

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

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WIPPS Research Partners

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WISCONSIN INSTITUTE for PUBLIC POLICY and SERVICE

# WIPPS Research Partners Mission and Values

- Unit of the University of Wisconsin System
- Provide research that helps communities make more-informed decisions
- Value objectivity, credibility, and transparency
- Do not take positions or make policy recommendations



# Project Funding and Partners

- Supported by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Overdose Data To Action Grant
- Developed with input from many partners



**Extension**  
University of Wisconsin-Madison



# Outline of Today's Presentation

- Background and project purpose
- Overview of focus group methods and approach
- Highlights of key findings\*
  - Stress, anxiety, and depression
  - Learning environments
  - Connectedness and belonging
  - Mental health and wellness
  - Coping and resilience
  - What students say they need
- Next steps



\* Findings from high school groups are shared today

# Project Background and Goals

- Summer of 2020 – DHS inquiry from UW Extension
- Little information available about students’ experiences and perspectives
  - WIPPS “Voices of Marathon County”
- Understand how students are coping with school, learning, and life
- Broadly share student voices
- Use data to make informed decisions



# Focus Group Approach and Methods

- Focus groups are helpful for understanding experiences
- Students in grades 6 to 12 from diverse backgrounds
- Medical College of WI – IRB approval
- Broad, statewide recruitment strategy
- 23 two-hour Zoom discussions
  - January and February 2021



# Student Focus Group Participants: Geographic, Community, and School Diversity

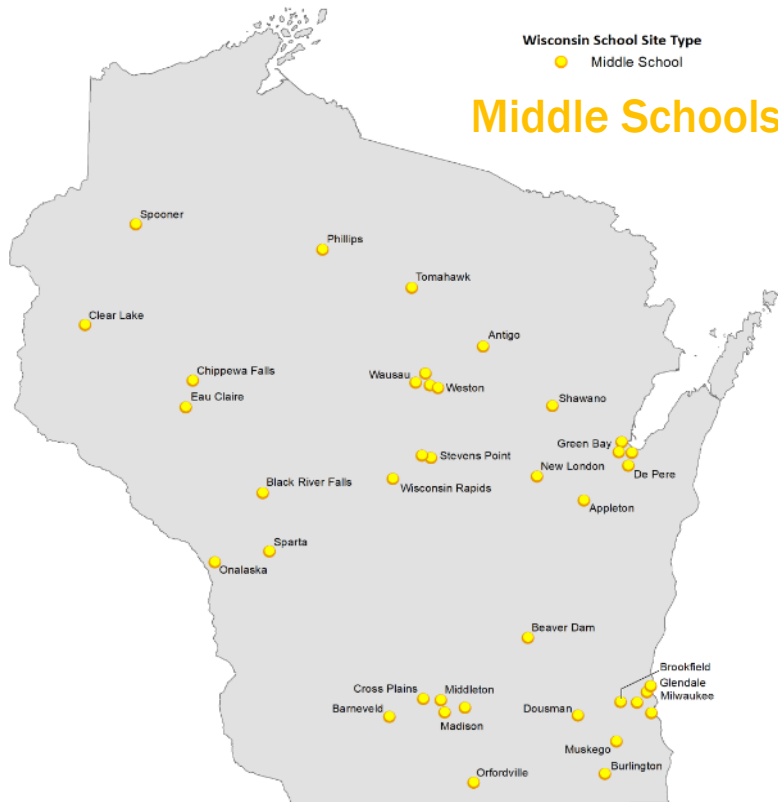
160 Total Students From Across Wisconsin



