

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: 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

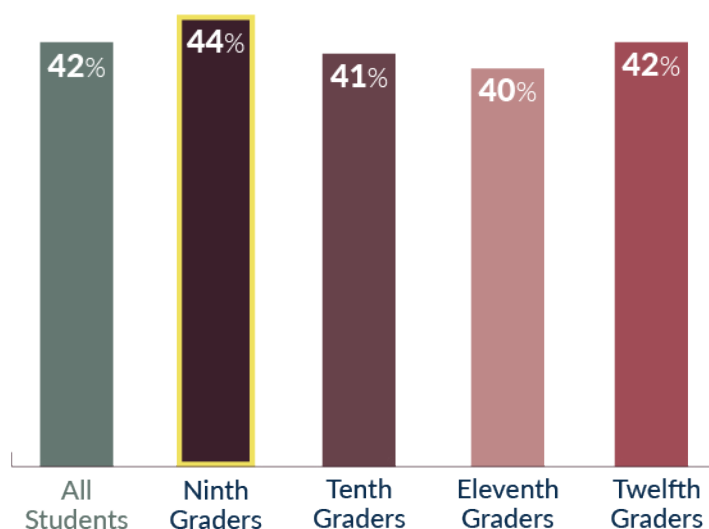
Belonging cuts a high school student's risk of being bullied by nine percentage points, yet fewer than half of students in any student group — by race, gender identity, or other background — report feeling part of their school community.

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

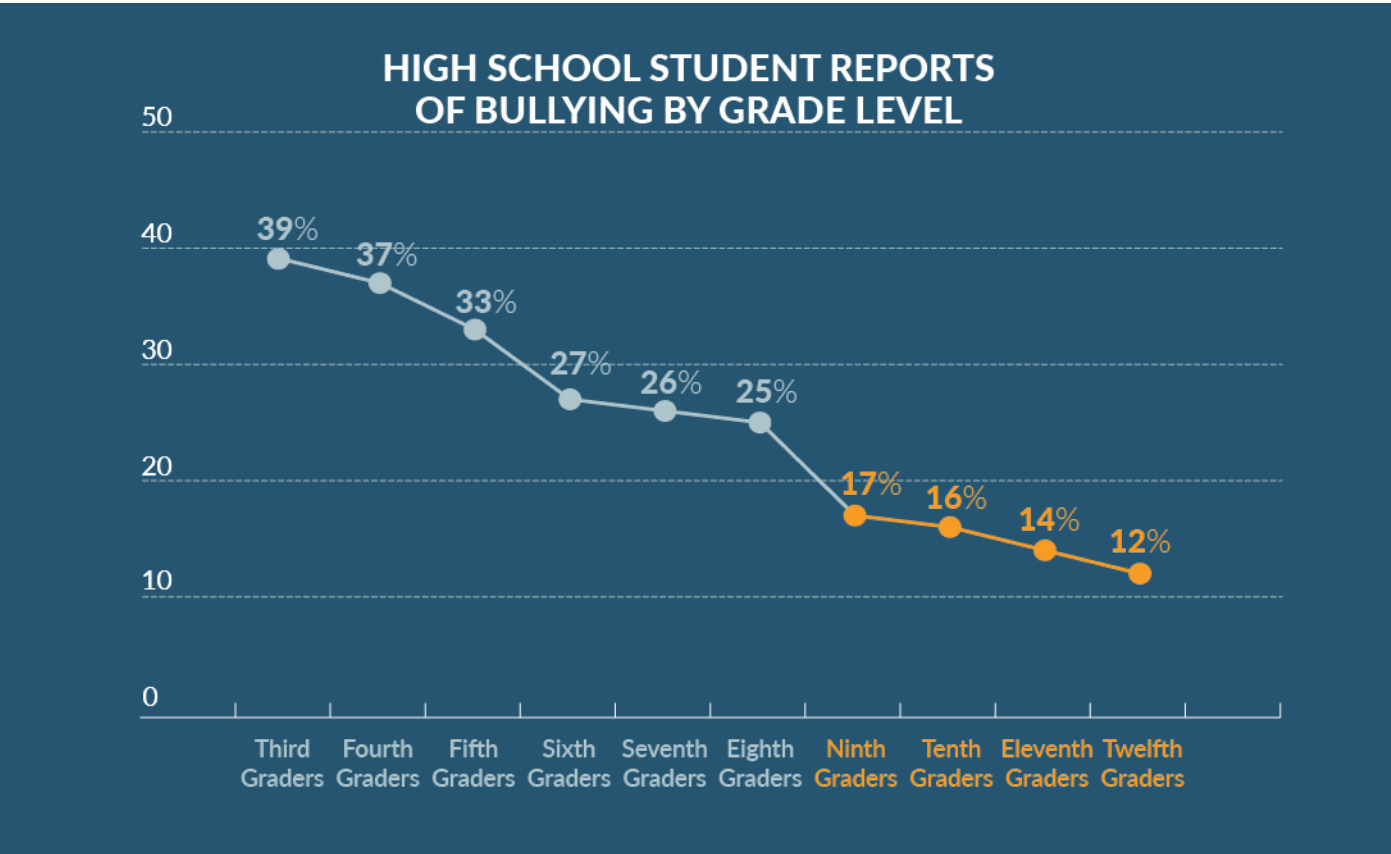
I really feel like a part of my school's community



