

THE COOPER SCHOOL



ONE PRIVATE K-8 GRADE SCHOOL'S COMMITMENT TO SAFETY

2020 CHILD PROTECTION CASE STUDY

20 YEARS **DARKNESS TO LIGHT**[®]
TWO DECADES OF PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

As one of South Carolina's progressive independent schools, the Cooper School believes that "children are vital, capable, contributing members of society." They hold to the philosophy that educational institutions should create a safe, nurturing, and inclusive environment where children learn and thrive. As such, they put child protection at the core of their culture, maintaining a firm commitment to their relationship with Darkness to Light.

THE ISSUE

In the past decade, numerous media reports have made incidences of violence in schools highly visible, including cases of child sexual abuse. Many schools across the nation have worked to determine what more they can do to protect the safety of their students and staff. The Cooper School began to search for ways to create the safest space for their students and ensure that their staff are prepared for all scenarios. In 2015 they adopted Darkness to Light's *Stewards of Children*® child sexual abuse prevention training and made it mandatory for teachers. The school's entire teaching staff, board members, and community were all on board and ready to learn.

THE RESULT

Since 2018 the Cooper School has trained 40 adults in prevention and changed many of their behaviors to ensure that they are doing everything possible to protect the children in their care. Their thorough prevention procedures help them achieve an annual distinction as a Darkness to Light *Partner in Prevention*. All staff and teachers are required to pass background checks and non-staff chaperones (e.g. parents, aunts, uncles, etc.) must also pass a background check before they can participate in field trips or events. Classrooms are designed so that all interactions between adults and children are interruptible and observable to minimize the opportunity for abuse. Because of *Stewards of Children*®, teachers are familiar

with the signs of abuse and how to check in with students as their “safe adult.” Child safeguarding is a regular focus area in professional development opportunities for staff.

“I really don’t think teachers realize what an issue sexual abuse is... It’s so important that everybody who comes into contact with children receives this training. It’s very eye opening.”

– Anne Wil Winfield, Director of Admissions & Operations at The Cooper School

Engaging with Darkness to Light has increased The Cooper School’s desire to continue their prevention work by inviting professionals such as therapists into the school to better equip parents and teachers. For example, they’ve asked local therapists to engage in an open dialogue with families on how to discuss child sexual abuse prevention and mental health. The Cooper School’s consistent attention to detailed child-safeguarding makes it a model for lower-school institutions.