

# PROVEN STRATEGIES FOR RE-OPENING OUR SCHOOLS: WHY SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING IS JOB #1



**COMMUNITY MATTERS**

Empowering Youth | Transforming Communities

*Rick Phillips, MS.Ed. and Founder of Community Matters*

In this COVID-19 upside down world there is no returning to business as usual and no going back to the way it was. Our communities, our country and our world have been altered like never before, and young people have been severely impacted. So, when schools do re-open, *job number one must be to ensure that students feel safe, welcome and connected to caring adults.*

Imagine what it must be like for the millions of young people, cut off from their schools, their friends, teachers, coaches and the other caring adults who support them. Imagine what it's like for them not knowing who among the staff and students will be there when they return to campus. Imagine what emotions children are experiencing, isolated from the familiar safety nets no longer in place. And imagine what they are going to need from the entire school staff when they finally get back to school.

The anxiety, uncertainty and trauma our children and young people are experiencing is also being felt by educators and families. School staff, from the principal to the bus driver will be in need of support and even some training on how to best return to work, address their own self-care needs, and be prepared to assist students in their re-entry process.

When schools do re-open there will be competing philosophies and ideas on the best way to get back to normal and catch up. For many, curriculum, meeting state requirements and testing will be the first priority, and that choice will influence and guide their planning.

However, initiating academics without first developing a social-emotional re-entry plan would be a serious mistake. Many students returning to school could be carrying another virus, one characterized by high anxiety, fear, and trauma. Adverse childhood experiences can lead to mental health issues and schools must be prepared to provide the wrap-around resources and support that many of their students will surely need.

Research and experience demonstrate that *for students to focus, learn and succeed, they need to first feel safe and connected to peers and staff.* Data demonstrates that the critical educational outcomes schools are measured by, which include positive attendance, high achievement and few discipline incidents, are more likely to occur when educators understand and operate by the following axiom: *Students don't care what we know, until they know we care.*

This adage is corroborated by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), who in the largest longitudinal study of young people and schools found that **the best predictor for student success is connectivity.**

Focusing on social-emotional learning (SEL) and school climate has been the heart of our mission at Community Matters for more than 20 years. We have partnered with thousands of schools in more than 40 states, providing strategies, programs and services that:

- Strengthen school climate and promote social & emotional learning
- Reduce bullying, cyber-bullying and harassment
- Empower students to be upstanders, contributors and positive role models
- Equip school staff with the tools and skills needed to connect and build strong relationships with their students

Our team of dedicated staff and trainers are working diligently to address the new level of needs schools are experiencing by designing several online services for distance learning. When schools do finally open, we have a suite of effective and proven resources, trainings and programs designed to address the social and emotional needs of staff, students and their families.

Our new resources include the development of an SEL **Re-Entry Tool Kit**. The kit includes:

- A series of online trainings for administrators, staff, families and students
- Self-care resources, guided lessons for leading class meetings, conversation prompts for supporting all staff, parents and guardians
- A guidebook with scripts and activities for conducting re-entry meetings and providing a safe place for students to decompress, connect, share stories, develop personal wellness plans and learn strategies for supporting friends and peers
- Coaching support from the Community Matters team



*SEL as defined by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)*

In these turbulent and uncertain times, educators are being challenged to lead with courage, plan from the heart and put young people and relationships first. When those actions become the day to day practices of school personnel, our schools can be places for healing and belonging, while helping students feel that they are safe, included and connected to caring adults.

To learn more about the Re-Entry Tool Kit and how we can support your school community, visit our website at <https://community-matters.org/> or call us at 707-823-6159.

#### About Community Matters

Established in 1996, Community Matters is a national thought leader in school climate improvement, school safety measures and bullying and violence prevention. Our mission is to *equip and empower students and adults to create schools and communities that are safe, welcoming and inclusive*.

The scope of programs and services includes professional development for educators, strategic planning and consulting, youth empowerment trainings, evidence-based bullying prevention program, Restorative Practices trainings, parent workshops, and community engagement forums.

Rick Phillips is a nationally recognized educator, sought-after speaker and presenter and author of *Safe School Ambassadors – Harnessing Student Power to Stop Bullying and Violence*. Community Matters is headquartered in Santa Rosa, CA.