



# BRIGHT SPOTS

COUNCIL BLUFFS, IOWA

Before the school year starts in Council Bluffs, Iowa, preschoolers get a home visit from their teacher to ease the school transition of children *and* their parents. In concert with other grade-level reading initiatives, the visits also are designed to spur steady attendance, school readiness and, ultimately, reading proficiency by the end of third grade.

“In the early grades, especially preschool, it’s so important that children are there to strengthen social skills, relationships and language skills, so we are increasing our focus on getting them attending regularly,” says Tracy Mathews, preschool administrator for Council Bluffs Community Schools, the lead organization for the **local Campaign** for Grade-Level Reading.

Honored in 2016 as a **Campaign Pacesetter** for achieving measurable progress in readiness, attendance, summer learning and grade-level reading, Council Bluffs school officials link attendance measures — including home visits — with reducing preschool chronic absence, defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year (about 18 days).

In the 2012–13 school year, 19.3 percent of 4-year-olds in Council Bluffs public preschool were chronically absent. In the 2015–16 school year, this percentage changed to 12.9 percent.

Preschoolers and kindergartners often have particularly high chronic absence rates. Research shows that chronically absent preschoolers arrive at kindergarten less school ready than others, notes GLR Campaign Implementation Partner **Attendance Works**, whose many resources include an **early education toolkit**.

During home visits with parents, Council Bluffs teachers “focus on why preschool is important — that it’s not just day care or ‘drop off at your leisure when it fits into your schedule,’ that we have learning objectives and standards,” says Mathews.

“We want to make a good impression because if parents feel more secure about where they’re sending their children, they’re more apt to get them to school every day.”

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Bright Spots showcase the work that GLR Campaign communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning.

The preschool attendance push comes as Council Bluffs works to expand the quantity and quality of its state-funded program, which now serves about 500 children — most 4-year-olds but also some 3-year-olds. With state funding available only to support a half-day program, the district has secured grants to offer a full-day program and is working to boost private preschool quality.

“If we can take what we know and help private preschools do similar things, then *their* kids come into our schools more ready to learn,” says Superintendent Martha Bruckner, of Council Bluffs, where about 70 percent of students are from low-income families.

All this is for naught if children don’t show up. Begun in 2015, the preschool home visits are made possible by having preschoolers start three days later than older children. This is offset by positive parent-teacher relationships that prove useful, including when a preschooler does develop an attendance issue, says Mathews.

Council Bluffs also links the drop in preschool chronic absence to a 2014 state decision to make attendance compulsory for 4-year-olds in state-funded preschool. (Enrollment is voluntary.) “That gave me the ability to tell people we need to start focusing on preschool as well,” says Kathy Hanafan, the district’s attendance supervisor. “We pushed down what we were doing for kindergarten through fifth grade.”

At district elementary schools, an attendance team that reviews attendance data and identifies students at risk now can use some of the same individualized attendance interventions with preschoolers once reserved for older students. “We’re trying to be more proactive and intervene early when we recognize a problem — looking at the reasons, how to support the family and putting interventions in place,” says Mathews.

Next fall, the district plans to assign a “graduation coach” to elementary schools to focus on preschool and kindergarten attendance. These coaches currently are in middle and high schools, working to boost attendance and, ultimately, increase the high school graduation rate.

Council Bluffs’ now **multifaceted attendance work** got a big assist in 2012 from the GLR Campaign and Attendance Works. “They gave us the guidelines, the language, the research — it really helped,” says Hanafan. In 2016, the district’s thinking is: “the sooner we can get to children the better.”

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