



# Better Than Before

## Building Exceptional Schools Through DC's COVID Recovery

Education Forward DC held the first of a series of events aimed at keeping DC's COVID recovery at the center of the education conversation. Over 20 students shared their experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic with more than 40 participants from DC government and non-profits at the kick-off event on June 29, 2022 at Washington Leadership Academy. Together they also explored the latest data from EmpowerK12 to better understand what supports students need to thrive in the coming school years.

### What We Heard From Students

#### Returning & Reconnecting

Students shared mixed reactions to the return to in-person learning. Some struggled with virtual learning, finding it distracting, isolating, too hard for families without a work-from-home adult or with multiple siblings, and not challenging or engaging enough. One said it was like having a year off from school. Returning to school has provided clearer expectations, social connections, engaging extracurriculars, and more personalized support.

Others felt the opposite, preferring virtual learning for the flexibility to complete work on their own schedule and enjoyed the extra time from not having to commute.

Many students shared that they were happy to return to in-person learning to rebuild their relationships with their teachers and friends, and pointed to the need for greater communications between them. One tool students repeatedly mentioned was Discord, an online chat application that has allowed them to connect with peers and teachers on academics and other school-related issues on a continuous basis.

There was a general sense that the return to in-person needs to look different than what they experienced before the pandemic. Long commutes have gotten longer (some reporting over 2 hour-long commutes) due to unreliable transportation. Workloads have increased and the students shared that their peers have skipped school in order to complete assignments they don't have enough time for.

Students hoped in the future that schools provide:

- Experiences and learning options that best suit a student's style and needs
- More time to connect in clubs and other community building activities.



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DC Education Recovery  
Dashboard

**"The transition for me was one of the hardest processes. I can say that for myself when I was learning virtually I was slacking off. I felt like 'Hey, I'm not in school this is not that important.'"**



**"There was somewhat of a lack of communication during COVID and after COVID. But also to be fair to the adults...there were some that tried to engage... but this is also hard on the adults too."**

## Student Wellbeing & Safety

Students raised concerns about safety with not only the ability to physically distance in schools, but also safety on their way to and from school. These were sources of stress and anxiety that compounded with the negative impacts of the pandemic.

Some students expressed that their school did a great job connecting them to school and supporting their mental wellbeing. A highlight for one was a mental health day for each student every quarter. Though some felt they had access to the supports they needed to be successful, several students raised concerns about a lack of awareness of available counselors and services or insufficient capacity and time to meet with the counselors they knew.

Students shared that they hoped in the future, schools provide:

- More wraparound services
- Mental health days/weeks after ends of quarter
- More positive reinforcements for students who are doing well (parties, honors, etc.)

## Academics

Some students indicated that the material schools were covering was relevant while others felt like many subjects or lessons were not relevant to real world skills and would prefer learning practical skills such as financial literacy. Many shared that the material was appropriately challenging or too easy, but they know that some of their peers are finding it difficult. One student shared that through the disruptions of the pandemic, they saw students who were at the top of their class struggling now and that teachers are spending more time having to review old material than in years past, especially in math. Workload was also a concern raised by students, with some indicating that they do not have enough time to complete the work that is assigned.

In the future, students shared that they hoped schools provided:

- Days off for independent study or catching up on assigned work.
- More opportunities for extra-curriculars and individual academic pursuits.

## School Leaders & Teachers

Several students expressed that they had teachers who care about them and want them to succeed. Further, they have at least a few teachers they have strong connections with and that they can go to when they need help, academic or otherwise. They've appreciated when teachers have been honest with them and when school leaders trust them. One student highlighted that they felt more connected and empowered by being a part of the interview process for hiring new teachers.

However, students reported seeing and sensing the stress that teachers and school leaders are under, from new challenges with maintaining safe learning environments and dealing with the emotional and behavioral challenges of their peers. One shared that 3 of their 4 teachers left after this school year.

## In their own words

Scan this QR code to watch the student panel share its hopes for what school will look like in the future.

