



Feeling Connected at School: Findings from the 2024 Youth Development Instrument Survey (YDI)

Giulia Maluf (MPH)

Contact Author: giulia_de_aruda_maluf@sfu.ca

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada

Jenna Whitehead (PhD)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada

Julia Kaufmann (MSc)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada

Jorge Andrés Delgado-Ron (MD, MPPGA, MSc)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada

Judy Wu (MPH)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada

Hasina Samji (PhD)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada;

Abstract

Background: Schools are key to mental health promotion (Barry et al., 2024), with evidence on the health benefits of school belonging (Holt-Lunstad, 2022). School engagement can mediate adverse childhood experiences and worsened mental health, regardless of demographic characteristics or pre-existing mental health conditions (Niu et al., 2024). A systematic review of longitudinal studies identified school connectedness as protective against depressive and anxiety symptoms (Raniti et al., 2022). We explored school belonging, positive school environment (i.e., the school's social atmosphere), and school safety within a Canadian youth sample, examining differences across subpopulations using 2024 data from the Youth Development Instrument (YDI) (Samji et al., 2025).

Methodology: The YDI is a school-based wellbeing survey conducted among secondary students in British Columbia (BC) (Samji et al., 2025). The survey was approved by the harmonized Behavioural Research Ethics Board of the University of British Columbia (ID: H20-02544). School environment and belonging were assessed using three-item scales from the Middle Years Development Instrument (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2013). School safety was measured with adapted item from the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (Su et al., 2014) and Child and Youth Resilience Measure (Liebenberg et al., 2013). Response options ranged from 1 (disagree a lot) to 5 (agree a lot); summed scores were categorized as high ($\geq 80\%$ of maximum), medium ($\geq 60\%$ and $< 80\%$), and low ($< 60\%$). Subgroup differences were tested using Chi-Square tests ($p < 0.05$).

Results & Conclusion: Among 17,078 youth (Mage = 16.6), 49% identified as boys, 47% as girls, and 4% as non-binary or another gender identity; 21% identified as 2SLGBTQIA+. Overall, 34% reported a highly positive school environment, 37% reported a strong sense of school belonging, and 68% reported feeling safe at school. Significant disparities emerged. Among 2SLGBTQIA+ youth ($n=3,473$), 26% reported a highly positive school environment, 26% a high sense of school belonging, and 56% felt school was safe, compared to 36%, 40%, and 71% for non-2SLGBTQIA+ youth, respectively. Regarding gender identity, 32% of girls ($n=7,845$), 37% of boys ($n=8,167$), and 22% of non-binary youth ($n=716$) reported a highly positive school environment; 36% of girls, 40% of boys, and 20% of non-binary youth had a strong sense of belonging; and 67% of girls, 71% of boys, and 43% of non-binary students felt safe at school. Findings highlight inequities in school experiences among 2SLGBTQIA+ and non-binary students, underscoring the need for youth-engaged initiatives that build supportive learning environments and strengthen students' sense of purpose and belonging.

Keywords: School belonging; school safety; school environment; youth mental health; equity.



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