



EMPOWERING TODAY'S YOUTH TO PLAN THEIR TOMORROW

**Understanding middle school
and high school students' attitudes
toward future planning**

2019

Strategic Insights Series





**A path for every student.
A plan for every future.™**

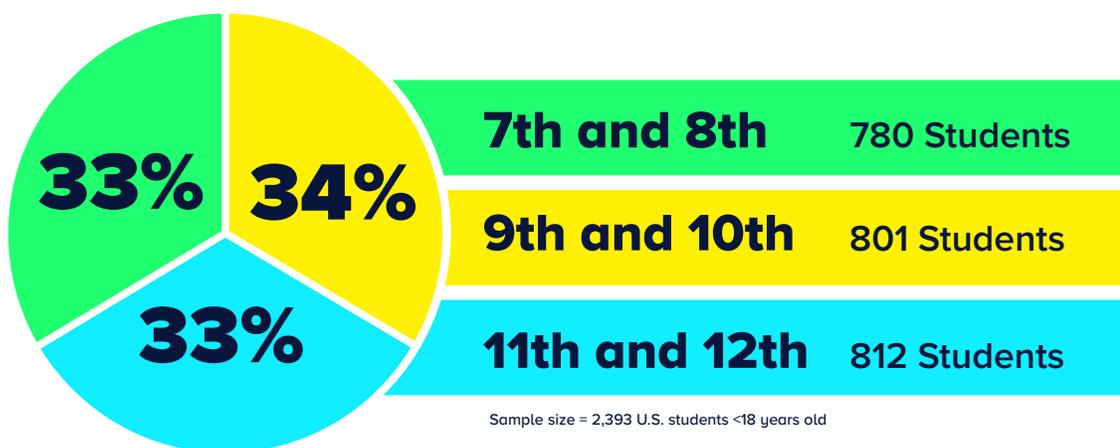
BACKGROUND

While middle school and high school students today are each unique and special in their own way, there are commonalities about how they think about and plan for their own futures.

American Student Assistance® (ASA) and its Strategic Insights & Program Outcomes group sought to understand how today’s youth are approaching education and career exploration as they find their way through middle school and high school. A deep-dive into current published perspectives on the topic was undertaken in the spring of 2018, which included partnering with Kantar Consulting and closely studying their 2018 Centennial Blueprint¹, which analyzed this new digital generation with a focus on understanding how they approach life differently because of “their unique starting points, shared social events and dynamics which shaped their formative years.”

Building on this foundation, the group spent the summer of 2018 conducting ethnographic and interview sessions in the homes of middle school and high school students, focused on how they think about their lives after high school. While the insights discovered were truly enlightening, they – and other internal hypotheses and learnings – were translated into a nationally-representative quantitative survey fielded with more than 2,300 students.

This resulting report focuses on some of the key themes emerging from that data, with future reports taking a deeper dive into specific issues, segments of students, etc.



For this quantitative research, ASA® partnered with Kadence International, a worldwide leader in market research design, data collection and analysis, to survey 2,393 students in grades 7-12 across the United States.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Students today tend to be pragmatic — many understand that to have a successful future, they must be willing to work hard now in school. That success, though, is often framed not by the pursuit of wealth and material possessions, but rather by meaningful experiences and happiness. In fact, the majority of middle school and high school students surveyed by ASA report they are working hard in school now to have the best possible future later.

That is not to say that financial success is not important to today's youth. When they think about their future, financial success is at the top of the list of their goals, but accompanied with self-respect and close relationships with family. This is a hallmark of a generation that is the first to be born and raised in a completely online, digitally-assisted way of life. This generation does not know life without Google, Facebook, Instagram or Netflix, and in that way, they are unlike any generation prior. Spending time with friends, focusing on their health and wellness, and finding new and meaningful experiences takes precedence over most other areas that are more important to smaller cohorts of this population, such as sports, video games, etc.

This omnipresent digital and social upbringing, however, has also driven very mixed emotions related to what is beyond high school. Half of these students are nervous; half are excited. Feelings get significantly more negative when asked about life immediately after high school, where they feel stressed, overwhelmed and pressured. Stress levels skew toward the high side, with 25% reporting very high stress levels — increasing as they progress through high school. Some of this pressure is driven by parents, a significant source of influence, and their performance in school — especially as most operate with the expectation that they will continue to college after they graduate high school.

