IDRA
VisionCoders

Reflection Contest Winning Entries 2025-26

IDRA VisionCoders

IDRA VisionCoders is a middle school computer science course developed by IDRA. Participating students who are in at-risk situations become software designers who create educational games for elementary school students (their "buddies"), who they also mentor. Throughout the year, students design games based on their buddy's learning needs.

Using asset-based approaches to STEM-Computer Science education the IDRA VisionCoders program builds-in opportunities for student inquiry and outside experiences that are exemplary practices for learning and student engagement.

VisionCoders students build educational game prototypes aimed at enhancing their buddy's math and literacy skills. VisionCoders students improve their own computational thinking skills, computing identity and math skills. This requires having well-prepared and knowledgeable teachers, which is why VisionCoders integrates focused high-quality teacher training.

The U.S. Department of Education funded the launch and study of this field-initiated, research-based program through 2024-25.

Learn more at
https://www.idra.org/services/idra-visioncoders

"VisionCoders helped me believe in myself. I've realized that I can do hard things as long as I don't give up. It's inspired me to keep exploring technology, and I'm even thinking about a career in coding now."

– VisionCoders student, Danna Rico Granados, Robert C. Zamora Middle School

Sofia Gover

8TH GRADE
ROBERT C. ZAMORA MIDDLE SCHOOL,
SOUTH SAN ANTONIO ISD

First Place

VisionCoders has helped me by....

Before I joined VisionCoders,
coding was just a word to me,
something that I heard in movies
or saw on screens. I imagined it was
for people much more older than me,
for people much more smarter than me,
and much more "techy" than me.

I thought it was all numbers,
confusing symbols,
and a giant mistake waiting
to happen. I thought one wrong click
would mean I ruined the whole code.
I thought maybe it wasn't for me.

But IDRA VisionCoders opened
a door for me I didn't even know
was there for me.

It showed me that coding isn't
just about typing. It's also about
creating, building, and trying again
when something doesn't work the first time.
And honestly that helped me
more ways than just on a computer.

Through coding I learned patience.
Not the easy kind, but the real kind.
The kind where you stare at the same
problem again and again until you
finally understand what needs to change.

I learned that mistakes are not the end.
They are clues, they are lessons, they are proof
that I am learning instead of standing still
staring at that same dang problem
over and over again.

Every bug
Every error
Every "why won't
this work?" moment
Taught me to keep going
Even though I might think
it's the end of the world.

So when I think about how
IDRA VisionCoders has helped me
I do not just think about
coding itself.

I think about growth
I think about courage
I think about confidence
I think about how I walked in
unsure and walked out stronger.

Still learning
Still growing
Still making mistakes
Still figuring things out
But now, I do believe
I'm capable of doing things
I've never done before.

So this experience
will stay with me,
Not just for today,
Not just for this class,
But for the future ahead of me.

And no matter where life
takes me, a part of me
will always remember that
this is where I learned that
It's okay to do things out of
your comfort zone, to believe
In yourself, and to believe in what
YOU can do.

And sometimes...
That's the greatest lesson of all.

Danna Rico Granados

8th Grade, Robert C. Zamora Middle School, South San Antonio ISD

Second Place

How IDRA VisionCoders has helped me

Joining IDRA VisionCoders really changed things for me. Before I started, I honestly didn't know the first thing about how computers worked or how to code. I always figured it would be way too hard for someone like me to learn. But once I got involved, that doubt started to fade, and I actually felt confident enough to try new things.

One of the best parts was how they taught us the basics step-by-step. The lessons weren't overwhelming, and I never felt like I had to rush through them. I also learned that making mistakes isn't a big deal. It's just part of how you grow. That realization alone made me a lot less afraid to just give it a shot.

Coding has also made me a better problem-solver. Dealing with bugs and figuring out why a program isn't working has forced me to think more clearly, which has actually helped me out in my math and science classes, too.

Plus, it's given me a chance to be creative. There's such a great feeling of pride that comes with building a game or a project from scratch and seeing it actually work. Most importantly, VisionCoders helped me believe in myself. I've realized that I can do hard things as long as I don't give up. It's inspired me to keep exploring technology, and I'm even thinking about a career in coding now.

