

THE ANTI-BULLYING REPORT



Lessons from Students and Principals on Belonging, Respect, and Safer Schools.

BULLYING REMAINS A STUBBORN PROBLEM in U.S. schools, eroding trust between families and educators and fueling fierce debates—from whether responses should be punitive or restorative to who decides if a student should be transferred. Some states are testing bullying deterrents that go beyond the school walls, including ticketing and imposing fines on parents and suspending bullies' driver's licenses for up to a year. Amid the debates, what everyone can agree on is that bullying needs to be stopped.

Although no federal law explicitly prohibits bullying, Congress is now for the second time considering the bipartisan STOP Bullying Act, which would fund state task forces and prevention efforts. Most states already require

districts to regularly review their policies, yet only a handful mandate comprehensive anti-bullying plans. Headlines—and firsthand reports from students about their school experiences—reveal the shortcomings of this patchwork.

This series urges policymakers, school board members, principals, educators, and parents to come together—listening to and collaborating with students, tailoring approaches to each grade span, and keenly tuning into the experiences of the most vulnerable. Deterrence and punishment alone are not enough to create inclusive and safe schools; lasting change will hinge on building school cultures where safety and belonging are non-negotiable, guided by the insights of those who know schools best: students.

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The Anti-Bullying Report: Elementary School Edition

As the first installment in a three-part series elevating students' perspectives on bullying in elementary, middle, and high schools, this report examines the experiences of students in grades three through five. Drawing on perception data from more than 62,000 elementary students, it distills key findings and shares lessons from the field—including practical guidance from a principal whose school, by her students' own accounts, is both safe and welcoming.

The two questions that frame this report are:

What can students' lived experiences teach us about school cultures that prevent bullying?

What can we learn from principals whose students report a strong sense of belonging and engagement?

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FINDINGS

1

BELONGING AND ACADEMIC CHALLENGE SHIELD STUDENTS FROM BULLYING

Elementary Students who feel like they belong and are academically challenged are significantly less likely to report being bullied; yet only 34 percent of elementary students consistently feel like an important part of their school.

2

IDENTITY-BASED BULLYING: A COMMON ELEMENTARY REALITY

Appearance, learning style, and how students express their identity are the most common reasons elementary students report being bullied. For many students of color, bias related to race and background adds another layer of vulnerability.

3

HELP-SEEKING GAP: HOME VS. SCHOOL

Elementary students are more likely to turn to adults at home than at school when they have been bullied, revealing a help-seeking gap between home and school. That gap is even wider for some students of color.

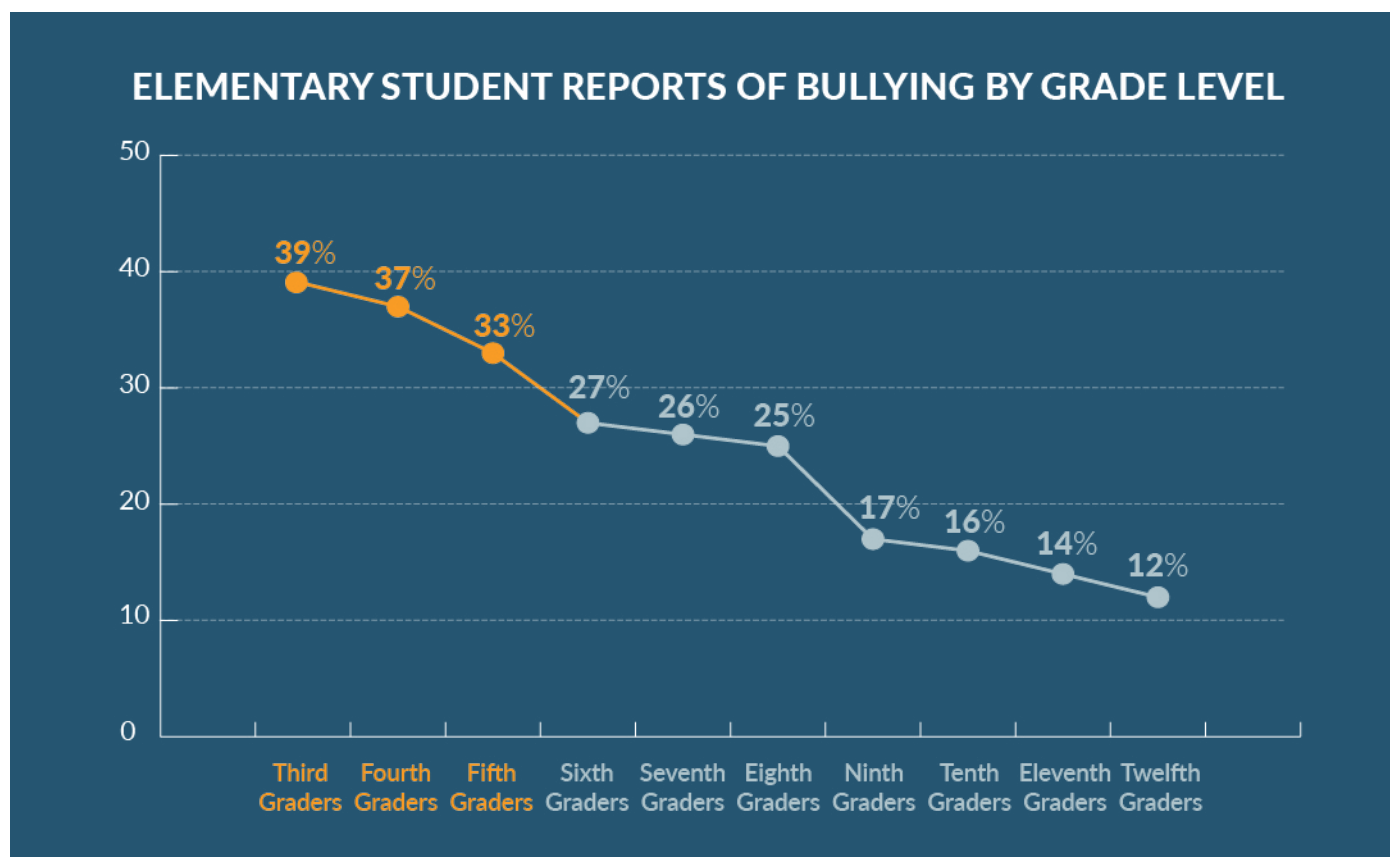
BELONGING AND ACADEMIC CHALLENGE SHIELD STUDENTS FROM BULLYING

- 1 Elementary Students who feel like they belong and are academically challenged are significantly less likely to report being bullied; yet only 34 percent of elementary students consistently feel like an important part of their school.

Elementary students' own reports show that schools have the power to shape safer, more inclusive environments, especially when students feel like they belong and are challenged. These protective experiences matter, yet for many elementary students, bullying remains an all too common part of the school experience, with more than one in three (35 percent) reporting being bullied or harassed in the past year.

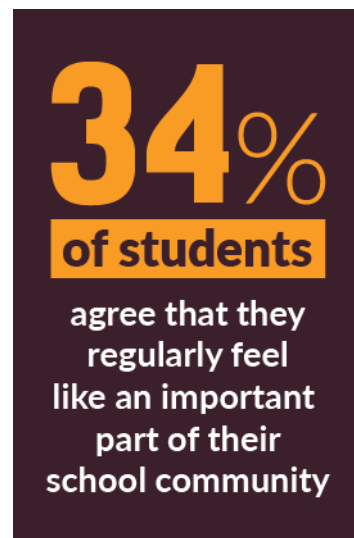


While more than a third of elementary students report being bullied, the likelihood of experiencing bullying decreases as students progress from grade three to grade five. In fact, the percentage of students who report being bullied falls through middle school and into high school, declining to 12 percent by senior year.



Grade level and age do not, however, have to determine how much bullying happens at school. Students' own reports highlight at least two key opportunities to create conditions that have the power to disrupt bullying in the early grades: building a strong sense of belonging and engaging students in meaningful work.

Belonging is the cornerstone of a good school, and students' reports show that feeling accepted, valued, and included is one of the strongest protective factors for preventing bullying. Elementary students who feel like an important part of their school are significantly less likely to report being bullied, even after accounting for grade level. And still, just 34 percent say they consistently feel like a valued member of their school community.



Along with belonging, students' experiences point to academic challenge as a powerful way to counter bullying. Elementary students who report finding their schoolwork engaging and challenging are less likely to report being bullied, a connection that holds across grade levels. When learning is interesting, relevant, and encourages reflection and persistence, students are less likely to report bullying.

THE PROTECTIVE POWER OF ACADEMIC CHALLENGE

- ✓ I learn interesting things in school
- ✓ What I learn in school helps me in life
- ✓ My schoolwork really makes me think
- ✓ My teacher supports me to correct my mistakes



