

INSIDE IOWA CLASSES

What Students Report
About Learning, Challenge
and Preparation for
the Future



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Foreword

Most would agree that young people should leave secondary school prepared to navigate the world on their own terms — able to set their own goals, seek feedback, make a plan and follow through. Yet for too many students, these experiences are inconsistently reported in their classes. Something is misaligned between what schools ask of students and what life will demand of them.

Through our partnership with Gallup, we surveyed 830 Iowa middle and high school students to understand that gap directly — what they are asked to do, how they spend their time and how prepared they feel for what comes next.

What we heard raises serious concerns. Smaller shares of students are spending time practicing the skills required to take ownership of their learning:

- **53%** report setting goals for improvement
- **52%** report asking for feedback
- **39%** report creating a plan for completing a major project or assignment
- **34%** report discussing specific actions to improve their work or skills

These are not peripheral skills; they are the foundation of self-direction. The fact that only about half or fewer students regularly practice them in school is not a minor gap. It is a structural problem.

The data also reveal what is possible when schools get this right. Students are six times more likely to report feeling prepared for life after high school when they can learn at their own pace, five times more likely when they set goals for improvement and four times more likely when they have meaningful choice in what they learn.

It is critical that schools deliberately build the conditions that move students from passive participants to genuine owners of their learning and, ultimately, creators of their own futures. That shift requires intentional design, structural change and a willingness to hold student agency not as a nice-to-have, but as a core measure of whether school is working.

This is the work we are doing at Opportunity Education, equipping educators with everything they need to develop students who are not just academically capable, but genuinely self-directed: able to set goals, make strategic decisions and create purposeful paths beyond school. We hope this report provokes the right questions — and the right action.



Jolene Zywica, Ph.D.

CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER, OPPORTUNITY EDUCATION

Introduction

Students are growing up in a time when the future can feel both full of possibilities and hard to predict. New technologies, evolving career pathways and shifting expectations are changing what it means to be ready for life after high school. For schools, the question is not only whether students are achieving, but whether they feel engaged in their learning and are building the skills they will rely on long after graduation.

This focus on student experience is especially urgent amid declining public confidence in K-12 education nationally.

Recent Gallup polling shows Americans' satisfaction with the quality of K-12 education has fallen to a record low,¹ underscoring the importance of listening directly to students about how school is showing up in their daily lives.



To better understand Iowa students' learning experiences, Opportunity Education Foundation partnered with Gallup to conduct a statewide study of students in grades 5-12. Iowa households were randomly selected to receive an invitation to participate in the study, and student surveys were completed with parent or guardian permission. Fieldwork was conducted from Sept. 22 to Dec. 1, 2025, yielding responses from 830 Iowa students across public, private and homeschool settings.

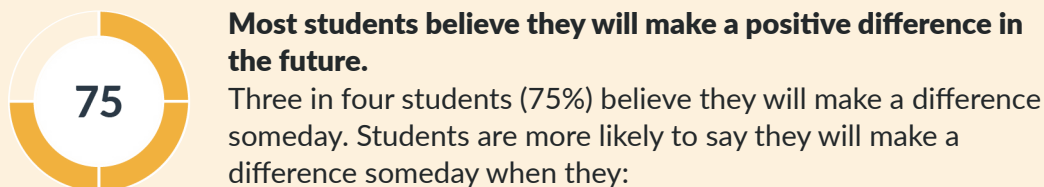
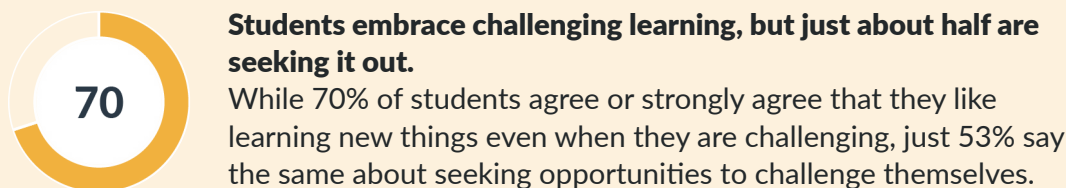
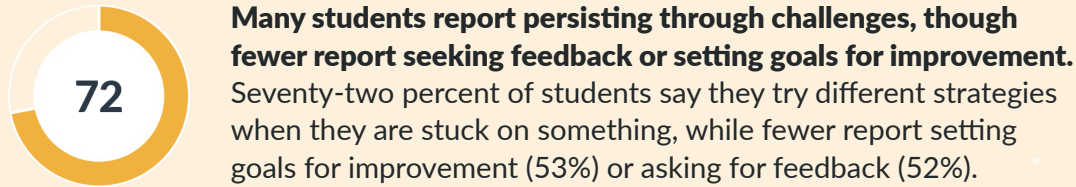
The study was designed to capture student classroom experiences, feelings of preparedness for the future and how these are connected. Five research questions guided those goals:

- 1 How do Iowa students describe their learning experiences in class, including the activities they do most often and the extent to which learning feels meaningful?
- 2 To what extent do Iowa students set goals, seek feedback and persist when faced with challenges?
- 3 How is challenge related to positive learning outcomes among Iowa students?
- 4 How do Iowa students view their future, including their optimism about making a difference and their sense of preparedness for life after high school?
- 5 Which learning experiences are most strongly associated with Iowa students' feelings of preparedness for life after high school?

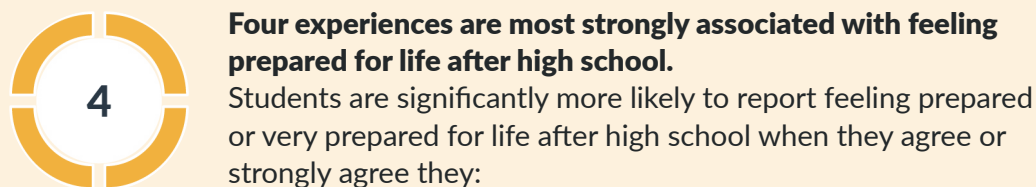
The results show clear strengths in Iowa students' learning experiences. Many students report strong effort and optimism, particularly when faced with challenges. However, gaps remain. Fewer students report having structured opportunities to build skills linked to future readiness, such as goal setting and making meaningful choices about their learning. The insights that follow highlight key patterns in the data and present opportunities for schools to strengthen classroom experiences that may better prepare students for what comes next.

1 Brennan, M. (2025, January 20). *Record-low 35% in U.S. satisfied with K-12 education quality*. Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/695174/record-low-satisfied-education-quality.aspx>

Key Findings



- Ask others for feedback to improve (5x more likely)
- Look for opportunities to learn new skills or try new things (4x more likely)



- Learn at their own speed (6x more likely)
- Set goals for improvement (5x more likely)
- Have meaningful choice in what they learn (4x more likely)
- Put effort into activities outside of school (3x more likely)

Student Learning Activities

While widespread, participation in class is not uniform. Most Iowa middle and high school students (84%) agree or strongly agree that they participate in activities such as conversations, experiments and games. However, this means that roughly one in six children in a 24-student classroom is neutral or not participating. Awareness of student participation and behavior in class provides an important insight into how students experience learning and where opportunities exist to deepen their engagement.

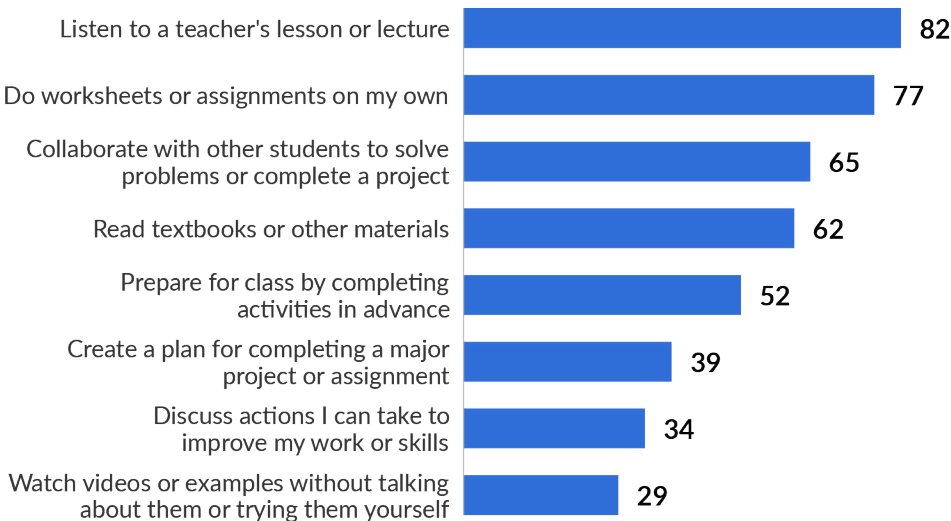
Listening and Doing Assignments Independently Are the Most Commonly Reported Class Activities

When asked about specific activities they regularly do in their classes, students most commonly report listening to a teacher’s lesson or lecture (82%) or doing worksheets or assignments independently (77%). More than six in 10 students also report regularly collaborating with other students to solve problems or complete a project (65%) and reading textbooks or other materials (62%).

