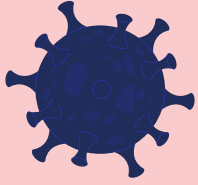


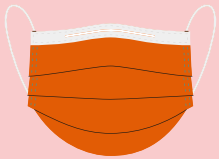
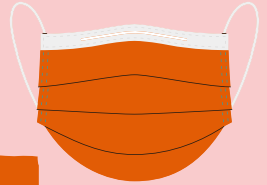


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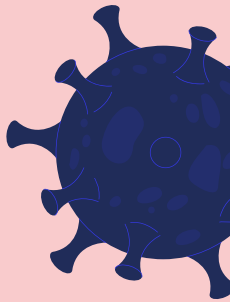
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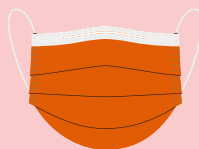
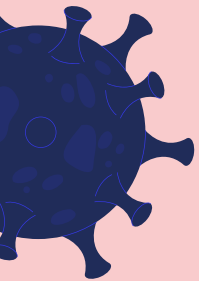
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IN KENTUCKY



A Call to Action for Post-Online Learning

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INTRODUCTION

This report is organized into the following sections:

First, we briefly introduce the purpose and rationale for the study, speaking to why student testimonies taken from across Kentucky hold incredible insight for how learning environments should be designed in the post-online learning era. Next, we speak to the methods that informed our data collection and analysis. The substance of the report highlights the central findings from our analysis, which we present vis-a-vis “themes” and “sub-themes.” Each theme includes a short description of the theme and illustrative quotes. Then, we share recommendations for educational practice based on our analysis of data, as well as our reflections as researchers. These collective reflections, based on our own experiences as student researchers, serve to close out the report as a reminder of the power and potential of integrating students as partners in education research more broadly.

Report Authors:

Spandana Pavuluri, Sofie Farmer, Esha Bajwa, Avery Lenihan, Cadence Brown, Francis Musoni and the Kentucky Student Voice Team

Adult Allies:

Dr. Daniela DiGiacomo and Dr. Beth Goldstein of the University of Kentucky

Methodology:

This study is the second part of a larger Kentucky Student Voice Team led study into learning during the time of COVID, begun in the Spring of 2020.

To date, this collaborative study has included a state-wide survey and more recently, two rounds of peer-to-peer interviews. In the first round of Coping with COVID Interviews, 32 peer-to-peer interviews were conducted during Fall of 2021. These interviews took place over Zoom, and participants were paid for their participation.

In the second round of interviews, an additional 18 peer-to-peer interviews were conducted. In both sets of interviews, interview questions asked students their perspectives on their current school situations, the status of their socio-emotional well-being, and experiences during remote, hybrid, and back to in-person learning. The interview analysis team was comprised Kentucky Student Voice team members, as well as adult allies from the University of Kentucky. The work of the analysis team was to review the interview data in its entirety, searching for emergent themes and patterns. The current report highlights these themes from the second set of peer-to-peer interviews, as well as KSVT researcher reflections on the process of doing the research itself.

OUR REASON FOR RESEARCH

OUR PURPOSE

This report is based on data from the second phase of the Kentucky Student Voice Team's Coping with Covid Study. Its purpose is to highlight findings with the intention of continuing to ensure that student voices, experiences, and perspectives are heard and valued as school-based decisions are made that impact students' learning lives. In this report, dozens of student testimonies will be shared. Student testimonies hold insight into how they learn, including their experiences, challenges, and perspectives on school, curriculum, and teaching. Such insights matter for students' educational experiences inside and outside of a pandemic.

The shifts and struggles students have experienced will continue to have effects long after the pandemic ends, as exemplified by responses throughout these interviews. The COVID pandemic has shifted the way that the world – including schooling– works, with a greater frequency and prevalence of hybrid or online learning. In what follows, readers will hear explicitly about what works in the context of online schooling and what may no longer work in the context of in-person schooling.

Taken together, this work sheds insight into contemporary questions of best practices for teaching and learning in Kentucky in 2022 and beyond. Our team, consisting of six student researchers and two adult allies affiliated with the University of Kentucky, recognizes that students continue to have a story to tell regarding their education and the effect the pandemic continues to have on it. As a student voice team, we are firm believers that this type of data is a testament to the power students and adults together can play in leading research, practice, and policy in education.

