

# Walton Family Foundation- Gallup Voices of Gen Z Study

## Year 2 Annual Survey Report



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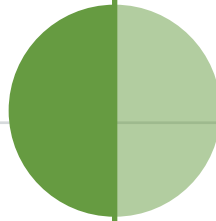
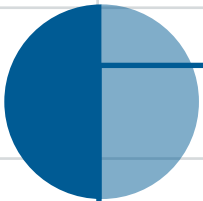
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# Table of Contents

<b>2</b>	<b>Introduction and Key Findings</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Thriving and Great Lives</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Engagement in School</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>Postsecondary Paths and Future Preparedness</b>
<b>20</b>	<b>Methodology</b>
<b>21</b>	<b>About</b>



## Introduction and Key Findings

In 2023, the Walton Family Foundation (WFF) established a partnership with Gallup to survey and report on the lives of Generation Z — children and young adults born between 1997 and 2012. The goal of this research is to share data-driven stories directly from the perspective of a generation that is more often spoken about than spoken with. During the first full year of the [Voices of Gen Z study](#), Gen Z has shared how engaged they are in school and work, their interest in pursuing STEM degrees and careers, their attitudes and experiences compared to millennials at the same age, their feelings of happiness and purpose, and their future outlook and aspirations.

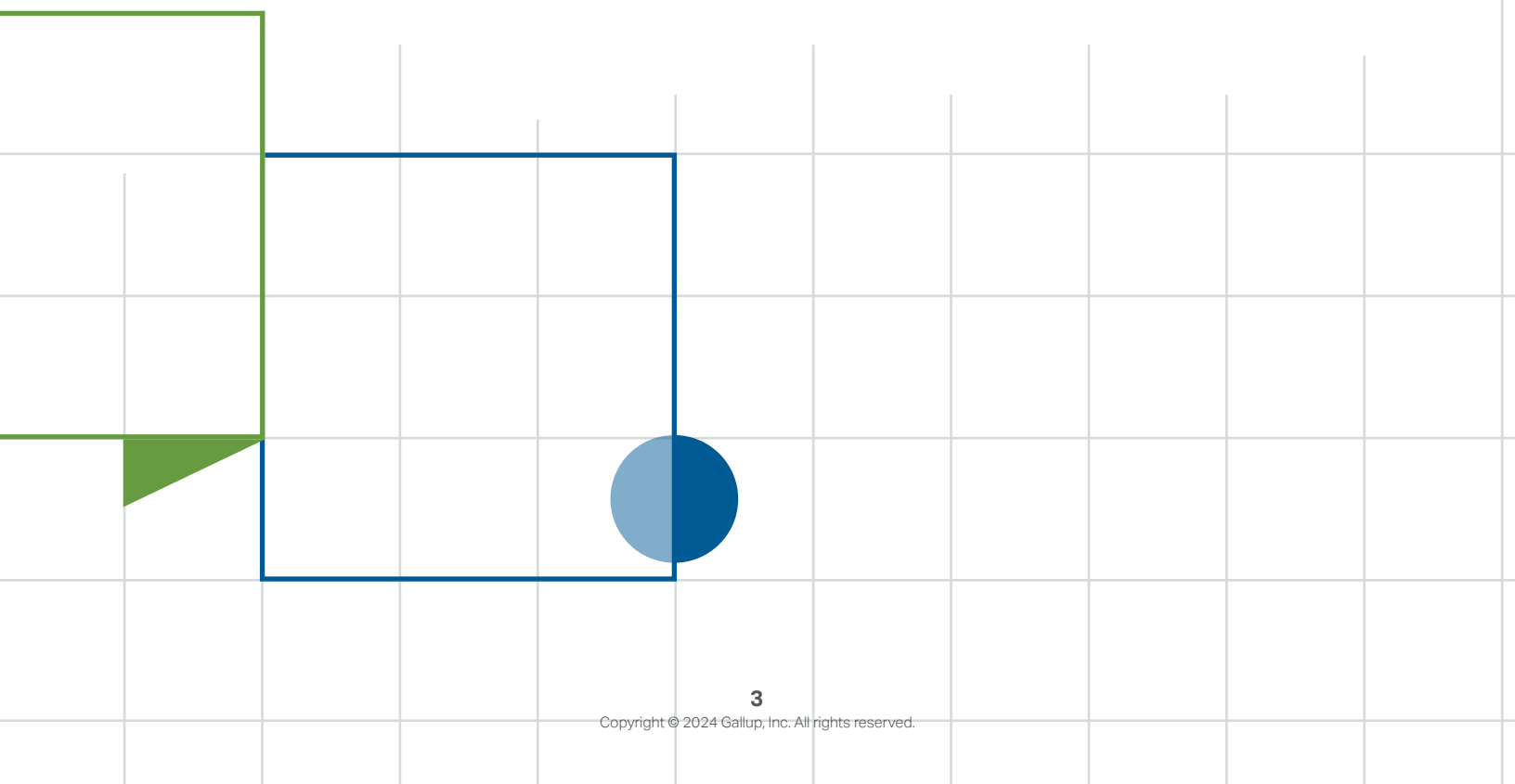
### So what has Gen Z told us so far?

They are struggling with their wellbeing and mental health. They are optimistic about their future but do not feel prepared for it. They do not feel engaged in their schoolwork and jobs. They are unsure how to articulate or pursue their purpose in life.



In response to these insights, WFF and Gallup incorporated several new elements in the second annual administration of the research to more explicitly illustrate what a great life looks like for Gen Z and how educators can deliver an engaging school experience that prepares middle and high school students for the thriving lives they envision but are not convinced they can attain. **The most notable findings from the 2024 Voices of Gen Z annual survey are:**

- 1 Just over half (51%) of Gen Z are thriving in their lives, and Gen Z adults ages 18 to 27 are eight points less likely to be thriving than their K-12 peers (47% vs. 55%).
- 2 Seventy-nine percent of Gen Zers agree they have a great future ahead of them, though only about half (51%) feel prepared for that future.
- 3 Engagement in school is critical to improving Gen Z's wellbeing and future outlook; however, nearly every measure of engagement declined from 2023 to 2024. Gen Z K-12 students who do not want to attend college are especially unlikely to feel engaged in their schoolwork.
- 4 Gen Z middle and high school students lack information and experiences related to their postgraduation futures — especially those that do not involve college. Between 23% and 35% of students say their schools offer opportunities to learn job-related skills, practice applying or interviewing for jobs, or work on projects related to a career they may want. Fewer than one in four high schoolers have had a lot of conversations about non-college pathways such as apprenticeships and internships (23%), careers that don't require a degree (19%) or entrepreneurship (13%).
- 5 In Gen Z's ideal lives, living comfortably and having close relationships with friends and family are significantly more important than becoming wealthy, buying a house or landing a high-status work position.

