RESEARCH & EVALUATION

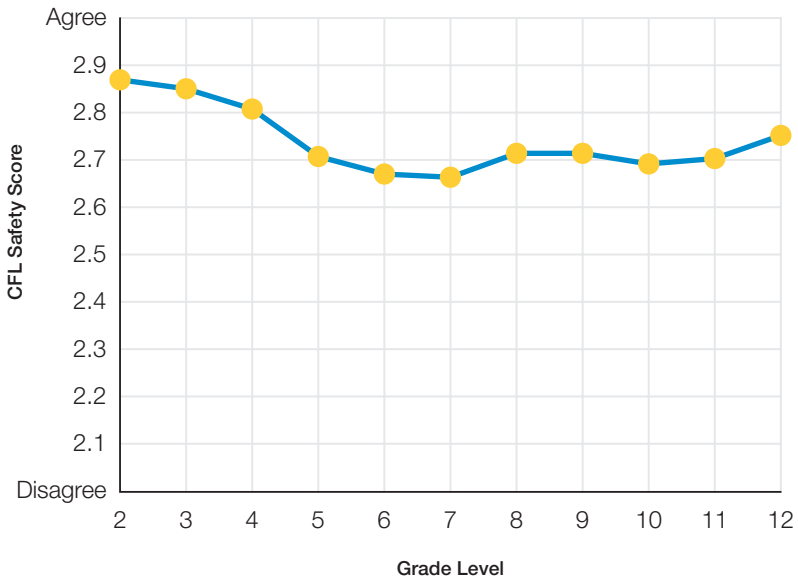
School Safety Research Brief

This report describes new research on school safety in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) and offers recommendations for how to make schools safer. School safety refers to how safe students feel on school grounds, in the hallways and bathrooms, and in classes. Students may feel unsafe at school when they are bullied, threatened, attacked, or disrespected or see these things occurring with other students.

How Safe Do Students Feel At School?

Students in CMSD, on average, do not view their schools as particularly safe or unsafe. On the Conditions for Learning (CFL) survey, the average student response falls between "disagree" and "agree" (on a 4-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") when posed with statements about their school being safe. For example, one statement on the CFL regarding safety is, "I worry about crime and violence in school." Students report feeling safest in grade 2, with a small decline across the elementary grades and a leveling out in middle school (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. CMSD Students' Perceived School Safety by Grade

