



MINNESOTA SAFE LEARNING SURVEY

Spring 2021 survey of Minnesota
educators, families, and students

August 2021



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION + HUMAN DEVELOPMENT



DEPARTMENT
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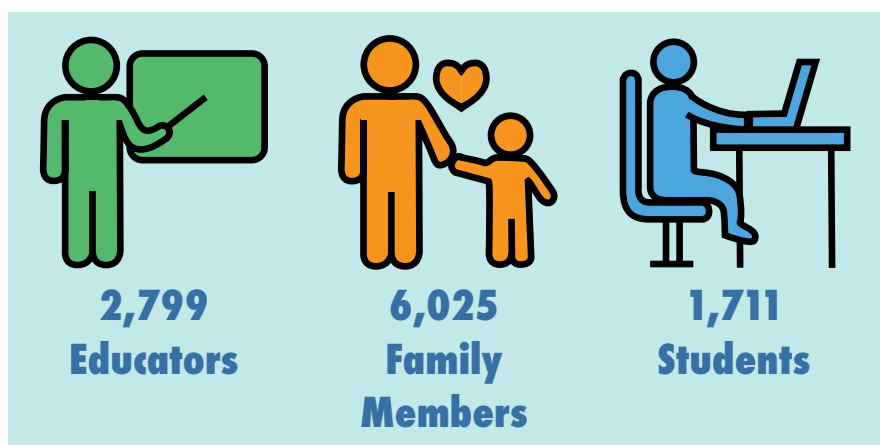
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Context

Schooling as we know it in Minnesota has been through multitudes of changes since the initial Executive Order 20-02, issued by Minnesota Governor Tim Walz on March 15, 2020, directed schools to close as a precautionary measure in response to COVID-19. In the spring of 2020, all schools operated under what came to be known as Distance Learning. The University of Minnesota’s College of Education and Human Development conducted a survey of educators between May 27 and June 28 of that year to gather feedback on how it went. One educator said, “We were asked to change the whole way of teaching in a very short period of time with little to no direction given. We did our best. I feel we as educators did the best [we could] but I don’t feel it was good enough.” That initial [Distance Learning Survey](#) elicited over 13,000 responses and over 700 pages of comments from administrators, teachers, and support professionals. Overwhelmingly, these educators reported that relationships really mattered in distance learning, technology was important and often a significant concern, and educators were worried about both the physical and mental health of themselves, their students, and their families. In the end, educators expressed that they learned a great deal about how issues of equity affected families and how to partner with families in new ways. Educators also quickly acquired new skills in relationship building, engagement, and technology.

As the 2020-2021 school year began, the Wisconsin-Minnesota Comprehensive Center ([WMCC](#))—working with Minnesota Department of Education ([MDE](#)) and housed at the University of Minnesota’s ([UMN](#)) Center for Applied Research & Educational Improvement ([CAREI](#)), the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative ([WEC](#)), and Education Analytics ([EA](#))—determined that surveys of educators, students, and families over the course of the school year would be prudent to capture the experiences of these key groups, learn from this unprecedented time, and plan for the future. This survey, the Safe Learning Survey, was developed to get a true picture of how those being most impacted by the MDE’s Safe Learning Plan are experiencing it. The survey is being deployed at three intervals, Winter (February), Spring (May-June), and Fall (October) 2021, with statewide reports following the conclusion of each survey window.

The first Safe Learning Survey, which sought respondents' feedback for the first half of the 2020-2021 academic year, was conducted from February 8 to February 26, 2021. The report covering that initial survey can be found at <https://wmcc10.org/resources>. Over 23,000 respondents, including 9,333 educators, 2,988 students, and 11,651



family members completed this first iteration of the survey in the winter of 2021. At that time, key findings included that all respondent groups felt that students were learning, although to a lesser extent than pre-pandemic. In addition, respondents reported concern for and support needed in the area of mental health, successes and challenges in the new instructional models, and feeling good about the safety precautions taken for COVID-19.

The second Safe Learning Survey, the subject of this report, was conducted from May 5, 2021 to June 18, 2021. Over 10,500 respondents, including 2,844 educators, 1,685 students, and 6,004 family members completed the survey this spring. Although the survey was sent statewide via school and district leaders, somewhat uneven and concentrated responses, both geographically and by respondent type, were observed. Additionally, the response rate for this second survey was approximately half the size of that for the first survey from the winter of 2021. This was perhaps a result of fewer school and district leaders sharing the survey with educators, students, and families. Some school and district leaders cited survey fatigue as a reason for not sharing the survey. Furthermore, while the survey window was selected to capture respondents' feelings regarding the second half of the 2020-2021 school year, the window itself was near the end of the school year when, admittedly, activities like surveys may not have been a high priority.

It is the continued hope of the WMCC that data from the Minnesota Safe Learning Surveys will continue to provide insights as to how educators, students, and families are feeling about school during this unprecedented time in history.

Key Findings

Overall, respondents to the Spring 2021 Survey differed from respondents to the Winter 2021 Survey:

- About half as many individuals responded.
- A smaller percentage of educators responded.
- A larger percentage of educators were located in the Resource Training & Solutions region, a larger percentage of families were located in the Lakes Country Service Cooperative and Metro ECSU regions, and a larger percentage of students came from the Southeast Service Cooperative region.

Despite differences in the respondents, key findings for the Spring 2021 Survey strongly aligned with findings from the Winter 2021 Survey:

» Students learned.

Educators, families, and students continued to agree that some learning took place during the 2020–2021 school year.



Compared to Winter 2021 data, more educators felt that students learned *a lot* academically and slightly more educators felt students learned *some* or *a lot* in terms of social and emotional skills.



As grade levels increased, families felt that students were learning less: most early childhood families reported students were learning *a lot* whereas an even percentage of elementary families reported students were learning *some* or *a lot*, and more middle and high school families reported students were learning *some* compared to *a lot*.

Compared to Winter 2021 data, levels of learning reported by families on the Spring 2021 Survey were higher for early childhood and elementary students but largely the same for secondary students.



Students in grades 6–12 continued to report that they were learning *some*.



Educators, families, and students continued to believe there was more learning taking place pre-COVID and that more learning occurred this school year in comparison to the spring of 2020 when the state was entirely in distance learning.

» Support for mental health is needed.

Mental health concerns and needed supports for both educators and students became more of a priority among all respondent groups in the Spring 2021 Survey. All respondent groups agreed mental health was a challenge:



Student and staff mental health support was administrators' number one reported challenge.

Teachers and support professionals reported their own mental health as their highest challenge, followed by mental health support for students.



Mental health support was the third most commonly reported challenge among families and students.

Accordingly, it was not surprising that mental health was the number one needed support reported by administrators and mental health support for students and themselves were among the top four needed supports among teachers and support professionals. Families agreed that mental health support was needed and although students most commonly reported other needed supports over mental health, it is likely that those other supports (e.g., clearer communication and doable lessons and assignments) would foster environments that better supported their mental health.

» Engaging students in learning was both successful and challenging.

Overall, findings suggested that there were successes in reaching surface levels of engagement but challenges in achieving the support needed for deeper engagement in learning.



There were mixed findings among teachers and support professionals. Teachers reported engaging students in learning as their top success, although this was also their third most common challenge. Support professionals reported relationship building and connection with students as a top success; yet, getting in touch with students and families was their fourth most common challenge.

Administrators primarily reported challenges with engagement: ensuring attendance and ensuring that rigorous instruction was provided were among administrators' top three reported challenges.



Families reported mixed experiences with engagement as receiving support from teachers and other school staff was their number one success and their second most challenging area. In addition, supporting their own students at home was families' number one challenge, which perhaps played a role in difficulties with engagement.



Students' reports suggested that surface level engagement went well as knowing where to be and when was among their top three successes; however, deeper engagement was more challenging as keeping up with and understanding their school work were students' top two challenges.



Aligned with these mixed findings about the successes and challenges of engagement, educators and families requested more supports to engage students in learning. Students' requests for clearer communication, more doable lessons and assignments, and more help with schoolwork might also align with challenges they faced with engaging more deeply in learning.

» All respondent groups largely reported successes with technology, COVID-19 safety measures, connectedness, and communication.



Hardware and software were among the least commonly reported supports needed among educators, families, and students. Reliable internet was among the top three reported supports needed by students; however, reliable internet fell in the middle among reported supports needed by educators and families.

Ensuring the health and safety of themselves and others consistently fell among the top four successes for all respondent groups, with students reporting their top success was staying healthy by following COVID-19 health rules.



Although feelings of connectedness to others varied by group, most respondents reported strong connections between teachers and students. Families with younger students felt more connected to their students' teachers than those with middle and high school students. In comparison to [the Winter 2021 Survey](#), families reported higher levels of connection across the board.

Overall, communication received by educators, families, and students either occasionally or almost always met their needs. In the Spring 2021 Survey, administrators more frequently reported that communication from MDE and MDH met their needs in comparison to [the Winter 2021 Survey](#).

» Moving forward, the areas of most concern and needed change are mental health, engagement, being behind academically, and social interactions and relationships.

All respondent groups reported mental health and engagement among their top four concerns moving forward.

- Families and students are highly concerned about students being behind academically.
- Families are most concerned about students' social interactions and relationships, which was also among the top five concerns for students and educators.

When asked about changes to schooling that respondents would like to see:



All groups focused on a desire to return to in-person schooling as much as possible.



Educators discussed school infrastructure needs, including a more manageable workload and more funding, staffing, and resources.



Families emphasized wanting reduced or eliminated COVID-19 restrictions, such as no requirement to wear masks due to concerns about their interference in students' socialization.



Students generally desired changes that would help them feel less stressed and worry less about their grades, including a more manageable workload and more meaningful assignments.



Grouping all respondents together, widening achievement gaps and racism/racial microaggressions were less frequently mentioned concerns and areas for change among educators, families, and students. However, additional analyses are now being completed around respondents' race and geographic location for a number of the questions in the Safe Learning Survey. A supplemental report on those analyses will be available in the early fall of 2021.

- » The Minnesota Safe Learning Survey will be distributed one more time in October 2021 in order to ascertain what can be learned from this unprecedented time. We hope all of Minnesota's educational leaders will help in distributing the Fall Survey to educators, families, and students in their district or school.
- » District and charter school reports for each data collection period are available to superintendents or charter leaders upon request:
z.umn.edu/MNSLS-ReportRequest

Resources

The following resources may help schools, districts, and other stakeholders address the key findings described above:

COVID-19

- [News Release: MN State Officials Recommend CDC School COVID-19 Guidance for Fall](#)

Equity

- [Five Equity Practices for Principals](#)
- [Great Lakes Equity Center Resources](#)
- [The Importance of Addressing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Schools](#)
- [Understanding Critical Race Theory in Relation to our P-12 Education Systems in Minnesota](#)

Learning & General Guidance

- [Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action](#)
- [Leveraging Recovery Funds to Prioritize Wellness and Accelerate Learning](#)
- [Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond](#)
- [SEL & MTSS Toolkit for State and District Leaders](#)
- [What Parents Want Moving Forward: A Summary of Two National Surveys about Schooling in the Context of COVID-19](#)

Mental Health & Social-Emotional Learning

- [A Quick-Start Guide to Reframing Children's Mental Health](#)
- [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\) Resources](#)
- [Restart & Recovery: Leveraging Federal COVID Relief Funding & Medicaid to Support Student & Staff Wellbeing & Connection](#)
- [Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Roadmap for Reopening School](#)

Methodology

Survey development

The Minnesota Safe Learning Survey was developed by educational researchers at the WMCC, who worked in close partnership with the MDE to develop, test, and disseminate this survey. This process included using results from other recent statewide surveys to inform question development,¹ as well as gathering and integrating feedback from focus groups conducted with a variety of stakeholders, including educational leaders, teachers, families, and students. Most Spring Safe Learning Survey items were identical to those asked of respondents in the Winter Safe Learning Survey distributed in February of 2021. However, the following changes were made:

- Teachers, support professionals, and families no longer reported on communication for a list of topics. Instead they were asked one general communication question: *To what extent has communication from your school or district met your needs this school year?*
- All respondents were asked to select response(s) to the prompt: *What are your top concerns around schooling moving forward? Select all that apply.*
 - Those who selected *Other* were prompted to provide an open-ended response.
 - Those who selected *Social interactions/relationships* were prompted to select a closed-ended response providing further detail about their concern.
- A random sample of educators, families, and students were asked to provide an open-ended response to the prompt: *Reflecting on your experiences from the past year, what do you think needs to change about schooling in the future?*

Seeking respondents

Attempting to secure respondents from a variety of groups (i.e., educators, students, and families), the WMCC used multiple forms of outreach. Using contact lists from the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA), Minnesota School Board Association (MSBA), and Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), the WMCC sent an email on May 5, 2021 to 2,846 Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, School Board Chairs, and Principals across the state of Minnesota, inviting them to share the survey link with all educators, families of students, and students (grades 6-12) in their district or school (see [Appendix A](#) for communication sent to educational leaders). This email stated that the survey would be open from May 5-28, 2021 (the original survey window), participation was voluntary, and results

1. e.g., [UMN's Distance Learning Survey](#), [MDE's Fall Planning Survey](#), [RAND's Spring 2020 American Educator Panels COVID-19 Surveys](#), and [WMCC's Wisconsin Distance Learning Survey for Students](#)

would be summarized in a statewide report, as well as an optional report of their district's responses. The email also provided leaders with language to use when distributing the survey among educators, families, and students (including text translated into Spanish, Somali, and Hmong for families and students) and a link to a list of [Frequently Asked Questions](#) about the survey.

The WMCC also sent a similar email to leaders of key educator and family advocacy organizations in Minnesota, including Education Minnesota, Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA), Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP), Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA), Minnesota Administrators of Special Education (MASE), PACER Center, and Minnesota Youth Council (see full list of organizations in [Appendix A](#)). Leaders of these organizations were asked to consider distributing the survey among their members. Education Minnesota represents 60,000 licensed and non-licensed educators across the state and distributed the link directly to their members. These educators were encouraged to complete the survey twice if they represented the roles of both educator and family. The link to the survey was also shared on Twitter several times throughout the survey window by CAREI, MDE, and affiliated organizations and individuals.

In late May, the WMCC team decided to extend the survey window to June 18, 2021 due to response rates that were significantly lower than those seen for the Winter 2021 Survey. A follow-up email was sent to the original distribution list on May 19, 2021 to prompt educational leaders and organizations to distribute the survey and to inform them of the extended deadline. Due to low response rates from districts in the Twin Cities metro area, additional targeted emails were sent in early June to districts in the metro area who had demonstrated high response rates to the Winter 2021 Survey, as well as to metro area districts who were affiliates of the WMCC (i.e., members of CAREI's [District Assembly](#)).