CHART 1
Activities Students in Grades 5-12 Regularly Do in Class

Which of the following activities do you do regularly in your classes? Select all that apply.

% Selected



Direct teaching, modeling and guided practice remain functional components of effective classrooms. However, previous research in middle and high school settings finds that instructional approaches emphasizing active engagement, collaboration and applied problem-solving are more strongly associated with deeper conceptual understanding and skill development than lecture-dominated environments.^{2 3 4}

Within this study, students were less likely to select class activities that are related to deeper forms of engagement, including:

- preparing for class ahead of time (52%)
- creating a plan for completing a project or assignment (39%)
- discussing actions to improve work or skills (34%)



- 2 Freeman, S., Eddy, S. L., McDonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H., & Wenderoth, M. P. (2014). Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(23), 8410–8415. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1319030111>
- 3 Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.
- 4 Minner, D. D., Levy, A. J., & Century, J. (2010). Inquiry-based science instruction — what is it and does it matter? Results from a research synthesis years 1984 to 2002. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 47(4), 474–496. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.20347>

Many Students Persist Through Challenges; Fewer Set Goals or Seek Feedback

When asked about their learning in school, 72% of Iowa middle and high school students agree or strongly agree that when they are stuck on something, they try different ways to figure it out on their own. Behaviors like setting goals and asking for feedback are less commonly reported. About half of students (53%) agree or strongly agree that they set goals for what they want to improve in their classes, and a similar share say the same about asking others for feedback to improve.



Prior research suggests that classroom environments that encourage such activities help students engage more deeply with their learning.^{5 6} These practices have also been linked to stronger academic outcomes and the development of skills such as problem-solving and adaptability.^{7 8}

Reports of these types of learning behaviors point to an opportunity for more students to practice setting goals, asking for feedback and navigating through problems when they are stuck.

5 Barron, B., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2008). Teaching for meaningful learning: A review of research on inquiry-based and cooperative learning. In L. Darling-Hammond (Ed.), *Powerful learning: What we know about teaching for understanding* (pp. 11–70). Jossey-Bass.

6 Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>

7 Chen, C. H., & Yang, Y. C. (2019). Revisiting the effects of project-based learning on students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis investigating moderators. *Educational Research Review*, 26, 71–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2018.11.001>

8 Roseth, C. J., Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2008). Promoting early adolescents' achievement and peer relationships: The effects of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic goal structures. *Psychological Bulletin*, 134(2), 223–246. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.2.223>

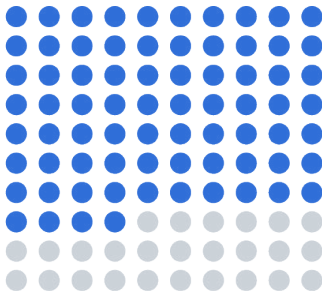
Effort and Trying New Things Are Commonly Reported, but Not Shared by All

Students who show curiosity and put effort into their learning are more likely to be engaged and to do well academically.^{9 10} Among Iowa middle and high school students, 80% report making an effort to learn new things in class, and 74% agree or strongly agree that they look for opportunities to learn new skills or try new things.

STRONGLY AGREE + AGREE

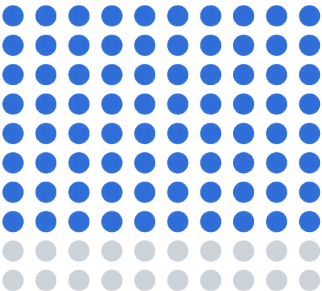
74%

I look for opportunities to learn new skills or try new things.



80%

I make an effort to learn new things in class.



While many students report these behaviors, about one in five do not agree they make an effort to learn new things in class, and about one in four do not agree they seek opportunities to learn new skills or try new things. Differences in how consistently students report these behaviors may reflect variation in their school experiences; however, these results also underscore the potential to identify and support students' interests in learning new things.

