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

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:
Middle School Students' Coping Strategies, Examples of Resilience, and What They Need to Succeed

Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service
Sharon Belton, Ph.D.
April Bleske-Rechek, 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

April 19, 2021

MCW
Central Wisconsin

WIPPS RESEARCH PARTNERS
WISCONSIN INSTITUTE for PUBLIC POLICY and SERVICE

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN SYSTEM
UW

OVERVIEW

This document serves as a supplement to the full report prepared by the University of Wisconsin's Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) summarizing the findings of ***The Voices of Wisconsin Students Project: Learning, Coping, and Building Resilience During COVID-19 – MIDDLE SCHOOL REPORT.[1]*** The full report and this supplement were prepared for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) by WIPPS Research Partners and MCW. WIPPS Research Partners was asked to conduct this project by DHS, with input from representatives from many state and non-governmental entities who serve the educational and mental health needs of Wisconsin's youth.

The Voices of Wisconsin Students project sought 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.

To gather this feedback, the WIPPS Research Partners and MCW conducted 10 virtual focus groups in January and February 2021 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.

By compiling and sharing this information, the "voices" of Wisconsin students can help policymakers and stakeholders make more informed and more targeted decisions about how to support students during these challenging times. This information can also help inform the broader community about additional resources to address students' needs. Below we share a brief summary of the key findings; we urge readers to refer to the full report which provides examples and illustrates—in their own words—the feedback and input from the student participants themselves.

While it is common in focus groups to summarize the themes that emerge across groups, we decided that, with respect to two specific focus group questions, a compilation of the direct student responses could serve as a useful foundation for identifying examples of students' coping strategies that others may benefit from, as well as an opportunity for school leaders to hear directly from the focus group participants and what they say they need to be successful with school and learning in the months ahead (and beyond). These two questions are:

- **Coping Strategies and Resilience (Q11 in the interview guide):** 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?

---

[1] The full report summarizing the findings of the middle school focus groups can be found at https://wipps.org/research-partners/. Separate reports summarizing the findings from the focus groups with Wisconsin high school students can also be found at that link.

- **The ONE Thing (Q12 in the interview guide):** 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?

We used the focus group transcripts to compile this information; any omissions in a specific student's response or comment were not intentional. For ease of readability, in some cases, students' quotes used throughout the report have been edited to remove filler words such as "like," "um," "yeah," "so," etc. Some student's responses may have contained several examples or ideas and could have fallen into several of the broader categories used to organize responses.

For more information about the Voices of Wisconsin Students Project, visit:
www.wipps.org/research-partners/

To view the complete set of reports:
https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-High-School
https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-High-School-supplemental
https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-Middle-School
https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-Middle-School-supplemental

Or contact:

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

COPING STRATEGIES AND RESILIENCE

Examples of Coping and Resilience: 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?

Connecting with Friends and Other People

I've been just talking to a lot more people and trying to like get out of my shell a little bit more.

Having a discussion with like our peers and our classmates would really help us, because then we're getting other opinions about it. And then we also like taking in other people's situations, so we're understanding it more and we're just getting it. And then also I feel like the social interaction could really help a lot of kids, if they needed it.

I just like to hang out with my friends a lot, and I'll, and sports and stuff take the, my mind off of it, off of stress and everything like that.

If something is bothering me, I like to tell someone that I trust right away before I explode on someone. Because I've done that before, and then I felt really bad after. So I just try to tell someone I trust how I'm feeling before I just explode, I guess.

I just basically reward myself. I like to get a lot of my work done, then I can go off and do whatever I want and stuff. And then, also, try to talk to friends and stay social as much as possible instead of just being by yourself all day. And, yeah, going outside and getting fresh air is really important, sometimes helps a lot.

I don't really deal with that much stress or anything like that. I normally just deal with it so I can look forward to watching TV or playing with my dog or hanging out with my mom. But I've seen my friends, I've talked to them on a Google Meet.

I guess just think about something positive. Like maybe what can I still do when this is happening? Or if you can still see your friends, then maybe you can go to your friend's house more often.