Description of the survey

The Minnesota Safe Learning Survey asked respondents to answer questions addressing the following themes, with the number of questions depending on the type of respondent: Demographics (5-7 questions); Successes and Challenges (2-5 questions); Needed Supports (1 question); Learning (3-4 questions); Connectedness (1 question); Communication (1-3 questions); and Moving Forward (1-4 questions). Families were prompted to consider their overall experiences with schooling for all of their children when responding to questions about demographics, successes and challenges, and needed supports. They were asked to respond specifically about their experiences at each age level (early childhood, elementary, middle school/junior high, and high school) for questions about learning, connectedness, communication, and concerns about schooling in the future. In total, educators responded to 17-20 questions, students responded to 16-17 questions, and families responded to 15-37 questions, depending on how many age levels their children represented and whether they were randomly selected to respond to an open-ended question about changes to schooling. All questions (except for respondent type and educator role) were optional to answer, so response rates varied by question. The survey was estimated to take 5-10 minutes to

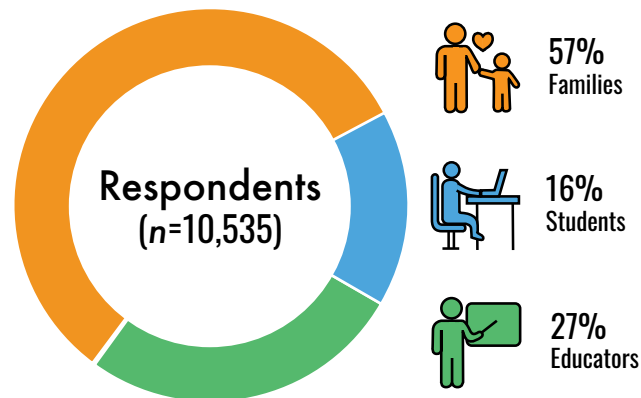
complete. Respondents from each group (i.e., educator, family, and student) were randomly selected to respond to the final question on the survey regarding what respondents think needs to change about schooling in the future. Initially, respondents had a 50% chance of being selected until a quota of 300 was met for each respondent group. These odds were changed to a 20% chance of being selected and quotas were increased to 600 for each respondent group after the first five days the survey was live because some of the initial quotas had already been met. Respondents were also advised to email CAREI@umn.edu with any questions or comments. The main survey link led to a page where families and students could click a link to complete a Spanish, Somali, or Hmong version of the survey. The full text of the English version of the survey is available in [Appendix B](#).

Respondents

The MN Safe Learning Survey was completed a total of 10,535 times, and included responses from 2,799 educators, 1,711 students, and 6,025 family members. Of these respondents, 17 responded to the Spanish version of the survey (16 family members, 1 student) and no respondents completed the Somali or Hmong versions of the survey. Notably, there is likely some overlap in the number of educator and family respondents, as educators were prompted to respond to the survey twice if they had children in school, once as an educator and once as a family member.

Region

Educator respondents represented a total of 296 districts or charter schools, while families represented 259 districts or charter schools and students represented 82 districts or charter schools.² The highest proportion of educator responses came from those working in the Metro Educational Cooperative Service Unit (ECSU; 39%), the Southeast Service Cooperative (13%), and the Resource Training & Solutions (12%) regions. Student respondents primarily attended schools in the Metro ECSU (41%), Southeast Service Cooperative (25%), and Sourcewell (9%) regions. The highest proportions of families had students attending schools in the Metro ECSU (40%), Southeast Service Cooperative (21%), and Lakes Country Service Cooperative (10%) regions. As noted in the context section above, these uneven and concentrated response rates both within and across respondent types likely reflect the fact that only some districts and school leaders distributed the survey to educators, students, and families in their school communities.

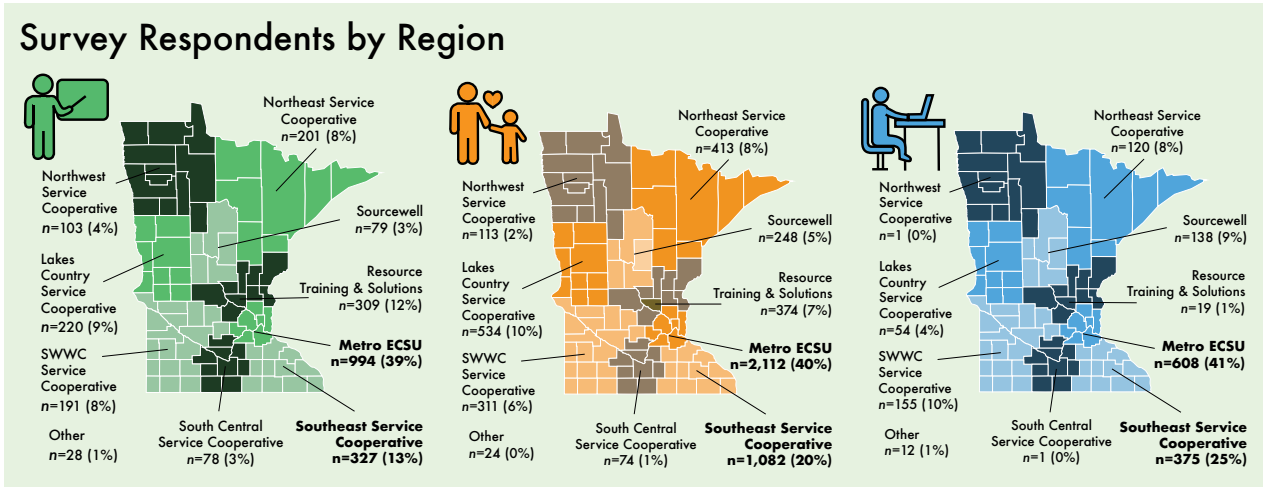


57% of respondents were families.

Demographics

Respondents were asked about a variety of demographic characteristics that would help to understand the perspectives of those who completed the survey. These characteristics included age/grade level(s) they worked with or that students represented, mode of learning they worked in or participated in at the time the survey was taken (in-person only, hybrid, or distance-only), educator roles and experience levels, services students received in school, and race/ethnicity. Educators and students were asked to report their own race/ethnicity, while family members reported the race/ethnicities that all of their students represented. All

2. Region n's for families are slightly inflated due to families that selected multiple districts within the same region.



Most educator, family, and student respondents came from the Metro area or the Southeastern region of Minnesota.

respondents could select multiple options on the race/ethnicity question. We specifically asked respondents about their race because although race is a social construct with no biological basis, there is widespread evidence that race does affect educators', students', and families' experiences in educational systems. In addition, we wanted to know the extent to which the survey respondents' racial and ethnic backgrounds were representative of the overall makeup of the state.

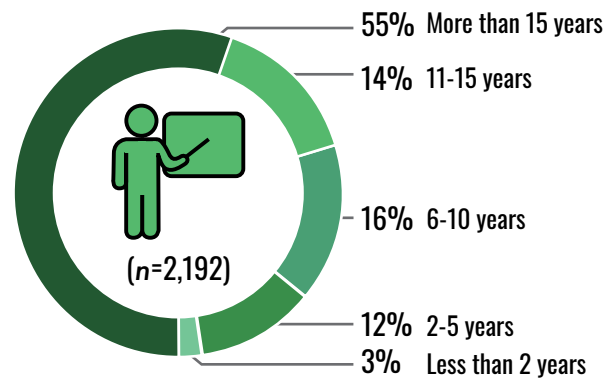
Educator respondents to the survey were primarily white general education teachers with more than 15 years of experience as an educator. Respondents serving elementary students were slightly more represented than other age groups, and only a small proportion of educator respondents worked in Early Childhood and Adult Basic Education settings. Educators were asked different questions depending on the role they selected, so their responses are sometimes reported by subgroup. The following terms will be used to describe each group of educator respondents throughout the report.

	Educators' race	Family reports of students' race	Students' race
Asian	16	150	63
American Indian or Alaska Native	23	60	24
Black or African American	15	111	49
Hispanic/Latino	23	141	64
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	4	17	7
White	1943	3412	767
None of these apply to me	28	104	33
I prefer not to answer	175	454	92

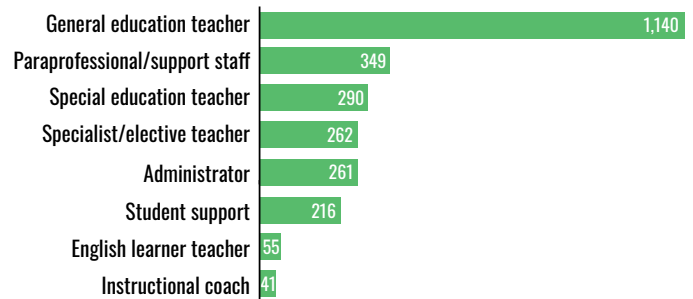
- **Administrators:** Respondents who chose administrator as their role. This includes those who serve in administrative leadership roles, such as superintendent, principal, assistant principal, directors and supervisors of special education, and various district-level roles.
- **Teachers:** Respondents who chose general education teacher, specialist/elective teacher (e.g., art, music, phy ed), special education teacher, and English learner teacher.
- **Support Professionals:** Respondents who chose instructional coach, paraprofessional/support staff, and student support (e.g., counselor, social work, school psychologist, speech/language pathologist, occupational therapist).

Family and student responses about student race/ethnicity indicated that most students represented in the survey were white. A slightly higher proportion of families had students in elementary school than other age groups, while student respondents were evenly spread across each grade level (grades 6-12). Most families reported that their students did not receive additional services in school. Those that did receive additional services primarily received support through special education or gifted and talented programming.

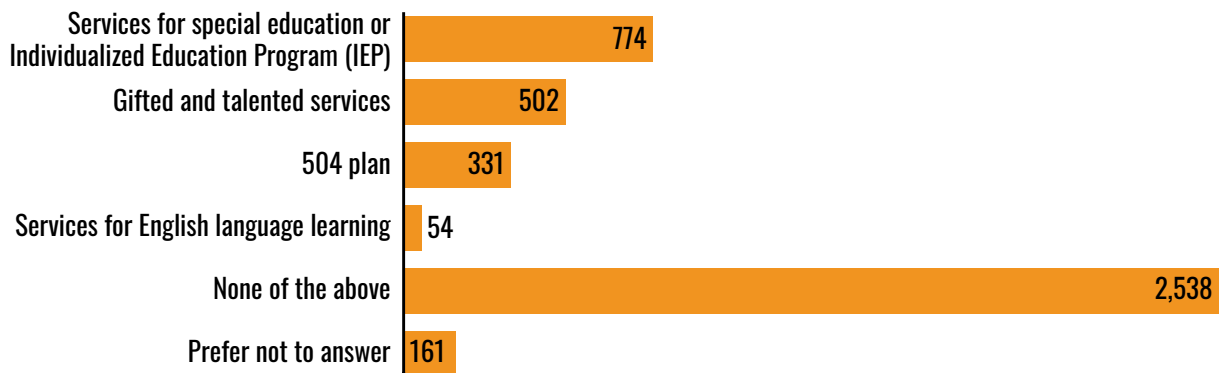
How long have you been an educator?



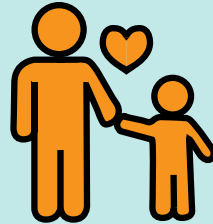
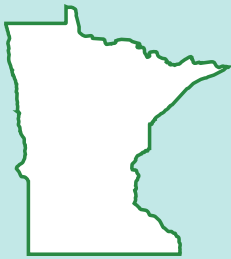
What is your role?



What services does your student receive, if any?



Survey Results



Mode of Learning

Respondents were asked which mode of learning (e.g., in-person, hybrid, distance) their district was in (administrators), what mode they were working in (teachers and support staff), or which mode their children (families) or they themselves (students) were in as of the day they completed the survey.

Administrators

Administrators ($n=256$) primarily reported that their district offered in-person learning for all students (77%) at the time the survey was completed. Other administrators indicated that there was in-person learning for elementary students and hybrid learning for secondary students (12%), hybrid learning for all students (7%), or selected other (4%).



77% of administrators reported their district was offering in-person learning for all students.

Teachers and support professionals

Teachers and support professionals ($n=2,306$) reported that they were primarily teaching or working in person with students (50%) or in a hybrid model (27%). A small proportion of educator respondents reported working in a distance learning mode only (6%) and many selected other (18%). Most educators who selected other reported that they were supporting students both in person and online, with many stating that they were teaching in person while livestreaming lessons from the classroom (with some describing this model as “concurrent,” “simultaneous,” or “hyflex” teaching).



50% of teachers and support professionals were working in person only, while **27%** were working in a hybrid model.

Families

Families were asked to report on the mode of learning for their students at each age level. Across all age levels, the highest proportion of families indicated having students in an in-person only model, followed by hybrid, and then distance learning. Families with middle and high school students reported larger proportions of students in hybrid and distance learning than those with early childhood and elementary aged students.



Students at all age levels were primarily attending school in person, though at the middle and high school level a higher proportion of students were in a hybrid or distance learning model.

Students

Students (grades 6-12; $n=1,520$) primarily reported that they were learning in an in-person only model (55%), while others were in a hybrid model (26%) or distance learning only (20%).



55% of students (grades 6-12) were learning in person; 26% were learning in a hybrid model.

Learning



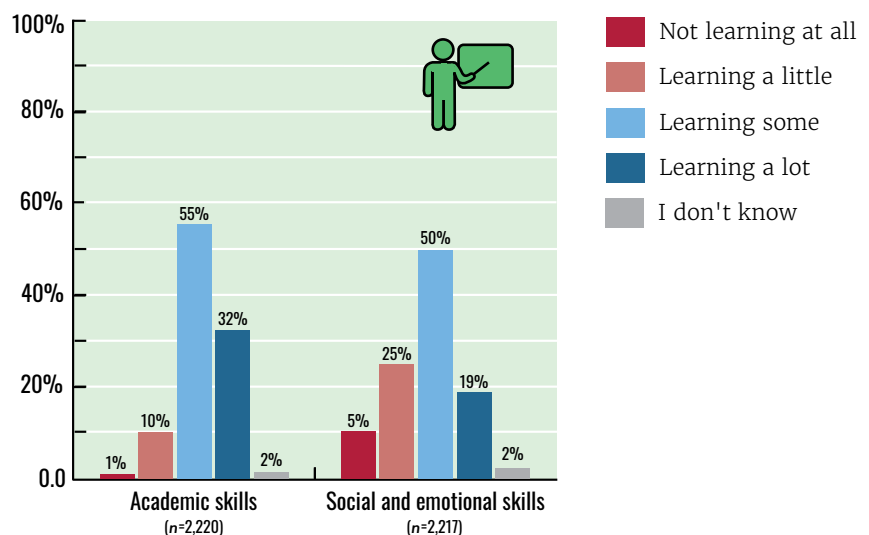
Educators, families, and students agreed that most students were learning some during the 2020-21 school year.

