Education Insights 2025-2026:

Fueling Learning Through **Engagement**

Discovery EDUCATION™

About This Report

Education Insights 2025–2026: Fueling Learning Through Engagement captures the perspectives of 1,398 K–12 superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and students in the United States. Conducted by Hanover Research on behalf of Discovery Education in May 2025, the findings offer meaningful insights into the real experiences of educators, students, and families in the United States.

Foreword

By Dr. Robert P. Taylor, Superintendent of the Wake County Public School System

As district leaders, we share a common goal: ensuring every student learns and remains motivated, challenged, and connected to their learning journey. Engagement sits at the heart of that mission. Yet defining what true engagement looks like, and how to nurture it, remains a challenge across classrooms, grade levels, and communities.

This report sheds valuable light on those challenges. The findings confirm what many of us have witnessed firsthand: students want to learn. They crave lessons that feel meaningful and relevant. Yet too often, their engagement goes unrecognized when it doesn't match traditional expectations. Compliance is mistaken for connection. Silence is mistaken for disinterest.

The insights in this report remind us that fueling engagement requires clarity, alignment, and support. Educators need shared definitions and consistent tools. Teachers need time and resources to personalize learning. And students need opportunities to reflect on their own engagement, so they can take ownership of their growth.

These findings aim to inspire new conversations and actionable steps schools and districts can take. By working together to understand the full spectrum of student engagement, we can create learning environments where every student feels seen, supported, and challenged to reach their full potential.

Dr. Taylor is the current superintendent of the Wake County Public School System and a seasoned education leader. He most recently served as Mississippi's state superintendent of education and held leadership roles at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Previously, he led Bladen County Schools for nearly a decade. A former teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent, Dr. Taylor has been honored for his work in school nutrition, health, and innovation, earning awards such as the Friday Medal and Superintendent of the Year. He holds degrees from the University of Southern Mississippi and Fayetteville State University, where he earned his doctorate.

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Introduction

In K-12 schools, engagement is not just a buzzword. It's the engine that drives deeper learning, motivation, and student success. Yet despite widespread agreement that engagement matters, educators have vastly different perspectives on what it looks like, how to measure it against learning, and how to consistently sustain it in the classroom.

This report draws from the voices of those closest to the classroom—students, families, and educators from rural, suburban, and urban districts across the country—to better understand what engagement means in schools today.

The findings confirm that while engagement is widely seen as essential to learning, it remains inconsistently defined, observed, and supported across the education ecosystem. At the same time, we recognize that how students express and experience engagement can vary based on many factors, including students' backgrounds, languages, and personal contexts. These findings offer valuable insight, while also underscoring the importance of continued exploration into the full range of ways students connect with learning.

Importantly, the survey underpinning this report did not impose a singular definition of engagement. That choice was intentional. Our goal was to explore the ambiguity that surrounds the concept, and to surface the diverse ways engagement is interpreted and experienced in education today. By doing so, our findings reiterate that any effort to support it must first acknowledge its complexity.

Three focus areas emerge from the data:

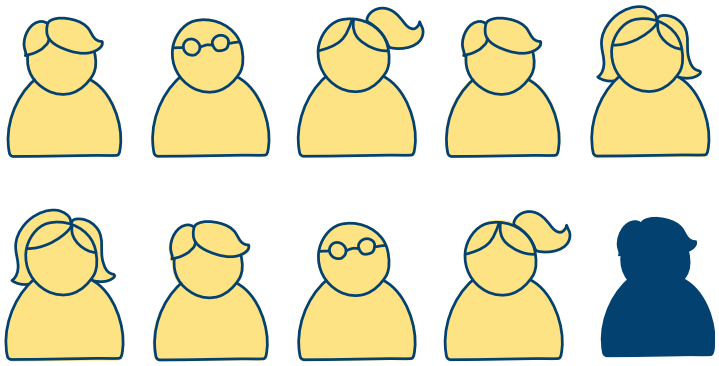
1. **Engagement is hard to define, and even harder to measure.** It can surface in many ways, and what counts as engagement can look different to educators and students.

2. **Barriers to engagement can be both visible and hidden.** Students may complete tasks without truly engaging, making it harder to spot passive or withdrawn behavior and hiding signs of boredom or being overwhelmed.

3. **Educators need clear strategies, shared definitions, and effective tools to drive engagement.** Alignment across roles, practical resources, and actionable insights empower teachers to create learning environments where all students can thrive.

Key Findings: Engagement Is Central to Student Learning

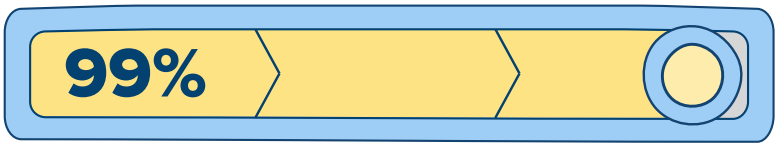
From students to superintendents, all stakeholders overwhelmingly recognize engagement as a key driver of learning and success.



+90%

Teachers, principals, and superintendents agree that **student engagement is a critical metric for understanding overall achievement.**

Almost all students say that **engaging lessons make school more enjoyable.**



Nearly all superintendents believe **student engagement is one of the top predictors of success at school.**

And Yet...

While engagement is universally valued, gaps in perception, experience, and support reveal that there's still work to be done to make learning consistently engaging for all students.

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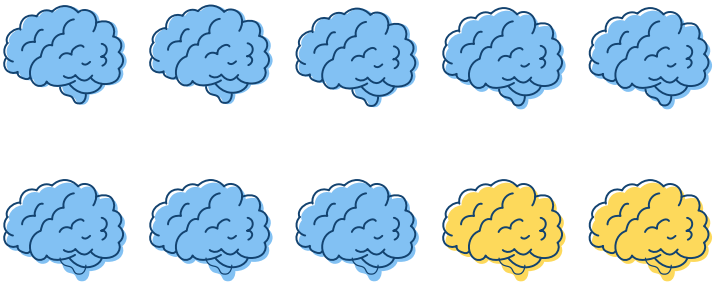
Nearly all students report **struggling with boredom** at least once a week.



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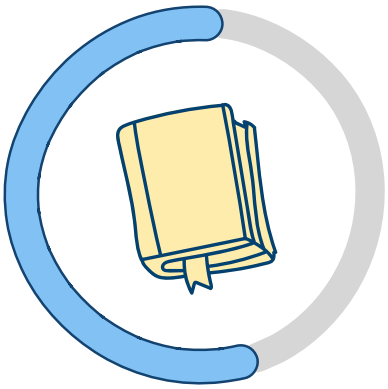
Only one-third of teachers say **students often ask reflective questions**—their top-rated indicator of engagement.

55%

Only about half of parents strongly believe that **their child is actively focused on learning** when in school.



Engagement in Focus: Fueling Student Learning

Student engagement is hard to define, detect, and measure.

By establishing shared definitions and frameworks that go beyond compliance and surface-level participation, educators can better assess whether students are genuinely invested in their learning.

Researchers believe that student engagement, fueled by interest, relevance, and motivation, can have as much influence on academic success as quality of instruction, which has long been considered the most important school-based factor.[1] While researchers and education stakeholders agree that engagement is central to learning outcomes, it remains difficult to define, measure, and foster effectively.

Our findings reveal a notable disconnect between students' reported experiences and educators' perceptions of engagement in the classroom. Students consistently report higher levels of engagement than teachers believe, but differing definitions and indicators across roles lead to gaps in understanding and support.

While teachers in our study reported more disengagement than students self-reported, this gap is not unusual. Student engagement is nuanced, multidimensional, and varies across contexts, age groups, and individual learners. It can be influenced, and often enhanced, when motivation and interest are present in the classroom or embedded in learning experiences.[2]

#1 Challenge

According to superintendents, principals, and teachers, the biggest barrier to measuring student engagement is its variability across individuals and contexts.

Teacher Perspective

As you become a more established educator, you start to evolve all your teaching methods, including, you know, seeing what students are doing and how they're outputting and are they engaged throughout class and what is distracting them and how can you solve that problem.

Shelby Kilmister
6th Grade Science Teacher,
Penacook, NH

Findings show that how engagement is identified, measured, and nurtured varies dramatically depending on whom you ask.

Perception gaps about student engagement across all stakeholder groups suggest that students feel more engaged in learning than educators believe. Although students report the highest levels of engagement among all groups surveyed, only 63% say they feel highly engaged in class, highlighting that even the most optimistic self-assessment shows significant room for improvement.

Students report higher engagement than educators perceive.

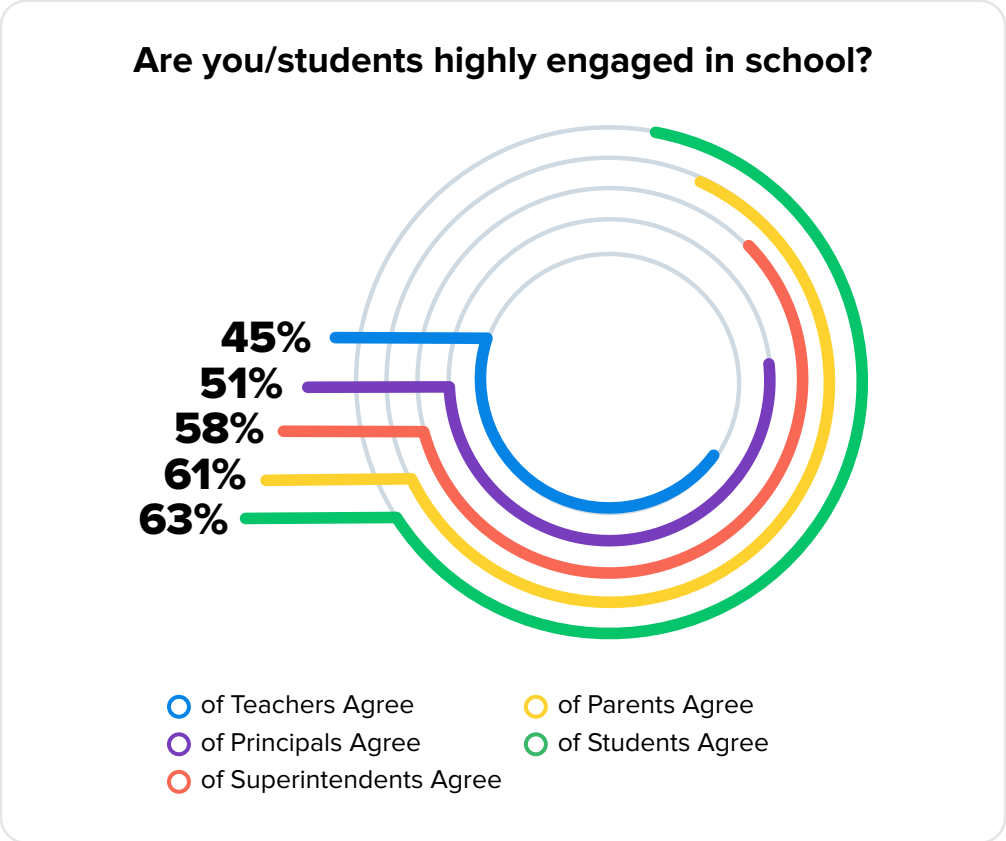


Figure 1: Comparison of students, parents, and teachers reporting school is challenging by grade level

Parents (61%) and superintendents (58%) are the most closely aligned with student perceptions, suggesting they may have a more optimistic view of student experiences. In contrast, **teachers and principals report lower levels of perceived student engagement, reflecting a notable difference in perspective among those most closely connected to the classroom experience.**

This gap reflects the differing vantage points of each group. Parents and superintendents may be focused on overall outcomes or general observations, while teachers and principals are closer to the daily signs perceived as disengagement, such as lack of participation, disinterest, or lack of motivation. This data reinforces the need for shared language and broader indicators of engagement that help bridge perception gaps and support more informed responses from schools.

41%

Less than half of students believe their teachers know that they are engaged.

Parent Perspective

I know my kids are truly engaged when they come home and, unprompted, share stories about the classes that interest them most. That engagement shows up in other ways too—like going above and beyond in their studies and challenging themselves to take harder classes without any push from us.

Keri F.
Parent,
Indianapolis, IN

Engagement declines as students advance through school.

As students progress through school, both self-reported engagement levels and educators' perceptions of engagement tend to drop.

