

## Student Perspectives on Access and Engagement in Virtual Schooling during the 2020-21 School Year

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### About this Report

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many aspects of schooling in Tennessee and nationwide since the initial school closures took place in March 2020. The pandemic continues to introduce new challenges for students across the state and understanding the student perspective at a time of turbulent change is critical for ongoing recovery efforts in schools and districts.

To learn more about the student experience during the pandemic, we worked with nine school districts in Tennessee to administer a student survey in the fall and spring of the 2020-21 school year. This report is the first in a series discussing the results of these surveys, giving some voice to the millions of students who had their lives turned upside down when the pandemic began 18 months ago. Specifically, this report examines student access to supports needed to engage in virtual schooling and how having access may have affected their engagement.

This section of the survey results focuses on fall 2020 when more districts participated in the survey in the fall and student response rates were higher.

### Methods and Sample

#### **Methods**

We worked with nine Tennessee districts during the 2020-21 academic year to support their administration of student surveys. Districts could opt to include certain topics in their survey and the questions for that topic were the same across all districts who opted in. As a result, we have three samples across the main topic areas highlighted in this report series. While we analyzed survey results from both fall 2020 and spring 2021, lower response rates and smaller sample sizes limited our analysis of the spring 2021 data. Thus, this section focuses on results from fall 2020.

All surveys were administered electronically, either through student emails or through a district's learning management software. Each participating district chose which students received the survey and the window for survey administration. In all participating districts, middle and high school students participated in the survey. In seven of nine districts, upper elementary students (3rd, 4th, or 5th graders) also participated. For fall 2020, survey administration occurred between

early October and mid-December. In spring 2021, surveys were administered between late March and mid-May.

### Sample

The sample for this report includes students from nine school districts in Tennessee who administered a student survey in fall 2020 that asked questions about student home learning supports and their access to virtual schooling. Survey response rates for this sample varied between districts, ranging from 20 to 82 percent, and the overall response rate for the sample was 31 percent, as shown in the table below. Response rates also varied across different student subgroups and across students learning in different instructional modalities (e.g., virtual, in-person, or hybrid) within the same district. Therefore, students who responded to the survey were likely not representative of all students in the participating districts. Specifically, it is likely that students who responded to the survey were more engaged in school and were more likely to have access to tools necessary for virtual schooling. See Table 1 for more information about the responding students whose data is included in this snapshot.

*Table 1. Information about Student Sample*

	Percent of Total Sample	Number of Responding students	Response Rate
<b>All Students</b>		30,322	31%
Grades 3-5	22%	6,542	34%
Grades 6-8	44%	13,028	45%
Grades 9-12	35%	10,340	26%
Asian Students	4%	1,267	44%
Black Students	29%	8,780	31%
Hispanic/Latino students	17%	5,171	30%
White Students	48%	14,487	37%

Other Racial Categories <sup>1</sup>	1%	205	34%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	29%	8,594	27%
English Learners	6%	1,941	24%
Immigrant Students	7%	1,993	28%
Students with Disabilities	10%	2,902	26%

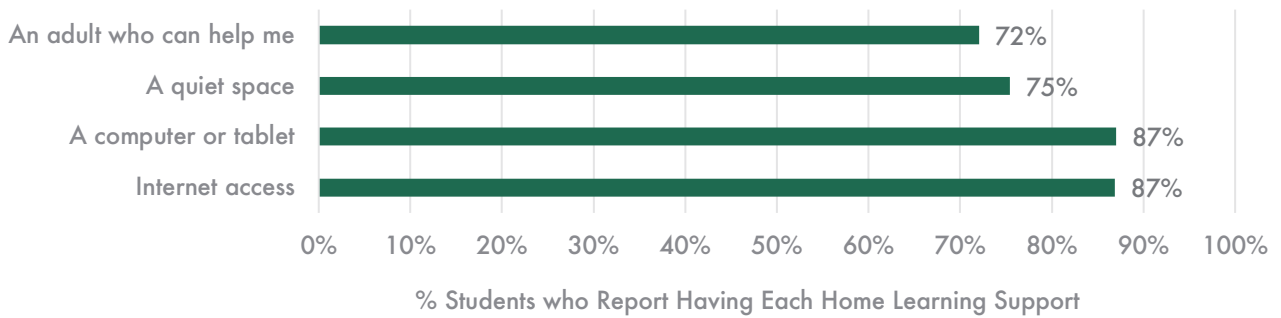
### Key Findings

Many students indicated that they had the necessary technology at home to engage in virtual schooling; however, fewer students reported having a quiet space to work at home or access to an adult to help with schoolwork, especially students of color and students who are immigrants.

