# SECURITY IS NOT SAFETY:
## AMERICA'S URGENT NEED TO TRANSFORM SCHOOL CULTURE TO STOP VIOLENCE

**COMMUNITY MATTERS**

Empowering Youth | Transforming Communities

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School shootings — Parkland, Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Columbine, and on and on 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". We characterize this response as 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 first priority
- 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".

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Too often security and safety are viewed as being in direct competition with one another, rather than being viewed 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.*

## THE PILLARS OF SCHOOL SAFETY

**SECURITY**        **CLIMATE**

**Outside-In Approach**      **Inside-Out Approach**
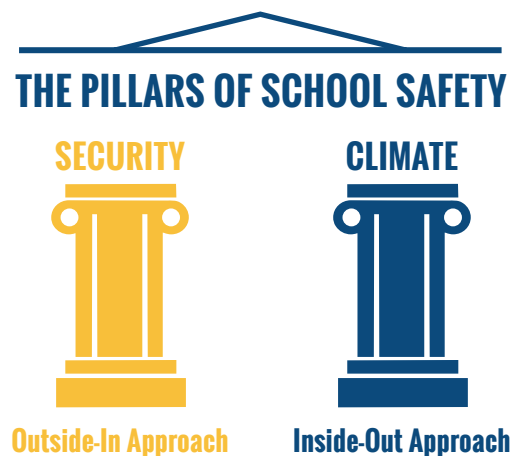
### STUDENTS CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE:

Recent history has demonstrated that *adults can't make schools safe by themselves.* While adults are in the best position to make school more <u>secure</u>, students are in the best position to make the school <u>safer</u>. 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, despite these attributes, many educators don't recognize their students' potential and their capacity for being an active partner with adults in making schools safer. Traditionally educators are accustomed to doing things *to* students, *for* students, and *at* students, rather than *with* students.

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 with the tools 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.

## A BEST PRACTICE EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTION

In more than 2,000 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 and fostering 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 helping school personnel to develop the communication skills to be effective and authentic "hall-friendly adults"
- Utilizing a 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, parent and 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, one 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.