

# The kids are (really) not alright: A synthesis of COVID-19 student surveys

Lisa Chu, Robin Lake

March 2021

Student [surveys found](#) that the educational experience in the first months of the pandemic was a mess. As schools quickly implemented remote learning last spring, many students experienced little meaningful online instruction and were unhappy with online classes. There were also big equity and mental health concerns, and few adults consulted with students about how to improve their learning.

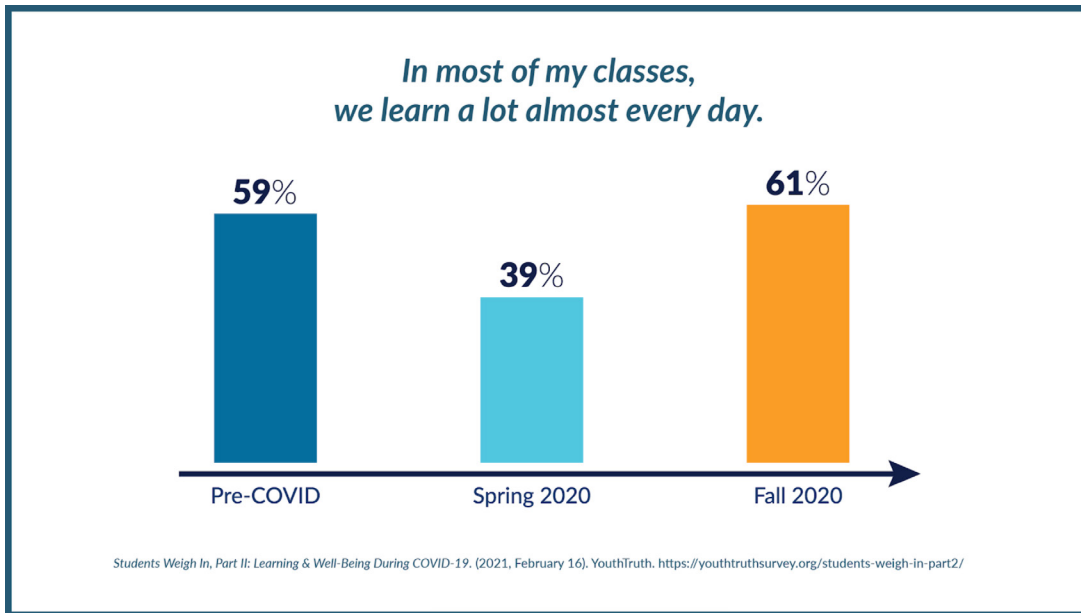
New student surveys have come out during the 2020–21 school year, and we wanted to know how the student experience has changed. We found some good news but also some very concerning new trends. While students report their schooling situation has improved since last spring, they also say they are struggling to stay motivated and engaged in that learning. Far too many say they still—nearly a year into the pandemic—lack the ability to connect easily to remote instruction. Very high numbers of students say they are experiencing mental health challenges, are getting less sleep, and do not feel there are adults in school they can turn to.

The scope of student needs calls for immediate action. Reopening schools and closing digital divides will help ensure students can begin to re-establish connections with peers and with adults in schools, especially if combined with strategies to address student social, emotional, and mental health needs. Student surveys, however, also suggest that the magnitude of the problem far exceeds what schools alone have the capacity to solve, suggesting the need for creative investment and planning to leverage community resources, and a long-term commitment to making this generation of students whole.

## **Students say they are learning more, both in-person and online, than when the pandemic started last spring.**

Last spring, less than 40 percent of students surveyed by YouthTruth said they learn a lot every day (figure 1). In the fall, that number rose to more than 60 percent, around the same rating they gave before the pandemic. While we'd hope to hear that nearly all students feel they are learning a lot, this marks an improvement and is consistent with CRPE's district data tracking that showed a significant increase in the amount of meaningful instruction this fall compared to last spring.

