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

HIGH SCHOOL REPORT

Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service

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Going virtual exposed the inequality present in public education. The students that are self-motivated have grown more than they would have otherwise because they can manage their schedules better, but for the apathetic students, it leaves them behind without support.

I learned a lot about myself and how I can work hard and get things done when they need to be done and take time for myself too.

There's no recognition of the mental health. It's hard to find the school-life balance. There's a lot of mental weight on me. I can't socialize. There's no clubs. I am feeling left behind by school and friends.

I feel, depression-wise and [that] sad feeling, that was more towards the beginning of the pandemic when everything was being canceled. Now I feel like it's more COVID fatigue and just being sick of everything. And we're all so used to things being canceled at this point, but we're just kind of numb to it, which is, it's so upsetting...everything is canceled, so, you know, there isn't that sad feeling, because we're all so used to being sad now.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Lastly, we thank all of the students from across Wisconsin who, with the support of their parents or guardians, took the time to participate in this project and contribute to these discussions. Without students' willingness to share their voices, this project would not have happened.

As a team, we feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to conduct this project. It truly reflects the spirit of partnership. It is our sincere hope that those reading this report can use the findings and information gathered from the Voices of Wisconsin Students in an impactful and meaningful way.

The findings expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or the organizations or agencies acknowledged above; nor does mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. The report and the findings, and any errors or omissions, remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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Information about the Voices of Wisconsin Students Project

For more information about the project or to access the reports, visit www.wipps.org/research-partners/ or contact:

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Notes on Focus Group Data and Terminology

This project relies on focus groups to capture the "voices" of Wisconsin students. It is important to remember that focus group methods are not intended to yield results or insights that are generalizable to a larger population (in this case, the population of Wisconsin middle school students as a whole). Rather, focus groups are used to better understand the reasons underlying individuals' perspectives or the range of perspectives on a given topic, or to provide insights about how a situation is perceived and experienced. The information shared in this report reflects the insights, feedback, and experiences of the students with whom we spoke. For readability, convenience, and to improve the flow of the narrative, throughout the report we sometimes use terminology such as "Students reported…," or "Students said…," or we may say directly, "Focus group participants said…." These are all shorthand references to the students who participated in the focus groups and should not be interpreted as reflective of, or generalized to, all Wisconsin students. At the same time, these students' perspectives can yield powerful insights that are valuable to understanding how a broad and diverse group of students has experienced the pandemic.

Our task is to communicate clearly how participants felt about the topics discussed. Given the nature of the topics discussed and differences in individual students' experiences, there may be different voices and multiple views that need to be presented. Our goal is to accurately represent the range of views expressed by the students who participated in the focus groups. With the exception of specifying when a comment was made by "one student," this focus group report does not report the exact frequency or quantity with which comments or opinions are expressed. The use of specific numeric references in a focus group report can sometimes lead readers to inadvertently think about responses in terms of percentages (X percent of students think this; Y percent think that), which can then lead to false generalizations. Those kinds of specific characterizations are better suited for a methodology where a larger number of individuals are sampled.

Instead, we use terminology to convey the general pervasiveness of a theme such as "many" or "most"; "some" or "several"; or "a few." How these characterizations are applied is largely at the discretion of the analyst/observer, as they can depend on the context of the question being analyzed; whether comments or themes related to a question come up at other points in the discussion; and other cues such as body language of the participants (head nodding). To minimize some of the inherent subjectivity and to introduce a level of inter-rater reliability, the focus group reports and characterizations of student comments were read and reviewed by all of the focus group observers. This additional review served as a "check" on the balance and completeness of the summary of the students' comments and to ensure agreement among the analysts that the report accurately reflected the focus groups they observed. For ease of readability, in some cases, students' quotes have been edited to remove filler words such as "like," "um," "yeah," "so," etc.

Lastly, for some students, "school" may mean being on site and learning in person. For others, "school" may mean learning from home, or a combination/hybrid of both. **Throughout the report we use the term "virtual" to refer to a learning environment where the student is not on site or physically present at school.** Some use this term to describe participating in a "virtual school" or "academy"; others use the term to refer to "school online," "remote learning," "e-learning," or "learning from home." In the report, "virtual" encompassed students participating in 100 percent remote learning or combination/hybrid models.

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 high 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]

To gather this feedback, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners[2] (a unit of the University of Wisconsin System) and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) conducted 13 virtual focus groups in January and February 2021 using Zoom with a total of 96 Wisconsin high school students. The students come from 29 different Wisconsin counties; live in 46 different rural, urban, and suburban communities; and attend 56 different high 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. But 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.

WIPPS Research Partners was asked to conduct this project by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS), with input from representatives from many state and non-governmental entities who serve the educational and mental health needs of Wisconsin's youth.

Stress, Anxiety and Depression

1 Many focus group participants reported that they and their friends and peers are experiencing high (and increasing) levels of stress and anxiety, and in some cases, depression during the pandemic. For some of the students, COVID-19 has exacerbated existing mental health challenges. Students' reasons for reporting these concerns include significant challenges with virtual school and learning during COVID-19; keeping up with homework, concerns about their grades, and their loss of study skills; concerns about their futures; lack of connections with teachers, peers, and school generally; diminished social opportunities and losses of connections with friends, teachers, and peers; and

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[1] A separate report summarizes the focus group findings from Wisconsin middle 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 unit of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) located at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point at Wausau campus. 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.

isolation. While many students reported struggling during COVID-19, some did report that their stress and anxiety had decreased during COVID-19 due to factors such as more sleep, more time to oneself, more time to work out, less pressure to hang out and be social, and they have adjusted well to their learning model.

2 Many focus group participants reported that they perceived an increase in the use of drugs, alcohol, and vaping products among their peers as ways to cope during COVID-19. A lack of other healthy coping mechanisms for pressures, stress, anxiety and declining mental health during COVID-19 were primary reasons the students cited for the increase. Other reasons they noted included boredom, more free time, a lack of supervision at home, tensions at home with parents and/or difficult home situations, and peer pressure. Some noted that these substances help students alleviate feelings of fear, isolation and loneliness that many are experiencing during COVID-19. Some students did express that spending more time at home may have decreased drug and alcohol use among some students.

Challenges of Virtual School and Learning

3 Virtual learning was described as a significant struggle and challenge for the vast majority of focus group participants who had experienced it. This includes students in fully-virtual models, as well as those in blended or hybrid models, and those who engaged in virtual learning on a periodic basis (for example, during isolation or quarantine).[3] The nature of their concerns and struggles were manifested in several key ways, including: a sense that virtual learners are not a high priority, especially for schools that have simultaneously implemented virtual <u>and</u> in-person models; difficulty accessing teachers or receiving timely help; a lack of hands-on learning opportunities and engaging strategies for remote learning; increased distractions while trying to learn at home; challenges with time management and keeping track of assignments and due dates; significant increases in workload; decreases in motivation; and temptations to do the bare minimum needed to complete assignments. Despite the challenges, virtual learning provided some students with a greater sense of independence, flexibility, and ability to learn at their own pace. Even students who strongly disliked attending school virtually could point to several things they had learned that will 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 understanding their personal learning preferences ("being a hands-on learner," for example).

Connectedness and Belonging

4 Many of the students who participated in the focus groups expressed feelings of grief surrounding the loss of aspects of their high school experience, sports, clubs, and activities. The cancellation of sports, clubs, band, choir, performing arts, and other extracurricular activities was noted as a significant loss for many students. For some of the students, the lack of sports has made it harder for them to stay on track with their schoolwork given the structure that practices and sport activities give

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[3] At the time of the focus groups, 70 of 96 students were in fully virtual or blended/hybrid models; of the 26 students who were in-person at the time of the focus groups in late January and early February, many 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 their routine; several noted the negative impacts on their physical health. Some students expressed frustration that sports were taking place at their school, but their clubs were not.

5 Many of the students in the focus groups expressed a lack of connectedness to their school, teachers, and friends. This was especially pronounced for the students in virtual learning environments. In-person students were more apt to express that they still feel like people care about them (at school) and do not feel left out. Access to friends and the ability to make friends is a key aspect of students feeling connected and a sense of belonging. Overwhelmingly, they miss their friends and opportunities to socialize. Even students who are in school expressed barriers to connecting with friends given the need to maintain social distancing while in school; being on a cohort schedule opposite their friends; and being separated from others who are remaining virtual. Students who are quarantining also worry about maintaining their connections with friends. Students who transitioned from middle school to 9th grade last fall described feeling especially disconnected from their school and peers; in several cases, freshmen students expressed that they have never physically set foot in their school building. Schools reinforcing a common understanding of the collective challenges of the pandemic has helped some students feel less alone.

6 For the students in the focus groups, the ability to see and talk with friends and participate in sports and extracurricular activities with friends and peers were key elements of students feeling connected to others and their school. There were virtual students in several groups who expressed the personal challenges they experience when they see their classmates doing things (sports, social activities, etc.) that they cannot because they or a family member is particularly high risk. These students may need additional support.

7 The students identified teachers as playing an especially important role in helping them feel more connected to their school and their peers and a greater sense of belonging. There were many students who recognized that specific teachers were making efforts to provide extra help; taking a little extra time to ask them how they were doing; reaching out to find out why they were not turning in assignments; and trying to incorporate fun things into their classes. Students who are able to connect with their teachers in person value and appreciate those opportunities. At the same time, some students expressed frustration that there were situations where they had asked for help (specifically with schoolwork), and they did not get response. The student comments illustrate the importance of student-teacher dynamics in terms of helping students feel a greater sense of connectedness and belonging. For virtual learners, in particular, the loss of opportunities for spontaneous interactions with their teachers may exacerbate their feelings of disconnectedness. From the student perspective, the importance of the student-teacher relationship may be even more pronounced during these heightened times of uncertainty, putting greater expectations on teachers for leadership, reassurance, and emotional support.

Getting Help: Mental Health and Wellness

8 The students in the focus groups expressed that they commonly turn to friends for support with mental health challenges, followed by their parents; school-based resources were perceived by the students as more limited or not accessible. It is not clear whether friends or parents are equipped with the information and resources needed to help. Most of the students in the focus groups had a

trusted adult that they could talk to, although this was not always an adult at their school. Parents were the main adult that students said they reach out to for help. Some students reported having no one to talk to, causing them to bottle their feelings up and "suffer in silence."

9 The students in the focus groups generally struggled to identify school-based or other resources available to help with mental health concerns; some expressed trying to cope on their own. Many students recognized and expressed a need for more mental health resources at their school (specifically counselors, therapists, and psychologists), yet at the same time noted the complexities of asking schools to serve in a mental health capacity. While students referenced their school counselor as a potential source of help, and several did describe specific instances where their school counselor was an integral source of help for them, many shared a perception that the counselors were not accessible; were too busy and "overloaded"; or were focused on helping students with practical problems like scheduling issues, and did not want to burden them.

10 Stigma was identified by the the students in the focus groups as the primary reason why kids do not seek help when they are struggling or when they need it. Many felt that they or their peers do not ask for help at school or in general because doing so leads to embarrassment, fear, and shame. Some are reluctant or not willing to get help on their own because they do not think it will help them; because they do not want to talk about their personal mental health challenges, preferring to handle on their own; or because they do not think they deserve help. Breaches of trust (or "distrust") were also identified as a reason students are reluctant to ask for help. There were several instances where students described situations where they had reached out for help within their school and felt that confidentiality was not maintained or their problem or concern was not taken seriously.

Coping and Resilience

11 Despite significant challenges, the students we spoke with are finding the "silver linings," reasons to be positive, and many have developed a greater self-awareness. Many students noted that they have developed a deeper sense of gratitude for their family, close friends, school and teachers, and their personal health and safety during COVID-19. Students who were attending school in-person (either periodically in a hybrid or blended model, or on a full-time basis), were appreciative that they had that opportunity to be in-person when they know that many other students across the state do not. Several in-person students were appreciative of their school's attention to and emphasis on COVID-19 safety. Those students described the use of masks, practicing social distancing and consistent enforcement of COVID-19 safety precautions by teachers and staff as signs that they felt their school was keeping them safe. Some students have developed new interests and new ways of spending their time that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to develop.

12 Many of the students could identify specific strategies or things they have found that help them cope or feel more resilient while trying to learn and go to school during COVID-19. These include: increased self-awareness of the need to relax and recharge; volunteering; making opportunities for self-reflection such as meditation, journaling, religious or spiritual study; spending time with pets; emotional releases such as crying to release stress; private therapy; exercising and physical health; managing and organizing time and tasks; listening to music or playing an instrument; spending time in nature; spending time with family; connecting with friends online; and driving around in their car.

13 At the conclusion of each focus group, the participants had 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 it was comforting and gained new insights about mental health. Beyond an information-gathering method, 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 the peers in other schools and in other 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. See Appendix F for more information on these results.

Organization of the Report

This report is organized into four sections. First, we provide an Overview, followed by a Summary of Key Findings which identifies the main findings from the focus groups. This is followed by detailed summaries of the responses to the individual focus group questions; this section also includes detailed quotes that are relevant to each question that support and illustrate the students' experiences. Last, we include a set of appendices that provide information on the methods (Appendix A); interview guide (Appendix B); informational flyers and recruitment materials (Appendices C and D); a summary of the responses to the open-ended feedback form (Appendix E); responses to a post-focus group survey (Appendix F); and references (Appendix G).

OVERVIEW

Background: The Need for Student Voices

With the 2020-2021 school year well underway, schools, nonprofit organizations, social service organizations, and governmental agencies have been actively trying to meet the educational, physical, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students in the complex and rapidly changing context of COVID-19. Understanding the nature and scope of students' immediate and ongoing needs is critical to ensuring that plans, programs, and strategies can be most effective and that staffing and/or financial resources can be targeted to have the greatest impact now and into the future. For example, the information gathered from this project can help inform discussions about how to support students' ongoing learning during COVID-19 and beyond, including implications for supporting transitions back to in-person learning or continuing with virtual learning models. In addition, understanding the sources of students' stress and anxiety, avenues of support, and perceptions of barriers to accessing that support, can help organizations make informed decisions about the allocation of mental health and wellness resources. Students themselves report many examples of positive coping strategies that may provide a foundation for new ideas or plant the seeds for new programs that could benefit students more broadly in the future.

Many groups have a stake in policies and programs that impact youth, including parents and guardians, school boards, school administrators, teachers and staff, government officials, medical and social service providers, and the community at large. **The students themselves are also a key stakeholder group.** While school districts, community groups, or other organizations are gathering and using information from parents and staff to help guide decisions, these groups are often assumed to be surrogates or proxies for the voices of students.[4] To date, there has been little direct information about adolescent students' perspectives about the challenges of learning, coping, and thriving during COVID-19.[5] Capturing the voices and input of students themselves provides data to help make informed public policy, administrative, and programmatic decisions.[6]

Against this backdrop, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services sought to better understand how students have been coping with school, learning, and life in general during COVID-19 and to understand in more detail the nature of students' current sources of stress and anxiety and their thoughts on what support

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[4] For example, a March 2021 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention used telephone survey data collected from parents/guardians of school-age children as part of a COVID Experiences Survey to make conclusions about the mental health and wellbeing of *both* adults and children. The study found that for 11 of 17 stress and well-being indicators concerning child mental health and physical activity, as well as parental emotional distress, findings were worse for parents of children receiving virtual or combined instruction than for parents of children receiving in-person instruction. The study authors go on to suggest that virtual instruction might present more risks than does in-person instruction in terms of *both* child and parental mental and emotional health, along with some health-supporting behaviors, despite the fact that the survey was not administered to children/students. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/pdfs/mm7011a1-H.pdf.

[5] A 2020 study found that more than two-thirds of Wisconsin's high school athletes have reported anxiety and depression since the pandemic at levels that would typically require medical intervention, up 37 percent from pre-pandemic studies. Physical activity levels and quality-of-life scores were also lower than researchers had found in pre-pandemic studies of adolescents. https://www.uwhealth.org/news/more-than-two-thirds-of-high-school-athletes-report-anxiety-and-depression-since-pandemic/53429 and https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2021.01.12.20248726v1.full.

[6] A 2020 literature review by Singh et al. suggests the need for longitudinal and developmental studies of the psychosocial and mental health needs of children and adolescents during and after the pandemic, as well as evidence-based plans of action to address identified needs. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113429.

they need. Equally important is identifying and reinforcing examples of success and resiliency.[7] The broader goal of this project is to gather information that can help improve access to resources, services, and support for Wisconsin youth.

The **Voices of Wisconsin Students Project**, conducted by the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service Research Partners (WIPPS Research Partners) and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW), gathers insight, information, and feedback directly from Wisconsin youth in grades 6 through 12 with a focus on: (1) the nature and intensity of challenges and concerns they are experiencing in the environment of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) how they are coping; and (3) feedback on how they may be strengthening their resilience during what is, for many, a period of heightened stress, anxiety, and isolation. Researchers used focus groups as the method of data collection for this study, with sessions held separately for middle and high school students. This report summarizes the high school student focus groups.

This effort builds on findings from *The Voices of Marathon County Students Returning to School during COVID-19*, a project conducted in the summer of 2020 by WIPPS Research Partners, which documented the extent to which students in Marathon County, Wisconsin expressed feelings of anxiety about returning to school in the fall.[8] These expressions of anxiety were not concentrated uniquely on issues of personal safety and COVID-19. Rather, they manifested across concerns about their learning environments, their futures, the loss of connections with friends, and their physical and mental health, among others. The Marathon County report noted that the emotional and mental health needs of students might be intensified in the COVID-19 environment. Youth participants expressed that they were eager to engage more directly with decision makers and to have their voices heard. That project served as a foundation for gathering student voices statewide.

Through facilitated, small group discussions, we gathered a more in-depth understanding of students' perspectives on school and learning during COVID-19, as well as their social, emotional, and mental health needs. We explicitly sought feedback on the kinds of support they need. We also talked with students about positive coping strategies they may be using with the intent of highlighting examples of building resilience.

By compiling and sharing this information, the "voices" of Wisconsin students can help policymakers and stakeholders make more informed and better targeted decisions about how to support students during these challenging times. This information can also help inform the broader community about additional resources needed to address students' needs.

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[7] The COVID-19 pandemic has raised many concerns about the mental health needs of students. A recent topical post by the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that, "in the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic, schools have confronted unprecedented challenges as they moved to quickly shift classes to an online format, provide equitable access for all students, support teachers' and students' educational needs, and make plans amidst great uncertainty. The pandemic itself has caused much worry, stress, and grief. These stressors can cause mental health challenges for anyone and can cause acute symptoms to appear for people who may experience preexisting mental health challenges." https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/student-mental-health..

[8] Students did not always use the specific terminology or label of "anxiety," but instead used terms such as "worry," "concern," "stress," and "uncertainty."

In January and February 2021, WIPPS Research Partners and MCW conducted 13 virtual focus groups using Zoom with a total of 96 Wisconsin high school students. The students were from 29 different Wisconsin counties and 46 different rural, urban, and suburban communities. The students attend 56 different high schools (including public, private, parochial, and homeschool environments). Figure 1 below illustrates the geographic mix of students based on their school location.

Figure 1. Geographic Location of Schools Attended by Participating Students

At the time of the focus groups, 52 percent of the 96 high school students reported attending school virtually; 27 percent in-person; and 21 percent in a blended/hybrid model.[9] It was clear that many students had

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[9] Of the students who reported that they were attending school in-person, several had just returned to in-person learning at the time of their focus groups.

experienced changes in their learning environments over the course of the school year. For example, some students reported recently going from virtual to some form of in-person or hybrid learning; others reported that they went from in-person to a virtual model during the course of the first semester. A few students described learning in some combination of all three models over the course of the year. It was also clear that within the categories of virtual, in-person, and blended/hybrid learning, there were many different varieties and approaches that students were experiencing.

A detailed overview of the focus group methodology and data collection procedures can be found in Appendix A. The goal was to gather in-depth information about students' learning experiences during the challenging environment of the COVID-19 pandemic. A comprehensive interview guide (Appendix B) was used to facilitate discussions about a range of topics, such as:

- What concerns do students have about how school is going for them?
- What are current sources of stress or anxiety and what challenges are they experiencing?
- What is going well? What new strategies have they developed to cope?
- Where are students turning for help and support with issues they may be having?
- What barriers prevent them from accessing help they need?
- What kinds of information and support do students say they need?
- What ideas do students have to improve learning during COVID-19?

Through these small group discussions, the research team gathered a more in-depth understanding of students' perspectives. It is important to keep in mind that unlike a scientific survey, which uses random sampling in order to make generalizations about a larger target population, focus groups are not intended to identify findings that can be generalized to a larger population or to draw conclusions about how an entire population of students might view a particular topic. Rather, focus groups are designed to gather information about *how* people feel and nuances about *why* they feel that way.

The Medical College of Wisconsin provided valuable assistance in the oversight of the project through its Institutional Review Board.[10]

Project Funding

Funding for this project was made possible by the Overdose Data to Action (OD2A) cooperative agreement #6NU17CE925003-02-02 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; nor does mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. The qualitative data collected from the focus group discussions with youth about how they are coping with and building resilience during COVID-19 is relevant to OD2A program goals of putting data into action to help prevent drug use, misuse, and overdose. From a broader public health perspective, there are concerns about the extent to which increased levels of stress and anxiety and isolation from peers resulting from COVID-19 may lead to substance use or misuse. By providing a forum for Wisconsin youth to share their voices and provide insights into their current challenges and concerns, DHS and others can use this qualitative data to make more informed policy decisions on issues, policies, and programs impacting youth statewide.

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[10] The Medical College of Wisconsin/Froedtert Hospital Institutional Review Board #5 granted approval for this project's protocol [PRO00039423] in accordance with 45 CFR 46.111 by expedited review, Category 5, 6, & 7. The protocol involves minors as research subjects and, with regulatory requirements having been met, the Committee granted approval under 45 CFR 46.404 of Subpart D.

KEY FINDINGS: WISCONSIN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

1 *Many focus group participants reported that they and their friends and peers are experiencing high (and increasing) levels of stress, anxiety, and in some cases, depression during the pandemic. For some students, COVID-19 has exacerbated their existing mental health challenges.*

When asked about levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, a pervasive theme across the focus groups was that the students felt high levels of stress and anxiety, and in some cases depression, as a result COVID-19 and its impact on school and their lives in general this year. For many, these feelings have increased during COVID-19. Several students indicated they had a personal history of stress, anxiety and/or depression and that COVID-19 had made it worse. Some students expressed feelings of isolation, or noticed others isolating themselves due to concerns about COVID-19. Students acknowledged that experiences with stress, anxiety, and depression during COVID-19 were unique to each individual, but offered generalizations based on their own perspectives or when thinking about their friends. The students' responses captured a full spectrum of perspectives, the most prominent being that many students were struggling. Many students answered that they and/or their friends were experiencing "very high stress" or "very high anxiety" or that "depression is at a high." One student noted, "Well, honestly, it's been one of the worst years of my life. I've, I struggled a lot at the beginning because I already felt alone, I guess. And then when I couldn't see my friends, I felt more alone. And I was also further isolated from them…" Some students acknowledged they had experienced anxiety or depression prior to COVID-19 and that the current situation has made it worse.

While many students reported struggling during COVID-19, several reported that their stress and anxiety had decreased during COVID-19 due to factors such as more sleep, more time to oneself, more time to work out, and less pressure to hang out and be social. These students appear to have adjusted well to their learning model. As one student put it, "I would say the stress level is lower now than towards the beginning of this school year, because now I'm used to how things are this year." In a few cases, the students' descriptions of having lower anxiety may be more reflective of a sense of apathy or "numbness." To illustrate this point, one student noted, "And I think anxiety levels, at least for the people at my school, are lower, because, honestly, we don't have to turn on our cameras. We don't have to participate. You don't really have to do anything."

Students' reasons for reporting increases in stress, anxiety, and/or depression reflect the convergence of multiple factors including significant challenges with virtual school and learning; keeping up with homework, concerns about grades, and a loss of study skills; concerns about their futures; lack of connections with teachers, school, and peers; diminished social opportunities and time with friends; and isolation. One student noted, "Lots of kids are pushing themselves, are not sleeping well, and are anxious about their schoolwork**."** One student who shared that they had anxiety and depression commented that, "By the end of the week, I am completely destroyed. I just crash. Everyone is stressed or they've given up." This student also noted, "It's hard to 'process' when you don't know how to do something, and being virtual makes it even harder." They worry they are not learning as much; missing out on labs and in-class demonstrations and experiments; and developing bad study habits, in some cases, resorting to cheating on assignments or tests. One student who had recently returned to in-person learning noted, "Things are better now than being on my own at home."

The students expressed worry about their futures and how COVID-19 has impacted their plans for the future and ability to meet academic and career goals. They perceive that they are missing key experiences that will help prepare them for college and/or the workforce. One person described it bluntly, "I feel that it's impacting my future a lot already." Adding to this, another student noted, "And so it kind of makes us feel more overwhelmed and basically, stressed with our future. Like we aren't really doing much for it. Like what we are doing right now is not really going to help us in the future, and basically, we're just surviving, but not living the lives that we really want to live."

Some feel that by being isolated and without social activities, they are losing "people skills" and forgetting "how to study." One student described this as, "I feel like depression is really at a high. I feel like it's creating a lot of introverts. And, usually, when you're an introvert, it comes with a lack of skills of how to be with people. And I feel like we all forgot how to be around people and to talk to people and to interact with people. And our people skills are really low, which can cause depression, maybe."

Individual family approaches to COVID-19 safety have, in some cases, created added pressure on students to either socialize when they may not be comfortable doing so, or further detach from their social networks. Students whose parents have more strict policies about socializing during COVID-19 have "fear of missing out," especially when the parents of their friends may be less strict. This is stressful for them and may cause them to withdraw further from their friends. The friend who is missing out feels badly when they see others socializing and the other friends, in turn, feel badly that their friend is not there. Students who have to remain virtual due to health issues within their immediate family are especially vulnerable to feeling this inner turmoil about missing out. Several students are acutely aware of the need to prioritize their family member's health, but still feel badly about missing out on sports, band and other activities.

Several of the focus group participants had recently returned to some in-person learning or were about to return to in-person. Some of these students were grateful to be learning in-person, while others said they are experiencing feelings of stress and anxiety about returning to school in-person and whether or not they can feel safe. COVID-related changes in learning environments are also a source of stress. "The thought of going to school made my chest tighten," said one student. Another noted that they felt "physical anxiety about being in school." Some students feel pressure to go back to school in-person and one described it as a "weird stress." One virtual student was required to go in to school to take a proctored test, though they strongly preferred to not to have to do so. As they described the experience, "I strongly asked to not have to go in. I was so anxious being in a high school again. How will I function?" Another student put it succinctly: "The change is stressful." A student at a small school commented that, "At a small school, you get quarantined a lot. That's never a good situation." A third student noted, "It's stressful because the teachers are back and forth. The Wednesday break is important for teachers, too, to catch up."

2 *Many students reported that they perceived increases in the use of drugs, alcohol, and vaping products among their peers as ways to cope during COVID-19.*

During the pandemic, many students described what they perceived as a significant increase in the use of vaping products, alcohol, and drugs (especially marijuana), among their peers as a way to cope during COVID-19. A lack of other healthy coping mechanisms for pressures, stress, anxiety and declining mental health during COVID-19 was a primary reason the students cited for the increase. Other reasons they noted included boredom, more free time, a lack of supervision at home, tensions at home with parents and/or difficult home situations, and peer pressure. Some noted that these substances help students alleviate

feelings of fear, isolation, and loneliness that many are experiencing during COVID-19. Several students described watching kids get high on camera during virtual learning or seeing family members in the background using drugs or alcohol.[11] Some students did express that spending more time at home may have decreased drug and alcohol use among some students.

