

What Do Students Have to Say about Learning and School During COVID-19?

In fall 2020, the Barr Foundation offered high schools the opportunity to hear firsthand from their stakeholders about the teaching and learning experience within the unprecedented educational environment brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Ten schools across New England opted to take advantage of this opportunity, partnering with YouthTruth to administer surveys to students (and in some cases, to staff and families), to gather information and insights about how they were faring nearly a semester into the 2020-21 school year. ▶

The Barr Foundation's Education Program and consultant Beth Peabody



Introduction cont'd

A total of 3,396 students completed the survey (along with 312 school staff and 229 family members, who completed a modified version) across the ten participating schools, eight of which serve students grades 9–12, and two of which serve grades 6–12. Collectively, these New England schools serve a high percentage of students of color, low-income students, English learners, and/or students with disabilities.

While the purpose of the surveys was to provide timely and actionable feedback to individual schools during the current school year, in the aggregate, the data tell a rich story that can help educators and policymakers reflect not only on the period of disrupted schooling, but also about what schools could and should do moving forward to address students' needs and set them on a path to postsecondary success. Students' voices are always critical to cultivating responsive learning environments, and they are especially crucial at this particular moment.

With the participating schools' permission, the purpose of this brief is to provide three key themes around the potential biggest areas of needed growth that emerged from the survey data across participating schools:

- 1. Students have limited access to challenging, relevant, personalized learning experiences;**
- 2. College and career planning is starting late in students' high school career, leaving many underclassmen feeling uncertain and unprepared;** and
- 3. There is a disconnect between the perceptions of students and the adults who support their learning.**

WHO PARTICIPATED

3,396 STUDENTS

312 SCHOOL STAFF

229 FAMILY MEMBERS

Many of the sentiments expressed through the surveys contain overlapping elements, although distinct aspects of the experiences also emerged in individual responses and within individual schools. It is important to note that many students expressed overall satisfaction with their schooling this year; the average "lowest ranked" responses were still typically between 3 and 3.5 on a 5 point scale, skewing just positive of neutral. However, the prevalence of certain common challenges across participating schools make them worthy of attention as potential opportunities for growth in schools more broadly.

While the highlighted challenges are framed in the context of the extraordinary 2020–21 school year, they are not challenges that are unique to this year. Rather, the COVID-19 context revealed in new ways both the structures with strong foundations, as well as the underlying areas of weakness. This deeper clarity will be important to leverage in recovery and renewal efforts in the 2021–22 school year and beyond.

1. Students have limited access to challenging, relevant, personalized learning experiences.

While students indicated that many teachers are accessible and supportive with regard to content-specific questions or problems, they reported a far smaller proportion of teachers who take an interest in, and align coursework with, what’s happening in students’ lives outside of school. Further, many students struggle to see how what they are learning in school will be of use to them after they graduate. These are two separate, but intricately connected, issues.



“If teachers attempted to make more personal connections with students and showed that they cared about them beyond schoolwork then I think that would help inspire kids to do their best.”

— Student comment

“My school can take into consideration how some people of diverse and low-income backgrounds have limited resources at times and experience discrimination at times which can cause students to feel obligated to rebel, not put their best effort, and/or self-doubt about going to college or university. An effort to make students feel accepted, safe and capable could improve many academic faults within students of my school.”

— Student comment

Within the remote and hybrid learning environments, many students reported in their comments that their teachers did not seem to account for the realities of being at home—and dealing with distractions and competing responsibilities—when conducting lessons and assigning work. Indeed, many students expressed difficulty staying engaged with their schoolwork for the simple reason that there were too many distractions. In addition, quite a few also noted that they found managing their time on their own difficult, which contributed to tasks piling up.

It also was common for students to comment that their virtual lessons often did not hold their attention, and would be better if they were more engaging, interesting, and/or interactive. Further, many students stated that they currently are uninspired in their classes, either because of the format or the content. Quite a few respondents articulated that their coursework was not challenging—some likened it to “busy-work,” or described assignments as “checking the box”—and many explained that they were not being asked to think critically and that there was too much time spent on memorization and repetition. As opposed to lessons that occurred when school operated in person full-time, many students stated that there was more lecturing and fewer hands-on learning activities in virtual classrooms. A number of students indicated that the virtual lesson formats did not align with their personal learning styles, and this made it difficult to keep up. It also was widely reported that the amount of work assigned was overwhelming, and many respondents found it difficult to manage and complete their various assignments, a sentiment echoed by some parent comments.

“Virtual classes are distracting, I can’t focus on them, I am not being educated at the level that I learn at. I need more directed education focused on me.”

— Student comment

“With distance learning, it’s become harder and harder to have good discussions. Also a lot of my classes have just expected me to be able to recite an answer without really thinking about it. There’s very little room for questions about why things work, and it’s rare that we are given a problem without being told a particular way to solve it.”

— Student comment

“I have seen little evidence of social emotional support for students. Students are not experiencing a regular school day. It seems as if the schools [sic] response is to assign more work with little regard for how students are surviving these unusual times. I would have expected the school to reach out to families with genuine interest in what was needed during this time. It has been disappointing.”

— Parent comment

Students also grappled with finding relevance in some of the work they were doing in school. The majority of student survey respondents indicated that what they were learning in class did not help them outside of school. For students who reported that they had seriously considered dropping out, the most common reason given was that they did not see how the work they were doing was going to help them in life. Further, this sentiment was common among the open-ended responses regarding what improvements could be made to the school. Students often reported that they did not think they would use the content of their courses in the “real world,” and some stated that they would prefer to learn about life skills, such as personal finance and creating resumes. Others also voiced a desire to have more opportunities to pursue interests that might lead to a career.



“I don’t like that we don’t write essays or speak upon real life situations that happen at the moment. We don’t ever learn more about the racism in our country, the discrimination... I want to learn about my country and others as well, like their struggles, because [it’s] something that I know really did happen and [it’s] something I can passionately write about without feeling like I’m stuck.

— Student comment

“[I’m] just not very interested in anything that we learn about. [I] just do whatever [I] need to do to pass and not actually get much of anything out of the class a lot of times.”

— Student comment

“I feel like my school never likes talking about real life situations. I also want to learn about how life is after high school, how to file taxes, how to be an owner of a house, how those things work.”

— Student comment

The data indicate that the combination of the above factors lead to students wanting to succeed, but struggling to find motivation to give their best effort. While many students selected survey responses indicating that they try to do their best in school, smaller proportions reported that they take pride in their work or enjoy school most of the time. Interestingly, while a large number of students mentioned these challenges, many qualified their responses with phrases such as, “But this is just a personal problem I have to deal with myself;” or “But this isn’t something the school can help me with.” In other words, while

lack of engagement, interest, and focus were commonly cited challenges to remote learning, many students believed it to be their own individual problem. As such, they may not have conveyed this feedback to their schools, and teachers would not have been aware that lack of motivation—and its underlying causes—was such a pervasive issue potentially impacting student performance.

Despite the prevalence of these challenges, a smaller sample of student survey responses also offered some examples of success in these areas:

“[My teachers] check up on me via text or email to see if I’m doing okay with school and outside of school as well. And they always let me know that if I need any extra help that all I have to do is ask and they set up a time for me.”

– Student comment

“I like that [my teachers] challenge me with the work and give me work that helps me excel in terms of academics. They challenge me to think critically by asking questions based on what I’ve learned. In one of my classes, my teacher had us answer some questions that connected what we’ve been learning to what’s going on around us in the world.”

– Student comment



2. College and career planning is starting late in students' high school career, leaving many underclassmen feeling uncertain and unprepared.

In response to both specific survey questions and in open-ended responses, students and parents expressed that they had been provided with little guidance about selecting and applying to colleges and exploring career options. While this tends to be common among 9th and 10th grade students in many high schools, a number of 11th grade students—and also some students in 12th grade—noted a lack of post-secondary planning.

Delaying the college preparation and planning processes until late in high school is a long-standing issue that predates the 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years; however, the pandemic likely exacerbated the problem with the disruptions to schooling and pivot to remote learning. The YouthTruth survey provided students with an opportunity to voice their concerns about their preparedness for life after high school. In addition to articulating confusion or lack of concrete information about how to pursue various post-secondary options, students also articulated uncertainty about whether they had developed the knowledge and skills that would enable them to succeed in their college and career pursuits.

“My school could give people advice on what to do for your career and what colleges would be good. Also my school could give lessons on filling out college applications and what to get ready for once [you’re] in college. My school could also give more lessons so you would know a good amount of information for college.”

— 9th Grade Student

“I haven’t even chosen what I want to do after high school but knowing how to get to college would be helpful, I don’t know what it takes to apply to college or how to send an application to a college. I don’t know if there are possible scholarships or loans I could apply for if needed, I have no idea what identifies a ‘good college.’”

— 10th Grade Student

“I felt as if I was completely thrown into the college process this year by myself with not much help or guidance from the school. I think most classes I’ve taken at [my school] have not helped me actually learn the material and I won’t be prepared for when I get to college classes. I never learned how to properly study and take notes as well as cite a research paper, all things that I have learned on my own and am still trying to learn on my own that [my school] has not taught me and I will need all those skills for college.”

— 12th Grade Student

“I have a senior. There has been no help with college applications, no college fairs, no FAFSA guidance, no communication to parents from the guidance department. We have reached out and they have responded, but there should be a more active approach for the seniors trying to plan for their futures. The communication from the school to help these kids out with college planning has been zero.”

— Parent comment



Though common among survey respondents, feeling underinformed and/or underprepared for life after high school was not a universal sentiment. A small proportion of students indicated that their schools take an active role in postsecondary planning; in some cases, beginning early in the high school experience.

“This school is getting me ready for college by once a week just focusing on different colleges and what they have for us. A lot of colleges have been catching my eye and I would have never thought I’d be looking at colleges in my grade.”

— 9th Grade Student



“My school has helped me prepare for college and my future career by offering different classes and opportunities to all students. For example, I would like to become a sports analyst in the future and go to college with a great broadcasting history. [My high school] offers courses that link to this through the school newspaper, debate clubs, sports, and sports marketing courses.”

— 9th Grade Student

“Teachers and counselors list the classes that can give you college credit, if you plan on taking that route, along with services like the common app, college board, and other resources to help access college information. Our college advisor provides meetings for help with financial aid or any other questions about the college process along with sharing when colleges/universities have open houses or tours available.”

— 12th Grade Student

3. There is a disconnect between the perceptions of students and the adults who support their learning.

While the sample size of adults surveyed was smaller than that of the students (not all schools opted to capture family and staff data), family and staff responses tended to be more positive than the responses of students to the same or similar questions about various facets of school (e.g. engagement; relationships; diversity, equity, and inclusion; etc.). Students almost always had lower “positivity” scores than one set of adults, and very often scored lower than both groups of adults.

In combination with the previous themes, this finding points to the disconnect between students’ experiences and adults’ understandings and actions, potentially further exacerbated by the remote learning context. Interestingly, some of the adults also recognize this disconnect, with several parents and teachers mentioning a lack of understanding of students’ needs and a lack of clear communication between every stakeholder group.



“I think all of the staff and admin at my school truly care about students, but I think there are huge misunderstandings about our students’ needs and abilities particularly now more than ever and that can hurt our students.

— *Staff comment*

“Communication among all levels [needs improvement] – administration to teachers, teachers to teachers, teachers to students, etc. We operate in a reactive mode vs. a proactive mode.”

— *Staff comment*

“I think teachers could use a little extra training on how to speak to students and their parents. Work with us...some of us work full time, have multiple kiddos without any assistance from family...we need just as much help as the kids do.”

— *Parent comment*

Conclusion

Listening to students, families, and staff through surveys or other methods provides a space for school communities to pause, reflect on the experiences of their stakeholders, and develop plans in response to their feedback. This type of deep listening and responsive action is always important, and was particularly crucial during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic shined a spotlight on issues that already laid below the surface, including the themes outlined in this piece. As more schools begin to reopen in person in the fall, there are many lessons to be taken from the past year and a half to support recovery and renewal efforts in the 2021-22 school year and beyond. A return to in-person school should not default to a status quo system that was not working for many students. The pockets of strength within each of the challenge areas highlighted in this piece show that solutions are possible. Regularly soliciting and acting on stakeholder feedback is one key step in improving the school experience and post-secondary outcomes for all students.

RESOURCES FOR CONTINUED LEARNING

The following resources are examples and are not contributions from survey participants.

Indicators of School Quality

The national organization Springpoint developed high school focused Indicators of School Quality based on research on what is required to have a high-quality, student-centered learning environment. The framework encompasses a number of themes included in this brief, including positive relationships, rigorous and purposeful learning experiences, collaboration with families and student supporters, college and career learning sequences, and college counseling.

Theme #1: Challenging, relevant learning experiences

Full Circle High School in Somerville Public Schools (MA) describes their approach to interdisciplinary, project-based curriculum to engage students in challenging and relevant learning experiences.

Theme #2: College and career planning

The national nonprofit Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) documented the strategic approach at Blackstone Academy Charter School (RI) to support college and career readiness for all students in this overview which includes a link to a podcast on this theme and links to additional resources.

Theme #3: Student voice and agency

The national research center, The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) captured the intentional development of student voice and agency at Common Ground High School (CT), including the structures and systems to support student influence on continuous improvement at the school.