

# BACK TO SCHOOL

## Checking in with Gen Z

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How High Schoolers Are Feeling As  
the School Year Begins and  
the Midterm Elections Ramp Up

During the spring of 2022, Murruration partnered with the Walton Family Foundation on an **extensive qualitative and quantitative study of Gen Z attitudes**. The research, which was executed by SocialSphere's John Della Volpe, the director of the Harvard Youth Poll and author of the critically acclaimed *FIGHT: How Gen Z is Channeling Their Fear and Passion to Save America*, focused on a range of issues, including mental health, education, career aspirations, and priorities for our country. The findings confirmed that Gen Z feels stressed, unprepared for life after graduation, and underwhelmed by the efforts of community and political leaders to understand and address the myriad of personal and public-facing challenges they are working to overcome.

In late August, we checked back in with high school-aged Zoomers to better understand how they were feeling about a new academic year and an election season where many of the issues they care about are on the ballot. The national survey of N=1,563 Gen Z high school students was conducted by SocialSphere from August 17 to August 25, 2022.

## Key Findings

- **Gen Z has mixed emotions about returning to school after more than two years of disruption.** While 52% of high school students volunteer positive words like “excited” (29%) to describe their feelings about the upcoming academic year, a roughly equal number of teenagers used negative words (39%) like “unenthusiastic” (9%) and “nervous” (9%).
- **It is difficult to understate the severity of the Gen Z mental health crisis.** A solid majority of Gen Z high school students admit struggling with their mental health over the last 30 days – and more than a quarter have had thoughts that they would be better off dead, or of hurting themselves in some way in the last two weeks. More than 60% of Gen Z high schoolers are also concerned about sexual assault, gun violence, or a friend attempting or completing suicide.
- **Gen Z credits teachers and some adults for trying to understand and address their needs – but not local or national education policymakers and politicians.** For example, 44% report that their local school district's board has “not much” or no (not at all) understanding of their needs, and Gen Z views their local superintendent (-10 net difference between “not much/not at all” and “a lot/some”), Democrats in Congress (-20), Republicans in Congress (-26), and local elected officials (-21) even more harshly.
- **Zoomers do not believe their educational experience will adequately prepare them for life after graduation.** While half express positive sentiment about returning to school, one third of high schoolers are not very confident about their future. Nearly all want learning opportunities that help them gain skills for the real world or obtain good jobs after graduation but say they aren't readily available.
- **Political engagement of Gen Z is tracking to historic levels from 2018.** More than a third of eligible high school voters plan to “definitely vote” in the midterm elections, most favoring Democrats.

Gen Z will have outsized influence on every sector, cause, business, and political race in the future. That makes understanding the stresses, perspective, and openness of Gen Z to find and connect around shared values more important than ever. The rest of us have an opportunity to engage and work together with Zoomers to build a more equitable future. Gen Z will drive change regardless of whether they have support, or feel a sense of partnership, with other generational cohorts. Ignoring the members of Gen Z and their interests will not prevent change from occurring, it will only leave those who are currently in positions of power on the outside looking in.

In the following pages you will find further analysis of how members of Gen Z who are currently attending high school feel about mental health, school and social experiences, national and local education leaders, the purpose of school, and their enthusiasm for politics and voting.

## Serious Struggles with Mental Health

Gen Z has mixed emotions about returning to school after more than two years of disruption. The reasons for this are many, but at the top of the list is concern for their own mental health and the well-being of their friends and family.

- A solid majority of Gen Z high school students admit struggling with their mental health over the last 30 days – and more than a quarter have had thoughts that they would be better off dead, or of hurting themselves in some way in the last two weeks.

The “[Looking Forward with Gen Z](#)” survey found that relative to their elders over age 25, Gen Z is about twice as likely (42% to 23%) to battle depression and feelings of hopelessness – and they are three times as likely (18% to 5%) to say their challenges are so severe that they have had thoughts of self-harm or that they might be better off dead.