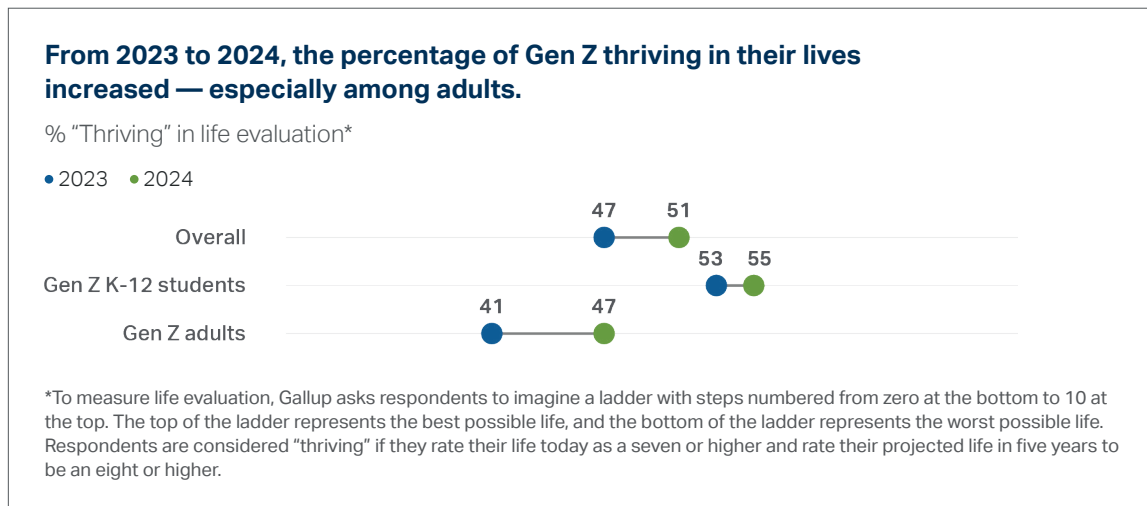


# Thriving and Great Lives

## Just over half of Gen Z are thriving in their lives; adults continue to struggle more than K-12 students

Just over half (51%) of Gen Z are thriving in their lives, based on assessments of their lives today and how they project their lives will be in five years. Gen Z's wellbeing has improved slightly over the past year, as 47% of Gen Z were thriving in their lives in May 2023.

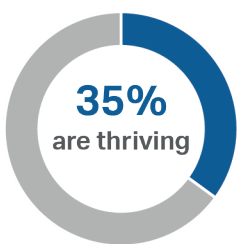
**CHART 1**



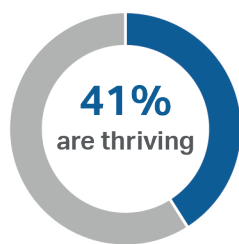
While all age groups of Gen Z report at least some improvement in their life evaluation, the overall increase from 2023 to 2024 is primarily driven by the six-point improvement among Gen Z adults. However, even after these significant increases, Gen Z adults remain eight points less likely to be thriving than Gen Z middle and high school students (47% to 55%).

While Gen Z adults lag their younger peers in life evaluation, those who have some level of postsecondary education are more likely to be thriving.

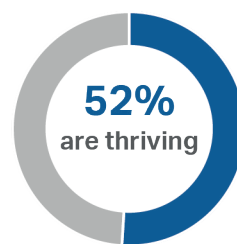
### Among Gen Zers between the ages of 21 and 27



among those with a high school diploma or less



among those enrolled in or who have completed an associate degree, certificate or technical training program



among those who are pursuing or have completed a bachelor's degree

Moreover, from 2023 to 2024, life evaluation improved by six percentage points among those with any postsecondary education (from 45% to 51%), while those with only a high school diploma saw a slight decrease in their life evaluation (from 37% to 35%).

## To Gen Z, a great life involves living comfortably and focusing on personal relationships; career and material outcomes are secondary

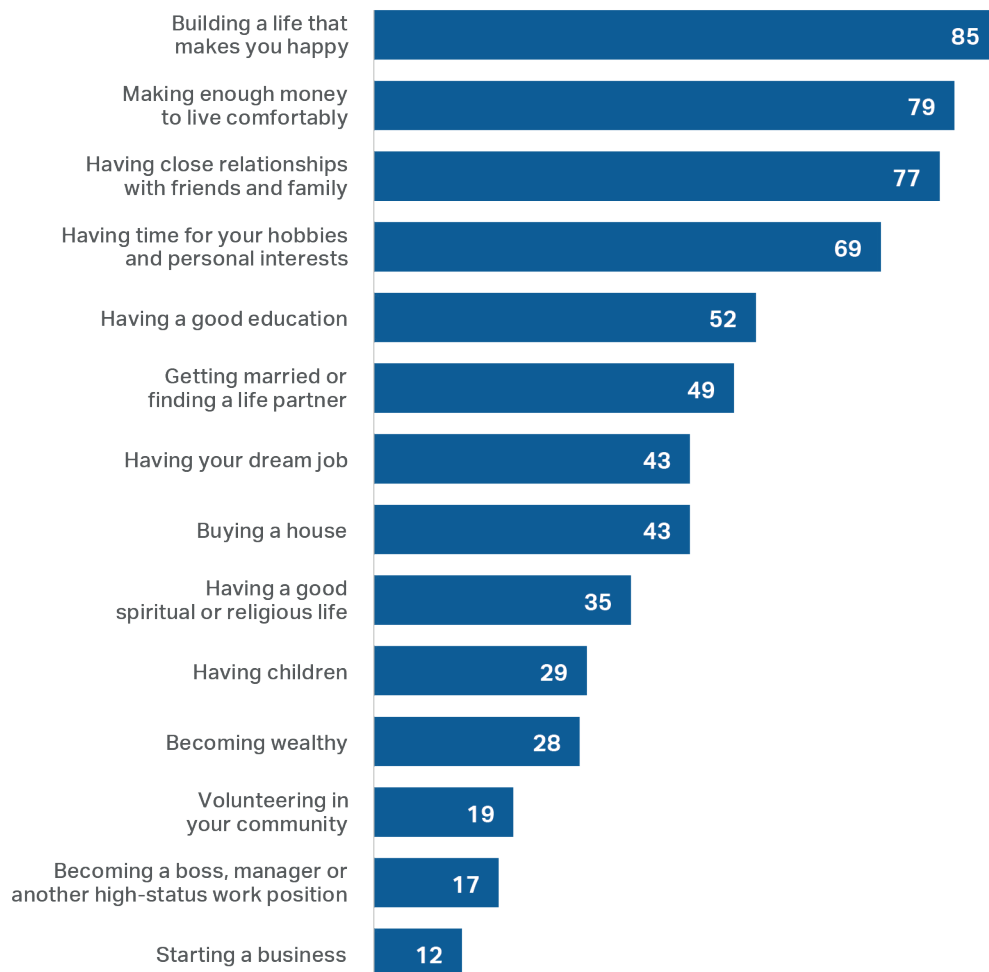
To better understand what is important when evaluating their lives, Gallup asked Gen Z to share their own definitions of a great life. Beyond generally building a life that makes them happy (85%), Gen Z of all ages are most likely to say it is very important that they earn enough to live comfortably (79%) and maintain close relationships with their friends and family (77%). While it is not clear whether this is unique to Gen Z as compared to older generations, fewer members of this generation prioritize obtaining a high-status job (17%) or becoming wealthy (28%).

### CHART 2

#### Gen Zers say a great life involves living comfortably and having good relationships; wealth and high-status jobs are far less important.

How important are each of the following to you, personally, when you think about your future and having a great life?

*% Very important*



Among Gen Z overall

Several of these priorities differ by age. Gen Z K-12 students are notably more likely than adults to say obtaining their dream job (50% vs. 36%) and becoming wealthy (34% vs. 22%) are very important aspects of a great life. Conversely, Gen Z adults prioritize getting married or finding a life partner (61%), having children (35%) and volunteering in their community (24%) more than Gen Z K-12 students (35%, 22% and 14%, respectively). That said, less than half of Gen Z adults say two aspects of a traditional family life — owning a home (45%) and having children (35%) — are very important to having a great life.

## When it comes to their future, Gen Z is more optimistic than confident

Nearly eight in 10 (79%) Gen Zers agree they have a great future ahead of them; however, just over half (51%) feel prepared for it. Both percentages have increased since 2023, when 76% were optimistic about their future and 44% felt prepared for it. The increases in feelings of preparedness may be the result of the oldest members of Gen Z — especially those between the ages of 25 and 27 — completing additional education after high school and having one additional year of experience in their adult lives and careers.





