



Community  
Matters

*Empowering Youth  
Transforming Communities*

# **School Climate and Bullying: Empowering Youth As Change Agents**

**Rick Phillips, M.S. Ed.  
Founder, Community Matters**

**[www.community-matters.org](http://www.community-matters.org)**

# Community Matters Mission

*“To equip and empower students and adults to create schools and communities that are safe, welcoming and inclusive.”*



# Secure School

## The “Outside-In” Approach

- **Security-Focused**
- **Adult-Driven**
- **Punitive Policies**
- **Control-Oriented**



## Living in a Disconnected World

"We are living in an unprecedented social experiment. We have systematically changed the patterns and connections that have characterized human life as long as there has been human life."

*Wachtel, Dreaming of a New Reality*

# School Safety: The Changing Landscape

- School Shootings (1995 – 99)
- Violence / Bullying (2000 – 09)

(2009 – present)

**Cyber-Bullying**  
**Relational Aggression**  
**Indifference**



# Intolerance and Incivility

It's not your typical playground bully anymore...



**Younger**

**Meaner**

**More Pervasive**

**Harder to Identify**

**24/7 On & Off Campus**



**Other's Pain as "Entertainment"**

**More Accepted as Normal**



“My school is a safe school!”

On a scale of 1 – 5 how much do you agree with the statement above?



Strongly  
Disagree

1



Disagree

2



Neutral

3



Agree

4



Strongly  
Agree

5



# Safe School

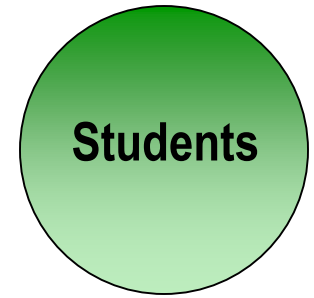
## The “Inside-Out” Approach



- Relationship-Focused
- Student-Centered
- Formative / Restorative
- Focused on Changing Social Norms



# Leveraging the Power & Potential of Students



- See, hear and know things adults don't
  - (In 88% of bullying incidents, peers are present)
- Can effectively intervene in ways adults can't
- First to arrive on the scene of mistreatment
- Set the tone and social norms on campus

## The Dynamic of Bullying & Other Mistreatment

**Targets**

**Aggressors**

**Bystanders = 85%**  
**The Passive Majority**





**Fights**  
**Weapons**  
**Gangs**  
**Physical bullying**

**Reactive**  
**Catch**  
**Discipline**  
**Suspend**  
**Expel**

***Unwanted contact***  
***Relational aggression***  
***Exclusion***  
***Put-downs***  
***Rumors***  
***Cyberbullying***  
***Harassment***

***Pro-active***  
***Prevent***  
***Intervene***  
***De-escalate***

# Empowering Students



Wake up **Courage**

Foster **Empathy**

Teach Skills to Gain **Competence**

...to intervene safely and effectively

# The Student Determinant of Whole School Climate



What do students need to succeed  
and to thrive?