Educators

Educators were asked to estimate how much they believe their students were learning academic and social/emotional skills during the 2020-21 school year. For both types of learning, the largest proportion of educators reported that students were *learning some* (55% for academic skills, 50% for social and emotional skills). For academic skills, the next highest amount of educators (32%) reported that students were *learning a lot* of academic skills. In contrast, for social and emotional skills, the next highest percentage of educators

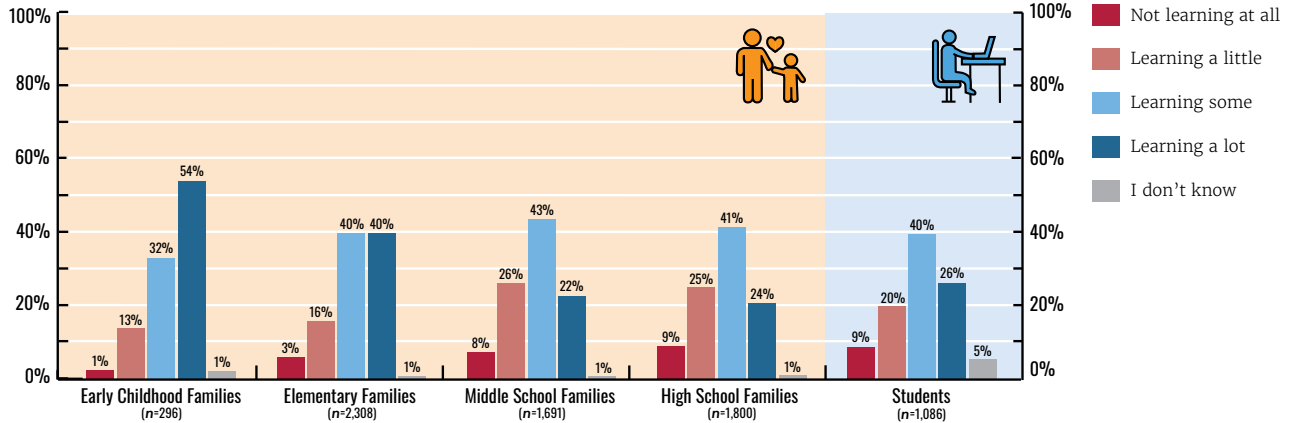
(25%) reported that students were *learning a little*. More educators also reported that students were *not learning at all* in terms of social and emotional skills (5%) than those that reported students were *not learning at all* in terms of academic skills (1%). Similarly, 32% of educators reported that students were *learning a lot* of academic skills, compared to only 19% who indicated that students were *learning a lot* of social and emotional skills.

To what extent do you believe your students are learning academic and social/emotional skills this year?



87% of educators believed students were learning *some* or *a lot* of academic skills, whereas **69%** of educators believed students were learning *some* or *a lot* of social and emotional skills.

To what extent do you believe you / your students are learning this school year?



Families

In order to keep the Minnesota Safe Learning Survey as brief as possible for families, the survey only included one question about learning overall (as opposed to asking about academic and social/emotional skills separately): *To what extent do you believe your student(s) are learning this school year?* Family members responded to this question for each age category their students fell into (i.e., early childhood, elementary, middle school / junior high, high school). For families with students in early childhood education, more than half of family respondents reported that their students were *learning a lot* (54%), while those with elementary-age students equally reported that students were *learning some* (40%) and *learning a lot* (40%). The most common response for the middle and high school age groups was that students were *learning some* (43% and 41%, respectively). The second most common response for those with middle and high school students was *learning a little* (26% and 25%, respectively). This trend of families reporting that younger students were learning more than secondary students perhaps aligns with the higher proportion of early childhood and elementary students reported to be in an in-person learning model. However, there are many factors that likely impacted families’ impressions of their children’s learning, so we cannot conclude that mode of learning was the primary or only influence on families’ perceptions.



More than half of all early childhood families reported that their children learned a lot during the 2020-21 school year.



Families with early childhood and elementary students reported at higher rates that their students were *learning a lot* versus families with secondary students.

Students

Students were asked one question about learning overall: *To what extent do you feel you are learning this school year?* Similar to educators and families with secondary students, 6th-12th grade students most commonly reported *I'm learning some* (40%). Student responses generally matched the responses of families with secondary students, though secondary families reported that students were *learning a little* at slightly higher rates than students, whose second most common response was *I'm learning a lot*.



Secondary students most frequently reported that they were *learning some* during the 2020-21 school year.

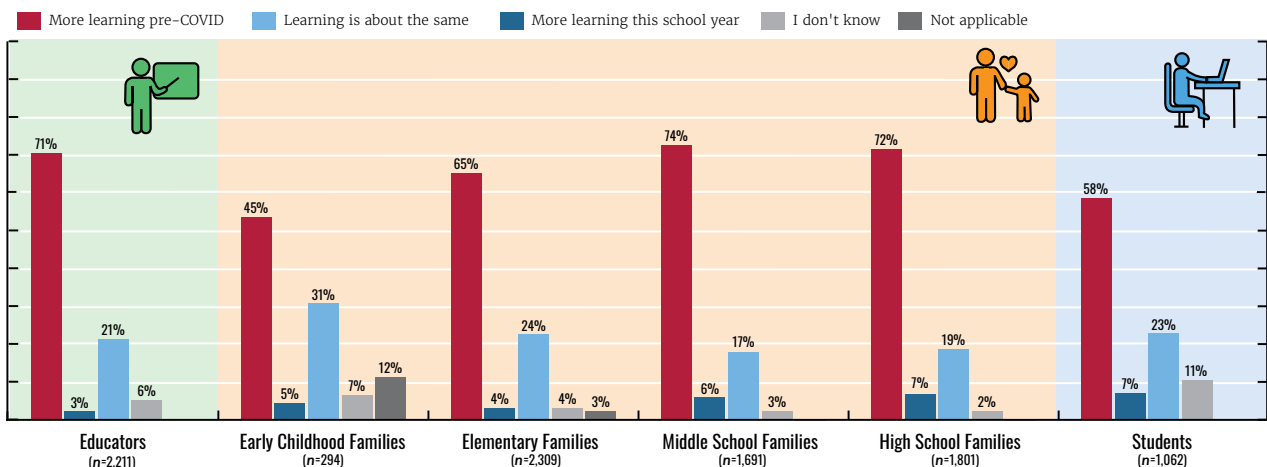
Comparing learning pre-COVID to the 2020-21 school year

All survey respondents were asked to compare their estimates of the amount of learning happening during the 2020-21 school year to learning that occurred “pre-COVID,” or before the COVID-19 pandemic began in March of 2020. Across all respondents, most reported that there was more learning happening before COVID-19 impacted schooling than during the first half of the 2020-21 school year.

Educators

Most educators (71%) agreed that there was more learning happening among their students before the COVID-19 pandemic than during the 2020-21 school

How do you believe you / your students' learning pre-COVID compares to learning this school year?





Educators, families, and students agreed that more learning occurred pre-COVID.

year. However, 17% reported that the amount of learning is comparable between the two time periods. Other educators indicated that they did not know enough to make this comparison (6%) and very few reported that there was more learning happening in 2020-21 than pre-COVID (3%).

Families

Family members responded to this question for each age category their students fell into. While most family respondents agreed that there was more learning happening pre-COVID within each age group, families with students at the early childhood level were more likely to report that *the amount of learning was about the same* than families reporting about other age groups; 31% of early childhood family respondents indicated that *the amount of learning was about the same*, in contrast to 24% at the elementary level, 17% at the middle school level, and 19% at the high school level. These responses align with family responses about learning overall described above, in which younger children were rated to generally be learning more than secondary students.

Students

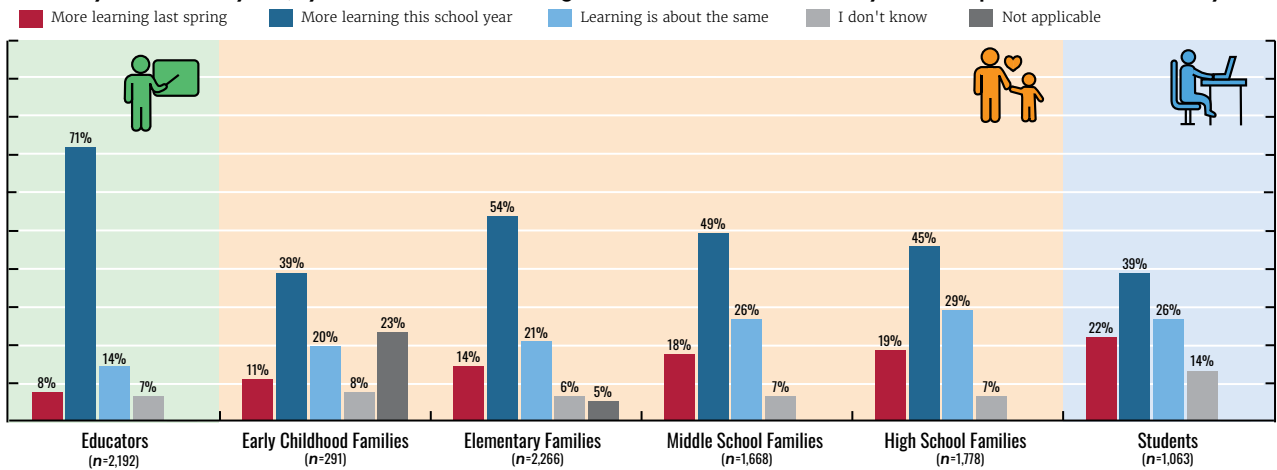
Along with educators and families, just over half of students (58%) also reported that they were learning more pre-COVID than during the 2020-21 school year. However, students were more likely than secondary parents to report that *the amount of learning was about the same* (23% of students compared to 17% of middle school parents and 19% of high school parents) or that *there was more learning happening this school year* (11% of students compared to 3% of middle school parents and 2% of high school parents). These results indicate that secondary students' own estimates of their learning tended to be slightly higher than estimates from secondary family respondents.

Comparing learning in spring 2020 to the 2020-21 school year

In the spring of 2020, schools across MN were thrust into the new and uncertain world of distance learning following the Governor's announcement that all school buildings needed to close by March 18, 2020. Although educators put forth extraordinary efforts to meet students' needs during this unprecedented time, there were many obstacles that impacted their ability to provide a high-quality education to all students (see the [University of Minnesota's Spring 2020 Minnesota PK-12 Distance Learning Survey](#) for more details on educators' experiences during the spring of 2020). As such, we asked respondents to compare their experiences with learning when the pandemic had just begun to the 2020-21 school year, when there had been more time and experience to inform putting new educational practices in place.

Across all groups, most respondents reported that there was more learning happening during the 2020-21 school year than during the spring of 2020. However, there were some differences in response patterns, both between and within respondent groups, as described below.

How do you believe you / your students' learning at the end of last school year compares to this school year?



Educators

Most educators (71%) reported that there was more learning happening among their students during the 2020–21 school year than during the spring of 2020. It is interesting to note that, compared to families and students, a higher proportion of educators reported that more learning happened during the 2020–21 school year in comparison to the end of the previous school year.

Families

Similar to the other learning questions, family members responded to this question for each age category their students fell into. Within each age group, the highest proportion of families reported that *there was more learning happening this school year*. The next most common response for families across all age groups was that *the amount of learning was about the same*, though a somewhat higher percentage of high school (29%) and middle school families (26%) reported this compared to families reporting about elementary (21%) and early childhood (20%) students. It is also interesting to note that despite the rapid and dramatic shift to distance learning in spring of 2020, a significant amount of families reported that *there was more learning happening at the end of last school year* (ranging from 12–15% across age groups).

Students

Although many student respondents shared views with educators and families that there was more learning happening in the 2020–21 school year than in the spring of 2020 (39%), student responses showed slightly greater variability than those of the other respondents. A total of 26% of students reported that *the amount of learning was about the same*, 22% selected that *there was more learning happening at the end of last school year*, and 14% reported *I don't know*.



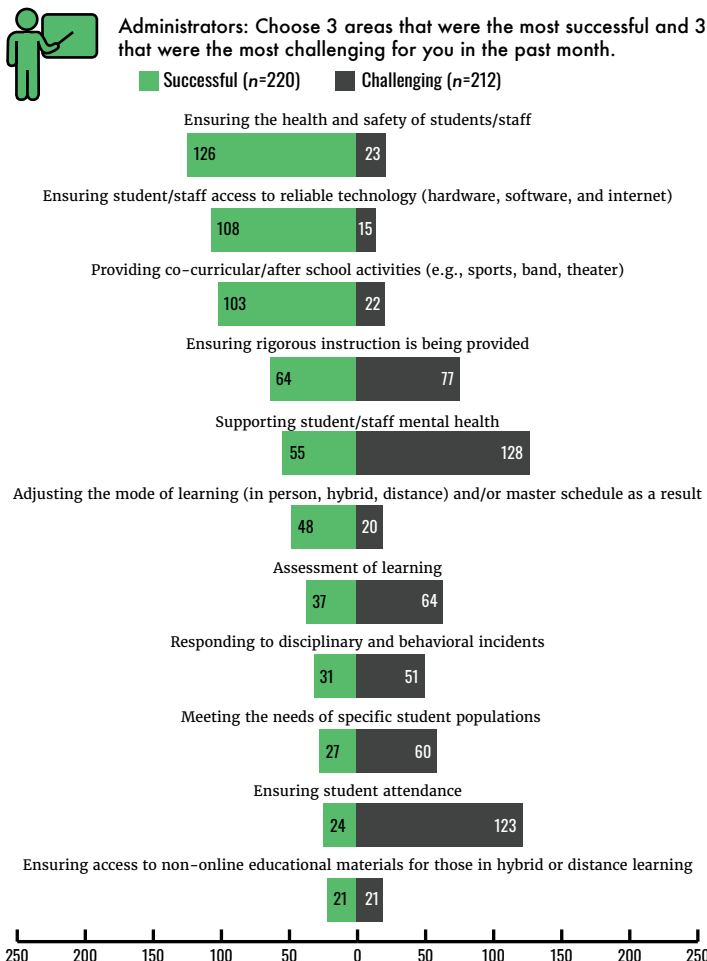
Educators, families, and students agreed that more learning occurred during the 2020-21 school year compared to 2020.

