

# Student Mental Health During the Pandemic: Educator and Teen Perspectives



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# Supporting Teacher Well-Being in a Time of Crisis

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Teachers face extraordinary challenges right now—under conditions that might linger into the 2021-22 school year. Not only is this detrimental to teachers themselves (and therefore the teaching profession); it also has tremendous repercussions on students. Especially in the current crisis, supporting the holistic needs of adults as well as their capacity to support the same needs in students is a critical priority for the development of effective learning environments that support the needs of the whole child.

Fortunately, schools and organizations around the country have been taking important steps to better address these systemic issues. Here four examples of powerful tactics schools are using to build environments that prioritize educator and staff well-being and capacity to support students:

## 1) Provide opportunities for staff and educators to reconnect, heal, and feel safe and supported.

Valor Collegiate Academies, a small charter school network in Nashville, aims to prioritize relationships and social-emotional development as highly as academics. As part of this emphasis, students engage in a carefully designed circle model where trust and vulnerability anchor strong relationships through face-to-face communication. Teachers and academy leaders engage in the same circle model, coming together to prioritize social emotional development and offer and receive peer support. They share what's going on in their classrooms—the victories and challenges alike—with openness, honesty and respect for one another. Adult circle participants say the experience is both validating and liberating.

## 2) Offer ways for educators to assess their well-being and cultivate self-care strategies.

The Center for Healthy Minds in Madison, Wisconsin, part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is dedicated to cultivating well-being and “relieving suffering through a scientific understanding of the mind.” The center has developed a free app that supports the elements of well-being with the opportunities for guidance, practice and feedback grounded in learning science. The center recently used this resource to deliver a well-being intervention to almost half of the teachers in Madison. After 15 weeks, the intervention showed lower rates of psychological distress and loneliness among participants, and higher ratings of mindfulness, self-compassion, connection to meaning or purpose and overall well-being.

## 3) Provide educators with professional development that supports student well-being and connection.

PilotED Schools, a social identity-centered elementary school in Indianapolis, is an example of a school that integrates healing and equity into teaching and learning. For example, a history lesson about Plymouth Rock includes the traditional story of Pilgrims and indigenous people gathering—along with what's left out of many history books. Teachers ask students to think about who they identify with in the story, and to express their thoughts about persecuted communities. The lesson wraps up with a discussion on emotions and questions such as, “What would it feel like if that was your family, or if it was your friend?” Environments of healing and equity focus not just on how educators engage with each other and students but also on how and what we teach.

## 4) Recognize the science behind relationships as the foundation of a healthy and rigorous learning environment.

Turnaround for Children, an organization that translates the science of learning and development into tools and strategies for educators, helps teachers understand the brain science connected to relationships and then share what they've learned with students. Its resources walk teachers through the connection between emotions, human connection and cognition. Because emotions and social connection are so deeply rooted in our success as a human species, they are intertwined with cognitive processes like attention and memory, which we access to engage in learning. Relationships are key to this engagement. Just as cortisol is released with stress, oxytocin is released through human relationships and connection. The sense of safety and belonging that relationships provide is truly the foundation for learning, because they create the context that readies the brain to learn.

In addition, the Search Institute provides research on developmental relationships identifies critical elements of relationship-building with students, including challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities. The organization also provides a checklist for teachers on building developmental relationships during COVID-19. Finally, it offers specific guidance for supporting the pillars of developmental relationships: For example, teachers can express care through a text, email, video or note expressing care and concern for them during this crisis. And they can challenge growth by asking students to set a personal goal during remote instruction, then periodically check in on their progress.

### Learn more:

[inservice.ascd.org/four-ways-to-support-teacher-well-being](https://inservice.ascd.org/four-ways-to-support-teacher-well-being)

## Executive Summary

Since the coronavirus pandemic emerged in early 2020, high school students have faced unique and previously unheard of disruptions in many aspects of their daily lives. This report examines results from winter 2021 EdWeek Research Center surveys of high school students and educators to gauge the pandemic's impact on students' mental health.

In a survey of 2,000 high school students, over 70 percent of students indicated they are experiencing problems in school to a greater degree now than they did in January 2020. Roughly three-quarters of Black (77%) and Latinx (77%) students cited a rise in problems compared to 68 percent of their white and 66 percent of their Asian American peers. Students who lived in poverty (76%) reported an increase more often than more affluent students (67%). More than 8 in 10 LGBTQ students cited additional problems compared to 69 percent of heterosexual students.

Close to three-quarters of students in full-time remote and hybrid settings reported having more problems but only about two-thirds of students attending school completely in-person did so.

There's no doubt the pandemic has brought tumultuous times for everyone — adults and young people, alike. But results when high school educators were asked comparable survey questions in January 2021 suggest they and their students have differing perspectives with respect to a range of issues connected to mental health. In general, educators believed that the pandemic had a more damaging impact on students' than students, themselves.

It's important to keep in mind that the young people surveyed were often asked only to respond about their own personal experiences and mental health while educators' survey responses may reflect their evaluation of all their students. To that extent, educators' responses could indicate their awareness of a broader range of struggles. That said, the survey data identify gaps between student and teacher perspectives and suggest a potential need for more dialogue between these two groups, especially with remote learning.

Remote and hybrid instruction may not allow teachers to keep tabs on students' outlooks and mindsets in the ways they traditionally did when they could see students in-person in the classroom. If remote instruction continues to be widespread in the future, they may seek new methods to gauge their students' points of view.

Key differences in perspectives include:

- When high school teachers were asked reflect back, 93 percent said their students are experiencing problems in school (either remote or in-person) more now than they did in January 2020. That compares to 72 percent of students, themselves.
- About two-thirds of high school teachers perceived that their students' state of mind during in-person or remote class was more negative than before the pandemic. In contrast, only 37 percent of students felt the same way.
- Eighty-six percent of high school principals said their schools offered mental health programs or services both before and during the pandemic. Only about two-thirds of high school students agreed.

## Introduction

Since the coronavirus pandemic began in early 2020, K-12 students have faced unprecedented upheaval in many aspects of their daily lives. Their schools abruptly closed and almost overnight their classes shifted to remote learning, a largely unfamiliar instructional model for them and their teachers. Extracurricular activities and sports events, along with traditional rites of passage — such as graduations and proms — were cancelled. Beyond the staggering academic changes that took place, students faced isolation from their friends, extended families, and communities. Their parents sometimes lost their jobs and incomes due to the economic downturn associated with the pandemic. And, in the most challenging circumstances, students lost family members to the virus or faced illness, themselves.

In the 2020-21 school year, although some students returned to at least a measure of in-person instruction, many continued in 100 percent remote schooling. Given the extraordinarily tumultuous times, there has been widespread concern about how all of the challenges and changes are affecting students' mental health.

