

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.



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.

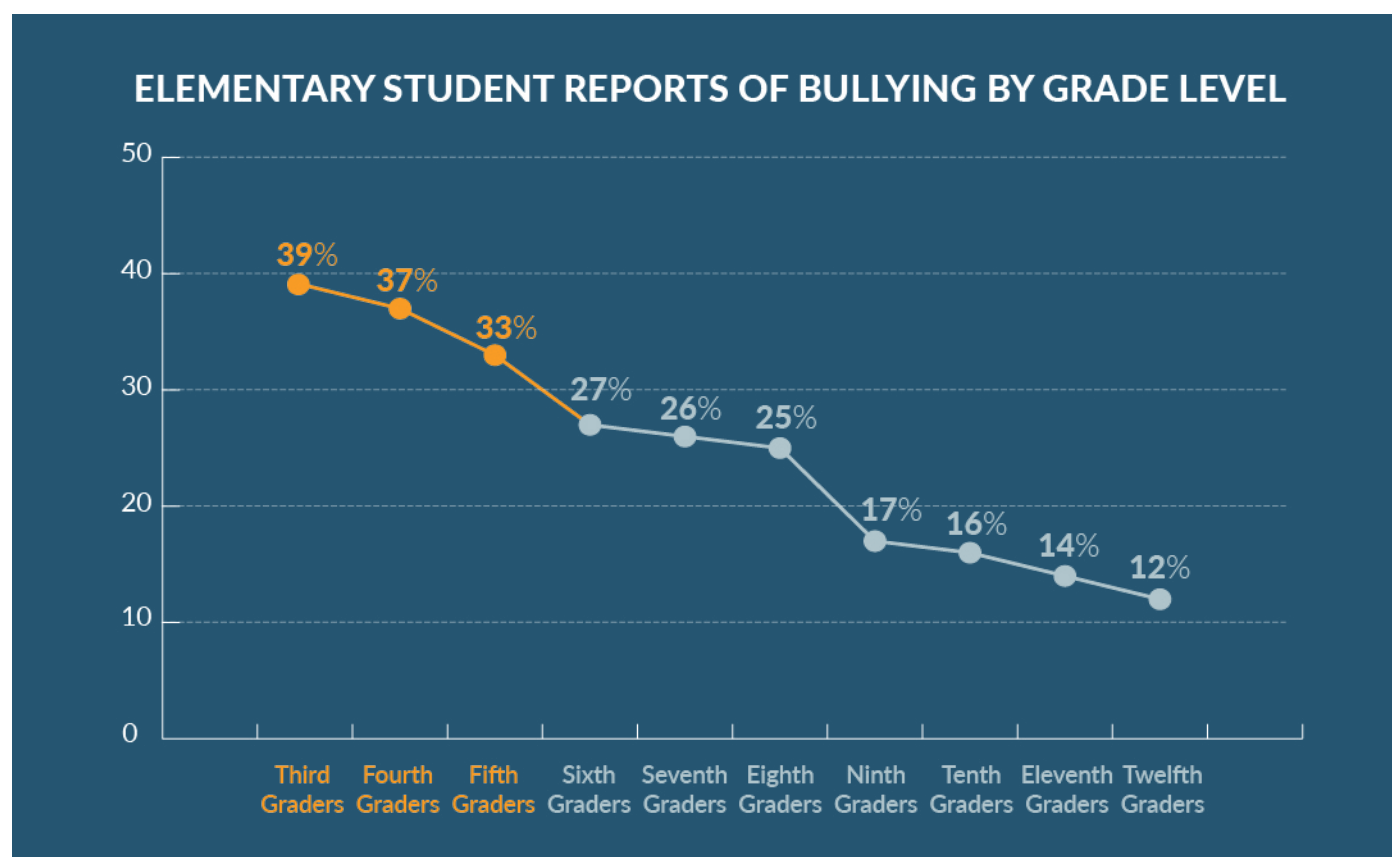
BELONGING AND ACADEMIC CHALLENGE SHIELD STUDENTS FROM BULLYING

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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.

