Zero-In:

Student Engagement in Safety:

From Awareness to Ownership

November 19, 2026

Student Engagement in Safety: From Awareness to Ownership

Locks, cameras, detection systems and response plans are essential, but they depend on the people inside the building. Students are the largest group of people in any school. They see the group chats, notice behavior changing, know where the blind spots are, and hear things long before adults do. Yet in most safety programs they are treated as people to protect, not as partners in protecting the school.

This Zero-In paper looks at how schools can move students from simply knowing about safety to taking real ownership of it. That means building trust and giving students a voice. It means teaching them in ways that fit their age and putting structures in place that last beyond one school year or one champion. The guidance draws on a national roundtable of school safety directors and a panel discussion with student safety club leaders and a national school safety advocate. It reflects the views of the adults who run safety programs and of the students who live inside them every day.

> *"Students know where the blind spots are. They know what the vulnerabilities are at the school, and they know how to create a safer school environment."*

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

Why Student Voice Matters in School Safety

Safety is often described in terms of physical and technical layers. Students are one of those layers, and one of the most important. They are present in every hallway, cafeteria, bus and online space where warning signs appear. When students feel connected to their school and trust the adults around them, they become a strong early-warning system. When they don't, what they know stays with them.

Practitioners agree on one point above all others. The evidence on what moves students from awareness to ownership is still limited. The evidence on culture and climate is not. A connected, trusting school climate is consistently identified as the leading preventer of school violence. Student engagement is how that climate gets built.

Schools that invest in student engagement report:

- Earlier and more frequent reporting of concerns
- Greater trust between students, staff, administrators and school resource officers
- Community support for safety programs, which holds up even in politically charged moments
- Student-generated ideas that adults would not have come up with alone
- Stronger mental health support and less stigma around asking for help

"Culture has everything to do with it. Top-down, principal down — that's where it starts."

Safety Knowledge Is Not Organic

Adults often assume students know what to do when they see something dangerous. The evidence says otherwise.

One district reviewed every case of a weapon or imitation weapon recovered in its schools and found that willingness to report changes sharply with age:

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

- **Elementary school:** In roughly 80% of cases, child witnesses came forward only when they were about to get in trouble themselves and were trying to shift attention elsewhere.
- **Middle school:** Students reported only when they were personally convinced the item was real and dangerous. A small pocketknife did not alarm them, but a large combat knife did. A gun was assumed to be fake unless they saw ammunition or handled it.
- **High school:** Students understood the stakes much better, often because they could point to real tragedies.

Part of the reason is how often students see guns as toys. Gel-bead blasters, foam dart guns, pellet and BB guns, first-person shooter games and movies all blur the line. Many students now assume every gun they see is fake.

The consequences can be severe. In one elementary school incident, a handgun was in a classroom for three days before it was fired. It was shown to at least three children, one each day. Teachers assumed any child who saw a gun would know to tell an adult. The students were in fourth grade.

"Their knowledge of school safety is not organic. What we believe our kids know, and take for granted that they know, they don't."

The lesson is that safety education must be explicit, age-appropriate and repeated, starting in the earliest grades. That includes reporting not only weapons but also vapes, knives and other contraband. Staff need clear, explicit permission to have these conversations with even the youngest students.

KEY INSIGHT

Many school staff do not realize how sophisticated some student activity has become. One district recovered firearms that students had built in their own bedrooms, using a 3D printer and an unfinished gun-frame kit, and that the students were selling. Messages for students and training for staff should reflect what students are actually exposed to, not what adults assume.

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

Creating Structures for Student Voice

Districts that succeed at student engagement do not leave it to chance. They create formal, repeating opportunities for students to be heard, and they act on what students say.

Effective models discussed include:

- **Principal or superintendent advisory committees:** Monthly lunch meetings with a rotating group of students and two student chairs, where any topic is open for discussion. In one school, a half-hour meeting scheduled two weeks after a national school shooting ran for two hours. The goodwill it built was still evident years later. When some in the community called for removing the school resource officer, those calls quickly lost support.
- **Student safety councils:** Groups like a student council but focused only on safety in the building. Councils have run at high schools, junior highs and alternative schools. One student council came up with putting QR codes for the anonymous tip line on school buses, an idea other districts have since adopted.
- **Recognition programs:** A “Safety Spotlight” program recognized students for safe behavior. In elementary grades that meant simple acts, like cleaning up a spill or making sure doors are closed. In upper grades it meant raising concerns about a friend. Monthly winners got a ride to school in a police car, and students now recognize the district safety director in the hallways.
- **Peer-led learning:** High school students who run a peer court come down to the feeder middle school to run peer court there. They handle cases involving safety, vaping and attendance and work with younger students to own and repair their mistakes. This builds a continuous thread of student ownership from grades 6 through 12.
- **Student-created content:** Student media teams have filmed safety training narrated by students. Older students in art clubs have made illustrated social stories to teach safety concepts to elementary children.
- **Short classroom videos:** Three-minute safety videos shown in homeroom, followed by teacher-led discussion questions. Topic ideas come from teachers and staff.

