



Meeting the Online Learning and Basic Needs of High School Students During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Introduction

At least 55 million students ended the 2019–2020 school year learning at home after approximately 124,000 public and private schools closed their doors due to the coronavirus.¹ More recently, only a little over a third of students were in the classroom five days a week, with the remainder learning entirely or partially at home.²

At the end of the 2020 academic year, ACT wanted to learn more about students' online learning experiences during the first several months of the pandemic. We sent an email in June to 130,000 students who had registered to participate in the April or June 2020 National administration of the ACT® test.³ A total of 7,800 students responded to the survey.⁴ Since so many students were learning remotely—most often, online—we asked students what they needed and wanted for that online learning to be successful. We also asked about other challenges they might be experiencing during the global pandemic.

Online Learning Needs

To understand whether students were getting what they needed to learn online, we asked them to indicate what resources (e.g., access to a teacher, clear and understandable educational materials) they needed for successful learning and then asked them whether they had access to those same resources (see Figure 1). By comparing the two indicators, we can gauge whether there were gaps in the delivery of online learning at the end of the 2019–2020 school year.

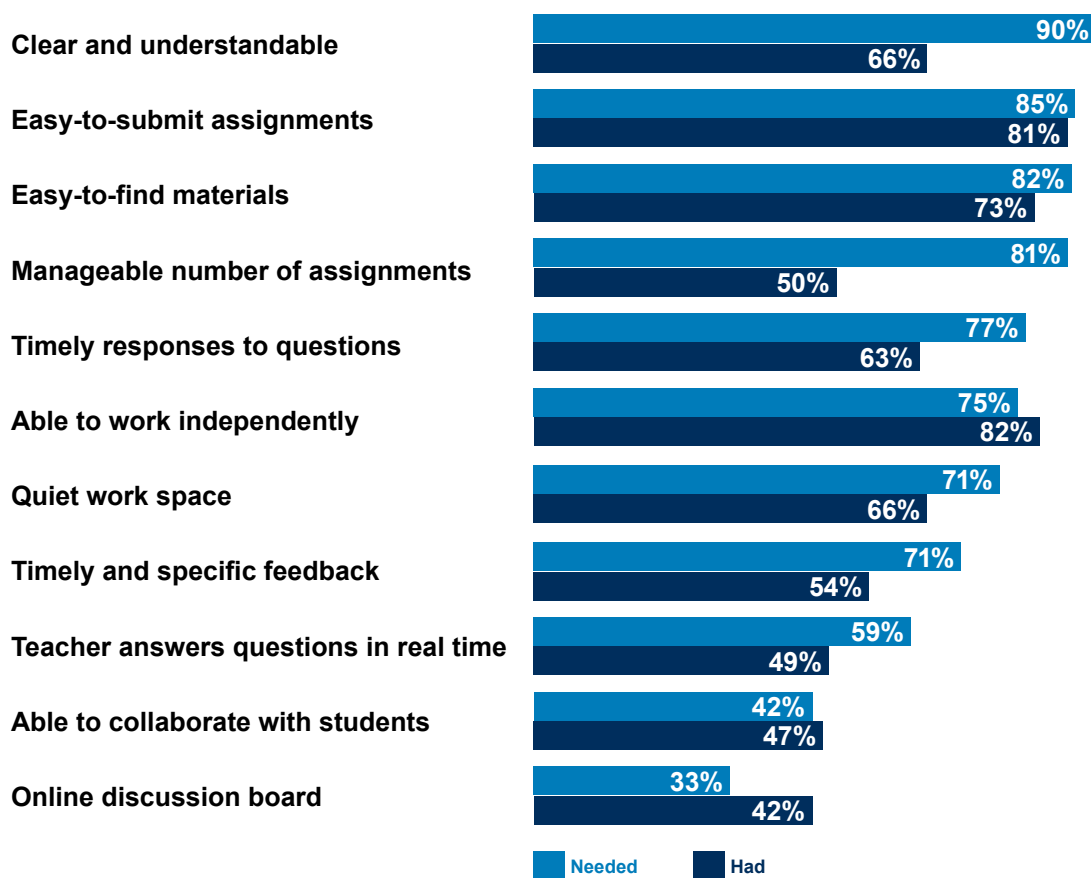
At least three out of four students reported that they needed support related to resource management and assignment completion to be successful in online learning. These were the top five supports:

- 1 Clear and understandable materials (90%)
- 2 Easy-to-submit assignments (85%)
- 3 Easy-to-find materials (82%)
- 4 Manageable number of assignments (81%)
- 5 Timely responses to questions (77%)



Unfortunately, these were also the areas with some of the largest gaps between what students needed and what they received, especially regarding receiving clear and understandable materials (66% received versus 90% needed), a manageable number of assignments (50% received versus 81% needed), and timely responses to questions (63% received versus 77% needed). The fact that students were not always receiving timely responses from teachers might have contributed to the students identifying a lack of clear and understandable materials and also feeling that they were assigned an unmanageable amount of work. If students cannot easily connect with their teachers regarding assignments and the materials provided, then these additional issues are likely to have a compounded effect on students' learning experiences.

