

Student Perspectives on School Climate During the 2020-21 School Year

Nisha Bala

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 second 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.

This report examines students' perceptions of their schooling environment, their relationships with both teachers and peers, and their perspectives on their safety and ability to focus on schoolwork. The analyses in this report draw primarily from fall 2020 survey results, yet one section includes spring 2021 questions that were not asked in the fall.

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. This section includes results from seven of the nine participating districts. 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 primarily 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 seven districts whose results are included in this section, upper elementary (3rd, 4th, or 5th grade), middle, and high school students

participated in the survey. 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 seven districts who administered a student survey during the fall 2020 semester that asked questions about their school climate. The overall survey response rates for these districts ranged from 20 percent to 76 percent, and the overall response rate for this sample was 30 percent, as shown in the table below. Across these districts, 14,833 students in grades 3-12 participated in the survey. Response rates varied between districts, and across different demographic subgroups and instructional modalities of students within the same district.

Table 1. Information about Student Sample

	Percent of total sample	Number of responding students	Response rate
All Students		14833	30%
Grades 3-5	29%	4320	30%
Grades 6-8	38%	5695	39%
Grades 9-12	32%	4797	24%
Asian Students	3%	490	41%
Black Students	21%	3053	25%
Hispanic/Latino students	11%	1700	26%
White Students	63%	9409	34%
Other Racial Categories ¹	1%	160	33%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	26%	3827	24%

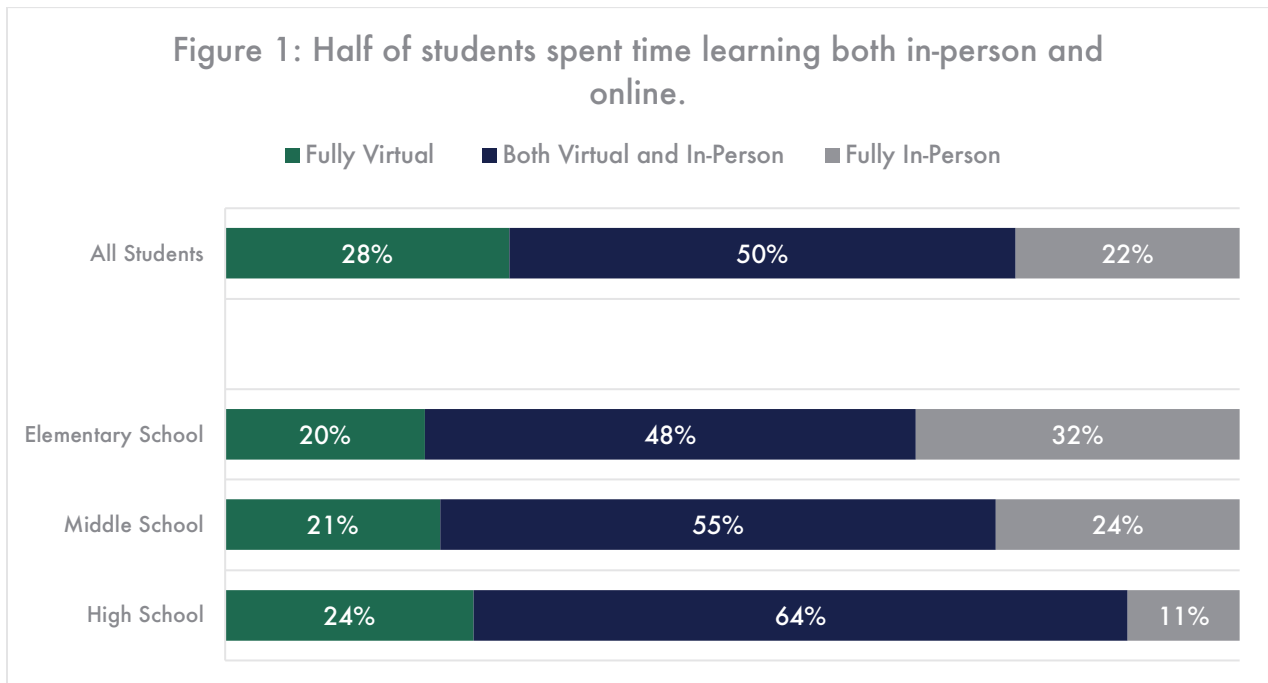
¹ This includes students who are identified as Native American, Alaskan Natives, or Pacific Islanders. Because this only includes a very small number of students, we have not shown results from this subgroup in the report.

English Learners	2%	362	17%
Immigrant Students	2%	253	22%
Students with Disabilities	10%	1470	23%

Key Findings

In Fall 2020, most responding students spent time learning both in person and virtually, however, compared to their peers, Black students and Asian students were most likely to report that they only attended school virtually.

