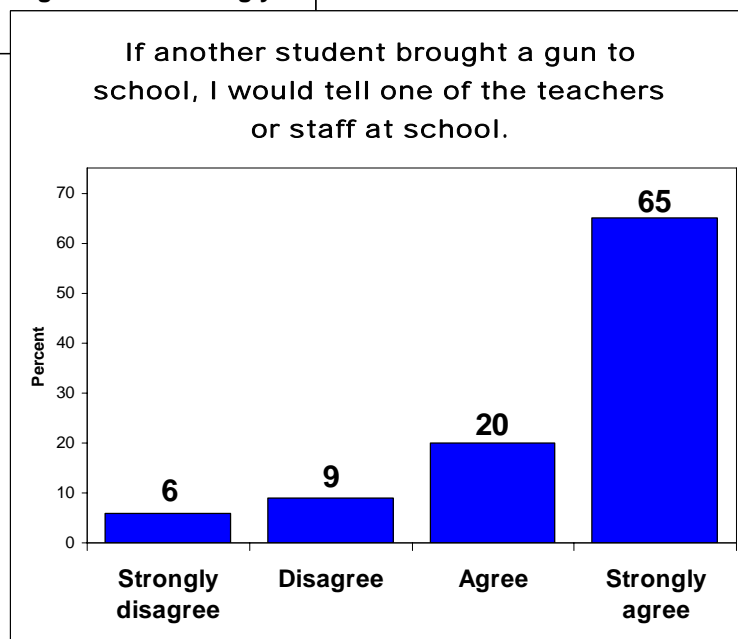
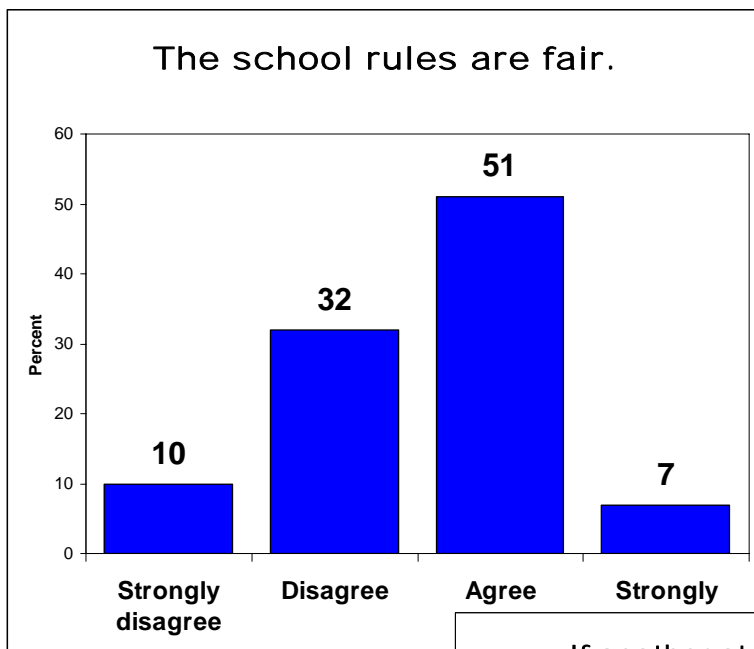


# Virginia High School Safety Study: Descriptive Report of Survey Results from Ninth Grade Students and Teachers

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## Executive Summary

*Chapter 1. Purpose of the Study.* The purpose of the Virginia High School Safety Study is to identify student safety, discipline, and support policies that best maintain a safe and orderly environment conducive to learning. The project is being completed by researchers at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, in collaboration with the Virginia Center for School Safety of the Department of Criminal Justice Services and the Virginia Department of Education. One component of this larger project was a school climate survey administered to ninth-grade students and teachers as part of Virginia's 2006-07 school safety audit program. This report provides a detailed review of survey results, item by item and scale by scale, but does not address the broader study questions that are still under investigation. This report does not review the research literature or theory regarding school climate, does not test formal hypotheses, or make recommendations for school practices. These matters will be addressed in additional reports.

*These survey results are limited to the responses of ninth-grade students and teachers, so they do not necessarily represent their whole school.* Surveys results will be integrated with additional data from the whole school in subsequent reports.

*Chapter 2. Study Methods.* Principals in each of Virginia's public high schools were asked to select approximately 25 students and 10 teachers using a series of random numbers provided by the researchers. Of 314 eligible schools, 296 schools submitted student surveys and 291 schools submitted teacher surveys. Approximately 7,400 ninth-grade students and 2,900 ninth-grade teachers completed the online survey during the spring of 2007.