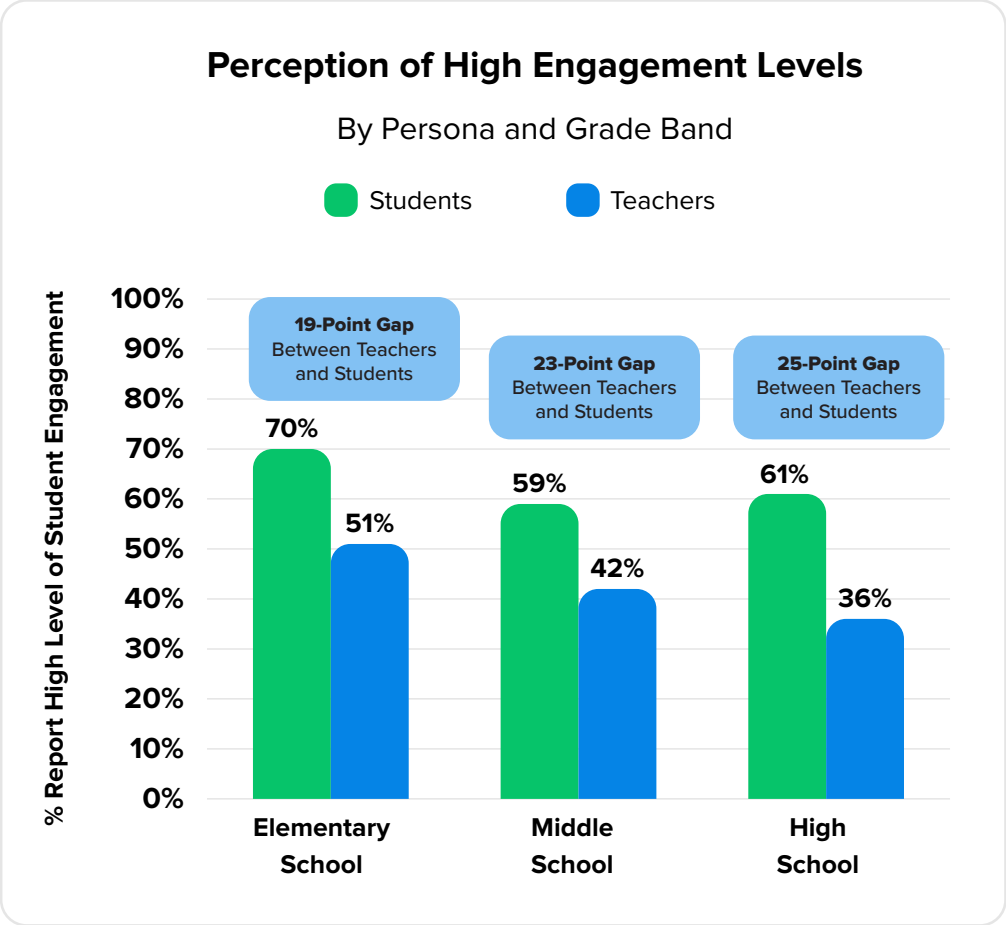


Figure 2. Student and teacher perceptions of high engagement level by grade band

The gap between student and teacher perceptions of engagement increases steadily from elementary (19 points) to high school (25 points), highlighting a widening disconnect between the student experience in schools and how educators self-report engagement for their students. This pattern aligns with research that shows that student engagement, especially behavioral and emotional engagement, declines over time, particularly during the transition from elementary to middle and from middle to high school.[3]

While the overall trajectory from elementary through high school reflects a decline in student engagement, the slight rebound in high school may suggest that some students begin to re-engage, possibly due to increased autonomy, more relevant coursework, or stronger identity development. These findings align with some developmental frameworks, such as self-determination theory[4] that shows when adolescent learners experience autonomy, competence, and relevance, their intrinsic motivation is more likely to increase, especially if learning feels meaningful or future focused.

Principal Perspective

As students get older, some lose their spark—learning feels routine and voices fade. Many aren't disinterested, just boxed in. But when schools encourage creativity and sharing ideas, students re-engage, take ownership, and grow with confidence.

Selina Latimore
Principal,
Columbia, SC

Even among students, what feels like engagement to one person may not appear that way to another.

Earlier findings highlight a disconnect between how students and educators perceive engagement, and further exploration reveals that even students don't agree with one another on how engaged they are. **In fact, students tend to rate their peers' engagement lower than teachers do in most grade bands**, particularly in elementary and middle school.

Across all grade levels, students rate their own engagement much higher than their peers'.

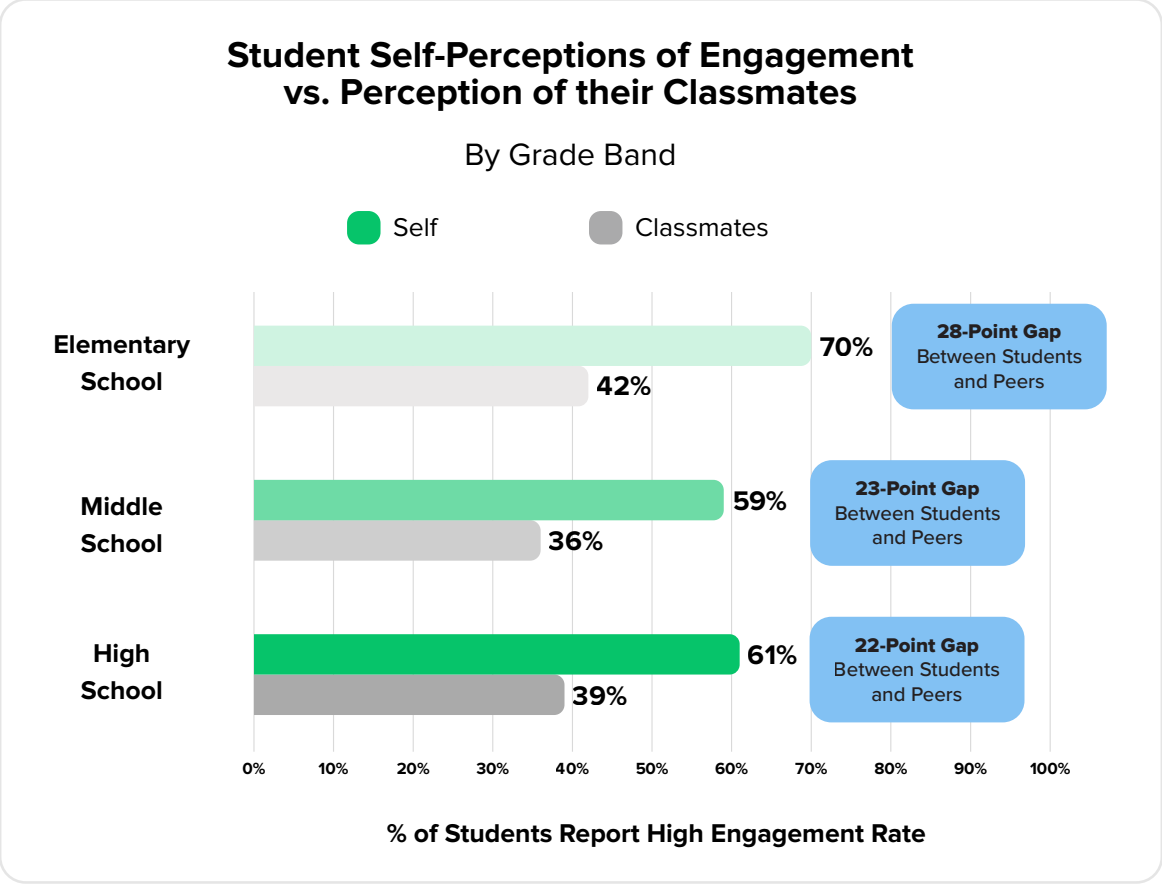


Figure 3. Student perceptions of their own engagement vs. their peers' engagement by grade band

A +20-point gap between how students rate their own engagement and their peers' highlights the subjective nature of motivation and engagement. Students of all grade levels struggle to recognize others' engagement, and tend to rate their own behavior more favorably to protect their self-image or appear more engaged.

As students grow older, they become more socially aware, especially during adolescence, a formative period marked by rapid cognitive, physical, and emotional development. During this stage (ages 10-19), students become increasingly self-conscious and aware of how they compare to others, particularly in school settings. This is known as social comparison theory,[5] which suggests that individuals evaluate their own abilities and self-worth by comparing themselves to others.

Because engagement includes both visible and invisible cues, students may overestimate their own effort and underestimate their peers, highlighting how even students subjectively interpret and measure engagement.

Student Perspective

I think my teachers know when I'm engaged because I show it by participating in discussions, and they usually ask more questions to the kids they think are interested in the lesson.

Astrid P.
Grade 7
Bend, OR

Perceptions of engagement differ by proximity to students.

We asked educators to identify the top behaviors or indicators of an engaged student. There is broad agreement on two leading signs across educator responses: asking thoughtful questions and contributing to classroom discussions. Responses diverge beyond that point, however, revealing important differences in how engagement is defined, observed, and valued.

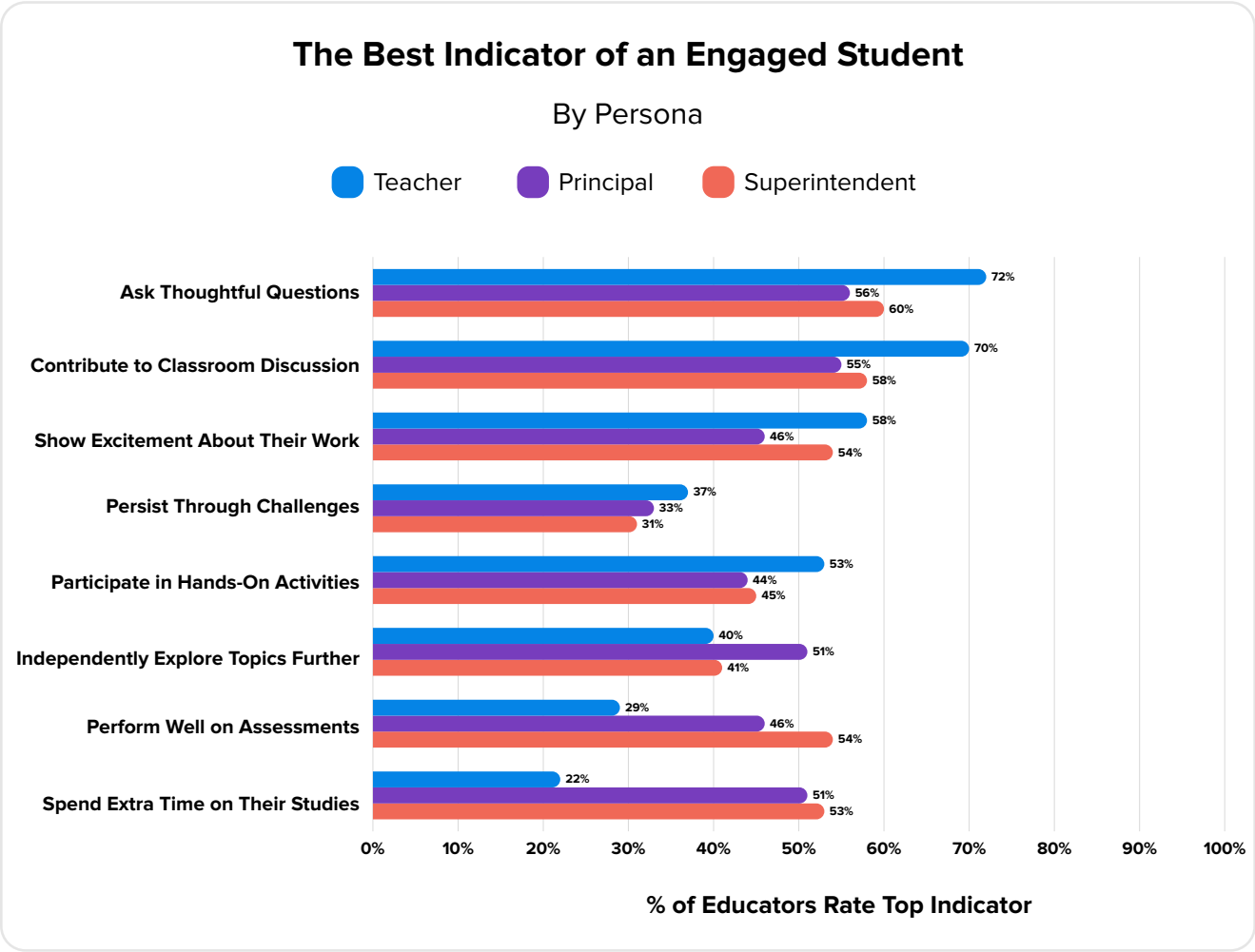


Figure 4. Educator perception of what defines an engaged student

While educators at all levels recognize the importance of visible, active participation as a sign of student engagement, classroom teachers place the greatest weight on these behaviors, rating them as more indicative of engagement than other signals.

Superintendents place greater emphasis on measurable outcomes, with 54% identifying performing well on assessments as a top engagement indicator. This is nearly twice as high as teachers, who rank standardized assessments among the lowest indicators of engagement. This insight is in line with other research we have conducted that shows administrators emphasize and value performance data and accountability metrics as measures of student success rather than day-to-day classroom behaviors.

Likewise, indicators like persisting through challenges and spending extra time on their studies **rank lowest** across all educator groups. This pattern suggests that while these quieter, less visible forms of engagement matter, they may not be consistently recognized or prioritized in formal assessments or day-to-day observations.

Principal Perspective

I know students are engaged when they are excited to learn and take ownership of their learning.

Mary Anne Jezierski
Principal,
Northborough, MA

Teachers value inquiry and expression as top engagement signals, but don't see them happening often.

As previous data indicates, there is a disconnect between how frequently teachers report observing student behaviors and how highly they value those behaviors as indicators of engagement.