**CHART 3**

**Feelings of preparedness for the future are highest among the oldest members of Gen Z, along with male, Asian and White Gen Zers.**

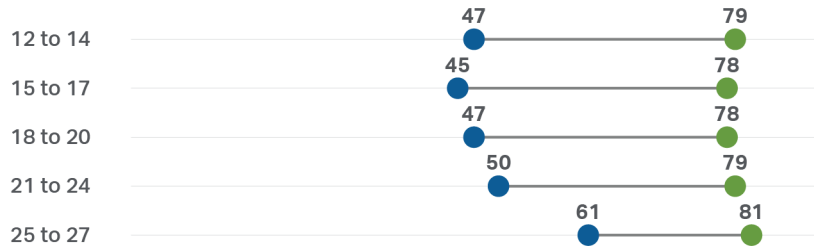
% Strongly agree + % Agree

● I feel prepared for the future ● I have a great future ahead of me

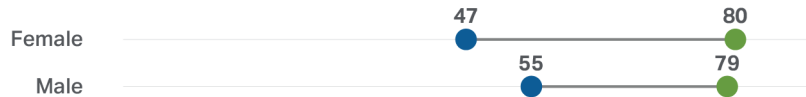
**OVERALL**



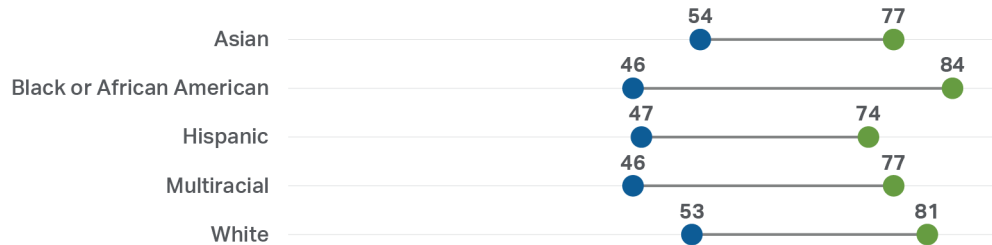
**AGE GROUP**



**GENDER**



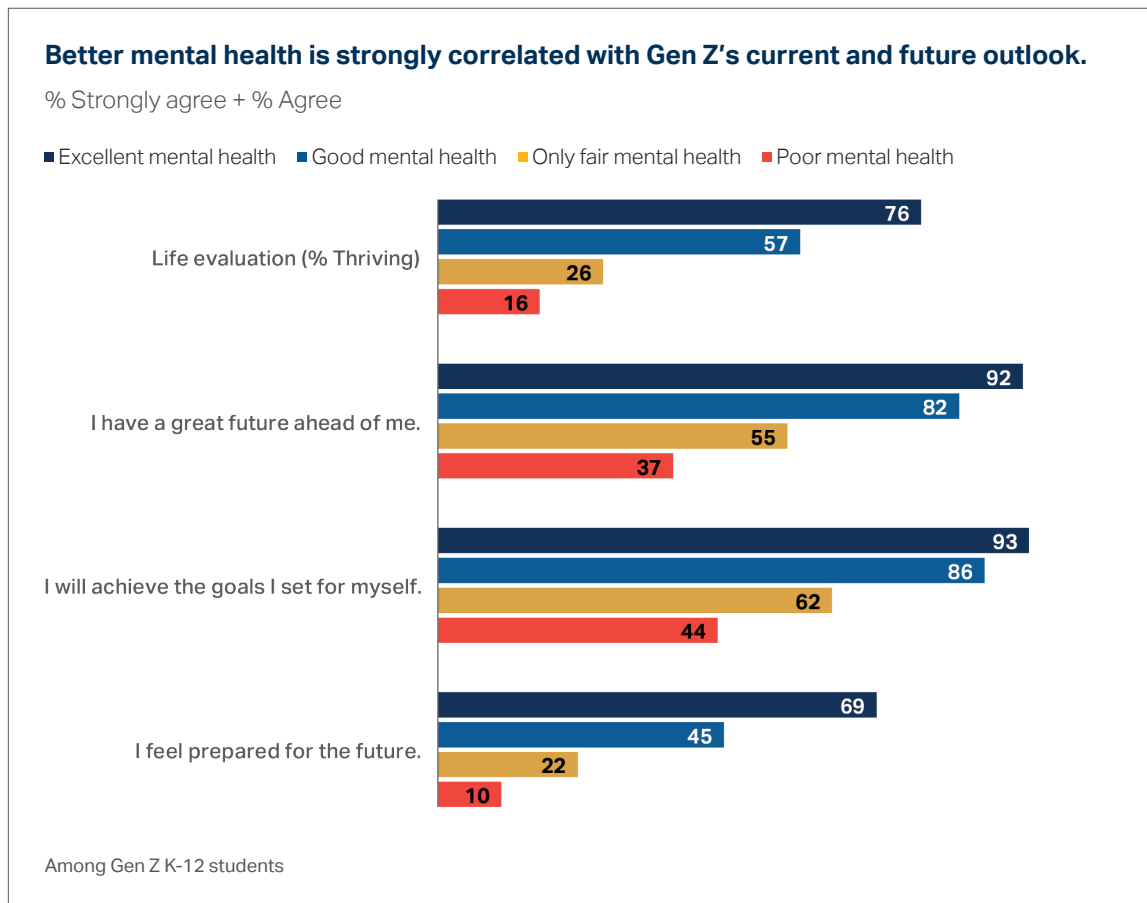
**RACE/ETHNICITY**



In addition to the oldest cohort of Gen Z feeling more optimistic and prepared for their futures, Black Gen Zers are also more likely than their peers to feel they have a great future ahead of them; however, this group remains among the least likely segments of Gen Z to feel prepared for the future. Meanwhile, while not uniquely optimistic about their future, young men, as well as Asian and White Gen Zers, are more likely to feel prepared for it.

Mental health continues to pose a challenge to many Gen Zers, especially older cohorts and women. About one in five (21%) Gen Zers — including 14% of adults and 16% of women — say they have “excellent” mental health, while more say their mental health is only fair (24%) or poor (7%). Importantly, mental health is strongly correlated with overall life evaluation, as well as Gen Z’s outlook on the future. About three-quarters (76%) of Gen Z K-12 students who report having excellent mental health are thriving in their lives, nearly three times the percentage of those who have only fair mental health (26%) and nearly five times that of Gen Zers with poor mental health (16%). Similarly, those with excellent mental health are more than three times as likely to feel prepared for their futures as those with only fair mental health, and about seven times as likely to feel prepared as those who have poor mental health.

**CHART 4**



**Engagement improves Gen Z's wellbeing and future optimism**

For K-12 students, the most important predictor of whether they feel excited about and prepared for their future — even when controlling for demographic differences such as gender, race and household income — is the extent to which they feel engaged at school. Students who are engaged feel like what they are learning in the classroom is interesting, challenging and allows them to leverage their natural talents. Engaged students also report that their teachers make them excited about the future and encourage them to pursue their goals.

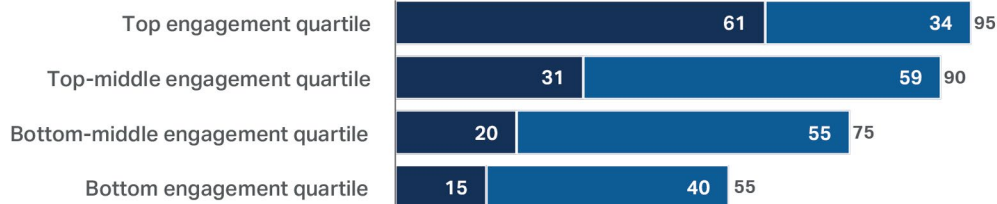
The students who are most engaged in school (the 25% of students who gave the highest scores to seven items related to their classroom engagement, including feeling interested in, excited about and challenged by what they are learning) are more than four times as likely as the least-engaged students to strongly agree they have a great future ahead of them and are 10 times more likely to strongly agree they feel prepared for the future.

