WHERE DO WE GO NEXT?

Youth Insights on the High School Experience During a Year of Historic Upheaval

Sean K. Flanagan, Max Margolius, Molly Pileggi,
Liz Glaser, Kri Burkander, Monika Kincheloe,
Justis Freeman

About America's Promise Alliance and the Center for Promise

America's Promise Alliance is the driving force behind a nationwide movement to improve the lives and futures of America's children and youth. Bringing together national nonprofits, businesses, community and civic leaders, educators, citizens, and young people with a shared vision, America's Promise sparks collective action to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of young people's success. Through these collective leadership efforts, the Alliance does what no single organization alone can do: catalyze change on a scale that reaches millions of young people.

The Center for Promise, affiliated with Boston University, is the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance. Its mission is to develop a deep understanding of the conditions necessary for young people in the United States to succeed in school, work, and life. The Center's unique value as a research institute is its dedication to youth voice, whether by highlighting the voices and views of young people or through working with youth to develop and implement research methods to study the issues affecting their lives. More information can be found at www.americaspromise.org.

About GradNation

The GradNation campaign was conceptualized around a growing consensus that the high school graduation rate signals both economic opportunity for those who graduate and the health of the nation. In 2010, America's Promise Alliance joined with then-President Barack Obama, General Colin Powell and Alma Powell, and then-Secretary Arne Duncan in setting a national goal of reaching a 90 percent four-year graduation rate by the class of 2020. Since then, the campaign has worked to mobilize adults across sectors by providing relevant data, promising strategies, and opportunities to connect and learn from one another. The GradNation campaign works with national, state, and community organizations to create more youth-centered high school experiences that are informed by research on adolescent development and rooted in action for equity and sharing power with young people.

About Research for Action

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization that seeks to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved students. RFA's work is designed to strengthen public schools and postsecondary institutions; to provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and the public at the local, state, and national levels; and to enrich the civic and community dialogue about public education. More information can be found at www.researchforaction.org.

About AT&T

AT&T has been a lead collaborator of the GradNation campaign for over a decade and is the sole sponsor of *Where Do We Go Next?* Since 2008, AT&T has committed more than $600 million to programs serving millions of students in all 50 states and around the world to help them succeed in school and discover their career passions and potential. AT&T Connected Learning is the company's multi-year commitment to help stem the tide of learning loss, narrow the homework gap, and create compelling educational content. It includes multiple solutions to connect today's learners with the skills, resources, and opportunities for success in school and in life. We give thanks to AT&T for their sustained GradNation support.

Authors' Acknowledgments

Designed by Research for Action

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the nation has made tremendous progress in improving the high school experience and raising graduation rates. But alongside this progress, graduation-rate improvement efforts, including the GradNation Campaign, have repeatedly demonstrated that deep societal inequities remain. Too many young people still lack adequate access to the kinds of learning environments and experiences, network of supportive adults, and extracurricular programming that contribute to holistic wellbeing, high school completion, and postsecondary readiness.

The events of this past year — a global pandemic, the largest movement for racial justice since the civil rights era, and an unprecedented shift to remote school — have highlighted the inequities that continue to define educational experiences for many young people in the United States and raised pressing questions around how schools and districts can support student learning now and in the coming years.

For high school students in particular, the need is acute. As of March, 2021, high school students were still not prioritized for in-person learning in 79% of the districts in the country.[1] Other reports suggest that many students have been attending school far less frequently or have stopped attending entirely, signaling a great deal of uncertainty about how high school aged young people are faring at this moment in time in their learning and in their lives.[2] As youth in America return to in-person schooling and as the education system plans for an unprecedented influx of funding under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) programs, the perspectives of young people shared in this report can help guide priorities and actions.

The present report explores three interconnected, but distinct, areas of young people's lives that have been particularly salient over the past year and are fundamental to supporting their learning and growth in the future. Those three areas are young people's sense of wellbeing, including their mental health and relationships; their opportunities to learn about race and racism in school and how that affects the ways they understand and engage with the world around them; and their plans for after high school and sense of readiness for pursuing those plans. Understanding young people's current experiences across those areas will be crucial as schools and communities plan their responses and approaches for the forthcoming recovery period.

Overall, young people's responses to this national survey suggest that:

Finding One: High schoolers are struggling with a decreased sense of wellbeing — reporting declines in mental health and concerning levels of disconnection from peers and adults.

Finding Two: Opportunities to learn about race and racism in the classroom vary but are associated with higher levels of critical consciousness and social action.

Finding Three: COVID-19 has upended postsecondary planning, yet feelings of postsecondary readiness are highest among students who are most connected to teachers and peers, have opportunities to learn about race and racism in school, and feel academically interested and challenged.

These findings illuminate several recommendations for school and district leaders to act on in both the immediate recovery period and afterwards:

Recommendation 1: Address student mental health, now and on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation 2: Teach a comprehensive and accurate history of race and racism in the United States.

Recommendation 3: Prioritize postsecondary success through relevant content and pathways planning.

Recommendation 4: Saturate young people's environments with caring adult relationships.

About this Report

Where Do We Go Next? presents findings from a national survey focused on understanding the experiences, assets, and conditions that have shaped young people's high school experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Where Do We Go Next?* aims to characterize young people's school-based experiences (in-person or remote) over the past year to inform youth-centered policy, practice, and recovery efforts moving forward.

America's Promise Alliance partnered with Research for Action (RFA) to conduct a national survey (n=2,439) of young people as part of its GradNation campaign. The survey was designed to assess young people's experiences during an unprecedented school year that was shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and a swelling movement for racial justice. Specifically, the present study sought to take a holistic approach to better understanding young people's high school experiences over the past year, all amidst an uncertain economic, social, and educational landscape. This study, thus, serves two related purposes. First, it adds to a growing knowledge base on high schoolers' learning experiences over the past year. And second, it explores a diverse set of young people's school-based and out-of-school experiences in an effort to better understand how the past year has impacted learning and development, specifically students' overall wellbeing, access to opportunities to learn about—and act upon—social issues like race and racism, and postsecondary readiness for life after high school.

Survey respondents included young people ages 13-19 years who were enrolled in high school in the United States during the 2020-2021 school year. The survey was administered over a six-week period in March and April 2021 using a multi-pronged sampling strategy that included an online panel, targeted recruitment through supporting organizations, and youth-oriented social media advertisements. A non-probability quota sampling strategy was used to approximate the U.S. population distributions of high school students along dimensions of education level, gender, ethnicity, and race. Parameter estimates were referenced according to the most recently available national education statistics published by the National Center for Educational Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau, and the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. The resulting 2,439 survey responses were weighted by grade-level, race, ethnicity, and gender to account for differences between the study sample and the overall national population. Additional sample information is available in Appendix A.

Research Questions

This report is organized around the following questions:

1. In light of the sprawling impact of COVID-19 on young people's lives, to what extent are students experiencing a sense of wellbeing, including their mental health and connectedness to peers and adults?

2. Amidst ongoing racial violence and a year of heightened discourse on race, racism, and racial justice, to what degree are students afforded opportunities to learn about race and racism in school? Further, how do these learning opportunities shape students' interpretations of power, privilege, and oppression in society (e.g., critical consciousness) as well as their likelihood of engaging in social action to create a more just world?

3. How has the past year influenced students' postsecondary planning for life after high school and what aspects of the broader high school experience most strongly predict their sense of postsecondary readiness?

Theory And Societal Context

America's Promise's research is grounded in a positive youth development (PYD) framework. This perspective is rooted in the belief that each young person has individual strengths, agency, and the ability to thrive.[3] Development of these strengths is shaped by the relationships between young people and the multiple environments in which they grow and learn. When each of those environments is rich with resources and opportunities that support a young person's holistic strengths and needs, those assets can help a young person achieve positive developmental outcomes.[4] Given this understanding of development, as well as recent advances in the learning and developmental sciences, a key takeaway for school leaders and educators is that social, emotional, and cognitive developmental processes are inherently interdependent, and learning and development occur across all domains of a young person's life, including, but not limited to, the classroom. For schools to support each and every young person's learning then, educational settings must adopt a holistic and more integrative and complementary educational model; one that is inclusive and supportive of all the aspects of young people's development.[5]

Many young people, however, experience inequitable access to the types of supportive resources and nurturing developmental environments that support safe and healthy development. Many groups of young people—particularly those marginalized on the basis of their learning styles, abilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic, racial, religious, and gender identities—experience disproportionately higher rates of adversity and systemic barriers to healthy development.[6] These experiences of adversity and marginalization may intersect with one another, shaping disparate developmental trajectories, and contributing to inequitable educational and life outcomes.[7]

This theoretical understanding of learning and development placed in the context of history and lived experience helps to explain the disparate impacts of the pandemic on a diversity of young people. A critical realization of this past year is that educational structures and practices that separate academic learning from all other aspects of a young person's life, like home and community, are insufficient and misaligned with how learning happens.[8] As schools and districts look toward recovery, there is a crucial window of opportunity to realign and redesign education to advance a more equitable, youth-centered, and developmentally-coordinated high school experience. Doing so will allow more young people to graduate and have the tools to thrive in their postsecondary lives.

These theoretical perspectives guided the focus of the research questions, survey design, and analysis represented in the current report as well as the applied recommendations to support recovery and reinvestment in the high school experience in 2021 and beyond.

The Importance of High School Graduation

The importance of high school graduation is well-documented and reaching this milestone confers a host of positive immediate and lifetime benefits for graduates. These outcomes include improved lifetime earnings,[9] higher rates of employment,[10] better lifetime health outcomes,[11] and being less likely to rely on public assistance.[12] Young people who graduate high schools are more likely to engage in civic activities, such as voting or volunteering.[13] High school graduates are also more likely to meet the changing demands of the workforce; contribute to the economy, as well as local and federal tax bases; and participate in job creation for the future.[14]

And yet, even before the pandemic, large groups of young people were not experiencing high school in a way that prepared them to graduate or to graduate ready to learn and work with diverse people in a changing economy. This inequity has only been exacerbated during the pandemic, underscoring renewed urgency for action against the backdrop of greater racial awareness and movement towards racial justice. The context of the last year presents an opportunity for policymakers and practitioners to redesign an education system that contributes to every student's wellbeing, one that supports their ability to understand the world around them, successfully engage with social issues within and outside of the classroom, and feel ready for their postsecondary futures.

An Unprecedented Year: A Global Pandemic And Movement For Racial Justice

Young people have experienced intense change and ongoing trauma over the past year. In spring 2020, 42 states issued stay-at-home measures[15] to control the spread of COVID-19, leading to immediate school closures and a long-term shift to remote learning. Throughout fall 2020, there were instances of more than 200 percent[16] increases in chronic absenteeism across all grade levels.[17] As chronic absenteeism was on the rise, so were significant increases in failing grades or disengagement with school entirely.[18] Six months into the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of students were still without reliable internet access,[19] which made attending online classes difficult. These disruptions translated to significant impacts on learning and postsecondary planning. The National Student Clearinghouse reported in fall 2020 that college[20] enrollment rates sharply declined. The economic impacts of COVID also led to a significant decline in FAFSA applications for both new and returning students, particularly among students at Title I schools.[21]

Over this same time frame, young people were also observing, participating in, or leading social action related to racial justice. The Black Lives Matter uprisings may be the largest protest movement for racial justice in US history[22] with several polls suggesting that between 15 million and 26 million Americans took part in demonstrations against racism and police violence in the summer of 2020. At the same time, the United States government deployed over 90,000[23] National Guard members and military personnel to control protestors, the largest military deployment outside of a war in U.S. history.[24] As has been the case throughout history,[25] youth leaders have been at the forefront of sociopolitical action in America over the past year. Voter turnout has increased among young people in recent years,[26] people under 35 years made up the largest share of participants in the 2020 protest movement,[27] and many young people cited racial justice as a primary reason for their sociopolitical involvement.[28] The social movements happening in communities across the country, coupled with young people's disproportionately high participation in those movements, suggest that schools can best support student learning by helping them make sense of and engage with the issues and movements that affect their lives outside of the classroom.

The Present Study: Key Constructs

Despite scientific consensus on the conditions that foster young people's learning and development, little is known about how students, particularly high school students, have experienced these conditions over the past year. As previously mentioned, the present study focuses on three distinct, yet interrelated, areas of high schoolers' lives: their wellbeing, opportunities to learn about race and racism and how that affects their belief systems and levels of social action, and their planning and readiness for life after high school. The following sections define the ways those constructs were conceptualized and measured for this study (see Table 1). Though young people do not experience these outcome areas as independent from each other, each construct was analyzed as a distinct outcome area for the purposes of this paper.

Wellbeing

Young people's wellbeing is fundamental for their learning and positive development. For this study, wellbeing was conceptualized and measured through questions related to health and mental health as well as students' sense of school connectedness. These questions are rooted in the idea that students learn best when their environments make them feel safe—physically, emotionally, mentally, and in their own identity—and that safety is a fundamental component of wellbeing.

Opportunities to learn about race and racism

One of the goals of secondary education is to cultivate an informed and sociopolitically engaged populace. In order to better understand the extent to which schools are supporting students' learning about the social events unfolding over the past year, this survey included questions on young people's exposure and opportunities to learn about race and racism in their schools; levels of critical consciousness around issues of equity and equality; and propensity to engage in behaviors related to social action.

Perceptions of postsecondary readiness and planning

Adults around the country, both inside and outside of the classroom, are working to create meaningful pathways that lead young people to pursue fulfilling and financially sustainable career opportunities after they complete high school. For this survey, we asked young people to report their sense of postsecondary readiness by asking if they felt that their high school experience was helping them learn skills that would prepare them for their lives after high school. The survey also asked about older high school students' postsecondary planning and the ways in which COVID-19 had affected those plans.

Table 1 provides descriptions of the key constructs as well as sample items from the survey.

Table 1. Key Constructs and Sample Items

Construct	Sample Items	Description/citation
Mental health	In the last month have you... • Been able to concentrate on what you are doing? • Lost much sleep over worry?	Adapted from the General Health Questionnaire-12, this construct assesses a young person's sense of health and mental health.[29]
Opportunities to learn about race and racism	• At your school, do you have the chance to discuss issues like race and racism? • How much are you taught about the history of racism in the United States? • How well does the curriculum or experiences at your school reflect the histories and experiences of people with non-white racial or ethnic backgrounds?	Constructed for this survey, this scale obtains a young person's assessment of whether they have been exposed to issues of race and racism through their school's curriculum and experiences.
Critical consciousness	To what extent do you perceive the following statements to be true: • Certain racial or ethnic groups have fewer chances to get ahead • It would be good if all racial, ethnic, and gender groups could be equal.	Adapted from the Short Critical Consciousness Scale, this construct assesses a young person's understanding of perceived inequalities, egalitarianism, and their motivation to change the current state.[30]
Social action	How often do you… • Talk about political or social issues with friends? • Attend political protests or rallies?	Adapted from the Current Population Survey, this construct measures how sociopolitically active a young person has been.[31]
Readiness for life after high school	To what extent do you feel that… • Your high school experience is preparing you for success after high school? • You learn valuable skills at school?	Adapted from the 5 Essentials survey, this scale obtains a young person's perception of how well their school experiences are preparing them for life.[32]

For a full description of study design, sample, and measures, please see Appendix A.

Findings

The findings capture the perspectives of thousands of high school students across the U.S.— illustrating the viewpoints of students from diverse geographic, racial/ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and yielding immense insight into the impact of the global pandemic and social unrest on young people across the country. This section begins by 'setting the stage' to describe the unique state of the high school experience over the past year, overviewing an array of key data points that depict the nature of students' daily learning experiences and examine young people's participation in social action within their communities. This context provides a backdrop for the report's three key outcome areas, which delve deeply into young people's high school experiences with an emphasis on students' wellbeing, opportunities to learn about race and racism, and readiness for life after high school as well as the factors associated with these domains.

Setting the Stage: A Year Unlike Any Other

What has the past year looked like for high school students across the United States? Unsurprisingly, most high schoolers reported that this has been a very different and difficult year.

The State of the High School Experience: Schedule Disruptions and Remote Learning Are Prevalent

This past year has disrupted the educational experience for many youth, with school often taking place in remote formats and over shortened days. Almost 60 percent of young people report attending high school *all* or *mostly remotely* over the past year (see Figure 1). An additional 22 percent report attending *an even mix of in-person and remote*, which might have looked like a hybrid approach for the whole school year or periods of attending in-person and periods of attending fully remotely. The remaining 20 percent report attending school *all* or *mostly in-person*.

Figure 1. Mode of School Attendance During the 2020-21 School Year

- All or mostly remotely
- An even mix of in-person and remote
- All or mostly in-person
- Declined to share
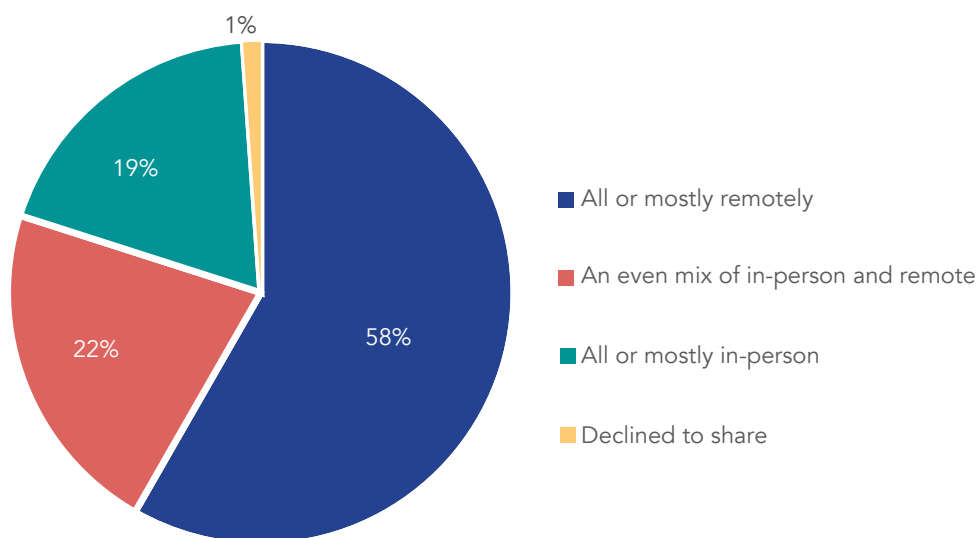
Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting their primary mode of school attendance over the past year.