3 *Many students have experienced significant challenges with virtual learning during COVID-19; these challenges contribute to their stress, anxiety, and/or depression.*

Learning has been a significant struggle and challenge for the vast majority of the students who are in a virtual learning model. This includes students in fully virtual models, as well as those in blended or hybrid models, and those who engaged in virtual learning on a periodic basis (for example, during isolation or quarantine). Even some in-person learning students experienced virtual learning at some point during the pandemic due to temporary school shifts to virtual learning or quarantine/isolation. The nature of their concerns and struggles were manifested in several key ways, including: a sense that virtual learners are not a high priority, especially for schools that have implemented virtual <u>and</u> in-person models; difficulties accessing their teachers for help in a timely way; lack of hands-on learning opportunities; increased distractions while trying to learn at home; lack of engaging ways of learning remotely; challenges with time management and keeping track of assignments and due dates; decreases in motivation; and temptations to do the bare minimum needed to complete assignments.

Many of the virtual students expressed a sense that virtual learners are an "afterthought" or are "forgotten" by their teachers or school. The general sentiment expressed by many of the virtual learners is that a higher priority is placed on the in-person learners. As one person put it, schools are "pushing hard to get back to normal, but they forgot about the students who can't learn normally, referring to students who have to remain virtual for specific reasons, such as personal or family health. This sense of being "forgotten" was commonly expressed by those attending school in completely virtual models. Some examples of how virtual students expressed this include: a high school senior who felt that the school counselor forgot to notify her of scholarship opportunities that had been already communicated to the in-person students; more difficulties in contacting the school counselor about course selections, standardized testing, and little involvement by the school counselors in the "daily life" of a [virtual] high school student; and a teacher who would "minimize the tabs" on their screen [of the virtual students] and then "forget about us" while teaching the in-person students. These feelings of being "forgotten" were also expressed by students who were virtual for a period of time due to quarantine, for example: "Teachers don't really worry about the students who are online due to quarantine." One felt that teachers can get frustrated with virtual students, noting, "Some teachers will forget about their students who are online. Some teachers don't have time for the kids who are in quarantine."

Many students described a disconnect between in-person students and those learning virtually when attending the same class simultaneously. The students attending virtually describe feeling left out or

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[11] The focus group findings are consistent with a 2020 article in the Journal of Adolescent Health on *The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Risk of Youth Substance Use*. This article highlights the need to better understand the nuances of how COVID-19 has potentially increased the use of substances as a coping mechanism, yet at the same time, lockdowns, more time at home, and increased time spent with parents might have decreased access to and use of substances. https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(20)30412-2/fulltext.

forgotten during class; those in-person do not have a way to interact with their friends and classmates joining online. Students in simultaneous learning models where a teacher would have to toggle between the in-person and virtual learners expressed concerns that some teachers were not noticing or including the online kids in their classes. According to one student, "Teachers don't give their best effort to the online kids. The teacher had to go back and forth between in person or in school and she wasn't noticing the online kids." Another student expressed this as, "Each day, half of my teachers are not teaching to me. Some teachers teach the in-person kids and ignore the ones online, and vice versa." A third student noted, "I've been virtual all year, and even though my teachers try and make an effort to make sure everybody knows what they're doing, some teachers just completely ignore the virtual kids and just put them up on a computer and then just teach the in-person kids. And then we get completely lost, and I can't take notes, and I have no idea what I'm doing. Or it's vice versa, they completely just do the virtual kids, and then they just leave the in-person kids in the dust."

Many students who experienced challenges with virtual learning described, from their perspective, an inability to access teachers for help in a timely way when not in-person; other frustrations included no consistent, clear, or timely mechanisms to access teachers or get help. One of the most common concerns or frustrations expressed by students about virtual learning that makes it more difficult for them is the inability to access their teachers in a timely way to get help. Not being able to get help when the students perceived that they needed it, especially later in the afternoons and evenings, makes it more challenging for students to complete and keep up with assignments and to feel like competent learners. Students often mentioned the need to wait for email responses to their questions, whereas prior to COVID-19, some students would get help or ask questions right before, during, or after school, during lunch, or at the end of class, for example. In the virtual settings, those more real-time or immediate mechanisms for help were not as accessible, especially when some teachers might be teaching in-person students during the day. This seems to have created a mismatch of expectations between when and how quickly virtual learners could get help relative to what is reasonable to expect from the teachers in terms of when they can respond to students.

Several students noted that teachers' comfort level with and use of technology has improved over time, as well as the communication channels between teachers and students. The "learning curve" associated with virtual learning had been cleared, in some ways, and students were more comfortable with "how" to learn, their routines and teachers were more comfortable with teaching in the virtual environment.

For some students, learning the material is more challenging online and several expressed that their teachers just "expect them to understand." The demands on teachers to answer questions and provide help may be more pronounced in virtual learning environments due to students having more difficulties absorbing information. For some students, they found themselves needing to "teach themselves more." It is also important to note that the students recognized that teachers need their downtime and evenings too and that they are "trying their best to make it work." One student noted, "They are not on the clock in the evening. They didn't sign up to be teachers teaching virtually." Some students have experienced a significant decrease in motivation for school. As one student put it, they have "checked out."

Some students reported a significant increase in their workload and homework this year. Some speculated that teachers were trying to compensate for the lack of in-person instruction by giving them more work and assignments. The amount of homework, coupled with difficulties getting help, contributed to some students taking "shortcuts" to complete their work and just "get it done." While some students felt teachers

have been more lenient with homework during COVID-19, increases in workload and homework were a significant concern for some students in virtual learning. One student noted that, "I know for my school, they give out, I feel like, compared to when we were in person, they give out much more homework workload. I feel like it's a little bit more stressful just because I feel like the teachers think that because we're at home, because there's a pandemic going on, we have more time." This was echoed by a student in a different group who said, "My school hasn't backed up off of the workload. I feel like they assign more because they think we're at home, that we can handle it." Another noted that in virtual learning, "they kind of expect us to do more homework because we're at home, and they expect us to have, because we have all this time, and so a lot of our homework is due really quickly now. So everything is due like quicker than it was before, even for first semester."

As stated above, many students mentioned that being unable to access help when needed was making it harder to complete assignments, leading to late work, stress, frustration, and in some cases, a decline in grades. Accessing, completing, and submitting assignments via on online platforms, in addition to managing large volumes of emails, notifications, etc. was overwhelming for many students. For some students, the process of navigating online assignments was resulting in adding time to completion. One student noted that they did not have access to a printer and had to copy things by hand. Students in several groups described taking shortcuts, such as looking up answers online and sharing answers with friends (especially math) just to get the assignment done. One student would take a picture of the screen instead of taking notes. Many of these students who admitted to taking shortcuts also recognized that they were not learning as much as they should.

Some students expressed a decrease in motivation and a decline in grades while trying to learn during the pandemic. Stress, procrastination, pushing work aside, watching a recording instead of logging on to class "live," the ability to walk away from a challenging assignment, or turning the camera off were examples of reasons students gave for decreases in their grades. Some expressed that they did not have the stamina to work all day in a virtual school setting, noting, "It's a lot to keep working all day." In some cases, those that returned to in-person learning during the year were able to rebound with their grades with one student noting, "I know my grades dropped a lot when I was virtual, and now they're a lot better."

In some cases, students felt that their school was not prioritizing students' mental health. One student expressed this directly as, "[they] show a disregard for students' mental health." They generally felt this way due to the significant increases in their workload, yet with limited ways to access help when needed; no one reaching out from their school (e.g.,teacher, counselor) to ask them how they were doing; and teachers not being understanding when work is late, especially if they were having trouble with it and could not get help in order to complete the assignment on time. One student commented that, "There's no recognition of the mental health. It's hard to find the school-life balance. There's a lot of mental weight on me. I can't socialize. There's no clubs. I am feeling left behind by school and friends."

At the same time that some students expressed concerns about workload and homework, others expressed concerns that the rigor of their classes was not the same as it would have been if learning was in-person and that they are not prepared for next year, or for AP Exams. These students did not feel they were learning as much in a virtual setting and that their workload and expectations had been lowered, especially in AP classes. These students did not feel prepared to take the ACT exam or upcoming AP exams. Some mentioned concerns that they were not able to participate in programs designed to help them prepare for college.

According to some students, turning cameras off during virtual classes creates even more of a barrier between students and can signal that a student is disengaged. With so many students turning their cameras off during classes, one student felt there was no culture or community around to support them in their learning or to be more interactive. The lack of group encouragement creates even more separation and isolation. Many students expressed that they did not like being in Zoom breakout rooms and described them as "awkward." Some students mentioned teachers creating additional barriers to interacting with friends online by disabling chats in Zoom meetings or in Google Meets, or by telling kids they cannot talk to each other during virtual classes. One student expressed that interacting with friends is difficult enough during COVID-19; they had trouble understanding why teachers would place even further limits on interactions, when even 5 minutes of chatting or talking informally with friends at the start of class would help them.

Other concerns about virtual learning expressed by students included: lack of hands-on learning opportunities, especially in science classes; distractions while trying to learn at home, such as no private space to do work, having to take care of younger siblings, and the temptation of being on their phones and social media; and challenges with time management. Changing due dates and managing various submission options for online work across classes (hard copy, email, uploading into Canvas, Google, etc.) were among other challenges expressed by students. Some reported difficulty balancing work, sports practices and other activities, and online homework.

Internet connections and other technology issues have presented additional challenges for some students in terms of being able to connect to their classes. This could include slow connections, dropped connections, or complete loss of connections. One student noted that they were taking a computer class, but the programs were only downloaded to the schools computers so she could not do any of the curriculum at home (so only half of the curriculum was completed). One student could not reliably send emails to the teacher. Another student could not have too many windows open at once. This was prevalent among, but not exclusive to, students in rural areas.

Some in-person students expressed concerns for their safety at school, although, as discussed later in this summary, others felt that their schools were taking COVID-19 precautions seriously. The students who raised concerns about safety focused primarily on the lack of enforcement of mask policies, including some teachers not wearing masks, as well as lack of social distancing.

4 *Many students expressed feelings of grief surrounding the loss of aspects of their high school experience, sports, clubs, and activities.*

Students were grieving the loss of many key aspects of the high school experience. They described a sense of "missing out on normal things" and "getting robbed" of key high school opportunities, such as homecoming and other traditions. One student noted that, "It's hard mentally when you are losing out on so many things." When talking about this topic, another student noted, "There's a lot of sadness." Several older students expressed concerns for younger students who cannot easily make social connections in platforms like Google Meet. With respect to the loss of traditions, one student felt that their school was taking things overboard and that instead of taking everything away, effort should be made to try to keep as normal a year as possible.

The cancellation of sports, clubs, band, choir, performing arts, and other extracurricular activities was noted as a significant loss for many students. Students who are musicians miss being able to access their instruments that are at school and to play and perform with fellow musicians. For some students, the lack of sports has made it harder for them to stay on track with their schoolwork given the structure that practices and sport activities give to their routine. Several noted the negative impacts on their physical health. Some students expressed frustration that sports were taking place at their school while their clubs were not. Among the students' concerns related to these activities are the loss of relationships, opportunities to develop leadership skills, and in some cases, a shift in the group of kids they hang out with. For some students, sports provide a mental health release. To cope with the loss of these activities, some students are working out on their own (running, walking outside, lifting weights, or doing workout videos) and in some cases, starting their own clubs or participating in clubs online (for example, Model UN and Science Olympiad).

Overwhelmingly, students miss their friends and opportunities to socialize. Even students who are in school expressed barriers to connecting with friends given the need to maintain social distancing while in school; being on a cohort schedule opposite their friends; and missing others who are remaining virtual. Students who are quarantining worry about maintaining their connections with friends. One student noted, "It's socially hard not being able to talk to people." And "the social connection is not as good." Students attending school in-person noted that the separation required at school can be difficult, especially not sitting by friends in class or at lunch and with desks spaced out. While overall very few students expressed issues with respect to wearing masks, several noted that wearing masks and using sanitizer routinely can be a struggle.

5 Virtual students generally reported diminished connectedness and belonging, compared to in-person students.

Many students expressed a lack of connectedness to their school, teachers, and friends (in one case, this was expressed as a feeling of being "invisible"). This was especially pronounced for students in virtual learning environments. In-person students were more apt to express that they still feel like people care about them (at school) and not feel left out. For example, one in-person learning student noted, "When I'm at school, I feel really connected. Our senior class has 60 kids; I am with a lot of the same kids all day." Some students expressed this directly with statements such as, "I feel disconnected." The lack of connectedness made it easier for some students not to do their homework because no one knew who they were, and there were no regular check-ins on the status of assignment completions until the end of the semester. Not being able to access help or tutoring services further contributed to feeling disconnected from school; for some students, this would snowball and result in them falling behind, losing track of assignments, etc. While some noted that teachers were using breakout rooms during classes, many students strongly disliked being in breakout rooms, noting that often students do not turn their cameras on ("breakout rooms are the worst thing ever") or that the experience is "awkward" when only a few people have their cameras on, and no one else participates. There were a few instances of students who had more positive experiences with breakout rooms (specifically, "When I do get in a group where everyone is talking, it's lots of fun." But many virtual students believe that teachers "don't have a connection with virtual students" or that "they don't pay attention to the virtual – only the in-person."

Students expressed mixed feelings about belonging, with those attending school virtually feeling a diminished sense of belonging. Virtual students may not feel like they are in a "school" ("I am just on a computer with some people"). They also may feel less included and accepted and miss their friends. Virtual

school can be especially hard for those who are shy or have difficulty "putting themselves out there to make friends." One virtual student noted, "I feel like I am on my own, surviving this pandemic on my own." Access to friends and the ability to make friends is a key aspect of student connectedness and belonging. One student described "stress and depression and hopelessness when you can't see friends." In some cases, a student may be more proactive in trying to connect with teachers by joining office hours, showing their face on camera more, and answering questions.

Students who transitioned from middle school to 9th grade last fall described feeling especially disconnected from their school and peers; in several cases, freshmen students expressed that they have never physically set foot in their school building. In situations where students from multiple middle or junior high schools feed into a larger high school, freshmen felt it was more challenging to make new friends or get to know their classmates virtually. For example, one freshman noted that, "I'm a freshman, so I don't know what most of my class looks like, which is really odd, just knowing like four or five people in my class looks like. It's really strange. And so there's like, the community is just completely lost there. I barely know anybody, and it's really difficult to make friends during a Zoom call. So it's weird, for sure."

Reinforcing a common understanding of the collective challenges helped some students feel less alone. "I feel more belonging – a common sense of everyone is struggling exists in the school. We regularly discuss mental health issues and the pandemic." Another student expressed this as, "But now we're all kind of like the same person where we're like, oh, we're all in the same situation. We can't go out play sports. We can't go to art clubs. So, in a way, I feel like that kind of connects us all and like makes me feel included."

6 *Sports, clubs, and extracurriculars help students feel more connected to their school, their friends, and their peers.*

Sports, clubs, and activities help students feel a sense of connectedness and belonging. Some students expressed a sense of unfairness of seeing sports take place but not clubs. This gives them a sense of feeling "overlooked," as if clubs are not as important as sports. Those without access to sports said they missed their community. The ability to see and talk with friends and participate in sports and extracurricular activities with peers were key elements of students feeling connected to others and to their school. Many students reported that their communications with friends from school has decreased during COVID-19 and they have lost contact with friends. Some have lost contact due to differences among their friend group in terms of the amount of social activity that they can engage in. Some noted that they had not seen some of their friends since last March's school closures. Some students are finding ways to maintain connections on their own or are making more of an effort to reach out through SnapChat, FaceTime calls, texting, Discord, writing letters, multiplayer online games, and doing assignments and homework together online. Several students noted, "I am using FaceTime a lot more this year," and, "I FaceTime my friends a lot more than I used to. We do our homework while we are FaceTiming together." Connecting with friends outside of school in community or youth organizations (for example, Scouts) has also been a way for some to connect. Others appreciated the small things that they can do while in school such as having socially distant lunch periods.

Several students expressed the personal challenges they have experienced when they see their classmates doing things (sports, social activities, etc.) that they cannot because they have to participate in virtual school (because they or a family member is particularly high risk). One student noted that it "amplifies the feeling of being an outsider." One student mentioned having to watch from home and take notes when the anatomy class that was doing dissection.

7 *The students indentified teachers as playing an especially important role in helping them feel more connected to their school and peers and a greater sense of belonging. Students' expectations of teachers in terms of providing them with leadership, reassurance, and support may be even more pronounced during COVID-19, especially for virtual learners.*

Many students described examples of the key role that teachers can play in helping them feel more connected to their school and to their peers during COVID-19. The student comments illustrate the importance of student-teacher dynamics in terms of helping students feel a greater sense of connectedness and belonging. For virtual learners, in particular, the loss of opportunities for spontaneous interactions with their teachers may exacerbate their feelings of disconnectedness. From the student perspective, the importance of the student-teacher relationship may be even more pronounced during these heightened times of uncertainty, putting greater expectations on teachers for leadership, reassurance, and emotional support. There were many students who recognized that some specific teachers were making efforts to provide them with extra help; taking a little extra time to ask them how they were doing; reaching out to find out why they were not turning in assignments; and trying to incorporate fun things into their classes. Students who are able to connect with their teachers in person, value and appreciate those opportunities. For example, several participants mentioned the importance of being able to see their teachers on in-person "extra help" days. Other students mentioned that they value teachers who provide opportunities for extra help. For example, teachers who have regular office hours, host one-on-one Zoom meetings, and respond to direct messages and emails. One student expressed this as, "I feel like I belong. Teachers don't get annoyed when I ask questions. We are communicating positively." Another noted, "Teachers are good about replying to my questions and emails." A third student offered, "Teachers do a good job of trying to stay in contact. But there is less human interaction, so the only way we can get help is if we seek help. This year really is what you make it. Teachers are making sure that students get their work done and stay caught up." The simple gesture of a teacher asking students how they are doing or taking the time reach out seemed to resonate with many of the students. One student noted, "Three of my teachers really make us feel like we belong. One teacher does a mental health check every day. Another teacher, I go in, I listen, I leave. I log in. I log out. It's fine, but there is no sense of belonging." Another student echoed this sentiment. "Our school counselors have been reaching out biweekly, scheduling office hours. The teachers send out emails every week and are receptive to student questions. They are reinforcing that we are all alone, but we are alone together…none of us wants to be in this situation so if we make a mistake. (There is more grace this year)."

Some students expressed frustration regarding situations where they had asked for help (specifically with schoolwork), and they did not get response. As one student recollected, "I send out emails to multiple teachers. I get that they have other students. But if the only way I can communicate is through email, it matters to me. It sets me up to fail because I can't get in touch with my teachers." One student had an experience with an outsourced tutoring organization that their school had contracted with, but often the tutors could not answer the questions. "My grades have gone down. I was an A/B student; this year I failed. I can't get a hold of my teachers. Even when you do get help, all of my teachers have office hours at the same time."

Many students described situations where students routinely turn their cameras off during virtual classes, further contributing to a lack of connectedness. Several students expressed that when a student turns off their camera, this should signal that the person may be struggling and prompt teachers to reach out and connect with that student and understand why they do not want to be on camera. One student said, "Cameras [off] are a definite sign that I don't want to participate. I don't feel up to it. I stay up later…I need to take extra time to get myself together and keep myself sane." Another student noted, "It bums me out. Teachers should be worried about the people that aren't showing up. What's going on?" At the same time that many students expressed a desire to "see" their classmates with cameras on ("If a few people would be brave enough, others would follow"), several noted that some students may not have access to a place at home where they feel comfortable being on camera and that being on camera may make them feel more vulnerable. One student noted that the blank screens in class helps them feel "a bit more accepted" and less like the "odd one out"; "they are all blank screens during class, nobody is a step ahead of anyone else."

8 *The students in the focus groups expressed that they commonly turn to friends for support with mental health challenges, followed by their parents; school-based resources were perceived by the students as more limited or not accessible.*

Friends and parents, rather than school-based supports, were identified by students as their primary, "frontline" sources of support with challenges such as stress, anxiety, and/or depression. Several noted that their schools were not prepared to help them. Instead, high school students were more commonly turning to non-school-based individuals in their life for help, especially their friends. It is not clear whether friends or parents are equipped with the information and resources they need to help. One student said, "I talk to my best friend a lot. She's been my best friend since I was four. She doesn't judge me or change who I am or tell me how to think." Other sources of support were parents and grandparents, older siblings, a boss, coach, mentor, and youth club leader. While students turn to their friends and parents, they also are sensitive about not wanting to burden them. One student noted, "I feel bad going to my mom. I have four siblings." Another said, "It's hard going to your family members." "A good chunk of our school does reach out to the school counselors, and they do a lot, but the front line really is friends."

Most of the students in the focus groups had a trusted adult that they could talk to, although this was not always an adult at that their school. Parents were the main adult that students reach out to for help. As one student noted, "My parents…when it's something serious, I would go to my parents. If it's about my parents, I would go to a close friend, to vent and stuff." Several students said there was a specific teacher, resource officer, principal, or school counselor they could talk to if they needed help. One student said, "My school's counselors have explicitly said over and over that they are available, and people feel they can go to them."

Some students reported having no one to talk to, causing them to bottle their feelings up and "suffer in silence." For some students, this is because they do not feel comfortable talking to people they do not know. One student made mention of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey and that she always struggles with the question about whether she has access to a trusted adult at her school. While she was able to think about one specific teacher, she mentioned that teachers are just "kind of passing by." Some have developed personal rituals to help calm themselves or have started to engage in more self-advocacy. Some students expressed a hope that there would be more individual outreach by their teachers, principal, or school counselors to check on their well-being.

9 *The students generally struggled to identify school-based or other resources available to help with mental health concerns; many expressed trying to cope on their own.*

Generally, students seemed to have limited awareness of mental health resources available at their school. Many seemed to initially struggle to identify specific sources of support; among those that were able to identify or pinpoint specific resources, their awareness of those resources seemed to be more peripheral rather than as a result of having accessed those resources directly. For some students, the difficulty in answering this question may have been a function of not personally feeling like they needed help or resources, and therefore they were not focused on where to go. When probed a bit further by the facilitators about this topic, some mentioned their school counselors as a potential resource, but also felt that their counselors had limited time, training and/or expertise in dealing with mental health issues. Some perceived that their school counselor was primarily focused on school scheduling issues or college applications. Some speculated that if they did want to access help at their school, they would talk to a favorite teacher; yet others noted that it would be hard to go their teachers. Other resources that students mentioned were things like posters in the hallways with guidance and resource information; virtual speakers on mental health issues; suicide hotline numbers in the hallways, bathrooms, or on the back of student IDs; a therapy dog; and in several instances, student-to-student or peer support programs or suicide prevention. Regarding the latter, one student who had a group at their school noted that the group had not met yet this year; another questioned whether the students leading the group were doing so for their college resume.

There were students who did express that their school was devoting time to supporting students and that teachers and counselors were proactively encouraging students to talk, if needed. One mentioned that there is time each day and week devoted to talking about mental health concerns; several noted that their school has a specific area (in one case, called a "Take Ten Room" where students can go "in the moment" if they need a short break). One student who attends a very small school in a rural area noted they struggle to find people to come in and talk to students about mental health awareness.

Many students recognized and expressed a need for more mental health resources at their school (specifically counselors, therapists, and psychologists), yet at the same time noted the complexities of asking schools to serve in a mental health capacity. In some instances, students noted difficult personal or home-life situations that were impacting their ability to focus on school. In the specific case of one student, it was noted, "We need to talk about home situations. How am I supposed to focus on school? I didn't feel safe [at home]." After staying in a hotel and "crashing on couches," one student mentioned that they are now staying with a friend. One noted, "A school counselor can't help. It's just someone to talk to for one hour."

Students frequently expressed that they try to deal with thoughts or feelings on their own. One student noted, "I probably have the least healthy way of dealing with anxiety or stress. I either read until it goes away, or I write in a book, or I daydream what I'm going to write in the book later about a bunch of fantasy adventures and different things and scenes. I typically don't talk to people to deal with stress or anxiety. I just don't like being vulnerable." Another said, "I just kind of sit with my thoughts. I work them out, with myself. 'How can I make this better?' I ask myself. I know other people will drink or something."

10 *Stigma, skepticism, self-reliance, and breaches of trust were identified as barriers to students accessing mental health and wellness resources or help.*

Stigma was identified by students as the primary reason why kids do not seek help when they are struggling or when they need it. The majority of students felt that they or their peers do not ask for help at school or in general because doing so leads to embarrassment, fear, and shame. Student comments reflect that they are afraid of being judged by teachers and peers. Similarly, they are afraid of being perceived as weak or vulnerable because it has been ingrained in them (and those around them) that mental health is a taboo topic, and that seeking and receiving help is something people who are "crazy," weak, or in trouble would do. They noted a fear of being shunned by admitting a need for help, or a fear of being rejected, or "losing popularity." One student noted, "I feel embarrassed when I go to someone. I feel like I should be able to handle it on my own. [I don't] want to give negative energy to others." Some students worried their parents would not be accepting of their need for help. Several students mentioned that it is helpful in reducing stigma when their school administration makes an effort to point out that anxiety and depression care can be common experiences, or if a teacher shares their personal perspectives.

Some students are reluctant or not willing to get help on their own because they do not think it will help them; because they do not want to talk about their personal mental health challenges, preferring to handle on their own; or because they do not think they deserve help. Some kids do not feel like they can talk about what they are experiencing. Some students might lack self-awareness and not recognize that how they are feeling could be something that could be helped. Breaches of trust (or "distrust) were also frequently identified as a reason students are reluctant to ask for help. Several described situations where they had reached out for help within their school and felt that confidentiality was not maintained or their problem or concern was not taken seriously. Several students mentioned difficulties in reaching out to adults and being open or honest about mental health struggles, particularly with people they do not have a personal connection with. Some expressed concerns about privacy and confidentiality, especially in a small school. "I think there is fear of judgment (being judged for having an issue and not handling it yourself). The staff members are super-cliquey. If one person knows, every staff member will know. Plus, staff members tell students about what's going on with other students. It's hard to find someone that others can actually trust."

While students referenced their school counselors at school as a potential source of help, and several did describe specific instances where their school counselor was an integral source of help for them, many shared a perception that the counselors were too busy and "overloaded," or trying to help students with practical problems like scheduling issues. Fear of being a burden to a counselor that they perceived to be very busy discouraged some students from seeking support. Some students felt counselors were also not adequately prepared to address their mental health concerns, and as a result, did not feel comfortable reaching out to them. One student noted, "They lack time," and, "Everyone has a problem." Some students perceived that help was not available to them at school. One student noted, "School counselors are not so great with long-term mental health." And another noted, "Counselors say they want the truth but sometimes seems like they don't want to hear."

11 *Despite significant challenges, students are finding the silver linings, reasons to be positive, and many have developed a greater self-awareness.*

Many students noted that they have developed a deeper sense of gratitude for their family, close friends, school and teachers, and their personal health and safety during COVID-19. For some students, they appreciated being able to spend more time with their family and have recognized that their family members can be a source of support and encouragement. In some cases, students developed a greater sense of empathy for their parents, which in turn led them to contribute more around the house. Several students noted that the social limitations of COVID-19 resulted in a "winnowing" of their friend group such that they developed a greater sense of who their "true" friends are, and those friendships had deepened during the pandemic; in some cases, COVID-19 has provided an opportunity for some students to make new friends. Several students expressed a sense that they realized that their teachers "care about them a lot." For some students, the pandemic has given them a greater appreciation for school in general, noting that they had taken for granted the benefits that school plays in their lives beyond academics. One student noted, "I never thought I'd miss going to school. I took it for granted." For another student, the process of being quarantined at home due to a COVID-19 exposure gave them a greater appreciation of the value of being in school.

Students who were attending school in-person (either periodically in a hybrid or blended model, or on a full-time basis), were appreciative that they had that opportunity when they know that many other students across the state do not. Several students who had been able to return to school in person were appreciative of their school's attention to and emphasis on COVID-19 safety. Those students described the use of masks, practicing social distancing, and consistent enforcement of COVID-19 safety precautions by teachers and staff as signs that they felt their school was keeping them safe. Students attending in-person valued their ability to access help from and connect with their teachers, participate in sports and clubs, and socialize and interact with friends and other students. While many of the students in cohort-type models described challenges staying connected with friends in other cohorts, a few students managed to make new friends in a different cohort. Many students had favorable comments about their school having a "catch-up day" (for example, a Wednesday or a Friday) which was designated a day to get extra help in-person, or to work on assignments from home. Because some students were choosing virtual options instead of in-person, some in-person students had smaller class sizes which allowed them to get more individualized help from teachers. While some students cited the challenges of wearing masks all day, they recognized it as "their new normal."

