



## Trace Pickering: Enabling Youth to Learn Hands-On in Their Communities with Iowa BIG

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 00:02

Hi, Trace

**Trace Pickering** 00:04

Good morning.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 00:06

It's finally time for us to change this paradigm of education and to collaborate across organizations so that we can be this EdActive Collective. And I'm so happy that Iowa BIG is a part of the collective and is presenting today.

**Trace Pickering** 00:25

Yeah, it's good to be a part of this, of this work.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 00:28

Trace, could you tell us who you are, and who Iowa BIG is?

**Trace Pickering** 00:34

Sure. I'm Chase Pickering, co founder and executive director of Iowa BIG. Lifelong Iowan and Iowa BIG is a immersive High School Program supported by three different school districts where kids can come and earn core academic credit through doing projects out in the community. And so BIG is founded on three basic ideas: focus on student passion and interest and use that as a driver for learning; find them real, authentic work to do and problems to solve; and then connect them with the communities so the community can be their teacher as well.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 01:13

I just want to thank you, because I know that this took so many conversations and exploring with all your stakeholder groups, and then creating it, and keeping anything running for eight years, with all the changes that go on in districts and everything is a huge undertaking. So thank you for your hard work.

**Trace Pickering** 01:35



Yeah, it's been a labor of love and it has been a struggle to keep it alive at times but it's been really important. I think our community embraces it to the point now where we're a little more stable.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 01:49

Yes. And what led your community and you to be change activators?

**Trace Pickering** 01:55

Yeah, so in Cedar Rapids, we have a river that runs right down the middle of our downtown. In 2008, we have the fourth worst US national disaster, where miles of our downtown was flooded by the river, upwards of 10, 12, sometimes 14 feet deep. So when the waters receded, our community was left with a question: do we quickly clean up the streets and go back to what we were, which honestly was somewhat of a dying rustbelt agricultural community? Or can we use this as an opportunity to reimagine our city and rethink what it, what we can look like for the next 100 years? So while all that was going on, and thankfully, the the people who wanted to create a new future won out for the most part. Some people started to ask questions about, "What about the schools? They have to come with us." And so, myself and my co founder, Sean, we started a project we lovingly called the Billy Madison project. We identified 60 leaders in our community, we wanted, we wanted those 60 people, if we put them in the newspaper with their pictures and names, that anyone in our community could look at at least one of those people and say, "That person's like me. They look like me, they talk like me, they're my age." So you know, whatever it might be, so that we had a well rounded, diverse pool. We sent those 60 people back to high school, to be students for a day. Not visitors in the back of the room, but they were given schedules, books, computers, said engage like you're a student, do the homework, do the assignments, whatever. And then we brought him back in small groups after shortly after that experience, within a week or so, and really start to explore with them what they saw. And it really opened their eyes. They thought highschoools had changed a whole bunch since they had been in school, and they realized they haven't changed at all. And they they identified that kids are bored, they were bored. The teachers are working really hard to try to make it interesting and keep the kids engaged. And the third thing that they discovered, which was a surprise to them, and honestly, it's a surprise to us if they noticed it, was that by separating out all the disciplines into discrete elements, algebra two, biology, you know, American lit whatever, that you decontextualized all that content and decontentualized content is boring and it's hard to learn and teach. And so from that experience, we said "Well, great. Design the high school you'd have if you could have what you wanted. Produce the things that you say are important," because we had them develop that list as well. What do you need to know, do, and be like to be a successful citizen and adult today? And they basically said most of what they experienced as a high school student met none of those things they said they wanted. I love what you're saying because it's about system change. And when your city decided this system, of course, means schools, then they focused in on the system of schools. And listeners, I think a really big takeaway for us is, you know, who are our 60 people, who are representatives where everybody



