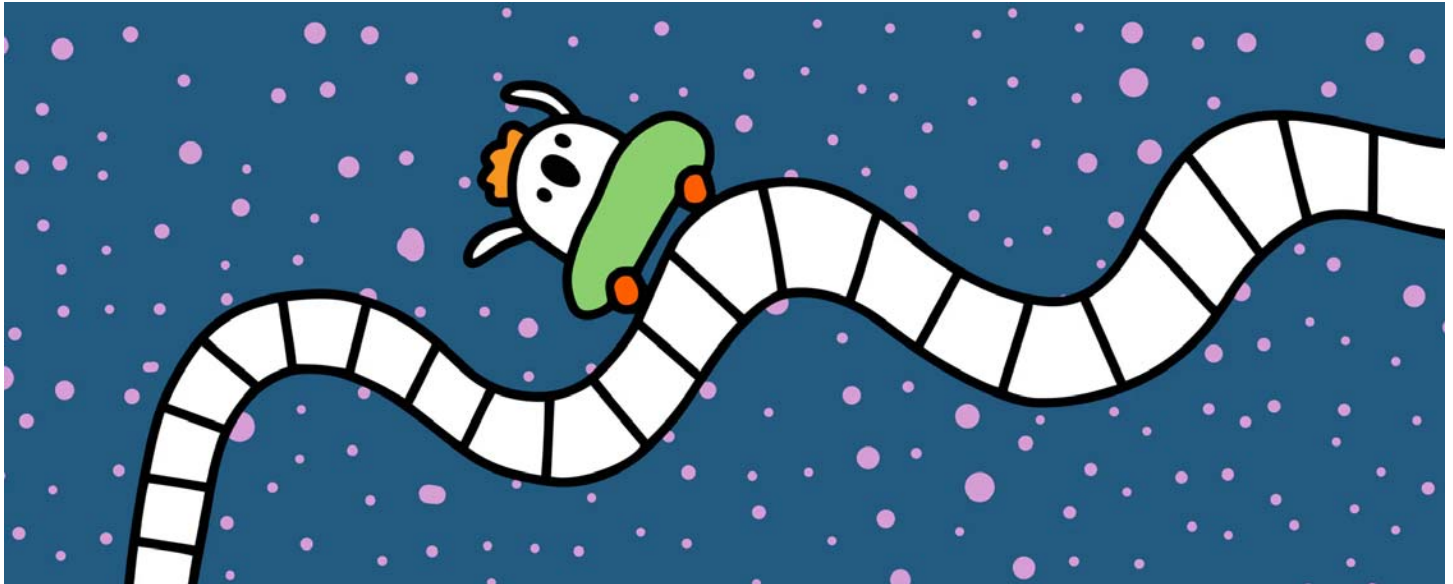# How to Help Students Navigate This Social-Emotional Rollercoaster

By **Colin Gilbert**   Apr 29, 2020

Ekaterina Chvileva / Shutterstock

*This article is part of the guide* Navigating Uncertain Times: How Schools Can Cope With Coronavirus.

Schools across the country have moved at different paces in efforts to maintain a semblance of normalcy during the final months of the 2019-20 school year. In the past month, we've heard countless stories from school administrators, teachers and parents about the stress caused by the shift to remote learning.

Unsurprisingly, students are also experiencing their own emotional rollercoaster throughout the changes and uncertainty.

