

Advisory Commission on Youth Special Report: 2020 Message on the Mental State of our Youth



In our continued effort to support Loudoun youth and advise the board, we are writing to provide updated recommendations. Last month we drew your attention to the alarming mental health concerns observed by local practitioners, additional community groups, and national data. This month, we want to focus on the results of the Loudoun County Public School (LCPS) surveys from October of this year and make recommendations to improve Loudoun Youth health and connectedness.

The data collected does not appear to be just a temporary deviation from a general trend but rather a more serious concern where action is required. As students around the country are experiencing measurable mental health declines (Reference: <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/28/938460892/pandemic-takes-toll-on-childrens-mental-health>), our own LCPS local survey indicates middle school and high school level youth are overwhelmed with classes in the new distance learning format. Neighboring counties are gathering data on youth health and connectedness and taking steps to help them. For example, Fairfax County has collected data and identified several actions. Similarly, Prince Williams County and Arlington are also surveying youth and taking action to help the kids that are struggling with connectedness and the stress of being shut in.

We recommend the continuation of data collection, but normalized across surveys, as we cannot manage what we do not measure. We need to ask the tough probing questions that provide clear insights into what is impacting our youth academically, socially, and emotionally. In the near term, to relieve some of the stress on our youth, we recommend the following based upon analysis of data from the recent LCPS surveys:

- a reduction of asynchronous work assigned
- use of Mondays for teacher planning and student connectedness programming, and
- a reconciliation between the discrepancy of teacher homework time assigned and student homework time reported.

Sincerely,
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Turning our attention to the recent October surveys of middle and high school students as well as teachers, LCPS produced summary reports that were presented to the School Board in November. In the student survey, the report concluded “almost all students are overwhelmed in at least 1 class” (See reprinted survey Table 4 in our Appendix). While true, this conclusion does not provide an adequate picture of the importance of the results being reported. In fact, that same tabular data is showing:



- **40% of middle school youth are overwhelmed in 3 or more classes.**
- **64% of high school youth are overwhelmed in 3 or more classes.**

