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

MIDDLE SCHOOL REPORT

Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service

April Bleske-Rechek, Ph.D.
Sharon Belton, Ph.D.
Eric Giordano, Ph.D.
Julie Bunczak
Olivia Rasmussen

Medical College of Wisconsin – Central Wisconsin

Corina Norrbom, M.D.
Amy Prunuske, Ph.D.
Sofie Kjellesvig

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

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

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

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

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

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

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

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

Sharon Belton, Ph.D.
April Bleske-Rechek, Ph.D.
Eric Giordano, Ph.D.
Julie Bunczak
Olivia Rasmussen
Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners
University of Wisconsin System

AND

Corina Norrbom, M.D.
Amy Prunuske, Ph.D.
Sofie Kjellesvig
Medical College of Wisconsin – Central Wisconsin

April 19, 2021

Information about the Voices of Wisconsin Students Project

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

Sharon E. Belton, Ph.D.
Director, WIPPS Research Partners
Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service
University of Wisconsin System
UW Center for Civic Engagement
625 Stewart Avenue
Wausau, WI 54401
sbelton@uwsa.edu
www.wipps.org
www.wipps.org/research-partners/

Notes on Focus Group Data and Terminology

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

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

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

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report shares findings from *The Voices of Wisconsin Students Project: Learning, Coping, and Building Resilience During COVID-19*. The goal of this project was to better understand how Wisconsin middle school students are coping with school, learning, and life in general during COVID-19 and to understand in more detail the nature of students' sources of stress and anxiety and their thoughts on what support they need. Equally important was to identify, strengthen, and reinforce examples of students' success and resiliency.[1]

To gather this feedback, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners[2] (a unit of the University of Wisconsin System) and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) conducted 10 virtual focus groups in January and February 2021 using Zoom with a total of 64 Wisconsin middle school students. The students come from 24 different Wisconsin counties; live in 38 different rural, urban, and suburban communities; and attend 40 different middle schools. By compiling and sharing this information, the "voices" of Wisconsin students can help policymakers and stakeholders make more informed and targeted decisions about how to support students during these challenging times. This information can also help inform local communities about the need for additional resources to address students' situations. Below we share a summary of the key findings. We urge readers to refer to the full report which provides examples and illustrates—in their own words—feedback and input from the student participants themselves.

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

Challenges of Virtual School and Learning

1 Many focus group participants—including students in fully virtual models, students in blended or hybrid models, and students who engaged in virtual learning on a periodic basis (for example, during isolation or quarantine)—described virtual learning as challenging and stressful.[3] Virtual learning involved less direct teacher contact, less explicit instruction, and fewer opportunities to talk to

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

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

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

teachers and ask questions. Some students perceived virtual learning as socially isolating, and they felt that student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions in the virtual environment were suboptimal. Many focus group participants said they struggled to pay attention, motivate themselves, and manage their time when learning virtually, noting that it was easier to pay attention to their teachers when they were there in front of them. For some students, the virtual learning environment was full of distractions as well as alternate responsibilities (such as sibling care). Despite the challenges, some students appreciated the increased independence, flexibility, and ability to learn at their own pace. In addition, several students reported developing skills that would help them be better students in the future, including being more of a self-advocate in reaching out to teachers, structuring their day more efficiently, and adapting to different learning environments. Others seemed to have realized the relevance and impact of their personal dispositions, such as sociability or proneness to procrastinate, on their learning.

Connectedness and Belonging

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

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

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

Stress, Anxiety and Depression

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

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

Getting Help: Mental Health and Wellness

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

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

Coping and Resilience

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

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

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

Organization of the Report

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

OVERVIEW

Background: The Need for Student Voices

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Through facilitated, small group discussions, we gathered a more in-depth understanding of students' perspectives on school and learning during COVID-19, as well as their social, emotional, and mental health needs. We explicitly sought feedback on the kinds of support students' said they needed. We also talked with students about positive coping strategies they were using with the intent of highlighting examples of building resilience. By compiling and sharing this information, the "voices" of Wisconsin students can help policymakers and stakeholders make more informed and better targeted decisions about how to support students during these challenging times. This information can also help inform the broader community about additional resources needed to address students' needs.

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

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

Focus Group Methods

In January and February 2021, WIPPS Research Partners and MCW conducted 10 virtual focus groups using Zoom with a total of 64 Wisconsin middle school students. The students were from 24 different Wisconsin counties and 38 different rural, urban, and suburban communities. The students attend 40 different middle schools (including public, private, parochial, and homeschool environments). Figure 1 below illustrates the geographic mix of students based on their school location.

Figure 1. Geographic Location of Schools Attended by Participating Students

At the time of the focus groups, 36 percent of the 64 middle school students reported attending school virtually; 25 percent in-person; and 39 percent in a blended/hybrid model.[9] It was clear that many students

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

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

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

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

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

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

Project Funding

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

KEY FINDINGS: WISCONSIN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

1 *Many students reported that the virtual learning environment was challenging for learning, connecting with other students, staying motivated, and managing their time.*

Many students perceived issues with technology and instruction in the virtual learning environment as disruptive and stressful. Virtual learning involved less direct teacher contact, less explicit instruction, and fewer opportunities to talk to teachers and ask questions. When learning virtually, students could not physically go back to the classroom to ask their teachers for help. Their computer would not work at inopportune times, such as during a virtual office hour, or their computer would glitch right when a teacher was giving a specific instruction. Students mentioned a wide variety of other frustrations, such as vague instructions or having to check multiple sites to access learning materials and deadlines, with the essence being that many focus group participants perceived online learning as more challenging than in-person learning.

Some focus group participants perceived virtual learning as socially isolating, and they felt that student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions in the virtual environment were suboptimal. These sentiments came from hybrid learners as well as 100 percent virtual learners, and they were primarily tied to discussions of other students turning off (their cameras) and "tuning out." Students felt it was more difficult getting to know other students in a virtual environment. Break-out rooms were awkward, for example, and class sessions with limited chat functions did not facilitate connecting. Students also felt that some of their teachers paid little or no attention to the students who were connected to the classroom virtually.

Many focus group participants said they struggled to pay attention, motivate themselves, and manage their time when learning virtually, noting that it was easier to pay attention to their teachers when they were there in front of them. Students reported that when they were participating virtually (learning at home), they were easily distracted by any number of elements: noise in the background, technology games, TikTok, SnapChat, and family members, among others. Students often mentioned having an irregular sleep schedule; they slept in on their virtual days compared to their in-person days, which they liked, but because they had more autonomy and choice on their virtual days, they found themselves doing schoolwork late at night, making the early in-person mornings difficult and rushed. Students also reported experiencing headaches and difficulty sleeping, which they attributed to excessive screen time.

Despite the challenges, some students appreciated the increased independence, flexibility, and ability to learn at their own pace. In addition, several students said they had developed skills that would help them be better students in the future, including being more of a self-advocate in reaching out to teachers, structuring their day more efficiently, and adapting to different learning environments. Others seemed to have realized that their personal dispositions, such as being highly sociable or prone to procrastinate, were important factors to consider for optimizing their learning.

2 *Many focus group participants reported that being physically <u>with</u> other students, friends, and teachers, ad seeing them face to face, was important to their sense of connectedness and belonging. They missed being with other people, and they felt that connecting in a virtual environment requires extra effort.*

Many focus group participants mentioned that they were happy to be in school, no matter how many days per week it was. They appreciated being with teachers to learn directly from them and ask them questions in person, and they felt that teachers devoted more time to checking in on them with the smaller classrooms. They also appreciated being at school to see and talk to their friends in person. Focus group participants frequently noted that their sense of belonging and connectedness with teachers and other students was stronger when they were in school compared to virtual. Just seeing their teachers' and friends' faces, and being able to share a space with them, gave them a sense of belonging they did not have in the virtual environment. Some students also felt they were developing new and more trusting friendships in their smaller classes. For some focus group participants, physically being with other people, through sports, games, and clubs, was helpful for a sense of connection to other students.

Some focus group participants said they rarely saw their friends in person, and some felt their interactions with friends were stilted in the virtual environment. Even those who did get to see their friends had social distancing regulations to contend with. Many students reported that connecting with their friends was more difficult than before, for various reasons: canceled clubs and sports, being on a different schedule, rules against mixing cohorts in hallways, and assigned seating. Students missed being with their friends, and many of them engaged in extra efforts to connect with their friends in other ways: through FaceTime at lunch, on breaks, and after school to do homework together; group chats; the local Boys and Girls Club; and hanging out with them on online days.

Students reported limited opportunities to develop new friendships, and they recognized that connecting with other students takes extra effort in the virtual and hybrid contexts. Some students explicitly recognized that they had to make an extra effort to engage -- by unmuting themselves, turning on their camera, making an extra effort to talk to other students in breakout rooms, and willingly talk in class to students with whom they were not already friends.

Focus group participants who were 100 percent virtual learners often felt disconnected from other students. Some virtual learners had established connections with their teachers via regular check-ins, but they did not connect with other students. They said they "just kind of did their class" and then logged off. Some reported no effort from school personnel to connect virtual learners with each other. Virtual students did not generally feel like they were in a "school," and they had little to say about belonging.

3 *Focus group participants who responded positively about belonging tended to have established friendships and tended to mention sports and clubs as routes for them to try new things, make new friends, and find a place to belong; students for whom belonging was tenuous expressed ambivalence about their friendships.*

Although some students expressed ambivalence about belonging, students who were positive about their sense of belonging and acceptance at school tended to know the students in their class and felt they had friends at school. Some students were uncertain about the status of some of their friendships because of not seeing them for so long due to the pandemic, and they tended to report ambivalence about belonging. Other

students responded positively about their sense of belonging, saying, "Yeah, I have friends." Some students reported a heightened sense of belonging from developing close ties with the small group of students they were in class with every day.

Clubs and activities helped students gain a sense of connectedness and belonging. Many students' schools had continued some or all extracurricular activities, such as book clubs, school musicals, sports, and student council, and focus group participants mentioned connecting and bonding with other students and their friends through these group activities. Other students mentioned joining a new activity this year, such as band, or joining a new club that *was* available (when other clubs were not) and connecting with students through those activities. Students frequently mentioned extracurricular activities as a way to help them get to know people and find people they could trust and communicate with on a regular basis. Students also highlighted being a part of student officers or student council. They recognized that in groups like student council, they found people who shared their interests and they felt proud of working with other students to help make their schools better. These students felt a positive sense of belonging at their school.

4 *Students believe that teachers play an important role in their feelings of connectedness and belonging. Students appreciated teachers' efforts and school-wide initiatives that support their learning, well-being, and sense of belonging.*

Many focus group participants said they had a good connection with at least some of their teachers. These students reported that their teachers engaged in a variety of behaviors that showed they cared about the students and their learning. Some students expressed genuine appreciation for the efforts their teachers made to support them. They mentioned teachers who managed to keep both in-person and virtual students engaged at the same time, communicated regularly and quickly via email, held personal video chats, offered individualized help, held weekly check-in sessions or open sessions in Zoom, asked students about their day, played music before class, polled the class to engage them in casual conversation, or regularly set aside time for class-wide conversation. That said, some students also felt they had teachers who were unapproachable and "all business." Students expressed frustration that teachers disabled the chat function or had strict rules about what students could and could not chat about. Some students said they had teachers who took multiple days to respond to emails.

Students appreciated their school-wide "catch-up" day. Students who had school in person four days per week, with a Wednesday or Friday virtual day, often referred to it as a "flex" day or "catch-up" day. They appreciated having the day to ask questions, get work done at their own pace, and to engage in non-school activities.

Students mentioned a wide variety of other initiatives in their schools or classrooms that they perceived as supporting students and creating opportunities for interaction. Many students had something positive to say when asked what efforts their school was making to help them this year. Examples include weekly end-of-day classroom activities (such as yoga); Kahoot! game sessions to bring virtual and in-person learners together; the school counselors visiting classrooms regularly and inviting students to attend small-group sessions on coping with anxiety; a school-wide program on kindness; and posters and classroom sessions devoted to suicide awareness.

5 *Some focus group participants reported an increase in their level of stress, anxiety, or depression, and these increases were tied to challenges of virtual learning, time management, social isolation, and the uncertainties of COVID-19.*

Many students reported struggling to stay motivated and felt more anxiety this year, which they attributed to various sources, including the unknown future of COVID-19, stress about homework and missing assignments, day after day of virtual meetings, and lack of social interaction. Some focus group participants reported feeling anxious due to the uncertainties surrounding COVID. Some students were stressed about the amount of homework they had or about getting help with it when they needed it. Others said they were assigned a lot of work in each class on their virtual days, and although it was not difficult work, it was time consuming. Others felt a lack of motivation given day after day of virtual learning and limited interactions with friends.

Focus group participants had family members, friends, and fellow students who were depressed. Some said they themselves were struggling, or had struggled, with depression. They tended to attribute these mental health concerns to struggling at school or COVID-induced isolation. Students with established friend groups and activities tended to report low levels of stress, whereas students who felt excluded or isolated, or who had too much time alone "in their head," said their mental health was suffering. Some students reported they had gone from being a virtual learner to an in-person learner in order to address their feelings of social isolation. Social interaction, particularly with friends, was key to students' perceptions of their mental health.

Students associated good time management and staying on top of their schoolwork with lower levels of stress and anxiety. Many focus group participants said they did not manage their time well under the hybrid model, and their time management issues caused them anxiety. Some students admitted they let schoolwork pile up, created stress for themselves by turning work in late, or procrastinated until the very last minute. Additionally, a few students felt that the hybrid learning model caused increased stress and anxiety. On at-school days, they felt they had to focus intensely so they could understand material well enough to do their virtual assignments. Then, on virtual days, they worried about having all their assignments done and submitted in Google Classroom; some worried so much they had a hard time calming down enough to go to sleep and wake up on time for school the next day. Those who had had to move back and forth between virtual and in person learning models (due to a quarantine period) found the transitions difficult and stressful.

6 *Many focus group participants did not have firsthand exposure to drug or alcohol use, including vaping, but they often speculated that use had increased among their peers. Students expressed the belief that drugs and alcohol were used as an escape from anxiety and depression and had probably increased among adults during the pandemic.*

Only a few students mentioned friends (or past friends) who had started vaping or using marijuana; instead, it was common for students to say they did not know anyone who was using but that use had probably increased. Many focus group participants said they thought there probably was a significant increase in the use of vaping and, to some degree, alcohol and drugs like marijuana, among their peers during COVID-19. The most frequent reason students identified was that alcohol and drugs (and smoking and vaping) are ways of coping with or escaping from stress, and students had more stress to deal with now. Some focus group participants thought that there might be *less* drug and alcohol use during COVID because there were

fewer social gatherings at which such behaviors were likely to occur. Students mentioned being shocked by seeing kids vape on camera during virtual learning or seeing other students' family members in the background using drugs or smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol. Relatedly, some suggested that drug and alcohol use might be on the rise for adults because of the stressors and because of feeling down and out from COVID.[11]

7 ***Many students reported going first to a parent (often their mother) or other family member, trusted adult, or personal therapist when they needed help, and many but not all students felt they would be comfortable reaching out to one or more of their teachers or a school counselor if they needed help.***

Family members were a front-line resource for students, and by far the most frequently mentioned family member was "my mom." Students also mentioned their friends' moms, a stepparent, a sibling, and extended family members such as a cousin, aunt, or grandparent.

Many focus group participants mentioned specific teachers or adults they would turn to for either homework help or dealing with mental health concerns. Many students mentioned turning to teachers for help with school, friend problems, or stress in general, as well as for enjoyable conversation. Some students felt they could talk to just about any of their teachers; however, a few students felt they could not talk to any of their teachers, which seemed to coincide with feeling like they did not really know their teachers. Some focus group participants also had positive relationships with adults outside of school, through their community and religious organizations.

On one hand, many students knew and had visited their school counselor, and several students mentioned seeing a therapist or psychologist (outside of school) on a regular basis. On the other hand, some students knew there was a school counselor but did not feel comfortable going to them or did not know how to find them. Students seemed generally unaware of formal mental health resources, beyond the school counselor, that may be available at their school. Many students shook their heads "no" when explicitly asked if they knew of resources, at school, besides their school counselor.

8 ***Focus group participants identified <u>fear</u> as a prominent barrier to accessing mental health resources: fear of breached trust and confidentiality; fear of being judged as weak or stupid; fear of being made fun of; and fear of having their feelings minimized or invalidated. Although students did not use the word "stigma," their responses suggested they perceived a stigma around mental health issues.***

Focus group participants suggested that some kids might not have someone they trust and feel comfortable enough with to confide in; others raised a variety of fears that students may have about seeking help. Students mentioned concern about friends, teachers, or parents finding out about their struggles, alongside fear of being laughed at, feeling embarrassed, being made fun of by their peers, or being

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

judged as stupid or weak. Focus group participants suggested that students might be afraid that others would minimize their problems or find out that their problems are more severe than they want to admit. Others mentioned that students might be afraid that seeking help could make a situation worse.