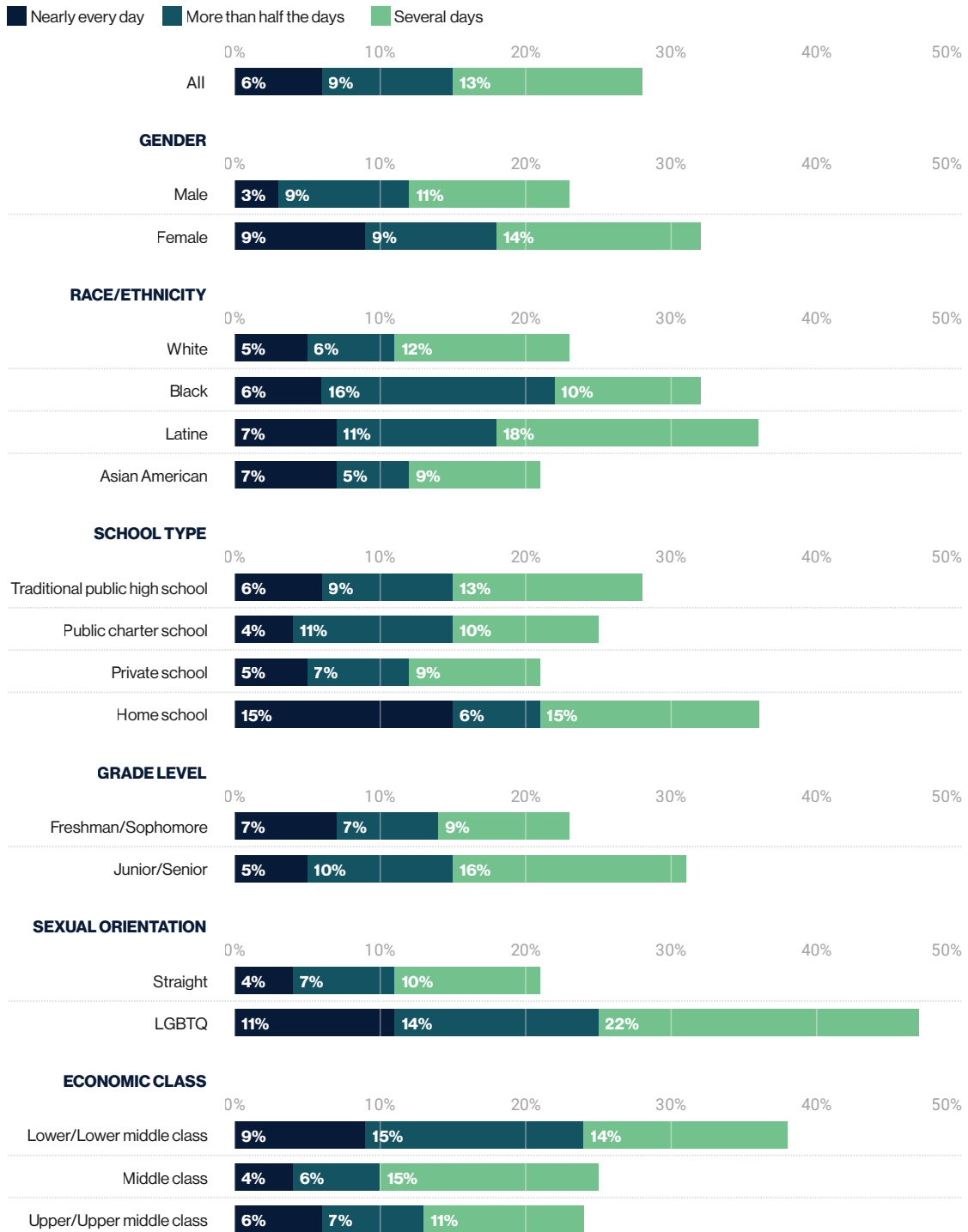
When high-school-aged Zoomers were asked how often in the last 30 days their mental health was not good (defined as under stress, having anxiety or depression), 58% reported either always (8%), most of the time (21%), or sometimes (30%). Only 24% said rarely and 18% indicated never. While mental health is a challenge that affects all subgroups within this population, we found that LGBTQ students (84%), home schoolers (71%), lower- and lower-middle class students (70%), those from small towns (69%), females (68% said at least sometimes), juniors and seniors in high school (64%), and Democrats (64%), were among the groups most prominently affected.

Alarmingly, more than a quarter (28%) of Gen Z high school students also indicated that they had “thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting themselves in some way,” at least several days within the last two weeks; and six percent felt that way “nearly every day.” While these feelings are prominent across every subgroup, they are especially acute within Black (32%) and Latine (36%) communities, those identifying as LGBTQ (47%), and also among those coming from families with less economic means (38%).

