



YouthTruth

STUDENT SURVEY

A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

LEADING THROUGH LISTENING:

STUDENT & COMMUNITY VOICES IN SONOMA COUNTY

*Summary of YouthTruth Findings & Implications
for Funders, School Systems, and Community-based
Organizations to Drive Change*

2020-21

Photo Credit Erik Castro

FOREWORD

We've heard this word repeated time and again since 2017: **resilience**. Youth are often celebrated for their resilience. In Sonoma County, after years of back-to-back-to-back wildfires, flooding, and the shocking disruption that COVID-19 brought to our daily lives, is it surprising that even the most resilient among us are struggling to bounce back?

The data in this report reflects the experiences of thousands of young people in schools across Sonoma County. By elevating their voices, we can see that for youth who were impacted by the fires or by COVID, the isolation they experienced with schools being closed has severely inhibited their ability to cope and learn. This is especially true for marginalized youth – including those in the LGBTQ community and those who face the unrelenting burdens of racism or poverty. For these young people, the loss of support in their school community has been devastating. This is truly a crisis like no other.

The good news is that resilience is a skill that can be developed and nurtured with the right kinds of support.

After the fires, our community came together to build our community's resilience. We honored our first responders. We supported our neighbors who lost everything. We donated to help those in need. We found thousands of ways, large and small, to support one another.

Our youth need us to rise to this latest crisis, too. As you read through this report, ask yourself, "what can I do?" How can each of us help rebuild our youth's resilience so they can see a healthy, fulfilling future for themselves? There is a role for every one of us. Sonoma County has proven its ability to come together to lift up those who are most impacted by disaster. Our young people are experiencing the long-term impacts of one disaster on top of another. It's time to rally together to create a resilient culture for them, too.

Join us,



Elizabeth Brown
President and CEO
Community Foundation Sonoma County



Kathy Goodacre
Chief Executive Officer
Career Technical Education (CTE) Foundation



Elizabeth Brown



Kathy Goodacre

WHY STUDENT FEEDBACK?

How student survey data can inform school systems, foundations, and communities to deepen understanding and inspire action

Students know what's working and not working in their schools and communities. But too often, those with the resources to make changes based on student input (typically adults), do not ask the questions. **There is a growing body of research that [empirically links](#) student perceptions to academic and life outcomes, so gathering student feedback is both the smart and the right thing to do.** YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that helps communities gather and act on student and stakeholder feedback through research-based perception surveys and professional development.

In 2017, Fay Twersky, who then led the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Effective Philanthropy group, invited a group of Bay Area, California funders to Hewlett's Menlo Park offices to explore a simple and radical question: **could student feedback help foundations improve their work and better support the communities they serve?**

That question set in motion what became the four-year *Bay Area YouthTruth Student Voice Initiative*, a learning community of foundation and education leaders uniting to explore, interrogate, and test that very question. Six foundations across five geographic areas — Sonoma County, Marin County, West Contra Costa County, the Peninsula, and Monterey County — agreed to partner with local school systems to help both fund and use YouthTruth data to support their communities.

Now in its final year, the *Initiative* as originally conceived is coming to a close. Yet that driving question lives on.

In Sonoma County, the YouthTruth data was initially used to evaluate school-based interventions through the Career Technical Education (CTE) Foundation. Yet when the Northern California fires of 2017 and 2018 so deeply impacted the community, there was a natural opportunity to augment the existing surveys in partnership with Community Foundation Sonoma County to include questions that would help inform recovery efforts across the region.

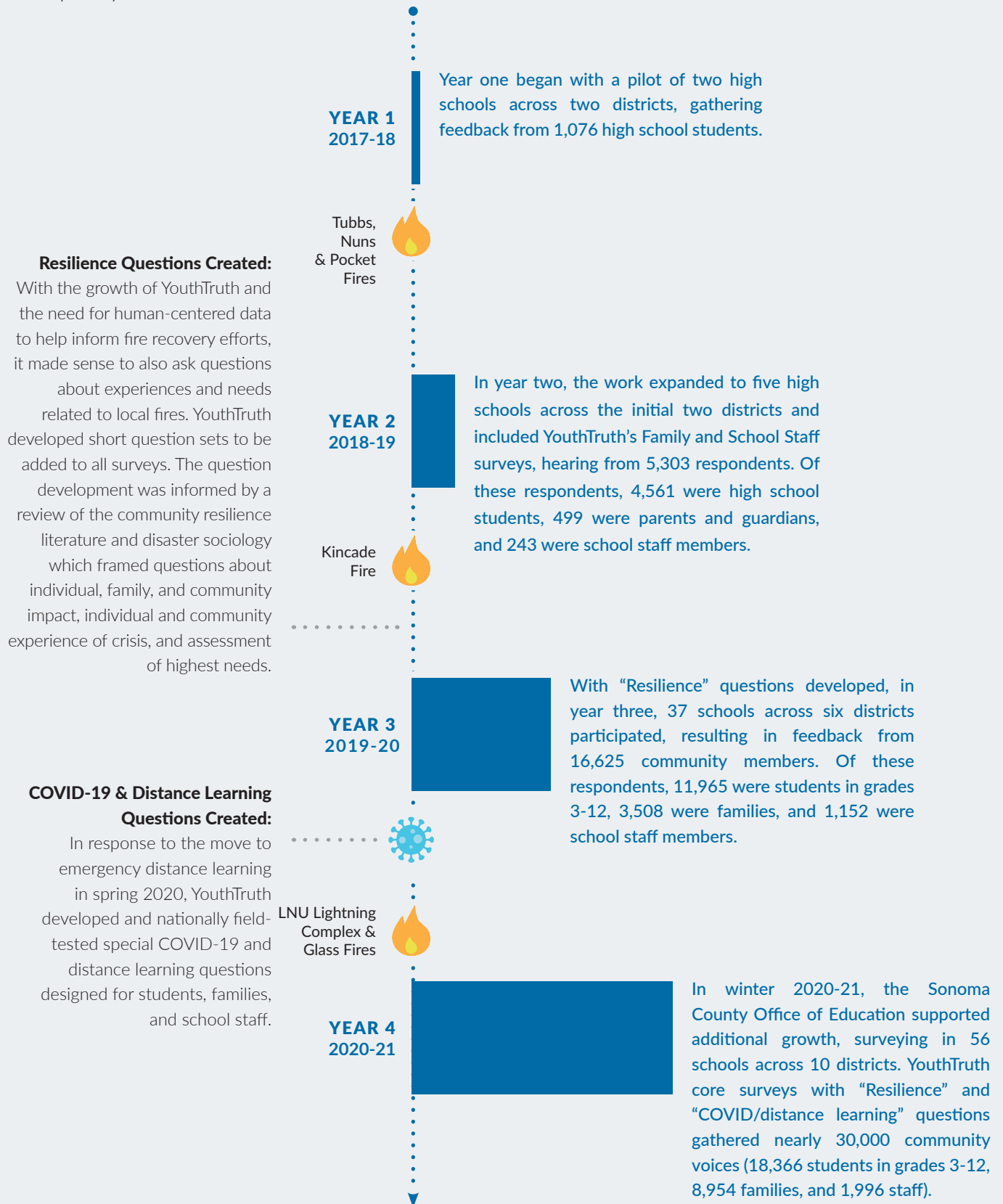
Then in spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic required all of Sonoma County's nearly 70,000 students — along with the rest of the country — to stop doing school in the way they had been taught and engage in learning remotely instead. **In response to a stark lack of firsthand data about how the fires and global pandemic are affecting students' and community-members' lived experiences, this report highlights key themes that emerged from winter 2020-21 Sonoma County YouthTruth surveys and seeks to prompt further reflection and action.**

