



NATIONAL SURVEY ON HIGH SCHOOL ALUMNI OUTCOMES

TURNING THE TASSEL

*What Generation Z Says About Life
After High School Graduation*



agency.



The Harris Poll

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**High school graduation is a rite of passage that marks an important milestone and symbolizes stepping into adulthood. Although it is the end of compulsory education, it is only the start of building a life as an adult.
What happens after graduation?**

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Introduction

**IF OUR SCHOOLS HAVE
DONE A GOOD JOB, THE
PROOF SHOULD LIE IN
WHETHER **YOUNG ADULTS
ARE THRIVING** WITHIN 10
YEARS OF WALKING ACROSS
THEIR HIGH SCHOOL
GRADUATION STAGE.**

Introduction

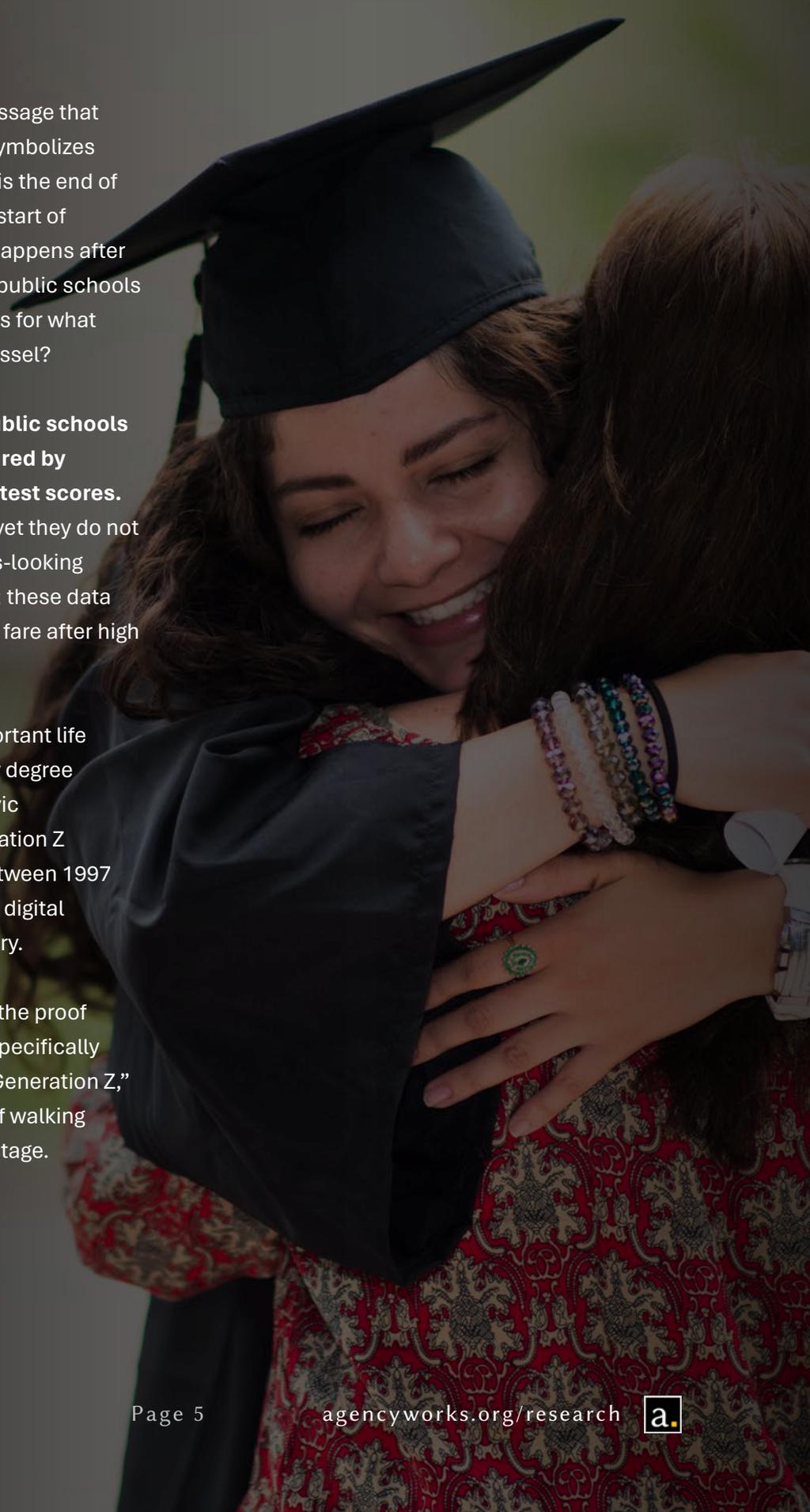
High school graduation is a rite of passage that marks an important milestone and symbolizes stepping into adulthood. Although it is the end of compulsory education, it is only the start of building a life as an adult. But what happens after graduation? How well are America’s public schools preparing their most recent graduates for what they can expect after they turn the tassel?

Historically, the performance of public schools in America has been largely measured by graduation rates and standardized test scores.

These are important measures, and yet they do not tell the full story. They are backwards-looking metrics, rather than forward-looking; these data say nothing about how well students fare after high school graduation.

That’s why this report examines important life outcomes like salary, postsecondary degree attainment, homeownership, and civic engagement for Generation Z. Generation Z encompasses young people born between 1997 and 2012. They are the most diverse, digital generation in the history of the country.

If our schools have done a good job, the proof should lie in whether young adults, specifically those recent graduates defined as “Generation Z,” are thriving within the first 10 years of walking across their high school graduation stage.



Introduction

Today's high school graduates face an uncertain economic landscape, with most employers reporting gaps in career readiness and a rising need for postsecondary education or skills training. As educational outcomes increasingly define economic opportunity, understanding what type of school experience best prepares students for the future—academically, professionally and personally—is more critical than ever.

More than 5,000 young Gen Z-ers who graduated high school between 2015 and 2025 participated in a national survey and shared their experiences both in and after high school, providing an up-close look at how well their public schools have prepared them to succeed in a world that is rapidly changing.

Agency, Inc., a nonprofit strategic communications and advocacy organization supporting K–12 public education choice, partnered with The Harris Poll to conduct this national research project, with additional emphasis on several states, and on city-level data from Denver, Indianapolis, New Orleans, and Newark.

This project sought to examine and elevate the real-world outcomes of public high school graduates—from both district-run and charter schools—by collecting information from high school alumni through a national survey of recent graduates.

In many ways, the results were mixed. Nationally, the majority of recent Generation Z high-school graduates pursue some type of post-secondary

education, but many drop out or do not complete. For those who do complete, life outcomes tend to be better. Across all public-school school types, graduates share similar paths after high school—most are employed, have pursued higher education and feel their current path aligns with their goals after high school. Most graduates—3 in 4—believe that the paths they are on are headed in the right direction.

However, the data reveal interesting differences in key outcomes among Generation Z alumni, often linked to the type of public school they attended. While it is true that most are employed, they are not doing the same type of work and they are not making the same salaries. For those who followed a particular path, salary, home ownership and degree completion are higher.

Surprisingly, the type of public school these young people attended mattered more than other factors such as race and socioeconomic factors. There is an attainable pathway to produce better outcomes for students, cities, states and the nation. We simply need to do more of what works and stop doing things that do not; this report will show what is working.

As many school systems are managing economic challenges that will mean consolidations and tough decisions about resource allocation, it is even more important to make smart choices. The question now is whether the political will exists to do what's right for future students.

Employment

RECENT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES ARE MORE LIKELY TO LAND JOBS **IN A SECTOR** THAT IS SHRINKING THAN IN ONE THAT IS GROWING. MOST YOUNG ADULTS WHO ARE EMPLOYED **WORK IN SERVICE AND CUSTOMER-FACING ROLES.**

Employment



One might argue that employment is the single most important outcome of education. While there are undeniably other benefits like literacy and general knowledge attainment, the ability to earn enough money to take care of oneself and one's family is critically important. **To what extent are America's public schools preparing young people to be employed?**

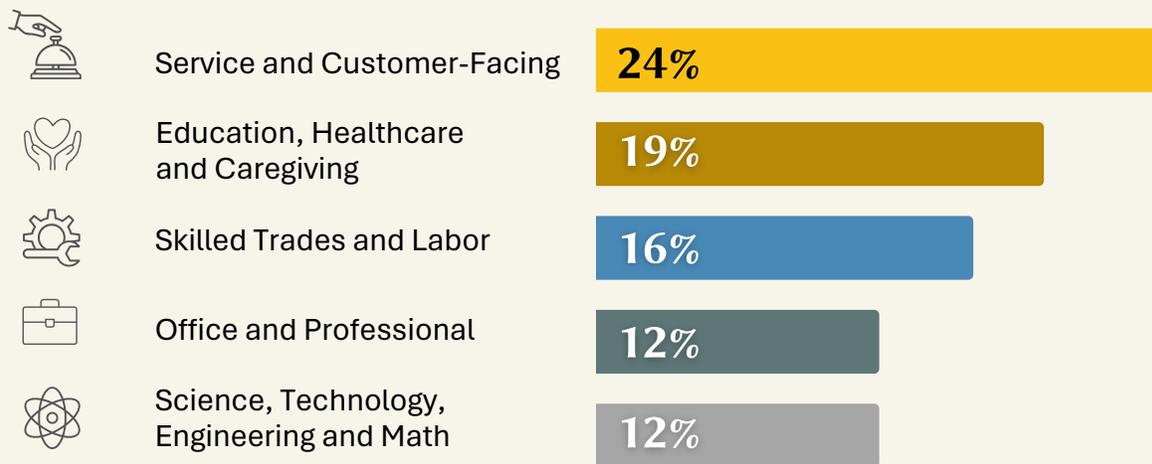
Due to many factors, unemployment has historically been and remains higher among younger adults in the United States. The U.S. unemployment rate for people aged 20 to 24 was 9.2% in August 2025, more than double the overall rate among all age groups. **(Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics)** It should be noted that these national statistics account for everyone in this age category, including graduates of private schools and those who did not complete high school. **According to the Agency-commissioned poll of recent high-school graduates, only about half (49%) report working full-time.** Nearly one-fifth (19%) are looking for work, and 18% are working part-time. About 14% report not working and only being enrolled in college, university, getting an online degree or some other type of formal education.

