SPOTLIGHT ON:

# SCHOOL SAFETY

Feedback about how safe – or unsafe – students feel at school helps school and district leaders develop and monitor school safety policies and interventions. In this spotlight report, 35,000 students across 8 states speak up about what school safety looks and feels like to them.

## YouthTruth
### STUDENT SURVEY
A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

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# A safe school environment is a prerequisite for student learning.

Studies show that when students feel unsafe at school, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors and there is a negative effect on their test scores.

To shine a light on students' perceptions of school safety, YouthTruth analyzed survey responses from nearly 35,000 students in grades five through twelve. The data was gathered between February 2012 and March 2017 through YouthTruth's anonymous school experience survey, administered in partnership with school districts and charter management organizations across eight states.

While this is not a nationally representative sample, these findings do provide important insight into the experiences of students. Our analysis looked at a subset of questions about perceptions of safety from YouthTruth's climate and culture survey and uncovered some key insights.

## 1  Just over half of students feel safe at school.

When asked how safe they feel at various locations around their school, just over half of students report feeling safe from harm at school.

While 66 percent of students feel safe in their classes, only 59 percent say they feel safe at school in general. When asked about other locations on their school campus, 55 percent of students feel safe on school property outside of their school building and 54 percent feel safe in the hallways, bathrooms, and locker rooms of their school.

**59**% feel safe at school in general

**54**% feel safe in the hallways, bathrooms, and locker rooms

**66**% feel safe in their classes

**55**% feel safe on school property outside the school building
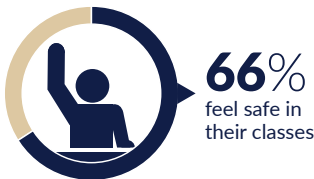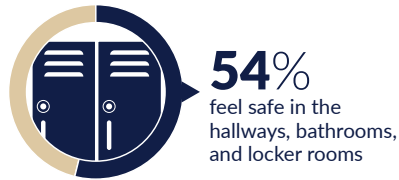
*"I don't like the negative energy between students. It's not a safe environment to be around. I want to feel safe. I don't want to feel like someone is trying to push me or cuss at me every time they're in the way and I'm trying to push my way through in order to get to class."*

Anonymous
High School Student

## WHAT DO PARENTS AND GUARDIANS THINK?

YouthTruth also asked family members about their perceptions of safety at their child's school. We analyzed responses from over 9,000 parents and guardians gathered between March 2016 and January 2018 and found the following:

▸ **The majority of family members believe their child is safe from violence at school.**
Seventy-nine percent of elementary school family members, 74 percent of middle school family members, and 72 percent of high school family members feel that their child is safe from violence at school.

▸ **Family members feel less positively about the fairness of discipline.**
Seventy-two percent of elementary school family members, 67 percent of middle school family members, and 61 percent of high school family members feel positively about the fairness of discipline at their child's school.

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# Less than two thirds of students report that adults at their schools try to stop bullying and harassment.

When asked about how adults at their school respond to bullying and harassment, only 60 percent of students report that adults at their school try to stop bullying and harassment.

While this is the majority of students, it still leaves considerable room for improvement when 40 percent of students feel neutrally or negatively about adult role models' reaction to bullying. The perception that adults are not addressing harassment and bullying contributes to students feeling less safe and negatively affects overall school culture.

**60**% of students report that adults at their school try to stop bullying and harassment
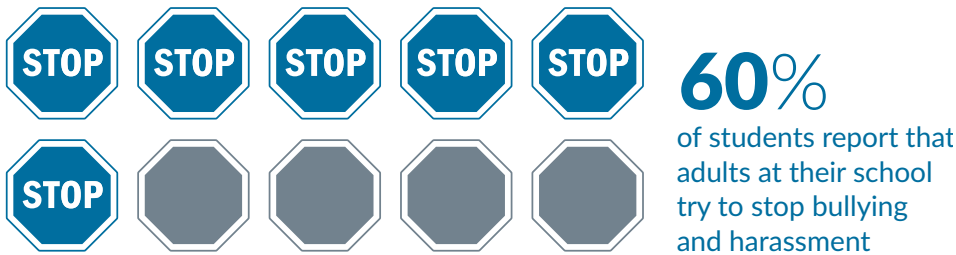
We also find that middle school students are slightly more likely than high school students to report that they help peers who are bullied or harassed. Fifty-eight percent of middle school students report that they help, compared to 51 percent of high school students.

## I usually try to help other students who are being bullied or harassed.

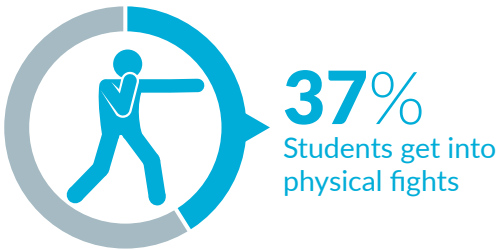**58**% MIDDLE SCHOOL

**51**% HIGH SCHOOL

## SCHOOL SAFETY RESOURCE

The CDC recommends various strategies for promoting school connectedness and reducing school violence. Here are a few of the suggestions on how to create trusting and caring relationships that promote communication among school stakeholders.

‣ Apply and fairly enforce reasonable and consistent disciplinary policies that are jointly agreed on by students and staff.

‣ Hold school-wide, experience broadening activities that enable students to learn about different cultures, people with disabilities, and other topics.

‣ Support student clubs and activities that promote a positive school climate, such as gay-straight alliances and multi-cultural clubs.

‣ Involve students in parent-teacher conferences, curriculum selection committees, and school health teams.

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# About a third of students report that students get into physical fights and feel they must be ready to defend themselves.

When asked about the prevalence of fights, 37 percent of students report that fights occur at least somewhat often. Thirty one percent of students report that they feel they must be ready to fight to defend themselves at least somewhat often. Schools in which physical fights are common may not be able to maintain a focused learning environment.

**37%**
Students get into physical fights

**31%**
I must be ready to defend myself

The data also reveals differences across different student demographic groups. When disaggregating the data by school level, we see that middle school students are slightly more likely than high school students to observe physical fighting. Middle schoolers are also more likely to feel that they must be ready to fight to defend themselves at school.

**Students at my school get into physical fights.**

Middle School — 43%

High School — 35%

**I must be ready to fight to defend myself.**

Middle School — 40%

High School — 28%

When examining responses by students' self-reported race/ethnicity, we see that black or African-American students are slightly more likely than white students to feel that they must be ready to fight to defend themselves.

**Middle & High School – Black/African American**

41%

**Middle & High School – White**

21%

"One thing that I think can be improved is to stop the fights. Usually we have fights around school. Sometimes we have kids and, like, strangers — they're like 30 years old — come in to the school. We have security, but they're not really paying attention to different places."

Henry Thach, 10th grade
Seattle, WA

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# Students have a right to feel safe at school.

Safety is an essential component of a supportive learning environment and a crucial foundation for academic success. We know that unsafe schools are associated with a variety of negative outcomes for students, including chronic absenteeism and poor academic outcomes. Students who feel unsafe at school may also be more likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as alcohol use or carrying weapons.

Asking for students' feedback — and truly listening to it — helps schools foster safe and supportive learning environments. We hope that this report encourages more school leaders to provide regular spaces for feedback and honest reflections about students' experiences. Student feedback can better equip school and district leaders to identify concerns and address them swiftly to ensure that all students feel safe and supported at school.

## RELEVANT RESOURCES:

Center for Disease Control — Understanding School Violence

Overview of school violence issues and CDC recommended resources

National Association of School Psychologists — School Violence Overview & Facts

Facts and tips about school violence prevention for school employees.

California School Board Association — How to Create Safer and Bully Free Schools

Webinar focused on how to create a safe and positive school environment.

AASA — Resources for Schools to Prepare for and Recover from Crisis

Inventory of resources to help school district leaders prepare for and recover from crisis.

National Crime Prevention Council — School Safety Toolkit

A step-by-step guide to engaging parents, assessing school safety, and identifying solutions.

My American Education

Highlights stories from students across the country sharing their experiences in schools.

## ABOUT YOUTHTRUTH

YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student and stakeholder feedback 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/resources.

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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## For Principals, Teachers, and Professional Learning Communities

Do you think about 59 percent of your student body feels safe at school, or do you think your students might feel more or less positively than that broad statistic? Why?

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Do you think 60 percent of students at your school would say that adults at their school try to stop bullying and harassment? What sources inform your hypothesis?

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How do you currently gauge school safety?

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What programs or processes do you currently have in place to support school safety?

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What questions do you have after reflecting on this data?

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Do school staff have the training and resources needed to keep students safe? What additional training or resources would be helpful?

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What mechanisms are in place to hear from students about their experience of safety in their schools? Are all students engaged in that process or are only some students being heard?

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## For Teachers and Principals in Conversation with Students

Do you think about 59 percent of your student body feels safe at school, or do you think your students might feel more or less positively than that broad statistic? Why?

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Do you think 60 percent of students at your school would say that adults at their school try to stop bullying and harassment? Why or why not?

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How often do you think fights happen at school? How concerned do you feel about needing to defend yourself?

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What do you think school leaders could do to make this school a safer place? What do you think students could do?

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How does your school communicate school safety policies, expectations, and resources? How could they do this better?

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What role do parents/guardians play in keeping schools safe?

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