



## LEARNING FROM STUDENT VOICE:

# Teacher Expectations & Support in Fall 2020

### **Teacher expectations and the belief that each student has the capacity to learn and grow is essential to supporting individual student achievement and equitable learning environments.**

Researchers [have shown](#) that teacher expectations can [improve](#) or [impede](#) student outcomes. But how do *students* feel about the expectations and support that their schools and teachers provide? How are students' experiences of their teachers' expectations changing during COVID-19?

To help answer these questions, YouthTruth analyzed responses from over 120,000 secondary school students surveyed between 2016 and 2019 through YouthTruth's anonymous student experience surveys administered in partnership with schools across 10 states. This "pre-COVID" analysis was then compared to findings from over 18,000 students surveyed in September and October 2020 across nine states.

Our analysis across both time periods investigated a subset of YouthTruth survey questions related to students' perceptions of their teachers' expectations and uncovered some key insights. After controlling for student- and school-level characteristics, student perceptions of teacher relationships are stronger now than before the pandemic, a testament to teachers' support of their students during this extraordinarily challenging time.

**1** Just over half of students feel that their teachers' expectations make them want to do their best.

**2** Just over half of students feel that their teachers care if they're really learning — and this is an improvement.

**3** Students are now more likely to report that their teachers don't let them give up when the work gets hard.

**4** Students are now more likely to report that teachers give them extra help when they need it.

**5** Over 80 percent of students say their teachers believe they can get a good grade if they try.

# 1

## Just over half of high school students feel that their teachers' expectations make them want to do their best.



As research has confirmed, teachers have the power to unleash their students' potential when they couple innovative teaching practices with explicit and implicit messages that *all* students can learn.<sup>1</sup> When teachers model and nurture growth mindsets in the classroom and when they communicate that they believe a student has the capacity to grow, that student is more likely to believe in their own ability, take risks, and try their best.

When high school students were asked in fall 2020 if they believe that their teachers' expectations make them want to do their best, we learn that over half – fifty-six percent – agree that their teachers' expectations make them want to do their best. This is slightly higher than usual. Our pre-COVID-19 analysis from 2016 to 2019 reveals that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, just fifty-one percent of students felt that their teachers' expectations made them want to do their best.

### "My teachers' expectations make me want to do my best."



### How do teachers' perceptions of their school's expectations for students compare to students' experiences?

In our pre-COVID-19 analysis, we also explored how *teacher* perceptions of their *school's* expectations for students relate to how students experience their teachers. We learned that at schools in which staff feel that their school sets high expectations for students, a greater proportion of secondary students also feel that their teachers have high expectations for them.



Additionally, at schools in which teachers feel that their school sets high expectations for students, a greater proportion of students feel that their teachers are willing to give extra help at school if they need it. This reveals that there is some consistency between educators' perception of a school's expectations for students and students' experience with teachers' expectations for them.

This analysis demonstrates the important connections between school and classroom climate, and reminds us that high expectations can be a powerful tool for supporting conditions of academic excellence for all students.

<sup>1</sup> Boaler, Jo. *Mathematical Mindsets: Unleashing Students' Potential Through Creative Math, Inspiring Messages and Innovative Teaching*. Jossey-Bass, 2015.

