

Marshalltown, Iowa Education and Community Change

BY MICHAEL MCGRATH

In 2006, civic leaders in Marshalltown, Iowa, met to begin what they hoped would become a community-wide dialogue on poverty. The original idea was to develop a methodology for increasing community knowledge of the issue and then to find ways of encouraging positive change, but the organizers found little interest in the community. “We had great information, wonderful presentations, but finally realized that when people hear the word ‘poverty’ it just seems too big,” said Arlene McAtee, executive director of Mid-Iowa Community Action (MIDI), a local nonprofit organization that runs Head Start programs and other initiatives aimed at addressing the needs of low-income families in and around Marshalltown. “When we started thinking about education as an antidote to poverty, people were more interested in the dialogue. They could see that there was something to be done and a role for the community to play. There were very specific things they could do.”

From a distance, Marshalltown does not seem like the sort of community where you would expect to find severe problems with educational achievement, much less poverty. Historically, Iowa has been known for its quality schools, and twenty or thirty years ago, the same could be said of Marshalltown. A community of about 27,000 in the central part of the state, Marshalltown’s changing demography has left the community and the school district with a list of challenges more often associated with aging Rust Belt cities than small towns in the Corn Belt. For example, the community has a significant problem with lead exposure, which can in itself be a factor in poor school performance. The median family income in Marshalltown is lower than the statewide average, and the unemployment and poverty rates are substantially higher. The portion of the local economy provided by manufacturing, about 27 percent, is much higher than the statewide average. And the number of Hispanic residents, about 24 percent, is much, much higher than the

statewide average. By way of comparison, Cedar Rapids has a Hispanic population of about 3.3 percent and Des Moines, the largest, most “cosmopolitan” of Iowa cities, about 12 percent.

Taken together, these facts and figures suggest the profile of exactly the sort of community where you would find the telltale signs of learning gaps and performance issues—a fading manufacturing sector, higher-than-average levels of lead poisoning, high poverty and unemployment rates, and large numbers of recent immigrants or refugees with limited command of English. Not surprisingly, the local school district ranks near the bottom of the state in math and reading proficiency. During the past five years, only 40 percent of students have entered local schools prepared to learn, according to one of the district’s main assessment tools. Over a third of students are not able to read proficiently as they leave the third grade. As in many other communities, there is a large achievement gap, with Hispanic, Asian, English language learners, African American, and low-socioeconomic-status students scoring well below the mean.

Marshalltown was founded in 1851 by Henry “Hank the Red-Headed Yankee” Anson, who arrived on a prairie schooner from Illinois and began promoting settlement and selling real estate in a town he called Marshall. The town was renamed Marshalltown when it was found that another community in Iowa already was named Marshall. The railroad arrived in the 1870s, bringing with it, ten years later, a machinist and inventor from Chicago named Dave Lennox. A local mason, who was working on the county courthouse building, asked Lennox to design better tools for laying bricks, which led him to found a manufacturing company called Marshalltown Trowel. Lennox’s next invention, the world’s first riveted steel furnace, led to the development of Lennox Industries, today a global manufacturer of

heating and cooling machinery. Another Marshalltown inventor of note, William Fisher, moved there to work as the city's chief engineer. To improve the city's capacity to fight fires, he developed a new pressure pump regulator. The Fisher Type 1 constant pressure pump regulator was later exhibited at the World's Columbia Exposition in Chicago in 1880. With another local, George Beebe, he founded the Fisher Governor Company, which, like Lennox Industries, is now a multinational corporation.

Any sudden or dramatic demographic change is likely to have positive and negative effects on a community's sense of itself.

By the turn of the century Marshalltown was a city of about 10,000 with an enviable job base thanks to Marshalltown's inventors and manufacturing concerns. Until the late 1970s, Marshalltown was one of the most prosperous communities in Iowa, but in the 1980s, several of the leading companies, including Fisher and Lennox, began moving most of their white-collar jobs to Texas and other distant locales. The school district lost an estimated 2,000 students during a period of twenty years, as families moved away with the jobs. School buildings were abandoned, sold, or torn down to save costs.