Suggested Guiding Questions

1. What questions does this data raise for you?
2. How does this data connect to your own observations of your community environment?
3. In what ways might this data inform changes that you or your organization could make to strengthen your community and support the most vulnerable within your community?

SURVEYING IN A CHANGING CONTEXT

What started as a high school student survey pilot in 2017 gained steady momentum as the effort responded to emergent needs — amplifying the voices from more schools and districts across stakeholder groups in each subsequent year.

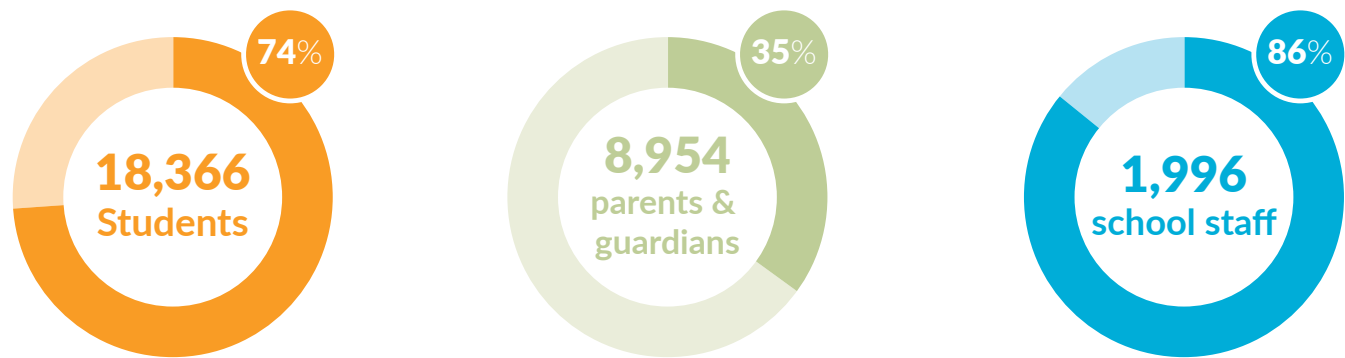


OVERALL

To address the need to hear directly and anonymously from students, families, and school staff about learning and well-being under the shadow of Northern California fires and the COVID-19 pandemic, this report explores survey findings from nearly 30,000 Sonoma County community members. The data was gathered in December and January of the 2020-21 academic year through a 25-minute online survey, administered in English and Spanish, that could be accessed via any internet-enabled device.

WHO WE ARE HEARING FROM

The nearly 30,000 respondents represent 74 percent of students, 35 percent of parents and guardians, and 86 percent of school staff from the 56 schools that participated across 10 districts in winter 2020-21. The survey data were examined using a combination of descriptive statistics, chi-squares, and effect size testing. An alpha level of 0.01 was used to determine statistical significance for differences between student demographic groups. Effect sizes were examined for all segmentation analyses; only analyses with at least a small effect size are reported.



While family and school staff perspectives appear throughout, this report centers the voices of students and shines a spotlight on the high school student experience. Of the more than 18,000 student voices gathered, 12,192 of those voices are from students in grades 9-12, representing two thirds of all student responses gathered. Three thousand three hundred ninety-eight middle school students and 2,776 elementary students also responded to the survey.

