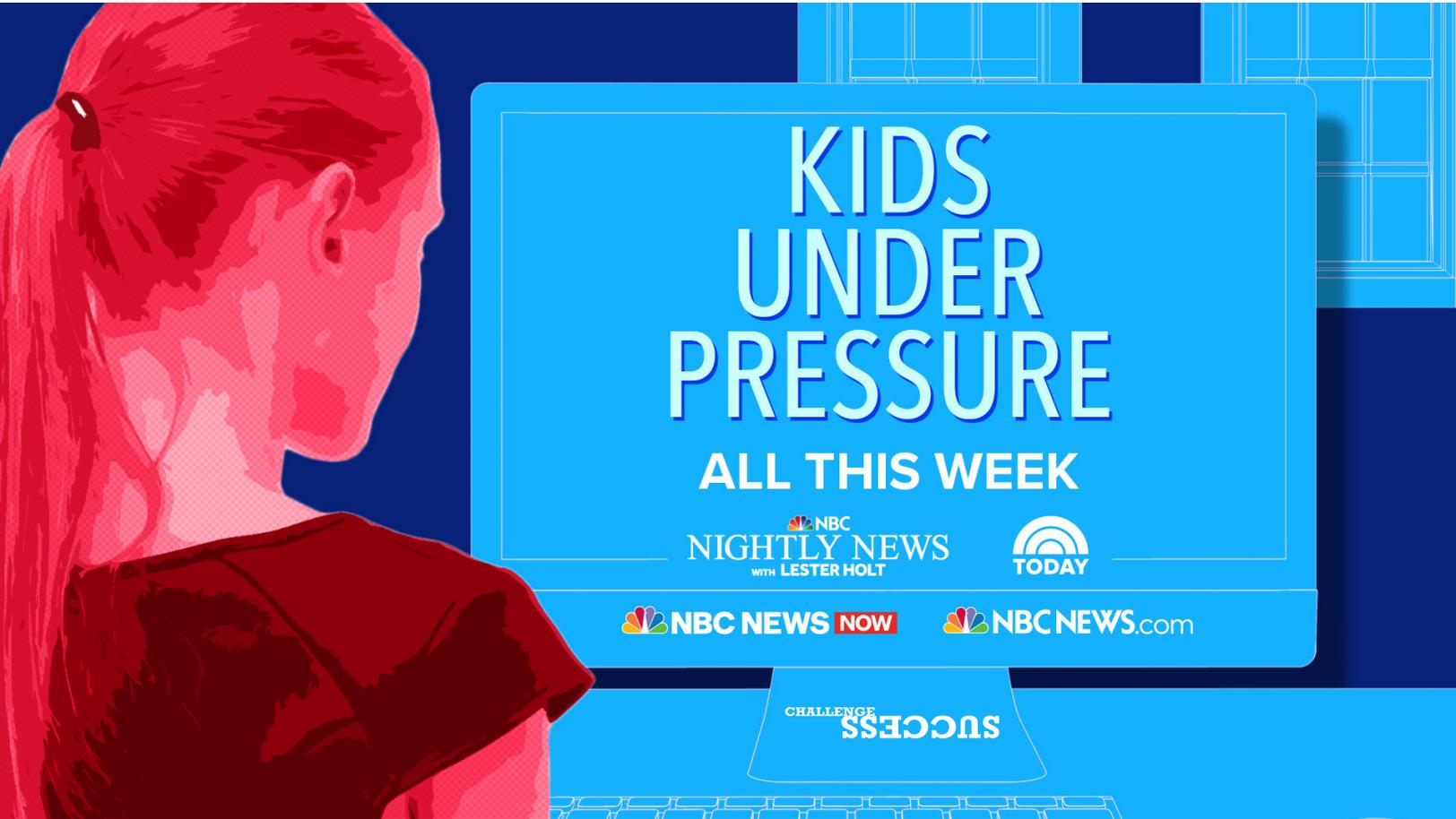


February 2021



# KIDS UNDER PRESSURE

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# KIDS UNDER PRESSURE

A Look at Student Well-Being and Engagement During the Pandemic

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**Challenge Success**, a school reform non-profit affiliated with the Stanford Graduate School of Education, and **NBC News**, the news division of the American broadcast television network NBC, partnered to conduct a large, national study to understand student well-being and academic engagement in these unsettled times.

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## METHODOLOGY

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Using the well-established *Challenge Success/Stanford Survey of Adolescent School Experiences*, and adding questions specific to the ways in which the Coronavirus pandemic disrupted schools and society, the study measures student well-being and student engagement, two areas critical to healthy adolescence. Topics covered include adolescent stress, worry, academic engagement, belonging and connection at school, parent expectations, and homework and extracurricular load. The findings reported here are based on responses collected between Fall 2018 through Fall 2020 which included over 75,000 high school students from 86 high schools across the country. These schools represented a diverse mix of students by gender, race and ethnicity, and geography. During Fall 2020, the survey was administered to over 10,000 students with additional questions designed to capture students' perceptions of how their experiences may have changed during the pandemic. This report summarizes key findings from this study. All differences reported herein between results from prior to Fall 2020 and Fall 2020 are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

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## THREE KEY FINDINGS

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**KEY FINDING 1:** Students, especially females and students of color, continue to experience high levels of stress and pressure.