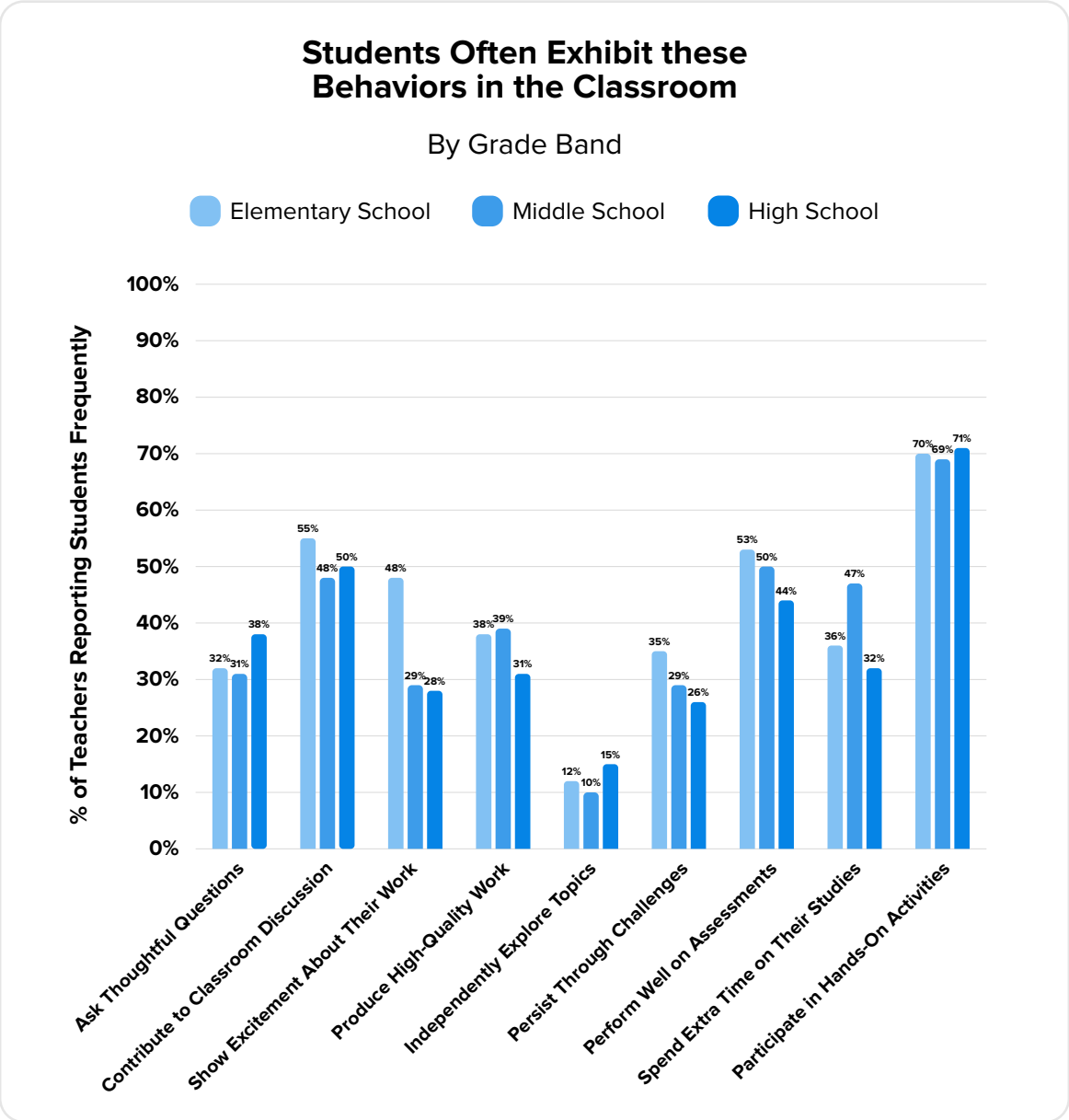


Figure 5. Teacher-reported frequency of engagement behaviors by grade band

Teachers (72%) overwhelmingly rate asking thoughtful questions as the strongest indicator of student engagement, yet only about one-third report seeing students exhibit this behavior frequently, particularly in middle and high school.

At the same time, behaviors teachers observe more frequently, such as participating in hands-on activities and performing well on assessments, are not rated as highly.

While most teachers (70%) highly value contributing to classroom discussions as a sign of engagement, they report seeing it with moderate frequency. This suggests classroom discussion occupies a middle ground, recognized as important and visible, but perhaps not happening as consistently as teachers would like, especially in middle and high school settings.

What You Can Do

Start a conversation in your district or school. **Ask your colleagues what student engagement means to them, and how they know it when they see it. Getting curious will help you begin to use common language and identify gaps.**

Finally, individual student activities like exploring topics independently show up least in both observed frequency and perceived value. This suggests that subtler expressions of engagement may be consistently overlooked or undervalued in classroom environments focused on visible and active participation and performance tasks.

Teacher Perspective

Sometimes a student is engaged even when it doesn't look like they're paying attention. I've had students who didn't take notes or do the written work, and I thought they weren't listening at all. But then during discussions, they'd jump in with an answer and I'd think, oh—they were listening. And when it came to assessments, they did better than I expected. Turns out, they really did hear me.

Susan Barnes
6th Grade Science Teacher,
West Columbia, SC

Engagement Challenges: Gaps Hinder Meaningful Learning

Barriers to engagement can be both visible and hidden.

Recognizing the many ways students engage can help teachers identify and nurture different expressions of learning.

While students overwhelmingly self-report that they enjoy learning, feel confident in their abilities, and feel motivated to learn, many educators reported not observing these behaviors in the classroom. **Some students may be deeply engaged in quieter, less visible ways: persisting through challenges, reflecting silently, or exploring ideas independently.** Research suggests that such "invisible" engagement is often overlooked because traditional indicators tend to privilege overt, performative participation over more internal, cognitive forms of involvement.[6] These subtler forms of engagement often go unrecognized, not out of neglect, but because they're harder to spot amidst the demands of classroom management, time pressures, and a system that tends to emphasize more outward signs of participation.

Parents Offer a Different Perspective

85%

say their child shares what they are learning in family discussions. This behavior may signal curiosity, interest, or personal connection to the material, even if those qualities aren't always visible during class.

These findings highlight that student motivation and engagement are multidimensional. To define and measure whether students are interested, motivated and engaged in the topic, we must look beyond isolated behaviors.

Parent Perspective

I knew my boys were truly engaged in school when they woke up on their own, excited for the day. And when they got home, they'd start talking about their day and what they were learning without me even having to ask.

Susan B.
Parent,
Pleasant Ridge, MI

Students report being motivated, but educators aren't seeing it.

A striking majority (82%) of students say they deeply love learning, suggesting high intrinsic motivation. Yet about half of educators (56%) report that it is difficult to instill a love of learning for students. This may reflect a difference between students' general curiosity and the structured nature of school, which can limit autonomy, independent meaning making, or perceptions of relevance. Further reinforcing this misalignment, fewer than half of students (41%) believe their teacher knows when they are engaged, indicating a divide between how students experience engagement and how teachers perceive it.

Data also suggests that educators may be misinterpreting the role of motivation.

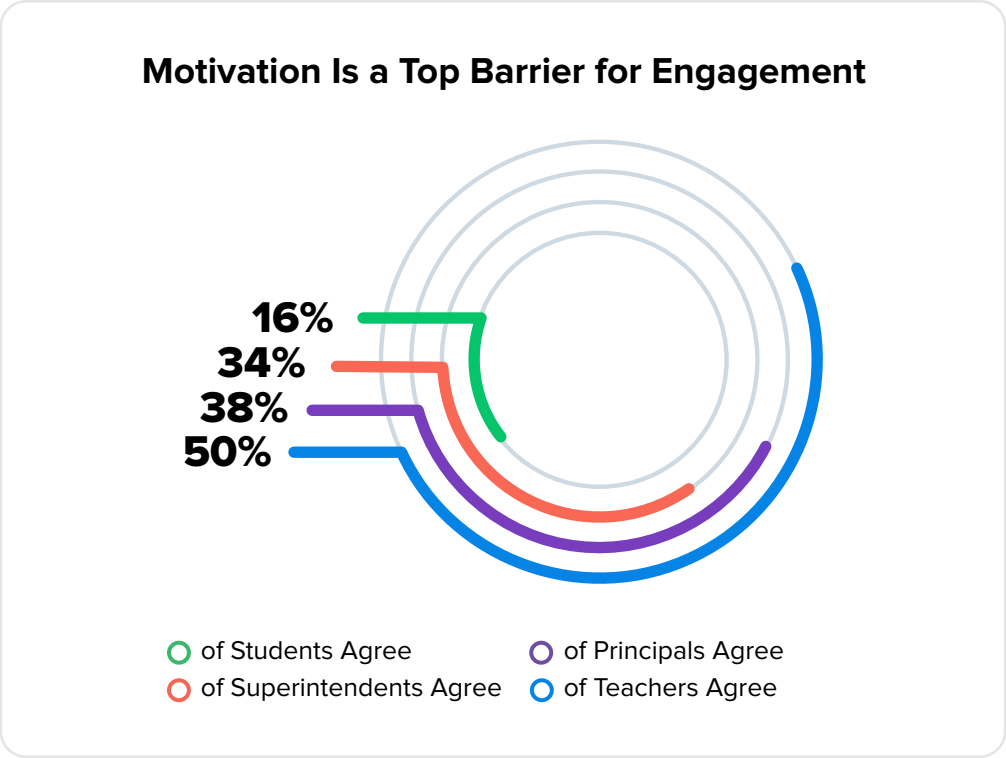


Figure 6. Comparison of how stakeholders perceive motivation as a barrier to engagement

When asked about barriers, over one-third of education leaders and half of teachers cite low motivation as the primary challenge to engagement, yet only 16% of students agree. **Nearly all students (86%) say intrinsic motivation, such as personal satisfaction and interest in subject matter is highly motivating, underscoring that motivation is less about whether they have it, and more about whether schoolwork taps into it.**

These findings align with recent Gallup research[7] which consistently shows that students report higher levels of intrinsic motivation and a desire for meaningful, challenging work, even as educators continue to view low motivation as a top concern. Similarly, a classroom study[8] found that students motivated by genuine interest or personal value in the work most often showed authentic, lasting engagement, while those driven mainly by external rewards or pressure tended toward surface-level or withdrawn participation.

Students Are Driven by More than Grades

86%

of students believe that personal satisfaction is very motivating for schoolwork.

Together, these findings suggest that what educators may interpret as disinterest often reflects a lack of relevance, personal connection, or appropriate challenge in the learning experience.

Parent Perspective

I can tell when my child is motivated and feeling personally driven when they show me what they've learned. It's one thing for them to tell me about their day, but when they're actively teaching me what they did in school and excited to share a new skill, I know they're truly interested in their learning.

Brittany S.
Parent,
Stamford, CT

Students are performing what they think counts as engagement.

Students identify participating in class, performing well, and completing homework as top metrics for engagement. These behaviors likely stand out because they are highly visible and often reinforced by educators through grading, feedback, and classroom norms.

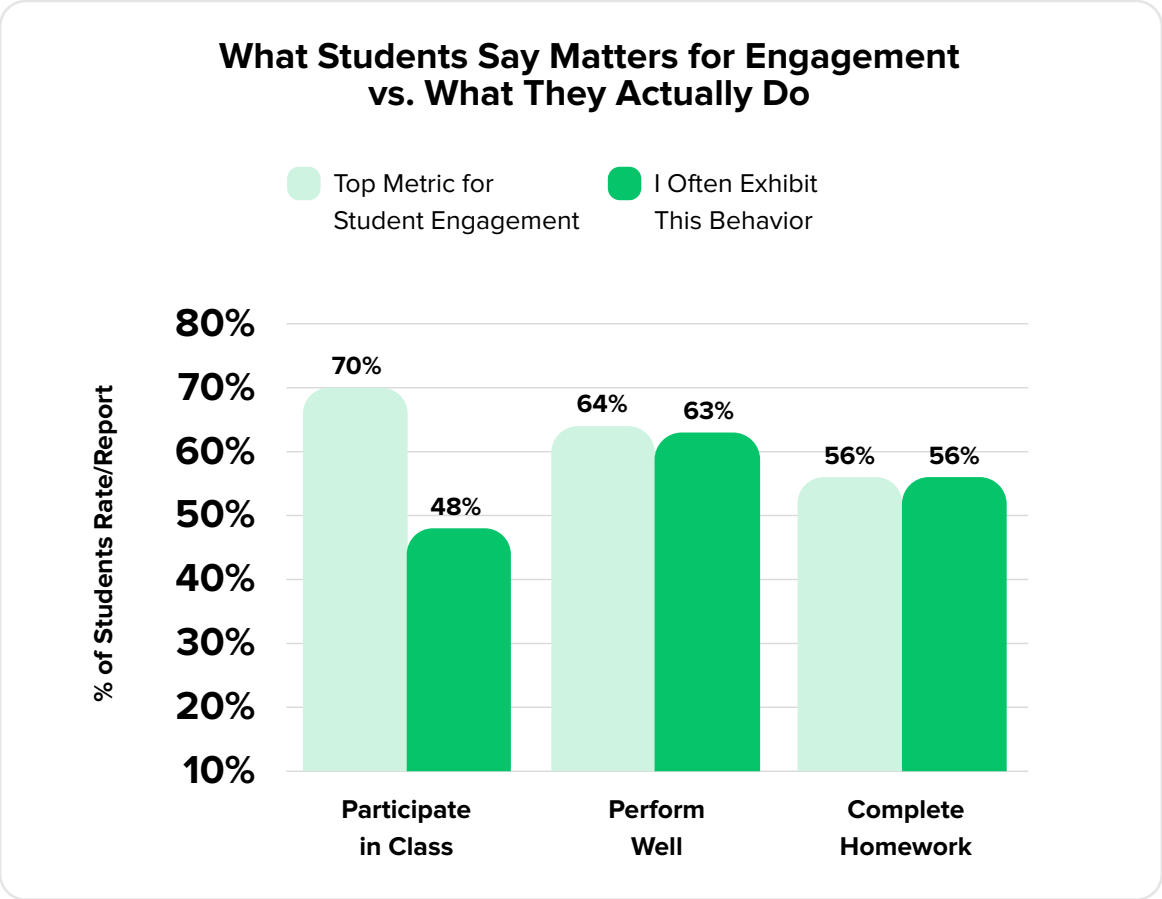


Figure 7. Comparison of students' top-rated engagement indicators and the frequency they exhibit them

However, **there is a noticeable 22-point gap between how much students value class participation and how often they actually engage in it,** suggesting that while students understand its importance, social factors like peer judgment, fear of being wrong, or discomfort speaking up may hold them back.