Nearly 90 percent of responding students reported having access to the internet and a device to access their online classes, yet only about 75 percent of students reported having access to a quiet space at home to do their work or an adult to help with schoolwork. Further, having access to an adult at home varied by grade level, with high school students being the least likely to have an adult around to help with schoolwork (63 percent) compared to middle school students (74 percent) and elementary school students (84 percent). The percentage of students reporting having a computer, internet, and a quiet place to work are similar across grade level.

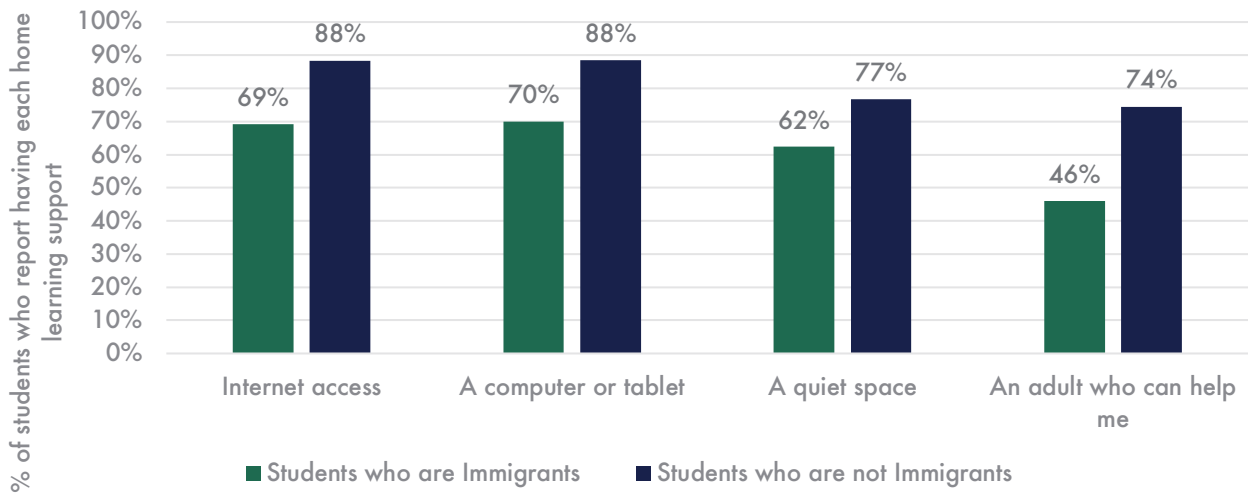
<sup>1</sup> This includes students who are identified as Native American, Alaskan Natives, or Pacific Islanders. Because this only includes a very small number of students, we have not shown results from this subgroup in the report.

Figure 1: Nearly 90 percent of responding students reported having access to the internet and a computer or tablet to do their schoolwork, while only 75 percent reported having a quiet space to work or access to an adult to help with schoolwork.



