

2026 YOUTH WELLNESS REPORT:

Understanding a Year of Rapid Change in K12 Student Wellness

**What 1M+ Student Interactions and Activities
Reveal About Belonging, Motivation, Sleep,
Attendance, and Student Support**

alongside
by timelycare



250K TO 1M+: **One Year of Unprecedented Student Wellbeing Data**

Welcome to our third annual youth wellness report!

Building upon last year, we've continued to expand our reach to over 200 schools, conducted a rigorous research trial which showed a **20% improvement** in attendance for students using Alongside, and drew insights from more than 1 million student interactions to provide you with a nuanced look at the wellness needs of today's students.

The 2025-2026 school year marked a time of rapid change for students, and Alongside, as we joined TimelyCare to provide all students with a level of continuous care that matches today's pace of change and ensures every student has access to immediate personalized support no matter their support needs.

This year's data shows that rapid change isn't just an external backdrop. Students are living it. Socially, academically, and digitally, the pace of their lives has outrun the support structures most schools were built around.

As such, AI has become a major new part of the student wellbeing journey. In fact, **70% of teens** have already turned to general AI tools, with many using AI companions for advice and emotional support, often before schools have had a chance to form a position on it.



***The goal is to
extend human
support, not
weaken human
connection.***

Underneath all of that change, one theme kept surfacing: disconnection and a lack of belonging. In a world that keeps shifting the rules, that quiet feeling of not quite fitting in carries more weight than ever. It doesn't always show up in referrals or office visits. But over time, it shows up as falling grades, distancing from friends and peers, declining attendance and more.

This report aims to help districts see those early signals before they become harder problems to address.

The goal is to reach every student earlier. Before disconnection becomes disengagement. Before disengagement becomes something harder to reverse.

In a year defined by rapid change, the most important thing schools can offer students is steady and continuous care.

Thank you for being that for them.



Dr. Elsa Friis, Ph.D.

Clinical Leader,
Alongside by TimelyCare

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METHODOLOGY + NATIONAL SNAPSHOT

What We Analyzed

Our AI-powered student wellbeing platform supports students through guided, skill-based chats and activities designed for everyday challenges, including stress, peer relationships, school pressure, sleep, motivation, focus, and big emotions.

Here’s a helpful glossary of terms to help you navigate terminology consistent throughout the report:

- **Topics** are the concerns students bring into the platform, such as lack of friends, lack of motivation, or sleep struggles.
- **Skills** are structured, clinically informed practices students complete, such as creating a sleep plan or reducing distractions.
- **Chats** are how we deliver personalized skill-building and help students set goals.
- **Activities** are structured skill-building experiences students complete on the platform.

This report distinguishes between two primary data sources:

- **Aggregate platform data**, including 2025-26 student usage patterns and comparisons with the last two years of Alongside by TimelyCare platform data.
- **Independent** third-party research, including the ESSA Level II attendance study referenced later in the report.

Individual student privacy is protected. Aggregate insights help schools identify needs earlier and strengthen support across MTSS.

National Snapshot

Measure

2026 Report Data

Student chats and activities

1M+

Total hours of student support

28,676

Languages used

32

Independent attendance study finding

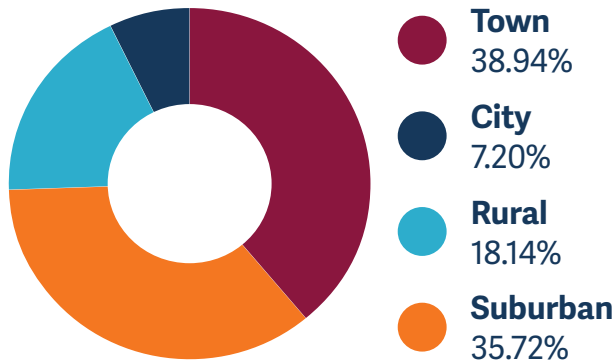
+20% improved attendance among platform users



Student Profile Demographics

Students across grades 4 through 12 used Alongside by TimelyCare during the 2025-26 school year. The data reflects a broad K12 student population across school communities, geographic settings, and languages.

