



# Preventing Sexual Violence in Washington State Middle Schools

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Washington Office of Superintendent of  
**PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON

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**Northwest Center**  
FOR PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE

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**Funding:**



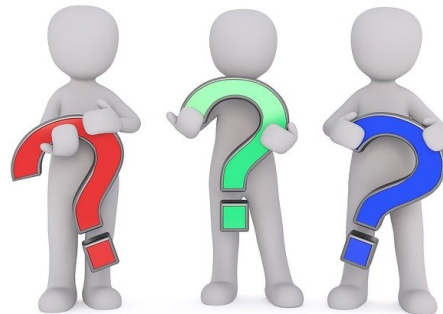
Centers for Disease  
Control and Prevention

# Question for the Viewers



How much concern do you have about sexual violence (or related behaviors/attitudes) among middle school students?

- A. None
- B. A little
- C. A moderate amount
- D. A lot



# Today's Objectives

Impact of sexual violence among WA students.

School-based and student-led SV prevention.

Youth-centered Environmental Shift (YES!) pilot study.

LGBTQ+ students' perspectives on preventing SV.

Challenges for middle schools to address SV.

# Background

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# Youth-Centered Environmental Shift (YES!)

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# Supporting Survivors & Responding to Sexual Violence

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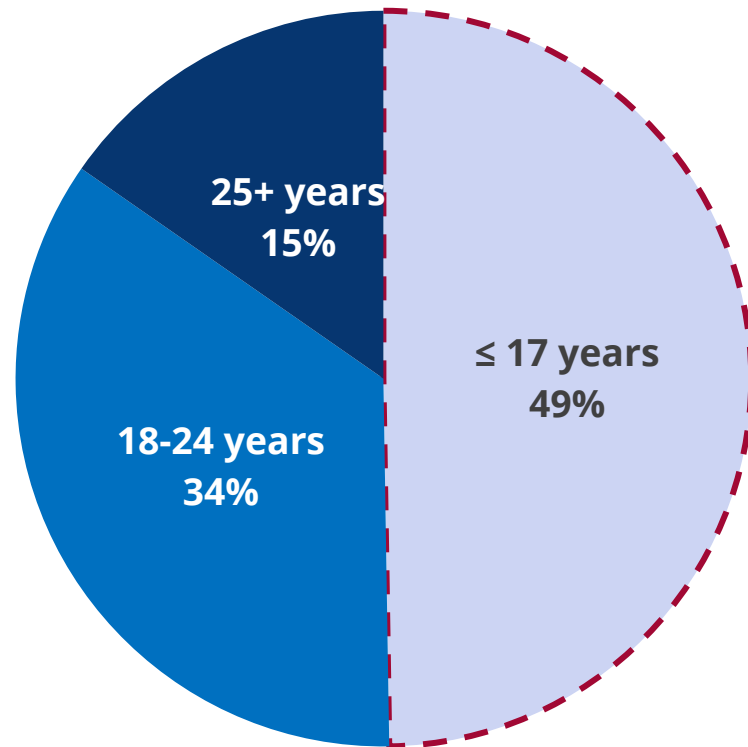
# Background

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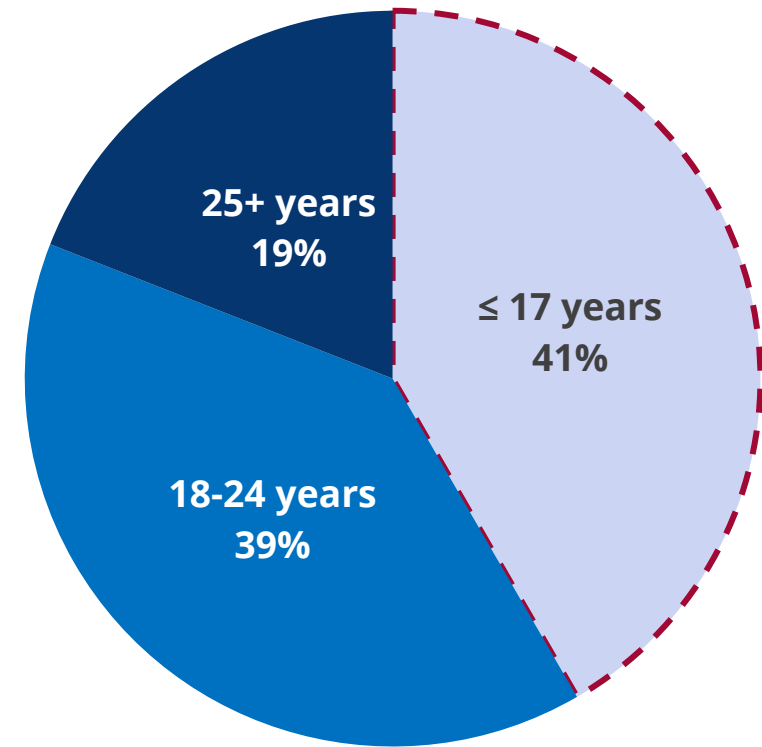
# Sexual Violence

