GENYOUth INSIGHTS | SPRING 2026

Present, Engaged, and Thriving:
The Power of a Wellness Culture in Schools

Chronic absenteeism and student disengagement are straining school communities and limiting opportunities for students nationwide. Yet students themselves are pointing the way forward—showing that when schools strengthen connection, belonging, and access to supportive resources, attendance and engagement improve in meaningful ways.

More than one in four students is chronically absent from U.S. schools. It's a crisis that peaked during the pandemic and persists with levels that remain significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. Widespread student disengagement in school and a lack of optimism for the future are related concerns. Education leaders are urgently working to find solutions to these dire issues.

What's at risk? Students' academic success and long-term life outcomes, community well-being, and financial and performance implications for school districts. Simply put, every empty classroom seat represents a loss in school district funding and academic performance.

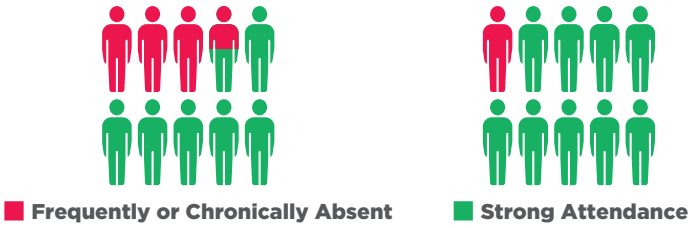
For decades, educators and community partners have championed student wellness—expanding access to school meals, creating opportunities for physical activity, and building supportive environments where students can thrive. What's different, and urgent, about this moment is a growing recognition that **school culture, student wellness, and student attendance are deeply connected.**

What Youth Are Telling Us!

GENYOUth Insights reveal:

Build a Culture of Wellness. Better Attendance Follows.

Students experiencing a weak culture of wellness at their school are more than 3 times as likely to be frequently or chronically absent vs. those with a strong culture of wellness experience.



Student-centered cultures of wellness in schools prioritize:

Physical Health and Nutrition
Connectedness and Belonging
Mental and Emotional Well-Being
Academic Motivation, Engagement, and Optimism

Culture of wellness strength is based on students' reported experience of key wellness conditions at their school. A strong culture of wellness means students reported consistently positive wellness conditions at school, while a weak culture of wellness means students reported relatively few positive wellness conditions at school.

Source: GENYOUth

Today's students have a strong sense of responsibility for their health and wellness. We know because we ask them. **GENYOUth INSIGHTS** elevates youth voice through original, timely research on topics that matter to students and to healthy, high-achieving schools.

This report was produced in counsel with David Bersofff, PhD, Head of Research at the Edelman Trust Institute, and Maria Slabaugh, President, MMS Education.

Yet too often, young people's perspectives on these interconnected issues are absent from the conversation. In Fall 2025, GENYOUth conducted a national survey to better understand how students experience the school day—what fosters a sense of connection, what drives disconnection, and how these experiences influence attendance, engagement, and optimism about the future.

Survey results show that students attend and engage more fully when they feel respected and included, are well nourished, and have regular opportunities for movement throughout the school day. These are not extras—they are foundational to a strong culture of wellness. Yet most students today do not experience such a culture at school.

Instead of focusing solely on improving attendance, we should ask what makes a school feel genuinely rewarding—a place students want to be and a community they feel part of. A culture of wellness can provide the motivation students need to show up each day. Encouragingly, many schools are finding that simple, low-effort wellness practices can meaningfully boost attendance, engagement, and connection.

Chronic Absenteeism: What's at Stake?

Chronic absenteeism is one of the most pressing challenges facing schools today—regardless of geography, income, race, and school type. What was once viewed as a concentrated issue in specific communities has become a widespread and systemic disruption to student success.

The scale and urgency of the problem demand not only attention, but new thinking.

ALARMING SCALE AND SCOPE.