50%
INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO WANTED BUT LACKED ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.*

*From the first round of data collection as part of our broad Coping with Covid-19 study, beginning in May 2020.

OUR MAIN FINDINGS

1

Students' reactions to online schooling was varied but skewed heavily negative

While students' reactions to online schooling varied, most skewed heavily negative. Few options were given for alternate learning, leaving students with little access to technology or preferences for alternative learning methods feeling left behind. Many interactive aspects of the classroom were seldom offered such as group work and one-on-ones with teachers.

2

Most students saw a need for more consistent and collaborative decision-making by school administrators

Students expressed an almost universal frustration with decisions made by administration with regard to how academics, social emotional well-being, and COVID health protocols were handled. Students voiced how difficult it had been to reach out to administrators, which unfortunately resulted in them feeling like their concerns were of less importance.

3

Students' mental health needs and lack of school and home boundaries impacted both their well-being and their schooling

The fact that the COVID pandemic had an impact on people's mental health and well-being is increasingly well documented. Young people's mental health was also impacted in negative ways. Less known at the current moment, however, are the longer-term impacts of such a drastic change in how students managed and dealt with the severe shift in their everyday schooling as a function of COVID induced changes.

4

Sudden loss of social connections with peers and with supportive teachers greatly impacted student learning

Many students communicated that social connection and interactions made a significant difference for their capacity and enjoyment of learning. Going from an in-person environment to an almost completely isolated virtual format, students experienced shock and grief at the loss of the social aspects of learning that are integral parts of the student experience.

1.

Finding from
interviews

Students' reactions to online
schooling was varied but skewed
heavily negative



FINDING 1: Students' reactions to online schooling was varied but skewed heavily negative

There were a variety of student reactions to online learning though they were most often negative. Students reported feeling like their choices for how to learn were limited, and watching videos and/or reading was the only way they were asked to learn the material. Many interactive aspects of the classroom were seldom offered such as group work and one-on-ones with teachers. The result, according to many students we interviewed, was students left in learning environments that were isolating and reported to hinder their learning. Here are three illustrative student quotes from the data that substantiate finding number one.

”

Give them options. That's what I would have liked last year, that's what I would have liked this year, and that's what I would have liked or will like for every year that we're dealing with something like this.”

”

So they said it's going to be like normal school, like the normal participation, the normal questioning, like warmups and just activities that you do, like group activities. And then in reality it wasn't really any of that. It was more of like a lecture and there wasn't any requirements for the cameras on, which I get. But it also, I felt like it created a barrier.”

”

I just needed some better instruction because watching a video, you don't learn anything. You're like... I can sit here and I can watch a video three times and I'd still be like, 'What did I watch?' Because it's different when they're talking at a screen because you lose that sense of personality.”





Schools attempted to adjust to changing health conditions by switching between in-person, hybrid and virtual learning. However, due to rapidly changing conditions, schools changed formats at rates that were difficult to maintain for students, families and teachers. This on-and-off approach left students disoriented and less enthusiastic about their learning. Without enthusiasm and a lack of accountability or structure, some students simply stopped showing up to class. This severely impacted student learning and success.

”

It was just this constant flip flop. It was tough. It was tough because one or two months this way, the other months you went another way, you can never really get a grasp on things.”

”

NTI... I know it hasn't affected me really bad because I took the responsibility to go to the online lectures, but I know so many people who didn't and they just had no clue what's going on [...] And they're completely lost, a good example, my friend who took biology sophomore year. He took it during COVID so he got just the tiniest bit of biology and now he's in anatomy and physiology and he's just completely lost.”

Meanwhile, other students felt that the pace of learning was too slow. The lack of cohesion and consistency within the learning environment during periods of online schooling negatively affected students' confidence in their schools and their performance in the classroom. This, along with the lack of alternative options, led to slower paced classes with fewer students in attendance.

2.

Finding from
interviews

Most students saw a need for more
consistent and collaborative decision-
making by school administrators



FINDING 2: Most students saw a need for more consistent and collaborative decision-making by school administrators

Students expressed an almost universal frustration with decisions made by administration with regard to how academics, social emotional well-being and COVID health protocols were handled. Students voiced how difficult it had been to reach out to administrators, which unfortunately resulted in them feeling like their concerns were of less importance. Students overwhelmingly desired opportunities to help shape decision making and voice concerns about decisions made that directly impacted their learning and well-being.

