

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Students of Color

Using Science to Maximize Resilience

January 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is on students' mental health during distance learning following the COVID-19 pandemic. It presents findings based on data from over 14,000 students who were assessed in the Spring of 2020.

The central goal was to examine patterns of mental health and well-being across students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds: White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian. Findings showed that as with adults, **youth of color generally demonstrated greater vulnerability than Whites**. Hispanic students stood out, having relatively high rates of clinically significant depression as compared to others, as well as higher levels of reported difficulties with learning in the online format. Black students scored lowest on satisfaction with how often they were able to confide in adults at school, and also on feeling that their concerns were being heard and acted upon at school. Asian students had the highest levels of worry about what would happen after graduation from high school.

In considering potential **drivers of mental health** (or risk and protective factors), results showed two themes that were common across all racial/ethnic groups. Higher levels of distress were linked with **low perceived support from parents**, and with **difficulties in remote learning**. Aside from these two themes, the most important risk and protective factors showed variations across racial/ethnic groups. For example, **low ability to focus in the online format** was linked with higher anxiety among Black and Hispanic students, whereas for Asian students, it was especially important to feel **connected with at least one supportive adult** at school.

The report concludes by presenting recommendations for how resilience can best be fostered in the student community as a whole, while also carefully attending to issues especially important for students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

Authentic Connections (AC) is a team of leading scientists, clinicians, and consultants committed to helping schools measure, track, and improve student well-being and resilience. **AC** works with schools to promote positive student outcomes by providing valuable tools such as research-based surveys, interactive presentations of data and results, actionable school-specific recommendations, and ongoing collaboration and support.

This report is based on a workshop that **AC** led at the **2020 National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) People of Color Conference**, an annual professional development and networking forum for educators of color and their allies in independent schools.

The paper begins by considering the disproportionate effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on minority students and their families. Next, it provides an overview of the **Student Resilience Survey (SRS)**, a scientifically-validated online survey designed to help schools assess the impact of disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic on student well-being and mental health. It then presents findings from the most recent administration of the **SRS** in Spring 2020 with specific breakdowns by race/ethnicity subgroups. The report concludes with a discussion of what we, at **AC**, believe educators need in order to foster resilience among students of color and their allies at school.

MISSION STATEMENT

At Authentic Connections, we aspire to maximize well-being and resilience in school communities through data-driven insights.

Note. We recognize that race and ethnicity are different constructs but for the sake of brevity, we use the terms interchangeably in this report.

COVID-19 AND RACIAL INEQUITY

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in extraordinary disruptions across all sectors of public and private life. Recent research indicates that the extent of the damage is disproportionately felt within communities and families of color.

Data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that rates of **COVID-related hospitalizations** in the U.S. through December 5, 2020 were **higher for all racial/ethnic minority groups** than for White individuals¹. Overall rates of COVID-related hospitalizations were higher for Hispanic/Latino (3.8x), American Indian/Alaska Native (3.7x), Non-Hispanic Black (3.3x), and Asian/Pacific Islander (1.1x) individuals than they were for White individuals (CDC, 2020). Relative to Whites aged 0-17 years old, **rates of COVID-19 hospitalizations were higher among minority children** of Hispanic/Latino (5.1x), Black/African American (3.7x), American Indian/Alaska Native (3.4x), and Asian/Pacific Islander (1.6x) descent (CDC, 2020).

The **economic impact of COVID-19** has also been disproportionately hard on communities of color. According to the Pew Research Center, **COVID-related job losses** among women were more pronounced among Hispanics (-21%), Asians (-19%), and Blacks (-17%) compared to Whites (-13%); among men, similarly, job loss rates were higher for Asians (-17%), Hispanics (-15%), and Blacks (-13%) compared to Whites (-9%) (Pew Research Center, 2020a)².

Considering only workers who are parents, the **percentage of mothers who were employed declined** more steeply among Hispanic (-8.0%), Black (-7.4%), and Asian (-7.3%) mothers than among White mothers (-4.1%) during the period between September 2019 and September 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2020b)³. Likewise, **employment rates among fathers fell more steeply** among Hispanic (-7.2%), Black (-6.3%), and Asian (-3.7%) fathers than among Whites (-4.2%) from 2019 to 2020.

¹ Based on a cumulative sample of 90,874 laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 hospitalizations through the week ending on December 5, 2020

² Based on a comparison of February 2020 and May 2020 employment rates among workers ages 16 and older

³ Based on September 2019 and September 2020 Current Population Survey data

In a recent scientific position paper published in the American Psychological Association's *Psychological Trauma* journal, Fortuna and colleagues (2020) argue that **the combination of social inequities and traumatic experiences are mediators of toxic stress**. These, in turn, have serious negative implications for the mental health and well-being of families and communities of color.

"The sociopolitical, racial, and environmental stresses that communities of color already experience are unimaginably magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic."
(Fortuna et al., 2020)

THE AMERICAN SPRING OF 2020

The tragic murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and others during the early months of 2020 led to an ongoing period of nationwide civil unrest and protest against systemic racism and police brutality.