There are about 48 million public school students, from kindergarten through 12th grade. Almost one in four, or 11 million students, are **missing** at least 10 percent of school. It's an issue that affects all types of school communities—urban, rural, affluent, and low-income. While the chronic absenteeism rate is highest among students in low-income districts, where 30 percent of students are chronically absent, the rates have jumped in low-poverty and high-achieving districts as well, affecting more than 15 percent of students.

DEFINITIONS

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason. The GENYOUth survey asked students to reflect on the most recently completed semester (half a school year), and results have been annualized to be equivalent to a full school year for comparison purposes. Survey findings report frequent and chronic absence using this full-year equivalent framework, defined as missing 9 or more full days, or missing 5–8 full days plus at least one half day.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: WHY IT MATTERS

STUDENT SUCCESS. Students who aren't attending school or are disengaged when they do attend are far less likely to learn, progress academically, and develop the social and emotional skills they need.

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING. Students who miss school lose access to school meals (especially important for children living with food insecurity), physical activity opportunities, and school-based health and counseling services.

GRADUATION AND LIFETIME EARNINGS. Chronic absenteeism is one of the strongest predictors of dropping out. Students who don't graduate face lower lifetime earnings and an increased likelihood of poverty.

SCHOOL FUNDING. Public school districts receive less funding when students aren't in school. High absenteeism can also lower school performance ratings, increase teacher workload, and disrupt learning for all students.

FIXABLE. Although it's a complex problem, many drivers of absenteeism can be addressed through school environment changes and coordination between schools, families, and communities.

Everybody wins when we reduce school absenteeism. We strengthen student outcomes, health, workforce readiness, and community resilience.

Learn more at attendanceworks.org.

UNCOVERED SOLUTIONS.

Chronic absenteeism has grown from a localized issue managed by individual schools and districts into a national crisis that commands the attention of local, state, and federal leaders to address the problem.

Traditionally, chronic absenteeism has been treated as an educational compliance issue, a matter of tracking, intervention, and enforcement. Today, educators, policymakers, and community leaders are seeking ways to improve attendance through sustainable, student-centered approaches grounded in the school-day experience. It's about creating conditions where students can succeed—and ensuring that every child has a fair chance to build a stable, healthy, and economically secure future.

Wellness practices in schools are under-leveraged solutions that can help.

"In many parts of the country, student proficiency is declining, and the instinctive response is to add more instructional time and more academic demands. While that may produce short-term gains, it often leads to diminishing returns and can ultimately undermine long-term student success. A more sustainable approach is to build a culture of wellness—one that not only brings students through the door, but keeps them engaged, supported, and positioned to thrive."

John Spatz, Executive Director
Nebraska Association of School Boards

Wellness Culture and School Attendance: Mutually Reinforcing

For more than two decades, schools, districts, and communities across the nation advanced efforts to foster environments that support student health and well-being. During this time, a growing body of research has reinforced the strong connection between health and learning.

Among the various school wellness approaches and frameworks—such as "whole child," "coordinated school health," "community schools," "supportive school climate," and "integrated student supports"—there is broad alignment around the importance of a holistic, system-wide approach in which health, learning, and well-being are woven into every aspect of school life.

NEW INSIGHT.

GENYOUth's national youth survey brings new insight into how student-centered wellness practices in schools specifically relate to chronic absenteeism. Survey findings point to **seven key wellness factors** that matter most for school attendance (see below).

What Youth Are Telling Us!

GENYOUth Insights reveal:

School Attendance: 7 Wellness Factors that Matter Most

Size of circle represents the strength of each factor's positive correlation with attendance levels, based on student responses to a series of questions about how they experience a culture of wellness at their school.

Together, these factors form the basis of a culture of wellness in K-12 schools where health, learning, belonging, and *attendance* are mutually reinforcing. Schools embracing this culture embed wellness into the curriculum, climate, and programs.

Yet, **cultures of wellness in schools are far from universal**. In fact, survey results reveal that fewer than one in three students (29%) experiences a strong culture of wellness at school (see pie chart at right). And students who experience a weak culture of wellness are more than three times as likely to be frequently or chronically absent than those who experience a strong culture of wellness (see data graphic on page 1).