# Empowering Youth: The Formula

## The 3 “P’s”

*(Purpose, Power and Place)*

+

## The 3 “E’s”

*(Engage, Equip, and Empower)*

=

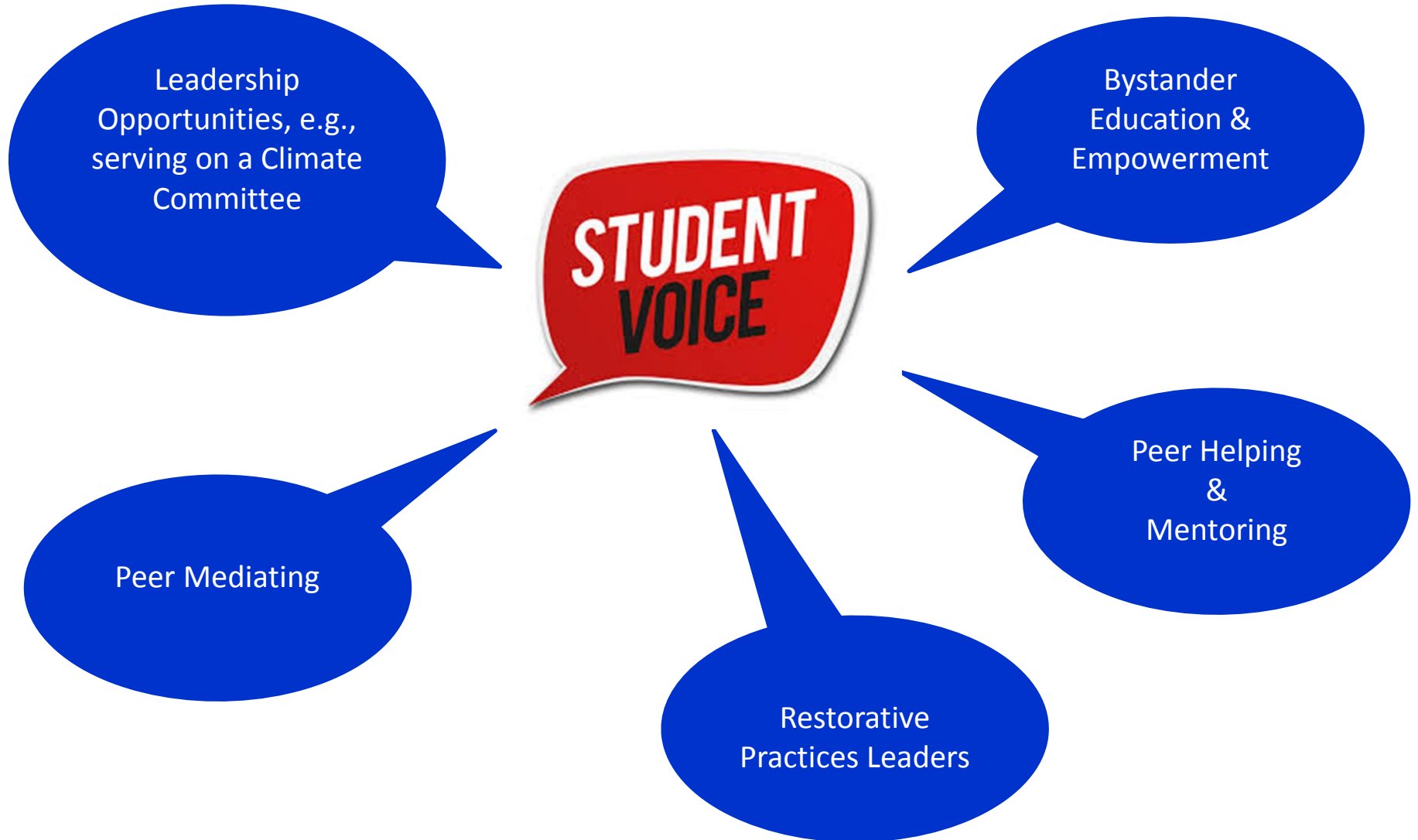
## The 3 “C’s”

*(Competent, Caring and Contributing)*



# Increasing Student Voice

(in both formal & informal settings)



# Criteria for Strong Youth Development Programs

1. Enroll diverse student leaders
2. Equip students with skills
3. Provide staff support and guidance
4. Collect data and measure impact
5. Celebrate successes

# Safe School Ambassadors®



A SAMHSA NREPP Listed, evidenced-based, field-tested program that engages, equips and empowers student bystanders to reduce bullying and other forms of mistreatment.

