

# YouthTruth

STUDENT SURVEY

A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

## STUDENTS WEIGH IN, PART III:

# LEARNING & WELL-BEING DURING COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended significant aspects of education in the United States. This report aims to help adults lead with compassion and curiosity about how the pandemic has affected students within K-12 education and answer the following questions: What do students have to say about learning and well-being in spring 2021, and what recommendations do students have about what to prioritize in the upcoming academic year? As we navigate the challenges of this moment and the days and months ahead, students' voices must be central to our pandemic recovery efforts.

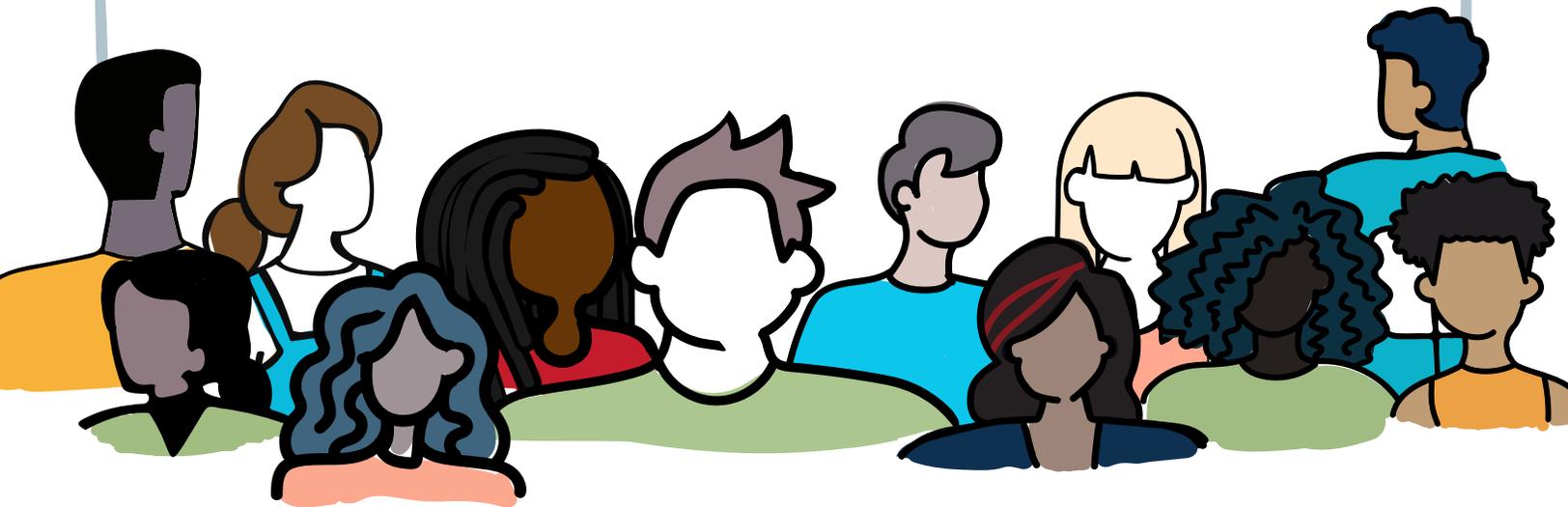
 [youthtruthsurvey.org](https://youthtruthsurvey.org)

 [@youth\\_truth](https://twitter.com/youth_truth)

## In Students' Own Words

"I know these times are unprecedented, and no one really has known what to do, but the lack of change gives me, the student, an impression that you have given up on us." "PLEASE LISTEN TO US!" "Do the right thing and plleeeaaaassee do something. This is your best feedback that you are going to get, please listen to it and do something." "I just had to get that off my chest. Please if someone reads this... hear out my ideas for school." "Why even ask in the first place if you aren't going to listen? I sincerely hope you understand what I'm saying, and where I'm coming from. Because I'm almost ready to just completely give up on getting an education.

Do something. Make changes. Do better."

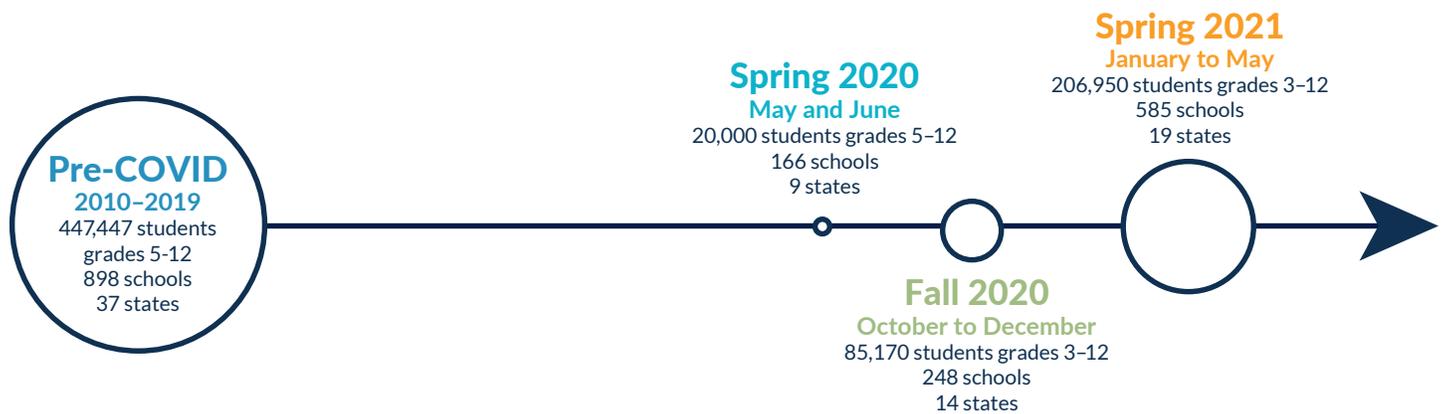


High school qualitative composite narrative coded for "listen to me," compiled from analysis of more than 270,000 open-ended responses in spring 2021.

# Introduction: The COVID-Effect Context

The *Students Weigh In* project reflects YouthTruth's mission as we worked to listen and learn from the experience of youth during a wholly unusual era of schooling. **Our hope is that these practical insights from students will inform educators, youth-serving organizations, policymakers, and funders to support students effectively and equitably in the upcoming school year and beyond.**

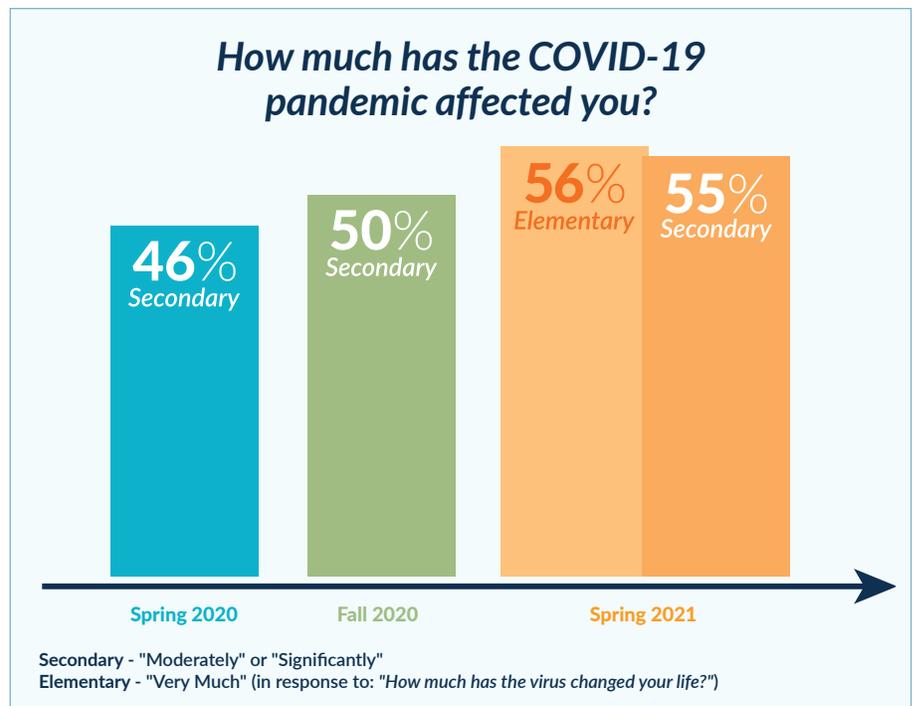
In this final report of our three-part *Students Weigh In* series, more than 200,000 students shared their experiences and feedback about learning and well-being in spring 2021. These insights build on YouthTruth survey findings from fall 2020, findings from emergency distance learning in spring 2020, as well as pre-COVID student voice insights from the decade prior to the pandemic.



## The “COVID Effect”

We invite you to join us in considering how the experiences of this generation of students have been shaped by this historic period.

This spring, a greater percentage of secondary school students reported that COVID-19 had moderately or significantly affected them as compared to fall 2020 and to spring 2020. Fifty-five percent of secondary school students reported being moderately or significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. And 56 percent of elementary students (grades 3-5) in spring 2021 said that the virus has changed their life very much.



**As you will learn in this report, students are emphatically asking to be heard, and they are imploring us all to do better.**

# Findings

## ONE

### Social, Emotional & Academic Development



While students' perceptions of learning returned to pre-pandemic levels this spring, there is cause for concern about students' social and emotional well-being. Students offer insights on how technology can help or hinder learning.

## TWO

### Obstacles to Learning



The overall number of obstacles to learning for students is down. However, inequitable experiences and compounding barriers persist, especially for Black and Latinx learners.

## THREE

### Respect & Teacher Support



Students felt more respect from adults during the pandemic as well as increased academic support from teachers. However, respect and teacher support are experienced unevenly across student groups.

## FOUR

### Plans for the Future



Fewer students plan to go to college. Students offer ideas for making access to higher education more equitable.