# GEN Z: BACK TO SCHOOL

SERIOUS STRUGGLES WITH MENTAL HEALTH

Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems: Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or thoughts of hurting yourself in some way.



N=1,563 High School Students

Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

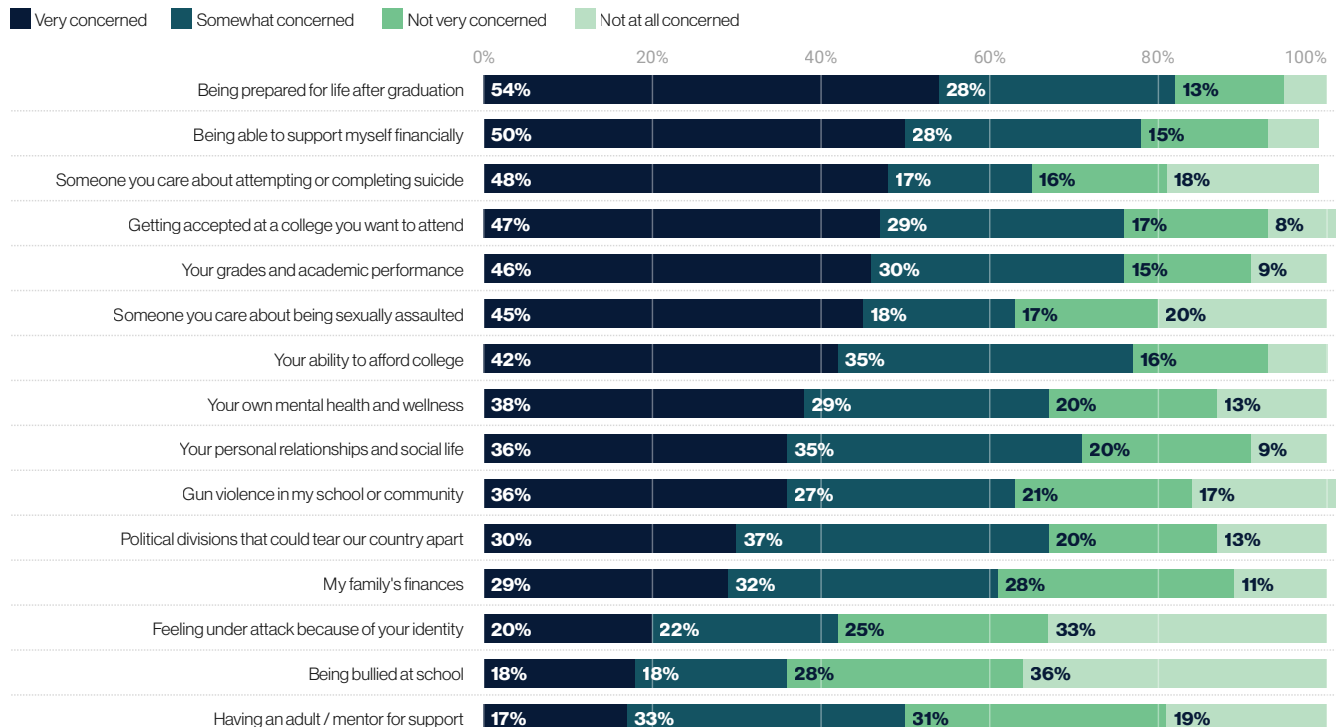
## Community Matters Most Of All

The results of the “**Looking Forward With Gen Z**” research confirmed that young people prioritize their own health and happiness, and the health and happiness of their friends and family, over getting involved in politics, advocacy, or other efforts. They care deeply about the issues our society is grappling with (inequality, racism, school shootings, climate, democracy, etc), but they don’t always have the bandwidth to do both.

- In addition to the classic adolescent stressors associated with academics, finances, and personal relationships – 70% of high school-age Zoomers reported being very or somewhat concerned with “personal relationships and social life” and more than two-thirds are concerned about political divisions, sexual assault, gun violence, or a friend attempting or committing suicide.

