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Voices of Gen Z Study

Year 4 Annual Survey



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Executive Summary

Since 2023, the Walton Family Foundation and Gallup have partnered to produce the Voices of Gen Z study, a collection of 14 surveys that have gathered Generation Z's perspectives on their lives, education and futures. These children and young adults, born between 1997 and 2012, have consistently shared that while they are generally excited and optimistic about their future, they are less confident that they are prepared for it.

The study has found that much of this sentiment is rooted in Gen Z's middle and high school experience. The extent to which students are engaged in school is predictive of several larger outcomes. Young people who are engaged at school are significantly more likely to say they are living a great life today, and are not only more excited about, but also more confident in, their future. Moreover, students' engagement is often tied to that of their teachers: When teachers are excited about what they are teaching, students are more excited about what they are learning.

The most recent survey in the Voices of Gen Z study, conducted May 22-June 9, 2026, sought to provide deeper insight into what makes a school experience enjoyable and engaging for 1,758 Gen Zers enrolled in middle or high school. In examining the factors that best predicted students' overall enjoyment of school, three main themes emerged:

1 CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT

Students feel like what they are learning in school is interesting and relevant, and it allows them to use their strengths and push their boundaries.

2 SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

Students feel like the teachers and other adults at their school not only support their academic needs but also recognize and develop their individual talents and aspirations.

3 BELONGING

Students feel like their school is a place where they fit in, and where their individual needs are understood and supported.

These factors are interrelated: Students who have developed strong, individualized relationships with their teachers and peers are also more likely to feel that their coursework is interesting, important and lets them do what they do best. Additionally, students who have these experiences are more likely to enjoy school and the benefits associated with it, regardless of their academic performance or intent to pursue postsecondary education.

Unfortunately, about four in 10 Gen Z students say their coursework is not interesting or important, and three in 10 say there are no adults at school who understand their unique talents and interests. Perhaps most concerning, about three in 10 say they don't feel like they belong at school or have a single adult there who regularly checks in on them.

Students may ultimately be measured by their understanding of the course material. But increasing the number of students who make the most of their education depends not only on demonstrating why that knowledge matters, but also that they themselves matter to the schools and teachers educating them.



Key Findings

1

Just under half of Gen Z K-12 students enjoy going to school every day (11%) or most days (37%). This percentage is somewhat higher among students of color and those who plan to pursue a bachelor's degree after high school.

2

The strongest predictors of whether students enjoy school are the extent to which they feel their coursework is interesting, important and lets them exercise their talents, whether their teachers recognize and encourage their individual strengths and goals, and whether they feel like they belong at their school.

3

Despite notable improvement over several years, 49% of Gen Z students still do not agree that school gives them the opportunity to do what they do best every day (down from 63% in 2023). Additionally, about four in 10 students do not agree that they have learned anything interesting in the past week (41%) or that their teachers make their schoolwork feel important (37%).

4

About three in 10 students do not agree that they have a teacher or other adult at school who recognizes their talents and interests (30%) or regularly checks in on them to see how they are doing (29%). Similarly, 33% do not agree that they feel like they belong at school.

5

Four in 10 Gen Z K-12 students do not agree that they feel prepared for the future. This is especially true of students who do not plan to go to college (50%). However, students who are more engaged at school are significantly more likely to feel prepared for their future, regardless of their postsecondary education plans.

6

More than one in three students (36%) say that adults at school talk to them about the future on at least a weekly basis, while 40% say that they never have these conversations or only have them once every few months. Students who engage in these conversations more regularly feel significantly more prepared for the future than those who rarely or never discuss their postgraduation plans with an adult at school.

Detailed Findings

“The structure of high school wasn’t very helpful to where I am now. I don’t really think most of my classes that I took in high school I have in my brain anymore. Like, I just don’t. But I would say certain people, specific teachers ... genuinely made an impact, and I still am able to go to them.”

— 20-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, NEW YORK

For many Gen Z middle and high school students, this perspective reflects the day-to-day school experience. School is boring. It does not allow them to apply their talents and interests, and it is not clear why what they are learning will matter in “the real world.” But having even one or two teachers who recognize their talents and invest in them can make a lasting difference.

Overall, less than half of Gen Z students (48%) look forward to going to school every day or most days. This finding is true across grade levels and genders, while students of color — particularly Asian students (72%) — are more likely than their White peers (41%) to look forward to school all or most days.

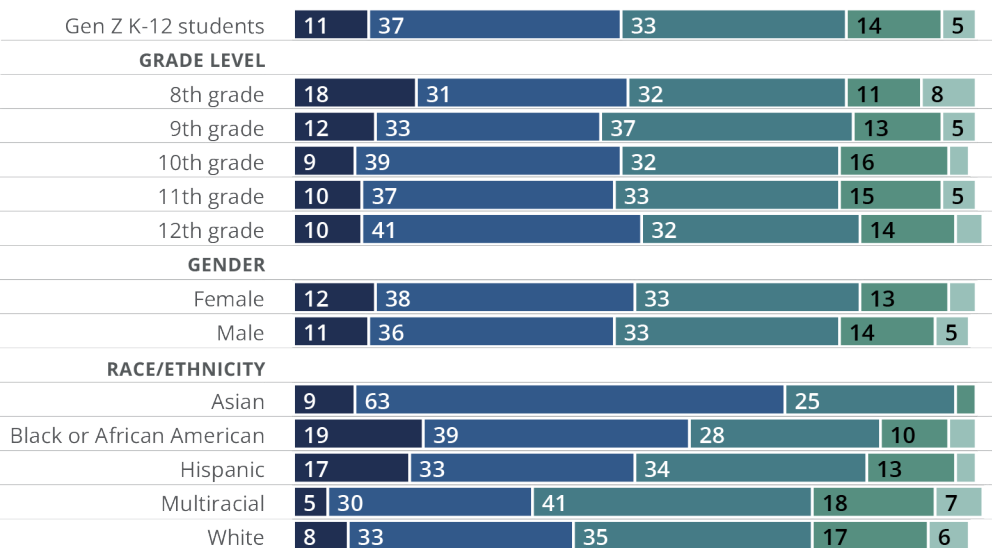
CHART 1

School Enjoyment

In general, how often do you look forward to going to school?