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

"We learned so much, and they so appreciated having a voice."

Reaching Beyond the Usual Voices

Student engagement often defaults to the students who already volunteer: student council members, honor students and club officers. Those students matter, but they are rarely the only influencers on a campus.

Practitioners stressed the value of seeking out natural leaders who are not "student council types." These students may be reluctant to get involved but carry real influence with their peers. Bringing them in gives schools a read on groups adults rarely reach, and a way to influence them.

Inclusive engagement also means:

- Hearing from students in alternative settings, whose perspective is often thoughtful and revealing
- Reflecting the language and cultural diversity of the student body
- Asking students directly whether they feel connected to their school, what that looks like for them, and what would need to change if they don't
- Encouraging students to talk with peers outside their own friend groups, since friends tend to share the same views

Student leaders said this kind of inclusion happens most naturally in small, everyday acts. These include making sure no one sits alone at lunch, sitting with students who often eat by themselves, and including classmates who are often left out.

"Talking to someone that is maybe in the corner, that you don't speak to as much, is really the best way."

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

From Awareness to Ownership

Awareness means a student knows what to do. Ownership means the student does it because they believe it matters and feel responsible for the outcome. Closing that gap is the central challenge of student engagement.

Ownership Comes From Input

Students take ownership of what they helped shape. When they have a real role in identifying problems and designing solutions, safety becomes "the way we do things here," not a set of rules handed down by adults.

"You develop ownership by having input into the process. You had a part of it — you've got skin in the game."

Accountability Through Conversation, Not Lectures

In one district, a fifth-grader in a group chat of 29 students threatened to shoot a teacher and then posted pictures of a gun. When classmates pushed back, he did not back down. Only two students told their parents. Those parents called the school, and the situation was resolved before morning.

The next day, the district safety director gathered as many of the group chat members as possible and asked why the other 27 had said nothing. The most common answer was "I knew it wasn't real." That led to a direct conversation. If you believed it wasn't real, why not say so in the chat? And if you didn't know for sure, you had to tell someone.

Reports rose sharply afterward. Many were minor, but they showed the message had landed. The approach worked because the director drew out students' own reasoning instead of lecturing them.

Reinforcement Makes It Last

One conversation in one school fades quickly, especially with middle schoolers. Practitioners pointed to three ways to make the message last:

- **Engage parents** to repeat the same messages at home
- **Recruit partners in every building**, such as teachers, administrators and social workers, who see students daily and can keep the conversation going

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

- **Praise the reporters.** Schools are quick to hold students accountable for failures but slow to recognize those who do the right thing

"We all certainly hold kids accountable when they drop the ball, but we really need to praise the ones that are making the reports."

Making Reporting Normal: Overcoming the "Snitch" Barrier

Student leaders were candid that the biggest obstacle to reporting is social. Students worry about being seen as a snitch or about getting a peer in trouble. Anonymous reporting systems help, but technology alone does not overcome that stigma.

What does help is presenting reporting as care rather than betrayal. Peers make a difference by modeling it themselves. Trust matters most of all. Students said they are far more willing to approach administrators who know them personally.

Effective practices include:

- Promoting anonymous reporting tools consistently, with student leaders as the messengers
- Putting tip line access where students already are: on buses, in hallways and in student media
- Having student leaders say openly that they would report too
- Making sure adults respond visibly and appropriately, so students see reporting leads to action and not to punishment

"When the administrators know our first names, we're 100% more willing to go up to them with concerns."

Teaching Students to Recognize Real Risk

Some districts have built structured "See Something, Say Something" lessons into their health curriculum. One district requires the lesson every quarter for all

seventh graders. It is taught jointly by the district safety director, a school counselor and a building administrator, each presenting specific parts. Including the counselor and administrator, whom students see every day, makes clear this is not just a gun lesson. It is a lesson about why speaking up matters, and students work through realistic scenarios.

