



Ask Me What's Up

Executive Summary

September 2020

Project Leader: Foundation For The Carolinas
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ASK ME WHAT'S UP!

A Student Mental Health Initiative



About the Report

Nationally, seventy percent of students ages 13-17 say anxiety and depression are major problems among their peers. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among children from ages 12-17. Ask Me What's Up was designed as the first phase of a community initiative aimed at shining a light on this growing mental health epidemic facing too many students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. During the fall and early winter of 2019, a team of trained facilitators led over 40 conversations with 600+ students, parents, teachers and counselors in nine public and private schools to gain their perspectives on stress, anxiety and other mental health issues students are experiencing. These conversations also helped uncover how students, parents and teachers are coping with these challenges and identify steps participants suggest could be taken to improve student wellbeing. Focus groups with teens were also held in early summer 2020 to hear how COVID-19 has compounded issues around student wellbeing. This report summarizes the findings of these conversations across all nine schools and will be used to help frame the next phase of the work designed to:

- **Create a sense of urgency and caring within the community** about the importance of tackling the social and emotional wellbeing of our students.
- **Reduce the stigma associated with mental health** among students, parents, teachers, principals and others in the lives of children so that conversations about the topic and seeking help when needed become normalized.
- **Raise awareness of the early signs** of students experiencing social emotional pain/distress, isolation, isolation, substance abuse disorder, and/or suicide ideation and how to effectively respond and connect to quality support.
- **Reduce the incidence of suicide** and suicide ideation among students.
- **Promote improvements in overall wellbeing**, kindness and respect for one another.
- **Build support for and commitment to** expand and invest in efforts to improve access to quality and affordable behavioral health services and support for children and adolescents in our community.

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Methods: Participants, Procedures & Analytical Process

Participants

	Middle Schools			High Schools			Total
	Title 1 2 Schools	Non-Title 1 2 Schools	Total MS 4 schools	Title 1 2 Schools	Non-Title 1 3 Schools	Total HS 5 Schools	Total 9 Schools
Focus Groups	8	10	18	8	15	23	41
Total Participants	110	213	323	172	220	392	715
Student Sessions	6 groups 84 students	6 groups 146 students	12 groups 230 students	6 groups 150 students	10 groups 146 students	16 groups 296 students	28 groups 526 students
Teacher Sessions	2 groups 26 teachers	2 groups 35 teachers	4 groups 61 teachers	2 groups 22 teachers	2 groups 36 teachers	4 groups 58 teachers	8 groups 119 teachers
Parent Sessions	N/A	2 groups 32 parents	2 groups 32 parents	N/A	3 groups 38 parents	3 groups 38 parents	5 groups 70 parents

Procedure

1 Facilitator/1 Scribe

Session Outline:

1. Introductions
2. What words come to mind: What is mental health? What is mental illness?
3. Individual responses using easel paper and sticky notes
 - What makes you feel stressed/anxious?
 - What do you do when you feel stressed/anxious?
 - Who do you talk to when you're stressed/anxious?
 - What would help when you feel stressed/anxious?
 - What gets in the way of talking to [parents/teachers/counselors/peers]?
 - Can you talk to your parents/caregivers about stress, sadness or anxiety? (Yes/Sometimes/No)
 - Can you talk to your teachers/counselors about stress, sadness or anxiety? (Yes/Sometimes/No)
4. Gallery walk
5. Group discussion: Observations, themes, and potential solutions

Scribes typed and submitted notes on the session

Analytical Process

Thematic Content Analysis process

- Three coders reviewed transcripts by school
- Quantitatively categorized responses to certain items
 - Proportion/percent of students
 - Proportion/percent of responses
- Examined trend salience across schools and focus group
- Disaggregated results based on Title 1 status and school level (middle vs. high)