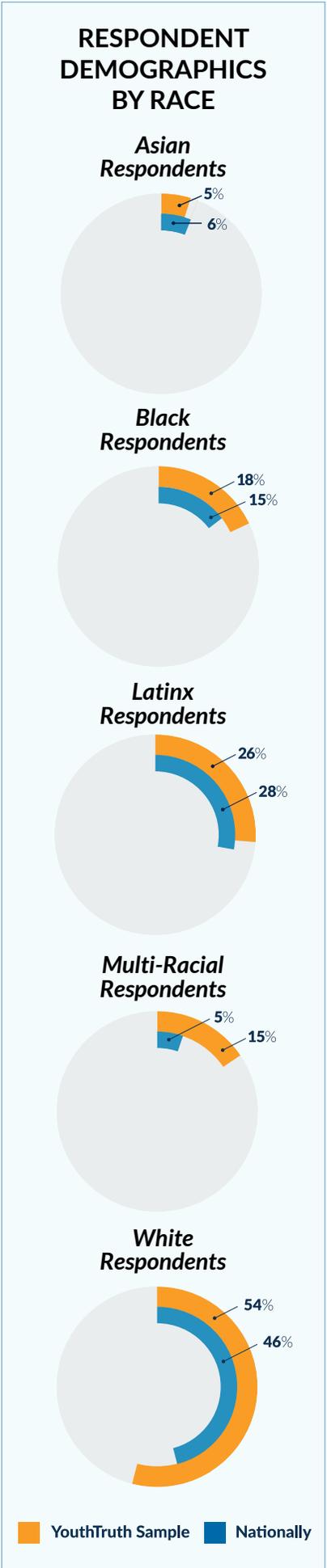
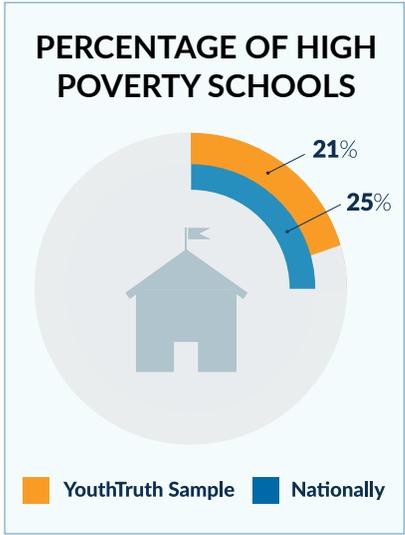
Survey Sample.....	page 5
Methodology.....	page 6
Qualitative Composite Narratives.....	page 6
Finding One.....	page 7
Finding Two.....	page 15
Finding Three.....	page 21
Finding Four.....	page 25
Conclusion.....	page 29
Acknowledgments.....	page 29
About YouthTruth.....	page 29

# Survey Sample

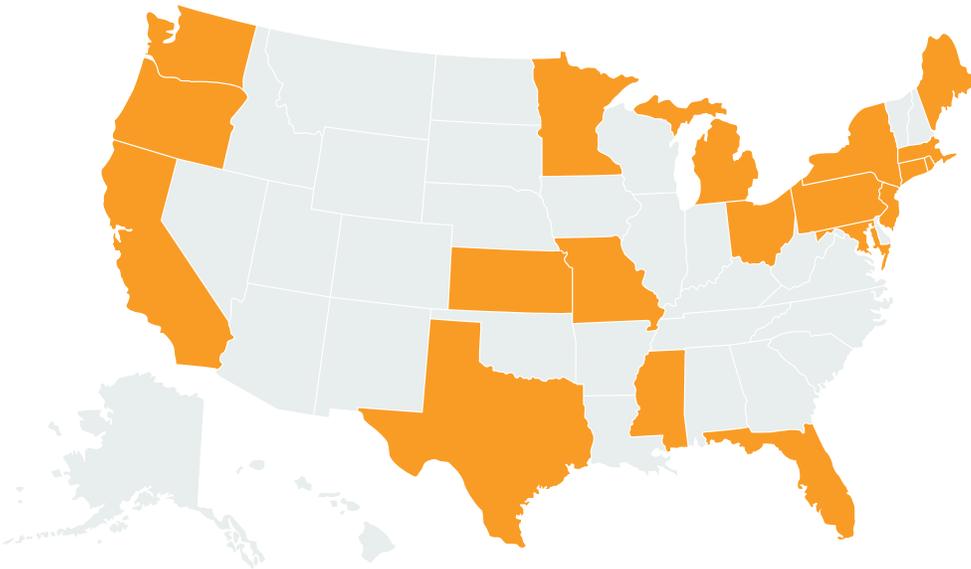
In spring 2021, 153,475 secondary students (grades 6–12) and 53,910 upper elementary students (grades 3–5) shared their perceptions of school and learning through YouthTruth’s research-based and anonymous 15-minute online survey. The survey was administered in both English and Spanish in partnership with 585 schools across 19 states.

The full set of data explored in this report is drawn from survey responses from 684,356 secondary students across four time periods: “Pre-COVID” (Fall 2010 to Fall 2019), “Spring 2020” (May and June 2020), “Fall 2020” (September to December 2020), and “Spring 2021” (January to May 2021).

Student voices represented in spring 2021 are from a mix of urban (29 percent), suburban (52 percent), and rural (14 percent) settings. Information not available for the remaining five percent. Respondent demographics by race, for students who chose to self-identify their race/ethnicity (76 percent), are shown at right.



## STATES REPRESENTED



## LEARNING SETTING



# Methodology

## Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative survey data were examined using descriptive statistics and a combination of independent t-tests, chi-squares, and effect size testing. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance, and effect sizes were examined for all analyses. Unless otherwise noted, only analyses with at least a small effect size are reported. To explore change over time a series of regressions were used, each controlling for student- and school-level characteristics across samples.

## Qualitative Data Analysis

Throughout this report, you will find text-based and video-animated qualitative composite narratives that are drawn from analysis of more than 480,000 open-ended sentiments in the 2020–2021 academic year.

The open-ended comments were collected in response to as many as five questions: what students liked and disliked about school, and for students learning in a virtual environment, what students liked and disliked about learning from home. Students learning in a virtual setting were also asked what was challenging about learning at home and were invited to suggest ways their school could help. Except where noted otherwise, the analyses in this report primarily focused on the 271,852 open-ended high school student responses collected in spring 2021.

The process for analyzing this qualitative data began with a review of the codes established in our two earlier [Students Weigh In](#) reports, as well as the spring 2021 quantitative findings. Analytic questions were crafted to illuminate specific student demographic groups' experiences. While we relied on our extant codes for lexical analysis, the approach remained data-driven and inductive.

Each narrative consists of sentiments from five to eight respondents and serves as a response to an analytic question. Where possible, we also sought to highlight actionable recommendations from students to adults. All composites received review for clarity and integrity.

### Qualitative Composite Narratives

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>1.</b> Listen to Me<br>PAGE 2  | <b>6.</b> Give Us Anti-Racist Policies<br>PAGE 20                                 |
| <b>2.</b> Give Us Emotional and Mental Health<br>PAGE 12 <a href="#">[Video]</a>  | <b>7.</b> Give Us Fair Treatment<br>PAGE 20                                       |
| <b>3.</b> In Solidarity<br>PAGE 12  | <b>8.</b> Please Understand: When Tech Hinders<br>PAGE 14 <a href="#">[Video]</a> |
| <b>4.</b> Danos Amabilidad Mientras<br>Aprendemos tu Idioma/<br><i>Give Us Kindness While We Learn Your Language</i><br>PAGE 20 | <b>9.</b> Please Understand: When Tech Helps<br>PAGE 14                           |
| <b>5.</b> Give Us Inclusive Curricula<br>PAGE 19 <a href="#">[Video]</a>  | <b>10.</b> Give Us Practical Guidance<br>PAGE 28                                  |
|   | <b>11.</b> Give Us Pathways for the Future<br>PAGE 28 <a href="#">[Video]</a>     |



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## FINDING ONE

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While students' perceptions of learning returned to pre-pandemic levels this spring, there is cause for concern about students' social and emotional well-being. Students offer insights on how technology can help or hinder learning.

SOCIAL,  
EMOTIONAL  
& ACADEMIC  
DEVELOPMENT

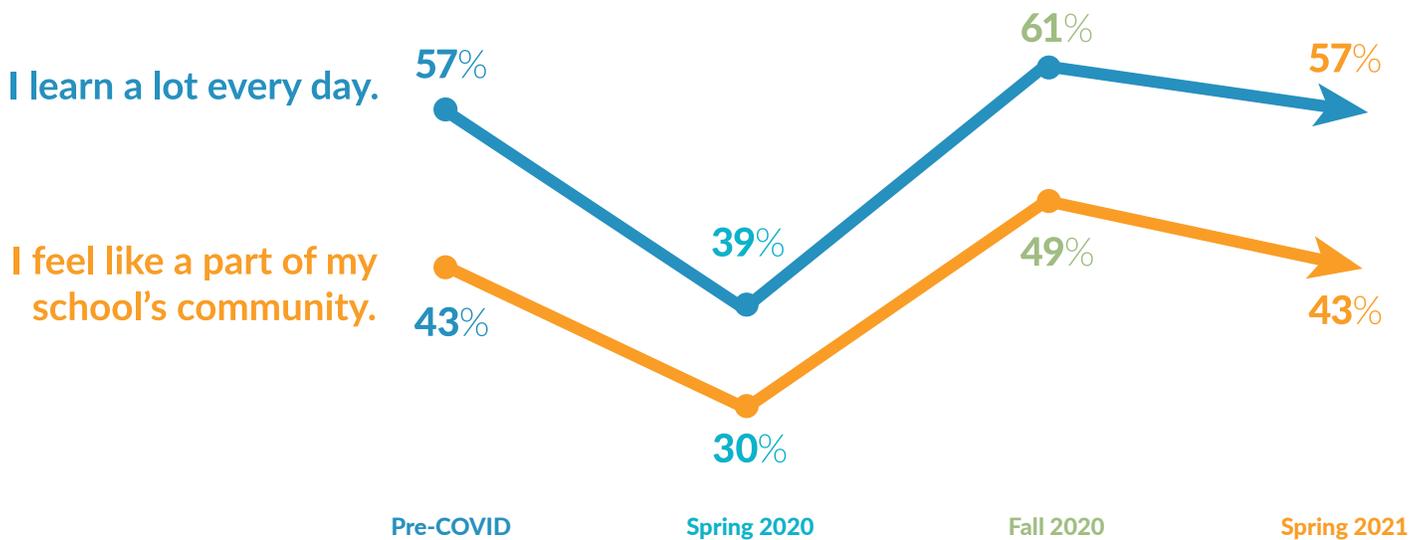




As education researchers [have demonstrated](#), belonging is foundational for learning and has the power to catalyze pro-social behaviors and students’ motivation to learn. Conversely, a lack of belonging or disconnection can lead to withdrawal, anxiety, and the absence of learning. **So, how much did students report learning throughout the pandemic and how connected did students feel to their school’s community?**

In the decade before the pandemic, 57 percent of students reported that they learned a lot every day, and 43 percent said that they felt like a part of their schools’ community. It was concerning, but surely no surprise, that in the transition to emergency distance learning these numbers dropped precipitously: 18 and 13 percentage points, respectively.