**CHART 5**

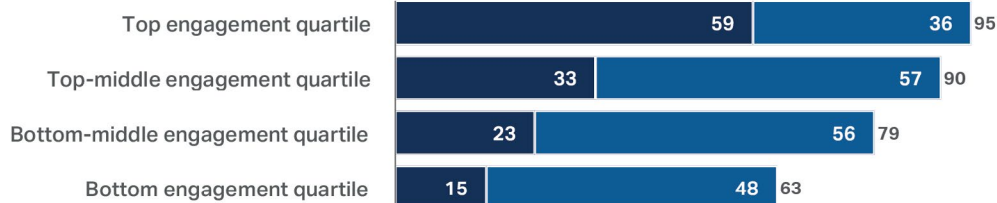
**Gen Z students who are most engaged in school also have the most positive outlook on their futures.**

■ % Strongly agree ■ % Agree

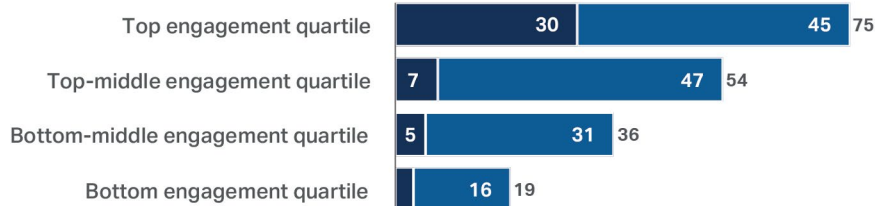
**I HAVE A GREAT FUTURE AHEAD OF ME.**



**I WILL ACHIEVE THE GOALS I SET FOR MYSELF.**



**I FEEL PREPARED FOR THE FUTURE.**



Among Gen Z K-12 students  
Data labels <5% are not displayed.

Because optimism for the future and feelings of preparedness are the most important predictors of whether a Gen Z student is thriving in their life, stronger engagement in school indirectly leads to higher life evaluation: The most engaged students are more than twice as likely to be thriving in their lives as the least engaged students (76% vs. 32%).

**Whether college- or career-bound, most Gen Zers don't feel very prepared for their futures**

Regardless of whether Gen Zers hope to pursue a college education or a non-college pathway after graduation, most do not feel very prepared for their future endeavors. Overall, just 10% of Gen Z high school students strongly agree they feel prepared for the future, which seems to reflect trepidation about both their academic and career pursuits. About one-quarter of Gen Z high school students feel they are very prepared to apply to (26%) or succeed in (24%) college. Career prospects are only marginally higher: 29% of Gen Z high school students believe they will be very prepared in the future to succeed in their careers.

**CHART 6**

**Fewer than one in three Gen Z students feel very prepared for college or career.**

■ % Very prepared ■ % Somewhat prepared

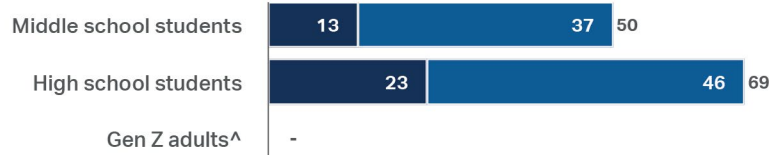
**HOW PREPARED DO YOU FEEL TO APPLY TO COLLEGE?**



**HOW PREPARED DO YOU FEEL TO SUCCEED IN COLLEGE?**



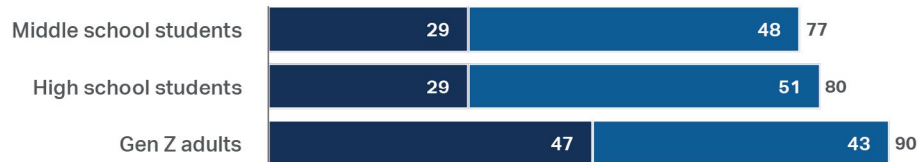
**HOW PREPARED DO YOU FEEL TO APPLY FOR A JOB?**



**HOW PREPARED DO YOU FEEL TO SUCCEED IN A CAREER?**



**HOW PREPARED DO YOU THINK YOU WILL BE IN THE FUTURE TO SUCCEED IN A CAREER?**



Among Gen Z who intend to pursue college or a career

\*Item was asked only of adults who are not enrolled in a college program and do not hold a degree or certificate.

†Item was asked only of adults without a college degree.

^Item was not asked of this subgroup.

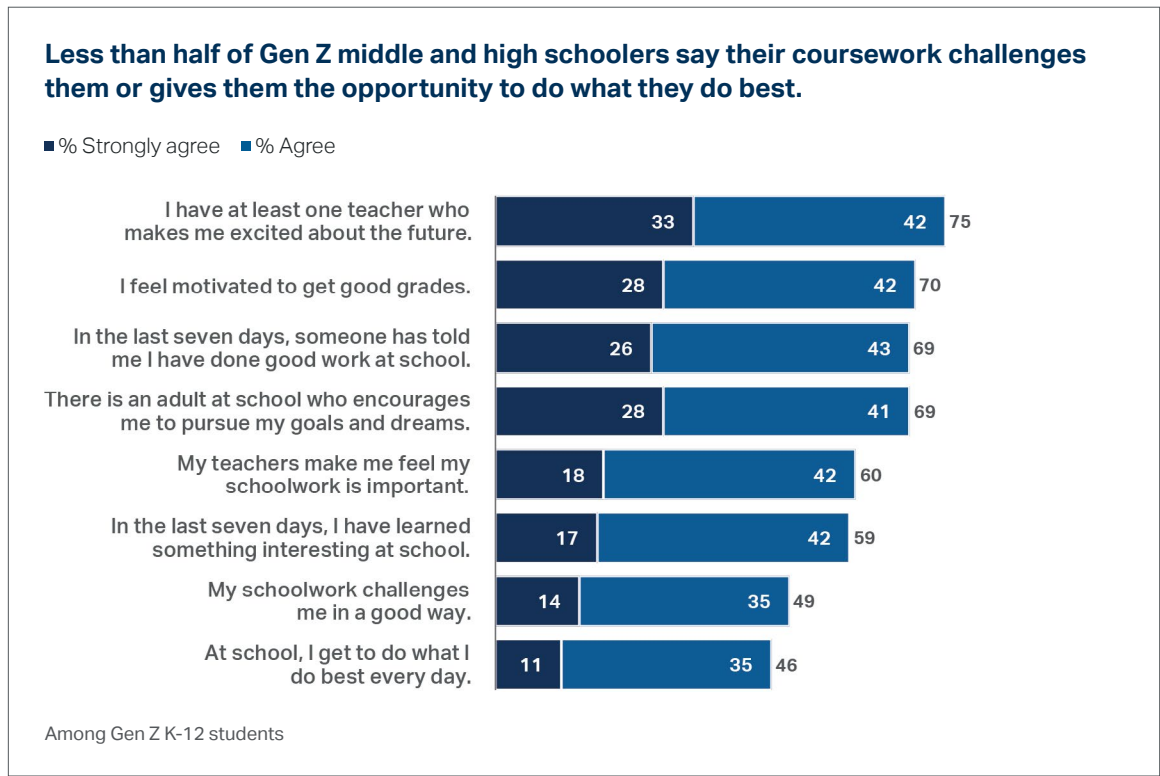
While Gen Z does get marginally more confident as they move through the early years of adulthood, most still have some doubts about their career-readiness. Even among the oldest cohort of 25- to 27-year-old Gen Zers, just about one in three (32%) feel they are currently very prepared to succeed in their careers.