AREAS OF INSIGHT

FIRE & COVID EFFECTS	6
HOUSING	7
BELONGING	8
OBSTACLES TO LEARNING	9
MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING	13
READINESS FOR THE FUTURE	15
IN THE END	17

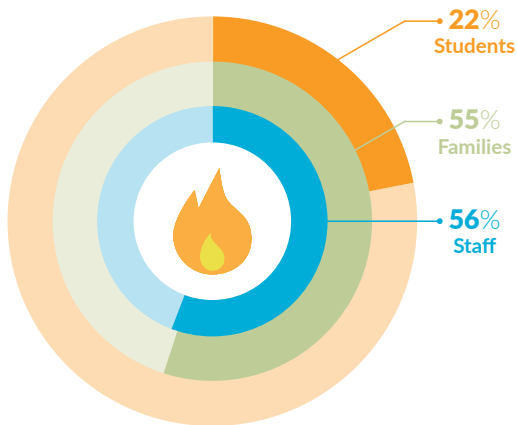
To set the stage for the findings that follow, it is important to quantify the impact that local fires and the pandemic have had on the Sonoma County community. To do so, we will look at responses to two simple demographic questions that were asked at the end of the surveys.

“Think about your life lately....

- **How much have the recent wildfires affected you?**
- **How much has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you?”**

The answers to these questions allow us to explore how respondents who are most affected by the fires and the pandemic respond to survey themes and questions.

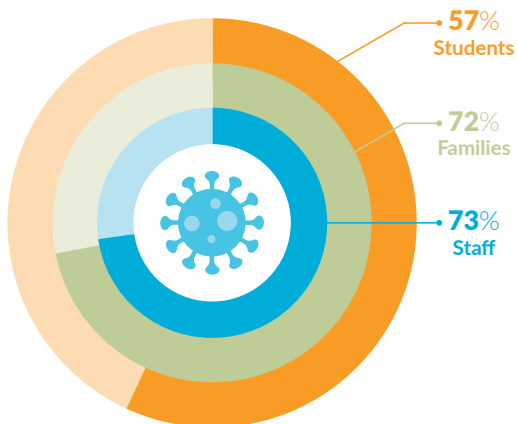
FIRE Effect



Over half of all adults surveyed — 56 percent of school staff and 55 percent of families — report being moderately or significantly affected by California fires.

In contrast, just over 1 in 5 students, 22 percent, of students report moderate or significant impact by the fires.

COVID Effect



Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents across stakeholder groups indicate moderate or significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventy-three percent of school staff, 72 percent of families, and 57 percent of students report that the pandemic has meaningfully affected their lives.

*Note: to be age and reading-level appropriate for students in grades 3-5, these items were modified to “Have the recent fires worried you?” and “How much has the virus changed your life?”

HOUSING

Education and housing are inextricably linked. For students, unstable housing and high mobility can [widen achievement gaps](#). For teachers, lack of affordable housing can force educators to [face impossible choices](#) to balance teaching ambitions with cost of living.

There is a [long-standing](#) housing crisis in the Northern Bay Area that was exacerbated when over 5,400 homes and business were [destroyed](#) in the wildfires of 2017. In Sonoma County's largest city, Santa Rosa, [5 percent](#) of the city's housing inventory was lost nearly overnight. Teachers and school administrators play a crucial role in providing continuity and supports for student well-being, making educators' abilities to stay in the community to support student learning essential.

When families and school staff were asked if the community needed more affordable housing, nearly 80 percent of parents and guardians and nearly 90 percent of staff agree.

"This community needs more affordable housing."



Will school staff stay local?

Of the nearly 2,000 staff members surveyed, 35 percent said that they've seriously considered moving away from Sonoma County as a result of at least one local issue. The most frequently cited local issues leading staff to consider moving away are *cost of living, wildfires, housing issues, and job availability*.

"In the past year, have you seriously considered moving away from Sonoma County as a result of the following reasons?"



BELONGING

Sense of belonging to one's school or community is [connected](#) to other positive academic and life outcomes.

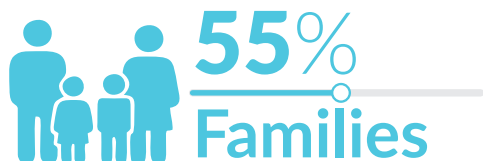
When Sonoma County school **staff** members were asked the degree to which they felt that they were a real part of their community, the majority — 67 percent — agree or strongly agree. The same percentage of **elementary students** also agree.

But a lower proportion of **families**, **middle school students**, and **high school students** report feelings of belonging to their community. Most striking is that just over one in three high school students, 37 percent, report feeling a part of their community.

"I feel like a real part of my community."



67% Elementary Students



48% Middle School Students

37% High School Students

What about sense of community at school?

With a spotlight on the high school student experience and narrowing this theme from sense of belonging in the *community at large* to sense of belonging in a students' school community, we find that only 34 percent of Sonoma County high school students report feeling like a real part of their school's community.

"I feel like a real part of my school's community."

34% High School Students

44% High School Students
Nationally during COVID

This Sonoma County rating of about one in three high school students feeling like a part of their school's community is 10 percentage points lower than typical when compared to other high schools nationally that have surveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the decade prior to the pandemic, 46 percent of students nationally and 45 percent of California students rated this question positively. While Sonoma County students' experiences do vary based on the "COVID effect" for other themes, this data suggests that other local factors, beyond the pandemic, are contributing to lack of sense of belonging in their schools' communities.

