



What Students Aren't Telling Us

What K12 Leaders Can Learn from the "Quiet Middle" to Improve Attendance, Engagement, and Student Outcomes



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We all know a student like this: Alex is a 14-year-old high school freshman. He sits in the third row, never causes a disruption, and turns in his assignments on time. In your district's student dashboard, Alex is green across the board. He's doing great.

But that dashboard doesn't tell us the whole story. It can't see that Alex is exhausted, lonely, and struggling to keep it all together while slowly drifting away from his school community. From the outside, there are few visible signs that he may need additional support.

And by the time his grades and attendance start falling, it may already be too late.

Across K12 education, districts pour immense effort into addressing rising absenteeism, student disengagement, and growing mental health needs. Schools have built robust systems to identify when students need help. Attendance tracking, academic performance, behavior reports, and counseling referrals all play important roles in supporting students once their challenges become apparent.

But what happens *before* a student shows up in those systems?

Recent insights drawn from a massive **national study of undergraduate students by TimelyCare** offer relevant insights for K12 leaders. The data reveals that many of the earliest indicators of disengagement do not appear in our traditional metrics. Instead, they emerge as subtle shifts in belonging, emotional capacity, and sense of direction long before a student's grades slip or they wind up in the principal's office.

The most shocking insight from the research isn't about the students in active crisis. It's about the students who report they are "doing okay." We know the same is true for K12 students based on an **analysis of 250,000+ student interactions** during the 2024–25 school year that points to early signs of stress and disconnection among students.

These students represent the largest group in our schools and the least visible risk. They are attending class, meeting basic expectations, and staying under the radar. Yet many may still be experiencing stress, disconnection, or early signs of disengagement.

For K12 leaders, this raises a critical question: **How many students in your schools are "doing okay," but quietly moving toward disengagement?**

This report breaks down the hidden signals that predict student burnout and offers practical, actionable strategies to help you reach the "quiet middle" before challenges begin affecting attendance and engagement.



Why This Matters for K12 Leaders

The patterns we see in college students often begin much earlier. Disengagement isn't a sudden event. It often develops gradually over time, beginning earlier in a student's K12 experience.

In K12 systems, schools often rely on key indicators to understand how students are doing:

- Daily attendance
- Grades and test performance
- Behavioral incidents
- Counseling referrals

These indicators are essential, and schools rely on them every day to identify when students need support. But they are often reactive by nature. By the time a student becomes chronically absent or experiences a sharp academic decline, those challenges may have already been building for months.

Youth rarely describe their experience using clinical terms like "anxiety" or "depression."

Instead, they talk about stress, pressure, and feeling overwhelmed.

The Key Takeaway

Student outcomes are shaped by challenges that may not be immediately visible. Earlier awareness can help schools provide support sooner.



What Schools Track Well (And What Schools Miss)

Most school systems are designed to respond when students show clear signs of need.

What we track well:

- Attendance patterns and unexcused absences
- Academic performance and missing assignments
- Behavior incidents and disciplinary actions
- Service utilization (who is visiting the nurse or counselor)

These signals are great for identifying students who are already struggling. But they often miss students whose challenges are less visible.

What we often miss:

- Emotional fatigue that has not yet escalated into a full-blown crisis
- A weakening sense of belonging in the classroom or hallways
- Quiet, internal disengagement from school life
- Stress that students have normalized and consider “manageable”

These early signs rarely appear in traditional reporting systems. Yet, they strongly influence whether a student remains engaged, begins to withdraw, or eventually experiences chronic absenteeism.



What K12 students are actually struggling with:



Balancing school and life



Sleep



Friendships and Relationships



Motivation



KEY FINDING 1:

Academic Performance Can Mask Vulnerability

We have a bad habit in education of equating “passing” with “thriving.”

A large majority of students report strong academic confidence and solid performance, yet many of those same students still report ongoing stress, disconnection, or thoughts of disengaging from school.

What this means for leaders:

Students who appear academically successful may still be experiencing challenges that are not reflected in traditional performance metrics.

Students who attend regularly and maintain passing grades might simultaneously be emotionally overwhelmed, deeply disconnected from their peers, and at a high risk for future burnout. These challenges may go unnoticed until they begin affecting engagement or academic performance.

The Implication:

Academic stability isn't a reliable indicator of student well-being.

A 3.5 GPA does not always reflect a student's overall well-being.

In fact, fewer than **4% of student interactions** reported severe issues, yet most describe ongoing stress in their daily lives that is impacting their performance.

Actionable Strategy:

Decouple grades from wellness checks:

Create regular opportunities for students to share how they're doing, regardless of academic performance. Simple, low-barrier check-ins can help schools identify early signs of stress. Questions like, “How manageable does your workload feel this week?” can help create space for earlier conversations and support.





KEY FINDING 2:

The “Quiet Middle” Is the Largest and Least Visible Group

When asked how they are doing, the most common response from students is not “thriving” or “struggling.”