Virtual learning has provided some students with a greater sense of independence, flexibility, and ability to learn at their own pace. This was expressed as an appreciation of being able to manage their time; spend less time on one subject and more on another, if needed; and to make decisions that are better for them with respect to how they are learning. Even students who strongly disliked attending school virtually could point to several things they had learned that will 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 understanding their personal learning preferences ("being a hands-on learner," for example). The freedom of virtual learning has allowed some high school students to pick up a part-time job or work additional hours at their current job. For example, one student noted, "I don't have to log on at certain times, so I can work more hours [at a job]. More hours means more savings." Some students have developed a greater understanding of their personal learning needs, preferences, and styles. As one student put it, "I have worked on my own personal learning style more." Another student commented, "I didn't like it [virtual school], but I learned about my own ambition to learn. I depend on other students to help me learn." It also forced some

students to recognize the importance of getting adequate sleep and breakfast in terms of their ability to learn effectively. Other students expressed a greater sense of efficiency when learning at home and better time-management skills. Some students welcomed that virtual learning suited their personality, especially those who like to work independently. In some cases, students noted that their grades had improved during virtual learning. Several students noted that they learned new things about themselves in that they enjoyed being alone and it was refreshing not to have the demands of socializing or talking with other people; for some, learning at home presented fewer distractions.

The cancellation of sports, clubs, and extracurricular activities has allowed some students to develop new interests and new ways of spending their time that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to develop. However, it should be noted that students saw this as a silver lining and a way to put a more positive "spin" on the challenges of this past year; for the vast majority of students, the cancellation of their activities was a significant concern and loss. Students noted they had developed new hobbies or had more time to keep up with their hobbies. By being able to complete their work more quickly during the day, they could get their homework done and go to the YMCA to work out, for example. The later start time of classes while learning virtually or on "at-home days" was appreciated by students who value their sleep. Several students had favorable views of shorter school days or modified schedules which allowed them greater flexibility to fill their time in other ways, such as with jobs, exploring more interests, and having better balance in their day.

12 | *Students have developed many coping skills and ways to feel more resilient. Some students learned new things about themselves that they are grateful for.*

Many students could identify specific strategies or things they have found that help them cope better or feel more resilient while trying to learn and go to school during COVID-19. These include: increased self-awareness of the need to relax and recharge; volunteering; making opportunities for self-reflection such as meditation, journaling, Bible study; spending time with pets; emotional releases such as crying to relieve stress; private therapy; exercising and physical health; managing and organizing time and tasks; listening to music or playing an instrument; spending time in nature; spending time with family; connecting with friends online; and driving around in a car.

13 | *The focus group participants overwhelmingly found the focus group experience to be positive. This format may be a valuable means for students across Wisconsin to engage with one another and to contribute feedback in other ways in the future.*

At the conclusion of each focus group, participants were given the option to complete an anonymous online survey. 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 it was comforting and gained new insights about mental health. Beyond an information-gathering method, 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 important to them, especially with the peers in other schools and in other 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. See Appendix F for more information on these results.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS BY QUESTION

Taking a Current Snapshot: How Are Things Going?

Q1a. – Positives

First, thinking about school or things related to school over the past few months, what are some things that have really gone well for you? These can be things related to your classes, social life, activities, other things related to school. Generally, what are some positive aspects of school and your learning this semester?

Response themes

A. **Many students noted that they have developed a deeper sense of gratitude for their family, close friends, school and teachers, and their personal health and safety during COVID-19.** For some students, they appreciated being able to spend more time with their family and have recognized that their family members can be a source of support and encouragement. In some cases, students developed a greater sense of empathy for their parents, which in turn led them to contribute more around the house. Several students noted that the social limitations of COVID-19 resulted in a "winnowing" of their friend group such that they developed a greater sense of who their "true" friends are and those friendships had deepened during the pandemic; in some cases, COVID-19 has provided an opportunity for some students to make new friends. Several students expressed a sense that they realized that their teachers "care about them a lot." For some students, the pandemic has given them a greater appreciation for school in general, noting that they had taken for granted the benefits that school plays in their lives beyond academics. One student noted, "I never thought I'd miss going to school. I took it for granted." For another student, the process of being quarantined at home due to a COVID-19 exposure gave them a greater appreciation of the value of being in school.

B. **Students who were attending school in-person (either periodically in a hybrid or blended model, or on a full-time basis) were appreciative that they had that opportunity to be in-person when they know that many other students across the state do not.** They valued their ability to access help from and connect with their teachers, participate in sports and clubs, and socialize and interact with friends and other students. Several students in cohort-type models noted they had been able to develop new friends in a different cohort. Many students had favorable comments about their school having a "catch-up day" (for example, a Wednesday or a Friday) which was designated a day to get extra help in-person, or to work on assignments from home. Because some students were virtual instead of in-person, some in-person students had smaller class sizes, which allowed them to get more individualized help from teachers.

C. **Several students who had been able to return to school in person were appreciative of their school's attention to and emphasis on COVID-19 safety. Those students described the use of masks, practicing social distancing, and consistent enforcement of COVID-19 safety precautions by teachers and staff as signs that they felt their school was keeping them safe.** While some students cited the challenges of wearing masks all day, they recognized it as "their new normal."

D. **Virtual learning has provided some students with a greater sense of independence, flexibility, and ability to learn at their own pace. This was expressed as an appreciation of being able to manage their time; spend less time on one subject and more on another, if needed; and to make decisions that are better for them with respect to how they are learning. Even students who strongly disliked attending school virtually could point to several things they had learned that will 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 understanding their personal learning preferences ("being a hands-on learner," for example).**

- The freedom of virtual learning has allowed some high school students to pick up a part-time job or work additional hours at their current job. For example, one student noted, "I don't have to log on at certain times, so I can work more hours [at a job]. More hours means more savings."

- Some students have developed a greater understanding of their personal learning needs, preferences, and styles, noting, "I have worked on my own personal learning style more." Another student commented, "I didn't like it [virtual school], but I learned about my own ambition to learn. I depend on other students to help me learn." It forced some students to recognize the importance of getting adequate sleep and breakfast in terms of their ability to learn.

- For some students, virtual learning helped them value and make better use of their time, leading them to be more productive and efficient. One student who noted that they were generally self-motivated felt that they were able to learn material in about one-third of the time of in-person school. Other students expressed a greater sense of efficiency when learning at home and better time-management skills.

- Some students felt that virtual learning suited their personality, especially those who like to work independently. In some cases, students noted that their grades had improved during virtual learning. Several students noted that they learned new things about themselves in that they enjoyed being alone and it was refreshing not to have the demands of socializing or talking with other people; working at home presented fewer distractions.

- Virtual learning forced some students to reach out to their teachers more and self-advocate. One student noted that she developed "more street smart skills" [in the context of her learning]. A self-confessed procrastinator had been able to work on this area of personal concern.

- Several students noted that teachers' comfort level with and use of technology has improved over time, as well as the communication channels between teachers and students. The "learning curve" associated with virtual learning had been cleared, in some ways, and students were more comfortable with "how" to learn, their routines, etc.

E. **The cancellation of sports, clubs, and extracurricular activities has allowed some students to develop new interests and new ways of spending their time that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to develop. However, it should be noted that students saw this as a silver lining and a way to put a more positive "spin" on the challenges of this past year; for the vast majority of students, the cancellation of their activities was a significant concern and loss.** Students noted they had developed new hobbies or had more time to keep up with their hobbies. By being able to complete their work more quickly during the day, they could get their homework done and go to the YMCA to work out, for example.

F. **Some students have experienced less homework and lighter workloads during COVID-19, which they viewed as a positive aspect of their school experience this year.**

G. **The later start time of classes while learning virtually or on "at-home days" was appreciated by students who value their sleep. Several students had favorable views of shorter school days or modified schedules which allowed them greater flexibility to fill their time in other ways, such as with jobs, exploring more interests, and having better balance in their day.**

H. **It should be noted that some students found it difficult to answer this question, as they struggled to identify any positives aspects of school this year.** One student noted, "There are not a lot of positives."

Relevant Quotes

I think a positive is you kind of appreciate things more, because, for me, I've been quarantined so many times, that by the time I get back to school, I appreciate going there and being in person.

It's really nice being in person, getting to see my friends again. I really missed them a lot while we were out back in March and that whole summer. So, yeah, it's just really nice being able to see everyone again.

So some things that have been going well this trimester for me [are] that I've been back in school, which is a lot of fun because I'm able to see my friends and socialize with them, which is something I wasn't really able to do when we were virtual. And I'm able to see my teachers, and that's a lot of fun because I personally learn better when I'm in person, and I'm able to see what they're teaching us. So that's definitely been some positives.

Learning at home gave me time to kind of go in my own pace, just because sometimes, it takes me a little longer to absorb the information than my classmates. And so it's really nice to have more time to actually like learn the material I'm supposed to be instead of it just being thrown at me, and then I'm supposed to learn it in a day. And so that's been really helpful. And also, still being able to relax and spend time, spend more time with my family is also really nice.

We've been back semi in-person. We have this system where half the school is in person for a few days, and then it switches to the other half. But I guess it's been a little better than being full virtual. It's been a little easier to follow along. I know my grades dropped a lot when I was virtual, and now they're a lot better, so.

So, I'm luckily able to go to school where the teachers actually care a lot about us. So, I'm able to make those connections with my teachers. Learning-wise, I feel like I'm not the best of my ability right now, just because it's over the computer, and I'm able to search up stuff, and there's distractions all around.

In our school, since we've gone full virtual for the time being, I've had more time to keep up with my hobbies, because they issue less homework to us in general now. My grades are doing better than they were with increased homework.

Some of the positives for me, I guess, well, obviously is probably new hobbies. And I guess I feel being more independent, especially during this time, it gives you more time to focus on your homework or understand things better. Definitely that, for me, that was one of the positives. I kind of saw myself in a different state of just focusing on school a bit more and just seeing what I can do to help out.

Honestly, I have been playing a lot of chess…I've been playing it online. I have improved a lot. I'm still nowhere near as good as some of the best, but it's fun. It forces me to think. It takes my mind off of things, and it's just something that I've really found that I'm passionate about.

I think a positive thing is that some kids are virtual in my school, and some aren't. So I think it's kind of nice that there's not so many people at school. And you can have more individual time with your teachers if you need it. I think that's kind of nice.

Recently, I've also had more work hours, so I have a job and all . And at the beginning of COVID, I had like no hours, because I had to get the full time in. And, recently, I've been getting a lot more so I can save up for like a car and stuff.

I'm all virtual. The only major benefit of that is that I can kind of manage my own time, I guess. Like I get things, if I don't feel like I need to spend a lot of time on a certain subject, I can spend less time on it. And if I was in school, you'd have to, you know, spend as much time as you're in class, but I can kind of make decisions that are better for me.

Well, my school pushed back the starting time for classes, so my first class isn't until 10:00. That's amazing. I love that.

This is something I am willing to share more personally, but my stress, depression, and anxiety has gone down a lot this year. This being said, I have more social anxiety from not seeing my friends and not having any social functions. With the decreased anxiety and depression…I cannot speak to the fact that increased mental health is just due to online school, but I definitely feel that having control of my schedule and getting an appropriate amount of sleep plays a role.

Now I'm kind of just understanding that like if people have shown their true colors about who really cares and who really doesn't care.

Some of my teachers have gotten a lot better with technology since they're kind of forced to be able to do that. So it's kind of nice having teachers that don't necessarily have to rely on our tech services. I mean, they still need tech help, but they're a lot better now, which is quite nice.

What I hope from this, though, is it shows an example of the things I can do…It was just kind of like a test flight of getting a job and still holding up school.

I learned a lot about myself and how I can work hard and get things done when they need to be done and take time for myself too.

Going virtual exposed the inequality present in public education. The students that are self-motivated have grown more than they would have otherwise because they can manage their schedules better, but for the apathetic students, it leaves them behind without support

A positive: being able on my virtual days to be able to watch lessons at 2x or 1.5 speed. It has been hard to go back in person and listen to them in person. It's too slow. I was able to get things done faster [virtually].

I think one of the positives about virtual students or a combination is that we have time to relax and get our thoughts back together from day to day because I think, in comparison to last year, I was very stressed, and I still don't get how I did eight classes of homework every night. And so I think this is one of the positives, that we get to relax between days.

There's not many positives. It's been really difficult.

Q1b. – Challenges
What are some things that have really <u>not</u> gone so well this school year? These might be things you are struggling with or things that you are most concerned about with respect to school or life in general.

Response themes
A. **Virtual learning has been a significant struggle and challenge for the vast majority of students who are in a virtual learning model. This includes students in fully virtual models, as well as those in blended or hybrid models, and those who engaged in virtual learning on a periodic basis (for example, during isolation or quarantine). Even some in-person learning students have experienced virtual learning at some point during the pandemic due to temporary school shifts to virtual learning or quarantine/isolation.** The nature of their concerns and struggles were manifested in several key ways, including: a sense that virtual learners are not a high priority, especially for schools that have implemented virtual <u>and</u> in-person models; difficulties accessing their teachers for help in a timely way; lack of hands-on learning opportunities; increased distractions while trying to learn at home; lack of engaging ways of learning remotely; challenges with time management and keeping track of assignments and due dates; decreases in motivation; and temptations to do the bare minimum needed to complete assignments.

1. **Many virtual learners expressed a sense that they are an "afterthought."**
   - Many virtual students expressed a sense that virtual learners are an "afterthought," "forgotten," or that there was a higher priority placed on the in-person learners. [Schools] are "pushing hard to get back to normal, but they forgot about the students who can't learn normally [referring to students who have to remain virtual for specific reasons, such as personal or family health].
   - This sense of being "forgotten" was commonly expressed by those attending school in completely virtual models. Some examples of how virtual students expressed this include: a high school senior who felt that the school counselor forgot to notify her of scholarship opportunities that had been already communicated to the in-person students; more difficulties in contacting the school counselor about course selections, standardized testing, and little involvement by the school counselors in the "daily life" of a [virtual] high school student; and a teacher who would "minimize the tabs" on their screen [of the virtual students] and then "forget about us" while teaching the in-person students.
   - These feelings of being "forgotten" were also expressed by students who were virtual for a period of time due to quarantine, for example: "Teachers don't really worry about the students who are online due to quarantine." One felt that teachers can get frustrated with virtual students, noting, "Some teachers will forget about their students who are online. Some teachers don't have time for the kids who are in quarantine." One student who was home sick

reached out to a teacher to get the assignments in order to keep up. The teacher did not reach back out until after school and the assignments were due that same day.

- Several students expressed that they did not have a good understanding of the tradeoffs between virtual vs in-person learning when they made their choice. One student noted they had to make their decision whether to return to in-person or remain virtual for the second semester starting at the end of January in early December. They felt that had more time been given they might have made a different decision.

2. **Many students who experienced challenges with virtual learning described an inability to access teachers for help in a timely way when not in-person; other frustrations included no consistent, clear, or timely mechanisms to access teachers or get help.**
   - One of the most common concerns or frustrations expressed by students about virtual learning that makes it more difficult for them is the inability to access their teachers in a timely way to get help. Not being able to get help when needed, especially later in the afternoons and evenings, makes it more challenging for students to complete and keep up with assignments and to feel like competent learners. Missing assignments that are entered into the gradebook as zeroes can make it hard to get grades back up.
   - Students often mentioned the need to wait for email responses to their questions, whereas prior to COVID-19, some students would get help or ask questions right before, during, or after school, during lunch, or at the end of class. In the virtual settings, those more real-time or immediate mechanisms for help were not as accessible, especially when some teachers might be teaching in-person students during the day. This seems to have created a mismatch of expectations between when and how quickly virtual learners could get help relative to what is reasonable to expect from the teachers in terms of when they can respond to students.
   - For some students, learning the material is more challenging online and several expressed that their teachers just "expect them to understand." The demands on teachers to answer questions and provide help may be more pronounced in virtual learning environments due to students having more difficulties absorbing information. Some felt that teachers were being more lenient. Others reported needing to "teach themselves more."
   - It is also important to note that the students recognized that teachers need their downtime and evenings too and that they are "trying their best to make it work." One student said, "They are not on the clock in the evening. They didn't sign up to be teachers teaching virtually."

3. **Lack of hands-on learning opportunities, especially in science classes, where labs are essential to the learning process**
   - Not being able to do labs (e.g., dissection in Biology) was disappointing for some students.

4. **Distractions while trying to learn at home**
   - Distractions while trying to learn at home can include no private space to do work, having to take care of younger siblings, and it being easier to be on the phone and social media. For several students, this exacerbated tendencies to procrastinate.

5. **Challenges with time management**
   - Changing due dates and managing various submission options for online work across classes (hard copy, email, uploading into Canvas, Google, etc.) were among the challenges expressed by students. Some are having difficulty balancing work, practice, and online homework.

6. **Some students have experienced a significant decrease in motivation for school; they have "checked out."**
   - "I haven't adjusted, and I am not sure I ever will."
   - One student noted that her source of motivation comes from hanging out with people, which is now lacking. Another student commented that motivation is lacking, even to do the things she used to like to do. One student forced herself not to attend virtual classes in bed.

7. **Students turning their cameras off creates even more of a barrier between students and can signal that a student is disengaged.**
   - With many students turning their cameras off during classes, one student felt there was no culture or community to support them in their learning or to be more interactive. The lack of group encouragement creates even more separation and isolation. Many students expressed that they did not like being in Zoom breakout rooms and described them as "awkward."

8. **Additional barriers to communication**
   - Some students mentioned teachers creating additional barriers to interacting with friends online by disabling chats in Zoom meetings or in Google Meets, or by telling kids they cannot talk to each other during virtual classes [one student who expressed this felt that interacting with friends is difficult enough during COVID-19; they had trouble understanding why teachers would place even further limits on interactions, when even 5 minutes of chatting or talking informally with friends at the start of class would help them].

B. **Many students noted a wide disconnect between in-person students and those learning online when attending the same classes simultaneously. The students attending virtually describe feeling left out or forgotten during class; those in-person do not have a way to interact with their friends and classmates joining online.** Students in simultaneous learning models where a teacher would have to toggle between the in-person and virtual learners expressed concerns that some teachers were not noticing or including the online kids in their classes. "Teachers don't give their best effort to the online kids. The teacher had to go back and forth between in person or in school, and she wasn't noticing the online kids." Another student expressed this as, "Each day, half of my teachers are not teaching to me. Some teachers teach the in-person kids and ignore the ones online, and vice versa." A third student noted, "I've been virtual all year, and even though my teachers try and make an effort to make sure everybody knows what they're doing, some teachers just completely ignore the virtual kids and just put them up on a computer and then just teach the in-person kids. And then we get completely lost, and I can't take notes, and I have no idea what I'm doing. Or it's vice versa, they completely just do the virtual kids, and then they just leave the in-person kids in the dust."

C. **Some students reported a significant increase in their workload and homework this year. Some students speculated that teachers were trying to compensate for the lack of in-person instruction by giving them more work and assignments. The amount of homework, coupled with difficulties getting help, has contributed to some students taking "shortcuts" in order to complete their work and just "get it done."**
   - While some students felt teachers have been more lenient with homework during COVID-19, increases in workload and homework were a significant concern for some students in virtual learning. One student noted that, "I know for my school, they give out, I feel like, compared to

when we were in person, they give out much more homework workload. I feel like it's a little bit more stressful just because I feel like the teachers think that because we're at home, because there's a pandemic going on, we have more time." This was echoed by a student in a different group who said, "My school hasn't backed up off of the workload. I feel like they assign more because they think we're at home, that we can handle it." Another noted, "Virtual, we're kind of, they kind of expect us to do more homework because we're at home, and they're expect us to have, because we have all this time, and so a lot of our homework is due really quickly now. So everything is due like quicker than it was before, even for first semester."

- As stated above, many students mentioned that being unable to access help when needed was making it harder to complete assignments, leading to late work, stress, frustration, and in some cases, a decline in grades. Accessing, completing, and submitting assignments on online platforms, in addition to managing large volumes of emails, notifications, etc. was overwhelming for many students and adding to the time it takes to complete their work.

- For some students, the process of navigating online assignments was resulting in adding time to completion. One student noted that they did not have access to a printer and had to copy things by hand. Students in several groups described taking shortcuts, such as looking up answers online and sharing answers with friends (especially math) just to get the assignment done. One student would take a picture of the screen instead of taking notes. Many of these students who admitted to taking shortcuts also recognized that they were not learning as much as they should.

D. **Some students expressed a decrease in motivation and a decline in grades while trying to learn during the pandemic.** Stress, procrastination, pushing work aside, watching a recording instead of logging on to class "live," the ability to walk away from a challenging assignment, or turning the camera off were examples of reasons students gave for decreases in their grades. Some expressed that they did not have the stamina to work all day in a virtual school setting, noting, "It's a lot to keep working all day." In some cases, those that returned to in-person learning during the year were able to rebound with their grades with one student noting, "I know my grades dropped a lot when I was virtual, and now they're a lot better."

E. **In some cases, students described that schools generally "show a disregard for students' mental health." They felt this way due to the significant increases in their workload, yet with limited ways to access help when needed; no one reaching out from their school (e.g.,teacher, counselor) to ask them how they were doing; and teachers not being understanding when work is late, especially if they were having trouble with it and could not get help in order to complete the assignment on time.** One student commented that, "There's no recognition of the mental health. It's hard to find the school-life balance. There's a lot of mental weight on me. I can't socialize. There's no clubs. I am feeling left behind by school and friends."

F. **At the same time that some students expressed concerns about workload and homework, others expressed concerns that the rigor of their classes was not the same as it would have been if learning was in-person and that they are not prepared for next year or for AP Exams.** These students did not feel they were learning as much in a virtual setting and that their workload and expectations had been lowered, especially in AP classes. These students (predominantly college-bound) did not feel prepared to take the ACT exam or upcoming AP exams. Some mentioned concerns that they were not able to participate in programs designed to help them prepare for college.

G. **Students were grieving the loss of many key aspects of the high school experience. They described a sense of "missing out on normal things" and "getting robbed" of key high school opportunities, such as homecoming and other traditions.** One student noted that, "It's hard mentally when you are losing out on so many things." When talking about this topic, another student noted, "There's a lot of sadness." Several older students expressed concerns for younger students who cannot easily make social connections in platforms like Google Meet. With respect to the loss of traditions, one student felt that her school was taking things overboard and that instead of taking everything away, effort should be made to try to keep as normal a year as possible.

H. **The cancellation of sports, clubs, band, choir, performing arts, and other extracurricular activities was noted as a significant loss for many students. For some students, the lack of sports has made it harder for them to stay on track with their schoolwork, given the structure that practices and sport activities give to their routine; several noted the negative impacts on their physical health. Students who are musicians miss being able to access their instruments that are at school and to play and perform with their fellow musicians. Some students expressed frustration that sports were taking place at their school, but their clubs were not.** Among the students' concerns related to these activities are the loss of relationships, opportunities to develop leadership skills, and in some cases, a shift in the group of kids they hang out with. For some students, sports provide a mental health release. To cope with the loss of these activities, some students are working out on their own (running, walking outside, lifting weights, or doing workout videos) and in some cases, starting their own clubs of participating in clubs online (for example, Model UN and Science Olympiad).

I. **Overwhelmingly, students miss their friends and opportunities to socialize. Even students who are in school expressed barriers to connecting with friends given the need to maintain social distancing while in school; being on a cohort schedule opposite their friends; and others who are remaining virtual. Students who are quarantining worry about maintaining their connections with friends.** One student noted, "It's socially hard not being able to talk to people." And "The social connection is not as good." Students attending school in-person noted that the separation required at school can be difficult, especially not sitting by friends in class or at lunch and with desks spaced out. While overall very few students expressed issues with respect to wearing masks, several noted that wearing masks and using sanitizer routinely can be a struggle.

J. **Internet connections and other technology issues have presented additional challenges for some students in terms of being able to connect to their classes. This could include slow connections, dropped connections, or complete loss of connections.** One student noted that they were taking a computer class, but the programs were only downloaded to the schools computers, so she could not do any of the curriculum at home (so only half of the curriculum was completed). One student could not reliably send emails to the teacher. Another could not have too many windows open at once.

K. **Some in-person students expressed concerns for their safety at school, although as stated previously, others felt that their schools were taking COVID-19 precautions seriously.** The students who raised concerns about safety focused primarily on the lack of enforcement of mask policies, including some teachers not wearing masks, as well as lack of social distancing.

Relevant Quotes

Virtual feels like my school is treating my decision to be online as what I would prefer, but it's put behind the in-person. Some teachers don't post that day's work until 3 in the afternoon. We are not their priority. I am not as important. It's what it feels like.

In-person days are a knowledge-dump. Teachers try to get in as much as possible and at-home days students are working on their own. We are supposed to ask questions [when at home] but the teachers aren't available – they are teaching the other half.

Some teachers are really good about it, and some teachers are really bad about it. And so like if I'm virtual for a day, half my teachers are teaching to the computer, and half of them are teaching to the class. And then like when I'm in class, half of them are teaching to the in class, and half of them are teaching to the kids at home. It's like if I'm at home, half of my class is, it's just really frustrating me, because like I can't win because half of them aren't actually teaching to me.

I feel like a lot of time we just need a brain rest, because I feel like we wake up at, well, at least I wake up at like 7:00 in the morning, and then I have to log on right away. I'm on the computer from 7:00 to 3:00 in the afternoon, and then right after that, I'm starting homework. So I feel like it's just, it's a lot for my brain to just keep working and working and working all day, you know.

I'm a hard-working student, but this has caused me to give up and lose all motivation. Like it's not even worth it anymore, whatever. Like grades are online. I can get through it. But the next year when, or like in two years when this circles around, if it circles around, it's going to be horrible.

I feel like there's a lot of freedom with logging on to class, like if you're on the computer or like just being able to turn off your camera and like go do something else, and I feel like it's very, it's easy to do that. And I feel like a lot of students do do that, and I feel like that's why we don't pay attention, because we feel like, oh, it's recorded. We'll just see it later, or we'll find out what the assignment is later.

So I think my teacher once put it really well. She said there's this almost a somberness, and it's not exactly somberness, that is depression. It's kind of like quiet, a kind of, I guess kind of closed into oneself, I think, and that, I guess, not able to look any more towards hope and things like that, instead just seeing the negative in things. And seriously, like every single thing that we do as high schoolers right now, you know, from homecoming dances and prom and just simply are we going to be able to see our friends tomorrow or be in school or not, everything is taking on a questionable meaning. And so it's like we're being conditioned to question everything and to not trust the outside and things that are around us anymore, trust that they'll be there tomorrow. And so that kind of turning towards the inside and closing off to promises, I guess.

But then like for my friends who…would grade it like a high, like really stressful, I think it's because they also have like other siblings to take care of, and like they're the oldest. And they have like a job to care, to help with supporting their family too, because, especially with like losing, their parents losing jobs and everything. And then, I think it's just like being able to like balance like your family time with your like academics. And it's just like a scary and just like unknowing, like we don't know what will happen.

It's certainly been an impact with grades. It's been really, I'm a definitely hands-on learner, so learning over the computer is hard. I ask a ton of questions in class, and it's always a lot more challenging to do that in a

virtual setting, in part because it was really weird. You know, I might hit the unmute button, and five seconds later, my teachers can hear me. So they're already on to a new topic, and I'm actually interrupting. So, it challenge for me already to ask questions when I need to, and the fact that I do, and then to have an added struggle, that causes issues, and then...comprehension of what's going on is hard. So I think that's probably the worst part of COVID for me right now.

My GPA isn't what it was. I feel like I would be doing better if I was in person. I wasn't prepared for the increase in the rigor of my courses in a virtual environment. I'm a procrastinator. Hard to adapt to.