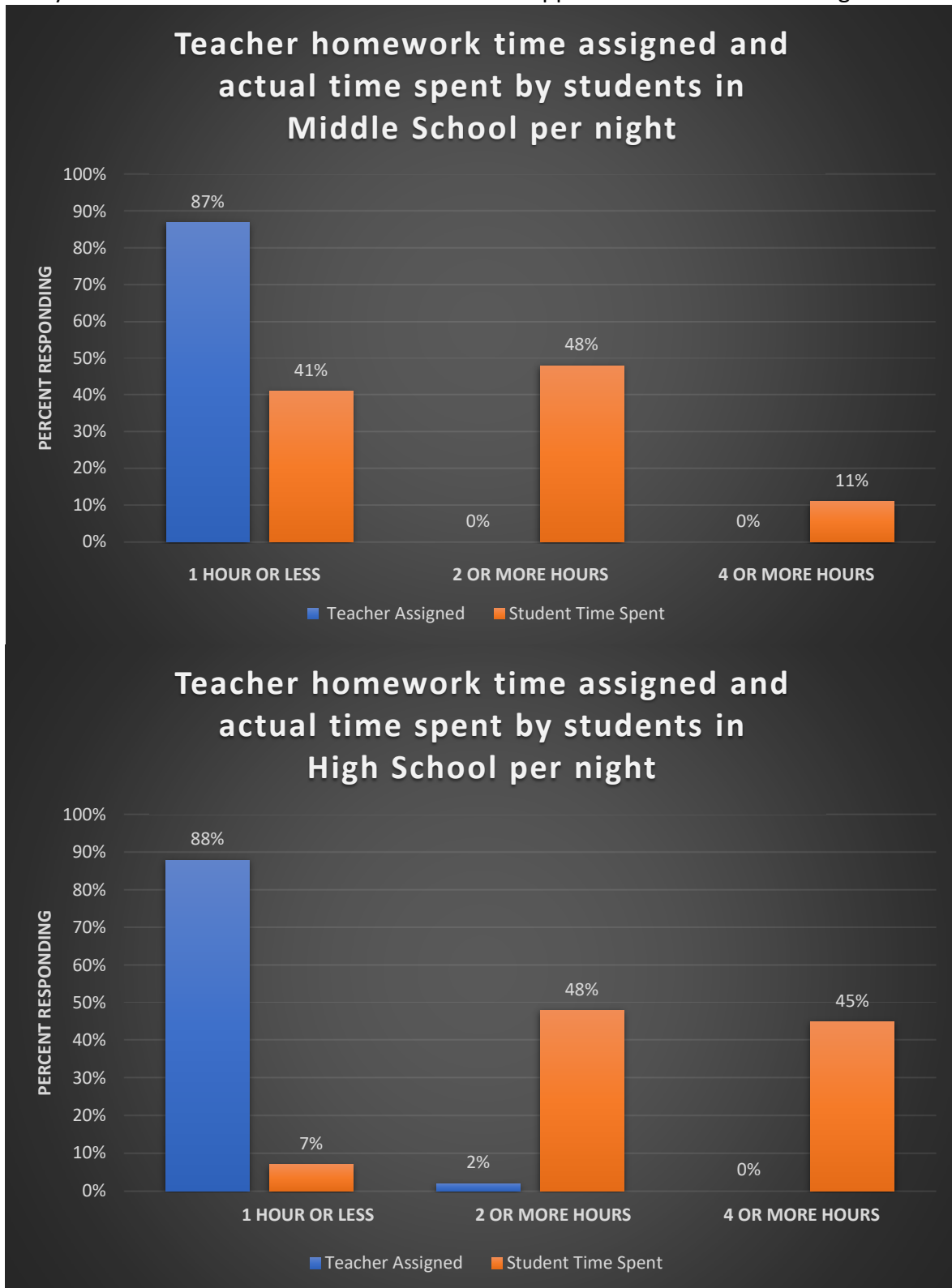
The summary ends with a question: “How might these results and conclusions guide our decisions moving forward?” However, no recommendations for planning purposes are provided whereas the teacher survey offers several options.

The Student Climate Surveys for both the elementary/middle school students and high school students in the fall of 2018 through Feb 2020 concluded the student environment related to significant mental health concerns or workload were positive with 80-90% agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements related to these issues (see reproduced data in our Appendix). In other words, pre-COVID, students were better managing workloads and stress levels. There was little evidence to suggest that they were “overwhelmed” to the degree we see in the recent survey.

The October 2020 surveys from LCPS identified a problem with students reporting overwhelming classes in the COVID format. The survey delved deeper and asked both teachers and students about homework levels specifically. The teacher survey reports, reproduced for convenience in Appendix Table 5, at the high school level, almost half surveyed are giving less than one hour of homework *per week, per class* and 75% one hour or less. At the middle school level, two-thirds report less than one hour of homework per week, per class and 83% one hour or less. However, in the student survey:

- **60% of middle school students surveyed reported spending 2+ hours on homework each *night***
- **93% of high school students surveyed reported spending 2+ on homework each *night***
- **45% of high school students surveyed reported spending 4+ on homework each *night***
- **Students are reporting spending 2-4x more time than Teachers are reporting assigning** (see Table 5 and Figure 2 in our Appendix along with detailed analysis to reach these conclusions)