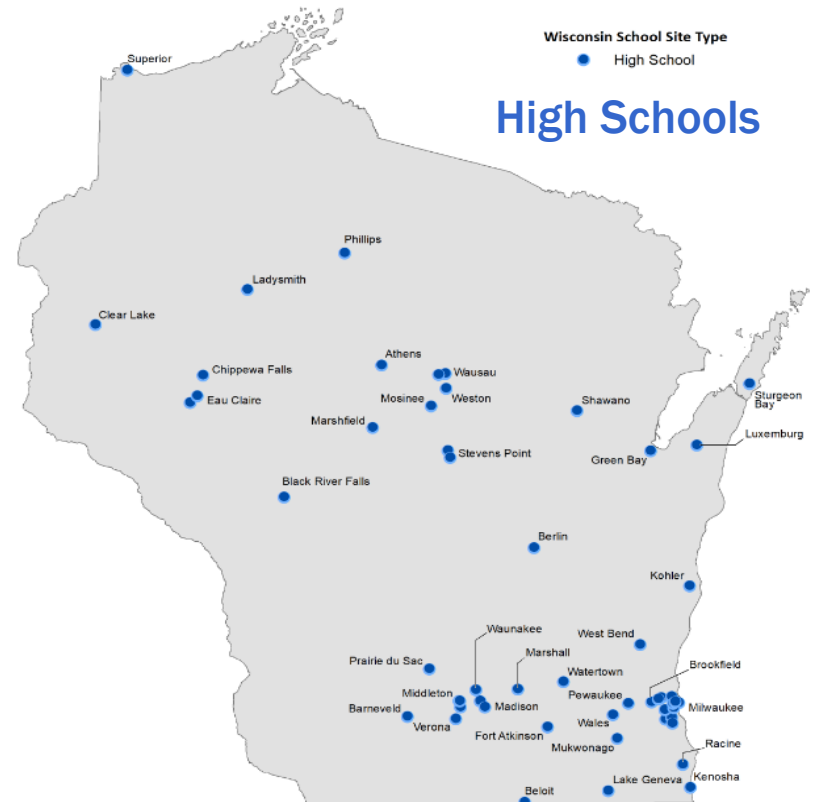
	Middle School	High School
Focus Groups (#)	10	13
Students (#)	64	96
Counties of Residence (#)	24	29
Communities of Residence (#)	38	46
Schools (#)	40	56

# Broad Geographic Scope of Student Voices: Diversity of Views and Experiences

Voices of Wisconsin Students: Learning, Coping, and Building Resilience During COVID-19  
Geographic Locations of the Schools Attended by Focus Group Participants



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Geographic Locations of the Schools Attended by Focus Group Participants





# About 75% of Students Were in a Virtual or Hybrid Learning Environment

160 Total Students From Across Wisconsin



	Middle School	High School
Students (#)	64	96
Schools	40	56
Learning Environments (%)		
Virtual	36%	52%
Blended/Hybrid	39%	21%
In-Person	25%	27%

# Demographic Characteristics of Focus Groups

	Middle School	High School
Male	45%	20%
Female	52%	77%
Non-binary or self-describe	4%	3%
Free or Reduced Lunch	23%	39%
African descent (Black)	2%	10%
American Indian/Alaskan	3%	4%
Asian descent	3%	17%
European descent (White)	81%	58%
Hispanic/Latino descent	3%	4%
Other or prefer not to say	8%	6%

# Separate Middle and High School Reports

## See [www.wipps.org/voices](http://www.wipps.org/voices)

### Middle School

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April 19, 2021



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

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# Students Want Their Voices to Be Heard

*The people in power should respond more to the students and ask them how they're feeling in different ways to improve...*

*...We've got to communicate back and forth.*

*Another thing would be if the school took more consideration of the students and their situation, because sometimes it feels like the school doesn't listen to our opinions or things that make us feel distressed.*

# Summary of Key Themes

- High (and increasing) stress, anxiety, and depression
- Significant challenges with virtual learning environments
- Lack of connectedness to school, teachers, and friends
- Students have heightened expectations of their teachers
- Limited awareness of mental health resources
- Stigma, skepticism, and concerns about confidentiality are barriers to accessing help
- Perceived increases in substance use among peers
- Despite challenges, students have developed new coping skills and ways to be resilient



# Student Voices: Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

*Lots of kids are pushing themselves, are not sleeping well, and are anxious about their schoolwork.*

