

**What Conditions Jeopardize and Support Safety in Urban Schools?
The Influence of Community Characteristics, School Composition and School
Organizational Practices on Student and Teacher Reports of Safety in Chicago**

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Abstract

School safety is a pressing issue in urban schools. Yet, there is little research that shows why schools vary in safety and whether school practices mediate the influence of neighborhood characteristics. Using a unique dataset on Chicago Public Schools, this study examines the internal and external conditions associated with students' and teachers' reports of safety, showing that factors under the school's control – their social and organizational structure – mediate the external influences of crime, poverty, and human resources in students' residential communities. In particular, the quality of relationships between school staff, students and parents define safe schools in Chicago. In contrast, frequent use of suspensions is associated with less safe environments, even when comparing schools serving students with similar backgrounds. The findings from this paper point to the important role that school leaders and personnel can play in fostering safe school environments for students, even in schools that serve students from disadvantaged neighborhoods. Policymakers should attend to the important influence of supportive, collaborative relationships among teachers and parents, and between teachers and students, for mediating the adverse influences of neighborhood circumstances on student and teacher reports of safety.

Key Words

School climate, school safety, urban schools, school social organization

Introduction

School safety is a pressing concern for parents, teachers, school administrators, policymakers and students themselves. The issue of safety periodically comes to public attention when shootings or homicides of school-aged children occur. However, daily interactions among students and their teachers that involve threats and intimidation – both physical and verbal – affect the academic performance of students and the effectiveness of teachers throughout the school year. Student bullying, including physical forms of aggression (assault, stealing, or vandalizing a victim's property), and emotional forms of bullying (name calling, threats of violence, slandering, excluding the victim from group activities, and taunting), often occur repeatedly with an intention to intimidate the victim and create a pattern of humiliation, fear, and abuse (Smokowski and Kopasz, 2005).

Many students are victims of bullying and harassment at some point in time; 65 percent of teens reported having been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted during the past year (Harris Interactive and GLSEN (2005). A quarter of all U.S. public schools reported incidences of student bullying at least once per week in the 2007-08 school year (Neiman and DeVoe, 2009). School safety is a particularly pressing issue in urban public schools, where the incidence of violent episodes is almost 60 percent higher than in suburban schools, and 30 percent higher than in rural schools.¹ Disrespect and threats are also more prevalent at urban schools, where teachers are twice as likely as at other schools to report that students verbally abuse teachers and

¹ During the 2007–08 school year, city schools experienced 35.8 violent incidents per 1,000 students occurred in city schools, compared to 26.4 and 22.8 incidents per 1,000 students in rural communities and suburbs, respectively – violent incidents include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attack or fight with or without a weapon, threat of physical attack with or without a weapon, and robbery with or without a weapon (Neiman and DeVoe, 2009).

act disrespectfully toward teachers either daily or at least once a week (Neiman and DeVoe, 2009).

Recent media attention has begun to focus on bullying and its effect on student welfare. The tragic suicide of Massachusetts teen Phoebe Prince in January 2010 brought national attention to the impact of physical and emotional bullying. In response to the growing concern over bullying, in August 2010 the U.S. Department of Education hosted its first summit on bullying, where assistant deputy secretary Kevin Jennings noted that “(bullying) can leave lifetime scars. And in the case of some of these young people, it can lead to their decision to end their own lives.”²

At the same time that there are concerns about bullying, there are also increasing concerns that school practices to enforce discipline are having harmful effects on students. Community advocacy groups have been alarmed by the disproportionate numbers of school suspensions among minority and economically-disadvantaged students. A recent study by the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA found that African-American students were more than four times as likely to be suspended during the 2009-10 school year as their white counterparts, and nearly twice as many students with disabilities were suspended compared to students without (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). U.S. Secretary of Education Duncan expressed concern about the disproportionate suspension rates of African American students in several recent public addresses (Rossi & Golab, 2012). In response, policymakers in urban schools districts such as Chicago, New York and Philadelphia, have made explicit attempts to limit the prevalence of school suspensions.

² Source: Source: Education Week online (retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/District_Dossier/2010/08/feds_to_tackle_bullying_at_con.html on September 2, 2010).

Reasons for Concern

There are a number of reasons to be worried about students' feelings of safety in schools. Students' emotional well-being is important in itself. Victimization also affects student functioning in school, adversely impacting student self-efficacy, attitudinal and behavioral investments in education, and the amount of time in school dedicated to student learning. Students who are victims of harassment attend school less frequently and feel less connected to and less engaged in school. In turn, they spend less time doing homework and participating in school activities, which ultimately has adverse effects on both cognitive and social growth (MacMillan and Hagan, 2004; Bowen and Bowen, 1999; Payne et al., 2003). Victimization has also been linked to psychological and health problems and disrupted educational and occupational attainment. These, in turn, negatively affect a student's later economic status, including labor force participation, occupational status, and earnings (Schreck and Miller, 2003; MacMillan and Hagan, 2004).

Teachers are also affected by harassment and violence that occurs in schools. Unsafe school environments have adverse effects on teacher professional development and personal safety. Children who are physically and verbally abusive in the classroom divert teachers' attention away from teaching, preventing teachers from being able to teach effectively (Bowen and Bowen, 1999). Teachers are more likely to leave schools with substantial student disciplinary problems, which further decreases school capacity for effective instruction (Payne et al., 2003; Smith and Smith, 2006; Allensworth et al., 2009).

Policy Efforts Addressing School Safety

In light of the increasing recognition of the negative impact that unsafe school environments have on students and teachers, policymakers at both the federal and local levels

have attempted to address concerns around school safety. The federal government has provided funding for the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, a partnership between the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice. This comprehensive approach to youth violence prevention is designed to prevent violence and substance abuse throughout U.S. schools and communities. The Initiative distributed nearly \$75 million in grant awards to school districts for the 2008–09 school year to “provide integrated and comprehensive resources for prevention programs and pro-social services for youth.”³ Underlining the importance of the initiative, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, “Every child in America deserves a safe and healthy school environment, and it’s our job as educators, parents, and community members to ensure that happens.”⁴ More recently, Secretary Duncan and Attorney General Eric Holder launched the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, a collaborative effort between the Departments of Justice and Education that aims to support school disciplinary policies and practices that foster safe and productive learning environments for students and teachers.

While it is imperative that schools establish a safe climate for students and teachers, it is less clear what strategies are most effective, especially in schools located in neighborhoods with high rates of crime and poverty and few human and social resources. One common response to concerns about safety and violence is to increase the overt presence of school security through the use of metal detectors and security guards. Nationally, 53 percent of U.S. public schools search student lockers, 54 percent lock entrance and/or exit doors during the school day, 90

³ Source: The Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative website: (<http://www.sshs.samhsa.gov/default.aspx>) (accessed July 15, 2009).

⁴ Source: The Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative website, <http://www.sshs.samhsa.gov/default.aspx> (accessed July 15, 2009).

percent place school staff in the hallways, and 93 percent require visitors to sign in upon entering the school building (Borum et al., 2010).

Schools have also enacted “zero tolerance” policies. These policies employ major consequences for students, such as school suspension and expulsion, for even relatively minor infractions and do not allow for individual circumstances to be taken into account when determining punishment.⁵ The theory is that tough, uniform enforcement of policies for all offenses will prevent more serious offenses from occurring. However, in practice, “zero tolerance” policies are often associated with higher levels of student fear at school, increased rates of school suspension, and loss of instructional time, with little if any evidence of a positive effect on reducing school violence (Schreck and Miller, 2003; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Moreover, as stated earlier, student suspensions and expulsions from school disproportionately affect economically disadvantaged students, students with emotional and behavioral disorders, and minority students (Osher et al., 2010).

Teachers and administrators often respond to student disciplinary problems through office referrals, school suspension, and expulsion. According to the most recently available national data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, approximately three million, or 8 percent of, school age children (grades K-12) received an out-of-school suspension and approximately one hundred thousand, or 0.2 percent, were expelled from school during the 2005-06 school year.⁶ In Chicago Public Schools (CPS), about 16 percent of students in grades six to eight were suspended at least once in the 2008–09 school year, causing them to miss a week of school, on average (5.2 days). About 22 percent of CPS high school students were suspended at

⁵ For example, a 10-year-old Florida student found a small knife in her lunchbox that her mother placed there for cutting an apple. The student immediately handed over the knife to her teacher; however, she was expelled from school for possessing a weapon (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

⁶ Source: U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection (ocrdata.ed.gov). These estimates do not include students classified as disabled under IDEA.

least once in the same year, with an average suspension of over a week of school (6.6 days).

Thus, large numbers of CPS students are missing a week or more of school due to disciplinary infractions.

An alternative approach to discipline is the framework of Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), which promotes effective, data-driven practices around school disciplinary practices. PBIS is supported by the U.S. Department of Education and by recent research.⁷ In contrast to reactive discipline, PBIS is based on designing school and classroom systems that establish a social climate that supports teaching and learning and prevents problematic behavior, with secondary and tertiary supports for students with problem behaviors.⁸ Such an approach requires a substantial change in practice, though, including time for planning and coordination with support and professional development.

Research on School Safety

Prevailing research suggests that students' feelings of safety at school, and problems with peer relationships and bullying, are influenced by a broad array of factors, including students' own attributes, attributes of their schools, adults with whom students interact, families, neighborhoods, and the broader society.⁹ Community-level factors such as crime and poverty are strongly related to school safety, but are not solely deterministic—schools serving similar

⁷ Recent experimental evidence assessing the impact of such an approach in elementary schools in Hawaii and Illinois found improvements in student achievement and school safety (Horner et al., 2009).

⁸ More information is available from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (www.pbis.org).

