



WHY **JA?**

Aligning Education
and Economic Mobility

WHY **NOW?**



Junior
Achievement™

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

There is no shortage of research pointing to the disconnect between the way we as a society educate our young people and what's needed to succeed as an adult.[1] The tendency is to claim “education is broken,” blaming educators, policymakers, and more.

But is that accurate? When public education was first established, promoting reading, writing, and arithmetic was sufficient for most people.[2] But beginning in the middle of the 20th century and to this day, there's been a greater expectation that education will prepare students for success as adults, which includes being work-ready. While this approach was successful when many well-paying and secure jobs could be done with just a high school diploma, the evolving complexity of our economy in recent decades has led to a growing disconnect between expectations and reality.

At Junior Achievement, we believe our educational system can provide a firm academic foundation. But something more is needed to build upon that foundation to better align student outcomes with work and essential life skills to ensure they achieve as adults, both personally and economically. As we will share in this white paper, **Junior Achievement has a unique ability to bring end-to-end solutions to create that better alignment between education with desired outcomes**, accelerating economic opportunity and mobility for our nation's young people, especially for those most in need.

NOT OUR PARENTS' ECONOMY

For decades, there have been questions about which generation would fail to do as well as their parents' generation. Such speculation became more prominent in the years following the post-war prosperity of the 1950s. For each subsequent generation, such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials, the previous generation has expressed skepticism of the next's ability to achieve.[3]

Such skepticism is not unfounded. For instance, by several metrics, including overall wealth accumulation, changes in retirement plans from defined benefits to defined contributions, and the financial responsibilities of being “The Sandwich Generation,” taking care of both children still at home and aging parents, Generation X has not done as well as Baby Boomers. [4] The wealth gap between Millennials and Baby Boomers on the whole is even more pronounced for different reasons. [5] These include Millennials having larger student loan debt than previous generations and the lasting effects the Great Recession had on their ability to achieve early professional and economic objectives following the 2008 financial crisis.

[1] “The U.S. Education System Isn't Giving Students What Employers Need”, Harvard Business Review, May 18, 2021

[2] “History and Evolution of Public Education in the US”, Center on Education Policy, 2020

[3] “Why Do We Always Sell the Next Generation Short?”, Forbes, March 13, 2012

[4] “Generation X: Between Baby Boomers and Millennials”, Investopedia, November 12, 2024

[5] “Millennials aren't all worse off than Baby Boomers, but the rich-poor gap is widening”, University of Cambridge, November 16, 2023

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

Despite these generational disparities, Generation X and older Millennials have been able to reach levels of economic stability on their own terms. While this might ultimately be true for Generation Z, the lingering impact of the global pandemic, growing wealth disparity, dramatic advances in technologies such as AI that are predicted to eliminate jobs, and decades-long increases in durable cost of living expenses, create economic realities Gen Z and many Millennials may find hard to overcome in the years ahead.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE MIDDLE CLASS IN AMERICA

The benchmark of economic success in America has long been the middle class. A strong middle class has been seen as essential for the personal and societal prosperity of the United States,^[6] yet long-term trends may be putting the middle-class lifestyle out of the reach of many.

A research report by The Brookings Institution^[7] shows that Americans think of being “middle class” more in terms of lifestyle than household income. According to Brookings:

“The key ingredients of a middle-class lifestyle, according to the report, are to: own a home, be able to save for retirement, provide a college education for their children, have health security (insurance), a car for each adult, and a family vacation at least once a year.”

The challenge to this expectation is that when it comes to being middle class the cornerstones of home, health, and higher ed may be eroding under the weight of economic reality for most Americans. This is especially true for Generation Z, and those Millennials and Gen Xers whose incomes haven't kept pace with the cost of the key aspects of a middle-class lifestyle.



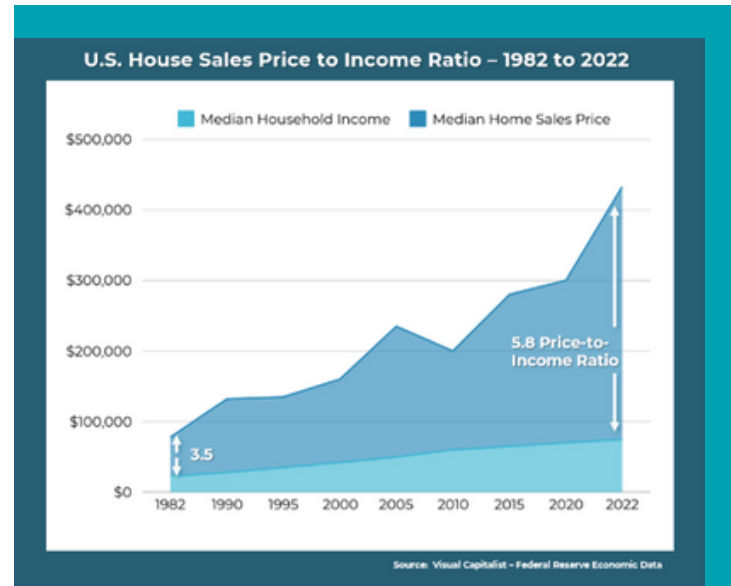
[6] “Is the Middle Class within Reach for Middle-Income Families?”, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, May 10, 2019