Added to the loss of manufacturing jobs was an unrelated financial trauma, Marshalltown's unfortunate embroilment in the notorious Iowa Trust scandal. The Iowa Trust Fund was created in the early 1990s for small- to medium-size local governments across the state to pool their investment funds. The fund was managed by a California investment advisor, who ended up being charged with fraud. It would take the Securities and Exchange Commission months to decipher the complex series of transactions the advisor made to cover his clients' investment losses. All over the state, cities were forced to shelve capital improvement plans and consider layoffs. The City of Marshalltown, which had invested \$3 million, lost its principal. The fiscal effects of this investment gone wrong are felt by local government to this day.

The demographics of Marshalltown changed dramatically in the 1990s, thanks in part to developments in the meat processing industry. As companies began to use refrigerated trucks instead of railroads to transport meat, plants were relocated from urban areas to smaller towns. This transfer of jobs and facilities was accelerated when companies began to box meat on site instead of leaving that task to retail outlets, and plants were moved to more rural settings so they could be closer to feedlots. Over time, union memberships and wages declined dramatically, and mergers and buyouts reduced the overall number of producers. The deunionization and downskilling of the industry meant a demand for low-wage, less-skilled workers. Immigrants from Mexico and Central America began moving in to Marshalltown as more jobs became available in the local J. B. Swift pork processing plant.

The community's response to this influx was mixed. Some older residents resented the changes and disapproved of the hiring of undocumented immigrants, but others—including business and civic leaders—saw the potential for revitalizing the local economy. The mayor and police chief traveled to Michoacán, Mexico, to visit the rural village where many of the newcomers had once lived to find out more about the local culture. Churches began to offer services in Spanish. The schools did their best to accommodate the children of the Swift workers. Hispanic businesses began to blossom. A Spanish-language newspaper was published. These and other steps to welcome newcomers earned Marshalltown recognition from Governor Tom Vilsack as one of the state's three "pilot communities" to develop plans and processes to recruit, accommodate, and welcome immigrant workers who were already living in the United States.

Any sudden or dramatic demographic change is likely to have positive and negative effects on a community's sense of itself. In Marshalltown's case, the newcomers brought economic vitality but also put a strain on an educational system that had been downsized in past years and was less well funded thanks to an earlier period of population loss. "I think because there was such a sea change in the community, people were left wondering how did we go from being seen as a leader in education to struggling with

these issues,” said MIDI executive director Arlene McAtee. “Everybody wanted to figure out if they could find the entity or the person to blame, then of course we’re all off the hook and it’s an easy solution to fix that problem. There was a tendency to want to blame the schools or the families—they don’t care or they’re not doing their job with their kids—or it’s the businesses—they don’t pay enough so the families are struggling. It’s the human services community. They’re not empowering families to do what they need to do, so we were spending a lot of time describing that sort of stuff instead of looking at solutions.”

In December 2006, Marshalltown experienced yet another disruptive event, a mass raid by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency on the Swift plant. As a special report from the Immigration Policy Center describes the event:

ICE agents blocked the exits and began checking identification, sorting workers into groups of presumed citizens, legal residents, and persons lacking legal documentation. They arrested 90 people, placed them in handcuffs, led them into three buses with opaque windows, and drove them to Camp Dodge, a National Guard facility in Johnston, Iowa. Families, lawyers, and clergy members struggled to get reliable information from ICE officials about detainees’ whereabouts. After 72 hours, the arrested workers were deported or transferred to out-of-state federal detention centers. Five other Swift plants around the nation were raided on the same day for a total of 1,282 workers arrested. It was the largest immigration raid on a single company in U.S. history. (p. 8)

The first concern of local officials and social agencies was to identify and help the children of deported or detained workers. The local school district helped identify the households with dependent children. Counselors, teachers, and others used a list of emergency contacts to find out which children were in need of assistance and to match those children with responsible adults. The Hispanic Ministries of the Catholic Church became a central focal point for families seeking assistance and information about deported or detained loved ones. A series of meetings

were held at Saint Mary’s Catholic Church. A town meeting was held at which Latino community leaders and pro bono attorneys explained the deportation process and met with families seeking help.

