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FOUNDATION

# Voices of Gen Z

## Perspectives on U.S. Education, Wellbeing and the Future



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## Executive Summary

The success of Generation Z — defined in this report as those born from 1997 to 2011 — will be determined by its members' ability to learn, prepare for the future and lead purposeful lives. Therefore, decisions affecting public policy, learning environments and workplaces should consider the perspectives of — not about — Gen Z, the challenges they face and the solutions that best suit their unique needs.

To better understand Gen Z's unique perspectives, Gallup and the Walton Family Foundation (WFF) have partnered to gather opinions directly from members of Gen Z and to track those opinions and experiences over time. This nationally representative, multiyear study of thousands of members of Gen Z between the ages of 12 and 26 gives policymakers and researchers an invaluable resource for not only understanding this generation's needs, but for making data-driven decisions to address them. The size and scope of the study also facilitates robust research of demographic subgroups, such as gender, race and educational attainment, many of which reveal ambitions and challenges unique among their Gen Z peers.

**The results of the inaugural Gallup-WFF Gen Z study provide unique insights into how young people think about themselves, their schools and their future possibilities.**





## Key Findings

- 1 **Less than half** (47%) of Gen Z Americans are **thriving in their lives** — among the **lowest across all generations** in the U.S. today and a much lower rate than millennials at the same age.
- 2 **Seventy-six percent** of Gen Z members agree they have a **great future ahead of them**, yet only **44% report feeling prepared for their future**.
- 3 Members of Gen Z who have an **adult encouraging them to pursue their goals and dreams** are more than **twice as likely** as those without to **strongly agree they have a great future ahead** (51% versus 23%) and **will reach their goals** (49% versus 23%).
- 4 Despite significant learning loss coming out of the pandemic,<sup>1</sup> **three-quarters** of Gen Z students **rate their academic performance as “excellent” or “good”** — though **male, Black and Hispanic** students rate their academic performance **lower than others**.
- 5 Gen Z students with **excellent mental health** are more than **twice as likely** as those with fair or poor mental health to say they get **excellent grades in school** (53% versus 25%) and are 24 points **less likely** to have **missed any school in the past month** (41% versus 65%).
- 6 Gen Z’s **most frequently** cited hope for the future is to **“make enough money to live comfortably”** (69%), while 64% say **financial resources** are a **barrier to achieving their future goals and aspirations**.

1 Kane, T., & Reardon, S. (2023, May 11). Parents don't understand how far behind their kids are in school [Opinion]. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/05/11/opinion/pandemic-learning-losses-steep-but-not-permanent.html>; Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University. (n.d.). Road to COVID recovery. <https://cepr.harvard.edu/road-to-covid-recovery>; Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2022, October 28). New research provides the first clear picture of learning loss at local level. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/news/22/10/new-research-provides-first-clear-picture-learning-loss-local-level>

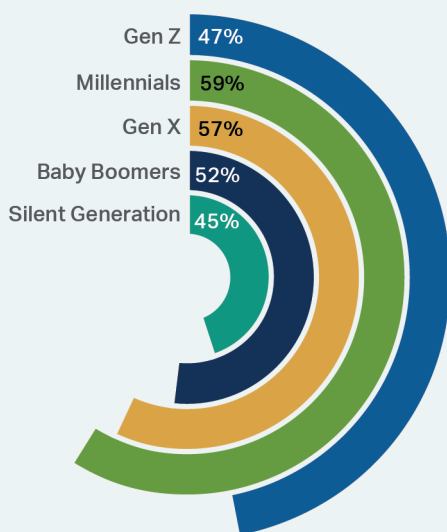


# Struggling With Wellbeing

## Less than half of Gen Z members are “thriving.”

As more members of Gen Z emerge into or approach adulthood, most U.S. adults worry about the future of this next generation. A 2022 [Gallup survey found](#) that Americans were the least optimistic they have been in three decades about young people’s chances of having a better future than their parents. This sentiment is reflected not only within the broader public, but also within Gen Z themselves.

**Percentage Thriving in Life Evaluation by Generation**



When asked to rate their current and future lives on a scale of zero to 10, 53% of Gen Z rate their current lives as a seven or higher, and 68% rate their projected lives five years from now as an eight or higher.

Those who are “thriving” have both a seven rating or above on the evaluation of their current lives and an eight rating or above on the evaluation of their future lives.<sup>2</sup> **Less than half (47%) of Gen Z members meet the thriving threshold**, trailing millennials (59%), Gen X (57%) and baby boomers (52%). **The only generation on par with Gen Z is the Silent Generation (aged 71 and older), of whom 45% are considered thriving.**

2 Gallup. (n.d.). Understanding how Gallup uses the Cantril Scale: Development of the “thriving, struggling, suffering” categories. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/122453/understanding-gallup-uses-cantril-scale.aspx>

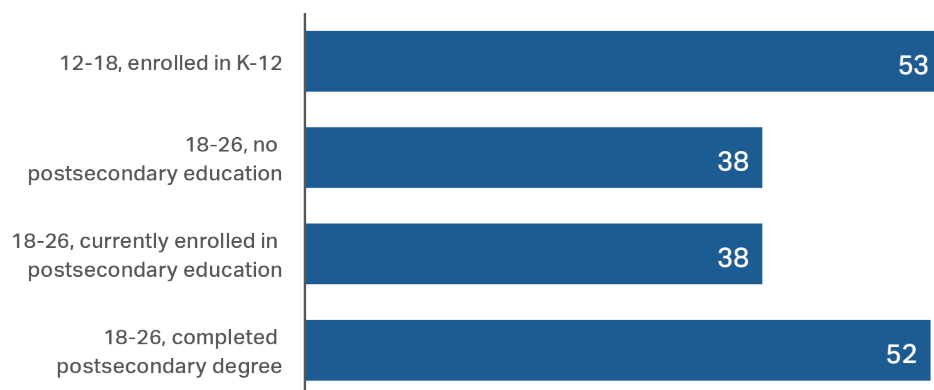


This low life evaluation does not appear to be wholly related to Gen Z's stage of life. In 2009 and 2014, when millennials were the same age as Gen Z today, Gallup measured 59% and 60% of 18- to 26-year-old millennials thriving, respectively, while in 2023, only 41% of 18- to 26-year-old Gen Z adults are thriving.<sup>3</sup>