Yeah, I guess some classes are definitely a little easier than they would've been normally. Like I'm in AP biology, and we haven't written a single FRQ or anything. So, I mean, pretty easy.

I think it's because teachers are like, you're all at home, so if I give you more work, you're just more engaged and not slacking off.

We got way more work than normal.

When this second semester started, [my friend] told me they hadn't gone to school for two weeks, and I recently convinced them to go back because their grades were really suffering, and they didn't know how to do a lot of the work. And I help a lot of my friends by tutoring them in classes. I noticed a lot of them were not getting as much from class. And also their families were having money issues, and they had to work and then have their money go towards the family instead. So, it was just a lot of things going on for a lot of my friends.

Like every single class is just giving us more and more work, and they're trying to fit a lot in. We started a hybrid model pretty recently, because we were virtual...from the beginning of September [until] to a few weeks ago. And they're trying to fit as much work as they can during in person before we end up possibly going back to virtual, and just the work piling up is stressing a lot of people out, and it causes everybody to not do their work because they're avoiding it.

It's like Friday night, it's 6:00 p.m., and then you look back at your email. Two more assignments have just been posted. It's like, seriously? I was about to go get dinner.

Something that's kind of hard is like math class just because if you don't understand something, you have to write a whole email to the teacher explaining why and then more steps to set up a Zoom or something. And another thing that is kind of difficult is making sure you can properly communicate with your teachers on what you're supposed to be doing and making sure you know what's going on. And if you're missing anything, that was kind of hard for me. And then another thing is on Zoom, when their video cuts out, and it starts lagging, and you can't hear anything they're saying, that's really hard.

The teachers also tend to take out some of their technical frustrations on us. So like sometimes the Zoom call won't go as planned for them, and they'll just kind of rant on about it instead of moving forward and trying to fix it. They just kind of like lay it all on us.

Well, for me, we've been quarantined like a lot. I think I've been quarantined like five times now. And I guess the hard thing for me was when I was quarantined, nobody else in my family was. So I was home all alone,

so I had to make sure I got on classes at the right time and did my homework and not falling asleep and doing all this stuff that, usually, I have somebody to help me with. And that was kind of hard. And then at the same time, once we got quarantined, like my whole family, that was also hard, because like everybody is doing their own thing, and then the power would go out and like the Internet would be bad. But it was like never a good situation for me, because it's either like one extreme or the other.

I social distance all the time. I wear my mask, and at school I kind of feel like it just takes the whole point away, because we live in very northern Wisconsin, and people totally do not believe in COVID around here. And so like you walk through our hallways, and the masks sit like right here. And then if you're like, hey, could you please put your mask on...And like some of our teachers won't do anything about it. And so then it just feels like you're the only one that seems to care, which is really frustrating.

I just wanted to go along with what [student] said about, you know, other kids not really caring. I mean, I was in my school today, and there were clumps of almost ten kids just side by side walking through the hallway, and there was no teacher to tell them to stop. They just, some teachers just kind of are done with it, and they don't really seem to want to enforce it anymore. So, that's frustrating.

It was hard for me when I went virtual because I had little siblings to take care of too and try to go to classes.

It's kind of hard not being able to sit at lunch next to your friends. You have to sit, there's these borders now that are glass, like plexiglass, so we can't, it's really hard to talk to them and doing that interaction during lunchtime.

They give you one carton of milk, which I guess helps some, but it's better than nothing. But I just really wish they would make water, because water is a necessity, so I really wish they wouldn't make you wait until you get home or wherever you're going after school to get water.

Q2. – Connectedness with School, Teachers, and Peers

Some of you may be at school in person. Some of you may be learning virtually, or some combination of the two. Thinking about how school is going for you so far this school year:

a. How would you describe the extent to which you feel connected to your school, your teachers, and your fellow students, and is this different than how you might have felt on a typical school year? By "connected," I am referring to things like: do you have regular contact or communication with your teachers or people at school who can support you with your learning or when you need help with your schoolwork? Are there opportunities through school for you to interact with or socialize friends or other students and be involved with your peers at school?

b. What are some things you are doing or have done this year to increase or improve your ability to feel connected with your school, teachers, or friends?

c. Are there some things that you have discovered that you really DON'T miss about what you might consider to be a "normal" school year?

Q3. – Feelings of Belonging

Still thinking about how school is going for you this year: How would you describe the extent to which you feel like you belong at your school this year? If you are not sure what I mean by this, think about it this way: do you feel like your school is a place where people personally care about you as an individual? Is school a place where you feel included or accepted?

Response themes

    A. Many students expressed a lack of connectedness to their school, teachers, and friends (in one case, this was expressed as a feeling of being "invisible"). This was especially pronounced for students in virtual learning environments. Some students expressed this directly in terms of "I feel disconnected." The lack of connectedness made it easier for some students not to do their homework because no one knew who they were and there were no regular check-ins on the status of completing assignments until the end of the semester. Not being able to access help or tutoring services further contributed to feeling disconnected from school; for some students, this would snowball and result in them falling behind, losing track of assignments, etc. While some noted that teachers were using breakout rooms during classes, many students strongly disliked being in breakout rooms, noting that often students do not turn their cameras on ("breakout rooms are the worst thing ever") or that the experience is "awkward" when only a few people have their cameras on and no one else participates. There were a few instances of students who had more positive experiences with breakout rooms (specifically, "When I do get in a group where everyone is talking, it's lots of fun"). For many virtual students, they sense that teachers "don't have a connection with virtual students" or that "they don't pay attention to the virtual – only the in-person." One student reported that, "Teachers choose favorites, go to the students who ask questions, and if you are not one of their favorites..."; a second student in this group echoed this saying, "It's true that some teachers pick favorites...they ignore some students. It's not all of them, but it's some of them."

    B. Students expressed mixed feelings about belonging, with those attending school virtually feeling a diminished sense of belonging. In-person students were more apt to express that they still feel like people care about them and do not feel left out (for example, "When I'm at school, I

feel really connected. Our senior class has 60 kids; I am with a lot of the same kids all day"). Virtual students may not feel like they are in a "school" ("I am just on a computer with some people"), feel less included and accepted, and miss their friends. Virtual school can be hard for people who are shy or have difficulty "putting themselves out there to make friends." One virtual student noted, "I feel like I am on my own, surviving this pandemic on my own." Access to friends and the ability to make friends is a key aspect of students feeling connected and a sense of belonging. One student described, "stress and depression and hopelessness when you can't see friends." In some cases, a student may be more proactive in trying to connect with teachers by joining office hours, showing their face on camera more, and answering questions.

C. There were students in several groups who expressed the personal challenges they have experienced when they see their classmates doing things (sports, social activities, etc.) that they cannot because they have to participate in virtual school (because they or a family member is particularly high risk). One student noted that it "amplifies the feeling of being an outsider." One student mentioned having to watch from home and take notes where the anatomy class that was doing dissection.

D. Sports, clubs, and activities help students feel a sense of connectedness and belonging. Some students expressed a sense of unfairness of seeing sports take place but not clubs. They noted that it was hard to see sports going on but not clubs, giving them a sense of feeling "overlooked" and as if clubs are not as important as sports. Those without access to sports expressed that they missed their community. The ability to see and talk with friends and participate in sports and extracurricular activities with friends and peers were key elements of students feeling connected to others and their school. Many students reported that their communications with friends from school has decreased during COVID-19 and that they have lost contact with friends. Some have lost contact with friends due to differences among their friend group in terms of the amount of social activity that they can engage in. Some noted that they had not seen some of their friends since last March's school closures.

- Some students are finding ways to maintain connections on their own or are making more of an effort to reach out through SnapChat, FaceTime calls, texting, Discord, writing letters, and multiplayer online games, and doing assignments and homework together online, for example. Several students noted, "I am using FaceTime a lot more this year," and, "I FaceTime my friends a lot more than I used to. We do our homework while we are FaceTiming together." Connecting with friends outside of school in community or youth organizations (for example, Scouts) has also been a way for some to connect.
- Others appreciated the small things that they can do while in school such as having socially distant lunch periods.

E. Students who transitioned from middle school to 9th grade last fall described feeling especially disconnected from their school and peers; in several cases, freshmen students expressed that they have never physically set foot in their school building. In situations where students from multiple middle or junior high schools fed into a larger high school, freshmen felt it was more challenging to make new friends or get to know their classmates virtually. For example, one freshman noted that, "I'm a freshman, so I don't know what most of my class looks like, which is really odd, just knowing what four or five people in my class look like. It's really strange. And so

there's like, the community is just completely lost there. I barely know anybody, and it's really difficult to make friends during a Zoom call. So it's weird, for sure."

F. **Many students described examples of the key role that a specific teacher can play in helping them feel more connected and noted even small things that teachers do can help increase their sense of connectedness and belonging.** There were many students who recognized that some specific teachers were making efforts to provide them with extra help; taking a little extra time to ask them how they were doing; reaching out to find out why they were not turning in assignments; and trying to incorporate fun things into their classes. Students who are able to connect with their teachers in person, value and appreciate those opportunities (for example, on Wednesday and Friday "extra help" days).

- Some students mentioned teachers who were more accessible with respect to being able to ask for help was important to them. For example, having regular office hours, one-on-one Zoom meetings, direct messages, responding to emails. One student expressed this as, "I feel like I belong. Teachers don't get annoyed when I ask questions. We are communicating positively." Another noted, "Teachers are good about replying to my questions and emails." A third student offered, "Teachers do a good job of trying to stay in contact. But there is less human interaction, so the only way we can get help is if we seek help. This year really is what you make it. Teachers are making sure that students get their work done and stay caught up."
- A few cited examples of teachers who make an effort to include virtual and in-person students together as helping them feel like they are learning as a "class." A student noted, "Teachers are using a camera that projects onto the kids who are there in person. When we are in person, we join the Google Meet so the whole class is together, whether we are at home or in the classroom." Another student noted, "Most of the teachers are good about including the virtual kids and get in good discussions with everyone."
- The simple gesture of a teacher asking students how they were doing or taking the time to reach out seemed to resonate with many of the students. One student noted, "Three of my teachers really make us feel like we belong. One teacher does a mental health check every day. Another teacher, I go in, I listen, I leave. I log in. I log out. It's fine, but there is no sense of belonging." This was expressed by one student as, "Our school counselors have been reaching out biweekly, scheduling office hours. The teachers send out emails every week and are receptive to student questions. They are reinforcing that we are all alone, but we are alone together…none of us wants to be in this situation so if we make a mistake (There is more grace this year)."
- That sense of reinforcing a common understanding of the collective challenges may help students feel less alone. "I feel more belonging – a common sense of everyone is struggling exists in the school. We regularly discuss mental health issues and the pandemic." Another student expressed this as, "But now we're all kind of like the same person where we're like, oh, we're all in the same situation. We can't go out play sports. We can't go to art clubs. So, in a way, I feel like that kind of connects us all and like makes me feel included."

G. **Many students described that students routinely turn their cameras off during virtual classes, further contributing to a lack of connectedness. Several students expressed that when a student turns their camera off, this should signal to teachers that a student may be struggling and prompt them to want to reach out and connect with that student and understand why they do not want to be on camera.** One student said, "Cameras [off] are a definite sign that I don't want

to participate. I don't feel up to it. I stay up later…I need to take extra time to get myself together and keep myself sane." Another student noted, "It bums me out. Teachers should be worried about the people that aren't showing up. What's going on?" At the same time that many students expressed a desire to "see" their classmates with cameras <u>on</u> ("If a few people would be brave enough, others would follow"), several noted that some students may not have access to a place at home where they feel comfortable being on camera and that being on camera may make them feel more vulnerable. One student noted that the blank screens in class helps them feel "a bit more accepted" and less like the "odd one out"; "they are all blank screens during class, nobody is a step ahead of anyone else."

    H. When students were asked about the things that that they discovered that they <u>do not miss</u> about school, among the specific responses students offered are:
- **Early wake-up times** (Getting more sleep this year is valued by many students).
- **Faster, more frantic pace and schedules** ("I don't miss the pace of last year. I don't miss the frantic busy-ness. It has been nice to realize what is important.")
- **Large group projects**
- **Large classes and lots of people** – one student noted, "I don't miss all the people." Some students liked the smaller classes during COVID-19, with one student noting that it allowed for more of an opportunity to share opinions "without so many judgmental people," with another noting, "I can share my opinions and feel more comfortable." Yet another noted, "I don't miss the large class sizes. When in-person, we can ask more questions now. Now there are about 15 in each class."
- **Lots of people** - The smaller classes and fewer students in school on a given day may have alleviated some of the social pressures for some students ("I have been able to have more peaceful days when I am only talking to the people I really want to be talking with." Another student noted, "This week a bunch of virtual learners came back, and it's louder, and the lunchroom has more people.")
- **Extra-long class periods and busier school schedules** (In some cases, class periods are shorter so teachers can wipe down the desks before the next class).

Relevant Quotes

I feel a bit more detached from school. I know for virtual students, I think they feel more detached than ever because I have friends and colleagues who are doing virtual, and they all say the same thing. They say it feels like a vacation for them. Like it doesn't even feel like they're at school. Like it's just like a side activity. And it's no different, I feel like, in person. You're actually there, but the work is definitely different. So there's not that sense of connection between you and the school anymore. It's just kind of like, oh, I'm here now, but I'm staying safe because of COVID, so it doesn't really count in that kind of way.

I mean, from an all-virtual standpoint, this is probably the least connected I've ever been in a school year. I've had some interactions with teachers and stuff like that, but overall, not really. I mean, I still, you know, obviously I still talk to my close friends, but I'm not making any new friends or anything like that…you know, it's kind of sad.

I would say that my teachers really don't have a connection with us. Well, besides being in person, my teachers do have a connection with the in-person students, but as many times I have to stay virtual, I realize that the teachers don't really pay attention to the virtual students. And a lot of the virtual students don't really have

their cameras on, so I really wouldn't know how they look. So I would say I don't have a connection with the teachers or the students.

I feel like the sense of community and connection to both my peers and my teachers is lost just because it's difficult to, like you have to make an appointment to talk to your teachers. Like you have to go through, I have to go through a calendar that I click on a little date and I fill out why I need to talk to my teachers and stuff like that.

If we were in an actual classroom, I would just be able to go up to my teacher's classroom and talk to them. So, … it's different, for sure. And for talking to my classmates, that's a whole different story, because I haven't seen most of my classmates, because I'm a freshman, so I don't know what most of my class looks like, which is really odd, just knowing like four or five people in my class looks like. It's really strange. And so there's like, the community is just completely lost there. I barely know anybody, and it's really difficult to make friends during a Zoom call. So it's weird, for sure.

Like our teachers would always put us in breakout rooms and stuff. It's like, okay, cool, and I like…breakout room, and I could be the only person with my camera on. And I'll be like, hi, guys, remember me? Like three months ago, you know, we were all back in school. And they'd be like, wait, what's your name again…?

I am feeling less connected. Teachers will tell the in-person kids one thing but then never send that info to the other kids. I do feel more connected to my friends, because my parents are letting me hang out with my friends and my girlfriend.

I really don't feel like I belong. My teachers don't know how to handle mental health issues. If you go in to ask for extra help, he makes you feel really stupid and he's condescending. Some others are understanding, but they don't post office hours or express that they are here for the students.

I've never really been that connected to my school. It's because my school is predominantly a white school. And so I read a statistic online that like our school has like 8 percent or something like that African Americans. That means like 8 in 100 people are African American at my school. And it's kind of like, I don't really know my place with this school. Like I don't know who to be like, I don't know whether to be friends with like, because I don't, I'm not going to get along with everyone, and so…

I felt like I belonged more when teachers could see me in person.

I was going to say with like the email, teachers emailing and responding more. But I feel like the younger teachers, this sounds really bad, but I feel like the younger teachers are more helpful. They respond faster. They're like not, I wouldn't say stuck in their old ways, but like not so much like doing books and like bookwork, like books, books, books. But with the older teachers, they're kind of more doing bookwork, sheets of paper. And you can't print these off at school, and then they don't put them online, because they don't really do the online stuff. So, in a way, I feel like it's brought me closer with teachers emailing me faster, but I feel like at the same time, it's pushing more teachers away.

The physical aspect of just being together is really beneficial for my mental health. I see my friends, one or two at a time, and outside when the weather allows. I work at Target. I want people to know that I am smiling at them and the mask is such a tangible reminder that we are disconnected, and this is not normal.

In person, you're able to, I go to [school], so in person you get to attend mass, assemblies, and like just be able to still see your friends and stuff like that. And obviously, when you're virtual, you don't have the same opportunities. And going back to the anatomy class, they're, right now, they're doing dissections, and they're dissecting different things. And when you're virtual it's like, okay, now you guys can go do notes. And I'm just like, "I don't get to dissect anything, like I just have to take notes?" You kind of miss out on a lot of the fun stuff.

I honestly hate it. There's a lot that's, I've missed out on. We never got our homecoming, and I don't know, things like that. Those should be normal high school experiences, and it's just a weird feeling that, oh, you grew up with these movies, looking forward to these things. You've heard your parents talk about these things, but your opportunity to have a normal experience is just...really not possible anymore.

I have been asking way more questions than I have in the past, because I want to be connected to my teachers. I just kind of decided that on my own, that I would have to be more outgoing if I was going to be successful.

I feel really connected still. Since I'm in person five days a week, there hasn't really been any effect with that.

I feel that like I'm being more connected with my school and the community in it. Because at my school, in person, the classes are like 87 minutes long. So we have four classes a day, which is a long time period, but it's every other day. Whereas, with virtual learning, teachers are, since our schools are trying to get, or my school district is trying to get students...going back in person ready to do that by the end of March, it's more easier to communicate with teachers, if you need help with assignments, rather than waiting two more days, when the assignment could be due.

I'd say that we all pretty much have the same fear of getting corona and all of the other uncertainties. So I think everybody is in the same mindset as you. So it's more comfortable, and we all know what we need to do. And so in the sense of belonging, I think everyone who's here knows why they're here. And so I don't think anybody feels out of place right now.

From the way our school is trying to say, you belong, it doesn't, the point does not come across. Our school is probably really bad at it. Like the LGBTQ people do not feel comfortable here. Like I know that. It's very not cool, but I know that they don't...and we have zero African American and black people here. We did have one two years ago, but he left immediately because he saw that there was no other[s]. But we do have a couple Hispanic. But they're all in one class. So they're like completely separated, which is, I don't know if it's because they're trying to still learn English or some other reason. But I'm pretty sure it's just because of the language barrier, and they need different teachers.

They try to make it so they promote the message. Like, yeah, everybody, everyone belongs here. But it's nothing more than that. It's just kind of like they say it, but they don't really do anything else to make it clear.

Q4. – Levels of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

This past summer we had a chance to talk with almost 50 students from across Marathon County about returning to school this fall. One thing they told us at that time was that many students were experiencing lots of stress and anxiety about school during COVID-19. Now that school has been in session for a while, and thinking about you and your friend group, would you say the level of stress, anxiety, sadness, or depression among students is currently high, medium, or low? Why? How have any changes in your learning environment this year impacted you, for example, going back and forth between in-person and virtual or from virtual to in-person or having to quarantine?

Response themes

A. **When asked about levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, a pervasive theme across the focus groups was that students felt high levels of stress and anxiety as a result COVID-19 and its impact on school this year. Several students indicated they had a personal history of stress, anxiety, and depression and that COVID-19 had made it worse. At the same time, other students reported that they and their friends were not too stressed, but also noted that it's hard to know how others are feeling.**

- Students acknowledged that experiences with stress, anxiety, and depression during COVID-19 were unique to each individual, but offered generalizations based on their own perspectives or when thinking about their friends. "I think it might vary depending on the person, but I would say for the most part, in the school, the stress and anxiety has gone up in my opinion." The students' responses captured a full spectrum of perspectives, the most prominent being feelings that many students were struggling emotionally during COVID-19. In responding to this question, many students answered that they and their friends were experiencing "very high stress" or "very high anxiety" or that "depression is at a high." Their reasons for reporting these perspectives reflect the convergence of multiple factors including challenges with school and learning, concerns about their grades, lack of connections with teachers, diminished social opportunities and connections with friends, and isolation. In addition, some students acknowledged they had experienced these issues prior to COVID-19 and that the current situation has made it worse.

- Other students, including a few who would describe themselves as introverts, reported that their stress and anxiety had decreased during COVID-19 due to factors such as more sleep, more time to oneself, more time to work out, and less pressure to hang out and be social, and they have adjusted to their learning model. "I would say the stress level is lower now than towards the beginning of this school year, because now I'm used to how things are this year." In a few cases, the students' descriptions of lower anxiety may also be more reflective of a sense of apathy. To illustrate this point, one student noted, "And I think anxiety levels, at least for the people at my school, are like lower because, honestly, we don't have to turn on our cameras. We don't have to participate. So, you don't really have to do anything."

B. **Many students expressed feelings of isolation, or noted others isolating themselves due to concerns about COVID-19.** "There's always some people that are so scared of the virus...they just isolate themselves, even if they don't have it." One student noted, "Well, honestly, it's been one of the worst years of my life. I've, I struggled a lot at the beginning because I already felt alone, I guess. And then when I couldn't see my friends, I felt more alone. And I was also like further isolated from them..."

C. **Individual family approaches to COVID-19 safety have, in some cases, created added pressure on students to either socialize when they may not be comfortable doing so, or detach from their social networks. Students whose parents have more strict policies about socializing during COVID-19 have "fear of missing out," when other parents are less strict.** This is stressful for them and may cause them to withdraw further from their friends. The friend who is missing out feels bad that they see others socializing and then the other friends feel bad that their friend is not there. Students who have to be virtual due to health issues within their immediate family are especially vulnerable to understanding what they are missing due to the need to prioritize their family member's health. Several students felt inner turmoil about missing out on their sport and band.

D. **Students described that it was more challenging on their mental health to be virtual.** "Lots of kids are pushing themselves, are not sleeping well, and are anxious about their schoolwork." One virtual student noted that, "By the end of the week, I am completely destroyed. I just crash. Everyone is stressed, or they've given up. It's hard to 'process' when you don't know how to do something and being virtual makes it even harder." They worry they are not learning as much; missing out on labs and in-class demonstrations and experiments; and developing bad study habits [in some cases, resorting to cheating on assignments or tests]. One student who had recently returned to in-person learning noted, "Things are better now than being on my own at home."

E. **Students are worried about their future and how COVID-19 has impacted their plans for the future and ability to meet their academic and career goals. There is a sense that they are worried that they are missing key experiences that will help prepare them for college and/or the workforce.** One person described it bluntly, "I feel that it's impacting my future a lot already." Adding to this, another student noted, "And so it kind of makes us feel more overwhelmed and basically, stressed with our future. Like we aren't really doing much for it. Like what we are doing right now is not really going to help us in the future, and basically, we're just surviving, but not living the lives that we really want to live."

F. **Some feel that by being isolated and without social activities, they are losing "people skills" and forgetting "how to study."** One student described this as, "I feel like depression is really at a high. I feel like it's creating a lot of introverts. And, usually, when you're an introvert, it comes with like a lack of like skills of how to like be with people. And I feel like we all forgot how to be around people and to talk to people and to interact with people. And our people skills are really low, which can cause depression, maybe."

G. **Several of the focus group participants had recently returned to some in-person learning or were about to return to in-person. Some of these students experienced feeling stress and anxiety about returning to school in-person and whether they can feel safe.** "The thought of going to school made my chest tighten." One student noted that they felt "physical anxiety about being in school." Some students feel a pressure to go back to school in-person (one described it as a "weird stress"). One virtual student had to go into school to take a test in order to keep the test secure; they strongly preferred to not to have to in to take it but was not allowed to do so. "I strongly asked to not have to go in. I was so anxious being in a high school again. How will I function?"

H. **Changes in learning environments are a source of stress.** One student put it directly, "The change is stressful." A student at a small school commented that, "At a small school, you get quarantined a lot.

That's never a good situation." A third student noted, "It's stressful because the teachers are back and forth. The Wednesday break is important for teachers, too, to catch up."

I. Several students spoke about the need for students and their peers to take greater personal responsibility for their own mental health, with one student noting, "The pandemic is a time where each individual has to do inner reflection – it's not your fault, but it's your responsibility."

<u>**Relevant Quotes**</u>
I feel like my friends' level of anxiety is really high. The school will switch the schedule all the time, and not communicate well what they are doing (or why, it seems).

I have struggled with anxiety and depression. Being online increased it to a whole other level.

It's just a lot piling up. Like every single class is just giving us more and more work, and they're trying to fit in a lot. Like I know we started a hybrid model pretty recently, because we were virtual from September 10th, so we got five days in person, and then we were virtual from beginning of September to a few weeks ago. And they're trying to fit as much work as they can during in person before we end up possibly going back to virtual, and just the work piling up is stressing a lot of people out, and it causes everybody to not do their work because they're avoiding it.

I think that the stress and anxiety levels within my friend group are high, because, well, me and my friends, we like to like have adventures and explore. But like, as like humans, we're supposed to like socialize and like have more physical contact with each other. But with the pandemic, it kind of prevents us from doing that.

Recently with going online, I think the stress level for teachers and students has been higher than normal because it's just a lot more work than if it would be in person.

So, I'm a freshman this year, so I'm like right into high school. And I notice a lot of people in my grade that are just now going into Algebra I, and they're really stressed, and they kind of don't get it. And our teacher, our math teacher isn't like the best. And everyone's kind of asking me for help, because I had Algebra I when I was in eighth grade, so I'm actually in Algebra II now. So, they ask me for help a lot, and it's kind of stressful for me, because I'm trying to do my own homework, and other people are asking me for help and answers. So that's kind of stressful for me. But I also do think that stress and anxiety has gone up higher than what it was like in the past.

And personally, I, even before COVID happened, I had, I have anxiety and depression, and so stacking online school on top of that, like by the end of the week, I'm completely destroyed. Like my mental health and how I feel, I'm just so on edge. I freak, it's a big crash, and it's really hard. And it's hard to make sure I understand things. And, yeah, it's, I think, especially at my school, everyone is stressed, or they've just completely given up.

The schoolwork is really, can really cause, you know, your mental health to go downhill also, because you're worried about it. And then a lot of people, like me, I take school very seriously, and I like to be, you know, in a good place with my grades, and I like to be proud of my grades and stuff like that, and I know people like that are really having a tough time.

So, I definitely notice a lot of my classmates being very unmotivated. Like, normally, we would have not even one person like fail a class, but this year, half the people are failing classes. I just think it's kind of sad. So, I think depression is probably the biggest issue right now. And I think anxiety levels, at least for the people at my school, are like lower, because, honestly, we don't have to turn on our cameras. We don't have to participate. So, you don't really have to do anything.

I feel like at the end of the day, once this whole COVID situation goes away, I feel like, you know, going back to losing the people skills and like losing the skills to know how to study, you know. How do you be in a classroom and aren't afraid to ask a teacher a question? You know, it's like, you're re-teaching how to teach a baby to walk or something, you know. It's harder now.

So, I'm in a scholarship program. It's called the [program name]. And that has been interesting, because we meet on Zoom calls every week. And that is supposed to pay for my college, but there are a lot of activities that I'm missing and a lot of connections that I should be making before I go into that sort of environment for trying to get scholarships and trying to get academic support and stuff like that. It's really difficult virtually. And with the scare of COVID just knocking people out or not even being able to go back ever, it's, really, it's frightening to know that my future career and my college is a little bit unstable right now just because of the fact that people may die or people may stop being able to meet together and stuff like that. It's just kind of, it's kind of scary is all.

I feel like a lot more kids are feeling much more isolated, especially because like teachers say, oh, say your room or like go somewhere where it's quiet, and you can set it up, like your computer. So like a lot of kids are like staying in one room for a long period of time just staring at a computer screen, and I feel like that's just like it's not good mentally, because then you're just like, your mindset is like, okay, I have to wake up, look at this computer screen for this amount of time, then do homework, then do this. And you don't get to go out, because there's a pandemic. Like you can't go out and do the same things that you were doing to even try to distract yourself, you know. And it's hard to see your friends, because some of them can't even go out, or sometimes your parents don't even let you go out. So, I feel like that isolation is really heavy right now with everything going on.

