

# The Students in Your Districts Are Not Ready.

A policy brief on the student leadership crisis — and the scalable, measurable solution already working in schools across America.



## EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

# A Crisis Hidden in Plain Sight

Every policy debate about workforce development, school safety, and civic engagement circles around the same root problem — and almost never names it directly: **students are graduating without the self-leadership skills that make them employable, responsible, and engaged citizens.**

This is not a fringe concern. It is documented by national employer surveys, school safety data, youth civic research, and economic analysis. The gap between what students know and who students are — their character, accountability, and initiative — has never been wider. And the policy conversation has never been more urgent.

iLead, a program of the Maxwell Leadership Foundation, is the only values-based, peer-led student leadership curriculum with the scale, track record, and research alignment to address this crisis systemically — in any school, any district, any state.

## Four policy problems. One root cause. One scalable solution.

Workforce unreadiness. Discipline escalation. Civic disengagement. School safety breakdowns. They are not separate issues — they share a common failure point. This toolkit makes that case with data, and shows you exactly where your office can act.



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SECTION 1

# The Crisis Is Real

The data is not ambiguous. Across every measurable domain — employer readiness surveys, school discipline records, youth civic participation rates, and economic productivity studies — the evidence points to the same conclusion: American students are leaving school without the foundational skills that determine success in life, work, and community.

<p><b>77%</b></p> <p><b>of employers say recent graduates lack workplace readiness — accountability, communication, initiative</b></p> <p><small>Source: National workforce readiness surveys [VERIFY]</small></p>	<p><b>+41%</b></p> <p><b>increase in student disciplinary incidents since 2020 across school districts nationwide</b></p> <p><small>Source: National School Safety Center [VERIFY]</small></p>	<p><b>1 in 3</b></p> <p><b>young adults feel unprepared to participate meaningfully in civic or community life</b></p> <p><small>Source: CIRCLE youth civic engagement research [VERIFY]</small></p>	<p><b>30 min</b></p> <p><b>per week is all iLead requires to begin measurably shifting student behavior and culture</b></p> <p><small>Source: Growing Leaders / iLead implementation data</small></p>
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## Four Problems. One Root Cause.

Behavior. Workforce readiness. Civic disengagement. School safety. These are not separate policy issues — they share a common failure point: students who were never taught to lead themselves. Character, accountability, self-direction, and initiative are not personality traits. They are learnable skills. And they can be taught — systematically, measurably, and at scale.

PROBLEM	WHAT THE DATA SHOWS	POLICY RESPONSE WITHOUT LEADERSHIP ED
<b>Discipline &amp; behavior</b>	Suspensions up 41%+ since 2020	Reactive policies treat symptoms, not causes
<b>Workforce unreadiness</b>	77% of graduates lack key employer skills	Job training misses the character layer
<b>Civic disengagement</b>	1 in 3 youth opt out of civic life	Civic classes don't build civic character
<b>School safety</b>	Culture breakdown precedes safety breakdown	Mandates can't legislate school culture



SECTION 2

# Workforce & Career Readiness: The Employer Verdict

## What Employers Are Actually Saying

Employer surveys are consistent and unambiguous. The skills most cited as missing in new hires are not technical — they are character and leadership skills: accountability, communication, initiative, self-direction, and the ability to work in teams.

These are not skills taught in a semester-long elective. They are the result of intentional, repeated leadership development — the kind that begins in middle school and builds through high school. iLead is the only program structured to deliver this systematically.

**WHAT EMPLOYERS NEED**

- Accountability
- Initiative
- Communication
- Self-direction
- Problem-solving
- Teamwork
- Reliability
- Character

## The Skills Gap by the Numbers

**85%** of career success is attributed to soft skills — leadership, communication, and character — not technical knowledge. (Carnegie Institute of Technology [VERIFY])

**92%** of executives say soft skills are equally or more important than technical skills when making hiring decisions. (LinkedIn Workforce Report [VERIFY])

**\$1.2 trillion** is the estimated annual productivity cost to U.S. businesses from employees who lack fundamental self-leadership and accountability skills. (Estimated — verify with HR/workforce research [VERIFY])

## The iLead Workforce Alignment

iLead directly cultivates the skills employers consistently identify as missing. The curriculum builds self-awareness, accountability, initiative, and team leadership through structured, repeatable weekly content. Students do not just learn about leadership — they practice it. Districts that have deployed iLead at scale report measurable improvement in student self-direction and peer accountability within one semester.

