

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: 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.

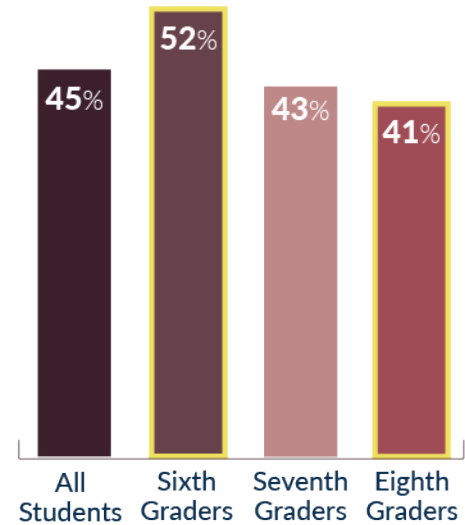
1 AS BELONGING DECLINES, BULLYING PERSISTS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

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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

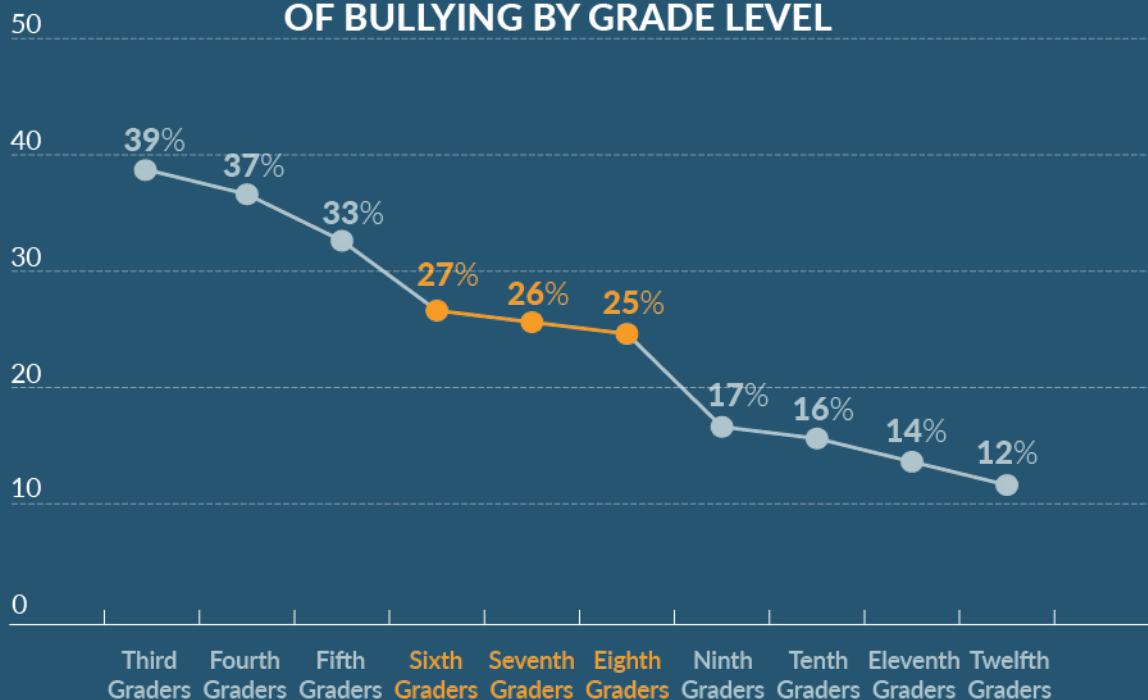
I really feel like a part of my school's community