[7] “Defining the middle class: Cash, credentials, or culture?”, The Brookings Institution, May 7, 2018

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

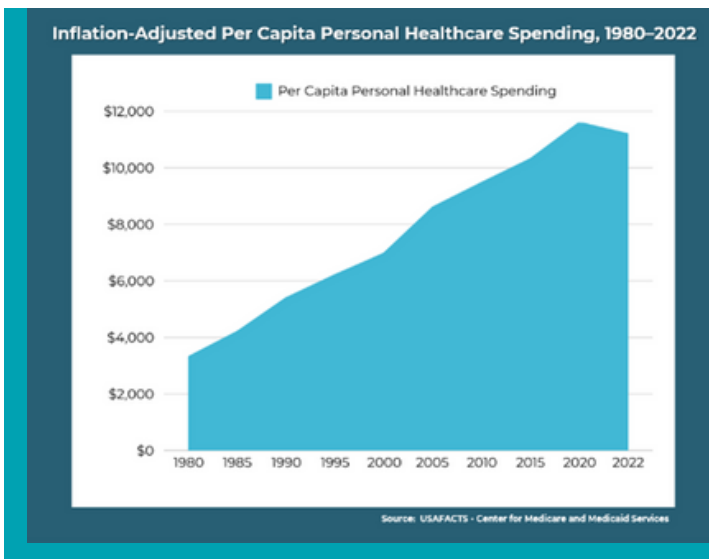
Home:

While housing costs have been at near record highs in recent years, the reality is that this has been part of a long-term trend where median home prices have outpaced median income.[8] In fact, in 1984 the median home price in the U.S. was 3.5 times more than the annual median income. By 2022, it was 5.8 times, according to Federal Reserve Economic Data. The National Association of Home Builders notes that 77 percent of U.S. households can't afford a median-priced home.[9] In 2024, the National Association of Realtors reported that the median age of first-time homebuyers was 38. In the 1980s, first-time homebuyers were in their late 20s.[10]



Health:

Access to healthcare has increased for Americans over the years. During the 1980s, the percentage of uninsured Americans grew by 30 percent.^[11] In 2023, 92 percent of Americans had health insurance during all or part of the year.^[12] However, costs have also increased, with total personal healthcare expenditures rising an inflation-adjusted 238 percent over the past 40 years. From 1980 to 2022, per-person spending on healthcare went from an inflation-adjusted \$3,310 to \$11,193.^[13] In 2020, out-of-pocket expenses for premiums and deductibles amounted to 11.6 percent of median income, up from 7.8 percent in 2008.^[14]



[8] "Charted: U.S. Median House Prices vs. Income", The Visual Capitalist, February 27, 2024

[9] "Nearly Half of U.S. Households Can't Afford a \$250,000 Home", National Association of Home Builders, May 17, 2024

[10] "Average age of first-time homebuyers is 38, an all-time high.", CNBC, November 5, 2024

[11] Americans' health insurance coverage, 1980-91, National Library of Medicine

[12] Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2023, U.S. Census Bureau, September 10, 2024

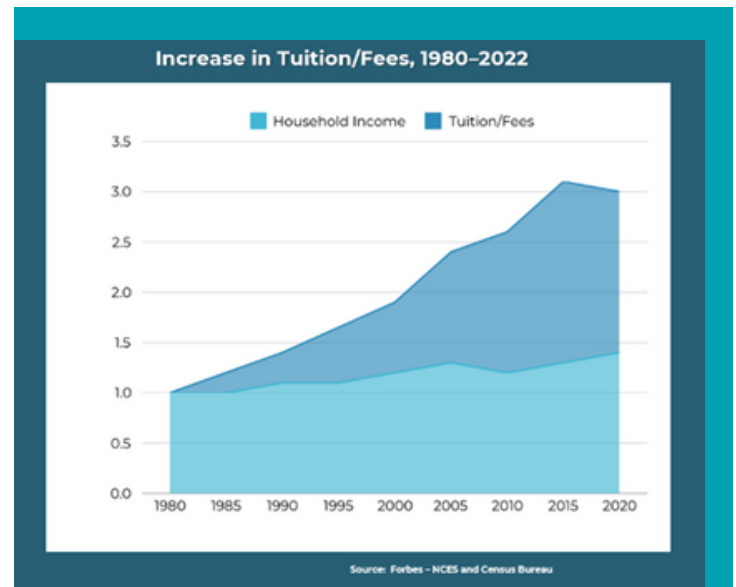
[13] "How much is spent on personal healthcare in the US?", USA FACTS, March 7, 2024

