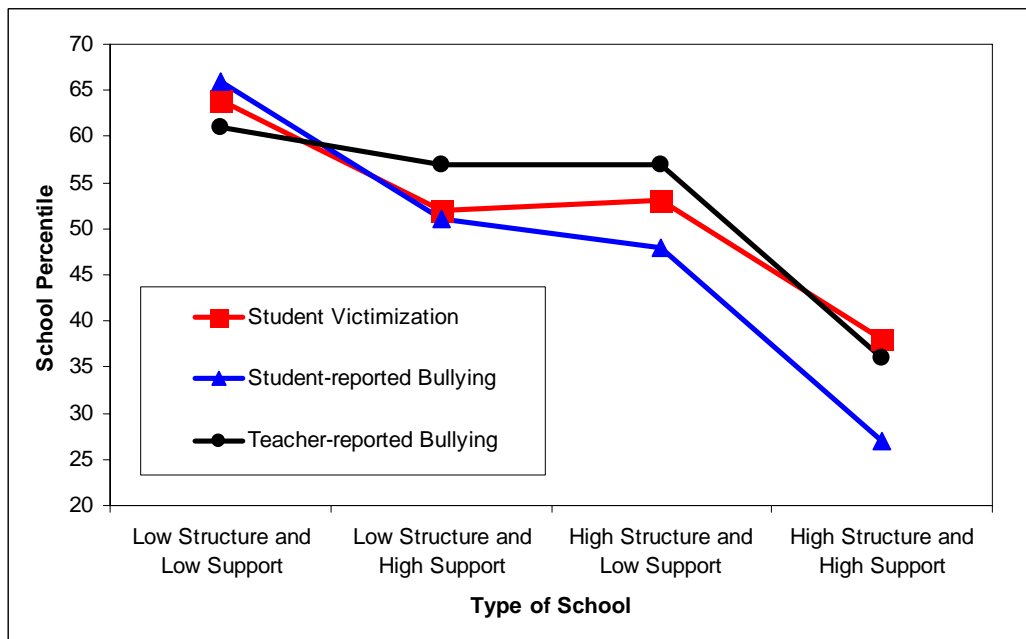


# Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study

Issue 1

## Be Strict or Be Supportive?

Debates about school safety often contrast strict discipline against more supportive approaches, but our study found support for *both* strategies. Schools that scored highest on measures of structure (students report that rules are strictly and fairly enforced) and support (students report that adults are supportive, caring, and willing to help) had lower levels of student victimization (such as theft, threats, and assaults) and bullying. As depicted below, schools low on structure and support were highest (61<sup>st</sup> to 66<sup>th</sup> percentiles) in measures of student victimization and bullying whereas schools high on structure and support were much lower (27<sup>th</sup> to 38<sup>th</sup> percentiles).



**Practical Suggestions.** In the safest schools, 9<sup>th</sup> grade students said that rules are strictly and fairly enforced, and that students were likely to be caught for infractions such as cutting classes, coming late to class, or smoking. At the same time, students also perceived that adults in the school really cared about all students, listened to what they had to say, and treated them with respect. However, zero tolerance policies were not associated with safer schools. Like a good parent, school staff members should be *authoritative rather than authoritarian*: communicating both high expectations and warm regard for their students.

**Study Overview.** The Virginia High School Safety Study was designed to identify effective policies and practices in Virginia public high schools. Safety conditions were measured using school discipline records, safety audit surveys, and surveys of approximately 7,400 9<sup>th</sup> grade students and 2,900 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers in 294 schools. Study findings controlled for differences in school enrollment, percentage eligible for free/reduced price meals, and minority composition. This is a correlational study that can support, but not prove, causal relationships. The VHSSS was conducted by Dewey Cornell, Anne Gregory, Xitao Fan, and Peter Sheras of the Curry School of Education in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Center for School Safety of the Department of Criminal Justice Services. The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Study conclusions do not necessarily reflect policies or recommendations of these state and federal agencies. For more information, see the website for the Virginia Youth Violence Project: <<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>>.