

# QUESTION THE QUO®

JUNE 2023

## Gen Z Teens Have Changed Their Priorities for Education and Work

*Pandemic-Driven Shifts in Student Outlook Persist*

ECMC  
Group

*This report reflects data from seven national surveys.*



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# INTRODUCTION

ECMC Group’s Question The Quo public awareness campaign, launched in 2020 with support from ECMC Foundation, was developed to empower learners of all ages—particularly Gen Z teens—to explore the numerous postsecondary education options available and take the path that is right for them. The campaign is grounded in national survey data collected from high school students ages 14-18 that has sought to gain perspectives about their future education and career goals. ECMC Group has conducted multiple surveys of these students over the past several years to capture their ever-changing viewpoints.

In January 2023, ECMC Group fielded a seventh Question The Quo Education Pulse survey—the fourth annual study since the public awareness campaign launched (three additional surveys covered timely topics and specific student demographics to uncover added insights). The latest research coincided with the official end of the COVID-19 national emergency in the United States and the return to classrooms that reflected the pre-pandemic environment. The peaks and dips in the data collected from 2020-2023 are particularly significant given that the trend lines have followed the shifts in these students’ education and life experience caused by COVID-19. Particularly interesting is that while some trends have bounced back to pre-pandemic levels, others remained changed—a potential sign that we have entered a new era that reflects the education wants and needs of incoming generations of workers.

## SEVERAL THEMES EMERGED FROM THE NEW DATA AND FROM THE TRENDS SINCE 2020:

### Gen Z teens believe postsecondary education is more necessary than ever.

The number of teens who believe education after high school is necessary initially dropped when the pandemic began. However, the most recent data shows an increase in their belief that education beyond high school is necessary. At the same time, four-year college is no longer a consideration for half of these students. Many see two or three years of post-high school education as being ideal. In addition, these students believe they can achieve success through pathways other than four-year college.

### The pressure to take the four-year path is immense.

Three-quarters of teens feel pressure to pursue a four-year degree despite 63% being open to other options. In addition, nearly half of students think about their education and career path daily—a trend that has been apparent for several years and an indication that the decision about what to do after high school weighs on them heavily. Many factors impact their decision-making, including career connections, future earnings, mental health and the ability to meet their basic needs.

Included in this report are findings from Question The Quo Education Pulse surveys conducted between January 2020 and January 2023 and recommendations on how existing education and workforce systems can better meet the needs of learners now and in the future.

### Gen Z teens feel unprepared for life after high school.

Despite most respondents leveraging family and school counselors to help them make their future educational decision, only 13% feel fully prepared to choose their path after high school. The areas where they seek additional information include finances (such as guidance on future debt and managing unexpected costs), education and career pathways, health (such as guidance on mental and physical health support) and logistics (such as housing).

### Postsecondary education is a means to an end—with the end being a career.

For several years, high school students have reported that it is important to have a career path determined before they graduate, and most have begun exploring their options in high school or earlier. They believe hands-on and on-the-job learning will be essential elements of their future education and are looking for opportunities that will allow them to gain skills over a lifetime. The number who are looking for hands-on and on-the-job learning opportunities has increased over the course of the pandemic.



