



THE VOICES OF MARATHON COUNTY STUDENTS RETURNING TO SCHOOL DURING COVID-19

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School districts across Marathon County are currently weighing policies and approaches to returning children to school this fall. In some areas, this may mean virtual or remote learning; in others, it may mean being physically on site at school. Alternatively, it may be a blend of both. To date, there has been little information about local students' thoughts and feelings about the topic of returning to school. This project seeks to fill this information gap and to provide students a voice with respect to communicating thoughts to school leaders. Our goal is to collect information and insights from local students, analyze the information, and share the findings so that others (for example, school boards and administrators) can consider it and make more-informed policy decisions about returning to school.

WIPPS Research Partners conducted a set of five (5) virtual focus groups with 47 Marathon County middle and high school students to gather in-depth information on about the topic of returning to school this fall and to obtain a greater understanding of students' perspectives and concerns. The focus groups were conducted using Webex from August 6 to 10, 2020. Middle school (grades 6 to 8) and high school students (grades 9 to 12) were grouped separately to ensure they felt comfortable discussing these topics with their peers. Students from 13 different schools from across 9 school districts in Marathon County participated in the discussions, including Athens, Colby, D.C. Everest, D.C. Everest Charter School, Edgar, Mosinee, Newman Catholic, Wausau, and Wittenberg.

We used a comprehensive interview guide to facilitate student discussions about a range of topics, such as:

- What concerns and questions do students have about returning to school in the fall?
- What kinds of information and support do students say they need?
- What do students want parents, teachers, and administrators to know about how they feel about school this fall?

Through small group discussions, the focus groups gathered an in-depth understanding of students' perspectives. It is important to keep in mind that, unlike a survey using random sampling, 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 might view a particular topic. Rather, focus group methodology is conducive to gathering information about how people feel and nuances about why they feel that way. By compiling and sharing this information with school boards, administrators, teachers, and the public-at-large, the voices of students can help inform larger policy discussions and decisions.

WIPPS Research Partners is a unit of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service located at the UW Stevens Point at Wausau campus. Part of the mission of WIPPS, and by extension, 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 particular case, our goal is to provide information from the perspective of students on the important topic of school reopening.

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 hope that the school districts and the community at large will be the primary beneficiaries of the information and the insights gathered through this analysis. Support for this project has been provided by WIPPS Research Partners and the COVID-19 Community Response Fund of the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin and the United Way of Marathon County.

A NOTE REGARDING TERMINOLOGY

In this report, the term *returning to school* refers to classes resuming and school starting back up in the fall. For some students, returning to school may mean being on site and learning in person. For others, returning to school may mean learning from home, or a combination/hybrid of both.

Focus groups revealed that students use the term *virtual* as shorthand for “not learning at school.” Some use this term to describe participating in a “virtual school” or “academy;” others use the term to refer to “starting school online,” “remote learning,” “e-learning,” or “learning from home.”

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.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1 Uncertainty and Anxiety Over School

- A. **Anxiety is a compelling underlying theme of student focus groups.** Students expressed feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and worry about how they will learn this fall (including their learning environments) and how they will connect in meaningful ways with teachers, friends and classmates. COVID-19-related safety concerns are also significant but are secondary to concerns about learning and social interaction.
- B. **Students worry about sudden changes in their learning environment in response to COVID-19.** Even if their school plans to open in person, students (especially in middle school) worry that it may unexpectedly shut down and revert to virtual learning again without warning or time to prepare. Students preparing to begin school in a virtual environment are in the dark about the basis (criteria) for making decisions about when school will return on site.¹
- C. **More specific information about schools’ plans for *how* students will learn may alleviate some of the uncertainty that is causing anxiety.** Students feel that they do not have enough information about what school will be like for them in the fall; what their day-to-day schedules will be like; how they will spend their time learning; what the expectations are; how they will get help from teachers; how they will connect with friends; and what schools’ safety plans will be on site. These observations were consistent regardless of their schools’ reopening plan and are a persistent source of anxiety.

2 Supporting Student Learning

- A. **Students stressed the importance of options and choices with respect to learning this fall.** Some students noted that they and their peers have supported learning virtually from home because of personal or family health reasons, or because they or their family had greater comfort with them being at home and less exposed to COVID-19. Others felt very strongly about the importance of learning on site. If appropriate safety measures are followed, nearly all students support options for students to learn virtually, on site, or both.

¹ Researchers observed a certain degree of residual “trauma” associated with the sudden shut down of schools in the spring that impacted how students perceived school reopening this fall.

- B. High school students are concerned that learning gaps will negatively impact their futures.** Students are worried that they did not learn adequately this past spring, that they did not retain crucial information, and that they are not prepared academically for the fall. This experience has students worried about what the fall may bring and the potential impact on their futures generally.
- C. Students hope that schools will retain some of the positive aspects of virtual learning: flexibility, independence, and working at their own pace.** Although students prefer not to be “tied” to their computer screens following a rigid schedule, they are interested in a learning environment that provides a balance between flexibility alongside some structure and routine.²
- D. Students want to connect with their teachers and fellow students to improve learning.** Students expressed a desire to actively learn from their teachers, not simply be assigned irrelevant tasks and “busy-work.” Interactive learning with fellow students is also important. Students suggested that teachers provide regular opportunities to collaborate on projects or assignments with other students; attend regular class meetings with peers (even when virtual); and engage in small group discussions with each other (and/or with the teacher).
- E. Providing timely academic support to is critical to improve learning in a virtual environment.** Difficulties getting help was one of the most negative aspects of students’ experiences with learning from home. Students need a way to access teachers for help in a “live” format and in a timely way in order to feel productive and stay motivated.
- F. Some students face organizational and motivational challenges while learning at home.** For a variety of reasons, some students struggled to keep on track while learning from home. Most agreed that teachers should use a common platform for sharing information and hosting meetings, rather than having students manage information and communication using multiple sources (email, Zoom, Webex, Google Meets, Canvas, Infinite Campus, itsLearning, etc.)
- G. Both middle school and high school students placed very high value on the importance of sleep.** The ability to get extra sleep was seen as a huge benefit of virtual learning. Students tied extra sleep to better overall physical and mental health.

3 Maintaining Social Connections

- A. Students crave social connections normally received through traditional school experiences.** Students want to connect with their peers in a meaningful way, not only in the context of learning, but in the traditional ways in which in person schooling provides social outlets. The potential for the continued absence of social connectivity due to safety concerns in a COVID-19 environment this upcoming school year is deeply concerning to students.
- B. Students desire communication channels that approximate in person connectivity.** Students want to be connected to friends, classmates, teachers, and school resources. Some cited the need for more access to counselors and mental health support. If forced into a virtual learning environment, many are concerned about the social-emotional well-being of peers for whom school is considered a “safe place.”

² One student noted that friends are planning to continue with their jobs or seek employment if school continues in a virtual setting. This is an interesting unintended consequence of virtual schooling that may be worth further investigation.

- C. **Students are hopeful that schools will find ways to offer extracurricular and co-curricular activities (e.g., sports, clubs, band and choir, the arts).** Students would prefer to have these activities in a virtual or alternative format than to cancel them outright. For some, these activities are seen as fun, stress-relieving social events that help them through the day.
- D. **Most students, including those who are not regular sports participants, expressed their hope that schools would offer some avenue for student-athletes to participate in their sport this fall.** The potential loss of sports is a significant concern for many of the student-athletes.

4 School Safety in a COVID-19 Environment

- A. **Students want to know what schools will be doing to keep them safe from COVID-19.** From the students' perspective, key components of safety include options for completely virtual classes; masks; sanitizer; effective cleaning of physical spaces; physical distancing; and crowd reduction, especially in hallways and lunch areas. Students expressed a higher level of concern for others' safety (friends, family members, teachers) than for themselves.
- B. **Many students expressed that having a mask policy is essential and sends a signal that schools care about personal safety.** Many students believe that wearing masks will also help keep themselves and others safe, especially teachers. While not all students agreed with requiring masks, even students against masks preferred to use them if it meant a return to in person learning. Students desire schools to clearly communicate the rationale behind mask (and other) policies along with clear enforcement.

5 Information, Communication and Engagement

- A. **Students have a high level of understanding of COVID-19.** Students understand many of the current issues surrounding COVID-19, risk levels among children, how to control transmission, various mitigation strategies, and the public policy considerations around safely returning to school.
- B. **Students are frustrated with a lack of direct communication from school leaders.** Information being communicated to parents is not reaching some students; many are unaware of school reopening plans, which is a source of stress. Even those who understood their schools' reopening plans expressed a strong desire for schools to communicate with students directly.
- C. **Students expressed a sense that decisions are being made for them, but without them.** Students would prefer direct communication from schools and opportunities to engage with school leaders. Collectively, students suggested that school leaders communicate their plans via existing learning platforms, email, or livestreamed Q&A sessions.

The goal of this study is to provide student perspectives to school leaders from diverse areas and settings in Marathon County as they consider and make specific decisions about opening schools this fall. It is clear that students hope school leaders will take their perspectives into account or, at a minimum, seek out their input and engage with them going forward. Findings from this study may be relevant to school leaders beyond the borders of Marathon County.³

³ Following this cohort of Marathon County students—or a statewide cohort—at regular intervals could help school leaders understand how students' thoughts and feelings change over time in response to the changing COVID-19 environment.

