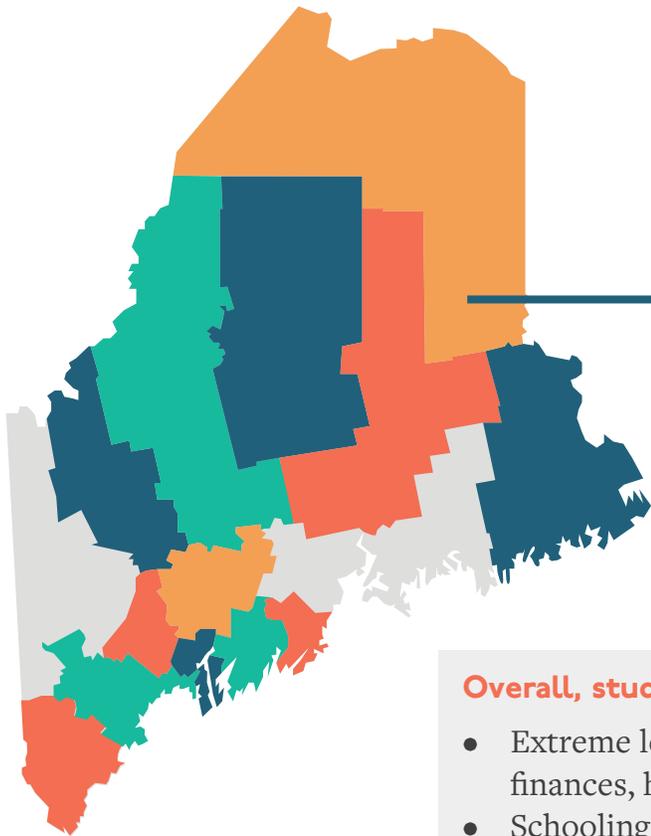


Facing the Fall

MAINE STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON RETURN TO IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION AND COVID-19



426 STUDENTS FROM 13 COUNTIES RESPONDED TO THE SURVEY

67% of all students surveyed said they want to go back to schools if they are open.

51% of those students said that they are also worried about their physical and emotional health and safety when returning.

Overall, students expressed:

- Extreme levels of anxiety around family and personal finances, health, safety, and mental/emotional health,
- Schooling environments are both the source and the remedy for anxieties,
- A desire for structural and/or behavioral changes to feel safe,
- The importance of social, cultural, and educational milestones in students' lives.

SUMMARY

As Maine's schools and supporting educational programs prepare for the upcoming Fall academic year, we wanted to know,

What concerns and hopes do youth throughout our state have when it comes to instruction and in-person programming?

426 Maine students from pre-k to twelfth grade filled out the survey—younger students had adult help.

We hope that educators, policymakers, and those working with youth will consider the student concerns, hopes, and needs as we all plan our programming in and with educational environments this fall.

"I'd be fine to go right now, but what scares me is if I get Corona [Virus] and bring it back to my family and one of them who are in the high risk category were to get really sick and maybe even potentially die. I'd never be able to live that down."

—York County Student, 9th Grade



81% agreed that they will wear masks



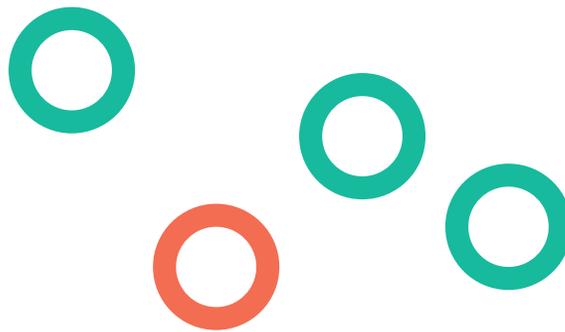
77% said that they will be able to socially distance while hanging out with friends



18% said they will not abide by mask-wearing guidelines



34% said that they will not be able to stay physically distant from friends



1 in 4 said it was **not possible** for their parents to support them during remote instruction.

RETURN TO SCHOOL, BUT WITH SIGNIFICANT CHANGES

Amongst those surveyed, there are many that want to return to school but would only feel comfortable if behavioral and structural changes are made to, and enforced within, schooling environments.

Return with Behavioral Adjustments

70% of surveyed students listed a variety of adjustments that they hope to see in the schooling environment:

- ♦ Mandatory mask wearing,
- ♦ Sanitation throughout facilities,
- ♦ Social distancing measures,
- ♦ Frequent hand sanitizing.

“Schools should require masks for all people, outdoor learning as much as possible, social distancing measures (mostly in hallways and the cafeteria), frequent sanitation and hand washing, etc.”

—Knox County Student, 10th Grade

Return with Structural Adjustments

Students that were ready to return to school articulated that they would be comfortable if schools and their administration made structural changes to the environment.

“I would like to do a hybrid schedule. Wearing a mask every day for five days a week will be really hard and I think it would be easier to do some remote learning and some at school learning.”