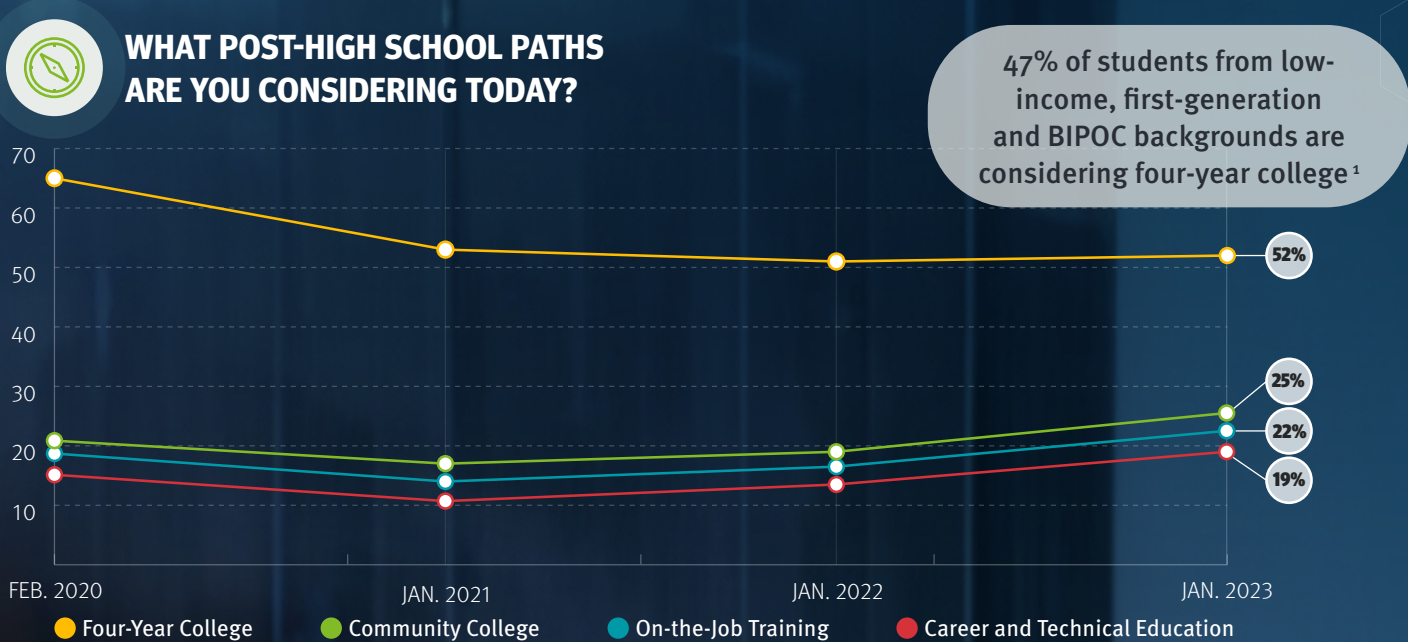
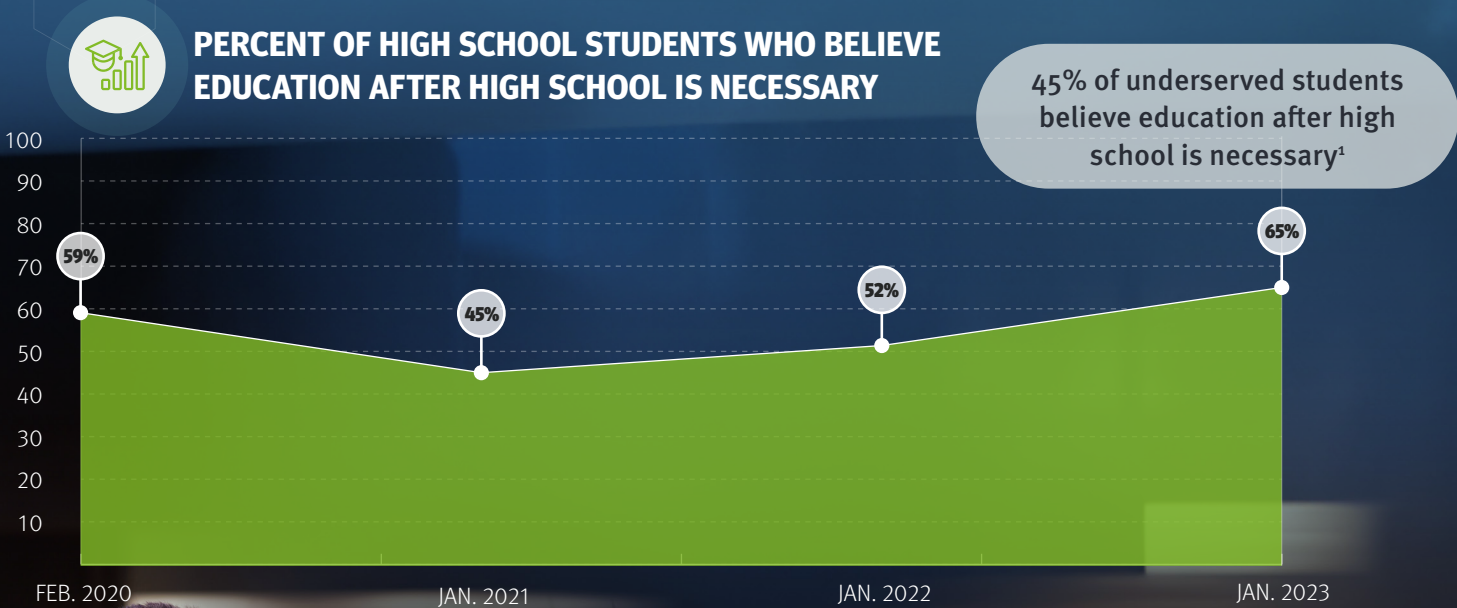


# GEN Z'S BELIEF IN EDUCATION AFTER HIGH SCHOOL HAS INCREASED...

After a two-year dip in teens who see education as part of their future, the percentage has rebounded above pre-pandemic numbers. More than ever, students believe education after high school is necessary: 84% plan on attending postsecondary education at some point, with 57% coming from families where a parent or guardian does not have a bachelor's degree.

# ...BUT FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE IS NOT THE ONLY PATH

While belief in postsecondary education has increased, the types of education teens are considering have shifted since before the pandemic. High schoolers are moving away from the four-year path—consideration of four-year college has **decreased 14 percentage points since before COVID-19** and **nearly 20 percentage points since the early days of the pandemic**. At the same time, interest in other credential-bearing and non-degree options has increased.



The pressure teens feel to pursue four-year degrees remains but is decreasing. The percentage decreased by 10 points between 2022 and 2023. While it lessened, more than half still feel self-directed pressure.

And while 75% of teens feel pressure to pursue a four-year degree, 63% are open to other options.

