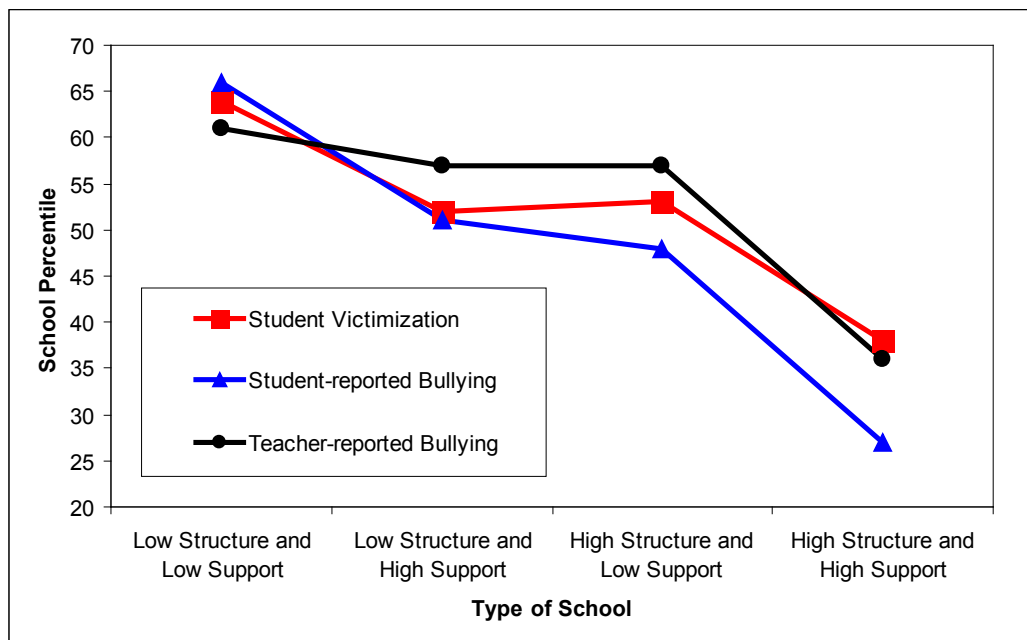


## Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study Issue 1

### 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).



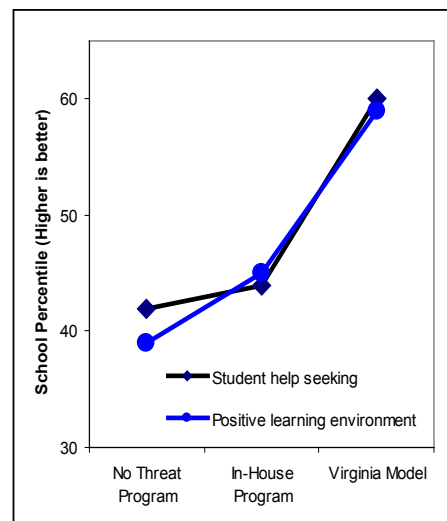
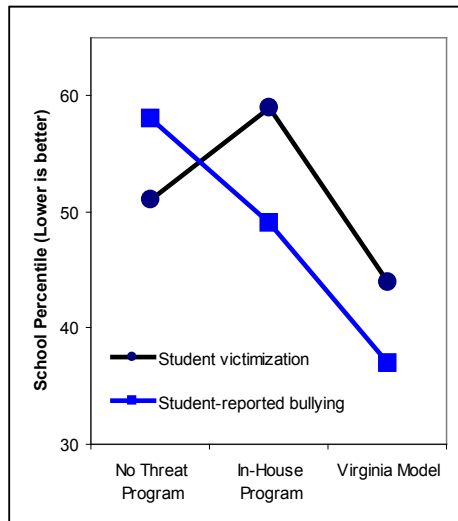
**Practical Suggestions.** In the safest schools, 9th grade students said that rules are strictly and fairly enforced, and that students were likely to be caught for infractions such as cutting classes, coming late to class, or smoking. At the same time, students also perceived that adults in the school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

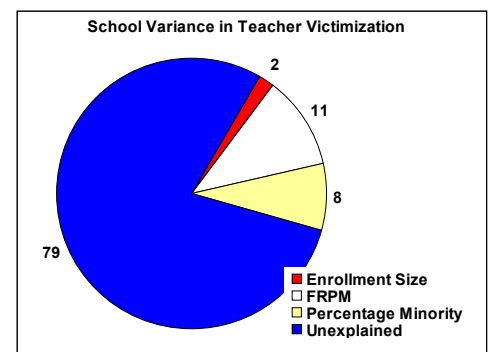
Virginia High School teachers report low rates of serious victimization, although most teachers have had the experience of a student speaking to them in a disrespectful manner. The Virginia High School Safety Study surveyed 2,922 ninth grade teachers (average 10 teachers selected by random number per 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.