⁹ An ecological theory of human development that comes out of the developmental psychology literature views youth academic and behavioral development in the context of multiple social domains that simultaneously influence youth experiences and outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bogenschneider, 1996). In the sociological literature, a social-organization perspective echoes ecological theory by explicating the complex and interrelated roles that micro domains – home, school, and community – play in a child's life, recognizing that these domains act as overlapping spheres of influence on youth outcomes (Epstein and Sanders, 2000). Recent work on school safety has argued that a social-ecological model is a particularly useful framework for understanding and addressing bullying in schools (Swearer et al., 2010) as well as for improving overall school discipline and classroom management (Osher et al., 2010).

neighborhoods can have different degrees of safety (Felson et al., 1994; Bowen et al., 2002; Welsh et al., 1999; Welsh et al., 2000; Payne et al., 2003).

However, it remains largely unknown how school policies and practices mediate the influence of neighborhood and community-level factors on school safety. In particular, there is very little research on the ways in which the social-organizational structures of schools – internal, school-based resources and the interactions that occur between students, teachers and parents – affect the climate of safety in schools. In fact, Welsh et al. (2000) note that “close scrutiny” of school climate and community characteristics should be explored to better understand school disorder. In a recent special issue of *Educational Researcher* dedicated to school safety, researchers called for more work focusing on the contributions of school context to school safety outcomes (Astor, Guerra, and Van Acker, 2010).

A recent case study by Astor and colleagues of nine Israeli schools provides suggestive evidence about the internal school structures that influence the climate of safety (Astor et al., 2009). This work indicated that a number of organizational factors within schools – the nature of teacher-student relationships, the presence of clear procedures coupled with teacher belief in school procedures, a coherent school educational mission, and an influential and respected principal with strong relationships with teachers – mediate the effect of community influences on school safety. Their conclusions are consistent with several other theories of organizational change that suggest school learning climate is better with inclusive leadership with empowered stakeholders (Sergiovanni, 2004; Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Bryk et al., 2010). The importance of student-teacher relationships is also supported by sociological studies showing that schools are important settings for transmitting values related to violence to students and for the formation of social bonds with adults (Felson et al., 1994; Payne et al., 2003; Crosnoe et al., 2004). In

particular, stronger intergenerational bonding – the relationships between students and adults – in school is associated with a lower likelihood of disciplinary problems (Crosnoe et al., 2004).

Bullying is most common in areas that lack adult supervision such as hallways, playgrounds, and lunchrooms, and evidence suggests that students feel most unsafe in unsupervised places in and around schools (Swearer et al., 2010). Thus, the extent to which students feel supported by their teachers and view their teachers as supportive of their academic and social development can shape the level of social resources in schools, and, in turn, school safety.

Astor's case studies, together with the theoretical and related work, suggest that school leadership, as well as teacher collective effort and strong relationships with students, might be important mechanisms for mediating the influence of external factors on school safety. This paper builds on this theoretical and empirical literature, confirming and extending these findings. We employ a large sample of schools, with a rich dataset on school, community and individual factors to empirically test the ways in which students' individual backgrounds interact with school and community factors to lead students and teachers to feel safe or unsafe at their schools.

Research Questions

Prior research has suggested that school safety is affected by neighborhood context, students' backgrounds, and school organizational structure. What is unknown is how all of these factors fit together and to what extent school practices can affect change in the climate, given the students they serve. Policymakers and educators need to know what schools can do to improve safety in our schools, particularly in schools serving students from neighborhoods with high levels of poverty and crime. This study analyzes different factors that affect students' and teachers' feelings of safety at school, from those that are not malleable by policy and school practice (e.g., neighborhood characteristics), to those that are not changeable by school practice,

although might be affected by policy (e.g., school size and composition), to those that are potentially malleable through school practice and design, answering the questions:

- 1) What are the community characteristics that are most strongly and directly related to students' and teachers' feelings of safety at school, including poverty, crime and socioeconomic status in the neighborhood around the school and in students' residential neighborhoods, and the extent of human and social resources in students' home neighborhoods?
- 2) What are the school conditions that are strongly and directly associated with school safety, including size, grade level, racial composition and average entering achievement?
- 3) How are the social-organizational characteristics of the school associated with school safety, including school leadership, teacher collaboration and support, school-family interactions and student-teacher relationships?
- 4) How are school discipline practices (suspension rates) associated with school safety?
- 5) To what degree can strong social-organizational characteristics mediate neighborhood differences and insulate students from adverse neighborhood threats to school safety?

While this study offers insight into the role of school policies and practices in producing safe and productive learning climates for urban public school students in general, evidence comes from one school district. The detailed organizational context variables included in this study are not available at a national level. As a result, differences by school context observed in the Chicago context might not be the same in other cities where schools are structured differently. Further research in other school settings might consider replicating some of the findings from this analysis to the extent that data are available.

Data and Measures

This study combines quantitative and qualitative data to examine the mechanisms through which schools may foster safe schooling environments. We incorporate a variety of

neighborhood, school and student-level data from Chicago Public Schools (CPS), as well as a rich set of survey measures from the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) on the organizational context of Chicago schools in a series of quantitative analyses. In addition, we use qualitative data from a longitudinal study of CPS students' transition to high school that gathered data through in-depth, semi-structured student and teacher interviews and ethnographic observation.

Survey data are drawn from all schools that participated in the CCSR teacher and student survey in the 2008-09 academic year.¹⁰ For teacher survey responses, our sample consists of 387 schools (68 high schools and 319 elementary schools), based on responses from 8,774 elementary school teachers (grades K-8) and 3,965 high school teachers (grades 9-12). The average teacher response rate across high schools is 61.2 percent and 54.5 percent across elementary schools. For student survey responses, our sample consists of 524 schools (76 high schools and 448 elementary schools), based on responses from 65,007 elementary school students (grades 6-8) and 52,478 high school students (grades 9-12). The average student response rate is 60.9 percent across high schools and 82.9 percent across elementary schools. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics from the 2008-09 school year for our sample of schools. Among our sample of schools, approximately 80 percent of students come from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds, as measured by receipt of free or reduced-price lunch. Approximately 90 percent are identified as either African-American or Hispanic. Elementary schools have total average enrollment of approximately 600 students; among high schools, average enrollment is approximately 1000 students.

Qualitative data are drawn from a longitudinal study of 52 students who were interviewed as many as six times between 8th and 9th grade, spanning the period from May 2008 to February

¹⁰ The CCSR survey was administered in the spring of 2009.

2010. We also interviewed each student's eighth grade and ninth grade English and math teachers, and observed their English and math classes. Interviews with teachers were not specific to the 52 students, but asked about their experiences with all students. Some of the students attended grade K-8 elementary schools in eighth grade, others attended middle schools; all attended neighborhood high schools serving grades 9-12. All of the students attended one of four elementary/middle schools that fed into five specific high schools. Using seventh grade Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) scores, researchers oversampled for middle-achieving students.

School Safety. School safety is measured through surveys conducted by CCSR of students in grades six through 12 (middle grades and high school) and teachers in grades K-12 (all grade levels) from the 2008-09 school year. From students' perspectives, the surveys capture two dimensions of safety: 1) general feelings of safety in and around the school as well as 2) the nature of interactions among students in the school – the degree to which peers are respectful or mean to each other. From teachers' perspectives, the surveys capture perceptions about crime and disorder in their schools. Table 2 provides the questions included in each of the three dimensions of school safety. In general, there is a very strong correspondence between student and teacher reports of safety.¹¹ The fact that two different groups of respondents – students and teachers – with different survey questions produce similar reports about school climate provides validation that the surveys capture real differences in school safety, even though they are based on self-reports.

There are considerable differences across schools in Chicago in student and teacher reports of safety. Table 3 provides insight into the extent of these differences by summarizing teacher and student reports of safety at three CPS high schools. In one of the safer high schools (School A), which is at the CPS system-wide average on the student safety measure, almost all

¹¹ The correlation between student and teacher reports is 0.80.

students feel safe within the school building and the vast majority feels safe coming and going to school. Teachers report few problems with crime or violence – just occasional disorder in the hallways and some problems with robbery, but few problems with classroom disorder, fights, or disrespect of teachers. Most students say their peers get along well and care about each other, although only about half feel their peers are respectful to each other. In a more typical CPS high school (School B), the vast majority of students feel safe within the building, but there are problems outside of the school building. Half of students are concerned about coming and going to school, and only about one-third feel safe in the area just outside the school. Teachers report some problems with violent threats in the building, and many report problems associated with gang activity and fights. Furthermore, more than 60 percent of teachers report problems with disorder and disrespect. In an unsafe CPS school (School C), which is two standard deviations below average on the student safety measure, not only do students feel unsafe outside of the building, but half the students feel unsafe in the hallways and bathrooms and only 60 percent feel safe in their classrooms. Nearly all teachers report problems with robbery in the building, gang activity, fights, disorder, and disrespect, and three-quarters of teachers report that students threaten them with violence. Interactions between students and teachers are frequently hostile and mutually disrespectful - the majority of students say their peers don't get along, just look out for themselves, put each other down, and don't treat each other with respect.

Other studies of school safety have used data on school security responses to disorder, such as school disciplinary data (e.g., number of suspensions) and student and teacher self-reports of victimization to capture safety in schools (Welsh, 2000). While student and teacher reports about their perceptions of school climate may not be completely objective, they have the advantage of showing how people are actually interpreting their experiences in the school

environment, and so are accurate in terms of people's feelings and concerns about their school. Discipline and victimization data are also not free from bias as they may reflect schools' responses to discipline and record-keeping as well as actual threats to safety. By using both types of data, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the climate of safety and discipline in schools.

