

A student with a backpack and a face mask hanging from their ear stands in a library aisle, looking at a stack of papers on a shelf. The image is overlaid with a blue tint.

# YouthTruth

STUDENT SURVEY

A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

STUDENTS WEIGH IN, PART IV:

## Learning & Well-Being After COVID-19

What did students have to say about their learning, sense of belonging, mental health, and support from adults during the 2022-23 school year? How did these elements of social, emotional, and academic development change over the course of the pandemic? And how did experiences in 2022-23 differ across student demographic groups?

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

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## STUDENTS WEIGH IN, PART IV: LEARNING & WELL-BEING AFTER COVID-19

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic upended student learning and well-being as we know it. Three years after the pandemic began, many aspects of learning and life have returned to some semblance of normal. As we emerge from the pandemic, how are students faring?

The [Students Weigh In](#) project is a series of reports designed to highlight student insights and learn directly from their experience during a wholly unusual era of schooling. YouthTruth's Students Weigh In reports track how secondary students' perceptions of learning and well-being evolved across four time periods – spring 2020, fall 2020, spring 2021, and the 2022-23 school year – relative to the student experience prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report explores secondary students' feedback in a fourth and final moment in time, 2022-23, as a coda to the Students Weigh In series. **What did students have to say about their learning, sense of belonging, mental health, and support from adults during the 2022-23 school year? How did these elements of social, emotional, and academic development change over the course of the pandemic? And how did experiences in 2022-23 differ across student demographic groups?**

Student perceptions of learning and belonging have returned to pre-pandemic levels but beg the question of whether this is a “normal” we want for our nation’s youth. On the other hand, students' experiences with mental health and support from adults in school worsened during the pandemic and have yet to show signs of recovery. Across all measures, there are significant differences in the student experience across demographic groups. The data presented in this report paint a concerning picture of this era’s impact on student experience and emphasize the importance of listening to students to help them learn and thrive in the years ahead.



## FINDINGS

### LEARNING AND BELONGING

1

Student perceptions of learning and belonging follow similar patterns over time. Learning and belonging fell in spring 2020, rose in fall 2020, and returned to pre-pandemic levels in spring 2021 – where they remained in 2022-23.

### TEACHER CONNECTION

2

After a temporary bump in spring 2020 relative to pre-pandemic, student perceptions of teacher connection declined over time to a new low in 2022-23, with less than a quarter of students reporting that their teachers understand their lives outside of school.

### MENTAL HEALTH

3

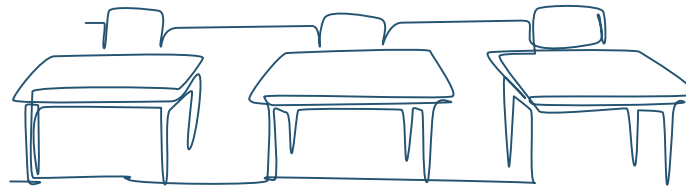
Even as students increasingly identified their own mental health as an obstacle to learning, the percentage reporting that they have an adult from school to talk to when having problems dropped during the pandemic and has not recovered as of 2022-23.