**63%** are open to options other than four-year college (up 7 percentage points since pre-COVID-19)

**59%** agree that they can be successful without a four-year degree (up 5 percentage points since pre-COVID-19)

**38%** say that because of the pandemic, they feel more comfortable following a path other than four-year college

# PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE EDUCATION & CAREER PATHS REMAIN CONSISTENT

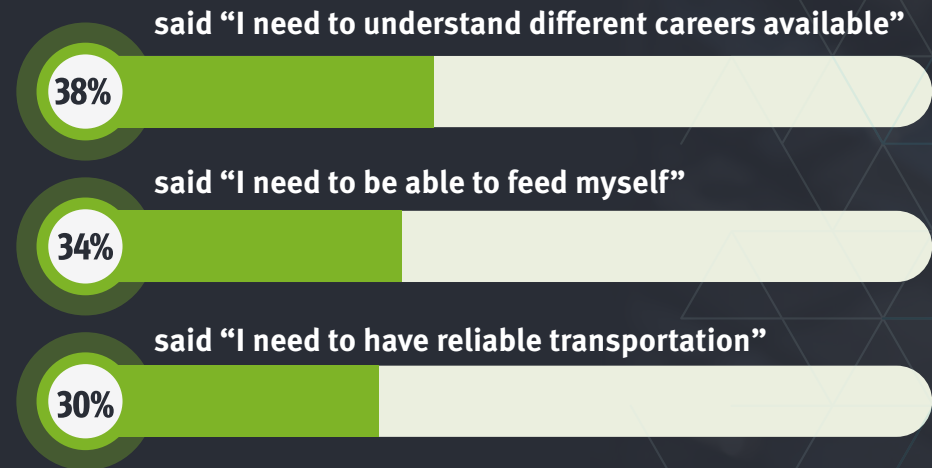
For four years, teens have reported that they are prioritizing career-first goals and future income that sustains their desired lifestyle when determining their future education path. When mental health was added to the survey’s priority list of factors in deciding what to do after high school, teens ranked it third in importance. These factors play into decisions they make pertaining to their postsecondary pathways, and they have remained constant throughout the pandemic and across populations, ranking these factors over things like “experiencing college life.”

## HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FOLLOWING FACTORS IN WHAT YOU DECIDE TO DO AFTER HIGH SCHOOL?

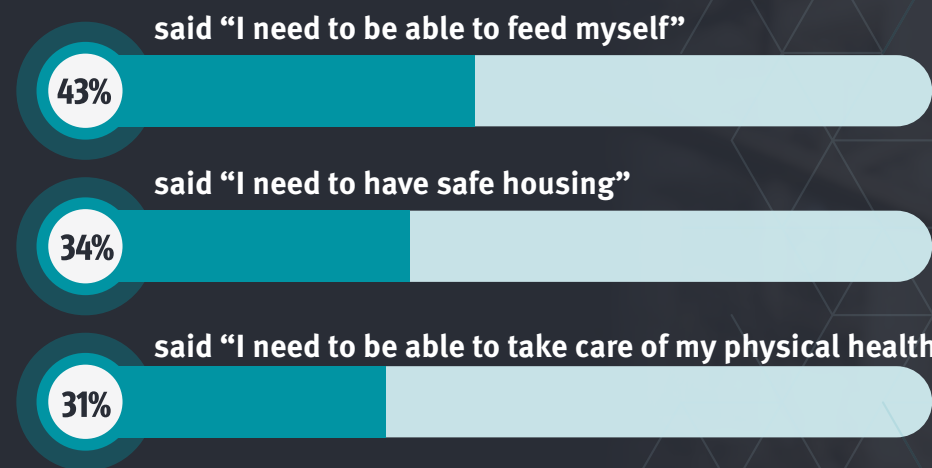


When asked to choose their top three factors in deciding what to do after high school, basic needs considerations were ranked second and third.

## WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU IN DECIDING WHAT YOU DO AFTER HIGH SCHOOL? (TOP THREE SELECTIONS)



## BASIC NEEDS WERE MORE IMPORTANT TO STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME, FIRST-GENERATION AND BIPOC BACKGROUNDS (TOP THREE SELECTIONS):<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>ECMC Group/VICE Media Question The Quo Education Pulse Survey October 2022: Insights from Underserved Populations





# STUDENTS NEED GUIDANCE WHEN DECIDING THEIR NEXT PATH...

WHEN SEEKING INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT TO DO AFTER HIGH SCHOOL, TEENS MOST COMMONLY TURN TO:



WHEN ASKED WHY THEY CHOOSE CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS, STUDENTS SAID:

"My counselor because she has my best interest at heart and wants me to succeed in life."

"I think my counselor is an important resource because they are in the know and I trust them."

"My family is the most important because they give me accurate and realistic advice."

"I think teachers are an important resource because they can steer you in the right direction of what you might want to do with your life."

"I think my counselor is an important resource because they are in the know and I trust them."