To better understand how they are faring, we looked at their self-reported feelings over the past couple months, as marked by thousands of check-ins on our social-emotional learning (SEL) platform. Students mark an emoji on a 5-point scale

(pictured) and then write reflections on their progress in academics and emotional well-being.
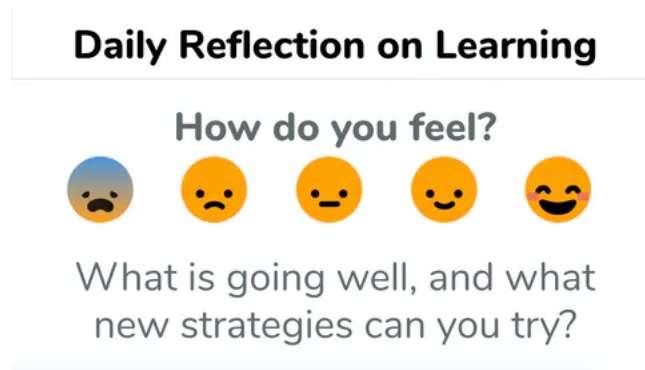
What we found were some unexpected and somewhat alarming trends. The week that most schools closed across the nation saw an acute drop in the emotional well-being of students. The next week, there was a stark swing with improved moods—perhaps an initial celebratory spirit of being out of school. Since then, there has been a consistent decline in students' self-reported emotional well-being.
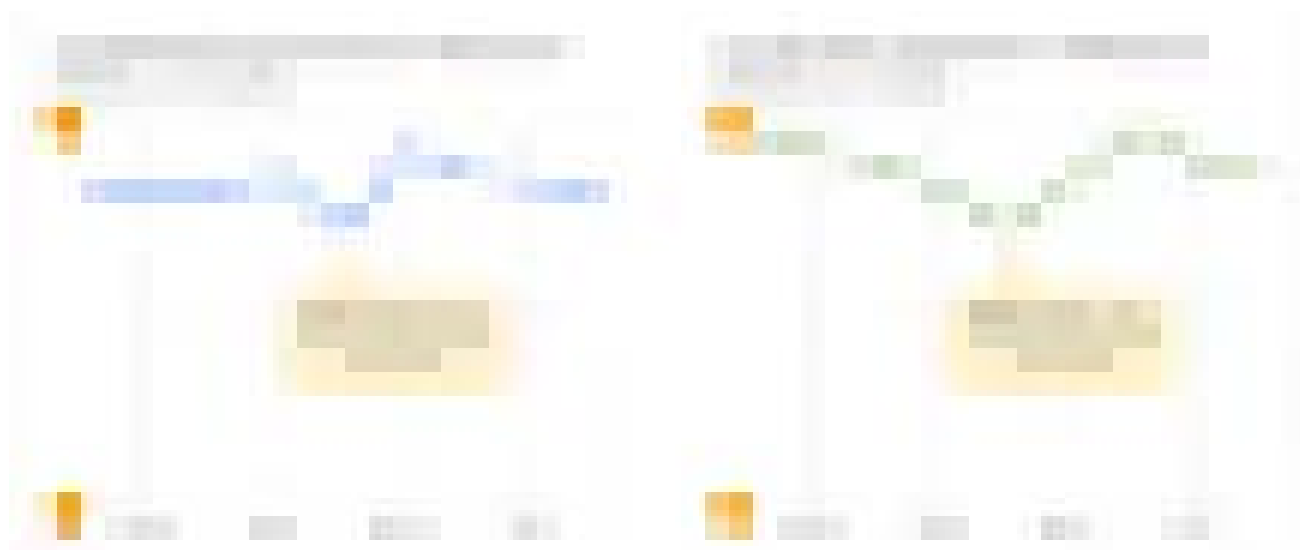
Swings in students' self-reported emojis and the sentiment of their written reflections (average n=2,600+ per week). Aggregate emotional response data is determined based on the emoji students select when checking in, ranging from very sad (1) to neutral (3) to very happy (5). The sentiment score analyzes the actual words of written student reflections and scores them on a continuum of positive to negative in tone (0=neutral).

These valleys and peaks were the largest swings in average emotion this entire

school year, signaling that educators should prepare for continued volatility. It's also worth noting that the data is inherently skewed toward those students who have continued checking in on the platform during school closures (about 50 percent in our system, in line with many national results). The trends therefore omit disengaged students, or those who don't have technology access and may be struggling the most.