At AC, we are committed to helping schools in their efforts to **increase diversity, equity, and inclusion for students and staff of color and their allies**. As such, we have carefully attended to issues potentially salient to particular racial/ethnic groups.

The Student Resilience Survey

The **Student Resilience Survey (SRS)** is an online mixed-methods survey with both quantitative and open-ended questions, designed to help schools assess the impact of disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic on student well-being. The **SRS** is a short survey that can be completed online by students in approximately 10 minutes.

Between April and June of 2020, the **SRS** was completed by 14,603 students from 49 independent (private) and public schools across the United States⁴. Table 1 presents the number of students in the overall sample by racial/ethnic group.

Race/Ethnicity	N
White	9,112
Asian	2,114
Black	1,172
Hispanic	669
Other	1,536
Total	14,603

Table 1. Number of Students by Race/Ethnicity

The “Other” group itself represents a broad collection of many separate racial/ethnicity subgroups, including Multiracial, Biracial, Middle Eastern, Native American, and Other. The number of students within each of these subgroups was too small to allow for generalizations, so we do not report findings on them separately in this paper.

⁴ A complete description of the SRS and overall findings are presented in the linked white paper, [*Student Resilience Survey: Preliminary Findings and Recommendations*](#).

SYMPTOMS

The **SRS** measured two components of mental health: **Depression** and **Anxiety**. For each component, five questions asked students to report how frequently they experienced the symptom in question on a 5-point scale (0 = never, 4 = very often). The items were taken from the **Well-Being Index**, a psychometrically-validated measure consisting of 25 items on 5 subscales (Luthar et al., 2020).

Besides capturing total and average scores on **Depression** and **Anxiety**, the **SRS** enables identification of those students who have **serious levels of symptoms**—levels that warrant clinical attention. Additionally, it was possible to compare rates of serious symptoms during Spring 2020 with parallel rates in similar schools during 2019, before the pandemic, in a total sample of over 15,000 students. Figure 1 presents rates of students reporting clinically significant symptoms in 2019 versus 2020, separately by racial/ethnic group.

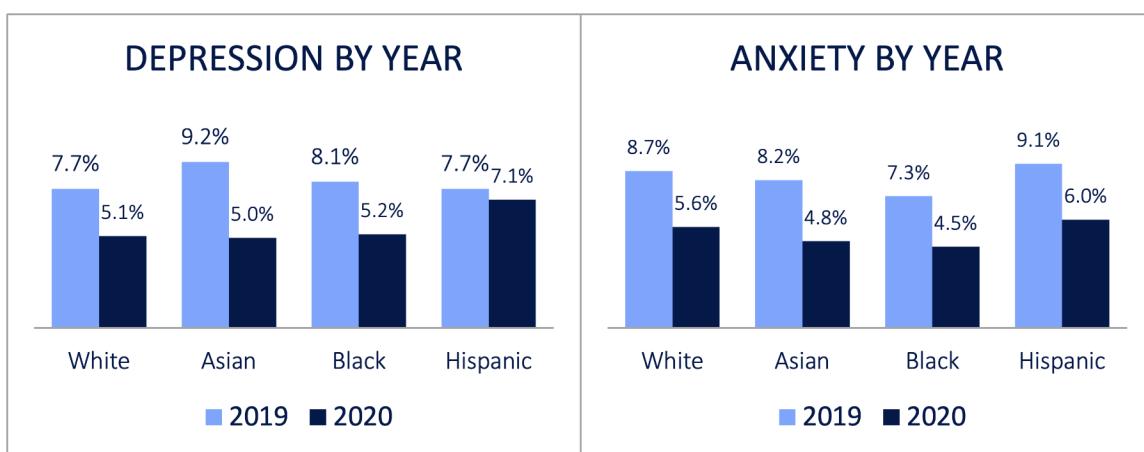


Figure 1. Percentage of Students with Serious Symptoms by Race/Ethnicity and Year

In all five racial/ethnic groups, rates of clinically significant depression and anxiety dropped—showing overall improvements—between 2019 and 2020. However, Hispanic students were the only one of four groups that did not show marked improvements in rates of serious depression between 2019 to 2020.

Figure 2 presents rates of clinically significant symptoms by racial/ethnic group over the course of the pandemic-related shift to distance learning, during the last twelve weeks of the Spring 2020 academic term.⁵