"A lot of my friends fit the mark of chronic absenteeism. School kind of feels like a chore for them. It's constantly more assignments. There aren't really resources to help navigate that load of schoolwork, and it gets to the point where there's no time for socializing with friends." High School Student, 11th grade, MN

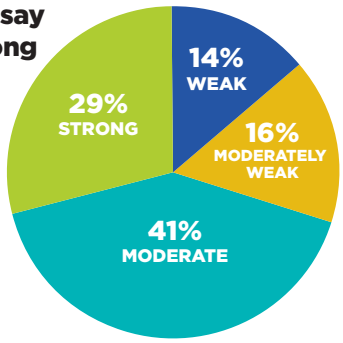
What Youth Are Telling Us!

GENYOUth Insights reveal:

Too Few Students Experience a Culture of Wellness at School

Only 29% of students say they experience a strong culture of wellness at their school.

Another 30% experience a weak or moderately weak culture of wellness.



Results are consistent across geographic regions, school settings, student race/ethnicities, and socioeconomic levels.

Culture of wellness strength was derived from student responses to a series of questions related to how they experience a culture of wellness at their school.

School Wellness Trends, Insights, and Student-Centered Solutions

Since 2010, GENYOUth has documented school wellness trends and opportunities through ground-breaking reports and youth insights surveys.

The 2020 GENYOUth report, ***Healthier School Communities***, identified key priorities that remain essential today to ensure every U.S. student can reach their full academic potential and lead a healthy life. It underscores that investing in youth health and well-being—through a holistic focus on cognitive, physical, and emotional development—delivers lifelong benefits for children, their families, communities, and society.

The report also highlights the critical role of school meal programs, particularly universal breakfast and lunch, as child hunger and food insecurity continue to affect students nationwide. In addition, it reinforces the importance of regular physical activity—including physical education, recess, and classroom movement breaks—in supporting both learning and overall well-being.

More recent GENYOUth research builds on this foundation by elevating youth perspectives and translating them into practical, student-centered solutions.

- A 2025 youth survey report, ***Fueled by Students: Unlocking the Full Potential of School Meals***, explores the "why" behind students' eating behaviors, nutritional knowledge, and overall school meal experience. Findings highlight a major opportunity to enhance the impact of school meals by offering more culturally diverse options—while also providing students with opportunities for input on school menus.
- ***Shaping the Future of Physical Activity and P.E.***, a 2024 youth survey report, examines the youth inactivity crisis and the role schools can play in reversing it. Key insights: fun is fundamental to participation in P.E.; students want activities that are enjoyable and social. They also seek a judgment-free, supportive environment that meets them where they are in terms of skill level and body confidence.

Recent work by others, such as ***A Whole School, Whole Community***, ***Whole Child Approach***, and ***Building Healthier Futures: Transforming School Environments***, also documents the impact of multi-component school strategies (policy, environmental, and programmatic) on student well-being and success.

What Students Say About Fixing Chronic Absenteeism

When students talk about what makes them want to come to school, they rarely begin with rules, policies, or consequences. They begin with people. With connection. With how school feels and how they feel when they enjoy being at school. The most consistent message from the GENYOUth youth survey is that attendance is fundamentally relational.

A PLACE STUDENTS WANT TO BE.

Among the seven school wellness factors that correlate most with school attendance (see page 3), those related to belonging, community, friendships, and opportunities to socialize are at the top of the hierarchy. Students describe school as a place where they show up not only for academic learning, but for human connection. Feeling known. Getting included. Being part of something larger than themselves. When students experience authentic belonging—when they have friends, social identity, and a sense of shared community—attendance becomes a natural practice rather than a forced behavior.

Positive and consistent adult relationships also matter. Students value teachers and staff who notice them, support them, and listen to their voices. Having trusted classroom teachers is crucial for all students, and those with strong attendance are much more likely than others also to note the importance of P.E. teachers and coaches as trusted adults in their lives.