9 ***Despite their challenges, many students also reported silver linings of their current learning situation, such as more time with family and more time for non-school activities and new interests and hobbies.***

Many focus group participants noted that this year, perhaps because their school had canceled various extracurricular activities, they had more time for family and for non-school activities. They mentioned spending more time with their family, getting a new puppy in the house, playing video games, or engaging in a hobby or taking up new hobbies. A few students mentioned using their free time to start working out. Students noted they had developed new hobbies or had more time to keep up with their hobbies. For example, students talked about how in the fall, they spent time biking with their siblings and playing outside, and others mentioned activities like going out on family walks or taking up skiing. By being able to complete their work more quickly during the day, students could get their homework done and go practice their sport or engage in a favorite hobby, like drawing.

10 ***Many focus group participants reported developing their own coping strategies. Some felt they had developed new skills in response to having more personal responsibility this year.***

Many students handled stress and anxiety by engaging with their friends, and others relied on alone time and a variety of personal coping strategies. Focus group participants commonly mentioned reaching out to their friends to talk or get help with homework. They reported that their friends got them engaged in activities, like sports, which helped them feel better. Being with friends, either talking or hanging out or playing video games together, was a distraction from stress. In addition to engaging with friends, students mentioned a variety of personal coping strategies: (1) think about positive events in the future and present; (2) take time to just "be alone" and listen to music, read a book, or sit with their feelings; (3) work on goals or goal-setting; (4) get things done, because when the source of their stress, such as an assignment, was done, the stress went down; (5) engage in sports or physical activities.

Some students liked having more personal responsibility and more choice, **and some students expressed pride in skills they had developed to handle that responsibility and freedom to choose.** It was common for students to express positivity about working at their own pace rather than waiting for others or completing work when they did not want to. A few students mentioned they had learned to be more organized and scheduled. Other students mentioned that they had learned how to "figure stuff out" for themselves a bit more if they did not understand something, and they had learned to send emails to their teachers when they needed help. These students seemed proud of their growth and self-improvement.

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

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

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS BY QUESTION

Taking a Current Snapshot: How Are Things Going?

Q1a. – Positives

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

Response themes

A. **Many focus group participants mentioned that they were happy to be in school, no matter how many days per week it was. They appreciated being with teachers to learn directly from them and ask them questions in person, and they appreciated being able to see and talk to their friends in person. Some students also felt they were developing new and more trusting friendships in smaller classes.** Students expressed positivity about being in school. They liked being in school, close to their teacher, talking to their friends and seeing everyone's faces. They felt that they and their peers had gotten used to sitting apart and wearing masks: What used to be uncomfortable is now normal. Several mentioned that they felt that at school, the teacher kept their attention, whereas at home they were easily distracted, and if they were confused about something on their at-home days, they could ask their teacher about it on their in-school days. Several students also mentioned liking that they had smaller classes, which occurred because of either a hybrid model or various students being 100 percent virtual. These students felt that they received more individualized help from teachers than they had before, and they felt that teachers noticed their potential. Some students also felt that, because they spent several hours each day with the same small group of students, they were getting close to them and developing new and trusting friendships with them.

B. **A variety of students felt they had good communication with their teachers. They mentioned teachers who managed to keep both in-person and virtual students engaged at the same time, teachers who communicated regularly and quickly via email, video chats with teachers, more individualized help from teachers, and regular zoom meetings.** Several focus group participants were very appreciative of teachers who set up weekly multiple-hour sessions (open office hours), offered "efficiency" half-hour slots, or held daily help sessions in the morning before school. Some students had Zoom meetings every day, which was useful when their cohort had had to temporarily move from a hybrid model to full virtual. Some students felt that communication was better this year than in years past; they felt that with daily email and video chats, they could get questions answered quickly and easily.

C. **Students often mentioned they had good grades or that, after an initial adjustment period, they had grades that were improving.** Several students mentioned that they were doing well in school. Some students also mentioned having a rocky start to the year, particularly if they were a full-time virtual learner or had a two-week move to the virtual context, but that they had figured things out and were improving. Some reported they had more homework but appreciated the flexibility in deciding when exactly to get it done.

D. **Many focus group participants noted that this year, perhaps because their school had canceled various extracurricular activities, they had more time for family and for non-school activities. They mentioned spending more time with their family, getting a new puppy in the house, playing video games, or engaging in a hobby or taking up new hobbies. A few students mentioned using their free time to start working out.** Students noted they had developed new hobbies or had more time to keep up with their hobbies. For example, students talked about how in the fall, they spent time biking with their siblings and playing outside, and others mentioned activities like going out on family walks or taking up skiing. By being able to complete their work more quickly during the day, students could get their homework done and go practice their sport or engage in a favorite hobby, like drawing.

E. **Students whose schools had continued some or all extracurricular activities, such as book clubs, school musicals, sports, and student council, were very happy to have them. Students who engaged in sports outside of school mentioned those activities as key motivators, as they could practice their sport when they finished their schoolwork, and getting their work done quickly left them more time than in the past to devote to their sport.** In many schools, some or all sports and extracurricular activities had been canceled, but in some schools the activities continued, and students appreciated any activities they could continue to be in or newly join. One student expressed appreciation for a book club that integrated both in-person and online students, and others noted activities they participated in outside of school (e.g., dance, horseback riding). Students noted that with some of their days being online, they had more time for sports. Several students mentioned that they could finish a day's work within a few hours and have the rest of the day for other things, including practicing their sport.

F. **Several focus group participants reported staying physically active through their school's PE course, and they seemed to appreciate it.** Several students mentioned that they were engaging in regular physical activity. When asked to clarify their activities and how they were held accountable, students were quick to describe the processes put in place by their teachers to encourage regular physical activity. They reported that teachers gave them a variety of workout ideas so they had plenty of options to choose from, and that they used a HomeCourt app to show documentation of their physical activity.

G. **Students who had school in person four days per week, with a Wednesday or Friday virtual day, often referred to it as a "flex" day or "catch-up" day. They appreciated having the day to ask questions, get work done at their own pace, and to engage in non-school activities.** The "catch-up" day was frequently mentioned by students as a day they could use to be sure they were caught up on assignments or, if teachers offered special sessions, to connect with and ask questions of teachers. Others appreciated the day to get work done on their own timeline or just go off and do something fun.

H. **Some students felt that it was easier for them to focus on their schoolwork when they were at home. Some students said it helped to have designated areas of their house where they did schoolwork. They mentioned that there was less "drama" at home compared to in-person school.** Several students felt very comfortable focusing on their schoolwork from home. Some students appreciated setting their own timelines and felt they could get their work done more quickly than they would if they were in school. For example, one student mentioned working alongside their parent in the home office and focusing well in that environment. Others mentioned that social

interactions and friend drama at school could be distracting, and that there was less of that drama at home.

I. **Some students felt they were getting more sleep or felt less rushed on those mornings when they did not go to school in person.** Many students mentioned getting more sleep or being able to catch up on sleep on their school-at-home days. Others noted that a lot of their class meetings on Zoom started later than normal school would, and they didn't have to undergo morning get-ready-for-school rituals, which allowed them to sleep in a bit.

J. **Students who had virtual days or who were all virtual frequently mentioned that they were gaining a sense of personal responsibility, and they enjoyed having freedom to make their own choices about when and how quickly to complete schoolwork.** Some students liked having more personal responsibility and more choices. It was common for students to express positivity about working at their own pace rather than being forced to complete work when they did not want to. Students who had learned to be more organized recognized it. As one student noted, "I'm being more organized. I have a calendar that I can see when all of my projects are due." Some students mentioned that they had learned how to "figure stuff out" for themselves a bit more if they did not understand something, and they had learned to send emails to their teachers when they needed help.

Relevant Quotes

It's good because I have a lot more time to spend with my family. My mom, she's working from home as well, so sometimes like I'll go into her office and do class with her, and it's better because now she can see what they're teaching us in school.

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

I'm doing all school now. I get to go four days...when I was virtual, I couldn't really pay attention a lot, because there's a lot of distractions in our house, especially since...so it's more distracting. And when I'm at school, of course, friends do distract me, but the teacher gets my attention most of the time, because she's talking, and I pay attention to her, or him or her.

So I go two days in person and two days virtual. So it really helps, because you get to ask your teacher for help, and you get to meet new friends and new people, and you're able to do hands-on activities sometimes.

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

Well, since I'm virtual, you still get to engage with the class, and you still get to kind of feel, like the teachers make you still feel like you're in the classroom.

I guess there's not a lot of positive things that's come out of it, but I guess one of them that I can think of is when we're at home, we can kind of, we get a lot more time to focus on things out of school.

I'm all virtual. I find it really easy to learn virtually. I know some others don't, but I find it easy.

I think what's gone good is the things aren't going especially bad, so…I was a fulltime e-learner, and things just were kind of road bump, pothole. And things have kind of smoothed out now, and I'm kind of falling more into line with this whole new learning style.

I just don't do very good virtually. Like in school is a lot better for me, because like I like being there with the people, because I learn better with the people right there in front of me.

I feel like it's my job to make sure that I do all of my assignments, because a lot of our teachers just come, give us an assignment, and leave. And so it's like my responsibility to make sure I get all of my assignments in.

I feel like I'm getting more sleep than I usually would, and I also feel like every, two nights a week we take a family walk together, me and my family.

Something that I feel is a positive to this whole pandemic thing and not being able to be present in school is my virtual days are pretty flexible. I don't, we don't do a whole lot of scheduled Zoom meetings and stuff like that. It's all kind of like whenever we decide to do it, as long as it gets done.

Well, I can, basically, work at my own pace on the virtual days that I have no school. So instead of it taking seven hours to get all my work done listening to teachers and waiting for other students to get done, I can just work on my work whenever I want to throughout the day.

But now with emailing and every day having to participate in video chats, it's become very easy, to the point, where within minutes, you can get an answer, no matter what, because they're always online. So I think communication has improved.

Right now, I've found with the hybrid model, I'm being more organized. I have a calendar that I can see when all of my projects are due so that I'm not falling behind like some of my friends are with the hybrid model.

Some of the flexibility is going good. Some of my teachers, in the morning before school starts, put in their stream that you can just go to the Meet link, and then they'll help you if you have, if you want help with an assignment.

I'm usually done with homework by like 3:30 or 4:00. And I get done at, from class at like 2:00. And so I have, I do a lot of homework each day. And then some days, like Fridays, if I finish all my homework, then I have the entire afternoon.

Q1b. – Challenges

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

Response themes

A. **Students experienced a variety of interrelated complications with technology -- Internet connectivity, virtual meeting platforms, and their Chromebooks -- all of which they perceived as both annoying and disruptive of their learning. Students also linked their extensive screen time to headaches and sleep disruptions.** One student mentioned being on their second malfunctioning Chromebook; others mentioned that internet on Chromebooks is limited to one Zoom meeting and two open tabs; that sometimes assignments would not load; that they frequently got kicked out of Google Meets; or that their computer crashed or did not start up properly. Some students mentioned that sometimes it was hard to find a Zoom link for class; others noted their teachers were not tech savvy, and they struggled to get into the Zoom calls, assign work virtually, and grade it virtually. One student mentioned that their teachers post to many different platforms, so they often worried they missed something. Students also mentioned getting headaches and sleep disruptions from extended screen time.

B. **Many focus group participants perceived online learning as more challenging than in-person learning, with online days and virtual learning involving less direct teacher contact, less explicit instruction, and fewer opportunities to talk to teachers and ask questions.** Some hybrid learners noted that on their online days, teachers would give out the assignment and then leave them to work alone. Others, whose teachers were teaching synchronously to students both in the classroom and at home, said it was difficult for teachers to attend to both students in their classroom and students who are attending via Zoom or Meet, with the latter group being relatively ignored. Students mentioned that some teachers used breakout rooms to encourage student interaction, but then were unable to make it around to more than a few of the breakout rooms, leaving many students' questions unanswered. Students who were 100 percent virtual noted they often felt like they were teaching themselves. Virtual learners reported that they received their assignments and "that's it"; some mentioned having little to no interaction with other students or teachers. When asked about why they felt their grades had slipped this year, one student said the teachers are "just handing us work, and they're like, here you go, do some two-step inequalities with fractions and negatives." Additionally, students mentioned that on online days, email was the primary method for communicating with teachers, and in this regard, a common concern was their inability to access their teachers in a timely way to get help. Students felt frustrated that sometimes they needed help when their teacher was in the middle of class, and hence they felt stuck and unable to move on until their question got answered. Other students noted that it was sometimes hard to understand the explanations that teachers gave over email, reinforcing their desire for verbal, face-to-face interactions.

C. **Many focus group participants said they struggled to pay attention, motivate themselves, and manage their time when learning at home. Notably, some students were required to engage in tasks for their family that detracted from their ability to do school while at home.** Several students mentioned that they had an easier time paying attention at school. They felt that at home, they were easily distracted by any number of elements: noise in the background, technology games, TikTok, SnapChat, and family members, among others. When they had homework to do, but their phone was

beckoning, they succumbed to their phone. Students also mentioned that if they had only a little bit of work to do on any given day, they would procrastinate and then stay up late to get it done at the last minute. Likewise, students mentioned finishing their work for one Zoom class early, which gave them downtime, but then they would get distracted and consequently forget to attend a Zoom class the next hour. Other students noted they needed to force themselves to follow a schedule and start writing down what they needed to do each day. They mentioned they would forget to do a project or assignment or would fail to bring home a packet distributed at school that needed to be completed at home. Notably, one (high-achieving) student felt that she, and some other students she knew, had home responsibilities that put her at an unfair disadvantage (this student, in particular, was responsible for babysitting her younger siblings on virtual days).

D. **Some students perceived virtual learning as socially isolating, and they felt that student-to-student interactions in the virtual environment were suboptimal. These sentiments came from hybrid learners as well as 100 percent virtual learners, and they were tied to discussions of other students turning off (their cameras) and "tuning out."** Students felt awkward getting to know other students in a virtual environment, and class sessions over Zoom, with limited chat functions, did not facilitate it well. Break-out rooms were perceived as awkward. One student said bluntly, "I hate virtual school," and went on to say that a lot of people had their cameras off and were not even there (In response to this comment, another student mentioned that in their school, a student whose camera was off would be marked absent; then another mentioned they could not enforce that policy in their school because internet was unreliable so it would be unfair to some kids). For some students, the feelings of social isolation were exacerbated by doing online school alone in their house. One student reported that she and two friends had worked against the isolation by spending each online day at one of their houses, doing all their virtual classes together.

E. **Some students felt they had more homework this year.** Although some students felt they had less homework this year, others felt they had more. As noted by one student who felt this way, "Sometimes it feels like the teachers are against you even if they're not." One student said they had multiple class meetings over Zoom, with only a few minutes between each one, so they typically could not finish their work for one class before the next class started, which led them to spend time in the next class doing work for their previous class. They felt it was hard to get all their homework done.

F. **Students missed being around other people. Students felt they had limited opportunities to develop new friendships or maintain and strengthen their existing friendships. Some focus group participants said they rarely, if ever, saw their friends in person. Some students felt their personal interactions were stilted in the virtual environment. Even those who did get to see their friends had social distancing regulations to contend with.** Some students were frustrated that they had had very little or no time with their closest friends, either because they had opposite schedules or because they were high-risk for COVID. Other students mentioned that their closer friends were not among the small cohort of peers with whom they attended class in person. Others noted they had fellow students who were casual friends but nothing more than that because they had not seen them in almost a year, and they didn't know their number or SnapChat in order to get in touch. Similarly, some reported not talking one on one with some of their friends since last March. Several students felt that their friendship interactions were stilted in the virtual environment. They felt that conversations over FaceTime "aren't the same" as those they had in person. Despite understanding and respecting the rationale, students lamented having to maintain physical distance and wear masks around their

friends while at school -- it felt awkward. Students mentioned having to sit a set distance apart during lunch or recess and sitting in assigned spots during lunch and class. Assigned seats in general limited their chances to talk with friends. School rules about distancing made it awkward to talk with friends or make new friends.

G. **Although some students felt they were getting more sleep or getting more opportunities to sleep late in the morning, students often mentioned having an irregular sleep schedule due to different wake-up times on virtual versus in-person days.** Students commonly mentioned that they slept in a bit on their virtual days compared to their in-person days, and they cited this as a positive. Because they had more autonomy and choice on their virtual days, however, some students said they found themselves doing schoolwork late at night, making the early in-person mornings difficult and rushed.

H. **Some students engaged in less physical activity than they usually would, some by choice, and some because school sports were canceled or because local gyms were closed.** Some focus group participants reported that they were less physically active than they had been before the pandemic. Some students were less active by choice: One student was considering being done with a sport and the pandemic "helped" her make the decision to be done; another student reported that they did not have to be active because it was easy to lie about exercise for their physical education class. Others who really enjoyed exercise and sports were very frustrated that gyms were shut down, that their sports were canceled, and that it was often too cold to be active outdoors. As noted by one student for whom volleyball was canceled, they were missing out on an opportunity to talk to people and make new friends.

