

## > A Snapshot of Student Voices Related to Coping And Resilience During The Covid-19 Pandemic

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 coping and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. 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>

### Finding the Silver-Linings and Reasons to Be Positive

**Despite significant challenges, students are finding the silver linings, reasons to be positive, and many have developed a greater self-awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

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. For some students, they appreciated being able to spend more time with their family and have recognized that their family members can be a source of support and encouragement. In some cases, students developed a greater sense of empathy for their parents, which in turn led them to contribute more around the house. Several students noted that the social limitations of COVID-19 resulted in a “winnowing” of their friend group such that they developed a greater sense of who their “true” friends are, and those friendships had deepened during the pandemic; in some cases, COVID-19 has provided an opportunity for some students to make new friends. Several students expressed a sense that they realized that their teachers “care about them a lot.” For some students, the pandemic has given them a greater appreciation for school in general, noting that they had taken for granted the benefits that school

plays in their lives beyond academics. One student noted, “I never thought I’d miss going to school. I took it for granted.” For another student, the process of being quarantined at home due to a COVID-19 exposure gave them a greater appreciation of the value of being in school.

**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 when they know that many other students across the state do not.** Several students who had been able to return to school in person 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. Students attending in-person valued their ability to access help from and connect with their teachers, participate in sports and clubs, and socialize and interact with friends and other students. While many of the students in cohort-type models described challenges staying connected with friends in other cohorts, a few students managed to make new friends in a different cohort. Many students had favorable comments about their school having a “catch-up day” (for example, a Wednesday or a Friday) which was designated a day to get extra help in-person, or to work

on assignments from home. Because some students were choosing virtual options instead of in-person, some in-person students had smaller class sizes which allowed them to get more individualized help from teachers. While some students cited the challenges of wearing masks all day, they recognized it as “their new normal.”

**Virtual learning has provided some students with a greater sense of independence, flexibility, and ability to learn at their own pace.** This was expressed as an appreciation of being able to manage their time; spend less time on one subject and more on another, if needed; and to make decisions that are better for them with respect to how they are learning. 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). The freedom of virtual learning has allowed some high school students to pick up a part-time job or work additional hours at their current job. For example, one student noted, “I don’t have to log on at certain times, so I can work more hours [at a job]. More hours means more savings.” Some students have developed a greater understanding of their personal learning needs, preferences, and styles. As one student put it, “I have worked on my own personal learning style more.” Another student commented, “I didn’t like it [virtual school], but I learned about my own ambition to learn. I depend on other students to help me learn.” It also forced some students to recognize the importance of getting adequate sleep and breakfast in terms of their ability to learn effectively. Other students expressed a greater sense of efficiency when learning at home and better time-management skills. Some students welcomed that virtual learning suited their personality, especially those who like to work independently. In some cases, students noted that their grades had improved during virtual learning. Several students noted that they learned new things about themselves in that they enjoyed being alone and it was refreshing not to have the demands of socializing or talking with other people; for some, learning at home presented fewer distractions.

The cancellation of sports, clubs, and extracurricular activities has allowed some students to develop new interests and new ways of spending their time that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to develop. However, it should be noted that students saw this as a silver lining and a way to put a more positive “spin” on the challenges of this past year; for the vast majority of students, the cancellation of their activities was a significant concern and loss. Students noted they had developed new hobbies or had more time to keep up with their hobbies. By being able to complete their work more quickly during the day, they could get their homework done and go to the YMCA to work out, for example. The later start time of classes while learning virtually or on “at-home days” was appreciated by students who value their sleep. Several students had favorable views of shorter school days or modified schedules which allowed them greater flexibility to fill their time in other ways, such as with jobs, exploring more interests, and having better balance in their day.

