



MINNESOTA SAFE LEARNING SURVEY: EDUCATORS', FAMILIES', AND STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH EDUCATION IN 2021

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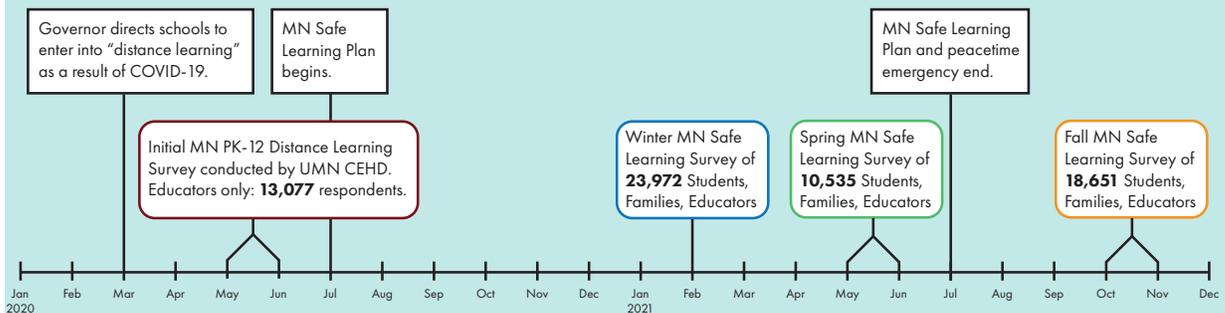
Context

On March 15, 2020, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz issued an executive order that directed schools to close and to enter into 'distance learning' as a result of COVID-19. Minnesota's statewide Safe Learning Plan, which aimed to keep students learning and communities healthy during the ongoing pandemic, then began in July 2020 and ended when the state's peacetime emergency ended on July 1, 2021. During the 2021-22 school year, COVID-19 response plans were being developed locally by school boards and school leaders. The Minnesota Department of Health issued a set of [Best Practice Recommendations for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools](#), based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance for schools.

Seeking to understand the experiences of educators, families, and students in K-12 public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Wisconsin-Minnesota Comprehensive Center ([WMCC](#))—working with the Minnesota Department of Education ([MDE](#))—developed the [Safe Learning Survey](#) and conducted it at three intervals: [Winter \(February\)](#), [Spring \(May-June\)](#), and [Fall \(October-November\)](#), 2021.

These statewide Safe Learning Surveys sought to understand the successes and challenges students, educators, and families across the state experienced. This summary report is intended to highlight the key findings across all three iterations of the Safe Learning Survey.

Survey Timeline



Key Findings

Consistently, all three respondent groups, across all three survey distributions reported concerns about mental health, a message heard far beyond this survey. As time pressed on and educators, students, and families adapted and became quite flexible, moving in and out of various modes of learning, sometimes in masks, sometimes in quarantine, they reported that learning got better as did approaches to communication and relationship building.

Key findings from across all three iterations of the Minnesota Safe Learning Survey follow:

Mental health. There was widespread consensus across educators, families, and students in the winter, fall, and spring of 2021 that mental health is a significant concern. While perhaps not new, the COVID-19 pandemic likely exacerbated mental health challenges leading to the need for additional support in these areas.

- **Mental health was consistently a top challenge.** Educators, families, and students repeatedly selected supporting the mental health of students and staff as a top challenge.
- **Mental health support is needed.** All respondent groups across surveys reported mental health as an area in need of support and change moving forward. Educators, families, and students wanted more support for student and staff mental health. In addition, families wanted prevention and intervention for bullying/harassment. Students also wanted prevention and intervention for self-harm and suicide as well as more positive teacher-student relationships. Furthermore, educators wanted opportunities for students to interact and build relationships with their peers.
- **Teaching and learning environments need to be changed to better support mental health.** Educators and students—across all three iterations of the survey—voiced needing various supports to improve the teaching and learning environments in ways that might better support staff and student mental health. These supports included more manageable workloads for staff, engagement of disengaged students, clearer communication for students, and more doable lessons and assignments for students.

