



**Findings from the  
 Virginia High School Safety Study:**  
*Strategies to make schools safer and more positive environments.*

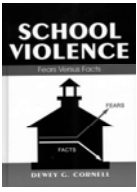
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**Dr. Cornell has studied youth violence for over 20 years and has assisted numerous schools in the development of violence prevention programs. He has authored more than 100 publications in psychology and education, including two recent books: *Guidelines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




News » Nation



**Four teens charged in fatal beating of Chicago student**

Updated 9/29/2012 12:31 PM

**5 teens charged in burning of Florida 15-year-old**

Michael Brewer was burned on 80% of his body after assailants doused him with rubbing alcohol and lit him on fire in Deerfield Beach, Fla. Authorities say the attack resulted from a squabble between Brewer and another boy.



Michael Brewer, 15, shown in photo, was burned on more than three-quarters of his body when a group of assailants doused him with rubbing alcohol and set him on fire in Deerfield Beach, Fla. Authorities said the attack was an act of retaliation in a squabble between Brewer and another boy. Five teenagers have been charged. (Carlisle Jean / South Florida Sun-Sentinel, / October 12)

**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 Colacic  
 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



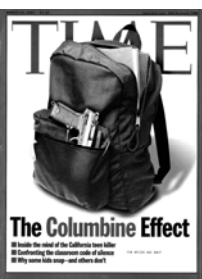
If fork, spoon, has been got it to take it. "He eats rlything else, so i would have a 6-year-old's" says Meredith



**Learn More**

On First-grader suspended over camping utensil Oct. 13 6-year-old Zachary Christie was suspended after he brought a camping utensil to school. TODAY's Meredith Vieira talks to Zachary, his mother, Denise, and her fiancé, Lee Irving, about the incident. Today show

**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*

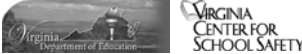
### Virginia High School Safety Study

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

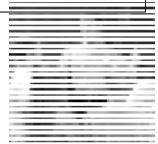
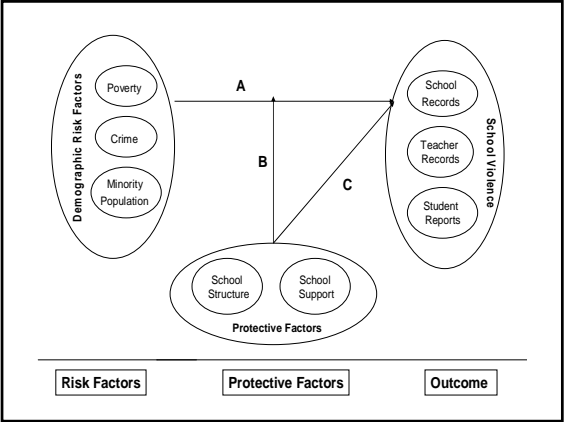