To learn more, the EdWeek Research Center surveyed 2,000 high school students in grades 9-12 between January 29 and February 11, 2021. The nationally representative survey examined students' views on a range of issues connected to mental health including their state of mind during in-person or remote classes, school-related experiences, problems, and relationships. It also gauged their views regarding access to and experiences with mental health services, such as counseling, offered by their schools.

Most students of all backgrounds said that they are experiencing problems in school more now than they did in January 2020. But African American and Latinx students were more likely than their white or Asian American peers to report a rise in challenges. Students who qualified for free or reduced-price school meals, a proxy for poverty, were also more likely to cite an increase than their more affluent peers. LGBTQ students more commonly pointed to additional difficulties than heterosexual students.

Instructional models appeared to make a difference as well. Students attending fully remote or hybrid (remote and in-person) school were more likely to see an increase in problems than their counterparts attending school only in-person.

The research center compared results from the student survey with high school educators' responses to similar questions that had been included in a late-January 2021 survey exploring their perspectives regarding the pandemic's impact on K-12 education. The comparison suggests substantial differences in perspectives, with educators often having a more negative view of the pandemic's impact on students than students, themselves.

## **| SURVEY DETAILS**

**Surveys Administered:** January 29 to February 11, 2021 (Student Survey)  
January 27-28, 2021 (Educator Survey)

**Sample:** Nationally-representative

**Method:** Online [Email invitations sent to an online survey]

**Respondents:** High school students (grades 9-12) and high school educators

Ultimately, it's unclear whether the differences in the survey results indicate educators are misjudging the pandemic's effects on students' well-being or simply reflect differing vantage points and roles. For instance, gaps between students and educators might reflect the fact that educators were asked to respond to survey questions about the experiences of all their students while students were only asked to report their own personal experiences and feelings.

Even before the pandemic, it would also be no surprise to find that the views of adults and teens on any subject might differ. On the other hand, educators working in remote learning have had to change how they communicate with students and aren't able to see students in-person to gauge their frame of mind or mental health. Remote learning can potentially make it more difficult for students and teachers to be in-sync. Survey results raise questions about the extent to which these barriers create new distance between students and the educators serving them.

## Demographics

From January 29 to February 11, 2021, the EdWeek Research Center conducted a nationally representative survey that asked 2,000 high school students about their mental well-being during the pandemic, especially as it compared to earlier in 2020 before the immense disruptions caused by the pandemic began. All of the students participating in the survey were in grades 9-12.

### Student Survey Respondents By Grade Level

Grade Level	Percentage
9th	30%
10th	28%
11th	24%
12th	18%

The student survey had a diverse pool of participants. Nearly half identified as white (49%). More than one-fourth (27%) are Latinx and 15 percent are Black or African-American.

About half of respondents are female (48%) and roughly half are male (52%).

Eighty-two percent of respondents identified as being heterosexual; the other 18 percent self-identified in various ways, including being gay or lesbian and bisexual.

The majority (55%) of students had qualified for or received free or reduced-price meals at school, a measure often used to indicate a family's poverty level.

Most student respondents (81%) were enrolled in a traditional public high school. Five percent attended charter schools. Five percent were students in private religious institutions and another five percent attended private non-religious schools. Homeschoolers made up four percent of respondents.

This report highlights some differences in survey results for different student demographic groups and for students attending schools with different instructional models during the pandemic, such as full-time remote learning and fully in-person instruction.

## Student Survey Respondents By Race and Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
Alaska Native	0%
American Indian	0%
Asian American	7%
Black	15%
Latinx	27%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0%
White	49%
Other	1%

Fifty-four percent of students said that they were attending fully remote school at the time of the survey and 28 percent were enrolled in a hybrid model, attending school in-person and at home. Eighteen percent attended school only in-person.

## Instructional Model For Schools Attended By Student Survey Respondents

	Total	Asian	Black	Latinx	White	Lower-Income	Higher-Income	Heterosexual	LGBTQ
100% in-person	18%	7%	13%	11%	24%	18%	18%	18%	13%
Hybrid	28%	16%	20%	25%	35%	25%	34%	30%	24%
100% remote	54%	77%	66%	64%	41%	57%	49%	52%	63%

Forty-one percent of the white teens were full-time remote students, but most Black and Latinx students were learning virtually 100 percent of the time at 66 and 64 percent, respectively. Similarly, students in poverty more often attended school 100 percent remotely (57 percent) than students who did not qualify for free and reduced-price meals (49%). Likewise, LGBTQ students were more likely than their heterosexual peers to be attending school 100 percent remotely (63 percent versus 52 percent, respectively).

On January 27 and 28, 2021, the EdWeek Research Center conducted a nationally representative online survey of 555 teachers, 210 principals, and 295 district leaders. The survey asked educators to share their views about the pandemic's impact on schools, school districts, and students. To understand more about how perspectives differ, results from matching questions on the student and educator surveys are compared throughout this report.

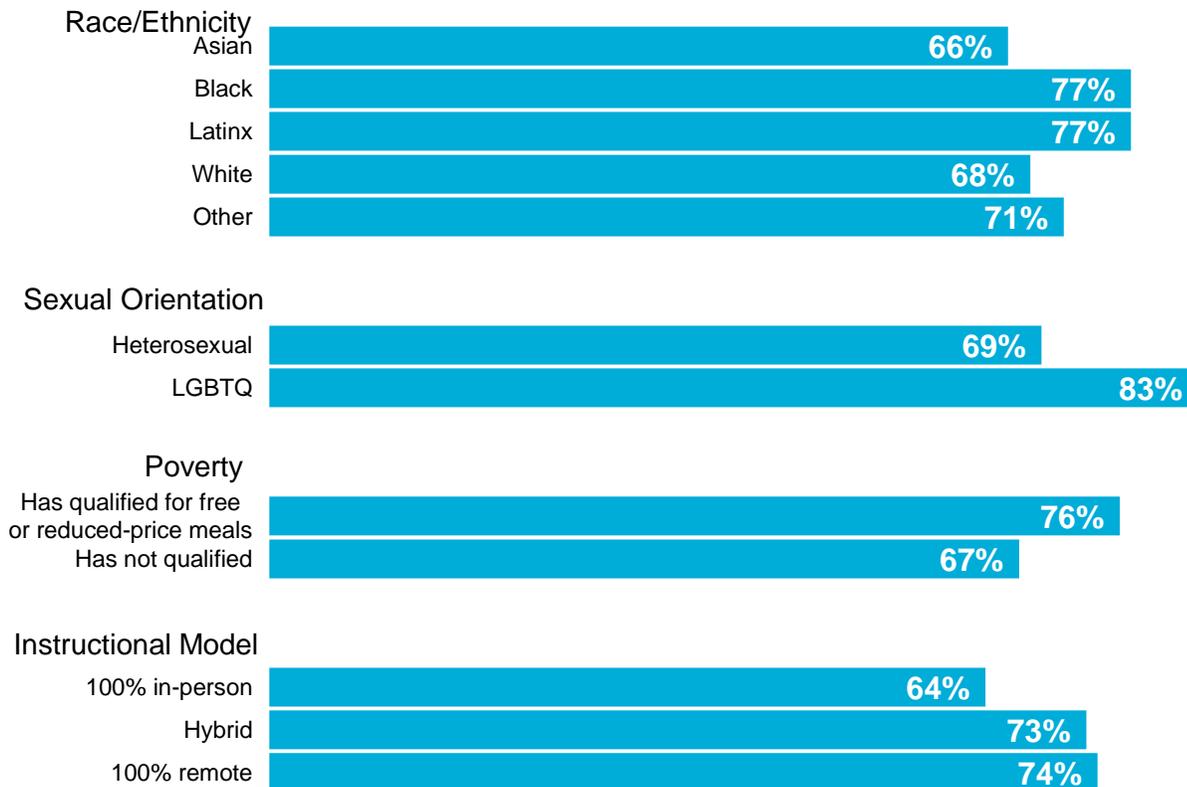
## More Difficulties in School During the Pandemic

