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University of Virginia Curry School of Education Professors Release First Findings of Virginia High School Safety Study

March 25, 2008 -- Each April, concerns about school safety rise as the anniversaries of the shootings at Colorado's Columbine High School and Virginia Tech approach. Despite these and other publicized cases of school violence, new research from the University of Virginia finds that conditions in Virginia high schools are generally safe and that serious acts of violence are rare.

The Virginia High School Safety Study, led by U.Va. Curry School of Education professors Dewey Cornell, Anne Gregory, Xitao Fan and Peter Sheras, is the first statewide effort to assess student attitudes toward and perceptions of their school environments. The first report from a multi-year project was conducted last spring, and the results are now being released.

A principal goal of the study is "to examine school discipline, safety practices and student support efforts across Virginia's high schools," Cornell said. One component of this project — coordinated by the Curry School's Virginia Youth Violence Project — is the school climate survey. It was administered to ninth-grade students and teachers in spring 2007 as part of the Commonwealth of Virginia's 2006-07 school safety audit program. Of 314 public high schools in Virginia, 296 submitted student surveys and 291 submitted teacher surveys. Approximately 7,400 ninth-grade students and 2,500 ninth-grade teachers completed the online survey.

Because it was conducted in April and May of 2007, it was possible to compare responses of students before and after the Virginia Tech shooting, said Cornell, the project director. The shooting had negligible effect on student perceptions of school safety conditions or reports of being bullied or victimized in other ways. However, the largest change was observed in student willingness to seek help for threats of violence. Prior to the shooting, 72 percent of ninth-grade students reported that they would report a classmate who talked about killing someone; after the shooting, the rate was 80 percent.

"It was good news to see the high numbers of students who were willing to seek help for a violent threat, particularly since we know that many acts of violence have been prevented when schools knew about threats and investigated them," Cornell said. "We would like to see even higher numbers, so it is important for teachers to emphasize to their students the difference between snitching for personal gain and seeking help to prevent someone from being hurt."

Among the study's findings:

- Ninth-grade students generally perceive their teachers as supportive and encouraging and they regard their school rules as strict, but fair. The schools with the lowest levels of victimization were schools in which the students reported that rules were strictly enforced, but that teachers were caring and supportive.

These findings support the theory of "authoritative school discipline" being developed by Gregory, a project investigator. Her work has found consistently that students do best in classrooms that have both a high degree of discipline and a teacher that communicates warmth and support.

- Most ninth-grade students 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.

- 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. More than 80 percent agreed that "students at this school accept me for who I am."

- 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 students who smoke or wander the halls. 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 schools foster the social and emotional development of their students, provide instruction to prevent substance use and have 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. No teacher reported having a weapon pulled on him or her, but about one in five 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.

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 so-called "zero-tolerance" policies for infractions such as bringing a gun, BB gun, toy gun, drugs or alcohol to school.

Other issues addressed in the survey and found in the report include student and teachers' perceptions of school climate associated with student enrollment, poverty and minority status, and correlates of student and teacher victimization with schoolwide Standards of Learning passing rates.

Ninth grade was selected for the survey primarily because it is the first year of high school and therefore permits longitudinal study of the ninth-grade cohort as they proceed through 12th grade, Cornell explained. "In addition, ninth-grade students account for approximately 45 percent of the disciplinary infractions that take place in high schools. These are the students most likely to get into trouble and so understanding how to help them adjust to high school is critical to their success."

Because the survey was conducted only on ninth-grade students and teachers, the results cannot be assumed to reflect the perceptions of all students in the school. The results provide an assessment of high school climate from the perspective of ninth-grade students and their teachers, and not necessarily those of older students, Cornell noted.

Over the next few years, the overall Virginia High School Safety Study will continue its examination of how various school safety and security practices, such as bullying prevention, video surveillance and zero-tolerance policies, influence school climate and student behavior, Cornell said.

To download a copy of this first full report (132 pages) or the executive summary (10 pages), go to <http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>.

Beside the four faculty investigators for this project, others who contributed include graduate assistants Sharmila Bandyopadhyay, Justin Collman, Megan Eliot, Jennifer

Klein, Talisha Lee, Tse-Hua Shih, Erica Shirley and Aisha Thompson. Graduate assistants Carli Hague Reis and Farah Williams assisted in data collection.

The Virginia Youth Violence Project is conducting this study as part of Virginia's School Safety Audit program and in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education, the Virginia Center for School Safety of the Department of Criminal Justice Services. The study is funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

For information about the Virginia High School Safety Study, visit <http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>.