So, for me in my friend group, I feel like the stress level has gone down a lot since the beginning of the year, because at the beginning of the year, we didn't really know what to expect and how things were going to go. And now we've kind of gotten the hang of things and how things work, and we've kind of just been able to go with it.

I'm kind of on the opposite side of that. I'm feeling my friend group's stress level is like super high. The anxiety is really high. Our school, while they have okay communication, or they don't tell us things, they just switch things out the day before. We got a whole new schedule where we were told that we needed to stay at school for an extra hour like the morning at 8:30, when our school day starts at 8:35. So they switch our schedules on us all the time. Or they'll tell us like we're four days next week. And then that Monday that's supposed to be four days, they'll be like, oh, that's cancelled. So, we wake up to a whole different day every day, and so it's just really frustrating going to bed when you don't know what you're supposed to do the next day. So, I feel like in our group chat, it's always like does anybody have any idea what's going on? And everybody's answer is no because we never have any idea. So, I'd say it's pretty high...

So, like lots of schedule changing, and I know that can be really stressful, especially for me and a few other like fully virtual kids. While it was like a mix, it was really hard when at school, they would change the schedule, and then we wouldn't get notified. And then it would like, well, what are we supposed to be doing right now? Am I supposed to be in this class or this class? And I don't know, that was kind of crazy. That was stressful.

… Social-wise, I feel like my anxiety just goes up whenever I see someone because I just kind of panic. Like my friends surprised me for my birthday a couple months ago, and I was like terrified. I was like, okay, just stay away. And they were close enough to each other, but they were all wearing masks. But I was just like 10' away, just like, hi. Yeah, they teased me so much about it. I feel like even when I go back to school, it's just going to be strange, seeing everyone and being able to go close to them.

Q5. – Where Do Students Go for Help?

Think about instances over the past few months where you may have felt sad, stressed, anxious, or maybe even depressed: What do you do, or where do you go to get help or support with issues you may be having? And if you have not experienced those feelings, you can think about it from the perspective of **IF** you had, what would you do or where would you go to get help?

Q6. – A Trusted Adult

During the past few months, if you were having a problem that was bothering you, did you talk to a teacher or other adult in your school about it? If yes, who was that person, and why did you choose them to talk to? If not, why not? <u>Follow up</u>: If you were not having any problems, is there an adult within your school that could go to if you felt you needed to talk to someone or if you needed help? If yes, who would that person be, and why would you choose them to talk to? If not, why not?

Response themes

A. **Most students did not identify school-based sources of support as their primary means of accessing help with mental health and wellness needs or concerns; parents and friends, rather than school-based supports, were identified by students as their frontline sources of support. Several noted that their schools were not prepared to help them.**

- For most high school students, friends were a main source of support when feeling sad, stressed, anxious, or depressed, as well as their parents. Some students reported that they typically seek support from trusted friends as a first sounding board when they are feeling anxiety or stress. One student said, "I talk to my best friend a lot. She's been my best friend since I was four. She doesn't judge me or change who I am or tell me how to think."

- Other sources of support were parents and grandparents, older siblings, a boss, coach, mentor, and youth club leader. Some did cite a teacher or their school counselor, but more typically, friends and parents were their primary source. Most of the students in the focus groups had a trusted adult that they could talk to, although this was not always an adult at their school. Parents were the main adult that students reach out to for help. "My parents…when it's something serious, I would go to my parents. If it's about my parents, I would go to a close friend, to vent and stuff."

- Several students said there was a specific teacher, resource officer, principal, or school counselor they had talked to, or would talk to, if they needed help. One student said, "My school's counselors have explicitly said over and over that they are available, and people feel they can go to them."

B. **While students turn to their friends and parents, they also are sensitive about not wanting to burden them. It is not clear whether friends or parents are equipped with the information and resources they need to help.** One student noted, "I feel bad going to my mom. I have four siblings." Another said, "It's hard going to your family members. A good chunk of our school does reach out to the school counselors, and they do a lot, but the front line really is friends."

C. **Some had personal therapists or psychiatrists for help with their own personal journey.**

D. **Some students reported having no one to talk to, causing them to bottle their feelings up and "suffer in silence."** For some students, this is because they do not feel comfortable talking to people they do not know. One student made mention of the YRBS survey and that she always struggles with the question about whether she has access to a trusted adult at her school. While she was able to think about one specific teacher, she mentioned that teachers are just "kind of passing by." Some have developed personal rituals to help calm themselves or have started to engage in more self-advocacy. Some students expressed a hope that there would be more individual outreach by their teachers, principal, or school counselors to check on their well-being.

E. **Some students expressed frustration that there were situations where they had asked for help (specifically with schoolwork), and they did not get response.** "I send out emails to multiple teachers. I get that they have other students. But if the only way I can communicate is through email, it matters to me. It sets me up to fail because I can't get in touch with my teachers." One student had an experience with an outsourced tutoring organization that their school had contracted with, but often the tutors could not answer the questions. "My grades have gone down. I was an A/B student; this year I failed. I can't get a hold of my teachers. Even when you do get help, all of my teachers have office hours at the same time."

Relevant Quotes

My friends and I have class-specific group chats; we figure out where we are struggling and work through it together. Technology has been so crucial.

Primarily my friends. I can think of a couple of teachers I would be comfortable going to, but my teachers are super stressed themselves.

One of my friends talks to me a lot; she talks to me to try to understand things more because her parents don't speak English very well.

I could trust the counselors, but…[would go to friends and family first].

When I really need help with my mental health, I'll talk to my parents. Recently though, I haven't really been, I haven't really been going to anybody. And I know that's kind of, that's not healthy at all. I've kind of been bottling things up recently, which is not good.

A lot of students are asking teachers less questions and asking other students MORE questions…there is a nice community of interconnectedness, and students don't have to worry then about teachers thinking they're stupid.

Our school did an anonymous survey last year, and the question was, is there a teacher or a number of adults in the building who you would feel comfortable talking to, and they found that almost everyone had at least two or three names on that list.

And I go to my parents for a lot of like bigger problems. And then if I just need to like talk to somebody, I go to like my friends like [Student], and I have a couple others that I trust enough to tell them my problems with. So that's pretty nice to have like two places.

I don't like talking to people; don't like to get out of bed – since I don't feel like I have people to talk to (parents are at work) and have to take care of my siblings, for me, it's music and my hobbies that I like doing. I have to make time to do those things. Being on a computer is draining. It's draining. It's not good for your health. Move. Do something you enjoy. I'm trying to find a balance of being responsible and doing my schoolwork.

I have depression, and I have a lot of stuff going on, I go to my mom. She's really helpful and caring. And if I can't go to her, I go to a few of my friends. And if it's something I REALLY don't want to talk about I tell my dog.

[I talk to] my brother. He doesn't turn everything into a lecture.

What I'm more scared of than COVID is the effects of it on mental health and like how suicide rates are extremely high, way higher than usual. [A student] that went to my school, just the stress and craziness got to [them], and [they] killed [themselves] because [they] couldn't handle everything going on.

There's the factor of, you know, your race and stuff like that, and there's always kids at my school who are just poking fun at [kids] who are of a different race. And it's kind of hard for me to watch because, of course, me being a minority, it's hard to watch them making fun of other, my other friends who are people of color and, you know, just already knowing that they're struggling with mental health.

So I do, I wasn't really close with my parents before this. They weren't the type of people that I'd tell everything to. Like my dad works two jobs, and I have a lot of siblings, and so it's my siblings have always been who I've gone to about things.

I think there's been more than a couple instances. I've struggled with homework, my emotions, my schedule. For me personally, it takes a couple like months of getting to know a person to really open up to that person. So I think mainly, I relied on some of my family, some of my friends. But I don't think I ever told anybody like the full story, I guess. I'm more of a secretive person, so I think I mainly relied on knowing myself more and just solving things by myself.

I think the first thing I always do is just like sleep on it and just like calm myself down first from like when I first like feel really like panicked or anything about it. And then, when I like understand the situation and like understand what's like wrong, I have to like to talk about it. I talk out to it with my siblings, my sisters especially, because like they're always there. And I know that they always will be there, so then I'll always just talk to them. And if like I have more like an academic issue, I always talk to like my English teacher or like my advisory teacher.

With my school, we have a teacher, she has depression and anxiety, and she's like, she shares her experience along with our guidance counselor. She's talked about her struggles, so I think that's helped, because we do a lot of like mental health awareness. And we've had some suicides within our school district of like recent seniors graduating, and I think depression has been taken a lot more seriously and people like seeking help for that. Anxiety, not as much, but a little step still counts for something.

Our guidance counselors try really hard, but they're not really the best. But I know that some students still have nowhere to go, and they still go there. But if, I think a lot of us just go to our parents. And if we don't have parents, we go to our friends.

I go to my teachers that I trust.

I feel like everyone had one teacher they went to specifically. So that was always really nice because our teachers were always like, we're here if you need us, not just for school, but if you just want to talk. So that was always really nice. And then I know for me, I would always just go talk to my friends if there was anything like bugging me, or I would, yeah, I would talk to them.

Q7. – Awareness of Resources

What kinds of things or resources are available to you or your friends to help you or fellow students with feelings of stress, anxiety, sadness, or with your overall mental wellness? [IF STUDENTS DO NOT KNOW OF RESOURCES OR CANNOT THINK OF ANY: Do you think students are aware of the resources available to them at school for help with mental health and wellness?]

Response themes

A. **Many seemed to initially struggle to identify specific sources of support; among those that were able to identify or pinpoint specific resources, their awareness of those resources seemed to be more peripheral rather than as a result of having accessed those resources directly.** For some students, the difficulty in answering this question may have been a function of not personally feeling like they needed help or resources, and therefore, they were not focused on where to go. When probed a bit further by the facilitators about this topic, some mentioned their school counselors as a potential resource, but also felt that their counselors had limited time, training and/or expertise in dealing with mental health issues. Some perceived that their school counselor was primarily focused on school scheduling issues or college applications. Some speculated that if they did want to access help at their school, they would talk to a favorite teacher; yet some noted that it would be hard to go their teachers. Other resources that students mentioned were things like posters in the hallways with guidance and resource information; virtual speakers on mental health issues; suicide hotline numbers in the hallways, bathrooms, or on the back of student IDs; a therapy dog; and in several instances, student-to-student or peer support programs or suicide prevention. Regarding the latter, one student who had a group at their school noted that the group had not met yet this year; another questioned whether the students leading the group were doing so for their college resume. There were students who did express that their school was devoting time to supporting students and that teachers and counselors were proactively encouraging students to talk, if needed. One mentioned that there is time each day and week devoted to talking about mental health concerns; several noted that their school has a specific area (in one case, called a "Take Ten Room" where students can go "in the moment" if they need a short break. One student who attends a very small school in a rural area noted they struggle to find people to come in and talk to students about mental health awareness.

B. **Many students recognized and expressed a need for more mental health resources at their school (specifically counselors, therapists, and psychologists), yet at the same time noted the complexities of asking schools to serve in a mental health capacity. In some instances, students noted difficult personal or home-life situations that were impacting their ability to focus on school.** In the specific case of one student, it was noted, "We need to talk about home situations. How am I supposed to focus on school? I didn't feel safe [at home]." After staying in a hotel and "crashing on couches," one student mentioned that they are now staying with a friend. One noted, "A school counselor can't help. It's just someone to talk to for one hour."

C. **Students expressed that they try to deal with thoughts or feelings on their own.** One student noted, "I probably have the least healthy way of dealing with anxiety or stress. I either read until it goes away, or I write in a book, or I daydream what I'm going to write in the book later about a bunch of fantasy adventures and different things and scenes. I typically don't talk to people to deal with stress or anxiety. I just don't like being vulnerable." Another said, "I just kind of sit with my thoughts. I work them out, with myself. 'How can I make this better?' I ask myself. I know other people will drink or something."

Relevant Quotes

I'll be honest, for my school, I can't think of any resources that I would use specifically besides just going, talking with one of my teachers personally. But I can't think of something that the school itself has advertised in a way to help students with that.

I think it depends, because sometimes it feels like there aren't any resources. Like it's not always there, but I feel like if you actually look for it yourself, you can. You just have to actually send out that email or ask for the call and then you can be exposed to the resources that you need. But if you aren't really looking, they don't really advertise it for you openly, I feel like.

Our school has done relatively nothing other than send one email out with a link to like the suicide prevention awareness hotline or something like that at the beginning of the school year, and relatively nothing else has come out at all.

Me personally, I haven't really heard [of] any mental health places or groups in where I live or that are with our school. But I do know that…there used to be this group thing. But I don't know if it's still a thing.

I personally don't feel like my school had been prepared to deal with students having that much, you know, stress or difficulty with the classes, because like I said, they're used to having like super smart kids come here. And so if you struggle at all, they're kind of like, oh, how about, like you usually have to get a friend to come help you or just someone who's good at the subject. I personally, I turn to my older siblings to help support me or my mom, because I have older-older siblings, and so I have to get most of my help from them or just my parents. It just feels very like I'm, like I said before, like I'm doing it on my own.

I don't really know anybody in my school who tells us about resources.

Honestly, not really. I know that, I think that my school offers those kinds of resources…but I have a problem with admitting that I need help, and I try to be my own hero, and I try to just take care of everything myself. So,…I haven't like really looked into those because…I mean—I already—I talk to my parents sometimes when they're like, "[Student X],…something is going on. You need to talk to us." I'll talk to them then, but otherwise, I mean, I'll…[talk to] my friends sometimes. I'll say, "this all sucks" in a joking manner, and it's only half joking. And I know that there are resources out there, but I haven't gotten around to really taking advantage of them now.

So, like [Student X] was saying, we have a bunch of resources, but a lot of students don't use them, or know about them, but they choose not to. We have posters in our bathrooms and some teachers have the National Suicide Hotline on their board like a magnet.

So, my guidance counselors, they provide us with, you know, like mental health websites, and they do all that kind of extra work to make sure that we're okay. I think it's just, you know, on the student to, you know, if they need help, for them to reach out. You know, because guidance can't, guidance counselors can't, you know, tell if you need help.

We have a guidance counselor at our school, and she has a lot of great resources. However, she's very busy, so it's difficult. She's not always available. But we have, almost all of our teachers are always willing to talk about any sort of problems that we have, and a lot of students have a favorite teacher that they would go to. But my friends and I, we all talk to each other. We're each other's therapists, and we all just equally dump our problems on each other. But we're, we all love that we can, we feel comfortable enough to do that.

Another resource we have is this thing called STS. It stands for Student to Student, where it's basically like you can go talk to another student, but it's not like talking to a friend where you, where they might tell someone. Like these kids, these students are trained to like actually listen and like know what to do and give advice. So, that's a resource that we have at my school.

If I had free access to mental health resources through my school, I would take advantage of it

I might look like I am okay on the outside; I'm not on the inside. I don't know how to solve it.

[We need to be] talking about what depression and anxiety look like. I have straight As, am organized, but I still struggle with mental illness.

I know that my school kind of offered counselors, and they were like just email this to talk to your counselor, but that doesn't really, I don't really feel comfortable talking to my counselor just because I don't really know her.

We have like a guidance counselor for our grade, but like from other kids, I heard she doesn't really get back. Plus she's always like busy, she says, so that's not much help.

I think there's been more than a couple instances. I've struggled with homework, my emotions, my schedule. For me personally, it takes a couple like months of getting to know a person to really open up to that person. So, I think mainly, I relied on some of my family, some of my friends. But I don't think I ever told anybody like the full story, I guess. I'm more of a secretive person, so I think I mainly relied on knowing myself more and just solving things by myself.

And we do like the peer like mediating and just kind of like listening to kids and like having an eye out for people who really need help. And they need like, they really need to see the guidance counselor like right away, and to like encourage them to like talk to them. And then our guidance counselor is available, but again, they're so busy with scheduling and so much other stuff, that it's hard if you just want to talk. But if like you're in a crisis, they definitely make time for you. So that's good.

Q8. – Reasons for Not Seeking Help
Why do you think kids don't get help when they are struggling or when they need it?

Response themes

A. **The majority of students felt that they or their peers do not ask for help at school or in general because of the enduring stigma of mental health, which leads to embarrassment, fear, and shame.** Student comments reflect that they are afraid of being judged by teachers and peers. Similarly, they are afraid of being perceived as weak or vulnerable because it has been ingrained in them (and those around them) that mental health is a taboo topic, and that seeking and receiving help is something people who are "crazy," weak, or in trouble would do. They noted a fear of being shunned by admitting a need for help, or a fear of being rejected, or "losing popularity." One student noted, "I feel embarrassed when I go to someone. I feel like I should be able to handle it on my own. [I don't] want to give negative energy to others." Some students worried their parents would not be accepting of their need for help. Several students mentioned that it is helpful in reducing stigma when their school administration makes an effort to point out that anxiety and depression can be common experiences, or if a teacher shares their personal perspectives.

B. **While students referenced their school counselors at school as a potential source of help, and several did describe specific instances where their school counselor was integral source of help for them, many shared a perception that the counselors were too busy and "overloaded," or helping students with practical problems like scheduling issues (and in some cases, did not want to burden them).** One student noted, "They lack time" and, "Everyone has a problem." Some students perceived that help was not available to them at school. One student noted, "School counselors are not so great with long-term mental health."

C. **Some students are reluctant or not willing to get help on their own because they do not think it will help them ("I don't want to have my problem minimized"); because they do not want to talk about their personal mental health challenges, preferring to handle on their own; or because they don't think they deserve help. Some kids do not feel like they can talk about what they are experiencing. Some students might lack self-awareness and not recognize that how they are feeling could be something that could be helped.** Several students mentioned difficulties in reaching out to adults and being open or honest about mental health struggles, particularly with people they do not have a personal connection with. Some expressed concerns about privacy and confidentiality, especially in a small school. "I think there is fear of judgment (being judged for having an issue and not handling it yourself). The staff members are super-cliquey. If one person knows, every staff member will know. Plus, staff members tell students about what's going on with other students. It's hard to find someone that others can actually trust."

D. **Several students identified lack of financial resources and costs of mental health services as a barrier. Some students who have sought help were not able to be seen right away due to a lack of providers.** One student noted, "...there's at least one or two people who I have asked, like you should really try and go to therapy, and they'll be like, oh, but I can't. I don't have the money for it. Like our family can't afford it right now and stuff. And that makes me really sad..."

E. **There were several instances where students described situations where they had reached out for help and felt that confidentiality was not maintained or their problem or concern was not taken seriously.** "Counselors say they want the truth but sometimes seems like they don't want to hear." A few students reported specific instances of emotional abuse that they did not think were taken seriously by those they had reached out to, noting that there was little that could be done in the context of a lack of physical scars or bruises. "Emotional abuse really sucks, and because you can't really gather evidence of it, whenever you go to someone about it, it kind of feels like they won't believe you, or think that without proof, it's not really happening." The word "distrust" was used by several students to describe their perception of why students do not ask for help. Several felt that school's ability to intervene of help in instances of emotional abuse was limited. "Schools need to take more attention to emotional [abuse]— especially since we are at home now."

Relevant Quotes

Stigma is a pretty big part of it, because I, like [student], I myself have struggled with depression and anxiety, and there have been times where I have had an anxiety attack during class. And all my classmates know I have anxiety and I struggle with all these issues. And yet there's still this huge stigma around depression and anxiety.

But like when you're like saying you're having an anxiety attack, all of that goes like out the window, and you just totally can't remember anything, and you just like start hyperventilating, and you just break down. And if you do remember those, like tactics or like go talk to someone, you're usually too scared to do it, because you think they're going to like judge you or try to say, oh, you're fine. Like you're just overreacting.

I think there is shyness and embarrassment. And it can take just one time to talk with someone and realize that it is helpful.

Students and staff are judgy. Our guidance counselor and principal say no one will know, but it ends up that they tell your parents or another teacher. I can only think of a couple of teachers who would actually help and keep it confidential.

I don't use the resources that I know are available to me, not necessarily provided by the school, of course, just that I know, because I think of it as, for some reason, I think I'm being selfish all the time. So I'm always like, no, you don't need to contact somebody else to solve your own problem. So some kids might feel selfish, or some might feel scared that somebody's going to doubt them or just judge them or try to change them to not have that problem, I guess.

I have a lot of strategies for different things because of what I've just learned from my own experiences, but like something I've, it's incredibly basic, but I feel like people often forget it is an option, but crying. Like there's, I feel like there's a lot of people, I feel like especially towards the male spectrum, and I say that because there's a lot of toxic masculinity, and they feel like they can't cry, or else they're not a man, or they're too weak, or they're not good enough or whatever. Especially girls, them as well, I suppose. Everyone, just cry. It definitely relieves stress. And it kind of makes your eyes sore, and you're probably tired, but at least you have a clearer head when you're done, at least for me.

And I can see other kids, when they start to get anxious, just noticing an anxious tic, like I do myself. And I'll try to reach out to them. Like, hey, are you okay? Like that's an anxiety tic, that's an anxiety thing. They'll

be like, oh, no, I'm fine, because anxiety is for crazy people. Like you're not crazy, but anxiety and depression is only a thing that like crazy people have. And so I can't show weakness or go out and get help, because that means I'm weak. And then the entire school and town knows your business, and then it just, you know, is more stigmatized, and it really sucks.

Our school is really small, and we know everyone in the community, too. I don't feel comfortable talking to someone I know personally; that narrows it down. Our AODA counselor is not technically our counselor, but she is super available. The school counselors are generally not available. It puts it off on the teachers, but they don't have any time. Students in our school are struggling to FIND someone to talk to (everyone is overtaxed).

People think that whoever they go to will think they need to be "fixed" and that you will be sent off to a therapist.

I don't want to be a burden and put my problems on them.

If people are relying on you to be the positive energy, because they are really negative, you try to be the piece of positivity that they need.

I think it's more of a trust thing…if it's just like a random person in your grade that's like if you need anyone to talk to, I'm here. It's not, you don't trust them because like you don't really know them that well. So I guess you don't really reach out because, I mean, yeah, they say they're there, but again, you don't really know them. And so it's more a trust thing, more than like you don't know where to go or anything like that.

I think some people don't go because they think that they don't need it. And they, like you're not going to get help unless you don't know that you need help. Like you need to accept that you need help to like accept the help that someone is giving you. So they think that they're big and strong, and they don't need it, and it's like sometimes you just need that help. You don't need to like put on a face and be like, I don't need it.

I think with how our society is today, it makes students or people in general really scared to seek for help because they don't want to be judged or embarrassed.

It just feels kind of strange to some people, opening up about something that's private, and they might be scared of what will happen once they tell someone this information.

Most people charge for therapy or meeting with a therapist or whatever. I mean, some people's insurance covers it, but most of the time, there's going to be some sort of out-of-pocket cost. And so I think people are like, this isn't a necessity, so they don't really feel the need to pay for something that they think they can figure out on their own.

Self-esteem, some people have really low self-esteem and don't think that they deserve it, which is really a sad thought.

Q9. – Lessons for Others

Has your school done anything that you have found especially helpful to support students from a mental health and wellness perspective during this time of learning and going to school during COVID-19? For example, has your school created opportunities for you to talk about your experiences with other students or made counselors more accessible? Or have virtual options made it easier to talk with someone?

Response themes

A. Consistent with an earlier question related to awareness of resources at school, this question was also difficult for students to answer. Many could not think of anything specific that their school had done. They answered in rather vague terms about things they had heard about rather than things they had experienced firsthand as helpful. In many cases, the students resorted to talking about things they had personally done to help themselves. Below are some of the things that students offered in their comments:

- One school added another counselor to help "lighten the load."
- One in-person student in a rural area mentioned doing activities together (carved pumpkins together at school).
- Some offered suggestions for how to cope personally such as, "don't let yourself zone out"; "be on camera"; "make connections with people and participate more"; "ask questions, you can never ask too many questions"; and "seek help for what you have trouble with."
- Some students really appreciated having a study hall day (Fridays, for example) to get caught up or a free period during the day to meet with a teacher about their concerns.

Relevant Quotes

Our school has done relatively nothing other than send one email out with a link to like the suicide prevention awareness hotline or something like that at the beginning of the school year, and relatively nothing else has come out at all.

Our school hasn't really done like anything. They don't even send emails out like, hey, how are you guys doing? They just like kind of like stress us out more, and they don't really talk to us. They just are kind of more like, oh, school is for school. Personal problems, that's for another time. They don't do anything.

There is nothing different this year. Nothing to encourage us. It's harder this year for everyone, but there should be something to help students.

Our school hasn't done anything. The teachers blame the students. When I was gone for a week, the teacher didn't help at all.

I would have to say no. Like I kind of said before, like I can't think of any resources that are provided or any like special things that have been made due to the, our like remote learning situation.

Q.10 – Use of Drugs or Alcohol

How do you think COVID-19 has impacted students' use of drugs or alcohol? And why?

Response themes

A. **Many students described what they perceived as a significant increase in the use of drugs (especially marijuana), alcohol, and vaping products among their peers during COVID-19.** As one student put it, "There's way more reaching out to drugs and alcohol." Seeing more references to drug and alcohol use on a social media was a main source of students' insights on this topic and "word of mouth," as they generally did not speak about this topic from a firsthand perspective in terms of their own personal use of drugs or alcohol. In some cases, students had a friend who had tried drugs, alcohol, or vaping during COVID-19. Some did not have any insight on the topic and did not want to speculate or comment, as they and their friend group were removed from situations where drugs and alcohol were being used.

B. **The key reasons students identified as contributing to the increases are:**
   - lack of other healthy coping mechanisms for pressures, stress, anxiety, and declining mental health during COVID-19
   - to alleviate feelings of fear, isolation, and loneliness
   - to feel better
   - boredom
   - more free time
   - lack of supervision at home while parents are working (although it should be noted that a few students perceived that drug and alcohol use had decreased during the pandemic because of closer parent monitoring at home)
   - tensions at home with parents and/or difficult home situations
   - peer pressure

C. **Several students described watching kids get high on camera during virtual learning or seeing family members in the background using drugs or alcohol.**

D. **Only a few students had a perception that vaping, alcohol, and drug use had decreased, primarily due to fewer kids gathering socially or having parties during the pandemic, or because of being under their parents' supervision while at home. In a few cases, the decrease was described as more applicable to when students were <u>on site at school</u>. One student in particular attributed it to differences in the students who chose to learn virtually versus those who were in-person.** Specifically, "I just don't see it as common anymore, probably because half of my school is virtual, and half of it is still in person. And at my school, most of the students that are in person are freshmen and sophomores, and most juniors and seniors are online. And I feel like the other generations last year, who are now juniors and seniors, were the ones using it more last year. So that's why I feel like I don't see it as more in my community."

I think it's been increasing because with the increase of mental health issues, specifically within the people that I've talked to, it's been increasing because due to the increase of mental health issues, they're just trying to escape from it, and they're turning to drugs and alcohol to escape that.

I think it's gone up because I know before COVID, a lot of people would use alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism for their everyday life, and then you throw a one-in-a-million thing into their life that will massively affect it, it's just very stressful.

I think that with this pandemic, that a lot of people who like weren't using drugs started to use drugs just because of the stress, and they have nothing other to like, nothing else to like help them cope with what's going on.

I'm not completely sure if it's gone up, but I think now that we're like people are getting more bored and feel like they just want to get out, away from the quarantine and self-isolation, they want to get out with their friends and do something. And in my town, at least, there's not much to do, so kids are resorting to bad things like that, so I think it has increased drinking and use of drugs.

The most common thing is probably drinking and then vaping and then probably pot. A lot of people smoke. People just don't want to feel anymore. They're done.

Like I see on social media all the time like kids who I have never seen before this year, like they just started partying. They just started doing things that like they haven't done before, because now we are so like secluded, and so that's like one thing that they can do all together. And so, yeah, I feel like it's definitely gone up.