Sources of Stress Among Youth



Academics

- Homework
- School Culture/Policy
- College Pressure
- Teachers



Home Life

- Family/Parenting Issues
- Basic Needs
- Home Environment



Cultural Needs

- Language Barriers of Latinx Youth
- Immigration



Non-Academic Activities

- Extracurriculars
- Employment
- Time Management



Intrapersonal

- Lacking Communication Skills
- Low Self-Esteem
- Other Internal Challenges



Social Media

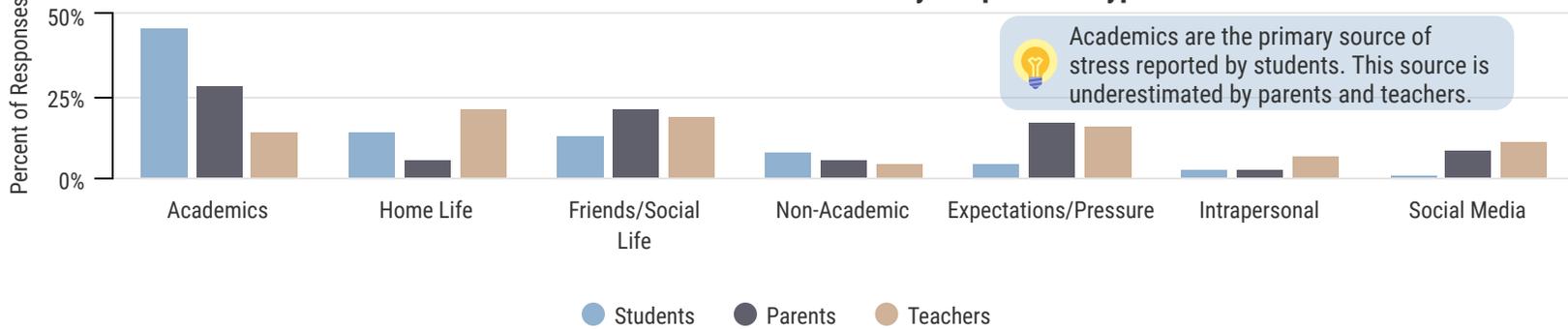


Friends/Social Life

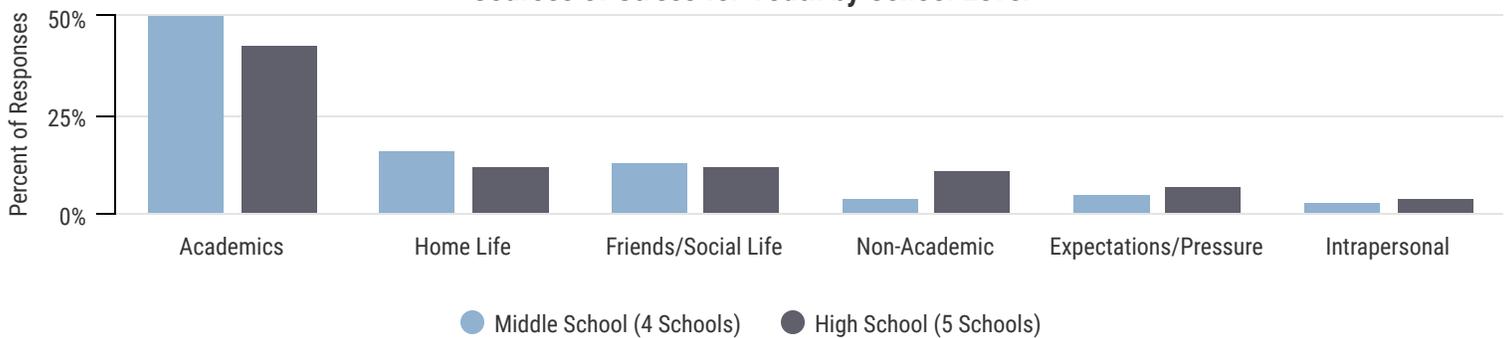


General Expectations/Pressure

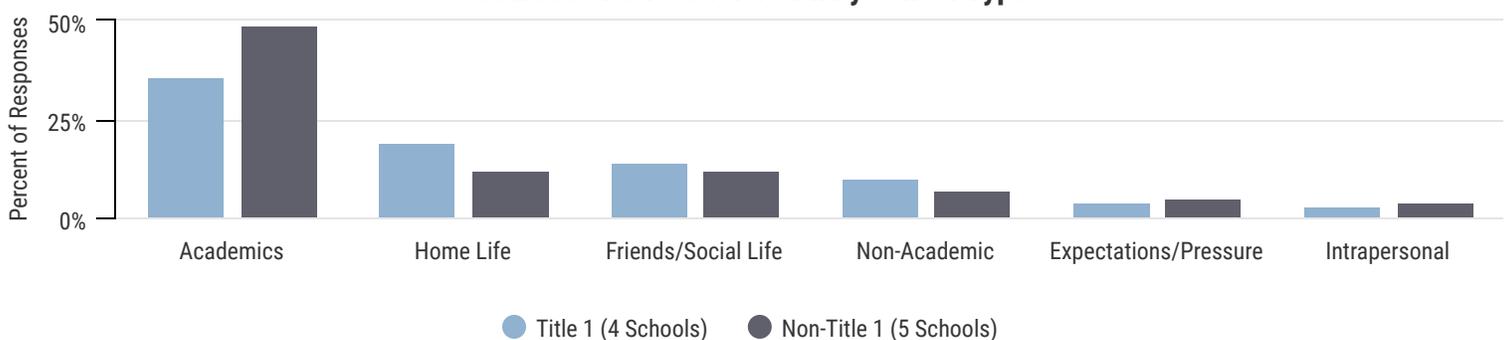
Perceived Sources of Stress for Youth by Respondent Type



