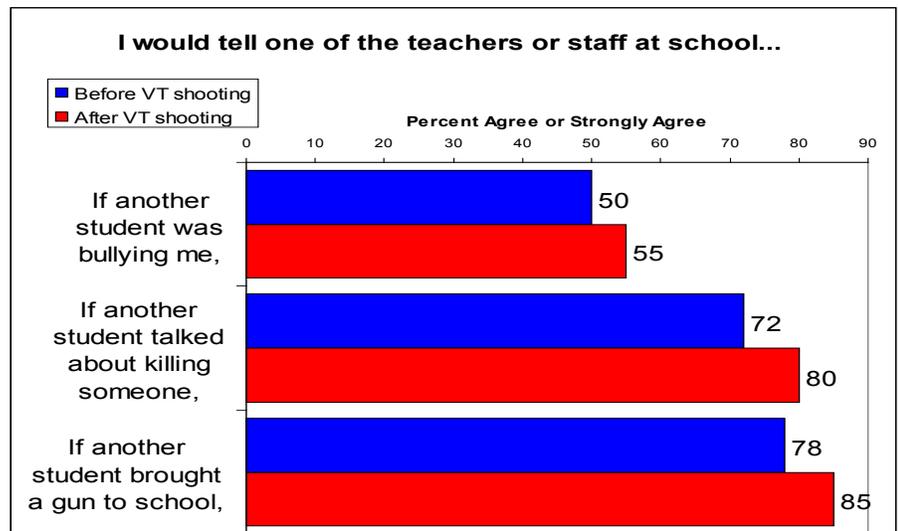


Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study Issue 4

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).

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>>.