Data from our first PDK COVID-19 survey, released on March 28th, revealed that since their schools have closed, most students have been looking to their teachers to create schedules and routines that will provide their everyday lives with structure, which they believe will help them cope with the many stresses they face. Further, they desire more communication with their teachers and more opportunities to interact with their schoolmates, whether in virtual or non-virtual environments. Overall, their survey responses suggest that the current crisis is taking a significant emotional toll on students. They long for a sense of normalcy, and they feel a profound sense of loss over the activities they are missing, such as prom, graduation, sports, the arts, and many other parts of school life.

In this report, we review data from a second survey, which was completed by educators (including classroom teachers and school and district administrators, and higher education faculty, as well as retired educators in all categories) across the country. Further, we’ve compared educators’ responses to those of the students in first survey, to see how closely they overlap. And, most important, we’ve tried to determine the extent to which educators have prioritized, and have actually provided, the kinds of supports students say they want.
1. Understanding how we cope informs what we need to provide for our students

We asked students and adults how they were coping with the crisis and organized their responses into the most common categories:

“What are some methods that you are using to cope with any current stress and anxiety (for example, concern about getting sick, being out of school, not seeing your friends in person daily, etc.)?”

While there is much to look at here, including the differences in how much each group turned to prayer and the relatively low incidence of social media use among all groups, some of the most interesting data relate to how much each group is engaging in activities (hobbies, skills, listening to music, watching programs, etc.) and self-care (mental and physical). Whereas adults primarily focus on self-care, students are indicated that they practice distraction and possibly avoidance almost as much as they do self-care. This difference between how kids are practicing self-care — or not — and the extent to which educators say they’re practicing it may come as no surprise, however, given that many adults have only learned the importance of self-care through experience and over time.

Students’ lower levels of emphasis on self-care may also reflect schools’ longstanding emphasis on academics as the chief measure of their success. In recent years, increased attention to social-emotional learning (SEL) has led many schools to implement efforts to promote student mindfulness and well-being, and to incorporate practices like yoga and meditation into the day. However, students’ responses suggest that, for whatever reason, few have turned to such practices during the pandemic, and it may be helpful to encourage them to do so.
2. Teachers are in as much need for social and emotional support as students

We asked classroom teachers what their needs were and asked administrators a parallel question:

“If you are a classroom teacher, what support do you need right now from your administrator(s)?”

“If you are a school or district administrator, how are you supporting classroom teachers/professors in this situation?”

The data show significant discrepancies between the supports classroom educators want and those that administrators say they’re providing (in both K-12 and higher ed). However, their responses are almost identical on the need for clear communication; teachers want it, and administrators are providing it.

There are striking discrepancies, however, between teachers’ and administrators’ views on the need for social-emotional supports and for structure and direction. Classroom teachers and professors want to know that their administrators care about their social-emotional needs, yet only a few administrators report that they are providing supports in this area. It’s possible that they aren’t aware of the need, or perhaps they simply don’t know how to provide this support in a way that doesn’t cross professional boundaries. More importantly, teachers and faculty overwhelmingly respond that they need administrators to provide structure and direction (with an appropriate degree of flexibility), but much lower numbers of administrators view this as a priority.
3. Adults may not know how to help students feel connected

Students and adults were both asked what supports are needed to help students feel connected to their classmates.

“What do you feel you can do to make sure the students you work with feel connected to their classmates while they are not physically at school?”

It’s interesting to note here that the ratios of response are similar within each population, with each group ranking these options similarly. However, significantly higher percentages of students express interest in each category, suggesting that adults may not recognize, and may not be delivering, the levels of support students need.

This could easily be a result of a generational disconnect, particularly when it comes to experiences with technology and social media — that is, adults’ recollections of their own childhoods may lead them to make faulty assumptions about the needs and social practices of today’s students. For example, adults might assume that setting up a Zoom or similar online activity is sufficient, whereas kids are used to engaging on other platforms and have different expectations. Deeper investigation would likely reveal a better understanding.
4. Advice to parents during the crisis

We asked educators what advice they could give parents to support their students:

“What should parents do outside of structured lessons to support their students without placing additional stress on their children or themselves?”

