



The 2021 Virginia School Survey of Climate and Working Conditions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2021 Virginia School Survey of Climate and Working Conditions (the Virginia School Survey) was administered from January through April 2021 to classroom instructors, and staff in all Virginia public schools and to middle school students (typically grades 6–8). The Virginia School Survey represents a new collaboration between the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to reduce school divisions' survey administration burden while meeting the DCJS legislative mandate to conduct a secondary school (grades 6–12) climate survey and the VDOE legislative mandate to conduct a working conditions survey of all licensed school personnel.

Local results from the Virginia School Survey are shared with participating schools and divisions to provide actionable information to division leaders and school administration that enables a safe, healthy, and positive school and work environment for all students and staff. The results from the 2021 survey administration capture, in part, the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on climate and working conditions. Nearly all eligible schools (over 97%) participated in the 2021 survey administration, with response rates above 60 percent for students and classroom instructors. This equates to over 99% of eligible schools participating in the survey and an increase from 93% in the previous survey administrations.

Findings from the Student Survey

- Most eligible schools (99.4%) participated in the student survey. There were 102,592 student responses, a response rate of 63.2% among 6th–8th grade students.
- The racial and ethnic demographics of student respondents was 0.7% American Indian or Alaska Native, 6.1% Asian, 18.3% Black or African American, 18.8% Hispanic, 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 10.4% Two or More Races, 41.4% White and 4.2% Other.
- Just under half (49.3%) of student respondents identified as female, 46.3% identified as male and 4.2% preferred to self-describe their gender.
- Eighty-three percent (83.2%) of students rated the atmosphere of their school as either positive or very positive.
- Comparatively, of student respondents, 85.2% of males, 82.7% of females and 66.8% of those preferring to self-describe rated the atmosphere either positive or very positive.
- Comparatively, of student respondents, 81.7% American Indian or Alaska Native, 91.1% Asian, 77.9% Black or African American, 82.0% Hispanic, 81.0% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 79.8% Two or More Races, 85.8% White and 81.9% Other rated the atmosphere either positive or very positive.
- Students having attended the school the previous year (63,005 students) were asked about the change in school climate. Thirty-five percent (35.1%) or 36,009 students stated that school climate has stayed about the same compared to previous years. Almost nine percent (8.8%, 5,544 students) stated that school climate has become somewhat or much worse; 17.5% (11,026 student) stated school climate has become somewhat or much better and 38.6% (24,320 students) had no opinion.
- Of the 5,544 students who indicated school climate was worse, 60.2% cited COVID-19 as very much or the only reason for the change. Of those 11,026 students who said school climate changed for the better, 54.5% cited COVID-19 as very much or the only reason for the change.

- Over a third (33.6%) of students reported depressive behaviors, 50.0% reported anxiety, and 38.6% reported experiencing worry within the past two weeks.
- Ten percent of students (10.1%) reported having seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months. Of those 10,297 students 11.7% identified as female, 5.6% identified as male, and 39% preferred to self-describe. When disaggregated by race, 10.9% American Indian or Alaska Native, 7.7% Asian, 11.2% Black or African American, 13.9% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 13.3% Two or More Races, 8.2% White and 8.6% Other reported seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months.
- Of those 34,471 students who reported depressive behaviors, nearly half (45.7%) said they had an adult in their life that they could turn to for help and 85.5% of students statewide said they would tell a trusted adult if a friend were having mental health struggles.
- Seventy-eight percent (78.1%) of students agree or strongly agree that what they learn at their school reflects multiple cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, and identities. When disaggregated by race, 80.5% American Indian or Alaska Native, 80.5% Asian, 75.2% Black or African American, 71.7% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 74.8% Two or More Races, 80.3% White and 77.2% Other agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.
- Just over one quarter (25.5%) of students reported their school had a School Resource Officer (SRO). These 26,209 students were then asked to respond to the statement “The School Resource Officer (SRO) makes me feel safe,” where 90.2% agreed or strongly agreed (88.8% American Indian or Alaska Native, 92.5% Asian, 86.2% Black or African American, 89.1% Hispanic, 91.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 85.9% Two or More Races, 92.0% White and 87.3% Other).
- Among the students that reported having an SRO in their building, 93.2% responded they agree or strongly agree the SRO has a positive impact on the school.
- Bullying was reported as a problem in schools by 35.2% of students. When asked about the reasons students are bullied at school, 22.2% reported that students are bullied due to their race or ethnicity; 41.1% endorsed that students are bullied about their clothing or physical appearance; 25.0% agreed or strongly agreed that students are bullied about their disability; and 26.5% agreed or strongly agreed that students are bullied about their sexual orientation.
- Eleven percent (11.3%) of students reported that students are bullied during on-line instruction.
- Almost seventy-five percent (74.8%) of students agreed that adults take action to address bullying.