Postsecondary education has a notable influence on Gen Z's life evaluation. About four in 10 members of Gen Z (38%) who are no longer enrolled in any school (neither K-12 nor college) are thriving — the same as the percentage of currently enrolled Gen Z college students who are thriving. Comparatively, 52% of those who have completed a postsecondary degree are thriving. The results suggest that after leaving K-12, Gen Z's level of thriving begins to suffer. But satisfaction and optimism rebound if, or after, Gen Z members complete a postsecondary degree.

### Life Evaluation by Educational Attainment

(% Thriving)



<sup>3</sup> Millennial life evaluation sourced from aggregated Gallup Daily tracking phone polls conducted January through December 2009 and January through December 2014.



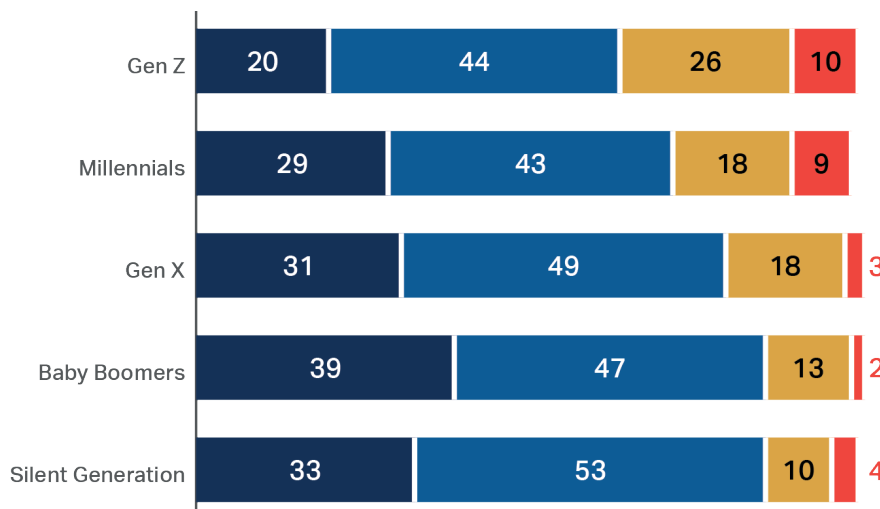
## Gen Z struggles with mental and emotional wellbeing more than the previous generation at the same age.

In addition to their relatively low life evaluations, Gen Z members rate their mental health far lower than their older peers.

### Generational Differences in Overall Mental and Emotional Wellbeing

#### How would you describe your own mental health or emotional wellbeing at this time?

■ % Excellent ■ % Good ■ % Only fair ■ % Poor



Note: Results for non-Gen Z cohorts are based on a separate web survey conducted with members of the Gallup Panel in February 2023. Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100%.

There is evidence that Gen Z’s self-reported mental health struggles are distinct from those of previous generations at the same age. Gallup asked young adults in 2004 and 2013, “How would you describe your own mental health or emotional wellbeing at this time?” Fifty-five percent of 18- to 26-year-olds in 2004 (spanning Gen X and millennials) and 52% of 18- to 26-year-old millennials in 2013 rated their mental health as “excellent.”<sup>4</sup> In this study, **only 15% of 18- to 26-year-old Gen Z rate their current mental health as excellent.** That said, some of this gap may be owed to overall declines in mental health between 2013 and 2023, as millennials and Gen X report far lower mental health ratings today than in 2013 and 2004.

How Gen Z feels on a daily basis is distinct from other generations as well. Many members of Gen Z report having experienced negative emotions — such as stress, anxiety and loneliness — a lot of the prior day. This incidence of negative emotions is particularly high among Gen Z, which reports rates of anxiety, stress, sadness and loneliness at least seven percentage points higher than those of millennials, Gen X, baby boomers and the Silent Generation.

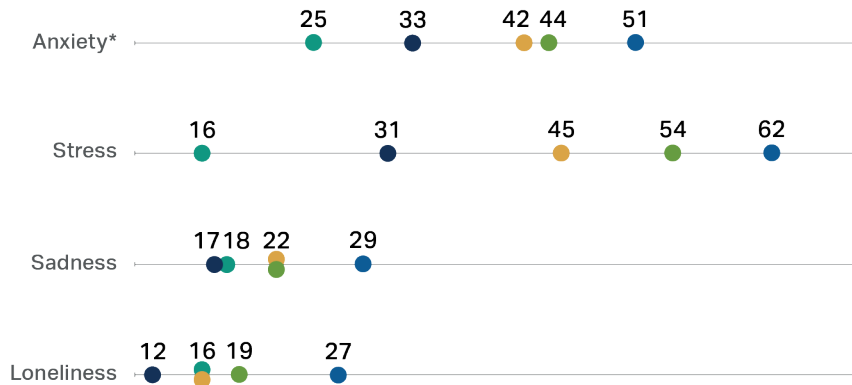
<sup>4</sup> 2004 and 2013 data from 18- to 26-year-olds are sourced from phone polls conducted as part of the Gallup Poll Social Series in November 2004 and November 2013.

## Generational Differences in Experiencing Negative Emotions

Did you experience the following feelings during a lot of the day yesterday?