% Selected

■ Every day ■ Most days ■ Some days ■ Almost never ■ Never



Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

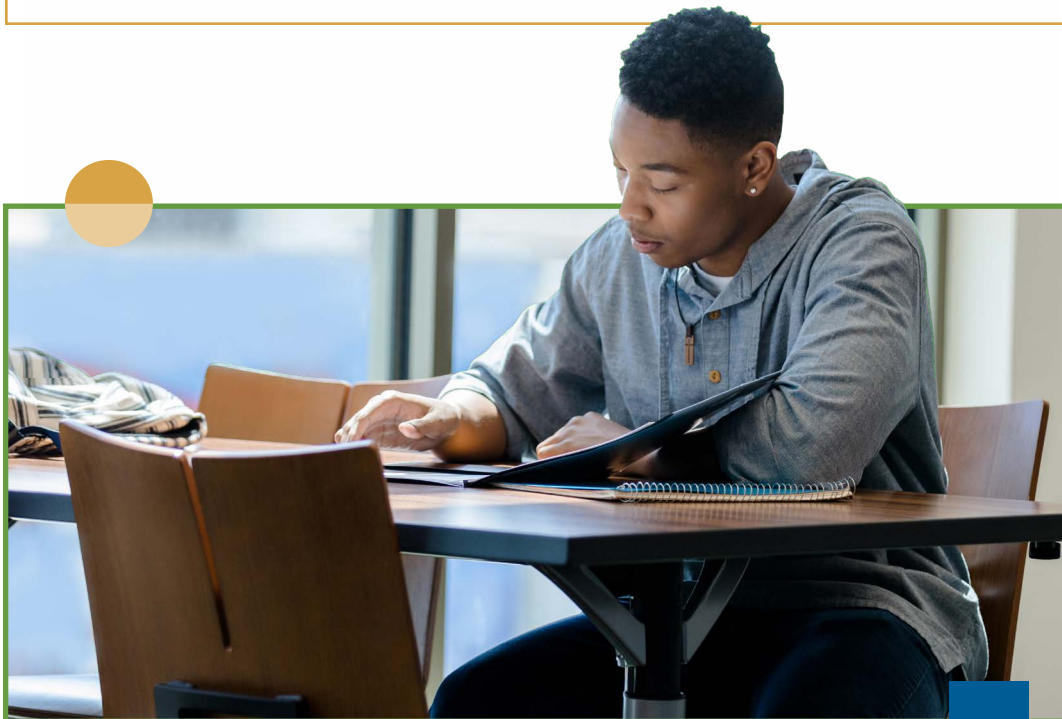
Additionally, enjoyment of school is not dependent on academic success. While students who are conventionally “good” at school — those who get good grades or want to pursue a college degree after graduation, for example — are more likely to say they enjoy school, 42% of students who do not intend to go to college look forward to school all or most days, as do 29% of students who say they get average or poor grades.

What is far more important than academic performance in determining whether students enjoy school is the extent to which they find their classwork interesting and meaningful, develop strong relationships with teachers and other adults at school, and feel a sense of belonging on campus and among their peers.

Despite improvements, Gen Z students continue to identify gaps in their classroom engagement.

“I feel like in my high school, there wasn’t really a lot of pushing from the school or the teachers to try to get you [to] go out there and experience a lot of things. A lot of the kids that were more successful coming out of high school kind of had to do those things on their own and kind of had to find programs or places to go to that would really suit their interests. There wasn’t really a lot of that available, at least in my school. So, I feel like if there was a more widespread focus on that, that would be extremely beneficial.”

— 19-YEAR-OLD MALE, OHIO



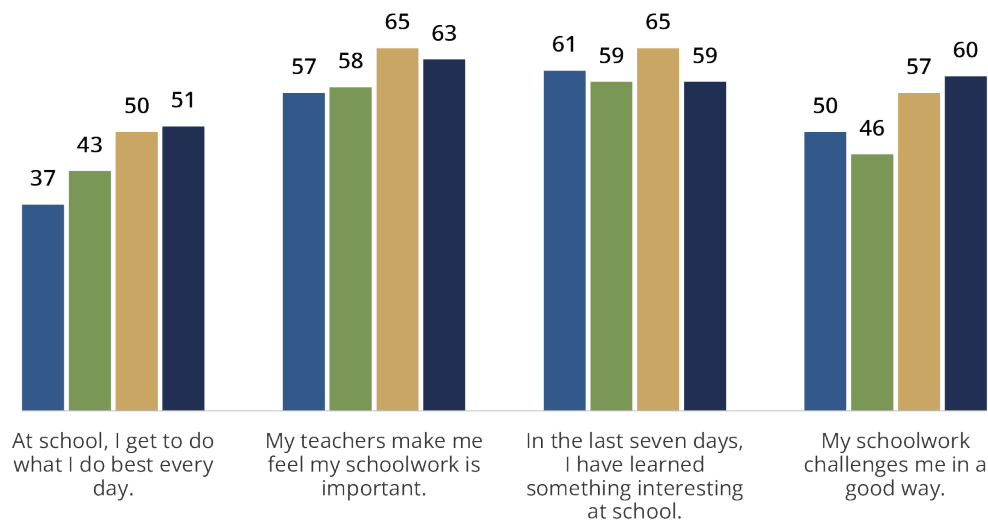
Since 2023, several key measures of classroom engagement for middle and high school students have improved or held steady. Students today are 14 percentage points more likely than students were in 2023 to agree or strongly agree that school gives them the opportunity to do what they do best every day. They are 10 points more likely to feel appropriately challenged by their schoolwork and 6 points more likely to say their teachers communicate the importance of what they are learning. Over this period, there has been no meaningful change in the percentage of students who agree they have learned something interesting in the past week.

CHART 2

Trends in Classroom Engagement

% Strongly agree + Agree

■ 2023 ■ 2024 ■ 2025 ■ 2026



Figures for each year are limited to 14- to 19-year-old students.

Despite improvements in classroom engagement, significant segments of Gen Z students continue to miss these experiences entirely. Roughly four in 10 students do not agree they have learned something interesting at school in the past week, and nearly half feel like school does not allow them to use their individual strengths.

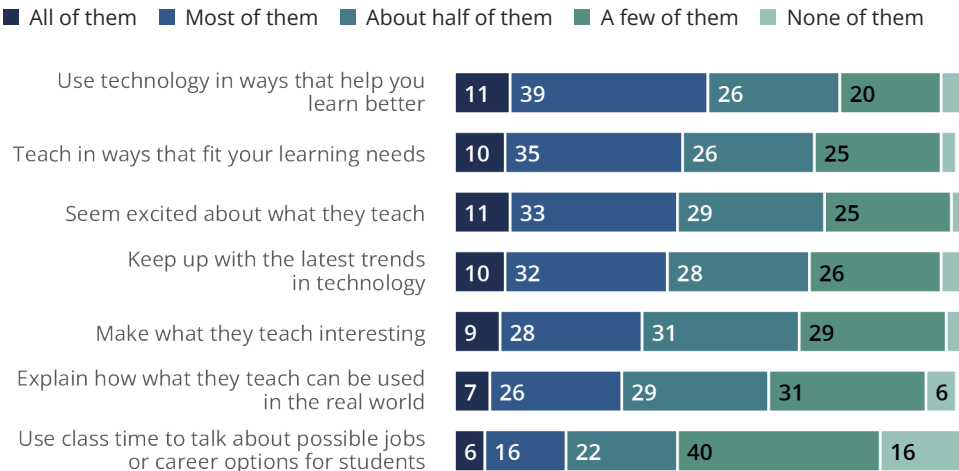
For several years, data from the Voices of Gen Z study have shown a clear connection between the extent to which students are engaged in the classroom and whether they feel their teachers are engaged and explain the importance of what they are teaching. Moreover, most students say that when they are most interested in what they are learning, it is because their teachers are excited about and engaged in what they are teaching.

