

Student Feelings of Safety and Connectedness as Related to Safety Incident Reports

Independent Analysis Unit
Los Angeles Unified School District

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On average, L.A. Unified schools and other sites report approximately 21,440 safety-threatening incidents a year (averaged from 2016-17 to 2019-20), according to an analysis of the Incident System Tracking Accountability Report (iSTAR) by the Independent Analysis Unit (IAU). Little information is available, however, on how these incidents may relate to students' needs for feeling safe or a sense of belonging at their schools. This report, the second in a series examining school safety, presents the results of analyses that sought to understand how—if at all—safety-threatening incidents related to student perceptions of safety and connectedness as reported in the 2018-19 School Experience Survey (SES).

Two questions guided our analysis. First: ***Which students reported feeling safe or a sense of belonging at their schools?*** Student responses to the 2018-19 School Experience Survey (SES) indicated that:

- About 7 in 10 L.A. Unified students felt safe and connected to their schools;
- However, a substantial minority of students did not report feeling safe in (30%) or connected to (30-40%) their schools,
- Black students reported feelings of safety on or around campus as well as feelings of connectedness to their school in lower percentages compared to their non-Black peers, and
- Students who did not report feeling safe at their school were less likely to report feeling connected to their school.

The second question that guided this analysis was: ***Are there relationships between incident rates and students' reported feelings of safety and belonging?*** Findings were that:

- Fewer students who attended schools with above-average rates of physically violent incidents reported feeling safe or connected to their school relative to their peers, and
- Fewer students who attended schools with above-average rates of weapons-related incidents reported feeling safe in their neighborhood compared to their peers.

This report also sought to understand more about the District's number one safety threat—suicidal ideation—by examining the relationship between suicidal ideation, bullying, and school connectedness. Results of this analysis were inconclusive, indicating that the SES is not an ideal way to understand trends associated with incidents involving suicidal ideation in the District.

These analyses provide some understanding about who reports feeling safe and connected to their schools and possible reasons for these feelings based on incidents at their schools. However, the analysis related to suicidal ideation provided little insight. If the District is interested in understanding more about these school climate topics, then the IAU suggests that leadership:

- Pose follow-up questions to students in the SES to understand what events or conditions at their schools are related to feelings of safety and connectedness.
- Ensure reports of weapons-related incidents includes information about student motivation for carrying weapons.
- Review and possibly renew advocacy efforts regarding safe passage to school initiatives and partnerships.
- Assess implementation of restorative justice practices in L.A. Unified Schools, and
- Identify a more direct way to examine suicidal ideation trends among students.

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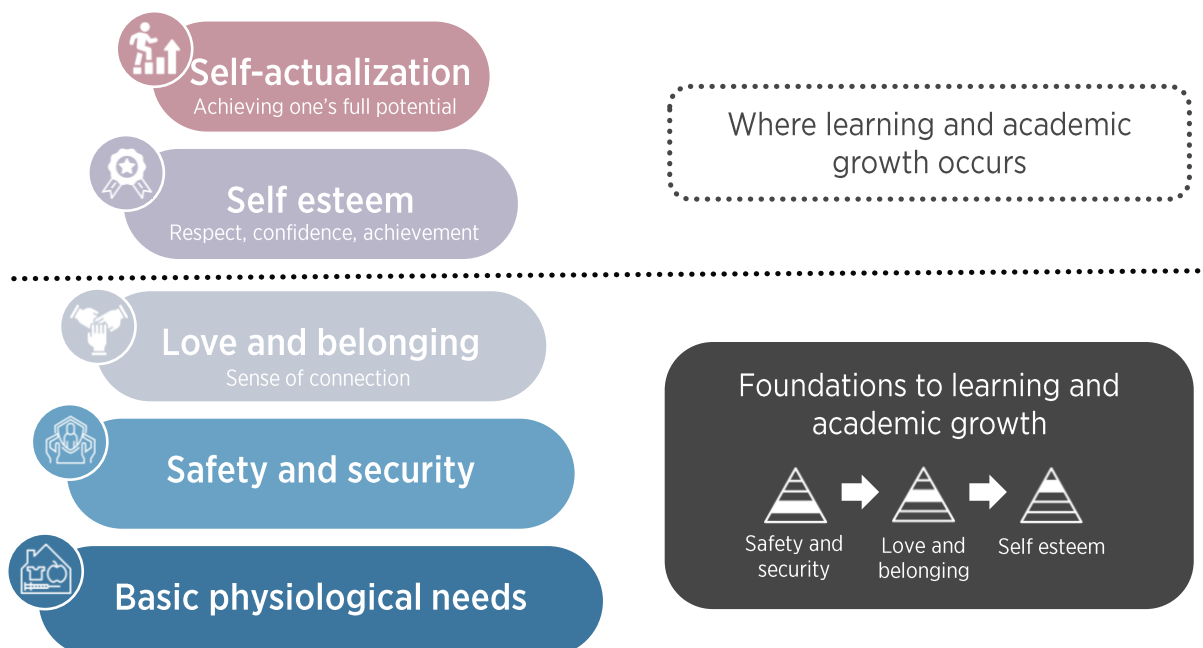
Most students reported feeling safe in and around school, as well as connected to the school, according to the District’s Student Experience Survey data in 2018-2019. However, a sizeable minority did not report feeling safe (30%) or a sense of connectedness to their school (30-40%). An understanding of who does and does not feel safe and connected at District schools can inform plans and policies to ensure schools meet students’ safety and belonging needs, which, in turn, can provide the foundation for academic achievement (Figure 1).

A comprehensive understanding of whether and how schools meet students’ safety and belonging needs would require data on a wide range of inputs and outputs. At present, two readily available sources of District data allow us to explore these issues. The first is the District’s Incident System Tracking Accountability Report (iSTAR) database, which the IAU previously used to calculate the rates of several categories of threatening incidents at each school.¹ These data are limited in that

they provide no information on the causes or consequences of incidents, including how they reflect or affect students’ perceptions of safety and belonging. However, the second source of data, the School Experience Survey (SES), provides information on student perceptions of safety in and around schools, school connectedness, and bullying. Matching SES data with safety-threatening incident rates—calculated by the IAU from iSTAR data—allows examination of associations between student perceptions and reported incidents, which can shed light on how students’ safety and belonging needs are threatened or met.

Two questions guided our analysis. First: ***Which students reported feeling safe or a sense of belonging at their schools?*** Second: ***Are there relationships between incident rates and students’ reported feelings of safety and belonging?*** To answer these questions, we selected related survey responses and incident types, which we describe in detail in the “About the Analysis” section.

Figure 1. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs



We found that, when compared to their peers of other races/ethnicities, fewer Black students reported feeling safe on and off campus as well as feelings of school connectedness to their schools. Moreover, students who did not report feeling safe on campus were less likely to report feeling connected to their school than students who reported feeling safe.

We also found statistically significant relationships between students' perceptions of safety and their school's physically violent and weapons-related incident rates—fewer students reported feeling safe *on* campus at schools with above-average physically violent incident rates and fewer students reported feeling safe *off* campus at schools with above-average weapons incident rates. Students' feelings of school connectedness were also negatively related to the level of physically violent incident rates (feelings of school connectedness were relatively low at schools with relatively high levels of physically violent incidents). However, there was no clear relationship between suicidal ideation incidents—what we previously found to be the most prevalent threat to students in L.A. Unified—and students' reported feelings of belonging or experiences of bullying.

We begin with a description of our analysis and the data used in this report. We then present the findings to each of our research questions, followed by a discussion of our key findings and recommendations for next steps.

ABOUT THE ANALYSIS

This analysis sought to show whose safety and belonging needs are unmet and what may affect or result from these unmet needs. As a first step in answering these questions, the IAU selected relevant data points from two District data sources for the 2018-19 school year: (1) the School Experience Survey

(SES); and (2) the Incident System Tracking and Accountability Reporting (iSTAR) database.^{2,3}

All data were disaggregated by school level—elementary, middle, and high. SES data were also disaggregated by student race/ethnicity—Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Filipino, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, white, and two or more races. Throughout this report, the IAU uses the term *Indigenous* to refer to students who are American Indian or Alaskan Native for brevity in presenting data and findings.

