When it comes to public education in the United States, what happens in California matters. California’s K-12 students represent 12 percent of all public school students in the country. The state has pushed for innovation in a variety of areas, from redesigning its funding system to focus on weighted per-pupil funding, to placing an increased emphasis on social emotional learning.

What do California students have to say about their experiences in schools?

To answer this question, YouthTruth analyzed survey responses from over 63,000 students in grades five through twelve. The data was gathered between November 2010 and February 2018 through YouthTruth’s anonymous online climate and culture survey, administered in partnership with school districts and charter management organizations throughout the state. Our analysis explored a subset of questions related to college readiness, student engagement, and school culture, and uncovered some key insights.

1. 84% of students want to go to college.
2. 59% of students feel engaged.
3. 40% of students rate their school culture positively.

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@youth_truth
The majority of students — 84 percent — want to go to college. Similarly, 70 percent of students expect to attend either a 2- or 4-year college after high school. While it is concerning that there is a decrease between wanting to go to college and expecting to do so, it is worth celebrating the work of California educators, as well as students and families, to cultivate college-going cultures.

When disaggregating by students’ self-reported race/ethnicity, we find that Asian students are slightly more likely than their peers to report that they want to go to college and that they plan on attending a 2- or 4-year college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Want to go to College</th>
<th>Expect to go to 2- or 4-Year College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian students</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American students</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White students</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-racial students</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic students</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order for students to make their dreams of going to college a reality, it is crucial that they understand the steps necessary in order to get there. This feedback tells us there is still work to be done to help equip students with a more complete understanding of how to navigate the college application process.

My school has helped me understand the steps I need to take in order to apply to college.

52%
Since student engagement is a **leading indicator of academic achievement** and persistence in school, as well as a **key element of school climate**, educators need to know if they are on track engaging students. Engagement is measured in the YouthTruth survey through a series of questions about enjoyment, pride, high expectations, and relevance. When we look at how engaged students feel in school, we see that the majority of students — 59 percent — feel engaged. However, only 52 percent of students report that they enjoy coming to school most of the time.

When disaggregating by grade level, middle school students are slightly more likely than high school students to report that what they learn in class helps them outside of school. Forty-nine percent of middle school students feel that what they learn in class helps them outside of school, compared to just 42 percent of high school students.

**What I learn in class helps outside of school.**

- **49%** of middle school students feel their learning helps outside of school.
- **42%** of high school students feel their learning helps outside of school.

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**PRACTITIONER STORY**

**OXNARD UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Oxnard Union High School District (OUHSD) in Ventura County goes beyond just gathering feedback from their students; they also engage students in the process of reviewing, prioritizing, and taking action based on the feedback data collected.

OUHSD participated in a follow-up **Student Voice Workshop**, which trains student leaders to direct survey findings into action plans for immediate service to their community. Facilitated by YouthTruth and a district coordinator, the workshop empowers diverse groups of non-traditional student leaders from each campus with data and tools to use the feedback to accelerate change. “Engaging students as part of the change process is so important,” says Dr. Penelope DeLeon, Superintendent of OUHSD. “They are stakeholders in their own education. By sharing this data back with them and engaging them in the change-making process, they know that we’re not just asking for their feedback — we’re genuinely using it to make improvements.”
A growing body of research shows that when schools focus on improving culture and climate they see a wide range of positive outcomes, from higher engagement and achievement to fewer behavioral disruptions and lower teacher turnover.

When asked questions about school culture, which are largely about respect and fairness, only 40 percent of students rate their school culture positively.

When disaggregating by grade level, we see that middle school students are slightly more likely than high school students to rate their school culture positively. Forty-four percent of middle school students feel positively about their school culture, compared to just 37 percent of high school students.

Similarly, less than half — just 44 percent — of secondary students feel discipline at their school is fair. When disaggregating by grade level, we see that middle school students are slightly more likely than high school students to feel that discipline at their school is fair. While 49 percent of middle school students feel that discipline at their school is fair, the proportion drops to just 42 percent of high school students.

Davis Joint Unified School District (DJUSD) uses YouthTruth data to measure and monitor each of their 16 schools’ culture and climate. And they don’t just look at the averages — which can sometimes mask the experiences of student subgroups — but also use the data to explore the intersectional experiences of students of varied demographics.

