

SEPTEMBER 2026

The Relevance Gap Study

 The Harris Poll
Commissioned by Milk





METHODOLOGY

About This Research.

The Harris Poll conducted an online survey on behalf of MilkPEP, from August 4th – August 14th, 2026 among 800 U.S. teens ages 13–17, as well as 800 parents of teens ages 13–17, and 400 teachers of students ages 13–17.

Respondents were selected from among those who agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the total sample data is weighted and is accurate to within ± 5 percentage points for the total Student and Parent samples, and ± 7 percentage points for Teachers using a 95% confidence level. These credible intervals will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.



800

U.S. Teens

Ages 13-17, nationally representative



800

U.S. Parents

of teens ages 13-17, nationally representative



400

U.S. Teachers

of teens 13-17, nationally representative

Heading Back to School? Mind The Relevance Gap.

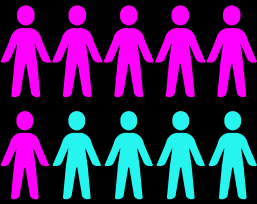


As students head back to school, more than half of U.S. teens say social content matters more to what they need to know to succeed than what they learn in the classroom.

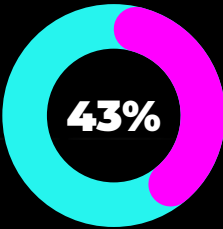
What is hardly news is that teens are easily distracted in the classroom, and let's be honest, in general. However, a recent study conducted by the Harris Poll on behalf of MilkPEP found that :

82% of teachers have noticed a decline in student attentiveness in the classroom.

Parents are noticing similar challenges at home.



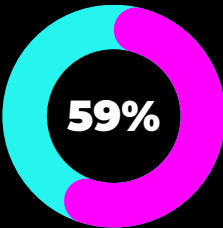
Nearly six in ten (59%) parents say their child struggles to focus in day-to-day life at least sometimes, while



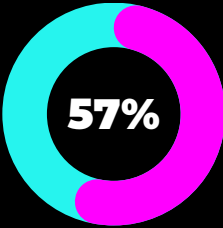
of parents believe their child's attention span is on the decline. Compared to when they were their child's age, the majority of parents feel teens today have it harder when it comes to focusing, both inside and outside of school.

2/3

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of parents say it is harder for teens to focus in school today.



of parents say it is harder to focus on homework.



say it is harder to stay focused during everyday activities, hobbies, and responsibilities.

Teachers share that perspective.

78% of teachers agree it is harder for students to focus in school today compared to when they were students themselves.

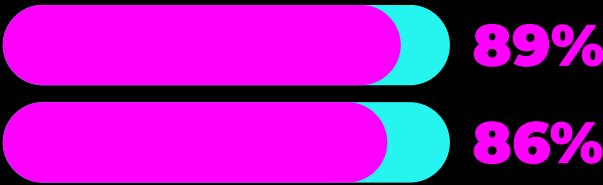
But contrary to popular assumptions, the problem is not simply smartphones buzzing with texts or energy bursts following the lunch period.

55% of students say disengagement stems from the subject matter no longer feeling relevant to what they need to know to succeed in the future.

Middle-school teachers are more likely than high-school teachers to report students saying school does not feel relevant to their lives or futures, **45% vs. 28%.**

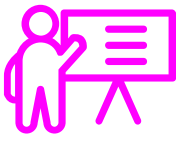


89% of teachers believe classroom learning is relevant to future success, yet **86%** had students express that school does not feel relevant to them, their futures, or the real world at least sometimes or more often.



FEEL STUDENTS / THEY ARE LESS ENGAGED WHEN THEY CAN'T SEE A CONNECTION BETWEEN A LESSON AND THEIR PERSONAL GOALS.

