

Student Perspectives on their Social and Emotional Well-being 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 third 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 focuses on results from the spring 2021 survey. In the follow up-spring survey, we added questions to learn more about the sources of stress and worry that students were experiencing, which is the main focus of this report.

In the fall survey, we asked students in middle and high school about what factors made it difficult to do their best in school this year. As reported on in TERA's previous brief, [Schooling during COVID-19: Fall Semester Trends from Six Tennessee Districts](#), the majority of responding students reported that worry, stress, or lack of motivation was impeding their schoolwork. **High school students were especially likely to note these challenges, with 78 percent reporting that worry or stress made it hard for them to do their best in school in the 2020-21 school year and 72 percent reporting that a lack of motivation made it hard for them to do their best in school.**

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 five 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. However, we asked numerous questions in spring 2021 on social and emotional wellbeing that were not included in the fall survey. Thus, despite the challenges of the spring survey sample, this section focuses on results from spring 2021.

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 of the five districts whose results are included in this section, upper elementary (3rd, 4th, or 5th graders), 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 five districts who administered a student survey in spring 2021. The overall survey response rates for these districts ranged from 18 percent to 69 percent, and the overall response rate for this sample was 21 percent, as shown in the table below. Across these districts, 8,952 students in grades 3-12 participated in the survey. Importantly, the spring follow-up survey had a smaller sample and lower response rates than the fall survey and it is unlikely that the students who responded are representative of all students in the participating districts. We strongly recommend keeping this in mind while considering these results.

Table 1: Demographics and response rate of spring follow-up survey

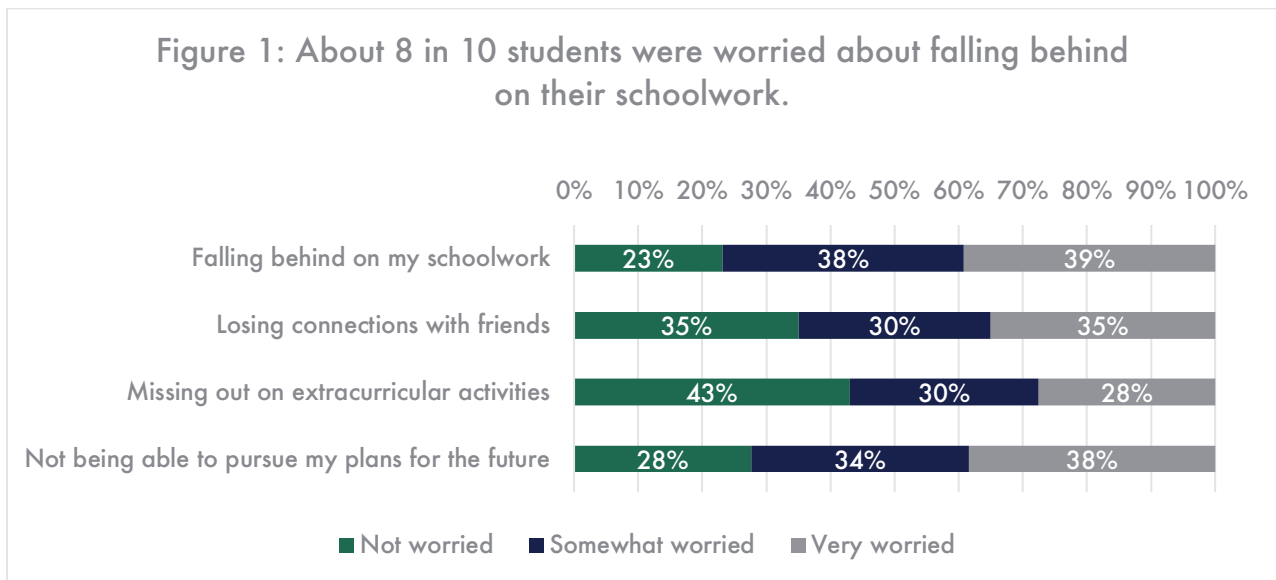
	Percent of Total Sample	Number of Responding Students	Response Rate
All Students		8,952	21%
Grades 3-5	38%	3,443	27%
Grades 6-8	34%	3,023	25%
Grades 9-12	28%	2,467	16%
Asian Students	2%	222	21%

Black Students	21%	1,908	17%
Hispanic/Latino Students	16%	1,388	22%
White Students	59%	5,310	25%
Other Racial Categories	1%	107	25%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	30%	2,650	20%
English Learners	5%	452	20%
Immigrant Students	3%	237	21%
Students with Disabilities	11%	974	19%

Key Findings

Students were most worried about falling behind in their schoolwork and not being able to pursue their plans for the future.