[14] Share of income spent on health plan costs by U.S. employees 2008-2020, Statista, March 22, 2023

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

Higher Ed:

In January 2025, U.S. student loan debt sat at \$1.7 trillion.^[15] For comparison, that amount is larger than the GDP of 166 of the world's 177 recognized countries, including Australia, South Korea, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia.^[16] The rising cost of higher education is a major driver of this growing debt. In fact, according to Forbes, 1982 was the last year college costs kept pace with median income. Today, college tuition is now 3 times higher compared to median household income than it was in the early 1980s.^[17]



[15] Student Loan Debt Statistics, Education Data Initiative, January 15, 2025

[16] World Development Indicators, World Bank, July 25, 2023

[17] "1982: The Last Time College Costs Kept Pace With Median Income", Forbes, August 23, 2023

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

The cost-of-living disparity wouldn't be as pronounced if median household income was keeping pace with these rising costs. However, adjusted for inflation, growth in median household income has been flat over the past three decades, except for very high-wage earners. [18] Research by the New York Times shows causes for this include pressure being put on wages by automation, technological advances, and globalization, which have increased productivity to where employers can do much more with fewer domestic workers and by utilizing less costly overseas labor. Those without college educations have been especially hard hit, as well as those with college degrees for majors not in high demand.[19]

Based on research from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), factoring out these external factors, median household income in the U.S. should be about 25 percent higher.[20]

Data from the U.S. Department of Labor highlights the scope of challenges facing the American workforce. In 2023, eight of the top 10 occupations in the United States in terms of total employment did not pay what many would characterize as “a living wage”. [21] Only two required education beyond high school and six of the 10 are in areas expected to see job reductions in the coming years due to growth in AI and automation technologies.[22]

RANK	OCCUPATION	EMPLOYED	EARNINGS	EDUCATION
1	Home Health/Personal Care Aides	3.9 M	\$	High School
2	Retail Salesperson*	3.8 M	\$	No Formal Credit
3	Fast Food and Counter Workers*	3.7 M	\$	No Formal Credit
4	General and Operations Manager	3.6 M	\$\$\$\$	Bachelor's Degree
5	Cashiers*	3.3 M	\$	No Formal Credit
6	Registered Nurses	3.3 M	\$\$\$\$	Bachelor's Degree
7	Laborers, Freight, Movers	3 M	\$\$	No Formal Credit
8	Customer Service Representatives*	2.9 M	\$\$	High School
9	Stockers and Order Fillers*	2.8 M	\$	High School
10	Office Clerks, General*	2.6 M	\$\$	High School

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, 2023 *Jobs vulnerable to replacement by AI or automation.



[18] "Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts", Economic Policy Institute, January 6, 2015

[19] "They Used to Be Ahead in the American Economy. Now They've Fallen Behind.", The New York Times, October 26, 2024

[20] "Raising America's Pay", Economic Policy Institute, June 4, 2014

[21] Careers with Largest Employment, U.S. Department of Labor, 2023

[22] "How Will Artificial Intelligence Affect Jobs 2024-2030", Nexford University, January 9, 2024

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

THE CURRENT EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY DISCONNECT

The connection between education and economic mobility is well established. Quality education can lead to better jobs, higher wages, social mobility, economic growth, and even societal stability.[23] However, in the United States, with a wide array of postsecondary education choices available to students, all paths do not lead to a guaranteed prosperous future.

For years, the conventional wisdom has been that obtaining a college degree virtually assures a better-paying job and economic mobility. That said, research by The Burning Glass Institute and Strada Education Foundation finds that 52 percent of college graduates in the United States are “underemployed,” meaning they are often working at jobs not associated with their college majors and that might only require a high school education. The research also shows that 45 percent continued to be underemployed a decade after graduation.[24]



52% of college graduates in the United States are “underemployed”.

Research by The Burning Glass Institute and Strada Education Foundation

An analysis of the U.S. Department of Education’s College Scorecard by The HEA Group found that out of 3,887 institutions of higher education assessed, 852 showed a majority of students earning below \$15 an hour ten years after enrollment, and 455 with a majority earning between \$30,000 and \$35,000. More than a thousand (1,022) of these institutions had students failing to earn as much as a high school graduate a decade after enrollment.[25] A review of Bureau of Labor Statistics data by HeyTutor shows even those college degrees for careers with low unemployment rates can still result in wages that fall far below the U.S. median income.[26] Even STEM majors face challenges, with only about one in four (28%) of those with STEM degrees ending up working in their fields of study.[27] Based on these findings, a significant proportion of college degrees do not guarantee better economic outcomes.