”

[A few of my friends and some of the other seniors...] tried to email him, the principal, several times to set up a meeting and he did not respond to any of our emails. We had to go track him down and find him. And we were like, ‘All right, we have to talk to you about some of these things.’ He was kind of just kind of like, ‘Uh huh. Uh huh. Yeah, okay.’ We emailed him one time about Confederate flag things in the hallway and he responded to that. But the response was kind of like a generic, automated response.”

As students were learning to adapt to their school environment during the COVID era, they naturally turned to the adults who have the power to shape their local educational policy when issues arose in their schools. But they got mixed signals.

”

Our superintendent made this very convoluted speech about how we need to wear masks, but they're not going to enforce it... But then our high school principal told everyone they had to wear a mask. So there's this feud between our principal and the superintendent. It was just very messy and everyone chose sides and it affected our education.”

”

I think they should have made it much more enforced with the mask mandates, because I didn't have one day where I saw every single person that I saw in a day have their mask on correctly and teachers wouldn't get onto them and it was just really hard. It shouldn't be my responsibility as a student to tell other students, ‘Hey, put your mask on.’”

When discussing the immediate impacts of administrations’ decisions in schools, students indicated that the limitations imposed by policies lacked the cultural competency and awareness necessary to accommodate for the diverse needs of any student body. As the future of school policy within the context of COVID and life after COVID continues to emerge, students communicated their desire for significant refinement to decision-making process that should not only involve the productive collaboration of administrators, teachers and parents but also the most important stakeholder in this issue: students.

3.

Finding from
interviews

Students' mental health needs and lack of school and home boundaries impacted both their well-being and their schooling



FINDING 3: Students' mental health needs and lack of school and home boundaries impacted both their well-being and their schooling

The fact that the COVID pandemic had an impact on people's mental health and well-being is increasingly well documented. Young people's mental health was also impacted in negative ways. Analysis of data from this second round of interviews suggested that the increased mental health burden and lack of boundaries between school/home during the pandemic may have lasting effects on students' well-being and ideas about schooling. Behavioral responses to the re-organization of time mediated students' sense of balance and well-being, impacting their mental health situations. For some students, the biggest mental health challenges of their lives came during remote learning. Here are three illustrative student quotes from the data that substantiate finding number three.

”

So it was the spring semester of my sophomore year and my friend and I, she's one of my two best friends. We are close. She was really struggling with COVID....she basically just shut down. And she was a good student. She put in the work to be a good student, but just being at home every single day, just completely made her shut down. I don't know how she passed that grade, honestly. And that was a completely different student than what I had seen just months earlier.”

”

And so school was the only thing that I had, I guess, that I could control, that's a better word for it. And so I would spend just hours at a time without going to the restroom or eating or anything, just working on schoolwork. And it was really unhealthy. And so that wasn't necessarily just because of COVID. But I think it definitely did enable me to feed into those bad habits a lot more.”

Meanwhile, other students, like the one noted just above, reported clinging onto the only structure they had in their day: school. This led to unhealthy habits fostered by a lack of other stimulating activities. This situation was made worse by increased time flexibility for some students of being at home, as well as the lag extra time that it takes teachers to provide students feedback online. This lack of physical presence made it easier for many students to disengage from learning and struggle with their understanding. Lastly, because school convened from home for an extended period of time, several students struggled to maintain a balance between their home and school lives. Recognizing the structure that on-site school scheduling requires, students named how education in the pandemic became a bit of “a blur.”

Along with the typical challenges of navigating through high school, students described how the pandemic particularly exacerbated their struggles with maintaining motivation for their schooling endeavors. The very nature of remote learning lacked the adequate structure that is crucial for students to have a proper balance between school and home life. Due to this, many students struggled to sustain their ability to focus and to perceive school in a serious light. Additionally, students described struggling to meet both internal and external expectations further contributing to a loss of motivation and feelings of hopelessness. Overall, for many students in our sample, the pandemic made maintaining motivation increasingly difficult whether it was because learning felt less meaningful to them, or the sheer difficulty of having to maintain such a strong work ethic in such an uncertain time.