We asked two sets of questions to students to understand more about their worries and stresses during spring 2021. As Figure 1 shows, 77 percent of students were “somewhat” or “very worried” about falling behind on their schoolwork, and 72 percent were worried about not being able to pursue their plans for the future.¹

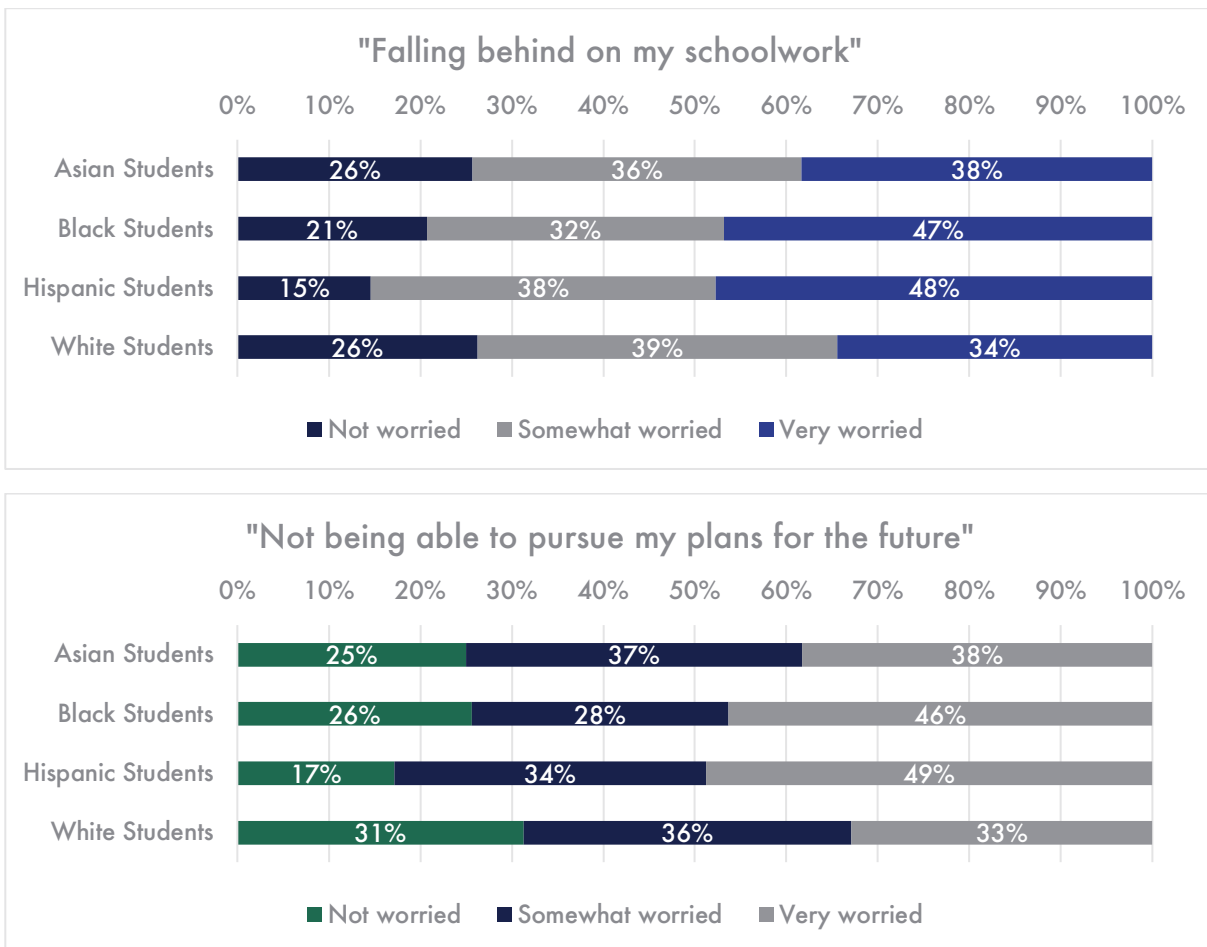


Students’ worries about losing connections and missing out on extracurricular activities were similar across most student characteristics. However, students in groups that have been historically privileged in schools were less likely to report being very worried about falling behind academically and not being able to pursue their plans for the future. For example, White students and students who are not economically disadvantaged were the least likely to report these worries while Black students, Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, and immigrant students were more likely to express these worries (see the appendix tables for full results). As shown in Figure 2, about 47 percent of responding Black students and 48 percent of responding

¹ Only middle and high school students were asked about whether they were worried about ‘Not being able to pursue my plans for the future’.

