

# **Safer Kids, Safer Schools Task Force**

***Draft Report of March 20, 2023***

**Traverse City, MI**

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# Introduction

Uvalde. Oxford. Parkland. Sandy Hook. The list of school shootings in the United States is unspeakably long. To date, there have been 366 school shootings since Columbine in the U.S. More than 330,000 K-12 students have experienced school gun violence, and 2022 had the highest U.S. incidence of school gun violence on record.<sup>1</sup>

Last year alone, 332 people were shot, fatally or wounded, on a school property (K-12) in the U.S. <sup>2</sup> Three hundred thirty-two is equivalent to an entire graduating class at Traverse City Central High School. Considering the broader impact and trauma of school gun violence on students, educators, first responders, and families - a single bullet has the power to inflict lasting trauma on entire communities.

As a nation, we are failing our children. At the time of this draft report, there have been 11 victims (killed or injured) in nine K-12 school shootings in 2023. <sup>3</sup> It is risky and irresponsible to hope that a school shooting will never happen in our community. From school lockdown and active shooter drills, to arming teachers, installing metal detectors and impenetrable doors, bulletproof backpacks and extra law enforcement, we have focused tirelessly on fortifying our schools. Yet school gun violence continues to impact communities. Research shows that school shootings are preventable.<sup>4</sup> What can we do as a community to prevent school shootings? We need to work together, as a community, to focus on prevention.

***"The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth" - African Proverb***

School shootings are often the result of a larger spectrum of social issues stemming from young people who do not feel safe or supported, and who are increasingly isolated from authentic connections and relationships.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cox, J., Rich, S., Chong, L., Muyskens, J., Ulmanu, M. (February 14, 2023) More than 338,000 students have experienced violence at school since Columbine. Washington Post.

<sup>2</sup> Riedman, David (2022). K-12 School Shooting Database.

<sup>3</sup> Education Week <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/school-shootings-this-year-how-many-and-where/2023/01>

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, J. & Densley, J. (2021) The violence project: how to stop a mass shooting epidemic. New York: Abrams Press (p.3).

<sup>5</sup> Source: GAO analysis of C. David-Ferdon, et al, A Comprehensive Technical Package for the Prevention of Youth Violence and Associated Risk Behaviors (Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016); and C. David-Ferdon and T.R. Simon, Preventing Youth Violence: Opportunities for Action (Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). | GAO-20-455

How can we ensure students have *positive* connections with their peers, parents/caregivers and other caring adults? The overall wellbeing and holistic support of our youth cannot be the responsibility of parents or teachers alone. It takes a village to care for the whole child.

In this report, we will summarize key observations and recommendations from the work of the Safer Kids, Safer Schools Task Force, with the goal of increasing the safety and wellbeing of youth in our schools and our community.

## Background

A group of concerned citizens spoke at the June 2022 Traverse City Area Public Schools (TCAPS) Board meeting to ask, “Are we doing everything we can to protect our kids and educators from school shootings?” Throughout the summer and early fall of 2022, discussions continued with TCAPS Board members and Superintendent Dr. John VanWagoner.

It was agreed that keeping our kids safe is a community responsibility and the best way to support TCAPS, other area school districts, and our community was to form a grassroots task force to become better informed about how to make our schools safer and bring urgent focus to the issue. This group, the Safer Kids, Safer Schools Task Force (SKSS) was formed in October 2022.

While this was a Traverse City-based focus, the results and recommendations from this effort can be applied and enacted in all schools and in most communities.

## Task Force Mission, Vision and Goal

**SKSS Mission Statement:** Engage with our community to ensure we do everything possible to reduce the chance of a local school shooting incident.

**SKSS Vision Statement:** The wellbeing and safety of all children, youth and young adults is assured in Grand Traverse County.

