



# YouthTruth

STUDENT SURVEY


A NATIONAL NONPROFIT


## STUDENTS WEIGH IN:

### Learning & Well-Being During COVID-19

Education in the United States, as across the globe, changed dramatically when the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools across the country to close in spring 2020 and over 50 million students were asked to learn remotely.

As a national nonprofit that elevates student voice on critical issues in education, YouthTruth wanted to know: how have students perceived their learning experiences, social-emotional development, and well-being during spring 2020 school closures?

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

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## Survey Fundings

Education in the United States, as across the globe, changed dramatically when the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools across the country to close in spring 2020 and over 50 million students were asked to learn remotely.

However, in this moment of rapid response and significant change in students' experiences of school and learning, there has been little firsthand data about how the pandemic is affecting students' experiences – whereas there have been numerous efforts to hear the important perspectives of adults. As a national nonprofit that elevates student voice on critical issues in education, YouthTruth wanted to know: how have students perceived their learning experiences, social-emotional development, and well-being during spring 2020 school closures?

To better understand this question and share insights with the field, we analyzed survey data from more than 20,000 students in grades 5-12. The data was gathered in May and June 2020 through a 12-minute online survey, administered in English and Spanish, in partnership with 166 public schools across nine states. For a summary of key findings, please see below.

To explore the online interactive report of all findings, please visit:

[https://youthtruth.surveystatements.org/report\\_sections/1087936](https://youthtruth.surveystatements.org/report_sections/1087936)

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## Overall

While school logistics worked relatively well from students' perspective, remote learning still didn't result in a lot of learning during COVID-19 related school closures in spring 2020. It was especially challenging for Black and Latinx students – who faced more obstacles to learning than other students – and for female students and students who identify in another way – who struggled more with mental health and well-being than males.

There were a number of other trends based on student demographic characteristics in how students experienced learning and well-being. Students who felt more personally affected by COVID-19 had less positive experiences across most themes and questions. The same is true of 11th graders, while 5th and 6th graders reported more positive experiences. Asian students also tended to report more positive experiences across most themes.

Additionally, our analysis of the over 40,000 open-ended student responses sheds light on the complexity of both the challenges faced and opportunities seized in this moment of profound disruption to the institution of schooling. [Students shared](#) in their own words that they enjoyed having more agency over their schedule and learning pace, that they appreciated opportunities to connect with their family, and that virtual learning often afforded flexibility to learn new skills and deepen knowledge. And still, distractions at home, stress and anxiety, and deep longing for social connection underscore the importance of listening to these voices and exploring this data with empathy and responsiveness to the student experience.

## FINDING 1



Only half of students said their teachers give them assignments that really help them learn and 39 percent said they learn a lot every day.

Student perceptions confirm what has been widely reported elsewhere: the transition to emergency distance learning did not go well. Only half of students said their teachers give them assignments that really help them learn and 39 percent said they learn a lot every day.

There were clear divides in the experiences of “A” students versus “D” students, with students who typically get lower grades rating their learning experience significantly less positively than those who typically get higher grades. Fifty-six percent of students who get mostly As said their teachers give them assignments that really help them learn, while only 26 percent of students who get mostly Ds said the same. Similarly, 43 percent of students who get mostly As, but only 13 percent of students who get mostly Ds, said they learn a lot every day.

### LEARNING EXPERIENCE

While my school building has been closed...

...My teachers give me assignments that help me learn

51%

...I learn a lot almost every day

39%

"I have no motivation and the assignments are just filler work with not much learning."

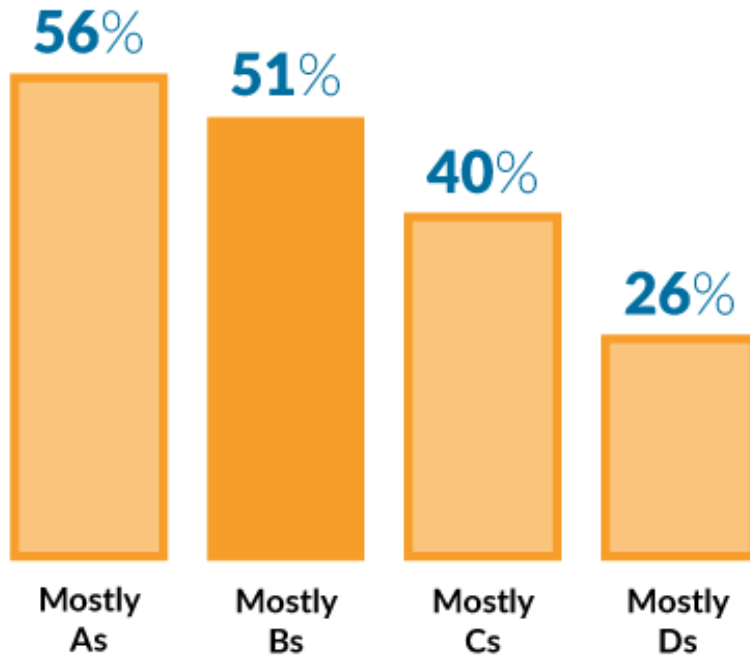
- High School Student



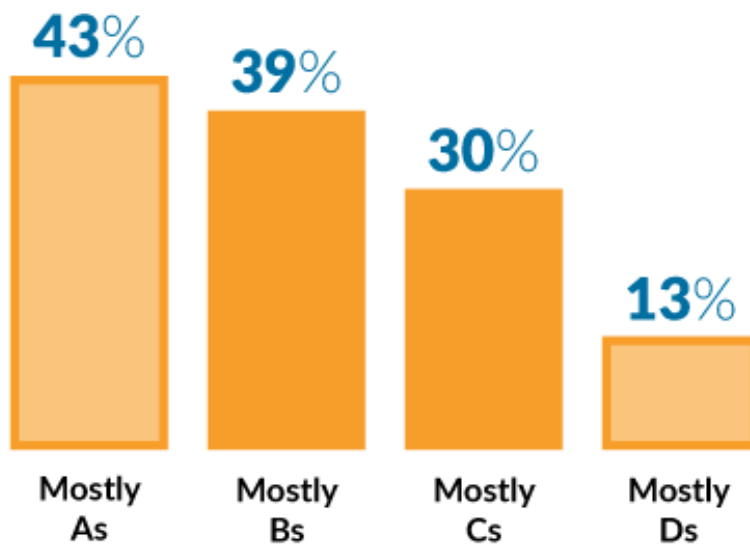
# LEARNING EXPERIENCE BY SELF-REPORTED GRADES

While my school building has been closed...