PROJECT OVERVIEW AND METHODS

THE NEED FOR STUDENT VOICES

With the start of the school year approaching, school districts are weighing policies and approaches to “returning children to school.” School re-opening is a topic of considerable public policy interest at local, state, and national levels. There are many stakeholders involved in current debates about returning children to school, including parents, school administrators, boards, teachers and staff, government officials, and the community at large. Students are also a key stakeholder group. To date, while there are some examples of student feedback in college/university settings, there is an absence of direct information about school students' perspectives of school reopening in the fall, possible approaches/plans and safety concerns.

While many local school districts have conducted surveys of parents and staff, and are using this information to help guide decisions, these results are often assumed to be surrogates for the voices of the students. There has been little information shared reflecting the direct perspectives of area students on the topic of return to school. WIPPS Research Partners sought to fill this information gap by collecting feedback directly from kids/teens throughout Marathon County through a series of in-depth focus groups. In order for the information to be timely, WIPPS Research Partners conducted these focus groups early August, with a goal of analyzing the data and publicly sharing the findings before school resumes in September.

WIPPS RESEARCH PARTNERS

WIPPS Research Partners is a unit of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service located at the UW Stevens Point at Wausau campus. Part of the mission of WIPPS – and by extension, 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 particular case, our goal is to provide information from the perspective of students on the important topic of school reopening.

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. In the context of this project, our goal is to collect information and insights from local students, analyze the information, and share/disseminate the findings so that others (for example, school boards and administrators) can consider them and make more-informed policy decisions about returning to school. We will share the insights in a public, transparent way in the hope that the school districts and the community at large will benefit from this information.

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

WIPPS Research Partners gathered information about students' perceptions of returning to school through facilitated focus group discussions. Focus groups are qualitative research methods in which a trained moderator conducts a collective, small group interview, generally lasting two hours. Focus groups create open lines of communication among individuals and rely on the dynamic interaction within a select group of 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 provide a more detailed, nuanced, and richer understanding of their perspectives.⁴ WIPPS Research Partners selected focus groups as the method to collect student feedback rather than a traditional survey in order to dig deeper into students' perceptions of this important topic.

⁴ See Paul Lavrakas. 2008. Focus Groups: Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods. Sage Publications.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Researchers developed a detailed discussion guide and used this as a standard instrument across the groups to ensure that individuals were responding to the same prompts. Using a standard interview guide allowed us to capture a wealth of information as effectively and efficiently as possible given tight time window to complete this project prior to school reopening.

Researchers spoke with school leaders, teachers, students, parents and county residents about the key issues on their minds and incorporated their feedback into the discussion guide design and content. As a result, the discussion guide focuses on topics most immediately relevant to local school districts. To reduce interviewer bias and minimize gaps, researchers also built in open-ended questions with opportunities for students to bring up a wide range of issues and perspectives that they felt would be relevant to the conversation. A copy of the discussion guide is provided later in this document.

FOCUS GROUP PROCESS SUMMARY

- Researchers conducted five (5) two-hour virtual Webex focus groups involving a total of 47 middle and high school students from across Marathon County. (See Tables 10, 11, 12 starting on page 34 for participant characteristics.)
- Parents/guardians were informed of their child's participation in the project prior to each session.
- Participants were students in grades 7 to 12 from a broad and diverse mix of socio-economic, ethnic, and demographic backgrounds, as well as different geographic areas (rural vs. Wausau metro schools) and school systems (public and private).
- By having diverse representation within and across each of the five groups, researchers identified patterns or themes applicable to teens/students in general, independent of their school setting, background, etc. This approach also lessens the issue of social pressure and conformity that can sometimes be present in homogenous (similar) groups from small communities. By taking this approach, we sought to increase the relevance and potential value of the information to middle and high schools throughout Marathon County as opposed focusing on one specific school district.
- Students participants were identified through various means such as through school guidance counselors and staff, peer nominations, resident referrals, and networking through local student groups and organizations. WIPPS Research Partners also provided information about the project on its Facebook page. Students received a \$10 gift card in appreciation for their participation.
- Students were informed that they would not be personally identified in the summary of the findings, nor would any quotes be reported with attribution to a specific individual.
- Students had the option of providing their comments to the facilitator and/or lead researcher via a private Webex chat space to create a sense of safety and ensure that sensitive responses would not be viewed by peers.
- The focus group sessions were observed by a member of the WIPPS Research Partners research team, a medical student, and a WIPPS student intern. Detailed notes, observations, and students' comments from each focus group were compiled by the lead research investigator. Student comments were categorized into common themes and areas of response (see Tables 1 to 9 starting on page 17). The summary report was prepared by the lead researcher and shared with the group facilitator and the other observers to ensure that the summary reflected students' views in an accurate, balanced, comprehensive, and unbiased way.
- In order to provide information as quickly as possible to school leaders and to be relevant to ongoing planning before school begins, researchers focused on and highlighted the most important themes

from the discussion. With more time, would have considered conducting additional focus groups or exploring students' insights and perspectives from different angles. Given the virtual format of the focus groups, this project naturally selected students who would have access to technology resources. Students without the means to access the internet may have different perspectives than those with whom we spoke.

DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS

The findings in this report will be distributed to key community stakeholders through CESA district contacts, superintendents, school board and teacher contacts, and through other public means. Student participants will also receive a copy of the report. WIPPS Research Partners will share the findings via presentations and one-on-one discussions with interested stakeholders.

DETAILED FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

On the following pages, we summarize several of the common themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. We present areas where there was high convergence in students' views both within each group, as well as across groups. Later in this document (starting on page 17) we provide more detailed descriptions of students' specific comments that reinforce the summary points described below.

I. Students Have a Sophisticated Understanding of COVID-19

- A. As a context for understanding students' perspectives about returning to school, it is important to describe their general, baseline understanding of COVID-19 and the extent to which they are informed about the pandemic. Based on the content and sophistication of student comments, we infer that the students are generally well-informed about COVID-19.
- B. In particular, the nature of their comments suggests that they have a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of many of the current issues being debated about how COVID-19 is transmitted, risk levels among children, how to control transmission, various mitigation strategies, and the public policy considerations around these topics and return to school options. This was consistent at both the middle and high school levels. For example:
 - 1. In general, students expressed low to moderate levels of concern about their own personal safety related to COVID-19. However, they expressed higher levels of concern about the safety of others and the risks of possible COVID-19 exposure of friends, family members, and teachers.
 - 2. Some students want schools to share more information about the criteria that schools are using to make decisions about their reopening plans and what specific criteria schools would use to switch from in person to virtual learning, or to resume classes in person after being at home.
 - 3. Unprompted, students naturally raised many of the factors contributing to the difficult decisions surrounding school planning, such as the need for schools to provide meals for students; technology challenges; concerns about the home environments of some of their peers and the "safe space" that schools provide; and the mental health consequences of COVID-19. Several noted concerns about depression experienced by friends or peers.
- C. In all areas of discussion, the students were engaged and eager to share their views in an open manner. While current debates about school reopening can be politically divisive, those undertones did not enter into the students' discussions or responses. Even in cases where there were some differences of opinion or alternative views, students expressed their views in a respectful way.
- D. Students did not hint at or couch their comments or viewpoints in terms of political ideology. Their preferences and perspectives, even when different from each other, seemed motivated by shared values related to personal learning preferences and outcomes, social and emotional development, and building and maintaining meaningful relationships.

II. Students Are Experiencing Stress and Anxiety about Returning to School

- A. **Student anxiety, uncertainty, and stress.** While many students expressed feelings of excitement about school starting in a few weeks, one of the most compelling themes underlying the focus group discussions is the extent to which students expressed feelings of anxiety about returning to school

in the fall. Students did not always use the specific terminology or label of “anxiety” in their comments but instead used terms such as “worry,” “concern,” “stress,” and “uncertainty.” These expressions of anxiety were not concentrated uniquely on issues of safety and COVID-19. Rather, they manifested across all topic areas discussed during the focus group, including concerns about their learning environments, their futures, the loss of connections with friends, and their physical and mental health, among others. An implication of this observation is that the emotional and mental health needs of students may be heightened and complicated by the COVID-19 environment.