There are other postsecondary education options that offer alternatives to college. For instance, there is high demand for those interested in the skilled trades. Qualifications for these jobs often require less costly occupational training, apprenticeships, certifications, and licensing.[28] Though many of these jobs pay well, the skilled trade workforce is aging with 40 percent being over the age of 45.[29] While there have been some signs that Generation Z is more likely to consider skilled trades, only 9 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 24 are entering those fields.[30]

[23] “Investing in Quality Education for Economic Development, Peace, and Stability”, CSIS, December 20, 2023

[24] “Talent Disrupted”, The Burning Glass Institute/Strada Education Foundation, February 2024

[25] “Ensuring a Living Wage Through Higher Education”, The HEA Group, February 20, 2024

[26] “College majors with the highest & lowest unemployment rates”, HeyTutor/BLS, January 6, 2023

[27] “STEM Majors Earned More Than Other STEM Workers”, U.S. Census Bureau, June 2, 2021

[28] “10 Great Trade Jobs Worth Considering”, Forbes, August 22, 2024

[29] “Are Skilled Trades in Demand?”, Fortis, July 30, 2024

[30] “Opening Doors to Skilled Trades”, EBSCO, January 25, 2024

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

The realities of the return on investment of postsecondary education have not been lost on Generation Z. Male college enrollment, both at four-year and two-year institutions, has been on the decline in recent years.[31] On the skilled trades front, Generation Z's interest in these occupations has risen to a level where many high school graduates are on waitlists for apprenticeships and training. Despite this level of interest, though, many teens express a desire to better understand these occupations, with evidence showing that early exposure is key to creating a pipeline for jobs in skilled trades.[32]

THE DISENGAGEMENT DILEMMA

The disconnect between education and economic mobility for many Americans may be contributing to a growing sense of disengagement with young Americans. In 2024, the Pew Research Center found that only 39 percent of Generation Z and 43 percent of Millennials believe the American Dream is “still possible”, though those with higher incomes and college educations were more likely to believe it is still possible.[33] This could help explain why only 32 percent of American workers feel engaged at work, according to Gallup,[34] with Generation Z especially prone to feeling disengaged. [35] Even more troubling is that the trend toward disengagement and disconnection is beginning early for many. Currently, about one in ten Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 are considered “disconnected,” meaning they are not in education, employment, or training.[36] According to the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, between 40 and 60 percent of high school students are “chronically disengaged”, which is characterized as being inattentive and exerting little to no effort.[37] Research by Gallup and The Walton Family Foundation finds that about half of Generation Z lacks a sense of purpose in school and work.[38]

40 and 60%
of high school students are
“chronically disengaged”.

*Source: U.S. Department of
Education's Institute of Education
Sciences*



[31] “Fewer young men are in college, especially at 4-year schools”, Pew Research Center, December 18, 2023

[32] “Gen Z workers want to pursue skilled trades but face barriers”, HR Drive, November 21, 2024

[33] “Americans are split over the state of the American dream”, Pew Research Center, July 2, 2024

[34] “Most Americans just aren't into their jobs, new Gallup data shows”, NBC News, January 26, 2023

[35] “Generation Disconnected: Data on Gen Z in the Workplace”, Gallup, November 11, 2022

[36] “Youth Disconnection in America”, Measure of America, October 31, 2024

[37] “The ‘Silent Epidemic’ Finds Its Voice”, ERIC – Institute of Education Sciences, 2020

[38] “Sense of Purpose in School and Work Drives Gen Z Happiness, New Gallup Survey Finds”, Walton Family Foundation, April 10, 2024

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

FORGING A NEW PATH FORWARD

At Junior Achievement, we believe creating a better alignment between our educational system and the levers of economic mobility...

is needed to address the disengagement and disconnection of current and emerging generations. Globalization and technological advancement have changed how we work and live. Our schools need to change the way they prepare young people to meet this challenge, and Junior Achievement is part of that solution.

According to The Pew Charitable Trusts, several key indicators support the promotion of economic mobility. These include a stable family structure, parental characteristics that emphasize education, positive community influence, the level of educational attainment, intergenerational wealth transfer, homeownership, and, in some cases, entrepreneurship.[39] Realistically, though, these indicators do not apply to millions of Americans. How, then, does society promote economic opportunity and mobility for those who don't happen to have the family structure, parents, community influence, intergenerational wealth, or other factors considered "key indicators" to improve their station in life?

At Junior Achievement, we are focused on using outcomes-based design in creating learning experiences that help students connect what they learn in school to life outside the classroom. Our proven experiential learning approach helps students in grades K through 12 and beyond take what they are learning academically and forge critical life skills that inform work and career choices, as well as build financial capability and entrepreneurial acuity. This student- and community-focused approach doesn't seek to reinvent education but to re-engineer what exists to better position students for future success as adults by making informed decisions about education, careers, and life choices that help them achieve their potential in life. Junior Achievement does this by emphasizing four research-based building blocks to economic opportunity and mobility. Those building blocks are:

1. Student Engagement & Growth Mindset
2. Transferable Skills & Competencies
3. Educational & Academic Attainment
4. Access to Networks & Opportunities



[39] Pathways to Economic Mobility: Key Indicators Fact Sheet, The Pew Charitable Trust