At the same time, the near alignment between performing well and completing homework as valued engagement indicators and the frequency with which students report doing them points to a different dynamic. These activities are more structured and task-driven, often tied directly to grades or accountability measures. Students may prioritize these behaviors not out of genuine interest or intrinsic motivation, but because they are compliance-based expectations set by teachers and schools[9].

This reflects a larger tension: students may equate engagement with doing what is required to appease educators, rather than connecting it to curiosity, challenge, or personal investment in learning.

Student Perspective

Sometimes I get good grades in classes I like because I'm interested in the topic. Other times I get good grades in classes I don't like because I need the grade for college. A good grade doesn't always mean I like the class, it could just be a means to an end.

Joseph T.
Grade 10,
Cupertino, CA

About half of students say they are focused and present in class, but only about a quarter of educators agree.

Stakeholders across all groups express concern about student focus in class. Just 55% **of students and parents strongly agree that students are present and focused on learning**, already signaling a significant challenge. Among **educators, that number drops sharply to just 22%,** with teachers, principals, and superintendents reporting far lower confidence in students' focus and presence.

Nearly 80% of teachers report that students often zone out, yet fewer than half of students say the same. This mismatch suggests that teachers may mistake quiet or internalized forms of engagement, like reflecting, imagining, or self-directing, as disengagement or a lack of motivation because these behaviors are harder to notice in the moment.

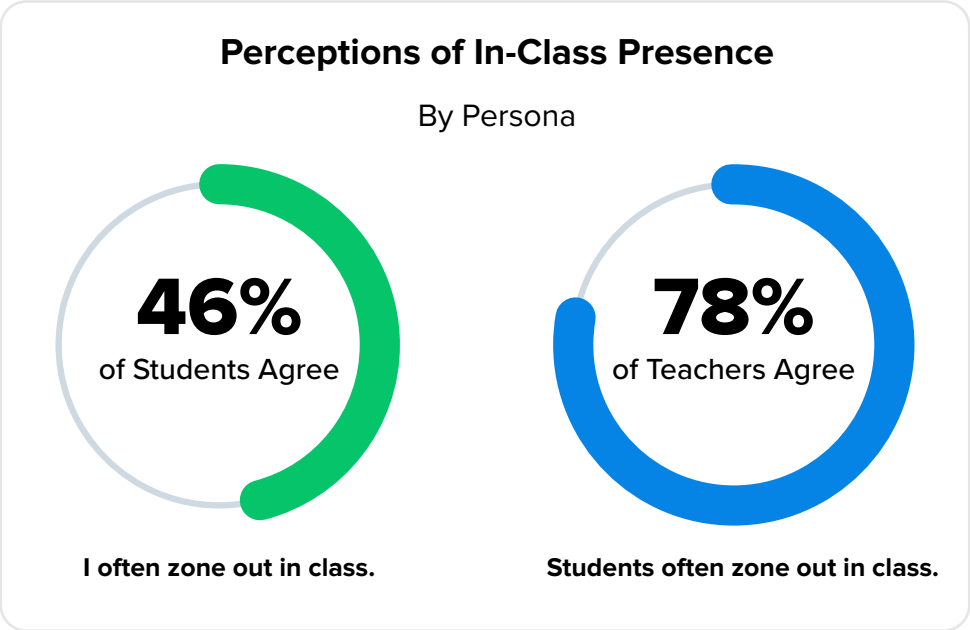


Figure 8. Comparison of teacher and student perceptions of in-class presence

Research supports this interpretation: not all teachers know how to interpret the silence of quiet students and may struggle to judge their engagement levels. In a study[10] that explored the experiences of quiet high school students, researchers found that many students viewed their silence not as disengagement, but as a deliberate strategy to stay focused and attentive. Quiet students described their silence as a sign of interest, commitment, and deeper learning, highlighting an often-overlooked form of engagement that can go unrecognized in classroom settings.

Teacher Perspective

Engagement doesn't always look the way we expect. I used to assume that a student who's drawing isn't listening. But then I'll have a quick conversation with them, or they'll complete a formative assessment or an exit ticket, and it's clear they actually got it. I think we tend to assume that if students are multitasking, they're off-task—but many are just engaging in their own way.

Shelby Kilmister
6th Grade Science Teacher,
Penacook, NH

Feeling overwhelmed is a top barrier for students, but not because they find school too difficult.

We asked all stakeholder groups to identify the top challenges impacting student engagement. While **students and parents consistently cited feeling overwhelmed as a primary barrier, second only to boredom**, educators ranked it far lower.

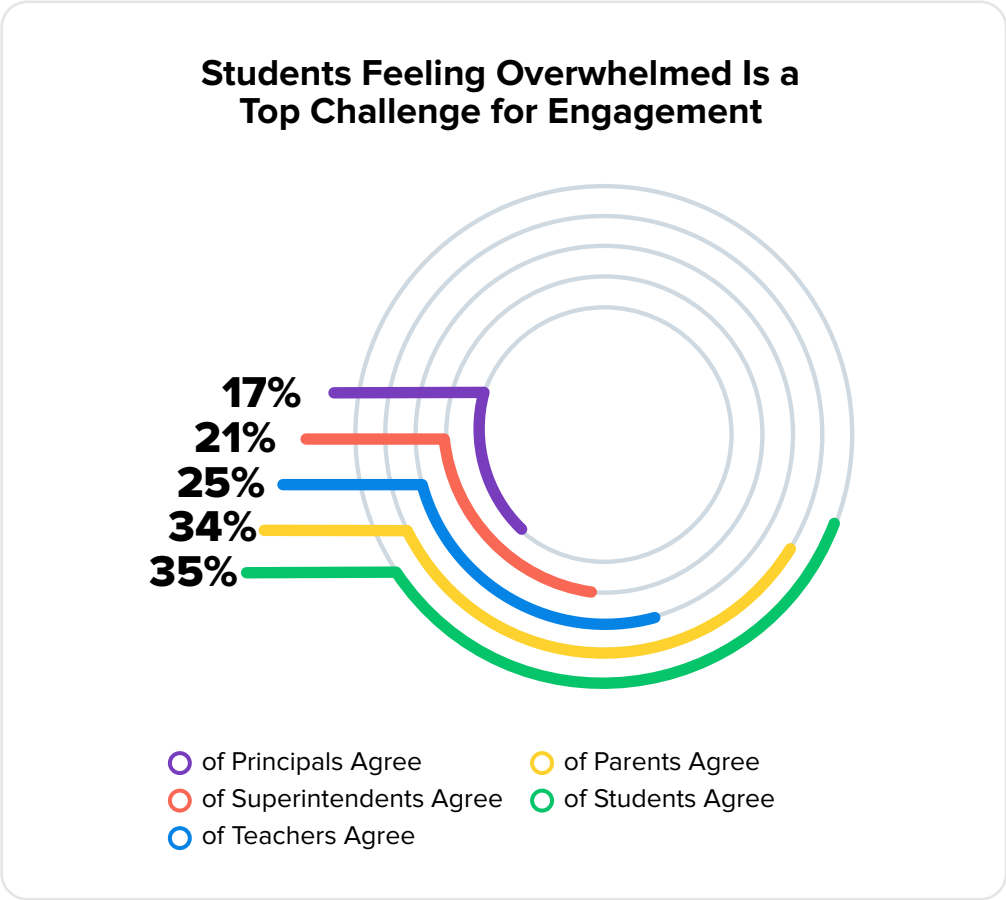


Figure 9. Comparison of stakeholder perceptions on overwhelm as an engagement challenge

Over one-third of students and parents identify feeling overwhelmed as a top barrier to engagement, yet only 25% of teachers, 21% of superintendents, and just 17% of principals say the same.

Conversely, across eleven challenge areas, **students being overwhelmed ranked among the bottom three for all educator groups**, third-lowest for teachers and superintendents, and lowest overall for principals.

Parent Perspective

Sometimes my kids get overwhelmed, especially when multiple assignments from different classes pile up with overlapping deadlines. It's not necessarily the difficulty of the work, but the volume and pace that can stress them out. I think building in more structured time during the school day for catching up, asking questions, or just decompressing would make a big difference. Some of the overwhelm comes from not knowing where to start or feeling like they have to manage everything on their own.

James T.
Parent,
Mountain View, CA

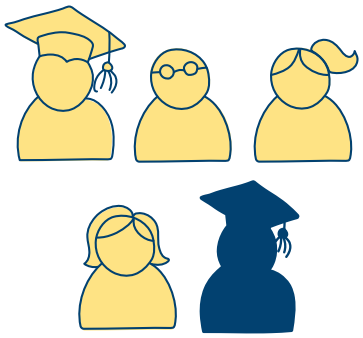
Teachers may be observing the effects of overwhelm firsthand.

~2/3

Nearly two-thirds of teachers report that students frequently turn in incomplete work.

Over 60% of teachers report that students frequently turn in incomplete work, compared to just 23% of students who acknowledge doing so. For educators, incomplete work may appear as a sign of struggle to learn new concepts or skills, while for students it may reflect disengagement, cognitive overload, or competing priorities. Research[11] on homework patterns shows that when students feel overloaded or stressed, they are more likely to leave assignments unfinished, not because they lack ability, but because the mental strain reduces focus and persistence.

Students feel both overworked and under-challenged.



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Students believe that school is easy.

The majority of students (79%) report that school feels easy, while only about half of teachers (53%) agree. This suggests students may find the material itself manageable but still feel overwhelmed by factors such as workload volume, pacing, or external pressures.

Engagement researchers have defined this dynamic of simultaneous workload and boredom as *passenger mode*.[12] Students show up, follow instructions, and complete homework, but they do so passively, without taking initiative or feeling personally or cognitively connected to their learning. Over time, this leaves students feeling both overwhelmed and bored, unsure of the purpose behind what they're asked to do and increasingly checked out.

Student Perspective

When you're doing the schoolwork it can feel like a lot of pressure if you're being graded, even if it's not hard. I want to do well, and that can be overwhelming.

Niko K.
Grade 7,
Lake Oswego City, OR

Students believe that challenging material could help improve engagement levels, but educators are less certain.

Students and parents widely agree that school feels easier than self-reported ratings by educators, and both groups believe that more challenging lessons would make learning more engaging.