# Engagement in School

## Most measures of school engagement declined over the past year; schools especially struggle to engage students who are not college-bound

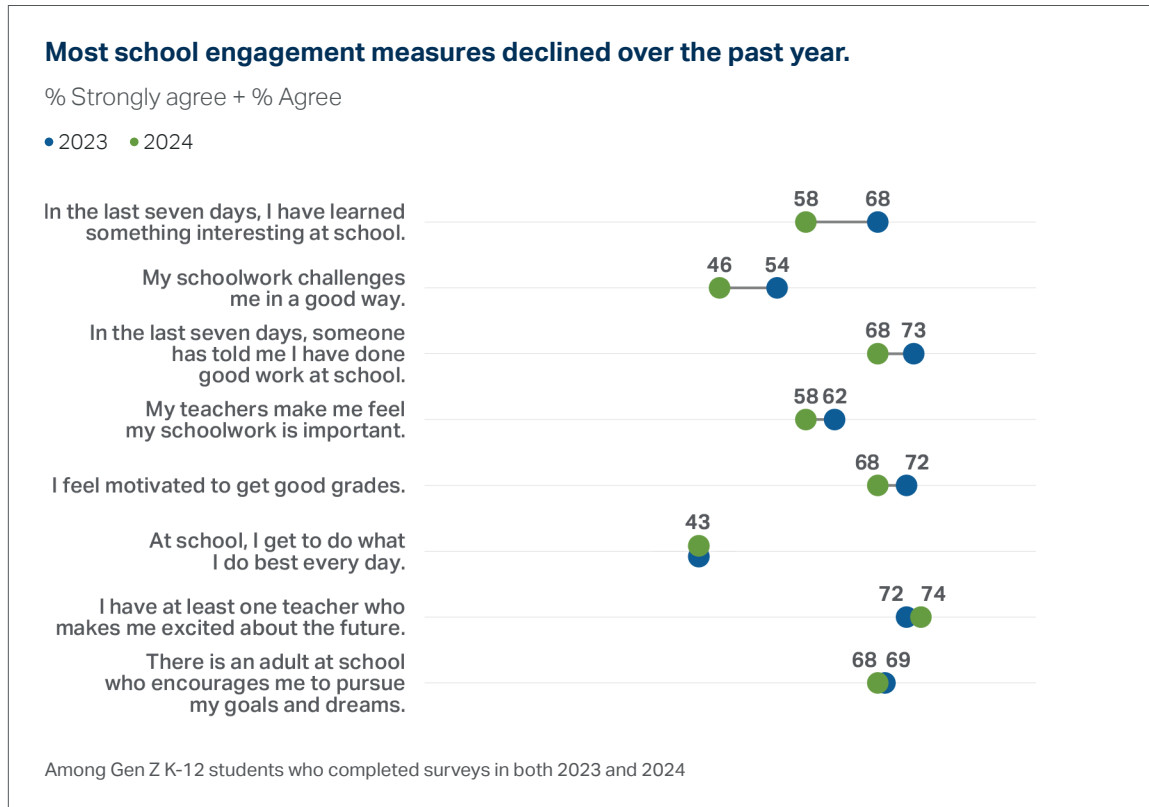
Despite the critical importance of engagement to their future outlook, Gen Z K-12 students continue to struggle with many of its elements: Between 11% and 33% of these students strongly agree they have any of eight engaging classroom experiences, such as having supportive teachers, feeling motivated and challenged by their schoolwork, and completing coursework that lends itself to their strengths and interests. Nearly half (46%) do not strongly agree that they are having even one of these experiences.

**CHART 7**



Nearly every educational engagement metric declined among middle and high school students who completed the Voices of Gen Z survey in both 2023 and 2024. The largest drops were in students being interested in and challenged by what they are learning. This trend is in line with multiple iterations<sup>1,2</sup> of Gallup research, which have repeatedly demonstrated that from fifth grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade — and often, even from year to year — students’ engagement with their schoolwork drops precipitously.

**CHART 8**



1 Busteed, B. (2013, January 7). The School Cliff: Student Engagement Drops With Each School Year. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/170525/school-cliff-student-engagement-drops-school-year.aspx>

2 Calderon, V. J., & Yu, D. (2017, June 1). Student Enthusiasm Falls as High School Graduation Nears. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/211631/student-enthusiasm-falls-high-school-graduation-nears.aspx>

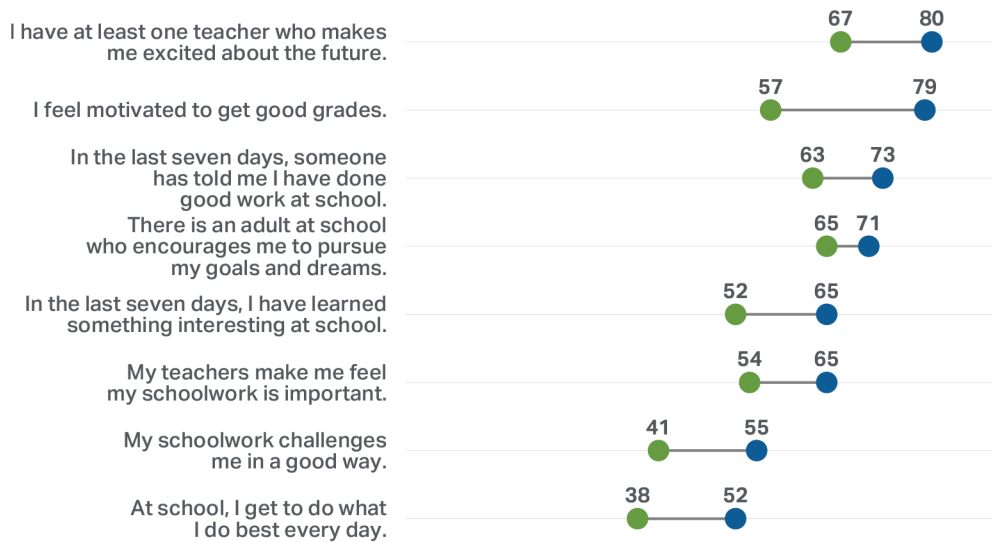
Engagement does not only decline as students advance along their middle and high school journeys; it is also lower among students who do not plan to pursue additional education after high school. Students who say they do not expect to go to college are notably less likely than college-bound students to feel motivated, interested or excited by what they are learning in school. They are also significantly less likely to feel their schoolwork gives them the opportunity to do what they do best.

**CHART 9**

**Schools are doing a better job of engaging students who hope to go to college than those who do not.**

% Strongly agree + % Agree

● Hopes to pursue a bachelor’s or associate degree ● Does not hope to pursue any degree