IDENTITY-BASED BULLYING: A COMMON ELEMENTARY REALITY

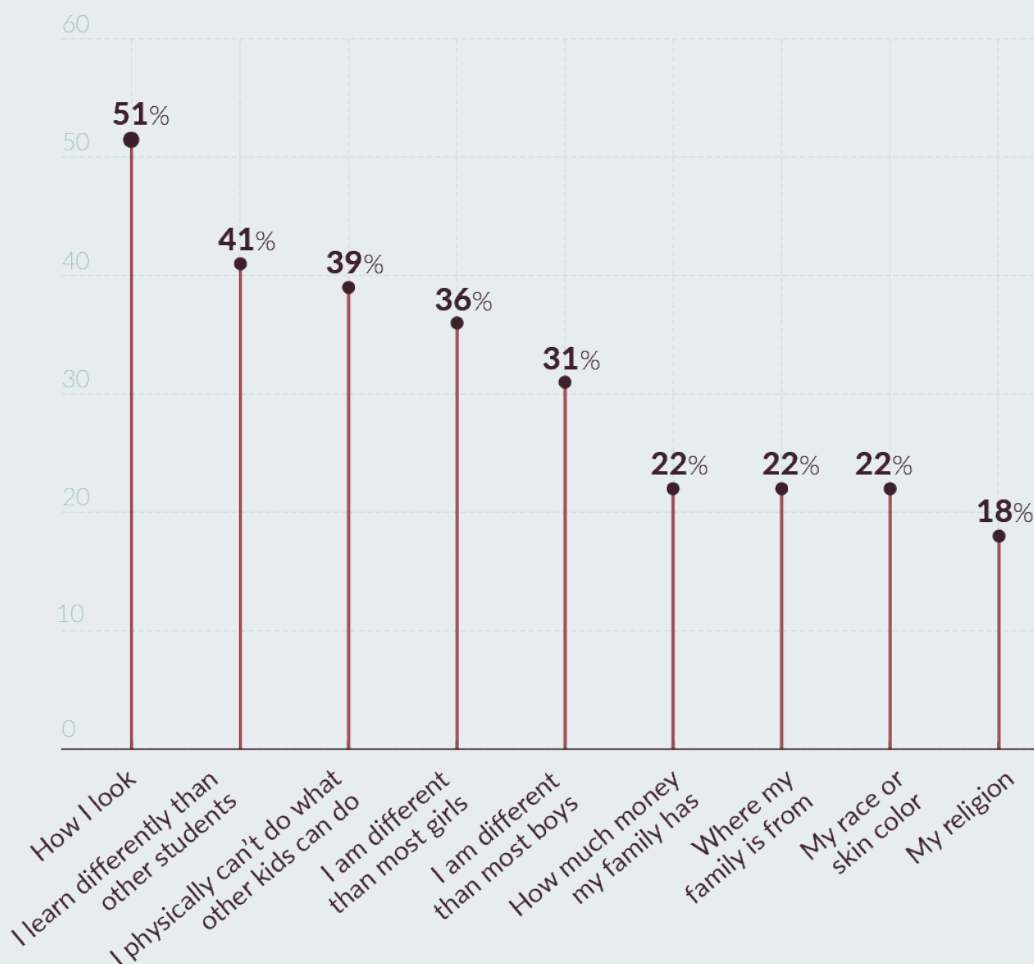
2

Appearance, learning style, and how students express their identity are the most common reasons elementary students report being bullied. For many students of color, bias related to race and background adds another layer of vulnerability.

Student reports show that bullying in elementary school is often rooted in a lack of respect for differences in appearance, ability, and identity. As such, addressing bullying at this stage means tackling the ways bias and exclusion show up in the everyday experiences of some of our youngest learners.

Students cite a range of reasons for being bullied, listed here from most to least common. At the top of the list, and perhaps not surprisingly, 51 percent of bullied elementary students who were bullied in the past year say they were targeted for how they look. A large share, 41 percent, report being bullied for how they learn, an especially important insight for educators striving to create classrooms where all students feel empowered to explore, take risks, and learn through mistakes. Bullying based on race, family income, and family origin is also common, with each reported by 22 percent of students who were bullied.

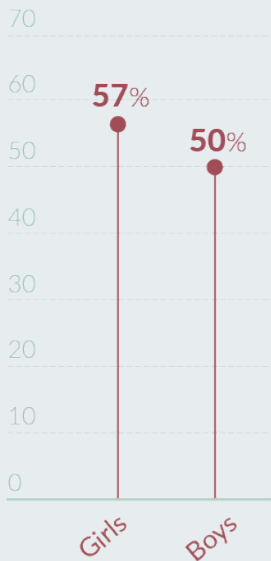
WHY ELEMENTARY STUDENTS REPORT BEING BULLIED



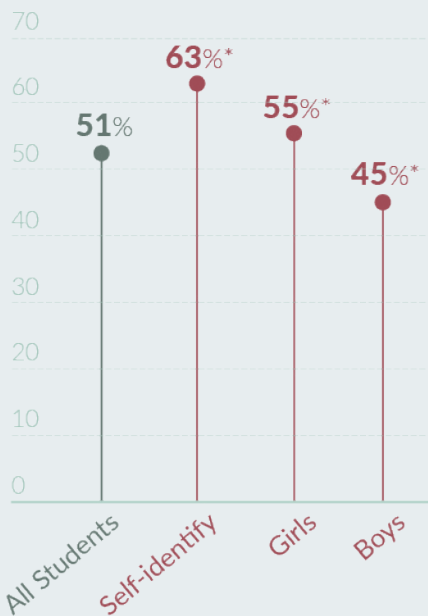
In elementary schools with greater racial and ethnic diversity, students report more bullying. This pattern deserves close attention in the early grades, when students are developing a sense of identity and culture, learning to navigate peer culture, and beginning to understand their own role in shaping the school community. The charts that follow show how bias and exclusion surface in young students' experiences when the data is disaggregated, with clear patterns across gender, race, and family background. Notably students in the minority often face greater risk, underscoring the need for vigilant, intentional efforts to build truly inclusive school cultures.

WHY ELEMENTARY STUDENTS REPORT BEING BULLIED

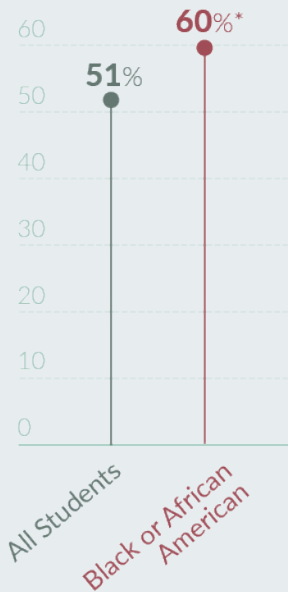
I am different from most girls/boys



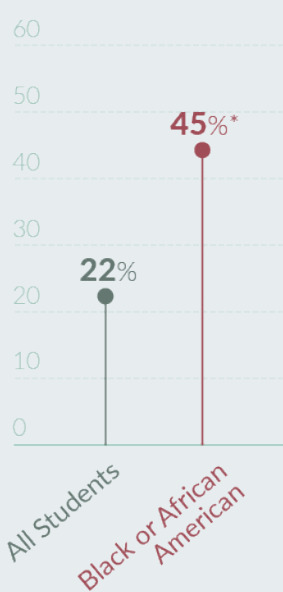
How I look



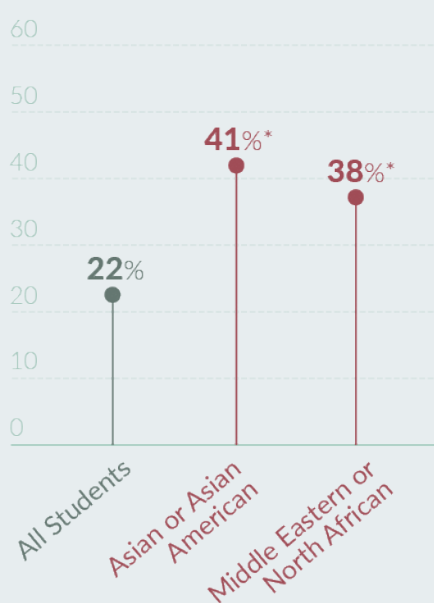
My race



My skin color



Where my family is from



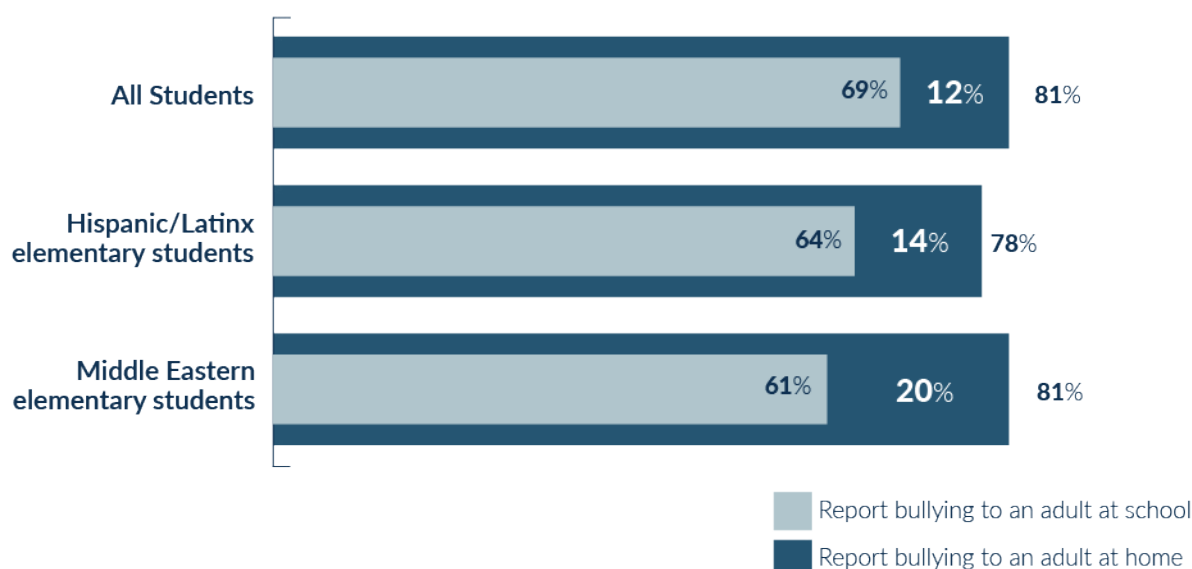
*indicates statistical significance.

HELP-SEEKING GAP: HOME VS. SCHOOL

- 3 Elementary students are more likely to turn to adults at home than at school when they have been bullied, revealing a help-seeking gap between home and school. That gap is even wider for some students of color.

Elementary students are more likely to seek help from an adult at home than an adult at school when they have been bullied, revealing a 12 percent help-seeking gap between home and school. In elementary school, the help-seeking gap is wider for some students of color: while 81 percent of students overall say they turned to someone at home when they were bullied, only 69 percent turned to an adult at school. Among Hispanic students, that gap grows to 14 percentage points, and for Middle Eastern and North African students, it widens to 21 percentage points.

REPORTING BULLYING TO AN ADULT AT HOME VERSUS SCHOOL



These patterns point to a powerful opportunity for schools to learn directly from students' experiences by tuning in to the needs of different student groups, starting with closing the help-seeking gap between home and school through intentional, collaborative relationships with families. It's also an opportunity to really listen to what students are telling us about the support they need, especially considering that one in four elementary students, 24 percent, say they don't tell anyone when they have been bullied. More reliable support for all students is a common-sense goal, yet that kind of connection is not consistently in place for all students. Only 54 percent of boys and girls say they have an adult they can turn to at school, and that number drops to just 43 percent among students who self-identify their gender.

ELEMENTARY STUDENTS REPORTS OF BULLYING TO AN ADULT

One in four or 24% don't report it.



PUT IT INTO PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Principal Regina Kirchner leads three primary campuses in Wyoming City Schools, a district in Ohio where students report strong belonging and low rates of bullying. One small campus of about 200 students ranks among the lowest in the nation for reported bullying. Drawing on this experience, Principal Kirchner shares three strategies rooted in daily practices that build connection, support positive behavior, and reflect a deep commitment to knowing and caring for each student.