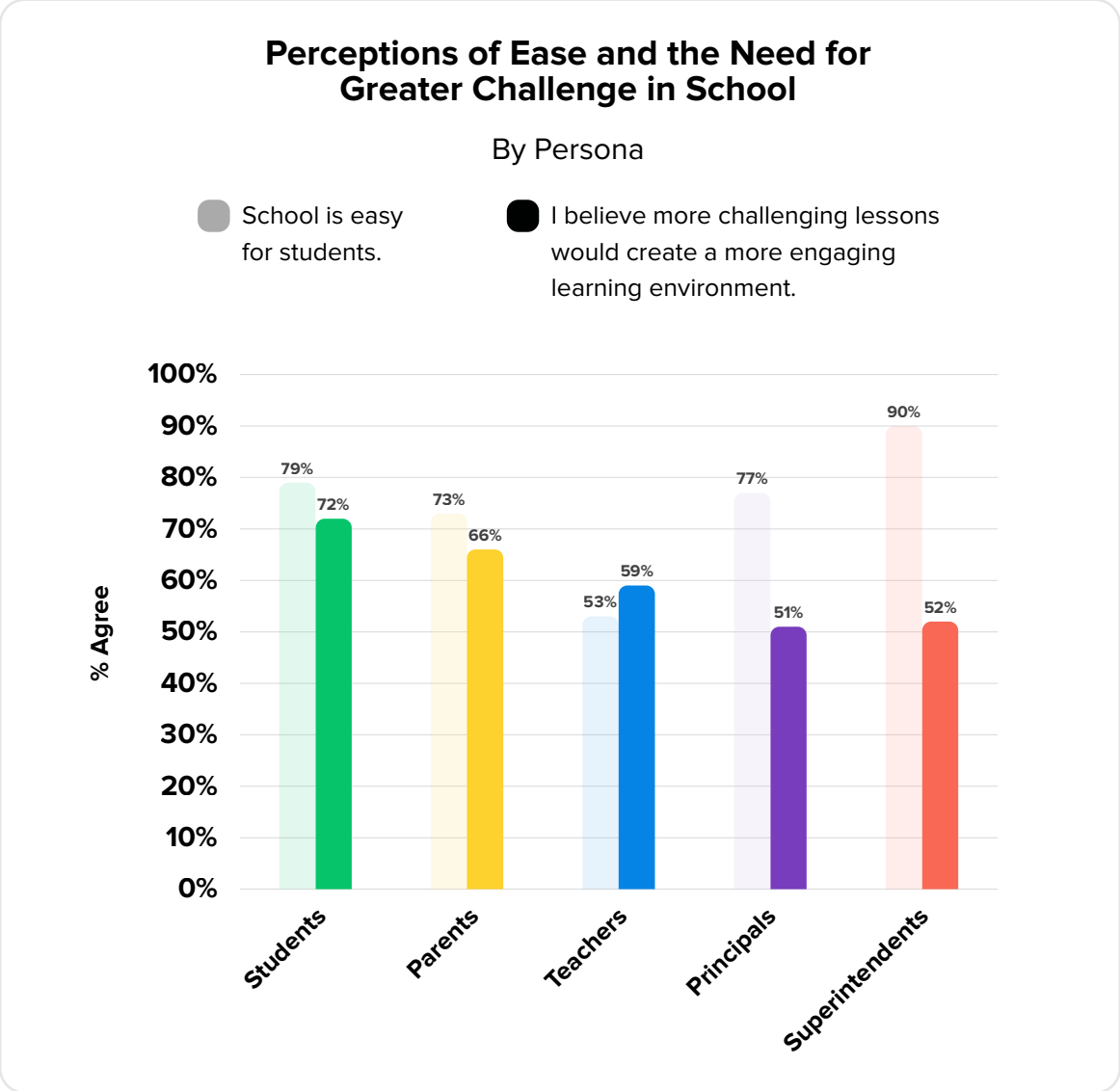

Figure 10. All stakeholder groups' perceptions of school rigor

This reflects a common tension highlighted in engagement research: while **students may find content easy to complete, they often crave deeper, more meaningful challenges** that spark curiosity and demonstrate relevance. Studies show that when tasks push students just beyond their comfort zone, engagement and long-term learning improve.[13]

Teachers hold a more complex perspective. They are the least likely group to say school is easy for students, yet they are also the most likely among educators to believe that adding more challenging lessons would improve engagement.

Teachers observe both visible struggles and missed opportunities for deeper learning in their classrooms and with individual students. Research on classroom dynamics shows teachers often see firsthand how appropriate challenge, when paired with the right support, helps keep students focused and invested. At the same time, teachers may carry concerns about balancing rigor with students' wide-ranging needs and managing their own instructional workload, which can shape how strongly they prioritize increased challenge.

Principals and superintendents often see school as easier for students than teachers do, but place less value on increasing challenge. Their broader leadership duties, including balancing academics with compliance, operations, and community needs, may lead them to gauge engagement through efficiency and results, especially when performance is strong.

Student Perspective

School can get really boring when it's too easy. In writing, they tell us to just do one paragraph. It's so easy that it makes me feel bored, and I don't even want to start. But when we get to write a whole story, I get really excited. I have so many ideas, and I can't wait to see how it ends. Writing a story makes me feel like I'm really thinking about something. Writing a single paragraph makes me feel dread.

Amelia C.
Grade 5,
Campbell, CA

Teachers may overlook quiet students who are mentally present but externally hesitant.

Data from Figure 4. shows that for all educators, students asking questions is the top engagement indicator. Teachers value it most highly, with 72% identifying it as a top signal of student engagement. **Yet, when asked how often students ask questions, only 34% of teachers report seeing it happen frequently in their classrooms. From the student perspective, less than half (41%) say they regularly ask questions in class.**

This gap highlights a key tension in how engagement is recognized and expressed. Asking questions requires not just curiosity, but also social confidence and a classroom environment where students feel comfortable speaking up.

Many students want to contribute but feel too shy or nervous, especially in middle school. This highlights that lack of verbal participation doesn't equal lack of engagement.

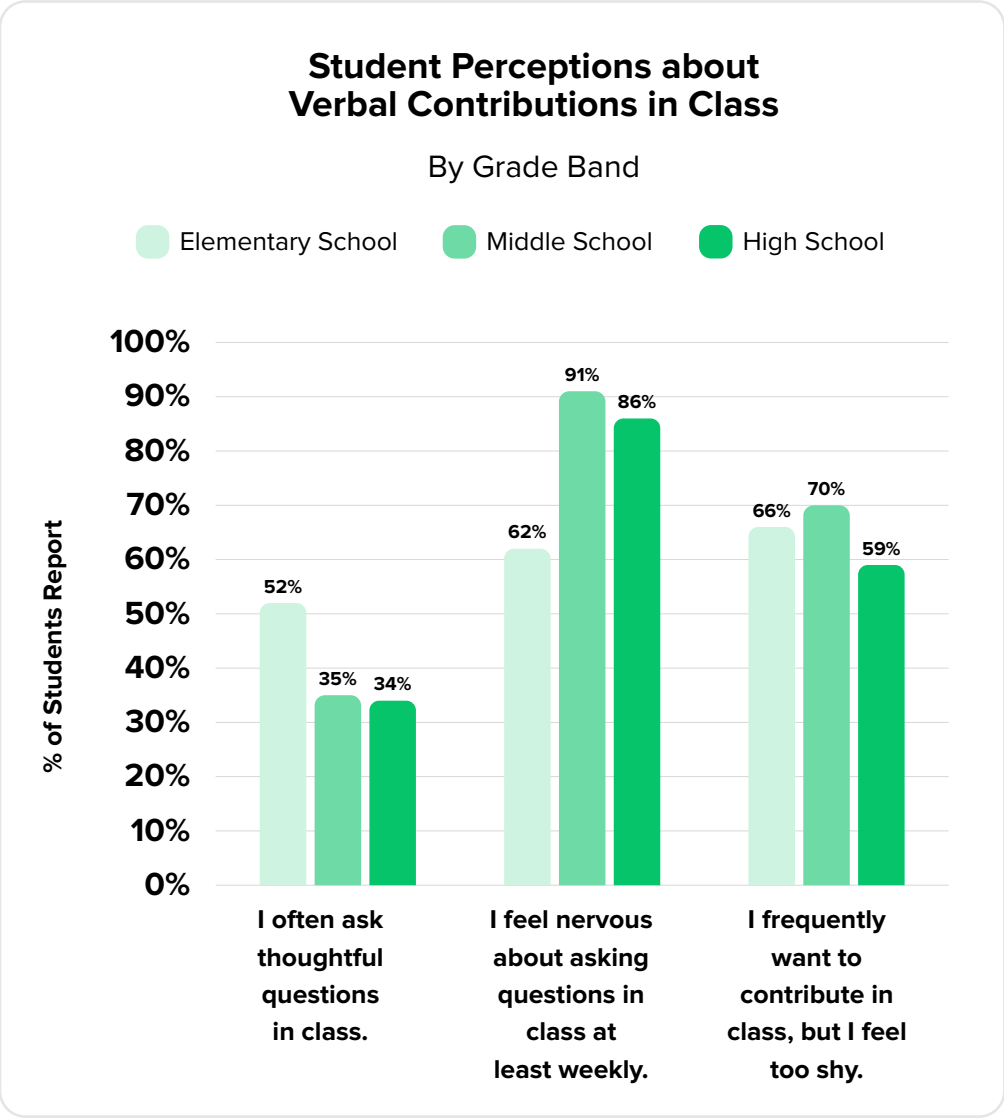

Figure 11. Student perceptions of participation and classroom confidence by grade band

As students move from elementary to high school, they become more hesitant to engage verbally in class, even as their internal engagement may persist or deepen. **This hesitancy reaches its peak in middle school: 91% of middle school students report feeling nervous about asking questions in class**, a 29-point increase from students in elementary school. As students enter adolescence, they become increasingly sensitive to peer perception and social evaluation, which can inhibit verbal participation.[14]

Student Perspective

I don't like being the center of attention, so I don't speak up often because I hate everyone looking at me.

Riley H.
Grade 8,
Perrysburg, OH

Additionally, help-seeking behaviors such as asking questions tend to decline with age, as students grow more concerned about appearing less competent to others.[15] These dynamics highlight an important engagement paradox: even as students mature cognitively, their willingness to visibly engage through verbal contributions may diminish, underscoring the need for classroom environments that actively reduce social risk and encourage curiosity-driven participation.

Recognizing Engagement in Multilingual Learners

Multilingual learners may express engagement in ways that don't align with classroom expectations, particularly when they are still developing English proficiency. Quiet reflection, internal processing, and nonverbal participation can be signs of deep cognitive engagement, even if students aren't speaking up in class. Research[16] shows that when multilingual learners are given scaffolded opportunities to engage through reading and writing before speaking, they build confidence, develop content understanding, and strengthen their language skills.

Teacher Perspective

It's easy to assume the hand-raiser is the engaged student, especially for someone observing from the outside. But engagement and understanding are far more complex. That's why it's important to give students different ways to show what they know. The student who's always raising their hand isn't necessarily the one who understands more, especially with younger students. A quieter student might be showing their understanding in other ways—through drawing, writing, or even just needing more time to feel confident sharing aloud.

Chris Higgins
1st Grade Teacher,
Philadelphia, PA

What You Can Do

Help students reflect on what drives their engagement, and how they learn best.

Incorporate student self-reflection on their engagement levels into formative assessments. By providing tools and language to help students articulate how engaged they feel, teachers will have a more complete picture and students will be motivated to take ownership of their learning.

As students get older, disengagement becomes harder to detect, and more tied to passive behaviors like phone use and sleep.

Data reveals a clear shift in how student disengagement manifests across grade levels. **Students shift from visible, socially oriented behaviors (chatting, acting out) to more passive, self-directed disengagement (phone use and sleeping).** This may reflect both developmental factors, such as increased autonomy, and access to personal devices.

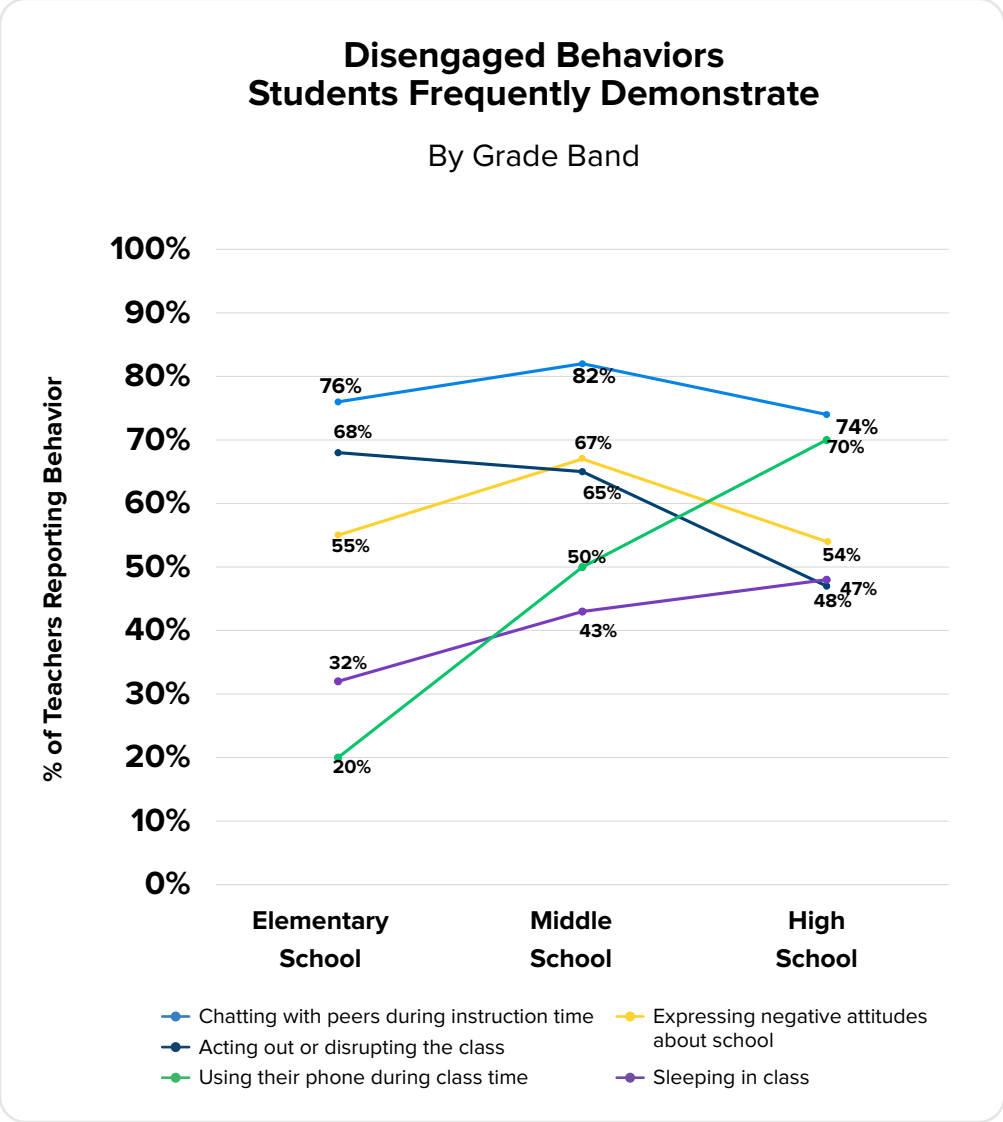

Figure 12. Teachers' observed signs of student disengagement by grade band

In elementary school, teachers most frequently observe disengagement through social behaviors such as chatting with peers (76%) and acting out or disrupting the class (68%), suggesting that younger students' disengagement is often outward and interactive.