All of this leads ASA to believe that more needs to be done to empower students to think about their future after high school. Our goal is to help students explore all the different options and pathways for education and career planning, particularly before the stress levels seen in high school juniors and seniors reaches critical levels.



SURVEY FINDINGS

One way to define this generation of students is “pragmatic.” In general, they indicate that they are willing to work hard in school today for the promise of a better future; they tend to prioritize happiness, relationships, and wellness over materialism or empty experiences. This pragmatism extends to their future as well.



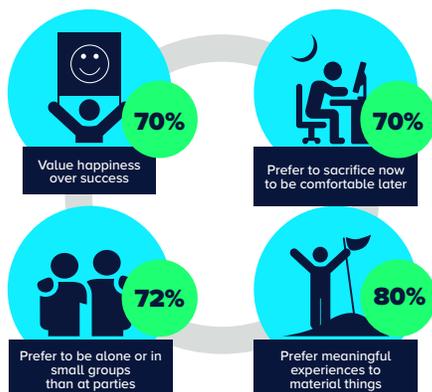
71% Working hard in school now to have the best future later.

In the context of their current education, more than seven in 10 students agree that they are “working hard in school now to have the best future later.” This approach reinforces the more fundamental

personality components also tested in this survey, where many middle school and high school students make trade-offs that show they understand their current education and life experiences will contribute to successfully realizing their ideal futures.

Consistently, 70% or more of middle school and high school students indicate that they:

- Value happiness over success
- Prefer to sacrifice now to be comfortable later
- Prefer meaningful experiences to material things
- Prefer to be alone or in small groups than at larger parties



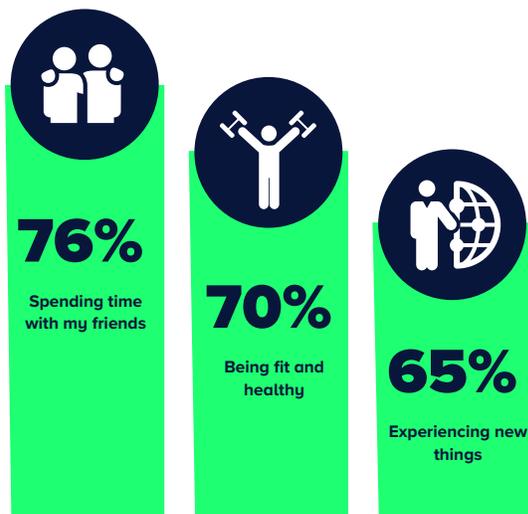
Interestingly, Kantar Consulting, well-known for their work in tracking how different generations have different outlooks, motivations, and needs, found this same pragmatic approach among what they call “centennials,” and suggest that this is the result of the realities of their upbringing to date. The current generation of those younger than 18 have largely been raised in a time of economic, political, and social uncertainty that is very different than when their parents, largely “millennials” and Gen X’ers, were raised with a different definition of success.

“Whereas Millennials were raised to follow their dreams, Centennials show preference for a pragmatic approach to life — one that enables them to identify truths, act with intention and work to improve the world around them. Centennials’ drive to solve for x influences their attitude toward everything — from their own personal lives to the marketplace to society at large.”

— 2018 Centennial Blueprint, Kantar Consulting¹



Further, when asking students which is more important to them, the overall cohesiveness of their responses to these trade-offs are telling. The majority of middle schoolers and high schoolers in our survey indicate that they most prefer:



Most important to students today

As they get older, there is a pivot as most start to find things like video games and even sports less important, and meaningful new experiences more important. As we also see, eight in 10 select ‘meaningful experiences’ to ‘materialistic things’ when asked to make a trade-off.

No doubt that this is somewhat driven by the realization that there is less time to devote to other activities as they approach graduation and post-high school pathways. However, it is completely in line with a hallmark of this generation that meaningful experiences matter more than other pursuits.