9 Schunk, D. H., Meece, J. L., & Pintrich, P. R. (2014). *Motivation in education: Theory, research, and applications* (4th ed.). Pearson.

10 Urhahne, D., & Wijnia, L. (2023). Theories of motivation in education: An integrative framework. *Educational Psychology Review*, 35(2), Article 45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-023-09767-9>

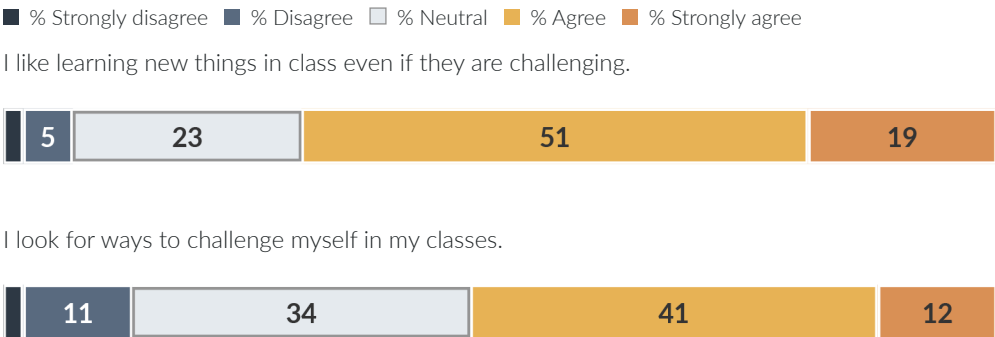
The Role of Challenge in Learning

Students’ experiences with challenge provide insight into how they engage with learning in their classes. Among Iowa middle and high school students, most report being open to challenging learning, yet fewer report looking for ways to challenge themselves in their classes. Looking more closely at how students experience challenges helps us understand not only their day-to-day learning, but also how appropriate levels of challenge are connected to other key learning outcomes.

Most Report Interest in Challenge, but Fewer Pursue It

Seventy percent of Iowa middle and high school students report they like learning new things in class, even when they are challenging. At the same time, about half (53%) agree or strongly agree that they look for ways to challenge themselves in their classes. The difference between interest and active pursuit highlights that while many students are open to challenge, fewer actively seek it in their day-to-day classroom experiences. This points to variation in how students experience or engage with challenges.

CHART 2
Interest in vs. Pursuit of Challenging Classwork Among Students in Grades 5-12



Note: Values ≤2% not shown.

Further, not all students report positive perceptions of challenge. Three in 10 students are neutral or disagree that they like challenging learning, highlighting that challenge may not feel equally accessible or engaging for all students.

Challenge Appears Alongside Other Positive Learning Experiences

Students who report they enjoy challenging learning tasks are also more likely to report confidence and optimism about their future. Among students who agree or strongly agree that they like learning new things even when they are challenging:

85%

agree or strongly agree that they are more confident in their abilities now compared to last year

83%

agree or strongly agree that they will make a difference someday

Further, students who report higher confidence are more likely to report positive attitudes toward challenging learning tasks and persistence when they are stuck. About eight in 10 middle and high school students (81%) agree or strongly agree that they feel more confident in their abilities now compared to last year. Among these students:

74%

agree or strongly agree they like learning new things in class, even if they are challenging

75%

agree or strongly agree they try different ways to figure things out on their own when they are stuck on something

These findings indicate that challenge is linked to positive learning experiences for students. Knowing this creates an opportunity to better understand how students experience challenges in class. When challenges feel manageable, more students may be likely to seek them out actively, helping support their confidence, persistence and optimism for the future.

Student Perceptions of Their Future

Students' beliefs about their future reflect how their current learning experiences shape their confidence and direction. Research suggests that when students experience meaningful participation in their learning, appropriate challenges and a sense of competence in school, they are more likely to develop optimism about the future and adaptive learning behaviors.^{11 12 13}

Understanding how Iowa students view their ability to make a difference — and how prepared they feel for life after high school — provides insight into whether learning experiences are translating into long-term confidence and readiness.