Four research questions stemmed from our first guiding question—***Which students reported feeling safe and a sense of belonging?***—these sub-questions and the corresponding SES items are outlined in Table 1. Most questions from the SES are Likert-style questions with scales that ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree with a neutral option.⁴ We simplified this range of student responses by grouping them into two categories, *Agree*—which included “Strongly agree” and “Agree”—and *Did not agree*—which included “Neutral,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly disagree.”⁵ The percent of students who agreed or did not agree was calculated using total respondents (not all students responded).

To answer our second guiding question—***Are there relationships between incident rates and students reported feelings of safety and belonging?***—the IAU analyzed three sub-questions. Table 2 lists these sub-questions with the corresponding incident types and SES items, organized by incident type. We used only incident types related to our hypotheses about a) factors that might affect students' safety and belonging needs or b) unmet safety and belonging needs that may contribute to certain incidents.

The first incident type shown in Table 2, physical violence, is a composite of several incident types reported in iSTAR. As in our first report, the IAU created the category *physically violent incidents* by combining incident types where one could intuit persons involved either put hands on other individuals or made serious threats of violence. Fighting and the threat to fight incident types in iSTAR comprised most incidents categorized as physically violent.

In addition to physically violent incidents, we also analyzed weapons-related and suicidal ideation incidents. The latter was included because the IAU previously found suicidal ideation was the most prevalent threat to students' safety as reported in iSTAR.⁶

For each incident type, the IAU calculated

incident rates per 1,000 students per school using CDE enrollment data from 2018-19.¹³ Incident rates were grouped into two categories (or levels), below or above the average incident rate for that incident type and school level.¹⁴ Most schools had incident rates that fell below the average (Table 3).

SES items for guiding question 2 included student responses to the safety and connectedness questions shown in Table 1 as well as bullying-related questions. On bullying, students were asked if they experienced a

Table 1. Question and Items for Guiding Question 1

GUIDING QUESTION 1

Which students reported feeling safe and a sense of belonging?

Data source: School Experience Survey (SES)

Sub-question	SES Item
Who feels safe on campus ?	"I feel safe at this school"
Who feels safe off-campus ?	"I feel safe in the neighborhood around this school."
Who feels a sense of connectedness to their school?	"I am happy to be at this school." "I feel like I am a part of this school." "I feel close to people at this school."
Are students who feel safe on campus more likely to feel a sense of connectedness to their school?	"I feel safe at this school" vs. "I am happy to be at this school." "I feel like I am a part of this school." "I feel close to people at this school."

Note: Connectedness was used as an indicator of belonging. All safety and connectedness SES responses were grouped into "Agree" or "Did not agree" categories.

Limitations of this Analysis

Four limitations affect the interpretation of the results presented in this report. First, this analysis only examines data from the 2018-19 school year, which increases the susceptibility of data to atypical trends in reporting.

Second, this analysis uses safety-related data solely from the iSTAR database, which are derived from incident reports that school staff members entered during the 2018-19 school year. Not all threatening or personal safety-related incidents that occurred on schools or involved students, employees or the school community during this time were recorded in the database. For instance, calls to the L.A. Unified school police department (LASPD) are recorded in another database. Because we did not use police call data in this analysis, our results may underrepresent safety-related incidents to the extent that calls to the LASPD reflect additional incidents that were not recorded in iSTAR. An unknown number of other personal safety-related incidents may occur that do not appear in iSTAR.

Third, this analysis uses self-reported data from the School Experience Survey. Self-reported data are susceptible to a variety of biases including – but not limited to – social desirability bias, reference bias, and recall bias.^{7,8,9} Each of these biases increases the likelihood of measurement error in this analysis.

Lastly, data from iSTAR may be less than 100% reliable. In its annual iSTAR reports, the Division of Operations warns that "incidents may be unreported or erroneously reported in the iSTAR system."^{10,11} School leaders may inconsistently categorize incidents within their schools and some schools may report more frequently than others, though the Division of Operations has taken steps to ensure universal understanding of reporting requirements and increase the reliability of iSTAR data.¹²

Table 2. Question and Items for Guiding Question 2

GUIDING QUESTION 2		
Are there relationships between incident rates and students' reported feelings of safety and belonging?		

Data source: SES; Incident System Tracking and Accountability Reporting (iSTAR) Database

Sub-question	Incident Type	SES Item
Is the level of physically violent incident rates related to (i) perceptions of safety on campus or (ii) perceptions of school connectedness ?	Physically violent	"I feel safe at this school" "I am happy to be at this school." "I feel like I am a part of this school." "I feel close to people at this school."
Is the level of weapons-related incident rates related to perceptions of safety (i) on campus or (ii) off campus ?	Weapons	"I feel safe at this school" "I feel safe in the neighborhood around this school."
Is the level of suicidal-ideation incident rates related to (i) perceptions of connectedness or (ii) student reported bullying ?	Suicidal ideation	"I am happy to be at this school." "I feel like I am a part of this school." "I feel close to people at this school." "In the last 12 months, how many times on school property have [students experienced specific types of bullying: Rumors Spread, Body Image, Way I talk, Physical, Sexual, Online.]" (For detail, see Appendix C).

Note: Using CDE enrollment and iSTAR incident data, incident rates were calculated per 1,000 students and then categorized into two categories (levels), above and below average, according to the average incident rate for the corresponding school level. All safety and connectedness SES responses were grouped into "Agree" or "Did not agree" categories, while bullying responses were grouped in "Frequently" or "Infrequently" categories.

certain type of bullying at frequencies ranging from never to four or more times. Responses were sorted into two groups: *Infrequently*—which included "Never" and "Only once"—or *Frequently*—which included "Two or three times" and "Four or more."

For each analysis, we conducted chi-squared (χ^2) tests of independence to determine whether the relationships between the variables were statistically significant overall or for each school level. For guiding question 1, student SES responses (agree or did not agree) were cross tabulated with student race/ethnicity. For guiding question 2, student SES responses were cross tabulated with their school's level of incident rates (above or below average).

Table 3. Percent of Schools in Below or Above Average Groups by Incident Category

Category	% Below Avg	% Above Avg
Suicidal ideation	63%	37%
Weapons-related	66%	34%
Physically Violent	60%	40%

Note: Total number of schools equaled 731.

FINDINGS

In the following section, we present findings related to the characteristics of students who did and did not report feeling safe or connected to their school. Then, we present findings on the relationship between safety-threatening incidents and student perceptions of safety and connectedness.

Which students feel safe and connected to their school?

Most L.A. Unified students reported feeling safe on campus and off campus in 2018-2019. They also reported feeling connected to their school. However, the number of students who reported feeling safe and connected generally decreased at each successive school level. In this section, we investigate how feelings of safety and connectedness differed by school level and ethnicity.

On-campus safety

Approximately 70% of students expressed feeling safe on campus, but—when disaggregated by school level and ethnicity—significant differences emerged.

More younger students than older students reported feeling safe. Approximately 8 out of 10 of elementary schoolers expressed feeling safe at school compared to 6 out of 10 middle and high schoolers (Figure 2). These school-level differences in safety-related SES

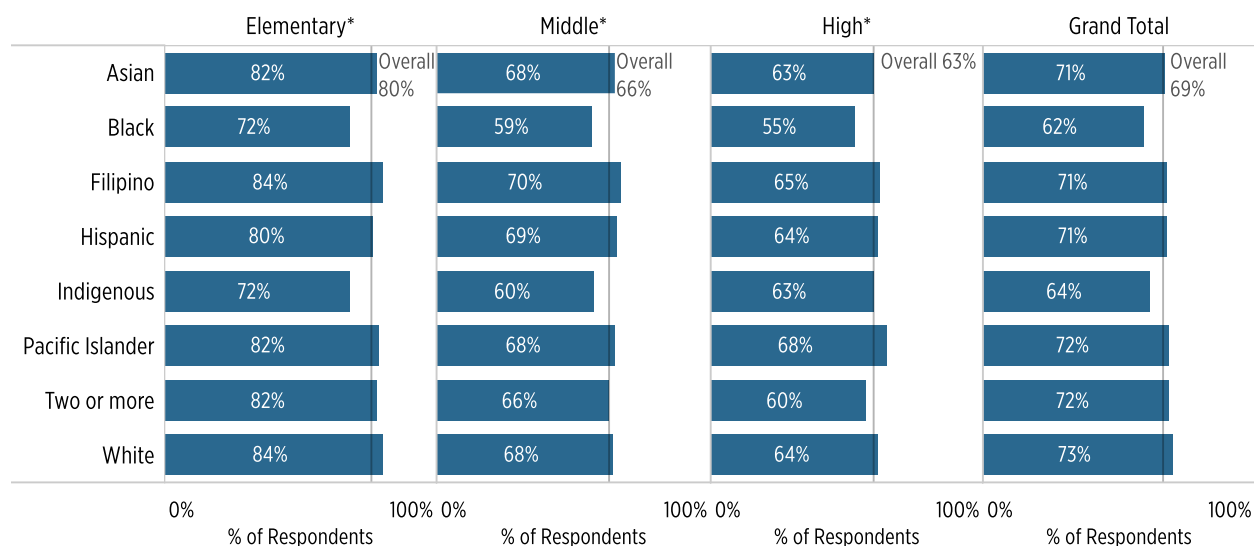
responses were mirrored in incidents reported in iSTAR. According to a recent report by the IAU — on average over a four-year period — middle and high schools experience and reported a higher rate of safety threats than elementary schools.^{15,16}