Spending Time with Family

I talk to my cousin and my godsister almost every single day, and that's sort of like coping because then we'll kind of do homework on the phone and just vent about school. So that sort of keeps it from boiling over.

We take family walks two nights a week, not only for exercise, but I feel like I really enjoy doing it because we'll talk about things that are going on. So if my mom had a rough day, she'll tell us why she had a rough day. And if my dad didn't have a great day, he'll tell us why. And if my brother had a super-awesome day, he'll tell us why he had a super-awesome day. And we'll tell jokes, and it will just be a good experience to talk to each other and just interact. And for me, that's like so very important, because I don't get that a lot, because I only talk to three people. Yeah, I feel like it's important to me.

So when I was done with school or in the middle of school, when I needed a break, me and my siblings would go downstairs, and we would work out or do something fun so that it would get my mind off of school. And then when I came back, I would refocus and get going, or vice versa, like at the end of school, I would do that just to get my mind off of things. We'd go on family walks and get some fresh air.

Engaging in Self-Reflection

I feel like just shifting your focus onto something else really helps, like doing something that's kind of repetitive and just trying to switch gears on to something that's a little bit more challenging, but it's not the same challenge that you were dealing with before. So it gives yourself something new to think about, so that you're not constantly stressing over that one math assignment or a social studies project or whatever. But it's more fun, I guess, like, oh, can I finish this puzzle in less than an hour?

My brother, he was struggling with getting work done and his grades were not the best. And I think just motivation was difficult. And it was difficult for me, knowing that I could do other things, because I was at my home where I had all the things that I like to do. Yeah, so motivation is kind of a difficult thing.

I'm not as motivated to do all of my assignments. And I feel like there's more things to do when we're on virtual, and middle school is a lot more different than online…because in elementary school, we only had math homework. And now we have homework for every class. So there's just a lot more things that I have to do and a lot less motivation that I have.

I feel like it's taught me to be more positive, because sometimes things are just going to go bad, and you can't think of it badly, or you're going to get down, so you need to think of it in a positive way.

I kind of go into my own area where I can just kind of zone out. The hardest part about being around your own family and stuff is like because in school you don't see them as much. So it's sometimes, just to make it feel like it's back to a normal year, in a way. And they're somewhere else, and you just have your time at home or something. You know, it's nice to just kind of just feel like it's a regular year in that way.

I like taking breaks during the day when I do my schoolwork at home, because I can't just sit down for like an hour or two and just do all my schoolwork. I have to take breaks between different subjects and classes. I don't do my work as good as I know I can.

I have two books full of coping skills that have worked for me. I like doing progressive muscle relaxation.

Now when I was virtual, I would take breaks every hour, so just short ten-minute breaks, just to take my mind off of things and slow the stress down so I could take my mind off things.

Something I've found that helps me was going away from like siblings, trying to find a [location] that wasn't distracting.

I like having my own spot, like I have a desk, and I know that's my spot to work. If I'm sitting at my desk, I know that it's work time and not like if I'm sitting on the couch or in the living room like trying to do work. But I know in the living room, that's where we would watch TV or have food. So I know that if I'm at my desk, I do work at my desk and not try to avoid doing my work.

For school, I've been sitting at my desk a lot more, and that's been helping with paying attention more because I'm not in my bed. And I've just been more focused.

I have been trying to formulate a picture of what a better future school might look like. They keep saying it might be better in fall, and I go ahead and believe that it might get better by then.

Just distracting yourself. It kind of helps me think better sometimes if I take my mind off it for a few seconds, if I'm frustrated with it.

Well, I just have a few fidgets just on my workspace, where I'll have slime or stuff like that. A lot of people think it distracts you, but it really just focuses my mind and keeps my hands doing something else. So that's really helped. And then it's also finding strategies to calm down my mind, like I enjoy running, because it just clears my mind.

Looking for a better future. And you can already kind of predict that it's going to be better because scientists came up with the COVID vaccine. And it's already getting better, so we can probably hope for a better future.