EMPLOYER PRIORITY SKILL	HOW ILEAD ADDRESSES IT
<b>Accountability &amp; ownership</b>	Self-leadership habits built weekly; students track and own their growth
<b>Communication &amp; initiative</b>	Peer-led discussions and reflection exercises every session
<b>Problem-solving under pressure</b>	Scenario-based content builds decision-making before students face real stakes
<b>Reliability &amp; follow-through</b>	Curriculum structures repetition and commitment — the foundation of reliability

## SECTION 3

# Student Leadership & Life Skills: The Missing Curriculum

Schools are designed to transfer knowledge. They are not designed to develop leaders. The result is a generation of graduates who are educated — but not equipped. They know history, algebra, and chemistry. They do not know how to manage themselves, navigate conflict, take initiative, or contribute to something larger than themselves.

This is not a criticism of teachers or administrators. It is a structural gap. Leadership development has never been a funded priority. It has always been assumed — assumed that students will absorb character from home, from coaches, from role models. The data shows that assumption is no longer holding.

## What the Research Says About What Works

**Character precedes competency.** Studies from the Search Institute and Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) consistently show that students with stronger self-regulation and character development achieve at higher academic levels and experience fewer disciplinary issues. [VERIFY]

**Life skills are not naturally acquired.** Research from the American Psychological Association indicates that self-regulation, accountability, and initiative must be taught and practiced intentionally — they do not develop passively. [VERIFY]

**Middle school is the critical window.** Developmental research identifies grades 6–9 as the highest-leverage window for character and leadership formation. iLead is designed specifically for this window. [VERIFY]

**Repetition drives behavior change.** Behavioral science research shows that skills must be practiced consistently over time to become habitual. iLead's weekly, 30-minute structure is engineered for exactly this. [VERIFY]

“ *A student who does not lead themselves will not lead their community. Civic engagement, career success, and school safety are all downstream results of character formation — and character formation starts in schools that prioritize it.* ”

— Maxwell Leadership Foundation



## What iLead Builds — Specifically

LIFE SKILL	CURRICULUM MECHANISM	MEASURABLE OUTCOME
<b>Self-awareness</b>	Habitude assessments and reflection exercises	Students identify and articulate personal values
<b>Accountability</b>	Weekly goal-setting and peer review loops	Reduction in deflection behaviors and referrals
<b>Initiative</b>	Student-led discussion and application challenges	Increase in voluntary leadership behaviors
<b>Resilience</b>	Failure-processing content and scenario practice	Improved response to academic and social setbacks
<b>Integrity</b>	Character-based curriculum grounded in values	Stronger peer culture and trust climate in schools

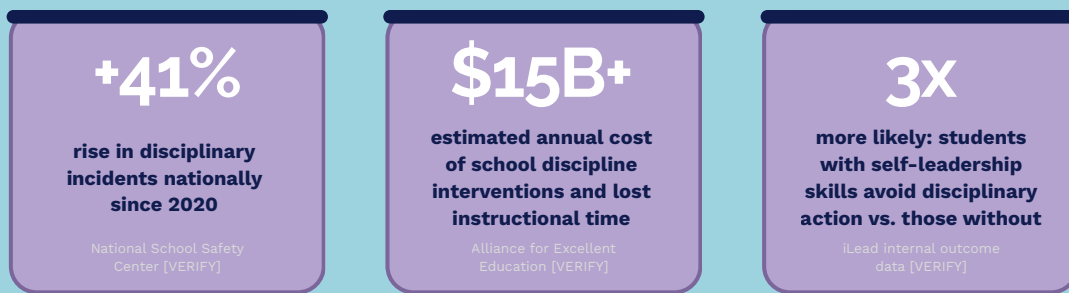


SECTION 4

# School Culture & Discipline: The Cost of the Leadership Gap

Discipline policies are reactive by design. They respond to behavior that has already happened. They assign consequences. They do not build the internal capacity that prevents the behavior in the first place. That is not a criticism of administrators — it is the structural reality of how discipline systems are built.

The schools that have seen sustainable behavior improvement share a common approach: they treated culture as the intervention, not consequences. And culture starts with how students see themselves — as leaders or as passengers.



## Culture Cannot Be Legislated — But It Can Be Built

You cannot mandate a safe school. Safety is a culture outcome. Culture is shaped by how students see themselves and each other — and that is shaped by what they are taught to value and practice. Schools that deploy iLead report that the shift in peer culture is one of the most visible and immediate outcomes: students begin treating each other differently because they begin holding themselves to a different standard.