The goal of the SKSS was to engage in open dialogue to learn more about the underlying cause(s) of school violence, explore diverse perspectives, and identify a short list of impactful recommendations to increase the safety and well-being of youth in our schools and our community, today and into the future. The Task Force agreed that it would not focus on guns, gun legislation or related Second Amendment issues. Instead, the group decided to concentrate its efforts on identifying solutions and taking action locally.

*“Our community history and culture demonstrates self-reliance. Rather than wait for the cavalry to save us, we identify problems, find solutions, and implement them.” said one Task Force member.*

## Task Force Composition

The 31 Task Force members represented a variety of ages, backgrounds, professions and perspectives ranging from students and educators, parents and grandparents, alumni, business owners, community non-profits, law enforcement, counselors and health professionals. Participants were recommended to serve on the Task Force by peers, colleagues, administrators, and community members. See Appendix A for a list of Task Force members.

The Leadership team consisted of six community members (listed below), who met regularly to plan, coordinate and implement each session and review participant feedback.

- Jay Berger, Co-Chair/Co-Founder
- Kathleen Guy, Co-Founder
- Kelly Hirko, Co-Chair
- Jonathan Pool, Facilitator
- Michelle Baggett, Administrative and Logistics Support
- Courtney Bierschbach, Communications Support

## Task Force Methodology and Process

Every session started with an overview of the purpose of the SKSS initiative:

1. Clarify the underlying cause(s) of violence in schools.
2. Create a culture of ownership within the community.
3. Align physical safety and well-being efforts to create a secure school environment.
4. Show the community how they can take actionable steps to improve school safety.

The SKSS Task Force met for seven, two-hour, face-to-face sessions from October 2022 through January 2023. A book, [The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic](#), was provided to each Task Force member for background reading. To prepare for each session, participants also reviewed additional school safety resources including articles, presentations, reports and videos (Appendix B). In each session, opportunities for discussion and anonymous feedback were provided. The feedback received throughout the sessions helped shape and guide future discussions as well as provided additional knowledge and context for SKSS members.

The SKSS sessions focused on school physical safety and student well-being. Once confident that the SKSS had achieved a common understanding of issues related to physical safety and student well-being, the sessions shifted to developing recommendations: What does the data say? What is already being done locally? Where are there gaps? What should our community be doing to promote school safety? A summary of each SKSS session is detailed at our website: <https://sksstc.com>.

After spending 350 hours collectively over seven sessions, the SKSS identified five key observations and preliminary recommendations to improve school safety, which are described in the following section of this report. Importantly, the Task Force recognized and commended the significant amount of work currently underway to support school safety in our community. However, there was broad recognition that schools and individual agencies cannot do it alone, nor should they be expected to. Our community must support their work with time, energy, and resources. The challenges are too great and the stakes are too high.

## Public Input

The community will be invited to participate in public input sessions scheduled for April and May 2023. These sessions will be designed to:

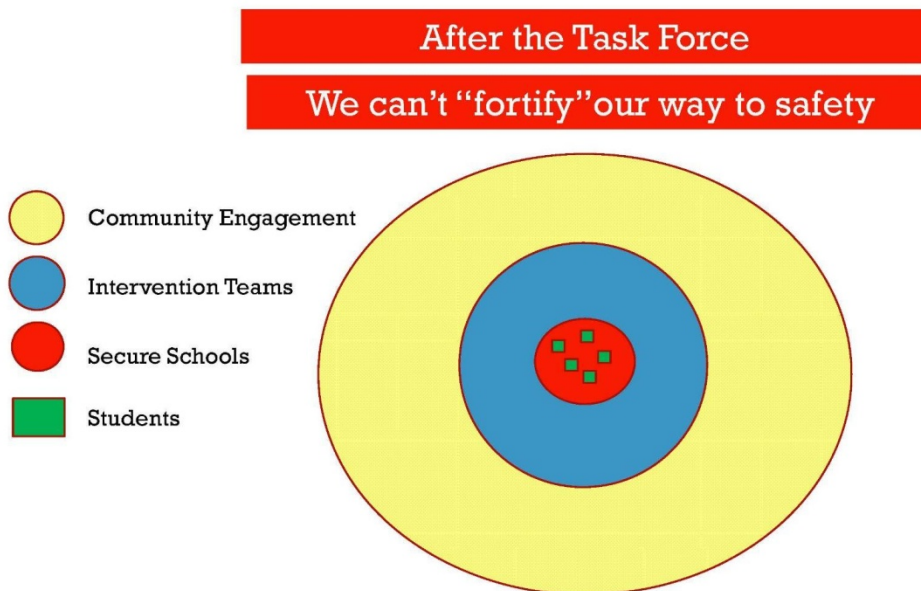
- Enhance participants' understanding of the issues surrounding the need for safer kids and safer schools.
- Engage participants in understanding and prioritizing intervention opportunities related to promoting safer kids and safer schools.
- Involve participants in co-designing implementation strategies for addressing prioritized needs.
- Support the movement-building efforts of the initiative.

