

Strategy Brief on the Children & Youth Community Plan Safety & Belonging Priority Area

What We Learned from Students: Experiences, Root Causes, and Ideas for Solutions

Through the Youth Needs Assessment and follow-up conversations, students shared consistently that violence and conflict are the result of layered social, emotional, relational, and systemic conditions that shape how safe students feel day-to-day. The following explains these conditions in more detail.

Students' Exposure to Violence, Conflict, and Unsafe Situations

When students were asked to talk about the violence, conflict, and unsafe situations they hear about or encounter, they described a continuum of harm, including:

- Fights and physical altercations at school, on buses, and after school
- Bullying, harassment, and gossip both in person and online
- Bias-based harassment tied to race, religion, appearance, or identity
- Threats, rumors, videos of fights, and fear of weapons or shootings
- Aggressive or inconsistent adult and security responses

"Every month there is always a fight, and I experienced bullying in school a lot of times. It makes me think that school is not safe."

"I see fights all the time."

"Students go to friends instead of adults because they don't feel adults will back them."

These experiences shape how safe students feel emotionally, socially, academically, and physically.

Many students said violence and conflict:

- Make them anxious or distracted at school
- Reduce their sense of belonging
- Interfere with learning and focus
- Lead some students to avoiding school altogether

"Coming into school makes you feel desensitized. Things seem so unserious. We've grown used to this - bomb threats, stabbings."

"My parents almost didn't let me come to this school because of fights. Doesn't feel like it's getting better."

"If students see violence at school or are being bullied, they won't want to come to school which affects the school community."

"I was bullied and it made me not want to come to school, which affected my grades."

For some, violence feels normalized while for others it creates constant fear and hyper-vigilance.

Students See Conflict as Escalating Through Relationships

Students repeatedly emphasized that most conflicts start small and escalate when underlying issues are not addressed. Common triggers include:

- Gossip, rumors, and social media posts

- Verbal harassment and name-calling
- Romantic or peer relationship conflicts
- Feeling embarrassed, disrespected, or provoked
- Pressure to “perform,” show toughness, or gain respect

“Social media has a big contribution to fights.”

“Fights at least once a week due to cyber-bullying/name calling.”

“People fight because of mean comments said to each other, or they want to be suspended, or they were provoked.”

Students noted that peer pressure and the desire to belong often push conflicts further, especially when walking away is seen as weakness. Importantly, students also described how online conflict frequently becomes in-person conflict, with social media accelerating rumors, retaliation, and public attention.

Stress, Trauma, and Emotional Overload Are Major Drivers

Students consistently linked violence and conflict to high levels of stress and emotional strain, including:

- Balancing school, work, family responsibilities, and social pressures
- Experiencing instability at home or in their community
- Exposure to violence, threats, or trauma outside of school
- Feeling overwhelmed, misunderstood, or unsupported

“Conflict w/parents or lack of supportive adult.”

“May be bringing family violence to school. Doesn’t help to punish but to try to understand where violence is coming from.”

“There’s still a lot of violence happening out of school and some people bring it into school. Some students feel heard, but there are also students who have issues that they think are serious but won’t talk to someone else. The emotions that some people feel can be dangerous for other students.”

“Need help managing day to day life.”

“Stress, students are balancing a lot of priorities - social, school, work - makes us feel like we should give up.”

Many students said they and their peers lack effective tools to manage strong emotions, communicate during conflict, or de-escalate situations, especially when adults respond with punishment rather than support.

Some described becoming desensitized to violence over time, which can make harmful behavior feel “normal” or less serious.

Trust Gaps with Adults and Systems Deepen the Problem

One of the strongest themes was lack of trust, particularly with adults, school staff, and systems meant to keep students safe.

Students shared that:

- They don’t always trust adults to listen, respond fairly, or protect their privacy
- Reporting concerns can feel risky or pointless if nothing changes

- Inconsistent enforcement of rules makes policies feel arbitrary or unfair
- Aggressive or biased treatment by adults or security can escalate situations

“Counselors shouldn't escalate the problem.”

“Students do not trust adults at school so they do not tell anyone about problems or conflict.”

“Respect goes both ways. We don't feel like we get any.”

“Security at Minnie Howard is stricter and tougher than King Street.”

“Different treatment from security guards depending on how students look. If I'm wearing a black hoodie, I get stopped all the time. Different students – like Hispanic students - get stopped all the time and treated differently. That's racial profiling.”

