

Life Disrupted: The Impact of COVID-19 on Teens



We have heard volumes from government officials, health professionals, teen experts, parents and educators, about the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns about its impact on youth. But until now, teens have not an opportunity to share their voice in ways that can guide adults to take action on their behalf.



This GENYOUth Insights survey, conducted in May 2020 with a nationally representative sample of teens ages 13 to 18 from across the United States, explores **seven dimensions of impact and distress** that are impacting youth right now. It identifies **five factors of resilience** that illustrate why and how many teens are coping with this life-altering global event. And it points to **six key elements of an effective support** response that can help the majority of youth to cope better, especially those who are hurting the most. In some areas, teens could teach adults a thing or two about how to cope. In other areas adults and teens are actually doing a pretty good job managing. But even if teens are managing well right now, the research results point to potentially serious long-term impacts and worries about the future that different groups of teens are feeling, sometimes profoundly.

The survey brings youth voice to the center of the COVID-19 dialogue to help us all better understand how young people are impacted, what they are feeling, how they are coping and what they need from adults to build and maintain resiliency.

Key Findings

YOUTH ARE ENGAGED IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS—AND THEY ARE FEELING THE IMPACT ACROSS MANY AREAS OF THEIR LIVES, OFTEN DEEPLY AND SOMETIMES IRRETRIEVABLY.

Youth know and care about what’s happening with the coronavirus pandemic. It’s an issue of great interest to them and they are paying close attention to the rapidly changing situation. Survey results show that **more than two-thirds (67%) of high school juniors and seniors, and 54% of teens overall, say they are looking for updates on what’s happening with the pandemic once a day or even more frequently.**

And they are feeling the impact in their lives. **Across the seven dimensions of impact the survey measured, many teens are experiencing deep disruptions to important aspects of their lives.** From missing special milestone moments, to losing sports seasons and dire impacts on familial financial

Today’s students have a strong sense of responsibility for their health and wellness. We know because we ask them. GENYOUth Insights elevates youth voice through original, timely research on topics that matter to students and to healthy, high-achieving schools.

This GENYOUth **INSIGHTS** survey was produced in counsel with David Bersoff, PhD, of Edelman Intelligence



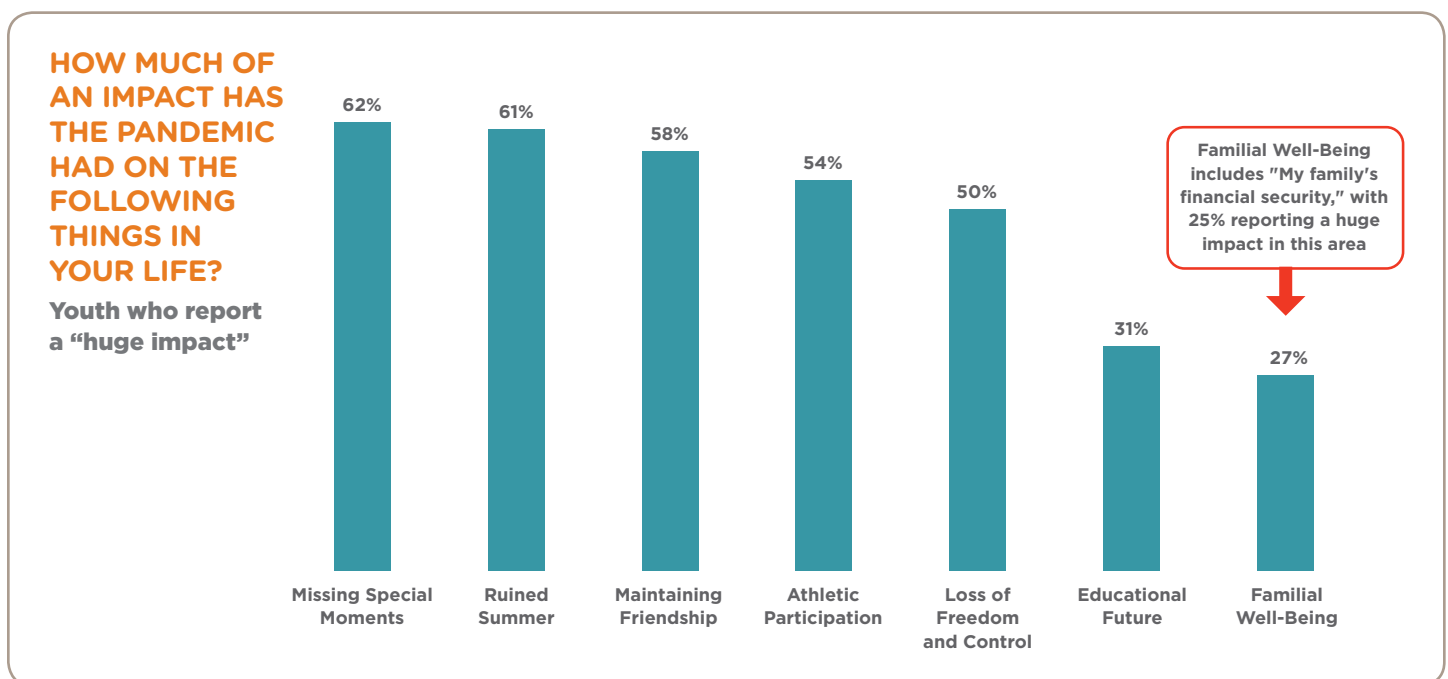
security, youth are feeling widespread, significant and meaningful impacts from the pandemic.