# 2

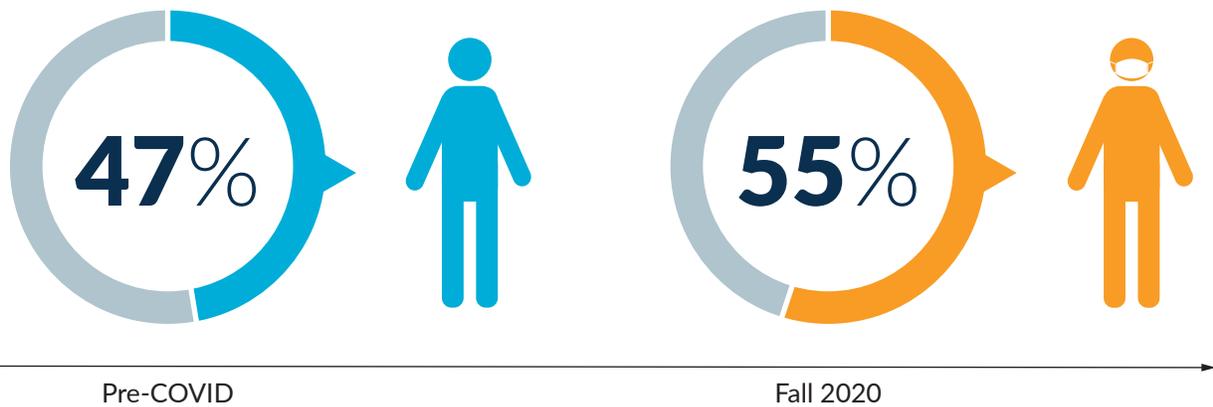
## Just over half of students feel that their teachers care if they're really learning – and this is an improvement.



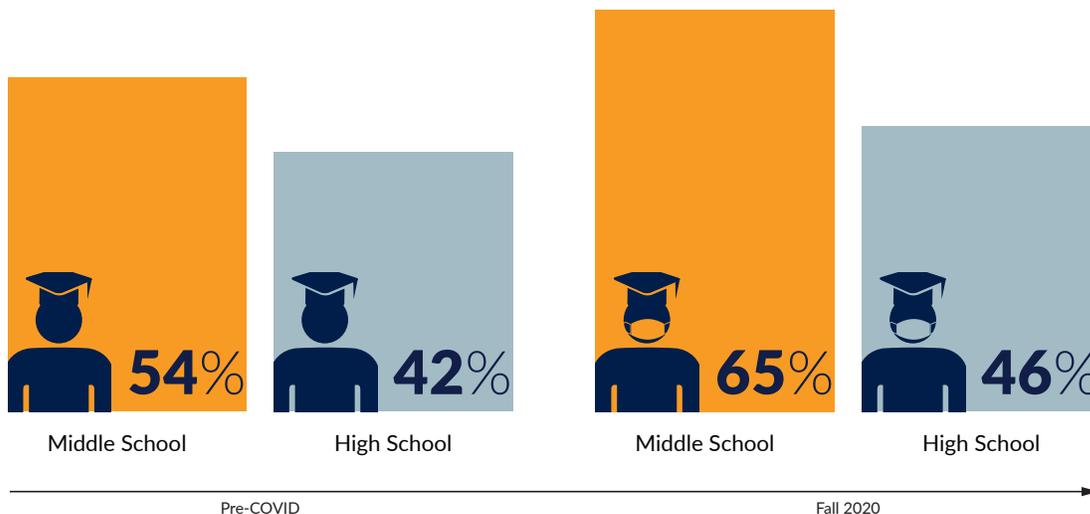
We also wanted to understand how students perceive their teachers' focus on *learning* versus *academic performance*. When students perceive that a teacher's focus is on satisfying outcomes like grades and test scores, they may experience their education as externally motivated and prioritizing the completion of tasks as opposed to "really learning."

Across all secondary students, our analysis shows that only 55 percent of students feel that many or all of their teachers aren't just satisfied if they pass, but care if they're really learning. This is an improvement from our pre-COVID sample, in which 47 percent of students responded positively.

### "How many of your teachers are not just satisfied if you pass, they care if you're really learning?"



When we look at student responses disaggregated by grade level, some differences emerge. While the findings are more favorable in fall 2020 across both levels, a greater proportion of middle school students feel that their teachers care if they are really learning as compared to high school students in both time periods. The difference is particularly pronounced now, with the proportion of middle school students rating positively this fall a full 19 percentage points higher than that of high school students.