“If someone is already aggravated and they get yelled at for being late or having their phone, they are not going to respond well.”

“My friend had a conflict with security guard. She felt stalked by the guard and stopped coming to school. She had to go to the police because he sent many messages threatening her. She transferred.”

How adults respond matters as much as the rules themselves. As a result, students often turn to peers instead of adults, even when conflicts feel unsafe.

Safety Is Shaped by Individuals *and* Systems

Students emphasized that violence and unsafety are not only about individual behavior, they are shaped by systems and environments, including:

- Overcrowded hallways and limited access to space
- Inconsistent monitoring in certain areas (e.g., bathrooms, buses)
- School discipline practices that feel punitive rather than restorative
- Policies that address symptoms but not root causes
- Safety concerns in surrounding neighborhoods and transit areas

“The halls [at school] feel out of control.”

“In this big space, there's still overcrowding because they don't let us use the space.”

“Suspension and expulsion don't work. They stop violence in school but not in the community.”

“Why are security guards fighting with students?”

Many students said that disciplinary responses like suspension or expulsion don't resolve conflict and may push violence into the community rather than preventing it.

Students Want Safety to Mean Belonging, Respect, and Support

Perhaps most importantly, students told us that feeling safe is inseparable from feeling respected and valued.

They want:

- Adults who listen and de-escalate rather than punish first
- Fair, transparent systems they can trust
- Support for mental health and emotional wellbeing

- Positive spaces and activities after school
- Opportunities to build relationships and community
- A school culture where conflict is addressed early and constructively

“Stop sugarcoating and be honest and open.”

“Lack of access to support and lack of trust in adults mean that students have less ways to deal with conflict or people to talk to that know how to effectively help someone. Listen empathetically, not escalate it.”

“It’s hard to gain trust with the counselors, students don’t feel they can talk to counselors.”

“Conflict between administration and students. We want more transparency from administration. There’s no respect for administration from students because we don’t like how they treat us.”

“There’s lots of violence in many schools. Violence doesn’t make ACHS unique. But the administration is not helpful. They like to treat us like children, so when we act like children, they get mad and ask us to behave like adults.”

“I have a friend that doesn’t want to go to class because a teacher is calling students names and calling them dumb.”

“Many students don’t want to come to school at all. Administrators don’t treat students with respect. Not feeling treated as a human being.”

Students see safety as something that must be built *with* them as partners.

Summary of How Students Frame the Problem

From students’ perspectives, violence and unsafety are driven by:

- Unaddressed stress, trauma, and emotional overload
- Peer dynamics, social pressure, and online escalation
- Lack of trust in adults and inconsistent system responses
- Environments that intensify conflict rather than prevent it
- Limited opportunities for belonging, connection, and positive engagement

See students’ recommended solutions on the next page!

CYCP Strategy Directions

Youth recommendations clustered around 11 interconnected strategy areas. These actions were drafted based on youth ideas.

Increase physical and emotional safety for youth in schools and communities

Strategic Direction #1	Rationale
Strengthen adult roles, training & accountability	Students consistently connected safety to how adults show up, not just whether adults are present.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Develop a required annual training series for teachers, administrators, counselors, and security staff focused on: - De-escalation and conflict mediation - Adolescent development and trauma-informed practices - Cultural responsiveness and implicit bias	
b) Establish clear intervention protocols for bullying, threats, and early conflict signals.	
c) Create adult coverage plans for known hotspots (hallways, bathrooms, dismissal zones).	
d) Implement feedback loops where students can report harmful adult behavior safely.	
Outcomes	
- Adults intervene early instead of reacting after fights occur - Fewer escalations involving staff - Students report feeling respected and taken seriously	

Strategic Direction #2	Rationale
Expand access to safe afterschool and enrichment opportunities *	Students see boredom, isolation, and lack of structure as contributors to conflict.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Increase funding for after-school programs that provide safe, supervised spaces.	
b) Expand clubs, sports, arts, and job-readiness programs, especially for students not already engaged.	
c) Partner with community organizations to offer evening and weekend programming.	
d) Launch an outreach campaign so youth know what programs exist.	
Outcomes	
- Fewer students “hanging out” in unsafe spaces after school - Stronger peer relationships - Increased student engagement and belonging	

Strategic Direction #3	Rationale
Improve community-level safety conditions	School, transit, and neighborhoods are interconnected.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Conduct youth-informed safety audits of neighborhoods, routes, and gathering spaces.	

