

New Study Identifies Four Classroom Experiences Strongly Linked to Student Readiness

Findings reveal gaps in key learning experiences among Iowa students

WASHINGTON, D.C., August 11, 2026 — New research from Opportunity Education Foundation and Gallup finds that while most Iowa students report effort and persistence in school, fewer regularly engage in behaviors tied to future readiness, such as setting goals or seeking feedback. These patterns connect to a broader set of classroom experiences that are associated with how prepared students feel for the future. The new report, [*Inside Iowa Classes: What Students Report About Learning, Challenge and Preparation for the Future*](#), includes results from 830 Iowa students in grades 5-12.

Effort and Persistence Outpace Goal-Setting Behaviors

Most Iowa middle and high school students report they are engaged in learning, with 80% saying they make an effort to learn new things in class and 72% saying they try different strategies when they are stuck. Students also report high participation rates at school, with 84% saying they take part in classroom activities. Still, this leaves roughly one in six students who are neutral or not participating in the classroom. Listening to teacher lectures (82%) and completing assignments independently (77%) are the most commonly reported activities.

Fewer students report practicing behaviors associated with ownership of learning. Only about half say they set goals for improvement (53%) or ask for feedback (52%), and even fewer report creating plans for major assignments (39%) or discussing actions to improve their work (34%). These gaps highlight differences between general effort and structured skill-building in classrooms.

The Challenge Gap: Enjoyment Exceeds Active Pursuit

Seven in 10 Iowa students say they enjoy learning new things even when they are challenging, yet only about half (53%) say they actively seek out challenges. This gap suggests that while most students are open to difficulty, fewer consistently pursue it in their daily learning experiences. Additionally, 13% of students say they do not like challenging learning, suggesting that these experiences may not resonate with all students.

Students who view challenge positively are more likely to report confidence and optimism. Among those who enjoy challenging learning, 85% say they feel more confident in their abilities than a year ago, and 83% believe they will make a positive difference in the future.

"These findings confirm a gap we see in schools every day, and one we've set out to close," said Jolene Zywica, Chief Learning Officer at Opportunity Education. "Students are putting in effort without the tools to direct it. They're rarely setting their own goals or using feedback to improve — not because they can't, but because school rarely asks them to. Effort tells us students are trying. It doesn't tell us whether they can own their learning."

Preparedness and Optimism Linked to Four Specific Classroom Experiences

While a majority of Iowa students report feeling prepared for life after high school, about four in 10 do not. The study identifies four experiences most strongly associated with preparedness. Only about half of students report having three of these experiences regularly in class: learning at one's own pace (54%), setting goals for improvement (53%) and having meaningful choice in what to learn (47%). The fourth experience — putting effort into activities outside of school — is reported by nearly all students (95%).

Students who say they can learn at their own speed are six times more likely to report feeling prepared for life after high school. Similarly, those who set goals for improvement are five times more likely to report feeling prepared, while students who make meaningful choices in their learning are four times more likely to report preparedness. Students who put effort into activities outside of school are three times more likely to feel prepared for life after high school. These patterns indicate that preparedness is linked to the experiences students have in the classroom.

Students' views of their future also correlate with the experiences they have at school. Overall, 75% of Iowa students say they expect to make a difference someday. This belief is more common among students who engage in behaviors tied to growth and initiative. Those who ask for feedback are five times more likely to say they will make a difference, while students who look for opportunities to learn new skills or try new things are four times more likely to express this optimism.

Together, these findings show that both preparedness and optimism are associated with specific, actionable learning experiences in the classroom.

Methodology

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 margin of error for the full sample at a 95% confidence level is 4.29 percentage points. The design effect for the study is 1.59.

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