### Virginia High School Safety Study

#### 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





### Virginia High School Safety Study

#### How was the survey carried out?

Written and video instructions for

- Principals
- Teachers
- Students



Adrianna Sgarlata, Miss Virginia 2006

### Instructions Sent to Virginia High Schools



### 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

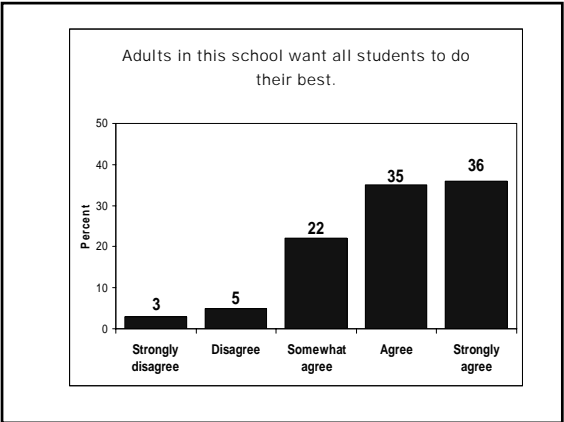
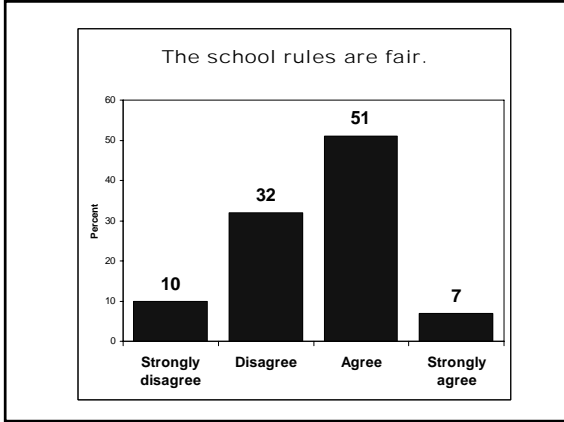
<b>Bullying Climate Scale</b>	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	Agree/ Strongly Agree
Bullying is a problem at this school.	<b>53</b>	<b>47</b>
Students here often get teased about their clothing or physical appearance.	<b>29</b>	<b>71</b>
Students here often get put down because of their race or ethnicity.	<b>65</b>	<b>35</b>
New students are made to feel welcome here by other students.	<b>30</b>	<b>70</b>
Students from different neighborhoods get along well together here.	<b>28</b>	<b>72</b>
There is a lot of teasing about sexual topics at this school.	<b>45</b>	<b>55</b>
Students at this school accept me for who I am.	<b>19</b>	<b>81</b>

<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.	<b>85</b>	<b>15</b>
Theft of personal property worth more than \$10.	<b>80</b>	<b>20</b>
Was physically attacked and had to see a doctor	<b>96</b>	<b>4</b>
Was physically attacked, but not serious enough to see a doctor.	<b>87</b>	<b>13</b>
Received obscene remarks or gestures from a student.	<b>49</b>	<b>51</b>
Was threatened in remarks by a student.	<b>72</b>	<b>28</b>
Had a weapon pulled on me.	<b>96</b>	<b>4</b>

### *Virginia High School Safety Study*

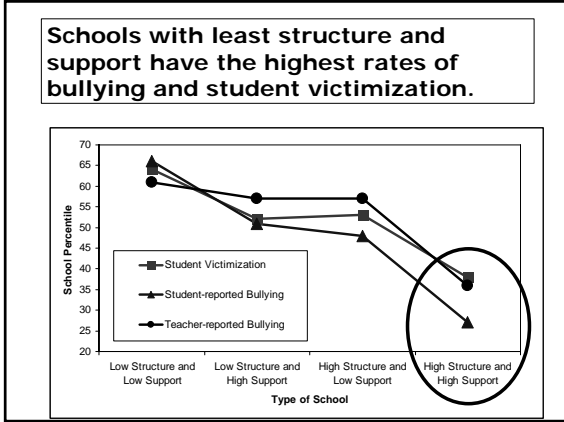
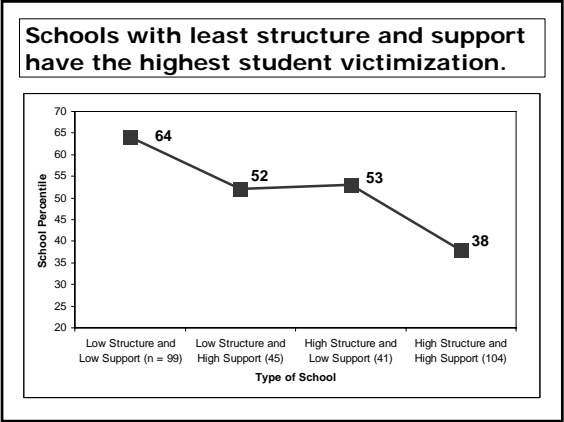
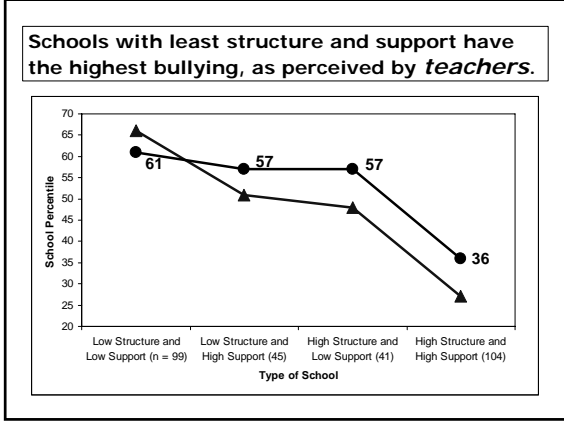
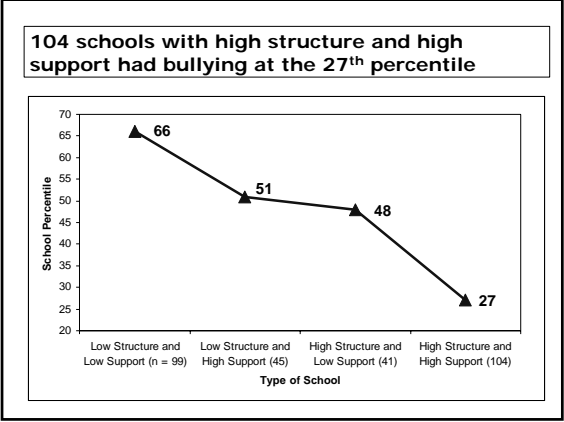
#### School climate factors