Among the dimensions of impact (see graph below), survey results show notable disruptions and a huge impact to youth on:

- 1 Special Moments** (62% of youth say they are experiencing a huge impact): Missing milestones such as proms/dances, concerts, graduation. Youth are feeling huge impacts in their ability to enjoy and experience these moments, many of which are once-in-a-lifetime events.
- 2 Summer Plans** (61% are experiencing a huge impact): Having summer travel or camp plans cancelled along with activities outside of school (such as scouting, religious activities, sports, clubs, etc.). These activities would have provided important access and connections to friends and excitement during the long summer months.
- 3 Friendships** (58% experiencing a huge impact): Being able to stay close to friends has become a lot harder without being able to see them in person at school or to interact with them via activities and informal gatherings.
- 4 Athletic Participation** (54% experiencing a huge impact): Loss of a season (or more) of sports and the ability to maintain conditioning, physical and mental health impacts, losing a key part of one's identity and what the future may hold. Youth have

lost connections to athletic programs with spring seasons cancelled and no other way to make it up. For talented athletes, sports can offer an opportunity to change their lives forever, which the pandemic has disrupted (see box, page 4).

- 5 Freedom and Control** (50% experiencing a huge impact): Teens are not able to do what they want, when they want. They are no longer living their lives the way they want to. Teens are less able to exert control and make their own choices freely.
- 6 Educational Future** (31% experiencing a huge impact): Struggling not to fall behind in school and be ready academically for next year, altered college exploration and application processes, including not doing the extracurriculars to be a competitive applicant. Teens feel disconnected from their teachers and a disruption to their plans for the future.
- 7 Familial Well-Being** (27% experiencing a huge impact): Impact on how teens are getting along with family members, having basic needs met and overall health of family members.
 - ▶ Familial Well-Being also includes **Financial Security** (with 25% of youth experiencing a huge impact): Financial hardships create food insecurity, inability to pay the mortgage, rent or family expenses. Youth are already seeing the impacts of job losses, wage reductions and extended unemployment for their family members and possibly for themselves.



YOUTH ARE FEELING HIGH LEVELS OF DISTRESS, WHICH MAY WORSEN AS THE PANDEMIC CONTINUES.

Youth who have experienced disruptions from the pandemic show high levels of worry or sadness in some areas. Without a sense of when, if ever, disruptions will end, youth show especially high levels of distress around personal and family dimensions. This insight has important implications for youth well-being as the pandemic continues.

- 91% of the youth feeling an impact on maintaining friendships are worried or sad about it, and 45% are really worried or sad.
- 83% of the youth feeling an impact around their family’s ability to buy what they need and pay bills are worried or sad about it, and 30% are really worried or sad.
- 87% of the youth feeling an impact due to missing special moments are worried or sad about it, and 45% are really worried or sad.

