



# Ten Years After Columbine: A Report Card on School Violence-Prevention

## Executive Summary

April 20, 2009, marks 10 years since the tragedy at Columbine High School, when students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, killed 12 of their peers and a teacher and wounded over 20 others before committing suicide. Columbine was a pivotal moment in our nation's history. While it wasn't the country's first school shooting, the scope of the tragedy shattered the commonly-held assumption that our schools are safe havens for our children.

***As a nation, we have failed to make good on the promises made to our children in the wake of the Columbine tragedy.***

**Ten years later, how much safer are our schools?** The sobering answer is that, despite the time and money spent to make schools safer, not enough has changed.

In fact, bullying and other forms of mistreatment are occurring at younger ages, getting meaner, and becoming more acceptable in youth culture. These incidents are also more difficult for adults to identify because students are becoming "experts" in electronic aggression via text messaging, social network sites, cell phone pictures and videos to bully, harass, and humiliate their peers.

In the weeks following Columbine, national leaders expressed outrage and communities vowed to make schools safer for all children. "Zero Tolerance" laws regarding school violence were passed in over 28 states. At least 19 states passed anti-bullying laws. Over \$10 billion dollars has been spent nationwide on "airport-like" security, such as, cameras, metal detectors, fences and security personnel.

***Ten years and \$10 billion dollars later, schools are not significantly safer.***

Despite these measures, there is very little evidence that Zero Tolerance, anti-bullying legislation or increased spending on security has led to significantly safer schools. While there has been some success in improving school safety, on average, the results are disappointing and point to the need for a more comprehensive approach.

Violence-prevention efforts, to date, have had limited success for four primary reasons:

1. While high levels of federal funding were allocated to school violence-prevention immediately following Columbine, in recent years, funding has been cut dramatically.
2. There has been an overemphasis by schools on an "outside-in" approach that focuses heavily on security, crisis management, and punitive measures.
3. There has not been enough emphasis on a complementary, "inside-out" approach that focuses on strengthening relationships and actively empowering young people to improve the school climate and change the social norms so that bullying and violence are no longer condoned.
4. There has been a failure to integrate violence-prevention strategies and social-emotional skills development programs and curricula into the schools' larger goals, culture and climate.

There are those who will argue that schools *are* safer, citing the reduction of the crime victimization rate (nonfatal violent crimes and theft) of students, ages 12-18, which the National Crime Victimization Survey showed did decline between 1992 and 2005.

Yet, trends from a majority of national surveys and studies tell a much different story:

- There was **an increase in the percentage of students who did not go to school because of safety concerns between 1999 -2007** (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).
- The National School Safety Center's Report on School Associated Violent Deaths (2009) shows **no clear trend up or down from 1999 -2008**.
- The percentage of students threatened or injured with a weapon has fluctuated between 7% - 9% between 1993 and 2005, also with **no clear trend** toward improvement (National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007).
- The percentage of students who had been in a physical fight on school property between 2001 and 2006 **did not change significantly** (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).
- From 2000 to 2005, there was a **50% increase** in the percentage of youth who were victims of online harassment (Ferndon & Hertz, 2007).

Ten years and \$10 billion dollars later, there is very little evidence of positive change. We are especially concerned about the lack of results, given the latest reports on the current state of bullying and violence:

- 36% of students reported being in a physical fight one or more times during the previous 12 months (12.4% on school property) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).
- 28% of 12- to 18-year-old students reported having been bullied at school during the previous 6 months (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).
- Between 9% -34% of youth have been victims of electronic aggression [or, "cyberbullying"] (Ferdon & Hertz, 2007).



Bullying and violence in every form will likely worsen if funding continues to be cut for violence-prevention efforts, if schools fail to make social/emotional skills development a significant part of the curriculum, and if schools continue to pursue the "outside-in" approach as their primary strategy for violence-prevention and school climate improvement.

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**About Community Matters:** Since 2000, Community Matters, a nonprofit organization dedicated to youth empowerment, has worked closely with young people and adults in over 700 schools across the country to prevent, reduce and stop bullying and violence.