Figure 1. Students Say They Are Learning More Now Than at the Start of the Pandemic

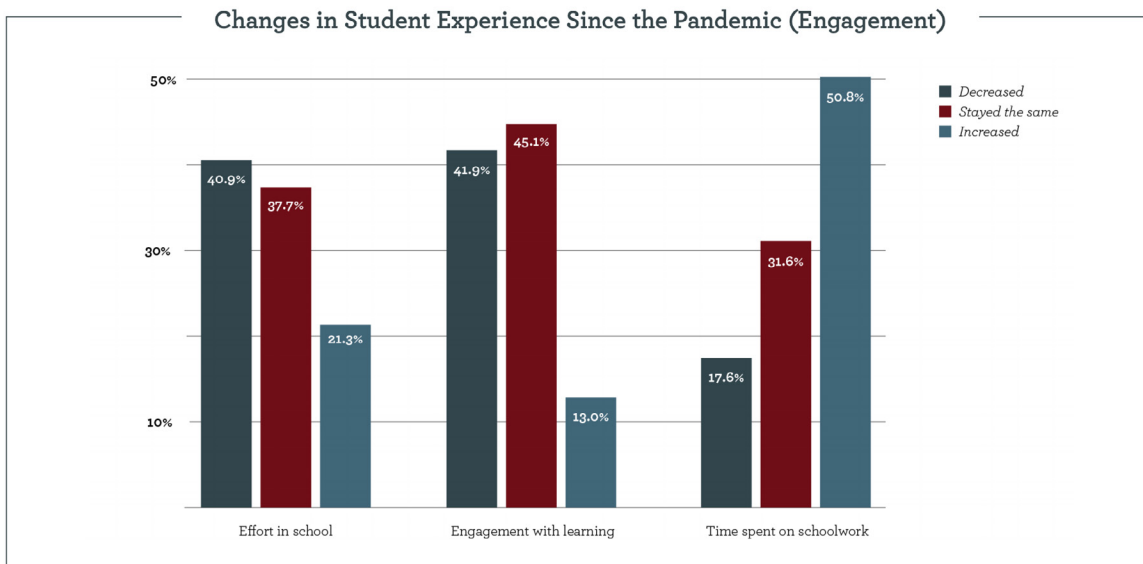


The results varied slightly by learning models. Surprisingly, about the same proportion of students reported they learn a lot almost every day whether they were learning in person (64 percent), virtually (61 percent), or in a hybrid setting (59 percent).

**But students, especially those learning remotely, are clearly struggling to stay interested and engaged in that learning.**

Compared to pre-pandemic times, nearly half of all students surveyed by Challenge Success say they are putting less effort into school and are less engaged in learning despite spending more time on their schoolwork (figure 2).

Figure 2. Students Report Spending More Time on Schoolwork, but Making Less Effort



Source: Challenge Success, Kids Under Pressure

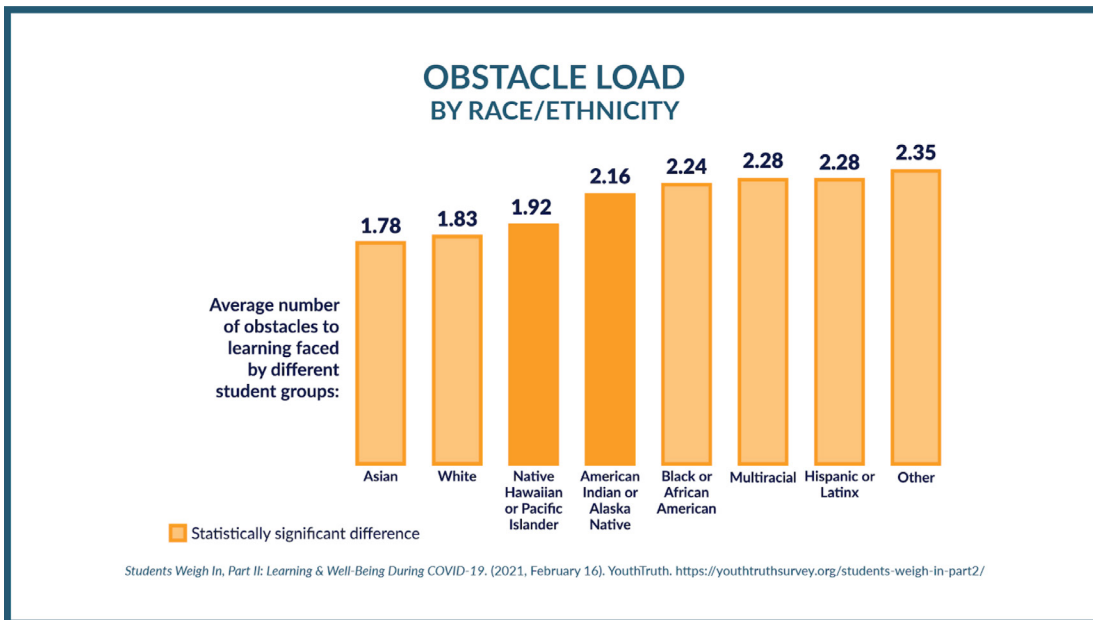
Clearly, students in remote instruction are having the hardest time staying motivated. There are lukewarm reports on the quality of remote instruction, and students are longing for more social engagement, even in the virtual environment. Although the majority of students felt they spent the right amount of time online in live instruction with teachers during remote learning, only 41 percent of remote learners said their classes were interesting.

