



IOWA BIG

Cedar Rapids and College Community School Districts

In the Iowa BIG model, students choose a project-based initiative to address problems in the community and develop solutions while earning academic credits.

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OVERVIEW

The Iowa BIG model allows students to learn standards, gain 21st-century skills, and earn credits in English, social studies, and business through community-driven passion projects focused on topics and initiatives students are interested in. Students get to experience what core subject areas look like in real-life situations by conducting research and giving presentations to community or business partners. The projects are tied to rigorous academic standards that prepare students to succeed.



Iowa BIG is designed to give students agency to manage the time, space, assessment, and curriculum they need to learn. They are responsible for scheduling and managing their work time. They learn the most effective places for them to work, think, and play. Standards are addressed through seminars and by demonstrating content knowledge within projects. In conjunction with their teachers, students assess themselves and make steps towards ongoing improvement.

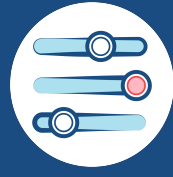
To date, Iowa BIG has had 1,300 students participate in the program across four districts and one affiliate site. Student testimonials featured in Iowa BIG's blogs and podcasts demonstrate the impact it has had on their learning experience. Additionally, a study found that students who participated in Iowa BIG were more likely to report that they were focused and engaged in their learning during the community projects as opposed to traditional school. [▶Story from XQ: Iowa BIG 🎧S3E3: Student Team - Kolach Bench Sculptures](#)

What Makes This Model Innovative?



Relevance

The Iowa BIG model encourages students to explore their own interests and goals connected to their communities. It enables them to understand and tackle real problems in authentic work-based contexts.



Customization

Projects from the Iowa BIG model allow for the focus, pace, and sequence of learning to be tailored to a specific project and the needs and interests of the student. The process ensures that all students have what they need to be successful.



Active Self-Direction

Students are active drivers of their learning; they can pick projects they are interested in and grapple directly with concepts while receiving adult and peer guidance and support.

DESIGN

Goals

Iowa BIG's goals are aligned to Iowa's Universal Constructs: Essential for the 21st Century. They aim to provide students with skills to be successful in the 21st century. [Iowa Department of Education Universal Constructs: Essential for 21st Century Success](#)

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| Critical Thinking | The ability to access and analyze key information to develop solutions to complex problems that may have no clear answer. |
| Complex Communication | Successful sharing of information through multiple means that include visual, digital, verbal, and nonverbal interactions. |
| Creativity | Incorporating curiosity and innovation to generate new or original thoughts, interpretations, products, works, or techniques. |
| Collaboration | Working among and across personal and global networks to achieve common goals. It requires cultural competence and personal and civic responsibility. |
| Flexibility and Adaptability | Responding and adjusting to situational needs, and changing to meet the challenges of new roles, paradigms, and environments. This includes balance between a student's beliefs and reactions to change. |

Productivity and Accountability

Prioritizing, planning, and applying knowledge and skills to make decisions that create quality results in a changing environment. Demonstrating initiative, self-direction, and personal responsibility to add value to the world.

Experience

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. As a result, the model focuses on meaningful and relevant experiences that allow students to learn academic content in a real-world context instead of through traditional means. The Iowa BIG model centers on three themes to design the learning experience:

- **Passion:** Tapping into a student's interests and using that as a powerful learning tool to drive success.
- **Projects:** Engaging students to solve real-world problems and see how content actually lives in the real world through authentic community projects.
- **Community:** Connecting students with a wide network so they can meet a range of people and be exposed to opportunities that exist within the community. Students need lots of "teachers" and learn by being out in and contributing to the community.



Through the Iowa BIG model, students simultaneously master and apply academic knowledge and skills while tackling authentic community needs and learning important business approaches like the Agile Mindset. [Modern Agile](#) Projects come in the form of "initiatives" that address local problems, support interdisciplinary learning, and are rigorously co-designed by students, teachers, and partners to meet Iowa state standards. Initiatives are generated by community partners or by students themselves. Because Iowa BIG is a fully competency-based environment, each learner's individual academic progress is carefully tracked and holistically assessed throughout each initiative.

Authentic Community Projects

Students select what type of project they are interested in pursuing. They have true ownership over their own learning including where, how, and when it happens through creating project timelines and managing their own calendars. With students in the driver's seat, teachers serve as coaches, guides, and content experts. Teachers are charged with finding out what the student wants and then guiding them toward the right resources and support. As such, the first and most important aspect of selecting a project is identifying passions that will keep students engaged in their learning.