**yellow outline indicates statistical significance.*

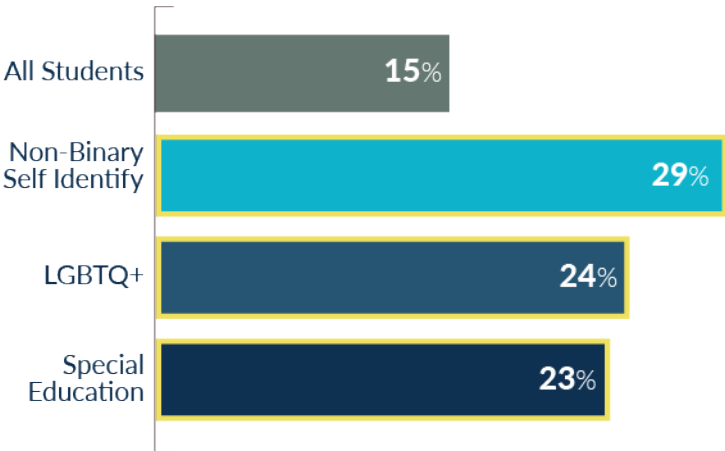
Belonging is low across the board in high school: no student group reaches 50 percent feeling part of their school community, whether by race, gender, grade, English learner status, or special education status. Within this overall pattern, some groups are especially disconnected, falling well below the 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?



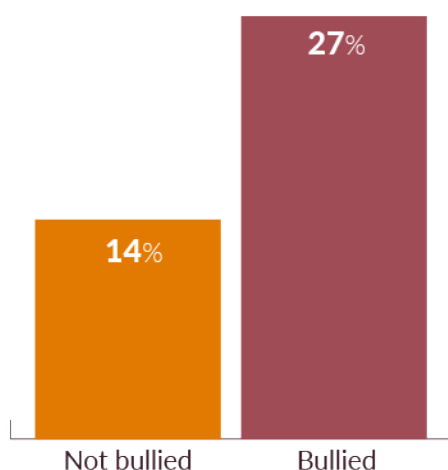
*yellow outline indicates statistical significance.

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

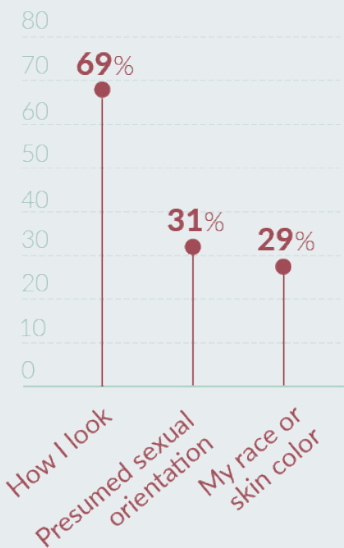


Bullying is a stronger predictor of dropout worry than race, gender, or grade level, making it one of the clearest warning signs that a student may be considering leaving school. The overall bullying rate among high schoolers is 15 percent, but certain students — particularly non-binary, American Indian, 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



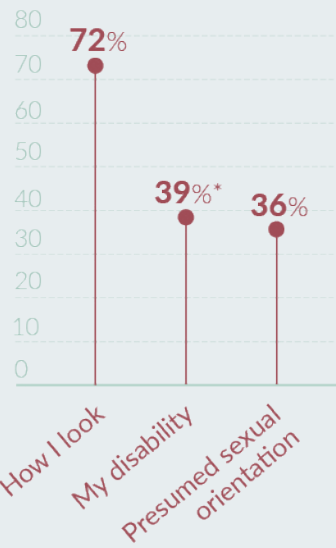
Non-Binary Students
29% bullied;
23% considered dropping out