Geographic Mix



Languages Used

Students used the platform in 32 languages, including:

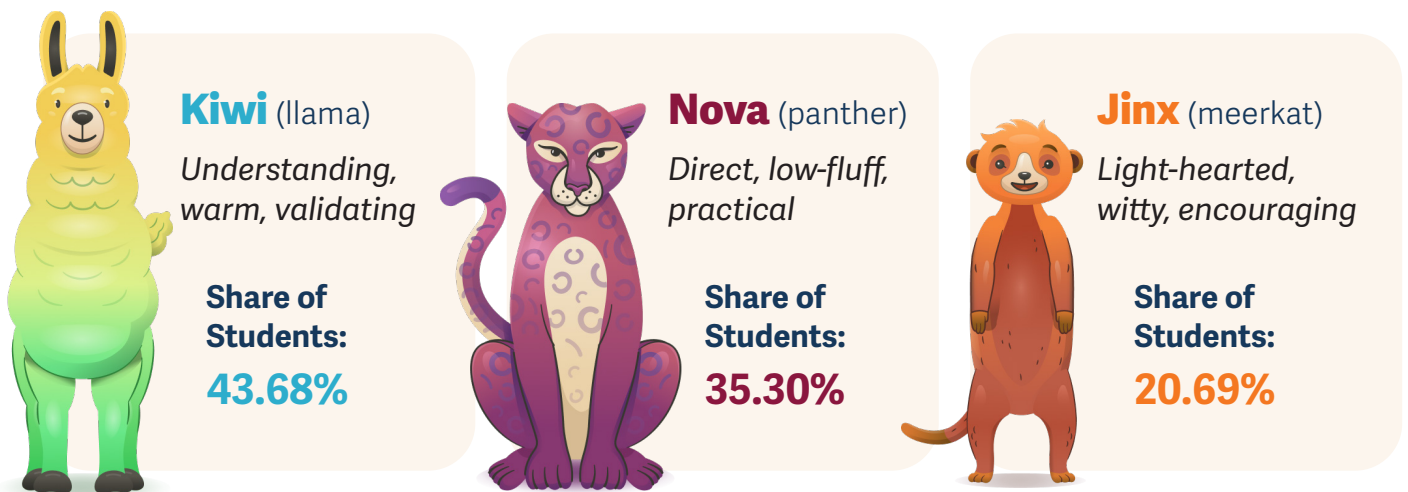
- French
- Chinese
- Portuguese
- Japanese
- Haitian Creole
- Vietnamese
- Spanish
- English
- Greek
- Dutch
- Arabic
- Korean
- Russian
- Czech
- Polish
- German
- Italian
- Burmese

STUDENT PROFILE: CHAT GUIDE PREFERENCES

How Students Chose to Engage

To better personalize support, students using Alongside by TimelyCare can choose a chat guide that matches their preferred support style. Some students respond best to warmth and validation. Others prefer direct coaching or a lighter tone before they're ready to name what feels hard.

Students are more likely to take a first step when support feels approachable.





TOP TOPICS AND SKILLS

What Students Talked About Most

The top student topics show a mix of social, emotional, academic, and daily-life challenges. Some are readily visible to adults. Others are easy to miss until they affect attendance, behavior, or grades.

Top 10 Student Topics

1. Lack of friends
2. Lack of motivation
3. Interpersonal conflict
4. Facing a challenge
5. Finding a relationship
6. Balancing school and activities
7. Sleep struggles
8. Having a bad day
9. Procrastination
10. Emotional numbness

Top 3 Skills Students Practiced



**Creating
a sleep plan**



**Learning to reduce
distractions**



**Learning to increase
motivation**

**Everyday
Challenge**



**Disconnection
or stress**



**Attendance / behavior /
academic impact**



SEVERE ISSUES AND SAFETY PROTOCOLS

When Students Needed More Than Tier 1 Support

Most conversations didn't involve severe issues. But when severe concerns did appear, the system moved students into structured safety workflows with human-in-the-loop support.

Our platform serves as a safe front door. For everyday concerns, students receive guided, skill-based support. For severe concerns, the experience shifts to safety protocols, resources, and human escalation based on the district's configured workflows.

Severe Issues by Type of Concern

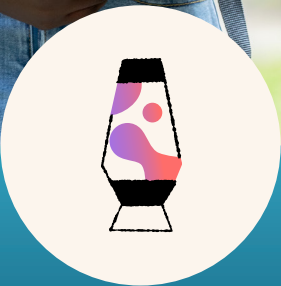
Type of Concern	Count	% of Severe Issues
Suicidal ideation	518	37.7%
Peer abuse	382	27.8%
Someone else needs support	207	15.1%
Abuse by an adult	161	11.7%
Homicidal ideation	105	7.6%
Total	1,373	100%

Peers Are Reaching Out

Students aren't only asking for themselves. They're also raising concerns about friends.

