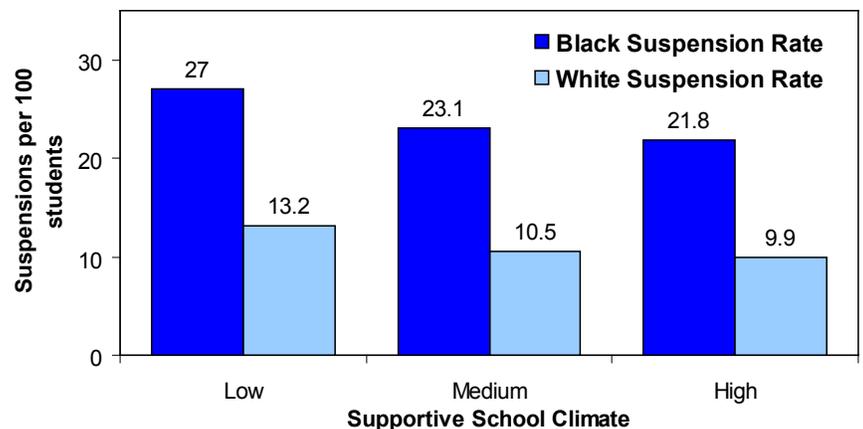


Can a Supportive School Climate Reduce Suspension Rates for Black and White Students?

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>.