The ability to be socially vulnerable—to express oneself, to make mistakes, to ask for help—emerges as an important layer of wellness culture. It signals trust, and trust strengthens connection. Experiences like these directly correlate with attendance (see graphic below).

What Youth Are Telling Us!

GENYOUth Insights reveal:

Student Experiences that Drive Stronger Attendance

Among the positive student experiences at school that most strongly correlate with attendance are the following:

BELONGING
- Feeling welcome at school
- Feeling part of the school community
- Having teachers who treat students fairly
- Feeling close to people at school
- Feeling that you matter to others

FRIENDS & SOCIALIZING
- Feeling connected to friends at school

SCHOOL MEALS
- Looking forward to school meals
- Considering school meals to be a positive experience on most days

ADULT CONNECTIONS
- Feeling listened to by adults
- Getting help or support from adults when needed
- Getting positive encouragement from adults
- Feeling like adults care about and believe in you

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
- Having time to socialize with friends during P.E. class
- Having enjoyable physical activity opportunities at school
- Having a caring P.E. teacher
- Playing on a school sports team at least a few times a week

Conversely, social vulnerability factors most strongly associated with absenteeism include:

- Feeling like no one cares whether or not you show up at school
- Feeling like you can't sit still in school all day
- Skipping breakfast at home or school often

MAKING SCHOOL BETTER: SPORT, PHYSICAL EDUCATION, AND SCHOOL MEAL EXPERIENCES.

Opportunities for sport and physical activity are powerful contributors to student engagement and attendance. Students consistently report that being active improves their mood, boosts energy, and enhances their overall school experience. For many, the chance to move is a key motivator to attend school—and it directly supports focus and engagement in the classroom.

School meals are equally critical. For students—especially those facing food insecurity—reliable access to nutritious meals is essential. Beyond meeting basic needs, school meals improve concentration, support readiness to learn, and create opportunities for social connection and a sense of belonging.

Bottom line: Access to physical activity and nutritious meals strengthens the overall wellness environment, helping motivate students to attend and fully engage in school (see graphic below).

OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE.

The survey found a strong link between a school's culture of wellness and students' optimism, engagement, and confidence in their future after high school.

In addition to highlighting key attendance factors, the results show that when students feel supported and valued in the present, they are far more likely to imagine positive futures for themselves—and to actively work toward success in school and beyond (see bar chart on page 7).

For districts aiming to cultivate confident, motivated, and optimistic young people, investing in a strong culture of wellness can have a meaningful and lasting impact on these outcomes.

What Youth Are Telling Us!

GENYOUth Insights reveal:

School Meals and Physical Activity Increase School Engagement and...

...motivate kids to come to school.*

2 out of 3 students with strong attendance say that **access to physical activity makes them want to come to school each day.**

...make the school day better.**

9 out of 10 students with strong attendance say that **participating in school breakfast and school lunch makes the whole day better.**

More than half (51%) of students with strong attendance **say eating school breakfast improves...***

...focus

...academic performance

...mental well-being

* Based on qualitative responses from youth.
**Based on responses from students who "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" with the statement.

Source: GENYOUth

"I love breakfast at school. It makes me feel happy. I love to eat with my friends."

Middle School Student
8th grade, CA

"Being active at school gives me a break from the constant workload and allows my mind to reset."

High School Student
10th grade, TX

"What matters to me are sports, free meals, and my friends being there."