Rankings of mental health-related topics when asked to “choose 3 areas that have been the most challenging for you in the past month,” by group and survey period

	Winter	Spring	Fall
Administrators^a			
“Supporting student/staff mental health”	1st (55%)	1st (60%)	1st (67%)
Teachers^b			
“Taking care of my own mental health”	1st (50%)	1st (54%)	1st (71%)
“Supporting student mental health”	5th (32%)	2nd (36%)	2nd (49%)
Support Professionals^c			
“Taking care of my own mental health”	1st (47%)	1st (50%)	1st (62%)
“Supporting student mental health”	2nd (34%)	2nd (40%)	3rd (46%)
Students^d			
“Getting help with mental health”	3rd (37%)	3rd (42%)	2nd (46%)
Families^e			
“Student(s) receiving mental health supports”	5th (36%)	3rd (36%)	6th (15%)

a. Administrators’ total responses: Winter, 352; Spring, 212; Fall, 204
b. Teachers’ total responses: Winter, 6079; Spring, 1530; Fall, 4058
c. Support Professionals’ total responses: Winter, 1362; Spring, 482; Fall, 1103
d. Students’ total responses: Winter, 2258; Spring, 161; Fall, 1239
e. Families’ total responses: Winter, 8896; Spring, 3942; Fall, 5906

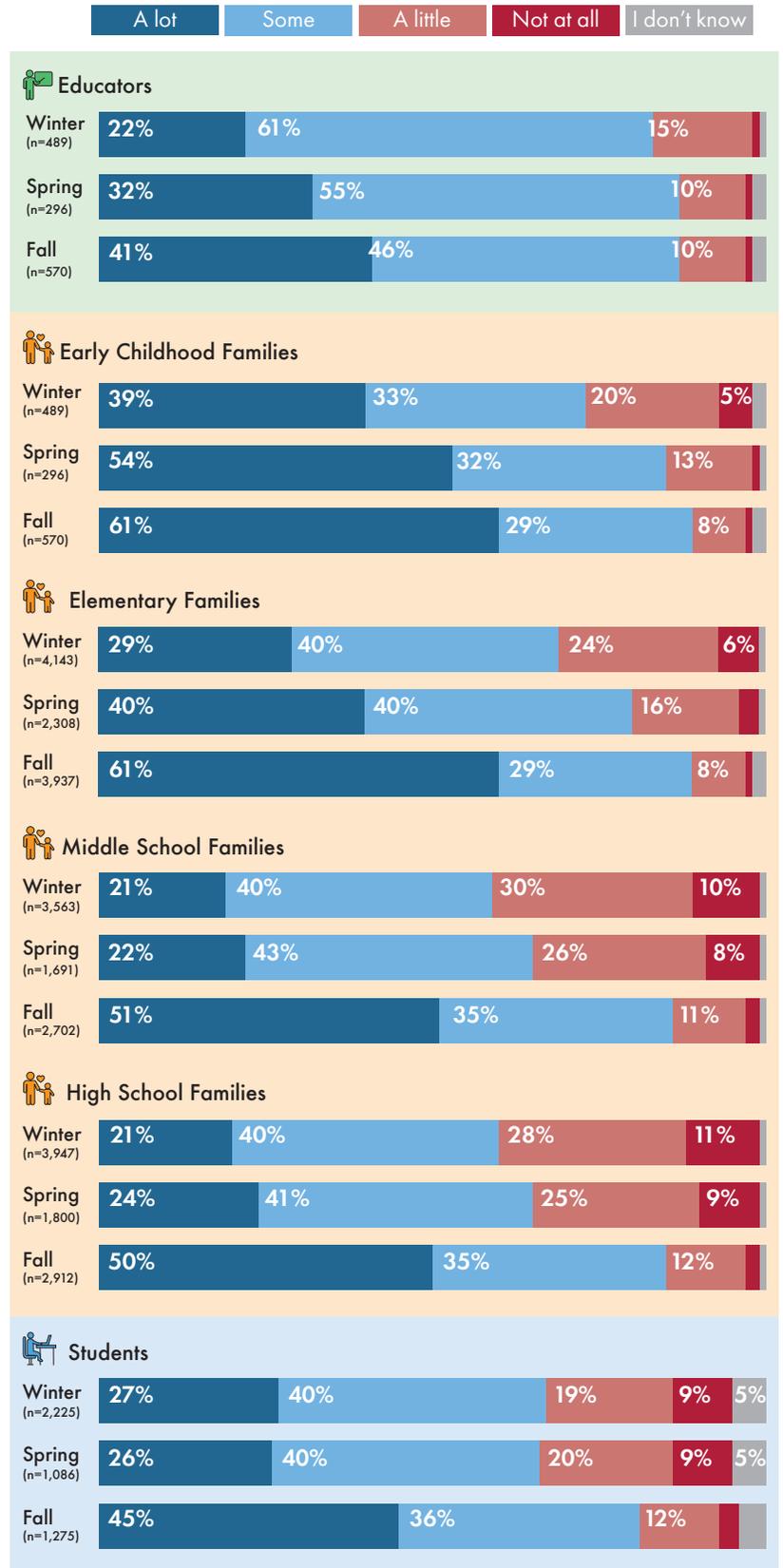
Learning and Engagement. As the education landscape changed throughout 2021, so did the opinions that families, students, and educators held about student learning and engagement.