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	<b>104</b>	<b>45</b>
	Lo	<b>41</b>	<b>99</b>



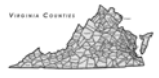
**GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENT THREATS OF VIOLENCE**

- 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
Fauquier	Roanoke Co
Fluvanna	Russell
Hampton Roads	Spotsylvania
Hanover	Surry
Henrico	Warren
Lee	Wise
Loudoun	Wytheville

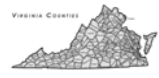


## Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

95 high schools using the UVA threat assessment model vs 185 other Virginia public high schools.

Threat assessment is a problem-solving approach to violence prevention that considers the meaning and context of student behavior. It presents an alternative to zero tolerance.

*School Psychology Quarterly, 2009*



## Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study


### 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*

## One-page summaries sent to every high school





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


### Virginia Youth Violence Project

Effective methods for youth violence prevention and school safety

<p>Home Based Education University of Virginia</p> <p>advisors/parents colleagues conference presentations clinical psychology training links research publications staff information training available</p> <p>Google</p> <p>Contact Information Virginia Youth Violence Project School of Education University of Virginia</p> <p>Postal Address P.O. Box 400730 Charlottesville, VA 22904-4270</p> <p>Delivery Address 405 Emmet Street Charlottesville, VA 22902</p> <p>Telephone: 434-924-8929 Fax: 434-924-1433</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:yv@uva.edu">yv@uva.edu</a> The email address is an e-mail rather than a</p>	<p>Our study shows that a balance of structure and support is important to maintain a safe and orderly high school.</p> <h4 style="text-align: center;">Aggressive Discipline Violations in Virginia High Schools (per 100 students)</h4> <p>0 to 3 violations 4 to 6 violations 7 or more violations Missing Data</p> <p>GUDELIES RESEARCH DISSENTING THOUGHTS ON VIOLENCE</p> <p>How available: our Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence. The research-based manual explains how school teams can evaluate and resolve potentially dangerous situations in schools. In most cases, student incidents can be resolved without resorting to long-term suspension. <a href="#">More information...</a></p>	<h4 style="text-align: center;">Violence in Schools</h4> <p>National statistics Virginia statistics College campus violence School shootings media School violence myths School crisis response resources Do we need zero tolerance? The school safety team</p> <h4 style="text-align: center;">Threat Assessment</h4> <p>Training available What is student threat assessment? School threat threat assessment works Our threat assessment and manual Sample threats Special education and threats Evaluations of our training Talking to children about terrorism</p> <h4 style="text-align: center;">Media Interviews</h4> <p>YouTube Home Testimony on College Safety News briefing on Youth Violence Act Research Channel lecture on school violence PBS interview on school violence PBS interview on school shootings CourtNews on schools under the Washington Post Online Interview</p> <h4 style="text-align: center;">Prevention</h4> <p>High School Safety Study Internet Safety Parent advice Parent statistics Prevention work Reduce the risk of gun violence Suicide</p>
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College Threat Assessment Project