Writing and Journaling

I personally started writing in a notebook. It helps me just because I would think more to myself and write. Or I would also just talk to my mom, my dad, and my grandma. So it really helped talking to people and also just keeping things to myself but also putting it somewhere else that I have close to me. So that really helped me.

Definitely music does help to learn. And one way to cope mentally is writing too. I feel like that just gets your mind, it helps you to sort through things so you can learn easier. I think that helps.

Spending Time with Hobbies and New Activities

I've learned new skills like solving Rubik's cube. A lot of my friends have done that too.

Sometimes just distracting myself from something, I like reading or listening to podcasts or inventing things or stuff like that. It sometimes helps me.

Listening to Music

For me, it's listening to music, talking to friends, doing crafts, drawing, reading, things like that.

Music, watching TV, your favorite shows that calm you. And then just drawing, sketching are very helpful things.

Normally I listen to music. But I just try to relax and calm down, because we have pets here that are good support animals.

I listen to music, and then pretty much pet him [their dog] for like a while. Then I feel a little bit better, because he's so adorable.

For me what is helpful is think calming thoughts in my head, just trying to focus on one thing. And sometimes it's helpful to listen to music, not most of the time, but just a few times.

Staying Organized

A way I've been coping is by making a checklist, just like a running list of things I need to get done. That just helps my mind organize everything and makes it easier to get my mind around.

I'm actually writing a paper right now on self-care, especially reflecting on what's going on in the world. Music is great. Another thing is setting goals for myself has helped me a lot and having a planner by me to write down everything and setting goals to make sure that I'm actually keeping myself accountable for everything that I need to get done.

I have this whiteboard calendar that I look at every time that I do my virtual work so I can see where my deadlines are. That's really helped me see how much time I can work on that, and then also plan out if I have a tournament on the weekend to make sure that I have done that work the day before. I've also found out that in the springtime of last year, when this first started and we were all out of school, I have turned to crafts. That was my way of getting out of the school environment. Like that was my way of calming down and like not getting overwhelmed with my workload.

I try to get ready every day like I would go to school. I'm just sitting in front of a computer, but that helps me focus. And I've made a workout schedule, but it's not really working out, but to try to actually make myself do that. Yeah, make more of a routine.

Well, usually when I stay in my room, that's also how I also get distracted. Because I look around, and I see a bunch of things I can do other than pay attention. So one thing I started doing was going downstairs because that's also where my parents work, so they can also keep their eye on me. That way, I can pay attention.

Exercising, Being Active, and Enjoying Nature

I really enjoy sports and outdoor activities. So, I'd say if you're really stressed, just get out, spend an hour or two or spend some time outside, and then go back in. After that amount of time, you should have a clearer head, at least if you're enjoying your time outside or sports or whatever, you should have a more clear head and be able to get focused and get your work done a lot faster and a lot easier than you were, than you would be if you're stressed and worried about all your classes.

What I like to do throughout the day is I like to space myself from electronics and social media and stuff like that. And I like to walk my dog or clean my room, things that I have been setting off while I was on my electronics, just so I can get some activity in without being on social media and stuff like that.

I am super goal-oriented, and so I channel that stress or the negative feelings that I'm feeling into something positive, and I work on my goals. So whether that's going out and practicing one of my rodeo events, whether it's like roping or whatever, that's kind of my, that's my favorite coping strategy.

Using Technology

What I like to do throughout the day is I like to space myself from electronics and social media and stuff like that. And I like to walk my dog or clean my room, things that I have been setting off while I was on my electronics, just so I can get some activity in without being on social media and stuff like that.

It's taking a break or using electronics in a way where it won't distract you but kind of help you. So for me, I'll listen to music on my phone while I'm working, because you can't do that in class. And it actually helps me stay more focused, because I have that tune in my head, and I'll play a tune that I just think helps me focus…Or if we're doing a creative essay, where we have to write a story, I'll play some music that helps me go with the story, and it helps inspire me to write something more in the story. You know, I just use stuff like that, and just take a mental break after doing a big essay or something. And I've learned not to overuse mental breaks, because that can just hurt you. But just taking a mental break every once in a while can really help you improve. Just set a timer, and go on your phone for a bit, because in real life, in class, you can't do that. But when it's available, I would definitely suggest taking a mental break is a huge thing that's helped me.

