



# YouthTruth

STUDENT SURVEY

A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

## LEARNING FROM STUDENT VOICE:

# Are Students Engaged?

**When students have a love of learning and a desire to succeed — when they are genuinely engaged with their school and their education — they are more likely to learn.** Since student engagement is a leading indicator of academic achievement and persistence in school as well as a key element of school climate, educators can greatly benefit from measuring it. So, what does engagement look like, according to the students themselves?

To answer this question, YouthTruth analyzed survey responses from over 230,000 students in grades three through twelve. The data was gathered between November 2012 and June 2017 through YouthTruth's anonymous online climate and culture survey, administered in partnership with school districts and charter management organizations across 36 states. Our analysis looked at a subset of questions related to student engagement and uncovered some key insights.

- 1 Across all grade levels, the majority of students feel engaged.
- 2 Most students take pride in their school work.
- 3 Less than half of secondary students feel that what they're learning in class helps them outside of school.
- 4 Only about half of secondary students enjoy coming to school most of the time.

 [youthtruthsurvey.org](https://youthtruthsurvey.org)

 @youth\_truth

# 1

## Across all grade levels, the majority of students feel engaged.



The majority of students report feeling engaged in school. However, when we compare student responses by grade level, elementary students are slightly more likely to feel engaged than secondary students, with 78 percent of elementary students feeling engaged. For secondary students, the proportion drops to 59 percent of middle schoolers and 60 percent of high schoolers feeling engaged. While still the majority, that leaves considerable room for improvement.



**78%**  
of students at  
elementary schools  
feel engaged



**59%**  
of students at  
middle schools  
feel engaged



**60%**  
of students at  
high schools  
feel engaged

### SCHOOL SIZE

The data also reveal variation across school sizes. Across the secondary grade levels, students at small schools are slightly more likely to feel engaged than their peers at medium and large size schools. This finding echoes previous [studies](#) on small schools, which have shown that students in small schools tend to have [better attendance rates, lower dropout rates, higher grade-point averages, and higher high school graduation rates](#). Proponents of small schools argue that small high schools, in particular, are able to [promote stronger academic rigor and personal relationships](#) between students and staff, which helps engage students and enrich their experience.



**68%**  
of students at  
small schools  
are engaged



**57%**  
of students at  
large schools  
are engaged

In our analysis, small schools are defined as high schools with 300 or fewer students and middle schools with 200 or fewer students, while large schools are defined as high schools with 1,200 or more students and middle schools with 800 or more students.

## Most students take pride in their school work.



Across all secondary schools, most students take pride in the work they do in school. Seventy-two percent of middle school and 68 percent of high school students report that they take pride in their school work. It is encouraging to see that students care about the work they are producing.

# 72%

of **middle school** students take pride in their school work



# 68%

of **high school** students take pride in their school work



### GENDER IDENTITY

When examining responses by students' self-reported gender identity, we find that students who identify as female are slightly more likely to take pride in their school work, and students who identify as other than male or female are slightly less likely to take pride in their school work.

# 74%

of **female** students take pride in their school work



# 66%

of **male** students take pride in their school work



# 44%

of students who **identify in another way** take pride in their school work



*"At my school, you can find people with determination, passion, and time management, and it really pushes me to be a better student. Everyone really cares about their education, and it pushes me to work harder."*



Anonymous  
High School  
Student

*"School is important to me, and I inspire myself every day to do well in school. Getting good grades and getting my work done makes me feel accomplished."*

Anonymous  
High School  
Student





## Less than half of secondary students feel that what they're learning in class helps them outside of school.



While it is encouraging that the majority of students feel engaged overall, when it comes to relevance the results are concerning. Only 48 percent of secondary students feel that what they are learning in class helps them outside of school. With less than half of sixth through twelfth graders feeling their learning helps them outside of school, we can imagine hundreds of thousands of students across the country wondering, "When will I ever use this in real life?"

When we disaggregate the findings by level, high school students are slightly less likely than middle school students to feel that what they learn in class helps them outside of school. In other words, as students get closer to "the real world," they are even less likely to feel their learning in school is pertinent to their outside lives.



Across **all secondary** students, **48%** feel that what they're learning in class helps them outside of school.

**54%**

MIDDLE SCHOOL



**46%**

HIGH SCHOOL



### ► PRACTITIONER STORY

#### High Tech High Chula Vista, San Diego

One way to help students relate their academic work to daily life is to connect students with projects in their local community. "If you want students to do work connected to the world outside of school, you need to create places and spaces for those intersections says Tim McNamara, Director of High Tech High Chula Vista (HTHVC) in San Diego, CA.

Each year, HTHCV hosts a Community Networking Lunch where local nonprofits, businesses, and community groups meet with teachers to share organizational challenges and brainstorm ideas for collaborative projects that students can undertake for school credit.

Teachers then design projects focused on issues that overlap with a community organization's areas of interest. In these community-centered, authentic projects students have the opportunity to work in teams

to develop solutions that suit the community partner's needs and address real-world issues and problems.

The final project is then exhibited publicly. By combining project based learning with cooperative community learning, students are making real-world connections, creating a professional network, and meeting academic learning goals.

For examples of HTHTCV student projects, visit [www.hightechhigh.org/hthcv/projects](http://www.hightechhigh.org/hthcv/projects).