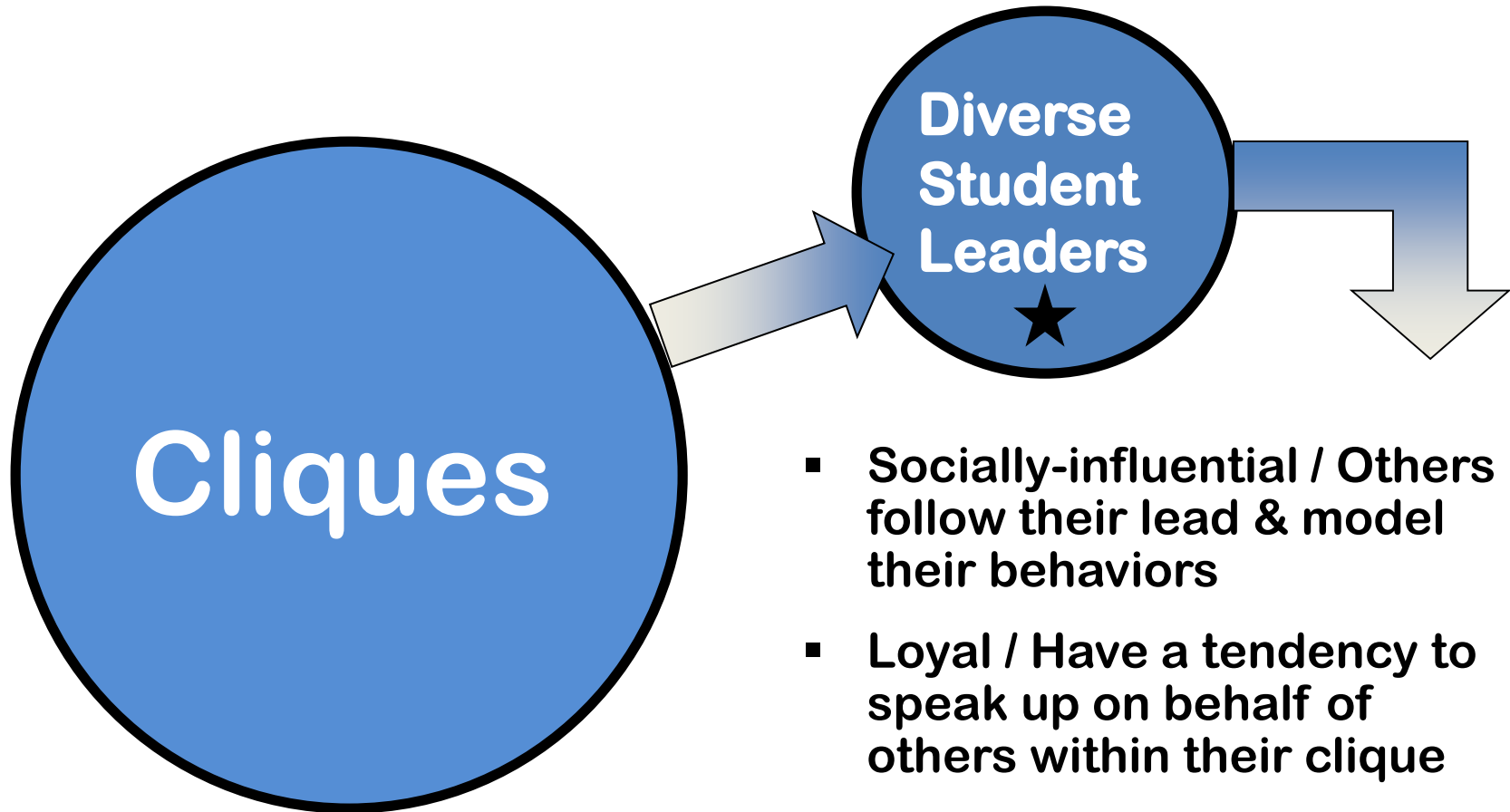
***Developed by***



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# “Alpha” Students



- **Socially-influential / Others follow their lead & model their behaviors**
- **Loyal / Have a tendency to speak up on behalf of others within their clique**
- **Outgoing by nature / Highly verbal**

# Identifying the “Alpha” Leaders

## Student and Adult Surveys



# Safe School Ambassadors® Training



- Two Days
- On- or Off-Site
- 25 to 40 Diverse Student Leaders
- 4 to 8 Adults

# SSA 2 Day Training Flow

## DAY 1

1. **Foundation & Community Building**
2. **Understanding the Problem of Mistreatment**
3. **Ambassador's Job**
4. **Actions: Overview & Practice**
  1. Balancing
  2. Supporting
  3. Reasoning
  4. Distracting
  5. Directing
5. **Meet with adults**

## DAY 2

6. **Welcome & Launch**
7. **Review**
8. **More Amb Actions**
  1. Listening
  2. Getting Help
9. **Actions: Overview & Practice**
10. **Implementation: Safe School Ambassador Program Operation**
11. **Closure**
12. **Meet with adults**



# Six Skills for Ambassadors

- **Balancing**



- **Supporting**



- **Reasoning**



- **Distracting**



- **Directing**

- **Getting Help**



# Safe School Ambassadors at Fairfield High School

# Ongoing Support & Supervision: Family Group Meetings

- **Connect & Inspire**
- **Regularly-Scheduled**
- **Deepen Skills**
- **Debrief Experience**
- **Collect Data**