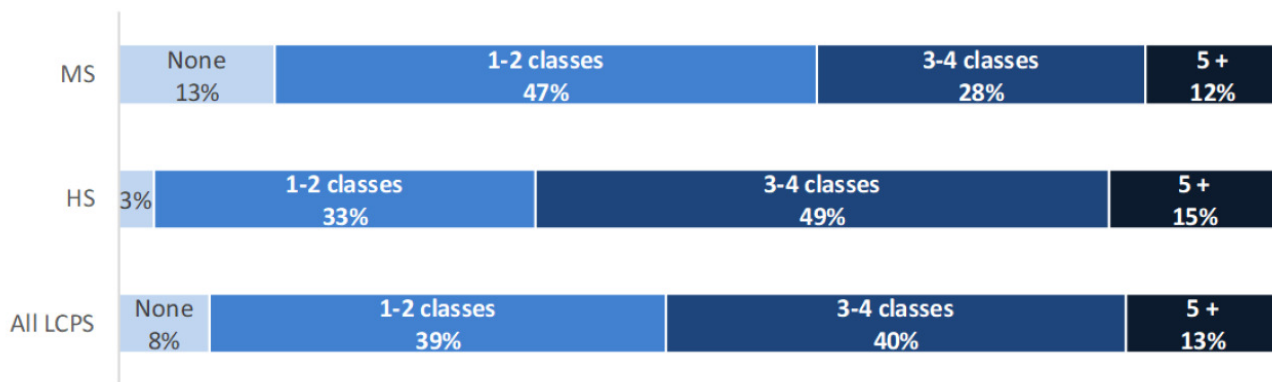
To illustrate more clearly here, we assembled both the table and figure from each of the surveys into a single normalized graphic below, delineated by middle and high school age groups. Note the unreported Teacher assigned survey results to total 100% were 13% and 8% not applicable for homework assignments.



Students complaining about homework is nothing new. However, the time discrepancy is clear. It may be the case that teachers are simply not aware of the extra time required by students to complete their homework in a distance learning environment. Some may be missing the preparation or instruction while others need more time to navigate their new online classroom. If teachers feel they are only assigning an hour or less but middle school students are spending twice that and half of high school students are spending four times or more each night, there is a major disconnect. We need to discover what that disconnect is to reduce the stress among our youth. In the meantime, we should be reducing the homework burden for our already overwhelmed students. Detailed analysis provided in the Appendix.

While unconfirmed, the loose comparison suggests the recent survey results are not a “blip” for our youth during distance learning. Most students are reporting being stressed and overwhelmed in the class content. 87% of Loudoun middle school students report being overwhelmed in their classes. Amazingly 97% of high school students report the same problem.

Table 4. Number of Overwhelming Classes for Students



When faced with overwhelming classwork many students will simply give up. We have reported that drop outs and chronic absenteeism disproportionately impact Hispanic students in our county. We expect this disconnect will only grow in the COVID education model being used in our county. ACOY’s report from 2020 summarizing 2019 data, we noted a rise in absenteeism, declining graduation rates, and a disproportionate number of Hispanic students dropping out of school. This was prior to the pandemic. It is likely when we report in future years, we will see additional negative impacts stemming from the pandemic.

To determine the impact of COVID on our youth, the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors need to survey youth and parents. We need to ask the tougher questions and measure over time, not unlike what is being conducted in Fairfax County schools. Specifically, their most recent report in November of 2020 shows sharp declines in grades overall from just prior to the pandemic and the current quarter. They conclude there is a cause for concern with a widening gap between students who typically perform well and those that struggle.

Reference:

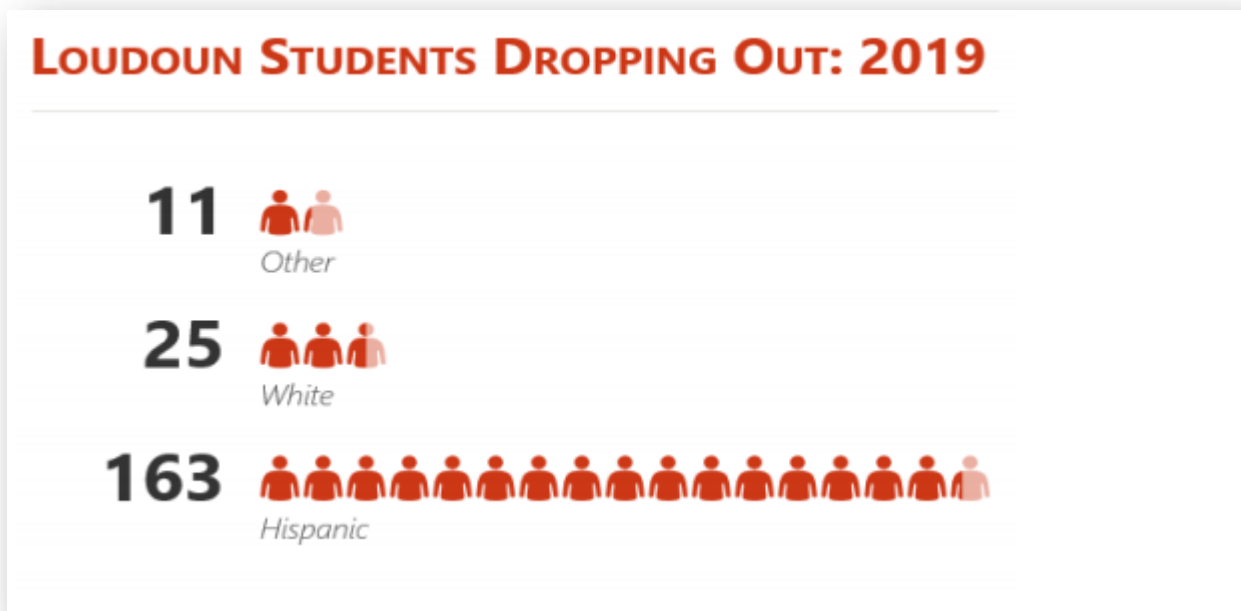
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In a recent article summarizing many of these finds from Fairfax County, high school students are showing a 50% rise in the number of F's this year compared to last year while middle school students show a 300% rise in the number of F's. Hispanic students, who were already reporting a disproportionate number of earned F's at 13%, nearly doubled that number during COVID.

Reference:

<https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/527367-fs-double-amid-remote-learning-in-virginias-largest-school-system?fbclid=IwAR060QsWe6rf91QOd1qzCbbj5WMTERgzxnHLDGEXyVhQsVv0a8qA6ZHLLQc>

Dropouts: Many factors may place students at risk and contribute to their decision to drop out of school. These include school, community, and family related factors. In many cases, no one factor leads to a student's decision to drop out, rather it is a combination of factors. In Loudoun, most students dropping out of school are Hispanic. While Hispanic students make up just under 20% of the school population, they represent 80% of students dropping out as shown below: Virginia Department of Education: Virginia Cohort Reports.



http://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/graduation_completion/cohort_reports/index.shtml

Recommendations:

For Loudoun, ACOY recommends we take these next steps now:

- Loudoun County should fund quarterly surveys of teachers, youth, and parents that answer the difficult questions about connectedness and mental health of our 120,000 youth. It is critical to offer the questions consistently across groups such as teachers and students to allow for direct comparison. Consider a portion of the LCPS budget dedicated for this monitoring outside of LCPS.
- Loudoun County schools should consider action to help students manage and reduce their stress. One suggestion is to stop the additional asynchronous work on Mondays, using this day instead for mental health support for youth (stress management, deep breathing exercises, peer led safe spaces to talk) and much needed additional teacher planning time. There are several groups in Loudoun already offering youth safe spaces to talk (Libraries, Ryan Bartel Foundation, Youth Advisory Council).
- Bring the homework time discrepancy issue to the teachers by showing the survey data and tasking them to understand **why students are reporting spending 2-4x as much time on their assigned homework** as the teachers think they have assigned. This has already created a communication gap and has increased stress on both sides.

Signs to Watch Out for and Positive Actions to Take Among Our Youth Population:

- Listen to your kids and give them a safe space to share their trauma because it is just as real to them as yours is to you. Encourage them to talk about how they are feeling.
- Eating disorders have increased because this is an aspect of your child's life they can control. Watch for changes in habits and be aware why this is happening.
- Thank your kids for making a sacrifice to help prevent the spread of the pandemic to the higher risk population. They are saving lives.

