

# ONE YEAR OF COVID-19:

## NORTH CAROLINA YOUTH PEER SURVEY FINDINGS

Youth Health Advisors  
Children and Youth Branch  
Division of Public Health

JUNE 2021



# WHO ARE THE YOUTH HEALTH ADVISORS?

The North Carolina Division of Public Health, Children and Youth Branch, Youth Health Advisors (YHAs) are a group of high school-aged students across the state interested in the health and wellbeing of North Carolina's youth. Our team is committed to identifying and amplifying the health needs of our peers statewide.

The Children and Youth Branch is located within the Women and Children's Health Section within the North Carolina Division of Public Health. The Children and Youth Branch partners with the Youth Health Advisor team in order to offer programs and services in a relevant, youth-centered, and community-based system of care.

# WHAT IS THE "YOUTH PEER SURVEY"?

This statewide survey was inspired by and created in consultation with youth leaders from the Kentucky Student Voice Team who gave permission for the North Carolina Youth Health Advisors to replicate aspects of their survey.

The Youth Health Advisor Team youth leaders aided in the development of the survey to emphasize changes in health, well-being, and health care access related to the daily life changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey, titled "Youth Peer Survey: The Impact of COVID-19" looked to identify changes to the educational and health experience of middle and high-school-aged youth in North Carolina approximately one year into the national COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey asked questions related to: the youth educational experience, changes in daily life, changes in mental and physical well-being, and access to or changes in physical and mental health care.

The 10-minute survey was shared electronically in February 2021 primarily through social media, school, and state agency networks. The following report shares the findings from this survey and reflects the experience of survey respondents as of February 2021. These survey results are not generalizable to the entire youth population in North Carolina.

## “A NOTE ABOUT QUOTES:”

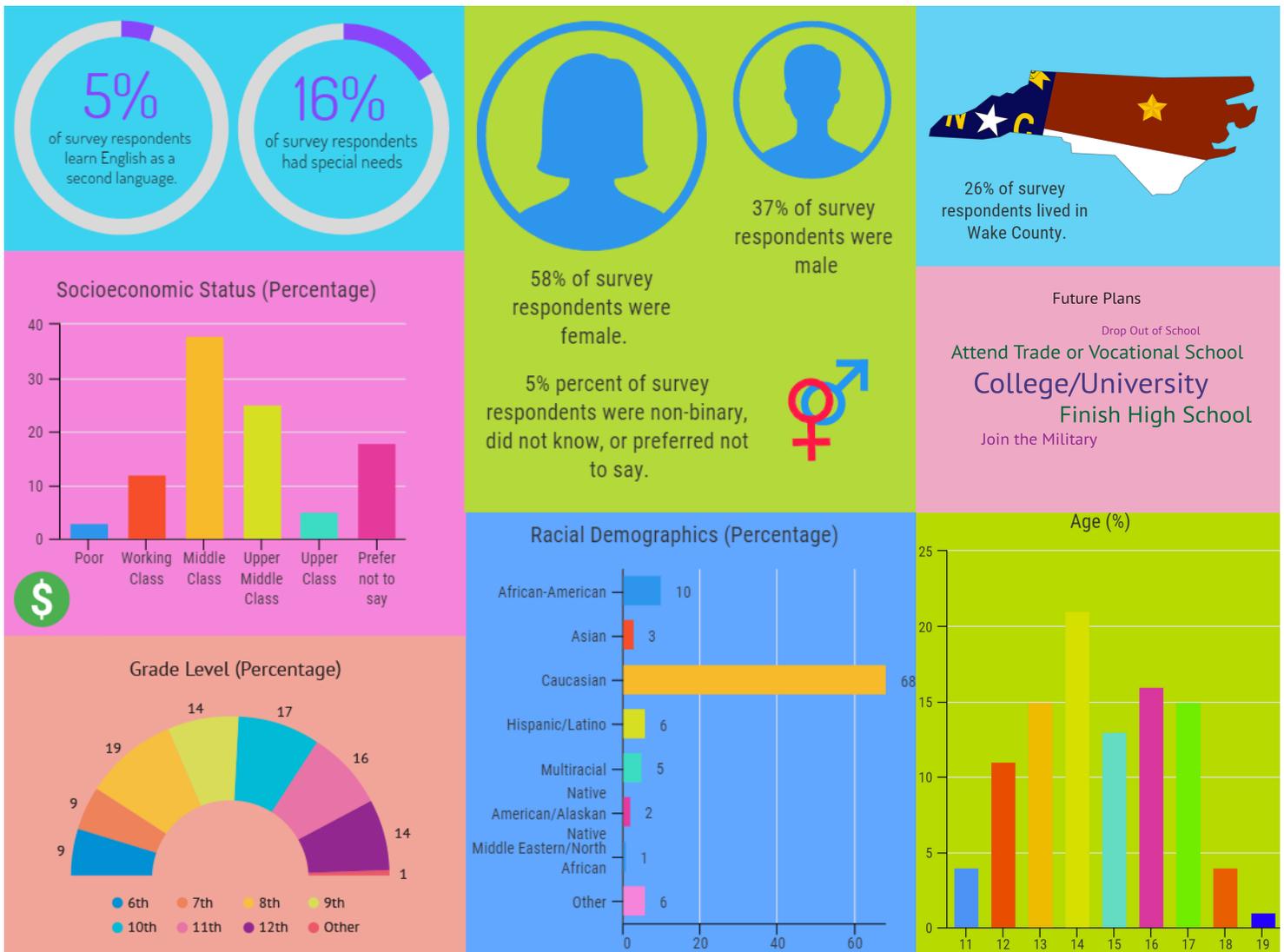
THE QUOTES YOU SEE IN THIS REPORT ARE DIRECTLY FROM YOUTH SURVEY RESPONDENTS SHARING THEIR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

# SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

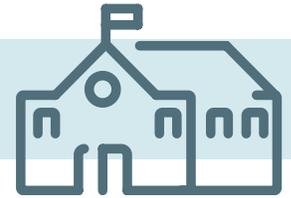


This survey received over 1,200 responses with 762 complete responses from 67 counties across the state of North Carolina. Survey respondents represent a variety of grades and ages. Respondents report a variety of plans for their futures with most planning on attending college/university. The survey has some representation from those who identify as English language learners and those who identify as having a special healthcare need whether physical, developmental, or behavioral.

Though a great variety of ages and grade levels were represented within the survey results, the results were largely biased toward white, middle-class or female youth in central North Carolina. Therefore, the survey does not properly represent the larger North Carolina youth population due to a lack of responses from different genders and geographic locations, minority youth, and youth in lower socioeconomic statuses.

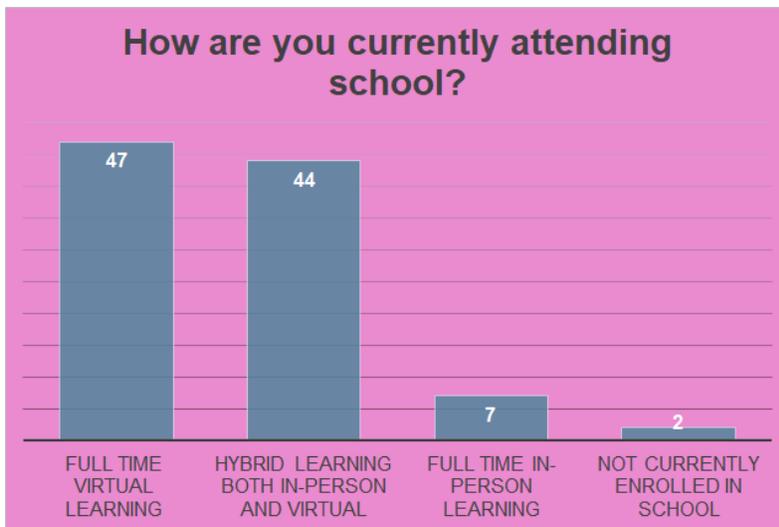


# LEARNING AND SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

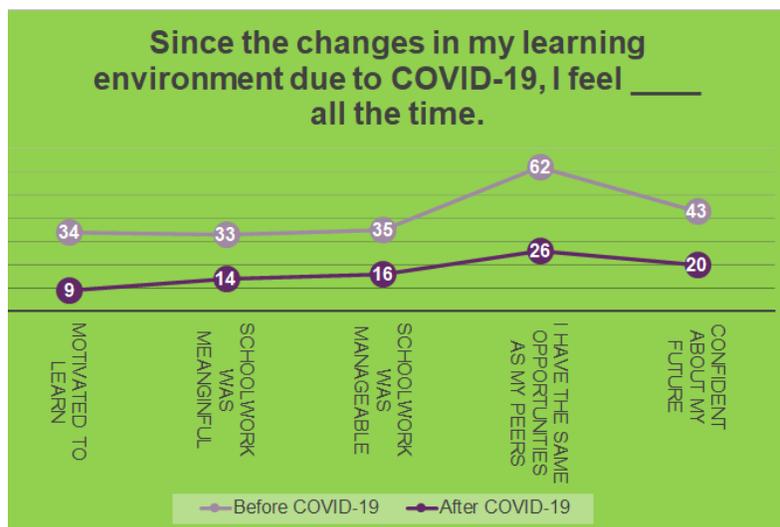


“PERSONALLY I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AN OVER ACHIEVER, I’VE ALWAYS RECEIVED A/B IN MY CLASSES BUT SINCE COVID I’VE BEEN FAILING ALL MY CLASSES. NOW I RECEIVE C/F. WHEN I WAS IN SCHOOL I PARTICIPATED IN SOCCER AND TENNIS AND MULTIPLE CLUBS. I WAS VERY ACTIVE. BUT NOW I SLEEP IN EVERY SINGLE DAY AND STAY UP ALL NIGHT. I LOVED GOING TO SCHOOL BECAUSE EVEN IF I WAS HAVING A BAD DAY SCHOOL WOULD FIX EVERYTHING WHEN I WOULD SEE MY FRIENDS.”