I. **Students reported struggling to stay motivated and they felt more anxiety this year, which they attributed to various sources: the unknown future of COVID, fears of someone close to them dying from COVID, limited contact with some family members, homework and missing assignments, day after day of Zoom meetings, and limited interactions with friends.** Some students reported that it could be hard to stay motivated. As one student noted, "(There are) some days where it's just really hard to wake up to go to Zoom class because I feel like I've been doing that every single day for the past almost year." Other students said they felt a heightened level of anxiety. Some said they felt anxious because they did not know how COVID was going to end up, while others said they had initially been very anxious and now knew that they were masking and distancing and maintaining good hygiene, everything they needed to do to stay safe. Others mentioned they were not anxious for themselves, but instead for their loved ones; they feared that someone close to them, like a grandparent, would contract COVID and get very sick or die. Others mentioned the sadness they felt from not getting to see a close relative (e.g., a grandparent or sibling in the military) for months on end or missing family gatherings over the holidays because of COVID precautions. Others attributed their anxiety to schoolwork and missing assignments, and to having limited opportunities to interact with their friends.

Relevant Quotes
When we have school projects and stuff, like working with groups, it's a little hard because our teachers will put us in breakout rooms, but, you know, a lot of people don't like turning on their cameras and unmuting, so it's like we don't really end up getting anything done. So it's always one or two people always contributing.

...sometimes it's stressful with the projects or getting help, because sometimes the teachers aren't around their device to answer on time. So they'll sometimes answer like an hour or the next day later.

I feel a whole lot more stress, because I can't really remember my assignments and when they're due and stuff. And my anxiety has gotten bad since that, since school has started, because I can't really remember a lot of things, and I can't, me, I always forget to put stuff in my planner, so it just, being in school helps me keep track of stuff.

A bad thing about the COVID thing is about that I don't get to see the friends that I usually hang out with, the friends that are usually my friend group that I used to. And I would just call that a different thing, not really a bad thing, because I made new friends, and that made me step out of my comfort zone, which is a good thing. But it's a bad thing not seeing my friends.

Both of my friends have different cohorts from me, and so they go out for lunch and recess different than I do. So I don't really talk to them, so I don't really get that social interaction at lunch. And, literally, the only time I talk to people is when I'm talking to my teachers.

Because with being like on technology for so long, I get a really bad headache, and then especially right before I go to bed, it's harder to fall asleep for me. So then you kind of stay up a little bit later, but then again, you don't have to get up as early to get out of the house, so you can sleep in a little bit later.

It's harder to fall asleep once you've been staring at screens all day. Say if I have a virtual day, then I'm on school for those seven or eight hours straight except for we get really long breaks, which kind of is not a good thing, but we are on school, we're on it for a long time.

It is hard. I don't get to see any of my friends because it's all virtual. And even making new friends, since it's virtual, you can't, because it's, you're just there to learn and then you log off. And it's, also, it can be hard to raise your hand in class or talk.

Yeah. Because people should have their cameras on while they're doing schoolwork. And I find it hard to be focused, because sometimes I can easily like, I'm like, I could just walk away...

I hate virtual school...It's just hard to do it, I guess. And a lot of people just have their cameras off and aren't even there. They just log in and turn their camera off...

Like regular school, you are talking with teachers. You're talking with friends. You talk to the lunch lady. You get kind of this flow of social ideas and mix of conversations and stuff. And now being an A learner, we, at my school, we do not even do virtual Google Meets at all. We have activities we work on by ourselves, and that's it. We had like a few group meetings, we did at the start of the year, but those aren't going to continue. So it's now just like we're isolated.

I'm not so much scared for myself but for others, such as those who are higher risk. And the fact that, you know, things are so different, we've reacted to this, really, on a super grand scale, it says something about how big it is. And that just kind of makes you feel small and scared.

Well, I mean, what makes me nervous is because I have a special needs brother. Every time I have to, every time I come home, I have to sanitize my hands, because we can't get, we can't let him get sick.

Yeah, when I'm at home, I'm alone, and so there's not really anybody to talk to, and that's been kind of a struggle, because I'm not really talking to anybody.

I am the oldest of three girls. And my dad works full time, and my mom is going to nursing school full time, and so I get stuck with a lot of babysitting on my virtual days. And so that's kind of a challenge, because I'm trying to focus on my school stuff, and it's a little bit harder to thrive academically when I have distractions like that.

I also think it's because the teachers aren't putting enough effort into teaching us. They're just handing us work, and they're like, here you go, do some two-step inequalities with fractions and negatives.

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

Well, I guess what's difficult for me is like coming home from school being exhausted, but then seeing your phone on the counter and then having to make the choice of, should I start my homework, or should I like watch TikToks? And that distracts me. And then, sometimes, I watch TikToks, and I get carried away, and I don't realize that I've been watching for an hour.

Usually, if I was in school non-virtually, I could pay attention because there was nothing to distract me. But since I'm at home, I always have my phone by my side too, so I usually go on my phone. I look around my room and choose random things to do.

Q2. – Connectedness with School, Teachers, and Peers

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

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

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

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

Response themes

A. **Students felt that physically *being with* other people, through sports, games, and clubs, was helpful for a sense of connection to other students.** It was common for focus group participants to mention with appreciation that, even though they had to wear masks, they were able to physically *be* around other students. They appreciated playing games like football and running around with other students at recess. Students mentioned they connected with students and friends through team sports and clubs such as skiing, robotics, choir, and basketball. Other students mentioned starting a new activity this year, such as band, or joining a new club that *was* available (when other clubs were not) and connecting with students through those activities.

B. **Many students reported that connecting with their friends was more difficult than before, for various reasons: canceled clubs and sports, being on a different schedule, rules against mixing cohorts in hallways, and assigned seating. Many of these students connected with their friends in other ways: through FaceTime at lunch, on breaks, and after school to do homework together; group chats; the local Boys and Girls Club; and hanging out with them on online days.** Many students said they had fewer opportunities to connect and spend time with their friends. Some students said they had friends who they had not seen in months because the sport or club they did together was canceled. Students frequently mentioned that had not seen half of their class for many months, with some expressing concern that they had literally forgotten what some of their friends look like. Relatedly, students reported they had close friends who went to school on a different schedule or were in different classes and had a different lunch. Some only saw their friends in the hallways, but due to social distancing guidelines about mixing between cohorts, they were unable to talk to them. Students also noted that when they had friends in the same class, they often still did not get to talk to them because of assigned seats. Students engaged in a variety of compensatory connection strategies. Many students mentioned FaceTiming with friends at lunch, between classes, after school, or for several hours in the evening to do homework. Some students talked with their friends when in breakout rooms together and played video games online together. Some talked on Discord or through a group chat. Others made a conscious effort to walk home with their friends. Students reported they had on occasion set up Zoom chats with their friends. Other students hung out in person with friends on their online days, or they met up with friends at a local coffee shop or the Boys and Girls Club.

C. **Students reported that connecting with other students is harder in the virtual and hybrid contexts. Students recognized that they had to make an extra effort to engage -- by unmuting themselves, turning on their camera, talking to other students in breakout rooms, and willingly talk in class to students with whom they were not already friends.** There was a general sentiment that connecting with others and making new friends was harder in the virtual and hybrid contexts. Students frequently said that it was hard to connect when students stayed on mute and turned off their camera; others lamented that most students did not really talk in the breakout rooms. Other students, however, reported great experiences with breakout rooms, which they said were helping them get to know other students. Notably, some students reported that the lack of connection really got to them, and they began forcing themselves to just start talking to new people; those students reported they had made new friends with people in their class.

D. **On one hand, some students felt that it was easier to connect with their teachers this year, because there were fewer students in the classroom. On the other hand, some students felt that it was harder to connect with teachers this year, either because they saw their teachers less, did not really like communicating with their teachers over email, or felt uncomfortable walking up to them to ask questions (presumably due to social distancing guidelines).** Some students noted that connection was easier in small classrooms, where there was more one-on-one time than in the past. They noted that teachers had more time during class to check on each student's progress and understanding. However, students also mentioned factors that made connection difficult. They said they had to put in effort to talk to teachers and some were more approachable than others; that it was harder to ask questions over email, and it often meant they would not get an answer until the next day; and that in class it was harder to just "walk up to them" and talk to them. Others mentioned that it was harder to connect with teachers because they only saw them twice a week; although they felt some connection, they wished there were more.

E. **Many focus group participants said they had a good connection with at least some of their teachers. These students reported that their teachers engaged in a variety of behaviors that implied to the students that they cared about the students and their learning: They held weekly check-in sessions, held open sessions in Zoom, replied quickly to emails, asked students about their day, played music, polled the class to engage them in casual conversation, and regularly set aside time for class-wide conversation.** Across the different learning models, students appreciated efforts from their teachers to connect. Many students noted that they had teachers who responded very quickly to emails, which they appreciated immensely. Students described an array of efforts from teachers to connect, both in person and online. Teachers played music before class began, asked students about their day, offered one-on-one Zoom meetings, held weekly drop-in chat sessions, hosted weekly check-in sessions when students were learning at home (e.g., on Flex Friday), put polls in their Google Meet each morning and then provided time for the students to talk with each other about their answers, and set aside time during class for casual conversation. Students clearly appreciated these efforts from teachers to be helpful and personable.

F. **Many students felt that some of their teachers did not try to connect with them or help them connect with other students. In response to these concerns, some students reminded the group that teachers had been thrown into a new set of teaching and learning challenges, too.** Many students had teachers who they felt were unapproachable and who were "all business." Students

expressed frustration that teachers disabled the chat function or had strict rules about what students could and could not chat about. Some students said they had teachers who took multiple days to respond to emails, so that by the time the students had a response, it felt too late to be helpful. Notably, when students raised these frustrations, they themselves and others in the group also acknowledged that this whole pandemic situation is new for the teachers, too, and that the teachers had a lot of students to take care of. Similarly, students recognized that on the days they were online, their teachers often could not reply to emails because their teachers were in the middle of teaching their in-person classes. Students said they relied on group chats with fellow students when they could not get immediate help from a teacher.

G. **Focus group participants had mixed views about teachers' skill in handling a classroom that contains in-person learners alongside at-home students who are attending virtually.** Some students felt that they had teachers who paid little or no attention to the students who were connected to the classroom virtually. They felt that sometimes the teachers forgot about the virtual kids, and students mentioned this concern whether they were a virtual learner or not. Other students said their teachers were really good at calling on students who were in class as well as on those who were online, and one student said their teacher regularly paused in-class instruction to check on the virtual students' comprehension.

H. **Students were proud of school-wide efforts to build student-student and student-teacher connections.** Students did not commonly mention school-wide efforts to improve connection, but those who did were very positive about them. One student said their school held a daily morning meeting for everybody in the school. Another student mentioned their school was doing a school-wide book club with the book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Learning*. The student said they started out each homeroom with a discussion of the book, and it provided a common theme for students to connect with throughout the day.

I. **Virtual learners often felt disconnected from other students.** Some virtual learners noted that they had established connections with their teachers via regular check-ins, but that they did not connect with other students. Some students reported they had no Google Meet sessions or class meetings. They said they "just kind of did their class" and then logged off. They reported no effort from school personnel to connect virtual learners with each other. One student reported that they had begun the year as a virtual learner, while their friends had started as hybrid; it had now been so long since they had talked to those friends that they were not sure if they were still friends. Another student mentioned moving from virtual to in-person because they had been unable to handle the lack of connection with other students.

J. **Some focus group participants mentioned there was less bullying at school this year.** The theme of less bullying was raised in only one of the focus groups, but students in that group agreed: There was less bullying and aggressive behavior at school and their peers were less likely to be mean for no reason. It was noted that less bullying might be linked to having fewer kids in school.

Relevant Quotes
It sort of kind of feels the same. It's more like the effort that you put into it, because I'll go to office hours and talk to some of my teachers. So it's kind of like last year when I had a connection with some teachers and where I didn't with others.

A lot of people don't like to either unmute or put on their cameras, so we don't really connect or talk about our opinions on things, where in person, other, they would talk more, and we could actually see them and talk and interact more than on the computer.

For me it's (lower), because I normally really have a connection with most of my teachers. I can't really have that connection like I would if I was in person.

So my friends at school, I have a few friends at school that have a thing called Discord, where it's like an online thing where you're able to talk with people. So me and my friends have added each other, so we're able to talk after school if you wanted.

And I feel one thing that's really helped me is getting together with friends and doing school together…So we're all, basically all in the same classes, so we go to each other's houses. We might even sleep over the night before just to make it more fun and have that contact.

And then I feel like I have a lot of friends who either are fully virtual or come on other days, and I've forgotten what some of them look like. And if we would have continued doing virtual school right now, I feel like I might have gone crazy, because not seeing people, I'm a very social person, so I kind of need that connection and learning.

I feel connected to my teachers. Some of my students, or some of the students, I don't know who they are, because they barely have their camera on, and they barely ever talk.

I don't really feel connected with my teachers, because they are dealing with half of the people in person and half of the people on virtual. And on the days that I'm virtual, they pay less attention to the people on Zoom than for the people in person. And my teachers are absolutely terrible at answering emails, to have like three days go by and then they'll answer…

Because we never do Google Meets for classes or anything, most of the time, I don't feel very connected at all. I don't know the name of my classmates or anything. And my teachers, they sent introduction emails, but beyond that, one or two of them did an introduction video, and then it sort of ends there.

…because like [Student] said, it could be a few days or something like that before they answer. And by then, everything, you're just mad, and you don't want to do the assignment anymore. You feel stressed. Everything is different, because you couldn't get a response.

But I also have to say I feel really bad for the teachers, because they've been thrown into this too, and they have a bunch of kids to take care of. And some of them are virtual and others are in person. And I don't check my email every 15 minutes.

I don't really feel as connected as I feel like I would if I was in person, because I don't really talk to anybody online. We just kind of like do our class and get off, and I don't really talk to anybody.

I've just started talking to people, because when I stopped talking to people, it like made me get really low, and so I like had to talk to more people on my own, and it's helped a lot.

On Thursday, Friday when I go to school, it's not that hard to contact teachers to ask questions. But since there's another cohort going on Monday, Tuesday, it's kind of hard to ask questions, because the teachers can't always answer when they're teaching the classes. But I can email friends and ask them, so I feel, yeah, pretty connected.

But I'm glad because for Fridays, for us, teachers are open. Like no one has school on Friday. And we can Zoom with them, or they'll, pretty quick with, they'll email you back, pretty quickly back on Fridays.

And we have to stick with the same class throughout the whole day, so I don't get to really see my friends that much unless it's in the hallway. And then, we still really aren't able to talk, because we're not supposed to mix with different cohorts.

Not a lot of my friends are in my classes, so I've kind of made friends with the people that are in my class, and we've helped each other with like homework and stuff like that. And with teachers, we have this meeting every, like when we're virtual or doing online on Fridays, we can check in with them and ask them questions about the homework they gave us the day before. So, if we're confused on that, we can talk to them then.

And the classes are like half the size, so that's nice. And it's easier to do the work, because there's not all those people the teacher has to go around to answer questions for.

But with friends, we just wave at each other usually, we don't really talk as much as I think we usually would in a usual year. Because you don't get to pick your spots, and usually, we email or text each other if we really want to talk.

Since I'm in middle school, you can join some more clubs and stuff. I joined band this year, and we have a school basketball thing, so you can get connected with more people that way.

I kind of have like mixed feelings on this, because in some ways, I feel like some friendships have grown, because you realize how strong they are over quarantine. But then in the same sense, you don't get to meet new people as much, because in breakout rooms, it's really hard to put yourself out there and talk to new people.

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

My school is doing the Seven Habits of Highly Effective Learning, and that's a school-wide thing. So, we do that every day in our homeroom, and we just kind of do that lesson. So, it's been really good to just like be able to connect, no matter what we're doing, to that. And everybody is learning the same thing, so we're all just able to connect back to that at the end of the day and just kind of learn a little bit more about how other people are taking it.

Me and my friends, we've created a group chat together, so it's kind of just group chat where we chatted normally, but now we've kind of used it to ask questions about assignments and just kind of get, if it's urgent, where we can't email teacher, we ask them, because we're all kind of relatively doing the same classes.

I've also found out that with the smaller classes, teachers have more one-on-one time with me and other students. So the teacher is really going around and making sure that you understand the topic that you're learning, whether it's an easier topic or a harder topic.

And then every day in math, we have a session, or Google Meets, that our teachers can put in polls and we…every morning, and so we do that. And everybody answers, and then we talk about it. And so that's when everybody groups together and just talk together.

