YOUTH CIVIC EMPOWERMENT

Insights from the Student Experience

America's public schools were founded with a clear mission: to prepare each generation anew for the responsibilities of citizenship. How well are schools fulfilling this mission today? Are students emerging from high school with the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for sustaining and strengthening our democracy?

This report offers insight into the current state of youth civic empowerment. On one hand, it is heartening to see that a large majority of American students are eager to improve their schools, communities, and the world around them, often expressing a willingness to work across differences. Yet, on the other hand there is also a troubling disconnect—students report that their schools are largely failing to equip them with the critical civic skills needed to translate their good intentions into action. This gap leaves many students disempowered, and, in some cases, leads others to reject civic responsibilities entirely. Moreover, the data reveals troubling patterns of inequity in civic readiness, with certain groups of students disproportionately affected.

This report delves into these patterns and outlines the urgent tasks ahead for educators, policymakers, philanthropic funders, and communities. The goal is clear: to ensure that every young person graduates high school not only equipped with the tools to engage in our democracy but also inspired by the promise of America to do so.

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The Civic Empowerment Project

The insights in this report come from the YouthTruth Civic Empowerment Project. During the 2023-2024 school year, we added nine questions to our comprehensive student experience survey, gathering responses from over 115,000 high school students from October to February. These responses highlight which youth are—and are not—civically empowered. We also conducted collaborative workshops with students in Ohio, Texas, and California to engage high school students themselves to better understand whether and how youth are embracing or rejecting their civic responsibilities. (For more details about the sample and our youth-inclusive methodology, see the appendix).

FINDINGS

1
STRONG CIVIC DISPOSITIONS BUT SKILLS LACKING
Most high school students want to help others and work across differences to improve society. However, fewer than half report learning the necessary civic skills in school, and fewer than a third have been empowered to create positive change in their communities.

2
INEQUITABLE CIVIC PREPAREDNESS
Civic readiness is uneven among high school students. Those with parents holding advanced degrees stand out as most civically prepared, while Hispanic/Latinx students are significantly less civically empowered than other racial groups.

3
ONLY HALF AGREE VOTING MATTERS AND DEMOGRAPHICS HIGHLIGHT CIVIC DISPARITIES
Overall, 53 percent of high school students believe that voting is important. School size and location do not significantly affect students' belief in the importance of voting. However, significant differences in this belief exist based on student demographics.

4
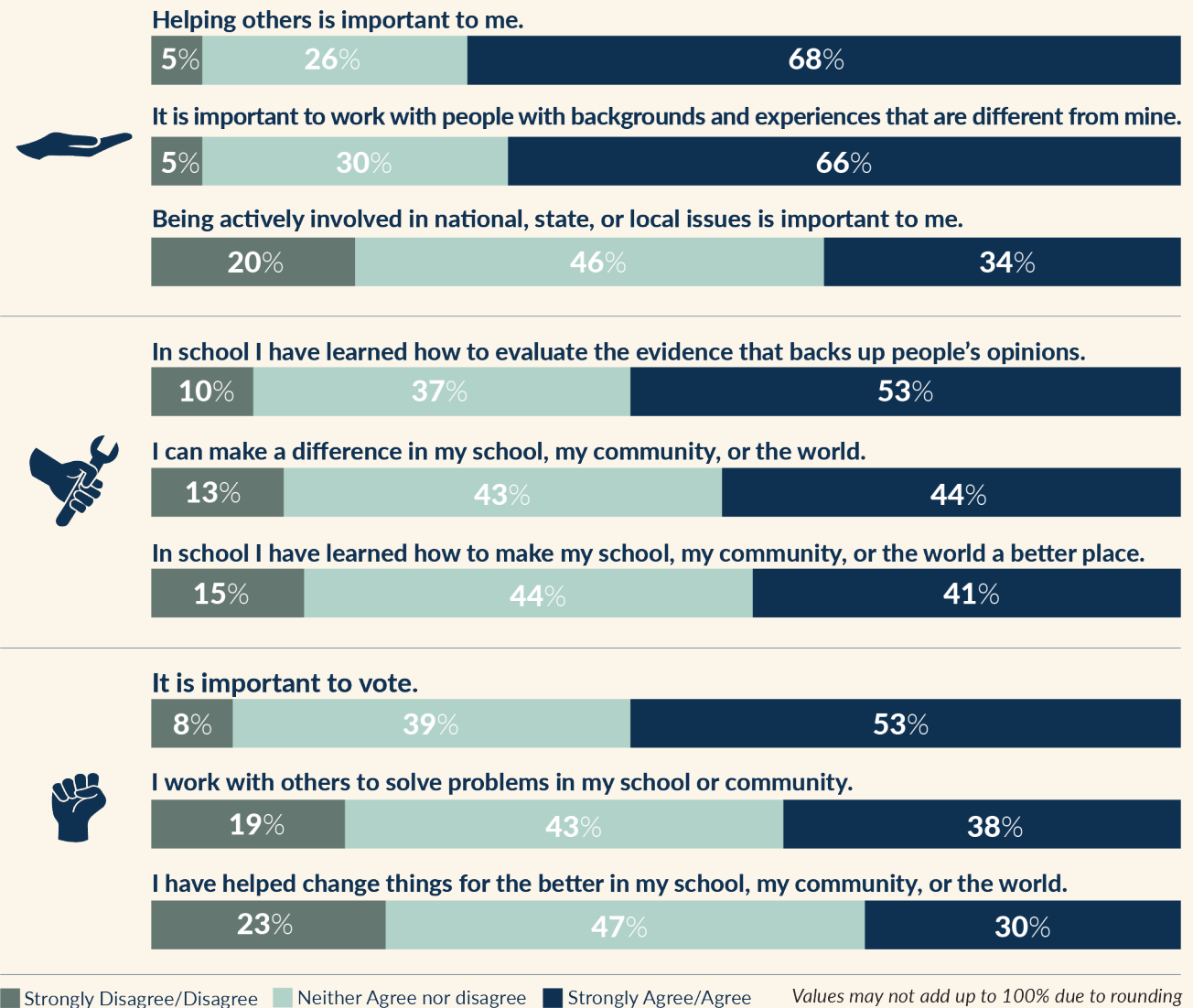### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THRIVES IN EXTRACURRICULARS DESPITE ACADEMIC DISCONNECT
Students describe academic work as disconnected from public life and a barrier to civic engagement, but they find participation in clubs, activities, and sports teams civically empowering.

Definition of Terms

To measure youth civic empowerment, we created survey items in three categories: civic dispositions, civic skills, and civic actions. This framework guided our exploration of young people's sense of responsibility and capability to participate in civic society, and how they are putting these skills into action.