# Safe School Ambassadors® Are Active

A minimum of  
2 “Actions” per week  
x 40 Ambassadors =  
**80 Actions per week**



34 Weeks x 80 Ambassador Actions =  
**More than 2,700 Actions per school year**



Click the “report” button to record an action log

**“It’s easier to grow and develop healthy and strong children than to fix broken adults.”**





Community Matters

**For More Information:**

**707-823-6159**

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## Security is Not Safety: America's Urgent Need to Transform School Culture to Stop Violence

**By Rick Phillips MS. Ed**

Founder of the nationally recognized non-profit [Community Matters](#) and lead author of the book “*Safe School Ambassadors: Harnessing Student Power to Stop Bullying and Violence*”

School shootings — Parkland, Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Columbine, etc., etc.— are horrific events that are forever imprinted into our collective psyche. However, as tragic as they are, school shootings represent a small percentage of the physical and emotional violence that plagues our schools. More often it is the in-school incidents of bullying, harassment, cyber-bullying, and other types of mistreatment, that foster the conditions where some targeted students seek revenge through physical attacks and gun violence.

### **The need for a balanced approach:**

Any rational approach for making our schools safe learning environments must begin by first unpacking and understanding this premise; *security and safety are not the same thing.* Security and safety are two different and necessary responses to effectively preventing and stopping school violence.

**Security** addresses the external, physical and logistical actions taken to “secure the perimeter” of our schools, recently referred to as “hardening the target”. Security is one element of the “Outside-In Approach”, which emphasizes:

- Security equipment and personnel
- Staff “on guard”, looking for trouble and threats
- Zero tolerance policies and practices
- Highly controlled environment

Security measures are extremely expensive and by themselves have not resulted in significantly safer schools. While schools can keep most weapons from entering the campus, they can’t keep the students out, and every day they bring undetectable weapons to school. These include, prejudice, grudges from their neighborhoods, values that regard violence as a valid problem-solving option, and cyber aggression.

**Safety** on the other hand, focuses internally, on the importance of building a positive social and emotional culture and climate inside the school. We characterize this response as the “Inside-Out Approach”, which emphasizes:

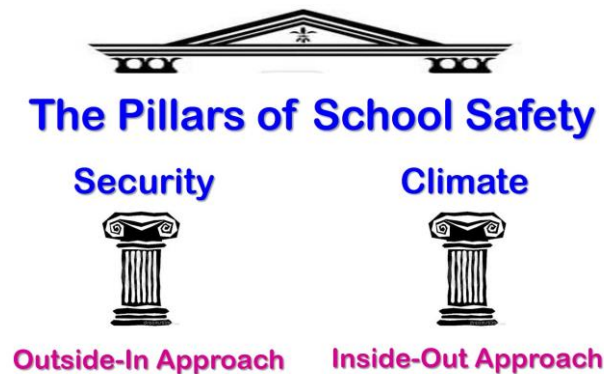
- Relationships and connection as job #1
- Students viewed as allies by adults in keeping school safe
- Connective and corrective discipline policies and practices
- The school as a community

Safety is more than “hardening the target” and locking trouble out. It’s an environmental strategy in which staff and students are committed to the values of acceptance of others, respect for differences, the willingness to resolve disagreements peacefully, and to speak up for one another when mean and hurtful things are being said or done. Safety is about engaging, equipping and empowering everyone in the school community to look out for one another, thereby influencing and changing social norms, making it “cooler to be kind”, rather than “cooler to be cruel”.

Too often security and safety are viewed as being in direct competition with one another, rather than being seen as integral components of a comprehensive, effective and sustainable school safety plan. As a result, many educators feel the pressure to choose one approach at the expense of the other, compromising the ability to work together in developing the most effective solutions to school violence.

After nearly 20 years of providing consultation, assessments and trainings to more than 2,000 schools and youth-serving organizations, we, at Community Matters, have learned this:

***Preventing school violence – attacks from without and attacks from within, requires a comprehensive and balanced plan, one that is built on the pillars of both the Outside-In and Inside-Out approaches.***



**Students can make the difference:**

Recent history has demonstrated that *adults can't make schools safe by themselves*. While adults are in the best position to make school more secure, students are in the best position to make the school safer. Consider the following:

- Students see, hear and know things that adults don't
- Students can intervene in ways that adults can't
- Students are generally on the scene of an incident well before adults know about it
- Students can influence the behavior of their peers by their actions

Unfortunately, in spite of these attributes, many educators don't recognize their students' potential and their capacity for being an active partner with adults in making schools safer, doing things to them, for them, and at them, rather than with them.