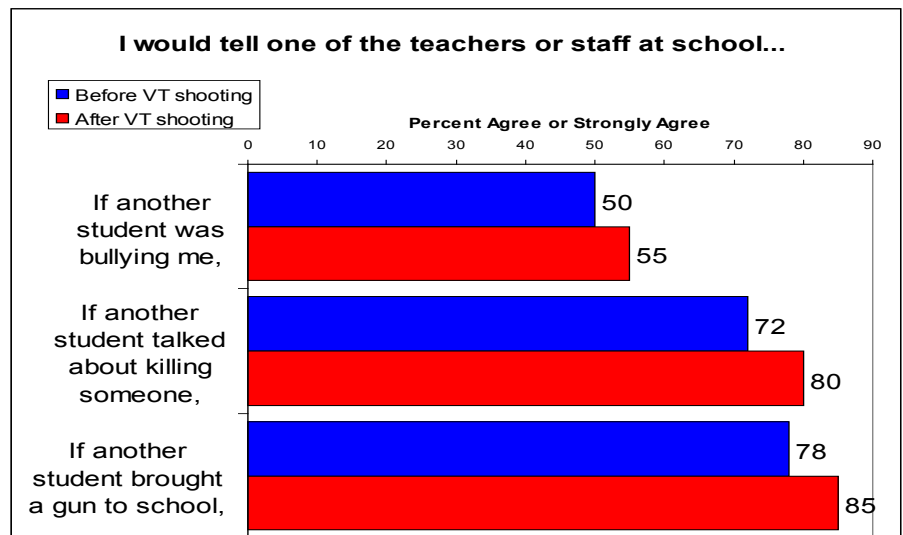
**Study Overview.** The Virginia High School Safety Study was designed to identify effective policies and practices in Virginia public high schools. Safety conditions were measured using school discipline records, safety audit surveys, and surveys of approximately 7,400 9th grade students and 2,900 9th grade teachers in 294 schools. 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 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

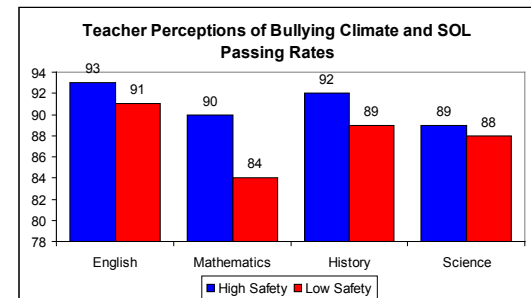
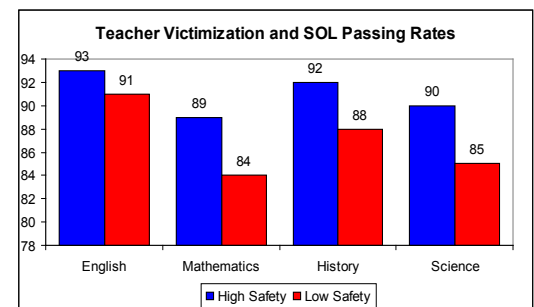
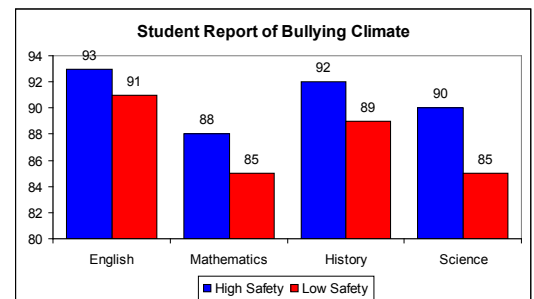
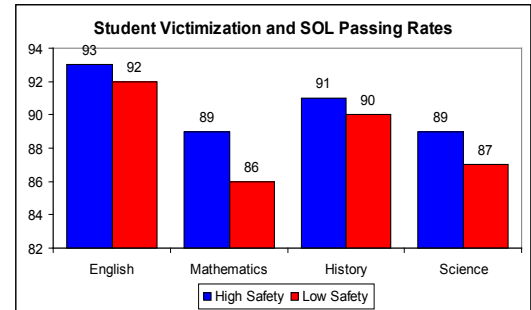
### Does School Safety Influence SOL Achievement?