However, less than half of students say that most of the teachers they took classes with last year were excited about what they were teaching (44%) or made what they taught interesting (37%). Even fewer students say that most of their teachers explained how what they were teaching could be used in the real world (33%) or talked about future job and career options (22%).

CHART 3

Student Assessment of Teacher Engagement

Think about the teachers who you have classes with this year. How many of your teachers ...
% Selected



Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

About one in three students lack a sense of belonging and individualized relationships with teachers.

While a teacher's primary role may be to ensure students learn and successfully demonstrate competency in their subject, the data suggest that their more important responsibility — at least as it pertains to engaging their students in class — extends beyond meeting students' academic needs. The students who are the most engaged at school are those who are most likely to say that they have close, meaningful relationships with their teachers. These students say that they have at least one teacher who checks in on their personal wellbeing, and not only encourages their goals and ambitions, but also helps them understand and develop those goals.

"There was a specific moment when my art teacher invited me to get coffee with her outside of school time. ... And I didn't know that was a thing that teachers can do. It was really meaningful because it basically showed me that, okay, you actually care about me if you want to do something with me without getting paid or whatever."

— 20-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, NEW YORK

But as with classroom engagement, many students report that there is not a single adult at school who provides that individualized care and support. About three in 10 students do not agree that there is a teacher or other adult at school who regularly checks in to see how they are doing (29%) or recognizes their unique talents and interests (30%). An even higher percentage (37%) say their teachers do not help them think about careers that would be a good fit for their talents.



"My senior year choir teacher, it was her first year teaching that year and she, out of all people, was the most beneficial. She made me feel accepted from day one and whenever I had family issues going on, like a big pivotal moment senior year, she gave me her phone number and she was like, 'If you need anything, contact me. I will get you help in any way, shape or form.' And now I still talk to her in my college career and she's helping me with my music journey as a music education major."

— 21-YEAR-OLD MALE, PENNSYLVANIA

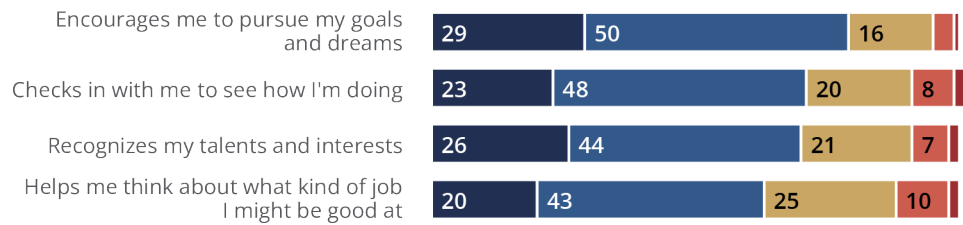
CHART 4

Supportive Relationships With Teachers and Other School Adults

There is an adult at school who ...

% Selected

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree



Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

Students also report gaps in their sense of belonging at school and in the quality of their relationships with peers. Again, students who feel a sense of belonging and strong connection are also more likely to feel engaged in the classroom.

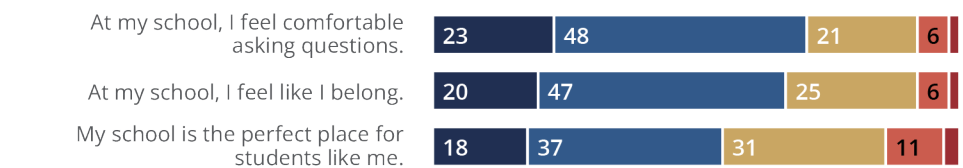
Two-thirds of Gen Z students agree that they belong at school, while one in three do not agree. A similar percentage of students agree that they feel comfortable asking questions (71%), while 56% agree that their school is the perfect place for students like them. Fewer than one in four students strongly agree with each of these aspects of belonging at school.

CHART 5

Belonging at School

% Selected

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree



Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

For those students who do not feel like they belong, a lack of connection with their peers may be partly responsible. Students who feel less trust and connection with their peers, as well as those who say their classmates are disengaged or disrespectful, are less likely to feel like they belong or to be engaged at school.

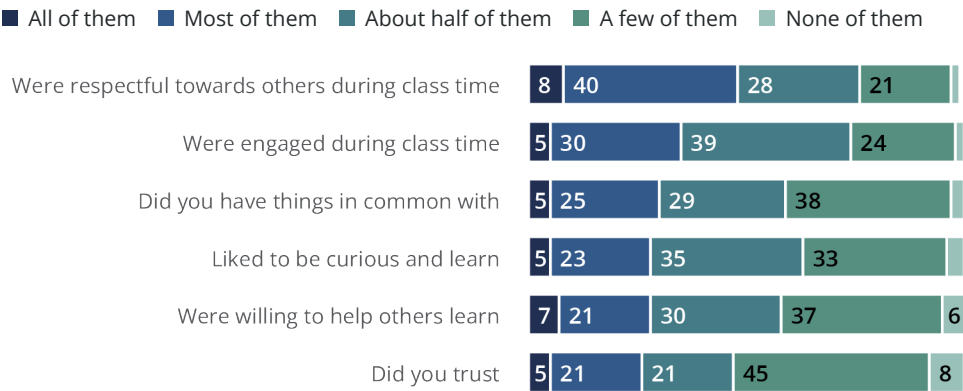
However, students perceive most of their peers as, at best, disengaged in the classroom, and at worst, actively detracting from the experience of others. Less than half of students say that most of their peers are respectful to others (48%) or engaged during class time (35%).

CHART 6

Peer Engagement and Connection

During the most recent school year, how many of the other students in your classroom ...

% Selected



Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

In addition, Gen Z middle and high school students do not feel personally connected to most of the other students in their classes. Thirty percent of students say that they have things in common with most of their classmates, 29% say this about half of their classmates, and the remaining 41% say they only have things in common with a few of them, if any. Students are even less likely to trust their classmates: 26% trust all or most of their peers, 21% trust about half, and a majority (53%) trust a few or none of them.

While students who only feel a personal connection with some or a few of their classmates can still feel a sense of belonging at school, it is less likely. Fifty-one percent of students who have things in common with only a few or none of their classmates agree they belong at school, compared with 72% of those who have things in common with half of their peers and 87% of those who have things in common with most or all of them.

“I think maybe it has to do with post-pandemic and everything, but people in school nowadays are kind of lacking social skills and sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes lack the tools to be able to just relate with each other. And I've been in a lot of situations where in the beginning of the year, the teacher will say, ‘Hey, don't worry. We're going to do a lot of hands-on work, a lot of talking-to-peer work,’ and it just devolves into paper packets and busy work.”

— 16-YEAR-OLD MALE, ARIZONA



Low-income and non-college-bound students report less engagement and belonging than their peers.

Across 12 measures of students’ overall engagement — four related to classroom engagement, five measuring the quality of relationships with their teachers and other adults at school, and three measuring their sense of belonging at school — students agree that they have about eight of these important experiences. On a proportional basis, students are most likely to miss experiences related to their classroom engagement, with the average student agreeing with 2.3 of the four measures. Conversely, students are most likely to report having supportive adults at school, agreeing with 3.5 of the five measures.