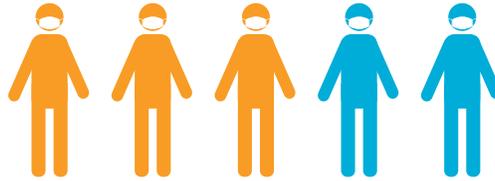
# 3

## Students are now more likely to report that their teachers don't let them give up when the work gets hard.

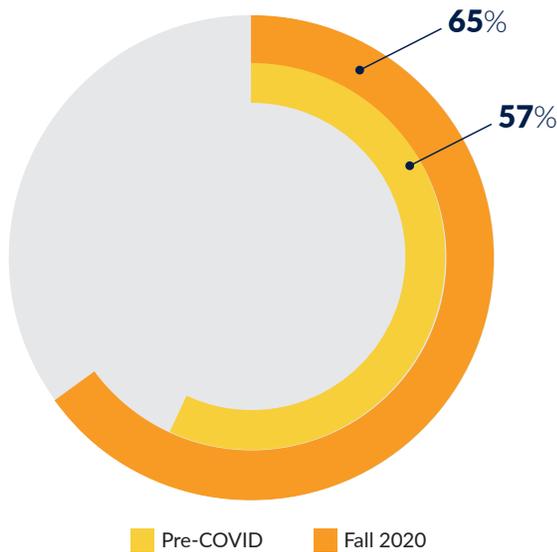


Persistence in the face of challenge (sometimes referred to as "grit") and the development of a growth mindset helps adolescents build resilience and excel academically.

**“Most of my teachers don’t let people give up when the work gets hard.”**

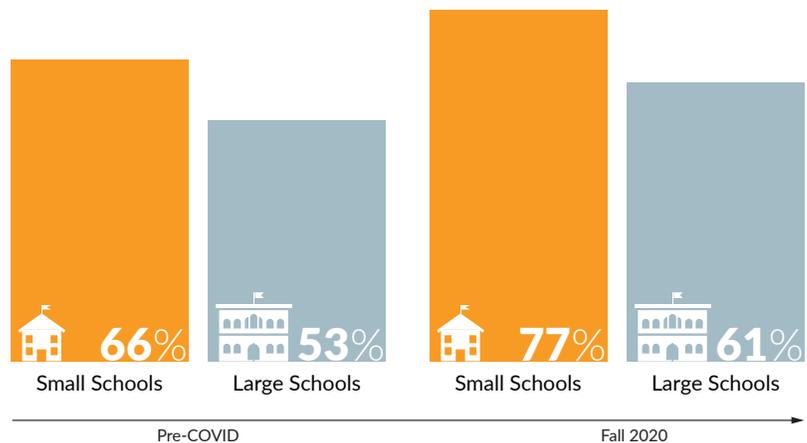


In our fall 2020 data, 65 percent of students – about three in five – agree that their teachers don’t let people give up when the work gets hard, as compared to 57 percent before the pandemic.



Similar to the positive change over time in key finding two, when asked about their teachers’ encouragement to persist when the work gets hard, students this fall are more likely to agree that their teachers are not letting them give up in the face of challenges.

Differences in student perceptions by school size suggest that conditions to support persistence may be more favorable in smaller schools.\* While students reported more favorable experiences in fall 2020 across both school sizes as compared to our pre-COVID sample, students at small schools had more positive experiences than their peers at large schools across both time periods.



\* Large high schools are defined as having 1,200-2,500 students in enrollment; large middle schools, 800 or more students in enrollment. Small high schools are defined as having fewer than 300 students and small middle schools are defined as having fewer than 200 students.