It is in this mindset toward their futures where we also see a general pragmatic approach. When asked to pick the three things that are most important to what they ultimately want in their future, more than two-thirds mention financial success, self-respect and/or close relationships with family. A “sense of accomplishment” is also mentioned frequently, more so than “a sense of belonging,” “fun and enjoyment,” or “excitement.”



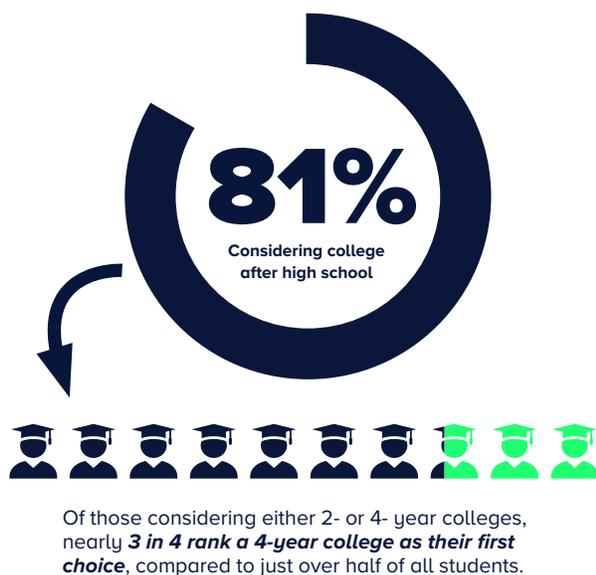
Most important to students' future plans

The combination of these priorities for young people’s future lives is interesting, as it further illustrates a very pragmatic outlook on life. There is also a recurring theme of success as it relates to their own personal accomplishments and beliefs.

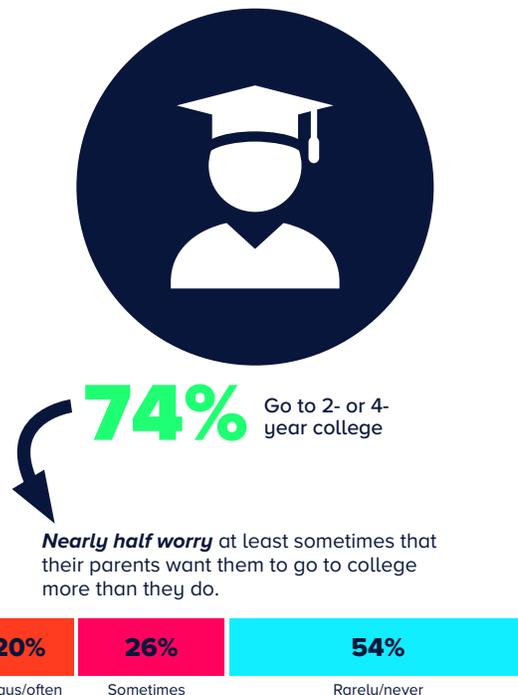


Not surprisingly, most students are anticipating college after graduation, with parents' expectations playing a large role.

Most students indicated that they are considering a college/university after they graduate from high school, with the clear majority (75%) considering a four-year school. Interestingly, those closest to graduation are more likely to be considering a two-year college than younger students.



Strikingly, among those who indicate that their parents want them to go to college, half report feeling that they worry often (20%) or sometimes (26%) that their parents' desire for them to go college outweighs their own.



Middle school and high school students are excited, but also nervous, about their future. For many, a confidence that they will ultimately succeed in realizing their dreams is tempered with anxiety and stress.

Most students (70%) have discussed their post-high school plans with their parents, who we see in this research and in other surveys of school counselors, college students, etc., as the biggest influencers on middle school and high school students.

Overwhelmingly, those students who have discussed their plans with their parents indicate that their parents likely want them to go to college (74%) versus some other direction (25%).

What one word comes to mind when thinking about your future?



Among the more than 2,000 that responded to our survey, feelings such as excitement, happiness and optimism were mentioned in combination with fear, nervousness, and anxiety.

These themes came across loudly in the time spent in homes with students and their parents, especially among high school students. Many mentioned things like the pressure to get good grades and make good decisions so they do not hurt their chances of getting into a good college or university after they graduate high school.