Sexual violence (SV) is prevalent and includes a range of behaviors

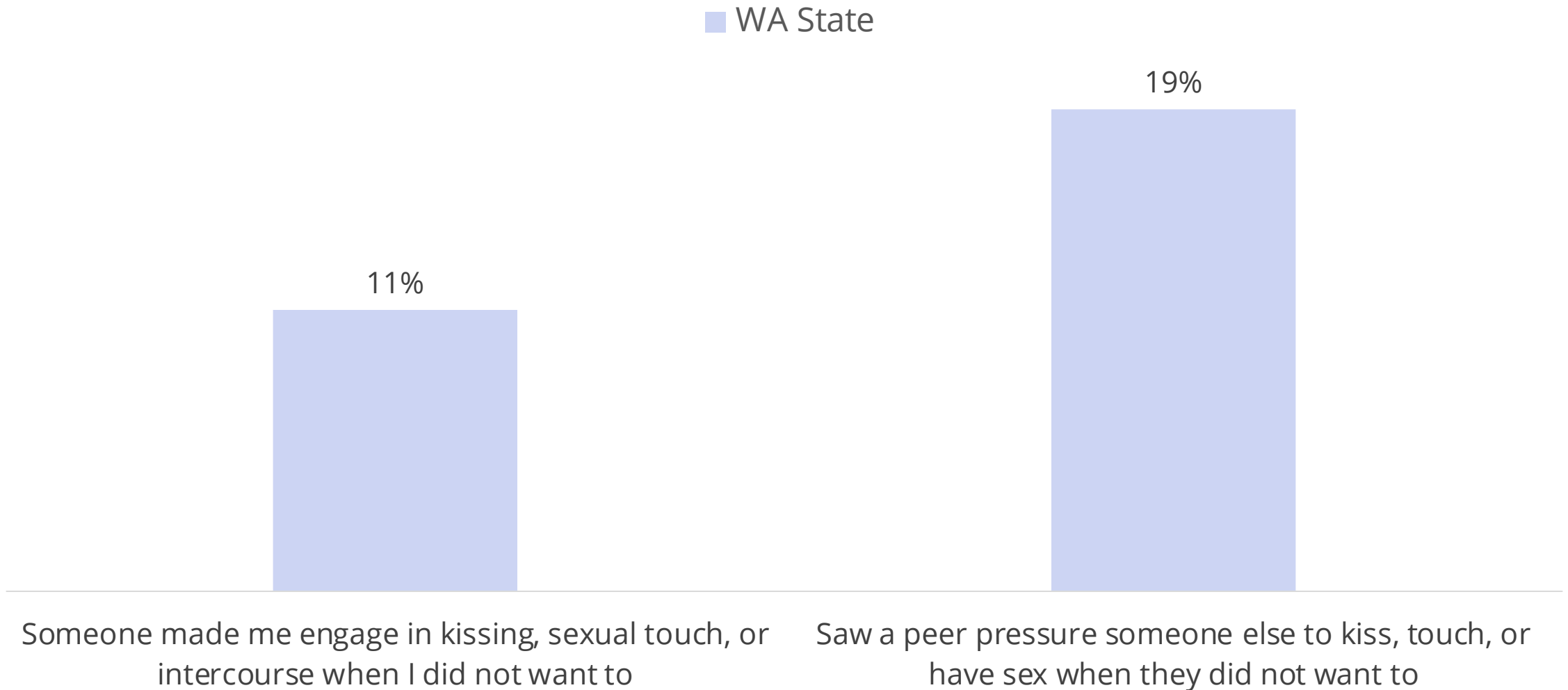
Age at First Victimization: Women



Age at First Victimization: Men



# Sexual Violence among 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Students





# Consequences of Sexual Violence

The consequences of SV can be severe and long-lasting



Mental health



Physical health



Reproductive health



Unhealthy behaviors



Death



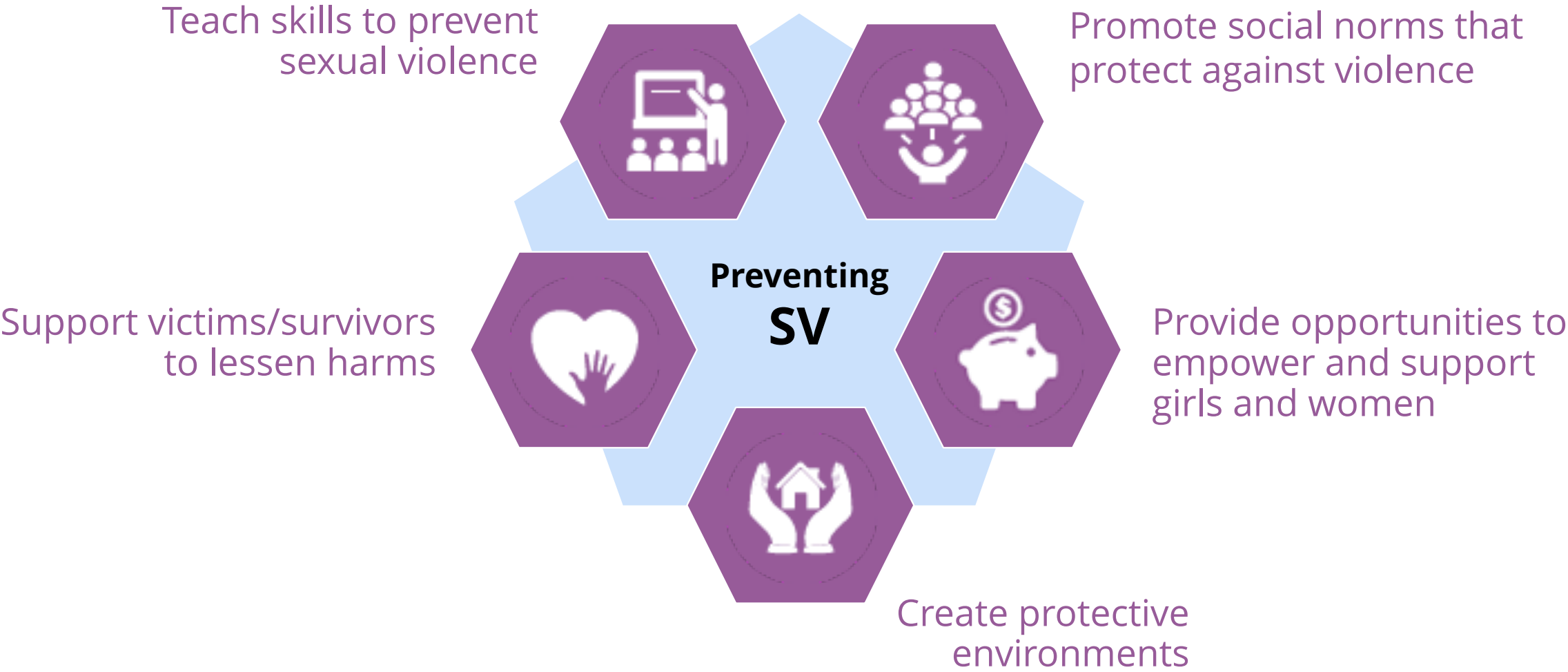
Societal costs

# Impact of Sexual Violence on Students



- More likely to experience health issues and engage in negative social behavior.
- Less likely to graduate, get and keep a job, and develop healthy relationships with others.
- Unable to access or benefit from the school's educational program, services, and activities.
- Fear being re-traumatized by school's failing to respond or responding unskillfully.

# Evidence-Based Strategies for Preventing Sexual Violence



# Role of Schools in Sexual Violence Prevention



- School environments offer an influential context to prevent SV
- Most school-based interventions for SV have focused on individual-level curriculum for students
- System-level interventions (e.g., focused on school policies and procedures) for primary prevention of SV are critically needed in schools

# Youth-Centered Environmental Shift (YES!) Program

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**Mission:** To create a school culture where students are emotionally and physically safe, supported, and free of abuse, specifically Sexual Violence.