Findings from the Classroom Instructor Survey

- Nearly one-hundred percent (99.2%) of schools participated in the Classroom Instructor Survey. There were 80,829 classroom instructor responses, a response rate of 68.8% among teachers and teachers’ aides.
- The racial and ethnic demographics of classroom instructors was 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.0% Asian, 11.1% Black or African American, 4.3% Hispanic, 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 4.1% Two or More Races, 75.8% White and 2.3% Other.
- Eighty-two percent (82.0%) of classroom instructors identified as female, 16.9% as male and 0.9% preferred to self-describe.
- In response to the statement “Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn,” 92.5% of classroom instructors agreed or strongly agreed.
- The degree to which classroom instructors experience their school’s climate and working conditions varies across race, ethnicity, and gender. Among the instructor respondents, 91.4% of males, 92.9% of females and 78.7% of those preferring to self-describe; 89.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, 94.0% Asian, 91.3% Black or African American, 92.2% Hispanic, 95.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 90.1% Two or More Races, 93.0% White and 84.9% Other agreed or strongly agreed that “Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn.”
- Overall, 40.9% or 33,059 classroom instructors stated working conditions have stayed the same as previous years. Almost fifteen percent (14.5%, 11,720 instructors) stated that school climate has become somewhat or much worse; 27.3% (22,066 instructors) stated school climate has become somewhat or much better and 17.3% (13,983 instructors) had no opinion.

- Among the 11,720 classroom instructors that indicated conditions were worse, 74.2% cited COVID-19 as very much or the only reason for the change. Nearly 45 percent (44.8%) of the 22,066 classroom instructors who reported conditions improved indicated COVID-19 as very much or the only reason for the change.
- Most classroom instructors (83.6%) intend to continue working at their current school. Another 3.4% plan to continue teaching in their division but leave their current school, while 2.7% plan to continue teaching in Virginia but leave their current division, 2.1% reported they plan to retire and 2.7% reported they would leave education to work in a non-education field.
- Almost 89 percent (88.6%) of classroom instructors agree or strongly agree that the content taught at their school reflects multiple cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, and identities.
- Sixty-two percent (62.3%) of classroom instructors reported their school had a School Resource Officer (SRO). These 50,374 classroom instructors were then asked to respond to the statement “The School Resource Officer (SRO) makes me feel safe,” and 89.6% agreed or strongly agreed (84.9% American Indian or Alaska Native, 91.0% Asian, 89.9% Black or African American, 89.9% Hispanic, 93.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 87.4% Two or More Races, 89.8% White and 82.0% Other).
- Among the classroom instructors that reported having an SRO in their building, 90.9% agreed or strongly agreed that the SRO has a positive impact on the school.
- Bullying was seen as a problem in schools by 17.0% of classroom instructors. When asked about the reasons students are bullied at school, 13.7% of classroom instructors reported that students are bullied due to their race or ethnicity; 21.6% indicated that students are bullied about their clothing or physical appearance; 11.5% agreed or strongly agreed that students are bullied about their disability; and 14.5% agreed or strongly agreed that students are bullied about their sexual orientation.
- Most classroom instructors (95.0%) agreed that adults take action to address bullying.

Findings from the Staff Survey

- Nearly 98 percent (97.7%) of schools participated in the Staff Survey. There were 20,855 staff responses. This is a response rate of 37.3% among other licensed and non-licensed individuals.
- The racial and ethnic demographics of staff respondents was 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, 1.5% Asian, 17.1% Black or African American, 5.2% Hispanic, 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 4.1% Two or More Races, 69.9% White and 1.8% Other.
- Eighty-three percent (83.0%) of staff respondents identified as female, 16.0% as male and 0.7% preferred to self-describe.
- In response to the prompt, “Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn,” 93.5% of staff agreed or strongly agreed.
- The degree to which staff experience their school’s climate and working conditions varies meaningfully across race, ethnicity, and gender. Among the staff responses, 93.1% of males, 93.7% of females and 84.7% of those preferring to self-describe; 88% American Indian or Alaska Native, 90.1% Asian, 93.3% Black or African American, 92.5% Hispanic, 91.3% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 90.7% Two or More Races, 94.3% White and 86.4% Other agreed or strongly agreed that “Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn.”
- Overall, 32.1% or 6,694 staff stated working conditions have stayed the same as previous years. Eight percent (8%, 1,668 staff) stated that school climate has become somewhat or much worse; 37% (7,716 staff) stated school climate has become somewhat or much better and 19.4% (4,046 staff) had no opinion.
- Among those that indicated conditions were worse, 67.0% cited COVID-19 as very much or the only reason for the change, and 37.1% of staff who reported conditions improved indicated COVID-19 was very much or the only reason for the change.
- Most staff (88.9%) intend to continue working at their current school. Another 6.1% plan to continue in education but transition to another school, division, or state. The remaining 5.1% plan to leave education, including 2.6% who plan to retire.