**KEY FINDING 2:** Students' engagement with learning, which is always a challenge, is especially low now.

**KEY FINDING 3:** Students' relationships with adults and peers are strong, yet appear strained in recent times.

## KEY FINDING 1:

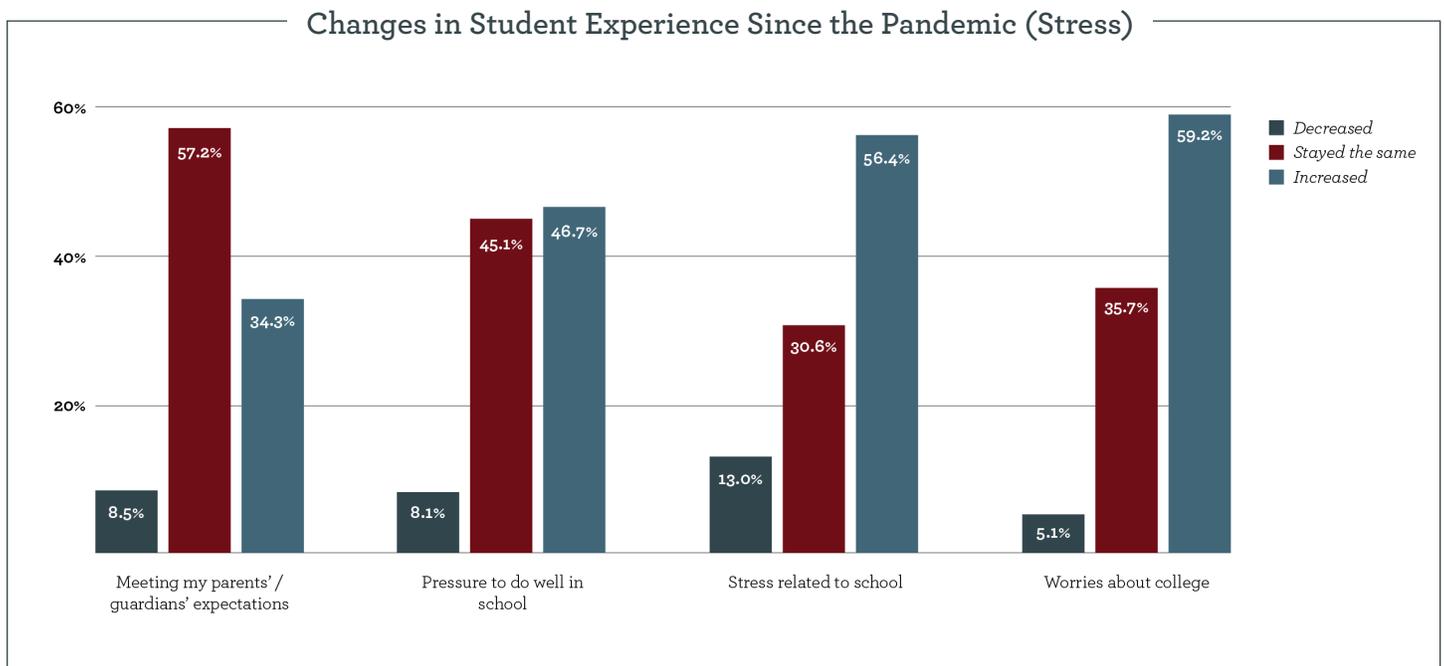
*Students, especially females and students of color, continue to experience high levels of stress and pressure*

Students have been experiencing high levels of stress for years, and the pandemic has exacerbated that trend in concerning ways. When asked: “Compared to the time before the coronavirus impacted your community, to what extent have your experiences in the following areas changed?” students report increases in school-related stress and pressure as well as worries about college.

- » 56% of students report that their stress about school has increased.

- » 63% of students who identify<sup>1</sup> as females versus 48% of students who identify as males report an increase in school-related stress, as do 63% of students who identify as Black and Hispanic/Latinx versus 55% of students who identify as White.

The major sources of stress shared by students are relatively consistent before and during the pandemic. The four major sources of stress cited by students are “grades, tests, and other assessments” followed by “overall workload,” “lack of sleep,” and “time management.”



<sup>1</sup> For the remainder of this report we use “female,” “male,” “Black,” “Hispanic/Latinx,” and “White” to signify students who identify as such.

