

REPORT

ELEVATING YOUTH VOICE IN SCHOOL SAFETY

July-November 2024

Presented by the Vermont Agency of Education, Vermont School Safety Center, and UP for Learning



Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning



VERMONT

**AGENCY OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY**

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Introduction

Students as Partners in the Work of School Safety

Ensuring safe and secure schools is a shared responsibility at every level. It is work that brings together school staff, administrators, agency leaders, emergency first responders and local emergency management professionals around the common goal of keeping students safe. Students are the beneficiaries of those efforts, but also have much to offer through their lived experiences and critical perspectives.

Elevating Youth Voice in School Safety originated from the recognition that students are key partners in the work of school safety. The project seeks to learn about how school safety policies and procedures have impacted students in their day-to-day lives; to hear students' concerns, thoughts and perspectives about school safety efforts in their schools; and to explore how to create shared ownership and trust around supporting safe schools.

To hear from a wide range of youth throughout Vermont, this project included two central components: Youth School Safety Dialogues and a Youth Survey on School Safety. The findings and outcomes of these two elements guided a presentation for the 2024 Governor's School Safety Conference and the content of this report. With the hopes of sharing this work widely and engaging more youth and adults in these collaborative conversations, this report includes [short films documenting the dialogues](#), as well as a [dialogue guide](#) to support on-going conversations.

UP for Learning held eight Youth School Safety Dialogues with a total of 122 participants from June through September 2024. The dialogues were designed and facilitated by Youth Program Specialists working with UP for Learning, along with the support of UP's adult staff. Each dialogue event lasted ~90 minutes, and included small-group structured activities to support participants in exploring topics and expressing their thoughts.

The Vermont Youth Survey on School Safety is a 30-question survey for 9th-12th grade students developed by the project partners with support from the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies. The survey covers topics including youth perceptions of and experiences with safety and security, emergency drills, trusted adults, and incident reporting. Over 1,450 Vermont students completed the survey in September 2024.



Engaging Youth in School Safety Benefits Everyone

Beyond merely listening, the work of these dialogues and survey serves to build a practice of working with students on all aspects of school safety.

This collaborative approach doesn't just enhance safety—it transforms school culture into one of shared responsibility and partnership. Working in true partnership with young people brings tremendous benefits for both youth and adults, including:

Shared Ownership: When students are included in critical conversations, they take an active role in shaping their own safety and well-being—and that of their peers. This sense of ownership fosters responsibility and engagement.

Fresh Insights and Creative Solutions: Youth often bring a fresh perspective, offering innovative ideas that might not occur to adults. Their input can lead to creative, practical solutions that better meet the unique needs of the school and its community.

Representation and Inclusion: Students' diverse backgrounds and experiences provide critical perspectives for shaping inclusive safety policies. Partnering with them helps ensure that every voice is considered, and policies are reflective of the entire student body.

Collaboration and Trust: Involving students in decision-making creates a culture of mutual trust and support between students and school staff. When young people feel genuinely heard, they're more likely to provide feedback and approach school safety procedures with a positive, collaborative mindset.

Empowerment and Leadership: When young people are part of the process, they gain a sense of purpose and leadership. Empowered students become champions of positive change, advocating for safer, more inclusive school environments for everyone.

Vermont School Safety Context

In 2016, the Vermont School Safety Center was formed in collaboration with Vermont's Agency of Education and Department of Public Safety. The focus of this partnership has been to ensure all students and staff are provided with a safe and secure educational environment. Additionally in 2023 the Vermont legislature implemented Act 29 which provided several new requirements, now required by Vermont State Statute, including the following:

- All schools must now lock all exterior doors during the academic day and have a centralized location for visitor sign-in.
- All schools must develop and implement a Behavioral Threat Assessment team.
- All schools are required to conduct a series of school safety drills, including both Fire/Egress and Response to Violent Intruder drills, during the academic year and report their completion to the Agency of Education.
- All schools must develop an all-hazards focused emergency operations plan.

- Much of this work has been conducted by school teams, first responders and emergency management professionals. To strengthen those efforts, leaders at the Vermont School Safety Center, Department of Public Safety, and Agency of Education recognized the importance of working with Vermont students.

About UP for Learning

UP for Learning’s mission is to empower youth and adults to reimagine and transform education together.

Through a coaching and facilitation process grounded in youth-adult partnership, UP helps teams develop essential skills to address complex challenges. These skills include using data to find common ground, practicing deep listening, amplifying unheard voices, and incorporating diverse perspectives to better understand issues.

The organization fosters equitable, cross-generational relationships where youth and adults share power, voice, and responsibility, resulting in increased equity, a sense of purpose, and lasting systemic change.

UP for Learning’s partnerships with school-based, district-wide, and regional teams empower youth to drive change in their lives and communities. UP for Learning’s youth and adult staff worked with the Vermont Agency of Education, Vermont Department of Public Safety, and the Vermont School Safety Center to plan, implement, and share this work, Elevating Youth Voice in School Safety.

School Safety Dialogues

Planned in Partnership Between Youth and Adults

The Youth School Safety Dialogues were planned by a group of youth and adults working as partners. Development of the agenda began in June of 2024, when a youth and adult team from UP for Learning met to brainstorm questions relevant to school safety and started to develop an agenda for the dialogues. This conversation included initial thoughts about key activities, length, norms, and other elements to include.

Following this brainstorming session, two of UP’s Youth Program Specialists held a facilitator meeting with other youth facilitators, to review and refine the agenda and further hone the dialogue questions.

Once the list of proposed questions and first draft of the agenda were finalized internally at UP for Learning, they were shared with the partners at the Agency of Education, Department of Public Safety, and the School Crisis Planning Team for their feedback and additions. Through this process, the final list of questions reflected the insights of youth and adults alike.

Agenda Overview

The key components of the dialogues included a welcome and introduction, community building, a written Chalk Talk activity, and small-group Circle Conversations. Each dialogue lasted roughly an hour and a half.

- 1. Welcome and Introduction:** Facilitators introduced themselves and read aloud an overview of the project from the AOE about the background and history of the project to contextualize the dialogues for the participants. The group (facilitators and participants) collectively read and reflected on the poem, “An Invitation to Brave Space” by Beth Strano, adapted by Mickey Scott Bey Jones. This reading led us into establishing shared norms for our time together to ensure that everyone felt welcome in the conversation. The facilitators also typically led one or two community-building activities throughout the dialogue.
- 2. Chalk Talk Protocol:** In planning, it was established that including various methods for participation was key to ensuring high engagement, so two distinct approaches were taken to data collection. The first of these is the Chalk Talk protocol. In this activity, participants were broken into small groups and rotated through eight stations, each with a question written on chart paper. Participants had several minutes to write their responses to the questions and interact with other people’s answers through arrows, drawings, and check marks before moving to the next station. At the end, each group returned to their original station to review what was written and to identify big themes.
- 3. Circle Conversations:** Following the Chalk Talk protocol, the participants were split up into small groups for circle conversations. Groups sat in circles around the room, each facilitated by at least one UP Youth Program Specialist and supported by an adult notetaker. Before beginning, facilitators revisited the norms introduced a talking piece (a tangible object that helps keep the focus on one speaker at a time). After each question was asked, the talking piece was passed around, allowing everyone the opportunity to respond or pass. Based on time, the participants responded to 6-8 questions.



Want to Hold a Safety Dialogue in your own school?

[Access UP for Learning’s facilitation guide!](#)

Data Collection and Documentation

Chalk Talk Questions

1. What does it mean to you to feel safe at school? What does it look like, feel like, and sound like to be safe at school?
2. What are the conditions at school that create a safe environment?
3. What is the impact that school safety has on your learning?
4. If you heard about a potential act of violence (either self harm or against others), what would you do? What would you be concerned about?
5. What is your expectation of how school administrators and school staff should be following up with students after an issue related to safety?
6. What could your school do to make you or your peers feel more likely to report something to a trusted adult?
7. What are the qualities and characteristics of a trusted adult?
8. What are things that would help you report something to a trusted adult?

UP for Learning partnered with filmmaker [Ned Castle and Frames to Life](#) to record four of the dialogues and share this work. Hear from the facilitators and participants in [this seven minute overview video](#).

Circle Conversation Questions

1. What does it mean to you to feel safe at school?
2. Would you share a story about when you did feel safe at school? Why did you feel safe in that situation?
3. Would you share a story about a time where you did not feel safe at school? Why did you not feel safe in that situation? And what got you through it? What resources or which adults did you turn to?
4. Is there an SRO or law enforcement officer in your school? How does their presence make you feel? What has your interaction with that person been like?
5. As students, you have experienced restricted access, safety drills, and other precautions throughout your life at school. How do these measures play into your sense of safety in school?
6. What do adults not know or what are they seeing when it comes to school safety?

Youth School Safety Survey

To reach a larger group of youth in Vermont, the project included the development and administration of the Vermont Youth Survey on School Safety, a 30-question survey for 9th-12th grade students. Like the dialogue questions, the survey was developed by the youth and adult staff at UP for Learning alongside the VT Agency of Education and the

Vermont Department of Public Safety. UP for Learning partnered with the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont to support the development, administration, and analysis of the survey.

