

## > A Snapshot of Student Voices Related to Their Learning Environments

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 students' learning environments. 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>

### Students Describe Challenges with Virtual Learning

**Many students have experienced significant challenges with virtual learning during COVID-19; these challenges contribute to their stress, anxiety, and/or depression.**

**Learning has been a significant struggle and challenge for the vast majority of the students who are in a virtual learning model. 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).** Even some in-person learning students experienced virtual learning at some point during the pandemic due to temporary school shifts to virtual learning or quarantine/isolation. 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 implemented virtual and in-person models; difficulties accessing their teachers for help in a timely way; lack of hands-on learning opportunities; increased distractions while trying to learn at home; lack of engaging ways of learning remotely; challenges with time management and keeping track of assignments and due dates; decreases in motivation; and temptations to do the bare minimum needed to complete assignments.

**Many of the virtual students expressed a sense that virtual learners are an "afterthought" or are "forgotten" by their teachers or school.** The general sentiment expressed by many of the virtual learners is that a higher priority is placed on the in-person learners. As one person put it, schools are "pushing hard to get back to normal, but they forgot about the students who can't learn normally, referring to students who have to remain virtual for specific reasons, such as personal or family health. This sense of being "forgotten" was commonly expressed by those attending school in completely virtual models. Some examples of how virtual students expressed this include: a high school senior who felt that the school counselor forgot to notify her of scholarship opportunities that had been already communicated to the in-person students; more difficulties in contacting the school counselor about course selections, standardized testing, and little involvement by the school counselors in the "daily life" of a [virtual] high school student; and a teacher who would "minimize the tabs" on their screen [of the virtual students] and then "forget about us" while teaching the in-person students. These feelings of being "forgotten" were also expressed by students who were virtual for a period of time due to quarantine, for example: "Teachers don't really worry about the students who are online due to quarantine." One felt that teachers can get frustrated with virtual students, noting, "Some teachers will forget about their students who are online. Some teachers don't have time for the kids who are in quarantine."

Many students described a disconnect between in-person students and those learning virtually when attending the same class simultaneously. The students attending virtually describe feeling left out or forgotten during class; those in-person do not have a way to interact with their friends and classmates joining online. Students in simultaneous learning models where a teacher would have to toggle between the in-person and virtual learners expressed concerns that some teachers were not noticing or including the online kids in their classes. According to one student, "Teachers don't give their best effort to the online kids. The teacher had to go back and forth between in person or in school and she wasn't noticing the online kids." Another student expressed this as, "Each day, half of my teachers are not teaching to me. Some teachers teach the in-person kids and ignore the ones online, and vice versa." A third student noted, "I've been virtual all year, and even though my teachers try and make an effort to make sure everybody knows what they're doing, some teachers just completely ignore the virtual kids and just put them up on a computer and then just teach the in-person kids. And then we get completely lost, and I can't take notes, and I have no idea what I'm doing. Or it's vice versa, they completely just do the virtual kids, and then they just leave the in-person kids in the dust."

### Connecting with Teachers

Many students who experienced challenges with virtual learning described, from their perspective, an inability to access teachers for help in a timely way when not in-person; other frustrations included no consistent, clear, or timely mechanisms to access teachers or get help. One of the most common concerns or frustrations expressed by students about virtual learning that makes it more difficult for them is the inability to access their teachers in a timely way to get help. Not being able to get help when the students perceived that they needed it, especially later in the afternoons and evenings, makes it more challenging for students to complete and keep up with assignments and to feel like competent learners. Students often mentioned the need to wait for email responses to their questions, whereas prior to COVID-19, some students would get help or ask questions right before, during, or after school, during lunch, or at the end of class, for example. In the virtual settings, those more real-time or immediate mechanisms for help were not as accessible, especially when some teachers might be teaching in-person students during the day. This seems to have created a mismatch of expectations between when and how quickly virtual learners could get help relative to what is reasonable to expect from the teachers in terms of when they can respond to students.

Several students noted that teachers' comfort level with and use of technology has improved over time, as well as the communication channels between teachers and students. The "learning curve" associated with virtual learning had been cleared, in some ways, and students were more comfortable with "how" to learn, their routines and teachers were more comfortable with teaching in the virtual environment.