Sources of Stress for Youth by School Level



Sources of Stress for Youth by School Type



Stress Management Among Youth



Tools of Distraction

- Youth are turning to their technology for an escape from everyday stressors
 - Netflix
 - Music
 - Video Games



Extra-Curricular Activities

- Across schools, youth engaged in prosocial, extracurricular activities to relieve stress
 - Sports/Athletics/Exercise
 - Arts & Personal Hobbies
 - Journaling



Technology & Social Media

- Technology and social media were viewed as a stressor by many teachers and parents, but noted as a prominent coping mechanism among students



Self-Reliance

- Problem solving and active coping strategies
- Self-isolation and "holding in" negative emotions
 - Sleep & Food
 - Substance Use



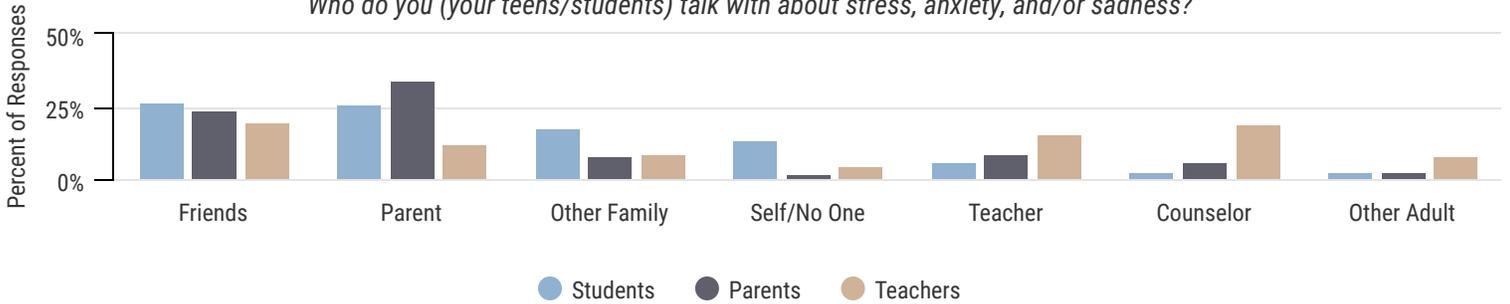
Technology and social media can be useful tools to reach youth and provide them with support.



"I usually just hold my emotions in because honestly no one will understand or can help." - High School Student

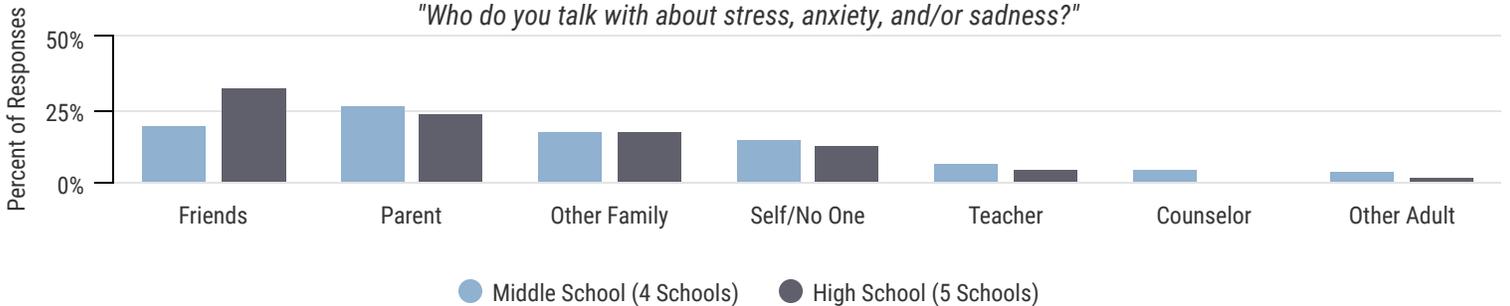
Perceived Sources of Support for Youth by Respondent Type

"Who do you (your teens/students) talk with about stress, anxiety, and/or sadness?"



