Coping with COVID-19 Student-to-Student Study

Executive Summary

Who Are We?

Student Voice Team
The Prichard Committee

The Prichard Committee Student Voice Team supports students as research, advocacy, and policy partners in the efforts to improve Kentucky schools. Our team amplifies and elevates youth voices in Kentucky's education system through the Student Voice Forum and Get Schooled, an independent student-produced blog and podcast respectively. We also actively engage students, educators, and policymakers through publications like our book (*Ready or Not: Stories from Students Behind the Statistics*), policy briefs, and Op-Eds, and through our professional development workshops and school climate audits.

Our student researchers, who led both the study design and analyses, were aided by a team of adult researchers primarily based at the University of Kentucky. They have been supporting and guiding us as we carry out this study and its analyses. As such, the University of Kentucky serves as our primary institutional partner for this project, exemplifying their dedication to community service and education innovation.

The Student Voice Team is generously supported with awards from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation's Civic Spring Project, Teach for America, National Geographic, Pathway 2 Tomorrow, and Project AWARE. This study would also not be possible without the unwavering commitment of our parent organization, the Prichard Committee. We also had distribution help from the KY Student Council Association and the Kentucky Youth YMCA.
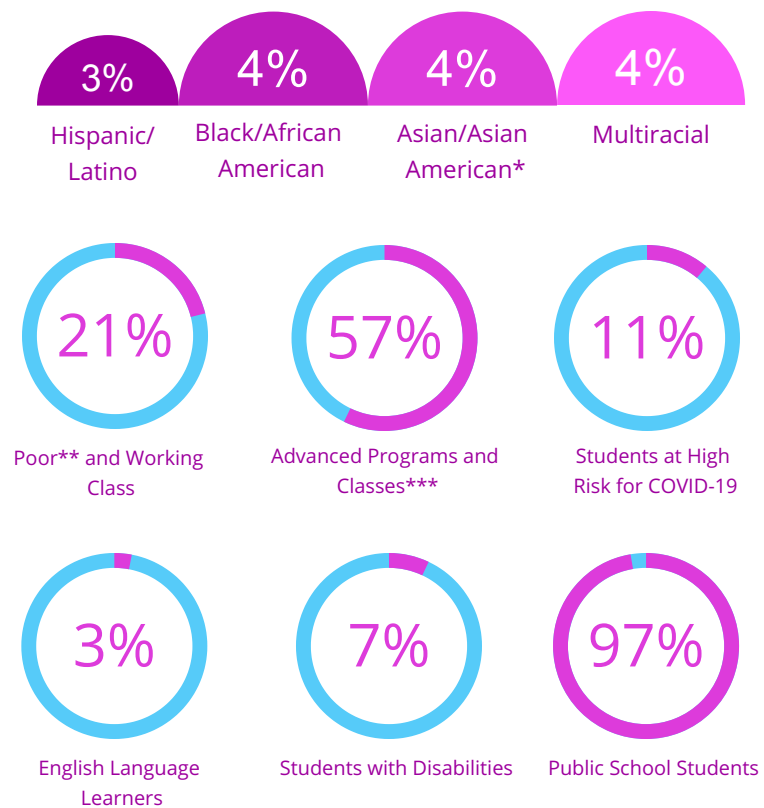
What is This Study About?

The "Coping with COVID-19 Student-to-Student Study" is a student-driven initiative launched in the wake of statewide school closures to understand Kentucky students' social-emotional and learning experiences during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis. The statewide survey was co-designed by students and adult research advisors and disseminated May 11-22, 2020, via a combination of peer-to-peer communication, administrative school-wide dissemination, and partnerships with youth and community organizations. Overall, more than 9,475 students from all but one county in Kentucky took part.

The survey covers four main topic areas: students' educational experience following non-traditional instruction (NTI), students' physical and mental wellness, changes in students' home lives, and students' plans for the future.