It is **“doing okay.”**

What this means for leaders:

In our classrooms, this “okay” group consistently shows up. They meet minimum expectations. They may not seek support or openly communicate what they’re experiencing. Because they are not in visible crisis, these students can be harder to identify through traditional systems. And staff attention is often focused on students with more immediate or visible needs.

Yet, this exact group represents the largest share of students at risk of future disengagement.

The Key Insight:

Students who describe themselves as **“doing okay”** may still need additional support.

Nearly
30%

of younger students express concern about talking to an adult about what they’re experiencing according to our data.



Actionable Strategy:

Redefine the baseline: Train educators and staff to recognize “doing okay” as a response that may still indicate a need for support, rather than a clear sign that a student is doing well. Create opportunities for students to share their experiences through anonymous climate surveys or digital wellness check-ins that do not require raising a hand in a crowded room.



KEY FINDING 3:

Belonging is a Leading Indicator of Engagement

Students who feel connected to their school community are significantly more likely to thrive. Research continues to show the important role connection plays in the student experience.



What this means for leaders:

Belonging plays a critical role in attendance consistency, classroom participation, and intrinsic motivation. Students who feel disconnected from their peers, their teachers, or the broader school community are much more likely to emotionally withdraw. Over time, disconnection can begin affecting attendance and overall engagement.

The Implication:

Belonging can serve as an early indicator of how connected, supported, and engaged students feel within their school community.

Actionable Strategy:

Map the connections:

Challenge your staff to identify every student in your building and name at least one trusted adult that student connects with. If a student has no obvious connection, they become a priority for intentional, casual outreach.





KEY FINDING 4:

Burnout is Normalized, Not Escalated

Students frequently report feeling overwhelmed or emotionally exhausted, yet many describe this chronic stress as simply “normal.”

What this means for leaders:

Many students experience ongoing stress and immense pressure to keep up, but they don't view their pain as severe enough to justify asking for help. Many assume their experiences are typical and may not realize additional support could help.

**Early Signal:
Sleep Struggles**

53% of students get less than 7 hours of sleep

23% of conversations focus on improving sleep

As a result, many students delay seeking help. School resources may remain underutilized by the students who could benefit from them most, while underlying challenges continue to build over time.

The Implication:

Students may adjust to ongoing stress long before they seek help. Schools may need to create more proactive opportunities for connection and support.



Actionable Strategy:

Normalize the struggle, destigmatize the support:

Encourage open conversations about stress, sleep, and emotional well-being across the school community. Classroom workshops, wellness check-ins, and virtual care options can help make support feel more accessible before students reach a crisis point.



KEY FINDING 5:

Students Disengage Before Outcomes Change

Students rarely drop out or become chronically absent overnight. Signs of disengagement often appear earlier.

What this means for leaders:

In K12, disengagement typically follows a highly predictable progression:



Early disengagement often shows up as:

Chronic Fatigue

Loss of Motivation

Difficulty Focusing

By the time attendance or academic performance begin to decline, students may already be experiencing ongoing disengagement. Intervening at this stage can require more intensive time, coordination, and support.

The Implication:

Absenteeism is often the result of challenges that have been building over time.

Actionable Strategy:

Shift the timeline of intervention:

Focus your resources on the “Doing okay” to “Disengaged” window. Use pulse surveys and early-warning digital platforms to identify signs of disengagement before it begins affecting attendance.





IMPLICATIONS FOR K12 LEADERS: Supporting Students Before Challenges Become Outcomes

Addressing early disengagement requires a fundamental shift in how schools operate. We need earlier awareness of the student experience, consistent proactive check-ins, and more accessible pathways to support.

For districts facing rising student needs and limited resources, this means finding ways to extend existing systems while continuing to protect staff capacity and well-being.

Younger students don't typically start by asking for help, but

41% will share with a trusted adult after taking an initial step

23% become more open to reaching out after in-the-moment support





Schools Need Solutions That Provide:

Fast, reliable access to care

**Support for students before
they hit a crisis point**

**Seamless coordination with families
and school staff**

**Measurable outcomes that justify
the investment**

When early signs are missed, absenteeism may increase, interventions become more reactive, and staff capacity can become strained. But when schools identify these signals earlier, they have more opportunities to provide meaningful support.



Conclusion

The challenging patterns higher education is seeing today didn't begin on a college campus. They began much earlier – in the classrooms, cafeterias, and hallways we oversee every single day. They often begin with early signs that may seem manageable or easy to overlook.

The students most likely to disengage aren't the ones raising their hands and asking for a lifeline.

They are the ones quietly treading water, trying desperately to keep up while telling us they are **"doing fine."**

For K12 leaders, our greatest opportunity is not just to respond to student crises. It is to recognize the quiet drift sooner and create environments where students can stay connected, engaged, and on track.



The bottom line is:
many students
who appear to
be doing fine are
quietly struggling.

Take action before students begin
to disengage.

TimelyCare helps K12 districts act earlier by supporting students before challenges escalate into attendance issues, disengagement, or academic disruption.

Learn how **TimelyCare + Alongside**
are expanding early student support:

[timelycare.com/timelycare-acquires-alongside/](https://www.timelycare.com/timelycare-acquires-alongside/)



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