



Sonoma County
Office of Education



SAFETY **REPORT**

2024

**SCHOOL CULTURE
& PARTNERSHIPS**

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Executive Summary

While the portrait of a school facing safety issues has been frequently sketched, the portrait of a safe school has not. This report takes a deeper look at the three comprehensive schools that Sonoma County high school students have identified as making them feel the most safe. We also examine instances where students report not feeling safe and provide recommendations for improvement.

School Selection & Methodology

The School Culture Department at Sonoma County Office of Education created a composite score from two questions from the YouthTruth Climate Survey: “I feel safe during school,” and “During this school year have other students bullied or harassed you?” These questions were selected to find schools that create safe environments and prevent harassment. We then selected three schools that were in the highest interval for the composite score.

We interviewed a cross-section of students at the three high schools to ensure proportional representation for the following characteristics: grade level, ethnicity, gender, special education, and multilingual learners. We also ensured students who identify as LGBTQ+ were included in each student panel.

Findings

- Students primarily define safety in terms of both mental and physical safety.
- The average positive response among comprehensive high school students to the YouthTruth prompt, “I feel safe at school,” was 51%.
- The average response for the top three high schools was 61%.
- Student perceptions of safety have significant correlations with other aspects of school culture.

Safe schools had the following characteristics:

- They communicate frequently with their students using multiple avenues of communication.
- They have clear procedures for safety and discipline. This especially includes violence, which students reported would lead quickly to suspension and/or expulsion.
- They are responsive to student concerns. Student concerns are taken seriously, investigated, and quickly reported back to the student who originated the concern.
- There is a strong adult presence around the campus. Whether it was highly visible campus monitors or, additionally, an engaged school resource officer, students feel

safer when there are friendly, respectful, responsive adults charged with keeping them safe.

- Students can easily name a trusted adult. In some cases, the adult was a teacher; in others it was someone from the front office, a campus supervisor, or a counselor.

Recommendations

Responding to emergencies

Students who experienced a school lockdown over the past year expressed a desire for more information during the lockdown. “I was very anxious during the lockdown,” one student told us, “and I didn’t get the information I needed. If students could get more information they would be able to be more calm.”

The long-term effect of a school-wide lockdown has a negative impact on students and contributes to a sense of unpredictability. Students who referenced a lockdown in interviews were much more likely to rate the school’s environment as “unpredictable.” SCOE’s Essential Five Safety Framework, which provides schools three options to fortify their campus: shelter in place (for environmental danger), secure campus (for danger near, but not on campus), and lockdown (for danger on campus), would provide more clarity and choices for emergency responses.

Protecting students from harassment

We also found that despite reported high levels of safety and a low level of bullying, students who are Black and students who identify as LGBTQ+ reported pervasive levels of harassment. These results align with the YouthTruth Survey, in which Black students and nonbinary or non-gender-conforming students reported low levels of safety. Students identified several concrete suggestions to improve their safety, which include:

- Support student affinity groups such as the Black Student Union (BSU) and Gender Sexualities Alliance (GSA). Students spoke about the positive teacher and student support they received in these groups, and appreciated when administrators had direct, meaningful, and consistent contact with the group.
- Strengthen the transparency of the reporting process to increase the clarity and confidence of students who are reluctant to report harassment. As one student articulated, “Reporting something is emotional, and it helps when you know what is going to happen. The school is clear about what happens when a student is tardy. Why can’t they have the same clarity about what happens if you report harassment?”
- Provide school staff with training on how to intervene in the classroom when there is harassment.
- Establish a formal feedback loop between administrators and students who are subject to historic bias, harassment, and other forms of denigration. The feedback

process should include formative check-ins throughout the school year with a clear articulation of how incidents are being resolved.

All children should feel safe at school. The Sonoma County Office of Education supports schools through grants, safety initiatives, training, and the elevation of student voice. Please contact us if you have any questions regarding support for your school or district. The full report is available and contains detailed information about methodology, student results, and findings.

Safety Report

Purpose

While the portrait of school-facing safety issues has been frequently sketched, the portrait of a safe school has not. This report is a deeper look at the three comprehensive high schools that Sonoma County high school students have identified as making them feel most safe. It details how the students describe and experience the environment, how school officials respond to safety issues, and the safety policies and practices of the school. It seeks to describe what a safe high school looks like. The underlying principle driving this research is that safety is an equity issue and all Sonoma County students deserve to feel safe at school. By highlighting the practices of schools with high safety scores, it is our belief that all schools can elevate their ability to cultivate an environment in which all students feel safe. We also examine instances where students did not feel safe and provide recommendations for improvement.

