

2025-2026



ANNUAL REPORT



EDUCATION IS A COMMUNITY EFFORT



A LETTER FROM OUR TEAM

This was a big year for By Degrees.

We launched and completed our \$5 million Moving the Needle on Student Success campaign, securing critical support for the next phase of our work. We welcomed more supporters than ever to our largest Sweet Dreams event to date. We also took an important step toward a goal we've had since launching our 529 savings program in 2014: expanding access so students across all our partner schools have the opportunity to build savings for their futures.

Each milestone represents years of work, partnership, and belief in what's possible for Des Moines students. And none of them would have been possible without you.

Thank you for your continued commitment to our students, your belief in our work, and your investment in the Des Moines community. We're incredibly grateful to have you alongside us as we build on this momentum and look toward what comes next.

Sincerely,

Emily Westergaard - Chief Executive Officer

Sam Early - Director of Finance & Operations

Heather Isaacson - Director of Programs

Amanda Shetler - Director of Development

Carol Sames - Office Manager

Kahara Hunafa - North Program Manager

Billy Kirby - North Program Manager

Cari Long - 529 Program Specialist

Jake Sund - Harding Program Manager

Laila Williams - Growth & Development Manager

Alyssa Zimmerman - Findley Program Manager



2025 - 2026 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Summit Carbon Solutions



SCHOOL YEAR HIGHLIGHTS

2,360

K-12 students served during the 2025-26 school year

\$500

average amount in 529 accounts across our partner schools

90%

of North High students participated in postsecondary and career readiness activities



Programming Spotlight

We welcomed nearly 200 families to Grand View University for an evening of dinner and games with information to help families plan for postsecondary opportunities. In partnership with ISL Education Lending, we gave students access to crucial financial literacy and education-spending programs. Many students left the night with newly opened 529 accounts, earning a \$50 milestone towards their future.

FROM FINDLEY TO VANDERBILT



This spring, North High graduate and longtime By Degrees scholar Romas Pokhrel returned to Findley Elementary to speak to sixth graders preparing for middle school. Before heading to Vanderbilt University this fall, he reflected on some of the experiences that began shaping his future years earlier in those same classrooms.

“I remember in 4th grade, our class visited the University of Iowa. It was the first time I ever stepped foot on a college campus. My family had never gone to college here, so growing up it always felt like this distant, unfamiliar thing.

But walking around that campus with my classmates, college stopped feeling like something that existed for other people and started feeling like something I could actually work toward. I truly believe those early college visits are part of why I never stopped believing college was possible for me.

One of my favorite memories from Findley is an afternoon when we got on Code.org and worked through puzzles. Something just felt right in a way I hadn’t experienced before. I didn’t know what to call it then; I just knew I didn’t want to stop.

You don’t always know in the moment which things are going to stick with you, but some of them will. So keep trying new things and giving yourself the space to explore. Those are the things worth chasing.”



Romas Pokhrel

*North High Graduate, Class of 2026
Vanderbilt University, Class of 2030*

POSTSECONDARY & CAREER EXPERIENCES

By Degrees begins early by introducing students to various careers and postsecondary programs starting in kindergarten. We believe that providing experiences for students to imagine their futures post-graduation empowers them to dream big and explore a wide range of educational opportunities. This year, our students visited 11 different higher education campuses.

Additionally, introducing students to a variety of careers across multiple educational paths is a fundamental aspect of the By Degrees model. Whether it's in the arts, health sciences, or skilled trades, students engage in hands-on activities that help them discover their passions.

K-8TH GRADE COLLEGE PARTNERS:

- Drake University
- Des Moines Area Community College
- Central College
- Grand View University
- Iowa State University
- Simpson College
- University of Iowa



FINANCIAL EMPOWERMENT



By Degrees operates one of the nation's few programs that combines early and ongoing postsecondary and career exploration with direct financial contributions to individual student postsecondary savings accounts. In November 2025, we announced the expansion of our 529 savings program to include all students at North High School, thanks in part to a generous grant from the Wells Fargo Foundation.

It is our mission to ensure that more students graduate from high school with a plan and the tools they need to be successful in postsecondary education and careers. This expansion allows all the students we serve to access funds for their postsecondary futures.



630+

students earned over \$160,000 in their accounts this year.

31%

of students in By Degrees partner schools have opened a By Degrees 529 postsecondary savings account.

28%

of the student body has a 529 savings account in the first year of account expansion at North High School.*

*up from 8% prior to whole-school expansion

MOST EARNED MILESTONES BY SCHOOL:

- Findley Elementary: demonstrating growth in reading scores
- Harding Middle: completing a grade-level career interest inventory
- North High: participating in at least one club or extracurricular activity



MOVING THE NEEDLE ON STUDENT SUCCESS

\$5 MILLION RAISED | 100+ DONORS | ONE YEAR

In July 2025, By Degrees launched *Moving the Needle on Student Success*, a \$5 million campaign to expand our work across Des Moines' north side. One year later, we celebrated reaching our goal.