(% Yes)

● Gen Z ● Millennials ● Gen X ● Baby Boomers ● Silent Generation



Note: \*In comparison data, this item is framed as "Worry" rather than "Anxiety." Results for non-Gen Z cohorts are based on web surveys conducted with members of the Gallup Panel in February 2023.

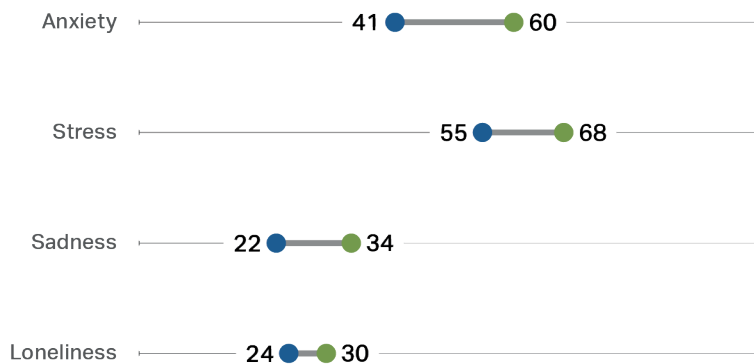
Within Gen Z, more women are struggling with negative emotions than men — especially when it comes to stress and anxiety.

## Gen Z Gender Identity Differences in Experiencing Negative Emotions

Did you experience the following feelings during a lot of the day yesterday?

(% Yes)

● Male ● Female





# Optimistic, but Not Prepared

Most in Gen Z believe their future is bright, but less than half feel prepared for it.

Overall, members of Gen Z are optimistic about their future — especially young people who have an adult who encourages them to pursue their goals and dreams.

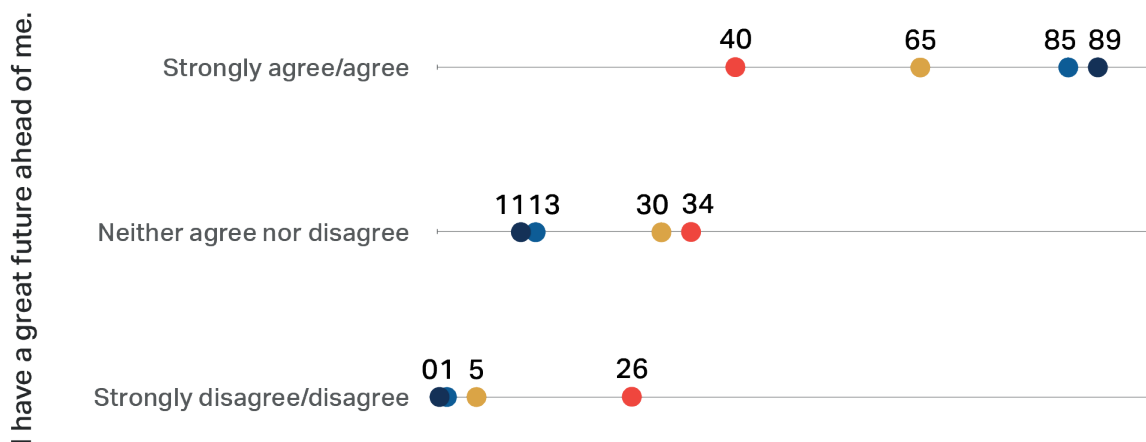


However, facing challenges with mental and emotional wellbeing can stifle optimism. Gen Z members who rate their mental health as “poor” are much less likely to believe they have a great future ahead of them than those who rate their mental health as “excellent,” “good” or “fair.” That said, there is quite an enduring optimism in the face of mental health struggles for this generation. More than three in five Gen Z members who rate their mental and emotional wellbeing as “only fair” have optimism for the future.

## Gen Z Optimism in the Face of Struggling Mental and Emotional Health

How would you describe your own mental health or emotional wellbeing at this time?

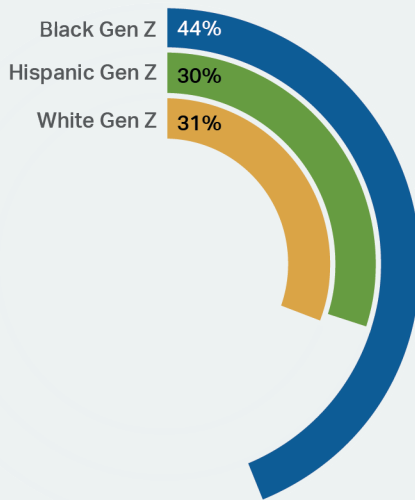
● % Excellent ● % Good ● % Only fair ● % Poor



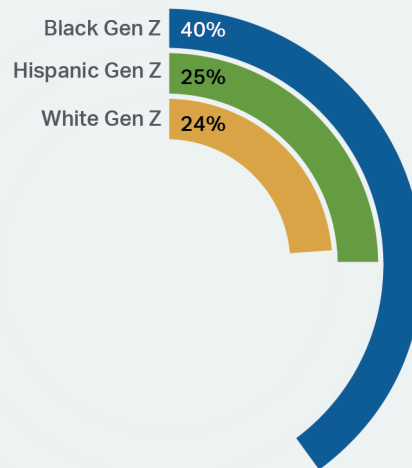
Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100%.

## SPOTLIGHT: BLACK GEN Z MEMBERS MOST OPTIMISTIC

44% of Black Gen Z members strongly agree they have a great future ahead of them, compared with 30% of Hispanic and 31% of White Gen Z members.



40% of Black Gen Z members strongly agree with the statement “I know I will get a good job in the future,” compared with 25% of Hispanic and 24% of White Gen Z members.