COVID-19 has brought changes in all areas of life, but one major one is school. Both the learning environment and overall school experience has changed over the past year for youth all over the state. At the time this data was collected in February 2021, 47% of students who responded to the survey were still attending school virtually. However, 67% of students said that they would prefer to be in-person for school.



Survey Question Number 5

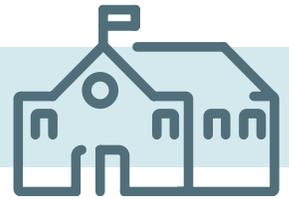


Survey Question Number 9

Overall, survey respondents reported lowered motivation and engagement in school since COVID-19. Students reported that schoolwork was less manageable and meaningful to them in the time after COVID-19.

Unfortunately, many students feel they do not have the same opportunities as their classmates following the pandemic and many report feeling less confident about their academic future.

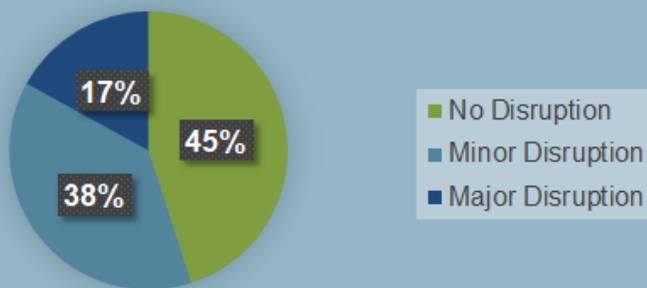
# LEARNING AND SCHOOL EXPERIENCE



The survey reports that a large amount of students have reliable internet and cell phone service/data with some variability. 83% of students have access to a desktop, laptop, tablet, or notebook computer all of the time; 86% do not have to share this device with someone in their household. However, it is important to note that this was primarily an electronic survey which likely was accessed by students who already have consistent internet and technology access.

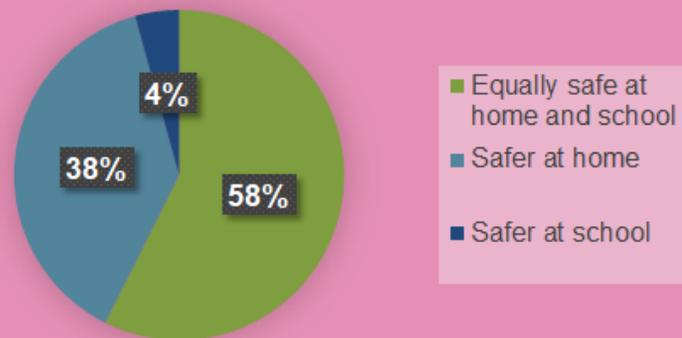
The educational experience for students with a disability is especially important to keep in mind. The majority of students who identified as receiving services for a physical, developmental, or behavioral disability reported some disruption in those services as seen below.