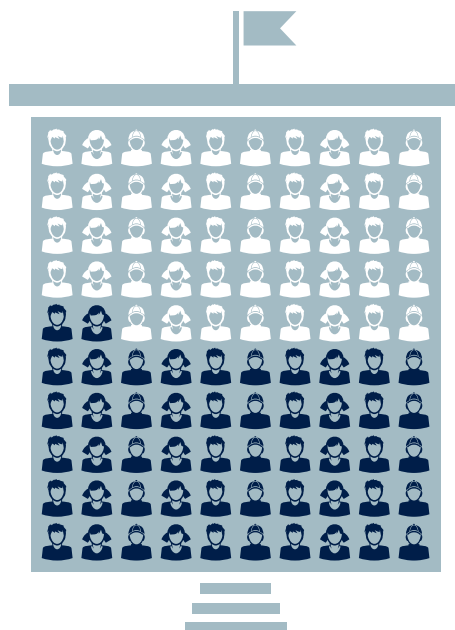
# 4

## Only about half of secondary students enjoy coming to school most of the time.



Only 52 percent of secondary students agree or strongly agree that they enjoy coming to school most of the time. Given the [recent national conversation about chronic absenteeism and its focus under many state ESSA plans](#), this finding is particularly concerning within the context of untangling why students may not be coming to school.

Students who are chronically absent — typically defined as those who miss 15 days of school or more in a year — may be missing school for a variety of reasons over which schools have little control, including [poverty, health challenges, community violence, and difficult family circumstances](#). But building a school environment in which students enjoy coming to school is an important place to start.



**52%**  
of students enjoy coming to school most of the time

**Research shows** that student engagement is an important component of a positive school culture and is necessary for driving academic achievement. The first step in understanding and prioritizing student engagement is to measure it. As the saying goes, “what gets measured gets managed.”

**Without a measure of student engagement as a leading indicator, educators are limited to lagging indicators like grades and attendance, which are much less useful once the student has stopped turning in assignments or coming to school.**

Asking — and truly listening — to what students have to say about what engages them as a learner is an important tool for understanding where to target improvements. Anonymous feedback from all students that is delivered to educators quickly is an efficient, effective, and affordable way to gather insights that make a difference in building a positive and engaging culture of learning.





# Other Resources



## Resources

### [Cornell University – Center for Teaching Innovation](#)

Resources for teachers at various stages of their teaching careers to explore different methods for engaging students.

### [Edutopia – 4 Student Engagement Tips \(From a Student\)](#)

Hear from one student how relationships, humor, choice, and displaying his work engaged him in learning.

### [Iowa State University – Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching](#)

Recommendations for creative techniques to engage students in discussions, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

### [Marzano Research – The Highly Engaged Classroom](#)

Compilation of research and tips on engaging students in the classroom.

### [University of Washington – Center for Teaching and Learning](#)

Tools for teachers to help engage students in the learning process.

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## Research

[Berkowitz, Ruth, Hadass Moore, Ron Avi Astor, and Rami Benbenishty. "A research synthesis of the associations between socioeconomic background, inequality, school climate, and academic achievement." Review of Educational Research 87, no. 2 \(2017\): 425-469.](#)

[Finn, Jeremy D., Gina M. Pannozzo, and Kristin E. Voelkl. "Disruptive and inattentive-withdrawn behavior and achievement among fourth graders." The Elementary School Journal 95, no. 5 \(1995\): 421-434.](#)

[Finn, Jeremy D., and Donald A. Rock. "Academic success among students at risk for school failure." Journal of applied psychology 82, no. 2 \(1997\): 221.](#)

[Lee, Jung-Sook. "The relationship between student engagement and academic performance: Is it a myth or reality?" The Journal of Educational Research 107, no. 3 \(2014\): 177-185.](#)

[GUNUC, Selim. "The relationships between student engagement and their academic achievement." International Journal on New Trends in Education and Their Implications 5, no. 4 \(2014\): 216-231.](#)

## ABOUT YOUTHTRUTH

YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student and stakeholder feedback to help educators accelerate improvements. Through validated survey instruments and tailored advisory services, YouthTruth partners with schools, districts, and education funders to enhance learning for all students. To learn more about the research that informs our work, please visit [www.youthtruthsurvey.org/resources](http://www.youthtruthsurvey.org/resources).

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# Closing the Feedback Loop:

## Sample Discussion Questions



### FOR PRINCIPALS, TEACHERS, AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

To what extent do these findings speak to the student experience at your school? Which findings seem most relevant?

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How do you think students' feelings of engagement on your campus might be similar to or different from these findings? What sources inform your hypothesis?

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What is one area in which your school is doing well at engaging students?

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What is one area in which your school could work to better engage students?

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In what ways are you encouraging dialogue about student engagement? Are students included in those conversations?

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# Closing the Feedback Loop:

## Sample Discussion Questions *(continued)*



### FOR TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS IN CONVERSATION WITH STUDENTS

To what extent do these findings speak to the student experience at your school? Which findings seem most relevant?

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How engaged do you think you and your peers feel?

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Do you feel that what you're learning in class helps you outside of school? If not, what ideas do you have for making school more relevant?

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Do you enjoy coming to school most of the time? Why or why not?

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What questions do you have after reflecting on this data?

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If you had a million dollars to make school more interesting, what would you spend that money on?

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