In the survey, students were asked whether they are experiencing any problems in school (either remote or in-person) more now than they did in January 2020. They were given a list of potential problems and asked to select all that apply. More than 7 in 10 students said that they are experiencing problems in school more now than they did in January 2020. Just more than three-quarters of Black (77%) and Latinx (77%) students reported increasing challenges compared with 68 percent of white students and 66 percent of Asian American high schoolers. Students who qualified for free or reduced-priced school meals, an indicator of poverty, more commonly cited an increase than their peers from higher-income families. Seventy-six percent of low-income students reported growing problems compared with 67 percent of

wealthier students. More than 8 in 10 LGBTQ students pointed to additional difficulties. Sixty-nine percent of heterosexual students said the same.

Instructional models seem to influence students' views. Students in 100 percent remote or hybrid (remote and in-person) school were more likely to say they experienced an increase in problems than their peers receiving fully in-person instruction. Close to three-quarters of students in full-time remote and hybrid settings reported having more problems. Closer to two-thirds of students attending school in-person full-time cited additional difficulties.

**I am experiencing problems in school more now than I did in January 2020**



It's possible that some student groups were more likely to face challenges due to remote learning. Black and Latinx students, for instance, more often attended school remotely full-time than their white peers. Forty-one percent of white teens were full-time remote students but most Black and Latinx students were learning virtually on a full-time basis (66% and 64%, respectively). Similarly, 57 percent of students in poverty attended school remotely full-time compared with 49 percent of students who had not qualified for free or reduced-price meals. LGBTQ students were more likely than their heterosexual peers to attend only remote schooling (83% versus 52 percent).

## Differing Perspectives: High School Educators and Their Students

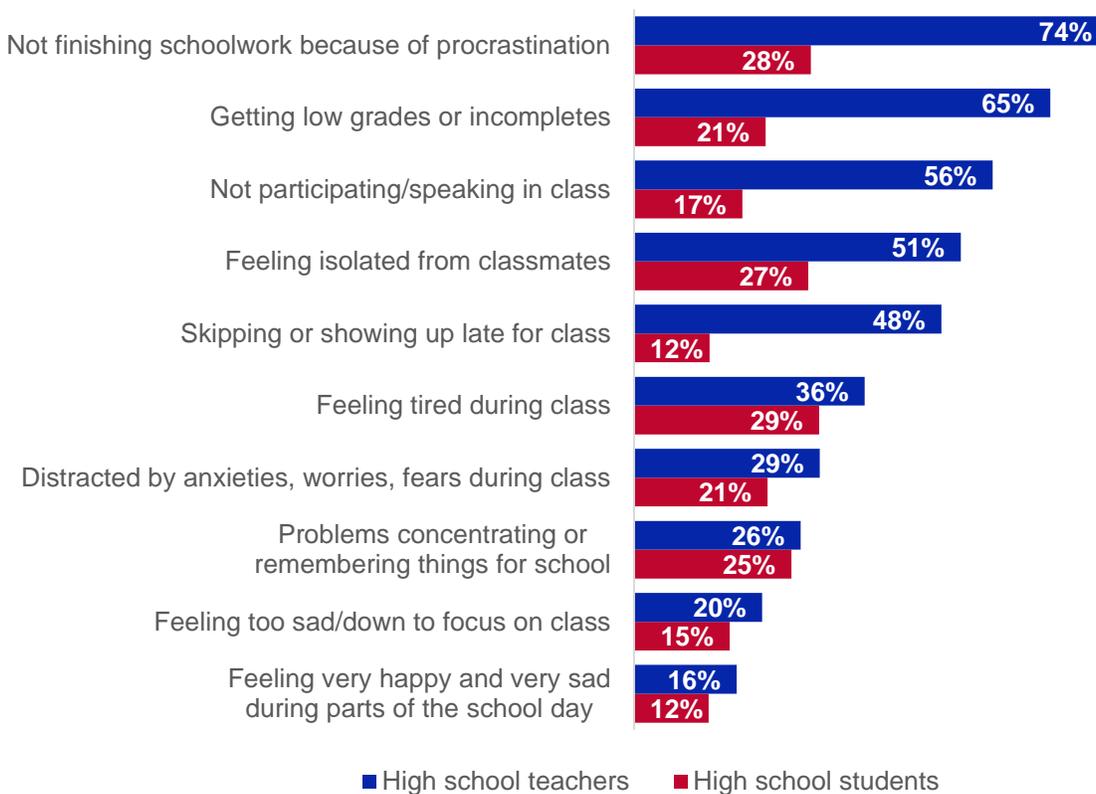
Survey results indicate that high school educators and their students have differing views on some key topics regarding mental health. Generally, educators believed that the pandemic had a more negative impact on students' than students' themselves. The gaps might not reflect differing worldviews or suggest that educators are out of touch with students although remote learning might make it more difficult for them to communicate with the young people they serve.

Instead, it's important to remember that the teens surveyed were typically asked only to respond about their own personal experiences and mental health while educators' responses reflected their views about all their students. In other words, students could say they weren't personally affected in a negative way by the pandemic but educators would be aware of the struggles of at least some of their classmates.

### Views on Problems Students Are Experiencing

When high school teachers were asked to reflect back, 93 percent said their students are experiencing problems in school (either remote or in-person) more now than they did in January 2020. That compares to 72 percent of students, themselves.

**Are you [your students] experiencing any problems in school (either remote or in-person) more now than you [they] did in January 2020? Select all that apply.**



Note: Chart shows the 10 most common responses from teachers and how results compared to responses from students.

Nearly three-fourths of teachers (74%) said students are now having more trouble finishing schoolwork because of procrastination than before the pandemic compared with just 28 percent of students.