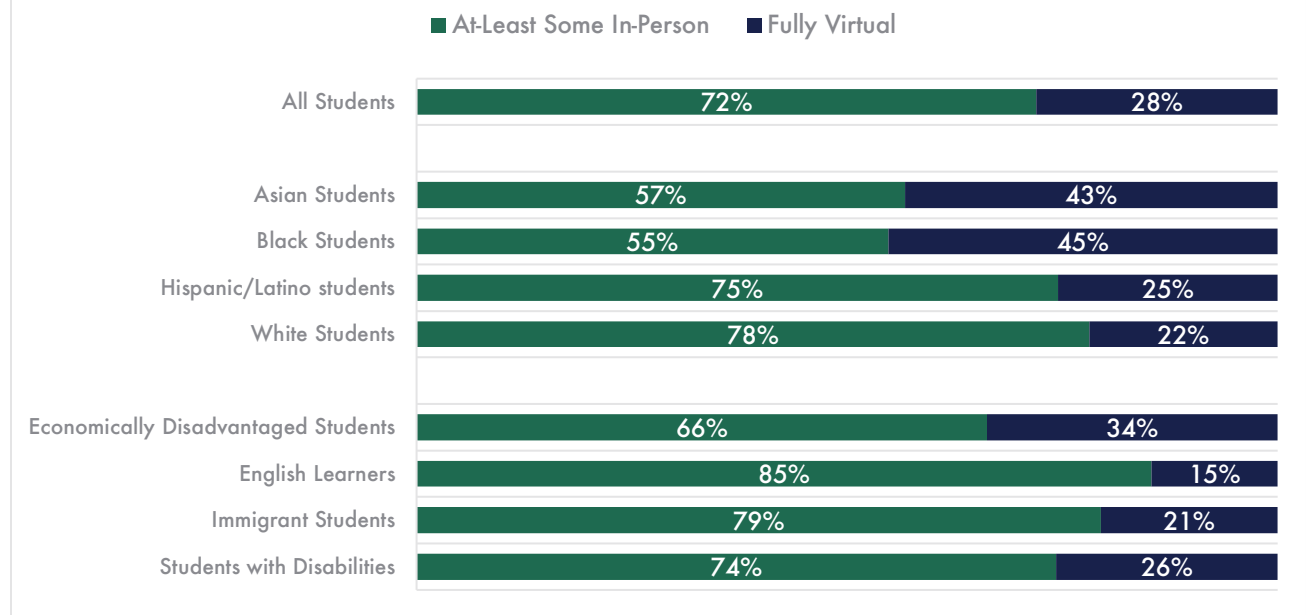
School climate for all students was very different than in previous years, in part because virtual learning was much more prevalent in the 2020-21 school year. As Figure 1 shows, as of fall 2020, half of all student respondents reported attending both in-person and virtual classes. Twenty eight percent of responding students reported attending only virtual classes as of the fall survey administration, while 22 percent indicated that they had only attended in-person classes.



For the remaining analyses in this report, we categorized students as either ‘at least some in-person’ and ‘fully virtual.’ We defined virtual students as those who either reported not having spent any time learning in person or at school or that they had had gone to in-person school for zero days in the last week. These categories are particularly useful because a ‘fully virtual’ student experience represents a meaningfully different engagement with the school climate than a student who attends at least partially in person.

Figure 2 shows the breakdown of the instructional modality of students by race/ethnicity and certain student subgroups. Asian and Black students were almost twice as likely to report that they were fully virtual when compared to Hispanic and White students. English Learners, meanwhile, were much less likely than their peers to report being fully virtual.

Figure 2: While nearly three quarters of students reported attending school at least some in person, Black and Asian students were most likely to report that they were fully virtual in the fall 2020 semester.