We recognize that students' perceptions and experience in May 2020 may not accurately represent their current sentiments, especially in regard to returning to school. However, we have selected data for this report that we believe provide a valid representation of students' lives and that have implications for improving education policy and practice.

Who Were the Participants?

The data in this report come from 9,475 students from 573 schools. Self-reported demographic data showed that these respondents were 81.7% high school students and 18.3% middle school students. The gender breakdown was 67% female, 32% male, and 2% gender non-conforming. Regarding race/ethnicity, 84% of respondents were White, and 16% were racial/ethnic minorities, which include the categories below and Native American students (0.4%).

3%	4%	4%	4%
Hispanic/ Latino	Black/African American	Asian/Asian American*	Multiracial

21%	57%	11%
Poor** and Working Class	Advanced Programs and Classes***	Students at High Risk for COVID-19

3%	7%	97%
English Language Learners	Students with Disabilities	Public School Students

The students surveyed live in a wide range of communities. The USDA rural-urban continuum code assigned by a student's school location indicated that 50% of the sample reside in metropolitan areas with a population over 250,000, 9% reside in non-metro areas with city populations over 20,000, 31% reside in non-metro areas with between 2,500 and 20,000 inhabitants, and 10% of individuals reside in rural communities (population less than 2,500).

*includes Pacific Islander and Middle Eastern students
** Poor includes students who identified as "poor or working poor"
***International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and Gifted and Talented

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Education Environment

Overall Findings

Students reported striking changes in the meaningfulness and manageability of their schoolwork, and in the content and frequency of teacher communications. An overwhelming majority of students experienced a decrease in meaningfulness and manageability during remote learning in Spring 2020.

"I work 7 hours a day and come home to a handicapped father and take care of him. I never get my work done."
- White, working class junior

The COVID-19 pandemic created an emergency situation with learning. Students were forced to adapt to a remote learning system that they felt was designed for short-term scenarios and wasn't responsive to an individual's personal challenges. 84% of students reported having to take on a new responsibility during the pandemic, which added to a student's manageability struggles. One student stated, "Some teachers have increased their workload since we moved online, giving us a lot more assignments that are essentially busy-work. This is hard to manage seeing as I am working more hours and taking on more responsibility at home."

Across the board, more than half of students surveyed reported an overall decrease in meaningfulness during remote learning. This was paralleled by a similar decrease in student motivation (57% of students experienced a decrease) and engagement (65%). Although a large number of students expressed that they were intrinsically motivated to learn through remote learning and cared about the content, their workload was not aligned with this desire. One student wrote, "Since I'm a front line worker I was constantly working and stressed and I felt like the work I had to do was meaningless and just busy work. I would've like less assignments but more engaging."

"During the regular school, teachers would take the time to check in on us...since quarantine started, there is less emotional support which has made me feel very alone... I don't want to reach out to the teachers and bother them."
-Upper middle class sophomore

Students who reported communicating with their teacher more often were less likely to experience a decline in motivation. 65% of students who reported their teacher communicated with them less than one time per week reported a decrease in motivation as opposed to the 55.3% of students whose teachers communicated with them 2 or more times a week.

More than 25% of respondents stated that they received teacher communications never, less than once a week, or once a week. It was jarring for many students to go from interacting in-person with teachers throughout a school day to infrequent online communications including emails, Zoom calls, and online class announcements. Overall, students wanted more frequent, meaningful teacher communications that involve both teaching of academic material and time for personal connection and growth.

Recommendations

- Encourage teachers and students working side-by-side to create classroom policies that support students in varied home environments. Support the collaboration of students, parents, and teachers to create communication pathways that are rooted in empathy and care.

- Ensure that teachers create and meaningfully implement feedback mechanisms to allow students and parents to voice their thoughts and challenges, both personal and academic, for both in-person and remote learning. Although this could take many different forms, possible ideas include: holding online sessions to discuss classroom expectations, building in time for personal check-ins with students, designing surveys for students and parents, and building in reflection periods throughout the school year to adapt classroom policies as needed.

