



Our mantra is: Trust your crazy ideas, build something you're proud of, and join the family table. In other words, let your passions drive you to do something great and be open to building authentic relationships and teams.

—Dr. Trace Pickering, Co-Creator & Associate Superintendent

IOWA BIG STARTED AS AN UNORTHODOX EXPERIMENT: send business and community leaders back to school for a day; not as observers, not as guests, but as students. In 2012-13, 60 local business and community leaders got the “Billy Madison” treatment. After their back-to-school experience, they shared reflections and insights and emerged with a set of principles for the kind of schools they wanted for their kids. These principals became the backbone of Iowa BIG:

1. Use student passion to drive deep learning and deliver core academic credits
2. Engage students in authentic community projects, problems, and opportunities
3. Connect them deeply to the people and resources of the Cedar Rapids Tech Corridor

Iowa BIG brings these principles to life by bridging the gap between learners and their community. It turns the challenges and problems that face Cedar Rapids' businesses, nonprofits, and community organizations into learning opportunities for high school kids.

This knocks down the traditional walls of school.

Learners at Iowa BIG generate new innovations, solve problems for their neighbors, and think critically about the challenges of their community. Started in 2013, this program coordinates with the area's high schools to have learners split their time between traditional classes and Iowa BIG projects. These projects originate from companies and organizations that have untapped ideas and challenges they can't resource. So, when an Iowa BIG learner takes up the challenge—it's a win-win.

When working on their projects, learners come to a co-located space in downtown Cedar Rapids—putting them side by side with local entrepreneurs and million dollar companies. This co-working space has a profound effect on learners. When they're at Iowa BIG, they aren't just students—they're inventors, creators, designers. And they know no limits.

Even when they return to their traditional high schools, their work and accomplishments follow them. Iowa BIG is a fully **competency-based** environment. Learners are tracked standard-by-standard as they move through their projects, ensuring the highest level of mastery. As learners explore the possibilities of their projects, highly qualified staff record experiences and products using proprietary software to ensure progress. Rather than build a pre-fabbed curriculum, at Iowa BIG their community is their curriculum.

Iowa BIG now has nearly 100 learners on board and is collaborating with 120+ business partners. Together they're working on 40+ different initiatives. The learners have innovated and created in the fields of marketing, computer science, public works, STEM, advanced manufacturing, environmental issues, logistics, and many more. At Iowa BIG, real life starts now.

LEARN MORE

[“The Back-to-School Project”](#)

[Competency Based Education: Next Level Learning](#)

[What is Real Academic Rigor?](#)



FACTS & FIGURES

Public (15-18)

92 learners

5 high schools, 3 districts

Learners with disabilities: 5%

Free or Reduced Lunch: 53.1%
as a district

Students reporting efficacy in
STEM fields: 94%

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