NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE
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STORIES
OF INEQUITY

FILM SERIES

Emerging Voices from the Pandemic:
Students Speak Out

Students felt as if their voices didn't matter

A National Urban League Film Series

Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom, **George Washington Carver, 1896. One hundred and twenty-five years later, having access to a quality public education remains one of the most significant influences on how our youth grow, develop, and thrive. To fully achieve Carver's decree, teaching strategies and protocols must be intuitively created with students participating in the process. Historically, however, educational policies and practices are all too often implemented merely for students rather than with them, resulting in initiatives that are misguided, riddled with half-truths that greatly delay progress. It is only with student input and student-based curricula that our youth will truly be able to realize the full impact that a public education can provide, thus allowing them the best opportunities to develop into healthy, successful adults.**

Never was this made more evident than in the 2020-2021 school year. And, as much as one would love to hear what Carver would have to say about it, nothing can compare to hearing the emerging voices of the actual students who lived it, via an ever-important film series developed by the National Urban League.

The National Urban League (NUL), founded in 1910, is the nation's oldest and largest community-based organization devoted to empowering African Americans to enter the economic and social mainstream through programs, advocacy, and research. One of the NUL's advocacy priorities is to amplify the voices of underserved youth, to empower them to become positive-change agents in their communities, and to impact policy at various levels through the telling of their stories.

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The *Emerging Voices from the Pandemic: Students Speak Out* film series project was spearheaded under the NUL's Equity & Excellence Project (EEP), which explicitly supports local, state, and national advocacy, engagement, and educational reform efforts throughout the Urban League Affiliate Movement and with local, state, and national partners. Currently, there are 91 Urban League affiliates serving 300 communities across 36 states and in the District of Columbia.

> **The National Urban League views educational equity as an ongoing process that removes historic barriers and creates a system of opportunity by which ALL students have the necessary resources to reach their full potential.**

As such, and central to the EEP and to this film series project, *Emerging Voices from the Pandemic: Students Speak Out* was launched to provide an authentic platform for youth to speak freely about their own experiences dealing with virtual learning during the pandemic to bring about real and lasting change in the way our students are supported. It is our hope that this film series will point us in the direction of being able to provide students with the resources they need to be successful if, or if not, remote learning continues to be in-play.

For this *Emerging Voices from the Pandemic: Students Speak Out* project, 26 high school students were recruited from National Urban League *Project Ready* affiliates. The youth interviewed one another about their educational experiences thus far during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on those students who "disconnected" from school during remote, virtual, and hybridized teaching and learning. The project defines "disconnected," "reconnected," and "connected" as follows:

"Disconnected"—youth who have not been consistently engaged in their academic experience thus far during the COVID-19 pandemic

"Reconnected"—youth who have at some point "disconnected" from their academic experience thus far during the pandemic

"Connected"—youth who have been consistently engaged in their academic experience thus far during the pandemic

At the onset of the film series, high school students were recruited from National Urban League affiliates who provide direct services and supports to students in their

Film Participants:

26 young people

Ages ranging from 15-18

Grades ranging from 9-12

13 "connected" students

7 "reconnected" students

6 "disconnected" students

communities. "Connected" students were paired with "disconnected" or "reconnected" students. To compensate for the time the youth invested in this project, the NUL provided stipends to each student. During this time, the participating students attended workshops and trainings to prepare for their interviews and to deepen their understanding of the overall project. The National Urban League contracted videographers and an animator in order to empower youth to bring the "disconnected" students' stories to life, a qualitative analyst to summarize key findings from this work, and two social workers to provide students with emotional support and direct them to necessary resources. The students interviewed one another in-person with the videography team or over Zoom, depending on the location and availability of the partners. "Connected" students led the discussions by interviewing "disconnected" or "reconnected" students.

This project identified three major aspects of students' lives that influenced "connection" or "disconnection" with schooling. No one factor took precedence over the other, and the importance of these factors may differ from student to student. The factors are as follows:

1. **FAMILY ENVIRONMENT**

2. **SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

3. **SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS**

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

"Connected" students reported having Wi-Fi and other necessary technologies, a designated study space, and few, if any, additional stressors within this context. "Disconnected" students often faced a number of challenges, including a lack of resources and space to create a functional learning environment, a need to care for younger siblings, unstable housing, ill family members within the home, and abusive caregivers. For example, Aayren, a "disconnected" student, explained that ongoing conflict in her family environment made it difficult for her to get emotional support within the home, further deteriorating her mental health and making it more challenging to engage in school.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The strong impact of friends and adults in student engagement in virtual schooling was noted in all 13 interviews. Having a supportive relationship with at least one person made it more likely for a student to remain "connected" or to eventually "reconnect" with schooling. Students reported on the benefit of supportive relationships with immediate or extended family, friends, and teachers. One student, Tara, received meaningful personal support from her teacher. She stated that her teacher is "an open-minded person and actually takes the time out to sit there and listen to your situation and give you good advice about certain situations." Another student, William, stated that having a teacher