Successes & Challenges

Educators, families, and students were asked to select three areas that were most successful for them and three areas that were most challenging for them in the month preceding the survey. The following is a description of those successes and challenges among each respondent group. There were slight differences in the response options for the three educator groups (administrators, teachers, and support professionals), families, and students due to the unique roles and responsibilities of each respondent group.

Administrators

Administrators' top three areas of reported success were *ensuring the health and safety of students/staff*, *ensuring student/staff access to reliable technology*, and *providing co-curricular/after school activities (e.g., sports, band, theater)*. In contrast, administrators reported *supporting student/staff mental health*, *ensuring student attendance*, and *ensuring rigorous instruction was being provided* as their top three areas of challenge.



Similar to Winter 2021, administrators reported **success with technical activities** (e.g., safety protocols, access to technology) but **challenges with adaptive activities** (e.g., supporting mental health, ensuring student attendance, ensuring rigorous instruction).

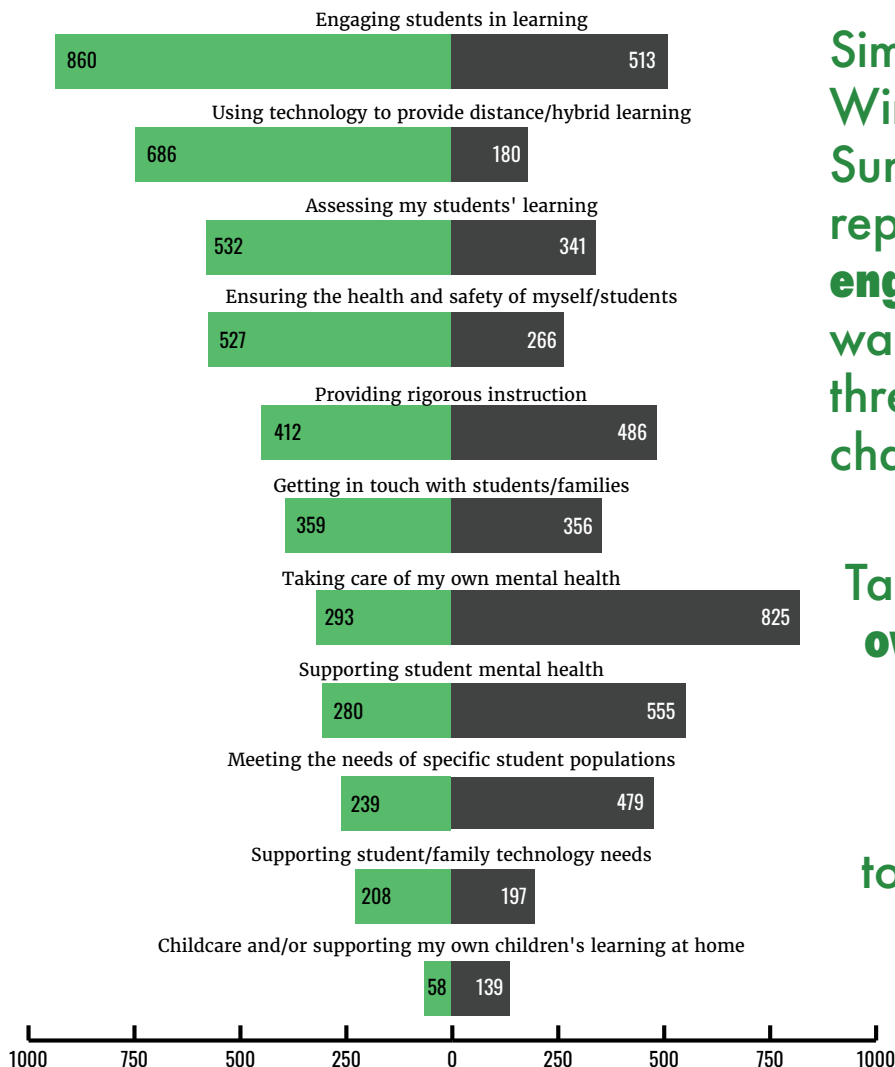
Teachers

Teachers' top three areas of reported success included *engaging students in learning*, *using technology to provide distance/hybrid learning*, and *assessing my students' learning*. The top three challenges reported by teachers were *taking care of my own mental health*, *supporting student mental health*, and *engaging students in learning*. Interestingly, *engaging students in learning* ranked first in successes and third in challenges.



Teachers: Choose 3 areas that were the most successful and 3 that were the most challenging for you in the past month.

■ Successful (n=1,550) ■ Challenging (n=1,530)



Similar to the Winter 2021 Survey, teachers reported that **engaging students** was among the top three successes and challenges.

Taking care of **their own mental health** and supporting **student mental health** were the top two challenges reported by teachers.

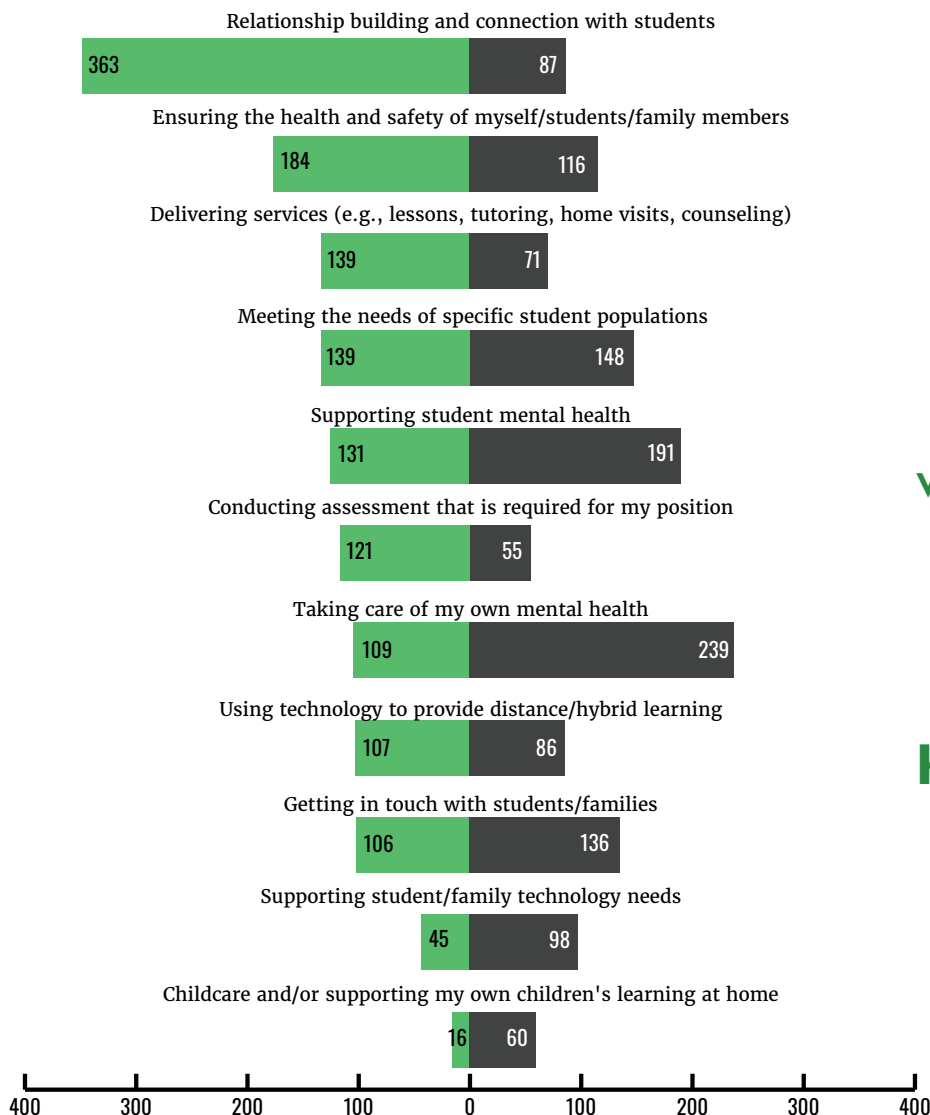
Support professionals

Among support professionals, the top two cited successes were *relationship building and connection with students* and *ensuring the health and safety of myself/students/family members*. Both *delivering services (e.g., lessons, tutoring, home visits, counseling)* and *meeting the needs of specific student populations (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless/highly mobile)* were tied for third. Support professionals ranked *taking care of my own mental health*, *supporting student mental health*, and *meeting the needs of specific student populations (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless/highly mobile)* as the top three challenges.



Support Professionals: Choose 3 areas that were the most successful and 3 that were the most challenging for you in the past month.

■ Successful (n=522) ■ Challenging (n=482)



Most support professionals reported **relationship building and connection with students** as their top success, while **taking care of their own mental health** and **supporting student mental health** were their top challenges.

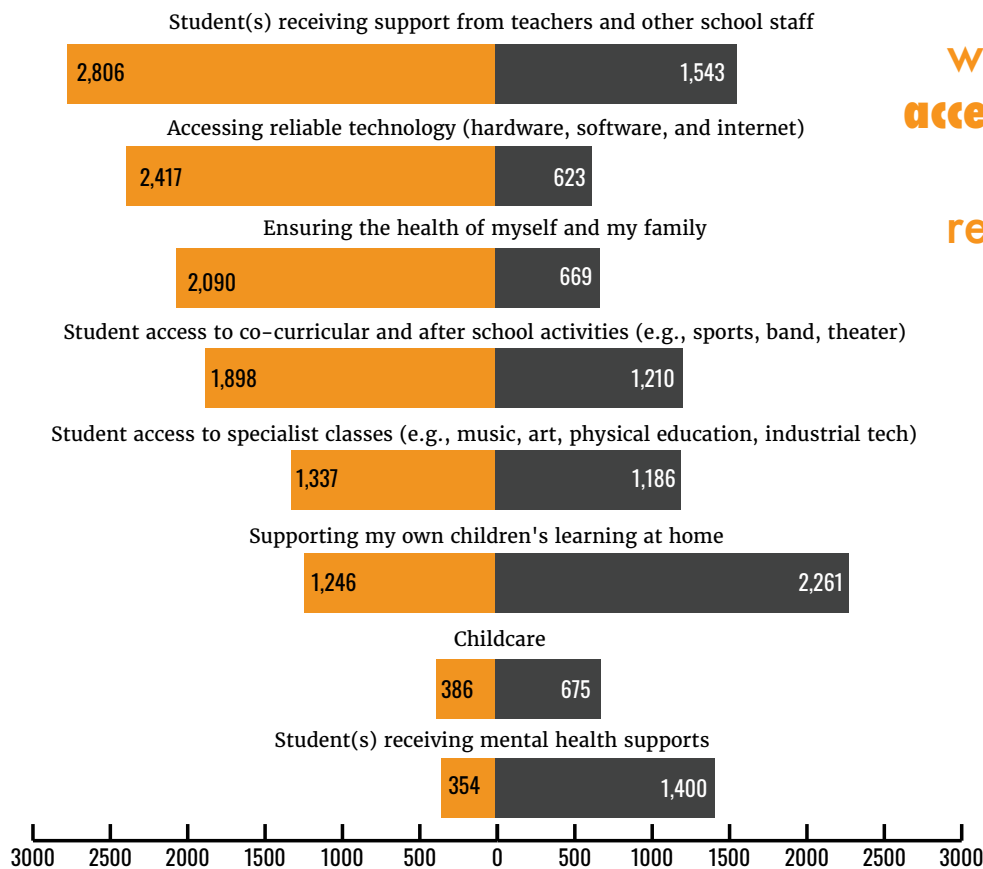
Families

The top three reported successes among families were *student(s) receiving support from teachers and other school staff*, *accessing reliable technology*, and *ensuring the health of myself and my family*. Families' top three reported challenges were *supporting my own children's learning at home*, *student(s) receiving support from teachers and other school staff*, and *student(s) receiving mental health services*. Interestingly, *receiving support from teachers and other school staff* was in the top three most common successes and challenges.



Choose 3 areas that were the most successful and 3 that were the most challenging for you in the past month.

■ Successful (n=4,761) ■ Challenging (n=3,942)



Just as in the winter of 2021, **accessing reliable technology** remained a top success.

Families reported **supporting my own children's learning at home** and **student(s) receiving mental health supports** among the top three challenges.

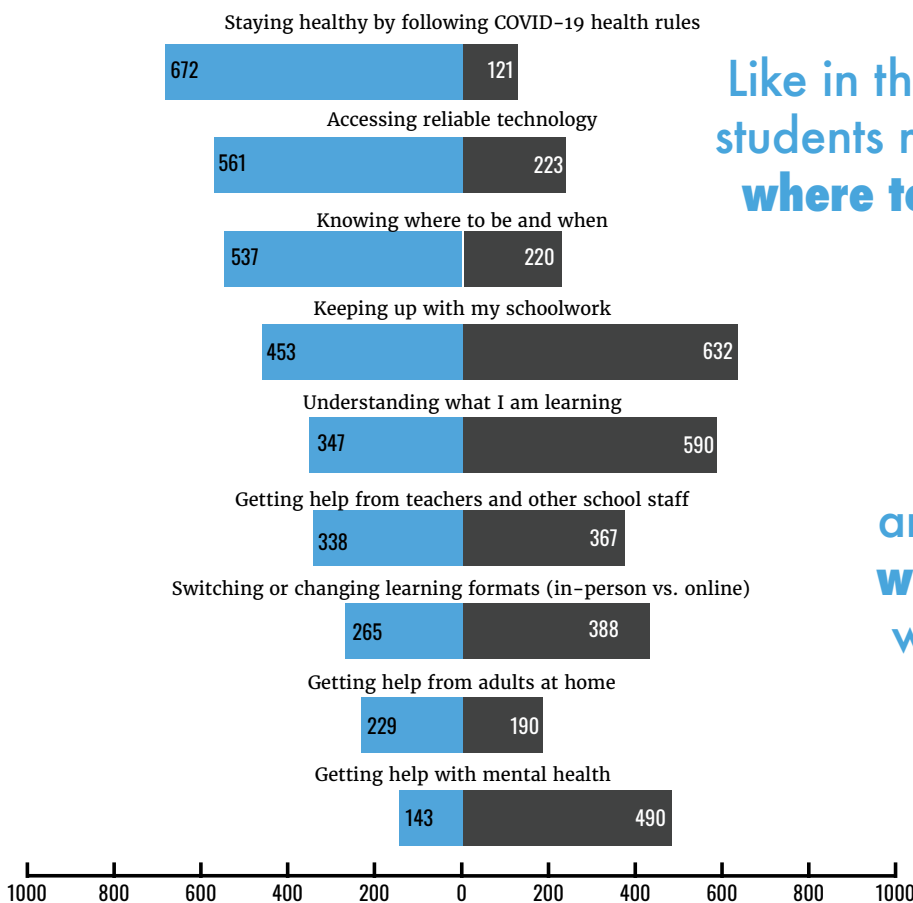
Students

Students' top three areas of reported success were *staying healthy by following COVID-19 health rules, accessing reliable technology (like the internet, your computer/iPad, Google classroom, Schoology, etc.), and knowing where to be and when*. The top three challenges among students were *keeping up with my schoolwork, understanding what I am learning, and getting help with mental health*.