CIVIC DISPOSITIONS
Opinion about community involvement, helping others, and a sense of responsibility to the community.

CIVIC SKILLS
Belief in one's skills and ability to positively impact the broader community or society.

CIVIC ACTIONS
Community-focused actions a young person has taken, intends to take, or is interested in taking.

CIVIC EMPOWERMENT SURVEY ITEMS OVERALL RESPONSE DISTRIBUTIONS

Helping others is important to me.
5% | 26% | 68%

It is important to work with people with backgrounds and experiences that are different from mine.
5% | 30% | 66%

Being actively involved in national, state, or local issues is important to me.
20% | 46% | 34%

In school I have learned how to evaluate the evidence that backs up people's opinions.
10% | 37% | 53%

I can make a difference in my school, my community, or the world.
13% | 43% | 44%

In school I have learned how to make my school, my community, or the world a better place.
15% | 44% | 41%

It is important to vote.
8% | 39% | 53%

I work with others to solve problems in my school or community.
19% | 43% | 38%

I have helped change things for the better in my school, my community, or the world.
23% | 47% | 30%

■ Strongly Disagree/Disagree ■ Neither Agree nor disagree ■ Strongly Agree/Agree   *Values may not add up to 100% due to rounding*
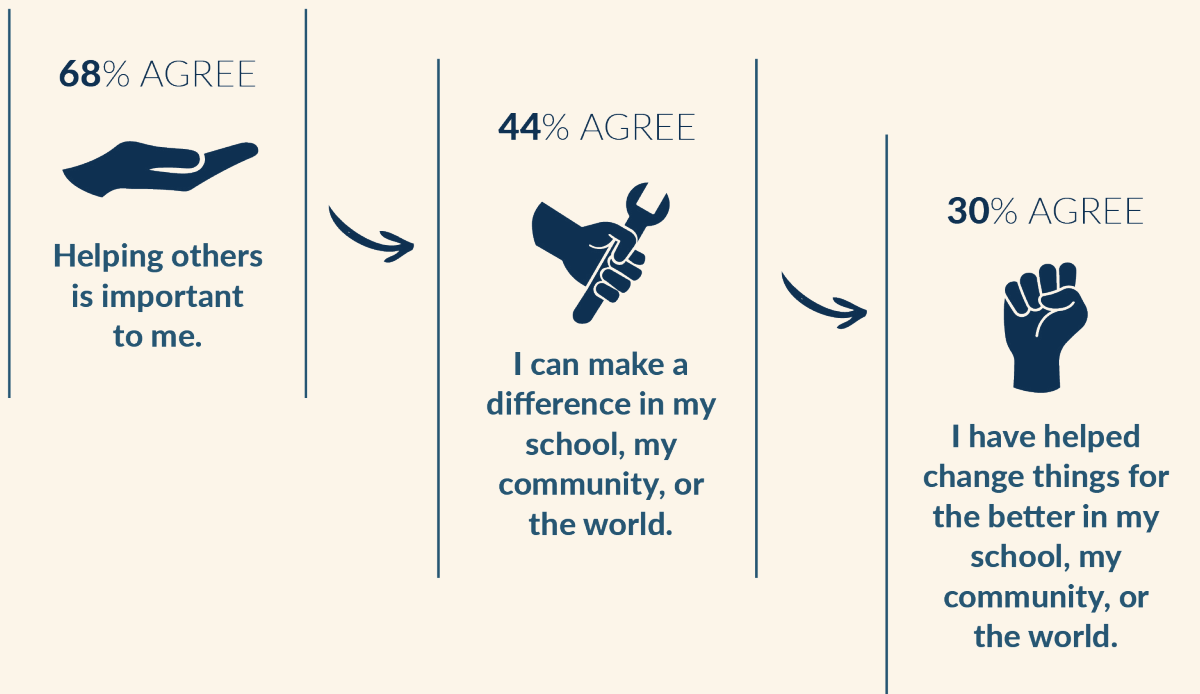
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1 STRONG CIVIC DISPOSITION BUT SKILLS LACKING

Most high school students want to help others and work across differences to improve society. However, fewer than half report learning the necessary civic skills in school, and fewer than a third have been empowered to create positive change in their communities.
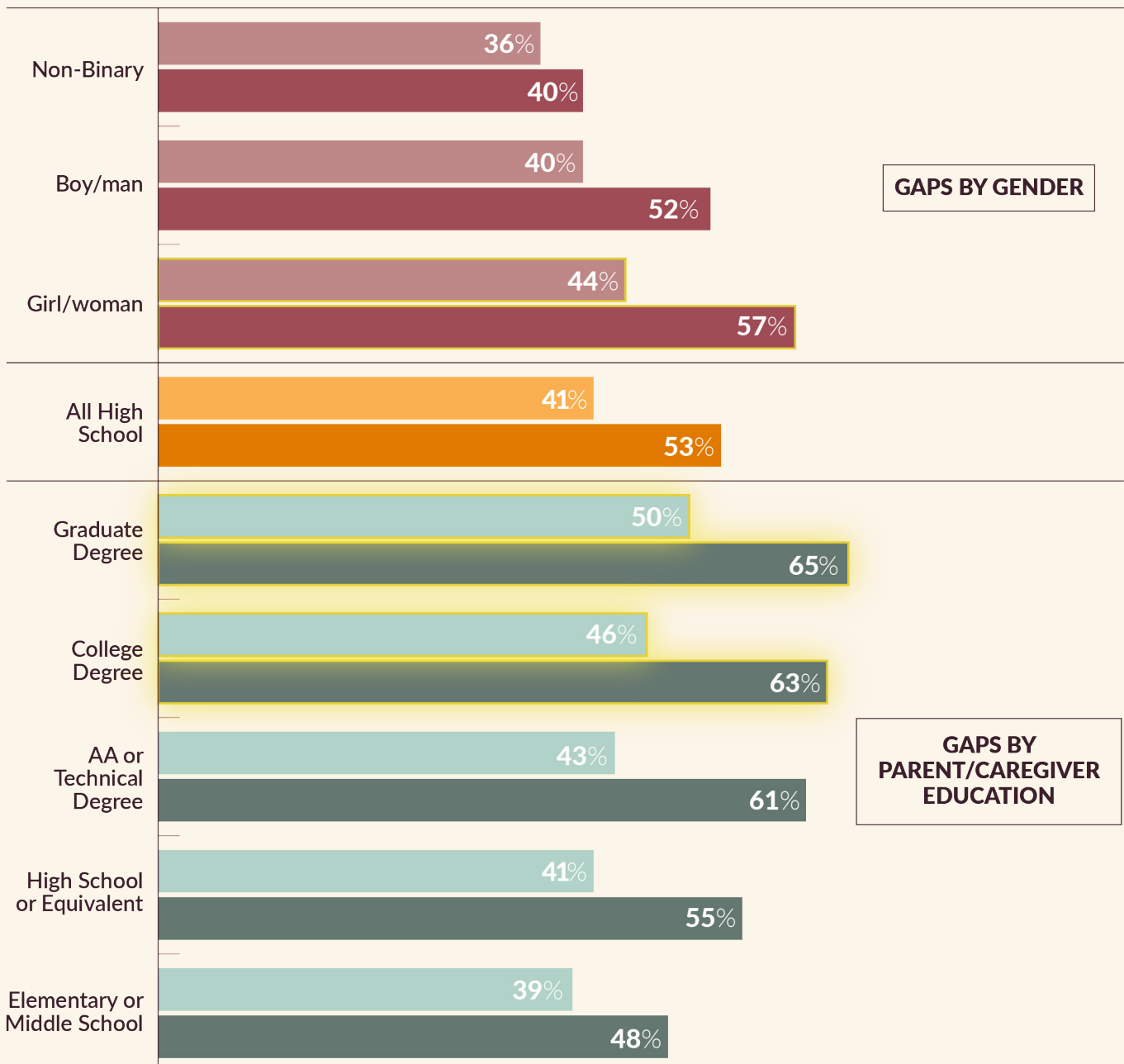
The main thread of our findings is that while high school students possess a strong collective civic disposition, this potential remains largely untapped by schools and communities. A striking majority of students – 68 percent – believe that helping others is important, yet fewer than half—just 44 percent—feel confident in their ability to make a difference. This gap in confidence has real consequences: only 30 percent of students report translating their civic-mindedness into meaningful action. Despite their desire to contribute positively to society, the majority of students find themselves without the skills or support necessary to turn their good intentions into real-world change.