Preventing Bullying Starts with How We Teach Behavior

Creating a culture that protects against bullying starts with shared expectations and a belief that behavior can be taught, just like academic skills. At Wyoming City Schools, Principal Kirchner and her team establish clear norms that guide daily life and help students grow into kind, prosocial members of the school community.

“We say together what our school expectations are: I am respectful, I am responsible, I am safe, and I am ready to learn.” These expectations are not just posted on walls—they are taught, revisited, and reinforced through reflection and restorative responses. When students fall short, the goal is not punishment, but growth. “It’s not that students are choosing to act out, it’s often about skill deficits,” Principal Jacob explains. “Just like we’d teach phonics to a struggling reader, we teach the social-emotional skills they need to succeed.”

Designing the Day to Build Connection

For Principal Kelly Kirchner, creating a school culture that fosters belonging and protects against bullying starts with how the school day is structured. At Wyoming City Schools, elementary classrooms are intentionally designed so that each teacher stays with the same group of students all day, building the time and trust needed for strong relationships.

“We do not departmentalize and switch classes,” Principal Kirchner explains. “To create that sense of belonging with young children, it is not really about the planning for all the different subjects. It is about the kid load.” Each teacher is expected to know their

students deeply. “You have got these 24 kids that you have to be experts on,” she says. “And limiting that number is really powerful.”

This structure also supports cross-curricular learning that keeps students engaged. It reflects a broader message Principal Kirchner shares with every new teacher: “We are really about teaching and learning, climate and culture.”

When Things Go Wrong, Repair and Reconnect

For Principal Kirchner, strong relationships are the foundation of a school culture where students feel safe, connected, and supported. That culture is built through consistent modeling by adults and a commitment to restoring relationships when harm occurs.

“There are consequences, but we try to drive toward natural consequences,” she explains. “It is usually about restoring the relationship.” Students are guided to reflect on what happened, consider better choices, and repair harm. “These kids live right in the same little neighborhood with each other. They have been in school together since kindergarten. They are going to be together until twelfth grade. We want to make sure those relationships stay intact regardless of the little mistakes they make along the way.”

That same commitment to connection extends to families. Parents are invited to participate in events that build understanding and shared purpose, from family reading nights to sessions on the school’s approach to belonging. “People make time for what matters the most to them,” she says. “What we spend our time on sends a really powerful message to kids.”

CONCLUSION

What happens when we truly listen to students and learn from their experiences? As this report shows, their answers have the power to reveal everyday levers that schools can pull to curb bullying and build inclusive, engaging communities. Insights from more than 60,000 elementary students can—and should—guide adults in making school a place where young people want to spend their days and where they can learn and grow. Educators, leaders, and policymakers should also pay close attention to insights of school-culture builders like Principal Kirchner. Her work demonstrates that creating such schools is within reach: by making continuous listening a core practice educators can make schools safe, keep learning engaging, and ensure every student walks through the door knowing they belong.

A heartfelt thank you goes to the 62,616 elementary school students who shared their experiences in school to help their schools improve and to inform this report. We also extend our sincere thanks to all YouthTruth school partners and their students for their commitment to listening to and learning from students. A special thank you to Principal Regina Kirchner for sharing her perspective on building a culture of care and consistency in elementary schools. We encourage everyone to take her advice and do your part to make schools places where students feel supported and cared for every day.



Contact us for more information:

131 Steuart Street, Suite 501, San Francisco, CA 94105
675 Massachusetts Avenue, 11th Floor, Cambridge, MA 02139



YouthTruth.org
hello@YouthTruth.org
844.987.8847



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The Anti-Bullying Report: Middle School Edition

As the second installment in a three-part series elevating students' perspectives on bullying in elementary, middle, and high schools, this report examines the experiences of students in grades six through eight. Drawing on perception data from nearly 57,000 middle school students, the report showcases key findings and offers lessons from the field—including practical guidance from a principal whose school, by her students' own accounts, is both safe and welcoming.

The two questions that frame this report are:

What can students' lived experiences teach us about school cultures that prevent bullying?

What can we learn from principals whose students report a strong sense of belonging and engagement?

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FINDINGS

AS BELONGING DECLINES, BULLYING PERSISTS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

1

Between sixth and eighth grade, students' sense of belonging drops by 11 percentage points (from 52 to 41 percent) while bullying stubbornly holds steady, affecting about one in four students throughout middle school.

APPEARANCE AND IDENTITY: TOP REASONS FOR BULLYING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

2

How students look is the most common reason they are bullied. Over three-quarters (76 percent) of bullied middle schoolers say they were targeted for their appearance. Many are also bullied based on race, gender expression, presumed sexuality, or disability.

WHEN ADULTS SHOW RESPECT, BULLYING DROPS

3

When middle school students consistently see adults at school treating people from different backgrounds with respect, reported bullying rates drop—but Black and non-binary students are significantly less likely than their peers to report witnessing such modeling.

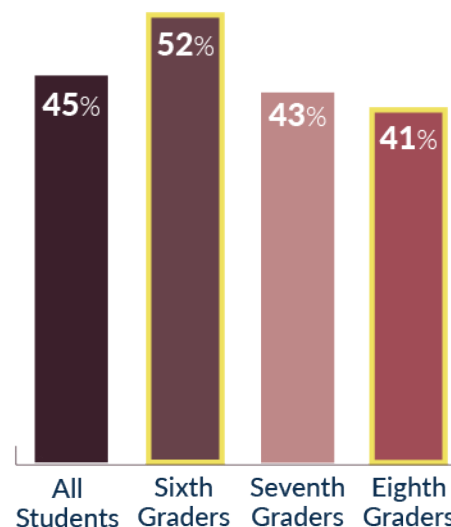
1 AS BELONGING DECLINES, BULLYING PERSISTS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Between sixth and eighth grade, students' sense of belonging drops by 11 percentage points (from 52 to 41 percent) while bullying stubbornly holds steady, affecting about one in four students throughout middle school.

Middle school students who report that they truly feel like part of their school community are significantly less likely to report being bullied. This is one of the strongest and most consistent protective patterns in the student experience data. Yet only 45 percent of middle schoolers overall agree that they truly feel part of their school's community, and that sense of belonging declines with each grade. By eighth grade, just 41 percent say they feel that they belong—a middle school low point that coincides with a peak turbulence of adolescence.

THE BELONGING SLIDE

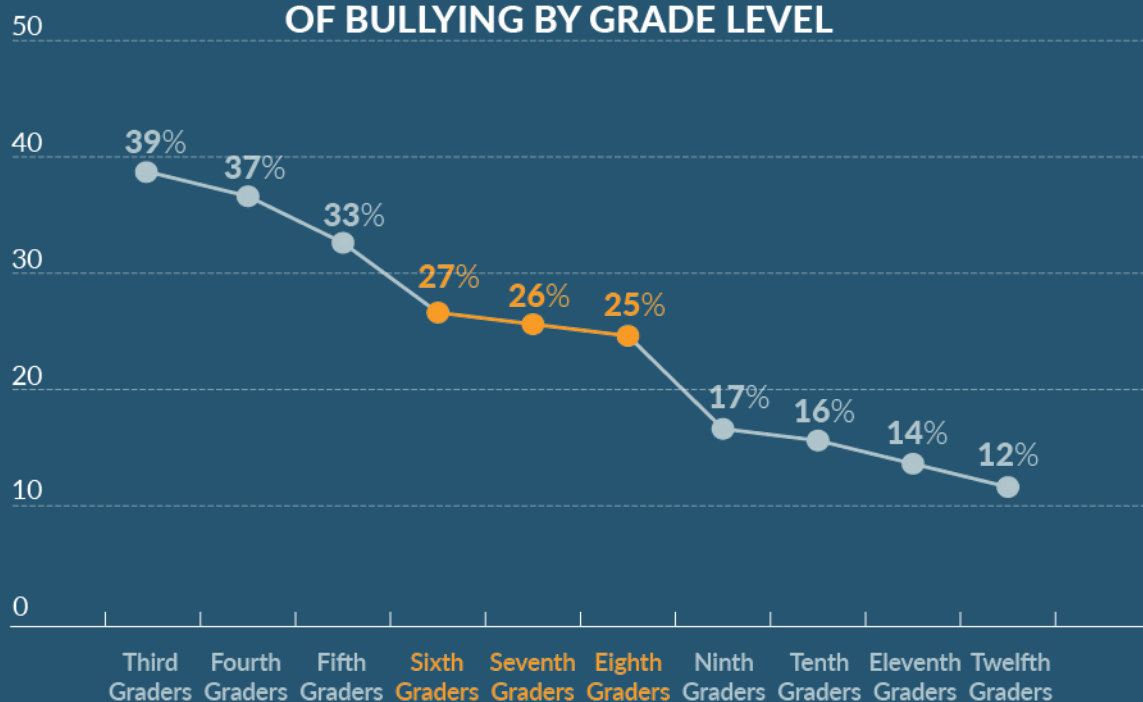
I really feel like a part of my school's community