### LEARNING AND BELONGING



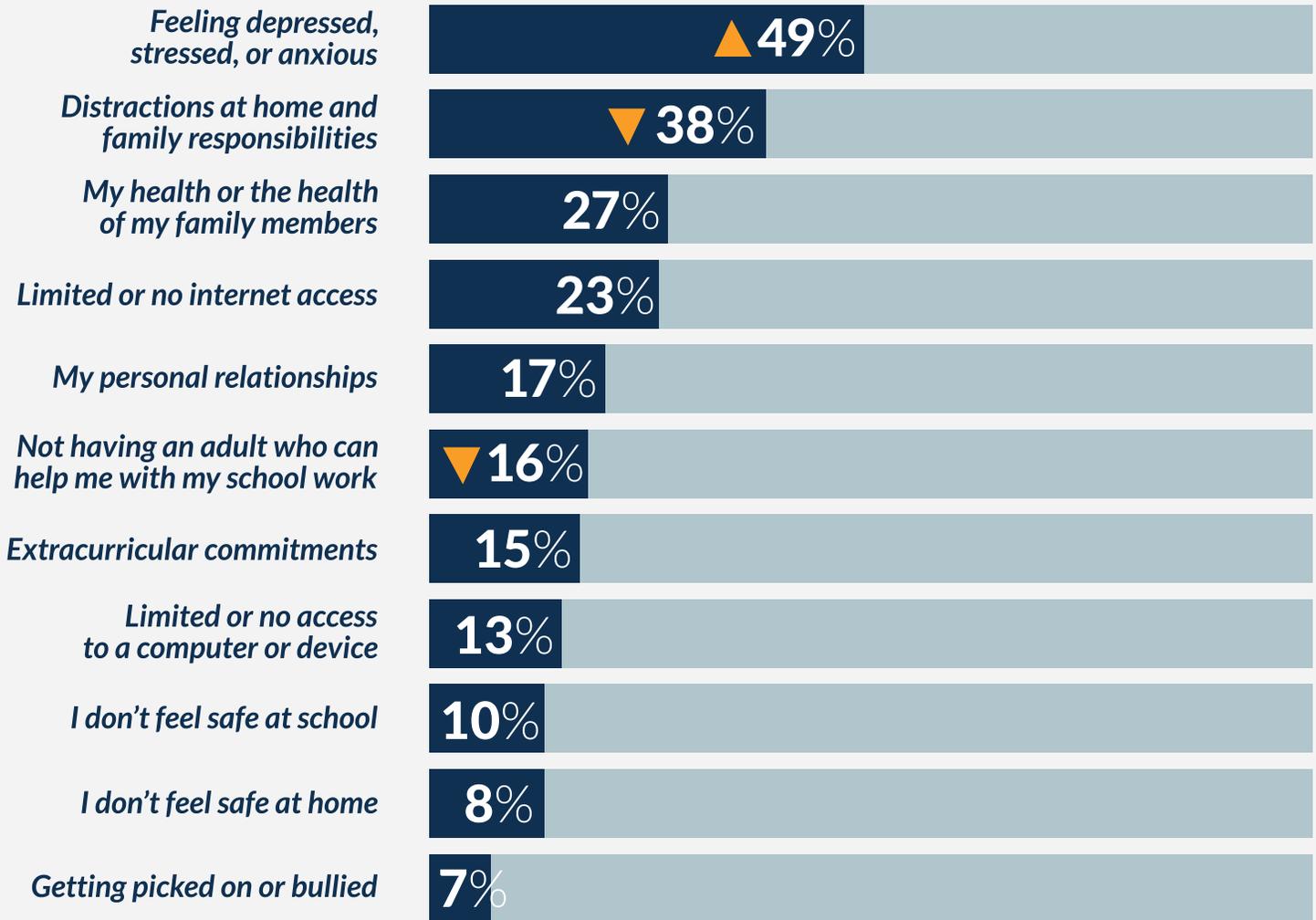
Yet, students and teachers seemed to adapt to many of the challenges of learning during the pandemic, resulting in a rebound of the *learn-a-lot* response to an even higher 61 percent in fall 2020. Students’ sense of belonging also improved to 49 percent last fall, surpassing the pre-COVID “normal.” This spring, both learning and belonging dropped back to pre-COVID numbers.



**What got in the way of students learning this spring?**

Most students—78 percent—reported at least one of nearly a dozen potential obstacles to doing their best in school. The most frequently cited obstacle to learning was *feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious*.

**Do any of the following make it hard for you to do your best in school?**



▲ Significant increase since fall 2020

▼ Significant decrease since fall 2020

**From distractions at home to depression, stress, and anxiety**

During the spring 2020 emergency school closures, amid the collective scramble to launch and support widespread virtual learning, more students reported *Distractions at Home* than any other obstacle to learning. In fall 2020, *Feeling Depressed, Stressed, or Anxious* eclipsed *Distractions at Home* and became the most frequently cited barrier to student learning, and then climbed even higher this spring. These results of depression and anxiety as significant barriers to student learning and well-being are in line with other recent research (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

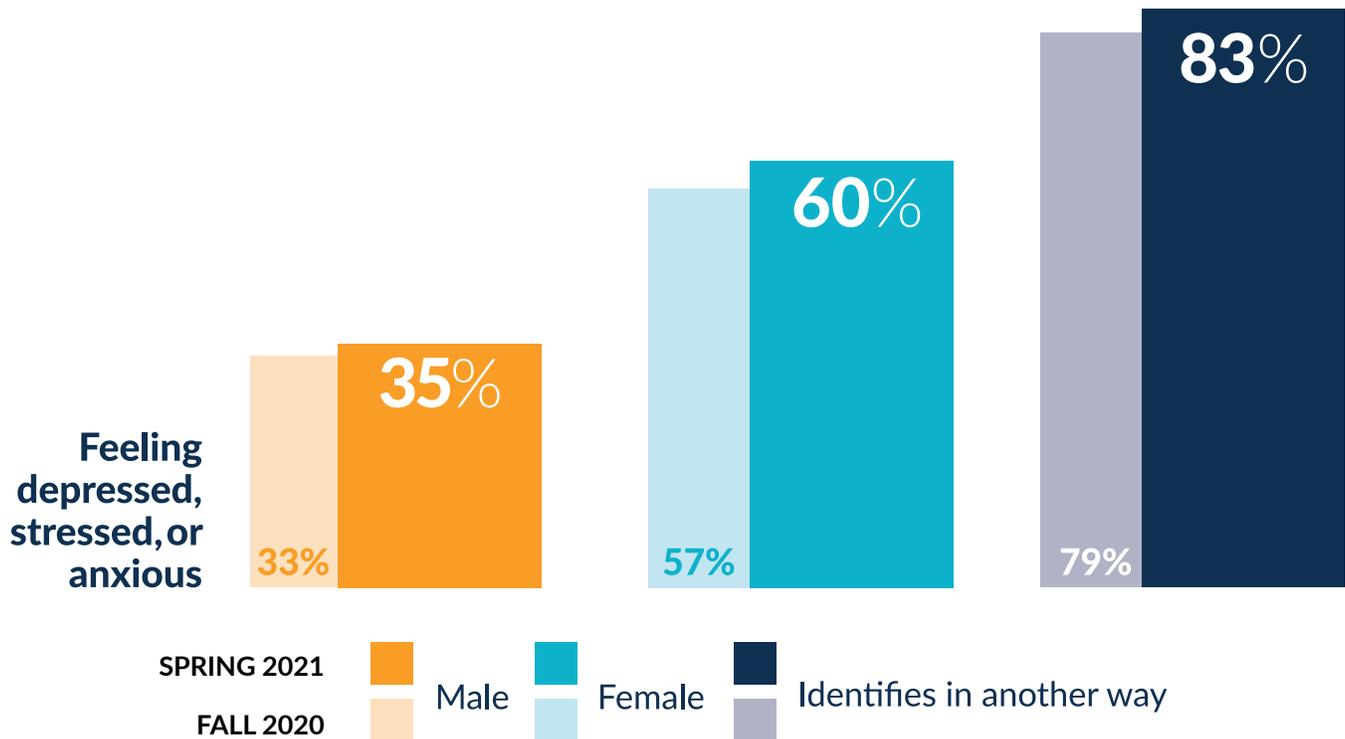


**Which groups are more affected by depression, stress, and anxiety as an obstacle to learning?**

Females and students who identify in a way other than male or female [continued](#) to report in significantly higher numbers that feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious was an obstacle to learning, with nonbinary students reaching a worrying 83 percent. Students who are nonbinary or gender nonconforming are [more at risk for suicide and self-harm](#). The Trevor Project’s most [recent survey on LGBTQ mental health has found](#) that the pandemic has made their lives even more stressful.

