Technical Report of the Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey: 2013 Results for 7th and 8th Grade Students and Teachers
Executive Summary
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The Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey was administered in the spring of 2013 as part of the annual School Safety Audit (§ 22.1-279.8) by the Center for School Safety in the Department of Criminal Justice Services, in cooperation with the Virginia Department of Education.

Anonymous online surveys were completed by 43,805 students and 9,134 teachers in grades 7 and 8 from 423 public schools. Schools could choose to survey all students or a randomly selected sample of 25 students per grade. Participation rates were high for schools (98%), students (85%), and teachers (79%). The student and teacher surveys covered two domains: school climate and safety conditions. The school climate measures included perceptions of the school’s disciplinary practices, student support efforts, and degree of student engagement in school. The safety conditions covered reports of bullying, teasing, and other forms of peer aggression, including threats of violence, physical assault, and gang activity.

Each school received two reports: one for its student results and one for its teacher results. 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.

Statewide results for students

School climate. The majority of students reported favorable perceptions of their school’s rules and disciplinary procedures. Students reported that their school rules are fair (64%), that the punishment for breaking school rules is the same for all students (62%), and that students are treated fairly regardless of their race or ethnicity (77%). Most students (56%) agreed that the rules are enforced in a strict but fair manner, with some students (15%) viewing discipline as more lax and others (29%) describing discipline as more harsh.

A large 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 (89%), care about all students (75%), and treat students with respect (72%). More than 93% of students reported that there was at least one teacher or other adult at their school who really wants them to do well and 70% said there was an adult at school they could talk with if they had a personal problem.

Strong student engagement in school was reflected in the high percentages of students who said they liked school (79%), are proud to be a student at their school (79%), and feel like they belong at their school (70%). Students overwhelmingly endorsed the idea that getting grades is important to them (96%) and that they want to learn as much as they can (92%). When asked about their educational aspirations, 97% of students reported that they expected to graduate from high school, and 81% reported that they expected to attain a four-year college degree or higher.
Safety conditions. Most students (77%) 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 half (50%) of all students reported that bullying is a problem at their school and 13% reported being bullied once or more per week at school this year. A substantial number of students reported that another student stole something from them (42%), physically attacked, pushed, or hit them (34%), or threatened to hurt them (32%) 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 (52%), sad (45%), like they didn’t want to come to school (29%), or so badly that life did not seem worth living (18%). Only 22% of students told a teacher or another adult at school what happened. When asked about gangs, 13% of students reported gangs at their school and only 3% said that they had considered joining a gang.

Statewide results for teachers

School climate. The majority of teachers reported that the school rules are fair (93%) and that students are treated fairly regardless of their race or ethnicity (90%), but there were mixed responses to the statement that “the punishment for breaking school rules is the same for all students” (52%). Teachers generally did not view rules to be as strictly enforced as did students. Nearly half of teachers (49%) agreed that “students can get away with breaking the rules at this school pretty easily,” and only 59% said they feel that “the disciplinary practices at this school are effective.”

Teachers had mixed views regarding school suspension practices. Only about half of teachers agreed that “zero tolerance significantly contributes to maintaining order” (50%) and that “suspension makes students less likely to misbehave in the future” (53%).

Teachers overwhelmingly characterized the relationships of 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 (99%), care about all students (97%), and treat students with respect (96%). Teachers also agreed that students know who to go to for help if they have been treated badly by another student (94%), and that students are encouraged to report bullying and aggression (97%).

Teachers were asked about 15 different kinds of student support programs in their school. The first series of questions asked whether such programs were available in their school. The most frequently identified programs were:

- Counseling services (96%)
- Bullying programs (83%)
- Individualized behavior plans for disruptive students (82%)
Mentoring services (72%).

In many cases, however, teachers reported that they did not know whether such a program existed in their school. Notably, many teachers did not know whether their school had a substance abuse prevention or intervention program (46%), an anger management program (45%), student assistance programming (44%), a social skills curriculum (34%), a truancy program (33%), peer mediation (33%), or a method to report a safety concern anonymously (30%). Although character education is mandated in Virginia schools, it is noteworthy that only 55% of teachers reported that they had a character education program, with 22% reporting they did not have character education, and 24% reporting that they did not know.

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:

- Counseling services (65%)
- Classroom management training (64%)
- Methods for students to report safety concerns (60%).

Teachers described their students as highly engaged, reporting that students generally liked school (90%), are proud to be at their school (85%), and feel like they are a part of their school (90%). They were somewhat less likely to agree that getting grades is very important to most students (71%) or that most students at their school want to learn as much as they can (66%).

Safety conditions. A large majority of teachers reported that they feel physically safe at their school (90%) and that there is adequate safety and security at their school (73%). Approximately 25% said that they worry about someone committing a shooting at their school.

Nearly half of all teachers (45%) reported that bullying is a problem at their school and only 60% agreed that students treat one another with respect in their school. Like students, few teachers (12%) reported the presence of gangs at their school.

Teachers were asked about their own 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 (68%)
- Stole or damaged personal property (29%)
- Threatened to harm them (12%)
- Physically attacked, pushed, or hit them (6%)
- Threatened them with a weapon (1%).
Teachers reported that a parent engaged in the following actions at least once during the school year:

- Said rude or insulting things to them (41%)
- Threatened to complain about them to the administration (30%)
- Threatened to harm them (2%)
- Physically attacked, pushed, or hit them (< 1%).

Some teachers also reported that a colleague said rude or insulting things to them (24%) and a small number (1%) reported that a colleague threatened to harm them.

**Future reports**

This report describes the survey process and presents some descriptive results. Future reports will address:

- Psychometric analyses to develop a small number of reliable scales that make survey results simpler and easier to use;
- 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.
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