





## Discover Iowa BIG

Students come to Iowa BIG from high schools across the Cedar Rapids region to take part in its forward thinking program of collaborative problem-solving, in which students work together in teams to solve problems they care about. The projects are tied to rigorous academic standards that prepare students to succeed, while also improving their community and building crucial skills like collaboration and leadership. The challenges are real, brought forth by local businesses, nonprofits, and government partners with a real challenge that students could help solve. Students spend 50-90 percent of their time at Iowa BIG or out in the community working on their projects, and the rest of the time at their home high schools.

**Iowa BIG began as a partnership between school districts in 2013 with only 12 students. By 2019, the program had over 200 students across multiple sites in grades 9-12.**



## Iowa BIG Design Features

### 1. Experiential learning that meets rigorous standards

Iowa BIG places a high value on experiential and contextualized learning—learning that can be applied to many different contexts, not just separated out by subjects and lessons. This means Iowa BIG is focused on meaningful and relevant experiences that allow students to learn academic content in a real-world context instead of through traditional means. Students simultaneously master and apply academic knowledge and skills while tackling authentic community needs. These needs come in the form of “initiatives” that are generated by community partners or by students themselves that must meet several criteria: address authentic local needs, support interdisciplinary learning, and be rigorously co-designed by students, teachers, and partners to meet Iowa state standards. Because Iowa BIG is a fully competency-based environment, each learner’s individual academic and progress is carefully tracked and holistically assessed throughout each initiative.



#### Hi, I’m Autumn.

“My job working in a pharmacy inspired me to found a project addressing teen opioid addiction. I wanted to know if there was a way addicted teens could ask for help at school. Our team researched school handbooks around the country and we couldn’t find a single example. Working with a local addiction rehabilitation center, we drafted a new policy to present to our local school board. Now that I’ve graduated, another student is leading this project and a new team through its completion.”



## Iowa BIG Design Features

### 2. Driven by student passion

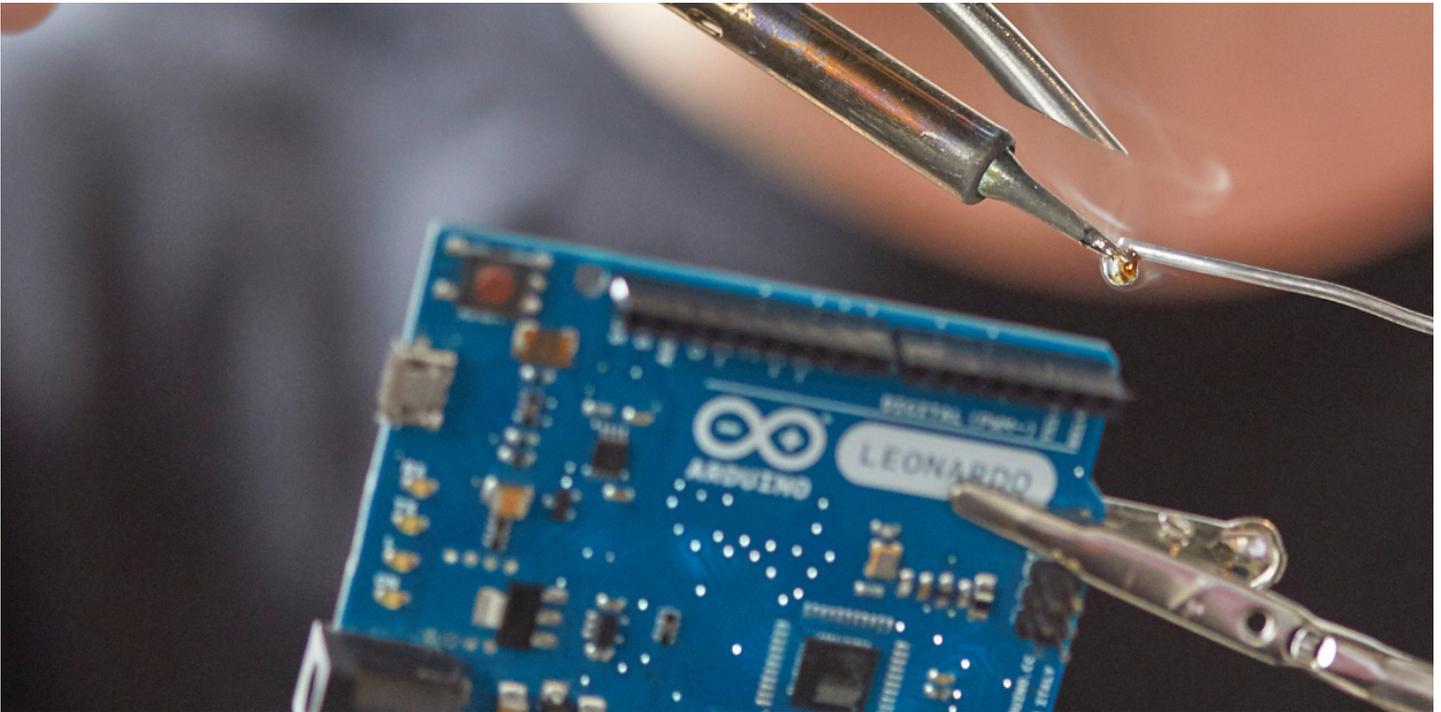
When a student comes to Iowa BIG, the first question they are asked is, “What are you passionate about?” Most struggle with this question, but it’s the cornerstone of every student’s experience at Iowa BIG. By honoring student passion, Iowa BIG empowers students to cultivate their own agency and engagements which drives their intrinsic motivation. Students have true ownership over their own learning and where, how, and when it happens, beyond just managing time. With students in the driver’s seat, teachers serve as coaches, guides, and content experts. They find out what the student wants and then point them toward the right resources and support.



### Becky Herman

Teacher

“I believe that teenagers are our most underutilized resource. To witness the energy that a group of passionate students can build toward a common goal in an unrestricted environment is inspirational and, at times, jaw-dropping.”



## Crosstown Design Features

### 3. Making real contributions as they learn

Students add value to their community while they learn. Local partners see the value, smarts, and ambition students bring to the table, and students see the resources and opportunities that surround them in their own hometown. The challenges they take on range from advising city officials on how to improve their use of social media, creating a dance therapy curriculum to promote inclusion for people with special needs, investigating the use of drones for agriculture, and drafting a plan to redevelop an abandoned meatpacking property for recreation, to researching local water quality. Iowa BIG students worked with the Catherine McAuley Center, a nonprofit that works with immigrant and refugee families, to [create a 20-plot garden](#) for people who miss growing their own food. The value students bring is clear—demand from partners is now so great that Iowa BIG can select only the very best projects.



### Hi, I'm Caitie.

“Last year I led the completion of a partner project with [Camp Courageous](#) to provide people with disabilities an outdoor space to safely and meaningfully enjoy nature. Our student team researched ADA compliance, designed the spaces, pitched our ideas, raised over \$17,000, and even incorporated solar technology. Campers can now enjoy an ADA compliant concrete path and raised garden beds containing fruit bearing perennials to pick, eat, and share.”



## Iowa BIG Design Features

### 4. A source for inspiration and innovation

As a partnership among several school districts, this transformational learning system connects young people more deeply to the community and its institutions, while also opening up rigorous, real-world learning for students across the metropolitan region. The community sees young people as assets, and young people see themselves as meaningful contributors to their hometown and the world. Students gain—and so do the districts, which learn from Iowa BIG’s innovative approach to assessment, real-world learning, and community engagement. Students from other districts can join, too, and their districts pay tuition. The model has great promise as a model for districts across the country—to pool local resources, provide students with deep and inspiring learning opportunities, and dissolve barriers between communities and their high schools.



## Theory Into Action

### Student work: A placemaking partnership

The placemaking project is a partnership between Iowa BIG and the Czech Village / New Bohemia Main Street District in Cedar Rapids. The goal for the students was to create a placemaking object that incorporated Czech history and created a place for young people to gather. After research and brainstorming, the students decided to design, create, and present a plan for benches that resembled kolache, a traditional Czech pastry. After designing prototypes and presentations, students met with local businesses about serving as a site for their benches, with the goal of having them funded and installed throughout Cedar Rapids Czech Village and at the Czech Museum.

#### State Standards Met:

- ✓ US History: Analyze human population movement and patterns and analyze change, continuity, and context
- ✓ Government: Iowa state history
- ✓ English: Reading literature, speaking and listening, sources of evidence, writing, reading non-fiction, audience, and language acquisition

#### Competencies Met:

- ✓ Collaboration
- ✓ Communication
- ✓ Critical thinking
- ✓ Creativity
- ✓ Productivity
- ✓ Accountability
- ✓ Flexibility
- ✓ Adaptability



**Trace Pickering**

Executive Director and Co-Founder

“We see Iowa BIG as a way to bring to life possibilities for the community that they want but don’t yet see.”



**Shawn Cornally**

STEM Teacher and Co-Founder

“As a teacher in this system, I can’t believe that I get to coach kids on how to manage their time, space, and all the things we all agree are really important for high school students to learn.”

**Senior stories**

What better way to understand what Iowa BIG means to students than by asking them! [Check out](#) what these Iowa BIG grads had to say about their experience.

**Student Data**

Iowa BIG serves 230 students in grades 10-12 this school year.

<b>77%</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>Free/Reduced Price Lunch</b>
<b>12%</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>English Language Learners</b>
<b>5%</b>	<b>Latinix</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>Special Education</b>
<b>3%</b>	<b>Asian</b>		
<b>3%</b>	<b>Other</b>		

## Blogs and Media

- [Kids these days: You had better believe they care XQ Blog](#)
- [How to engage community partners XQ Blog](#)
- [Taking it to the streets in Cedar Rapids XQ Blog](#)
- [A school where students meet “failure” with a smile: A visit to Iowa BIG shows the unexpected joys of project-based learning XQ blog](#)
- [Failure is an option: For students at Iowa Big, tests come first, learning from experiences follows The 74](#)
- [How passion projects and community partners create relevant learning for teens in school Mindshift KQED](#)

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