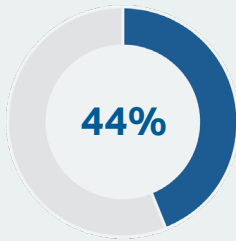
Overall, about one-third (32%) of Gen Z members strongly agree they have an adult who encourages them to pursue their goals and dreams. Members of Gen Z who strongly agree they have such an adult or mentor in their life are **more than twice as likely** as those who do not to strongly agree they have a great future ahead of them and will achieve their goals.

### Mentorship and Gen Z Optimism

**[There is an adult at school]/[I have someone] who encourages me to pursue my goals and dreams.**

		Strongly agree	Do not strongly agree
<b>I have a great future ahead of me.</b>	% Strongly agree	<b>51</b>	<b>23</b>
	<b>I will achieve the goals I set for myself.</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>23</b>





**Although optimism is high, only 44% of Gen Z Americans report feeling prepared for their future.**

Feeling prepared is slightly more prevalent among the youngest and oldest within the Gen Z cohort. Gen Z members who are of typical high school through college age have the lowest reported feelings of preparedness. However, feelings of being prepared for the future rebound as Gen Z reaches their early 20s.

**Feelings of Preparedness by Gen Z Age**

**I feel prepared for the future.**

(% Agree or strongly agree)



**While Gen Z is exposed to different career paths in school, less than half of Gen Z students say their schools provide practical opportunities to prepare them to enter the workforce.**

Nearly seven in 10 Gen Z members enrolled in middle and high school<sup>5</sup> say their schools expose them to different career paths (68%), and about half say they learn skills in school relevant to the job they want (47%). However, schools are falling short in providing practical learning opportunities that will help young Americans secure a good job after high school.

**34%**

say their school offers opportunities to learn how to apply for a job.

**33%**

say their school offers opportunities to work on projects relevant to the job they want.

**29%**

say their school offers help on how to interview for a job.

<sup>5</sup> This includes the youngest members of Gen Z in this survey who were enrolled in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Throughout the report, when "middle and high school" Gen Z members are referred to, it includes those enrolled in 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

# Engaged, but Seeking Purpose

## Gen Z members lack opportunities to do what they do best in school.

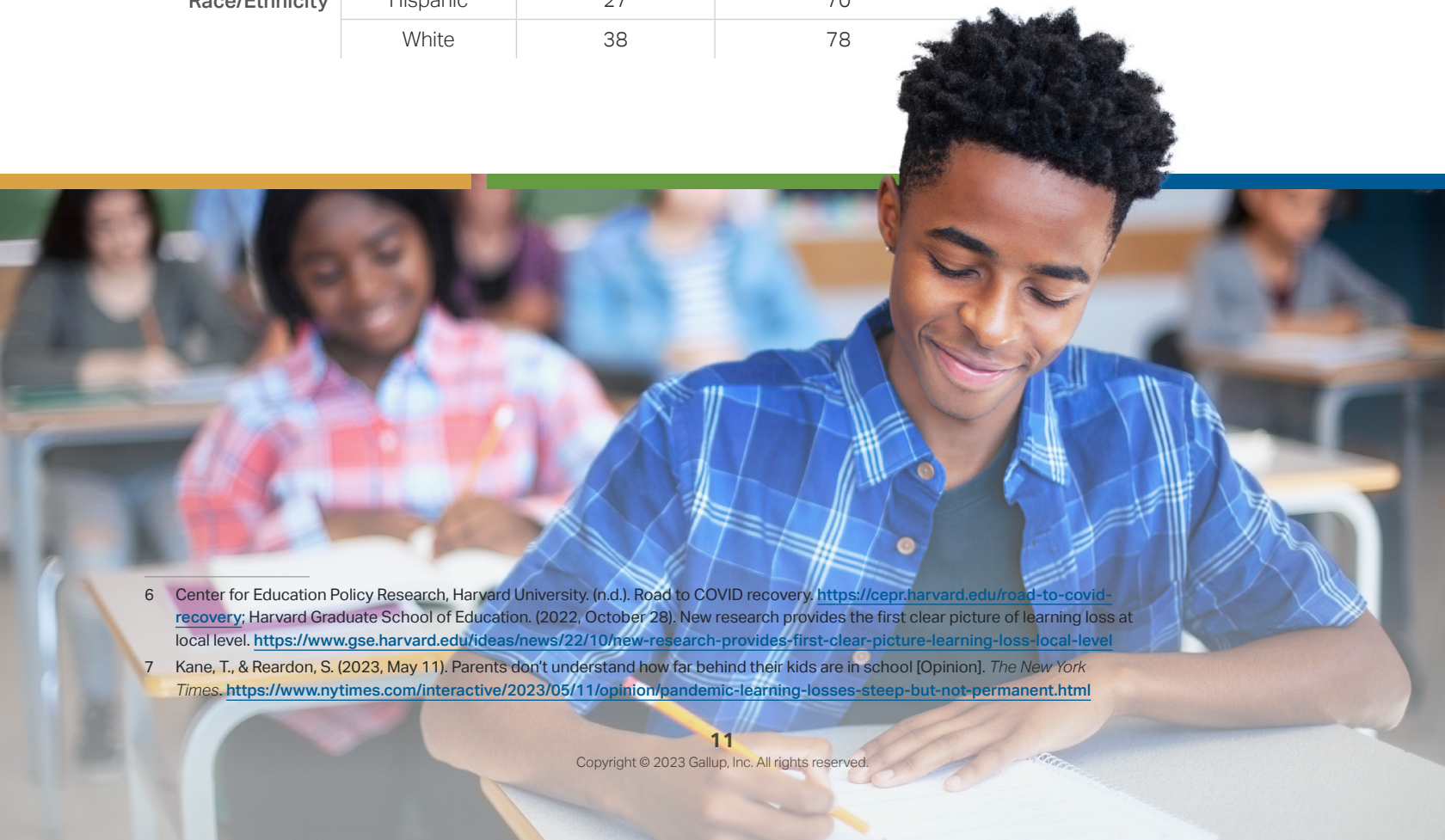
Research has shown that the disruption in education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant learning loss<sup>6</sup> that many parents underestimate.<sup>7</sup> The Gallup-WFF study further shows that students themselves are likely underestimating the state of their academic achievement today, with 74% of Gen Z middle and high schoolers describing their grades as “excellent” or “good.” Gen Z boys are slightly less likely than girls to report excellent or good grades. Black and Hispanic Gen Z members are less likely than their White counterparts to describe their grades as excellent or good.

