



**Authoritative School Discipline is Linked to  
Safer Schools and Higher Achievement:**  
*Results from the Virginia High School Safety Study:*

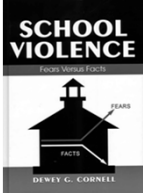
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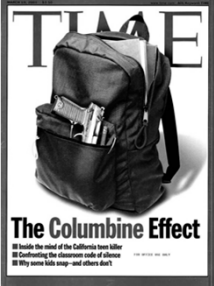



**Dewey G. Cornell, Ph. D.**, is a forensic clinical psychologist and Professor of Education in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. Dr. Cornell is Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project and a faculty associate of the Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy.

Dr. Cornell has studied youth violence for over 20 years and has assisted numerous schools in the development of violence prevention programs. He has authored more than 100 publications in psychology and education, including two recent books: *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence* and *School Violence: Fears versus Facts*.



**The disconnect between youth violence and school safety practices:  
Zero Tolerance**



**From No Guns to**

- No Toy Guns
- No Nail clippers
- No Plastic utensils
- No Finger-pointing
- No Jokes
- No Drawings
- No Rubber band shooting

*No Accidental violations*

**The disconnect between youth violence and school safety practices**

**Cub Scout utensil gets boy, 6, school suspension**  
First-grader brought it to eat his lunch with; now he's facing reform school

By Mike Celliac  
TODAYShow.com contributor  
updated 58 minutes ago

Dressed in a button-down shirt and tie and speaking calmly and articulately, first-grader Zachary Christie hardly looks or acts like the sort of kid who should be spending 45 days in reform school. But, thanks to a zero-tolerance policy, that's where Zachary's Delaware school system wants him to go after he made the mistake of taking his favorite camping utensil to



Launch

if fork, spoon, has been got it to take is. "He eats rything else, so i would have a 6-year-old's JAY's Meredith

Today Show

**Virginia High School Safety Study**

How the study was designed and conducted

The identification of authoritative schools

1. Effects on bullying
2. Effects on teacher victimization
3. Suspension practices and dropout rates
4. Threat assessment


Authoritative school practices

**Virginia High School Safety Study**

How are school safety practices in Virginia's public high schools related to student outcomes?

- Student safety conditions
- Student discipline infractions
- Academic achievement

Aggressive Discipline Violations in Virginia High Schools (per 100 students)




## Virginia High School Safety Study

Conducted by a research team at the Curry School of Education (Cornell, Gregory, Fan, & Sheras)

In collaboration with:

- Virginia Department of Education
- Department of Criminal Justice Services and Center for School Safety


Funded by U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention



## Virginia High School Safety Study

### Data Sources

- Surveys of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students and teachers
- School discipline records
- School safety audit data
- SOL results
- Dropout data




## Virginia High School Safety Study

### How was the survey carried out?

Written and video instructions for

- Principals
- Teachers
- Students




Adrianna Sgarlata, Miss Virginia 2006

## Virginia High School Safety Study

### Who participated in the study?

296 of 314 schools (94%)

1. 7,431 ninth grade students
2. 2,353 ninth grade teachers




## Virginia High School Safety Study

### Conceptual model for study

Two strategies underlie school safety efforts:

1. **Structure** – school discipline and order
2. **Student support** – efforts to support and engage students