When disaggregating by students’ self-reported gender identity, they learned that students who do not identify as a “boy” or “girl” but rather “identified in another way” were reporting less positive experiences with school culture than their peers.

The district was already leading various inclusive schools initiatives and providing data-driven trainings to better support students who identify beyond the gender binary, but this data helped them evolve even further. “What matters most is that the data help us better make the quantitative case with our staff, board, and community for the importance of the social and emotional factors in student success,” says John Bowes, superintendent of DJUSD. “Every time we do a gender inclusiveness training, we incorporate this data; the clarity of the data has supported the foundational argument for staff that our newer policies about gender inclusivity are relevant and important.”
California is making impressive strides toward providing a high-quality education for all students. Particularly as a state with a diverse student body and income inequality as consistent challenges, California’s successes can provide examples that other states can experiment with or adapt.

However, as the state continues to focus on local accountability and decision-making, it is important that student voices are included in the conversation. These findings highlight students' unique insights about college readiness efforts, student engagement strategies, and school culture. Students need a seat at the table as co-creators of their educational experience. Asking for — and listening to — student feedback provides school, district, and state leaders, as well as education funders, with crucial insights about what's working and what's not.

Resources

The Education Trust-West works for the high achievement of all students at all levels, pre-k through college. ETW exposes opportunity and achievement gaps that separate students of color and low-income students from their peers and advocate for strategies to close these gaps.

One of ETW's ongoing projects is the Data Equity Walk. In this activity, stakeholders engage with education leaders and discuss equity issues in their communities. Participants explore the data individually before collectively discussing implications and identifying solutions to address disparities and improve outcomes.

Californians for Justice believes that young people are the leaders we need to create the healthy, just, and vibrant schools all of our communities deserve. CFJ ensures that students have the opportunity to grow as leaders, and work with students to win campaigns so that every school and community can thrive.

CFJ’s Keeping Students at the Heart of LCFF report highlights the importance of including students in conversations about decision-making and accountability in districts under the new funding formula, and includes examples of promising models of student voice from throughout California.

Children Now serves as a hub for key children’s issues, supporting and connecting thousands of groups in California to create an unprecedented power base for kids.

Children Now's California's Children's Report Cards illuminates the facts and figures behind the experiences of California children, ranging from health to education to child welfare issues. These reports highlight where California is serving children well – and where it needs to improve.
FOR PRINCIPALS, TEACHERS, AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- Do you think these findings speak to the student experience at your school? Which data points most resonated with you? In which ways does your school experience feel different?

- What steps are you taking to ensure that students understand the steps they need to take to apply to college?

- What is one way in which your school is productively engaging students? How do you know that this approach is working? What's one area in which there is room for improvement?

- What initiatives do you have in place to promote a positive school culture?

- How are you making sure that students have a seat at the table?

- Are you hearing from all of your students about their perceptions of your school's culture, or are the voices of a subgroup of your student body most prominent?

- Do you think California students have a different perspective about their schools than do students in the rest of the country? In what ways might their perceptions be different? In what ways might they be similar?

FOR TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS IN CONVERSATION WITH STUDENTS

- Do you think these findings speak to the student experience at your school? Which data points most resonated with you? In which ways does your school experience feel different?

- How do you find information about the college application process? Where do you wish you had more support?

- Do you feel that what you’re learning in class helps you outside of school? What ideas do you have for making school more relevant?

- What is one thing your school could try to do this year to improve school culture?

- For California educators: If you are considering staying in California for college, are you familiar with UC/CSU requirements (also known as the A-G requirements)? Do you know if you are on track to meet the UC/CSU requirements? If you’re not sure, do you know who to talk with to make sure you are on track?

- In what ways do you think California students may have a different perspective from the rest of the country? In what ways might it be similar?
### FOR STUDENTS IN CONVERSATION WITH EDUCATION LEADERS

- Do you think these findings speak to the student experience in our district? Why or why not? What sources inform your answer?

- What are the current ways in which students can have their voices heard within this school and district? How can we make those avenues more accessible to all students?

- How do you as an education leader think about student engagement and school culture?

- What efforts are you making to prepare students for the college application process? Have you gathered student feedback on what resources they feel they need?

- How do you think about engaging students that are not already actively involved in the school community (i.e. a member of student government, on a sports team, etc.)?

### 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).

- [email](mailto:youthtruthsurvey.org)
- [@youth_truth](https://twitter.com/youth_truth)