# ...& REQUIRE MORE INFORMATION THAN THEY ARE RECEIVING

While the survey respondents have some resources that can help them choose their post-high school path, students still feel they need more information. **Only 13% of teens feel that the resources they have received have fully prepared them to decide what to do after graduation.**

GEN Z TEENS FEEL LIKE THEY ARE MOST IN NEED OF:

63%

**Guidance on finances,** including how to manage future debt and unexpected big costs in case of an emergency

48%

**Guidance on education and career,** such as different career paths and the variety of education options that exist

40%

**Guidance on health,** things like how to feed themselves, how to receive mental health support and how to stay physically healthy

34%

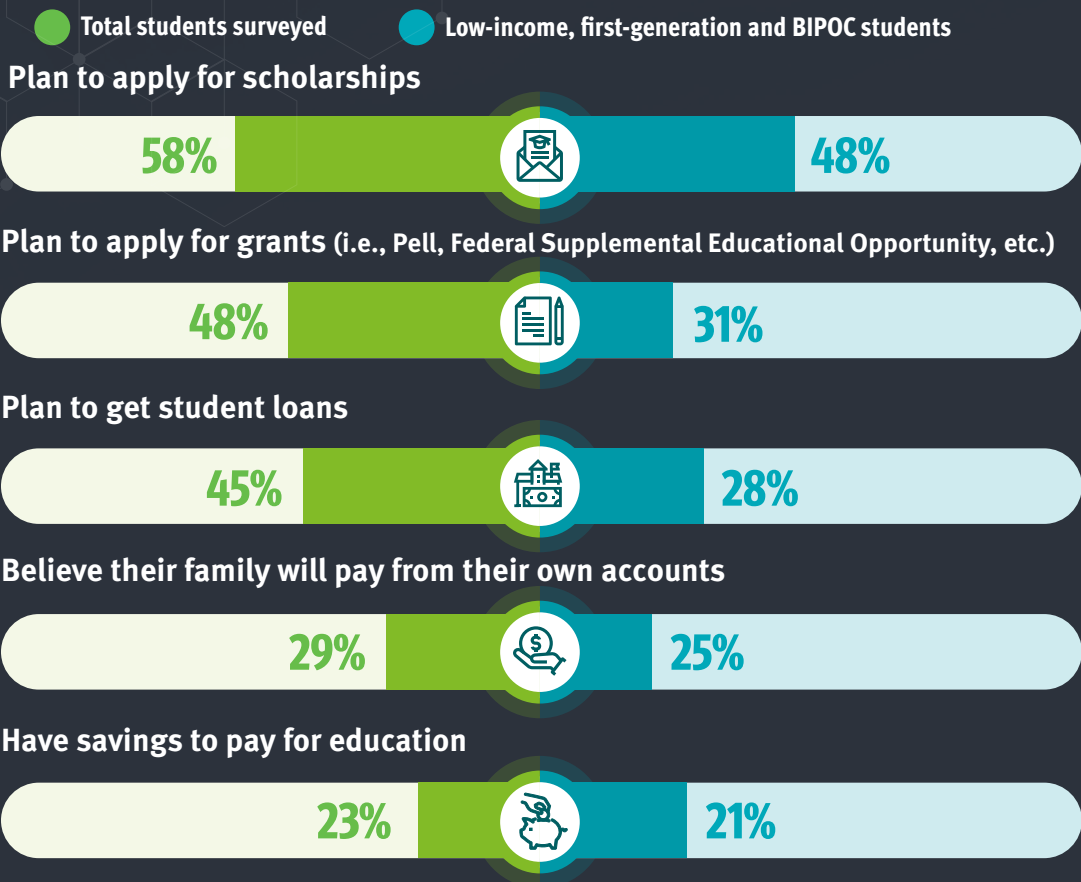
**Guidance on logistics,** including how to find housing and reliable transportation