WEAK CIVIC EFFICACY AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

68% AGREE

Helping others is important to me.

44% AGREE

I can make a difference in my school, my community, or the world.

30% AGREE

I have helped change things for the better in my school, my community, or the world.

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When examining student reports on learning key civic skills, we find no significant differences based on school size or location. However, notable skill disparities emerge among different demographic groups. Girls and students whose parents or caregivers hold college or graduate degrees (widely accepted as a proxy for socio-economic status) agree at significantly higher percentages than students overall that they have learned in school how to make a difference in the world and how to evaluate evidence to support an opinion. These findings highlight inequities in civic education, with certain groups of students reporting that they gain more skills in school than others.

GAPS IN CIVIC EDUCATION

GAPS BY GENDER

Non-Binary — 36%, 40%
Boy/man — 40%, 52%
Girl/woman — 44%, 57%

All High School — 41%, 53%

GAPS BY PARENT/CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Graduate Degree — 50%, 65%
College Degree — 46%, 63%
AA or Technical Degree — 43%, 61%
High School or Equivalent — 41%, 55%
Elementary or Middle School — 39%, 48%

Percentage of students who agree that they have learned in school how to make a difference in their school, community, or the world.
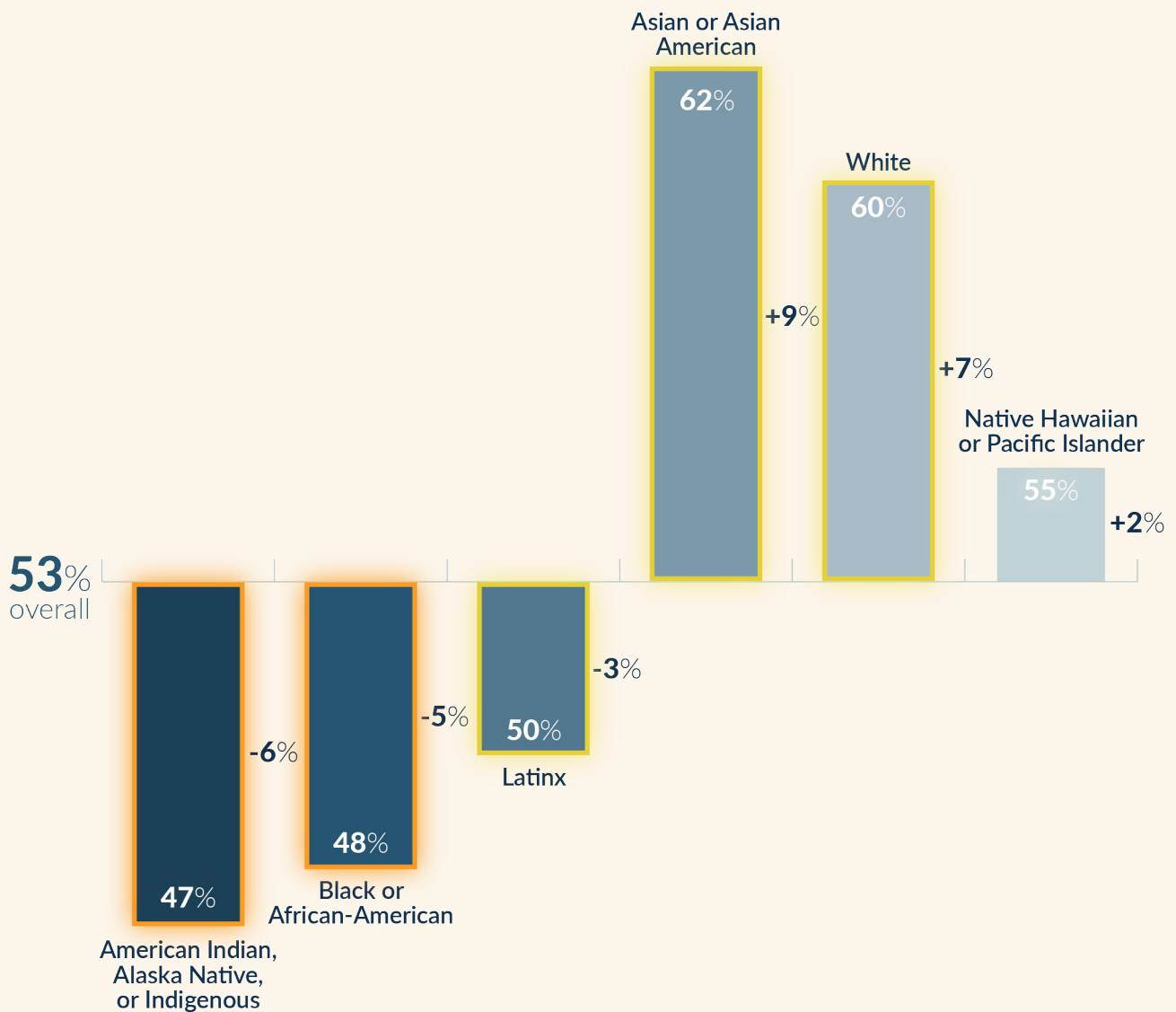
Percentage of students who agree that they have learned in school how to evaluate the evidence that backs up people's opinions.

yellow outline indicates statistical significance.