”

There were times during NTI and during bad times of COVID where I literally didn't leave my house for a week or so. And it would just be so hard to get up, do school. I never turned anything late. It was always before the due date. I was proud of myself. I know that sounded like it's the bare minimum, but I'm proud of myself, I guess, for the bare minimum.”

As a way to overcome motivation struggles, some students stated how support from loved ones, goal setting and recognizing accomplishments were crucial coping mechanisms for online school.

”

In terms of support, I would say my friends and family, because they really care about you, and they want you to do your best. And also having goals really helped me get through it because it's like, oh, so I want to do this career, or I want to do this in life or even these dreams that might not seem achievable. It's like, if I can get through this, I can get through that.”

Whether the pandemic was the inciting event or merely an amplifier, its effects on mental health for students were devastating and deserve to be studied for years to come.

4.

Finding from
interviews

Sudden loss of social connections with
peers and with supportive teachers
greatly impacted student learning



FINDING 4: Sudden loss of social connections with peers and with supportive teachers greatly impacted student learning

Many students communicated that the decreased opportunities for social connection and interactions made a significant difference in their capacity and enjoyment for learning. Going from an in-person environment to an almost completely isolated virtual format, students experienced shock and grief at the loss of the social aspects of learning that are integral parts for the experience of students. From the jovial chit-chat within collaborative projects, to the importance of in-the-moment feedback on their work from peers, there are many ways in which students talked about how important the social aspect of school was for their learning.

”

But in the meantime, it's those small moments, those memories, that laugh, that joke, that little small project that you had with your classmates, that class project that we had, that is what makes school meaningful and important right now. It's those moments. It's those moments that make school what it is. It always has been.”

”

I think it's actually like seeing other people's work and everything, or collaborating with your peers, not in the way where it's like you're working together on a project, but having their input on stuff or just that support. And I feel like that changed, that was a missing part of the education.”

Other students discussed how the loss of important milestone events and moments made it increasingly difficult during the pandemic. Whether it be football games, prom, or graduations, students recognized they weren't getting the high school experience they once envisioned.

Despite the quite common struggle to survive online schooling during a pandemic, many students cited the individual efforts made by teachers to be a crucial factor in their ability to cope with the situation.

”

My teachers, a lot of them were really understanding of the situation. I like to say I love teachers that are human, where they're not like a teacher and then there's teacher and student. They're people just like you, they know what you're going through. They're acknowledging that they know what you're going through.”



Students noted that a sense of empathy from their teachers often made a significant impact on them, and ultimately helped them to foster connection, even across digital platforms. Feelings of isolation were eased when teachers themselves acknowledged the pandemic and the difficulties it brought. Many students outlined the importance of teachers in their life and students' feelings of empathy towards their teachers.

”

She would pop into our individual breakout rooms and check up on us. And that really made me feel like, a teacher, when they care about you, it really changes how you work and everything. And when she would like pop in, like we could, she would ask us questions-- teachers really cared for us enough to reach out and be like, 'Hey, I see this is happening. Could you support them a little bit extra?' That just meant a lot to me because it showed that teachers really cared about you.”

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Prioritize student mental health by adapting workload and class structure, and advocate for better awareness and access to mental health counselors

- Consider adding in student mental health days
- Carry out mental health check in surveys with students
- Integrate mindfulness/meditation/relaxation opportunities in school

Allow for more transparency in understanding material and provide additional support for students

- Review material that was not covered adequately over remote setting
- Adapt and include different methods if all students are underperforming
- Integrate peer tutoring and student-to-student support systems

Demonstrate care for students' vast and varied circumstances

- Be cognizant of equity differences
- Humanize the struggles during and after COVID

Consider health precautions through a new perspective

- Make necessary adjustments for immunocompromised individuals
- Execute clear communication regarding possible exposure

Actively seek to involve students in the decision-making processes

- Add voting student members on school board, site-based decision making, etc.
- Consider implementing surveys and roundtables to gather student perspectives

Implement equity-oriented positive reinforcement systems to celebrate student achievements and foster supportive school climates

Create an environment where students can connect with each other and teachers

- Make time for social connection in the classroom agenda
- Value and incorporate student interests and experiences into learning

Challenge the normative notion that a students' value is tied to academic successes

- Celebrate student achievements beyond a solely academic context
- Utilize a variety of grading methods that emphasize student progress and mastery

Utilize more interactive teaching practices

- Consider project-based learning and lab opportunities
- Amplify group work and partner work opportunities

STUDENT RESEARCH REFLECTIONS

The following are direct reflections from the leading student researchers on this study. These are important to include because their experiences analyzing the data while being students also experiencing COVID themselves provides key analytical insight.