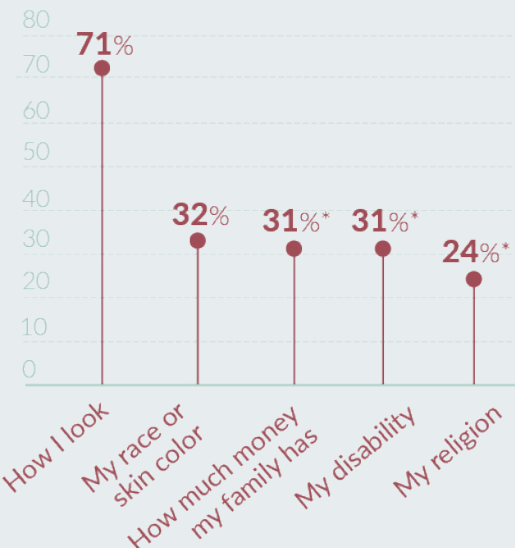
LGBTQ+ Students
24% bullied;
18% considered dropping out



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



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

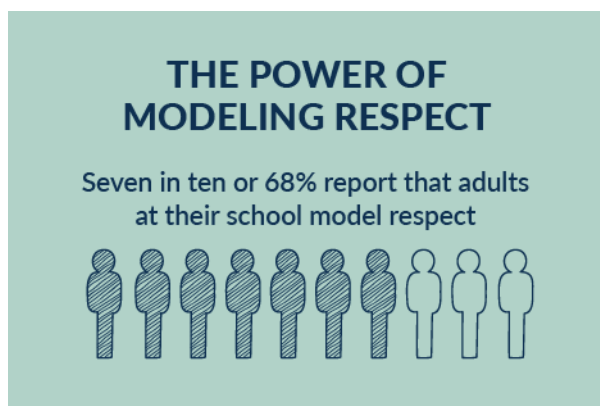


*indicates statistical significance versus all.

ADULT RESPECT REDUCES BULLYING, BUT IT IS UNEVENLY FELT

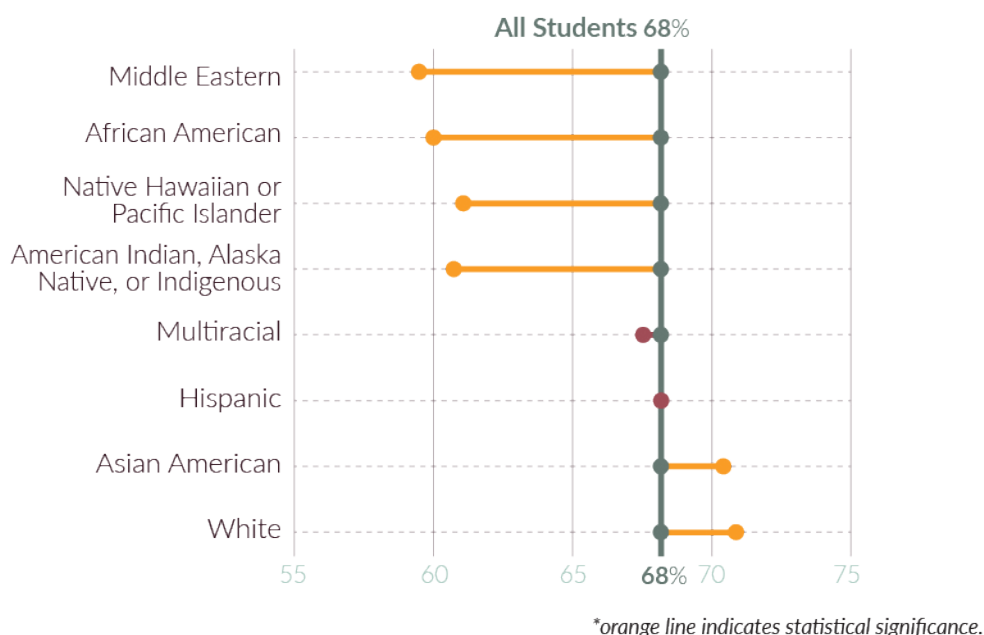
- 3 When high school students consistently see adults treat people from different backgrounds with respect, reported bullying rates drop — yet perceptions of that respect vary significantly by race and gender.

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.



