



WORLD HEADQUARTERS  
1101 15th Street, NW, Suite 900  
Washington, DC 20005

---

December 15, 2020

## Student Voices in the Time of COVID

Survey of American Public School Students

**To:** The NEA and PTA

**From:** GQR

---

This generation of students faces unprecedented challenges. Some lost friends and family members to the pandemic; many endured economic hardships as parents have lost jobs and income; all of them have had their education and lives interrupted in a profound way. On top of the pandemic, the country has not seen an era of deeper political and racial divisions in generations. Through it all, this generation of young people have proven resilient. Most say they are doing “OK” and many have found unforeseen advantages in the pandemic, bonding with family, time for hobbies and exercise, and for some, a commitment to science and medicine to avoid future pandemics.

Their school work has suffered and they crave the lost, personal interaction with their teachers. Over half attend virtual classes and many report diminished academic progress since the COVID outbreak. Nonetheless, most believe their teachers are doing the best they can. Three-quarters believe they are getting a good education, including 74 percent of those who attend online, full-time.

This inventory of American public school students reflects a suite of online focus groups among students age 13-18 (grades 7-12), including groups of suburban students, rural students, urban students and students of color. That qualitative look was quantified in an online survey of 1,328 public school students (same grades), including oversamples of Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian Pacific Islander and rural students. Parental permission was obtained before any student was interviewed. Online surveys use opt-in, non-probability samples; if this were a probability sample, the margin of error would be +/- 2.7 percent on the full sample.

## Key Findings

- **Most students report doing “OK.”** A 56 percent majority describe themselves and their family as “doing OK” when it comes to handling the pandemic, only 16 percent are struggling. These numbers remain fairly consistent along different racial groups.
- **Some students are suffering.** Four in ten report significant economic stress in the family, higher among Black students, and as many have had a family member contract the virus. Students also complain of boredom and social isolation. At the same time, some students have used the pandemic to reconnect with their families, take on hobbies, exercise, and even reconsider career goals.
- **Many students report a significant decline in academic performance.** A 58 percent majority of students say they were doing well academically before the virus; only 32 percent believe they are doing well currently. Younger students and students whose parents did not attend college are the most likely to report an academic decline.
- **Nonetheless, an 88 percent majority trust their teachers to teach them this year and 76 percent believe they are getting a good education, despite the recognition that their teachers lack resources and time.**
- **Students miss the one-on-one interaction of the pre-COVID period.** The most popular suggestions for improving education in this period all have one thing in common: more interaction with their teachers.
  - More interaction between teachers and students (49 percent very helpful)
  - Faster response time from teachers in grading assignments and giving feedback (48 percent very helpful)
  - Additional tutoring to help kids catch up and stay on track (48 percent very helpful, 61 percent among Black students)
  - More one-on-one time with teachers (47 percent very helpful, 59 percent among Black students)
- **Given the choice, most students opt for in-person learning, at least part of the time, assuming nothing changes with the pandemic.** A 38 percent plurality prefer full-time, in-person classes (only 23 percent attend in full-time in-person classes currently) and another 27 percent prefer some hybrid of online and in-person learning. Students currently in online classes full-time are less eager to go back to school, but even here more than half prefer some level of in-person instruction.
- **This generation of students believes it can make a difference.** Given the scale of events, a certain feeling of helplessness might be forgiven among these students. Nonetheless, an 88 percent majority believe their generation has the power to change the country and this number grows even higher among students of color.