Have any services or instruction you were receiving because of a disability been disrupted as a result of remote learning?



Survey Question Number 35

Do you feel safer at home or at school?



Survey Question Number 11

As far as safety is concerned, 58% of students feel equally safe at both home and school as seen above. Those who identified as male were 6% more likely than females to say they felt equally safe at home and school. Young people who identified as Black, Asian, Latino or Hispanic, Native American, Middle Eastern, and multiracial were all less likely than white respondents to say they felt equally safe at home and school. Finally, young people who identified their families' socioeconomic status to be poor or working poor were less likely to report feeling equally safe at home and school, with the majority reporting they feel safest at home.

# RECOMMENDATIONS:



## LEARNING AND SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Find ways to authentically connect with students to let them know you care and encourage hope for the future

Make more assignments using online resources, as well as providing physical copies for those who need them

Increase access to technology and reliable internet service

Build in class days that are less content heavy and more relaxed/fun encourage student motivation

Look for natural opportunities to emphasize the school environment as a safe space

Recognize that learning in a digital world can quickly lead to students feeling burned out

# PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

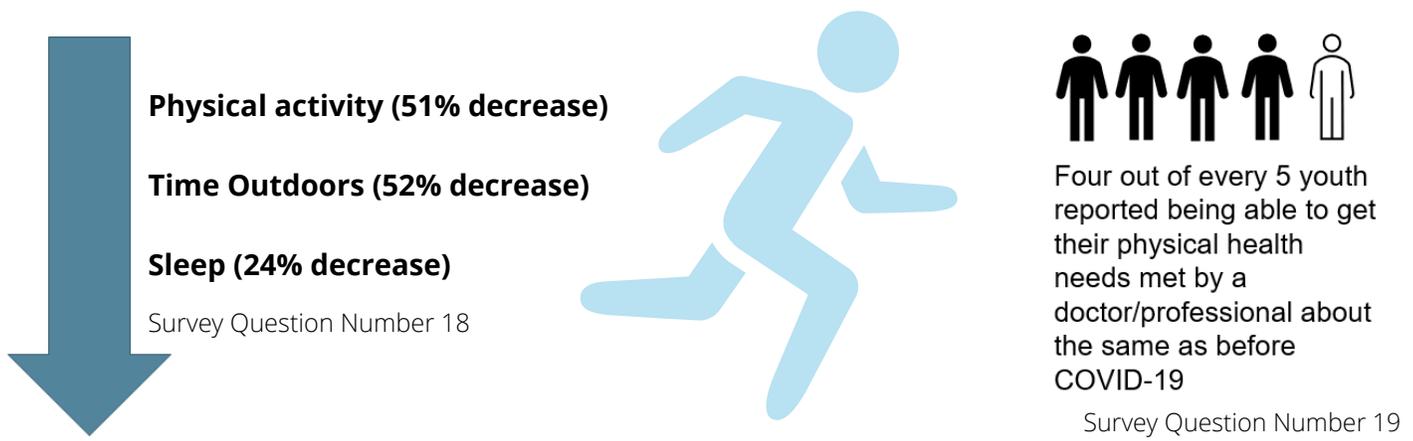


“**THERE IS NOT ENOUGH TIME FOR FITNESS. WE STAY ON THE COMPUTER ALL DAY WHEN WE ARE HOME AND WE DON'T HAVE TIME TO MOVE AROUND.**”

Over the span of the COVID-19 pandemic, adolescents have experienced multiple changes to their physical health. Some of these changes demonstrate negative impacts on adolescent physical well-being. For instance, 51% of respondents have reported a decrease in physical activity and time spent outdoors compared to the time before COVID-19. This significant decrease could be a result of the lack of sports and outdoor extracurriculars. In addition, with virtual learning, many adolescents are no longer required to leave their house for school and be active.

