

**Determining the Frequency and Impact
of Bystander Interventions
in the Safe School Ambassadors® Program**

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“Being an Ambassador has given me the ability to stop bad things from happening to people. It shows me that I can make a difference in a lot of people’s lives.

- Ambassador, Atlantic High School, Del Ray Beach, Florida

“In the beginning, I used to like to make fun of people, but when I saw how it can affect others I stopped and thought about their feelings. Now since we have the SSA group, we can make a difference in people’s perspectives of others. Every school should have this program, because one person can make a big difference.”

- Ambassador, Stanford Middle School, Long Beach, California

“I’ve noticed a huge decrease in fights and suspensions; overall we have a much more friendly environment on campus this year, thanks to our Ambassadors.”

- Josh Nowak, Counselor, Valencia High School, Valencia, California

The Safe School Ambassadors program embodies an innovative strategy for addressing the problem of peer mistreatment:

- identify and recruit the socially influential opinion leaders of a school’s diverse cliques;
- help them awaken to the problem of mistreatment, understand its costs, and unleash their motivation to do something about it;
- impart powerful nonviolent communication and intervention skills they can use with their peers, and provide them with supervision and support so they’ll continue to sharpen those skills and stay committed.

The rationale or “logic model” at the core of this strategy goes on to say that:

- those students who have high social capital will actually use their skills to intervene with their peers when they witness or learn about mistreatment; and
- as a result, the school’s social emotional climate will improve (i.e. discipline incidents will decrease, attendance and academic achievement will rise).

This report explores the degree to which these last two outcomes really happen. Do these Ambassadors actually use the skills they’ve learned? If enough of them do, will their interventions make a difference? In other words, does this approach really work?

Intervention Frequency and Effectiveness

If miniature video cameras could sit on the shoulders of these students, then the adults overseeing their work could review those tapes to count and assess the students' interventions. Until that becomes more practical, other methods need to be used to determine what these students actually do with the skills they've learned. These methods include Action Logs completed by the Ambassadors, regular Family Group meetings, and surveys.

Action Logs

As discussed in Element 6 of Chapter 7, these students complete a simple Action Log to record each intervention. The Log captures information like:

- What they notice – like space probes sent to distant planets to send back observations about climate, Ambassadors travel in a realm most adults at a school are only vaguely aware of. By recording on their Logs the different types of mistreatment they notice, Ambassadors help adults see the prevalence of exclusion, put-downs, and bullying, and help them better understand what's really going on in the social-emotional layer of the school.
- Where it happens – this usually confirms that most mistreatment happens in places the adults aren't, and helps identify bullying "hotspots." Ambassadors at the Lawrence Middle School in Falmouth, Massachusetts, used this information to determine the best places to post student-designed posters that named the offensive behaviors and reminded students that it was not OK to treat people that way.
- What skills they are using – if a carpenter only used a hammer, it would be hard to build a house. In a similar way, this information helps determine if Ambassadors are using the full range of intervention skills, and if further training might be beneficial.
- How effective they were – by rating each intervention on a 1-5 scale, Ambassadors can sharpen their skills (Is this a good response to the mistreatment I noticed? Is this a skill I need to improve in?) and Advisors can look at the overall effectiveness of each type of Action as a way of corroborating the need for further training.

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Here are several examples of what Action Logs reveal about whether Ambassadors actually use the skills they have learned.

- Riverside Middle School, New Castle, Colorado – more rural, grades 5-8; pop approximately 400 students. Ambassadors documented 258 interventions in the 110 school days between November 14, 2003 and May 18, 2004; 850 students were directly involved as targets or aggressors (some obviously involved several times); additionally 626 students witnessed the interventions. Average effectiveness rating 3.86 out of 5.
- Winter Springs High School, Winter Springs, Florida – suburban, grades 9-12, pop approximately 2700 students. Ambassadors documented 52 interventions in the 24 school days between April 12 and May 13, 2004; more than 168 students were directly involved as targets or aggressors; additionally more than 289 students witnessed the interventions. Average effectiveness 4.09 out of 5
- Santa Rosa Middle School, Santa Rosa, California – urban, ethnically diverse, grades 7-8; pop approximately 800 students. Ambassadors documented 178 interventions in the 62 school days between September 17 and December 17, 2004; 434 students were directly involved as targets or aggressors; an additional 683 students witnessed the interventions. Average effectiveness rating 3.75 out of 5.

