

Early Financial Education and Youth Decision Making

An Independent Mixed Methods Study of High School Students Ages 14 to 18

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Region Southern California

Sample Size 250 anonymous student respondents

Year 2025

Abstract

This independent research study examines the relationship between early financial literacy education and financial confidence, preparedness, and money related stress among high school students in Southern California. Using an anonymous survey based methodology, the study compares students who have received formal or informal financial education with those who have not. Quantitative findings are supplemented by qualitative student responses. Results indicate higher confidence, lower stress, and improved emergency preparedness among students with financial education exposure.

Introduction and Context

Financial decision making has become increasingly complex for adolescents. Rising education costs, widespread access to credit, and regional cost of living pressures place greater responsibility on students to understand financial fundamentals earlier than previous generations. In Southern California, these pressures are particularly pronounced. This study explores whether exposure to financial literacy education during high school is associated with improved student outcomes.

Research Questions

1. Is exposure to financial literacy education associated with higher financial confidence
2. Does financial education correlate with improved financial preparedness
3. How does financial education relate to money related stress
4. What financial topics do students prioritize for school based instruction

Methodology

This study surveyed 250 high school students ages 14 to 18 residing in Southern California. An anonymous online survey was used to collect quantitative and qualitative responses. Participants were categorized based on whether they reported exposure to any form of financial literacy education. Measured variables included self reported financial confidence, emergency preparedness, money related stress, and student identified gaps in financial education.

Limitations

Findings are based on self reported data and reflect perceived confidence and stress rather than objective behavior. The sample is geographically limited and exposure to financial education varied in duration and format. Results should be interpreted as associative rather than causal.