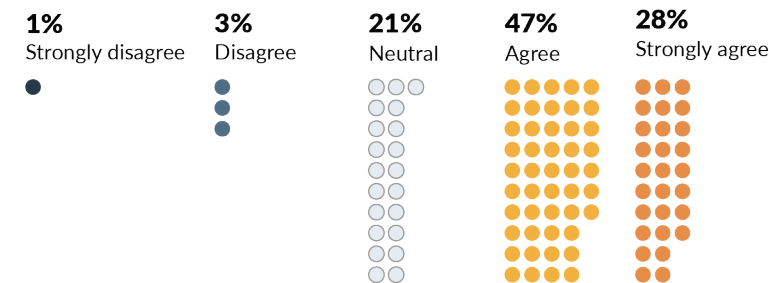


The Majority of Students Are Positive They Will Make a Difference Someday

Most Iowa students are optimistic about their future. Three-fourths (75%) agree or strongly agree that they are positive they will make a difference someday.

CHART 3
Student Optimism About Making a Difference in the Future

I am positive I will make a difference someday.



11 Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01

12 Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59–109. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059>

13 Salmela-Aro, K., Tang, X., Upadaya, K., & Renninger, K. A. (2021). Study demands-resources model of student engagement and burnout. In A. L. Reschly & S. L. Christenson (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (2nd ed., pp. 77–94). Springer.



Students are more likely to say they will make a difference someday when they also agree with the following behaviors, even after accounting for demographic characteristics.¹⁴

- Students who agree or strongly agree that they look for opportunities to learn new skills or try new things are four times more likely to report feeling they will make a difference someday (81%) compared with students who do not agree (19%).
- Students who agree or strongly agree that they ask others for feedback (84%) are five times more likely than others (16%) to believe they will make a difference.

This pattern suggests that future-oriented optimism is linked to behaviors associated with initiative and growth.

Parent education also plays a role in how students see their ability to make a difference. Students without a parent who has a bachelor's degree are less likely to indicate they will make a difference someday. However, this relationship is weaker than the link between the likelihood of agreeing they will make a difference and seeking out opportunities to learn new skills, try new things or ask for feedback.

¹⁴ This was the case even after controlling for demographic characteristics, including school level (middle and high school), gender, urbanicity, race, parent education and school type (public, private or homeschool).

Preparedness for the Future Is Uneven

Students' optimism about making a difference reflects one aspect of their view of the future. Another important dimension is whether they feel prepared for the next stage of life. While a majority of Iowa students report feeling prepared for life after high school, roughly four in 10 do not.

CHART 4
Feelings of Preparedness Among Students in Grades 5-12

How prepared do you feel for life after high school?

■ % I don't know ■ % Very unprepared ■ % Unprepared ■ % Prepared ■ % Very prepared



Note: Values ≤2% not shown. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Rather than treating preparedness as a fixed outcome, the data suggest that it is closely tied to specific learning experiences. Four factors in particular stand out as especially important in shaping students' sense of preparedness for life after high school.¹⁵



Learning Speed

Fifty-four percent of students agree or strongly agree that they are able to learn at their own speed in class. These students are six times more likely to report feeling prepared or very prepared (85%) than not prepared or not at all prepared (15%) for life after high school.



Goal Setting

Fifty-three percent of students agree or strongly agree that they set goals for what they want to improve in their classes. These students are about five times more likely to say they feel prepared or very prepared for life after high school (84%) than to say they are not prepared or not at all prepared (16%).



Meaningful Choice

Forty-seven percent of students agree or strongly agree that they get to make meaningful choices about what they learn in class. These students are four times more likely to report feeling prepared or very prepared (80%) than not prepared or not at all prepared (20%).