Moreover, a smaller proportion of Black and Indigenous students at every school level reported feeling safe at school compared to their non-Black and non-Indigenous peers—with gaps as low as 5 percentage points and as large as 15 percentage points (Figure 2).

Off-campus safety

Approximately 60% of students reported feeling safe in the neighborhood surrounding their school (Figure 3). Regardless of school level, Black students consistently reported feeling safe in the neighborhood surrounding their school less frequently than their peers. Differences between race/ethnicities in middle and high school were either small or inconsistent across racial/ethnic groups and school levels (Figure 3).

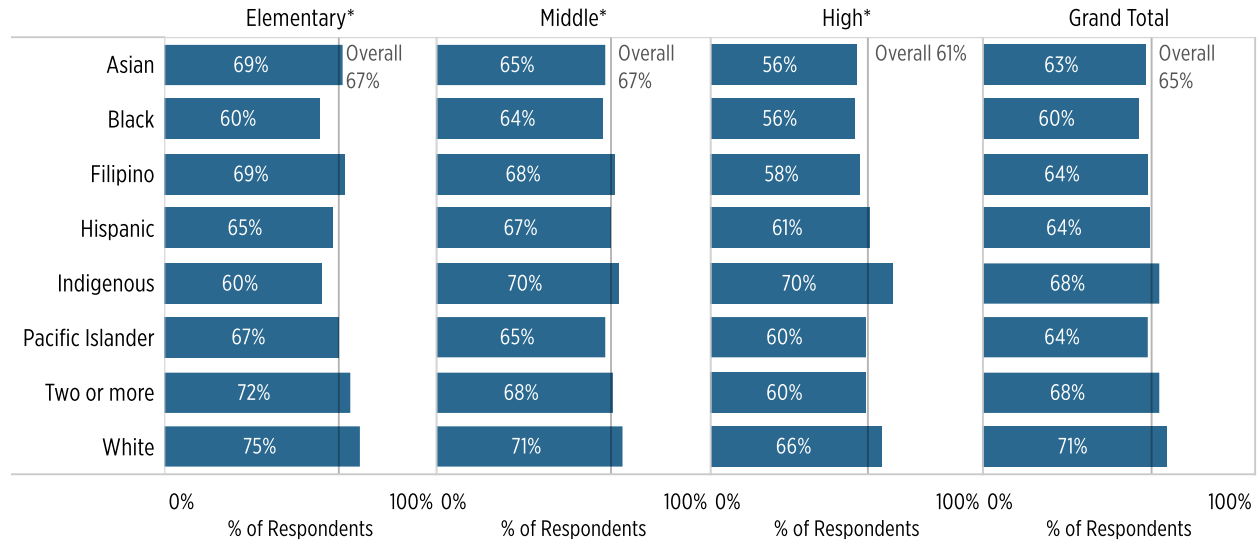
Figure 2. Percent of Students Who Agreed They Feel Safe on Campus by Race/Ethnicity and School Level



*Results were statistically significant, with $p \leq 0.000$

Note: This table references Q8 of the SES that asks students how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement "I feel safe in this school."

Figure 3. Percent of Students Who Agreed They Feel Safe Off Campus by Race/Ethnicity and School Level



*Results were statistically significant, with $p \leq 0.000$

Note: This table references Q9 of the SES that asks students how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement “I feel safe in the neighborhood around this school.”

School connectedness

At least 60% of students across school levels expressed feeling happy at school, feeling a part of their school, and feeling close to people at their school—three measures of school connectedness in the SES. However, like the pattern observed with feelings of safety, a greater share of younger students reported feelings of connectedness than their peers in middle and high schools.

Averaged across the three connectedness measures,¹⁷ approximately 80% of elementary school students affirmed feelings of connectedness compared to about 70% of middle school students, and about 60% of high school students.

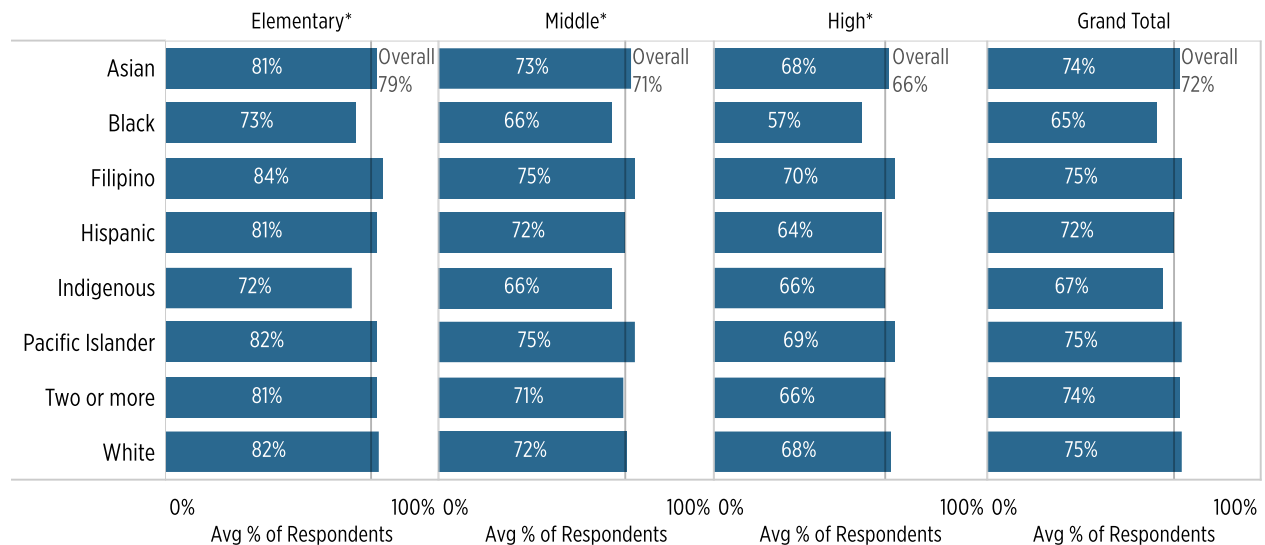
Moreover, in elementary schools, between 8 and 11 percentage points fewer Black and Indigenous students reported feeling connected to their schools relative to their peers

(Figure 4). Black students consistently reported the least amount of connectedness, but, as school levels increased, fewer students reported feeling connected to their school overall. Appendix A provides more information on the individual connectedness measures by race/ethnicity.

On-campus safety and school connectedness

Findings of this analysis indicate that students’ perceptions of on-campus safety were associated with and may be foundational to feeling connected to their school. Across school levels and measures of connectedness, students who did not report feeling safe at their school were less likely to report feeling connected to their school (Table 4). The differences were large and significant, with gaps ranging from 23-40 percentage points.

Figure 4. Average Percent of Students Who Agreed to School Connectedness Measures^a, by Race/Ethnicity and School Level



*Results were statistically significant, with $p \leq 0.000$

^a Average percentages of student connectedness represent the average percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to the following statements on the SES: (1) I am happy to be at this school; (2) I feel like I am a part of this school; (3) I feel close to people at this school. See Appendix A for data on each question.

