

New Gallup Survey Shows How Human Connection in School Drives Gen Z Engagement and Future Readiness

Engaged students are thriving and looking ahead with confidence, but too many Gen Z youth are missing the support, belonging and connection that make them feel engaged at school.

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Aug. 26, 2026 — Gallup and the Walton Family Foundation today released the [2026 Voices of Gen Z Study](#), an annual survey designed to better understand Gen Z's unique perspectives, including the ambitions and challenges shaping this generation.

The survey found that Gen Z K-12 students who feel engaged, supported and connected at school are more than five times as likely as their least-engaged peers to look forward to school most days or every day (75% vs. 14%). They're also more likely to be thriving today (73% vs. 31%) and to feel prepared for the future (81% vs. 27%).

However, there are significant gaps in the daily school experience. Across 12 core indicators evaluating classroom engagement, adult support and belonging, the average student reports experiencing only about eight. The largest gaps are in classroom engagement, where, on a proportional basis, students agree with 2.3 of four measures on average. Students report stronger experiences with supportive adults, agreeing with 3.5 of five measures on average.

Daily Classroom Engagement and Belonging

While classroom engagement delivers high payoffs, a substantial portion of Gen Z K-12 students lack important engagement-related experiences. Four in ten students (41%) do not agree that they have learned anything interesting in the past week, and about half (49%) report that school does not allow them to do what they do best every day.

"Students are telling us they want learning that feels meaningful and connected to their futures," said Romy Drucker, director of the Education Program at the Walton Family Foundation. "Together with educators and partners, we have an opportunity to build that future."

The gap extends to adult support and community connection. Nearly one in three students report having no adult at school who recognizes their talents (30%) or regularly checks in on their wellbeing (29%). Furthermore, one-third (33%) of Gen Z students state they do not feel a sense of belonging at school. Peer relationships compound the belonging gap: Just 30% of students say they have things in common with all or most of their classmates, and only 26% say they trust all or most of their peers.

These disparities are most pronounced among students from financially insecure families and those who do not plan to attend college, half of whom do not feel prepared for life after graduation.

Future-Focused Guidance and Career-Oriented Coursework

According to the survey, optimism about the future doesn't always translate into preparedness. While 80% of Gen Z K-12 students say they have a great future ahead of them, only six in 10 feel prepared for it. This gap widens sharply along engagement lines.

However, regular conversations with an adult at school about postgraduation options make a substantial difference. More than seven in 10 students (71%) who say adults talk to them about their future at least weekly feel prepared for the future, compared with about half of those who rarely or never have these conversations. For non-college-bound students, having these regular conversations nearly closes the readiness gap with their college-bound peers.

Career-oriented coursework is also associated with students' sense of preparedness. Non-college-bound students who took career-oriented classes in the past year were far more likely to feel prepared for their future than those who did not (67% vs. 40%). Additionally, nearly half (47%) of Gen Z students prefer self-paced learning models over standard whole-class instruction, demonstrating a demand for learning environments that adapt to individual needs.

"The data show that when students have flexibility in how they learn and can see a clear connection between their coursework and their future, they feel more prepared for what comes next," said Stephanie Marken, senior partner at Gallup. "Schools have an opportunity to make those connections more visible and meaningful for students pursuing a range of paths after graduation."

Practical Barriers Can Make School More Challenging

Large class sizes and curricular barriers can hinder academic success. Nearly half of students (48%) report that overcrowded classrooms occasionally or often disrupt their ability to learn. Similar shares say the time it takes to study (48%) and the time it takes to complete homework (49%) make it very or somewhat challenging to succeed in their classes, while 39% say the same about how their school sets up class schedules.

Chronic absence is also an area of concern as approximately one in four (24%) Gen Z students missed three or more days of school in the past month, and 53% say they've missed school in the past year due to mental health struggles, exhaustion, or feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

To read the full 2026 *Voices of Gen Z Study*, visit <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/651674/gen-z-research.aspx>.

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.

About the Walton Family Foundation

The Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. Three generations of the descendants of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, and their spouses work together to lead the foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta. To learn more, visit waltonfamilyfoundation.org and follow us on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#) and [X](#).

About Gallup

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