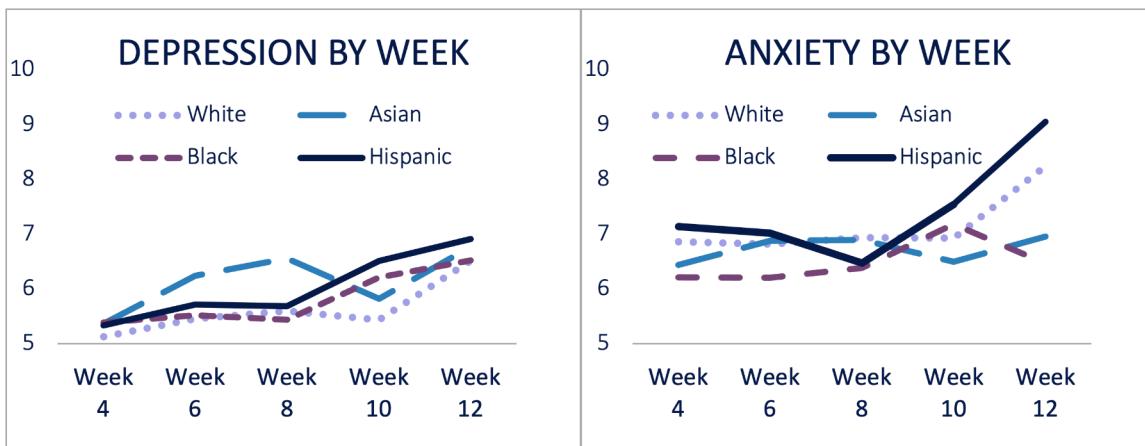


Figure 2. Percentage of Students with Serious Symptoms by Race/Ethnicity and Week

As shown in Figure 2, rates of clinically significant **Depression** and **Anxiety** increased across all ethnic groups between April and June 2020. However, the increases were most pronounced among Hispanic students.

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

The SRS assessed two broad aspects of student life during COVID-19—**Academics** and **Relationships**—using empirically-validated measures with multiple items rated on 5-point scales.

Three components of academics, all specific to the COVID-19 distance learning context, were measured. **Learning Ability** assessed how well students felt they were able to learn at home in the new online format. **Learning Focus** asked students how well they were able to focus during their online classes. **Time for Fun** asked students whether their typical days at home had specific times set aside for activities that were fun or relaxing.

⁵ We use the week of March 16-20, 2020 as Week 1 of distance learning; school closure data are from the website Edweek.org

Similarly, three components of students' close relationships during distance learning were measured. ***Sharing with Friends*** and ***Sharing with Adults*** asked how frequently students were able to share personal concerns with a peer or supportive adult, respectively, and how satisfied they were with that degree of sharing. A third measure, ***Concerns Heard***, asked students about the degree to which they felt teachers and administrators were listening to their concerns about school, and were doing something about those concerns.

Two quantitative measures assessed both positive and negative aspects of students' relationships with parents or adults at home. ***Parent Support*** assessed the degree to which students felt their parents understood and helped manage their feelings. ***Parent Stress*** asked students about the degree to which they felt their parents were a source of stress for them.

Additionally, based on preliminary findings from the first six weeks of data collection, we added 4 quantitative measures on worries for those schools assessed in the second six week period (a total of 7,506 students completed this expanded version of the **SRS**). Students were asked how much they worried about each of the following: completing school assignments/keeping up their grades (***Worry Grades***), uncertainty about their personal futures including college and what will happen after high school graduation (***Worry Post-Graduation***), their parents' jobs or family finances (***Worry Family Job***), and the physical health of their parents/family members (***Worry Family Health***). These variables were each rated on five point scales from "Not at all" to "Very much."

TOP AREAS LINKED WITH WELL-BEING

Besides comparing racial/ethnic subgroups on dimensions of well-being, another major question addressed was the following: **Which of the many risk and protective factors measured were most strongly related to students' Depression and Anxiety levels?**

Figure 3 presents the **top 3 areas linked with Depression** within each racial/ethnic group (risk factors associated with higher **Depression** scores are shown in red, and protective factors linked with lower **Depression** scores are in green).

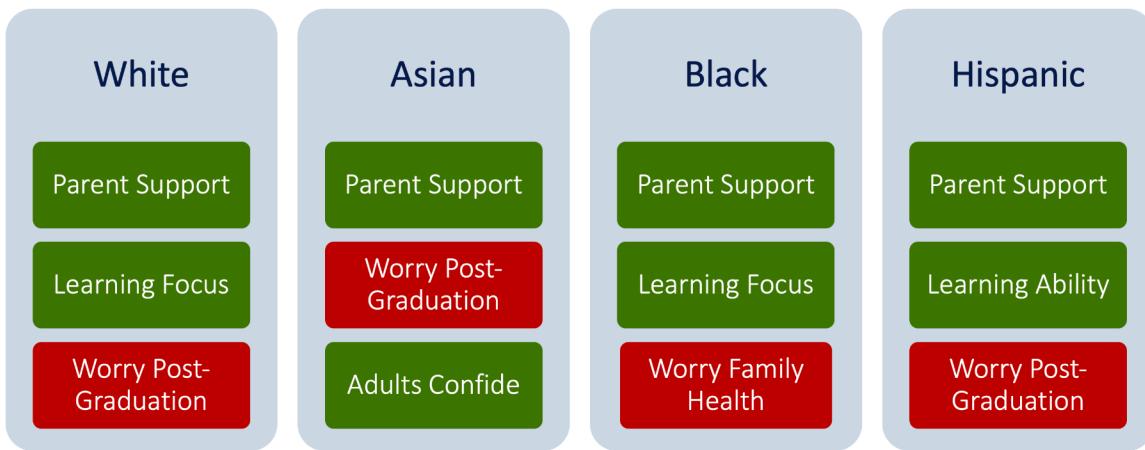


Figure 3. Top 3 Risk/Protective Factors Predicting Depression by Race/Ethnicity

For all racial/ethnic groups, the single most important protective factor associated with lower **Depression** scores was a high level of **Parent Support**. Figure 4 shows the average scores of perceived support and of stress experienced around parents by race/ethnicity. As shown, youth of color were slightly more vulnerable than Whites on both **Parent Support** and **Parent Stress**.

