School Safety, Security, & Emergency Preparedness:

Understanding and Acting on How Students Experience Safety

A sense of safety and security is foundational to students' learning, belonging, and healthy development.

Yet creating and maintaining schools where students feel truly safe is a complex and ever-shifting challenge, spanning protection from violence and bullying to emotional well-being, and disaster preparedness.

In recent years, schools have turned to a broad mix of strategies with varied levels of effectiveness, from hardened buildings and early-warning systems to social-emotional learning programs and tiered supports. At a time when investments in school safety are growing and security products are expanding, this report offers a reminder that safety cannot simply be purchased—it requires a deep understanding of, and investment in, the daily work of tending to a healthy school culture.[1]

That work begins with one perspective that remains essential for understanding what's effective and what's not: the lived experience of students. Do students feel safe in school? Do they believe their safety concerns are taken seriously? Do they feel prepared for security risks and natural disasters? These questions get at how safety is actually experienced day to day by young people.

Guided by these questions and what students shared with us, this report is both an analysis of student perceptions and a practical tool that boards, policymakers, district teams, and school leaders can use to improve their understanding of students' experiences and guide local conversations about safety. The report highlights clear trends, surfaces blind spots, and concludes with a discussion guide that leaders can use with students and staff to reflect on the findings and identify next steps. Our hope is that this resource deepens understanding and sparks conversations and actions that make schools safer for all young people.

1 For comprehensive resources on school safety see the Center for Safe and Healthy Schools (Johns Hopkins University); the National Center for School Safety (University of Michigan); the Youth Violence Project (University of Virginia School). For a thorough examination of contemporary school safety frameworks, see the special issue of School Psychology Review (Volume 50, Issues 2–3). Bear, G. G., & Linas, K. (Eds.). (2021). School safety and student well-being: An integrative framework [Special issue]. School Psychology Review, 50(2–3). For an overview of the growing school safety industry, see Education Week's School Safety Market Brief.

During the 2024-25 school year, YouthTruth introduced a focused set of safety, security, and emergency preparedness questions across student and staff surveys we administer in schools across the country.

Drawing on responses from 198,558 students and 19,246 educators nationwide, these questions deepen our understanding of how students experience safety in schools—from everyday feelings of security to perceptions of risk and readiness for emergencies, and where student and staff perspectives align or diverge. Here are five key findings.[2]

198,558 students

19,246 educators
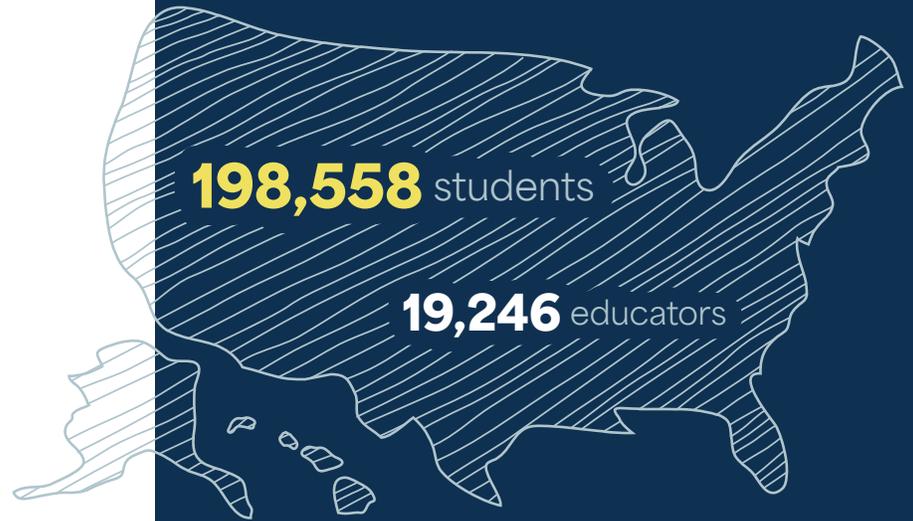
Key Findings

1. Students feel safer when their safety concerns are heard.

2. Students' sense of safety varies across school spaces, with classrooms feeling safest and school buses among the least safe.

3. Safety anxiety is widespread, and some students carry a heavier emotional burden than others.

4. Perceptions of whether students are safe from violence differ across race, gender, and LGBTQ+ identity—students often perceive more risk than adults.

5. School staff feel prepared for security threats and natural disasters, but many students do not.

2 See the appendix for methodology. YouthTruth also produced The Anti-Bullying Report, a companion report focused on students' experiences with bullying and harassment, as well as implications for school culture, safety, and lessons for practice.

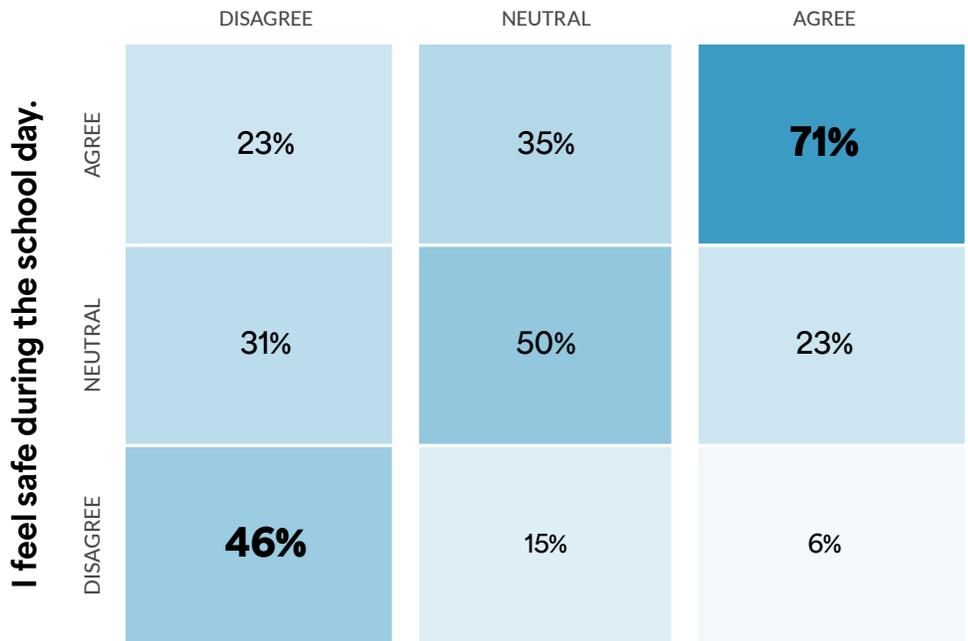# Students feel safer when their safety concerns are heard