I'm so grateful for how much I've grown in terms of my skills and my confidence, and I can't wait to see what I learn next. I'm so grateful for how much I've grown, both in my skills and my confidence. VisionCoders didn't just teach me how to code; it showed me what I'm capable of, and now I'm excited to keep learning and see where this path takes me.

Robert Hernández

8th Grade, Robert C. Zamora Middle School, South San Antonio ISD

Third Place

Thank You IDRA VisionCoders!

Ever since starting school, IDRA VisionCoders has had a significant impact on my life. At first, I didn't think much of it. I assumed it would just be another program where I would learn something new and move on. But over time, it became something I actually looked forward to.

It pushed me to try things I normally wouldn't, especially when it came to coding and working with others. I've spent many hours coding, and somehow, I never got tired of it. Looking back, I can honestly say that I've grown as a person because of IDRA and VisionCoders, not just academically, but in the way I think and interact with people.

Coding has become a way for me to express myself. I can create different types of games without having to follow a strict step-by-step process, which makes it feel less like an assignment and more like something that is actually mine. Instead of just consuming things like games or apps, I'm able to build them myself. That shift-from consumer to creator changed how I see technology. It's not just something I use anymore, but something I can shape. It also made me more comfortable experimenting. Not everything works the first time, and honestly, most things don't. But that's part of it. You try something, it fails, you fix it, and you move on.

That process started to affect how I think outside of coding too. I began to approach problems differently, almost like everything could be broken down into smaller steps. Instead of getting stuck or overwhelmed, I try to figure out where things went wrong and adjust from there. It's similar to debugging, just applied to real life. Whether it's schoolwork or something more personal, I've gotten better at slowing down and thinking things through instead of reacting right away.

One of the biggest things VisionCoders taught me was patience, especially when working with younger students. Helping second graders sounds simple, but it really isn't. There were times when they didn't understand things right away, or they would lose focus halfway through an explanation. In those moments, I had to remind myself that it wasn't about how fast they learned, but how well I could help them understand. I learned to explain things in different ways, repeat myself without getting frustrated, and stay calm even when things didn't go as planned. That kind of patience isn't something you can just learn from a lesson, it comes from actually being in those situations.

Since I speak Spanish, communication wasn't really a barrier for me, but I still had to learn how to adjust the way I spoke depending on who I was talking to. Talking to second graders is very different from talking to people my age. I had to simplify what I was saying, be more clear, and sometimes change how I explained things completely so they could understand. It wasn't just about translating words, it was about making ideas make sense to them. That's something I didn't really think about before, but now I notice it more in everyday conversations.

There was one moment that stood out to me and changed how I saw everything. I was helping one of my buddies who kept getting stuck on one of the questions I gave them. They were getting a little frustrated and said they didn't know how to answer the problem. At first, I thought the answer was easy, but I realized they didn't need me to just solve it for them. So instead, I walked

them through it step by step, asking questions and letting them figure things out on their own. When they got it, their whole attitude changed. They went from being frustrated to being confident in their answers. That moment stuck with me because it made me realize that helping someone understand something is more important than just giving them the answer.

Being part of VisionCoders by IDRA also made me more aware of how important access to education really is. Not everyone gets the same opportunities, especially when it comes to technology. Some students don't get exposed to coding or programs like this at all. Being in this program made me realize that what we were learning wasn't just an extra activity, it was something that could actually open doors for people in the future. In a way, programs like these help narrow the academic achievement gap by giving more students access to skills that are becoming more important every day.

Overall, VisionCoders by IDRA has helped me grow in ways I didn't expect. It changed how I approach problems, taught me patience, and helped me improve the way I communicate with others. It also made me realize that teaching isn't just about explaining things, it's about helping people understand and build confidence in themselves. I don't think I would see things the same way if I hadn't been part of this program, and that's probably the biggest impact it had on me.

Estrella Gandara

8th Grade, Dwight Middle School, South San Antonio ISD

Honorable Mention

How VisionCoders Has Helped Me

The IDRA VisionCoders program has been fun, incredibly rewarding, and educational. My VisionCoders class has significantly improved multiple skills, including my creativity, leadership skills, improving my grades and job explorations for my future. By creating educational games and watching my buddies (Bryanna and Izabella*) play sparked a new excitement in me. It changed my view of my future, and it gave me inspiration to keep coding. Finally, visualizing my upcoming goals made me have a strong sense of what I want to do when I grow up.