This study is also the first of several that will examine YouthTruth data within the context of improving the experience of students at their schools. Additional studies will examine how students conceptualize and experience belonging, engagement, and relationships – all key components of what the YouthTruth Survey is measuring. We hope to provide foundational understanding of school culture through this incremental approach. Research – based support and strategies will be included in the recommendation section of this and subsequent reports.

Theoretical Framework

Our framework draws on two distinct areas of scholarship that center both our focus and analysis: school culture and targeted universalism.

School Culture

SCOE's Department of School Culture and Partnerships is founded on the belief that a healthy school culture is essential to creating and maintaining effective learning environments. The California Department of Education has noted that the “physical, environmental, and social aspects of a school have a profound impact on student experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and performance.” The CDE defines a positive school culture as one in which, “all students experience equally supportive learning environments and opportunities that help them learn and thrive.”

The School Culture and Partnerships Department at Sonoma County Office of Education has developed the [School Culture Framework](#), which serves as a structure for planning and evaluating the essential components of a healthy school culture. A healthy school culture

is one that provides all students with equitable access to high-structure and high-support learning environments and opportunities.

Targeted Universalism

Targeted universalism was developed at the Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, under the leadership of John A. Powell. Their [framework](#) “supports the needs of the particular, while reminding us that we are all part of the same social fabric.”¹ It accomplishes this by defining a universal goal, and then using targeted policies to achieve that goal. For example, universal transition kindergarten is open to all 3- to 4-year-olds. The universal goal is to provide early education to every child. But not every child’s needs are the same, and so to ensure every child receives an equitable education, individual services are tailored and provided as needed. At its core, targeted universalism recognizes that people have differing needs, often because of structural inequities, and therefore require differentiated support so that everyone can reach the universal goal. Targeted universalism outlines five steps that include: 1) creating a universal goal, 2) assessing the general population performance relative to the universal goal, 3) identifying groups performing differently with respect to the goal and the overall population, 4) assessing and understanding the structures that impede each group from achieving the universal goal, and 5) developing and implementing targeted strategies so all groups reach the goal.

An important aspect of Targeted Universalism is to set realistic, measurable, and attainable goals. The goals move as the average increases. We call for an initial target, with the knowledge that this is a baseline that must move incrementally forward.

Method

The School Culture and Partnerships team analyzed YouthTruth survey data from Sonoma County. YouthTruth is an annual school climate survey that is administered at most school districts in Sonoma County. We created a table of all comprehensive high schools and their positive student responses. We then calculated the range for each category and divided them into four intervals. We were able to sort by each school culture measurement and determine which schools were in the top tier for each category, including safety.

We established the average safety score for the entire sample, and then determined the baseline for a safe school (the universal goal), and next disaggregated the data to find which groups should receive targeted support. To be clear, the support is needed because of systemic inequities the education system has failed to address.

¹ Powell, John, Stephen Menendian and Wendy Ake, “Targeted universalism: Policy & Practice.” Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, University of California, Berkeley, 2019. haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/targeteduniversalism.

I feel safe during school

<p>Percent Positives (favorability rating: percentage of students who chose 4 or 5 on a five-point scale)</p>	All high schools	51%
	First-interval high schools	61%
	By race/ethnicity (all high schools):	
	Latino students	49%
	Black students	43%
	White students	57%
	Asian students	56%
	American Indian, Alaska Native or Indigenous students	50%
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students	50%
	Middle Eastern or Northern African students	52%
	Multiracial and/or Multiethnic students	59%
	By gender identity (all high schools):	
	Girl/Woman	50%
	Boy/Man	57%
	Prefer to Self-describe/identify	36%
	Nonbinary or Gender Nonconforming	36%
	Other demographics:	
English Language Learners	52%	
Students with an IEP	51%	
Gay or Lesbian	45%	

Targeted Universalism Summary & Universal Goal

We have set a universal goal of 61% of students feeling safe at school. This goal was determined by taking an average of the positive responses to “I feel safe at school” from the top three comprehensive high schools.

The 61% goal represents a number that is explainable and achievable. It is an initial, incremental goal – that is, as schools increase their positive student responses on YouthTruth survey questions, the goal will shift up. Currently the average for all comprehensive high schools in Sonoma County is 51%. A universal goal of 100% safety remains the ultimate goal.