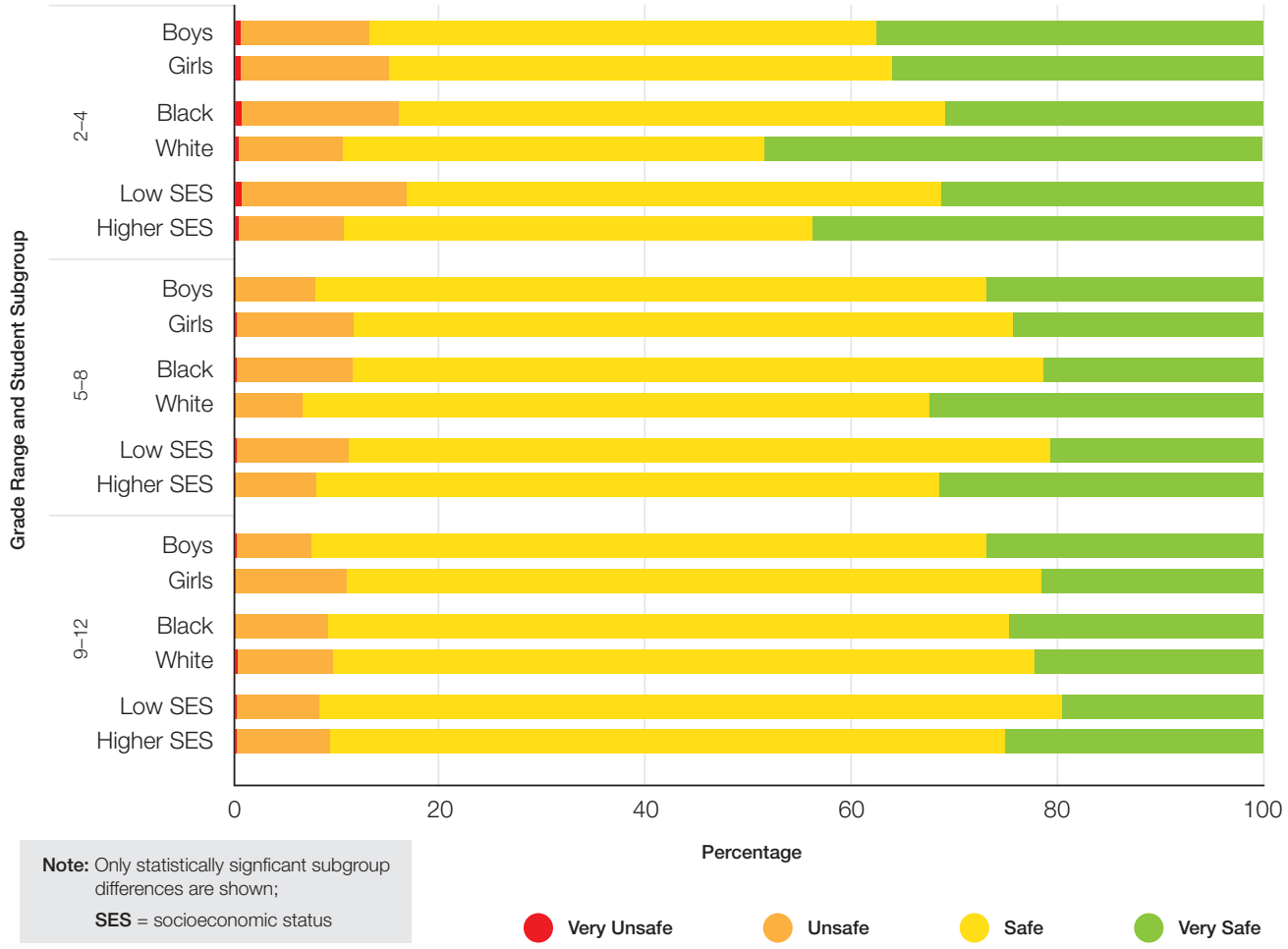


Across CMSD's schools, there are some gaps in perceptions of school safety among different student subgroups (see Figure 2). For instance:

- Across all grade ranges—2–4, 5–8, and 9–12—boys feel safer at school than girls. This gender gap is most pronounced in high school and least pronounced in grades 2–4.
- Additionally, there are gaps in school safety perceptions between Black and White students: in grades 2–4 and 5–8, Black students report feeling significantly less safe than White students do. In high school, the reverse is true.
- In grades 2–4 and 5–8, students who come from lower-socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhoods report feeling less safe at school than students from higher-SES neighborhoods. There is no gap between these groups in high school.
- Finally, in high school only, special education students report feeling less safe than their peers.

Some of these gaps exist because certain schools have more of one type of student or another and certain schools, overall, may be more or less safe. For example, higher-SES students may be clustered in only a few schools, and those schools may be generally safer.

Figure 2. Differences in Perceived School Safety among CMSD Student Subgroups across All District Schools, by Grade Range



Note: Only statistically signficant subgroup differences are shown;
SES = socioeconomic status