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




0 to 3 violations  
4 to 6 violations  
7 or more violations  
Missing Data

How many schools are in the top 10% of schools for aggressive discipline violations per 100 students? Aggressive discipline violations were determined by numbers of arrests and sexual assault, battery and hazing, fighting, gang activity, physical altercations, robbery and extortion, threatening, and possession of a real weapon. Data were obtained from state records for 2006-07 in the Virginia Department of Education Discipline, Crime, and Violence database <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/DCVDB/Database>.


Issue 1. Do Not Act on the Suggestion?




Issue 6. How Can We Encourage Students to Seek Help in Present Situations?




Issue 2. How Should Schools Respond to Student Threats of Violence?




Issue 3. Does School Safety Influence SOL Achievement?



Issue 3. How Much Teacher Victimization Occurs in Virginia High Schools?



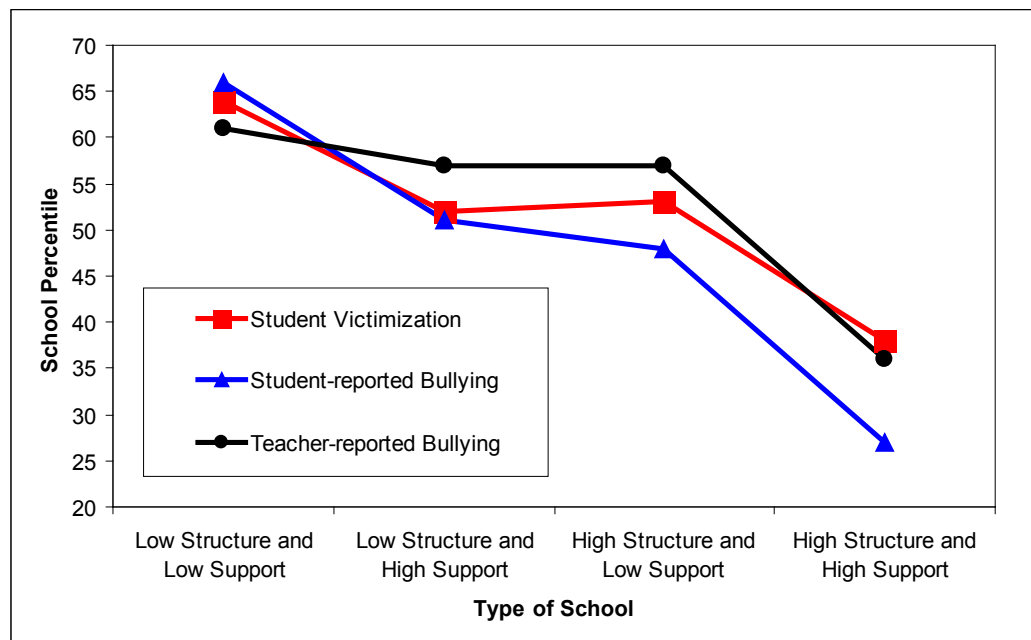
Issue 5. Why do Suspension Rates Vary so Much From School to School?



## 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 (61st to 66th percentiles) in measures of student victimization and bullying whereas schools high on structure and support were much lower (27th to 38th percentiles).