For several reasons, these students do not in practice record every intervention they do. Many have a distinct distaste for paperwork, and so they don't want to bother pulling out the Log form. Many of the interventions are very subtle, spontaneous, and quick; they become a natural part of the way these students conduct themselves, and so they become less noticeable to the students themselves. Field experience shows that the Action Logs reflect only 10-20 percent of the interventions these students actually do.

Family Group Meetings

As mentioned in Element 5 of Chapter 7, these students need ongoing supervision and support if they are to continue using the skills they have learned in the training, and really master and integrate them into their personalities. The Family Group meeting is a more intimate setting in which a small group of these students meets with one or two specially trained adults. These meetings provide another way to determine what students are actually doing with the skills they have acquired.

Many times students come to a Family Group meeting thinking they've only done a handful of interventions, but upon further reflection and discussion guided by the Family Group Facilitator they discover many more instances of using the skills they've learned. The meetings often include a "success round" in which the students take turns describing situations in which they have intervened. One student's report will often trigger another student's memory of another intervention he or she had done.

The meeting record forms completed by the Family Group Facilitators consistently show that students are in fact using the skills they have learned.

Year End Surveys

At the end of the school year, the adults and students involved in the program complete surveys that provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and impact of the program. The first surveys were given in May of 2002, and have been distributed on a national basis every year since.

First year: June 2002

In May of 2002, a seven-question survey was distributed to 12 schools that had active Safe School Ambassador programs. Five schools (2 middle and 3 high) in California and Massachusetts were able to participate, returning 105 surveys representing 96 percent Ambassadors. Ambassadors were asked to estimate the number of times they intervened in a typical day, and in a typical week. This provided the raw numbers for a calculation of intervention frequency: 6.6 times per week, on average.

Student respondents also reported examples of interventions they had done. These included:

- At the start of P.E. class, two boys were arguing and started pushing each other. I'm the TA in the class so I walked up and asked one boy "Hey, Marcus, when's the pep rally?" They stopped pushing long enough to answer me, and started in again. So then I asked something else, like "What's it going to be about?" The boys stopped again and one of them answered me, so I asked another question. Finally, one of them said, "Just forget it dude" and walked away. I kept talking with the other boy.

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- Two guys walked into my American Lit class having this loud argument. The teacher took them outside and I guess she helped them work it out. But when they came back in, one guy tried to get the last word in and said something that got the other guy really mad, and a couple of people laughed a little. But before he could say anything and start up again, I said to both of them kinda loud “So... looks like it’s time to read Huck Finn,” which was the book we were reading. They both looked at me funny but took the hint and sat down.
- At lunch and after school, we play soccer a lot. One team is mostly Mexican and the other is mostly white. There are lots of arguments and sometimes they get into fights. When that happens, I just say things like “Hey, we all just want to play soccer. If we fight, they won’t let us play. Let’s work this out” or “Just let it go, it’s not worth fighting over.” Then they mostly cool down and we play again.

In an open-ended question, students were asked to describe what if any effect the program had had on them. This structure permitted both “positive” and “negative” effects to be reported. More than 92 percent of Ambassadors reported that the program had benefited them personally. The most common effects reported were: increased tolerance and respect for differences, increased ability to resolve conflicts, more friends, better communication skills and improved relationships with peers, parents, teachers and other adults.

Second Year: June 2003

This year 25 schools (17 middle and 8 high) in California, Colorado, Florida, and New York returned surveys representing 384 Ambassadors. The responses confirmed the information and trends that emerged from the first year’s surveys. Ambassadors estimated performing more than 50,000 interventions, at an average of 7.2 per week. Exclusion and verbal abuse comprised more than two thirds of the mistreatment Ambassadors reported. Looking at Ambassadors’ responses, in only 19 percent of situations did they feel that they needed adult help; the balance they were able to work out on their own.