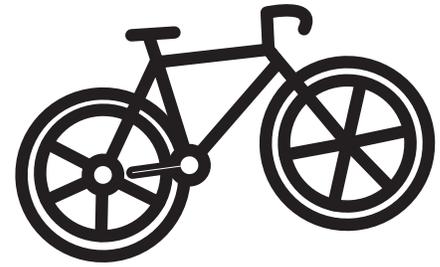
Nearly three-quarters of those who reported a decrease in physical activity also reported that they "never" felt motivated to learn which is something significant to consider as it demonstrates how physical activity impacts motivation to learn. Those who reported lower levels of family income reported less physical activity than those with higher family incomes which may be due to the reduction of opportunities that the school environment provides everyone with regardless of income to participate in sports and activities. 5% of survey respondents stated they were more concerned about having enough food to eat each day compared to before COVID-19.

Decreased sleep can have many negative impacts on the physical and mental well-being of youth. 24% of adolescents reported sleeping less since the beginning of the pandemic. Decreased sleep can result in the inability to concentrate, fatigue, and increased anxiety. Although there have been adverse effects on physical health due to COVID-19, 73% of youth reported that they are able to get their physical health needs met by a doctor/professional about the same as before or even more than before. This demonstrates that the majority of youth were still able to get help with their physical health as needed despite the limitations caused by COVID-19. Overall, there has been a decrease in physical activity and in behaviors that are beneficial to physical health but individuals reported that they were able to get their physical health needs met.



# RECOMMENDATIONS:

## PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



Reduce screen time

Promote outdoor activities as well as movement during virtual learning

Create small, socially distant activities for students to engage in both indoors and outside

Teach time-management strategies

Encourage healthy sleep and nutrition habits

Encourage preventive care visits and immunizations to stay healthy

# MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



**“ I FEEL LIKE MORE PEOPLE HAVE GOTTEN MORE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES (SUICIDAL, DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, ETC.). A LOT OF TEENS DON'T KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH IT BECAUSE THEY ARE SCARED TO TALK ABOUT IT TO THEIR PARENTS BECAUSE THEY DON'T WANT TO BE LOOKED AT DIFFERENTLY. ”**

The mental health impact of COVID-19 on young people has been one of the biggest reported challenges in this survey. From the time before COVID-19 to February 2021, many young people reported feeling increasingly unmotivated or stressed or even depressed and anxious. In addition, 61% said they are feeling more lonely than before. When asked "what has been the biggest impact of COVID-19 on young people?" many responded that being separated from friends and loved ones, switching to virtual learning, and being in a new isolated routine took a toll on their mental health.

Survey respondents also reported differences in not accessing mental health services but wanting mental health support. Respondents who identified as non-binary or female were more likely than males to say they wanted mental health support. Additionally, respondents who identified as Asian or Latino were more likely than those who identified as Black or white to say they wanted mental health support. While only 3% of respondents said they felt less physically safe in their home/living conditions, 18% said they felt less emotionally safe. Furthermore, 19% of respondents said they were more concerned about their family having enough money compared to before COVID-19.

43% of survey respondents said they were more concerned with racism in communities since the time before COVID-19. This significant rise could largely be a result of movements like Black Lives Matter as well as increased social media awareness surrounding issues around racism during the pandemic. This response demonstrates the impact that major societal movements have had on youth throughout the pandemic. The increased concern and awareness reveals the need to address these concerns. This can be done through increased conversations around racism in schools and increased education on the history and development of racism in our country. We feel one of the best ways to address the societal problem of racism is to get the support to learn how to be actively anti-racist as opposed to simply not racist.

Compared to the time before COVID-19, I feel:

	More than Before	About the same as before	Less than before
Unmotivated	61%	27%	12%
Stressed	70%	21%	9%
Depressed	47%	35%	18%
Anxious	60%	28%	12%
Grateful	42%	44%	14%

Since COVID-19, have you used any mental health services:

No, but I would like some mental health support	Females	Males	Non-binary or gender neutral	Asian	Black or African American	Latino, Hispanic, or Latinx	White or Caucasian
	16%	8%	33%	25%	13%	22%	13%

# RECOMMENDATIONS:

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



Provide mental health supports in school; encourage checking in with school support staff or other trusted adult