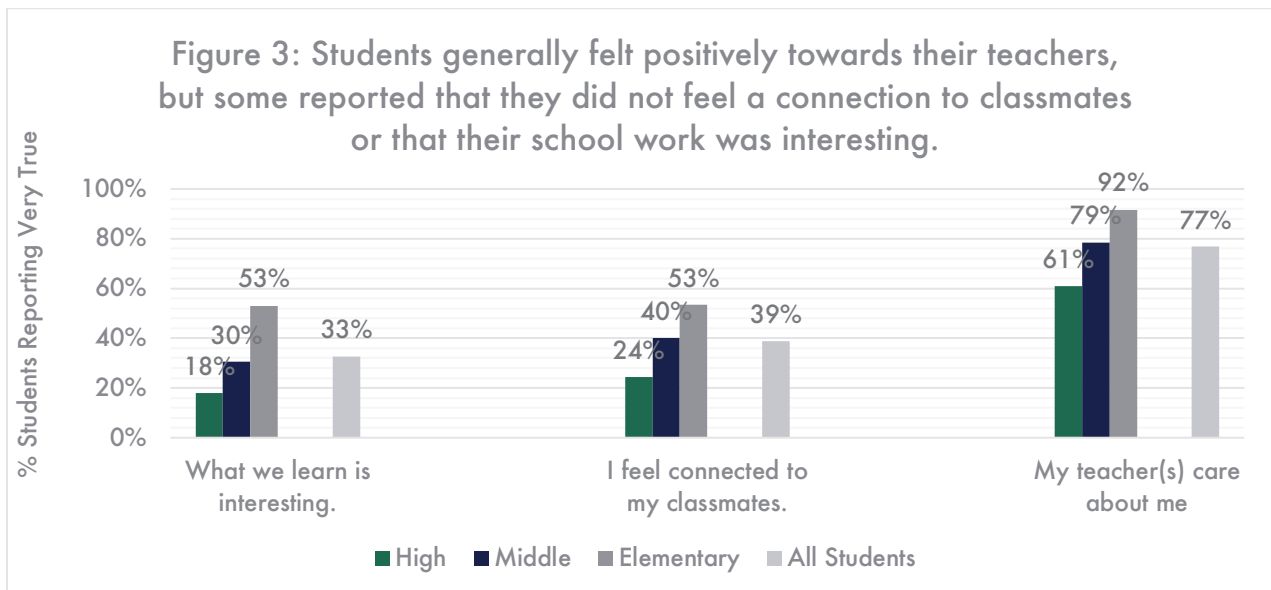


While almost all surveyed students reported feeling supported by their teachers, only some students felt that they were learning a lot, felt connected to their school community, and felt comfortable at school.

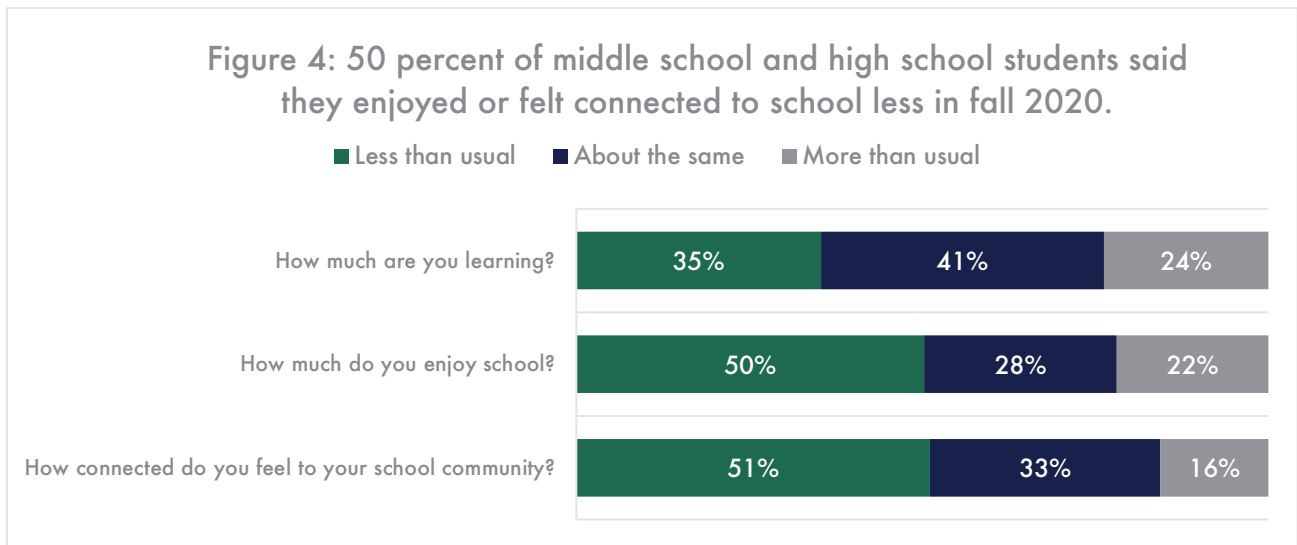
Students were asked to comment (from not true to very true) on whether they agreed with a series of statements about their school climate. In addition, middle and high school students who attended at least some in-person schooling were asked questions tailored specifically to the in-person learning experience.

While most students felt supported by their teachers, fewer students felt connected to their classmates or were interested in their coursework. Specifically, 77 percent of students said it was “very true” that their teachers cared about them, and 80 percent felt that it was “very true” that teachers were doing their best to help them learn. On the other hand, only a third of all students who responded to the survey said that it was “very true” that what they were learning was interesting, and 39 percent said that it was “very true” that they felt connected to their classmates.

When looking across grade levels, elementary school students responded more favorably toward their schooling than the other grade levels while high school students were less likely to feel positive about their schooling experience in the fall of 2020. Figure 3 illustrates these differences by grade-level across three of the questions and appendix Table A1 show the results for all questions. As shown in Figure 3, upper elementary students were more than twice as likely to respond it was “very true” that what they learned was interesting and they felt more connected to their classmates compared to high school students.