OBSTACLES TO LEARNING

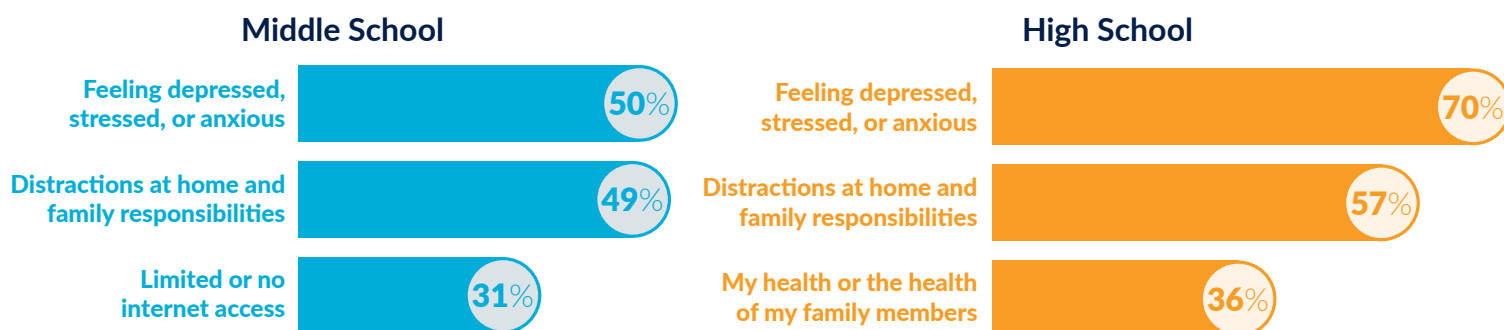
Feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious is the number one obstacle to learning.

Sixty-five percent of middle school students and 63 percent of high school students report at least one obstacle to learning.* For those students, the most frequently cited obstacles to learning are *feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious* — followed by *distractions at home and family responsibilities*. The third most frequently cited for middle school students is *limited or no internet access*, whereas *my health or the health of my family members* ranks third by high school students. About 1 in 4 Sonoma County secondary students cite the lack of an adult who can help them with their schoolwork as an obstacle.

The YouthTruth survey asked students to select from a list of potential barriers to their learning this year, including:

- Limited or no internet access
- Limited or no access to a computer or a device
- Not feeling safe at home
- Distractions at home and family responsibilities
- Feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious
- My health or the health of my family members
- Extracurricular commitments
- My job
- Not having an adult who can help me with my school work
- Getting picked on or bullied
- My personal relationships

“Do any of the following make it hard for you to do your best in school?”



Proportions are out of number of students who selected at least one obstacle.

What do parents observe?

While parents and teens are not known to agree very often, stress and anxiety as an obstacle to learning is one place where child and adult see eye to eye. When high school parents and guardians were asked about obstacles to their child's learning, *my child feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious* similarly emerge as the most frequently cited obstacle, with 68 percent of parents and guardians agreeing. The second most frequently cited obstacle from parents' perspectives is *family stress* (41 percent) followed by *teachers not being as available to help* (39 percent).

Across the U.S., the COVID-19 pandemic is [linked to increased rates of depression and anxiety in youth](#). Indeed, while feeling depressed, stressed, and anxious rose to the number one obstacle to learning for both middle and high school students surveyed by YouthTruth nationally, it also remains true that a higher proportion of Sonoma County students report this obstacle as compared to students at other schools. Sixty-four percent of high school students in California in the past year and 66 percent nationally — and 43 percent of middle school students in California and 48 percent of middle school students nationally — report that feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious makes it hard for them to do their best in school.

*Note that a previous version of this question was asked in spring 2020. Through a process of refining COVID-19/Distance Learning questions, the former verbiage “feeling anxious about the future,” was changed to “feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious.”

OBSTACLES TO LEARNING

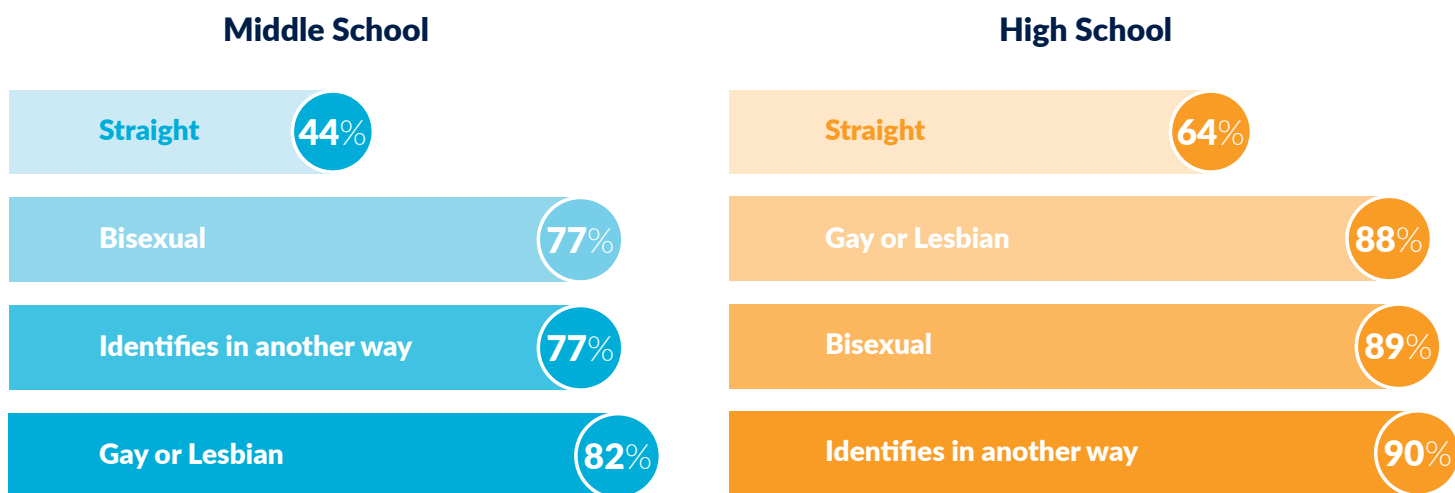
While feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious is the number one obstacle to learning across the county, a higher proportion of non-straight students report depression, stress, and anxiety as obstacles to learning.

Recall that overall, half of Sonoma County middle school students and seven out of 10 Sonoma County high school students who cited at least one obstacle to learning say that feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious is an obstacle to doing their best.

