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EDUCATION

'Challenging, lonely, meh': Tennessee students reflect on school amid the COVID-19 pandemic



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Strange. Frustrating. Eye-opening. Difficult. Long. Lonesome. Meh.

These are some of the ways Tennessee students are describing the school year.

In the midst of a global pandemic, some students in Middle Tennessee learned remotely at home for months. They waited for schools to reopen, for sports seasons to start and for COVID-19 restrictions to lift.

For many Nashville students, learning virtually was lonely and often stressful.

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For others, academics were pushed aside as they took on more responsibilities — younger siblings, jobs, even their own children.

Even when schools reopened, some students realized they had missed significant moments — like senior year traditions — or scrambled to raise their grades.

But most students also feel they learned something this year — about their teachers, about their schoolwork or their families, and most significantly, about themselves.

These are their stories.

Katie Shepherd, 3rd grade, Johnson Elementary School in Franklin

Even before the coronavirus pandemic hit, Katie Shepherd was in and out of school. Then a second-grader, Katie was undergoing chemotherapy treatments for leukemia.

Katie received chemotherapy through a port in her chest, so for much of second grade, she rarely saw her friends or went to school to avoid infection or because of the harsh side effects of her treatment.

"I missed my friends last year," she said.

When COVID-19 hit, she and her classmates were suddenly in similar situations — but on May 19, 2020, she finished her treatments. And by the time Williamson County Schools reopened in August, Katie was ready to go.

"When they saw me at school, the first day, I saw them, they were all like 'Katie! You're back!'" the 9-year-old said.

Her friends helped her feel safe, even in the midst of what she described as a "difficult" year.

“It’s difficult to wear a mask because you can’t breathe, but when you’re sitting at your desk you can take it off. Because that’s what the teacher says every time, you can take your mask off when you sit down and you’re spaced out a little bit," Katie explained.

Katie is looking forward to fourth grade — being able to go to school in person all year.

"It’s fun to be at school, I get to see all my friends," she said,

Max Pulle, 5th grade, Issac Litton Middle School in Nashville

Max Pulle was not a fan of virtual learning.

He actually told the Metro Nashville Board of Education so during a December board meeting.

“In-person school is important. Some might say that virtual is the same as in-person school, but it isn’t," Max said at the time.

Most of all, Max described the virtual school as "annoying."

Since he returned to campus in late February along with other Nashville middle schoolers, Max said his band class has been more efficient than it had most of the year. He is learning how to play the clarinet.

"We made more progress in the first month of band than we did in the whole virtual school period," Max said.

Max said he was both mad and sad when his first day in-person got pushed back several months.

"Probably a lot more like 75% sad, 25% mad. I was just sad, the virtual school has a lot of aspects, but it has a lot of bad parts," he said.

Since he also started a new school this year, Max said it was a little hard to make friends virtually. Instead of being able to talk or chat with your friend, you can only send a message to the whole class in Microsoft Teams — the platform Metro Nashville Public Schools uses.

Max hopes next school year is more normal.

"No masks and I hope at the beginning of sixth grade, there aren't stickers in the hallway that you have to stand on to keep yourself socially distant. I hope we get to have a back-to-school party," he said.

Ann Goode, 8th grade, West Wilson Middle School in Mt. Juliet

For Ann Goode, the school year has been "weird."

While learning virtually, Ann spent most of her day sitting at a desk in her bedroom.

“Learning virtually was a different experience compared to normal school. I didn’t get outside much due to class and homework taking up all of my time," she said.

Spending so much time on her computer was a strain for her eyes, Ann said. It was hard to stay focused. Even worse, though, she heard from many of her peers that they fell behind academically while learning at home.

The challenges this school year were "immense," and sad, she said.

"It has been a weird and different experience," she said. “Sports were postponed and pep rallies couldn’t happen. It was very sad that many school-wide events disappeared due to COVID-19."

But being around her friends back at school helped, Ann said.

"Although we have felt discouraged, at least being with our friends has helped us feel better about the future," she said.