...My teachers give me assignments that really help me learn



...I learn a lot every day



 \*Statistically significant difference



While there is room for improvement in the logistics of virtual learning, according to students it was the most positive aspect of their school experience this spring. The majority of students were able to navigate mechanics such as accessing and turning in their schoolwork (87 and 79 percent, respectively). Students rated their school’s clarity about grading less positively than other dimensions of school logistics, with only 62 percent rating favorably overall.

However, some groups of students found school logistics more challenging. Students from low-income families, special education students, and students who are learning English (ELL) had less positive experiences accessing, completing, and turning in schoolwork. Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that the findings from this online survey likely represent the best case scenario – as students with no internet access at home are less likely to have completed the survey.

## SCHOOL LOGISTICS

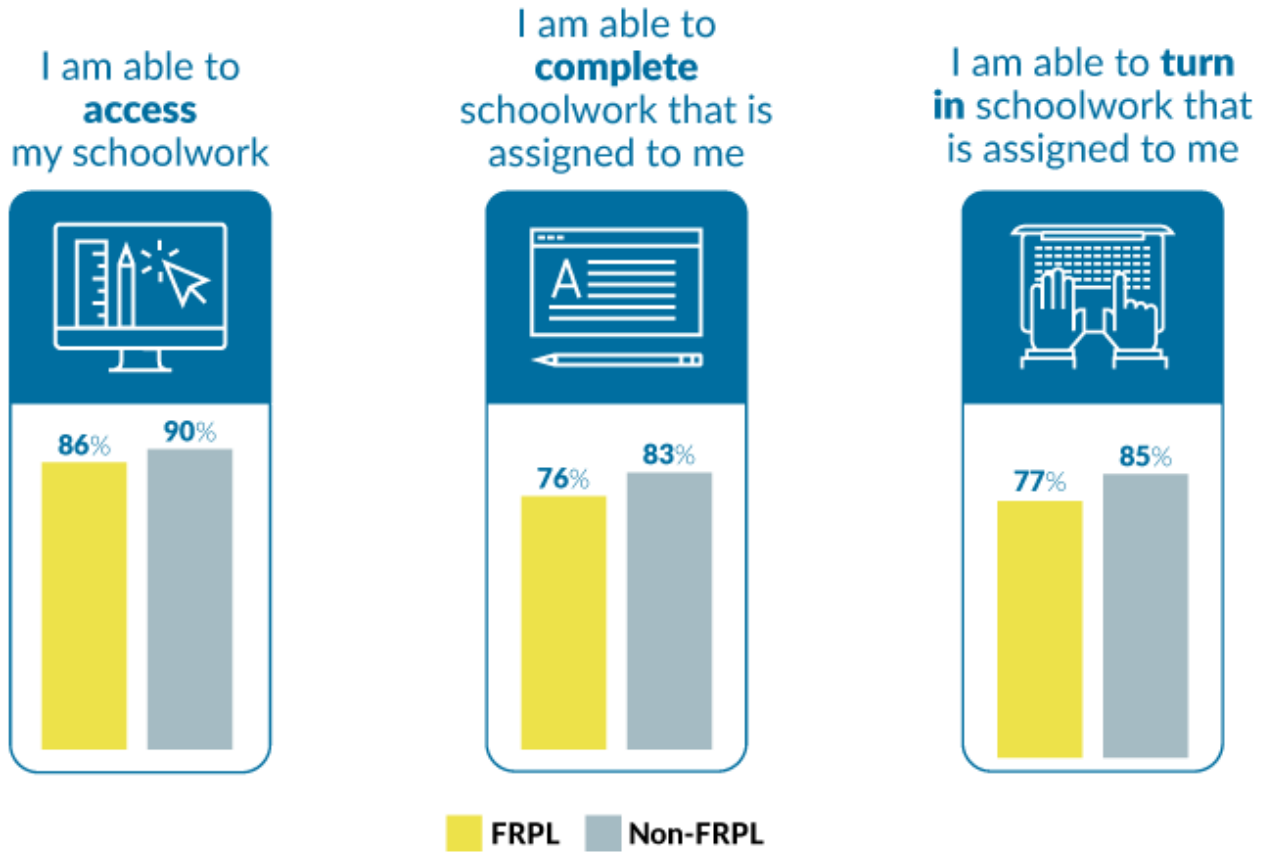
While my school building has been closed...





# SCHOOL LOGISTICS BY FREE AND REDUCED PRICE LUNCH ELIGIBILITY

While my school building has been closed...



## EQUITY & THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

In describing obstacles they faced to virtual learning, two such obstacles were “limited or no internet access” and “limited or no access to a computer or device.” Students from low-income families faced these obstacles at greater rates than did other students – with 26 percent of students eligible for free and reduced priced lunch (FRPL) reporting “limited or no internet access” as an obstacle, compared to 18 percent of other students, and 19 percent of FRPL students reporting “limited or no access to a computer or device” as an obstacle, compared to only 10 percent of other students. Latinx students also faced these obstacles to connectivity at greater rates than did other students. Twenty-six percent of Latinx students reported “limited or no internet access” as an obstacle, compared to 22 percent of other students, and 21 percent of Latinx students reported “limited or no access to a computer or device” as an obstacle, compared to only 15 percent of other students.

