

Students Pandemic Reflections Project: Making History

Cheryl Bielema, Ph.D., and Harold Rose, Project Co-leaders
Canton Area Heritage Center, Canton, Illinois, 2021

This paper is a report of the Students Pandemic Reflections Project, undertaken by the Canton Area Heritage Center (CAHC) and Canton High School (CHS) history students and their teacher Harold Rose. During the last month of the school year in May, with the help of several more teachers, the students' reflections project team captured the pandemic experiences of almost one-third of CHS students using online surveys.

Survey questions included:

- Compare your school activities before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- What have you missed most during the last year?
- Have there been positive/negative experiences?
- What have you learned about yourself, your learning preferences, and life, in general?

This summer, members of the project team analyzed the survey results. A number of interesting outcomes have emerged with some students expressing very little negative impact of the pandemic, while others felt that their lives had been altered drastically. Overall the students felt they 'had lost a year.' They also mentioned suffering from depression, fear, paranoia, sadness, and worry. The upside to this is that they were more likely to talk about seeking help from professional counselors. Respondents also expressed the importance of family and friends for bolstering their emotional health. The team went on to identify possible strategies for coping should this pandemic worsen, or for preparing for future pandemics.

Positive responses included finding more time to do the things they loved, learning a new hobby, and discovering themselves. There was a noticeable increase in time outdoors, either alone or with friends and family. With this new found independence and somewhat looser daily structure, some students sought out jobs or began working longer hours. Other students assumed more responsibility at home, caring for siblings, cleaning, preparing food, and tending animals.

Negatives included many expressions of online instruction not being a preferred means of learning. In fact, students stated they weren't as successful in the remote and hybrid models as when attending in-person classes. They wrote about being distracted, unmotivated, unable to keep up with their assignments, and unable to stay in touch with their teachers.

These students also listed the loss of specific extra-curricular activities for which they had prepared, such as football, basketball, plays, marching band, concerts, archery, dance team,

speech, FFA and 4-H contests, and they also missed being able to congregate in groups at the school and with their friends at local hang-outs, which were shuttered during the shutdown.

Teachers were recognized as the *front-line* of help for troubled or failing students. The data likewise identified lacks in student learning support. Extra staff, counselors and social workers, substitute teachers and friends of students might have roles to play. The Pandemic Reflections team will invite Canton Union High School administrators and teachers to review their findings. An Educators' Pandemic Reflections online survey for CUSD administrators and teachers is currently open. These data will be analyzed and developed as a separate research report.

The responses of these Canton teenagers paint multi-layered and complex reactions and outcomes for them. Time will bear out what happens next for these young people. We hope we see stronger, more confident, versatile and problem-solving young adults because they survived the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Another result of the project is a display in the Canton museum showcasing specific students' pandemic experiences. This effort was headed by Museum Studies student Angela Drach, who is volunteering with us. Interested parties may view the display at the Canton Area Heritage Center, 111 South Main Street, in Canton. Check our webpage, www.cantonillinois.org/heritage-center.

For more information:

Cheryl Bielema, Ph.D., Project Co-leader. Cell phone: (314) 440-0326; email, bielema@comcast.net

Harold Rose, Project Co-leader. Cell phone: (309) 357-9240; email, hrose@cantonusd.org