TABLE 1
Summary of School Engagement Measures

Category	Survey Items	% Strongly agree + Agree
Classroom Engagement	My teachers make me feel my schoolwork is important.	63%
	My schoolwork challenges me in a good way.	60%
	In the last seven days, I have learned something interesting at school.	59%
	At school, I get to do what I do best every day.	51%
Supportive Relationships With School Adults	There is an adult at school who encourages me to pursue my goals and dreams.	79%
	I have at least one teacher who makes me excited about the future.	76%
	There is an adult at school who checks in with me to see how I'm doing.	71%
	There is an adult at school who recognizes my talents and interests.	70%
	There is an adult at school who helps me think about what kind of job I might be good at.	63%
Sense of Belonging	At my school, I feel comfortable asking questions.	71%
	At my school, I feel like I belong.	67%
	My school is the perfect place for students like me.	56%

CHART 7**Average Engagement, Support and Belonging at School***Mean number of experiences students agree or strongly agree they have had*

	TOTAL (12 items)	CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT (4 items)	BELONGING (3 items)	SUPPORTIVE TEACHERS AND SCHOOL ADULTS (5 items)
Gen Z K-12 students	7.7	2.3	1.9	3.5
GRADE LEVEL				
8th grade	8.3	2.6	2.0	3.7
9th grade	7.2	2.2	1.9	3.2
10th grade	7.5	2.2	1.9	3.4
11th grade	8.0	2.4	1.9	3.8
12th grade	8.1	2.4	2.0	3.8
GENDER				
Female	7.8	2.3	1.9	3.6
Male	7.8	2.3	1.9	3.6
RACE/ETHNICITY				
Asian	8.1	2.7	2.2	3.3
Black or African American	8.9	2.8	2.1	4.0
Hispanic	8.0	2.5	1.9	3.6
Multiracial	6.8	1.8	1.6	3.4
White	7.5	2.1	1.9	3.5
POSTGRADUATION PLAN				
Wants to pursue a bachelor's degree	8.4	2.5	2.1	3.8
Wants to pursue an associate degree	8.0	2.5	2.0	3.6
Does not want to pursue a college degree	6.9	2.0	1.7	3.3
SUBJECTIVE HOUSEHOLD INCOME				
Family living very well or comfortably	8.2	2.5	2.1	3.6
Family getting by on present income	7.8	2.3	1.9	3.6
Family finding it difficult on present income	6.6	1.8	1.6	3.3

On average, engagement is highest among 8th grade students and lowest among 9th and 10th grade students, most of whom will likely have just spent their first or second year in a new school environment. Older high school students report slightly stronger levels of engagement. However, even seniors report having just over eight of the 12 total experiences — only about one more on average than their freshman peers.

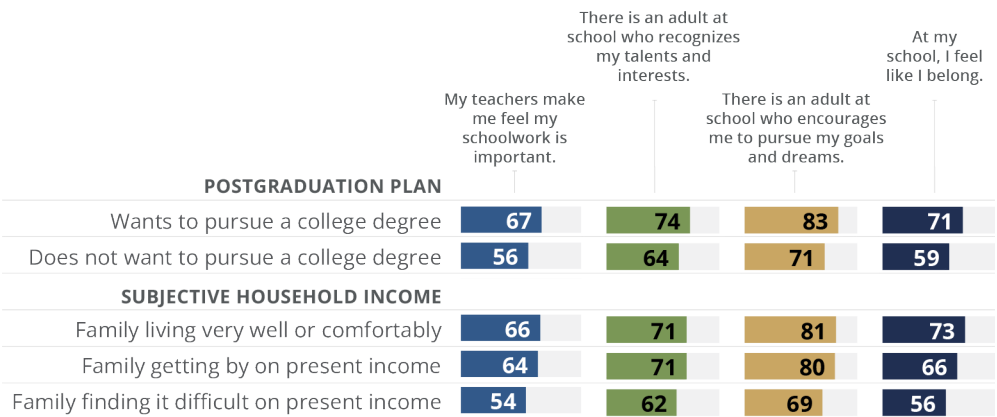
The largest gaps in engagement occur in students' postgraduation intentions and their families' financial situations. Students who say that they do not plan to attend college report having significantly fewer engaging experiences than their peers who hope to pursue a two- or four-year degree. The same is true of students whose families are finding it difficult on their present income, compared with those who are living comfortably or getting by. These gaps span not only classroom engagement, but also the extent to which they feel connected to their school and the teachers and adults they interact with there.

For example, 67% of college-bound students say their teachers make them feel their schoolwork is important, compared with 56% of students who do not want to go to college. Meanwhile, college-bound students are at least 10 percentage points more likely to agree that they belong at school (71% vs. 59%) and that there is an adult who recognizes their talents (74% vs. 64%) and encourages them to pursue their goals and dreams (83% vs. 71%).

CHART 8

Gaps in School Engagement by College Intention and Household Income

% Strongly agree + Agree



Similarly, students whose families are living comfortably or getting by on their present income are about 10 percentage points more likely than their peers from less financially secure households to feel like their schoolwork is important, that they have adults who recognize their talents and encourage them to pursue their goals, and that they belong at school.

Black or African American students have the highest engagement average of any racial or ethnic group, as they report having nearly nine of the 12 engagement experiences. This is driven primarily by higher levels of engagement in the classroom, as well as stronger relationships with their teachers and other adults at school. Meanwhile, there are no meaningful engagement differences between Gen Z females and males.

This sense of school engagement is not just important for improving students' overall enjoyment of their education. The extent to which students are engaged in class, connected to teachers and other adults at school, and feel like they belong at school is also closely related to their sense of optimism about their future and how they evaluate their lives overall.

"My high school piloted one of the engineering programs that's gaining popularity. My first teacher was a woman. So, it was really helpful for me to enter class on the first day and it was a female teacher in an engineering field. I continued with her classes after that. ... We still talk and she was able to help me with college and with all my engineering."

