2026 ANNUAL REPORT

The State of School Assembly & Student Engagement

A data-driven review of school assemblies, educational performers, enrichment & student engagement — the belonging science, the performance categories, SEL, technology, the business, and the road to 2027.

K12 Academics — helping schools & performers Find Your Community! since 2004

25%
Students chronically absent

46%
of teens feel low engagement

$9.3B
SEL market (2025)

+11pts
Academic gain from quality SEL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Engagement is the priority — and experiences are how schools deliver it

American schools are in the middle of an engagement reckoning. Chronic absenteeism sits near double its pre-pandemic level, disengagement is widespread, and belonging has become the metric that ties attendance to achievement. In that context, school assemblies, educational performers, and enrichment experiences are being reframed — from a nice-to-have to a deliberate tool for connection, culture, and learning.

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Biggest trends

- Engagement & belonging are the education priority of the moment.
- Assemblies & enrichment are reframed as engagement tools.
- SEL, character & safety programming keep growing.
- Virtual, hybrid & immersive formats are expanding reach.

Key findings

- ~1 in 4 students is chronically absent — still near double 2019.
- Belonging strongly predicts attendance & achievement.
- Quality SEL is tied to an ~11-point academic gain.
- Engagement measures rebounded to record highs in 2025.

Major challenges

- Proving the impact & ROI of assemblies.
- Tight, uneven budgets & funding.
- A fragmented, hard-to-navigate provider market.
- Competing for scarce instructional time.

Opportunities

- Enrichment as a lever for attendance & belonging.
- Virtual & hybrid reach for every school.
- Discoverability through performer directories.
- Experiential delivery of SEL & character education.

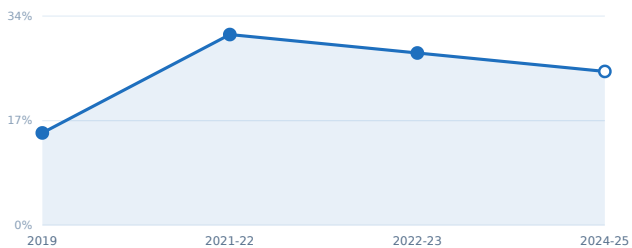
SECTION 01 — THE ENGAGEMENT CRISIS

Why experiences matter more than ever

The backdrop for everything in this report is a measurable crisis of connection. Roughly one in four students is chronically absent — still near double the pre-pandemic rate — and surveys show many teens feel disengaged from their coursework. Encouragingly, engagement measures rebounded to record highs in 2025, evidence that deliberate efforts to re-engage students can work.

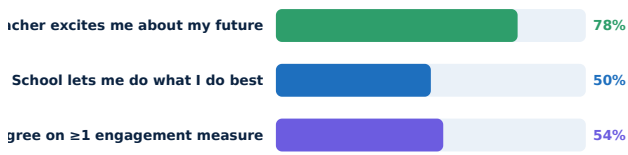
Chronic absenteeism is still elevated

Share of students chronically absent



Engagement is rebounding

Gen Z who strongly agree (2025)



The crisis in numbers

Absence & disengagement

~25% — of students are **chronically absent** — ~2× pre-pandemic.

4× — chronically absent students are **4× likelier to drop out**.

46% — of teens do **not strongly agree** they have even one engagement experience.

Rebound — all 8 Gallup **engagement measures hit highs** in 2025.

What re-engages students

The evidence

Belong — **belonging & connection** drive attendance.

Excite — **78%** have a teacher who excites them about the future.

Strengths — students want work that uses their **strengths**.

Experience — **enrichment & experiences** spark motivation.

A fragmented ecosystem of experiences

The school-assembly world is large but diffuse: thousands of independent performers, assembly companies, speaker bureaus, and booking agencies, connected to schools through directories and word of mouth. There is no single catalog — which is exactly the gap a performer directory fills. K12 Academics organizes this ecosystem into its Performers category, one of its six directories.

The provider landscape

Who delivers assemblies

Performers **independent artists & educators** — the core of the field.

Companies **assembly companies** with touring shows.

Bureaus **speaker bureaus & booking agencies** broker dates.

Directories **performer directories** — how schools find them.