YT

Inequities in the acquisition of civic skills by race are also evident. White and Asian/Asian-American students report learning to evaluate people's opinions at a significantly higher percentage than their peers overall. In contrast, a lower percentage of Latinx, Black or African-American, and American Indian/Alaskan Native/Indigenous students feel they have gained this essential skill in school. These disparities again underscore the uneven impact of civic education.

LEARNING TO EVALUATE BY RACE

Percentage of students who agree that they have learned in school how to evaluate the evidence that backs up people's opinions

Asian or Asian American
62%

White
60%

+9%

+7%

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
55%

+2%

53%
overall

-3%

-5%

50%
Latinx

-6%

48%
Black or African-American

47%
American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous

*yellow outline indicates statistical significance.
**orange outline indicates p-value is small; however, the effect size does not reach the threshold for statistical significance.*
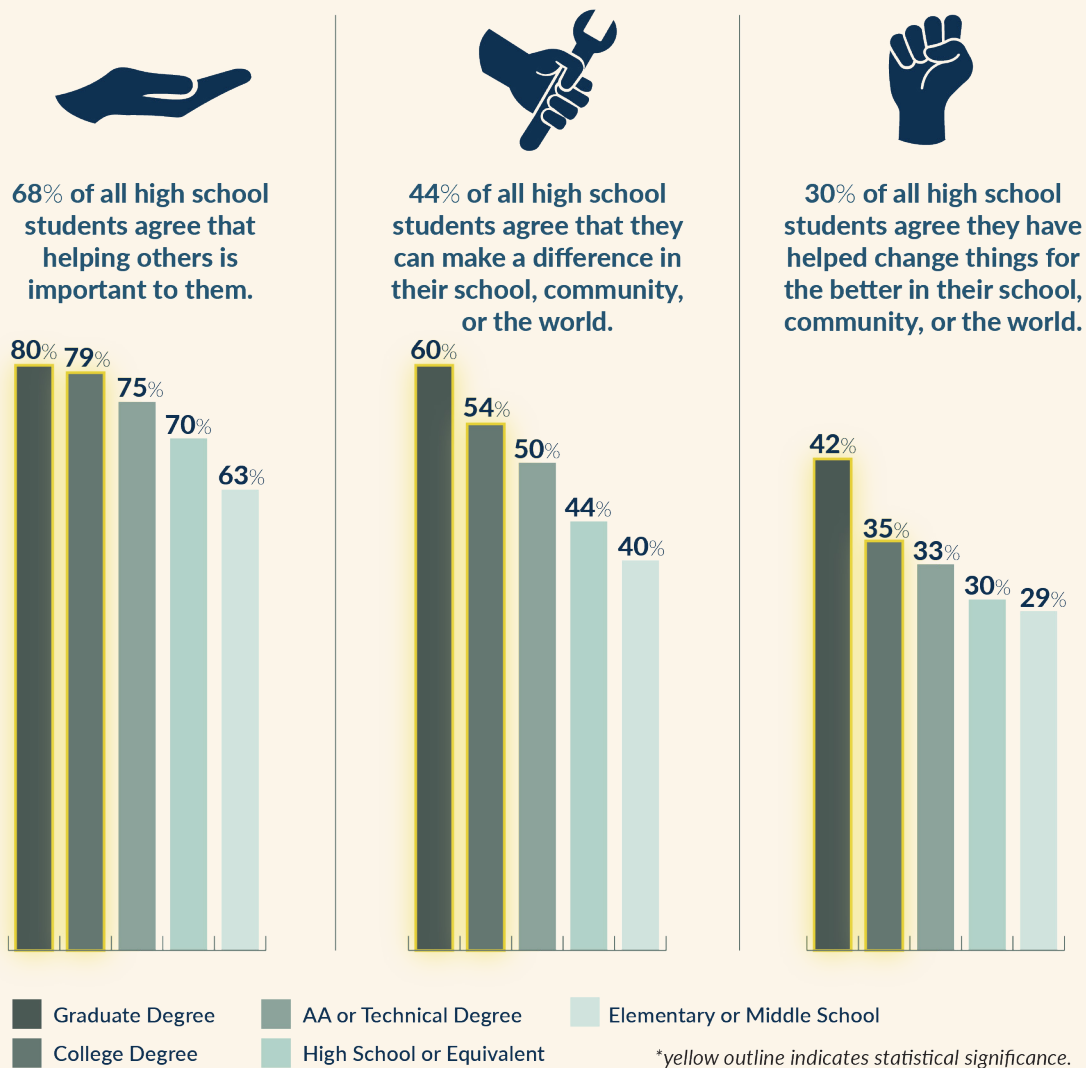
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2 | INEQUITABLE CIVIC PREPAREDNESS