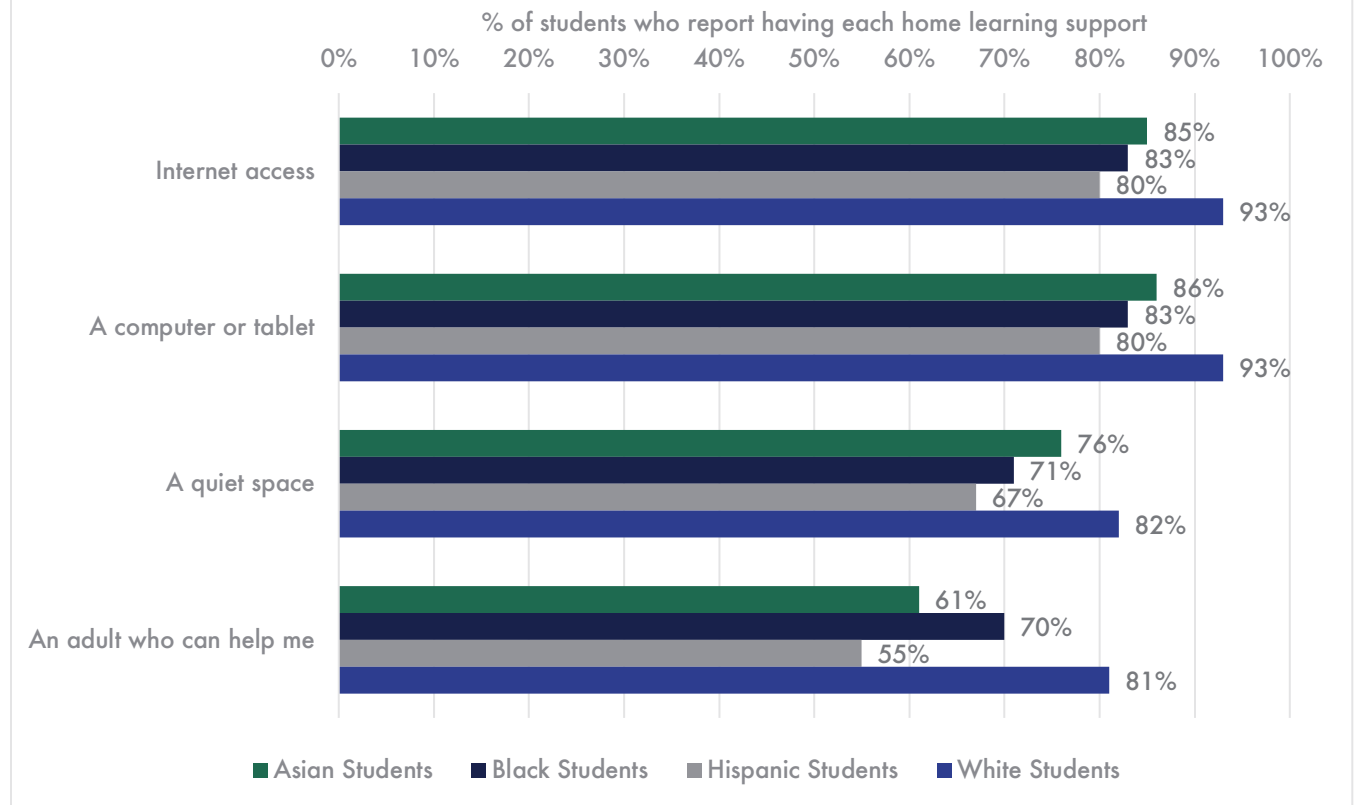
Additionally, students who are immigrants were significantly less likely to have access to all four types of home learning supports than their peers. As shown in Figure 2, just under 50 percent of all responding immigrant students reported that they had an adult at home to help them with schoolwork, compared to nearly 75 percent of their peers. Students who are immigrants were also nearly 20 percentage points less likely to have access to a computer or internet than their peers.

Figure 2: Immigrant students were less likely to report that they had access to home learning supports, especially access to an adult to help with schoolwork.



Further, Asian, Black, and Hispanic students reported that they had less access to home learning supports than their White peers, especially having access to an adult at home to help with schoolwork (see Figure 3). Specifically, 55 percent of Hispanic students, 61 percent of Asian students, and 70 percent of Black students reported that they had an adult at home to help with schoolwork compared to 81 percent of White students and students of other races. Across all supports, Black and Hispanic students were at least ten percentage points less likely to report having each home learning supports than White students, with slightly lower numbers of Hispanic students reporting access to these supports than Black students.

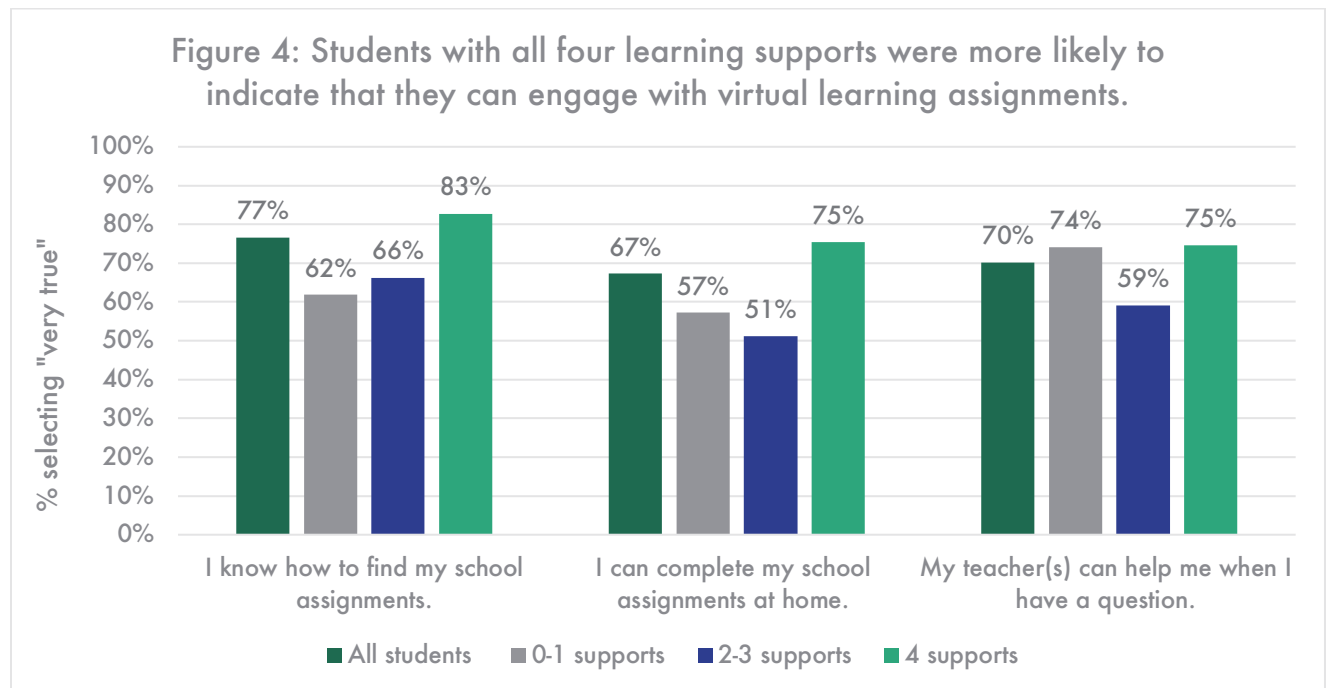
Figure 3: Asian, Hispanic and Black Students were less likely to report that they had access to home learning supports, particularly access to an adult who can help them.