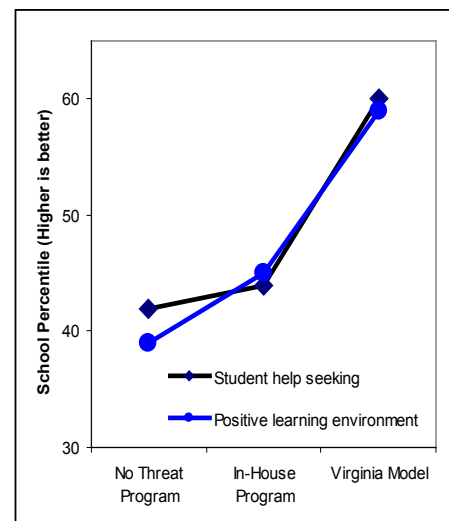
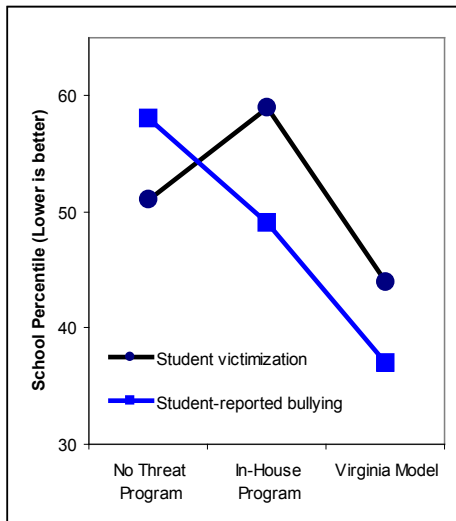
**Practical Suggestions.** In the safest schools, 9th grade students said that rules are strictly and fairly enforced, and that students were likely to be caught for infractions such as cutting classes, coming late to class, or smoking. At the same time, students also perceived that adults in the school 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 9th grade students and 2,900 9th 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>>.

## Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study Issue 2

### How Should Schools Respond to Student Threats of Violence?

Since 2002, the Virginia Youth Violence Project in the Curry School of Education has provided training to Virginia school divisions on the use of threat assessment as an approach to violence prevention. According to the 2006-07 school safety audit survey completed by principals, 95 Virginia high schools are using the Virginia model, 54 have no formal process, and 131 have some other process, typically developed in-house. VHSSS survey results show that ninth grade students in schools using the Virginia model guidelines reported less bullying and victimization, greater willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence, and more positive perceptions of the learning environment (felt that teachers wanted them to do well and treated them fairly) than students in either of the other two groups of schools. In addition, schools using the Virginia guidelines had fewer long-term suspensions.



**Practical Suggestions.** The Virginia model trains staff to use a decision tree and published set of guidelines to assess the seriousness of student threats, quickly resolve most threats and take more extensive action in more serious, substantive cases. Threat assessment takes a problem-solving approach to resolve conflicts, bullying, and teasing before they escalate into violence. Zero tolerance policies are not needed in using this approach. Although these findings support use of the Virginia model, a correlational study cannot demonstrate that use of the model caused these differences among schools, and it is possible that schools using the Virginia model had other positive characteristics that were not controlled in this study. The three groups did not differ, however, in school size, minority composition or socio-economic status of the student body, neighborhood violent crime, or the extent of security measures in the schools.

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## Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study Issue 3

### How Much Teacher Victimization Occurs in Virginia High Schools?

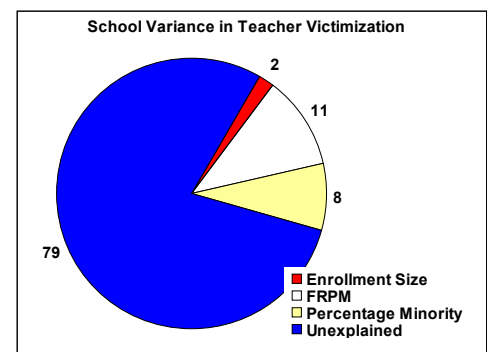
Virginia High School teachers report low rates of serious victimization, although most teachers have had the experience of a student speaking to them in a disrespectful manner. The Virginia High School Safety Study surveyed 2,922 ninth grade teachers (average 10 teachers selected by random number per school) and asked them whether any of eight forms of victimization had occurred to them in school this year (spring 2007).