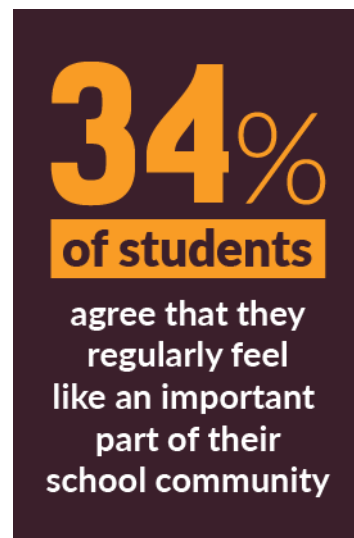


While more than a third of elementary students report being bullied, the likelihood of experiencing bullying decreases as students progress from grade three to grade five. In fact, the percentage of students who report being bullied falls through middle school and into high school, declining to 12 percent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

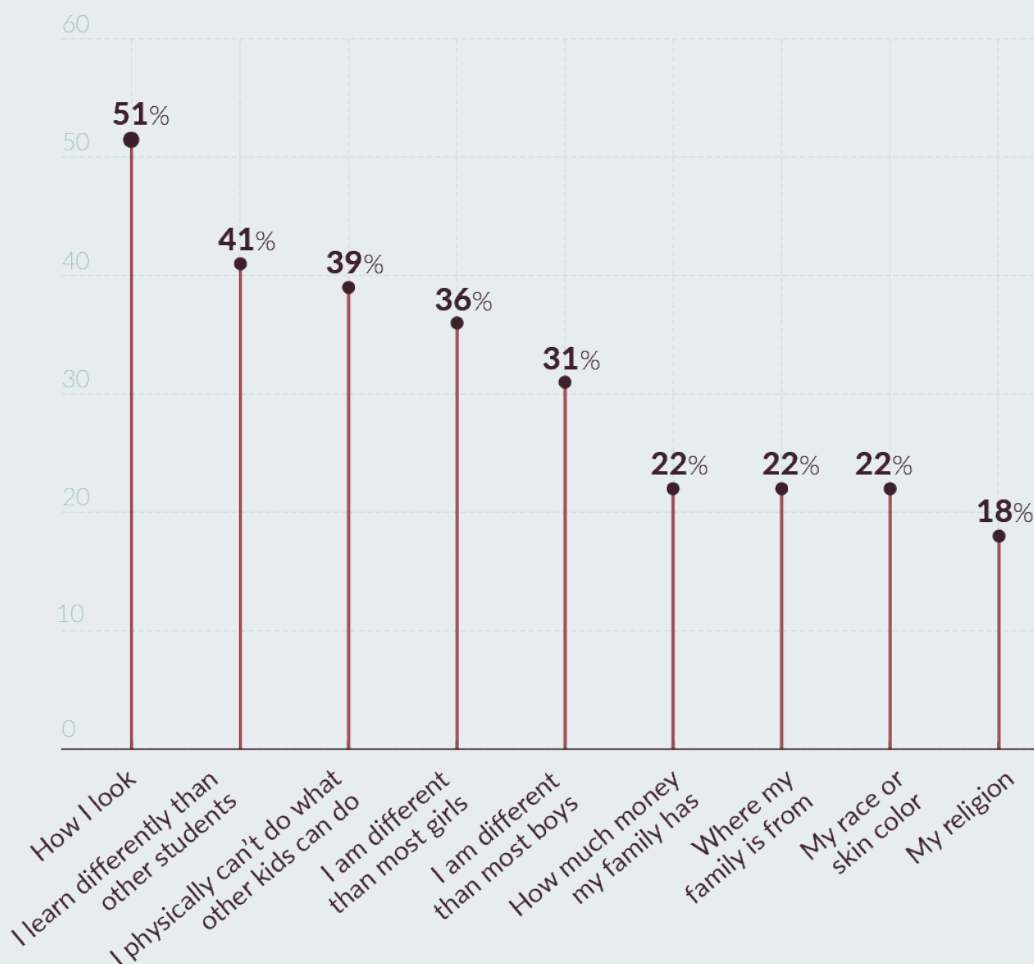
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Appearance, learning style, and how students express their identity are the most common reasons elementary students report being bullied. For many students of color, bias related to race and background adds another layer of vulnerability.

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



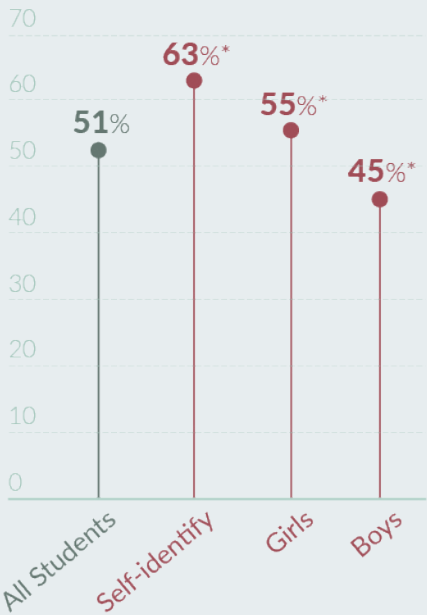
In elementary schools with greater racial and ethnic diversity, students report more bullying. This pattern deserves close attention in the early grades, when students are developing a sense of identity and culture, learning to navigate peer culture, and beginning to understand their own role in shaping 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