A couple months ago, I did a project on self-care. I'm very interested in human psychology and everything. So many of the people from, particularly older generations, try to tell us that technology is bad, technology is bad, over and over again. And I understand that there's so many studies that say, that, yes, technology can be bad. But there's also so many other studies that prove that technology can be very good for us, if we use it in moderation and in the right ways. And in our society, we're bound to use technology, no matter what. So it's better for our teachers and everyone else to educate us on what good things that we should do with technology, not just cancel out the whole thing as a whole.

I've been taking little breaks playing interactive games with my friends, so it's not just random people online or anything. It's not some random stuff that is not at all stimulating my brain or anything but just little things with my friends and then going straight back to work after that. In moderation, I'd say, is the most important thing.

One thing that I've found really helpful is the email. So if they post something on Google Classrooms, which is their main source, you could see everything. And then I would click on it, read it, do it, and then once I was done with it, I would delete the email so that at the end of the day, I would look back and say, okay, so I have a little bit more ELA, I'm done with social studies, so that I would know like how much do I have, how much do I have to go, and plan out.

I know for me, I usually have a really hard time focusing because I always have my phone right by me. So I'm always on my phone during class. So I normally have a fidget-type thing near me, like putty or a fidget spinner or just anything, really, that I can use to fidget and that helps me focus.

Sometimes I'm really tired in the morning when my mom tries to wake me up. And sometimes, I'll start falling asleep. And so I have to stay awake during my classes. So I like to get out of my bed and put it together and make it so I can't be in my bed, and so I have to pay attention. And I open up the blinds and turn on the light so it's bright.

WHAT STUDENTS NEED FROM SCHOOL LEADERS

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?

Involvement in Decision-making; Communication and Information

The reason why we're having a hard time answering this question or we're hesitant…because what we've been taught is not to say anything negative to superiors. The thing is, usually, your superiors will end up saying a lot of negative stuff about you. You have all the negative stuff you want to say about them, but you will get in trouble if you do tell them.

The decision to, hey, do we go all virtual? Do we stay all virtual or do we go back to school? A student or students should have a voice. We should have a way to communicate with those teachers and with our principals and whatnot, and kind of say, hey, this is how we feel about that. And I really think student voice is a big problem right now in schools, especially during COVID, because a lot of these big-time situations and big-time questions, they're lacking a student voice. Yeah, I think student voices could really improve schools going forward.

I feel, at the moment, we don't really have as much of a voice. I just really want them to get feedback for how we're doing and what we should do and what we want, what they should do, and what we want them to do.

Students should get a bit more of a say. It's kind of hard, because obviously, coronavirus is a global health pandemic, and your parents should have some say whether you go back to school, because it affects the entire family. But even just online school, even if we could just get input, like, hey, this works for me and this doesn't, because we are the ones who are learning through online school, and I don't think our parents or teachers can really tell what is working for us.

Well, I agree that people need to listen more to the students. But one of the main points that I would like to bring up is they need to remember that we are middle schoolers. And by that, I mean we're not elementary schoolers, so we can handle some of the topics that you bring on to us. But we're not high schoolers either necessarily, and we can't handle all that either. And high schoolers can't even handle all the pressure that they're put under. They need to remember that we're middle schoolers, so we can have our own say in some things, but also they can't put the same pressures on us as they would on a 20-year-old. And it's very important that they acknowledge that.

