



> A Snapshot of Student Voices Related to Connectedness and Belonging

In the following document we take a focused look at findings from the Voices of Wisconsin Students Project that are specific to the topics of connectedness and belonging. We highlight findings from the high school student focus groups. However, many of these same themes are reflective of the findings of the middle school reports and are relevant to middle school students as well. For more information and copies of the project reports, see <http://www.wipps.org/voices>

Lack of Connectedness and Belonging during COVID-19

Virtual students generally reported diminished connectedness and belonging, compared to in-person students.

Many students expressed a lack of connectedness to their school, teachers, and friends. This was especially pronounced for 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 not feel left out. For example, one in-person learning student noted, "When I'm at school, I feel really connected. Our senior class has 60 kids; I am with a lot of the same kids all day." Some students expressed this directly with statements such as, "I feel disconnected." The lack of connectedness made it easier for some students not to do their homework because no one knew who they were, and there were no regular check-ins on the status of assignment completions until the end of the semester. Not being able to access help or tutoring services further contributed to feeling disconnected from school; for some students, this would snowball and result in them falling behind, losing track of assignments, etc. While some noted that teachers were using breakout rooms during classes, many students strongly disliked being in breakout rooms, noting that often students do not turn their cam-

eras on ("breakout rooms are the worst thing ever") or that the experience is "awkward" when only a few people have their cameras on, and no one else participates. There were a few instances of students who had more positive experiences with breakout rooms (specifically, "When I do get in a group where everyone is talking, it's lots of fun." But many virtual students believe that teachers "don't have a connection with virtual students" or that "they don't pay attention to the virtual - only the in-person."

Students expressed mixed feelings about belonging, with those attending school virtually feeling a diminished sense of belonging. Virtual students may not feel like they are in a "school" ("I am just on a computer with some people"). They also may feel less included and accepted and miss their friends. Virtual school can be especially hard for those who are shy or have difficulty "putting themselves out there to make friends." One virtual student noted, "I feel like I am on my own, surviving this pandemic on my own." Access to friends and the ability to make friends is a key aspect of student connectedness and belonging. One student described "stress and depression and hopelessness when you can't see friends." In some cases, a student may be more proactive in trying to connect with teachers by joining office hours, showing their face on camera more, and answering questions.

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.

In situations where students from multiple middle or junior high schools feed into a larger high school, freshmen felt it was more challenging to make new friends or get to know their classmates virtually. For example, one freshman noted that, "I'm a freshman, so I don't know what most of my class looks like, which is really odd, just knowing like four or five people in my class looks like. It's really strange. And so there's like, the community is just completely lost there. I barely know anybody, and it's really difficult to make friends during a Zoom call. So it's weird, for sure."

Reinforcing a common understanding of the collective challenges helped some students feel less alone. "I feel more belonging - a common sense of everyone is struggling exists in the school. We regularly discuss mental health issues and the pandemic." Another student expressed this as, "But now we're all kind of like the same person where we're like, oh, we're all in the same situation. We can't go out play sports. We can't go to art clubs. So, in a way, I feel like that kind of connects us all and like makes me feel included."

The Role of Sports, Clubs, and Activities in Fostering Connectedness

The students expressed that sports, clubs, and extracurricular activities help them feel more connected to their school, their friends, and their peers.

Sports, clubs, and activities help students feel a sense of connectedness and belonging. Some students expressed a sense of unfairness of seeing sports take place but not clubs. This gives them a sense of feeling "overlooked," as if clubs are not as important as sports. Those without access to sports said they missed their community. The ability to see and talk with friends and participate in sports and extracurricular activities with peers were key elements of students feeling connected to others and to their school. Many students reported that their communications with friends from school has decreased during COVID-19 and they have lost contact with friends. Some have lost contact due to differences among their friend group in terms of the amount of social activity that they can engage in. Some noted that they had not seen some of their friends since last March's school closures. Some students are finding ways to maintain connections on their own or are making more of an effort to reach out through SnapChat, FaceTime calls, texting, Discord, writing letters, multiplayer online games, and doing assignments and homework together online. Several students noted, "I am using FaceTime a lot more this year," and, "I FaceTime my friends a lot more than I used to. We do our homework while we are

FaceTiming together." Connecting with friends outside of school in community or youth organizations (for example, Scouts) has also been a way for some to connect. Others appreciated the small things that they can do while in school such as having socially distant lunch periods.

Several students expressed the personal challenges they have experienced when they see their classmates doing things (sports, social activities, etc.) that they cannot because they have to participate in virtual school (because they or a family member is particularly high risk). One student noted that it "amplifies the feeling of being an outsider." One student mentioned having to watch from home and take notes when the anatomy class that was doing dissection.