These patterns can be difficult to interpret because we don't know how students would have responded to similar questions before the pandemic. To better understand how students felt this year compared to prior years, we asked middle and high school students an additional set of questions comparing three aspects of school climate – learning, enjoyment of school, and connection to school community – to that of last year. As illustrated in Figure 4, almost two-thirds of responding students reported that they were learning about the same this year or more this year as they were in a usual school year. However, half of all students said they did not enjoy school as much and felt less connected to their school community than in usual years.

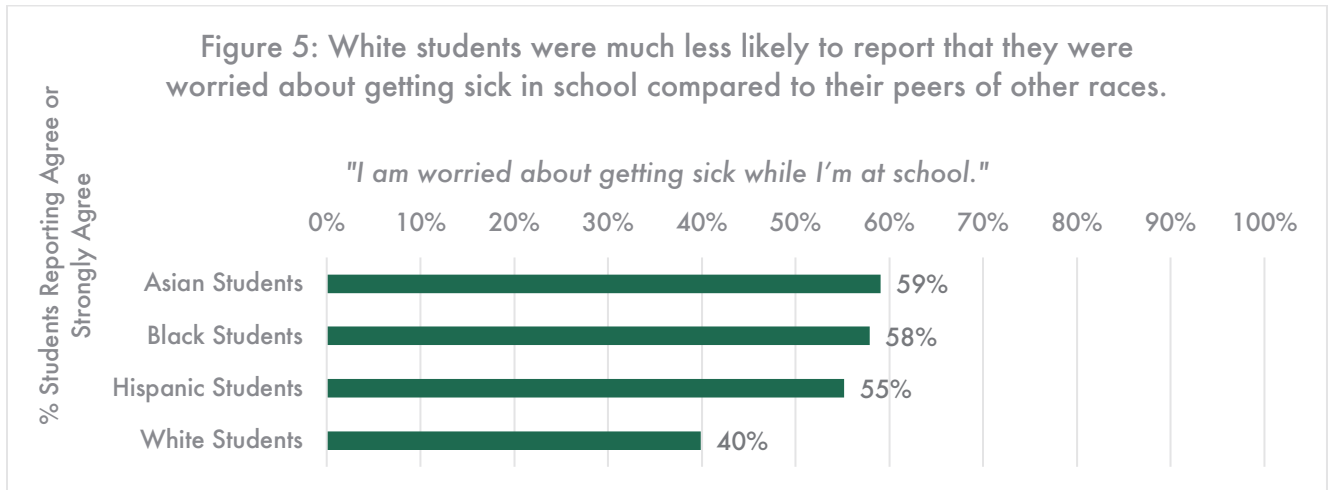


While almost all surveyed students reported feeling safe at school, students of color were more likely to report that they were worried about getting sick at school compared to White students.

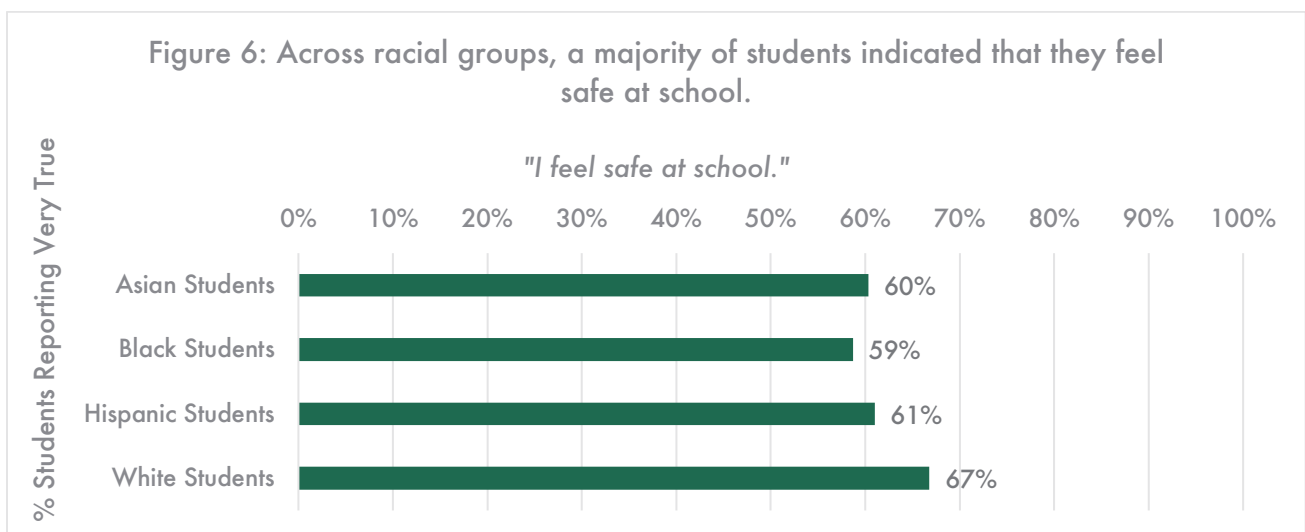
The survey also asked middle and high school students who reported that they were attending school in person whether they worried about getting sick at school or whether everyone at their school was following the new health and safety rules. Overall, 45 percent of responding students said that they worried about getting sick at school while 60 percent agreed that everyone was following health and safety rules.