**OBSTACLES TO LEARNING**

*Do any of the following make it hard for you to do your best in school?*



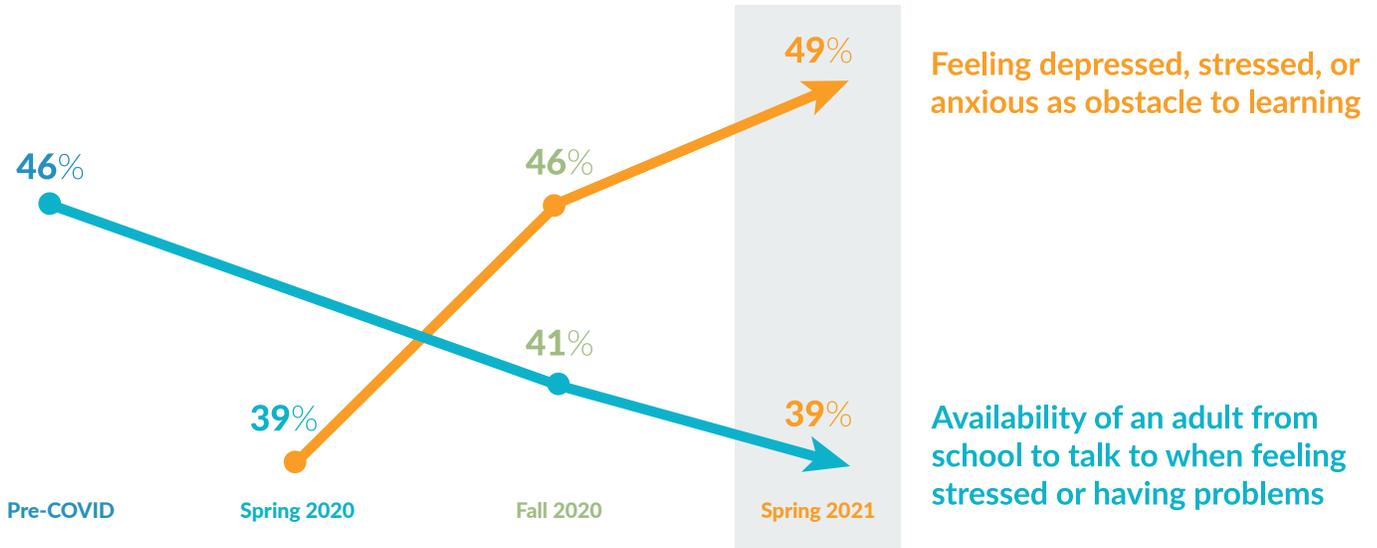
**The “Ezra Insight”**

While fewer males cite feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious as an obstacle, a high school student in a recent YouthTruth workshop reminded us why mental health services and supportive relationships should be universal design elements in *all* schools to support *all* students. The school had recently experienced a suicide cluster. When the principal shared school-level data that echoed the findings above of greater mental health obstacles for females and students who identify as other than male or female, a student named Ezra wisely pointed out that boys learn “to downplay their feelings,” and he asked that his school “create more space for boys to open up.”



As mental health needs rose through the pandemic, fewer students reported that they had someone to talk to about their stress. At the same time as the percentage of students reporting *feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious* as an obstacle to learning peaked, the percentage of students affirming that there is an adult from school who they can talk to about those feelings dropped, from 46 percent pre-pandemic to 41 percent in fall 2020, and landed at a concerning low—39 percent—this spring.

## DEPRESSION, STRESS, AND ANXIETY HAS INCREASED AS AVAILABILITY OF ADULTS TO TALK TO WHEN FEELING STRESSED HAS DECREASED



\*Note that questions about obstacles to learning, including "feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious" as shown above, were introduced in the emergency distance-learning survey in spring 2020; thus, Pre-COVID data are not available. In addition, the "availability of an adult from school to talk to" question was not included in the spring 2020 emergency distance learning survey; therefore, it does not have a spring 2020 finding.

### How many of your teachers make an effort to understand what your life is like outside of school? ("MANY" OR "ALL")



It is clear that teachers made a considerable effort in the immediate wake of the pandemic to understand students lives outside of school. That focus on students' non-academic identities, however, has waned over time.



## In Students' Own Words

The following pair of narratives on students' experiences of stress and what their schools can do to support them are drawn from more than 7,000 open-ended comments from high school respondents in the 2020-21 academic year.

### Give Us Emotional and Mental Health

When investigating how students describe stress, we encountered a chorus of student sentiments that described an overwhelming workload as school was reduced to an endless list of assignments.

"Chill on the workload. It's too much." "Really really dog, like how do I learn so much in so little time. It's half the time, same amount of material." "I feel like every day is the same, and I can feel myself just running out of mental and physical energy. I'm burnt out and sometimes I feel stressed over nothing."

"My neuroses jump out and that harms my quality of life." "Teachers can maybe help by putting out

more fun assignments." "Make us more engaged by having convos with us, games, music... because everyone is going through their own little thing."



>> [Watch video: bit.ly/3ypnAv9](https://bit.ly/3ypnAv9)

### In Solidarity

Many students detailed a new "solidarity" with their teachers, particularly those who demonstrated an understanding for students' home lives and their individual challenges. These students felt trusted to "do good work," and they valued the new ways of communicating with teachers.

"I like that I've gotten to know my teachers better this year. I've been able to connect with them and know them better this year than in previous years." "I like that teachers seem more understanding of home lives."

"I hope that teachers will continue to be understanding of students and their needs especially when it comes to mental health." "I do hope that teachers have asynchronous times in schools in the

future, or times where students are given time to work on assignments, as it has

been extremely helpful to have that time." "As much as I do not like learning from home, I do like how much my teachers who know me trust me to do good work.

They are really doing an incredible job of trying to stay in communication and

make sure I can ask for help when I need it. I hope that this kind of solidarity and cooperation can continue, between students as well as students and teachers.

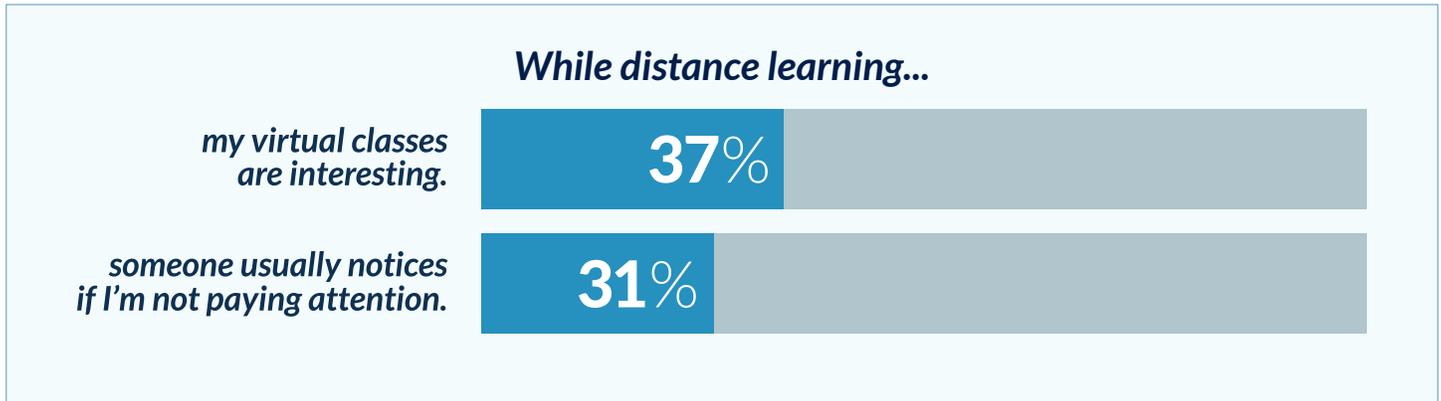
A lot can be learned from it."



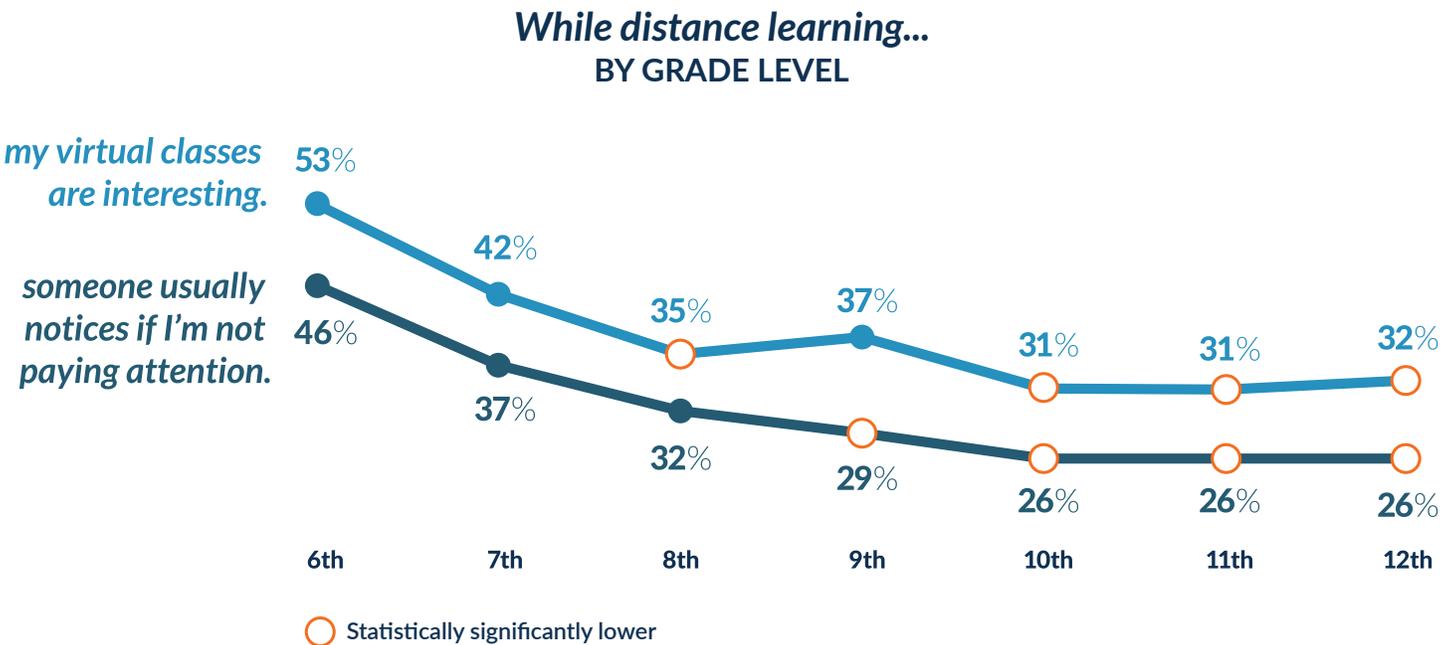


**Just as many students described the positive and negative impacts of learning at home on their mental health, students reported benefits and shortcomings of virtual schooling on their learning.**

Just 37 percent of secondary students who learned virtually in the 2020–2021 academic year reported that their virtual classes were interesting, and only 31 percent of students said that someone noticed if they were not paying attention.