Overview of Survey Questions

The survey questions focused on youth perceptions of and experiences with safety and security, emergency drills, trusted adults, and incident reporting. It also asked students to reflect on and provide suggestions for the implementation of school safety measures.

- The survey's first seven items consisted of Likert-scale questions designed to assess how safe students felt in various locations and times within their school, such as hallways, the lunchroom, and bathrooms.
- Questions 8-19 ask respondents about their ability to share safety information with adults in their school, including whether they have a 'trusted adult', who that person is, and how likely they are to report a threat of violence if they saw or heard about it.
- Questions 20-30 asked about respondent familiarity and experiences with emergency response procedures and drills in their school, including how they get information during and after incidents.
- The survey also asked for demographic information, including students' race and ethnicity, grade level, gender identity, and whether they identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community

Want to use the survey at your own school?

[View the complete list of survey questions below!](#)

Survey Outreach

The survey was advertised to schools throughout Vermont. UP for Learning worked with 8 schools that administered the survey to large groups of students. Other respondents accessed the survey independently, as it was shared through the AOE's Weekly Field Memo, social media and with UP for Learning's youth interns.



Dialogue and Survey Sites

Dialogues held in:

Burlington, Fair Haven, Hyde Park, Lyndon, Montpelier, Rutland, St. Albans, and online.

Strong survey participation at:

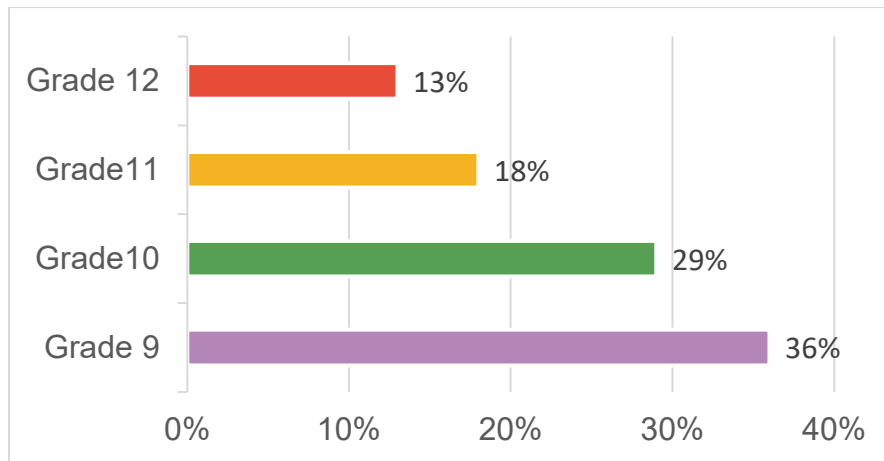
Burr and Burton, Colchester, Leland and Gray, Mt. Abraham, North Country, Otter Valley, South Burlington, and Vergennes Union.

Overall Participation

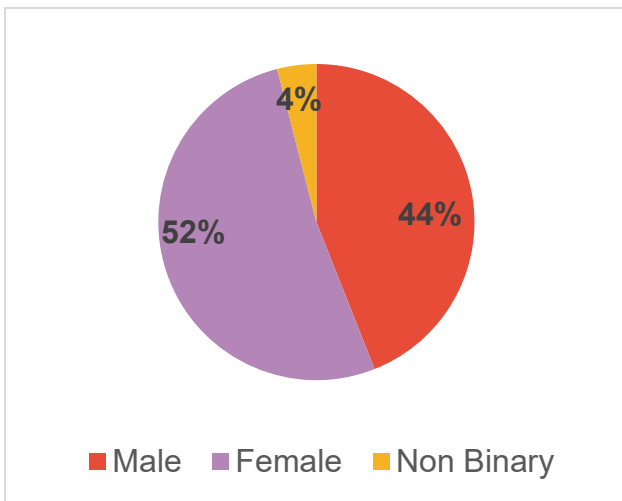
- 122 students participated in eight dialogues
- 1456 students responded to the survey, with high participation in eight schools
- Through both the survey and the dialogues, participation represented 10 of Vermont's 14 counties.

Participation and Demographics

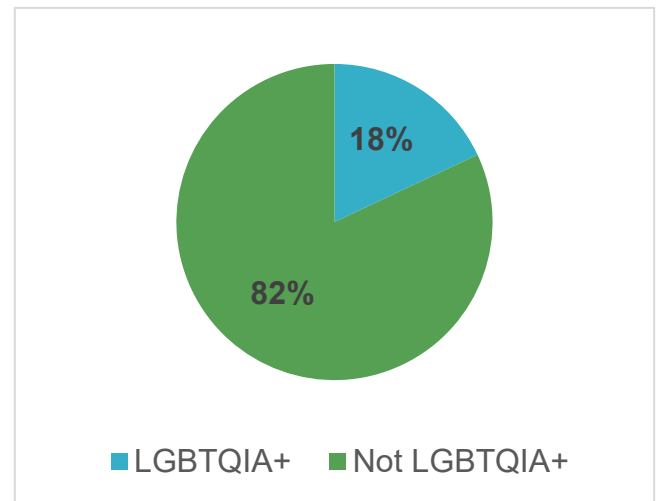
Survey Response Rate by Grade



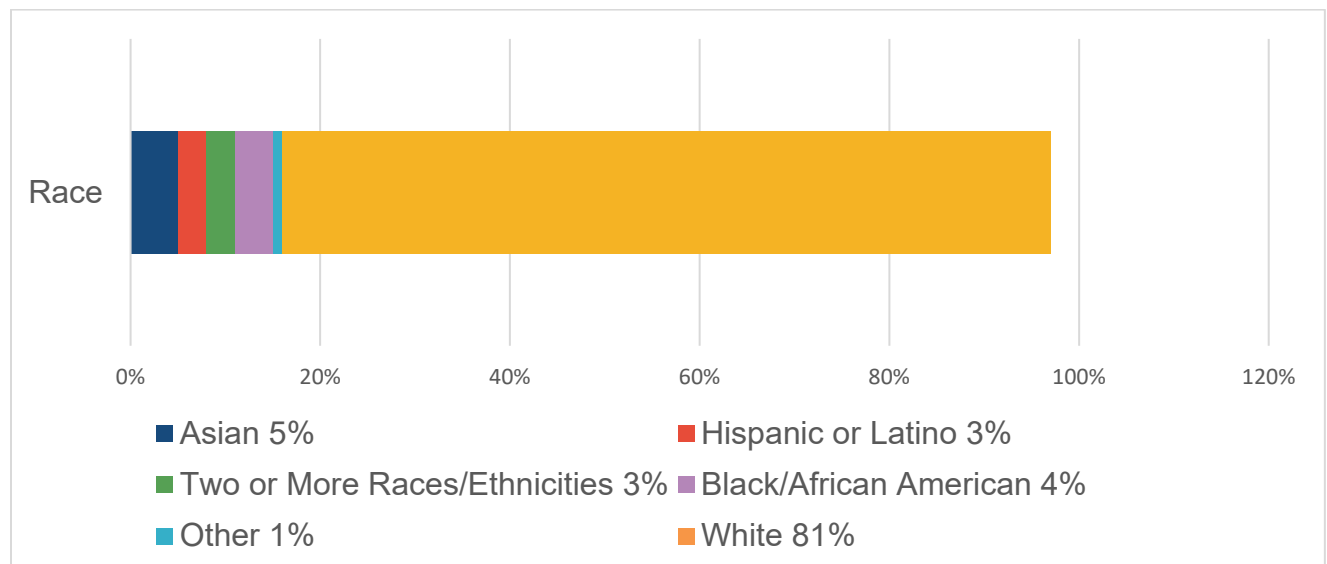
Response Rate by Gender



Response Rate by Sexual Orientation



Response Rate by Race



Findings

Data Analysis Overview

A team of three youth and three adults from UP for Learning worked to organize and analyze the information collected from the dialogues and survey. In a series of collaborative meetings, the team coded the Chalk Talk and Circle Conversation responses and then grouped those codes to identify common emergent themes. We then categorized those themes into six focus areas.

Those focus areas and themes are presented in the following pages, supported by direct quotes from the dialogues, relevant data from the survey, and film clips featuring the dialogue participants in their own voices.

Focus Area 1: What Helps Students Feel Safe at School?

Focus Area 2: What are student’s experiences with drills, school resource officers, and other school safety measures?

Focus Area 3: What Makes a “Trusted Adult”?

Focus Area 4: What Helps Students Report Threats or Incidents?