56%
of students agree they **feel safe in school**

Fifty-six percent of secondary students (grades six through twelve) say they feel safe during school. That means nearly half of young people move through the school day without the sense of safety that learning and well-being depend on.

Students' own experiences reveal a strong relationship between feeling heard about safety concerns and feeling safe at school.

My school takes my safety concerns seriously.

	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE
AGREE	23%	35%	**71%**
NEUTRAL	31%	50%	23%
DISAGREE	**46%**	15%	6%

I feel safe during the school day.

Each column of the chart represents the population of students who responded (disagree, neutral, agree) to "My school takes my safety concerns seriously." The percentages represent the proportion of those students who responded (disagree, neutral, agree) to "I feel safe during the school day."

Student-Staff Gaps in Perceptions of Safety Responsiveness

Overall, about six in ten secondary students (62 percent) say their school takes their safety concerns seriously. The association is striking: 71 percent of students who feel heard also report feeling safe, compared with just 6 percent of those who do not feel listened to. In other words, students who believe adults take their concerns seriously are far more likely to report feeling safe at school.

Students and staff don't always experience the sense of being heard in the same way. In both middle and high schools, most adults feel their schools listen to safety concerns, while many students do not experience the same level of responsiveness.

In middle school, 82 percent of staff agree or strongly agree their school takes safety concerns seriously, compared with 65 percent of students—a 17 point gap. In high school, the divide widens to 20 points, with 79 percent of staff agreeing their concerns are taken seriously, versus only 59 percent of students.

IN ELEMENTARY

60 percent of elementary students report feeling "very safe" during school; 79 percent of elementary students report that adults at school care about keeping them safe.

Percent of staff and students who agree or strongly agree that their school **takes their safety concerns seriously.**
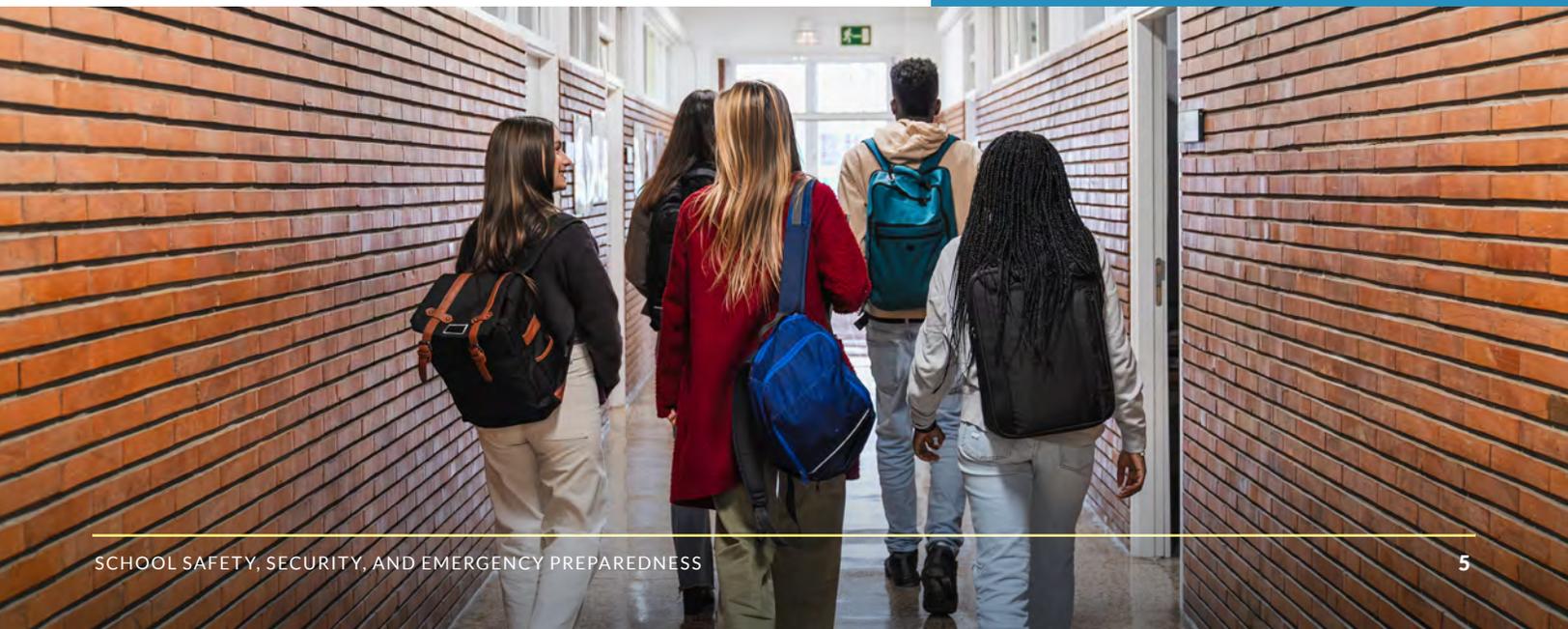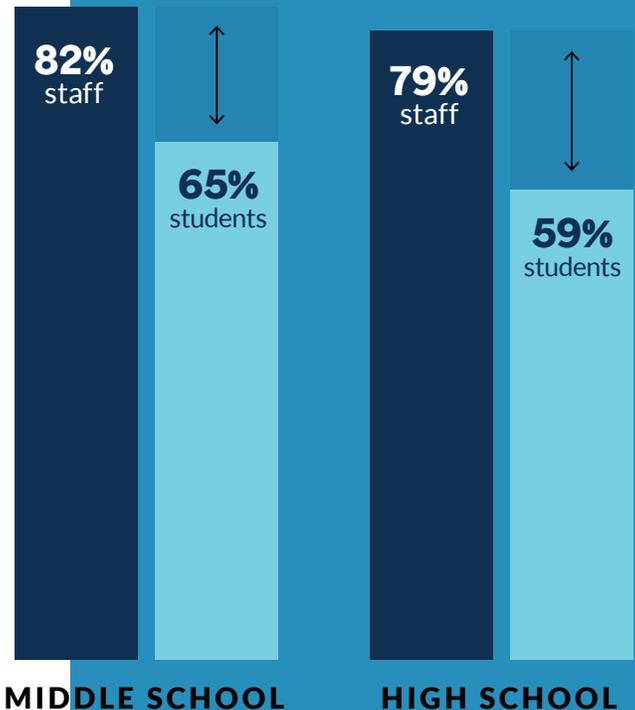
82% staff