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

Student Engagement & Growth Mindset

Research shows that promoting student engagement and a growth mindset can boost individual empowerment, particularly for those with disadvantaged backgrounds, resulting in enhanced self-belief and a desire to take on more personal agency when it comes to educational attainment and future employment prospects. Specifically, a growth mindset can promote resilience and improved academic performance.[40]

How JA Supports

Through its Experiential Learning Centers, where students can apply what they have learned in the classroom through real-world simulations, Junior Achievement can increase student engagement and promote a growth mindset. With Experiential Learning Centers like JA Finance Park and JA BizTown, students take on roles that require them to make financial and work-like decisions to allow them to better understand what they will need to know as adults. Third-party research shows that these Experiential Learning Centers help students better understand financial concepts and the role of education in preparing for careers.[41]

Transferable Skills & Competencies

As low-skill, repetitive jobs decline in demand due to the rise of more cost-effective technologies like AI and automation, having transferable skills and competencies will become increasingly important to maintain employability in the emerging skills economy.^[42] Skills needed to be successful in this new economy include cognitive skills like analytical and critical thinking, self-efficacy in the forms of motivation and curiosity, management skills, technology skills, and the ability to work with others.^[43]

How JA Supports

Research by third parties shows that Junior Achievement's Instructional Models have a positive impact on cognitive skills, self-efficacy, and hands-on competencies related to management and technology literacy.^[44] JA's in-classroom learning experiences, which align with national and state educational standards, infuse experiential learning delivered by subject matter experts to help students bridge the academic with the applicable and bring context to what they are learning in school. This is further backed up by independent surveys of adult Junior Achievement alumni.^[45]

Access to Networks & Opportunities

Students access pre-employment opportunities that establish track record and credibility of industry experiences.

Educational & Academic Achievement

Students increase proficiency and comprehension in core academics, while gaining meaningful education credentials.

Transferable Skills & Competencies

Students gain knowledge, acquire skillsets, and develop competencies to successfully navigate post-secondary options.

Student Engagement & Growth Mindset

Students see the relevance of education, sparking self-motivation and confidence to pursue academic and career interests.

[40] "Growth mindset of socioeconomic status boosts subjective well-being", ScienceDirect, August 14, 2020

[41] "JA Finance Park Virtual Entry Simulation", Junior Achievement USA, 2022

[42] "The skills economy: What is it and what does it mean for talent?", World Economic Forum, October 12, 2022

[43] "Future of jobs 2023: These are the most in-demand skills now - and beyond", World Economic Forum, May 1, 2023

[44] "Global Education Innovation Initiative", Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2016

[45] "JA Alumni Survey Report", Ipsos, 2022

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

Educational & Academic Achievement

The connection between educational and academic achievement and gaining access to better-paying jobs is well established. Certifications, credentials, and college degrees in good-paying occupations that are in high demand can lead to economic and social mobility that benefits families through the building of intergenerational wealth and communities by fostering innovation.[46]

How JA Supports

One way JA supports educational and academic achievement is through 3DE by Junior Achievement, a school within a school model that features case methodology, a student-centered approach that increases engagement, strengthens learning outcomes, and builds critical thinking. Case studies present students with real-world challenges facing today's high-growth industries and require students to problem-solve and present their approach to effective decision-making. Launched in 2015, 3DE has been shown to decrease student absenteeism while increasing high school graduation rates and college enrollment.[47]

Access to Networks & Opportunities

Building social capital through networks that lead to opportunities is essential to promote economic mobility. This social capital can lead to many benefits, including mentorship and guidance, job referrals, access to information, and skills development. Unfortunately, those from disadvantaged backgrounds may have limited access to such networks without the engagement of outside organizations and institutions.[48]

How JA Supports

For much of its history, Junior Achievement had an informal approach to promoting access to networks and opportunities through offerings like the JA Company Program, an afterschool program where students formed companies and worked with local business leaders. In recent decades, with Junior Achievement featuring more prominently in schools, many JA students have gone on to college internships at companies that support JA. Today, Junior Achievement is developing structured programs for young adults focused on coaching, credentialing, and connections to employment opportunities through internships and apprenticeships.