## Four Parenting Styles

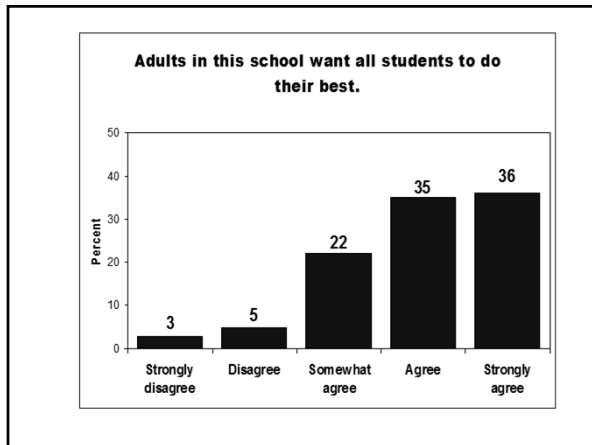
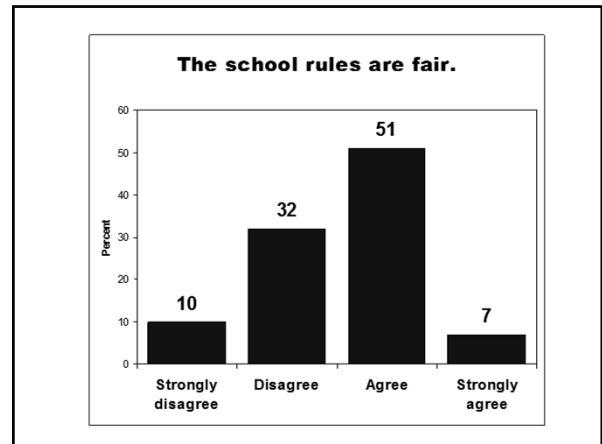
		Structure	
		Hi	Lo
Support	Hi	Authoritative	Permissive
	Lo	Authoritarian	Negligent

Derived from parenting research by psychologist Diana Baumrind

### Virginia High School Safety Study

#### School climate factors

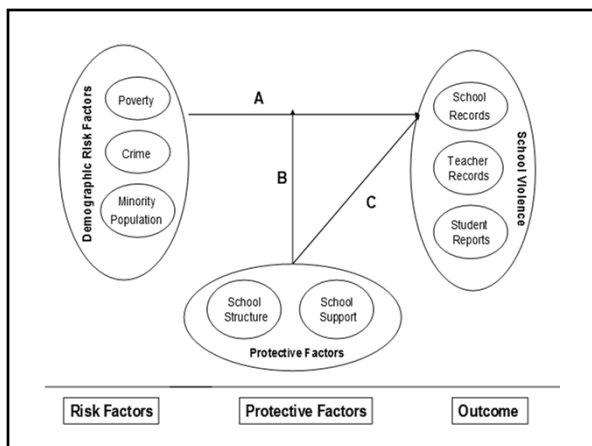
1. Structure
  - Rules are strictly enforced, but fair
2. Support
  - Teachers treat me with respect, willing to seek help from them.