Table 4. Percent of Students Who Agreed to School Connectedness Measures by Whether They Agreed They Feel Safe on Campus and School Level

Feel Safe at School	School Connectedness Questions:											
	Happy to be at their school (Agree)				Feel a part of their school (Agree)				Feel close to people at school (Agree)			
	ES	MS	HS	Overall	ES	MS	HS	Overall	ES	MS	HS	Overall
Agree	91%	86%	82%	86%	87%	80%	74%	81%	81%	80%	75%	79%
Did not agree	59%	47%	42%	47%	55%	42%	36%	42%	57%	57%	47%	53%
PP Difference ^a	32**	39**	40**	39**	32**	38**	38**	39**	24**	23**	28**	26**

^aHere, PP is an abbreviation for percentage point. ** $p \leq 0.001$

Is there a relationship between incidents and student perception of safety and connectedness?

Most students reported feeling safe and connected to their school. But what contributes to a student's perception of safety and connectedness?

In this section, we describe how feelings of safety and connectedness differed by

enrollment in schools with above- or below-average safety-threatening incident rates.

Physically violent incident rates and on-campus safety and connectedness

We hypothesized that fewer students on campuses with above average rates of physically violent incidents would report feeling safe or connected to their school than their peers. Findings from this analysis confirm there was

a relationship between physically violent incident rates and feelings of safety and connectedness.

Safety on campus. Data show that relatively fewer students (between three and four percentage points) reported feeling safe at schools with above-average rates of physically violent incidents (e.g. fighting and threats) compared to their peers at schools with below-average rates of physically violent incidents (Table 5). These findings are consistent across school levels. The differences are statistically significant though small. Nonetheless, most threats of physical aggression are not carried out or, if they are, do not end in injury.^{20,21}

Table 5. Percent of Students Who Agreed They Feel Safe on Campus, by Level of Physically Violent Incident Rates and School Level

School Phys. Violent Incident Rate	Agreed They Feel Safe on Campus			
	ES	MS	HS	Overall
Below Avg	82%	69%	65%	72%
Above Avg	78%	66%	61%	68%
PP Difference ^a	4**	3**	4**	4**

^a Here, PP is an abbreviation for percentage point. ** $p \leq 0.001$
 Note: This table references Q8 of the SES that asks students how strongly they agree or disagree with the following statement: I feel safe in this school.

School connectedness. Differences in student connectedness to school at schools with different levels of physically violent incident rates also were apparent. Relatively fewer students who attended schools with above-average rates of physically violent incidents reported connectedness to their school compared to their peers at schools with lower levels of physically violent incidents (Appendix B, Table B1). The size and significance of the differences varied across measures and school levels.

Weapons-related incident rates and on- and off-campus safety

Safety on campus. We tested the hypothesis that weapons-related incident rates may affect student feelings of safety on campus. Differences in feeling of safety between students at above- or below-average weapons-related incident rate schools were insignificant in elementary and middle school. However, there was a significant and negative relationship between school weapons-related incident rates and student perception of school safety in high school. Students who attended schools with weapons rates that are above the high school average were less likely to report feeling safe at school than their peers who attend schools that are below the high school average weapons-related incident rate.

School Connectedness and Risky Behavior

Research suggests that there is a relationship between school connectedness and student involvement in risky behavior (which we define as incidents involving illegal or controlled substances or sexually inappropriate behaviors). A student's involvement in risky behaviors can impact their own connectedness to school as well as that of their peers. The National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments defines a safe school as one that is free from violence, bullying, harassment, and substance use.¹⁸ Thus, risky behavior incidents have the potential to threaten student perception of campus safety which could impact student connectedness to school.

Moreover, research suggests that school connectedness can serve as a protective factor against risky behaviors such as illegal substance abuse or early sexual initiation.¹⁹ That is, students who feel connected to their school are less likely to engage in risky behaviors.

The IAU examined the relationship between risky behavior incident rates and student responses to the School Experience Survey (SES) on school connectedness questions. The relationship was inconsistent and inconclusive (Appendix B, Tables B3 and B4).

Safety off campus. We hypothesized that fewer students on campuses with above-average rates of weapons incidents would report feeling safe *around* their school than their peers. Findings from this analysis confirm there is a relationship between these two measures. Data show that relatively fewer students reported feeling safe in the neighborhood around their school at schools with above-average weapons-related incident rates (62%) compared to their peers (66%) (Table 6). This pattern was consistent across all school levels. Though the differences are small, they are statistically significant.

Table 6. Percent of Students Who Agreed They Feel Safe off Campus, by Level of Weapons-Related Incident Rates and School Level

School Weapons Incident Rate	Agreed They Feel Safe off Campus			
	ES	MS	HS	Overall
Below Avg	68%	68%	63%	66%
Above Avg	63%	65%	58%	62%
PP Difference ^a	5**	3**	5**	4**

^a Here, PP is an abbreviation for percentage point. ** $p \leq 0.001$; * $p \leq 0.05$

Note: This table references Q9 of the SES that asks students how strongly they agree or disagree with the following statement: I feel safe in the neighborhood around this school.

Suicidal ideation incident rates and school connectedness and bullying

School connectedness. The District’s number one recurring safety threat is suicidal ideation. School connectedness is one factor that research shows is related to suicidal ideation.²² Thus, we hypothesized that fewer students on campuses with above-average rates of suicidal ideation incidents would report feeling connected to their school than their peers at campuses with below-average rates of suicidal ideation. Findings from this analysis were inconclusive (Appendix B, Table B2).²³

Bullying. Research also suggests that there is a strong relationship between suicidal

ideation and bullying. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) “any involvement with bullying behavior is one stressor which may significantly contribute to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that raise the risk of suicide.”²⁴ This analysis examined the relationship between student responses to bullying questions on the SES and campus suicidal ideation rates. The results of this analysis were inconclusive in that they were inconsistent across bullying type or the differences were too small to report (see Appendix C, Table C5).

A Note on Bullying

In the SES, most students reported infrequent bullying (never or once) across all categories. However, the share of students who reported frequent bullying (2 or more times) varies by bullying category and school level. As shown below, elementary school students often report a greater share of frequent bullying relative to students in middle or high school. Almost one-third of elementary students reported frequently having rumors spread about them and a quarter experience frequent physical bullying.

Percent of Students Bullied Two or More Times by Type and School Level

Type	ES	MS	HS
Rumors Spread	31%	24%	18%
Body Image	20%	19%	14%
Made fun of the way I talk	18%	19%	16%
Physical	26%	16%	6%
Sexual	N/A	15%	14%
Online	7%	5%	4%

Source: 2018-19 SES Questions 14-19

Though SES results indicate that elementary students experience the highest level of bullying of the three school levels, these students also make up the largest share of enrollment. Per student, the bullying rate is actually highest among middle school students because middle schools enroll fewer students than either elementary or high schools. These results are consistent with iSTAR reports of bullying, as described in our earlier report.²⁵ For more information on bullying, see Appendix C.

DISCUSSION

This analysis functions as an initial step to help us understand more about what conditions and events may be related to students feeling safe or connected to their schools. Though several limitations of the data restrict how we can interpret the results, this report describes associations between incidents at school sites that either plausibly affect feelings of safety and connectedness or reflect those feelings. By combining what we know about these relationships with research on causes of safety threats and promising ways to reduce these threats, we can provide insights for policymakers.

In this section, we discuss our three key findings and what they suggest about how L.A. Unified schools can continue to improve how they meet the safety and belonging needs of students.

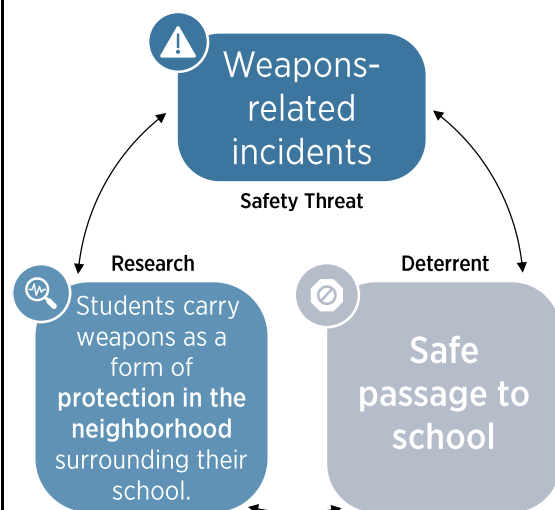
Key Finding 1: There is a relationship between rates of physically violent incidents and whether students feel safe and connected to their school.