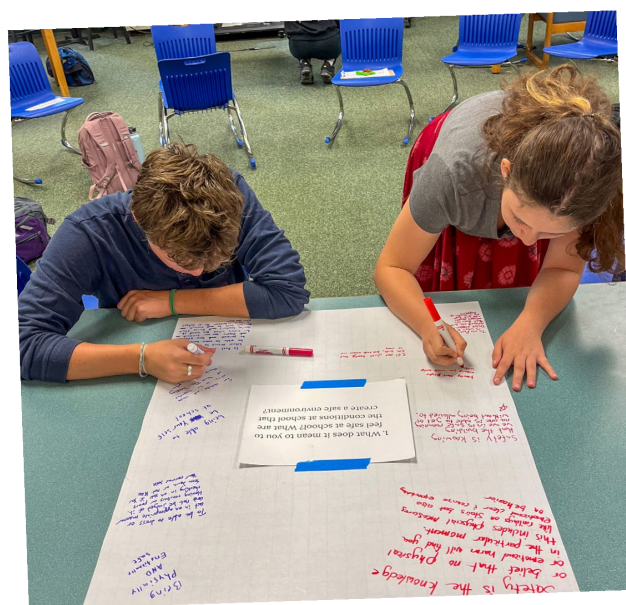
Focus Area 5: How Can Schools Best Communicate with Students Following Incidents?

Focus Area 1: What Helps Students Feel Safe at School?

Students feel safe at school when they are connected with caring, trusted adults, when they are connected with friends, when they are able to show up as their authentic self, and when they can go to school free from worry about threats. The responses in this section come from a series of dialogue questions which asked students to share stories about times they felt safe and unsafe in school.

Theme 1: Students feel safe when they are connected with a caring, trusted adult.

- “In my junior year I had a panic attack, and this teacher helped me de-escalate. That is the safest I’ve ever felt here.”
- “I feel safe when I am with this teacher who cares about me and my education and goes to great lengths to let me know she cares.”
- “One teacher who I really liked made me feel safe because she genuinely cared. It



was clear that she was not just doing it for the paycheck. I get that feeling too from my peers, because I know that they genuinely care about me.”

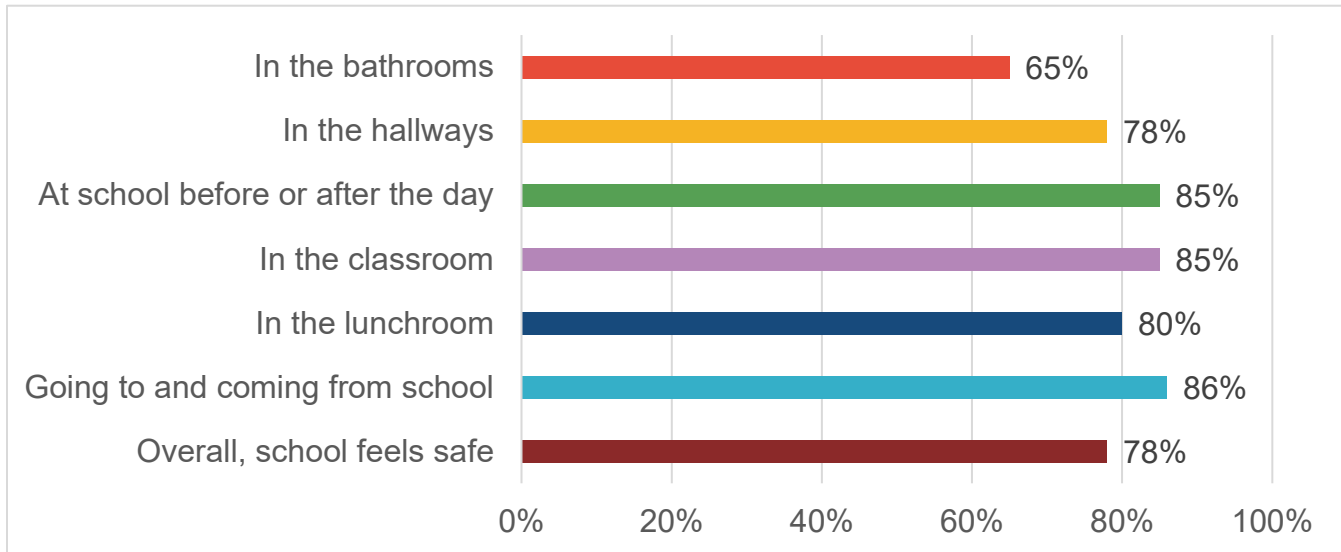
- “I had a teacher who would check in with every single student, and who asked them about something specific about them from the last time he talked with them.”
- “Having those connections with teachers, so you know that they care about you.”
- “Having adults that I can talk to, and who will take care of my concerns when I come to them.”
- “Knowing that I have staff in my corner who care about my education and well-being.”
- “The teacher was telling us what to do and made sure we were all there and all OK. Other adults came into the room and reassured us. They were just helpful and in control.”
- “My teacher is very casual and is constantly sitting down and chatting with students – It is not a stereotypical teacher thing, but it really helps students feel safe.”

Theme 2: Students feel safe when they are connected with friends.

- “There was a lockdown drill when we were in chorus. There are a lot of kids in my class, but I was right next to my best friend, so that made me feel safe.”
- “Safety means knowing that there are people there for you (teachers or peers), and not having to worry about harm to yourself.”
- [I feel safe] “whenever I am in class with people I know.”
- “Having teachers or peers checking in on you if you seem down or not like your normal self.”
- [I feel safe] “when I’m surrounded by friends and people that I know and trust – I know them as people and I know that they aren’t going to do anything.”
- “Just a community – You feel safer when you have friends and teachers who are there for you.”
- “There have been times I’ve felt unsafe in school, but having my partner around makes me feel safe in school 100% because they always have my back. There are teachers that do that, but having that student-based support is really important.”
- “The most unsafe I’ve felt at school was when I was recorded. Both of those times, I had someone looking out for me, I had a student tell me, because I didn’t see it. That means so much to have students looking out for the students around them.”

Where Students Feel Safest

(Respondents Selected “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” when asked if they feel safe)



Theme 3: Students feel safe when they are able to show up as their authentic self, free from worry about threats and bullying

- “When you walk in, you can feel like you can be your authentic self and you don’t need to hide anything.”
- [You feel safe when you can] “be open and be yourself, share your opinions.”
- [I feel safe when] “people around me accept me and will help me if I need it.”
- “Knowing that you always have a safe space to go if you ever don’t feel safe or just need someone to talk to.”
- “To feel safe at school means to be able to come here and be yourself and have spaces and people you can connect to in times when you need it.”
- “To walk into the building and feel effortless about it. Not having days where you feel like you can’t go to school.”
- “Sense of community, feeling like I belong, feeling like I can be authentically me within that space.”
- “It means that everyone is welcome, there are friendly interactions, positive words being used and it feels natural. School should feel natural.”
- “Feeling seen and heard, that you matter, that you won’t be picked on.”
- “Safety is an act of respect: Knowing that I can come in and be respected and not be bullied.”
- “Not being scared of any physical threats, that you can trust the adults to take care of you.”
- “Not be bound by how you may be ridiculed physically or mentally.”

- “To me, feeling safe at school involves both physical and social and emotional aspects. Not being worried about another student or someone else hurting you is important.”

In Their Voices: [Watch this video](#) of dialogue participants share stories about times when they felt safe and unsafe in school.



Focus Area 2: What are students’ experiences with safety drills and other school safety measures?

Students’ experiences with and perceptions of safety drills and school resource officers (SROs) are varied and diverse. What students shared during the dialogues and in the survey does not point to any one approach, but rather highlights the need for intentionality and communication around whatever approaches are in place

Theme 1: Participants said that feeling safe at school is important to be able to learn.

- “If a person doesn’t feel safe at school they will not be as productive or able to focus on learning. Feeling safe at school not just physically but also mentally means that you will be able to participate.”
- “It’s very hard to focus if the idea
- of danger is always on your mind, if I can focus 100% on my work I will learn better.”