### Virginia High School Safety Study

4 groups of schools

		Structure	
		Hi	Lo
Support	Hi	104	45
	Lo	41	99



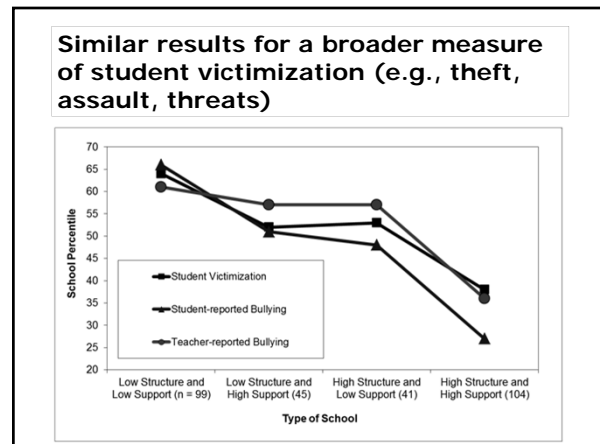
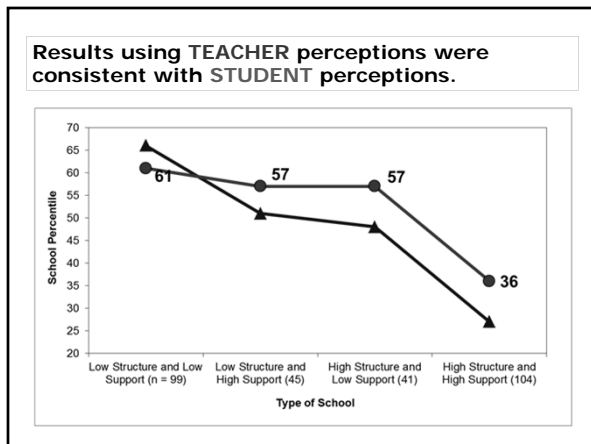
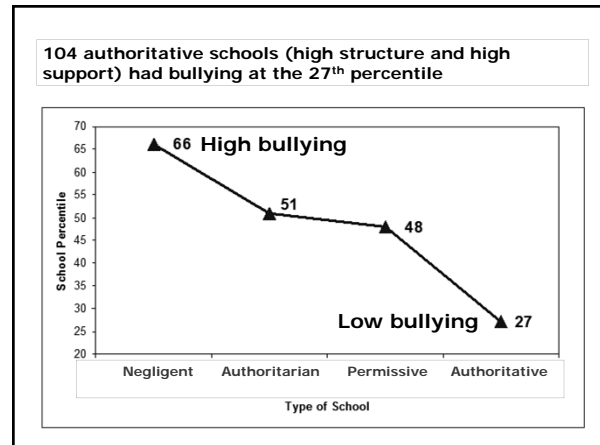
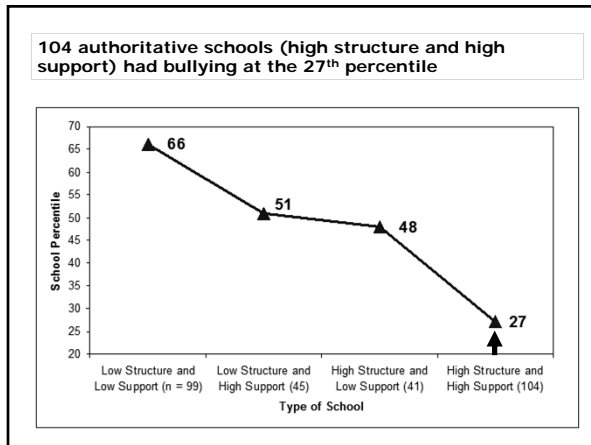
### Virginia High School Safety Study

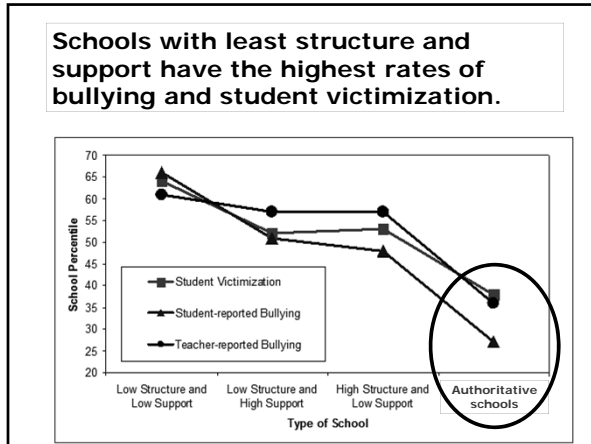
**How are structure and support related to student bullying and victimization?**

<b>Bullying Climate Scale</b>	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	Agree/ Strongly Agree
Bullying is a problem at this school.	53	47
Students here often get teased about their clothing or physical appearance.	29	71
Students here often get put down because of their race or ethnicity.	65	35
There is a lot of teasing about sexual topics at this school.	45	55

- Stable factor structure
- Works for males and females, grades 6-12, white and minority students
- Teacher and student versions

<b>Victimization</b>	False	True
<b>This year in school have any of the following happened to you personally in the school?</b>		
Damage to personal property worth more than \$10.	85	15
Theft of personal property worth more than \$10.	80	20
Was physically attacked and had to see a doctor	96	4
Was physically attacked, but not serious enough to see a doctor.	87	13
Received obscene remarks or gestures from a student.	49	51
Was threatened in remarks by a student.	72	28
Had a weapon pulled on me.	96	4





**Virginia High School Safety Study**

Schools do not have to choose between “get tough” and “be supportive” policies, but should strive for both. However, rules must be enforced in a fair and consistent manner that respects and supports students.

