

## Student Agency Linked to Engagement in Class, Readiness for the Future

*Fewer than three in 10 Iowa students say they get to make choices about what they learn in class, according to new research from Opportunity Education Foundation and Gallup*

**WASHINGTON, D.C., June 3, 2025** — Fewer than three in 10 Iowa students (28%) agree or strongly agree that they have a say in what they learn in class, according to new research from Opportunity Education Foundation and Gallup. The latest report, *Learning in Focus: Examining Iowa Students' Engagement in Grades Five Through 12*, highlights findings from nearly 1,000 students in Iowa to understand how student agency — the ability to make choices and take ownership in learning — is tied to academic engagement, effort, and preparedness for life after high school.

### Students With More Control Over Learning Are More Engaged in Class

While most Iowa students agree that they participate in in-class activities (76%) and make an effort to learn new things in class (77%), fewer say they always pay attention (49%) and enjoy their classes (47%).

The research reveals that agency in learning is a key factor in driving engagement measures. However, less than half of students (42%) say they can learn at their own pace in class, and less than a third (28%) say they get to make choices about what they learn. Students who agree that they have a say in what they learn are 18 percentage points more likely to report participating in class (89%) and 26 percentage points more likely to say they enjoy their classes (66%) than their counterparts who do not get to make choices about what they learn.

Engagement levels also fluctuate with age, which may correlate with lower autonomy as children progress through school. Eighty-one percent of middle schoolers say they participate in class, compared with 70% of high school students. At the same time, high schoolers report lower levels of autonomy over their learning pace; just 35% say they can learn at their own pace, compared with 48% of middle school students.

### Students Invest More Effort in Out-of-School Activities

Students report greater engagement in learning activities outside of school, where they may experience more autonomy. Fifty-five percent say they put a lot of effort into activities outside school — 10 percentage points higher than in-class activities. Most students (77%) say they make an effort to learn new things outside of school, and 73% say they feel excited when they do.

Participation in extracurriculars appears to be largely voluntary: Just 9% of students say they only participate in after-school activities because their parents or guardians want them to. Student-led learning tendencies appear to play a role in involvement, as students who make an effort to learn new things outside of school are 73% more likely to be involved in three or more activities outside of class.

### Student Ownership May Be Key to Future Preparedness

Just 11% of Iowa high school students say they feel very prepared for life after graduation. Students who take ownership in learning life skills — whether in school or outside of it — are significantly more likely to feel ready for life beyond high school. Those learning life skills in school are 53% more likely to say they feel prepared for the future, and those doing so outside of school are 33% more likely to say the same.

Engagement in school is also closely tied to preparedness. Students who enjoy learning new things in class, even when it's challenging, are 69% more likely to report feeling prepared for what comes next. Preparedness,

in turn, is linked to students' sense of potential impact: While 72% of high school students believe they will make a difference someday, those who feel prepared for life after high school are 40% more likely to hold that belief.

## **Methodology**

Results for this study are based on a survey of 962 students between grades five and 12 in Iowa, conducted Sept. 23-Nov. 18, 2024. Households were randomly selected to participate using a probability-based methodology via address-based sampling. Gallup secured permission for students to take the survey from a parent or guardian and asked parents/guardians a limited set of demographic questions for statistical purposes. Public, private and home school students were eligible to take the survey.

For results based on this sample of Iowa middle school and high school students, the margin of sampling error is about  $\pm 6$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The design effect for the study is 4.17.

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