When we disaggregate those findings by students' self-reported sexual orientation, we learn that a higher proportion of students who identify as bisexual, gay, lesbian, or in another way, report that depression, stress, and anxiety are obstacles to their learning.

Feeling Depressed, Stressed, or Anxious

by students' self-reported sexual orientation



Based on research from the [CDC](#), [Population Reference Bureau](#), and the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), among others, we know that students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual are at a higher risk for facing mental health challenges and other external stresses (such as harassment) when compared to their straight peers. This data suggests an opportunity to bring additional [trauma-informed support](#) to Sonoma County LGBTQI students, as well as resources to advance the work of creating an [inclusive school climate](#) and community.

OBSTACLES TO LEARNING

When we desegregate by “fire effect” we see that while 41 percent of middle school students who were not at all impacted by fires say that depression and anxiety is an obstacle, that number jumps to 58 percent for middle school students who were most impacted by fires.

Similarly, 77 percent of high school students who were most impacted by fires cite this obstacle as compared to just 61 percent of high schoolers who were least impacted by fires.

Feeling Depressed, Stressed, or Anxious

by fire effect

Middle School



High School



Teachers feel this, too.

Teachers were also asked if any of the following obstacles make it hard for them to do their best while teaching online:

- No access, or limited access, to internet
- No access, or limited access, to a computer or device
- Lack of a quiet space
- Supporting my own child/children with their distance learning
- Challenges using the distance learning applications
- Lack of training on systems and tools
- Distractions from other family members
- Taking care of relatives
- Family stress
- Feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious

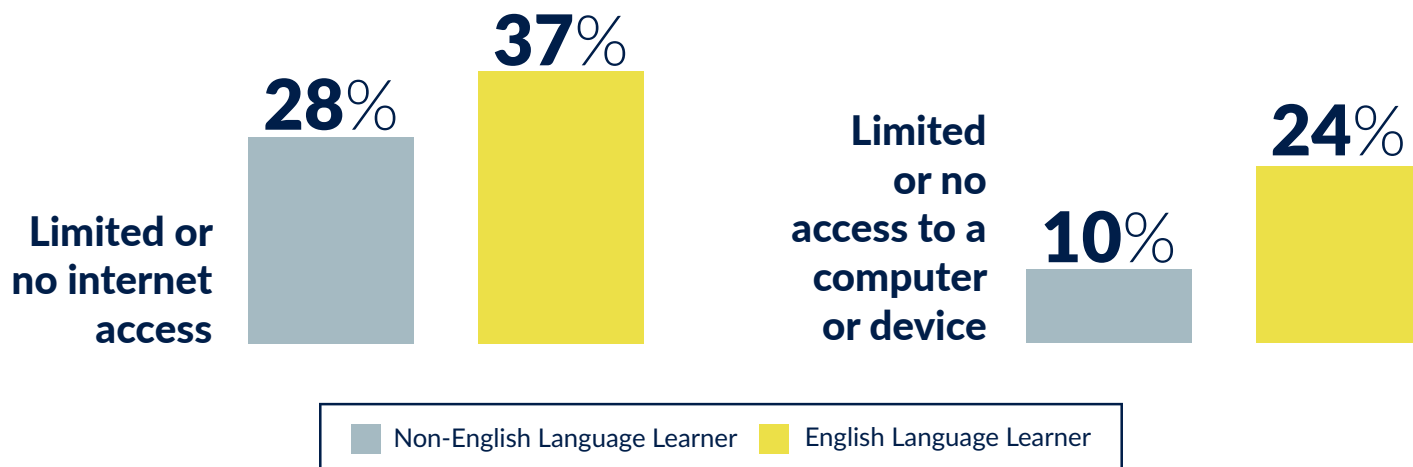
Eighty percent of staff selected at least one obstacle. As with students, among the respondents who selected at least one obstacle, the most frequently cited obstacle to teaching online is *feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious*, with 68 percent of staff indicating this obstacle. Just over half of staff, 52 percent, say that *family stress* makes it hard for them to do their best while teaching online. This is followed by *challenges using distance learning applications* which was selected by 46 percent of respondents.

“While teaching online, do any of the following make it hard for you to do your best?”



EQUITY AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: Spotlight on English Language Learners

Compared to their peers, a higher proportion of Sonoma County secondary students who are learning English (ELL) cite limited or no internet access or limited or no access to a computer or device as obstacles to their learning.



The digital divide in Sonoma County has been chronicled [elsewhere](#) and speaks to geographic, language, and socioeconomic divides. Dr. Conor Williams, founder of the EL Virtual Learning Forum of The Century Foundation has [remarked](#), “For English learners, the pandemic is both a crisis and a revelation: a brutal moment that has pulled back the curtain on long-standing structural issues and inequities that English learners face in U.S. schools.”

MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Nationally, we know that America's youth are [not doing well](#). Anxiety and depression were [on the rise before the pandemic](#) and mental health-related emergency department visits [have only increased since](#).

Sonoma County high school students have faced compounding traumas over the past four years, making the [need to provide](#) school and community-based emotional and mental health supports now so essential.

While Sonoma County high school students' ratings are typical relative to national and state-based comparison groups for questions related to spending time outside (50 percent), eating regular meals (57 percent), eating healthy meals (57 percent), and connecting with friends (55 percent), **a slightly lower proportion of Sonoma County high school students report getting enough sleep (37 percent versus 42 percent in California) and feeling energized (31 percent versus 36 percent in California).**

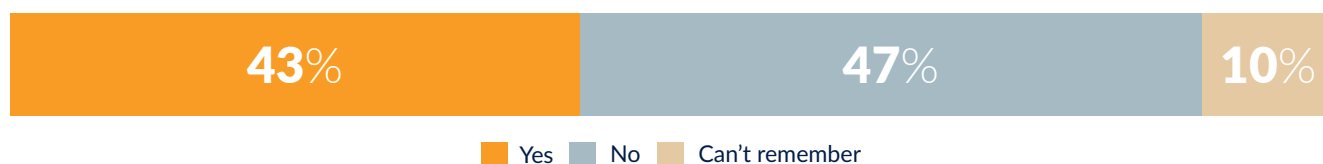
Twenty-three percent of Sonoma County high school students say that they have felt sad often or all the time in the past week and 43 percent said that in the last year they have experienced prolonged sadness (versus "typical" ratings of 40 percent in California and nationally).