# Youth-Centered Environmental Shift (YES!) Program

## Program Components

**School Support Team  
(SST) Development**

**School Climate and  
Environmental Shift**

**Policy and Procedure  
Revision and  
Implementation**

## Program Activities

Identifying SST members

Youth listening sessions

Identify policies and  
procedures to review

Training of SSTs

Environmental shift  
assessment

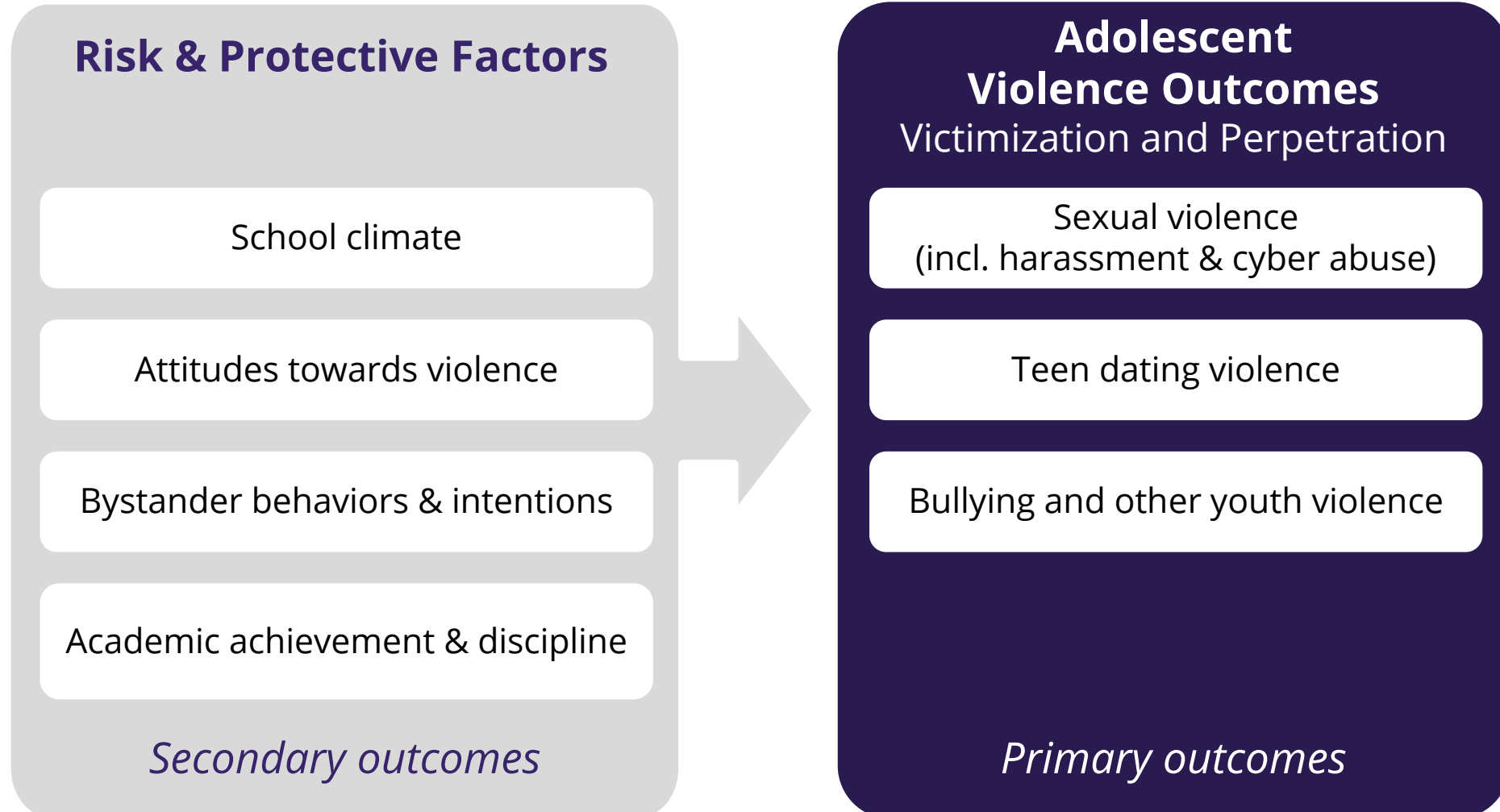
Revision of policies and  
procedures

Coordinate SST cohort

Social norms campaign

Implementation of building  
protocols and plans

# YES! Outcomes of Interest





# Hot Spot Mapping: Safety in School Environment

**56%** of students agree on and/or can identify at least one safe area or safe person at their school. School spaces identified as “safe” have these characteristics:



**Open**

bright, many exits

**Trusted adults**

supervision

**Calming aesthetic**

music, books peaceful

**Clear expectations**

enforced rules

**Familiar people**

**Quiet**

private, uncrowded

**Gender affirming**

# Protective School Environments

## Address community-level risk through environmental approaches

- Adult monitoring and presence in hotspot areas
- Designate certain areas for a particular class grade (e.g., “6th grade only hall”)
- Implement awareness weeks, social challenges, and trusted adult appreciation days
- Post easy-to-read infographics reminding student of their rights in “hot” locations
- Display student art/posters promoting healthy relationships, mental health, anti-bullying
- Create “trusted adult”/“safe space” signs or pins to put up in your classroom and office



# Youth-centered Strategies: Being a Trusted Adult Ally

**Violence between students is not always obvious** and can often be hidden or overlooked.

Teachers can indirectly contribute by **joking about it** or dismissing a student's **boundaries**.

Just because a teacher asks the right questions **does not mean a student will feel comfortable** answering honestly.



# Supporting Survivors & Responding to Sexual Violence

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# Supporting Survivors: School Responses to SV

- Lack of staff training, minimization, harmful gender norms, and working in silos are all barriers to effective school response to SV.

I do think that sexual assault complaints ***don't get taken as seriously*** as other complaints...[T]here were **no consequences** for what was happening, so it kept going."

"I just wish it felt like there's **someone I could go to who would walk me through the process** instead of making me go through the process without myself being ready."

"Teachers handle these poorly because they don't ask for our input... they are sometimes **blatantly disrespectful, but other times misguided** or think it is helpful when it's not."

# Supporting Survivors: School Responses to SV

*“Our conclusion is that a multi-tiered system of support, grounded in compassion for survivors, a well-trained staff, clear and well-enforced policies...is the best path forward.”*

[Supporting Survivors Report](#), 2023



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# Trauma-Informed Approach to SV

- Students highlighted the importance of trauma-informed response

“The teachers that have caused us stress and harm, they’re learning something too. They’re learning how to accommodate these people who have gone through these things. **They’re learning about how assault affects people, how it affects things that have nothing to do with assault, [such as] their learning.**”

“[Students need teachers] who kind of have empathy or informed experiences about it so they’re **able to provide more genuine support for people who have trauma** from these types of experiences.”

# Survivor-centered Approach to SV

- Prioritize and validate survivor's feelings and rights to decide who should know and what happens next
- Focus on supporting survivor's emotional needs first while assisting

"I feel like maybe some people who report might feel like they are talking to a robot..."

...the main thing is, when they go to the person for help, **they want that actual person-to-person communication, where they feel like they're being advocated and cared for.** And even if the person isn't able to automatically take the measures against the alleged harasser, it still feels nice to be believed and understood."



# Centering Student Voices

## Young People Want to Know:

- What the reporting process is, step by step.
- Who their trusted adults are, like the Title IX Coordinator.
- What supportive measures and other choices they have.

## Young People Want to Decide:

- Whether to file a report.
- Who supports them during the process.
- Accountability for the respondent/perpetrator.
- How much is shared (with parents/families, classmates, teachers).

# How to Respond to a Disclosure of SV

## Students Want Adults to:

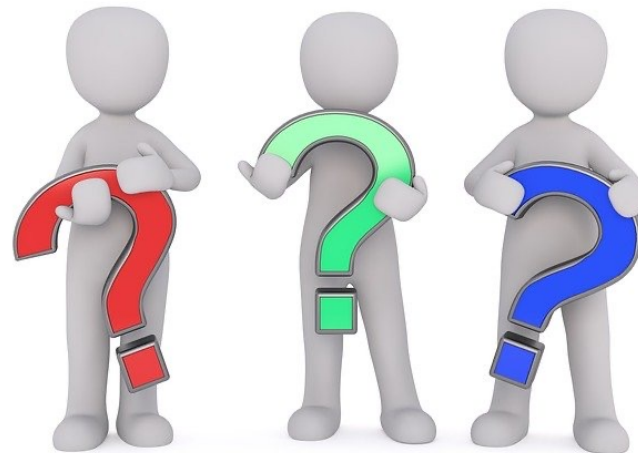
- Believe them.
- Support first.
- Be up front about your role and the reporting process.
- Ask questions about what the survivor wants and get their consent.
- Make a plan together and keep checking in.
- Be trained in sexual assault response.

# Question for the Viewers



1. How can schools play a role in addressing SV among students?
2. What is important for relationship-building with schools and young people?

Write in the chat!



## Cognitive Interviews to Adapt Survey Measures

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## Needs & Attitudes: Data from Staff & Students