So I've noticed vaping in my high school has definitely gone up a lot. But like drinking alcohol, that has been like a really prominent thing in my school for forever. Like I'm pretty sure our school is known for like having so many teenagers who get drunk all the time, and everyone is all like, oh, yeah, it's [community], like, of course, we're going to drink. And it's like you're a teenager.

[I'm] seeing students who didn't drink before drinking together now.

People just don't want to feel anymore. They're done.

I feel like because you're trapped in your house a lot of the time, and like even through quarantine, I feel like a lot of time a lot of kids began to feel lonely and alone and afraid. So kids just like became probably more suicidal, you know, with thoughts of like, hey, I'm alone or like I don't have anybody here. You know, it just, it was really hard for them, so maybe that is a lot of...the problem. You know, a lot of time, parents go to work, and you're stuck by yourself at home, you know. So I feel like a lot of the time they have the opportunity to do whatever they want, and, you know, release their stress that they say they have, or, you know, by using drugs and alcohol.

Some kids do it just because they can and because they have nothing else to do. But, also, some children [are] coming from abusive homes where school is the only place where they could go out. And since nothing else

is really open, it's not like they can go to like afterschool programs or to open gyms and stuff like that, so that's how they cope with their home life.

I think it's mostly weed. I think there are students that are like strictly alcohol, and there are students that are strictly weed. There's not really a lot of mixes. I think most of the kids who have been using weed more or using it beforehand, like they used it before the pandemic, and it's just become, instead of a once-in-a-while thing, it's become a lot. And I think the kids who started are just, have been like the really stressed kids.

I'd definitely say like in this virtual setting, some kids are just like, oh, I'm at home, and my parents are gone. Ooh, I got, you know, free time to do whatever. So there's definitely some of that happening.

One time, I was in science class, and this kid, he was, he had his camera off, but he was not on mute, and you could hear him ripping a bong. And I was like, what? Like I think there have been people more turning to it because, like [student] said, there's nothing else to do. What are you going to do? But I think people also who were using it before do it a lot more now because there's a lot more free time. Like no one, if the teacher, what is the teacher going to do, kick you off the Zoom? You know, I think a lot of people just don't have the fear anymore of that repercussion

Before the pandemic, and it's just become, instead of a once-in-a-while thing, it's become a lot. And I think the kids who started are just, have been like the really stressed kids.

During online school, I have people that I'll have all of my classes with, and they're high in every class. And I'm like, do you have any brain cells left?

I think it's vaping and smoking. It's gone up. The school hasn't done much because everyone is online.

Yeah, it's gone up a lot. It's high school. The stress of school – "I'm so stressed out, let me go get a buzz, get drunk, deal with my problems another day. You're only a teenager once."

A main part of it is, especially where I live, and I think just Wisconsin in general, we're known for having a lot of beer and stuff like that. I think a lot of my friends' parents drink, so they're, they don't care that their kids drink because they do it all the time, where like, I don't know, I just feel like they don't get in trouble about it. Or a lot of people I know, their parents supply it to their kids for their parties, and I just think that's, in my opinion, I think that's terrible. But, I mean, I think due to COVID, people just are doing whatever they want, or they've given up, and they can't choose what their child is doing anymore.

I know for my friends and their friends, they go out at night a lot, mostly every day, where they can all be together because that's where like they feel like the pandemic might not even exist to them, or they don't feel like it exists to them. And with not having that value to them, they kind of, they all want to drink more because they all just want to like forget about this pandemic and just have fun together and create memories.

High schoolers party. COVID has not changed that. Like SnapChat stories all look the same as it would, definitely all they do, so it's definitely increased. And like for vaping, like people use it as a stress reliever, so I feel as if that would probably would have increased as well. Like now you're in the privacy of your own home. You don't have to sneak alcohol in a water bottle. Like you don't have to like be discreet about it. You're at home, so you can really do whatever you want.

I think there is a little less partying, just because a lot of people's parents have closer eyes on them, I guess, the pandemic and stuff. So, there's a little less kind of like going out and doing illegal drugs and alcohol.

I would have to say that I would think it would have actually decreased the use of drugs and alcohol. Just because I know like from the people that I know that like do drink or whatever, it's usually like with their friends like at a party or something like that. So, I'm assuming that with COVID, there's less of those events-type things, and less for people to actually have the chance to like drink. So, I would guess that it's less.

In the past, I think, three weeks…like there's a smoke lounge…for nicotine in the bathrooms. They're locking the locker rooms during lunchtime so kids can't go in there…our school is kind of known for it too, because I think we're kind of like a redneck school.   So, like, oh yeah, we have loud trucks, we have mullets, and we have beer. I kind of like that's what our school is known for.

Sometimes kids just don't have a good home life, and school is their escape from that. And now that everyone is home all the time, you can't get away from toxic relationships, and sometimes you think, oh, there's nothing else to do. So, you like default to drugs and alcohol. And then it just, yeah, it causes more stress from being at home and, or it can, it can cause more stress and anxiety being at home and like no one to go to. I think it's rising.

Q.11 – Coping Skills

Are there some specific strategies or things you have found that help you cope better or help you feel more resilient while trying to learn and go to school during COVID-19? Or you can think about it this way: Is there something the experience of COVID-19 has taught you about yourself that has helped you in a positive way that you would want to share with someone else?

Q.12 – The One Thing …

Going forward and thinking about the next several months of the school year that lie ahead, what is the ONE thing you and your friends need most from your school leaders in order to do the best you can in school?

Students' responses to these two questions are included in a separate, stand-alone document. We did this in order to provide the students' direct quotes in a way that would be more easily accessible. See the report: *In Their Own Words: High School Students' Coping Strategies, Examples Of Resilience, And What They Need To Succeed.* This report can be found at https://wipps.org/research-partners/ or at this link https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-High-School-supplemental.

Note: While these questions were asked in most focus groups, there was not time in every group to cover these topics. However, among the groups where these questions were asked, there was considerable saturation and convergence across groups in the themes.

Q.13 – Sleep
Are you getting more or less sleep this semester? How do you think that is impacting your overall health and wellness?

Response themes
A. **Overall, many students said they are getting more sleep now compared to the pre-COVID era. It is worth noting that more sleep was frequently mentioned as a positive aspect of the school year (see Question 1 above).**

B. **However, students also mentioned that they had developed poor sleep habits, such as staying up too late.** This was especially the case for students in hybrid models who report staying up very late on the evenings before their at-home learning days, only to have to get up really early on their in-person learning days. This resulted in those students to feel like they were not getting enough sleep.

C. **The discussion of sleep also prompted some students to talk more generally about the need for self-care and the importance of naps, physical health, nutrition, and relaxation.**

Relevant Quotes
And so last year, I was probably getting five hours of sleep a night, whereas this year it's closer to seven or eight. And I probably spend maybe 7 or 8 hours total on school, as opposed to last year's 15 to 18. So I think it's really nice being able to decide what I do and when, especially if I have a day, and I want to make plans or I want to be lazy. Maybe I watch Netflix one day and do more homework the next day, that sort of thing, whereas when we were in person, I didn't have that choice.

I kind of like how we're doing it, so how like we'll be in person one day then virtual the next day, I like that, because I feel like when you're virtual you can like sleep in a little bit later. You don't have to be up at 6:00. Like you can get up five minutes before class. You can get up 30 minutes before. It's whatever. So, I like that aspect of it. You have a little bit more freedom.

I also really like that I get an extra hour of sleep [when virtual], typically, because I just feel like that's a really crucial and important thing, because I've had times where I'm pretty tired, and I know it affects my classes. So I feel like that's pretty helpful to my education.

So lots of my friends are just like, and constantly pushing themselves and just trying their best to understand things, and lots of them don't sleep very well.

I'm motivating myself to get, you know, a proper eight to nine hours of sleep every night. Some kids are still, you known, staying up until 3:00 a.m. and then getting up at whenever.

Along with everyone's motivation for school, our sleep schedules also don't have any motivation. Most of my friends stay up until like 12:00 or 1:00 in the morning, and then we get up at 7:00…

For me, my sleep schedule is like, has been like very iffy, because some days, I would get like probably up to two hours of sleep. And some days, I would get up to like about 10 to 12 hours of sleep. So it's kind of weird, and it's, it varies like from day to day and depending on how I feel and stuff. But like with that sleep schedule, it has made it a bit harder for me to like attend classes, because like, you know, classes start early, and I sometimes do not want to get up.

Before COVID, I was already having sleep problems. Like I had insomnia. Like I had restless sleep. I couldn't get to sleep. And then once COVID happened, I didn't have motivation to get out of bed anymore. So I was staying up really late and wanting to like stay in bed, but I was awake, and that didn't help. So my mom especially, she's been like on me about good sleep hygiene, not staying in my bed, thinking that maybe I'll get better sleep. But for some reason, it's just gone downhill further because of the situation.

Sometimes I'll sleep for a whole entire day, and then I don't get a lot done, and that stresses me out. And then sometimes I get like 1 hour of sleep for 48 hours, and then that just stresses me out. And it kind of like fluctuates with everything for me.

Q.14 – Stigma
How are students reacting to classmates who may have had COVID-19? Do you feel that there are negative perceptions of a student who may test positive for COVID-19, or have you experienced this yourself?

Q.15 – Pressure
Do you feel pressure to downplay or hide possible COVID-19 exposure because of repercussions at school? Classmates need to quarantine? Sports or activities shut down?

Response themes
A. **Some students reported instances of frustration towards kids whom they perceive as "not careful." For example, "They must have been out doing something they shouldn't have."**

B. **Despite some instances of negative perceptions of students who had COVID-19, students did not report widespread concerns or pressures to hide or downplay symptoms or positive cases of COVID-19.** As one person put it, "Everyone knows someone who has had it." This was due primarily to concerns students had about wanting to be sure they did not harm others, especially family members, by not being open about potential COVID-19 illness. "But if I did like get a fever or something, I would definitely be kind of scared, and I would definitely tell my family right away to make sure that I get tested, so that I don't like spread it to my grandma or anything, for example."

C. **Several students reported feeling pressure to go back to school in person.** One student said, "I felt pressure to attend hybrid, even though I felt more comfortable in virtual." Another noted, "It's hard to go back. My mom has asthma. There is constant pressure to go back." A student who remained virtual said, "I felt put down by the kids who have chosen to go to school."

Relevant Quotes

If I'm being honest, if I find out someone from my old school got COVID, I'm like, "OH?!" I just can't help myself, especially since I personally have been so safe. I'm not saying that they're not, but it's a lot of, like there were kids at my old school…this kid had got an entire basketball team sick. And it's just like, are you serious? …I just, and especially since I have my dad and family that are super high risk and will literally die if they get COVID, I just, I can't help but be like, maybe you should be more safe, you know?

Some people are like, wow, are you kidding me, they really got the coronavirus? But I think a lot of times, you never know...someone could be being as careful as they possibly can. But even if they're wearing a mask and everything, and people just assume that they weren't taking any sort of precautions.

I feel like there's like a negative like feeling around like testing positive. Because I think that people who like, like when someone hears that someone like got COVID, they probably thought like they went out and stuff, and they were doing stuff purposely to like get it. But then I feel like there's also like the thing where they have to see like, they might have accidentally caught it like when doing like a shopping trip for like grocery and stuff.

Definitely not. I know students who get COVID. There's different, there's so many different ways or reasons you may get COVID, whether family members work in a very populated area, such as a hospital, or maybe they just went out in general and touched something. Just contact like that easily can just spread right away. And most of the times, especially in high school, kids who have COVID don't even realize that they have it because it's so subtle in us. We can't really tell. So we don't view them as differently. We just, I guess it just happens if it happens now. But I wouldn't really look at them differently or negatively because they don't know, and we wouldn't be able to notice.

I don't really notice any change in the perception of them. It's not like their personality changes or the way people think about them changes. It...just like blows over. Like you have it, you get rid of it, and then you go back. I don't really notice any like huge impact on people's lives that have it, unless it's due to the actual health problems it causes.

I think that the jokes have not subsided. People at my school are still taking it as a joke. And if somebody is called out, the, it's like just seen as two weeks off for everybody. It's not seen very seriously at my school, which I don't like very much that it's not.

I got it at like the beginning of 2021, so I was quarantined. I was out of school for like two weeks because I was, I had it, and then I was like a close contact too. So, like, at the beginning of the pandemic, I think that everybody was taking it as a joke, like, oh, two weeks off of school. And then two weeks turned into a month, and then a month turned into the rest of the year.

I feel like this summer people were like over it, and they were like, I'm done with it. I'm just going to go out and hang out with my friends. But then like this fall started, and they were like super, like they're just over it now. But like I had it now, and it's no joke. COVID is no joke. Like it can really like mess with you. And like you still, I still kind of have those like long-term side effects and stuff like that. And I feel like people are almost, oh, you're like coughing. Like, oh, my gosh, I think you have the virus and stuff like that. And, you know, it takes everything in you not to tell the people that you have already had it, because you don't want like your privacy matter like everywhere, kind of.

At my school, there are people who are just, really want to come back into the building. And on the other hand, there are people who don't want to do that because they don't want to create a situation where people are going into the building, and then like a week later, they have to come back out from the building and go back online.

APPENDIX A – METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

Focus Groups as the Data Collection Method

Focus groups were the primary method used to gather information about students' perceptions through facilitated small-group discussions. Focus groups are qualitative research methods in which a trained moderator conducts a collective, small group discussion, generally lasting two hours. Focus groups create open lines of communication across individuals and rely on the dynamic interaction between participants to yield data that would be impossible to gather via other approaches, such as one-on-one interviewing or surveys. When done well, focus groups offer powerful insights into people's feelings and thoughts and thus a more detailed, nuanced, and richer understanding of their perspectives.[12] We selected focus groups as the method to collect student feedback rather than a traditional survey in order to dig deeper into students' perceptions and experiences with learning, coping, and building resilience during COVID-19.

In January and February 2021, WIPPS Research Partners and MCW conducted 13 virtual focus groups using Zoom with a total of 96 Wisconsin high school students (see Table 1). A total of 156 high school students registered for the focus groups; of these, we were unable to enroll 7 of the students due to the inability to contact their parent/guardian using the email address provided by the student during registration, as required by our consent process. Of the 149 students we enrolled and assigned to a focus groups, 96 attended the actual focus group session (participation rate of 64 percent).

Table 1. The Number of Focus Group Participants by Group

FOCUS GROUP EVENT	TOTAL REGISTRANTS	VALID REGISTRANTS	ATTENDEES
Rural 1 - Tuesday, 1/26 from 3:30 to 5:30 pm	13	11	9
Rural 2 - Monday, 2/1 from 1:00 to 3:00 pm	7	6	3
Rural 3 - Wednesday, 2/10 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm	15	14	9
Suburban 1 - Wednesday, 1/27 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm	13	13	10
Suburban 2A - Tuesday, 2/2 from 3:30 to 5:30 pm	13	13	9
Suburban 2B - Tuesday, 2/2 from 3:30 to 5:30 pm	5	5	5
Suburban 3 - Monday, 2/8 from 1:00 to 3:00 pm	13	13	6
Milwaukee/Racine 1 – Monday, 2/1 from 3:30 to 5:30 pm	14	14	7
Milwaukee/Racine 2 - Tuesday, 2/9 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm	10	9	6
Milwaukee/Racine 2B - Tuesday, 2/9 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm	12	11	7
Other Cities/Urban 1A - Monday, 2/8 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm	13	13	8
Other Cities/Urban 1B - Monday, 2/8 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm	15	14	9
Other Cities/Urban 2 - Thurs, 2/11 from 1:00 to 3:00 pm	13	13	8
TOTALS	**156**	**149**	**96**

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[12] See Lavrakas, Paul. 2008. *Focus Groups: Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*. Sage Publications.

Focus Group Framework

The following is the basic framework that was followed with respect to organizing and conducting the groups:

- Our goal was include up to 10 students in each group. To meet this goal, approximately 13 students were enrolled in each group, which would account for a "no-show" rate of approximately 30 percent. As stated previously, ultimately, we found that the "no-show" rate was closer to 35 percent.
- Each focus group lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.
- The participants were students in grades 9 to 12 that represented a broad and diverse mix of socio-economic, ethnic, and demographic backgrounds. When students registered for the focus group, they self-reported information related to gender, race/ethnicity, and whether or not they receive free or reduced lunch. This information was collected only for the purposes of understanding the demographic characteristics of the students in the groups.
- Having diverse participation within and across each of the groups can lessen issues of social pressure and conformity that can sometimes be present in homogenous groups. By taking this approach, we could increase the relevance and potential value of the information, rather than be of more narrow benefit to a specific subgroup of students.
- Students were recruited for participation through various means such as through youth and community organizations, school counselors, social workers, teachers and staff, peers, and other referrals and extensive networking. Appendices C and D provide the recruitment. Specific strategies are discussed later in this document.
- Registration for the focus groups was done via a Qualtrics link. As part of the registration process, students were asked to provide the name and contact information for their parent/guardian. We then emailed each parent/guardian to inform them that their child had registered to participate and included the details of the project. Signed consent was not required; we did inform parents that they could let us know if they wished to withdraw their child from participation. In cases where a student did not provide a valid email address for the parent, we contacted the student to request clarification.
- Students received a $10 gift card in appreciation for their participation.
- Students were informed that they would not be personally identified in the report or summary of the findings, nor would quotes be reported with attribution to a specific individual by name.
- The focus groups were conducted via Zoom and were recorded and transcribed to assist with analysis.
- At the conclusion of each focus group, a brief, anonymous questionnaire was provided in the chat in order to get the students' feedback about the experience. Results of the survey are in Appendix F.
- In the few situations where a student registered for a group but was unable to participate, we provided an alternative means for contributing their thoughts and views on learning, coping, and building resilience during COVID-19. To do this, we used an online open-ended feedback form created in Qualtrics to anonymously gather student input on a limited number of questions/topics. WIPPS Research Partners sent a link to the Qualtrics form to each student who registered for a focus group but who could not participate for any reason and invited them to submit their feedback and responses using the online form. The parent/guardian was also copied on the email inviting the student to fill out the feedback form (but they did not see the students' responses). Using an open-ended online feedback mechanism to collect responses is a common form of qualitative data collection used in listening sessions, quality improvement, etc., and provided additional opportunities to collect data. WIPPS Research Partners staff compiled the information and excerpts from the student comments are included in Appendix E. Students' names and contact information were not collected during the open-ended feedback process.

The Interview Guide

A standard interview guide was used across groups to ensure that comparable topics were discussed (see Appendix B). We sought to hear from students about a range of topics related to mental health and wellness, as well as experiences with school and learning including:

- What concerns do students have about how school is going for them so far this year?
- What is going well for them? What challenges are they having?
- To what extent are they experiencing feelings of stress, anxiety, or depression?
- Where are students turning for help and support with issues they may be having, both within schools and/or outside of the school setting?
- How aware are students of specific mental health resources available to them within their school?
- Do they access those resources? If not, why not? What are the barriers or reasons why students may or may not be seeking out or accessing resources within the school setting?
- How has drug and alcohol use changed during the pandemic?
- What kinds of information and support do students say they need?
- What ideas or suggestions do students have to improve how schools are supporting students?
- What do students want parents, teachers, and school leaders to know about how they feel about school this fall?

Observers of the discussions listen carefully to identify common themes or "threads" that emerge within a focus group, as well as across groups. These common themes were then summarized, with de-identified quotes or comments from the participants used to illustrate or support the over-arching themes. The focus group facilitators independently review the overall summary of themes prepared by the observers in order to provide a secondary check for accuracy and completeness and to minimize the potential for any bias in how the information is presented.

Participant Selection Criteria and Recruitment

Students from across Wisconsin in grades 9 through 12 had the opportunity to participate in this project, including those learning in-person, hybrid/blended settings, or virtual settings. Males and females of all races/ethnicities could participate in the project. Students were not excluded on the basis of gender or ethnicity. To reach students, we used many strategies to get the word out about the project, including:
- School and school professional associations
- Statewide school student organizations
- Statewide youth organizations
- Local, regional, and statewide youth councils and coalitions
- Community and social services organizations
- Medical and mental health providers and networks
- Various listservs maintained by WIPPS and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services
- Social media maintained by WIPPS
- Individual networking with teachers, counselors, or other professionals
- Word of mouth

Protecting Student Confidentiality

The nature of a focus group involving multiple individuals (as opposed to a one-on-one interview) is such that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed to the participants.[13] A second consideration is that while a structured interview guide is used, the content of a focus group discussion can be unpredictable and generate emotions or sensitive and personal feelings. When discussing topics surrounding mental health, for example, some students may have reactions to topics or trigger intense feelings in response to concerns expressed by other students. Several steps were taken to minimize identified risks and protect confidentiality:

- All communications about the project during the recruitment phase included a clear statement of the goals of the project and a description of the range of topics that would be covered during the focus groups. While the group discussions would be wide-ranging and touch on students' experiences with school and learning, some of the discussion could raise issues about students' mental health concerns and how they are getting help with stress and anxiety that they may be feeling during COVID-19.
- Participants were informed of the procedures in place to maintain confidentiality of the focus group discussions during the recruitment, consent, and assent processes.
- At the onset of each focus group discussion, the facilitator clearly established the groundrules, including reminding participants of the importance of confidentiality and asking participants not to repeat what is said by a specific individual in the focus groups to others.
- During the focus groups, individuals who wished to make a comment privately could do so using the chat function.
- Individuals could opt out of the focus group discussion at any time, or they could turn off their video setting in Zoom.
- A licensed mental health professional was available during each focus group in case a student had an immediate crisis situation; the counselor was introduced to all of the students at the start of the Zoom session. In no sessions was the counselor called on to provide immediate or one-on-one support.
- The names of focus group participants were not listed anywhere in the reports and have not been shared with anyone outside of the few WIPPS Research Partners staff that organized and scheduled the focus groups.
- Students are not to be quoted by name or with attribution in the summary report. No specific personal or demographic or other characteristics is reported such that it would allow for the possibility that a quote or comment could be attributed to an individual.
- Recordings of the focus group sessions and the transcripts are not shared with anyone outside of designated WIPPS Research Partners and MCW staff.

Focus Group Size and Number

The typical size of a focus group ranges anywhere from 6 to 10 participants. The intent of focus groups is not to make inferences about or generalize to a larger population. Rather, focus groups are used to better understand the reasons underlying individuals' perspectives or the range of perspectives on a given topic, or to provide insights about how a situation is perceived. While a degree of randomization may be used in selecting students for participation, it is not the primary factor in selection. When randomization is used in focus groups it is often for the purpose of elimination of selection bias inherent in some forms of personal

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[13] See Sim, J. and J. Waterfield. 2019. Focus group methodology: some ethical challenges. *Quality & Quantity* 53: 3003–3022. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11135-019-00914-5.

recruitment.[14] The information shared in this report reflects the insights, feedback, and experiences of the students with whom we spoke. For readability, convenience, and to improve the flow of the narrative, throughout the report we use terminology such as "Students reported…" or "Students said…" These are shorthand references to the students who participated in the focus groups and should not be interpreted as reflective of or generalized to all Wisconsin students.

There are no firm "rules" about "how many focus groups is enough." In a study by Guest et al. (2016), the authors conclude that when averaging the sequential and randomized order of focus groups, two to three focus groups are sufficient to capture 80 percent of themes, including the most prevalent themes, and three to six groups for 90 percent of themes in a homogenous study population using a semi-structured discussion guide.[15] Another 2019 study found that one focus group per stratum was needed to identify issues; two groups per stratum provided a more comprehensive understanding of issues, but more groups per stratum provided little additional benefit.[16] In this project, 13 focus groups were conducted, with prevalent themes persisting across groups.

Benefits of Participation

A $10 gift card was provided to all participants. Participants in this project had an opportunity to contribute their "voice" to help make more-informed decisions about how to support students during COVID-19. In addition to the information-gathering benefits of the focus groups, they indirectly provide a forum for students to "see" and "hear" from one another during a time when simply talking with one another about how things are going is more limited. The focus group discussions themselves may help students feel less alone or provide reassurance that some of the things that they are feeling or struggling with are not that unusual. A post-focus group survey was used to gather information about the students' experiences; this data is summarized in Appendix F.

Identifying Common Themes and Capturing Students' Voices

Four (4) different analysts served as independent observers of the high school focus groups; each analyst took their own detailed notes of the students' discussions and then subsequently used their notes to identify common themes from across their specific groups. The analysts also identified subthemes that captured potential differences in students' experiences, or individual experiences and perspectives that were particularly noteworthy.

The lead analyst drafted a document highlighting the main themes based on the specific groups they observed. In this case, the lead analyst observed 5 different high school groups, including at least one focus group in each of the community areas of rural, suburban, urban, and urban Milwaukee-Racine. This summary document was shared with all of the other analysts for review and group discussion. One of the takeaways of this group discussion among the analysts was the observation that there was considerable similarity in

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[14] See https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/24056_Chapter4.pdf.

[15] Guest G., E. Namey, K. McKenna. 2016. How many focus groups are enough? Building an Evidence Base for Non-Probability sample sizes. *Field Methods* 29, no. 1: 3–22.

[16] Hennik, M., B. Kaiser, and M. Weber. 2019. What Influences Saturation? Estimating Sample Sizes in Focus Group Research. *Qualitative Health Research* 29, no. 10: 1483–1496. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6635912/#:~:text=The%20authors%20conclude%20that%20when,semi%2Dstructured%20discussion%20guide%20

students' themes regardless of the community designation of the groups; in other words, the main themes generally cut across all groups regardless of whether it was a "rural" group or a "suburban" group. Analysis of the findings by community group was less relevant or meaningful given the pervasiveness of the themes. In the report, therefore, all focus groups are summarized together. In some instances in the report, we point out relevant experiences of students that may be unique based on community size or rural area, for example, but we decided not to systematically analyze similarities or differences in "types" of communities due to the extent of commonalities across all of the groups.[17]

Once there was general agreement among the analysts on the main themes and subthemes, the lead analyst used all of the available notes and transcripts from all 13 groups to prepare the Focus Group Findings by Question section. Students' quotes from the transcripts were to illustrate the themes in the students' own words. The detailed Focus Groups Findings by Question document was then shared with the analysts for a second round of review to ensure that all analysts felt the document accurately captured the nature of the students' comments and that appropriate completeness and balance was reflected in the narrative. It was important to ensure that the students' quotes reflected the range of students' perspectives on any given topic.

In writing the report, our task was to communicate clearly how participants felt about the topics discussed. Given the nature of the topics discussed and differences in individual students' experiences, there may be different voices and multiple views that need to be presented. Our goal is to accurately represent the range of views expressed by the students who participated in the focus groups. With the exception of specifying when a comment was made by "one student," this focus group report does not report the exact frequency or quantity with which comments or opinions are expressed. The use of specific numeric references in a focus group report can sometimes lead to readers to inadvertently think about responses in terms of percentages (X percent of students think this; Y percent think that), which can then lead to generalizations. Those kinds of specific characterizations are better suited for a survey methodology where a larger number of individuals are sampled.

Instead the report uses terminology to convey the general pervasiveness of a theme such as "many" or "most"; "some" or "several"; or "a few." How these characterizations are applied is largely at the discretion of the analyst/observer, as they can depend on the context of the question being analyzed; whether comments or themes related to a question come up at other points in the discussion; and other cues such as body language of the participants (head nodding).

To minimize some of the inherent subjectivity and to introduce a level of inter-rater reliability, the focus group draft report and characterizations of student comments were read and reviewed by all of the focus group observers and the facilitators. This additional review served as a final "check" on the balance and completeness of the summary of the students' comments and to ensure agreement among the analysts that the report accurately reflected the focus groups they observed.

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[17] Students could self-select a group based on which best described the kind of community where their school is located: rural, suburban, Milwaukee or Racine, or other cities and urban areas. To test the fidelity of students' selected community designation, we compared the student's school against the National Center for Education Statistics geographic/community designation for school districts. We found that in 11 of the 13 groups, at least 66 to 100 percent of the students were in the "correct" group based on the NCES designation; in two of the "other cities and urban areas" groups, there was a considerable mix of community designations such that the groups reflected students in suburban and city designations.