School Organization. Prior research and theory suggests four broad domains of a school's social-organizational structure that could potentially affect the climate of safety in schools. These include (a) school leadership; (b) teacher collaboration and support; (c) school-family interactions; and (d) student-teacher relationships. These domains are defined based on prior work which has validated the components in each domain as relevant for school improvement efforts (Bryk et al., 2010). Table A1 in the appendix provides details about the survey questions used to construct the measures described here. Each measure is created through multiple survey items, and multiple measures are used to study each of the four social-organizational domains. *School Leadership* is studied through measures of teacher influence, principal instructional leadership, program coherence, and teacher-principal trust. There are four measures of *Teacher Collaboration & Support*--collective responsibility, orientation to innovation, socialization of new teachers, and teacher-teacher trust. For *School-Family Interactions*, we use a measure of teacher-parent trust. *Student-Teacher Relationships* are measured through questions to students about teacher personal support and student-teacher trust.

School Context and Student Background Data. CPS school administrative files provide information on school racial composition, enrollment size, the percent of low-income students and grade-level. CPS student administrative files provide information on student test score and achievement data. To disentangle the endogeneity of school achievement with respect

to student and teacher reports of school climate and safety we use measures of achievement that predate the measures of safety. For schools serving students in grades K-8, incoming achievement is the standardized proportion of students in grades six to eight (in the 2008–09 school year) who met or exceeded proficiency on the ISAT math and reading test when they were in fifth grade. For high schools, school achievement is based on the EXPLORE exam, which is taken in early October of student's ninth grade year, in the fall of the 2008-09 school year.

Neighborhood Crime, Socioeconomic Status, and Poverty Data are measured with data from the 2000 U.S. Census, and Chicago Police Department records. Census data are available at the block group level, which represents about one city block for most areas of Chicago.¹² Students are linked to the census block group through their residential address. Schools are linked to the census block group in which they are located, unless there is a low density of population near the school (e.g., a school located in a park). In those cases, we use information from the census tract. Poverty is measured with the percentage of families below the poverty line and the percentage of males unemployed in the block group. A measure of social status is created from the median family income and the average number of years of education of adults in the neighborhood. Information on crime is provided by address from the police records, aggregated to the block group level, and linked to students' residences and school locations in the same way as census data. Poverty, crime and social status are studied both in terms of the conditions in the neighborhood around the school, and as an aggregate of the students' home neighborhoods

¹² There are approximately 10,000 census blocks in Chicago. Source: University of Chicago Library (information accessed from <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/maps/censusinfo.html> on March 13, 2012).

(calculated as a weighted average of the census block groups in which the school's students live).¹³

Neighborhood poverty and crime may contribute to school safety through a number of mechanisms, one of which is the degree to which neighbors provide support to each other and watch over children in the community. We use an indicator of *Human and Social Resources in the Community* from the student surveys to capture students' assessment of the extent of their trust in and reliance upon neighbors and community members, and whether they feel that adults in the community know and care about them.¹⁴

Analytic Methods

Our aim is to understand the ways in which community and school factors together are related to students' and teachers' feelings of safety in their schools. We begin with quantitative analysis showing the correlations of a large array of compositional, structural, and organizational features of schools with the three measures of safety. These correlations show which features of schools are most strongly related to school safety. However, each feature could show a relationship with safety simply because of correlations with the other factors. We then examine the factors in combination, to determine which are most directly related to school safety. We begin with factors outside of the control of the schools – the community context of the school and the neighborhoods in which students reside and then add school contextual, structural, and social-organizational features. The qualitative analysis provides rich descriptions of school organizational structures and practices in schools. Further information on the methods used for both the quantitative and qualitative work is provided in the appendix.

¹³ Nearly 60 percent of CPS high school students and 50 percent of elementary school students attend a school other than their neighborhood school.

¹⁴ We incorporate this indicator as prior research (Sampson et al., 1997) has found that neighborhood collective efficacy – the extent of social cohesion among neighbors coupled with neighbors' willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good – is particularly related to neighborhood violence and victimization

Results

As one would expect, schools serving a large share of students from high-poverty and high-crime neighborhoods, and with few human and social resources, tend to be less safe than schools serving more advantaged students. However, the findings from this paper show that the ways that adults in the school building interact with each other, with parents, and with students mediate these environmental influences. This leads schools serving students from similar neighborhoods to have very different school climates. Indeed, about one-quarter of the differences in safety across schools can be attributed to school-based factors, rather than student background factors.

We find that the nature and quality of the interactions between adults and students matter greatly for school climate and safety. These interactions are shaped by school structures around student discipline and students' daily interactions with teachers. For example, while high rates of suspension are associated with lower levels of safety, training teachers and staff on how to deal with conflict in constructive ways could help prevent conflicts from escalating. The evidence further suggests that it is critical that school personnel engage families in constructive and supportive ways. Moreover, there is an important education component to school safety that is often overlooked—the achievement level of the incoming student population is a far stronger predictor of school safety than the poverty or crime rate of their neighborhoods.

School Safety and Neighborhood Context

Crime and poverty explain a substantial proportion of the differences in safety across schools. However, while the location of the school does matter, the characteristics of students' home neighborhoods are more important in explaining variation in student and teacher reports of school safety. For student reports of safety and peer interactions, crime in the neighborhood

around the school explains 29 percent of the variation across schools, while poverty around the school explains 25 percent of the variation (See Table 4). For teacher reports of crime and disorder, crime in the neighborhood around the school explains 27 percent of the variation across schools, while poverty around the school explains 21 percent of the variation.¹⁵ Crime and poverty in students' *home neighborhoods*, in contrast, explain approximately one-third of the differences in students' and teachers' feelings of safety, and nearly half of the differences across schools in the quality of peer interactions. Thus, school safety is strongly defined by the characteristics of a school's student population – who attends the school and the neighborhoods in which they live. Peer interactions, in particular, are less supportive and respectful in schools with greater percentages of students from high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods.

Neighborhood poverty and crime may contribute to school safety through a number of mechanisms, one of which is the degree to which neighbors provide support to each other and watch over children in the community. The extent of human and social resources in the community are as strongly associated with students' perceptions of school safety as crime and poverty in student's home neighborhoods. Students feel safer coming and going to school, around the school, and in the school building if they come from communities where adults know the neighborhood children and work together to keep the community safe. Human and social resources in the community further explain differences in school safety beyond crime and poverty. As shown in Table 6, crime and poverty together explain about 40 percent of the variation in student reports of safety across schools (model 1 R-squared=.396). By including human and social resources in the model, about half of the differences in student safety are explained (model 2 R-squared=.510). The coefficient for poverty also shrinks by a third, indicating that some of the relationship of poverty with safety likely operates through

¹⁵ To calculate the share of variation, we square the value of the bivariate correlation coefficient.

human/social resources in the community. Human and social resources in the community are also associated with peer interactions, but less strongly than with safety (see Table 4). They are even less strongly associated with teachers' feelings of safety than with students' feelings of safety, although they are related. This makes sense, as it is students who would be receiving support from adults in the community rather than teachers.

One might also expect the presence of more affluent families in some communities, where residents have more education and are employed in more managerial or executive jobs, to be associated with fewer safety concerns. However, only modest relationships exist, regardless of whether they are measured in the area around the school or in students' home neighborhoods, and they are completely attributable to the fact that neighborhoods with more affluent families also have less poverty and lower crime rates. The relationships disappear when poverty and crime are controlled. It is the presence or absence of poverty and crime, more than the presence of higher-income families that is correlated with school safety.

School Safety and School Context

School safety is better in elementary/middle schools than in high schools. Yet, while there are marked differences in safety between middle grades and high school grades, these differences are overshadowed by the differences in safety by community context. The relationship between school level and school safety is about half of the size of the relationship between safety and community context factors, and there is only a very modest relationship between grade level and the quality of student interactions (see Table 4). Safety at the school is much more strongly determined by where the school is located, and the backgrounds of the students at the school, than by the grade levels it serves. On average, the number of students enrolled in a school is also not related to either students' or teachers' perceptions of safety (see

Table 4). Larger schools are positively related to student perceptions of peer interactions; but, the magnitude of the correlation is small.

There are large differences in safety by school racial composition. Students attending schools that serve predominantly African American students feel much less safe and report less positive peer interactions than students at other schools, on average. Teachers at these schools also report substantially less safe environments. The biggest difference in safety between African American schools and others is in the quality of peer interactions, with African American students especially unlikely to say their peers treat each other with respect. The schools that are most safe, on all three aspects of safety, are those that are majority white/Asian. Schools that are predominantly Latino fall in-between. However, it is difficult to disentangle school racial composition from neighborhood characteristics like crime and poverty. Almost all schools serving students from neighborhoods with the highest levels of crime and poverty are African American schools. Most schools with a substantial proportion of white or Asian students serve students from neighborhoods with low or very low crime rates. Predominantly Latino schools tend to serve students from neighborhoods with average levels of crime and poverty.

While school safety is strongly related to students' neighborhood characteristics, it is even more strongly related to the academic skills of students served by the school – the average prior achievement levels of students who enter the middle grades or high school (see Table 4). On average, students in Chicago who attend schools that enroll higher-achieving students report feeling safer at school than students in schools serving students with lower academic skills. In fact, school achievement by itself explains approximately half of the differences in student reports of overall safety and teacher reports of crime and disorder and the differences in the quality of interactions among peers at both the elementary and high school levels.

One interpretation of this relationship may be that achievement is higher because safety is higher – that students are better able to concentrate on learning when they are in a safe environment. Other research has shown that schools are more likely to show improvements in test scores if they have safe learning climates (Bryk, et al., 2010). However, in this case, school achievement level is measured with students' incoming test scores at the beginning of ninth grade (for high school reports) or the end of fifth grade (for students in grades six through eight). Thus, it is the characteristics of students that show a relationship with safety, not the quality of the education they received while at the high school or in the middle grades.

