

GROWING LEADERS

POWERED BY MAXWELL LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION

NATIONAL RESEARCH BRIEF | 2025

The Student Leadership Gap Report



What the Latest National Research Reveals About America's Growing Leadership Deficit—and What It Costs

**Workforce
Readiness**

**Mental Health &
Self-Regulation**

**Civic
Participation**

The Core Argument

America's schools are producing graduates who are academically credentialed but leadership-deficient. The research is now unambiguous: academic achievement alone is not a reliable predictor of workforce success, civic participation, or community contribution. A measurable, widening gap exists between what students know and what they are able to do with what they know—and it begins in school, long before the workforce or ballot box enter the picture.

This brief synthesizes the most significant national research from 2024–2025 across three converging crises: workforce unreadiness, youth mental health decline, and civic disengagement. Taken together, these findings point to a single root cause: the absence of intentional, values-based leadership development in K–12 education.



84%

of hiring managers say HS grads are NOT workforce ready (U.S. Chamber, 2025)

40%

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33%

of hiring managers say HS grads are NOT workforce ready (U.S. Chamber, 2025)

48%

of hiring managers say HS grads are NOT workforce ready (U.S. Chamber, 2025)

The solution is not more academic intervention. It is the one investment that improves all three outcomes simultaneously: developing students' capacity to lead themselves and others. This report examines the evidence and presents a proven model already producing measurable results in K–12 schools across the country.

The Workforce Readiness Crisis

The U.S. economy faces a documented, worsening paradox: employers cannot find the talent they need while record numbers of graduates cannot find work in their fields. The gap is not primarily technical. It is a leadership gap.

FINDING 1

High School Graduates Are Not Workforce Ready

U.S. Chamber of Commerce / College Board New Hire Readiness Report, September 2025

- 84% of surveyed hiring managers agree that most high school graduates are not prepared to enter the workforce
- 80% agree that current high school graduates are less prepared than previous generations
- The deficit is not academic credentials—it is a combination of leadership, communication, and self-management skills
- Based on 500 hiring managers surveyed across small, mid-sized, and large U.S. companies



*Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce & College Board,
New Hire Readiness Report, September 2025*

FINDING 2

The Leadership Competency Gap Is the Widest of All

National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) — 2024 Student Survey & Job Outlook 2025



- For leadership and professionalism competencies, the gap between employer expectations and graduate proficiency exceeds 30 percentage points
- Both employers and students agree on the high importance of leadership—yet graduates consistently underperform against employer benchmarks
- Data drawn from 20,482 college students and 237 employers in a nationally representative survey
- The gap is widest for leadership initiative, career self-development, and professional accountability—the capacities most directly built through K–12 leadership development

Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce & College Board, *New Hire Readiness Report, September 2025*

FINDING 3

Nearly Half of 2025 Graduates Feel Unprepared

Cengage Group 2025 Graduate Employability Report + Bain & Company, 2024–2025

- Only 30% of 2025 graduates found jobs in their field; 48% felt unprepared to apply for entry-level positions
- 33% of 2025 graduates are unemployed and actively seeking work—youth unemployment is more than double the overall national rate
- 71% of U.S. employers report they cannot find the talent they need (ManpowerGroup, cited in Bain 2025)
- Bain & Company's 2024 survey of 2,619 alumni found career readiness and character-based leadership as the top gaps



Source: Cengage Group 2025 Graduate Employability Report (Sept. 2025); Bain & Company Alumni Early Career Outcomes Survey (2024, n=2,619)

What Employers Are Actually Saying

"The widening career readiness gap, along with the growing demand for upskilling driven by technological advancements, is creating an urgent need to rethink how we equip learners for future employment. Closing this skills mismatch is essential to narrowing the wealth gap."

— Michael Hansen, CEO of Cengage Group, September 2025

The research is consistent: employers are not primarily asking for better test scores or more coursework. **They are asking for graduates who can manage themselves, communicate across differences, take initiative, and operate from a clear values framework under pressure.** These are not soft skills—they are leadership capacities, and they must be built before students ever reach the workforce.

