Students are more likely to succeed when they are in environments that foster a positive school culture.

School culture is built on a foundation of respect and positive relationships that help, in turn, contribute to a positive school climate. A growing body of research shows that when schools focus on improving culture and climate, they see a range of positive outcomes: higher engagement and achievement, fewer behavioral disruptions, lower teacher turnover, and higher teacher satisfaction. Additionally, a recent comprehensive review of 15 years of research about school climate, inequality, and academic achievement finds that a positive school climate can help close the achievement gap.

So, how do students feel about the culture of their schools?

To help answer this question, YouthTruth analyzed survey data from more than 80,000 students in grades five through 12. The data was gathered between 2013 and 2016 through YouthTruth’s anonymous online surveys administered in partnership with public schools across 24 states. Our analysis looked at a subset of questions relating to school culture — largely about respect and fairness — and uncovered some key insights. Since student perceptions are linked with outcomes, it’s smart to understand what students are experiencing. We believe these findings can help educators make more informed decisions about improving school culture.

**1. Only one in three students rate their school culture positively.**

**2. Students recognize that they and their peers are less respectful to adults than adults are to them.**

**3. Less than half of students feel that discipline at their school is fair.**

**4. Gender identity matters: students who identify as other than male or female report profoundly less positive perceptions of school culture.**
Across all grade levels, only one in three students rate their school culture positively. The data is even more revealing when examined by age group — while 37% of middle school students rate their school culture positively, only 30% of high school students say the same. When examining students’ perceptions by grade level, the gap is even more dramatic: 44% of sixth-grade students rate their school culture positively, compared to only 32% of ninth-grade students, and just 28% of eleventh-grade students.

Across all grade levels, 1 in 3 students rate their school culture positively.
According to the National School Climate Center, one of the core components of a positive school culture is that members of the school community feel both engaged and respected.

Our data shows that students recognize that adults in schools tend to treat students with more respect than students treat adults. Given adults' responsibility to model respect, this may not be particularly surprising. While 57 percent of students agree that most adults treat students with respect, only 34 percent agree that students treat adults with respect.

But here’s what stands out: both students and adults have significant room for improvement when it comes to being respectful. These insights from a student perspective offer a starting point for school-based discussions about respectful treatment across all members of the school community.

**A STUDENT’S PERSPECTIVE**

“Although I believe that most staff members do treat staff and students with respect, I have noticed that many students do not show their teachers and fellow students respect. I observe students both disrespecting the authority of teachers and disrespecting the ideas, beliefs, and personalities of their peers. This bothers me because disrespect discourages openness and safety. High school equips us for our future, so it is important that students learn the value of respect now.”

Anonymous High School Student

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**Most adults in this school treat students with respect.**

57%

**Most students in this school treat adults with respect.**

34%

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**PRACTITIONER TIP**

John Boyd, Superintendent of Quincy School District in Washington state, requires school administrators to present their YouthTruth data and findings back to students and engage them in conversation so students can take more ownership as co-creators of school culture. “School environments are shaped by the behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of the people who spend time there — both adults and students,” says Boyd. “Teachers are responsible for modeling respectful interactions and students are responsible for treating teachers and peers with respect, as well. This data tells us that middle and high school students are aware they are falling short in their agreement. This awareness creates the starting place for a new, and better, relationship dynamic.”
Across all demographics, only 37 percent of students feel that discipline at their school is fair. When breaking down the data by students’ self-reported race and ethnicity, however, student experiences vary widely. While 49 percent of Asian students, 39 percent of white students, and 39 percent of Hispanic students agree that discipline at their school is fair, only 34 percent of multiracial students and 28 percent of black or African-American students agree.

These findings echo previous studies and we hope they will embolden educators to prioritize closing the gap in how students of different races and ethnicities experience and perceive discipline. We know that students’ experiences with discipline affect many aspects of their lives and learning experience; the cost of not addressing this gap is high. Students who are suspended are less likely to graduate on time and are more likely to be suspended again, drop out, or become involved in the juvenile justice system.

PRACTITIONER TIP

David Ross, long-time educator and CEO of Partnership for 21st Century Learning shares, “These findings on culture underscore the importance of transparent and understandable discipline policies. Discipline and fairness are key components to a healthy and trusting school culture. Therefore, educators must solicit feedback from students about what’s working and not working to keep schools safe and equitable. All schools can take this data back to help create a common understanding of guidelines that can help build that trust and transparency.”

youthtruthsurvey.org
Gender identity matters: students who identify as other than male or female report profoundly less positive perceptions of school culture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Positive School Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify in another way</td>
<td>16%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

While there is a smaller difference in how students who self-identify as male or female experience school culture, students who select “I identify in a different way” report having a profoundly less positive experience.

Only **16 percent of students who identify in a different way** have positive perceptions of school culture. While these students account for less than two percent of the students in this analysis, this data deserves our attention. Every student’s voice matters. To create inclusive schools and drive overall improvement, teachers, building leaders, and superintendents, need information about which students are having less positive experiences.

The only way to fully understand whether a school’s culture is healthy and supportive of learning and achievement is to ask students directly about their perceptions and experiences. **Recent studies** have shown that school leaders should focus on school climate and culture to help drive positive academic outcomes, particularly as they work to bridge the achievement gap. When schools have a positive school culture, students feel more encouraged to attend school and achieve academically.

From a policy perspective, the passage of the **Every Student Succeeds Act** in 2016 has many education leaders thinking about school climate and culture as an additional indicator of school success. Asking students about their experiences is crucial to understanding where there is room to improve school culture, and understanding the varied experiences of different students can help school leaders focus on the areas for greatest growth. Student perceptions are a powerful complementary measure of school success beyond just academic test scores.

**ABOUT YOUTHTRUTH**

YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student and stakeholder perceptions to help educators accelerate improvements. Through validated survey instruments and tailored advisory services, YouthTruth partners with schools, districts, and education funders to enhance learning for all students. To learn more about the research that informs our work, please visit www.youthtruthsurvey.org/learn-more.

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For Principals, Teachers, and Professional Learning Communities

Do you think these findings speak to the student experience at your school? Which data points seem most reflective of your school's culture?

How do you think students' perception of culture on your campus might be similar to or different from these findings? What sources inform your hypothesis?

When and how will you engage students in reflecting on this data with school leadership teams?

For Students in Conversation with Teachers and Principals

Do you think this data reflects the experiences of students at your school? Which data points seem most relevant? Can you share more about what this looks and feels like at your school?

What is one thing your school could try this year to improve school culture?

What does respect mean to you? Can you share an example that you've seen at your school of someone being respectful?

What strategies and resources are available if you see a student treating someone else with disrespect?