If you or someone you know needs help immediately, please call the National suicide prevention hotline 1-800-273-8255 or text "START" to 741-741 to connect with the crisis text line.

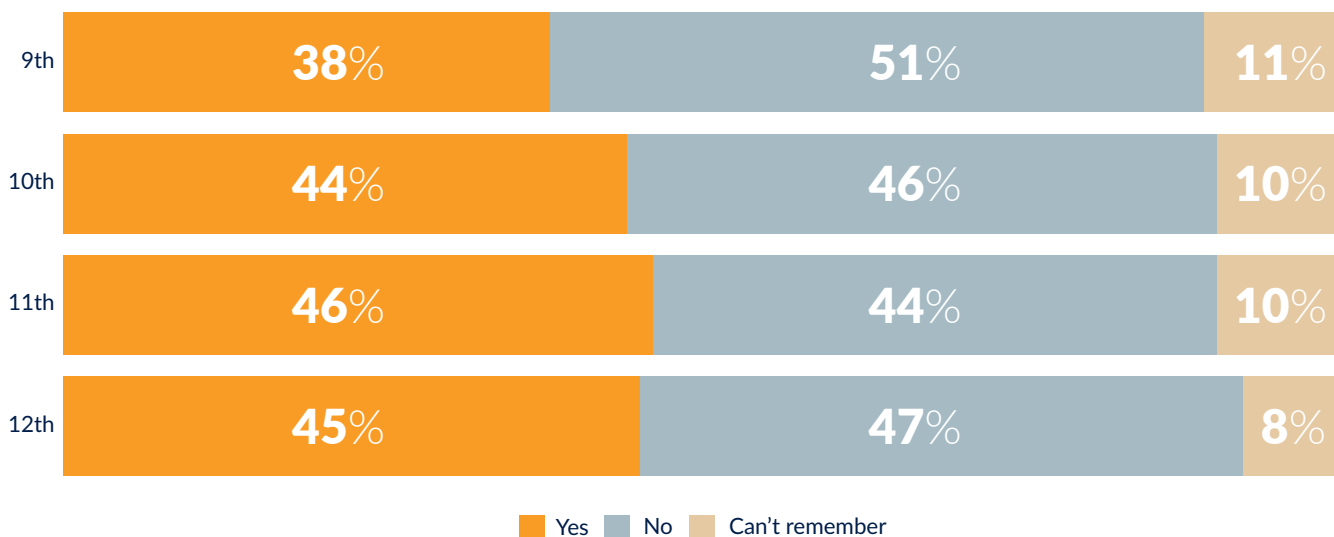


If you are an educator looking for resources, check out the Jed Foundation's [Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention for High Schools](#).

"In the last 12 months, have you ever felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that you stopped doing some usual activities?"



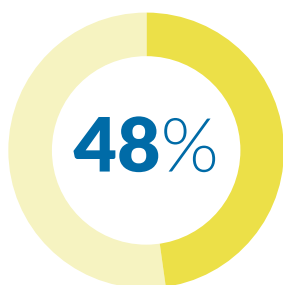
A higher proportion of 11th and 12th grade students tend to indicate prolonged sadness in the past year.



Are students reaching out to adults for support?

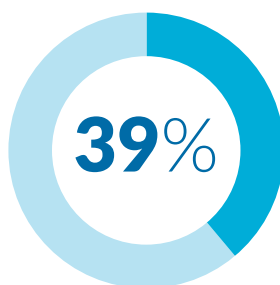
Nationally and in California, less than half of high school students report that there is an adult from school who they can talk with when they are feeling upset, stressed, or having problems (45 percent and 43 percent, respectively). While this stark datapoint is already articulating a national need for more intervention and support for young people, in Sonoma County, less than 1 in 3 high school students — 32 percent — say that there is an adult from school who they can talk to when they need it.

“When I’m feeling upset, there is an adult from school I can talk to.”

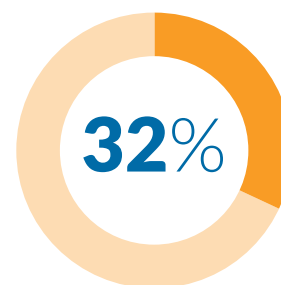


Elementary

“When I’m feeling upset, stressed or having problems, there is an adult from school who I can talk to about it.”



Middle



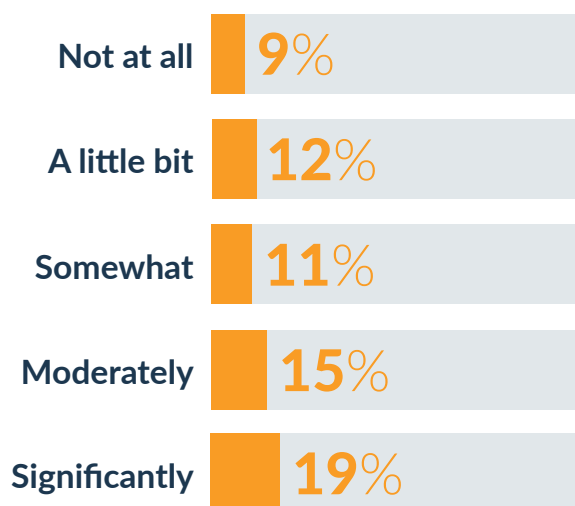
High

Thoughts of suicide are about the same for students in Sonoma County versus California and nationally, with 12 percent of high school students surveyed indicating that they have seriously considered attempting suicide in the last 12 months. However, that number rises for students who report being significantly impacted by fire or COVID-19.