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

*The schoolwork can really cause your mental health to go downhill because you're worried about it. A lot of people, like me, take school very seriously and I like to be proud of my grades. People are having a tough time.*

# Many Students Reported High and Increasing Levels of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

- Theme of high stress and anxiety during COVID-19; worsening for those with existing issues
- Multiple contributing factors
  - Challenges with virtual learning
  - Keeping up with homework
  - Lack of connections with teachers
  - Concerns about grades and study skills
  - Concerns about their futures
  - Diminished social opportunities
  - Limited access to support



# Additional Nuances Related to Students' Levels of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

- Some reported less stress and anxiety due to more sleep, less social pressure, and more down time
- Lack of stress may also reflect apathy (“numbness”)
  - Consistent with decreases in motivation towards school
- Family approaches may create social pressures
- Some anxiety about returning in-person
  - Want reassurance about safety protocols
  - Loss of “people skills” and “study skills”
  - Hard for students who need to stay virtual





# Student Voices: Learning Environments

*Some teachers don't post that day's work until 3 in the afternoon. We are not their priority. I am not as important. It's what it feels like.*

*I'm a hard-working student, but this has caused me to give up and lose all motivation...*

*Learning at home gave me time to go at my own pace...so it's really nice to have more time to actually learn the material...instead of it being thrown at me...*

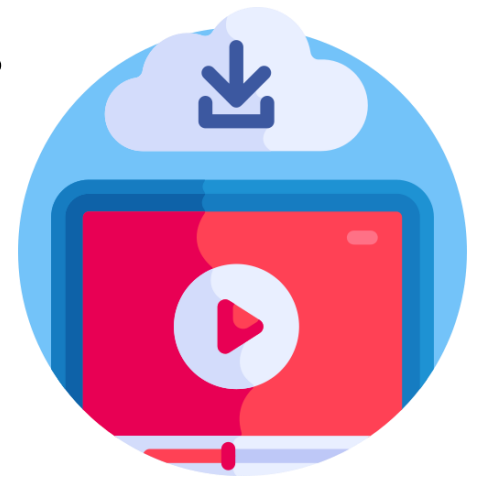
# Many Students Experienced Significant Challenges with Virtual Learning

- Significant increases in workload
- Lack of engaging ways of learning
- Lack of hands-on learning
- Difficulties accessing teachers for help
- Feeling “forgotten”
- Increased distractions at home
- Challenges with time management
- Decreases in motivation
- Cameras off (creates barrier)
- Technology issues
- Lack of concern about mental health



# Students Could Identify Positive Aspects of Virtual Learning

- Increased flexibility
  - Work at own pace
  - Could take breaks when needed
  - Spend more time on subjects as needed
  - Time to pursue hobbies and activities
- Independence
- Understand own learning styles
- More sleep
- Flex days



# Student Voices: Connectedness and Belonging

*The sense of community and connection to both my peers and my teachers is lost.*

*My teachers do have a connection with the in-person students, but [they] don't really pay attention to the virtual student.*

*Three of my teachers really make us feel like we belong. One teacher does a mental health check every day. Another teacher, I go in, I listen, I leave. I log in. I log out. It's fine, but there is no sense of belonging.*

# Students Generally Reported Diminished Connectedness and Belonging

- Lack of connectedness to school, teachers, and friends was more pronounced for virtual learners
- Students deeply miss opportunities to socialize
- Freshmen feel especially disconnected
- Sports, clubs, and extracurriculars
  - Help students feel more connected
- Common experience of pandemic
  - Helps some students feel less alone



# Teachers Play an Especially Important Role in Helping Students Feel Connected

- Increased importance of student-teacher dynamics
  - Loss of spontaneous interactions with teachers
  - Small gestures resonate with students
- Inability to access help when needed
- Turning cameras off
  - Contributes to disconnectedness
  - Could signal student may be struggling



# Student Voices: Sources of Mental Health Support

*I could trust the counselors, but I would go to friends and family first.*

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

*We have a guidance counselor at our school, and she has a lot of great resources. However, she's very busy, so it's difficult. She's not always available.*