We recently had the end of the semester, which means we get put through a lot of tests…what the teachers did was they posted all six assignments, seven actually, because we had two for one class, in that same week with only four days to get them done. And it just put so much pressure on us. A lot of kids, they gave up, and it just made their grades flunk…I just think that seven assignments, like big paragraph-upon-paragraph

essays, due in four days is just, it ruins your mind. I remember sitting here at 10:00 at night just so that way the next day I could have enough time to get my other assignments done. And I really think they need to have communication, because the week before, I think, there were some days when we were barely doing anything. I started school at 7:00 am one week and ended at 8:00 am, because there was nothing. And it kind of just says why can't you put some of that bigger stuff back on the days when we have nothing else to do? Yeah, those days are nice, but I'd rather spend every day doing around the same amount of work, rather than some days be nothing and some days just have, like I said, seven assignments due in four days, some of them less, because they assigned them so late. I think one teacher assigned the assignment two days before the due date. And it was huge piling on top of everything else we had to do. So I think that's one thing they need to improve is communication between the teachers and realizing what a student can and can't do in the amount of time. I know that eventually they pushed back the deadline, I think, one or two days, because of the amount of backlash they got, but I think they do need to talk about that.

More Understanding, Empathy and Sympathy

Just support, really, just a simple email asking how we're doing and how things are going helps a bunch because it makes us feel like somebody actually cares.

Support from our teachers and the staff, and maybe just to be around their devices more, like be able to get back to our emails about questions we have either on our schoolwork or on our homework and things like that.

Knowing that your teachers or guidance counselor or principal or assistant principals just know you and acknowledge that you do work or invite you to a special event or a PBIS award thing to help you. When kids get noticed by their teachers like them and do work, they do better and do more work effectively, and they're happier, so more likely to do better in the class.

When it was locked down, it wasn't that easy. It kind of wasn't the same. Because when adults, when they were little, they got to go to school without masks, without all this stuff. So they don't really know what it's like to go to school as a kid.

Mental Health Support and Resources

I feel like they should focus more on students' mental health, because a lot of my friends are in really low spots right now, and I am starting to get into a low spot.

To recognize mental illness or disorders more. It's not like they don't recognize them. It's just, it's mainly just like autism they pay more attention to.

Changes to Teaching Approaches and Teacher Interactions

Connecting and going back in school learning, connecting with the teachers and the people, face to face, more often, just going in full in-person.

I kind of wish my math teacher was a little less blunt. When the quiz results came out, she was literally like either you did good or you did not so good. And I'm like, are you kidding me?

I would probably say it would be really great if you could just open my school full time. Like when did we not have school on a Friday? Like why don't we have school on Fridays, and why don't you just send all the kids back? There's only going to be like 15 kids in my class. Normally, there's like 30. Just send us all back. Get rid of the masks. I don't like masks.

At least let the kids who want to, give everybody an option to go back to school and/or do virtual. And I would also really like to go a full week with everyone who wants to go, because I have a lot of friends who come on other days, and I don't really get to see them at all.

I kind of wish for some of my classes, that they would give more fun homework. I'm fine with math homework, because I'm usually ahead in math, but I really don't like social studies so the homework that I have is kind of boring.

I think they're doing a good job. But…my ELA teacher gives so much homework, and half of it is just busywork, but she still grades it all. And then on top of that, like this weekend, I had to do five slides for ELA, three worksheets for science, three pages for math in a pamphlet, and then two pages in the textbook. And I don't know, I just felt like I had a lot.

Maybe explaining stuff a lot more, because some kids, even if they are taught stuff, some kids might not understand still. And I wish they had more study time too, so you can understand the problem or whatever in your class.

I don't have any homework. I haven't had homework all year. And I kind of want homework, because I feel like I'm not really learning a lot with, not just the virtual aspect, but not getting as much work done. Like I said, one of my teachers told me that they were four weeks behind in lessons because of having to work virtually and then having kids who don't pay attention. But I feel if teachers do give homework that some kids would thrive from it, and then some kids would even fall farther behind, because there's some kids who don't even get their work done in class, which takes me five minutes.

More on Zoom, social interaction with other kids, having games or stuff you can do online.

I would tell them that I feel that it's better when people interact with at least somebody, whether it's a Google Meet, or you're actually going in person rather than just self-isolation, doing your assignments on your own, and stuff like that.

I would want them to know I would rather just skip a year and then have to do sixth grade over again when we can go in person.