—Piscataquis County Student, 6th Grade

The suggested changes included:

- ♦ Hybrid learning,
- ♦ Part-time learning options,
- ♦ Having classes outdoors,
- ♦ Scheduling adjustments such as staggered in-person and online days,
- ♦ Teachers moving to new classrooms rather than students.

At the same time, others articulated a fear and risk of being exposed in one room for long periods of time.

“I don’t like learning online, but I think we should do online learning in the first half of the school year and if everything is ok then we should be able to go back to school for the second half of the school year.”

—Androscoggin County, 12th Grade

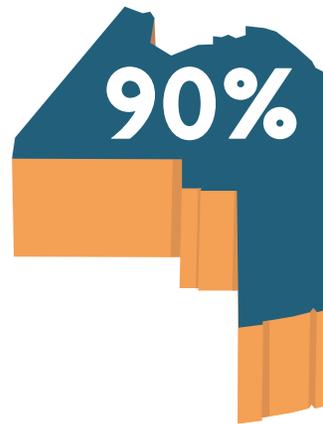
SMALL PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS COMFORTABLE “AS IS”

Less than 10% of students stated that they would not need masks to feel comfortable and that they would like school to return to “normal.”

While we can interpret some of these responses to be the ideal situation students would like to be in, there were students in this category of respondents who expressed they would not wear masks, even if required.

“Open the doors. I’m not nervous about the virus, I’m worried about how not going to school and getting a quality education will affect my future.”

—Aroostook County Student, 11th Grade



of respondents from Aroostook County expressed a strong desire to return to in-person school.

32%

said they will need extra emotional and mental health support no matter what happens in the fall

IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL/CULTURAL MILESTONES

Students expressed hopes and wishes for what they wanted in the Fall, out of which emerged a recurring theme—

Youth are—or fear—missing the social and cultural milestones they associate with education and their school communities.

For example, students noted the importance of seeing their friends *in person*, the need to connect with their new and former teachers, as well as the desire and benefits of school-based activities—such as having access to recess time with friends or the importance of sports.

Responses in this category emphasized a connection between missed life milestones and negative impacts on student mental health. A number of students connected educational and social/cultural milestones to their personal sense of emotional and social wellbeing.

“I want to go back to school. I want to see the faces of my friends and teachers and be able

to communicate with them. School makes me stressed but online school makes me depressed at least going to school and being able to see my friends again would make me happy.”

—York County Student, 11th Grade

Students Experiencing Extreme Anxiety and Distrust

A small number of students expressed extreme anxiety and concerns around returning to school. Two main concerns emerged from their responses—fears of financial stress caused by infection and fears for the health of themselves and their families.

Among these concerns, students stated that due to COVID-19 they:

- Were experiencing mental health issues,
- Felt unmotivated working from home,
- Feared their teachers were at risk and overburdened with teaching during a pandemic.

Others articulated that in order to feel comfortable, there would have to be zero cases in Maine, the end of the tourist season, or availability of a viable vaccine.

“I don’t feel safe. I honestly don’t think other people will social distance, wear masks, or follow the guidelines. They aren’t doing it now, so why would they do it at school?”

—York County Student, 12th Grade

Also within this group, some respondents began to express distrust towards their peers, which was a

cause for their anxiety and contributed to their fear of returning. Students that expressed anxiety and distrust related to other peers not following rules tended to be from higher populated counties with higher numbers of positive COVID-19 cases.

“I wish I could just hug my friends again but I know that probably won’t happen again. I wish school could be normal so I don’t have anxiety about it anymore than normal.”

—Cumberland County Student, 8th Grade

Recommendations

Focus on School Culture

Anxieties are high for most students. Overall, the health of school culture, schooling environments and the safety of ourselves and our communities should be prioritized.

Based on student responses, the majority understand this quite well. By centering relationship-building and introducing elements of recovery and care we can reduce distrust and tend to the emotional and social strains likely to increase whether districts and programs offer in-person or online opportunities.

Minimize Potential for Anxiety Due to Distrust

While only a small percentage stated that a distrust of fellow students was a concern, this could increase for schools and programming that provide in-person opportunities.

Teachers, administrators, and those working with youth can prioritize relationships and community building in all respective environments. It was clear that there is potential for a polarizing situation.

A stark relief emerged between students who desire strict enforcement of guidelines and those who stated that they would not follow CDC guidelines, even if mandatory.

Prioritize Relationships Within the School Community

Prioritizing relationships between members of the school community can foster trust and interpersonal responsibility, ultimately leading to a safer school with students and teachers committed to keeping one another healthy.

Support Student-driven Efforts to Adapt Social and Cultural Milestones

Among all students surveyed—no matter where they fell on the question of returning to school or remaining remote—there was a collective concern about missing significant social and cultural milestones connected to educational environments.

Because these milestones are so important to students’ lives, centering youth participation can help reduce anxieties driven by school-based environments. With everyone facing new realities this fall, Schools should pursue opportunities for students to lead or participate in re-imagining important cultural, social, and educational milestones.