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# 1

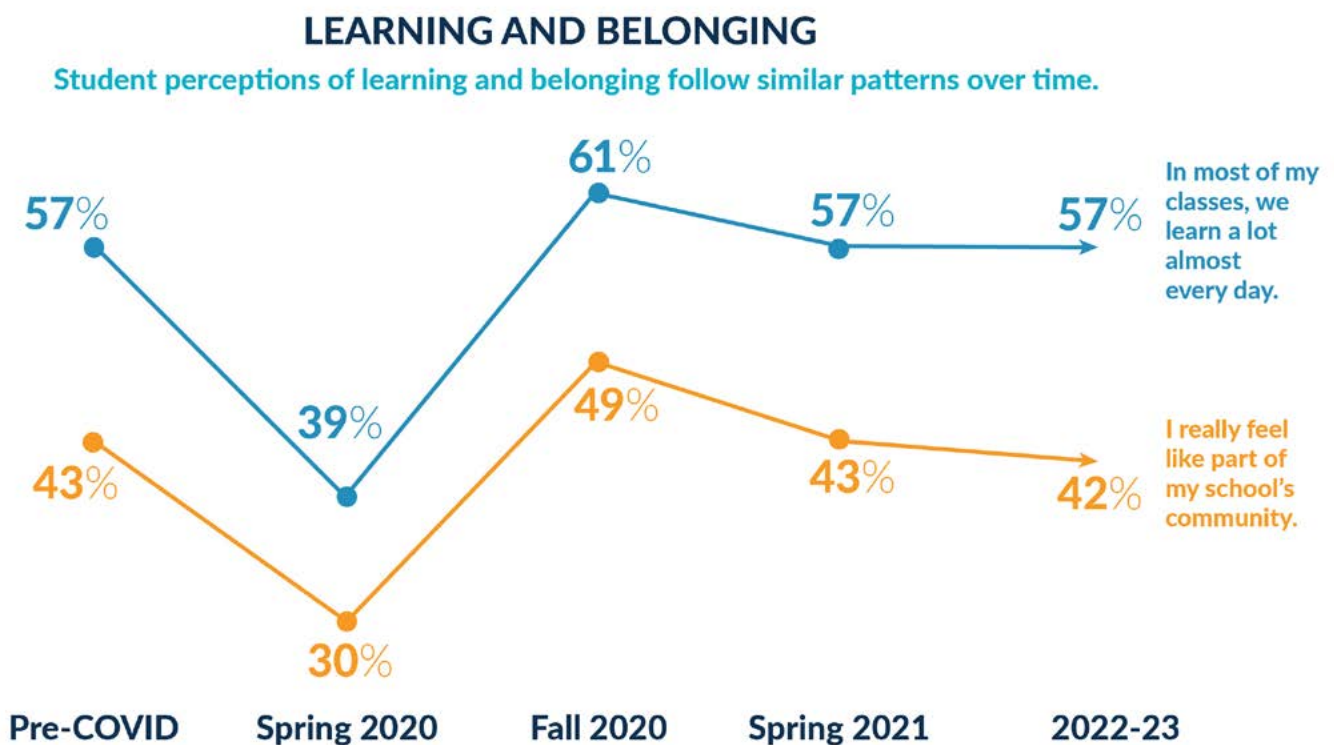
Student perceptions of learning and belonging follow similar patterns over time. Learning and belonging fell in spring 2020, rose in fall 2020, and returned to pre-pandemic levels in spring 2021 – where they remained in 2022-23.



As education researchers [have demonstrated](#), a sense of belonging is foundational to learning and has the power to catalyze students' motivation to learn. In a recent [study by SRI International](#), a positive sense of belonging in YouthTruth student surveys predicted better student outcomes. So how did student perceptions of belonging change over the course of the pandemic?

In the decade prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 43 percent of students, on average, reported that they really feel like part of their school community. After plummeting to just 30 percent during spring 2020 distance learning, surpassing the pre-pandemic “normal” in fall 2020 at 49 percent, and returning to pre-pandemic levels of 43 percent in spring 2021, student perceptions of belonging stagnated in the 2022-23 school year. In 2022-23, just 42 percent of students reported that they really feel like a part of their school community.

Student perceptions of learning follow the same pattern. In the decade prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 57 percent of students, on average, reported that they learn a lot almost every day in most of their classes. After a precipitous drop to just 39 percent of students during online learning in spring 2020 and a temporary high of 61 percent in fall 2020, the proportion of students indicating that in most of their classes they learn a lot almost every day returned to pre-pandemic levels (57 percent) in spring 2021. In the 2022-23 school year, student perceptions about learning remained unchanged from spring 2021.



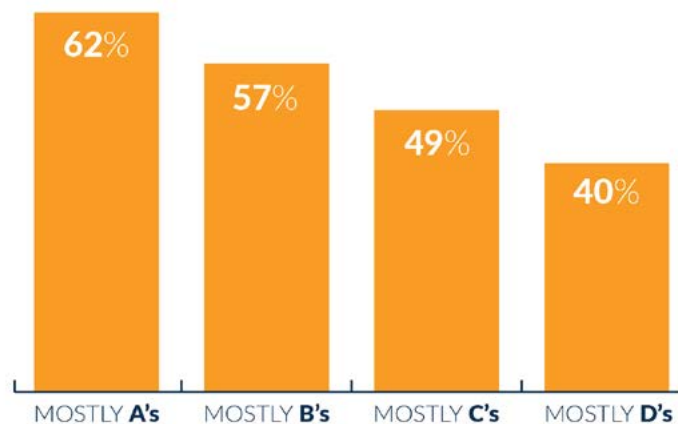
While it is encouraging that, overall, student perceptions of both learning and belonging returned to pre-pandemic levels in spring 2021 and stayed there in 2022-23, there remains much room for improvement – particularly for some groups.