With knowledge that a majority of Gen Z students struggle with mental health, we attempted to understand and quantify some of the pressures they are facing. While roughly half of high schoolers are “very concerned” about grades, college acceptance, and life after graduation – we find similar numbers of Gen Z students now also carry the additional burden of being “very concerned” about people they care about attempting or committing suicide (48% very, plus 17% somewhat concerned) and being a victim of sexual assault (45% very, plus 18% somewhat concerned). Nearly one in two (48%) Black high school students and 41% of Latine students are “very concerned” about gun violence in their school or community – which is significantly higher than the 30% of White students who say the same.

### How concerned, if at all, are you about the following?



N=1,563 High School Students  
Source : SocialSphere, Inc.

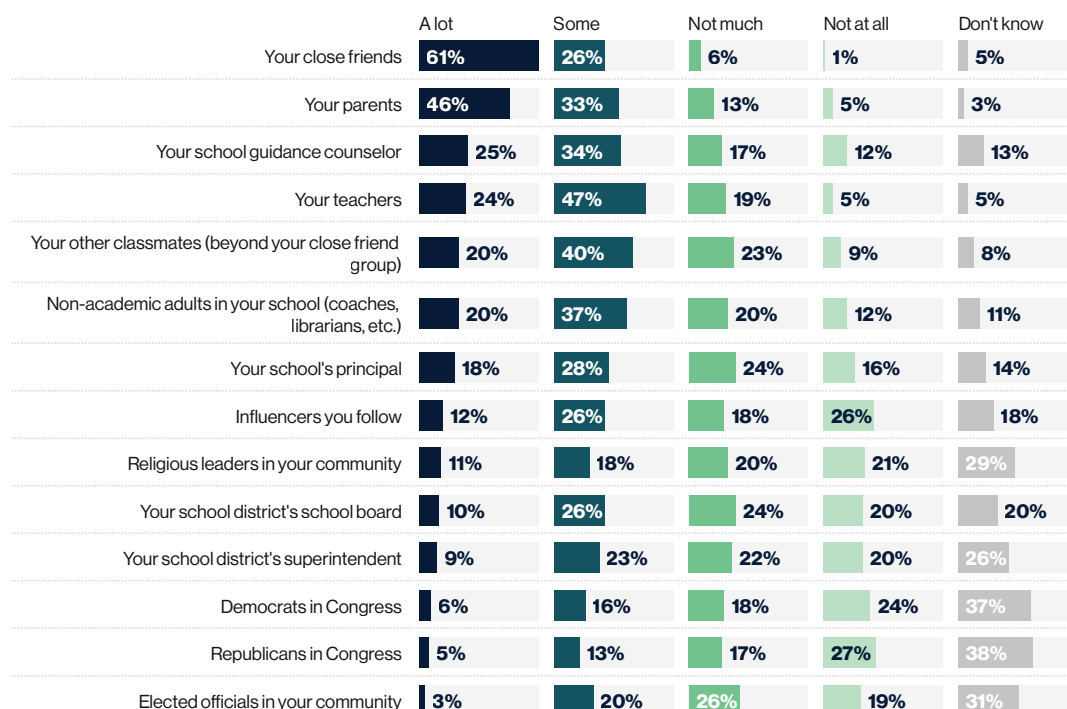
## Political Leaders Don't Understand What Gen Z Needs

While every generation faces its share of challenges, we found in the “[Looking Forward With Gen Z](#)” research that the urgency and seriousness of what Zoomers are dealing with is stressing the systems designed to support and respond. Exacerbating the anxiety and fear of young Americans is a sense that parents, mentors, teachers, employers, and older generations more broadly are unable to understand, or worse, are dismissive of the depth of their struggles.

- High school students give credit to their friends, parents, guidance counselors, teachers, and other classmates for at least somewhat understanding their needs. Administrators, political leaders, and others who are most involved in developing curriculum and policy have little, if any, understanding of their generation. For example, 44% report that their local school district's board has “not much” or no (not at all) understanding of their needs, compared to 36% who say they have “a lot” or “some” understanding (-8 net difference between “not much/not at all” and “a lot/some”). On this subject, Gen Z views their local superintendent (-10), Democrats in Congress (-20), Republicans in Congress (-26), and local elected officials (-21) even more harshly.

They have more positive than negative feelings associated with parents (+61 net difference between “not much/not at all” and “a lot/some”), teachers (+47), school guidance counselors (+29), other classmates (+28), non-academic adults in school (+25), and principals (+6). The only group where a majority (61%) of Zoomer students feel understood “a lot” is among their close friends (+79).

How well do the following individuals or groups understand you – and your needs as a high school student today?



N=1,563 High School Students

Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

## Questions About Future Readiness

The young people we profiled in the “[Looking Forward With Gen Z](#)” research all agreed that the purpose of K-12 education was to prepare individuals for adulthood, and to position them to take advantage of the benefits available in society. When public education was positioned as a basic American right for every child, the Zoomers we surveyed ranked education as one of the most important priorities in the country.

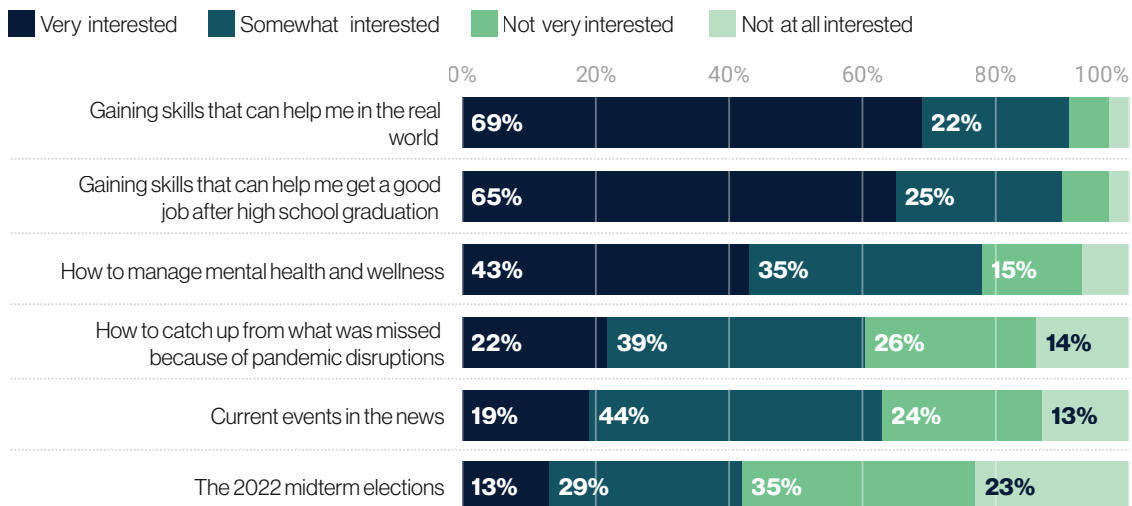
- However, when we surveyed high schoolers, only about half of Gen Z students believe their academics will adequately prepare them for life after graduation. High school students are most interested in learning skills that help them in the “real world” and can help them land a “good job after high school graduation.”

Overall, 52% of Gen Z students feel like the classes they are required to take in high school “will adequately prepare” them for life after graduation; 36% tell us that they will not be prepared, while 13% are unsure. Those who attend a private school (68%) are far more likely than traditional public (51%) or charter school (49%) students to feel adequately prepared. Additionally, the wealthier the individual, the more they say their classes are preparing them for life after school.

### For example:

- **42% of students from lower or lower-middle class backgrounds feel adequately prepared, 45% do not (-3);**
- **51% of middle class students feel prepared, 38% do not (+13); and**
- **64% of students from upper middle class and upper income families feel prepared, 28% do not (+36).**
- **63% of students seriously considering a four-year college say their required classes have adequately prepared them for life after high school compared to only 44% of those not seriously considering college.**

### How interested, if at all, are you in learning more about the following areas and topics in school?



N=1,563 High School Students  
Source: SocialSphere, Inc.



