

Bullying may contribute to lower test scores

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High schools in Virginia where students reported a high rate of bullying had significantly lower scores on standardized tests that students must pass to graduate, according to research presented at the 119th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association.

"Our study suggests that a bullying climate may play an important role in student test performance," said Dewey Cornell, PhD, a [clinical psychologist](#) and professor of education at the University of Virginia. "This research underscores the importance of treating bullying as a schoolwide problem rather than just an individual problem."

The research, which is part of the ongoing Virginia High [School](#) Safety Study, compiled surveys about bullying in 2007 from more than 7,300 ninth-grade [students](#) and almost 3,000 teachers at 284 high schools located across Virginia. Approximately two-thirds of the students were white, 22 percent were African American, and 5 percent were Hispanic.

The study found that schoolwide passing rates on standardized exams for Algebra I, Earth Science and World History were 3 percent to 6 percent lower in schools where students reported a more severe bullying climate. "This difference is substantial because it affects the school's ability to meet federal requirements and the educational success of many students who don't pass the exams," Cornell said.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, students must receive a passing grade on the [standardized tests](#) to graduate from high school, and at least 70 percent of a school's students must pass the tests for the

school to keep its state accreditation in Virginia.

Ninth-grade students were surveyed because ninth grade is the pivotal year when students enter high school, and research has shown that [poor academic performance](#) in ninth grade predicts a higher probability of [high school](#) drop-outs.

The survey defined bullying as "the use of one's strength or popularity to injure, threaten or embarrass another person on purpose. Bullying can be physical, verbal or social. It is not bullying when two students of about the same strength argue or fight."

Schools are under immense pressure to improve standardized test scores because of the No Child Left Behind Act, Cornell said. "This study supports the case for schoolwide bullying prevention programs as a step to improve school climate and facilitate academic achievement," he said.

Effective anti-bullying programs must take a schoolwide approach that involves students, teachers and parents, Cornell said. The programs should provide help for bullying victims, counseling and discipline for bullies, and education for bystanders to discourage them from supporting bullying. The study was co-authored by Anna Lacey, a University of Virginia graduate student in clinical and school psychology, and the research was supported by a grant from the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

The study couldn't explain the reasons for a bullying climate at some schools or the causes of lower [test scores](#) at those schools, but the researchers offered several theories. The academic performance of students in schools with pervasive bullying may suffer because students are less engaged in learning due to fears about bullying or due to a greater level of school disorder associated with bullying, they said. Teachers also may be less effective because they spend more time

focused on discipline, they added.

Cornell doesn't believe bullying has increased in schools, but media attention has highlighted the serious problem. "We have always had bullying in our schools. What has changed is we have become more aware of [bullying](#) due to a series of high-profile tragic cases involving school shootings and suicides," Cornell said. "Our society does not permit harassment and abuse of adults in the workplace, and the same protections should be afforded to children in school."

Provided by American Psychological Association

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