Third Year: June 2004

This year, the survey was redesigned in collaboration with Omni Research and Training of Denver, so intervention frequency numbers are not directly comparable with previous years. Thirty-five of 144

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schools (24 percent) returned surveys, representing 656 Ambassadors, 122 Family Group Facilitators, and 72 Program Advisors. Intervention frequency data shows that:

2.7 percent of Ambassadors did not intervene at all in the month prior to the survey;

77.1 percent intervened 1-15 times

14.0 percent intervened 16-30 times

6.2 percent intervened more than 31 times

Ambassador Interventions - Snapshots 2003-2004

The Ambassador	The Situation	Ambassador Response	Effect / Impact
2029; age - 14, Fem grade - 8 th Sch - Santa Rosa MS Santa Rosa, CA	I was at a dance and I noticed a person sitting by themselves	I basically asked them to come and join me and my friends and dance.	They began to have a lot of fun and it made me feel good that I could help.
2239; age - 12, Male grade - 6 th sch - Basalt MS Basalt, CO	Someone was leaving a person out of a game.	I started playing the game so it was uneven teams and they said I have to get another person to play so it would be even teams so I picked the kid who was left out.	He was having fun in the game.
2190; age - 12, Fem grade - 7 th sch - Oliver MS Brockport, NY	A girl was called "Fatso" because she is slightly overweight.	I did Active Listening to listen to the girl's feelings and I reasoned with the bully.	The aggressor said sorry to the target and the girl felt better.
1079; age - 15, Fem grade - 10 th sch - Pine Bush HS Pine Bush, NY	People in my class were spreading rumors about another girl.	I asked them if they realized how mean they were being and then asked them to stop.	They stopped talking bad about the girl.
2221; age - 16, Fem grade - 10 th sch - Los Molinos HS Los Molinos, CA	There is a boy at our school that is different than others. He doesn't have many friends and is often alone and kids often make fun of him.	I acknowledged his presence and was friendly when I saw him. I talked to him when he was alone and defended him when he was made fun of.	Towards the end of the year, he is a completely different guy. He's social, friendly and stands up for himself.
2071; age - 16, Male grade - 11 th sch - Franklin HS Elk Grove, CA	I was at lunch – a kid was calling another kid of a different race derogatory remarks.	I told him that that wasn't cool and that he would feel bad if that kid was baggin on him.	He stopped bullying the kid, and since then he has thanked me.
2236; age - 12, Male	Some people I knew were talking about beating up	I reasoned with them, reminding them of the	I think that this Action was successful

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grade - 7 th sch - Basalt MS Basalt, CO	another kid who they didn't like.	consequences of their actions.	because they ended up not beating the kid up and leaving him alone.
2002; age - 14, Fem grade - 8 th sch - Rifle MS Rifle, CO	A girl had a hit list, and was threatening to bring her brother's gun to school.	I told her that it would ruin her life, and she didn't really want to do it, then I told a counselor.	Well, she didn't do it.
2156; age - 13, Fem grade - 7 th sch - Mtn View MS Lamont, CA	My friend and I overheard a boy saying that he was going to stab someone. We even saw the knife.	We got help. We told a teacher or to be more specific an administrator.	The boy didn't get stabbed. I feel like if I saved his life.
2191; age - 12, Fem grade - 7 th sch - Oliver MS Brockport, NY	A friend at the dance threatening suicide.	A got help from a counselor.	He is still alive.

Impact on Ambassadors

If recruiting has been done according to the model, the students involved in this effort are the opinion leaders, trend setters, and norm changers on a school campus. What they say, do, and believe is noticed – and emulated – by others; in other words, they are at or near the center of the “ripple effect.”

Therefore, it is not farfetched to think that any changes in them will ripple out across the general student population of the school. Surveys – both Year-End and Pre-and Post-training – shed light on how the program has impacted the students involved in it, as do the hundreds of stories told by Ambassadors and the adults who work with them.

Surveys

The Year-End surveys also include questions designed to assess how being involved in the Ambassadors program has affected the Ambassadors themselves. The third year responses, consistent with the two prior years, showed the percent of Ambassadors reporting improvements in their own...

Empathy	93.6
Acceptance of Diversity	90.1
Leadership skills	94.0
Communication Skills	91.7

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Grades	68.7
Attendance	68.4

Survey responses from the adults involved in the program showed virtually identical results.

Another way to assess how students are affected by being involved in school climate improvement efforts such as the one described here is to administer a survey prior to their involvement, and then to administer an identical survey at some point afterward, usually 6-12 months later. Several schools have used this “pre & post” approach with Ambassadors, and the early results seem to confirm what the Year-End surveys show.