The observations and recommendations of the SKSS appear on pages 8-12 and are preliminary drafts. We are eager to involve broader community input to develop more specific and finalized work plan recommendations.

# Observations and Preliminary Recommendations

## # 1: We cannot fortify our way to safety.

- Physical security measures alone do not make schools safe.
- Our local schools scored well on the physical security measures in place according to an audit completed by Secure Education Consultants (<https://secureed.com/>) and delivered to the TCAPS Board in early 2023. Details of the report remain confidential for security reasons.
- TCAPS recognizes the need for additional physical security improvements and they continue to be diligent in making local schools physically secure.
- The SKSS recognized that much is already being done to ensure that our schools are physically safe. But physical fortification and lockdown drills are treating the symptom, and school systems do not have sufficient resources to address the root causes of school gun violence alone.



*“Schools, parents, and community members need to focus on building and repairing connections with children. Prevention, although time intensive, is more effective than responding to crisis situations.” - SKSS Task Force Member*

*“Safety does not just encompass the physical side of it, there is an emotional safety piece that seems to be an even bigger part of the equation. Without addressing the emotional/mental wellbeing of students and young adults there will never be true physical safety.” - SKSS Task Force Member*

**RECOMMENDATION: Increase community awareness.**

- Information about the physical security investments that have already been made in our local schools needs to be more broadly shared across the community.
- Information on the costs of recommended physical school security measures and the limitations of focusing only on physical security measures needs to be more broadly shared across the community.

**# 2: Early student intervention is critical.**

- Educators have developed a variety of methods to track and support student academic performance but standardized processes for tracking and supporting emotional and social development of each student are under-developed.
- Early intervention is key to prevention. Identifying students in need and providing supportive resources early on is critical to prevent escalation to violence.
- The Violence Project has a framework ([www.off-ramp.org](http://www.off-ramp.org)) to assist schools in creating teams for early intervention. Well diversified teams might include members representing: family, a peer, education, mental health professionals, etc.

*“The best defense is a good offense. We need to find at risk kids and get to them before they blow up.” - SKSS Task Force member*

**RECOMMENDATION: Assess and strengthen current programs.**

- Collate a list of school safety programs currently in place and assess how well they are implemented across schools in our community.
- Allocate sufficient resources to build intervention teams and provide support for frequent check-ins and follow-up. Determine if the framework outlined at [www.off-ramp.org](http://www.off-ramp.org) is a best practice and can be implemented locally.
- Teach warning signs of violence and promote the use of reporting platforms (e.g., “OK2SAY”).



### **# 3: Schools cannot do it all.**

- School staffing and financial resources are already fully committed. Educators and administrators go above and beyond to ensure school safety.
- The community has the capacity to play an important role in keeping our kids safe.
- Existing community mental health resources can and do help promote student well-being and school safety, but awareness of and access to these resources is limited.