**Teacher Victimization**

This year have any of the following happened to you personally in the school?	% of teachers (2,870)
Had a weapon pulled on me.	.3
Was physically attacked and had to see a doctor.	1
Was physically attacked, but not seriously enough to see a doctor.	3
Damage to personal property worth more than \$10.	14
Theft of personal property worth more than \$10.	15
Was threatened in remarks by a student.	20
Received obscene remarks or gestures from a student.	43
Was spoken to in a rude or disrespectful manner by a student.	84

**Teacher Victimization**

**What school characteristics are linked to lower levels of teacher victimization?**

**Teacher Victimization**

**After controlling for:**

- School size
- Student poverty %
- Minority students %
- Urbanicity

**Lower victimization in schools with:**

- Higher structure
- Higher support

**Teacher Victimization**


**Schools in which teachers are strict but fair, as well as supportive, have less teacher victimization.**

## Suspension Practices

EDUCATION AND TREATMENT OF CHILDREN Vol. 34, No. 2, 2011

High Suspension Schools and Dropout Rates for Black and White Students

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Rutgers University  
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University of Virginia


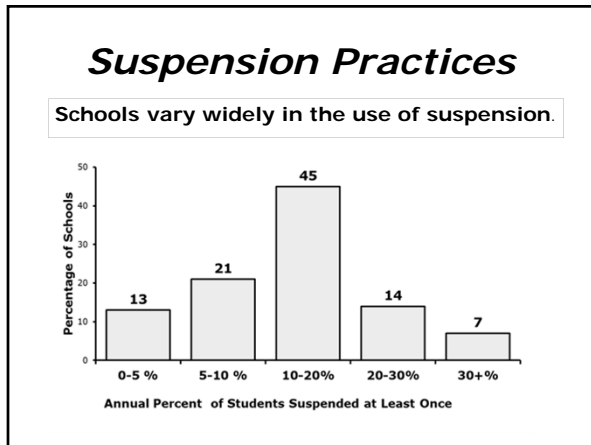


Abstract  
This study examined the association between school suspension rates and dropout rates in a statewide sample of 289 Virginia public high schools. The contribution of suspension rates on dropout rates were examined for both Black and White students, after controlling for school demographics (school racial composition, percentage of students eligible for Free and Reduced Price Meals, urbanicity), and school resources (per pupil expenditures). Because student attitudes also might influence suspension rates, the prevalence of aggressive attitudes and rejection of school rules among students were used as additional predictors. Hierarchical regression analyses using schools as the unit of analysis found that, after entering both school demographics and student attitude measures, schools with high suspension rates tended to have high dropout rates. There were comparable findings for both White and Black students, although school suspension rates were more strongly associated with White dropout rates than Black dropout rates. These findings contribute new evidence that suspension policies may have an adverse effect on student completion of high school.  
Keywords: dropout rates, suspension rates

## Suspension Practices

Suspension may be a practice that has more negative than positive effects on students:

- Fall behind in their classes
- Feel alienated and rejected
- Continue to misbehave and be suspended
- Drop out of school


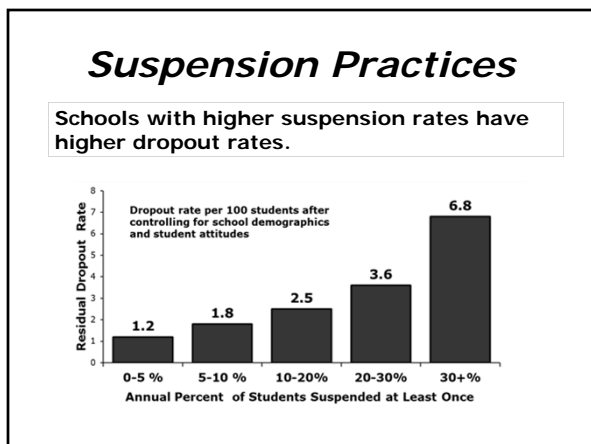



## Suspension Practices

After controlling for:

- Student poverty %
- Minority students %
- Urbanicity
- Per pupil expenditure
- Student aggressive attitudes
- Student belief in school rules

**High suspension schools had higher dropout rates**

## Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

Threat assessment is a authoritative approach to violence prevention that considers the meaning and context of student behavior.

Rules are strictly enforced, but punishment is based on the seriousness of the offense.