The impacts of COVID-19, and the distress they inflict on youth, have the potential to increase in the near-term if the situation doesn’t improve or even worsens.

DISRUPTIONS FROM THE PANDEMIC HURT SOME YOUTH MORE THAN OTHERS.

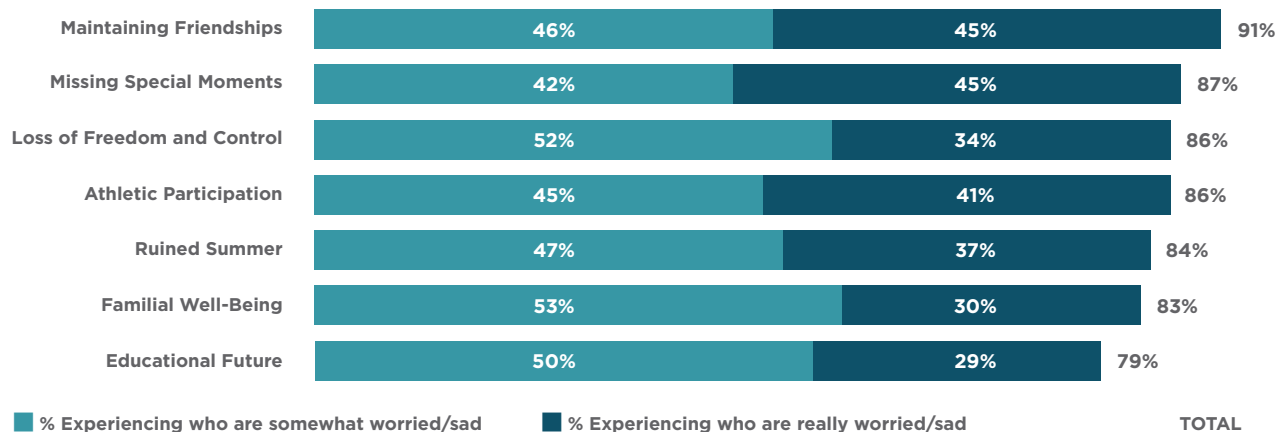
Key groups of youth are feeling more severe impacts and greater distress levels. The survey identified certain groups based on age, gender,

socioeconomic conditions, race/ethnicity and geographic location who are suffering more and may need greater support to cope. Based on the percent of youth who indicated the pandemic has had a **huge impact** on aspects of their lives are these notable segments:

- Upperclassman** (high school juniors and seniors) are closer to college and more likely to have milestone events cancelled. They reported above-average impacts for Missing Special Moments (74% experiencing a huge impact), Loss of Freedom (58%) and Educational Future (42%).
- African American youth** indexed higher for impact around Missing Special Moments (69% experiencing a huge impact) and Maintaining Friendships (69%), while Latinx youth indexed higher for Ruined Summer (67%), Athletic Participation (62%), Educational Future (42%) and Familial Well-Being (38%).
- Youth living in urban areas** indicated higher-than-average impacts for Educational Future (36% experiencing a huge impact) and Familial Well-Being (33%), while those living in rural areas had lower impacts around Ruined Summer (53%) and loss of Freedom and Control (41%).
- Youth living in households whose income is below \$50,000 a year** were more likely to feel impacts related to Familial Well-Being (31% experiencing a huge impact), including an impact on Financial Security (35%). Youth living in households

IN THE PREVIOUS QUESTION, YOU SAID THE PANDEMIC IS HAVING AN IMPACT ON THE FOLLOWING THINGS IN YOUR LIFE. HOW WORRIED OR SAD ARE YOU ABOUT THAT IMPACT?

Youth who report that they are “somewhat worried/sad” and “really worried/sad” about the impact



ATHLETICS

An integral part of youth identity and a key to the future for many

Participation in athletics offers more than benefits to physical and mental health. For many youth, sports are an important part of their identity. It allows them to better themselves, excel and develop important leadership skills. And it is a key to their future in cases where athletics offers a pathway to getting into a better college or getting into college at all. Some youth who excel in athletics can use their skills to overcome barriers and hardships they face at home or in their communities. With 54% of youth experiencing huge impacts to their athletic participation and, among those youth, 86% are worried or sad about this particular disruption, athletics is an area of particular concern—and an opportunity to help youth cope and overcome the disruptions the pandemic is causing.