Physical and Mental Wellness

Overall Findings

Students experienced significant behavioral and emotional changes due to COVID-19.

"Many of the things I relied on to fill my time or keep me upbeat and happy have gone away and now I feel sad, lonely, and consumed by my thoughts most of the time."
- White, middle class junior

Emotions shifted in the initial months of the pandemic. Students reported feeling more unmotivated, stressed, and anxious, but also more grateful and less worthless. The most common challenge students described (22.5% of responses) was motivation and self-regulation.

Feelings of physical and financial security impacted emotional wellbeing. Students who felt safer at school than at home, students who lacked consistent Wi-Fi access, and students of lower socioeconomic statuses all tended to have more negative emotional changes, for example, 45.8% of poor students reported feeling depressed compared to 26.5% of middle class students.

Educational experiences appeared linked to emotional experiences. Older students tended to have more negative emotional changes. 23.4% of middle school respondents felt more anxious, versus 41.9% of 11th and 12th grade respondents. Students who felt their schoolwork was more meaningful also had more positive emotional changes. Additionally, students who spent less than one or more than five hours per day on schoolwork, on average, had more negative emotional experiences than students who spent one to five hours on schoolwork.

"Litera[ll]y just want to go out with my friends and not have the crippling fear of getting sick and dying because I have respiratory problems."
- Multiracial, middle class junior

COVID-19 significantly impacted students' behaviors. Respondents generally spent more time on activities for fun, sleep, and outdoor activities. They generally spent less time communicating with friends and engaging in physical activity. 18.3% of respondents listed social loss as one of their primary challenges.

Students of a lower socioeconomic status, students who felt their schoolwork was less manageable, and students who felt less emotionally or physically safe generally had more negative behavioral changes.

"My parents work an 8-5 job everyday so I stay home by myself the majority of the time with nothing to do. Not being around my friends, family, or peers as much as I was before COVID has drastically affected me and my mental health."
- White, middle class sophomore

In tandem with the increase in emotional distress, there was an increase in desire for mental health services. Of the students who answered an open-ended question about what primary challenge they were facing, 15% reported a mental health-related concern. Of those, 35% said that they wanted mental health services, but didn't have access to them. Overall, there was an over 50% increase in the number of students who wanted but lacked access to mental health services (9.8% before COVID versus 14.9% since COVID). Students who wanted but didn't have access to mental health services generally also spent less time communicating with friends.

Recommendations

- Ensure mental health services are available. Schools should increase counselor availability for students and decrease student-to-counselor ratios.
- Create infrastructure for teachers to obtain training for social-emotional learning.
- Encourage social connection within and outside the regular curriculum and build a positive school climate and space for students to process.

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Home Environment

Lack of access to technology, increased responsibilities at home and work, and changes in physical, financial, and emotional safety and stability all created new challenges for students.

"I don't have reliable WiFi and I don't always have access to all the devices I need to complete my work. It's also very difficult to focus on my school work and it's taking me much longer to complete my work."
        - White, middle class student, 9th grade

Poor students were disproportionately more likely to report having unreliable WiFi access (7.2% reported never having access) compared to their more affluent peers. Additionally, rural students were three times more likely to report never having access to reliable WiFi than students in metro areas (4.4% compared to 1.4%).

Access to reliable WiFi was linked to time spent on schoolwork. Students who reported never having access to reliable WiFi were more likely to spend less than one hour per day on school (21%) than students who had more reliable access. Students who had reliable access to WiFi also tended to report higher levels of motivation and work manageability.

"Currently, I am challenged with being at work so much and my family is facing the pay cut that is forcing our family to work side jobs just to make ends meet."
        - White, middle class student, 11th grade

The employment status of students and adults in their household changed during the pandemic for many students. Nearly one-third (32.7%) of students surveyed had parents (or adults in the household) who lost a job or whose pay/hours were cut. Student employment was more variable, as 13.3% of students had reduced employment, while 9.8% had increased employment.

Students whose parents (or adults in the household) had reduced employment were also the most likely to report being more worried about having enough money. Students who noted a change in family employment status tended to worry more about school. Students who had taken on more work themselves since the start of the pandemic were the most likely to spend less than an hour on school per day (19.7%).

"[My primary challenge is] not having enough money to pay bills or buy food."
        - Black/African American, middle class senior

Students saw a rise in at-home responsibilities. Most students (65.3%) had two or more increased household responsibilities since the pandemic started.

Female students saw a disproportionate increase in responsibilities compared to male peers, with the exception of farm work. Poor and working class students were more likely to have taken on four or five increased responsibilities, as opposed to one or two.

Since the pandemic, 16.4% of students were more worried about money, and 5.6% were more worried about food. This increase in financial concerns disproportionately affected lower income students, with 43% and 19.1% of poor students worrying about money and food, respectively.

Recommendations

- Students are experiencing unprecedented shifts in their home environments which make synchronous NTI elements less feasible. The value of synchronous learning is multifaceted, but for students of all backgrounds to benefit, communities need to provide universally accessible broadband and technology.
- Students have less access to their school counselors, external support networks, and meal programs. School districts must meet their students' basic needs, including psychological safety.

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Overall Findings

Students experienced high levels of uncertainty about their K-12 schooling, postsecondary education, and their career aspirations. Roughly one-fourth of students described a change in their future plans, and 54% of those changes were negative. Only 18% of the changes described were positive, while the rest were neutral or mixed.

"I no longer want to do online classes of any sort."
        - White, middle class junior

Online learning was an extremely divisive subject. Of students who mentioned online learning, 47% noted a negative change, 11% noted a positive change, and 38% noted a neutral change. Many students wished to continue online learning, with a handful writing that they could see themselves participating in online college. However, a large group of students noted extreme distaste for it, with a few saying that if their education continued to be virtual, they would postpone their postsecondary plans.

Students also indicated that traditional attendance policies had room to change. Of all students, 82% responded that they agreed or strongly agreed to the statement "My school should have a more flexible attendance policy next year." Low-income students (88%), students at high risk for COVID (89%), and Black students (90%) all had even higher levels of support for the policy.

"My grades are going to hit the floor and I am scared I won't get into the college I want. I live in poverty and always viewed college as a must to get out of this lifestyle, but now I'm not so sure about anything."
        - White, poor sophomore

Among students who described changes in their future plans, the most-mentioned category was postsecondary education (35%). These students frequently mentioned choosing to stay in-state or going to community colleges in order to be closer to family and for financial reasons. Many students pointed to the cancellation of sports seasons and standardized testing as jeopardizing chances for athletic and merit-based scholarships. Other barriers to college education included the cancellation of extracurricular events that were important for resumes and shifts in academic performance during remote learning that would compromise college admissions. Students also pointed to a lack of access to trusted adults in schools in order to receive college and career advice.

"I'm going to just become a mailman, I've given up on my dreams."
        - White, working class sophomore

Many students expressed worry about the financial feasibility of their career aspirations after seeing so many others lose their jobs during this pandemic. Several students noted looking into an "essential" career. Stability was a driving issue in many of the respondents who described a change in their future career. One student remarked, "I have started to second guess if my future job is even obtainable in today's economy." Additionally, a large number of respondents had a newfound interest in the medical field, with one student stating that the pandemic had given them a "real life example of job security," while other students felt that the field was a more viable option after seeing the impact that doctors, nurses, and others had on their communities.

Recommendations

- Access to postsecondary advising from school counselors was stripped away with the transition to remote learning, but the quickly changing landscape of admissions and finances makes it even more critical. Robust counseling should consider the landscape of test optional admissions, cost-effective alternatives to direct four-year university attendance, merit and need-based aid, and methods to evaluate schools without visiting. It should also be built into the school day for upperclassmen so it remains accessible.

Acknowledgements

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