What Students Report About Learning, Challenge, and Preparation for the Future in Iowa Classrooms (Gallup): Core Ideas and Summary

Gallup's research in Iowa found that students want more than good grades and test scores. They want learning experiences that are **challenging, engaging, relevant, and connected to their future goals.**

1. Students Want to Be Challenged

Core idea: Students want rigorous learning that pushes them to think deeply.

Students reported that the best classrooms:

- Expect high-quality work.
- Encourage critical thinking.
- Ask students to solve complex problems.
- Require students to explain their thinking.
- Challenge students to go beyond memorization.

Students did not equate challenge with simply having more work. Instead, they described challenge as work that was:

- Meaningful
- Interesting
- Relevant
- Worth the effort

Key message:

Students want to be challenged intellectually, not overwhelmed with assignments.

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2. Students Want Learning to Be Relevant

Core idea: Students want to understand why they are learning something.

Students repeatedly asked questions such as:

- Why are we learning this?
- How will I use this?
- How does this connect to my life?
- How will this help me in the future?

Students reported higher levels of engagement when teachers connected learning to:

- Real-world situations
- Community issues
- Careers
- Personal interests
- Authentic problems

Key message:

Relevance increases engagement.

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3. Students Want More Ownership of Their Learning

Core idea: Students want to participate in their learning rather than simply receive information.

Students valued opportunities to:

- Make choices
- Set goals
- Work independently
- Collaborate with classmates
- Explore topics that interested them

Students described learning as more meaningful when they had some control over the process.

Key message:

Student voice and choice increase motivation.

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4. Students Want School to Prepare Them for the Future

Core idea: Students believe schools should prepare them for life, not simply for tests.

Students identified several future-ready skills they considered essential:

- Communication
- Collaboration
- Critical thinking
- Creativity
- Problem-solving
- Leadership

- Adaptability

Many students reported wanting more opportunities to develop these skills in authentic settings.

Key message:

Students want preparation for college, careers, citizenship, and life.

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5. Relationships Matter

Core idea: Students learn more when they feel known and supported.

Students emphasized the importance of teachers who:

- Build relationships
- Encourage them
- Believe in their potential
- Listen to their ideas
- Create a positive classroom culture

Students consistently linked strong relationships to stronger engagement.

Key message:

Students learn best when they know their teachers care about them.

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6. Engagement Declines as Students Get Older

Core idea: Student engagement often decreases as students move through school.

Gallup found that elementary students typically report higher levels of engagement than middle and high school students.

Contributing factors include:

- Fewer opportunities for student choice
- Less authentic learning
- Increased emphasis on compliance
- Fewer opportunities for creativity

Key message:

Schools must intentionally design learning experiences that sustain engagement across all grade levels.

The Five Major Findings From Iowa Students

Students said they want classrooms that...	
Challenge them	Think deeply and solve problems
Engage them	Make learning interesting and interactive
Prepare them	Develop future-ready skills
Empower them	Give them voice and ownership
Connect with them	Build strong relationships

One-Sentence Summary

Iowa students told Gallup that they want learning experiences that are challenging, meaningful, engaging, and connected to their future while giving them opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, and relationships they need to succeed in life.