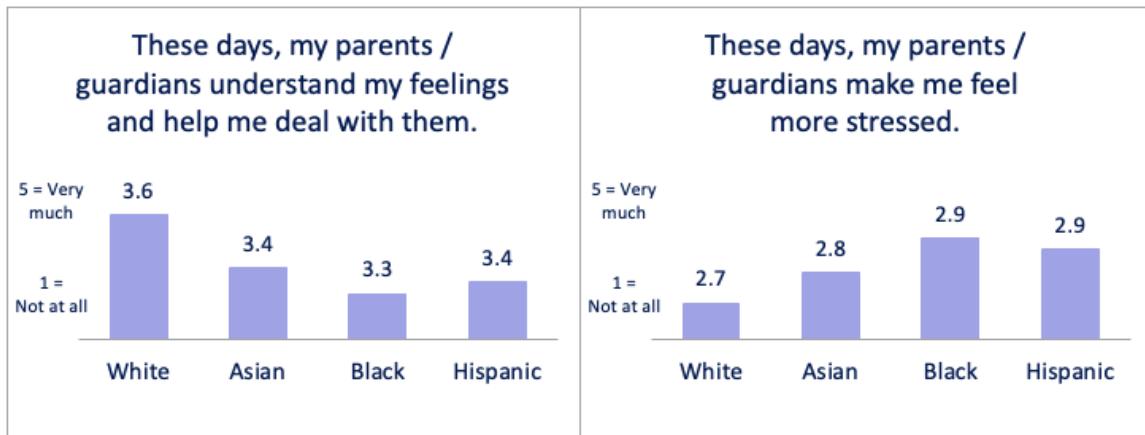


Figure 4. Mean Scores for Parent Support and Parent Stress by Race/Ethnicity

For all groups except for Asian students, the next strongest predictor of **Depression** following parental support involved distance learning. High levels of **Learning Focus** ("During your online classes in general, how distracted or focused are you?") were protective against **Depression** among White and Black students, and high levels of **Learning Ability** ("How well are you able to learn new school materials at home?") were among the top three protective factors for Hispanic students. Mean scores on both these variables are shown in Figure 5.

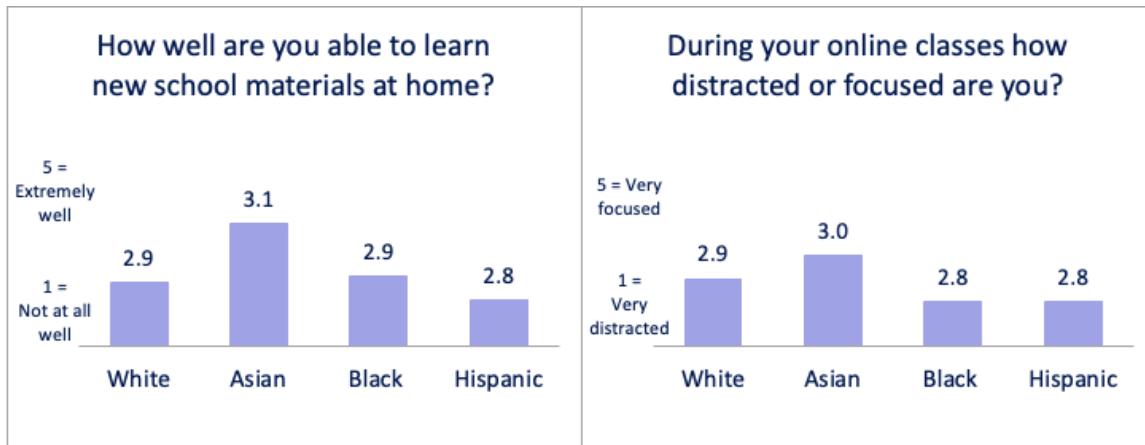


Figure 5. Mean Scores for Learning Ability and Learning Focus by Race/Ethnicity

For all but Black students, **Worry Post-Graduation** was one of the top 3 risk factors for **Depression**, with higher worry scores predicting higher levels of **Depression**; for Black students, **Worry Family Health** was more salient. Mean scores on these worry dimensions by race/ethnicity are shown in Figure 6.