## FINDING 2

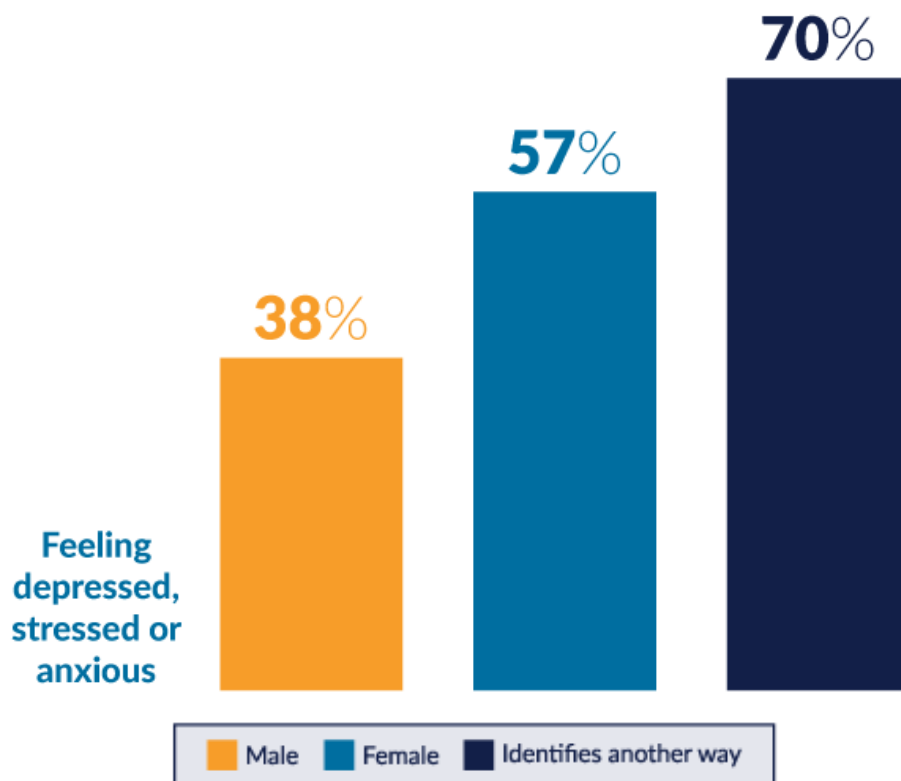


Distractions at home and feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious were the most frequently cited obstacles to virtual learning. Black and Latinx students faced more obstacles than White and Asian students.

Seventy percent of students reported obstacles to their virtual learning. Of those students, 64 percent reported facing distractions at home and 50 percent reported feeling depressed, stressed or anxious. A greater proportion of female students and students who identify in a different way reported feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious than did male students.

### OBSTACLES TO VIRTUAL LEARNING: DEPRESSION, STRESS, & ANXIETY BY GENDER IDENTITY

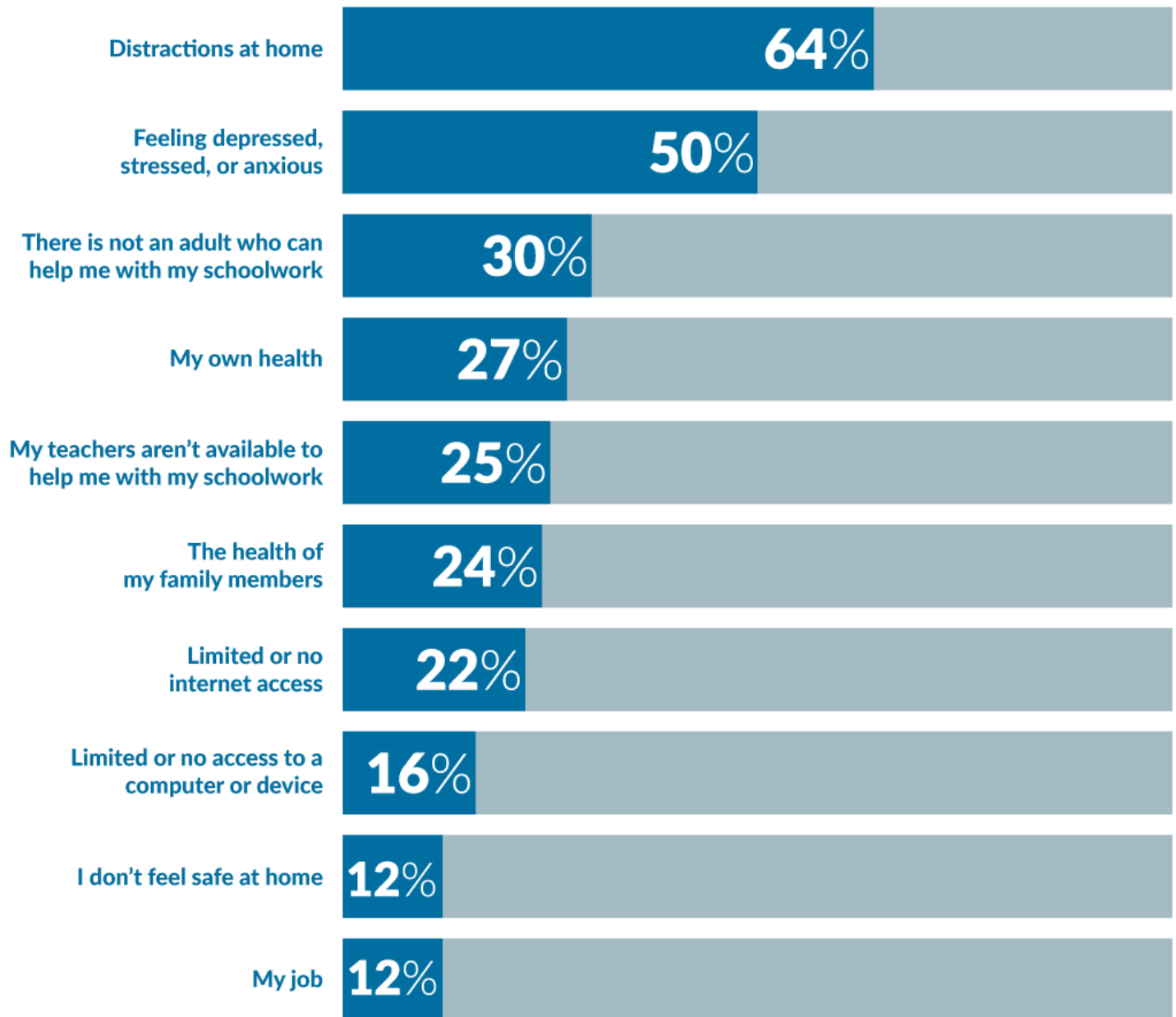
Do any of the following make it hard for you to do the at-home learning opportunities provide by your school?