Figure 1. Percentages of Students Reporting the Need for Specific Supports for Online Learning and Receiving Them



We also asked students to tell us in their own words how learning remotely was different from in-person learning, if at all.⁵ Their comments often mirrored the needs addressed above. For example, a student described the experience of struggling to have questions answered while learning remotely:

Learning at home is different from school, and [the two] have totally different atmospheres. At home your parents may or may not know the answer to a homework question, but at school your teacher does and can help you out.”

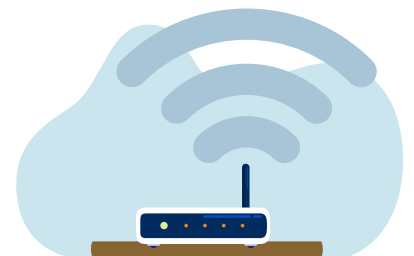
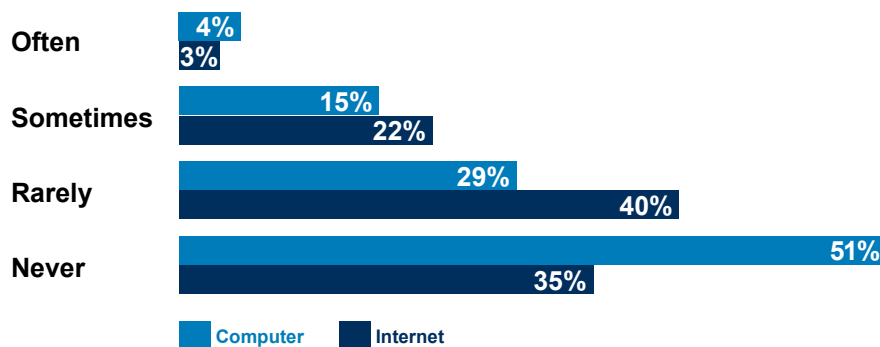
Another student articulated this issue in terms of balancing competing needs and schedules:

With the pandemic, I was scheduled to work more. Six or 7 days every week. Managing schoolwork was hard. Especially when I attempted to do it in my free time, but my teacher wasn't free to answer my question at the time.”

A few students indicated that reaching out to ask questions of teachers was easier during remote learning. For example, one student said, “To be honest, learning at home allows me to work with my teachers more one-on-one. For example, when I need further help, it's easier to reach out to them.”

Additionally, many students reported struggling to complete classwork because of technology issues, particularly unreliable internet connections. Students were asked how often they were unable to complete classwork because of their internet connection, and only 35% reported “never,” whereas one quarter said this happened “often” (3%) or “sometimes” (22%) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of Students, by Learning Format, Who Agreed or Disagreed That Their School Could Effectively Help Students Experiencing Mental Health Issues



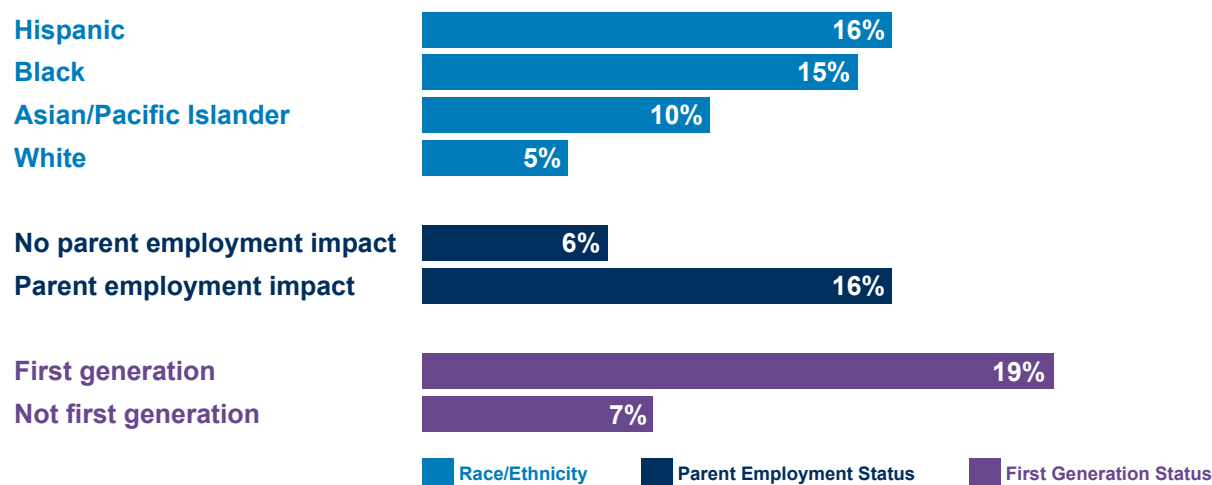
Basic Needs

As we explained in our analysis of March student survey data, a student's ability to learn is negatively affected by various stressors in their lives, including not having their basic needs met.⁶ To investigate this further, we asked students again in June whether certain basic needs—specifically, food and mental health support—were being met during the pandemic.