This year in school have any of the following happened to you personally in the school?	% Answering True
Had a weapon pulled on me.	.4
Was physically attacked and had to see a doctor.	1.1
Was physically attacked, but not seriously enough to see a doctor.	2.9
Damage to personal property worth more than \$10.	13.6
Theft of personal property worth more than \$10.	15.1
Was threatened in remarks by a student.	19.9
Received obscene remarks or gestures from a student.	43.1
Was spoken to in a rude or disrespectful manner by a student.	83.6

Note. Because ninth grade students have a higher rate of disciplinary infractions than other high school students, the victimization rates for these teachers may be higher than for other teachers.

Male teachers were more likely than female teachers to report having a weapon pulled on them, while female teachers were more likely than male teachers to report being spoken to in a rude or disrespectful manner. Teachers with more years of teaching experience reported slightly lower rates of victimization (in most categories) than less experienced teachers.

To examine schoolwide rates of teacher victimization, the eight categories were combined into an overall score, but because physical acts of aggression against teachers were so low, this score is largely a measure of verbal aggression. Multiple regression analyses found school enrollment size accounted for just 2% of the variance in teacher victim rates, the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced price meals (FRPM) accounted for 11%, and the proportion of minority students accounted for 8%. These three school demographics explained approximately 21% of the variance in teacher victimization. Although school demographics are important, there are substantial differences in teacher victimization even among large schools with demographically challenging student bodies.



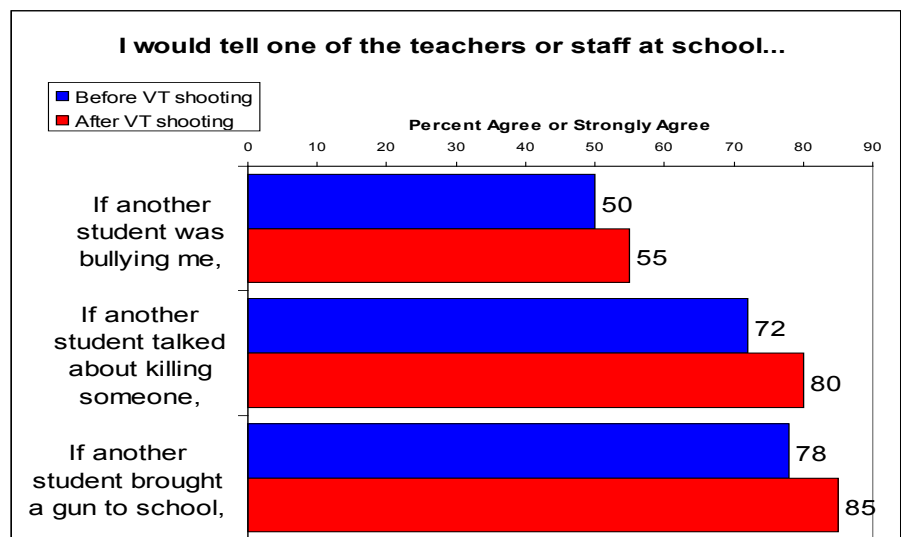
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## Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study Issue 4

### How Can We Encourage Students to Seek Help to Prevent Violence?

Students may know in advance that a classmate is threatening to commit a violent act, but are reluctant to seek help. The VHSSS measured the willingness of 9th grade students to seek help for problems such as a classmate bullying, threatening, or bringing a gun to school. Schools varied widely in how willing their 9th grade students were to seek help from teachers or other adults at school. A hierarchical linear modeling analysis found that students were most willing to seek help in schools with a supportive school climate. Supportive climate was defined as student perceptions that their teachers care about them, listen to them, and treat them with fairness and respect. This finding held up across schools of different size and percentages of low income and minority students.

Because the student survey was conducted in the spring of 2007, it was possible to compare results before and after the April 16 shooting at Virginia Tech. The two groups of schools did not differ in student demographics, reports of victimization, or perceptions of school climate. However, students completing the survey after April 16 showed greater willingness to seek help from a teacher or staff member at school, suggesting that the event increased their awareness of the need to report threats of violence. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion (15-45%) of students remained unwilling to seek help for a threat of violence.