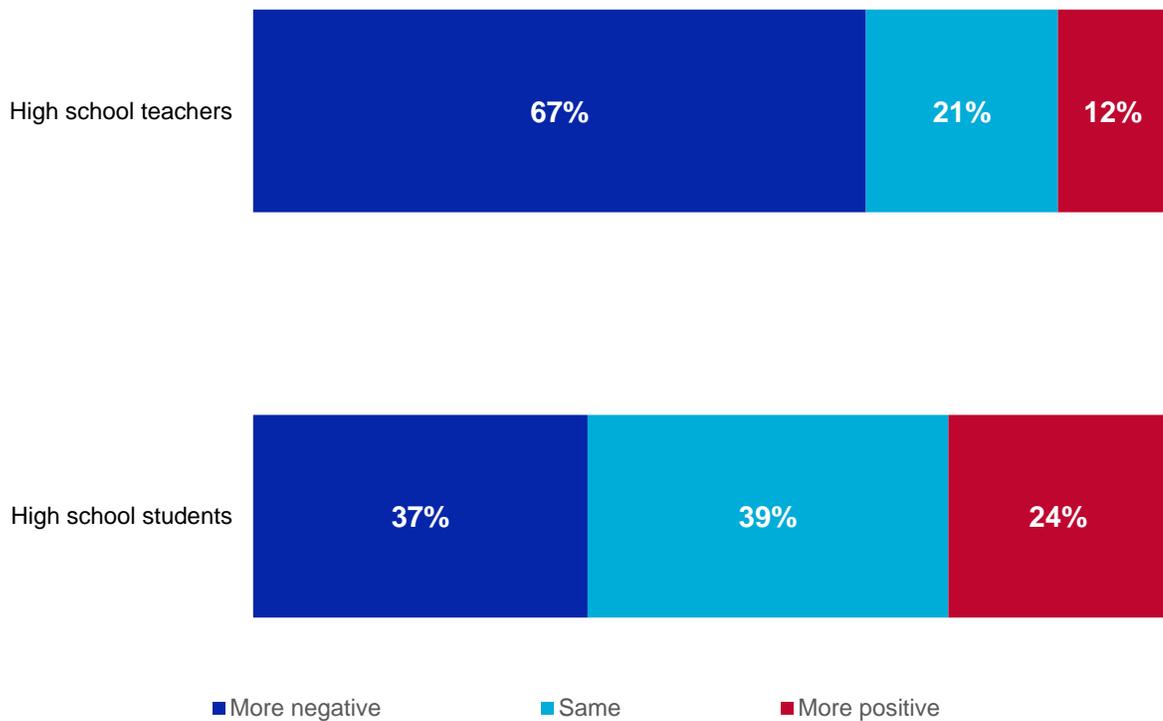
Similarly, nearly two-thirds of teachers (65%) reported that students are now getting low grades or incompletes to a greater extent than very early in 2020. Just 1 in 4 students found that to be true about themselves.

## State of Mind During In-Person or Remote Classes

About two-thirds of high school teachers perceived that their students' state of mind during in-person or remote class was more negative than before the pandemic. In contrast, only 37 percent of students felt the same way. Students most commonly reported that their state of mind remained the same and were two times more likely than teachers to say that they had grown more positive than they were before the coronavirus emerged.

Forty percent of students attending school remotely full-time and 38 percent in a hybrid model reported that their state of mind was more negative at the time of the survey compared with just 29 percent of students attending school only in-person.

### Compared to before the pandemic, my [my students'] state of mind during in-person or remote class is:

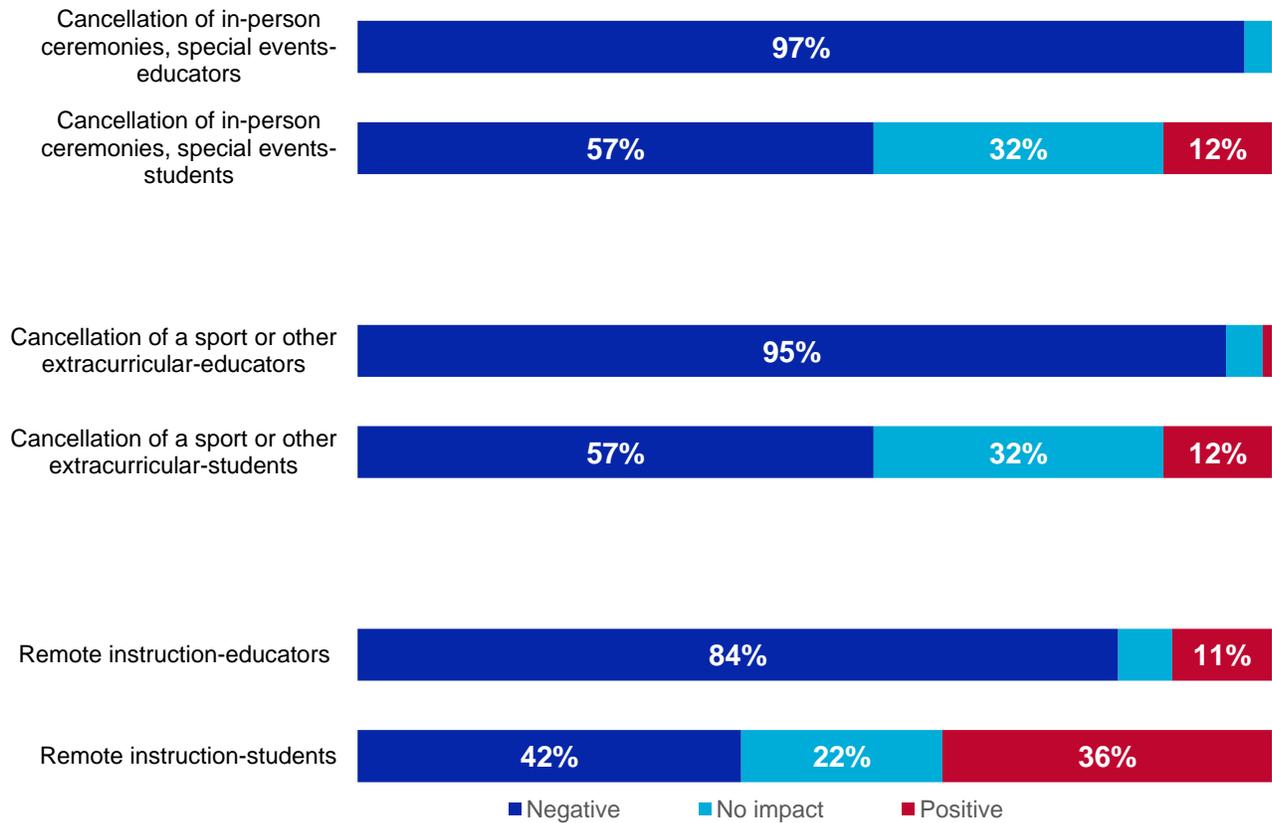


## Impact of School Experiences

High school teachers and principals overwhelmingly believed that the cancellation of school-related events had a harmful effect on students but only a slim majority of students agreed. Ninety-five percent of educators said the cancellation of a sport or other extracurricular activity negatively impacted students compared with 57 percent of students, themselves. Similarly, 97 percent of educators saw an adverse impact with respect to the cancellation of in-person graduations, parties, awards ceremonies, or other special events. Just 57 percent of students saw it the same way.