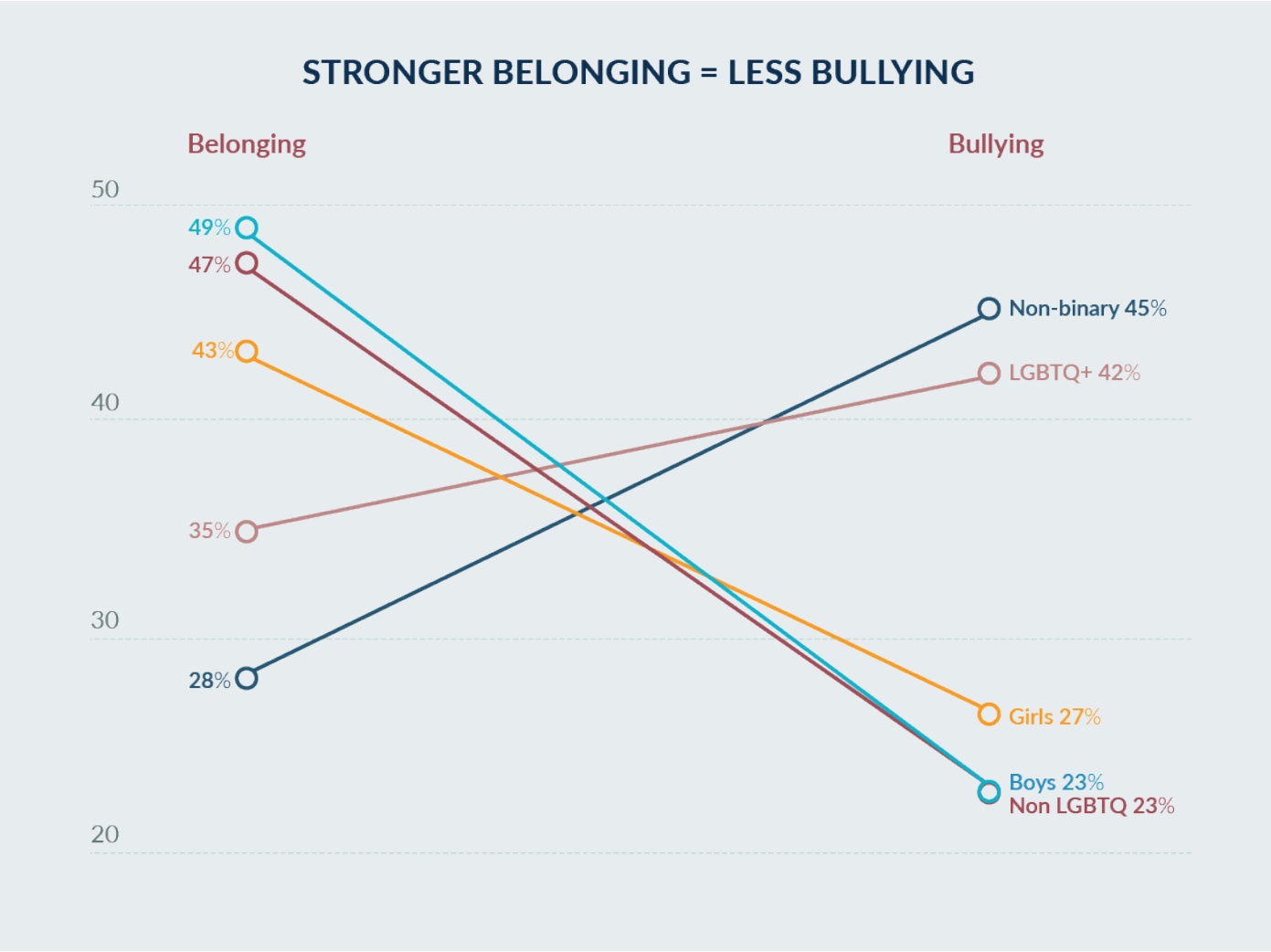
*yellow outline indicates statistical significance.

As middle school students' reports of belonging drop, bullying remains stubbornly entrenched across the grades: reports hover at roughly one quarter of students reporting being bullied in the last year, with virtually no change from sixth (27 percent), seventh (26 percent), to eighth grade (25 percent).

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT REPORTS OF BULLYING BY GRADE LEVEL



An inclusive school culture where students feel they belong is a powerful shield against bullying, but not all students experience that protection equally. Those whose identities sit outside mainstream norms report weaker belonging and, in turn, higher bullying rates. The burden is heaviest for LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming students: 42 percent of LGBTQ+ students and 45 percent of students who self-describe their gender say they were bullied in the past year—nearly twice the overall middle-school rate. For these students, limited belonging leaves them more exposed to harassment, making middle school especially challenging.



APPEARANCE AND IDENTITY: TOP REASONS FOR BULLYING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

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How students look is the most common reason they are bullied. Over three-quarters (76 percent) of bullied middle schoolers say they were targeted for their appearance. Many are also bullied based on race, gender expression, presumed sexuality, or disability.

Students report being targeted for many reasons – often simply for who they are and aspects of their identity they cannot control. While race or skin color, gender expression, and disability can all spur bullying, one reason stands out above the rest: appearance. In fact, 76 percent of bullied middle schoolers say they were targeted for how they look. Many also report bullying based on race or skin color (30 percent), presumed sexual orientation (26 percent), and family income (22 percent). Other common reasons include sex or gender (21 percent), where their family is from (20 percent), disability (19 percent), and religion (16 percent).

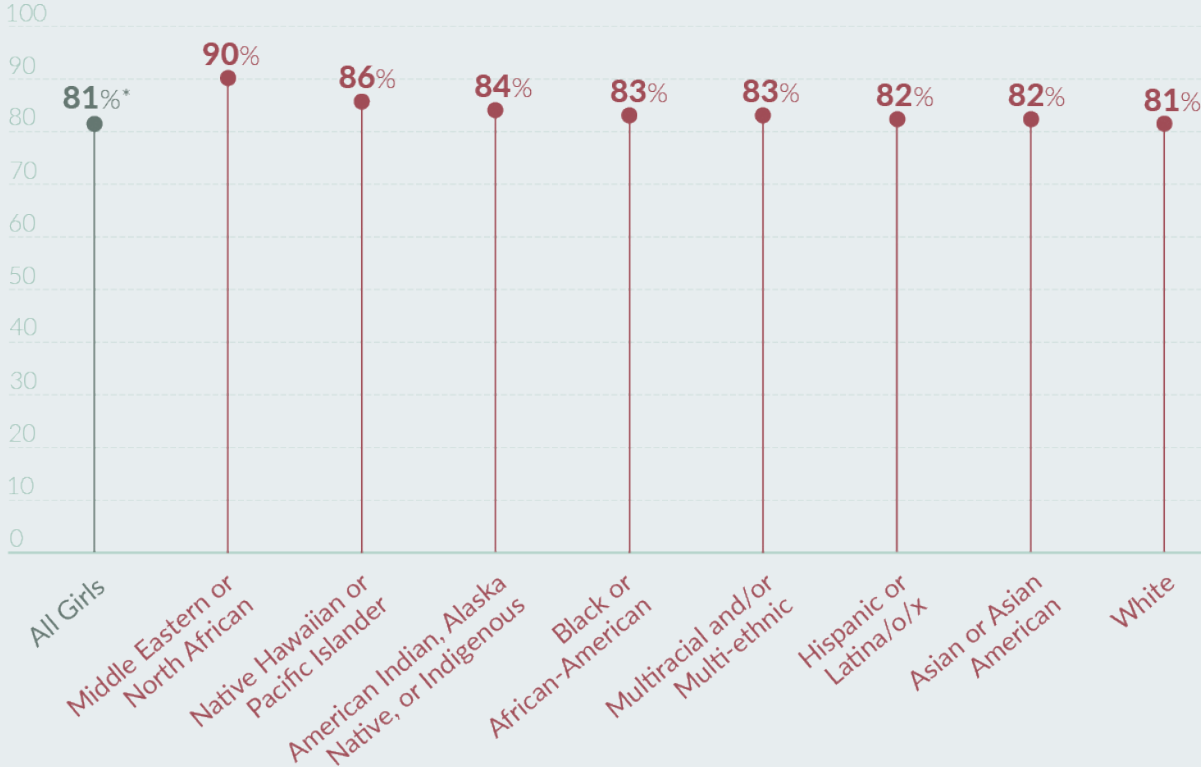
WHY MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS REPORT BEING BULLIED



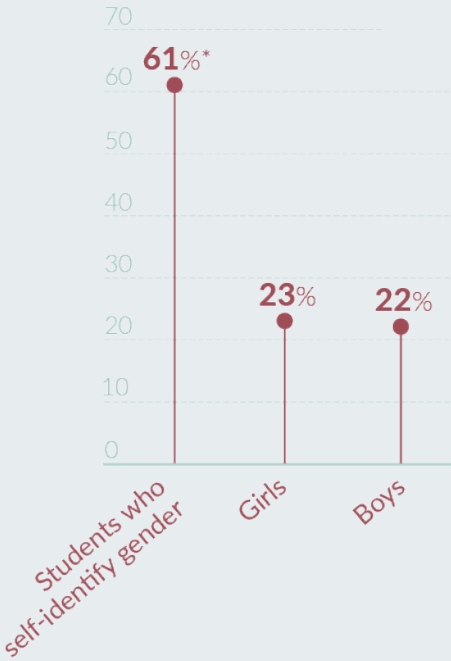
Students’ reports reveal that middle-school bullying is deeply intertwined with everyday biases and social hierarchies, underscoring that any effort to build a culture of belonging to curb bullying must address the social pressures shaping adolescents’ daily interactions.

WHY MIDDLE STUDENTS REPORT BEING BULLIED

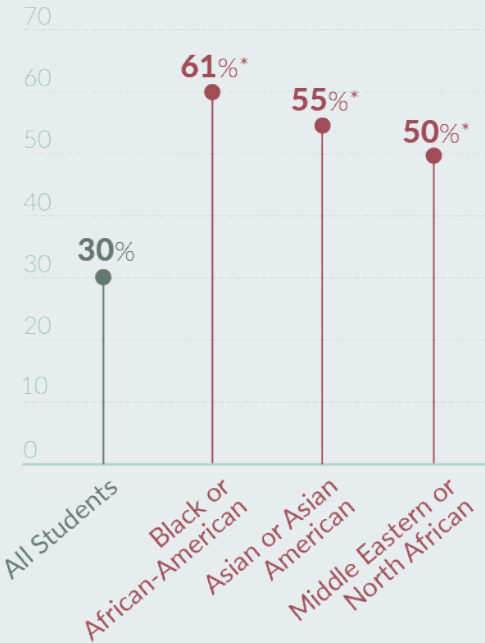
Bullied for how I look: appearance drives middle-school bullying, hitting girls hardest



Because people assume my sexual orientation



My race or skin color



*indicates statistical significance.

WHEN ADULTS SHOW RESPECT, BULLYING DROPS

- 3 When middle school students consistently see adults at school treating people from different backgrounds with respect, reported bullying rates drop—but Black and non-binary students are significantly less likely than their peers to report witnessing such modeling.

When middle-schoolers see adults treating people from different backgrounds with respect, bullying falls sharply. Even after accounting for other school climate factors, the link between adult respect and lower bullying remains strong, underscoring staff behavior as a powerful, controllable lever for shaping a culture of belonging. Encouragingly, seven in ten students (71 percent) already report that adults at their schools model this respect—an existing asset schools can amplify as they build safer, more inclusive environments.