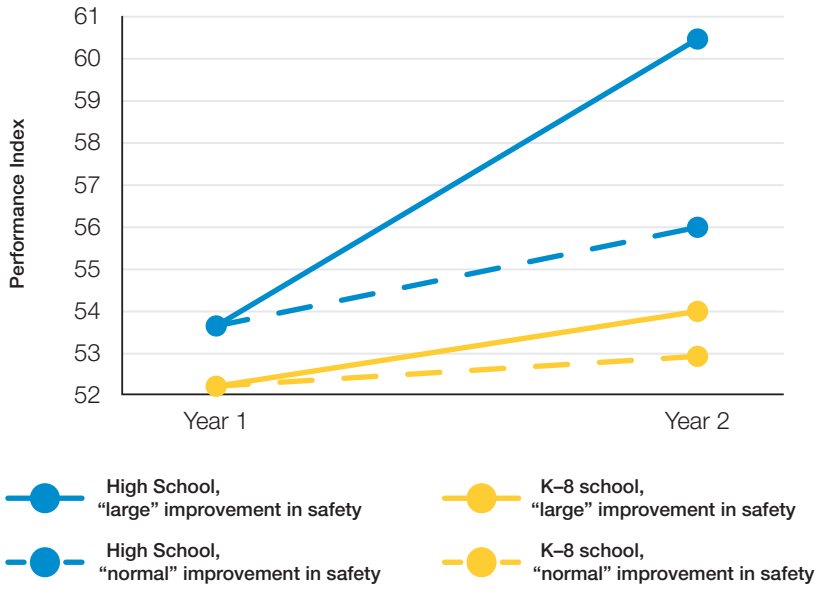
However, there are also gaps in perceptions of school safety *among students who attend the same school*. The CFL reports given to schools show these within-school subgroup gaps. Inside the typical CMSD school:

- Boys feel safer than the girls in the same school building.
- In grades 2–4 and 5–8, Black students feel less safe than the White students in the same school building.
- In grades 5–8, low-SES feel less safe than the higher-SES students in the same school building.

Safety and School Performance

A safer CMSD school is a better performing school. For CMSD primary schools, safety (the average of all CFL safety scores among students in a school) is linked with performance index (PI) and attendance rate. Every school year, the typical CMSD school's average safety score goes up or down about a tenth of a point. A CMSD primary school that improves its safety by this "normal" amount from one year to it would expect its PI to improve 0.6 points (see Figure 3) and its attendance rate to improve 0.2 percentage points. However, if the same school improved its safety score a "large" amount (say three tenths of a point), its PI would be expected to go up 1.8 points and its attendance rate to go up 0.5 percentage points. These analyses accounted for any changes in schools' demographics and enrollment.

Figure 3. Change in an Average CMSD K–8 and High School's Performance Index from One Year to the Next Associated with "Normal" and "Large" Improvements in Safety



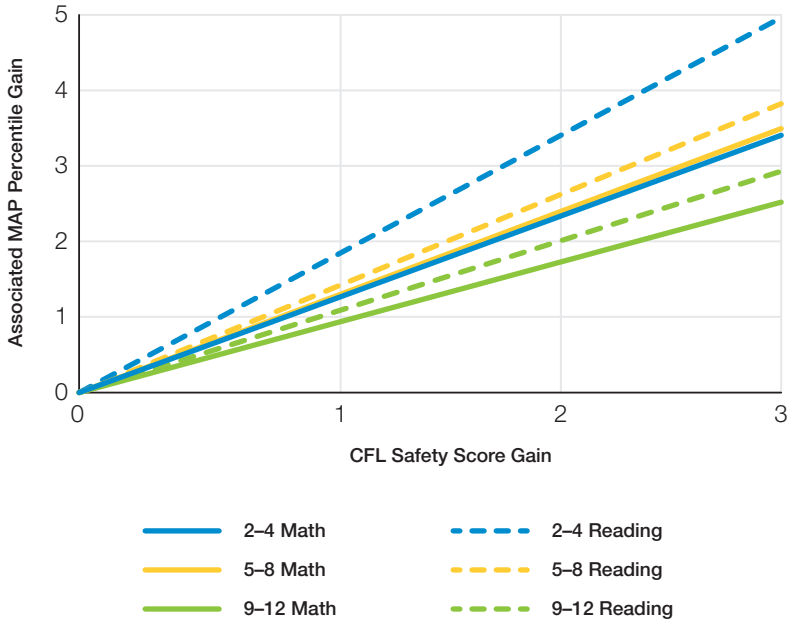
Note: A "large" improvement in safety is a 0.3-point improvement in the average CFL safety score; a "normal" improvement is a 0.1-point improvement