How schools find performers

Discovery & booking

- **Performer directories**
- **Booking agencies**
- **Speaker bureaus**
- **Referrals & reviews**
- **Conferences**
- **Repeat bookings**

Because the market is **so fragmented**, the **K12 Academics Performers directory** is where schools discover and compare providers.

Connection is the mechanism

The case for shared experiences is not sentimental — it is well-evidenced. Analyses across thousands of schools link a sense of belonging and positive school climate to lower absenteeism, higher achievement, and better wellbeing. Assemblies and shared events are among the clearest ways a school signals to every student at once: you belong here, and learning can be joyful.

The belonging effect

What the research shows

Attend — **belonging & climate** lower chronic absence (7,000+ schools).

Achieve — **connected students** achieve & persist more.

Protect — **connectedness** buffers mental-health & risk behaviors (CDC).

Lead — **peer-leadership** programs added ~6 attendance days.

What a great assembly does

Beyond entertainment

- **Whole-school belonging**
- **Shared memory & culture**
- **Spark for curiosity**
- **Role models & voices**
- **Resets climate**
- **A message that sticks**

The best assemblies are not a diversion from learning — they are a **catalyst** for it.

SECTION 04 — PERFORMANCE CATEGORIES

One stage, many disciplines

The variety of educational performance is remarkable — and each category maps to curriculum and culture goals. Science shows spark STEM curiosity; wildlife and conservation programs bring the natural world indoors; music, theater, dance, and circus arts build cultural literacy and confidence; magic and comedy carry character and safety messages; and living history and cultural programs deepen understanding of the world.

The performance menu

Categories schools book

- **Science & STEM**
- **Wildlife & conservation**
- **Music & culture**
- **Educational theater**
- **Magic**
- **Comedy**
- **Living history**
- **Dance**
- **Circus arts**
- **World cultures**

Every category can carry an **academic, character, or wellbeing** message — entertainment with a curricular core.

Matching show to goal

How schools choose

STEM	**science & robotics** shows for curiosity & careers.
Wildlife	**live-animal & conservation** for environmental ed.
Arts	**music, theater, dance & circus** for culture & confidence.
Message	**magic & comedy** deliver character & safety lessons.

SECTION 05 — ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT

Curiosity is the point of entry

Beyond culture, performers are curriculum partners. Reading-motivation and author programs turn literacy into an event; STEM and STEAM shows make abstract science tangible; and financial-literacy, coding, and entrepreneurship programs connect classroom skills to the real world. Done well, an enrichment experience is a hook that sends students back to class curious.

Enrichment that supports curriculum

Academic tie-ins

Literacy — **reading motivation & author visits** make books an event.

STEM/STEAM — **hands-on science** makes the abstract tangible.

Money — **financial literacy & entrepreneurship** programs grow.

Code — **coding & computer science** enrichment expanding.

Enrichment themes

Curriculum-aligned

- **Reading motivation**
- **Author visits**
- **STEM / STEAM**
- **Mathematics**
- **Science**
- **Financial literacy**
- **Entrepreneurship**
- **Coding**

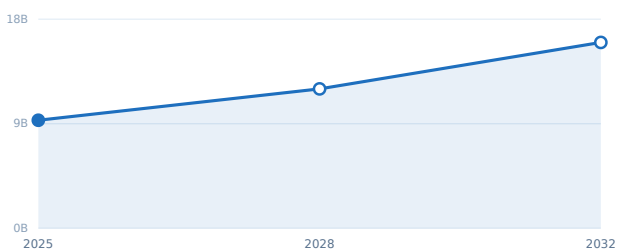
The best enrichment is a **spark** — it sends students back to the classroom asking questions.

The fastest-growing message

Social-emotional learning has moved from enrichment to core infrastructure. The SEL market is worth roughly $9-10 billion and growing, ~85% of educators use SEL tools to flag at-risk students, and quality SEL is tied to an ~11-percentile academic gain. Crucially, SEL works best when it is interactive and experiential — exactly what a well-designed assembly or character program delivers.

SEL is now core infrastructure

Social-emotional learning market (USD billions)



Character & SEL

Why it keeps growing

$9.3B — **SEL market** in 2025 — growing toward ~$16B.

85% — of **educators** use SEL tools to flag at-risk students.

+11 — quality SEL tied to an **~11-percentile academic gain**.

Experiential — SEL works best when **interactive & experiential**.