## Mental Health Concerns

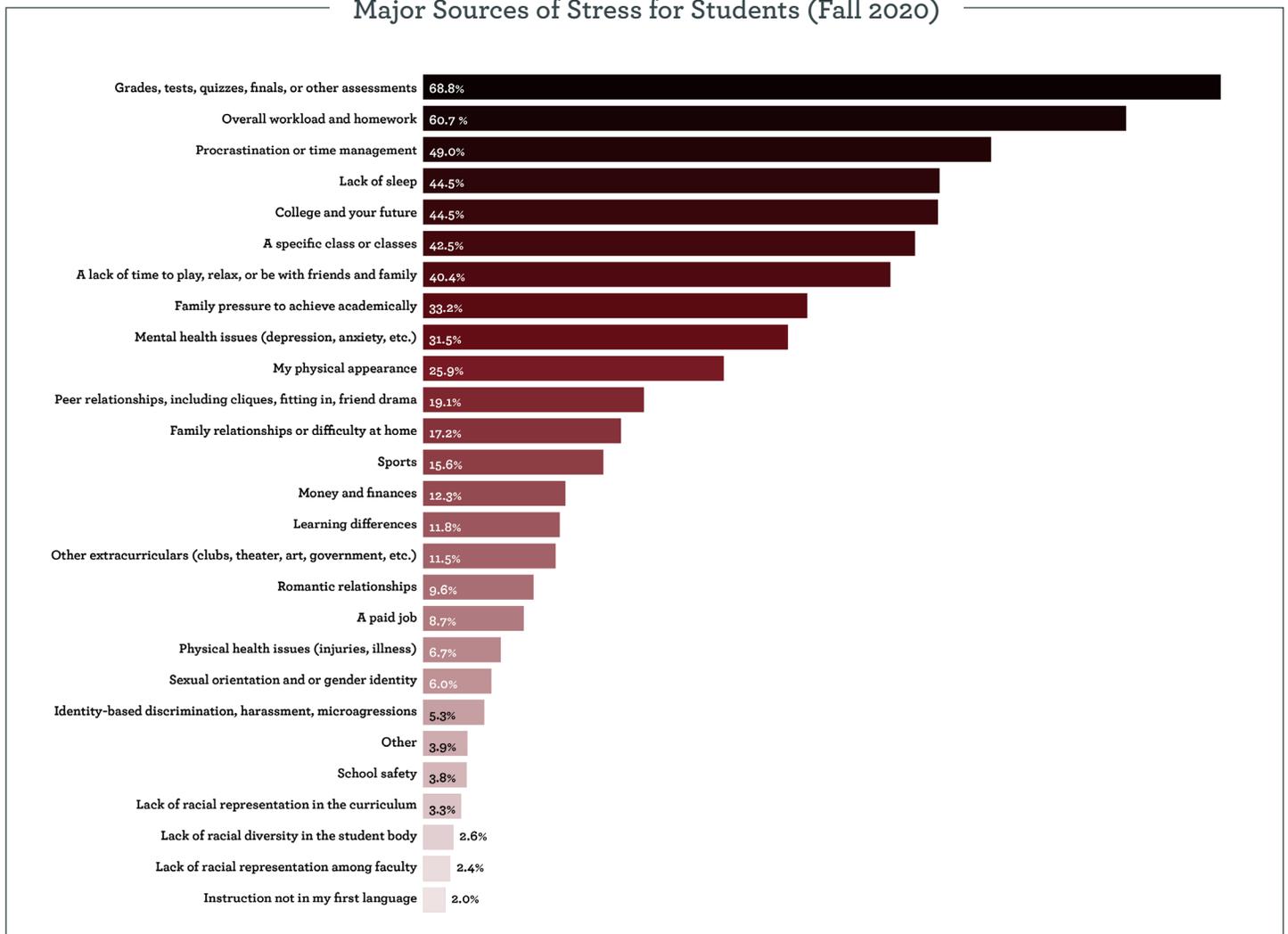
Mental health<sup>2</sup> concerns have increased as a major source of stress for students.

- » In Fall 2020, 32% of students report mental health as a major source of stress versus 26% pre-pandemic.
- » This is even more concerning for females who cite mental health as a source of stress at more than twice the frequency of their male classmates.

*“I would do anything for things to go back to normal. My school is giving too much work even though times are tough for everyone. At first this was just a break from school, but now all I feel is stress, anxiety, and pain.”*

– 10th Grader

Major Sources of Stress for Students (Fall 2020)

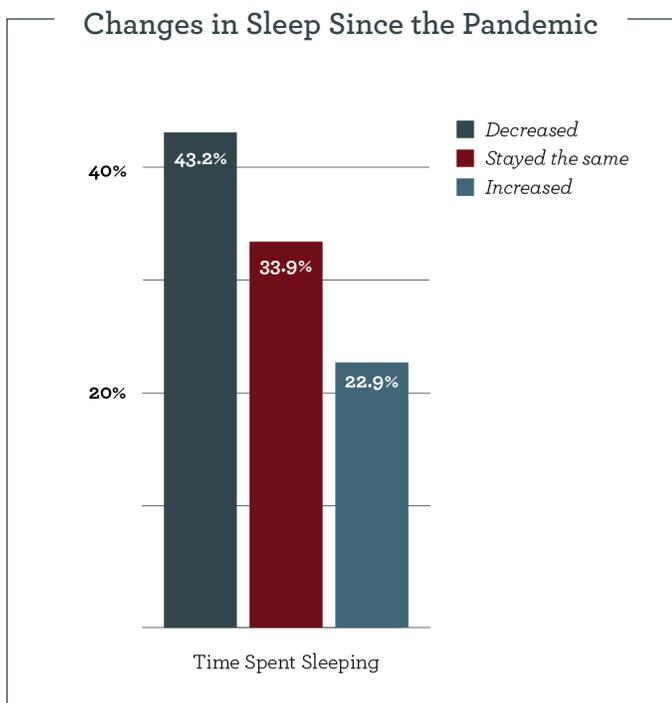


<sup>2</sup> Students can choose as many “major sources of stress” as they wish from a list of 27, including “other.” Mental health is one option. However, it is important to note that our survey does not include questions about more serious mental health symptoms or illnesses.

- » 83% of students report having at least one stress-related physical health symptom,<sup>3</sup> and that statistic is higher for females (92%) than for males (72%).
- » Only 35% of students report they are quite or very confident in their ability to cope with stress. This percentage is even lower for females (24%) and Hispanic/Latinx students (31%).

### Lack of Sleep

The American Academy of Pediatrics and leading sleep experts recommend that adolescents get eight to ten hours of sleep. The amount and quality of sleep is associated with mental and physical health, and sleep deprivation is associated with numerous negative outcomes. During Fall 2020, here’s what high school



students report about their time spent sleeping:

- » Average of 6.7 hours sleep per night with twelfth graders getting the fewest hours (6.4) and ninth graders the most (7.0).
- » 5% got 4 or fewer hours of sleep.
- » Only 6.6% got the recommended nine hours of sleep per night.
- » 43% say the amount of sleep has decreased since the time before the pandemic.