Findings

Chart 1 Financial Confidence by Education Exposure

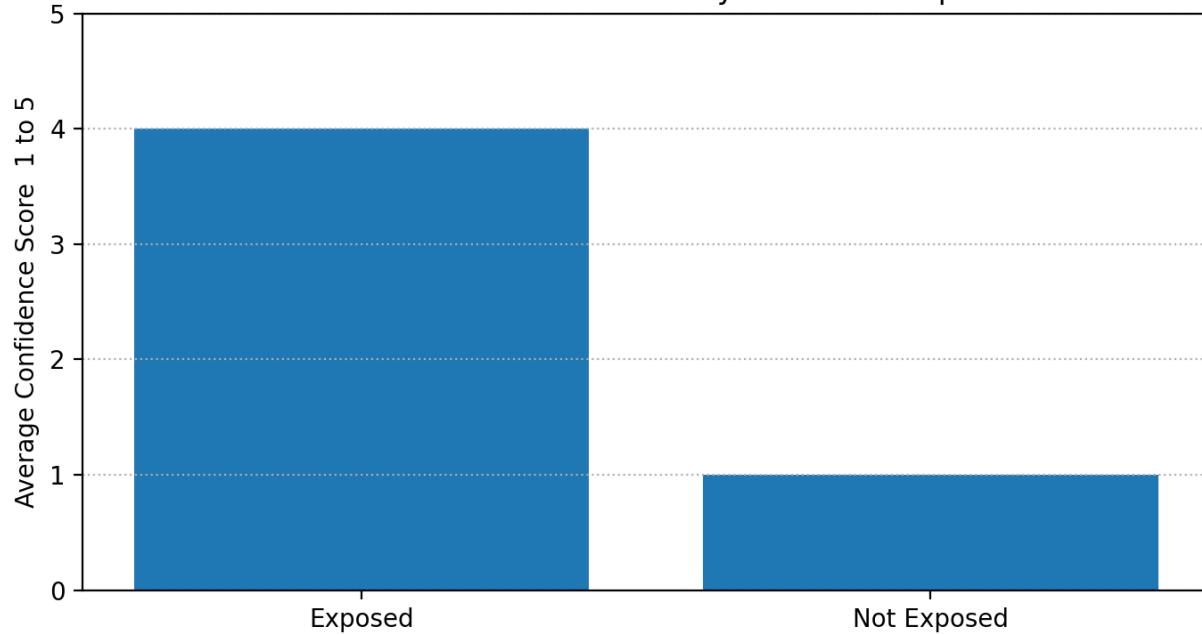
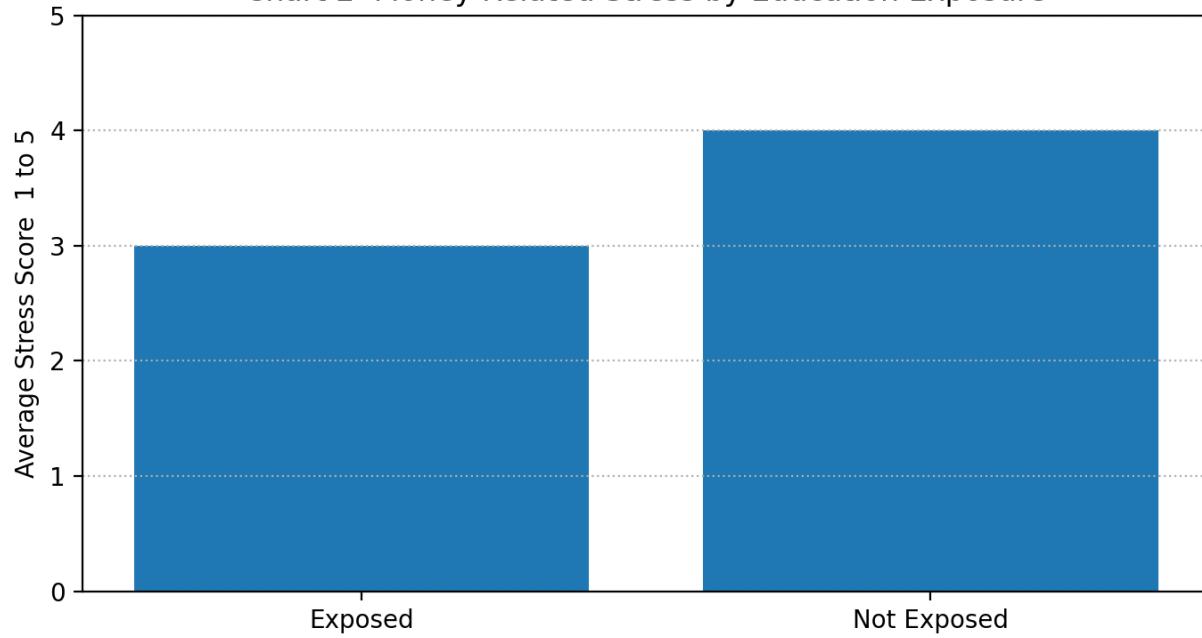