# Friends are Primary Source of Support; Students Had Limited Awareness of Resources

- Friends are primary source of support, then parents
  - Unclear whether peers and parents are equipped to help
  - Less access to friends during COVID-19
- Limited awareness of school-based resources of mental health and wellness support
- Students referenced school counselors, but many noted they are often busy
- Need for more resources at school
- Many deal with feelings on their own





# Student Voices: Barriers to Accessing Support

*There's still this huge stigma around depression and anxiety.*

*I feel embarrassed when I go to someone. I feel like I should be able to handle it on my own.*

*Students and staff are judgy. Our guidance counselor and principal say no one will know, but it ends up that they tell your parents or another teacher.*

# Key Barriers Include Stigma, Skepticism, and Lack of Trust

- Stigma was main reason students do not seek help
  - Fear, embarrassment, and shame
- Skepticism about whether getting help will work or how to talk about what they are feeling
- Breaches of trust
  - Concerns about confidentiality
- School counselors are “too busy”



# Student Voices: Drug and Alcohol Use

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

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

# Many Perceived Increases in Use of Drugs, Alcohol, and Vaping Products to Cope

- Students perceived increases in use of drugs (marijuana), alcohol, and vaping products
  - Lack of other healthy coping mechanisms
  - Boredom, more free time, lack of supervision
  - Alleviates feelings of fear and isolation
- Some felt pandemic may decrease substance use due to less access



# Student Voices: Findings Reasons to Be Positive and Developing New Coping Skills

*You kind of appreciate things more, because, for me, I've been quarantined so many times, that by the time I get back to school, I appreciate going and being in person.*

*Some of the positives for me are new hobbies. And being more independent, especially during this time, it gives you more time to focus on your homework or understand things better.*

# Despite Challenges, Students Find Reasons to Be Positive

- Gratitude for family, friends, and their health and safety
- Appreciation for school, especially in-person
- New skills resulting from time in virtual learning
  - Self-advocacy and time-management
  - Understanding of learning preferences
  - Appreciation for sleep
  - Increased comfort in being alone
- Explore interests and hobbies



# Students Developed New Coping Skills and Ways to Feel More Resilient

- Connecting with friends and others
- Spending time with family
- Engaging in self-reflection
- Writing and journaling
- Development of new hobbies
- Staying organized
- Listening to music
- Exercising; spending time outdoors
- Taking a drive
- Using technology



# Student Voices: What Students Need from School Leaders to Be Successful

*I would tell them that we're all trying. We're trying every day. We're getting out of bed, and we're giving it all we can give some days.*

*I wish they would put themselves in our shoes and in our teachers' shoes, because a lot of them aren't physically in buildings right now, so they don't understand...*

*They should be more understanding and open minded with us and help us and know that it's a very big transition going back into school.*



# In Their Own Words: What Students Need from Schools to Be Successful

- Involvement in decision-making
- More communication and information
- Communication about COVID-19 safety
- More understanding, empathy, and sympathy
- Mental health support and resources
- Changes to virtual teaching
- Ability to connect with other students



Read “**In Their Own Words**” Reports!

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# What's Next?

- Access the reports!
  - Emotional impact of the students' own words
- Share findings with school leaders, agencies, community and youth organizations state-wide
  - Implications beyond the pandemic, especially for learning and mental health
- Distill findings and generate ideas
- Find ways to include student voices



# See [www.wipps.org/voices](http://www.wipps.org/voices)

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# Intrinsic Value of Student Focus Groups

- 97% had a somewhat or very positive experience
- 93% reported a somewhat or very positive impact on their mental wellness
- 63% changed their perspective on mental wellness
- 96% felt their voice was heard
- Value in exchange of ideas with peers



# Student Voices: Finding Value in Focus Groups

*I really liked hearing other people's perspective on things. It was very eye opening.*

*It was definitely beneficial to my mental health. I would want to do this again. It helped me express myself and made me feel happier.*

*I am really glad that I was a part of the group and people got to hear my voice.  
I really felt that my voice was heard!*

# Questions?



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