## Dealing with COVID

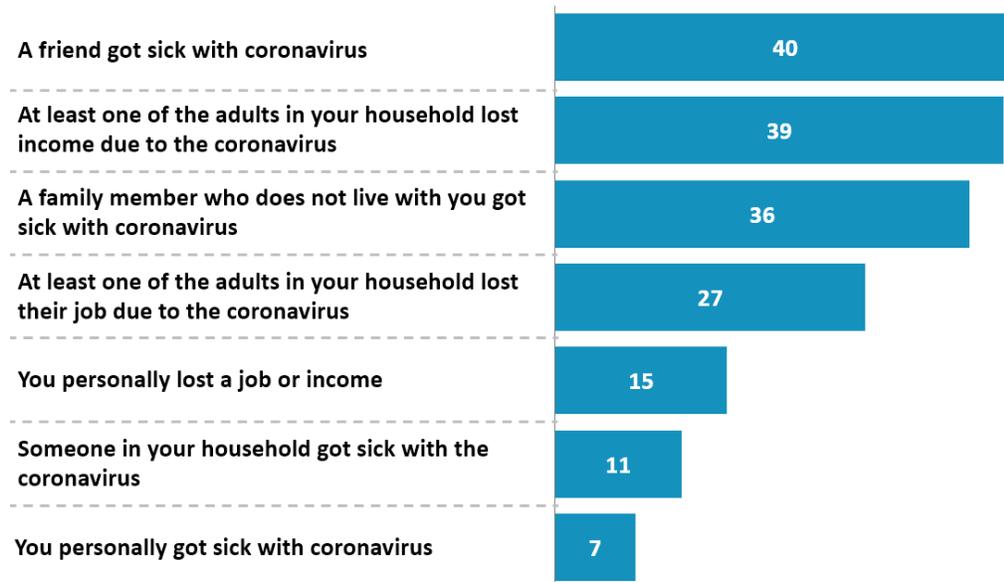
A majority of students (56 percent) say they are doing “OK” dealing with the pandemic and more say they are doing well (28 percent) than struggling (16 percent). These results remain fairly consistent along racial groups. Students who attend school full-time, in-person seem to be doing a little better than others (34 percent doing well). Urban students (21 percent struggling) and students whose parents or guardians lack college degrees (24 percent) struggle a bit more than average. But in no group does majority of students say they are struggling with this pandemic.

In focus group discussion, students complain of boredom and, more than anything, missing their friends. On the other hand, this generation proved adept at communicating virtually before the pandemic and almost all spend time with their friends through social media. Moreover, some students have used this time to draw closer to their families, exercise, cook and explore hobbies. Some have even been inspired by events to pursue careers in medicine and science.

Some students have suffered more than others. Four in ten have had a friend or family member contract the virus. A similar number of students report losing family income. Economic stress runs significantly higher among Black students (44 percent report losing household income, compared to 39 percent overall). Nearly four in ten (37 percent) Black students report at least one adult in their household losing their job, compared 27 percent overall.

Figure 1: Experiences with COVID

*Below is a list of some things that have happened to people during the coronavirus outbreak. For each one, please indicate if it happened to you or your immediate family:*



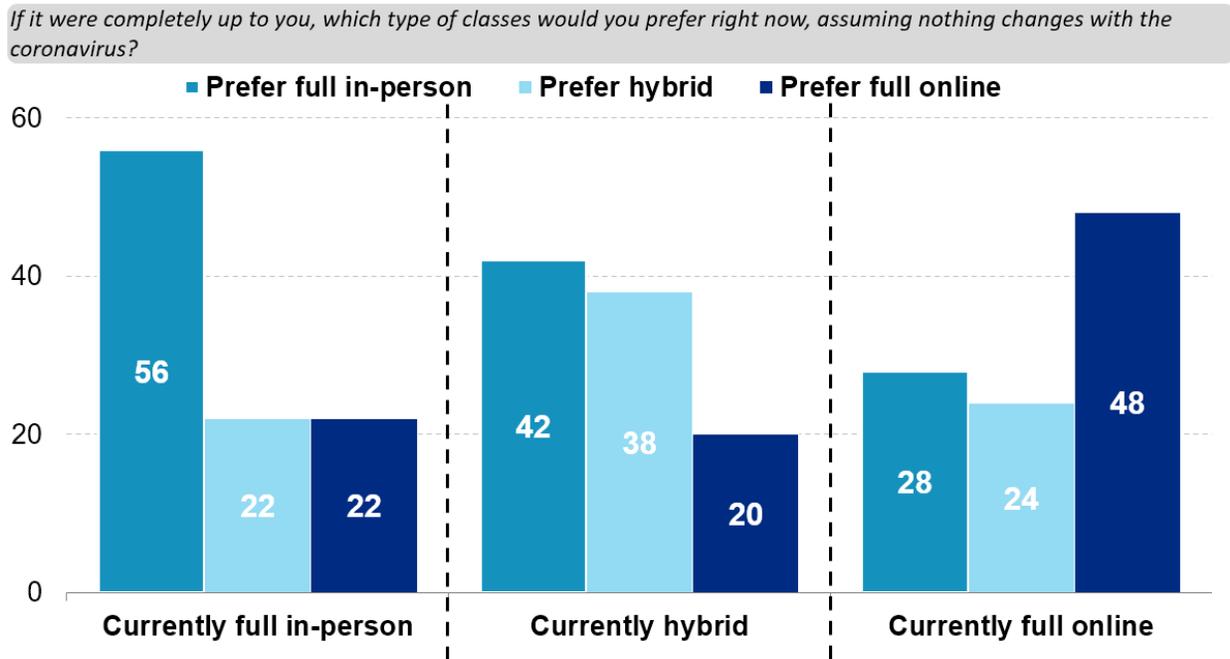
## Education in the Time of COVID

A significant number of students report an academic decline in the time of COVID. A majority of students prefer some level of in-person learning and, no doubt, part of this decline reflects the drawbacks of online education. But there have been disruptions for all students. Those currently taking in-person classes are nearly as likely to report a decline in their school work as virtual students.