Further, perceptions about their school climate varied by student race/ethnicity. While students across all racial/ethnic groups responded similarly about their learning experiences (e.g., what we learn is interesting) and their teachers (e.g., my teachers care about me), White students were much less likely to report that they were worried about getting sick in school compared to their

peers of other races. As shown in Figure 5, 59 percent of Asian students, 58 percent of Black students, and 55 percent of Hispanic students agreed or strongly agreed that they were worried about getting sick at school, compared to 40 percent of White students. These racial/ethnic differences hold when looking at student responses within the same school.



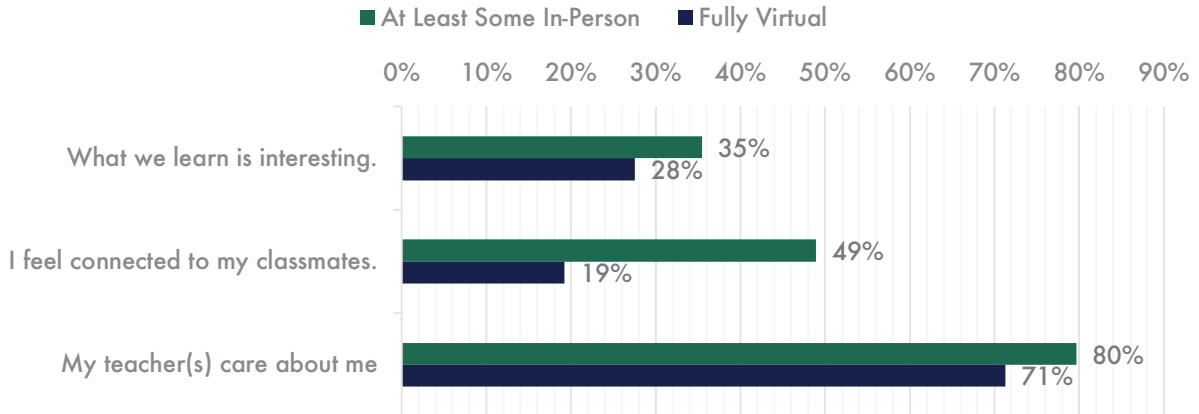
Notably, students across racial/ethnic groups responded more similarly to the question of whether they felt safe at school, with White students being only slightly more likely to indicate it was very true that they felt safe at school compared to their Asian, Black, and Hispanic peers. This may suggest that the concerns expressed by students of color are more focused on COVID-19 risks rather than general feelings of safety.



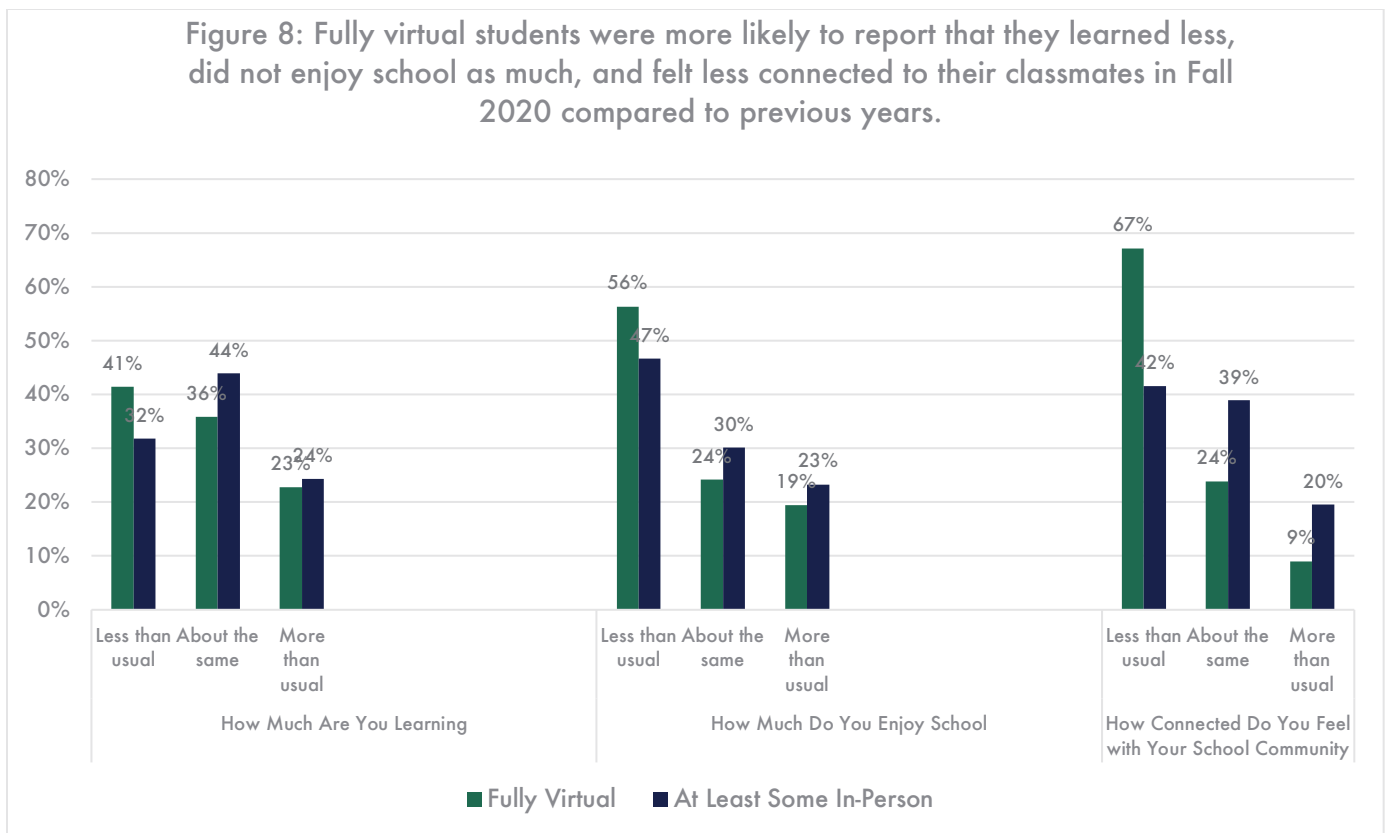
Fully virtual students responded significantly more negatively to all questions about school climate, especially about feeling connections with their classmates.