Not only is school average incoming achievement level the strongest predictor of student reports of school safety, but it also explains most of the relationship of school safety with poverty and crime. As shown in model 4 in Tables 6-8, the achievement level of the school fully mediates the relationship between crime and poverty with student and teacher reports of school safety. Conditional on school context variables and, in particular, academic achievement, the magnitude of the coefficients on crime and poverty decrease dramatically to the extent that these community context variables are no longer statistically distinguishable from zero. Poverty and crime show strong relationships with school safety primarily because schools in high-poverty, high-crime areas tend to serve students who enter school with low achievement.

The inclusion of variables representing school structure together with variables on student characteristics—especially including achievement—together explain most of the variation in safety across schools. As shown in model 4 and Tables 6-8, these variables together explain three fourths of the variance in student reports of safety and two thirds of the differences in student reports of peer interactions and teacher reports of safety. Figure 1 provides more detail on the strong relationships between student reports of safety and the characteristics of students

attending the school – the degree to which they live in neighborhoods with crime and their academic achievement levels.¹⁶ There is almost no overlap in student reports of safety among schools serving students with the most disadvantaged backgrounds and schools serving the most advantaged students. Safety is strongly defined by the characteristics of the students served by the school.

However, student characteristics are not completely deterministic of the level of safety of the school. Even after accounting for neighborhood and school factors, more than one-fourth of the differences in student reports of safety and peer interactions, and nearly one-third of the differences in teacher reports of crime and disorder remain unexplained (see Tables 6-8). As can be seen in Figure 1, there are large differences in safety among schools serving similar types of students. Schools serving students from neighborhoods with the highest crime rates – approximately two standard deviations above the mean – range from some of the very least safe in CPS (two standard deviations below the mean safety level) to others at about one standard deviation above the mean (around the 66th percentile of safety among all schools). Likewise, there are schools that serve students from very low-crime neighborhoods that are less safe than the average CPS school, despite serving more advantaged students. Schools serving students from neighborhoods with average levels of crime vary quite dramatically in how students report safety in their schools. Some are among the safest schools in CPS (at the 99th percentile), while other schools serving students from neighborhoods with identical levels of crime are among the least safe (at the 10th percentile). Schools' social-organizational structures explain some of these differences.

¹⁶ While not shown, the relationship between teacher reports of crime and disorder and student reports of peer interactions with crime, poverty and achievement look very similar and tell the same story. That is, there are similar patterns of large differences in teacher reports of crime and disorder and student reports of peer interactions among schools serving students from neighborhoods with similar crime rates, poverty levels, and achievement.

School Safety by School Social-Organizational Structure

Each feature of a school's social-organizational structure is significantly associated with school safety—leadership, teacher collaborative work, family interactions, and student-teacher relationships (see Table 5). What stands out is the degree to which meaningful school-family interactions show particularly strong relationships with school safety. Both students and teachers feel safest in schools where teachers view parents as partners in children's education. These relationships are so strong that they far overshadow the relationships of neighborhood crime and poverty with safety – and are at least as strong as the relationship of safety with school achievement level.

School leadership and collaborative work among teachers are also associated with safer environments, as represented by the relationships between collective responsibility and teacher influence and school safety. The more that teachers take responsibility for the whole school and work together, rather than just focusing on their individual classrooms, the safer those teachers feel. Likewise, the more that teachers are involved in school decision-making, the safer the environment for both teachers and students. Safety is also higher the more that programs and instruction are coherently coordinated, as indicated by the relationship between safety and program coherence.

Of course, the patterns observed in Table 5 could exist because it is easier to have strong relationships and good organizational structures in schools that serve more advantaged student populations. In other words, it is possible that the relationships themselves do not promote safety; they simply occur naturally in schools already inclined to be safe, based on their student population. To examine the degree to which school organizational structure is related to school safety, net of the characteristics of the students served by the school and school structure, Model

Model 5 in Tables 6-8 predicts school safety with variables from each of the components of organizational functioning, as well as the variables for school and community context. Because variables representing specific organizational features in schools (e.g., leadership, teacher collaboration) are correlated with each other, we aggregate the CCSR survey measures into composite measures. Each composite measure is standardized across the sample of CPS schools.

Once we consider the four aspects of a school's organizational structure (leadership, teacher collaboration, school-family interactions, and student-teacher relationships) approximately 80 percent of the differences in safety across schools, as reported by students and teachers, are explained. Thus, school organizational factors help explain why schools with very similar students can have very different outcomes when it comes to safety, and consideration of these factors lead almost all of the differences in school safety to be explained—only 20 percent remains unexplained in each measure of school safety. What stands out from these models is the importance of positive and constructive relationships between students and teachers and teachers and families.

As can be seen in Model 5 in tables 6-8, school-family interactions continue to be significantly related to safety, even after controlling for school structure and composition. However, the relationships are smaller than observed in Table 5 because of correlations with compositional variables. In particular, the coefficients for human/social resources in students' neighborhoods and school achievement level decline once school-family interactions are included in the models. There are inter-correlations among all of these variables—some of the relationships of human/social resources and school achievement level are mediated through the relationships that families have with teachers. At the same time, it is more likely that teachers

will have good relationships with families when they work in high achieving schools serving students that come from communities where adults look out for children.

Teachers' feelings of crime and disorder at the school are especially strongly related to family interactions, even after controlling for the composition of students served by the school. Leadership in the school also continues to show a relationship with teachers' reports of crime and safety in the school, after taking into account other social-organizational features. But most of the relationship of leadership with safety seems to be mediated through other mechanisms: school-family interactions and teacher-student relationships. The relationship of leadership with students' feelings of safety and peer interactions is completely mediated through other organizational features; leadership matters for safety to the extent that it affects these other elements of schools.

Once we control for school composition and structure, student-teacher relationships emerge as the strongest organizational feature associated with students' reports of peer interactions. They are also as important as teacher-family partnerships for students' overall feelings of safety. Students feel safer, and feel that their peers are more respectful, when they have more trusting, supportive relationships with teachers.

Given the evidence on the strong relationships of school-family interactions and student-teacher relationships with student and teacher reports of safety, we wondered whether high-quality relationships can make up for differences across schools in the types of students they serve. To examine this, we compared safety in schools that were highly disadvantaged but had strong relationships to schools that were advantaged but had weak relationships. We did this by constructing a composite indicator of the socioeconomic advantage of schools which took into account the level of crime, poverty, and human and social resources in a student's home

neighborhood, as well as the level of academic achievement in the school. Using this composite indicator, we divided schools into low, middle and high advantage groups; low advantage schools are approximately half a standard deviation or more below the mean level of school advantage, and high advantage schools are approximately half a standard deviation or more above the mean. We then created a composite of the quality of school-based relationships by combining the school-level values of the school-family interactions and student-teacher relationships constructs into one measure. We divided schools based on whether they had high, average or low-quality relationships. Schools with low-quality relationships are approximately half a standard deviation or more below the mean level of school-based relationships, and schools with high-quality relationships are approximately half a standard deviation or more above the mean. For each combination of school advantage and quality of relationships (e.g. low-advantage/low-quality relationships, low-advantage/average-quality relationships, etc.), we compared the three measures of safety. Figure 2 summarizes the results for student reports of safety.

Regardless of the overall level of school advantage, safety is better in schools where there are higher-quality relationships among students, teachers and families. This holds true across all three indicators of school safety, although we only show student reports of safety here (other figures are available from the authors upon request). What is particularly notable is the extent to which high-quality relationships among students and adults can make up for socioeconomic disadvantage. In particular, schools serving the least advantaged students – students who live in neighborhoods with high levels of crime and poverty, few human and social resources and who attend lower achieving schools – but with high-quality relationships are as safe, on average, as the most advantaged schools with weak relationships. A t-test of the difference of means

confirms that low-advantage schools with high quality relationships are as safe as high-advantage schools with low-quality relationships. Indeed, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the mean values are the same since the p-value of the test statistic is approximately 0.9 (for each of the three safety outcomes). This is true for student reports of safety, and also with teacher reports of crime and disorder and student reports of peer interactions.

Weaker student-teacher relationships in high school make it more difficult to maintain a safe school climate

A number of studies have documented that the transition to high school can be problematic for students' relationships with teachers and performance in school.¹⁷ Students enter schools that are typically larger and more impersonal than their elementary/middle school, with any one teacher seeing a student for no more than one or two class periods in a day. By comparing students' experiences as they move across the transition through interviews with students and their teachers, we get a concrete understanding of some of the ways relationships work to buffer students from adverse factors in their environment. At the same time, we can see how the absence of trusting relationships between adults, students, and families may leave students emotionally and physically vulnerable, particularly during the often difficult transition to high school.

In many Chicago schools, especially those where students feel unsafe, gang violence dominates students' concerns. Gang problems become more directly present in many students' everyday lives when they enter high school. While they expressed concerns about gang activity during elementary/middle school, perceived threats and issues moved from outside to inside the school building, and were more likely to involve them and their friends in a direct way. Students explained that in high school, they had to become more careful about choosing associates, often

¹⁷ Seidman et al. 1996; Seidman et al. 1994; Roderick & Campburn, 1996

out of fear of being mistaken for gang members themselves. In high school, one student explains, “You have to watch what you’re saying – [you] have to watch who you talk to.”

Worries about personal safety, concerns about the safety of friends and acquaintances, and more general fears about the unpredictability of gang violence in high schools, contributed to a broad sense of uncertainty and mistrust among the students whom we interviewed to a greater extent in ninth grade than the year before high school. Students also observed that fights in high schools became larger, less controlled, and more dangerous. The one-on-one scuffling of elementary schools appeared to give way to groups of students engaged in what occasionally became wild, melee-style brawls.

For a small number of the students, worries about being drawn into increasingly violent and seemingly unpredictable fights during high school became a central preoccupation. Among this group, students became increasingly withdrawn from school, often skipping classes or even entire days in order to avoid conflicts. Even students who remained closely engaged in school still experienced high schools as more uncertain and less connected, with a majority of students whom we studied voicing concerns about fighting and gang violence in their school.

