Thought **Leadership**

Teens & Personal Finance Survey

Presented by: MissionSquare Foundation | Junior Achievement™

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a concerted effort at the national and state levels to promote financial literacy mandates for schools. According to the Council for Economic Education, 35 U.S. states now have some form of financial literacy requirement. Implementation of financial literacy programs can vary significantly from state to state, often being under-resourced and defaulting to educators to develop their own solutions based on a variety of personal finance programs in the marketplace. Despite efforts to improve financial knowledge, the Financial Educators Council reports that states are not reaching financial literacy milestones for their students.

What Teens Say

The Teens & Personal Finance Survey recently conducted by Junior Achievement and MissionSquare Retirement's Foundation highlights the growing availability of financial literacy courses for high school students aged 13-18. Despite the increase in course offerings, significant gaps remain in the curriculum, which need to be addressed to better prepare teens for their financial futures.

The survey of 1,000 teens, independently fielded by Wakefield Research, found that 45 percent of high schoolers took a personal finance or financial literacy class, up from 31 percent in 2024. While 64 percent of these students found the classes helpful, deeper analysis reveals concerning trends in their financial understanding.

Results show that 68 percent of teens believe saving for retirement is something to consider later in life. However, research by Georgetown University notes that starting to invest for retirement at the age of 25 versus 35 will result in having nearly twice as much saved by the age of 65. Additionally, 43 percent of teens think an 18 percent interest rate on debt is manageable, even though over borrowing at high interest rates can lead to a cycle of debt that is hard to escape.

When it comes to investing, teenagers don't appear to be able to distinguish between savings, income, and investing. For instance, teens believe the best forms of investing are savings accounts, side hustles, and keeping cash at home. When they do put money aside, only 36 percent save part of their money for the future, 23 percent save for education, and 13 percent report that they "invest".

Alarmingly, 80 percent of teens have never heard of FICO credit scores or do not fully understand their purpose. As we know, good credit scores are essential to obtaining affordable loans, access to quality housing, and so much more. It comes as no surprise, then, that 42 percent of teens are worried they won't have enough money to meet their future needs and goals.

What's Working and What Isn't

Many teens' exposure to financial literacy programming is a semester-long experience in high school, sometimes optional and often delivered using online resources with limited or no in-person interactions with facilitators well-versed in financial concepts. While this approach may have positive outcomes for academically proficient students, those most in need of this type of education - under-resourced students who may struggle in school - often don't experience the knowledge gains and attitudinal shifts necessary to impact long-term behaviors.

At Junior Achievement, our proven learning experiences are based on a multi-grade approach, similar to other curricula like math and science, and delivered by volunteers experienced in money management and the concepts being taught. These learning experiences are offered at no or low cost to educators and align with state educational standards.

Our Response

Financial literacy is one of the key pillars of Junior Achievement's learning experiences. Since 2022, the MissionSquare Foundation has invested significantly in promoting financial literacy education through Junior Achievement.

What the Research Says

Junior Achievement's approach gives students the tools to increase their chances of achieving economic security as adults. Research results from Ipsos include:

- 82 percent of JA Alumni agree that they are on a strong financial footing.
- 84 percent of JA Alumni agree that their JA experience helped them with financial literacy.
- 73 percent of JA Alumni report saving for retirement.
- 68 percent of JA Alumni between the ages of 18 and 29 say they are financially independent from their parents. Research from Pew shows that about one in three (34%) Americans in that age range say the same.

Survey Methodology:

The Junior Achievement and MissionSquare Foundation Teens & Personal Finance Survey was conducted by Wakefield Research (www.wakefieldresearch.com) among 1,000 nationally representative US Teens ages 13-18, between February 3rd and 10th, 2025, using an email invitation and an online survey. Data was weighted to ensure a reliable and accurate representation of U.S. teens ages 13-18.

Results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of the variation is measurable and is affected by the number of interviews and the level of the percentages expressing the results. For the interviews conducted in this particular study, the chances are 95 in 100 that a survey result does not vary, plus or minus, by more than 3.1 percentage points from the result that would be obtained if interviews had been conducted with all persons in the universe represented by the sample.