Peer signals show why safety workflows must be clear, timely, and connected to real people. A student shouldn't need to know the right office, the right form, or the right adult to ask for help.

Measure	Count/ Share
Severe issues reported by a peer	207
Confirmed crises reported by a peer	11.7%



Our wellbeing platform encourages students to build real-world relationships and connect with trusted people. It's not designed to become a student's companion or replacement relationship.

23%
of all conversations

FINDING 1:

Loneliness Is Now the Top Student Concern

A 2025 American Psychological Association (APA) poll revealed that more than 6 in 10 U.S. adults reported feeling emotionally disconnected from people, with societal division as a significant source of stress in their lives.

Sadly, we see these trends start at a far younger age.

Two years ago, we saw the leading relationship concern center around "conflict," but now, "a lack of friends" appeared in roughly **23% of all conversations** — marking loneliness as this year's top student topic.

There are many multiple contributing factors that contribute to feelings of loneliness, so let's dive into the nuances we see among our youth.

Exclusion Looks Different by Age

Younger students often described exclusion in direct, concrete ways: being left out of games, lunch tables, recess, or peer groups. The signs are often visible.

For older students, loneliness became more layered. Some students described having friends but still feeling invisible inside the group. Others described being the third person in a friendship dynamic, being talked over, or feeling present but not seen. A student can look completely connected from the outside and still feel utterly alone.

Social connection and emotional belonging don't always match, and assuming they do is where a lot of well-meaning support falls short.



Social Anxiety Can Be the Primary Hurdle

Many students wanted more connection to their peers but didn't know how to begin. They described not knowing what to say, worrying they'd say the wrong thing, or feeling embarrassed to talk about their feelings.

This was especially visible in middle school, where the challenge often shifts from being kept out to feeling unsure how to enter.

Watch a short clip of how one student uses Kiwi to navigate friendships:



Quality Friendships are Missing

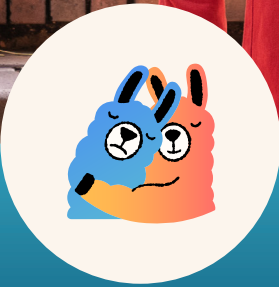
Students described friendships that felt mean, transactional, or untrustworthy. Some students were surrounded by peers but didn't feel emotionally safe with them.

A student doesn't need more social exposure as much as they need healthier connections, conflict-resolution skills, and trusted adults who can help them understand why they feel a lack of belonging despite being surrounded by peers

Conflict-focused relationship concern



Connection-focused relationship concern



Lack of motivation
appeared in
16.11%
of conversations

FINDING 2:

Motivation Runs Beneath the Surface

Lack of motivation appeared in **16.11% of conversations**, making it the second-highest topic across age groups.

When students say they're not motivated, adults may hear, "I don't care." In many conversations, students described something more specific: difficulty starting, focusing, planning, or regulating their attention long enough to take the next step.

For school districts, this points to a practical executive-function opportunity and skill-building needs.

The Breakdown Often Happens at the Starting Line

In motivation-related conversations, students struggled most with starting a task. They described schoolwork piling up, feeling behind, not knowing where to begin, or losing focus before momentum could build.

Student-reported barriers were concrete and immediate: notifications, noise, shared spaces, interruptions, messy work areas, and unclear first steps.

These patterns suggest that motivation support should begin with initiation: helping students identify the first small action they can take.



Focus Is Affected by More Than the Assignment

Peer stress, bullying, friend conflict, and feeling left out appeared as top focus disruptors. These concerns weren't always named as the original reason for low motivation, but they often surfaced when students were asked what made schoolwork harder.

Your students who appear disengaged may be carrying social stress that drains attention and effort. Students need additional probing questions to identify the source issue and early resources to address the underlying skill gap.

Motivation Is a Laddered Skill System

Lack of motivation is often treated like a character fault. The platform data points to something more useful: motivation is supported by compounding practical skills.

Students Need Help With



Initiation

What's the first step?



Focus

What can I reduce or block for the next few minutes?



Planning

What needs to happen, and when?



Self-regulation

How do I restart when I get stuck?

These are foundational executive function skills that can be taught and reinforced through Tier 1 supports.



Sleep support needs to start before exhaustion becomes absence.

Night routine



Morning readiness



School engagement

FINDING 3:

Sleep Challenges Begin Earlier Than We Realize

Compared with the last two years of platform data, sleep moved down in topic rank, but the concern didn't go away. Students continued to report sleep struggles, and those concerns began to appear among younger students.