The move into high school affected students’ perceptions of the threat of violence at school. Because of the greater size, the mixing of students from dozens of elementary feeder schools and different neighborhoods, and the decrease in sustained contact between children and adults, adults and students are less likely to know each other well. There is a greater chance for misunderstanding among students and between students and teachers who know each other only superficially. “It’s easier to get in trouble in [high school],” a student explains – “it’s more people, so it’s easy to either get picked on or somebody throw something at somebody – and you can come to the wrong person and [then] it’s a fight.”

We can see a number of ways that the strength or absence of relationships between teachers and students can affect the climate of safety as students move into high school. One key difference comes from the increase in time and frequency of interactions that teachers spend with students, getting to know them and other students in their class. In middle schools, stronger relationships between teachers and students, and frequent communication, facilitates teachers' awareness of potential conflicts and their ability to prevent those conflicts from escalating or even occurring in the first place. Personal knowledge of all or most of the parties involved in a conflict makes it easier for teachers to mediate among students and plan interventions. Second, the way that teachers interact with students who are having problems in school can affect subsequent problems—potentially aggravating or ameliorating student behavior. Finally, discipline practices in the school can affect students' trust in adults and their subsequent interactions.

In the elementary/middle schools, teachers were dealing with smaller numbers of students, sometimes in self-contained classrooms, and were more aware of, and responsive to, emerging conflicts. Elementary/middle school teachers were able to take students aside, draw on students' relationships to other adults in the building, and constructively involve administrators and parents to resolve conflict before it became violent. The elementary school teachers generally also devoted more time to group dynamics in their classrooms, sometimes holding whole-class meetings to discuss and learn from disagreements and fights. In the high schools, adults were less likely to know all the parties involved in a conflict or to be aware of emerging conflicts as they developed. In unsafe high schools, weak relationships between students and adults limited the opportunities adults had to manage students' interactions, to be proactive in curtailing disagreements before they become violent, and to control and address conflict where it

occurs. Strong, stable bonds between students and adults in middle school helped adults in the building prevent and manage the encroachment of gang issues and fighting within and outside of the school.

Positive relationships between teachers and students can also mediate the adverse influences on school engagement from peers and community violence. This can be seen in the contrasting cases of two students in the same school. One, Derrick, a soft-spoken African American student was assaulted by an older student outside school, and subsequently threatened after school. As a result, he started skipping school. When he tried to return, his teachers did not try to find out what happened. Instead they assumed that he did not care about school; his algebra teacher complained that students like Derrick, “don’t see education as a priority . . . They don’t think it’s important for them to be here every day.” After feeling picked-on by his teachers, Derrick floundered in his classes and had a number of discipline problems, including multiple suspensions.

Chalise, an African American ninth-grader, had a very different experience, marked by much stronger and more supportive relationships with her teachers. Early in the fall of her freshman year, two of Chalise’s close friends from elementary school were shot and killed in gang-related violence. In a very short time, Chalise’s attitude towards school seemed to change dramatically—instead of an outgoing, cheerful girl, she became morose and fearful. However, instead of pulling away from her, Chalise’s teachers—and particularly her algebra teacher—knit more closely together around her as she struggled. Her algebra teacher offered to come in early before school to help her complete missed assignments, encouraged her to join a club he sponsored after school, and kept in close contact with her family throughout the year. Chalise slowly rebounded—eventually, her grades improved dramatically, until they exceeded her previous performance in school. She was selected for a national

honor society, and one of her teachers observed that she had become one of the few students in her high school class for whom college was obviously attainable.

Disciplinary measures in high school become more severe as teachers react to, rather than preempt, conflict. With the exception of one elementary school in the study where there were frequent suspensions, conflicts among 8th grade students were often likely to be resolved through conversations. Students would be sent to sit with the principal, talk with a staff member, or resolve a conflict with the teacher. In the larger, more anonymous environment of the high school, conflicts and fights often ended with out of school suspensions. Students were surprised at the severity of punishments they and their peers received when they entered high school, and greater enforcement of school rules. In the schools with high suspension rates, school discipline itself became a threat for students, making them feel less in control and cared for, and less likely to trust adults in the building. As one student described ninth grade, “trouble comes along every once in a while. It’s bound to happen. Nobody [can] go through a school year without having a suspension or detention.”

School Safety and School Discipline Practices

While high-quality relationships among students and adults seem to mediate students’ adverse neighborhood circumstances, we wondered whether punitive school responses to safety were also associated with student and teacher reports of safety. Schools across CPS serve very different populations of students who arrive at school from different social and economic circumstances. Suspensions are a response to school staff’s perceptions of threat and concerns about safety; they reflect which schools struggle the most with these issues. Given that there are strong relationships between neighborhood context, school context and school safety, we looked to see whether the relationship between suspension rates and feelings of safety persisted after controlling for neighborhood and school characteristics. Table 9 summarizes this analysis.

Controlling for differences in community and school context, schools with higher suspension rates have lower levels of safety as reported by students and teachers, with standardized correlations of $-.14$ for student safety and $-.24$ for teacher reports of safety.

While we are hesitant to make a causal argument based on correlational data, at best, this suggests that high suspensions rates do not sufficiently address the problems that schools face – schools with high rates of suspensions are still less safe than others that serve students with similar backgrounds in similar neighborhoods. At worst, this suggests that suspensions themselves may aggravate problems with safety. This latter perspective is consistent with research by others showing that schools with more severe suspension and “zero tolerance” policies often have higher levels of student fear (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Schools may unwittingly be exacerbating the low levels of safety in schools serving students from high crime/high-poverty neighborhoods through their discipline practices.

Conclusions

Broadly speaking, students’ families, peer groups, neighborhood and community characteristics, and school settings interact to shape students’ academic and behavioral development, and the overall climate in schools. As might be expected, crime and poverty in students’ residential neighborhoods are strongly associated with school safety. Neighborhoods with high crime and poverty tend to have fewer human and social resources available to students, and these social resources help students to feel safe as they travel between home and school and as they manage conflicts with peers.

While it is not surprising that crime and poverty are related to school safety, our analyses indicate that crime and poverty operate largely through the academic achievement level with

which students enter the school. Both students and teachers feel safer the more that a school serves academically strong students. The strong relationship between school achievement level and school safety may seem surprising, particularly because it is stronger than the relationships of crime or poverty with safety. But it makes sense for a number of reasons. One reason is the degree to which students are attached to school: high-achieving students tend to be engaged in learning and feel successful academically, while students with low levels of achievement are less likely to be engaged academically and more likely to feel frustrated by their performance (Newmann et al., 1992; Singh et al., 2002). This, in turn, makes lower-achieving students more likely to act out and less likely to respond to academic punishments. Indeed, the salience of academic consequences for misbehavior may be minimal for students who are already poorly engaged in learning – if students do not care about school, suspension may not be a powerful deterrent (Kazdin, 2000). Students with lower academic achievement often have experienced higher levels of disruption outside of school – family disruption, violence, and stress. These factors influence both student achievement and the likelihood of acting out and engaging in disruptive behaviors (Forehand, Miller, and Dutra, 1997; Meyers and Miller, 2004; Graber, Nichols, and Lynne, 2006). Students living in high-poverty and high-crime neighborhoods are particularly vulnerable and likely to experience disruption, and those students are likely to exhibit both low academic achievement and more behavioral problems. This is consistent with evidence that the biggest benefit to CPS students from selecting a higher-achieving school rather than a neighborhood school was in the decreased likelihood of trouble with police (Cullen et al., 2003).

Schools which most need resources and interventions to address issues of school climate are not necessarily those that are located in the poorest neighborhoods, but those serving students

with lowest levels of achievement. This suggests that district leaders might support schools with very low academic achievement with strong plans and resources for support around school safety. Policies that cluster students into schools based on their achievement need to recognize these safety concerns for schools serving low-achieving students. This also suggests a vicious cycle – schools need to search for ways to make students with low incoming achievement more invested and successful in school in order to promote safer schooling environments. Yet, it is more difficult for students to focus on learning, and for teachers to teach effectively, when the school environment is unsafe and disorderly.

However, demographics need not be destiny with respect to school safety. Schools serving very similar kids can have very different levels of safety. Inside the school building, the mutually supportive relationships that students and their parents have with teachers are a critical element defining school safety for both students and teachers. Much of what accounts for the large differences in school safety among schools in Chicago are the ways in which parents, teachers, and students work together collaboratively. Schools are safer when teachers view parents as supportive partners in children's education. When students feel that their teachers care about their learning and overall well-being and listen to them, students and teachers alike report safer school environments. Strong relationships between teachers and students can mediate the degree to which conflicts with peers or outside of school interfere with students' behavior within the school. Teachers who know their students well are more aware of emerging problems and understand the people involved. This gives them a better opportunity to prevent problems from occurring and to keep them from escalating.

To put these differences into perspective, recall the example schools in Table 3. A school serving students with few advantages – with low incoming achievement levels and many

students coming from neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and crime – would be very unlikely to resemble School A, a very safe school, regardless of the quality of relationships within the school. However, if that school had strong relationships among parents, teachers, and students, it would be more likely to resemble School B, where there are some problems with fights and disrespect, but most students feel safe within the school, than School C, where there are frequent fights, substantial disrespect among students and staff, and half of students feel unsafe in the hallways and bathrooms. Likewise, a school that served relatively advantaged students might have the opportunity to provide a very safe environment for students, such as the climate in School A, where the vast majority of students feel safe in all areas within the school and there are few problems with physical conflicts or disrespect of teachers. However, to do so, it would need to develop and maintain strong relationships among parents, teachers, and students; otherwise, it would be more likely to resemble School B, with substantial, but not overwhelming, threats to safety among students and teachers.