65% students

79% staff

59% students

MIDDLE SCHOOL　　**HIGH SCHOOL**

Students' sense of safety varies across school spaces, with classrooms feeling safest and school buses among the least safe

Students' Sense of Safety Varies Across the School Day and School Spaces

While only half of secondary students (56 percent) report generally feeling safe during school, their day-to-day experiences reveal a more nuanced picture of when and where they feel secure. Students' responses show that feelings of safety shift across time and place: classrooms feel secure, while bathrooms and buses often do not. This pattern underscores that safety is not experienced uniformly across the school day and offers important guidance for where adults should direct their attention and action.

A majority of secondary students report their classrooms are the safest place at school (67 percent). Less supervised spaces feel less safe: 59 percent of students feel safe on school property outside the building, and 57 percent feel safe in the halls. Bathrooms and buses stand out as the least safe spaces—only half of secondary students feel safe in school bathrooms, and just one in four feel safe on school buses.
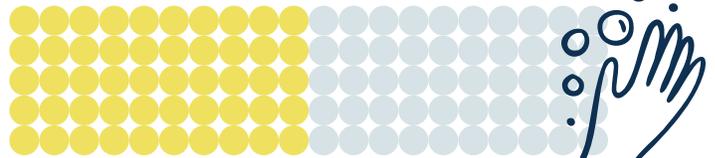
IN ELEMENTARY

21 percent of elementary students do not feel safe in the bathroom. 79 percent do not feel safe on the school bus.

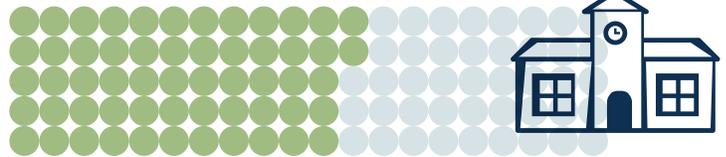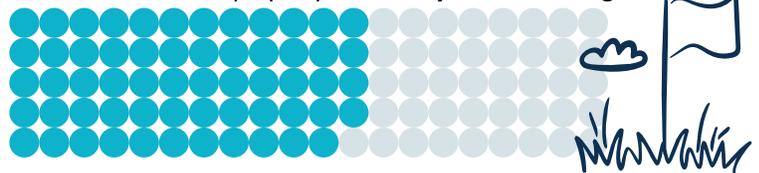### Locations where students report feeling safe

25% on the **school bus**
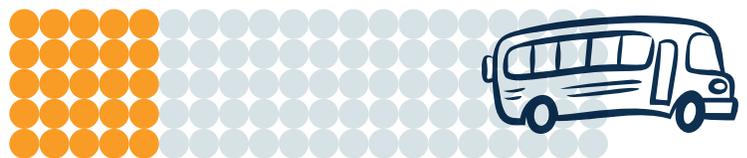
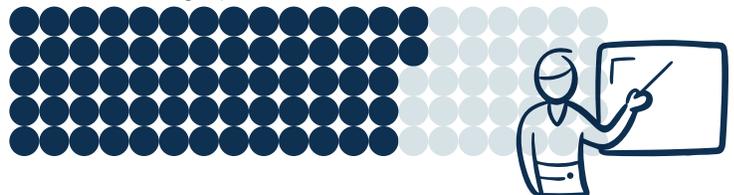**50%** in the **bathrooms** at my school

57% in the **hallways** at my school

59% on school property **outside my school building**

67% during my **classes**

Many Boys Do Not Feel Safe Using School Bathrooms

While buses stand out as a place students feel vulnerable, school bathrooms are also a key area of concern, with a significant share of secondary students reporting they do not feel safe in a space essential to their daily well-being.

Bathroom safety concerns are especially pronounced for boys. Just over half of boys who do not identify as LGBTQ+ (52 percent) report feeling safe using school bathrooms. Concerns are even greater among LGBTQ+ boys and young men, who report the lowest sense of safety of any student group in these spaces: only 40 percent say they feel safe and one-third disagree or strongly disagree that they feel safe in this everyday space.