The lesson includes a “Real or Fake?” exercise. Students see images of real weapons recovered in the district’s own schools, including a handgun found in a seventh grader’s lunchbox. Some are painted bright orange or made to look like toys. Students consistently guess wrong, which makes the central point: unless you are staring right at it, you cannot tell whether a gun is real or fake.

The program is measured with a pre-survey, a post-survey and a graded exit ticket. The data shows at least a short-term improvement in understanding. Families get a letter about a week in advance with an opt-out option, and very few use it.

These lessons raise honest questions. Some teachers are uncomfortable delivering the material. Practitioners also asked how far public schools should go in this area. Others argued strongly that such lessons are necessary. Many students play violent video games and grow up with little guidance at home. In an active threat, teachers may need students’ help to secure a classroom. If students are not getting these conversations at home, school may be the only place they will.

Where states already require gun safety instruction, districts can use that time to also teach tip line awareness and “don’t touch it, tell an adult” messages.

KEY INSIGHT

Before building new safety lessons, one district audited its entire K–12 health curriculum. It also reviewed what local law enforcement was teaching in schools. It then aligned everything into a single age-appropriate sequence covering drugs, weapons and reporting. The curriculum had not been reviewed in about 30 years. The work was heavy, but it closed gaps and removed duplication students had been experiencing for decades.

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

Sustaining Engagement: Clubs, Curriculum and Continuity

Many student engagement efforts fade when a champion leaves, a grant runs out or a busy year crowds them out. Practitioners agreed that one-off efforts do not last.

Programs last when they are built into the school's normal operations:

- **Curriculum:** When student safety work is a class, like peer mediation, a teacher is assigned to it, students are graded on it, and it has a structural reason to continue.
- **Formal clubs:** A recognized student club with a small stipend and a committed adult sponsor provides continuity and accountability. The sponsor might be a teacher, counselor or school resource officer. Where SROs serve as advisors, students say they grow more comfortable raising safety concerns with them.
- **Ready-made frameworks:** National programs such as Make Our Schools Safe (MOSS) Clubs and SAVE Promise Clubs provide handbooks, monthly activity calendars, starter materials and coaching. Sponsors and students don't have to design a program and run it at the same time.
- **Leadership pipelines:** Effective clubs put underclassmen on their leadership boards so the club continues when seniors graduate. They recruit at freshman orientation, schedule pickup and open house, when new students are looking for a way to get involved.
- **Every grade level:** Adapted versions exist for elementary schools, with simple safety activities, as well as for middle and high schools. Some have now expanded to colleges and universities.
- **Family involvement:** Parent volunteers can support club meetings and events, extending the work into the home.

Policy and Funding

After the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, under the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act (SB 7026), Florida required every school to have a crime prevention student group, and many districts met that requirement through established student safety clubs. Most other states have no such mandate. That leaves student engagement up to local leaders.

Funding does not have to be a barrier. Starting a club typically requires little more than an adult advisor, a few student officers and a starter kit. Districts can use

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

federal Title IV funds, which can support student involvement in safety, campus culture and climate. Some national programs also give small grants for student-identified safety projects developed with the school's security team.

"If you just try to do these pop-up surveys and communications with small groups of students, that will never survive. Someone's going to lose track of it."

Students as Partners in the Human Layer

Even the most advanced security systems can be defeated by ordinary human behavior. A propped side door or a stranger let in out of politeness can undo an expensive access control system. Students are central to closing these gaps.

Student leaders said technology clearly adds to their sense of safety. Cameras, weapon detection, panic buttons, self-locking doors and reinforced glass all give them reassurance. They added that safety also comes from simpler things, such as showing ID at pickup, using the gate pass when leaving early, and keeping doors closed.

To reinforce these behaviors, schools can:

- Post clear signage, such as "Stop the Prop — Keep This Door Closed and Locked," so students and staff can refuse entry without feeling rude
- Teach students directly that closing a door on someone they don't know is the right thing to do, and that everyone should go through the main entrance
- Model the expected behavior consistently, from administrators to parents to visitors
- Train students in practical life-safety skills such as Stop the Bleed and CPR

Student leaders were equally clear about the limits of their role. Students should help raise awareness, encourage peers and speak up about vulnerabilities. Responsibility for physical security remains with administrators and security professionals.

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

"Students shouldn't have the responsibility of keeping an entire school safe. They should be the ones voicing it, encouraging it, and making sure their peers are aware of it."