Grieving the Loss of the Experiences and Connections

Many students expressed feelings of grief surrounding the loss of aspects of their high school experience, sports, clubs, and activities.

Students were grieving the loss of many key aspects of the high school experience. They described a sense of "missing out on normal things" and "getting robbed" of key high school opportunities, such as homecoming and other traditions. One student noted that, "It's hard mentally when you are losing out on so many things." When talking about this topic, another student noted, "There's a lot of sadness." Several older students expressed concerns for younger students who cannot easily make social connections in platforms like Google Meet. With respect to the loss of traditions, one student felt that their school was taking things overboard and that instead of taking everything away, effort should be made to try to keep as normal a year as possible.

The cancellation of sports, clubs, band, choir, performing arts, and other extracurricular activities was noted as a significant loss for many students. Students who are musicians miss being able to access their instruments that are at school and to play and perform with fellow musicians. For some 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 while their clubs were not. Among the students' concerns related to these activities are the loss of relationships, opportunities to develop leadership skills, and in some cases, a shift in the group of kids they hang out with. For some students, sports provide a mental health release. To cope with the loss of these activities, some students are working out on their own (running, walking outside, lifting weights, or doing workout videos) and in some cases, starting their own clubs or participating in clubs online (for example, Model UN and Science Olympiad).

Overwhelmingly, students 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 missing others who are remaining virtual. Students who are quarantining worry about maintaining their connections with friends. One student noted, "It's socially hard not being able to talk to people." And "the social connection is not as good." Students attending school in-person noted that the separation required at school can be difficult, especially not sitting by friends in class or at lunch and with desks spaced out. While overall very few students expressed issues with respect to wearing masks, several noted that wearing masks and using sanitizer routinely can be a struggle.

Greater Importance of Student-Teacher Interactions

The students identified teachers as playing an especially important role in helping them feel more connected to their school and peers and a greater sense of belonging. Students' expectations of teachers in terms of providing them with leadership, reassurance, and support may be even more pronounced during COVID-19, especially for virtual learners.

Many students described examples of the key role that teachers can play in helping them feel more connected to their school and to their peers during COVID-19. 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. There were many students who recognized that some specific teachers were making efforts to provide them with 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. For example, several participants mentioned the importance of being able to see their teachers on in-person "extra help" days. Other students mentioned that they value teachers who provide opportunities for extra help. For example, teachers who have regular office hours, host one-on-one Zoom meetings, and respond to direct messages and emails. One student expressed this as, "I feel like I belong. Teachers don't get annoyed when I ask questions. We are communicating positively." Another noted, "Teachers are good about replying to my questions and emails." A third student offered, "Teachers do

a good job of trying to stay in contact. But there is less human interaction, so the only way we can get help is if we seek help. This year really is what you make it. Teachers are making sure that students get their work done and stay caught up." The simple gesture of a teacher asking students how they are doing or taking the time reach out seemed to resonate with many of the students. One student noted, "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." Another student echoed this sentiment. "Our school counselors have been reaching out biweekly, scheduling office hours. The teachers send out emails every week and are receptive to student questions. They are reinforcing that we are all alone, but we are alone together... none of us wants to be in this situation so if we make a mistake. (There is more grace this year)."

Some students expressed frustration regarding situations where they had asked for help (specifically with schoolwork), and they did not get response. As one student recollected, "I send out emails to multiple teachers. I get that they have other students. But if the only way I can communicate is through email, it matters to me. It sets me up to fail because I can't get in touch with my teachers." One student had an experience with an outsourced tutoring organization that their school had contracted with, but often the tutors could not answer the questions. "My grades have gone down. I was an A/B student; this year I failed. I can't get a hold of my teachers. Even when you do get help, all of my teachers have office hours at the same time."

Many students described situations where students routinely turn their cameras off during virtual classes, further contributing to a lack of connectedness. Several students expressed that when a student turns off their camera, this should signal that the person may be struggling and prompt teachers to reach out and connect with that student and understand why they do not want to be on camera. One student said, "Cameras [off] are a definite sign that I don't want to participate. I don't feel up to it. I stay up later...I need to take extra time to get myself together and keep myself sane." Another student noted, "It bums me out. Teachers should be worried about the people that aren't showing up. What's going on?" At the same time that many students expressed a desire to "see" their classmates with cameras on ("If a few people would be brave enough, others would follow"), several noted that some students may not have access to a place at home where they feel comfortable being on camera and that being on camera may make them feel more vulnerable. One student noted that the blank screens in class helps them feel "a bit more accepted" and less like the "odd one out"; "they are all blank screens during class, nobody is a step ahead of anyone else."

In Their Own Words...

Below we feature a sampling of student comments relevant to the topics of connectedness and belonging.
A comprehensive set of comments can be found in the reports.