Students with fewer home learning supports were less likely to report that they knew how to find and complete assignments and that their teachers could help them if they had a question.

The survey also asked students a series of questions about how they experienced learning supports in the virtual environment, including whether they knew how to find and complete school assignments, and if they felt their teachers could help them when they had a question.

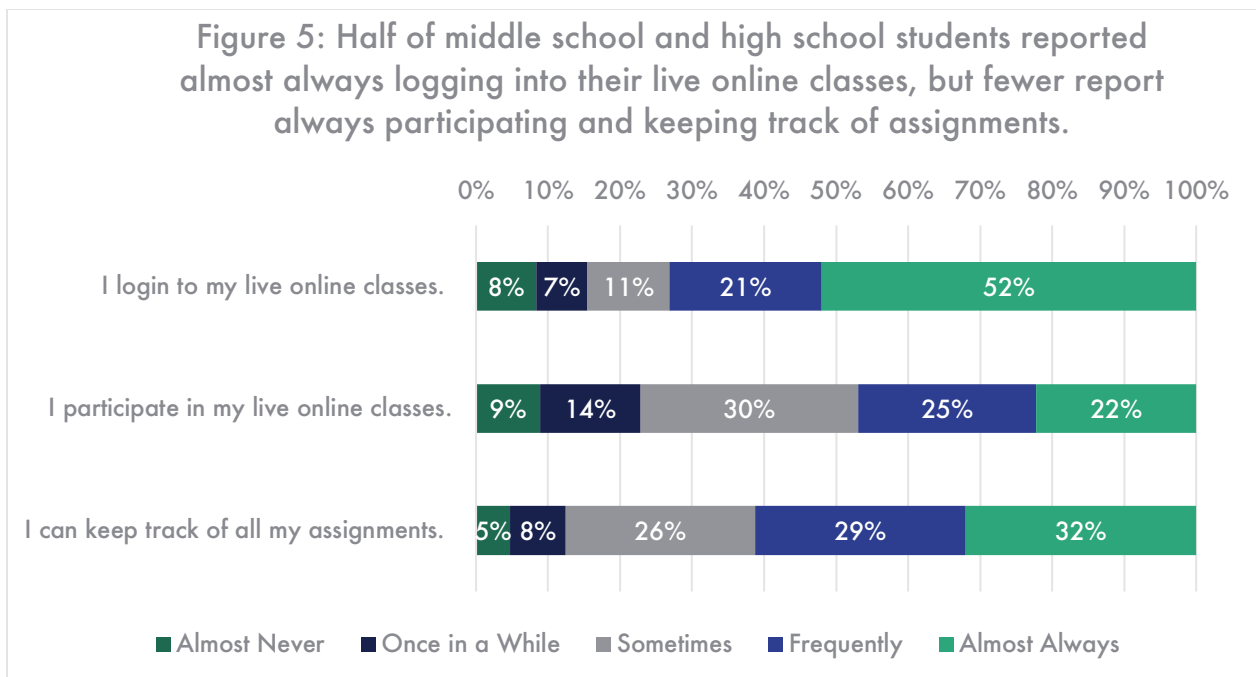
When looking at results for all students, most students (more than two-thirds) indicated that it was “very true” that they could find their virtual learning assignments, complete those assignments at home, and get help from their teacher. However, students with fewer home learning supports were less likely to say that they knew how to find and could complete school assignments. As Figure 4 shows, 83 percent of students who reported having access to all four at-home learning supports said they knew how to find their school assignments, compared with 66 percent of students who said they access to two to three supports and only 62 percent of students reporting having access to zero to one supports. These responses were relatively similar across student demographic groups surveyed.