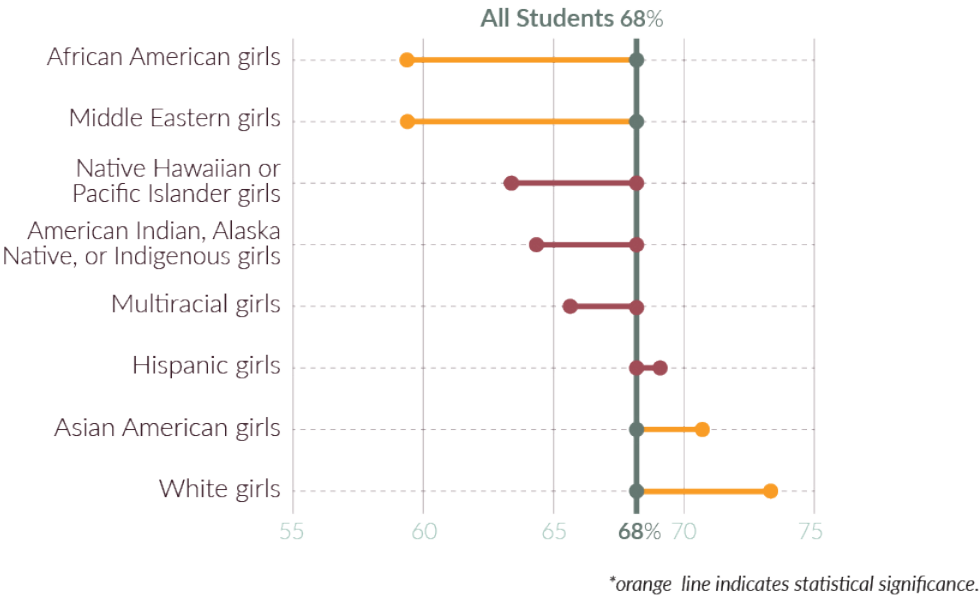
Yet notable differences emerge by race. Asian American (71 percent) and White (72 percent) students are significantly more likely to report witnessing such behavior, while American Indian, Alaska Native or Indigenous (62 percent), African American (60 percent), and Middle Eastern (59 percent) students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



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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		

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

High School Student Sample: Student-Level Characteristics

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

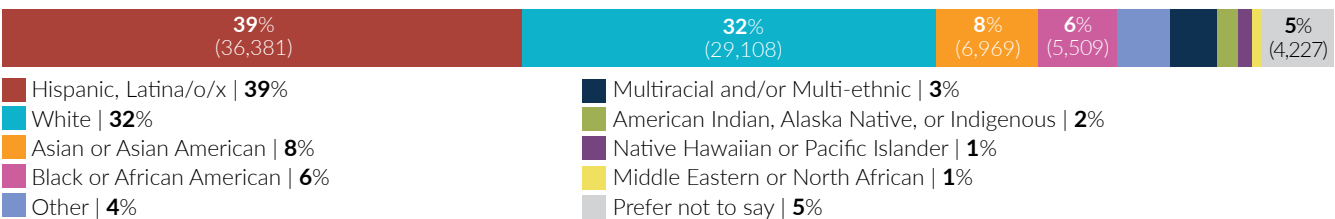
Grade Level



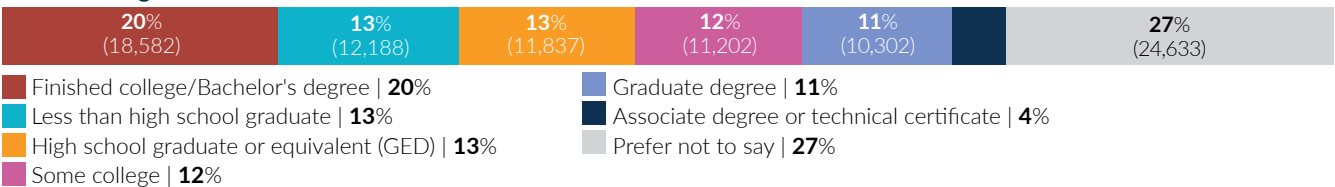
Gender



Race



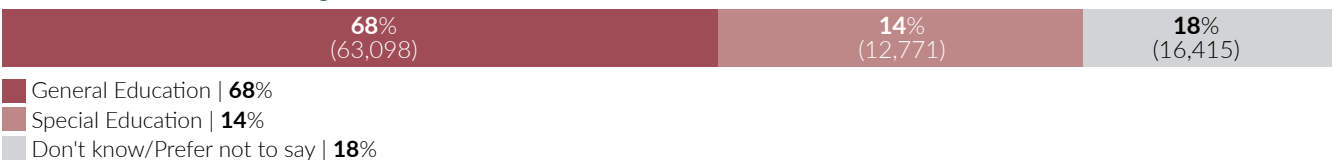
Parent/Caregiver level of education



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*