[46] Review Education Policies, OECD, December 10, 2024

[47] "3DE Impact, RMC Third Party Data

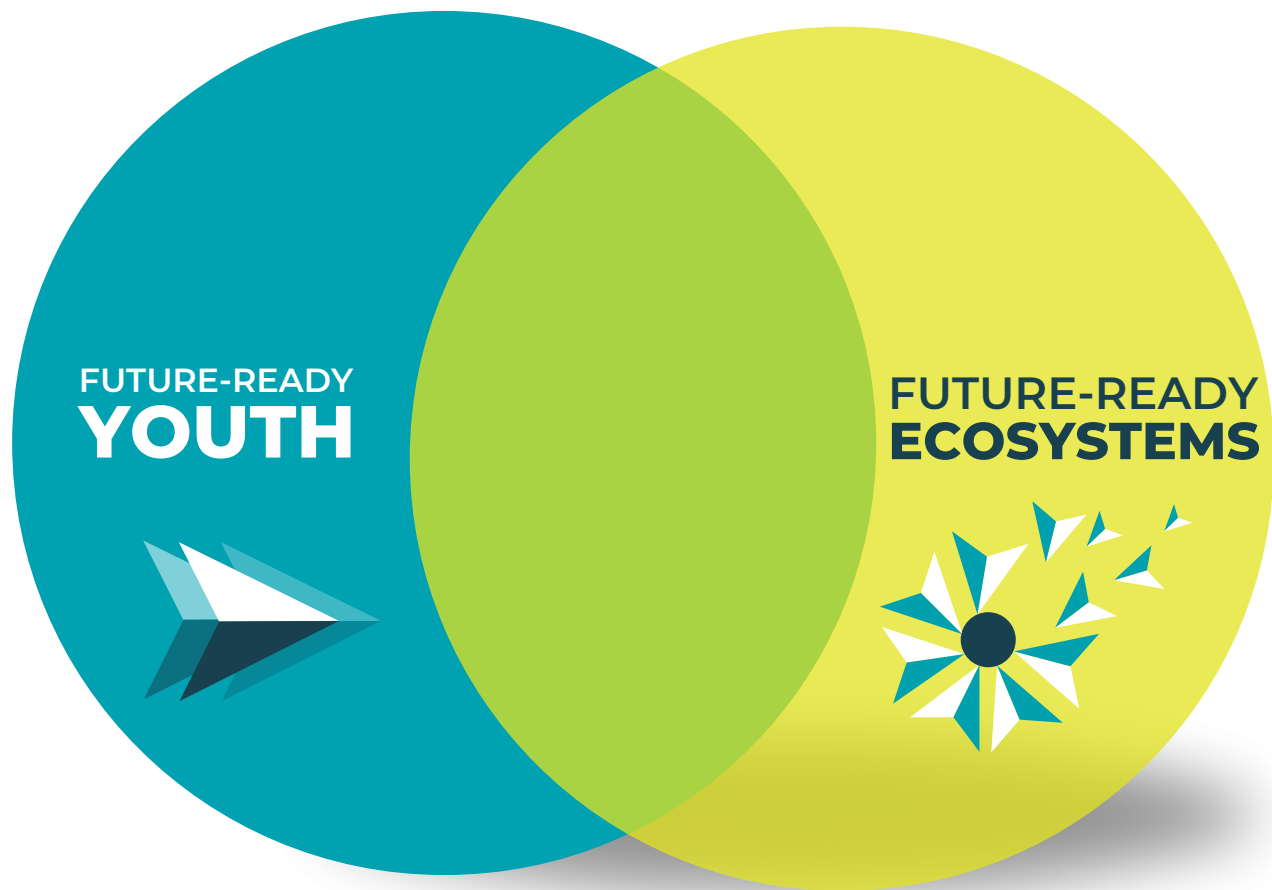
[48] "The Role of Social Capital in Supporting Economic Mobility", U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, May 2019

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

From Youth Development to Systemic Change

For much of its history, Junior Achievement's approach to youth development has been demonstrated to help young people develop the skills and connections they need to succeed in adulthood. This has involved the use of our experiential learning experiences to help develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills while helping to build a sense of belonging, purpose, and self-worth. At Junior Achievement, we refer to this as creating Future-Ready Youth.

Moving forward, Junior Achievement intends to accelerate economic opportunity through an integrated set of solutions designed to spur broader systemic change in a region. This will be accomplished by linking JA's established and demonstrated abilities to promote student engagement and growth mindsets, as well as transferable skills and competencies, to our emerging strengths in the areas of educational and academic achievement and building access to networks and opportunities. Doing this in strategic, reproducible, and measurable ways will result in scalability that will foster systemic change in the communities where JA operates. We refer to this as creating Future-Ready Ecosystems.



WHY JA? WHY NOW?

Future-Ready Youth Vision:

Developing youth with the mindsets and skillsets to open doors for greater economic opportunity. Measurable outcomes would include:

- Students have hope in their future and confidence in their ability to succeed.
- Students can envision potential, attainable career paths that will fulfill their aspirations.
- Students are motivated to pursue their academic and career interests while applying future-ready competencies.
- Students gain critical knowledge and skills in financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and career readiness.
- Increase in students receiving course credits, industry certifications, and/or dual enrollment toward graduation.
- Increase of students (alumni) placed in pre-work experiences and/or earning certifications with regional employers.

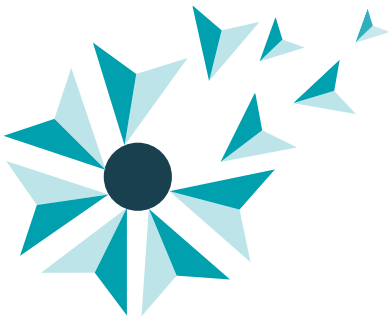


Future-Ready Ecosystems Vision:

Accelerating economic opportunity through an integrated set of solutions designed to spur broader systemic change in a region.