WHAT WE HEARD

Positive relationships with peers & adults are vital

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check-in on him when he was struggling made him feel "special and loved," and that he mattered to that teacher. For another student, Angel, it was his friends who supported his "reconnection" to school. He stated, "my friends were an instrumental part of getting me to come back to school . . . After my initial negative experience with online learning, I didn't want to go through it again for junior year, but they convinced and supported me all the way through."

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

Schools that offered additional resources to students fostered a sense of community and encouraged students to remain engaged even in virtual and hybrid contexts. Those that didn't provide these supports and engagement strategies contributed to student disengagement. Thomas, a "disconnected" student, called for teachers to focus on engagement strategies to make *class fun again*: for example, using the breakout room feature, doing warm-ups, and promoting participation from students. Other desired supports noted by the youth included newsletters, student feedback forms, interactive classroom structures, reasonable workloads, mental health counselors, and transparency about available resources. For example, one student,

Parker, mentioned that "most schools don't really have good mental health infrastructure to check in on students and make sure they're okay . . . and performing at their maximum capacity." Schools that did not offer such resources made students feel isolated and unheard, resulting in disconnection. One student, Esther, stated:

> "I feel like the teachers haven't really listened to the students . . . They never really asked the students for their opinions . . . I feel like there was that absence of asking students what was the best way for them to learn."

WHAT WE HEARD

Students need caring, supportive teachers who are trained to properly engage students virtually

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Schools must be better equipped to offer students emotional support

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REFLECTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS At the conclusion of the film project, we invited youth participants to reflect on the entire program, from recruitment through training, activities, and filming. These reflections represent favorable, though unintentional, outcomes as a result of their participation.

> **"I wasn't as invested in school and I lacked motivation. Working on this film helped me back on the right path to graduating."**

"I now realize that I have to keep pushing to feel more involved with school."

"My favorite part was being asked to take a moment to breathe and doing this project with a friend."

"I learned that the way people learn drastically changes between person to person."

"I learned that there are many people like me and it's great to have a strong support system."

"I started taking more time to myself rather than strictly schoolwork. I also tried to make it more enjoyable, even if it was just a little."

"The most beneficial thing I took from working on this film was being able to be part of a space where I could openly discuss my feelings of the virtual learning environment with peers."

Youth who participated in the film project identified which supports they would have found useful during the pandemic to keep them "connected" to school. Students voiced a desire for a more engaging school environment, recommending the following:

- **Using hands-on materials during instruction time.**
- **Using interactive features like Jamboard and Kahoot other than PowerPoint.**
- **Incorporating more check-ins to ensure students are keeping up with the material before moving onto the next lesson.**

Although this project did not center on teachers' experiences during the pandemic, many students recognized that virtual schooling was also a challenging transition for their educators. As such, students voiced a need for school leaders to provide teachers and other educators with the resources and training necessary to meet student needs, one student, Parker, commenting that, "as students, we were struggling with the adjustment, teachers also didn't have any preparation." Educators will again be challenged in the 2021-2022 school year which, for many, will bring about a return to in-person instruction. It is likely that disengagement with schooling will continue for students who do not feel heard or supported during their return to school, and so adequate resources and training should be devoted to engagement strategies and other supports for students.

The virtual learning environment needs to be more engaging for students

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OUR TAKEAWAY FROM THIS IMPORTANT FILM SERIES EXPERIENCE should allow educators and administrators across the educational ecosystem to better understand the compounded stressors that students are experiencing with remote schooling to enable them to direct their efforts in sustaining and building students' connection to school, whether virtually or in-person.

As suggested by the students, these practical adjustments will certainly enhance their overall well-being by alleviating some of the burdens on them, their peers, and teachers.

Districts should allocate resources to provide teachers with the training and supports they need to engage students during this critical time and beyond. Supports should focus on making the learning environment more engaging, for example, by requiring less synchronous screen time with students when in a virtual format and engaging students through project-based and experiential learning activities.

Administrators and teachers should work to make schools more supportive of the variety of needs that youth have, such as health counseling and college admissions, which begins with focusing on developing trusting and caring relationships with students to ensure they know that they matter and have the support of adults in the school.

Communities should also step up to help support students' thriving, which requires being able to recognize the types of responses and supports that would help to build on their youth's assets, as well as to be versed in knowing how to address their needs as they continue to experience challenges and take on new opportunities over the coming years.

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