By middle school, disengagement patterns begin to change. It's a pivotal stage where both traditional disruptions and emerging passive behaviors appear at similar rates. While social disruptions like acting out and chatting with peers remain prevalent, phone use increases by 30 points and sleeping in class rises noticeably.

Middle school teachers also report the highest frequency of students expressing negative attitudes toward school, likely reflecting early adolescence as a time of heightened pushback against authority and identity exploration.

By high school, overt negativity declines to its lowest point (54%), but this drop does not necessarily indicate higher engagement. Instead, disengagement and engagement become more individualized: nearly half of teachers report students sleeping in class frequently, and nearly three-quarters (70%) report frequent phone use. Phones, in particular, create a private channel for disengagement that may go unnoticed by others yet still undermines learning. This shift from visible to quiet disengagement aligns with research showing that as students mature, they often mask disinterest through avoidance behaviors rather than open resistance.

Educator Perspective

For students to truly engage, they need to feel safe, accepted, and have a clear sense of purpose in the classroom. That starts with us, as educators, recognizing who they are as people before introducing our own goals, ideas, or academic expectations.

Sarah Yonts
School Librarian,
Green Bay, WI

Data from this report also reveals how technology continues to shape engagement and distraction in classrooms. **Over half (60%) of high school students admit to using their phone in class, and two-thirds of teachers and education leaders believe that students are distracted by their phones in class.**

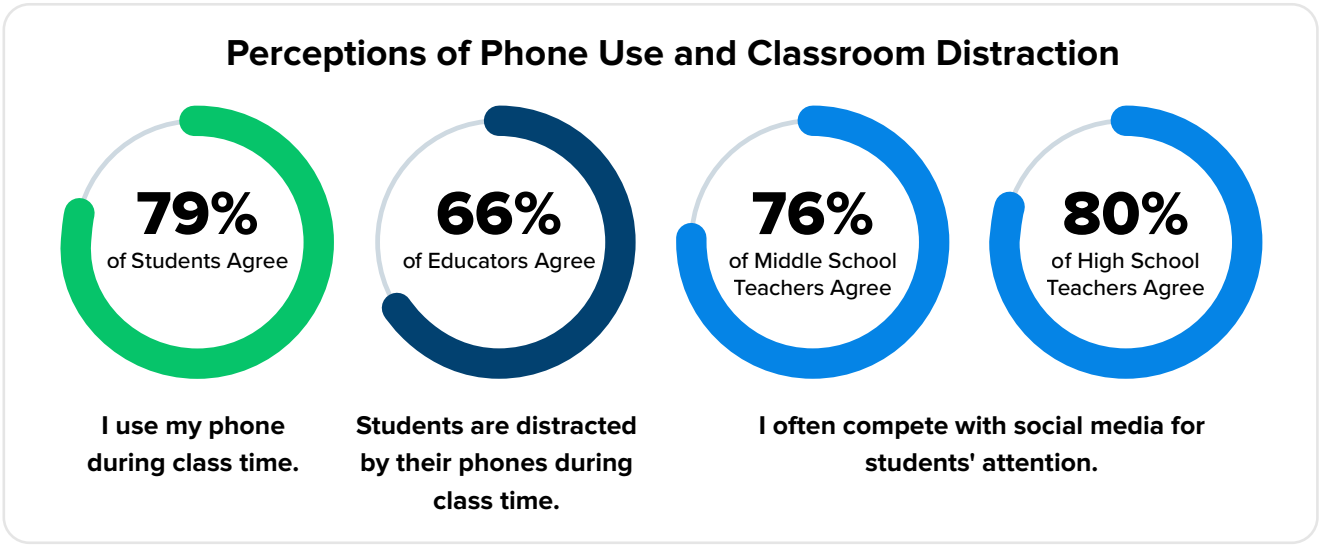

Figure 13. Student and educator perceptions of technology distractions

The majority of teachers also agree that technology poses a major distraction, especially in higher grades where 76% of middle school teachers and 80% of high school teachers say they often compete with social media for students' attention. Most students (79%) also admit that cell phone usage in class can be disruptive to learning.

Technology shapes engagement, distraction, and participation in learning.

At the same time, new challenges around AI are emerging: **40% of students report using AI on assignments without permission**, while 65% of teachers say they have caught students doing so.

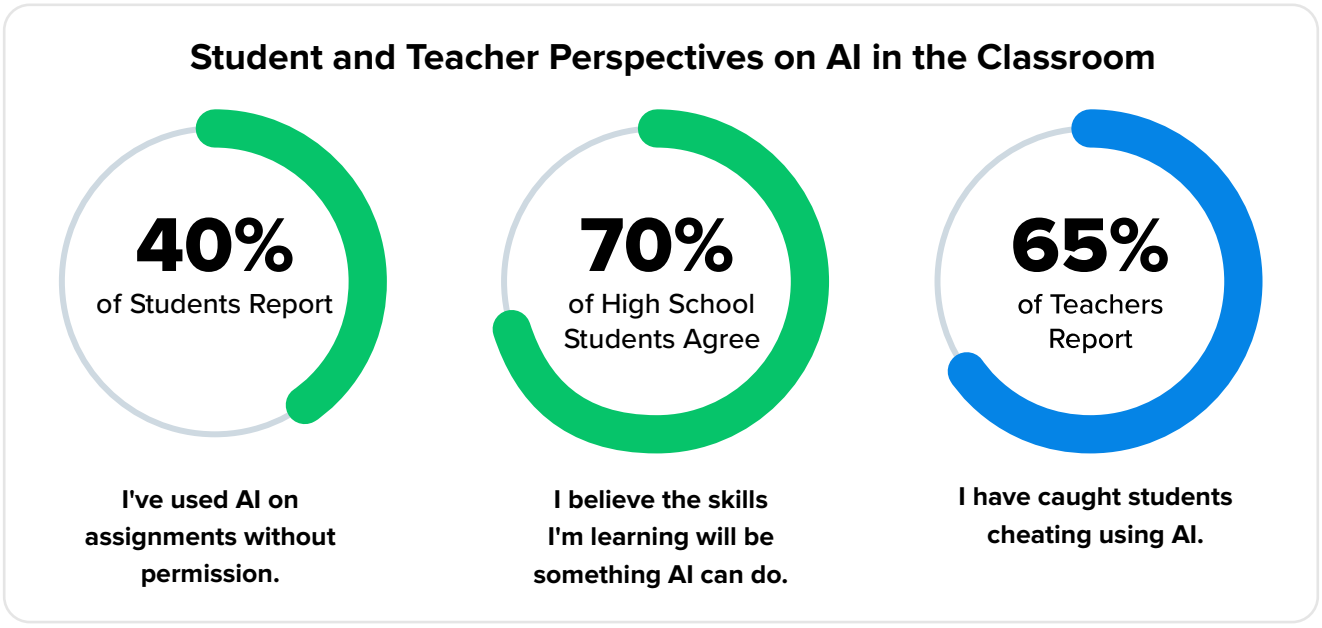

Figure 14. Teacher and student AI experiences and beliefs

Notably, when asked, 70% of high school students believe that the skills they are learning will eventually be replaced by AI, suggesting that disengagement in traditional learning methods may be driven not only by distraction but also by uncertainty about the long-term value of what and how they're being taught.

High school students are 35% more likely than their parents to believe AI will replace the skills they're learning in school, and research from Common Sense Media[17] echoes this sentiment. Data shows that while students express some reservations about AI's impact on learning and society, they report a more optimistic outlook on AI and social media compared to parents. This contrast highlights a generational gap in how technology's role in education is perceived, with students seeing both the risks and opportunities it presents.

Teacher Perspective

Balancing technology use in 2025 is challenging. I recently attended a conference on integrating AVID strategies into AP, Dual Enrollment, and honors classes, and many colleagues shared that they are returning to paper for 2025–2026 to reduce plagiarism and keep students engaged and on track in class.

Jessica Erlanger
High School English Teacher,
Upland, CA

Engagement Opportunities: Conditions Where Learning Thrives

Driving deep and meaningful student engagement takes recognition, strategies, and support in today's classrooms.

Alignment across roles, practical resources, and actionable insights empower teachers to create learning environments where all students can thrive.

Student engagement is complex, and as previous findings show, it can be difficult to define, recognize, and support consistently across classrooms. Teachers play a critical role in shaping engagement and motivation and supporting them is key to fostering a learning environment where engagement thrives. However, educators report challenges with measuring engagement, identifying disengagement, and creating space for deeper, more meaningful learning.

Top 3 Challenges Teachers Face When Measuring Engagement:

1. **Variation across each student, grade, or subject.**
2. **Limited time or resources.**
3. **Lack of tools or resources to monitor and measure engagement over time.**

Despite these barriers, there is strong alignment across roles about what's needed to improve engagement. Both teachers and district leaders recognize that better tools, shared language, and practical strategies are key to moving forward. **Eighty-nine percent of superintendents and 78% of teachers agree that educators would benefit from tools to measure and monitor students' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement.**

This data in this section explores those shared strategies and system-level solutions. From clarifying expectations to creating more time for personalization, the findings highlight actionable ways to move from recognizing the problem to resolving it, grounded in alignment, practical support, and better use of tools and technology to meet students' needs.

Teacher Perspective

As educators, the number one challenge that we have is that the level of engagement for our students varies so much. It could change from student to student, it can change from the context of whatever we're teaching at the time as well.

Trish Messer
Math Teacher,
Palm Beach, FL

All groups agree on what drives engagement.

According to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework[18] building learners, fostering meaning-making, and developing strong self-management skills is central to drive engagement. When these elements are intentionally built into lessons, students are more likely to engage deeply, self-regulate, persist through challenges, and make meaningful connections. This aligns closely with what stakeholders in this study identified as the most powerful drivers of engagement, lessons that feel meaningful, relevant, and connected to real-world applications. Across all stakeholder groups, there is clear alignment that **students put in stronger effort when lessons feel meaningful and relevant.**

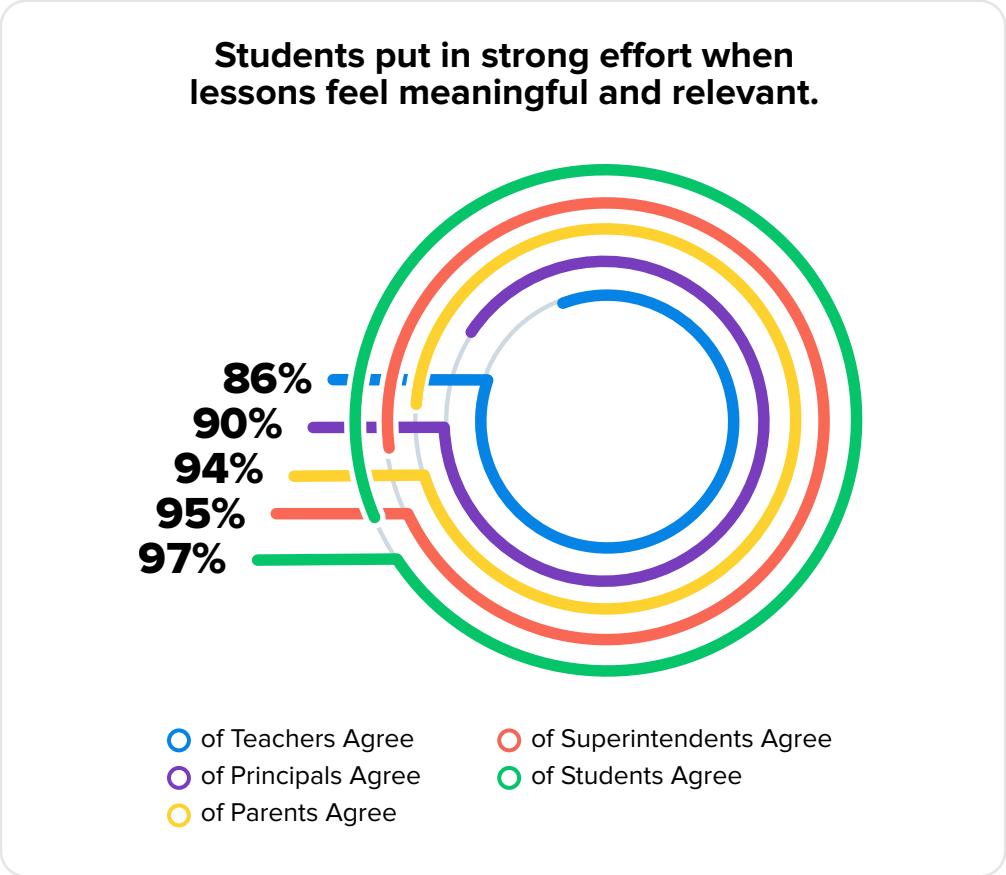

Figure 15. Stakeholder perceptions of meaningful and relevant content

This shared understanding highlights the importance of creating purposeful, personally connected learning experiences that help students see real-world value, not just completing tasks for compliance or grades.

