

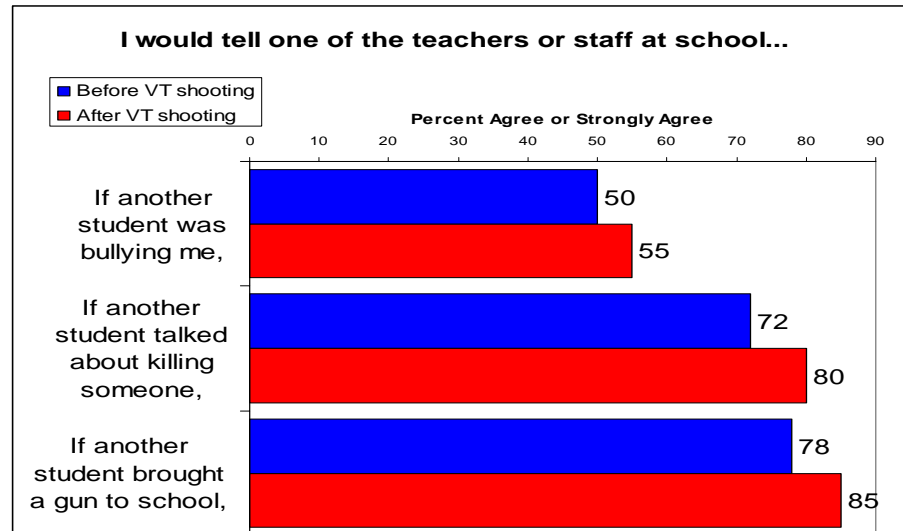
Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study

Issue 4

How Can We Encourage Students to Seek Help to Prevent Violence?

Students may know in advance that a classmate is threatening to commit a violent act, but are reluctant to seek help. The VHSS measured the willingness of 9th grade students to seek help for problems such as a classmate bullying, threatening, or bringing a gun to school. Schools varied widely in how willing their 9th grade students were to seek help from teachers or other adults at school. A hierarchical linear modeling analysis found that students were most willing to seek help in schools with a supportive school climate. Supportive climate was defined as student perceptions that their teachers care about them, listen to them, and treat them with fairness and respect. This finding held up across schools of different size and percentages of low income and minority students.

Because the student survey was conducted in the spring of 2007, it was possible to compare results before and after the April 16 shooting at Virginia Tech. The two groups of schools did not differ in student demographics, reports of victimization, or perceptions of school climate. However, students completing the survey after April 16 showed greater willingness to seek help from a teacher or staff member at school, suggesting that the event increased their awareness of the need to report threats of violence. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion (15-45%) of students remained unwilling to seek help for a threat of violence.



Practical Suggestions. Although the majority of students are willing to seek help, schools should encourage all students to come forward to prevent an act of violence. VHSS results suggest that students will be more willing to seek help when (1) they are reminded of the serious consequences of violence and (2) believe that their teachers have positive regard and respect for them. Schools should strive for a school climate where students feel that their teachers treat them with fairness and respect. Students should be taught the difference between *snitching* (personal gain from getting someone else in trouble) and *seeking help* (no motive other than preventing violence).

Study Overview. The Virginia High School Safety Study was designed to identify effective policies and practices in Virginia public high schools. Safety conditions were measured using school discipline records, safety audit surveys, and surveys of approximately 7,400 9th grade students and 2,900 9th grade teachers in 294 schools. This is a correlational study that can support, but not prove, causal relationships. The VHSS was conducted by Dewey Cornell, Anne Gregory, Xitao Fan, and Peter Sheras of the Curry School of Education in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Center for School Safety of the Department of Criminal Justice Services. The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Study conclusions do not necessarily reflect policies or recommendations of these state and federal agencies. For more information, see the website for the Virginia Youth Violence Project: <<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>>.