To understand more about the student experience in fall 2020, we looked at differences in how fully virtual students felt about their school climate compared to students who had at least some in-person learning. On all survey questions that addressed school climate, fully virtual students responded significantly more negatively, especially when asked about connections to their classmates. Specifically, 49 percent of students who responded to the survey who participated in at least some in-person learning reported that they felt more connected to their classmates compared to only 19 percent of fully virtual students (see Figure 7) Further, fewer fully virtual students felt that what they were learning was interesting (28 percent) than students who attended some in-person schooling (35 percent).

Figure 7: Fully virtual students responded more negatively about school climate than students with at least some in-person learning experiences in fall 2020.



These patterns also held true when students were asked to compare their school climate in fall 2020 to that of a usual year of school. For example, while 42 percent of students who participated in at least some in-person schooling said they felt less connected to their school community than usual, 67 percent of fully virtual students reported the same feeling. Additionally, fully virtual students were more likely to say they enjoyed school less than usual and also learned less than in a typical year compared to those students who attended some in-person schooling. Figure 8 displays these patterns below.

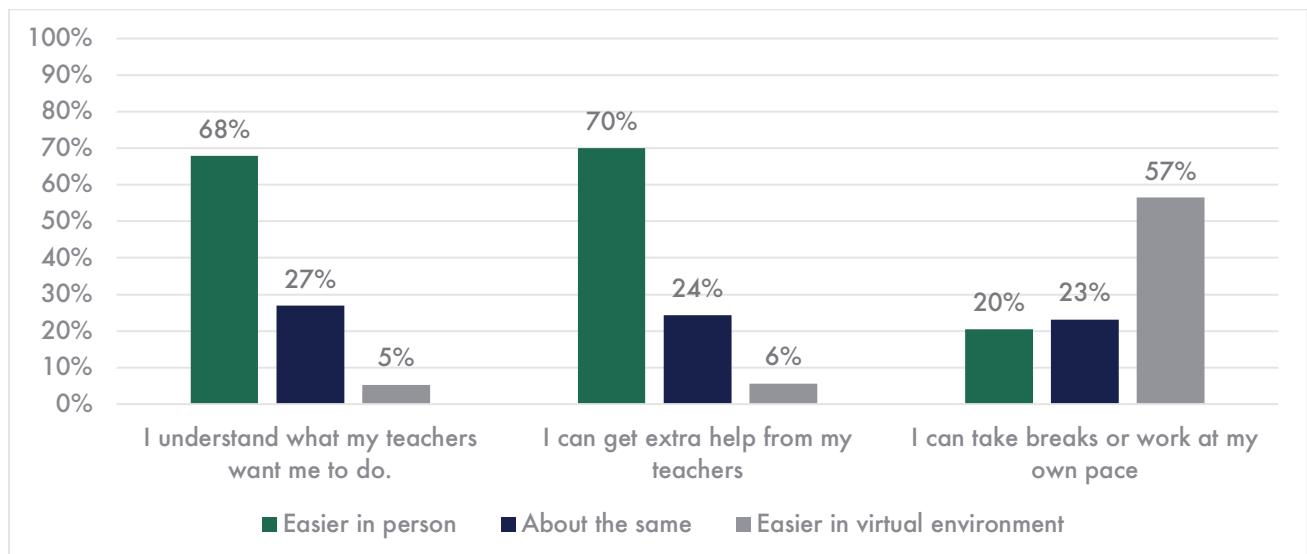


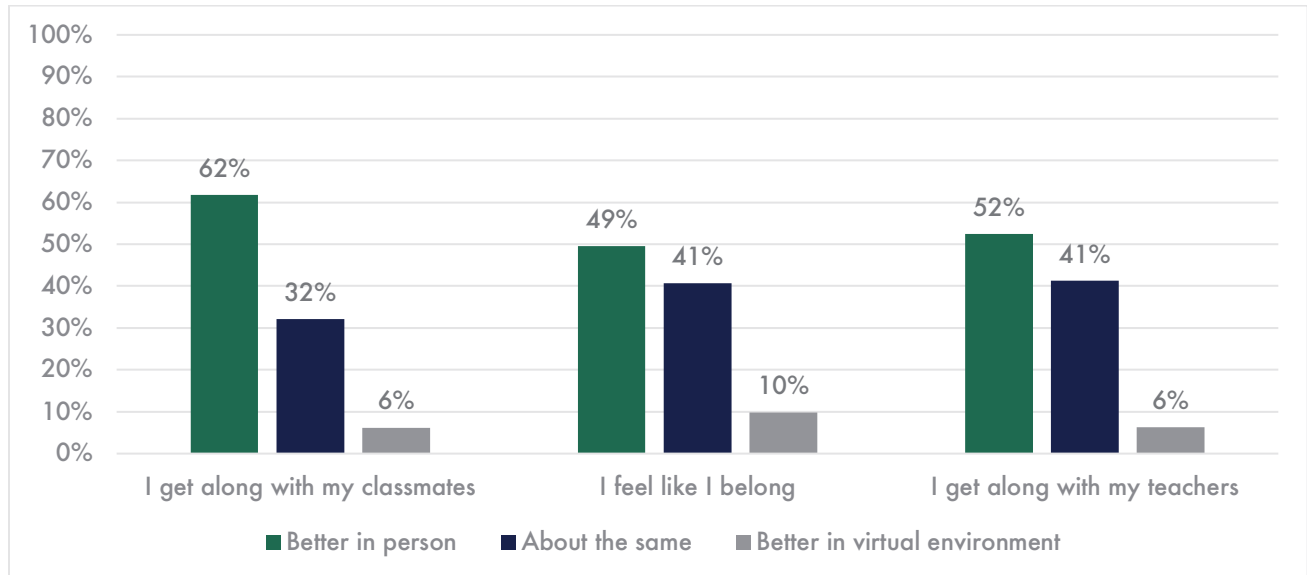
For a subset of districts that participated in both fall and spring surveys, students reported that it was easier to communicate with their teachers in person, but that it was easier to take breaks and learn at their own pace when attending school virtually.

Between the fall and spring surveys, the percentage of students who reported being fully virtual dropped by almost half. To better gauge student perspectives on their educational experience, the spring follow-up survey asked students about their **preferences** between in-person and virtual education. Sixty-two percent of students who responded to the spring survey preferred in-person education, while 17 percent of students preferred virtual education. Notably, students identified as ‘fully virtual’ in the spring were more likely to prefer virtual education.