Measurable outcomes include:

- Students connect the importance of education to future financial/career success.
- Students demonstrate future-ready competencies through earned credentials.
- Improvement in attendance rates, chronic absenteeism, and ELA/Math academic proficiency.
- Increase in high school graduation rates & post-secondary enrollment.
- Increase in post-secondary graduation rates and/or industry-recognized credentials.
- Increase in employment rates for young adults within high-growth career sectors.



Using these approaches, Junior Achievement has a unique ability to bring end-to-end solutions to create a better alignment between education with desired outcomes, accelerating economic opportunity and mobility for our nation's young people, especially for those most in need.

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Junior Achievement's approach to promoting economic mobility is based on a foundation of experience. JA periodically surveys JA Alumni, adults who went through Junior Achievement's learning experiences as students. In December of 2024, global research firm Ipsos surveyed Generation Z and Millennial JA Alumni. For this survey, a sample of 1,002 Junior Achievement alumni aged 22-43 from the continental U.S., Alaska, and Hawaii was interviewed online in English. The poll has a credibility interval of plus or minus 3.8 percentage points for all respondents. Responses from JA Alumni included:

Influence on Career Choices, Money Management, and Running a Business

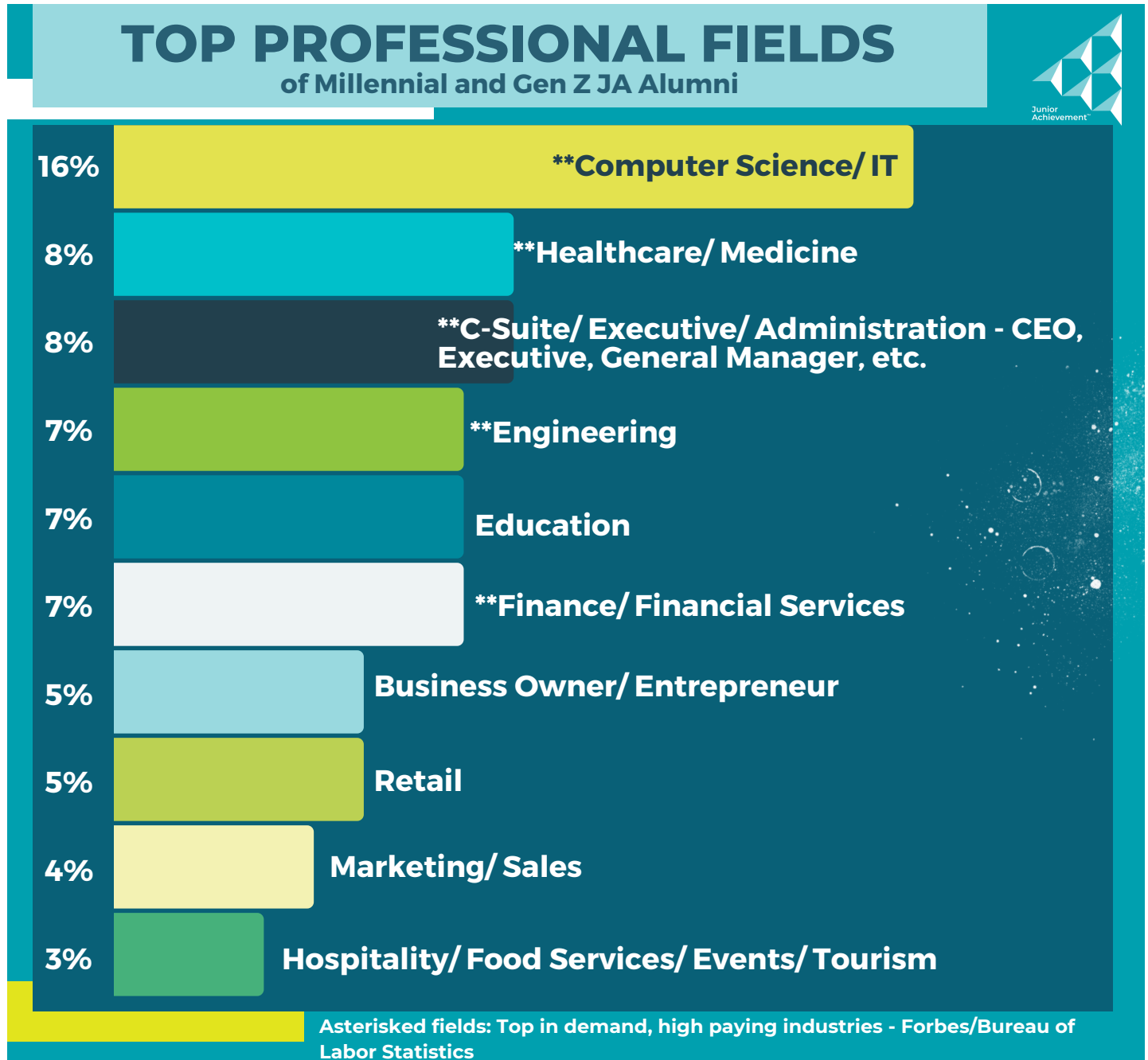
Over half of JA Alumni say that their work ethic (57%), career choices (56%), or money management (54%) were positively influenced in some way by their Junior Achievement experience. Millennial alumni are more likely to say their work ethic (62%) was positively influenced compared to their Gen Z counterparts (44%).

