

PANDEMIC EDUCATION RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT



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A REPORT PREPARED FOR:

HAMILTON
COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION

HWDSB

THE PROJECT

Our Purpose

As part of the education initiative by Hamilton Community Foundation, [ABACUS](#) (Advancing Post-Secondary Access)*, the Pandemic Education Research Project was created to understand the effects of the pandemic on Hamilton youth.

In partnership with the **Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board**, we wanted to learn how young people experienced online programming and how they connected with their community, their peers, and adult role models during the pandemic. We also wanted to know what supports worked best for youth during the pandemic and where there were gaps in support. This information will help **youth-serving groups in Hamilton serve children and youth better**.

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*<https://www.hamiltoncommunityfoundation.ca/leadership/abacus-advancing-post-secondary-access/>



What Happened

During November and December 2021, two researchers spoke to **children and youth** across Hamilton. In total, the researchers met with 23 young people from five different organizations. These 23 participants ranged in age from 7-years-old to 17-years-old. Three of the focus groups were held in person and two were held online using the Zoom platform. Which school board participants were from was not identified.

There were also two focus groups held with **program staff** of non-profit youth serving organizations by a researcher over Zoom. A total of 12 program staff

representing 11 organizations participated.

WHAT WE FOUND

Online Learning and Programming



ENGAGEMENT

Overall, young people talked about their online school experiences, rather than how they experienced other programs or clubs. They shared mostly negative experiences with online learning, focusing on how **online school was boring, monotonous, and provided few opportunities for play.**

“I felt like I was in this endless loop, and it was just the same thing every day, I’d wake up, go to online school...(be) in Minecraft for a little while and then I’d leave. Go to sleep and repeat.” – Youth participant (YP)

Many of the participants said that they did not enjoy classes like gym or music online because they couldn’t play sports or learn instruments. They missed doing these activities and what had been fun and engaging during in-person school (e.g., gym class) were replaced with boring activities, like fitness drills. When asked what would make online learning better, young people suggested having more break times, more time built into the schedule to connect with friends, and more engaging lessons that made **use of games** (e.g., Kahoot), **or other incentives** like prizes, competitions and contests.

ACADEMICS

We heard many young people say they felt **grades were pointless**, or they were not being graded, which meant they had less motivation to do assigned work or that work would be too easy. On the flipside, when some material was too difficult or hard to understand, they also **struggled to ask their teachers questions**, not knowing who or how to ask for help in the virtual space.

“It was hard because if I didn’t get something the teacher was explaining, it’s not like in-person where you can get the teacher to help you, you kind of have to figure it out yourself.” - YP

Program staff also noted this struggle in their program participants and would try to find ways to connect them to resources.

We also heard from many young people that **logging in didn't mean they were present and engaged**, with many students logging in for attendance and then leaving their computers or starting a different activity.



"When you're in the [meeting], you can basically do anything. Like, earlier I was talking about how you have the power to do anything, it's basically you can turn your camera off, turn your mic off, and you can literally go to the store, meanwhile, your device is just still on and no one's even there." - YP

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

We heard about technological issues like poor internet connection, unreliable or no access to devices like laptops and tablets, and online learning platforms that were hard to understand or didn't work as designed. The volume of screen time also increased headaches and made it difficult to stay engaged online.

"I would try and log on and my teacher would be like, 'where are you, why are you not here, why were you not there last period, or why were you not there last meet?' And I'd be like, 'oh, my computer's not working. It's not letting me join.' And they would always get mad at me...it's very frustrating." - YP

While some young people said the **technology improved as online learning continued** and they had better access to devices, we also heard about challenges that came from being at home where there were **more distractions and quiet and private spaces were difficult to find**. Being at home could be comforting and provide some freedoms like wearing pajamas or eating lunch when they wanted, but there were also distractions from games, youtube, and the absence of the school setting and structure.

"...you know when you're learning something [at school] - everywhere is quiet and everyone is listening to the teacher. But [at home] your dad could be mowing the lawn outside and it could disturb you, your mind, instead of focusing on the teacher." - YP

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

For online learning to be successful, the logistics of online access should be carefully considered. This includes **access to reliable technology** as well as considering the impact of each **student's home environment**. Beyond technical elements, online programming could be **more engaging** and find ways to **integrate play and spontaneity**.

Social Connection

PEERS

Young people shared that they were able to keep in touch with their existing friends throughout the pandemic. This was facilitated by online platforms such as **video games** (Minecraft, Roblox, Discord) and **social media** (Instagram, Snapchat, Kids Messenger). While the in-person class time may have offered them the opportunity to connect, this was often disrupted online as they wouldn't see each other's faces and, at times, the chat would be disabled. Some said they would hang out and talk to their friends after school and would go to the park, library, or friends' homes, when allowed.



Generally, young people found it harder to make new friends while doing online schooling. Others said that they were **not as emotionally close** to their friends as they used to be, even though they stayed in touch by texting or through social media. Many young people shared that the **quality of their friendships was worse** during the

"I probably just kept in touch with everyone through like social media. Some of my friends - like our relationship, it just like decreased, so when I see them in-person, it was like I just met them. It was like kind of awkward." - YP

pandemic, noting a difference upon returning to in-person school and programming.

some young people struggled to re-integrate and had lost their ability to interact with others.

