

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

HIGH SCHOOL REPORT – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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

To gather this feedback, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners² (a unit of the University of Wisconsin System) and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) conducted 13 virtual focus groups in January and February 2021 using Zoom with a total of 96 Wisconsin high school students. The students come from 29 different Wisconsin counties; live in 46 different rural, urban, and suburban communities; and attend 56 different high schools. By compiling and sharing this information, the “voices” of Wisconsin students can help policymakers and stakeholders make more informed and targeted decisions about how to support students during these challenging times. This information can also help inform local communities about the need for additional resources to address students' situations. Below we share a summary of the key findings. But we urge readers to refer to the full report which provides examples and illustrates—in their own words—feedback and input from the student participants themselves.

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

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

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

Stress, Anxiety and Depression

1

Many focus group participants reported that they and their friends and peers are experiencing high (and increasing) levels of stress and anxiety, and in some cases, depression during the pandemic. For some of the students, COVID-19 has exacerbated existing mental health challenges. Students' reasons for reporting these concerns include significant challenges with virtual school and learning during COVID-19; keeping up with homework, concerns about their grades, and their loss of study skills; concerns about their futures; lack of connections with teachers, peers, and school generally; diminished social opportunities and losses of connections with friends, teachers, and peers; and isolation. While many students reported struggling during COVID-19, some did report that their stress and anxiety had decreased during COVID-19 due to factors such as more sleep, more time to oneself, more time to work out, less pressure to hang out and be social, and they have adjusted well to their learning model.

2

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

Challenges of Virtual School and Learning

3

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

³ At the time of the focus groups, 70 of 96 students were in fully virtual or blended/hybrid models; of the 26 students who were in-person at the time of the focus groups in late January and early February, many had just recently returned to in-person learning. Many students had experienced multiple learning models over the course of the year and had switched between various models.

Connectedness and Belonging

4

Many of the students who participated in the focus groups expressed feelings of grief surrounding the loss of aspects of their high school experience, sports, clubs, and activities. The cancellation of sports, clubs, band, choir, performing arts, and other extracurricular activities was noted as a significant loss for many students. For some of the students, the lack of sports has made it harder for them to stay on track with their schoolwork given the structure that practices and sport activities give to their routine; several noted the negative impacts on their physical health. Some students expressed frustration that sports were taking place at their school, but their clubs were not.

5

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

6

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

7

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

Getting Help: Mental Health and Wellness

8

The students in the focus groups expressed that they commonly turn to friends for support with mental health challenges, followed by their parents; school-based resources were perceived by the students as more limited or not accessible. It is not clear whether friends or parents are equipped with the information and resources needed to help. Most of the students in the focus groups had a trusted adult that they could talk to, although this was not always an adult at their school. Parents were the main adult that students said they reach out to for help. Some students reported having no one to talk to, causing them to bottle their feelings up and “suffer in silence.”

9

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

10

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

Coping and Resilience

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

12

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

13

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