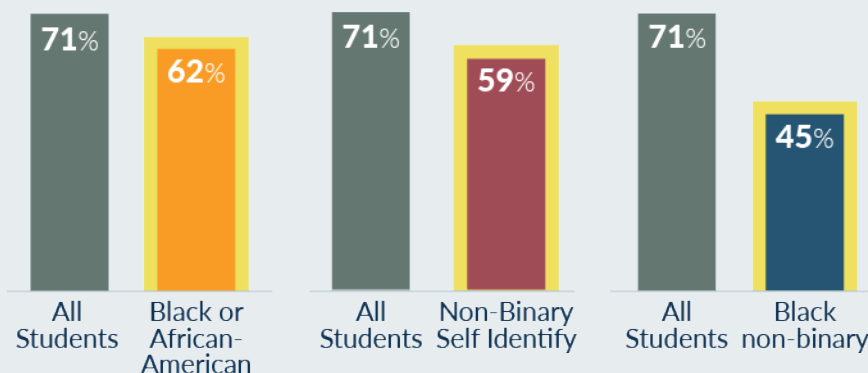
THE POWER OF MODELING RESPECT

Seven in ten or 71% report that adults at their school model respect



Although adult respect is a valuable asset, the data show concerning gaps across race and gender. Only 62 percent of Black students, 59 percent of gender-nonconforming students, and just 45 percent of Black non-binary students agree that adults model respect. These disparities deprive groups from the protective benefit that inclusive adult role models can provide middle schoolers.

WHO SEES ADULTS MODEL RESPECT?



*yellow outline indicates statistical significance.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Principal Kelly Jacob – keenly attuned to the needs and rhythms of early adolescence – leads High Tech High Middle North County, where bullying rates sit nearly 10 points below the national average. She views belonging as the bedrock of school culture and credits intentional structures, close relationships, and unwavering respect for each student's identity as key to creating a middle school environment where young people feel supported and safe. At High Tech High Middle North County, belonging is the organizing principle: the team focuses on closing gaps and empowering students to express their full identities.

Make belonging the organizing principle

Principal Jacob and her team treat belonging as a deliberate practice, embedding it in the school's daily routines. As one example, each week, teachers meet in "huddles" to identify students who seem off track—academically or socially—and draft targeted action plans. They begin with two guiding questions: "Who seems off this week?" and "What change can we try?" Jacob advises new educators to invest time in relationships with students outside of class—share lunch with students or sponsor a club—and to act quickly when a student struggles. She recommends the "two-by-ten" strategy: talk with the student for two minutes a day over ten consecutive days. These small, consistent gestures create the conditions where belonging can flourish and bullying loses ground.

Always Asking: What's the Missing 11 Percent?

For Principal Jacob, deep relationships with students are non-negotiable—and they are the lens through which she hunts for the "missing 11 percent." "You have to have somebody who connects with kids the way we need them to — and who collaborates with their partner teachers," she explains.

Even when things look strong, she pushes her team to ask what more they can do, modeling for students that continuous improvement is everyone's responsibility. "If we're at 89 percent, I always go back to what someone once told me: if a doctor said you were 89 percent healthy, wouldn't your first question be, 'What's the 11 percent?' That's what we're always looking for — where are we missing the mark?"

Make It Safe to Stand Out

Principal Jacob insists on a school culture where every student can show up authentically, and adults are expected to model respect for students of all backgrounds. "Our kids are not afraid to be weird," says Principal Jacob. "In most middle schools, you try to hide who you are because you don't want to be the standout. Here, kids know they're accepted for who they are." She's quick to add that perfection is not the goal: "Middle school is still a place where it's developmentally appropriate to be oppositional sometimes," she notes. What matters, she explains, is creating the conditions that help every student learn from those moments and keep growing.

CONCLUSION

Early adolescence is defined by shifting identities, changing friendships, and heightened sensitivity to peers, conditions ripe for both intense connection and painful exclusion. Feedback from nearly 57,000 sixth- to eighth-graders shows belonging drops just as social hierarchies harden, while identity-based bullying remains a stubbornly common part of the middle school experience. Yet these same students point to clear levers to combat bullying: prioritize belonging and have adults visibly model respect across differences. When schools do, bullying declines and students feel safe being themselves. Leaders who treat culture-building as core work—like Principal Jacob—prove it can be done. By pairing continuous listening with visible, daily respect, they make middle schools safer, keep learning engaging, and ensure every student walks through the door knowing they belong.

A heartfelt thank you goes to the 56,881 middle school students who shared their experiences in school to help their schools improve and to inform this report. We also extend our sincere thanks to all YouthTruth school partners and their students for their commitment to listening to and learning from students. A special thank you to Principal Kelly Jacob for sharing her perspective on fostering belonging and respect during the middle school years. We encourage everyone to take her advice and do your part to make schools places where every student feels a sense of belonging.



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hello@YouthTruth.org
844.987.8847



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The Anti-Bullying Report: High School Edition

As the third installment in a three-part series elevating students' perspectives on bullying in elementary, middle, and high schools, this report examines the experiences of students in grades nine through twelve. Drawing on perception data from more than 92,000 high school students, it showcases key findings and offers lessons from the field – including practical guidance from a principal who has built a school culture where, in his words, “it’s really difficult for someone to be a bully.”

The two questions that frame this report are:

What can students’ lived experiences teach us about school cultures that prevent bullying?

What can we learn from principals whose students report a strong sense of belonging and engagement?

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FINDINGS

BELONGING PROTECTS AGAINST BULLYING, BUT NO HIGH SCHOOL GROUP TOPS 50 PERCENT

1

Belonging cuts a high school student’s risk of being bullied by nine percentage points, yet fewer than half of students in any student group – by race, gender identity, or other background – report feeling part of their school community.

BULLYING DOUBLES RISK OF DROPOUT CONCERN AMONG HIGH SCHOOLERS

2

High school students who are bullied are nearly twice as likely to say they have seriously considered dropping out. Fourteen percent of students overall report dropout worry, compared to 27 percent of those who are bullied.

ADULT RESPECT REDUCES BULLYING, BUT IT IS UNEVENLY FELT

3

When high school students consistently see adults treat people from different backgrounds with respect, reported bullying rates drop – yet perceptions of that respect vary significantly by race and gender.

BELONGING PROTECTS AGAINST BULLYING, BUT NO HIGH SCHOOL GROUP TOPS 50 PERCENT

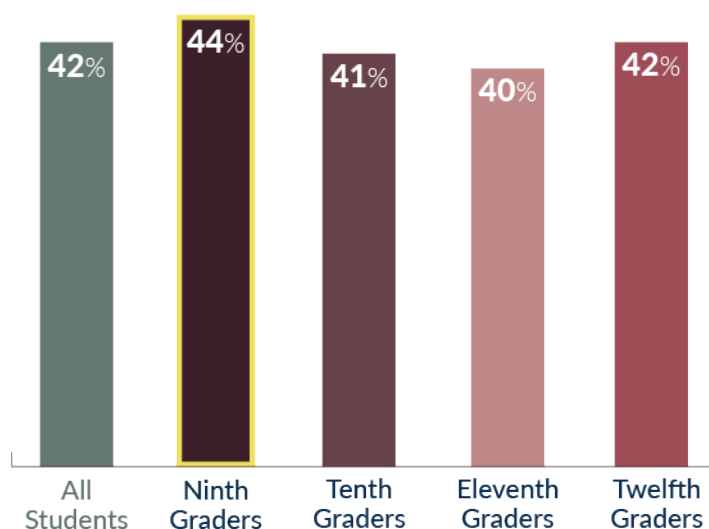
Belonging cuts a high school student's risk of being bullied by nine percentage points, yet fewer than half of students in any student group — by race, gender identity, or other background — report feeling part of their school community.

As in elementary and middle school, a sense of belonging remains a powerful buffer against bullying in high school. High school students who feel connected to their school are nine percentage points less likely than their peers to report being bullied—demonstrating that the seemingly simple feeling of “I fit in here” remains a consistently strong foundation of a school culture that keeps bullying in check.

Despite the power of belonging, just 42 percent of high school students say they truly feel part of their school community. Ninth-graders experience a modest but meaningful “belonging bump” as they settle into their new high school — but that boost quickly fades. By tenth and eleventh grade, students feel less connected, and although there is a slight rebound senior year, belonging never returns to ninth-grade levels.

THE BELONGING SLIDE

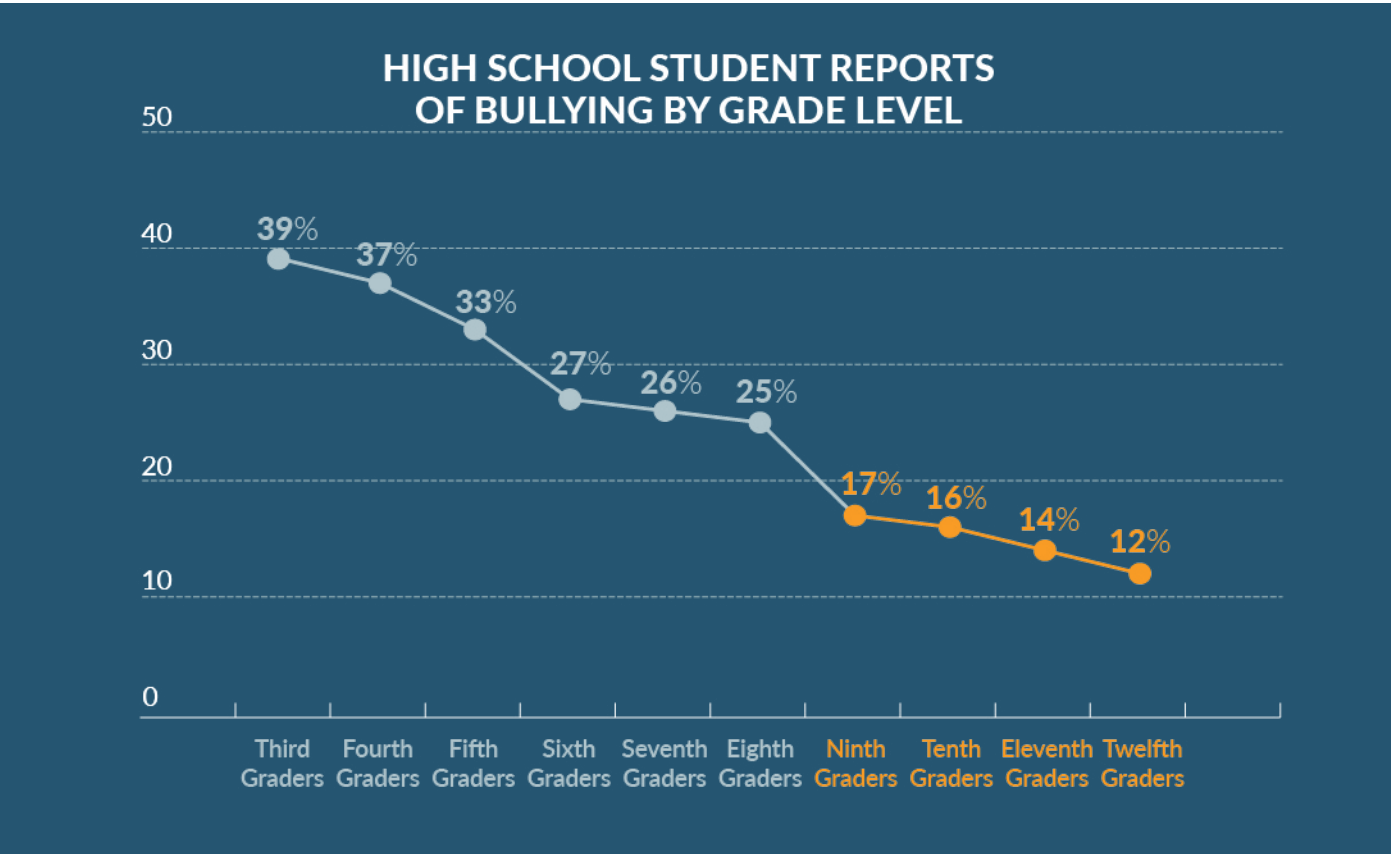
I really feel like a part of my school's community