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Issue 5

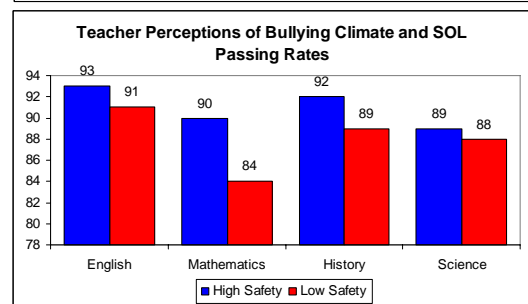
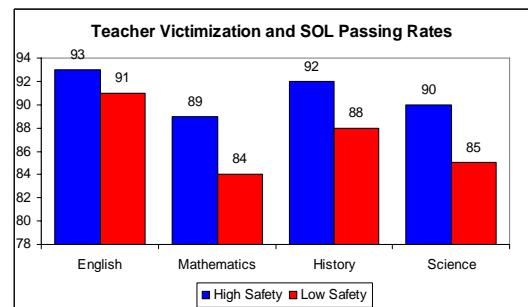
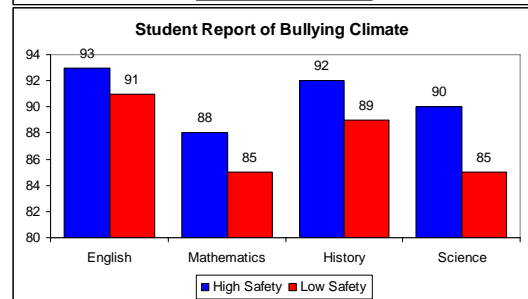
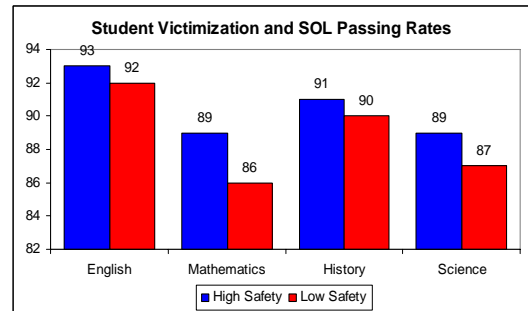
Does School Safety Influence SOL Achievement?

Most Virginia high schools have a high passing rate on the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests, but those with greater student and teacher safety have an even higher rate. To measure school safety for students and teachers, our survey asked randomly selected samples of 9th grade students: (1) how frequently they are victims of thefts, threats, abusive language, and assaults (victimization); and (2) how much bullying and teasing they observe at school (bullying climate); and asked 9th grade teachers: (3) how often they are victims (teacher victimization); and (4) how much student bullying and teasing they observe at school (teacher perceptions of bullying climate). Multiple regression analyses found that all four measures of safety were predictive of one or more of the schoolwide (grades 9-12) passing rates for English, Mathematics, History, and Science, even after controlling for the percentage of minority students and percentage of students receiving a free or reduced price meal in the school.

The charts show the passing rates for schools in the top third versus bottom third on each safety measure. For example, schools with student victimization rates in the top third of the state had an average Mathematics SOL passing rate of 86 percent, but schools with the lowest (safest) levels of victimization had an 89 percent average passing rate. Although the percent gains are small, they reflect *schoolwide* rates (grades 9-12) and they are consistent across all measures and they are statistically significant improvements above and beyond differences due to student demographics. Certainly the quality of academic instruction is critical to SOL achievement, but school safety conditions can make a clear difference in the school's overall passing rate.

Practical Suggestions. Schools may be able to improve their SOL passing rates by improving school safety conditions. School should make systematic efforts to reduce victimization of students and teachers as well as the level of teasing and bullying among students. In previous reports, we pointed out the importance of a balanced approach to school safety that emphasizes both support for students and a clear and consistent discipline policy.

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Issue 6

Why do suspension rates vary so much from school to school?

In 2006-07, the typical Virginia high school issued 10-19 suspensions per 100 students, but there was a wide range, from 35 schools that had fewer than 5 suspensions per 100 students to 19 schools that had 30 or more suspensions per 100 students. Three high schools had rates that exceeded 50 per 100 students. Why do suspension rates vary so much from school to school? (These figures combine short and long-term suspensions and count suspensions rather than students, so that one student could be suspended multiple times and increase the school's suspension rate).

We used hierarchical multiple regression to assess how much variance in suspensions was associated with population characteristics, starting with (1) Size of the student body, and then adding (2) Urbanicity (census population density per square mile); (3) Poverty rate (% of students eligible for free/reduced price meals); (4) Student commitment to school and belief in school rules (survey of 9th grade students); and (5) Minority composition (% nonwhite students).

As the pie chart shows, a total of 55.3% of the variance can be explained by school population characteristics – most notably student body size (29.5%; as would be expected, larger schools have more suspensions), poverty rate (16.3%), and minority composition (6.3%). Relatively little of the variance is associated with the urban-rural location of the school (1.3%) or student commitment to school and belief in school rules (1.8%). After considering all these factors, there is still a great deal of unexplained variance across schools (44.7%).

Practical Suggestions. Schools with high suspension rates should carefully consider why so many students are being suspended (including some students who are suspended multiple times). *Schools with comparable student demographics are not suspending at similar rates.* Much of the variance among schools cannot be explained by the student demographics we measured. There is a body of educational research suggesting that school suspension is not an effective way to improve student behavior and often leads to declining behavioral and academic outcomes for students. This suggests that schools with high suspension rates may be engaging in a counterproductive practice.

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