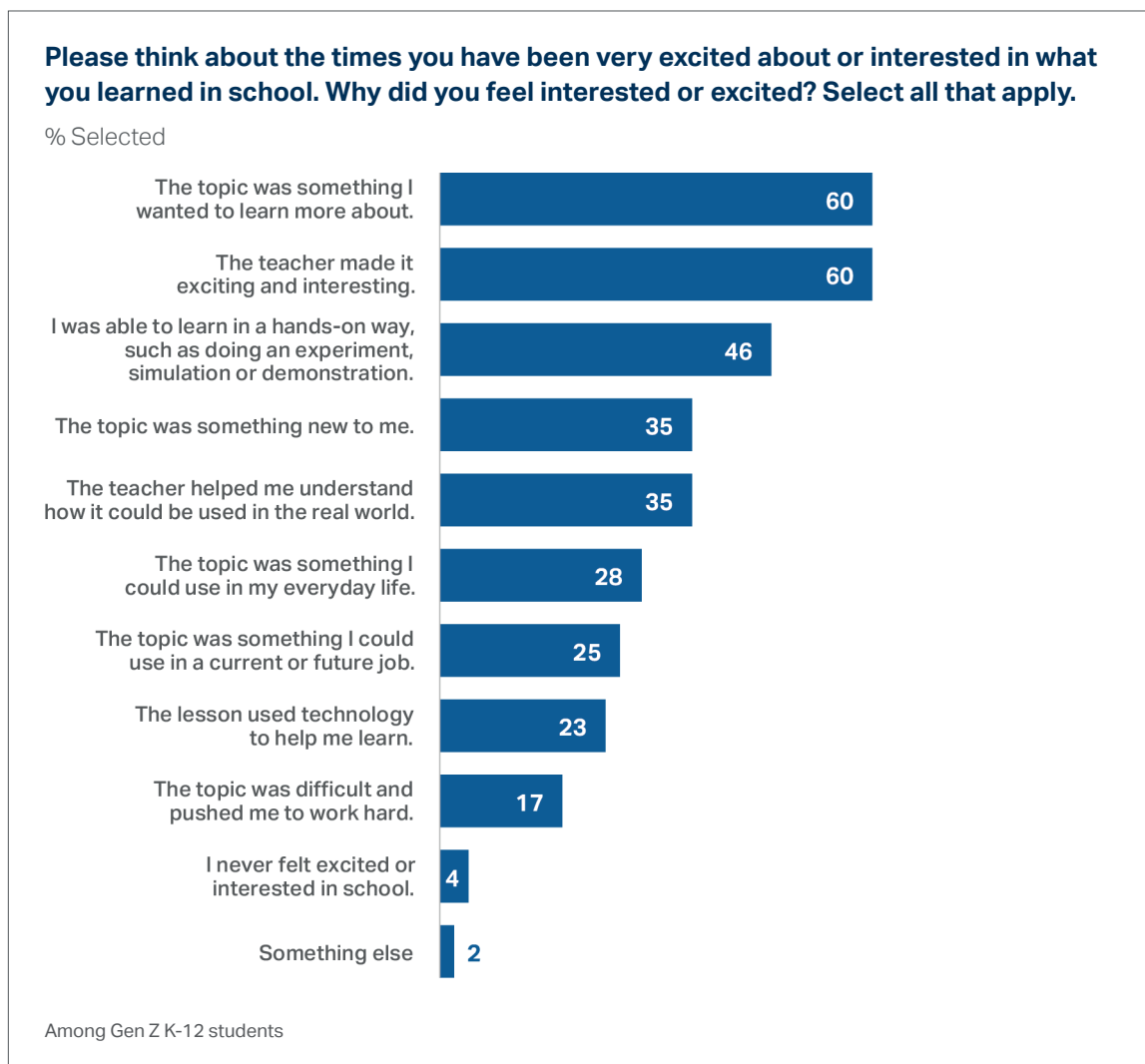
Among Gen Z K-12 students

## Teachers who offer practical, hands-on learning opportunities drive student engagement

Engagement is one of the most influential predictors of several important outcomes in Gen Zers' lives, yet schools continue to struggle to engage large segments of their students. More than four in 10 Gen Z students do not agree they have learned anything interesting in the past week or that their teachers make them feel like what they are learning is important; more than half do not agree they have the opportunity to do schoolwork that aligns with their interests or talents. What can be done to improve this critical aspect of Gen Z students' day-to-day lives?

According to students, it starts with their teachers: 60% of Gen Z students say that when they feel most engaged with what they are learning, it is because their teacher made the topic interesting or exciting. Gen Z students also feel more engaged in their classwork when they have opportunities to learn in a hands-on way or are able to connect what they are learning to a career or their life outside of school.

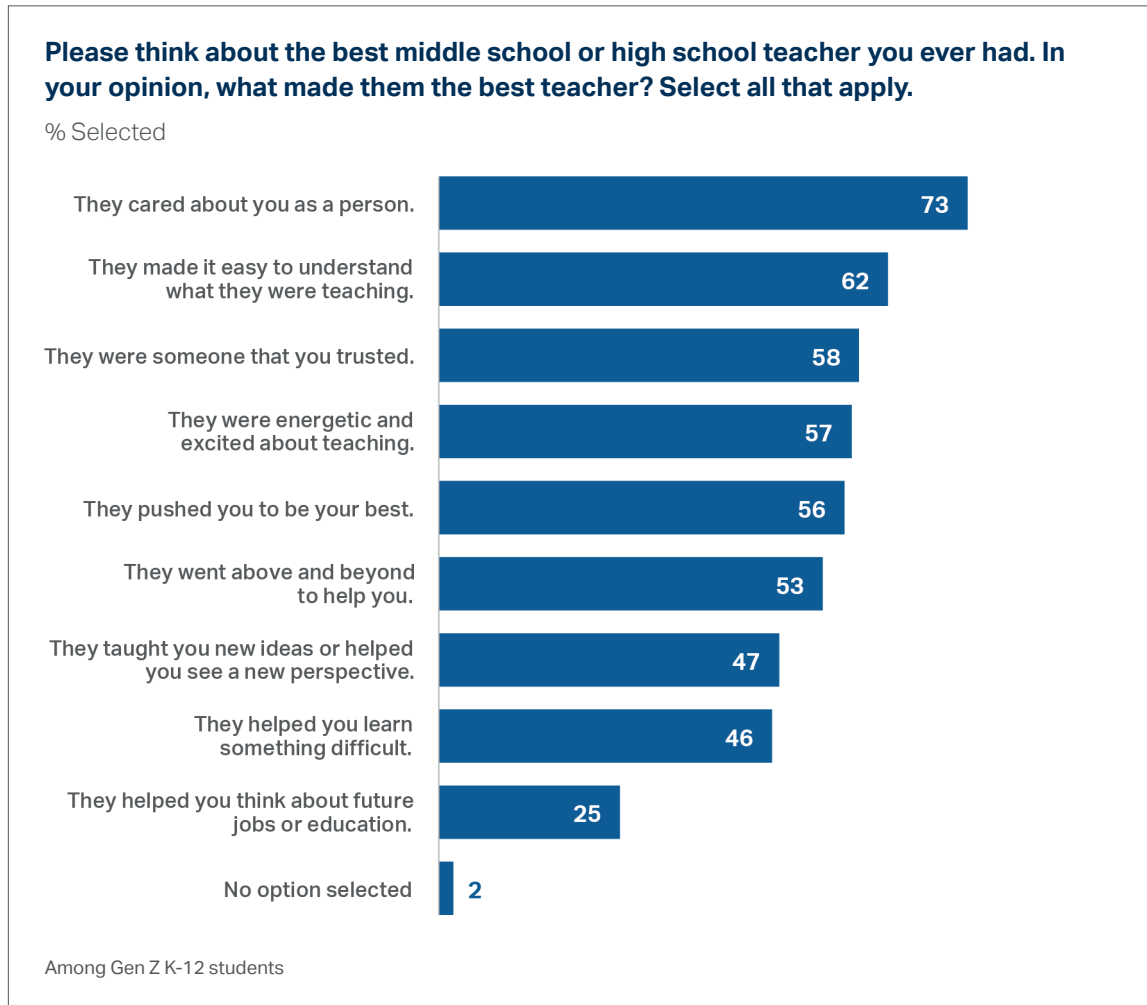
**CHART 10**





Similarly, 57% of students report that the best teacher they ever had was energetic and excited about what they were teaching. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of Gen Zers also say this teacher cared about them as a person — a factor that is more important than several substantive teaching qualities, such as making the content easy to understand (62%) or helping students learn difficult material (46%).