Civic readiness is uneven among high school students. Those with parents holding advanced degrees stand out as most civically prepared, while Hispanic/Latinx students are significantly less civically empowered than other racial groups.
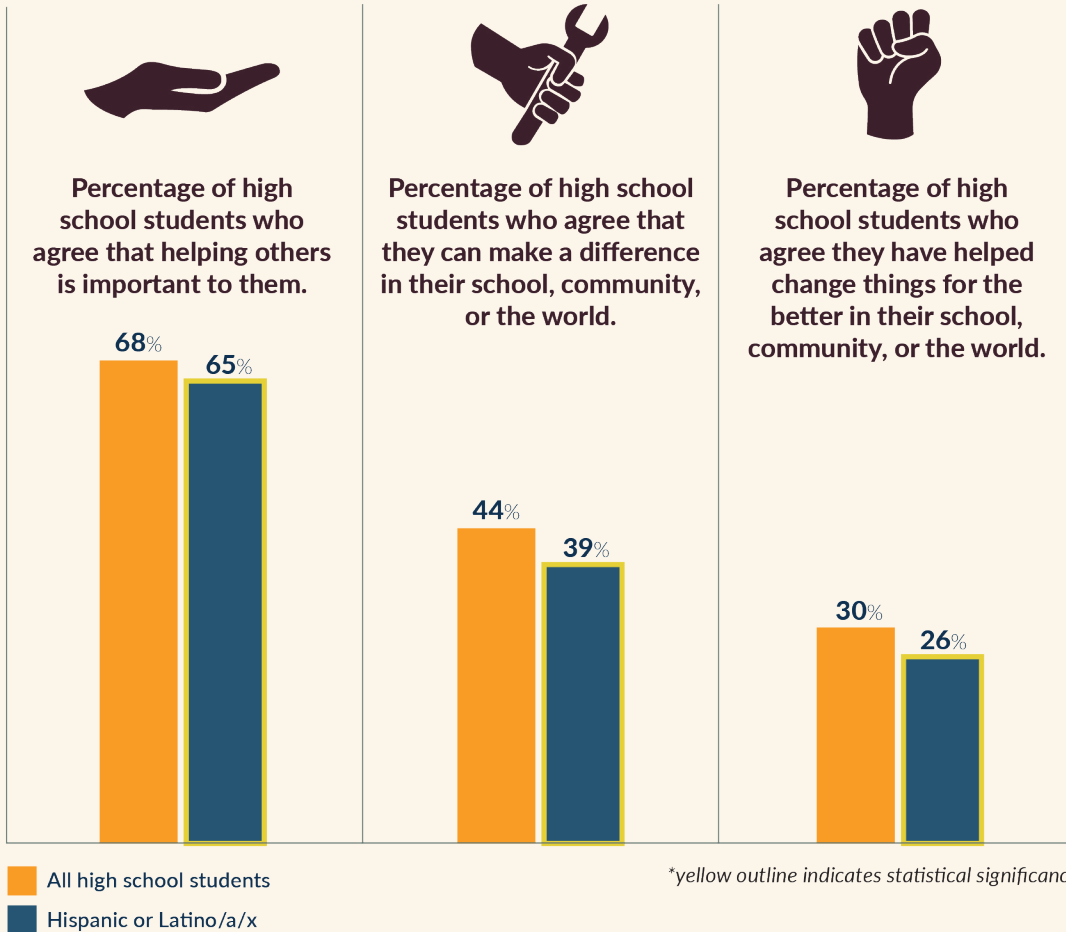
High school students with parents who hold advanced degrees or have completed college are the most civically empowered group. They report stronger collective civic readiness, with significantly higher average responses across all nine survey items compared to the overall student population. Notably, 80 percent of students with the most highly educated parents believe helping others is important, and 60 percent have a solid belief in their ability to effect change. However, despite their advantages, a significant gap between good intentions and action persists. Fewer than half of these students—only 42 percent—report having actually taken civic action, highlighting a broader challenge in turning civic readiness into real-world engagement, even among the most prepared students.

CIVIC READINESS DISPARITIES: HIGHER PARENTAL EDUCATION, HIGHER PREPAREDNESS

68% of all high school students agree that helping others is important to them.

80% 79% 75% 70% 63%

44% of all high school students agree that they can make a difference in their school, community, or the world.

60% 54% 50% 44% 40%

30% of all high school students agree they have helped change things for the better in their school, community, or the world.

42% 35% 33% 30% 29%

Legend:
- Graduate Degree
- College Degree
- AA or Technical Degree
- High School or Equivalent
- Elementary or Middle School

yellow outline indicates statistical significance.

In contrast, Latinx youth are the least civically empowered group among high school students, reporting the weakest collective civic readiness with average responses across eight of the nine survey items that are statistically significantly lower than those of the overall student population. While 65 percent of Latinx students believe helping others is important, only 39 percent feel they can effect change. Furthermore, just one in four Latinx students (26 percent) report having taken civic action – again underscoring the broader challenge of translating civic mindedness into active participation.

LATINX YOUTH: A RISING VOTER BLOCK LEFT BEHIND IN CIVIC READINESS

Percentage of high school students who agree that helping others is important to them.	Percentage of high school students who agree that they can make a difference in their school, community, or the world.	Percentage of high school students who agree they have helped change things for the better in their school, community, or the world.
68% 65%	44% 39%	30% 26%

■ All high school students
■ Hispanic or Latino/a/x

yellow outline indicates statistical significance.

In 2024, Latinx voters will make up nearly 15 percent of the electorate, with 31 percent of this group being among the nation's youngest voters. Despite the significant potential influence of this demographic, Latinx high school students report less civic empowerment than their peers. Fewer than half (46 percent) believe that voting is important, and fewer than a third (30 percent) agree that being involved in national, state, or local issues matters.

LATINX YOUTH: A RISING VOTER BLOCK LEFT BEHIND

46%
OF LATINX STUDENTS believe it is important to vote.

30%
OF LATINX STUDENTS believe it is important to be actively involved in national, state, or local issues.

3 | ONLY HALF AGREE VOTING MATTERS AND DEMOGRAPHICS HIGHLIGHT CIVIC DISPARITIES

Overall, 53 percent of high school students believe that voting is important. School size and location do not significantly affect students' belief in the importance of voting. However, significant differences in this belief exist based on student demographics.

Voting is one of the most important acts of civic engagement, reflecting an individual's belief in their power to create change and their confidence in our political systems. Yet, only a third (34 percent) of high school students believe that being actively involved in civic issues is important, and just over half (53 percent) see voting—the quintessential act of American citizenship—as something that matters.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: ATTITUDES TOWARD VOTING AND CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

53%
OF ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
believe it is important to vote.

34%
OF ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
believe it is important to be actively involved in national, state, or local issues.

YT

High school students' perceptions of voting as important are surprisingly consistent across different school sizes and locales, suggesting that we share a national challenge in educating young people to embrace voting as a key civic responsibility. Whether students attend rural (50 percent), suburban (53 percent), or large city schools (53 percent), only about half view voting as important. This consistency is also evident across students enrolled in both large (53 percent) and small schools (50 percent) who hold a similarly underwhelming collective belief in the importance of voting.