- B. Uncertainty about return to school plans.** The level of “uncertainty” that characterizes the COVID-19 situation is contributing to stress and anxiety among students. Students are concerned that they do not know enough specifics or details about what school will be like for them in the fall; what it will “look” like; what their day-to-day schedule will be; how they will spend their time learning; what the expectations are; how they will get help from teachers; how it will feel; and what the physical space and safety plans will be like if and when they are on site at school. (Note: this was a consistent finding regardless of their school’s reopening plan, including among those returning on site.)
- C. Sudden changes in learning environments.** Students expressed concern about uncertainty surrounding their learning environment. If their schools plan to reopen in person, students worry that they will immediately shut down again or they will go back and forth between at home and in person, without warning or time to prepare. Meanwhile, students returning to a virtual environment feel in the dark about the decision-making process about when they will return to school on site. Schools may wish to consider the implications of sudden changes to students’ learning environments, how those decisions will be communicated to students, and what support is offered during transitions from one format to another. Nearly all students were unprepared for the suddenness of the decisions made in the spring and they fear of it may happen again.⁵
- D. Concerns about learning, academics, and future success.** Students across all groups, but especially in high school, are worried that they did not learn adequately this past spring, that they did not retain the information they were exposed to, and that they are not prepared academically for the fall. For high school students, this raised concerns about their future and their ability to succeed in college or follow their intended career path.
- E. Need for connections with friends.** While students are eager to get back to learning, an even bigger priority is the ability to connect with friends and peers, which they see as an essential social-emotional component of school. They expressed a need to establish communication channels among students that at least tries to resemble what they are used to in person at school, as well as the need for more social-emotional support generally. They are experiencing an overwhelming sense of loss: loss of connection with other students and the loss of the experiences that come with being in school, like band, clubs, sports, and other extracurricular activities. Many expressed concern about fellow students for whom school is a “safe place.”
- F. Mental health support.** Some expressed a need for increased access to school therapists. One student noted that school psychologists were “tucked away and reserved for extreme cases,” even though they believed more students could use the help. Some Students expressed a need for a dedicated mental health professional.

⁵ The authors of this report are not mental health professionals. However, there seemed to be a certain level of residual “trauma” associated with the sudden nature of school shutting down in the spring that may impact how students experience school this fall.

III. Students Are Concerned about Learning and Support in a Virtual Environment

- A. Need for details and specifics.** One of the primary sources of students’ anxiety is that they do not have a clear or concrete understanding of what their learning environment will be like in the fall. Although they understand that schools were still working on reopening and contingency plans, they are struggling to manage expectations in the absence of details and specifics. Students had strong feelings about what schools could do to help support their learning in a COVID-19 environment.
- B. Provide options and choices.** Students stressed the importance of options and choices with respect to learning. In particular, they recognized the benefits of virtual learning for some students, whether for reasons of personal or family health, learning styles and preferences, social anxiety, flexibility of sleep and work schedules, or simply because they or their family had greater comfort with them being at home. Others felt that there were significant advantages to have some portion of their learning to remain virtual, while some instruction and extracurriculars be held in person. A significant number of students felt strongly about the need to be on site, or at least wanted the ability to choose to be learning on site.
- C. Active instruction and learning with other students.** Whether in a virtual or in person setting, students want to connect with their teachers and peers in a real, tangible way. The importance of being able to interact and talk with teachers cannot be overemphasized. Some felt there was too much emphasis on irrelevant tasks and busy-work during the spring at home school experience. Connecting with and learning alongside or with their fellow students, even if in a virtual environment, is also important to students. Yet, most said they were not provided significant opportunities to interact with peers. They missed discussion groups, carrying out group projects and exercises, and simply seeing other students while learning.
- D. Getting help from teachers when needed.** Students reported having difficulty getting timely help from teachers while learning from home during the spring quarantine. The ability to access teachers consistently in a “live” format, especially to get help when needed in real-time, was a pervasive concern. While students acknowledged the efforts of specific teachers to assist them, help was inconsistent at best. Many also stated that it was hard to replicate the quality and quantity of direct support from teachers available through in person channels at school. Both middle and high school students identified this lack of support as a key barrier to successful learning in a virtual environment. Some students noted that normal avenues of getting help from their peers (such as class group chats) vanished during the spring’s virtual learning environment.
- E. Streamline and coordinate to avoid “information overload.”** Students expressed challenges related to staying organized given all of the emails, tasks, meetings, and multiple platforms that teachers were using during the spring. Many noted that it was hard to keep track of everything and manage all of the emails, assignments, and due dates. Some suggest that all teachers within a specific school use a common platform for sharing information and hosting meetings rather than requiring students to manage a barrage of information coming from email, Zoom, Webex, Google Meets, Canvas, Infinite Campus, itsLearning, etc. Students also expressed a wish that teachers would better coordinate meetings, assignments and expectations, as some students encountered conflicting online meetings for classes or found assignments and due dates overly concentrated at times.

IV. Students Seek to Balance Flexibility and Structure in a Virtual Environment

- A. Flexibility, independence, self-pacing.** While students' experiences with virtual learning this past spring were generally negative, they identified several positive aspects that may be helpful for school leaders to consider in terms of providing virtual learning models on a longer-term basis. In fact, those returning to school this fall, whether virtually or in person were concerned about whether or not they would be able to retain some of these positive attributes of virtual learning.
1. While students expressed a need for some structure and predictability with their learning, they saw tangible benefits of virtual learning in terms of having independence, flexibility and being able to work at their own pace.
 2. One student shared that when learning became too stressful or if he became stuck on something, he could step away, play with his dog, and return to learning more focused. He noted that with in person learning, there was no option to take a break and do something fun in order to refocus.
 3. Students also expressed strong feelings against transposing the typical in person "8 am to 3 pm" class schedule to the virtual learning environment. Stated differently, they do not want to be "tied" to their computer screens following the same schedule as a normal in-school day. Their comments suggested an interest in a learning environment that provides a balance between flexibility and working independently at their own place with some structure, predictability, and routine.
 4. Both middle school and high school students placed very high value on the importance of sleep and saw the ability to get extra sleep as a benefit of learning from home. Some expressed frustration with teachers who would schedule very early online meetings. In some cases, students made a connection between being able to get additional sleep with feeling less stressed about school during the spring at home experience.
- B. Structure, accountability, and routine.** For some students, the absence of structure in the home environment was detrimental to their learning. Some noted that they lacked the self-discipline to get their work done. Phones and other activities were distractions. Some felt keenly the absence of regular accountability; some noted the challenges of asynchronous learning which meant a decrease in timely support from both peers and teachers.

V. Students Feel a Strong Need to Regain and Maintain Social Connections with Peers

- A. Need for social connections through extracurriculars.** As stated earlier, students noted that interactions and connections with other students are a key component of their learning process and social-emotional health. Students crave the social connections with other students that they get through the school setting. They want to connect with their peers, not only in the context of learning, but through meaningful social interaction that naturally occurs during extracurricular activities. In fact, some students find extracurricular activities to be the motivating factor that gets them through the rest of the school day. The potential for the continued loss of these opportunities this upcoming school year is deeply concerning to students.
- B. Look for creative solutions rather than cancel activities.** While the students acknowledged the challenges of safely convening sports, clubs, band, choir, theater and other extra- and co-curricular

activities in a COVID-19 environment, they are hopeful that schools will look for creative ways to retain these activities rather than cancel them outright. They want schools to “find a way to make it work.” For example:

1. Students noted that at a minimum, clubs could meet virtually and still achieve their goals.
2. Students were aware of the safety concerns of providing band and choir but were hopeful that these important components of the school curriculum could still be provided in person, in smaller groups, or even virtually. One student felt strongly that band and choir should proceed as normal, with students assuming any associated risks of participation.
3. They noted that providing platforms for students to meet informally online such as through Zoom or Google Meets could help fill the void they are missing when not being physically present at school. Other ideas included having regular open forums online for students to connect. Two students in separate groups each mentioned that schools should consider Discord servers with grade-level or topic/interest groups. Middle school students noted the benefits having socially distant recess opportunities.
4. Students also expressed concern that they will miss traditional activities such as homecoming, being in the student section at sports events, and school performances, among many others. They strongly desire their schools to find ways to hold these or similar activities.
5. One student captured this sentiment by suggesting that amidst all the new safety rules, procedures, and signage accompanying a return to in person learning, the school should make a special effort to create an environment of “fun” and “welcomeness.”
6. Middle school students placed less importance on the need for clubs than high school students.

- C. Impact of loss of sports on mental health.** The potential loss of sports is a significant concern for many of the student-athletes. Some decried the negative effects on cancelling sports on their mental health. Most students, including those who are not regular sports participants, expressed their hope that schools would offer some avenue for students to participate in their sport this fall with safety precautions. A few did note that if sports could not be provided safely, they should be cancelled.

VI. How Students Prioritize Safety at School in the COVID-19 Environment

- A. Explain safety measures to students.** Students want to know what schools will be doing to keep them safe when they are learning in person in a COVID-19 environment. Many students are not aware of what their school’s safety plans are for fall; those not returning to school expressed concerns about not knowing what criteria schools will use to return or the safety measures that will be in place when they do return. In thinking about COVID-19 and safety, students expressed a high level of concern about others’ safety (friends, family members, teachers) more so than their own.
- B. Providing a choice/option for virtual.** When asked to think about what they would do if they were in charge of making the school year a positive experience for students with respect to safety, the most prevalent response was to give students the option whether to attend school in person or virtually.
- C. Masks.** In terms of specific safety measures students said would help to make the school a safer place, the use of masks was the initial, immediate response for the vast majority of students across all groups. However, not all students agreed that masks should be required.
1. For most students, masks were described as an essential safety component and signal that their school was taking serious efforts to keep them safe.