Some Available Resources:

- Student Pupil Services (LCPS)
 - <https://www.lcps.org/Page/228303>
 - https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQmXVEdpeqfUIGh3qptYy5nKH7LNN90j4xpVTbYY3NsX0AZbf_OQjp6av_g0eCO7umKIBxoymBg_hu9h/pub
 - Mental Health Resources: Suicide Prevention, Loudoun County Mental Health Services, LGBTQ Youth Talk Line, Child Protective Services, and Loudoun Abused Women's Shelter
- Ryan Bartel Foundation - <https://www.ryanbartelfoundation.org/>
- SCAN of Northern Virginia <https://www.scanva.org/>

Appendix – Data summary from LCPS and Climate surveys

Specific data from the climate surveys conducted every other year by age group

- 31,970 3rd-8th graders responded to this survey in February 2020
- At the high school level in 2019, 15,483 9th-12th graders responded to the survey

ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT (section B of the survey)

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Mark one response per line.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly Agree

Question #5. I usually work hard on my schoolwork (high school)

- **86%** of high school aged youth agreed or strongly agreed with question #5

Question #18. I get a chance to look back at my work in school and fix it or make it better (middle/elementary school)

- **84%** elementary school aged youth agreed or strongly agreed with question #18
- **81%** middle school aged youth agreed or strongly agreed with question #18

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (section D of the survey)

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Mark one response per line.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly Agree

Question #28. I can control myself when I am upset.

- **85%** elementary school aged youth agreed or strongly agreed with question #28
- **88%** middle school aged youth agreed or strongly agreed with question #28
- **90%** high school aged youth agreed or strongly agreed with question #28

From the LCPS survey of teachers in October of 2020:

Table 5. Fifteen percent of high school respondents assigned two or more hours of homework per week per class.

Hours per week	Elementary			LCPS
	School	Middle School	High School	
Less than one hour	56%	67%	47%	56%
1 hour	9%	16%	28%	17%
2 hours	4%	4%	13%	7%
3+ hours	2%	0%	2%	2%
Not applicable	29%	12%	10%	19%
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

From the LCPS survey of students in October of 2020:

Figure 2. Amount of Time Spent on Homework Each Night by Level



Combining data from Table 5 and Figure 2

To make an accurate comparison between the two surveys, we can calculate the average number of hours of homework assigned per week per class with the data we have at the high school level. We have assigned work each week from the teachers reporting as:

47% < 1 hour
 28% 1 hour
 13% 2 hours
 2% 3 or more hours
 10% N/A

The average of those responses is roughly:

$(0.47)(20 \text{ min}) + (0.28)(60 \text{ min}) + (0.13)(120 \text{ min}) + (0.02)(200 \text{ min}) \approx \mathbf{46 \text{ minutes per class assigned per week.}}$

Given that the class meets twice a week, that is roughly 23 minutes per class assigned per night. If a typical high school student has 4-5 academic classes and 3-4 N/A or non-homework assigning classes, you would suppose on average they have 2-2.5 of these classes per day which would mean about 45-60 minutes total homework assigned per night for high school students according to the teacher survey. Note this is a conservative per night estimate using a 2 night per class model. If we used a 7-day week, the survey response is closer to 30 minutes total homework per night for high school students.

The high school students are reporting totals each night of:

7%	0 to 1 hour
48%	2 to 3 hours
45%	4 or more hours

The average of those responses is roughly $(0.07)(20 \text{ min}) + (0.48)(150 \text{ min}) + (0.45)(300 \text{ minutes}) = 209 \text{ minutes}$ or about **3 ½ hours per night actual**. Even if we are conservative and counted the 45% of 4 hours or more as *exactly* 4 hours, that still averages to 3 hours per night vs teacher assigned 45-60 minutes per night in total.

The discrepancy is 3x-4½x.

We clearly have an expectation that needs to be managed. In fact, the above calculation was a conservative estimate. The true interpretation comparing the reported per week vs per night could be computed in the following manner.

If high school students are reporting 3 ½ hours per night, that is 24 ½ hours per week vs (46 minutes/class/week assigned)*(4-5 classes) = about 3-4 hours per week. This is more than a 6x discrepancy and a communication gap.