

Coping With COVID in Kentucky: A Call to Action for Post-Online Learning

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Organization of report

This report is organized into the following sections: First, we briefly introduce the purpose and rationale for the report, speaking to why student testimonies taken from across the state of Kentucky still hold incredible insight for how learning environments should be designed in the post-online learning era. Next, we speak to the methods that informed our data collection and analysis. The lionshare of the report highlights the central findings from our analysis, which we present vis-a-vis “themes” and “sub-themes.” Each theme includes a short description of the theme, as well as illustrative quotes. Then, we share recommendations for educational practice based on our analysis of data, as well as our reflections as researchers. These collective reflections, based on our own experiences as student researchers, serve to close out the report as a reminder of the power and potential of authentic student voice.

PURPOSE

This report is based on data from the second phase of the Kentucky Student Voice Team's *Coping with Covid Study*. Its purpose as a report is to highlight emergent findings and themes with the intention of continuing to ensure that student voices, experiences, and perspectives are heard and valued as school-based decisions are made that impact students' learning lives.

In this report, dozens of student testimonies will be shared. Student testimonies hold insight into how they learn, including their experiences, challenges, and perspectives on school, curriculum, and teaching. Such insights matter for their educational experiences inside and outside of a pandemic. The shifts and struggles students have experienced will continue to have effects, as exemplified by responses throughout these interviews. The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the way that the world (including school works), with a greater frequency and prevalence of hybrid or online learning. In what follows, readers will hear explicitly about 'what works' in the context of online schooling and what may no longer work in the context of in-person schooling.

Taken together, this work holds insight into contemporary questions of best practices for teaching and learning in Kentucky in 2022 and beyond. Our team, consisting of 6 student researchers and 2 adult allies affiliated with University of Kentucky, recognizes that students continue to have a story to tell regarding their education and the effect the pandemic continues to have on it. As a student voice team, we are firm believers this type of student analyzed student data is a testament to the power citizens, students, and adults can play in leading research, practice, and policy in education.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger Kentucky Student Voice Team led study into learning during the time of COVID-19, begun in the Spring of 2020. To date, this collaborative study has included a state-wide survey and more recently, two rounds of peer-to-peer interviews. In the first round of Coping with COVID Interviews, 32 peer-to-peer interviews were conducted during Fall of 2021. These interviews took place over the Zoom video conferencing platform, and participants were paid for their participation.

In the second round of interviews, an additional 18 peer to peer interviews were conducted. In both sets of interviews, interview questions asked students their perspectives on their current school situations, their socioemotional well being, and experiences during remote, hybrid, and back to in-person learning. The interview analysis team was made of Kentucky Student Voice team members, as well as adult allies from the University of Kentucky. The work of the analysis team was to review the interview data in its entirety, searching for emergent themes and patterns. The

current report highlights these themes from the second set of peer-to-peer interviews, as well as KSVT researcher reflections on the process of doing the research itself.

THEME #1:

Student Reactions to Online/Hybrid/In-Person School

While the reaction to online schooling was mixed, on the whole, reactions skewed heavily in the negative direction. Few options were given for alternate learning, leaving students with little access to technology or preferences for alternative learning methods feeling left behind.

- “Give them options. That's what I would have liked last year, that's what I would have liked this year, and that's what I would have liked or will like for every year that we're dealing with something like this.” Interview 7

Many interactive aspects of the classroom were seldom offered such as group work and one-on-ones with teachers. The end result was students left in learning environments that were isolating and hindered learning.

- “So it's going to be like normal school, like the normal participation, the normal questioning, like warmups and just activities that you do, like group activities. And then in reality it wasn't really any of that. It was more of like a lecture and there wasn't any requirements for the cameras on, which I get. But it also, I felt like it created a barrier.” Interview 16
- “I just needed some better instruction because watching a video, you don't learn anything. You're like... I can sit here and I can watch a video three times and I'd still be like, ‘What did I watch?’ Because it's different when they're talking at a screen because you lose that sense of personality.” Interview 3917

Schools attempted to adjust to changing health conditions by switching between in-person, hybrid, and virtual learning. However, due to rapidly changing conditions, schools changed formats at rates that were difficult to maintain for students, families, and teachers. This on-and-off approach left students disoriented and less enthusiastic about their learning.