Students were then asked to compare their experiences attending school in person and virtually through questions about relationship formation and classroom success. Students particularly reported that communications with teachers was easier in-person, yet over 50 percent of students said it was easier to take breaks or work at their own space when learning virtually (see Figure 9). Further, 10 percent of students said that they felt more like they belonged when learning virtually.

Figure 9: In the spring survey, students particularly found communicating with teachers easier in in-person, but also said that it was easier to take breaks and work at their own pace when learning virtually.





Looking Ahead

As districts continue to recover from the pandemic, understanding how students feel about their school climate will be critical. Notably, we found that many students—including those attending school in person—reported that they felt less connected to their school community in fall 2020. This lack of social connection, along with relatively low percentages of students reporting that they were interested in what they were learning, suggests that re-engaging students both socially and academically may be critical to recovery efforts.

Further, when comparing in-person and virtual learning experiences, it is important to note that the composition of students who attended virtually versus in person varied in every district who participated in the survey. Overall, fully virtual students responded more negatively about their school climate. However, these responses should not be thought of as an indictment of online education more broadly. Indeed, most fully virtual students experienced a new model of schooling that was born out of a global emergency during which school districts were required to make drastic changes in a short amount of time. Instead, it is important to place these responses in context with the understanding that fully virtual students with no in-person contact with other students or teachers had a different experience than those who attended school at least some of the time. Looking forward, it is important to keep in mind the potential benefits of the virtual experience as well, such as a better sense of belonging for a subset of students as well as the ability to take breaks that many students preferred. Even as districts largely return to in-person learning, there are aspects of the virtual learning experience that they may want to maintain.