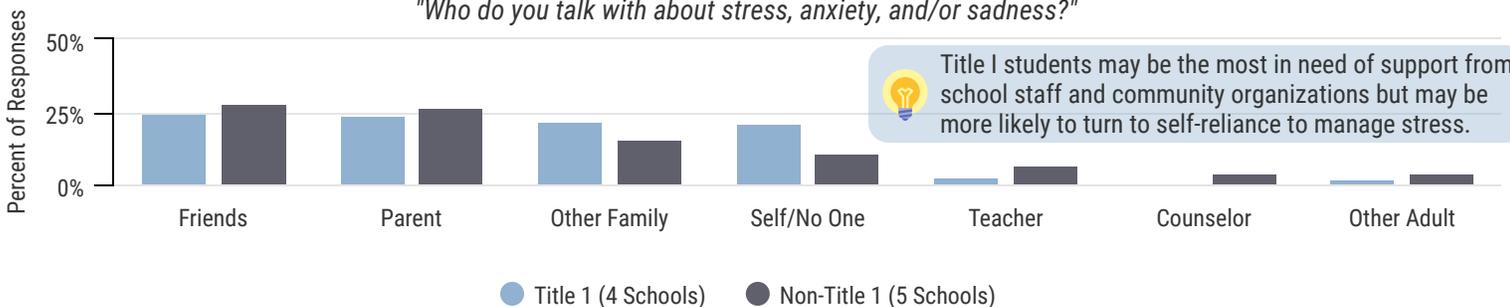
Sources of Support for Youth by School Level

"Who do you talk with about stress, anxiety, and/or sadness?"



Sources of Support for Youth by School Type

"Who do you talk with about stress, anxiety, and/or sadness?"



Title I students may be the most in need of support from school staff and community organizations but may be more likely to turn to self-reliance to manage stress.

"I feel more comfortable talking with my friends than actual family members or anyone else." - High School Student

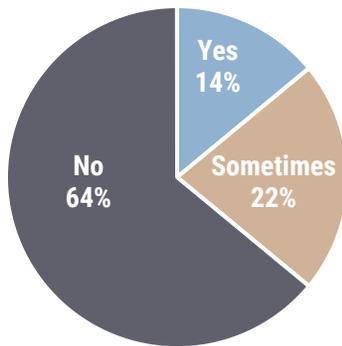
Barriers to Help-Seeking



Within the School Setting

"Can you talk to your teachers/counselors about stress, anxiety, and/or sadness?"

Percent of Students



Confidentiality Concerns

- Students, parents and teachers expressed concern that information shared by students is not kept confidential, preventing students from sharing or seeking help
- Students fear being labeled for seeking help



Fear of Escalation

- Many youth perceived that if they talk about their stress with a counselor or teacher, their concern would be misunderstood, they would get into trouble, or the problem would escalate
- On the other hand, students seem to be doubtful that there's anything adults could do to fix their problem



Lack of Trust & Familiarity

- Students are unaware of who their assigned counselor is and where to find them
- Counselors and teachers report a lack of trust or familiarity between school staff



Teacher Centered Challenges

- Limited staff training
- Lack of time
- Staffing issues
- Teacher fatigue/burnout



Liability Concerns

- Teachers report avoiding inquiring about sensitive topics with students due to fears of overstepping assumed legal or school policy boundaries and facing punishment



Cultural Barriers

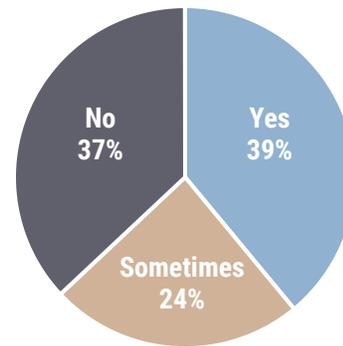
- Language barrier
- Adolescent culture



Among Family

"Can you talk to your parents/caregivers about stress, anxiety, and/or sadness?"