2. The discussion of masks was not solely focused on students' own safety; many noted that in addition to personal safety, masks would also help keep others safe, especially teachers.
3. There was an interesting discussion about the need for schools to have clear policies in place for enforcing the use of masks if required by their school and what steps schools should take if a student refused to wear a mask. Students shared ideas ranging from suspension to a civil fine based on current state or county health orders.
4. A few students whose schools were planning on in person learning expressed concerns about being in an indoor environment where masks would be optional rather than mandatory.
5. Some noted that students may need a new mask each day or could have trouble keeping their masks clean.
6. Several high school students did not agree with arguments about the benefits of masks, or with making masks mandatory. Their reasoning related to concerns that students would fidget with the masks throughout the day, touch their face, and expose themselves anyway; that masks would not be effective in reducing the spread to others if the virus was on their clothing; and possible long-term health concerns of daily mask use. These students typically felt that the preferences of some should not be forced on all. However, several of those who did not agree with requiring masks also noted that they would be willing to wear a mask if it meant that they could attend school in person.
7. One potential implication of the focus group discussions about masks is the need, from the student perspective, for schools to clearly communicate the rationale or basis behind their policy choices related to the use of masks in school and to have clear policies related to enforcement.

D. Sanitizing, social distancing, and limiting the number of students. In addition to masks, the students mentioned the importance of other components of safety in an in person setting, including:

1. Sanitizer
2. Cleaning the school and physical space effectively, especially the bathrooms
3. Physical distancing
4. Crowd reduction, especially in hallways and lunch areas

VII. Students Are Frustrated by Lack of School Communication and Engagement

Students were asked what they have heard about their school's plans for opening in the fall, where they get their information, and who they most trust to give them accurate information about plans to return to school. Common themes about information and communication include the following:

A. Awareness of schools' plans is mixed: Many of the students are not at all aware of what their school's plans are for resuming in the fall, though high school students reported being more informed than those in middle school. Most students could point out in general terms if they were "going back in person," "staying virtual," or some "hybrid" or "blended" approach. Beyond those generalities, students reported that they did not know much about the specifics. Although they recognized that schools are still making plans, the lack of details or concrete understanding of what their routines will be is causing stress and anxiety.

B. Information communicated to parents may not reach students. Parents are the primary source of school reopening information for both middle and high school students. However, some expressed concern that their parents do not check emails routinely. High school students also reported receiving information from word-of-mouth via friends or from friends who have parents who work at school. Some felt that information about school reopening was like a game of telephone: friends heard it from other friends who heard it from other friends. And like the game, they feel that

messages reaching them are garbled, confusing, or incomplete. While some students have watched school board meetings with parents or have taken initiative to look on their school's web site, only a few seemed to be proactively seeking information on their own. Nearly all students expressed a strong preference that schools reach out to them directly and not assume that information sent to parents is reaching them.

- C. Students want direct communication and engagement.** Students expressed frustration with the lack of direct communication from school representatives and desired a mechanism to provide input and share their thoughts with school leaders. Several students noted the value of schools hosting a Zoom-type meeting where school leaders could meet with and talk directly to students. Only a handful could identify any direct communication or outreach from their school. As one participant put it, even though students “are the ones who will be going to school and trying to learn,” they remain left out of the communication channels. As a result, students feel that decisions are being made for them, without them.

VIII. Students Realize the Value of School

If there is a silver lining takeaway from the students, it is a near unanimous sense of appreciation for the value of school. Some students admitted taking school for granted before COVID-19. Most verbally acknowledged that they have come to realize the value of education in their daily lives and as an important stepping stone towards college and/or their future career path. As one student put it, “This experience made me realize what can be taken away so fast.”

VIII. Student Messages to School Leaders

At the conclusion of the focus groups, students were asked, “If you could tell your school leaders one thing about how you and other students feel about returning to school in the fall, what would you tell them?” A compilation of their responses is below.

MIDDLE SCHOOL RESPONSES

- “Take all necessary precautions to keep students and staff safe.”
- “Take safety precautions so everyone can be safe.”
- “School could be safe. But if school can't be safe, do it virtual.”
- “Please do virtual because I like taking breaks with my dog.”
- “Keep it virtual. Some kids aren't prepared for face to face.”
- “Give us the option of in person or virtual.”
- “When it's safe, do a hybrid. It helps us socialize and it helps our mental health.”
- “Keep a hybrid so we can develop good habits.”
- “If we do it virtually, I want to communicate with people.”
- “Make a decision week-by-week. I want to see friends. Maybe use Google Meets” (same for another student).
- “Ensure that we have a way to communicate with teachers and each other...like a daily Webex.”
- “It would be good if schools had our feedback to make adjustments.”
- “It would be good [for schools] to talk with us about problems [related to COVID-19] and get our ideas about things you want to fix.”

HIGH SCHOOL RESPONSES

- “There is a need to prioritize safety. Keep up the flexibility [when virtual]. With too much structure [virtually], there will be burnout. Not too much structure.”
- “If it is not safe, we should not be in school.”
- “We need to prioritize health, but also the future. This is our future.”
- “Remember that these are people’s lives at stake. Be wise [with decisions.]”
- “Remember to weigh all of the possibilities when making decisions.”
- “Consider the risks and take safety precautions.”
- “To keep people safe, have a plan.”
- “Focus on safety. Wear masks.”
- “Be decisive. [The Board] is just kicking the can down the road.”
- “Communicate and stop changing things.”
- “Keep school fun and engaging. There is nothing to look forward to”
- “Focus on “engagement”, not “busy work”
- “Make things as normal as possible.”
- “Most of us want to go back to school, sports, clubs, things like that.”
- “This experience made me realize what can be taken away so fast.”
- “Going back and forth from in person to online is stressful.”
- “No matter how kids may shape it, the reality is that kids *do* like school and they need school.”
- “For some kids, school is their safe place. Some risks are worth taking when we are talking about isolation, lack of community, etc.”
- “We need clubs and sports.” “Some kids [need those things] to be able to get through the day.”
- “No matter what, we need better communication. So I know what it happening. So I can have a better say.”
- “Students should be able to have a say.”
- “Students and parents need to know the plan. It can’t be [so] last minute.”
- “There should be constant communication [with students].”
- “Keep us updated.”

Our goal in providing these insights, is to provide school leaders from diverse areas and settings in Marathon County relevant information about students’ perspectives as they consider plans and make specific decisions about returning to school this fall. The findings from this study may be relevant to school leaders beyond the borders of Marathon County. It is clear that students hope school leaders will take their perspectives into account, or at a minimum, seek out their input and engage them going forward.

It may also be valuable to follow-up with the student participants in these initial focus groups at a later date to get their ongoing feedback. Following this cohort of students—or a statewide cohort—at regular intervals (for example, quarterly) can help school leaders understand how students’ thoughts and feelings are changing over time. This is particularly relevant in an ever-shifting COVID-19 environment.

APPENDIX A – DOCUMENTATION OF STUDENT VOICES

STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN SPRING 2020

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE BY LOOKING BACK ON THIS PAST SPRING

We started the focus groups by asking students to think back on their experiences this past spring as a way to identify some aspects of the experience that went well, and things that did not go well. Specifically, we asked if there was anything they liked about the experience? Did teachers do something that they thought was positive or helpful to their personal learning? Were they able to interact with other students as part of their learning from home experience? What were one or two things they struggled with? What did not go well? By reflecting on the past, students could help students identify lessons for the future under a virtual or remote learning environment.

Table 1. Students’ Perceptions of School at Home in Spring 2020—What Did They Like About It?

Middle School	High School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility • Self-paced • Independence • Less stressful (including more sleep) • Teachers were understanding of the situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility • Self-paced • Independence • Less stressful (including more sleep) • Teachers were understanding of the situation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Doing work at own pace” ✓ “Choice to do my work on my own schedule” ✓ “It was less stressful” ✓ More flexible: “I could get my work done at whatever time I wanted” ✓ Several said they would finish their work in 2 to 3 hours and be done for the day ✓ Able to wake up later ✓ Helped build independence ✓ “The teachers tried really hard to help us”; some mentioned holding frequent “office hours” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Flexibility, independence, ability to take a break ✓ “It was nice not being there for 8 hours” ✓ “I could stop and do another activity” ✓ “I liked the freedom of it...and not being in class” ✓ “...being outside; doing some different things, like baking and learning new things outside of school” ✓ Being able to get outside during the day ✓ Many noted they would spend 2 to 3 hours a day on school and then have the rest of the day to do what they wanted; more free time ✓ Ability to work at their own pace ✓ “Getting things done for myself” ✓ “I liked having weekly tasks. ...flexibility with time” ✓ “Working at my own pace” ✓ “Working on my own” (independence) ✓ “Getting up later”; “I was not as tired”; “...more manageable deadlines” ✓ “I liked starting the day at 10 am and not so early” ✓ Sleeping in ✓ “Teachers understood that their style had to change. They were more lenient with grades and the workload” ✓ “The teachers went to great effort to have personalized learning, with emails, resources, video explanation”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “I think teachers were more helpful during e-learning” ✓ “Some worked hard to be creative and mix it up and not do the same things every day” ✓ “My teacher had a Webex every week to see how we were doing” ✓ “I thought my teachers were more willing to help and open to answering more questions” ✓ Teacher had a Google Meet where we could “pop in and ask questions” ✓ Being a part of something unprecedented and experiencing something “new” ✓ “I was more productive in things outside of school, which made me more focused on school” ✓ “I grew closer to my family”
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Table 2. Students’ Perceptions of School at Home in Spring 2020—What Did Not Go Well?

