

# PSI (PROBLEM-SOLVING INCUBATOR) HIGH

(SEMINOLE COUNTY, FLORIDA)

Public school, Seminole County Public Schools (SCPS); located within Seminole High School

Summer 2019



## A DEEPER DIVE

Just northeast of Orlando's High-Tech Corridor, Seminole County is home to aerospace, optics, digital media, and other technology industries—all with ongoing demands for employees equipped with strong critical-thinking and communication skills. Thanks to capable and sustained leadership, Seminole County Public Schools has done much to prepare its students for the opportunities these industries represent, most of which require post-secondary education. The district has cultivated deep relationships with the business community and has earned a reputation for innovation.

Indeed, SCPS is a district that can outline a vision and make it a reality. A large, diverse district with 67,000 students, Seminole is the 12th-largest school district in Florida and 60th in the U.S. In recent years, SCPS successfully created an "ePathways" (Educational Pathways) initiative that allows students to pursue their interests in a variety of programs. Two SCPS high schools offer International Baccalaureate programs. In 2015–16, SCPS students took nearly 15,000 Advanced Placement exams and nearly 12,000 industry and digital-tool certificate assessments, and the district achieved a graduation rate of 86 percent, nine percent higher than the state average.

When Superintendent Walt Griffin learned about the XQ Super School competition in 2015, his first response was to seek advice from students. He asked Derek Jensen, a manager of digital and blended learning, to convene high school students from around the district. With Jensen's guidance, students gathered insights from their peers. What they discovered was disturbing: students said they felt deeply bored and alienated, shut out from learning that mattered to them, and frustrated by what seemed to be inequitable opportunities.

The student team crystallized these insights into a three-point mission statement. First, they declared, "All students want the opportunity to have a secure and productive future in college and career," and to leave high school with a plan for life after school. Second, students want "a fair playing field," with "equal opportunities for all people regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation or income."

## AT A GLANCE

*PSI High was piloted in the 2017–18 school year as an elective course serving approximately 250 students at three SCPS high schools. It launched as a program within a school in fall 2018 with an initial class of 56 students. PSI High will grow over the next few years to reach a total enrollment of approximately 200 students, and the elective course may be implemented at additional SCPS schools.*

**Superintendent:**  
Dr. Walt Griffin

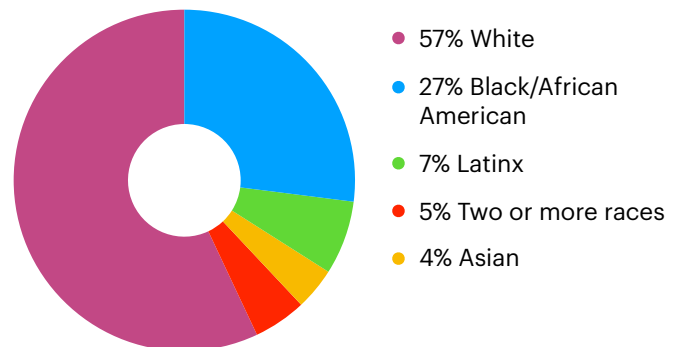
**PSI High Project Manager:**  
Derek Jensen

**Executive Director, High Schools:**  
Mike Gaudreau

## Students of PSI High

**2018-19 Enrollment: 56 Students**

**Projected Total Enrollment: 200 Students**



**61%**  
Qualify for free or reduced price lunch

**18%**  
Qualify for special education services

**13%**  
Require 504 Plan

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## A DEEPER DIVE CONTINUED

They explained, “We still are divided in many ways, even within schools, and our students are tired of these institutional barriers.” And, third, students want to play a part in “solving local and global problems,” ranging from small-scale community and business challenges to large-scale social issues.

With ongoing support and encouragement from district leaders, the team created a plan for the Problem-Solving Incubator, or PSI High, where students would experience hands-on learning, competency-based credit, and a flexible learning environment that feels more like a high-tech office than a classroom. “Designed by students for students,” the proposal declared, “PSI High will serve as living proof that students can play a leading role in changing the world for the better.”

XQ recognized the team for the quality and authenticity of its stakeholder engagement—and for the promise its model represents for Seminole County students and others. And since that moment, the district hasn’t missed a beat.

A pilot project in 2017–18 developed the PSI High approach in three SCPS high schools: Lake Mary, Lyman and Seminole. Approximately 250 students in ninth and tenth grades enrolled in an elective course, where they participated on teams to solve real community, business and social problems.

Through the pilot program, students and teachers gained experience with new ways to learn. Each pilot school created a custom-built classroom for the elective. Teachers from across the district were able to observe how flexible spaces enable differentiated instruction, independent work and self-direction, and collaboration among students.

At its core, the pilot was about reorienting students and educators to what self-directed and project-based learning look like, and toward enabling students to see meaning in their learning. Recognizing that many students are unaccustomed to exercising ownership and agency, the pilot helped students to understand who they were, who they hoped to become, and what they needed to do to get there. Students were then eligible to apply to the new, small high

school—PSI High—when it launched the following school year.

When PSI High opened in fall 2018, it featured a full program designed around an expanded definition of what it means to be college- and career-ready. Students collaborate to solve real-world problems and build skills, using the SCPS ePathways Skills for Future Ready- Graduates. This profile for future-ready graduates includes an understanding of what today’s graduates need to be successful—including things like innovation, imagination, problem solving, engaged citizenship, an international outlook, interpersonal skills, self-awareness and perseverance. Student progress will be tracked via personalized portfolios and measured by competence on performance tasks. Every PSI High student will also gain entrepreneurial business experience and service experience, for which the team is currently recruiting local partners.

PSI High represents a major leap toward a more holistic approach to high school, one that honors student voice while being more attuned to the demands of the future. It also shows how a large school district can respond constructively, with real concern, candor and creativity, to students’ concerns about the current system—and there’s a lesson in that story for every high school in America.