In what sectors do recent public high school graduates who have full-time or part-time jobs work? The Agency-Harris Poll survey found young adults are most likely to work in service and customer-facing roles, with the next most popular choice being employment in the fields of education, healthcare and caregiving.

Employment

Figure 1.1

AMONG THOSE WHO WORK A FULL-TIME OR PART-TIME JOB, WHERE ARE RECENT HIGH SCHOOL GRADS WORKING?



Note: All sector figures are NET totals among employed recent graduates (full-time or part-time).

Looking to the future, labor trends are beginning to shift. **A major change is coming as AI is poised to replace many retail and customer service jobs.** Already, cashiers and clerks are being replaced by machines in many retail stores. Chatbots and automated phone prompts are replacing traditional call centers. The pace of change will only get faster.

Are American schools preparing students to go into disappearing sectors? To keep pace, schools must also shift and begin preparing more students for careers in high-demand sectors like healthcare and technology that are experiencing rapid growth. Most unfilled jobs in the United States are heavily concentrated in healthcare (nurses, aides, therapists), skilled trades (electricians, plumbers, machinists, welders, mechanics) and advanced manufacturing (technicians, engineers), alongside ongoing needs for software developers. **(Source: Indeed)**

The data from the Agency-Harris Poll survey suggests recent high school **graduates who are employed are more likely to land jobs in a sector that is shrinking than in one of those that is growing.** They are also less likely to work in fields that command higher salaries. Perhaps the labor trend among young adults is less about whether jobs are going away and more about whether we are adequately preparing them for the job opportunities that exist today and those that are on the horizon.

Employment



Many skilled trades professionals and healthcare workers are retiring, creating large employment gaps. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projected that by 2026, nearly 25% of the U.S. workforce will be 55 years or older. This marks a significant increase from 16.8% in 2006. (**Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics**) Adding to that, there is a widening skills gap—a mismatch between available workers' skills and employer needs, particularly in advanced manufacturing.

This mismatch is partly driven by changes in the skills and roles that businesses need. LinkedIn's inaugural **Work Change Report** shows that global hiring for AI talent has surged more than 300% over the last eight years. LinkedIn's annual **Jobs on the Rise** list also reflects the changing needs of businesses—almost three-quarters (71%) of this year's *Jobs on the Rise* roles are new to the annual lists.

While these changes are driving innovation and growth, they are also presenting new hiring challenges. LinkedIn data shows that the skills needed for jobs are expected to change 70% by 2030, accelerated by rapid developments in AI. Human Resources professionals list finding candidates with the right technical (51%) and soft (45%) skills as some of the top challenges they face—and nearly two-thirds (63%) say there's a mismatch between the skills job seekers have and the skills their organization needs.

To keep pace, schools must also shift and begin preparing more students for careers in **high-demand sectors like healthcare and technology that are experiencing rapid growth.**

Training and Education After High School

COLLEGE ATTENDANCE
REMAINS **A VERY POPULAR
POSTSECONDARY CHOICE
WITH GENERATION Z,**
DESPITE GROWING PUBLIC
CONCERNS ABOUT
**AFFORDABILITY AND THE
VALUE** OF A COLLEGE
DEGREE.

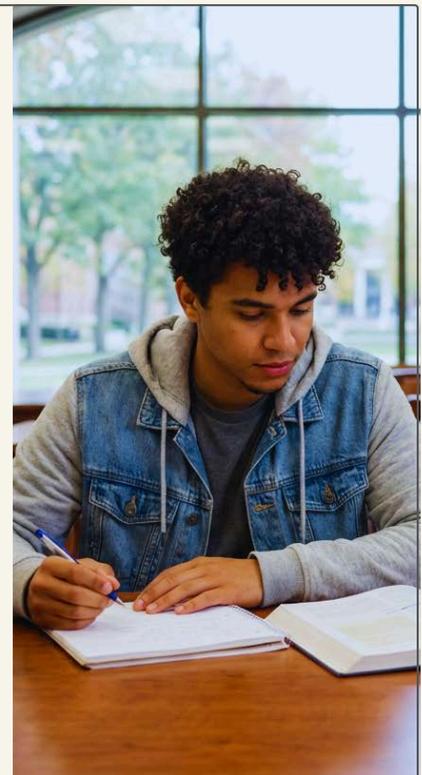
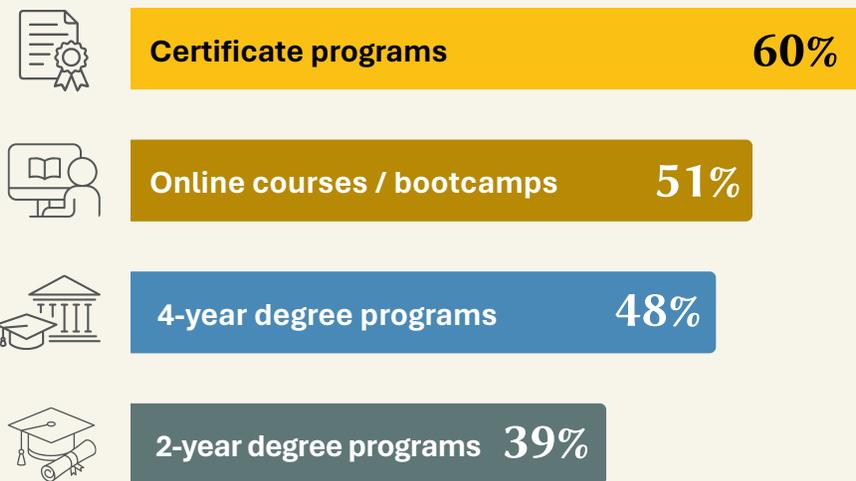
Training and Education After High School

Nationally, about three-quarters of recent high school alumni in the survey report having enrolled in some type of postsecondary education or training program since graduating high school. This may suggest two important, related things: First, a high school diploma is not enough to land the jobs that recent graduates want. And second, Generation Z is acutely aware of it.

But as we all know, starting something isn't the same as finishing it.

Figure 2.1

COMPLETION RATES OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION / TRAINING PROGRAMS AMONG RECENT GRADUATES



Despite the demand for highly-skilled labor, most young adults do not complete their postsecondary education or training programs, leaving them less likely to qualify for roles that require specialized training beyond a high school diploma.