*"I come from the business world. You can't really appreciate all that our teachers/administrators have to deal with unless you really hear the stories and listen to them share their experiences. It was quite an eye opener to me." - SKSS Task Force member*

### **RECOMMENDATION: Rally the community.**

- Raise awareness regarding the complexities of school safety and SKSS preliminary recommendations. We need all community members to engage with our youth regardless of whether they have kids in school or not.
- Elevate this issue to the highest community priority and inspire community members to act.
- Strengthen and leverage existing community entities (resources) to create a continuum of support for students so that care does not end when they leave school.

#### **# 4: Some students feel isolated and disconnected in their schools and communities.**

- Ninety-eight percent (98%) of school shootings are carried out by young males who often feel like they have nothing to lose.
- School shootings are more likely to be committed by those who feel isolated, bullied and disconnected.
- The presence of one or more caring, committed adults in a child's life increases the likelihood that children and youth will flourish and become productive adults themselves.
- There are many community organizations and faith-based institutions that are already focused on the wellbeing of children and youth in our community.
- We do not know the extent to which children and youth lack positive connections with caring, committed adults in our community.

#### **RECOMMENDATION: Engage caring adults to provide positive and consistent connections.**

- Consult with health professionals, counselors and social workers to identify how to best leverage existing resources as the most expedient pathway to promoting authentic connections, particularly for young males.
- Identify a backbone organization to engage members of the community with children and young people in meaningful ways, and measure and evaluate effectiveness of these programs.
- Ensure that youth are part of this process at every level. They have invaluable insight and perspectives that cannot be provided by adults.

*"Give love to the ones you feel deserve it the least, because they need it the most." – Aaron Stark, TEDx talk "I was almost a school shooter."*

*"When we started, I believed preventing school shootings was an intractable problem. While the causes are complex and the solutions are not easy, I have come to realize that we have the power to help be part of the solution in our community."*  
- SKSS Task Force Member

## **# 5: Community awareness is necessary to engage helpers.**

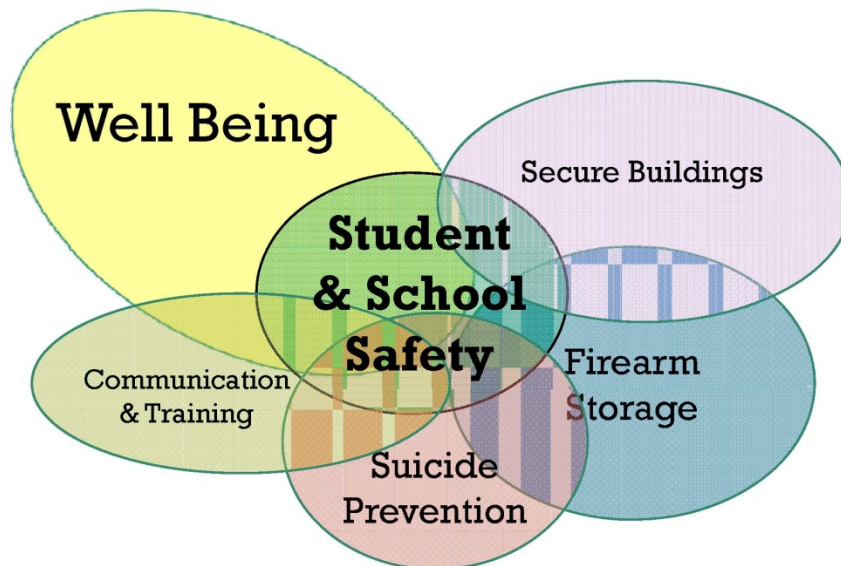
- We must raise awareness in our community and provide practical steps that individual citizens and organizations can take to prevent a school shooting in our community.