# OBSTACLES TO VIRTUAL LEARNING: DEPRESSION, STRESS, & ANXIETY BY GENDER IDENTITY

Do any of the following make it hard for you to do the at-home learning opportunities provide by your school?\*

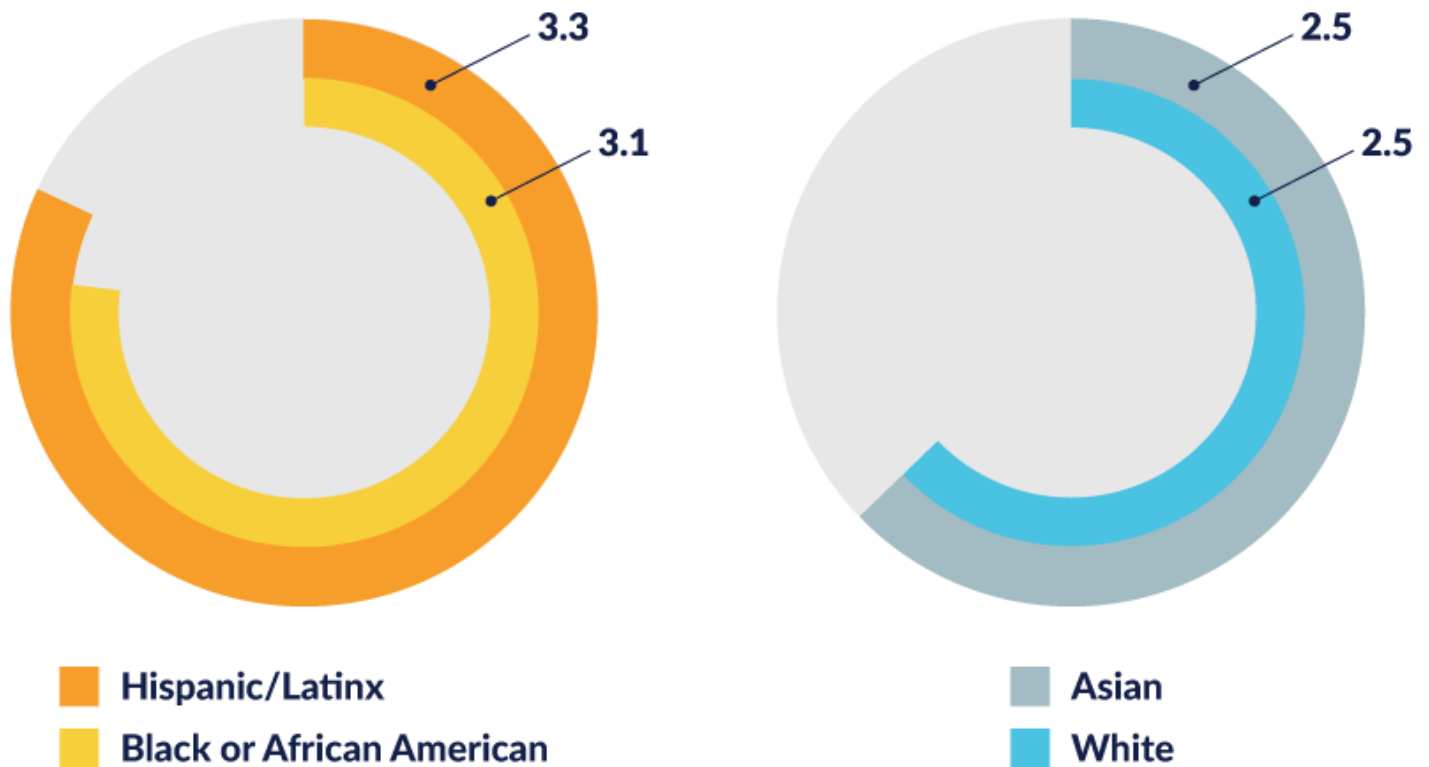


\*Seventy percent of students faced at least one obstacle. Of those students, these are the percentages of students that reported various obstacles.



Similar to the idea of ACES “[trauma load](#)” scores, some students experience compounding obstacles to their virtual learning. On average, Black and Latinx students faced more obstacles than White and Asian students. Of the seventy percent of students who reported at least one obstacle, there were differences by race/ethnicity in students “obstacle load” – that is, the average number of obstacles students reported facing. On average, Latinx students reported 3.3 obstacles, Black students reported 3.1 obstacles, White students reported 2.5 obstacles, and Asian students reported 2.5 obstacles.

## OBSTACLE LOAD BY RACE/ETHNICITY



For the two most frequently cited obstacles across all students (distractions at home and feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious) there was not a significant difference in how Latinx or Black students rated. However, for several other obstacles – the availability of an adult to help with schoolwork, students’ own health, family members’ health, limited or no internet access, limited or no access to a computer or device, and not feeling safe at home – a higher proportion of Latinx students reported these obstacles while a lower proportion of White students reported facing these obstacles. We did not observe a statistically significant difference for Black students, but this is likely due to sample size.



### A NOTE ON FOCUS AND MOTIVATION

In terms of their engagement with learning, half of students said they are able to focus on their learning and only 41 percent said they are able to motivate themselves to do schoolwork.

#### ENGAGEMENT

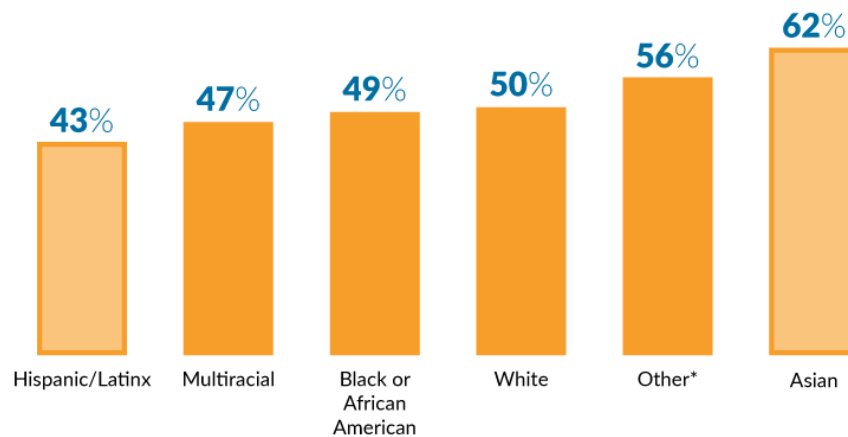
While my school building has been closed...



