



Welcome to

Grand Rapids Public Museum School

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Empowering students to tackle environmental injustice.

How They Came to Be

Grand Rapids Public Museum School's XQ Super School Journey

The Grand Rapids Public Museum School (GRPMS) finds its roots through a civic and community response to the XQ Super School Challenge. Community members from the mayor to the president of the Public Museum, Kendall College of Art and Design, Grand Valley State University, parents, and young people mobilized to create a school where students could be problem solvers, communicators, and innovators to revitalize downtown Grand Rapids. They collectively proposed to build on the partnership that formed the Grand Rapids Public Museum Middle School to create a high school in partnership with the museum, two colleges, and business leadership. After the school district acquired the closed Public Museum Archives building, they transformed it/the space into the Grand Rapids Public Museum High School with the help of partners, community research, and exciting place-based learning experiences to create a public school option to compare with the best in suburban high schools.

This community-based school located in the Grand Rapids Public Museum stands out as a compelling example of innovation in a traditional public school district.



Discover Grand Rapids Public Museum School

Everyone understands what it means to be part of a community and have a sense of local pride, but few understand the deep context of their community. Students at Grand Rapids Public Museum High School are building that understanding—for themselves and through their contributions to the wider community. Instead of traditional school buildings separated from the community, the school is co-located with public spaces, including the Grand Rapids Public Museum and museum archives, with its collection of 250,000 cultural and historical artifacts. Imagine a museum relic as a starting point for an exploratory learning process that spurs a conversation on the uses and abuses of power or tackling local issues such as gentrification, pedestrian safety, and light pollution.

Grand Rapids Public Museum High School welcomed its first class of 9th graders in Fall 2018 and today serves over 200 students in grades 9-11.

Grand Rapids Public Museum School Design Features

1. Leveraging a city's resources to deepen learning

The high school is located in a historic downtown building that was once the main museum building and now connects to the Grand Rapids Public Museum archives, allowing students to use and explore more than 250,000 cultural and historic artifacts. Students also help museum staff collect, process, and curate new materials in a design lab, and help design and update existing exhibits. This year, students did a research project where they had to identify an artifact in the archives that is not yet in the Grand Rapids Public Museum database. One student found a spacesuit from an Apollo mission, and another found a flapper dress from the 1920s. Students had to research the item and its era in history and enter the information into the museum database, and went on to record interviews about the artifact and create podcasts.



Dale Robertson

President and CEO, Grand Rapids
Public Museum

“If we’re just preserving artifacts for the future, that means we are missing an opportunity to have the museum used for its most noble purpose, which is education.”



Christopher Hanks

Founding Principal

“Grand Rapids answered the call to rethink high school with such passion and commitment. Since day one, our community rallied around the idea that we could do more for our kids, and that the skills, resources, and dedication needed to turn our vision into reality lives right here in the heart of Grand Rapids.”

2. School as a source of civic engagement and renewal

GRPMS is part of an ongoing regional effort to revitalize greater Grand Rapids born out of a city-wide commitment to investing in education and innovation and a belief that schools can be an engine for revitalization. With the broader goal of civic engagement and community stewardship, students choose projects that contribute to the improvement of the community. At the core of the team’s work is a simple idea: disengaged learners are more likely to become disengaged citizens, and the Grand Rapids community can change that trajectory by immersing students in engaging learning experiences.

3. Design thinking in action

The GRPMS mission is to use place-based design thinking and the museum context to create learning experiences that develop confident, creative, and competent thinkers, doers, and leaders. To accomplish this, teachers at the school created ways to introduce design thinking in the week-long student induction process. It is infused throughout students' learning at the school, and all students gain basic proficiency with CAD tools and learn to utilize "Design Lab" tools such as laser cutters, 3D printers, and vinyl cutters. Students use these skills to create original school signage, fabricate 3D models, and build equipment for use in the Design Lab. A partnership with Kendall College of Art and Design (KCAD) engages students, teachers, and partners in reviewing and revising course modules and developing a teaching and learning institute. GRPMS students can also earn college credit by taking design courses through the KCAD partnership.

4. The community as a classroom

The museum is a resource students use nearly every day but is just one of the places they learn. Students also spend time working with community partners and collaborators all over the city, from universities and nonprofit groups to local scientists, artists, and businesspeople. They visit the downtown YMCA and city parks for physical education, use the nearby public library, and work with community partners and collaborators all over the city, including universities, non-profit groups, scientists, and artists. Nearby colleges like Kendall College of Art and Design and Grand Valley State University are also important partners who help with professional development.



Torin Hodgman

11th Grader

"I find design thinking really helpful because I have a little bit more freedom to execute what [teachers] ask of me. My science teacher is always willing to have conversations with students and offer constructive feedback. Having those conversations is where the design thinking piece comes in. He'll listen to our feedback and reorganize or re-plan in a way that makes sense to us."



Haylee Smith-Scales

11th Grader

"Going to the museum school is not the normal way of learning. You're given a set of rules, but you have the freedom to let your ideas flow freely. Having those types of projects helps me to gain skills like networking. Since my school is in downtown Grand Rapids, a lot of our core projects are centered around community projects, like a neighborhood project where we worked with the homeless shelter. It was really cool to learn how this organization was so close even though I never knew about it."

Theory Into Action

Student work: Representing those in need

In a powerful example of community engagement and impact, 9th graders at the school recently engaged in a community partnership with two neighborhood shelters. Working with a group of “clients” who access these social services, students developed art projects which connect the contemporary local issues they heard about to historical issues like the role of government, poverty, and equity. The project integrates student academic content in multiple domains. Students investigate historical phenomena such as the impacts of urban development in the early 20th century and the origins of the Great Depression. In science, students research chemical properties in order to make soaps, paints, wax, and other materials for the project. The project is also supported through narrative writing and through reading *Of Mice and Men*.

Competencies Met:

- ✓ Explore Social Phenomena
- ✓ Communicate Effectively
- ✓ Build Community

A student’s take on learning in a museum

What does it look like to go to school in a museum? Listen to how [Donovan](#), a student at GRPMS, learns and creates art through access to the artifacts in his building.

State Standards Met

- ✓ U6.3.1: Social Issues—Describe the Significant problems or issues created by America’s industrial and urban transformations between the 1890s and 1930s.
- ✓ U9.1.2: Transformation of American Politics—Analyze the transformation of American politics in the late 20th and early 21st centuries
- ✓ W7.2.2: Inter-war Period—Analyze the transformations that shaped world societies between World War I and World War II (Global Great Depression)
- ✓ U9.3.1: Compose a persuasive essay on a public policy issue
- ✓ PS1-1: Periodic Table, Valence Electrons
- ✓ PS2-6: Molecular Level Structure, Macro Function
- ✓ PS1-3: Intermolecular Forces, Polarity
- ✓ PS1-5: Reaction Rates, Collision Theory
- ✓ PS1-7: Conservation of Mass in Reactions, Moles

Student data

Grand Rapids serves 198 students in grades 9-11 this school year.

23%	Black
23%	Latinx
48%	White
2%	Asian
4%	American Indian or Alaska Native
61%	Free Lunch
10%	Special Education

Blogs and Media

- [How Museums are Engaging with Students Remotely](#)
- [Want a Strong School Culture? Focus on Coherent School Leadership](#)
- [Easy Steps to Seamless Teacher Collaboration](#)
- [Design Thinking, City as Classroom, Museum as Homebase](#)

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