

Big Ideas, Big Futures: Unique event offers hands on experience

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A Big Ideas USA staff members assists a Corinth High School student with the crane simulation.
Staff photo by Emma Tanner



This week, students at both city and county schools have been given the chance to explore careers in a very unique way: VR headsets.

The experience is through Minnesota-based nonprofit Big Ideas USA, which specializes in interactive activities using augmented and virtual reality technology. The tour is the result of a partnership between the Toyota Wellspring Education Fund at the CREATE Foundation and the Tennessee Valley Authority, as well as community partners.

The visit to Alcorn County was made possible through a grant from the C.A.R.E. Community Foundation (an affiliate of CREATE) with special thanks to Sandy Williams. The grant was \$17,500 and allowed all eligible students to participate, explained CARE Board Member Orma Smith.





Big Ideas was at Corinth High School Tuesday and Wednesday and will be at the Alcorn Career and Technology Center on Thursday, Friday and Monday. Tenth grade students will be led through a module using a Transfr VR Meta headset to choose a job, complete a task and receive feedback on their performance.

The module will be staffed by a trade instructor who is available to answer questions and provide insight on their experience in the field. At CHS, the modules were directed by Caterpillar employees. At ATCTC, the modules will be directed by Caterpillar and Mission Forest employees.

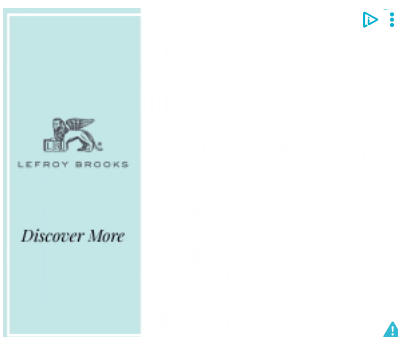
Certain jobs take place in classrooms, as students only use the VR headset and controllers. These include overpass demolition, commercial aircraft servicing, elevator repairs, fiber internet repairs and more.



At CHS, there were 26 indoor tasks for students to choose from. The tasks were hand-picked based on the surrounding industry.

Sophomore Tanvi Padala found the modules entertaining since she had not yet explored the careers offered.

"I had a lot of fun because I got to use VR headsets," she said. "The regular headsets let us choose between a lot of different occupations. I picked to demolish an overpass. We had to use a jackhammer and burning bar to cut through the curb. I really enjoyed it, and I think it will help a lot of people because you could randomly pick one and say, 'Wait, this is so fun. I want to do this in the future.' I'm really grateful to whoever sponsored it."



Padala found it useful that the experience was offered to sophomores, as it may allow more time for students to figure out what they want to do in the future.

"I feel like it's better to have a plan earlier on or at least narrow it down a bit," she said. "If you go into college with no idea of what you're going to do, you could waste a lot of money switching degrees. It's good to have this experience in high school."

Outside, students were moved through the Big Ideas trailer, where they could practice welding, crane operation and automotive painting.



“The first station is our overhead crane,” said Chris DeVries with Big Ideas USA. “The overhead crane you would see somewhere like Caterpillar, where they’re moving heavy, heavy equipment. We have our two virtual welders in the middle, which gives a very good representation of what it’s like to do a weld underneath a hood. You don’t have the smoke, the heat, the pushback. We don’t have to worry about kids getting burned. Up front we have our automotive or industrial paint system. They’re all training with actual industrial-grade trainers. It’s not an Atari system or a Nintendo system. It’s an actual trainer.”

CHS junior Max Evans was one of the few juniors who got to participate, as he is involved in the district’s Career and Technical Center. He particularly enjoyed the modules inside the trailer.

“I was invited to come out and experience these jobs in kind of a virtual job shadow,” Evans said. “It’s been a lot of fun. I didn’t know, coming into it, what it would be like. I knew Big Ideas and what it was about, but I didn’t know what the simulators were, how fun they were and how much it actually was like job shadowing. You’re able to do some things that you wouldn’t be able to do if you were to job shadow.”



The junior has an interest in the medical field – particularly surgery – but he thinks the skills learned in certain trades could be useful for his future career.

“I’ve looked into surgery, so the steady hands definitely carry over,” he said. “I haven’t looked into welding. I look forward to job shadowing further into the year and seeing what I like.”

Career coach Candace Marlar oversaw the operations at CHS. Similar to Padala and Evans, she finds the simulations useful for students to find their path in life.



“It’s important for students to be exposed, prepared and connected to as many different opportunities to help get a plan in place for life after graduation,” she said. “The more they can be exposed to careers in a safe environment, then it will help to put something on their radar that they didn’t know was available.”

Both the Alcorn School District and Corinth School District provide job shadowing and internship opportunities. The VR simulations may help students find their career path early.

“It can lead to potential job shadows where we can send them out into the community, where they can observe different careers to learn more about them.”



The sophomores at CHS have all completed the YouScience program, which matches them with potential careers based on their learning styles, interests and talents.

“This might either further reinforce something that they are currently learning about or researching,” Marlar said. “Sophomore year, we’re going to do a lot of exposure. Then, junior year we can start doing more of the connecting and the job shadows so that by the time their senior year comes around, they have a better understanding of what that path might look like as far as education and certifications. Then we can start to help them with scholarship opportunities or applications to help bridge that transition.”

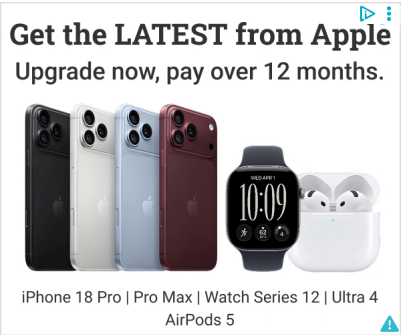
Alcorn School District career coach Taylor Johnson has been interested in Big Ideas since they visited nearby counties the year before. She appreciates the safety of the program.



“It’s a way for our kids to be exposed to different skilled trades, but also get a little bit of that hands-on experience in a way that doesn’t require them to have to do the dangerous side of it,” she said. “We’re really excited. Big Ideas came to Pontotoc, Lee and Union County last year, so we’re really excited to have it in Corinth and Alcorn County this year. It gives our students something really cool to participate in and get exposed to.”

Johnson became involved with getting Big Ideas to Alcorn County through her experience with CREATE.

“This is my sixth year career coaching, and when [Rebecca Lewis and I] were hired, we were hired through the governor’s grant,” she said. “Because of that, we actually got to be a part of the CREATE cohort out of Tupelo. We are still very involved. We had to have local buy-in to be able to do this because they’re a three or four person team and we have over 100 tenth graders in Kossuth alone.”



Through community assistance and connections, the visit was secured.

“We included G.T. McCullough and his team at The Alliance,” Johnson said. “They helped us push it out. He and Candace Marlar with Corinth worked really hard. We were able to get the community buy-in that we needed.”

In total, 393 sophomores from all four local high schools will get to experience Big Ideas due to C.A.R.E.’s support.



To learn more about Big Ideas, visit www.bigideas.usa.org. For information on CREATE and C.A.R.E., visit www.createfoundation.com or www.careforcorinth.com.

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