PART 2 OF 3

The Student Mental Health & Self-Regulation Crisis

The mental health emergency in American schools is not a peripheral concern for education leaders—it is now the central operational challenge. McKinsey's 2024 survey of 500 district superintendents found that mental health challenges appear in three of the top five district spending priorities. The data driving that urgency is stark.

FINDING 4

40% of High Schoolers Report Persistent Hopelessness

CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey — 2023–2024 Data (Most Recent Available)

- 40% of high school students in the U.S. reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2023—a 10-point increase since 2013
- 57% of high school girls exhibit symptoms of depression compared to 31% of boys
- 20% of high school students have seriously considered suicide; 9% have made attempts
- One in seven children ages 10–19 worldwide experiences a mental health disorder (WHO, 2023)
- The CDC confirms youth mental health has been on a continuous worsening trajectory since 2011

Source: CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary 2023; WHO Mental Health Atlas 2023



FINDING 5

Behavior and Absenteeism Are Surging Inside Districts

McKinsey & Company Survey of U.S. District Superintendents, 2024



- Student behavior challenges and chronic absenteeism are now two of the top five spending priorities for U.S. school districts
- Student behavior prioritization rose 18 percentage points year-over-year among surveyed superintendents
- Student absenteeism prioritization rose 14 percentage points year-over-year
- ESSER (pandemic relief) funding has ended, leaving districts without the financial buffer relied on for mental health staffing
- Nearly 60% of students with major depression go untreated in school settings

Source: McKinsey & Company ESSER Survey, 2024 (n=~500 district superintendents); eLuma State of Student Mental Health Report 2024–25

FINDING 6

6The Root Cause Is a Self-Regulation and Self-Leadership Deficit

PMC / CDC School Mental Health Research, 2024–2025

- Students who lack self-leadership skills—emotional regulation, impulse control, and clear values—are disproportionately represented in mental health crisis data
- Youth with serious emotional disturbance are twice as likely to drop out of school (IDEA/OSEP data, cited by McKinsey 2025)
- Middle school self-referrals for mental health support increased 90% post-COVID; high school referrals increased 36%
- Students who report having a trusted adult at school show significantly lower internalizing symptoms across the school year (Reinke et al., 2025)
- AERA 2024 research links social-emotional learning deficits directly to discipline incidents, attendance gaps, and reduced academic engagement



Source: PMC School-Based Mental Health Education 2025; AERA Annual Meeting Research Presentations 2024; McKinsey, June 2025

The Self-Leadership Connection

Research consistently demonstrates that students who develop self-leadership skills—the capacity to manage emotions, make values-aligned decisions, and build trusted relationships with adults—show measurably better mental health outcomes. The mental health crisis is not a counseling problem alone. It is a leadership formation problem. Addressing it requires building the internal capacities that allow students to navigate difficulty without crisis.

UNESCO (2024) places student wellbeing at the center of educational reform, linking self-regulation, relationship skills, and values formation directly to the outcomes schools are measured against. SERP (Strategic Education Research Partnership) 2024 research similarly identifies student agency—a core leadership competency—as the highest-leverage intervention point for improving both mental health and academic outcomes.

PART 3 OF 3

The Civic Disengagement Crisis

A healthy democracy requires citizens who understand their role, trust institutions enough to engage with them, and possess the relational and leadership skills to contribute constructively. The data from 2024–2025 indicates the pipeline of engaged citizens is in serious decline.

