

# **Despair, Community and Resiliency: Observations of Students and Families During the Pandemic**

**A Survey of Student Services Personnel in the Parkway C-2  
School District**

**Ken McManus**

**Director: Alliance for Healthy Communities**

**April, 2021**

# Purpose:

To document the social-emotional impact of the ongoing pandemic on Parkway area students and families through the lens of Parkway frontline personnel (counselors, social workers and care coordinators) working to serve these students and families- Parkway's internal "first responders." The goal of this project is to build capacity for substantively informing community members and local leaders about the pandemic's impact on the wellbeing of local kids and families.



# Method:

A survey link was distributed to 106 Parkway School District student services professionals on February 26, 2021 and again on March 11, 2021. The survey was designed to be brief, incorporating two questions asking grade level and Parkway region served followed by three narrative questions intended to elicit participant observations as to prominent social-emotional challenges faced, the impacts of these challenges and any observations of positive adaptations made by students and/or families.

Fifty-nine PSD student services personnel participated in the survey. Summaries of their responses were organized by grade level and crosschecked by region served. Prominent themes were identified using both a word count process and reviewer observations of theme patterns. Importantly, while the responses to the survey were almost entirely about students and families, the distress felt by the survey respondents was palpable throughout all grade levels and across all Parkway regions.



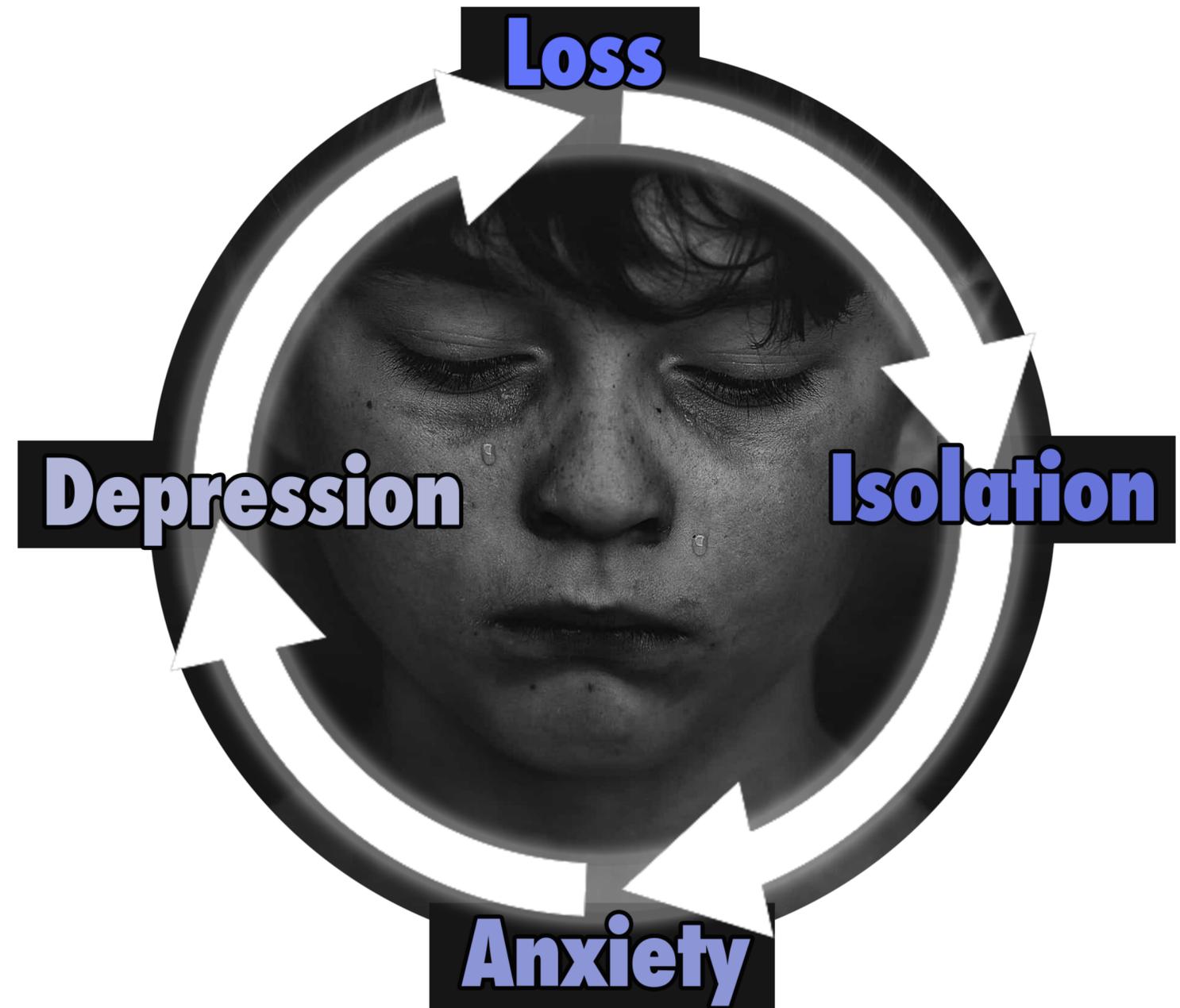
Example Question: \_\_\_\_\_



# Summary:

As a consequence of a full year of pandemic living, Parkway area youth, families and staff are hurting. That is the readily discernible reality expressed in the aggregate of responses received between February 26 and March 18, 2021 to the *Impacts of the Pandemic on Parkway Students and Families* survey.