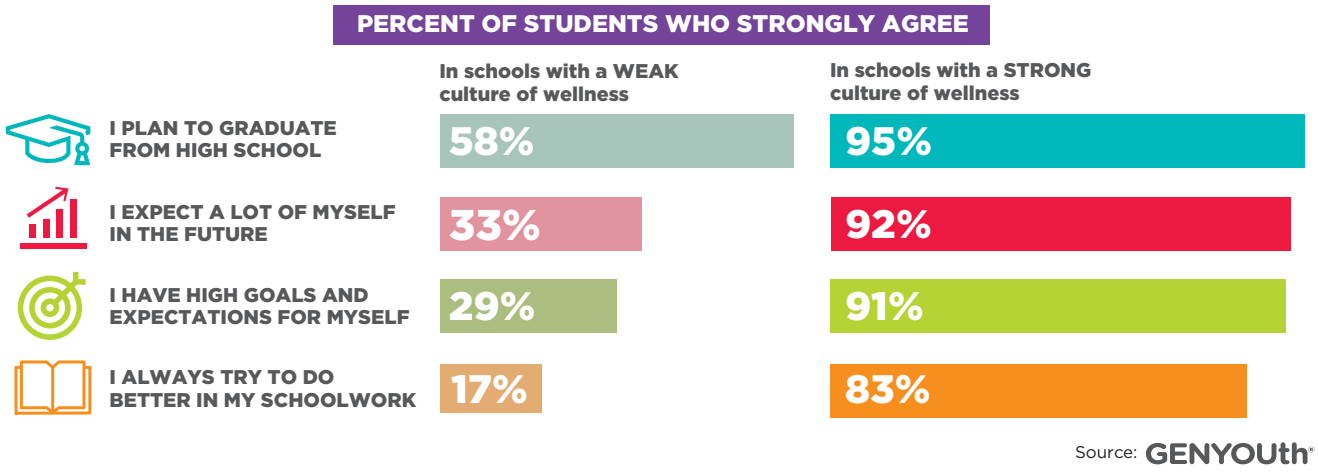
Middle School Student
7th grade, PA

What Youth Are Telling Us!

GENYOUth Insights reveal:

Engaged, Goal-Oriented, and Future-Focused

Students in schools with a strong culture of wellness are 2 to 4 times more likely to report positive future expectations.



Source: GENYOUth

WHEN I HEAR THE TERM "CULTURE OF WELLNESS" IT MEANS...

"Everyone is included, no matter who they are or their economic situation."
Middle School Student, 8th grade, KY

"Teachers check in on how we're doing."
High School Student, 9th grade, FL

"Proper eating. I feel healthy when I eat healthy."
Middle School Student, 8th grade, NY

"More cultural and sports activities that motivate me to attend school more often than now."
"High School Student, 11th grade, OR

"Giving students more of a voice in decisions made about students."
High School Student, 11th grade, LA

"Offering more mental health support, like counselors we can talk to easily, and more time to relax or de-stress during the day."
High School Student, 9th grade, FL

Getting It Right

FOR THE WIN: BURKE COUNTY, GEORGIA

One of the most dramatic culture of wellness impact stories I know was with our football team. Our coach came to me and said that our team had been told by a physician that they were malnourished. Despite training, they weren't gaining muscle, they were tired during practice, and it was attributed to a poor diet. We were able to get funding to start a training-table supper program. It had an amazing effect on morale, let alone nutrition, and the team ended up having dinner together each night. When they won the state championship, the school **credited the school nutrition program for the win**. But my satisfaction was the supportive environment we'd created. It wasn't just about eating better, it was the camaraderie, fellowship, and togetherness that the nightly meal created and that the kids looked forward to as much as the game. If that isn't a culture of wellness, I don't know what is.

DONNA MARTIN
Past President, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics; Former School Nutrition Director; GENYOUth Board Member

A REASON TO COME TO SCHOOL: MIAMI-DADE, FLORIDA

I developed special-interest academies in our district, in areas like sports marketing, sports medicine, and sports management, to give students more than just a schedule of classes—I wanted to give them a reason to be there. These **academies create smaller communities within the larger school**, organized around shared interests. What we saw was powerful. When students felt that school reflected their interests and aspirations, their engagement increased. Attendance improved not because of mandates or consequences, but because students wanted to be there. They had a place to go, peers who shared their passions, and adults who supported their goals. Students are more likely to show up when school feels meaningful to them. Creating structures that reflect student voice can transform the school experience.

