



> Supporting Students in Sharing Their Voices

In the following document we take a focused look at findings from the Voices of Wisconsin Students Project that are specific to the topic of supporting student voices and opportunities for students to share their ideas, insights, and perspectives. 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 copies of the project reports, see <http://www.wipps.org/voices>

Students Value Opportunities to Share their Voices and Want to Be Heard

At the conclusion of the focus groups we asked students about their "one thing": what is the "one thing" you and your friends need most from your school leaders in order to do the best you can in school? Among the range of responses, one of the most common themes centered on wanting involvement in decision-making and additional communication and information. Below we feature a sampling of student comments relevant to the topic of student voice. A comprehensive set of comments can be found in the reports.

Maybe for students to be more involved within school, so maybe if the school board would say, 'here are the students' opinions,' actually. It's (school board) making big decisions.

Right now, it's having our questions answered (about going back to in-person learning). They said we were going back to school, but they don't really have any answers to what happens if this, or how's this going to work? So just kind of having an actual structure to how our day is going to look.

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

I feel like the people in power should respond more to the students and ask them how they're feeling in different ways to improve more often. And when you take the survey, make sure you actually do something. Because a lot of the time, I feel like I'm taking surveys for this Madison thing, and it's like they don't do anything about it afterwards. So, yeah, I guess taking action on what you need to improve.

The administrators put a lot of faith in the teachers recognizing the students that really need help, but the teachers can't know everything. Their classmates are really the ones that do know all of it. So, give the students more power to reach out and help people...but also the students that are asking to do more, create a system where they can actually do more. Because I want to do more, but I've maxed out everything in the district. I even talked to the superintendent, but there's nothing more I can do.

The decision to, hey, do we go all virtual? Do we stay all virtual or do we go back to school? A student or students should have a voice. We should have a way to communicate with those teachers and with our principals and whatnot, and kind of say, hey, this is how we feel about that. And I really think student voice is a big problem right now in schools, especially during COVID, because a lot of these big-time situations and big-time questions, they're lacking a student voice. Yeah, I think student voices could really improve schools going forward.

I feel, at the moment, we don't really have as much of a voice. I just really want them to get feedback for how we're doing and what we should do and what we want, what they should do, and what we want them to do.

Students should get a bit more of a say. It's kind of hard, because obviously, coronavirus is a global health pandemic, and your parents should have some say whether you go back to school, because it affects the entire family. But even just online school, even if we could just get input, like, hey, this works for me and this doesn't, because we are the ones who are learning through online school, and I don't think our parents or teachers can really tell what is working for us.

Well, I agree that people need to listen more to the students. But one of the main points that I would like to bring up is they need to remember that we are middle schoolers. And by that, I mean we're not elementary schoolers, so we can handle some of the topics that you bring on to us. But we're not high schoolers either necessarily, and we can't handle all that either. And high schoolers can't even handle all the pressure that they're put under. They need to remember that we're middle schoolers, so we can have our own say in some things, but also they can't put the same pressures on us as they would on a 20-year-old. And it's very important that they acknowledge that.

Students Value Opportunities to Share their Voices with Other Students

After each focus group session, students were provided a link in the Zoom chat feature for a brief Qualtrics survey to assess their experiences participating in the focus groups. Participants were informed that survey completion was optional and that their responses would be anonymous. No student names or other personally identifiable information were collected. The students overwhelmingly found this 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 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.

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

It was nice to hear other's opinions and views and resources they shared. It felt good to finally be heard, too.

The time went by fast, it was comforting to be surrounded by people going through the same thing and actually talking about it, because I know that everyone knows that we are in a pandemic but not many people talk with each other about the effects of it.

It was nice to hear other people's perspectives too, gave me more insight.

Everyone was so nice and it was such an eye-opening experience to hear what everyone is going through.

The people setting the standards for school are done by adults who have no experience learning in this format. We need to have more of a say in the way we learn.

This felt really good to be heard and to be engaged with and knowing that I'm not the only one going through these struggles.

It really helped a lot to know that I'm not alone with my mental health state, and how this situation is really affecting everyone else how its [sic] affecting me. Nice to know that I'm not alone.

I really enjoyed getting to meet new people as this opportunity is rare in today's age (of the Covid era). This meeting was very useful in that I got to see other kids' perspectives on the pandemic and the way people live in general and how they may have changed from their initial lifestyle.

I loved participating in this experience. It was helpful to know I share experiences with others that go to different schools than me. This was kind of like a therapy session too. It was nice to talk to people who are the same age as me. I already felt like I was connected more to them. But I really appreciate being able to be a part of this experience!

I learned that some people have really tough lives and that I wish that there was more that we could do to help them. It completely changed my perspective about mental health and that I'm worried about people that aren't brave enough to stand up to people, and that they might be in danger. Some more extreme than others, but still...I wish that I could make sure that people are living in safe conditions, and that they don't have to feel scared, or uncomfortable.

I am glad that each student got to speak, and we heard students from different schools in settings. A lot of the time we can be stuck listening to the same people in the same situation. Through this experience, I, among other students got to hear what it's like for everyone.

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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