Chart 2 Money Related Stress by Education Exposure



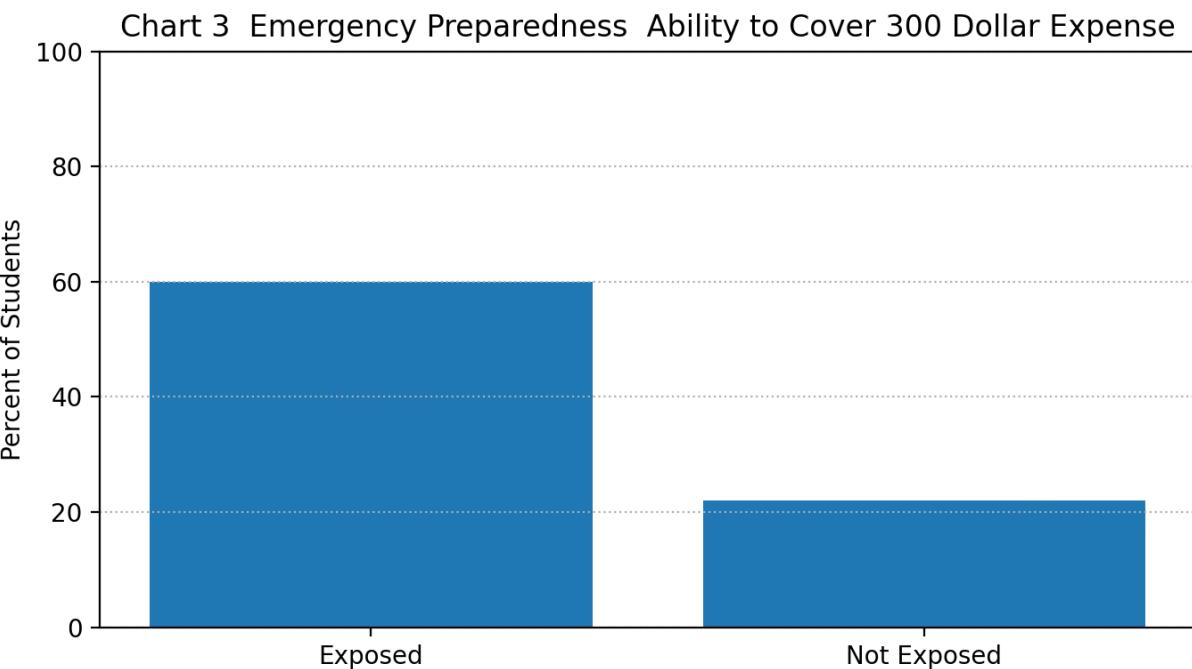
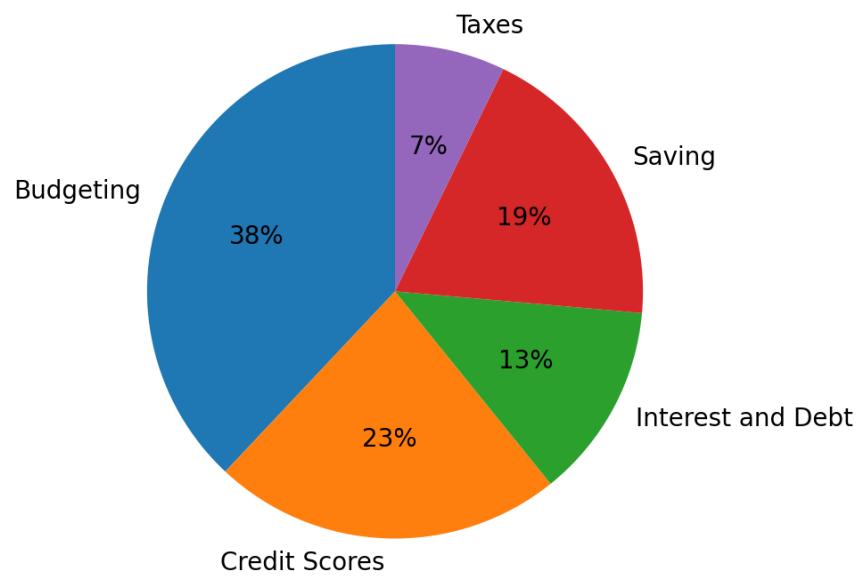


Chart 4 Financial Topics Students Want Taught in School



Qualitative Insights

Open ended responses revealed strong agreement among students regarding the need for practical, real world financial education. Students frequently cited confusion around credit, budgeting, and debt, and described money as a significant source of stress. Many reported feeling unprepared for financial decisions they expect to face shortly after graduation.

Selected anonymized responses include statements such as wishing schools explained credit before age eighteen, expressing frustration at being expected to know how to budget without instruction, and describing money related stress as something students feel they must manage independently.

Discussion

Across all measures, students with financial education exposure reported stronger outcomes. The largest differences appeared in confidence and emergency preparedness, suggesting that applied instruction may improve readiness for real world financial situations. The Southern California context may intensify these effects due to higher living costs and financial tradeoffs faced by families.

Policy and Education Recommendations

Schools may benefit from integrating applied financial literacy modules that emphasize budgeting, credit, and emergency planning. Instruction should reflect realistic scenarios relevant to student experiences. Community based programs can complement school instruction by reinforcing these skills outside the classroom.

Future Research

Future research could examine longitudinal outcomes following graduation, compare regional differences, and evaluate standardized financial education programs delivered at consistent levels.

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of early financial education in supporting student confidence, preparedness, and emotional well being. As financial decision making becomes increasingly complex, accessible and practical instruction may play a critical role in improving youth outcomes and reducing stress.

Conducted independently by Ella Shahbazian. Findings inform community based initiatives through Ella's Angels.