Q3. – Feelings of Belonging

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

Response themes

A. **Many students expressed ambivalence about belonging. Students who were positive about their sense of belonging and acceptance at school tended to know the students in their class and felt they had friends at school. Some students reported a heightened sense of belonging from developing close ties with the small group of students they were in class with every day.** Focus group participants repeatedly expressed mixed feelings about belonging. As one student noted, "It's middle school." Some students said that with COVID, they were no longer friends with people they used to think of as friends - that some friendships had just "dropped off." Some mentioned that in middle school, there were more kids in their class they did not know, which made belonging more difficult. They recognized that it can be hard to reach out to new people. Some students had the same kids in their homeroom as they did the previous year (a looped system) and appreciated having some continuity with classmates and teachers. Other students linked their sense of belonging to the idea that the kids in their class were all friends and talked to each other. Several hybrid students mentioned that they had developed closer knit friendships with the small group of students they were with each day in school. That said, a couple of students expressed strong dislike of some of the students they felt "stuck" with every day.

B. **Students expressed positivity about efforts at their school that facilitated students' sense of belonging.** One student described a program at their school in which pairs of 8th graders introduced 5th graders to the school and mentored them; they felt that it built a good community for kids new to the middle school. Other students mentioned that their grade occupied one wing of a larger school, helping them feel like they belonged even though they were in a very large building with five other grades. These students expressed pride that their schools had designed ways to help younger students' transition into a bigger school.

C. **Clubs and activities helped students gain a sense of connectedness and belonging.** Students frequently mentioned extracurricular activities as a way to help them get to know people and find people they could trust and communicate with on a regular basis. Students often mentioned clubs

and sports, noting that working together in teams like that was fun and built tight bonds. Students also highlighted being a part of student officers or student council. They recognized that in groups like student council, they found people who shared their interests, and they felt proud of working with other students to help make their schools better.

D. **Focus group participants frequently noted that their sense of belonging and connectedness with teachers and other students was stronger when they were in school compared to at home. Just seeing their teachers' and friends' faces, and being able to share a space with them, gave them a sense of belonging that they did not have in the virtual environment**. Students appreciated being able to see and physically be with other students and their teachers. It was in response to this question that many students again lamented students who did not show their face and kept their cameras off during class. Students' feelings of belonging were linked to interacting with their teachers and having teachers reach out personally to them. Some students mentioned that they had specific teachers who provided encouragement to them, who would tell them "you got this." Others mentioned they had specific teachers who cared about them and asked why they were absent if they missed class. Other students mentioned that some teachers talked with them about issues that mattered, like Black History Month (whereas others did not), and that some held office hours and provided tutoring. Students felt that teachers were less likely to check on them when they were at home. These students felt that some teachers really didn't notice the kids attending online. They also observed that when they themselves were learning at home, the teacher wasn't physically there in front of them, so it was easier to get distracted and feel disconnected from the learning environment.

E. **Virtual students do not generally feel like they are in a "school."** Virtual students had little to say about belonging. Those who responded said they were not connected to other students. They just did their classes and logged off. As one student noted, "It's just like you're alone on your ship here."

Relevant Quotes

Sort of kind of, because before we went to quarantine, I feel like I was like a different person, and now it's over quarantine, I fell off with so many of my people that I used to call friends that I wouldn't know.

My math teacher feels like I can keep on doing stuff. She encourages me. And like with all my teachers, but mainly my math teacher, because she always says you got this. You're a really good student, and you're really good at math. You're smart and everything like that.

The thing that makes me feel more belonging is, as [Student] said, when teachers reach out to you personally. And when I'm virtual, I don't really feel like I belong, because I feel like I'm disconnected from the conversation most of the time, but some of the time, not so much.

I feel connected, and I just I feel connected with them, and they care about me. Because same with [Student], my math teacher cares about me, and whenever I'm not there, she always asks why I'm not there.

I feel like I belonged more last year than I did this year, because like I said before, I need that connection with my teachers and having to talk to my friends. Because we don't always talk on the Google Hangout platform they give us to like contact our teachers and stuff. But so we don't always talk, so I don't really get to speak with them that often.

Being virtual, it's just like you're alone on your ship here. And I have teachers from all different schools in my district, because my school kind of switched up the e-learners learning program. And now we're doing it through something else sort of, and so a bunch of teachers have just been kind of scrapped together to try to teach the e-learners. And it feels weird, like I can't really now call my one school my school.

I have a lot of friends, and I'm good at making friends. So even if not all my friends are in my class, I just get more connected with other people then. So then, I've been doing fine on feeling belonged, and, even though we're half virtual.

I feel like with the smaller class sizes, you get a lot more one on one with the teachers, and, because they don't have to go around to every single student on that day. Yeah. So with the teachers, I feel pretty included with. And I hang out with everyone in my grade on their cohort, so, yeah, I'm good.

Yeah. You kind of have, you got to have to get used to each other. So, in a way, it makes you feel more accepted by others around you, because they're just all there with you every time you're in school, the same group of people. And it's not a big group. It's a, like a small group. Like my class has nine people when everyone is there, which normally…we have like seven people. So you kind of get close with the group of people you're with.

Yeah, I do, because I'm still in the clubs that I would be at school, and I'm still in contact with my two favorite teachers last year.

My homeroom has been the same this year and last year, so I feel like having that group of people to fall back on has been so nice. And extracurriculars, I feel like also totally helps with just like getting to know people and finding a group of people that you can trust and communicate with on a regular basis.

I feel accepted. I mean, our school has lots of different opportunities for us. Like they have clubs and sports, and then there's also what we like to call officers, where you get to give ideas and help our, make our school better. And so you can really feel accepted there when you're in those clubs, because you're really tight.

Q4. – Levels of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

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

Response themes

A. **Focus group participants had family members, friends, and fellow students who were depressed. Some focus group participants said they were struggling, or had struggled, with depression. They tended to attribute these mental health concerns to struggling at school or COVID-induced isolation.** Some students said that they themselves had struggled with depression, or that members of their family had struggled with depression, due to the isolation of the pandemic. More commonly, however, students expressed concern about fellow students and friends who were sad or depressed. For example, one student said she made a point to sit at lunch with a friend with depression so she could regularly ask how she was doing. Other students knew of specific students at school who had depression or other mental health issues. They thought perhaps a cause was difficulty with schoolwork, or that the social distancing restrictions that COVID brought had exacerbated these students' pre-existing issues.

B. **Students associated good time management and staying on top of their schoolwork with lower levels of stress and anxiety. Many focus group participants said they did not manage their time well under the hybrid model, and their time management issues caused a lot of stress.** Students linked good time management with less stress, and poor time management with more stress. For example, students said they knew people who they thought must be really stressed because those people went and did fun things well into the evening and then had to scramble to get schoolwork done for the next day. And they knew others who appeared not at all stressed because they did everything on time and finished everything on schedule. Other students admitted they let schoolwork pile up, created stress for themselves by turning work in late, or procrastinate until the very last minute. Additionally, students felt that the hybrid learning model caused increased stress and anxiety. On at-school days, they felt they had to focus intensely so they could understand material well enough to do their at-home assignments. Then, on their at-home days, they worried about having all their virtual assignments done and submitted in Google Classroom; some worried so much they had a hard time calming down enough to go to sleep and wake up to go to school the next day. Those who had had to move back and forth between online and in person found these transitions difficult and preferred to be at school. Students who had had to go virtual for weeks at a time due to COVID had had their grades slide because they did not manage their time well, and then they had had to work their grades back up upon returning to school.

C. **Some students were stressed about the amount of homework they had or about getting help with it when they needed it.** Some students said they were assigned a lot of work in each class on their virtual days, and although it was not difficult work, it was time consuming. They mentioned students

who felt overwhelmed by the amount of work they had to do each day. Other students mentioned coming into the new academic year thinking the workload was going to be very light like it had been last spring, but it was not so, and they had had to get accustomed to the workload. Students appreciated that because they were in school at least a couple of days a week, they could go in and get extra help, and some students felt they had homework help available if they were struggling. However, some said they knew other kids who were often really stressed about homework and the fact that they had less time with teachers than they had had in previous years. Others mentioned times when they themselves became very frustrated because they could not figure out their homework and had no help.

D. **Other students' inattentiveness caused anxiety.** A couple of students reported that other students' behavior in the virtual classroom caused them anxiety. Their fellow students joined the Meet late, repeatedly looked down at their phone, had the TV on in the background, and did not pay attention and then would ask questions for the teacher that had already been answered while they had not been paying attention. Notably, one student remarked that online learning was forced on some kids because of a high-risk situation or parents' fear of COVID, despite that those kids had a harder time paying attention when learning virtually.

E. **For many focus group participants, stress levels appeared to hinge on social interaction. Students with established friend groups and activities tended to report low levels of stress, whereas students who felt excluded or isolated, or who had too much time alone "in their head," said their mental health was suffering. Some students reported they had gone from being a virtual learner to an in-person learner in order to address their feelings of social isolation.** Social interaction, particularly with friends, was key to students' perceptions of their mental health. Some students said they had a close group of friends who kept each other happy and laughing together. Others said they were playing video games as usual with friends. Several others who said their stress level was low attributed it to the fact that they had their "quarantine group" of friends who they saw regularly. Other students attributed low stress to social interaction in general. As one student noted of her and her friends, "We all do out of school activities, like sports or clubs, and I think that helps." Students felt that being in school the past few months had provided them with sorely needed social interaction. For example, one student mentioned going back to in-person in order to be able to be social and talk to people; being virtual had been hard on the student academically and socially. Other students noted that when the pandemic began, they had lost touch with friends for a while and holed up in their room, and they spent too much time in their heads getting anxious; when they started hanging out with friends again, it got better. Relatedly, some students said that their stress and anxiety levels were high, and when they offered an explanation, it was that they felt excluded by other students, had too much time alone, or spent too much time alone with their thoughts.

F. **Issues with technology and instruction in the virtual learning environment caused students a lot of stress.** Many students expressed frustration with technology and issues related to learning in a virtual environment. When they were online, they could not go back to the classroom to ask their teachers for help. Their computer would not work at inopportune times, such as during a virtual office hour, or their computer would glitch right when a teacher was giving a specific instruction. A variety of other frustrations were mentioned: teachers posting materials and deadlines in several different places; difficulty seeing math problems over the computer screen (as opposed to having a paper packet); being in a class and not understanding, and then losing an internet connection to make the

situation worse; being unable to hear the class; the teacher being muted; unclear instructions; and instructions given verbally before all students have joined the session.

G. **Some focus group participants had initially felt very stressed about COVID and the unknowns in spring 2020, and other students mentioned that they and their friends were still stressed due to the uncertainties surrounding COVID. As one student noted, "It just makes me feel like everything is out of my control. And I don't like that."** Over the past months, some had experienced anxiety over a COVID exposure and having to quarantine and fearing how bad the symptoms would be; they also reported it was stressful for their friends to see them get sick; others had anxiety for friends who had family members who were high risk. Some kids were anxious about NOT wearing a mask at some point in the future, saying, "I'm just so used to it, and it just makes me feel safe somehow." Similarly, students mentioned feeling anxious when other students did not wear their masks or wore their masks improperly.

H. **Some students were stressed because they had responsibilities and distractions that made learning at home difficult.** Several students mentioned a home environment that made learning at home difficult. Some had younger siblings who were loud and rambunctious. Others had siblings who seemed to want their attention whenever they were working. Others were responsible for watching over their siblings.

I. **A few students reported that they and their friends experienced stress, but that they had found ways to address it.** One student acknowledged that negative thoughts could really get to people, and that it was important to tell themselves that things were going to get better. Another noted that her friends had all found ways of de-stressing; for example, she mentioned that one of her friends enjoys painting and did that whenever she needed to calm down.

Relevant Quotes

But just having the social aspect and being able to communicate with people has actually helped my mental health.

And then also my friends have, one of my, I know one of my friends has had it too, and I was really worried about him, because I know him and his family, they don't, I don't think they have, someone in his family doesn't really have the best health. And so I was just really worried about him. And…I'm glad that they got through and stuff, but I was very worried about them.

The level of stress is medium, because, well, sometimes I do get frustrated with the technology. And sometimes when you're in a class, and you don't understand it, but then your Wi-Fi goes out, and then you can't hear the class, or your teacher is muted, and they don't know that they're muted.

I'd say for my class, it would be, overall, a medium, because (it) just depends on who you are. So some people, they handle stress and anxiety better than others.

Oh, some days I just want to pull my hair out in class. It's because it's so terrible. Some kids, they join the Meet late, or they're just not paying attention, because they're on their phones. I've had kids in my Zoom Meets or my Google Meets turn on their camera, and you can see the reflection, there's a TV in the background that they're watching, or they're looking down at their phone. You can just tell that they're distracted.

One of my friends, I mean, is probably stressed a little bit, but he...he always gets his work done all the time the moment it's assigned. For me, no, I do not...it's always almost late, or, I mean, part of that is because I do have ADD, which is really not fun in virtual school.

The negative thoughts can really, in my opinion, personally, the negative thoughts can really get to you. And you just have to stop thinking of it. It's going to get better. Things are going to work out.

I get stressed. But it's not so high that I like feel like I'm totally not going to do it. I feel like I have a lot of people that can help me if I do feel stressed, or if I need help with anything. So I feel like I'm pretty good on that area, but I know a lot of other kids can get really stressed because of the homework and not being able to talk to the teachers as much and stuff like that.

I don't think anyone in my immediate class that I see all day is very stressed about schoolwork, because, I mean, the stuff we get isn't extremely hard. I don't think it really stresses anyone out, because we have the flexible time schedules that we can do it whenever, so we don't really have much stress on us to have to get the work done whenever we want.

So my mom got COVID, and I had to do virtual for three weeks. And whenever I do virtual, my grades drop a lot, because I have, I'm really, I like to procrastinate. Like I get stressed, and I decide not to do my work and that I'll do it later. And then I never end up doing it. So, I get really stressed.

I feel like sometimes, on our virtual days, our teachers' expectations, there's a lot of gray area there, and they're not always super clear in their instructions and what exactly they want from us. And so that can, it hasn't affected me a ton, but it has some, and it definitely has affected some of my friends.

Me and my friends, we all kind of know each other, and so if we are feeling a little stressed or anxious, we kind of know each other, so we know how to cheer each other up, like [Student] said. And there's not really anything to worry about right now. School is going really good, I think, for all of my friends. So, I think me and them are pretty low.

So, one thing I know, it's better than it was in spring by a lot. I feel like in spring there were so many unknown answers, and that just kind of made everything a little bit worse. And now that we're back in school, I feel like everyone's kind of getting back into a routine.

I personally am doing pretty okay. Being trapped inside the house for a long period of time can do a lot to a person, and obviously, some of my other family members have suffered from depression as well.

There have been a lot of people in my school too with mental health issues. Like one girl didn't come on to school on a Monday because she just couldn't stop crying, and I'm sure that COVID was not helping with this. And one girl also went to a mental hospital. I don't know. She didn't really share the reasons, but again, I'm sure that COVID is not helping these kids.

I know some people who get a lot of work, and they just get overwhelmed by that and then the due dates of it. And then they're spending seven hours on it, and they really take up the majority of the day with that.

I feel like I've been a lot more upset and anxious. And I think it's because there's just a lot of uncertainty, and I don't deal well with not knowing what's going on.

I get really distracted. So then when it's due, the day it is due, and it's like the day before it's going to be due, I just have to do it. And then, I get stressed out. And sometimes, I just don't feel like doing it, but I still know I need to. And it just makes it more complicated for me to do things because I can't stay focused. And I'm too lazy to do it. And then, I get stressed out about how I think they give me too much work, but it's mostly because I can't pay attention.

Q5. – Where Do Students Go for Help?

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

Q6. – A Trusted Adult

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

Response themes

A. **Family members are a front-line resource for students, and by far the most frequently mentioned family member was "my mom." Students also mentioned their friends' moms, a stepparent, a sibling, and extended family members such as a cousin, aunt, or grandparent.** Many students mentioned a family member, often their mom, as their go-to trusted adult. Some relied on their parents more now than before, since they had lost some friends due to COVID. Some reported that they talked with their siblings who lived away from home using Discord or Zoom. Siblings were mentioned more often for homework help than for help dealing with friends or stress; moms were mentioned across the board: Students went to their moms for help with homework, friend problems, and stress and anxiety.

B. **Many focus group participants mentioned specific teachers they would turn to for either homework help or dealing with socio-emotional concerns. Students mentioned turning to teachers for help with school, friend problems, or stress in general, as well as for enjoyable conversation. Some students felt they could talk to just about any of their teachers; however, some students felt they could not talk to any of their teachers, which seemed to coincide with feeling like they did not really know their teachers.** Students who mentioned that they felt comfortable reaching out to one or more teachers, either in person or via email or via Zoom/virtual recess, expressed that their teachers were empathic and good listeners, that the teachers showed concern for their well-being, or that the teachers were enjoyable to talk to. Some students mentioned teachers who talked weekly about social and emotional issues, and mental health and well-being, and it was noted that teachers are some of the only people outside of their families they had regular contact with. Many students felt that they could talk to any of their teachers, felt their teachers were nice and friendly, and that they had teachers they could trust if they had a problem.