Hispanic students indicated that they were very worried about falling behind on their schoolwork compared to 34 percent of White students.

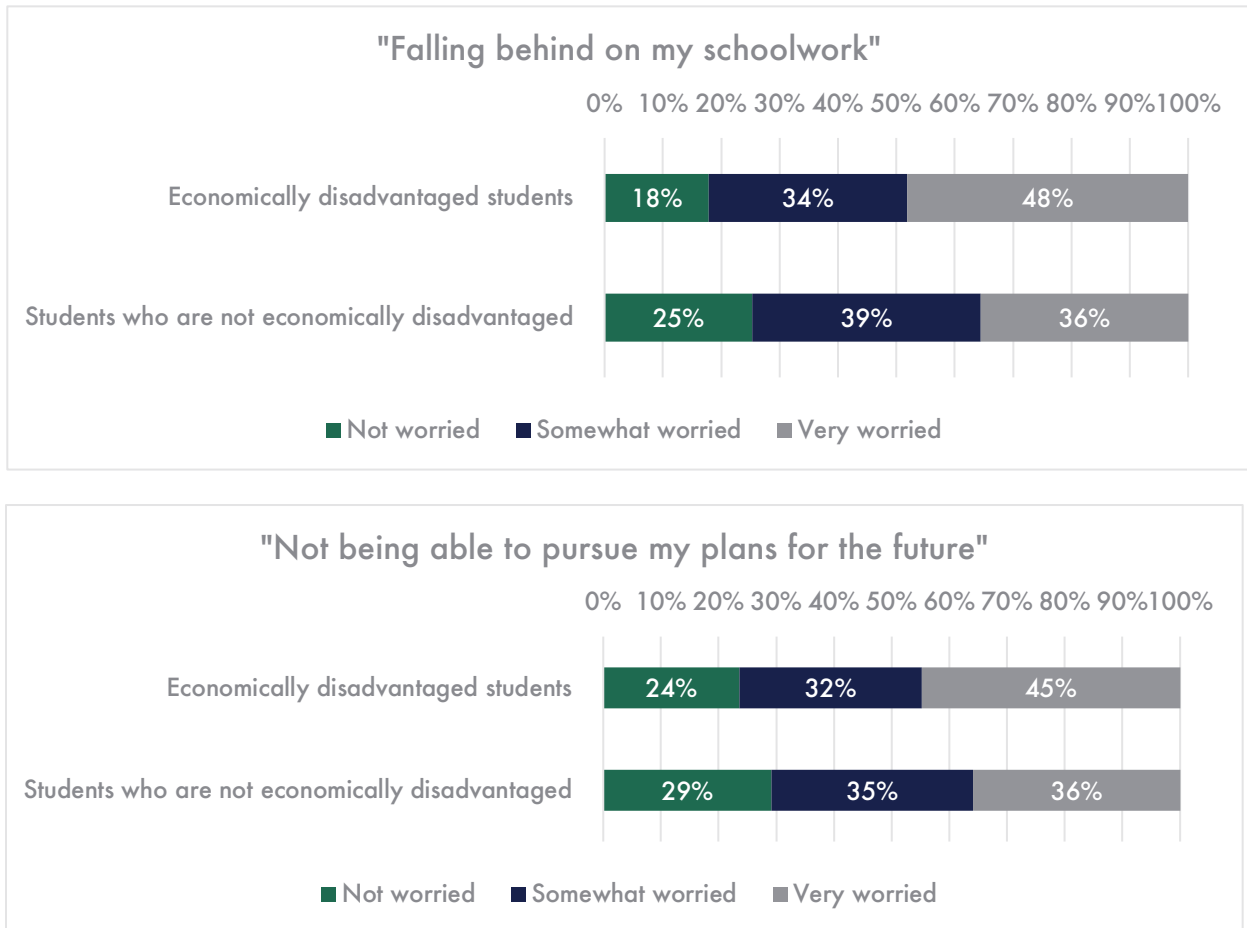
Figure 2: Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be very worried about falling behind on schoolwork and not pursuing plans for the future.



As shown in Figure 3, students who are economically disadvantaged were also more likely than their peers to indicate that they were very worried about falling behind on their schoolwork or not being able to pursue plans for their future. Specifically, 48 percent of economically disadvantaged respondents indicated that they were very worried about falling behind academically while 36 percent of students who are not economically disadvantaged indicated the

same. There were similar patterns when comparing immigrant students and non-immigrant students as well as English Learners and students who are native English speakers.