For some students, learning the material is more challenging online and several expressed that their teachers just "expect them to understand." The demands on teachers to answer questions and provide help may be more pronounced in virtual learning environments due to students having more difficulties absorbing information. For some students, they found themselves needing to "teach themselves more." It is also important to note that the students recognized that teachers need their downtime and evenings too and that they are "trying their best to make it work." One student noted, "They are not on the clock in the evening. They didn't sign up to be teachers teaching virtually." Some students have experienced a significant decrease in motivation for school. As one student put it, they have "checked out."

### Concerns about Increased Workloads and Declining Motivation

Some students reported a significant increase in their workload and homework this year. Some speculated that teachers were trying to compensate for the lack of in-person instruction by giving them more work and assignments. The amount of homework, coupled with difficulties getting help, contributed to some students taking "shortcuts" to complete their work and just "get it done." While some students felt teachers have been more lenient with homework during COVID-19, increases in workload and homework were a significant concern for some students in virtual learning. One student noted that, "I know for my school, they give out, I feel like, compared to when we were in person, they give out much more homework workload. I feel like it's a little bit more stressful just because I feel like the teachers think that because we're at home, because there's a pandemic going on, we have more time." This was echoed by a student in a different group who said, "My school hasn't backed up off of the workload. I feel like they assign more because they think we're at home, that we can handle it." Another noted that in virtual learning, "they kind of expect us to do more homework because we're at home, and they expect us to have, because we have all this time, and so a lot of our homework is due really quickly now. So everything is due like quicker than it was before, even for first semester."

As stated above, many students mentioned that being unable to access help when needed was making it harder to complete assignments, leading to late work, stress, frustration, and in some cases, a decline in grades. Accessing, completing, and submitting assignments via on online platforms, in addition to managing large volumes of emails, notifications, etc. was overwhelming for many students. For some students, the process of navigating online assignments was resulting in adding time to completion. One student noted that they did not have access to a printer and had to copy things by hand. Students in several groups described taking shortcuts, such as looking up answers online and sharing answers with friends (especially math) just to get the assignment done. One student would take a picture of the screen instead of taking notes. Many of these students who admitted to taking shortcuts also recognized that they were not learning as much as they should.

**Some students expressed a decrease in motivation and a decline in grades while trying to learn during the pandemic.** Stress, procrastination, pushing work aside, watching a recording instead of logging on to class “live,” the ability to walk away from a challenging assignment, or turning the camera off were examples of reasons students gave for decreases in their grades. Some expressed that they did not have the stamina to work all day in a virtual school setting, noting, “It’s a lot to keep working all day.” In some cases, those that returned to in-person learning during the year were able to rebound with their grades with one student noting, “I know my grades dropped a lot when I was virtual, and now they’re a lot better.”

**At the same time that some students expressed concerns about workload and homework, others expressed concerns that the rigor of their classes was not the same as it would have been if learning was in-person and that they are not prepared for next year, or for AP Exams.** These students did not feel they were learning as much in a virtual setting and that their workload and expectations had been lowered, especially in AP classes. These students did not feel prepared to take the ACT exam or upcoming AP exams. Some mentioned concerns that they were not able to participate in programs designed to help them prepare for college.

**According to some students, turning cameras off during virtual classes creates even more of a barrier between students and can signal that a student is disengaged.** With so many students turning their cameras off during classes, one student felt there was no culture or community around to support them in their learning or to be more interactive. The lack of group encouragement creates even more separation and isolation. Many students expressed that they did not like being in Zoom breakout rooms and described them as “awkward.” Some students mentioned teachers creating additional barriers to interacting with friends online by disabling chats in Zoom meetings or in Google Meets, or by telling kids they cannot talk to each other during virtual classes. One student expressed that interacting with friends is difficult enough during COVID-19; they had trouble understanding why teachers would place even further limits on interactions, when even 5 minutes of chatting or talking informally with friends at the start of class would help them.

**Other concerns about virtual learning expressed by students included: lack of hands-on learning opportunities, especially in science classes; distractions while trying to learn at home, such as no private space to do work, having to take care of younger siblings, and the temptation of being on their phones and social media; and challenges with time management.** Changing due dates and managing various submission options for online work across classes (hard copy, email, uploading into Canvas, Google, etc.) were among other challenges expressed by students. Some reported difficulty balancing work, sports practices and other activities, and online homework.

