SUBJECT: KCS Middle School Eighth-Grade Cohort School Year 2021-22 Focus Groups

Executive Summary

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### Introduction

In the Knox County School District, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted every level of the education system—from the daily practices in individual classrooms to the multi-year scope of pacing, curricula, and assessments. Although the district returned to in-person instruction for the ‘21-22 school year, staff at one KCS middle school are seeing more kids fall through the cracks. Worse, those cracks seemed to have widened from approximately an academic year and a half of virtual learning and continued disruptions such as quarantine and school closures. Current student concerns specific to KMS include the following:

1. The student failure rate in one or more classes has more than doubled since the onset of the pandemic.
2. Teachers expressed concerns over students “not doing the work,” such as not attempting assignments, turning them in, taking tests, or engaging in classroom instruction.

These impacts have led KMS staff to ask the following questions, which informed this study:

1. Have these students just given up?
2. Is their lack of attempt because they have [widened] skill gaps from being virtual the previous year?
3. a) Do they know how to get help? b) Do they even want help?

### Aim of this Research

This research aimed to explore these questions from the perspective of this KCS middle school’s eighth-grade cohort. We wanted to figure out from students’ perspectives about what they’re lacking, what they need, what they even think about school, and how that has changed (if it has) over the last three years. Findings from the study can inform developments and amendments of targeted support for students in areas of their learning that have been hit hardest by the pandemic.

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### Theoretical Framework

Psychological Capital is the theoretical framework around which this study is built, which included the developing research and focus group questions and coding the data according to how much students experienced perceived self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resiliency[[1]](#footnote-1). Self-efficacy refers to the active belief in one’s ability to channel the mental and physical attributes necessary to executing a specific task within a particular context. Hope is a mental state comprising agency (willpower to pursue challenging goals) and pathways (ability to create different paths to reach goals when beset with challenges). Resilience is the ability to bounce back from setbacks, failure, or even positive progress and greater responsibility. Finally, optimism is a positive interpretation that attributes good events to permanent, personal, and pervasive causes and views bad events in terms of temporary, external, and situational factors.

### Methodology

This research was informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis[[2]](#footnote-2) because we must examine the meanings that particular events, experiences, and states hold for students as they make sense of their personal and social worlds. Using interpretive phenomenology, focus group questions were constructed to direct students to reflect on their views and interpretations of various school and classroom experiences before, during, and after being virtual the previous year. Specifically, questions were phrased to see how much hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism students had to draw from when they faced different experiences related to school. The questions are Appendex A.

*Participants and Data Collection*

The object of inquiry for this study was a higher rate of student disengagement in school since returning from virtual schooling. Eighth-grade students were chosen to participate in the focus groups because the pandemic disrupted their middle school experience the most at KMS. These students missed essentially 12 months of in-school education, especially those who were virtual all of SY2021. Specifically, they experienced the following:

* Their sixth-grade year was cut short, closed in March 2020;
* Their seventh-grade year was an odd mix of virtual and in-person;
* Everyone was given academic “grace” during their seventh-grade year;
* They were virtual for at least some part of their seventh-grade year. Approximately one-fourth were virtual all year long (both semesters of SY2021). Roughly a third were virtual first semester.
* They were primarily average students, neither honors nor low performers (some but not much).

Two focus groups were conducted of five eighth-grade students, who ranged from honors to failing. The first focus group consisted of all five students, and the second focus group had two of the original five. Each focus group lasted between approximately an hour to an hour and a half.

*Data Analysis*

The focus groups were recorded and then transcribed, and the transcript data were coded using the CAQDAS software NVivo. Data were read through once, and then the second read-through was coding using interpretive phenomenology, resulting in 20 codes. Interpretative phenomenology focuses on detailed descriptions of everyday experiences and comprehensively analyzes how students determine where and how school fits into their personal and social worlds. Reading through the transcripts, REA coded any indication of an individual’s subjective perception or account of an object or event instead of an attempt to produce an objective statement of the thing or event itself[[3]](#footnote-3). These 20 codes were then coded again through the psychological capital framework and generated the following themes described below.

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### Findings

*School is a Means to an Uncertain End*

This theme comprises two major categories constructed from answers to the questions, “What would you like to learn in school?” Focus group data indicated that doing well in school is not the intended outcome, but a means to reach some more significant goal (or not). The first major category was related to practical knowledge. Students spoke of wanting classes that taught practical skills such as doing taxes and balancing checkbooks. They also wanted classes that help them 1) learn skills needed for pertinent jobs and 2) decide if that job is what they want to do or the path they want to take. For example, the participants described having goals such as wanting to become a lawyer or a nurse and often included detailed explanations for why, which suggests they are motivated by something beyond simply doing well in a class or school. What is interesting is that it did not seem to be whether or not they have something that motivates them that marked the difference among these students. Rather, it was the degree to which they believed that doing well in school is a way to reach their goal.

In addition to future-oriented, career-type goals, participants described other goals that became categorized as a sense of belonging. Specifically, students spoke of the desire for fostering relationships with adults, which included caregivers and teachers. A question then arises, does getting good grades earn the student attention and celebration? These two categories suggest that some students may be lacking optimism about the classes they are currently taking or fail to see the connection.

*Hope: The Intersection of Consistent Consequences and Alternative Pathways*

One of the questions raised by KMS—whether students truly have “given up” on school—suggests a concern that students lack a sense of agency. From the psychological capital framework, agency is a state of mind where an individual can set challenging but realistic goals and expectations and then pursues those aims through “self-directed determination, energy, and perceptions of internalized control.”[[4]](#footnote-4) What students learn about the value of an education is grounded in their developing understanding that their actions do or do not help them achieve the outcomes that matter to them. When educators see students actively pursuing good grades and attempting and completing assignments and tests, they are witnessing the result of students learning several critical factors that have shaped their perceptions of personal control:

1. Their actions have consequences/outcomes.
2. Different actions yield different types and intensities of outcomes (for example, studying hard earns a higher test grade, while chronic absenteeism results in poor grades).
3. Consequences of actions are relatively stable and consistent (for example, the likelihood of earning a higher test grade increases with dedicated studying).