FINDING 7

One in Three Young Adults Plans No Civic Participation

Institute for Citizens & Scholars — Civic Outlook of Young Adults in America (National Survey, 2024)

- 33% of 18–24-year-olds indicated no intention to participate civically in 2024, including voting, volunteerism, or community engagement
- 40% of respondents could answer only one of four standard civics questions correctly; only 4% answered all four correctly
- 35% say they do not feel informed enough to participate politically
- 33% are not currently engaged in any community activities—not sports, hobbies, volunteerism, or faith groups
- 61% do not identify with either major political party; 52% report no or very little trust in government institutions
- Survey conducted with 4,008 young adults ages 18–24 in a nationally representative sample

Source: Institute for Citizens & Scholars, Civic Outlook of Young Adults in America, 2024 (n=4,008)

Youth Voter Participation Fell Sharply in 2024

CIRCLE (Center for Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) — Tufts University, Post-2024 Election Survey

- Youth voter participation fell from 50% in 2020 to only 42% in the 2024 presidential election
- More than a third of young people reported that voting in 2024 was not important to them
- More than 60% of young people who did not vote had low rates of in-person community connection
- Asian, Black, and Latino youth are less likely to spend in-person time in community settings, further widening the participation gap
- Despite the voting decline, young people remain active in other civic forms: 56% have signed petitions, 41% have boycotted products, and 66% discuss politics regularly

Source: CIRCLE Post-2024 Election Youth Poll, Tufts University; NASBE State Policy Review, September 2025



The Leadership-Civic Engagement Link

The Institute for Citizens & Scholars found that young adults who score high on civic knowledge are twice as likely to engage civically as low-knowledge scorers (80% vs. 40%). But civic knowledge alone is insufficient. Young people also need relational intelligence, the capacity to collaborate across differences, and the confidence that comes from being seen as someone whose voice matters. These are leadership capacities—and they are built in schools, not at polling booths.

CIRCLE research further confirms that in-person community connection is the single strongest predictor of civic participation among youth. Leadership development programs that build precisely these connections are not merely educational investments. They are civic infrastructure.

SYNTHESIS

Three Crises. One Root Cause.

The workforce readiness crisis, the student mental health crisis, and the civic disengagement crisis are not three separate problems requiring three separate solutions. They are three expressions of the same underlying deficit: students are leaving K–12 education without the foundational leadership capacities that allow human beings to function well—in work, in relationship, and in community.

WORKFORCE READINESS	MENTAL HEALTH	CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
Employers cannot find graduates with leadership initiative, relational intelligence, and values-based decision-making.	Students without self-leadership skills are disproportionately represented in every mental health crisis metric.	Young adults who lack community connection and civic confidence are disengaging at record rates.

The common thread across all three is the absence of what researchers consistently call self-leadership—the capacity to manage one's own emotions, decisions, relationships, and growth trajectory. Schools that have intentionally invested in developing this capacity are producing measurably different outcomes. The question for education and policy leaders is not whether this is true. The question is whether your district or state has a strategy for developing it.



iLEAD CURRICULUM OVERVIEW

Closing the Gap: How iLead Addresses What the Research Demands

iLead is a comprehensive, values-based leadership curriculum for K–12 students developed by Growing Leaders, powered by the Maxwell Leadership Foundation. It is not a program layered on top of teachers' existing responsibilities—it is designed to integrate into school structures, equip educators, and develop the whole student.

iLead directly addresses all four dimensions of the leadership deficit identified by the national research in this brief:

Self-Leadership

Emotional regulation, resilience, and values-based habits. iLead builds the internal foundation that determines whether academic achievement translates to life outcomes. Directly addresses CDC and AERA mental health findings.

Relational Intelligence

Communication, trust-building, and collaboration. The competency employers rank as most deficient in NACE data, and the one most directly linked to civic engagement in CIRCLE research.

Values-Based Decision Making

A clear internal compass for navigating pressure. Most directly tied to school discipline reduction, mental health outcomes, and the character gap identified by U.S. Chamber of Commerce research.

Leadership Initiative

The willingness to step up, take ownership, and influence others positively. The rarest and most valued competency in both employers and civic institutions—and the hardest to retrofit in adults.

What the Research Shows When iLead Is Implemented



1.7M+

Students Impacted in the U.S. to Date

iLead has reached over 1.7 million cumulative students across the country, with primary implementation in South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Texas, and Ohio.

8.6M+

Total Students Impacted Program to Date (Global)

As of January 2026, iLead has reached over 8.6 million students globally across 40 countries, with 889 U.S. schools actively using the curriculum.