Percent of Students



Confidentiality Concerns

- Students expressed concern that information shared with their parents would be shared with their school or peers



Burden

- Youth reported worrying about adding to their parents' stress level by sharing their own stressors



Lack of Response

- Youth reported not being believed or taken seriously by their parents



Fear of Discipline

- Students reported being afraid of experiencing punishment as a result of sharing stressors



Embarrassment

- Parents expressed feelings of embarrassment when discussing sensitive topics with their child



Fear of Judgement

- Parents expressed concern over their family being labeled for seeking help



Lack of Time

- Parents report limited time to speak to their child due to other commitments like homework or sports, as well as a lack of energy to have difficult conversations because of their busy schedules



Among Peers



Lack of Familiarity

- Some students expressed that they did not know their peers well enough to be able to confide in them about their stress



Lack of Understanding

- Some youth reported worrying that their problems wouldn't be taken seriously by their peers



Fear of Response/Stigma

- Youth reported fears of being bullied or misunderstood if they shared stressors, a fear echoed by parents

"A mental health diagnosis can lead to jail or institutions." - High School Student

"Kids need to feel that reporting will lead to getting proper help without getting into trouble." - High School Teacher

Participant Recommendations

Training & Resources



For Teachers



Ongoing Training Focused on:

- Relationship Building
- Understanding and Eliminating Biases
- Understanding Mental Health & Identifying Issues Among Students



Increased Opportunities for:

- Self-Care Practices
- Group Support Sessions with Other Teachers
- Collaboration Among Teachers to Address Student Issues



Increased Understanding of How to Utilize School Resources and Referral Sources

"Teachers need proper education knowing the signs, knowing correct vocabulary in terms of addressing an issue, and being able to communicate well with students."

- High School Teacher



Ongoing Training Focused on:

- Improving Supportive Parenting Skills
- Understanding Mental Health
- Practical, Age-Specific Tools & Tips



Increased Opportunities for:

- Accessing Therapeutic and Social Services
- Group Support Sessions with Other Parents
- Communication with the School



For Parents



Increased Understanding of How to Utilize School Resources and Referral Sources

"Parents want to know more about school-based and community resources."

- Middle School Teacher



For Students



Peer/Mentor-Based Supports



Student Mental Health Training

"Talking to another person, an adult or friend, who's going through the same thing and can relate."

- Middle School Student

"Teachers need to learn how to make their classes safe spaces, so students feel comfortable sharing."

- High School Teacher

Participant Recommendations

School Changes & Support Networks



Open Door Culture

- Conversations around mental health encouraged and supported
- Advice Hotlines for students and parents
- Time for breaks to catch up, take a moment to breathe, or get help



Health Education

- Group assemblies designed to educate about mental health and related topics
- Ongoing small student group discussions
- Designated time for intentional conversations on mental health



Open Door Spaces

- Private, designated setting to access tools and share concerns
- Designated space for releasing stress
- A 'Mental Health Services Center' or a Media Resource Center



Alternative Class Offerings

- More offerings for hands-on classes, such as shop class
- Opportunities for alternative educational paths for students
- Study hall to provide more time to catch up



Modified Schedules & Workloads

- Later start times or early release days
- More 4-day weeks or designated "catch up" days
- Designated "homework free" nights or weekends
- Weeknights free of sports or extracurriculars



School-Based Activities

- Opportunities for community engagement and volunteerism
- Increased number of school events to help relieve stress



Mindfulness Strategies

- Designated spaces for yoga or meditation
- Education on and time for meditation tools and strategies



Prosocial Activities

- Student groups and clubs designed to improve relationships and connection
- Activities to develop new peer groups



Creating a Network of Accessible Supports



Increased Access to School-Based Counseling & Treatment Services

- Improved counselor to student ratio
- More trained staff in schools available to address mental health issues
- Increased opportunities for students to meet counselors
- Counseling services available free of charge
- Issue-specific (ex: divorce) small group support sessions



Shared Expectations for Parents, Teachers, & Students

- Increased trust among students towards parents and teachers to feel more comfortable discussing mental health issues
- Improved education and vocalized support for teachers to reduce concerns of legal repercussions
- Clearly defined roles and expectations for students, parents, and teachers in addressing the topic of mental health



Shared Community Responsibility & Improved External Support

- Increased and consistent engagement of external organizations providing various services (for example, mental health education, counseling, social services) within the school

"Students need a climate/culture in which this type of conversation is supported... They will need to feel as though a comfortable space has been created for them to express and be heard."- Middle School Teacher

Participant Recommendations

Early Prevention & Intervention

Why Should We Start the Conversation Around Mental Health Earlier?