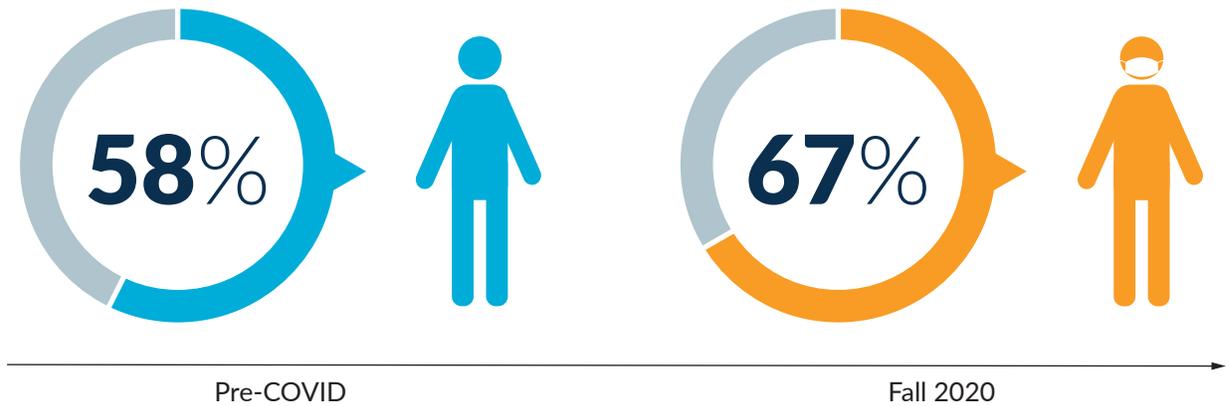
# 4

## Students are now more likely to report that teachers give them extra help when they need it.



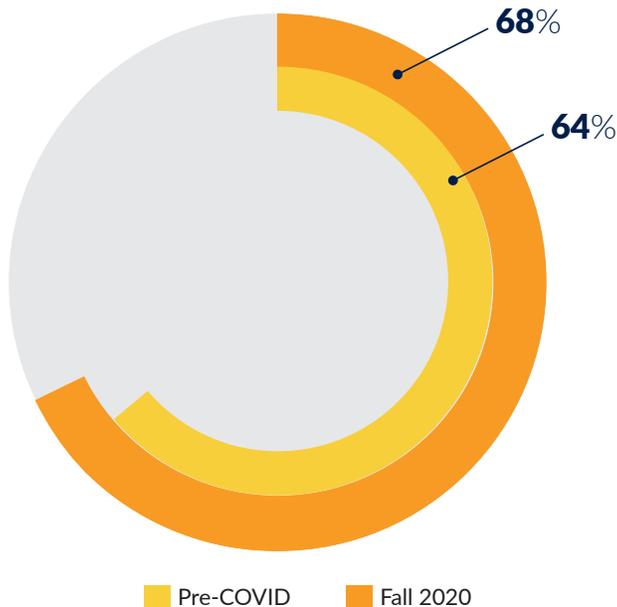
We were also curious about how students experience extra support from their teachers when they need help. Our analysis reveals that in fall 2020, students are more likely to report that their teachers give them extra help when they need it. Prior to the pandemic, 58 percent said that many or all of their teachers would give extra help compared to 67 percent of students in fall 2020.

### “How many of your teachers are willing to give you extra help on school work if you need it?”



Students are also slightly more likely in fall 2020 to report that in most of their classes, they are learning to correct their mistakes.

### “In most of my classes, we learn to correct our mistakes.”



# 5

## Over 80 percent of students say their teachers believe they can get a good grade if they try.



Our analysis reveals that most students – 82 percent – feel that their teachers believe they can get a good grade if they try. This is an increase of three percentage points over our pre-COVID sample. It's encouraging to see that most students feel that their teachers' expectations support growth mindsets.

**“How many of your teachers believe you can get a good grade if you try.”**



At first glance, this datapoint stands in tension to the [grading crisis](#) that is playing out across the country, with a greater proportion of students failing classes than ever before. What is important to note in this student perception data, however, is that students feel their teachers believe in their ability to succeed, even during this challenging context in which student performance in terms of grades is faltering.

### Conclusion

These are tremendously challenging times. The COVID-19 pandemic is taxing our schools and overwhelming the already-limited resources to serve each student equitably. We know that the pandemic has led to the significant interruption of learning for millions of students and that these setbacks are especially [affecting historically marginalized students](#).

While there are myriad challenges and alarming trends everywhere we look – from widening gaps to [plummeting community college enrollment](#) – it is also true that educators are stepping up in ways previously unimaginable. And this data affirms that students are noticing teachers' heroic efforts to challenge and support them in spite of the obstacles. While significant challenges to students' learning and well-being remain, the way students are experiencing their teachers during this time is in and of itself meaningful.