At the time of the survey, a 53 percent majority of students report taking classes entirely online, another 24 percent use a hybrid model, and 23 percent are in-person full time. The incidence of online learning runs significantly higher among students of color—over 60 percent—as well as in the West (65 percent) and declines to 43 percent among rural students.

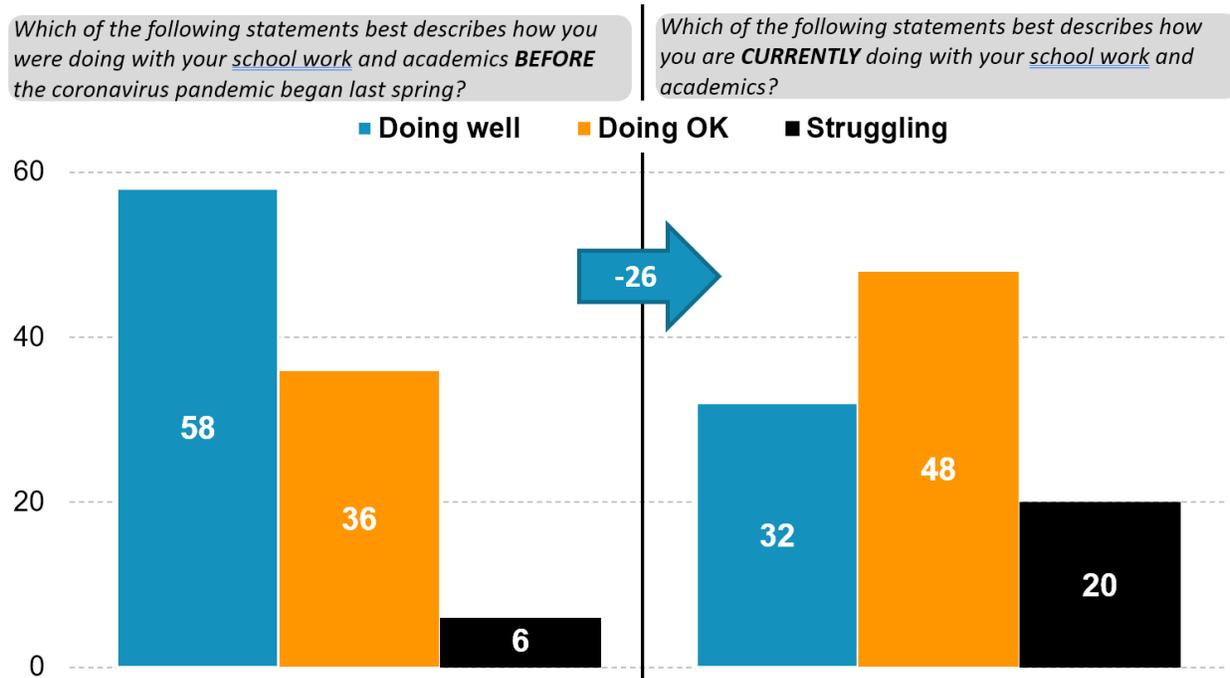
Given the choice, most students would prefer more in-person instruction, but less than four in ten (38 percent) prefer going back to school full-time at this moment. Notably, only 28 percent of virtual students prefer full-time in-person instruction and 24 percent prefer some hybrid model.

Figure 2: Class type preference, by current learning situation



A 58 percent majority of students report doing well with their school work before the virus; only 32 percent make the same claim currently. Altogether, 17 percent of students say they were doing at least OK academically before January, but are now struggling.

Figure 3: Academic performance pre- and mid-pandemic



The academic decline remains fairly consistent along different racial subgroups—a little less so among Asian Pacific Islanders. Moreover, there is relatively little difference between students taking live classes and students in a fully virtual environment. In fact, it is the students in hybrid situations who seem the least successful. What matters more are age and parental education. Younger students and students whose parents or guardians lack any college are the most likely to report a decline in their education.