# COST OF EDUCATION REMAINS A TOP CONCERN FOR GEN Z TEENS

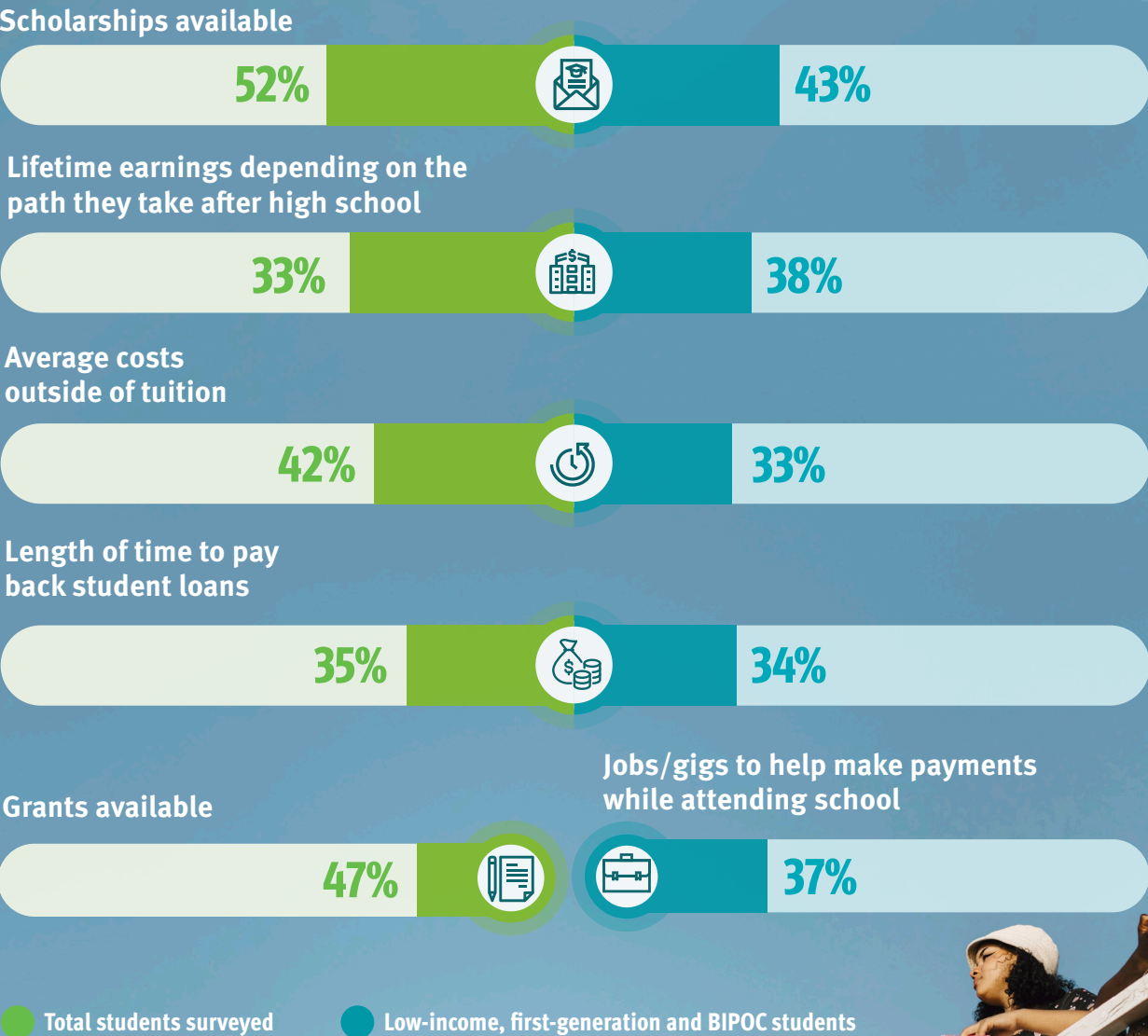
High schoolers from all demographics are looking at external sources to help cover the cost of college through scholarships, grants and student loans. Six in 10 teens say they are worried about how they will pay for college—a number that has remained consistent since before the pandemic. Despite financial concerns, 65% of students would prefer a career they are passionate about over a career that pays more money.

## STUDENTS ARE MAKING PLANS ON HOW THEY’LL PAY FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION.



**NOTE:** Students from low-income, first-generation and BIPOC backgrounds differ from their peers in terms of how they plan to pay for education, with significantly fewer planning to pursue scholarships, loans and grants.<sup>1</sup>

## DESPITE HAVING PLANS FOR HOW THEY WILL PAY FOR COLLEGE, STUDENTS HAVE ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS ABOUT:



<sup>1</sup>ECMC Group/VICE Media Question The Quo Education Pulse Survey October 2022: Insights from Underserved Populations