Choose 3 areas that were the most successful and 3 that were the most challenging for you in the past month.

■ Successful (n=1,224) ■ Challenging (n=1,161)



Like in the winter of 2021, students reported **knowing where to be and when** as a success.

...however, **keeping up with my schoolwork and understanding what I am learning** were students' top challenges.

Getting help with mental health was also a top challenge among students.



Meeting needs of special populations

Educators who selected *meeting the needs of specific student populations* (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless/highly mobile) as either a success or a challenge were then prompted to report on which specific populations they experienced successes or challenges with. Overall, 396 educators responded to the question about which populations they had successes with and 669 educators responded to the question about which populations they experienced the most challenges with when seeking to meet students' needs. Similar to the winter of 2021, students with *Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)* and/or *504 plans* were selected the most frequently for both successes ($n=314$) and challenges ($n=470$), followed by *English learners* ($n=105$ for successes and $n=280$ for challenges). Fifty-six educators selected *early learners* for successes and 51 selected *early learners* for challenges. *Students experiencing homelessness/high mobility* were selected less frequently by educators for successes ($n=33$) than for challenges ($n=173$). Similarly, *other* was selected less frequently by educators for successes ($n=25$) than for challenges ($n=121$). Finally, *t* were selected least frequently for both successes ($n=16$) and challenges ($n=39$).



Similar to Winter 2021, educators most commonly reported successes and challenges in **seeking to meet the needs of students with disabilities and English learners.**

COVID-19 related decreases in enrollment

In response to a question about the extent to which administrators were concerned about COVID-19-related decreases in enrollment in their school/district this year, 29% of administrators reported they were *very concerned*, 25% reported they were *moderately concerned*, 29% reported they were *slightly concerned*, and 18% reported they were *not at all concerned*.



54% of administrators were very concerned or moderately concerned about **enrollment**, down from 64% in the Winter 2021 Survey.

Supports

Administrators

Administrators reported on the top three supports their school/district needed this school year. Overall, 218 administrators responded to this question and nearly all indicated needing *mental health supports for staff, students, and/or families* as well as needing *support to re-engage highly disengaged students*. Some administrators reported needing *clear expectations from district/state/federal agencies, academic supports for students/families, services and supports for specific student populations, access to reliable internet for staff/families, and professional development/coaching for staff*. Relatively few administrators reported needing *childcare for staff/families, informational resources, curricular resources, staff/family access to technology: hardware, or staff/family access to technology: software*. Only 6 administrators reported needing *none at this time*.

More than half of educators in all roles reported needing support to re-engage highly disengaged students immediately followed by needing mental health support for students, staff, and families.

What are the top 3 supports that your school/district needs this school year?

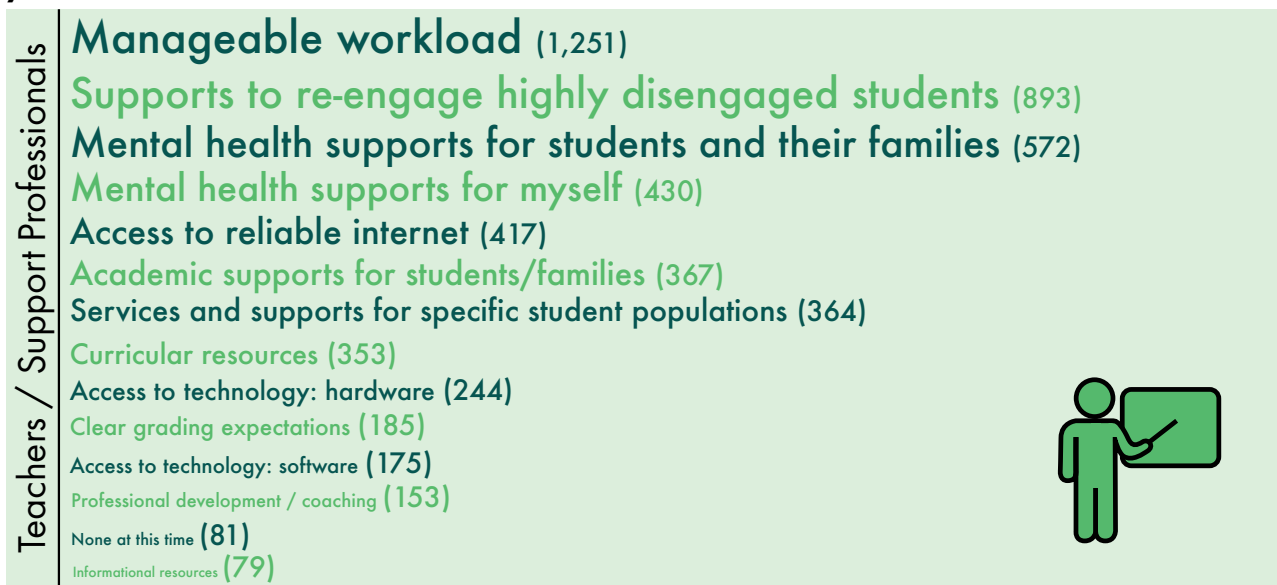
Administrators	Mental health supports for staff, students, and/or families (148)
	Support to re-engage highly disengaged students (139)
	Clear expectations from district/state/federal agencies (82)
	Academic supports for students/families (58)
	Services and supports for specific student populations (45)
	Access to reliable internet for staff/families (39)
	Professional Development/Coaching for staff (35)
	Childcare for staff/families (21)
	Informational resources (15)
	Curricular resources (11)
Staff/family access to technology: Hardware (11)	
Staff/family access to technology: Software (9)	
None at this time (6)	



Teachers and support professionals

Teachers and support professionals were prompted to report on the top three supports they needed to be effective this school year. Nearly 2,000 teachers/support professionals responded to this question and most reported needing a manageable workload. About half of teachers/support professionals reported needing *supports to re-engage highly disengaged students* and about a quarter reported needing *mental health supports for students and their families, mental health supports for myself, and access to reliable internet*. A smaller number of teachers/support professionals reported needing *academic supports, supports for specific student populations, curricular resources, access to hardware, clear grading expectations, access to software, professional development/coaching, and informational resources*. Only 81 teachers/support professionals reported needing *no supports at this time*

What are the top 3 supports that you need to be effective this school year?

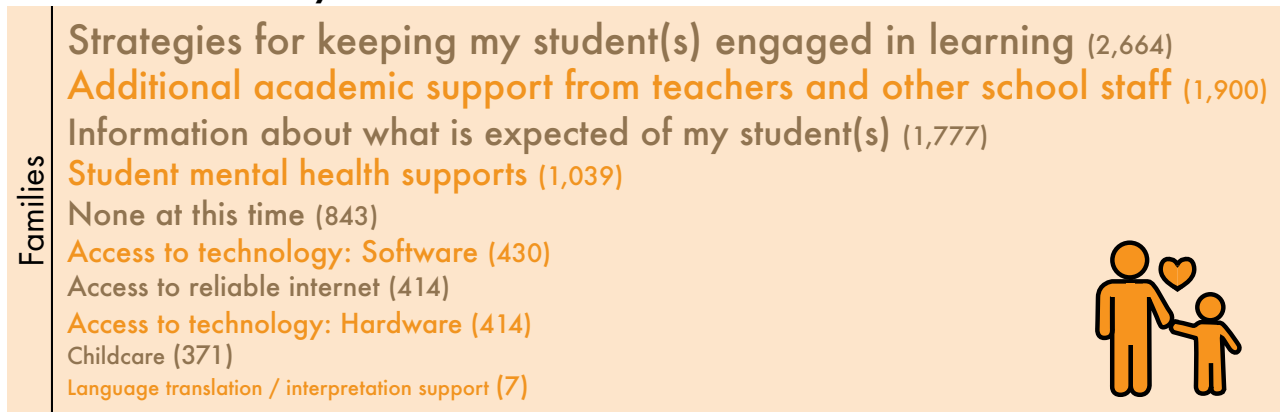


Similar to Winter 2021, it was not surprising given the multiple modes of teaching/learning that the top needed support among teachers and support professionals was a **more manageable workload**.

Families

All families were asked what were the top three supports they needed for their student(s) to learn this school year. More than 4,400 families responded to this question with respect to their students' overall needs if they had more than one student. More than half of respondents indicated needing *strategies for keeping my student(s) engaged in learning*. Nearly 2,000 families reported needing *additional academic support from teachers and other school staff* along with *information about what is expected of my student(s)*. Just over 1,000 respondents reported needing *student mental health supports*. Some families reported needing *access to software, reliable internet, hardware, and childcare*. Very few families needed *language translation/interpretation support*. Interestingly, over 800 families reported needing *no supports at this time*.

What are the top 3 supports that you need for your student(s) to learn this school year?

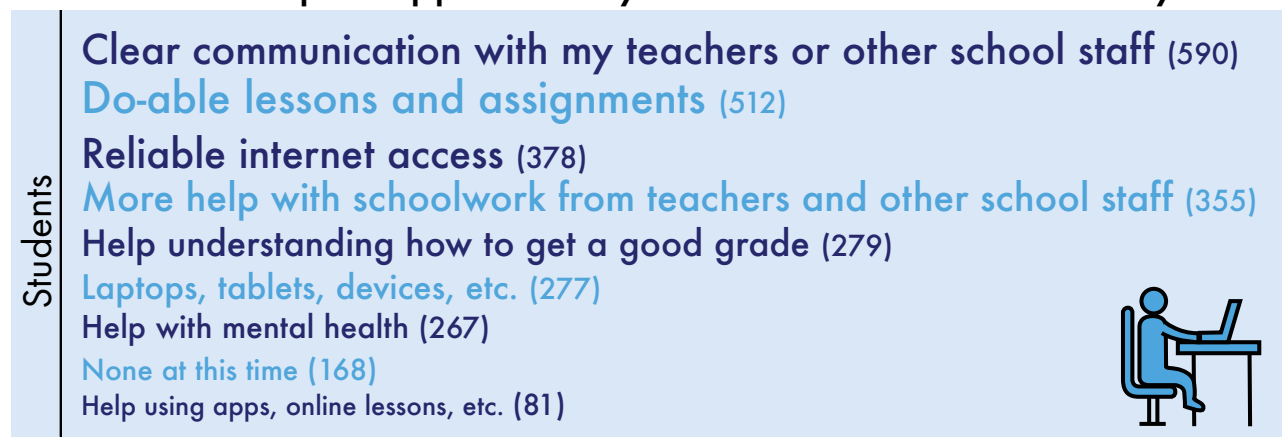


The most common supports families needed were **strategies to keep their student(s) engaged, academic support from teachers/school staff, and information about expectations for students.**

Students

Finally, students were asked to report on the top three things they needed in order to learn this school year. Over 1,100 students across grades 6 through 12 responded to this question and more than half reported needing *clear communication with my teachers or other school staff*. The second most common need was *do-able lessons and assignments* followed by *reliable internet access* and *more help with schoolwork from teachers and other school staff*. About a quarter of student respondents reported needing *help understanding how to get a good grade; laptops, tablets, devices, etc.*; and *help with mental health*. Few students reported needing *help using apps, online lessons, etc.* Over 160 students reported needing *no supports at this time*.

What are the top 3 supports that you need to learn this school year?



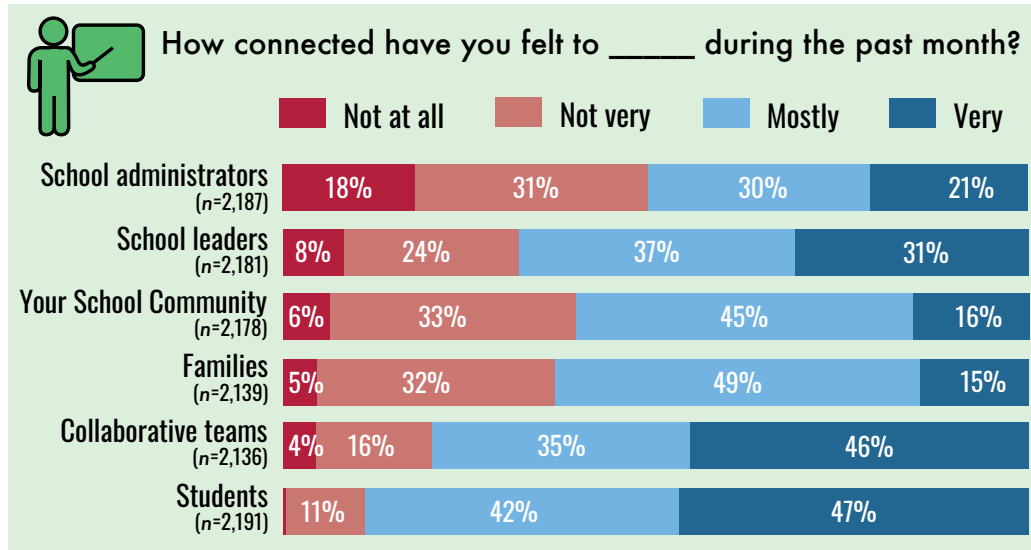
Clearer communication with my teachers or other school staff as well as **doable lessons and assignments** were the top needed supports reported by students.



Overall, educators, families, and students continue to need supports relating to engagement and communication.