C. **On one hand, many students knew and had visited their school counselor, and several students mentioned seeing a therapist or psychologist (outside of school) on a regular basis. On the other hand, some students knew there was a school counselor but did not feel comfortable going to them or did not know how to find them.** It seemed that in some of the focus groups comprised of students from smaller or rural schools, the students knew their school counselor personally, and the school counselor was mentioned alongside teachers as a front-line resource. In other focus groups, the

school counselor seemed to be less known personally. Many students said they knew their counselor but had not gone to see them or had not needed them, although students mentioned them as a good resource to recommend to their peers. Others noted that the school counselors were mentioned often at school, but they didn't know how to find them. Other students were new to their middle school or had a new school counselor this year and had never seen the counselor or felt they did not know the counselor.

D. **Some focus group participants also had positive relationships with adults outside of school, through their community and religious organizations.** Students mentioned leaders in their community and religious organizations as caring and trusted adults. Students mentioned staff members at their local Boys and Girls Club. One student described their church leader as the most understanding person they had ever met; another described their weekly confirmation calls as a positive influence on them and the others in the group. Students described confirmation sessions and church retreats as opportunities to think positively and take their minds off school while playing games and getting time outside.

E. **Not all focus group participants said they reached out to adults for help, and some actively voiced a preference for other avenues. For example, many students handled stress and anxiety by engaging with their friends, and others relied on alone time and a variety of personal coping strategies.** Students commonly mentioned reaching out to their friends to talk or get help with homework. They reported that their friends got them engaged in activities, like sports, that they felt helped them feel better. Being with friends, either talking or hanging out or playing video games together, was a distraction from stress. In addition to engaging with friends, students mentioned a variety of personal coping strategies: (1) think about positive events in the future and present (such as that their family had not contracted COVID); (2) take time to just "be alone" and listen to music, read a book, or sit with their feelings; (3) work on their goals, as working towards something and making progress on it made them feel better; (4) just get things done, because when the source of their stress, such as an assignment, was done, the stress went down; (5) engage in physical activities such as walking, ice skating, or snowmobiling; notably, some students implied that being occupied with a sport provided a buffer from stress and anxiety.

Relevant Quotes

So, my mom is very helpful at home. She's very knowledgeable about a lot of issues. So, most of the time, I'll end up just going to her or just taking my breaks outside. Like I really enjoy snowmobiling or four-wheeling, so I'll just go out riding, or I'll play games for a little while with friends. Or I'll just go out and do something for a little while until I'm able to get my mind back on track.

We have two counselors, one for each grade, and then our social worker, and we can get in contact with any of them at any time. And it is very well, like that message is very well known. And teachers do have social-emotional learning days on Fridays, where they just like sit down and discuss what they think is best for students. And I think knowing that teachers are taking into account how students are feeling, I think that is such like a good feeling to know that they're worried about us.

Usually, when I'm feeling down or depressed, I usually go to my mom because she's pretty good with helping it. Or I like sort of kind of just, I don't know, it's not healthy, but I ball it up and wait until I have my therapy session with my therapist, so.

Whenever I'm feeling really sad or depressed, I just try and think about how lucky I am, just that I haven't gotten COVID. My family hasn't gotten COVID. I'm better off than a whole lot of other people. So I just try and think about that, and that helps.

Our school has been very much like, you can talk to your counselors if you need to. They're always there. And they've also been very much like, if you need help, ask for it. Don't just stay quiet. But I know for me, personally, I've talked to my mom a lot about it because she works with mental health. And I've also, I mean, I've got my own counselor that I've seen, so I know that's how I get help.

Recently, I haven't just because a lot of them don't reach out back. But when we were in school, I would go to my counselor that I used to talk to a lot. But now that we have a new one, and I don't really know her, and I've never really talked to her, it's kind of harder to talk to somebody you don't really know than to somebody you've known for more than a couple of years.

Yeah. Because I have teachers that always ask how people are feeling, and they want to know.

So the first person I always talk to is my older cousin, just because she's like my best friend. And then if it's something that I think I need help with, I would probably end up going to my homeroom teacher, just because I'm really close with her. And also my (XXXX) teacher, which is also my (club) advisor. So just kind of, I have a really good relationship with some of my teachers that I know I can trust.

I don't really go to a lot of people when I have those, when I'm stressed or have anxiety, because I'm not, I have some trust issues with some people. But the majority of the time, I either go to my mom or one of the staffs at Boys and Girls Club.

I feel like someone who's helped me a lot is one of my small group leaders from church. She is probably the most understanding person I've known in my whole life, and she just, she's a really good listener.

The (stress), usually, for me, it goes away. I just have to complete something. So even just completing one assignment, I just feel like so much better, and then that's usually how I solve the stress.

The people who talked about building more relationships with their teachers, I've been doing that too. I feel like it's just kind of like a quarantine bond. They're one of the only people that you really contact on a basis with, for school and like asking questions and other stuff like that.

I'm in sixth grade. So I just switched to the middle school, so I don't know any of my teachers, and I don't know the counselors.

Our school guidance counselor, so we all have specific emails for our school accounts. So I feel like, if anyone really needed to talk with someone, we have them to talk to. And most of our teachers at our school are really easy to talk to and understanding about stuff. So I feel like we could talk to them, if we needed to.

So when I started hanging out with them (my friends) again, I kind of got better, I guess. They helped me to actually do something with my life or to just go out for sports and stuff like that.

So I am not close with any of the teachers or staff at school. I know that if there was a real issue that I could talk to any of them, but I, they're not like, none of the staff at school are my person of choice that I would talk to.

I know for me, I have confirmation calls for church every Wednesday. Like yesterday, I know my confirmation teacher, she went to everyone's house and handed out like painting stuff. And we watched like a Bob Ross tutorial yesterday and like painted along to Bob Ross. And that was really fun because everyone was talking about like how terrible theirs looked, and it was awful. But we were all having a lot of fun doing it.

Q7. – Awareness of Resources

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

Response themes
A. **When asked about resources available to students who need help, most students again mentioned trusted adults: parents, specific teachers, or the school guidance counselor.** Many students responded to the question about recommended resources by expanding on the kindness and availability of many teachers and of the school counselors. Some school counselors had regular contact with students, either through class presentations or biweekly emails, etc. Students frequently mentioned they had themselves reached out, or would recommend that a friend reach out, to trusted teachers or the school counselor if they were struggling.

B. **Students seemed generally unaware of formal mental health resources, beyond the school counselor, that may be available at their school.** When students were explicitly asked if they knew of options at school other than their school counselor, students almost across the board shook their heads and had nothing to say. Just one student mentioned a school social worker.

C. **A small number of focus group participants mentioned non-school related resources for help with mental health. Students mentioned going on sites such as Reddit, for learning what other people did about their problems, or using apps such as HeadSpace app, for helping them de-stress before bedtime.**

Relevant Quotes
If it's severe enough, I'll just direct them to a school counselor. But, yeah, I really don't think there's too many resources to go to besides the school counselor or a therapist.

Yeah, my school counselor, she has office hours open from 3:00 to 5:00 every single like Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, even though Friday is asynchronous for us. And she usually pops into some of our classes, mostly our social studies or ELA classes. And…very rarely she talks about mental health, presents a presentation, and also lets people know that she also has office hours open. And she sends emails a lot, asking how students are doing, because I get a email from her every two weeks.

At our school, if my friends need help, we have teachers that they can talk to, and there's a guidance counselor that we can talk to. So I could always have them talk to them, or I could tell that, tell the counselor that something is bothering one of my friends.

Like a lot of other people said, our guidance counselor is really good with listening. So…any problems, just like if you don't want like any advice about it, she's just really good with listening and stuff, or like a trusted adult or something.

Our school has some really good school counselors, and there's just an easy form you can fill out on our school's website that, where you can sign up for a slot. Like it takes you directly to a shared Google calendar with all of the counselors, and you can book meetings with them.

I know my counselors sent out an email a couple weeks ago…asking if any of us would be like interested in joining some small like groups to connect with your peers or to talk about anxiety and how to cope with it and stuff. So I signed up for a couple of those. So I know that the counselors have been trying to make sure everyone is talking if they need to and stuff like that.

I would recommend any of their teachers. As I said earlier, the teachers are always there to help in our district.

I would just say teachers, probably, or family. I don't really know any programs or any of that, but I feel like if I had a problem, I would go to a teacher or a sibling or something.

Yeah, I would say that, of course, it depends on what in particular they're going through and for what reasons and everything, depending on how much it's related to school and everything. But I would say that I have a lot of friends that really do trust their teachers with their lives and everything. And I would suggest that they definitely go to their teachers, if they haven't already, because those teachers are very giving. But I also know that I have a couple friends that don't go to my school in particular, but I did go to their school before, and the counselor is not very helpful…So I would suggest, instead of going to the counselor, particularly stay with their teachers.

I would recommend going to my social worker, just because I've worked with her, and I know how helpful she can be. But if they aren't from my school, I have access to a website that I'm using for a project right now, and it just kind of tells other people's stories and tells you kind of how certain things can affect you and how to cope with that. And it's just a really good website.

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

Response themes

A. **Many students felt they were not struggling with a level of anxiety or depression that required intervention.** Although some focus group participants reported feeling stress, anxiety, and depression, and some reported engaging regularly with a therapist, many of the focus group participants gave responses indicating that they and their friends were experiencing relatively low, normative, or manageable levels of stress and anxiety. Thus, one reason for not seeking help was that they did not feel help was necessary at the time.

B. **Focus group participants suggested that some kids might not seek help because they do not have someone they trust enough to confide in.** Some of the students we spoke to suggested that students who do not seek help might not have an adult who they trust enough to confide in. They noted that it takes a lot of trust to ask an adult for help or feel comfortable talking with that person about mental health concerns – especially if a student feels awkward talking to adults in the first place.

C. **Students commonly gave responses that implied the existence of a negative stigma around having mental health issues. Students mentioned concern about friends, teachers, or parents finding out about their struggles, alongside fear of being laughed at, feeling embarrassed, being made fun of, or being judged as dumb or weak.** Student comments reflect a fear of being judged and viewed in a negative light by teachers, parents, and peers. One student noted that people might say they won't judge, but then they react in a "judging way." In middle school, "image matters," and students mentioned feeling afraid of what others might think of them. Some had had experiences where friends made fun of them upon finding out they had seen the school counselor. Others noted a fear that the counselor would tell their parents, and some students mentioned having had a counselor tell a parent or stepparent what they seem to have thought was confidential. Students mentioned fear of their parents not accepting them or getting mad at them for having issues with their mental health.

D. **Students in the focus groups suggested that students might be afraid that others will minimize their problems or find out that their problems are more severe than they want to admit. Others mentioned that students might be afraid that seeking help could make a situation worse.** On one hand, students reported having had their mental health concerns being brushed off by their parents. On the other hand, students suggested that students might not want to be told they have a serious mental health issue. Notably, students also mentioned a fear that seeking help could make a situation worse (for example, if one student sought help for bullying, and the person doing the bullying were punished as a result, could that lead to more bullying than before?).

E. **Some kids don't want to talk about it.** Another common response from focus group participants reflected the idea that some students did not want to talk about their concerns or did not feel a strong need to talk to someone.

F. **Students mentioned time and money as potential barriers to seeking help.** Students suggested some kids might be too busy and stressed about their schoolwork to have time to see someone, and others suggested that going to therapy was an expense that some families might not be able to afford.

G. **Some focus group participants mentioned technology as a barrier to seeking help.** Students mentioned that scheduling an appointment with a school counselor probably required knowing where to go and which links to click. They also noted that seeking help from teachers required sending emails to their teachers, who already received many emails every day. Students' responses suggested that some students may not feel comfortable emailing their teachers or may worry about adding to their teachers' workload.

<u>Relevant Quotes</u>

For me, sometimes I know I'm just scared to ask for help because I, I don't want my teachers or my counselors to judge me if I have an issue. Like if it's something that, in my mind, is kind of dumb, I feel like I'll probably think they're going to think it's dumb. And then, I just get scared to ask for help. Even though I know it's a judgment-free kind of zone, it's still just like I get scared to actually ask for help.

We have our counselor, and a lot of people used to go to her, but now a lot of people choose not to mostly. I think it's just harder to get to a lot of teachers, or a lot of people don't talk to the new counselor just because they don't really know her. But the younger kids do, but the middle school, they choose to not talk to or talk about their problems with other people. So, I think it's harder for them.

They just might not trust the person that they're talking to, even though they know that that person won't tell anything. Or they might just not feel comfortable with that environment that they will be in, talking about what they're going through.

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

I think it might be awkwardness talking to adults. It's sometimes hard just to approach an adult by yourself.

So first of all, trust, because a lot of times people, particularly quite a few adults, will say things like I won't judge you, and then they react like they judge you. Or I won't tell anyone, and then they tell people, things like that. And it's very hard to build up that trust for quite a few students with trusted adults. They don't have trusted adults. And second of all, pressure is because we're getting better and better as a society, but mental health issues are definitely still stigmatized, and people are very afraid to finally say I do have depression, because there are so many negative connotations that go with that. And they don't want to be seen differently because of their mental state.

Well…they might feel embarrassed, and people want to seem all popular and stuff, and they don't want to admit that they're not like doing so well, or they're afraid. Like people call people who tell on people snitches or something. And especially like for my case, like I want to tell people what's, how, some things that are happening really be like bullies, but I'm worried that it's going to cause that person in trouble, because they think they're going to tell on them, and then it's just going to make the whole situation worse.

I feel like a lot of people choose not to go just because like our old school counselor, people would tell her that something was going on and that they weren't feeling good, and she would go to their parents, and I feel like a lot of people don't want to go because they don't want their parents to know.

They want to pile it down inside, because in my experience, I know someone that told somebody that they were having a problem, and then later they got made fun of it for it.

Maybe they can't afford it because of low-income family. Also, they might be really shy. They might have trust issues. They might just not, they might just want to overcome it themselves to feel like they've accomplished something when all this stuff is going on. And they also might just want to, they also just might want to not reveal that they are stressful to anybody and stuff like that.

But I feel like sometimes, as a girl, our counselor is a boy, and sometimes the issues that would come up with girls would be kind of awkward to talk about with them.

I feel like for a lot of people, like especially in middle school, having a good self-image is important, and I guess reaching out to help would make them feel uncomfortable.

…sometimes someone might overhear your conversation with your teacher or something. And they might talk about it behind your back or something like that.

My guidance counselor wanted me to meet in school, and I hated the concept of that, because I felt like my friends would be asking me all kinds of these questions, and I'm just, I would not be comfortable sharing it with them. And so leaving in the middle of class and having everyone watch you and ask you about it and this and that, it's just really hard. Like it makes it even worse knowing that everyone is going to be thinking about it and everything else.

I think a lot of it is people not finding the time to even talk to someone, because they might be really stressed with like finishing their schoolwork or doing other things that take priority, that they might not have time to even talk to someone about their problems.

Q9. – Lessons for Others
Has your school done anything that you have found especially helpful to support students from a mental health and wellness perspective during this time of learning and going to school during COVID-19? For example: Has your school created opportunities for you to talk about your experiences with other students? Or made counselors more accessible? Or have virtual options made it easier to talk with someone?

Response themes
A. **A few students said nothing had changed at their school or that their access to their counselors was similar to that of previous years**.

B. **Most students, however, had no problem coming up with at least one recent or continued initiative in their school or classrooms that they perceived as supporting students and creating opportunities for interaction. There was wide variety:**
- school counselors invited students to attend small group sessions on coping with anxiety;

- the students took a survey at the beginning of the year to identify who could benefit from an anxiety support group;
- the school principal was jazzing up lunchtime food choices to make up for the lack of interpersonal interaction during lunch;
- the school had initiated a new program focused on kindness;
- some teachers were allowing conversation during lunch;
- some teachers implemented weekly ice-breaker questions in homeroom;
- schools posted suicide awareness posters in the halls and signs in the bathrooms, and they held classroom sessions devoted to suicide awareness;
- a school continued, even when virtual, their school-wide virtual pledge against bullying;
- students at one school put on an outdoor performance of the school musical for everyone;
- school counselors were sending regular emails and coming into classes to talk with students;
- school staff gave students hotlines to call if they were going through depression or anxiety;
- teachers were showing videos about stress and mental health, or taking the students through breathing exercises;
- the school was continuing as many extracurricular activities as possible, including some sports and some academic clubs such as forensics;
- homeroom teachers implemented Zoom meetings during the off-day for students to interact and play online games together;
- students reviewed the school's "daily bulletin" together each day in homeroom;
- teachers made special effort to integrate in-school students and online students through Kahoots games;
- schools were providing weekend food for their students or free meals for their online students;
- some teachers were cutting back on homework and being more understanding or lenient about late work;
- teachers included email addresses and links to mental health resources (such as for scheduling a Meet with the school counselor) on all their pages;
- students engaged in a weekly end-of-day class activity, such as yoga or bullying awareness.