# Report Card Summary

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This School Violence-Prevention Report Card is based on a careful review of data from the past ten years, documenting school violence and school climate as well as Community Matters' experience working with hundreds of schools across the nation.

It is not an indictment of any individual school system, policy or leadership team, but rather, a call to action for all of us to work together to find more effective solutions. The anniversary of Columbine provides us with the opportunity to reassess strategies, learn from experience, and make significant and necessary course corrections.

Because we are all familiar with the usual public school grading system, we used a "Report Card" format with traditional letter grades from "A" to "F." These grades are based on a review of results and outcomes, rather than effort and intentions.

**Overall Violence-Prevention Grade = D+**  
*Ten years after Columbine*

## Federal Funding = D

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**D**

- Although funding was strong right after Columbine, since 2000, several of the main sources of federal funding available for violence-prevention have been significantly cut (e.g., Safe and Drug-Free Schools & Communities, Safe Schools/Healthy Students).
- The majority of federal funding has been disproportionately spent on costly campus security: cameras, metal detectors, security personnel, etc.
- Despite this allocation of resources, school safety has not significantly improved.

### **Recommendations**

- Reinstatement of overall federal funding for violence-prevention and school climate improvement.
- Create a more balanced distribution of federal funding between security measures and school climate improvement efforts (programs, curricula, activities) that have proven effective.
- Provide funding for staff development and student instruction in social-emotional skills development.
- Improve monitoring, tracking, and accountability in the use of federal funding for violence-prevention.

## Legislation and Policies = D

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### D

- Following the Columbine tragedy, several states passed anti-bullying and “Zero Tolerance” laws regarding school violence. However, many of these laws and policies were punitive in nature rather than preventative.
- In response to the legislation, many schools drafted anti-bullying or violence-prevention policies. Yet, too often, policies were created with little to no input from students, staff or parents. These policies were also often not clearly communicated to students, staff or parents, and, not applied consistently.
- In addition, the passage of legislation, like “No Child Left Behind,” and the pressures on schools associated with testing and accountability have led to a decline in emphasis on emotional and social skills development.

### **Recommendations**

- Review the effectiveness and application of “Zero Tolerance” laws and policies and make necessary changes.
- Develop violence-prevention policies with the input of students, staff and parents and ensure clear, consistent communication of those policies.
- Revise laws and policies that narrow the curriculum, such as No Child Left Behind, to reverse this trend, in order to create a better balance between social-emotional education and academics.
- Develop and implement educational policies so that coursework which fosters positive interpersonal behaviors is a required part of the core curriculum for graduation.

## On-Campus Security Measures = C-

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### C-

- Despite a marked increase in security measures since 1999, the number of students who have experienced physical injuries from assaults, fights, and weapons on campus has not significantly changed.
- Security measures, such as, surveillance cameras, metal detectors and dedicated campus police officers, are extremely expensive and divert limited resources away from the more cost-effective prevention programs.
- Some schools have successfully utilized security personnel to strengthen relationships with students and encourage reporting of potentially dangerous situations. However, in many instances, students are wary of security personnel and fear being viewed as “snitches” if they enlist officers’ help.
- Surveillance cameras, which have been a large component of on-campus security, have primarily served to record incidents and have not demonstrated effectiveness as deterrents.
- Increased security measures can lead to a negative school climate, both by increasing anxiety and by creating an institution-like atmosphere.

## ***Recommendations***

In order to create a better balance between external and internal methods of maintaining a safe and positive school climate, we must:

- Reallocate a significant portion of school site resources spent on costly security measures towards prevention programs and curricula.
- Create a better balance between external and internal methods of maintaining a positive school climate by combining security measures, such as increased campus law enforcement, with building positive, caring and trusting relationships between students and adults.
- Provide increased opportunities for training of law enforcement personnel working in schools for building positive relationships with students and for understanding the complexities and pervasiveness of youth mistreatment.