— 19-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, ILLINOIS



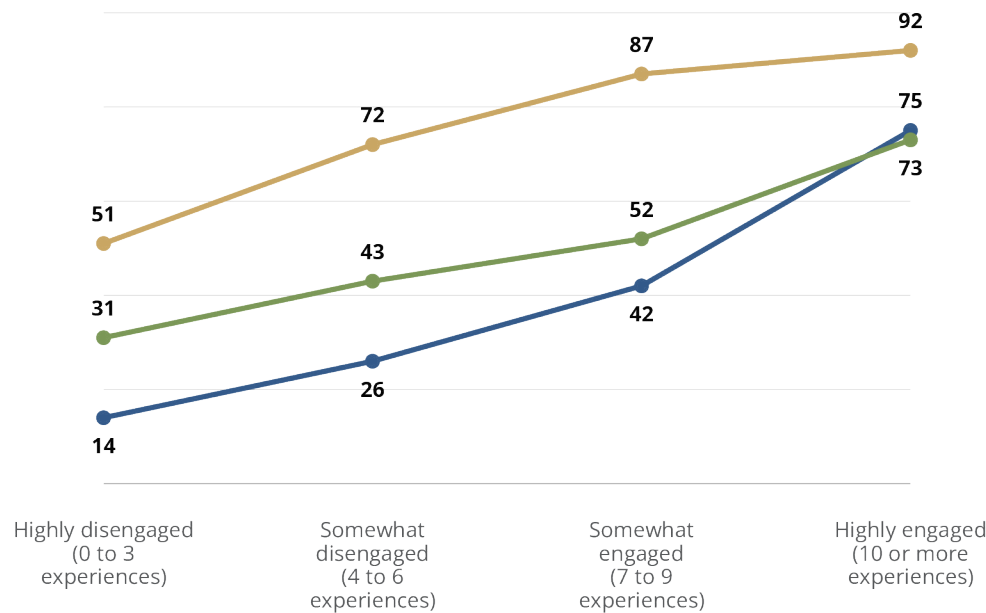
The most engaged students are more than five times as likely as the least engaged students to say they look forward to school every day or most days (75% vs. 14%), more than twice as likely to be thriving in their current life evaluation (73% vs. 31%), and more than 40 percentage points more likely to agree that they have a great future ahead of them (92% vs. 51%).

CHART 9

School Enjoyment, Life Evaluation and Future Outlook

Based on number of school engagement experiences

- In general, how often do you look forward to going to school? (% Every day + Most days)
- Current life evaluation (% Thriving)*
- I have a great future ahead of me. (% Strongly agree + Agree)



*Life evaluation is based on the following survey question:

“Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?”

Respondents who rate their current life as a 7 or higher are considered “thriving” in their current life evaluation.

About half of students say homework and large class sizes make it difficult to succeed in school.

In addition to gaps in engagement, many students also report practical barriers to succeeding in school. These concepts are related: Students who say they face more barriers to success also report being less engaged at school.

Large class sizes regularly disrupt students' learning. Nearly half of students say they often (13%) or occasionally (35%) find it difficult to learn because there are too many students in their classroom. This is particularly true of students whose families are struggling financially, as well as those who do not plan to go to a four-year college — two groups who are among the least engaged at school.

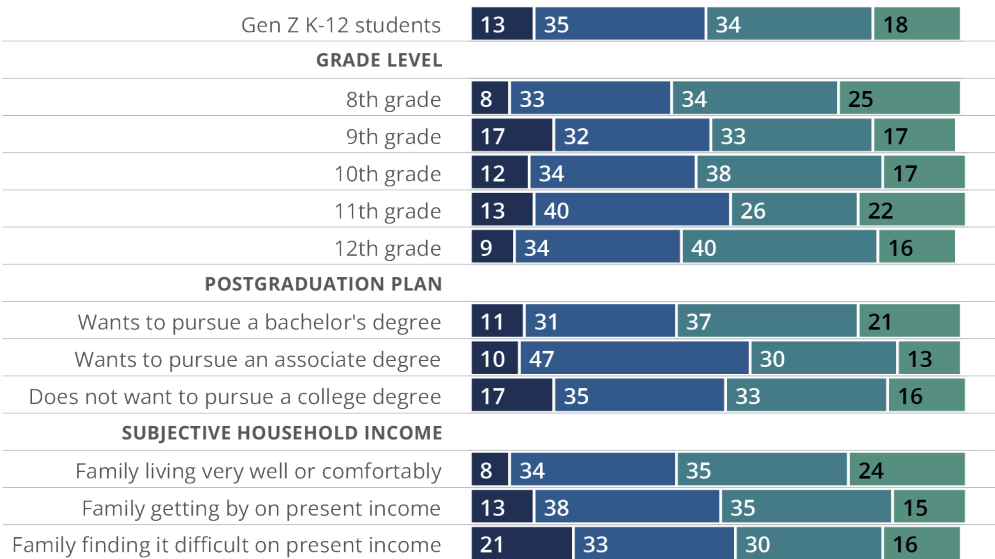
CHART 10

Negative Impact of Class Sizes on Learning

How often, if ever, do you feel like you can't learn well because there are too many students in your classroom?

% Selected

■ Often ■ Occasionally ■ Rarely ■ Never



Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

A similar percentage of students also have challenges with the schoolwork they take home. About half of students say that the time it takes to study (48%) or complete their homework (49%) makes it very or somewhat challenging to succeed in their classes. This is not only a challenge for students who struggle academically: While about 60% of students who report receiving average or poor grades say their out-of-class studies are overly burdensome, more than 40% of students who receive excellent or good grades also say the time it takes them to study and complete their homework makes it difficult to succeed.

“My school is very college preparatory, and I feel like they give us a lot of homework to the point that we’re all awkward teenagers that don’t know how to talk to each other. I feel like most of us aren’t prepared for the social aspects of college or the real world.”

— 17-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, ARIZONA

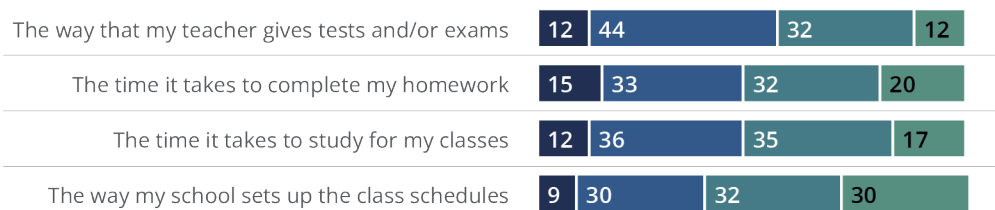
CHART 11

Curricular Barriers to Academic Success

How challenging, if at all, have the following made it for you to succeed in your classes?

% Selected

■ Very challenging ■ Somewhat challenging ■ A little challenging ■ Not at all challenging



Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

Extracurricular activities create additional strain on students’ ability to succeed in their coursework, as 39% say their commitments outside of school make it very or somewhat challenging to succeed in their classes. Students’ homework and studying loads are related: More than half of students who say their extracurriculars affect their ability to succeed in the classroom also say these activities make it difficult to study for tests and exams (54%) and complete their homework on time (51%).

“I wish that the school environment was more accepting of extracurriculars, because I think sometimes engaging in a club or an activity that you actually care about can feel like a punishment because it can set you back and give you less time for schoolwork. And I think teachers don’t really address that.”

— 17-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, PENNSYLVANIA

Four in 10 students do not feel prepared for the future, including half of those who do not plan to attend college.

While 80% of Gen Z students believe they have a great future ahead of them, fewer say they are ready for that future. Overall, six in 10 students agree (47%) or strongly agree (13%) that they feel prepared for the future. Asian and Black students are especially likely to agree (73% and 68%, respectively), while males (61%) and females (59%) are about equally likely to feel prepared.