The assembly as a whole-school message

Some messages are best delivered to everyone at once. Anti-bullying and digital-citizenship programs, internet and personal-safety education, and substance- and vaping-prevention assemblies use the shared-experience format to set norms across a whole school — reinforcing wellbeing, health, and safety in a way a worksheet cannot.

Prevention & wellbeing

Whole-school messages

Bullying — **anti-bullying & cyberbullying** are top-requested topics.

Digital — **internet safety & digital citizenship** for a connected age.

Prevent — **vaping, drug & alcohol** prevention programming.

Wellness — **mental health, nutrition & healthy living** assemblies.

Safety & wellness topics

Setting norms at scale

- **Anti-bullying**
- **Digital citizenship**
- **Internet safety**
- **Vaping prevention**
- **Substance prevention**
- **Mental wellness**
- **Personal safety**

A shared assembly can **set a norm** for an entire school in a single hour.

Widening horizons

Assemblies are also windows onto the wider world. Career speakers and skilled-trades programs make futures feel real; cultural, heritage, and global-citizenship programs build understanding and inclusion; and environmental and sustainability programming connects students to the planet. These experiences answer the question students most want answered: why does this matter to me?

Horizons & belonging

Career, culture & planet

Career — **career speakers & skilled trades** make futures tangible.

Culture — **cultural & heritage** programs build understanding.

Global — **global-citizenship & DEI** widen perspective.

Planet — **environmental & sustainability** programming inspires.

World-widening themes

Relevance & inclusion

- **Career exploration**
- **Skilled trades**
- **World cultures**
- **Heritage programs**
- **Global citizenship**
- **Environmental education**
- **Sustainability**

Relevance is a powerful engagement lever — these programs answer **why this matters**.

Engagement extends beyond the stage

The strongest engagement strategies turn students and families into participants, not just audiences. Peer-leadership, student-government, and service-learning programs give students voice and ownership — and measurably improve attendance — while family nights, workshops, and community events extend school culture into the home, where engagement is reinforced or lost.

Student leadership

Voice & ownership

Peer — **peer leadership & mentoring** boost attendance (~6 days).

Voice — **student government & voice** build ownership.

Serve — **service learning & volunteerism** connect to community.

Lead — **leadership development** as an engagement engine.

Family engagement

Extending the culture home

Family nights — **family & community nights** build belonging.

Workshops — **parent workshops** support home learning.

Portals — **parent communication** keeps families connected.

Community — **community events & partnerships** widen the circle.

SECTION 10 — THE TECHNOLOGY SHIFT

Virtual, hybrid, and immersive reach

The pandemic forced assemblies online, and the format stuck as an option. Virtual and livestreamed programs now let a performer reach schools anywhere; hybrid models blend live energy with remote reach; and an emerging frontier — audience-response apps, gamification, VR/AR experiences, and even AI and holographic presenters — is expanding what a show can be, especially for schools far from touring routes.

The delivery shift

From stage to screen & back

Virtual — **livestreamed programs** reach any school, anywhere.

Hybrid — **hybrid models** blend live energy with remote reach.

Interactive — **audience-response & gamification** boost participation.

Immersive — **VR/AR, AI & holographic** presenters are emerging.

The engagement-tech toolkit

The emerging frontier

- Livestream assemblies
- Hybrid programs
- Audience response
- Gamification
- VR / AR
- AI presenters
- Holographic shows

Technology does not replace the **live magic** — it **extends its reach** to more students.

Running an assembly enterprise

Behind every show is a small business. Performers navigate pricing and scheduling, travel and logistics, insurance and contracts, marketing and school outreach, and the realities of school procurement — where a booking may be funded by a PTO/PTA, a grant, Title funds, or a district line item, often through cooperative purchasing. Getting discovered and getting booked are the twin challenges.

The performer business

Operations & logistics

Price — **pricing & scheduling** around the school calendar.

Travel — **travel, equipment & logistics** shape economics.

Protect — **insurance, contracts & background checks** are table stakes.

Market — **marketing & discoverability** drive bookings.

How assemblies get funded

Where the money comes from

- **PTO / PTA**
- **Grants**
- **Title funds**
- **District budgets**
- **Booster & community**
- **Cooperative purchasing**

Funding is **patchwork** — so clear value & easy booking win the calendar.