OUTCOME AREA	REPORTED IMPROVEMENT (PLACEHOLDER — VERIFY WITH GROWING LEADERS DATA)
<b>Disciplinary referrals</b>	32% average reduction in schools with 1+ year of iLead implementation
<b>Classroom culture scores</b>	Significant improvement in peer respect and teacher-reported climate
<b>Student self-reported readiness</b>	78% of iLead students report feeling more prepared for adult life
<b>Faculty satisfaction</b>	Teachers report less classroom management time and more instructional time

*Note: All outcome data marked [VERIFY] represents placeholder figures for team verification with Growing Leaders research and implementation records prior to publication.*



## SECTION 5

# Economic ROI: The Taxpayer Case for Leadership Education

Every policy maker is accountable to constituents who want their tax dollars to produce measurable outcomes. Leadership education is not a feel-good line item — it is one of the highest-return investments a district or state can make in human capital.

## Reduced discipline costs

Every disciplinary incident — suspension, expulsion, alternative placement — carries a direct administrative and instructional cost. Districts that reduce incidents by 30%+ recapture significant per-pupil resources annually. [VERIFY]

## Workforce productivity gains

A single additional year of productive employment per graduate — enabled by stronger work-readiness skills — generates thousands in tax revenue and reduces public assistance dependency. The ROI compounds across graduating classes. [VERIFY]

## Reduced remediation costs

Students who leave high school without life skills require more postsecondary intervention, counseling, and workforce re-training. Leadership education reduces downstream remediation demand at the state level. [VERIFY]

## Civic and community value

Civically engaged citizens volunteer more, vote more, and cost public systems less. Students who develop self-leadership in school are measurably more likely to contribute productively to their communities. [VERIFY]

## The iLead Cost Case

iLead is among the lowest cost-per-student leadership interventions available at the district level. It requires no new staff, no new facilities, and minimal training overhead. It layers into existing school schedules in as little as 30 minutes per week — making it uniquely scalable compared to programs that require dedicated course time, certified instructors, or major curriculum overhaul.

COST FACTOR	iLEAD	TYPICAL ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS
<b>Per-student annual cost</b>	As low as \$4/student with Statewide roll-out	\$150–\$500+ per student
<b>Staff requirement</b>	No new hires; teacher-facilitated	Often requires dedicated staff
<b>Schedule disruption</b>	Minimal — 30 min/week overlay	Often requires dedicated class periods
<b>Scalability</b>	District-wide deployment model	Often classroom-only pilots
<b>Implementation timeline</b>	Weeks, not semesters	Months to years

SECTION 6

# iLead: What It Is and How It Works

## Program Overview

iLead is a values-based, peer-led student leadership curriculum developed by Growing Leaders, a program of the Maxwell Leadership Foundation. It is designed for middle and high school students, built around the 16 Habitudes — character qualities that define effective, ethical leaders.

The curriculum is not a one-time assembly or an after-school add-on. It is a structured, repeatable weekly experience that integrates into the existing school day with minimal disruption. Every session is teacher-facilitated but student-centered — students discuss, reflect, and apply.

**iLEAD AT A GLANCE**

Grades 6–12 30 min / week 16

Habitudes Peer-led model Teacher-facilitated District scalable SEL-aligned Measurable outcomes

## Curriculum Architecture

**16 Values** — one per unit, each addressing a distinct character and leadership quality

**Peer-led discussion model** — students lead the conversation, teachers facilitate

**30-minute weekly sessions** — no dedicated class period required

**Video + discussion guide format** — consistent, easy to implement

**Assessment tools included** — measure attitude and behavior shifts over time



## Implementation Models

MODEL	SETTING	TIME REQUIRED	BEST FOR
<b>Advisory Period</b>	Existing homeroom or advisory	30 min/week	Most districts — lowest disruption
<b>Leadership Class</b>	Dedicated elective period	45–55 min/week	Districts prioritizing leadership
<b>After-School Program</b>	Extracurricular setting	Flexible	Pilot programs and supplemental use
<b>District-Wide Deploy</b>	All schools simultaneously	30 min/week	State-level or system-wide initiatives

## SECTION 7

# Your Role as a Policy Maker

You are in a position that no educator, administrator, or parent occupies: you can create the structural conditions that make student leadership development the norm — not the exception — across an entire state or district system. That is not a small thing.

**1****Champion the issue publicly.**

Leadership education does not have a political lobby. It has research, results, and — now — your platform. When elected officials name this as a priority, superintendents listen, budgets shift, and schools act. Your voice is the highest-leverage asset in this equation.