The first key finding is that, **at schools with above-average rates of physical violence, students were significantly less likely to report feeling safe and connected to their schools** than students at schools with below-average rates of physical violence. Averages are coarse representations, but this finding does indicate some connection in the aggregate between physically violent incidents and students' reported feelings of safety and connectedness, which conforms to our expectations.

Research on why adolescents fight helps put these findings into context since most physically violent incidents in our data are fights.

According to this research, fighters are unaware of alternatives to fighting that could resolve disputes.²⁶ Non-fighters, on the other hand, recognize various strategies for resolving disputes that do not involve fighting. Guidance from adults on how to problem-solve and handle grievances can make all students aware of alternative dispute resolution strategies, which could reduce the number of fights. This kind of guidance is a pillar of restorative justice, which is part of the discipline and school climate policy at District schools (Figure 5).²⁷⁻³⁰

Figure 5. Physically Violent Incidents, Research on Adolescent Fighters, and Possible Deterrents



Source: Shetgiri, R., et. al. (2015). Why Adolescents Fight: A Qualitative Study of Youth Perspectives on Fighting and Its Prevention.

There is some evidence that—irrespective of restorative justice—many students do not learn about conflict resolution strategies in District schools. One question on the SES asks students if they agree that “an adult on [their] campus talked to [them] about what to do if someone makes [them] uncomfortable.” Results show that only 50% of high schoolers and 60% of middle schoolers indicated that an adult talked to them about what to do if

someone made them uncomfortable compared to 75% of elementary schoolers.

More students (80%) who indicated an adult on campus told them what to do if someone makes them uncomfortable expressed feeling safe on campus than did students who did not indicate that an adult had told them what to do if someone makes them uncomfortable (55%).³¹ If helping students understand what to do when someone makes them uncomfortable is comparable to adults providing guidance to students on alternative dispute resolution strategies, then evidence suggests that adherence to this restorative practice might reduce on-campus violence.

Reducing physically violent incidents in schools is worthwhile in its own right but **results from our analysis also suggest that decreasing these incidents holds promise for meeting students' needs for safety and connectedness.**

However, more information is needed before we can recommend restorative justice to meet the safety and belonging needs of students. First, to state definitively that students feel unsafe because of a high-level of violent incidents at their schools, we would need to ask students directly what makes them feel unsafe. If we do determine in fact that physical violence is what threatens students' sense of safety, we would then need to evaluate the effectiveness of restorative justice as it is practiced in our schools for reducing physical violence before we could recommend it for this purpose. Nonetheless, **findings from this analysis do provide justification for further examining the causes of students' feelings of safety and connectedness and for an evaluation of the efficacy of restorative justice in the District.**

Key Finding 2: There is a relationship between above-average rates of weapons-related incidents and whether students feel safe around campus.

The second key finding is that, **at schools with above-average rates of weapons incidents, students were less likely to report feeling safe in the neighborhood around their school than students at schools with below-average rates of weapons incidents.** This finding does not mean that all students in all schools with above-average rates of weapons-related incidents feel unsafe in their neighborhoods or that the other schools are in safe neighborhoods; it just points to a relationship on average across the District between students' reported feelings of off-campus safety and the rate of incidents involving weapons.

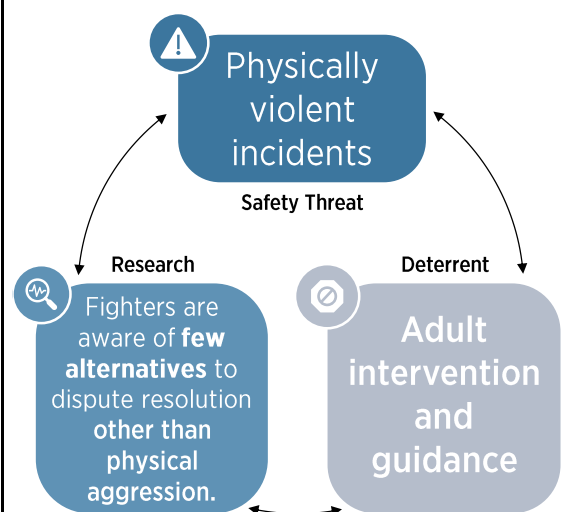
Some students carry weapons to school, and given our findings relating these incidents with perceptions of off-campus safety—**understanding the root causes of weapon-carrying could be a step towards addressing students' safety needs.**

Some weapons-related incident reports may be the result of students carrying weapons because they felt safer with a weapon to protect them from dangerous situations.³² In a report published by the ACLU SoCal, students stated a reason for carrying weapons was that they did not feel safe on their commute to school. This report quoted one student saying they carry pepper spray as protection to and from school.^{33,34}

Protection for students on their commute to and from school could be a deterrence strategy: it is one way to make students feel safer and could therefore decrease weapons-related incidents reported at schools (Figure 6).

However, more information is needed before we can recommend safe passage to school initiatives as a strategy to meet the safety needs of students. First, to state definitively that students carry weapons as a form of protection on their commute to school, we would need to ask students who are caught carrying weapons why they did so. If we do determine in fact that students carry weapons to protect themselves from dangerous situations in the neighborhood around their school, we would then need to evaluate the effectiveness of particular safe passage programs for improving students' perception of off-campus safety before we could recommend it for this purpose. Still, **findings from this analysis do provide justification for further examination of the causes of students' feelings unsafe around campus and for an evaluation of the efficacy of safe passage programs in the District.**

Figure 6. Weapons-Related Incidents, Research on Why Adolescents Carry Weapons, and Possible Deterrents



Source: Wallace, Lacey. (2016). Armed Kids, Armed Adults? Weapon Carrying From Adolescence to Adulthood; Leung, V., et. al. (June 2018). Here to Learn: Creating Safe and Supportive Schools in Los Angeles Unified School District.

Key Finding 3: The relationship between connectedness measures and school suicidal ideation rates is inconsistent.

The third key finding is that **students at schools with above-average rates of suicidal ideation incidents were no more or less likely to report feelings of connectedness than their peers at schools with below-average rates of suicidal ideation incidents.**³⁵

Here, the data tell us that the school-level suicidal ideation incident rate has no relation to its students' reported feelings of connectedness, even though school connectedness can serve as a protective factor against suicidal ideation.³⁶

This lack of association between SES-reported feelings of connectedness and suicidal ideation suggests that (1) students' relationships with their school may be only one of many factors that contributes to suicidal ideation, and (2) that the SES is not useful for helping us understand what drives suicidal ideation among L.A. Unified students.

Therefore, more information is needed before a firm recommendation can be made about how to reduce suicidal ideation in District schools. However, since L.A. Unified recognizes suicide and other related behaviors as serious public health issues but has no large-scale, direct way to identify hotspots or trends in circumstances surrounding suicidal ideation-related incidents among students, **further research that can identify the causes of suicidal ideation and its relationship to school climate is justified.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Before the District can effectively direct resources in ways that will help students feel safer and more connected to their schools, leadership needs to know more about what conditions in and around their schools make students feel safe and connected. Then, the District needs to explore and evaluate ways to improve those conditions.

If the District is interested in understanding what makes students feel safe, unsafe, or connected to their school or if leadership is interested in understanding more about incidents involving suicidal ideation, then we recommend the District:

- **Pose follow-up questions to students in the School Experience Survey (SES) to understand what makes them feel safe, unsafe, or connected to their school community.** The SES is a readily available but underutilized tool to learn more about the ‘why’ behind student perception of safety and connectedness.
- **Ensure reports of weapons-related incidents include information about student motivation for carrying weapons.** Students may carry weapons as a form of protection, but more information is needed to confirm this explanation.
- **Review and possibly renew advocacy efforts regarding safe passage to school initiatives and partnerships.** While we do not know for certain what makes students feel unsafe off campus, there is evidence that suggest that students who feel unsafe in the neighborhood surrounding their school feel so during their commute to and from school. In October 2020, the Board passed a resolution entitled [Safety First: Leveraging Partnerships and Advocacy to Create Safe Routes and Passages to School for All Los](#)

[Angeles Unified Students](#) (Res 040-19/20) which directed the Superintendent to – among other things – study and report back to the Board on the feasibility of a Safe Passages pilot program.