**CHART 11**



Many Gen Z K-12 students feel most excited about what they are learning when they can see how it connects to the real world (35%) or when it is something they can use in their future job (25%) or everyday life (28%). These kinds of career-related activities — which include learning to apply and interview for jobs, learning job-related skills in the classroom, or obtaining an internship or industry certificate — also marginally improve Gen Z students’ career confidence. Students whose schools offer these career-related activities and curricula are six to 16 points more likely to feel very prepared to succeed in their future career than students whose schools do not offer these opportunities. However, other than learning about different types of careers, 35% or less of students say their school offers such career-related activities or curricula.

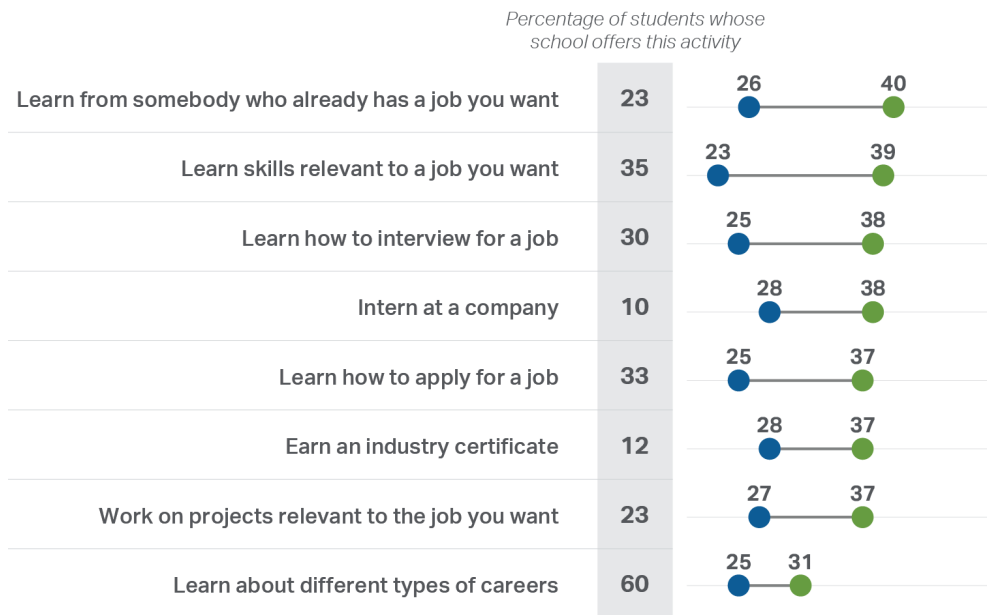
**CHART 12**

**Future career confidence increases among students whose schools offer career-related activities.**

Does your school offer any opportunities to ... ?

% Very prepared for “How prepared do you think you will be to do each of the following in the future: Succeed in a career”

- School does not offer this activity
- School offers this activity



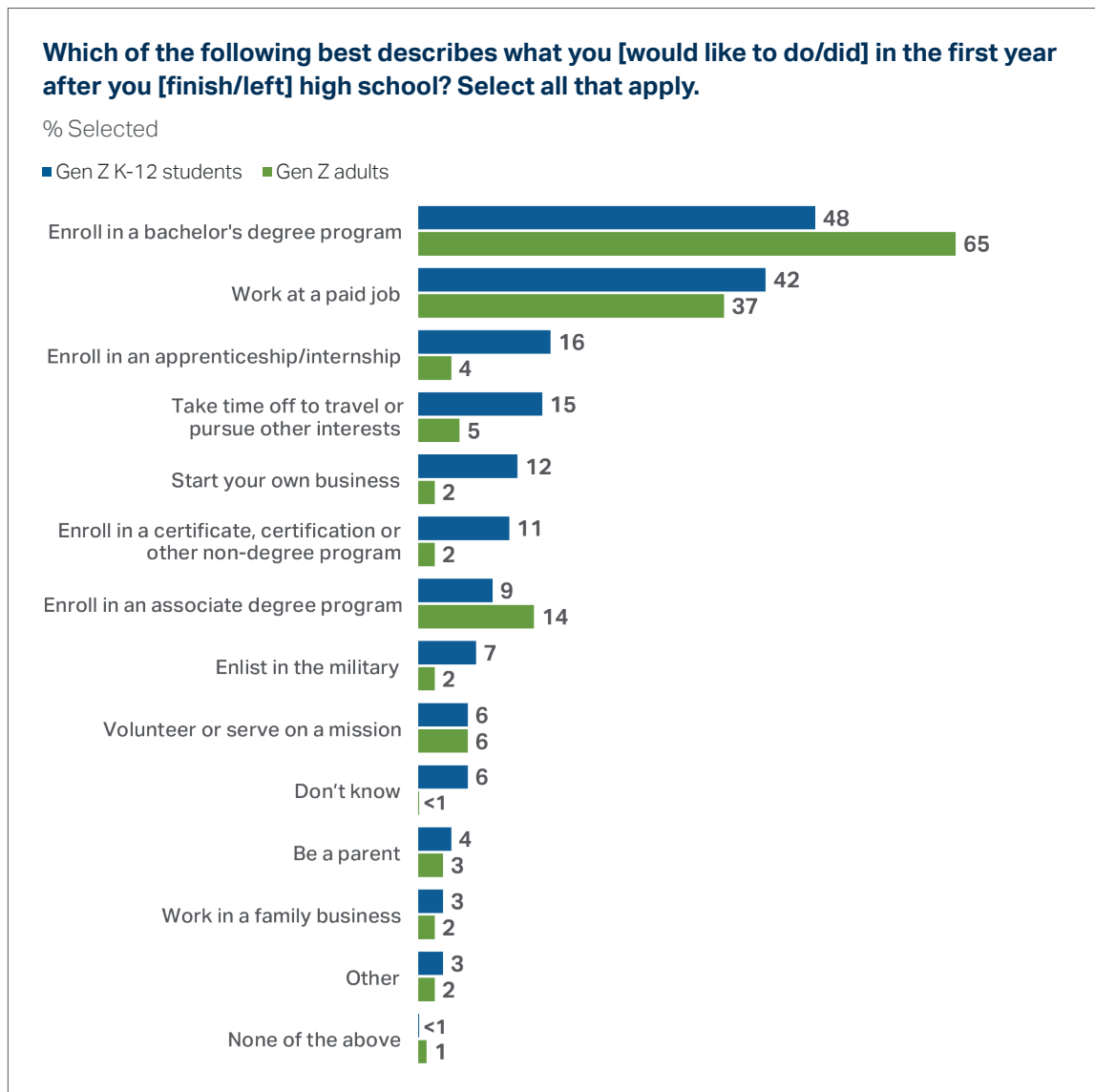
Among Gen Z K-12 students

# Postsecondary Paths and Future Preparedness

## College remains the primary postgraduation pathway for Gen Z, but few other options are widely discussed

The Voices of Gen Z study previously found that 13- to 17-year-old Gen Zers are less inclined to pursue college than their millennial peers were at the same age. Even still, Gen Z continues to prefer college education of some kind to every other postsecondary pathway by a fairly wide margin. Nearly eight in 10 Gen Z adults surveyed say they enrolled in a bachelor’s degree (65%) or associate degree (14%) program in the first year after completing high school, and 57% of K-12 students say they intend to pursue one of those paths (48% and 9%, respectively).

**CHART 13**



While more than half of Gen Z K-12 students say they intend to pursue a degree, data on college attendance, persistence and graduation suggest that for many Gen Zers, their aspirations may not come to pass. In 2020, roughly two-thirds of bachelor’s degree students had graduated within six years of starting their program, and about half of associate degree students had completed their programs or transferred to a four-year program.<sup>3</sup> As it is, there are already more than 2 million 20- to 24-year-old adults who enrolled in a postsecondary degree or credential program but stopped out before completing it.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, many of the Gen Zers who hope to attend college — and even many of those who enroll — will likely not complete a degree and will primarily rely on their high school diploma for their future success.