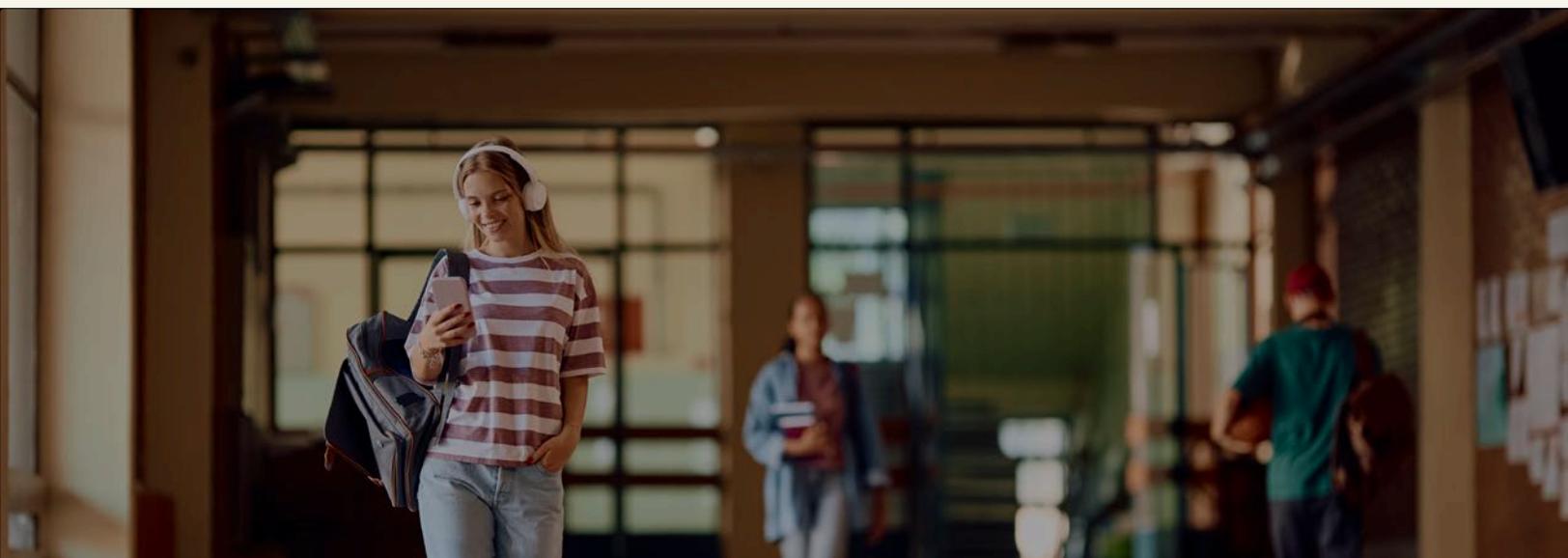
Training and Education After High School

Recent high school graduates who are enrolled in these programs are far more likely to complete certificate programs and online bootcamps/courses than to stick it out for a degree. This is likely at least in part because it is much quicker and cheaper to earn a certificate or complete a single course. But are these options worth it?

The [Wall Street Journal](#) recently reported that “skills-based hiring... which dangled the promise of a major shift in white-collar recruiting: Companies would stop fixating on traditional credentials, like college degrees and years of experience, and bring in anyone able to perform the duties of open roles...is a fad that is going out of style.” Those lured by the promise of a fast-track to high-paying jobs might just find themselves in a lurch.

College attendance remains a very popular postsecondary choice, despite growing concerns about affordability and the value of a college degree. According to a poll released by NBC News in November 2025, almost two-thirds of registered voters say a four-year college degree isn’t worth the cost. ([Source: NBC News Poll](#)) This represents a dramatic decline over the last decade. With most American voters agreeing that “it’s not worth the cost because people often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt.”

Nonetheless, college and university enrollment increased 2% this school year, the third consecutive year of growth, according to a [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center report](#) released in November 2025. That growth was driven by community colleges, which saw 4% growth in undergraduate enrollment, and by certificate programs.



Training and Education After High School

Indeed, there is compelling data that the associate degree is well worth it. The unemployment rate in 2024 for 20-to-29-year-olds who had recently received an associate degree was quite low: 2.1% versus 15.3% for those with a bachelor’s degree. (Source: [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#))

Further, a new [Indeed](#) survey of 10,000 workers found roughly three-quarters of people whose education ended after high school earn less than \$50,000 a year, while only 45% of bachelor’s degree holders make less than \$50,000.

Figure 2.2

GOING TO COLLEGE TO GET THAT KNOWLEDGE

58% enrolled in two-year or four-year degree programs

9% enrolled in certificate programs

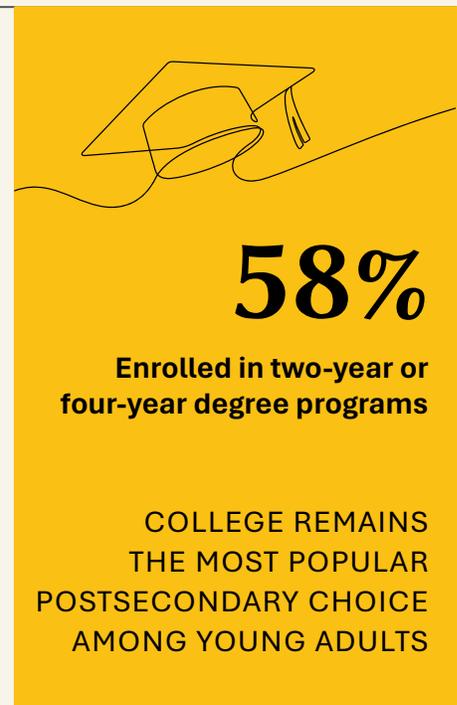
8% enrolled in trade or vocational school

7% enrolled in an online course or bootcamp

3% enrolled in an apprenticeship program

2% enlisted in the military

1% pursued another option



Eighty-one percent of recent high school graduates who have ever enrolled in a two-year community college are either currently enrolled in or have already completed and earned an associate degree. Many (55%) of the Agency-Harris Poll survey respondents who graduated from district-run schools within the last 10 years report having access to college-credit opportunities while enrolled in high school. Further, 68% of those recent district graduates who had access to International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, dual enrollment or similar options took advantage of those options. It is worth noting that students who attended district-run public schools were far more likely (55% vs 41%—14 percentage points higher) to have access to these options than their peers who attended charter schools.

Training and Education After High School



Nationally, a small percentage—1.6%—of public school students graduate from high school with an associate degree in hand. **(Source: Education Data Initiative)** Programs like College Credit Plus (CCP) in Ohio, vocational-technical schools like those in New Jersey and early college high schools like Bard High School Early College in New York make it possible to earn an associate degree while enrolled in high school—at no cost to the student. This is perhaps the most efficient route from high school straight into a well-paying career. It is also an affordable route to a college education because students can graduate high school with up to half the courses for a four-year degree already completed. This is a promising practice that should be scaled.

Although they hold great promise, two-year degree programs also have the highest dropout rate—20% of district school graduates who enrolled in these programs dropped out or did not complete. However, charter school graduates who enrolled in two-year community college were far more likely to persist. Only 7% nationally did not complete or dropped out.

Charter school graduates who enroll in two-year community college are far more likely to persist and complete. **Only 7% drop out or do not finish, compared to 20% of district graduates.**

Postsecondary Preparation, Persistence and Degree Attainment

SLIGHTLY **MORE THAN ONE-HALF** OF ALL RECENT GRADUATES REPORT THAT THEIR **HIGH SCHOOL DID NOT PREPARE THEM FOR THE RIGORS** OF POSTSECONDARY OR CONTINUING EDUCATION COURSEWORK **AFTER HIGH SCHOOL.**

Postsecondary Preparation, Persistence and Degree Attainment



Getting a college degree is not the only path to success. And yet, it is undeniable that, on average, people with college degrees consistently make significantly more money over their lifetimes and have better employment prospects than those with only a high school diploma. Earnings also increase with higher degrees, and with degrees in specific fields like engineering, technology and healthcare that show high returns. **(Source: [Social Security Administration](#))**

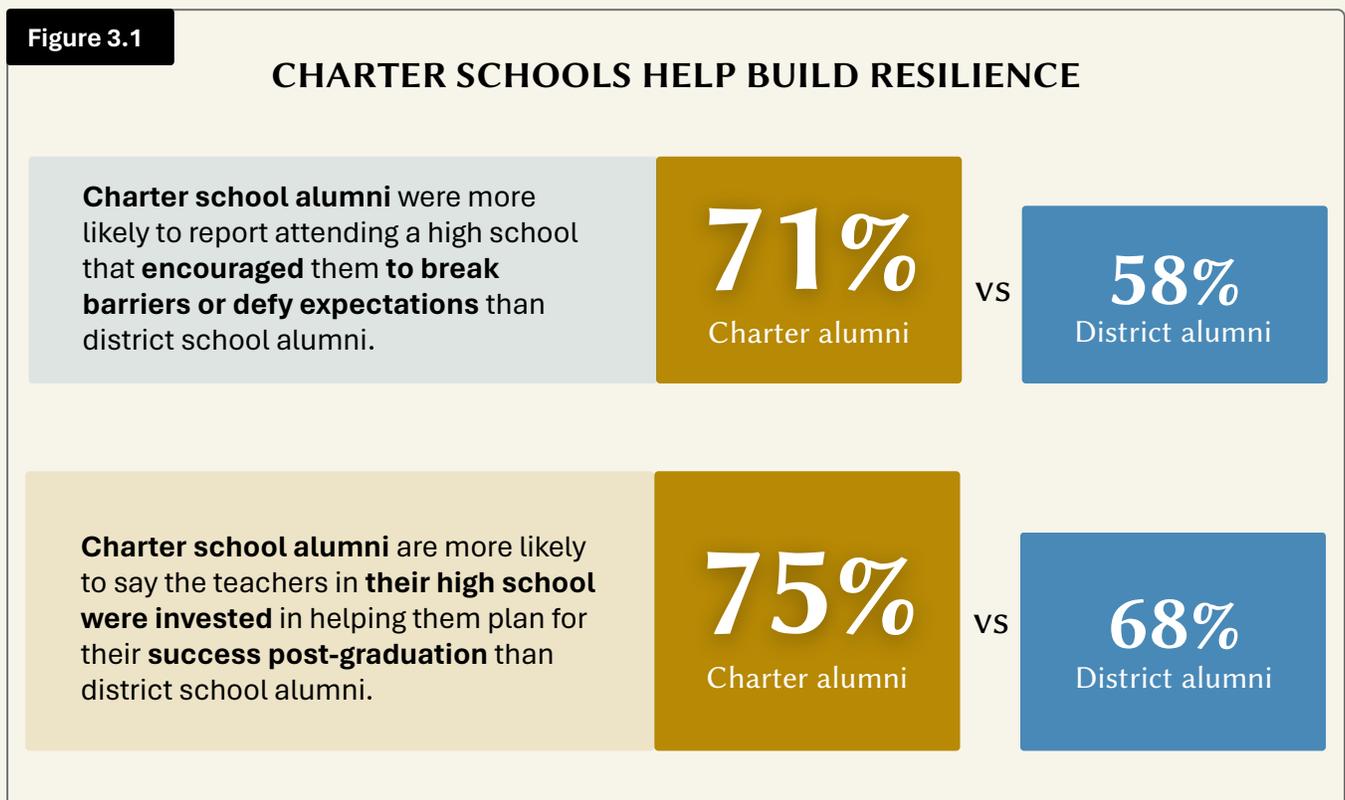
It is therefore useful to explore the extent to which Generation Z public high school graduates are prepared for college, and to better understand their paths to and through college, noting the patterns more likely to produce degrees—and specifically to produce degrees that are more likely to lead to higher incomes.

