

(CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA)

Program operated through a partnership among Cedar Rapids School District, Community College School District, and Linn-Mar Community School District.

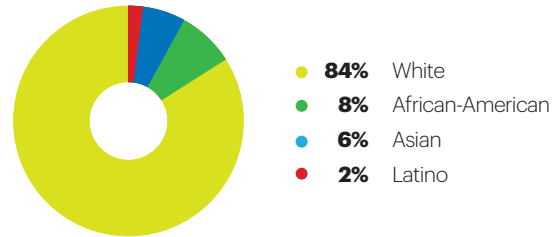
AT A GLANCE

Iowa BIG was created in 2013 by the Cedar Rapids Community School District, the College Community School District, the Gazette Company and other community partners. In its first year, it served 12 students, who participated in four projects; in 2016–17, 126 students participated in 52 projects. Iowa BIG plans to grow significantly over the next several years.

Executive Director and Cofounder: Trace Pickering
STEM Teacher and Cofounder: Shawn Cornally
Director of Strategic Partnership
Development: Troy Miller

Projected Student Demographics (at Full Enrollment)

Student Enrollment: 250 Students (Grades 9-12)



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Iowa BIG is a place where high school students learn by working with peers from across the city on projects that matter to them and to others in the community. It's a place where superb, committed teachers from all the major disciplines ensure that those projects integrate experiences that meet state standards, and prepare students for college. It's not a stand-alone school, but rather a special place where students spend 50 to 90 percent of their time, while still being enrolled in their home schools. It's a place where, at the end of their high school experience, students walk away with more than just credits and grades: they also get the satisfaction of real-world problems solved, projects accomplished, and résumés that speak to who they are as people. Whether applying for college or for a job, what a great way to differentiate oneself from the pack!

Initially designed in 2013 by a team of 60 educators and community members from the greater Cedar Rapids area, Iowa BIG currently serves 220 of the 750 students it eventually expects to enroll. Participating students come from high schools in three different school districts: Cedar Rapids, College Community and Linn-Mar. Students take courses and extracurriculars through their home schools and choose core academic and elective courses they wish to satisfy through Iowa BIG. For their BIG coursework, they journey across town

to Iowa BIG's homebase, located inside a co-working space known as "The Vault," or to project sites in businesses, government agencies and nonprofits throughout the community.

How did such a radical idea come about?

Most of the major stakeholders had been working on various initiatives to improve education in Cedar Rapids for some time. The pivotal moment came when key leaders invited adults from the community to "go back to school" for a day as if they were high school students. After the experience, the adult participants shared their observations about what they would change if they could. According to a local newspaper report, the same comments emerged over and over again: "School should teach more soft skills. School should teach how to iterate gracefully, rather than accept failure. School should relate to the outside world." They also heard common ideas expressed about what students need: "Students need to know how to manage their own time, rather than simply shuffling from class to class, and students need to have an entrepreneurial mindset to be ready to enter the so-called 'real world'."

Following that back-to-school event, the organizers concluded that they should create a model for their city

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that would focus on meaningful, relevant and authentic experiences organized so students could learn academic content in real-world contexts. That model is Iowa BIG.

Iowa BIG students learn through rigorous projects generated and co-designed by community partners focused on solving real problems those partners are facing. Potential partners—including businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies—are encouraged to look carefully at their current priorities and ask: What problems are we facing that high school students could help us solve? How could we make the project really interesting and challenging, so students will be motivated to learn a lot and do a great job? Teachers help curate and filter the pool of projects to ensure rigor and relevance and to make sure students' participation adds value for both students and to the community.

Each student takes part in two to five projects per year, which they either choose from a project pool or create themselves with the Iowa BIG teaching staff. Students first look through the project pool to choose the projects they are most excited about. Then, the choice is mediated through three filters: Does the student really love the idea? Is the project itself interdisciplinary—so it creates an opportunity for learning across multiple fields? Is there an external audience with a vested interest, not just in the product but also in the project?

For projects that survive these filters, the next step is to create a project team and begin to map out the details of the project. The teachers at BIG are certified in a wide variety of different fields. Throughout the project, they work with each team of students and partners to organize the work and build out the content to be learned along the way. That includes assembling a customized "textbook" of links, videos, ideas, lectures

and other resources and defining student-learning goals, which are carefully mapped to state standards. Using project-management tools, a schedule is created with time for in-person discussion, teamwork and reporting. Teachers monitor student progress against the identified project standards so "courses" can be marked as completed and grades awarded.

Interest in BIG is growing every year, both among students and in the community. "The more we're in the community," says Troy Miller, Iowa BIG's director of strategic partner development, "the more this model propagates itself." Lura McBride, Chief Operating Officer of Van Meter Inc., one of the largest employers in the area, agrees. "This is one of the most exciting and potentially game-changing things our community has done in the educational arena.... VMI sees Iowa BIG as an essential element in our community's development of a strong, home-grown STEM-based workforce."

Is it possible that, as Iowa BIG comes closer to its planned enrollment of 750, the supply of partners with substantive projects won't keep up. Organizers don't think so. "The curriculum is community," explains Miller. "Our community has enough problems and opportunities for students to have an endless number of things to do."

Iowa BIG stands as a potential model for cities and regions across the country. Its organizers believe it can work in any community that has people committed enough to take on the challenge of rethinking education as a shared enterprise and responsibility. This is a true public-private partnership, proving that great things are possible when an entire community opens its doors to young people, sees them as assets, and empowers them to engage in meaningful work.