The three student groups who have the lowest reported feeling of safety are students who are Black, identify as nonbinary, or gay or lesbian.

Correlations

In order to determine the relationship between school culture categories, such as safety, with other measures assessed by YouthTruth such as relationships, we performed a Pearson Correlation Test between each question and every key measure: Academic Challenge; Belonging and Peer Collaboration; College and Career Readiness; Culture; Emotional and Mental Health; Engagement; and Relationships. This methodology allowed us to find high-impact categories, which in turn allowed us to hone in on questions that had exceptional correlations with other categories, which we are calling **high-leverage questions**. We defined high-leverage questions as those that had multiple moderate ($r > 0.5$) or strong correlations ($r > 0.7$) and were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

The table below summarizes the high-leverage questions and their correlations with the key YouthTruth measurements. Values in bold represent very significant correlations.

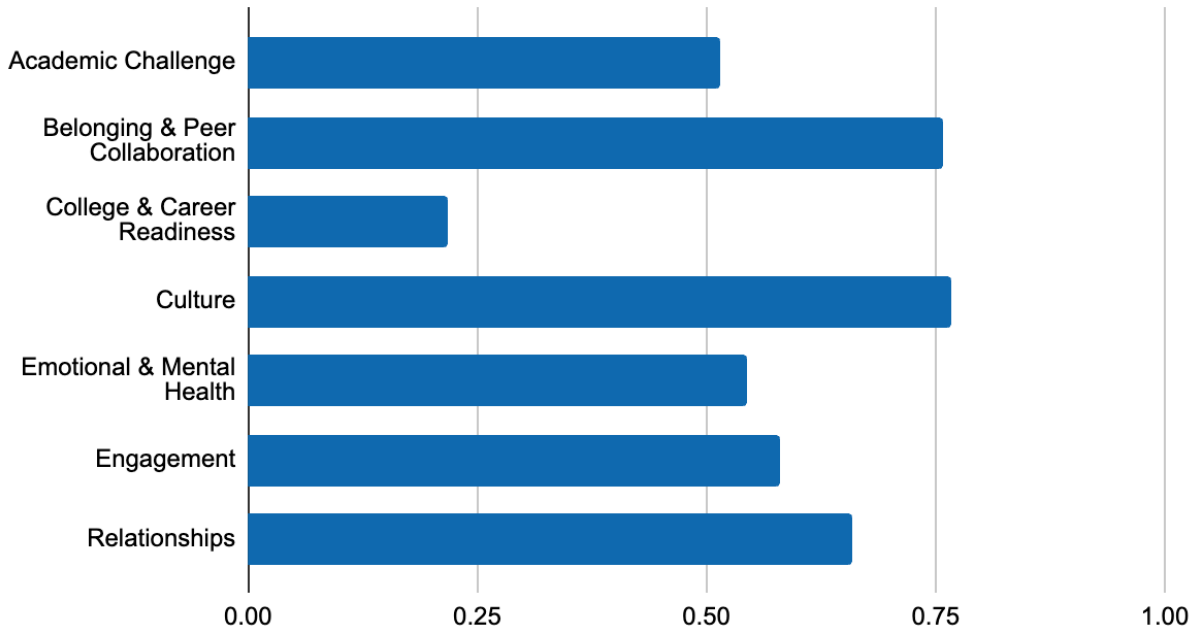


YouthTruth
— STUDENT SURVEY —
A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

	Academic Challenge	Belonging & Peer Collab.	College & Career Readiness	Culture	Emotional & Mental Health	Engagement	Relationships
In most of my classes we learn to correct our mistakes.	0.940	0.522	0.391	0.792	0.61	0.927	0.654
My teachers give me assignments that help me to better understand the subject.	0.878	0.562	0.114	0.662	0.548	0.82	0.721
I can usually be myself around other students at this school.	0.618	0.876	0.409	0.905	0.752	0.714	0.893
I really feel like part of my school's community.	0.614	0.829	0.461	0.879	0.752	0.725	0.793
Most students at this school are friendly to me	0.576	0.824	0.009	0.674	0.532	0.592	0.805
My school has helped me develop the skill and knowledge I will need for college level classes.	0.666	0.801	0.440	0.772	0.575	0.657	0.738
Most adults in this school treat students with respect.	0.759	0.621	0.452	0.878	0.72	0.758	0.635
Most students in this school want to do well in class.	0.895	0.778	0.381	0.926	0.778	0.856	0.798
Most students in this school treat adults with respect.	0.705	0.745	0.596	0.965	0.772	0.729	0.853
When I'm upset, stressed, or having problems, I know some ways to make myself feel better or cope with it.	0.618	0.631	-0.161	0.48	0.508	0.676	0.742
I am getting a high quality education at this school.	0.813	0.767	0.064	0.715	0.535	0.712	0.719
How many of your teachers try to be fair?	0.485	0.595	-0.113	0.438	0.441	0.526	0.788
How many of your teachers are not just satisfied if you pass, they care if you're really learning?	0.576	0.705	0.492	0.746	0.773	0.721	0.993

The chart below summarizes the strong correlation between safety and other components of school culture.