Because sleep problems have significant downstream effects on attendance, emotional regulation, focus, and academic performance, sleep support needs to begin earlier in a student's academic career.

Younger Students Need Routine Support

In sleep-related conversations, younger students (Grades 4-7) described routine-based barriers, including bedtimes, difficulty winding down, and late-night device use outside the school day.

For younger students, addressing practical routines is the most effective starting point for school-based resources. Equipping students and parents with sleep resources shows a compounding impact for school-based metrics (attendance, grades, etc.).



Stress Keeps Older Students Up at Night

By the late middle and high school years, students connected sleep struggles to school stress, homework, activities, worry, and racing thoughts.

That shift from setting routines to managing anxiety calls for a different set of skills. A simple bedtime reminder helps some students, but others need resources to develop skills such as stress management, planning, and calming the body before sleep.

Sleep Problems Build on Each Other

Sleep challenges compound. A student stays up late to decompress, struggles to wake up, feels tired in class, falls behind, and then feels more stressed the next night.

This cycle slowly erodes attendance, often before a student reaches the threshold for chronic absenteeism.



Helped calm me down so I can go back to sleep to wake up for school

— 10th Grade Student



FINDING 4:

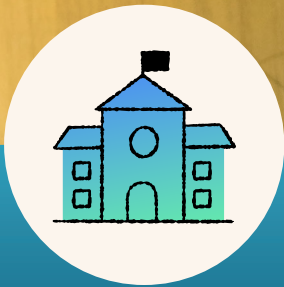
Earlier Support Improves Attendance

Attendance challenges rarely begin with absence. They start with stress, disconnection, peer conflict, sleep problems, or low motivation.

By the time a student starts missing school regularly, the need has often been building quietly for weeks or months.

In a separate independent ESSA Level II study from the 2025–26 school year, students using Alongside by TimelyCare missed only **5.2 days** on average compared to **6.5 days** missed for students not using Alongside.

That statistically significant difference translates to a **20% reduction in absences** over the school year and a **2% higher average** daily attendance (ADA).



Students **using** Alongside by TimelyCare



5.2
days missed

Students **not using** Alongside by TimelyCare



6.5
days missed



Early Signals Appear Before Attendance Data Changes

Conversations show students naming concerns that often precede absenteeism:

- Lack of belonging
- Anxiety or stress
- Peer conflict
- Sleep struggles
- Low motivation
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Unmet emotional needs
- Family conflict
- Lack of access to resources



Tier 1 Support Helps Students Restart

Earlier support gives students a way to take the next step before challenges escalate.

That means practicing how to join a conversation, building a sleep plan, reducing distractions, naming a stressor, or asking to connect with a trusted adult.

Encouraging small steps interrupts patterns before they become absences, behavior incidents, or academic decline.

Staff Capacity is Spread Thin

District teams are stretched. Counselors, social workers, psychologists, attendance teams, and administrators are often asked to support more students with the same or fewer resources.

A student-initiated, skill-based support platform expands staff capacity by enabling more students to access Tier 1 support while routing higher-need concerns to human support pathways.



FINDING 5:

Students Pick Up Real-World Skills on Their Schedule

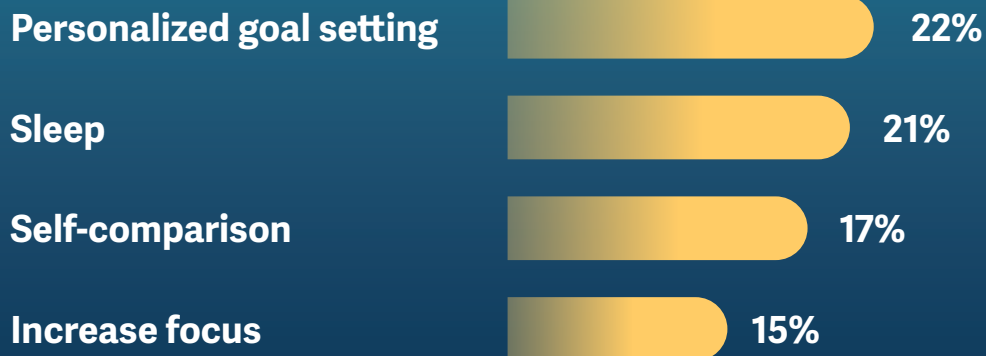
Students aren't only talking about what's hard. They're practicing what to do next when prompted.