There was a clear divide between higher-performing versus lower-performing students in the 2022-23 school year on the question of learning a lot in most classes almost every day. In 2022-23, 62 percent of students who receive mostly A's said they learn a lot almost every day versus just 40 percent of students who receive mostly D's.

Student feedback about their learning experience echo data on student learning as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress ([NAEP](#)) in 2022. NAEP scores declined across nearly every race and income level in 2022. Notably, the decline was particularly pronounced for already low-performing students, widening a pre-existing gap.

## LEARNING EXPERIENCE BY SELF-REPORTED GRADES (2022-23)

**In most of my classes, we learn a lot almost every day.**



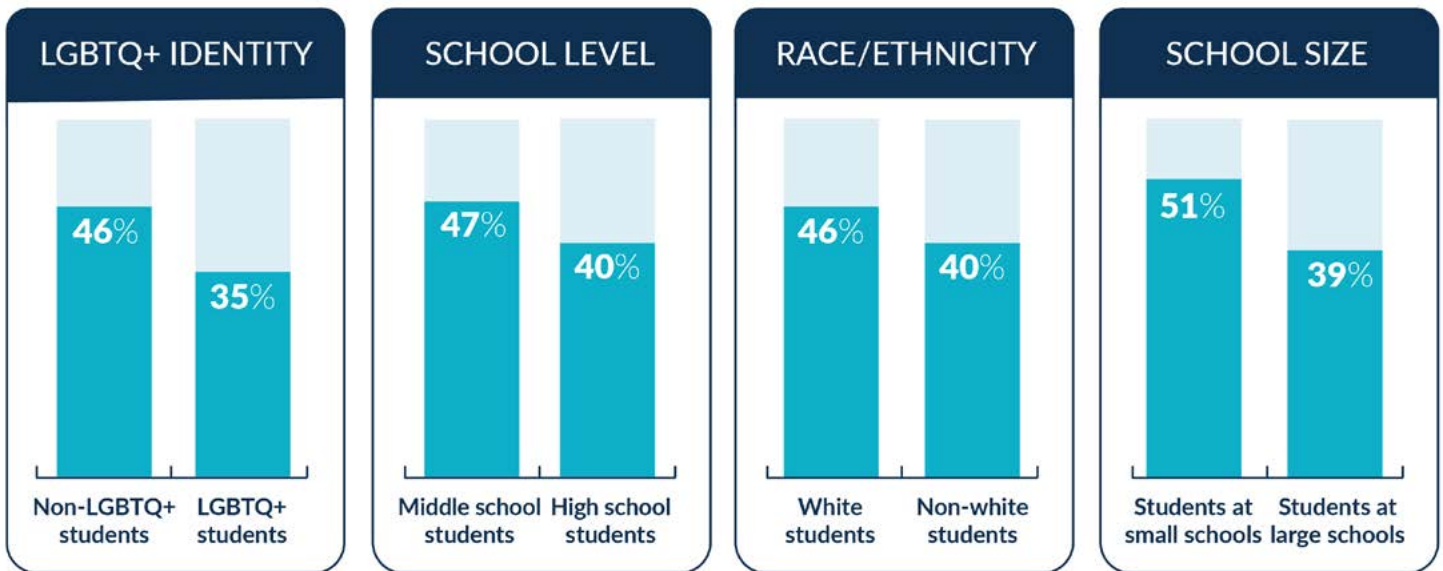
There were differences, too, in the 2022-23 school year across student demographic groups when it comes to students' sense of belonging – which research has shown increases students' social well-being and academic performance. Perceptions of belonging were lower for LGBTQ+ students (35 percent versus 46 percent among their peers) and high school students (40 percent versus 47 percent among middle school students). While a greater proportion of white students experienced a strong sense of belonging (46 percent versus 40 percent among students of other races and ethnicities), it is notable that for all racial groups, less than half of students reported that they feel connected at school. Even for students at small schools – often touted for the relational advantages of their [environment](#) – only 51 percent of students reported that they really feel like a part of their school community. This is compared to an alarmingly low 39 percent of students at large schools.