Landry Rose, 8th grade, Meigs Academic Magnet School in Nashville

Landry Rose still hasn't gone back to school.

Metro Nashville Public Schools asked families by December to choose whether they wanted to return in person or not this spring.

At the time, Landry said she was really concerned about COVID-19.

"I still am," she said.

Most of her friends were staying remote and she had settled into a routine, Landry said. But it was still lonesome without her friends.

"You can Facetime and everything and we've done that millions of times, but it's not the same," she said. "I've gotten used to being in my room by myself, I'm in my own bubble. Sometimes I'll be in my room all day and I won't see my parents until four o'clock."

The aspiring theater student did get to perform a play with her classmates virtually though. Each student acted out their own scene or pre-recorded a skit.

"I think I really learned what my strengths and weaknesses are. I learned how to do a lot of things on the computer. I think a big thing is I learned when enough is enough and I have to say to myself, 'You've done a ton today, just go play with the dogs or do something besides this,'" she said.

"It's been a really good time to grow as a person, which I know sounds very cheesy, but it really has been."

Lucas Taylor, 8th grade, West Wilson Middle School in Mt. Juliet

For Lucas Taylor, learning virtually was one of the hardest things he's had to "endure."

“The lack of human interaction caused me to lose the focus, motivation, and vigor that I usually have in relation to learning," Lucas said. " Also, teachers assigned a lot of homework, causing many students to fall behind."

“Going to school during the COVID-19 pandemic has been very rough on all the student body, mentally and emotionally," he said. "We have been denied so many things that we were used to in the past years. Among these: sitting where we want at lunch, sitting close to our friends in class, and simply interacting with others."

"We haven’t been able to participate in the activities that students look forward to, such as dances, celebrations, and sports," he said.

Because of these challenges, Lucas was ready for schools to reopen — and stay opened.

“I was finally able to talk to friends that I had not seen for around a year," Lucas said. "School is gradually getting back to normal, as many regulations have been lifted, and we have been given much more freedom.”

Diluv Lindsley, 9th grade, Whites Creek High School in Nashville

Diluv Lindsley hasn't really truly experienced high school yet. Middle school ended abruptly when Nashville schools remained closed after spring break in 2020, and she didn't make it to campus as a high school freshman until March.

"It was disappointing because I feel like I didn't really get to have a first day of high school," Diluv said. "I didn't get to have a first day of ninth grade. So it was really frustrating dealing with that."

And unfortunately for the social butterfly, her granny kept her and her little sisters locked down throughout the pandemic out of fear of the coronavirus.

After eighth grade, Diluv expected to have more freedom as high school neared, but the pandemic ruined that.

"Freedom. I was expecting freedom. I was thinking we would be able to do what we want, but that's not the case," she said. "That's not the case at all."

The transition back to school in person this spring was also difficult though, Diluv said.

"It was hard to get used to," she said. "You have to wake up earlier, you have to get used to putting on your clothes and getting out. You can't just lay in your bed anymore."

And at school, she has more distractions: friends to socialize with.

Jenaia Bailey, 10th grade, Pearl-Cohn High School in Nashville

In her pink T-shirt, on Pearl-Cohn High School's campus, Jenaia Bailey says she hates high school.

But she might not have a lot to base that on — both years of high school have been different for Jenaia so far. Her freshman year came to an abrupt half when the coronavirus first appeared in Tennessee and she didn't make it to campus until March this year.

It was really different for her to learn virtually, Jenaia said.

She felt like she had to teach herself most of the time, especially as her own teachers sometimes struggled with the technology.

"We aren't used to learning over a computer and having to teach ourselves most of the time," she said. "Even though we had instructors, but they weren't used to teaching us like that because they weren't used to the [technology] themselves."

Jenaia said she thinks the experience has been beneficial for her and her classmates, though.

"I think getting the experience throughout the whole thing that happened, just getting the experience of having to do online school, they're going to have that experience when they go to college," Jenaia said of her older classmates who are closer to graduation.