Connectedness

All educators, families, and students were asked to rate how connected they felt to various individuals or entities relating to school. Connectedness reported by each respondent group varied by who or what they were being asked about.



Educators

Educators reported feeling most connected to their students (89% feeling *mostly* or *very connected*). Second to students, 81% of educators felt *mostly* or *very connected* to their collaborative teams (e.g., PLCs, departments, or grade level teams). Educators reported moderate connections to school leaders (68% *mostly* or *very connected*), families (64% *mostly* or *very connected*), and the school community (61% *mostly* or *very connected*). The lowest levels of connectedness were with school administrators (51% *mostly* or *very connected*, 49% *not very* or *not at all* connected).

Educators felt most connected with their **students**, followed by their **collaborative teams**.

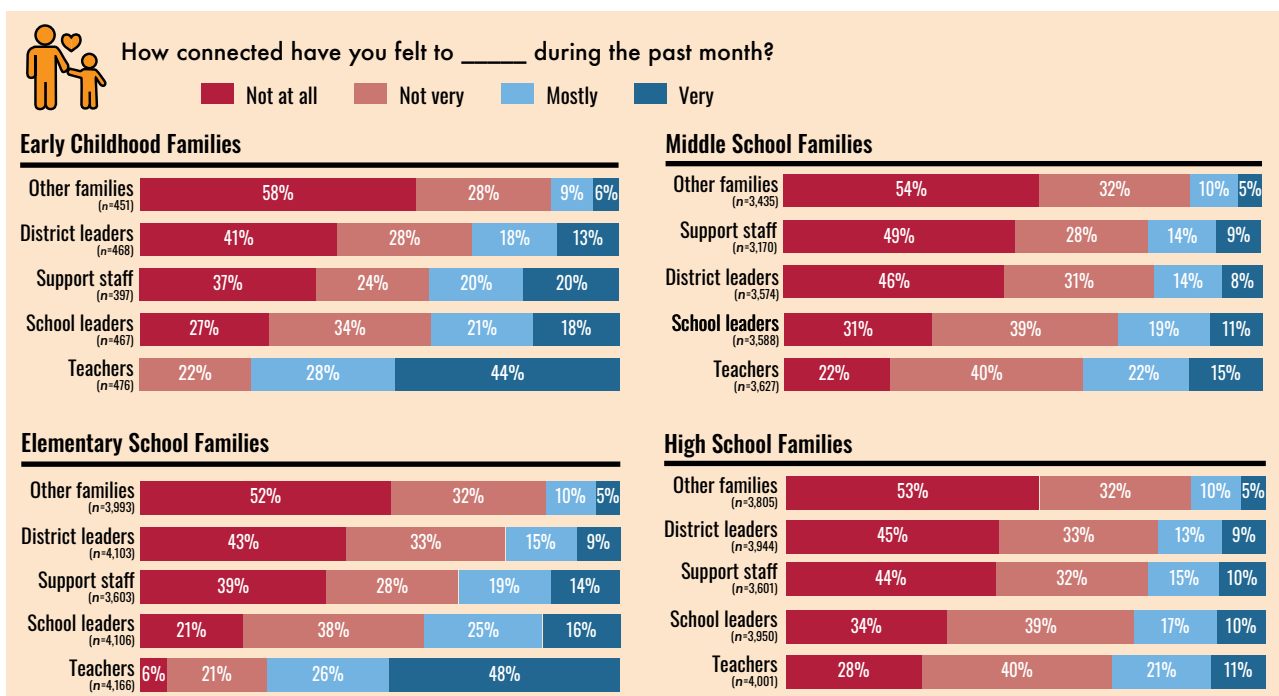
Families

Families at the early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school levels similarly reported lacking connectedness to other families, district leaders, support staff, and school leaders. Nearly 75% of families reported feeling *not at all* or *not very connected* to other families and 63–69% of families reported feeling *not at all* or *not very connected* to district leaders. Families also felt little connectedness to school support staff (50–72% *not at all* or *not very connected*) and school leaders (50–65% *not at all* or *not very connected*), particularly at the middle and high school levels.

Across grade levels, families differed in their connectedness to teachers. Specifically, families at lower grade levels felt more connected to their students' teachers than families at higher grade levels. Among the early childhood and elementary levels, about 80% of families reported feeling *mostly* or *very connected* to their students' teachers. However, among the middle and high school levels, only about 40% of families felt *mostly* or *very connected* to their students' teachers.

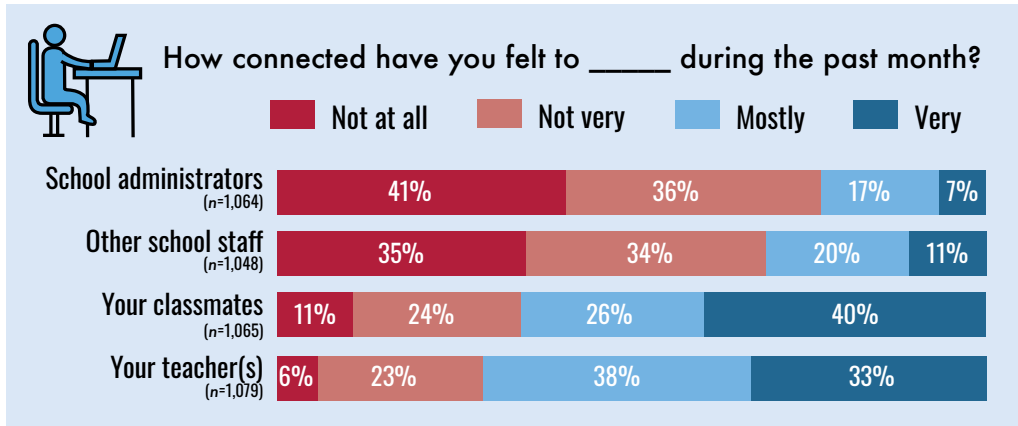
Nearly **75%** of families across grade levels felt **not at all** or **not very connected** to other families.

About twice as many **early childhood and elementary school families** felt **connected to their student(s)' teachers** compared to middle and high school families.



Students

Students in grades 6 through 12 felt most connected to their teachers (71% *mostly or very connected*), followed by their classmates (66% *mostly or very connected*). Few students reported feeling connected to other school staff (31% *mostly or very connected*) or school administrators (24% *mostly or very connected*).



Almost three-quarters of students felt mostly or very **connected to their teachers** and about two-thirds of students felt mostly or very **connected to their classmates**.

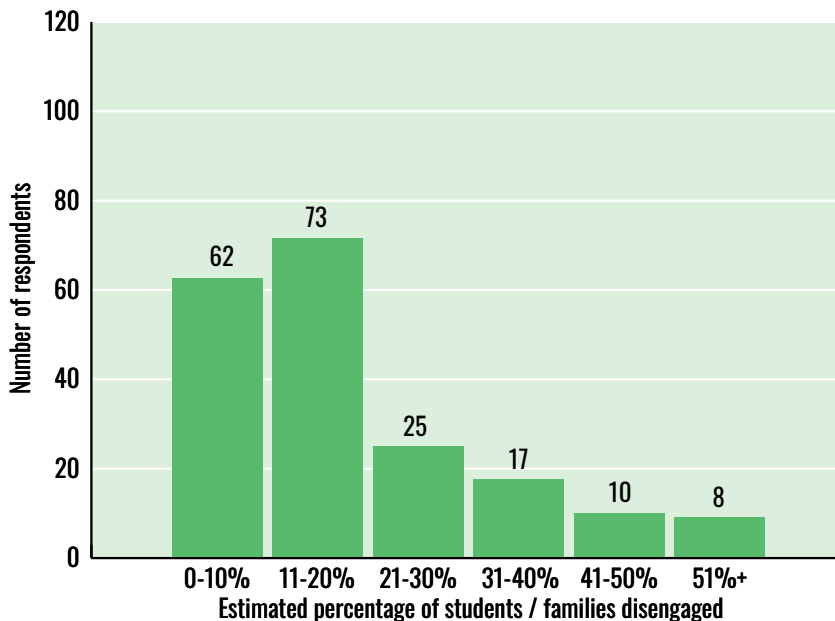
Communication

Percentage of students/families who have been disengaged

Administrators were asked to report the percentage of their students/families that have been disengaged from classes/school this school year. A total of 195 administrators responded to this question and the average percentage of students/families that these administrators perceived to be disengaged from classes/school this year was about 21%, with a standard deviation of 16% and a range from 2-100%. Most administrators ($n=135$) reported that 0-20% of students/families were disengaged and only 8 administrators reported that more than half (51-100%) of students/families were disengaged.



Administrators: What percentage of students/families in your school/district would you estimate has been disengaged from classes/school this school year?



As with the Winter 2021 Survey, most administrators reported that between **0% and 20%** of students/families were disengaged from classes/school.

Rate whether communication has met your needs

Administrators were asked *Have communications from these organizations met your needs?* with regards to communication from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), regional service cooperatives, their district, and professional organizations. Overall, the majority of administrators reported that communication from these entities met their needs. In particular, 84% agreed that communication from professional organizations met their needs and 79% agreed that communication from MDE met their needs. There was only slightly less agreement that communication from their district (73%), MDH (71%), and regional service cooperatives (69%) met their needs.



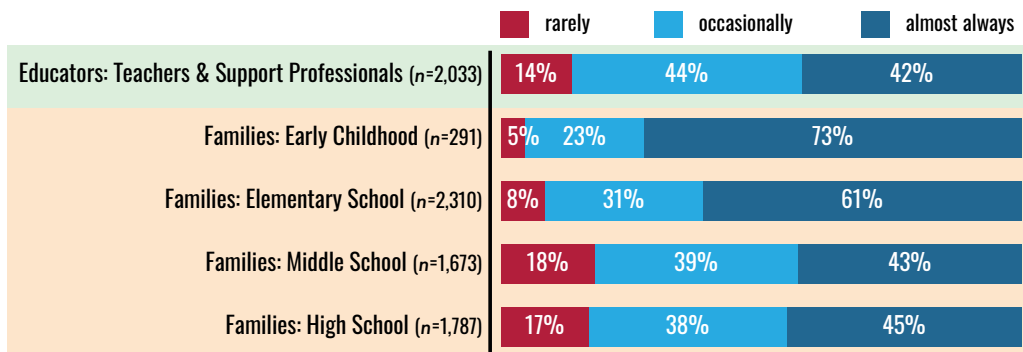
Administrators overwhelmingly agreed that communication from state agencies and local professional organizations generally met their needs.

Because responses were quite similar across communication topics asked about in the Winter 2021 Survey, the Spring 2021 Survey asked, overall, whether **teachers and support professionals** thought that communication from their district met their needs. Among teachers and support professionals, 42% agreed that their district’s communication almost always met their needs and 44% reported that their district’s communication occasionally met their needs. Only 14% thought communication from their district rarely met their needs.

42% of teachers and support staff agreed that communication from their district almost always met their needs.



To what extent has communication from your school or district met your needs this school year?



Families

Similar to teachers and support professionals, families largely reported similarities across types of communication asked about in the Winter 2021 Survey and, subsequently, were asked broadly whether communication from their district met their needs in the Spring 2021 Survey. Overall, families with younger students (early childhood or elementary) were more likely to agree that communication from their district met their needs than families with older students (middle or high school). Whereas 73% of families with early childhood students and 61% of families with elementary students agreed that communication almost always met their needs, 43% of families with middle school students and 45% of families with high school students agreed that communication almost always met their needs. Aligning with this trend, smaller percentages of families with early childhood or elementary students compared to middle or high school students thought communication occasionally or rarely met their needs.

Half to three-quarters of families with **early childhood or elementary school** students agreed that district communication *almost always* met their needs...

...however, less than half of families with **middle and high school** students agreed that district communication *almost always* met their needs.

Knowing what to do each day and seeking help

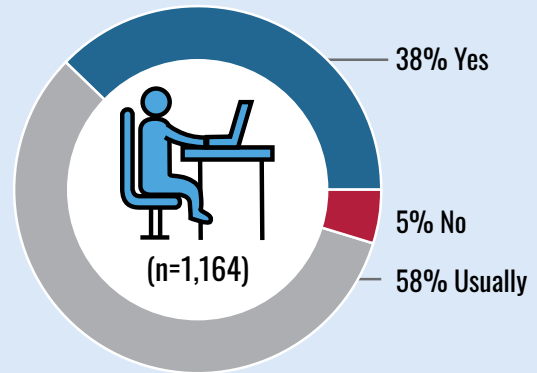
In relation to communication, **students** were asked if (a) they know what to do for school each day, (b) they know how to get help if they need it (e.g., help completing assignments, talking to a counselor), and (c) teachers and other school staff are available when they need help.

In terms of knowing what to do each day, 38% of students reported *yes*, they do know what to do, 5% reported *no*, and 58% reported *usually*.

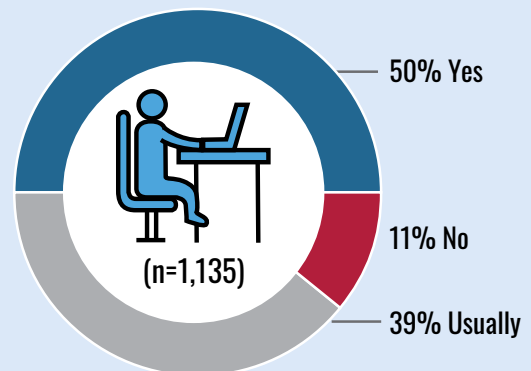
Fifty percent of students reported that they know how to get help if they need it, with only 11% reporting *no* and 39% reporting *usually*.

Finally, 36% of students selected that *yes*, teachers and other school staff are available when they need help, with 9% reporting *no* and 56% reporting *usually*.

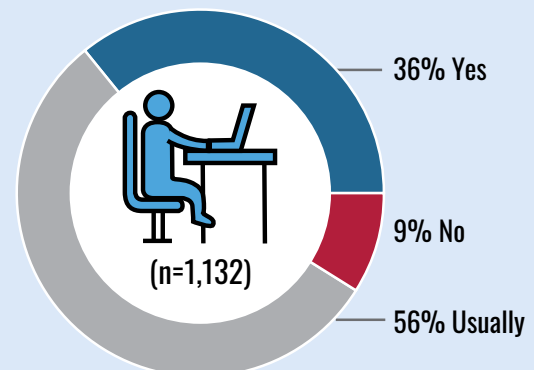
Do you know what you are supposed to do for school each day?



Do you know how to get help if you need it?



Are your teachers and other school staff available to you when you need help?