## BELONGING BY STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

(2022-23)

*I really feel like part of my school's community.*



2

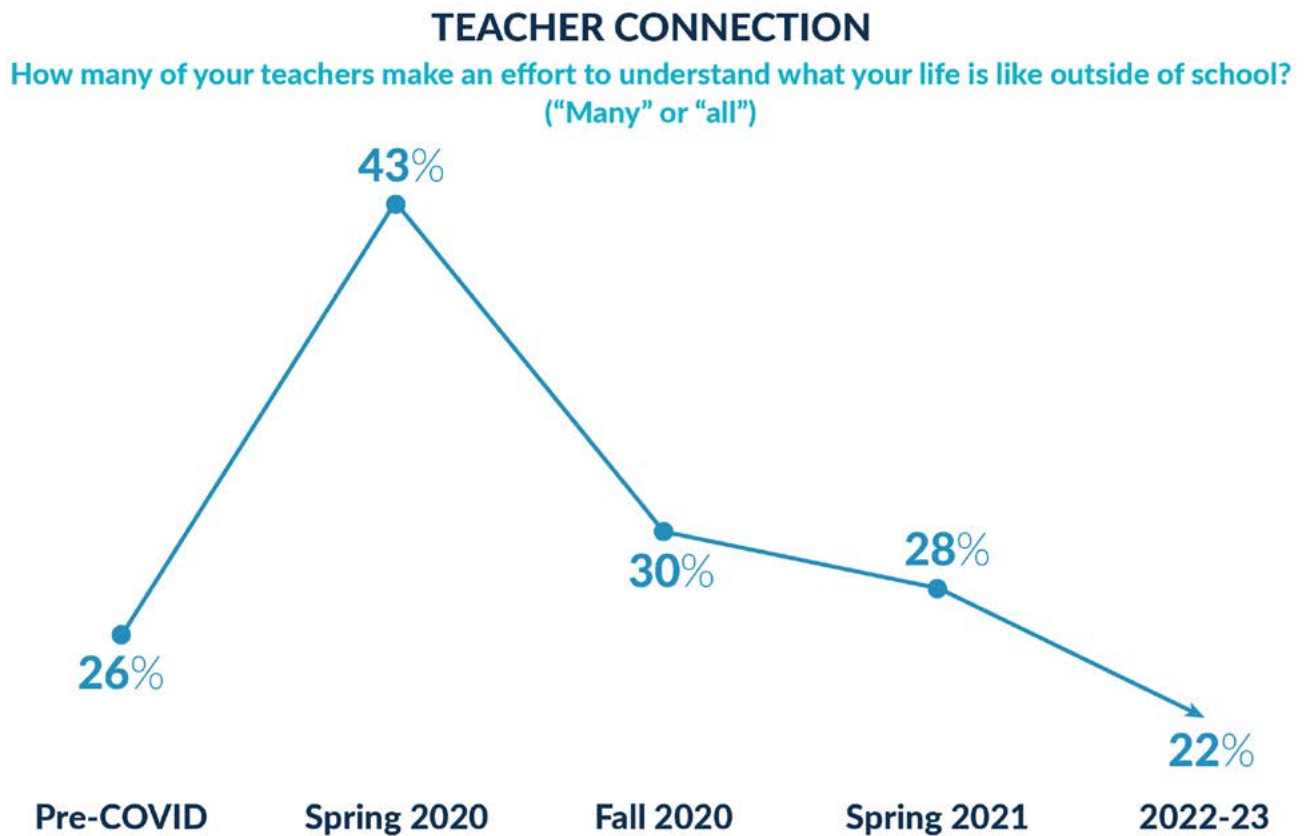
After a temporary bump in spring 2020 relative to pre-pandemic, student perceptions of teacher connection declined over time to a new low in 2022-23, with less than a quarter of students reporting that their teachers understand their lives outside of school.