Threat assessment is an alternative to zero tolerance that mandates the same punishment for all infractions.

**GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENT THREATS OF VIOLENCE**

- Legally defensible procedures for responding to student threats
- Step-by-step guidelines and decision-tree
- Research-based and field-tested
- Covers K-12, regular and special education

Available from [sopriswest.com](http://sopriswest.com)

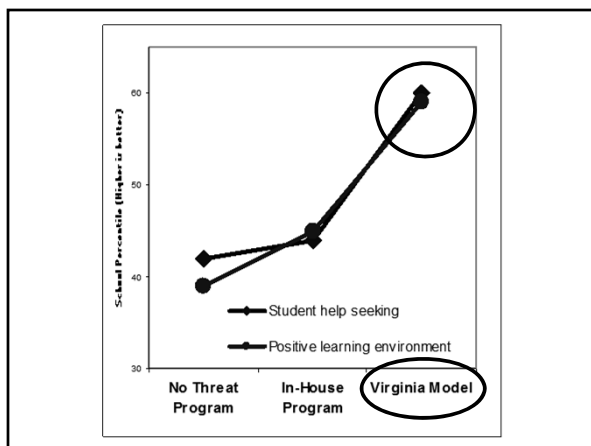
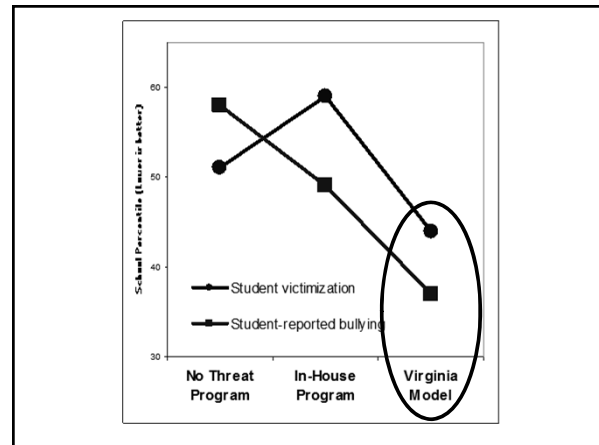
## Training Workshops

Virginia School Divisions	
Albemarle	Louisa
Alleghany	Lynchburg
Amherst	Madison
Appomattox	Manassas Park
Bedford	Nelson
Charlottesville	Newport News
Chesterfield	Patrick
Clarke	Portsmouth
Culpeper	Powhatan
Fairfax	Richmond
Franklin City	Roanoke City & Co
Fauquier	Russell
Fluvanna	Spotsylvania
Hampton Roads	Surry
Hanover	Virginia Beach
Henrico	Warren
Lee	Wise
Loudoun	Wytheville

### Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

- 95 high schools using the UVA threat assessment model
- 131 using locally developed models
- 54 not using threat assessment

*School Psychology Quarterly, 2009*




### Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

#### Findings for Virginia Model Schools

- Less bullying and other victimization
- Greater student willingness to seek help
- Perceive adults as more caring and fair
- Fewer long-term suspensions

Controlled for school size, poverty, minority %, school security measures, and neighborhood violent crime.


*School Psychology Quarterly, 2009*



## High School Discipline Study

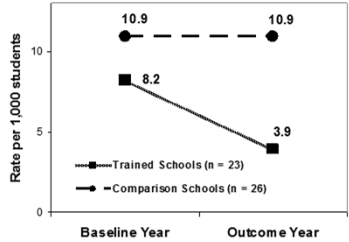
- Compared 23 high schools implementing threat assessment with 26 control high schools (no threat assessment).
- Used school records of suspensions and discipline infractions for baseline year prior to training and follow-up year after training.