- **Assess implementation of restorative justice practices in L.A. Unified Schools.**

Though we cannot say for sure why some students fight or feel unsafe at school, evidence suggests that adolescent fighters know of few alternative dispute resolution strategies relative to non-fighters and more students express feeling safe when adults tell them what to do when someone makes them uncomfortable compared to when they do not. In May 2013, District leadership adopted the School Climate Bill of Rights and committed to implementing restorative justice practices in all schools by 2020.³⁷ The Board needs to know to what extent restorative justice practices have been implemented throughout the District.

- **Identify a direct way to examine suicidal ideation trends among students and to identify possible associations between school climate and suicidal ideation.**

While school facilities have been closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some areas of the District have implemented mental health screenings for students as a way to assess for increased risk of suicidal ideation. The District could consider ways to maintain and expand these mental health screenings to reach more students now that school campuses are open. But screenings would not necessarily improve school conditions that may contribute to suicidal ideation, so more research is needed into relationships between suicidal behavior and conditions such as bullying, academic expectations, safety, students’ sense of belonging, and other psychological factors.

NOTES

¹ Wise, B and Thomas, A. (April 2021). Threats to School Safety: An analysis of iSTAR incidents from 2016-2020. Independent Analysis Unit. Retrieved from <http://laschoolboard.org/sites/default/files/IAU%20Report%202021%200105%20-%20Threats%20to%20School%20Safety.pdf>

² For more information on the Incident System Tracking and Accountability Reporting (iSTAR) database and the District's incident reporting process, see: Wise, B and Thomas, A. (April 2021). Threats to School Safety: An analysis of iSTAR incidents from 2016-2020. Independent Analysis Unit. Retrieved from <http://laschoolboard.org/sites/default/files/IAU%20Report%202021%200105%20-%20Threats%20to%20School%20Safety.pdf>

³ School Experience Survey. *Los Angeles Unified School District*. <https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/8397>

⁴ Response options were Likert-style for SES questions related to safety and connectedness.

⁵ Initial analysis indicated the "Neutral" and the two disagree response items followed similar trends; this grouping allowed for simplicity.

⁶ Wise, B and Thomas, A. (April 2021). Threats to School Safety: An analysis of iSTAR incidents from 2016-2020. Independent Analysis Unit. Retrieved from <http://laschoolboard.org/sites/default/files/IAU%20Report%202021%200105%20-%20Threats%20to%20School%20Safety.pdf>

⁷ Social desirability bias occurs when survey participants allow external biases caused by the need for approval to influence their responses to sensitive questions. Reference bias occurs when survey responses are influenced by differing standards of comparison. Recall bias occurs when participants erroneously provide responses that depend on his/her ability to recall past events.

⁸ Althubaiti, Alaa. (May 2016). Information bias in health research: definition, pitfalls, and adjustment methods. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4862344/>

⁹ West, Martin. (December 2014). The Limitations of Self-Report Measures of Non-cognitive Skills. *Brookings*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-limitations-of-self-report-measures-of-non-cognitive-skills/>

¹⁰ L.A. Unified Division of Operations. (August 2019). *iSTAR Annual Report 2018-2019*. Retrieved from <https://ca01000043.schoolwires.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=38665&dataid=84067&FileName=iSTAR%20Annual%20Report%202018-2019%20-%20Final%2020112619.pdf>

¹¹ L.A. Unified Division of Operations. (October 2018). *iSTAR Annual Report 2017-2018*. Retrieved from

<https://ca01000043.schoolwires.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=38665&dataid=70939&FileName=iStar%20Annual%20Report%202017-2018.pdf>

¹² Administrators and other school staff who are granted access to iSTAR must participate in a training related to the system. Additionally, definitions of incident categories are readily available for users to promote universal understanding of categories and reduce error.

¹³ Enrollment data from the California Department of Education (CDE) is based on Census Day counts rather than Norm Day counts (as is the District's enrollment data). Because it is based on Census Day counts, CDE enrollment data is more static and, as a result, functions as a better metric for comparison than enrollment data based on Norm Day counts.

¹⁴ The average incident rate for elementary schools was different from middle and high schools, and these differences were statistically significant.

¹⁵ Averaged over a four-year period

¹⁶ Wise, B and Thomas, A. (April 2021). Threats to School Safety: An analysis of iSTAR incidents from 2016-2020. Independent Analysis Unit. Retrieved from <http://laschoolboard.org/sites/default/files/IAU%20Report%202021%200105%20-%20Threats%20to%20School%20Safety.pdf>

¹⁷ Q1 – happy to be at this school; Q2 – Feel a part of this school; Q3 – Feel close to people at this school.

¹⁸ (n.d.) Safety. *National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments*. Retrieved from <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/safety#:~:text=School%20safety%20is%20defined%20as,illegal%20substances%20on%20school%20grounds>.

¹⁹ <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/pdf/connectedness.pdf>

²⁰ For example, fighting and threat incidents were the second and third most recurring threats to student safety, but only 5% end in injury.

²¹ Wise, B and Thomas, A. (April 2021). Threats to School Safety: An analysis of iSTAR incidents from 2016-2020. Independent Analysis Unit. Retrieved from <http://laschoolboard.org/sites/default/files/IAU%20Report%202021%200105%20-%20Threats%20to%20School%20Safety.pdf>

²² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.

²³ Here the results were inconclusive because the magnitude and the direction of gaps varied across race/ethnicity and school level.

²⁴ (April 2014). The Relationship Between Bullying and Suicide: What We Know and What it Means for Schools. *The Center for Disease Control*. Retrieved from

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-suicide-translation-final-a.pdf>

²⁵ Wise, B and Thomas, A. (April 2021). Threats to School Safety: An analysis of iSTAR incidents from 2016-2020. Independent Analysis Unit. Retrieved from <http://laschoolboard.org/sites/default/files/IAU%20Report%202021%200105%20-%20Threats%20to%20School%20Safety.pdf>

²⁶ Shetgiri, R., et. al. (2015). Why Adolescents Fight: A Qualitative Study of Youth Perspectives on Fighting and Its Prevention. *Academic Pediatrics*, 15(1), 103-110. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1016%2Fj.acap.2014.06.020>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Restorative justice practice in L.A. Unified was projected to be fully implemented by the 2019-20 school year and focuses on skills for learning, empathy, communication, emotion management, problem-solving, and friendship. Within the problem-solving component, students learn – among other things – how to choose safe and respectful solutions to resolve their problems. <https://www.iirp.edu/images/pdf/IIRP-presentation.pdf>

²⁹ (n.d.) The Power of Restorative Justice Practices PLUS a Social Emotional Skill-Building Program [PowerPoint Slides]. *Los Angeles Unified School District*. <https://www.iirp.edu/images/pdf/IIRP-presentation.pdf>

³⁰ Ayesha K. Hashim, Katherine O. Strunk & Tasmina K. Dhaliwal. (2018). Justice for All? Suspension Bans and Restorative Justice Programs in the Los Angeles Unified School District, *Peabody Journal of Education*, 93:2, 174-189, DOI: 10.1080/0161956X.2018.1435040

³¹ These numbers represent additional analyses conducted using SES data. The differences presented here were statistically significant.

³² Wallace, Lacey. (2016). Armed Kids, Armed Adults? Weapon Carrying From Adolescence to Adulthood. *Youth Violence Juvenile Justice*, 15(1), 84-98.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1177%2F1541204015585363>

³³ In a public comment on October 24, 2017 during a study session on random searches, a 12th grade student from Washington Preparatory High School said the following: “Our school is in a dangerous area and a lot of stuff happens to kids on their way home or on their way to school. So it feels safe to carry pepper spray or tasers. I actually carry pepper spray, I don’t take it on school, I leave it somewhere so when I leave to go home, I can pick it up and have it.”

³⁴ Leung, V., et. al. (June 2018). Here to Learn: Creating Safe and Supportive Schools in Los Angeles Unified School District. *#StudentsNotSuspects Coalition*. Retrieved from https://www.aclusocal.org/sites/default/files/aclu_social_report_here_to_learn.pdf, p. 21

³⁵ In fact, in high schools, the relationship was counter to expectations. That is, relatively more students (though small amounts) expressed feeling happy at their school or feeling a part of their school at schools with above-average rates of suicidal ideation compared to their peers at other schools.

³⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.

³⁷ (n.d.) Restorative Justice in L.A. Unified. *Los Angeles Unified School District*. Retrieved from <https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib08/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/293/Restorative%20Justice%20Statement.pdf>

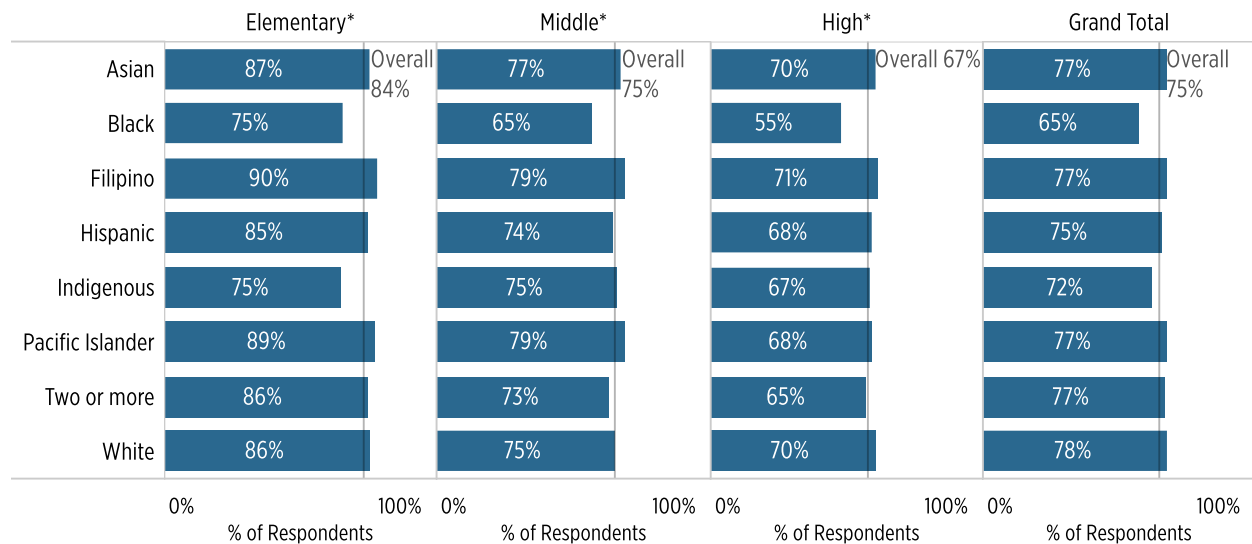
Appendix

APPENDIX A

SES School Connectedness Measures by Student Characteristics

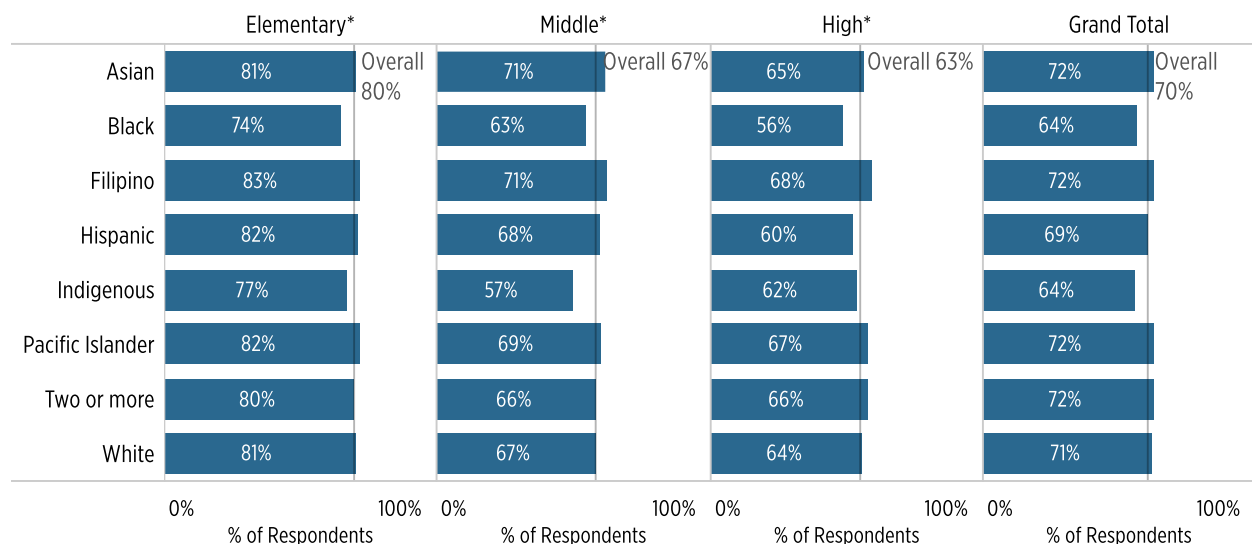
Question 1: “I am happy to be at this school.”

Figure A1. Percent of Students Who Agreed They are Happy to be at Their School, by Race/Ethnicity and School Level



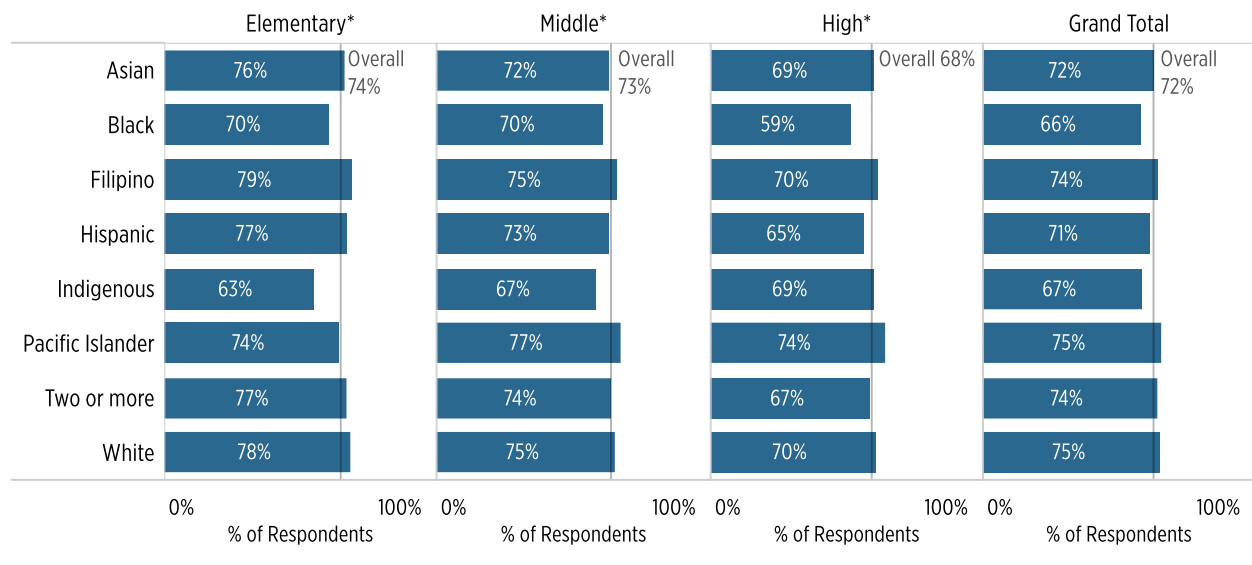
Question 2: “I feel like I am a part of this school.”

Figure A2. Percent of Students Who Agreed They Feel Like They are a Part of Their School, by Race/Ethnicity and School Level



Question 3: “I feel close to people at this school.”