Middle School	High School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distractions • Harder to learn • Harder to get help when needed • Overwhelming to keep track of everything • Technology issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very limited interaction and learning with other students and with the teacher • Concerns about missing content and being behind • Need to be self-motivated • Harder to get help when needed • Overwhelming to keep track of everything
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Nothing was positive for me” ✓ “I slacked off on my responsibilities” ✓ “It was hard to focus on school when I wanted to be doing other things” ✓ “I become too distracted with other things” ✓ Too confusing (too many emails and things to keep track of) ✓ Too many things to keep organized ✓ Much harder to get help when needed; “lots of times I needed help and I couldn’t get it” ✓ Harder for teachers to explain the information ✓ “I would need to email the teacher and wait for them to get back to me; this made it harder to get my work done” ✓ “Sometimes we would have Zoom meetings” ✓ “I did the bare minimum; I was doing my work, but not really taking it in” ✓ “I just did the tasks (‘did what I was told’) but nothing else” ✓ One student observed that a family member with autism faced difficulties learning and “saw his learning slipping” ✓ Little interaction with friends; some Zoom meetings with friends; talked; tried to play games ✓ Internet crashed – too many people on it at once ✓ Internet would crash and then come back later 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Lack of interaction and learning with others ✓ “There was no learning with other students” ✓ Pre-COVID, students would use group chats to work on things together; then “all of that stopped” ✓ Limited interaction with other students ✓ “...wish school more closely mirrored actual school” [in terms of learning with other students] ✓ “It is hard to capture the interactions from school” ✓ One student had a neighbor in some of their classes and they worked together ✓ No interaction ✓ “Friends and people around you vanished” ✓ “90% of the social decreased. I miss that” ✓ “I had no interactions with friends” ✓ “I had no interactions with my fellow students” ✓ “We weren’t really able to do much. It was kind of useless” ✓ “We had Webex calls, but they were optional. So only 1 or 2 other students would be on” ✓ The content of classes was too condensed; concern about what they were missing – “2 units of AP Bio were eliminated. It’s hard to miss” ✓ “We didn’t cover as much” ✓ “I didn’t learn as much. I am not as confident [about learning] as I am when it is in person” ✓ No discussion groups

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Could not get Webex to work on school Ipad – “have to use my phone” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The teachers were not as hard; became less motivated and productive – “I’d get my work done for the day in 2 hours” ✓ “I was not learning as much. ... lessons ... were left out. I feel less prepared for next year” ✓ Had to be self-motivated ✓ “Interaction was very minimal [with teachers]. We did not have a lot of meetings.” It was “teachers posting assignments” ✓ “It was really tough for me – it is hard to draw something positive [from this past spring] ✓ Harder to retain information – “I don’t remember as much what I learned” ✓ Video did not always work; could not do many assignments; sometimes the assignment video would not be approved on the school system for the student to watch ✓ Lack of access to printers was very difficult for several students; limited printer resources at home ✓ Lack of Wifi ✓ 3 siblings at home--hard to concentrate/distracted ✓ Difficulty retaining information while learning at home ✓ Phone is a distraction at home ✓ Lonely and sad – would be home alone all day ✓ Communication and getting help was difficult ✓ “I would email the teacher, but it would take too long to get back to me” ✓ “I couldn’t get questions answered. It took too much time” ✓ “Communication with teachers was tough – I had to wait for feedback. There was no instant communication” ✓ “It was hard to get help” ✓ “It would be nice to be able to discuss problems as a group and set up future assignments” ✓ “I struggle with math. I would need help but would not be able to get it. I didn’t get the help I needed” ✓ Little instruction was given; just lots of assignments to figure out on own. “This was not a great experience” ✓ “There seemed to be a lack of centralized leadership or direction [when we were working at home virtually]. The teachers succeeded, but there was no leadership” ✓ Some gave assignments daily; some weekly ✓ “I had about 20 minutes of work a day in some classes” ✓ Some had super early meetings – there is no reason to have a 7 am meeting ✓ “Teachers didn’t communicate or coordinate – everything ... due on the same day [or] time”
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ANTICIPATING SCHOOL IN FALL 2020

THINKING AHEAD – WHAT ARE STUDENTS LOOKING FORWARD TO?

We also asked student to think about the upcoming school year and to identify the one thing they are most looking forward to with respect to school starting.

Table 3. What Are Students Most Looking Forward to about School Starting This Fall?	
Middle School	High School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing and interacting with friends and other students • See and interact with teachers and students • Learn from teachers and other students • Establish a routine/structure (not to be interpreted as wanting to be online from 8 to 3 pm but having some predictability to their day) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing and interacting with friends and other students • See and interact with teachers and students • Learn from both teachers and other students • Establish a routine/structure (not to be interpreted as wanting to be online from 8 to 3 pm but having some predictability to their day)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Seeing and interacting with friends ✓ Seeing friends ✓ Collaborating on projects with students ✓ Doing projects with other people ✓ In person interactions with teachers ✓ Interacting with teachings ✓ Structure and routine ✓ Getting back into learning and being productive – “people are starting to crave structure” ✓ Air conditioning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Getting back into learning ✓ Getting into a routine, “I am excited to see how it goes [this fall]” ✓ Anticipation – “It will take some time to get used to it” ✓ “I was looking forward to activities...” ... “now they have disappeared” ✓ Generating new ideas – for example, how to have a virtual “homecoming” – maybe others will use our ideas in the future ✓ Interacting with teachers ✓ Clubs and activities ✓ Excited to have a schedule back; “every day is just the same thing now. Time seems so slow” ✓ “I want a routine back” ✓ “I want to do more hands-on, in person learning. Being on a computer all day is ‘old’” ✓ “I like the idea of a blended schedule” ✓ “I am excited to be virtual so I can work ahead if I want to and be ahead for next year” ✓ Communicating with my teachers. ✓ “I was really looking forward to sports. Not sure now” ✓ “I want to see what they do that is special for the Class of 2021” ✓ “I am excited to see people ‘in real life and get help immediately [with school work]” ✓ “I hope the teachers have had more time to prepare for virtual learning, I hope they have better plans” ✓ Seeing teachers again

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Seeing people “I don’t usually see”✓ “Talking to people in person”✓ Having a schedule – “It was hard to be able to get it all in one time”✓ “Going back and having a teacher give clear instructions and show me what they are talking about”✓ Watching sports and being in the student section✓ Face-to-face interactions and more communication with people✓ “We are staying online, so not really” [nothing looking forward to]✓ “There is nothing I can say I am looking forward to”
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WHAT ARE STUDENTS WORRIED ABOUT?

THE LEVEL AND NATURE OF STUDENTS' CONCERNS

We wanted to develop a greater understanding of how worried students are about school starting back up in the fall. We made a conscious decision to ask about this topic using an open-ended question and without referencing safety or COVID-19. As a result, we were able to get a broader view of the nature of their concerns. We also wanted to get a sense of the intensity of their feelings and therefore asked them to assess their level of concern in returning to school in the fall—whether virtual, face-to-face, or hybrid—on a scale of 1-10, (with 1 being not worried and 10 being extremely worried). We then asked them to elaborate on their assessment.

Table 4. What Are Students Most Worried About?

Middle School	High School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns clustered around safety; impact of exposure to COVID-19 on other people outside of school; uncertainty and unpredictability; and learning • Some of their concerns were related to safety and not being clear about what steps their schools would be taking to keep them safe. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Main safety concerns centered on whether hallways would be crowded and if students could maintain social distancing. ○ The use of masks would be reassuring as a minimum safety precaution. • While some concerns related to safety, those concerns appeared to be more moderate compared to other areas of concern; for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In one of the groups, there was universally high level of concern about school starting in person and then shutting down again • Concerns about learning if not with a teacher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns clustered around uncertainty about what will school be like; how they will learn; their future; mental health; and safety • Students generally seemed to be more worried or concerned about the learning environment than the COVID-19 risk in particular • Primary concerns were also related to not knowing what their school’s plan is and how it will work day to day
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Starting virtually – “I am not worried” ✓ Kids who are sick will stay home ✓ We can wear masks and take precautions ✓ Hallways may be too crowded ✓ Not enough clarity about safety. “Chaotic.” ✓ “We can try, but kids will take off their masks and we can’t always maintain social distancing” ✓ Kids and teachers might get sick and “we’d need to shut down” ✓ Being responsible for someone else getting sick ✓ What about fire and tornado drills? [How to maintain social distancing?] ✓ “If my friends are at school, I will feel safe. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “I am a 4 for my safety, but a 7 for my future” ✓ What school will be like – “we have no information about what’s happening” ✓ I am missing out on things that are relevant to my future career choice ✓ I am worried about my future ✓ I am at a 10 for safety [Mosinee] ✓ Worried about the schedule ✓ Food for kids ✓ Teachers and the workload and stress that will be placed on them ✓ “I am worried about how virtual learning will be different” [hopes it’s different from spring]