In press, *NASSP Bulletin*




## High School Discipline Study

Long-Term Suspension Rates

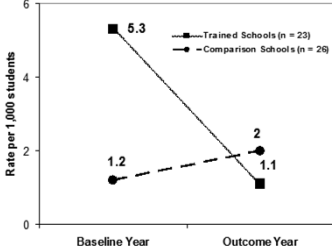


Year	Trained Schools (n = 23)	Comparison Schools (n = 26)
Baseline Year	8.2	10.9
Outcome Year	3.9	10.9




## High School Discipline Study

Bullying Infraction Rates



Year	Trained Schools (n = 23)	Comparison Schools (n = 26)
Baseline Year	5.3	1.2
Outcome Year	1.1	2



## Randomized Controlled Trial

- 40 schools (K-12)
- Randomly assigned
- 1 year follow-up
- 201 students



## Randomized Controlled Trial

Students in threat assessment schools...


- Received more counseling
- More parent involvement
- Fewer long-term suspensions
- Fewer alternative placements

Logistic regression odds ratios:  
3.98, 2.57, .35, and .13

## Authoritative Schools

Schools using authoritative practices of structure and support have:

1. Less bullying
2. Less teacher victimization
3. Lower suspension rates
4. Lower dropout rates



## **Authoritative Schools**

*Student perceptions of Disciplinary Structure*

Thinking about your school over the last 6 months, would you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following...

1. Everyone knows the school rules for student conduct.
2. The school rules are fair.
3. The punishment for breaking school rules is the same no matter who you are.
4. The school rules are strictly enforced.
5. If a school rule is broken, students know what kind of punishment will follow.
6. We have a strict dress code at school.
7. If a student breaks the rules at this school, he or she will be punished.

## **Authoritative Schools**

*Student perceptions of a supportive climate*


How much do you agree that adults in this school...

1. Really care about all students.
2. Acknowledge and pay attention to students.
3. Want all students to do their best.
4. Listen to what students have to say.
5. Believe that every student can be a success.
6. Treat all students fairly.
7. Support and treat students with respect.
8. Feel a responsibility to improve the school.

## **Authoritative School Practices**

1. Firm but fair discipline, not zero tolerance
2. Less frequent use of suspension
3. Students feel that teachers and staff respect them and have concern for their success
4. Bullying prevention efforts
5. Threat assessment approach

<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>



**Virginia Youth Violence Project**  
*Effective methods for youth violence prevention and school safety*

Violence In Schools | Safe Schools Project | High School Safety Study | Threat Assessment | Media Reports

Curry School of Education  
University of Virginia  
Doctoral Training in Clinical and School Psychology

**Latest Research Findings**

**Our Staff**  
Research  
Conference Presentations  
Research Publications

**Violence in Schools**  
National Statistics  
Virginia Statistics  
Campus Violence  
Do we need zero tolerance?

**Bullying**  
Middle School Bullying  
Research on Bullying  
Bullying Resources  
Virginia Bullying Legislation

**Threat Assessment**  
Training  
Research  
College Threat Assessment

**Prevention**  
Safe Schools  
High School Safety Study  
SOS for Parents  
Gun Violence Prevention  
Suicide Prevention Project

**Juvenile Violence**  
Homicide  
Suicide  
Juvenile Psychopathy  
Multicultural Issues

**Should schools be strict or be supportive?** Our study of 294 Virginia high schools found that the combination of strict discipline (high structure) and a supportive climate (high support) was associated with the lowest levels of bullying and victimization. [Read this article.](#)

**Are students really safer in smaller schools?** We found that students and teachers may perceive more bullying and threatening behavior in larger schools simply because there are more students, but the actual rate of victimization is not different. Some school demographics do influence victimization rates, but in our analysis of 290 high schools, size did not matter. [Read this article.](#)

**What is threat assessment?** Threat assessment is a problem solving approach to violence prevention that is an alternative to zero tolerance. We have trained school teams to use our guidelines in schools throughout Virginia and across the U.S. A recent study found lower rates of student victimization, fewer school suspensions, and a more positive learning environment in schools that adopted our guidelines. [Information on threat assessment in K-12 schools](#)  
[Information on college settings](#)

**What is the state of school safety research?** School safety is an essential condition for learning, and a surprisingly old problem in the history of education, but a relatively new field of study. We co-edited and contributed to a special issue of Educational Researcher devoted to school safety. See the featured article, an article on school shootings, and the entire special issue with additional articles on bullying, discipline practices, measurement issues, and research methods.