

School Climate and Safety in Virginia High Schools:

Technical Report of the Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey,

2014 Results for 9th - 12th Grade Students and Teachers

Executive Summary



Acknowledgements

Many individuals and organizations contributed to this effort, including the Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety of the Department of Criminal Justice Services, the Virginia Department of Education, and the Virginia Youth Violence Project and Youth-Nex, the Center for Effective Youth Development at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia. We especially thank Donna Michaelis and Jessica Smith of the Department of Criminal Justice Services and Cynthia Cave of the Department of Education. We thank the 323 Virginia public schools for their participation in the school climate surveys.

Survey design, data analyses, and preparation of this report were conducted by faculty and students of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. The University of Virginia research team included Juliette Berg, Dewey Cornell, Pooja Datta, Anna Heilbrun, Francis Huang, Tim Konold, Anna Lacey, Patrick Meyer, Erin Nekvasil, and Kathan Shukla.

We thank Ann Bevans-Selig and Scott Brunner of Ann Bevans Collective for survey report software development.

We thank our research advisory board: Catherine Bradshaw, Jonathan Cohen, Michael Furlong, Matthew Mayer, David Osher, Russ Skiba, and Patrick Tolan.

This project was supported by Grant #2010-TY-FX-0005 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

Recommended citation: Cornell, D., Huang, F., Konold, T., Meyer, P., Shukla, K., Lacey, A., Nekvasil, E., Heilbrun, A., & Datta, P. (2014). *Technical Report of the Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey: 2014 Results for 9th - 12th Grade Students and Teachers*. Charlottesville, VA: Curry School of Education, University of Virginia.

Executive Summary

The Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey was administered in the spring of 2014 as part of the annual School Safety Audit (§ 22.1-279.8) by the Center for School and Campus Safety in the Department of Criminal Justice Services, in cooperation with the Virginia Department of Education.

Anonymous online surveys were completed by 48,027 students and 13,455 teachers in grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 from 323 public high schools. Schools could choose to survey all students or a randomly selected sample of 25 students per grade. Participation rates were high for schools (99.7%) and students (88.7%), but lower for teachers (56.5%). Both the student and teacher surveys covered two domains: school climate and safety conditions. The school climate domain included perceptions of the school's disciplinary practices, student support efforts, and degree of student engagement in school. The safety conditions domain covered reports of bullying, teasing, and other forms of peer aggression, including threats of violence, physical assault, and gang activity.

Each school received a single report with results from students and teachers. All reports compared individual school results to state and regional averages, so that schools could identify strengths as well as areas in need of improvement. In addition, each school received a comma-separated values (csv) data file containing summary results for each item at each grade level.

Statewide results for students

School climate. The majority of students described positive and supportive relationships with their teachers and other adults at school. Students endorsed the view that most teachers (and other adults at school) want all students to do well (86%), care about all students (74%), and treat students with respect (74%). More than 95% of students reported that there was at least one teacher or other adult at their school who really wants them to do well and 76% said there was an adult at school they could talk with if they had a personal problem.

Students have widely different views of their school climate, but the majority has favorable perceptions of their school's rules and disciplinary procedures. Students reported that their school rules are fair (67%), that the punishment for breaking school rules is the same for all students (61%), and that students are treated fairly regardless of their race or ethnicity (79%).

Strong student engagement in school was reflected in the high percentages of students who said they liked school (84%), are proud to be a student at their school (81%), and feel like they belong at their school (76%).

When asked about their educational aspirations, 98% of students expect to graduate from high school. The overwhelming majority (87%) expect to obtain some form of post-secondary

education, including two-year college (9%), four-year college (39%) and post graduate studies after graduating from a four-year college (39%).

Safety conditions. Most students (82%) reported that they feel safe in their school, but this appears to be an area for improvement. One reason why some students might not feel safe is that 38% of all students reported that bullying is a problem at their school and 6% reported being bullied once or more per week at school this year. Most students reported that students are teased or put down about their clothing or physical appearance (67%), sexual topics (55%), sexual orientation (40%), and race or ethnicity (36%).

A substantial number of students reported that another student stole something from them (30%), physically attacked, pushed, or hit them (17%), or threatened to hurt them (21%) at school this year. Students were asked how they reacted to the worst time that they were bullied or harmed at school this year. Students reported that this experience made them feel angry (58%), sad (49%), or like they didn't want to come to school (30%). Only 19% of students told a teacher or another adult at school what happened.