**yellow outline indicates statistical significance.*

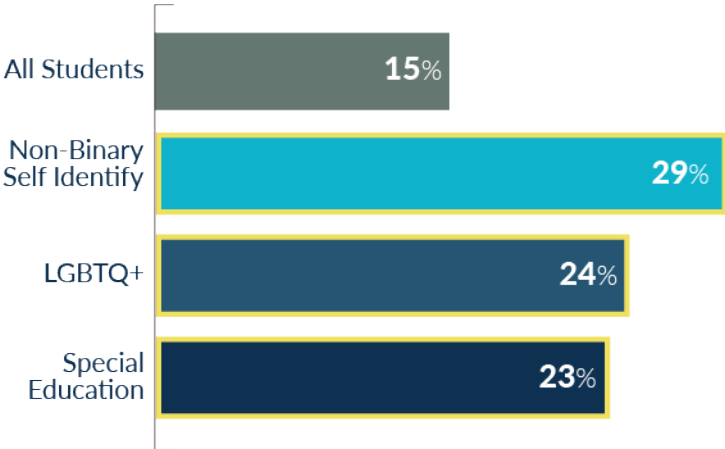
Belonging is low across the board in high school: no student group reaches 50 percent feeling part of their school community, whether by race, gender, grade, English learner status, or special education status. Within this overall pattern, some groups are especially disconnected, falling well below the average of 42 percent — including gender nonconforming students (29 percent), LGBTQ+ students (37 percent), and students whose parents or caregivers did not graduate from high school (39 percent).

These gaps in belonging have real consequences. Because students who feel connected are nine percentage points less likely to be bullied, the groups with the lowest sense of belonging are often the ones most at risk. While overall bullying rates taper off from 17 percent in ninth grade to 12 percent in senior year – the lowest across the K–12 spectrum – disparities persist.



But the challenge of making schools safe and welcoming for all students is far from resolved even in high school as particular students remain disproportionately targeted throughout their school careers. In particular, gender nonconforming high school students are nearly twice as likely to report being bullied than their peers (29 percent compared to 15 percent). Bullying rates are also elevated for LGBTQ+ students (24 percent) and students receiving special education services (23 percent).

PERSISTENT INEQUITIES IN BULLYING: WHO'S STILL BEING TARGETED IN HIGH SCHOOL?



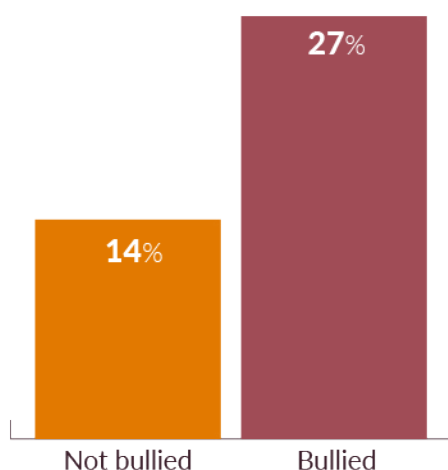
*yellow outline indicates statistical significance.

BULLYING DOUBLES RISK OF DROPOUT CONCERN AMONG HIGH SCHOOLERS

- 2 High school students who are bullied are nearly twice as likely to say they have seriously considered dropping out. Fourteen percent of students overall report dropout worry, compared to 27 percent of those who are bullied.

Bullying can have serious and lasting consequences, undermining students' long-term engagement with school. High school students who are bullied are nearly twice as likely to say they have seriously considered dropping out: 14 percent of students overall report dropout worry, compared to 27 percent of those who are bullied.

STUDENTS WHO SAY THEY HAVE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED DROPPING OUT

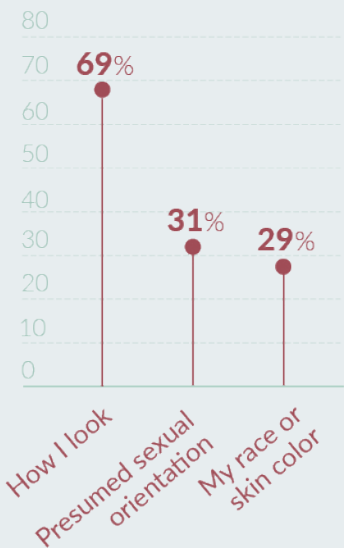


Bullying is a stronger predictor of dropout worry than race, gender, or grade level, making it one of the clearest warning signs that a student may be considering leaving school. The overall bullying rate among high schoolers is 15 percent, but certain students — particularly non-binary, American Indian, Alaska Native or Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and those receiving special education services — report much higher rates of both bullying and dropout worry.

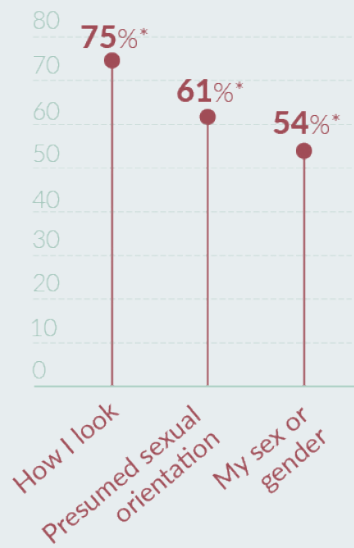
The charts that follow show the top reasons students in each group say they are bullied. While some patterns repeat — such as being targeted for how they look — each group's list is distinct. For non-binary, LGBTQ+, and special education students, the top three reasons align with statistically significant differences. For American Indian, Alaska Native or Indigenous students, five reasons are shown to reflect both the most common responses and those that stand out statistically. These outliers can reveal overlooked dynamics in school culture that disproportionately affect certain groups.

WHY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS REPORT BEING BULLIED

All Students
15% bullied;
14% considered dropping out



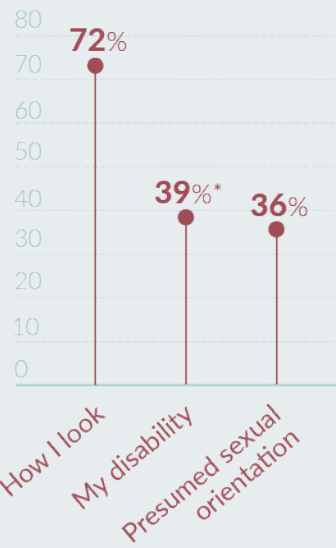
Non-Binary Students
29% bullied;
23% considered dropping out



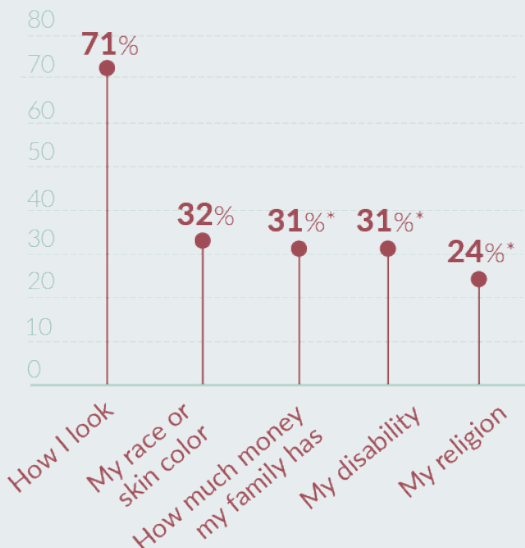
LGBTQ+ Students
24% bullied;
18% considered dropping out



Special Education Students
23% bullied;
18% considered dropping out



American Indian/Alaska Native/Indigenous Students
19% bullied;
19% considered dropping out.

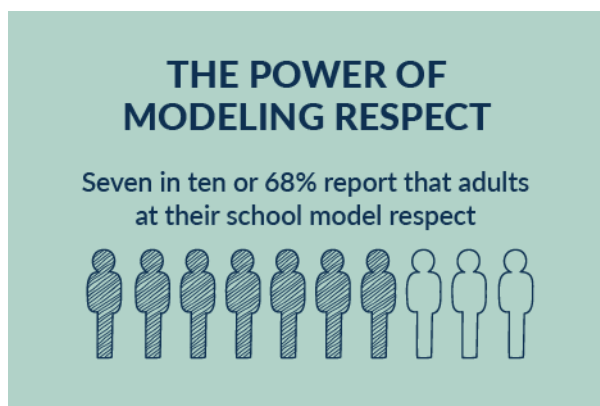


*indicates statistical significance versus all.