Addressing social-emotional needs earlier can reduce challenges for students and teachers later



By normalizing conversations about mental health early, you can reduce perceptions of stigma around mental health later in life



Teaching students early that it is okay to ask for help and help is available will prepare them to use their resources effectively

"(What's needed is) time within the curriculum and standards pressuring (teachers) to talk about this (mental health); training on how to handle those conversations."

- High School Teacher

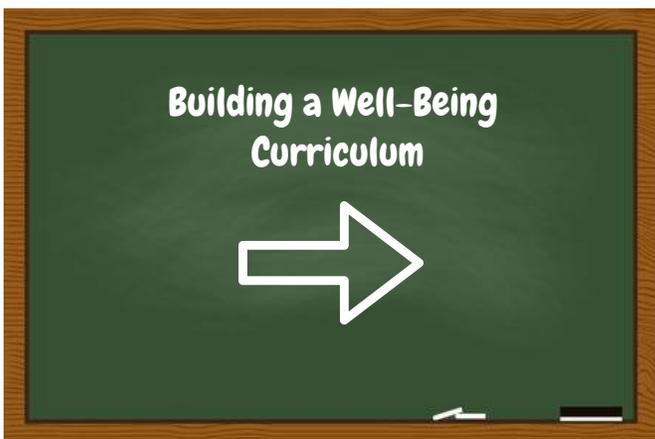
Top 5 Responses by Group

"What do you think of when you hear Mental Health?"

Middle School Students	High School Students	Teachers	Parents
Mental	Depression	Stigma	Depression
Depressed	Anxiety	Depression	Anxiety
Anxiety	Stress	Crazy	Mental
People	Mental	Health	Disorder
Crazy	Suicide	Struggle	Awareness



As early as middle school, self-reliance is a prominent coping mechanism among students and stigmatizing associations have been made to mental health challenges, highlighting the need for early prevention and education.



- ✓ Clear standards, guidelines, and policies for a mental health curriculum
- ✓ Emphasis on relationship building and stress management over symptoms, risk factors, and negative outcomes
- ✓ Time and support for teachers to connect with students
- ✓ Purposeful implementation of strategies to enhance school culture and connectedness

"We've lost the concept of what school is... Our job is to educate. (We need to) provide time and space for families but not impede on education time. Provide mental health support along with education, not instead of it."

- High School Teacher

Counselors Debrief & Focus Group

□ Initial findings from the first round of student focus groups were shared with 20 CMS school counselors and social workers through a Zoom-based presentation on May 1, 2020. Eight counselors/social workers participated in a subsequent focus group to respond to findings on May 22, 2020. Common themes from these sessions can be found below.

Common Themes



Confidentiality & Trust for Parents & Students

- ✓ Concerns over student and parent confidentiality were echoed by counselors
- ✓ Counselors reported limited opportunities to build relationships and trust with students and parents



Prevention over Reaction

- ✓ *"More proactive work with parents and students than reactive responses."*



Universal Mental Health Education

- ✓ *"[Students and parents need] education of what would happen [if they came for help] and a realistic timeline of support."*
- ✓ *"Parent reassurance that mental health concerns are not a failure on the part of the student or the parent! Parents fear that something is "wrong" with them or their child."*
- ✓ *"Counselor training to support students whose mental health issues go beyond general counseling issues. Ideally, professionals who are more qualified to address those more serious issues."*
- ✓ *"Parent education surrounding various mental health concerns for adolescents."*
- ✓ *"Counselors staying up-to-date with practice/research and training relevant to current times we are in."*



Defined Roles & Responsibilities

- ✓ *"More clearly defined counselor roles and more protected time to talk with students - Give us assistance with non-counseling tasks and let counselors focus on counseling."*
- ✓ *"A better counselor/student ratio so our focus can be on mental health and not on extra responsibilities or administrative tasks."*
- ✓ *"It is frustrating to know a student needs me but I have to stand in the cafeteria for 30 minutes."*



Accessible Services & Supports for Families

- ✓ *"Educational resources to hand out at programs and in our offices, more no cost therapy options, easier process to handle moderate to high risk suicide assessments to community resources."*
- ✓ *"More available resources they can access. Parents are not supportive towards mental health counseling due to cost."*



Areas for Further Exploration:

- What is a healthy counselor caseload?
- What should and should not be within the comprehensive responsibilities of counselors?
- What are the experiences of counselors working directly with students, parents, and administrators?
- What are student, parent, and administrator's expectations around confidentiality and how is confidentiality broken?