Effort Outside of School

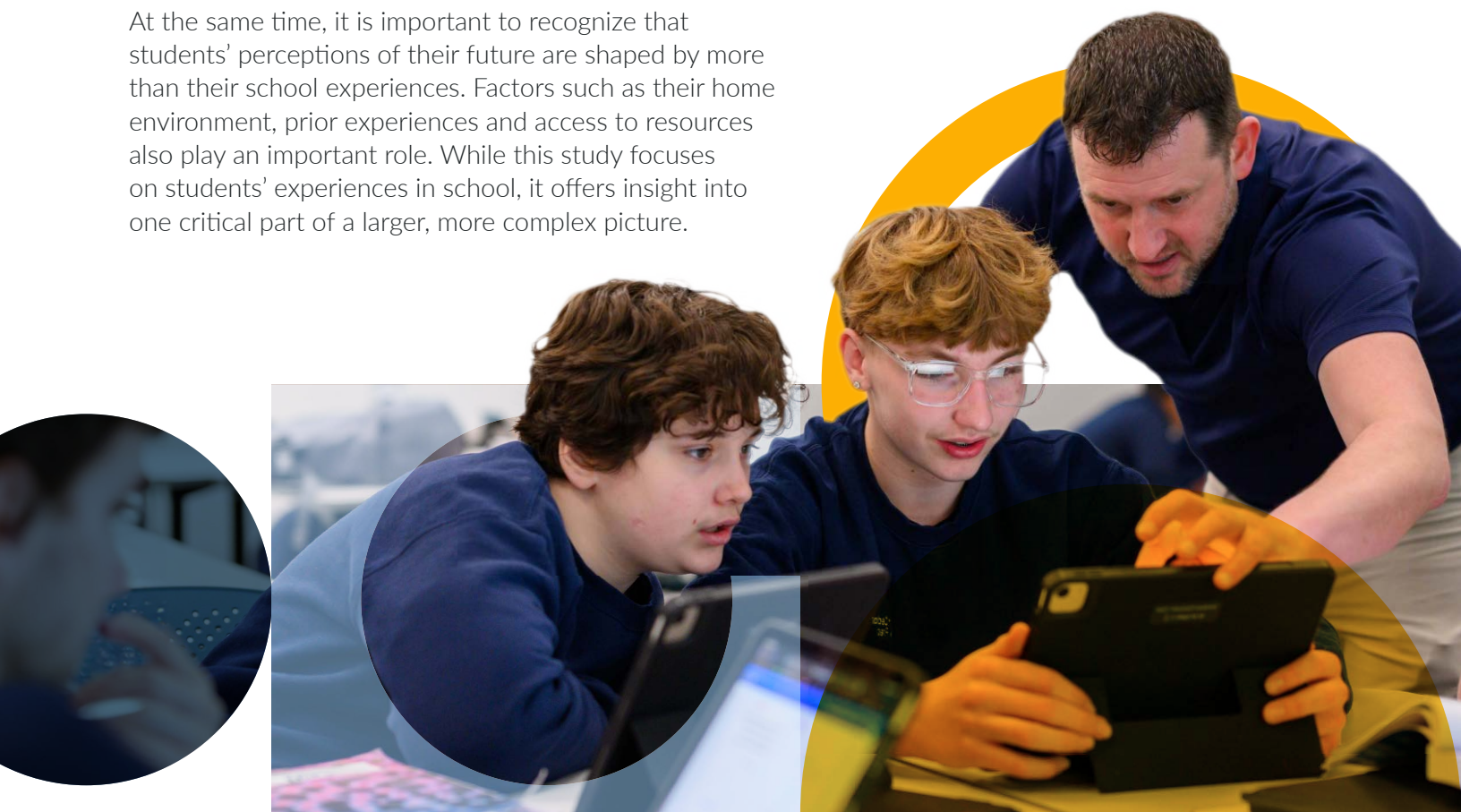
Ninety-five percent of students report putting some or a lot of effort into activities outside of school. Students who report putting in this level of effort are three times more likely to report feeling prepared (77%) than not prepared or not at all prepared (23%) for life after high school.

¹⁵ These associations remain statistically significant even after controlling for demographic characteristics and school factors, including school level (middle and high school), gender, urbanicity, race, parent education, perceptions of school grades and school type (public, private or homeschool).

Students' perceptions of their grades and their school level — middle or high school — also factor into how prepared they feel. Students who view their grades positively are four times more likely to report feeling prepared or very prepared for life after high school than to report feeling unprepared or very unprepared. High school students are marginally more likely than middle school students (77% vs. 73%) to report feeling prepared or very prepared. Among all factors examined in this study, students' perceptions of their grades show the strongest association with feelings of preparedness.

These findings align with broader research on motivation and self-regulated learning, which suggests that when students experience autonomy in their learning and develop skills like goal setting and reflection, they are more likely to stay engaged, build confidence and develop habits that support long-term success.^{16 17 18} Together, the results point to clear opportunities to support student readiness through the practice of goal setting, decision-making and sustained effort.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that students' perceptions of their future are shaped by more than their school experiences. Factors such as their home environment, prior experiences and access to resources also play an important role. While this study focuses on students' experiences in school, it offers insight into one critical part of a larger, more complex picture.



16 Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227-268.

