

# Students' Priorities for Recovery and Beyond

a Joint Report by Haverhill High School VIP  
and the Harvard Law School Education Law Clinic<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This report was authored by students from Haverhill High School VIP (Chelsea Daigle, Taeyah DeJesus, Michelle Duston, Alice Marvin, Jonathan Orellana, Trish Pham, and Gabriela Vargas) and law students from the Harvard Education Law Clinic (Noni Brown, Samantha Harris, Jordan Mulevicz, and Cynthia Tan). Advisory support was provided by Carol Ireland, Eridania Nieves, Lori Curry and Andy Polanco (for Haverhill VIP) and Prof. Michael Gregory (for the Education Law Clinic).

## I. Introduction

Remote learning has been a challenging adjustment for students, parents, educators, and schools since the COVID-19 pandemic started last spring. It has been an unprecedented time for students, who are missing social interactions with their peers and have spent an excessive amount of time in front of screens to learn. Challenges with remote learning have only compounded many pre-existing challenges. Listening to students' voices is more important now than ever, as decision makers at all levels contemplate plans for the rest of the remote learning period and the transition back to campus.

In this report, Haverhill High School VIP students offer our own insights and experiences concerning the pandemic's impact on our education. We explain that while the pandemic has caused some unique challenges, it has primarily exacerbated existing issues in our education.

As screens and website links have taken the place of in-person human interaction, many of us have felt unmotivated and isolated—finding it difficult to engage in an environment devoid of social ties. Our workloads have been heavy, and without a separation between school and home, we have found it difficult to unwind, leading us to feel overtaxed and anxious.

We have discussed these issues and brainstormed solutions to implement at both local and system-wide levels in order to combat not only issues posed in the current learning environment, but to allow a safer and more supportive environment upon our return to school. Many of the issues are merely manifestations of existing problems made worse by current conditions. Thus, these problems will not simply dissipate upon a return to traditional learning. In this document, we lay out our concerns and propose solutions in order to ensure that when school doors are open again, we are able and ready to walk through them and engage fully in learning.

The sections below highlight five overarching priorities students in Haverhill High School VIP would like to see addressed as part of recovery and beyond. Our priorities are consistent with what students across the Commonwealth have shared, even prior to the pandemic, about what they need in order to do well in school. Under each of these priorities we describe 1) our most pressing concerns and 2) our proposals for possible solutions.

## II. Learning Environment

### Classroom Environment

**Teachers vary significantly in terms of approachability and classroom engagement, which is stressful and makes it difficult for us to engage with and adapt to remote learning.** Some teachers have clearly worked hard to overcome the challenges of the remote/hybrid learning

environment and have been quite successful. Others have struggled with technology learning gaps. Some teachers seemingly have not participated in or engaged with trainings to help them improve, and many who have participated have not implemented best practices in the classroom. At worst, some teachers have not even turned on their cameras at all while providing instruction.

### Possible Solutions

- Implement school-wide standards to help make sure students and teachers have a uniform understanding of how classrooms should run during remote/hybrid learning (and beyond).
- Create new professional development opportunities for teachers, including topics on social-emotional learning, anti-racism, and technology. Students' voices should inform all faculty training. Other training ideas include how to affirm and validate others, empathy, motivation/productivity support, and workplace in-home support.
- Provide avenues for student feedback to individual teachers so they can hear directly from students regarding what we need and how best to reach us in the new learning environment, including surveys and suggestion boxes.

### School Environment

**With multiple streams of information and little centrality or coordination, we are constantly struggling to locate important information—creating a school environment that causes us to become confused and anxious and lose motivation.** The school uses Google Classroom where there are class-wide pages, but not everyone registers for these platforms. Trying to find information, or even trying to figure out whom to ask can feel like a wild goose chase, with conflicting answers scattered across multiple platforms. Consolidating information would allow us to better understand expectations; easily find resources, assignments and updates; and encourage coordination with important information being in one place.

### Possible Solutions

- Develop a central information hub to consolidate information from across platforms and regularly communicate with students and our families to help us feel knowledgeable and supported at all times.
- Utilize Computer Programming and Website Design students to finish building the new website so that it will be functional and usable. This website should be the main communication hub.
- The website could also be updated by students. Updates should include: 1) weekly updates from administrators, 2) an updated calendar of *all* events, and 3) sections where different student organizations, clubs, and teams can submit their own updates.

## Listening to Students

**There are not sufficient pathways for us to share our voices with teachers and administrators, which contributes to our isolation and impacts motivation as many of us feel we are not represented.** We would like our concerns to be heard and to have clear pathways for communicating with teachers and administrators. With remote and hybrid learning, there have been even fewer opportunities for us to engage with the broader community and feel both heard and validated. We would like “built-in” channels to communicate, so that we can feel as though our voices matter and our concerns are being addressed.