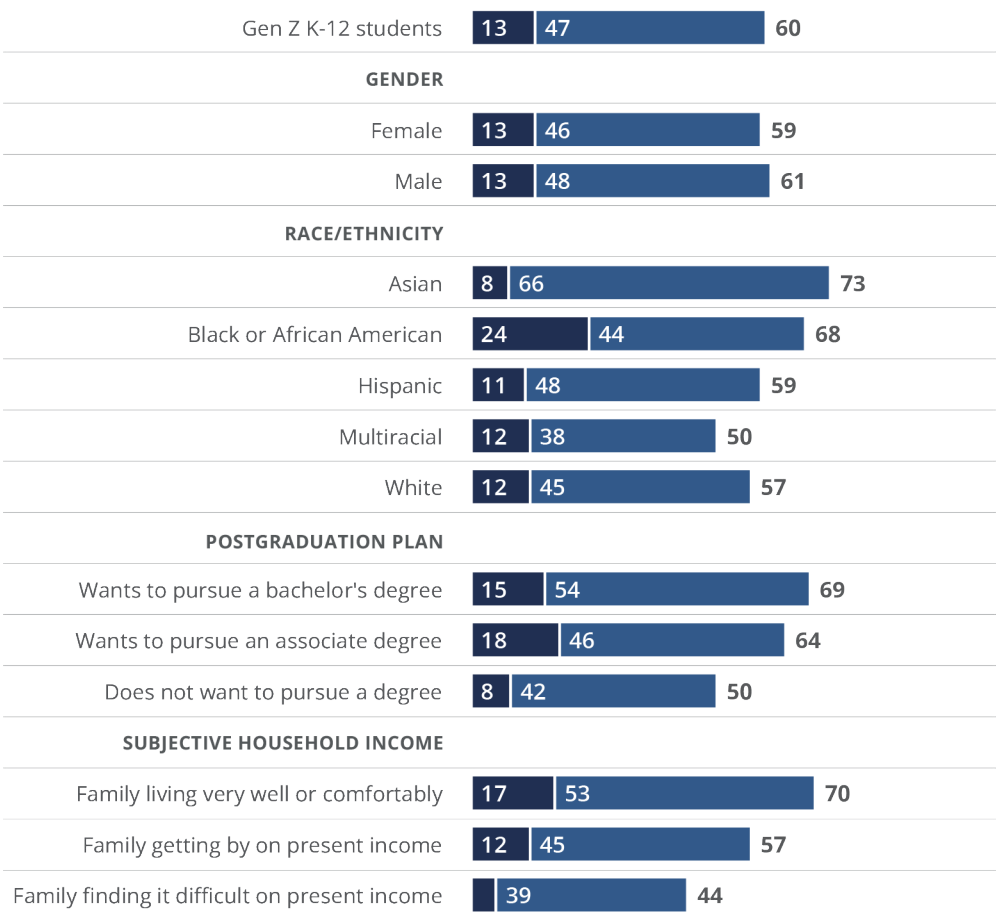
CHART 12

Gen Z Students' Sense of Preparedness

I feel prepared for the future.

% Selected

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree



Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

Half of students who do not plan to attend college after graduation agree that they feel prepared for the future, compared with 69% of students who plan to pursue a bachelor's degree and 64% of students who plan to enroll in an associate degree program.

Just as engagement at school is closely related to students' assessment of the overall quality of their lives, more engaged students are also more likely to feel prepared for their future. Eighty-one percent of the most engaged students agree that they feel prepared for the future, compared with 27% among the least engaged students.

This relationship holds true regardless of whether a student wants to attend college after high school. While college-bound students consistently feel more prepared than their peers, students who do not plan to attend college see roughly equivalent improvements in their sense of preparedness as their engagement at school increases.



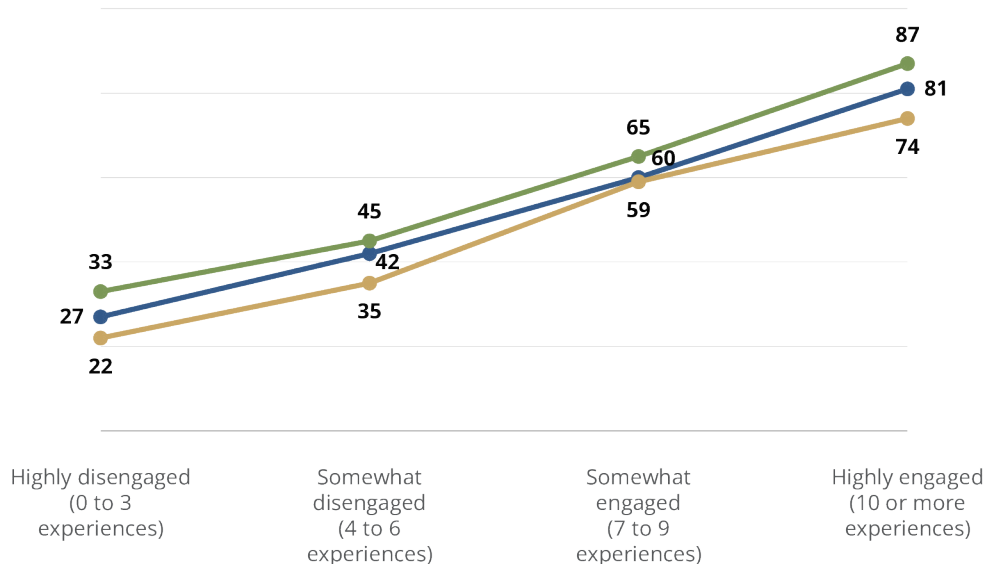
CHART 13

Future Readiness Based on School Engagement

I feel prepared for the future.

% Strongly agree + Agree

- All Gen Z students
- Students who want to attend college
- Students who do not want to attend college



When non-college-bound students are highly engaged, 74% agree that they feel prepared for their future, compared with 59% of students who are somewhat engaged, 35% of those who are somewhat disengaged and 22% of those who are highly disengaged. Moreover, highly engaged students who do not plan to attend college feel more prepared than their less-engaged, college-bound peers.

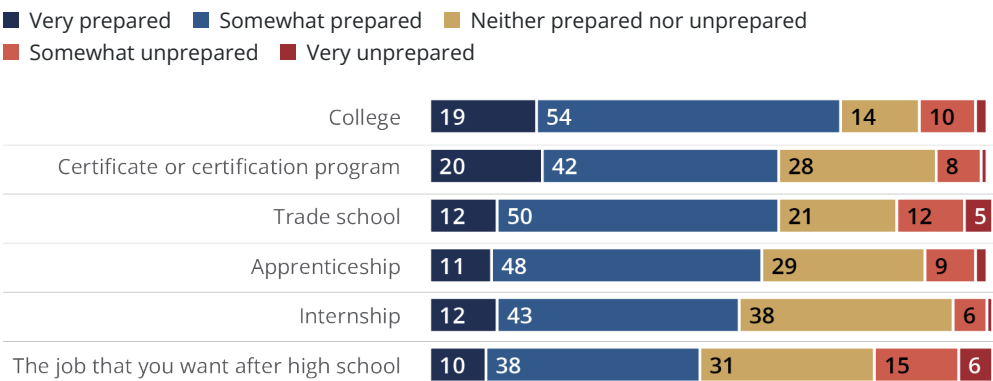
Students' concerns about preparedness are evident in their assessment of how ready they feel for the paths they plan to take immediately after high school. No more than 20% of students feel very prepared for any of the specific postgraduation pathways they plan to pursue.