The student survey consisted of standard scales designed to measure:

1. School structure (such as perceived fairness of rules, security measures, awareness of zero tolerance, daily enforcement of school rules);
2. Student support efforts (willingness to seek help from teachers, perceptions that the learning environment is supportive);
3. Student engagement (commitment to school, belief in school rules, trust in teacher authority, extracurricular involvement, perception that teachers encourage students to work hard, absence of aggressive attitudes);
4. Student victimization (various forms of victimization ranging from personal theft to being threatened, bullied, or assaulted; perceptions that there is a lot teasing and bullying at school, presence of gangs at school).

The teacher survey was similar to the student survey, but measured teacher perspectives on:

1. School structure (such as perceived fairness of rules, security measures, awareness of zero tolerance, daily enforcement of school rules);
2. Student support efforts (student willingness to seek help from teachers, teacher encouragement of help-seeking, and perceptions that administrators are supportive of teachers);
3. Student engagement (how much teachers encourage students to work hard); and

4. Teacher victimization (various forms of victimization ranging from personal theft to being threatened or assaulted; perceptions that there is a lot teasing and bullying at school, presence of gangs at school).

*Chapter 3. Student Survey Descriptive Results.* Most ninth-grade students regarded their school rules to be strictly enforced, but fair. They reported trust in their teachers and acceptance of their authority. They believed their friends do not support breaking school rules, with the exception of copying homework assignments. They disavowed aggressive attitudes. They expressed willingness to seek help from their teachers if a student brought a gun to school or talked about killing someone, but were much less willing to seek help for bullying. Only about half of the students said they like school. Most students said they found school boring, but nevertheless reported that they work hard and want to get good grades.

Students reported varying rates of victimization. About one in five students reported theft of personal property, one in four reported being threatened by a student, and one in eight reported being physically attacked.

Overall, about half of the students perceived that bullying was a problem at their school. About one in five students reported being bullied in the past 30 days, although fewer than half of those students reported telling someone that it happened. One in twelve reported being bullied at least once per week.

When asked about the general school climate, nearly three-fourths reported that students were teased about their physical appearance, about half reported teasing about sexual topics, and about one-third reported that students are often put down because of their race or ethnicity. However, about three-fourths also indicated that new students are made to feel welcome and that students from different neighborhoods get along. Over 80% agreed that “students at this school accept me for who I am.”

*Chapter 4. Teacher Survey Descriptive Results.* Most ninth-grade teachers regarded their school rules to be fair, but had mixed opinions about enforcement. Most teachers thought that students would be caught if they got in a fight or cut class, but were less confident about smoking or wandering in the hall. Only about half thought that school rules were rigorously enforced and most did not regard their dress codes as strict. Nevertheless, most teachers expressed confidence in how their administrators handle school discipline. They also agreed that administrators are supportive of teachers and treat them fairly.

The large majority of teachers reported an atmosphere in which students are free to seek help for problems such as bullying. Almost all teachers claimed that they personally encourage students to come to them for help. They consistently reported that their school fosters the social and emotional development of their students, provides instruction to prevent substance use, and has programs to resolve conflicts and provide character education. Most teachers also indicated that students are challenged to do thoughtful academic work.

Teachers reported low rates of victimization for problems such as physical attacks at school. Approximately 4% reported being physically attacked in some way, with about one quarter of

these attacks requiring medical attention. About one in five teachers reported verbal threats, two in five reported obscene remarks or gestures, and four out of five reported being spoken to in a rude or disrespectful manner by a student.

Overall, about half of the teachers regarded bullying as a problem at their school, although a large majority reported that new students are made to feel welcome and that students from different neighborhoods get along. More than half reported that students tease one another about physical appearance and sexual topics, but fewer than one-third reported that students are often put down because of their race or ethnicity.

*Chapter 5. Comparison of Student and Teacher Surveys.* There was modest agreement between ninth-grade students and teachers in their perceptions of school rules. Predictably, teachers were more likely than students to judge the rules to be fair and students were more likely than teachers to perceive the rules as strictly enforced. There was moderate agreement between students and teachers in their perception of how closely students are supervised at school, although teachers were more likely than students to think that students will be caught for various infractions.

There was high agreement between students and teachers in identifying what kinds of security measures (e.g., security cameras, security guards, and metal detectors) are in use at school. There was low agreement, however, in awareness of zero tolerance policies for infractions such as bringing a gun, BB gun, toy gun, drugs, or alcohol to school. Teachers reported slightly higher rates of zero tolerance policies than did students. The comparison of students and teachers highlights an obvious, but important feature of all surveys, which is that they represent the *perceptions* of the respondents. In future reports, student and teacher perceptions can be compared with data from other sources, such as principal reports on the school safety audit surveys.