In contrast, punitive measures are less likely to be effective than measures that build and foster respect and trust. High rates of suspension do not show any benefit for either students' or teachers' feelings of safety at school, and they may even have adverse effects on school climate by aggravating distrust between students and adults. A focus on building relationships, rather than simply enacting punishments, is consistent with the framework of Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports which is being encouraged by the federal government, and may be one approach for policymakers to consider as an option to more punitive measures. Particularly in schools serving the most impoverished neighborhoods with the highest crime rates – schools where the student population tends to be 100% African-American—it is vitally important that school staff have sufficient time and resources to develop effective strategies around school

safety and discipline, and to develop structures that support collaborative relationships with students and their families.

This suggests that staffing levels need to be sufficient in schools with large safety concerns to keep teachers and other staff members from feeling overwhelmed so that they can develop positive relationships. Faculty and staff in very low-achieving schools require skills in managing conflict, and time and resources for strategically managing disruption and violence, so that students, their parents, and teachers can productively work together. It suggests that district and school leaders need to be strategic about building internal school structures that encourage productive dialogue among adults and students. Schools do not choose which students they serve, but the ways in which they set up interactions with parents, respond to conflicts among students, and build collaboration among staff do much to determine the climate in which students and teachers do their work.

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Tables & Figures

Table 1. Summary Statistics: School Context

	Student Reports		Teacher Reports	
School Characteristic	<i>High Schools</i> (n=76)	<i>Elementary Schools</i> (n=448)	<i>High Schools</i> (n=68)	<i>Elementary Schools</i> (n=319)
Enrollment	1020.2 (824.6)	592.0 (350.6)	937.3 (730.4)	579.5 (334.8)
% Black	.59 (.37)	.56 (.43)	.58 (.37)	.54 (.43)
% Hispanic	.32 (.31)	.32 (.36)	.33 (.32)	.34 (.37)
% White	.06 (.11)	.09 (.17)	.06 (.09)	.09 (.16)
% Asian	.03 (.06)	.03 (.08)	.03 (.06)	.03 (.09)
% Free/Reduced Lunch	.81 (.14)	.82 (.21)	.82 (.14)	.82 (.20)

Notes. Means (standard deviations) reported. School characteristics are for the 2008-09 school year. There are 524 schools with student reports and 387 schools with teacher reports.

Table 2. Survey Questions about School Safety

CCSR Survey Measure	Survey Question
Student Reports of Safety (Surveys of students in grades six to 12) Alpha = .63	How safe do you feel (not safe; somewhat safe; mostly safe; very safe): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Outside around the school 2. Traveling between home and school 3. In the hallways and bathrooms of the school 4. In your classes
Teacher Reports of Crime and Disorder (Surveys of teachers in grades K–12) Alpha = .88	To what extent is each of the following a problem at your school (not at all; a little; some; to a great extent): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Physical conflicts among students 2. Robbery or theft 3. Gang activity 4. Disorder in classrooms 5. Disorder in hallways 6. Student disrespect of teachers 7. Threats of violence toward teachers
Student Reports of Peer Interactions (Surveys of students in grades six to 12) Alpha = .62	How much do you agree with the following statements about students in your school (strongly disagree; disagree; agree; strongly agree): Most students in my school: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Don't really care about each other 2. Like to put others down 3. Help each other learn 4. Don't get along together very well 5. Just look out for themselves 6. Treat each other with respect

Notes. Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) surveys were administered to students in grades six through 12 during the spring of 2009. When combined into one measure, the items that indicate negative behaviors were reversed so that higher scores on all measures indicate better safety and peer relationships.

Table 3. Student and Teacher Reports of Safety at Three Chicago High Schools

	Student Reports of Safety	Teacher Reports of Crime and Disorder	Student Reports of Peer Interactions
School A A safe high school	92% feel safe in classrooms 90% feel safe in hallways and bathrooms 63% feel safe traveling between home and school 39% feel safe just outside the school	0% report violent threats to teachers 31% report robbery/theft 7% report gang activity 7% report physical conflicts 10% report disrespect of teachers	70% say peers care about each other 66% say peers get along well together 45% say peers just look out for themselves 47% say peers put others down
School B A typical high school	83% feel safe in classrooms 70% feel safe in hallways and bathrooms 47% feel safe traveling between home and school 35% feel safe just outside the school	16% report violent threats to teachers 29% report robbery/theft 75% report gang activity 61% report physical conflicts 62% report disrespect of teachers	60% say peers care about each other 55% say peers get along well together 58% say peers just look out for themselves 46% say peers put others down
School C An unsafe high school	60% feel safe in classrooms 50% feel safe in hallways and bathrooms 45% feel safe traveling between home and school 30% feel safe just outside the school	75% report violent threats to teachers 91% report robbery/theft 95% report gang activity 98% report physical conflicts 98% report disrespect of teachers	42% say peers care about each other 34% say peers get along well together 66% say peers just look out for themselves 63% say peers put others down

Table 4. Correlations of School Safety by Community and School Context

	Independent Variable	Student Reports of Safety	Teacher Reports of Crime and Disorder	Student Reports of Peer Interactions
Community Context	Crime (school neighborhood)	-0.54 ***	-0.52 ***	-0.54 ***
	Crime (students' home neighborhoods)	-0.60 ***	-0.57 ***	-0.69 ***
	Poverty (school neighborhood)	-0.50 ***	-0.46 ***	-0.51 ***
	Poverty (students' home neighborhoods)	-0.60 ***	-0.58 ***	-0.66 ***
	Human/Social Resources (students' home neighborhoods)	0.60 ***	0.44 ***	0.53 ***
	Social Status (school neighborhood)	0.37 ***	0.20 ***	0.19 ***
	Social Status (students' home neighborhoods)	0.38 ***	0.23 ***	0.14 ***
School Context	School Level (high school v. elementary school)	-0.32 ***	-0.32 ***	-0.12 ***
	Enrollment Size	-0.05	-0.07	0.10 **
	% Free/Reduced Lunch	-0.66 ***	-0.49 ***	-0.52 ***
	Academic Achievement	0.69 ***	0.72 ***	0.70 ***
	% Black	-0.49 ***	-0.52 ***	-0.70 ***
	% Hispanic	0.22 ***	0.31 ***	0.48 ***
	% White	0.66 ***	0.52 ***	0.58 ***
	% Asian	0.33 ***	0.31 ***	0.40 ***

Notes. Correlations statistically significant at * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, and *** $p < .01$. Those greater than .5 are in bold.

Table 5. Correlations of School Safety by School Social-Organizational Structure

Construct	CCSR Survey Measure	Student Reports of Safety	Teacher Reports of Crime and Disorder	Student Reports of Peer Interactions
School Leadership	Teacher Influence (t)	.52 ***	.56 ***	.54 ***
	Principal Instructional Leadership (t)	.20 ***	.32 ***	.21 ***
	Program Coherence (t)	.41 ***	.49 ***	.40 ***
	Teacher-Principal Trust (t)	.28 ***	.37 ***	.29 ***
Teacher Collaboration and Support	Collective Responsibility (t)	.49 ***	.61 ***	.51 ***
	Orientation to Innovation (t)	.43 ***	.51 ***	.45 ***
	Socialization of New Teachers (t)	.38 ***	.43 ***	.42 ***
	Teacher-Teacher Trust (t)	.38***	.42 ***	.39 ***
School-Family Interactions	Teacher-Parent Trust (t)	.72 ***	.79 ***	.74 ***
Student-Teacher Relationships	Teacher Personal Support (s)	.44 ***	.38 ***	.38 ***
	Student-Teacher Trust (s)	.39 ***	.34 ***	.45 ***

Notes. There are 524 schools for student reports of safety and interactions and 387 schools for teacher reports. Student and teacher survey measures indicated with a *t* and *s*, respectively. Correlations statistically significant at * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, and *** $p < .01$.

Table 6. OLS Regressions: Student Reports of School Safety

Construct	Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Community Context	Poverty (students' home neighborhoods)	-.3297 *** (.0589)	-.2149 *** (.0484)	-.1795 *** (.0491)	.0071 (.0448)	-.0095 (.0432)
	Crime (students' home neighborhoods)	-.3009 *** (.0542)	-.2308 *** (.0456)	-.0996 ** (.0501)	-.0047 (.0442)	-.0318 (.0418)
	Human/Social Resources (students' home neighborhoods)		.3760 *** (.0307)	.2979 *** (.0291)	.2848 *** (.0242)	.1482 *** (.0289)
School Context	School Level (high school v. elementary school)			-.6863 *** (.1126)	-.7826 *** (.0876)	-.8249 *** (.0732)
	Enrollment Size			-.1357 *** (.0475)	-.1602 *** (.0373)	-.0846 *** (.0291)
	African-American			-.7093 *** (.1431)	-.5340 *** (.1270)	-.4420 *** (.1092)
	Hispanic			-.3885 *** (.1063)	-.1650 ** (.0808)	-.2463 *** (.0728)
	AA/Hispanic			-.5321 *** (.1244)	-.3019 *** (.1018)	-.3144 *** (.0914)
	White/Asian			.0858 (.1239)	-.0156 (.0935)	-.0349 (.0850)
	Academic Achievement				.4905 *** (.0438)	.3479 *** (.0476)
School Social Organizational Structure	School Leadership					-.0126 (.0313)
	Teacher Collaboration and Support					.0138 (.0334)
	School-Family Interactions					.1844 *** (.0423)
	Student-Teacher Relationships					.2086 *** (.0286)
	R²	.3957	.5104	.6349	.7476	.7967
	Schools	524	524	524	524	524

Notes. Standardized coefficients (with robust standard errors in parentheses) are significant at *p<.10, **p<.05, and ***p<.01.