- “It was just this constant flip flop. It was tough. It was tough because one or two months this way, the other months you went another way, you can never really get a grasp on things.” Interview 7

Without enthusiasm and a lack of accountability or structure, some students simply stopped showing up to class. This severely impacted student learning and success.

- “NTI... I know it hasn't affected me really bad because I took the responsibility to go to the online lectures, but I know so many people who didn't and they just had no clue what's going on [...] And they're completely lost, a good example, my friend who took biology sophomore year. He took it during COVID so he got just the tiniest bit of biology and now he's in anatomy and physiology and he's just completely lost.” Interview 14

Meanwhile, any student enthusiastic to show up felt that the pace of learning was slower to accommodate those who didn't.

- "And with COVID, it's been constant excuses for students. And I know they need them. People do need them, but it's also difficult for people like me who are ready for challenging courses and ready for more. But they have to constantly slow down." Interview 14

The lack of cohesion and consistency within the learning environment during periods of online schooling negatively affected students' confidence in their schools and their performance in the classroom. This, along with the lack of alternative options, led to slower paced classes with fewer students in attendance.

THEME # 2:

School Administrator Decision Making

Students expressed an almost universal frustration with decisions made by administration in regard to how academics, social emotional well-being, and COVID health protocol were handled. Students also voiced how difficult it had been to reach out to administrators, which unfortunately resulted in the dismissal of their concerns. They overwhelmingly desired opportunities to help shape decision making and voice concerns about decisions made that directly impacted their learning and well-being.

- "[A few of my friends and some of the other seniors...] tried to email him, the principal, several times to set up a meeting and he did not respond to any of our emails. We had to go track him down and find him. And we were like, 'All right, we have to talk to you about some of these things.' He was kind of just kind of like, 'Uh huh. Uh huh. Yeah, okay.' We emailed him one time about Confederate flag things in the hallway and he responded to that. But the response was kind of like a generic, automated response." Interview 27

As students are learning to adapt to their school environment during the COVID era, they naturally turned to the adults who have the power to shape their local educational policy when issues arose in their schools. The reliability of administrative figures across districts was then put into question, and students felt like hasty, ill thought out decisions happened that ultimately fell short of many expectations.

- "I think sometimes [the administrators are] always like, 'Make sure you wear your mask.' But it's never an actual enforced thing compared to [how] they enforce dress code really heavily. And I'm like, 'Maybe you should focus a little bit more on masks than you do dress code because it's very crucial that we have masks on in order to stay in school.'" Interview 27

When discussing the immediate impacts of administrations' decisions in schools, students indicated that the limitations imposed by policies lacked the cultural competency and awareness necessary to accommodate for the unique needs of the student body.

- “Our superintendent made this very convoluted speech about how we need to wear masks, but they're not going to enforce it... But then our high school principal told everyone they had to wear a mask. So there's this feud between our principal and the superintendent. It was just very messy and everyone chose sides and it affected our education.” Interview 14

As the future of school policy within the context of COVID and life after COVID continues to emerge, students communicated their desire for significant refinement to the flawed decision making process that should not only involve the productive collaboration of administrators, teachers, and parents but also the most important stakeholder in this issue: students.

Sub-theme # 1: COVID Safety/Guidelines

Students expressed concern with regard to how COVID-19 safety guidelines would be applied during the return to in-person schooling. Inadequacy from previous decisions made by administration left students feeling as though their health was not going to be taken as a serious priority. Many students acknowledged that social distancing was improbable with many school districts returning to in-person learning, and they focused on the enforcement of other policies such as masking and contact tracing. *(Note: This round of interviews was conducted before several school districts lifted their mask mandates.)*

- “I think they should have made it much more enforced with the mask mandates, because I didn't have one day where I saw every single person that I saw in a day have their mask on correctly and teachers wouldn't get onto them and it was just really hard. It shouldn't be my responsibility as a student to tell other students, ‘Hey, put your mask on.’” Interview 3
- “In terms of safety, in my opinion, it would've been best for just remote learning all year. I know it's rough, I know it's tough, but it could have saved many of our members of our community. Many of our teachers and staff members have died because of COVID, it's really sad.” Interview 7

In addition to dealing with evolving school health policies, some students encountered adults who actively disregarded COVID-19 precautions. These choices made by school staff can significantly compromise students' well-being and trust in their school. Many students found this to be frustrating and forced them into situations that caused concern for their safety.