In this section, the report will explore how positive outcomes were more closely associated with alumni of one particular type of public school: charter schools. **Charter schools are unique public schools that operate independent of school districts.**

Postsecondary Preparation, Persistence and Degree Attainment

Beginning with alumni perceptions of preparedness, graduates from both types of public schools report feeling equally unprepared. Slightly more than one-half (53% district-run; 55% charter) of recent graduates report that their high school did not prepare them for the rigors of postsecondary or continuing education coursework after high school. Although nearly 70% of graduates from district-run schools (67%) reported earning good grades in school, they were slightly less likely (31% vs. 38% charter) to describe their schools as “being known for strong academic performance” or to say their “school was academically challenging” (24% vs. 28%).

Charter graduates recall more academically rigorous experiences, marked by challenging coursework and higher expectations for success after high school. These experiences were most likely shaped by teachers who both supported and pushed them to excel—helping students grow not only academically but also personally.



Postsecondary Preparation, Persistence and Degree Attainment

Nationally, charter school alumni are more likely than district school alumni (71% vs 58%) to report attending a high school that encouraged them to break barriers or defy expectations, and more likely to say their teachers were invested in helping them plan for success after graduation (75% vs. 68%). Given that charter schools serve a higher proportion of students statistically less likely to be admitted to college or complete college—charter schools enroll nearly 70% students of color and students from low-income families (**Source: National Center for Education Statistics**)—there is likely a correlation between high expectations in school, support with planning for success after high school and better outcomes in life.

Although the number of recent graduates from Washington state who participated in the survey is small—less than 100, the results are still compelling and worth discussion. In Washington state, charter school alumni stood out as being significantly more likely to report attending a high school that encouraged them to break barriers and defy expectations (97%** vs 77% district-run).

The Agency hypothesis is that something special happens in charter schools. Students are nurtured and supported in a way that fosters foundational skills which served these young people well in postsecondary education and beyond. According to the **Harvard Business Review**, “In an age when technical expertise can become irrelevant in just a few years, foundational skills matter more than ever. Abilities like collaboration, problem-solving...transfer across jobs and help teams adapt to new challenges.”

**Results in are based on small bases (N=50-99) and should be interpreted as qualitative or directional only.



NEW ORLEANS

CITY-WIDE SPOTLIGHT



NEW ORLEANS

Life Outcomes in An Almost All-Charter City

Almost every public school in New Orleans is a charter school. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the city of New Orleans and destroyed almost everything in its path, including its public schools. As city leaders worked to get schools reopened, charter schools—public schools that operate independent of the school district—emerged as a viable option. This created the nation’s first and only almost all-charter public school system.

By the end of the 2013-2014 school year, looking at all grades and tests, New Orleans increased the percentage of students proficient on state tests by 27 percentage points to 62 percent. **(Source: Louisiana Believes)** Objectively, the new model produced better immediate academic outcomes for students.

But what happened after graduation? What do life outcomes look like for young adults in New Orleans who graduated between 2015 and 2025? In a word: Better. Better than the national average.

RECENT NEW ORLEANS
ALUMNI **OUTPACE** NATIONAL
PEERS IN **COLLEGE**
ENROLLMENT, FINANCIAL
INDEPENDENCE AND
AVERAGE ANNUAL **EARNINGS.**

NEW ORLEANS

CITY-WIDE SPOTLIGHT

Graduates of New Orleans public schools **are significantly more likely to continue their education after high school**, with 75% of graduates reporting that they have enrolled in a two-year community college and/or four-year college or university, compared with 58% nationally. This higher rate of postsecondary participation is reflected in stronger early-career outcomes.

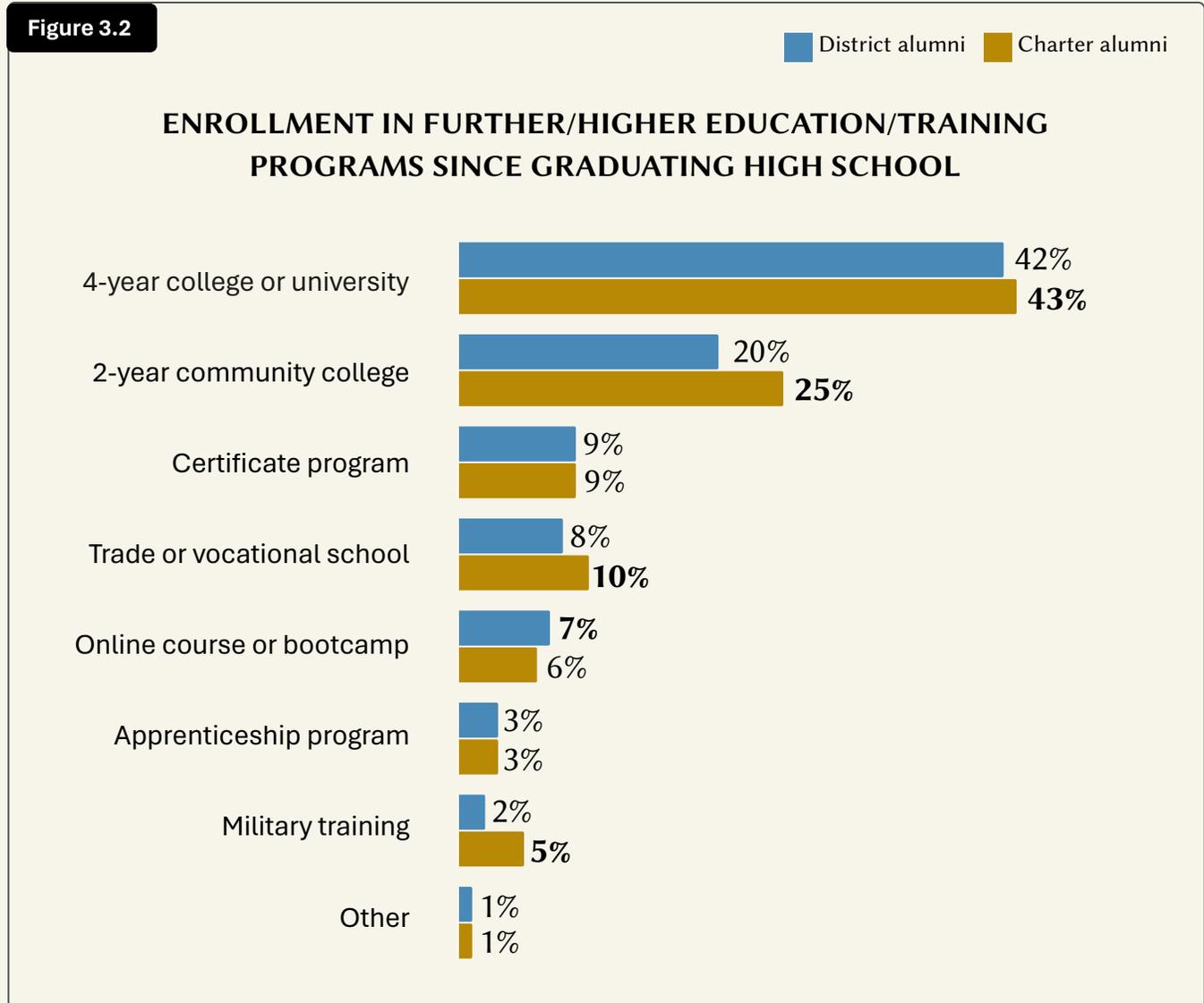
New Orleans graduates who work a full-time or part-time job earn, on average, about \$4,000 more per year than their peers nationwide (\$89,717 in New Orleans vs. \$85,988 nationally). They are also far more likely to hold jobs that offer benefits—93% compared with 83% nationally—and New Orleans graduates are substantially more likely to report feeling financially independent (63% versus 40%). These markers of stability suggest that many New Orleans alumni are transitioning into adulthood with greater economic security.