Program staff also noted that upon returning to in-person programming,

"Their social skills totally changed, and we had to work with that. We had to make sure they got counselling if they needed to. We walked hand in hand with the parents." - Program Staff Participant (PSP)

ADULTS IN THE COMMUNITY

In general, many of the young people we spoke with expressed a disconnect from adults in the community, mostly in reference to teachers at school. Some felt assumptions were made about their behaviours in online

"Sometimes when we had to work or when I would have to go into the meetings, they wouldn't let me in [the online platform], and they would blame it all on me. And they wouldn't listen to me when I would say they wouldn't let me in." - YP

class, which **negatively impacted the trust and support** they felt from their teachers.

That being said, some adults in the community did reach out to young people and create activities to help them manage through the pandemic.

“My teacher would always talk to us. Like at the end of the day, she would see we were tired and like my teacher herself, she would get stressed too, so she would play a fun game with us and would just try and cheer us up.” – YP

Program staff also found it difficult to connect with young people online, with all staff agreeing that **having cameras turned off hindered engagement and connectedness**.

Additionally, program staff expressed difficulty in accessing young people who would have traditionally been engaged through barrier-free drop-in or community outreach programs - the same young people ABACUS was designed to engage. Program staff noted that **some young people just “disappeared” from programs, not engaging or participating at all in the online form**. Staff didn’t hear from them and feel they were suffering but the staff **“don’t know what [they] don’t know”** because they are not connected to those students anymore.

For the young people they were able to access, some program staff found it easier for their **volunteers to connect with the students more frequently online**. The option of meeting with young people virtually allowed for more opportunities for volunteers to reach out.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

While online platforms exist to facilitate connection, we could create more opportunities for young people to **connect with each other and adults in their community** so that they can engage in more **meaningful and intentional** interactions. This might be especially important for young people who are already difficult to reach.

Community Support & Student Wellness

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

While young people’s connection to community programs were not explored explicitly with the youth participants, program staff did note that they felt they were able to offer programming more widely since there was **no more geographical**

“The benefit of offering virtual programs means we can support families that would never have had access to our program before just because transportation links weren’t strong enough.” - PSP



limit. The removal of this geographical barrier also led to **more volunteers** being able to continue their role since being local was no longer a factor, especially for students who would move away from the community.

Program staff also noticed that they were better able to **connect with parents**, and also other family members of their program participants. For example, an organisation that offered cooking programs, stated:

“So, things like [cooking programs]: amazing online, we will never go back. We have a small kitchen at best in these spaces now we can send kids home with recipes and the added bonus is family engagement.” - PSP

It is important to note that technology continued to be a **barrier** for children and youth who did not have access to adequate technology or did not know how to use them.

STUDENT WELLNESS

Overall, program staff did note a **decrease in mental health** and the importance to address these needs during programming. One program staff stated:

When young people were asked how they stayed strong through the pandemic, they highlighted the benefits of **engaging activities** (music, video games), and **connection to friends, family - even their pets**. The importance of and desire for **more outdoor activities** was emphasized by many participants.

“If in the middle of a session, mental health came up, we dropped our reading and writing and math - it didn't matter, mental health was most important.” - PSP

While some programs were not replicable online, program staff felt that they were able to engage in **more creative programming** that served these needs, including creating new programs that integrated outdoor activities, opportunities for young people to connect, and ones that engage family members.

Several young people also shared that they didn't know what was going on during the pandemic, they said **better communication from adults** was needed to keep them informed of all the changes.

“We had a winter break, it was like a surprise because the thing got extended, we didn't have school and then after it turned into online school. And then after, when we came

back to school, we had March Break and then it repeated again, and it was just like a surprise because I didn't know what was happening at that time and they didn't tell me anything about it." – YP

Young people also wished that **adults would check-in on them more frequently** and "ask them if they're okay - if they don't sound good."

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

In addition to providing young people the opportunity to engage in activities that help them **cope with challenges and changes**, young people could benefit from adults **checking in on their well-being**. Also, consider ways to engage the entire family in activities, especially when connecting through online means.

WHAT COULD WE THINK ABOUT NEXT?

We know that children and youth experienced a number of challenges during the pandemic. As they continue this transition, we would like to pose the following questions to serve young people better in the future:

- **Play and engagement** mattered to the young people who participated. **How do we think about play in programming and policy decisions to ensure we keep our young people engaged?**
- The **relationships** young people had with their friends, their classmates, and the adults in their lives changed during the pandemic. **How can we support young people's social relationships in the future?**
- Many of the young people we spoke to felt frustrated by a **lack of power** or feeling like they had little control during the pandemic. **How can we share in this feeling of uncertainty with young people? How can we build youth agency in our program activities?**
- **Wellness** of young people is a clear priority. **How do we ensure we check in on young people in our community and help them cope with difficult situations?**