Aaron Espinoza, 10th grade, Whites Creek High School in Nashville

For Aaron Espinoza, the pandemic came with responsibility — a responsibility he didn't ask for.

While he and his twin brother, Uriel, were stuck learning virtually at home, Aaron's parents both took on second jobs.

Mexican immigrants, his parents were able to take advantage of their older children being able to stay home and keep an eye on the 6-year-old.

That was until his dad got the coronavirus, Aaron said.

"It wasn't a bad thing for him, though," he said. "He was able to get a break because he always works all the time. Since he had to be quarantined he was able to just relax at home."

Helping his little brother with his own schoolwork meant Aaron sometimes had to be flexible with his own teachers.

School itself was pretty "straightforward," Aaron said, but it was also challenging.

"The first week of virtual was really a struggle because I had to learn everything again, but then after that I just needed to make a routine to do everything," he said.

He said adults should remember that teenagers' struggles might seem "pretty easy for them."

"But for us, we're still growing up," he said.

Shiv Mehta, 10th grade, Ravenwood High School in Brentwood

For Shiv Mehta, the pandemic gave him the opportunity to give back to his community.

He noticed a lot of businesses and organizations didn't have the technical skills or knowledge to manage a website or an online brand. So he launched his own service project.

"There were a lot of small businesses and organizations going unnoticed because they lacked the bandwidth and resources to create an online presence," Shiv said.

The 16-year-old started his own initiative called "I Build Websites."

Shiv pledged to build his clients' websites for free.

"I thought I'd be able to let them find their place in the digital world and expand their creations to audiences on the web," he said.

He's already helped about half a dozen clients. One of his favorites to work on was his sister's website for her own service project she launched in 2020 — a tutoring service where she donates her profits to victims of human trafficking.

While he was learning virtually himself during periods of quarantine, Shiv said he noticed that "pandemic has really perpetuated the like digital divide."

"All the people that can't access technologies ... they really suffered, and it really hurt me to see that happen," he said.

He also noted that what he calls an "unprecedented" year has been difficult for both students and educators alike.

"[Educators] have had to weigh the potential health risks of in-person school against what every child needs in terms of education, and usually, being in person is easier for students to learn," he said.

Reghan Grimes, 11th grade, Ravenwood High School in Brentwood

For Reghan Grimes, the school year was "unpredictable."

Despite keeping busy on her winning basketball team or at track and field events, the 16-year-old said it was challenging to constantly adjust from "being in-person to sporadically going online from time to time."

Though she missed interacting with other students and friends when schools were closed or she was stuck at home, there were benefits when she was learning remotely, Reghan said.

One benefit, the all-star athlete said was having more free time.

Antonio Mason, 11th grade, Whites Creek High School in Nashville

Antonio Mason enjoyed having to help his two little sisters with their schoolwork.

In years past, Antonio, who struggles with ADHD, would sometimes get in trouble in his own classes. And doing school virtually for most of the school year was especially difficult for him.

His grades dropped and he was anxious to be able to return to school. But he loved helping his little sisters out.

"I try to help them out whenever they did it," he said. "Just spending time with them and helping out."

"My 7-year-old sister, she's so smart. She can read like a 10th grader. Her reading level is already there and she can do everything by herself really, she doesn't get distracted or nothing," he said.

Antonio relies on that same type of loving, one-on-one relationships to succeed. Though he let his grades drop and didn't always make it to class when it was virtual,

he's been able to bring his grades up since he returned to campus.

He credits his teachers for being willing to help him get back on track.

"I just love the teachers and administration here and all the staff," he said.

Finley Oldham, 11th grade, Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet High School in Nashville

For Finley Oldman, the pandemic meant more time at the pool. The SoundWaves pools at the Gaylord Opryland Resort to be exact.

While learning virtually and even after other Nashville high school students returned to campus, Finley finished up her classes before noon most days. Then she would don her swimsuit and head over to the lifeguard stands at the resort.