Statewide results for teachers

School climate. The majority of teachers reported that the students know rules for conduct (90%), but there were mixed responses to the statement that “the punishment for breaking school rules is the same for all students” (56%). Nearly half of teachers (46%) agreed that “students can get away with breaking the rules at this school pretty easily,” and only 64% said they feel that “the disciplinary practices at this school are effective.”

Teachers had mixed views regarding school suspension practices. About half of teachers agreed that “zero tolerance significantly contributes to maintaining order” (51%), although less agreed that “suspension makes students less likely to misbehave in the future” (44%).

Teachers overwhelmingly characterized the relationships of students with teachers and other adults in their school as supportive. Almost all teachers said that the teachers and other adults at their school want all students to do well (98%), care about all students (97%), and treat students with respect (96%).

Teachers were asked to rate the effectiveness of 13 different kinds of student support programs in their school. In many cases teachers reported that they did not know whether a program existed at their school, and in some cases teachers in the same school had conflicting views of whether or not the program existed. Overall, the most frequently identified programs were:

- Bullying programs (80%)
- Individualized behavior plans for disruptive students (82%)

- Mentoring services (79%)
- Truancy prevention/intervention (76%).

Those teachers who reported that their school had a program were next asked to rate the effectiveness of this program. The highest ratings (moderately effective or very effective) were given to:

- Bullying programs (42%)
- Individualized behavior plans for disruptive students (40%)
- Mentoring services (46%)
- Truancy prevention/intervention (32%).

In 2013 the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation mandating public schools to establish threat assessment teams. The establishment of these teams is confirmed in the annual safety audit survey of school principals. The teacher survey inquired whether teachers were aware that their school uses a “formal threat assessment process to respond to student threats of violence.” Only 37% of teachers were aware that their school uses threat assessment, 3% did not think their school did so, and 59% responded “I don’t know.”

Teachers described their students as highly engaged, reporting that students generally liked school (91%) and are proud to be at their school (87%).

Safety conditions. A large majority of teachers reported that they feel physically safe at their school (91%) and that there is adequate safety and security at their school (72%). Approximately 28% said that they worry about someone committing a shooting at their school.

Only 33% of teachers reported that bullying is a problem at their school, although more agreed that students are teased or put down about their clothing or physical appearance (45%), sexual topics (37%), sexual orientation (33%), and race or ethnicity (27%).

Most (86%) teachers reported that they are treated with respect by their students. They were asked about their experiences of aggressive behavior in their interactions with students, parents, and colleagues. Teachers reported that a student engaged in the following actions at least once during the school year:

- Said rude or insulting things to them (62%)
- Stole or damaged personal property (21%)
- Threatened to harm them (10%)
- Physically attacked, pushed, or hit them (4%)
- Threatened them with a weapon (0.9%).

Teachers reported that a parent engaged in the following actions at least once during the school year:

- Said rude or insulting things to them (36%)
- Threatened to complain about them to the administration (28%)
- Threatened to harm them (2%)
- Physically attacked, pushed, or hit them (0.3%).

Some teachers also reported that a colleague said rude or insulting things to them (22%) and a small number (0.8%) reported that a colleague threatened to harm them.

Overall, Virginia high school students and their teachers reported that their schools are safe and supportive places for learning. Students consistently described supportive relationships with their teachers and positive feelings toward their school. Both students and teachers reported that they feel physically safe at school, but many students reported problems with bullying, teasing, and other forms of peer aggression. Teachers overwhelmingly reported that their students treated them with respect, but most had experienced a student who said rude or insulting things to them at least once during the school year and a smaller percentage reported being threatened (10%) or physically attacked (4%). One area of concern is that teachers have mixed views of the consistency and effectiveness of school discipline. Another concern is that many teachers reported little knowledge of the student support programs available in their school. The individual school survey reports prepared for each high school can provide a springboard for examination and discussion of these issues as part of the school improvement process.

Future reports

The full report describes the survey process and presents some descriptive results. See our website (<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>) for future reports that address:

- Analyses of differences associated with gender, grade, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, including determination of scales that can be used across demographic groups;
- Identification of school discipline and support practices that are associated with fewer discipline problems and safer school conditions;
- Identification of school-level factors that are associated with higher student engagement, academic achievement, and graduation rates;
- Identification of practices that help to reduce racial and socio-economic disparities.