*Chapter 6. Student Perceptions of School Climate Associated with Student Enrollment, Poverty, and Minority Status.* This chapter used student perceptions of school climate to compare schools on three demographic characteristics: (1) number of students enrolled; (2) percentage of students receiving a free or reduced price meal; and (3) percentage of minority students. These three demographic variables are only modestly intercorrelated: school size was correlated -.42 with the percentage of low income students and .35 with the percentage of minority students, and the percentage of low income students was correlated .31 with the percentage of minority students. These correlations may seem contrary to conventional expectations, but reflect the demographic composition of Virginia schools. For example Virginia has a number of small rural schools that enroll a large percentage of low-income white students. Additional analyses of the relationships among these demographic characteristics will be undertaken in a future report.

The correlations summarized below are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), but many are relatively small in magnitude. They indicate areas of concern in schools that are larger, have more low-income students, or a greater proportion of minority students. These correlations do not, however, indicate that these schools are unsafe or unhealthy environments or that these school characteristics caused the differences in school climate.

Although school size did not matter for most survey items, there were some differences that favored smaller schools. Ninth-grade students in larger schools perceived a less supportive school climate and were less willing to seek help from a teacher. They were also less likely to report involvement in extracurricular activities. Although there were no school size differences for most forms of victimization, students in larger schools were more likely to report theft of personal property and having a weapon pulled on them. They were also more likely to report gangs in the school and to indicate that those gangs have been involved in drug sales and violence at school. It should be noted that all the survey questions reflect student perceptions, and do not establish that gangs are present or not present in different schools.

In schools with more low-income students, ninth-grade students perceived less fairness in how rules are enforced and less support from adults in the school. Curiously, they reported less willingness to seek help from teachers, but more occasions when they did seek help or advice from a teacher. They reported less commitment to school and less trust in teachers, and described their friends as less respectful of school rules. They endorsed more aggressive attitudes and described more teasing and conflict in the school climate. They were more likely to report being bullied or physically attacked, and having personal property stolen.

In schools with higher proportions of minority (nonwhite) students, there was a student perception that teachers would be more likely to overlook a student coming late to class or making a sarcastic remark, and that students would be less likely to be caught cutting class. Students perceived teachers as less supportive, but nonetheless rated themselves as more committed to school. They described their friends as less likely to accept school rules and themselves as less trusting of teachers. They were less likely to report involvement in extracurricular activities.

Furthermore, students in schools with more minority students were less likely to express willingness to seek help for bullying. They were also less likely to seek help for a threat of violence such as a fellow student bringing a gun to school or talking about killing someone. However, students did report more occasions when they asked a teacher for help or advice about an academic matter or something that worried them.

Students from schools with higher proportions of minority students were more likely to endorse aggressive attitudes, to report teasing about clothing and physical appearance, and to indicate more conflict among students from different neighborhoods. They were more likely to report being bullied. They reported more incidents of being physically attacked and having a weapon pulled on them (although both were relatively rare events). Like students in larger schools, they were more likely to report gangs in the school and to report that those gangs have been involved in drug sales and violence at school.

#### *Chapter 7. Teacher Perceptions of School Climate Associated with Student Enrollment, Poverty, and Minority Status.*

This chapter examined how teacher perceptions of school climate varied across schools based on school enrollment, student income, and minority status. The correlations summarized below are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), but many are relatively small in magnitude. They indicate areas

of concern in schools that are larger, have more low income students, or a greater proportion of minority students, but do not necessarily mean that these schools are unsafe or unhealthy environments. These correlations do not demonstrate that these school characteristics caused the differences in school climate.

In larger schools, ninth-grade teachers reported more security measures, but less strict enforcement of school rules and less confidence in administrator handling of disciplinary matters. They expressed feeling less supported by the school administration. They reported more health and prevention programs, but perceived students as less willing to seek help. They were less likely to encourage students to come forward if they have information about a gun at school or a student who plans to hurt someone.

Ninth-grade teachers in larger schools were more likely to report victimization, particularly obscene remarks or gestures from a student. They perceived a less positive school climate, with more conflict among students from different neighborhoods and more students being put down because of their race or ethnicity. Like the ninth-grade students, teachers in larger schools were more likely to report gangs in the school and to report that those gangs have been involved in drug sales and violence at school.

Ninth-grade teachers in schools with higher proportions of low income students reported relatively few consistent differences from other teachers. They perceived more awareness of zero tolerance policies, and less emphasis on health and prevention programs in their schools. Teachers in schools with a higher proportion of students from low-income families experienced higher rates of victimization, particularly verbal threats, obscene remarks, serious physical attacks (although rare), and theft of personal property.

In schools with higher proportions of minority students, teachers reported less confidence that the school rules were fair and strictly enforced. They reported more security measures, but a less structured school environment, with students less likely to be caught cutting class, smoking, or getting into a fight. Teachers were more likely to overlook students coming late to class or making a sarcastic remark.