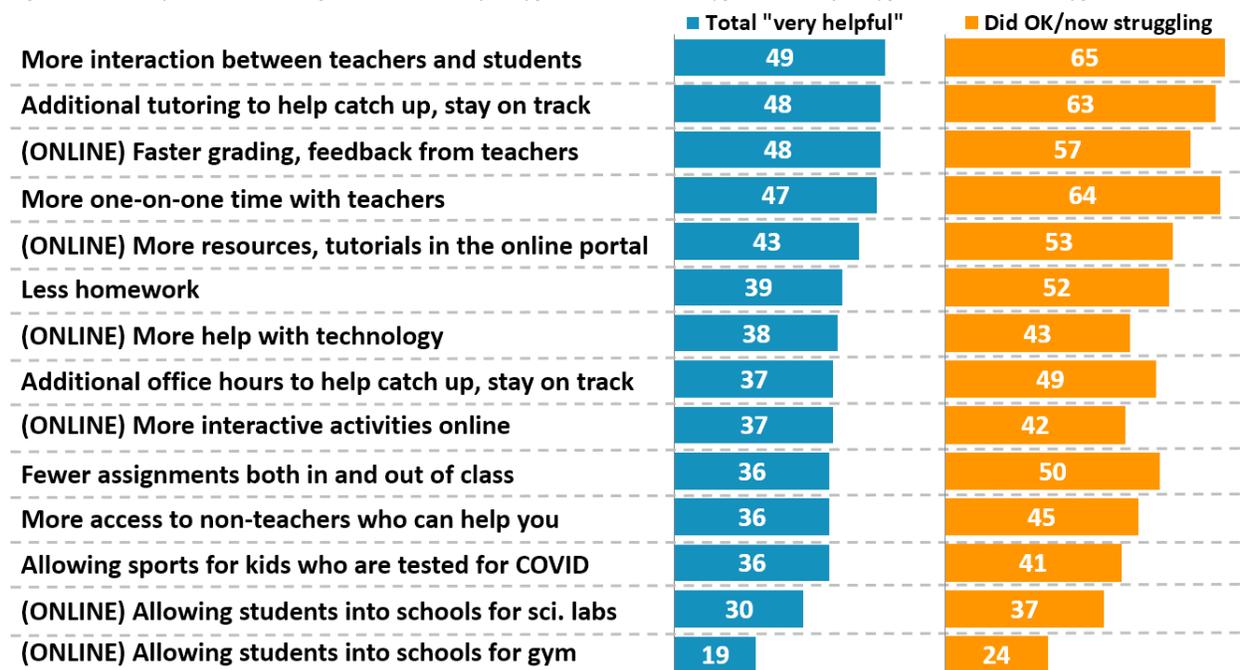
In focus group discussion, a number of students struggle to pay attention and stay motivated online, but the key piece they are missing is more interaction with their teachers.

- “It is pretty tough to stay motivated sometimes.” (Suburban group, Hispanic/Latino student)
- “I feel like a Zoom Zombie.” (Students of color group, AAPI student)
- “They do not understand that some kids learn different and have a hard time understand[ing] what they are putting on a Google classroom for us.” (Rural group, White student)
- “The teachers are trying their best to do their job and there are a lot of kids that need help and can’t get that one or one time.” (Students of color group, Black student)
- “More time with teachers would be good. Also, more live classes and not just videos.” (Rural group, White student)

Not surprisingly, then, when asked how to improve learning in this time, students zero in on teacher interaction. In fact, the four top recommendations all involve increasing teacher interaction in one way or the other. Among students who were doing OK and are now struggling, fully 65 percent describe “more interaction with teachers” as very helpful for their own situation. Among Black students, 61 percent describe “additional tutoring to help kids catch up and stay on track” as very helpful, the leading suggestion among these students.

Figure 4: Ways to improve learning

Here are some things some people have suggested to help students learn. Thinking specifically about your own situation, for each one, please indicate if it would be very helpful, somewhat helpful, not very helpful or not at all helpful?



Focus group discussion also makes plain that some students thrive in the online environment. They appreciate the ability to work more on their own pace and the freedom from social pressures (bullying, cliques, clothes, gossips, etc.) that typically crowd teenage life. More broadly, most students also understand that they their teachers and their schools are doing the best they can under unprecedented circumstances. In the survey, a near-unanimous 88 percent of students trust their teachers to “teach you in ways that help you grow as a student.”

And despite all the current issues, a 76 percent majority of students believe they are getting a good education. This number jumps to 86 percent among students involved in full-time, in-person learning, but lags among hybrid students (just 70 percent agree, just 15 percent agree strongly). Full-time online students reflect the overall average (74 percent agree).

## Conclusion

There may be a temptation in future months and years to describe this generation of young people as another “lost generation.” There is no doubt the trauma and disruption of 2020 will play an enduring role in their lives, but they are resilient. They have adapted to their reality. Most are doing OK. They are making the most of their current school situation and are grateful for their teachers.

This generation will likely surprise people in the end.