### Development of New Coping Skills

**Students have developed many coping skills and ways to feel more resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some students learned new things about themselves that they are grateful for.**

**Many students could identify specific strategies or things they have found that help them cope better 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, Bible study; spending time with pets; emotional releases such as crying to relieve 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 a car. A comprehensive list of specific examples can be found at:

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

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

## Finding Value in Sharing their Experiences

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

**At the conclusion of each focus group, participants were given the option to complete an anonymous online survey.** The students overwhelmingly found the focus group to be a positive experience and reported that it positively impacted their mental health. They enjoyed hearing each other's

stories and the structure allowed the students to feel heard. The students reported it was comforting and gained new insights about mental health. Beyond an information-gathering method, these results suggest that there may be additional benefits to providing students with similar opportunities to engage with one another and discuss topics of interest and important to them, especially with the peers in other schools and in other areas of the state. This virtual focus group model and the process used to gather the information underlying this study could be replicated in other settings such as schools, school districts, communities, and youth organizations, or applied to other kinds of topic areas. See Appendix F in the full reports for more information on these results.

## In Their Own Words...

Below we feature a sampling of student comments relevant to the topics of coping and resilience during COVID-19. **A comprehensive set of comments can be found in the reports.**

*I think a positive is 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 there and being in person.*

*It's really nice being in person, getting to see my friends again. I really missed them a lot while we were out back in March and that whole summer. So, yeah, it's just really nice being able to see everyone again.*

*So some things that have been going well this trimester for me [are] that I've been back in school, which is a lot of fun because I'm able to see my friends and socialize with them, which is something I wasn't really able to do when we were virtual. And I'm able to see my teachers, and that's a lot of fun because I personally learn better when I'm in person, and I'm able to see what they're teaching us. So that's definitely been some positives.*

*Learning at home gave me time to kind of go in my own pace, just because sometimes, it takes me a little longer to absorb the information than my classmates. And so it's really nice to have more time to actually like learn the material I'm supposed to be instead of it just being thrown at me, and then I'm supposed to learn it in a day. And so that's been really helpful. And also, still being able to relax and spend time, spend more time with my family is also really nice.*

*We've been back semi in-person. We have this system where half the school is in person for a few days, and then it switches to the other half. But I guess it's been a little better than being full virtual. It's been a little easier to follow along. I know my grades dropped a lot when I was virtual, and now they're a lot better, so.*

*So, I'm luckily able to go to school where the teachers actually care a lot about us. So, I'm able to make those connections with my teachers. Learning-wise, I feel like I'm not the best of my ability right now, just because it's over the computer, and I'm able to search up stuff, and there's distractions all around.*



*In our school, since we've gone full virtual for the time being, I've had more time to keep up with my hobbies, because they issue less homework to us in general now. My grades are doing better than they were with increased homework.*

*Some of the positives for me, I guess, well, obviously is probably new hobbies. And I guess I feel being more independent, especially during this time, it gives you more time to focus on your homework or understand things better. Definitely that, for me, that was one of the positives. I kind of saw myself in a different state of just focusing on school a bit more and just seeing what I can do to help out.*

*I'm all virtual. The only major benefit of that is that I can kind of manage my own time, I guess. Like I get things, if I don't feel like I need to spend a lot of time on a certain subject, I can spend less time on it. And if I was in school, you'd have to, you know, spend as much time as you're in class, but I can kind of make decisions that are better for me.*

*Well, my school pushed back the starting time for classes, so my first class isn't until 10:00. That's amazing. I love that.*

*This is something I am willing to share more personally, but my stress, depression, and anxiety has gone down a lot this year. This being said, I have more social anxiety from not seeing my friends and not having any social functions. With the decreased anxiety and depression...I cannot speak to the fact that increased mental health is just due to online school, but I definitely feel that having control of my schedule and getting an appropriate amount of sleep plays a role.*

*Some of my teachers have gotten a lot better with technology since they're kind of forced to be able to do that. So it's kind of nice having teachers that don't necessarily have to rely on our tech services. I mean, they still need tech help, but they're a lot better now, which is quite nice.*

*What I hope from this, though, is it shows an example of the things I can do...It was just kind of like a test flight of getting a job and still holding up school.*

*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.*

*A positive: being able on my virtual days to be able to watch lessons at 2x or 1.5 speed. It has been hard to go back in person and listen to them in person. It's too slow. I was able to get things done faster [virtually].*

## 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.

### For more information about the project, please contact:

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