I feel safe during school.



Students' perceptions of their personal safety are strongly correlated (stronger than 0.5) with six of the seven Youth Truth constructs/categories. Those categories are: Academic Challenge, Belonging & Peer Collaboration, Culture, Emotional & Mental Health, Engagement, and Relationships. Only College & Career Readiness is not correlated with the question "I feel safe during school."

The implications of this finding are that by increasing the feeling of safety, schools can also leverage significant positive changes in academic challenge, belonging, culture, emotional and mental health, engagement, and relationships.

While this data is correlational, we can articulate a causal explanation for the link. Safety is a primary need and thus the ability of a school to provide a safe environment is also indicative of the school's ability to be responsive to student needs by establishing, maintaining, and adapting systems that promote student well-being. In other words, the focus on safety brings with it a concurrent focus on other essential components needed for a positive school culture. Additionally, the presence (or absence) of safety profoundly impacts the experience of a student's education. If we look at safety as a crosswalk through

school culture, we can see the overlap of impact. We highlight the specificity of impact in the table below:

Category	Impact of safety
Emotional & Mental Health	Safety and security has long been recognized as a primary driver of mental health. The absence of trauma, bullying, and fear is essential for stable, healthy psychological development.
Culture	YouthTruth’s categorization of culture focuses on fairness of policies and how students are treated. Both fairness and treatment shape a student’s experience at school and it is notable that culture has the highest level of correlation with safety.
Relationships	Students’ relationship with adults on campus has a reciprocal link to safety in both prevention and protection: First, the relationship often prevents an incident from becoming traumatic because students will report the concern quickly to a trusted adult and intervention measures can be deployed before the incident intensifies. Secondly, a supportive relationship with an adult is a protective factor against traumatic events.
Engagement	Students who feel safe, both psychologically and physically, are more likely to show up to school and to participate or engage in their classes and community activities. Conversely, a student who is concerned about their physical and psychological safety faces increased hurdles to access the instructional and curricular content. Thus, safe school environments lead to improved student engagement and, ultimately, improved educational outcomes. It is also important to note that Engagement and Relationships share the strongest correlation (0.82) of any two measures in this study, so increasing one of these measures has a nearly reciprocal effect on the other.
Belonging & Peer Collaboration	Schools that cultivate environments in which students are comfortable being themselves (a form of psychological safety), report a stronger sense of belonging. Additionally, prosocial

	involvement increases a child’s protective factors. Conversely, students who feel marginalized, unprotected, or othered are likely to perceive the school environment as hostile or distressing, and thus are more likely to either avoid or fear school because they feel unsafe or unwelcome.
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Sample

Data from Sonoma County’s 15 comprehensive high schools represent over 13,000 students. Categories of high schools not included in this report include charter, private, and magnet schools.

From the list of comprehensive high schools in Sonoma County, we selected three schools that rated highest in safety and low in bullying.

Anonymity

The purpose of this study is to highlight the practices and policies of schools that are essential to creating a safe environment. The process of revealing these hidden structures requires us to use interviews from students and administrators, as well as to contrast policies and data between schools with high scores and schools with low scores. Our purpose is neither to reward nor punish schools, but rather to provide a roadmap for safety. Throughout the study we refer to specific data sets, which are provided as a range or an average. We do not highlight data that could identify a school, a student, or an administrator, and that is why the tables of data used throughout this study neither label schools, nor use data that would otherwise identify the school, or an individual.

School Selection

We created a composite score from two questions from the YouthTruth Climate Survey: “I feel safe during school,” and “During this school year have other students bullied or harassed you?” The composite score was calculated by subtracting bullying from safety. We then selected schools that were in the highest interval for the composite score.