*“Start school later; sleep is the single most important thing to have. School starts earlier than most adult jobs; the only thing this does is harm students’ mental health.”*

- 10th Grader

### College Worries

Of students surveyed during Fall 2020:

- » 59% report that their worries about college have increased.
- » 67% of female students report that college related worries have increased compared to only 50% of male students.

<sup>3</sup> Physical health symptoms listed on the survey include difficulty sleeping, difficulty breathing, exhaustion, headaches, stomach problems, and weight gain or loss.

## Homework

Homework consistently appears as a major stressor for students. Students often perceive their homework load to be excessive while not necessarily useful.

- » Over 50% report the amount of homework is “too much,” a statistic that remained consistent in Fall 2020 compared to previous years.
- » Fewer than half (40%) find “three-fourths” to “all” of their homework “useful.”
- » Students report an average of 3 hours of homework per weeknight, up from 2.7 in Fall 2019.

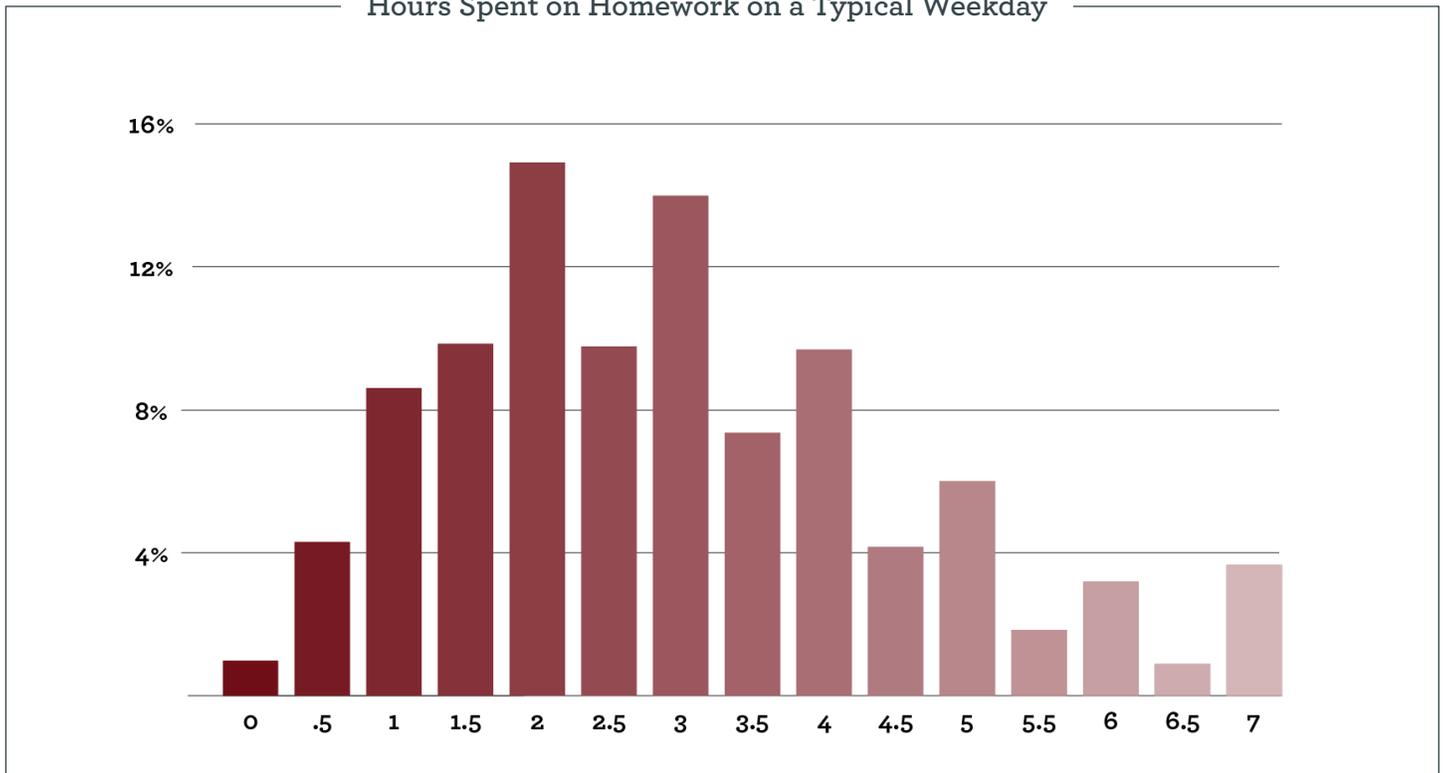
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*“Because the school day has been shortened, teachers feel that it is okay to make the workload very large because it seems like we have more time. My more ‘essential’ classes give us 30-minute videos to learn concepts on our own, in addition to the nightly homework.”*

– 10th Grader

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Hours Spent on Homework on a Typical Weekday