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.

**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. 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>>.



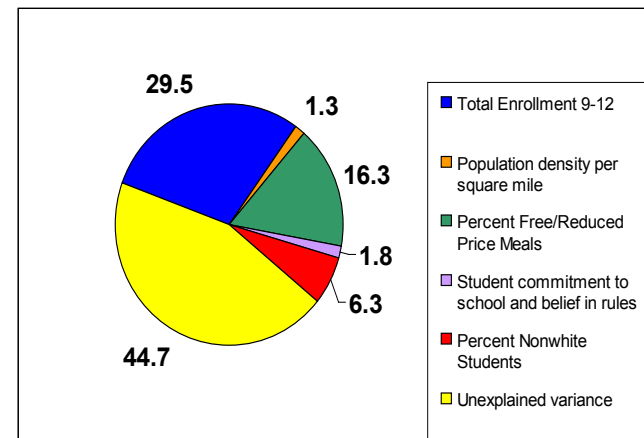
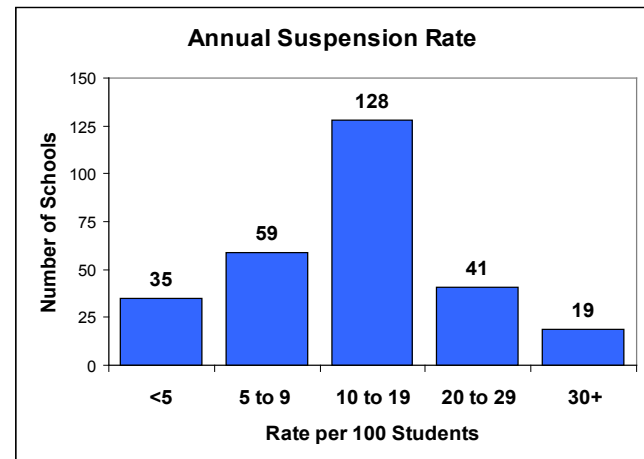
## Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study Issue 6

### 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>.

## Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study

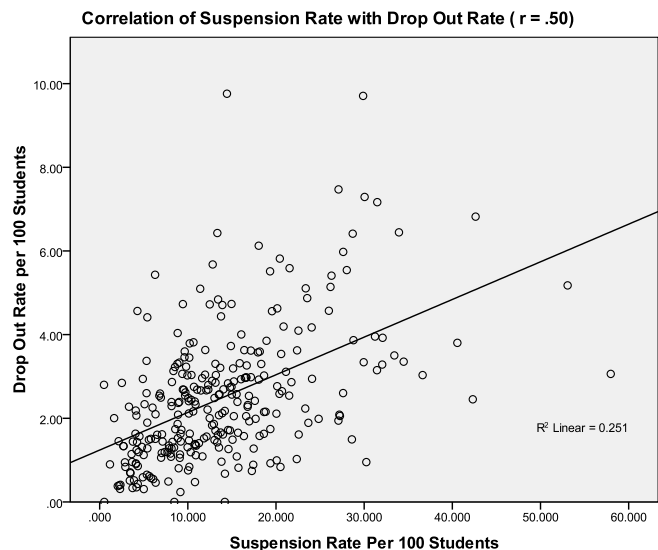
# How are suspension rates related to dropout rates?

Issue 7

In Issue 6, we reported that suspension rates vary greatly in Virginia high schools and that only about half of the variance across schools could be explained by student demographics, such as school size, student poverty rate, and minority composition. In this Issue, we report that schools that use suspension most frequently tend to have high dropout rates. Using the new Virginia standards for determining dropout rates, we examined average dropout rates for 2 years (2006-07 and 2007-08) in 287 Virginia high schools. For example, the scatterplot chart below shows how the average drop-out rate is correlated ( $r = .50$ ) with the short-term suspension rate. Using hierarchical multiple regression, we found that a school's suspension rate (including short- and long-term suspension and expulsion) was consistently predictive of dropout rates for the whole school, and that there were similar effects for White and Black students considered separately. The effect of suspension rates on dropout rates was statistically significant even after controlling for the influence of school demographics (percentage of students eligible for free/reduced price meals, percentage of minority students, urbanicity, and average per pupil expenditure). Recognizing that some schools may deal with more challenging populations of students, we also controlled statistically for the influence of student attitudes that can lead to disciplinary infractions by using measures of student attitudes toward the use of aggression and belief in following school rules (two scales from our school climate survey administered to 9th grade students). In sum, the frequent use of suspension as a disciplinary practice is predictive of higher drop out rates for both White and Black students, and is not explained by other school demographics or by student attitudes that are associated with breaking school rules.