52% of boys who do **not** identify as LGBTQ+ report feeling safe

40% of boys who identify as LGBTQ+ report feeling safe

Safety anxiety is widespread, and some students carry a heavier emotional burden than others

Safety Anxiety Is Common Among Secondary Students

Nearly one in five secondary students (19 percent) worry often about their safety at school.

Safety anxiety is highest in middle school, declining from 26 percent in sixth grade to 20 percent by eighth grade. In high school, levels of worry remain lower but largely flat, hovering between 14 and 16 percent across grades nine through twelve.

19% of secondary students report **worrying often about their safety** at school
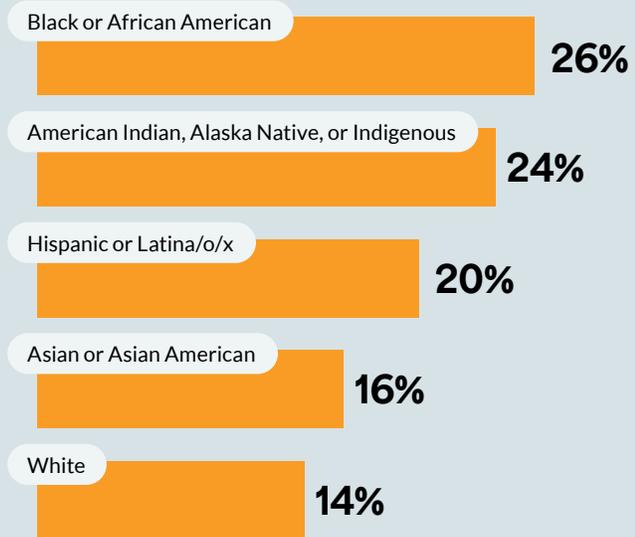
Safety Anxiety Varies by Race, Language Background, and LGBTQ+ Identity

Safety anxiety is also not experienced equally. Clear gaps emerge across race, language background, and LGBTQ+ identity.
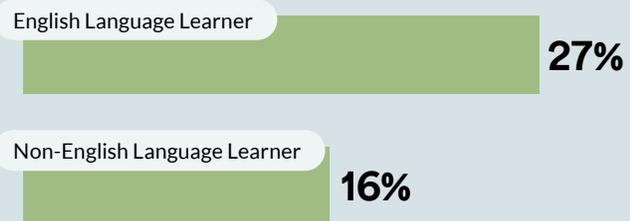
Safety Worries by Race

About one in four Black (26 percent) and one in four American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous students (24 percent) students report worrying often about their safety at school, along with one in five Latino or Hispanic students (20 percent). These rates are significantly higher than those reported by white students (14 percent) and Asian or Asian American students (16 percent).

Safety Worries by Language Background

More than one in four (27 percent) English language learners worry often about their safety, compared with 16 percent of non-ELL students. Non-ELL students are also significantly more likely than their peers to say they rarely worry about safety (60 percent versus 46 percent).

Safety Worries by LGBTQ+ Identity

One in four (25 percent) LGBTQ+ students often worry about staying safe —significantly more than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Non-LGBTQ+ students are also more likely than their peers to say they rarely worry about safety.
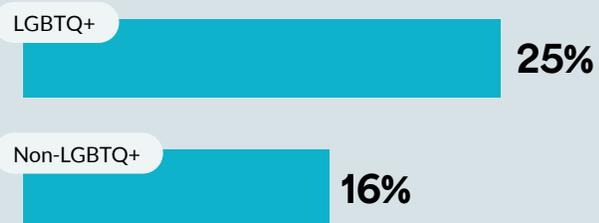
Percent of secondary students who **worry often about their safety at school** by identity groups.

Black or African American — **26%**

American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous — **24%**

Hispanic or Latina/o/x — **20%**

Asian or Asian American — **16%**

White — **14%**

English Language Learner — **27%**

Non-English Language Learner — **16%**

LGBTQ+ — **25%**

Non-LGBTQ+ — **16%**

All differences shown are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Student-Staff Safety Anxiety Diverges in Middle School