While these findings need to be interpreted with caution, due to the small sample sizes, pre-post data has shown slight:

- decreases in the number of students who teased or made fun of others
- increases in the mistreatment students noticed
- increases in the number of students who tried to help students who looked alone / isolated or sad / depressed, or who were the targets of mistreatment;
- increases in the number of students who used various skills to redirect or challenge the aggressor or instigator;
- increases in the number of students who sought adult help for situations they did not feel qualified or equipped to handle on their own.

While some students reported that they had been teased or made fun of because of their interventions, none reported being physically harmed or feeling scared. While these results are encouraging, it is clear that more extensive research needs to be done in this area.

Stories

These surveys quantify the individual actions of thousands of Ambassadors in hundreds of schools from coast to coast since 2001. While they allow us to make generalizations and see trends, they also filter out the details of how these actions have made a profound difference in the lives of real people. Hundreds of stories also shed light on the program’s impact on the Ambassadors themselves. Told by Ambassadors and the adults they work with, these stories reveal similar trends and themes:

- Ambassadors working through prejudices and stereotypes;

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- Ambassadors gaining confidence and life skills;
- Ambassadors seeing their own behavior in new ways, and changing that behavior;
- Ambassadors renouncing violence.

Busting Stereotypes

Despite the best efforts of educators and community members, too often schools reflect the racial divisions in our society. At Perris High School, a large comprehensive high school 2800 students in San Bernardino County in southern California, tensions ran high between African-American and Mexican students. These were fueled by the activities of the 70+ gangs that have been active in the community for generations. Several violent “race riots” had occurred at the school in recent years, requiring police intervention and many arrests. In this environment, thirty-some students of all races began their Safe School Ambassadors training in February of 2002. One of the smaller working groups included Deszirre, an intense and very dark-skinned African American girl who was feared by many on campus. It also included Elias, a quiet but obviously powerful Latino boy whose gold chains and muscular physique sent a strong “don’t mess with me” message to all in his presence. Steeped in the prejudices they had acquired from their families and friends, both began the training sitting back in their chairs with their arms crossed over their chests. Over the course of those two days, prompted by many of the activities they engaged in side-by-side, they began to see their commonalities, and those prejudices began to soften. The seeds of a friendship based on understanding and mutual respect were sown, and those seeds were cultivated in the Family Group they both attended regularly. Several months later, the two described how their friendship had affected the campus. Deszirre: “I’m walking with my people, and I see Elias, so I say “hey” and he says “hey” back to me, and maybe I say ‘what’s up?’ and we talk for a minute. My people see that, and they see it every day, and they start to think well maybe those Mexicans aren’t so bad.” Elias agreed. “And my people see that I can get along with her, and they just think about it. Then they ask what’s up with that, and I say she’s OK, and then they aren’t so quick to fight the Blacks.” Eddie, an Ambassador at nearby Paloma Valley High School, put it this way: “With this program, I started just hanging out with different people, talking with them and whatever, and you learn. You learn that they’re like you. Even though you might not see them on the outside like you, if you get to know them, they are.” Samantha, an eighth grader at Basalt Middle School in Colorado spoke of how her eyes and heart opened: “I see people differently now. I see past the cliques, past the labels, past the color, and past the prejudice.”

Confidence and Leadership

Jody, a seventh grader at Basalt, identified another common theme: “It’s definitely given me more self confidence.” Seth Groveman, counselor and Advisor to the Safe School Ambassadors program at Palm Beach Central High School in Florida, agreed: “The Ambassadors program has given our Ambassadors a tremendous boost in self confidence. It makes them feel special, which doesn’t happen to enough students in high school. It is amazing how proud they are to be selected, as they should be.” Kristin Greenstreet, counselor and Program Advisor at Kathryn Sen~or Elementary School in New Castle, Colorado, noted that teachers have seen a difference. “Instead of sitting idly by, the Ambassadors speak up and take leadership. Each week, teachers lead discussions on topics suggested by the counselor or the students themselves. Ambassadors are not just participants, they’re big facilitators in these small group discussions.”

