

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### ***Who is Community Matters?***

Community Matters' is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 1996 by Rick Phillips, M.Ed.. Headquartered in Sebastopol, California, Community Matters' mission is to collaborate with schools and communities to engage, equip and empower young people to become change agents and peacemakers. Working with youth and adults, Community Matters provides knowledge, tools, and opportunities that equip young people to be capable, connected contributors in their schools and communities. To this end, Community Matters has eight (8) nationwide programs that 1) harness the power of young people to prevent and stop the bullying and violence they see around them; 2) train adults to more effectively connect with youth in schools and youth serving organizations; and, 3) provide keynote addresses and workshops at state, national and regional conferences. To date, Community Matters has partnered with over **1,000** schools nationwide.

### **SAFE SCHOOL AMBASSADORS (SSA) PROGRAM**

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#### ***What was the inspiration behind the Safe School Ambassadors program?***

The Safe School Ambassadors (SSA) program was created in response to the horrific events at Columbine High School in 1999. Following the tragedy, Rick Phillips and SSA program co-creator, Chris Pack, observed a response that was focused largely on "airport-like" security: installing metal detectors, building higher fences, installing surveillance cameras and hiring security guards. What was lacking was a pro-active, youth-centered approach to improve relationships among students.

#### ***What is the program impact nationwide?***

The Safe School Ambassadors program was developed to equip and empower young people to help prevent and stop mistreatment and cruelty among their peers. The first SSA program school training occurred in Palm Beach County, Florida in 2001. Since 2000, approximately **60,000** students and **5,000** adults have been trained at **900** public and private schools in **28** states and **2** Canada provinces.

#### ***What issues does the SSA program address, and what is the scope of the problem?***

Every day in the U.S., 160,000 students stay home from school because they are afraid of how they might be treated by their peers. This does not include the thousands – or millions – more who come to school with knots in their guts, unable to concentrate, learn, or perform at their best for fear they'll be insulted, harassed, assaulted or worse. Even with the increased focus on school safety and climate, and recent changes in many schools' policies. Following statistics confirm these reports: 25,000 students are targets of attacks, shakedowns, robberies in secondary schools every day (National School Safety Center); 46% of high school students report having seen a serious fight at least once month at school (USA Today). Research shows that one-third of the brain shuts down for as much as 72 hours after seeing that type of violence; approximately 75% of students reported that they had been bullied at school (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention). This pervasive fear for their own and others' well-being undermines all attempts to improve student performance because academic achievement requires a school climate of physical and emotional safety.

#### ***Is the SSA program model research-based?***

Yes. The SSA program is a research-based, field-tested model that empowers and equips youth leaders to prevent, de-escalate, or stop mistreatment and cruelty on their school campus. It is not a program that shows how to or tries to fix bullies or aggressors. Rather, the SSA program harnesses the power of bystanders, whose silence or acquiescence in the face of mistreatment "permits" it to happen. But the SSA program does not involve just any bystanders, nor does it try to directly reach all of the hundreds or thousands of bystanders at any given school. The SSA program carefully and

precisely identifies, orients, and selects the socially-influential, “opinion leaders” of the school’s diverse groups and cliques, because research has shown these students are in the best position to transform the social norms of their groups, from “it’s cool to be cruel” to “it’s cool to be kind.”

***How does the program work and how is it structured?***

Thirty to forty students, who have been carefully identified and recruited from different social groups, and four to eight teachers and other adult leaders come together for two days of training in a powerful, community-building experience. The trainings teach words and skills of nonviolence, providing students with things to say and actions they can take when they witness mistreatment. After providing the training for students to be positive agents of social change, the SSA program model includes ongoing support for Ambassadors by having regularly-scheduled, small group meetings during which they can share experiences and continue to hone their skills with fellow Ambassadors and adult leaders.