At the same time, many of these very same schools implore students to report what they see, hear, or know through the use of electronic reporting tools, and then wonder why they are not getting the level of student participation or involvement they anticipated.

Why is it that many students are reluctant to report? In a youth culture that has adopted the phrase, “snitches get stiches”, students first need to feel respected, engaged, empowered, and connected to caring adults, before they’ll be motivated and feel safe enough to bring vital information forward.

When schools engage, equip and empower students to speak up persuasively and effectively with aggressors, neutralize destructive gossip and rumors, support targeted students, reach out to excluded or isolated students, and mediate everyday conflicts, the evidence is clear. Young people will step up, speak up, take action, and report risks and potential incidents to trusted adults.

In more than 1500 schools across North America, that have implemented Community Matters’ evidence-based [Safe School Ambassadors Program](#), the results are compelling:

- Students are eager and ready to partner with adults to create safer schools
- Students who are trained to recognize mistreatment and given skills for intervening appropriately are in the best position to prevent, reduce, de-escalate, and stop emotional and physical violence
- Students, who are empowered and feel connected to caring adults, attend school regularly, do better academically and reduce their involvement in high-risk behavior.

By recognizing the ability of students to act as peace-makers, we help young people strengthen their innate character and acquire the social, emotional, and communication skills, most often associated with leading successful, healthy and happy professional and personal lives.

### **The blueprint for achieving safer schools:**

If we are going to be successful in reducing attacks on our schools from without and creating healthy connections within, educators will need to demonstrate the vision, the courage and the leadership to craft and implement school safety plans that include two critical strategies, to ***prepare and prevent***.

### **Preparedness planning:**

Being prepared for the “worst case scenario”, includes:

- Developing a well-constructed school based crisis management plan
- Creating a crisis management team of diverse stakeholders from the school and the community
- Conducting threat assessments and reviewing current policies and practices to identify what’s working well, what’s not working well, and what gaps exist
- Using “fair process”, building buy-in through inclusion, and by engaging, explaining and setting expectations
- Providing comprehensive training to all staff and students

**Prevention planning:**

Creating a school culture and climate where all students can feel welcome, safe and connected to caring adults, includes:

- Providing professional development training for all staff in understanding the value and benefits of building positive relationships with students and help school personnel to develop the communication skills to be effective and authentic “hall-friendly adults”
- Utilizing the Multi-Tiered System of Support to ensure that all students receive the appropriate help and assistance they need, including mental health support and other social services
- Engaging, equipping and empowering students with the support and opportunities to take an active role in creating a culture of compassion
- Developing discipline policies and practices that go beyond traditional punishment and include corrective measures and restorative practices

**A call to action:**

As an educator, a parent and a grandfather, I firmly believe that our schools can become safe havens for students and staff. I have spent my entire professional life committed to championing youth involvement and to creating safe schools for everyone. I challenge each and every one of us, regardless of any differences of outlook or politics, to be passionate advocates for a balanced and comprehensive school safety approach. An approach that protects our schools from assault without turning them into fortresses, and that recognizes the importance of investing in school climate initiatives, which over time, can create communities of inclusion and safety for all.

For information on Community Matters Programs and Services, [click here](#).

**WHO WE ARE:** Community Matters is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit founded in 1996 and headquartered in Sonoma County, California. The organization is recognized as a national leader in school safety efforts, school climate improvement and bullying and violence prevention. During the past two decades, the organization has worked with more than 1,700 schools, agencies and organizations across 38 states, Puerto Rico, Guam, Canada and Japan. Our work has been featured in numerous media outlets, and we have presented to audiences at the local, state, regional and national levels.

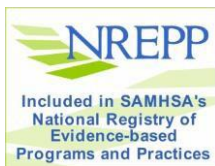
Our central beliefs and expertise are expressed through our Whole School Climate Framework. The Framework provides educational leaders with an easy to understand, cost-effective and comprehensive blueprint for accomplishing the outcomes that schools are mandated to achieve. The Framework supports leaders in prioritizing, organizing, coordinating, and reporting on their efforts in an integrated and systematic way.