17 Mammadov, S., & Schroeder, K. (2023). A meta-analytic review of the relationships between autonomy support and positive learning outcomes. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 75, Article 102235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2023.102235>

18 Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(2), 64-70. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4102_2

Implications for Supporting Student Learning

The findings in this report provide insight into how Iowa students experience learning and view their future. Many students report strong effort, persistence and optimism about what lies ahead. At the same time, fewer consistently report behaviors that reflect ownership of their learning, like setting goals or asking for feedback.

The following actions outline potential opportunities for educators, leaders and stakeholders to help students take more responsibility for their learning.

1 Pay Attention to Uneven Participation

While most Iowa students report good participation and effort in class, a meaningful share do not. About one in five students are neutral or disagree that they actively participate or put effort into learning new things. Including a variety of learning experiences in class — such as collaboration, inquiry or project-based approaches — can create multiple entry points for student participation.

2 Help Students Practice Goal Setting and Asking for Feedback

About half of Iowa students report setting goals or asking for feedback at school. Providing regular opportunities for students to set goals, take time for reflection and seek feedback can help them monitor their progress, adjust strategies and take ownership. These behaviors are also associated with feeling more prepared for life after high school.

3 Cultivate a Positive Relationship With Challenge

Many Iowa students say they are open to challenges, but fewer actively seek them out. Designing tasks with structured support, such as scaffolded learning or emphasizing progress over correctness, may help shape how students experience challenges. Positive experiences with a learning challenge could help more students engage with difficult work, build confidence and practice persistence.



4 Create Opportunities for Meaningful Choice and Pacing

Roughly half of Iowa students report regularly learning at their own speed and making meaningful choices about what they learn in class. Students who report these experiences are more likely to say they feel prepared for life after high school. Designing assignments that allow students to make decisions about content, approach or pacing may help them feel greater control over their learning.

5 Encourage Effort Outside of School as a Bridge to Readiness

Almost all Iowa students report putting effort into activities outside of school, highlighting the importance of learning experiences that extend beyond the classroom. Students who report such effort are more likely to say they feel prepared for life after high school. Encouraging participation in extracurricular activities or helping students connect those experiences back to their learning may support real-world application and reinforce skills that contribute to long-term readiness.

Understanding how students experience learning provides valuable insight into how to support both ownership of learning and preparedness. By listening to students' perspectives, educators and leaders can create classrooms that foster curiosity, confidence and the skills students will rely on long after graduation.



Methodology Statement

Results for this study are based on a survey of 830 students in grades 5-12 in Iowa, conducted Sept. 22-Dec. 1, 2025. Households were randomly selected to participate using a probability-based methodology via address-based sampling. Gallup secured permission from a parent or guardian for students to take the survey and asked parents/guardians a limited set of demographic questions for statistical purposes. Public, private and homeschool students were eligible to take the survey.

The primary outcomes of interest were variables related to student engagement, classroom behavior and perceptions of the future. Student engagement refers to students' involvement in and commitment to their learning experiences; classroom behavior refers to unique activities students engage in while in the classroom; and perceptions of the future represent optimism about their future, plans for the future and sense of preparedness for the future.

The analysis is based on weighted survey responses from all students. Descriptive statistics are primarily based on weighted crosstab calculations for select demographic groups. Weighted correlations and weighted difference-in-means statistics were calculated for continuous and categorical variables, respectively. Significance testing was used to determine whether associations among select variables were, or were not, due to chance.

A small number of items analyzed in this report had missing data for a subset of respondents. Missing values were addressed using multiple imputation, with all study and demographic variables included in the imputation model. Comparisons of respondents with and without complete data on these items showed no meaningful differences on demographic or substantive variables.

Logistic regression modeling was used to identify variables that were most consistently associated with outcomes of interest, after accounting for demographic characteristics. Variables described as key drivers in this report reflect statistically significant associations observed in these models. Models were estimated hierarchically, with demographic characteristics in the first block and predictors of interest in the second block, allowing for assessment of associations above and beyond demographic factors. The demographic control variables used in these models included school level (middle and high school), gender (boys and girls), urbanicity (urban and rural), race (Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, Other), parent education (at least one parent with a bachelor's degree and neither parent with at least a bachelor's degree), perceptions of school grades (rated continuously from below-average to excellent), and school type (public, private and homeschool).

The margin of error for the full sample at a 95% confidence level is 4.29 percentage points. Substantively, this means that if the survey were conducted multiple times, we would expect the true population proportion to be within 4.29 percentage points of the estimate. The design effect for the study is 1.59.

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