I don't really know what I would tell them. I don't know. A lot of the stuff that's wrong with virtual learning is kind of out of their control, like students not participating. They've tried a lot of ways to get students to participate, but there are certain things like that they can't force people to put their cameras on. They can't

force people to do their work more than they already have. They email all the kids like all the time about doing their work. But like there's still a lot of us that don't do it.

Please support virtual learning more. I, as a virtual learner, feel isolated and not included and sort of second tier. I guess when the student council plans activities, it's for those who go in person. When the teachers do things, they talk to the in-person kids. Some of them don't bother to even send even one email to introduce themselves to their virtual students. It just feels like can I have some more love?

Some teachers, I feel like they should just cut back. Wednesday is supposed to be more like a down day, because you can get caught up from say Monday, Tuesday if you need one more thing to finish. It's supposed to be a day to catch up, not, okay, here is double the work that you usually have, and now you're sitting on your computer all day again.

Update the school system. Change the process or update it so it's better. Mostly how students are told to do assignments, not just this one way. There's like a million other ways you could do it and not just give them one specific way, because that just takes away imagination from the current students, which means they have to get a job where they're mostly, where they can also follow one thing and not follow all these other ways. It might make the job a lot better.

I would like them to explain stuff so I know what I'm doing more.

Teach us more of the lesson and give us more study time before we get on to the test and stuff like that.

I need a little more direction on what we need to do on our virtual days. Because while some of my teachers are very good at going through the next lesson during class when I'm in school, but I need it written down somewhere on a piece of paper or just like in our Google Classroom for me to be sure I know what I'm doing.

I wish instead of having a separate Google Sheet for each class to tell you what you need to do each day, I wish there was one spot I could go that would tell me what I need for all of the classes and directions on that sheet. Just so I can see and know where I need to go the entire time, and not have to open up five different tabs of Google Classroom, six different Google Sheets to find out what I need to do each day for each class. It takes a while. And it's just, it would be a lot easier if it was all on one sheet.

For the to-do list for virtual school, all the classes are set up until the end of the year...I wish they would just balance that (classes) out over the week, so instead of having lots of work, no work, lots of work, no work.

This is mostly for teachers. Some of them don't post all the stuff you're supposed to do on the calendar. Some classes have a calendar we have to go on to see what we're supposed to do, and they don't post everything we're supposed to do on it. So then I end up doing the work on it, but then, apparently, I was supposed to watch some video and then have to fill out an assignment after I'm done with that video. It's just a lot easier to figure out what you're supposed to do if the teachers would tell you everything you're supposed to do instead of just telling us a little bit of what we're supposed to do and then we have to go figure out everything else of what we're supposed to do on the virtual days.

I feel like, so most of my teachers don't explain the assignments very well. They kind of just show us what it is and tell us to do it. That would help if they explained it a little bit better than just telling us what it is. That

would help me quite a bit…to go more thoroughly throughout the assignment. And tell us in description what's the whole thing about and how to do it, and not just say this is the assignment, go do it.

A lot of people have been getting their work in late, and I understand that's what happens…not that they should give them more slack, but there should be reminders and stuff. Because they just say that it's due on Monday, and then people forget that it's due. So that's something that I guess they should give more reminders for the homework.

I understand that they can't do large presentations to the entire school, but we are having homeroom every day, so I feel like they could do presentations in every homeroom, maybe weekly, monthly.

Overall, I think our school is doing pretty good. But I do think something that could help would be if they could send some materials home for us. Because really, right now, all we're getting is our Chromebooks and a website. So if we had materials to work with or do more hand materials to work with for hands-on projects, that would be helpful.

After we're done with assignments, we usually have this website that we use in math, and we have one for social studies too. And it's not really fun, although it does help us learn. It's not that fun to do. So maybe they could have something to do if we get finished with an assignment early or something.

Some of our teachers are like making videos for when we're at home, and I think they could do more of that.

I wish teachers found some more interactive ways, because there are some teachers who are really good with it, and they make slideshows every day for you to interact with. But there's some teachers who you can tell are just like giving you the answers for digital notebooks and just showing us videos. So it's kind of frustrating the lack of effort from some teachers.