Promote opportunities for peer sharing and support

Normalize and destigmatize reaching out for help

Encourage taking care of basic sleep and nutrition needs

Encourage healthy social media habits

Provide mental health support that is appropriate to gender and culture



**61% SPENDING  
MORE TIME ON  
SOCIAL MEDIA**

Survey Question Number 18



**57% SPENDING  
LESS TIME  
COMMUNICATING  
WITH FRIENDS**

Survey Question Number 18



**16% REDUCTION  
IN REPORTS OF  
BULLYING**

Survey Question Numbers 16/17



**INCREASES IN  
CONCERN ABOUT THE  
FUTURE:**

**ACADEMICS: 52%  
SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL:**

**53%**

Survey Question Numbers 15

## OTHER FINDINGS

The daily life patterns of NC youth have shown some notable changes in the past year due to COVID-19. 52% of respondents said that they spend less time participating in activities for fun and 57% said they are spending less time communicating with friends.

The COVID-19 infection has been an issue of concern as 8 of 10 survey respondents expressed that they were at least “a little,” “some,” or “a lot” worried about someone they know getting COVID-19. In addition, 1 in 4 stated that it worried them “a lot.”

Patterns of social media usage have shown a significant change, with almost two-thirds of respondents saying that they now spend more time on social media than before.

Survey respondents reported a reduction in bullying following the transition of school from an in-person to a remote/virtual learning environment with 43% of respondents reporting that they experienced some amount of teasing or bullying before and only 27% reporting any bullying after.

Finally, young people report an overall increase in concerns about their future both academically and socially/emotionally since before the time of COVID-19.

# YOUTH ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE



**“TELE MENTAL HEALTH APPTS ARE IRREGULAR AND CONFLICT WITH TIMES I HAVE TO BE ONLINE FOR SCHOOL SO I MISS A LOT OF APPOINTMENTS.”**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of survey respondents reported that they have been able to get both their physical and mental health needs met as needed about the same or even more as before. Respondents were more likely to report challenges in getting their mental health care needs met as compared to physical health care needs. Mental health appointments were more commonly reported as missed than physical health appointments.

Young people who identified as having a special healthcare need were slightly more likely to report that both their physical health and mental health needs were being met. There were no significant reported differences among gender identities and health care access. However, respondents who identify as white were more likely to report that their physical and mental health care needs are being met compared to other races. Those who identified their family income as "poor or working poor" were significantly less likely to have their mental and physical health care needs met after COVID-19 than peers who reported higher family incomes. The disparities identified in healthcare access demonstrates that there is a need to support access among minority youth and youth who identify as having a lower socioeconomic status. To address some of these disparities, the primary reasons for missed health care appointments must be addressed. This may be done by expanding insurance access, creating better in-school services to support healthcare needs, and providing more opportunities for youth to learn about how to access and advocate for their own health care needs.

13% of survey respondents reported attending a telehealth virtual appointment. The majority of telehealth appointments were for behavioral health visits. 60% of respondents shared they liked their telehealth appointment *less* than an in-person appointment.

## Primary reasons for missed health care appointments

Lack of insurance or local provider	Uncomfortable with talking about parent about health care need	Provider's office too busy	Unsure of how to make an appointment	Parent not supportive of a health care need	Services were previously provided in school and no longer available
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# RECOMMENDATIONS:

## YOUTH ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE



Encourage routine preventive health care visits and immunizations

Address the primary reasons for missed healthcare appointments

Encourage parents/guardians to learn more about the health care needs of young people and how to access needed care

Educate young people on health care services available to them including laws on confidentiality and privacy

Develop strategies to improve the telehealth care experience for young people

Encourage strong relationships with a trusted adult

# CONCLUSIONS

COVID-19 HAS CHANGED A LOT FOR THE RESPONDENTS OF THIS SURVEY AND WE CAN USE OUR FINDINGS TO FOCUS ON THE AREAS OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH THAT ARE MOST URGENT TO THESE YOUNG PEOPLE.

WITH THE PANDEMIC AND THE SHIFT TO VIRTUAL LEARNING, YOUNG PEOPLE WHO RESPONDED TO THIS SURVEY REPORTED GENERALLY WORSENERED MENTAL HEALTH AND STRUGGLES WITH ACADEMIC SUCCESS. HOWEVER, BY ADDRESSING ISSUES LIKE SOCIAL ISOLATION, PROMOTING HEALTHY HABITS, AND USING SOME OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS IN THIS REPORT, WE BELIEVE MANY OF THESE CHALLENGES CAN BE ADDRESSED.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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