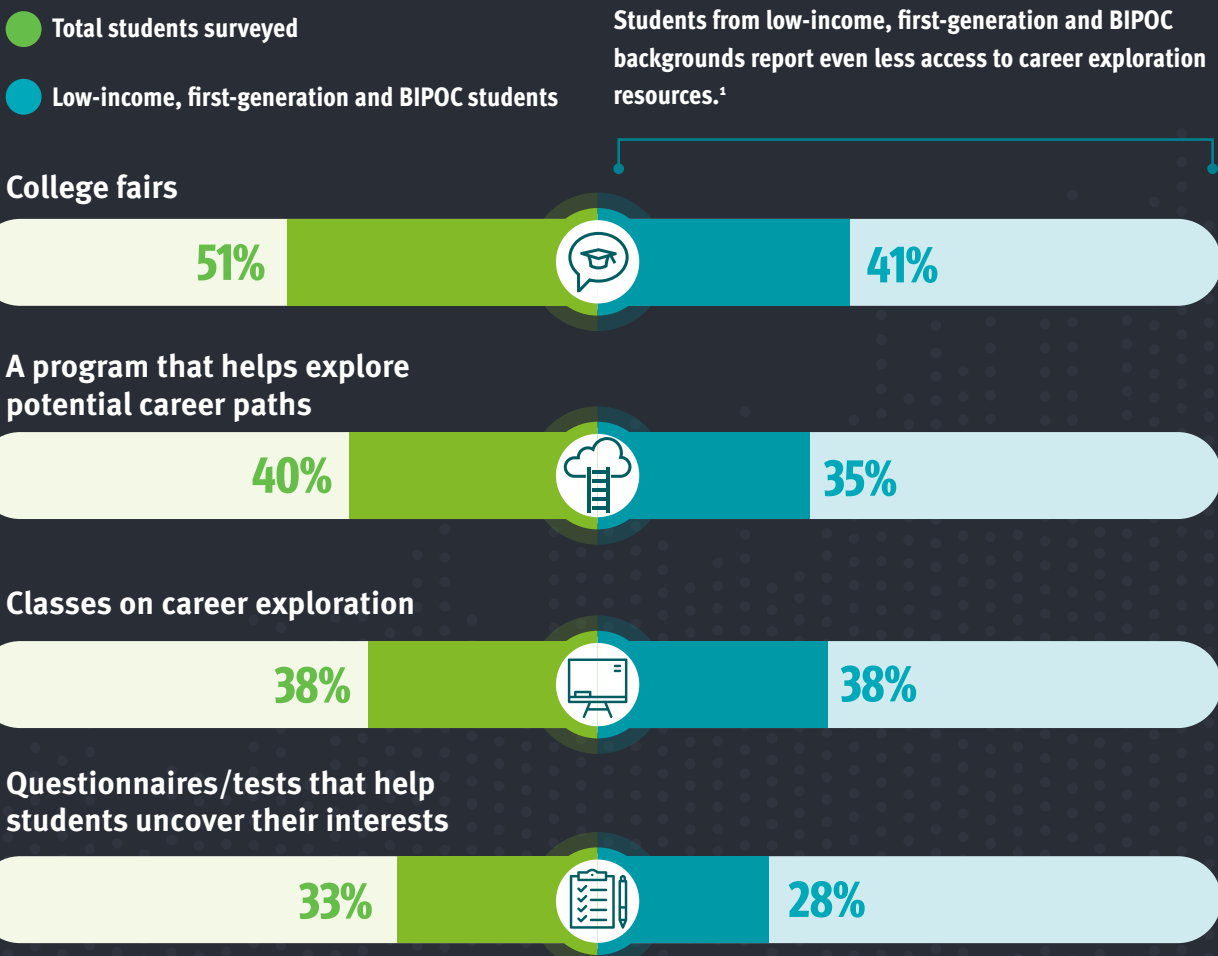
# CAREER EXPLORATION STARTS EARLY & STAYS TOP OF MIND

Determining a career path is an important decision Gen Z students feel they should make during their high school years. This decision weighs heavily on them, with more than three-quarters of teens thinking about their education and career path after high school at least weekly, and nearly half thinking about it daily.



Despite most students wanting to determine a career path before high school graduation, only about half have received assistance in exploring career options from their high school.

## STUDENTS SAY THEIR HIGH SCHOOLS PROVIDE THE FOLLOWING OPPORTUNITIES TO DISCOVER CAREERS:



<sup>1</sup>ECMC Group/VICE Media Question The Quo Education Pulse Survey October 2022: Insights from Underserved Populations



# STUDENTS WANT TO LEARN ON THE JOB & OVER THEIR LIFETIME

Nearly 80% of high school students believe it is important to have on-the-job learning opportunities, like internships and apprenticeships, as part of their postsecondary education—a 14 percentage point increase since 2022. They value time on the job and the ability to gain perspective on what the actual day-to-day work looks like.



**35%** say their ideal learning would be through coursework only

**65%** say their ideal post-high school learning should be on the job, through internships or apprenticeships

**67%** say their ideal post-high school learning would be hands-on in a lab or classroom

## DESPITE HAVING POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION PLANS IN THEIR FUTURE, GEN Z TEENS EXPECT TO BE LEARNING THROUGHOUT THEIR LIFETIME

Gen Z teens fully expect to be lifelong learners. Nearly 70% say they will need to continue learning throughout their lifetime. This has increased since before the pandemic (59%). **Nearly half of Gen Z teens believe that they will need to pursue additional education or training in a new career or field within 10 years.**

**53%**

of teens want more formalized learning throughout their life



Increased 7 percentage points since 2021

**37%**

of teens say that a post-high school education would be better in several short (one year or less) experiences over a lifetime vs. one long education experience (four years or more)