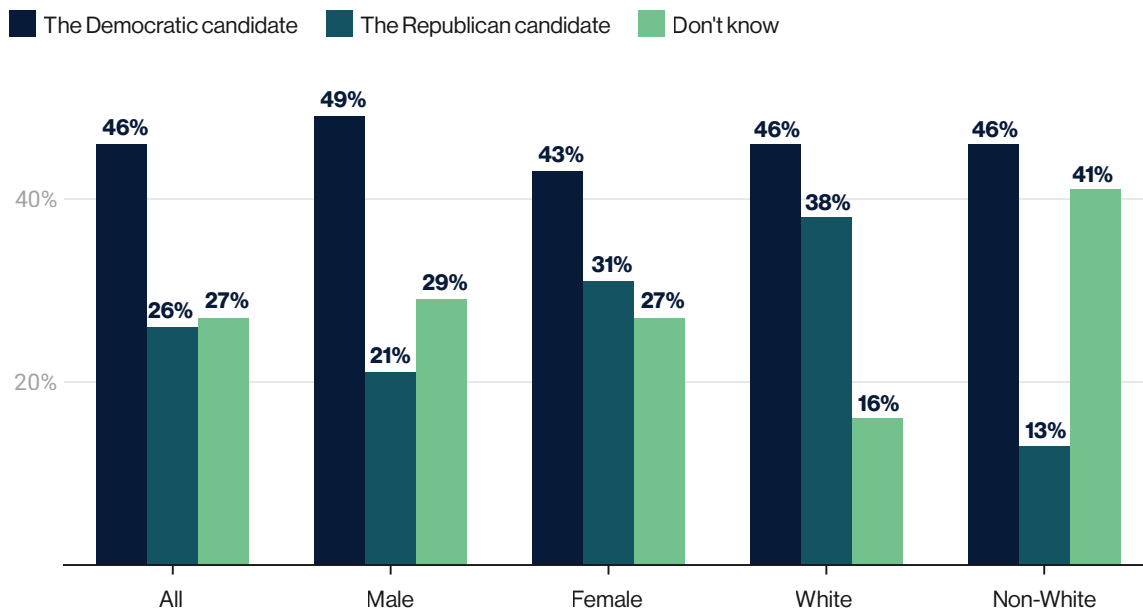
## Enthusiasm for Politics and Voting

Through the qualitative and quantitative research detailed in our “[Looking Forward With Gen Z](#)” research, we found that Zoomers overwhelmingly understand that robust government action is required to solve the systemic inequities and major challenges faced by our society. While Zoomers are dissatisfied and disappointed with the pace and scale of change in Washington, they believe America can only live up to its promise if they as young people continue to engage and fight.

- So, it should not be surprising that our survey of high schoolers indicated that political engagement of Gen Z is tracking to historic levels from 2018. More than a third of eligible high school voters plan to “definitely vote” in the midterm elections, most favoring Democrats. At the same time, 67% said they are very or somewhat concerned with “political divisions that could tear our country apart.”

Similar to the historic youth turnout patterns of 2018, we find that 35% of Gen Z students who will be eligible to vote in November “definitely” plan to vote – with an additional 14% saying they will “probably be voting” and 26% saying they are “50-50.” Among Gen Z high school-age students, support for the Democratic candidate exceeds the Republican candidate by 20 points, 46% to 26% – with 27% still undecided. Democrats lead among men and women, Whites and non-Whites in the sample – and their lead grows to 25 points among the most likely cohort of voters.

### When thinking about the election for Congress this year are you more likely to vote for:



*N=326 High School Students Eligible to Vote (and somewhat likely)*  
Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

## About Murmuration

Murmuration's mission is to transform the politics of K-12 public education. We believe that electoral, organizing, and advocacy work is key to creating a sustainable and growing base of voters and other stakeholders, especially in marginalized communities, and elected officials who are committed to fighting for an equitable and high quality public education system. By providing data, tools, research, and strategic guidance to our partner community, we believe that we can create a sector that is best positioned to make long term, systemic changes to public schools possible. Creating an equitable and high-quality public education system will pave the way for generations of children to reach their fullest potential.

To learn more, visit [www.murmuration.org](http://www.murmuration.org).

## About the Walton Family Foundation

The Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. Three generations of the descendants of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, and their spouses, work together to lead the Foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving K-12 education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta.

To learn more, visit [waltonfamilyfoundation.org](http://waltonfamilyfoundation.org) and follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

## About John Della Volpe

John Della Volpe is the director of polling at the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, where he has led the institute's polling initiatives on understanding American youth since 2000. The Washington Post referred to him as one of the world's leading authorities on global sentiment, opinion, and influence, especially among youth and in the age of digital and social media. Della Volpe is a MSNBC contributor and he regularly on Morning Joe. His research and insights are often found in national media outlets in the United States and abroad. He is also the founder and CEO of [SocialSphere](http://SocialSphere), a public opinion research firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

To learn more, visit [www.johndellavolpe.com](http://www.johndellavolpe.com) or on Twitter @dellavolpe