**Practical Suggestions.** Students choose to drop out of school for a variety of personal as well as educational reasons. Undoubtedly, students at risk for dropping out of school could benefit from individualized counseling and academic support to help them finish high school. However, schoolwide policies and practices could also be helpful in creating a school environment that helps keep at-risk students in school. Our results suggest, but do not prove, that schools may be able to reduce their dropout rates by placing less emphasis on suspension as a disciplinary consequence and using alternative consequences that do not involve school removal. Many Virginia high schools have low suspension rates despite student demographics and risk factors that are present in schools with high suspension rates. As we noted in Issue 6, there is a body of educational research indicating that school suspension is not an effective way to improve student behavior and often leads to declining behavioral and academic outcomes for students. 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. 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 findings in this Issue are derived from a doctoral dissertation by Talisha Lee. 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>.

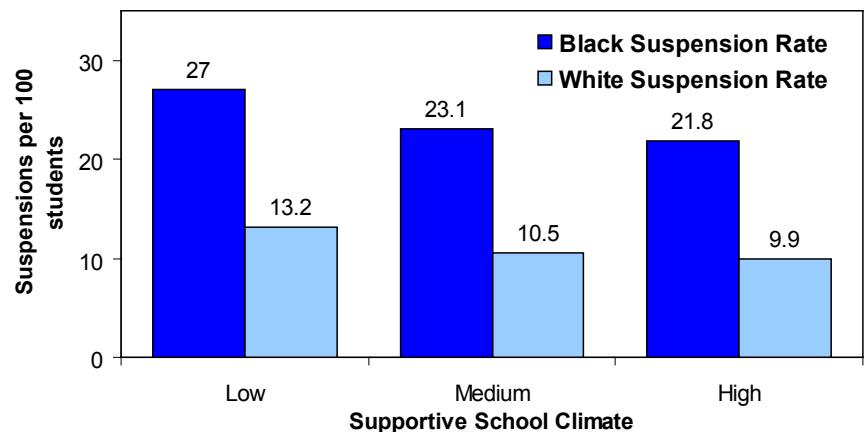


## Can a Supportive School Climate Reduce Suspension Rates for Black and White Students?

In Issue 7, we reported that schools with high suspension rates also had high dropout rates. Therefore, we looked for school characteristics that might help reduce suspension rates. We examined the percentage of students in grades 9-12 who received at least one short-term school suspension during the 2006-07 school year. In Virginia high schools, the suspension rate for Black students (24 per 100 students) was approximately double the suspension rate for White students (11 per 100 students), so we examined these groups separately. Certainly student misbehavior is the most important factor in suspension rates, but we wanted to investigate whether a characteristic of the school climate could help explain why suspension rates differed so much across schools. Although we could not test a causal model directly in a correlational study, we could determine whether a more positive school climate was associated with lower suspension rates. We measured Supportive School Climate using a sample of approximately 25 ninth grade students from each school who described the extent to which adults at the school are supportive, caring, and willing to help. We found that a supportive school climate showed a modest correlation with suspension rates in the entire school for both Black ( $r = .29$ ) and White ( $r = .30$ ) students. This relationship is illustrated in the chart, which divided a sample of 201 schools into thirds (designated Low, Medium, High) based on supportive school climate scores. We adjusted suspension rates statistically for the effects of school size, percentage of students eligible for a free/reduced price meal, and urbanicity (residents per square mile in the school attendance zone).

**Practical Suggestions.** Schools may be able to improve student behavior and reduce suspension rates by building a supportive school climate. It is important for students to feel that the adults in the school are caring and concerned, and treat them with respect. It may be that when students feel respected and cared for, they cooperate with the rules or resolve conflict with adult support, before the problem becomes more serious. Certainly there are other factors that contribute to suspension rates, but it is noteworthy that this factor emerged as a predictor of schoolwide suspension rates even though the measure of school climate was limited to the perceptions of 9th grade students. We continue to seek ways to reduce the large gap between White and Black suspension rates.