### Gen Z Middle/High Schooler Self-Reported Academic Performance

#### Which of the following best describes the grades you get?

(Among middle/high school students)

		% Excellent	% Excellent + Good
Overall		34	74
Gender	Female	39	77
	Male	30	71
Race/Ethnicity	Black	29	68
	Hispanic	27	70
	White	38	78



6 Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University. (n.d.). Road to COVID recovery. <https://cepr.harvard.edu/road-to-covid-recovery>; Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2022, October 28). New research provides the first clear picture of learning loss at local level. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/news/22/10/new-research-provides-first-clear-picture-learning-loss-local-level>

7 Kane, T., & Reardon, S. (2023, May 11). Parents don't understand how far behind their kids are in school [Opinion]. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/05/11/opinion/pandemic-learning-losses-steep-but-not-permanent.html>



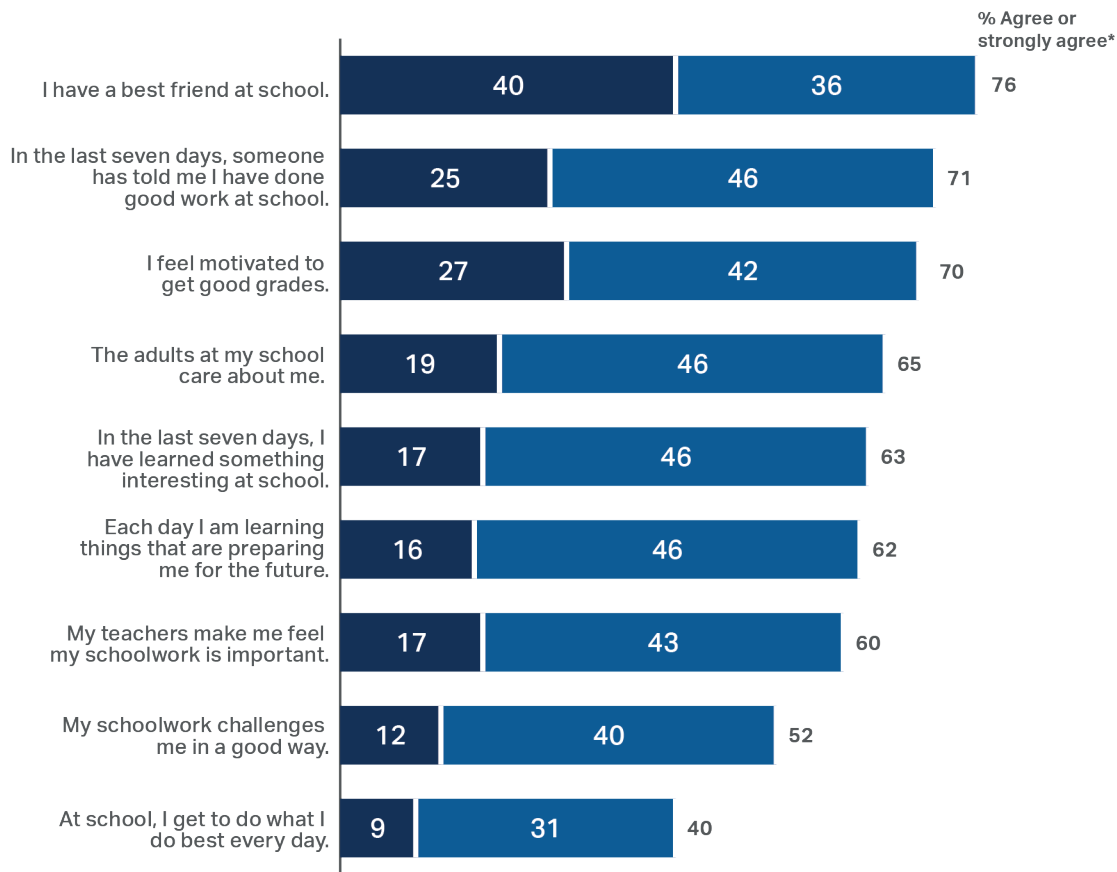
**Middle and high school Gen Z members perceive school experiences positively, although only two in five say they get to do what they do best every day at school.**

Most Gen Z students enrolled in middle or high school agree they have supportive relationships at school and feel they are learning interesting things that will prepare them for the future. However, they are less likely to feel challenged (52%) or that they are able to do what they do best every day (40%).

**Gen Z School Experiences and Engagement in School Among Middle/High School Students**

**How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?**

■ % Strongly agree ■ % Agree



Note: \*Sums of "strongly agree" and "agree" percentages are calculated based on addition prior to rounding. As such, totals listed here may vary by ±1 percentage point from totals derived by adding rounded values.

## Greater school engagement is related to more positive life outlooks for Gen Z.

The following five items are highly interrelated and, when combined, give a general assessment of the extent to which middle/high school Gen Z students are engaged in their schoolwork:

- 1 Each day I am learning things that are preparing me for the future.
- 2 At school, I get to do what I do best every day.
- 3 In the last seven days, someone has told me I have done good work at school.
- 4 In the last seven days, I have learned something interesting at school.
- 5 My schoolwork challenges me in a good way.