When asked to rate specific strategies for improving engagement, **students, parents, and principals selected *more exciting content and lessons* as most impactful.** Teachers emphasized personally relevant lessons, while superintendents prioritized more opportunities for active, hands-on learning. These findings reinforce established research showing that relevance and active learning fuel deeper engagement.

Educator Perspective

Students engage more deeply when they feel their voice matters. One of the ways I support that is by sharing credible resources that align with what they care about, whether it's a topic they're passionate about or something they believe needs to be heard. When they have solid information to back up their perspective, it builds their confidence. They know what they're saying is accurate, and that empowers them to speak up, even louder. Helping them find those tools to amplify their voice is a big part of my role as a high school librarian.

Lisa Dibello Wolski
High School Librarian,
Hamburg, NY

What You Can Do

Prioritize real-world examples and career connections.

Students feel engaged when they see the personal relevance of lessons. Across all core subjects, teachers can demonstrate that relevance through instruction that students can see themselves in.

Stakeholders also agree that limited classroom resources are a barrier to engagement.

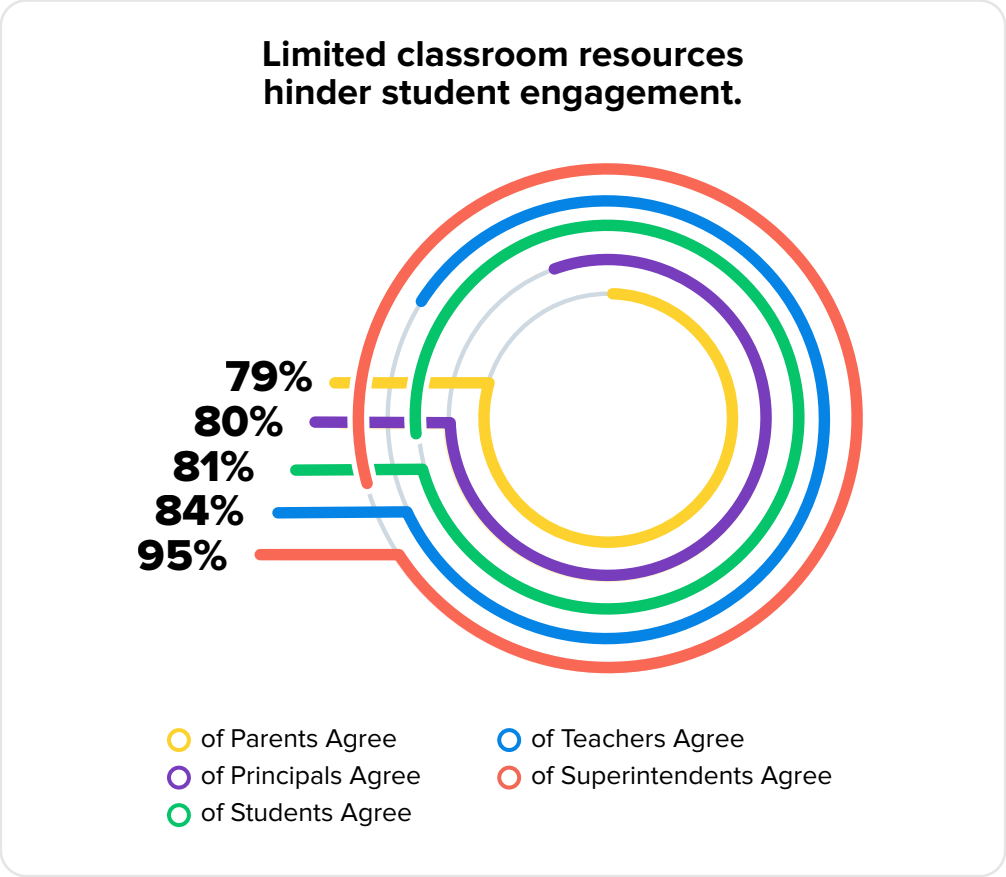

Figure 16. Comparison of stakeholder perceptions for resource limitations

At the same time, stakeholders widely agree on a major barrier: limited classroom resources. While 81% of students and 79% of parents recognize this challenge, educators feel it even more acutely.

Eighty-four percent of teachers and 80% of principals report limited resources as a barrier, with superintendents citing it most strongly at 95%. This consistent pattern underscores that **resource constraints continue to limit schools' ability to support deeper student engagement.**

Student Perspective

I feel most engaged in class when the topic is interesting and the teacher explains why it's important. I want to know why it matters and how it applies to the real world.

Lennon S.
Grade 5,
Concord, NC

Leadership sees systems in place, yet teachers don't feel it in practice.

While educators largely agree on the value of fostering engaging learning experiences and deeper connection for students with content, teachers often report feeling less supported and less aligned when it comes to implementing this in their classrooms.

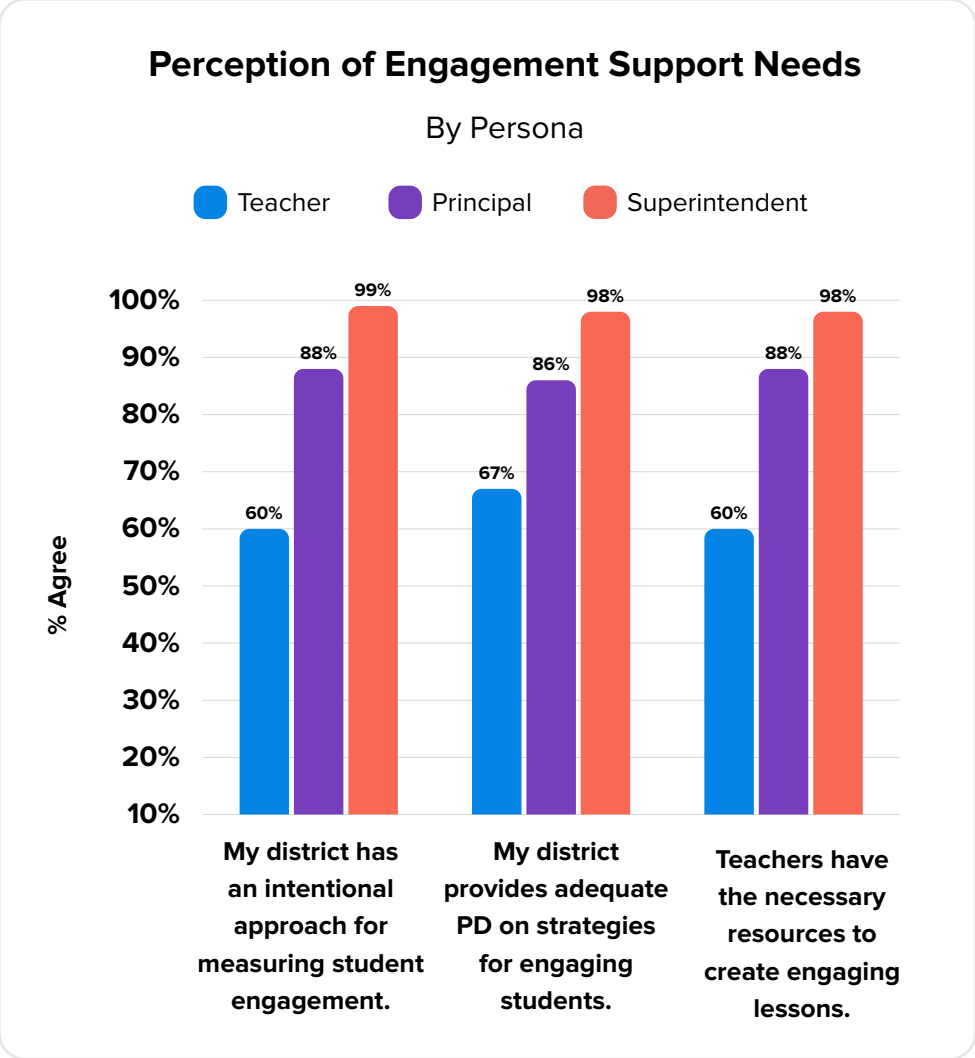

Figure 17. Comparison of educator engagement support needs

Approximately one in three teachers identify the absence of a clear, shared definition of student engagement as a key obstacle to effective measurement. Further, while 99% of superintendents and 88% of principals say their district has an intentional approach for measuring engagement, only 60% of teachers agree. Data consistently shows a gap between leadership perception and teacher experience. Leaders may point to outcome metrics like assessment data or attendance, while teachers may be seeking more immediate, observable signs of engagement in the classroom.

Similarly, while the majority of superintendents (98%) and principals (86%) believe their district provides adequate professional development to support student engagement in learning, only about two-thirds of teachers agree. Teachers also report far lower confidence in having the necessary resources to create engaging lessons,

Bridging the Gap: How Principals Connect District Goals to Classroom Needs

Principals consistently fall in the middle between teachers and superintendents, reflecting their unique role bridging district strategies and classroom realities. This pattern suggests that proximity to students influences perception: teachers, working closest to students, tend to report lower confidence in system supports, while superintendents, with a broader system-wide view, express greater confidence in district efforts.[19]

These findings suggest that principals have the opportunity to bridge this gap, helping district leaders develop the systems needed by classroom teachers, and ensuring teachers are aware and using the support available to them.

Principal Perspective

Advocacy starts with trusting our teachers—they know their students best. I listen to their ideas, support them as they try new strategies, and create opportunities to learn from one another by observing great practices in action. Then, I bring their voices to the table to advocate for the tools and training they need to help our kids thrive.

Selina Latimore
Principal,
Columbia, SC

Meaningful engagement requires bandwidth that many teachers simply don't have.

Findings from this report show strong alignment among educators on what drives engagement: more relevant, personalized, and active learning experiences. Yet when asked what would most help them deliver those experiences, **teachers overwhelmingly identified more time to prepare lessons as their top need.** This suggests that even when teachers know which strategies work, limited time prevents them from fully putting those approaches into practice.

#1

Teachers ranked time to prepare lessons as the number one support to increase student engagement.

Teacher Perceptions on Time and Resources

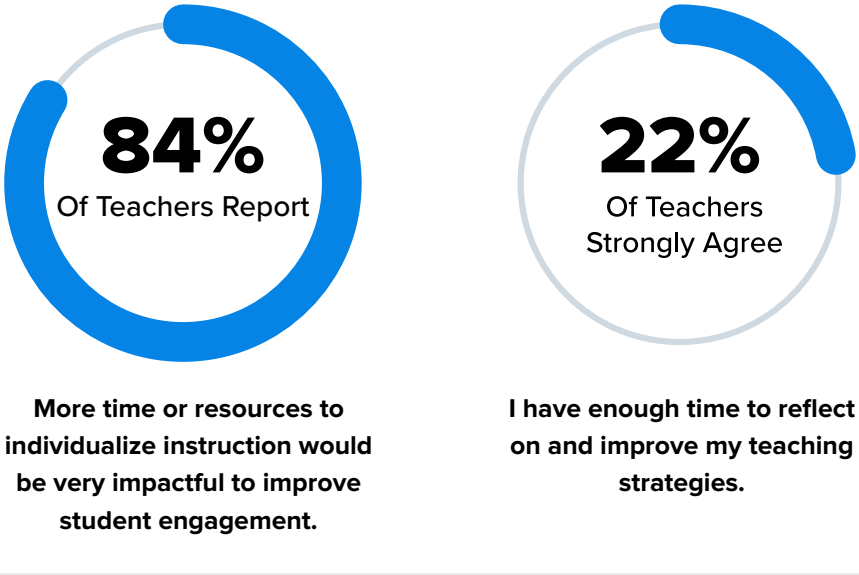

Figure 18. Teachers' reported time limitations

Eighty-four percent of teachers say that having more capacity to individualize instruction would be highly impactful. **Time is not only a barrier to creating new engagement opportunities, but also to improving what is already in place.** Fewer than one in four teachers (22%) feel that they have enough time to reflect on and improve their teaching strategies.