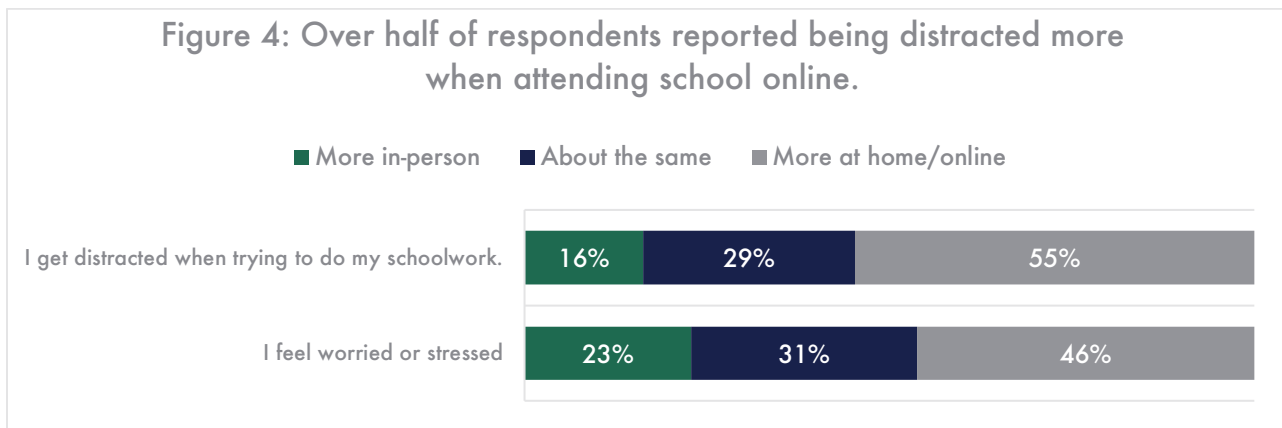
Figure 3: Economically disadvantaged students were more likely to be very worried about falling behind on schoolwork and not pursuing plans for the future.



Many, but not all, student respondents reported feeling more worried and distracted while learning at home or online.

Students were also asked to compare their social-emotional state when learning in-person and learning at home or online. As shown in Figure 4, just over half the students reported that they

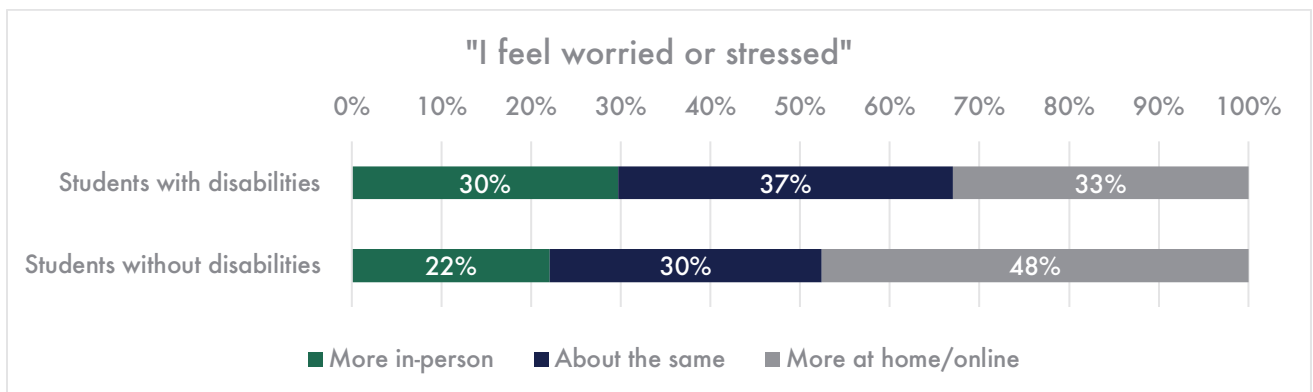
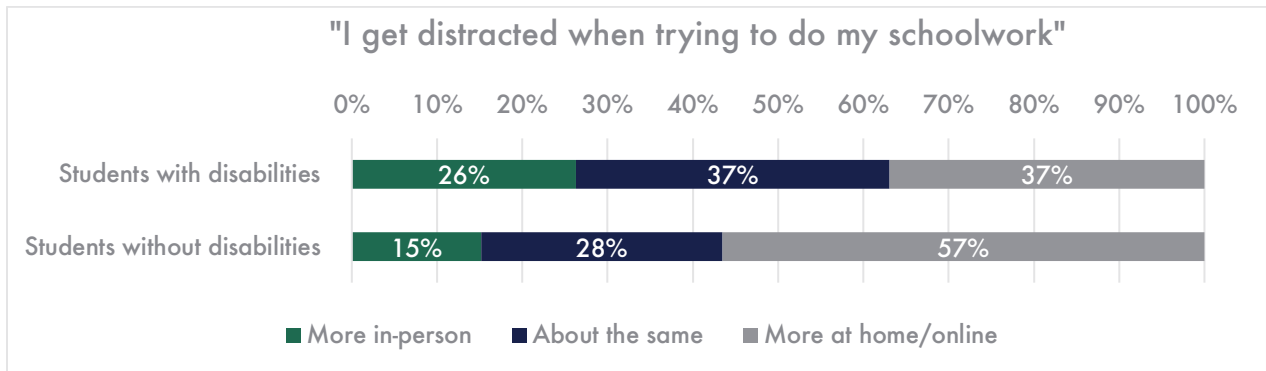
were distracted when trying to do schoolwork online more than when learning in person, and 46 percent reported feeling more worried or stressed when learning at home. Further, 23 percent of students reported feeling worried or stressed while more when learning in person and 16 percent of students report feeling distracted more when learning in person. These patterns suggest that most students prefer the in-person learning experience when it comes to social-emotional considerations but that a subset of students prefer the online learning experience.



