

# Hope In The Spotlight

By Jess D. Taylor — Originally published in Made Local Magazine, Sept/Oct 2023

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## Meet Erica Vogel – Chief Executive Officer of Community Matters

### What is your organization's mission?

Our mission is to equip and empower students and adults to create schools and communities that are safe, welcoming, and inclusive.

### What project(s) are you most urgently working on right now?

The Safe School Ambassadors and the Restorative Practice training for educators.

Our flagship program is the Safe School Ambassadors® (SSA) program, an evidence-based program that harnesses the power of students to prevent and stop bullying and mistreatment. The SSA program relies on an “inside-out” approach to improving school climate. Student bystanders see, hear, and know things adults don’t; they can intervene in ways adults can’t, and they are often on the scene of an incident before an adult.

Students participate in a two-day interactive training along with several adults who serve as program mentors, which gives the student ambassadors the skills and tools to resolve conflicts, defuse incidents, and support isolated and excluded peers. After the training, small group meetings of ambassadors are held every few weeks. Led by the adult mentors, these meetings provide time for strengthening skills, building peer-to-peer connections, and creating positive adult-to-student connections.

We are also meeting the needs of schools looking to improve their school climates through restorative practice approaches, a whole-school approach that focuses on encouraging healthy relationships, restoring harm, and reducing discipline issues. We train educators from all levels (classified through admin) in restorative practices to help school staff build stronger connections to students and each other and to create social norms based on empathy, understanding, and trust.

### What measurable outcomes are you most proud of?

In Sonoma County, we trained over 600 students and 200 adults this past year alone! Nationally (and beyond our borders) we trained over 5,000 youth and 1,500 adults in the

2022–23 school year.

Since students are the majority on any given campus, it is important that we engage them in meaningful ways because they can make an impact in ways the adults can't. Most students (really, most people) are looking for a sense of purpose, power, and place. If we give students a place to feel like they belong, we are doing much more than preventing bullying or creating safer school climates: we are empowering a generation of leaders that will carry these skills with them into adulthood, into the workplace. It's powerful!

### **What are the biggest roadblocks/challenges to accomplishing your mission?**

It's probably not surprising that time and money are the biggest obstacles.

Educators are overwhelmed. Students are struggling, and the expectations on educators have grown over the years. It can be a challenge to overcome the misconception that there is no time to add something new. When students are empowered and the program is being implemented as designed, the discipline issues are reduced. Students are helping to create a more positive school climate by stopping some of the smaller problems before they blow up into bigger, catastrophic issues.

Also, school budgets can be a challenge. Community Matters works hard to make sure that funding is not a barrier for local schools. If a school is ready and willing to do our programs, we do our best to find a funding source or meet them part way. We never want money to be the reason a school does not get to have our programs!

### **What do you wish local residents knew more about?**

Community Matters primarily works through the schools and other nonprofit partners. The SSA program is at many schools around Sonoma County and the Bay Area. In fact, we have worked with over 2,000 schools in 43 states, Guam, Puerto Rico, Japan, Canada and Paraguay.

### **How can people support your work or get involved?**

**- Sign up for our newsletter.** We would love to have more people sign up for our Friends of Community Matters newsletter. This helps keep them informed about local events and our impact.

**-Join us at events.** We have two primary fundraising events each year, including our fall comedy event scheduled for October 7th called Laughter Matters. [October 25, 2025 is our Family Friendly Bowling Event "Pins for Positivity"]. Other companies sometimes host their own events to raise funds for Community Matters, like the annual corn hole tournament called Bags Against Bullying sponsored by the Corday All Day Foundation.

- **Volunteer.** Community Matters works with volunteers (graphic artists, musicians, comedians, lawyers, social media and marketing professionals, etc.) who support us with their specific expertise, and those who serve on our board and event committees. We are also developing a volunteer program to help support the local schools' SSA programs.
- **Invite us to speak.** We love to introduce our work to new people and get them involved.
- **Donate.** <https://community-matters.org/donate>

**For more, contact Erica Vogel at [erica@community-matters.org](mailto:erica@community-matters.org) or visit <https://community-matters.org>**