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ "I am a little worried. I am not sure my school is prepared" ✓ "I feel ok about it....fear of giving it to my family" ✓ "I am concerned that school will be different than normal" ✓ "I like virtual. I can take breaks" ✓ "Things could get shut down again" ✓ "It might not last that long" ✓ Uncertainty (7) ✓ "I am really worried...." (due to family member's health) ✓ Low immune system ✓ Asthma ✓ "I am kind of worried about my grandma and that I could pass it on" ✓ "I am not superworried. ✓ "Topics covered are not as full." (concern about missing things they should be learning) ✓ In person – "getting everything" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ "I am worried about the uncertainty" ✓ "I hope the schools and teachers are prepared (and more prepared) ✓ Worried about future – ACTs ✓ "I am not nervous" ✓ "It is scary not to know [what's going on]" ✓ "I am mentally prepared to succeed in a new environment" ✓ "I don't know what to expect" ✓ "I am worried about the kids in 'close quarters. ✓ "I am worried about the students who are going back [student is virtual] and how it will work and what it will be" ✓ Student is less worried about safety at school than what kids do outside of school ✓ Concern about exposing a family member ✓ Nervous to see if cases will increase and if more people will get sick. "At the same time I am eager to be back" ✓ I still don't know what's happening ✓ I am concerned for kids where school is their safe space ✓ Concerned about how views will jibe with other students' views and if there will be judgement ✓ Mental health concerns due to lack of sports ✓ I don't know what we are doing yet ✓ Virtual is scary...mentally and socially ✓ Worried about so many in my family [who will be in the schools as parents and siblings] will catch it and bring it back ✓ Really concerned about virtual and mental health ✓ Ramifications and being prepared for college
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RETURNING TO SCHOOL SAFELY DURING COVID-19

STUDENT VIEWS ON SAFETY

In order to develop a better understanding of the nature of specific concerns, we gathered information in two ways. First, we asked students to imagine that when school starts back up in three weeks, they are in charge. We asked them to identify what would be the one thing they would be certain to do to make school the most positive experience possible for students? What would they focus on and why? In a separate question, we asked them to think about the upcoming school year, and what help they thought they and their friends would need most in order to be successful this fall. These questions were asked in an open-ended format with opportunity for follow-up prompts to ensure that the discussion covered the areas of safety; the learning environment; social interactions; emotional/mental health, and physical health.

Table 5. How Would Students Address Safety and What Do They Need to Feel Safe

Middle School	High School
<p>Student input on safety</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Kids and teachers need to be safe and protected ✓ “Be sure that staff and students have a say – we have to have input” ✓ “So far, students have had no say” ✓ “There should be a way to have input” ✓ “I hope that schools will listen to thoughts of teachers [and students]” <p>Masks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Masks are essential, as it may not be easy to keep kids apart and socially distant ✓ Masks, sanitizer, wipes, and sprays ✓ Masks, may be hard to wear all day ✓ Masks – “it’s a no-brainer” ✓ Masks, cleaning, and separation ✓ “Masks should be the number 1 priority” ✓ Not concerned about wearing a mask in school but awkward wearing in public <p>Sanitizing/cleaning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Use safe sanitizers. (May be hard to get safe ones) ✓ Clean the bathrooms <p>Physical distancing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Plexiglass dividers, “but it might be hard to get” ✓ Use Plexiglass to separate the kids from the teacher in order to be face-to-face, but not spread ✓ “Social distancing may be impossible.” [“especially for the younger kids”] ✓ Have fewer people in class ✓ Social distancing 	<p>Student input on safety</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Communicate to students – what is the plan if there is a case, how long would a student need to be out of school? ✓ Enforce policies to make school safe <p>Masks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Masks should be mandatory” ✓ “Masks would provide peace of mind” ✓ Clean masks ✓ Masks for students and teachers ✓ Mandate masks ✓ Students should wear masks to protect other people ✓ Discussion about the need to have enforcement of mask policies – may be hard to do – consider suspension – one student pointed out that the law is a \$200 fine for violating mask use ✓ One student said not everyone may feel the same way about masks: can’t make a “hard policy” and “force everyone to do the same thing” ✓ Some noted that the benefit of the mask is to prevent spreading to other people and to protect others, especially the teachers ✓ Three students said masks should be optional and that they had concerns about the effectiveness of masks: kids touch their face when adjusting the masks; dangers of wearing a mask all day; not as effective as we believe; masks not as helpful if COVID-19 is on your clothes; CO₂ poisoning ✓ No masks – kids will fidget with them; touch their face and it will be counter-productive

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Masks should be a personal choice; being physically active can boost the immune system ✓ Some felt that the masks were essential to not spread it to other people ✓ People are getting together outside of school with no masks. ✓ “Wear a mask” ✓ “Wearing a mask is not really part of the high school experience” <p>Sanitizing/cleaning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Have “take out boxes” for lunches – no “scooping” ✓ Disposable lunch trays ✓ Hand sanitizer <p>Physical distancing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Keep students in a class, like their homeroom, and rotate the teachers (some pointed out this may not be possible since kids take different classes) ✓ Have the teachers walk the hallways, but the kids stay out ✓ Reduce interactions while at school – for example, stagger the need to be in the hallways ✓ Schedule lunch hours so there are less kids in the lunch area ✓ Don’t have all students in the building at the same time ✓ Keep students socially-distanced in the hallways and by their lockers ✓ Get students outside to get fresh air ✓ Be socially distant <p>Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Do a COVID screening before school; take temperature
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THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT DURING COVID-19

THE NATURE OF STUDENT VIEWS ON LEARNING

In order to develop a better understanding of the nature of specific concerns, we gathered information in two ways. First, we asked students to imagine that when school starts up in September, they are in charge. We asked them to identify what would be the one thing they would be certain to do to make school the most positive experience as possible for students? What would they focus on and why? In a separate question, we asked them to think about the upcoming school year, and what help they thought they and their friends would need most in order to be successful this fall. These questions were asked in an open-ended format, but with opportunity for follow-up prompts to ensure that the discussion covered the areas of safety; the learning environment; social interactions; emotional/mental health, and physical health.

Table 6. How Would Students Address Learning and What Do They Need to Be Successful?

Middle School	High School
<p>Choices and Options</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Offer choices and options ✓ Offer options of in school or virtual ✓ Provide some in person learning with a virtual option; “like an every other day with some virtual.” “I like a mix of half online, and half in school” ✓ “Hybrid” option ✓ Several students noted that some students might actually do better with a virtual option. “Some might learn better at home. Some might do better in person.” ✓ “Have a day where you can sign up to come to school.” <p>Projects and Collaboration with Other Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Do some project-based work so we can work with some new people, not just our group of friends” (in personal and virtual) <p>Interact with Teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Option to interact with teachers and be able to get help right away ✓ Zoom calls or Webex calls with other students ✓ Group chats with teachers ✓ “I didn’t learn as much when not in school” ✓ “In person!” – to “learn from the teacher” 	<p>Choices and Options</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Offer a wide range of choices and options ✓ Avoid “back to back” Webex meetings ✓ “Get creative” so “we are not sitting in front of a computer all day” ✓ Offer a choice of in person or virtual ✓ Don’t have classes offered online at the same time every day ✓ Give people options ✓ Go back to school face to face; consider suicide risks and those struggling with isolation <p>Projects and Collaboration with Other Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Need more Google Meet-type options ✓ Learning that more closely resembles “normal school”: not being at a desk and screen all day but learning with students and from a teacher ✓ “Try to make it feel as normal” as possible ✓ Maybe have some smaller group work (3 students) ✓ Try to have a classroom “feel” ✓ Some strong support for a central, common platform for all classes; teachers using too many different things (Webex, Zoom, Google Meets, email, Canvas, itslearning, etc.) ✓ Do some things in groups <p>Interact with Teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Have a “path” for the month so students know what to expect ✓ Give students a plan a week in advance ✓ Have things more “personalized” ✓ No need to have a super early meeting ✓ Try to offer some in person

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

STUDENT VIEWS ON SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

In order to develop a better understanding of the nature of specific concerns, we gathered information in two ways. First, we asked students to imagine that when school starts back up in three weeks, they are in charge. We asked them to identify what would be the one thing they would be certain to do to make school the most positive experience as possible for students? What would they focus on and why? In a separate question, we asked them to think about the upcoming school year, and what help they thought they and their friends would need most in order to be successful this fall. These questions were asked in an open-ended format, but with specific follow-up prompts to ensure that the discussion covered the areas of safety; the learning environment; social interactions; emotional/mental health, and physical health.

Table 7. How Would Students Address Social Interactions in the Context of School?