ADULT RESPECT REDUCES BULLYING, BUT IT IS UNEVENLY FELT

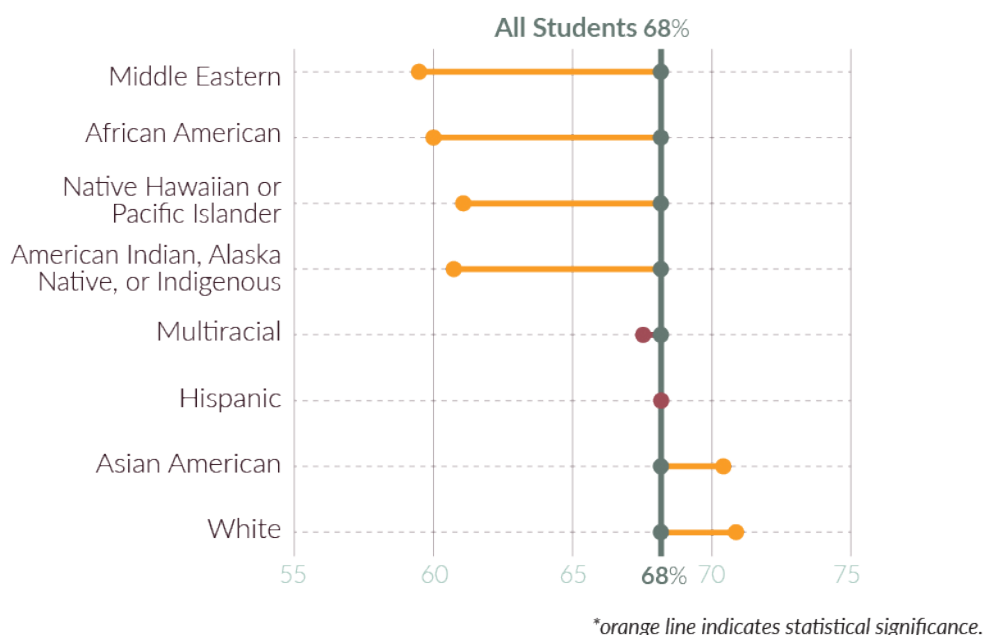
- 3 When high school students consistently see adults treat people from different backgrounds with respect, reported bullying rates drop — yet perceptions of that respect vary significantly by race and gender.

When high school students see adults treating people from different backgrounds with respect, reported bullying rates decline — even when other aspects of school climate are taken into account. This makes adult behavior a tangible, actionable lever for building a culture of belonging. Overall, more than two-thirds of high schoolers (68 percent) say they observe this respect in action, a shared strength across many student groups.



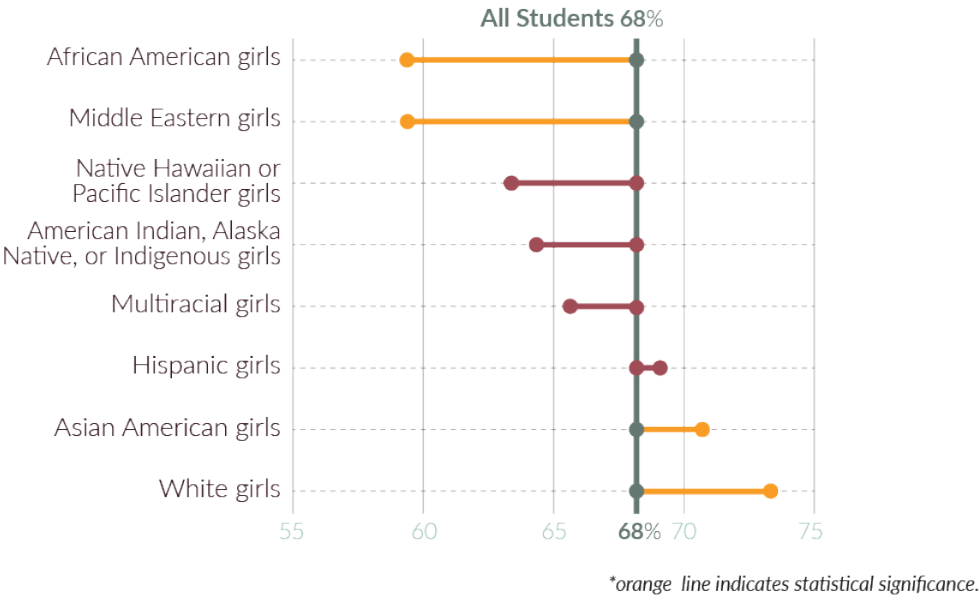
Yet notable differences emerge by race. Asian American (71 percent) and White (72 percent) students are significantly more likely to report witnessing such behavior, while American Indian, Alaska Native or Indigenous (62 percent), African American (60 percent), and Middle Eastern (59 percent) students are significantly less likely to do so.

GAPS IN SEEING RESPECT ACROSS DIFFERENCES BY RACE



Examining student reports by both race and gender reveals an alarming gap in who sees adults treat people from different backgrounds with respect. African American girls and Middle Eastern girls report the lowest rates—just 59 percent—compared to 68 percent of students overall. These rates are not only well below those reported by White girls (73 percent) and Asian American girls (71 percent), but also show how the intersection of race and gender can leave some students with dramatically less exposure to this critical protection against bullying.

INTERSECTING RACE AND GENDER HIGHLIGHTS RESPECT GAPS



PUT IT INTO PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Principal Joseph Davidson leads High Tech High North County, where students report high levels of respect and belonging, which in turn, reduce bullying. He credits daily relationship-building, intentional structures, and restorative practices with creating a culture where, as he puts it, “it’s really difficult here for someone to be a bully.” Drawing on his school’s experience, Principal Davidson shares three strategies that make respect tangible, foster connection, and engage students in meaningful work alongside adults.

Start Each Day with Belonging & Relationships

Each morning, Principal Davidson and his team greet students at the door—an intentional act that signals to every student that they matter and sets a tone of mutual respect. It’s also a way to stay closely attuned: “When you greet students every day, you notice patterns. You notice when something’s off, and that gives you a conversation starter.” Over time, this daily consistency creates a foundation where students feel safe to open up: “So when I check in—‘Hey, on Tuesdays, you seem a little down’—you’re more likely to talk to me.”

Culture Needs Structures

At Principal Davidson’s school, structures signal what matters: relationships, respect, and meaningful work. Belonging starts with mixed-grade advisories that connect ninth graders to older students. “That dynamic really helps our ninth graders understand this place—because they interact with and observe the older

students,” he explains. Project-based learning reinforces those values, engaging students in work that matters—like presenting traffic safety proposals to city council—and building the accountability that makes students want to show up for each other.

Make It Hard to Be a Bully

When a student does make a mistake, Davidson’s team doesn’t default to punishment. Instead, they use restorative practices to address conflict, repair relationships, and strengthen the culture of respect. “We want to understand what led to the behavior—and how to make it right,” he explains. Students even lead their own restorative conversations. These moments model what respect looks like in action—listening, accountability, and empathy—and change how students see one another: “What happens is the students start to see their peers as human beings. That’s the reason why it’s really difficult here for someone to be a bully.”

CONCLUSION

The teen years bring increasing independence, new responsibilities, and higher stakes as adulthood approaches. Reports from more than 92,000 ninth- to twelfth-grader students show that belonging remains a powerful protection against bullying, yet fewer than half of students in any student group feel part of their school community. Respect from adults toward people from different backgrounds also matters, but not all students witness it equally—especially when race and gender intersect. Leaders like Principal Davidson show how these conditions can be strengthened in practice. By greeting students daily, building structures that connect them across grades, and using restorative practices to resolve conflict, his team creates a school culture that actively guards against bullying. When educators pair continuous listening with visible respect and inclusive practices, they can strengthen belonging and make high schools safer for all students.

A heartfelt thank you goes to the 92,284 high school students who shared their experiences in school to help their schools improve and to inform this report. We also extend our sincere thanks to all YouthTruth school partners and their students for their commitment to listening to and learning from students.

A special thank you to Principal Joseph Davidson for sharing his perspective on cultivating a strong, respectful culture in high schools. We encourage everyone to take his advice and do your part to make schools places where "it's really difficult for someone to be a bully."



Contact us for more information:

131 Steuart Street, Suite 501, San Francisco, CA 94105
675 Massachusetts Avenue, 11th Floor, Cambridge, MA 02139



YouthTruth.org
hello@YouthTruth.org
844.987.8847



YouthTruth

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

The resources below offer tools and strategies to support this work, from building belonging to preventing bullying and creating more responsive school cultures.

[StopBullying.gov](#)

This federal clearinghouse brings together trusted guidance on bullying, cyberbullying, prevention, and response from agencies including the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice.

[NEA Advice on Bullying](#)

This practical toolkit equips educators with clear definitions, warning signs, and types of bullying, from physical and verbal aggression to social exclusion and cyberbullying. It helps staff distinguish bullying from everyday conflict and outlines steps to intervene effectively, advocate for targeted students, and support schoolwide prevention efforts

[Edutopia Bullying Prevention](#)

This curated collection offers practical strategies, lesson plans, planning guides, and multimedia tools for schools working to create safe and inclusive environments. The resources emphasize research-based approaches, including empathy-building activities and community engagement, to support both classroom and schoolwide efforts to prevent bullying

[The Trevor Project](#)

While the Trevor Project primarily provides crisis support for LGBTQ+ youth, it also plays a key national role in school-based efforts to prevent bullying related to sexual orientation and gender identity. The organization offers resources for educators and advocates working to create safer, more inclusive school environments.

[Teach Kindness](#)

Teach Kindness is a collaborative initiative led by educators and supported by leading education organizations. The program offers free, research-based resources that help schools foster kindness, strengthen school climate, and prevent bullying by creating more inclusive and supportive environments for all students.

[University of Virginia: Youth-Nex & Curry School of Education](#)

Youth-Nex is a research center focused on advancing positive youth development and prevention strategies in schools. For district leaders, school psychologists, and school safety teams, especially those seeking to align their practices with national best practices, this center offers valuable research and tools.