Comparable differences emerge when examining educator and student perspectives on remote learning. Most educators (84%) believed remote instruction had a negative impact on students but only 42 percent of students said it had been negative for them.

**The following is a list of school-related experiences that many students have had since the pandemic started. Please tell us how they affected you [your students].**



Sixty-two percent of female students indicated the cancellation of in-person graduations, parties, awards ceremonies, or other special events had an adverse impact on them compared with 52 percent of male students.

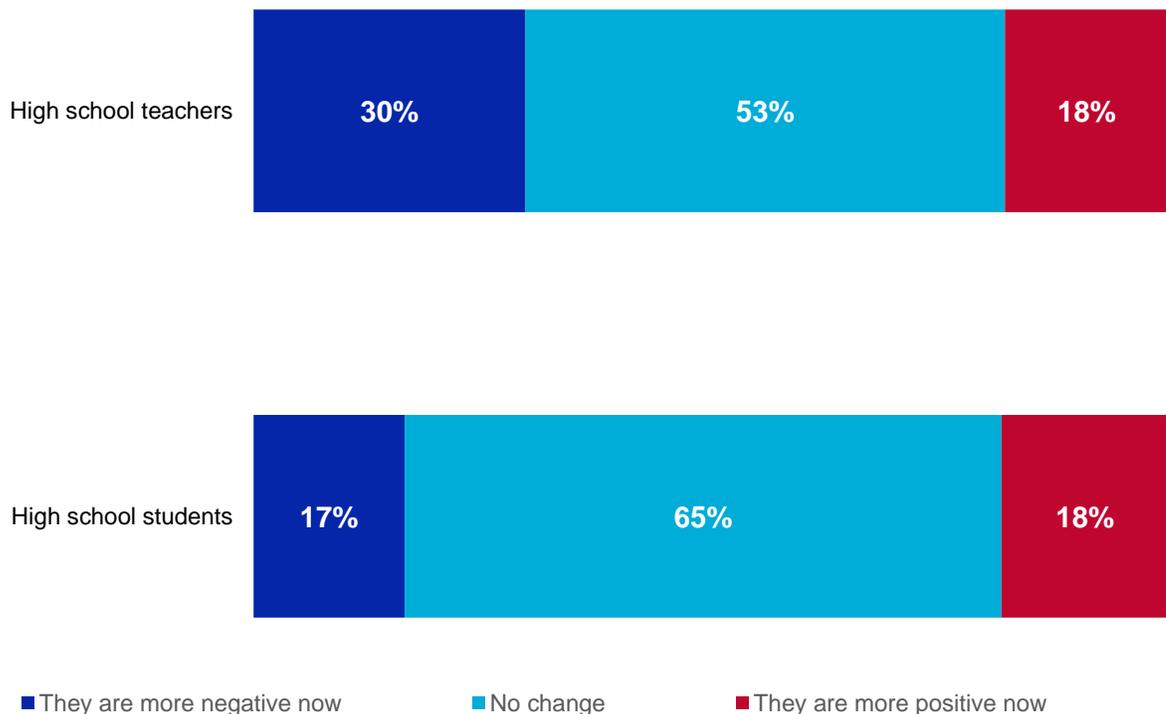
Not surprisingly, high school seniors more frequently said they suffered from the loss of those special events than their counterparts in earlier high school grades. Sixty-eight percent of seniors saw a negative impact compared to 56 percent of freshmen.

Sixty-two percent of more affluent students said the loss of those events affected them negatively compared to 52 percent of lower-income students.

## Changes in Relationships Since the Pandemic Started

When surveyed in winter 2021, most high school students and teachers did not think that their relationships had changed since January 2020. Nearly two-thirds of students (65%) and the majority of teachers (53%) reported no change in their relationships with each other. Still, teachers were nearly two times more likely than students to report that student-teacher relationships had grown more negative. Thirty percent of teachers described those relationships as more negative but only 17 percent of students did so.

### How, if at all, have your relationships with your teachers [your students] changed since January 2020?



Students' responses to this survey question differed based on the type of school they attended. Students attending a traditional public school or charter school had more negative views than those attending private schools. Roughly one-fifth of students in traditional public (18%) or charter (21%) high schools believed that their relationships with teachers had deteriorated. But only 11 percent of students in private schools saw the same erosion. A larger share of private school students (27%) reported that those relationships had grown more positive.

Overall, 67 percent of students saw no change in their relationships with kids at school. Thirty percent of LGBTQ students saw a decline in their relationships with other kids compared with 19 percent of heterosexual students.

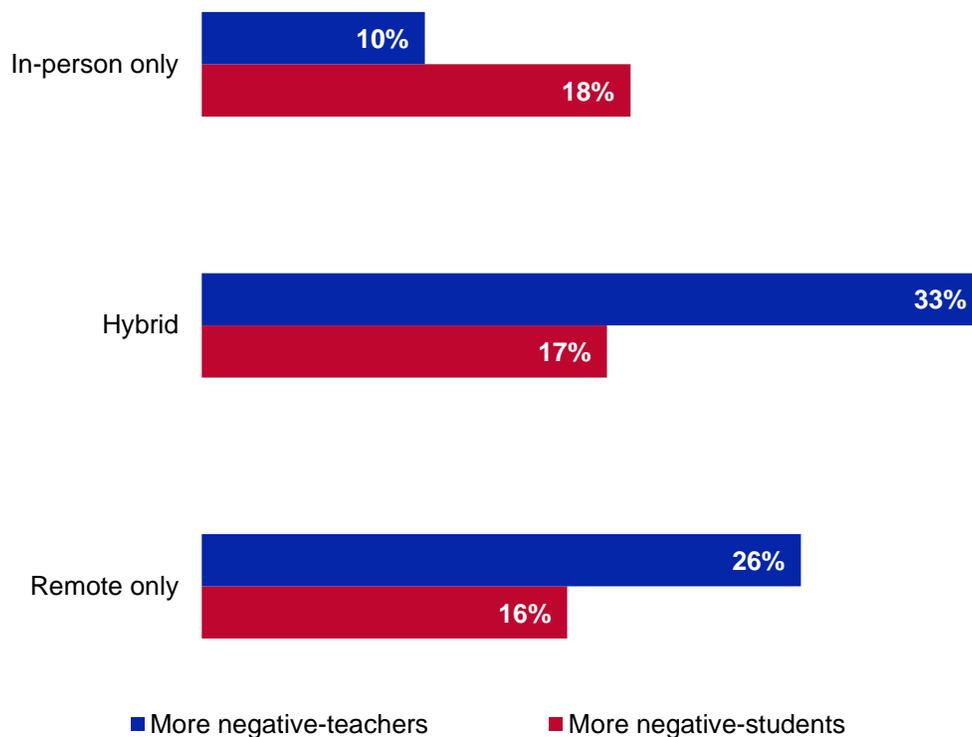
Teachers working in fully remote or hybrid instructional models reported worsening relationships with students more frequently than their peers in schools where all instruction was in-person. More than one-quarter (26%) of teachers in

remote-only settings and 33 percent in hybrid instruction saw relationships on the decline. But only 1 in 10 teachers working in-person all the time viewed it that way.