75% OF NEW ORLEANS GRADUATES REPORT ENROLLING IN A TWO-YEAR OR FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE, COMPARED TO 58% NATIONALLY.

Career pathways also differ in notable ways. Graduates from New Orleans who work a full-time or part-time job are much more likely to work in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math fields than graduates nationally who work a full-time or part-time job (25% versus 12%), while participation in skilled trades is relatively low (6% versus 16%). Graduates from New Orleans are also more likely to work in office and professional settings (18% vs 12%). This pattern highlights both strengths in preparation for professional careers and opportunities to further diversify career pathways aligned with workforce needs.

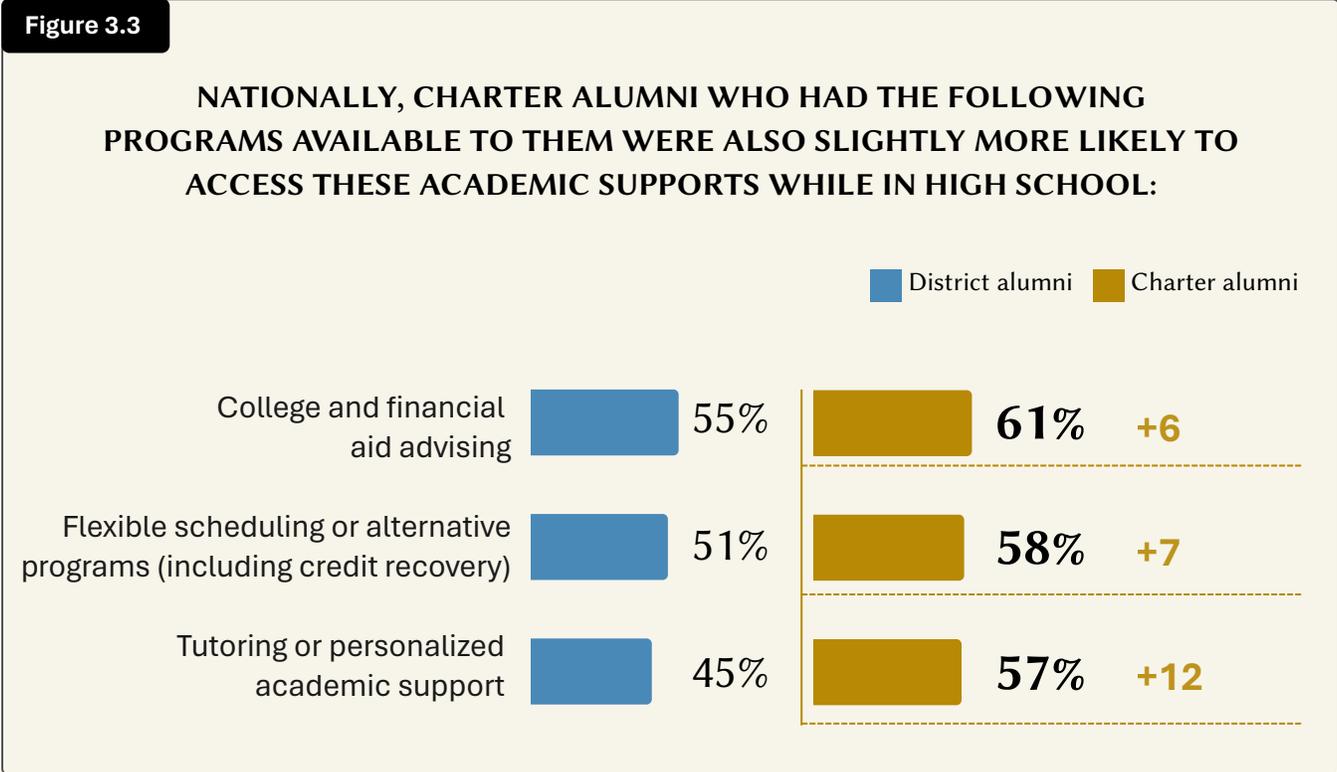
Taken together, these outcomes suggest that New Orleans’ almost all-charter public education system is producing graduates who are more likely to pursue higher education, earn higher wages and achieve financial independence earlier in adulthood—key indicators of long-term success beyond high school.

Postsecondary Preparation, Persistence and Degree Attainment



Charter alumni are **slightly more likely to attain college degrees** (38% vs 31% district graduates), which according to [Social Security Administration](#) data, is linked to **higher salaries**. They are also at least **slightly more likely** to earn associate degrees (9% vs. 7%), which are associated with **lower debt** and **lower unemployment** than bachelor’s degrees. Perhaps this pathway gives many an earlier start to saving money for a house. Charter school graduates are also **slightly more likely** than district graduates to work in higher paying jobs like office and professional roles (15% vs. 12%) and Science Technology, Engineering and Math careers (14% vs. 11%).

Postsecondary Preparation, Persistence and Degree Attainment

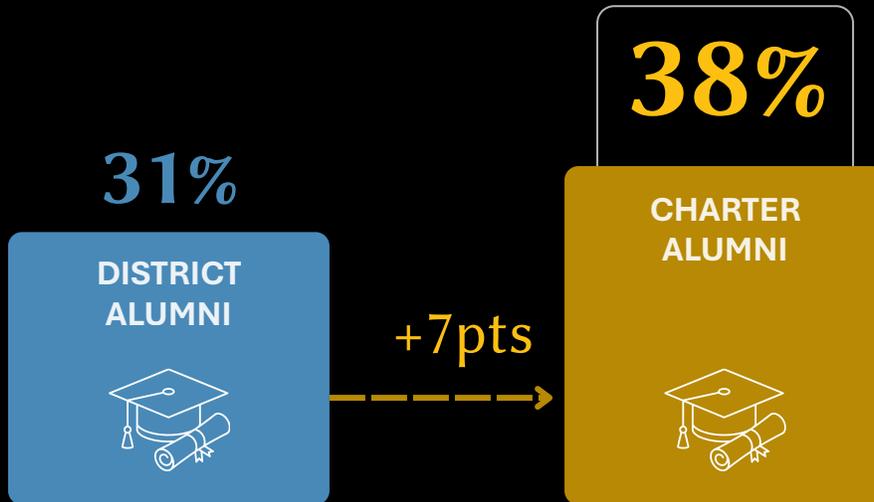


Although recent graduates of district-run high schools report having better access to certain resources to prepare for life after high school, specifically with respect to college readiness (67% district-run vs. 57% charter), charter alumni make stronger use of the supports available to them (97% vs. 89% district-run). They engage most often in college and financial aid advising, flexible scheduling, alternative programs and personalized academic support, suggesting possibly greater emphasis on connecting students to the resources and opportunities that could help them succeed in college. Charter graduates report at least slightly higher usage of every college readiness tool or resource available to them, except Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. District graduates are most likely to take advantage of these college credit opportunities (68% district graduates vs 61% charter graduates).

Postsecondary Preparation, Persistence and Degree Attainment

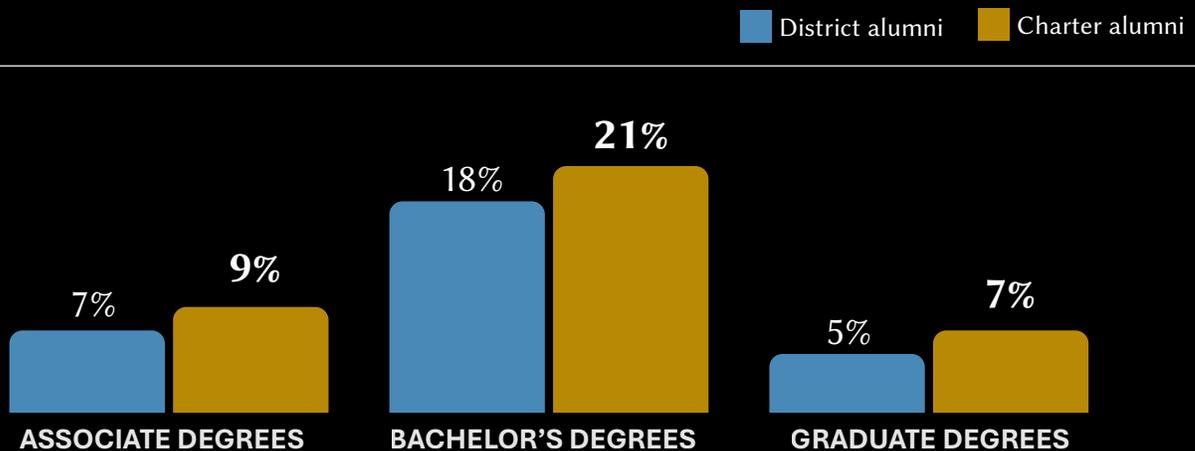
Figure 3.4

CHARTER ALUMNI EARN MORE DEGREES



AT EACH LEVEL OF DEGREE ATTAINMENT, **CHARTER SCHOOL ALUMNI** ARE AT LEAST SLIGHTLY **MORE LIKELY TO GRADUATE THAN THEIR PEERS** WHO ARE GRADUATES OF DISTRICT-RUN SCHOOLS.