At the end of chats, students set personalized goals connected to their current challenge. These goals are supported by clinically developed skill modules.

The range of skills students are actively practicing demonstrates that students want tools they can use right away and on their own time.



Top Goal Topics





Accessible Tier 1 Skill Building has a Waterfall Effect

Students want tools, not lectures. Many students don't need intensive intervention at first. Instead, they need a safe, accessible way to name a challenge and practice the next step to move beyond it.

Skill modules still account for nearly half of student-initiated activity, with completion holding steady at **58%**.



These aren't abstract wellness concepts. They're daily functioning skills.

- A student who sticks to a sleep plan shows up more ready to learn.
- A student who practices self-compassion recovers faster after a mistake.
- A student who learns to reduce distractions completes more work.
- A student who sets and completes a small goal gets unstuck.

Tier 1 tools do not replace staff support. They help students arrive at the counselor's office with more reflection and a clearer next step. That waterfall shows up in the data: One in four students who chatted voluntarily brought what they learned to a school counselor.

Engagement Becomes Insight

When students practice skills regularly, schools gain earlier insight into common needs. Patterns in topics and skills help districts understand where students struggle and where deeper support may be needed.

This is the power of a connected MTSS model: engagement becomes insight, and insight can become action.

Insights are a great way for us to see what's happening at a campus level that week - it's really hard to get that kind of high-level data so quickly, and we appreciate that [this platform] provides some suggested actions.

Assistant Superintendent in KY



THE AI QUESTION:

Not All AI Is Built for Student Support

As noted in Dr. Friis’s introduction, students already use general-purpose AI tools and AI companions for advice, and help with personal problems.

That reality creates a serious responsibility for schools and families.

Now that AI is part of the student wellbeing journey, we have to ask:

“How do we ensure this technology is safe, structured, clinically governed, and built with guardrails to support students?”

Because not all AI is the same.

General AI vs. Purpose-Built Student Support

General AI and AI Companions

Built for broad use or engagement

Designed for youth wellbeing

Encourages open-ended dependency

Lacks school escalation pathways

Responds unpredictably in distress

Not integrated into MTSS

Alongside by TimelyCare

Built for student support

Designed with clinical governance

Encourages real-world connection

Connects to school safety and human-in-the-loop protocols

Uses structured, human reviewed safety protocols

Built to support MTSS from coaching to care



FINAL THOUGHTS:

What Schools and Districts Can Do For Students

Students are stepping into a world that changes faster than most school systems can keep up with. They're facing new pressures, new distractions, new expectations, often with limited support resources. These three recommendations are a starting point for closing that gap.

Give Students Low-Stakes Places to Build Belonging

In our research, loneliness came up more than any other topic. Not bullying. Not academics. That's a signal worth taking seriously.

Students already reach out to one another in small, low-pressure ways, with peer kudos rising from **1% to 12%** of all activity year over year. For districts, the takeaway is to make belonging easy, repeated, and visible in the school day so students do not have to self-identify as lonely before someone makes room for them.

Make Executive Function a Skill Students Can Practice

Getting started, staying focused, and breaking work into smaller steps are not automatic for many students, especially when "too much going on" and low motivation are both among the top student concerns.

Students who seem unmotivated may actually be stuck at the first step. Simple routines that help students name the task, set a small goal, reduce distractions, and recover after losing focus can turn executive function from an invisible expectation into daily practice.

Design Support Systems That Make Tier 1 the Front Door

In Alongside by TimelyCare's 28,676 total hours of student support, we see students are willing to start with low-stakes support, but they also need clear pathways back to trusted adults when the issue is bigger than a skill-building moment.

When Tier 1 tools handle everyday practice and reflection, counselors spend more of their time with students whose needs require clinical judgment, trusted relationships, and continuous care.





About Alongside by TimelyCare

Alongside by TimelyCare helps K12 districts support student wellbeing across MTSS by connecting early, skill-based support with care pathways.

Students access guided support for everyday challenges like school stress, peer relationships, sleep, motivation, focus, and big emotions. When students need more help, Alongside by TimelyCare connects early signals to human support through district workflows and care pathways.

We help districts:

- Support all students earlier
- Identify needs before they escalate
- Give their students skills before challenges affect attendance
- Augment staff capacity without replacing staff
- Connect Tier 1 support to care in one coordinated system



Support every student.

Identify needs earlier.

Act before it impacts attendance.

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by **timelycare**