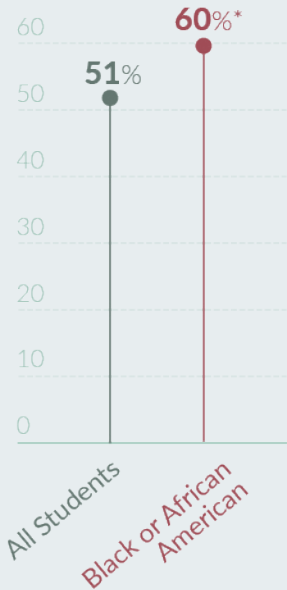
I am different from most girls/boys



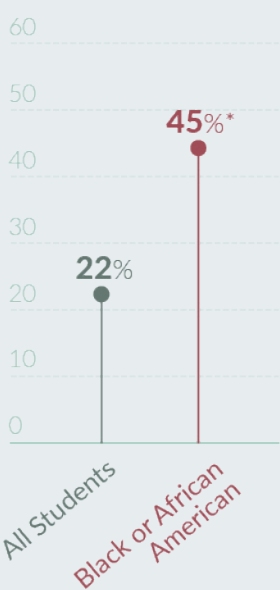
How I look



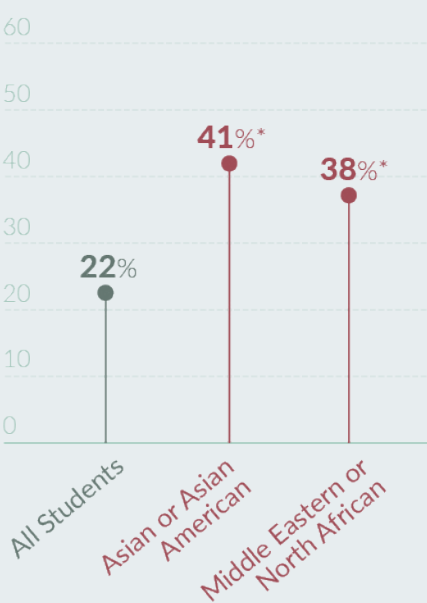
My race



My skin color



Where my family is from



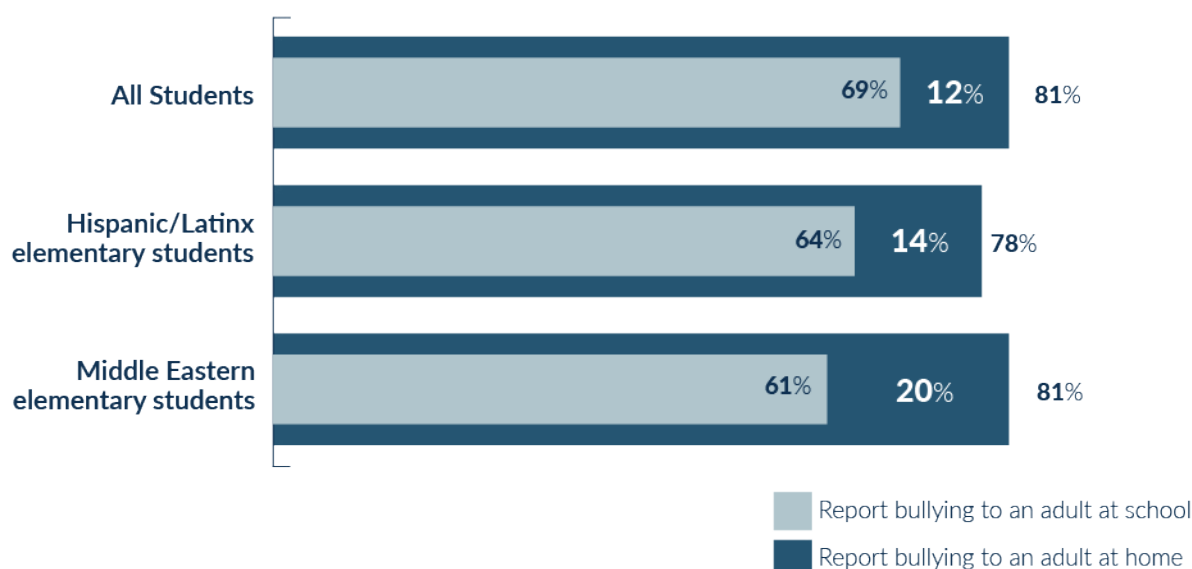
*indicates statistical significance.

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.



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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		