	I feel safe during school	Bullying	
Range	31-66 %	7-17%	All high schools in Sonoma County
Range	58-66%	10-11%	Schools in our study
Average	51%	11%	All high schools in Sonoma County

Average	61%	11%	Schools in our study
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Combining both measurements into a composite score allowed us to evaluate the schools along two categories: how well the environment fostered a sense of safety in all students, and how well it protected vulnerable students from being bullied. The result is that three schools that scored in the highest tier for safety but were in the bottom two intervals for bullying, were eliminated from our study. The table below highlights the range and average for all comprehensive high schools in Sonoma County, compared to the three schools in our study.

Composite Safety Score		
Range	20-55	All high schools in Sonoma County
Range	48-55	Schools in our study
Average	39	All high schools in Sonoma County
Average	51	Schools in our study

Both the range and average of the composite scores for the three schools in our study are considerably different from the range and average for all high schools in Sonoma County. While there is a 36 point difference in the range for all high schools, there is only an 8 point difference for the schools in our study. The average composite score at 51 is also significantly higher for the three schools than for all high schools in Sonoma County, which is 39.

Demographics

The three high schools represent a diverse range of students. While we do not list the figures for each school – since doing so would compromise their anonymity, we can summarize the demographics by noting that two of the three schools are either a plurality or majority Latino. The second-largest ethnic group is white: one in which they constitute a slight majority, and two ranging from 34% to 38%.

Student Interviews

We interviewed a cross-section of students to ensure proportional representation for the following characteristics: grade level, ethnicity, gender, special education, and multilingual learners. We also ensured students who identify as LGBTQ+ were included in each student panel. Participation in the study was optional, and students at each site were absent or

opted out. A summary of the key demographic characteristics of the 33 students we interviewed can be found in the table below.

Male	Female	Non-binary	LGBTQ	Latino	Black	White	Biracial	Asian	SWD ²
13	18	2	7	18	4	7	4	2	10

Working with each school’s administration, we asked that they select 16 students from each school, with the following characteristics and numbers:

Eight girls, eight boys (exclusive of nonbinary students), equally spread across each grade, and included two students with disabilities (IEP or 504), 2 LGBTQ+, at least one multi-language learner, and seven students of color.

After the students were selected, we asked that the administration pause for an equity check to ask themselves:

- Does this group represent the demographics of the school?
- Are there a disproportionate number of student athletes, elected students, honor roll, or students without a discipline record?
- Did you ensure there are other ethnicities represented besides Latino and Caucasian students that would help present a more accurate cross-section of the school?

Interview Questions

We followed a semi-structured interview protocol. We asked the questions listed below and inquired further when clarification was needed.

Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Your school’s positive response for this question was __% does that sound right? If so, can you provide an explanation? If not, please set the record straight for us. ● In answering the safety question on YouthTruth, how did you think about safety? For instance, was it physical safety? Safety from being hurt emotionally? Both? ● In your opinion, what makes a school safe? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What, in your opinion, is something that makes this campus safe? ○ What are your biggest safety concerns on campus? ○ Do you feel safe being yourself at school?

² Students with disabilities

- Which of these three terms would you say most accurately describes your school environment: orderly, unpredictable, or chaotic?
- Why did you select that term?
- How would you describe how the school handles discipline?
- Do you agree or disagree with this statement: If there is an emergency at my school, I know what to do to keep myself safe.
- During a lockdown or other school emergency, how does your school communicate with you? And do you feel that the communication helps you understand what is going on?
- Do you agree or disagree with this statement: The school responds quickly to concerns from students about safety or discipline issues.
- Have you ever gone to an adult on campus with a concern about your safety?
- If so, what was that experience like?
- Does your school have an anonymous reporting system and, if so, do you know how to use it?
- Does your school have a school resource officer? If it does, what has your experience with the SRO been like? If you don't, what is your feeling about having one?
- Have you heard the term restorative justice? Does your school use restorative justice? Have you ever had experience with this? If so, what was your experience like?
- Are there any positions or roles on the campus that make you feel safer?
- Has your school taught you specific strategies to resolve conflicts between students?

Data

Data for suspensions and expulsions was retrieved from DataQuest. We ordered the suspension and expulsion data for all comprehensive high schools in Sonoma County and created a three-tiered demarcation of low, mid, and high.

Suspensions

Suspension rates for two of the three schools in our study were low compared to the entire group of comprehensive high schools. One school had a high rate of suspension, but in examining the past five years, we found this year was an outlier. The other four years had exceptionally low suspension rates.

Expulsions

Expulsion rates for two of the three schools were in the mid-range, (the other, again, had an unusually high outlier year). The data here suggests that safe schools use suspensions and expulsions judiciously: they suspend only for serious offenses such as violence, and they expel the small number of students who repeat serious offenses.

Schools that reported the lowest levels of safety also had the lowest expulsion rates.

School	Suspension rate 2022-23	Expulsion rate 2022-23
1	Medium*	High**
2	Low	Medium
3	Low	Medium
2nd lowest ranked in all of the comprehensive high schools	Medium	Low
Lowest ranked in all of the comprehensive high schools	Medium	Low

*Although medium this year, it has been low over a 5 year period.

**Although high this year, it has been low over a 5 year period.

Student Interviews

Defining Safety

Many students do not think about safety as being a purely physical concept.

While some students said they defined safety in purely physical terms, most students told us they identified both mental and physical safety as key components that determined whether they felt safe at school.

Lockdowns

Two of the three schools had experienced one or more lockdowns in the past year.

Students expressed a desire for more information during the lockdown. As one reported, “I was very anxious during the lockdown, and I didn’t get the information I needed. If students could get more information, they would be able to be more calm.”

The long-term effect of a schoolwide safety issue such as a lockdown has a negative impact on students and contributes to a sense of unpredictability. When a student mentioned a lockdown at their school, they were more likely to rate the school as unpredictable instead of orderly.

Restorative Justice Practices

Students were not familiar with their school's restorative justice program, and were not sure if their school had one.

Anonymous Reporting

With the exception of one site, students were not aware if their school had an anonymous reporting system. At the one site where anonymous reporting had been highly publicized, all the students expressed confidence in how to use it.

School Resource Officers (SRO)³

Two of the three schools have school resource officers. Every student (except two who expressed neutrality) indicated high levels of support and trust in their SRO. The students described high engagement and responsiveness as reasons why SROs contributed to their safety. They appreciated having someone on campus who could respond quickly to various situations such as searches, fights, or potential weapons. Students feel safer knowing there is immediate assistance available, which helps alleviate anxiety and fosters a safer environment. "She's chill. I've talked to her a couple of times. She goes to the Spanish class. Nice to have the SRO. She connects with students. Personally I don't like cops, but she's different." Another student described their SRO as "super present in the school community."

Responsiveness to Student Concerns

Most students found the schools in this study to be responsive to student concerns. "Discipline is handled well, not too strict and not too lenient. The school responds quickly to concerns from students and has taught students that they need to go to adults for help."

Fairness

Students at all three schools overwhelmingly rated their schools as fair. When considering their answer, the students displayed a complex understanding of the components of the school that intersected with fairness. These components fell into four categories:

1. Access to a range of opportunities – "the school takes everyone's interests into consideration and offers pathways for college and also for trades for people who

³ Also sometimes referred to as a community resource officer.

don't want to go to college; students are given "fair and balanced" options for their future.

2. Clear and consistent discipline policies – “the school handles discipline well. There are clear consequences for fighting. Participants are treated the same; it doesn't matter who started it.”
3. Services for those who need them – “Students are treated in a way to meet their needs”
4. Treatment by adults – “I don't really see differences in how other students are treated.”

Relationships with Adults Have a Significant Impact on Safety

In almost every interview, students mentioned how their sense of safety is influenced by their relationships with adults on campus. In most cases, the students mentioned teachers, but students also mentioned the front office, campus monitors, and counselors. Here is a sampling of what they told us:

- “I know she would help any kid. I can trust her with my life.”
- “Teachers check up on students who are wandering around, and it makes me feel safe.”
- “Teachers are quick to address bullying.”
- “Teachers make students feel safe.”
- “There are teachers to talk to if you need help.”

Harassment of Protected Populations

Despite higher than average scores for feeling safe, and lower than average scores for bullying, we encountered students at every school we visited who told us about harassment and bullying targeted toward Black students, LGBTQ+ students, and students who receive special education services.

We spoke with students who felt the teachers ignored evidence of harassment. “A few students are openly racist and homophobic, but teachers rarely intervene. There are no consequences for hateful behavior. Teachers seem ill-equipped to manage difficult behaviors.”

One student described a pervasive atmosphere where racial slurs are common. “I hear the “n” word every day like 10 times. It's not a big deal to the students saying it. Just walking on campus is uncomfortable. I'm coming to terms that I can't restrict what comes out of people's mouths but some people don't understand how disrespectful [it is]. There should be more recognition that it isn't OK. It's something that is accepted, teachers don't do anything about it. The more people say it, the more it is accepted.”