The biggest thing is giving us breaks, because we have 90-minute classes for our core classes, and we just need more breaks because we're sitting in front of our iPads or computers or whatever you're using for 90 minutes straight. And that is really, really difficult, especially when you're given time to just kind of go off and work. But still you're just kind of working as hard as you can to get your assignments done. And I think just like giving us a little bit more leniency with deadlines a little bit and more breaks throughout the classes is really important.

I think the face-to-face kids are doing pretty good, but the virtual kids, they're really separated, because there's a small group of them. So I think they should have a little more virtual face-to-face integration.

I think just staying as they are right now. I think it would be really hard if they would just switch it up completely. So I think just staying on track and keeping the load. Our curriculum is getting covered, but not too much to where it's overwhelming. So just to stay mindful that we do have eight classes, and we do have to do all of them and knowing there's a limit to the amount of work that we get.

I think it would be nice that if on Wednesdays, that's our day that everyone is at home, it would be nice if all the teachers could be on the Google Meet. And then if you have any questions at any point of the school day, then you could go on there and then ask them as if you were in a one-on-one classroom with them.

I feel that we could probably have less work to do at home. Because if you miss one day at school, you're behind on a lot of work. So if we get less work to do at home, it would help bring people in more, bring down the stress and be less anxious about work and things. And you actually have more time to socialize with family and things, so just giving less work to go with.

I recently missed a day at school. And so now, I have all these assignments from that day that I have to do because I missed that one day.

I would say to cut down on the homework load because some days, I come home, and I do homework until I go to bed. And it's just so stressful and frustrating doing so much work.

The teachers explaining how to do the work more and giving us interaction with other kids. And not putting us in breakout rooms by ourselves because that's what a lot of my teachers do.

Well, either more time to do homework if you're going to assign a lot, or less homework. Because during the week, we get a lot of homework, and they only give us two or three days. So I'd either like more time to do it, or if they're going to give us that much, I'd like them to extend the time it's due.

Do more things with the class. Because a lot of times, we just do things by ourselves in the breakout room or something, and it's really hard.

I have a teacher who doesn't really understand how much the other teachers are already giving us. So I feel like I lost it again.

I had a teacher last year who, I mean…he gave us a lot of homework, not constantly, but he did give us a lot, which was annoying. And on top of that, not saying our other teachers give us a lot of homework, but he gave us the most. Usually, when he gave us homework, other teachers gave us a lot too, which was kind of annoying. Also, you know, there's those kids that bring up, are we going to have any homework today? Gosh, they're annoying.

For us, we have asynchronous Wednesdays, so, and some teachers assign very little work, and some teachers assign quite a bit of work on Wednesdays. And I think the teachers who assign a lot should just cut down on that a little bit, because when it's like, when there's no teacher to teach it to you or anything, it can just be hard to do a lot of work. Some teachers will just do like, okay, get these couple things done and then you're good for the day. And I think that all teachers should cut down on the workload just a little on like one day to give you a little break.

Attention to and Communication about Safety and COVID-19

Not to send kids back to school even if the numbers are starting to drop. Keep kids virtual especially for next year, because not a lot of kids can or want to wear a mask. And you're also likely to endanger the teachers, because there are a lot of teachers that are old or go home with somebody that is a high risk.

One thing that I definitely want to bring up to them soon is that we shouldn't be sending kids back in full time, because we started out hybrid, then we went to all virtual, now we're hybrid, and now we're going to go full

time. So it's been kind of all over the place, and I feel like we're just pushing it a little bit too fast and it could endanger a lot of people.

I think that students just need to have more of a voice in safety precautions that they want to take with COVID-19, and I really do think that state governors need to take a backseat. Like with this whole mask thing. I know my dad, he was working with insulation, and his insulation got into his mask, and I mean, if that's something that you can see in the air, then how on earth is this protecting us from a virus that you need a special microscope to even view it? So I feel like if we don't want to wear a mask, we shouldn't really be forced to.