Middle School	High School
<p>Friends</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Have common group chats between kids. ✓ Every Friday, have a meeting where you can ask questions. “An open forum” ✓ Have the meetings so they don’t take time out of the school day ✓ Want to connect more with friends. ✓ “I don’t see my classmates much. There is less interaction” ✓ “There’s a couple people I haven’t seen since last year” ✓ Help connect with friends. ✓ Have recess outdoors so we can see each other – with social distancing. ✓ Want to “have fun” ✓ “Talk with kids about school” ✓ Create a Discord server or have a platform where kids can hop on and talk; could have a 6th, 7th, 8th grade server <p>Clubs/Band/Sports</p> <p><u>Clubs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Cut out clubs” – sports and band are more popular. ✓ Try to offer clubs and sports <p><u>Band</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ May be hard to have band safely in person because of the spit; consider a virtual band or choir 	<p>Friends</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Kids need to be social and connect ✓ Use Google meets, Zoom, etc., so kids can connect ✓ Provide opportunities for teamwork. ✓ Make the school environment more “fun” – not so many signs about “rules, rules, rules” <p>Clubs/Band/Sports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Find a way to make it work” [sports, clubs, extracurricular] ✓ “Don’t cancel everything all together” ✓ “Try to do something online” <p><u>Clubs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Maybe have clubs meet online ✓ “Find a way to do sports and clubs” ✓ “Fit it in somehow. Kids who participate can assume the risk” <p><u>Band</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Have band and choir online; practice at home ✓ Offer smaller groups in person to sing or play <p><u>Sports</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Try to offer something – at a minimum have practices online ✓ Even just have practices ✓ Sports and activities are “vital” ✓ Do something besides “cancelling outright” ✓ Do what can be done [instead of taking everything off the table] ✓ “Consider cancelling high risk sports” ✓ It is better to prevent the risks

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Do not share equipment like reeds, mouthpieces. Every student should have his or her own equipment and supplies. “The spit in band is not safe” <p><u>Sports</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Offer sports safely and where they “are not packed”; take precautions. High contact sports are not as necessary. “If we are diligent, it might be possible.” ✓ “If it is something you are passionate about...should be able to do it” ✓ Sanitize and wear masks; stay apart ✓ A few felt that sports “were not worth the risk” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Allow kids to play their sport if it makes them happy ✓ There can be certain precautions taken and a certain level of caution exercised ✓ Need fall sports [concern about mental health] ✓ Even give kids access to the weight rooms ✓ Small school – everything is shut down – no practices, no workouts. “It is taking a toll.”
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Table 8. How Would Students Address Emotional/Mental Health in the Context of School?	
Middle School	High School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Kids need guidance counselor support ✓ “Kids need someone they can talk to” ✓ Be able to get help privately ✓ Have people in every school ✓ “Anxiety and stress are piling up” [due to COVID-19] ✓ Concerns about “what’s going to happen and how will it work?” “Will I get to hang out with friends?” ✓ Some kids need to “get out of different at home situations” ✓ One student noted they have a friend who is depressed, as they have “no one they can talk to at home.” “It takes a toll” ✓ Stress and anxiety. ✓ Help connect with friends. ✓ Give flexibility for how to do work (less stressful when there is flexibility) ✓ “I would imagine that there could be some discrimination against someone who has tested positive. I hope that’s not how it is” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ There should be more counseling available ✓ Provide mental health services virtually ✓ Check in on students ✓ “It’s hard to reach out.” ✓ “Alone...” ✓ Maybe do monthly check-ups ✓ Teachers were encouraging and nice ✓ Homeroom teachers would check in with us ✓ Outreach to students ✓ More access to the school psychologist – “need a dedicated mental health officer” ✓ We shouldn’t allow Webex meetings before 8 am ✓ Need sleep; “this is stressful” ✓ Kids need access to counselors – after school, Facetime ✓ Just need someone to talk to ✓ Having sports and extracurriculars would help kids’ mental health

Table 9. How Would Students Address Physical Health in the Context of School?

Middle School	High School
<p>Staying fit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Some kids “didn’t stay active” – required a focus on individual health ✓ No enforcement of expectations to be active. ✓ “Maybe have smaller gym classes” and “make assignments” for smaller groups ✓ Have sports if we can be 6 feet apart. <p>Food</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Students noted that kids do not have access to nutrition at home and “school provides” ✓ “I have a friend who relies [on school] for food.” 	<p>Staying fit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Concerns that kids are not working out like they used to ✓ “It’s hard to get a workout in” ✓ The weekly workouts were not great. “Not everyone can run a mile” Provide a “challenge of the day”-type thing that gives some options based on where a student is at ✓ Kids need to be active every day ✓ Kids are not staying physically active. Not exercising and not eating right. ✓ Kids eat more when they are bored <p>Food</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Students noted that kids do not have access to nutrition at home and “school provides” ✓ “Have sports if we can be 6 feet apart.” ✓ “I have a friend who relies [on school] for food” ✓ “Food [lack of] is an issue ✓ Kids rely on school for food

STUDENT VIEWS ON COMMUNICATION

AWARENESS, INFORMATION, AND COMMUNICATION

We wanted to get a better sense of how much students know about their school's plans for starting classes back up in the fall and what they have heard about their school's plans for reopening in the fall. We asked them to tell us a little bit about where they get their information about what is happening with school reopening and who they most trust to give them accurate information about plans to return to school.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

- A.** Only a handful of middle school participants could speak about their school's reopening plans for fall; about half did not know at all. Parents were the most-trusted source of information about schools' plans. Sources of information:
1. Parents
 - Emails and letters to parents
 - Parents are watching school board meetings
 2. School web site
 3. Friends (or a friend who has a parent who works at a school)
 4. News media
- B.** Students suggested open meetings where kids can hear information on their own, first-hand since "we are the ones who are going to school." "I kind of wish they would inform the kids directly."

HIGH SCHOOL

- Most of the high school students could speak about their school's reopening plans for fall at a general level. Their main sources of information were parents.
 - Parents
 - Friends
 - Board meetings
 - School > parent > kid > other kids – students are "out of the loop"
 - Snapchat – but the information is vague
 - Word of mouth
 - Even parents who work in the schools are not clear about schools' plans
 - Facebook
 - News
- Students have concerns about lack of information and clarity on the plans for fall
 - ✓ "There is no outline of what a plan would "look like."
 - ✓ "I would like some idea of what would happen if school shut down again. A plan."
 - ✓ "The plans are not clear"
 - ✓ "Kids want to know. What will virtual "look" like?"
 - ✓ Strong sentiment that kids do not want to be "stuck" in front of a computer all day or taking the same class and the same time each day
 - ✓ "No clue" what the plan is for fall.
 - ✓ "Zero communication" – with students
 - ✓ "Everything is constantly changing. It is hard to keep up."

- ✓ “Our school has said we will be virtual until it is safe. But there are no criteria to know what they will use to decide what is safe. So I have to keep checking my emails every day.”
- ✓ “What are decisions being based off?”
- ✓ “Send a different version to students of what is being sent to parents.”
- ✓ “No information about plans for band or choir [at the high school level’
- Wide-spread theme about a lack of communication with students:
 - ✓ It is hard not knowing anything (about the plans) and “we are not being told anything”
 - ✓ Schools are “not communicating” with students
 - ✓ “Everything could change”
 - ✓ “They are not telling students when or what happens”
 - ✓ “We are being treated like little kids, like we don’t know anything”
 - ✓ “There has been “no communication” with students”
 - ✓ “There is a lack of communication. They are not treating kids like we are part of the conversation”
 - ✓ No idea what the criteria are for when school would be closed and what the plan is for in person learning
 - ✓ “Communication is lacking”
 - ✓ “No contact with students”
 - ✓ No communication “just to students”
 - ✓ “[I/we] have heard nothing from schools”
 - ✓ “We need better communication”
 - ✓ “Information is not being sent to students”
 - ✓ Students want direct communication to them
- How do students want to get information?
 - Emails to students directly
 - Phone calls
 - The “information can’t just go to parents”
 - Information-sharing meetings

ONE THING STUDENTS WANT SCHOOL LEADERS TO KNOW

FINAL THOUGHTS

At the conclusion of the focus groups, we asked students as a final thought, “If you could tell your school leaders one thing about how you and other students feel about returning to school in the fall, what would you tell them?” A compilation of their responses is below.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

- “Take all necessary precautions to keep students and staff safe.”
- “Take safety precautions so everyone can be safe.”
- “School could be safe. But if school can’t be safe, do it virtual.”
- “Please do virtual because I like taking breaks with my dog.”
- “Keep it virtual. Some kids aren’t prepared for face to face.”
- “Give us the option of in person or virtual.”
- “When it’s safe, do a hybrid. It helps us socialize and it helps our mental health.”
- “Keep a hybrid so we can develop good habits.”
- “If we do it virtually, I want to communicate with people.”
- “Make a decision week-by-week. I want to see friends. Maybe use Google Meets” (same for another student).
- “Ensure that we have a way to communicate with teachers and each other...like with a daily Webex.”
- “It would be good if schools had our feedback to make adjustments.”
- “It would be good [for schools] to talk with us about problems [related to COVID-19] and get our ideas about things you want to fix.”