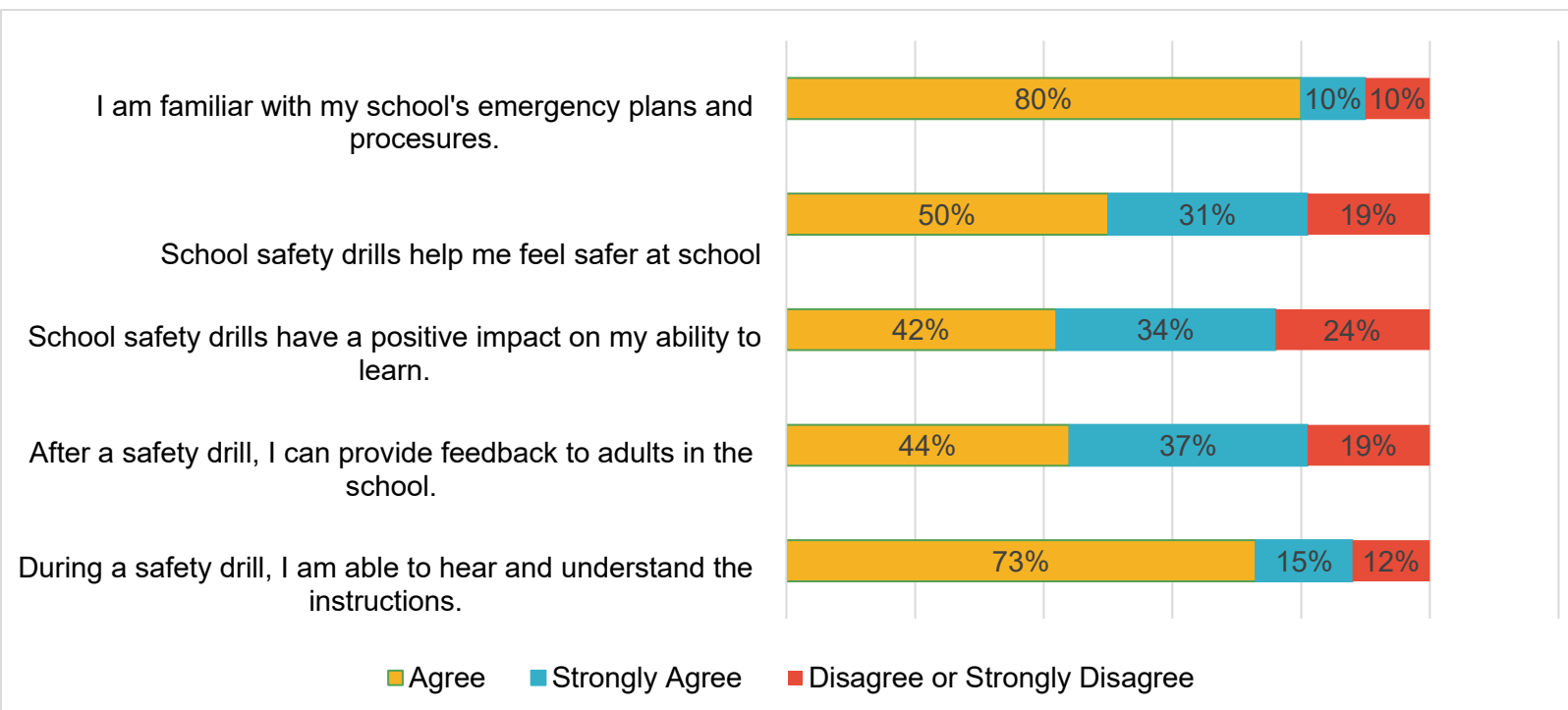


- “I find it hard to focus or thoughtfully contribute when I have concerns about my safety because it feels more pressing.”
- “Knowing I’m safe in school helps me be able to focus on my learning and not have to worry about the bad things.”
- “If I don’t have to worry a lot and feel safe I can focus much better.”
- “Knowing you are safe at school makes it easier to share personal thoughts, knowledge, and opinions that allows others to learn from you and you to learn from others.”

Theme 2: Students’ experiences with drills were mixed. Some students felt safer, others felt anxious, and some students questioned their efficacy.

- “They make me feel a little bit like we aren’t learning what to do if something happens, if someone gets into the room. We don’t know what we should do if there is a situation that happens.”
- “The drills for lockdowns make me nervous cause all we are doing is hiding in a corner and not learning to push back.”
- “I feel safer knowing that everyone knows what to do and teachers will know what to do to keep us safe.”
- “I don’t think they hold the same gravity that they held before. I worry about people’s ability to follow them in an emergency.”
- “I think practicing is a good thing, but not having any prior notice is scary sometimes for some kids.”
- “When they rarely happen it feels like an inconvenience during class.”
- “If you’re in lunch, you miss your lunch. If you don’t have your jacket, you can be wet or cold.”

Student Insights About School Safety Drills



In Their Voices: [Watch the video](#) of dialogue participants discussing their experiences with safety drills and emergency lockdowns

Theme 3: Students had diverse views about school resource officers (SRO) and police in schools. Some students said that having a SRO in school made them feel safer, while others noted the importance of having a SRO who had a strong connection to the community.

- “We have a lot of fights, and a lot of racism, so I think it would be good to have an SRO, but the right type of SRO.”
- “I think having [an SRO] builds a positive connection between law enforcement and the community. It would make that feeling return to safety and security, and would build positive relationships.”
- “We had one or two officers that you’d normally see, I never put too much thought into it. It seemed like a normal thing. I don’t have to worry about it, but I guess I never put too much thought into it.”
- “When I see an officer in the school, it makes me feel like there is a threat to be defended from, which makes me feel like there is some danger. Just having them there gives me an uneasy feeling in a sense.”
- if we had a safety officer, it would be beneficial to have someone who was a member of the community, so it is not just their job, but it means something to them to be here.”
- “Knowing that there was an SRO presence really made me feel safe. They are here for us. That SRO was here to protect us and had a really strong connection to us and our community.”
- “Police officers are human, and they have biases. They have a huge amount of power, and that can be used for good. When I am scared for a person’s safety, I will call the police.”

In Their Voices: [Watch the video](#) of dialogue participants discussing the impacts of school resource officers on students’ sense of safety.

Focus Area 3: What Makes a “Trusted Adult”?

Participants noted that being connected with a caring, trusted adult makes them feel safe at school. Those adults prioritize building relationships and community with students. Participants and survey respondents identified them as understanding, trustworthy, kind, caring, non-judgmental, approachable, welcoming, helpful, and good listeners. Trusted adults take many roles in schools.

Overarching Theme:

- “I definitely felt safe at the beginning of the school year, our teacher was really big on making sure our class was a community. We did icebreakers and spent time getting to know each other which was an important first step.”
- “[I feel safe] every day in personal safety class. [My teacher] is professional and casual. She jokes and will joke with you and she tells us she loves us all like a big family. Even making mistakes, everyone in that class makes me feel very warm and welcome.”
- “I feel safe in a classroom when I’m with people who are engaged in school, rather than being disinterested. It is a good connection with other people in class, and people are interested in being there.”
- “It is important to have a sense of community (in a class or in the school in general) with a sense of shared respect and shared responsibility.”
- “I have a specific teacher who really takes the time to get to know students, he just builds communities. It feels like a community, without sacrificing learning.”
- “I feel comfortable talking to this adult because he seems like a person instead of a robot. He is able to share stories with me that are similar to my own and he validates my emotions instead of brushing them off like other staff members have.”
- “Because they would hear my opinion and not just judge it because they would think I’m addicted to my phone. Instead they should listen and find a way around my concerns.”

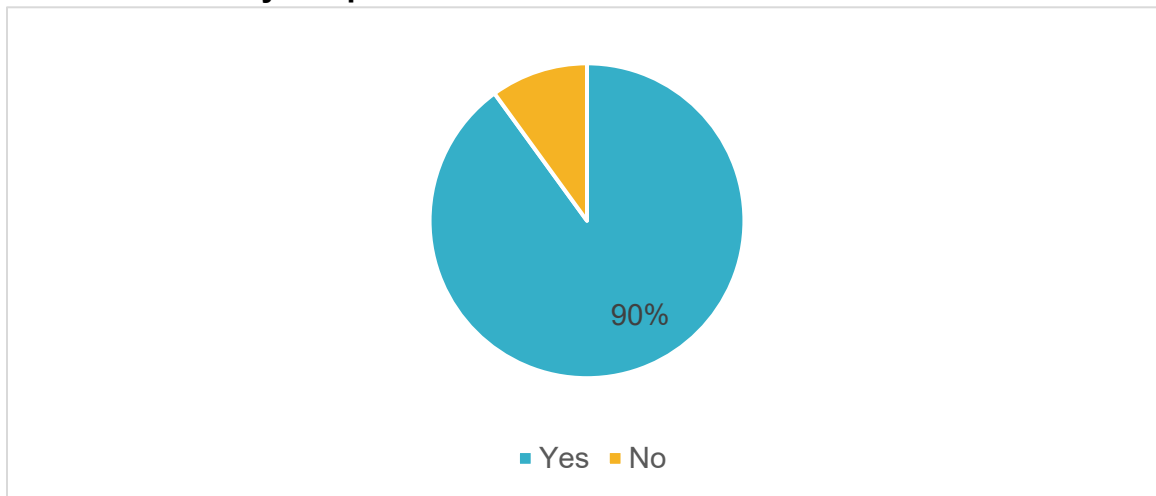
When asked about the characteristics of trusted adults, dialogue participants shared the following words:

- Understanding
- Comfortable
- Safe
- Known
- Open
- Friendly
- Relationship
- Care
- Listen
- Kind