Many middle and high school students reported struggling with engagement in virtual schooling, especially with participating in their online classes and keeping track of assignments.

In the survey, middle school and high school students specifically responded to three questions about the frequency of their attendance and engagement in live virtual classrooms as well as how often they could keep track of their virtual assignments.

As Figure 5 demonstrates, only 50 percent of middle and high school students who responded to the survey reported almost always logging into class; 32 percent reported being able to track all of their assignments almost all the time, and 22 percent reported almost always participating in live online classes. At the same time, nearly 10 percent of these students reported *almost never* logging into or participating in online classes. These responses were fairly similar across grade levels, with high school students reporting participating slightly less often in live online classes.

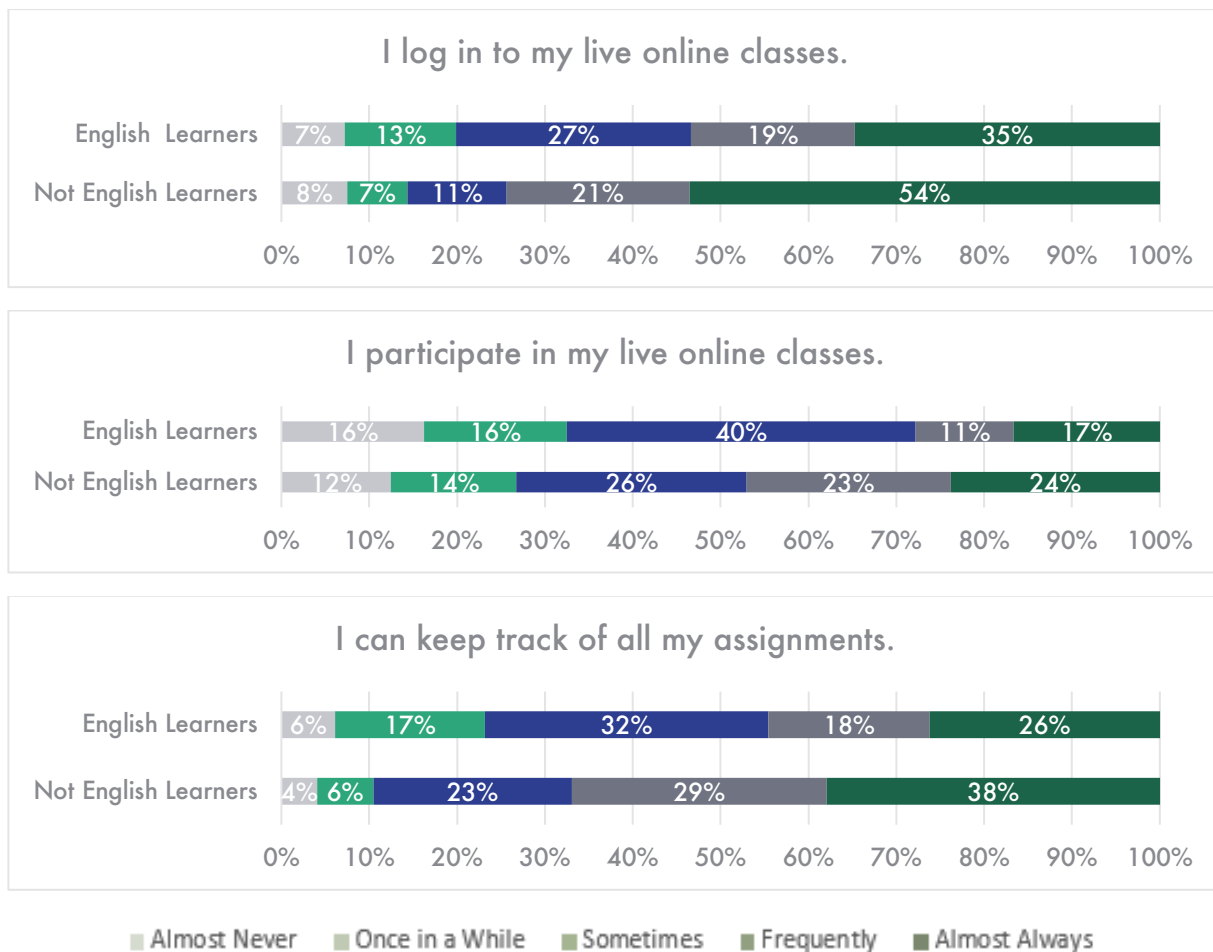


Further, responses to these questions varied across different student groups on all three questions. Notably, English Learners were almost twenty percentage points less likely to almost always log in to their online classes, five percentage points less likely to report almost always participating in class, and nearly ten percentage points less likely to report almost always keeping track of assignments. These differences between English Learners and students who are not

English Learners remained similar when we took into account the number of home learning supports reported by students.