Relevant Quotes

I just know that there are people in our building that we can go to that are trusted adults that the students know that's why they're here. You can talk to them, and it's okay to talk to them.

Well…everyone takes like a survey asking like, has something happened in your life, or like, what's going on and if you want help. And so one of my friends was put into an anxiety group or something. And so, yeah, they like, I know that they put people into groups and stuff.

Well, I guess what our school is trying to do that's helping the problem could be since our homerooms can't hang out with each other, the principal has been doing, like every two weeks, your homeroom can buy lunch from any restaurant you pick. And that's just kind of a fun thing to do because COVID is just not fun. And it's just kind of a switch up from all the same old, same old.

This year, we started like a program thing that focuses on like helping yourself and others like being kind, basically. And so that's a thing that we do in our homeroom. And we also started doing like ice-breaker questions every Wednesday, so we have to get to know everyone a little better in our homeroom.

So my school, every Wednesday, we kind of have a work day/off day, and so we, all we have to do is homeroom. And, but if you want to interact with kids, there's a Zoom meeting every Wednesday you can go to. And last week, they played (game)…which me and my friend went to, and it was really fun.

Personally, our school sometimes we'll do like breakout rooms or like Kahoots together, to include the online kids and the in-person kids, and I think that's really cool, because it's really hard to include the online kids and talk to them as well as you're dealing with a room full of children…So I feel like it's really cool that they also include us in there too.

Some of our teachers have been really lenient on late work or assignments that you couldn't get done the night before because of like activities or stress or whatever. They've also put posters around, like I've said, that are supposed to help boost your like self-esteem or help you if you're like sad or depressed. And they also have these bags that they give out every weekend, to kids that need them, with food and cooking supplies if they can't afford that and stuff like that.

Q.10 – Use of Drugs or Alcohol
How do you think COVID-19 has impacted students' use of drugs or alcohol? And why?

Response themes

A. **Many of the students reported that they and their friends did not use drugs or alcohol, nor did they personally know of people their age who used drugs or alcohol. At the same time, many said they thought there probably was a significant increase in the use of vaping, in particular, and to some degree alcohol and drugs like marijuana, among their peers during COVID-19. The most frequent reason students identified was that alcohol and drugs (and smoking and vaping) are ways of coping with or escaping from stress, and students had more stress to deal with now.** Focus group participants commonly mentioned that they thought drug use may have increased with the stresses linked to the COVID pandemic. Students mentioned a variety of other reasons they thought their peers might use drugs: drugs help to not feel anything; students are bored at home; older students are a bad influence on them; it is easier to get access to drugs now because adults aren't paying attention; students have less supervision at home, where for some kids there are drugs/alcohol; parents let their kids try alcohol; parental role modeling; TikTok videos show (glamourize) people vaping and doing other drugs.

B. **Some focus group participants thought that there might be *less* drug and alcohol use during COVID because there were fewer social gatherings at which such behaviors were likely to occur.** Some students felt that because kids had fewer opportunities to gather socially, they were less likely to end up doing drugs and alcohol. These students thought that alcohol and drug use was probably still going on, just not as much.

C. **Although a few students mentioned friends (or past friends) who had started vaping or using marijuana, it was common for students to say they did not know anyone who was using.** Some students said they really did not know what to think, as they and their friend group were removed from situations where drugs and alcohol were being used.

D. **Students mentioned being shocked by seeing kids vape on camera during virtual learning or seeing other students' family members in the background using drugs or smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol. Relatedly, some suggested that drug and alcohol use might be on the rise for adults because of the stressors and because of feeling down and out from COVID.** A few focus group participants noted being struck by other kids vaping on camera or having family members in the background using alcohol or drugs. They were surprised either that students would show family members on their camera or, notably, at the possibility that alcohol or drug use might be so normative in some households that students would not think to keep it off camera. Several focus group participants said that although they did not know if drug use was on the rise among their peers, they assumed it probably was on the rise among adults, given the stressors of COVID such as job loss and having to homeschool their kids.

Relevant Quotes

A lot of people I know, and in my class, don't use drugs or alcohol at all.

Yeah, one of my friends asked me if she were to go get some weed from her mom's drug dealer if anybody would want to smoke it with her. And I'm like, hell, no. I unfriended her pretty quickly after that.

…if there's families who have parents who drink or smoke, I feel like since kids are home more, they might feel more tempted to do that type of use.

A lot of kids are, more particularly what they're resorting to is vaping, just because that's the newer cooler thing, and it's supposed to not be as dangerous as smoking, even though it is. So a lot of kids are resorting to that in particular and likely because of popularity, just because I feel like more kids are doing that for popularity than before as well, because we can't have as meaningful connections, when we're virtual and everything. So they do these things to make them popular, even if they're negative things to do.

Yeah, I have a friend right now that I'm currently, I'm trying to kind of get her help, because she vapes, and she'll occasionally smoke weed. So, yeah, so I don't, and I don't know, she just says that she just does it because she's bored, and it's fun. But she didn't used to do that before COVID, so I think maybe it's a stress thing also because before, she would always talk about how schoolwork was super hard to do and how she just like felt stupid and, yeah, so.

For me, I've seen vaping has become a lot more prevalent. Like I've seen on people's SnapChat stories like, my friend made me a cake because I quit vaping, or something like that, where it's like people are admitting that they actually have done it, and they're trying to quit. And I guess I never really realized that vaping was actually a problem at my school. But I have seen more that people are like, they have been vaping. And I think it's because drugs are some, they're addicting, and they can make you feel happier, better. And I think because COVID just makes so many people feel like upset, that they just like turn to drugs and alcohol.

At my school, there's only been a couple people. They, I think Juuling is the same as vaping, but they Juuled in the bathroom sometimes. And my friend's sister caught one of them. She didn't tell on her because I don't think she wanted to.

I think it's impacted more than it has in previous years, because it's been more stressful. And I know it's, my parents, not drugs and alcohol, but smoking cigarettes, it's helped my parents relieve most of their stress with my family issues and stuff. But I think it's gone up, because it's helped, people say it helps with stress.

I think it makes people think that they'll have less stress, even though it's just bearing down their mind. So I think it would increase.

I can't really have an input on this. I mean, I have a selective like friend group where I know that they don't do those kind of things, or they don't turn to those kind of things for like stress relief, so I don't really have an input on that.

Yeah, so I know that in a recent instance, I was sitting in class…no one could see what was on the screen besides me and the other kid who was in the Meet…The other kid turned around his camera, and he started smoking a vape, and it just kind of surprised me, because, you know, to do that in the middle of a classroom

in real life would be insane, and just kind of seeing it virtually kind of shocked me. And he just started smoking a vape, and I just was very shocked by it. And then after he stopped, all of a sudden, he got out a cigarette and started lighting it and smoked a cigarette as well and then turned off his camera.

Not to mention that we're all at that age, where a lot of parents are offering like just one sip, for example, which I know that the parents don't have a negative intent with that. That's just letting their kids try new things, but the thing is that it only takes one sip for a lot of students. It's genetic and everything for a lot of alcoholism. It isn't that they just drink all the time, and then they become alcoholics. That's not how it always works.

I never have, I don't really know if it has or not. I don't hang out with that type of people. And I would actually assume that it might have, because more people might be getting like stressed or sad, and then they go to drugs or alcohol for that.

But from my experience, we haven't had as many students doing it, but I have noticed students that are at home are with their parents, and they're doing it, and it's really awkward to me that they have their cameras on with their parents even in the room with them.

I feel like a lot of what happens with underage drinking is because of popularity and peer pressure. Like, for example, last year there was a Halloween party, where one kid decided it would be fun to start drinking. And then all of the other kids, based on peer pressure, did it too. So, I feel like it just shocks me that in seventh grade kids are already doing that…

I know some people, I don't really hang out with them as much, but they get really stressed, and they take vaping, for an example, as a way to cope with that. And I know they do that quite a bit, and they didn't really before. And I know like kids may do it to be cool, but like I feel like a lot of people just do it to take on stress as a way of like coping with it, stuff like that.

I can also see how a lot more adults are, who usually, typically, try to stay away from that sort of thing, could be doing it now. Especially with people who have kids and are trying to homeschool them and be their teacher full time and try to work a job, I can see how that could be something an adult would do and be very stressed about.

I would say if there is, I'm less aware of it. Because before, at my school, there was a lot of smoking and stuff, but now I don't really know of that, because kids have their cameras off and stuff. So, yeah, I wouldn't really know.

I feel like there's less, because you're not seeing as much people. You're not doing as much activities since COVID. A lot more things are shut down. You're not allowed to see as much people.

Q.11 – Coping Skills

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

Q.12 – The One Thing…

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

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

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

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

Response themes

A. **Although some focus group participants said their sleep was the same as before or that they were getting less sleep because they sometimes had a hard time falling asleep, many focus group participants said they were getting *more* sleep this year compared to before. The most commonly given reason was that they were able to sleep in a bit on the days they were doing school from home. Students who said they were getting more sleep said that it was good for their health and especially good for their learning and for paying attention in class.** Although the focus group participants varied in whether they reported getting less, more, or the same amount of sleep, a common response was that they were getting more sleep. Students often mentioned being able to sleep in on virtual days; some reported getting up with just a few minutes to spare to use the bathroom and hop on the computer. Students also mentioned that their schedule gave more opportunities to nap during the day.

B. **Another common theme among the focus group participants, especially those in a hybrid or blended learning model, was that their sleep schedule was irregular.** Some students reported that sleeping in on virtual days could make it hard to fall asleep at a good time on the nights they needed to wake up early to be at school the next day. Also, if they were up late and had to get up early for school, they would be extra tired the next day and take a nap, which would continue the cycle.

Relevant Quotes
I am getting more sleep this semester or year, because of the virtual learning. And I think it's made an impact on my learning, because when I have more sleep, I have more flexible learning in my brain, at least, because most of my, all my brain is rested and ready...so I can learn better.

My sleep is great. I've been getting to sleep in on the days that I don't have school, because sometimes, I have practices from 7:30 to 9:30, and then I'm getting home at 10:30, and then it's super-late. It's just nice to have the next day to like sleep in and refuel my body. Because at this age, I think it's really crucial to get our sleep and a right amount of nutrients in our body. So, I just think it's benefiting us.

I know with my, some of my friends at the virtual days, their sleep patterns get so off. Some days, they're going to bed early for school and waking up, and then the night of school or the day after school, they're going to bed at 3:00 in the morning. And then their whole sleep schedule has been shifted. And then they try and fix it, but then the next day for school, they're tired again, and then it's a whole cycle of not getting enough sleep.

Yeah, sometimes I feel that because we do get to sleep in until 9:00, 9:00 a.m., which isn't very late, but I just feel like the night then, it's hard to fall asleep, because I slept in that day. It's just hard to readjust and be like, no, we've only been up for this long. But you still have to go to bed.

My sleep schedule is really off from day to day. I go to bed at different times every night, and I have trouble, in general, with falling asleep. And now from all of my schoolwork that I have to get done, I am a little stressed, and I just don't sleep well.

I feel like I've been getting some pretty good sleep, but overall, when I get home, I get so tired out, and I end up taking a nap. And I end up going to sleep at like 11:00 or 12:00. But I have to wake up at 6:00 in the morning to get ready for school because I get on the bus at 7:00.

Q.14 – Stigma

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

Response themes

A. **Many focus group participants felt there were not negative perceptions around a student who tested positive for COVID-19.** Many students gave responses that reflected that being quarantined and then returning to school was part of their new normal. Sometimes kids had to be quarantined and when the time was up, they could return to school. Several students said that students tried to help each other out when one of them had to quarantine. Some of these students gave responses that suggested they felt COVID-19 was likely to catch up with all of them eventually, whether they took all the precautions or not. Students also mentioned joking, but not in a mean way, when students coughed or sneezed.

B. **Another response given by a few focus group participants was that some people might react poorly to people who contract COVID-19 because they might be under the impression that the person contracted it due to their failure to practice the safety guidelines.** One student, for example, felt that if they had to be quarantined because of a particular person, they would blame that person a little bit for not keeping other people safe.

Relevant Quotes

They just leave for two weeks, and then they come back and just the same.

But when someone does get COVID, we're all like super caring and try to help out as best as we can. I've never seen anyone have a negative reaction to someone getting COVID that they're close to.

I personally went through it. My friends really didn't have a problem with it, but I feel like other people would, but I don't feel like they should just because you're not around them in person. So, but I think a lot of people don't say things just because they're embarrassed of getting it. I don't know.

I haven't noticed anything. But I don't really talk to my friends about COVID or anything like that. We don't really communicate in that way, and we don't really, we just don't talk about it or anything. I've never heard

any of my friends that I've really talked to say, oh, I got COVID, or something like that. But, I mean, if they would, I wouldn't care because it's not their fault.

Everyone can get it at this point. And I find it hilarious that the popular kids make fun of people with COVID and then get it two weeks later.

No, but, I mean, I know that their close friends kind of laughingly joke about it trying to kind of lift their spirits too and trying to make light out of the situation that we've been in.

It's not really a big deal. If somebody tests positive, people around them quarantine. They don't make it known to us who has it. Everybody pretty much figures it out. But they come back to school normal. Nobody really makes a big deal about it.

If you do test positive, you usually have to stay home for two weeks, and you can't come back to school until you don't have any symptoms again. And if you do come back to school, or if you're in class, and you sneeze or cough or something, some people will say like, "COVID" or something as a joke. Everybody does that. And but I don't think people really mean it. I think it's more of a joke.

For me, personally, I feel like I would blame the person if they got me quarantined just a little bit, because I'm doing my part to keep you guys safe. You should be doing your part to keep me safe.

I feel like a lot of people react to people who have had COVID and kind of like, well, don't come by me. And I think that's just because a lot of people think that people who have gotten COVID are not practicing the safety precautions for COVID.

Q.15 – Pressure

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

Response themes

A. **Focus group participants did not generally report strong personal pressure to hide or downplay COVID-19 exposure, and they did not think that students felt ashamed if they got COVID. Some focus group participants thought that students might feel bad if they contracted COVID because some of their friends might miss out on activities due to having to quarantine on their account.** Although many focus group participants said they did not feel ashamed to have COVID or feel pressure to hide symptoms or downplay a COVID-19 exposure, some students acknowledged the perception that individuals might be blamed for contracting COVID, such as by failing to follow guidelines or by traveling. Other students mentioned that when they traveled, they made sure to let people know that they were traveling and may have had an exposure. A few students suggested that students might not want to have or show symptoms because they would not want to be the reason for their friends having to quarantine and miss out on activities.

Relevant Quotes

No one is really being mean to each other over someone got COVID. But sometimes people think that the person who got COVID might have gotten it because they were doing something stupid like traveling across the country and stuff like that. But other than that, no one is really being mean to each other over it. Like we know it can happen to basically anyone just by going to the grocery store.

No, I don't really feel pressure to downplay it because I haven't had COVID or exposure to COVID. But I have traveled and stuff, so I'll tell people I just traveled, so I don't want to possibly expose anybody to COVID. And people sort of kind of understand just because I could've had exposure.

I mean, they care, but I feel like my friends wouldn't, I don't know how you say it, but they don't really feel <u>ashamed</u> that they have COVID. Maybe they're confused. I don't really know of a friend that gotten COVID, luckily. But if they would've, I don't think they would be ashamed.

I don't feel pressured to hide my symptoms, because if I do come down with it, then all the people I was around then can obviously know and then probably get tested to see if they have it. And then I would probably be saving a bunch of other people from getting it. But if there was repercussions, like if people thought that, oh, she got it, and now I don't like her, I wouldn't really care, because I have three amazing friends that go to my school. And I don't really care about what anyone else thinks, because as long as I'm with them, I don't really care.

Sometimes I think that students do feel badly, because their close friends they were around had tested or would have gotten quarantined, and that is ten days of missing out on activities. So I do feel like they feel that pressure, but I don't think other students are giving them that pressure.

I kind of feel like...Like people aren't going to want to tell you if they have it, because they don't want you to feel like it's their fault.

I think students might feel a little pressured that they don't want to acknowledge that they don't feel the best, because then if they do go get tested, come back positive, then that means they're putting other people at risk. So I can see how some people might not want to show that they aren't feeling the best, because they would feel guilty that they're putting other people on missing out on fun activities in school.

APPENDIX A – METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

Focus Groups as the Data Collection Method

Focus groups were the primary method used to gather information about students' perceptions through facilitated small-group discussions. Focus groups are qualitative research methods in which a trained moderator conducts a collective, small group discussion, generally lasting 2 hours. Focus groups create open lines of communication across individuals and rely on the dynamic interaction between participants to yield data that would be impossible to gather via other approaches, such as one-on-one interviewing or surveys. When done well, focus groups offer powerful insights into people's feelings and thoughts and thus a more detailed, nuanced, and richer understanding of their perspectives.[12] We selected focus groups as the method to collect student feedback rather than a traditional survey in order to dig deeper into students' perceptions and experiences with learning, coping, and building resilience during COVID-19.