► **More youth reported impact and worry around athletic participation than they did for their educational future. COVID-19 has surfaced a lot of focus on academic disruptions, but for some youth the athletic disruption has had a greater, more meaningful impact on their lives.**

whose income is below \$35,000 a year reported an even greater impact on Familial Well-Being, with 34% experiencing a huge impact.

► **Youth living in households whose income is above \$125,000 a year** are not immune to impacts, despite the financial resources that may be available to their families. This group reported above-average impacts for Ruined Summer (70% experiencing a huge impact), Missing Special Moments (68%) and Maintaining Friendships (65%).

■ **Females** reported Missing Special Moments (70% experiencing a huge impact), Ruined Summer (66%) and Maintaining Friendships (62%) as particular areas of impact.

FORGET STRIVING FOR A NEW NORMAL, TEENS HAVE THEIR EYE ON A NEW AND BETTER FUTURE.

Youth are displaying admirable reliance and even optimism as they experience a reset on life. Even while they experience disruptions and distress, teens are able to see a brighter future and positive outcomes. Survey results point to **five factors of resilience** that are helping youth to cope:

- 1 They have perspective.** Only 33% of teens see themselves feeling the impact of these disruptions in their lives for a period of several years or more.
- 2 Adults are listening to them.** 80% of teens say that adults are listening to them when making decisions that affect them during the pandemic.

HOW MUCH OF AN IMPACT HAS THE PANDEMIC HAD ON THE FOLLOWING THINGS IN YOUR LIFE? Youth who report a “huge impact”

	Total	Grade Level			Gender		Income		Race/Ethnicity				Area Currently Living		
		Middle School	HS Underclassmen	HS Upperclassmen	Female	Male	Less Than \$50,000	Greater Than \$125,000	White	Asian	Black or African-American	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	Urban Area	Suburban Area	Rural Area
Number	1025	235	407	383	474	547	312	181	772	79	133	118	255	604	166
Percentage	100%	23%	40%	37%	46%	53%	30%	18%	75%	8%	13%	12%	25%	59%	16%
Familial Well-Being	27%	23%	27%	34%	28%	26%	31%	26%	26%	29%	31%	38%	33%	26%	22%
Educational Future	31%	25%	30%	42%	31%	31%	30%	36%	29%	39%	34%	42%	36%	32%	22%
Athletic Participation	54%	54%	55%	54%	53%	56%	48%	63%	54%	63%	49%	62%	53%	56%	51%
Missing Special Moments	62%	57%	59%	74%	70%	56%	58%	68%	63%	56%	69%	63%	60%	64%	61%
Maintaining Friendship	58%	56%	59%	61%	62%	55%	56%	65%	56%	66%	69%	54%	56%	60%	57%
Loss of Freedom	50%	46%	48%	58%	54%	46%	43%	58%	48%	60%	50%	54%	50%	52%	41%
Ruined Summer	61%	60%	61%	64%	66%	58%	54%	70%	61%	75%	59%	67%	61%	64%	53%

NOTE: Coloration serves as heat map for “huge impact” responses:

- Highest percentages of youth experiencing a “huge impact”
- Middle-high percentages of youth experiencing a “huge impact”

- Middle percentages of youth experiencing a “huge impact”
- Middle-low percentages of youth experiencing a “huge impact”
- Lowest percentages of youth experiencing a “huge impact”

Financial Distress and Insecurity Around Basic Needs

Financial insecurity is dire to youth and their families. One in four (25%) of all survey respondents are feeling an impact from COVID-19 on their family's financial well-being, and an overwhelming 88% of those experiencing financial disruptions are worried or sad about them. For youth themselves, job prospects are a big concern; 44% of all teens and 53% of high school juniors and seniors are feeling a huge impact on their ability to get or keep paid work, increasing to 55% of youth in urban locations.