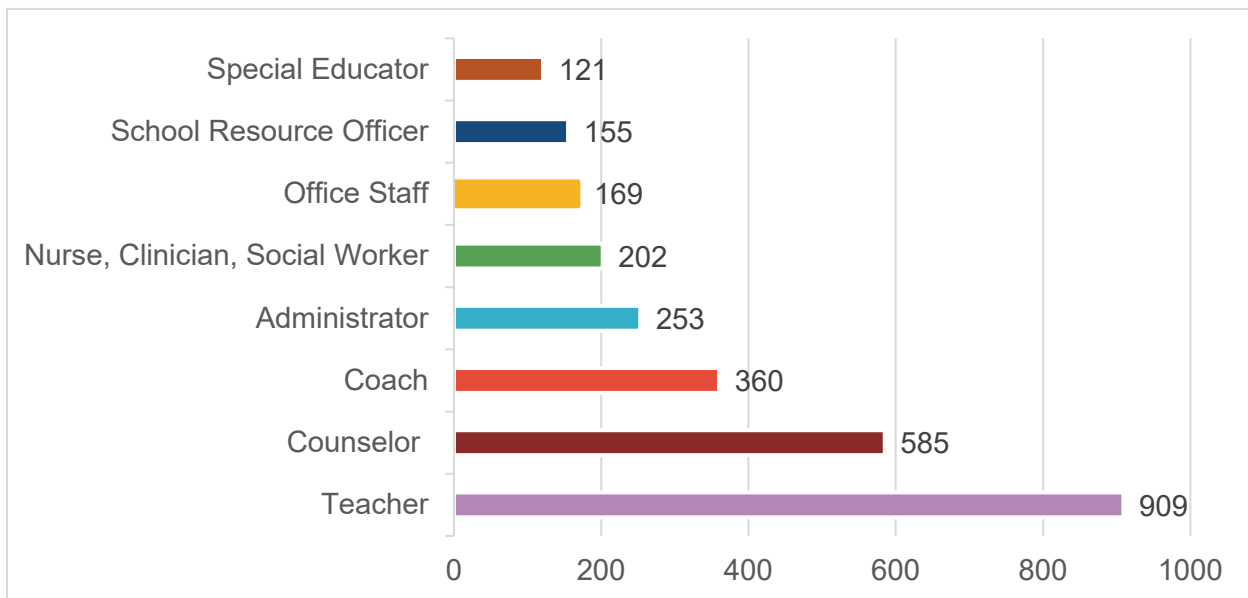
In Their Voices: [Watch the video](#) of dialogue participants discussing the characteristics of trusted adults as part of school safety.



Percent of Survey Respondents Who Have a Trusted Adult at School



Who Do Student's Talk to About Safety Concerns?



Focus Area 4: What Helps Students Report Threats or Incidents?

: Students had concrete insights about encouraging reporting of threats or incidents: Schools can work to make the reporting process clearer, provide options to report privately and anonymously, and ensure follow-through to let the student know what happened as a result of the report. Strong youth- adult relationships are the foundation of encouraging students to report things they see and hear.

Theme 1: Students want clarity about the reporting process, including what to report, whom to report it to

- “Sometimes it is hard to evaluate what you are supposed to report. When there was something big, like someone recording me, but if in passing someone says something rude to me, do I report it? Who do I talk to about

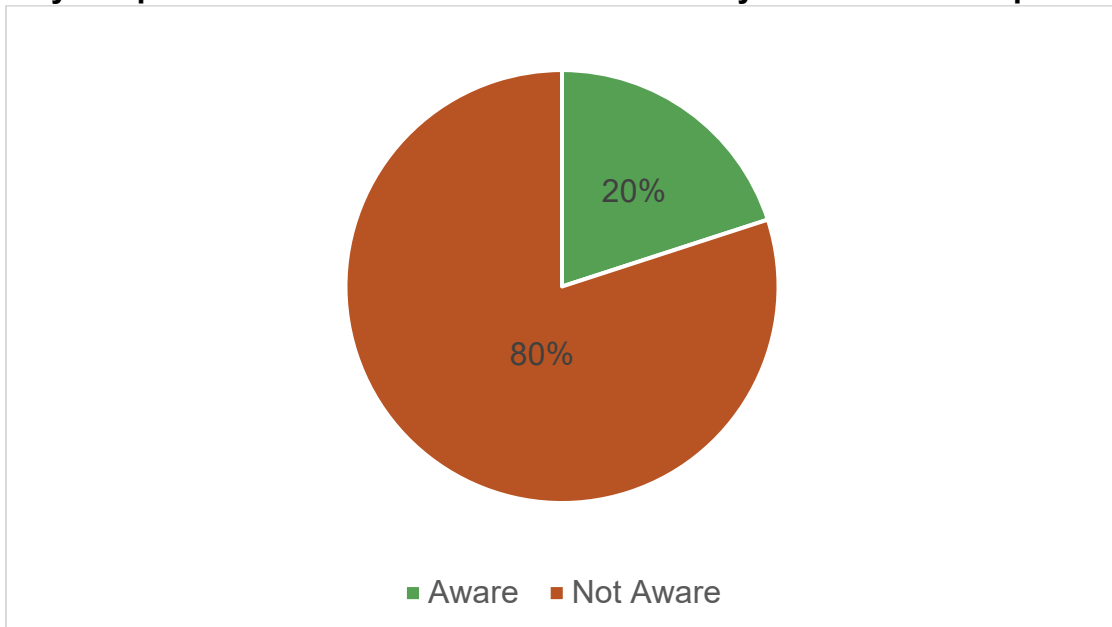
it? It is weird. You are not always 100% sure what you are supposed to report.”

- “I’ve had to report things that have happened to me in school, and teachers made me feel safe by reporting it and following up on those reports.”
- “There are a lot of missing links. While the system has been created to make people feel more safe, the process seems big and it makes me shy away from wanting to report it. It is a big thing, and that makes you not want to do it.”
- “Promote the electronic [reporting system] 100%. I probably knew it existed, but didn’t know where I would find it. On top of something happening, it is hard to go down and report it. You just didn’t want this thing to happen to you in the first place, and now you have to talk about it.”
- “What really constitutes bullying, harassment, and hazing – Do people know what constitutes this?”
- “Often when I report something, I do not know what actions, if any, were taken to prevent it from happening again.”

Theme 2: Students value the options to report in private or anonymously

- Knowing I have a safe place to talk to an adult, I still might not feel totally comfortable so I would rather email than face to face.”
- “Make an anonymous way to report things, such as paper in a box.”
- “Anonymous reporting so you can’t be judged or targeted.”
- “[Make it] easier to find a private time with people so you don’t have to report in front of others.”

Survey Respondents Who Were Aware of the Anonymous Safe4VT Tipline



To Use the Tipline: Call (844) 723 – 3448 or Text “SafeVT” to 274637

Theme 3: Students need to trust that adults will listen to them, believe them, and support them.

- “Have a space or a person to help me report something and make sure it would be taken care of.”
- “Every time I’ve gone to report something, the adult says something like they don’t believe me. Nothing is done.”
- “A nice, welcoming teacher makes everyone feel welcome and who I know will listen to me - I would feel comfortable reporting something to her.”
- “Any time a kid or other person comes to you and says something about what another kid or person did, listen and try to solve the problem.”
- “I would report something if I felt respected by the adult and felt heard.”
- “[I have] a looming threat that what I say will not be acknowledged or heard.”
- “Feeling as though my concern will not be taken seriously or just dismissed.”
- It is really important that I know something is being done and not just talking into a void. What is the point if I’m just raising a concern and nothing gets done or followed up on?”

Theme 4: Concerns about social consequences prevents students from making reports.

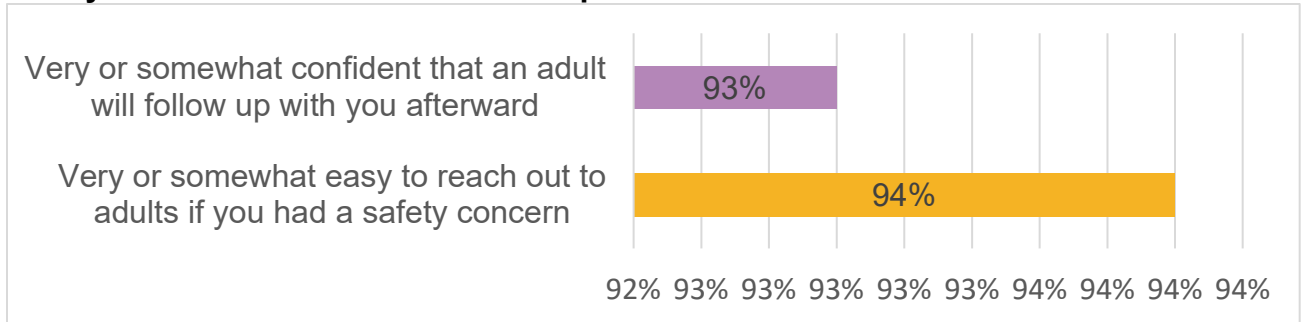
- “I fear retaliation. If something happens and you were also doing something in the wrong, you would get in trouble for doing something. When something happens at parties, it can be really dangerous and we don’t want to report it.”
- “Fear of social consequences. There is a stigma around reporting. In the domain of a student about what could go wrong when reporting, there are infinite answers.”
- “There is definitely a fear of retaliation. If you see someone vaping in the bathroom and report it, people know it was you. And teachers don’t always know the best way to respond to the problem.”
- “I worry that I’d report it and have it not be dealt with... it would just cause more trouble.”

Theme 5: Students want to know that something happened after their report.