Table 7. OLS Regressions: Student Reports of Peer Interactions

Construct	Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Community Context	Poverty (students' home neighborhoods)	-.2531 *** (.0541)	-.1787 *** (.0529)	-.1037 ** (.0500)	.0585 (.0475)	.0345 (.0454)
	Crime (students' home neighborhoods)	-.4608 *** (.0535)	-.4153 *** (.0522)	-.1041 * (.0553)	-.0216 (.0517)	-.0605 (.0501)
	Human/Social Resources (students' home neighborhoods)		.2439 *** (.0315)	.2580 *** (.0321)	.2465 *** (.0282)	.0816 *** (.0299)
School Context	School Level (high school v. elementary school)			-.1621 * (.0942)	-.2457 *** (.0745)	-.2942 *** (.0594)
	Enrollment Size			-.0995 ** (.0440)	-.1208 *** (.0359)	-.0254 (.0266)
	African-American			.9820 *** (.1387)	-.8296 *** (.1281)	-.7211 *** (.1038)
	Hispanic			.0970 (.1059)	.2913 *** (.0891)	.1901 *** (.0729)
	AA/Hispanic			-.4429 *** (.1311)	-.2428 ** (.1119)	-.2677 *** (.0889)
	White/Asian			.1449 (.1274)	.0568 (.1040)	.0352 (.0921)
	Academic Achievement				.4264 *** (.0398)	.2552 *** (.0367)
School Social Organizational Structure	School Leadership					.0019 (.0311)
	Teacher Collaboration and Support					.0545 (.0362)
	School-Family Interactions					.1816 *** (.0409)
	Student-Teacher Relationships					.2476 *** (.0286)
	R²	.5057	.5536	.6286	.7133	.7861
	Schools	524	524	524	524	524

Notes. Standardized coefficients (with robust standard errors in parentheses) are significant at *p<.10, **p<.05, and ***p<.01.

Table 8. OLS Regressions: Teacher Reports of Crime and Disorder

Construct	Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Community Context	Poverty (students' home neighborhoods)	-.3136 *** (.0618)	-.2498 *** (.0618)	-.2502 *** (.0612)	-.0212 (.0588)	-.0201 (.0511)
	Crime (students' home neighborhoods)	-.2734 *** (.0576)	-.2449 *** (.0564)	-.1116 * (.0626)	-.0184 (.0556)	-.0328 (.0469)
	Human/Social Resources (students' home neighborhoods)		.2208 *** (.0409)	.1665 *** (.0440)	.1411 *** (.0372)	-.0249 (.0359)
School Context	School Level (high school v. elementary school)			-.5522 *** (.1011)	-.6449 *** (.0693)	-.6263 *** (.0602)
	Enrollment Size			-.1894 *** (.0492)	-.1631 *** (.0447)	-.0774 ** (.0349)
	African-American			-.4284 ** (.1697)	-.1712 (.1422)	-.2082 ** (.1054)
	Hispanic			.0638 (.1274)	.2608 ** (.1164)	.0930 (.1011)
	AA/Hispanic			-.2608 * (.1405)	.0071 (.1194)	-.0574 (.0929)
	White/Asian			.2734 * (.1534)	.1099 (.1306)	.0274 (.1032)
	Academic Achievement				.5872 *** (.0374)	.2969 *** (.0419)
School Social Organizational Structure	School Leadership					.0713 ** (.0347)
	Teacher Collaboration and Support					.0313 (.0359)
	School-Family Interactions					.3494 *** (.0466)
	Student-Teacher Relationships					.1391 *** (.0272)
	R²	.3620	.4029	.5294	.6733	.7807
	Schools	387	387	387	387	387

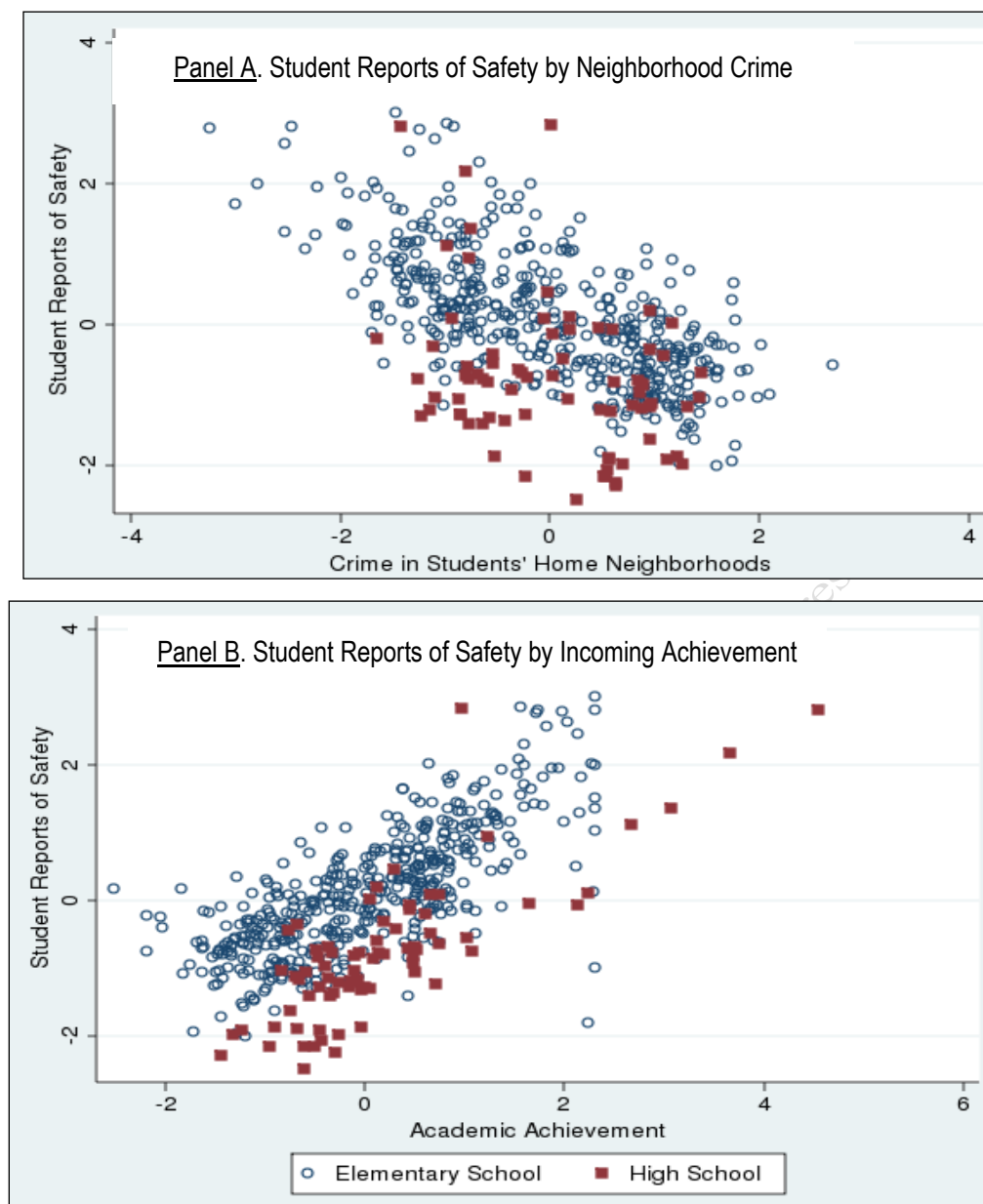
Notes. Standardized coefficients (with robust standard errors in parentheses) are significant at *p<.10, **p<.05, and ***p<.01.

Table 9. Role of School Suspensions on Student and Teacher Reports of Safety

Construct	Independent Variable	Student Reports of Safety	Teacher Reports of Crime and Disorder	Student Reports of Peer Interactions
	Suspension Rate	-.1408 *** (.0478)	-.2399 *** (.0419)	-.1789 *** (.0419)
Community Context	Poverty (students' home neighborhoods)	.0067 (.0457)	-.0388 (.0578)	.0577 (.0486)
	Crime (students' home neighborhoods)	.0033 (.0448)	-.0048 (.0564)	-.0080 (.0531)
	Human/Social Resources (students' home neighborhoods)	.2876 *** (.0243)	.1337 *** (.0362)	.2525 *** (.0283)
School Context	School Level (high school v. elementary school)	-.6363 *** (.1203)	-.3366 *** (.0876)	-.0414 (.0982)
	Enrollment Size	-.1608 *** (.0361)	-.1738 *** (.0416)	-.1214 *** (.0336)
	African-American	-.4813 *** (.1174)	-.0764 (.1369)	-.7842 *** (.1197)
	Hispanic	-.1914 ** (.0805)	.2260 ** (.1122)	.2570 *** (.0864)
	AA/Hispanic	-.2918 *** (.0971)	.0089 (.1148)	-.2424 ** (.1068)
	White/Asian	-.0144 (.0927)	.1134 (.1262)	.0636 (.1002)
	Academic Achievement	.4453 *** (.0483)	.5202 *** (.0395)	.3625 *** (.0417)
	R²	.7603	.6965	.7304
	Schools	516	380	516