Another student reported, “kids say mean shit” targeted at students with disabilities and students that identify as LGBTQ+. Students even go so far as to label specialized courses “for the queer kids” or “the racist kids.”

Students did have concrete suggestions about how to remove hurdles for reporting harassment. One student told us that, “Although my experience with the administration is that they are responsive to reports of harassment – they act quickly, show understanding, pull camera footage, and interview witnesses – there are many of my friends that don’t report when they are harassed or bullied.” When asked why they don’t report these incidents, he said, “I think it’s because there is uncertainty around what is going to happen after they report it. Can they remain anonymous? What is going to happen if I do report it?” The student suggested that, “it would help if the entire process was outlined, knowing what is happening in each phase, so the students know the steps.” Understanding the steps would be helpful because, “reporting something is emotional and it helps when you know what is going to happen. The school is clear about what happens when a student is tardy. Why can’t they have the same clarity about what happens if you report harassment?” We discuss remedies and recommendations for action in the next section.

Recommendations

Definition of Safety

Over half of the students we interviewed defined safety in both physical and mental terms. Focusing on physical safety, while necessary, is not sufficient to address the needs and expectations of students. An environment free of harassment is a requisite condition for students to feel safe.

Essential Five Emergency Action Responses Promote Physical Safety

To minimize the detrimental mental health impacts of emergency events on students and staff, school leaders, schools should adopt the Essential Five Emergency Action Responses, which utilize a gradient, trauma-informed approach to emergency response. [The Essential Five Action Responses](#) are Shelter in Place; Drop, Cover, and Hold On; Secure Campus; Lockdown/Barricade; and Evacuation. These protocols should be routinely communicated and practiced in an age-appropriate, trauma-informed manner to enhance student and staff response to an emergency, and to instill a sense of confidence and empowerment during an incident.

Protected Populations

We also found that despite a reported high level of safety and a low level of bullying, students who receive special education services, are Black, multilingual learners, or who

identify as LGBTQ+ reported pervasive levels of harassment. These results align with the YouthTruth survey, in which Black, Latinx, and nonbinary or non-gender-conforming students reported low levels of safety. Students identified several concrete suggestions to improve their safety, which include:

- Support [student groups](#) such as the Black Student Union (BSU) and Gender Sexualities Alliance (GSA). Students spoke about the positive teacher and student support they received in these groups, and appreciated when administrators had direct, meaningful, and consistent contact with the group.
- Strengthen the transparency of the reporting process to increase the clarity and confidence of students who are reluctant to report harassment.
- Provide teachers with training on how to intervene in the classroom when there is harassment.
- Establish a formal feedback loop between administrators and students who are subject to historic bias, harassment, and other forms of denigration. The feedback process should include formative check-ins throughout the school year with a clear articulation of how incidents are being resolved.

Additionally, we also recommend administrators take the following actions to effectively address a school culture in which denigrating language is pervasive:

- Recognize that a student who hears denigrating language daily is in an unsafe and unhealthy environment.
- Educate both students and staff about Title VI and Title IX protections. Students who know their rights are more likely to advocate for them.
- Adopt a preventive mindset with regard to harassment complaints so that the source of the behavior is curbed before it rises to the level of being pervasive or severe.

SCOE offers programs, professional development, and financial support that is targeted toward preventing harassment and increasing positive school culture. This includes communities of practice for either administrators or staff centered around interrupting racism; and [Welcoming Schools](#), which trains participants to create inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students. SCOE also provides financial support for schools who want to implement [Safe School Ambassadors](#), a program that empowers students to safely intervene when they encounter othering, bullying, and harassing student behavior.

Relationships

Relationships with adults are an important component of student safety. The high correlation between the question, “Most adults treat students with respect” and all of the composite measures in YouthTruth: Academic Challenge; Belonging and Peer Collaboration;

College and Career Readiness; Culture; Emotional Health; Engagement; and Relationships, was among the highest in the survey. In fact, of the seven measures, this question correlates at the very significant level (0.7) and above with three of them: Academic Challenge, Culture, and Engagement.

- YouthTruth data measuring student-to-adult relationships is available for every school that administers the survey and should be a primary focus of every school's efforts to increase student safety.
- Schools hoping to increase their positive relationships with students, can find vetted, research based resources at the [Search Institute](#), which focuses on building positive relationships between students and adults.