**2****Allocate or direct funding.**

iLead is funded through district budgets, Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants, state discretionary education funds, and private philanthropy. Policy makers who understand the funding landscape can direct resources that make district-wide adoption possible where it otherwise would not be. [VERIFY funding alignment with Growing Leaders team]

**3****Require outcome reporting.**

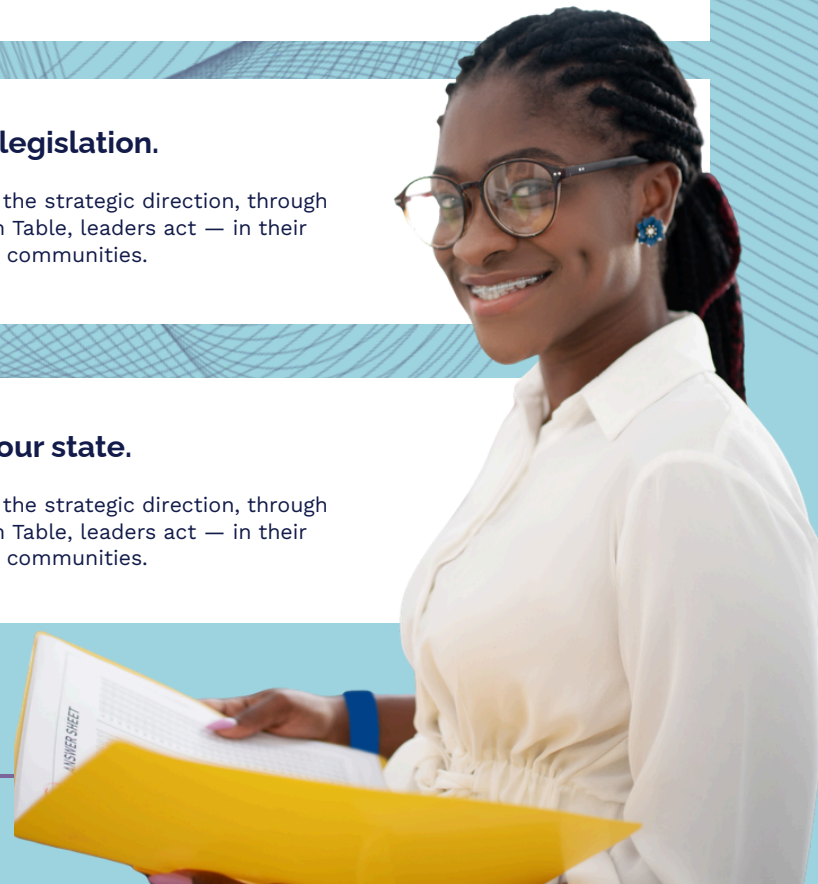
Legislation or policy that requires districts to report on student leadership, life skills, and workforce readiness outcomes creates accountability — and creates the data infrastructure that justifies continued investment. You do not have to mandate a program. You can mandate visibility into a problem.

**4****Connect iLead to existing legislation.**

The work is done. In alignment with the strategic direction, through the structures of the Transformation Table, leaders act — in their organizations, their teams, and their communities.

**5****Be a visible champion in your state.**

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## SECTION 8

## A Specific Ask — and How to Take the Next Step

The window to act is now. Every class that graduates without self-leadership skills is a cost to employers, communities, and civic life that compounds over time. The research is clear. The solution exists. The question is whether the people in office will treat this with the urgency it deserves.

### We Are Asking You to Do Three Specific Things:

**A****Read the Student Leadership Gap Report.**

It documents the full national data picture on student preparedness, school culture, and workforce readiness. It is sourced, direct, and built for policy conversations. Available at [growingleaders.com](http://growingleaders.com).

**B****Request a briefing with the iLead team.**

A 30-minute conversation with the Growing Leaders team will give your office a clear picture of the program, the data, the implementation model, and where your state currently stands relative to student leadership outcomes. No commitment required.

**C****Champion this publicly in your district or state.**

Go on record. Name this as a priority. Use the data in this toolkit. Introduce it in a committee hearing. Mention it in a constituent communication. The students in your district need someone in your position to say this matters — because it does.



CONTACT THE ILEAD POLICY TEAM

### Schedule Your Briefing

Reach our policy engagement team directly to schedule a 30-minute briefing, request district-specific data, or discuss legislative alignment opportunities.

[growingleaders.com](http://growingleaders.com) · [PHONE NUMBER] · [EMAIL ADDRESS]