WHEREVER THEY LEARN, ONLY HALF OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS VALUE VOTING

Percentage of high school students who agree that it is important to vote

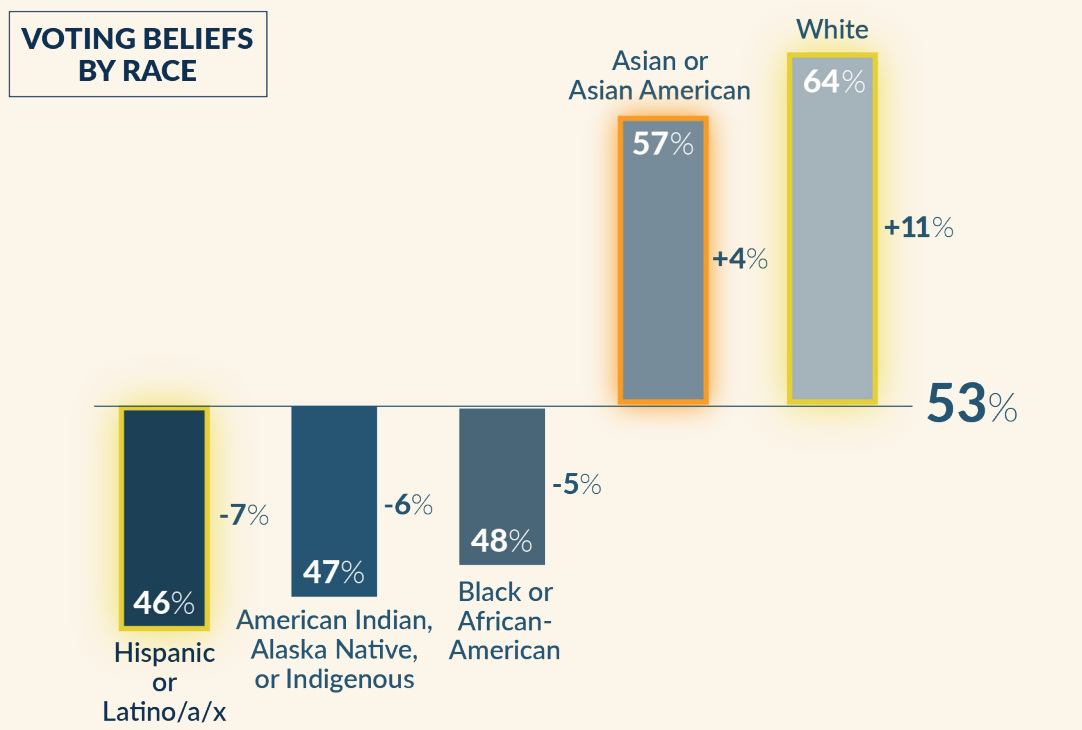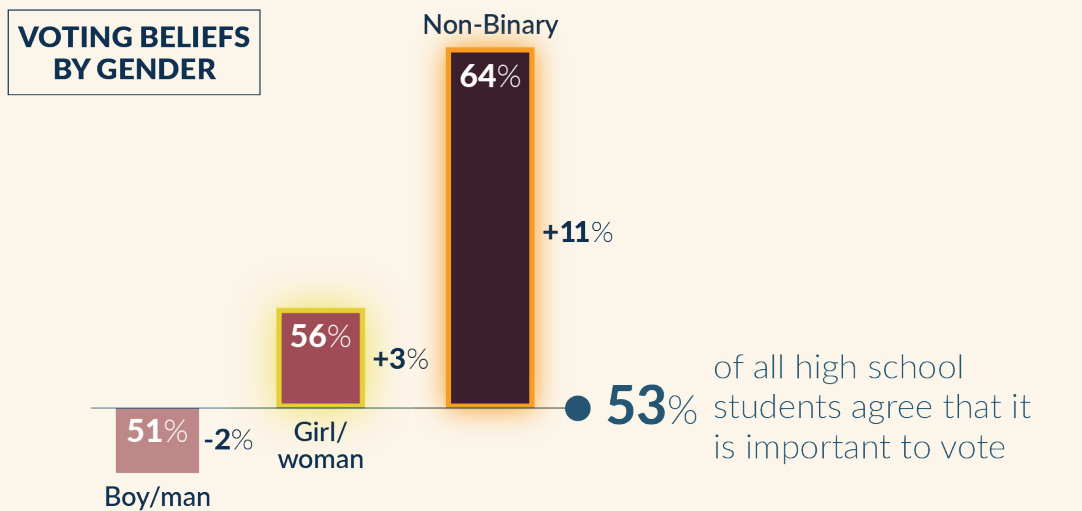| SCHOOL LOCATION					SCHOOL SIZE	
50%	53%	53%	55%	53%	53%	50%
Rural	Suburban	Large City	Small City	All High School Students	Large Schools	Small Schools
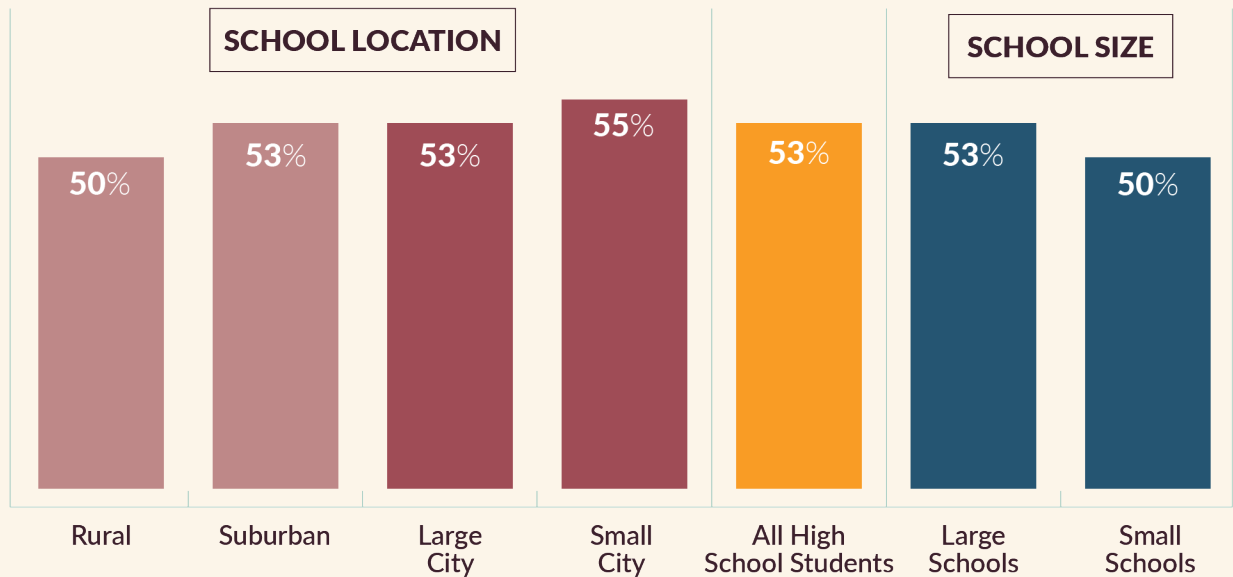
While there are no significant differences in students' views on voting based on school size or location, a clear pattern emerges when we consider voting beliefs by grade level. Overall, 53 percent of high school students view voting as important, but this perspective strengthens over time. By twelfth grade, 60 percent—or six in ten—students see voting as a crucial civic duty. While this increase among twelfth graders is encouraging, the fact that 40 percent still do not see voting as crucial is a concerning reminder that there is more work to be done.