The same pattern did not hold true for students. The percentage of students perceiving more negative relationships with their teachers hovered between 16 and 18 percent regardless of the instructional model used at their schools.

Teachers in remote-only and hybrid settings were also more likely to say that relationships with students had gone downhill than students in those same settings, themselves. The gap between students and teachers was largest in hybrid models where instruction was delivered both remotely and in-person.

**How, if at all, have your relationships with your teachers [your students] changed since January 2020?**



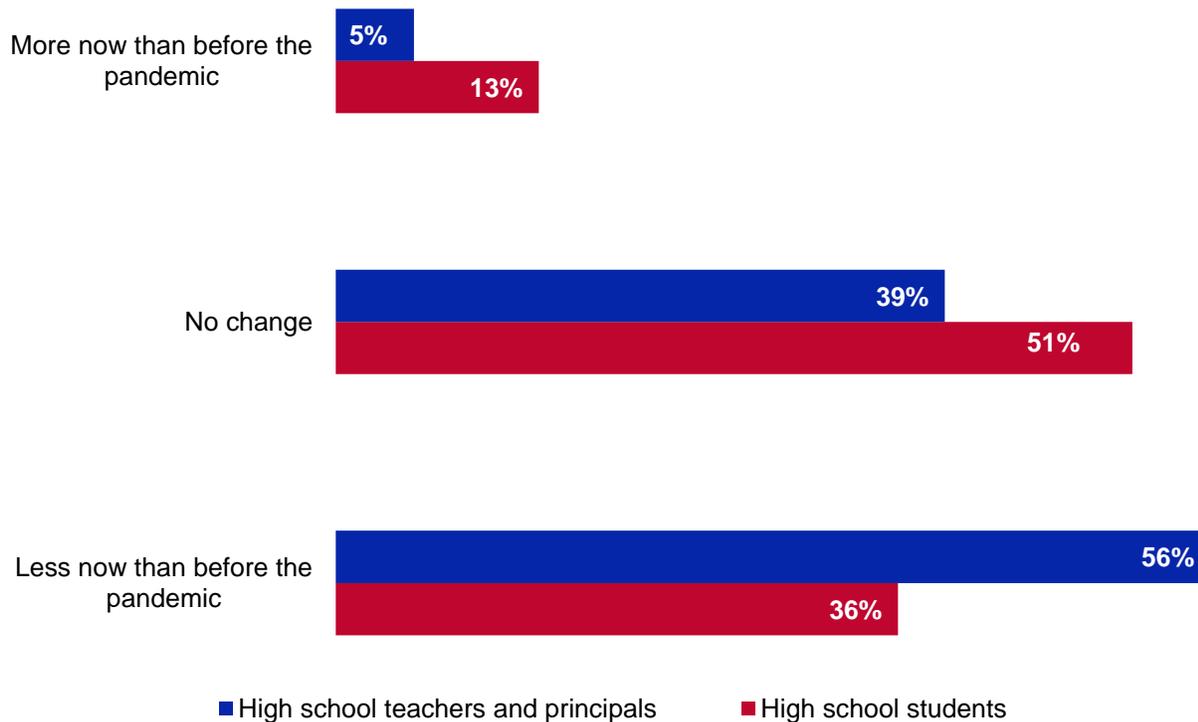
It's unclear from the survey results, alone, whether teachers' views were based on feedback they heard from their students or on their own sense that relationships were fading. The gaps between student and teacher survey responses suggest a potential need for more dialogue between these two groups, especially with remote learning.

Remote and hybrid instruction may not allow teachers to keep tabs on students' outlooks and mindsets in the ways they traditionally did when they could see students in-person in the classroom. If remote instruction continues to be widespread in the future, they may seek new methods to gauge their students' points of view.

## Changes in Bullying

Fifty-six percent of high school teachers and principals said that student bullying, harassment, and harsh teasing has decreased compared with prior to the pandemic. Only 36 percent of students agreed with that assessment. Most 9th-12th graders (51%) said that the amount of such behavior had not changed. Thirteen percent said it had increased, making students nearly three times more likely than educators to see an uptick.

**How if, at all, has the total amount of bullying, harassment, or harsh teasing that goes on among kids at my school/district — either in-person or via social media/internet/phone — changed since January 2020?**