Neil Williamson, Dean and Program Advisor at Belmont High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District, gave an example of this increase in self confidence. “One girl lives in a shelter downtown. She was born with a lot going against her and she’s struggled. But since she’s become an Ambassador, she’s flourished. She sees that she has an important role, and she’s really stepped up to it. She’s intervened a lot within her peer group, and they’ve come to respect her even more, which has helped her tremendously.” Josh Nowak, counselor and Program Advisor at Valencia High School described how one of his Ambassadors gained enough confidence and self-respect to confront a teacher about bad behavior in the classroom, and it helped greatly! Greenstreet echoed this theme: “Last year, there were two best friends (boys) who took SSA very seriously. It also helped deepen their friendship because they really connected over the work they were doing. They have moved onto the middle school, but still talk about how being Ambassadors helped them see themselves as leaders.”

Awareness of their own hurtful behavior

Groveman also pointed out that going through the training and becoming an Ambassador helps students think about the nature and consequences of their own hurtful behavior, and helps them change it. Greenstreet described what happened to a boy at her school: “When we were selecting kids to participate one question mark for us was Timothy. He was not always the best example. He’s had difficulties at home. He struggles with anger outbursts and getting into trouble since kindergarten, but he gets it and

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has a big heart. At first, after the training, he was a perfect role model and very active Ambassador. In November, he started having problems again with his anger and inappropriate behavior. The kids and adults discussed whether or not to allow him to continue and decided he should. He lost privileges, but came to the SSA meetings anyway. At the meetings, he would own up to his behavior and what he should have done differently. The other Ambassadors would encourage him – saying that he could do it. Since Christmas, he has greatly improved and is back on track to being a good example.”

Jay, a junior at Paloma Valley High School reports a similar impact: “I used to be one of the people that would tease and make fun and go along with the crowd and do what everybody else was doing. Not any more... It’s just like this overall feeling of satisfaction knowing that if this program has changed me, I know it can change other people.” A Family Group Facilitator at Valencia High School in California reported that “After the training, an Ambassador spoke to a member of his group who was being teased and picked on. He told his friend that he thought that the teasing was wrong and that he was no longer going to participate. He reported to me that his friend was grateful, and it gave him the courage to ask the others to stop too, and they did.”

Maria Juaregi is the Program Advisor at Markham Middle School in the Los Angeles Unified School District, a school surrounded by housing projects, where students affiliated with one gang cannot safely exit the school grounds through the gates that lead into another gang’s territory. She reports that “Progress is being made. One student came to me and said ‘I saw a fight and walked away. I told my friends, ‘Come on, we don’t need to see this.’” While that may not sound like much, it’s a huge change for that boy, and it must have had a big impact on his friends.”

Renouncing Violence

Ambassadors have also reported other huge changes. Standing with a group of his fellow Ambassadors before a crowd of school and community leaders and philanthropists in Los Angeles, Eric, an eighth grader at Stanford Middle School in Long Beach, California, spoke of what it is like to be a third-generation gang member. He described the violence and the ever-present fear, and he showed the gang tattoos on his neck and knuckles. “But,” he said, “I’m in a new gang now. I’m a Safe School Ambassador.”

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In a similar setting in northern California a few months later, Nancy, an eighth grader at Santa Rosa Middle School described how she had come into her last year of middle school just hoping to make it through. “I had a pretty rough seventh grade year. I was always in trouble and almost got expelled. But Ms. Coker, my principal, invited me to be an Ambassador. She had a lot of faith in me. She saw that I had a pretty big influence on other people, and I guess she thought it might as well be a good influence instead of a bad one. Being an Ambassador gave me a big wake up call. I saw that I was doing things that weren’t going to get me anywhere. I decided to change, because people wouldn’t take a piece of good advice coming from a troublemaker.... This year, I worked really hard to keep myself out of trouble, although it wasn’t easy. A lot of problems came up that I never thought I could deal with without violence, but I did. Not once did I turn to violence.... I am out of gangs. That’s it for me. I am tired of fighting without a reason.”

Impact on Adults

“The successful, long-lasting programs have one element in common: they have an on-site program advisor who ‘owns’ the program and sees it as an extension of their personal sense of mission” says Rick Lewis, District Training Coordinator for the Safe Schools Department in Palm Beach County, Florida, where more than 800 Ambassadors have been trained to work in 21 middle and high schools. But with most schools strapped for funds, providing stipends and other forms of recognition is increasingly uncommon. It becomes clear that the adults who stick with the program must be getting something besides money back in return for their efforts.