Overall, students wrote powerful reflections on the "new norm," their experiences of remote learning, and how they are coping. The following themes emerged from students' reflections, which have been lightly edited for brevity and to ensure privacy. (The tone and core content have been maintained.)

Not all students have a safe space at home to continue learning.

Millions of students have been required to get creative with limited space, loud siblings, and potentially stressed parents as they seek to find quiet places to get their work done. As a high school student in South Los Angeles wrote:

> I set up my learning space in the kitchen or my room. (Privacy doesn't exist in this house.) Concerns I have about online learning that I have is that why is this so confusing? What if I fall back with my grades? I'm concerned about my grades and this situation doesn't seem to be helping me in any way, and there is no one to help me.

Students who are homeless or living in poverty without internet access and dependable devices are in even more trouble to find the emotional stability to continue learning.

Students feel disconnected and are

worried.

A recently conducted national survey of 13-17 year olds showed that about 4 in 10 students feel more lonely than usual, and an additional 40 percent say they feel about as lonely as usual. A sixth grader from a small town in rural Iowa reflected about boredom and the fear of not being able to maintain academic performance:

> I am a little bored being stuck in the house, but I still do some of my homework. I am also a bit worried. With Corona going on, I get out of the house once in a while, but it isn't the same anymore.

A high school student in Central California expressed missing the ability to see teachers in-person as a primary concern:

> This week was very chaotic for me and very stressful. It was kind of difficult learning everything online without seeing our teachers but I am now getting the hang of it. The most challenging for me would be to not be able to see my teachers in person.

They are struggling to deal with negative emotions.

Students are dealing with new levels of stress and some are encountering traumatic experiences. A high school student in Austin wrote about being frustrated and disengaged during the first week of remote learning:

> I don't like the high school online learning setup and therefore I haven't done any work on it. I figure I'll try soon but right now I don't want that negativity in my life. I hate it so much.

What can we do?

The data trend and reflections paint a concerning picture, but also demonstrate students' authenticity and emotional openness when given the opportunity to share. Knowing that remote learning will remain the norm in most states throughout the rest of this school year, many educators are expanding their definition of student success to go beyond academic mastery.

Dr. Stanton Wortham, Dean of the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College, highlighted this shift in a recent presentation, noting:

"Social-emotional learning is particularly important at this moment for at least two reasons: First, young people are struggling with the disruption of routines and anxiety about the consequences, and they need extra empathy and support. Second, that disruption of routines has given students, parents and educators an opportunity to step back and reflect on what outcomes we really want for our children; and many are concluding that healthy relationships, meaning and fulfillment should be crucial goals of schooling."

Here are some practical strategies we've seen working across the country to support students and engage them in social-emotional learning:

- Create a space for students to share their emotions, ideally as part of a consistent routine. We've seen a quick daily check-in work well; other ideas include regular journaling, video reflections, or live check-ins via phone or video.
- Pay attention to student responses and the tone of written work. Look for trends and shifts, and provide timely feedback to make sure students don't get lost due to a time lag. As a best practice, we've seen teachers respond to students two to three times per week when they are reflecting daily.
- Identify students who are entirely disengaged and creatively communicate with them or their caretakers to better understand their situation. Instead of focusing

on truancy or academic work, consider checking in with them on their emotional well-being to start. Here are a few prompts to try.

- Check out one of the many free resources available to engage students in SEL practices. We especially like the guides from the National Association of School Psychologists, CASEL, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Across the country educators are doing an amazing job at getting creative in identifying struggling students, and doing whatever they can to continue engaging them in a productive learning process. The task ahead remains difficult, but the effort is well worth its time to ensure whole child development continues during this pivotal new norm caused by COVID-19.

Every one of us, especially our students, will be stronger as a result.

Colin Gilbert (@cgilbs) is a former high school teacher and Head of Partnerships and Pedagogy at Sown To Grow.