Across many measures studied in this report, student perceptions of their experience in school did not change between spring 2021 and the 2022-23 school year. However, student perceptions of their teachers' efforts to understand their lives outside of school declined. Whether influenced by [staffing shortages](#), [behavioral disruptions](#) in class, teachers' own [mental health](#), or other factors, a strikingly low proportion of students – just 22 percent – in the 2022-23 school year said that many or all of their teachers make an effort to understand what their life is like outside of school.

In the aftermath of widespread school closures in spring 2020, 43 percent of students reported that many or all of their teachers make an effort to understand what their lives were like outside of school, a dramatic increase from 26 percent in the decade before the COVID-19 pandemic. As classes met online, students and teachers were afforded windows into each others' homes and lives. It seems that, at least temporarily, this connection facilitated a more prevalent understanding of students' lives outside of school.

Several months into the COVID-19 pandemic, however, student perceptions that many or all of their teachers were making an effort to understand their lives outside of school fell to just 30 percent of students in fall 2020 and 28 percent of students in spring 2021. During the 2022-23 school year, student perceptions on this measure declined to a new low of just 22 percent of students.

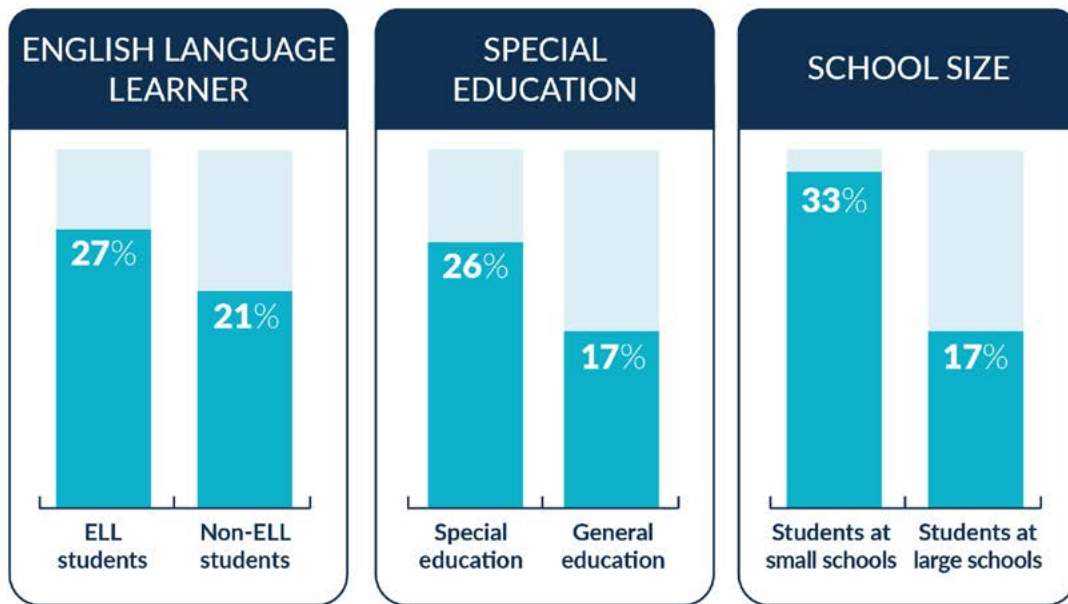


Even among students that fared somewhat better in 2022-23 (those that tend to learn in smaller groups or receive individualized support) students still gave low marks on the question of how many of their teachers make an effort to understand their lives outside of school. Twenty-seven percent of students who are learning English (versus 21 percent of their peers), 26 percent of students receiving special education services (versus 17 percent of their peers), and 33 percent of students attending small schools (versus 17 percent of their peers) said that many or all of their teachers make an effort to understand their lives outside of school.

## TEACHER CONNECTION BY STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

(2022-23)

How many of your teachers make an effort to understand what your life is like outside of school?  
("Many" or "all")



3

Even as students increasingly identified their own mental health as an obstacle to learning, the percentage reporting that they have an adult from school to talk to when having problems dropped during the pandemic and has not recovered as of 2022-23.