These numbers are particularly disquieting for high school students in the upper grades, with only 26 percent of tenth through twelfth graders agreeing that someone noticed if they were not paying attention while distance learning.



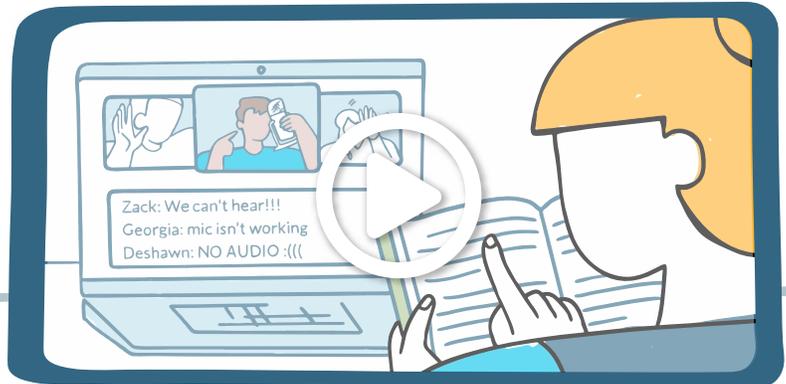


## In Students' Own Words

We analyzed more than 57,000 high school student comments about what they found challenging about learning from home. Students resoundingly expressed a need for more reliable tools, more engaging content, and for a new approach to scheduling. In particular, many students detailed a profoundly negative experience when, as many put it, “roomers” (in-person students) and “Zoomers” (students learning online) were taught at the same time by a single teacher.

### Please Understand: When Tech Hinders

“Internet is a major issue, something so small can make the biggest difference during online (school).” “It's hard learning from home when your teacher's microphone is broken or your speakers/camera/microphone is broken.” “Teachers should treat e-learners just like regular students.” “They barely pay attention to our needs and if you have a question, they don't look at the chat until very much later.” “Make online school more accessible and motivating so that I can be surrounded by distractions like tv, my pet, and my siblings and still want to do school work.”



>> [Watch video: bit.ly/3jSCbt8](https://bit.ly/3jSCbt8)

### Please Understand: When Tech Helps

Students also applauded specific favorable adaptations to online schooling that they hope will stay the same for in-person learning. In particular, many students reported high satisfaction with paper-free schooling, and they appreciated that teachers made it easy to access materials by posting them online.

“I like that I can privately ask teachers for help if I am confused about the material in class.” “I really appreciate that assignments are all organized and have due dates and if I lose a copy I can print another out on my own and still do it that same day.” “I no longer have to fish for papers in binders but can just type a few words and pull any document up that I need.” “I don't have to worry about keeping track of supplies, textbooks, and class materials since everything is at home with me. I hope that teachers use online programs and applications next year to keep things more organized and so that there are less items and stray papers to keep track of. It will also make it so there are less items to carry around.”





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## FINDING TWO

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The overall number of obstacles to learning for students is down. However, inequitable experiences and compounding barriers persist, especially for Black and Latinx learners.



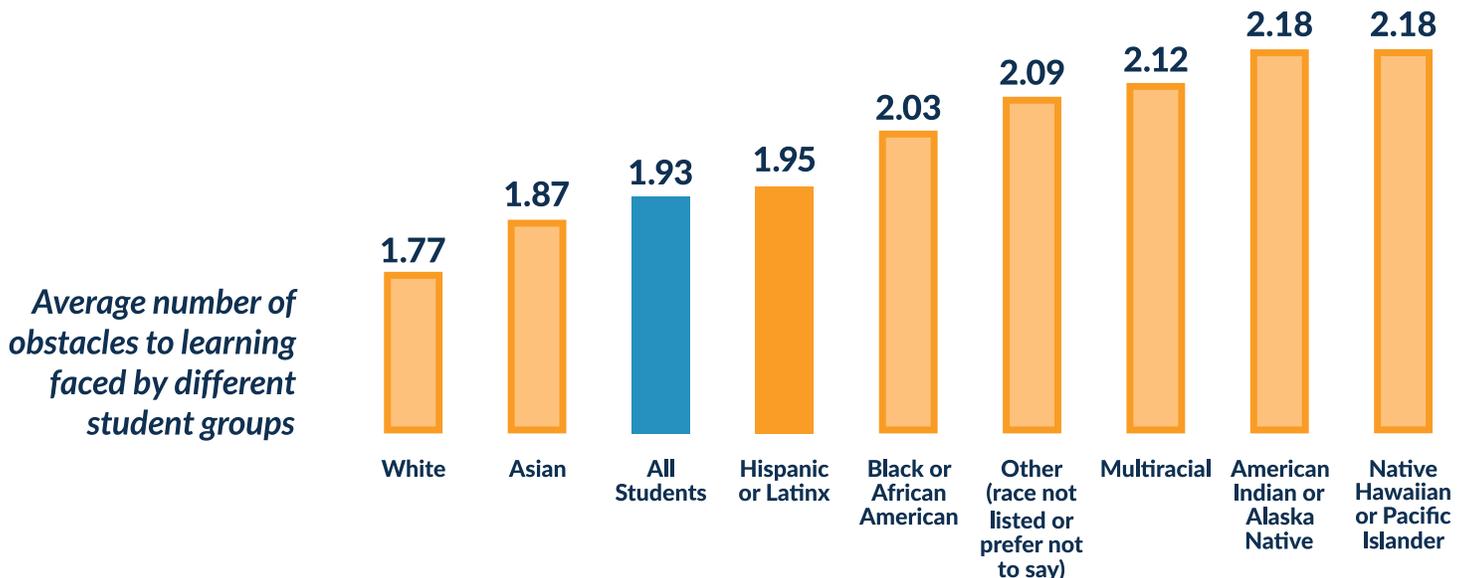


**Obstacle Loads**

Some student groups faced compounding obstacles to their learning throughout the pandemic. We [continue](#) to investigate which groups of students faced more obstacles to learning through a simple “obstacle load” score, which is the average number of obstacles to learning faced by any given student. While it was heartening to see that the average obstacle load decreased from 2.14 in fall 2020 to 1.93 this spring, there are important differences between student groups.

When disaggregating the obstacle load score according to students’ race/ethnicity, we see similar equity and experience gaps to our [fall findings](#) in that white and Asian students experienced significantly fewer obstacles to learning than their non-white and non-Asian peers. However, Asian students as a group did not experience the benefit of the obstacle load decrease between last fall and spring this year. They were the only group whose obstacle load increased between fall and spring.

