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## **Community-based Cedar Rapids High School Program Set to Grow BIG**

Image



Two school districts partner to support expansion of program from 20 to 80 students next fall

Mikinzie Farmer describes her experience as a student with a new, atypical high school program in Cedar Rapids, Iowa as transformative. Not only is she more hopeful about her future, but she's [excited about possibilities](#) she sees for both her local community and the traditional education system.

In many ways, her story captures how BIG Ideas Program is on its way to thriving as its cofounders would measure thriving — students are leaving with a stronger sense of hope, possibility and self-efficacy about the future.

“It’s been beyond our expectations as to the things that Shawn Cornally and I, the primary designers of BIG, imagined we could get accomplished in this past year,” says co-founder Trace Pickering. “We’re kind of living the dream right now.”

In an official ribbon-cutting ceremony May 21, BIG announced that two area school districts have now partnered to support the program’s expansion. College Community School District has formally partnered with Cedar Rapids Community School District, which has supported the school since its inception.

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*The May 21 ribbon-cutting ceremony for BIG Ideas School.  
Photo credit: Melissa Hocking.*

“It’s unprecedented, having two different school districts come together like this,” said College Community School District superintendent John Speer.

While this past year 20 students were enrolled in BIG and could earn one elective credit, the program’s doors will be open a half day every day come this fall. Students can earn two to three elective or core credits. Organizers anticipate an enrollment of about 80 students for the 2014-2015 year.

A key condition for the program to even get off the ground, let alone thrive, has been its community engagement.

For instance, to help design what the school would be like, 60 community members were invited to join regular local high schools as students for a half day. It was expected to help identify what elements a new, separate school entity might offer that are missing or less fully developed in the traditional school setting.

“We really first focused on the community and making sure we had key community thought leaders involved and that we were listening to what it is they said they really wanted and needed, which matched most research on (developing) kids’ sense of hope and possibility, how people learn best,” Trace says.

BIG's learning model shares features with an increasing number of private and public school systems across the U.S. and Canada. There is a growing interest in students centering the bulk of their high school learning on creating and implementing a project that they are passionate about and that serves members of the broader community, a business, for instance, or non-profit.

BIG is unique in that it's taken the next step and created a completely separate environment in which this type of learning can happen. Trace suggests this could be setting students up for even stronger success. In this new setting, students are less constrained by the inherent expectations of the traditional school setting — for instance, that good grades are the ultimate goal and indication of success.

"The one key distinction that we've had with BIG is to take it outside the confines of the school building, which changes the way kids react and respond," Trace says. "They're used to walking into a high school and having certain roles they're supposed to play, so our thinking was to set it up so kids have to be out in the community and to put them in businesses and organizations so they can see different cultures and environments."

More than 40 local organizations have now partnered with BIG to offer these settings where students can come to and work on projects useful to the organizations.

One interesting learning in this has been that nearly every student enrolled in BIG this past year reached a point of wanting to quit. But rather than go with that and take the C grade, for instance, as they might in a traditional school setting, they felt an extra motivation — as did their supporting educators — to push past, knowing that their fellow community members were counting on them for the work to be done and done well.

Looking to BIG's future, indicators that it is thriving will include that students are maintaining or improving their academic performance in their traditional high school classes.

Another indicator will be that students have a strengthened sense of hope, possibility and self-efficacy. BIG is undertaking pre- and post-assessments with students to measure this. A number of instruments, including some from Gallup, are available to do these kinds of assessments.

There is also an anticipation and hope that the projects students complete meet and exceed the expectations of the organizations and community members on whose behalf they are done.

There is also interest in more students enrolling and more schools joining to support BIG.

“We see this as a community-wide, co-owned effort, so having more of the local districts want to join and give their kids this opportunity would be another great indicator,” Trace says.

“If this can be truly be a Creative Corridor program, where it’s owned by the 30-some school districts in our corridor and the hundreds of businesses and non-profits and government entities that we have and it’s all about providing this opportunity without bringing our egos and logos with us, that would be the ultimate vision.”

To learn more about BIG, click [here](#).

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