

Self-Identified Student Barriers:

How the COVID-19 Pandemic Has Created a Superclass of At-Risk Students and What We Can Do About It

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Executive Summary

As researchers and educators seek to understand student experience of pandemic learning in hopes of curtailing the impending second wave of the dropout epidemic for a new superclass of at-risk students, this report offers an early look at struggling students' self-identified barriers to engagement during the 2020-21 school year, and what these barriers—related to academic performance, academic resources, and social emotional factors—can reveal to educators about students' needs as we contemplate building our post-pandemic learning environments.

Four states, New Mexico, Arkansas, South Carolina, and Michigan, along with Los Angeles USD and individual districts across the country, partnered with Graduation Alliance for the 2020-21 school year to develop and launch an attendance recovery program called ENGAGE.

The foundational principles of the attendance recovery program include:

1. Persistent, consistent, and systematic outreach to disengaged and struggling students and families.
2. A triage approach to understanding each individual student's barriers to engagement.
3. Ongoing coaching support using a differentiated treatment strategy based on students' identified barriers.

Graduation Alliance collected data about student-identified barriers to pandemic learning, including questions about academic performance, academic resources, and social emotional factors (between the beginning of school closures in 2020 and April 2021), from approximately 37,662 students and their families.

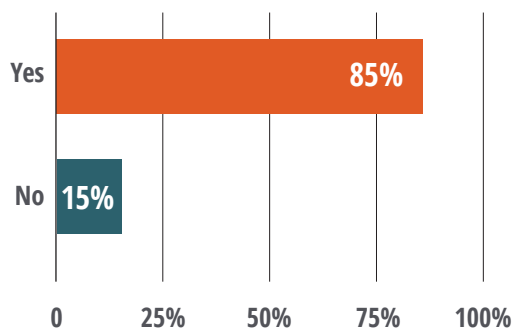
Although an indicator of student risk, inconsistent attendance is a result of academic and social emotional barriers rather than a root cause of vulnerability. Therefore, it behooves us to examine the underlying reasons students stop participating.

Summary of Significant Findings

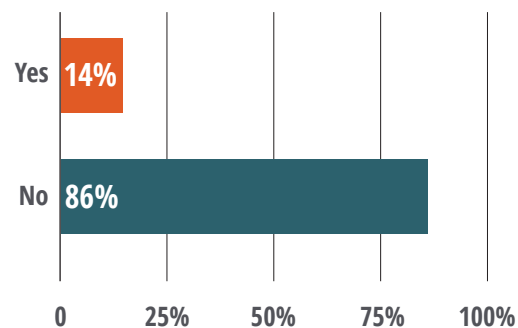
The following significant findings emerged from our data collection:

15% of students in grades 6-12 lacked adult supervision, and 14% of students had sibling care responsibilities.

Do you currently have an adult checking on your progress?



Are you responsible for taking care of siblings or other children with their schooling?



Structure and connectedness were challenges for students across the board. Instead of having schools define the structure as families were accustomed to in face-to-face learning, families—and in some cases, the students themselves—had to learn how to navigate the new learning environment and create and sustain the structures and relational support necessary to succeed.

Families — and in some cases, the students themselves — had to learn how to navigate the new learning environment and create and sustain the structures and connections necessary to succeed.

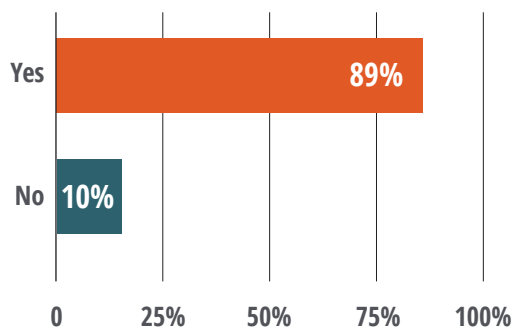


Sibling care responsibilities can threaten resiliency by increasing non-school responsibilities, reducing time for engagement, and contributing to poor academic performance for both the older students and the younger students in their care.

The economic forecast increases the likelihood that teens who have dropped out of school to work will not be able to leave their jobs and return to school any time soon. At a time when economic survival dictates immediate income, connecting their education to a better financial future may seem like a luxury these teenagers cannot afford. This is a resiliency issue requiring multiple supports for students to prioritize education while continuing to meet their family responsibilities. Addressing this catch-22 is one of the many challenges facing educators and policy makers.