Remote high school most often consisted of live instruction, with two-thirds of youth reporting that all of their classes were hosted on an online platform like Zoom or Google Meet. An additional 16% of youth reported their classes were a mix of live instruction and pre-recorded classes, for which they were expected to review materials and complete assignments at their own pace. Twelve percent of youth who attended school remotely said that all of their classes were asynchronous, pre-recorded classes.

Almost half of respondents who attended in-person school said their in-person school days lasted more than 6 hours. In contrast, only 17% of students attending remote school said their days lasted that long. Remote school days were most often in the range of 3-6 hours per day.

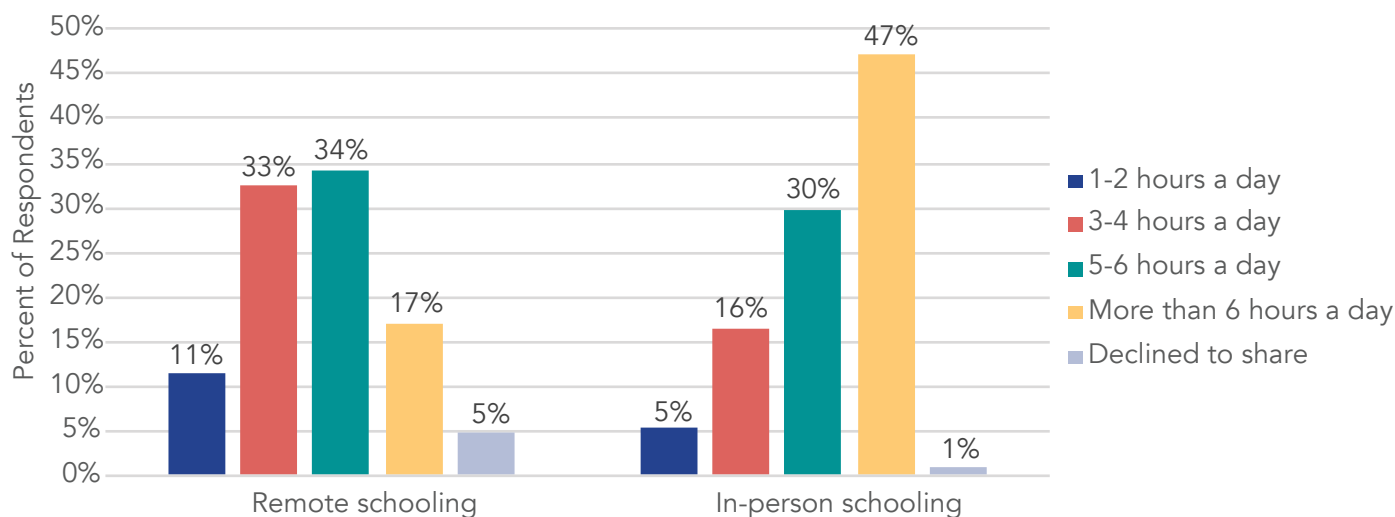Figure 2. Reported Number of Hours Per School Day in 2020-21, by Mode of School Attendance

Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting the number of hours per school day over the past year, by mode of school attendance.

This represents a dramatic shift in the daily lives of high school students, as many have attended school remotely, for fewer hours a day and, for some, with fewer opportunities for live instruction and interaction with their teachers, peers, and curriculum. The vast changes to the basic structure of school illustrate COVID-19's disruption of the very foundation and fabric of students' daily experiences, providing key context for understanding the far-reaching implications of the pandemic on various domains of students' learning and development, which are further documented within this report's findings.

The Largest Protest Movement for Racial Justice in Recent History: Social Action is on the Rise Among Students

In addition to COVID-19, the 2020-21 academic year was shaped by prominent social and political events, including an historic presidential election and the ongoing racial justice movement. These events have profoundly shaped the context of education and drawn attention to the notion that young people's lives and identities as students and as citizens are inextricably intertwined, as are schools with the broader sociopolitical landscape in which they are embedded. To better understand the ways that students have responded to this historic moment, the present study asked students about their engagement in social action as well as the extent to which their levels of participation have changed over the past year.

Overall, more than 4 in 5 high schoolers reported engaging in personal forms of social action, such as consuming information about political, societal, or local issues and discussing these issues with friends or family members.

Further, one- to two-thirds of students reported having engaged in public forms of social action such as volunteering (66% of respondents), donating to a political organization (39%), or attending political protests or rallies (40%).

Importantly, levels of engagement in social action have remained strong and increased for many over this tumultuous year. Among students who have participated in social action, just under half report continuing *the same amount* of involvement in the past year and up to 40% of students reported doing *much more* this year than in the past on certain examples of social action. These data are consistent with research suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice movement have prompted a renewed commitment toward social and political engagement among young people.[33]

Figure 3. Changes in Levels of Social Action Among Students Over the Past Year
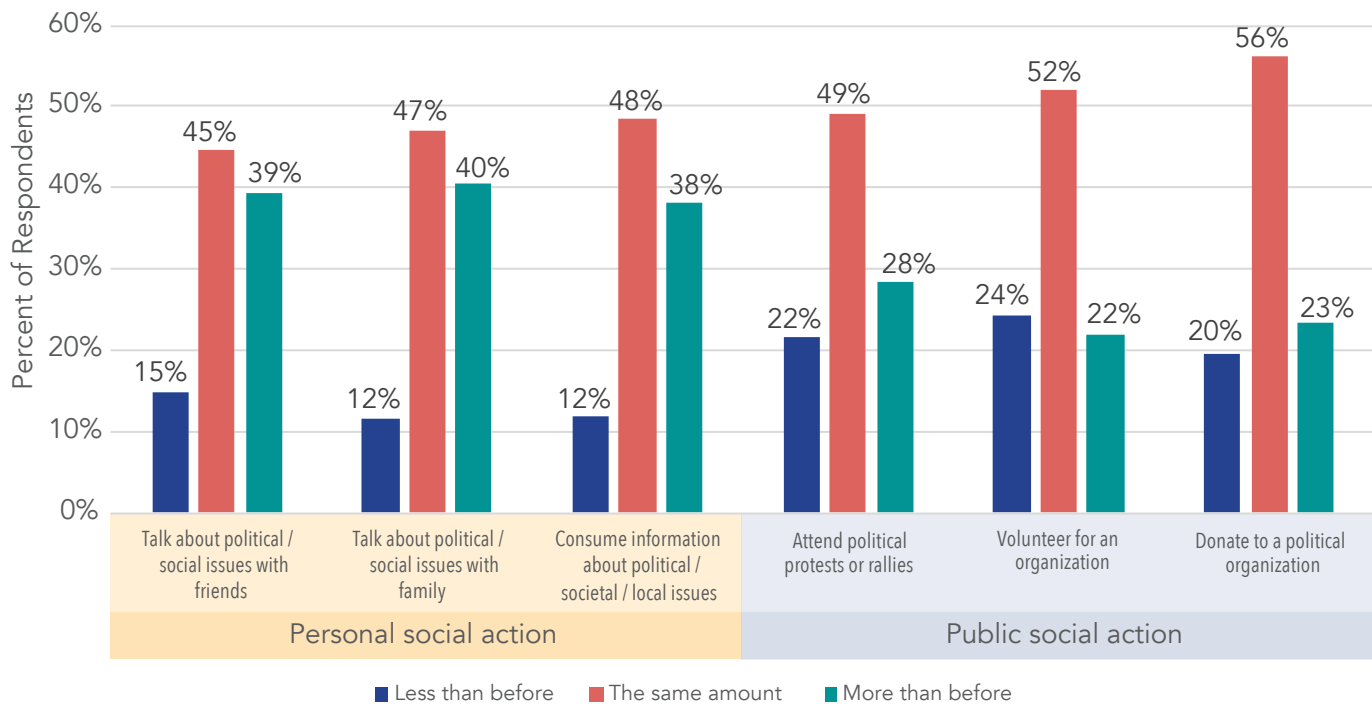
Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting changes in their level of social action over the past year. Social action was measured according to the six items included above (see Appendix A for more information). Examination of the psychometric characteristics of this scale suggests that the six items represent two primary factors, or forms of social action: 1) *Personal*, describing social action taken within one's personal life, including forms of intrapersonal (e.g., consuming information) and/or interpersonal engagement (e.g., talking with friends, family) with sociopolitical issues and 2) *Public*, describing social action that takes place in more formal public, institutional, or community contexts (e.g., protests, rallies, volunteer organizations, political entities). Young people who have never engaged in social action, either prior to or during the past year, were excluded.

The data provide important reference points to understand young people's lives over the past year; the ways they have responded to a unique sociopolitical landscape; and the ways in which their engagement as social, political, and civic individuals in the world may shape their experiences as students and their presence in the classroom. Existing literature affirms the importance of understanding students' engagement in social action, as youth civic engagement has been associated with improved wellbeing,[34] academic outcomes (e.g., academic performance, attainment), social connection (e.g., social networks, social capital), and access to educational and occupational opportunities,[35] with particular benefits for youth from historically marginalized communities, including youth of color, undocumented students, and LGBTQ+ youth.[36] Together, this snapshot of students' daily school experiences and their engagement in social action, provides a vantage point into young people's lives over the past year and sets a foundation for exploring more deeply students' wellbeing, experiences learning about social issues and racism at school, and the factors that shape their readiness for life after high school.

Finding One: High schoolers are struggling with a decreased sense of wellbeing—reporting declines in mental health and concerning levels of disconnection from peers and adults

In light of the enormous changes to students' daily school experiences and the volatile social, political, and economic climate within the nation over the past year, how are students faring with regard to their overall wellbeing, mental health, and connectedness to key relationships that can help them cope? The following section outlines young people's responses to questions about their mental health, levels of distress, and sense of connectedness across important sources of support in their lives.

Young people are stressed and their mental health is suffering—with disproportionate impacts on young women and nonbinary youth, Latinx students, and youth experiencing food insecurity.

Overall, the data suggest that most young people are suffering. Almost 3 in 4 surveyed high schoolers (72%) report a poor or decreased sense of mental health in the past 30 days, indicating that they "feel happy," were "able to concentrate," or that they were "playing a useful part in things," *much less than usual* or *not at all*. In addition to these mental health indicators, more than half of respondents (58%) report feeling signs of distress *much more than usual* (e.g., feeling "unhappy and depressed," "constantly under strain," or losing "much sleep over worry," etc).

While these indicators are concerning among all youth, analyses showed important and significant differences between subgroups, even after controlling for other factors.

Figure 4. Poor or Declining Mental Health Among Students, by Demographic Characteristics
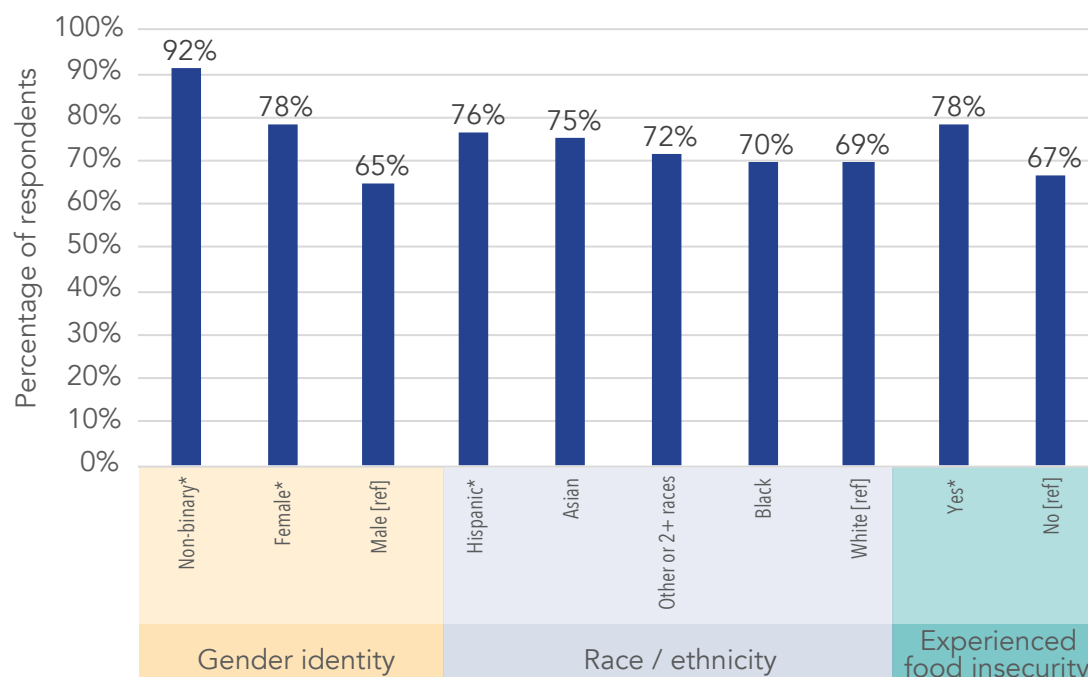
Note: A logistic regression model was conducted, including control variables for race/ethnicity, gender identity, socio-economic status, whether or not the student had experienced any food insecurity in the past year, and the mode the student attended school this year. The figure above reflects regression adjusted percentages of youth reporting that they experienced any of the indicators of positive mental health *much less than usual* or *not at all*. Asterisks indicate significant differences compared to the reference group "[ref]" based on the multivariate regression. All differences are significant at the level of p < 0.05.

More than three-quarters of female youth (78%) and nearly all non-binary youth (92%) reported experiencing at least one sign of poor or decreased mental health in the past 30 days, compared to 65% of male youth. This means that, compared to male students, female students were almost twice as likely and non-binary youth were six times more likely to cite feelings of poor or reduced mental health in the past 30 days. In addition, Latinx youth were 60% more likely to report feelings of poor or reduced mental health compared to white youth. Youth who reported experiencing at least one instance of food insecurity in the past year were 85% more likely to report signs of poor or reduced mental health compared to youth who had not experienced any food insecurity. While there were differences based on learning format (e.g., remote v. in-person), those differences did not remain significant when controlling for demographic characteristics.

Overall, students' responses highlight an overwhelming collective experience of diminished mental health and disproportionate suffering experienced by students of marginalized gender identities, Latinx youth, and students experiencing financial difficulty.

High schoolers feel disconnected from peers and adults, and disconnection is particularly prevalent among female students, non-binary youth, and students who have attended school remotely.

Social connectedness is a key protective factor for students and can buffer the adverse effects of developmental stressors, contributing to improved wellbeing and developmental outcomes.[37] Students were asked to indicate how connected they feel to their classmates, teachers, peers in their community, and other adults at school as well as in their communities.

Overall, levels of connectedness were low, with more than half of students indicating feeling *not at all connected* or *only a little connected* across each of these sources of relationships. Youth report feeling most connected to their teachers (47% felt *somewhat connected* or *very connected*), followed by classmates (41%), and peers in their communities (39%), however, the majority of students still indicated feeling only a little or somewhat connected within these relationships. Levels of disconnection were highest in relation to "other adults," with nearly half of respondents reporting feeling not at all connected to other adults at their schools (44%) or in their communities (43%).

Figure 5. Students' Perceived Level of Connectedness to Peers and Adults
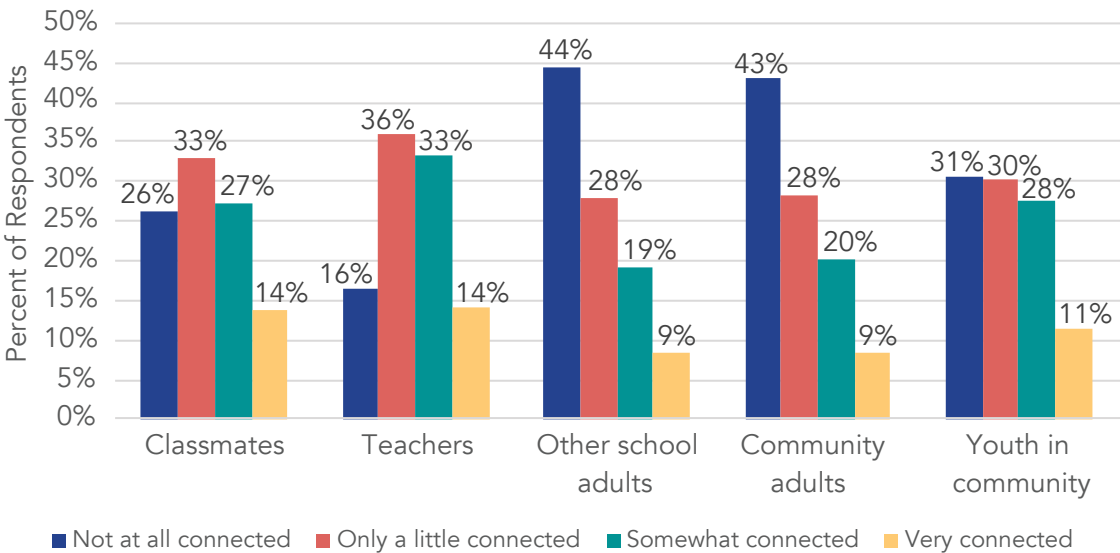
Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting interpersonal connection to each source of relationships, by perceived level of connectedness.