I feel a bit more detached from school. I know for virtual students, I think they feel more detached than ever because I have friends and colleagues who are doing virtual, and they all say the same thing. They say it feels like a vacation for them. Like it doesn't even feel like they're at school. Like it's just like a side activity. And it's no different, I feel like, in person. You're actually there, but the work is definitely different. So there's not that sense of connection between you and the school anymore. It's just kind of like, oh, I'm here now, but I'm staying safe because of COVID, so it doesn't really count in that kind of way.

"I mean, from an all-virtual standpoint, this is probably the least connected I've ever been in a school year. I've had some interactions with teachers and stuff like that, but overall, not really. I mean, I still, you know, obviously I still talk to my close friends, but I'm not making any new friends or anything like that...you know, it's kind of sad"

I would say that my teachers really don't have a connection with us. Well, besides being in person, my teachers do have a connection with the in-person students, but as many times I have to stay virtual, I realize that the teachers don't really pay attention to the virtual students. And a lot of the virtual students don't really have their cameras on, so I really wouldn't know how they look. So I would say I don't have a connection with the teachers or the students.

If we were in an actual classroom, I would just be able to go up to my teacher's classroom and talk to them. So, ... it's different, for sure. And for talking to my classmates, that's a whole different story, because I haven't seen most of my classmates, because I'm a freshman, so I don't know what most of my class looks like, which is really odd, just knowing like four or five people in my class looks like. It's really strange. And so there's like, the community is just completely lost there. I barely know anybody, and it's really difficult to make friends during a Zoom call. So it's weird, for sure.

Like our teachers would always put us in breakout rooms and stuff. It's like, okay, cool, and I like...breakout room, and I could be the only person with my camera on. And I'll be like, hi, guys, remember me? Like three months ago, you know, we were all back in school. And they'd be like, wait, what's your name again...?

I am feeling less connected. Teachers will tell the in-person kids one thing but then never send that info to the other kids. I do feel more connected to my friends, because my parents are letting me hang out with my friends and my girlfriend.

I really don't feel like I belong. My teachers don't know how to handle mental health issues. If you go in to ask for extra help, he makes you feel really stupid and he's condescending. Some others are understanding, but they don't post office hours or express that they are here for the students.

The physical aspect of just being together is really beneficial for my mental health. I see my friends, one or two at a time, and outside when the weather allows. I work at Target. I want people to know that I am smiling at them and the mask is such a tangible reminder that we are disconnected, and this is not normal.

I honestly hate it. There's a lot that's, I've missed out on. We never got our homecoming, and I don't know, things like that. Those should be normal high school experiences, and it's just a weird feeling that, oh, you grew up with these movies, looking forward to these things. You've heard your parents talk about these things, but your opportunity to have a normal experience is just...really not possible anymore.

I have been asking way more questions than I have in the past, because I want to be connected to my teachers. I just kind of decided that on my own, that I would have to be more outgoing if I was going to be successful.

I feel really connected still. Since I'm in person five days a week, there hasn't really been any effect with that.

I'd say that we all pretty much have the same fear of getting corona and all of the other uncertainties. So I think everybody is in the same mindset as you. So it's more comfortable, and we all know what we need to do. And so in the sense of belonging, I think everyone who's here knows why they're here. And so I don't think anybody feels out of place right now.

From the way our school is trying to say, you belong, it doesn't, the point does not come across. Our school is probably really bad at it. Like the LGBTQ people do not feel comfortable here. Like I know that. It's very not cool, but I know that they don't...and we have zero African American and black people here. We did have one two years ago, but he left immediately because he saw that there was no other[s]. But we do have a couple Hispanic. But they're all in one class. So they're like completely separated, which is, I don't know if it's because they're trying to still learn English or some other reason. But I'm pretty sure it's just because of the language barrier, and they need different teachers.

They try to make it so they promote the message. Like, yeah, everybody, everyone belongs here. But it's nothing more than that. It's just kind of like they say it, but they don't really do anything else to make it clear.

Project Background

The Voices of Wisconsin Students Project sought to better understand how Wisconsin 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 University of Wisconsin's Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) conducted a total of 23 virtual Zoom focus groups in January and February 2021 with a total of 160 Wisconsin students (64 middle school students and 96 high school students). The students were from 38 different counties and 68 different rural, urban, and suburban communities. The students attend 96 different public, private, and parochial schools. Separate reports were prepared for middle and high school students. Copies of the reports can be found at <http://www.wipps.org/voices> or directly at:

<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>

WIPPS Research Partners responds to community needs by providing research and information that can help citizens and communities make more-informed decisions about issues that matter to them. In the case of this particular 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. This project 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. We partnered with the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) to provide valuable oversight of the research project through the Institutional Review Board; MCW faculty also served as members of the research team.

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