Asian students rated their ability to focus more positively than did other students, while Latinx students rated less positively.

#### ABILITY TO FOCUS BY RACE/ETHNICITY

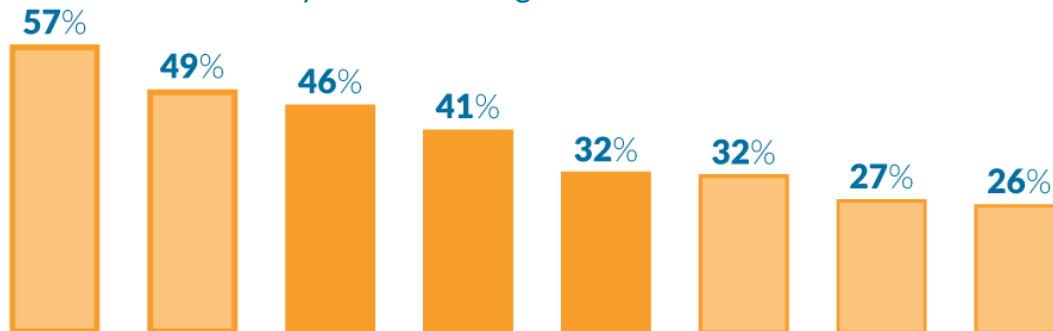
While my school building has been closed...



There were differences in students' motivation across different grade levels, with 5th and 6th graders feeling more positively about their ability to motivate themselves to do schoolwork, and 10th, 11th, and 12th graders feeling less motivated.

#### MOTIVATION BY GRADE LEVEL

While my school building has been closed...



Statistically significant difference

\*Other includes American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and those who prefer not to say.

## FINDING 3



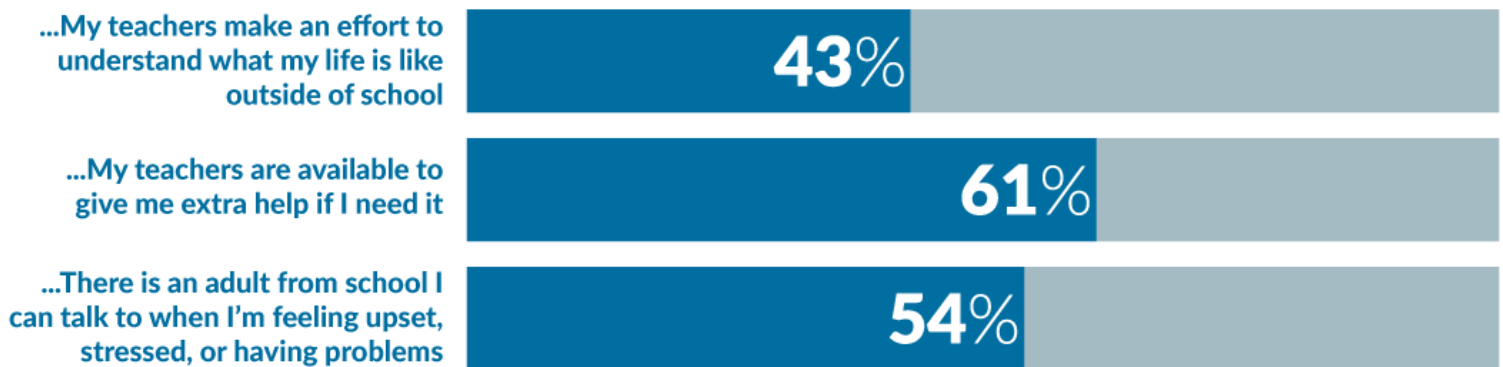
# Relationships with teachers were a bright spot, while sense of belonging suffered.

Overall, about half of students rated their relationships with teachers and adults in school positively. In reflecting on relationships, four in ten students (43 percent) said many or all of their teachers make an effort to understand what their lives are like outside of school, and six in ten students (61 percent) said many or all of their teachers are available to give extra help if they need it. And just over half of students (54 percent) said there is an adult from school they can talk to when they're feeling upset, stressed, or having problems.

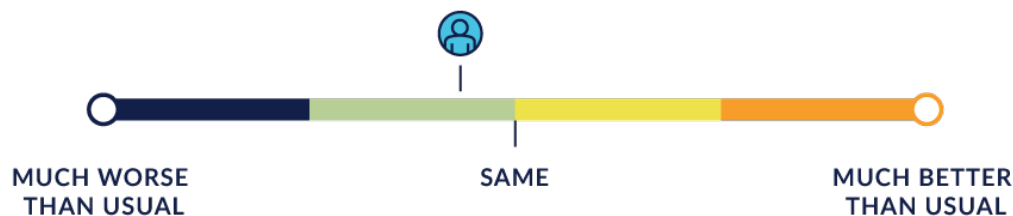
Spring 2020 has called for even greater resourcefulness in how teachers connect with and support their students. On average, students reported that their relationships with their teachers are slightly better than usual than usual, a testament to teachers' care, commitment, and concern for their students during this challenging time.

## RELATIONSHIPS

### While my school building has been closed...



## RELATIONSHIPS NOW VERSUS USUAL



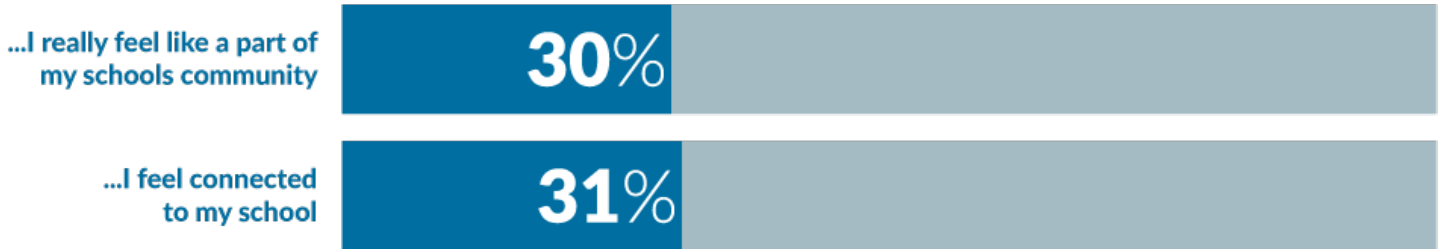
This composite represents average student ratings across two questions - the frequency with which students really feel like a part of their school's community and feel connected to school - now compared to usual



While relationships have been better than might have been anticipated, students' sense of belonging has suffered. Only one in three students said they really feel like part of their school community (30 percent) and feel connected to school (31 percent). On average students reported that this is worse than usual.