VisionCoders has widened my knowledge of coding terms and technology. I now understand real world connections. While working on my projects, I started noticing how the same coding appears in different apps I use every day, such as codes that control the scrolling or clicking on a simple icon and it takes you to a different screen. It made technology feel less impossible for me and made me feel like coding was in my reach.

Whenever I actually get something to work in Scratch or Code.org I visibly brighten. There have been times when I've been stuck in the same blocks for a while, then suddenly the code works just right! Those little moments made me realize to celebrate my solutions and to keep going even when I felt annoyed with the obstacle.

This also made me more determined to try things. At first, I needed tutorials for every single small game, but now I can read articles and figure out new codes on my own. And through that, instead of following exact instructions, I started making the code different to match it more to my own interests or my little buddies' interests. That whole process made it feel so rewarding.

Joining IDRA VisionCoders really extended and widened my viewpoint of the potential jobs for the time ahead. For example, jobs like software engineering, data scientists, medical coding and so much more, have all changed my outlook on future coding occupations. I have also learned leadership skills, which made me learn that a leader is supposed to be leading and helping others with small mistakes. They're supposed to be an authentic, empathetic, and a decisive individual – that shows collaboration and listens to their classmates. This program taught me how to be accountable, responsible and wise because of my positive classmates and teacher.

VisionCoders also taught me that playing games is not just about screens, but a tool to support students who need extra help with reading and math. For example, my first grade buddies used my games to help them understand more about the topics they were learning. By creating these games for Bryanna and Izabella not only did I learn coding, but I also helped them learn something that made a difference in their education. Doing this has helped me gain a feeling that work matters more than I thought. As well as letting me have a connection with my classmates, teacher, and buddies that I found to be enjoyable each class period and every buddy visit.

Since the start of this program, my academic grades have dramatically gone up. Like in math and science, my problem-solving abilities and processing skills have sharpened. I learned to not be embarrassed to ask for help, which made me more confident and comfortable in asking questions, which I thought was nearly impossible before entering VisionCoders.

This program has helped me make more unique, original designs and ideas. For example, in my school projects, I have my own ideas instead of asking others, which makes my projects more interesting and makes it stand out. At first everything felt confusing, but with support from others' help it has helped me comprehend more about coding and creativity.

It has also made me more wise and manageable with time due to the deadlines on our games. It was interesting to explore the inside of other games, made me learn how games similar to mine work, and helped me understand the background of how coded games run. Finally, a valuable lesson I've learned is that making errors is definitely okay in this class because it helps you learn from your mistakes.

By considering this STEM path, I have been able to study and read about coding employment. Learning new technologies is important for coding and should seriously be considered by any student who wants to code. I am pleased and extremely obliged to be in this program.

Finally, a valuable lesson I've learned is that making errors is definitely okay in this class, it helps you learn from your mistakes! In VisionCoders, coding teaches you that not everything will go smoothly and perfectly. You learn and understand how you made the code, what you can do better, and realize errors in your code are learning opportunities instead of failures.

To summarize, IDRA VisionCoders helped me with academic development, social interactions, time management, unique information, understanding how games I play work, improved my everyday life, enhanced my angle of possible careers, extended my vocabulary, and so much more. I would like to thank my teacher, classmates and the whole program for helping me boost and advance multiple skills that I thought were not even possible.

** names changed for privacy*

Andrea Pedraza-Villasenor

8th Grade,
Kingsborough
Middle School,
Harlandale ISD

Honorable Mention

How has being a VisionCoder changed the way I think about my future? IDRA VisionCoders has presented me with so many opportunities and possibilities for my future. Technology is surrounding us, and as time passes, technology continues to develop. Being able to learn how to code is an incredible opportunity.

Before becoming a VisionCoder, I was confused about my future. I did not realize how many career paths involve coding. Now I can choose exciting possibilities in fields like software development, game design, app creation, web development and businesses that rely on technology.
Being in VisionCoders has also taught me many more skills than just coding! It has helped me problem solve, learn how to work with others in a team, manage conflict, and bring my ideas to life with websites, apps and games.