“In the last 12 months, have you seriously considered attempting suicide?”



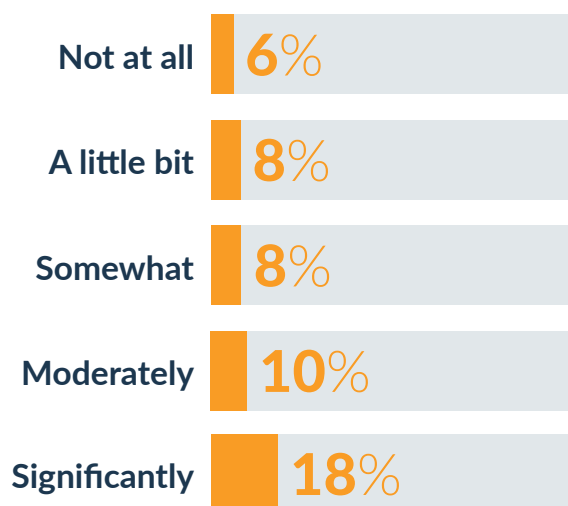
By Fire Impact



A greater proportion of students who were moderately or significantly impacted by the fires indicate serious thoughts of suicide.



By Covid Effect



Similarly, a greater proportion of students who were significantly impacted by COVID-19 indicate serious thoughts of suicide.

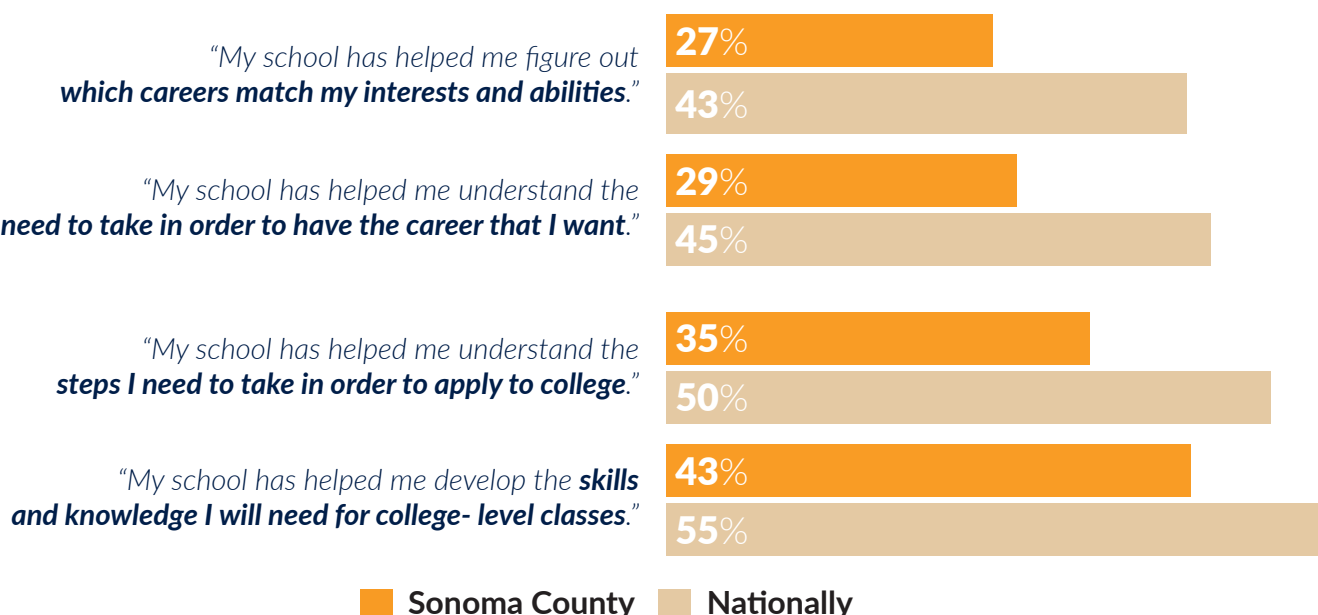
READINESS FOR THE FUTURE

The national high school graduation rate has historically [been on the rise](#) — but do students feel prepared for what's next? And for Sonoma County students, what are their plans for an uncertain future?

Students do not feel prepared.

A lower proportion of Sonoma County high school students report that their schools are providing the support they need to pursue postsecondary plans as compared to their peers nationally.

When asked a pair of questions related to readiness for *careers* and a pair of questions about readiness for *college*, Sonoma County high school students' ratings fall between 12 to 16 percentage points lower than the typical high school in our dataset nationally.



Even when the comparative data is restricted to high school responses from other schools surveyed during the pandemic, Sonoma County high school students' ratings still fall between six and 11 percentage points lower than the typical high school surveyed in the past year.

What do students say about relevance and engagement?

Relevance is essential to learning and may also play a role in students' feelings about their readiness for the future. While 45 percent of high school students nationally report that what they learn in class helps them outside of school, only 32 percent of Sonoma County students agree. Just 53 percent of Sonoma County students say that the work that they do for their classes really makes them think, as compared to 61 percent nationally. And only about half — 51 percent — of Sonoma County high school students report that they are able to create goals for their own learning.

Students' perceptions of the relevance of their schoolwork [plays a substantial role](#) in their level of engagement in school. And when it comes to engagement with learning, Sonoma County students' ratings across YouthTruth engagement questions fall in the bottom quartile relative to other schools nationally.