Thanks to more than 100 generous donors, this investment will fuel five years of growth across our north side partner schools—expanding our elementary presence and giving thousands more students the opportunity to build savings for their futures.

We are deeply grateful to every individual, foundation, and corporate partner who helped make this next chapter possible.

THROUGH THIS CAMPAIGN, BY DEGREES WILL:

PRIORITY 1:

Triple the number of elementary students served annually from 300 to 1,100

PRIORITY 2:

Grow the number of individual students with access to 529 savings accounts from 600 to 3,200

CAMPAIGN DONORS



\$1,000,000+

Thomas and Linda Koehn Foundation

\$750,000+

Wells Fargo Foundation

\$500,000+

Charlotte & Fred Hubbell

\$250,000+

Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines

The Stan Thurston Family

\$100,000+

Joanie & Dan Houston

John Deere Foundation

Cathy & Steve Lacy

Mid-Iowa Health Foundation

Middleton Family

The Nelson Foundation

Prairie Meadows

Michele & Steve Whitty

\$50,000+

Anonymous

Pam & Harry Bookey

Patty & Jim Cownie

Pat & Karen Halter

Ken & Linda McCullum

Lucas & Mary Katherine Nelson

Polk County Board of Supervisors

Jeff & Sarah Rader

Sammons Financial Group

\$25,000+

Lauren Burgeson & Cooper Lewis

Teresa & Tim Dunbar

Debbie & Michael Hubbell

Tessie Johnson & John Owens

Janet Nelson & Georgia Humphrey

Gerard & Mary Louise Neugent

Riley Family Foundation

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Rachel Stauffer & Jim Lawson

Kathy & Ted Stuart

Marie & Marv Walker

Kim & Rich Willis

Larry & Kathleen Zimpleman

\$15,000+

Anonymous

Ted Thoms & Kelly Caldbeck

The Dayton Family

Bryan & Katie O'Neill

Meredith Hubbell Stahl & Andrew Stahl

Adam & Sabrina Zenor

\$10,000+

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Pauline & Bill Niebur

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\$5,000+

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Justin & Alanna Greenwood

Ginny & Terry Hancock

Sara & Marc Hopkins

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Greg Nichols & Dawn Connet

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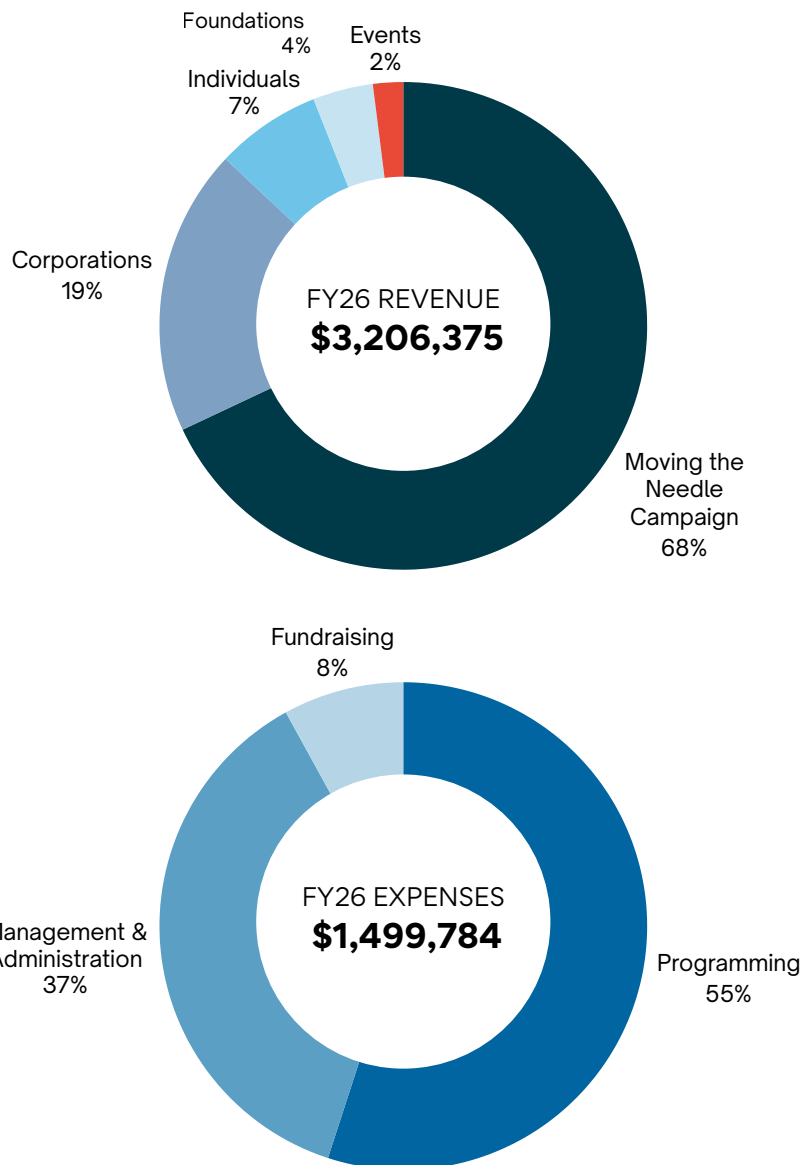
Meg & Patrick Whitty