HIGH SCHOOL

- “There is a need to prioritize safety. Keep up the flexibility [when virtual]. With too much structure [virtually], there will be burnout. Not too much structure.”
- “If it is not safe, we should not be in school.”
- “We need to prioritize health, but also the future. This is our future.”
- “Remember that these are people’s lives at stake. Be wise [with decisions.]”
- “Remember to weigh all of the possibilities when making decisions.”
- “Consider the risks and take safety precautions.”
- “To keep people safe, have a plan.”
- “Focus on safety. Wear masks.”
- “Be decisive. [The Board] is just kicking the can down the road.”
- “Communicate and stop changing things.”
- “Keep school fun and engaging. There is nothing to look forward to”
- “Focus on “engagement”, not “busy work”
- “Make things as normal as possible.”
- “Most of us want to go back to school, sports, clubs, things like that.”
- “This experience made me realize what can be taken away so fast.”
- “Going back and forth from in person to online is stressful.”
- “No matter how kids may shape it, the reality is that kids do like school and they need school.”

- “For some kids, school is their safe place. Some risks are worth taking when we are talking about isolation, lack of community, etc.”
- “We need clubs and sports.” “Some kids [need those things] to be able to get through the day.”
- “No matter what, we need better communication. So I know what it happening. So I can have a better say.”
- “Students should be able to have a say.”
- “Students and parents need to know the plan. It can’t be [so] last minute.”
- “There should be constant communication [with students].”
- “Keep us updated.”

APPENDIX B – TECHNICAL RESOURCES

GROUP AND PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Table 10. Focus Group Size

Student Participants in Each Focus Group	Frequency
Middle School – Grades 6 to 8	
Thursday, August 6 – 3 to 5 pm	8
Friday, August 7 – 9 to 11 am	7
Total	15
High School – Grades 9 to 12	
Thursday, August 6 – 6 to 8 pm	10
Friday, August 7 – 1 to 3 pm	11
Monday, August 10 – 3 to 5 pm	11
Total	32
Grant Total	47

Table 11. Student Participants by School Districts

Student Participants by School District	Frequency
Athens	3
Colby	1
D.C. Everest	19
D.C. Everest Charter School	1
Edgar	2
Mosinee	2
Newman	2
Wausau	16
Wittenberg	1

Table 12. Focus Group Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Frequency
Grade	
7th	4
8th	11
9th	8
10th	5
11th	9
12th	10
Gender	
Male	21
Female	26
Race/ethnicity	
African descent (black)	1
Asian	6
European descent (white)	24
Hispanic/Latino	2
Two or more ethnicities	3
Prefer not to say	1
Free or Reduced Lunch	
Yes	4
No	42
Prefer not to say	1

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT INFORMATION SHEET



MARATHON COUNTY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF RETURNING TO SCHOOL IN FALL 2020

PROJECT GOALS

In the next few weeks, WIPPS Research Partners is conducting a series of five (5) focus groups with Marathon County middle and high school students to gather information on about the topic of returning to school this fall and to obtain a greater understanding of the student perspectives and concerns. For example, we will talk with students about:

- What concerns and questions do students have about returning to school in the fall?
- What kinds of information and support do students say they need?
- What do students want parents, teachers and administrators to know about how they feel about school this fall?

School districts are weighing policies and approaches to returning children to school. In some areas, this may mean virtual learning; in others, it may mean being physically on site at school. Or it may be a blend of both. To date, there has been little information about local students' thoughts and feelings about the broader topic of returning to school. This project will fill this information gap. Through small group discussions, the focus groups will gather a more in-depth understanding of students' perspectives. By compiling and sharing this information with school boards, administrators, teachers, and the public-at-large, the "voices" of students can help inform larger policy discussions and decisions.

HOW WILL THE FOCUS GROUPS BE CONDUCTED AND HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE USED?

- A total of five (5) focus groups will be conducted consisting of 8 to 10 students each. Middle school and high school students from across Marathon County can participate with parent consent. Each focus group will last two (2) hours. A trained focus group facilitator from WIPPS Research Partners will host discussions on:
 - Thursday, August 6 – 3 to 5 pm (students in grades 6 and 8)
 - Thursday, August 6 – 6 to 8 pm (students in grades 9 to 12)
 - Friday, August 7 – 9 to 11 am (students in grades 6 and 8)
 - Friday, August 7 – 1 to 3 pm (students in grades 9 to 12)
 - Monday, August 10 – 3 to 5 pm (students in grades 9 to 12)
- Students will receive a \$10 gift card in appreciation for their participation.
- Students participate virtually using Webex. The sessions will be recorded and transcribed only for research purposes; the recordings and transcripts will not be shared with anyone outside of the research staff.
- After the focus groups are completed, research staff will analyze the information and identify common themes and insights. Findings will be compiled in a summary report and shared publically. Students will NOT be personally identified in the report. Any quotes or comments included in the report will NOT be attributed to students by name or school. Student names or other identifiable information will NOT used in the report.

INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING OR KNOW A STUDENT WHO MIGHT BE INTERESTED? OR HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you are a student interested in participating or know of a student(s) who might be interested, please contact Sharon Belton, Ph.D., Director of WIPPS Research Partners, at sbelton@uwsa.edu or at 715-302-8483. WIPPS Research Partners is a unit of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service located at the UW Stevens Point at Wausau campus. See: www.wipps.org/research-partners

FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

RETURN TO SCHOOL FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT

I. Introduction, Purpose, Ground Rules

A. *Who is on the Call*

- Eric Giordano— moderator
- Sharon Belton – host/observer
- Luke Rudolph – technology support
- Mikeala DeCoster – observer (medical student)

B. *Purpose*

School districts are weighing policies and approaches to school starting back up in the fall. For some of you, this may mean virtual learning; for others, it may mean being physically on site at school. Or it may be a blend of both. To date, there has been little information about local students' thoughts and feelings about the broader topic of returning to school and classes starting back up. This project helps to fill this information gap. Through these focus groups we will gather a more in-depth understanding of your thoughts and perspectives about returning to school so that the “voices” of students can help inform the larger discussions and decisions that are taking place. In the next few weeks, we will use these focus groups to talk with students, and then create a report and share our findings with school leaders.

C. *Logistics*

The session will be recorded and transcribed only for research purposes; the recordings and transcripts will not be shared with anyone outside of those of us on the meeting. After the focus groups are completed, we will analyze the information and identify common themes and insights. Findings will be compiled in a summary report and shared publicly. You will also get a copy of the report. Students will NOT be personally identified in the report. Any quotes or comments included in the report will NOT be attributed to students by name or school. Your names or other identifiable information will be kept confidential will NOT used in the report. If there is something you want to share privately, you can send it to Eric or Sharon using the chat function. Does anyone have any questions?

D. *Technology Guidelines*

- How to use the private chat function.
- How to set the video function so you can see everyone.
- How to mute and unmute.

E. *Discussion Guidelines*

- Be present.
- Avoid side conversations [via chat].
- 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.]
- 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 Eric or Sharon.]
- Please respect the opinions of others even if you don't agree.
- Respect privacy. [You are welcome to discuss with others what you heard and shared today, but do not to reveal *who* said it]

II. Focus Group Questions

A. Thinking Back

1. Let's talk briefly about your experience doing school from home this past spring. Was there anything that you liked about it?
 - a. Did your teachers do something that you thought was positive or helpful to your personal learning? What was it?
 - b. Were you able to interact with other students as part of your learning from home experience? Tell us about it.
 - c. Is there anything else that was positive about your learning experience from home?
2. Still thinking about your school at home experience this past spring. What are one or two things you struggled with? What did *not* go well? Tell us what happened.

B. Thinking Ahead

3. Now I want you to think about the upcoming school year. What is the *one thing* you are most looking forward to? [Round robin] Is there anything else you are looking forward to?
4. Now I would like you to imagine that when school starts back up in three weeks, you are in charge. What would be the *one thing* you would be certain to do to make school the most positive experience possible for students? What would you do and why? [open ended; potential prompts below]
 - a. [Safety]: As the person in charge, what is *one thing* you would do to keep students and teachers safe?
 - b. [Learning] As the person in charge, what is *one thing* you would do to help students learn in the COVID environment?
 - c. [Socialization] As the person in charge, what is one thing you would make sure the school does to help students connect to other students in the COVID environment?
 - d. [Emotional support]: As the person in charge, what would you do to make sure students had the emotional support they needed while attending school in the COVID environment?
 - e. [Physical Health]: As the person in charge, what is the *one thing* you would do to make sure students were doing well in terms of being physically healthy?

C. Awareness, Information, and Communication

5. Are you clear about your school's plans for starting classes back up in the fall? What have you heard about your school's plans for reopening in the fall?
6. Tell us a little bit about where you get you information about what is happening with school reopening.
7. Who do you most trust to give you accurate information about plans to return to school?

D. Safety and Other Concerns

8. Thinking about your return to school this fall—whether it is virtual, face-to face, or hybrid—on a scale of 1-10, (with 1 being not worried and 10 being extremely worried), how do you feel about school starting back up again in a few weeks?
9. What worries you the most and why?
10. Thinking about the upcoming school year, what help do you think you and your friends need most in order to do the best you can in school? Is there anything teachers or school leaders can do to help you succeed as you return to school?

E. Final Thought

11. As a final thought, if you could tell your school leaders one thing about how you and other students feel about returning to school in the fall—whether in a virtual or in person environment—what would you tell them?