Student Advocacy in Action

When students are given a real voice and a framework to use it, they can bring about meaningful change. Examples shared include:

- **Graduation requirements:** A student club in New York helped make first aid and CPR training a graduation requirement.
- **Safety projects:** Students worked with school security teams to fund projects such as a front-entrance security cart, first aid and bleeding-control kits, and mental health journals for 250 students.
- **Climate and belonging:** Students have run campus beautification projects, kept bulletin boards of positive notes for peers to take, and assembled thank-you packages for teachers, security staff and SROs.
- **Resilience and wellness:** Clubs have partnered with community resiliency centers on breathing techniques, stress response and leadership training.
- **Community outreach:** Student leaders staff tables at community events, run social media accounts for their clubs, and help start new clubs in other states.

Student leaders described this as resilience in action: turning fear and difficult experiences into positive change that makes future students feel safe, supported and heard.

"Your voice is your power." - Lori Alhadeff

Measuring What Matters

Practitioners were candid that the field lacks strong data on what moves students from awareness to ownership. Much of what schools know is anecdotal. Districts should say so plainly, and should also build measurement into their programs from the start.

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

Useful approaches include:

- Adding safety-specific questions to existing school climate surveys
- Using pre- and post-assessments and exit tickets around safety lessons
- Tracking the number, type and source of tip line reports over time
- Holding structured listening sessions with a wide range of students, not only the usual participants
- Watching informal signs, such as students sending safety ideas and questions to district staff directly

Measurement is imperfect, but the direction is clear. Culture and climate remain the best-supported predictors of a safe school, and student engagement is one of the most direct ways to strengthen both.

Recommendations for School Leaders

1. **Start with a conversation.** Invite a broad mix of students in, provide lunch, and ask open-ended questions about safety, connection and what they would change. Then act on what you hear.
2. **Teach safety explicitly and early.** Don't assume students know what to do. Build age-appropriate reporting education from the earliest grades, and give staff explicit permission to have these conversations.
3. **Build formal structures.** Set up student safety councils, advisory committees, peer-led programs or recognized safety clubs with adult sponsors, a modest stipend and clear goals.
4. **Reach beyond the usual voices.** Actively recruit students who are natural leaders among their peers, along with students in alternative settings and those from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.
5. **Make reporting a form of care.** Promote anonymous tools, use student leaders as messengers, respond visibly to reports, and praise students who come forward.
6. **Engage the whole community.** Send messages home for parents to reinforce. Recruit staff partners in every building. Involve SROs as advisors and mentors.
7. **Embed it so it lasts.** Build student engagement into curriculum, club structures and leadership pipelines. Align safety content across grades and with law enforcement programs.
8. **Use available resources.** Draw on established national student safety club frameworks, Title IV funding and small grants for student-led projects.

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

9. **Measure and refine.** Add safety questions to climate surveys, assess learning, track reporting trends, and adjust based on what the data and students show.

Conclusion

Moving students from awareness to ownership does not depend on one program, lesson or piece of technology. It comes from a school culture where students are trusted, heard and taught clearly. In that kind of culture, speaking up is expected and valued.

Students see what adults miss. When schools invite them in, build structures that last, and keep reinforcing the message from kindergarten through graduation, students become one of the strongest safety layers a school can have. The most important step is the first one: asking students what they think, and listening.

“Just start. It’s always the hardest thing to do, no matter what you do — but just start.”

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.

About ZeroNow

ZeroNow is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit think tank advancing school safety through a collective impact model. Bringing together educators, public-safety professionals, industry leaders, and policymakers, ZeroNow drives coordinated, experience-based solutions to reduce the risk of school violence. Through research, national roundtables, and practical frameworks like the Path to Safer Schools, ZeroNow helps schools strengthen prevention, detection, preparedness, and response.

Visit ZeroNow.org to learn more and to become a supporter.

Contributors:

Members of ZeroNow and the National Council of School Safety Directors who participated in national online and roundtable discussions on this topic. A panel discussion included:

Lori Alhadeff
CEO and Founder
Make Our Schools Safe
MakeOurSchoolsSafe.org
School Board Member
Broward County Schools School Board Member and Former Chair of the Board

Justin Krameisen
Student
Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School
Co-President, MOSS Club

Allison Ofstein
Student
Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School
Co-President, MOSS Club

Major Supporters:

Axon

Motorola Solutions

Omnilert

International Association of Campus Law Enforcement (IACLEA)

VTVCare

Watch the full Conversations video and post questions/comments.

©Copyright ZeroNow, a 501(c)(3) collective impact non-profit organization.