Amidst the bleak picture of traditional measures of student success, this is a time to celebrate successes where we see them and identify bright spots to inform continuous improvement. Many things are not going in the direction we'd hope right now, but students' positive message about their teachers' expectations and support is loud and clear. As we navigate the challenges of this moment, student voices must be central to the way school is reimagined.



## Other Resources



### **Teaching Tolerance's Teaching Through Coronavirus: What Educators Need Right Now**

This article synthesizes resources from nearly 2,000 educators on a range of relevant and timely topics at the intersection of COVID-19 and social justice.

### **ASCD's Art and Science of Teaching / High Expectations for All**

Learn from ASCD's four step process designed to help educators set high expectations for students.

### **Character Lab's Grit Playbook**

Use these playbooks to model passion and perseverance to youth to help them strive toward short and long-term goals.

### **High Tech High Graduate School of Education Protocol Library**

From empathy interview protocols to appreciative inquiry guidance to outlining new ways to evaluate student work, this library of protocols will support equitable dialogue and collaborative work.

### **Additional Research**

- Gershenson, Seth. "*Who believes in me? The effect of student-teacher demographic match on teacher expectations.*" ELSEVIER, No. 52 (2017).of Coaching and Approaches to Supporting Coaching in Education" Digital Promise.
- Garcia, Emma and Elaine Weiss. "*COVID-19 and student performance, equity, and U.S. education policy.*" Economic Policy Institute. (2020)
- Johnston, Olivia, Helen Wildly, and Jennifer Shand. 2019. "*A decade of teacher expectations research 2008-2018: Historical foundations, new developments and future pathways.*" Australian Journal of Education, Vol. 63(1) 44-73.
- Karlan, Yves, et al. "*The role of implicit theories in students' grit, achievement goals, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and achievement in the context of a long-term challenging task.*" ELSEVIER, no 74 (2019).
- Mindset Scholars Network. "*Compendium of Studies that Measure Learning Mindsets.*"
- Mindset Works. "*The Impact of a Growth Mindset.*"
- Polirstok, Susan. "*Strategies to Improve Academic Achievement in Secondary School Students: Perspectives on Grit and Mindset.*" SAGE Open (2017).
- Van Onstrand, Kasey et al. "*Prevalence of Coaching and Approaches to Supporting Prevalence of Coaching and Approaches to Supporting Coaching in Education.*" Digital Promise.
- Yarborough, C. B., & Fedesco, H.N. "*Motivating Students.*" Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. (2020).

## ABOUT YOUTHTRUTH

YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student and stakeholder perceptions to help educators accelerate improvements. Through validated survey instruments and tailored advisory services, YouthTruth partners with schools, districts, and education funders to enhance learning for all students. To learn more about the research that informs our work, please visit [www.youthtruthsurvey.org/resources](http://www.youthtruthsurvey.org/resources).

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— STUDENT SURVEY —  
A NATIONAL NONPROFIT



# Closing the Feedback Loop: Sample Discussion Questions

## FOR PRINCIPALS, TEACHERS, AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

To what extent do you think these findings speak to student experiences at your school? Which findings seem most relevant?

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How do you think students' perceptions of teachers' focus on student learning versus grades shows up in your school? In what ways do you see this mindset supporting the whole child?

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What is one thing you've observed in your school this year that reflects teachers holding high expectations for students?

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What programs or processes do you currently have in place to incorporate student voices into your planning?

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What groups of students might be left out from experiencing high engagement with teachers? What resources could be allocated to support these students?

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# Closing the Feedback Loop:

## Sample Discussion Questions

### FOR STUDENTS IN CONVERSATION WITH ADULTS IN SCHOOL

To what extent do you think this data reflects the student experience at your school? Which findings seem most relevant. What questions do you have after reflecting on the data?

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What expectations do you think teachers have for you and your peers?

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Do you feel that your teachers care if you're really learning and aren't just satisfied if you pass? Do you have any ideas about how your teachers could better support student learning?

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Do you feel like your teachers are willing to give you extra help? What suggestions do you have for your teachers or your school about how to better support you academically when you need help?

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In what ways have you seen adults in your school listen to the voices and ideas of youth when making decisions? What recommendations do you have for how your school could better listen to student experiences?

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