Sonoma County students' comparatively low ratings of engagement and postsecondary preparedness present an opportunity to invest in more relevant learning experiences that connect the dots between academics, life outside of school, and career aspirations. When students are informed about how their skills and interests align to careers, they are [more likely to pursue and complete](#) postsecondary education in alignment with those interests.

Spotlight on Seniors

Nationally, we know that [one in four seniors](#) (25 percent) report that their post-secondary plans have changed since the start of the pandemic.

In Sonoma County, the pivoting is even greater.

One in three, or 34 percent, of Sonoma County seniors say that their plans for what to do after high school have changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

So, what are Sonoma County high school seniors' plans?

After finishing high school, 62 percent of Sonoma County high school seniors still expect to attend a two- or four-year college, and just 4 percent expect to attend a trade or technical school.

Twelve percent of high school seniors are not sure what they want to do next, nine percent expect to get a full-time job, and two percent plan to join the military.

Ten percent of high school seniors say that they expect to do something other than the options listed.

Are there any broad trends in students' college aspirations?

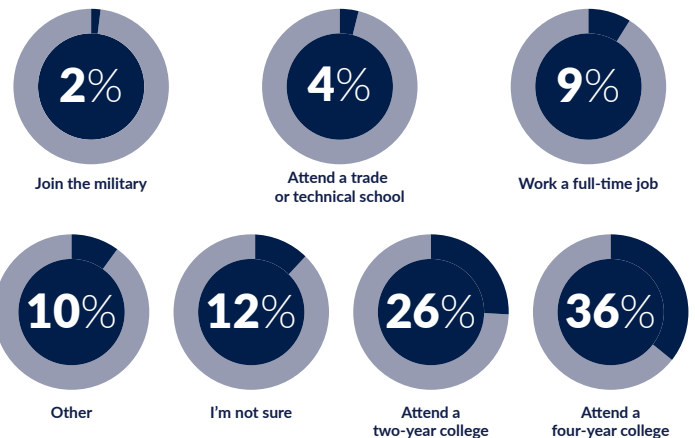
Based on historical YouthTruth data, over the past decade 76 percent of high school students surveyed nationally said they want to go to college. However, during the pandemic, that proportion dropped 10 percentage points to 66 percent. A similar proportion of Sonoma County students this year — 68 percent — say they want to go to college.

According to [NPR's Anya Kamenetz](#), the percentage of students who say they expect to go to college has historically mapped to the proportion who actually do. As such, this data may represent both a national and local shift away from college aspirations, in line with other [trends reported elsewhere](#) about college enrollment plummeting among first-year students and underscoring the opportunity to connect learning experiences in school to a broad range of college and career pathways.

1 in 3 Sonoma County high school seniors' postsecondary plans have changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic



After you finish high school, what do you expect to do next?



(Note that these percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding).

Sonoma County students have faced a constellation of traumas over the past four years: multiple devastating fire events and floods, a pandemic, an experiment in remote schooling, economic and political instability, a national racial justice movement stemming from police killings of Black Americans, and local mourning of the [police killing](#) of 13-year-old Andy Lopez. These compounding stressors in the environment will surely complicate students' ability to learn and thrive. Given this, a trauma-informed approach to recovery both in and out of school is essential.

From educators to nonprofit and industry leaders to funders and policymakers to grandparents, there is a role that everyone can play in supporting the resilience of today's youth.

We hope this report helps individuals connect this data to what they observe in their community and what's possible to change within their sphere of influence. And we hope it deepens conversations about how to better support young people, their families, teachers, and school administrators — and helps target resources where they are needed most.

There is a critical opportunity now to listen to and learn from students' and community members' lived experiences during this unprecedented time. Whether in Sonoma County or in other communities across the country, prioritizing students' emotional and mental health and well-being — and hearing directly from students about their experiences and needs — should be a foundational step in any recovery effort as we move forward.

In reflecting on the initial driving question that sparked this work: **can student and stakeholder feedback help communities get stronger? The answer is a resounding YES.**

GRATITUDE

We would like to thank the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for bringing the *Bay Area Student Voice Initiative* to life, without which this work would not have been possible.

Additional heartfelt gratitude is extended to the dedicated school and district leadership teams from the following local education agencies for partnering with YouthTruth and helping to bring these insights to light:

Cloverdale Unified School District

Santa Rosa City Schools

Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified School District

Sonoma County Office of Education

Geyserville Unified School district

West Sonoma County High School District

Healdsburg Unified School district

Windsor Unified School District

Petaluma City Schools

Sonoma Valley Unified School District

And of course, tremendous thanks to the approximately 18,000 Sonoma County students, 9,000 parents and guardians, and 2,000 school staff for sharing your insights. We hear you. We see you. And you are not alone.



About Community Foundation Sonoma County

Community Foundation Sonoma County is the hub of philanthropy for the county, connecting people, ideas, and resources to benefit all who live here. Founded in 1983, CFSC works with philanthropists to create plans that will make an impact in our community and become part of their family's legacy.

More information: sonomacf.org





About Career Technical Education (CTE) Foundation

The Career Technical Education (CTE) Foundation, founded in 2013, works to improve the economic outlook for Sonoma County's youth by investing resources in a coordinated system of college and career readiness programs that lead to high-wage, high-demand, and high-skilled jobs in the county.

More information: ctesonomacounty.org

About YouthTruth

YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student and stakeholder perceptions to help educators accelerate improvements. Through validated survey instruments and tailored advisory services, YouthTruth partners with schools, districts, and education funders to enhance learning for all students. To learn more about the research that informs our work, please visit www.youthtruthsurvey.org/resources.

 youthtruthsurvey.org
 [@youth_truth](https://twitter.com/youth_truth)

YouthTruth
— STUDENT SURVEY —
A NATIONAL NONPROFIT