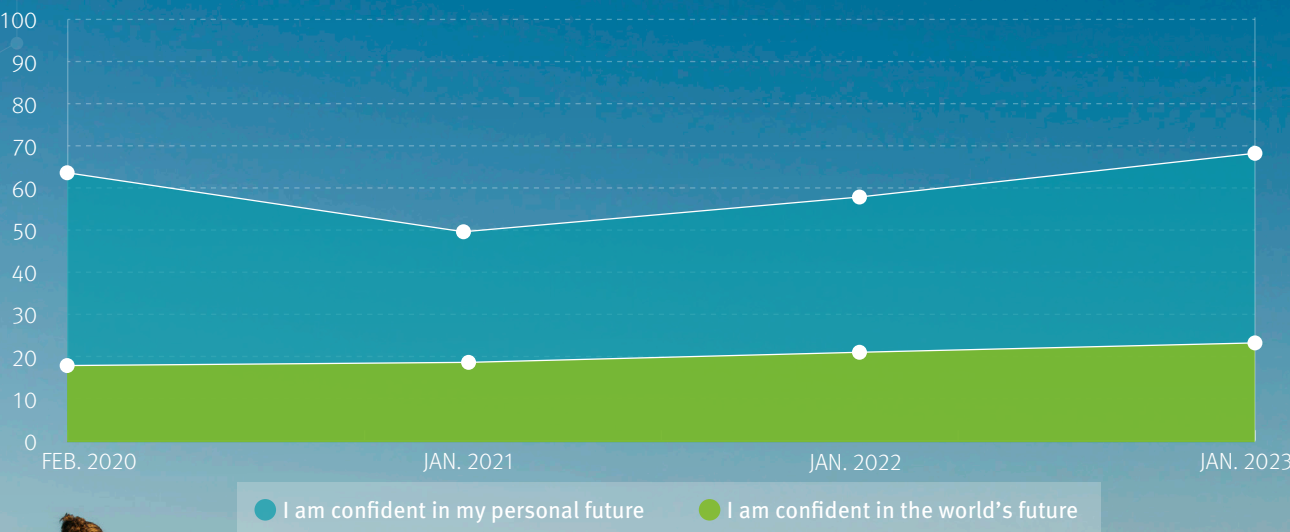
Increased 6 percentage points since 2021





# STUDENTS ARE CONFIDENT IN THE FUTURE...

After several years of experiencing pandemic-influenced impacts on their education and lifestyle, teens’ confidence in their future appears to be rebounding. Today’s high schoolers are more confident in themselves than before the pandemic, although their confidence in the world around them, while higher than pre-pandemic levels, remains low.



# ...& ARE LOOKING FOR SUPPORT FROM EMPLOYERS & POLICYMAKERS

Since before the pandemic, Gen Z teens have expressed an expectation that the government and their future employers support their postsecondary education financially and through formal training. These numbers have remained consistent for four years.

9 IN 10 HIGH SCHOOLERS BELIEVE THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD PLAY A ROLE IN THEIR FUTURE EDUCATION BY:



8 IN 10 STUDENTS BELIEVE BUSINESSES/EMPLOYERS SHOULD PLAY A ROLE IN SUPPORTING EDUCATION AND TRAINING BY:





# RECOMMENDATIONS & TAKEAWAYS

Cultivating the next generation of learners and workers will involve action on the part of educators, policymakers, businesses and philanthropy.



- **To stay relevant, postsecondary institutions should explore how shorter programs may be integrated into their existing structure.** Today's high schoolers believe in education after high school but are interested in pathways that take less time to complete than a four-year degree. They also fully expect to be lifelong learners and receive upskilling and reskilling throughout their lives. Their desire to gain skills that align with the needs of the marketplace and employers has led to an interest in career-focused pathways, and many believe a two- or three-year program would suit them. Given the interest in shorter educational pathways, education institutions may consider bachelor's degree programs that take less time to complete, as well as programs that integrate credentials, such as associate degrees and certificates, into four-year programs after students have completed a certain number of courses. Institutions should also consider how to support students' desire for ongoing learning through stackable credentials or other continuing education opportunities.
- **Education institutions should provide career-focused learning experiences.** High school students are expressing a clear desire for hands-on and on-the-job learning opportunities, both during high school and in their postsecondary education. Institutions that wish to recruit and retain today's students while providing an experience that provides them value should consider integrating additional opportunities for experiences such as internships, externships, apprenticeships, lab-based learning or offering credit for learning gained while on the job.
- **High schools must create an ecosystem of support among people students trust.** High school students turn to teachers and counselors for support but do not feel prepared to make a decision about their future. To turn the tide, high schools must provide comprehensive information about education pathways and offer career exploration opportunities for students throughout their education. Given that many students think about their education and career path every day, it is essential that we provide them with information that allows them to make educated decisions about their future learning and work.
- **Policymakers and government entities must support education pathways that are affordable and meet students' basic needs.** Gen Z teens have expressed a desire for educational programs that are affordable and take less time to complete. In addition, their concerns about ensuring their basic needs are met during their educational experience is also a key concern that should be considered by policymakers. Short-term Pell grants and similar legislation can provide financial assistance and support for shorter education-to-career pathways.
- **To remain competitive, employers must invest in their workforce.** Gen Z expects future employers to be involved in their education process. To attract workers from this demographic, employers should consider offering support, such as offering tuition reimbursement for a variety of educational pathways, providing formal training programs or funding future educational pursuits for their workers.



# SURVEY METHODOLOGY

ECMC Group, in partnership with VICE Media, has conducted seven nationally representative surveys of high school students to understand their perceptions of postsecondary education and their plans for the future.