- “The thing that is 100% making me think that I shouldn’t report something is that I feared it wouldn’t be written down, it wouldn’t be followed up on, or it wouldn’t be taken seriously. It is really important that I know that something
- is being done and not just talking into a void. What is the point if I’m just raising a concern and nothing gets done or followed up on.”
- “When we know that adults can help us, we will be more likely to report things to them.”
- “Teachers will tell you to report it and then you report it, but it feels like it goes nowhere.”

- “Often when I report something, I do not know what actions, if any, were taken to prevent it from happening again.”

Survey Respondents Who Report They Can Reach Out to an Adult with a Safety Concern and Receive Follow Up



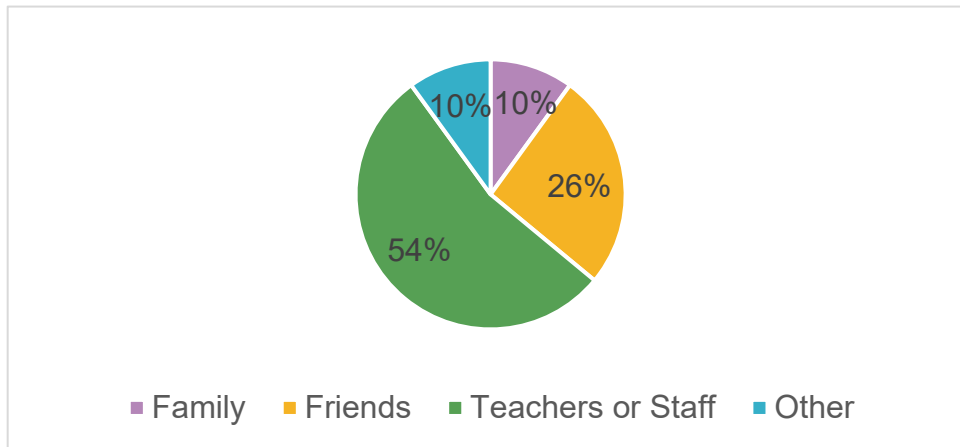
Focus Area 5: How Can Schools Best Communicate with Students Following Incidents?

During or after a school safety incident, students look to their teachers and other school staff for information. Students appreciate timely and clear communication when there is an incident related to school safety, and also expressed the need to take time to discuss incidents in small groups.

Theme 1: Students appreciate timely and clear communication when there is an incident related to school safety.

- “I think transparency during drills is really important. There is sometimes joking around, it would be helpful to know when something was a real drill and when it was a test.
- “I feel like it is better to share what has happened and the consequences than to cover it all up and not speak about it. It sends the message to other people that it is not important, or maybe that it didn’t even happen.
- “Sometimes it is important to tell the kids – It is their business if it is their safety.”
- Some of this information gets shared through other people and turns into gossip, which makes it worse, instead of better.”
- “At my school, they tell us three days after the incident, which doesn’t feel helpful.”
- “Clearer communication between staff and students. Being more open

Where Survey Respondents Go for Information About a School Safety Incident



Theme 2: Students appreciate the opportunity for open dialogue about incidents, whether local, national, or global.

- “I think small group discussions processing what happened, with groups of students that are generally connected/ comfortable with each other, helps after a threat.”
- “We have made talking about school shootings taboo. They are hard to talk about, but we need to create an environment where we can talk about challenging subjects without feeling shut down.”
- “When those three students in Burlington were shot, I didn’t hear anything.... We have a lot of immigrant students coming, and they don’t hear teachers talking about the issues that scare them like hate in their communities.”
- “We need to eliminate the sense of normalcy around school shootings. We hear about them weekly, and we never talk about them in school.”
- “Admin and teachers are scared to speak out, and don’t often know how to speak out. If they are scared to talk about school violence, then that feeling is going to trickle down to students. We need to support teachers and administrators in talking about these things. If teachers feel safer than students are going to feel safe too.”
- “In advisory, we would have circle discussions, and it collected data, and the point of them was for adults to just listen. That made most of us feel heard.”
- “I genuinely thought I was going to die, and then we barely talked about it in school afterward.”

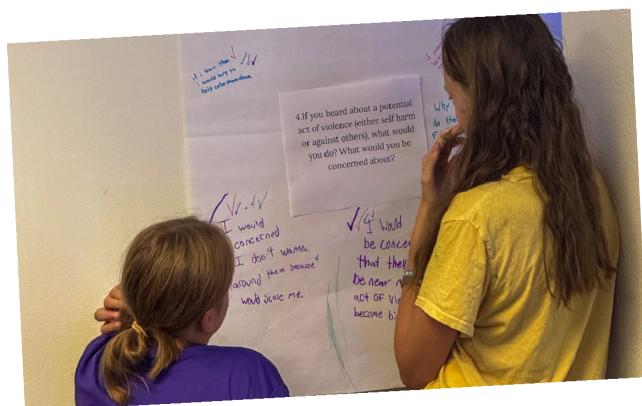
In Their Voices: [Watch the video](#) of dialogue participants discussing the importance of communication as part of school safety.

Focus Area 6: How do students' identities impact their sense of safety at school?

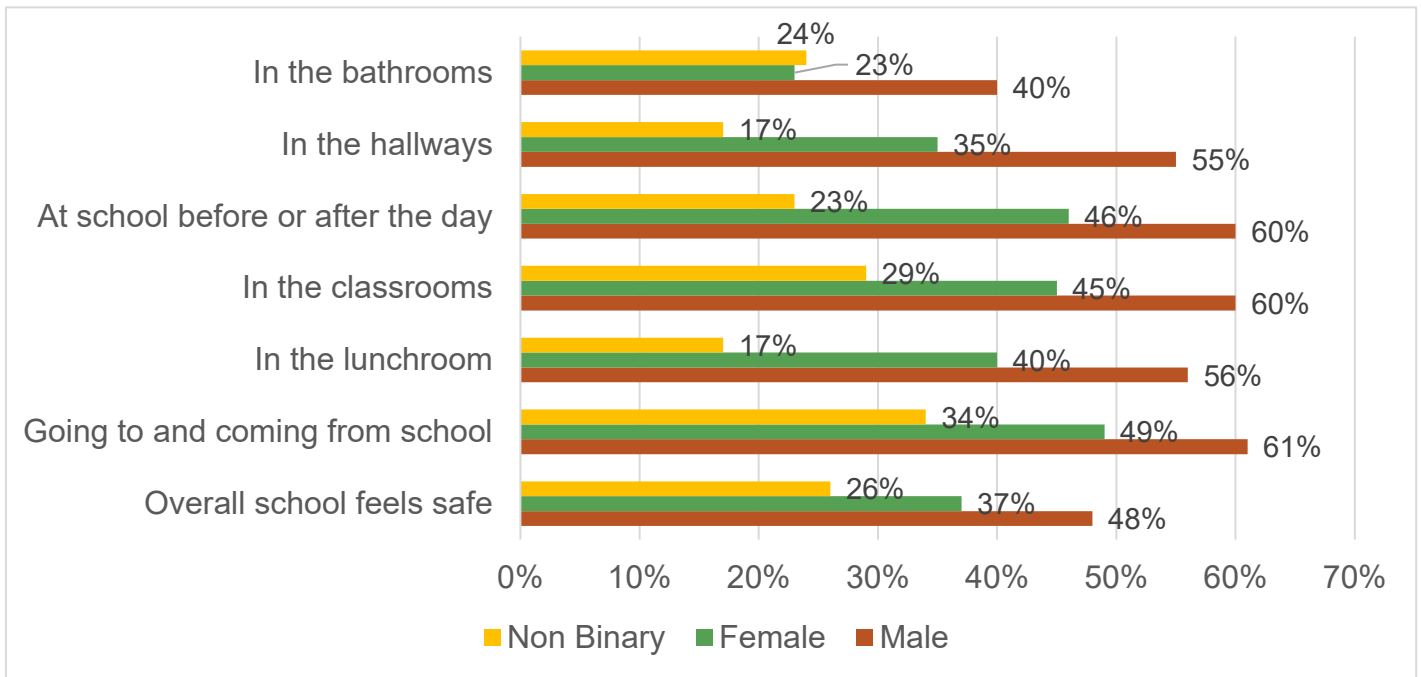
Students with historically marginalized identities feel the impact of school safety more acutely. This ranges from their experiences with safety drills and SROs, to being harassed and bullied because of their identity. The survey data reflected a lower sense of school safety among LGBTQIA+ students, Black and African American students, females, and non-binary students.

Overarching Theme: Students experienced bullying, harassment, and were generally made to feel less safe at school because of their identity.