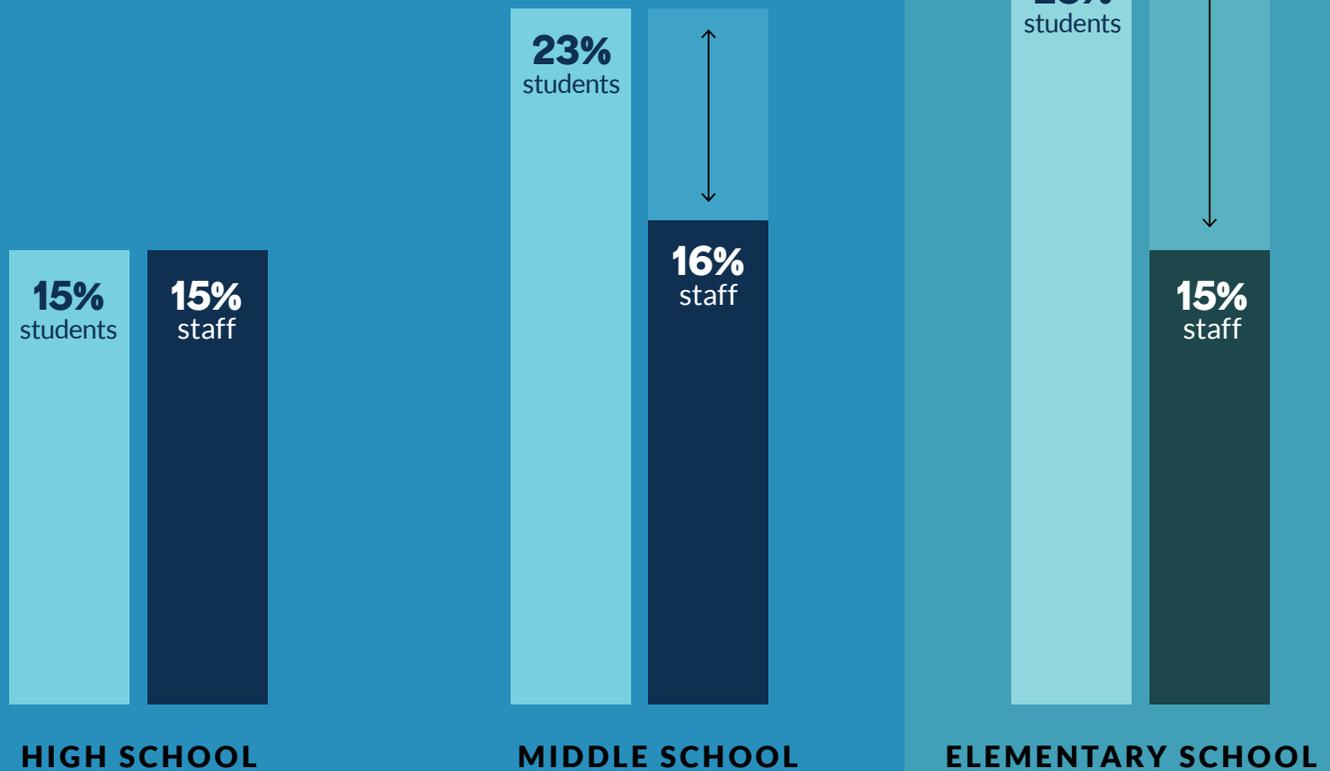High school students and staff report similar levels of concern about safety, one of the few areas in our findings where student and staff perceptions aligned. Fifteen percent of both groups say they worry about safety often, while about one in four (25 percent of students and 26 percent of staff) report worrying sometimes. In contrast, middle school students worry significantly more often than staff.

Nearly one in four middle school students (23 percent) report worrying often about their safety, compared with 16 percent of staff.

One in four elementary students (25 percent) report worrying very often about staying safe at school—a rate 10 percentage points higher than that of elementary staff.

Percent of students and staff who **report worrying often** or very often about their safety at school

HIGH SCHOOL
- 15% students
- 15% staff

MIDDLE SCHOOL
- 23% students
- 16% staff

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
- 25% students
- 15% staff

Differences shown are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Perceptions of whether students are safe from violence differ across race, gender, and LGBTQ+ identity

Students often perceive more risk than adults

Most Secondary Students Do Not Believe Students Are Safe From Violence at School

While 56 percent of secondary students agree they personally feel safe during school, a different and more sobering picture emerges when students are asked about safety from violence at their school overall. Fewer than half (44 percent) agree students are generally safe from violence at their school.

This perception of safety from violence at school remains remarkably low and consistent across grades six through twelve: no secondary grade reaches even the 50 percent threshold.
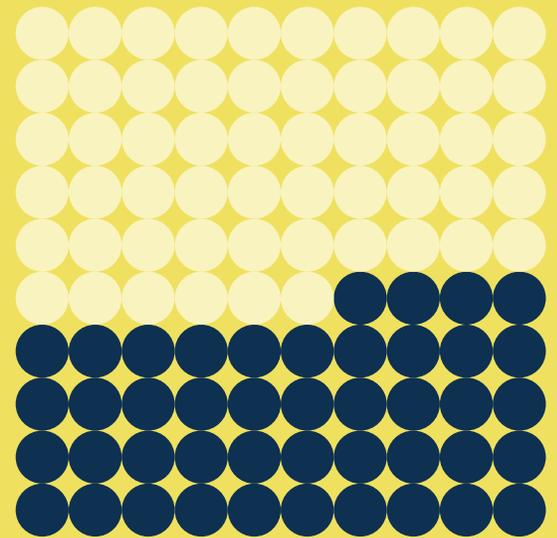
44%

of secondary students **agree that students are safe from violence** at their school.

Safety From Violence Varies by Race, Gender, and LGBTQ+ Identity

Although grade-level patterns are consistent, significant differences appear across race, gender, and LGBTQ+ identity in students' perceptions of whether students are safe from violence at school.

Fear of Violence by Race

White and Asian or Asian American students are significantly more likely to agree that students are safe from violence at their school (53 percent and 47 percent, respectively), while other groups are significantly less likely to do so. Agreement is lower among American Indian or Alaska Native/Indigenous students (41 percent), Hispanic or Latino students (40 percent), and lowest among Black or African American students (37 percent).

Fear of Violence by Gender Identity

Gender differences are also significant. Boys are more likely to say students are safe from violence at their school (47 percent), compared with 43 percent of girls and young women. Only one in three non-binary or gender non-conforming students (33 percent) say students are safe from violence at their school—the lowest of any group measured.

Fear of Violence by LGBTQ+ Identity

Non-LGBTQ+ students are significantly more likely to say students are safe from violence (46 percent) than LGBTQ+ students (38 percent).

