Teens Dissatisfied with Virtual School

New study finds that teens in virtual classes are less satisfied with their school experience, but are no more likely to be depressed

As middle and high schools around the United States open again after pandemic closures, teens might actually be looking forward to getting back into classrooms full-time.

In a national survey of U.S. teens and parents in Fall 2020 sponsored by the Wheatley Institution, teens attending school virtually with a live component (37%), virtually asynchronously (38%), or attending in person on a part-time basis (38%) were more likely to be dissatisfied with their school experience than those attending school full-time in-person (24%).

Teens in part-time or full-time virtual schooling were less satisfied with their schooling than teens attending school in-person full-time

% of teens who said they were dissatisfied with their schooling experience during the pandemic

Source: Survey conducted Fall 2020, among U.S. teens and parents

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Similarly, the parents of school-aged children attending school part-time in-person or virtually with no live sessions (asynchronous) were the most likely to be dissatisfied (29% in both groups), compared to virtual with live (synchronous) sessions (25%) and full-time in-person (18%).

However, teens in virtual classes were no more likely to be depressed, lonely, or unhappy than those attending in person. Virtual students were also less likely to be sleep deprived.

Teens in virtual classes were also more likely to say that they disliked school than their peers attending school in-person on a full-time basis. Dislike of school was especially high (22%) among those taking asynchronous classes, which was more than twice as high as teens attending school full-time in person. However, virtual students still felt connected to their teachers, with slightly more virtual and part-time students vs. full-time saying their teachers cared about them more than they did before the pandemic.
Virtual and part-time schedules carry significant logistical and educational challenges for students and parents – they seem to be yearning to get back to full-time in-person school,” said Jean M. Twenge, Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University and author of iGen, who helped design the survey. “On the other hand, it’s very encouraging that teens in virtual classes were not experiencing more mental health issues than those attending in person.”

Parents whose children were in virtual school, whether live or asynchronous, were the most likely to say that managing their children’s schooling had been difficult (31% in both groups), compared to 27% for those with children in part-time in-person school and 14% for full-time in-person.

Parents whose children had asynchronous virtual instruction were also the most likely to say that the school district’s implementation of school changes during Fall 2020 was poor (48%), compared to synchronous virtual classes (35%), part-time in-person (26%) and full-time in-person (25%).

Teens also used digital media differently depending on their school mode. Teens in asynchronous virtual school spent less time using social media and video chat than those in other school modes. “Teens participating in online only school may be at risk for technology fatigue,” said Sarah M. Coyne, Associate Director of the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University, who helped design the survey and analyze the data. “Even though these teens may be craving social connection, they may be becoming increasingly tired of looking at screens,” she noted.
Nearly twice as many parents with teens in virtual asynchronous schooling rated their school districts implementation of school changes as “poor” than did parents with teens attending in-person school on a full-time basis.

% of parents who said their school district poorly implemented school changes

Although presented as percentages, the numbers in this report are, in reality, predicted probabilities (multiplied by 100) from binary logistic regression models run for each outcome, adjusting for demographic factors. “By including these controls, we can have greater confidence that observed differences are due to school mode and not to other factors,” said Spencer James, Associate Professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University and the lead analyst for the project. “By taking into account other plausible explanations for the links between the type of classes teens are engaged in and their mental health, we hope to strengthen policy and civil society discussions about how the pandemic is impacting teens.”
Acknowledgements

Research Team

Jean M. Twenge (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is a professor of psychology at San Diego State University and the author of more than 140 scientific publications and books, including iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood.

Spencer James (Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University) is an associate professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University and a Fellow of the Wheatley Institution. His research focuses on global family relationships and how those relationships influence the wellbeing of children, adolescents, and adults.

Sarah M. Coyne (Ph.D., University of Central Lancashire, England) is a professor of human development at Brigham Young University and a Fellow of the Wheatley Institution. Her latest research project, M.E.D.I.A. (Media Effects on Development from Infancy to Adulthood) follows 510 families with children who are “digital natives,” tracing how media usage influences attitudes and behavior.