*"I'm reminded of this quote from Helen Keller, "Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much." - SKSS Task Force Member*

### **RECOMMENDATION: Invite community input.**

- Invite community input to strengthen the thinking of the SKSS Task Force and its recommendations. These community input sessions will be conducted in April and May, 2023 with generous support from a Rotary Charities Seed Grant Award.
- To provide feedback on this report and the SKSS recommendations, please:
  - 1) Submit online at <https://sksstc.com/community-feedback>.
  - 2) Email [sksstc@gmail.com](mailto:sksstc@gmail.com).
  - 3) Attend a public community input session.
  - 4) Sign-up to stay involved with our efforts at [www.sksstc.com](http://www.sksstc.com).
  - 5) Share this report with someone else.

**Potential Community Framework for Fostering  
Safer Kids, Safer Schools  
The Swiss Cheese Approach**



There are no quick fixes to systemic social problems. For too long, America has either viewed possible solutions in isolation or created false dichotomies that are pitted against each other, from gun safety measures to mental health treatment. Even when solutions have merit, they are wrongly dismissed for being imperfect. The reality is that imperfections do not render solutions completely useless. There is no one solution to rule them all. As with Swiss cheese, there are holes – but if you layer the slices, one on top of the other, the holes start to get covered up. And layering imperfect solutions, holistically, is the only way to prevent mass violence.<sup>6</sup>

## **Final Recommendations**

Based on outcomes from the public input process, the SKSS will incorporate public input recommendations to finalize this report. The final SKSS report will be distributed to TCAPS and other regional schools' administrators, staff and board members, Northwestern Michigan College administrators, faculty, staff and board, law enforcement agencies, elected and appointed officials, non-profit organizations, participants in the Public Input sessions and members of the public.

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<sup>6</sup> Peterson, J. & Densley, J. (2021) The violence project: how to stop a mass shooting epidemic. New York: Abrams Press (p.3).

## Our Thanks

With gratitude, the SKSS recognizes the generous gifts of local individuals and foundations. We give special thanks to Jim and Diana Huckle, the Oleson Foundation and the Art and Mary Schmuckal Family Foundation, whose leadership support enabled us to jump-start this grassroots effort to make our kids, schools and community safer for all.

The SKSS Leadership is indebted to the dedicated voluntary participation of the Task Force members. Members have been resolute in their caring, diligence, honesty, insight and commitment to making our kids, young people, schools and community safer.

The core work of the SKSS was strategically planned, documented and organized by these talented professionals: Facilitator Jonathan Pool, communications specialist Courtney Bierschbach and administrative coordinator Michelle Baggett. We are thankful for their experienced guidance.

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## APPENDIX A—Task Force Members

Berger, Jay—Owner, Independent Wealth Management, Traverse City  
Cole, Chris—Traverse City West Middle School Parent  
Collins, Marshall—Northwest Ed School Health Coordinator  
Curtis, Ty—LMSW, TC Counseling Solutions  
Dickinson, Lindsey—Director of Academic Advising, Northwestern Michigan College  
Guy, Kathleen—Owner, Eaton Cummings Group  
Hettich, Kristin—Director of Community Development, Rotary Charities of Traverse City  
Hirko, Kelly—Assistant Professor, MSU Traverse City Campus  
Houghton, Jessie—Principal, Traverse City Central High School  
Janie Sulecki—Student, Traverse City Area Public Schools  
Jarvi, Ryan—Northwest Ed Director of Communications  
Johnson, Seth—Executive Director, United Way of Northwest Michigan  
Kadlec, Ginger—Executive Director (Ret.), Traverse Bay Children’s Advocacy Center  
Kass, Alyson—Munson Community Health  
Knapp, Emily—LPC, Leelanau Life Counseling  
LaRue, Barb—Michigan Department of Health and Human Services  
Jeremy Martinchek—Athletics and Facilities, Grand Traverse Catholic Schools  
McManus, Patrick—Safety Coordinator, Traverse City Area Public Schools  
Migazzi, Lisa—Executive Director, Traverse Bay Children’s Advocacy Center  
Minor, Genevieve—Teacher and Librarian, Traverse City West Senior High  
O’Brien, Jeff—Chief of Police, Traverse City  
Perthes, Marci—Counselor, Traverse City West Middle School  
Plumstead, Norm—President and CEO, Honor Bank  
Schmidt, Ty—Founder and CEO, Good Works Lab  
Sides-McKay, Angela—Principal, Traverse City Willow Hill Elementary School  
Simon, Sophie—Student, Traverse City Area Public Schools  
Stachnik, Claire—Student, Traverse City Area Public Schools  
Sullivan, Jessica—President, Legado Family Office  
Wade, Steve—Vice President of Community Impact, Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation  
Zuidersma, Deirdre—Counselor, Traverse City West Senior High School