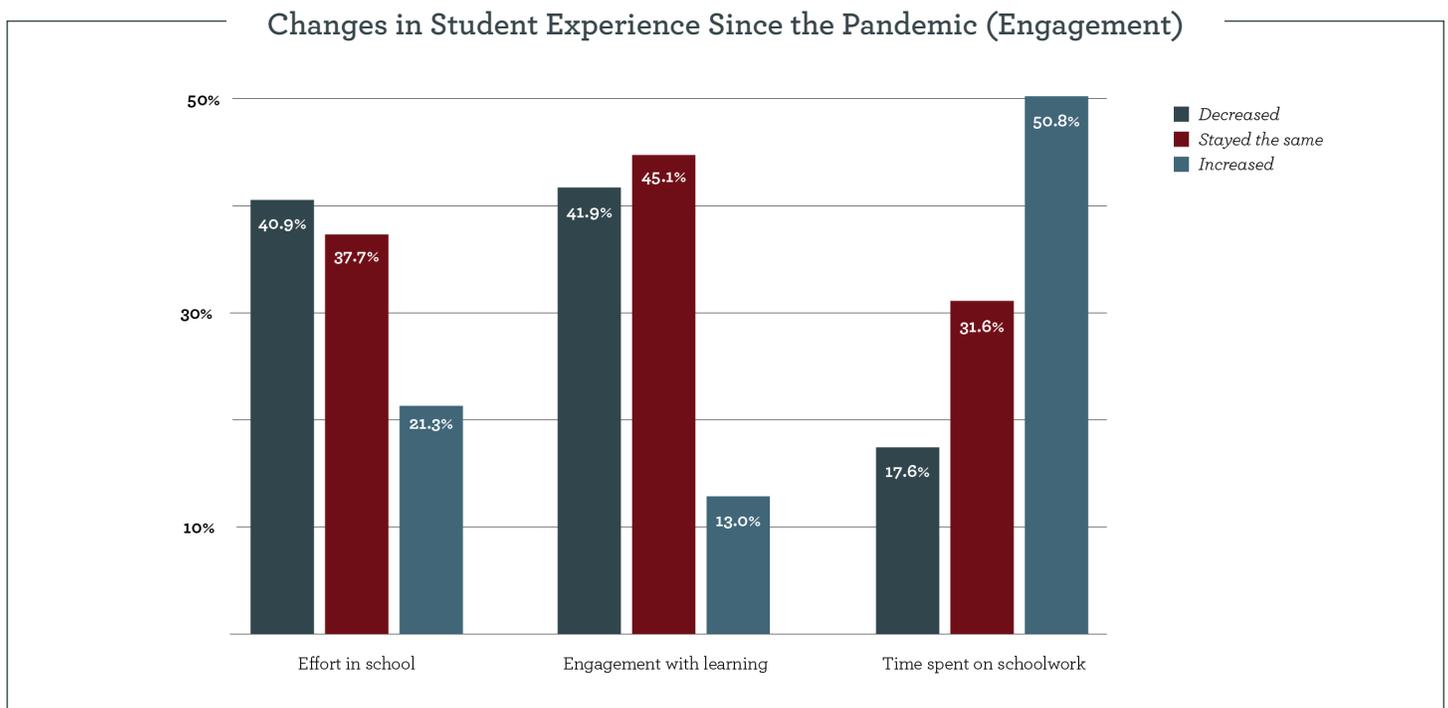
## KEY FINDING 2:

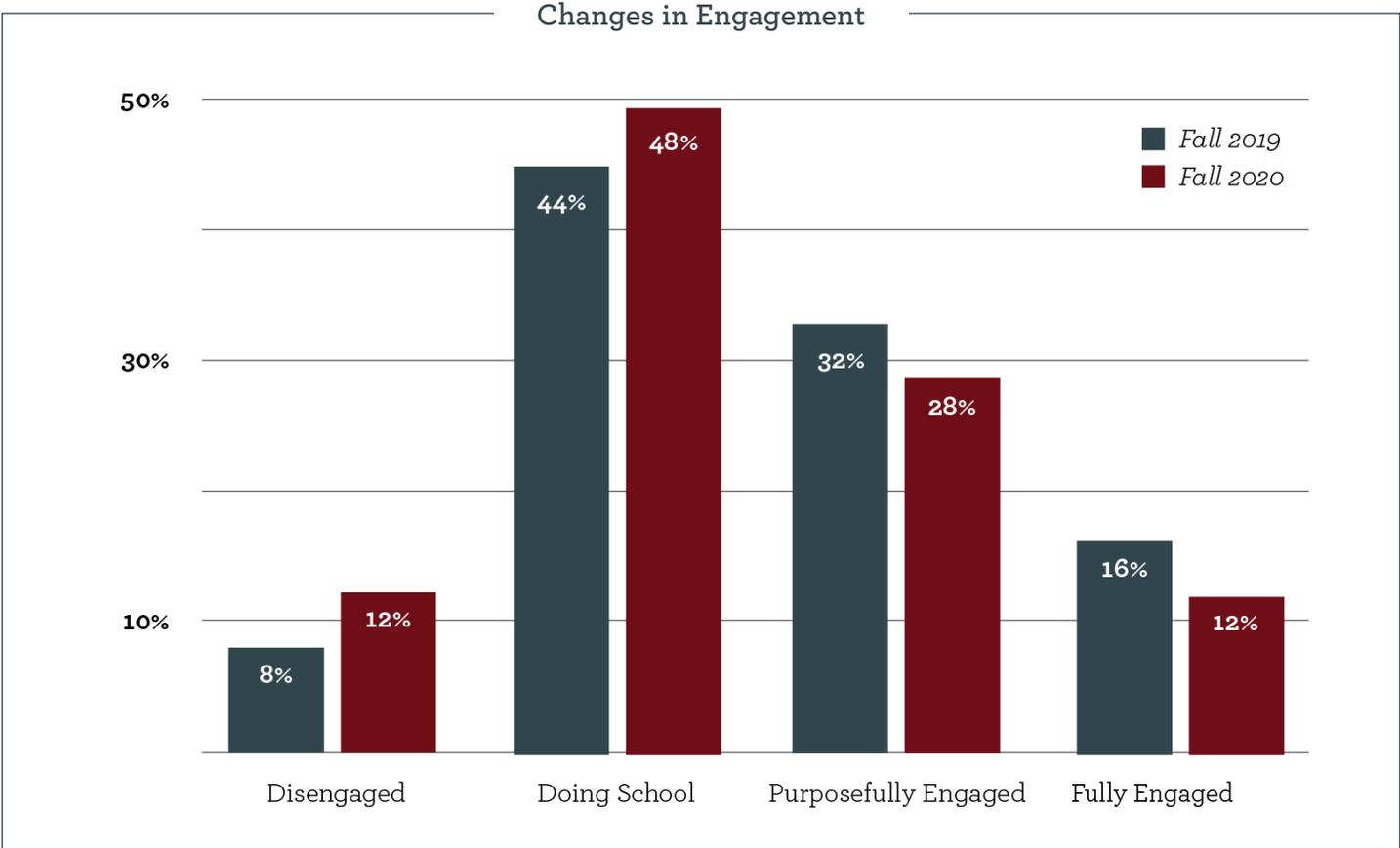
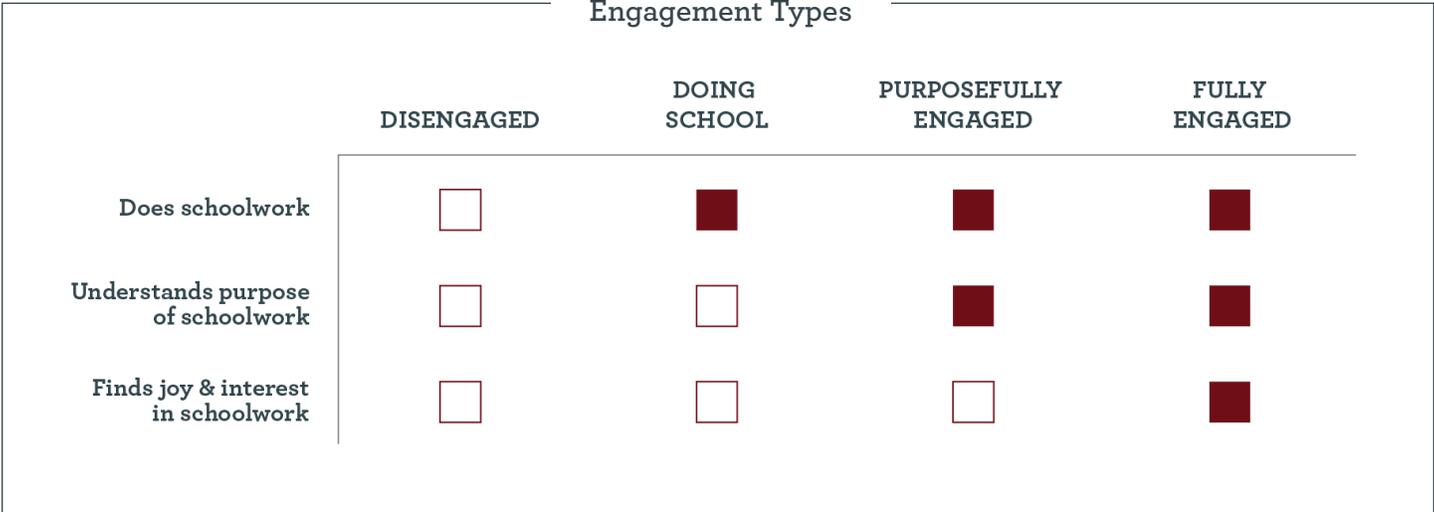
*Students' engagement with learning, which is always a challenge, is especially low now*

High levels of student engagement are positively related to learning retention and healthy adolescent development, while disengagement has implications for negative consequences and behaviors. During Fall 2020, many students report a decrease in both engagement and effort at school compared to the time before the pandemic.

- » 41% report a decrease in effort in school.
- » 42% report a decrease in engagement in learning.
- » 51% report that they spend more time on schoolwork.

The *Challenge Success Stanford/Survey of Adolescent School Experiences* considers three important dimensions of student engagement: affective, behavioral, and cognitive. For *affective* engagement, students are asked about their level of interest in and enjoyment of school work. For *behavioral* engagement, students are asked to consider their effort, hard work, mental exertion, and the completion of assignments. For *cognitive* engagement, students report on their attitudes towards their schoolwork, its value, and its importance. Using a combination of these three engagement scales, four profiles or “Engagement Types” are created.





The “Doing School” students — those that complete their schoolwork but find it neither purposeful nor joyful — increased to 48% and “Disengaged” students increased to 12%. A higher percentage of female students report “Doing School” in Fall 2020 (53%) as compared to Fall

2019 (48%). A higher percentage of male students have moved to the “Disengaged” category in Fall 2020 (13%) compared to Fall 2019 (9%).