- Sixty-eight percent (67.5%) of staff reported their school had a School Resource Officer (SRO). These 14,068 were then asked to respond to the statement “The School Resource Officer (SRO) makes me feel safe,” where 91.7% agreed or strongly agreed (80.5% American Indian or Alaska Native, 94.0% Asian, 92.2% Black or African American, 91.9% Hispanic, 100% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 89.5% Two or More Races, 91.9% White and 84.1% Other).
- Among the staff that reported having an SRO in their building, 92.5% responded they agree or strongly agree the SRO has a positive impact on the school.
- Bullying was seen as a problem in schools by 14.7% of staff. When asked about the reasons students are bullied at school, 12.4% of staff reported that students are bullied due to their race or ethnicity; 18.3% indicated that students are bullied about their clothing or physical appearance; 9% agreed or strongly agreed that students are bullied about their disability; and 12.5% agreed or strongly agreed that students are bullied about their sexual orientation.
- The majority of staff (95.6%) agreed that adults take action to address bullying.

Looking Ahead

DCJS and VDOE will administer the Virginia School Survey during the 2021–2022 school year, focusing on school climate among high school students (grades 9–12) and working conditions among high school classroom instructors and staff. DCJS and VDOE will continue to improve the survey administration experience for schools, based on lessons learned from the 2021 administration, and revise survey items as needed to improve the psychometric properties and actionable information derived.

Legislative Authority for Survey

Prior to the 2020–2021 school year, DCJS administered a school climate survey and VDOE administered a working conditions survey in response to separate legislative mandates.^[1] In 2019, the Governor’s Children’s Cabinet’s Student Safety Workgroup endorsed a recommendation^[2] authorizing DCJS to conduct an annual school climate survey of students and staff in secondary schools (grades 6–12) in consultation with VDOE and the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. In the same year, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation that modified the Code of Virginia^[3] requiring the Superintendent of Public Instruction to identify and then consolidate, to the extent possible, all surveys and questionnaires of schools. Both efforts intended to reduce survey burden on schools and eliminate duplicative efforts while providing statewide data to address school climate and working conditions issues.

To meet this intent, DCJS and VDOE began planning a consolidated survey effort in 2020 with the goal of combining each agency’s required survey efforts into a single survey instrument and administration cycle. This effort was supported by a DCJS contract for survey administration with Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) and a University of Virginia (UVA)-VDOE research partnership funded by a federal grant from the Institute of Education Sciences.

Notes on Administration

Results from the Virginia School Survey are intended to assist school and division personnel in understanding how connected students feel to their school, the quality of their relationships with other students and classroom instructors, and their feelings of safety. For classroom instructors and staff, the survey provides insights on their perceptions of the learning environment, support for their professional role, and with whom they collaborate to serve students well. The survey is not intended to be evaluative, but may be useful for understanding areas of strength and opportunity, as well as points of accomplishment, within school buildings.

^[1] VDOE’s Teacher and Staff Working Conditions Survey is required by Item 143.G of the 2020 Appropriation Act; and the DCJS Secondary School Climate Survey is required by the *Code of Virginia* § 22.1-279.8.B.

^[2] <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/governor-of-virginia/childrens-cabinet/Final-Recommendations-Student-Safety-Work-Group.pdf> Recommendation 2c.

^[3] <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/22.1-23.2>

While unanticipated at the onset of survey planning, the Virginia School Survey was administered for the first time during the height of COVID-19. This created uncertain and evolving circumstances through which schools continued to provide educational services to students. DCJS and VDOE believed that it was critically important to understand the impact of the pandemic on climate and working conditions, even as classroom instructors, staff, and students were adapting to new instructional circumstances.

Reports summarizing state-level results by item for classroom instructors, staff, and students are available on the DCJS and VDOE websites through the links below:

Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services:

<https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/virginia-center-school-and-campus-safety/school-safety-survey/secondary-school-climate-survey>

Virginia Department of Education:

<https://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/school-climate/index.shtml>