



BRIGHT SPOTS

MARSHALLTOWN, IOWA

Preschoolers in the small Iowa city of Marshalltown look forward to monthly visits from Punctual Pete — a bilingual costumed crusader dressed as a giant clock (set at 8 a.m.) who reads to the children and distributes bracelets featuring the words, “I’m here and ready to learn.”

“The children get excited,” says Karina Hernandez, project coordinator for Marshalltown’s grade-level reading campaign (and the person inside the giant clock costume).

The mascot is a component of the **Perfectly Punctual Campaign** (PPC), a nationally available program that Marshalltown uses to address two GLR Campaign focus areas — reducing chronic absenteeism and increasing school readiness.

“Kids need to be prepared to go into school with a good attendance pattern, and the more time they’re in preschool, the more they benefit from an early learning program that prepares them for kindergarten,” says Clarissa Thompson of Mid-Iowa Community Action, Inc. (MICA), the lead organization for Marshalltown’s GLR effort, **Spread the Words – Read by 3rd!**

Among 30 communities honored by the Campaign as a **2014 Pacesetter**, Marshalltown — a high-poverty, ethnically diverse community — saw its number of school-ready kindergartners increase from 25 to 32 percent between 2011-2012 and 2013-2014, as measured by the **DIBELS Next** assessment. Over four years through 2013-2014, the number of Marshalltown children reading proficiently by the end of third grade increased from 63 to almost 69 percent as measured by the **Iowa Assessments**.

PPC comes from **LearnLead**, based in Washington, D.C., which offers programs to strengthen school readiness and early school success for young children from low-income families by engaging parents and educators.

Launched in Marshalltown in 2013, PPC reaches 224 children in 14 preschool classrooms, most are part of the Head Start program operated by MICA. Students receive a calendar to track their classroom attendance, adding a sticker or stamp for each day they attend. They take the calendar home monthly to show their parents.

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Bright Spots showcase the work that Grade-Level Reading communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning by 2016. They are written and produced by the Campaign. You can nominate a Bright Spot in your community by emailing Betsy Rubiner at brubiner@gradelevelreading.net.

Three PPC family activity nights help parents create nighttime and morning routines to help their children regularly attend school on time. “It really engages the parents and that’s our opportunity to give them information,” says Hernandez. Attendance data are collected monthly and sent to LearnLead, which provides feedback.

Marshalltown’s other school readiness strategies include free training to early childhood program providers and home visitors on ways to foster young children’s social-emotional well-being and literacy. “Children’s social-emotional development is the foundation of their learning,” says Thompson. “If that’s not in order, the literacy won’t come.”

At the training, school readiness tip cards with easy activities to boost early literacy — such as making a small reading corner for a child — are distributed. Developed by Marshalltown’s GLR school readiness steering committee and teachers, the tips also are made available to parents via the [Marshalltown campaign’s Facebook page](#). Twelve small paper cards (one for each month) are attached to a metal ring, the tips are designed so various users can do the same activity.

“Then they’re all on the same page,” says Thompson. “People need to know what literacy skills are important to have prior to school so we focused on basic things anyone in the community needs to know and can do.”

Another school readiness strategy that also addresses the Campaign’s summer learning focus area is a free two-week summer camp for 45 children, designed to ease their transition into preschool or kindergarten at a specific elementary school serving many low-income families.

Funded by MICA and other local organizations, the June camp recruits door-to-door in order to reach families not yet connected to a school and/or an early childhood program. The camp is staffed by preschool and kindergarten teachers who report that it helps acclimate young children to the classroom.

“After this, everyone starts the school year two or three months ahead of schedule because the kids have already been through that transition,” says Thompson. “The earlier we can intervene, provide education and confront issues, the better the outcomes and results we’ll have.”

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