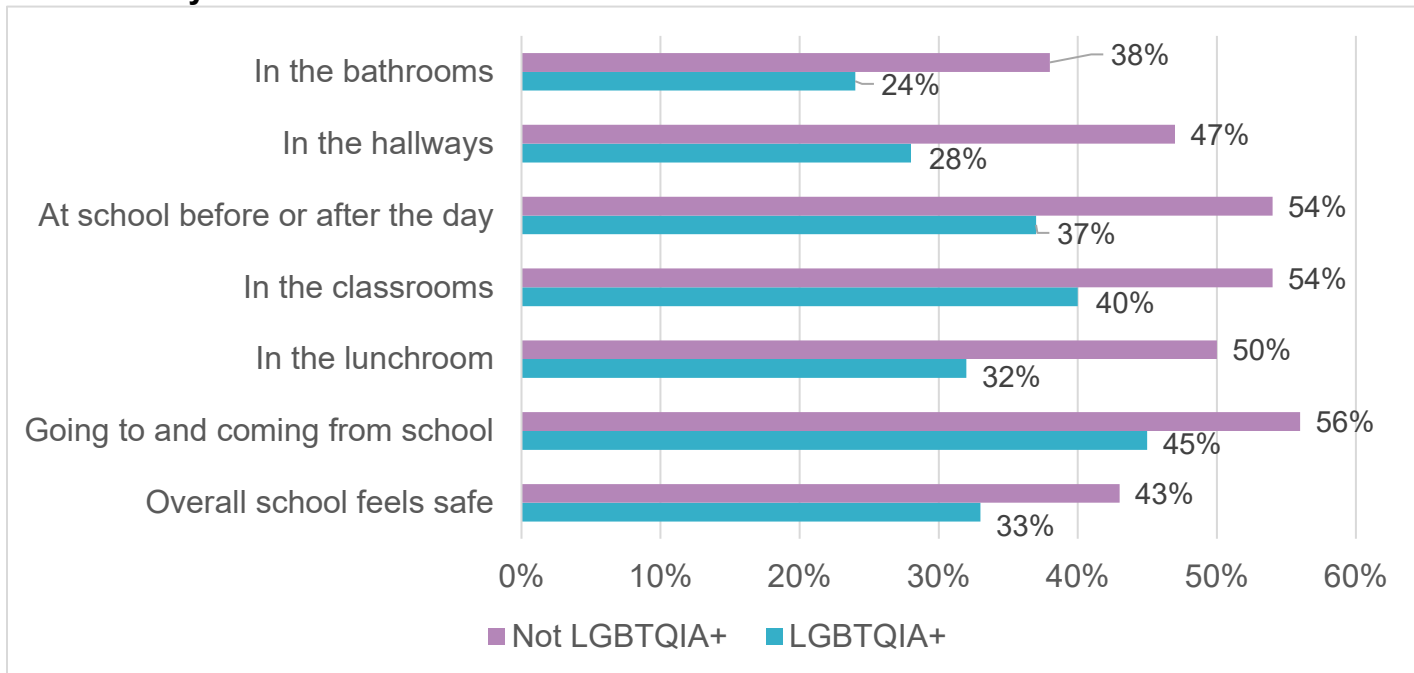
- “In the past few years, I feel like I am more on edge, I feel unsafe more often than I feel safe. I speak out about issues, so people respond. I have definitely had incidents with students where we have had difficult conversations (e.g. about our BIPOC affinity space). After speaking up about issues I definitely feel less safe. I’ve had conversations with white students that didn’t end well.”
- “I have fear about people judging me when I speak up about issues I am passionate about (especially if they are controversial).”
- “I carry a pride flag on my bag, and it is countless times I’ve been harassed about it.”
- “Political climate similarly builds that fear factor for BIPOC students. Students in the social justice club were hit with signs. Coming up to an election feels volatile.”
- “At my old school, I would wear a pride flag and get bullied for it.”
- “Students of color feel unsafe when they are just talking about their experiences. I’ve seen teachers micro-aggressing on students, questioning students’ identity... ..It takes a toll on those students’ mental health, sleep, function, on top of all the safety concerns faced by all students.”
- “Many of my friends have been targets of bullying and harassment around school – It is common to hear slurs and harassment around school which makes it particularly hard to be a queer student here.”
- “I was punched on the bus in kindergarten, and buses are my worst enemy now. I’ve had things thrown at me and have been called trans slurs. I have had big safety things happen, but the way that adults responded definitely helped my perceptions of safety.”



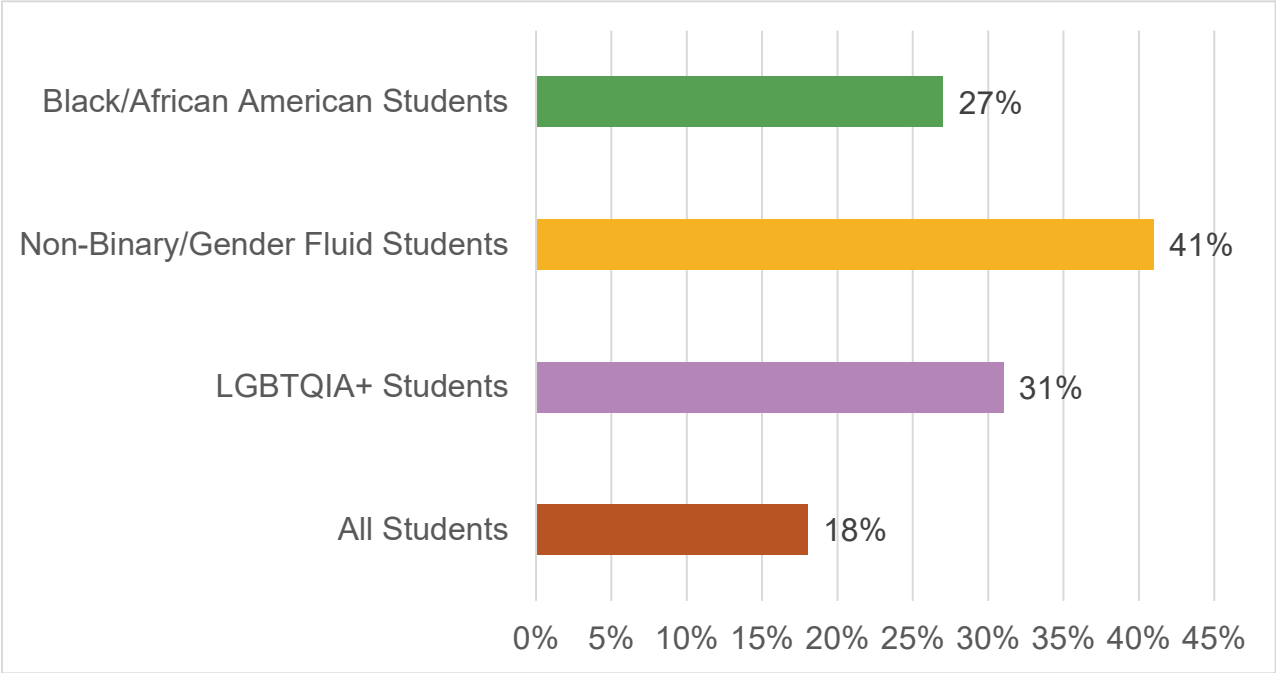
Percent of Survey Respondents By Gender Identity Who “Strongly Agreed” That They Felt Safe



Percent of Survey Respondents By Sexual Orientation Who “Strongly Agreed” That They Felt Safe



Percent of Students Who Answered “Yes” When Asked if They Have Ideas on How to Make Their School Safer



12 Action Steps for School Leaders and Policy Makers

1. Engage in schoolwide and classroom practices to build strong student-teacher relationships, including:
 - Regularly checking in with students to see how they are doing.
 - Providing opportunities for students to share their perspectives on school issues.
 - Letting students know you are someone they can share concerns with.
2. Communicate during and after drills or incidents:
 - Communicate clearly and consistently.
 - Check in with students to ask if they are OK and see what they need.
 - Ask for feedback about what could be done differently next time.
3. Publicize the anonymous SAFE4VT tip hotline and consider local options for students to make anonymous reports.
4. Recognize that not all students are impacted by school safety measures or incidents in the same ways:
 - Examine safety policies with an equity lens, considering how different groups of students may be impacted differently.
 - Ask students with marginalized identities what they suggest. Many of those
5. Make sure all staff (including special educators, coaches, substitute teachers, etc.) are familiar with school safety procedures and know how to communicate those procedures with students.
6. Share clear information about what the process is when students report concerns.
 - List what sorts of incidents should be reported to specific adults.
 - Provide options for private or electronic reporting.
 - Explain the process that adults go through upon receiving a report, including when and how they will follow up with the reporting student.
7. Build systems to ensure follow-up after they make a report:
 - Share what has happened as a result of the report and what your next steps are.
 - Ask how you can continue to support the student who made the report.
8. Maintain adult presence in lunchrooms and hallways in the morning and between classes.
9. Be as open and transparent about incidents as possible:
 - Make sure staff have the most current information about incidents – They are the first people students said they'd look to during an incident.
 - Share updates and follow-ups on incidents directly with students (in addition to community, staff and caregivers).
 - Provide opportunities for students to debrief incidents in small groups.
10. Consider how best to create safe bathroom spaces.
 - Student suggestions included: More single-stall bathrooms, ensuring that adults check in on bathrooms at regular intervals, having adults monitor the halls outside of the bathrooms, and using bathroom passes.
11. As possible, notify students and staff in advance of drills.
12. Continue to engage youth in school safety work, asking “What is it that adults don't see?” and “What can we do better?”