Percent of secondary students who agree that **students are safe from violence** at their school

White	53%
Asian or Asian American	47%
American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous	41%
Hispanic or Latina/o/x	40%
Black or African American	37%

Boys	47%
Girls	43%
Non-Binary	33%

Non-LGBTQ+	46%
LGBTQ+	38%

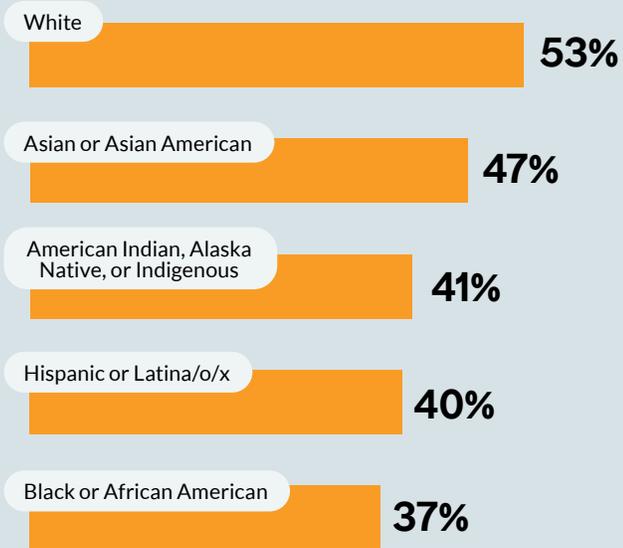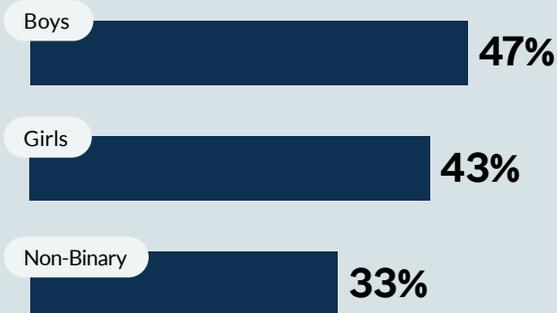All differences shown are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Student-Staff Gaps in Perceptions of Safety Responsiveness

Middle and high school students are also significantly less likely than staff to report that students are safe from violence at their school. Forty-four percent of students at both levels agree students are safe from violence, compared with 63 percent of middle school staff and 57 percent of high school staff. These differences—19 points in middle school and 13 points in high school—indicate that staff view safety from violence more optimistically than students do, highlighting moments where adults may be out of step with students' lived experience.

IN ELEMENTARY

71 percent of elementary school staff agree that students are safe from violence at school.

Percent of students who agree or strongly agree **they are safe from violence at their school**.

57%
staff

44%
students

63%
staff

44%
students

HIGH SCHOOL

MIDDLE SCHOOL
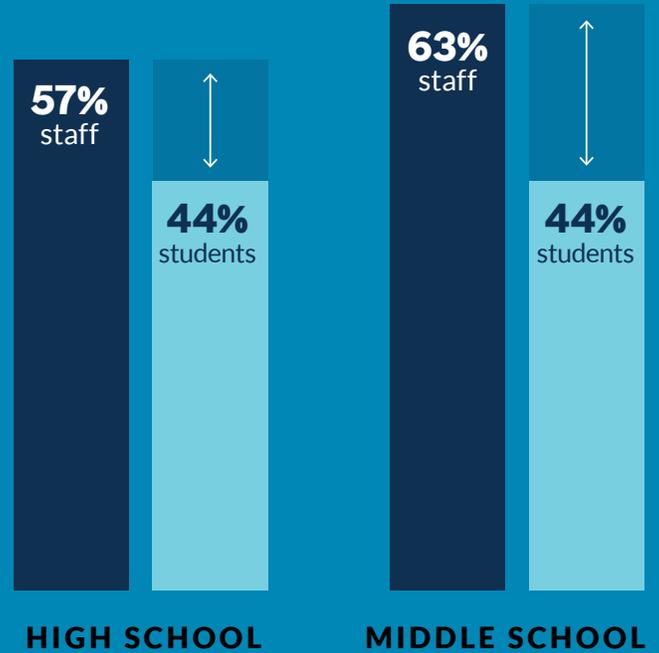
Differences shown are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Exposure to Weapons at School

Students' perceptions of safety from violence at school are strongly shaped by what they witness on campus. Identifying which students are likely to be exposed to threats—including seeing weapons and physical fights at school— is essential to understanding their sense of security.

Overall twelve percent of secondary students report seeing a weapon (such as a gun or knife) at school. But this exposure is not experienced equally. Differences by gender identity and race reveal disparities in who encounters threats on campus. Boys (13 percent) are more likely than girls (9 percent) to report seeing a weapon, and the risk is even higher for non-binary students: 27 percent of non-binary students say they have seen a weapon—more than double the rate for boys and nearly triple that for girls.

Among boys, reports of weapon sightings rise steadily from eighth through twelfth grade, suggesting that exposure becomes more common—or more visible—as students get older.

Racial disparities also emerge among boys. American Indian, Alaska Native or Indigenous boys (18 percent), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander boys (18 percent), and Black or African American boys (17 percent) are most likely to report seeing a weapon, compared with 13 percent of white boys and 11 percent of Asian or Asian American boys.

Secondary students report witnessing physical fights significantly more often than staff. In high school, 18 percent of students say they see fights somewhat or very often—twice the rate of staff (9 percent). While a majority of staff (70 percent) say fights are rare or that they never see them, just over half of students (52 percent) agree.

The gap is even larger in middle school. Nearly one in three middle school students (26 percent) report seeing fights somewhat or very often, compared with only 11 percent of staff. More than two-thirds of staff (68 percent) say fights are rare or that they never see them, but fewer than half of students (45 percent) say the same—underscoring a substantial disconnect in how frequently students and adults perceive violence on campus.

Exposure to Weapons at School Varies by Gender Identity

Percent of secondary students who report seeing a weapon (such as a gun or knife) at school, by gender identity.