**OBSTACLE LOAD  
BY RACE/ETHNICITY**



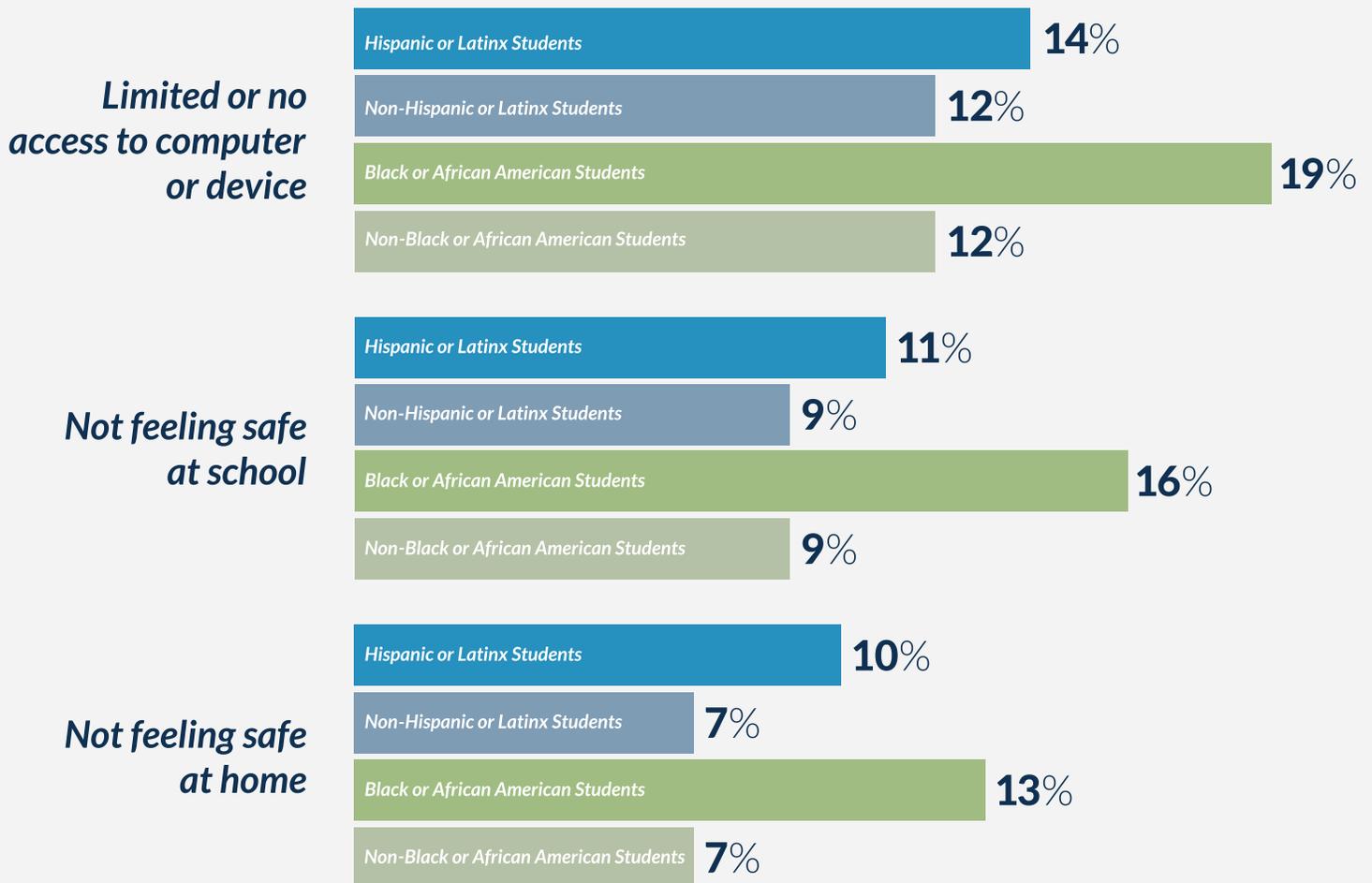
■ Statistically significant difference



**Access to Digital Devices and Safety for Black or African American and Hispanic or Latinx students**

Recall the [list of nearly a dozen potential obstacles](#) to learning detailed in finding one. While not having access to a computer or device, not feeling safe at school, and not feeling safe at home were some of the least frequently cited obstacles that all students faced this spring, a greater proportion of Black or African American students faced these barriers as compared to their peers. The same is true for Hispanic or Latinx students.

**A GREATER NUMBER OF LATINX AND BLACK STUDENTS CITE LACK OF ACCESS TO COMPUTERS AND SAFETY AS COMPARED TO THEIR PEERS**





### Dialing In: Hispanic or Latinx as well as Native Spanish Speakers' Obstacles to Learning

Compared to other students, Hispanic or Latinx students more frequently reported not having a teacher available to help with their schoolwork. Twenty-one percent of Hispanic or Latinx students cited lack of teacher support as an obstacle to learning as compared to just 14 percent of non-Hispanic or Latinx students.

A number of students described in their qualitative comments in Spanish an additional obstacle to learning that was not listed as a choice in our survey. For Spanish-speaking students, there was a bilingual or English language–learner burden to simply navigating the mechanics of the school day.

#### OBSTACLES TO LEARNING My teachers aren't available to help me with my schoolwork.

Non-Hispanic or Latinx **14%**

Hispanic or Latinx **21%**

## En las Proprias Palabras de los Estudiantes In Students' Own Words

### *Danos Amabilidad Mientras Aprendemos Tu Idioma / Give Us Kindness While We Learn Your Language*

“Cuando entre el primer día de escuela me humillaron porque no sabia ingles. No me siento agusto entrando a las clases y no entender nada por no entender el idioma. A veces me duermo tarde por algunas tareas que no las entiendo y al otro dia tengo que despertarme temprano. Es que no puedo entender algunas cosas ya que están en inglés, pero creo que es más culpa mía. Aún no lo he aprendido muy bien.y es difícil comunicarme tanto con maestros como con otros estudiantes. Mas aparte algunos maestros, no todos, cuando les pido un favor o les pregunto de tareas o de mis calificaciones me salen con otra cosa y enojados. Me gustaría que algunos maestros fueran más comprensivos. Quisiera más tiempo para los trabajos explicando mejor y dejando menos trabajos que tomen en cuenta que es difícil por no entender el idioma.”

*English Translation:* “My first day of class I was humiliated because I didn't know English.” “I don't feel comfortable going to classes and not understanding anything because I don't understand the language.” “Sometimes I sleep late because I don't understand some of the homework and the next day I have to wake up early.” “I just can't understand some things since they are in English, but I think it's more my fault.” “I have not learned [English] very well yet and it is difficult to communicate with both, teachers and other students.” Besides, “some teachers, not all, when I ask them for support or ask them about homework or my grades, they change the subject and [get] angry.” “I wish some teachers were more understanding.” I would like “more time for assignments, explaining them better and leaving fewer, taking into account that” it is difficult “due to not understanding the language”.





## Dialing In: Black or African American Students' Obstacles to Learning

# In Students' Own Words

How do Black or African American students describe obstacles to learning, and what are their recommendations for improvement? As the pandemic intersected with the Black Lives Matter movement and the attempts by state legislatures to limit how schools teach about race, we wanted to understand how Black or African American students described their obstacles to learning.

### Give Us Inclusive Curricula

There was a poignant theme among Black or African American students' responses that owing to the absence of their history and meaningful engagement on current topics including racism, they were not inspired to learn.

"Support me by being diverse; there aren't many Hispanic or Black teachers. Stop making us copy notes and help us think. Tie learning to real and current issues. I understand this is the last thing on a teacher's mind because of COVID, but I at least expect social studies to bring up current topics." "We also don't talk about racism and how it's affecting us as students." "I wanna learn about things that affect me and my family (and) friends—mainly black culture and history." "Assignments don't appeal to my race and don't inspire me. DO BETTER."

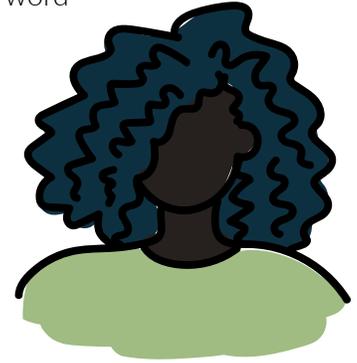
>> [Watch video: bit.ly/37lvHwS](https://bit.ly/37lvHwS)





### Give Us Anti-Racist Policies

"I have teachers who value every race and person and go out of their way to make people feel comfortable sharing who they are and then I have teachers who don't address it at all." "The number of times that I hear people ... say the N-word and just throw it around like it's just an everyday thing, I find it to be quite insulting and I feel that no one is telling them the history of the word and why they SHOULDN'T say it." "(I've been) picked on ... for what I looked like or sounded like or even the color of my skin. Like how are YOU mad that I'M black? And when I tell the teachers they get mad and don't do anything about it." "There is no zero tolerance policy for racism. It feels like administration's hands are always tied and there is no point sharing who is saying racist things because [the adults] did not hear it so they cannot help." "You guys look the other way... like it didn't happen. Like that's not okay ya'll really need to up your game up."



### Give Us Fair Treatment

"(Do) not pick on the black female students who are wearing shorts, and let the white female students who wear the same shorts be left alone." "These Males that ... walk around pants low and let everything show and it makes me mad that the girls come in fully clothed at times and still get dress coded." "The dress code needs to be readjusted unless every student is being held accountable." "Young girls need to stop getting sexualized." "I want to be extremely honest here; I am not distracted by Ripped Jeans, I am not distracted by Sagging, I am not distracted by Crop Tops, I am not distracted by Tank Tops, I am not distracted by Leggings, I am not distracted by Flip Flops, I am not distracted by Skirts that are a couple of inches above the knee, I am not distracted by Untraditional Colored Hair."





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### FINDING THREE

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Students felt more respect from adults during the pandemic as well as increased academic support from teachers. However, respect and teacher support are experienced unevenly across student groups.

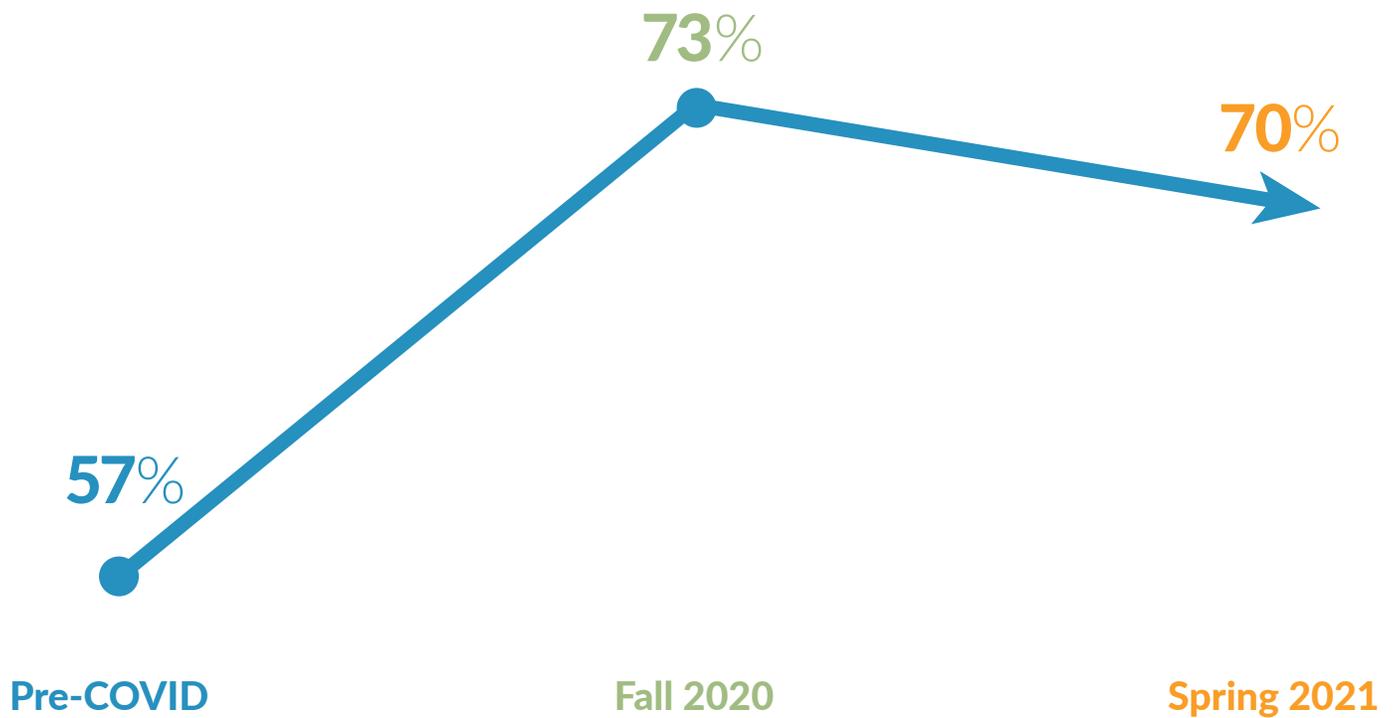
RESPECT  
& TEACHER  
SUPPORT





In the decade prior to the pandemic, 57 percent of secondary students agreed or strongly agreed that adults at their school treat students with respect. Respect is an [essential ingredient to a positive school climate](#), so it is meaningful to see that during the turbulent 2020–2021 academic year, this number jumped from 57 percent to north of 70 percent.