### Possible Solutions

- Create more channels for students to voice our opinions and needs, including between VIP, Student Council, and the Administration
- Consider “town hall-style” events with Mr. Burns facilitated by the student council--a whole-school forum in which teachers and students can come together and ask questions as well as elevate concerns. Rather than a one-time event, this should be regularly scheduled with the opportunity to follow up as needed on specific issues.
- Form a team or committee in school where all voices are included and can connect. The team would meet to propose ideas for the town halls referenced above and then debrief afterwards in order to form solutions and/or responses to students’ concerns.
- In all spaces involving student voice, ensure feedback is welcomed in a way that is open to and reflective of the entire school community, including the voices of neurodivergent students and students with disabilities.
- Generally speaking, we appreciate it when our teachers and administrators validate and affirm our concerns, particularly with regard to the challenges of remote learning.

## **III. Relationships**

### Teachers

**Some teachers feel unapproachable when we have challenges and this fuels our anxiety, making it harder to engage.** Being able to communicate regarding extensions and heaviness of workload would ease our anxiety. Breaking down these barriers would also allow for a sense of connection more generally and help us to feel more supported.

### Possible Solutions

- Encourage more open avenues of communication between teachers and students, generally.
- Make sure teachers have cameras on during class time.
- Invite teachers to a “town hall-style” event (described above) or a meeting of VIP to listen to students’ voices and concerns (and to share their own) as a means of fostering

empathy. Students who would not normally feel comfortable sharing individually may feel empowered by such an event and this would allow more students' voices to be heard.

- Provide for more mentoring of students by teachers — different from the previous model of “advisor” meetings. Students should be treated with respect and provided content appropriate to our development levels. Teachers could be paid for their time, so they could provide more targeted and committed support. They would apply for the position in order to ensure the program attracts teachers who are truly interested via an opt-in process as opposed to a requirement. Students should be on the interview committee to help select those who are the best match for the role.
- Ensure that mentoring and “town hall” sessions are guided by students and not by a curriculum or imposed structure, so that we have the flexibility and freedom to share what we need.

## **Support Staff**

**Support staff are not being effectively utilized to provide resources and address our needs.**

Current long wait times for appointments and lapses in communication add unnecessary stress to simple problems like issues with our class schedules. Additionally, for students who have disengaged, we need to feel as though there are adults who genuinely know us and can actually support us in an effective way that gets us to re-engage.

### **Possible Solutions**

- Make sure that support staff understand the needs of each student so that they can provide better strategies for how the school can support the particular student, and how the student can make changes to support themselves.
- Streamline communication and designate a point person for each department so that we can quickly access a counselor when we are in need.
- Ensure resources are well known and accessible to students and our parents.
- Establish “office hours” for students to connect with counselors and other support staff to strengthen our feeling of connection to the school community and provide easier access to resources.

## **Peers**

**We often feel isolated, with no camaraderie with our peers or connection to the broader school community.**

### **Possible Solutions**

- More virtual and in-person events (when possible) in order to build a sense of community with each other and with faculty and staff.
- Build community through virtual field days, “pie the teacher” days, or equivalent events.

- Continue and expand the Hillie Connectors program so that all freshmen students have an upperclassman to help support their transition to high school.
- Support and expand the English Language Learners Mentoring program for incoming ELL students. It is a similar model to the Hillie Connectors but specifically offers bilingual support to ELL students.
- Incorporate interesting ice-breakers in classes and other activities so students can genuinely get to know each other more.
- Organize a virtual “pep rally” activity that will foster school spirit to help motivate us during the school year. A virtual “field day” is another idea that could also help.

## IV. Equity

### Equity in Remote Learning

**We want our teachers and administrators to understand that we are balancing jobs, household responsibilities, and other stressors that come with working from home, as well as the global pandemic’s impact on daily life.** We have work responsibilities that cut into both our learning capacity and time to de-stress. We wish our teachers and administrators were cognizant of this and understood our need to earn income for our families and the exhaustion and additional stress this brings.

#### Possible Solutions

- Create opportunities for support staff and teachers to connect with students and understand what we are dealing with outside of school.
- Make sure our workload reflects these challenges and provide flexible deadlines so we can better manage our competing responsibilities.

**Our home and work environments have now become the same place, decreasing motivation and increasing anxiety as we lack the physical space to decompress after school.** For some students, working from home is okay; we have a space that is better for us than school, including a private work area and increased independence. But for others, not only do we not have an effective, productive work environment, but this work environment is in conflict with our home environment. Dealing with these boundaries is distressing, particularly when it interferes with our ability to get work done without distractions or interruptions. Similarly, many students feel that our spaces are hard to relax in after school, so we no longer have a space to relax.

