

## **TEN KEYS TO SAFER SCHOOLS**

### **Strategies for Engaging Students in Improving School Climate**

---

#### **TEN KEYS OVERVIEW**

The “Ten Keys” that follow provide a framework for long-term planning and development of a school safety plan that focuses on involving youth with adults in creating safer schools. Several of the keys provide excellent opportunities for increasing ongoing student involvement and empowerment. Other keys are typically the exclusive domain of adults, so involving students in these areas will require commitment and perseverance, along with good youth development practice. It is our hope that the information provided below will encourage more schools to engage their students as allies in creating and maintaining learning environments that are physically and emotionally safe for all students and adults. These ten keys below can unlock the door to a campus where youth feel empowered and are empowered, and work with adults to build a safe, supportive, and positive school climate.

- **Key 1:** Establish A School-Community Partnership
- **Key 2:** Start a School Climate Team
- **Key 3:** Set Clear Behavioral Standards, Policies and Procedures
- **Key 4:** Improve the Physical Environment
- **Key 5:** Empower Students as Agents of Social Change
- **Key 6:** Implement Diversity Activities
- **Key 7:** Create Opportunities for the Least Engaged Youth
- **Key 8:** Support Social Skills Curricula and Instruction
- **Key 9:** Conduct Teacher & Staff Training
- **Key 10:** Encourage Parent Involvement

#### **Key 1: Establish A School-Community Partnership**

School violence is not a problem of schools alone. Reducing incidents of bullying and violence requires a comprehensive, community-wide effort best coordinated by a school-community partnership that includes law enforcement, faith groups, businesses, government, seniors, community-based and youth-serving organizations, along with students, teachers, administrators and parents.

#### **Key 2: Start a School Climate Team**

A site-based School Climate Team is comprised of students, teachers, administrators, school resource officers, other staff, and parents, and meets regularly to monitor school climate. It provides a forum in which all stakeholders can voice their concerns, and can work with key decision-makers to implement specific actions that promote safety and prevent violence in the school. Since students are the primary victims and perpetrators of school violence, they hold a critical key to the success of whatever solutions are developed and need to play a prominent role on this Team.

#### **Key 3: Set Clear Behavioral Standards, Policies and Procedures**

Every school community needs clear standards of behavior which are known and accepted by all members. These standards also need to have clear consequences for those who are stepping outside the boundaries of acceptability, and these consequences need to be consistently applied.

#### **Key 4: Improve the Physical Environment**

Every school needs to make sure that its students and staff are protected from the most likely potential threats – student weapons on campus, armed intruders or other unwelcome visitors. However, new

fencing, locks, cameras, and metal detectors are not the only way to make the physical environment safe. The overall quality of the physical environment has a significant impact on how students feel at school, which influences how they behave. Is the lighting harsh or warm? What colors are used for school walls, offices and classrooms? Are the halls and common spaces sterile, or are they student-friendly, containing plants, student art, projects, and awards? Are grounds clean or littered? How quickly is graffiti or vandalism responded to? How quickly are repairs to broken items made? The answer to these and other important questions are part of a general self-assessment about the physical environment that contribute to making timely and effective decisions about creating a climate of safety.

#### **Key 5: Empower Students as Agents of Social Change**

Every school can benefit from an organized team of students—the socially influential opinion leaders of its diverse groups and cliques—who are committed to notice hotspots and trained to cool them off. Students who have the observation skills to notice the exclusion, put-downs, teasing, relational aggression, bullying, harassment and other forms of mistreatment that usually go unnoticed by adults. Students with powerful non-violent communication and intervention skills who interact with their peers to prevent and stop this mistreatment when and where it happens – on the bus, in the yard, at lunch, in the locker rooms and bathrooms, in the halls and on the fields.

#### **Key 6: Implement Diversity Activities**

Infuse the entire school with ongoing activities that promote dialogue, deepen understanding, and increase respect for differences. These activities will have greater impact when they are not stand-alone but are consistent with themes woven into the curricula. These efforts will decrease the tensions between the cliques and interest groups on a campus. Through opportunities to learn about other people, assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices can be replaced with acceptance, tolerance, and compassion.

#### **Key 7: Create Opportunities for the Least Engaged Youth**

Athletics, academics, and traditional activities do not meet the developmental needs of all students. And in today's schools, far too many students feel disengaged, left out and isolated. Research shows that those who lack a sense of belonging are at greater risk for dropping out, or acting out. Therefore, it is mutually beneficial to create new and diverse opportunities for these least engaged youth to reconnect with their school and community. Initiate dialogue and ask these students what they want to become involved in and how they want to become involved.

#### **Key 8: Support Social Skills Curricula and Instruction**

Especially in the elementary grades, students benefit from active teaching of the skills and values that equip them to communicate effectively, establish solid friendships, and resolve their differences non-violently. This can be accomplished directly through lessons that teach these skills, and it can also happen more indirectly through the class meetings and other strategies (like cooperative learning) that teachers use in their classrooms. Success requires that students experience consistent messages in all social-emotional curricula ... and in all classes. A school must encourage and support consistent instruction and use of the curricula. It doesn't work as well if a handful of teachers spend 15 minutes a week on friendship skills while the others spend 2 hours and weave it into their reading for the week.

#### **Key 9: Conduct Teacher & Staff Training**

Whether they are classroom teachers or bus drivers, attendance secretaries or administrators, counselors or librarians, all adults have a role to play in building and maintaining a positive, healthy, and safe school climate. Unfortunately, too many adults don't see the student mistreatment around them, and don't have enough options to intervene effectively when they do notice it. Saying "Hey, cut that out!" is only one tool in a potentially big tool kit. Moreover, many adults fail to take advantage of readily available opportunities to build positive relationships with students beyond the content of schoolwork. These relationships not only improve the climate of the school and students' sense of connection to it, they become the gateways students use to report information about fights, weapons, or other potential harm to people or property.

### **Key 10: Encourage Parent Involvement**

Since parents significantly influence students' opinions, values and interaction skills, parent understanding and support is essential for any successful school safety plan. But booster nights and open houses usually draw only the familiar faces of the highly engaged parents, so schools must find other ways to connect with parents, especially those not actively involved in their children's education.

#### **CONTACT INFORMATION TO DOWNLOAD THESE TWO DOCUMENTS**

---

1. **Ten Keys Assessment Tool** provides the framework for an assessment and planning meeting for key school district staff.
2. **Ten Keys** detailed document provides potential actions, challenges, and tips for implementing each key in this framework.

**Email:** [outreach@community-matters.org](mailto:outreach@community-matters.org)

**Phone:** (707) 823-6159