Once students find their passion, it's all about matching this passion to a community project, or initiative. In these initiatives, students experience authentic workplace partnerships. These go beyond having an evening where students show off their work or having a professional video-call in for a class period. Instead, partners fully integrate with students as they work on authentic, contextually rich projects. The success of the project is not a priority to the student learning experience. In fact, many projects

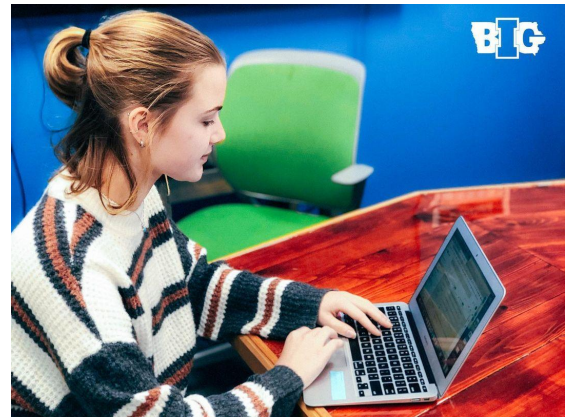
often fail or end prematurely, just like projects *in* the real world because they are projects *from* the real world.

Students practice, demonstrate, and learn the standards and 21st-century skills needed to be successful through projects. They must cover material and show an understanding of standards from multiple traditional courses and subjects. Students are assessed on the learning they acquire and the work they conduct on their projects. The emphasis on learning over test scores relieves tension for students and allows them to truly engage without fear of failure. This level of direct agency over their learning, and the ability to choose what projects they are passionate about, ensures students stay connected and engaged.

Additionally, 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 taken on by students have ranged from advising city officials on how to improve their use of social media, to creating a dance therapy curriculum to promote inclusion for people with special needs, to investigating the use of drones for agriculture, to drafting a plan to redevelop an abandoned meatpacking property for recreation, to researching local water quality.

Seminars

Projects do not allow a student to demonstrate all the standards in a particular course, and not all standards (literature and Algebra II are examples) appear in every authentic project. For this reason, seminars ensure that students are given the opportunity to learn standards that their projects simply will not cover. Seminars are designed like college courses. Teachers offer subject-based seminars weekly or bi-weekly and students have the agency to decide whether they will attend. Students do a lot of the learning and exploration in between classes and are responsible for learning the subject covered in the seminar and submitting written reflections to assess learning of core standards.



Supporting Structures

The following shifts in school structures are necessary to implement the Iowa BIG model. Because the program boasts student agency, there is a lot of flexibility, and community partnerships are integral to the model. [▶Iowa BIG Prospective Students Intro](#)

Iowa BIG relies on key practices like the use of the Agile framework for projects, seminar-style instruction, and unconventional assessment approaches.



CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, & ASSESSMENT

In the Iowa BIG model, instruction is given in seminar style and community projects drive the curriculum. An agile approach to project management and teaming—which incorporates planning, testing, and iteration to design solutions—must be used across projects. Teaching this type of process is a key part to the real-world learning experience. [Modern Agile](#)

The process of leading projects through this framework is critical to students experiencing real-world learning. Projects are graded based on whether standards are met along the way rather than focusing solely on the final product. Students review their work and demonstrate what they have learned through portfolios. Learning is assessed through presentations and follow-up conversations, and core subject standards are assessed through written reflections.



SCHOOL COMMUNITY & CULTURE

The school culture must emulate adult work environments to create a real-world experience.

In order to give students a real-world work experience, the school culture should model an adult working environment. To facilitate this, teachers can use their first name to remove hierarchy. Using practices like Agile, which prioritize process and reflection over just products and grades, mimics real-world work experience and allows for collaboration to be emphasized.



ADULT ROLES, HIRING, & LEARNING

Teachers act as partners and provide guidance to support student learning.

Teachers should see themselves as coaches and mentors who advise on project direction when needed. Because they will rarely have subject matter expertise in students' various projects, they should model and support the learning process versus acting as a disseminator of knowledge. Building trusting relationships with students is critical to this type of learning and teachers should prioritize unleashing a student's potential and have a learner-centered mindset. Teachers must think outside the box when it comes to curriculum because project flow can be unpredictable, and they need to be responsive to what students need in real-time.

As a way to model the Agile framework, teachers are the leaders of the school and have collective decision-making power. They must use problem-solving skills by continuously looking for ways to improve the student experience and creating a school culture built on trust. The whole team is involved in the hiring process and includes students where possible.

Students must have the autonomy to manage their schedule.



SCHEDULE & USE OF TIME

At Iowa BIG, students spend two hours each day at the main building. During this time, students can attend seminars or work on their projects. Students might be engaged in team meetings, planning and/or review sessions with their partner, visiting their partner's work site, having retrospectives on their projects, or engaging in a seminar to cover standards not met through their projects. Students have agency to decide whether they will have team meetings and what they want to accomplish during their scheduled time. In addition, schedules and project timelines are created between the partner and the students to ensure accountability. Each block begins with 5-10 minutes of community time to maintain a trusting culture and openness to learning.

Outside of their 2-hour time blocks at Iowa BIG, students engage in traditional coursework at their respective high schools.

Community partnerships are critical to the learning experience.



FAMILY & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Cultivating partnerships between the school and the community is essential. Having a dedicated community partnership developer (CPD) plays a critical role in developing these partnerships. There are two ways that partnerships develop between the school and the community in order to have relevant projects that support student learning. The CPD can reach out to community members to find projects that students are able to work on and help translate these projects into student-friendly language.

Additionally, students can identify a project or problem in the community that they want to take on. The CPD will help students find a person or group that can support this type of project. Finding projects that directly impact the community is an essential part of the model and a dedicated role to support this ensures that teachers and students can focus on the project and engage in real-world learning.



SPACE & FACILITIES

Spaces should be designed to model a contemporary work space.

Facilities should emulate an adult working environment by making strategic use of space and color. There should not be classrooms, and desks and lockers should be removed so that the space reflects an office space as opposed to a classroom. Students have the flexibility to find the best places for them to focus and work.

IMPLEMENTATION

Supports Offered

[Iowa BIG](#) offers the following supports to help you implement their approach.

Immersion Professional Development

Cost Associated



A week-long immersive professional development gives new teachers the chance to understand how the curriculum of Iowa BIG is designed and implemented. The PD can be customized to support implementation.

[Get in Touch](#)

The Iowa BIG Podcast

Free



Teachers share their experiments, failures, innovations and progress at Iowa BIG in a range of podcast episodes.

[Access Now](#)

Reach

1400

Learners

2

Districts

5

Schools

43%

FRL

Impact

Iowa BIG has been positively received by its students, many of whom wish to continue their projects after the school year ends.

A study conducted by the University of Northern Iowa and Claremont Graduate University found the following: [Iowa BIG Report](#)

- When randomly prompted on their phones at IowaBIG or with a community partner, students were significantly more likely to report their activities as important, as having clear goals, and as ones they had the freedom to choose.
- Students were significantly more likely to report that they were concentrating, enjoying the activities, and were able to do the activities successfully.
- Moreover, they were significantly more likely to report being engaged, active, capable, happy, in control, feeling like an insider, like they were putting in a lot of effort, and like time was flying by.

Contact

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RESOURCES



[Story from XQ: Iowa](#)

A video overview of the Iowa BIG model.



[Iowa Big Podcast S3E3](#)

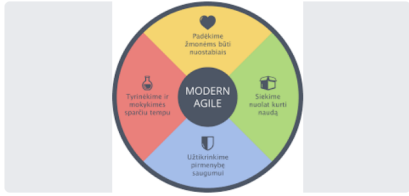
In this episode of the Iowa BIG podcast, students share their process of creating a large piece of public art.

[Universal Constructs: Essential for 21st Century Success](#)

The universal constructs were identified following an analysis of the competencies and habits of mind needed for future success: careers, college and citizenship. A team of educators and business representatives conducted a literature review of multiple sources including the P21's "Framework for 21st Century Learning," the "Definition and Selection of Key Competencies" by NCREL/Metr

[Iowa Department of Education Universal Constructs: Essential for 21st Century Success](#)

Iowa's 21st Century Success standards.



[Modern Agile](#)

Modern Agile framework informing the Iowa BIG project process.



[Iowa BIG Prospective Students Intro](#)

Learn about the Iowa BIG processes and structures.



[Initiative-Based Learning vs. Traditional High-School Learning: A New Way to](#)

[Iowa BIG Report](#)

Impact report demonstrating student success.



[The Iowa BIG Podcast](#)

Teachers share their experiments, failures, innovations and progress at Iowa BIG in a range of podcast episodes.