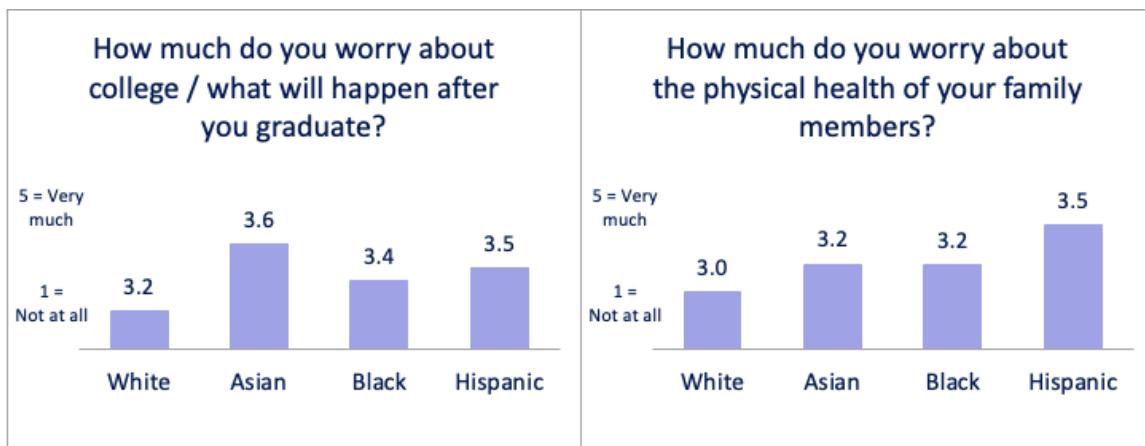


Figure 6. Mean Scores for Worry Post-Graduation and Worry Family Health by Race/Ethnicity

Turning next to the most important **risk and protective factors linked with Anxiety**, findings are summarized in Figure 7 for each racial/ethnic group. Risk factors associated with high **Anxiety** scores are shown in red, and protective factors linked with low levels of **Anxiety** are shown in green.

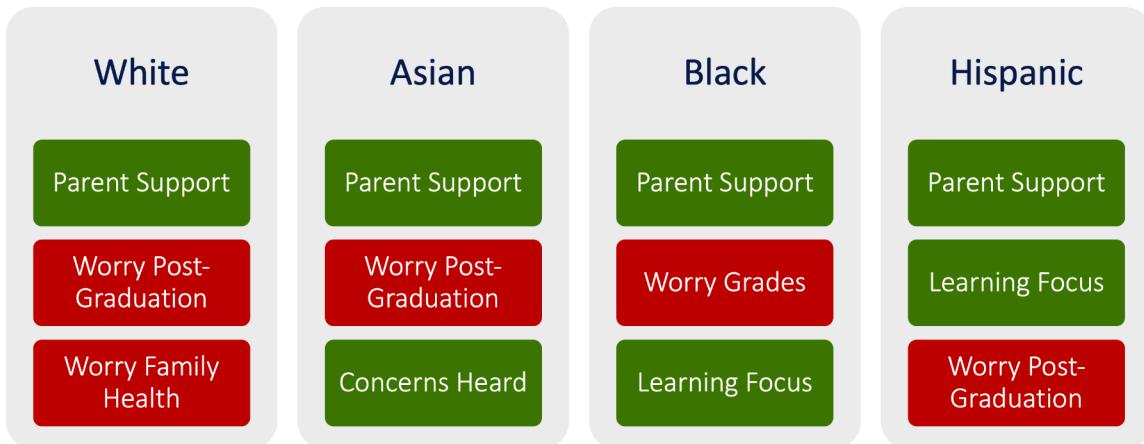


Figure 7. Top 3 Risk/Protective Factors Predicting Anxiety by Race/Ethnicity

As was the case for **Depression**, for all race/ethnic groups, the most important protective factor associated with **Anxiety** was a high level of **Parent Support**. Comparisons by ethnic group were previously shown in Figure 4. Next strongest were risk factors related to academics. Low levels of **Learning Focus** were especially important in predicting **Anxiety** among Hispanic and Black students. **Worry Post-Graduation** was a top predictor of **Anxiety** among White, Asian, and Hispanic students, and **Worry Grades** was a top risk factor for Black students.

As shown in Figure 7, for White students only, high levels of **Worry Family Health** were strongly linked with **Anxiety**, and for Asian students only, low levels of **Concerns Heard** at school were linked with increased **Anxiety**.

Asian students were the only group for whom the top three predictor variables associated with mental health symptoms involved relationships with adults at school. For Asian students only, high levels of **Adults Confide** were associated with lower **Depression** (Figure 3), and high levels of **Concerns Heard** were protective against **Anxiety** (Figure 7).

The **Adults Confide** variable captured two components of relationships with adults at school: how frequently students shared personal concerns with a trusted adult, and how satisfied they were with this amount of confiding. Similarly, the **Concerns Heard** variable measured whether students felt adults were listening to their concerns, and whether they felt adults were acting on

their concerns about school. Figure 8 shows comparisons by race/ethnicity for feeling satisfied with adult confiding and for feeling heard by adults at school.