- **Students reported they learned more in fall 2021 than they had since the pandemic began in March 2020.** Families and students agreed that a lot of learning occurred in fall 2021, compared to only some during the 2020–21 school year. Most educators agreed that some academic learning occurred across all three surveys, but the amount of educators reporting that students were learning a lot did increase in the Fall 2021 Survey.
 - There were mixed opinions when comparing fall 2021 to pre-COVID learning. Families with young students tended to report that learning in fall 2021 was about the same as pre-COVID, while educators, students, and families with secondary students most often reported that more learning happened pre-COVID.
 - Educators consistently reported across the surveys that social-emotional learning lagged behind academic learning.
- **Engaging students in learning was both successful and challenging.** Educators, families, and students reported that engaging students in learning was among both their top successes and top challenges across all three survey iterations. Respondents reported that it was particularly challenging to elicit deep levels of engagement from students during periods of distance or hybrid learning and to re-engage highly disengaged students, especially as the pandemic has continued.

Looking back and looking forward. Findings from the series of three surveys (Winter, Spring, and Fall 2021) all demonstrate that COVID-19 dramatically disrupted schooling as we know it and will have lasting effects on education moving forward.

- **Technology was an area of dramatic improvement.** Compared to widespread reports of challenges with access to hardware, software, and internet at the beginning of the pandemic ([CEHD Distance Learning Survey](#)), educators, families, and students reported successes with technology throughout 2021.

To what extent do you believe you / your students are learning this school year?



- **COVID mitigation strategies were an area of disagreement.** Respondents across groups reported ensuring the health and safety of students and staff as a success in the winter and spring of 2021 but a challenge in the fall of 2021. In addition, some respondents wanted to see more COVID mitigation strategies (e.g., contact tracing, vaccination requirements, and quarantine) in the fall of 2021 and some wanted to see fewer.
- **More supportive school infrastructure, prioritization of equity, and greater involvement of stakeholders in decision-making were areas for learning and improvement moving forward.** Specifically, educators and families wanted to see more manageable workloads for staff, smaller class sizes, and more support staff. Students wanted a “catch-up”/flex day built into the schedule, reduced focus on standardized testing, and later start times. Students wanted more instruction on systemic racism and sexual identity as well as more prevention and intervention for racism and racial microaggressions. Educators and families wanted more family and community, teacher/educator, and student involvement in decision-making.

Looking Forward

With over 53,000 individual responses across three surveys, there is an abundance of evidence supporting the aforementioned summary of findings. It’s what comes next that we turn to now. These findings can offer insights to guide the next phase of providing education during the pandemic and beyond.

As schools continue to be affected by COVID-19, many are transitioning from “getting through” to managing a new normal. Below are a few questions stemming from the findings of the Safe Learning Surveys for the consideration of stakeholders impacting and impacted by PK-12 education in Minnesota. Our hope is that these questions help stakeholders better address areas of need.