- “We have a lot of teachers who don't wear their masks either like ever. My chem teacher will not wear his mask and he will encourage us to not wear our mask sometimes.” Interview 27

Many students also expressed concern about school cultures that encouraged noncompliance of guidelines and pressure to stop masking. Students commented on seeing few students masking and feeling isolated for continuing to follow guidelines even after a school lifted mandates.

- “I still wore a mask for a while, even after because it made me feel safer, but there were just so many social cues. I know I shouldn't let them make me uncomfortable. It was very stigmatized to wear a mask once you weren't forced to.” Interview 14

Overall, students indicated that the general lack of enforcement of safety precautions left them worried about their health and the health of others. From the interviews, there is an overwhelming sentiment that students would largely benefit from comprehensive guidance and support from adults setting the tone for how to properly handle health crises in a school environment.

THEME # 3: Mental Health

The fact that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on people's mental health and well-being is increasingly well documented. Young people's mental health was also impacted in negative ways. Less known at the current moment, however, are the longer-term impacts of such a drastic change in how students managed and dealt with the severe shift in their everyday schooling as a function of COVID-19 induced changes. Behavioral responses to the re-organization of time mediated students' sense of balance and well-being, impacting their mental health situations.

For some students, the biggest mental health challenges came during remote learning.

- “So it was the spring semester of my sophomore year and my friend and I, she's one of my two best friends. We are close. She was really struggling with COVID....she basically just shut down and she was a good student. She put in the work to be a good student, but just being at home every single day, just completely made her shut down. I don't know how she passed that grade, honestly. And that was a completely different student than what I had seen just months earlier.” Interview 3

Meanwhile, others clung onto the only structure they had in their day: school. This led to unhealthy habits fostered by a lack of other stimulating activities.

- “And so school was the only thing that I had, I guess, that I could control, that's a better word for it. And so I would spend just hours at a time without going to the restroom or eating or anything, just working on schoolwork. And it was really unhealthy. And so that wasn't necessarily just because of COVID. But I think it definitely did enable me to feed into those bad habits a lot more.” Interview 3

Whether the pandemic was the inciting event or merely an amplifier, its effects on mental health were devastating and will be studied for years to come.

Sub-theme 1: Blur of Home and School Life

Because school convened from home for an extended period of time, several students struggled to maintain a balance between their home and school lives. Recognizing the structure that on-site school scheduling requires, students named how education in the pandemic became a bit of “a blur.”

- “And with being a student, like sleep and schoolwork, since everything's at home, it was all kind of a blur, like looking back on it because there wasn't like really a separation from like home life and school, because it was like all together.” Interview 16

This situation was made worse by increased time flexibility for some students of being at home, as well as the lag extra time that it takes teachers to provide students feedback online. This lack of physical presence made it easier for many students to disengage from learning and struggle with their understanding.

- “When you're at home, you've got a choice of what you want to do. You can lay in your bed and watch TV and take a nap or do anything that you ever want to do. Or you can sit on the computer, watch videos of a teacher trying to teach and then do the work. If you have a question, you have to email them, wait for them to email you back, and if it's like 3:00 AM, you're doing your school work. You don't get a question... You don't get your answer, you fall asleep the next morning, you forget what you were learning. There's just no connection there.” Interview 3917

Sub-theme 2: Shifts in Motivation

Along with the typical challenges of navigating through high school, students described how the pandemic particularly exacerbated their struggles with maintaining motivation for their schooling endeavors. The very nature of remote learning lacked the adequate structure that is crucial for students to have a proper balance between school and home life. Due to this, many students struggled to sustain their ability to focus and to perceive school in a serious light. Additionally, students described struggling to meet both internal and external expectations further contributing to a loss of motivation and feelings of hopelessness. Overall, for many students in our sample, the pandemic made maintaining motivation increasingly difficult whether it was because learning felt less meaningful to them, or the sheer difficulty of having to maintain such a strong work ethic in such an uncertain time.