***Why involve students as the focal point of the program?***

Research shows adults do not see up to 95% of incidents of mistreatment that occur on campus. It’s not that they don’t care; they just aren’t in a position to catch all that happens. Students see, hear, and know things adults don’t. They are everywhere mistreatment happens; adults aren’t. And, students can intervene in ways adults can’t. Therefore, adults need to enroll students as allies and share power and decision-making with Ambassadors.

***Are students receptive to the program?***

Yes. Often, Ambassadors are selected from marginalized groups and typically are not involved in the extracurricular world. Being selected to be an Ambassador may be the first time these students see themselves as leaders. They are curious, sometimes feel honored, and are willing to experiment and explore the work on behalf of themselves and their friends. Most Ambassadors draw on this “enlightened self-interest,” becoming motivated by that to learn ways they can keep friends and family members safe. Many find that the program teaches them skills they find helpful in all aspects of life.

***Do Ambassadors fear being seen as “narcs” or snitches?***

No. Ambassadors learn several intervention skills that they can use on their own; only one involves getting adult help, in the instances when they are not able or do not feel comfortable intervening. When students are empowered and are made part of the solution, they realize that bringing this kind of information to adults is part of helping to keep the campus and their friends safe. Rather than believing that sharing this information is intended to get someone in trouble, it becomes a case of self protection vs. tattling. Once invested, Ambassadors become the eyes and ears of the campus, and are more inclined to share what they know with adults, when necessary, and stand up on behalf of their friends. In fact, it has been noted often that the diverse groups of students become more communicative between each other’s groups, Ambassador to Ambassador, as well, working together to improve campus safety.

***What is the cost to schools, and the return on their investment?***

The two-day training costs approximately \$4,300, plus trainer travel expenses, or about \$100-\$125 per Ambassador. The benefit to the school is twofold. First, Ambassadors themselves develop increased self-esteem, along with improvements in academic performance and attendance. Secondly, the school benefits from an overall improvement in school climate. Schools witness a reduction in incidents of mistreatment, a decrease in tensions between groups on campus, increased tolerance across campus, and an increased flow of information to adults about potentially hurtful and violent acts. Time-on-task in classrooms increases, and teachers spend more time teaching and less time disciplining or managing students’ relationship problems.

***How do you know the Safe School Ambassadors program works?***

Through pre- and post-training evaluations, including administrator, Ambassador, and general school climate surveys, we are able to gauge the success of the SSA program. Interviews with students and administrators, along with Ambassador action logs, also provide evidence of the positive impact the

program has on campuses across the country. Finally, a study of specific discipline data (office referrals and suspensions reported due to bullying and other types of peer mistreatment) is effective in demonstrating the influence of Ambassador actions over time.

***What differentiates the SSA program from other violence-prevention programs?***

The most significant and unique innovations of the program are the criteria for Ambassadors selection and the ongoing small group meetings. Through a detailed and precise identification process involving administrator, faculty, staff and student participation, a group of student leaders with the "social capital" required to be effective Ambassadors are selected. These leaders are more likely to use their skills, and when they do, they are more likely to be heeded and imitated by their peers. The ongoing small group meetings allow Ambassadors to join with other Ambassadors who share common experiences, sharpen their skills through practice and coaching from peers and trained adult mentors, and receive meaningful recognition and appreciation for their courage and commitment. The SSA program is not a curriculum taught in the classroom, and it is not a school-wide training. It is a targeted intervention program with campus-wide effects. The SSA program trains these chosen students, along with a few adult supporters, thereby empowering the school's leaders to respond to mistreatment in the moment. The new behaviors Ambassadors model and encourage then spreads throughout the campus by a ripple effect.

***How do I get more information or become involved with Community Matters and Safe School Ambassadors?***

Further material on both Community Matters and the Safe School Ambassadors program can be found online at [www.community-matters.org](http://www.community-matters.org) and [www.safeschoolambassadors.org](http://www.safeschoolambassadors.org). You may also contact our offices directly by email at [outreach@community-matters.org](mailto:outreach@community-matters.org), or by telephone at (707) 823-6159, 8am-5pm PST.