## BELONGING

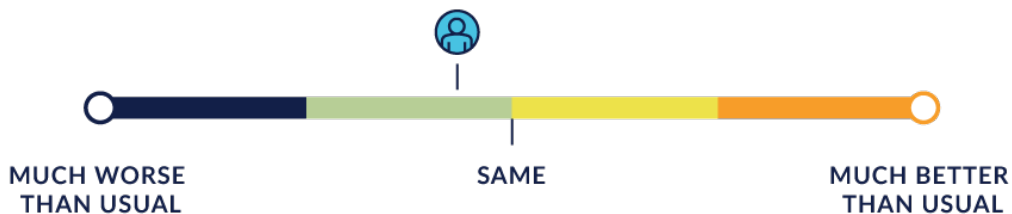
While my school building has been closed...



"I don't get to see/interact with most of my friends, I don't get to see/interact with my teachers. Sometimes I feel alone because my parents go to work and my brother is just really annoying. I don't feel a part of my school at all."

- High School Student

## SENSE OF BELONGING NOW VERSUS USUAL



This composite represents average student ratings across two questions – the frequency with which students really feel like a part of their school's community and feel connected to school – now compared to usual

## FINDING 4

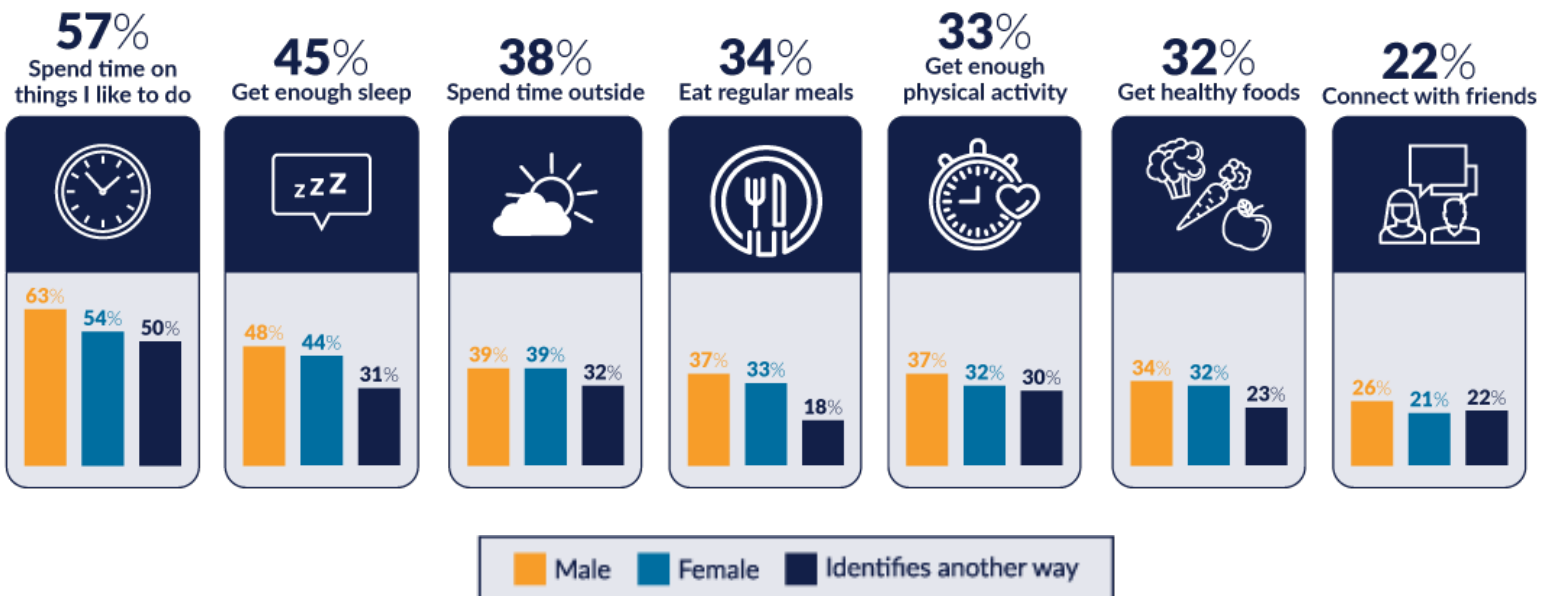


# Females and students who identify in another way rated their health and well-being less positively than males.

Students were asked to share feedback about various aspects of their health and well-being during spring 2020 school closures compared to their usual experience. Students most appreciated spending time on things they like to do (57 percent said they are able to do so more now than usual). However, the ability to connect with friends received the lowest average rating of all items in the survey (with only 22 percent of students rating favorably).

Male students tended to rate their health and well-being more positively than did female students and students who identify in another way – males rated significantly more favorably in terms of spending time on things they like to do, getting enough physical activity, and connecting with friends.

## HEALTH AND WELL-BEING Compared to my usual experience, now I...



## FINDING 5



# One in five high school seniors' postsecondary plans have changed.

When asked what they expect to do after they finish high school, students reported a range of postsecondary plans.

Sixty-two percent of students said they expect to attend a 4-year college, ten percent said they expect to attend a 2-year college, three percent said they expect to work full time at a job, two percent said they expect to attend a trade or technical school, and two percent said they expect to join the military. Sixteen percent said they aren't sure what they'll do after high school.