## APPENDIX B—Resources

While there are countless resources available on the internet, this curation was utilized by the SKSS members over the course of seven meetings. If viewing this report electronically, the bullet points provide links to online documents when applicable. If viewing a print copy of this report please visit [www.sksstc.com/resources](http://www.sksstc.com/resources) to access direct links.

Please note presentations including data sets and statistics were up to date at the time of presenting but are not maintained. Individual presentations include sources where applicable.

### General Resources

- The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic by Jillian Peterson Ph.D.
- EducationWeek Article: School Shootings This Year: How Many and Where (2022)
- Additional Resources in the Community

### Session One – October 4, 2022

- Presentation on Gun Violence in America by Kelly Hirko

### Session Two – October 18, 2022

- Presentation on Social and Emotion Learning by Carol Greilick

### Session Three – November 1, 2022\*

\*Please note this session was postponed.

- Article to read prior to session: St. Louis School Shooting Tuesday
- Article to read prior to session: Ethan Crumbley admits guilt to murder in Oxford High School shooting

### Session Three – November 15, 2022

#### Required

1. Questions on physical safety submitted to TCAPS Superintendent Dr. John VanWagoner and GT County Emergency Management Coordinator.
2. Bio for Presenter Gregg Bird and Information about the GT School Safety Collaborative
3. Article to read prior to session: Michigan Superintendent Makes Proposals to Prevent School Shootings

4. Article to read prior to session: Final recommendation for State of Michigan School Safety Task Force 2018
5. Michigan Profile For Health Youth Survey For Neighboring Counties
6. Interview with Superintendent John VanWagoner

#### Recommended

1. Recommended Article: Trained, Armed, and Ready. To Teach Kindergarten (may need to register to read)
2. Alpena Superintendent Letter to Families on 2022-2023 School Security
3. Recommended Article: How to Keep a School Safe (references metal detectors)
4. Recommended Article: School Shooting Warning Signs
5. Recommended Book: Lockdown Drills: Connecting Research and Best Practices for School Administrators, Teachers, and Parents by Jaclyn Schildkraut and Amanda Nick
6. Recommended Article: 'We have to do something': Michigan school district considers arming staff, Detroit News

#### Post- Session

1. GT Lock and Secure Mode Definition and Roles

### **Session Four – December 6, 2022**

#### Required

1. Blog posts recapping each session
2. Feedback cards submitted by Task Force members at the end of session 3
3. Interview with Superintendent John VanWagoner (if not already reviewed)
4. School Mass Shooters Graphic
5. The Violence Project book – Chapter #5 Relationships, Chapter #9 Hope
6. Review and familiarize yourself with the Additional Resources document

#### Recommended

1. The Off Ramp – The R Model (Ready \* Respond \* Refer \* Revisit)

### **Session Five – December 20, 2022**

#### Required

1. Michigan School District Hires Mental Health Coordinator (1-minute read)
2. Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model (5-minute read)

#### Recommended

1. The Off Ramp – The R Model (Ready \* Respond \* Refer \* Revisit) (20-minute read)



## **Sessions Six and Seven – January 6 and 20, 2023**

Sessions Six and Seven focused on reviewing prior session recaps and discussing what had been learned during sessions One through Five to identify key observations and propose recommendations.