Fairness

Students identified three categories that shaped how they viewed fairness at their school. We have recommendations for how schools could increase students' sense of fairness in each category.

- Access to a range of opportunities: Ensure there are high-quality choices for students preparing for both college and career. Conduct an [equity audit](#) to assess whether students have equal opportunities to access pathways to success.
- Clear and consistent discipline policies: Establish, publicize, and follow discipline guidelines that have been developed with student, teacher, and administration input.
- Services for those who need them: Ensure that programs and services for students who are struggling both emotionally and academically are available, publicized, and utilized.

Suspension and Expulsion Practices

Schools with high safety ratings had low rates of suspensions and medium rates of expulsions. Schools with low safety ratings had medium rates of suspensions and low rates of expulsions. This is significant because the differences in these rates also highlight a difference in practices and policies. The principals we spoke with identified a consistent philosophy regarding expulsions and all felt supported by their district office and school board – an important finding that emphasizes the importance of district officials and board members in creating, supporting, and maintaining safe schools.

Best practices for expulsion include:

- use them sparingly, and ideally only after other means of support and intervention have failed
- use them only for issues of safety

- adhere to the law when the severity of the offense requires expulsions (refer to California Department of Education’s Administrator Recommendation of Expulsion Matrix).

Like red meat in the Mediterranean diet, safe schools use suspensions and expulsions sparingly. As a group, the schools in this study did not suspend heavily, but they were more prone to expel for repeated and serious offenses. The Administrator Recommendation of Expulsion Matrix, created by the California Department of Education, identifies three categories of exclusionary offenses, which the state labels as “mandatory,” meaning the student must be put up for expulsion, “shall recommend expulsion,” meaning there is some room for maneuvering to other options, and “may recommend expulsion,” meaning there is considerable room for discretion. Schools that were identified as being safe in this study expelled students in the “shall” and “may” categories more often than other comprehensive high schools in Sonoma County.

Targeted Universalism

Using the tenets of Targeted Universalism, we established an incremental universal goal of safety for all students. We then disaggregated the YouthTruth data and found groups of students that had significantly lower rates of feeling safe at school. We identified specific actions schools should take in order to support them. We recommend districts adopt the incremental goal of 61% of students affirming they are safe at school. While not everything that matters can be measured, and not everything that can be measured matters, safety matters and it can be measured. Accordingly safety should be a top priority for all districts, especially those that fall below the incremental goal of 61%.

Correlations

We identified 13 high-leverage questions that education leaders can use to impact their school culture. We recommend using these questions to conduct formative check-ins with students throughout the school year. These correlations underscore the conceptual coherence of school culture through the intersecting relationships components have with each other. We have highlighted the importance of attending to safety as a primary concept that crosses over to many other components of school culture.

Conclusion

Safety is an equity issue. Students have the right to feel safe regardless of where they attend school. Safe schools have policies, procedures, and cultures that promote positive outcomes for all. Safe schools are perceived by students as responsive, communicative and fair.

Harassment, particularly for students who receive special education services, LGBTQ+, nonbinary, and Black students, remains a pervasive characteristic of most schools. Using a targeted universalism approach, we have set a universal goal of 61% feeling safe at school. To that end, we have made recommendations that will increase safety for everyone; for students experiencing harassment, they deserve additional support from their school. This includes supporting student clubs that help students amplify their voice. It also includes a strong public commitment from schools to remove barriers for students to report harassment to administrators. One barrier we identified was the lack of transparency in how the reporting works. Schools can easily lift the veil of this process and ensure they understand every step the process will take, including how students who report offenses will be protected.

Creating a safe school is the result of clear priorities, policies, and commitments. Safety is also a cross-cutting concept that is deeply embedded and shapes a significant portion of school culture. It is within the ability of every school to be safe, and it is only fair that every child attends a school that is safe.

Appendix

Interview Coding

Safety categories were coded using the following classifications:

Safety category	Codes	Data sources
Environment	Orderly, Unpredictable, Chaotic	Student interviews
Suspension rate	High, medium, low	DataQuest, principal interviews
Expulsion rate	High, medium, low	DataQuest, principal interviews

Restorative justice practice	Effective, not effective	Student interviews, principal interviews
Responsiveness to student concerns	High, medium, low	Student interviews
Perceptions of reporting system	Useful, not useful	Student interviews, principal interviews
School's communication with students	High, medium, low	Student interviews
Clarity of emergency procedures	Clear, not clear	Student interviews
Fairness	Fair, not fair	Student interviews