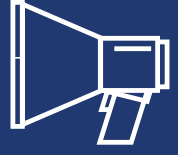
Students were also asked if their plans for after finishing high school have changed since their school building closed. Overall 13 percent of students said yes, two thirds said no, and 19 percent said they don't know. Among seniors, one in five (19 percent) said their plans for after they finish high school have changed.

## COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS Postsecondary Plans

**1** in **5** high school seniors' postsecondary plans have changed.



# IN STUDENTS' OWN WORDS



Over 40,000 anonymous open-ended responses were gathered through the survey in response to the following three questions:

**What about learning at home do you like? Are there things you hope will stay the same next school year?**

**What about learning at home do you find challenging?  
How can your school help?**

**Since your school building closed, briefly describe your day...**

In addition to delivering organized school-system specific comments tables to the participating schools, YouthTruth also analyzed the full cannon of responses to help identify broad themes across all students' unique experiences across schools and geographies. We find that the open-ended responses provide tremendous insight into students' lived experiences and that the open-ended responses provide qualitative nuance to help contextualize the quantitative findings. The following themes emerged from the aggregated qualitative responses:

## Likes

- Work Pace
- Comfortable Environments
- Free Time, Sleep, and Wellness
- Family Connection
- Workload and Pedagogy

## Challenges

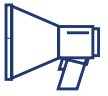
- Distractions
- Online School Work and Schedule
- Motivation
- Stress at Home
- Belonging and Connecting with Friends

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## Qualitative Sentiment Analysis Methodology

Methodology for analyzing the qualitative responses: This process began with a manual review of a sample of the responses to select a set of positive and negative themes (emic themes). With the themes identified, we next began natural language processing (NLP) by cleaning and vectorizing data using an English Language NLP library. This step allowed us to execute a clustering algorithm on the responses and enabled us to find emergent themes. Using an n-gram range of up to three words, we conducted a K Means clustering analysis. As a result, we were able to categorize student comments into clusters based on common threads or sequences of words. To train and correct for 'noise' in the comments, the emic theme analysis was overlaid on the clusters to confirm that the clusters were accurate in describing the topic of the comment. Finally, each cluster and emic theme was summarized using YouthTruth's text summary tool that compiles the responses within a cluster and identifies the most 'representative' comments based on the number and type of keywords used in the comment.





## Qualitative Composites: Likes

### Work Pace

**"Some things I like about learning at home is having a bit more flexibility with how I learn and being able to work at my own pace. I hope we will be able to work more at our own pace next year."**

While their school building was closed, students enjoyed being able to dictate the pace of their own work. Some describe being able to work faster than when they are in the classroom like one student who wrote: "I can finish school early if I'm done with everything. Like I don't have to wait," while others appreciate "not being rushed." Another student explained how the home environment was working well for their learning style compared to a classroom: "I really like that I can learn at my own pace [...] because when I'm at school it can be really loud and I like being in a quiet space where I can learn on my own." Another student wrote about their surprise at how well it was working: "[...] initially I thought I would procrastinate more than usual, but I actually started getting in the habit of doing things early so I could get more free time. It helped me with time management because I had to create my own structure and schedule to follow." Overall, some students have grown to appreciate the autonomy that learning at home can give them in terms of setting their schedule and pacing themselves.

### Comfortable Environments

**"I like learning at home because I can take breaks whenever I want, which actually leads to me being more productive and motivated [...] I can also eat and drink whenever I want and use my kitchen, so I've been eating a more healthy amount and variety of food and staying better hydrated."**

Some students experiencing schooling away from their school building enjoyed learning in a more comfortable environment. Many students built a learning environment that was suitable to them by eating home-cooked meals, listening to music, doing work in bed, taking breaks when they wanted, and

turning on/off their camera. "I like at home-learning because it makes me more comfortable." "I can take breaks when I want and snack on things when I want[,] just be in sweatpants and a hoodie and relax." "We also get to eat our food ... which I prefer rather than eating the food at school." When asked about what they would like to stay the same next school year one student wrote "I want to still be able to listen to music while I work because it helps me focus and it blocks out distractions."

### Free Time, Sleep, and Wellness

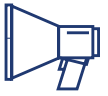
**"I like that I am able to get enough sleep at home. I hope that I am able to get enough sleep next school year."**

While their school building was closed, students appreciated extra time for hobbies, sleeping, and getting time outside. "I get much better sleep, I have more time to cook so I'm eating healthier, I get a lot more exercise since I'm not so tired all of the time, I get to spend more time with my family and pets, I get to go outside earlier in the day before it's dark." Students enjoyed the flexibility of their day and hope their schedule next year permits the same level of sleep and self-care that learning from home has enabled. One student wrote, "I hope that they change the school schedule, so that way kids are able to get more sleep and focus more at school."

### Family Connection

**"I like how we get to spend extra time with our families during this time. If this were a normal schedule, then we would be at school for six hours a day instead of spending that six hours doing something fun with your family. It gives us free time to go on family walks or bike rides, it lets us play family games, and watch movies together."**

Some students wrote about the benefits of being able to spend more time with family while their school building has been closed. One student wrote: "before quarantine, [school] left me very little time to spend with my family, and I'm so grateful that



*I'm able to be with them more now.*" Another wrote that "[...] *making my own schedule throughout the day helped me focus on other things in my life like religion, exercise, and family life.*" When asked what aspects of distance learning they'd like to stay the same next year, several students wrote that they don't want to lose the additional time they have been getting to spend with their families. One student wrote that the current learning environment allowed them to *"take care of myself more like washing my hands very often, and constantly taking care of myself and my family,"* emphasizing some student's feeling that they are playing an important role in their home life during the pandemic.