CHART 14

Pathway-Specific Postgraduation Readiness

How prepared or unprepared do you feel for ...

% Selected



Among those who are likely to follow each path after high school.

Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

Nearly three-quarters of students who say they are likely to attend college (74%) feel very prepared or somewhat prepared to do so; among those who plan to complete a certificate, certification program or trade school, 62% feel prepared to do so. Less than half of students who plan to enter the workforce immediately after graduation (48%) feel even somewhat ready for that job.

The students who do not plan to attend college, and who consistently feel less prepared for their future than their college-bound peers, represent a substantial segment of the Gen Z high school population. While a clear majority of Gen Z students (62%) say they would like to attend a two- or four-year college immediately after graduation, the remaining 38% do not want to. This is especially true of lower-income Gen Zers: 51% of students from families that are finding it difficult on their present income do not want to attend college, compared with 39% of students from families that are getting by on their present income and 32% of students from families that are living comfortably.

Frequent conversations about the future and career-oriented coursework boost students’ confidence in their futures.

These readiness gaps are further reflected in the frequency of conversations about students’ postgraduation futures — particularly those that apply to non-college pathways — as well as limited opportunities for students to apply what they are learning in the classroom to what is happening outside of it.

Four in 10 Gen Z students say adults at school talk to them about their future after high school every few months or never at all. The frequency of these conversations increases somewhat as students approach graduation, though at least three in 10 juniors and seniors say that adults at school talk to them about their future after high school less than once a month.

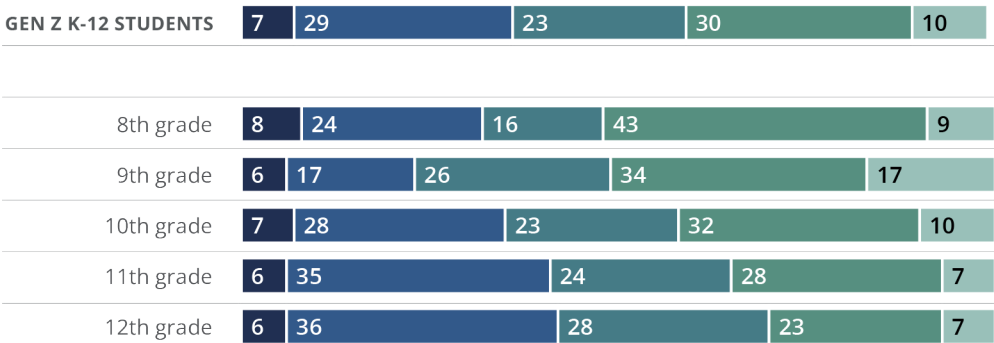
CHART 15

Frequency of Future-Focused Conversations

How often, if ever, does an adult at school talk to you about your future after high school?

% Selected

■ Daily ■ Weekly ■ Monthly ■ Once every few months ■ Never

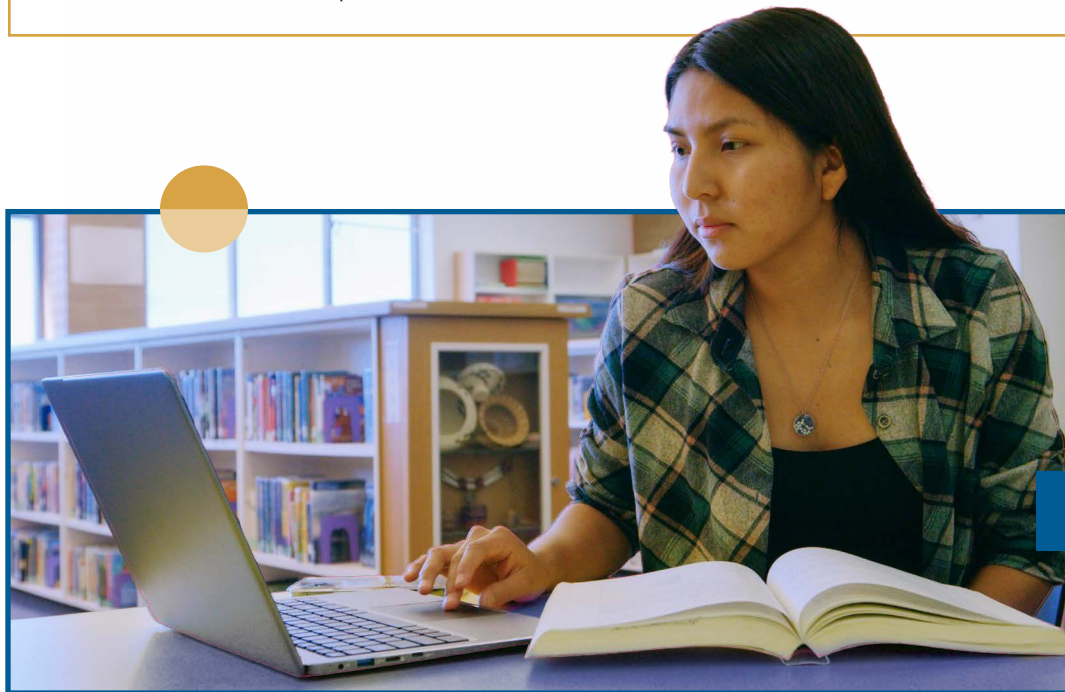


Note: Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

When these conversations happen, they are heavily focused on college: While 52% of students say that adults have talked to them a lot about going to college, fewer than two in 10 say that adults have talked to them a lot about any postsecondary options other than college, including apprenticeship, certificate or other vocational programs (17%), jobs that do not require a college degree (14%), or starting a business (12%). This is not just because most students say they plan to go to college. Even the 38% of students who say they do not plan to pursue a degree are still about as likely to say they have heard a lot about college (32%) as they are to say they have heard the same amount about any option other than college (35%).

“When most adults talk about the future, the first thing they think is going to college and getting a degree. ... At least at my school, I also feel like when people mention like, ‘Oh I want to go to like the Marines or the Army or the military when I’m older,’ or if they want to go to a trade school or do something of that sort, I feel like sometimes teachers get a little bit self-defensive of college. ... I feel like there should be more representation that teachers show to other career paths. ... If I heard of other paths after high school, like trade and stuff like that when I was younger, I feel like what would have been my interest would have changed.”

— 15-YEAR-OLD MALE, MASSACHUSETTS



These conversations have a clear influence on students' sense of preparedness, regardless of their postgraduation intentions. Seventy-one percent of students who say that adults talk to them about their future on at least a weekly basis feel prepared for the future, compared with 63% of students who have these discussions monthly, and 49% of students who rarely or never have these conversations.