70%+

Pilot-to-Multi-Year Adoption Rate

More than 70% of districts that begin with an iLead pilot go on to adopt the program for multiple years—a direct measure of superintendent and educator confidence in results.

25%

Reduction in Out-of-School Suspensions — Texas Schools

In Texas Region 18 ESC districts with two years of iLead implementation, out-of-school suspensions fell by 25% and in-school suspensions dropped by 23.12% year-over-year. This represents 2,473 fewer days students spent outside classrooms—equivalent to 17,311 additional hours of instruction regained.

45%

Reduction in Aggressive Behaviors Leading to Discipline

U.S. schools implementing iLead are reporting a 45% reduction in aggressive behaviors resulting in disciplinary actions—a direct impact on school culture, teacher retention, and student safety.

68%

of Senior Boys Reported Increased Values-Aligned Choices

68% of U.S. senior boys in the iLead program reported an increase in their choices connected to good character—a self-reported values formation outcome with long-term workforce and civic implications.

1 in 4

11th Grade Girls in SC Reported Increased Initiative to Lead

1 out of 4 11th grade girls in South Carolina who participated in iLead reported an increase in their initiative to lead—a direct measure of the leadership confidence gap being closed.

269,920

Teachers Trained Program to Date

iLead's professional development component has trained over 269,000 educators globally, with 3,012 active in 2026—meaning its impact compounds through every teacher who carries the model forward



Texas Education Agency KPI Data: Year-Over-Year Comparison

Source: iLead Positive Character Traits Dataset, Texas Education Agency / Region 18 ESC (Year 2 vs. Year 3), December 2025. K-12 districts with two years of iLead implementation.

Metric	2024	2025	Change (Year-over-Year)
In-School Suspensions (ISS)	7,919 days	6,088 days	↓ 23.12% (-1,831 days)
Out-of-School Suspensions (OSS)	2,577 days	1,935 days	↓ 25.0% (-642 days)
DAEP Placements	584 placements	503 placements	↓ 13.87% (-81 placements)
Instructional Hours Regained	—	+17,311 hours	2,473 fewer days × 7 hrs

Texas Education Agency Conclusion (December 2025)

"The data strongly indicates that the iLead program is a key driver in improving the K-12 learning environment. The ability to reduce exclusionary discipline by 25% demonstrates a powerful and positive shift in school culture and student engagement."

Study conducted in partnership with: Texas Education Agency, Region 18 Education Service Center, Growing Leaders, and Maxwell Leadership Foundation.

How iLead Works in Schools

- Curriculum-integrated, not added on — designed to fit within existing school structures without increasing burden on teachers or administrators
- Values-based and nonpartisan — works across ideological, cultural, and community contexts; appropriate for public and private K-12 settings
- Professional development included — teachers are equipped, not just given materials; the program builds school-level leadership culture over time
- System-driven implementation model — combines curriculum, platform, assessment, and ongoing professional development into one integrated system
- Measurable outcomes — clear KPIs tied to discipline reduction, student engagement, and leadership readiness; independent verification from TEA and partner districts
- Scalable from single school to statewide — active in 889 U.S. schools across multiple states, with 40 countries globally

[GrowingLeaders.com](https://growingleaders.com) | [MaxwellLeadershipFoundation.org](https://maxwellleadershipfoundation.org)

Sources: U.S. Chamber of Commerce & College Board New Hire Readiness Report 2025; NACE 2024 Student Survey and Job Outlook 2025; Cengage Group 2025 Graduate Employability Report; Bain & Company Alumni Early Career Outcomes Survey 2024; McKinsey & Company ESSER Survey 2024; CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2023-2024; Institute for Citizens & Scholars Civic Outlook 2024 (n=4,008); CIRCLE Post-2024 Election Youth Poll, Tufts University; TEA iLead Positive Character Traits Dataset / Region 18 ESC, December 2025; WHO Mental Health Atlas 2023; UNESCO 2024 Education Framework; SERP Strategic Education Research Partnership 2024; AERA Annual Meeting Research 2024; PMC School Mental Health Research 2025.