Moving Forward

Educators

Over 2,000 educators responded to the question, *What are your top concerns around schooling moving forward?* More than half of all educator respondents were concerned about the *mental health of students, mental health of staff, and student engagement. Widening achievement gaps, student social interactions/relationships, and students being behind academically* were the next most commonly selected options. Other concerns included *COVID-19 safety, racism/racial microaggressions, and access to extracurricular activities*. A total of 118 educators selected *other*, and were prompted to provide a brief open-ended response describing their concern(s) (described in a section below).



Educators: what are your top concerns around schooling moving forward?

- Mental health of students (1,376)
- Mental health of staff (1,354)
- Student engagement (1,151)
- Widening achievement gaps (1,043)
- Student social interactions/relationships (1,004)
- My student(s) being behind academically (968)
- COVID-19 safety (647)
- Racism / racial microaggressions (605)
- Access to extracurricular activities (337)
- Other (118)



Families

Over 4,000 families reported their *top concerns around schooling moving forward*. Families responded to this question for each age level their students represented (early childhood, elementary, middle school, and/or high school) and we summed the data across age levels, so counts in the figure below include some families' reports of concerns for more than one age group. Overall, families most frequently reported *concerns about student social interactions/relationships, students being behind academically, and the mental health of students*. *Student engagement, access to extracurricular activities, and mental health of staff* were the next most frequently selected concerns. Similar response trends were observed for each age level, with *social interactions/relationships, being behind academically, and mental health of students* ranking among the top three concerns for all age groups and student engagement ranking in fourth or fifth place. To a lesser extent, families overall and within each age group reported concerns about *widening achievement gaps, COVID-19 safety, and racism/racial microaggressions*. A total of 321 families selected other, and were prompted to provide a brief open-ended response describing their concern(s) (see below).



Families: what are your top concerns around schooling moving forward?

- Student social interactions/relationships (3,510)
- My student(s) being behind academically (3,273)**
- Mental health of students (3,217)
- Student engagement (2,795)**
- Access to extracurricular activities (1,954)
- Mental health of staff (1,671)**
- Widening achievement gaps (1,631)
- COVID-19 safety (1,279)**
- Racism/racial microaggressions (645)
- Other (454)**

Students

Over 1,000 students responded to the question, *What are your top concerns around schooling moving forward?* Students most frequently selected that they were concerned about *being behind academically, being engaged in my classes/schoolwork, my own mental health, and social interactions/relationships*. Other concerns included *access to extracurricular activities, COVID-19 safety, and racism/racial microaggressions*. A total of 124 students selected *other*, and were prompted to provide a brief open-ended response describing their concern(s) (see below).



Students: what are your top concerns around schooling moving forward?

- Being behind academically (576)
- Being engaged in my classes / schoolwork (492)
- My own mental health (486)
- Social interactions / relationships (478)
- Access to extracurricular activities (326)
- COVID-19 safety (288)
- Racism / racial microaggressions (161)
- Other (124)
- Racism/racial microaggressions (645)
- Other (454)

Social interactions and relationships

Respondents from any group who selected *social interactions/relationships* in response to the question about their concerns moving forward were also given this prompt: *You indicated that you are concerned about “social interactions/relationships.” Please select the response below that best represents your concern.* The most commonly selected response to this question by educators (65%) and students (43%) was *I am concerned I / my student(s) will have a difficult time readjusting to social interactions.* Educators’ and students’ second most common response was *none of these represent my concern* (18% and 40%, respectively), followed by *I am concerned I / my student(s) will not feel socially/emotionally safe at school* (12% and 14%, respectively), and *I am concerned I / my student(s) will experience racism at school* (5% and 3% respectively). Responses from families showed slightly different trends in that families from all age groups most frequently selected *none of these represent my concern* (ranging from 47–54% in each age group), followed by *I am concerned my student(s) will have a difficult time readjusting to social interactions* (33–39%), *I am concerned my student(s) will not feel socially/emotionally safe at school* (8–12%), and *I am concerned my student(s) will experience racism at school* (2–3%).

Other concerns

Respondents from any group who selected *other* in response to the question about their concerns moving forward were also given this prompt: *You indicated that you are concerned about “other.” Please specify your other concern(s) here.* Over 500 respondents (118 educators, 321 families, and 124 students) provided text responses to this question. These comments were coded into nine categories, which are presented below in alphabetical order. All of the individual comments are presented by respondent type in the [Data Supplement](#).

Academics

Respondents from all groups expressed concerns about students being behind academically, students receiving inadequate academic support, the lack of support for students with disabilities during the pandemic, and the amount or difficulty of students’ schoolwork. Only a few educators expressed concerns in this area, while a moderate number of families noted concerns about students struggling in school—both due to students not understanding or engaging in schoolwork and due to a lack of high-quality, rigorous schoolwork being provided to students. Additionally, many students voiced concerns about their grades, missing assignments, and whether they would pass their classes.



“With so much online learning time, it seemed [that the] pace was set for slowest students, leaving highest learners bored and not challenged, thus little learning and slacking off [took place].”



“[I’m] concerned about the material we were supposed to learn. I don’t feel like I learned so in the future I might not know how to do many things.”



"Many students [in] distance learning are going to be behind because they do not turn assignments in or engage in Google Classroom despite contacting them every day."

COVID-19 protocols

A large number of responses reflected concerns about COVID-19 protocols, with most comments indicating frustration that safety protocols, such as wearing masks and quarantining after exposure to COVID, were overly restrictive and potentially harmful to students’ wellbeing (especially their social interactions/relationships). A large majority of these responses came from families (with students of all ages), though educators and students also expressed concerns in this area. Some responses called for a full return to 5-day in-person instruction with no COVID-19 restrictions in place, while others reflected specific requests such as removing mask requirements or reducing the amount of time spent in quarantine. Additionally, a small number of responses reflected concern that COVID-19 safety protocols were not being followed (e.g., from a student: “The school isn’t enforcing the mask rule enough”) or that they were insufficient to keep students and educators safe while in school (e.g., from a family member: “I prefer my child is vaccinated for COVID before returning to in person learning”).



“A shorter quarantine period should be strongly considered for students exposed. 14 days is too long with negative COVID tests. Students suffer from being away from school this long.”

Educational systems

Educators, families, and students expressed concerns about educational systems as a whole, though families provided the majority of responses in this category. Families primarily indicated concerns about the impact of politics on education, including frustration with political leaders (e.g., Minnesota’s governor, Minnesota Department of Education), as well as concerns about curricula or lesson content that respondents considered overly political, biased, or divisive. Additionally, both educators and families



“I am concerned that our school system will return to 'normal' when normal didn't work for all students. I hope that [we can] reimagine education to serve all of our kids.”

expressed concerns related to who makes decisions and who should be making decisions that influence education (with many emphasizing a need for local control). Respondents also commented on systemic shifts in education, including concern that educational systems are shifting too much or not enough to meet students' academic and social-emotional needs.

Equity

Many respondents were concerned about topics related to equity, including comments about race, multiculturalism, gender, and people with disabilities. Respondents (primarily families) were largely concerned about topics like Critical Race Theory, antiracism, equity, white privilege, and gender identity being taught in schools. These respondents often spoke of “indoctrination,” “reverse racism,” or pushing “political agendas.” Other responses (especially from students) reflected concern about students being bullied or treated poorly due to their race, gender identity, or sexual identity.



“In my school [there are] major issues, such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, and other horrible issues. The school...has [not done] anything to try to fix it and is actually a very big problem. Do better.”



“We are not supporters of CRT and divisive identity politics being brought into school. Please carry on with MLK teachings, not the opposite.”

Learning format

Respondents from all groups and age levels reported similar concerns about learning format, with most emphasizing a strong desire to return to in-person schooling as much as possible (ideally five days per week). Similarly, some respondents reported a more general need to return to “normal” schooling, though a few noted that returning to the way school was done might mean losing some of the flexibility that was available over the past school year (e.g., less access to online materials when a student is out sick, or on snow days). Other respondents reported concerns about shifting to in-person learning, either because they preferred distance or hybrid learning or because they worried about students transitioning to a more traditional school schedule/format (e.g., from a student: “I got used to my at home schedule with working out and stuff so it’s gonna be a big change in schedule when I go back to full in person”).



“Students who learned exclusively online for 15 months will need to re-learn how to be in school (no mute button there!).”

School infrastructure

Educators and families reported concerns related to the way schools are run, including needed improvements regarding staffing, budget, class sizes, communication, staff workload, technology (either access to technology or worries about screen time), and access to extracurricular activities. Educators frequently expressed concerns about their workload and working conditions—many emphasized that the workload connected to teaching both online and in person was “unsustainable,” “unrealistic,” or “insurmountable.” Responses from all respondent groups also focused on a need for improved communication between administrators, educators, and families.



“The teacher workload pre-COVID was unmanageable and increasing for the years prior to the pandemic. This year [it] has increased exponentially. I don't know if I can keep doing this.”

Social and emotional wellbeing

Educators, families, and students each expressed concerns about social and emotional wellbeing, commenting on the mental health of both students and staff as well as student social interactions and relationships with other students and school staff. Many students reported worrying about bullying (either of themselves or others), friendships, and/or negative interactions and relationships with school staff. Educator and family responses in this category emphasized a need for schools to focus on supporting the mental health and social interactions for students, with several reporting a need to accomplish this through full-time in-person schooling.



“Need for more emphasis on mental health and well being—concerned [that] districts will have too strong of a focus solely on academics vs SEL.”

Student and family engagement

A small number of responses (primarily from educators) reflected concerns about students and families not engaging in learning. Some comments reflected the difficulty of contacting some families and students during distance/hybrid learning, while others focused on a greater need to hold students accountable for not showing up for class, not completing assignments, and/or cheating. Comments from families and students that fell under this category indicated concerns about students not caring or not being motivated to engage in schoolwork since the pandemic began.



“Recently I have shown an inability to focus on schoolwork and don't have the drive to complete it. I am worried that this will affect my education, especially when I go to in person school.”

Other

Respondents reported a wide range of other concerns that did not fit into any of the categories described above. These comments included concerns about school safety (e.g., drugs or weapons in schools, school shootings), the physical fitness of students as a result of the pandemic, general school cleanliness, school food being unhealthy or of low quality, childcare, and general frustration with school/district administrators.

Changes to schooling in the future

The following is a summary of the 1,250 individual responses provided by a sample of educators ($n=431$), families ($n=600$), and students ($n=219$) who were randomly selected to respond to the question: Reflecting on your experiences from the past year, what do you think needs to change about schooling in the future? These responses were coded into 11 categories, which are presented in alphabetical order. All of the individual comments are presented by respondent type in the [Data Supplement](#).

Academics

Respondents from all groups requested changes to address their concerns about students being behind academically and receiving poor quality instruction and support services this year.

- **Educators:** Educators primarily wanted more support for students to get “caught up” academically and for low-income and BIPOC students, in particular, to receive the high-quality learning opportunities that they are often denied. Some educators specifically voiced wanting changes that would allow for more differentiated instruction tailored to students’ unique needs.
- **Families:** Families perceived the overall quality of instruction and student services (e.g., IEP/504 services) this year to be low and thought homework did not help as it was either too much, too little, or poor quality busywork. As a result, families feared that their students’ learning and academic self-efficacy were negatively affected, and wanted more time spent on academics to help students learn as well as time spent on social-emotional supports to help students focus on learning.
- **Students:** Students largely focused on changes relating to homework. Specifically, students wanted a more manageable workload, clearer instructions and expectations around assignments, and more meaningful assignments that fostered deep learning. In addition, students wanted their teachers to be more supportive around mental health challenges, to better help students understand course material, and to make learning more fun. Students also wanted school support staff (e.g., counselors) to be more available for help.



“I think some of the material needs to be changed. In some classes, I seem to get busy work which is so frustrating because the workload never seems to go down. Right when I get down to the bottom, more things pop back up, keeping the pile alive.”

Appreciation

Although mentioned less frequently in comparison to other categories relating to changes moving forward, some respondents in each group (i.e., educators, families, and students) did write notes of appreciation for their district, school, and staff. Respondents were thankful for the hard work that everyone put into making school happen during this unprecedented time. As one educator wrote, and other respondents echoed, they felt their “district did the best it could under these circumstances.”



“Our administration, faculty, and staff did an amazing job of navigating a nearly impossible year. Our students’ safety and well being were at the heart of [every] decision they made.”

COVID-19 protocols

A significant number of responses reflected desired changes regarding COVID-19 safety measures. For example, respondents across all groups requested that protocols such as mask wearing, social distancing, and quarantining after exposure to COVID be eliminated because respondents believed that transmission of COVID among students was relatively low and that such protocols posed potential harm to students’ wellbeing.

- **Educators:** Wanting to prioritize schooling over safety protocols, many educators requested that masks, social distancing, and quarantining of healthy students and staff not be required next year. Teachers, specifically, disliked mask protocols because they felt “forced to become mask police,” subsequently straining teacher-student relationships. However, there were some educators who did want to prioritize safety—suggesting that unsafe practices, such as keeping COVID cases confidential, needed to be addressed. All in all, educators found it challenging to navigate these differing priorities.



“We have to do a better job of prioritizing what is most vital for our students. The emphasis on COVID mitigation statewide has come somewhat at the expense of every other aspect of student and school life. Distancing is the opposite of what all teachers strive to do with and for their students. We are in an industry where connection is recognized to be a vital component and that has been absolutely devastated through this past year in many areas.”



- **Families:** The majority of changes requested regarding COVID-19 protocols came from families, with most wanting to get rid of such protocols and instead return to full 5-day in-person instruction. Beliefs that distance learning fell short of the quality of instruction provided during in-person learning largely led families to request returning to “normal” in-person instruction. In addition, families wanted there to be no mask wearing and social distancing required because of concerns that such protocols limited important social interactions and opportunities to build relationships with peers and teachers. Although less prevalent, some families wanted COVID-19 safety protocols to stay in place to keep students safe, at least until all students had the opportunities to get vaccinated.
- **Students:** Students wanted COVID-19 protocols to be removed rather than remain in place. Generally, students preferred to not wear masks and felt that COVID-19 protocols made it harder to build relationships with peers.

Educational systems

In terms of changes moving forward, educators, families, and students also voiced frustrations and hopes with regards to systemic changes in education. These comments related to the role of government and politics in education, decision-making power, and common practices used in our educational systems (e.g., grading, tracking, one size fits all or industrial model of education).