In January and February 2021, WIPPS Research Partners and MCW conducted 10 virtual focus groups using Zoom with a total of 64 Wisconsin middle school students (see Table 1). A total of 106 middle school students registered for the focus groups; of these, we were unable to enroll 7 of the students due to the inability to contact their parent/guardian using the email address provided by the student during registration, as required by our consent process. Of the 99 students we enrolled and assigned to a focus groups, 64 attended the actual focus group session (participation rate of 65 percent).

Table 1. The Number of Focus Group Participants by Group

FOCUS GROUP EVENT	TOTAL REGISTRANTS	VALID REGISTRANTS	ATTENDEES
Rural 1 - Thursday, 1/28 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm	11	11	4
Rural 2 - Tuesday, 2/2 from 10 am to noon	10	10	7
Rural 3 - Wednesday, 2/10 from 3:30 to 5:30 pm	11	11	6
Suburban 1 - Wednesday, 2/3 from 3:30 to 5:30 pm	11	11	8
Suburban 2 - Tuesday, 2/9 from 10 am to noon	6	5	3
Suburban 3 - Thursday, 2/11 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm	12	11	8
Milwaukee/Racine - Friday, 2/5 from 3:30 to 5:30 pm	9	7	4
Other Cities/Urban 1 - Tuesday, 2/2 from 6:30 to 8:30 pm	14	13	10
Other Cities/Urban 2A - Thursday, 2/4 from 3:30 to 5:30 pm	10	10	7
Other Cities/Urban 2B - Thursday, 2/4 from 3:30 to 5:30 pm	11	10	7
TOTALS	**106**	**99**	**64**

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

Focus Group Framework

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

- Our goal was to include up to 10 students in each group. To meet this goal, approximately 13 students were enrolled in each group, which would account for a "no-show" rate of approximately 30 percent. As stated previously, the "no-show" rate was closer to 35 percent.

- Each focus group lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.

- The participants were students in grades 6 to 8 that represented a broad and diverse mix of socio-economic, ethnic, and demographic backgrounds. When students registered for the focus group, they self-reported information related to gender; race/ethnicity; and whether or not they receive free or reduced lunch. This information was collected only for the purposes of understanding the demographic characteristics of the students in the groups.

- Having diverse participation within and across each of the groups can lessen issues of social pressure and conformity that can sometimes be present in homogenous groups. By taking this approach, we could increase the relevance and potential value of the information, rather than be of more narrow benefit to a specific subgroup of students.

- Students were recruited for participation through various means such as through youth and community organizations, school guidance counselors, social workers, teachers and staff, peers, and other referrals and extensive networking. Appendix C and D provide the recruitment materials. Specific recruitment strategies are discussed later in this document.

- Registration for the focus groups was done via a Qualtrics link. As part of the registration process, students were asked to provide the name and contact information for their parent/guardian. We then emailed each parent/guardian to inform them that their child had registered to participate and included the details of the project. Although signed consent was not required, we informed parents that they could withdraw their child from participation at any time. In cases where a student did not provide a valid email address for the parent, we contacted the student to request clarification.

- Students received a $10 gift card in appreciation for their participation.

- Students were informed that they would not be personally identified in the report or summary of the findings, nor would quotes be reported with attribution to a specific individual by name.

- The focus groups were conducted via Zoom and were recorded and transcribed to assist with analysis.

- At the conclusion of each focus group, a brief, anonymous questionnaire link was provided in the chat in order to get the students' feedback about the experience. Results of the survey are in Appendix F.

- In the few situations where a student registered for a group but was unable to participate, we provided an alternative means for contributing their thoughts and views on learning, coping, and building resilience during COVID-19. To do this, we used an online open-ended feedback form created in Qualtrics to anonymously gather student input on a limited number of questions/topics. WIPPS Research Partners sent a link to the Qualtrics form to each student who registered for a focus group but who could not participate for any reason and invited them to submit their feedback and responses using the online form. The parent/guardian was also copied on the email inviting the student to fill out the feedback form (but they did not see the students' responses). Using an open-ended online feedback mechanism to collect responses is a common form of qualitative data collection used in listening sessions, quality improvement, etc., and provided additional opportunities to collect data. WIPPS Research Partners staff compiled the information and excerpts from the student comments are included in Appendix E. Students' names and contact information were not collected during the open-ended feedback process.

The Interview Guide

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

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

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

Participant Selection Criteria and Recruitment

Students from across Wisconsin in grades 6 through 8 had the opportunity to participate in this project, including those learning in-person, hybrid/blended settings, or virtual settings. Males and females of all races/ethnicities were encouraged to participate and no students were excluded on the basis of gender or ethnicity. To reach students, we used many strategies to get the word out about the project, including:
- School and school professional associations
- Statewide school student organizations
- Statewide youth organizations
- Local, regional, and statewide youth councils and coalitions
- Community and social services organizations
- Medical and mental health providers and networks
- Various listservs maintained by WIPPS and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services
- Social media maintained by WIPPS
- Individual networking with teachers, counselors, or other professionals
- Word of mouth

Protecting Student Confidentiality

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

- All communications about the project during the recruitment phase included a clear statement of the goals of the project and a description of the range of topics that would be covered during the focus groups. While the group discussions would be wide-ranging and touch on students' experiences with school and learning, some of the discussion could raise issues about students' mental health concerns and how they are getting help with stress and anxiety that they may be feeling during COVID-19.
- Participants were informed of the procedures in place to maintain confidentiality of the focus group discussions during the recruitment, consent, and assent processes.
- At the onset of each focus group discussion, the facilitator clearly established the ground rules, including reminding participants of the importance of confidentiality and asking participants not to repeat what is said by a specific individual in the focus groups to others.
- During the focus groups, individuals who wished to make a comment privately could do so using the chat function.
- Individuals could opt out of the focus group discussion at any time, or they could turn off their video setting in Zoom.
- A licensed mental health professional was available during each focus group in case a student had an immediate crisis situation; the counselor was introduced to all of the students at the start of the Zoom session. In no sessions was the counselor called on to provide immediate or one-on-one support.
- The names of focus group participants were not listed anywhere in the reports and have not been shared with anyone outside of the few WIPPS Research Partners staff that organized and scheduled the focus groups.
- Students are not quoted by name or with attribution in any summary report. No specific personal or demographic or other characteristics are reported such that it would allow for the possibility that a quote or comment could be attributed to an individual.
- Recordings of the focus group sessions and the transcripts have not been (nor will be) shared with anyone outside of designated WIPPS Research Partners and MCW staff.

Focus Group Size and Number

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

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

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

There are no firm "rules" about "how many focus groups is enough." In a study by Guest et al. (2016), the authors conclude that when averaging the sequential and randomized order of focus groups, two to three focus groups are sufficient to capture 80 percent of themes, including the most prevalent themes, and three to six groups for 90 percent of themes in a homogenous study population using a semi-structured discussion guide.[15] Another 2019 study found that one focus group per stratum was needed to identify issues; two groups per stratum provided a more comprehensive understanding of issues, but more groups per stratum provided little additional benefit.[16] In this project, 10 focus groups were conducted, with prevalent themes persisting across groups.

Benefits of Participation

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

Identifying Common Themes and Capturing Students' Voices

Three (3) different analysts served as independent observers of the middle school focus groups; each analyst took their own detailed notes of the students' discussions and then subsequently used their notes to identify common themes from across their specific groups. The analysts also identified subthemes that captured potential differences in students' experiences or individual experiences and perspectives that were particularly noteworthy.

The lead analyst drafted a document highlighting the main themes based on the specific groups they observed. In this case, the lead analyst observed 3 different middle school groups. This summary document was shared with all of the other analysts for review and group discussion. One of the takeaways of this group discussion among the analysts was the observation that there was considerable similarity in students' themes regardless of the community designation of the groups; in other words, the main themes generally cut across all groups regardless of whether it was a "rural" group or a "suburban" group. Analysis of the findings by

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

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

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

community group was less relevant or meaningful given the pervasiveness of the themes. In the report, therefore, all focus groups are summarized together. In some instances in the report, we point out relevant experiences of students that may be unique based on community size or rural area, for example, but we decided not to systematically analyze similarities or differences in "types" of communities due to the extent of commonalities across all of the groups. [17]

Once there was general agreement among the analysts on the main themes and subthemes, the lead analyst used all of the available notes and transcripts from all 10 groups to prepare the Focus Group Findings by Question section. Students' quotes from the transcripts were to illustrate the themes in the students' own words. The detailed Focus Groups Findings by Question document was then shared with the analysts for a second round of review to ensure that all analysts felt the document accurately captured the nature of the students' comments and that appropriate completeness and balance was reflected in the narrative. It was important to ensure that the students' quotes reflected the range of students' perspectives on any given topic.

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

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

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

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[17] Students could self-select a group based on which best described the kind of community where their school is located: rural, suburban, Milwaukee or Racine, or other cities and urban areas. To test the fidelity of students' selected community designation, we compared the student's school against the National Center for Education Statistics geographic/community designation for school districts. We found that in 8 of the 10 groups, at least 66 to 100 percent of the students were in the "correct" group based on the NCES designation; in two of the "other cities and urban areas" and "Milwaukee and Racine" groups, there was a considerable mix of community designations such that the groups reflected students in suburban and urban designations.

Focus Group Participants

Focus group participants came from a broad geographic span of rural, urban, and suburban communities throughout Wisconsin, as well as a diverse mix of public, private, and parochial schools. Table 2 provides information about the counties and hometowns of the focus group participants. Students from 24 different Wisconsin counties and 38 different communities participated in the focus groups.

We did not choose specific schools to participate in this project, and we did not target specific schools and exclude others. Rather we used a very broad recruitment strategy (explained later in this document) with the goal that students could register regardless of what school they attend. A benefit of the broad recruitment approach is that the information and feedback from the students would not be overly defined by or weighted toward students' experiences in one school environment or another. Of the 64 middle school student participants, 40 unique Wisconsin middle schools (public, private, and parochial schools) were represented (see Table 3). In sum, focus groups included geographic diversity among the participants, as well as diversity in the kinds of schools that students attend. We do not analyze the data by "school type," nor do we (nor can we) report data for specific schools. It is important to note that geographic and school diversity does not mean *representativeness*; with a focus group design, the intention is not to generalize to the population of <u>all</u> Wisconsin students or make inferences about all Wisconsin students.

**Table 2. Middle School Student Focus Group Composition:
County and Community of Residence**

County	Community	County	Community
Brown	De Pere	Milwaukee	Milwaukee
Brown	Green Bay	Milwaukee	Wauwatosa
Brown	Suamico	Monroe	Glendale
Calumet	Appleton	Monroe	Sparta
Chippewa	Chippewa Falls	Outagamie	New London
Dane	Madison	Portage	Plover
Dane	Middleton	Portage	Stevens Point
Dane	Verona	Price	Phillips
Dodge	Fox Lake	Racine	Burlington
Eau Claire	Eau Claire	Rock	Footville
Iowa	Barneveld	Shawano	Shawano
Jackson	Black River Falls	St. Croix	Deer Park
La Crosse	Onalaska	Washburn	Spooner
Langlade	Antigo	Waukesha	Delafield
Lincoln	Tomahawk	Waukesha	Mukwonago
Marathon	Edgar	Waukesha	Muskego
Marathon	Wausau	Waukesha	Wales
Marathon	Weston	Waukesha	Waukesha
Milwaukee	Fox Point	Wood	Wisconsin Rapids

Table 3. Schools Represented by Student Participation

Antigo Middle School	Kromrey Middle School
Barneveld Middle School	La Causa
Bay View Middle School	Lake Denoon Middle School
Beaver Dam Middle School	Leonardo da Vinci School
Ben Franklin Junior High school	Lombardi Middle School
Black River Falls Middle School	Madison Middle School
Brookfield Academy	Maple Dale
Chippewa falls Middle School	Milwaukee School of Languages
Clear Lake Middle School	New London Intermediate Middle School
DCE IDEA Charter School	Onalaska Middle School
DC Everest Middle School	Parkview Junior and Senior High
De Pere Middle School	Phillips Middle School
Glacier Creek Middle School	PJ Jacobs Junior High School
Glen Hills Middle school	Sennett Middle School
Horace Mann Middle School (Wausau)	Shawano Community Middle School
Innovations STEM Academy	South Middle School
James Madison Middle School	Spooner Middle School
John Muir Middle School	Toki Middle School
Karcher Middle School	Tomahawk Middle School
Kettle Moraine Middle School	Wisconsin Rapids Area Middle School

Tables 4.1-4.4 below show the demographic characteristics of the students who participated in the focus groups, reflecting all 10 groups combined. Females represented about 52 percent of the participants, in comparison to 45 percent male and 2 percent nonbinary. About 23 percent of the participants reported that they receive free or reduced lunch. White students represented 81 percent of the participants, compared to 2 to 3 percent Asian; Hispanic/Latino; American Indian/Alaskan; or Black. Five (5) percent reported a race different from those categories. Understanding these demographics is relevant to understanding the background of the students whose voices were included in the project, and potentially whose voices were not included in the project.

Table 4.1. Demographics: Gender

GENDER	Frequency	%
Female	33	52%
Male	29	45%
Nonbinary	1	2%
Prefer to Self-Describe	1	2%
Total	64	100%

Table 4.2. Demographics: Free or Reduced Lunch

FREE/REDUCED LUNCH	Frequency	%
Yes	15	23%
No	45	70%
Prefer Not to Say	4	6%
Total	64	100%

Table 4.3. Demographics: Race/Ethnicity

RACE	Frequency	%
African descent (Black)	1	2%
American Indian/Alaskan	2	3%
Asian descent	2	3%
European descent (White)	52	81%
Hispanic/Latino descent	2	3%
Other	3	5%
Prefer Not to Say	2	3%
Total	64	100%

Table 4.4. Demographics: Grade Level

GRADE	Frequency	%
6	14	22%
7	20	31%
8	30	47%
Total	64	100%

At the time of the focus groups, 36 percent of the 64 middle school students reported that they were attending school virtually (n=23); 25 percent were attending school in-person (n=16); and 39 percent were attending school in a blended/hybrid model (n=25). It is important to note that of the students who reported that they were attending school in-person, many had just returned to in-person learning at the time of their focus groups (some that very same day). Some students reported that they were anticipating a return to in-person learning in the weeks shortly after their focus group. It was clear that many students had experienced changes in their learning environments over the course of the school year. For example, some students reported going from virtual to some form of in-person or hybrid learning; others reported that they went from in-person to a virtual model. A few students described learning in a combination of all three models over the course of the year. It was also clear that within the categories of virtual, in-person, and blended/hybrid learning, there were many different varieties and approaches to what that meant in practice.

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW GUIDE

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

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

I. **Introduction, Purpose, Logistics, Ground Rules**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II. **Focus Group Questions**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

     e.   Non-school-based: teacher, counselor, coach, staff person, etc. (other adult mentors who are not school-based)

     f.   Parent(s)

     g.   Other family member (sibling, aunt or uncle, cousin)

     h.   Adult outside of school who is not a family member (family friend)

     i.   Church (priest, pastor)

     j.   Community organization

     k.   Outside counselor or therapist

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

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

C. *Barriers to Accessing Resources (10 minutes)*

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

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

D. *Drugs and Alcohol (10 minutes)*

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

    f. decrease: more supervision

    g. no change

E. *Ideas for Improvement*

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

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

III. Optional - COVID questions – only if time allows

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

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

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

IV. Closing

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

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

Some other house-keeping items:

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

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

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

Thank you again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Voices of WI Students Focus Groups

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grupos de enfoque de Voices of WI Students

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

¿CÓMO SE DIRIGIRÁN LOS GRUPOS DE ENFOQUE?

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

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

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

¿PREGUNTAS?