Appendix

Table A1

	All Students	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
% of students indicating that they experienced each of the following instructional modalities				
Fully Virtual	28%	20%	21%	24%
Both Virtual and In-Person	50%	48%	55%	64%
Fully In-Person	22%	32%	24%	11%
% of students indicating 'Very True' to the following statements				
What we learn is interesting.	33%	53%	30%	18%
I learn a lot almost every day.	48%	65%	50%	31%
I can stay focused on my schoolwork.	41%	50%	41%	34%
I feel safe at school.	65%	73%	66%	55%
I feel connected to my classmates.	39%	53%	40%	24%
My teachers are doing their best to help me learn.	80%	92%	81%	68%
My teacher(s) care about me.	77%	92%	79%	61%
% of students they agree or strongly agree with the following statements				
I am worried about getting sick while I'm at school.	45%	N/A	42%	49%
Everyone at my school is following the new health and safety rules.	60%	N/A	62%	56%
How much are you learning?				
Less than usual	35%	N/A	26%	46%
About the same	41%	N/A	45%	36%

More than usual	24%	N/A	29%	18%
How much do you enjoy school?				
Less than usual	50%	N/A	45%	56%
About the same	28%	N/A	29%	27%
More than usual	22%	N/A	26%	16%
How connected do you feel to your school community?				
Less than usual	51%	N/A	43%	61%
About the same	33%	N/A	37%	29%
More than usual	16%	N/A	21%	10%

Table A2

	Asian Students	Black Students	Hispanic Students	White Students
% of students indicating that they experienced each of the following instructional modalities				
Fully Virtual	43%	45%	25%	22%
Both Virtual and In-Person	42%	32%	39%	58%
Fully In-Person	15%	23%	35%	20%
% of students indicating 'Very True' to the following statements				
What we learn is interesting.	37%	34%	40%	31%
I learn a lot almost every day.	51%	52%	50%	46%
I can stay focused on my schoolwork.	52%	42%	43%	41%
I feel safe at school.	60%	59%	61%	67%
I feel connected to my classmates.	34%	34%	38%	41%

My teachers are doing their best to help me learn.	82%	77%	85%	80%
My teacher(s) care about me.	79%	73%	78%	78%
% of students they agree or strongly agree with the following statements				
I am worried about getting sick while I'm at school.	59%	58%	55%	40%
Everyone at my school is following the new health and safety rules.	58%	61%	66%	58%
How much are you learning?				
Less than usual	33%	33%	27%	38%
About the same	45%	35%	43%	42%
More than usual	21%	32%	29%	20%
How much do you enjoy school?				
Less than usual	47%	53%	40%	51%
About the same	31%	25%	34%	28%
More than usual	22%	22%	27%	21%
How connected do you feel to your school community?				
Less than usual	56%	53%	40%	52%
About the same	31%	32%	40%	33%
More than usual	12%	16%	20%	15%

Table A3

	Economically Disadvantaged Students	English Learners	Immigrant Students	Students with Disabilities	Chronically Absent Students	Fully Virtual Students
% of students indicating that they experienced each of the following instructional modalities						
Fully Virtual	34%	15%	1%	26%	37%	N/A
Both Virtual and In-Person	41%	31%	57%	46%	37%	N/A
Fully In-Person	25%	54%	41%	28%	26%	N/A
% of students indicating 'Very True' to the following statements						
What we learn is interesting.	35%	56%	47%	40%	29%	28%
I learn a lot almost every day.	52%	51%	53%	53%	43%	44%
I can stay focused on my schoolwork.	39%	48%	47%	43%	33%	37%
I feel safe at school.	62%	63%	60%	65%	58%	61%
I feel connected to my classmates.	37%	47%	42%	45%	32%	19%
My teachers are doing their best to help me learn.	79%	86%	83%	82%	76%	75%
My teacher(s) care about me.	76%	80%	74%	80%	70%	71%
% of students they agree or strongly agree with the following statements						
I am worried about getting sick while I'm at school.	50%	66%	61%	49%	56%	50%
Everyone at my school is following	63%	72%	60%	66%	56%	63%

the new health and safety rules.						
How much are you learning?						
Less than usual	32%	16%	32%	27%	34%	41%
About the same	38%	41%	34%	41%	37%	36%
More than usual	30%	43%	35%	32%	28%	23%
How much do you enjoy school?						
Less than usual	50%	29%	35%	43%	54%	56%
About the same	27%	28%	32%	29%	25%	24%
More than usual	24%	43%	33%	28%	21%	19%
How connected do you feel to your school community?						
Less than usual	49%	27%	42%	39%	51%	67%
About the same	34%	40%	36%	34%	33%	24%
More than usual	17%	33%	22%	27%	16%	9%