Half of JA Alumni say that their educational choices were positively influenced (49%), and a third say their decision to start or run a business was positively influenced (31%). Gen Z JA Alumni are more likely to say that JA impacted their education choices (57%) than Millennial alumni (46%), while there is no generational difference in the decision to run or start a business.



WHY JA? WHY NOW?

When asked what fields they currently work in, JA Alumni reported the top fields were computer science and IT, healthcare and medicine, c-suite and senior management, engineering, education, finance and financial services, business ownership, retail, marketing and sales, and hospitality/food service/tourism. The top six responses by JA Alumni included the top five high-growth, high-income career fields, based on [Bureau of Labor Statistics data](#).^[49]



[49] "Top 10 In-Demand, High-Paying Industries In 2024, From Research", Forbes/BLS Data, June 14, 2024



WHY JA? WHY NOW?

Influence on Self-Belief, Motivation, and Perceptions of Education

Nine in ten JA Alumni report that the program played an important role in shaping their belief they can achieve goals (89%), their personal development (88%), career path (88%), professional development (86%), or their decision to pursue further education (86%).

Nine in ten JA Alumni agree that the program exposed them to different ways of thinking (91%), made them think of new work opportunities or career paths (89%), motivated them to succeed in their professional life (88%), or that it widened their horizons (87%).

Nearly all JA Alumni (98%) would say that because of their involvement with the program, they perceive education to be important as it relates to future success. Thirty-six percent would say they perceive education as extremely important, 43 percent as important, and 19 percent as somewhat important as it relates to future success.

Lifestyle and Career Satisfaction

JA Alumni have varied views of what it means to be thriving, but a majority (51%) say that to be thriving is to be satisfied with your own life choice, and 29 percent say to be thriving means being financially secure and stable, 14 percent say it is being healthy or having a good well-being, and 5 percent say it is about career advancement and success at work. Two in three JA Alumni consider themselves to be thriving (66%) as they described it.

- Eighty-three percent of JA Alumni agree that they have a career which is extremely fulfilling.
- Eighty-one percent of JA Alumni feel like they have a strong financial footing.

Half of JA Alumni describe themselves as middle class (49%). One in five describe themselves as working class (19%) and 24 percent as higher income. Only 5 percent describe themselves as lower income. Gen Z Alumni are more likely to say they are higher income (31%) than their Millennial counterparts (21%).

In comparison, while 73 percent of Millennial and Generation Z JA Alumni describe themselves as middle class or as higher income, [research by Gallup](#) shows that only 47 percent of Americans in those generations identify as middle or upper-middle class. While 24 percent of JA Alumni in the same age range describe themselves as working class or lower income, 51 percent of Americans identify the same way, according to Gallup.[50]

[50] "Declining Middle-Class Identification Apparent in Most Subgroups", Gallup, May 19, 2022

WHY JA? WHY NOW?

Current Impact Indicators

Junior Achievement takes a comprehensive approach to program evaluation to ensure the impact of its learning experiences.[51] Recent third-party research of 3DE by Junior Achievement, a school-within-a-school model that uses case methodology to help students connect what they are learning academically to solve real-world problems. Research of 3DE students shows:

- **A 30.2 percent higher post-secondary enrollment rate as compared to school averages prior to 3DE;** (66.1% aggregate for 3DE students compared to 50.7% average of portfolio schools at 3DE inception). Additional Comparison Point: The National Average for all students is 61.4 percent.
- **A 10 percent higher post-secondary persistence rate as compared to the National Average of all students;** (83.5% aggregate for 3DE students compared to 76% national average).

Conclusion

The systemic challenges detailed in this white paper have been in the making for decades and appear to be destined to continue for the foreseeable future. Much has been written and discussed about “the vanishing middle class” and questioning the efficacy of higher education. But in most of those conversations, the problems have been identified but few practical solutions have been advanced besides imploring policymakers to do something different.

At Junior Achievement, we are approaching the problem within the scope of our mission and capabilities in response to the system as it is. We do not view our approach as “the solution” but potentially “a solution” for those we can reach. Junior Achievement currently serves 4.6 million students in communities across the country. We have the scale to take a systematic approach that can start to make a real difference at a level that begins to benefit individuals, families, communities, and, ideally in time, the nation.



[51] “An Inside Look a JA Program Development”, Junior Achievement USA, September 18, 2018

WHY JA? Aligning Education
and Economic Mobility

WHY NOW?