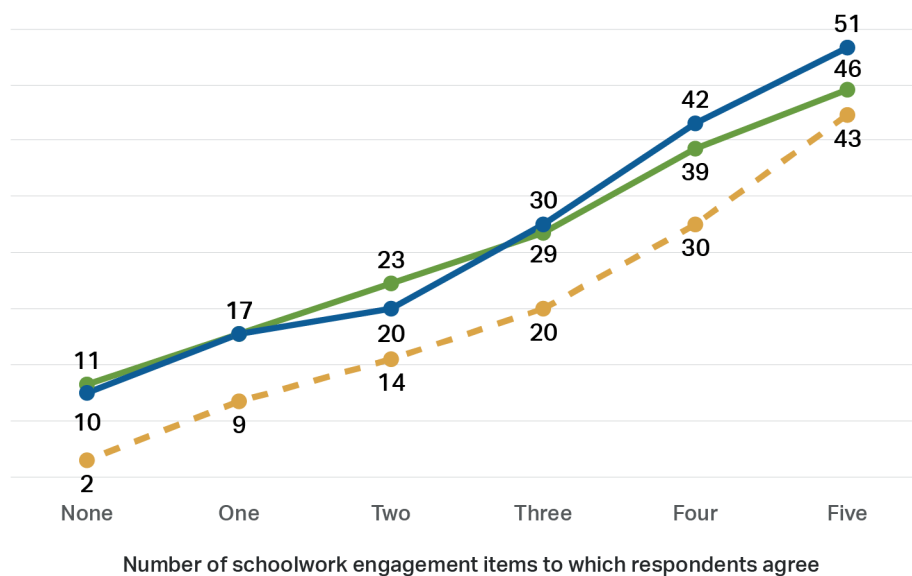
Members of Gen Z who strongly agree they have these experiences — and thus can be considered engaged in school — are significantly more likely to feel they lead purposeful lives and to feel confident about their future.

### Relationship Between Gen Z Engagement in School and Positive Outlook

Among Gen Z members currently enrolled in middle/high school

% Strongly agree

—●— I have a great future ahead of me   
 —●— I will achieve the goals I set for myself  
- - - ● - - - I feel that I lead a purposeful and meaningful life





## Poor mental health and concern about gun violence can create a challenging environment at school.

The emotional state of Gen Z students enrolled in middle and high school is highly correlated with their academic performance and attendance. Students with excellent mental health are **more than twice as likely** as those with fair or poor mental health to say they get excellent grades in school (53% versus 25%) and are 24 points less likely to have missed any school in the past month (41% versus 65%).<sup>8</sup>

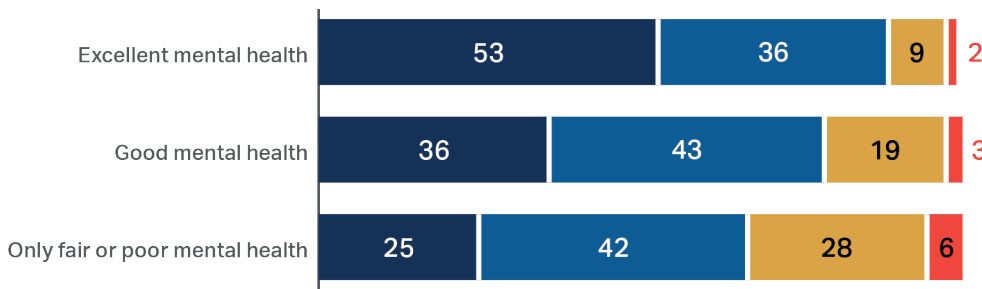
### Gen Z Mental Health and Academic Performance

#### Which of the following best describes the grades you get?

(By self-reported mental health or emotional wellbeing)

Among Gen Z members currently enrolled in middle/high school

■ % Excellent grades ■ % Good grades ■ % Fair grades ■ % Poor grades



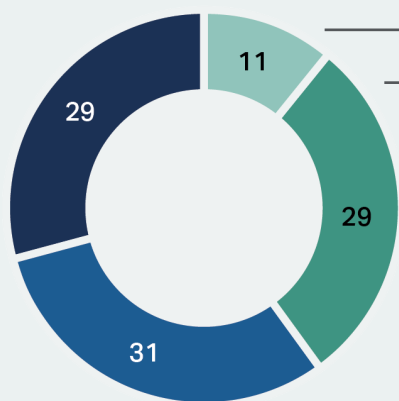
Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100%.

## SPOTLIGHT: ANXIETY AND THREAT OF GUN VIOLENCE IN SCHOOL

### How much, if at all, do you worry about gun violence at your school?

Among Gen Z members currently enrolled in middle/high school

■ % A lot ■ % Some ■ % Not much ■ % Not at all



**40% of Gen Z students report worrying a lot or some about gun violence at their school.**

Experiencing general negative emotions — which Gen Z does at a higher rate than all other generations — can exacerbate concerns about gun violence, and vice versa. Gen Z middle and high school students who say they experienced anxiety a lot of the day yesterday are twice as likely as those who did not have anxiety yesterday to say they worry a lot about gun violence at their school (16% versus 7%).

<sup>8</sup> To measure school absenteeism, parents of Gen Z respondents aged 12 to 18 were asked how much school their child missed in the past month.

## A Financial Quandary

**Earning enough to live comfortably is Gen Z's top hope, but a lack of financial resources is the greatest barrier to achieving their goals.**

In addition to exploring Gen Z's experiences within school, Gallup-WFF asked all Gen Z respondents what they hope and wish for in the future. More than two-thirds (69%) say earning enough money to live comfortably was among their three most important wishes for the future, making it the most consistently reported aspiration. Financial security was followed by finding romantic partnerships and pursuing a personal passion in their work.