Students

- **What worked for you during this time?** We heard about your increased satisfaction with technology and your need for more clarity in directions from educators. As schools continue to explore options like distance learning for snow days or different models of delivery of coursework, **what advice do you have for your teachers and principals?**

Teachers and Support Staff

- Your resiliency, creativity, and professionalism have been the driving force of our educational system for the past 22 months. From our first Distance Learning Survey in the spring of 2020 through the fall of 2021, there was an incredible change in your reported success with technology. While many more serious issues needing attention remain, the frustration reported with technology in the spring of 2020 was largely gone come the fall of 2021. Of course, mental health continues to be your most reported concern. In this time of overwhelming demands, **how can you propose and collectively advocate for structures that will make workloads more manageable for you and your colleagues?** Additionally, as you continue to support your students day-in and day-out, **how can you elevate their voices and provide opportunities for their perspectives, and the perspectives of their families, to inform schooling moving forward?** Lastly, as you advocate for improved structures and supports, **how can you also take time for yourself to rest and recharge?**

Families

- If there was anything from educational research that was reinforced in the initial stages of distance learning, it was the confirmation that the family is the most important factor in student success. Families made incredible sacrifices and engaged in their students’ educations in ways that elevated their influence in the decisions schools were making. We are hopeful this solicitation of family and community input in so much of what happens in schools outlasts COVID-19. **What has and has not worked for you during this time? What do your students need? How can you communicate these insights to your students’ teachers and school leaders?**

Administrators

- The ability to manage very complex technical problems—such as food distribution, technology deployment, and COVID-19 safety protocols—reinforced the strength so many of you have in analysis and decision-making. We see the next step will be transitioning those skills from

solving technical problems to adaptive ones. **How can structures be created or modified to make the workloads placed on teachers and support staff more manageable?** How will the curriculum be aligned for acceleration? How will assessment be used for learning and not just accountability? **How will we think about the support students, families, and educators may need right now?** Schools across the state are facing many of the same issues, yet we often try to solve these problems by ourselves at the local level. **How can you engage in collaboration with your regional colleagues, your service cooperative, MDE's regional centers of excellence, the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI), etc.?** After all, there is clear evidence that collective leadership has some of the greatest impacts on student learning ([Wahlstrom, Seashore Lewis, Leithwood, and Anderson, 2010](#)).

School Boards

- With the overwhelming concern about mental health, school boards too are likely looking for ways they can support those they serve. A few questions school boards may want to discuss are things like: **do we need to think about time and our school calendar differently?** For example, the Rochester School Board decided to add collaboration and well-being days throughout the year to allow educators more time to collaborate as they worked to catch kids up. **Are there ways we can secure more mental health professionals to support our schools? Are there opportunities to collaborate with city and county leaders to develop integrated services for students?**

Policymakers

- The concerns presented in these findings are certainly ones that require thoughtful leadership, collaboration, and innovative ideas that lead to new ways of providing education that better meet students', families', and educators' needs. Much work has been done to increase the numbers of teachers of color and American Indian teachers, though the retention of these teachers along with other teachers needs to become a focus. This requires culturally responsive leaders and environments. Mental health concerns stretch across all aspects of the educational system and beyond our schools' physical walls. **How can policymakers leverage systems outside of education to support the communities in which students and families live?** Can easier collaboration occur at the county level so that mental health supports and services are more seamless? What resources and guidance need to be accessible to school and community organizations to make this kind of collaboration effective?

Mental Health Resources

- A comprehensive list of resources on [Responding to COVID-19 School Mental Health](#)
- [Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#)
- [Common Trauma Symptoms in Students and Helpful Strategies for Educators](#)
- [Common Symptoms of Trauma by School Age Group](#)
- [Recognizing the Signs of Trauma](#) in the classroom
- [Responding to Trauma in Your Classroom](#) and [Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom](#)
- [Strategies to Build Relationships with Students](#)
- [Structural Supports to Promote Teacher Well-Being](#)
- [Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems: A Guide for State Education Agencies](#)
- [Grief Resources for Students and Families](#)

Other Resources

Results from several nationwide surveys about schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic echoed trends seen in Minnesota. Examples include:

- [YouthTruth's Student Survey: Learning & Well-Being During COVID-19](#) (Students)
- [RAND Corporation's Will Students Come Back? School Hesitancy and Parental Preferences for COVID-19 Safety Practices in Schools](#) (Families)
- [Learning in the 21st Century: How the American Public, Parents, and Teachers View K-12 Teaching and Learning in the Pandemic](#) (Families, Educators)
- [Key Findings from the 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey](#) (Educators)
- [National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19](#) (School & District Administrators)



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