"Right now all my friends are in school but here I am in Opryland," she said. "It's really, really nice. It's good to just go work."

Financially, it's also been a positive for Finley, who hopes to go to college and eventually medical school one day.

But Finley acknowledges that virtual learning wasn't always best for her academically.

"It was **meh**. It had some goods and it had some bads," Finley said. "Virtual, it's good for me to be able to wake up at 7:45 a.m. and roll over and grab my computer. But it's also bad because I'm not going to remember anything from math next year."

Finley is taking pre-calculus next year and is worried if she'll be successful.

"I already know I'm not going to do too great. Grades, not good. Free time and family time, not good. Meh."

Stephanie Shepherd, 11th grade, Franklin High School in Franklin

Even though many Williamson County Schools quickly allowed for at least some in-person learning this school year, Stephanie Shepherd started the year learning virtually.

The 17-year-old enrolled in the district's online learning program out of caution for her immune-compromised little sister, Katie — a pediatric cancer survivor.

But after a few weeks, Stephanie was done.

“No, I cannot do online," she said. "It was kind of hard to focus. You don’t really have a teacher with you.You just kind of have to do it by yourself.”

She didn't miss school when the pandemic first hit. It just felt like "an extended summer break" but trying to learn online quickly changed her opinion.

"It's super hard because you can't ask anybody questions or anything like that you just kind of have to sit there and just do it,” she said.

Even after she was able to return to school in person, things remained pretty unpredictable, Stephanie said.

Students would get pulled from class after contact tracing flagged them as potentially being exposed to the coronavirus.

"Someone could have gotten COVID-19 and if you were just around them, you'd have to quarantine for two weeks. So I got contacted traced one day, and I had to stay home for two weeks," she said.

But all in all, the school year was "decent" once she switched from virtual to in-person earning, Stephanie said.

"It wasn't like a great year, just because a lot more people are stressed," she said.

Seth Thorpe, 11th grade, Pearl-Cohn High School in Nashville

Seth Thorpe is used to pressure. A student-athlete and a rising star in Pearl-Cohn High School's entertainment career pathway, he is used to have to show up and do his best.

He often serves as the narrator or voice of school videos or broadcasts and is currently working on a documentary for his school's basketball team.

He even has his own office in the school's entertainment studio, that he dubbed "Sethville."

But the pandemic demanded even more from the Indiana native.

"This year was testing," Seth said. "It made you think and ask yourself, how willing are you to put in the work to get the grades you want? How much value do you put into school? How much discipline do you have?"

And even though he wasn't overly concerned about catching the coronavirus himself, Seth had to worry about bringing it home, where it's just his mom and him.

Seth compares this past school year to the same pressure that eventually creates a diamond.

He wants to be a diamond.

"The most memorable thing about [this year], is it taught me that you can’t rely on life being reliable. anything can happen," Seth said. "You have to adapt quickly and be willing to change in a new situation."

O'marion Walker, 11th grade, Pearl-Cohn High School in Nashville

Before the coronavirus pandemic, O'marion Walker had a 3.6 GPA.

The student-athlete was proud of being able to keep his grades up, but when schools closed for months he had a problem.

His house didn't have internet. To do his schoolwork, O'marion would have to go to a friend's house or find a place with WiFi.

Even once he logged on to his classes, O'marion didn't feel like he was getting "the full experience" of learning. It was difficult at first.

As his grades dropped, O'marion hoped he could improve them when schools reopened in March but when the first day of in-person finally came, O'marion was stuck at home.

He had caught the coronavirus.

"I had to stay home, but I guess I got used to virtual," he said.

He decided to stay virtual for the rest of the school year, but "it's easy now," he said.

O'marion is glad that he's only a junior. He hopes next year he can come back for the "real experience of being a senior."

His last basketball season. Prom. Pep rallies.

"Everything really," he said.