in the community can see themselves in these? I think getting all the voices to the table is something that we haven't done well enough to get the change that we want. So anyway, back to what do you what would you have if you could have what you wanted, and they kept coming back to three themes. Show me a passionate person, I'll show you a person who's committed, who's resilient, who's going to stick with it, who can build a network and find others who love what they do. That I'll show you a successful person, if show me a person who has passion for something. So use that. Kids have passions and interest, they may be more fleeting than an adult passion or interest, but they're there. So tap into them. The teachers that we saw, we believe could take any of those passions and wrap their standards around it. So so that was a big component: focus on student interest and passion. The second one I mentioned earlier, is one of our participants said, "Has anybody ever acknowledged the fact that most all the work that kids do in school is fake?" We're like, "What?" It's fake work made up by a person or a curriculum committee. And it's in service of that one person to get a grade or a score. There's no why why would you think people would put their best effort into something they know is fake. Like, wow, that's spot on, you know. So they're like, "Give them real work to do. Our community is full of problems and opportunities. Why aren't we engaging our high school kids to help us with these things?" And the third is like, get them out of that school and get them in our community. They have to see all the great things that are happening in Cedar Rapids, because so many of our kids think that there's nothing going on in Cedar Rapids, that they have to move to Chicago, or Denver, or Seattle, or wherever. That's where the cool stuff is going on. So, so that project really launched us, a couple of school board presidents had been kind of watching us do this experiment. When it wrapped up, they said, We want to give you the sandbox to play in, we want to give you the resources to make this school happen, because it's what our community said they wanted. So that's how we got started and those 60 people remain important to Iowa BIG, they see themselves in a lot of ways as the founders of it, because they are certainly the designers of it. So that's how we got started.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 07:49

Trace, I want to take it a step further. I recently interviewed a neuroscience specialist on my podcast, and she said innovative schools like yours and mine, we need to tell our story in a way that it triggers different parts of the brain because our brains are triggered, you know, we're wired to be go with what's familiar that kept our ancestors alive. And we're wired to do what the larger group does, that herding instinct. So we know that kids at our schools go on to great colleges. But that seems to be a fear a lot of parents have, that if we don't do what's normal, how can our kids go on to the normal next step that we're looking for? So how do you think we can tell our story differently so that parents know that this is not anything that makes it harder to get to college? If anything, it might be the opposite?

**Trace Pickering** 08:49

Yeah, that's a that's a great question, Maureen. It's a challenge. As a parent of a couple of girls in their 20s now, I remember feeling those exact same thing. Like, if I have my daughters do



something different, what's the opportunity cost? You know, and it was, I get the natural feelings for that. It's really fear based. And oftentimes, sadly too, the it's more about the parents need for that self esteem or my kids a 4.0. kid and that too, that's that all plays into this as well. But what we try to help parents understand, is look, it's okay that your kids going doing these AP courses and they've got a great GPA. The appeal that we've been making to parents to help get them off that bus is, look, if your kids trying to get into brown or Stanford or you know, pick a selective college, those colleges are looking at thousands of kids with 4.0s and with their ACTS and with 50 AP courses under their belt, right? What are you going to do? What's your kid going to do to stand out? right to be noticed in that crowd? Well, these selective colleges at, all the colleges, they're looking for people who have a passion for something, have an interest, they have a drive, they want to they know what they want to explore and learn. And that's exactly what programs like yours and mine do is help those kids find out what they care about, and fuel their passion, and own their learning. All right. When you do that, if you can do that, you stand out like a bright light to those places. And we've had, we have two graduates right now at Ivy League schools. And it's largely because they had a story to tell. They're they're more than just somebody that cranks out A papers and gets A's on exams, you know. It's just, it's just an ongoing constant messaging, that that's important. And reminding, I think it's also reminding parents that most of what they learned they didn't learn in high school. They learned that all they learned in kindergarten, and then they learned it again, when they got a job as an adult, I answer you just help them. You have to remember those kinds of things that with the rates of teen depression and suicide and that today, we have a bigger problem than whether kids are getting their AP courses, right? They're just, the current system is just so dehumanizing to kids and adults, even the successful kids, that we just have to do something about.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy 11:41**

Absolutely. Going a step further, if we get the parents to see this, how do we trigger different parts in the teen brains? We know that our our schools are small and personalizing, kids quickly become a part of the community. But I know I've had a lot of students visit and they just can't imagine life without their existing circle of friends around them all day, even if they don't have any classes together or they are on different lunches. How might we help teens experience and feel safe making a change in their social worlds?