89% percent of students in grades 6-12 reported having a course with a grade below a C.

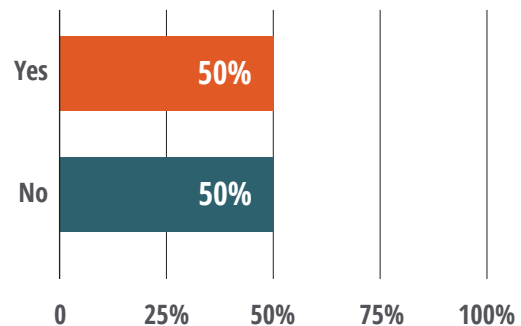
Do you have any classes where your grade is below a C?



The high incidence of students who are failing at least one course has alarming implications for whether students are on-track for graduation.

50% of students in grades k-5 reported not knowing how to use technology for learning.

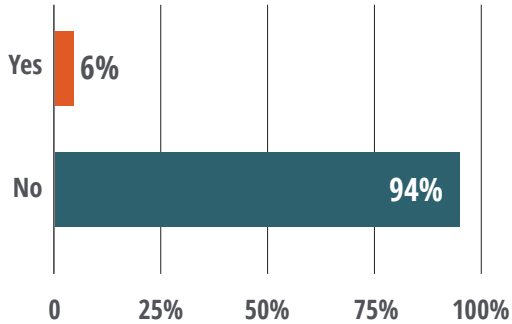
Does your student struggle with how to use the computer for learning?



Families are navigating challenges unrelated to academic ability—beyond curricular requirements—in the form of social and emotional barriers that threaten to overwhelm everything else. Families and students in the pandemic and post-pandemic world require a brand of relational support that falls somewhere in its own category, among the supports provided by teachers, counselors, and paraprofessionals. This relational support does not replace the existing network of caring adults—it supplements it and fills gaps where they manifest. This is exactly the type of advocacy the academic coaches in the attendance recovery program stepped in to supply.

On average 6% of students in grades K-12 responded “yes” when asked if the McKinney-Vento definition (read aloud) applied to them.

McKinney Vento definition of homeless is read to student/family: Does definition apply to you?



The ramifications of McKinney-Vento eligibility for younger children are reflected in the discussion above about both technology (academic resources) and reading and math (academic performance) and have been exacerbated by the pandemic: Crowded housing conditions, food insecurity, lack of bandwidth and privacy to focus on school work, and anxiety caused by economic uncertainty all contribute to the COVID slide and an attack on student resiliency in immeasurable ways.

Implications

We found when working with students and their families during the 2020-21 school year that barriers to student success fell into three primary categories: academic performance, academic resources, and social and emotional factors. Particularly for high school students and emerging readers, disruptions to academic performance will require a combination of academic resources and social and emotional supports for students to regain credits, build a solid foundation of literacy and numeracy skills, and resume a trajectory toward success, regardless of future learning modality. Whether students continue their education online, face to face, or a combination of the two, learnings from our examination of student self-identified barriers revealed that having access to academic resources alone are not sufficient for the success of vulnerable populations: they require relational support, as well.

In the traditional education model, when students don't “show up,” it's a sign the student needs more support. They need an adult who is tenacious and caring in their outreach and able to help students navigate the challenges they face, which seem insurmountable. The need for support does not change in a remote education environment, but the scale of the need and the method of outreach does.

Human support paired with flexibility and accountability is the key to student engagement and success. What is currently missing for many students in America, particularly low-income students who may need additional resources to replace the traditional school support structures, is a coaching/mentoring role. The academic coach acts as the connective tissue between students/families and teachers/administrators.

Our findings and implications throughout this paper have repeatedly shown that additional layers of social and emotional supports are imperative for helping students build the resiliency necessary to overcome barriers to learning in the post-pandemic landscape. These supports must continue when classes resume in the brick-and-mortar environment—these needs are not learning-modality dependent.

With an increasing number of students entering the at-risk student superclass, students with more complex needs are in jeopardy of permanently disengaging from their education. In the changing education landscape, more children need adjustments to traditional models both of learning and support. The children who have opted out of our school systems or struggled to succeed during these fast-changing and incredibly challenging times require our best efforts, our creativity, and our dedication. Their futures—and ours—depend on it.



If you are interested in more information on the impact these states have made for their students please contact Graduation Alliance.

855.486.8855 | [GraduationAlliance.com](https://www.GraduationAlliance.com)