## **Prevention Programs and Curriculum = C**

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**C**

- Many innovative, violence-prevention programs and curricula have been developed (a majority in response to Columbine) and have demonstrated success in reducing school violence and improving school climate at individual school sites. However, the funding available is inadequate and applied unevenly across the country.
- At too many schools, these programs are short-lived, coming and going with each fiscal year or new administration. They are merely “add-ons,” and so fail to be valued as integral to student success and a positive school climate.
- Finally, the pressures of testing and accountability have led many schools to reduce or even eliminate time spent on social and emotional instruction and programs; often, scripted curricula focused on academic standards leave character development topics and content out.

## ***Recommendations***

- Increase funding for prevention programs, curricula and activities that focus on building relationships across diversity and equipping students with communication skills to navigate differences.
- Restore instructional and staff hours devoted to social and emotional skills curricula and program implementation.
- Choose violence-prevention programs that have proven effective over time and include skills development, ongoing supervision and support, and tools for assessment.

## Staff Involvement = C

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### C

- Most school staff care deeply about the physical and emotional safety of their students. However, research shows that many adults don't recognize the more covert student mistreatment around them or lack the necessary skills to intervene effectively when they do notice it.
- As schools face increasing pressure to raise academic test scores, they have:
  - 1) reduced staff development and training time related to school climate issues, such as bullying and mistreatment;
  - 2) significantly reduced the amount of in-class time for teachers to focus on social and emotional skill development; and,
  - 3) reduced opportunities for fostering positive relationships between staff and students.

### **Recommendations**

- Increase funding and opportunities for training and staff development for teachers, administrators, and other school staff for building positive relationships with students and for understanding the complexities and pervasiveness of youth mistreatment.
- Reallocate staff hours and resources to elevate the importance of providing instruction and supporting the social-emotional learning of students, recognizing that strong relationships and positive social skills will enhance academic performance.
- Ensure manageable teacher-to-student ratios to facilitate stronger student-teacher relationships, reduce student anonymity, and support student engagement.
- Restore staff to counseling and support positions and lower student caseloads to manageable levels.
- Raise the importance of what a U.S. Secret Service report refers to as "simple and genuine measures" to increase student connectedness, such as, "regularly greeting students, talking to students, and addressing students by name" (Pollack, Modzeleski & Rooney, 2008, p. 8).

## Youth Involvement = D

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### D

- At many schools, young people continue to be seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution to school violence.
- Many schools have failed to take advantage of the power and influence students have to reduce bullying and violence and to actively improve their school climate.
- When students are involved, often their role is limited to reporting potentially dangerous situations. In addition, many student-centered activities frequently involve the same students (often the high-achievers, or "joiners").
- Too few schools provide students with the skills training, support and opportunities to reduce conflicts among their peers.

## ***Recommendations***

- Adjust our thinking to view young people as allies and contributors, not just consumers and problems.
- Engage young people as partners in decision-making by authentically involving them in school-improvement activities and policy-making, in order to reconnect students and help them develop positive affiliations with their schools.
- Reach out to and involve marginalized, non-traditional students and youth who are not usually engaged in mainstream student activities in order for the school to benefit from the experiences of a diverse array of students.
- Equip and empower students with the skills, support and opportunities to reduce bullying and violence and improve school climate. Students are in the best position to address mistreatment. They see hear and know things about their peers that adults don't. They can intervene in ways adults can't, because they can get and hold their peers' attention.

## **School-Community Partnerships = D+**

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**D+**

- At some schools, parents and community members play a key role in violence-prevention, advocating for and often funding programs and curricula when federal or state funding is unavailable. However, too many schools do not encourage parents' and community members' involvement.
- Even more schools fail to engage the broader community (e.g., community organizations, public agencies, law enforcement, faith groups, government) to work in a coordinated way to address youth violence.

## ***Recommendations***

- Convene a variety of key community stakeholders (e.g., leaders from law enforcement, faith groups, businesses, government, senior citizens, and community-based organizations) along with students, teachers, administrators and parents, to develop plans to reduce violence and mistreatment.
- Encourage parent and guardian involvement, particularly at the secondary level, where parents are often less engaged.
- Reach out to all families by providing a variety of opportunities for involvement, utilizing methods and strategies for engaging people from diverse cultures and backgrounds.
- Parents and guardians need to educate themselves on issues of school violence and learn how to advocate for safer schools.