

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>>.