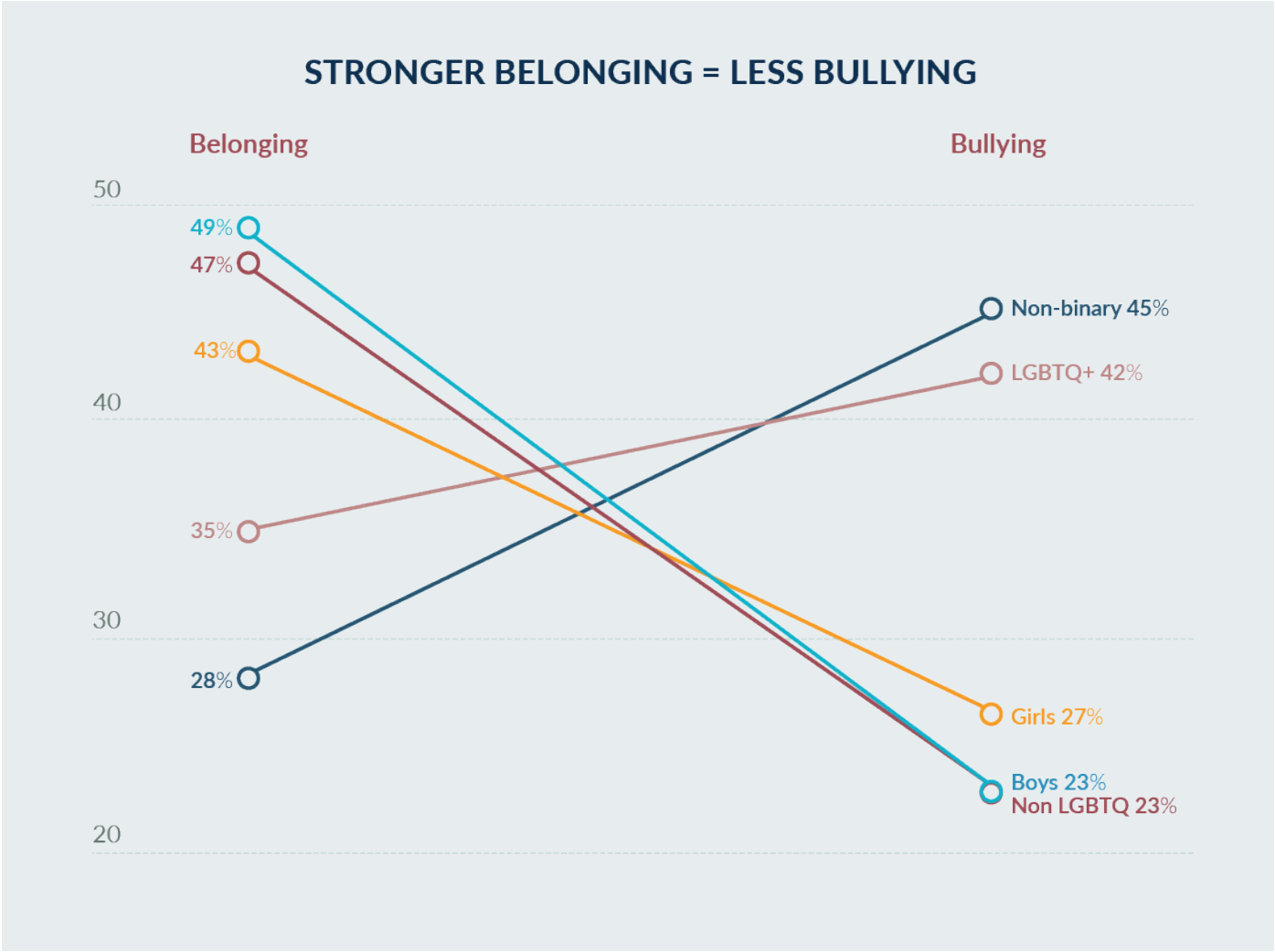
*yellow outline indicates statistical significance.

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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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).

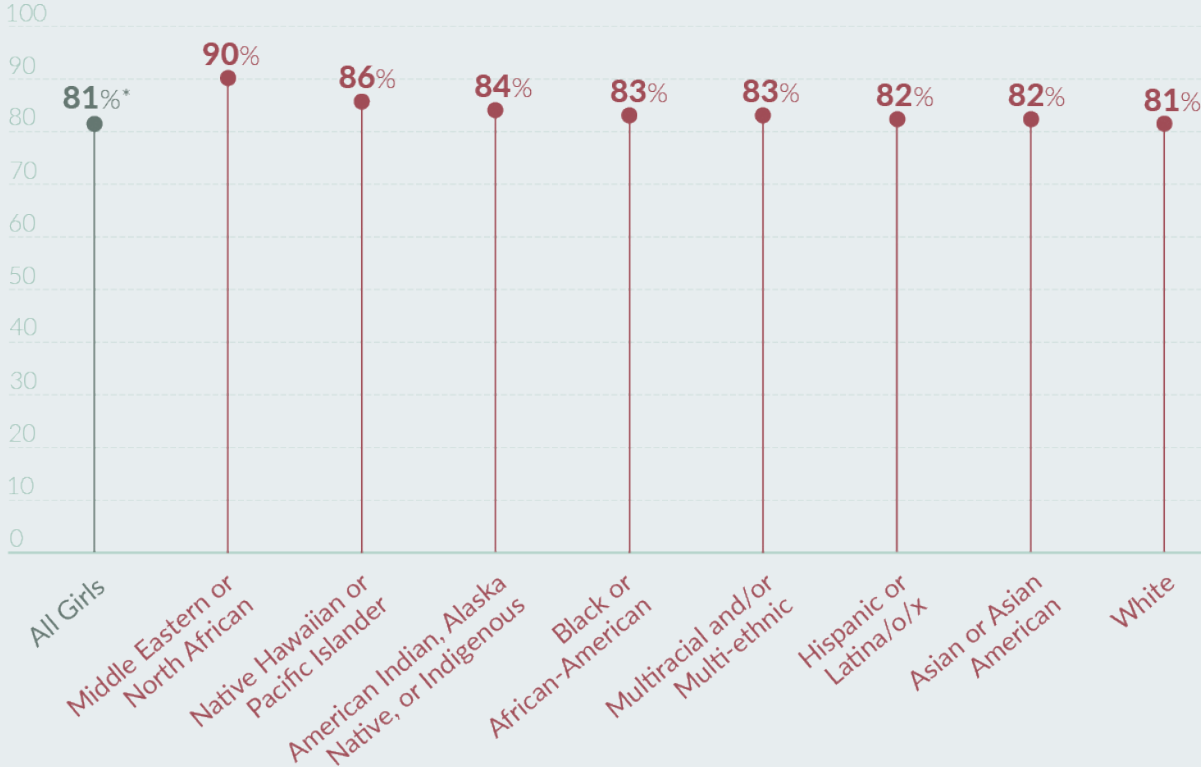
WHY MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS REPORT BEING BULLIED