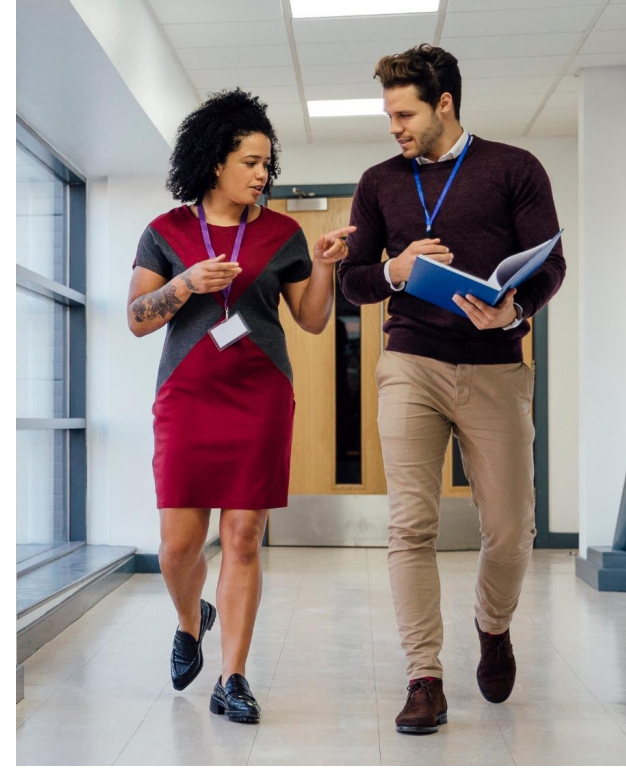
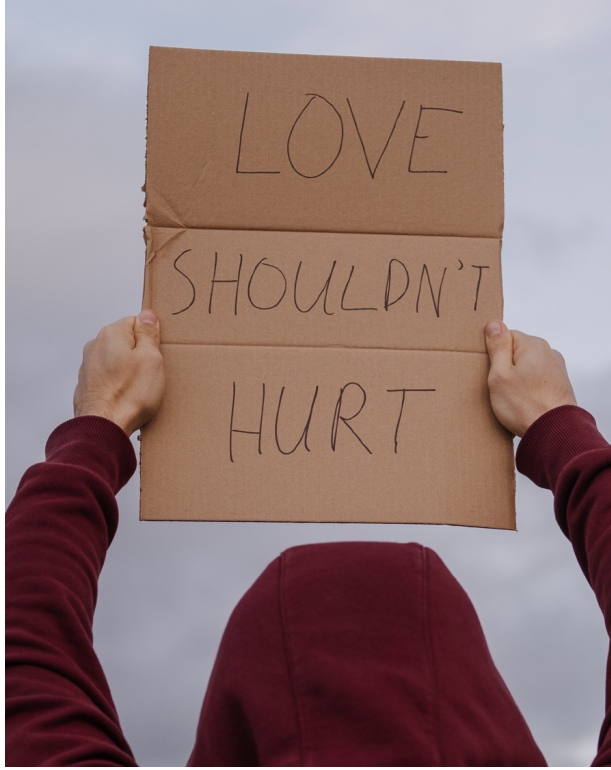
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## Perspectives of LGBTQ+ Youth

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## Perspectives of School District Leaders

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# Cognitive Interviews to Adapt Survey Measures

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# Cognitive Interviews for Survey Questions

**Aim:** To identify adolescents' comprehension of survey questions on interpersonal violence, including SV, teen dating violence, and cyberbullying



- Zoom interviews with 15 middle school youth in WA
- Feedback from youth on meaning of specific survey questions and questions/edits to wording for clarity
- PowerPoint slides with survey questions shown
- Content analysis to identify patterns and classify comprehension issues youth experienced

# Example Items: Sexual Violence

**In the past 12 months, how often has anyone you know done the following to you IN PERSON?**

	<b>Never</b> This has never happened	<b>A Few Times</b> This has happened 1-3 times	<b>Sometimes</b> This has happened 4-9 times	<b>Often</b> This has happened 10+ times
Made unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks				
Called you gay or lesbian in a negative way				
Touched you in an unwelcome sexual way				
Showed, gave, or left sexual pictures, drawings, messages, or notes that you didn't want to see				
Spread sexual rumors about you				
Forced you to do something sexual (like kissing, sexual touch, or intercourse)				

# Comprehension and Clarity

- Most questions were clear and understandable
- Including the definition of 'sex' ('sex includes oral, vaginal, and/or anal sex') was helpful for understanding

“*That makes sense. With kissing to intercourse, those are pretty different. Someone might not take being forced to kiss, compared to intercourse, that seriously. They might not write it down as an answer, but **since you're [listing] all of it, it's easier to understand***”



# Comprehension Challenges: Intent and Terminology

- Uncertainty about whether to “count” an experience of violence if the perpetrator committed it “by accident” or did not intend to cause harm
- Unfamiliar with certain terms (e.g., intercourse)
- Trouble identifying examples of ‘unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, gestures, or looks’

“*When I think of that, I think about two different things, **whether if it’s a compliment or an insult.** I think that, with this question, I would be confused what to put down. I’d probably just end up putting it if it was an insulting joke*”

# Comprehension Challenges: Interpretation

- Conceptualized certain constraints/parameters around questions

- Examples:

- **Spread sexual rumors:** Some interpreted as spreading lies about someone's sexual history, while others interpreted as spreading true but private information
- **Forced you to do something sexual:** Some interpreted as only physical force vs. psychological force

“*I guess my only kind of, I want to say objection, but I'm not really objecting to anything is like forced ... What if you were coerced? I don't know if that would specifically fit under forced. I feel like maybe pressured, in a sense, maybe would be better, because I think pressured might fit forced and coerced and anything in between*”

# Youth Suggestions for Improving Items



Clarifying language about dating relationships (what counts as dating, ensuring gender-neutral terminology)



Expanding type of social media platforms listed where cyberbullying takes place (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram, Discord, Twitch)



Including more examples alongside items (e.g., “something sexual”)

# Needs & Attitudes: Data from Staff & Students

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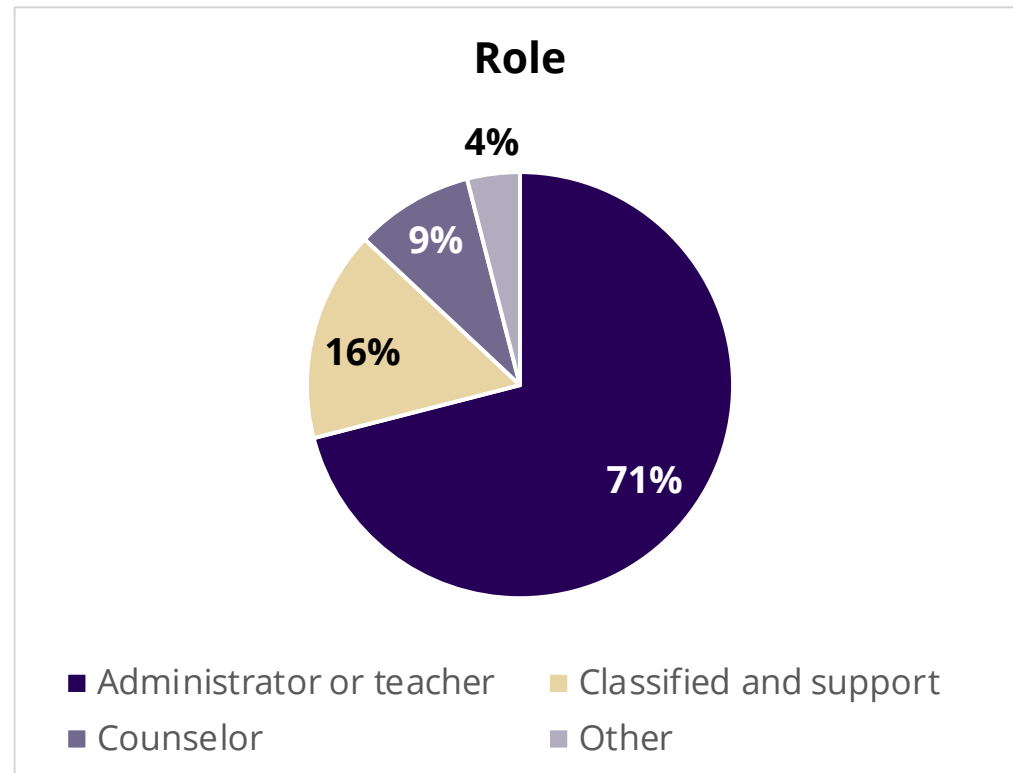


# Staff & Student Surveys across 3 Middle Schools

## Staff (n=110)

### Survey Topics:

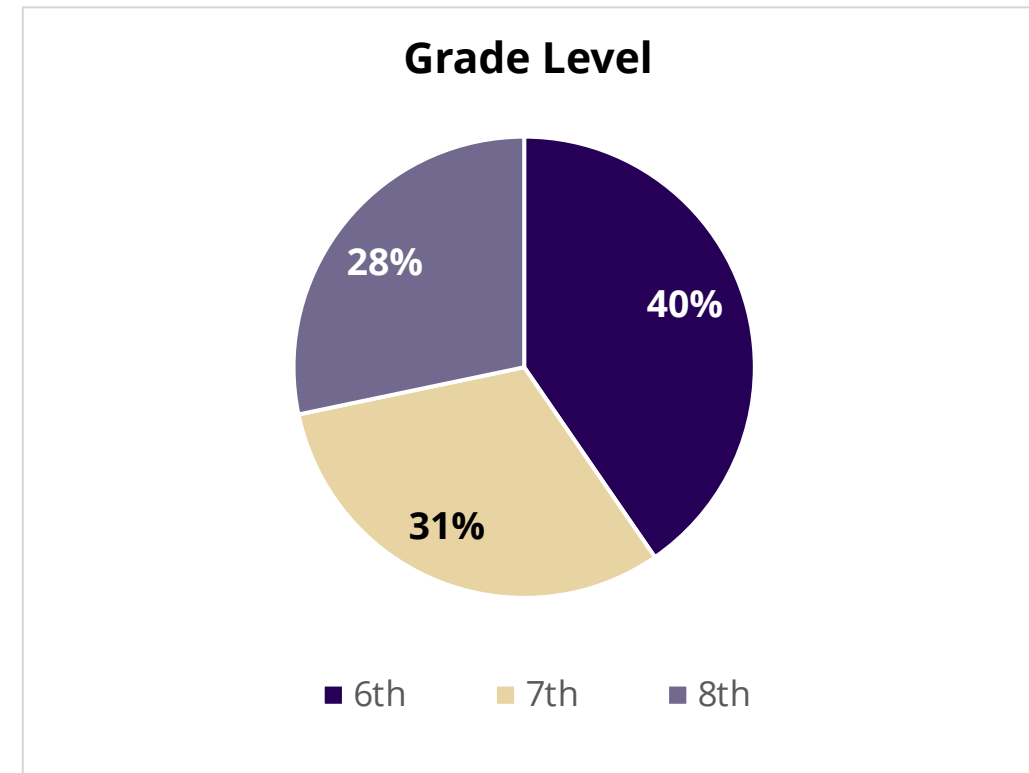
- Knowledge and attitudes
- School policies and practices
- Intervening in situations of SV



## Students (n=337)

### Survey Topics:

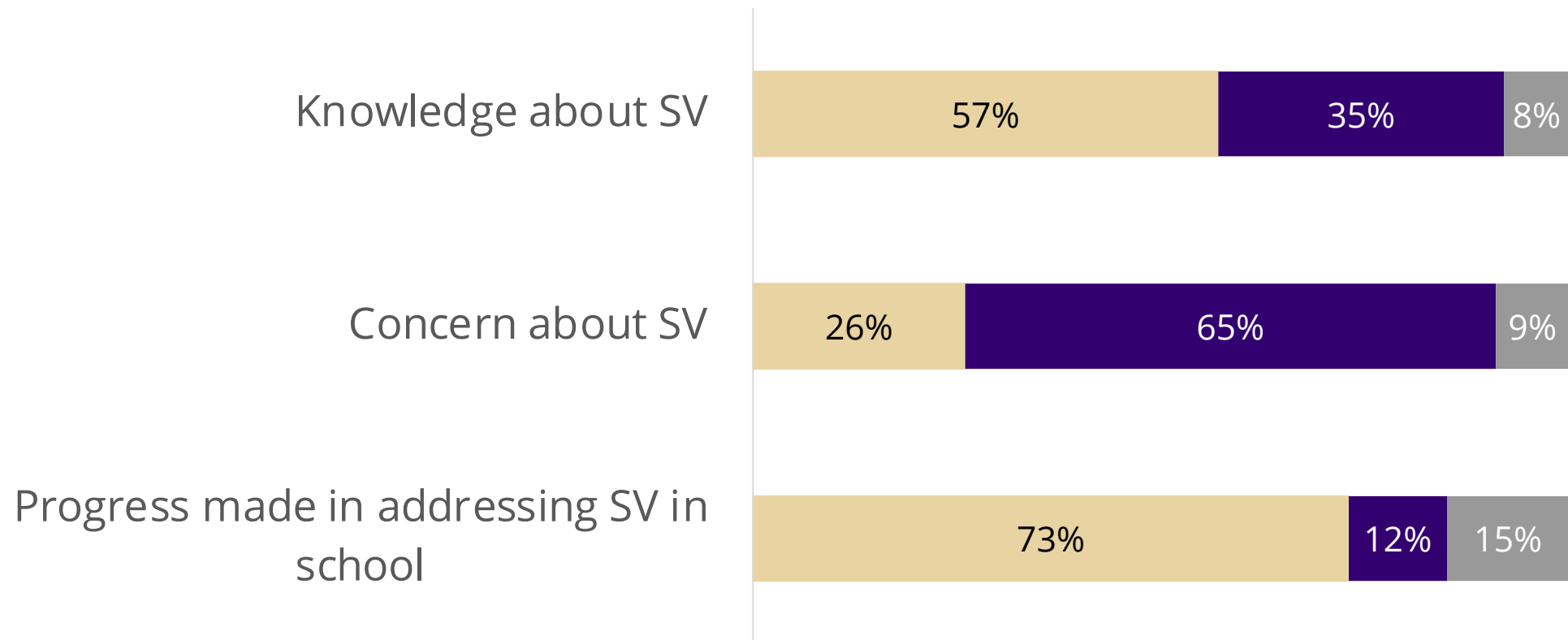
- Perceptions of school climate
- Perceptions of abusive behaviors
- Experiences of SV



# Staff Survey: Knowledge & Attitudes about Sexual Violence

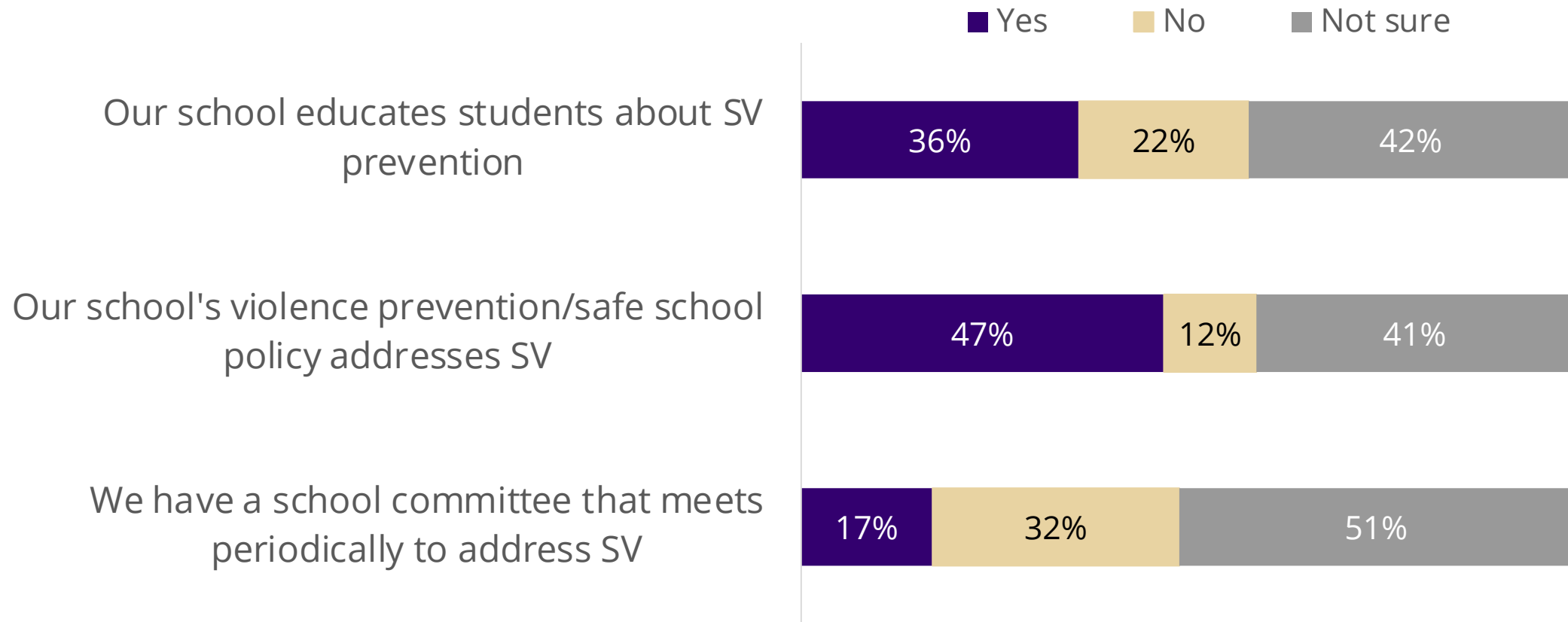
Mixed knowledge about SV and concern about SV, but challenges with planning and progress toward addressing SV at the school