Teachers in schools with higher proportions of minority students consistently perceived less support from their administrators and described less confidence in how they handle disciplinary matters. They reported less emphasis on health and prevention programs

Furthermore, these teachers felt that students were less likely to express willingness to seek help for bullying or a threat of violence such as a student bringing a gun to school or talking about killing someone. Teachers perceived a consistently less favorable school climate, with more teasing and bullying, and gangs.

Teachers in schools with higher proportions of minority students experienced more victimization, including verbal threats, rude and obscene remarks, physical attacks, and theft of personal property.

*Chapter 8. Correlates of Student and Teacher Victimization.*

School safety is essential to maintaining an environment conducive to learning. In support of this view, the correlations of victimization rates with schoolwide SOL passing rates were examined. These are preliminary analyses using relatively simple correlational analyses that will be followed up with more complex analyses controlling for potentially confounding variables. These analyses are presented to illustrate the kinds of questions that can be investigated in subsequent phases of this project.

Schools with higher rates of teacher victimization had lower passing rates in Science, Mathematics, English, and History SOL exams, even after controlling for school size, the percentage of low income students, and the percentage of minority students in the school. Similarly, ninth-grade student victimization was correlated with lower passing rates in Mathematics and English SOL exams. It was surprising to observe these correlations since most of the students taking SOL exams were not ninth graders. It would appear the ninth grade victimization rates are sufficiently indicative of school climate trends that they are correlated with academic performance on the SOL exams. The statistical significance of the correlations were maintained even after using partial correlations to control for school size, the percentage of low income students, and the percentage of minority students in the school. These findings will be examined in more detail in future reports when additional SOL data are available.

One indication of how victimization rates could influence teaching and learning is that ninth-grade student victimization rates were correlated with lower student commitment to school and lower academic press (how much teachers press students to really think and do their best work).

It is important to identify school characteristics that increase victimization rates and in turn depress student achievement. Several findings are highlighted in this chapter:

- Victimization rates were higher in schools with gangs.
- Victimization rates were lower in schools with stricter dress codes.
- Victimization rates were lower in schools with higher teacher support of students.
- Victimization rates were lower in schools with higher administrative support of teachers.
- Victimization rates were lower in schools with higher daily structure (more likely enforcement of school rules).

It is important to note again that these findings are correlational; they do not establish a causal relationship between school climate and victimization levels. However, these findings do support the theory of authoritative school discipline that underlies this project and they indicate important directions for further study that will be examined in future reports.

*Chapter 9. Participant Reactions to the Survey.* The survey period began on April 1, 2007, about two weeks before the Virginia Tech shooting on April 16. Surveys completed before April 16 were compared to those completed after April 16. Overall, these analyses showed no large changes in survey results. The most notable changes were that after the shooting, students expressed greater willingness to seek help from teachers if a student brought a gun to school (increasing from 78% to 85%) or if a student talked about killing someone (increasing from 72% to 80%).

After the student and teacher surveys were completed, principals completed a brief online survey that invited them to write any comments they had about the study. All 87 comments are included in this report. Although many principals found that the survey process went smoothly and praised the project, others noted that it was time-consuming to select participants and they encountered technical difficulties with the online survey and video instructions. Many also questioned the timing of the survey because of the need to prepare for SOL exams.

Students and teachers also had an opportunity to write comments on their surveys. The vast majority chose to comment on school climate and safety conditions. For example, a teacher commented:

“I have taught for over 40 years, and I have never seen an administration try so hard to make both students and teachers feel appreciated. We pick students of the month on a regular basis and reward them for their academic and behavioral efforts. We sometimes get students who have never been successful at anything, and before they leave our school, they DO become successes. This makes our whole society safer.”

There were 1,593 student comments, including 58 that praised the survey (“The survey was an excellent idea for the school”) and 48 that criticized the survey (“This survey was stupid because no one is going to listen to it and change what the students want changed.”)

The most commonly expressed student concerns were complaints about school safety (179 comments), bullying (121), the fairness of school rules (112), weapons at school (68), the dress code (67), drugs (56), fighting (52), racism (47), and gangs (39).

There were many positive comments by students who felt safe and supported at school. Here are three examples:

1. “This is a great school, but all schools have flaws, all schools have bullies. Safety is not an issue here. I can go to school without worrying about my personal safety.”
2. “I feel very safe at this school and the teachers have all treated me well.”
3. “I think that our school is a very safe place to be and I wouldn’t pick any other place to be that I could be more safe.”

This Executive Summary presents a selected sample of survey results intended to give a broad overview of study findings. There are many additional results in the report that may suggest interpretations and conclusions not presented here. Readers are cautioned that the findings are descriptive and correlational, and do not necessarily indicate causal relationships. Moreover, this is a study in progress, with additional data analyses and reports to come.



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