Breakdown of degree earned by type



SCHOOL-WIDE SPOTLIGHT



100% GRADUATION RATE AT EDNOVATE

Ednovate, a network of high-performing public charter college prep high schools in Los Angeles and Orange County, is committed to creating what they call “positive multigenerational change”—proof that when students are supported to thrive together, the possibilities are limitless.

When Ednovate students graduate, between 98% and 100% meet the requirements for admission to University of California schools and the California State University system. These young people also significantly outpace their peers at the state and district level with respect to the college readiness benchmark established by the California Department of Education.

At Ednovate, persistence is not an aspiration—it is an expectation, built into every layer of the student experience. Ednovate’s schools are grounded in a simple belief: when students experience rigor, support and true belonging, they not only get to college—they make it through.

IN THE 2024-2025 SCHOOL YEAR, **100% OF EDNOVATE GRADUATING SENIORS** WERE ACCEPTED TO COLLEGE AND THEY EARNED **\$70 MILLION IN SCHOLARSHIPS.**

SCHOOL-WIDE SPOTLIGHT

That belief is reflected in the students whom Ednovate serves. Ninety-nine percent are students of color, primarily Latino and Black; nearly 4 in 5 come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds; and many are English learners or receive special education services. Ednovate meets this reality with intention, pairing academic excellence with holistic care that ensures students are supported academically, socially and emotionally.

The results are powerful. In the 2024-2025 school year, Ednovate achieved 100% college acceptance for all graduating seniors and helped students secure \$70 million in scholarships. Further, Ednovate's commitment does not end at graduation. Alumni of their schools continue to receive guidance, mentorship and access to college success supports designed to help them navigate challenges and persist through college.

99% OF EDNOVATE STUDENTS ARE LATINO OR BLACK.

Nearly **4 in 5** COME FROM ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS.

The network's outcomes mirror broader charter trends—graduates who are more prepared to manage time, pursue careers, handle new responsibilities and navigate finances—skills that matter long after high school.

According to the team at Ednovate, **60% of their alumni earn a living wage** vs. 45% of their peers, and **66% secure strong early-career jobs** vs. 43% of their peers.

WHAT CHARTER ALUMNI ARE SAYING

“My time in high school provided me with many skills, but the most helpful thing it did to prepare me for life after graduation was emphasize the importance of critical thinking and problem-solving.”

- California Charter Alumnus



“The most helpful thing my high school did to prepare me for life after graduation was teaching me practical skills beyond academics. Through assignments and projects, I learned time management and discipline...I gained teamwork and responsibility. Some teachers also focused on critical thinking and problem-solving, which helped me feel more prepared for college and real-world challenges. Overall, it wasn’t just the lessons, but the environment that encouraged me to grow and become more independent.”

- California Charter Alumnus

Wealth Creation: Homeownership, Salaries and “Adulting”

WITHIN 10 YEARS OF GRADUATING HIGH SCHOOL, **CHARTER SCHOOL ALUMNI** ARE MORE LIKELY THAN THEIR PEERS TO **EARN HIGHER SALARIES, COMPLETE A COLLEGE DEGREE AND OWN THEIR OWN HOMES.**

Wealth Creation: Homeownership, Salaries and “Adulting”—The Surprising Connection with Charter Schools



The median age of participants in the Agency-Harris Poll survey is 23-24 years old nationally. Although many recent high school alumni are still figuring things out, others are well on their way to adulting. They are holding down full-time jobs with benefits, moving out on their own and buying homes. This is another area where the data revealed stark differences, depending upon the type of public school young adults attended. Generally speaking, charter school alumni fared better.

Less than a quarter of young adults who graduated high school between 2015 and 2025 own their own homes (24%). However, charter school graduates in the same age group **are more likely (33%) to be homeowners than graduates of district-run high schools (23%)**. This general trend holds true nationally, as well as in Florida (35% of charter graduates vs 23% of district graduates), Texas (40% vs 25%) and Washington state (47%** vs 18%). Nationally, charter school alumni are also slightly more likely (35% vs 33% district graduates) to live on their own in rented homes.

Charter school alumni are more likely to own homes.
33% are homeowners versus 23% of district graduates.

**Results in Washington state for charter graduates based on small bases (N=50–99) and should be interpreted as directional only.

Wealth Creation: Homeownership, Salaries and “Adulting”—The Surprising Connection with Charter Schools

\$22,000

MORE PER YEAR

ON AVERAGE WITHIN 10 YEARS OF
COMPLETING HIGH SCHOOL,
CHARTER SCHOOL GRADUATES EARN
MORE PER YEAR THAN DISTRICT
SCHOOL GRADUATES

Homeownership is expensive and so is paying rent. A person generally needs a good salary to afford it. This is yet another area **where charter school alumni are doing better** than their peers.

On average, within 10 years of completing high school, charter school graduates who work full-time or part-time **earn around \$22,000 more per year** than district school graduates (\$106,764 vs. \$84,199). In Washington state, the difference is even more pronounced: **nearly \$44,000** (\$120,109** vs. \$76,178). In addition to higher salaries, charter school alumni nationally are slightly more likely to have jobs that offer healthcare benefits (62% vs 60%), and less likely to work at a job that offers no benefits (12% vs 17%).

What likely accounts for the difference in life outcomes? There are many factors. First, charter graduates are more likely to have enrolled in higher education—fewer stop at high school.

In Washington state, the salary gap is even bigger. **Charter school graduates earn nearly \$44,000 more per year than district school graduates**

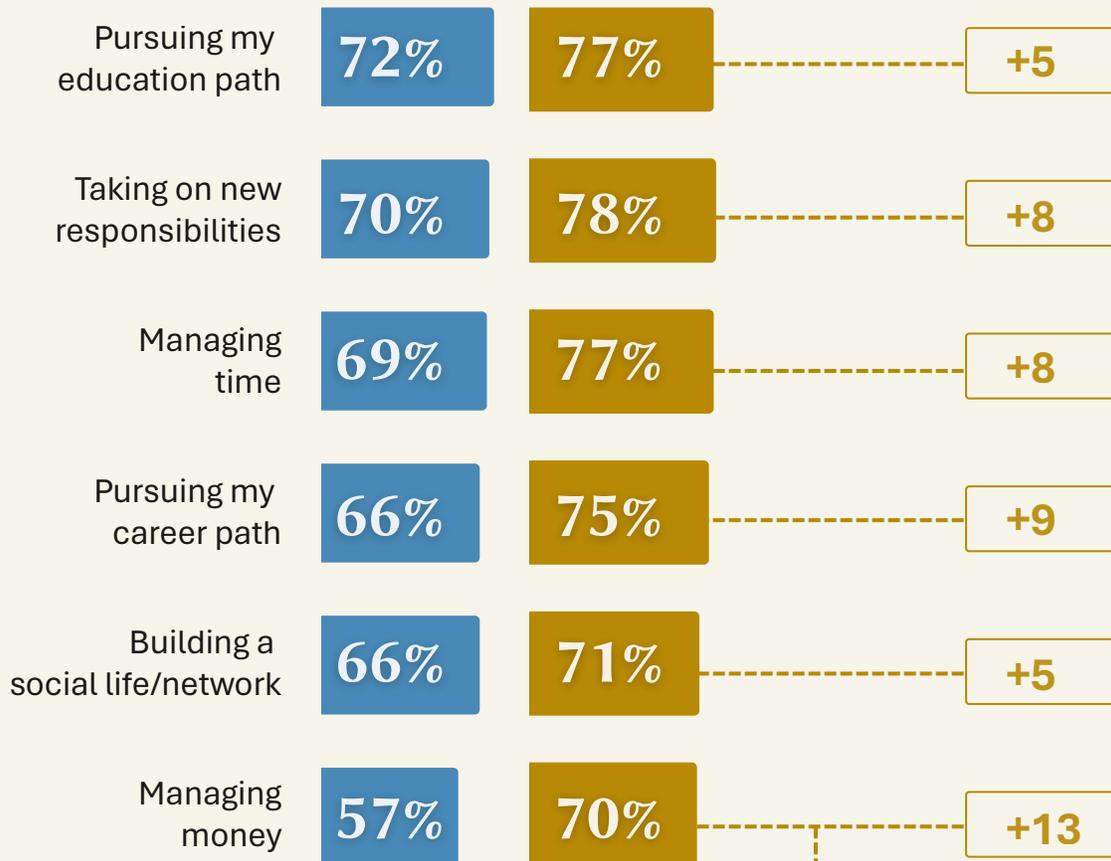
**Results in Washington state for charter graduates based on small bases (N=50–99) and should be interpreted as directional only.