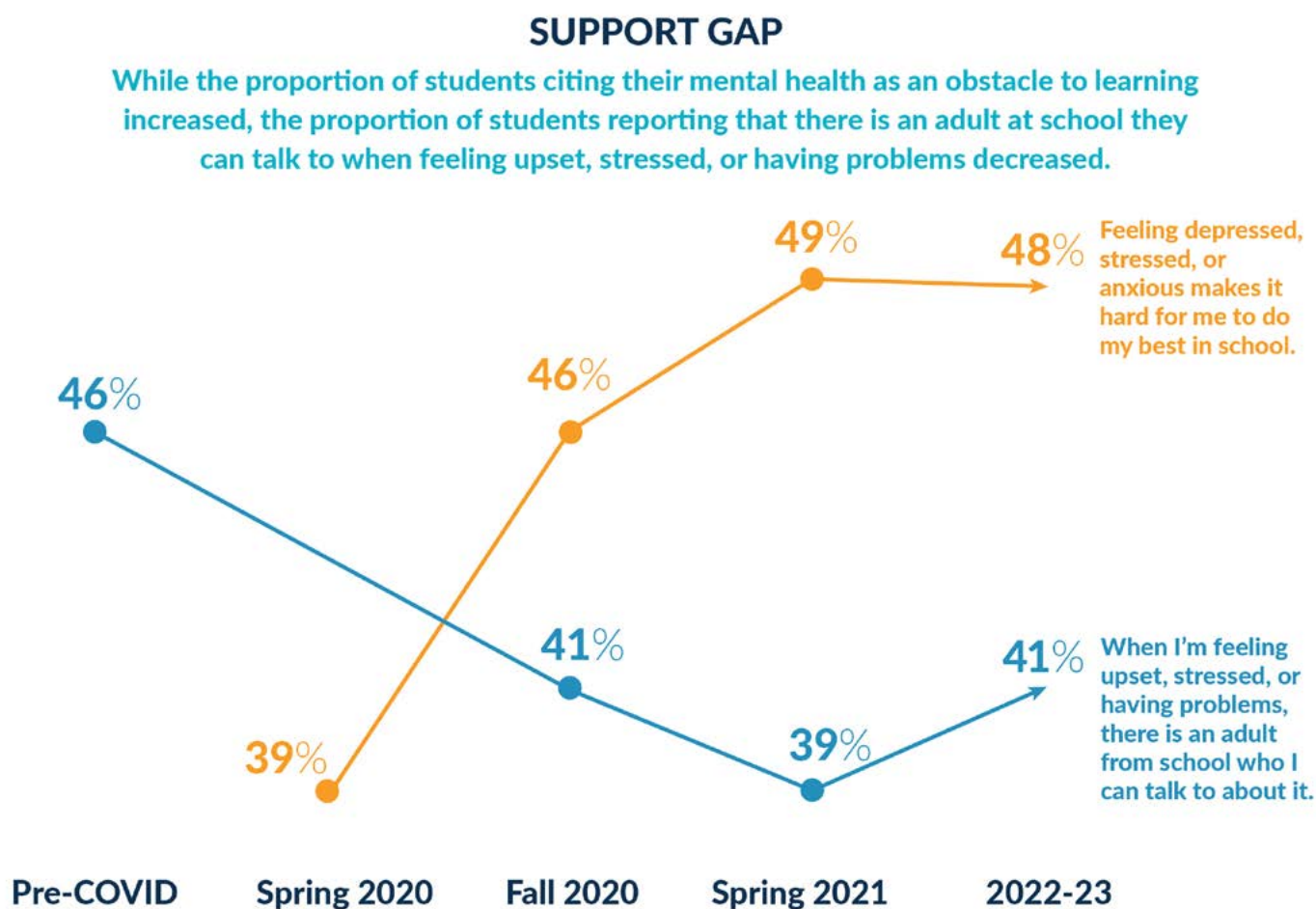


Unlike student perceptions of learning and belonging, which have returned to pre-pandemic levels, student experiences with mental health and support from adults at school have not. The “support gap” – a gap created by the rising proportion of students citing mental health as an obstacle to their learning and the declining proportion of students reporting that there is an adult from school they can talk to when feeling upset, stressed or having problems – widened during the first year of the pandemic and has not recovered.