These comparisons between in-person and online learning experiences varied somewhat across student subgroups. As shown in the appendix Table A2, higher percentage of Asian and White students indicated that they got distracted more online when compared to Black and Hispanic students.

Students' reported comparisons also varied depending on disability status. A higher percentage of students with disabilities reported that they got distracted more or felt worried or stressed more when learning in-person when compared to students without disabilities. As shown in Figure 5, 48 percent of responding students without disabilities reported that they felt worried or stressed more when learning online while only one-third of responding students with disabilities felt the same.

Figure 5: Compared to their peers, a higher percentage of students with disabilities reported that they get distracted more and feel more worried or stressed when learning in person.



Looking Ahead

As schools and districts move ahead with COVID recovery efforts, it is critical to understand the sources of student worry and stress, and how those vary for different students. For example, students of color and economically disadvantaged students were more likely to say that they were worried about falling behind academically than their peers. Going forward, it will be important to unpack this variation and target student supports accordingly.

Additionally, it is useful to understand what aspects of the online learning environment worked for students. Nearly a quarter of students surveyed report feeling more worried or stressed while learning in person, and students with disabilities were more likely to report that they felt this worry or stress more when learning in person. These students will also need supports to feel

comfortable in their schooling environment as they return to an in-person schooling environment in the 2021-22 school year.

Appendix

Table A1

	All Students	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
% of students indicating they are very worried about the following.				
Falling behind on my schoolwork	39%	40%	38%	41%
Losing connections with friends	35%	43%	34%	25%
Missing out on extracurricular activities	28%	33%	26%	23%
Not being able to pursue plans for my future	38%	N/A	36%	42%
I feel worried or stressed				
More in-person	23%	27%	23%	23%
About the same	31%	45%	28%	34%
More in virtual environment	46%	27%	48%	43%
I get distracted when trying to do my schoolwork				
More in-person	16%	36%	17%	15%
About the same	29%	36%	29%	30%
More in virtual environment	55%	27%	54%	55%

Table A2

	Asian Students	Black Students	Hispanic Students	White Students
% of students indicating they are very worried about the following.				
Falling behind on my schoolwork	38%	47%	48%	34%
Losing connections with friends	37%	29%	33%	38%
Missing out on extracurricular activities	28%	33%	27%	26%
Not being able to pursue plans for my future	38%	46%	49%	33%
I feel worried or stressed				
More in-person	23%	27%	22%	22%
About the same	30%	29%	36%	30%
More in virtual environment	47%	44%	43%	48%
I get distracted when trying to do my schoolwork				
More in-person	14%	22%	17%	14%
About the same	21%	32%	35%	27%
More in virtual environment	65%	46%	48%	59%

Table A3

	Economically Disadvantaged Students	English Learners	Immigrant Students	Students with Disabilities	Chronically Absent Students
% of students indicating they are very worried about the following.					
Falling behind on my schoolwork	48%	52%	49%	48%	50%
Losing connections with friends	34%	29%	33%	34%	31%
Missing out on extracurricular activities	30%	31%	29%	30%	27%
Not being able to pursue plans for my future	45%	58%	57%	45%	47%
I feel worried or stressed					
More in-person	23%	28%	26%	30%	27%
About the same	32%	33%	33%	37%	32%
More in virtual environment	45%	39%	41%	33%	41%
I get distracted when trying to do my schoolwork					
More in-person	19%	25%	19%	26%	19%
About the same	33%	32%	29%	37%	33%
More in virtual environment	48%	43%	51%	37%	48%