Avery Lenihan



"I specialize in quantitative work and tend to shy away from qualitative work. However, seeing so many quotes echoing both each other and my own feelings was an extremely comforting experience. Students expressed feelings of aloneness while their feelings were so similar to so many other people. The lack of connection they felt with each other meant they didn't know their next-door neighbor was having the exact same feelings as them. The anecdotes serve to strengthen the numbers we found with Coping with COVID in a symbiotic way that few other projects I have worked on have been able to."

"I joined the Coping with COVID research during the second round of interviews, towards the beginning of the data analysis phase. From analyzing the round 2 interviews, what really seemed to stick out to me was: Students almost felt "stranded" in a sense where online schooling was not set up in a comprehensive way meant to stimulate learning. Instead, it was mostly an afterthought to sending people home with many feeling that there was no real way of feeling connected and/or engaged with school. COVID truly exposed the underlying shortcomings of the educational system in America where those who "fall under the cracks" or those who simply needed a little more support were brushed aside. There's still a lot of work to be done in restructuring schools for the better. People deserve more recognition for being able to continue living a life that has been overshadowed by COVID and its long-lasting impacts, especially considering the fact that teenagers are already in a developmental and uncertain stage in their lives."

Esha Bajwa



Sofie Farmer



"Throughout this process of interviews and analysis, I have been consistently struck by the empathy and awareness prevalent in every interview. Students have shown understanding of experiences and hardships faced by peers, teachers, administrators, and other community members. They commented on their own experiences and acknowledged ways in which they experienced privileges that others had not. They understood the nuances of decisions that were made and how they impacted different members of their community. While these themes have been consistent throughout both stages of the Coping with COVID research, in this round, students across the board expressed feelings of frustration in a new way. Many of these students were upset with decisions being made and a lack of agency imposed on them by school staff and administrators. They had big ideas of positive, radical change that could drastically improve their own experiences and those of peers. Students craved to share these recommendations with administration and to see decision making reflect the needs and wants of students, parents, and teachers. I am compelled to not let you forget these students' passion, drive, and empathy about improving learning experiences for all students and the hardships they have faced, so you may have the same empathy and sense of urgency for radical change as these students."

Spandana Pavuluri

"Beginning my work with the Coping with COVID study made my experiences throughout the pandemic feel less isolating. For over 2 years, I've read countless responses, conducted interviews, and analyzed the authentic feelings that Kentucky students were willing to share. I realized that as a researcher, I had to ensure I did everything in my power to shine a light on the stories of thousands of Kentucky students whose lives had suddenly shifted in the matter of mere days. Beyond simply giving coverage to students, I knew as a researcher, I had to work to give them justice. We had to fight for the struggles they boldly brought to us. We had to advocate for the recommendations they made. We had to humanize each and every student because they are not, and never were, just statistics. And the first part meant trusting myself- a student with no PhDs, no formal degrees, no large scale analysis experience. Yet, my expertise had been present since the day I entered a school building; I was an expert on my own student experience. With that being said, this work gave me the foundation to understanding why my own voice, and why students' voices, are worthy enough to be listened to, fought for, and cared for."



WHO WE ARE

The Kentucky Student Voice Team (KSVT) is an independent, statewide, 501(c)(3) organization co-founded in 2012 by young people from across the Commonwealth. Our mission supports students to co-create more just, democratic Kentucky schools and communities as research, policy & advocacy partners.

Kentucky Student Voice Team

@kystuvoiceteam

www.ksvt.org

hello@ksvt.org

As innovators of youth-driven education research, we collect, analyze, and share data about a range of student experiences with policymakers and the public. KSVT's studies include examinations of the effects of racial and ethnic identity on learning; the social, emotional, and academic impacts of the COVID pandemic; and what students need to feel safe, engaged, and included in their school communities.

WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT OF OUR PROGRAMS



**Kentucky Student
Voice Team**