During widespread emergency school closures in spring 2020, 39 percent of students cited depression, stress, or anxiety as an obstacle to their learning. That proportion increased to 46 percent in fall 2020 and 49 percent in spring 2021, and it held steady at 48 percent of students in 2022-23.

Unfortunately, the availability of an adult from school to talk to when students are feeling depressed, stressed, or having problems followed the opposite trajectory over time. In the decade preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly half (46 percent) of students reported having an adult at school they could talk to when feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious. That proportion dropped to just 39 percent of students in spring 2021 and stayed at a similar level (41 percent) in 2022-23, which is not a statistically significant change.

This support gap is striking. Perhaps even more alarming, however, is the fact that this gap persisted between spring 2021 and the 2022-23 school year despite significant attention to the COVID-19 pandemic's [impact on youth depression, anxiety, and mental health](#) – issues that were already worsening pre-pandemic.



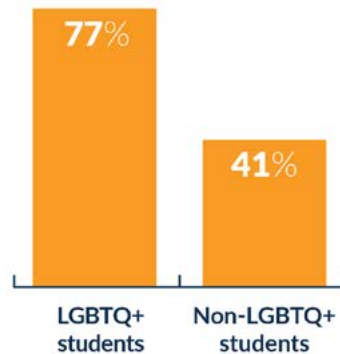
\*Note that questions about obstacles to learning, including “feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious” as shown above, were introduced in the emergency distance-learning survey in spring 2020; thus, Pre-COVID data are not available. In addition, the “availability of an adult from school to talk to” question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



Concerningly, some groups of students are having a particularly challenging time when it comes to mental health interfering with their learning. An astonishing 77 percent of LGBTQ+ students in the 2022-23 school year cited depression, stress, and anxiety as an obstacle to their learning, compared to just 41 percent of their peers.

## DEPRESSION, STRESS, AND ANXIETY BY LGBTQ+ IDENTITY (2022-23)

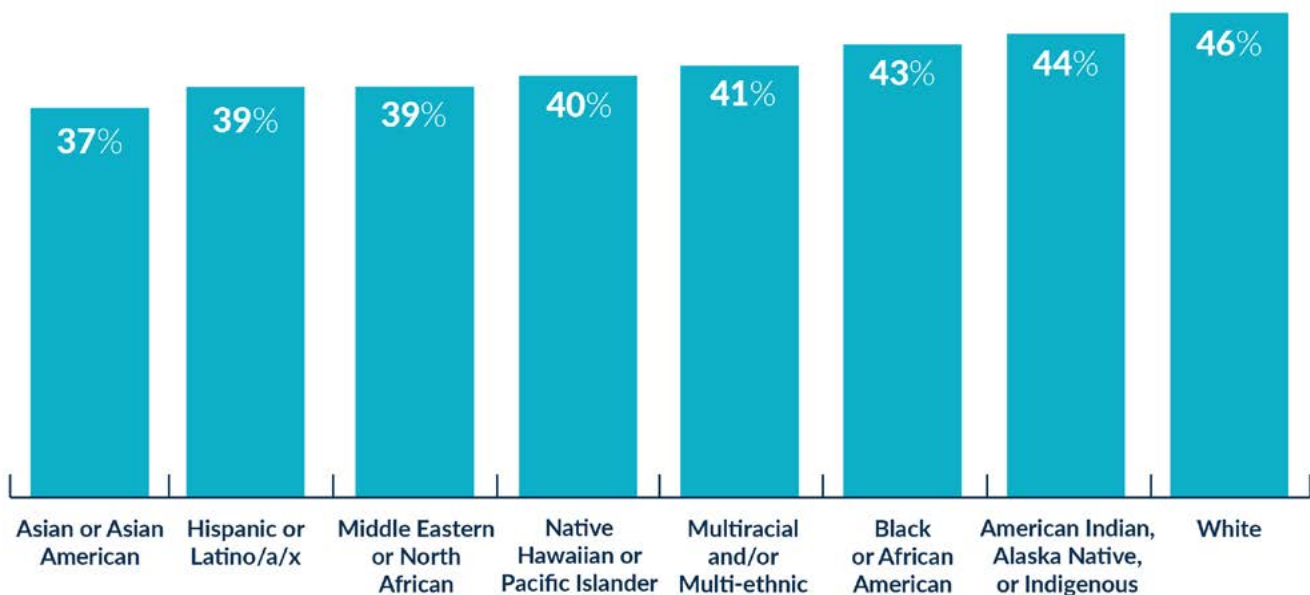
Feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious makes it hard to do my best in school.