These figures align with current levels of job losses in the U.S. in mid-May where about 36 million people have filed for unemployment and 20% of the labor force is out of work, even without accounting for unreported job losses because people have given up on the system or they don't classify for the traditional claims.

Among youth in households that make less than \$35,000 a year, the percentage of youth experiencing financial impact rises to 35%, while 31% of youth in urban areas are experiencing financial impacts from COVID-19. What might this look like three months from now?

3 They are getting good adult support. In particular, adults are helping youth cope by providing them with access to technology (reported by 64% of youth), keeping them informed of what is going on (60%), reassuring them that everything will be all right (57%), giving them quality one-on-one time (56%) and establishing new routines (53%).

4 They are engaging in self-help, doing and finding things to help keep themselves positive, such as reading, watching movies and listening to music (61%), doing things with their family (57%) and connecting with friends virtually (55%).

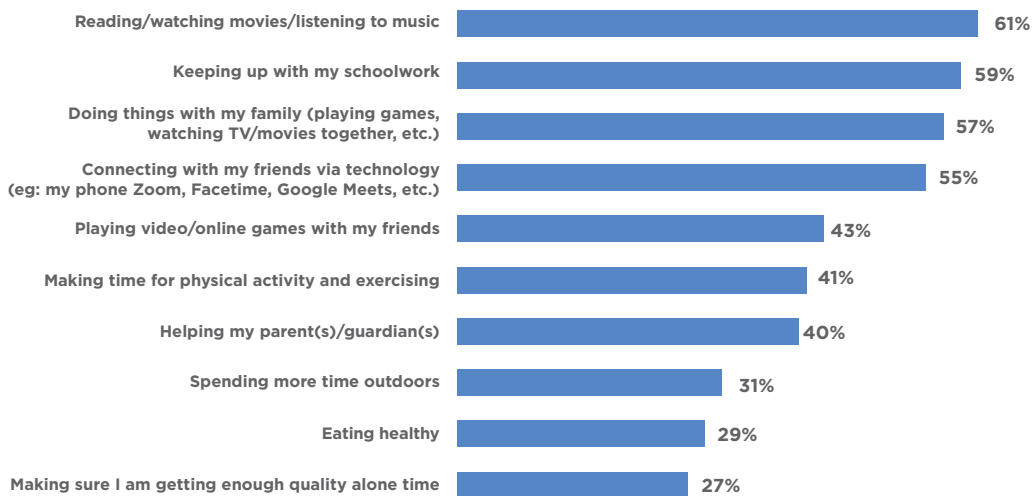
5 They are seeing silver linings in the situation, such as getting more sleep (45%), experiencing less school pressure (43%) and having a less packed schedule (40%).

In addition, teens have learned important and reaffirming things about themselves and the world. In an open-ended survey question, youth reflected on something they've learned about themselves during this time. Typical responses centered around: "I am stronger than I thought" (29% of comments focused on this theme), "I like and rely on my family more than I knew" (23%), "I see goodness in people" (20%) and "I am discovering new talents and interests" (20%).

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING HAVE THE ADULTS IN YOUR LIFE DONE IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC? CHECK ALL THAT APPLY



WHICH OF THESE THINGS ARE YOU DOING TO STAY POSITIVE? CHECK ALL THAT APPLY



WHAT YOUTH WANT FROM ADULTS TO HELP THEM COPE: SIX THINGS.

The survey points to six key elements of an effective support response that can help the majority of youth to cope better, especially those who are hurting the most. While youth are finding many ways to cope, there are important aspects that the adults in their lives need to start providing, or keep providing, to help teens navigate the ongoing disruptions. Or, if answers are not readily available, youth need reassurance and reliable information from adults. Youth told us they need:

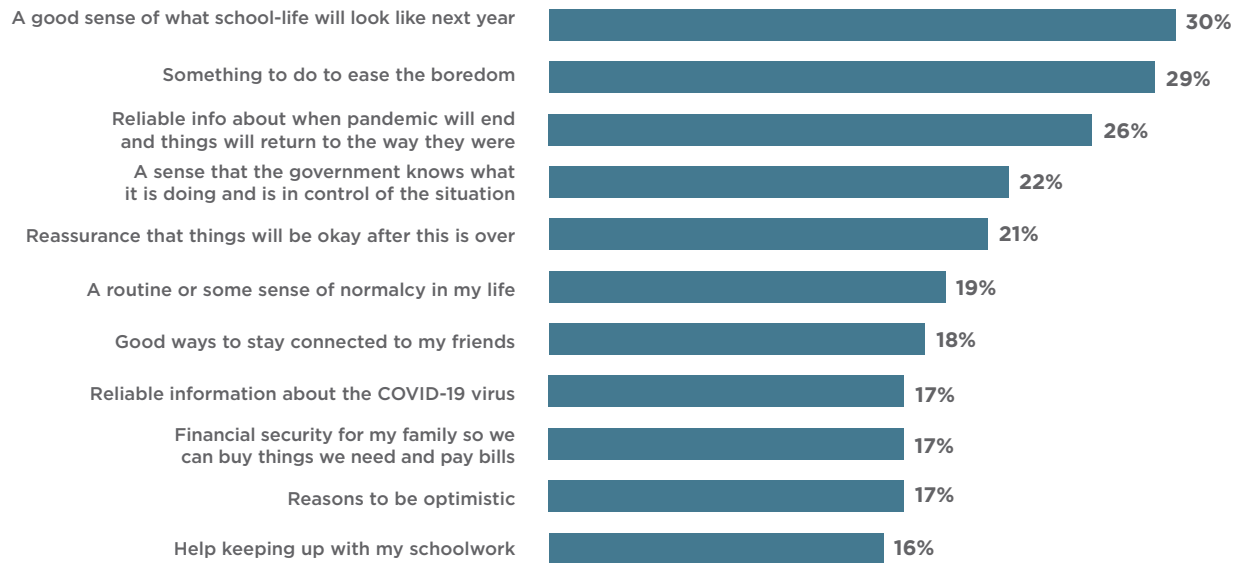
- 1 A sense of what school will look like next year:** needed by 30% of youth who want to reduce the uncertainty in their lives by having a sense of what their new future will look like.
- 2 Something to relieve the boredom:** 29% of youth say boredom is a big issue for them and it's likely a problem that will become more acute as the school year ends and there is little to nothing on the horizon to replace that activity.
- 3 Reliable information about how long the disruptions will last:** needed by 26% of youth. It is easier to hang on and hang in when you know how much longer you need to last.
- 4 Confidence the government knows what it is doing:** needed by 22% of youth who say they currently aren't feeling this. There is nothing more anxiety provoking than a lack of competent

leadership during a time of crisis. Youth who are particularly distressed need this even more, with 28% saying they need this right now.

- 5 Some aspects of normalcy in their lives:** needed by 19% of teens. In a world in which they feel disempowered and without control, the familiar and the routine can feel like islands of sanity in a sea of uncertainty. Youth who are particularly distressed need this even more, with 25% saying they need this right now.
- 6 A feeling of financial security:** needed by 17% of youth. As the pandemic and its economic impacts continue or even accelerate, giving youth a sense that their family will have their basic needs met is critical for coping. Youth who are particularly distressed need this even more, with 24% saying they need this right now.

A supportive response from adults that includes ALL SIX of these elements will help the majority of teens to cope with the pandemic and the disruptions it is causing. Two out of three (66%) youth say they need, but are not currently getting, one or more of these six elements. And among youth who report the highest level of worry or sadness related to COVID-19 impacts, nearly three out of four (72%) say they need, but are not currently getting, one or more of these six elements to help them cope better.

WHAT DO YOU NEED RIGHT NOW THAT YOU JUST AREN'T GETTING TO COPE BETTER WITH THE PANDEMIC AND THE DISRUPTIONS IT IS CAUSING IN YOUR LIFE? CHECK ALL THAT APPLY



The Bottom Line

AS TIME GOES ON, THE PANDEMIC WILL FURTHER DISRUPT LIVES, PUTTING YOUTH'S COPING ABILITIES AND RESILIENCE TO THE TEST EVEN MORE.