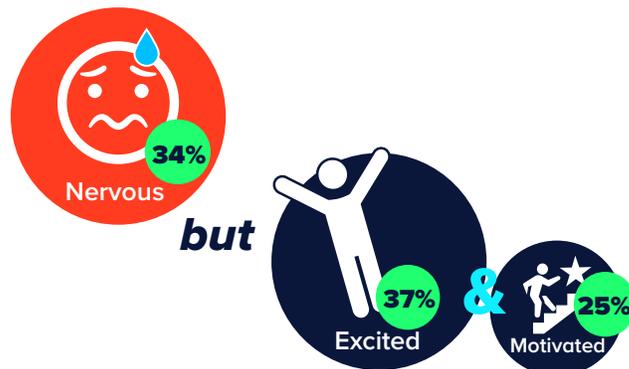
ASA also heard this repeatedly in interviews conducted with school counselors:

“The biggest trend that we’ve seen is a huge uptick in the stress and anxiety manifesting in really tangible physical ways. By the time they get to high school they’re wrapped really tightly... now this is for all the marbles. This isn’t just participation. This is for my future.”

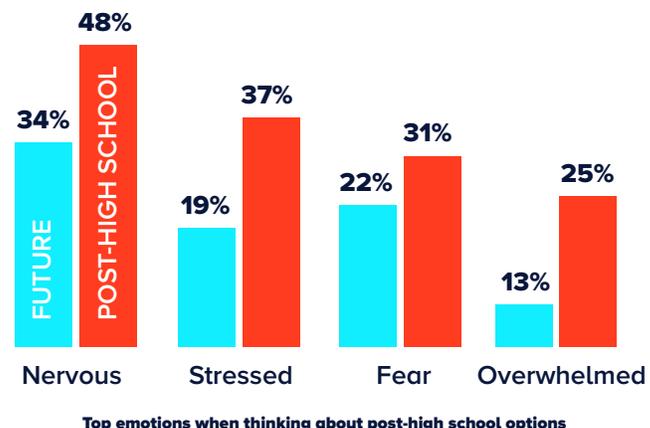
— Massachusetts High School Counselor

When asked about specific emotions they felt with respect to thinking about the future in general, students were again split between nervousness and excitement, with one-third feeling “nervous” but also “excited” (37%) and “motivated” (25%).

When thinking about the future, students feel:



However, when focusing on post-high school plans specifically, stress, fear, and a sense of being overwhelmed become much more prominent.

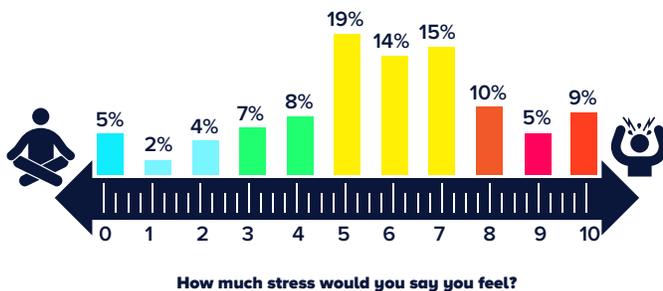


As one student, a junior in high school preparing to apply to top-tier colleges, expressed during an in-home interview:

“[Thinking about the future] stresses me out because I feel like there’s a lot of unknowns. Every single decision I make now will affect what happens in the future.”

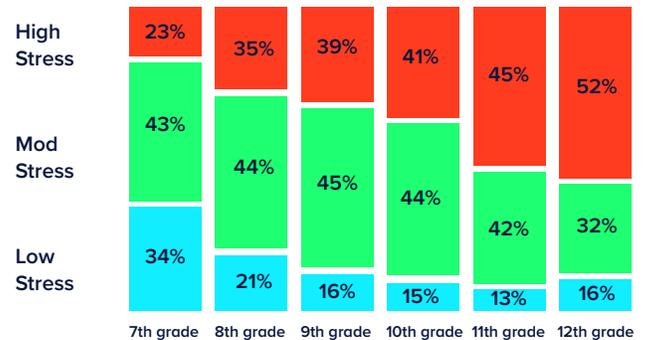
This stress is much more pronounced among those in high school, especially with respect to stress over what needs to be done to meet their future goals.