Groveman describes one dimension of satisfaction that he gets from his involvement with Ambassadors: greater connection with students. “It reminds me that there are so many great students who have so much to say. So often, kids are not heard, when in reality they can teach us so many things. From listening to our Ambassadors, I have come to understand what frustrates them, what inspires them, what makes them tick. That makes me a better teacher, and a better person.” Other teachers expand on this theme, reporting how their involvement with Ambassadors recharges them. In an era of education that is so strongly focused on academics and testing, working with students on interpersonal skills and social-emotional learning feeds a part of them that has been starved for a long time. One Family Group Facilitator described how her meetings with Ambassadors help her maintain a healthy and balanced

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perspective on school and the world. “I work with great kids, and they’re not all the “good kids” either. When they talk about what they’ve done, I feel so proud. I feel so hopeful and so positive. It’s like a warm bath that washes away a lot of the dirt that gets stuck to me over the course of the week.” Other teachers describe how tired they got when so much of their energy had to focus on discipline. With Ambassadors on campus as allies, many report that the climate inside their classrooms has improved and they feel more energy, lightness, and even joy in their teaching.

Les Luxmore, Assistant Principal and Program Advisor at Valencia High School in Valencia, California, describes another aspect of the “payback:” how working with Ambassadors aligns with one important part of his personal mission, and helps him fulfill it. “I am very excited about Safe School Ambassadors, because I had been running a program we called The Movement, which followed Dr. King’s model for addressing injustice. But SSA offered training, greater student and staff participation, and a support element my program could not offer. I am committed to these kinds of programs because since Dr. King’s death, I have continued to see division and conflict between people world wide, based on ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual preference, age, size, any difference. SSA is one very effective way I can continue that healing work that is so important to me.” “I’ve always been a believer in what elementary kids can do,” says Greenstreet, “but this program confirmed my belief that early intervention and skill training can make a difference. The students take their skills home, and out into the community, and on to the middle school. Besides, now I get to work with a team of people who are equally committed to building a positive climate at our school.”

Kevin Crider is a counselor and Program Advisor at Gardena High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Like Belmont High, Gardena is heavily impacted by conflict and violence. “In Los Angeles, what happens in the prisons directly impacts the schools. If there are race wars in the prisons – fights over territory or rights – these grievances often spill over into the schools. Recently, these tensions resulted in a student bringing a gun to school. Thankfully, one of our Ambassadors found out about it. He approached the campus police officer and told him who had the gun, where it was, and what the boy’s intentions were. School officials were then able to remove the gun from the student’s locker, thereby protecting many potential victims. After an incident like that, I felt relieved that we were able to stop students, and even me, from being harmed. Stopping violence like that changes your life. You realize that you have to stay involved if you can stop events like that from occurring.”

Impact on the School

More Reports to Adults

Crider's report is not unique. "I am so stoked," writes Linda Camardella, Program Advisor at Conniston Middle School in West Palm Beach, Florida. "One of my Ambassadors did the right thing. He saw a girl in the cafeteria Friday morning showing off a knife. He didn't feel comfortable approaching her directly, so he got help from our Assistant Principal. They talked to the girl, got the knife, and a potentially big incident was averted. The program works!" Dozens more Ambassadors have come forward to let adults know about potentially dangerous situations or hurtful situations (see ***A girl and her dog***), which have in turn been prevented or foiled.

Beyond that, at El Dorado High School in northern California, it was NOT an Ambassador who came forward to let school staff know about a plot by several students to bomb the school. Administrators at the school credit the Ambassadors program with helping to break the "code of silence," to shift the norms and create a school climate where reporting information like that is seen by students as a good thing. Crider adds that "while Ambassadors feel more comfortable going to an adult about big issues like guns and gang fights, they also enjoy the idea that they can put out fires without adult help."

These more extreme acts at the tip of the iceberg are thankfully relatively rare, especially when compared to the onslaught of more subtle acts of mistreatment: exclusion, put-downs, and bullying. By capturing the views of a school's most well-connected and socially savvy students – the Ambassadors themselves – Year-End Surveys provide insights into a school's social-emotional climate. Surveys consistently indicate that exclusion, put-downs, and bullying have decreased in schools where

A Girl and her Dog

"My 15-year old daughter Ann has cerebral palsy, but thanks to her service dog Sierra she attends our local high school. Two weeks ago, a girl that knew of Ann overheard four kids plotting a way to take her service dog away from her on the bus, and how they could get away with it. This girl, who was one of the Safe School Ambassadors, brought this information to a teacher at her school that knew Ann very well. He went to the office and called Ann in and they discussed it. The teacher, the next day with Ann, went directly up to those four kids and confronted them with the information that they had heard about regarding what their "plan" was going to be. This teacher told these kids that he was aware of what they were planning, as was Ann, her parents, and the entire school administration. He tried to explain to them that Sierra is NOT just a dog, but a very expensively trained service dog that Ann needed in order to help her to do things that she couldn't do any other way, and that as a result of their threat, she was afraid to take him to school. They apologized and we haven't had any problems since. Ann brought Sierra back to school the next day."