### KEY FINDING 3:

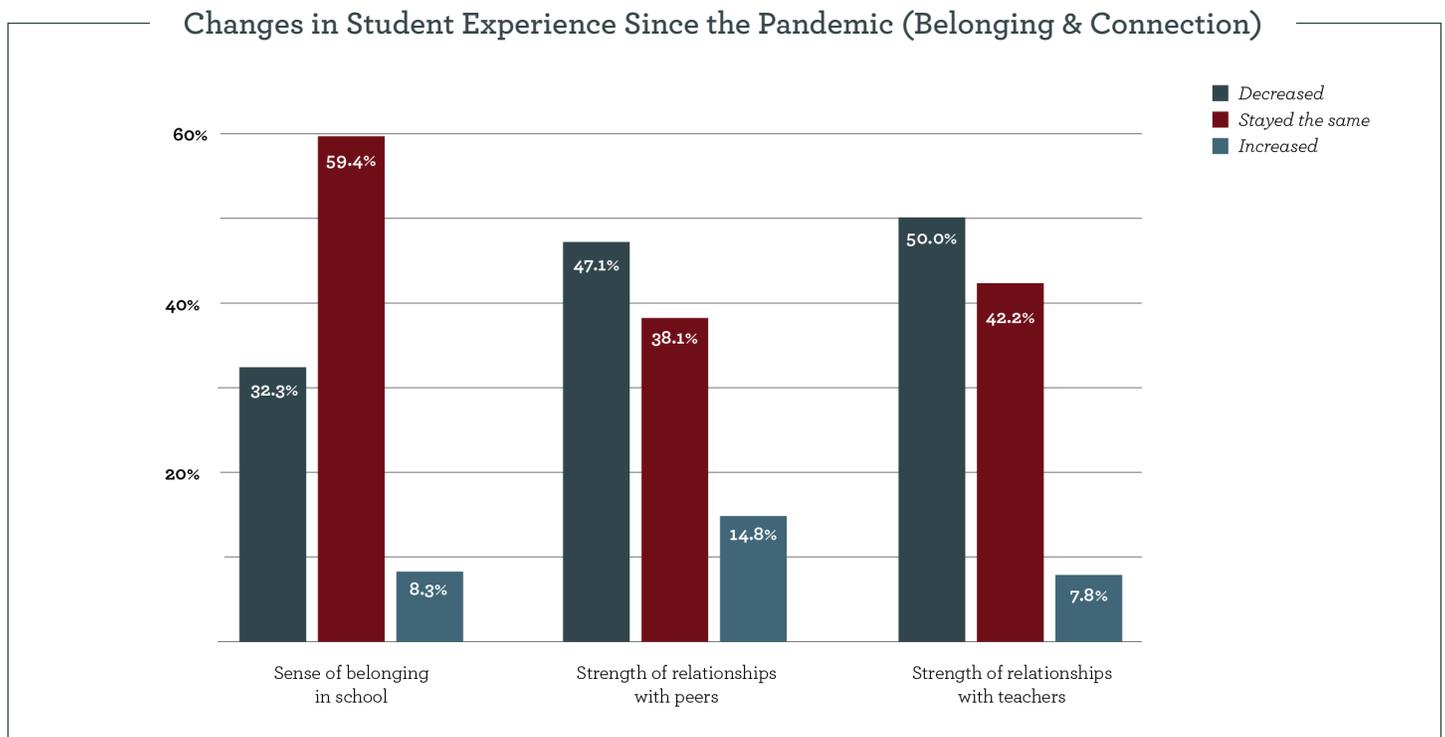
*Students' relationships with adults and peers are strong, yet appear strained in recent times*

Students, of all ages and developmental stages, need to feel like they belong at school and that they are able to be themselves in and out of the classroom. When students feel a sense of belonging and connection, they do better academically, show higher levels of engagement at school, and have increased physical and mental health. Numerous studies highlight these findings across income levels, ethnic and racial backgrounds, geography, and gender. School belonging is assessed using a set of questions designed to measure students' perceptions and experiences of feeling respected, valued, liked, cared about, and known in school. Connection is a related concept that

captures students' relationships with peers and adults, important elements of adolescent development.

During Fall 2020, students, on average, report that they are less connected with both teachers and peers.

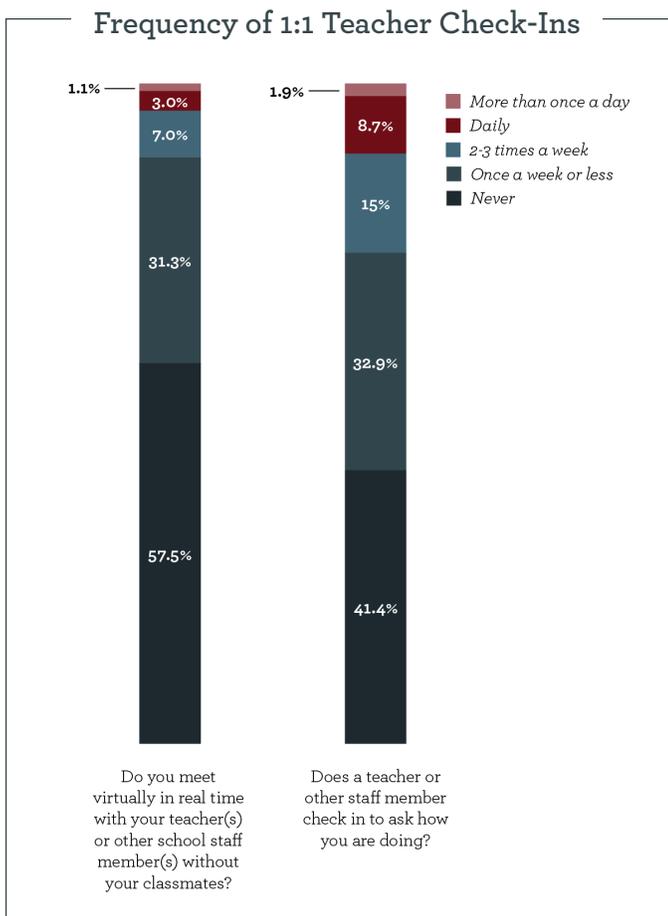
- » 50% of students say the strength of their relationships with *teachers* has decreased.
- » 47% say the strength of their relationships with *peers* has decreased.