**Internet connections and other technology issues have presented additional challenges for some students in terms of being able to connect to their classes.** This could include slow connections, dropped connections, or complete loss of connections. One student noted that they were taking a computer class, but the programs were only downloaded to the schools computers so she could not do any of the curriculum at home (so only half of the curriculum was completed). One student could not reliably send emails to the teacher. Another student could not have too many windows open at once. This was prevalent among, but not exclusive to, students in rural areas.

**Some in-person students expressed concerns for their safety at school, although, as discussed later in this summary, others felt that their schools were taking COVID-19 precautions seriously.** The students who raised concerns about safety focused primarily on the lack of enforcement of mask policies, including some teachers not wearing masks, as well as lack of social distancing.

### Identifying Positive Aspects of Learning 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 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 learn-

ing. 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. Sever-

al 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.

## In Their Own Words...

Below we feature a sampling of student comments relevant to the students' learning environments.

**A comprehensive set of comments can be found in the reports.**

*Virtual feels like my school is treating my decision to be online as what I would prefer, but it's put behind the in-person. 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.*

*In-person days are a knowledge-dump. Teachers try to get in as much as possible and at-home days students are working on their own. We are supposed to ask questions [when at home] but the teachers aren't available – they are teaching the other half.*

*Some teachers are really good about it, and some teachers are really bad about it. And so like if I'm virtual for a day, half my teachers are teaching to the computer, and half of them are teaching to the class. And then like when I'm in class, half of them are teaching to the in class, and half of them are teaching to the kids at home. It's like if I'm at home, half of my class is, it's just really frustrating me, because like I can't win because half of them aren't actually teaching to me.*

*I feel like a lot of time we just need a brain rest, because I feel like we wake up at, well, at least I wake up at like 7:00 in the morning, and then I have to log on right away. I'm on the computer from 7:00 to 3:00 in the afternoon, and then right after that, I'm starting homework. So I feel like it's just, it's a lot for my brain to just keep working and working and working all day, you know.*

*I feel like there's a lot of freedom with logging on to class, like if you're on the computer or like just being able to turn off your camera and like go do something else, and I feel like it's very, it's easy to do that. And I feel like a lot of students do that, and I feel like that's why we don't pay attention, because we feel like, oh, it's recorded. We'll just see it later, or we'll find out what the assignment is later.*

*My GPA isn't what it was. I feel like I would be doing better if I was in person. I wasn't prepared for the increase in the rigor of my courses in a virtual environment. I'm a procrastinator. Hard to adapt to.*

*I think it's because teachers are like, you're all at home, so if I give you more work, you're just more engaged and not slacking off.*

*We got way more work than normal.*

*Like every single class is just giving us more and more work, and they're trying to fit a lot in. We started a hybrid model pretty recently, because we were virtual...from the beginning of September [until] to a few weeks ago. And they're trying to fit as much work as they can during in person before we end up possibly going back to virtual, and just the work piling up is stressing a lot of people out, and it causes everybody to not do their work because they're avoiding it.*

*Something that's kind of hard is like math class just because if you don't understand something, you have to write a whole email to the teacher explaining why and then more steps to set up a Zoom or something. And another thing that is kind of difficult is making sure you can properly communicate with your teachers on what you're supposed to be doing and making sure you know what's going on. And if you're missing anything, that was kind of hard for me. And then another thing is on Zoom, when their video cuts out, and it starts lagging, and you can't hear anything they're saying, that's really hard.*

*The teachers also tend to take out some of their technical frustrations on us. So like sometimes the Zoom call won't go as planned for them, and they'll just kind of rant on about it instead of moving forward and trying to fix it. They just kind of like lay it all on us.*

*It was hard for me when I went virtual because I had little siblings to take care of too and try to go to classes.*

*It's kind of hard not being able to sit at lunch next to your friends. You have to sit, there's these borders now that are glass, like plexiglass, so we can't, it's really hard to talk to them and doing that interaction during lunchtime.*

*Recently, I've also had more work hours, so I have a job and all. And at the beginning of COVID, I had like no hours, because I had to get the full time in. And, recently, I've been getting a lot more so I can save up for like a car and stuff.*

*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.*

*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.*

## 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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