Some report that they are under a lot of stress as they plan for their future after high school. Others don’t feel as much stress. On a scale of 0-10, where a ‘0’ means ‘I don’t feel any stress at all,’ and a ‘10’ means ‘I feel almost more stress than I can bear,’ how much stress do you feel?



Survey results also reinforce that this anxiety and stress is driven by their current school performance as well as their future plans. About half (49%) of students consider maintaining or improving their grades as one of their greatest sources of stress. Besides grades, thinking about what needs to be done to meet future goals (25%) is most stressful to today’s students.

Strikingly, and one reason why ASA feels strongly that career exploration needs to happen in middle school, is that these levels of high stress increase steadily as students approach high school and come closer to graduating and going on to post-secondary pathways.



Increasing stress levels though high school

Combined with popular and widely-accepted research by education experts across the country, this research overwhelmingly points to a need to provide our youth with empowerment and the associated resources to explore, experiment, and execute on post-high school planning. This will allow them to realize their own unique goals, passions, and the various pathways available. ASA and its strategic partners are committed to the innovation and promotion of resources that will enable this generation to realize these optimal outcomes.

1 Kantar Consulting: Centennial Blueprint prepared for American Student Assistance, 2017 U.S. Monitor, <https://consulting.kantar.com/>

2 Below are several commonly-cited cases for beginning future education and career exploration in middle grades. ASA's own research reinforces these findings:

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (N.d.). Academic and Career Planning: Background. <http://dpi.wi.gov/acp/background>

ED475388 2003-06-00 Gearing-Up for Career Awareness: Profile of a Middle School Career Program." ERIC/ CASS Digest. 2003. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED475388>

Palladino Schultheiss, D. "Elementary Career Intervention Programs: Social Action Initiatives." Journal of Career Development, 31:3. 2005. <http://jcd.sagepub.com/content/31/3/185.full.pdf+html>

Hughes, K. & Karp, M. February 2004. "School-Based Career Development: A Synthesis of the Literature." Teachers College, Columbia University. <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/iee/BRIEFS/BRIEF30.pdf>

"The Economic Benefits of Academic and Career Preparation." ACT. 2008. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED501272.pdf>

"Career Planning: Students Need Help Starting Early and Staying Focused." ACT. 2005. <http://www.act.org/content/act/en/research/pdfs/career-planning-studentsneedhelpstartingearlyandstayingfocused.html>

Luzzo, D.A. & Pierce, G. (1996). Effects of DISCOVER on the career maturity of middle school students. The Career Development Quarterly <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/j.2161-0045.1996.tb00267.x>

Panzer, Craig, "The importance of career exploration to at-risk middle school students : a thesis ..." (2006). Capstone Projects and Theses. 467. http://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes/467

Kerka, S. "Middle School Career Education and Development." Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. 2000. <http://www.calpro-online.org/eric/docs/pab00018.pdf>



Ongoing Insights

Future topics and reports will take a deeper dive into many of these key themes as they relate to the issues, challenges, and realities that face middle school and high school students today as they plan for education and career choices after high school.

View our published report:

Planning their entry into the workforce: Exploring students' perceptions and expectations for internships and other experiential work strategies: asa.org/internships

Additional reports will include topics such as:

Influencers, mentors and advisors to Generation Z: Who are the most common influencers to middle school and high school students when it comes to future planning? Who is the most significant?

The gender split: How do male and female students differ when it comes to their education decisions and future planning?

Career preferences among Generation Z: How do students select their preferences for careers and how does this relate to post-HS planning?

Stress and other emotions toward future planning: What are the drivers and impact of stress, anxiety and fear for students with respect to thinking about their future?

Alternatives to traditional education paths: How do middle, high school and college students and their parents perceive alternative education and employment paths?

Living in the present vs. planning for the future: How do these mindsets impact current middle and high school students and those already in college?

Gen Z student segments: How do students generally differentiate from one another in terms of their perceptions of school, their outlook on the future, and their emotions when it comes to planning?

Preferences for resources & programming: How students, parents and school counselors perceive various resources geared toward future planning?

The parent vs. student mindset: How do parents and students compare and contrast with respect to future planning?

Extracurriculars and pathways to futures: What role do sports and other extracurricular activities contribute to post-HS education and career planning?

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