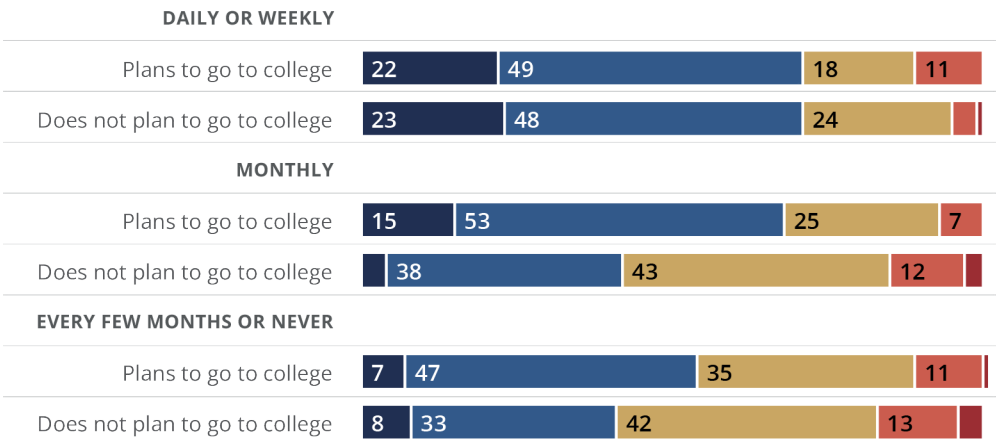
CHART 16

Influence of Future-Focused Conversations on Students' Sense of Preparedness

I feel prepared for the future.

% Selected, by frequency of conversations about the future with adults

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree



Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

Moreover, students who do not plan to go to college feel as prepared as their college-bound classmates when adults talk to them at least weekly about the future. When these conversations happen less frequently, non-college-bound students feel significantly less prepared.

Most students also do not feel like their coursework gives them the opportunity to develop and apply skills they can use in a future career. Just under half (49%) of high school students say they took career-oriented classes in the prior year. While this percentage is somewhat higher among students closer to graduation, fewer than six in 10 juniors and seniors report taking career-oriented courses (55% and 58%, respectively).

As with conversations about the future, students who take career-related coursework feel more prepared for the future than their peers. This is especially true for students who do not plan to go to college. Two-thirds of these students who took a career-oriented class in the prior year feel prepared for the future, compared with 40% of those who did not participate in this type of coursework.

“Everyone wants to do different stuff when they’re older. I wish some schools could maybe have different types of classes that could benefit a wider range of people than just, like, your ordinary math, science and histories and stuff like that.”

— 15-YEAR-OLD MALE, MASSACHUSETTS

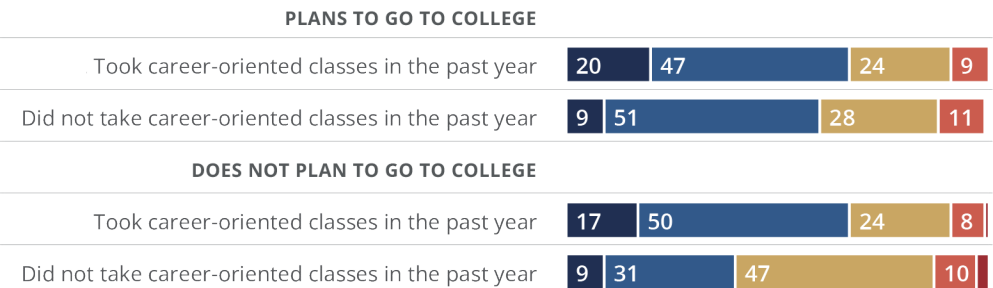
CHART 17

Influence of Career-Oriented Coursework on Students’ Sense of Preparedness

I feel prepared for the future.

% Selected

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree



Based on career-oriented coursework participation.

Note: Percentages below 5% are not shown. Totals may vary by ±1 point due to rounding.

Conclusion

For several years, the stories shared by Gen Z middle and high school students through the Voices of Gen Z study have demonstrated a clear relationship between the quality of their school experience, the quality of their lives outside of it, and their optimism and readiness for whatever comes after graduation. This year's findings reiterate that many students continue to struggle with their enjoyment of and engagement at school.

Some may see this finding as a hard but necessary reality that students must learn to accept: In life, you sometimes have to do things that are boring or seemingly unimportant. But the experience that many students report goes far beyond that. For these students, the problem is not that some of their courses are tedious or irrelevant to their future; rather, they say that nothing at school interests them, and they struggle to find outlets to do what they are naturally good at.

While many Gen Z students report these kinds of experiences, it is especially problematic for several discrete segments. Students whose families are struggling financially and those who do not plan to go to college — two groups with a disproportionate amount of overlap — are less likely to report having an engaging school experience, less likely to feel that what they are learning in the classroom is related to their postgraduation goals, and less likely to feel that school is preparing them for their lives.

Fortunately, the data also reveal that these sentiments are not inevitable. When they have several key experiences, students are significantly more likely to enjoy and understand the value of their education, regardless of their age, gender, race, academic performance or plans for the future.

Many of these experiences start with students' teachers. Young people who feel like their teachers care about and understand them as individuals — rather than just one more student among many — are more likely to enjoy school and engage in coursework.

This kind of investment may take the form of a teacher identifying a unique talent or passion a student did not even recognize in themselves, and encouraging them to take a course that allows them to develop or explore it further. Perhaps a teacher knows what kind of job a student wants to have in the future and explains how what they are learning could help them succeed in that role. Or it may be as simple as a student knowing that if they were having a bad day, there would be at least one teacher on their schedule who would notice and take the time to help them work through it.

Career-connected content is also important for classroom engagement and student success. Providing students avenues to connect what they are learning in the classroom to life outside of it — especially through career-oriented courses — makes them feel more prepared for the future and engaged in the classroom today. And while teachers may lack the time or depth of knowledge to provide every student with individualized guidance about the path they hope to follow after graduation, these conversations are also critical to students' readiness.

Engaging and preparing students takes time and intentional, discretionary effort from teachers, many of whom report already being stretched thin. Research from the Walton Family Foundation-Gallup [Teaching for Tomorrow](#) study finds that about half of teachers always or very often feel burned out at work, and about two-thirds say their current workload is already too high. Meanwhile, students say their class sizes are sometimes too large for them to learn well, which may make it difficult for middle and high school teachers to build individualized relationships with every student. But finding ways to help teachers make time — such as through [effective use of artificial intelligence](#) — to build and maintain these kinds of relationships could result in more engaged, confident students.

Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web survey conducted May 22-June 9, 2026, with a sample of 3,199 14- to 29-year-olds living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults who are randomly selected using address-based sampling methodology. Gallup also recruits using random-digit-dial phone interviews that cover landlines and cellphones.

Within the overall sample, 1,815 14- to 18-year-old children were reached through adult members of the Gallup Panel who indicated they had at least one child 18 or younger living in their household. The remaining 1,384 18- to 29-year-old respondents are members of the Gallup Panel.

Following data collection, both the 14- to 29-year-old sample, as well as the sample of parents of 14- to 18-year-old children, were weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent American Community Survey figures.

For the sample of 1,758 Gen Z respondents still enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is ± 3.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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