### Workload and Pedagogy

***"I like that there is more focus on projects rather than tests all the time. I hope this focus on education over grades will continue."***

Although many students found it challenging to focus on schoolwork due to home distractions, some students found that the home learning environment, unstructured time, and project-oriented work complemented their learning styles. *"Being at home allows me to focus on my needs... I like that there is more focus on projects rather than tests all the time."* One student explains that because *"the workload is decreased, we have time to understand the assignments instead of mindlessly doing them. For example, In math, instead of learning a new formula each day and using those formulas, I can understand the formulas and how they work."* While some students enjoy distance learning mechanics and instructional methods, others enjoy the aspect of working alone during home instruction. *"I like learning at home because I can't be distracted or pressured by my classmates. Sometimes they're a bit rowdy and make it hard to focus on work."*

## Qualitative Composites: Challenges

### Distractions

***"I get distracted a lot more at my house and procrastinate a lot. At school, I was better at time management because I had class time to work. Now I am distracted by tv, pets, games, etc."***

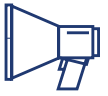
Students identified distractions at home as a challenge for them when trying to learn since their school building was closed. One student finds it *"harder to learn at home because (they) get distracted by family and pets."* Some students feel that it was *"hard to find a place that is not occupied by any family members,"* and that it was challenging to *"speak and focus without any background noise being caused by any of my family members."* One student describes the challenges of working in a full house when three family members are on zoom calls at the same time which *"causes a strain on both the volume in my house and the internet."* When asked about what the school could do to help, students were unsure that anything could be done due to the specific nature of their

home life or their parents' schedules. Students feel as though this challenge is a *"me thing."*

### Online School Work and Schedule

***"It is hard to find assignments and meetings. I think the school can help by having us make classes for meetings specifically instead of mixing it with the normal assignments."***

While engaging in distance learning, some students expressed the nature and amount of schoolwork to be a challenge for them. Though some of their teachers have adjusted their workload, many still assign the same amount or more "filler work," which has been difficult to adjust to in addition to learning away from school. In addition, students feel as though the setting of online classes can be confusing and does not lend itself to getting help in the best way possible. *"I feel like we have more schoolwork and it's hard for the teachers to help with schoolwork because we can't really interact with them."* When asked about



what the school could do to help, students hope that teachers continue to reach out to help those who need it. *"I find it challenging on how we don't get a lot of instructions as we do in a normal school. My school can help by taking a bit more time to answer our questions and concerns."*

### Motivation

***"Finding the motivation to do school work was the most difficult challenge I found during distance learning. In a classroom, most of the time, you are forced to work on assignments either as a class or in a small group of friends. At home, you have to push yourself to be productive. Lacking motivation caused me to dramatically fall behind."***

After school building closures, some students identified a lack of motivation as an obstacle when trying to learn. The main reasons students are not motivated are mental health, unengaging class sessions with their teachers, a deluge of "filler work," and a lack of peer collaboration. One student described their situation: *"I have no motivation, no teacher to ask questions, no one to talk about my mental health [...] the online classes doesn't work the same way as being physically there."* When asked about what the school could do to help, students feel as though *"having supportive teachers/staff that can advise [them] of ways to improve can help in actively doing work"* and engaging in the content. One student found that the class in which their teacher supported them the most during this time was *"the class [where they were] better able to catch up and pass."* Students also feel as though schools should offer therapy as a way to *"help students and their mental health."*

### Stress at Home

***"Some people have chores, family members who need extra help, older family members, sibling, and pets [...] You might be helping your grandma and miss a zoom meeting and that adds a lot of stress."***

Youth expressed feelings of being stressed at home as a challenge when trying to learn. The main contributors to students' stress are caring for family members and doing errands, conflicts with parents'

schedules, and an inability to talk to peers or adults about their problems. *"Some people have chores, family members who need extra help, older family members, sibling, and pets [...] You might be helping your grandma and miss a zoom meeting and that adds a lot of stress."* Another student describes a busy homelife of juggling child care, a job and school. *"I live with 4 others and my brother's family is always over and I usually have to take care of my niece and nephew and recently I started working again because restaurants are opening again."* Some students see school as the only place they could focus on their work. Since their school has closed many must grapple with both the stress of their home life and schoolwork. *"Maybe what schools could do is give us this time off. And summer break or any breaks [...] stress is going around the world like a virus. And we as students and teachers need this time off to relax and not need to get more stress from school right now, we don't need more stress than we already have."*

### Belonging and Connecting with Friends

***"...not being able to talk to your friends in person is very hard. during bad times like this, you need someone to cope to, whether that's a friend or a family member, it can be hard to vent over the phone..."***

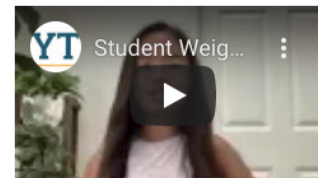
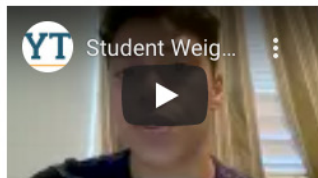
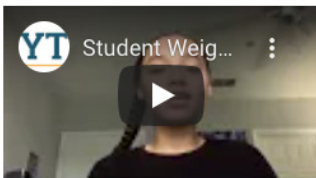
Since closing school sites, students identified their inability to connect with peers or friends as a challenge. This student notes feeling *"lonely when [they're] at home doing all the things they used to do at school but without friends."* Students feel as though having a way to connect with friends might give them more motivation to focus and engage on schoolwork. *"My main motivation to go to school was being able to see my friends and now that I don't have that motivation it is very challenging to get schoolwork done."* When asked about what the school could do to help, students requested more settings to work and connect with peers inside and out of class hours, including one student proposal for schools to set up *"a google meet so that you can talk to your friends."*



## Hear from students directly

The videos below are composites of sentiments that emerged through our analysis of the over 40,000 open-ended student responses. The composites shed light on the complexity of both the challenges faced and opportunities seized in this moment of profound disruption to the institution of schooling. Special thanks to our student volunteers Aaliyah (FL), Efrain (CA), Kaleb (HI), Maya (HI), and Tommy (MA) for reading the anonymous sentiments on camera for us!

Visit the Student's Weigh In microsite to watch these videos: [www.youthtruthsurvey.org/student-weigh-in](http://www.youthtruthsurvey.org/student-weigh-in)



### In Conclusion

There is a critical opportunity now to listen to and learn from students' lived experiences during this unprecedented time. As we navigate the challenges ahead and adapt to new learning models, students' voices must be central to the way school is reimagined.

## A Special Thanks

We'd like to thank each of the 20,438 students who weighed in about their unique experience with learning and well-being during spring 2020 school closures. Thank you for sharing your experience, your insight, your wisdom, and your recommendations.

**We hear you. We see you. And you are not alone.**

### 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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