- **Educators:** In terms of government and politics in education, educators voiced wanting to remove politics from school and feeling disappointed that the pandemic was handled politically. In addition, educators worried about extremes on both ends of the political spectrum making school more difficult. Educators advocated for more support navigating these tenuous situations and some requested more local control so that schools could make decisions that best fit their local context. At a district or school level, educators also requested that administrators listen to and value the input of staff as well as offer more flexibility to meet students’ and communities’ individual and cultural needs in innovative ways (e.g., opportunities for students to specialize or pursue different paths, allowing students to specialize in certain areas, multi-age groupings, focus on social-emotional learning and mental health, and alternative school schedules).



“Autonomy needs to be preserved for individual schools and districts to make decisions that are best for their students and community.”

- **Families:** Families, more frequently than any other respondent group, expressed the need for politics to stay out of the classroom and school curriculum. The teacher’s union was regarded as “too powerful” by some and other families criticized the way Governor Walz and the Minnesota Departments of Education and Health handled the COVID-19 pandemic, with the primary critique being that too much control was taken from local leaders and stakeholders. Families also voiced wanting changes

that allowed more flexibility for schools to be innovative and provide alternatives for students with varying needs and home resources. For example, some would like students to have opportunities to explore their interests rather than focusing primarily on testing.

- **Students:** Only a few students addressed educational systems in their response to the question about changes moving forward. These students criticized the Governor Walz and Minnesota Department of Education for their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, wanted to see more informed decision-making responsive to their district, and requested more opportunities to express their thoughts and influence decision-making.

Equity

Respondents described a need for changes to schooling related to equity, including issues related to race, multiculturalism, gender/sexual identity, and people with disabilities. Responses that fell in this category were primarily about race/racism and came mostly from families, though educators and students also reported needed changes to race and other equity-related issues in schools.

- **Educators:** Most educators' responses focused on a need to improve schools' efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion of minoritized students in schools, including implementing culturally responsive/antiracist approaches to teaching and examining systemic racism. In contrast, some educators reported that they did not agree with the movement to address "biased" topics such as antiracism, white supremacy, or gender identity in schools and wished to see these efforts stopped.
- **Families:** Most families' responses expressed frustration that topics and frameworks such as antiracism, Critical Race Theory, and gender/sexual identity were being taught in schools without their knowledge or permission. In contrast, some families reported that they were concerned about "opportunity gaps for children of color," the lack of diversity training for educators, "systemic racism and classism" in schools, and concerns that some students do not feel safe in schools due to their race, ethnicity, or gender identity.
- **Students:** A few students provided responses related to equity, with most reporting that they would like schools to be a "more inclusive environment" where marginalized students could feel safe and accepted. Alternatively, some students stated that topics such as antiracism and white supremacy should not be taught in schools.



"[We need a] more inclusive environment, to the LGBTQIA+ community, to BIPOC people, to disabled or mentally ill people, and not just recognition or kindness, but education and making changes and adjustments to the environment of learning to make it a better place."

Learning format

Many educators, families, and students reported that something needs to change regarding learning format (in-person, distance, and/or hybrid learning) when schooling continues in the fall of 2021 and into the future. Responses from each group largely focused on a desire to return to in-person learning as much as possible. However, respondents also expressed a variety of more nuanced opinions about learning format, as described below.

- **Educators:** Many educators were frustrated with hybrid learning in that when they were expected to teach students online and in person at the same time, their workloads were unmanageable and either students at home or those at school were neglected as it was too challenging to focus on both groups. Several of these educators reported that they were not opposed to distance learning for some students, but that these students should have teachers who focus solely on distance learners rather than expecting educators to teach both groups simultaneously. Educators also emphasized a need for schools and districts to become more flexible in how they deliver instruction, given that some students and families found that they preferred distance learning and that schools may encounter additional situations in which online learning is necessary (e.g., snow days, additional pandemics, natural disasters, students with medical needs). As such, some educators reported a need for districts and schools to prepare for distance learning through supplying adequate technology and investing in staffing and infrastructure to support distance learning.
- **Families:** In addition to reporting a need for in-person learning, families also expressed varying opinions about hybrid and distance learning. Some families enjoyed having students in school four days per week with one day at home so that students could get extra support from teachers on the “flex” day, while others reported that nothing got done on flex days when students were at home. Some families also stated that distance learning worked well for their student(s), so they would like the option to continue, while others reported that their students did not get enough support as online learners.



“I believe the focus needs to be on in-person learning. I believe every kid learns better and teachers and can better assess the needs of their students when they see and interact with them daily. Students can access help and understand lessons better when they can ask questions and see/interact with the teachers and their peers.”



“My daughter who is academically able has had no issues and enjoys hybrid learning. She is relieved by the reduced class sizes and lessened distractions the larger groups create.”

- **Students:** Similar to families, many students expressed a desire to attend school in person, though a small number reported that they enjoyed the flexibility and opportunities for additional support that hybrid or distance learning formats provided. Regarding hybrid/distance learning formats, students also shared specific requests for how these could be changed if they are used in the future, including increasing coordination between teachers so that students are not given too many assignments at the same time across their classes, providing an “end of class recap of what we did today, what is due tomorrow and such” for online students, and providing opportunities for online students to occasionally meet their teacher(s) in person. Lastly, some students reported that schools should continue to be flexible and offer distance learning to those who want it, or to provide students with access to some form of online learning when they miss school due to illness or weather.



“I think that in the future, schooling needs to be more flexible to students' needs. This year, students who felt safer could stay at home and still learn the material, though it was not always to the same degree. In the future, students who need to take a day at home for their mental or physical health, or due to some other circumstance such as the weather, should have the same opportunity to experience the classroom learning that students who wanted to learn at home had this year.”

Programming

Some educators, families, and students responded to this question with requests for schools to implement specific curricula or approaches to instruction/learning. Respondents reported a wide variety of programming requests, though some themes arose including calls for more hands-on learning, project-based learning, interactive lessons, social-emotional learning, STEM education, and lessons/classes that build technical and trades-based skills. There was also a general theme of a need to shift away from technology-based learning to learning that could happen on paper, outdoors, on field trips, or in the community. Other ideas that respondents suggested included: more art/music education, more exercise/movement, more gifted and talented options, a focus on 21st century skills, better online curricula, job fairs/opportunities to learn about careers, an increased focus on equity, and more whole-school activities such as dances or competitions. Also included in this category were responses that mentioned a need for increased access to or options for after-school or extracurricular activities.



“I really hope there is a huge focus on social emotional learning before tackling learning loss next year.”

School infrastructure

Many educators and families as well as a few students reported that they would like to see changes to some of the basics of how schools are funded, staffed, and generally run in the future. These responses focused largely on a need to provide adequate funding and staffing to schools so that educators can have a reduced workload and meet the needs of all students (e.g., through lower class sizes and increased access to staff who can offer academic and social-emotional support to students). Responses also indicated that people would like to see improvements made to communication between schools/districts and families, changes to how technology is used (e.g., improved access to technology, a call for reduced screen time), and a reduced focus on standardized testing.



“During the time of the pandemic, it became more evident that schools provide more than academic instruction for students. As educators, we are expected to provide high academic rigor, social/emotional support, child care, parent education, technology support, etc. I don't think society in general realizes how much we do day to day and week to week to support the children and families in this state. A regular classroom teacher can't keep carrying this burden on his/her own shoulders.”

- **Educators:** Many educators reported that they would like to see increased funding, improved staffing (with some mentioning a need for an increase in specific roles, such as educational assistants, interventionists, counselors, nurses, and media specialists), and lower class sizes in schools. Many spoke about their workload over the past school year and emphasized that it had taken a significant toll on their mental health. Other topics educators reported included a need for society to value and respect teachers more, a call to reevaluate the state standards, a need for more funding to support “full-service community schools,” and improvements to the professional development offered to educators.



“The students did a lot better during hybrid. The classes were smaller and each student got more attention. We need smaller class sizes.”

- **Families:** Some families reported a need for change to school infrastructure, with most comments focusing on providing more funding to schools in order to reduce class sizes and provide more individualized supports for students. Families also discussed a need to change how scheduling is done (e.g., shifting to block scheduling, liking or not liking

the “flex” days when students can get support). Families also emphasized a need for clearer and more regular communication about expectations for what students are supposed to do (especially during distance learning) and how they are doing in school.



“Good teachers are fleeing the field due to the unmanageable workload, low pay, and exploitative work culture. Our system is in a crisis and major changes need to be made.”

- **Students:** A few students commented on a need for changes to how schools are run. Students’ comments included comments about a need for more school staff and funding, a range of opinions about schedules (e.g., liking or not liking block scheduling, wanting more time for lunch or recess, wanting different start times), and several comments about a desire for more or improved communication from their teacher(s).

Social and emotional wellbeing

Educators, families, and students reported a need to support the mental health of students and educators and to attend to the importance of student social interactions and relationships. Across all groups, the biggest focus for these comments was a need to support the mental health of students after such a challenging school year.

- **Educators:** Educators primarily reported concerns about student mental health and made statements about a need to prioritize supporting mental health and building positive relationships with students when school resumes in the fall of 2021. Educators also mentioned concerns about stress and their own mental health due to high workloads.



“There needs to be more awareness of students’ social and emotional needs. This can only be accomplished through the addition of trained support staff. It is hard to deliver curriculum while supporting emotional needs of students.”

- **Families:** Families also expressed significant concerns about their students’ mental health and feelings of isolation during distance/hybrid learning. They frequently commented on a need to return to in-person schooling to support their students’ mental health and relationships with peers.
- **Students:** Students reported experiencing significant stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, low motivation, and feelings of isolation over the past year and a half. Students stated that they need schools to focus much more on mental health in the future, with several students stating that during the past school year the schools focused too much on academics and that it was very difficult for them to access supports for their mental

health. These students often made statements about how educators need to “get better at understanding mental and physical limitations of students” and prompted educators to “think of our lives outside the classroom.” Additionally, several students reported that there is bullying that occurs at their schools that goes unnoticed or unaddressed by staff.



“Teachers need to understand that students are stressed too ... It takes so much to even get up in the morning and the assignments are overflowing. It’s just a lot and it’s very stressful. My mental health is not okay.”

Student and family engagement

Educators and families (as well as a small number of students) commented on a need for improvements to student and family engagement in school, especially if schooling needs to be online again in the future.

- **Educators:** Several educators reported that they would like to see a change in the extent to which students are engaged in learning (especially if this occurs online) and the extent to which families are engaged in supporting their students’ education. Several educators noted that they would like to learn more about effective ways to engage families, especially during distance learning.
- **Families:** Some families reported that distance learning lessons were often not engaging to students and sometimes seemed more like “busywork” than meaningful assignments. However, they also noted that their students had become more engaged as soon as in-person learning began.
- **Students:** The few students who commented on engagement requested that teachers provide more engaging content and put more effort into contacting families when distance or hybrid learning is occurring.

Other

Respondents reported a wide range of other changes to schooling they would like to see that did not fit into any of the categories described above. These comments included requests for improvements to school buildings (e.g., cleaning, ventilation systems), school food, school safety (e.g., school shootings, drug use), school–community collaboration, and general statements about a need to stay flexible and incorporate what was learned about schooling as a result of the pandemic.



“We need to recognize that the pandemic forced us to do things differently and many of those things worked well. We need to question the ‘ways things have always been done.’ We need to find ways to build in and continue the flexibility that was required of us.”

Closing Thoughts

As educators, students, and families across Minnesota navigated a school year like none other in 2020–2021, our ongoing collection and analyses of their experiences illustrate that their perceptions remained fairly consistent across the academic year. While the overall response rate for this administration of the survey was about half of that in the February survey, respondent groups (educators, families, and students) were similarly represented in both distributions. [The first Safe Learning Survey conducted in February of 2021](#) also had very similar key findings to this survey conducted at the end of the 2020–2021 school year.

On the positive side, responses to this survey reflect that educators, families, and students continue to believe that learning is taking place, even if it is not at the same level as pre-COVID. Potentially most concerning among the findings is that the concerns for mental health of both students and staff also remain an overwhelming conclusion in this iteration of the survey as it was in the Winter 2021 Survey findings. There are some mixed feelings among respondents surrounding engagement. While engaging students was reported as both a success and a challenge, the qualitative data analysis seems to point to the notion that surface level engagement is present, though that may not be leading to the deeper learning we know educators are working so hard to ensure.

This survey offered insights into how educators, students and families feel schooling should be moving forward. They commented on a wide range of issues including school structures and formats, academics and social and emotional well being, COVID-19, and equity and engagement, to name a few. Overall, educators, families, and students all focused their comments on a desire to return to in-person schooling as much as possible. Educators also discussed school infrastructure needs, including a more manageable workload and more funding, staffing, and resources, while families emphasized wanting reduced or eliminated COVID-19 restrictions, such as no requirement to wear masks due to concerns about their interference in students' socialization. Students generally desired changes that would help them feel less stressed and worry less about their grades, including a more manageable workload and more meaningful assignments.

With two data sets from these two distributions of the survey, additional analyses are now being done around race and geographic location for a number of the questions in the survey. A supplemental report on those analyses will be available in the early fall.

We sincerely thank the educators, families, and students who took the time to complete the survey. The information you shared will be used to directly inform leaders' decisions about supports needed in education across the state.

The Minnesota Safe Learning Survey will be distributed one more time in October 2021 in order to try and ascertain what can be learned from this unprecedented time. We hope all of Minnesota's educational leaders will help in distributing subsequent surveys to educators, families, and students in their district or school.

District and charter school reports for each data collection period are available to superintendents or charter leaders upon request.

Authors & Collaborators

Authors

Laura Potter, PhD
Research Associate, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement

Alyssa Parr, PhD
Research Associate, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement

Katie Pekar, EdD
Principal in Residence, Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development

Kim Gibbons, PhD
Co-Director, Wisconsin-Minnesota Comprehensive Center
Director, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement

Joe Schantz
Graduate Research Assistant, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement

Alex Evenson, MA
Communications and Marketing Manager, Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development

Collaborators

Heather Muller, EdD, Minnesota Commissioner of Education

Wendy Hatch, Chief of Staff and Assistant Commissioner, Office of External Relations, MN Department of Education

Denise Specht, President, Education Minnesota

Deborah Henton, Ed.D., Executive Director, Minnesota Association of School Administrators

Jon Millerhagen, Executive Director of Minnesota Elementary Principals Association

Kirk Schneidawind, Executive Director of the Minnesota School Boards Association

This report is available in alternative formats upon request:
contact CAREI@umn.edu



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