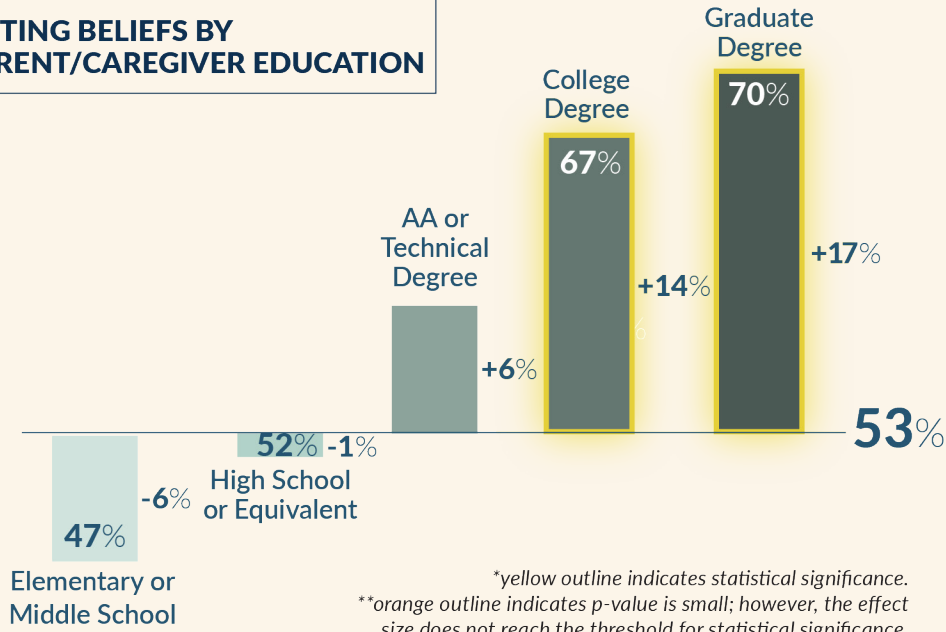## ONLY 6 IN 10 SENIORS SEE VOTING AS IMPORTANT: A CAUSE FOR CONCERN

Significant demographic differences in how students value voting highlight the need for schools to deliver inclusive civic education that reaches and inspires all demographic groups to become voters. While 53 percent of students overall report that voting is important, a larger percentage of non-binary students (64 percent) and girls (56 percent) value voting compared to boys (51 percent). Similarly, a higher percentage of white (64 percent) and Asian/Asian-American students (57 percent) find voting important compared to Black (48 percent) and Latinx students (46 percent). The impact of parental education is also notable: more students whose parents have advanced degrees (70 percent) or completed college (67 percent) view voting as a vital civic responsibility, compared to those whose parents have only completed elementary or middle school (47 percent).

DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDES: THE IMPACT OF GENDER, RACE, AND PARENTAL EDUCATION ON STUDENTS' VOTING BELIEFS

VOTING BELIEFS BY GENDER

Non-Binary
64%
+11%

56% +3%
Girl/woman

51% -2%
Boy/man

● **53**% of all high school students agree that it is important to vote

VOTING BELIEFS BY RACE

Asian or Asian American
57%
+4%

White
64%
+11%

53%

Hispanic or Latino/a/x
46% -7%

American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous
47% -6%

Black or African-American
48% -5%

VOTING BELIEFS BY PARENT/CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Graduate Degree
70%

College Degree
67%

AA or Technical Degree

+17%

+14%

+6%

52% -1%

High School or Equivalent

-6%

47%

Elementary or Middle School

53%

yellow outline indicates statistical significance.
**orange outline indicates p-value is small; however, the effect size does not reach the threshold for statistical significance.*

Youth Perspectives: The Importance (or Not) of Political Involvement

"Feelings of unimportance have stopped me from getting involved. I feel like I have no voice because I'm just a dumb 16-year-old kid who can't even vote yet." —11th grade white girl

"I am a part of Vote 16. I canvassed for lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 in my city." —11th grade Black girl

"I just want to mind my own business. I don't ever want to get involved with politics — it's not like it ever helps. Taking sides is a waste of time." —11th grade Latinx boy

"I help run voter registration every year as a part of student council. I have always believed that it is our right and responsibility to vote." —12th grade white boy

"Even when I talk to family and teachers about things that matter to me, they tell me I can't change things. We live in a world that has too many issues." —10th grade white boy

"My school facilitates involvement with real world issues. We have written letters to world leaders and we are making pamphlets to educate voters on a real proposition. —11th grade multiracial, prefer to self describe

4 | **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT DRIVEN BY EXTRACURRICULARS, UNAFFECTED BY SCHOOL SIZE OR LOCATION**

Students describe academic work as disconnected from public life and a barrier to civic engagement, but they find participation in clubs, activities, and sports teams civically empowering.

As this report has shown, even the most civically minded high school students find it challenging to acquire the skills and opportunities needed to take action. When asked in an open-ended question about what propels or impedes them from engaging in civic action, students identified five main challenges. These diverse barriers paint a complex picture of student engagement, underscoring the need for schools to address these challenges by not only providing explicit civics instruction but also fostering a culture that values youth voice and participation.

STUDENT BARRIERS TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

FEELINGS OF POWERLESSNESS & LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES	A sense that their actions will not make a difference, combined with a shortage of opportunities to participate, leave students feeling disengaged, uninspired, and disempowered.
ACADEMIC & TIME CONSTRAINTS	The demands of schoolwork, college applications, and packed schedules leave students little room for civic engagement.
PEER PRESSURE & SOCIAL SKILLS	Fear of judgment, lack of confidence in social interactions, and the threat of bullying all deter students from getting involved.
FAMILY & FINANCIAL ISSUES	Family problems, language barriers, and economic challenges overshadow the ability to participate in civic activities.
HEALTH & EMOTIONAL BARRIERS	Issues like insomnia and emotional hurdles, such as fear of failure and anxiety, affect students' capacity to engage in activism.

In their open-ended responses, students conveyed that the intense focus on academics and individual achievement leads them to see their primary responsibility as excelling in coursework, while civic engagement is viewed as "not my job." To many, school is about solely academic success rather than learning to be an engaged citizen. In stark contrast, students enthusiastically described clubs and sports as vital for enhancing their civic-mindedness and offering them opportunities to take action that contributes to their community. They highlighted three key benefits that clubs provide for fostering their sense of civic identity and involvement:

STUDENT EXPLANATIONS OF EXTRACURRICULAR BENEFITS

BELONGING & CAMARADERIE	Clubs and sports foster a sense of belonging and counter feelings of powerlessness by providing students with tools and opportunities to make a change. The camaraderie within these groups not only inspires students but also encourages them to extend their civic engagement through volunteer activities beyond the school environment.
PEER MOTIVATION & RECIPROCITY	Membership in a club or sports team instills a sense of responsibility and reciprocity in students, motivating them to manage their time effectively and overcome personal challenges to meet their commitments to the group.
LEARNING TO LEAD	Participation in clubs and sports teams offers practical experiences that help students develop confidence and leadership skills. These activities equip students with civic skills, the ability to lead initiatives and influence others within their schools and communities.