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Ambassadors are present. In June of 2004, more than 55 percent of Ambassadors reported that bullying at their schools had decreased somewhat, and 58 percent of adults agreed. Additionally, 10 percent of Ambassadors and 12 percent of adults felt that bullying had decreased a lot. Erica Martenson, counselor and Program Advisor at American Canyon Middle School in California agreed. “I notice a difference, and the police officers who are here on campus working with the students tell me the same thing. We’re not dealing with teasing and bullying as much. We’ve been doing other things to address these issues, but our Ambassadors have tipped the scales.” James Corral, Assistant Principal at Kenilworth Junior High School in Petaluma, California, reported that for the 5 months (January – June) after the Ambassadors began their work, compared to the previous year’s figures, harassment was down 50 percent, bus incidents were down 25 percent, and sexual harassment was down 55 percent. Greenstreet adds that discipline referrals at Kathryn Senor Elementary are down about 30 percent since they began the Ambassadors program.

Fewer Fights

Ambassadors also seem to be able to reduce the amount of fighting on their campuses. In Year-End Surveys, nearly 60 percent of Ambassadors and adults felt that fighting had decreased. “Our concentration has been on reducing fights,” said Sheryl Stone, Assistant Principal at Alta Loma Junior High School in California. “We compared the number of fights we have had so far this year (10) to the number we had at this point last year (21) – we are down 53 percent.” Crider reports similar decreases at Gardena, saying that police officers on his campus tell him that there have been far less fights and issues for them to deal with since the SSA training.

Reduced Suspensions and Lost ADA Funds

By reducing the number of conflicts that erupt, Ambassadors have also been successful at reducing suspensions. Mark Balch, Safe and Drug-Free Schools Coordinator for the Kern High School District in Bakersfield, California, reports that East Bakersfield High School experienced a 20 percent drop in suspensions after Ambassadors fanned out across campus. Stone reports a 40 percent decrease in suspendable incidents at Alta Loma Junior High. “Since Ambassadors got started, our out-of-school suspensions are down 49 percent, and our in-school suspensions are down 69 percent,” says Luxmore. Jack Schipper, Assistant Principal at Montgomery High School in Santa Rosa, California, says that

Ambassadors have been able to cut suspensions by 62 percent over two years. With each 3-day suspension costing roughly \$115 in lost ADA funds, the school has been able to retain more than

Ambassadors as Peer Coaches

Will Peterson was in trouble. Will always got along famously with adults but he seemed to be missing what psychologists call “social cues.” Will irritated other kids, he made inappropriate comments, he tried too hard to be popular and he couldn’t control his angry impulses. Over the years, Will pushed more and more kids away from him. He was kicked off the soccer, baseball and snowboarding teams. Both Will and his family had visited psychologists and medical doctors. Medication for ADHD and depression offered some relief, but it was short lived. After a series of poor choices, Will had just about used up his chances at our school.

We didn’t want to give up, so we tried one last intervention. Will selected three students and requested that they coach him. Will picked these kids because he knew them to be cool, powerful and also compassionate. Each kid Will selected had been through the Safe School Ambassadors program the previous semester. Our hope was that if Will heard it just right from the “powerful” kids it might help him make better choices with his behavior. I contacted the three boys and thankfully they agreed to give it a shot.

The meeting took place in the school library. We were all nervous. I introduced everyone and thanked them for coming. Then, the Ambassadors just took it from there. I was amazed at their ability to be at once compassionate and direct. They were clear. “Will, you go too far, like yesterday when you pushed that kid on the bus.” “Will, when you act like this, we feel frustrated.” There were many, many specific examples. They did not hold back. Will somehow managed to listen, tears in his eyes. And then it came: the support. “We are here to help you,” the boys said. “Let’s work out a system.” “If you need help, we are here.” “You are a great kid inside.” Keep in mind; these were the most powerful, respected students in my school, advising a kid so low on the food chain that the term “plankton” comes to mind.