Focus Group Participants

The focus group participants were from a broad geographic span of rural, urban, and suburban communities throughout Wisconsin, as well as a diverse mix of public, private, and parochial schools. Students from 29 different Wisconsin counties and 46 different communities participated in the focus groups (see Table 2).

We did not choose specific schools to participate in this project, and we did not target specific schools and exclude others. Rather we used a very broad recruitment strategy (explained later in this document) with the goal that students could register regardless of what school they attend. A benefit of the broad recruitment approach is that the information and feedback from the students would not be overly defined by or weighted towards students' experiences in one school environment or another. Of the 96 high school participants, 56 unique Wisconsin high schools (public, private, and parochial schools) were represented (See Table 3). In sum, focus groups included geographic diversity among the participants, as well as diversity in the kinds of schools that students attend. We do not analyze the data by "school type," nor do we (nor can we) report data for specific schools. It is important to note that geographic and school diversity does not mean *representativeness*; with a focus group design, the intention is not to generalize to the population of <u>all</u> Wisconsin students or make inferences about all Wisconsin students.

Table 2. High School Focus Group Composition: County and Community of Residence

County	Community	County	Community
Beaumont	Racine	Marathon	Weston
Brown	New Franken	Milwaukee	Milwaukee
Chippewa	Chippewa Falls	Polk	Clear Lake
Dane	Madison	Portage	Plover
Dane	Marshall	Portage	Stevens Point
Dane	Middleton	Price	Phillips
Dane	Verona	Racine	Mt. Pleasant
Door	Sturgeon Bay	Rock	Beloit
Douglas	Superior	Rusk	Ladysmith
Eau Claire	Eau Claire	Sauk	Prairie du Sac
Green Lake	Berlin	Shawano	Shawano
Iowa	Barneveld	Sheboygan	Kohler
Jackson	Black River Falls	Trempealeau	Eleva
Jackson	Hixton	Walworth	Genoa City
Jackson	Merrill	Walworth	Lake Geneva
Jefferson	Fort Atkinson	Washington	West Bend
Jefferson	Watertown	Waukesha	Delafield
Kenosha	Pleasant Prairie	Waukesha	Menomonee Falls
Kewaunee	Luxemburg	Waukesha	North Prairie
Marathon	Athens	Waukesha	Oconomowoc
Marathon	Kronenwetter	Waukesha	Pewaukee
Marathon	Mosinee	Waukesha	Waukesha
Marathon	Wausau	Wood	Marshfield

Table 3. Schools Represented by Student Participation

Alexander Hamilton High School	Madison Country Day School
Athens High School	Madison East High School
Audubon High School	Madison Memorial High School
Badger High School	Marshall Public High school
Barneveld High School	Marshfield High School
Beloit Memorial High School	Middleton High School
Ben Franklin Junior High School	Milwaukee Excellence High school
Berlin High School	Milwaukee High School of the Arts
Black River Falls High School	Mosinee High School
Brookfield East High School	Mukwonago High School
Case High School	North Cedar Academy
Chippewa Falls High School	Notre Dame Academy
Clark Street Community School	Pewaukee High School
Clear Lake High School	Phillips High School
Cross Trainers Academy	Pulaski High School
DC Everest Senior High	Riverside University High School
Divine Savior Holy Angels High School	Ronald Reagan High School
Eau Claire Memorial High School	Sauk Prairie High School
Eau Claire North High School	Sevastopol High School
Fort Atkinson High School	Shawano Community High School
Harborside Academy	Stevens Pont Area High School
Hmong American Peace Academy	Superior High School
Hope Christian School	Verona Area High School
Kettle Moraine High School	Watertown High School
Kohler High School	Wausau East High School
LaFollette High	Wausau West High School
Luxemburg-Casco	West Bend East High School
MacDowell Montessori	Wisconsin Conservatory of Lifelong Learning

Tables 4.1-4.4 show the demographic characteristics of the students who participated in the focus groups, reflecting all 13 groups combined. Females represented about 77 percent of the participants, in comparison to 20 percent male and 2 percent nonbinary. About 39 percent of the participants reported that they receive free or reduced lunch. White students represented 58 percent of the participants, compared to 17 percent Asian; 4 percent Hispanic/Latino and American Indian/Alaskan, respectively; and 10 percent African descent (Black). Understanding these demographics is relevant to understanding the background of the students whose voices were included in the project, and potentially whose voices were not included in the project.

Table 4.1. Demographics: Gender

GENDER	Frequency	%
Female	74	77%
Male	19	20%
Nonbinary	2	2%
Prefer to Self-Describe	1	1%
Total	64	100%

Table 4.2. Demographics: Free or Reduced Lunch

FREE/REDUCED LUNCH	Frequency	%
Yes	37	39%
No	57	59%
Prefer Not to Say	2	2%
Total	96	100%

Table 4.3. Demographics: Race/Ethnicity

RACE	Frequency	%
African descent (Black)	10	10%
American Indian/Alaskan	4	4%
Asian descent	16	17%
European descent (White)	56	58%
Hispanic/Latino descent	4	4%
Other	5	5%
Prefer Not to Say	1	1%
Total	96	100%

Table 4.4. Demographics: Grade Level

GRADE	Frequency	%
9	27	28%
10	20	21%
11	30	31%
12	18	19%
Prefer Not to Say	1	1%
Total	96	100%

At the time of the focus groups, 52 percent of the 96 high school students reported that were attending school virtually (n=50); 27 percent were attending school in-person (n=26); and 21 percent were attending school in a blended/hybrid model (n=20). It is important to note that of the students who reported that they were attending school in-person, many had just returned to in-person learning at the time of their focus groups (some that very same day). Some students reported that they were anticipating a return to in-person learning in the weeks shortly after their focus group. It was clear that many students had experienced changes in their learning environments over the course of the school year. For example, some students reported going from virtual to some form of in-person or hybrid learning; others reported that they went from in-person to a virtual model. A few students described learning in a combination of all three models over the course of the year. It was also clear that within the categories of virtual, in-person, and blended/hybrid learning, there were many different varieties and approaches to what that meant in practice.

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW GUIDE

THE VOICES OF WISCONSIN STUDENTS – BUILDING RESILIENCE DURING COVID-19

This focus group guide has been developed by the
University of Wisconsin's Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service Research Partners.
https://wipps.org/research-partners/

I. Introduction, Purpose , Logistics, Ground Rules

A. *Who is on the Zoom Meeting*
- NAME– facilitator
- NAME – observer - listens and takes notes, as it is hard to talk, listen, and take notes at the same time
- NAME – technology support – will drop off the call after everyone is connected, but is available on standby if technology help is needed
- NAME – counselor is here to ensure that if there is a topic that may bring up strong emotions, we have someone here to support you

B. *Purpose*
WIPPS Research Partners and the Medical College of Wisconsin are helping the Wisconsin Department of Health Services conduct a series of small group discussions with students from across Wisconsin. The purpose of these discussions is to gather in-depth information directly from students like yourselves about your experiences with school and learning this year and to obtain a greater understanding of students' perspectives about how things are going; how you and your fellow students are coping during the COVID-19 pandemic; and concerns and challenges you may be experiencing. We also want to hear about things that might be going well or ways you are trying to get through this stressful time. The information that is learned from hearing from students can help school leaders, public officials, state agencies, and youth organizations make better decisions about how to help and support students.

C. *Logistics*
Today, there are no right or wrong answers, so we encourage you to give your honest opinions. Keep in mind that we are just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times, the negative comments are the most helpful. If there are questions you are uncomfortable answering, you can pass or feel free to send your thoughts to me privately in the chat function. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. It is okay to disagree, but please do so respectfully.

In order to ensure all voices are heard, there may be times when I ask some of you to shorten your comments. I may encourage others to share more thoughts if we haven't heard from you. People often say very helpful things in these discussions, and we can't write fast enough. We would like to record this meeting as it will help us remember what you said. The recordings and notes from the sessions will be kept private and will NOT be shared with anyone outside of our project team. The recording and notes will NOT be shared with your teachers, parents or guardians, or any other organizations. Only members of the project team at WIPPS Research Partners and the Medical College of Wisconsin will see the recordings or notes. May I have your permission to record the conversation? Please give me a thumbs up.

Also, I want to make sure you are each joining us today from an area where you have privacy and can feel comfortable talking without lots of other friends or family members in the background. This will help minimize the possibility that family members or friends might overhear comments in the background that are made by other students in the meeting. If you need to relocate to a more private space, please feel free to do that.

After the focus groups are completed, WIPPS Research Partners and the Medical College will analyze the information to identify common themes and insights. The findings will be compiled in a summary report and shared with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services and the community. You will also get a copy.

You will NOT be personally identified in the report. Your name will not be used in any way in the report. Any quotes or comments included in the report will NOT be attributed to you by name. If there is something you want to share privately, you can use the chat function and send it to me. Does anyone have any questions?

D. *Discussion Guidelines*
   - Be present. Avoid checking your phones during our discussion.
   - Avoid side conversations with each other via chat.
   - We would like you to please have your video camera turned on. However, if at any time you prefer to participate by audio only and not video, you may do so.
   - Everyone participates. In order to ensure all voices are heard, there may be times when I ask some of you to shorten your comments—or I may call on some of you to share your thoughts if we haven't heard from you on a specific topic.
   - You have a right to "pass." If you are not comfortable answering a question or have nothing to say, you can say, "I'll pass" or "I have nothing to add." However, if you have something important to say but don't want to say it out loud, we encourage you to write it in a private chat message to me or to [OBSERVER].
   - Please respect the opinions of others even if you don't agree.
   - If you need to get up to use the restroom at any time, feel free to do so—you don't need permission.
   - Respect privacy. Welcome to discuss with others what you heard today, but do not to reveal *who* said it.

II. **Focus Group Questions**

A. *Taking A Current Snapshot – How Are Things Going?*
   1. Let's start out by talking about how things are going for you.
      a. **Positives:** First, thinking about school or things related to school over the past few months, what are some things that have really gone well for you? These can be things related to your classes, social life, activities, other things related to school. Generally, what are some positive aspects of school and your learning this semester?
         Question is open-ended; these are prompts for categorizing student responses:
         i. More flexibility in getting schoolwork completed; take breaks when needed
         ii. Increased independence and personal responsibility
         iii. Less stress or anxiety associated with "fitting in" at school
         iv. More time to do other things outside of school, including spending time with family or working at a job
         v. More sleep, physical activity, or overall better "school-life" balance

      b. **Challenges:** What are some things that have really <u>not</u> gone so well this school year? These might be things you are struggling with or things that you are most concerned about with respect to school or life in general.
         Question is open-ended; these are prompts for categorizing student responses:
         i. Learning, including getting help with schoolwork, accessing teachers, learning with peers, sudden changes in learning environments due to COVID-19
         ii. COVID and health and safety (self, family, friends, teachers, etc.)
         iii. Social (staying connected with friends; loss of sports and activities)
         iv. Emotional/mental health
         v. Physical health (illness, staying physically active)
         vi. Basic needs (food, clothing, other basic needs, etc.)

2. **Connectedness:** Some of you may be at school in person. Some of you may be learning virtually, or some combination of the two. Thinking about how school is going for you so far this school year:
   a. How would you describe the extent to which you feel **connected** to your school, your teachers, and your fellow students and is this different than how you might have felt on a typical school year? By "connected," I am referring to things like: Do you have regular contact or communication with your teachers or people at school who can support you with your learning or when you need help with your schoolwork? Are there opportunities through school for you to interact with or socialize friends or other students and be involved with your peers at school?[18]
   b. What are some things you are doing or have done this year to increase or improve your ability to feel connected with your school, teachers, or friends?
   c. Are there some things that you have discovered that you really DON'T miss about what you might consider to be a "normal" school year?

3. **Belonging:** Still thinking about how school is going for you this year:
   a. How would you describe the extent to which you feel like you **belong** at your school this year? If you are not sure what I mean by this, think about it this way: Do you feel like your school is a place where people personally care about you as an individual? Is school a place where you feel included or accepted? [REMINDER for WIPPS OBSERVER: Please make a note of whether a student is learning all in-person, all virtually, a blend of both, or homeschool].
      i. If you are a virtual student: Has virtual learning changed how you feel about belonging at school? How? What does "belonging" at school mean to you when you are learning from home?
      ii. If you are an in-person or blended learning student: Has learning in-person or a combination of in-person and at home this year changed how you feel about belonging at school? What does "belonging" at school mean to you?

4. **Levels of Stress or Anxiety:** This past summer we had a chance to talk with almost 50 students from across Marathon County about returning to school this fall. One thing they told us at that time was that many students were experiencing lots of stress and anxiety about school during COVID-19.
   a. Now that school has been in session for a while, and thinking about you and your friend group, would you say the level of stress, anxiety, sadness, or depression among students is currently high, medium, or low? Why?
   b. How have any changes in your learning environment this year impacted you? For example, going back and forth between in-person and virtual or from virtual to in-person? Or having to quarantine?

B. *Where Are Students Getting Help? How Aware Are Students of Resources? [20 minutes]*
5. **Where Do Students Go for Help:** Think about instances over the past few months where you may have felt sad, stressed, anxious, or maybe even depressed: What do you do or where do you go to get help or support with issues you may be having? And if you have not experienced those feelings, you can think about it from the perspective of **IF** you had, what would you do or where would you go to get help?
   Question is open-ended; these are prompts for categorizing student responses:
   a. Deal with on my own
   b. Friends
   c. Online or social media contacts (group chats, etc.)
   d. School-based: teacher, counselor, coach, staff person, etc.

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[18] Per the CDC, *connectedness* refers to a sense of being cared for, supported, and belonging, and can be centered on feeling connected to school, family (i.e., parents and caregivers), or other important people and organizations. Youth who feel connected at school and home are less likely to experience negative health outcomes related to sexual risk, substance use, violence, and mental health. See https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/youth-connectedness-important-protective-factor-for-health-well-being.htm and https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/school_connectedness.htm.

e. Non-school-based: teacher, counselor, coach, staff person, etc. (other adult mentors who are not school-based)
f. Parent(s)
g. Other family member (sibling, aunt or uncle, cousin)
h. Adult outside of school who is not a family member (family friend)
i. Church (priest, pastor)
j. Community organization
k. Outside counselor or therapist

6. **Trusted Adult:** During the past few months:
   a. If you were having a problem that was bothering you, did you talk to a teacher or other adult in your school about it? If yes, who was that person and why did you choose them to talk to? If not, why not?
   b. If you were not having any problems, is there an adult within your school that could go to if you felt you needed to talk to someone or if you needed help? If yes, who was that person and why did you choose them to talk to? If not, why not?

7. **Awareness of Resources:** What kinds of things or resources are available to you or your friends to help you or fellow students with feelings of stress, anxiety, sadness, or with your overall mental wellness? [IF STUDENTS DO NOT KNOW OF RESOURCES OR CANNOT THINK OF ANY: Do you think students are aware of the resources available to them at school for help with mental health and wellness?]

C. *Barriers to Accessing Resources (10 minutes)*
8. Why do you think kids don't get help when they are struggling or when they need it?
   Question is open-ended; these are prompts for categorizing student responses:
   a. Don't know about resources to help them
   b. Don't know how to access them (finding someone to help)
   c. Stigma
   d. Transportation
   e. Insurance
   f. Money/financial
   g. Scheduling
   h. Can't access at the time help is needed
   i. Lack of support from parents/guardians
   j. Lack of privacy
   k. Can't talk freely without being "turned in"
   l. Don't think they will help

9. **Lessons for Others:** Has your school done anything that you have found especially helpful to support students from a mental health and wellness perspective during this time of learning and going to school during COVID-19? For example: Has your school created opportunities for you to talk about your experiences with other students? Or made counselors more accessible? Or have virtual options made it easier to talk with someone?

D. *Drugs and Alcohol (10 minutes)*
10. **Use of Drugs or Alcohol:** How do you think COVID-19 has impacted students' use of drugs or alcohol? And why?
    Question is open-ended; these are prompts for categorizing student responses:
    a. increase: as a way to cope with stress or anxiety
    b. increase: bored and it's fun
    c. increase: less supervision
    d. decrease: less peer pressure
    e. decrease: less access

      f.   decrease: more supervision
      g.   no change

E. *Ideas for Improvement (20 minutes)*

11. **Coping skills:** Are there some specific strategies or things you have found that help you cope better or help you feel more resilient while trying to learn and go to school during COVID-19?

      PROMPT: Or you can think about it this way: Is there something the experience of COVID-19 has taught you about yourself that has helped you in a positive way that you would want to share with someone else?

12. **Ideas:** Going forward and thinking about the next several months of the school year that lie ahead, what is the ONE thing you and your friends need most from your school leaders in order to do the best you can in school?

III. *Optional - COVID questions - only if time allows*

13. **Sleep:** Are you getting more or less this this semester? How do you think that is impacting your overall health and wellness?

14. **Stigma:** How are students reacting to classmates who may have had COVID-19? Do you feel that there are negative perceptions of a student who may test positive for COVID-19 or have you experienced this yourself?

15. **Pressure:** Do you feel pressure to downplay or hide possible COVID-19 exposure because of repercussions at school? Classmates need to quarantine? Sports or activities shut down?

IV. **Closing** *[5 minutes]*

Finally, I'd like to open the floor and ask – is there anything we should be talking about that I haven't mentioned today?

If you do think of something you wish to share, or if there is something you'd prefer to share privately, you can contact me at the email that is in the chat box.

Some other housekeeping items:

A gift card will be mailed to you in the next several weeks.

In the chat, there is also a link to a brief, 2-minute survey. Please fill out the survey before you log off.

https://mcwisc.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2osyrZIf1zPnEuV

Thank you again.

THE VOICES OF WISCONSIN STUDENTS PROJECT
LEARNING, COPING, AND BUILDING RESILIENCE DURING COVID-19

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT? The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS), in partnership with the Medical College of Wisconsin and the University of Wisconsin's (UW) Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners, is providing youth from across Wisconsin an opportunity to share their thoughts, concerns, and insights on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students. WIPPS Research Partners will conduct a series of **ZOOM** small group discussions with youth from across Wisconsin to gather in-depth information about how students are coping during the COVID-19 pandemic; to identify concerns and challenges, as well as examples of success and resilience; and to get feedback about what support students need. This project is funded by a grant from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Topics will include:

- What concerns do students have about how school is going for them? What are current sources of stress or anxiety and what challenges are they experiencing?
- What is going well? What new strategies have they developed to cope?
- Where are students turning for help and support with issues they may be having? What kinds of information and support do students say they need? What ideas do students have to improve learning during COVID-19?

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE? Students from across Wisconsin in 6th to 12th grade can participate. Separate sessions will be held for middle and high school students. Focus groups will be held virtually using ZOOM.

WHEN ARE THE FOCUS GROUPS? Sessions will be held in January and February 2021. **See the table on the next page for specific dates and times.**

HOW DO STUDENTS REGISTER FOR A FOCUS GROUP? Click the link here or use the QR code to register – registration takes about 2 minutes to complete. A confirmation email is sent to each student and their parent/guardian once registration is completed. A ZOOM link is sent to each student about 24 to 48 hours in advance of their session.

<div align="center">

[Voices of WI Students Focus Groups](#)

</div>

ZOOM SESSION DATES AND TIMES
Choose a date/time based on whether your school is in a rural, suburban, or city/urban area.

What best describes the kind of community where your school is located?	Not sure which one to select? *These are some examples.* Is your community similar to one of these areas? Use your best judgement to choose.	MIDDLE SCHOOL (Grades 6 to 8)	HIGH SCHOOL (Grades 9 to 12)
Rural community (people, homes and businesses are located far away from one another)	Abbotsford, Albany, Alma, Ashland, Baraboo, Barron, Bayfield, Belmont, Bowler, Bruce, Cedar Grove, Chetek, Eagle River, Edgar, Hammond, Lac du Flambeau, Ladysmith, Manitowoc, Marshfield, River Falls, Stockbridge, Strum, Viroqua, Wisconsin Dells	Thurs, 1/28 6:30 to 8:30 pm Tues, 2/2 10 am to noon Wed, 2/10 3:30 to 5:30 pm	Tues, 1/26 3:30 to 5:30 pm Mon, 2/1 1:00 to 3:00 pm Wed, 2/10 6:30 to 8:30 pm
Suburban community (generally outside of or within commuting distance of a city)	Altoona, Ashwaubenon, Brookfield, Brown Deer, Chippewa Falls, De Pere, East Troy, Genoa City, Greenfield, Hartford, Hartland, Holmen, Howard, Hudson, Kaukana, Kimberly, Kenosha, Middleton, Oregon, Somerset, Superior, West Salem, Weston/Schofield	Wed, 2/3 3:30 to 5:30 pm Tues, 2/9 10 am to noon Thurs, 2/11 6:30 to 8:30 pm	Wed, 1/27 6:30 to 8:30 pm Tues, 2/2 3:30 to 5:30 pm Mon, 2/8 1:00 to 3:00 pm
Milwaukee and Racine (a high concentration of people live or work)	Milwaukee and Racine	Fri, 2/5 3:30 to 5:30 pm Thurs, 2/11 3:30 to 5:30 pm	Mon, 2/1 3:30 to 5:30 pm Tues, 2/9 6:30 to 8:30 pm
Other cities and urban areas (not Milwaukee or Racine, but where a high concentration of people live or work)	Appleton, Beloit, Eau Claire, Fond du Lac, Green Bay, Janesville, La Crosse, Madison, Neenah, Onalaska, Oshkosh, Sheboygan, Waukesha, Wausau, West Allis	Tues, 2/2 6:30 to 8:30 pm Thurs, 2/4 3:30 to 5:30 pm	Mon, 2/8 6:30 to 8:30 pm Thurs, 2/11 1:00 to 3:00 pm

HOW WILL THE FOCUS GROUPS BE CONDUCTED?
- A maximum of 10 students will be in each group. Each focus group will last about 1.5 to 2 hours.
- Only students and a few members of the WIPPS Research Partners project team will participate in the ZOOM discussion. Teachers, principals, and school staff will <u>not</u> participate in or observe the student discussions.
- Sessions will be conducted using ZOOM and will be recorded to help with the analysis. The recordings and notes will be kept <u>private</u>. Only members of the project team at WIPPS Research Partners and MCW will see the recordings or notes. They will not be shared with parents, teachers, counselors, or anyone at DHS.
- After the focus groups are completed, WIPPS Research Partners and MCW will analyze the information to identify common themes and insights. Findings will be compiled in a summary report and shared with DHS. This information can help DHS and leaders of school, nonprofit, and community organizations make more informed decisions about how to support students during these challenges times.
- Students will <u>NOT</u> be personally identified in the report. Any quotes or comments included in the report will <u>NOT</u> be attributed to students by name or by school. Student names or other identifiable information will <u>NOT</u> used in the report. Students will be mailed a $10 gift card in appreciation for their participation.
- Procedures for informed consent and privacy/confidentiality protections were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

QUESTIONS?
Contact Sharon Belton, Director of WIPPS Research Partners and Student Voices project manager at
sbelton@uwsa.edu or at 715-302-8483.

EL PROYECTO DE *THE VOICES OF WISCONSIN STUDENTS*
APRENDER, ENFRENTAR Y CONSTRUIR LA RESILIENCIA DURANTE EL COVID-19

¿CUÁL ES EL OBJETIVO DE ESTE PROYECTO? El Departamento de Servicios de Salud de Wisconsin (DHS), en asociación con la Facultad de Medicina de Wisconsin y los Socios de Investigación del Instituto de Políticas y Servicios Públicos de Wisconsin (WIPPS) de la Universidad de Wisconsin (UW), ofrece a los jóvenes de todo Wisconsin la oportunidad de compartir sus pensamientos, preocupaciones y conocimientos sobre el impacto de la pandemia COVID-19 en los estudiantes. Los socios de investigación de WIPPS llevarán a cabo una serie de discusiones en grupos pequeños Zoom con jóvenes de todo Wisconsin para recopilar información detallada sobre cómo los estudiantes están aguantando durante la pandemia de COVID-19; para identificar preocupaciones y desafíos, tanto como ejemplos de éxito y resiliencia; y para recibir comentarios sobre cuáles apoyos necesitan los estudiantes. Este proyecto está financiado por una subvención de los Centros para el Control y la Prevención de Enfermedades de los EE. UU. Los temas incluirán:

- ¿Qué preocupaciones tienen los estudiantes sobre cómo les va en la escuela? ¿Cuáles son las fuentes actuales de estrés o ansiedad y qué desafíos están experimentando?
- ¿Qué va bien? ¿Qué estrategias nuevas han desarrollado para aguantar?
- ¿A dónde se dirigen los estudiantes en busca de ayuda y apoyo con los problemas que puedan tener? ¿Qué tipo de información y apoyo dicen los estudiantes que necesitan? ¿Qué ideas tienen los estudiantes para mejorar el aprendizaje durante COVID-19?

¿QUIÉN PUEDE PARTICIPAR? Pueden participar estudiantes de todo Wisconsin de 6º a 12º grado. Se llevarán a cabo sesiones separadas para estudiantes de intermedia y secundaria. Los grupos de sondeo se llevarán a cabo virtualmente usando Zoom.

¿CUÁNDO SON LOS GRUPOS DE SONDEO? Las sesiones se llevarán a cabo en enero y febrero de 2021. **Consulte la tabla en la página siguiente para conocer las fechas y horarios específicos.**

¿CÓMO SE REGISTRAN LOS ESTUDIANTES PARA UN GRUPO DE SONDEO? Haga clic en el enlace aquí o utilice el código QR para registrarse; el registro tarda unos 2 minutos en completarse. Se envía un correo electrónico de confirmación a cada estudiante y a sus padres / tutores una vez que se completa el registro. Se envía un enlace Zoom a cada estudiante entre 24 y 48 horas antes de su sesión.

Grupos de enfoque de Voices of WI Students

FECHAS Y HORARIOS DE LAS SESIONES DE ZOOM
Elija una fecha / hora en función de si su escuela se encuentra en una zona rural, suburbana o urbana.

¿Qué describe mejor el tipo de comunidad donde se encuentra su escuela?	¿No estás seguro de cuál elegir? Estos son algunos ejemplos. ¿Su comunidad es similar a una de estas áreas? Utilice su mejor criterio para elegir.	ESCUELA INTERMEDIA (Grados 6 a 8)	ESCUELA SECUNDARIA (Grados 9 a 12)
Comunidad rural (las personas, los hogares y los negocios se encuentran alejados unos de otros)	Abbotsford, Albany, Alma, Ashland, Baraboo, Barron, Bayfield, Belmont, Bowler, Bruce, Cedar Grove, Chetek, Eagle River, Edgar, Hammond, Lac du Flambeau, Ladysmith, Manitowoc, Marshfield, River Falls, Stockbridge, Strum, Viroqua, Wisconsin Dells	jueves, 1/28 6:30 a 8:30 pm martes, 2/2 10 am a 12 pm mierc., 2/10 3:30 a 5:30 pm	martes, 1/26 3:30 a 5:30 pm lunes, 2/1 1:00 a 3:00 pm mierc., 2/10 6:30 a 8:30 pm
Comunidad suburbana (generalmente fuera o dentro de una distancia de viaje de una ciudad)	Altoona, Ashwaubenon, Brookfield, Brown Deer, Chippewa Falls, De Pere, East Troy, Genoa City, Greenfield, Hartford, Hartland, Holmen, Howard, Hudson, Kaukauna, Kimberly, Kenosha, Middleton, Oregon, Somerset, Superior, West Salem, Weston/Schofield	mierc., 2/3 3:30 a 5:30 pm martes, 2/9 10 am a 12 pm jueves, 2/11 6:30 a 8:30 pm	mierc., 1/27 6:30 a 8:30 pm martes, 2/2 3:30 a 5:30 pm lunes, 2/8 1:00 a 3:00 pm
Milwaukee y Racine (donde vive o trabaja una alta concentración de personas)	Milwaukee y Racine	viernes, 2/5 3:30 a 5:30 pm jueves, 2/11 3:30 a 5:30 pm	lunes, 2/1 3:30 a 5:30 pm martes, 2/9 6:30 a 8:30 pm
Otras ciudades y áreas urbanas (no Milwaukee o Racine, pero donde vive o trabaja una alta concentración de personas)	Appleton, Beloit, Eau Claire, Fond du Lac, Green Bay, Janesville, La Crosse, Madison, Neenah, Onalaska, Oshkosh, Sheboygan, Waukesha, Wausau, West Allis	martes, 2/2 6:30 a 8:30 pm jueves, 2/4 3:30 a 5:30 pm	lunes, 2/8 6:30 a 8:30 pm jueves, 2/11 1:00 a 3:00 pm

¿CÓMO SE DIRIGIRÁN LOS GRUPOS DE ENFOQUE?