91%



TEACHERS OF STUDENTS 13-17

97%



STUDENTS 13-17

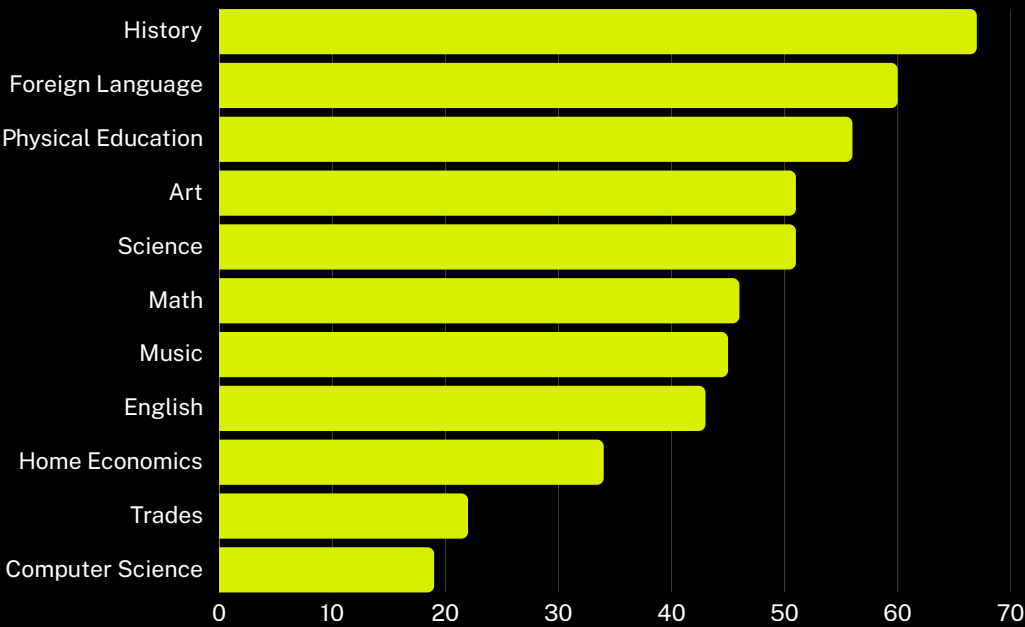
Learning Must Feel Relevant.

For students, the most meaningful learning is learning that delivers immediate value in their daily lives while opening doors to some of today's most sought-after and opportunity-rich careers in computer and data science.

In other words, students aren't looking for less learning, they're looking for learning that feels connected to the future they're trying to build.

CLASSES THAT FEEL LEAST RELEVANT TO U.S. MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

(% NOT AT ALL, A BIT, OR SOMEWHAT RELEVANT*)



*asked among those who took each class in Spring of 2026

And when students do see that connection, their interests become remarkably clear. When asked which subjects felt most connected to their future goals, students pointed to STEM (45%), finance and money skills (43%), and creative arts (33%).

TOPICS/SKILLS STUDENTS WISH WERE COMMONLY TAUGHT IN SCHOOL

(% RANKED IN TOP 2)

Financial literacy / stock market / crypto	53%
Entrepreneurial skills	45%
Physical wellness health	44%
Day-to-day tasks	44%
Creative writing/thinking	43%

Importantly, the effort to bridge that gap is already underway. Initiatives to spark interest in the classroom are not lacking. **Nearly every teacher (99%) has taken steps to make coursework more relevant or engaging.** In fact, 42% want to be able to incorporate financial literacy into their curriculum, yet many have faced significant barriers in their efforts to make classroom content more engaging.

94%

of teachers believe a program that could strengthen students' real-world connections to their coursework would have a moderate to transformative impact on attentiveness in the classroom.

UNDER THE 'INFLUENCE'

In an age when information is only a tap away, it is perhaps unsurprising that students are increasingly looking beyond the classroom for answers.

45%

Nearly half of teens (45%) place greater trust in online experts and content creators, saying they are better equipped to help them discover information and opportunities aligned with their goals and interests.

50%

of teens say the content they encounter on social media feels more relevant to their future aspirations than what they are learning in school.

That shift in trust is reflected in where teens turn to learn. Whether they're exploring a new interest, researching a topic, or trying to better understand the world around them, social and video platforms have become everyday learning destinations.

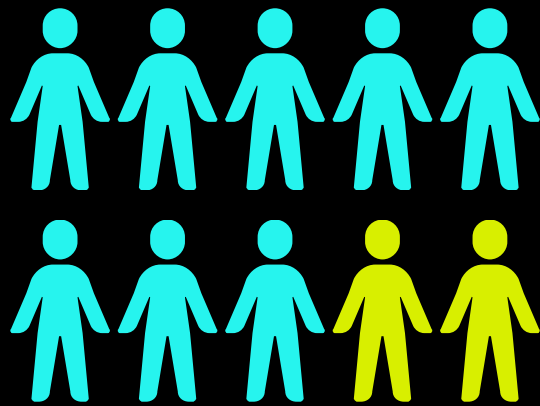
TOP 3 PLATFORMS TEENS USE TO LEARN SOMETHING NEW

(% ACCESSED SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK OR DAILY)

YouTube	69%
TikTok	57%
Instagram	53%

But while social platforms are winning on relevance, they are not without consequences.

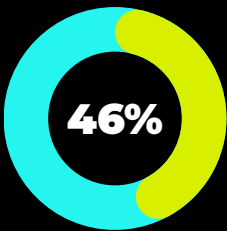
The struggle to stay engaged extends beyond the classroom, with eight in ten teens saying they sometimes or more often have trouble getting interested in homework topics.