TOTAL  
SAMPLE  
SINCE 2020

7,339

students ages 14-18 surveyed across seven rounds of research.

	FEBRUARY 2020			MAY 2020			JANUARY 2021			SEPTEMBER 2021				JANUARY 2022			OCTOBER 2022			JANUARY 2023			
SAMPLE SIZE	1,177			1,025			1,001			1,052				1,062			1,020			1,002			
	HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS			HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS			HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS			HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS				HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS			HIGH SCHOOLERS FROM LOW-INCOME, FIRST-GENERATION OR BIPOC BACKGROUNDS			HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS			
GENDER	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/NA	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/NA	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/NA	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/NA	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/NA	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/NA	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/NA		
	49%	49%	2%	49%	49%	2%	48%	48%	4%	46%	46%	7%	46%	46%	8%	48%	48%	3%	49%	49%	2%		
RACE/ETHNICITY	WHITE/CAUCASIAN	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/HISPANIC/LATINO	WHITE/CAUCASIAN	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/HISPANIC/LATINO	WHITE/CAUCASIAN	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/HISPANIC/LATINO	WHITE/CAUCASIAN	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/HISPANIC/LATINO	WHITE/CAUCASIAN	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/HISPANIC/LATINO	WHITE/CAUCASIAN	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/HISPANIC/LATINO	WHITE/CAUCASIAN	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/HISPANIC/LATINO		
	62%	18%	15%	50%	16%	23%	47%	28%	20%	50%	30%	16%	50%	30%	17%	45%	31%	22%	50%	32%	17%		
	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN/INDIGENOUS	OTHER	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN/INDIGENOUS	OTHER	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN/INDIGENOUS	OTHER	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN/INDIGENOUS	PACIFIC ISLANDER	OTHER	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN/INDIGENOUS	PACIFIC ISLANDER	OTHER	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN/INDIGENOUS	OTHER	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN/INDIGENOUS	OTHER
	11%	4%	4%	15%	2%	4%	11%	4%	4%	10%	7%	1%	3%	9%	6%	2%	1%	7%	4%	3%	6%	4%	2%
LOCATION	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL		
	28%	53%	19%	28%	57%	15%	28%	57%	15%	30%	51%	19%	30%	51%	19%	30%	51%	19%	30%	50%	20%		
REGION	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/WEST		
	29%	33%	38%	33%	31%	36%	31%	31%	38%	32%	32%	36%	32%	32%	36%	32%	33%	35%	29%	34%	37%		
SOCIOECONOMIC HOUSEHOLD INCOME/YEAR	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000-\$24,999	\$25,000-\$49,999	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000-\$24,999	\$25,000-\$49,999	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000-\$24,999	\$25,000-\$49,999	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000-\$24,999	\$25,000-\$49,999	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000-\$24,999	\$25,000-\$49,999	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000-\$24,999	\$25,000-\$49,999	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000-\$24,999	\$25,000-\$49,999		
	9%	11%	16%	6%	6%	13%	18%	11%	12%	14%	15%	15%	16%	14%	13%	19%	15%	15%	12%	15%	19%		
	\$50,000-\$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/DID NOT ANSWER	\$50,000-\$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/DID NOT ANSWER	\$50,000-\$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/DID NOT ANSWER	\$50,000-\$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/DID NOT ANSWER	\$50,000-\$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/DID NOT ANSWER	\$50,000-\$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/DID NOT ANSWER	\$50,000-\$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/DID NOT ANSWER		
	13%	24%	27%	11%	24%	40%	9%	15%	35%	9%	18%	29%	9%	18%	30%	9%	13%	28%	13%	20%	21%		



# ENCOURAGING TEENS TO QUESTION THE QUO

Question The Quo Education Pulse surveys conducted between 2020 and 2023 are part of ECMC Group's Question The Quo public awareness campaign, which empowers high school students and beyond to take the postsecondary education and career path that is right for them. ECMC Group developed the Question The Quo campaign in 2020 to encourage learners to explore the various education and career options available to them and to help them understand that there are many ways to achieve education and career success.

[www.questionthequo.org](http://www.questionthequo.org)

**?QUESTION  
THE QUO®**



**ECMC**  
Group

## ABOUT ECMC GROUP

ECMC Group is a nonprofit corporation focused on helping students succeed by creating, providing and investing in innovative educational opportunities. Headquartered in Minneapolis, ECMC Group and its family of companies are focused on advancing educational opportunities through financial tools and services; support for postsecondary access, persistence and completion; and impactful and mission-aligned funding for innovative programs to help students achieve their academic and professional goals and to address the future of work.

[www.ecmcgroup.org](http://www.ecmcgroup.org)

## ABOUT VICE MEDIA

VICE Media is the world's largest independent youth media company. ECMC Group partnered with VICE Media to conduct seven nationally representative surveys of high school students as they consider their future education and career paths. Surveys were conducted online and took place between January 2020 and January 2023.

[www.vicemediagroup.com/insights](http://www.vicemediagroup.com/insights)





[www.questionthequo.org](http://www.questionthequo.org)



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