Parents of Gen Z<sup>9</sup> members are aligned with their children regarding financial security goals; however, Gen Z parents are much more likely to say they hope their child pursues a passion in their work, makes a positive impact on the world and grows intellectually than Gen Z are themselves. Conversely, 32% of Gen Z aspire to home ownership, while 13% of parents hope their child will buy a house in the future.

### Gen Z Hopes and Aspirations for the Future

**What are your top three most important hopes or wishes for [your/your child's] future?**

Hope or Aspiration	% Selected			
	Overall	K-12	Non-K-12	Parent
Make enough money to live comfortably	69	72	66	66
Get married or find a life partner	35	33	36	32
Pursue a personal passion in your work	33	39	28	51
Buy a house	32	27	36	13
Make a positive impact on the world/your community	31	28	33	43
Grow intellectually throughout your life	29	23	35	47
Have kids	18	15	21	12
Start your own business	14	16	12	9
Create or develop something new or innovative	9	13	5	4
Gain public recognition or awards for your achievements	6	8	4	1
Work in senior management or another high-status position	5	4	6	2
Actively participate in civic life and our democracy	5	3	6	6
Other	5	6	3	10

<sup>9</sup> Only parents of Gen Z children aged 12 to 18 whose Gen Z child still lives in their household were asked to complete the survey.



When asked about the future pathways they hope to take, Gen Z members are most likely to indicate they hope to work at a paid job (48%), followed by taking time off to travel or pursue other interests (44%).

**Black Gen Z Americans are particularly interested in entrepreneurial endeavors:**

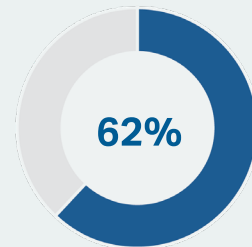
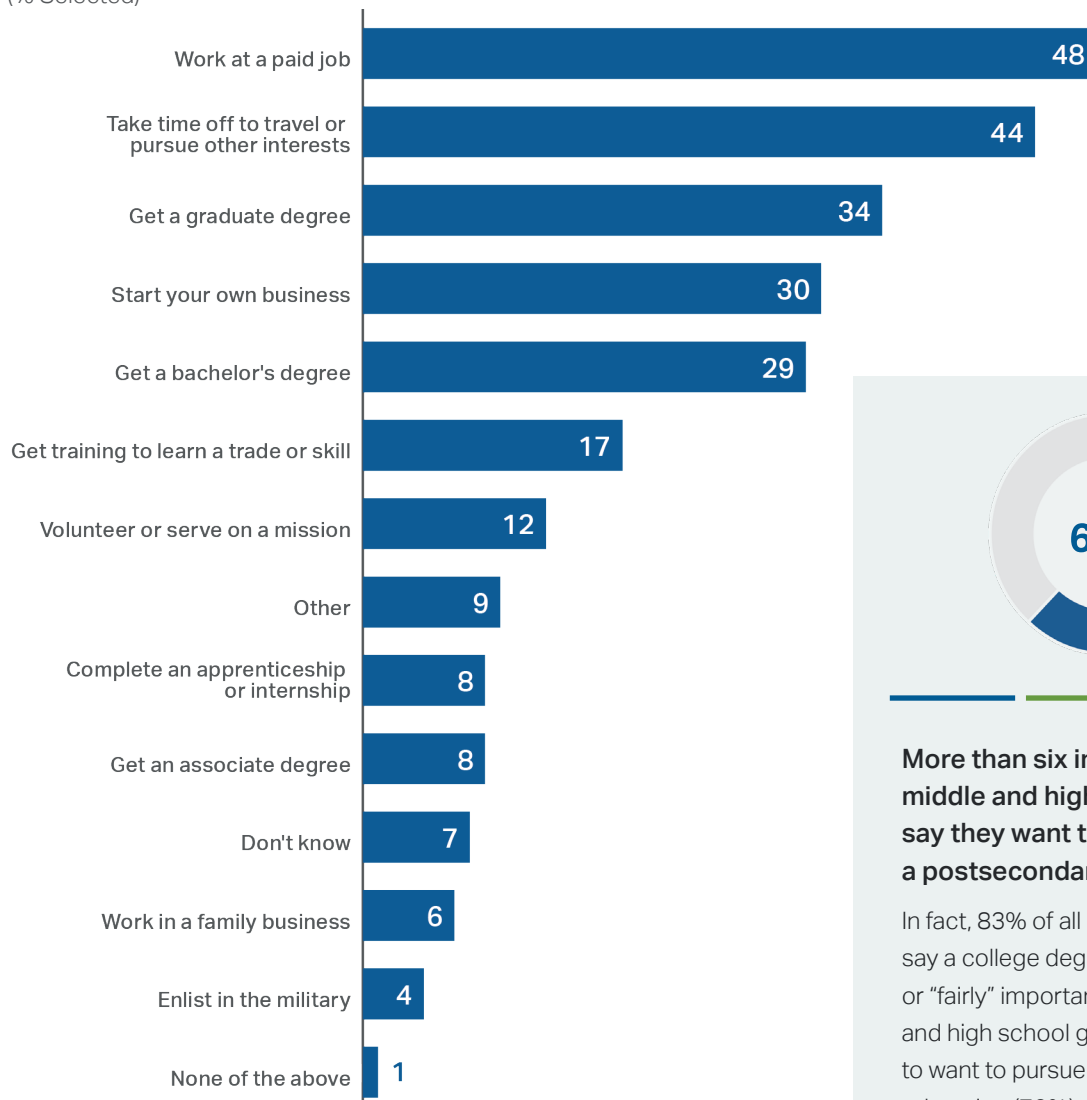
Over four in 10 (41%) Black Gen Z Americans say they want to start their own business, compared with 36% of Hispanic and 25% of White Gen Z Americans.