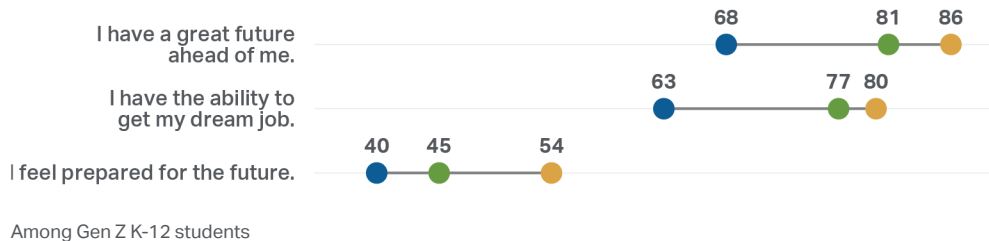
While more than four in 10 Gen Z K-12 students intend to pursue something other than college after high school, schools are struggling to engage these students at even higher rates than their peers who hope to attend college. Due to the relationship between school engagement and future outlook, it follows that the students who do not plan to pursue a degree are also less optimistic about their future, as well as their readiness for it.

**CHART 14**

**Students who are not college-bound are less optimistic about their future and job prospects.**

% Strongly agree + % Agree

• Does not hope to pursue any degree • Hopes to pursue associate degree • Hopes to pursue bachelor’s degree



3 National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). Fast Facts: Undergraduate Graduation Rates. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>

4 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (n.d.). Some College, No Credential Student Outcomes. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/some-college-no-credential-dashboard/>

Some of the preference for attending college — and the reason those who do not prefer this path are less confident in their futures — reflects the messaging that Gen Z is receiving about their post-high school opportunities. About two in three (68%) Gen Z high schoolers say that people have talked to them “a lot” about going to college; this includes 48% of students who do not want to pursue a degree.

Meanwhile, less than one-quarter of Gen Z high school students say others have talked a lot with them about apprenticeship, certificate or vocational programs (23%); jobs that don’t require a college degree (19%); or starting a business (13%). Students who do not want to go to college are about twice as likely as their college-bound peers to say others have talked to them a lot about apprenticeships, internships and jobs that don’t require a college degree; however, even among students who don’t intend to pursue a degree, these non-college conversations are still happening significantly less frequently than conversations related to college.

**CHART 15**

**Gen Z high schoolers are about three to five times as likely to have heard a lot about going to college as any any other postsecondary option.**

How much have people ever talked to you about the following?

■ % None ■ % Some or a little ■ % A lot

Going to college



Completing an apprenticeship, certificate or vocational program to learn a trade or skill



Jobs that don't require a college degree



Starting a business



Among Gen Z high school students; due to rounding, percentages may sum to 100% ± 1  
Data labels <5% are not displayed.

The frequency of these conversations is a critical factor both in Gen Z’s postsecondary plans as well as how important they believe a college degree is to their future success. Statistically, the strongest predictor of whether a Gen Z student intends to pursue a college degree is whether they have had “a lot” of conversations about a postsecondary pathway other than going to college — those who have had more non-college conversations place less importance on a college degree and are less likely to want to pursue one. This is true even when controlling for factors such as the pressure a student feels from their parents to go to college, their engagement in the classroom and their academic performance.

# Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web survey conducted April 26-May 9, 2024, with a sample of 4,157 12- to 27-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 landline and cellphones.

Within the overall sample, 2,364 12- to 19-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; Panel members whose child completed the survey in 2023 were asked to have the same child complete the survey again, even if they were 19 years old. The remaining 1,793 18- to 27-year-old respondents are members of the Gallup Panel.

For the total sample of 4,157 Gen Z respondents, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 2.1$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 2,317 children still enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 2.7$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 1,840 Gen Z youth who are no longer enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

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.

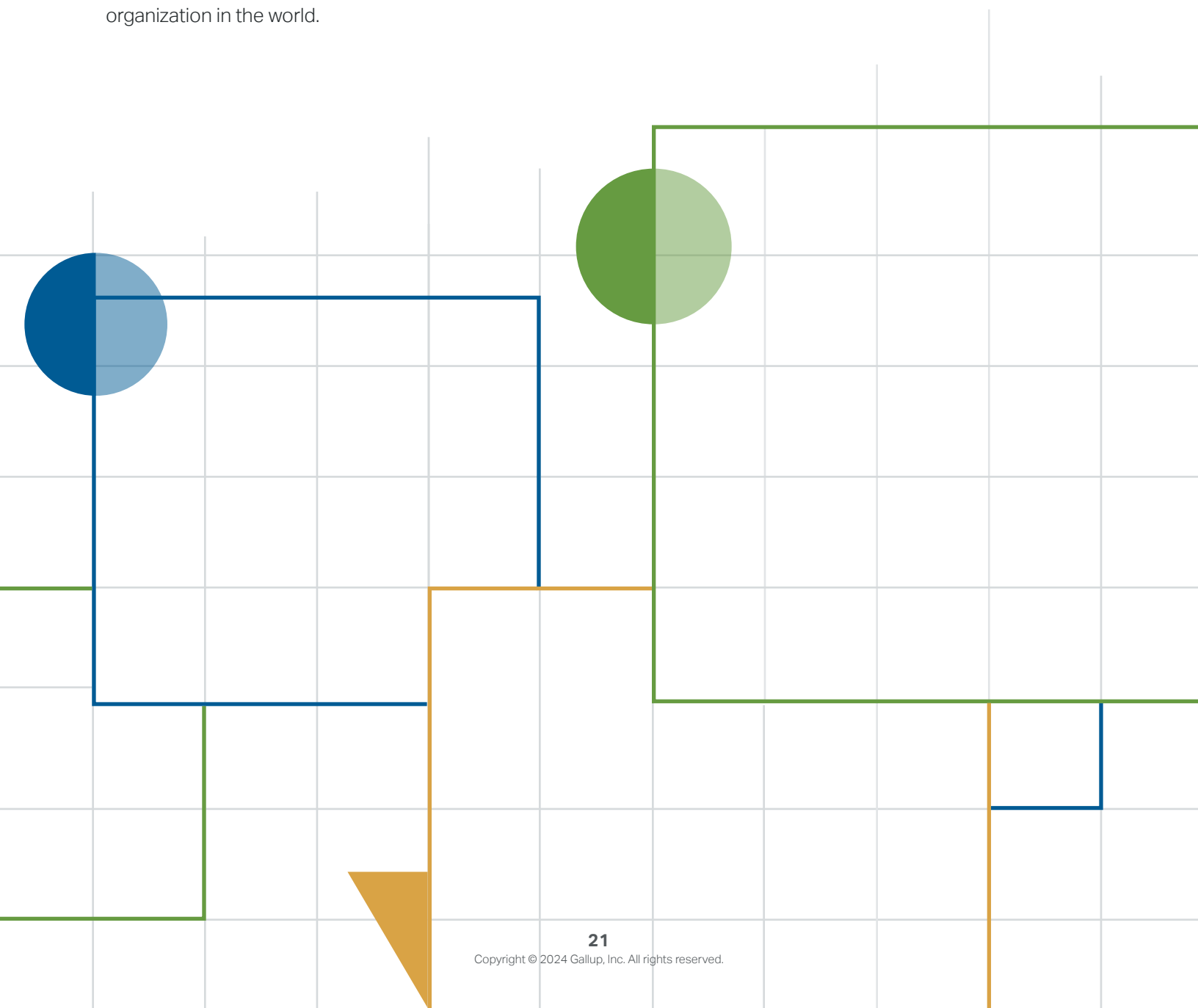
# About

## 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.

## Gallup

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