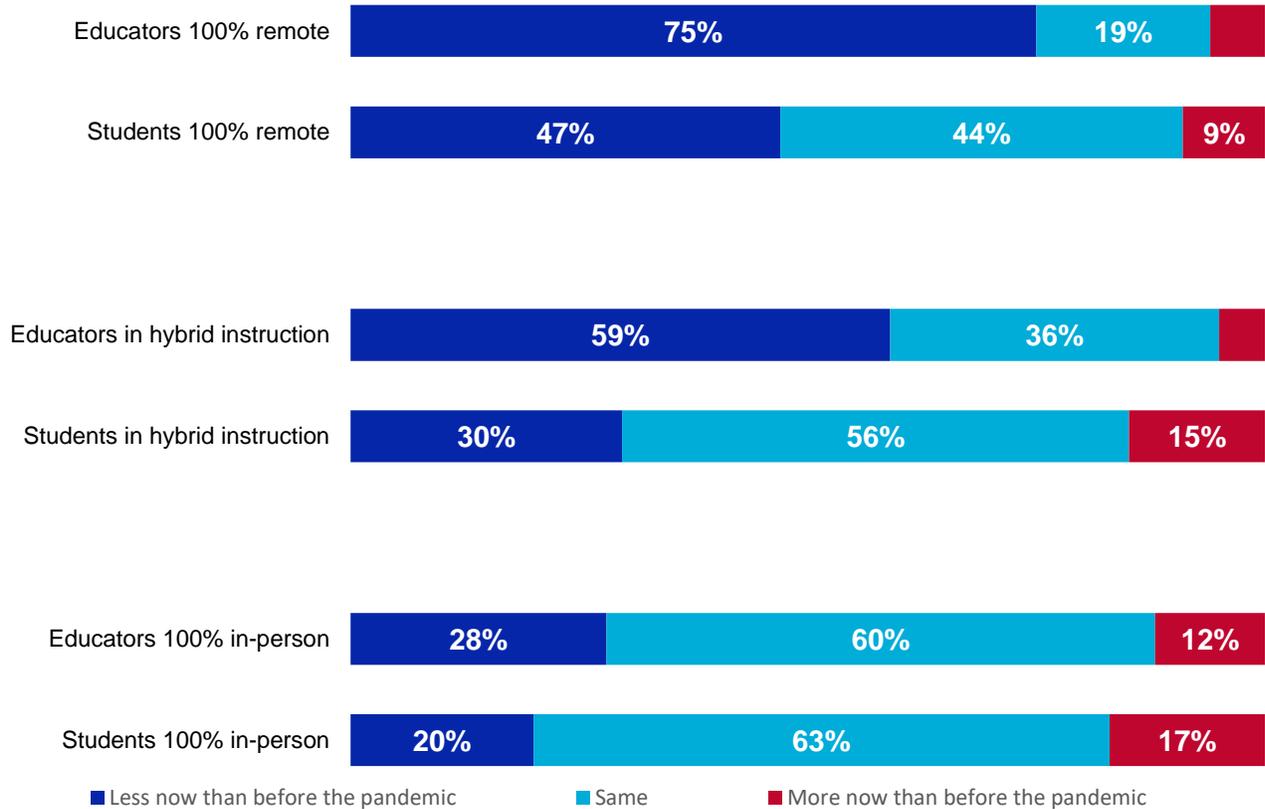


The gaps between student and educator perspectives on changes in bullying were larger for those participating in full-time remote instructional models than fully in-person learning.

Three-fourths of teachers, principals, and district leaders working in full-time remote districts said bullying has declined compared with just under half of students in 100 percent remote schools.

Unlike some other areas of the survey in which educators had a more negative outlook than students, educators had a rosier view of changes in bullying than students. Perhaps, some bullying occurs online and on social media platforms that educators aren't aware of rather than in class.

**How if, at all, has the total amount of bullying, harassment, or harsh teasing that goes on among kids at my school/district — either in-person or via social media/internet/phone — changed since January 2020?**



### Changes in Tiredness

Overall, more than 6 in 10 high school teachers found that students are more tired in class than before the pandemic but only about 3 in 10 students indicated their own level of tiredness increased. Forty percent of students saw no change and 31 percent noted they were less tired. Only 3 percent of teachers thought students were less tired.

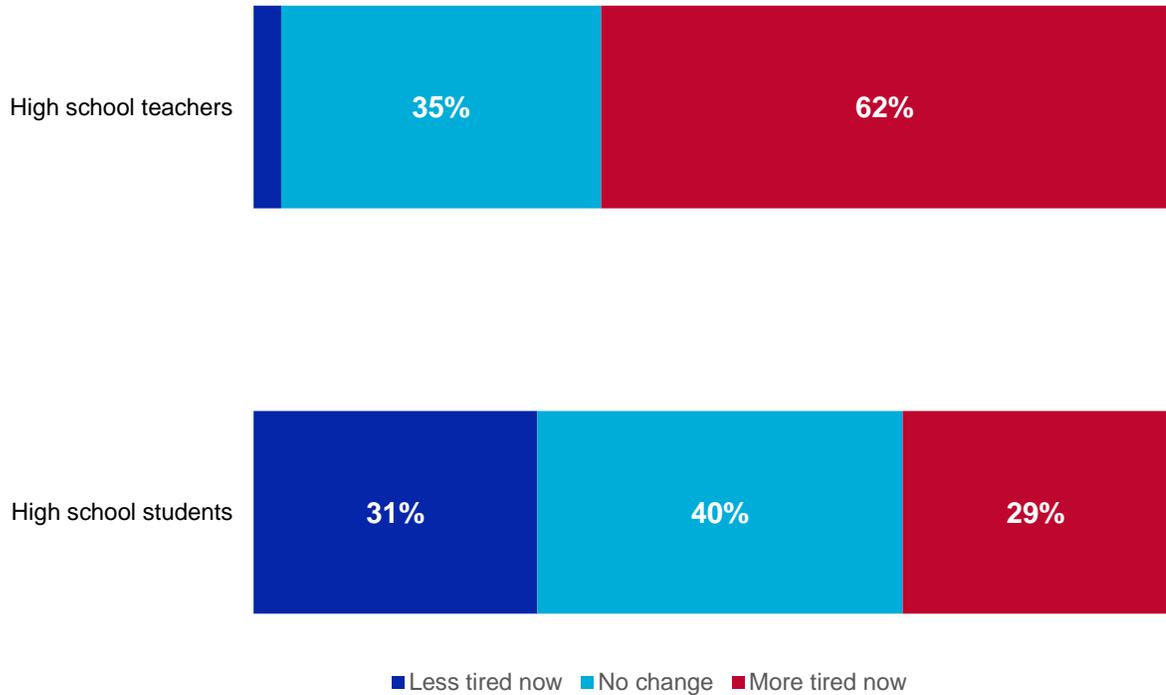
About 1 in 10 students reported that their sleep quality/quantity has not changed, but they feel more tired in class than before the pandemic.

Twelve percent said they got less/worse sleep and felt more tired in class than they did before the pandemic.

Students in fully remote or hybrid schools were slightly more likely than their peers attending school only in-person to say they get less sleep than before the pandemic.

Twenty-eight percent of students in full-time remote schools and one-quarter in hybrid schools reported less sleep compared with one-fifth at schools where all learning is in-person.

**How, if at all, has your [your students'] level of sleepiness or tiredness changed compared with before the pandemic?**



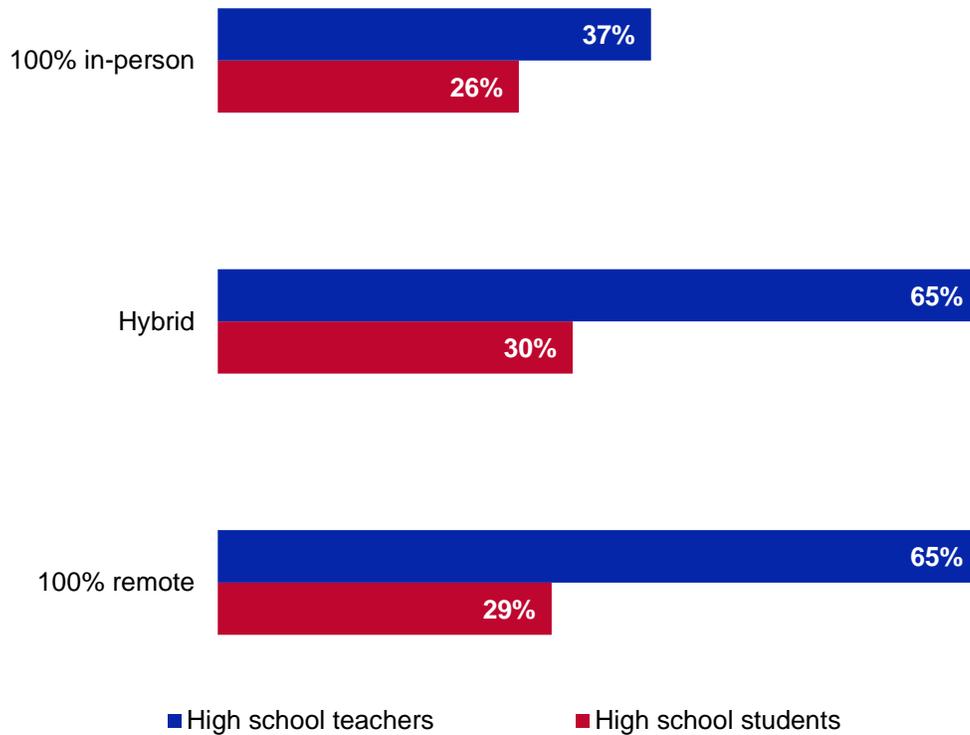
On the question of sleep and tiredness in class, some differences exist between students of various backgrounds.