Wealth Creation: Homeownership, Salaries and “Adulthood”—The Surprising Connection with Charter Schools

Figure 4.1

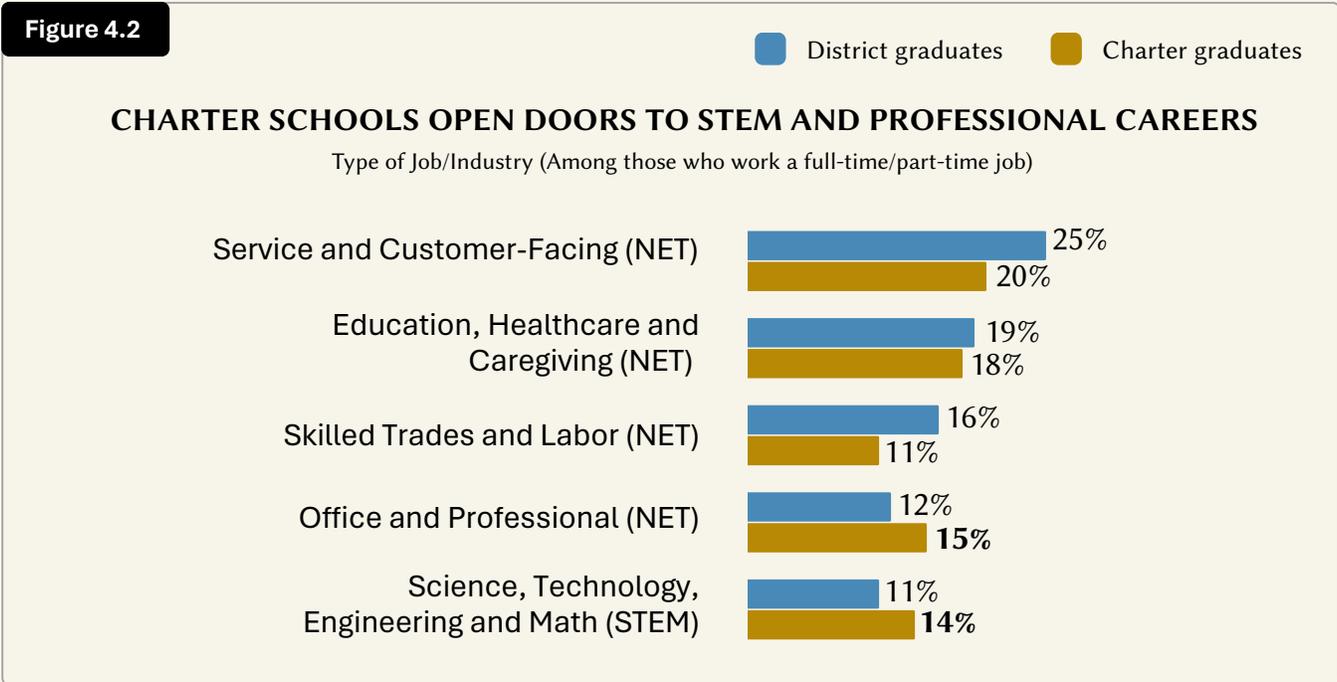
District alumni Charter alumni

LEVEL OF PREPARATION TO HANDLE ASPECTS OF LIFE AFTER GRADUATION BY TYPE OF PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

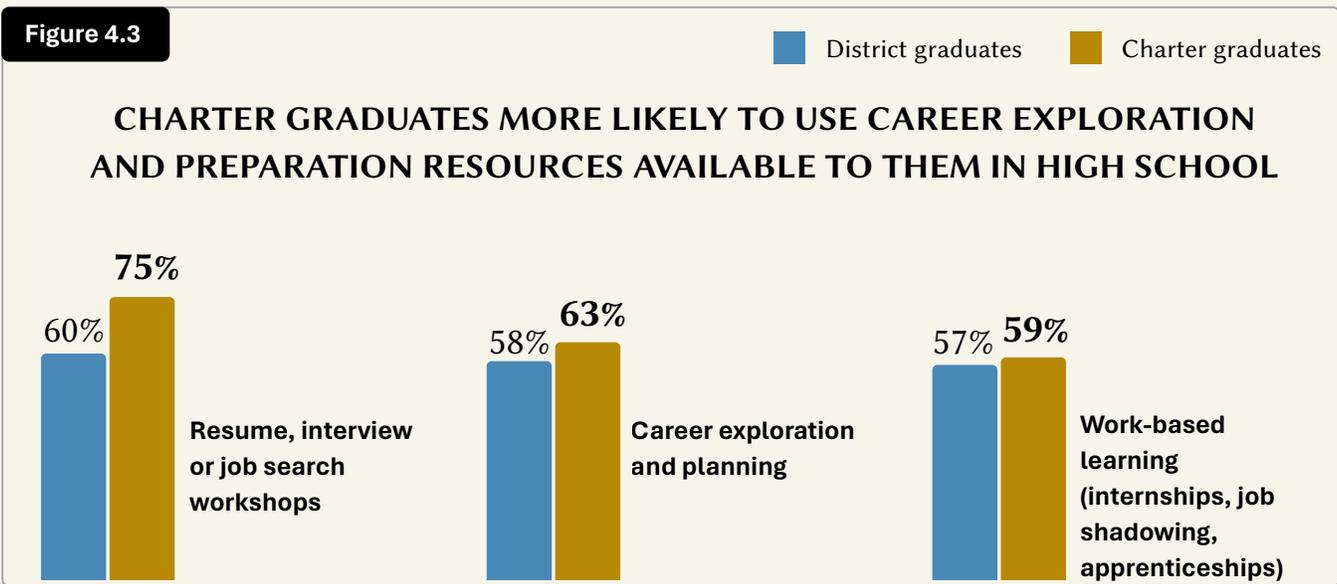


Across every life skill, charter alumni feel more prepared after graduation.

Wealth Creation: Homeownership, Salaries and “Adulthood”—The Surprising Connection with Charter Schools



Going back to their high school experiences, charter school alumni **are more likely** to say the teachers in their high school were invested in helping them plan for success post-graduation (75% vs 68% district graduates). They also **cite early support in developing the skills** that helped them to be successful at understanding and navigating the world of work.



WASHINGTON

STATE-WIDE SPOTLIGHT



Punching Above Their Weight in Washington State

Charter schools are still relatively new in Washington, serving a small but growing population of students statewide. The newness and small size of the charter community makes their results all the more remarkable. This tiny group of public schools is producing some of the most impressive life outcomes in the country for high school graduates.

On average, within the first 10 years of graduating high school, charter alumni in Washington state who work a full- or part-time job earn nearly \$44,000 more a year than students who graduated from district public schools (\$120,109** vs. \$76,178). They are also significantly more likely to have jobs with benefits (100%** vs. 93%), and charter alumni in Washington state are also more likely to own their own homes (47% vs. 18%).

\$44,000

AVERAGE **ANNUAL SALARY GAP** BETWEEN RECENT **CHARTER SCHOOL ALUMNI** AND THEIR PEERS WHO ATTENDED DISTRICT-RUN SCHOOLS.

** Results in Washington state for charter graduate based on small bases (N=50–99) and should be interpreted as directional only.

WASHINGTON

STATE-WIDE SPOTLIGHT

Charter schools are an important part of the public education landscape in Washington, serving nearly 5,000 students. These innovative public schools began serving students in 2014, and today they are among the highest performing public schools in the state. Of particular note, they provide an exceptional educational experience for students who have been historically and systemically underserved—students from low-income families, Black students, Latino students, students who do not speak English as a first language and students receiving special education services.

47%

OF **CHARTER SCHOOL ALUMNI** IN WASHINGTON STATE **OWN THEIR OWN HOMES** VS. 18% OF DISTRICT SCHOOL GRADUATES



Not only do charter schools serve these students well, they serve a higher rate of students with the greatest needs—multiple language speakers, students from low-income families and students who are several grade levels behind—than other public schools.

They are punching well above their weight. Imagine what might happen if there were more.

A Closer Look at
Communities of Color

**RACIAL DIFFERENCES
CORRELATE TO SOME
LESSER LIFE OUTCOMES
FOR YOUNG ADULTS.**

WHITE STUDENTS OFTEN
ARE AHEAD, **BUT THOSE
DIFFERENCES ARE ERASED**
FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR
WHO GRADUATE FROM
CHARTER SCHOOLS.

A Closer Look at Communities of Color



Nationally, racial differences correlate to some differences in life outcomes for young adults. Recent graduates who self-identify as Black, Latino, Asian or Native American are slightly less likely (70%) to have ever enrolled in postsecondary education or training when compared to their White counterparts (74%). They are also less likely to have completed a four-year degree (44%) than White alumni (54%), and annual salaries are about \$5,000 less overall (\$80,290 vs. \$85,302).