- Habrá un máximo de 10 estudiantes en cada grupo. Cada grupo de sondeo tendrá una duración aproximada de 1,5 a 2 horas.
- Solo los estudiantes y algunos miembros del equipo del proyecto *WIPPS Research Partners* participarán en la discusión de Zoom. Los maestros, directores y personal escolar <u>no</u> participarán ni observarán las discusiones de los estudiantes.
- Las sesiones se llevarán a cabo utilizando Zoom y se grabarán para ayudar con el análisis. Las grabaciones y notas se mantendrán <u>privadas</u>. Solo los miembros del equipo del proyecto en *WIPPS Research Partners* y MCW verán las grabaciones o notas. No se compartirán con padres, maestros, consejeros ni nadie en DHS.
- Una vez finalizados los grupos focales, los socios de investigación de WIPPS y MCW analizarán la información para identificar temas y conocimientos comunes. Los hallazgos se compilarán en un informe resumido y se compartirán con el DHS. Esta información puede ayudar al DHS y a los líderes escolares y de las organizaciones sin fines de lucro y comunitarias a tomar decisiones más informadas sobre cómo apoyar a los estudiantes durante estos tiempos difíciles.
- Los estudiantes <u>NO</u> serán identificados personalmente en el informe. Las citas o comentarios incluidos en el informe <u>NO</u> se atribuirán a los estudiantes por su nombre o por la escuela. Los nombres de los estudiantes u otra

información identificable <u>NO</u> se utilizarán en el informe. Los estudiantes recibirán por correo una tarjeta de regalo de $10 en agradecimiento por su participación.

- Los procedimientos para el consentimiento informado y las protecciones de privacidad / confidencialidad fueron revisados y aprobados por la Junta de Revisión Institucional del *Medical College of Wisconsin*.

¿PREGUNTAS?

Comuníquese con Sharon Belton, directora de socios de investigación de WIPPS y gerente de proyectos de Student Voices en **sbelton@uwsa.edu** o al 715-302-8483.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

RECEIVE A $10 GIFT CARD FOR PARTICIPATING!

The Voices of Wisconsin Students Project is looking to hear the voices of students across Wisconsin about learning, coping, and building resilience during COVID-19.

- How is school and learning going for you during COVID-19?
- What are current sources of stress or anxiety and what challenges are you experiencing?
- What is going well? What new strategies are you and your fellow students using to cope better?
- What kinds of additional resources and support do you wish you had?
- What do you want school and community leaders to know about how COVID-19 is impacting students?

Join us for a ZOOM discussion of these topics with other students across Wisconsin!

REGISTER HERE

SESSIONS WILL BE HELD IN JANUARY AND FEBRUARY

For dates, times, and more information, visit **https://wipps.org/research-partners/** or click **HERE**

The Voices of Wisconsin Students Project is being done in partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS), the Medical College of Wisconsin, and the UW's Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS). We are providing Wisconsin youth an opportunity to share thoughts, concerns, and insights on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students. WIPPS will gather information about how students are coping during COVID-19; identify challenges, as well as examples of success and resilience; and obtain feedback about students' learning experiences. This project will help DHS, school leaders, and community organizations improve and implement services, programs and supports for Wisconsin youth.

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT *of* **HEALTH SERVICES**

WIPPS RESEARCH PARTNERS
WISCONSIN INSTITUTE for PUBLIC POLICY and SERVICE

MEDICAL COLLEGE OF WISCONSIN

Questions? Contact Sharon Belton at sbelton@uwsa.edu or 715-302-8483

APPENDIX E – OPEN-ENDED FEEDBACK

Focus groups were the primary means of collecting information and feedback from students for this project. Given the focus group design and the small-group nature of the discussion, participation was generally limited to a maximum of 10 students per group. In the few situations where a student registered for a group but was unable to participate due to a capacity issue or because of a scheduling conflict, we wanted to provide an alternative means of contributing their thoughts and views on learning, coping, and building resilience during COVID-19. To do this, we used an online open-ended feedback form created in Qualtrics to anonymously gather student input on a limited number of questions/topics. A link to the Qualtrics form was sent from WIPPS Research Partners to each student who registered for a focus group, but was unable to attend, and invited them to submit their feedback and responses using the online form. The parent/guardian was also copied on the email. Using an open-ended online feedback mechanism to collect feedback and responses is a common qualitative data collection method used in listening sessions, quality improvement, etc. Excerpts from the student comments are included below. Students' names and contact information were not collected during the open-ended feedback process.

1. This past semester, which of the following best describes how you typically attended school?

In-person learning	2
All virtual or remote learning (no in-person school)	0
A blend or hybrid of in-person and virtual/remote learning	5
Total Responses	**7**

2. First, thinking about school or things related to school over the past few months, what are some things that have really gone well for you? These can be things related to your classes, social life, activities, other things related to school. Generally, what are some positive aspects of school and your learning this semester?

- *I still get to see two of my friends. Math is easier than it was last year. It is nice not having to get up as early for online school.*
- *It's nice to be in school learning. It made things much easier to learn.*
- *Since I am in a hybrid school schedule, I have been able to exercise and work more often. I have extra free time to relax while also getting my schoolwork done.*
- *Learning what's in the best interests of myself. And learning to be comfortable in my own skin.*
- *I could not focus when we had to go virtual. So when we were able to join the building again, I caught up in my classes and started to get better help. I stopped skipping classes for more sleep time and fixed my sleep schedule altogether.*
- *I have still been given the opportunity to have violin lessons. In school, most teachers are very willing to go out of their way on their own time to help students with school. Some teachers have also been very lenient with how they teach and understand the unique circumstances of this year.*

3. What are some things that have really not gone so well this school year? These might be things you are struggling with or things that you are most concerned about with respect to school or life in general.

- *I feel very unmotivated for online and at homework. Online can be extremely annoying and stressful. I feel that in all the online classes I am taking I am not really learning anything.*

- *Well, I started to procrastinate because I lost the motivation to do anything that had to deal with school or homework. I still have two classes that have a failing grade because of this. I try to talk myself into doing it. Trying to make it sound easy and hype myself up. But once I look at it, I overthink things and just shut the laptop.*

- *I was quarantined for two weeks or so, it was not fun and I miss my friends a lot.*

- *One significant impact from the hybrid schedule is not getting the highest education possible. Compared to past years, [when] we went to school five days a week. Now, I go to school two times a week and teachers are way more lenient on work. On Wednesdays, all I have to do for some classes is answer a question for attendance. That is it. No homework or learning. The questions the majority of the time don't even relate to the class. For example, a history teacher will ask, "What is your favorite type of cereal?"*

- *Grades/classes.*

- *I have struggled with most of my classes because they are either Advanced Placement or harder courses in general. Two days a week is not enough time to learn the same material, and some teachers are rushing through content to still stay on track for the school year. I remember in Chemistry having a test on a Thursday, studying for a qualifying quiz the next week, and then taking finals that same week. They are nice in the sense they don't give us virtual work because a) they can't teach two classes at one time and b) students can't learn nearly as well virtually as they can in person. The downfall is we have about 2-3 hours a week of instruction and are still expected to be proficient in all classes. I am taking three AP classes this year and am very concerned and worried about testing in May. I don't feel ready to take the tests with the amount of time I have spent learning. I think emotionally it is also very hard to go to school 7 hours a day and get almost no interaction with our peers. Class is very quiet and we rarely get chances to socialize. Most people need that interaction for them to feel good, including me. Not only till recently when my sport opened up have I felt happy again and like I belong. I am also very scared for the ACT for the same reasons I am for AP testing.*

4. Are there some specific strategies or things you have found that help you cope better or help you feel more resilient while trying to learn and go to school during COVID-19? Or you can think about it this way: is there something the experience of COVID-19 has taught you about yourself that has helped you in a positive way that you would want to share with someone else?

- *It has taught me to cherish every little thing and take no simple thing for granted. Talking to my friends helps me cope.*

- *I think having a routine every day makes things much easier and flows a lot better.*

- *I am the opposite of a procrastinator. The moment I am asked to do something, I get it done. This is a good skill to have with online school because all my homework gets finished right away. Then I have more free time to relax.*

- *Be comfortable with who you are: Overweight, underweight, big forehead, bushy eyebrows, hip dips, hourglass figure, boxy figure, it doesn't matter. you. are. beautiful. SO OWN IT.*

- *I talked with my teachers in the classes that I am currently failing. We discussed which assignments worked toward my grade, and which were just extra practice/busywork. We made a deal. If I do the ones that help my grade, I won't have to do the extra work and still pass their class. So instead of 30+ assignments, I only have 12 to do, and I have to turn them in before next semester.*

91

- *Attitude is huge. From the beginning I have always tried to stay positive about things. I think time management is also an important aspect!*

5. Going forward and thinking about the next several months of the school year that lie ahead, what is the ONE thing you and your friends need most from your school leaders in order to do the best you can in school?

- *Do not just give us six assignments per week and barely teach us anything in one, 45-minute Teams meeting per week.*
- *Have fun and more interesting things to do, it has been pretty boring.*
- *For the second semester we have switched to four days a week. Something I need from my teachers is to slowly bring back the idea of homework. So far in the semester, I have about four hours of homework to complete each night. It has been very difficult to transition because I went from having school for four hours of the day, to twelve. I am taking multiple higher education courses, so everything is just thrown at me and expected done the next day.*
- *Be easier on us. WE ARE ALL LIVING THROUGH A PANDEMIC. Mental health is at an all-time low and yelling at us or giving us a new project every day and expecting us to have good attendance with all that is unrealistic. We need to live too. Mental health is more important.*
- *Stop giving out long assignments, busywork, "practices," and homework. It's just putting more stress on us. Just give us the basic idea of what to learn and not tie in side stories or add anything extra. Keep it plain and simple.*
- *Attend school five days a week.*

6. Is there anything else you wish to share about how COVID-19 and the pandemic has impacted you personally?

- *I miss my friends a lot and it has really affected some of them negatively a lot more than others.*
- *It made things super hard, they were not very funny. I was very sad that things ended the way they did.*
- *I have found COVID-19 to create a barrier between me and others. Majority of the time, my friends and I text through Snapchat, but my face-to-face interaction skills have decreased drastically. I used to be very close with my friends, but the lunch table is always quiet now.*
- *It made me be okay being by myself. I used to hate it but now I don't. It made me realize even being overweight I'm beautiful. But it didn't just come easy. I cried and beat myself up, but I found the beauty in me even if others can't see it and that's what matters. As teenagers, we have so many expectations while adults are still telling us to be kids. We have to get all our chores done but still be kids, do all our assignments but still be kids, get a job but still be kids, be mature but still be kids, keep your grades up, still be kids, live through a PANDEMIC but still be kids. There is so much coming at us but society and parents are telling us not to grow up too fast but pushing all of this on us at once. It's so hard. Lots of us battle with low mental health and they expect us to get all this done and it's very hard. And I'm not saying teachers and parents shouldn't expect us to do our best but they can't expect us to do it all, and as of today that's what they are doing.*
- *I usually dislike going out in public. But I have school, and the adults in the house have jobs. We can't work from home because too many devices are on the Wi-Fi. TVs, phones, etc. We tried to limit who uses the Wi-Fi on what and when but we started to lose progress and fall back in school and at work, so we all leave the house daily. I have had to quarantine four times during this semester. Even if we didn't show symptoms and the tests came back negative, the people who gave us the tests still said*

we had to stay inside the full 14 days. We had friends drop off groceries and then repaid them over Facebook. So the cycle of sharing the Wi-Fi at certain times of the day got infuriating quickly.

- *Mentally draining. I feel like now the same work I did years past takes more time and effort, even with all the extra time I have. I don't have as much motivation and drive like I used to.*

Demographics of Open-Ended Respondents – High School

Gender

Female	5
Male	2
Non-binary/Third gender	0

Race/Ethnicity

European descent (White)	6
American Indian/Alaskan	1

Reduced/Free Lunch

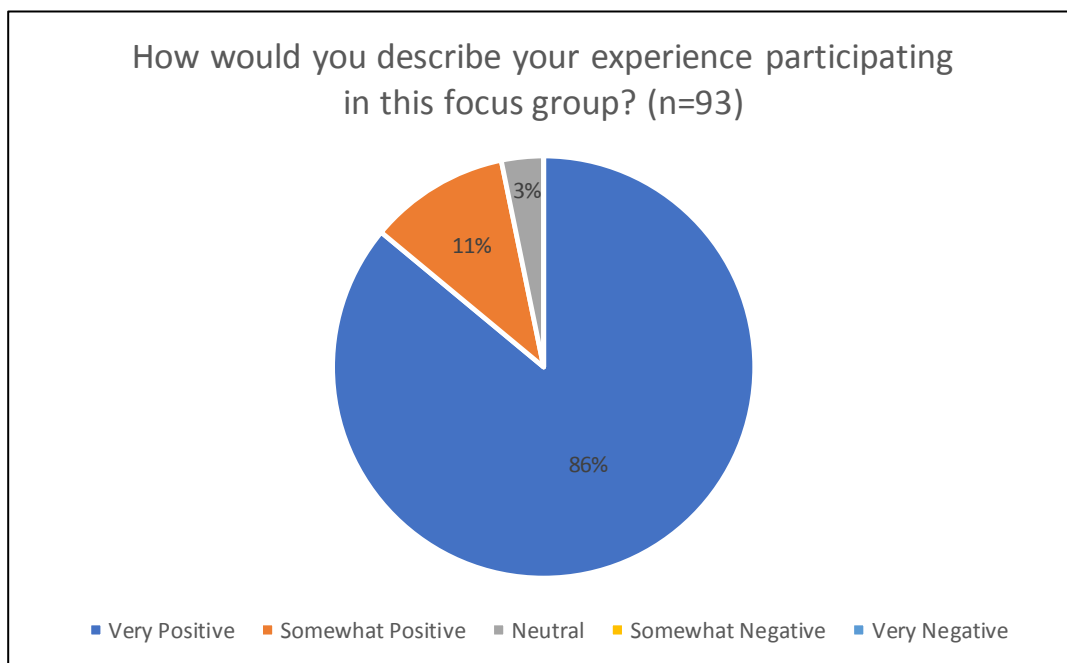| Yes	1
No	5
I prefer not to say	1

APPENDIX F - STUDENT PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

High School Students' Post-Focus Group Survey

At the end of the focus group sessions, students were provided a link in the Zoom chat feature for a brief Qualtrics survey to assess their experiences participating in the focus groups. Participants were informed that survey completion was optional and that their responses would be anonymous.[19] No student names or other personally identifiable information were collected. Among the 96 high school students in grades 9-12 who participated in the focus groups, 93 completed the survey participated in the groups (a response rate of 97 percent). The students overwhelmingly found this 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 it was comforting and gained new insights about mental health. Beyond an information-gathering method, 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 important to them, especially with the peers in other schools and in other areas of the state. This 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.
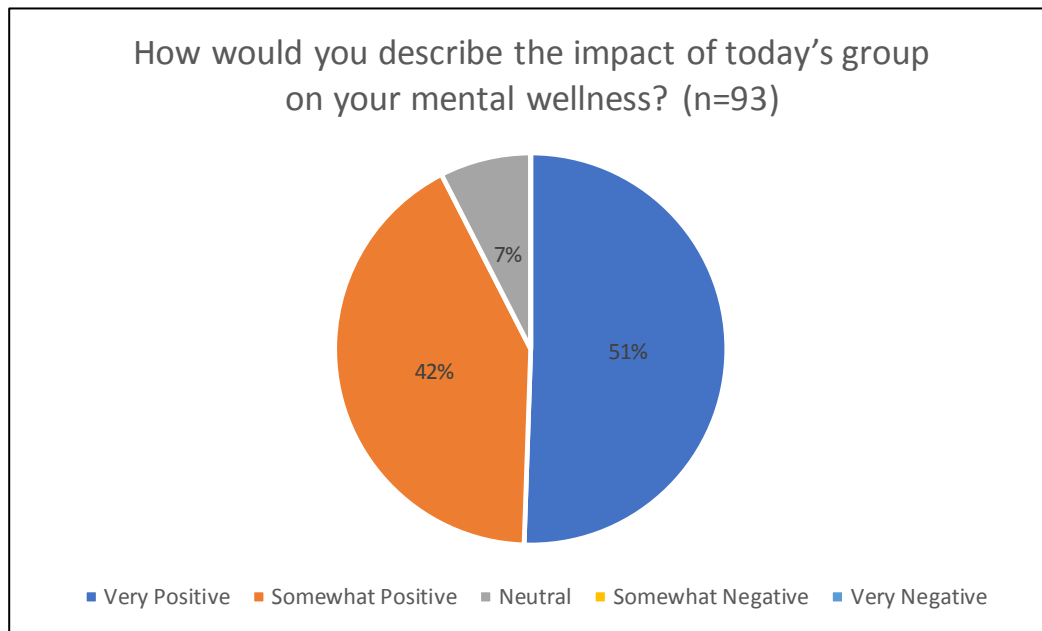
Results

- 97 percent of the focus group participants responded that participating in the focus group was a somewhat or very positive experience, with the vast majority (86 percent) of students reporting that it was a very positive experience. None of the students responded that it was a negative experience.


How would you describe your experience participating in this focus group? (n=93)

3%

11%

86%

■ Very Positive ■ Somewhat Positive ■ Neutral ■ Somewhat Negative ■ Very Negative

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[19] This survey was designed and programmed by Sofie Kjellesvig, a medical student at the Medical College of Wisconsin; she also analyzed the data shown above.

- 93 percent of the focus group participants responded that participating in the focus group had a somewhat or very positive impact on their mental wellness; among those responding, about 51 percent responded that the focus group had a very positive impact on their mental wellness. None reported that it had a somewhat or very negative impact of their mental wellness; 7 percent were neutral.

How would you describe the impact of today's group on your mental wellness? (n=93)

7%
42%
51%

■ Very Positive ■ Somewhat Positive ■ Neutral ■ Somewhat Negative ■ Very Negative

- 63 percent of the focus group participants responded that participating in the focus group with their peers had changed their perspective on mental wellness; 27 percent responded that the focus group maybe had changed their perspective on mental wellness. Ten (10) percent reported that it had no impact.

Did participating in this group with peers change your perspective on mental wellness? (n=92)

10%
27%
63%

■ Yes ■ Maybe ■ No
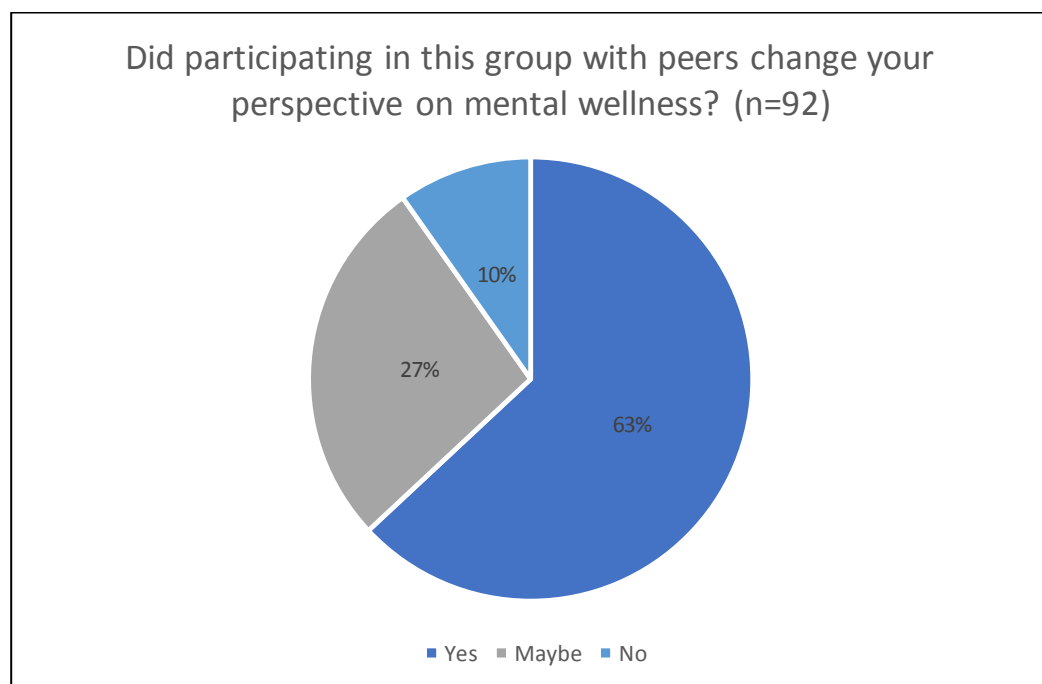
- 96 percent of the focus group participants responded "yes" to the question of whether they "felt like their voice was heard today?"; 4 percent responded "maybe." None responded "no."

Do you feel like your voice was heard today? (n=93)

4%

96%

■ Yes ■ Maybe ■ No
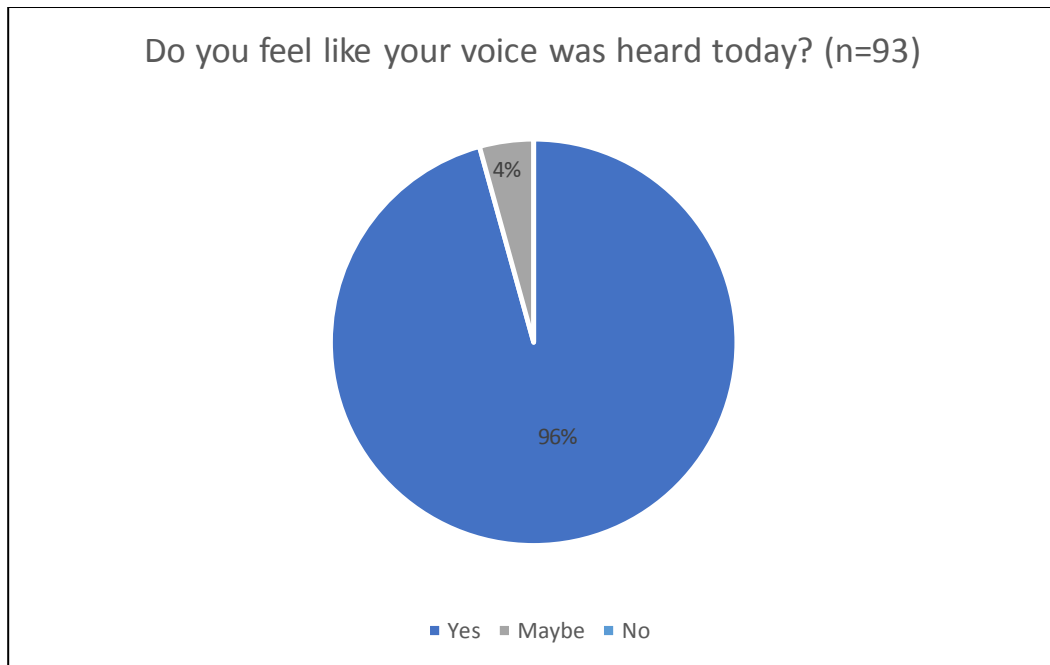
Prompt: Do you have any additional comments about your experience in the group today that you would like to share?
- *I really liked hearing other people's perspective on things. It was very eye opening.*
- *No, but thank you for taking your time to do this with us.*
- *Thank you for putting this together, I was excited to hear what everyone had to say!*
- *It was nice to hear other's opinions and views and resources they shared. It felt good to finally be heard, too.*
- *The time went by fast, it was comforting to be surrounded by people going through the same thing and actually talking about it, because I know that everyone knows that we are in a pandemic but not many people talk with each other about the effects of it.*
- *Nothing really, overall there was great discussions, and I enjoyed it.*
- *It was nice to hear other people's perspectives too, gave me more insight.*
- *It was really fun! The questions were nice and it was cool to talk to people I didn't know.*
- *Everyone was so nice and it was such an eye-opening experience to hear what everyone is going through:)*
- *I think I was able to be very open and honest. I could trust all of the other kids and all of you adults that were on this meeting as well.*
- *The people setting the standards for school are done by adults who have no experience learning in this format. We need to have more of a say in the way we learn.*
- *No it was great to meet new people*
- *This was actually pretty fun.*
- *It was definitely beneficial [sic] to my mental health. I would want to do this again. It helped me express myself and made me feel happier*

- *This was a great opportunity and I'm thankful to have been able to participate! Everyone was so nice and positive and supportive!*
- *This felt really good to be heard and to be engaged with and knowing that I'm not the only one going through these struggles.*
- *You guys really helped, and I enjoyed this virtual chat...*
- *I wish to do another chat like this one.*
- *It really helped a lot to know that I'm not alone with my mental health state, and how this situation is really affecting everyone else how its [sic] affecting me. Nice to know that I'm not alone.*
- *I really enjoyed getting to meet new people as this opportunity is rare in today's age (of the Covid era). This meeting was very useful in that I got to see other kids' perspectives on the pandemic and the way people live in general and how they may have changed from their initial lifestyle.*
- *I think there was a lot of chance for interaction and [it] was a very enjoyable experience.*
- *It was too short.*
- *None that I can think of. Thank you for the opportunity, I had a great time.*
- *I am really glad that I was a part of the group and people got to hear my voice and I really felt that my voice was heard!*
- *It was very nice seeing new people who share the same struggles that I do. Very safe and positive environment.*
- *This was a great idea, I really appreciate you taking the time to listen to us!!*
- *I loved how everyone was sharing their stories and that I could help get my voice heard where it normally isn't. I'm glad that everyone was very receptive and aware and it made me glad.*
- *I only had said that I was maybe heard because I had so very many things to share (all things considered (other people definitely need to be heard too).*
- *It was a great group. I loved hearing the other feedback and understanding how others were impacted by COVID too. It just gives a sense of relatability and comfort to understand that all of us are struggling and that we need to work together to overcome the pandemic.*
- *I think it was very enlightening to hear people both agree and disagree with some of my thoughts. I also learned about how different schools are running things.*
- *This was very fun and I enjoyed it.*
- *That was awesome! Wish I could become friends with a group member I shared a lot of points with honestly. Overall very positive experience.*
- *I loved participating in this experience. It was helpful to know I share experiences with others that go to different schools than me. This was kind of like a therapy session too. It was nice to talk to people who are the same age as me. I already felt like I was connected more to them. But I really appreciate being able to be a part of this experience!*
- *I really enjoyed this opportunity to learn about what students from different schools and areas are going through!*
- *Just need to address that you need to help the students.*
- *That I think that all the schools should do a thing like the [High School] is doing on Wednesday where we can go in to school and get help from the teachers just by yourself or with a small group of kids that need the help with the same thing. It is a nice thing that are [sic] school is doing that so the kids that are online can get all of their work done and not fall behind in your class. I love the Wednesday thing it is a good thing for me cuz I have a IEP so I need a little more help with things than other kids do so it is nice for me so I can get all the help I need.*

- *I am so thankful for this opportunity! It was very enriching and awesome to hear how other people felt about such an issue. Thank you for the invitation and I hope to see more discussions like this happen in the future!*
- *Nothing other than this was a really great meeting very much worth my time I would 100 % take this chance again if I could.*
- *I really enjoyed this experience and I am grateful that I could share my opinion.*
- *I loved the mixed peers getting to hear such different stories and situations! Host/Co-Host was very nice!*
- *I really want to keep schools open.*
- *My perspective on mental health didn't really change because I felt I was relatable in this group. Thanks for listening to us!*

APPENDIX G – REFERENCES

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