- “Freshman year, I liked school. Sophomore year, I didn't like school. Junior year, it's school. I don't know. The workload, I think the workload really just changes your way that you look at school.” Interview 15

- “There's times during NTI and during bad times of COVID where I literally didn't leave my house for a week or so. And it would just be so hard to get up, do school. I never turned anything late. It was always before the due date. I was proud of myself. I know that sounded like it's the bare minimum, but I'm proud of myself, I guess, for the bare minimum.” Interview 14

As a way to overcome motivation struggles, some students stated how support from loved ones, goal setting, and recognizing accomplishments were crucial coping mechanisms for online school.

- “I would say my friends and family, because they really care about you and they want you to do your best. And also having goals really helped me get through it because it's like, oh, so I want to do this career or I want to do this in life or even these dreams that might not seem achievable. It's like, if I can get through this, I can get through that.” Interview 16

THEME # 4: **Social Connections and Social Loss**

Many students communicated that social connection and interactions made a significant difference for their capacity and enjoyment of learning. Going from an in-person environment to an almost completely isolated virtual format, students experienced shock and grief at the loss of the social aspects of learning that are integral parts of the experience of students.

- “But in the meantime, it's those small moments, those memories, that laugh, that joke, that little small project that you had with your classmates, that class project that we had, that is what makes school meaningful and important right now. It's those moments. It's those moments that make school what it is. It always has been.” Interview 7

From the jovial chit-chat within collaborative projects (noted above), to the importance of in-the-moment feedback on their work from peers (noted below), there are many ways in which students talked about how important the social aspect of school was for their learning.

- “I think it's actually like seeing other people's work and everything, or collaborating with your peers, not in the way where it's like you're working together on a project, but having their input on stuff or just that support. And I feel like that changed, that was a missing part of the education.” Interview 16

Other students discussed how the loss of important milestone events and moments made it increasingly difficult during the pandemic. Whether it be football games, prom, or graduations, students recognized they weren't getting the highschool experience they once envisioned.

- “I was valedictorian for our high school and we did not get a graduation ceremony. I wrote a speech and read it to the camera and we had a little TV broadcast of our graduation. It wasn't done very well and I didn't even want to watch it.” Interview 10160

Sub-theme 1: Key Teachers

Despite the quite common struggle to survive online schooling during a pandemic, many students cited the individual efforts made by teachers to be a crucial factor in their ability to cope with the situation. Students noted that a sense of empathy from their teachers often made a significant impact on them, and ultimately helped them to foster connection, even across digital platforms. Feelings of isolation were eased when teachers themselves acknowledged the pandemic and the difficulties it brought. Whether it be one teacher in particular or a multitude of teachers, many students outlined the importance of teachers in their life and students' feelings of empathy towards their teachers became a prominent theme amongst interviews.

- “My teachers, a lot of them were really understanding of the situation. I like to say I love teachers that are human, where they're not like a teacher and then there's teacher and student. They're people just like you, they know what you're going through. They're acknowledging that they know what you're going through.” Interview 5

Furthermore, many students often described a particular teacher who made their experiences during COVID 19 feel less isolated and difficult. Students' response to the connections they formed with particular teachers is a testament to the power that adult-student connection can play in easing or aiding difficult circumstances.

- “[My computer science teacher] gave me this laptop and it was slow and awful, but it helped me do my schoolwork. That's what got me through that whole year because I wouldn't have done it either way. I didn't have anything else. That was before they started giving out Chromebooks.” Interview 3917

Students' focus on a small subset of teachers with whom they were able to form true connections which allows us to understand the importance that just one key adult can play in a students life. If these connections and interactions are mirrored on a larger scale, students may feel strengthened systems of support within the classroom-virtual or in-person.

- “She would pop into our individual breakout rooms and check up on us. And that really made me feel like, a teacher, when they care about you, it really changes how you work and everything. And when she would like pop in, like we could, she would ask us questions and really as the teachers really cared for us enough to reach out and be like, ‘Hey, I see this is happening. Could you support them a little bit extra?’ That just meant a lot to me because it showed that teachers really cared about you.” Interview 16

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

- ❖ Prioritize student mental health by adapting workload/class structure, and advocate for better awareness and access to mental health counselors
 - Considering student mental health days
 - Mental health check in surveys
 - Mindfulness/meditation/relaxation opportunities in school
- ❖ Allow for more transparency in understanding material and provide additional support for students
 - Reviewing material that was not covered adequately over remote setting
 - Different methods if all students are underperforming
 - Peer tutoring and student-to-student support systems
- ❖ Demonstrate care for students' vast and varied circumstances
 - Being cognizant of equity differences
 - Humanizing the struggles during COVID-19
- ❖ Consider health precautions through a new perspective
 - Adjustments for immunocompromised individuals
 - Clear communication regarding possible exposure
- ❖ Actively seek to involve students in the decision making process
 - Voting student members on school board, site-based decision making, etc.
 - Surveys and roundtables to gather student perspectives
- ❖ Implement equity-oriented positive reinforcement systems to celebrate student achievements and foster supportive school climates
 - Celebrating students' achievements and efforts
- ❖ Create an environment where students can connect with each other and professors
 - Making time for social connection in the classroom agenda
 - Value and incorporate student interests and experiences into learning
- ❖ Challenge the normative notion that a student's value is tied to academic successes
 - Celebrate student achievements beyond a solely academic context
 - Utilize a variety of grading methods that emphasize student progress and mastery
- ❖ Utilizing more interactive teaching practices
 - Project based learning and lab opportunities
 - Group work and partner work opportunities

STUDENT RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS

Avery Lenihan: I specialize in quantitative work and tend to shy away from qualitative work. However, seeing so many quotes echoing both each other and my own feelings was an extremely comforting experience. Students expressed feelings of aloneness while their feelings were so similar to so many other people. The lack of connection they felt with each other meant **they didn't know their next door neighbor was having the exact same feelings as them**. The anecdotes serve to strengthen the numbers we found with Coping with COVID in a symbiotic way that few other projects I have worked on have been able to.

Esha Bajwa: I joined the Coping with COVID research during the second round of interviews, towards the beginning of the data analysis phase. From analyzing the round 2 interviews, what really seemed to stick out to me was:

- Students almost felt “stranded” in a sense where online schooling was not set up in a comprehensive way meant to stimulate learning. Instead, it was mostly an afterthought to sending people home with many feeling that there was no real way of feeling connected and/or engaged with school.
- COVID truly exposed the underlying shortcomings of the educational system in America where those who “fall under the cracks” or **those who simply needed a little more support were brushed aside**. There’s still a lot of work to be done in restructuring schools for the better.
- People deserve more recognition for being able to continue living a life that has been overshadowed by COVID and its long lasting impacts, especially considering the fact that teenagers are already in a developmental and uncertain stage in their lives.

Sofie Farmer: Throughout this process of interviews and analysis, I have been consistently struck by the empathy and awareness prevalent in every interview. Students have shown understanding of experiences and hardships faced by peers, teachers, administrators, and other community members. They commented on their own experiences and acknowledged ways in which they experienced privileges that others had not. They understood the nuances of decisions that were made and how they impacted different members of their community. While these themes have been consistent throughout both stages of the Coping with COVID research, in this round, students across the board expressed **feelings of frustration in a new way. Many of these students were upset with decisions being made and a lack of agency imposed on them by school staff and administrators**. They had big ideas of positive, radical change that could drastically improve their own experiences and those of peers. Students craved to share these recommendations with administration and to see decision making reflect the needs and wants of students, parents, and teachers. I am compelled to not let you forget these students’ passion, drive, and empathy about improving learning experiences for all students and the hardships they have faced, so you may have the same **empathy and sense of urgency for radical change** as these students.

Spandana Pavuluri: Beginning my work with the Coping with COVID study made my experiences throughout the pandemic feel less isolating. For over 2 years, I’ve read countless responses, conducted interviews, and analyzed the authentic feelings that Kentucky students were willing to share. I realized that as a researcher, I had to ensure I did everything in my power to shine a light on the stories of thousands of Kentucky students whose lives had suddenly shifted in the matter of

mere days. Beyond simply giving coverage to students, I knew as a researcher, I had to work to give them justice. We had to fight for the struggles they boldly brought to us. We had to advocate for the recommendations they made. We had to humanize each and every student because they are not, and never were, just statistics. And the first part meant trusting myself- a student with no PhDs, no formal degrees, no large scale analysis experience. Yet, my expertise had been present since the day I entered a school building; **I was an expert on my own student experience.** With that being said, this work gave me the foundation to understanding why my own voice, and why **students' voices, are worthy enough to be listened to, fought for, and cared for.**