The church received more than \$120,000 in unsolicited donations from groups, individuals, and businesses in Marshalltown and elsewhere. Some companies contributed gift cards for gasoline and food. The local United Way worked with donors and the church to keep track of the money. Mid-Central Iowa Community Action visited the homes of immigrant families to determine their needs. Local librarians helped families fax legal paperwork to the appropriate agencies and seek information on the Internet. A local real estate agent helped families with deported breadwinners expedite the process of selling homes. The raid brought to fore long-simmering fears, resentments, and conflicts in Marshalltown, including some racial comments and incidents. But it also demonstrated a sense of solidarity among those who viewed the newcomers as valued and productive members of a changing community.

Not surprisingly, the Swift raid had both short- and long-term impacts on a community as small as Marshalltown. Business that offered goods and services to Hispanic customers suffered. Local government receipts from sales taxes declined by 3.2 percent in 2007. The turnover rate at the Swift plant increased dramatically in 2006, as managers struggled to find new employees. Schools and community organizations struggled to meet the needs of newcomers. One indirect result of the raid was an influx of a new group of residents as the pork processing plant began to hire refugees from Southeast Asia who did not have the disadvantage of nonlegal resident status.

The most recent group of newcomers to Marshalltown is a population of political refugees from Myanmar (Burma), a country with a pattern of fierce political repression. About 800 workers at the Swift plant are from Myanmar, about one-fourth of the workforce at the Marshalltown processing facility. Having spent years in refugee camps along the Thai–Burmese border, many of these newcomers lacked formal education. The refugees spoke several different languages or dialects, adding to the challenges for local schools and service providers. The vulnerability of these new residents was tragically

underscored one Fourth of July weekend in 2012, when three Burmese children drowned while swimming in the Iowa River. The children were unused to the deceptively swift currents and hidden drop-offs that made the river treacherous to swimmers. Earlier in the summer, a Hispanic child had drowned in the river, revealing an unforeseen community need—free swimming and water safety lessons for kids who could not otherwise afford them.

Community Initiatives

Marshalltown has been a finalist for the National Civic League's All-America City Award three times in the past four years. All-America Cities tend to be communities that have tough challenges and find ways of working collaboratively to develop innovative or successful programs, initiatives or campaigns to address them. Going back through Marshalltown's three applications for the award, I pulled out several of its community efforts that were related directly or indirectly to the challenge of educating a diverse population of young residents.

Imagine 7 Big Ideas

Looking for new ways to revitalize the community, a group of civic leaders visited three cities, two in Iowa and one in Minnesota, to learn from their experiences in doing community development projects. From Dubuque they borrowed the idea of holding a communitywide competition to develop a short list of community priorities.

Ideas were sought from organizations, businesses, individuals, school children, community college students, and anyone who cared to participate. More than 3,000 ideas were submitted by more than 100 people. A selection committee was put together with a goal of getting residents involved who did not have a history of civic engagement as well as young people and those not traditionally active in local affairs. The committee narrowed the 3,000 ideas to 100. A series of community forums were held so residents could vote on the top twenty-one ideas. One of the forums specifically sought participation on the part of the city's Spanish-speaking population. Eventually, the ideas were posted on a Web site, and online voting was encouraged. Among the seven "big" ideas selected was an effort to improve the local schools. The process, believes Betty Bo-

lar, a retired college administrator and community volunteer, helped build momentum for a bond issue to remodel the elementary schools and fix up the high school's auditorium, which she describes as a "real focal point" for the whole community.