***Most adults in this school treat students with respect.***





Respect is also an essential ingredient for [fair treatment and equitable access to opportunity](#). For this reason, we seek additional insights from students in response to four questions about the degree to which students observed adults showing respect for people of different backgrounds and characteristics.

Across each question the majority of students—between 70 and 74 percent—agreed or strongly agreed that adults are respectful of people of different backgrounds. However, a higher proportion of students who belong to groups that have historically benefited from social and economic privilege perceive respect for various identities, as compared with students in groups that have historically been farthest from opportunity.

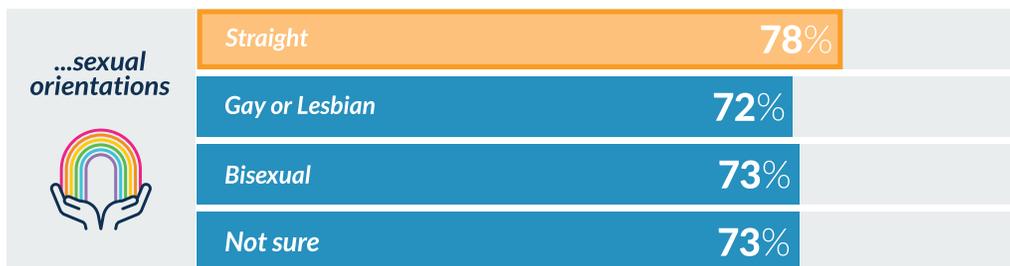
### Adults from my school respect people from different



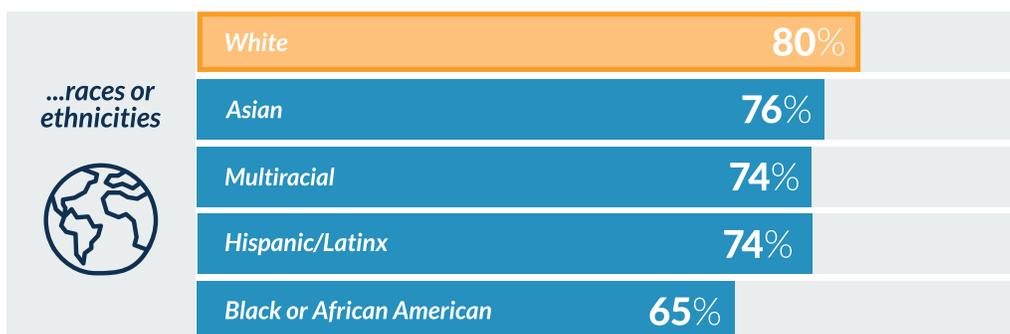
A higher percentage of students who **do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch** agree that *adults are respectful of people of different incomes*, as compared to students who receive free or reduced-price lunch.



A slightly higher percentage of students who **do not receive special education services** agree that *adults are respectful of people of different abilities*; compared to students who do receive special education services.



A higher percentage of students who identify as **straight** agree that *adults are respectful of people of different sexual orientations*, as compared to students who do not identify as straight.



A higher percentage of students who identify as **white** agree that *adults are respectful of people of different races and ethnicities*, as compared to students who do not identify as white.

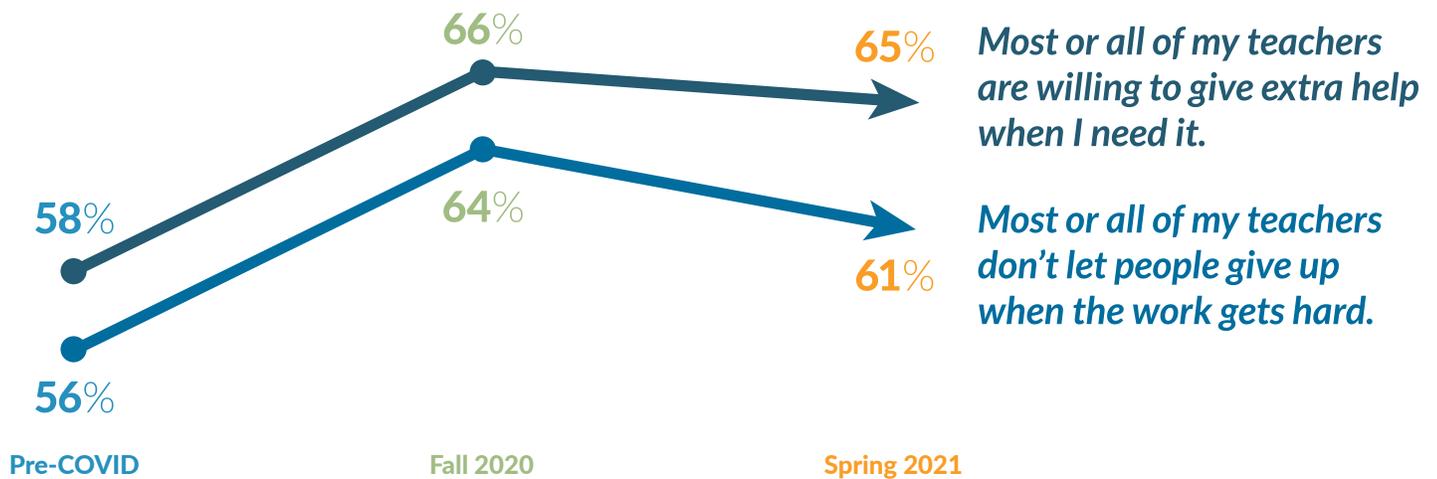
■ Statistically significantly higher



Of course, an [essential ingredient](#) for students' interpersonal growth and [academic achievement](#) is their relationships with their teachers.

During the pandemic, students reported an improved sense that most of their teachers were *willing to give them extra help when they need it* as well as to *not let people give up when work gets hard*. As [researchers have demonstrated](#), high schools with a high value-add to student work habits improve student academic outcomes. We are hopeful that these positive academic interventions may prove durable.

### TEACHER SUPPORT REMAINS A BRIGHT SPOT



**While 65 percent of students this spring reported that most or all of their teachers give them extra help when needed, this help is not experienced uniformly.** A statistically significantly greater number—71 percent—of students who typically receive As report that teachers are willing to give extra help when they need it as compared to students who do not tend to receive high academic scores.



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## FINDING FOUR

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**Fewer students plan to go to college. Students offer ideas for making access to higher education more equitable.**