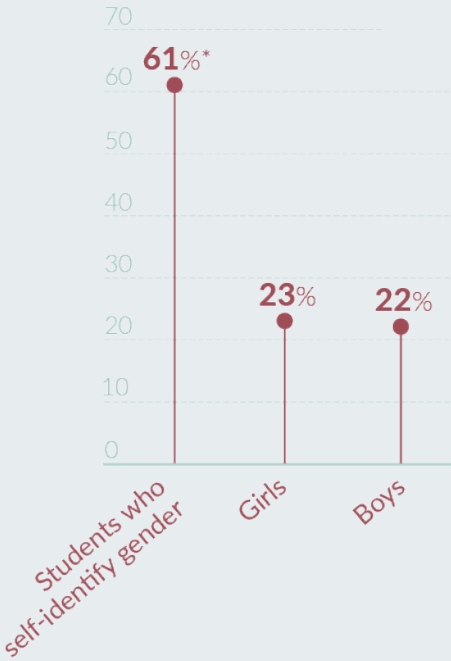
Students’ reports reveal that middle-school bullying is deeply intertwined with everyday biases and social hierarchies, underscoring that any effort to build a culture of belonging to curb bullying must address the social pressures shaping adolescents’ daily interactions.

WHY MIDDLE STUDENTS REPORT BEING BULLIED

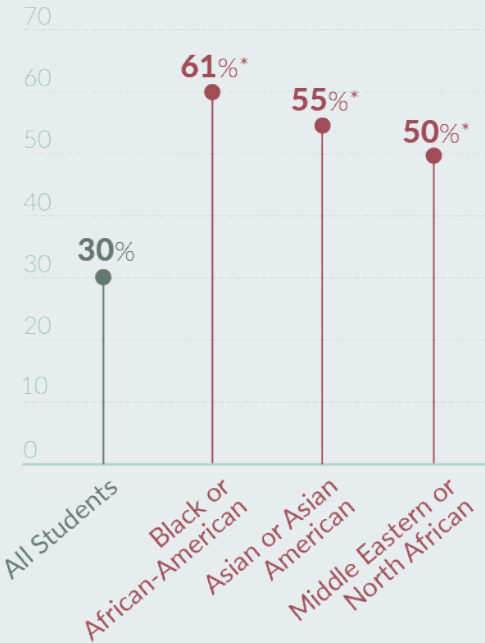
Bullied for how I look: appearance drives middle-school bullying, hitting girls hardest



Because people assume my sexual orientation



My race or skin color



*indicates statistical significance.

WHEN ADULTS SHOW RESPECT, BULLYING DROPS

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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.

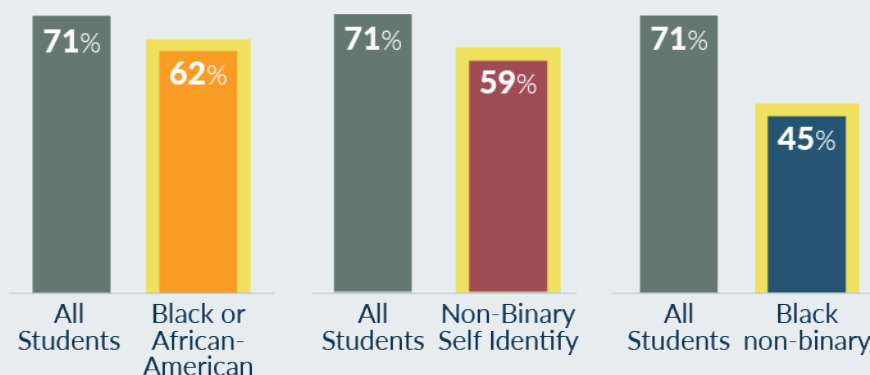
THE POWER OF MODELING RESPECT

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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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		

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METHODOLOGY