**Supportive School Climate is Associated with Suspension Rates for Black and White Students**



**Study Overview.** The Virginia High School Safety Study was designed to identify effective policies and practices in Virginia public high schools. This is a correlational study that can support, but not prove, causal relationships. In the analyses for Issue 8, we omitted 35 schools with fewer than 10 White or Black students so that suspension rates would not be skewed by small numbers of students. We also lacked data on 54 schools with 1-9 suspensions, per Department of Education policy on the release of data for groups of fewer than 10 students. This may have diminished the effect of school climate in schools with the lowest suspension rates. Additional statistical information is available from the authors. 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>>.

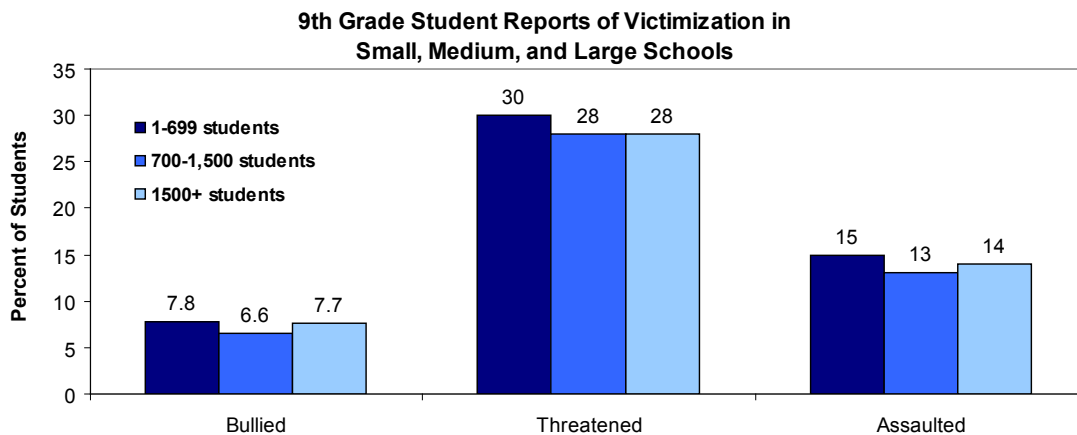


## Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study

# Do larger schools really have more student bullying and victimization?

Issue 9

There is a widely accepted view that larger schools are less safe environments than smaller schools. In our sample of 290 Virginia high schools, we examined the effects of school size using hierarchical multiple regression to control statistically for the influence of other school demographics (student poverty, minority composition, urbanicity). We found that 9th grade students and teachers reported that they observed more bullying and teasing taking place in larger schools than smaller schools. And in fact, there were more incidents of student victimization in larger schools, according to school discipline records. However, one can expect more incidents of student victimization simply because there were more students. Most importantly, when we examined the rates of bullying, threats, and physical assault, using both students' reports and school discipline records, there were no positive correlations with school size. Simply put, students were not at greater risk of victimization in a larger school. Factors such as student body poverty and minority composition had a small positive association with victimization rates, but contrary to popular perception, urban location was negatively correlated with assault. Although these other school demographics generated significant statistical effects, school size did not matter. The chart below is a simple representation of the percentage of 9th grade students who reported being bullied, verbally threatened, or physically assaulted in the past month in 89 small (1-699), 97 medium (700-1,500) and 104 large (1,500+) schools.



**Practical Suggestions.** School size by itself does not place students at greater risk for being bullied, threatened, or assaulted. Students may feel less safe in larger schools because they observe or hear about such incidents more frequently. This phenomenon is analogous to citizens who hear frequent news reports of violent crimes because they live in large cities and consequently believe they are at increased risk of being a crime victim, even though the violent crime rates might be lower than some smaller communities. From a school safety perspective, more important than the size of the school is the staffing level of the school and the proportion of students who may be at increased risk for school difficulties.

**Study Overview.** The Virginia High School Safety Study was designed to identify effective policies and practices in Virginia public high schools. Student victimization was measured using school discipline records (grades 9-12) and surveys of approximately 7,400 9th grade students and 2,900 9th grade teachers 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 findings in Issue 9 are derived from a predissertation project conducted by Jennifer Klein. 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>>.