In addition, in 2022-23 there was a significant difference in the perceptions of students by race/ethnicity regarding the availability of an adult to talk to. Almost half of white students (46 percent) reported that when they're feeling upset, stressed, or having problems, there is an adult from school who they can talk to. For students of other races and ethnicities, the proportion of students that agreed is lower. While all students need greater access to trusted adults and more support, this data indicates that this is especially true for students of color.

## AVAILABILITY OF AN ADULT TO TALK TO BY RACE/ETHNICITY (2022-23)

When I'm feeling upset, stressed, or having problems, there is an adult from school who I can talk to about it.



Finally, it is interesting to note that one in three students in 2022-23 cited their health or their family members' health as an obstacle to learning, compared to one in four in spring 2021 – even while many experts are declaring a [shift](#) in the COVID-19 crisis from pandemic to endemic, and many aspects of learning and life have returned to normal. While this data does not indicate why a greater proportion of students are now citing "my health or the health of my family members" as an obstacle to learning, it may be that more and more students are experiencing the cumulative toll of COVID's impact on their own health and their family members' health over the last three years. What's more, this obstacle affects students across race, school levels, and poverty levels.

## OBSTACLES TO LEARNING: HEALTH (2022-23)

**My health or the health of my family members  
makes it hard to do my best in school.**



## CONCLUSION

These sobering findings are a stark reminder that while COVID's acute phase is behind us, its effects on students remain. Some measures of the student experience like learning and belonging have returned to their pre-pandemic levels, but experience gaps between student demographic groups remind us that not all kids are alright. Other facets of the student experience, including mental health and access to adults from school to help, that worsened during the pandemic have still not recovered – and gaps between student groups persist. The trends presented here raise important questions and will require a dedicated response from educators, policymakers, and funders.

As these and other actors seek to support students' social, emotional, and academic development, it is imperative that we tune in to the voices and experiences of those for whom our education system is designed: students.

## METHODOLOGY

The 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. 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.

## SURVEY SAMPLE

During the 2022-23 school year, 88,236 secondary school students shared their feedback through YouthTruth's research-based, anonymous 15-minute online survey. The survey was administered in English and Spanish in partnership with 101 high schools and 97 middle schools across nine states.

The full set of data explored in this report is drawn from survey responses from 538,195 secondary school students across 609 high schools and 403 middle schools during five time periods:

- » Pre-Covid (fall 2010 to fall 2019)
- » Spring 2020 (May and June 2020)
- » Fall 2020 (September to December 2020)
- » Spring 2021 (January to May 2021)
- » School Year 2022-23 (October to December 2022)

Student voices represented in the 2022-23 sample are from a mix of schools in urban (26 percent versus 22 percent nationally), suburban (35 percent versus 31 percent nationally), and rural (25 percent versus 28 percent nationally) settings. Forty-one percent of respondents are boys/men, 38 percent are girls/women, and five percent preferred to self-describe/identify.

High-poverty schools – defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as a school in which at least 70 percent of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch – are over-represented in the fall 2022 sample. High-poverty schools comprise 42 percent of this sample versus 22 percent of schools nationally.

The 2022-23 sample includes students from a diverse range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. However, given YouthTruth's role as a nonprofit service provider, the sample is not fully nationally representative. The sample under-represents white students (25 percent versus 46 percent nationally), Black or African American students (nine percent versus 15 percent nationally), and multiracial and/or multi-ethnic students (three percent versus five percent nationally) – while it over-represents Hispanic or Latino/a/x students (37 percent versus 28 percent nationally), Asian or Asian American students (eight percent versus five percent nationally), and American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous students (two percent versus one percent nationally).