Jameshia Griffin, 12th grade, Pearl-Cohn High School in Nashville

Most days over the past year, Jameshia Griffin would go to work at 8 p.m. and work until 8 a.m. Then the 18-year-old would either head to school at Pearl-Cohn High School or log in virtually for her classes.

Once students could return to school in March, her mom or her aunt would watch her 5-year-old daughter Jamysia, but while she was learning remotely, sometimes her daughter would be running around, distracting her.

Navigating a global pandemic isn't easy for any student, but it's especially difficult for a young working mother who is also trying to stay on track to graduate.

"Caffeine. I keep a lot of caffeine," Jameshia jokes when asked when she found time to sleep this school year.

Trying to remain focused while learning virtually was especially difficult for her, Jameshia said.

"I have to be right there in person to see and learn what the topic is, because if not, I'm going to cut the computer off and back to sleep, especially early in the morning. But other than that, it's okay," she said.

When she finally was able to return to school in person, she took part in the first cohort of a new program, the result of a partnership between Metro Nashville Public Schools and Nashville State Community College.

She was among about 20 seniors from Pearl-Cohn and Maplewood high schools set to receive patient care technician certification. This month, she starts a new job at TriStar Skyline Medical Center.

She's also managed to "hustle and hustle and hustle" to get her grades back up and stack on track to graduate on May 21.

What's kept her motivated throughout the pandemic?

"I have to slow down and think, I've got a daughter looking at me. I got to graduate. I got to accomplish something for her," she said.

Sadie Jackson, 12th grade, Hume-Fogg Academic High School in Nashville

Even though Sadie Jackson has performed in several school musicals, including most recently in one of the leading roles in Hume-Fogg Academic High School's

rendition of "The Addam's Family," going back to school in person was nerve-wracking after a year at home.

"It was really weird to even come back," she said. "I was the most nervous I've ever been for anything."

For Sadie, staying at home was hard.

"Being alone for so long was really difficult mentally," she said. Her parents even encouraged her to go back in person when she could.

The wait for schools to reopen didn't help as the date kept getting pushed back, she said.

"It was really emotionally exhausting for me and then after a while, I got numb to it," Sadie said. "I was like, 'Oh, another bad thing has happened.'"

Many of her peers struggled with feeling depressed or lonesome throughout the pandemic, Sadie said. It was a long and lonely year. She missed many of the usual senior traditions, like every senior wearing a crown on the first day of school.

But she is also thankful for the challenges the pandemic threw her way, Sadie said.

"I definitely had a lot of personal growth," she said. "I'm not the same person I was going into the pandemic."

Lacy Stroh, 12th grade, Oakland High School in Murfreesboro

Senior year. It's what most students can't wait for. Senior year traditions, being top of the class.

But for Lacy Stroh, her senior year during a pandemic was often a lonely one.

Most of Lacy's friends decided to remain virtual and learn remotely, but Lacy said "that just wasn't for me."

Since the Rutherford County senior was also working through dual enrollment classes, she returned to school in person without her friends, but school was a different place.

And lunch was one of the aspects of the school day most affected.

"We had six different lunch periods and I wouldn't eat lunch until like 1:15 p.m. even though I had to be there at 7:00 a.m. every day. You could only have two people at a table, so on the very off chance that you do have lunch with someone you know, you have to sit across from them," Lacy said.

It was hard for her to find a place to sit at first. She didn't have lunch with any of her friends or other seniors she knew.

"I did eat lunch with a girl that invited me to eat lunch with her, so we became friends I guess eventually," she said.

The 18-year-old described the year as eye-opening. She realized how much her teachers did for her and what they were going through. She also realized how much she took for granted, whether playing her clarinet in the marching band or just a normal school day.

"I used to just be like, 'oh, I'm going to school again.' But I didn't realize how much social interaction would go on there and being able to see my friends," she said.

"Senior year is all about doing a bunch of lasts and it's supposed to be the best year yet, and it's kinda hard when you have to start over making friends."

Reporters Anika Exum and Andy Humbles and photojournalist Stephanie Amador contributed to reporting for this story.

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