JAYNE GREENBERG
Former District Director, P.E. and Health Literacy, Miami-Dade County Public Schools (FL); International Sport and Culture Association

RELATIONSHIPS DRIVE ATTENDANCE: RALSTON, NEBRASKA

Our attendance went off the deep end during COVID, and we've struggled to build it back up. What we've learned is that yes, it's all about the culture of wellness, but that **culture is about relationships**. We've invested time and training in making sure that every interaction with a student on the part of everyone in the school building is positive and supportive—principals, teachers, bus drivers, nutrition personnel, everyone. They're all cheerleaders for attendance, and you'll hear them say to kids throughout the day, "I miss you when you're not here, glad to see you're in school today." It's always intentional, and never accusatory. You've got to think of things that can help students be there. Flat tire on the car that a family can't afford to fix? We've set up an emergency fund. No transportation at all? We'll arrange pickup or hook you up with a carpool. A lot of it is common sense. But it's got to be granular, and it's got to be partnership, not punishment.

JASON BUCKINGHAM
Superintendent, Ralston Public Schools (NE)

Actionable, Wellness-Focused Pathways

Youth survey findings offer clarity and direction. Students are telling us that wellness practices are not "extras." They are essential. Attendance improves when school feels like a place of connection, security, and support. This insight offers practitioners a roadmap for addressing one of the most pressing challenges facing education today.

A NEW LENS.

At a time when chronic absenteeism is undermining both immediate learning and long-term life outcomes, reframing attendance as inseparable from a school's culture of wellness opens a more powerful lens—and new possibilities for change. By centering student voice, GENYOUth aims to shift the conversation from simply diagnosing the problem to building durable solutions grounded in how young people truly experience school.

Happily, what emerges is not a portrait of inevitability, but of fixability—actionable wellness-focused pathways that can help schools strengthen student attendance, well-being, and success.

Who Can Help and How

Let's work together to build school environments that reinforce a strong culture of wellness.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP CAN:

- Set a tone that attendance equals belonging, not compliance.
- Expand access to school breakfast, particularly with grab and go options.
- Provide adequate time for school lunch.
- Offer daily P.E.
- Publicly celebrate improved attendance in an affirming way.
- Invest in and support staff wellness.

TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF CAN:

- Foster a sense of belonging in the classroom.
- Notice patterns of absence early and check in personally.
- Ensure students have a voice in decisions that impact their school experiences.
- Design a P.E. experience that is positive, engaging, and collaborative.
- Incorporate movement breaks and active learning.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROFESSIONALS CAN:

- Identify and address physical and mental health barriers affecting students.
- Provide school-based counseling access.
- Promote preventive health education.

PARENTS CAN:

- Champion school wellness practices as essential—not optional.
- Advocate for 60 minutes of daily physical activity, including recess and P.E.
- Support healthy school meals for all students to eliminate stigma and improve access.

BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS CAN:

- Support grants and in-kind support for essential equipment for school kitchens, playgrounds, and sports.
- Provide supplemental funding to expand school wellness initiatives—such as food access programs, and in-school and after-school services.
- Leverage communications platforms to ensure important issues impacting youth reach a wide audience.

SCHOOLS CAN STRENGTHEN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT BY:

- Regularly including them in feedback sessions on school policies and practices, including school meals and physical activity.
- Asking meaningful questions, such as *What makes you want to come to school?*, and using answers to guide decisions.
- Creating peer mentoring or attendance ambassador programs that empower students to support one another.
- Actively elevating student voice in school climate initiatives.

See other *GENYOUth Insights reports* for more student-centered research and actionable opportunities for improving the school wellness environment.

Convening across Sectors, Charting a Course of Action

In March 2026, GENYOUth convened a Leadership Roundtable in Washington, DC, with participants representing education, health, business, media, sports, government, and youth leadership to explore how cultures of wellness in schools can reduce chronic absenteeism—and how diverse sectors can align around shared solutions and action.

Four priorities emerged as critical to progress.