This challenge reflects broader national patterns. According to the RAND Corporation, teachers report working an average of 53 hours per week, seven more than the average working adult, with a significant share of that time spent on non-instructional tasks like paperwork, grading, and administrative duties.[20] This heavy workload limits the time available for lesson preparation, collaboration, and reflection, all of which are critical for fostering engaging, student-centered learning.

AI holds promise for all groups, though teachers temper their enthusiasm with caution.

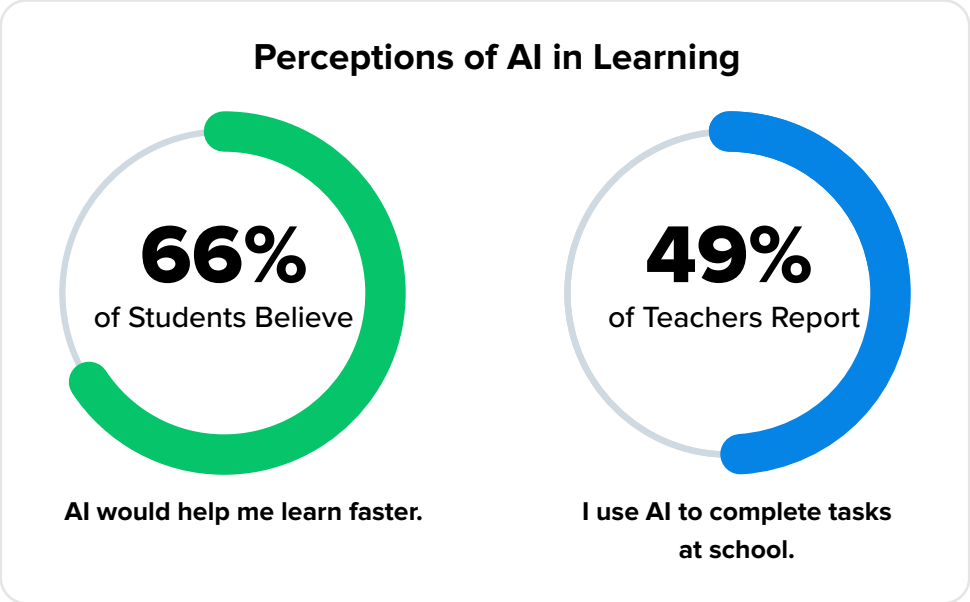

Figure 19. Teacher and student AI perceptions and usage

At the same time, students express openness to new tools that could help accelerate learning. Two-thirds of students believe AI could help them learn faster, yet fewer than half of teachers report using AI themselves to complete tasks. **This gap suggests untapped opportunities to streamline teacher workload, freeing up valuable time that could be redirected toward personalizing instruction** and building more engaging, student-centered learning environments.

Students and educators alike are optimistic about the role AI can play in enhancing learning and engagement. **Nearly three out of four high school students report having been allowed to use AI on an assignment, and most students believe that AI tools can help them learn and complete schoolwork faster.**

70%

Of students believe AI tools could help them complete schoolwork faster.

These numbers reflect a growing comfort with AI as both a learning aid and productivity tool among students.

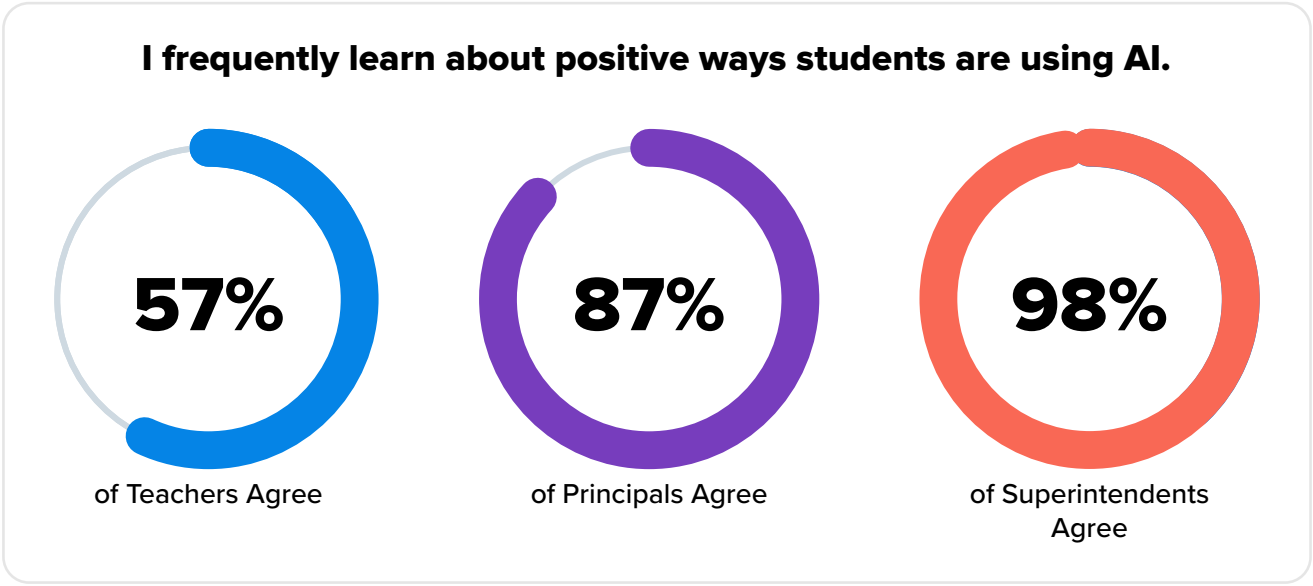

Figure 20. Comparison of educator awareness of positive AI use

While students are eager to use AI and see clear benefits, many teachers may not yet share that same optimism, partly because they may not be seeing as much of AI's positive impact firsthand.

Only 57% of teachers report frequently learning about positive ways students use AI, compared to 87% of principals and 98% of superintendents. This gap in visibility may help explain why only about half (53%) of teachers report feeling optimistic about AI's potential.

Teachers' more measured outlook likely reflects their frontline experience: managing student distractions, navigating unclear policies, and often lacking the training or support needed to integrate new technologies effectively. **Without clear guidance, professional development, and regular exposure to success stories, AI may feel like one more challenge rather than a helpful tool.**

At the leadership level, however, excitement is high. Nearly all superintendents (94%) and principals (89%) say they are excited about AI's potential to support teaching and learning. At the same time, **100% of superintendents agree AI must be implemented carefully to avoid negative consequences**. This enthusiasm mirrors a national trend, with states and organizations creating AI hubs and guidance[21] support responsible adoption.

Together these findings point to system-level focus and implementation of AI that harnesses student interest in new technologies while prioritizing engagement. In addition to identifying how AI could enhance student engagement, educators and technologists must also consider how AI could contribute to passive disengagement.

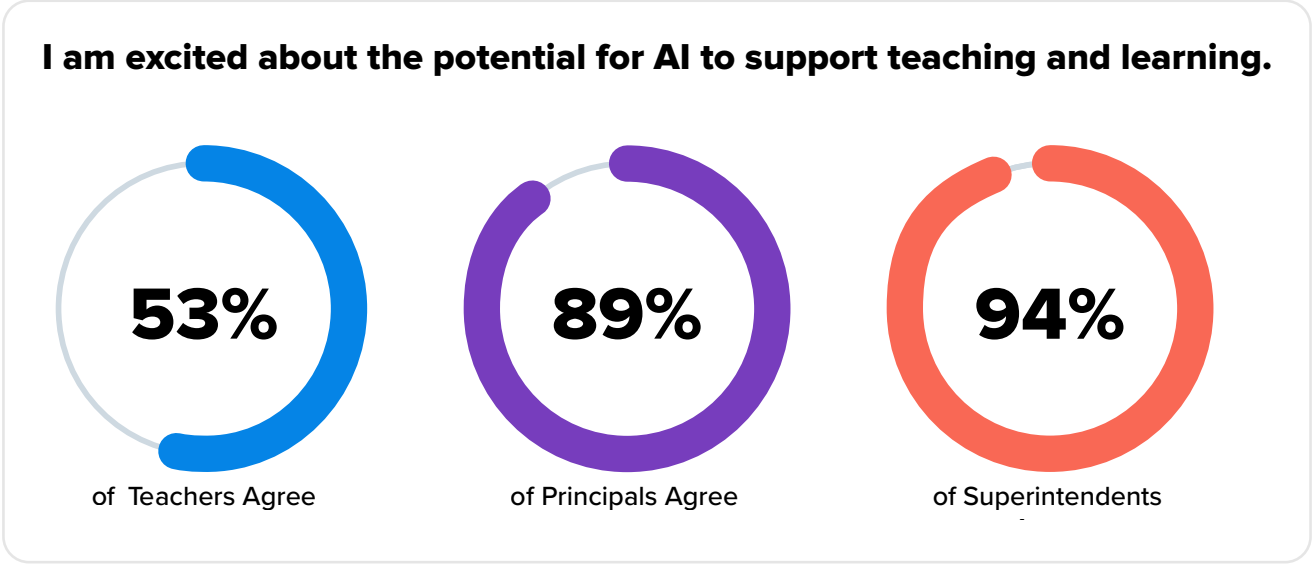

Figure 21. Comparison of educator enthusiasm for AI technology for learning

Teacher Perspective

I always look for ways to engage students in using AI effectively—for example, to generate ideas, organize thoughts, and clarify questions—rather than relying on it to write papers or complete assignments. In my own practice, I've used AI to support teaching by creating calendars, converting documents into presentations, and generating agree/disagree statements from text to spark discussions.

Jessica Erlanger
High School English Teacher,
Upland, CA

Student Perspective

I used AI outside of school for my YouTube channel to create graphics and turn myself into an animated version. It helped me make a logo for my YouTube channel.

Lennon S.
Grade 5,
Concord, NC

Engagement Fuels Learning

Engagement is not only a lever for improving learning outcomes, but it can also be a leading indicator of student success across the board. By listening to the voices of educators, students, and parents, we can take the next step: building more consistent and actionable approaches to engagement in every classroom.

Our research, along with decades of educational studies, confirms that when students are actively involved in their own learning, they learn and achieve more. When students are deeply engaged, knowledge retention improves, skills transfer, and deeper understanding takes place. These are outcomes that matter not just for end-of-course or grade-leveloutcomes, but for real-world readiness. You can be engaged and not retain new information, but you cannot learn deeply without cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement.

Researchers believe that when students are engaged, thinking deeply, motivated to learn, and actively participating, they gain a stronger understanding of material and experience better learning outcomes.[22] This report reveals persistent disconnects between how that engagement is defined, observed, and supported. These gaps can undermine instruction, limit opportunities and growth for students, and make it harder to create meaningful learning experiences.

Students who are quiet or reflective are sometimes assumed to be disengaged, while those who comply may be seen as engaged, even when they're not truly connected with the material. At the same time, educators face limited time, tools, and capacity to make instruction consistently relevant, active, and personalized.

Technology further complicates the picture. Students view digital tools as opportunities for personalization and exploration. Educators worry about distraction and disengagement. These tensions highlight the need for thoughtful, intentional integration that supports rather than competes with engagement.

This challenge isn't a lack of commitment; it's a lack of shared understanding. Teachers often look for signs like curiosity and reflection. Students and district leaders may associate engagement more with task completion or achievement. Without shared frameworks and definitions, meaningful engagement risks being misread or missed entirely. Research[23] suggests these quietly compliant students may miss valuable opportunities to build lasting knowledge and skills, especially during key developmental years when engagement tends to decline.

Stakeholders agree the most engaging lessons are relevant, hands-on, and connected to real-world applications. This shared insight provides a strong foundation, but it needs stronger systems to support it.

Since emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement are critical to learning, educators can reflect on research, implement defined measurements in classrooms, and support teachers with the time, tools, and resources to ensure all students are engaged in deep learning.

Without this clarity and support, we risk more than missed signs; we risk widening the engagement gap and limiting student success. But with the right tools and shared commitment, schools can create a learning environment where every student is empowered to engage deeply and thrive.

Methodology

The survey was conducted by Hanover Research on behalf of Discovery Education in May 2025 and included 1,398 K–12 superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and students in the United States. To complement these quantitative findings, we also conducted live interviews with stakeholder groups, allowing us to explore personal experiences and perspectives that added depth to the survey results.

While this survey gathered broad input from educators, students, and families across the U.S., including significant samples from rural, suburban, and urban communities, demographic identifiers were not analyzed in this phase. This remains an important area for future research and deeper exploration. More information about this survey and methodology is available upon request.

About Discovery Education

Discovery Education empowers educators and inspires students with award-winning solutions that ignite engagement, deepen cross-curricular learning, and fuel student success. Our digital-first curriculum, personalized learning programs, and time-saving instructional tools help scale teacher impact and make learning more meaningful and relevant every day. For over twenty years, our team—including many former educators—has partnered with schools and districts to deliver powerful learning experiences. Together, we equip students with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to thrive in the classroom and beyond.
Explore more at www.discoveryeducation.com.

About Hanover Research

Founded in 2003, Hanover Research is a global research and analytics firm. Hanover was named a Top 50 Market Research Firm by the American Marketing Association.

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