For CMSD high schools, the link between safety and performance is even stronger. A CMSD high school that improves its safety by a "normal" amount from one year to the next would expect its PI to improve 2.4 points and their attendance rate to improve 1.2 percentage points. If the same school improved its safety score a "large" amount, its PI would be expected to go up 6.7 points and its attendance rate to go up 3.7 percentage points. **Such an improvement in PI** from 2015–16 to 2016–17 **would have moved four CMSD high schools from an F to a D grade on PI**, one high school from a D to a C, and three high schools from a C to a B.

Safety and Student Performance

Across all grade levels, CMSD students who view their school as safer have higher math and reading achievement. From one marking period to the next, if a student's perception of safety increases by one point on the CFL survey (for example goes from an average of "agree" to "strongly agree"), her achievement is expected to increase by about 1 percentile point on the math and reading Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests (see Figure 4). Safety matters most for the achievement of students in elementary and middle school, and reading achievement relates more strongly to safety than math.

Figure 4. Associated Gain in a CMSD Student's MAP Percentile for Gains in CFL Safety Scores, by Grade Range and Subject



If a CMSD student's perception of safety were to move from the lowest to the highest value, her achievement would be expected to improve:

- 3.4 percentiles in math and 5.0 in reading in grades 2–4;
- 3.4 in math and 3.8 in reading in grades 5–8; and
- 2.5 in math and 2.9 in reading in grades 9–12.

In short, improving students' feelings of safety at school may bring with it an increase in their academic achievement.

Safety and Student Attendance and Behavior

CMSD students in the middle grades (5–8) and in high school attend school more often when they feel safer at school. In a 180-day school year, if a high school student's perception of safety increases by one point on the CFL survey from the preceding year, she is predicted to attend more than one full additional day of school. Furthermore, middle and high school students receive fewer discipline referrals when they view their school as safer.

How to Improve School Safety

According to the Humanware department, there are a number measures that school can take to improve school safety. These include:

- Social and emotional learning curricula like the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) and Second Step programs. These curricula have the strongest evidence for improving school safety. Lesson may address such topics as problem-solving, conflict-resolution, bullying, and anger management. At the high school level, engage the Student Advisory Committee to assist in analyzing CFL data and creating ways to improve or enhance the environment.
- Using the Conditions for Learning data to design interventions and activities in schools that address safety concerns is highly recommended. These data provide the student perspective of the school environment.
- Connecting students with service providers in the school and surrounding community to help deal with more serious physical and mental health-related issues.
- Assessing the physical environment of the school and visitor protocols to ensure that they are adequate and safe. Physical characteristics of the school that matter for safety include general cleanliness, supervision of all areas of the school building (either by camera or in person), a comfortable temperature, and proper maintenance of windows, doors, and desks.
- Ensuring that school rules are fair and consistently enforced by all members of the school community.
- Fostering more parent involvement at school. Parents should be aware of Conditions for Learning data, as well. They should be a part of school planning teams that make decisions about school culture.
- Encouraging school-based adults to continuously discuss and implement ways to establish relationships with students that are caring and respectful. This, in turn, creates an environment where students do the same.

Given the student subgroup differences in perceptions of safety noted above, schools should consider how these measures may affect different types of students. For example, if girls find their school to be less safe than boys, it may make sense to deliver some social and emotional learning lessons that address girls' unique needs and concerns.

This research brief was produced by the Cleveland Alliance for School Climate Research with support from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences grant #R305H170068. The Cleveland Alliance for School Climate Research is a research partnership between the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, the Center for Urban Education at Cleveland State University, and the American Institutes for Research. Please contact Adam Voight at A.Voight@CSUOhio.edu with questions or comments.