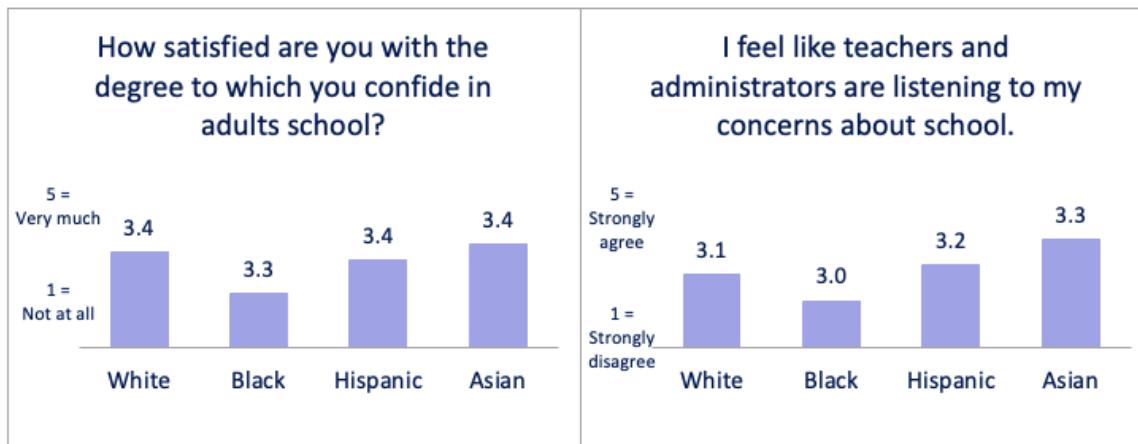


Figure 8. Mean Scores for Satisfaction with Adults Confide and for Feeling Heard

SRS QUALITATIVE RESPONSES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Besides the quantitative, rating-scale variables discussed so far, the **SRS** also included three open-ended free response questions designed to capture students' feelings about issues that were top of mind for them during distance learning. Table 2 lists the three free response questions included in the **SRS**.

FREE RESPONSE PROMPTS
These days, what are you most worried about?
In thinking about your school experience, what could your teachers/faculty be doing to improve things for you?
What are things that your school is doing well to support your overall school experience and well-being?

Table 2. Student Resilience Survey Free Response Prompts

As shown in Figure 9, the top 3 most frequently mentioned themes in response to the question on what they were **Most Worried About** were **Family Well-Being**, **Academic Workload**, and **Post-Graduation/College**. Across all ethnic groups, **Family Well-Being** was top of mind for students. As compared to Whites, Asian and Black students mentioned **Future/College** as a worry significantly more often, and Hispanic students mentioned **Academic Workload** as a worry somewhat more often.

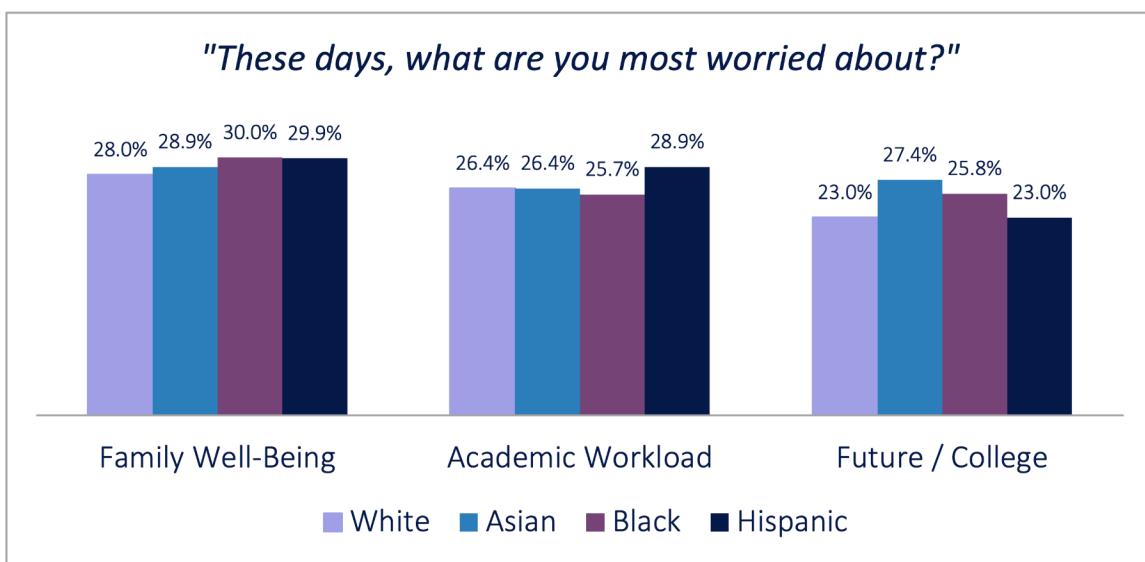


Figure 9. Response Themes for Most Worried About by Ethnicity

Figure 10 shows the most frequently mentioned themes in response to the question on **Suggestions for Improvement** at school. Black students were significantly more likely than other groups to mention **Academic Workload** as needing improvement, and Asian students were significantly more likely to mention **Faculty Support**. Black students were significantly less likely to mention **Learning Efficacy** as needing improvement than all other groups.