PLANS  
FOR THE  
FUTURE

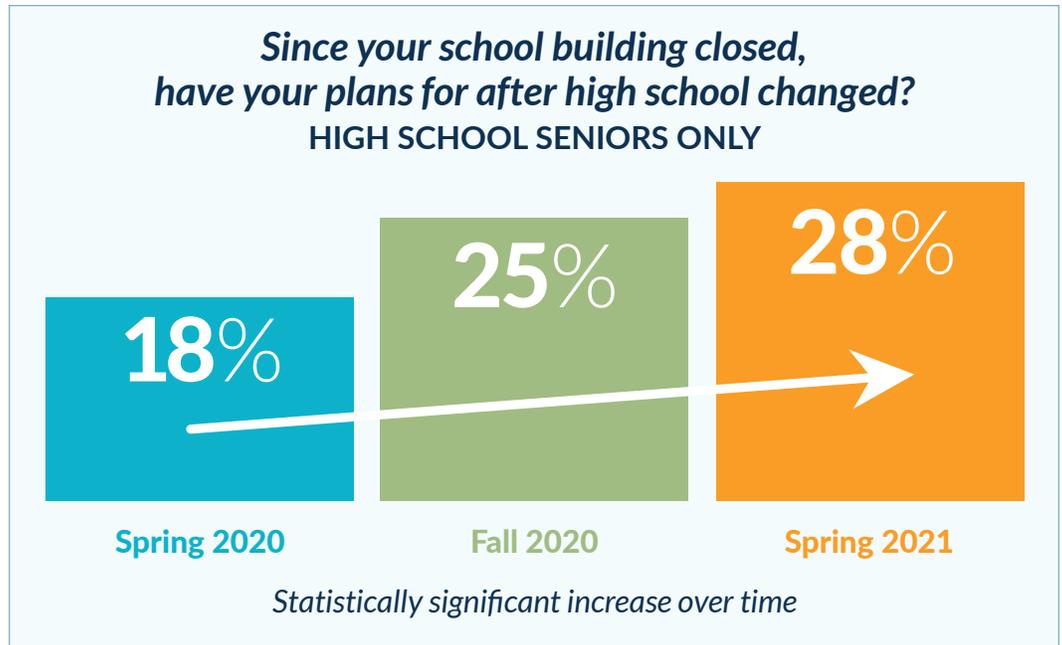




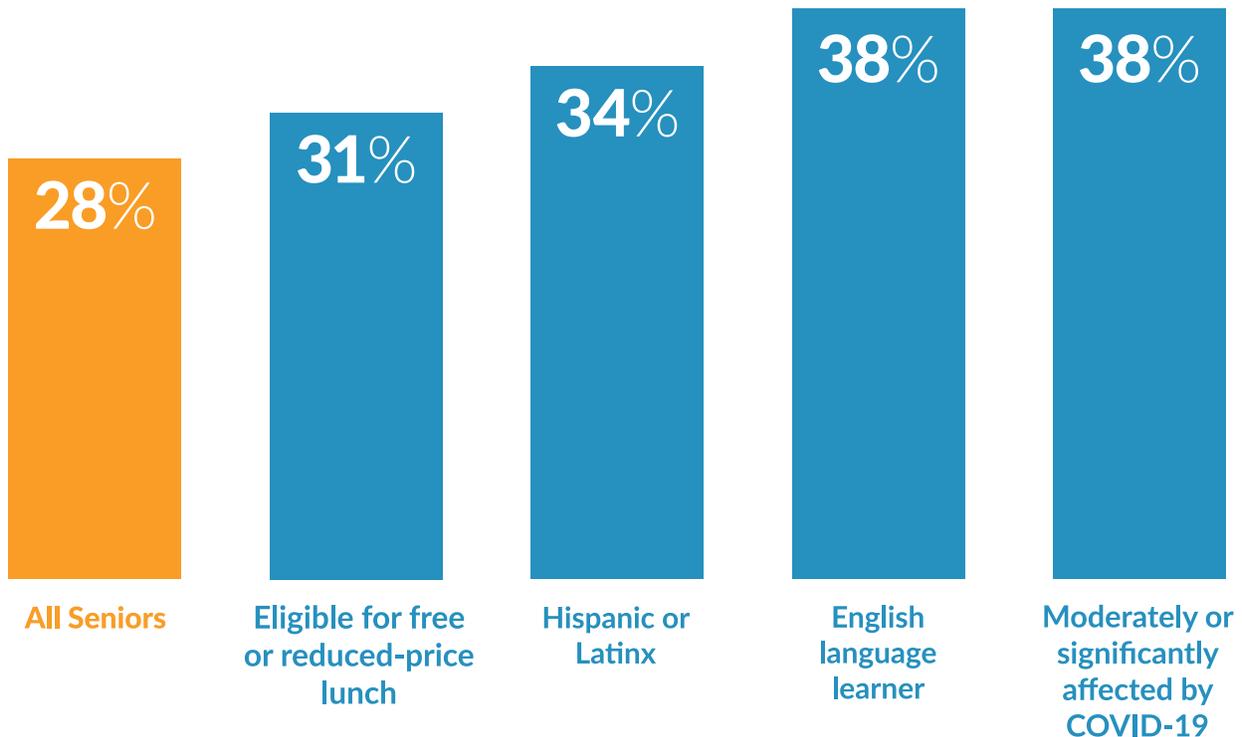
This spring, more than one in four seniors—28 percent—reported that their plans for after high school changed since the start of the pandemic, a significant increase from the 25 percent who reported so in fall 2020, and the 18 percent who reported so during emergency distance learning last spring.

The proportion of students in the senior class of '21 whose post-secondary plans have changed is higher for

some groups. Relative to their peers, a higher proportion of seniors eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, who are Hispanic or Latinx, who are taking special classes to learn English, and who are moderately or significantly affected by COVID-19 report changing their plans.



**Have your plans for what to do after high school changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?  
("YES")**



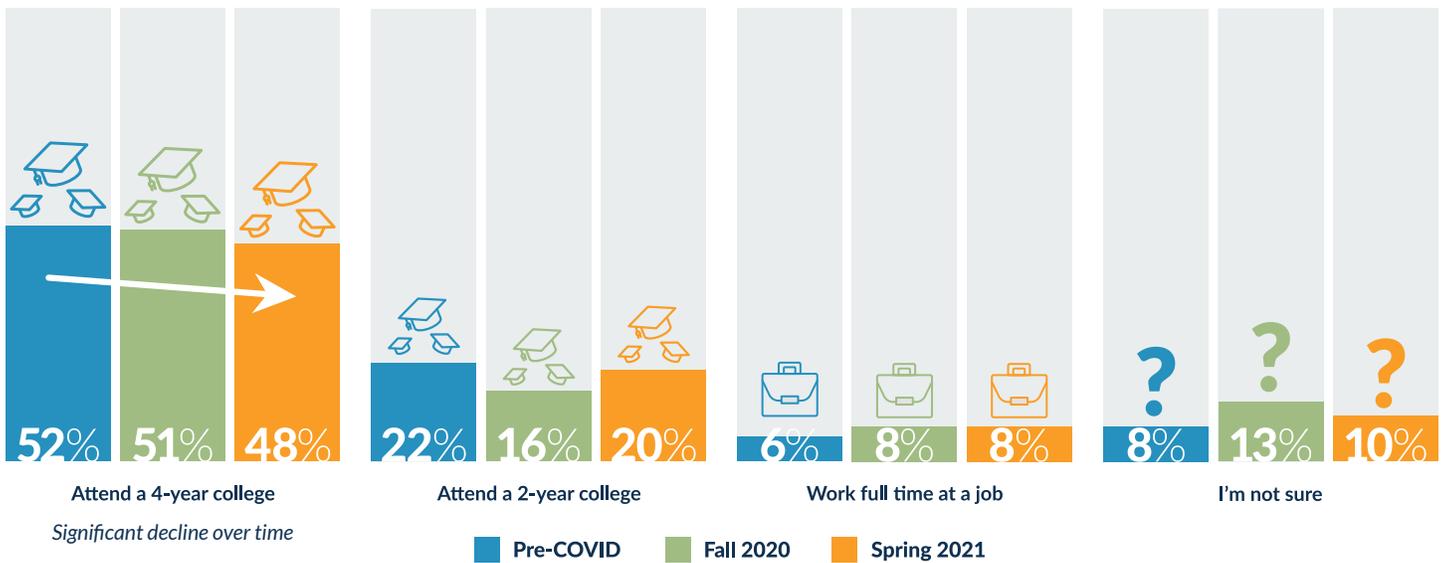


**So, what did the class of '21 say that they planned to do next?**

There has been widespread concern as college enrollments have dropped over the course of the pandemic, an indicator that for many, college-going plans have been derailed. This trend was also evident in our data.

The percentage of seniors planning to attend four-year and two-year colleges declined in 2020 and remained lower than pre-pandemic levels in spring 2021. In particular, the percentage of seniors this spring who reported that they plan to attend a four-year college dropped to below half, to 48 percent. This is an important signal for higher education enrollment predictions. As the National Student Clearinghouse recently [reported](#), colleges recorded a near six percent drop in undergraduate enrollment this spring, the “steepest decline so far since the pandemic began.”

**After you finish high school, what do you expect to do next?  
HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS**



Improving access to higher education demands our attention, and students expressed a strong desire in their qualitative comments for more counselors and more personalized support navigating the application process. Many students requested access to more substantive career and technical education (CTE) courses to help them successfully chart a pathway to self-sufficiency and into a job. Compared to pre-pandemic responses, in spring 2021 more students reported that they plan to work full time, and a full 10 percent remained unsure of what their next step will be.

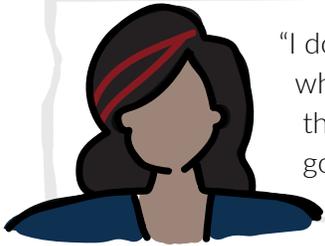


## In Students' Own Words

We analyzed the qualitative responses of more than 5,000 high school seniors who reported that their plans after graduation had changed due to the pandemic.

### Give Us Practical Guidance

Many seniors who reported a change in plans this spring explained that they did not have access to the support needed to navigate the application process, and there was a plaintive refrain among the comments of students asking for help.



"I don't have siblings and I have no clue on what I need to do to go to college. I don't know when I should apply or what classes I need to take to even go to college." "I felt so lost throughout the application process and applying for scholarships. As the first in my family going to college it was stressful and felt like giving up. I needed help."

"The school mainly just says here's a website now figure it out yourself." "We had the ultimate college planning help book thing, but even then I felt lost. It was like, 'Okay you're a senior. Good luck on your college apps,' which was really difficult." "Normally (counselors) are too busy to help you understand and it's hard to get time with them because there are so many students. They need to talk more about what college life is even like. Many students such as myself are afraid of college because we aren't properly informed about it." "It was hard for me to figure this out on my own. Please do better. There's kids out there who need help."



### Give Us Pathways for the Future

Many of these students also expressed frustration at the lack of access to career and technical pathways, and they described how traditional academic subjects seemed esoteric or irrelevant in the midst of the pandemic.

"Give me assignments that require thinking instead of" "giving us mindless worksheets that mean nothing." "I don't find any of the content we are learning in our classes challenging." "For example in my ag chem class we have learned little to no chemistry and it makes me question whether I should even be taking the course at all." "In some classes I am actually learning while others feel like a complete joke,

so it's like rolling dice on your education." "The school can help by changing their curriculum to fit the times. What we are learning is NOT relevant, especially during a pandemic, like survival, starting a fire, filing taxes, college tuition, jobs, how to drive, loans, credit, and stuff like that. I've had to learn all of that by myself."



>> Watch video: [bit.ly/3IWcVVe](https://bit.ly/3IWcVVe)

# Conclusion

As the United States continues to navigate new COVID-19 variants, vaccine adoption, and what they mean for schools' ongoing operations and staffing, there is a critical opportunity now to listen directly to K-12 students and use their feedback in continuous improvement practices.

As we've seen in this report, many aspects of students' experience of school are returning to pre-pandemic levels and may be perceived as a salutary marker. However, when we investigate the unequal experiences across student groups and listen to how students characterize their perceptions in their own words, it is clear that students still face formidable challenges. We also learn in this report that students offer actionable feedback about how and where to target support, and students seek partnership with adults in creating solutions. Finally, this data prompts important questions about what we've learned during this period and what we will choose to take with us into the future.

As educators and education funders continue to make progress supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development – even in these uniquely difficult times – it is imperative that we perpetually tune into the voices and experiences of those for whom the education system is designed for: students.

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Thank you to our volunteer student voice composite memo readers: Jonathan ("Give us Emotional and Mental Health"), Robert ("Give us Inclusive Curricula"), Noah ("Please Understand: When Tech Hinders"), and Lola ("Give Us Pathways for the Future"), as well as the team at Scope & Sequence for the animated video collaboration.

This work would not be possible without the partnership of the hundreds of schools that elevate student voices within their local communities and the more than half a million students who have shared their insights and expertise by weighing in.

**A heartfelt thank you to each anonymous student voice represented here.  
We hear you.**

### 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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