- Thirty-seven percent of LGBTQ students indicated they were more tired than before the pandemic but just 27 percent of heterosexual students said the same.
- Twenty-eight percent of students who had qualified for free or reduced-price meals reported less sleep than before the pandemic compared to 22 percent of those who had qualified.
- Thirty-two percent of Latinx students and 29 percent of Black students indicated a reduction in sleep compared to 24 percent of Asian American and 21 percent of white students.
- Twenty-eight percent of female students and 24 percent of male students noted a decrease in sleep.
- Thirty-five percent of students attending charter schools and 27 percent in traditional public schools said they slept less but just 15 percent of private schoolers and 15 percent of homeschoolers said so.

Teachers working in fully remote and hybrid instruction were more than two times more likely to say students were more tired in class than students attending that type of school. Roughly two-thirds of teachers in those types of settings saw students as more tired compared with 3 in 10 students, themselves.

The gap wasn't as wide when instruction was only in-person. But differences in perceptions emerge even when students and teachers aren't learning virtually. Thirty-seven percent of teachers in fully in-person schools believed students were more tired but just 26 percent of students receiving only in-person instruction described themselves as more sleepy.

**My [my students'] level of sleepiness or tiredness is higher now than before the pandemic.**



**Mental Health Services**

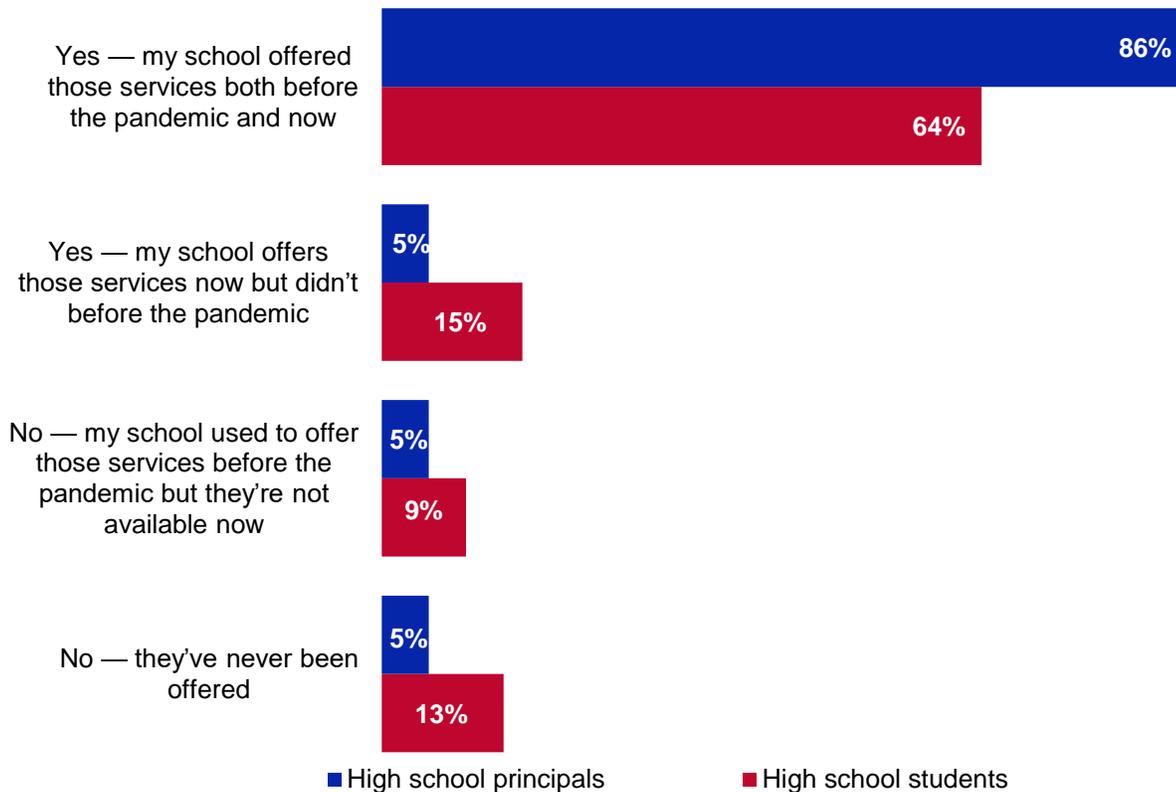
Eighty-six percent of high school principals said their schools offered mental health programs or services both before and during the pandemic. Only about two-thirds of high school students agreed. It's possible that students, in their daily lives, might be less aware of schoolwide mental health programs than principals tasked with supervising such services. Still, the survey results suggest a potential need to make students more aware of the programs and services that might be available to them.

Black (58%) and Latinx (61%) students were somewhat less likely than their Asian American (65%) and White (67%) peers to say that their schools made mental health services available both before and during the pandemic.

A slightly higher share of more affluent students (67%) reported their schools offered those services very early in the year and after the coronavirus emerged than their lower-income counterparts (62%).

More than 6 in 10 students in traditional public and charter schools indicated their schools provided services both before and after the pandemic but just 57 percent of students in private schools said the same.

**Does your school currently offer mental health programs or services like counseling to help students who are feeling upset, stressed, or having problems?**



## Conclusion

In a January 2021 EdWeek Research Center survey, 93 percent of high school teachers said their students are experiencing problems in school (either remote or in-person) more now than they did in January 2020. Winter 2021 survey results also show that a lower — but still sizeable — share of students (72 percent) reported they are having additional problems. Those numbers illustrate the main findings of this report. The pandemic is, for understandable reasons, causing students to face additional stress and significant challenges. Many are having additional problems in school, but they may not see the situation as negatively as their teachers.

On bullying, by contrast, educators had a rosier view than students. The majority of high school teachers and principals said that bullying has declined compared to before the pandemic. Only about one-third of students said the same.

Given that their schools abruptly shut down, their classes quickly shifted to remote learning, and extracurricular activities were discontinued, school has changed in almost unfathomable ways for many students. Educators will need to work to address the pandemic's impact. In doing so, it will be important for them to find the best ways to gauge how students are feeling in unfamiliar and difficult times in order to avoid overestimating or underestimating their challenges and difficulties.