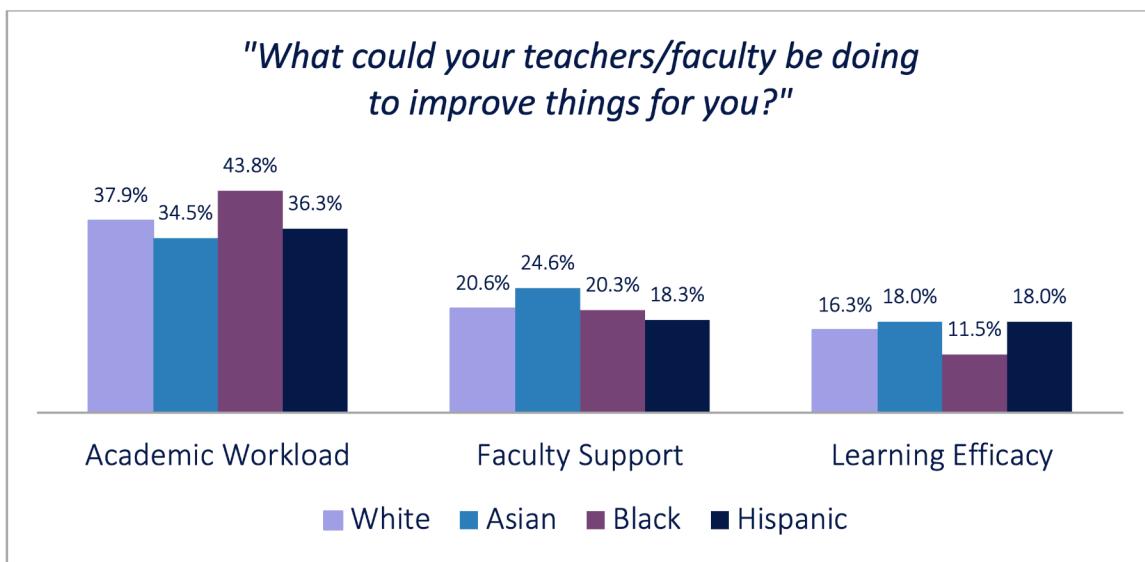


Figure 10. Response Themes for Suggestions for Improvement by Ethnicity

Figure 11 shows the top 3 most frequently mentioned themes for **What's Going Well** at school. Black students were significantly more likely than all other groups to name **Faculty Support** as a positive, and Asian students were significantly more likely to name **Learning Efficacy** as something that was going well. Across all ethnic groups, **Structure/Schedule** during distance learning was also frequently mentioned as something that was going well.

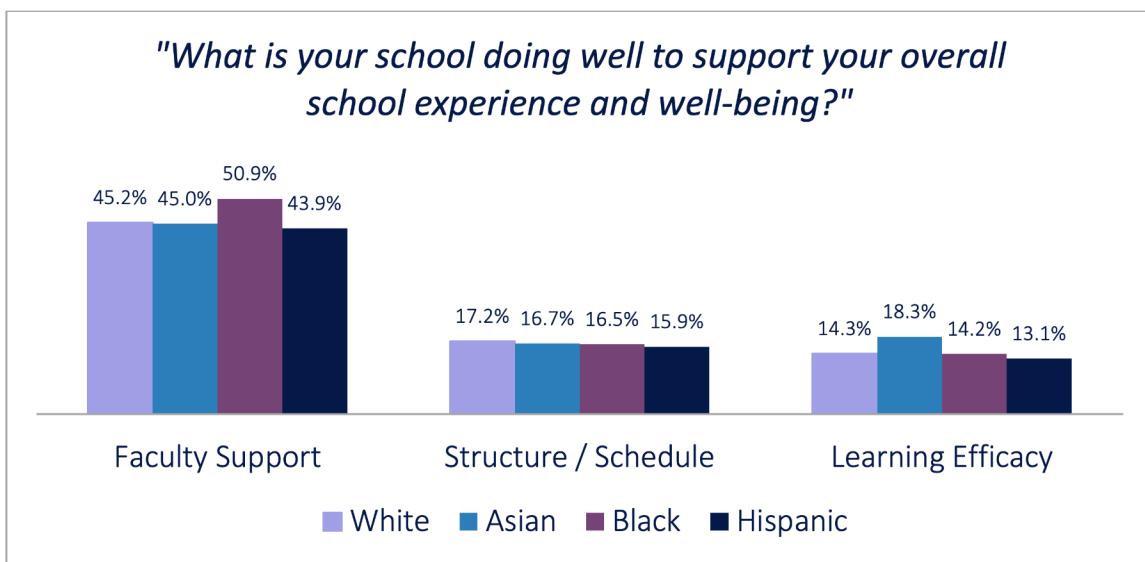


Figure 11. Response Themes for What's Going Well by Ethnicity

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Taken together, several themes emerged from examining quantitative and qualitative data on over 14,000 students assessed during distance learning due to COVID-19. Overall, findings of this study showed some issues that were clearly important **across all racial/ethnic groups**, and others that were **distinct across the different subgroups** of students. Table 4 presents the **specific focus areas** that emerged as the most important risk and protective factors, along with **actionable recommendations** that can be taken to address each concern.

Considering the common themes, feelings of **low support from parents** was clearly the most important factor linked with **high depression and anxiety across all groups**, and it was commonly mentioned in open-ended responses as well. Implications for interventions are that it is **essential to ensure support for parents**, as they themselves continue to face serious and often prolonged challenges due to COVID-19. These interventions can take the form of **talks organized for parents** about stressors commonly faced and ways of coping, as well as **parent support groups** convened on a regular basis.