A number of students surveyed by YouthTruth wrote about their challenges with engagement and motivation during remote learning. One student wrote, “I think the biggest hardship with learning from home is that I find myself with absolutely no desire to work. It’s habitual to get into my classes every day, but I find it hard to pay attention, hard to focus, hard to care.” Others noted difficulty in staying motivated with their schoolwork due to a lack of sports, clubs, and other extracurricular activities.

### Serious problems remain when it comes to opportunity gaps and digital equity.

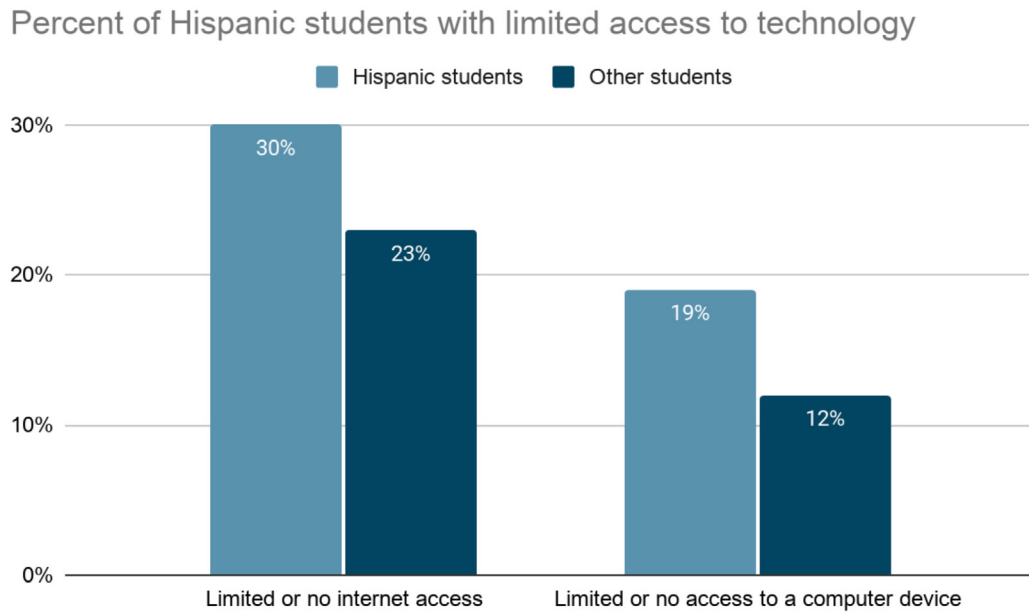
As was true last spring, Hispanic, multiracial, and Black students reported more obstacles to learning than did white or Asian students (figure 3). They reported obstacles such as feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious, distractions at home and family responsibilities, and concerns around their own health and the health of their family members. Similarly, students who are learning English and those receiving special education services continue to have a less positive experience accessing their schoolwork compared to their peers.

Figure 3. Hispanic, Multiracial, and Black Students Face More Obstacles to Learning