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Conclusion: Students' Advice on Civic Empowerment

While the data presented raises concerns about our civic health and the effectiveness of American high schools in educating engaged citizens, the contributions of the students who provided insights into these findings and the factors influencing their civic empowerment are inspiring. As these young people helped us to understand, interpreting this data as merely indicative of youth apathy would be simplistic. A more accurate response would be for adults—especially those with the authority to improve civic education—to listen attentively to the nuances of students' experiences to guide the creation of systems that empower all youth, equipping them with the dispositions, skills, and opportunities needed to positively impact their schools, communities, and our world.

As we concluded each student workshop for this project, we gave students the opportunity to have the final word in this report, offering advice to adults on how they can empower young people. We hope their advice inspires you to take action.

> " You are a role model to the people you encounter in your day to day life. Uplift young people's voices, educate them on their rights. "

> " In order to support young people to become more civically empowered, y'all need to make the information more engaging towards our generation, while keeping it short and brief.

> " Include kids in political environments that allow them to gain an understanding and let them voice their opinions. "

> " Have young people actually use their voice. Tell them they can be heard and there are others who think like them, that they are not alone. "

> " To support young people to be more empowered adults should get more engaged with the kids, and let them know no matter their age, kids can be heard and they will be!
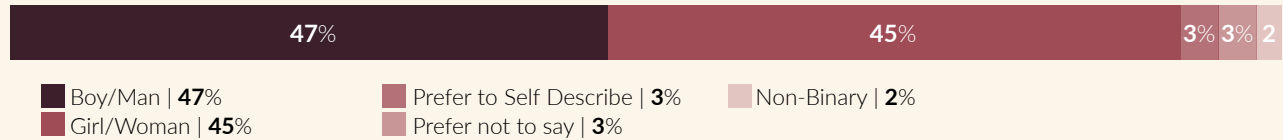
> " Tell students how important it is to vote. Give them space and attention to speak out against things they feel are unjust.

> " Provide adequate resources to students so they know the importance of standing up for what they believe in while knowing exactly how to. Students just need to know how to start. "

> " I think that we should be taught how to effectively protest or petition things so we will have a basic understanding about how to fight against what is wrong. "

> " There should be some kind of club, class, or opportunity to show and educate young people on how they are important to the community and the world even if it doesn't feel like it. "

> " Educating students on things like the ability to go to school board meetings is important so that young people know what they can do. "
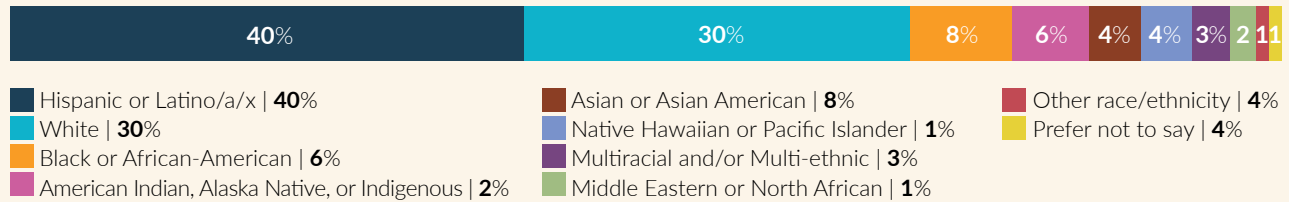
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APPENDIX

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The insights shared in this report are based on data collected from October 2024 through February 2025 from 115,473 high school students from 188 schools in 69 districts across 12 states: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maine, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington.
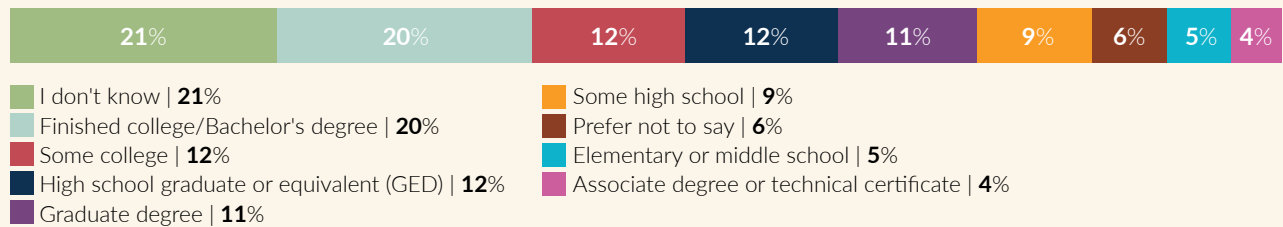

GENDER OF RESPONDENTS

47%	45%	3%	3%	2

- Boy/Man | **47**%
- Girl/Woman | **45**%
- Prefer to Self Describe | **3**%
- Prefer not to say | **3**%
- Non-Binary | **2**%

RACE OF RESPONDENTS

40%	30%	8%	6%	4%	4%	3%	2	1	1

- Hispanic or Latino/a/x | **40**%
- White | **30**%
- Black or African-American | **6**%
- American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous | **2**%
- Asian or Asian American | **8**%
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | **1**%
- Multiracial and/or Multi-ethnic | **3**%
- Middle Eastern or North African | **1**%
- Other race/ethnicity | **4**%
- Prefer not to say | **4**%

CAREGIVER'S EDUCATION LEVEL

21%	20%	12%	12%	11%	9%	6%	5%	4%

- I don't know | **21**%
- Finished college/Bachelor's degree | **20**%
- Some college | **12**%
- High school graduate or equivalent (GED) | **12**%
- Graduate degree | **11**%
- Some high school | **9**%
- Prefer not to say | **6**%
- Elementary or middle school | **5**%
- Associate degree or technical certificate | **4**%

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES

The quantitative survey data were examined using descriptive statistics and a combination of independent chi-square tests, phi effect size, and weighted ordinal regression. For comparisons among subgroups, chi-squared tests were conducted. An alpha level of .05 was used to determine statistical significance, and effect sizes were examined for all analyses. Only analyses with at least a small effect size are reported.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSES

Before inputting students' open-ended responses into the research tool used for this project (CANVS AI) the data were cleaned using a script to remove empty, very short (less than five words), and nonsensical responses. In student voice workshops in Texas and California students worked in groups to review and refine a preliminary set of codes derived from their own districts' qualitative data, checking preliminary insights from our own analyses. Informed by the outputs of this student-inclusive process, we then developed the analytic prompts that were used to generate insight from the open-ended responses from 53,917 students using CANVS AI.

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