- **Alignment** across sectors is vital. No single organization or sector can solve absenteeism alone. Together, organizations can advance a shared vision and commitment to making a culture of wellness a core part of every school day—so more students attend, engage, and thrive.
- **Clear messaging** and evidence are needed to drive awareness and action, as is translating research into compelling narratives and policy briefs.
- **Parents and families** are under-engaged change agents: parents have enormous influence over school priorities and policies, yet they are not fully mobilized around wellness.
- **Student voice** is essential but often overlooked; centering student perspectives is a fundamental principle.

The group also identified immediate opportunities to build momentum.

- **Make the case.** Leverage the power of the group and their ecosystems. Capture case histories, share success stories, compile convincing data, make the financial case for strong cultures of wellness.
- **Spread the word.** Build cross-sector campaigns to elevate school wellness as a national priority. Focus on storytelling, particularly from the student perspective—with policymakers, budget deciders, and others in positions of influence. Coordinate consistent messaging across media platforms; engage sports spokespeople/celebrities; target multiple audiences.
- **Enlist under-tapped messengers.** This includes both students and parents. Example: student groups can use social media to advocate for cultures of wellness in schools, and to champion change with school board officials in their district. Seize opportunities for stronger parent engagement and voice.
- **Provide implementation support.** Learn from implementation science and build out models. Offer schools assistance not just with the "why," but the "how" around implementing and sustaining cultures of wellness—with specific, actionable steps that have worked for others. *See "Getting It Right," on page 8.*
- **Support policy and systems improvement efforts** by sharing relevant research and insights with policymakers and education leaders.

Roundtable Participating Organizations

Action for Healthy Kids
Ad Council
Aetna
Amazon
American Academy of Pediatrics
Attendance Works
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Challenge Success
Congressional Hunger Center
Edelman Trust Institute
ESPN
GENYOUth
GENYOUth National Youth Council members
International Sport and Culture Association
Milken Institute
National Basketball Association
National Football League
National Governors Association
National School Boards Association
NBCUniversal
Nebraska Association of School Boards
Physical Activity Alliance
School Nutrition Association
SHAPE America
Sodexo Foundation
Tyson Foods
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

"The GENYOUth survey results align with what we know about improving the positive conditions for learning that motivate students to come to school—physical and emotional health and safety; belonging, connectedness, and support; academic challenge and engagement; and adult and student social and emotional competence along with strong relationships at school. We're very excited about GENYOUth's research."

Catherine Cooney, Director of Communication, Attendance Works; Roundtable Attendee

SURVEY METHODOLOGY. The GENYOUth Insights survey on chronic absenteeism and cultures of wellness in schools was fielded October 15 to 30, 2025, with a weighted, nationally representative sample of 1,505 public school students, ages 13-18. The survey asked respondents to reflect on the most recently completed semester (January 2025 to end of school year). The survey design was informed by GENYOUth Youth Insights Advisory Council and National Youth Council members. All differences reported between segments of the data are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Thank you to the GENYOUth National Youth Council and Youth Insights Advisory Council experts who provided invaluable perspective on this survey and report.

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GENYOUth®

GENYOUth is a 501c3 national nonprofit dedicated to helping school children thrive by living a well-nourished and physically active life. A catalyst for youth health and wellness, GENYOUth has supported over 77,000 U.S. schools to equip them with the resources needed to ensure millions of children have equitable access to nutrition and physical activity. As part of the Action for Healthy Kids Network, GENYOUth convenes a network of private and public partners, including Fortune 100 companies and foundations, to ensure all children are nourished and active to be their best selves. Committed to ending student hunger and promoting physical activity, GENYOUth provides grants that increase access to healthy school meals for food insecure students and empower kids to develop lifelong healthy habits through movement and activity. GENYOUth is the official charitable partner of Taste of the NFL, a purpose-driven Super Bowl culinary experience, and Taste of the Draft, both of which raise awareness and generate funds to fight hunger and food insecurity. To learn more and support GENYOUth, visit **GENYOUthnow.org**.