The biggest opportunity

The greatest weakness of the field is also its biggest opportunity: impact is rarely measured. Schools book on reputation and gut feel, and performers struggle to prove outcomes. As budgets tighten and administrators demand evidence, the providers who can connect their programs to engagement, attendance, climate, and SEL data — with simple before-and-after measures — will win trust and repeat bookings.

The evidence problem

Why measurement matters

Gut feel most bookings rest on **reputation, not data**.

Prove link programs to **attendance, climate & SEL** outcomes.

Simple **before/after surveys** & feedback build the case.

Repeat **evidence drives** repeat bookings & referrals.

What good measurement looks like

From feel to evidence

- **Engagement surveys**
- **Attendance tracking**
- **Climate measures**
- **SEL indicators**
- **Teacher feedback**
- **Repeat-booking rates**

The providers who **measure & report impact** will define the next era of the industry.

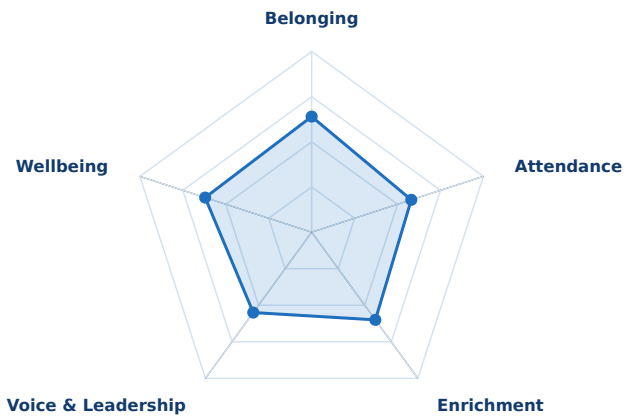
SECTION 13 — THE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT INDEX™

A K12 Academics framework for school culture

Attendance numbers tell you who showed up, not who is connected. The Index profiles a school engagement health across five weighted pillars — so leaders can see beyond attendance to belonging, enrichment, voice, and climate, and target where experiences can help most.

Five-pillar profile

Illustrative — weights sum to 100



Belonging & Connectedness 25%

Do students feel they belong?

Attendance & Participation 20%

Are students present & taking part?

Enrichment & Experiences 20%

Access to assemblies & the arts.

Student Voice & Leadership 15%

Ownership & leadership roles.

Wellbeing & Climate 20%

Safety, SEL & school culture.

SECTION 14 — THE 2027 OUTLOOK

Two forces, and a to-do list

Toward 2027, engagement stays at the top of the education agenda, and experiences — live, virtual, and immersive — remain a core lever for belonging and culture. The providers who thrive will pair genuine, curriculum-aligned content with easy discovery, easy booking, and real evidence of impact. The shared experience is not going away; it is getting more measurable.

↗ Tailwinds

Engagement & belonging atop the education agenda.

Virtual & hybrid reach for every school.

SEL, character & safety demand keeps growing.

Discoverability via performer directories.

! Headwinds

Tight, uneven budgets & patchwork funding.

The measurement gap — proving impact.

A fragmented provider market.

Competition for scarce instructional time.

For schools

- Use enrichment to build belonging
- Tie experiences to climate goals
- Measure engagement, not just attendance

For performers

- Align content to curriculum & SEL
- Be discoverable & easy to book
- Prove your impact with data

For families & communities

- Fund & attend shared experiences
- Extend school culture home
- Champion student voice

DATA & METHODOLOGY

Methodology & sources

This report synthesizes the most recent publicly available research on student engagement, belonging, and enrichment, current as of publication in 2026 — a data-driven analysis.

Data sources

- US Dept. of Education — chronic absenteeism
- Gallup / Walton Family Foundation — Voices of Gen Z
- Brookings — the disengagement gap
- CDC YRBS & Panorama Education — belonging & climate
- Market research (Mordor, Grand View, GMI) — SEL market
- Center for Supportive Schools — peer leadership
- K12 Academics Performers directory

A data-driven analysis. The school-assembly industry is fragmented and not formally sized; SEL market figures come from published research and definitions vary; figures reflect the most recent data available at publication in 2026; percentages rounded.

Contact K12 Academics

Are you a performer or assembly company? List your program in our Performers directory, or ask about this report. We'd love to hear from you.

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