b) Improve lighting, crosswalks, and crossing guard coverage near schools and transit.
c) Support neighborhood watch or community safety ambassador programs that include youth voices.
d) Coordinate school and community safety planning to address spillover violence.
Outcomes
• Safer routes to and from school • Reduced after-school and evening conflicts • Youth feel safer beyond school grounds

Address root causes of conflict and violence

Strategic Direction #4	Rationale
Expand mental health and therapeutic supports	Students directly connect untreated stress, stigma, and emotional overload to violence.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Increase school-based counseling capacity, prioritizing culturally responsive providers.	
b) Normalize help-seeking through mental health literacy lessons and peer conversations.	
c) Provide confidential access points for students seeking help.	
d) Train staff to recognize early signs of emotional distress linked to violence.	
Outcomes	
• Students seek help earlier • Reduced stigma around counseling • Fewer conflicts escalating from unmanaged stress	

Strategic Direction #5	Rationale
Build students' conflict-resolution and coping skills *	Students repeatedly said many peers "don't know how to resolve conflict."
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Integrate conflict resolution, communication, and emotional regulation into curriculum or advisory.	
b) Expand violence prevention education beyond one-off assemblies.	
c) Create mentorship and accountability supports for students involved in repeated conflicts.	
d) Promote school-wide norms around respect and problem-solving.	
Outcomes	
• Students have language and tools to resolve conflict • Fewer repeat incidents • Improved school climate	

Increase trust, transparency, and early reporting

Strategic Direction #6	Rationale
Strengthen reporting systems and follow-through*	This was the single most frequently named solution across schools.

Recommended Actions from Students	
a)	Fully implement and promote a division-wide anonymous reporting system.
b)	Guarantee reporter protection so students aren't punished for coming forward.
c)	Establish clear follow-up timelines so students know reports matter.
d)	Increase transparency around why decisions are made and what happens after reports.
Outcomes	
- Increased reporting of concerns <i>before</i> violence occurs - Greater student trust in systems - Fewer "everyone knew it was going to happen" incidents	

Strategic Direction #7	Rationale
Improve transparency and communication across systems	Students believe inconsistent or misaligned policies can worsen conflict.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a)	Clearly explain school safety decisions and policies to students.
b)	Coordinate responses across schools, families, and community partners.
Outcomes	
- Students better understand <i>why</i> decisions are made, even when they don't fully agree with them. - Reduced confusion and misinterpretation of safety policies	

Ensure fair, effective, and preventative school responses

Strategic Direction #8	Rationale
Refine security and enforcement systems	Students distinguish between "security presence" and security effectiveness.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a)	Reduce reliance on suspension and expulsion.
b)	Expand restorative and relationship-based responses to conflict.
c)	Review emergency protocols with student input.
d)	Reassess phone policies with a safety + trust lens.
e)	Ensure rules are consistently enforced across students and schools.
Outcomes	
- Fairer discipline outcomes - Less resentment and disengagement - Fewer conflicts pushed outside school walls	

Create security systems that protect without harming trust

Strategic Direction #9	Rationale
Improve security staffing, training, and oversight	Students do not feel reassured by technology alone without trust and follow-through.
Recommended Actions from Students	

a) Hire and retain professionally trained security staff
b) Require training in de-escalation, bias awareness, and relationship-building
c) Establish clear accountability standards for security conduct
Outcomes
• Security reduces conflict rather than escalating it • Students feel protected, not targeted • Fewer complaints about inconsistent enforcement

Strategic Direction #10	Rationale
Use surveillance and technology strategically to improve weapons prevention and detection	Students report awareness of weapons being brought to school, express fear of school shootings, and question the effectiveness of current weapons detection technology.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Address blind spots in hallways and bathrooms	
b) Ensure surveillance is safety-focused, not punitive	
c) Maintain reliable detection and monitoring tools	
Outcomes	
• Increased perception of physical safety in known risk areas • Improved legitimacy of surveillance tools • Faster, more accurate response to incidents	

Elevate youth as leaders in safety and belonging

Strategic Direction #11	Rationale
Expand youth leadership and peer-led solutions	Students emphasized that solutions work best when created with youth.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Expand peer mediation and conflict navigation programs.	
b) Fund youth-led safety, wellness, and awareness campaigns.	
c) Create formal roles for youth in safety planning and evaluation.	
d) Invest in trust-building spaces between youth, adults, and officers.	
Outcomes	
• Students intervene before conflicts escalate • Youth feel ownership over safety • Stronger peer norms around care and accountability	