Figure A3. Percent of Students Who Agreed They Feel Close to People at Their School, by Race/Ethnicity and School Level



Summary of Responses to Questions 1-3

Table A1. Percent of Students Who Agreed to School Connectedness Measures, by Race/Ethnicity and School Level

Race/Ethnicity	Elementary				Middle				High			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Avg.	Q1	Q2	Q3	Avg.	Q1	Q2	Q3	Avg.
Asian	87%	81%	76%	81%	77%	71%	72%	73%	70%	65%	89%	68%
Black	75%	74%	70%	73%	65%	63%	70%	66%	55%	56%	60%	57%
Filipino	90%	83%	79%	84%	79%	71%	75%	75%	71%	68%	70%	70%
Hispanic	85%	82%	77%	81%	74%	68%	73%	72%	68%	60%	65%	64%
Indigenous	75%	77%	63%	72%	75%	57%	67%	66%	67%	62%	70%	66%
Pacific Islander	89%	82%	74%	82%	79%	69%	77%	75%	68%	67%	74%	69%
Two or more	86%	80%	77%	81%	73%	66%	74%	71%	65%	66%	67%	66%
White	86%	81%	78%	82%	75%	67%	75%	72%	70%	64%	70%	68%
Overall	84%	80%	74%	79%	75%	67%	73%	71%	67%	63%	68%	66%

APPENDIX B

SES School Connectedness Measures by iSTAR Incident Type

Physically Violent Incidents

Table B1. Percent of Students Who Agreed to School Connectedness Measures, by Level of Physically Violent Incident Rates and School Level

School Phys. Violent Incident Rate	School Connectedness Questions:											
	Happy to be at their school (Agree)				Feel a part of their school (Agree)				Feel close to people at school (Agree)			
	ES	MS	HS	Overall	ES	MS	HS	Overall	ES	MS	HS	Overall
Below Avg	86%	74%	69%	76%	82%	68%	61%	70%	77%	73%	66%	72%
Above Avg	83%	73%	65%	73%	80%	67%	60%	68%	75%	72%	63%	70%
PP Difference ^a	3**	1**	4**	3**	2**	1	1**	2**	2**	1*	3**	2**

^a Here, PP is an abbreviation for percentage point; ** $p \leq 0.001$; * $p \leq 0.05$

Suicidal Ideation Incidents

Table B2. Percent of Students Who Agreed to School Connectedness Measures, by Level of Suicidal Ideation Rates and School Level

School Suicidal Ideation Rate	School Connectedness Questions:											
	Happy to be at their school (Agree)				Feel a part of their school (Agree)				Feel close to people at school (Agree)			
	ES	MS	HS	Overall	ES	MS	HS	Overall	ES	MS	HS	Overall
Below Avg	85%	74%	67%	75%	81%	68%	60%	69%	77%	74%	65%	72%
Above Avg	84%	73%	68%	74%	81%	68%	61%	69%	76%	71%	65%	70%
PP Difference ^a	1**	1**	-1**	1**	0**	0	-1*	0	1**	3**	0	2**

^a Here, PP is an abbreviation for percentage point; ** $p \leq 0.001$; * $p \leq 0.05$

Illegal or Controlled Substance Incidents

Table B3. Percent of Students Who Agreed to School Connectedness Measures, by Level of Illegal or Controlled Substance Rates and School Level

School Illegal/ Controlled Substance Rate	School Connectedness Questions:											
	Happy to be at their school (Agree)				Feel a part of their school (Agree)				Feel close to people at school (Agree)			
	ES	MS	HS	Overall	ES	MS	HS	Overall	ES	MS	HS	Overall
Below Avg	85%	74%	67%	75%	81%	68%	60%	70%	77%	73%	65%	72%
Above Avg	83%	72%	69%	73%	79%	67%	62%	67%	75%	71%	65%	69%
PP Difference ^a	2**	2**	-2**	2**	2**	1*	-2**	3**	2**	2**	0	3**

^a Here, PP is an abbreviation for percentage point; ** $p \leq 0.001$; * $p \leq 0.05$

Inappropriate Sexual Behavior or Sex Crime Incidents

Table B4. Percent of Students Who Agreed to School Connectedness Measures, by Level of Inappropriate Sexual Behavior or Sex Crimes Rate and School Level

School Inappropriate Sexual Behavior or Sex Crime Rate	School Connectedness Questions:											
	Happy to be at their school (Agree)				Feel a part of their school (Agree)				Feel close to people at school (Agree)			
	ES	MS	HS	Overall	ES	MS	HS	Overall	ES	MS	HS	Overall
Below Avg	85%	74%	68%	76%	81%	68%	61%	70%	76%	73%	66%	72%
Above Avg	84%	73%	67%	73%	81%	68%	60%	68%	77%	72%	64%	69%
PP Difference ^a	1**	1*	1**	3**	0**	0*	1**	2**	1	1**	2**	3**

^a Here, PP is an abbreviation for percentage point; ** $p \leq 0.001$; * $p \leq 0.05$

APPENDIX C

SES Bullying Measures

Table C1. SES Bullying Items

Question	Bullying Type	Item (During the last 12 months, how many times on school property have...)	Question Given To		
			ES	MS	HS
14	Rumors Spread	"I have had mean rumors or lies spread about me"	✓	✓	✓
15	Body Image	"I have been teased about what my body looks like"	✓	✓	✓
16	[Made fun of the] Way I Talk	"I have been made fun of because of my looks or the way I talk"	✓	✓	✓
17	Physical	"I have been pushed, shoved, slapped, hit, or kicked by someone who wasn't just kidding around"	✓	✓	✓
18	Sexual	"I have had sexual jokes, comments, or gestures made to me"		✓	✓
19	Online	"I have been bullied online"	✓	✓	✓

Note: SES bullying responses ranged from never to four or more times. The IAU sorted responses into two groups: *Infrequently*—which included "Never" and "Only once"—or *Frequently*—which included "Two or three times" and "Four or more."

Table C2. Percent of Elementary School Students Who Reported Frequent Bullying (Two or More Times), by Race/Ethnicity and Bullying Type

Race/Ethnicity	Rumors Spread	Body Image	Way I Talk	Physical	Online
Asian	26%	18%	17%	26%	6%
Black	43%	30%	29%	39%	10%
Filipino	24%	15%	16%	24%	8%
Hispanic	30%	20%	17%	24%	7%
Indigenous	37%	26%	17%	33%	8%
Pacific Islander	32%	20%	17%	26%	6%
Two or more	30%	17%	18%	27%	5%
White	31%	18%	17%	28%	7%
Overall	31%	20%	18%	26%	7%

Note: This table presents the average percent of students who responded "2 or 3" or "4 or more" to questions 14-19 on the SES.

Table C3. Percent of Middle School Students Who Reported Frequent Bullying (Two or More Times), by Race/Ethnicity and Bullying Type

Race/Ethnicity	Rumors Spread	Body Image	Way I Talk	Physical	Sexual	Online
Asian	23%	18%	21%	15%	16%	5%
Black	32%	26%	28%	22%	21%	6%
Filipino	23%	20%	22%	14%	18%	5%
Hispanic	23%	19%	17%	15%	13%	4%
Indigenous	32%	22%	23%	15%	26%	6%
Pacific Islander	26%	22%	19%	18%	15%	4%
Two or more	26%	20%	20%	17%	21%	5%
White	26%	21%	21%	17%	19%	6%
Overall	24%	19%	19%	16%	15%	5%

Note: This table presents the average percent of students who responded “2 or 3” or “4 or more” to questions 14-19 on the SES.

Table C4. Percent of High School Students Who Reported Frequent Bullying (Two or More Times), by Race/Ethnicity and Bullying Type

Race/Ethnicity	Rumors Spread	Body Image	Way I Talk	Physical	Sexual	Online
Asian	15%	13%	17%	5%	13%	4%
Black	22%	19%	24%	8%	22%	5%
Filipino	18%	16%	20%	6%	16%	5%
Hispanic	17%	13%	14%	6%	13%	4%
Indigenous	26%	14%	16%	7%	18%	5%
Pacific Islander	22%	15%	20%	4%	20%	4%
Two or more	19%	15%	21%	7%	21%	6%
White	20%	17%	20%	6%	20%	5%
Overall	18%	14%	16%	6%	14%	4%

Note: This table presents the average percent of students who responded “2 or 3” or “4 or more” to questions 14-19 on the SES.

Table C5. Percent of Students Who Reported Frequent Bullying (Two or More Times), by Level of Suicidal Ideation Rate

Suicidal Ideation Rate	Rumors Spread	Body Image	Way I Talk	Physical	Sexual	Online
Below Avg	24%	18%	18%	15%	15%	5%
Above Avg	24%	18%	17%	16%	14%	5%
PP Difference ^a	0*	0	1	-1*	1**	0

^aHere, PP is an abbreviation for percentage point; ** $p \leq 0.001$; * $p \leq 0.05$

Note: This table presents the average percent of students who responded “2 or 3” or “4 or more” to questions 14-19 on the SES.