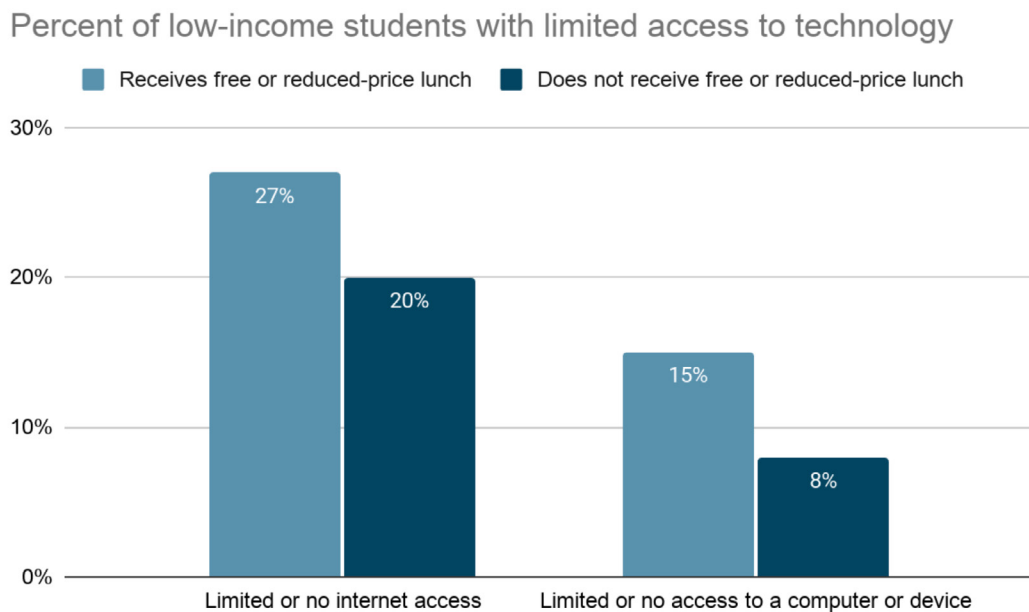
The lack of reliable access to the internet and other challenges accessing remote learning likely contribute to this remote learning divide. Last spring, Hispanic students and students from low-income households faced greater challenges in accessing the internet or a computer/device (figures 4 and 5). This figure remained true in the fall.

**Figure 4. Hispanic Students Report Less Access to Technology**



Source: YouthTruth, Students Weigh In, Part II

**Figure 5. Students from Low-Income Households Report Less Access to Technology**



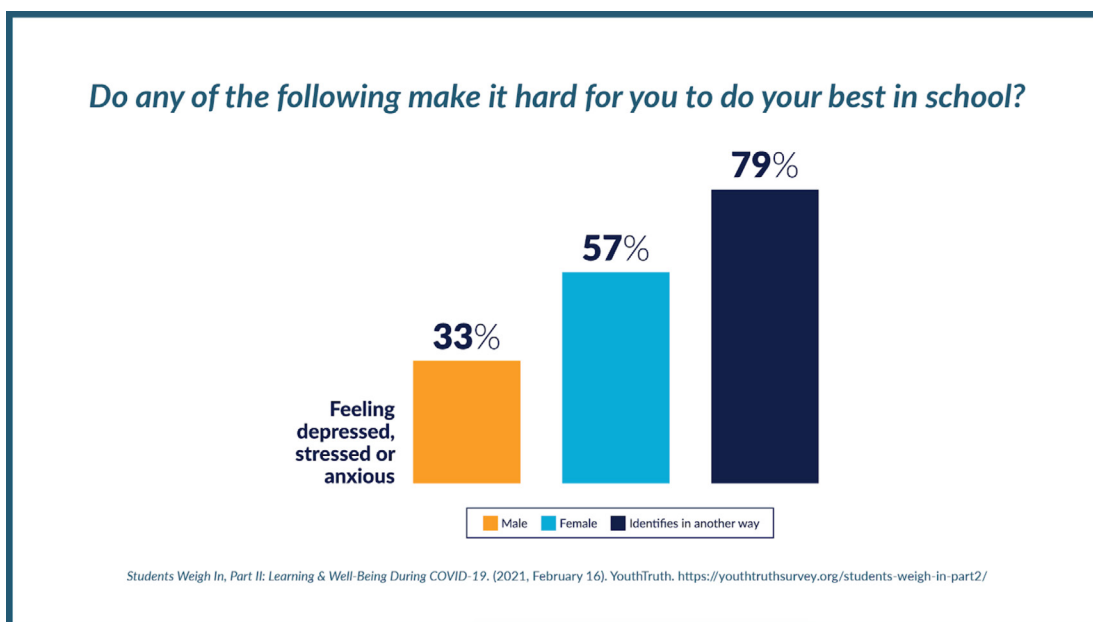
Source: YouthTruth, Students Weigh In, Part II

## Mental health concerns appear to be on the rise, but vary by gender.

The numbers point to serious concerns about student mental health challenges. According to YouthTruth’s survey, nearly half of all students reported feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious—a number that hasn’t changed since last spring. A number of students wrote about the toll that the pandemic has taken on their mental health. One student explained, “I’m stressed out every day because not only do I have to do a ton of homework, but I also have responsibilities at home and I’m also facing a very serious situation. This all just stresses me out and sometimes I feel like giving up on trying to complete everything.”