27% of non-binary students

13% of boys

9% of girls
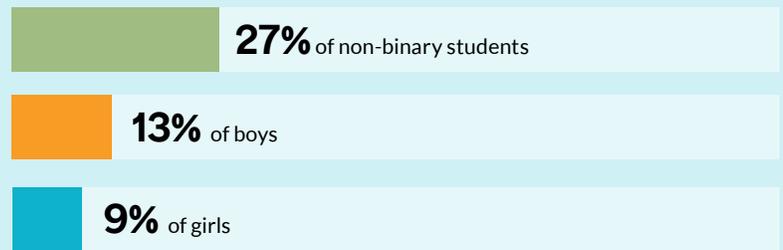
Student-Staff Gaps in Witnessing Physical Fights

Percent of staff and students who report seeing physical fights.

70% staff
52% students
9% staff
18% students
Report seeing fights often
Report seeing fights rarely

HIGH SCHOOL

68% staff
45% students
11% staff
26% students
Report seeing fights often
Report seeing fights rarely

MIDDLE SCHOOL
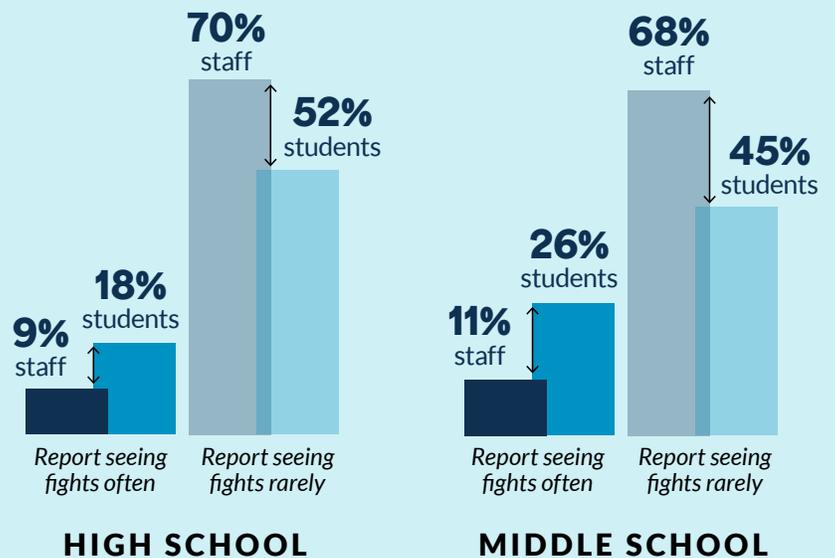
Differences shown are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

School staff feel prepared for security threats and natural disasters, but many students do not

Large Student-Staff Gaps in Preparedness for Security Threats

Clear safety instruction helps students feel less worried, yet many still feel unprepared for emergencies at school—especially for natural disasters. Staff, by contrast, report high levels of emergency preparedness, revealing a serious disconnect in how safety education reaches and reassures students.

High school staff are significantly more likely than high school students to say their school has provided clear safety instructions for security threats: 83 percent of staff agree, compared with just 59 percent of students —a 24-point gap. This indicates a potential disconnect in how effectively safety protocols are communicated to students. Middle school shows a similar pattern: 85 percent of staff, compared with 66 percent of students—a 19-point gap.

Percent of students and staff who agree that **their school has provided clear safety instructions** for security threats.

HIGH SCHOOL

83% of staff

59% of students

MIDDLE SCHOOL

85% of staff

66% of students

Exceptionally Large Student-Staff Gaps for Natural Disasters

The preparedness gap is even wider for natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes and wildfires. High school staff are far more likely than students to agree their school has taught them how to stay safe in a natural disaster: 80 percent of staff versus just 45 percent of students, a staggering 35-point difference. Middle school students also feel significantly less prepared than staff for natural disasters. Eighty-one percent of staff agree they have been taught how to stay safe in a natural disaster, compared with only 51 percent of students—a 30-point gap.

IN ELEMENTARY

89 percent of elementary students report that their school has taught them how to stay safe during an emergency of any kind at school.

Percent of students and staff who agree that their school has provided **clear safety instructions for natural disasters**, by school level.

HIGH SCHOOL

80% of staff

45% of students

MIDDLE SCHOOL

81% of staff

51% of students

All differences shown are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Leading Through Crisis: Lessons from School Leaders During the California Wildfires

During recent wildfires in California, school leaders were challenged to put emergency plans into action under rapidly changing conditions. To better understand how schools and communities navigated these moments, YouthTruth interviewed leaders from several partner districts and institutions that experienced these emergencies firsthand. These conversations focused on decision-making, communication, and supporting students. The experiences shared here offer three concrete lessons about what preparedness looks like in practice—and what leaders have learned when plans are tested under real-world conditions.

1 Down to the Detail Before a Crisis Hits

When the Tubbs Fire swept through Sonoma County, California in October 2017 and destroyed more than 5,500 buildings, school leaders quickly realized they lacked clear, statewide guidance for wildfire response. Steve Herrington, then Superintendent of the Sonoma County Office of Education overseeing 70,000 students across 40 districts, put it bluntly: "That's when we started realizing we were caught short everywhere throughout the state."

As fires spread and evacuation orders mounted, Herrington and his team were forced to make real-time decisions about school closures, evacuations, and how to support students and families that were displaced. Many students temporarily met the federal definition of homelessness, requiring schools to provide meals and other basic support. The experience underscored a core lesson: statewide guidance matters, but real preparedness is built locally—through anticipating scenarios and having clear, written plans that are reviewed and practiced before a crisis hits.

2 Communication is Safety

When crises unfold, clear and trusted communication becomes a form of protection. During the 2024 Mountain Fire evacuation in Ventura County, Mesa Union School principal Kim Kuklenski relied on established communication systems to keep students and families informed. Staff sent real-time updates through their parent communication system, coordinated internally via classroom radios, and accounted for students using rosters stored in pre-packed emergency backpacks. As Kuklenski explained, "In a real emergency, you don't have a script, but at least you have some type of foundation."