Parents are trying to navigate their own new normal, as many of them are now working from home while their children are home from school. With everyone at home all the time, quiet places for work or private contemplation may be hard to find. In addition, some families may be grappling with layoffs because of the pandemic or increased work pressures among medical professionals, grocery store workers, and other essential personnel. While all parents care about their children’s academic progress and their well-being, these two surveys suggest that for the moment, the higher priority may be to tend to their well-being.

According to the data, all three groups — higher education faculty and administrators, k-12 administrators, and classroom teachers — ascribe similar importance to providing a sense of normalcy, opportunities to play, and reassurance, with representatives from higher education giving higher weight to a sense of normalcy and teachers and administrators focusing more on the need for reassurance.

However, the most important takeaway here may have to do with what is missing from the data, which was coded from open-ended answers. In the first finding, we indicated that adults seem to have learned the importance of self-care in times of crisis and stress and that students may be engaging in avoidance as much as they are in self-care. Taking the two findings together, we see educators’ advice to parents is missing the importance of teaching self-care (albeit with the understanding that playing is a form of exercise and self-care) to our students so that they can better cope with the current crisis and build resilience for their futures as adults.
Summary

Our students say they want more structure during the current crisis, and our teachers say they want more reassurance and emotional support. Perhaps, it would be wise for parents, teachers, and educational leaders to reassess the extent to which they prioritize these things. This means we need ensure that the structures, activities, and interactions we’re providing aren’t just distractions or ways to keep everyone busy and productive. Adults and students alike need to know that we’re going to come out of this, hopefully sooner rather than later. By ensuring that our virtual instructional environments provide purpose, structure, and connection, and offering direction on self-care as a tool in crisis, we can help our kids, families, and staff to weather the storm and come out of it better prepared for our individual and collective futures.
Appendix: Educator Responses in Aggregate*
(*Student responses can be found in PDK’s First COVID-19 Survey Brief. Please contact us on our website if you did not already receive this.)

What are some methods that you are using to cope with any current stress and anxiety (for example, concern about getting sick, being out of school, not seeing your friends in person daily, etc.)?

- Self-Care (eg. Meditation, exercise) 48%
- Going to work 2%
- Video games 0%
- Actively Worrying 5%
- Watching programs 0%
- Prayer 6%
- Phone 4%
- New hobbies or skills 1%
- Friends 2%
- Reading 3%
- Music 1%
- Online activities 10%
- Family 10%
- Live activities 3%
- Trying not to worry 7%
If you are a classroom teacher/professor, what support do you need right now from your administrator(s)?

- District state policy updates: 12%
- Chat rooms, group chats: 2%
- Technology training: 12%
- Health and Safety: 1%
- Key guidelines: 21%
- Manageable workload, flexible administrators: 6%
- Lesson planning aid: 1%
- Technology being supplied: 8%
- Resources online: 3%
- Online classroom experience: 4%
- News, outreach communication: 13%
- Understanding and flexibility: 14%
- Varied concerns about pay and benefits: 2%
If you are a school/district/university administrator, how are you supporting classroom teachers/professors in this situation?
What do you feel you can do to make sure the students you work with feel connected to their classmates while they are not physically at school?
What should parents do outside of structured lessons to support their students without placing additional stress on their children or themselves?

- Time Schedule & Structure: 16%
- Live Activities: 13%
- Keep positive attitude: 8%
- Include play in the day: 13%
- Online Activities: 2%
- Maintain trust in education system: 1%
- Reading: 9%
- Solve problems: 1%
- Purse area of interest: 2%
- Decision-making (involve your kids in family decisions): 5%
- Discussions on current events: 10%
- Trust your kids are doing the right thing: 5%
- Address anxiety on current events: 2%
- Food (provide healthy options or find lunch programs): 0%
- Help navigate kids with online learning tools: 4%
- Encouragement: 10%
- Pursue area of interest: 2%
- Pursue area of interest: 2%
- Online Activities: 2%
- Maintain trust in education system: 1%