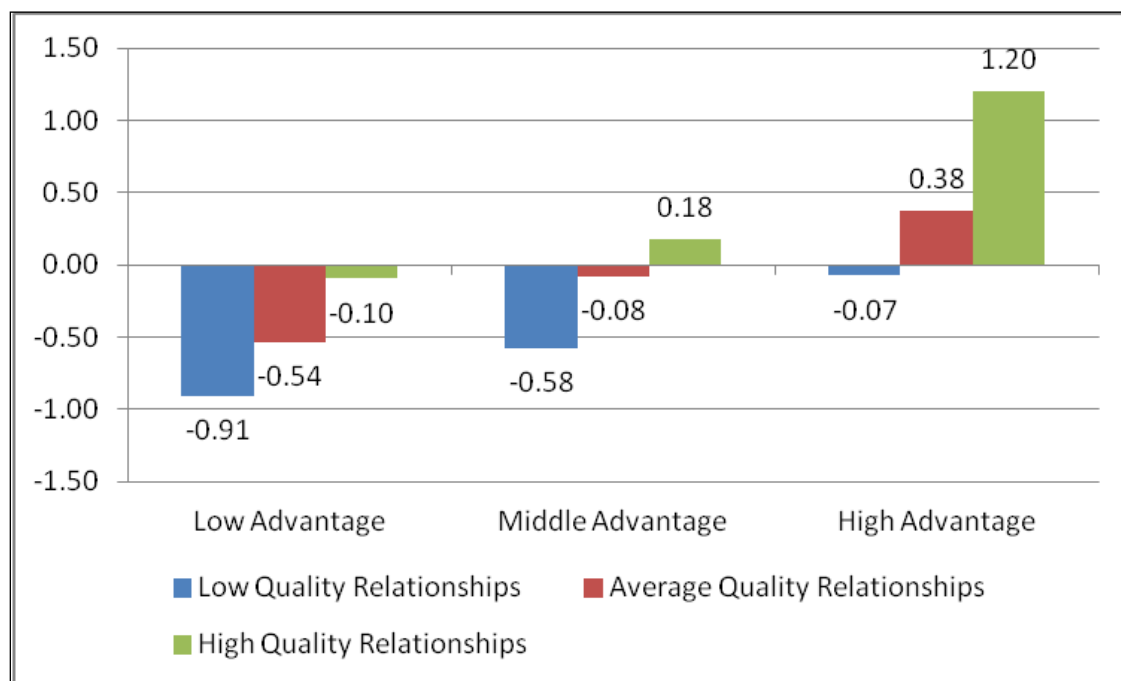
Notes. Standardized coefficients (with robust standard errors in parentheses) are significant at * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, and *** $p < .01$. The suspension rate is the (standardized) percent of students suspended for at least one day during the 2008-09 school year.

Figure 1. Student Reports of Safety by Crime and Incoming Academic Achievement



Notes. Each dot represents a single school. The axes are in standard deviation units. Crime and poverty are measured in students' home neighborhoods. There are 76 high schools and 448 elementary schools represented in the graphs.

Figure 2. Student Reports of Safety by School Advantage and Relationships



Notes. The values reported are the mean level of school safety as reported by students in standard deviation units. A school's level of advantage is a composite measure which includes crime, poverty and the extent of human and social resources in students' home neighborhoods and the academic achievement of the school. A school's quality of relationships depends on the quality of its *School-Family Interactions*, as perceived by teachers, and *Student-Teacher Relationships*, as perceived by students. Among *Low Advantage* schools, there are 96 schools with *Low Quality Relationships*, 65 schools with *Average Quality Relationships* and 13 schools with *High Quality Relationships*. Among *Middle Advantage* schools, there are 64 schools with *Low Quality Relationships*, 65 schools with *Average Quality Relationships* and 46 schools with *High Quality Relationships*. Among *High Advantage* schools, there are 15 schools with *Low Quality Relationships*, 45 schools with *Average Quality Relationships* and 115 schools with *High Quality Relationships*.

Table A1. Survey Measures of School Social-Organizational Structure

Domain	CCSR Survey Measure	Survey Questions
School Leadership	Teacher Influence (t) Alpha = .81	<p>How much influence do teachers have over school policy in each of the areas below? (none, a little, some, to a great extent):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Determining books and other instructional materials used in classrooms 2. Determining the content of in-service programs 3. Establishing the curriculum and instructional program 4. Hiring new professional personnel 5. Planning how discretionary school funds should be used 6. Setting standards for student behavior
School Leadership	Principal Instructional Leadership (t) Alpha = .90	<p>The principal at this school:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Makes clear to the staff his or her expectations for meeting instructional goals 2. Communicates a clear vision for our school 3. Sets high standards for teaching 4. Understands how children learn 5. Presses teachers to implement what they have learned in professional development 6. Carefully tracks student academic progress 7. Knows what's going on in my classroom 8. Participates in instructional planning with teams of teachers
School Leadership	Program Coherence (t) Alpha = .74	<p>To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Curriculum, instruction, and learning materials are well coordinated across the different grade levels at this school 2. Many special programs come and go at this school 3. Once we start a new program, we follow-up to make sure that it's working 4. We have so many different programs in this school that I can't keep track of them all 5. There is consistency in curriculum, instruction, and learning materials among teachers in the same grade level at this school
School Leadership	Teacher-Principal Trust (t) Alpha = .76	<p>Please mark the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The principal at this school is an effective manager who makes the school run smoothly 2. The principal places the needs of children ahead of personal and political interests

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. I trust the principal at his or her word 4. It's OK in this school to discuss feelings, worries, and frustrations with the principal 5. The principal has confidence in the expertise of the teachers 6. The principal looks out for the personal welfare of the faculty members 7. The principal takes a personal interest in the professional development of teachers 8. Do you feel respected by your principal?
Teacher Collaboration and Support	Collective Responsibility (t) Alpha = .91	How many teachers in this school: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Feel responsible for helping students develop self-control 2. Feel responsible that all students learn 3. Feel responsible to help each other do their best 4. Feel responsible when students in this school fail 5. Help maintain discipline in the entire school, not just their classroom 6. Take responsibility for improving the school
Teacher Collaboration and Support	Orientation to Innovation (t) Alpha = .87	How many teachers in this school: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are eager to try new ideas 2. Are really trying to improve their teaching 3. Are willing to take risks to make this school better Please mark the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. All teachers are encouraged to "stretch and grow" 5. In this school, teachers are continually learning and seeking new ideas
Teacher Collaboration and Support	Socialization of New Teachers (t) Alpha = .54	Please mark the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Experienced teachers invite new teachers into their rooms to observe, give feedback, etc. 2. A conscious effort is made by faculty to make new teachers feel welcome here
Teacher Collaboration and Support	Teacher-Teacher Trust (t) Alpha = .63	Please mark the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It's OK in this school to discuss feelings, worries, and frustrations with other teachers 2. Teachers at this school respect those colleagues who are expert at their craft 3. Teachers in this school trust each other 4. Teachers respect other teachers who take the lead in school improvement efforts 5. Do you feel respected by other teachers?

School-Family Interactions	Teacher-Parent Trust (t) Alpha = .76	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For the students you teach this year how many of their parents support your teaching efforts? 2. For the students you teach this year how many of their parents do their best to help their children learn? 3. How many teachers in this school feel good about parents' support for their work? 4. To what extent do you feel respected by the parents of your students? <p>Please mark the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following statements about your school:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Staff at this school work hard to build trusting relationships with parents 6. Teachers and parents think of each other as partners in educating children
Student-Teacher Relationships	Teacher Personal Support (s) Alpha = .81	<p>How much do you agree with the following statements about your teacher:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Really listens to what I have to say 2. Is willing to give extra help on schoolwork if I need it 3. Helps me catch up if I am behind 4. Believes I can do well in school
Student-Teacher Relationships	Teacher-Student Trust (s) Alpha = .63	<p>How much do you agree with the following statements about your teachers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My teachers always keeps his/her promises 2. My teachers always try to be fair 3. I feel safe and comfortable with my teachers at this school 4. When my teachers tell me not to do something, I know he/she has a good reason 5. My teachers will always listen to students' ideas 6. My teachers treat me with respect 7. My teachers really care about me 8. The teacher for this class really cares about me
Community Collective Efficacy	Human and Social Resources in the Community (s) Alpha=.68	<p>How much do you agree with each of the following six items about the community in which they live:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There are adults in this neighborhood that children can look up to 2. Adults in this neighborhood know who the local children are 3. You can count on adults in this neighborhood to see that children are safe and do not get into trouble 4. During the day, it is safe for children to play in the local park or playground 5. People in this neighborhood can be trusted 6. The equipment and buildings in the neighborhood park or playground are well kept

Appendix

Constructing and Analyzing School-Level Measures from CCSR Surveys

All analysis is conducted at the school level. We use the CCSR survey questions of students and teachers (detailed in Tables 2 and A1) to create school-level means of both the three measures of safety as well as a school's social-organizational structure. When using survey responses, there are multiple sources of error as an estimate of school climate. One source comes from the ways in which individual respondents fill out the surveys. For example, a person may not fill out all of the questions about safety, or may misread a question and respond in the opposite way intended. A second source of error comes from less than complete response rates at the school – if not all students or teachers at the school participate in the survey, we may not gain a completely accurate sense of the school climate since we do not include all people's perceptions.

To adjust for the first source of error, we use Rasch modeling techniques to create individuals' scores on the school climate measures, producing a standard error for each individual based on the ways in which they responded to the questions. Responses that are incomplete or irregular receive a larger standard error. We then use the standard error to adjust for the degree to which that person's score is likely to be accurate when constructing the school mean. The school-level means (used for all survey measures in this paper) are constructed using unconditional hierarchical models in which the first level is a measurement model that uses the standard error. The second level is students or teachers, and the third level is schools. The school-level estimate is a precision-weighted Bayesian estimate, which takes into account the second source of error – the number of responses in a school. Schools with smaller response

rates are “shrunk” towards the grand mean of the system, since there is less confidence that the school is properly represented.

Qualitative Analysis Methods

Qualitative data are analyzed typologically (Hatch, 2002, LeCompte & Preisle, 1993). Interviews were transcribed and entered into Atlas Ti coding software; working with general themes individually, we coded transcripts inductively for emergent themes. Data were subsequently analyzed categorically and summarized along relevant factors, such as student perceptions of safety and quality of relationships with adults. These analyses allowed us to observe trajectories within cases, patterns across cases, and relationships among the factors we explored.