A total of 15% of our survey respondents indicated that during the pandemic, they worried that their food would run out before they or their family got enough money to buy more.

Approximately 8% of all students indicated that this was a new worry brought on by the pandemic.⁷ As we might expect, this varied by race/ethnicity, parental education level, and whether the pandemic had negatively impacted parental employment (see Figure 3). Hispanic, Black, and first-generation students were more likely to worry for the first time about paying for food at the start of the pandemic, relative to their non-first-generation and White counterparts. Additionally, worrying about having money to pay for food was new to 16% of those students whose parents had their employment status impacted by the pandemic.

Figure 3. Percentage of June Respondents by Subgroup Reporting That They Began Worrying About Having Enough Money to Buy Food for the First Time at the Start of the Pandemic



Regarding mental health supports, exactly half of responding students said that their school had communicated the availability of mental health services. Students in rural areas (41%) were less likely to report communication from their school regarding mental health services than students in urban (53%) and suburban (55%) areas. Two thirds of students (66%) reported that an adult from their school had reached out to see how they were doing. Black students (74%) were more likely to say that someone had reached out than White students (66%).



Recommendations

- 1** Support teachers in maintaining open communication with students. State and local education agencies should prioritize technology and professional development that provide teachers with the tools to quickly and effectively respond to student questions and concerns. At the same time, it is vital to ensure that teachers are able to maintain a work-life balance to avoid burnout. Principals should model and prioritize responsiveness from teachers and make sure teachers have the supports they need to educate and connect with their students successfully.
- 2** Ensure all students have reliable internet and devices. It has been stated over and over, including by ACT, that to succeed in remote learning (and in the broader digital economy), students absolutely need reliable access to internet and devices—particularly students from low-income families and other students who may not have had such access before the pandemic.⁸ Federal policymakers should expand the E-Rate subsidy to cover students' home internet, but state and local policymakers can also subsidize internet access, and education agencies can partner with communications and technology firms to ensure that every student has equitable access to virtual learning.⁹
- 3** Ensure all students have access to healthy food. ACT encourages the U.S. Department of Agriculture to continue and expand waivers for certain aspects of child nutrition programs (e.g., school lunch) that encourage innovation in food provision at the state and local level and ensure that students who would not otherwise have their nutritional needs met during virtual learning can easily access healthy food.¹⁰
- 4** Provide and communicate opportunities for students to access mental health services. Policymakers should ensure school counselors have the capacity and resources available to offer virtual counseling services. All school staff should be given appropriate professional development related to mental health and be encouraged to reach out to students (and their families) to check in on their mental health status and how they are faring in a highly unusual education environment.¹¹



Notes

1. As of April 20, 2020; see “Map: Coronavirus and School Closures in 2019–2020,” Education Week, March 6, 2020, last modified September 17, 2020, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures-in-2019-2020/2020/03>.
2. Christine Vestal, “Pressure Grows to Reopen Schools, But Fears Persist,” Stateline, February 3, 2021, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2021/02/03/pressure-grows-to-reopen-schools-but-fears-persist>.
3. Students were initially sent an email to participate in the online survey June 10, 2020. The survey closed June 22, 2020. While we have previously administered surveys both online and through mail, in order to turn around results as quickly as possible, we administered these surveys online only.
4. Students had to answer at least 50% of the survey to be considered a respondent. Students who responded to the survey were more inclined to be White and female. These characteristics were not adjusted in the study, so generalizing the results to all ACT registered test takers should be taken with caution. A total of 5.2% of students who were sent the survey completed it. A total of 70% of respondents were female, 12% would be first-generation college students, 57% were White, 16% were Hispanic, 10% were Asian, and 7% were Black.
5. Student responses have been lightly edited for readability.
6. Michelle Croft, Rael Moore, Gretchen Guffy, Shannon Hayes, Katie Gragnaniello, and Dan Vitale, High School Students’ Experiences in March During the Coronavirus Pandemic (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1841-covid-insights.pdf>.
7. Students were asked to first indicate whether they ever worried about not paying for food before the pandemic, and then they were asked to indicate whether they had had this worry during the last three months during the pandemic. A comparison of these two items was used to calculate those students who were new to worrying about paying for food because of the pandemic.
8. ACT, “Inequities in Technological Devices and Internet Connection Persist During the Coronavirus,” April 20, 2020, <https://leadershipblog.act.org/2020/04/inequities-in-tech-coronavirus.html>.
9. See, for example, Ryan Johnston, “For Students Without Home Internet During Pandemic, Could FCC’s E-Rate Help?” StateScoop, August 19, 2020, <https://statescoop.com/home-internet-pandemic-fcc-erate-expansion/>.
10. “Child Nutrition COVID-19 Waivers,” USDA Food and Nutrition Service, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/programs/fns-disaster-assistance/fns-responds-covid-19/child-nutrition-covid-19-waivers>.
11. See “ASCA Toolkit: Virtual High School Counseling,” American School Counselor Association, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Publications-Research/Publications/Free-ASCA-Resources/COVID-19-Resources/Virtual-High-School-Counseling>.





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