## Trusted Adults

Despite the decrease in perceived relationship strength, most students — before and during the pandemic — feel they have an adult they can go to with a problem.

- » 71% report that they have an adult at school to go to if they have a problem.
- » But percentages vary widely by school (56% to 82%) as well as by gender identity and race and ethnic background within each school.
- » Fewer students from schools with a majority of socioeconomically disadvantaged students report having a trusted adult to go to at school.



One positive trend is that most students report a high level of respect from adults at their schools in terms of respecting various aspects of their diverse identities. And, when asked what is going well during remote learning, many students note their appreciation of understanding and caring teachers.

## More Check-Ins Needed

While students report relatively positively about access to a trusted adult, very few are having regular check-ins with teachers during Fall 2020.

- » 59% report teachers check in to ask how they are doing at least once a week.

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*“They make an effort to check in with students. Many adults are very cooperative and understanding. They do the best they can with trying to decrease the stress that students are going through.”*

12th Grader

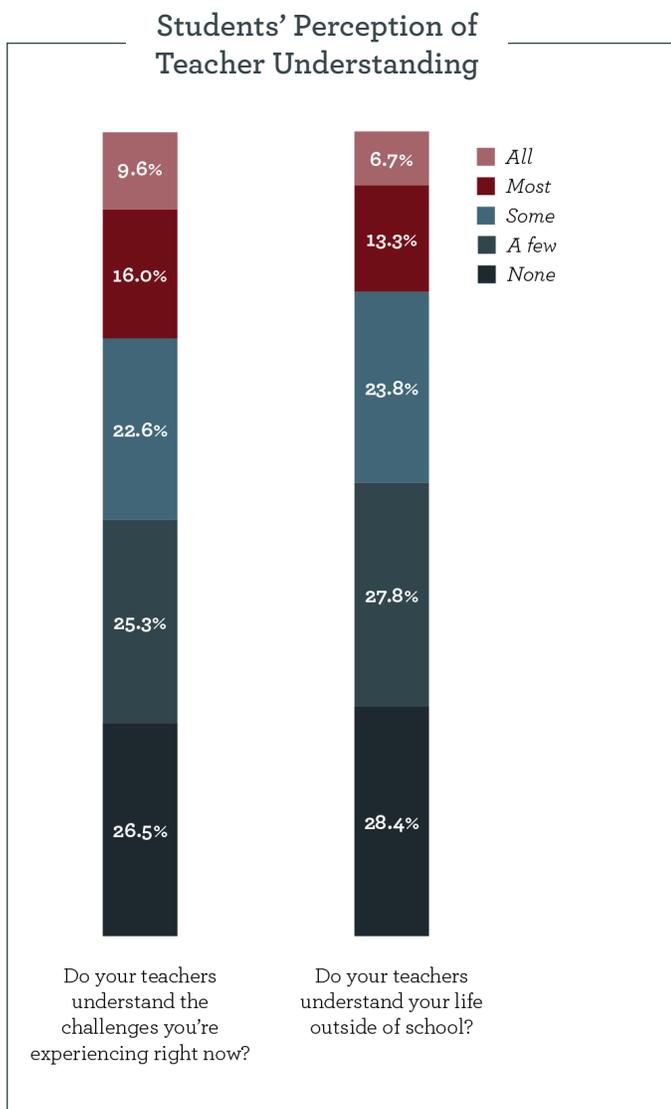
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But these check-ins are rarely happening on an individual basis.

- » 58% say that they never meet in real time individually.
- » 41% say they *never* have a teacher or other school staff member ask how they are doing.

Also, students do not feel like teachers understand what they are dealing with right now.

- » 28% of students believe that no teachers understand their life outside of school.
- » 26% of students believe that no teachers understand the challenges they are experiencing right now.



*“To improve remote learning, our school could implement more emotional connections with teachers and other students. Especially check-ins on our mental and physical health. By understanding what is going on in our lives and what we’re going through, it would improve how much and what kind of work they give us. It would relieve a lot of stress.”*

12th Grader

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## IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS

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The data presented here paint a concerning picture of high school students' well-being and academic engagement during the pandemic. It's important to remember that these are averages. Each student is experiencing the disruption of "normal life" in their own way. Challenge Success encourages families and schools to dig deeper with the students in their lives to identify their unique sources of stress and explore the reasons why they may be less (or more) engaged academically right now.

It should also be noted that many students experienced unhealthy levels of stress and pressure and low levels of engagement before the pandemic. Challenge Success has partnered with schools and families to address this issue for many years, and the pandemic has only reinforced the importance of prioritizing student well-being and deeper engagement with learning. These days, educators and parents are making heroic efforts to support students in the classroom and at home while juggling their own well-being and workload. Challenge Success has worked with many school communities to make changes including: carving out class time to build students' connections with adults at their school; adjusting traditional homework policies to focus on quality versus quantity; incorporating more opportunities for revision, redemption, and student choice into their assessment practices; and strengthening communication efforts between home and school. The pandemic presents an opportunity to rethink what schools and families can do to best support every student's journey to become balanced, healthy, and engaged learners.

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### ABOUT CHALLENGE SUCCESS

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*Challenge Success is a non-profit organization affiliated with Stanford Graduate School of Education. We partner with schools, families, and communities to embrace a broad definition of success and to implement research-based strategies that promote student well-being, equity, and engagement with learning.*

*For more information about this study or how to administer a Challenge Success Survey in your community, visit [www.challengesuccess.org](http://www.challengesuccess.org) or contact [info@challengesuccess.org](mailto:info@challengesuccess.org).*