### SERVICES PROVIDED:

- Programs and services that address school safety, school climate, bullying, cyberbullying and other forms of mistreatment
- Consulting, climate assessments and strategic planning for districts and schools
- Presentations and trainings



**RESULTS:** Community Matters programs are effective. Schools that have implemented our programs report having a safer school with fewer suspensions, increased attendance and improved academic achievement including fewer alternative education placements. Schools also see reductions in the costs and losses in both time and money related to suspensions.



Our flagship program Safe School Ambassadors® was included in SAMHSA'S National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (2012-2017). The Safe School Ambassadors program engages the socially influential leaders of a school's diverse cliques, and equips them with effective non-violent communication and intervention skills they can use with their peers to prevent, stop and report bullying, cyberbullying and harassment.

**ABOUT OUR LEADERSHIP:** Our Executive Director, **Diana Curtin** led the innovative Chops Teen Club for eight years prior to taking the helm at Community Matters. Diana has expertise in nonprofit management, youth development and a history of passionately advocating for youth. She is known for her involvement in the community, has been recognized with several leadership awards and has served on multiple nonprofit boards. **Rick Phillips**, founder, former Executive Director and now consultant to Community Matters is the lead author of *Safe School Ambassadors: Harnessing Student Power to Stop Bullying and Violence*. Rick is an expert on violence prevention, school climate transformation and empowering youth. Rick has been a keynote speaker at many prestigious conferences, has been recognized as a James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award Winner and was a Guest Speaker at The Clinton School of Public Service. Community Matters **Board Members** are well respected community leaders associated with education, community building, financial institutions, non-profits and the healthcare industry. All of Community Matters leadership are driven by a common purpose – youth empowerment and school safety.

**OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE:** Imagine...schools and communities where young people are valued as contributors and not just consumers, where they acquire the skills to be leaders, change agents and peacemakers. Envision a future where our children and young people are recognized as the catalysts for positive change; equipped and empowered to problem solve, speak up on behalf of others and prosper in a diverse, multi-cultural world. We are dedicated to equipping and empowering students and adults to create schools and communities that are welcoming, safe and inclusive.



# Safe School Ambassadors® Program

## The Safe School Ambassadors (SSA) Program is:

- A proven anti-bullying and violence-prevention program
- A research-based, field-tested logic model
- Focused on social norms change
- Student-centered: designed for students in 4th - 12th grade
- Cost-effective

The program identifies and selects student leaders from diverse groups across the campus. Ambassadors are trained in the skills of non-violent communication to stop bullying, cyberbullying and harassment.

## How the Safe School Ambassadors Program empowers youth:

Few schools have fully engaged, equipped and empowered their students as peacemakers to improve school climate. As a result, students believe that they have only two options:

- To be a bystander and condone the hurtful acts they see, or
- To “tell” on their peers

**The Safe School Ambassadors Program provides students a third option:** to be an “upstander” - giving them the motivation, support and intervention skills to prevent and stop bullying and harassment.



*“We learned how to defuse conflicts that arise in everyday life and how to create a community of peace and unity.”*

- Dani, 16, Safe School Ambassador, Northern CA

## Why the SSA Program is student-centered:

- Students are a powerful, often underutilized force for improving school climate
- Students see, hear and know things adults don’t
- Students can intervene in ways adults can’t
- Students are often the first to arrive on the scene of an incident before adults even know about it
- Students determine the social norms - what’s OK and what’s not - while adults set the rules, policies and consequences

## Impact of the SSA Program:

- Reduces bullying and cyberbullying
- Increases student reporting to adults
- Reduces suspensions and expulsions
- Improves school climate and student retention

**Since 2000, the Safe School Ambassadors Program has been implemented in over 1,700 schools, training over 95,000 students and over 13,000 adults in 38 US states, Puerto Rico, Guam, Canada and Paraguay.**

*“The Safe School Ambassadors program has provided us with a well-designed student-to-student initiative that has made a positive difference in over 30 of our district’s schools.”*

- Alison Adler, Ed.D., Chief, Safety & Learning Environment  
Palm Beach County, Florida