Youth Safety Dialogue Facilitator's Guide

Use this facilitator's agenda to guide a conversation about school safety at your own school or organization. This agenda is designed for 10-15 participants and will take about 90 minutes.

Introduction and Norms

Setup:

- A room big enough to comfortably fit all your participants moving around.
- Chairs for all participants, set up in a circle.
- Chart paper or posterboard with chalk-talk questions written out.
- Printouts of circle questions
- Markers

Introductions:

- Introduce yourself as a facilitator.
- If possible, have each member of the group introduce themselves as well.
- Share why the group is together.
- Review the group norms to set the tone.

Norms:

- Be fully present
- If you wonder, ask (ask the hard questions)
- Listen for understanding (while withhold- ing judgment)
- Support each other's learning
- Speak your truth equitably (knowing it is only part of the truth)
- Make it safe to take risks
- Invite and give gentle reminders (if any of us stray from our agreements)
- Step up/step back
- Take care of your own needs (opt out at any point if needed)
- Take the lessons, leave the stories

Chalk Talk

Setup:

Sheets of chart paper set up around the room with the questions written on them.
Markers for each participant.

Split participants into small groups and assign each a starting station, each with a question written on chart paper.

Give participants several minutes to silently write their responses to the questions and interact with other people's answers through arrows, drawings, and check marks before moving to the next station.

Groups rotate until each group returns to their original station to review what was written and to identify big themes aloud.

Chalk Talk Questions:

1. What does it mean to you to feel safe at school?
2. What are the conditions at school that create a safe environment?
3. What impact has safety had on your learning?
4. What is your expectation of how school administrators and school staff should be following up with students after an issue related to safety?
5. What are the qualities and characteristics of a trusted adult?
6. What are things that would help you report something to a trusted adult?

Circle Conversations

Setup:

- Chairs for all participants, set up in a circle.
- Printouts of circle questions.
- Note sheets (and an assigned note-taker).
- Talking piece

Based on the number, split up into small groups (6-8) for circle conversations. Sit in circles around the room, each led by one facilitator (who has a copy of this guide) and supported by a notetaker.

Before beginning, facilitators revisit the norms and introduce a talking piece (a tangible object that helps keep the focus on one speaker at a time).

Emphasize that there is no judgement about passing: Participants don't need to share something for every question.

Pose one question at a time. After each question is asked, pass the talking piece around, allowing everyone the opportunity to respond or pass. Based on time, the participants might respond to 6-8 questions.

Circle Questions:

1. Introduction Question: Share your name, pronouns, and a favorite childhood cartoon or TV show.
2. What does it mean to you to feel safe at school?
3. Would you share a story about when you did feel safe at school? Why did you feel safe in that situation?
4. Would you share a story about a time where you did not feel safe at school? Why did you not feel safe in that situation? And what got you through it? What resources or which adults did you turn to?
5. Is there an SRO or law enforcement officer in your school? How does their presence make you feel? What has your interaction with that person been like?
6. As students, you have experienced restricted access, safety drills, and other precautions throughout your life at school. How do these measures play into your sense of safety in school?
7. What do adults not know or what are they not seeing when it comes to school safety?
8. Open round to share additional thoughts.

General Notes for Facilitators

- Spend time reviewing and preparing for your dialogue, thinking about the different steps that people will go through.
- Consider using an icebreaker game like “Where the Wind Blows” to help people be more comfortable in the space.
- Team up with a partner or a group to share the responsibilities of planning and facilitation.
- Think about how you would answer each of the questions first!
-
- Partner with adults who can support the dialogues.
- Return to the norms if there is a challenging situation in the group.
- Consider who to invite: How can you bring together a group of youth who represent all students at your school?
- Document your dialogue with notes and photos - They will help you tell your story and share your insights with others in your school and community.

Vermont Youth Survey on School Safety Questions

Thank you for taking time to share your thoughts on school safety at your school. We want to hear from students about your experiences with school safety and how school safety measures impact your daily life.

- This survey will take about 10 minutes to complete.
- Taking this survey is optional. You can choose to stop taking the survey at any time.
- All the questions are optional. You can choose to skip questions that you do not want to answer.

The survey is anonymous. We do not collect any personal information.

First, we have some questions about safety at your school. Please tell us your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

1. Overall, I feel that my school is a safe school.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
2. I feel safe going to and coming from my school.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
3. I feel safe in my school's lunchroom.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
4. I feel safe in my school's classrooms.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
5. I feel safe before and after school while on my school's grounds.

- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
6. I feel safe in my school's hallways.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
7. I feel safe in the bathrooms at my school.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

Now we have some questions about sharing safety information with adults in your school.

8. Adults at school listen carefully to what I have to say
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
9. Is there at least one adult in your school that you can talk to if you have a safety concern?
- Yes
 - No
10. If so, what is that adult's job?
- Teacher
 - Counselor
 - Administrator
 - School Resource Officer (SRO)
 - Special Educator
 - Office staff

- Nurse
- Coach
- Someone else? _____

11. Do you have ideas about how to make your school safer?

- Yes
- No
- If you answered yes, tell us what your ideas are to make your school safer: _____

12. Have you ever talked with anyone at school about ideas to make your school safer?

- Yes
- No

13. How easy is it for you to reach out to those adult(s) in your school you would talk to if you had a safety concern?

- Very easy
- Somewhat easy
- Somewhat difficult
- Very difficult

14. How confident are you that adult(s) in your school that you would talk to if you had a safety concern will follow up with you afterward?

- Very confident
- Somewhat Confident
- Not at all confident
- I don't know

15. Were you aware before now that the state of Vermont has an anonymous school safety tip line? (Call (844) 723 – 3488 or Text SAFE4VT to 274637)

- Yes
- No

Now we have a few questions about emergency drills in your school. Please select your level of agreement on the following safety drill statements.

16. I am familiar with my school's emergency plans and procedures.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

17. School safety drills help me feel safer at school.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

18. School safety drills have a positive impact on my ability to learn.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

19. After a safety drill, I can provide feedback on the drill to adults in school.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

20. During safety drills, I am generally able to hear instructions that are being given.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Do you know what you are supposed to do in the following scenarios? Please answer honestly so we can make improvements where needed.

21. Are you aware of what actions you should take during an emergency during after school activities?

- Definitely
- A little bit
- Not at all

22. Are you aware of what actions you should take during an emergency during transition time or when you're in the hallway?

- Definitely
- A little bit
- Not at all

23. Are you aware of what actions you should take during an emergency when you're in the library, cafeteria, or other large gathering places?

- Definitely
- A little bit
- Not at all

24. If there was an ongoing safety incident at your school, where would you go first to find out information about what to do in the moment?

- Friends or peers
- Family member
- Teachers or school staff
- School administrators
- Social media
- School website
- School email
- Local media
- Other: _____

Demographic Questions

Thank you for taking time to provide this important feedback. We have just a few demographic questions that help us to better understand the needs of different populations within Vermont schools. Your responses are anonymous.

Please select any of the following race or ethnicity categories that you use to describe yourself.

- American Indian / Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black / African American
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- White / European American
- Other: _____

What grade are you in?

- 9th
- 10th
- 11th
- 12th

Select the gender with which you identify

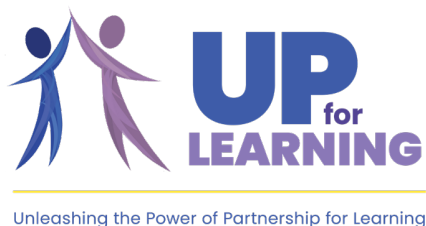
- Woman
- Man
- Non-binary or gender fluid

- Another gender: _____

Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

The Vermont Youth Survey on School Safety was developed in August 2024 in partnership between youth and adults at the Vermont Agency of Education, Vermont School Safety Center, and UP for Learning, and the Center for Rural Studies at UVM.



Additional Supporting Materials

The following links are available materials shared to provide additional content and insight about this work, and to support replication of similar projects in the future.

- [One page summary of Youth School Safety Dialogues](#)
- [Slides presented at 2024 Vermont Governor’s School Safety Conference](#)
- [Survey outreach email template](#)
- [Survey FAQ for participants and caregivers](#)
- [Dialogue Outreach and Caregiver letter](#)

Video Links

We encourage you to use the short videos along with the dialogue guide as a starting point for your own conversations about school safety.

All of the School Safety Dialogue videos shared throughout this report are available on the [UP for Learning YouTube Channel](#). Additionally, links are available here.

- [Full video \(7 minutes\)](#)
- [Facilitator focus \(4 minutes\)](#)
- [Physical Safety Short \(2 minutes\)](#)
- [Trusted Adult Short \(2 minutes\)](#)
- [Communication Short \(2 minutes\)](#)
- [Drills Short \(2 minutes\)](#)
- [SROs Short \(2 minutes\)](#)

Thank you to Ned Castle and the film team at Frames to Life for documenting and sharing the dialogues through these videos.

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