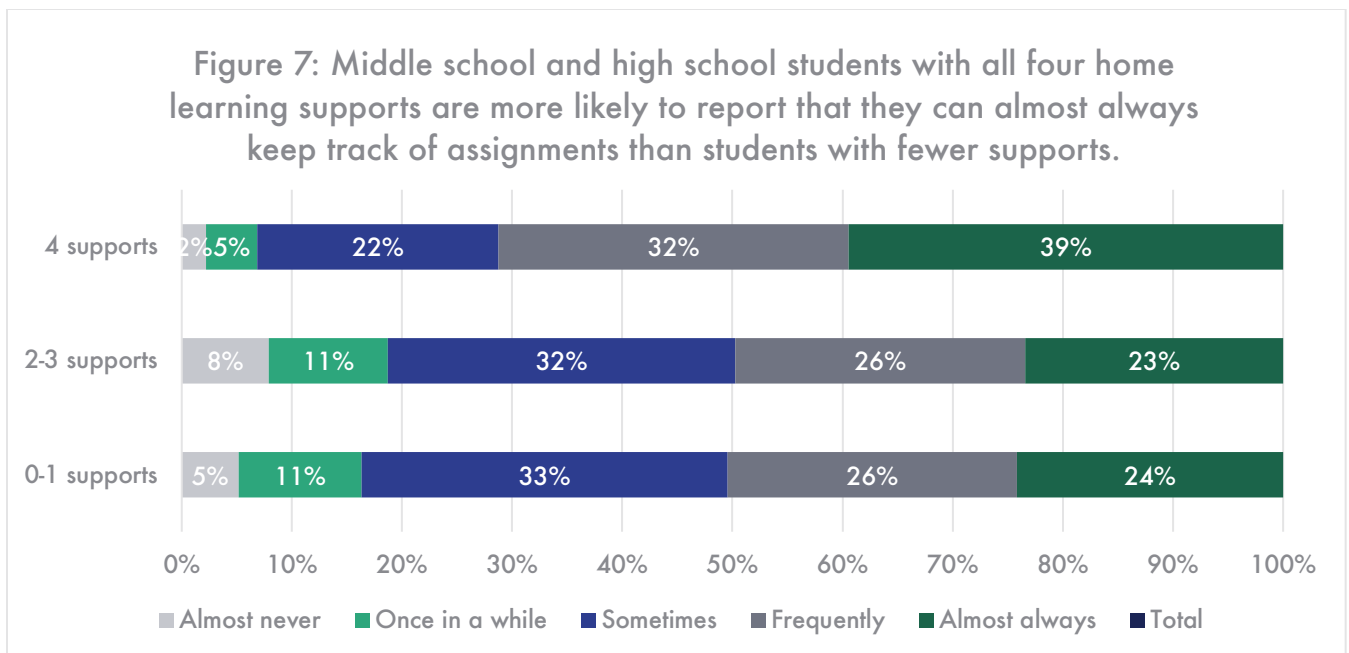
As shown in the appendix Table A2, Black and Hispanic students were slightly less likely to report almost always logging in, participating, and keeping track of assignments than White students. Economically disadvantaged students were also less likely to report all three types of engagement when compared to their peers. These differences by race/ethnicity and economic disadvantage remain similar when you control for the number of home learning supports reported by students.

Figure 6: English Learners were less likely to report almost always logging in to online classes, participating in class, and keeping track of assignments.





Here too, the frequency of engagement among middle school and high school students differed based on reported access to home learning supports. As expected, students with all four home learning supports were significantly more likely to report almost always being able to keep track of their assignments compared to students who did not have access to all four of the home learning supports (see Figure 7). The patterns of student responses across home learning supports for other questions of engagement are similar to the differences illustrated in Figure 7.