#### Possible Solutions

- Create a “Calming Room,” a dedicated physical place in school to go to when we are feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Such a space would allow us to decompress and hit pause when the school day becomes too overwhelming. In this space, we could have

access to positive stimuli, support staff, food, bean bags, blankets, music, play-doh, and other calming activities. Currently, a version of this exists at Haverhill in the form of Mr. Polanco's room. However, this should be school wide, however, and advertised so that all students can use it.

**Unstable internet and technology challenges can hamper genuine learning and cause those of us with limited access to technology to fall behind.** Additionally, some courses (for example, computer science) are incompatible with chromebooks, so some students are precluded from participating.

#### Possible Solutions

- Technology grants to purchase better hardware, more stable internet, and fund computer science-related courses for students.
- Rethink and reduce school account restrictions for websites, applications, and computer functionality to ensure these are helpful, rather than hurtful. For example, we currently cannot schedule Google Meets or use File Explorer on their chromebooks.
- Establish policies that ensure we are not penalized for faulty technology and/or unstable wifi connections.

## **V. Genuine Learning**

### **Genuine Learning**

**The workload can be crushing and stressful, which interferes with our ability to engage with and really learn the material.** When the workload is lighter, it is easier not only to plan and manage, but also to learn. We get to actually think about what we are being taught, take thorough notes, read beyond what is required, make diagrams, and color code. When the workload gets to be excessive, we just have to get it done. Many teachers seemed to start out understanding this, but over time many have been less lenient. Just because it has been a whole year does not mean remote learning has gotten easier to manage.

#### Possible Solutions

- Ensure teachers communicate between each other, as well as with us, to make sure the workload is coordinated among classes and reflective of our capacity.
- Encourage teachers to use pacing guides and be more lenient with deadlines.

### **Classroom Engagement**

**One of the reasons it is so hard to genuinely learn virtually is that there is only one stimulus--a flat screen.** It is difficult to listen without a real person in front of you.

### Possible solutions:

- Encourage teachers to avoid passive lectures and to provide frequent opportunities for us to actively participate in learning.
- Have teachers make online (and in-person) lessons more engaging and interactive and pay attention and adapt to the way we learn.

## **Testing**

**Standardized testing is a significant source of stress for us and takes away from our learning experience by forcing teachers to “teach to the test.”** Juniors who did not take their standardized tests last year are anxious about taking the test now when it is no longer aligned with what we have actually been learning. We also find that, in classes without standardized testing, the curriculum has been more flexible and has focused on learning goals that better suit our needs. The narrow focus of standardized tests stifles creativity and flexibility.

### Possible Solutions

- Advocate strongly with the Commonwealth to suspend MCAS during the pandemic.
- Moving forward, advocate for alternatives to standardized testing that allow us to more accurately show what we have learned.

## **Students with Disabilities**

**Remote learning has made it a challenge for those of us with disabilities to truly engage with and learn material.** Incomplete implementation of our §504 Plans and IEPs have made remote and hybrid learning much worse for many of us. Those of us with 504 Plans and IEPs want to feel like our teachers respect us. We also want our teachers to become better aware of our learning needs and accommodate us when creating lessons and activities.

### Possible Solutions

- Ensure that all teachers have a basic understanding of special education and accommodations for students with disabilities. This includes training teachers on how to incorporate our IEPs or 504s in their lessons and activity plans.

## **VI. Wellbeing**

### **Connection to Community**

**Many of us have experienced a decrease in our motivation as a result of the pandemic because of feeling isolated from our peers, teachers, and the school itself.** More live interaction will enable teachers to be in tune with how we are coping and where we are at in terms of learning goals and capacity.

### Possible Solutions

- Ensure teachers set aside time in every class for social interaction among students and teachers. Teachers should have the discretion to decide whether this time should be used for social engagement or well-being check-ins. This time could also be used for discussing time management, self-care and burnout avoidance.
- Encourage both teachers and students to be on-camera during class and increase face-to-face contact where possible.

### **Additional Supports**

**We need access to resources and knowledge that will help us cope with the many unexpected changes we are experiencing right now.**

### Possible Solutions

- Implement a mandatory counseling/mental health/social-emotional learning block as part of our schedules, including developing best practices for how this time should be used to address trauma and anxiety caused by the events of this past year.
- Ensure that all students have a consistent touch point with school support staff (such as counseling, mental health, social work staff).
- Communicate strategies to students and families, as part of regular newsletters, that help us learn skills to better manage our time, incorporate self-care into our daily/weekly activities, and avoid burnout.
- Develop protocols for when a student may need to take breaks throughout the school day, in both the live and remote (breakout rooms) school environments. Some teachers have already implemented such strategies. For example, if a student is having trouble, some teachers suggest that they go take a walk and get a drink of water and then come back. When students return they are more focused and ready to work.