**Practical Suggestions.** Although the majority of students are willing to seek help, schools should encourage all students to come forward to prevent an act of violence. VHSSS results suggest that students will be more willing to seek help when (1) they are reminded of the serious consequences of violence and (2) believe that their teachers have positive regard and respect for them. Schools should strive for a school climate where students feel that their teachers treat them with fairness and respect. Students should be taught the difference between snitching (personal gain from getting someone else in trouble) and seeking help (no motive other than preventing violence).

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## Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study Issue 5

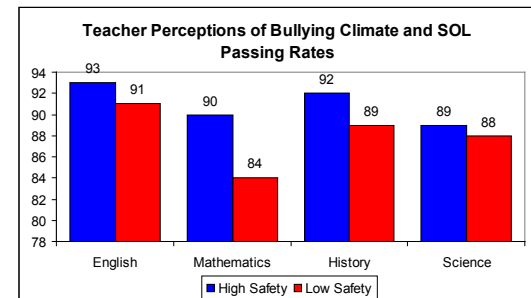
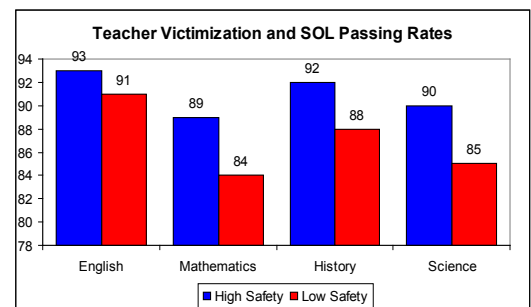
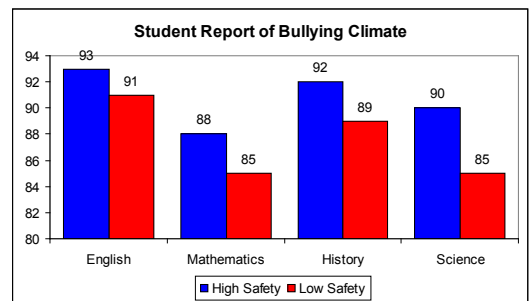
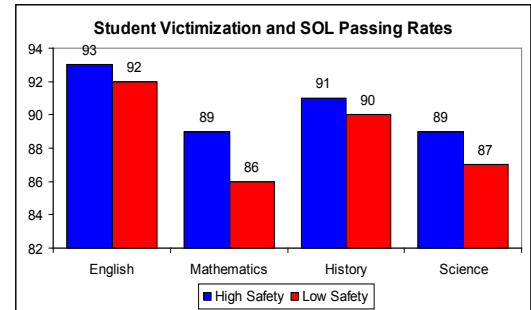
### Does School Safety Influence SOL Achievement?

Most Virginia high schools have a high passing rate on the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests, but those with greater student and teacher safety have an even higher rate. To measure school safety for students and teachers, our survey asked randomly selected samples of 9th grade students: (1) how frequently they are victims of thefts, threats, abusive language, and assaults (victimization); and (2) how much bullying and teasing they observe at school (bullying climate); and asked 9th grade teachers: (3) how often they are victims (teacher victimization); and (4) how much student bullying and teasing they observe at school (teacher perceptions of bullying climate). Multiple regression analyses found that all four measures of safety were predictive of one or more of the schoolwide (grades 9-12) passing rates for English, Mathematics, History, and Science, even after controlling for the percentage of minority students and percentage of students receiving a free or reduced price meal in the school.

The charts show the passing rates for schools in the top third versus bottom third on each safety measure. For example, schools with student victimization rates in the top third of the state had an average Mathematics SOL passing rate of 86 percent, but schools with the lowest (safest) levels of victimization had an 89 percent average passing rate. Although the percent gains are small, they reflect schoolwide rates (grades 9-12) and they are consistent across all measures and they are statistically significant improvements above and beyond differences due to student demographics. Certainly the quality of academic instruction is critical to SOL achievement, but school safety conditions can make a clear difference in the school's overall passing rate.