Pierce M. Zanders

Under \$5,000

Many

2025-26 FINANCIAL INFORMATION



MOVING THE NEEDLE ON STUDENT SUCCESS CAMPAIGN

\$5 million raised | \$2.16 million received in FY26

During FY26, By Degrees completed our \$5 million *Moving the Needle on Student Success* campaign, securing multi-year support for the expansion of our work. Approximately \$2.16 million in campaign contributions were received during FY26. These funds will be drawn down over the next several years as By Degrees implements our planned expansion across Des Moines' north side.

2025-26 PARTNERS



Our partners play an important role in advancing our work, contributing their time, resources and expertise to create more opportunities for By Degrees students and families.

\$100,000+

Archer Daniels Midland
Principal Foundation

\$50,000+

Corteva
Prairie Meadows
United Way of Central Iowa

\$25,000+

BLK & Bold
EMC Foundation
PricewaterhouseCoopers
Sammons Financial Group

\$10,000+

Bank of America
BWA Foundation
GreenState Credit Union*
ISL Education Lending
John Deere Des Moines Operations
Polk County Board of Supervisors*
Variety Iowa - the Children's Charity

\$5,000+

Businessolver Foundation
Viking Foundation
West Bank Foundation

\$2,500+

Bankers Trust*
Community Youth Concepts
Federal Home Loan Bank of Des Moines
ITA Group
McGill Junge Wealth Management*
Veridian Credit Union

\$1,000+

Community Choice Credit Union*
Habitat for Humanity of Central Iowa
MidAmerican Energy
Mid-Iowa Health Foundation

*** Sponsors of our 2026 Sweet Dreams event**

2025-2026 SUPPORT A SCHOLAR

Support a Scholar is our annual giving program through which supporters invest in a class of elementary scholars. Thank you to Support a Scholar members who made an annual gift of \$1,000 or more during the 2025-26 school year.

* 2025-26 NAVIGATORS

Supporters who gave \$2,000 or more

Anonymous
Karen Andrew
Carol Bodensteiner
Margie & Jay Davidson
Scott Galenbeck & Leann Treloar
Nancy Green
Tessie Johnson & John Owens
Mary & Dan Kelly
Cory & Lauren McAnelly
Ken & Linda McCullum
Susan & James Meimann
Joan Middleton
Matt & Dana Moore
The Mueller Family
Lucas & Mary Katherine Nelson
Mondale & Lucréia Smith
William Todd & Teresa Weidmaier
Michele & Steve Whitty

* 2025-26 LEADERS

Supporters who gave \$1,000 or more

Anonymous
Kelli & Bruce Baker
Pamela Bass-Bookey & Harry Bookey
Claudia Batesole
Nancy Bone
Annie Brandt
Barron & Britt Bremner
Allison & Jim Fleming
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Danielle Hermann
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Nikki & Jay Syverson
Kathleen Till Stange
Deanna Ver Steeg
Nancy Vernon
Meg & Patrick Whitty
Jim Work & Judith Eastburn
Maribeth & Bill Wright



HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT A SCHOLAR THIS YEAR



Make a gift to By Degrees Foundation and support the 2026-27 class of kindergarten scholars at By Degrees partner schools.

All Support a Scholar gifts help us provide a strong foundation for By Degrees' youngest scholars, promoting educational equity and creating more opportunities for students in under-resourced communities.

With your gift, you'll receive updates from By Degrees scholars throughout the year. You'll also receive complimentary reservations at our annual springtime fundraiser, Sweet Dreams.

Join Support a Scholar today and connect with an established group of philanthropists who've helped us grow from supporting 50 scholars to over 2,400 annually.



**SCAN THE QR CODE OR
MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO:**

By Degrees Foundation

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Des Moines, IA 50311



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