One of the major changes I have noticed in myself because of VisionCoders is that I am more resilient. I know how to approach problems without getting irritated. When my first game had a bug in it, I felt frustrated. I almost gave up, but I continued testing and debugging until the game worked flawlessly. Moments like these teach me mistakes are part of the learning process. It also taught me that perseverance has helped me in my other classes and even in daily life problems.

VisionCoders has persuaded me to work in groups, and if I am honest with myself, at first I disliked the idea of working with others. However, working on group projects has not only made me more confident, but it has helped me enhance my communication skills. It taught me how to share ideas, improve my listening skills, and resolve disagreements when our first problem appeared. This has improved me in my daily life and classes. I am now able to answer questions without getting overly nervous, and I raise my hand when teachers ask a question before my brain can even process it. I find myself knowing problems that look like complex math problems, all because VisionCoders has improved my attentive skills.

In conclusion, being a VisionCoder has completely changed my future and how I see myself. I no longer feel unsure of what I want to do. I am confident of what I want for myself, and I now feel excited when I present. I feel prepared to pursue something that involves technology. This class has given me more skills than I need. It has given me confidence and the mindset to turn ideas into reality. It's something I can build, one line of code at a time. I'm proud to be a VisionCoder, and I'm now ready to face anything that comes my way.

Alfredo Arriola

8th Grade,
Brentwood
STEAM School
of Innovation,
Edgewood ISD

Honorable Mention

Being an IDRA VisionCoder

My experience with the IDRA VisionCoders program was a lot of fun. I learned about Scratch and code.org. I have started making my own games with coding and have learned a lot throughout the year. I signed up for an interview for my school VisionCoders class, and we talked about the VisionCoders program and what I was working on at the time. I explained to her about the games I wanted to create to help kids learn more and make games a lot more fun for them.

Being a VisionCoder is a fun experience. It has helped me to see what I wanted to do in high school and in college. Going on field trips to help kids learn with the games I have created for them is a cool and fun experience. It makes me happy that I'm helping kids learn and making them smarter.

Learning how to code at a young age will help people in the future when you get a job. Coding is a useful tool you can use, especially with jobs that use technology.

Coding is like a tool that you can use all your life, especially with jobs that have software development, data science, etc.

Being in the VisionCoders program has been the most fun class I have had all year. I hope to continue to be a part of the IDRA VisionCoders in the future.

A Legacy of Valuing Students

For decades, IDRA has upheld a belief that all students have intelligence, potential and power beyond what schools often expect.

But it is not a mere attitude. It requires intentional strategies, like creating purposeful experiences in classrooms, recognizing student strengths and contributions, and maintaining positive relationships between teachers and students.

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership's 98% success rate over 40 years demonstrates what happens when schools use asset-based practices. IDRA has applied the bedrock qualities of youth leadership to many other programs over the years.

Here are our most recent examples.

IDRA Valued Youth Partnership

Our philosphy came alive in the **IDRA Valued Youth Partnership** (VYP) where teenagers who are deemed at risk of dropping out become tutors of elementary students.

Tutors turn from struggling to having higher attendance, lower discipline rates, stronger academic skills, and higher self-esteem. And 98% stayed in school.

In four decades, **over three-quarters of a million people's lives** have been changed as schools and communities see what is on the inside – the inherent value and potential of each child.

IDRA Youth Leadership Now

Starts with VYP for high-need eighth graders and expands impact schoolwide by also integrating teacher mentoring for high school transition with our IDRA Education CAFÉ family leadership model.

IDRA Digital Ambassadors

Supports students as leaders who first conduct participatory action research to identify technology needs in their low-income community and then lead community training.

IDRA VisionCoders

Asset-based college prep program through a computer science course in Title I (low wealth) middle schools where students learn about AI and problem solving while coding educational games for early elementary "buddies."

IDRA Youth TechXperts

Middle school students build cutting-edge STEM skills to provide campus technology support while fostering leadership, inclusivity and real-world experience.

Learn more!
www.idra.org

Children First IDRA Transforming Education | www.idra.org | idraseen.org | @IDRAed | @IDRAedu | idra.news/LinkedInIDRA

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

May 2026

Children First IDRA Transforming Education

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