Ability to Connect to and Socialize with Other Students

I'd probably say like being able to go back to school and stay back in school instead of having to have a schedule, because you have to talk to your principal, talk to the principal at the school and then make up and say when you want to do it and if you want to go back, go virtual.

For me it would be just being able to go every single day with everyone at school, because then I would get the social interaction I need with my friends, also being with all my teachers and stuff like that.

Maybe some independent time, even if you're in COVID…the people who are ahead [on their schoolwork] get an independent day where you're just with your friends and you get to do whatever you want. The teachers just check in one or two times throughout the day, and then you get the whole day to yourself. But during COVID you don't get to do it anymore. So especially for the virtual kids, since they're online, they don't get to engage and talk to their friends at all. So maybe some independent time where you can just spend time with your friends.

Right now, our school is doing pretty good with making it more normal right now. But some of my friends and me, sometimes you get distracted during class or stressed. So I think maybe they should make it a little more fun, because right now, it's harder for people to focus, maybe because something is going on or just because of the pandemic. So people can't really focus as well as they normally would.

I think something that would help would be more opportunities just to do things. A lot of opportunities have been taken away because of COVID. So I would like to see that.

Before I came to middle school, they always did a play, but that was taken away. I'm not sure if it was because of COVID or not, and I was really looking forward to doing crew for that, but now I can't do that. So that's a big thing that I would like.

Introduce some sort of way we can communicate, the virtual students can communicate with the face-to-face students. Because while I'm not virtual, I know it's difficult for the virtual students at my school to socialize with their friends, because as human beings we need to socialize. That's one of our core things. So when you limit to us our social skills and when you limit us being able to socialize, then it just doesn't work, and it kind of puts more stress on the students, because they want to talk to their friends, and they just kind of get more sad, because, when I was virtual, it kind of felt like it was all work. The teachers seemed like they were enforcing all work, and they didn't even allow us to talk to each other.

I need time to actually have social interaction with other kids and not just sit in class and have a lecture. Just give us like five or ten minutes to talk to other people.

I haven't gone back to school yet, but when we go back to school, they're like, oh, during lunch, you can't talk. And during recess, you have to keep your masks on and like stay six feet away. And I think if during recess they would bring out the balls or something to just make school a little bit more enjoyable with COVID.

Other Ideas

What would help me the most is if, well, first of all, this dream is not going to become a reality, COVID to be over. It's not going to be a reality in the next two months, right. And that would make me my best, everybody, in person, all the time, snow days to be back, because that just lets us unwind from all the school.

It would also help if they would provide a better feeling of school. Because most people that I know get really, really, really fidgety during school, so if they would provide fidget things, I know I would do a little better because I could play with like a little fidget toy in my hand and listen to school. I know a lot of people that would also benefit from having a fidget toy next to them as they do school.

I really don't like my school board, and some of the decisions they've made have been really frustrating.

I mean, since this started, there's been the different learning options, and they've done their best to accommodate those who feel really strongly about in person and those who feel really strongly about going virtual. And I'd say that I just kind of learned a lot about how people's ideas and opinions can differ a lot, and it's really hard to find a happy middle. Especially because these crazy, huge situations that are out of our control cause these different situations, and these differing opinions don't help that either.

My sleep schedule is really off from day to day. I go to bed at like 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.

During the day, I get overwhelmed very easily. I get up for schoolwork and stuff, but I cannot sit down and concentrate on my schoolwork. So at night, when I'm worn out and then my mind starts to calm is when I'll do my homework. During the day, I cannot focus. I start to wonder, and then I get overwhelmed so fast. But at night, my brain is just starting to shut down, and that's when I'll do my homework so that I can stay focused and get it done. So then, I'll fall asleep at like 1:00, 2:00. Like anywhere from 11:30 to 3:00 is when I'll go to bed.

There was one person that just got sent home yesterday for the rest of the school year because he wasn't wearing his mask properly. And he isn't the best student, but I don't think that they should just shove him out of school for the whole year because they weren't wearing their mask. I mean, yes, he didn't constantly wear his mask, but you shouldn't kick a person out of school just because they weren't wearing their mask properly.