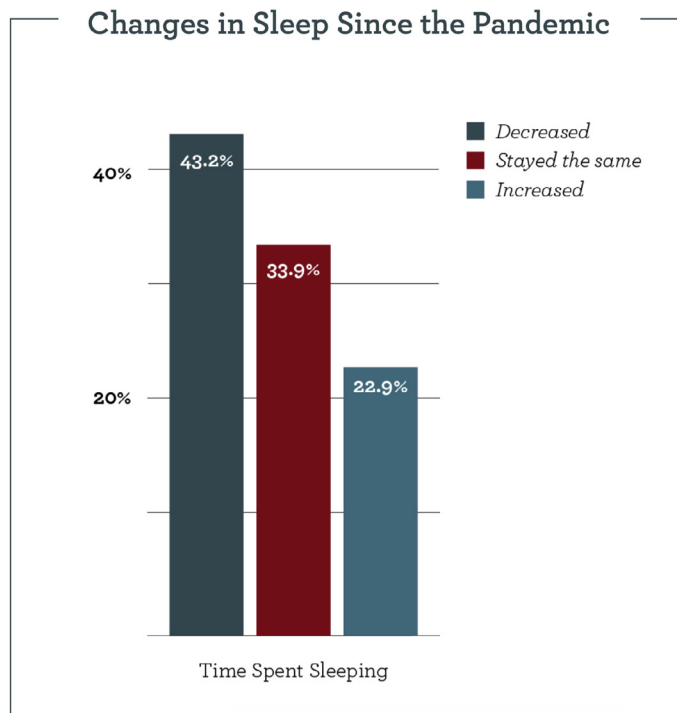
Female students and those who identify as neither male nor female report consistently higher incidences of mental health concerns (figure 6). This increase in mental health concerns is alarming. A [recent study](#) found significantly higher rates of suicidal ideas and attempts among youth during the pandemic. The proportion of mental health-related emergency department visits for children has also [increased](#), leaving an [unprepared medical system](#) overloaded with students requiring help.

Figure 6. Male Students Report Less Mental Health Challenges Than Their Peers



Sleeping habits play a large role in students’ mental health. As one 10th-grade student wrote, “School starts earlier than most adult jobs; the only thing this does is harm students’ mental health.” Challenge Success found that students are getting less sleep now than before the pandemic, with only 6.6 percent of high school students receiving the recommended nine hours of sleep per night (figure 7).