**What Gen Z Would Like to Do in the Future**

**Which of the following best describes what you would like to do in the future?  
Select up to three answers.**

(% Selected)



**More than six in 10 (62%) Gen Z middle and high school students say they want to pursue a postsecondary degree.**

In fact, 83% of all Gen Z members say a college degree is "very" or "fairly" important. Gen Z middle and high school girls are more likely to want to pursue postsecondary education (70%) than middle and high school boys (57%).

## Financial resources and uncertainty about how to choose the best path forward are the top barriers for Gen Z in pursuing what they want for their future.

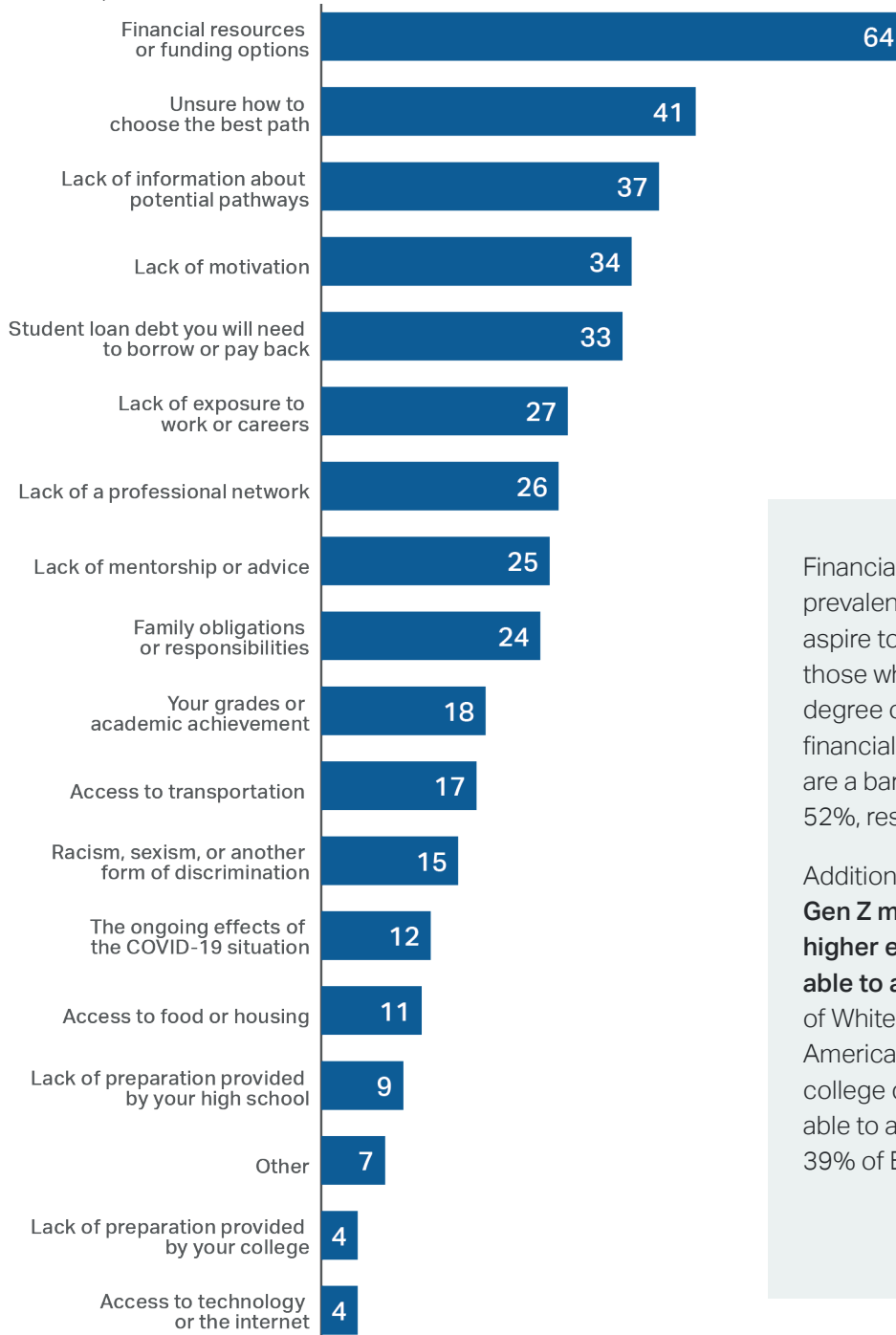
Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Gen Z members say financial resources are a barrier to at least one of the pathways they hope to pursue in the future.

### Gen Z Barriers to Goals and Aspirations

**What barriers, if any, do you currently face to achieving your goals/aspirations?**

**Select all that apply.**

(% Selected)



Financial barriers are especially prevalent for members of Gen Z who aspire to college: More than half of those who hope to attain an associate degree or bachelor's degree say financial resources or funding options are a barrier to doing so (59% and 52%, respectively).

Additionally, **only about half (53%) of Gen Z members who want to pursue higher education believe they will be able to afford it.** Fifty-seven percent of White and 56% of Hispanic Gen Z Americans who want to pursue any college degree believe they will be able to afford it, compared with only 39% of Black Gen Z Americans.



## Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web survey conducted April 24-May 8, 2023, with a sample of 3,114 12- to 26-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, 2,294 12- 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 additional 820 18- to 26-year-old respondents are members of the Gallup Panel.

For the total sample of 3,114 Gen Z respondents, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 2.6$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 2,223 Gen Z K-12 students, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 2.6$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 891 Gen Z youth who are no longer enrolled in K-12, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 4.5$  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.

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