"I wish there were boundaries regarding the way others talk to us. Parents and caregivers will fight for their kids, but in the process they can hurt a counselor." - School Counselor

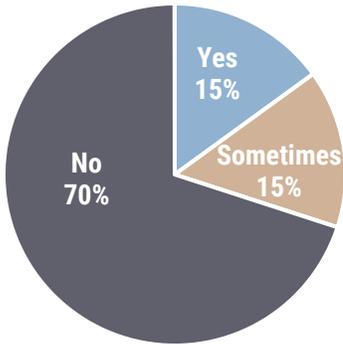
COVID-19 Student Focus Groups

□ In June 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, two focus groups were held for 40 total students currently connected to intact student groups, Teen Health Connection's Teen Advisory Board and Generation Nation. Conducted over a virtual platform, students responded to prompts that mirrored earlier focus groups and open-ended discussion was encouraged. Data from these focus groups can be found below.



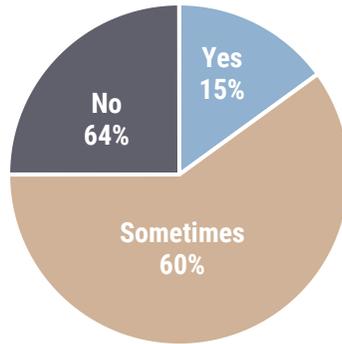
Within the School Setting

"Can you talk to your counselors about stress, anxiety, and/or sadness?"
Percent of Students



💡 In the COVID-19 environment, **95%** of students perceived school-based counselors as accessible but above data indicates many don't feel comfortable talking to them.

"Can you talk to your teachers about stress, anxiety, and/or sadness?"
Percent of Students

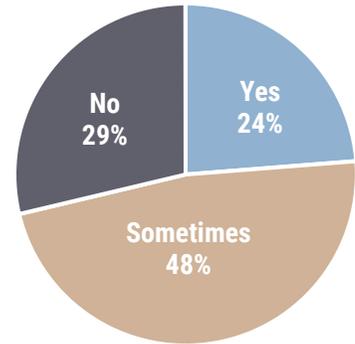


💡 In light of COVID-19 and remote learning, teachers may provide a new source of connection to students who are more isolated from other forms of social support (e.g., friends, coaches).



Among Family

"Can you talk to your parents/caregivers about stress, anxiety, and/or sadness?"
Percent of Students



💡 Parents are and continue to be a primary source of support for many students. Some parents may require additional skill building to develop these relationships.

Sources of Stress



College Admissions

"Applying to college is extremely stressful... I'm not able to do my extracurricular activities which are needed for applications... It puts a lot of pressure on perfecting your essay."



COVID Exposure

"The amount of kids inside the building, seating arrangements, and how students' education will be affected... We may still get COVID no matter what they do."



Missed Milestones

"I am afraid we will not be able to return. It is my senior year and I don't want to miss out on all the things I've worked so hard to get to."



Remote vs In-Person Learning

"With school being online it is changing the learning strategies that I am used to using."



Masks

"I don't know how I will be able to learn with a mask on my face."



Social Impact

"I am not friends with certain people anymore."



Ambiguity

"It is very unclear and that leads to stress. With COVID having potential to impact so much, it can be overwhelming."



Employment

"Getting a job is hard. Along with connecting with friends, dating, and even connecting with strangers."



Positive Implications

"I'm getting time to self reflect which has been really helpful to me."

Suggestions from Teens

- ✓ Links to anonymous support
- ✓ "Keep me motivated"
- ✓ Re-examine academic rigor and requirements
- ✓ Create ways to "listen" to the needs of student individually or in groups
- ✓ Non-academic groups to stay connected to

💡 Focus groups were performed with intact student groups and this source of connection outside of the family, virtual classroom, and immediate friend groups was perceived as useful. As a result, these teens may have been more connected to resources and stress-relieving activities that youth participating in the AMWU focus groups held in the fall of 2019.

"I'm worried about not being able to see my counselor and teachers in person because I have issues with my parents and it will be extremely difficult to not have the escape and be able to work through my problems in person." - High School Student 10