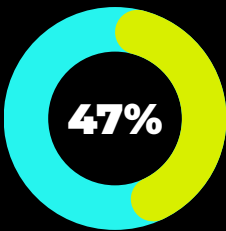
52% More than half (52%) attribute that to the material feeling irrelevant, while

59% cite distractions such as their phone or social media.

Given that...



of teens say they use social media almost constantly, while



of teens report checking it several times a day.

the challenge is hardly surprising.

Parents and teachers are increasingly concerned about the impact that social content may be having on attention spans. Teachers and students themselves largely agree that short-form content may be playing a role. **When asked whether short-form social media videos, such as TikTok and Instagram Reels, have made it harder for students to focus for extended periods of time, 88% of teachers agreed, alongside 61% of students who are feeling the impact themselves.**

Yet the data suggests young people are not rejecting deeper learning for social screentime. They're actually asking for it.

A Solution To The Scroll.



Conveniently, students are overwhelmingly willing to engage with educational resources.

95%

of students say they would watch long-form educational YouTube content that connects help with what they're learning in school with real-world opportunities, future careers, and the goals they hope to achieve

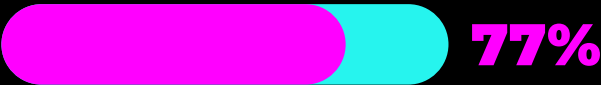
However, many educators do not currently leverage any kind of social content (short or long form) in their assignments (41%). Despite this, many express that they would be willing to if the resources were educational.

WILLING TO INCLUDE IN AT HOME ASSIGNMENTS IF CONTENT WAS EDUCATIONAL (% SOMEWHAT OR VERY WILLING)

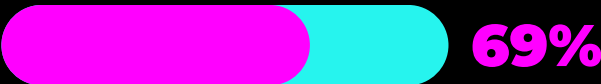
YouTube videos / vlogs (from creators or experts)



Written posts or blogs (from creators or experts on platforms like Reddit, Substack, Patreon, etc.)



Video clips from social platforms (like TikTok or Instagram)



Meanwhile, at home, parents see both a challenge and an opportunity in how teens are currently spending their time after school.



PARENT FINDINGS

- **36%** wish their child had access to more productive and safe activities outside the classroom.
- **33%** worry about content their children may encounter on social media.
- **65%** believe these platforms connect their children with tools and resources that help them succeed academically.
- **4 in 5** parents (**80%**) recognize social and video apps expose their children to ideas and topics relevant to their interests and future ambitions.



PARENTS PRIORITIZE
SAFE & TRUSTED CONTENT

The features parents value most are straightforward: content labeled for the appropriate age range (**50%**), adherence to established youth safety standards (**49%**), and content created by organizations they know and trust (**40%**).

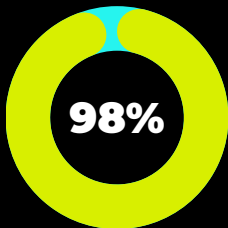


NUTRITION FUELS FOCUS

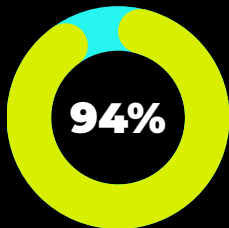
- **93%** of parents say focus is easier when their child has eaten a nutritious breakfast or lunch; a belief shared by **94%** of teens.
- Many students already recognize the connection between nourishment and concentration.
- When they need to lock in on homework, nearly three-quarters (**74%**) say they grab a snack or drink to help fuel their focus.

More importantly, parents are willing to lean into screen time when they see educational value.

PARENTS WHO WOULD BE WILLING
ALLOW THEIR TEEN MORE SCREENTIME.



if content was more
educational



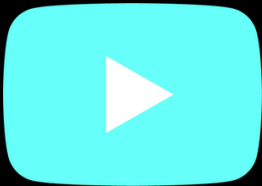
if safety standards around type
and appropriateness of content
were clearer

If relevance is one key to engagement, nutrition may be another. Students, parents, and educators alike recognize that focus is influenced not only by what students are learning, but also by whether they are properly fueled to learn. Together, these findings suggest a new approach: meeting students where they are with educational content that makes learning feel meaningful while reinforcing habits that help them stay attentive and engaged.

Students are actively searching for content that helps them connect today's lessons to tomorrow's opportunities.

If educational content can meet young people where they already are, speak to the futures they envision for themselves, and provide the safeguards parents are looking for, digital platforms could become a powerful bridge between classroom learning and real-world aspirations.

A NEW DIGITAL LEARNING PLATFORM.



A new digital learning platform: milkXP, which addresses this gap through a long-form educational video series, available on YouTube beginning September 15, in collaboration with experts in digital wellness and education to support purposeful, age-appropriate digital learning resources that connect what is being taught in the classroom to the topics that feel most relevant to teens today.