**Practical Suggestions.** Schools may be able to improve their SOL passing rates by improving school safety conditions. School should make systematic efforts to reduce victimization of students and teachers as well as the level of teasing and bullying among students. In previous reports, we pointed out the importance of a balanced approach to school safety that emphasizes both support for students and a clear and consistent discipline policy.

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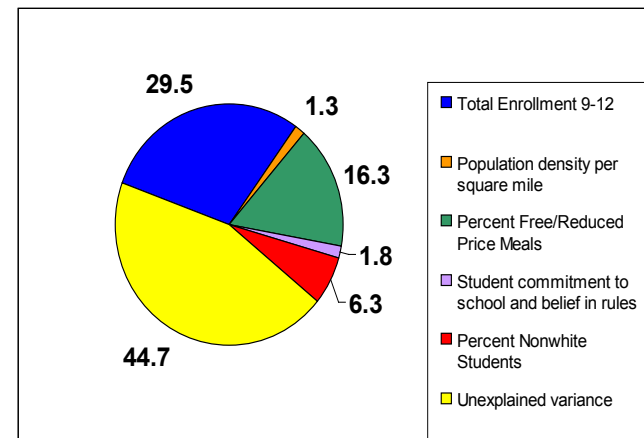
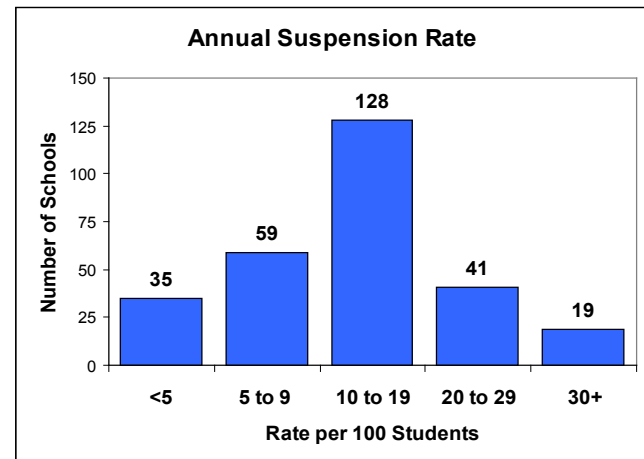
## Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study Issue 6

### Why do suspension rates vary so much from school to school?

In 2006-07, the typical Virginia high school issued 10-19 suspensions per 100 students, but there was a wide range, from 35 schools that had fewer than 5 suspensions per 100 students to 19 schools that had 30 or more suspensions per 100 students. Three high schools had rates that exceeded 50 per 100 students. Why do suspension rates vary so much from school to school? (These figures combine short and long-term suspensions and count suspensions rather than students, so that one student could be suspended multiple times and increase the school's suspension rate).

We used hierarchical multiple regression to assess how much variance in suspensions was associated with population characteristics, starting with (1) Size of the student body, and then adding (2) Urbanicity (census population density per square mile); (3) Poverty rate (% of students eligible for free/reduced price meals); (4) Student commitment to school and belief in school rules (survey of 9th grade students); and (5) Minority composition (% nonwhite students).

As the pie chart shows, a total of 55.3% of the variance can be explained by school population characteristics – most notably student body size (29.5%; as would be expected, larger schools have more suspensions), poverty rate (16.3%), and minority composition (6.3%). Relatively little of the variance is associated with the urban-rural location of the school (1.3%) or student commitment to school and belief in school rules (1.8%). After considering all these factors, there is still a great deal of unexplained variance across schools (44.7%).



**Practical Suggestions.** Schools with high suspension rates should carefully consider why so many students are being suspended (including some students who are suspended multiple times). *Schools with comparable student demographics are not suspending at similar rates.* Much of the variance among schools cannot be explained by the student demographics we measured. There is a body of educational research suggesting that school suspension is not an effective way to improve student behavior and often leads to declining behavioral and academic outcomes for students. This suggests that schools with high suspension rates may be engaging in a counterproductive practice.

**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 and surveys of approximately 7,400 9th grade students in 294 schools. 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>.