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Methodology

Sample Selection and Weighting

We partnered with the international survey research firm Qualtrics, which collected a sample of 2,000 teens in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade between November 2 and December 15, 2020 (we dropped 77 observations that occurred after December 15th because, due to the holiday break, most teens were not in school then) and a complementary sample of 1,500 parents of teenagers between November 2 and December 15 2020 (we dropped 6 observations, again due to concerns that children were likely not in school). Parents answered questions for each child in the household and their response for one child was randomly selected. The data were weighted to make them representative of each population.

The sampling strategy was designed to match the demographic profile of parents of teenagers in the United States based on race-ethnicity, income, education, biological sex, age, marital status, and region of the country. The final data were weighted to make the data representative of the United States population based on the most recent microdata available, the 2019 1-year data release of the American Community Survey.

Parents gave consent for their minor children to participate. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Brigham Young University.

School format was the primary variable in this survey report. Specifically, we examined four types of schooling formats: (1) In-person, Full-time (24% of our sample), In-person, Part-Time (16% of our sample), Virtual, with Live Sessions (50% of our sample), and Virtual, with No Live Sessions (10% of our sample).

Analysis

We employed binary logistic regression to predict each outcome. Although presented as percentages, the numbers in the report are, in reality, predicted probabilities (multiplied by 100) from each respective binary logistic regression model adjusting for controls. In the teen survey, the predicted probabilities are adjusted for sex, race-ethnicity, mother’s educational attainment, enrolled grade, public vs. private school, self-reported academic achievement, family structure, parental marital quality, religious importance, political ideology, and urban/suburban/rural residence, and residence in a blue state or red state. In the parent survey, predicted probabilities are adjusted for parental age, sex, income, education, race-ethnicity, marital status, relationship to child, child’s grade, public vs. private school, and number of children in the household.
Cutoffs

The measures of teen school dissatisfaction, parent dissatisfaction with schooling, teen dislike of school, parent reports of difficulty managing children’s schooling, and parent reports of poor school district implementation of school changes were coded from 1 to 5, as outlined in the question texts below.

In each case, we created cutoffs indicating dissatisfaction, dislike, difficulty, and poor implementation, respectively. To create these cutoff points, we recoded the categories in bold (below) to have a value of ‘1’, indicating the particular attribute (dissatisfaction, dislike, difficulty, and poor implementation) whereas other response categories were coded as 0.

Survey Items

Figure 1. Teen School Dissatisfaction by Type of Teen School Attendance

How satisfied are you with your school experience in fall 2020?

A. Completely dissatisfied
B. Quite dissatisfied
C. Somewhat dissatisfied
D. Neither, or mixed feelings
E. Somewhat satisfied
F. Quite satisfied
G. Completely satisfied

Figure 2. Parent Dissatisfaction with Schooling by Type of Teen School Attendance.

How satisfied are you with your [X grader’s] school experience in fall 2020?

A. Completely dissatisfied
B. Quite dissatisfied
C. Somewhat dissatisfied
D. Neither, or mixed feelings
E. Somewhat satisfied
F. Quite satisfied
G. Completely satisfied
Figure 3. Teen Dislike of School by Type of Teen School Attendance

Some people like school very much. Others don’t. How do you feel about going to school?

A. I like school very much.
B. I like school quite a bit.
C. I like school some.
D. I don’t like school very much.
E. I don’t like school at all.

Figure 4. Parental Reports of Managing Children’s Schooling by Type of Teen School Attendance

How easy or difficult has it been for you to manage your children’s schooling in fall 2020?

A. Very easy
B. Somewhat easy
C. Neither easy or difficult
D. Somewhat difficult
E. Very difficult

Figure 5. Parental Report of Poor School District Implementation of School Changes

In your opinion, how good or bad of a job have the administrators and staff at your child’s school or school district done at implementing online learning and other school changes this fall?

A. Very good
B. Good
C. Fair
D. Poor
E. Very poor