This study initially focused on whether students experienced a low sense of agency; however, focus group data suggest one of the biggest challenges for struggling participants is lacking hope. Hope is conceptualized as

a positive motivational mental state based on an interactively derived sense of successful 1) agency (goal-directed energy) and 2) pathways (the ability to generate alternative paths to achieve goals when obstacles hinder plans).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Like an internalized sense of control (agency), alternative pathways are developed by students as they learn various goal-seeking strategies, such as contingency planning and mental rehearsals of both goals and pathways. Several key factors determine one’s available pathways[[6]](#footnote-6), such as the following:

* Figuring out and evaluating alternative paths to the same destination
* Having alternatives already determined that can circumvent challenges when frustrated
* Having strengths to draw from to manage areas of weakness and vulnerability

In general, all focus group participants indicated they believed they had control over at least a few of their outcomes in school. What separated the students who were doing well from the struggling students was the degree to which they had or could create alternative pathways toward their desired outcomes when their current paths were blocked.

*(Re)building Mentoring Relationships and Adapting Instruction*

All of the participants emphasized the importance of building one-on-one relationships with teachers. They saw those relationships as critical for learning how and when to advocate for their needs, including balancing competing priorities among different classes or between school and home life. When viewed through psychological capital, relationship-building enables teachers to become social support that students can leverage when facing adversity such as post-ish pandemic impacts and other academic issues[[7]](#footnote-7).

Teachers also must know what and how to adapt their instruction or assessment for students who may be struggling. Students felt that teachers who did build relationships with them were better able to adjust their instruction, assignments, and homework to the needs of students whose stories they know. Such negotiations between student and teacher could help the student learn positive adaptation patterns and develop alternative pathways toward getting good grades, which was a goal all focus group participants indicated they had.

Among the most significant short-term adaptions needed is shifting the focus of teacher feedback and assessment away from a correct answer and more toward how students are making sense of the nonsensical because they currently have nothing onto which to anchor, other than consistently poor grades. Learning effective adaptations and alternative pathways build students’ resilience and hope[[8]](#footnote-8). In both of these instances, teachers are paramount as they can provide learning opportunities for students. However, that requires committed communication and a willingness to adapt feedback to students’ level of resilience or hope.

### Suggestions and Future Research

* It is important to note that students who are not struggling to reach the desired outcome do not indicate that they are aware of many or even any alternative pathways. Instead, they may be fortunate enough to be on an unobstructed path toward their goals or could be facing little adversity, such as learning style, RTI needs, an unstable home life, or other examples. Further research would need to be conducted to determine if students are creating multiple pathways to deploy at any required time or if luck may be on their side. Findings from such work could guide instructional practice that teaches students such a skillset.
* Work with students to help them learn how to identify what’s in their control and how they handle what’s in control and what’s outside of it. Develop advisor role/relationships. Begin a process of coaching students by identifying their current problems (gaps). Then teach them how to identify places where they have control (completing work, studying, etc.) and areas where they don’t (who their teacher is, whether they like the subject, how far behind they are). Then help them develop a plan that involves both faculty and students. Assign students to a faculty advisor that can check in with them to monitor their progress. Couch all of this in terms of real-world problem-solving that they will use as an adult to solve financial difficulties, health issues, getting into preferred college, dealing with school and job, marital problems, difficulty with boss/coworker, handling customers/clients/patients, etc.

Appendix A

1. If you were to think about what school meant to you, what would you say?
2. Overall, what’s been your experience with transitioning from virtual to in-person?
3. Think of one of your favorite classes, what’s a typical day in class look like for you?
4. Think of a class you just don’t like, what’s a typical day in it look like for you?
5. Could you tell me what happened the last time you got frustrated with an assignment or test in your class?
   * 1. Possible follow-up: What did you do? How did you respond to this frustration?
6. Think about the last test you took. What was that like for you?
7. Thinking about what we’ve talked about, what do you need/want from your teachers to feel better about these things?

1. Luthans, F., & Youssef-Morgan, C. M. (2017). Psychological capital: An evidence-based positive approach. *Annual review of organizational psychology and organizational behavior*, *4*, 339-366. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Smith, J. A., & Shinebourne, P. (2012). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*. American Psychological Association. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Smith, J. A., & Shinebourne, P. (2012). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*. American Psychological Association. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Luthans, F., & Youssef-Morgan, C. M. (2017). Psychological capital: An evidence-based positive approach. *Annual review of organizational psychology and organizational behavior*, *4*, 339-366. P. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Snyder CR, Irving L, Anderson J. 1991. Hope and health: Measuring the will and the ways. In Handbook of Social and Clinical Psychology, ed. CR Snyder, DR Forsyth, pp. 285–305. Elmsford, NY: Pergamon. P. 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Luthans, F., Youssef, C. M., & Avolio, B. J. (2007). *Psychological capital: Developing the human competitive edge*(Vol. 198). Oxford: Oxford university press. P. 63 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Luthans, F., Vogelgesang, G. R., & Lester, P. B. (2006). Developing the psychological capital of resiliency. *Human resource development review*, *5*(1), 25-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Luthans, F., & Youssef-Morgan, C. M. (2017). Psychological capital: An evidence-based positive approach. *Annual review of organizational psychology and organizational behavior*, *4*, 339-366. P. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)