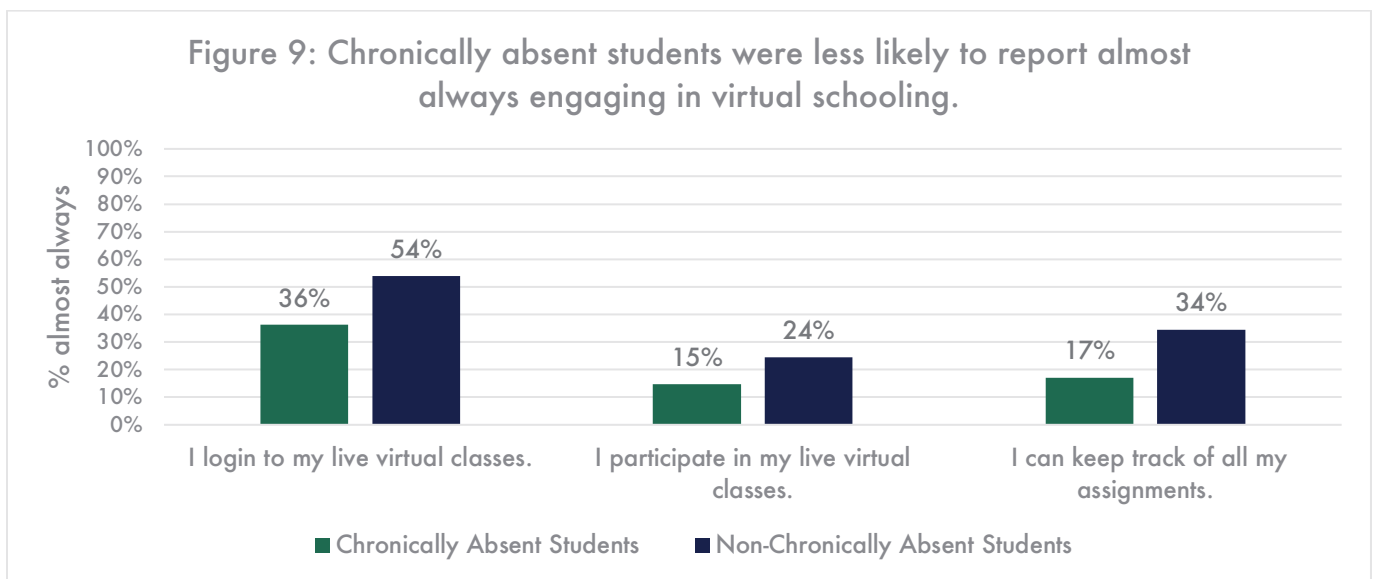
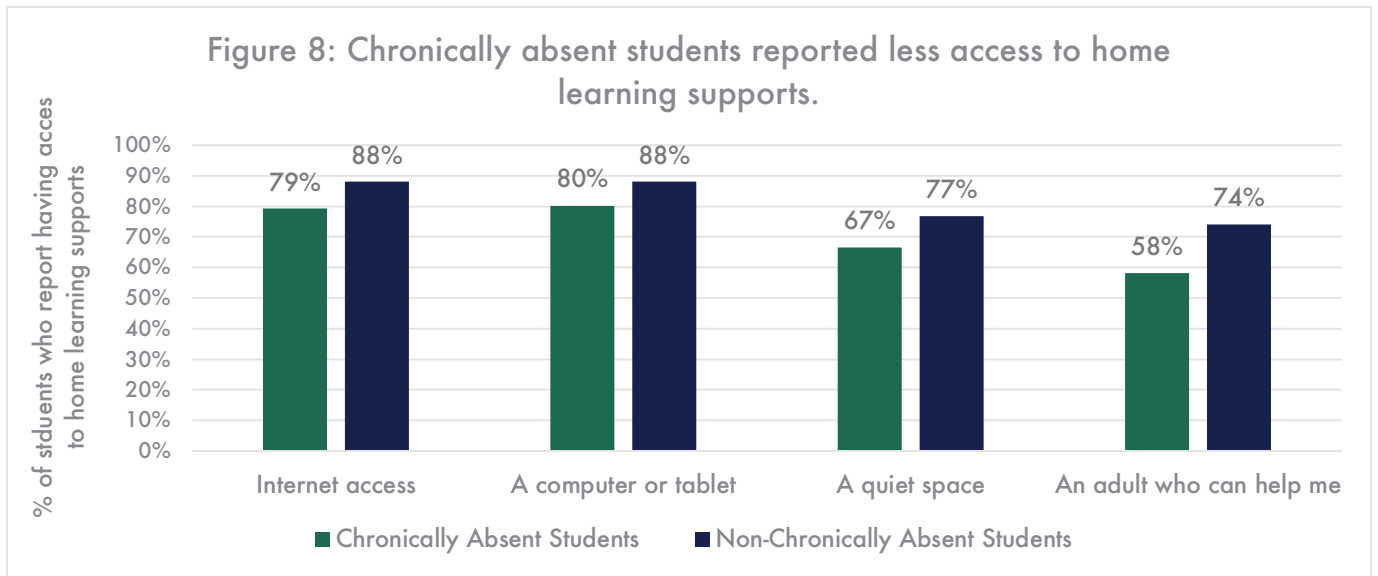


**Chronically absent students reported having less access to home learning supports and were not as likely to be able to engage in virtual schooling than their peers.**

TERA’s [earlier analysis](#) of a separate set of Tennessee districts identified chronic absenteeism as a key challenge for schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, with more students than previous years identified as chronically absent. We defined chronic absence during the first semester as missing more than 10 percent of instructional days between the first day of school and October 1, 2020. We examined variations in students’ survey responses based on whether they were chronically absent in the first semester of the 2020-21 academic school year.