While youth show resilience and coping skills, survey results suggest that teens need and want supports to help mitigate their worry and distress—both today and in the near-term future as more families face financial hardships and as we witness possible ongoing waves of COVID-19 infection. Youth are looking for more, and more effective, coping mechanisms to help them thrive despite the current disruptions.

Survey results suggest that, first and foremost, adults, can best support and guide youth by listening to them. Rather than making flawed assumptions about what youth are feeling, trust teens to articulate what helps them cope the most, what they are not getting that they need and where they are feeling the most distress. Using these insights, adults can find more, and more effective, ways to help strengthen teens' resilience, especially for those suffering the most.

EVEN IF ADULTS DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS, THEY STILL CAN HELP YOUTH NAVIGATE THE DISRUPTIONS AND DISTRESS CAUSED BY THE PANDEMIC.

Opportunities for Action:

Keep youth informed. Perhaps more than anything else, youth are seeking information about what's happening and what it means in their lives. Whether at home or at school, let youth in on the current thinking. Schools can provide regular updates directly to and for students, with information and messaging targeted to students by age/grade level.

Seek and listen to youth input. Ask young people for input on what school might look like in the coming year to help them feel more in control and give them a sense of belonging to the school community. Provide easy ways for students to reach out to their school with concerns and questions. As schools develop their re-opening plans, they can survey students about what they would want or need to feel reassured, safe and excited to return to school.

Problem-solve together. Engage youth in problem-solving and decision-making to help to give them a sense of control. Consider expanding opportunities for student representation on committees or work teams that address, for example, summer learning

opportunities, back-to-school plans, school wellness initiatives, fighting hunger or other priorities in the school community.

Help youth cope with uncertainty. Adults can help by talking with and listening to youth. Adults can monitor their own level of anxiety, help to build a routine and help give youth a sense of agency. For example, help youth identify ways they can contribute to a local cause or volunteer opportunity, or share examples of youth who are taking action to show that youth are not powerless and can make a difference.

Keep youth active during the summer. Schools and community-based organizations should help to ensure summer activities are coordinated with schools' summer plans and shifting start dates, and that activities are available to youth who need them most during the summer.

Athletics: Play it forward. When it comes to sports and athletics, youth can use this time to focus on skill-building and training. They can stay in shape off the playing field by working out alone or in small groups, and study the playbook, videos or other information to get smarter about their sport. It's also a good time for athletes to think about their back-up plan to athletic pursuits to make sure they are grounded and accepting of life's "curve balls." More broadly, the pandemic is causing a **re-think of youth sports** and youth can and should have a voice in this dialogue.

Address financial concerns. Parents/caregivers can keep teens appropriately informed about their family situation and even engage teens in finding and taking advantage of supports available to families, such as food pantries (visit SAP4Kids.org to find local feeding sites, for example) and various relief programs.

Co-create the future of education. The COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the essential role schools play in the lives of students and communities. It also has highlighted deep inequities that exist in access to resources, tools and supports that children and youth need to thrive. The crisis has sparked dialogue in many sectors, including education, on how to re-imagine the future. Including youth voice and ideas in this dialogue is vital, and it will help our school communities better meet the needs of all. ■

METHODOLOGY

Online survey conducted May 1 to 6, 2020 with a nationally representative sample of 1,025 middle, junior and senior high school students, ages 13-18. Results were statistically weighted to ensure a representative group by gender, age, race/ethnicity and geography. An advisory committee of health, education, youth counseling and youth engagement experts and practitioners provided guidance on the research topic, hypothesis and online survey content. One student focus group (conducted by phone conference) was held to inform the survey content and questions.

THANK YOU

GENYOUTH would like to thank the many students and adult thought leaders who provided their expertise and invaluable perspective in the development of this survey.

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CREATING HEALTHIER SCHOOL COMMUNITIES™

GENYOUTH empowers students to create a healthier future for themselves and their peers. GENYOUTH convenes a network of private and public partners to raise funds for youth wellness initiatives that bolster healthy, high-achieving students, schools, and communities nationwide. We believe that all students are change-agents who deserve the opportunity to identify and lead innovative solutions that positively impact nutrition, physical activity, and student success. Learn more at www.genyouthnow.org.