**The content of responses reflects innumerable examples that illustrate a self-perpetuating cycle of despair across grade levels and regions within the Parkway community: loss – isolation – anxiety – depression.**



# Loss:

The losses observed have been myriad and, in combination, have dramatically disrupted access to the significant social touch points that foster individual and collective securities; the loss of friends and loved ones to COVID-19, the loss of routines and the “normalcy” of life and the loss of social connections, traditions, friendships and belonging in community with others. The lived experiences across so many losses have left grieving interrupted and fragmented; the sadness of grief permeates much of daily life. In addition, the loss of jobs and financial stability combined with increased food and shelter insecurities compound larger experiences of the loss of control over life circumstances and the loss of capacities to make things better.

“Loss in general, loss of social interactions, loss of activities, loss of family members, loss of the life before COVID. Grief is everywhere you look”, “...lack of connections, lack of social interaction...”, “Grief over the loss of how school should be.”, “...losing that social connection you get daily by attending school...”, “...loss of loved ones, or the general loss of how things used to operate.”, “Students are facing a challenge of pushing through with school because the loss that they have faced, which can come off as a lack of attendance, or completion of work.”, “Lack of closure when they were unable to be present with loved ones that died.”, “Depression and anxiety due to family stress, loss of work, divorce, and school changes...”



# Isolation:

These patterns of loss, and the length of time over which these losses have been endured, fuel experiences of isolation; isolation from others and isolation from established lifestyle “anchors.” Obviously, the pandemic context, with restrictions on gathering, physical contact, and social distancing, has isolated people from each other. Real time interactions involving social touch, affection and all the vital non-verbal cues and energies, have either been lost entirely or replaced by screen-based interactions that too often serve to deepen the pain of isolation. Isolation from grandparents/relatives, “play dates”, clubs, faith communities, arts programs, athletics, tutors, prom or the earned recognition afforded in a graduation ceremony, has left students and parents feeling alone or forgotten and helpless.

“Isolation and feeling alone”, “Lack of engagement social isolation...”, “Isolation has also been very difficult for student.”, “Student report feeling lonely, isolated and sad.”, “Our virtual students are struggling the most as many have not played with a friend in over a year.”, “Isolation: not being able to interact with their peers in typical ways, not being able to reach out to supportive adults in typical ways, not being able to access typical outlets and releases, this is hugely disruptive to their lives and social emotional health.”, “...the lack of community and feelings of isolation from their peers and teachers...”, “...struggling with missing the socialization of being in person...”, “...losing that social connection you get daily by attending school...”, “Loneliness and isolation resulting in low motivation...”, “Those that are virtual are feeling disconnected and isolated. It appears their mental health is diminishing. In person students are missing connections with friends and classmates since they cannot socialize as they once did.”, “social isolation is debilitating to daily life...”



# Anxiety:

Recurring helplessness, in the face of continuing uncertainties, appears to fuel increased episodes, and levels, of anxiety. The context of the ongoing pandemic has been comprised of chronic change and unknowns, leaving students and their parents feeling that life is “out of control”. Students and their families worry intensively about many aspects of life that previously were stable and secure, such as school and activity schedules, childcare and the risk of illness for themselves and others. Parents worry about their ability to adequately assist their children with the challenges of distance learning, anxious about their capacities to supervise their students and work from home; anxious about their ability to navigate distance learning software and effectively manage changing, erratic schedules. And students across all grade levels are anxious about their friendships, their grades, their families and when the pandemic and its chaos will ever end.

“Kids are more stressed out and anxious than ever! Anxious about school. Some of them could be reflecting their parents’ anxiety if they are out of work or sick.”, “We are seeing more anxiety and depression.”, “Depression and anxiety due to family stress.”, “Students expressing more worries about "getting sick" or loved ones getting sick - student/family fears about falling behind academically.”, “Parents and students are struggling with anxiety. Parents have anxiety over virtual platforms being used and needing to be home to support virtual learning... Students have anxiety due to decrease in seeing friends.”, “Depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues in both students and caregivers.”, “Increased anxiety related to various factors related to the pandemic - school performance, access to resources, health safety.”



# Depression:

Intensive anxiety, fueled by ongoing helplessness, often predicts depression, especially when the triggering conditions persist for as long as the current pandemic. Disrupted, fragmented grieving at losing isolated loved ones, has left many students, and their parents, struggling with hopelessness and feeling defeated, unable to find motivation for the tasks of daily living, let alone the complicated challenges of the pandemic. Students' depression, frequently characterized as "lack of motivation", "sadness", "grief" or "feeling overwhelmed", has undermined attendance, performance, social initiative and relational bonds, cementing, for many, a self-perpetuating cycle of despair.