When kids help other kids, it’s amazing. When kids with power offer genuine help to those who have no power, it seems to transform. In this case it was big motivation for Will to clean up his act, and he did. We have no illusions. Will may not become a new person, but it really has helped him to manage his emotions better and treat others more kindly. And it made a big difference for the three Ambassadors. They used their power to do something that felt right, for a kid who needed help. They saw that their actions made a real difference in lots of lives and made our school a more compassionate place,

- Jim Gilchrist, Principal, Aspen Community School, Colorado

Determining the Frequency and Effectiveness of Bystander Interventions

It's been said that anger masks pain. The most common expressions of rage are those that aggressors act out on others – the pushing, shoving, and fighting, even verbal attacks. What's often overlooked is the revenge directed back at self, which can be expressed in any number of self-destructive ways: anorexia and bulimia; use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs; premature sexual activity; cutting (self-mutilation) and suicide. Ambassadors' training includes how to listen and offer support to peers in pain, and how to connect them to adults who could offer further help. Year End Surveys indicate that roughly 20 percent of Ambassadors' interventions involve some help from adults. Conor Cusack, one of the Prevention Coordinators for the Greece School District outside of Rochester, New York, tells of the most powerful moment in his two-year tenure as Program Advisor and coordinator of the District's Ambassador programs. "One of our Ambassadors told of how a friend had been cutting herself for a long time. Tina said she'd noticed the marks on her friend's arm before, but didn't have the courage to bring it up and didn't know what to say or do. After her training, she brought it up with her friend, and was able to listen, offer support, and get her to see the school counselor. Now, her friend has been through some private counseling, and has stopped cutting herself. Because of what she did, Tina was nominated and accepted into the New York State Attorney General's 'Triple C' (Character, Courage, Commitment) Awards Program. To me, the fact that a life was changed as a result of the Ambassadors program was profound."

Year-End Surveys also show that more than 62 percent of Ambassadors and 67 percent of adults felt an increased sense of safety at school since implementing the Ambassadors program, and 78 percent of adults felt that school climate had improved as a result. "Ambassadors have been great for our school climate," says Groveman of Palm Beach Central High School. "Fights are almost non-existent. There have been less than half as many fights this year than last, and that was down 60 percent from the year before. Suspensions and crime are also way down. Although we still have subgroups and cliques, there is no animosity between the groups. Students feel safe and have expressed to me how much they like Palm Beach Central."

Summary

Action Logs, Year End Surveys, and the reports of Family Group Facilitators all point toward one conclusion: Ambassadors do use the skills they learn in the training to intervene with their peers when they witness mistreatment. Those same surveys indicate, and the reports of dozens of administrators in schools coast to coast confirm, that those interventions do actually reduce the amount of mistreatment on a campus. Disciplinary referrals, fights, suspensions and other indicators all seem to go down when the program is implemented according to the model that has been described in this book. Crider describes an experience that in many ways sums up the power and potential of this model: “I took an Ambassador with me to the Community Council meeting, to speak about the program. He told them that SSA had changed his life. He said ‘I understand now that I am responsible for helping stop mistreatment and violence. It’s true that kids can help and make a difference.’”

And what if 40 of these carefully selected, powerful students fanned out across a campus? How would their individual actions add up? If each Ambassador intervenes just one time each day, just speaks up once to squelch a rumor, or to counsel restraint and tolerance, or to offer support to a classmate in pain, together they would create 40 incidents of peace on a campus in one day. In the five school days of a week, they’d create 200 such incidents, and in the 35 weeks of a school year, they’d create 7000. Each intervention directly involves at least one aggressor or target, and usually both. Experience shows that on average it’s roughly 2 people per incident, which means that in those 7000 interventions, some 14,000 students will be directly impacted by the words and actions of the Ambassadors; clearly some students would be impacted more than once in a school year. Experience also shows that each intervention is witnessed by an average of 4 students, meaning that in addition the students on that campus will have 28,000 “witness” experiences in which they see before their very eyes the social norm of cruelty and violence being redefined by socially powerful students. They come to see that it’s not so cool to be cruel...