Figure 7. Students Are Getting Less Sleep Now Than Before the Pandemic

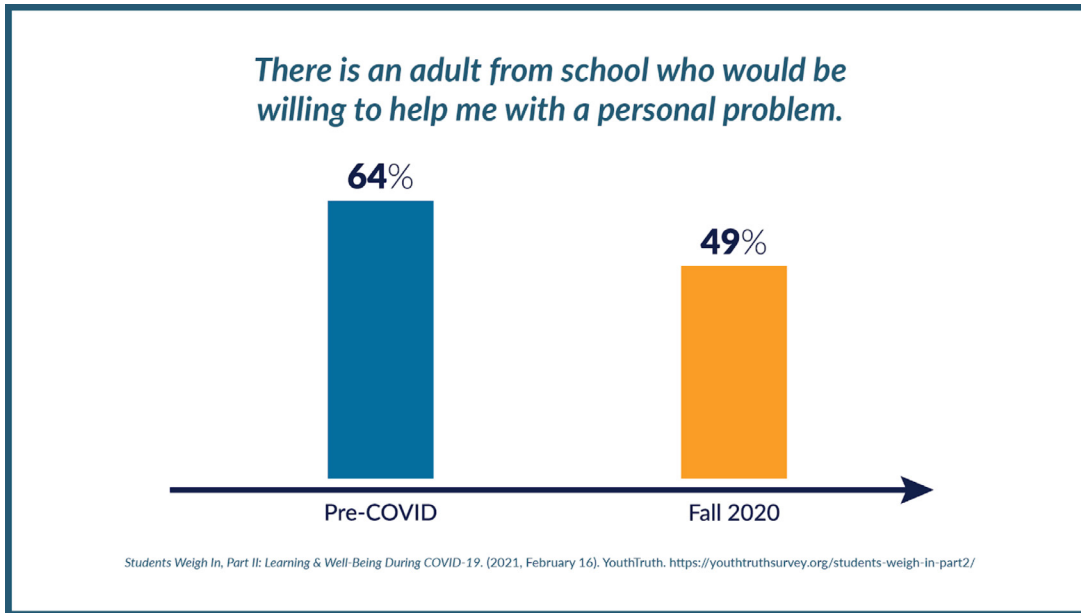


Source: Challenge Success, Kids Under Pressure

### Students, especially those from low-income households, lack personal support from adults in schools.

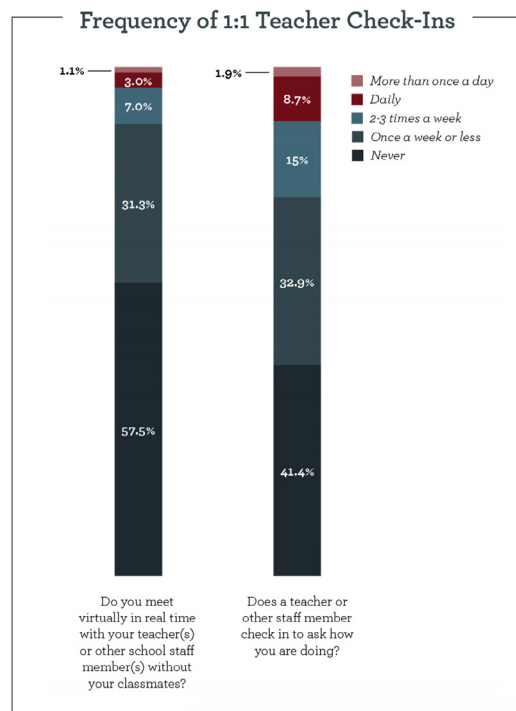
Despite persistent mental health concerns, students still receive little support from adults in their school—an alarming trend, considering [parents often lack resources](#) to help their children in times of crisis (figure 8). When asked if there was at least one adult in their school who would be willing to help with a personal problem, fewer students responded yes than they did before the pandemic.

Figure 8. Fewer Students Say They Have an Adult's Support at School



This perceived lack of support is not surprising given the lack of personal connection students say they have with the adults in their school (figure 9). Fifty-eight percent of students surveyed by Challenge Success said they never had individual check-ins with a teacher or staff member in real time, and 41 percent said they never had an adult ask how they were doing. And fewer students from schools with a majority of students from low-income households report having a trusted adult to go to.

Figure 9. Students Report Fewer Check-Ins with Their Teachers



Source: Challenge Success, Kids Under Pressure

## The kids are far from alright. They need our help.

These findings suggest that while online instruction appears to have improved since the start of the pandemic, students are truly struggling to stay motivated and to have a healthy mental state of mind.

An obvious needed step is to finally close the digital access gaps that continue to be an issue affecting Hispanic students and students from low-income households. Nearly a year into the pandemic, there should be no reason any American student should lack stable access to remote instruction.

To address student social isolation and lack of motivation, school districts must prioritize reopening school buildings and using creative ways to provide in-person support to students learning remotely, such as community-based learning hubs. Teens, who are often not prioritized for in-person learning, urgently need access to friends, mental health support, and in-person instruction. Schools can also work to build more engaging, joyful, and motivating instructional experiences for students by giving teachers ideas for rigorous but fun virtual projects, more interactive peer projects, and virtual clubs. Drawing on student interests and helping them set small but achievable learning goals are likely effective practices during—and after—the pandemic.

Addressing fast-growing student mental health challenges will require an influx of supports that go beyond what schools can provide. Funding for free or low-cost local mental health services can help, but schools must do better to establish trusted relationships with students and to build in systems that students feel comfortable using. One charter school network conducted student surveys and gave students the option to “raise their hand” to have an adult follow up with a personal phone call. Other school systems have built in time for one-on-one advisories with students or virtual home visits.

This has been a trying year with no immediate end in sight. Students are telling us, in no uncertain terms, that they are struggling and need our help. This will likely be the case for many years to come as we try to make students whole for the lost learning and social time. We must take action today to address their immediate concerns and then keep asking them to identify problems and solutions.

## Surveys used for this brief

Students Weigh In, Part II: Learning & Well-Being During COVID-19	<a href="#">YouthTruth</a> . Conducted September - December 2020.	Limited national. 62,996 secondary students and 22,174 elementary students across 14 states.
Kids Under Pressure	<a href="#">Challenge Success</a> . Conducted Fall 2018 - Fall 2020.	Limited national. 75,000 high school students from 86 high schools across the country. 10,000 high school students during fall 2020.



## About the Evidence Project

The Evidence Project is an initiative from the Center on Reinventing Public Education to advance solutions-oriented analysis of the K-12 response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project brings together researchers from around the country under the banner of narrowing the gap between research and policy. Learn more at [evidence-project.org](https://evidence-project.org).

## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.