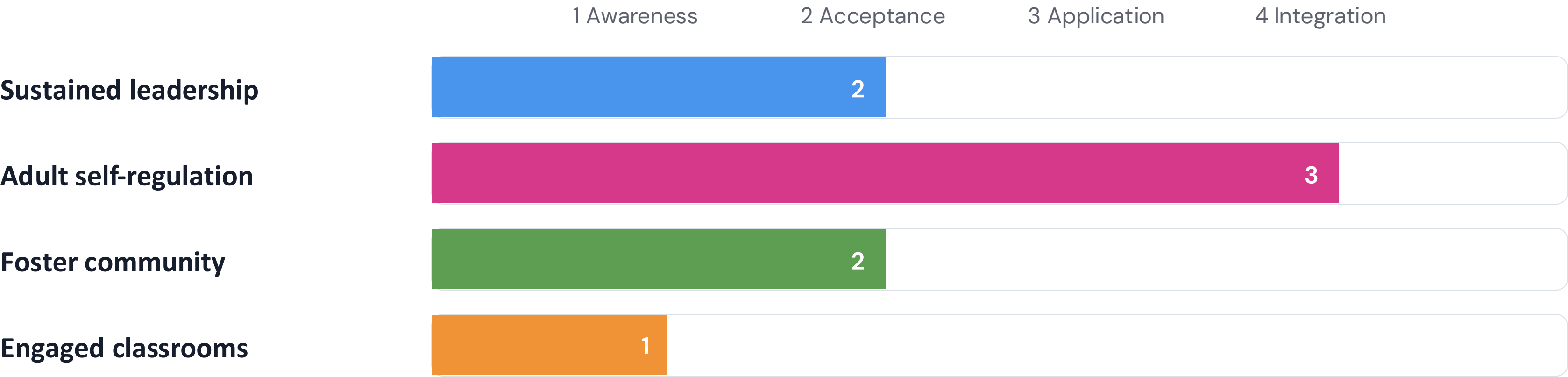
The shift is part of identity and belief. Practice is principled and automatic, not just procedural.



Big Idea: Long time partners...you may have chosen CD for the 'E'...what's missing?

EXAMPLE

A sample site profile



Big Idea: We are an asset-based approach – what can we build on? Your inner gifts.

TURN INSIGHT INTO ACTION

Don't change everything. Change the condition.

Four minutes, on your own

01 EXPERIENCE

The culture experience we want more of is...

02 CONDITION

The S.A.F.E. condition that needs attention is...

03 PRACTICE

One adult practice we will strengthen is...

04 FIRST STEP

Our first small step will be...

One focused condition. One strengthened practice. One small first step.

NEXT STEPS

Where to take this next

10 MINUTE REFLECTION

Take the S.A.F.E. Diagnostic

Reflect on your goals, challenges and readiness for Conscious Discipline, and leave with a site profile and short list of priorities.



consciousdiscipline.com/safe-framework-survey

ORLANDO · OCT 15-17

Join us at Elevate

Learn the science of co-regulating cultures alongside leaders and teams doing this work in their own buildings.



elevateteacherconference.com/

SITE IMPLEMENTATION

Talk with an Advisor

Schedule a conversation to discuss where you are today and what's possible when a community establishes shared language and practices.



www.consciousdiscipline.com/contact

THANK YOU

Safety. Connection. Problem-solving.

Questions are welcome — and both links are in the chat.