Examination of group differences indicated significant gender differences such that approximately half of male respondents (52%) reported feeling *not at all* or *only a little* connected to their classmates, compared to two-thirds of female respondents (66%) and three-quarters of non-binary respondents (76%). Even after controlling for mode of school attendance and other demographics, female students were still almost 90% more likely than male students to feel disconnected from their classmates while non-binary students were more than three times as likely to feel disconnected compared to male students.[A]

Figure 6. Percentage of Students *Not At All* or *Only A Little* Connected to Each Group, by Gender Identity

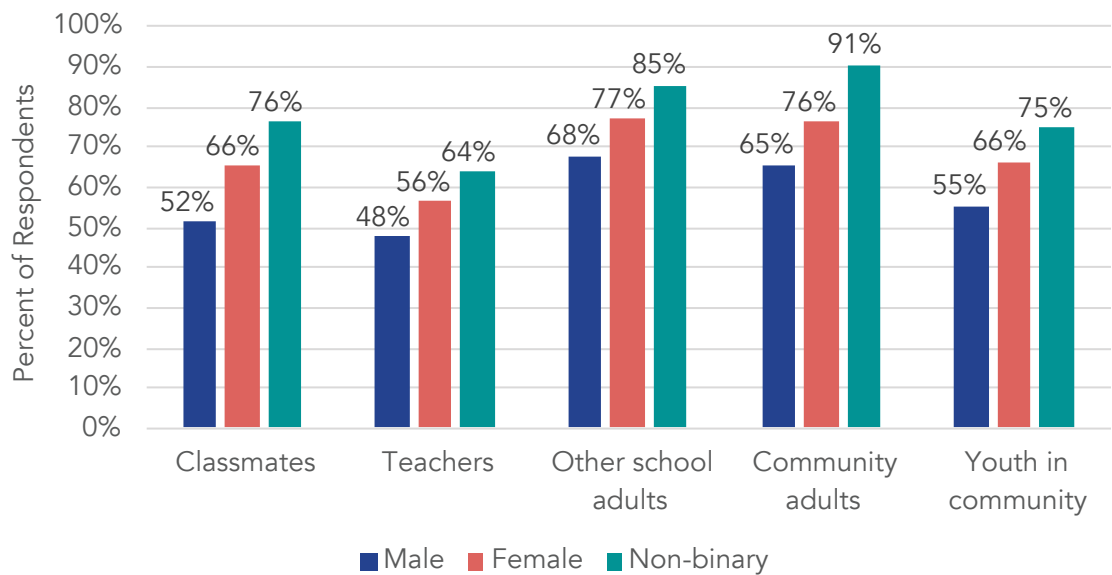Note: A logistic regression model was conducted examining differences in levels of connectedness to each source of relationship by participant gender identity, including control variables for race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, whether or not the student had experienced any food insecurity in the past year, and the mode the student attended school this year. The figure above reflects regression adjusted percentages of youth reporting that they felt *not at all* or *only a little* connected to each source of relationship.

Significant differences in connectedness were also observed by learning format, such that higher levels of remote learning were associated with higher levels of disconnectedness across sources, including both school-based relationships and out-of-school adults and peers. For example, more than half of youth (58%) who attended school mostly or completely remotely felt *not at all* or *only a little connected* to their teachers, whereas disconnection from teachers was lower among students who attended "an even mix" of in-person and remote school (47%) and lowest among those who attended all or mostly in-person (40%). Even when controlling for demographics, students attending school remotely were almost twice as likely to report feeling less connected to their teachers compared to youth attending all or mostly in-person.[B]

A The percentages presented in the graphs display the descriptive, unadjusted rates at which respondents exhibited each characteristic (e.g. 50% felt "somewhat" or "very" connected). The likelihoods presented following the unadjusted rates (e.g. "60% more likely" or "twice as likely") are relative percentages obtained from logistic regression modeling to describe the differences between groups.

B Differences by learning format also pertained to out-of-school relationships, as youth attending school remotely also reported lower levels of connection to adults and youth in their community, compared to students who have attended any in-person schooling. These consistencies may reflect underlying connections between school policies (e.g., learning formats) and family-, community-, or state-level policies and practices regarding social distancing; the difficulty of accessing the broader school community (e.g., school psychologists, paraprofessionals, etc.) in virtual learning formats; and the diminished opportunities for remote learners to access opportunities associated with the embeddedness of place-based schools within the broader community (i.e., daily interactions that occur en-route to and from school).

Figure 7. Percentage of Students *Not At All* or *Only A Little* Connected to Each Group, by Mode of School Attendance
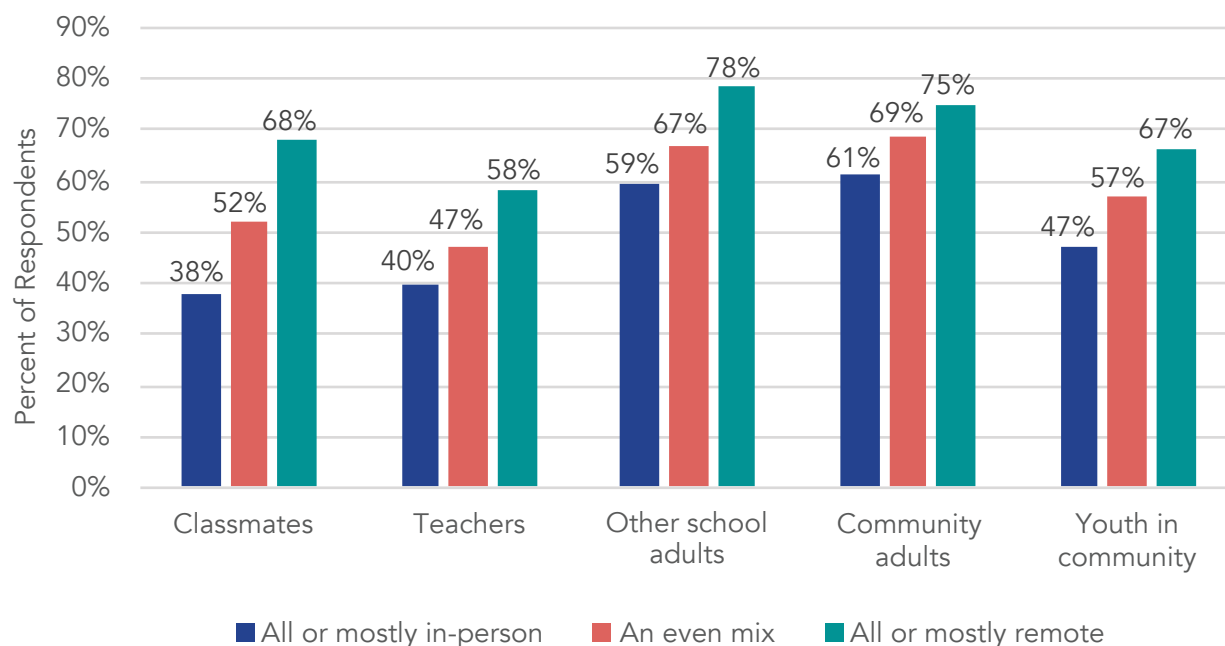

Note: A logistic regression model was conducted examining differences in levels of connectedness to each source of relationship by participant mode of school attendance, including control variables for race/ethnicity, gender identity, socio-economic status, and whether or not the student had experienced any food insecurity in the past year. The figure above reflects regression adjusted percentages of youth reporting that they felt not at all or only a little connected to each source of relationship.

Overall, the data suggest that young people are experiencing diminished mental health, increased distress, and limited connections to cope with the challenges that the past year has imposed. Further, examination of group differences indicate disproportionate levels of suffering along the lines of gender, race, and socioeconomic status and increased isolation among female and nonbinary students as well as remote learners. Additional studies show that prior to the pandemic, adolescents were experiencing rising levels of mood disorders and decreased mental health.[38] Responses from this survey suggest that those trends have worsened over the past year. This insight into students' overall wellness, their lack of access to relationships that can provide support, and the subgroups of students that have experienced higher levels of difficulty and isolation is crucial for grasping a more complete picture of the student experience amidst the pandemic and racial unrest.

Laying Out the Lexicon

Some of the terms referenced throughout this report are defined below according to existing literature, their meaning within the present research study, and their unique application and relation to one another within this report.

Opportunities to Learn about Race and Racism: In the present study, ***opportunities to learn about race and racism*** refers to a young person's assessment of whether their school curriculum and culture offer avenues to learn about issues of race and racism. This includes formal teaching of the history of racism in the United States, opportunities to discuss race and racism, and access to learning experiences that explore non-white histories and perspectives.

Critical Consciousness: Critical consciousness derives from an educational pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire, which articulates a vision of education as a means of social and political empowerment intended to equip students, particularly marginalized students, with the capacity for ***critical reflection***, the ability to analyze sociopolitical inequity as it exists within one's life and the surrounding world, and to leverage that analysis toward ***critical action*** that embodies efforts to transform self and society toward justice.[45] This perspective departs from dominant western approaches that viewed education as a system of institutions and practices intended to impart knowledge with the aim of assimilating successive generations to existing social, political, and economic systems and norms.

In the present study, critical consciousness describes students' capacity for ***critical reflection***, more specifically defined within research and literature as 1) students' attitudes toward ***egalitarianism***, the value of sociopolitical equality among groups in society and 2) students' ***perceptions of inequality,*** or ability to identify manifestations of inequity in the world as they analyze the social and political conditions around them.[46]

Social Action: While critical consciousness, in the present study, refers to the cognitive capacity to critically reflect and analyze sociopolitical conditions, Freire and other scholars posit that reflection ought to incline individuals toward sociopolitical action to resist, dismantle, and transform unjust systems and engender positive change in the world.[47] The present study adopted a somewhat broader conception of sociopolitical action, referred to hereafter more simply as ***social action,*** to encompass sociopolitical action that may derive from a range of individual motivations, including, but not limited to, efforts intended to correct perceived injustice in the world. In the present study, social action was defined as the frequency by which students engage in a range of social, political, or civic activities such as discussing political or social issues with others; consuming information about sociopolitical issues; and participating in protests, rallies, campaigns, or other causes.

Bringing these concepts together, the present study explored whether students are afforded ***opportunities to learn about race and racism*** at school, the extent to which these opportunities are associated with students' development of ***critical consciousness***, and the degree to which such opportunities and consciousness are associated with students' levels of ***social action***. Together, these concepts examine how often schools have provided learning contexts that support students in exploring key social issues and current events as well as the influence that these learning opportunities have on young people's development as students and as citizens.

Finding Two: Opportunities to learn about race and racism in the classroom vary but are associated with higher levels of critical consciousness and social action.

In the previous section, respondents shared insights about the extent to which their wellbeing has been impacted by the events of this year. Finding Two is centered on the belief that, while schools provide a means of fostering wellbeing, education is also a space for fostering young people's development as informed and engaged members of society. Among the range of social, political, and economic issues influencing young people's lives, communities, and classroom experiences, racism and our nation's ongoing struggle toward racial justice have persistently and prominently shaped the American social consciousness and the politics of education for centuries. There has been a growing demand from students,[39] scholars,[40] and educators,[41] particularly over the past year, to teach the truth about our country's history of race and racism, diversifying a canon that has been centered on a white, western, cis-male experience, and creating much more explicit bridges between classroom learning and diverse lived experiences.

School districts, however, vary widely in their treatment and teaching of race and racism. Recently, debate has resurfaced about instructional materials, like the Pulitzer Prize winning 1619 Project;[42] instructional approaches, like fostering inquiry on how laws can perpetuate racism;[43] and content, like understanding the impacts of white settlers exploiting and enslaving Mexican and Black people to establish western states.[44] These debates highlight the lack of agreement on the role of racism in American history and the resistance to interrogate the narratives that schools present to young people about our nation's past and present.

Despite the vigorous debates of adults, the degree to which high school students have access to opportunities to learn about race and racism in their classes remains unclear. Also unclear is our understanding of how these opportunities influence key learning processes as well as students' likelihood of engaging in social action. This findings section analyzes youth perspectives to address those gaps.

About half of high school students report learning about race and racism in their classes and many students encounter white-centric curricula.

Amidst a year of heightened discourse and struggle toward racial justice, to what extent have schools provided young people with opportunities to learn about race, racism, and non-white histories within the classroom?

While some youth report having these opportunities in school, they are far from universal. For example, just over half (55%) of students surveyed reported that they had opportunities to discuss race and racism *sometimes* or *a great deal* at school. Additionally, about three in five students surveyed reported that their school curriculum represented non-white communities sometimes or a great deal.

Figure 8: Opportunities to Learn About Race and Racism at School
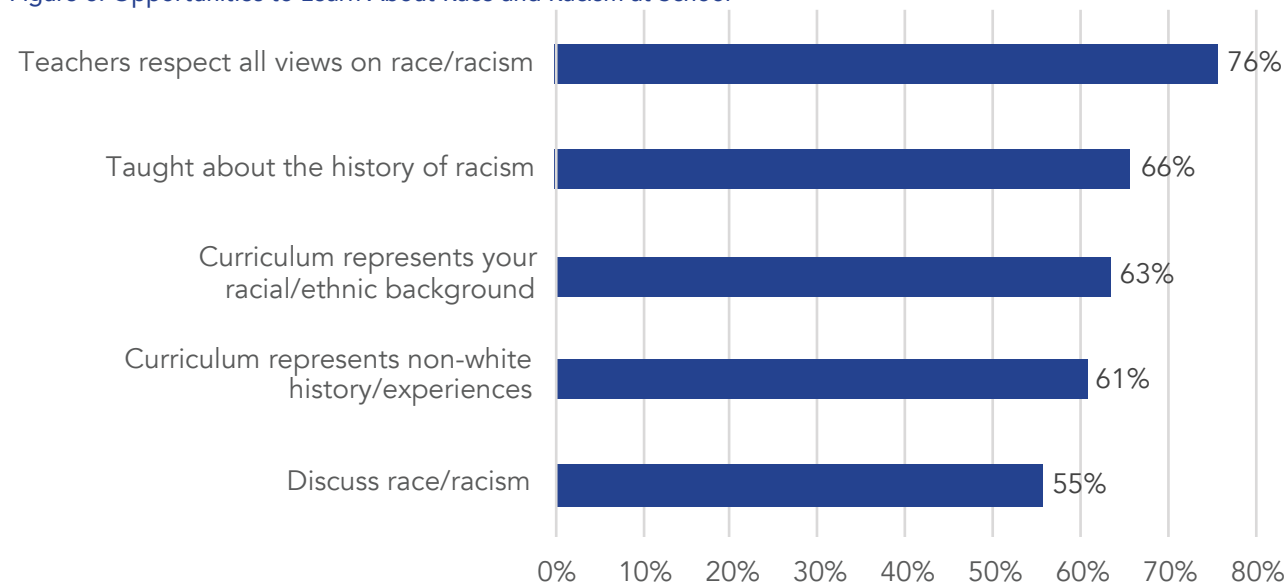
Category	Percentage
Teachers respect all views on race/racism	76%
Taught about the history of racism	66%
Curriculum represents your racial/ethnic background	63%
Curriculum represents non-white history/experiences	61%
Discuss race/racism	55%

Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting experiencing each type of opportunity to learn about race and racism *sometimes* or *a great deal* at school.

Examination of differences by race suggests that Black students reported a small, but statistically significant higher rate (61%) of opportunities to discuss race and racism compared to white students (54%). Fewer students of color reported that their curriculum represented their own specific racial/ethnic background compared to white students. For example, only 52% of Asian students report that their curriculum matches their specific racial/ethnic background compared to 68% of white students.[C]

Figure 9. Opportunities to Learn About Race and Racism at School, by Race/Ethnicity
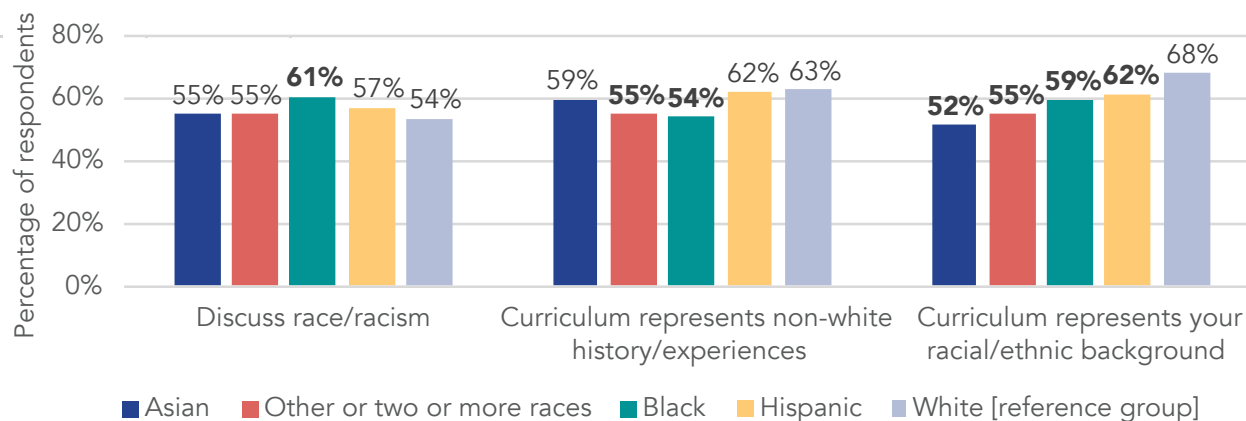
	Asian	Other or two or more races	Black	Hispanic	White [reference group]
Discuss race/racism	55%	55%	61%	57%	54%
Curriculum represents non-white history/experiences	59%	55%	54%	62%	63%
Curriculum represents your racial/ethnic background	52%	55%	59%	62%	68%

Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting experiencing each type of opportunity to learn about race and racism *sometimes* or *a great deal* at school.

Overall, the data suggest that while police violence, protests, and calls for racial justice have occupied the public discourse in communities across the country, many students continue to lack access to opportunities to discuss race and racism within their classrooms. Further, while some students report that their curriculum includes non-white histories, data suggest a need for deeper attention to the specific perspectives, histories, and communities of color that are represented within curricula and teaching. These data are concerning, but not surprising given extant research highlighting the overwhelmingly white education workforce, difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers and administrators of color, and resistance among many policymakers to include topics of race and racism within formal curricula.[48]

C This is consistent with research suggesting that Asian American participation and perspectives are underrepresented in statewide curricula development (An, 2016).

Critical Consciousness at a Glance: A Snapshot of Students' Attitudes Toward Equality and Inequality

Students across the country observed and participated in the public discourse and demonstrations on racial justice over the past year, however, little current systematic data exists documenting high school students' attitudes toward the sociopolitical conditions within the U.S. To better understand students' *critical reflections* about the sociopolitical conditions in the U.S., participants were asked about their attitudes toward *egalitarianism* as well as their *perceptions of inequality* within society today.

Overall, a majority of students endorse egalitarian beliefs, suggesting that society should strive to promote equality among social groups. More than 80% of youth respondents felt it was *somewhat* or *very true* that people should be treated equally, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender. Most respondents also felt it was *somewhat* or *very true* that "we would have fewer problems" if this were the case and that these groups "should be given an equal chance in life."

Compared to students' beliefs about equality, respondents' perceptions of existing societal inequality was more varied. Though more than 80% of youth espouse egalitarian beliefs, only 54-66% believe that it was *somewhat* or *very true* that women, certain racial or ethnic groups, or poor people have fewer chances to get ahead in society.

Figure 10. Critical Consciousness: Students' Attitudes Toward Egalitarianism and Perceived Inequality

|	Percent of respondents
Egalitarianism	
We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally.	85%
All racial, ethnic, and gender groups should be given an equal chance in life.	83%
It would be good if all racial, ethnic, and gender groups could be equal.	83%
Inequality	
Poor people have fewer chances to get ahead.	66%
Certain racial or ethnic groups have fewer chances to get ahead.	58%
Women have fewer chances to get ahead.	54%
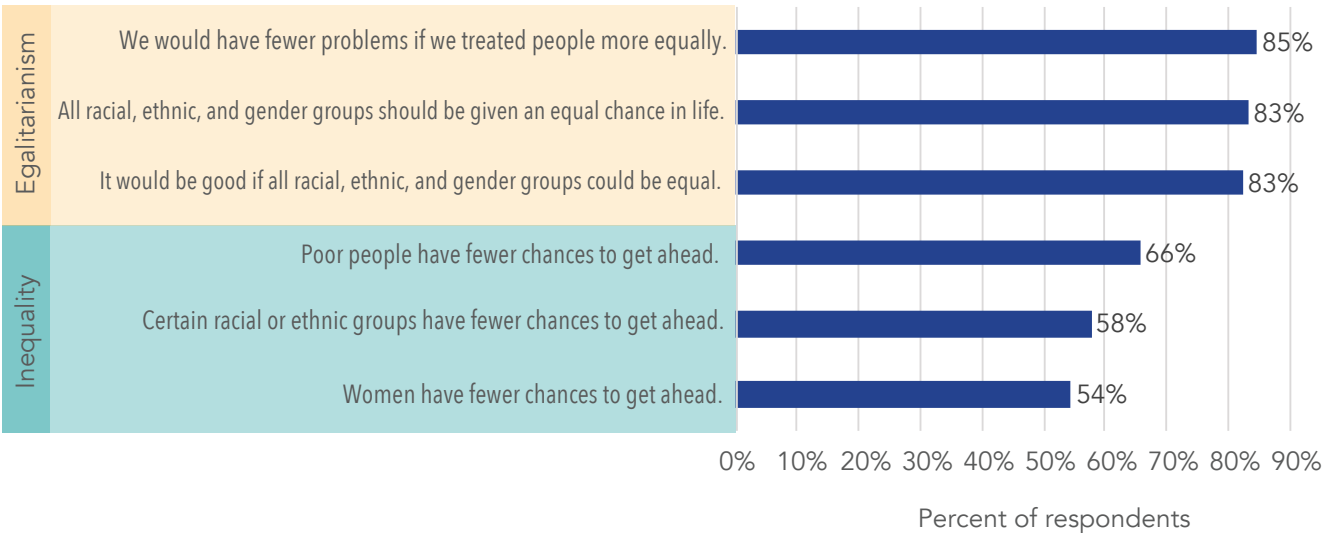
Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting each statement of egalitarianism or perceived inequality *somewhat* or *very true*.

There were also important and statistically significant differences in perceptions of inequality,[D] such that youth who identify with marginalized groups were more likely to identify inequality in society (see Figure 11). Compared to half of male respondents, three-quarters of non-binary youth and two-thirds of female students reported high perceptions of inequality (saying on average that it was *somewhat* or *very true* that these groups had fewer chances to get ahead). In addition, 64% of Black youth reported a high perception of inequalities, compared to 57% of white youth. Similar between-group trends were observed with regard to egalitarianism.

D An aggregate "perceptions of inequality" scale was created by averaging the responses to each individual item, using a 1-to-4 scale for each response option. This scale was then dichotomized at the median value of 2.7. This approach was also used to create a scale measuring attitudes toward "Egalitarianism."

Note: A logistic regression model was conducted including control variables for race/ethnicity, gender identity, socio-economic status, the mode the student attended school this year, and whether or not the student had opportunities to discuss race and racism at or above the median rate. The figure above reflects regression adjusted percentages of youth reporting agreement with the statements of perceived inequality at or above the median rate. Asterisks indicate significant differences compared to the reference group "[ref]", based on the multivariate regression. All differences are significant at the level of $p < 0.05$.

Together, the data suggest that most students believe individuals and groups should be treated equally within society and though most, yet somewhat fewer, believe inequality exists today, students of historically marginalized identities are more likely to identify social injustice within the world.

Opportunities to learn about race and racism in school matter and are associated with higher levels of critical consciousness and social action.

Though students' responses indicated that opportunities to learn about race and racism vary, the data in the present study suggest that access to these opportunities matter and are associated with key indicators of student learning and development. Specifically, the data indicate that opportunities to learn about race and racism in school are associated with higher levels of critical consciousness and social action among high school students.

Opportunities to learn about race and racism in school are associated with higher levels of critical consciousness.

Young people who had more exposure to topics of race and racism in school were significantly more likely to endorse egalitarian beliefs, a component of critical consciousness, compared to peers with less exposure (65% v. 56%, respectively), even after controlling for differences associated with demographic characteristics and learning format. Interestingly, there were not significant differences in perceptions of inequality based on the degree

to which students had opportunities to discuss race and racism in school.[D] Together, the findings suggest that opportunities to learn about race and racism in school are associated with higher levels of certain dimensions of critical consciousness, although the influence of particular curricula on these belief systems may be more complex, warranting additional research.

Figure 12. Critical Consciousness: Students' Attitudes Toward Egalitarianism and Perceived Inequality, by Degree of Opportunities to Learn About Race and Racism in Classes
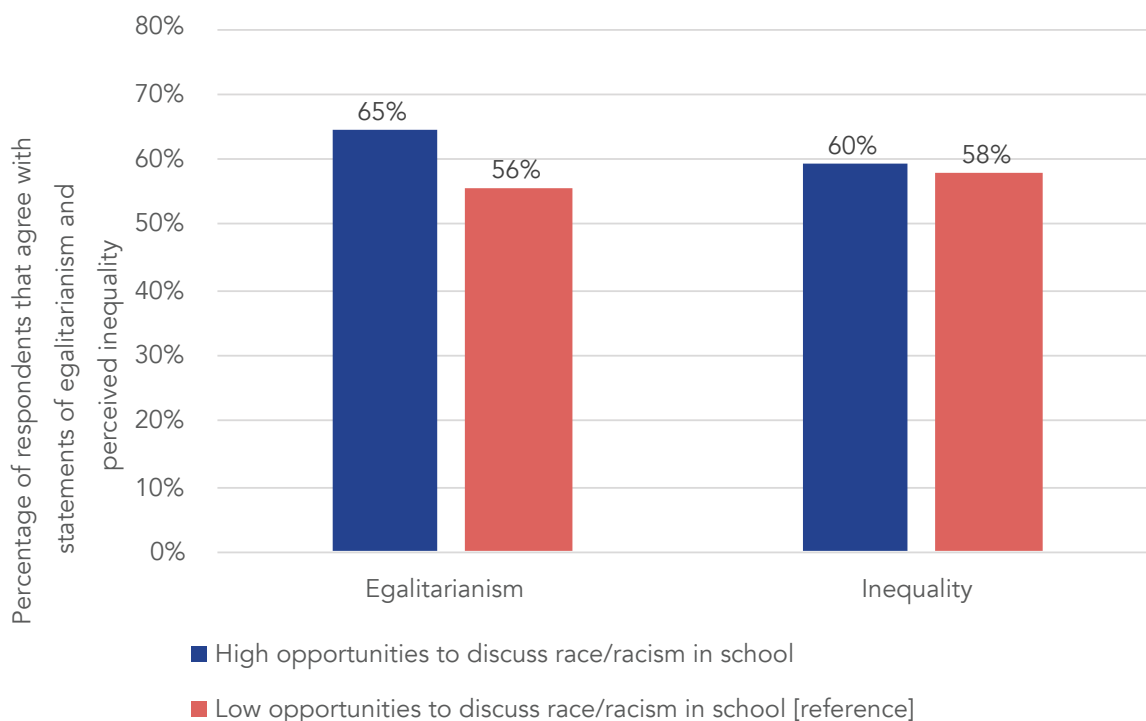
Note: A logistic regression model was conducted including control variables for race/ethnicity, gender identity, socio-economic status, the mode the student attended school this year, and whether or not the student had opportunities to discuss race and racism at or above the median rate. The figure above reflects regression adjusted percentages of youth reporting agreement with the statements of perceived inequality or egalitarianism at or above the median rate. Asterisks indicate significant differences compared to the reference group "[ref]", based on the multivariate regression. All differences are significant at the level of $p < 0.05$.

Opportunities to learn about race and racism, along with critically conscious mindsets, are each associated with higher levels of social action.

While opportunities to learn about race and racism in school were associated with higher levels of critical consciousness, these opportunities are also significantly associated with higher levels of social action. This indicates that such learning opportunities are associated with the development of both students' mindsets and actions.

Youth who had more opportunities to learn about race and racism in school more often reported high levels of personal social action (60%) compared to those who had less exposure (52%), even after controlling for demographic characteristics and learning format. While a similar trend was observed with regard to public social action, it was less pronounced and not statistically significant.[E]

D Lack of significant differences may reflect methodological differences in the breadth of the sociopolitical inequality scale, which, in addition to race, asks about differences along gender and socio-economic lines. Observed differences in egalitarianism but not perceived inequality may also reflect differences in the content and nature by which many schools approach topics of race and racism, as many may introduce 'safer' topics, such as the importance of equality, while venturing less frequently into more difficult topics, such as the identification and analysis of existing inequity and injustice within society.
E This may belie a meaningful difference, given limitations on social activity presented by the pandemic.

Figure 13. Student Participation in Social Action, by Degree of Opportunity To Learn About Race and Racism and by Levels of Perceived Inequality
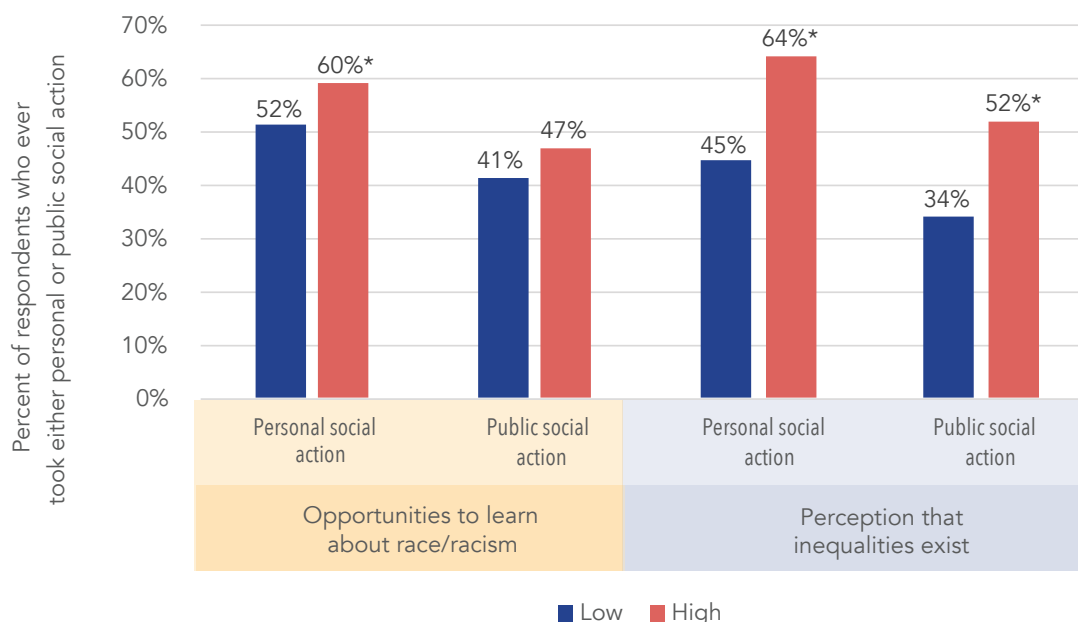
Note: A logistic regression model was conducted, including control variables for race/ethnicity, gender identity, socio-economic status, the mode the student attended school this year, and either whether or not the student had opportunities to learn about race and racism or whether or not the student agreed with statements of inequality at or above the median rate. The figure above reflects regression adjusted percentages of youth reporting personal social action (i.e. discussing political/social issues with family or friends or consuming information about social issues) or public social action (i.e. volunteering, donating, or attending rallies) at or above the median rate. Asterisks indicate significant differences compared to the reference group that had lower exposure, based on the multivariate regression. All differences are significant at the level of p < 0.05.

Finally, while opportunities to learn about race are associated with development of both critical consciousness and social action, results also suggest a link between mindsets themselves and social action (see Figure 13). In other words, mindsets matter; students' levels of critical consciousness were significantly associated with levels of social action. Youth who perceived higher levels of inequality reported significantly higher rates of engaging in both personal and public social action to address the issues they identify in the world, even after controlling for differences associated with youth characteristics and mode of school attendance. Consistent with existing literature on sociopolitical attitudes and engagement, this link between mindsets and action suggests that those who perceive inequity are more likely mobilized to discuss, attend to, and address political or social issues.[49]

Many educators, administrators, and policymakers are actively contemplating how issues of race, racism, and other social issues show up in the classroom. The findings here suggest that opportunities to grapple more honestly with difficult issues in the classroom can meaningfully shape student mindsets and that these learning experiences and mindsets can equip students to engage more readily in social action to address the social, political, and economic realities around them. This is consistent with existing research and theory suggesting that opportunities to learn about social issues are crucial for preparing students with the skills, openness, and attitudes to engage with peers and adults around difficult topics;[50] to foster more equitable school environments;[51] and to take action in the interest of creating a more just and inclusive society.[52] Importantly, all students benefit from these types of learning opportunities[53] and for marginalized youth, these opportunities may validate experiences of institutional exclusion or harm and provide empowering environments and relationships to discuss those experiences and work with those in power to reduce inequity.[F]

F Cohen, Kahne, & Marshall, 2018; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; See examples like the Building Equitable Learning Environments Network's framework for more on evidence-based characteristics of and strategies for building equitable learning environments, including students' critical consciousness. Research suggests that critical consciousness can impact youth mental health (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, & Maton, 1999), academic achievement and engagement (Seider, Clark, & Graves, 2020), healthy decision-making (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019; Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016), and civic or sociopolitical action (Diemer and Li, 2011), particularly among marginalized youth.

Finding Three: COVID-19 has upended postsecondary planning, yet feelings of postsecondary readiness are highest among students who are most connected to teachers and peers, have have opportunities to learn about race and racism in school, and feel academically interested and challenged.

In addition to promoting wellbeing and fostering student development as informed and engaged members of society, high school plays a crucial role in preparing students for postsecondary education, training, and/or employment. As district leaders and policymakers look toward recovery, it is imperative to understand the influence that the past year has had on students' plans and readiness for the future. What ambitions do young people hold for their postsecondary futures, and how have their plans been influenced by COVID-19? To what extent are young people's high school experiences preparing them for the future? And what aspects of those school-based experiences help students feel most ready for what is to come?

This final section examines how students' postsecondary planning has been disrupted by COVID-19 and explores the extent to which young people's sense of postsecondary readiness is influenced by school-related factors, such as a) levels of connectedness to teachers and classmates (see Finding One for more information), b) opportunities to learn about race and racism in school (see Finding Two for more information), and c) the degree to which students feel academically challenged by and interested in their high school courses. The answers to the questions above are explored below and offer key insights to guide policy and practice as the nation looks toward recovery and reinvestment.

Many students hold ambitious goals along diverse postsecondary pathways, although COVID-19 has disrupted their postsecondary planning in myriad ways.

Students have witnessed tremendous upheaval in their families, schools, and communities over the past academic year. Broader influences including the nation's economy, disruptions to the higher education landscape, and looming public health concerns have imposed a great deal of uncertainty on students' lives after graduation. Overall, approximately four out of five (78%) 11th and 12th graders reported that COVID-19 has impacted their plans after high school at least *a little bit*, with almost one in five reporting their plans were impacted *a great deal*.

Among those who indicated COVID-19 had impacted their postsecondary plans, most maintained ambitions for further education with 66% planning to go to a community college or a 4-year institution. Almost 20% said they planned to work full time after high school and the remainder reported planning on an internship, apprenticeship, part-time work, or entering the military.

Among those who report their post-high school plans have changed, many indicate that plans have shifted in multiple ways. Most commonly, students reported changes to *where* they plan to attend college. For example, one-third (34%) of young people report changing their plans to attend college closer to home and one-quarter (24%) plan to attend a 2-year instead of a 4-year institution. Some young people (7%) report that they no longer plan to attend college, and 16% say they plan to attend college later. Notably, nearly half indicate that their plans have changed due to financial (47%) or family reasons (45%) with far fewer citing changes to their interests (24%), suggesting that shifting plans are driven largely by constraints beyond young people's control.

Figure 14. Changes to Postsecondary Plans Among 11th And 12th Graders

How Plans Have Changed

Change	Percentage
Planning to attend college closer to home	34%
Planning to attend a 2-year instead of 4-year college	24%
Planning to attend college remotely instead of in-person	17%
Planning to work in a different field	16%
Planning to attend college later	16%
No longer planning to go to college	7%
Other	2%
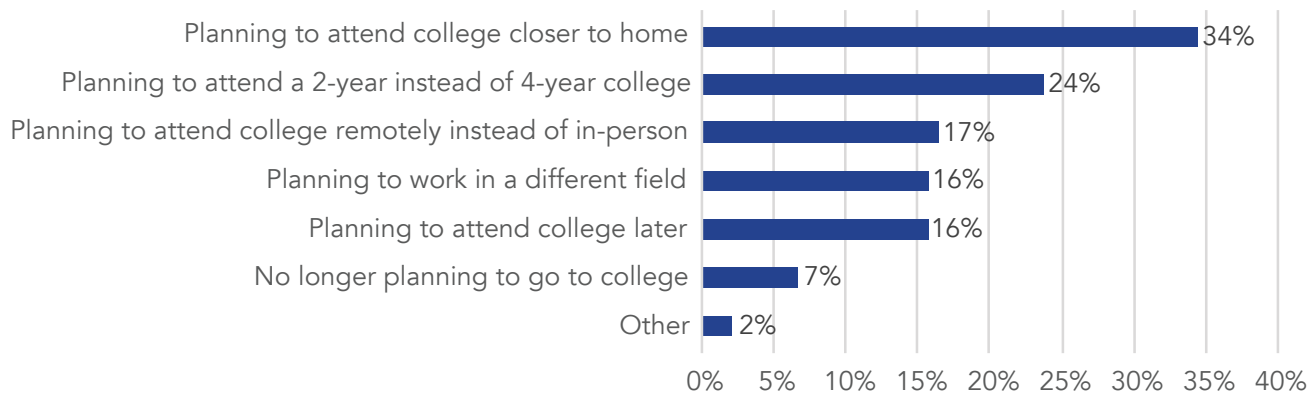
Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting each type of change among 11th and 12th grade students who report their plans have changed at least *a little bit* due to COVID-19

Figure 15. Reported Reasons for Changes to Postsecondary Plans Among 11th And 12th Graders

Why Plans Have Changed

Reason	Percentage
Financial reasons	47%
Family reasons	45%
Your interests have changed	24%
Don't feel ready for college	23%
Don't think college is a good investment	11%
Other	4%

Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting each reason for changing postsecondary plans among 11th and 12th grade students who report their plans have changed at least *a little bit* due to COVID-19.

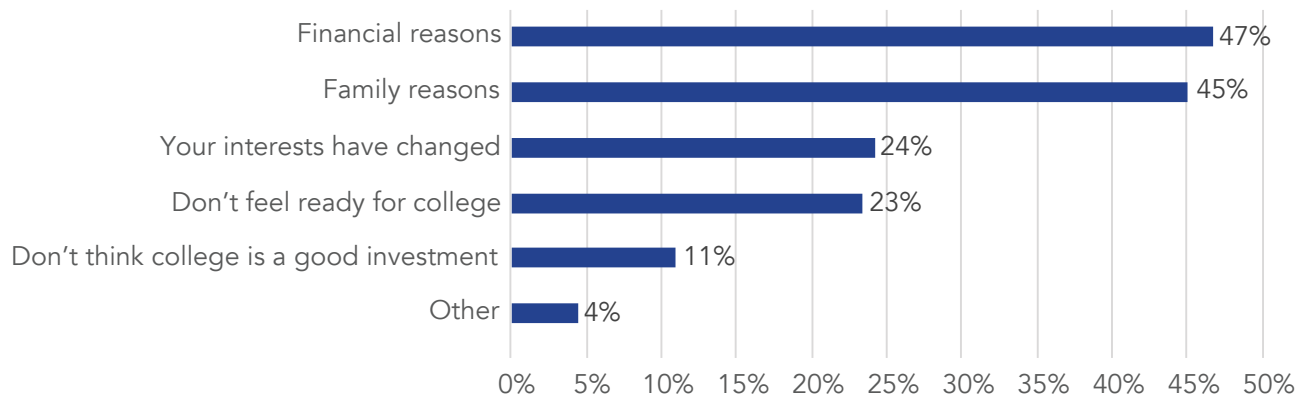That the overwhelming majority of students indicated COVID-19 impacted their postsecondary planning is understandable, but concerning, particularly among students making adjustments that will impact their long-term trajectories (e.g., planning to attend 2-year, rather than 4-year college; deferring higher education plans for later). While many students reported sustained intentions to pursue higher education, research indicates that actual enrollment is typically lower than youth's self-reported plans for postsecondary education.[G] Further, young people who take time off after high school are less likely to complete a degree, even when controlling for academic and socioeconomic characteristics.[54] The data in the present study, therefore, raise concerns that as students cope with the economic and familial impacts of the pandemic, the disruptions of the past year may result in lower levels of postsecondary enrollment,[H] higher levels of "undermatching" among students who do attend higher education,[I] as well as far reaching and long-term effects on student achievement, employment, and earning.

G For example, in 2012, 74% of 11th graders expected to enroll in college (2- or 4-year), and 19% expected to work full-time (Oymak & NCES, 2017), but the immediate college enrollment rate from 2010-2019 has remained around 66% (NCES, 2021).
H Due to COVID there was a significant decline in FAFSA applications for both new and returning students, particularly among students at Title I schools (DeBaun, 2019, as cited in Suarez and Marcus, 2020). According to a Census survey in October 2020, more than 40% of households reported that a prospective student was changing or cancelling plans for postsecondary enrollment, and community college students were changing their plans at twice the rate of four-year college students (Belfield & Brock, 2020).
I Undermatching occurs when students attend postsecondary education that is less academically challenging than their qualifications may predict (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). Undermatched students tend not to persist or complete at the same rates as their matched or "overmatched" peers, and some evidence suggests that undermatching can affect post-college employment and earnings (Ovink, Kalogrides, Nanney, & Delaney, 2018).

Readiness is highest among students who are connected to teachers and peers, have opportunities to learn about racial issues like race and racism at school, and feel academically challenged and interested in their courses.

As students strive to adapt their goals, plans, and pathways in light of COVID-19, the role and relevance of school as a key context for developing the postsecondary readiness required for life after high school remains crucial. To what extent, however, do young people believe their high school experience is fostering the sense of readiness required for their postsecondary success?

While two-thirds of high schoolers reported having a *somewhat* or *very clear* idea of their career interests, many indicated that their school experience is not preparing them for life after high school. Students were presented with a series of questions assessing the degree to which their high school experiences contribute to feeling ready for life after high school (see Figure 16). Only about half (57%) of respondents reported that it is *somewhat* or *very true* that what they learn in classes is "necessary for success in the future" or offers "useful information to prepare" them for what they want to do in life. In addition to assessing the value of their classes, only about two-thirds (64%) of respondents felt it was *somewhat* or *very true* that they "learn valuable skills at school" or that their "high school experience" is preparing them for success. Interestingly, while approximately 90% of respondents reported that they will graduate in four years, just 57-64% reported that their high school experience is preparing them for postsecondary success.

Figure 16. Perceptions of Postsecondary Readiness
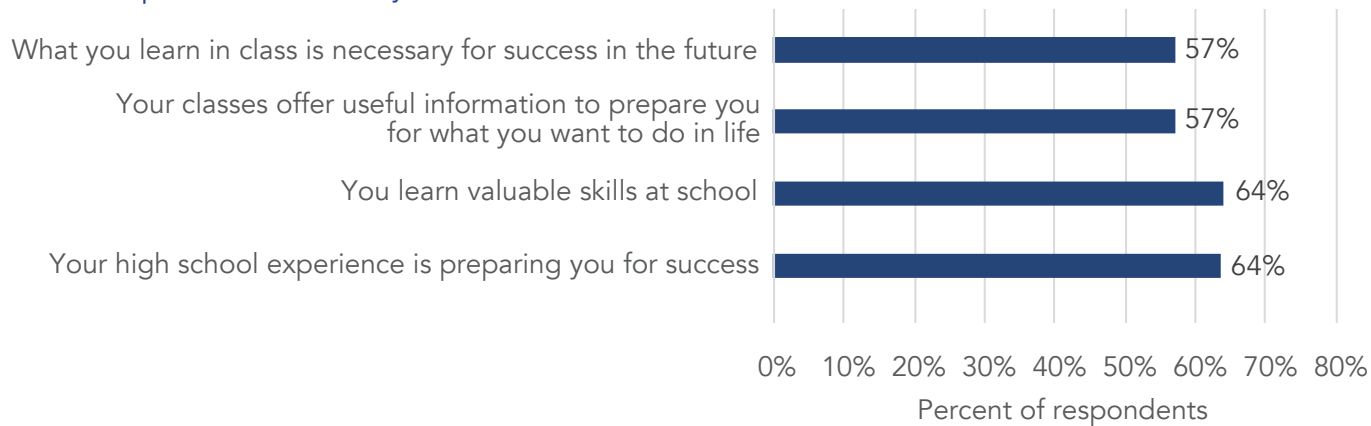
Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth agreeing *somewhat* or *a great deal* with each statement related to postsecondary readiness.

Given the vast disruptions in postsecondary planning imposed by COVID-19 and varying sentiments regarding the extent to which the high school experience has prepared students for the future, which of the relational, civic, and academic aspects of students' school-based experiences are associated with improved perceptions of postsecondary readiness?

Building from Findings One and Two, Finding Three explores several school-based factors that represent aspects of a more holistic school-based experience and examines whether these factors are associated with students' perceptions of postsecondary readiness. Specifically, the analysis examines the degree to which students' postsecondary readiness was influenced by their sense of connectedness to key school-based peers and adults: their opportunities to discuss important social issues like race: and their experiences with more traditional academic factors of feeling academically challenged and interested in their courses (see box on page 28). [J]

[J] While additional, previously mentioned variables (i.e. mental health, critical consciousness, social action) may indeed be associated with higher levels of postsecondary readiness and success, one of the primary goals for this report is to serve school and district leaders in planning for the upcoming and future school years. As a result, for this study we focused on those experiences that fall more directly within the purview of school practices: students' connectedness to teachers and classmates, opportunities to learn about race and racism in school, and their academic coursework.

Experiencing academically challenging learning experiences, interesting coursework, and connectedness to school-based adults and peers are key factors of high school and postsecondary success. Prior research, pedagogy, and policy have referred to these characteristics as "the new 3 R's—rigor, relevance, and relationships," citing these as key factors for improving academic achievement, graduation rates, and the high school experience.[55] Less is known about whether opportunities to learn about race and racism in school promote postsecondary readiness. However, prior research, including the findings from this study, suggest that learning about social issues like race and racism is associated with key developmental and educational outcomes such as improved critical consciousness and multicultural skills,[56] racial identity, attitudes, and behaviors among students;[57] personal growth and self esteem;[58] academic engagement and achievement (e.g., grades, academic interest, belonging),[59] and civic engagement and social action.[60] To better understand the school-based factors that influence students' preparation for the future, each of these factors were examined to explore their unique contributions to students' perceptions that their high school experience has fostered their postsecondary readiness.

The following sections detail findings from each step of this analysis, presenting the results from a logistic regression predicting the degree to which each of these school-based experiences contribute to students' belief that school is preparing them for life after high school. Given the disruption to young people's learning this past school year, and the open questions about how schools and districts can proactively plan to support young people's learning and development in the coming years, understanding whether these school-based factors support increased feelings of postsecondary readiness can help school and district leaders optimize their planning and investment by cultivating and re-designing experiences that prepare students to succeed beyond high school.

While many feel challenged by their courses, fewer feel interested

To understand the range of factors that shape young people's overall perceptions of postsecondary readiness, students were asked about their academic experiences. Two key aspects of students' academic experiences include the extent to which students' coursework offer academically challenging and interesting learning opportunities. Decades of research underscore that access to rigorous and relevant learning experiences[76] are associated with students' cognitive development and attitudes,[77] grades and test scores,[78] high school graduation,[79] postsecondary readiness,[80] college enrollment,[81] college degree completion,[82] and wages.[83] Young people were, therefore, asked to assess the degree to which their high school experience offered courses that were academically challenging and interesting. Here is how students are doing on some of these academic indicators.

While most students (66-77%) reported that their courses were academically challenging, as many as one in three reported not feeling "challenged in most of [their] classes" and one in four report not having to "work hard to do well." Fewer (46-55%) reported feeling interested in their courses with only about half of students (46%) indicating that they "look forward to [their] classes" or are "interested in the topics [they] study" (55%). Overall, the figures suggest that large proportions of students lack access to challenging and interesting coursework within their high schools.

Figure 17. Student Perceptions of Feeling Academically Challenged and Interested by School
Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting each statement was *somewhat* or *very true.*

Challenged in school	You have to work hard to do well	77%
	You are challenged in most of your classes	63%
Interested in school	You are interested in the topics you study	55%
	You look forward to your classes	46%
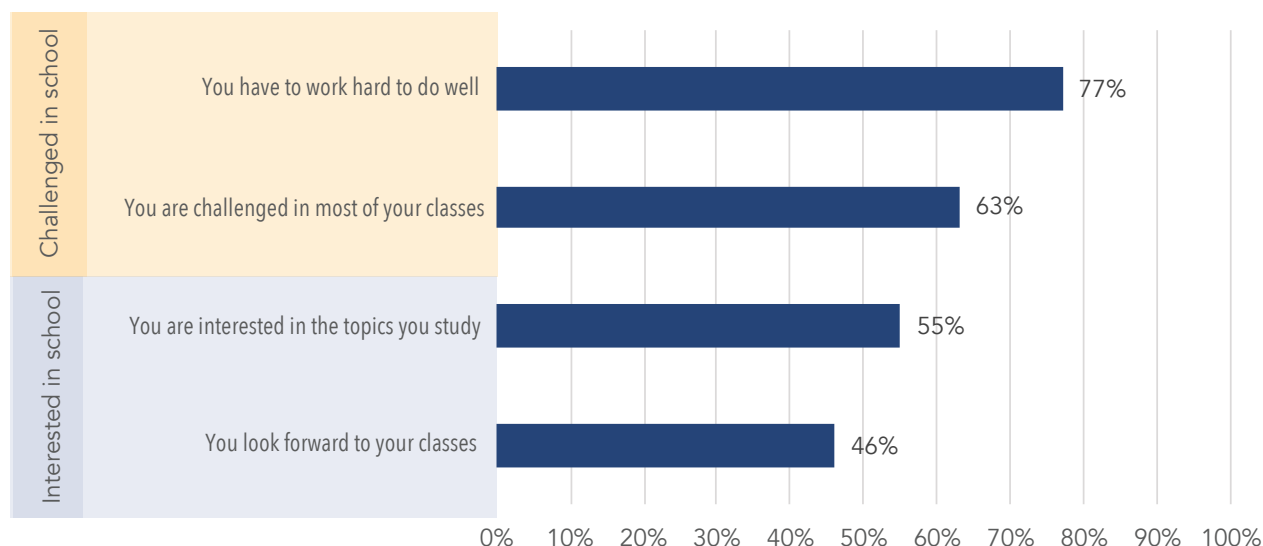
Note: The figure above reflects percentages of youth reporting each statement was somewhat or very true.

Concerningly, female and non-binary students, as well as those who attended all or mostly remotely over the past year reported significantly lower rates of interest in their classes compared to peers, even after controlling for other demographic characteristics (see Figure 18).

Figure 18. Student Perceptions of Feeling Academically Interested in School, by Demographic Characteristics and Mode of School Attendance
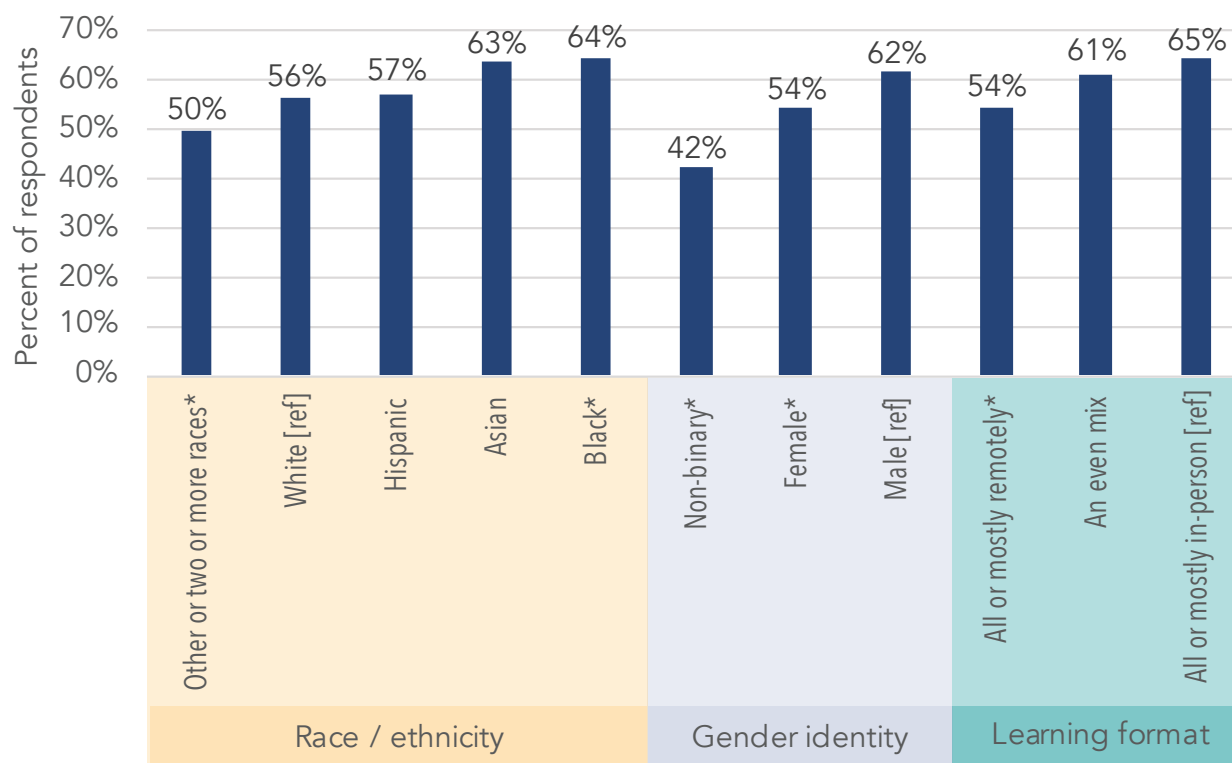
Race / ethnicity					Gender identity			Learning format		
Other or two or more races*	White [ref]	Hispanic	Asian	Black*	Non-binary*	Female*	Male [ref]	All or mostly remotely*	An even mix	All or mostly in-person [ref]
50%	56%	57%	63%	64%	42%	54%	62%	54%	61%	65%

Note: A logistic regression model was conducted, including control variables for race/ethnicity, gender identity, socio-economic status, and the mode the student attended school this year. The figure above reflects regression adjusted percentages of youth reporting that they felt interested in and looked forward to their classes at or above the median rate. Asterisks indicate significant differences compared to the reference group "[ref]" based on the multivariate regression. All differences are significant at the level of p < 0.05.

Analysis indicated that each of these school-based factors significantly, substantively, and positively predicted perceived postsecondary readiness, such that higher levels of connectedness to teachers and peers, have opportunities to learn about race and racism at school, and access to academically challenging and interesting courses were significantly associated with higher beliefs that one's high school experience had prepared them for postsecondary success.

Figure 19. Perceptions of Postsecondary Readiness, by School-based Factors
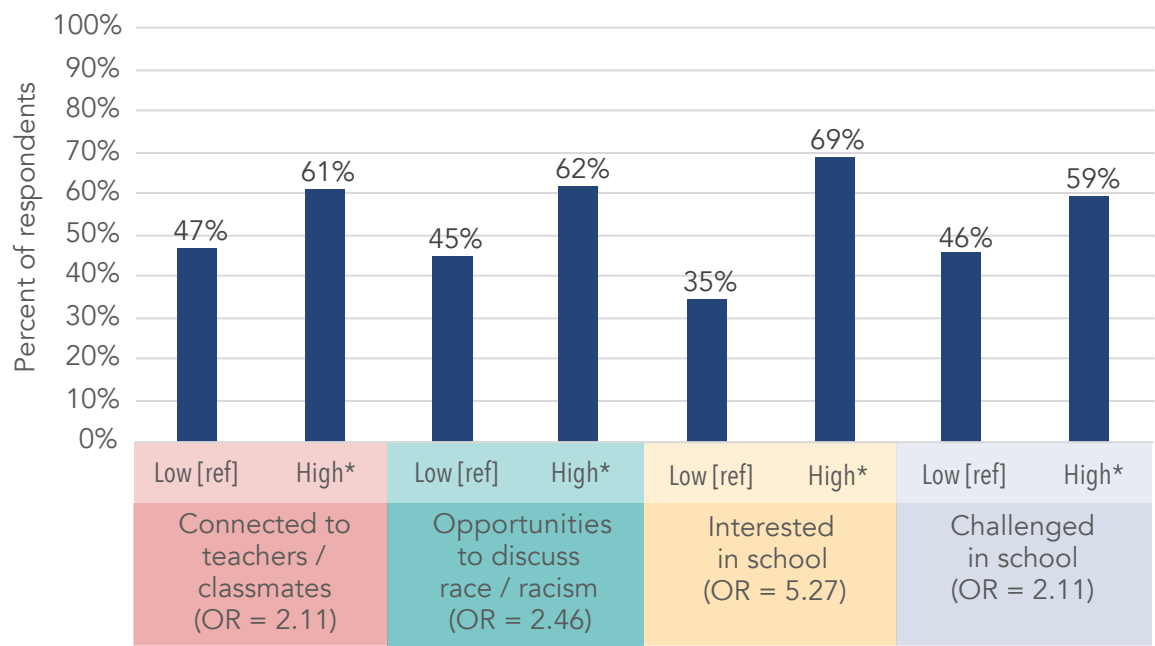
Note: A logistic regression model was conducted, including control variables for race/ethnicity, gender identity, socio-economic status, the mode the student attended school this year, and whether the student rated at or above the median response for interest in school, challenge in school, connectedness to teachers and classmates, and have opportunities to learn about race and racism. The figure above reflects regression adjusted percentages of youth reporting that they feel ready for life after high school at or above the median level. Asterisks indicate significant differences compared to the reference group "[ref]" based on the multivariate regression. Odds Ratios (OR) describe the relative odds that the outcome variable (e.g., readiness) will be experienced based on the level at which participants experienced each predictor variable (e.g., low v. high interest, low v. high connectedness). All differences are significant at the level of $p < 0.05$.[K]

There were few differences in feelings of readiness by demographic characteristics[L] or by remote learning format; together these factors explained only about 2.3% of differences in students' perceived levels of postsecondary readiness (see Appendix B). The collection of school-based factors were much more robust predictors of perceived postsecondary readiness, together explaining nearly 40% of differences in students' levels of perceived readiness. In other words, there were significant and substantive differences in postsecondary readiness between students who reported high versus low levels of connectedness to teachers and classmates, opportunities to learn about race and racism at school, and academically challenging and interesting coursework.

Having strong connections with teachers and classmates significantly predicted students' perceptions of readiness for the future. Youth who felt highly connected to their teachers and classmates more often felt a high degree of readiness for life after high school (61%) compared to those who felt only a little bit or not at all connected (47%). Youth who had strong connections to their teachers and classmates were more than twice as likely to feel a high sense of readiness than those who were disconnected.

K To construct this regression model we first tested the goodness of fit of using an OLS model with a continuous measure of readiness. Our base model which included only demographics and the mode of school attendance had an R-squared value of 0.023. The model had a much larger R-squared after adding a single factor of holistic high school experience, growing to 0.244, and reached 0.387 with all four included.

L The sole significant difference observed between demographic characteristics was by race/ethnicity, such that Asian youth (62%) felt a higher degree of readiness compared to white youth (52%). Within the model that controlled for other demographics and experiences of the past year, Asian youth were 78% more likely to report a high level of postsecondary readiness, compared to white youth.

In addition to relational factors, opportunities to learn about race and racism in school was significantly and substantively associated with perceived postsecondary readiness. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of students who had more opportunities to talk about race and racism in school reported feeling a high degree of readiness compared to just 45% of youth who had fewer opportunities. Even when controlling for other characteristics, youth who have opportunities to learn about race and racism in school were more than twice as likely to feel a sense of postsecondary readiness compared to students who do not have those opportunities.[M]

Finally, the degree to which students felt academically interested in and challenged by their courses significantly predicted perceptions of postsecondary readiness. For instance, most youth (69%) who felt a high degree of interest in their courses also reported feeling a high degree of readiness for life after high school, compared to just 35% of youth who were less interested in their courses. In other words, youth who felt a high degree of interest in their classes were five times more likely to report a high degree of readiness for life after high school, after controlling for other characteristics. The degree to which youth reported feeling challenged in school also significantly predicted perceptions of postsecondary readiness. More than half of youth (59%) who felt a high degree of challenge in school also felt a high degree of readiness, while less than half of youth (46%) who felt less challenged felt a high degree of readiness. Controlling for other characteristics, youth reporting high levels of challenge in school were more than twice as likely to feel ready for life after high school.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that the collection of academic, relational, and civic characteristics of students' school-based experiences strongly predicted students' beliefs that their high school experience has prepared them for the future. As school-, district-, and state-level leaders contemplate strategies for recovery, the present data underscore the importance of prioritizing students' relationships with classmates and teachers; opportunities to learn about the social realities, such as race and racism, that affect life within and outside of the classroom; and school curriculum and culture that focus on rigorous and relevant academics. Each of these school-based factors appear to promote students' readiness for the future in unique ways, and decision makers can optimize students' likelihood for success by designing a high school experience that equips each student with the learning, relationships, and social awareness required to navigate a complex world.

M While it is beyond the scope of this analysis to identify the causal or explanatory reasons for this relationship, one hypothesis is that these learning experiences more authentically reflect the realities of the social, political, economic, and cultural world in which students and schools are situated. Allowing students to learn about, make sense of, and refine the skills necessary to address complicated issues and interactions, may thereby strengthen students' beliefs in their ability to navigate the complex world around them during high school and beyond. Additionally, prior research suggests that learning about issues of systemic oppression can support young people's sense of belonging and that fostering more inclusive classrooms can promote academic resilience, motivation, persistence, and interest in school, all of which are associated with higher levels of achievement and postsecondary readiness. Future research should explore the particular mechanisms through which learning about issues of race and racism in school support increased feelings of readiness.

Recommendations

The findings from this survey show that the past year has weighed heavily on high school students as they navigate social disconnection, mental health challenges, and significant social and civil unrest. As COVID rates decline and the urgency for ending remote learning increases, many communities are planning for a return to more consistent in-person schooling. Such planning should be grounded in what young people are telling us about their experiences and needs.

As communities progress in this planning, the federal government is providing the largest investment in schools to date through ESSER and GEER. This nearly $125 billion investment in education is intended to meet the urgent needs of students and educators as they safely return to school in person; address educational inequities exacerbated by the pandemic; and meet social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs. Young people's insights make clear that the school experience this year was significantly disrupted due to the pandemic and that these disruptions deeply affected their wellbeing and readiness for life after high school.

The scale of these disruptions highlights the imperative to redesign the ways in which schools support a young person's life, rather than simply restoring schools to their pre-pandemic state. This moment calls for a transformation of the high school experience that will better and more holistically support young people so they feel more prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow. A transformation like this becomes possible when youth-supporting systems (1) prioritize the needs of high school students and (2) adopt a community approach so that schools alone do not carry the full responsibility for young people's learning and wellbeing.

The present study makes a compelling case for state and district leaders to prioritize support for high school students in the allocation of their federal recovery funds. Before the pandemic, elementary schools and institutions of higher education received higher allocations of federal funds - over four times more - compared to middle and high schools.[61] As this research indicates, high school students have been deprioritized for in-person learning during the pandemic. At the same time, there is a much shorter runway to support them through graduation. The graduating classes of 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025 have the most limited amount of time in the K-12 education system to heal, reengage, reconnect, and reestablish their learning in ways that prepare them for postsecondary life.

The following four recommendations offer examples of how the perspectives of young people shared in this report can help guide classroom, school, district, and community leaders' planning and practice now and in the coming years:

1. **Address student mental health, now and on an ongoing basis.** The findings from this survey add to the numerous reports during and prior to the pandemic showing that young people's mental health is rapidly declining. Young people report not being able to sleep or concentrate, worrying about their and their families' health, and fearing for their own safety. Yet mental health is not a privilege, it is an urgent prerequisite to engaging in learning.

   - *Partner directly with mental health service providers: School and district leaders should consider contracting directly with mental health service providers to create easy access to a wider and deeper network of caring adults who have expertise in mental health provision.* In addition, school leaders should consider increasing the number and availability of counselors, social workers, and psychologists in schools in ways that can be sustained even years after the pandemic. Student supports should coincide with increased investment in teacher access to mental health services, as teachers cannot support student mental health in sustainable ways if their own mental health is sapped in the process.[N] Taken together, in- and out-of-school options are important to ensuring

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N Placing the responsibility of young people's mental health needs on small numbers of school leaders and teachers may compromise teacher mental health and contribute to compassion fatigue, burn out, and adverse wellbeing among teachers.

that young people, particularly young people of color, and teachers have access to a range of supportive services.

- *Embrace a more holistic understanding of mental health: A young person's mental health is fundamentally connected to their health and wellbeing in other areas of their lives.* Financial insecurity, grief from the loss of a loved one, physical health challenges, neighborhood violence, and trauma, among many more, all affect a young person's mental health. Findings from this and other research suggest that over the past year, young people, particularly those with fewer financial resources, have experienced immense amounts of trauma, loss, and hardship. Utilizing frameworks and approaches such as integrated student supports and comprehensive screening tools can help schools better understand the broad range of needs that students will have now and in the coming years and deliver targeted interventions to meet those needs. Doing so will allow for young people to engage more fully in their academic learning and contribute to healthy development.

2. **Teach a comprehensive and accurate history of race and racism in the United States.** Young people are best able to learn and develop their talent when they are affirmed and supported in exploring their and other people's full histories and identities. Too often, however, the history of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) are sensationalized, ignored, or relegated to particular months or units. Students expect their classroom experiences to teach them content that will help them to navigate their lives outside of the classroom—a life that is guaranteed to include working and learning across lines of difference. Part of that content is an honest and balanced history of how race and racism have shaped American culture; economics, wealth, and income; and all facets of society. For young people from historically marginalized groups, this content provides validation and corroboration that their experiences as marginalized young people have affected the way they learn and are treated in the world.

Amidst significant public discourse and proposed legislation to limit opportunities to learn about race and racism and threaten teachers if they raise these topics in their classrooms, the responses from young people demonstrate that these opportunities shape student learning and development and contribute to a stronger sense of postsecondary readiness. Teachers, schools, and district leaders should invest in facilitating this kind of learning.

- *An honest account of history must include a celebration of diverse histories, people, and cultures.* Opportunities to learn about race and racism in America will necessarily encompass histories of racial trauma and violence but that need not be the only content. Through joyful exploration and celebration of the rich histories and societal contributions of people from different races, backgrounds, and cultures, young people can develop their own identity and develop skills like empathy and perspective taking. One way to determine whether course content accomplishes this is for high schoolers to audit instructional materials with their teachers.

- *Develop adult capacity to teach about race and racism and non-white histories and experiences.* Every school community is in a different place in terms of how issues of, and content about, race and racism are handled. School leaders can prioritize professional development on this topic by partnering with community organizations to facilitate Courageous Conversations about student experiences with race and racism; or they could utilize curricula such as those from Learning for Justice, Facing History and Ourselves, and Black Lives Matter at School that teach concepts like identity, power, and privilege and explore how these concepts show up in society now and in the past. School and classroom leaders should consider engaging students and families in making decisions about curriculum, content, and instructional strategies. Educators should engage them on an ongoing basis about the avenues through which they would like to learn about those topics. School leaders should also provide educators with the support and backing they may need to teach more politicized topics in their classrooms.

3. **Prioritize postsecondary success through relevant content and pathways planning.** The journey through a public education should result in a graduate feeling ready for what comes next. Young people reported feeling more ready for life after high school when they were interested in their studies, challenged by their schoolwork, engaged with the world around them, and connected to peers and adults. These insights into the high school experience, explicit connections between content and postsecondary options, and robust postsecondary transition supports can optimize students' feelings of readiness for the future. With an eye toward the immediate recovery and fostering longer-term opportunities, school partners like business leaders, community-based organization leaders, and higher education professionals will need to come together to support and provide coordinated opportunities for high school students.

   - *Connect content to postsecondary learning.* Content that is relevant to postsecondary life can be both challenging and interesting because it directly relates to a student's expressed aspirations and can take the shape of simple career inventory sessions or more complex long-term projects. Already, many schools and communities have created structures to incorporate relevancy into instructional time, like the flourishing body of dual enrollment and early college courses, embedded internship experiences into coursework, and project-based learning exercises. Community partners can also work with educators to support the design of classroom conversations and lesson plans explicitly devoted to college and career readiness. To get a better sense of students' postsecondary aspirations, school leaders should also consider annual surveys, beginning in ninth grade and continuing annually, that collect information on students' interests, goals, and perceived obstacles. Given the youth insights about interest contributing to a sense of readiness, administrators should find ways to systematically collect this information and use it to support every student in meeting their postsecondary goals.

   - *Create multiple years of postsecondary transition support for every student.* High school leaders should work with community partners to establish postsecondary planning and transition supports and ensure that immediately following graduation, young people have a clear plan for what is next. Given that many young people reported planning to graduate but changing their plans due to COVID,[O] states should consider leveraging GEER funds to strengthen data systems, intentional partnerships, and multi-year structures between K-12 and higher education to, for example, ensure young people who enroll in two-year programs transition to four-year programs, or that young people who defer enrollment do in fact enroll in higher education. Since young people shared that their changes are mostly related to ongoing financial challenges and familial obligations, higher education leaders, along with business leaders, can provide financial aid and resources to address those needs. High school leaders and their higher education counterparts can also partner to create educational environments that are responsive to their out-of-school obligations (like needing to work during the day or care for a child or family member), especially utilizing the GEER funds that will soon be available.

4. **Saturate young people's environments with caring adult relationships.** Strong, caring relationships are foundational to safe, supportive, and healthy learning environments. Adolescents have an acute need for connection, and findings from this and other surveys of young people[62] suggest that the events of the past year have isolated young people from those relationships. Ninth graders who have been attending school remotely all year, for instance, may have never met their classmates in person as they begin tenth grade. Notably, young people in this survey and others report stronger levels of connectedness to teachers, suggesting that teachers have done an impressive job under immensely challenging circumstances to keep students connected to school. However, students in this study report far less connection to other school adults (i.e. coaches, counselors, mentors), adults in their community, and their peers.

O Changing their plans may lead to summer melt. Summer melt is the phenomenon of students enrolling in college but failing to start in the fall, largely due to the significant number of tasks to be completed like submitting forms and paperwork. Some summer melt research even shows that failing to start the fall immediately after graduating leads to never attending at all.

- *Center relationships in school structures and practices. T*his study shows that high schoolers are profoundly disconnected from their peers, an incredibly important developmental source of support for adolescents. In response, district and school leaders can help young people build connections by centering relational structures within the school day. Studies show that, when done well, structures such as [advisories](#) and consistent peer mentor groups can create a sort of [family](#) within a school where every student has at least one adult and a community of peers who know them well and can support them. Prioritizing relational structures such as these may support young people in reconnecting with their peers and school-based adults.

- *Provide opportunities for new and renewed relationships with caring adults.* Outside of their parents or guardians and classroom teachers, this study's findings suggest that young people may not have had the opportunity to develop or continue relationships with other adults in their lives over the past year and a half. For older high school students, this means ensuring they have opportunities to reconnect with adults with whom they may have lost touch, while for newer high school students this may mean creating ample opportunities for forming new relationships that will [anchor](#) them in their school community. To that end, understanding the [relationships](#) in young people's lives through [relationship mapping](#) can be a good place to start.

Responses to this survey show that high schoolers across the country are weighed down by a year marked by both a pandemic that uprooted normal routine and by civil unrest that challenged what we know about our country's foundational values. As the nation reflects on the profound difficulties of the past year, policymakers, district leaders, educators, families, and students across communities are grappling with foundational questions about the future of education. Where do we go next? How do we move forward? Young people's insights from this research can help guide the way. To advance progress toward the national graduation goal, communities must strive to cultivate a more holistic high school experience that prioritizes students' wellbeing and connection to peers and adults, provides them opportunities to learn about and engage with the world around them, and offers the preparation and pathways necessary to succeed beyond high school. We must act swiftly and purposefully to support the nation's young people as they return to schools to complete their high school experience and graduate ready to thrive in whatever comes next.

Endnotes

1   Institute for Education Sciences, n.d.

2   Fry & Barroso, 2020; Korman, O'Keefe, & Repka, 2020

3   Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011

4   Zaff, Donlan, Pufall Jones, & Lin, 2015

5   Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, & Osher, 2020

6   Burke, Hellman, Scott, Weems, & Carrion, 201; Hammond, 2020; Slopen et al., 2016

7   Cantor, Osher, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2019; Pan, Zaff, & Porsche, 2020

8   Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2019

9   Belfield, Levin & Rosen, 2012; BLS, 2021

10   BLS, 2021; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009

11   Muennig, 2005; Muennig, Fiscella, Tancredi, & Franks, 2010; Pleis, Lucas, & Ward, 2010

12   Belfield, Levin & Rosen, 2012

13   Levine, 2013

14   Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013; Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012; Szmigiera, 2020

15   Smith, Khurana, Siemaszko, & DeJesus-Banos, 2020

16   Jacobson, 2020

17   Balfanz & Chang, 2021

18   Bauer, Lu, & Moses, 2020; Gross, 2021

19   Esquivel & Bloom, 2020

20   Debaun, 2020

21   Suarez and Marcus, 2020

22   Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020

23   National Guard, 2020

24   Szmigiera, 2020

25   Conner & Rosen, 2016

26   Andes & Kiesa 2020

27   Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020

28   CIRCLE, 2020

29   Hankins, 2008

30   Rapa, Bolding, Jamil, 2020

31   Current Population Survey, 2017

32   UChicago Impact, 2020

33   Andes & Kiesa, 2020; Bort & Aleah, 2020; CIRCLE, 2020

34   Finlay, Wray-Lake, & Flanagan, 2010

35   Flanagan & Levine, 2010

36   Ballard & Ozer, 2016

37   Cohen, 2004; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004

38   Margolius, Lynch, Pufall Jones, & Hynes, 2020; Mojtabai & Olfson, 2020; Parodi et al., 2021; Twenge, Cooper, Joiner, Duffy, & Binau, 2019

39   America's Promise Alliance, 2021; Moran, 2020

40   Smith, 2020; The 1619 Project, 2019

41   Educators for Excellence, 2021; Florido, 2021; National Education Association, 2018; Pelletiere & Kindelan, 2020

42   Serwer, 2021

43   Schumaker, 2021

44   Romero, 2021

45   Diemer & Li, 2011;Freire, 1970, 1994; Ginwright & James, 2002; Jemal, 2017

46   Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2017; Heberle, Rapa, & Farago, 2020

47   Diemer et al., 2021; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015

48   Almarza & Fehn, 1998, as cited in Bolgatz, 2005; Bolgatz, 2005; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; McIntyre, 2003; NCES, 2016;

49   Diemer & Li, 2011

50   Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019

51   Gay, 2013; Hammond, 2014

52   Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009

53   Barton, 2012; Gould, Jamieson, Levine, McConnel, & Smith, 2011

54   Bozick & DeLuca, 2005

55   Wagner, 2002; Wallach, Ramsey, Lowry, & Copland, 2006

56   Kubal, Meyler, Stone, & Mauney, 2003;

57   Byrd, 2016; Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007; McGregor, 1993; Reeder, Douzenis, & Bergin, 1997; Slavin & Madden, 1979;

58   Bigler & Wright, 2014; Kubal, Meyler, Stone, & Mauney, 2003

59   Byrd, 2016

60   Einfield & Collins, 2008

61   Alliance for Excellent Education, 2019

62   Flanagan, Margolius, Lynch, & Hynes, 2021; Margolius et al., 2020

63   United States Census Bureau, 2021

64   For a review, see Callegaro, Baker, Bethlehem, Göritz, Krosnick, & Lavrakas, 2014

65   Chandler, Rosenweig, Moss, Robinson, & Litman, 2019

66   Baker et al., 2010

67   Krosnick, Presser, Fealing, Ruggles, & Vannette, 2015; Borgers & Hox, 2001; Omrani, Wakefield-Scurr, Smith, & Brown, 2019

68   Tait, French, & Hulse, 2003

69   Hankins, 2008

70   Blumberg, Bialostosky, Hamilton, & Briefel,1999

71   Rapa, Bolding, & Jamil, 2020

72   Current Population Survey, 2017

73   Roberts, 1999

74   Knekta, Runyon, & Eddy, 2019

75   Knekta, Runyon, & Eddy, 2019

76   Borman & Smerdon, 2012

77   Culver, Braxton, Pascarella, 2021; Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009; Kurlaender & Howell, 2012

78   Attewell & Domina, 2008; Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009; Kurlaender & Howell, 2012

79   Kurlaender & Howell, 2012; Schneider, Swanson, & Riegle-Crumb, 1997

80   Savitz-Romer, Jager-Hyman, & Coles, 2009

81   Attewell & Domina, 2008; Kurlaender & Howell, 2012

82   Adelman, 1999, 2006; Attewell & Domina, 2008; Kurlaender & Howell, 2012

83   Altonji, 1995; Kurlaender & Howell, 2012; Rose & Betts, 2004

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Appendix A: Methodology & Analysis

This brief describes selected data from a national survey of 2,439 young people, aged 13-19, that was conducted by America's Promise Alliance and Research for Action as part of the GradNation Campaign. The study employed a cross-sectional survey designed by the teams at America's Promise and Research for Action. In this appendix we describe in more detail the research methods utilized in this study, including the sampling framework and procedure, the design of the survey instrument, and the statistical methods used to analyze the responses.

Purpose of this study

America's Promise Alliance partnered with Research for Action to conduct a national survey (n=2,439) of young people as part of the GradNation campaign. The survey was designed to assess young people's experiences during an unprecedented school year that was shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and a swelling movement for racial justice. Specifically, the present study sought to take a holistic approach to better understanding young people's high school experiences over the past year, all amidst an uncertain economic, social, and educational landscape. This study, thus, serves two related purposes. First, it adds to a growing knowledge base on high schoolers' learning experiences over the past year. And second, it explores a diverse set of young people's school-based and out-of-school experiences in an effort to better understand how the past year has impacted learning and development, specifically students' overall wellbeing, access to opportunities to learn about—and act upon—social issues like race and racism, and postsecondary readiness for life after high school.

Sampling Framework and Approach

Sampling Framework

Target population. The target population for this survey was high school-aged youth, ranging from ages 13-19. The projected size of this population is 16 million youth, encompassing both public and private 9th through 12th graders, with 3.7 million students expected to graduate in the Spring of 2021.[63]

Desired Sample. At the outset of this study, three demographic characteristics were prioritized in the sample: members of racial minority groups (e.g. Black or African Americans), members of ethnic minority groups (e.g. Hispanics), and English language learners. Several secondary subgroups of interest were also identified, including students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, students with disabilities, homeless youth, and youth in foster care. Each of these groups were targeted with desired response rates proportional to the rates in the US population. These student groups were prioritized as they are often the least well-served by educational systems and have graduation rates that are disproportionately low in comparison to the national average.

Sampling Approach: Opt-in Online Research Panel

We utilized an online research panel, Prime Panels, as the main source of data collection for this study. Online research panels, such as Prime Panels, have expanded in popularity since 2000 and been utilized across research involving marketing, psychology, and elections.[64] Several benefits associated with using online research panels include: access to more diverse, nationally representative samples, using quotas to match a desired sample to census estimates and targeting participants from specific locations (e.g. zip codes).[65] They have become a popular method to address the lack of sampling frame in studies where there are no comprehensive membership lists (containing email addresses or phone numbers) for the target population.[66]

Prime Panels sample and recruitment. Prime Panels maintains a youth panel for researchers to access consisting of high school-aged youth aged 12-19 in grades 9-12. In addition to the youth panel, Prime Panels also maintains profile information about adults in their adult panels, including information about their children and their children's ages, which enabled additional indirect recruitment via parents. For some characteristics (i.e., race, ethnicity, and gender), Prime Panels can target participants and further allow the use of quotas to ensure the survey sample matches recruitment goals. However, for characteristics like free and reduced-price lunch, students with disabilities, English learners, and homeless youth, Prime Panels does not have that data to appropriately target representativeness. Respondents with these characteristics were reached through convenience sampling, not a representative one.

In addition to reaching the target population, Prime Panels included a maintenance process that helped ensure quality responses. This maintenance process monitors for 1) technical fraud, such as bots or duplicate IP addresses, and 2) cognitive behaviors, such as engagement, attentiveness, and consistency. Respondents are removed from a panel, thus cannot respond to future surveys, if fraud is suspected or if they receive more than one "quality termination", meaning they were rejected from a survey response based on a lack of quality responses, within a certain timeframe.

One shortcoming of the use of panels comes in transparency of recruitment. While Prime Panels provided some examples of how youth participants are recruited into the panel, such as through advertisements on cell phone video games, there is no comprehensive overview of all recruitment measures as the information was considered proprietary.

Sampling Approach: Coverage deficiencies and targeted recruitment

Targeted recruitment. To address the coverage deficiencies of Prime Panels, as well as further target several populations that were of particular interest to this study, additional targeted recruitment strategies were conducted. Based on the data captured in the Prime Panels data, both RFA and APA conducted outreach to several organizations including:

- Organizations serving populations of:
    - Homeless youth (SchoolHouse Connection, National Network for Youth, state specific contacts for the National Center for Homeless Education)
    - Students with disabilities (Partners for Youth with Disabilities)
    - English Learners (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, Speak Your Language, Colorín Colorado) and
- Organizations promoting youth voice (StudentVoice)

Youth who responded to the survey through our targeted outreach were not compensated through Prime Panels. To thank respondents for their time, at the end of the survey youth were invited to share their email address to be entered in a drawing to win one of five $100 gift cards. The email addresses were removed from the data as the first step of our data cleaning process, to ensure the identifying information was only used for the purposes of the drawing.

Survey Development Process

Research for Action and America's Promise Alliance worked collaboratively to design the survey with the aim of maximizing reliability, response variation, and survey completion rates, and minimizing survey fatigue and item non-response, drawing on best practices in survey design literature for surveying adolescents.[67]

The survey development process began by refining the research questions this survey aimed to answer. Existing literature and other recently administered surveys were reviewed to gather relevant, previously validated survey scales that addressed the research questions. Where previous scales were not available, original scales and survey questions were developed by the research team. The specific scales used and any adaptations made to previously developed scales are discussed in more detail below.

Cognitive interviewing

Once a draft survey instrument was developed, cognitive interviews were conducted with six participants with varied grade-level and demographic characteristics. The purpose of the cognitive interviews was to diagnose and correct any issues related to the survey, such as language clarity and accessibility to the target audience, relevance of questions, and perceived length of time to take the survey. During the interviews, youth were asked to read and respond to each question and were asked targeted questions about the survey items, such as assessing whether it was easy or hard to answer, what they thought about when answering the question, and what specific language meant to them. Based on the responses from the cognitive interviews, several changes to question stems and scale choices were made to improve clarity and several items were added and/or removed to assist with survey flow.

Validated survey scales

Many of the constructs assessed in this survey leveraged items from previously validated survey scales. Each construct scale, its source, example items, and a description of modifications made to the items, if any, are provided below.

- Mental Health. Survey items related to mental health come from the GHQ-12 (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88 when tested with adolescents in Australia).[68] Following a previous administration of this scale for a similar project, 9 of the 12 items were directly taken from the questionnaire,[69] including questions such as "In the last month have you been able to concentrate on what you are doing?" but excluded items that asked about being "Able to enjoy day-to-day activities," "Able to face problems," and "Thinking of self as worthless."

- Food insecurity. Survey items related to food security were adapted from the Six-Item Food Security Scale (no psychometric properties could be found for this scale).[70] The number of items from this scale were reduced to remove those that felt repetitive and reduce respondent burden. Response options were also streamlined, combining multiple items into one in order to assess the frequency by which food insecurity was experienced. Questions included: "In the last 12 months, how often were you hungry because there was not enough money for food?"

- Critical consciousness. Survey items related to critical consciousness come from the Critical Consciousness Scale.[71] Respondents were asked to assess to what extent they felt several statements were true, selecting from a 4-point scale ranging from not at all true to very true. Statements included: "Poor people have fewer chances to get ahead" and "All racial, ethnic, and gender groups should be given an equal chance in life." In response to cognitive interview feedback, we made slight changes to survey items to add the phrase "racial, ethnic, and gender" in front of the word groups, to better help youth distinguish the types of groups being asked about.

- Social Action. Survey items related to Social Action came from the Current Population Survey[72] and ask respondents to assess how often they engaged in activities like "talking about political or social issues", "attend political protest or rallies", and "read, watch or listen to news or information about political, societal, or local issues."

Newly created scales

In addition to the previously validated scales, the following scale was created for the unique purposes of this survey:

- **Connectedness.** To assess respondents' feelings of connection, respondents were asked, "Since the start of this school year, how connected have you felt to each of the following people": your classmates, your teachers, other adults at your school, other adults in your local community, and other youth in your local community. Response options were a four-point scale ranging from not at all connected to very connected.

- **Opportunities to learn about race and racism.** Survey items were developed to assess whether the students' have been exposed to issues of race and racism through their school's curriculum and experiences. Questions asked included "At your school, do you have the chance to discuss issues like race and racism?", "How much are you taught about the history of racism in the United States?", and "How well does the curriculum or experiences at your school reflect the histories and experiences of people with non-white racial or ethnic backgrounds?"

- **Readiness for life after high school.** A series of questions were developed to assess students' perceptions of whether their high school experiences were preparing them for life after high school. Questions asked to what extent the respondent felt things like "your high school experience is preparing you for success after high school," "your classes offer useful information to prepare you for what you plan to do in life," and "you learn valuable skills at school." Response options were on a four-point scale ranging from not at all to a great deal.

- **Academic challenge.** To assess the degree to which respondents' felt academically challenged, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which two statements were "true for the classes at your school." The statements were: "you are challenged in most of your classes" and "you have to work hard to do well." Response options were a four-point scale ranging from not at all true to a great deal true.

- **Academic interest.** To assess the degree to which respondents' felt interested in their classes, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which two statements were "true for the classes at your school." The statements were: "you look forward to your classes" and "you are interested in the topics you study." Response options were a four-point scale ranging from not at all true to a great deal true.

Factor analysis

Exploratory and/or confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to examine psychometric properties of validated and originally constructed scales. Table A1 provides an overview of the survey constructs, their corresponding survey items, whether it was new or created, the type of factor analysis conducted, and corresponding fit indices describing the psychometric properties of each scale. Together, these aspects of the factor analysis process allow assessment of whether and which items "load" onto the overall construct as expected, as well as the goodness of fit of the overall model.[73]

Table A1. Survey Construct Information

Construct	Number of Items	New or Previously Created	Type of factor analysis	Fit indices			Alpha score
				RMSEA	CFI	SRMR	
Mental health and distress	9	Previously created	CFA	0.062	0.965	0.048	0.80
Food insecurity	3	Previously created	CFA	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.91
Connectedness to others	4	Previously created	CFA	0.094	0.993	0.014	0.83
Opportunities to learn about race and racism	5	New	EFA	0.069	0.982	0.025	0.79
Social action	6	Previously created	CFA	0.079	0.965	0.050	0.75
Critical consciousness	9	Previously created	CFA	0.111	0.919	0.062	0.87
Readiness for life after high school	4	Previously created	CFA	0.079	0.992	0.016	0.84
Engagement in classes	4	Previously created	CFA	0.037	0.998	0.006	0.84

Exploratory factor analysis process. To assess newly developed scales, the sample was split in half randomly and exploratory factor analysis was performed on one half to establish the scale. The exploratory factor analysis process consisted of extraction of factors and assessment of factor loadings. Factor loading scores larger than 0.4 were retained in the construct. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on the other half of the data to validate factor structure and psychometrics identified by the exploratory factor analysis, employing the same process described below.

Confirmatory factor analysis process . A Confirmatory Factor Analysis approach was used to assess the factor loading of each indicator variable for each construct. High factor loadings (the coefficient values) served as evidence that the construct remained valid, despite changes to language. High, but not too high, factor loadings, ranging from .70 to .90, serve as evidence that the items belong to the designated construct.[74] Fit indices for each proposed construct were evaluated to determine if the construct retained valid psychometric properties. Multiple fit indices, such as the comparative fit index (CFI), root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) were examined to determine if the model was a good fit to the data. The following cutoffs were used to evaluate good model fit: CFI >0.95, RMSEA < 0.1, and SRMR < 0.08.[75] If the fit indices indicated a good fit, the constructs were further examined within descriptive analysis. If the evidence suggested low validity, the constructs were deconstructed into multiple scales that met baseline validity thresholds or were reported on the survey items individually.

Survey Sample and weighting

Overall, 2,585 total survey responses were received, of which 75 were excluded because they were not currently enrolled in high school, 25 were excluded because they did not answer the demographic questions needed for weighting, and 46 were excluded because they did complete the initial screening questions and answer at least the first question specific to the research questions. This resulted in a final sample of 2,439 young people between the ages of 13 and 19. The demographics for the final sample are presented in Table A2.

Table A2. Unweighted Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Number	Unweighted Percentage	Weighted Percentage
Age			
13 Years	92	3.8%	3.9%
14 Years	243	10.0%	10.4%
15 Years	445	18.3%	18.8%
16 Years	583	23.9%	24.3%
17 Years	606	24.9%	24.2%
18 Years	363	14.9%	14.2%
19 Years	107	4.4%	4.2%
Grade			
9th	597	24.5%	24.6%
10th	555	22.8%	25.2%
11th	632	25.9%	24.7%
12th	655	26.9%	25.5%
Sex assigned at birth			
Female	1,363	55.9%	48.9%
Male	1,076	44.1%	51.1%
Gender Identity			
Female	1,262	51.7%	45.9%
Male	1,085	44.5%	50.9%
Non-Binary	76	3.1%	2.8%
Declined to share	16	0.7%	0.4%
Race / Ethnicity			
Asian	145	6.0%	5.5%
Black	347	14.2%	14.9%
Hispanic	457	18.7%	26.3%
Other	353	14.5%	4.6%
White	1,137	46.6%	48.7%

Region			
Midwest	256	10.5%	10.1%
Northeast	271	11.1%	11.6%
South	594	24.4%	24.4%
West	335	13.7%	13.9%
Declined to share	983	40.3%	39.9%

Weighting procedure

Survey responses were weighted to account for residual sampling error and ensure proportional representation based on population estimates of the three primary sampling characteristics: grade-level, race/ethnicity, and sex.

Using the population data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau, and the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, a "raking" method was used to weight responses to the survey. The raking process involves adjusting weights to match known population estimates. Weights were continuously adjusted so that the weighted survey sample matched the desired population estimates along key demographics. Once constructed, weights were employed in subsequent analyses to ensure survey results proportionally represented the population of high school students with respect to grade-level, race/ethnicity, and sex.

Overall Analytic Approach

To answer the research questions in this study, descriptive and inferential data analysis was conducted. Descriptive analysis of survey data followed analytic procedures appropriate for data generated through convenience sampling, specifically calculating the weighted frequency and percentage response distributions, and when appropriate, measures of central tendency and dispersion for survey items and constructs.

For several constructs differences were analyzed on a dichotomized scale in order to evaluate differences in relatively high or low responses. In these cases, a continuous measure was first constructed by averaging an individual's responses to each item on a 1-to-4 scale, with 4 representing more agreement or impact. Scales were then dichotomized by splitting responses at the median value, grouping responses at and above the median value.

When assessing the statistical significance of group differences, multivariate logistic regression modeling was used and adjusted means were reported. Each regression model included covariates of respondent characteristics (race/ethnicity, gender identity, social economic status). Additional model covariates varied based on relevance to the outcome being studied. In the case of the final research question, four independent variables were added which were expected to impact the outcome based on prior context (i.e. academic engagement, learning format during 2020-21 school year, connectedness to teachers and classmates, and opportunities to learn about race and racism). The full regression models and their coefficients and constant terms can be found in Appendix B.

Appendix B:
Regression Results and Data Tables

Table B1. Responses to each item on the mental health and distress scales

Scale	In the past 30 days, how often have you...	Not at all	Much less than usual	Same as usual	Much more than usual
Distress	Lost much sleep over worry	21%	17%	35%	27%
	Felt you could not overcome difficulties	17%	18%	36%	28%
	Have been losing confidence in yourself	20%	17%	32%	31%
	Felt unhappy and depressed	18%	17%	31%	34%
	Felt constantly under strain	15%	16%	34%	35%
Mental health	Felt capable of making decisions	10%	24%	50%	16%
	Felt happy	10%	30%	42%	18%
	Been able to concentrate	10%	37%	42%	10%
	Felt you were playing a useful part in things	20%	28%	42%	9%

Table B2. Regression results and adjusted means for dichotomized scales of mental health and distress

	Mental Health		Distress	
Subgroup	% experiencing decline	Odds Ratio	% experiencing increase	Odds Ratio
Gender Identity				
Non-binary	92%	6.03*	80%	3.68*
Female	78%	1.98*	63%	1.60*
Male	65%	-	52%	-
Race/ethnicity				
Hispanic	76%	1.46*	56%	0.81
Asian	75%	1.37	54%	0.74
Other or 2+ races	72%	1.12	54%	0.76*
Black	70%	1.01	54%	0.76*
White	69%	-	61%	-
Experienced food insecurity				
Yes	78%	1.83*	63%	1.50*
No	67%	-	54%	-

Learning format				
All or mostly remote	72%	1.09	60%	1.32*
An even mix	70%	0.99	56%	1.11
All or mostly in-person	71%	-	53%	-
Socioeconomic status				
Low SES	70%	0.82	57%	0.94
High SES	74%	-	59%	-

Note: * indicates the odds ratio was significant at the 5% level. - indicates the reference category, hence no odds ratio is presented.

Table B3. Adjusted percentage of respondents who felt not at all or only a little connected to each group

	Classmates	Teachers	Other school adults	Community adults	Youth in community
Learning format					
All or mostly remote	68%	58%	78%	75%	67%
An even mix	52%	47%	67%	69%	57%
All or mostly in-person	38%	40%	59%	61%	47%
Race / ethnicity					
Asian	60%	54%	73%	76%	68%
Black	55%	49%	66%	66%	59%
Hispanic	64%	54%	76%	75%	68%
White	57%	52%	72%	70%	56%
Other or two or more races	61%	55%	71%	72%	64%
Gender Identity					
Female	66%	56%	77%	76%	66%
Male	52%	48%	68%	65%	55%
Non-binary	76%	64%	85%	91%	75%
Experienced any food insecurity					
Yes	56%	50%	67%	65%	55%
No	61%	54%	76%	76%	65%
SES composite					
Low SES	59%	51%	70%	70%	61%
High SES	59%	53%	76%	72%	61%

Table B4. Responses to each item on the opportunities to learn about race and racism scale

At your school...	Not at all	Only a little	Somewhat	A great deal
Do you have the chance to discuss issues like race and racism?	17.1%	27.4%	34.2%	21.3%
Do teachers respect all students' views on race/racism?	8.9%	15.4%	39.1%	36.6%
How much are you taught about the history of racism in the US?	7.8%	26.4%	39.1%	26.7%
How well does the curriculum represent non-white history/experiences?	10.4%	28.8%	38.7%	22.0%
How well does the curriculum represent the full history and experiences of people who share your racial/ethnic background?	11.3%	25.4%	38.7%	24.6%

Table B5. Responses to each item on the Critical Consciousness scales of Egalitarianism and Inequality

Scale	To what extent do you perceive the following to be true?	Not at all true	Only a little true	Somewhat true	Very true
Inequality	Certain racial or ethnic groups have fewer chances to get ahead.	20.0%	22.1%	28.0%	29.9%
	Women have fewer chances to get ahead.	22.8%	22.9%	29.9%	24.4%
	Poor people have fewer chances to get ahead.	14.6%	19.5%	27.2%	38.7%
Egalitarianism	It would be good if all racial, ethnic, and gender groups could be equal.	6.6%	10.8%	18.2%	64.4%
	All racial, ethnic, and gender groups should be given an equal chance in life.	5.5%	11.4%	15.4%	67.7%
	We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally.	4.3%	11.2%	25.5%	59.0%

Table B6. Regression results and adjusted means for the dichotomized Egalitarianism and Inequality scales

	Egalitarianism		Inequality	
	% at or above the median score (3.7)	Odds Ratio	% at or above the median score (2.7)	Odds Ratio
Gender identity				
Non-binary	80%	3.31*	73%	2.64*
Female	66%	1.60*	66%	1.90*
Male	55%	-	51%	-
Race / ethnicity				
Black	53%	0.67*	64%	1.35*
Asian	62%	1	63%	1.33
Hispanic	63%	1.02	59%	1.1
Other or 2+ races	62%	0.93	57%	1.01
White	61%	-	57%	-
Socioeconomic status				
High SES	63%	-	62%	-
Low SES	60%	0.86	57%	0.79*
Opportunities to discuss race/racism in school				
High opportunities to discuss race/racism in school	65%	1.47*	60%	1.08
Low opportunities to discuss race/racism in school	56%	-	58%	-
Learning format				
All or mostly remote	63%	1.11	61%	1.26
An even mix	57%	0.86	56%	1.01
All or mostly in-person	60%	-	56%	-

Note: * indicates the coefficient or odds ratio was significant at the 5% level. - indicates the reference category, hence no regression coefficient or odds ratio is presented.

Table B7. Responses to each item on the Social Action scales

	How often do you engage in any of the following?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Personal Social Action	Talk about political or social issues with friends	17.7%	29.1%	36.8%	16.4%
	Talk about political or social issues with family	15.8%	27.4%	35.9%	20.9%
	Consume news or information about political, societal, or local issues	12.4%	26.9%	39.8%	20.9%
Public Social Action	Spent time volunteering	34.0%	25.6%	25.9%	14.4%
	Attend political protests or rallies	60.5%	16.1%	17.3%	6.1%
	Given money to a political organization	61.4%	15.7%	15.6%	7.3%

Table B8. Regression results and adjusted means for the Social Action scales

	Personal social action		Public social action	
	% at or above the median score (2.7)	Odds ratio	% at or above the median score (1.7)	Odds ratio
Opportunities to learn about race/racism				
Low	52%	-	41%	-
High	60%	1.41*	47%	1.29*
Perception of inequalities				
Low	45%	-	34%	-
High	64%	2.30*	52%	2.27*
Egalitarianism				
Low	52%	-	63%	-
High	59%	1.36*	33%	0.27*
Gender identity				
Non-binary	57%	1.12	48%	1.22
Female	58%	1.20	45%	1.06
Male	54%	-	44%	-
Race / ethnicity				
Black	58%	0.93	47%	1.11
Asian	52%	0.74	50%	1.23

Hispanic	50%	0.66*	41%	0.83
Other or 2+ races	61%	1.07	47%	1.08
White	59%	-	45%	-
Socioeconomic status				
High SES	60%	-	46%	-
Low SES	54%	0.75*	44%	0.91
Learning format				
All or mostly remote	55%	0.85	44%	1.1
An even mix	56%	0.86	48%	1.27
All or mostly in-person	59%	-	42%	-

Note: * indicates the coefficient or odds ratio was significant at the 5% level. - indicates the reference category, hence no regression coefficient or odds ratio is presented.

Table B8. Responses to each item asked about readiness for life after high school

To what extent do you feel…	Not at all	Only a little bit	Somewhat	A great deal
Your high school experience prepared you for success	9%	27%	40%	23.5%
Your classes offer useful information to prepare you for what you want to do in life	11%	32%	39%	18%
You learn valuable skills	9%	27%	41%	23%
What you learn in class is necessary for success in the future	12%	31%	36%	21%
You have a clear sense of your career interests? (*not in readiness scale*)	10%	21%	35%	34%

Table B9. Responses to each item on the Academic Challenge and Academic Interest scales

Scale	To what extent do you feel…	Not at all	Only a little bit	Some-what	A great deal
Academic challenge	You are challenged in most of your classes	9%	28%	44%	19%
	You have to work hard to do well	5%	18%	36%	41%
Academic interest	You look forward to your classes	23%	31%	30%	16%
	You are interested in the topics you study	16%	30%	37%	18%

Table B10. Regression results and adjusted means for the Academic Challenge and Interest scales

	Challenged in school		Interested in school	
	% at or above the median score (3.0)	Odds ratio	% at or above the median score (2.5)	Odds ratio
Race / ethnicity				
Other or 2+ races	61%	0.99	50%	0.76*
White	61%	-	56%	-
Hispanic	67%	1.3	57%	1.04
Asian	57%	0.84	63%	1.36
Black	64%	1.11	64%	1.40*
Gender identity				
Non-binary	61%	1	42%	0.45*
Female	66%	1.27	54%	0.72*
Male	61%	-	62%	-
Learning format				
All or mostly remotely	63%	1.03	54%	0.65
An even mix	62%	0.99	61%	0.85
All or mostly in-person	63%	-	65%	-
Socioeconomic status				
High SES	64%	-	57%	-
Low SES	62%	0.9	58%	1.08

Note: * indicates the coefficient or odds ratio was significant at the 5% level. - indicates the reference category, hence no regression coefficient or odds ratio is presented.

Table B11. Regression model building and adjusted means from the final model for the Readiness scale

	OLS regression model building stages			% at or above the median score (2.8)	Odds ratio
	(1)	(2)	(3)		
Degree of connectedness to teachers and classmates					
High		0.449* (0.020)	0.157* (0.0213)	61%	2.11*
Low	-	-	-	47%	-
Academically challenged					
High			0.154* (0.0202)	59%	2.11*
Low	-	-	-	46%	-
Academically interested					
High			0.430* (0.0186)	69%	5.27*
Low	-	-	-	35%	-
Race / ethnicity					
Asian	0.132 (0.0642)	0.136 (0.0596)	0.110 (0.0481)	62%	1.78*
Black	0.0990 (0.0528)	0.0668 (0.0449)	0.0253 (0.0402)	54%	1.12
Hispanic	0.0808 (0.0485)	0.125* (0.0416)	0.0648 (0.0358)	57%	1.34
Other or 2+ races	-0.0445 (0.0498)	0.00131 (0.0433)	0.0373 (0.0359)	55%	1.22
White	-	-	-	52%	-
Gender identity					
Female	-0.158* (0.0356)	-0.0495 (0.0318)	-0.0491 (0.0271)	55%	1.01
Non-binary	-0.355* (0.0988)	-0.154 (0.0793)	-0.0842 (0.0757)	50%	0.76
Male	-	-	-	54%	-
Socioeconomic status					
Low SES	0.00307 (0.0372)	-0.0120 (0.0320)	-0.0481 (0.0268)	44%	0.91
High SES	-	-	-	46%	-

Learning format					
All or mostly remotely	-0.129* (0.0453)	0.101 (0.0412)	0.0235 (0.0335)	53%	0.81
An even mix	-0.0221 (0.0533)	0.0620 (0.0468)	0.0208 (0.0385)	55%	0.87
All or mostly in-person	-	-	-	57%	-
Constant	2.855* (0.0456)	1.579* (0.0700)	0.850* (0.0705)	-	-
Observations	2,185	2,185	2,185	2,185	2,185
R-squared	0.023	0.244	0.461	-	-

Note: In the OLS regression columns, regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) are presented. * indicates the coefficient or odds ratio was significant at the 5% level. - indicates the reference category, hence no regression coefficient or odds ratio is presented.

About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the driving force behind a nationwide movement to improve the lives and futures of America's children and youth. Bringing together national nonprofits, businesses, community and civic leaders, educators, citizens, and young people with a shared vision, America's Promise sparks collective action to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of young people's success. Through these collective leadership efforts, the Alliance does what no single organization alone can do: catalyze change on a scale that reaches millions of young people.

About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise, affiliated with Boston University, is the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance. Its mission is to develop a deep understanding of the conditions necessary for young people in the United States to succeed in school, work, and life. The Center's unique value as a research institute is its dedication to youth voice, whether by highlighting the voices and views of young people or through working with youth to develop and implement research methods to study the issues affecting their lives. More information can be found at www.americaspromise.org.

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