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

APPENDIX E – OPEN-ENDED FEEDBACK

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

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

In-person learning	8
All virtual or remote learning (no in-person school)	3
A blend or hybrid of in-person and virtual/remote learning	2
Total Responses	**13**

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

- *That I am doing pretty well in school, my grades are pretty good.*
- *I was one of the top 5 scores for my biography paper in my ELA class. I'm really proud of what I wrote and telling people about General Vang Pao.*
- *My grades have been getting better.*
- *Well, I've never ever really cared about my grades until this year. I have basically always not been good with school, like last term I was in virtual school and I had no idea because it didn't show in Skyward, but all my grades were F's. This term I tried so hard and so far have two A's and a C in gym, and I only have a C because I missed a day. I also have been trying to find another sport to play. I play softball and softball is my favorite, but I want to find another because I can only play softball in the summer for summer rec.*
- *I have started at a new school and met new people virtually. I also made some new friends, and the school has been going pretty well for me.*
- *Wearing masks, going to different classrooms instead of being in one classroom.*

- *Some things that have gone really well for me is school and my own mental health. Some positive aspects of school was that I was able to go in-person. For me personally I learn better in person than online.*
- *I got into the high school of my choice.*
- *I have been getting very good grades and I found a very great group of friends.*
- *I was able to get some grades up, but not all.*

3. **What are some things that have really not gone so well this school year? These might be things you are struggling with or things that you are most concerned about with respect to school or life in general.**
   - *Virtual learning is hard and inconsistent.*
   - *Something I've been struggling with is my schoolwork. Most of the time my classmates have a lot of questions and the teacher can't really get through the homework. Most of the time I don't have time to do the homework.*
   - *I really miss the 2006 Mean Girls nostalgic feeling :(and I have lots of problems in my love life and school makes it worse.*
   - *Well, before I came back I was so nervous and excited about what if my friends don't remember me? What if they are different, what if they don't like me anymore? I had all those thoughts but when I came back I changed a lot not in such a good way but the rest pretty much stayed the same. My parents are also saying I have had a big attitude lately.*
   - *I haven't been able to hang out with my friends as often or see them in person, another thing is that sometimes if our Wi-Fi goes out I can't get help because my parents aren't home and they have to go to work.*
   - *I have gotten picked on at school in PE class.*
   - *For me I think knowing that I have to be careful and watch what I touch. Also I think not being able to see my family as well was really hard for me.*
   - *I have been struggling with waking up on time and actually getting ready for my virtual classes.*
   - *I don't talk very loud, so I struggle with making new friends on my own. I found one friend and she has introduced me to many new people.*
   - *School is way harder now.*

4. **Are there some specific strategies or things you have found that help you cope better or help you feel more resilient while trying to learn and go to school during COVID-19? Or you can think about it this way: Is there something the experience of COVID-19 has taught you about yourself that has helped you in a positive way that you would want to share with someone else?**
   - *Well since we don't have school on Fridays and Fridays are work days to catch up on things, so I would use that time to catch up on homework.*
   - *Counseling.*
   - *I have found a lot of different things to do. I have found crafts, I have learned how to sew, I have learned a lot.*
   - *I guess if I hear an interesting topic it will get me more motivated to do it. Also, sometimes if I listen to music while doing work it will keep me focused.*
   - *We do in-person learning which helps me learn.*
   - *I think the one thing I kept on telling myself that everything was going to be okay. Just having that positive mindset knowing that I could still live my life to the fullest was the best thing for me.*

- *My friends and I often help each other with missing work, stuff we missed or just encouraging each to get our work completed.*
- *I've found that I learn much better with an actual teacher speaking to me, opposed to reading a book.*

5. **Going forward and thinking about the next several months of the school year that lie ahead, what is the ONE thing you and your friends need most from your school leaders in order to do the best you can in school?**
- *I do not know about my friends but for me it is support.*
- *We would need to stop spending time with each other to get work done, and when we're done, we can hang out and have some fun.*
- *The nostalgic feeling!*
- *I don't know, I think my school is a pretty good school overall.*
- *I think that the teachers just need to understand more about how it is on our side and also for us to understand their side of the story during this global pandemic.*
- *Do more activity in the classroom.*
- *I think the one thing we need from our teachers is for them to just not go so hard on us or tell us that we are doing a bad job. Having that negativity doesn't help us but only makes us put more pressure on ourselves.*
- *I need more communication with my teachers where they will listen and understand my problem or concerns I have.*
- *Clear directions and materials to find the information on.*
- *Put us back in school.*

6. **Is there anything else you wish to share about how COVID-19 and the pandemic has impacted you personally?**
- *I can't see many of my friends.*
- *I'm emo now :) and I really miss the nostalgia.*
- *COVID has messed a lot up for me. I have missed so many things, so many fun events and then my family and I got COVID and we still take precautions and wear our masks and put hand sanitizer on. Once we come out of a store we aren't as worried as we were and when my family and I had COVID I didn't even have any symptoms. Before we got COVID it was so hard because I missed out on seeing my family, my best friend's birthday party, and so much more. I was feeling pretty upset when I found out I couldn't go back to school normally and I had to do online while all my friends did in-person. I missed them like crazy because I was still used to seeing them all the time.*
- *COVID-19 has just kept me at home more, and it has gotten me into more hobbies such as sewing, painting, drawing, playing instruments, playing video games, and cooking!*
- *I feel like COVID-19 is draining towards my mental health.*

Demographics of Open-Ended Respondents – Middle School

Gender

Female	8
Male	2
Non-binary/Third gender	3

Race/Ethnicity

European descent (White)	5
Hispanic/Latino descent	2
African descent (black)	2
Other	2
Asian descent	1
American Indian/Alaskan	1

Reduced/Free Lunch

Yes	9
No	1
I prefer not to say	3

Middle School Students' Post-Focus Group Survey

At the end of the focus group sessions, students were provided a link in the Zoom chat feature for a brief Qualtrics survey to assess their experiences participating in the focus groups. Participants were informed that survey completion was optional and that their responses would be anonymous.[19] No student names or other personally identifiable information were collected. Among the 64 middle school students in grades 6-8 who participated in the focus groups, 61 completed the survey (a response rate of 95 percent). The students overwhelmingly found this to be a positive experience and reported that it positively impacted their mental health. They enjoyed hearing each other's stories and the structure allowed the students to feel heard. The students reported it was comforting and gained new insights about mental health. Beyond an information-gathering method, these results suggest that there may be additional benefits to providing students with similar opportunities to engage with one another and discuss topics of interest and important to them, especially with the peers in other schools and in other areas of the state. This focus group model and the process used to gather the information underlying this study could be replicated in other settings such as schools, school districts, communities, and youth organizations, or applied to other kinds of topic areas.
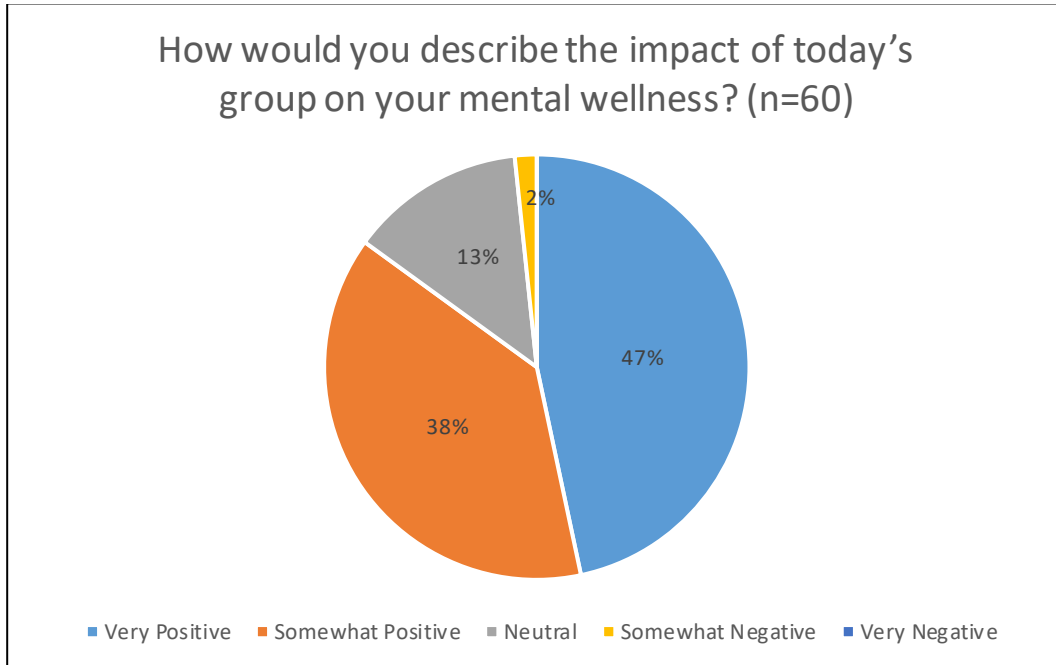
Results

- 98 percent of the focus group participants responded that participating in the focus group was a somewhat or very positive experience, with the vast majority (73 percent) of students reporting that it was a very positive experience. None of the students responded that it was a negative experience.


How would you describe your experience participating in this focus group? (n=60)

2%

25%

73%

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

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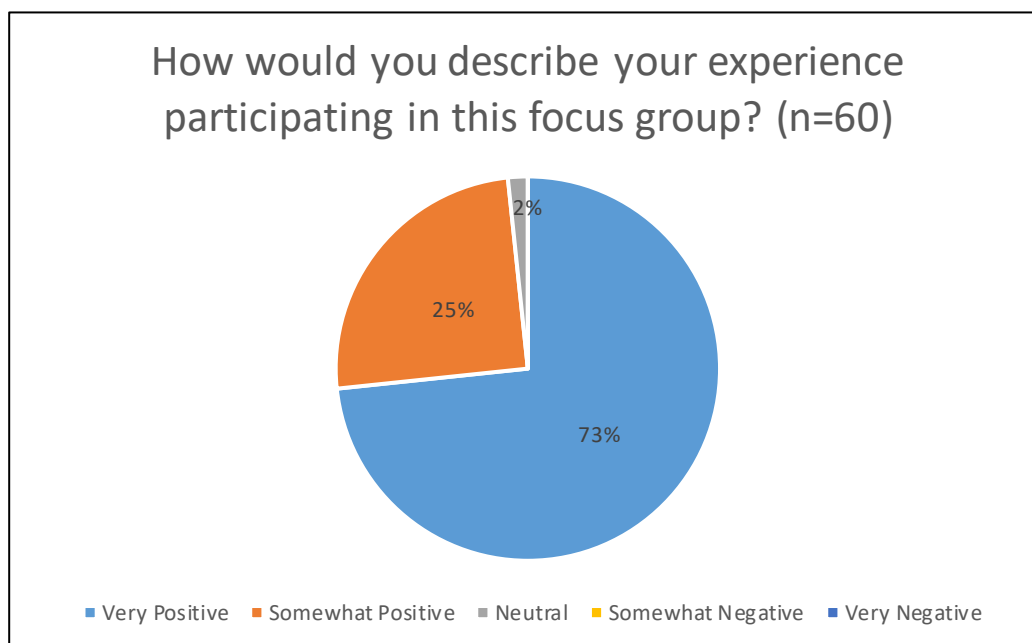
[19] This survey was designed and programmed by Sofie Kjellesvig, a medical student at the Medical College of Wisconsin; she also analyzed the data shown above.

- 85 percent of the focus group participants responded that participating in the focus group had a somewhat or very positive impact on their mental wellness; among those responding, about 47 percent responded that the focus group had a very positive impact on their mental wellness. Two (2) percent reported that it had a somewhat negative impact of their mental wellness; 13 percent were neutral.

How would you describe the impact of today's group on your mental wellness? (n=60)

Very Positive: 47%
Somewhat Positive: 38%
Neutral: 13%
Somewhat Negative: 2%

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

- 56 percent of the focus group participants responded that participating in the focus group with their peers had changed their perspective on mental wellness; 33 percent responded that the focus group maybe had changed their perspective on mental wellness. Eleven (11) percent reported that it had no impact.

Did participating in this group with peers change your perspective on mental wellness? (n=61)

Yes: 56%
Maybe: 33%
No: 11%

■ Yes ■ Maybe ■ No
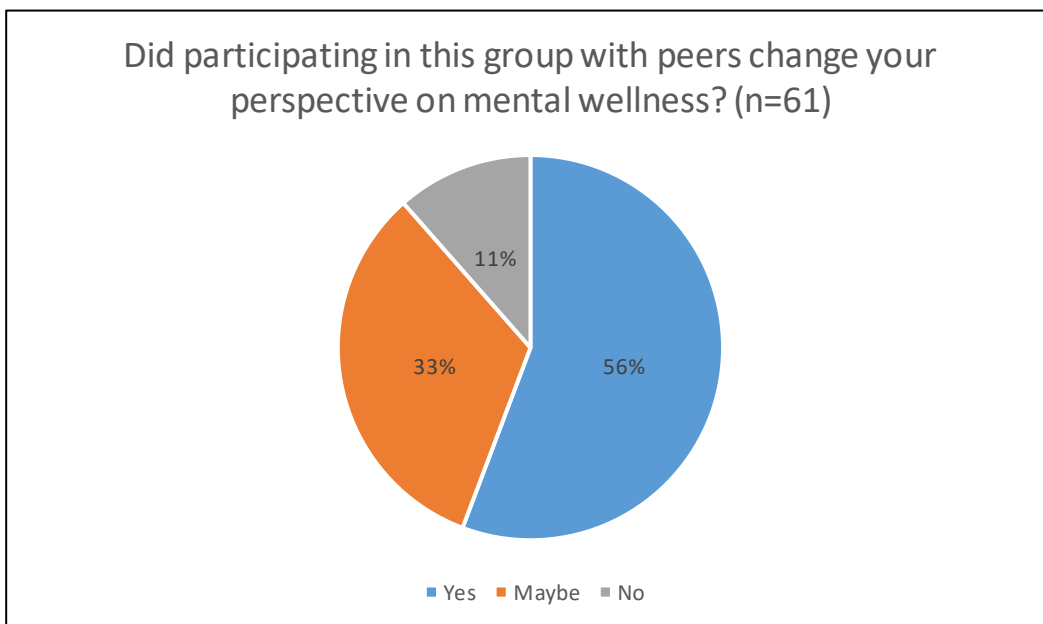
- 97 percent of the focus group participants responded "yes" to the question of whether they "felt like their voice was heard today?"; 3 percent responded "maybe". None responded "no."

Do you feel like your voice was heard today? (n=60)
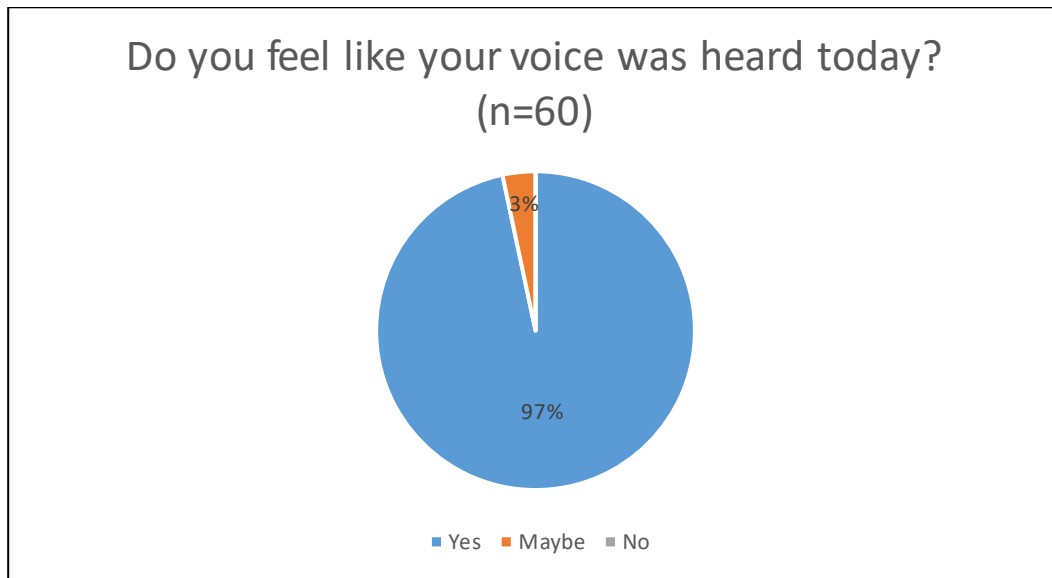
Prompt: Do you have any additional comments about your experience in the group today that you would like to share?
- *I think that it was well organized and that I had fun.*
- *Nothing except for I really appreciate this, and I hope you all have a great day!*
- *This group was giving me more of an idea of what other students do in Wisconsin.*
- *Thank you for having me and letting me share my voice! It was great getting to know all of my fellow peers!*
- *Nope! It went really well!*
- *This is great—totally do it again.*
- *I learned that some people have really tough lives and that I wish that there was more that we could do to help them. It completely changed my perspective about mental health and that I'm worried about people that aren't brave enough to stand up to people, and that they might be in danger. Some more extreme than others, but still...I wish that I could make sure that people are living in safe conditions, and that they don't have to feel scared, or uncomfortable.*
- *This was really fun. I can't believe it was two hours it felt like half the time!*
- *No, thanks for having me! I really appreciated it.*
- *I liked the pace and I feel like the main topics were talked about.*
- *I really enjoyed hearing other people's perspectives and hearing about...situations others are in.*
- *I am glad that each student got to speak, and we heard students from different schools in settings. A lot of the time we can be stuck listening to the same people in the same situation. Through this experience, I, among other students got to hear what it's like for everyone.*
- *I am very grateful to have been [given] this opportunity.*
- *No, the discussion was really good and everyone engaged equally.*
- *No, I just think that it was very well set up for students.*
- *I appreciated that she asked everyone their opinion.*

APPENDIX G – REFERENCES

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