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

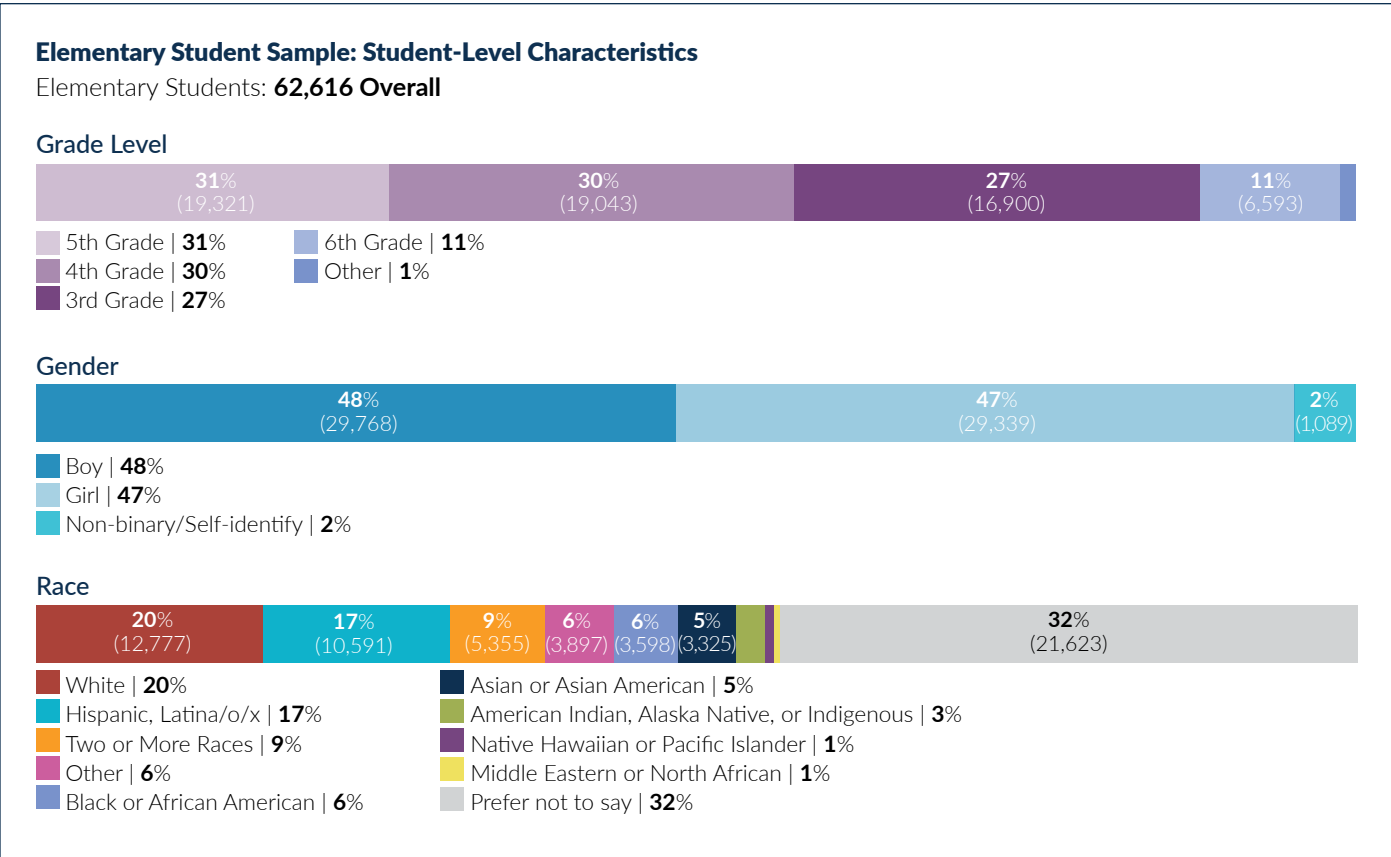
We analyzed data from YouthTruth's Survey of the Student Experience, conducted during the 2024–25 school year, which included responses from 62,616 elementary, 56,881 middle, and 92,284 high school students. To examine how students' school experiences - their sense of belonging, access to a trusted adult, and experience of academic challenge - relate to reports of being bullied, we used weighted regression models.

Models controlled for student characteristics (grade level, gender, race/ethnicity), school characteristics (school type, staffing levels, total student enrollment, community locale, racial/ethnic composition, diversity index), and included fixed effects for the calendar quarter in which the survey was administered. Group differences were evaluated using two-tailed t-tests, and p-values were adjusted for multiple comparisons.

In addition to the survey analyses, we conducted semi-structured interviews with principals at schools where bullying reports were notably low. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, transcribed, and summarized to capture key insights.

SAMPLE OVERVIEW: SCHOOLS, DISTRICTS, AND STATES

| SCHOOL LEVEL | SCHOOLS | DISTRICTS | STATES | STATE NAMES |
|--------------------|---------|-----------|--------|--|
| Elementary Schools | 367 | 88 | 11 | CA, CO, IL, KY, MA, MI, OH, OR, TX, VT, WA |
| Middle Schools | 199 | 89 | | |
| High Schools | 189 | 82 | | |



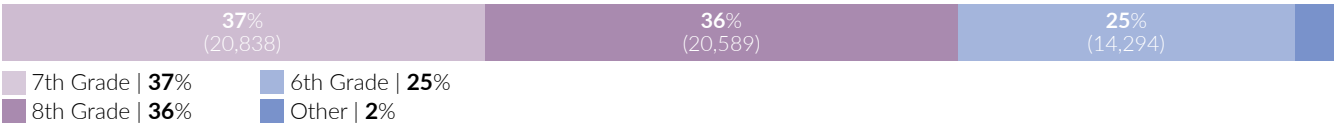
APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

Middle School Student Sample: Student-Level Characteristics

Middle School Students: **56,881 Overall**

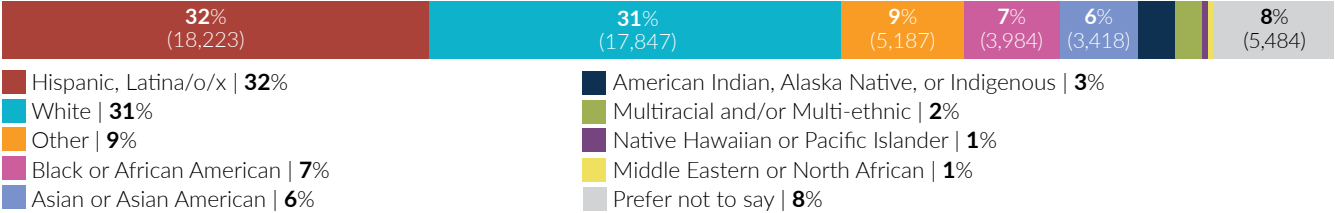
Grade Level



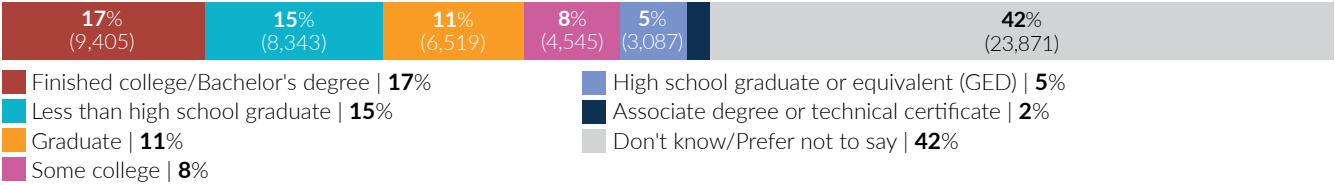
Gender



Race



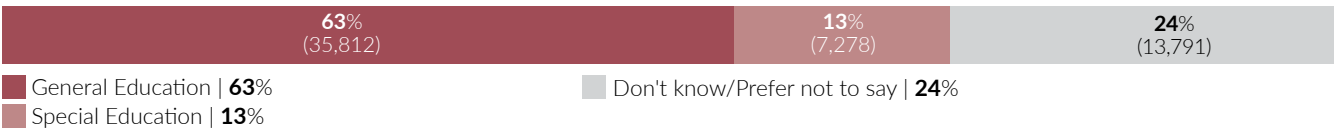
Parent/Caregiver level of education



English Language Learner

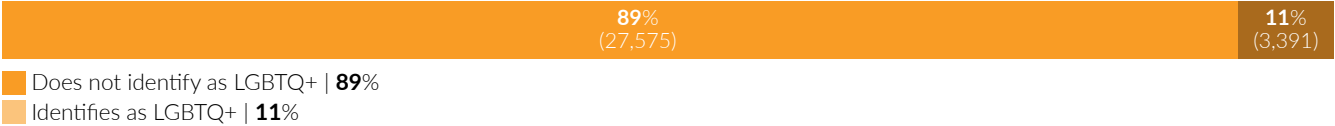


Individualized Education Program (IEP)



Identify as LGBTQ+

Optional demographic item = results exclude non-responses.



APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

High School Student Sample: Student-Level Characteristics

High School Students: **92,284 Overall**

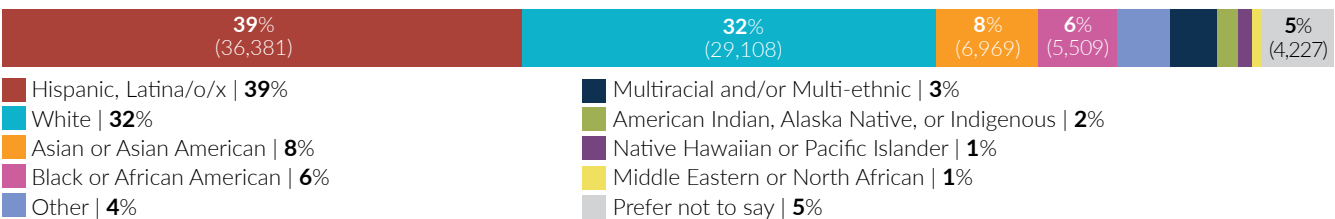
Grade Level



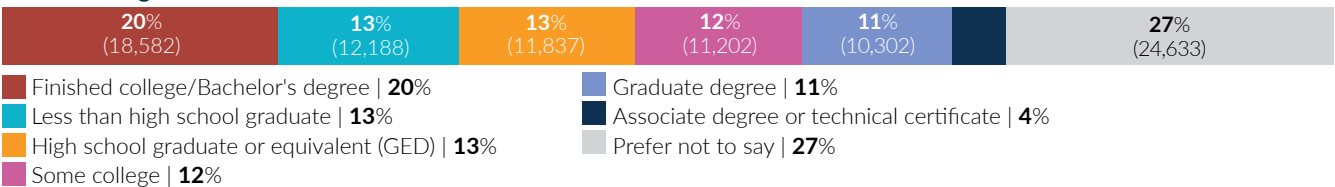
Gender



Race



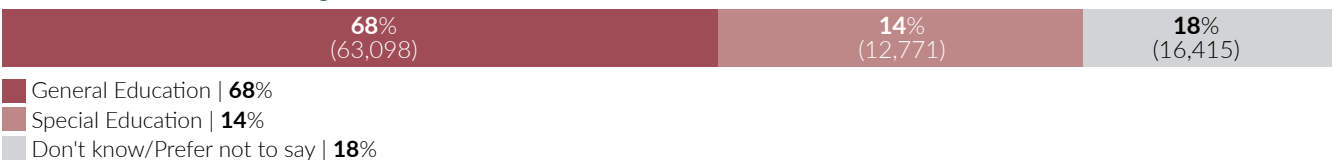
Parent/Caregiver level of education



English Language Learner



Individualized Education Program (IEP)



Identify as LGBTQ+

Optional demographic item = results exclude non-responses.



*Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding