

The Voices of Wisconsin Students: Learning, Coping, and Building Resilience During COVID-19

MIDDLE SCHOOL REPORT – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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I really enjoy being in school, because then you can have the social aspect, and you can get along with your classmates instead of being virtual. And then you can also, instead of turning off your camera when you're virtual, you can actually be there and see everyone's faces, besides people making up excuses to keep their camera off.

It's hard if you want to get your schoolwork all done in one period, and then you email your teachers at a certain point, but they're teaching your other four classes in a row. It's hard to continue to do your work when teachers can't reply to you 24/7. But I get why they can't. It's just a struggle.

...my family has been getting together more since we're all at home.... We don't really go out, so we're just together, either after school, since we get out earlier now because our periods are shorter, or we do more things together than we normally used to.

...one thing that would block kids from getting help [is] that they just feel scared of what people are going to think of them. And maybe they're somebody who likes to keep to themselves too, and they don't like to express their personal feelings to other people.

I'd say it's very dependent on the teacher, in particular, who's running the class...I have one teacher, for example, that we have time out of their class... to talk to the other students about ourselves.... And that teacher is always open to emails and everything, and you can even request Zoom calls personally with that teacher. Whereas I have another teacher where it will take days before they respond to emails, and we're not allowed to be talking during Zoom class unless it applies to our actual classes...

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report shares findings from *The Voices of Wisconsin Students Project: Learning, Coping, and Building Resilience During COVID-19*. The goal of this project was to better understand how Wisconsin middle school students are coping with school, learning, and life in general during COVID-19 and to understand in more detail the nature of students' sources of stress and anxiety and their thoughts on what support they need. Equally important was to identify, strengthen, and reinforce examples of students' success and resiliency.¹ For more information about the project or to access the reports, visit www.wipps.org/research-partners/ or access the reports directly at:

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-Middle-School>

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-Middle-School-supplemental>

To gather this feedback, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners² (a unit of the University of Wisconsin System) and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) conducted 10 virtual focus groups in January and February 2021 using Zoom with a total of 64 Wisconsin middle school students. The students come from 24 different Wisconsin counties; live in 38 different rural, urban, and suburban communities; and attend 40 different middle schools. By compiling and sharing this information, the “voices” of Wisconsin students can help policymakers and stakeholders make more informed and targeted decisions about how to support students during these challenging times. This information can also help inform local communities about the need for additional resources to address students' situations. Below we share a summary of the key findings. We urge readers to refer to the full report which provides examples and illustrates—in their own words—feedback and input from the student participants themselves.

The Voices of Wisconsin Students is a project conducted by WIPPS Research Partners and the Medical College of Wisconsin – Central Wisconsin. It was supported by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It was developed with input from many partners including representatives of the DHS, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health, and the University of Wisconsin - Extension.

¹ A separate report summarizes the focus group findings from Wisconsin high school students. While the middle school and high school reports follow a similar format and organization, each should generally be considered as a stand-alone document. Although there is some overlap in the themes described in the two reports, we urge caution in making side-by-side comparisons of similarities and differences between middle school and high school students in their responses to the focus group questions. The qualitative focus group data were not analyzed to systematically identify areas where middle and high school students may differ in their experiences. All reports can be found at <https://wipps.org/research-partners/>.

² WIPPS Research Partners is a part of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS), which is a unit of the University of Wisconsin System. Part of the mission of WIPPS Research Partners is to respond to community needs by providing information and to help citizens and communities make decisions about issues that matter to them. In this project, our goal was to provide information to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) from the perspective of students on the important topic of learning, coping, and building resilience during COVID-19. Objectivity and non-partisanship are core values of WIPPS Research Partners; we have no policy "agenda" in conducting this work. We do not make recommendations or take positions on public policy issues. We partnered with the Medical College of Wisconsin on this project to provide valuable oversight through the Institutional Review Board; MCW faculty also served as members of the research team.

Challenges of Virtual School and Learning

1 Many focus group participants—including students in fully virtual models, students in blended or hybrid models, and students who engaged in virtual learning on a periodic basis (for example, during isolation or quarantine)—described virtual learning as challenging and stressful.³ Virtual learning involved less direct teacher contact, less explicit instruction, and fewer opportunities to talk to teachers and ask questions. Some students perceived virtual learning as socially isolating, and they felt that student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions in the virtual environment were suboptimal. Many focus group participants said they struggled to pay attention, motivate themselves, and manage their time when learning virtually, noting that it was easier to pay attention to their teachers when they were there in front of them. For some students, the virtual learning environment was full of distractions as well as alternate responsibilities (such as sibling care). Despite the challenges, some students appreciated the increased independence, flexibility, and ability to learn at their own pace. In addition, several students reported developing skills that would help them be better students in the future, including being more of a self-advocate in reaching out to teachers, structuring their day more efficiently, and adapting to different learning environments. Others seemed to have realized the relevance and impact of their personal dispositions, such as sociability or proneness to procrastinate, on their learning.

Connectedness and Belonging

2 For many focus group participants, being physically with other students, friends, and teachers, and seeing them face to face, was important for their sense of connectedness and belonging. Students appreciated being with teachers to learn directly from them and ask them questions in person, and several mentioned that in a smaller classroom, their teachers spent more time checking in on them. Students also appreciated being able to see and talk to their friends in person. Some focus group participants rarely saw their friends in person, and some felt their interactions with friends were stilted in the virtual class environment, so many of them engaged in extra efforts to connect with their friends virtually or in person outside of school. Likewise, some students explicitly recognized that in the virtual environment, they had to make an extra effort to engage with other students they were not already friends with by unmuting themselves, turning on their camera, and talking to other students in breakout rooms. Some students who were 100 percent virtual reported essentially zero connection with other students and had little sense of belonging to a “school.”

3 Although some students expressed ambivalence about belonging, students who were positive about their sense of belonging and acceptance at school tended to know the students in their class and felt they had friends at school. Many students’ schools had continued some or all extracurricular activities, such as book clubs, school musicals, sports, and student council, and focus group participants mentioned connecting and bonding with other students and their friends through these group activities.

4 Focus group participants identified teachers as playing an important role in their feelings of connectedness and belonging. Students mentioned many different behaviors that teachers engaged in

³ At the time of the focus groups, 48 of the 64 students (75 percent) were in fully virtual or blended/hybrid models; of the 16 students (25 percent) who were in-person at the time of the focus groups in late January and early February, some had just recently returned to in-person learning. Many students had experienced multiple learning models over the course of the year and had switched between various models.

to show they cared, and students expressed genuine appreciation for their teachers' efforts to support them. As examples, some teachers communicated regularly and quickly via email, held personal video chats, offered individual help, held open sessions in Zoom, asked students about their day, or regularly set aside time for class conversation. (That said, some students said they had teachers who were unapproachable or who took multiple days to respond to emails). Students who had a weekly "flex" or "catch-up" day appreciated it, and they expressed positivity about things their schools had implemented to support well-being during the pandemic, such as end-of-day activities, *Kahoot!* game sessions, classroom visits from school counselors, and a school-wide book group.

Stress, Anxiety and Depression

5 Many students reported struggling to stay motivated and said they felt more anxiety this year, which they attributed to various sources, including the unknown future of COVID-19, feeling stressed about homework and missing assignments, day after day of Zoom meetings, and a lack of social interaction. Some students with established friend groups and activities tended to report low levels of stress, whereas students who felt excluded or isolated, or who had too much time alone "in their head," felt their mental health was suffering. Some students reported they had gone from being a virtual learner to an in-person learner to combat their feelings of social isolation. Students associated poor time management and procrastination with higher levels of stress and anxiety.

6 Many focus group participants did not have firsthand exposure to drug or alcohol use, including vaping, and only a few students mentioned personal friends (or past friends) who had started vaping or using marijuana. Students often speculated, however, that use had increased among their peers. They often expressed the belief that drugs and alcohol were used as an escape from anxiety and depression. Several students thought that, regardless of whether use had increased among their peers, it had probably increased among adults during the pandemic.

Getting Help: Mental Health and Wellness

7 Family members were a front-line mental health resource for middle school students, and by far the most frequently mentioned family member was "my mom." Many focus group participants mentioned specific teachers or adults they would turn to for either homework help or dealing with mental health concerns. Some students knew their school counselor personally and had visited them, and several students mentioned seeing a therapist or psychologist (outside of school) on a regular basis. At the same time, some students knew there was a school counselor but did not feel comfortable going to them or did not know how to find them. Students seemed generally unaware of formal mental health resources, beyond the school counselor, that may be available at their school.

8 Focus group participants identified fear as a prominent barrier to accessing mental health resources: fear of a breach in trust and confidentiality (such as a teacher or counselor sharing their issues with a parent), fear of being judged as weak or stupid, fear of being made fun of by peers, and fear of having their feelings minimized or invalidated. Although middle school students did not use the word "stigma," their responses suggested they perceived a stigma around mental health issues.

Coping and Resilience

9 Despite the challenges they reported, many students reported silver linings of their current learning situation, such as more time with family and more time for non-school activities and new interests. Several students who were already committed to a sport (such as skiing) or hobby (such as horseback riding) mentioned that the flexibility in their schedule allowed them to pursue these activities at a level they desired. Students mentioned enjoying being able to work at their own pace; for some, this meant that if they were able to complete their work quickly during the day, they could spend extra hours practicing a sport or engaging in a favorite hobby.

10 Many students handled stress and anxiety by talking and spending time with their friends. Many students also relied on alone time and a variety of personal coping strategies, such as positive thinking, reflection, goal setting, listening to music, and exercising. In terms of resilience, some students felt they had developed new skills in response to their increased responsibility and freedom this year, including better time management and resourcefulness.

11 At the conclusion of each focus group, participants were given the option to complete an anonymous online survey about their experience. The students overwhelmingly found the focus group to be a positive experience and reported that it positively impacted their mental health. They enjoyed hearing each other's stories, and the structure allowed the students to feel heard. The students reported that it was comforting and that they gained new insights about mental health. These results suggest that there may be additional benefits to providing students with similar opportunities to engage with one-another and discuss topics of interest and importance to them, especially with peers in other schools and areas of the state. This virtual focus group model and the process used to gather the information underlying this study could be replicated in other settings such as schools, school districts, communities, and youth organizations, or applied to other kinds of topic areas.