That foundation also extends beyond campus. During the 2017 Tubbs Fire, leaders in Sonoma County recognized schools as trusted community hubs. Erin Fender, then Director of Curriculum and Instruction in Healdsburg Unified, emphasized the importance of close coordination with emergency services. "We were getting that information directly from the people who were reading the maps and making the call," she said. Regular, bilingual updates helped schools serve as reliable conduits of information when families needed it most.

3 Harnessing Youth Capacity During Emergencies

As part of the local education ecosystem, Pasadena City College (PCC) in Los Angeles County works closely with area high schools and often serves as a bridge between secondary education and the broader community. After the Eaton Fire in 2025, PCC transformed part of its campus into a resource hub for families displaced by the fire. Many of the volunteers were high school students whose schools had been closed for weeks.

As Que Dang, Executive Director of Student Equity and Success at PCC, explained, "They weren't in school for a long time. They were sitting there for days or weeks without anything to do. So it became this outlet." She added, "They can leave and say, 'I helped one person.'" As the emergency unfolded local leaders recognized that young people—often sidelined during a crisis—were an untapped resource and created opportunities for them to contribute to the community's response. Similar youth-led efforts, such as Altadena Girls, also mobilized young people to support their community in the wake of the fire.

The takeaway is not simply about engagement, but about perspective: during emergencies, young people are not only individuals in need of support, but capable contributors whose energy, skills, and care strengthen community recovery.

Conclusion: From Insights to Action

As this report makes clear, students' experiences of safety and security at school are complex—and they often diverge from the perceptions of adults around them. The findings highlight where students feel supported and where they do not, revealing how some young people carry heavier burdens of safety anxiety, perceived risk, and exposure to violence at school.

Strengthening school safety depends on thoughtful policies, well-designed systems, and careful planning—and it also depends on a genuine partnership with students. We offer these insights as an invitation to listen deeply, understand students' lived experiences, and act on their advice. When leaders engage students directly, ask forthright questions, and respond with care, schools can become safer and more trusting places for everyone.

The questions that follow are designed to support study sessions, listening circles, safety planning meetings, and board–student forum conversations —using the data in this report as a shared starting point.

10 Questions for District and School Leaders to Ask Themselves

Listening & Trust

1. Do our students and staff believe their safety concerns are taken seriously?

2. What formal and informal channels exist for students to report safety concerns? Are they working equitably for all groups?

3. How quickly and transparently do we respond when students and staff raise a safety concern?

4. Are adult perceptions of safety aligned with what students are actually experiencing?

School Spaces & Exposure

5. Do we understand which spaces in our schools students feel least safe in and why?

6. Have we conducted walk-throughs with students to see these spaces through their eyes? Have we ever ridden the bus ourselves?

7. What kinds of unsafe situations do students see that adults might not be aware of?

Preparedness & Communication

8. Do students feel meaningfully prepared for both security threats and natural disasters?

9. Are safety instructions being communicated in ways that students and staff actually understand, remember, and trust?

10. How do we know whether our safety efforts are making students feel more secure and less anxious?

10 Questions for District and School Leaders to Ask Students and Staff

Listening & Trust

1. When you raise a safety concern, what happens next? Do you feel listened to?

2. What would help you feel more confident that adults take your concerns seriously?

3. What do students and staff observe about safety during the school day that leaders may not be aware of?

School Spaces & Exposure

4. Where in our school do you feel most safe? Why?

5. Where do you feel least safe? What makes those spaces feel that way?

6. What changes could make those areas feel safer?

7. What kinds of things make you worry about safety at school?

Preparedness & Communication

8. Do you feel prepared to stay safe during a security threat? During a natural disaster?

9. What ways does the school communicate about safety that work well for you—and what ways do not?

10. If you could tell the school board one thing about safety at your school, what would it be?

Methodology

During the 2024–25 school year, YouthTruth added a dedicated set of Safety, Security, and Emergency Preparedness items to its elementary, middle, and high school student and staff surveys. These questions were designed to deepen understanding of how students and educators experience safety across multiple dimensions, including everyday feelings of security and preparedness for emergencies. The items were administered across 343 elementary schools, 204 middle schools, and 166 high schools participating nationwide.

Although the full set of items was administered across grade levels three through twelve, the analyses in this report focus primarily on secondary schools (middle and high school). Elementary school findings are not fully included in the analytic sections because the elementary survey uses a three-point response scale, whereas the secondary student and staff surveys use a five-point scale. This difference limits direct comparability across levels; however, key elementary findings are noted where appropriate.

To ensure precise estimates across racial groups, we employed a stratified random sampling design for secondary students to ensure reliable representation across racial groups. Sampling rates were determined based on the second smallest racial group in the population, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (NHPI), using a target margin of error of approximately 3 percent. This sampling rate was then applied to all other racial groups to ensure comparable precision across groups. The smallest group, Middle Eastern/North African (MENA), was sampled at a higher fixed rate to ensure sufficient representation for analysis. This approach produced analytic samples of 38,868 middle school students and 44,596 high school students, for a combined student sample of 83,464. For staff, we used a census approach, including all respondents, given the smaller size of staff populations (19,246).

Quantitative analyses were conducted using DisplayR for descriptive statistics, subgroup comparisons, and statistical inference. All reported estimates, including percentages and means, are based on the stratified analytic sample and are accompanied by p-values of 0.05 or less and 95 percent confidence intervals, which indicate the precision of each estimate. In interpreting the results, statistical significance was considered alongside the magnitude of observed differences (effect sizes) to assess practical relevance.

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