■ None/A little   ■ A moderate amount/A lot   ■ I don't know enough to answer



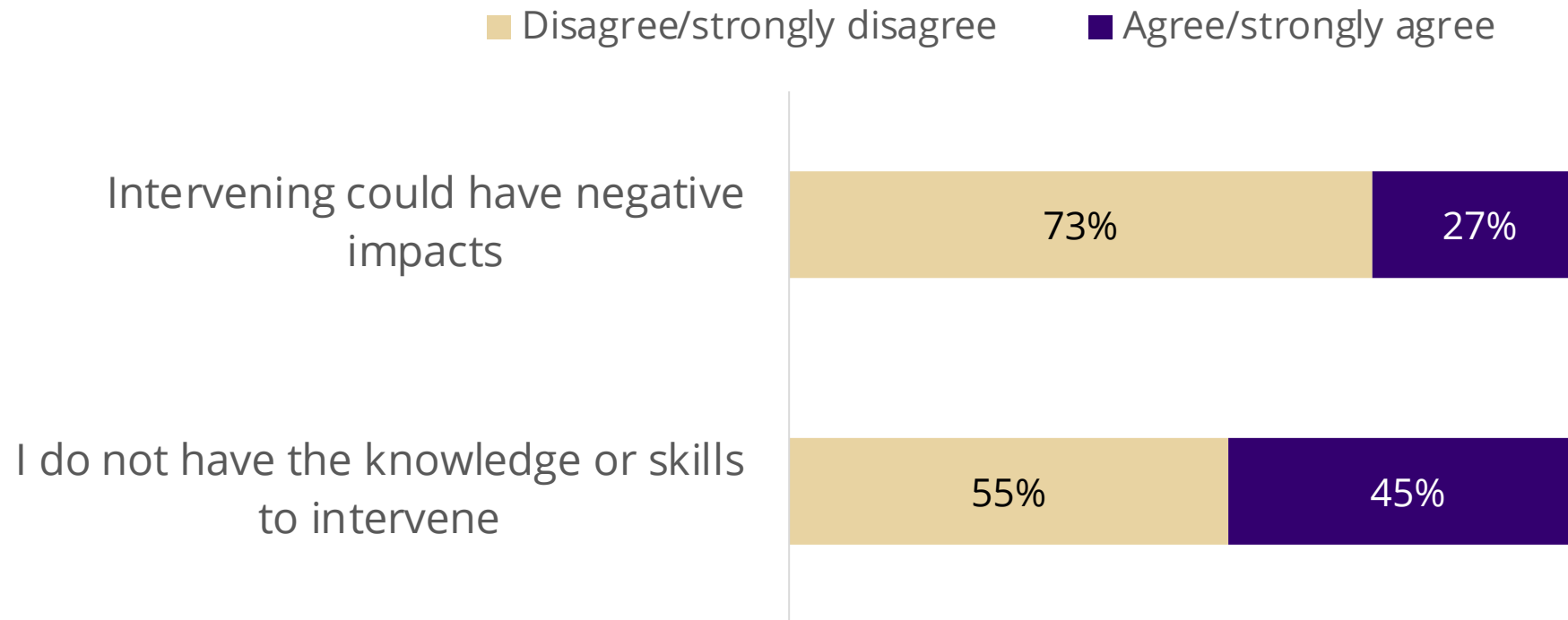
# Staff Survey: School Policies & Practices for Sexual Violence

General lack of knowledge about student education about SV, where to report, or if there was a school policy to address SV



# Staff Survey: Intervening in Situations of Sexual Violence

97% of staff feel responsible to intervene but have some concerns about the negative impacts and not having the knowledge or skills to intervene





# Student Survey: School Climate & Culture

Middle school students are divided on their feelings about school climate

## Students agree or strongly agree that...

- Teachers treat them with respect **(73%)**
- School is a place they feel safe **(64%)**
- They feel successful at school **(60%)**
- Students are frequently recognized for good behavior **(44%)**

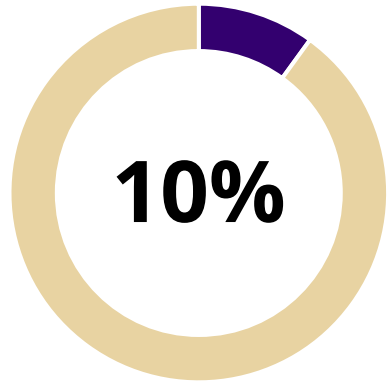
# Student Survey: Perceptions of Abusive Behavior

Middle school students are split on what behaviors they consider “abusive”

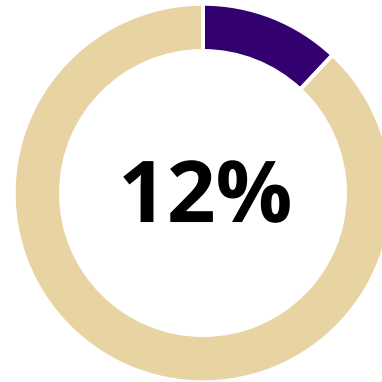
## Behaviors rated abusive or extremely abusive...

- Pressuring them not to break up with them **(72%)**
- Telling them which friends they can and can't see or talk to **(68%)**
- Telling them what to do all the time **(53%)**
- Telling them they're ugly or stupid **(46%)**
- Name calling or insulting them **(32%)**

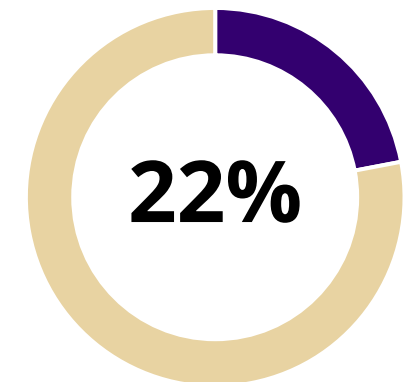
# Student Survey: Sexual Violence Victimization



Report being touched in an unwelcome or unwanted sexual way



Report seeing someone their age pressure someone else to kiss, touch, or have sex when they didn't want to



Report having someone make unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks towards them

# Perspectives of LGBTQ+ Youth

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LOVE

SHOULDN'T

HURT



# Perspectives of LGBTQ+ Youth

**Aim:** To understand LGBTQ+ students' perspectives on protective factors for sexual violence experiences in K-12 schools

## Partner Organization: Pizza Klatch

- LGBTQ+ organization in Thurston County, WA
- Mission: "to foster reliance in LGBTQ+ youth and create a safe and positive school experience"
- Weekly lunch support group for students who identify as LGBTQ+
- 31 students participated in interviews or open-ended surveys



# Recommendations from LGBTQ+ Students

## To prevent and respond to SV:

- Provide LGBTQ+ competent mental health support
- Enforce SV and anti-bullying policies and ensure accountability
- Increase and ensure access to gender-neutral spaces
- Include LGBTQ+ relationships and SV in the comprehensive sexual health education curriculum
- Train staff in cultural humility to support LGBTQ+ students

# Provide LGBTQ+ Competent Mental Health Support

- Need for licensed mental health professional
- Concerns of being outed

Enough counselors but not therapists, because there are kids that need them. **Kids actively say they want therapists** but have a lack of insurance or money to pay said therapist

We had counselors at my school to talk to, but **I felt a little bit afraid they'd tell my parents**

# Enforce SV and Anti-Bullying Policies and Ensure Accountability

- Stronger disciplinary action and transparency around "next steps" after reporting incidents of SV
- Traditional forms of discipline in addition to counseling and anti-oppression education

Without that open line of communication, **victims sometimes they think it's not worth [reporting]**

If you don't have physical proof of someone harassing or bullying you, they'll be like, "*Oh, we can't do anything.*" Or say that it's just drama



# Increase and Ensure Access to Gender-Neutral Spaces

- Access to gender-neutral locker rooms/restrooms as protective factor
- SV perpetration occurs in restrooms
- Facilities not always accessible for students

Although a lot of the sexual violence that I've heard of has always been in the bathrooms...

...the gender-neutral bathrooms have been locked for about two months now. So I know quite a bit of people who have not been able to use the bathroom at school because there's only two gender-neutral bathrooms besides the nurse's office. And I know a lot of people that don't want to go into the nurse's office just to use the bathroom

# Comprehensive Sexual Health Education

- Intersections of sexual health education, SV prevention education, and LGBTQ+ inclusive education

There's not enough teaching on what happens when you're sexually assaulted or what is sexual violence... **I feel some people experience it and don't even realize that they're experiencing it because they think it's just normal...** especially among queer people who aren't addressed in those conversations

I have one teacher that I remember very well because she didn't do anything extraordinarily out of pocket, **but she just acknowledged the existence of LGBTQ people in a positive light rather than a negative light**

# Train Staff in Cultural Humility to Support LGBTQ+ Students

- Unmet need for more supportive and trustworthy staff to support LGBTQ+ students
- Issues of enforcement of heterosexuality and cisgender norms

There was one teacher  
and **no matter how many times I tried,**  
**she would not call me by my preferred name,**  
which was both incredibly frustrating  
and it felt really bad

Unfortunately, it's sad to see,  
but even teachers, not only students,  
but **teachers will even join in on some of**  
**the very heinous things that people**  
**will say to other people,**  
and it's not it

# Perspectives of School District Leaders

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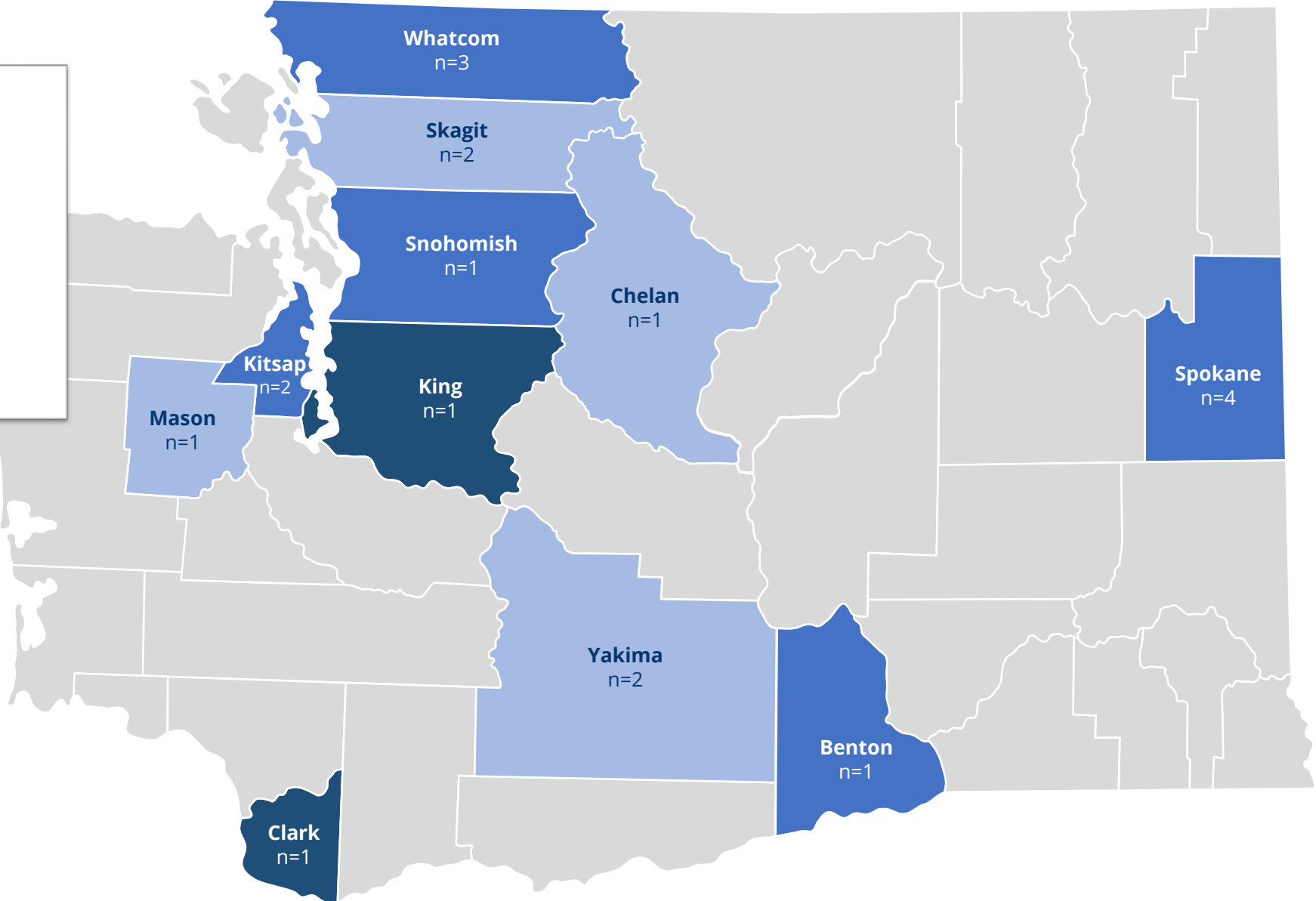
# Evaluation Challenges

**Purpose:**

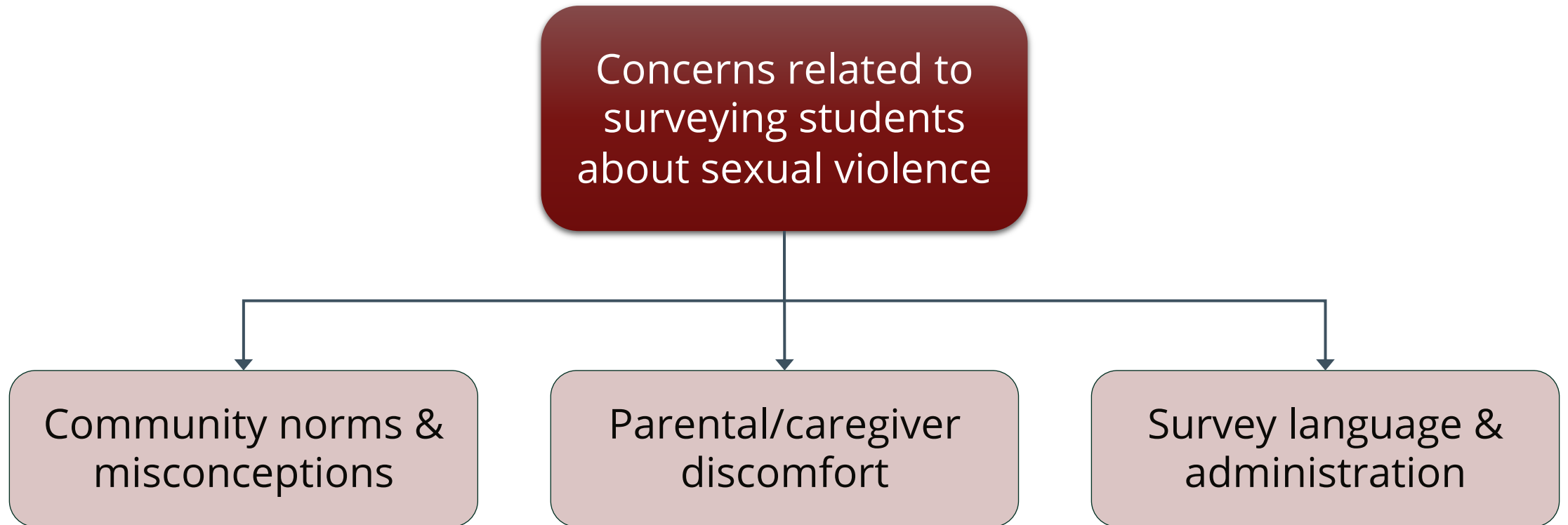
Explore concerns related to surveying students about sexual violence & identify ways to mitigate these concerns

**Population density (persons per mile<sup>2</sup>)**

- > 800
- 100 - 800
- < 100 (rural)



# School District Leader Concerns




# Community Norms & Misconceptions


...There's a bit of an environment, particularly in conservative faith communities, that this is introducing things or teaching kids how to have sex way too early or indoctrinating kids into LGBTQIA lifestyles or identities



# Parental/Caregiver Discomfort



I think parents start to become defensive and upset when they feel like their ability to lead this important conversation got pulled out from under them



...In our community, I think they see 11-15 year olds...as being very vulnerable and very young. And that talking about these kinds of issues, we are scaring them. We're talking to them about things that they don't need to know about yet

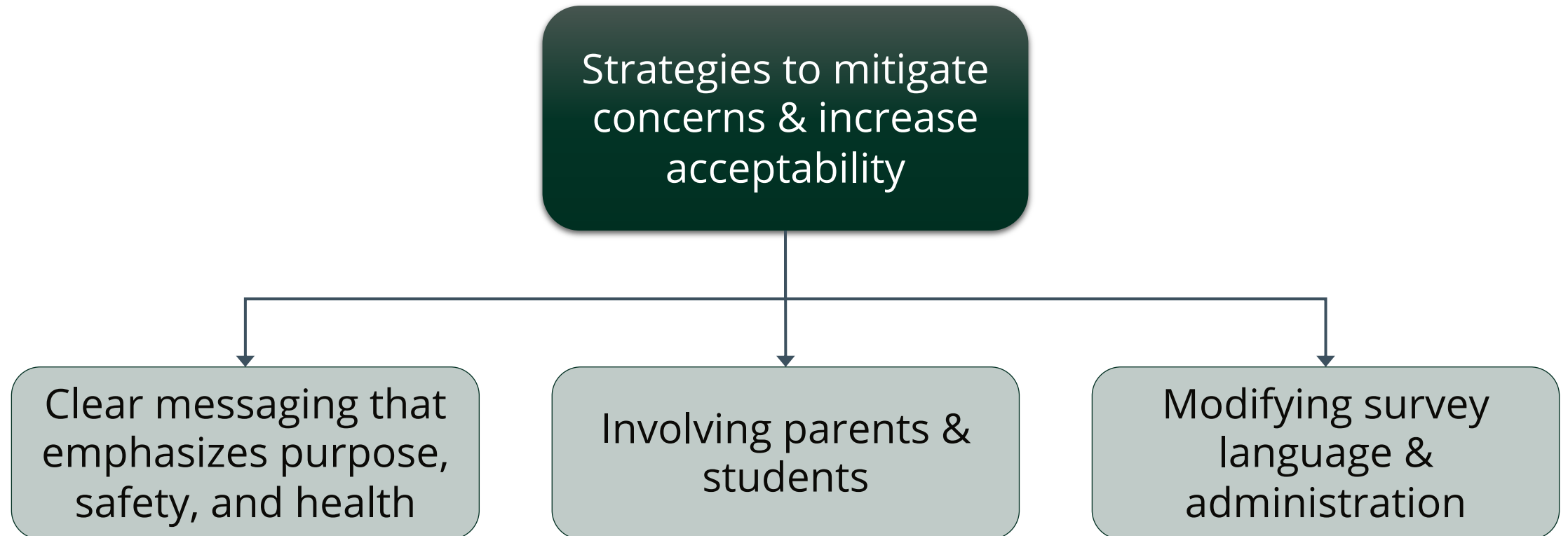


# Survey Language & Administration



...if we put questions like this in front of a child who has been abused sexually and is already dealing with that personally and in their family and maybe beyond what we might know about as a school, that's a very uncomfortable and inappropriate position to put that student in

# Potential Solutions



# Clear Messaging

... I would encourage reflecting:  
“Here's what we are hearing from students. Here's what we understand from the surveys we do. Here's what we know from our own population and this is important to us because your kids being safe is important to us. And one of the ways that we can help them be more safe is having a real picture of what they're experiencing. And that's what this survey is going to help us understand”



# Involving Parents & Students



What would really value [students'] time is for them to have the opportunity to see what a difference taking the survey meant, what you did with the results and whether you used it to advocate for certain things ... to see what the results were and then what next steps you are taking

# Modifying Survey Language and Administration

Definitely don't ask these in the fall...of any grade because the kids have all been home with their parents over summer. Maybe the spring of seventh grade especially...if these topics have already been talked about [in sex education]... then asking these questions I think really is valuable to us because, did we get through to the kids or not?



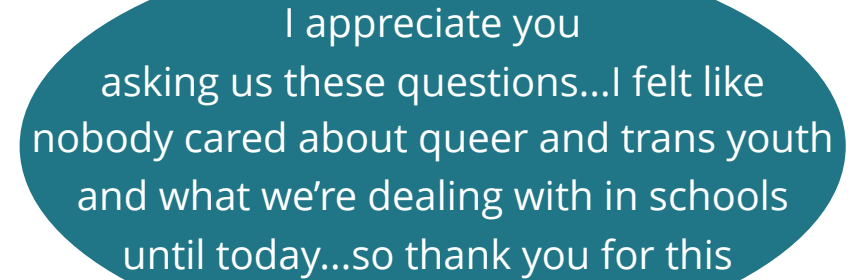
# Implementation Challenges



- School/staff capacity
- Competing priorities
- Participatory research was not desired by all schools
- Turnover
- Decision-making structure

# Takeaways

- SV is a concern among middle school students & staff
- Centering student voices and perspectives, especially those at highest risk, is critical for effective and sustainable prevention
- Current tensions and political climate have led to more pushback around addressing SV in schools
- Important to engage school community, build trust, and align with existing school efforts to ensure acceptability



I appreciate you asking us these questions...I felt like nobody cared about queer and trans youth and what we're dealing with in schools until today...so thank you for this

# Thank You

## Questions?

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# Resources

**Sexual Violence Prevention Resource for Action** - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/SV-Prevention-Resource\\_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/SV-Prevention-Resource_508.pdf)

**Sexual Violence (Overview)** - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/index.html>

**About Sexual Assault (FAQ included)** - Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs

<https://www.wcsap.org/help/about-sexual-assault>

**Sexual Violence Prevention** - Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

<https://ospi.k12.wa.us/student-success/health-safety/sexual-violence-prevention>

**National Sexual Assault Hotline** - Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network

<https://rainn.org/about-national-sexual-assault-telephone-hotline>

**National Sexual Violence Prevention Center** - Prevention (Resources)

<https://www.nsvrc.org/prevention>

**love is respect** - A project of the National Domestic Violence Hotline

<https://loveisrespect.org>