However, findings look remarkably different for students of color who graduate from charter schools—public schools where, as mentioned earlier in this report, nearly 70% of the students nationwide are students of color. (Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#))

When reviewing the racial demographics of respondents, a compelling pattern emerged among respondents who self-identify as Black, Latino, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander or Native American—groups that have historically faced disparities in educational and economic outcomes. Life outcomes for these respondents were significantly better if they were graduates of charter schools.

Life outcomes for these respondents were significantly better if they were graduates of charter schools.

A Closer Look at Communities of Color

\$55,000

MORE PER YEAR

**ON AVERAGE, WORKING CHARTER
SCHOOL GRADUATES OF COLOR
EARN NEARLY \$55,000 MORE PER
YEAR THAN THEIR PEERS WHO DID NOT
GRADUATE FROM A CHARTER SCHOOL.**

Across many metrics, charter school recent high school graduates of color have better life outcomes when compared to their counterparts who graduated from district schools. One of the most remarkable differences is with respect to earnings. On average, working charter school graduates who self-identified as Black, Latino, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander or Native American earn \$129,108 annually, which is nearly \$55,000 more per year than alumni of color who did not graduate from a charter school (\$74,619). Full or part-time employment is also slightly higher (70% vs. 67% for district alumni), as is enrollment in postsecondary training or higher education (77% vs. 69%).

In fact, The Harris Poll-Agency survey found that charter alumni who self-identified as Black, Latino, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander or Native American are just as likely to earn two-year and four-year degrees as their White counterparts from district-run schools (two-year degrees: 40% charter alumni of color vs. 38% white district alumni; four-year degrees: 55% vs. 55%)—effectively closing the degree attainment gap. In 2019, the most recent year of reported data from the National Center for Education Statistics on four-year college graduation rates, White students were significantly more likely to earn degrees than Black, Latino, Pacific Islander and Native American students. **(Source: National Center for Education Statistics)**

*Black, Latino, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or Native American Alumni from Charter Schools (Among those who enrolled in college)

A Closer Look at Communities of Color

Figure 5.1

ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS HELPING TO CLOSE THE DEGREE ATTAINMENT GAP BETWEEN RACES?



AMONG THOSE WHO ENROLLED IN COLLEGE

Completed Two-Year Degree

WHITE ALUMNI
District-Run Schools

ALUMNI OF COLOR*
Charter-Run Schools

38%

40%

Completed Four-Year Degree

WHITE ALUMNI
District-Run Schools

ALUMNI OF COLOR*
Charter-Run Schools

55%

55%

DEGREE ATTAINMENT GAP CLOSES BETWEEN THE RACES FOR CHARTER ALUMNI

*Black, Latino, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or Native American Alumni from Charter Schools (Among those who enrolled in college)

Civic Engagement

THERE ARE **MORE REGISTERED VOTERS IN GENERATION Z** THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE, BUT FEWER WHO HAVE ACTUALLY EVER PARTICIPATED IN AN ELECTION. **EQUALLY SPLIT BETWEEN PARTIES**, THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE INDEPENDENT.

Civic Engagement



Generation Z is estimated to compose about **17%-18% of the U.S. electorate.** (Source: [Datonics](#)) Their numbers are growing each year as more enter adulthood. The most mature members of this group graduated from high school in 2015, the top end of the audience for the Agency-Harris Poll survey.

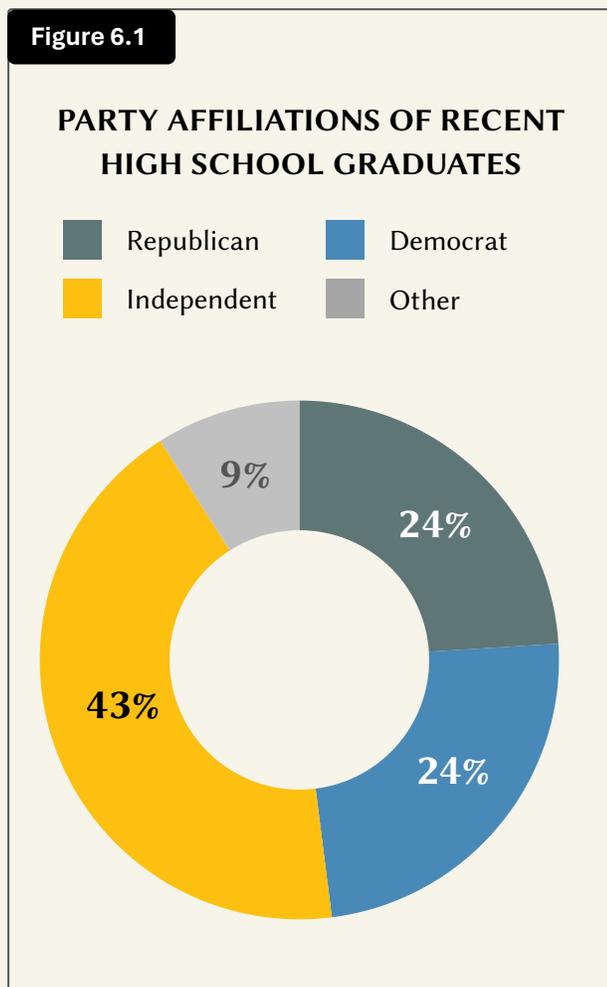
The survey found that **80% of recent Generation Z high school graduates are registered to vote**, which according to [the U.S. Census Bureau](#), is slightly higher than the overall percentage of U.S. citizens registered to vote in 2024 (73.6%). This is significant and signals an interest in civic engagement because these recent high school graduates had to make an active decision to register to vote.

Although many schools may hold voter registration drives, or even make registration forms available on campus, and it is also convenient to do so while getting a driver's license, young people cannot be automatically registered. **This suggests that recent high school alumni care about voting enough to take the first step.** There is, however, a gap between registering to vote and showing up at the polls.

Participants in the Agency-Harris Poll survey revealed 55% of recent graduates have ever voted in a federal election, compared to 65% of eligible Americans who voted in the 2024 presidential election. (Source: [U.S. Census Bureau](#)) Even fewer young adults in the survey—45%—have ever voted in a state-level election. There are early signs in the 2025 elections—specifically in the New York, Virginia and New Jersey elections and ballot referendums in California—that young voters are finding their voices and showing up for issues that matter to them. (Source: [Tufts University](#))

Civic Engagement

According to [polling from the University of Chicago](#), young voters whether Democratic, Republican or Independent, are all worried about similar issues: affordability and the economy. When asked to identify the most pressing issues in their community, **the most popular answer was housing affordability, regardless of political affiliation.** Nearly half of both Republicans and Democrats listed this as their top issue.



Considering the Agency-Harris Poll survey found that less than 25% of recent high school graduates own their own homes (24%) and more than 40% live rent-free with family or friends (41%), **their concerns about housing costs are warranted.** Within 10 years of graduating high school, 81% of young people have never been married, which is perhaps also tied to affordability. This tracks with the declining number of young people who plan to marry in the future. According to [a recent study by Pew Research Center](#), only about 67% of U.S. high school seniors in 2023 said they expect to marry someday, down from 80% in 1993.

Recent high school graduates **are evenly split** between Democrats (24%) and Republicans (24%), and nearly half (43%) are Independents. These numbers suggest the **rise of a new generation of independent-minded voters** who will be less reliably linked to the base of any political party.

Conclusion

EVERY YOUNG PERSON
DESERVES TO GRADUATE
**EQUIPPED TO PURSUE THE
PATHWAY OF THEIR
CHOICE.** LET'S PUT ALL
GOOD OPTIONS ON THE
TABLE AND **DO MORE OF
WHAT WORKS.**

We need more of everything that works. We need more dual enrollment programs and early college high schools that provide a fast-track to degree attainment without crushing student-loan debt. We also need to train more high school students so they are ready to step immediately after graduation into the high demand, well-paid positions that remain unfilled in healthcare, technology and advanced manufacturing.

And it is hard to argue with the value of charter schools—public schools that overwhelmingly serve students of color and students from low-income families and produce graduates who earn more money (an average of around \$22,000 more annually), complete their degrees more often and are more likely to own their own homes. Charter schools are not the only solution, but they are certainly an important part of the solution. There should be nothing controversial about that.

This study sought to better understand life outcomes for Generation Z, a generation that has had access to more options for their public education than any generation before them. They now face a precarious and ever-changing job market, making it even more important to assess how well they are being prepared to succeed after high school. The data show that they are doing well in many respects. But we can create conditions for them to do better.

We must make good on the promise of public education as an opportunity for every child to have the best shot at a successful life. Every young person deserves to graduate equipped to pursue the pathway of their choice. Let's put all good options on the table and stop dumping more money and resources on antiquated models that aren't producing good outcomes. Now that we know better, let's do better.



Methodology

The research was conducted online in the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Agency, Inc. among 5,000 U.S. adults age 18+ who graduated from public (district or charter) high school within the last 10 years. The survey was conducted September 9–22, 2025.

Data are weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, employment, household income and political party affiliation to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within ± 1.9 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

Acknowledgments

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