"I also have seen an increase in depression... ", "...reduced motivation, and less positive social interactions. These struggles lead to poor grades and less social support- which adds to the feelings of anxiety and depression.", "ANXIETY and DEPRESSION!!!!", "Depression, isolation and hopelessness.", "Depression... ", "Sadness due to lack of peer interactions... ", "Grief related to the loss of friends and family members related to COVID or other reasons. Lack of closure when they were unable to be present with loved ones that died.", "social isolation, helplessness... ."



# Families in Turmoil

**For even the healthiest of individuals and families, life during the pandemic has been fraught with new and unfamiliar difficulties, shattered routines and minimal consistency regarding much of anything. For families struggling before the pandemic, crisis management has become the “norm”, leaving parents feeling defeated, exhausted and inadequate. Financial stress has precipitated food and shelter insecurities; a new, overwhelming circumstance for many Parkway families. Parents’ pre-pandemic arrangements for managing their family’s lifestyles were undone by “shelter at home” restrictions.**

**Parents have been overwhelmed with the challenges of employment as onsite essential workers or working from home or not working at all, while also sustaining childcare, adequately navigating their student's distance learning needs, attending to isolated, aging parents, getting few breaks and little, if any, rest. Stress (and distress), broken lines of communication in the home and with school personnel, embarrassment and "adaptation fatigue" have left families less able to buffer the cycle of despair that has characterized pandemic life.**

"... families the stress of making the right choice for their students and family unit in terms of staying virtual, returning to in person, and trying to find stability and routine in a year that is constantly changing is the biggest challenge... ", "Families at home struggling to juggle everything.", "There have been several families that have struggled financially as a result of the pandemic.", "Increased stress on families due to economic struggles and separation from family members.", "Students and families are definitely not coming out of this pandemic unscathed.", "...students and families feel worn down from trying to constantly adapt and adjust their expectations...", "Students and their families are operating at a starting stress level that is higher normal because they are living through a pandemic ... This does not even get to the students and families that have experienced loss by means of death, job loss, social isolation, or even losing their homes that are just trying to keep going.", "... families feel worn down from trying to constantly adapt...", "Families at home struggling to juggle everything.", "Families are stressed and the kids haven't had consistency in routines."



# Positive Adaptations- Discovering Community

As students and parents have had to cope with the impacts of the pandemic and associated despair, those individuals and families that appear to have coped most effectively have been those who have extended themselves to others- communicating, collaborating, sharing, receiving and supporting. During the pandemic, Parkway students and families, some for the first time, have had to ask for help- help of all kinds.

# And help showed up-

help in the form of neighbors, friends, families, colleagues, peers, teachers, and clergy as well as through community resources like the Parkway food pantry and mental health services. And, there are those individuals and families who have collaborated with others; pooling or sharing resources, new ideas, new interests and supports, while improving communications and building empathy for the challenges of managing kids at home or as students in a classroom. Creative initiatives like virtual play dates or family visits, getting off screens to play together, as a family, *outside*, seemed to sustain, or increase, connections with others. Further, parents and students have reported learning to “let go” of overloaded schedules and “back off” high-pressure expectations, finding renewed value in being together. It appears that the best antidote for coping with the isolation and despair of the pandemic has been each other.



“... families the stress of making the right choice for their students and family unit in terms of staying virtual, returning to in person, and trying to find stability and routine in a year that is constantly changing is the biggest challenge... .”, “Families at home struggling to juggle everything.”, “There have been several families that have struggled financially as a result of the pandemic.”, “Increased stress on families due to economic struggles and separation from family members.”, “Students and families are definitely not coming out of this pandemic unscathed.”, “...students and families feel worn down from trying to constantly adapt and adjust their expectations...”, “Students and their families are operating at a starting stress level that is higher normal because they are living through a pandemic ... This does not even get to the students and families that have experienced loss by means of death, job loss, social isolation, or even losing their homes that are just trying to keep going.”, “... families feel worn down from trying to constantly adapt...”, “Families at home struggling to juggle everything.”, “Families are stressed and the kids haven't had consistency in routines.”

# Conclusion

The pandemic has, for over a year, engendered a perpetuating cycle of despair, the heart of which has been the loss of access to each other; to community as we knew it. For many Parkway families, the despair of this isolation has been compounded by financial, food and shelter insecurities or by the passing of isolated loved ones due to COVID-19. These traumas, which substantiate “adverse childhood experiences”, have set the stage for increases in the frequency and level of anxiety and depression, both of which fuel perceptions of helplessness and hopelessness. Importantly, the longer these perceptions sustain, the more deeply they engrain, creating the potential for life-long behavioral and cognitive habits sets rooted in despair. Trauma informed communities will prove essential for our collective recovery moving forward.

# Conclusion

However, some students and families have shown significant resilience during the pandemic, resilience fueled by extending themselves towards others, sometimes in **new, uncomfortable ways**. The risk of vulnerability to ask for help, to invite others, or accept the invitation from others, into new partnerships and collaborations, or to relinquish established expectations into more accepting and empathic postures, has allowed people to engage with each other in unexpected and meaningful ways. These new, substantive paths of connection appear to mitigate the damage that might otherwise have accumulated upon themselves, their families and their lifestyles and foster resilience for moving forward.