**Trace Pickering 12:18**

Yeah, that's that's been a tough one as well. Because just like any other human they know, it's kind of like they choose the devil they know. They're afraid of it. I think the long term answer is if we had a K12 system that was more humanistic and did some of these things, that wouldn't be a problem. Right? It's such a contrast. And we had earlier this spring, we had a recruiting session where kids who were wondering about BIG could come and visit, and we always have students tell their stories. And one of the one of the students told the story, "You're not going to feel comfortable here for like four months. You're going to be confused, you're going to think you're not doing anything. But trust us, hang in there. After three or four months, you will all of a



sudden it clicks, you'll know why you're here, and it'll be the best thing ever happened to you." But a lot of it is just kids being able to tell kids. And once we had our first few kids at BIG and they could go back and start telling their story, that was way more powerful than adults tell them this is good for you.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 13:31

Absolutely. Can you give us an example of how Iowa BIG has done something that was student driven, humanistic, connected to the community, tied into passions, just an example, because I know you've done so much of that?

**Trace Pickering** 13:49

Yeah. A quick one from this spring, we had a group of students who worked with a local nonprofit called Sleep in Heavenly Peace, actually, it's a national group. And the idea is that there are so many children who don't have a bed to sleep in at night. And that, you know, self esteem and self worth is having a place to lay your head at night. And so this organization works to make beds for kids, and give give them out in the community. And so our group of BIG students took this project on, learned about, you know, learned about all the information. They were shocked to learn how many kids in our community don't sleep and don't have beds to sleep in. They set up the fundraising campaign, built the marketing, organize a volunteer day and built 121 beds in one day. We got all the, all the mattresses and linen, and all that donated and had about 60 kids from around the community come and help build that. So that's an example where, again, it's doing something that's bigger than yourself. Maybe it's the pride those kids felt by setting this up, making this happen, and knowing that 121 kids in our community now have a bed to sleep in, had incredible power. Now, the challenge for schools like ours is that a lot of people look at that project and go, "Well, whoop dee do. It's great. But that's not learning. That's just volunteering and setting up some marketing." They don't understand the depth. They they look at the end product and try to assess the quality of the learning based on they made beds, right? No, they, they, they learned a ton about sociology and psychology and the impact that it's something as simple as having a bed to sleep in, affects a child's development. They did all that learning, all that child development. They had to learn how to work as a team. They got all kinds of English standards met, they had to do interviews on TV and radio, and they had to write scripts and spots for that and build the marketing campaign. And know how to conduct an ask and figure out the financial part of it and make sure their figures are all correct, right? All things adults do in life. So there's a lot of learning in there. It's just sometimes layman just can't see it, right? And so it's important for us to attach standards and deeper, the deeper learning that's going on, so when people look at the project, they also recognize things that the kids learned.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 16:35

Listeners, I just want to remind you that we had just talked about how what we learned in high school doesn't really apply to life. But there are now degrees for project management and



design thinking is something we want all of our employees to be able to do, to identify a need and then create and produce a result. So you're modeling and you're giving an example of real life learning that transfers, as opposed to memorizing something in a textbook out of context. So you're making the connection that you just said, is so important for our kids.

**Trace Pickering 17:15**

Right. So yeah you've got that project and really quickly. On the other side, a project that's clearly deeply academics. We have a young lady whose passion is biology and chemistry and her her real interest is Brownfield cleanups; can you remove carbon-based materials from soil and reclaim that soil and refresh it? And she's been doing original research as a junior in high school, making her own bio organisms and she's connected to the local college here using their \$60,000 spectrometer. So she's working with those professors. And so she's doing junior/senior level college work as a junior in high school, because it's her passion and her interest. So you can see the heavy academics there. And the opportunity to really push on and enhance the, the AP courses, and that she's taking back at her high school,

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy 18:14**

And what a way to inform her future, even if it's like, you know, I really don't like research, or I don't want to go this direction. How nice to learn that, or this is what I want my life to be about, to know that and then to make a post-secondary choices that align with what she's learning, instead of so many of our kids like, "Okay, I have a diploma now what?" And they're flying blind, and it takes them a couple expensive years of college or life to figure that out. So she's getting to frontload.

**Trace Pickering 18:40**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy 18:42**

So if you had a magic wand, what would you wish would be a result of the hard work at Iowa BIG?

**Trace Pickering 18:52**

As I often tell people, I said that I don't know if I'll live long enough to see it, but I would love the day when we could shut the doors of Iowa BIG because we weren't necessary. This is just how high schools, the high schools in our area just did things, right? This was the kind of humanistic, purpose driven, student focused experience that all the kids in our community, right? And I when I say that some people take offense like, "Oh, so you mean that people in traditional schools don't care about kids?" No, they care deeply about kids, but they're stuck in a system that's designed not to have not to give you the tools to actually treat these kids as full functioning human beings and the passions and interests, and their own, their own set of needs, and that



kind of thing. So yeah, my best my best hope would be that BIG isn't necessary. It's just what we do.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 19:51

Okay, so I'm gonna put that on our summit attendees: what would be one thing they could do to start making BIG obsolete in their own community?

**Trace Pickering** 20:06

Yeah, perfect.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 20:07

So yeah, I want everybody to be thinking, throw it in the chat. What could you do to make humanistic schooling, the norm, what's one step you might be able to take, one place you might be able to explore, one school leader or educator you might be able to talk to? So Trace, what resources do you have available? If somebody's like, "I want to know more about Iowa BIG" or how we might be able to do something, what would you recommend for them?

**Trace Pickering** 20:39

Yeah, of course, our website, [iowaBIG.org](http://iowaBIG.org). We have, well, pre and post COVID, hopefully, we're into post COVID, we have a couple of visit days each year, where people from across the country can come and spend the day at BIG and and see how we do it and get all their questions answered, and, and so forth. So we've got that. And then for every year, we usually have a school district that wants to start a program like this. And so we offer immersive training, so we don't go and train you there, you come and spend a week with us, and we basically make you a BIG teacher for a week, so that you can see an entire cycle of what, what a week looks like and be able to answer the deeper questions that emerge by observing what we do and why we do it.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 21:29

Impressive. And I see that in other innovative schools, Summit, High Tech High, ours, yours, that hey, come visit, let us share we want this to happen. And we're not it's not company secrets that we're trying to keep from people. So I love that you do that. We're all really committing to being activists, activists and making change here. So Trace, I want you to think, I'll share mine first, but we in the collective are committed to playing bigger. So think about one way, I'm going to have you share in a second, that you're committing to playing bigger as a part of Edactive. And I know for me, I'm committing and have met with the State Board of Education, and with a politician and political activism, this is not something I do. But it's like if I really want all those different voices at the table, I have to keep getting bigger and who those voices are. So that's something I'm committing to, because it's never going to change unless we all commit to taking bigger steps. Trace, what's something in terms of activism that you're committing to?



**Trace Pickering** 22:39

Yeah, that's a great question. I have recommitted myself to doing more writing. Writing is one one gift I've been given, so I think I can use that to tell the story and to help parents and business people understand that what they're asking for, what they really are wanting and what they're seeing in schools are a mismatch, right? And so doing that, and then having some experience in business, I think, continuing to learn how to help help our business community understand what's going on here and how they can, how they can help, because they've, they've been playing the bell for a long time about schools need to change. And often, their suggestions for change, just further entrench the existing system. So helping them and parents and everybody see that we really need to take a different direction here.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 23:39

Absolutely. Well, thank you, Trace, for helping us break down the silos of innovation and work together as educational activists.

**Trace Pickering** 23:47

Yes, thank you. It's great to be, be with you and be a part of this.

**Maureen O'Shaughnessy** 23:52

And now listeners, use your button at the bottom of this page to join our Facebook group. And Trace and I are hopping over there too, and we want you to share what your activism step is going to be. And then we'll keep the conversation going and answer your questions. Thanks again, Trace.

**Trace Pickering** 24:11

Yes, thank you.