On the student survey, chronically absent students reported significantly lower rates of having the home learning supports compared to their peers and were especially unlikely to have an adult

at home to help with schoolwork (58 percent compared to 74 percent, respectively). Additionally, chronically absent students were far less likely to report being able to complete assignments and keep track of their assignments compared to their peers and did not feel as confident that their teachers could help them if they had a question. Figures 8 and 9 below show the differences in reported access to supports and being able to engage in school between chronically absent students and their peers.



## Looking Ahead

Overall, student responses about their access to and engagement in virtual learning highlight gains and key areas for districts to engage on with students during recovery. Student responses about their access to and engagement in virtual learning show concerns around equity stemming from pandemic-induced virtual learning. Students from marginalized identity groups tended to report less access to home learning supports, and we expect even more substantial gaps in access given that non-respondents to the survey might have greater difficulties in accessing virtual education. Access to home learning supports were also associated with students' reported engagement in virtual learning. If students who were less engaged in virtual learning in the 2020-21 school year had less academic growth, these inequities may persist into the 2021-22 school year despite the return to in-person schooling. Given increased reliance on computer-based learning management systems for students to access and complete their assignments even when learning in-person, these gaps in access may continue to be a source of inequity.

Notably, an important bright spot in these survey results are students' positive perceptions of their teachers' ability to help them, and honing in on student-teacher relationships will likely be an important piece of pandemic recovery.

## Appendix

Table A1

	All Students	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
<b>Home learning supports: % indicating that they have each support</b>				
Internet access	87%	86%	88%	86%
A computer or tablet	87%	86%	89%	87%
A quiet space	75%	76%	77%	74%
An adult who can help me	72%	84%	63%	74%
<b>Engagement with Virtual Learning: % of responding students who report 'very true' for the following statements</b>				
I know how to find my schools assignments.	76%	74%	76%	76%
I can complete my school assignments at home.	67%	70%	66%	65%
My teachers can help me when I have a question.	71%	81%	75%	61%
<b>Frequency of Engagement (Middle/high school only): % selecting almost always</b>				
I login to my live virtual classes	53%	N/A	56%	50%
I participate in my live virtual classes (for example, I ask questions or participate in the discussion).	23%	N/A	25%	19%
I can keep track of all my assignments	33%	N/A	33%	32%

Table A2

	Asian Students	Black Students	Hispanic Students	White Students
<b>Home learning supports: % indicating that they have each support</b>				
Internet access	85%	83%	80%	93%
A computer or tablet	86%	83%	80%	93%
A quiet space	76%	71%	67%	82%
An adult who can help me	61%	70%	55%	81%
<b>Engagement with Virtual Learning: % of responding students who report 'very true' for the following statements</b>				
I know how to find my schools assignments.	79%	76%	71%	78%
I can complete my school assignments at home.	70%	67%	59%	69%
My teachers can help me when I have a question.	72%	69%	76%	68%
<b>Frequency of Engagement (Middle/high school only): % selecting almost always</b>				
I login to my live virtual classes	70%	48%	42%	56%
I participate in my live virtual classes (for example, I ask questions or participate in the discussion).	25%	22%	17%	27%
I can keep track of all my assignments	41%	28%	24%	38%

**Table A3**

	Economically Disadvantaged Students	English Learners	Immigrant Students	Students with Disabilities	Chronically Absent Students
<b>Home learning supports: % indicating that they have each support</b>					
Internet access	83%	61%	69%	78%	79%
A computer or tablet	83%	62%	70%	79%	80%
A quiet space	69%	55%	62%	70%	67%
An adult who can help me	66%	40%	46%	70%	58%
<b>Engagement with Virtual Learning: % of responding students who report 'very true' for the following statements</b>					
I know how to find my schools assignments.	72%	62%	69%	72%	61%
I can complete my school assignments at home.	60%	57%	64%	60%	50%
My teachers can help me when I have a question.	70%	78%	75%	70%	67%
<b>Frequency of Engagement (Middle/high school only): % selecting almost always</b>					
I login to my live virtual classes	44%	35%	38%	44%	37%
I participate in my live virtual classes (for example, I ask questions or participate in the discussion).	21%	19%	23%	24%	15%
I can keep track of all my assignments	26%	23%	28%	28%	17%