A second theme emerging across all racial/ethnic groups was **concerns about learning**. In quantitative analyses, **difficulties with focusing on and mastering academic materials** during distance learning were among the top three variables linked with **higher levels of depression and anxiety for all groups**. Similarly, in open-ended responses on how the school could improve things for them, students from all racial/ethnic groups noted the **desire for reductions in workload**. These findings indicate the need to **monitor subgroups of students who are having learning difficulties**, and to **identify possible reasons for these difficulties**, such as lack of office hours to discuss difficult class materials or too much screen time without breaks in between.

Considering **findings more specific to students by race/ethnicity**, overall, the findings showed that **Hispanic students were at a disadvantage** compared to others in many respects. First, Hispanic students were the only group for whom **rates of serious depression and anxiety were not notably improved** compared to rates previously documented in 2019. Second, the **greatest increases in rates of serious depression and anxiety** in assessments during each week of pandemic-related distance learning were seen among Hispanic students. Third,

FOCUS AREA	RECOMMENDATION	EXAMPLES
Low Parent Support	Provide Support for Caregiving Parents	Schedule talks for parents on social-emotional challenges for youth during COVID, and opportunities for them to get support for themselves, in their role as parents
	Providing Structured Academic Help	Ensure students have the opportunity to receive extra help from various sources (e.g., peer-to-peer tutoring / mentoring, office hours)
	Providing Opportunities to Connect	Regularly schedule unstructured opportunities for students to get together socially (not to discuss work)
	Identifying and Using “Nominated Adults”	Ask students in whom they would confide if they had a personal problem; shift responsibilities accordingly so that frequently nominated adults can be more available to students
	Communicating Actions Stemming from Student Concerns	Seek regular feedback on plans, procedures and the school climate, and perceptions of DEI initiatives; clearly outline the feedback received and how it will be addressed
	Scheduling Time with College Admissions Staff	Have counselors connect with college admissions' offices about how they plan to accommodate in their considerations of applicants' grades and extracurriculars; ensure students and families understand that accommodations will be made

Table 4. Top Areas Impacting Well-Being and Recommended Practices

Hispanic students were **least likely to report that they felt they were learning effectively** during the online distance-learning format. Finally, **worries about family health were highest** in this group, possibly reflecting the high emphasis on family closeness in Hispanic communities; as a result of this, there could have been increased concerns about older relatives such as grandparents. Considered together, the findings indicate the **need for focused attention to issues of mental health as well as learning efficacy among Hispanic students** as the pandemic continues. This can take the form of additional one-on-one connections with teachers and supportive adults, and also affinity groups where students can share concerns with others from similar backgrounds.

Black students scored lowest on **satisfaction with connections with adults at school**, and on feeling like their **concerns were being heard and acted upon**. Findings on low satisfaction with adult connections could be due to a **low representation of Black individuals among faculty and administrators in high-achieving schools**, such that it could be more difficult for students to find **supportive adults with similar racial/ethnic backgrounds** with whom they could discuss shared stressors. Both findings may also be tied to an **increased focus on racism and discrimination**, generally in the **nationwide Black Lives Matter movement**, and specifically to high-achieving schools in **social media accounts dedicated to highlighting accounts of racism** experienced by current and former students and staff (e.g., “Black@[School Name]”). In the months ahead, it is clear that Black students will need to see convincing evidence that their **concerns around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are being taken seriously** by their schools, with appropriate consequences for students and adults in the community who perpetrate racism.

Asian students stood out on two dimensions: first, that they **worried the most about college and their futures after high school graduation**, and second, that **positive connections with school adults** were among the top three protective factors linked with lower depression and anxiety. Again, both findings may be linked to aspects of culture. With regard to worries about college, this may reflect a **high value placed on higher education** in Asian families generally, and possibly still more so among international students, many of whom are from Asia. Similarly, in Asian cultures, the **emphasis on privacy about psychological problems** can limit help-seeking, so that could have been considerable benefits for those Asian students who **were able to connect with and who felt heard by** at

least one supportive adult at school. It will be important for schools to have regular discussions— for students and their parents— about ways in which colleges have modified application processes and acceptance criteria in light of the pandemic. As with other racial/ethnic subgroups, it will also be important to **ensure that every student is connected to at least one supportive adult at school**, and small affinity groups can also provide valuable help and peer support.

In conclusion, results of this study demonstrate the critical need for schools to carefully assess well-being not only among students as a whole but also separately by racial/ethnic subgroups. The findings on over 14,000 students showed some commonalities in the top areas impacting student well-being overall, but also revealed significant differences, many of which could be tied to shared subcultural experiences. In the months and years ahead, it will be important for schools to regularly measure and track mental health symptoms—as well as important, *modifiable* risk and protective factors linked with these—ensuring careful attention to issues particularly important in specific subgroups. This type of specificity of analysis is essential to tailor interventions best fitted to the needs of each subgroup of students, fostering resilience in the face of continuing challenges at the national and local levels.

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