Lead Hazard Control Program

Exposure to lead is one of the most common, preventable environmental hazards facing American children. Lead poisoning can have a significant impact on learning. It can cause inattention, hyperactivity, and irritability. Exposed children can have problems learning and reading. At high exposure levels, they can experience permanent brain damage or even death. In 1992, children were tested in Marshall County; about 25 percent were said to have some level of lead poisoning. That year, the city initiated the East Central Iowa Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program. In 2003, it applied for a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. After receiving this grant, the community was able to have a real impact on the problem.

Nearly 75 percent of Marshalltown's housing stock was built before 1978, when the use of lead paint became less common. Marshalltown is not unlike other older, rural communities. New housing tends to be built at the edge of the city limits, leaving the older housing in the center of town to deteriorate. These older buildings tend to be more affordable and to house the city's lower-income families. Having limited financial resources, these less affluent families may find the onus of maintaining or fixing the older buildings beyond their means. The city's program helps families address this challenge with window replacement, siding installation, repainting, and soil coverings.

One of the notable partnerships in the program is with Friends of the Marshalltown Public Library, a local association. The Friends own two houses near the library, which are used to temporarily house families during lead abatement work in and around their homes. The houses are lead safe and fully furnished. The Friends support the program by subsidizing rent. The city pays for utilities and ongoing maintenance. The proximity to the library encourages the families to use it as an educational and informational resource. This partnership helped the

Marshalltown Library win an award from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. In 2012, the city began healthy home education efforts. Families who completed a survey were given a toolkit of items, such as smoke detectors, carbon monoxide detectors, fire extinguishers, night-lights, anti-slip bathtub mats, cleaning supplies, and educational materials. Marshalltown's success led to other nearby communities joining the effort. Now it is a regional program comprising three counties and eighteen towns.

Higher Education Partnership

The Marshalltown Education Partnership (MEP) is for kids who otherwise couldn't afford it go to college. Kids who can establish financial need and would be first-generation college graduates are enrolled in the program in eighth grade. Participants are required to sign a "Commitment to Excellence" contract, promising to achieve a 95 percent attendance record and grade point average of at least 2.75 for four years in high school.

The program began in 2004 when the Martha-Ellen Tye (MET) Foundation invited an outside speaker to talk to an audience of business leaders and educators about a similar program in San Antonio. A foundation board member, Terry Busbee, president of the local division of Emerson Fisher, volunteered to take the lead. Over the next eighteen months, he worked with a small group of school and community college administration business leaders, nonprofit representatives, and interested citizens. Together they created a steering committee of leaders representing the legal profession, local hospital, the chamber of commerce, the school district, the community college, the MET Foundation, and the local economic development organizations.

They hired a part-time director who promoted the program to school staff, students, and parents. They also recruited 100 community members to mentor students and raised \$270,000 from local businesses and foundations to fund the first five years of program administration and scholarships. The community college volunteered to match MEP's scholarships so that each award would offer a half-tuition scholarship at Marshalltown Community College (MCC). MCC also provided office space and support for the newly hired director and employed her

part time in its recruiting office. The current director is now devoted to MEP full time. She continues to be supervised as an employee of Marshalltown Community College.

The program director, a first-generation college graduate from a Hispanic family, gives monthly small-group sessions at Marshalltown High, sharing information on career opportunities, scholarships, and sources of financial aid. The program awards a half-tuition scholarship to MCC for sixty credit hours to eligible participants. The program started in 2005, and by 2011, thirty-three students had fulfilled their Commitment to Excellence contracts and received the scholarship to the community college, sixteen first-generation students had graduated from MCC, and six were pursuing four-year degrees. The program helped increase the percentage of high school graduates seeking higher education opportunities by 30 percent.

Swimming and Water Safety Classes

After the tragic drowning death of two children on Fourth of July Weekend, the Marshalltown police chief, Mike Tupper, decided to launch a community-wide campaign to educate kids about the dangers of swimming in the Iowa River. A community meeting convened to discuss options. As summer heat was one of the factors that drew children to the river, city police, local firefighters, and community volunteers created water sprinkler "cooling stations" near several elementary schools. The local YMCA worked with an intermediate school principal to establish a water safety/swimming program for kids who could not otherwise afford swimming classes. One reason for involving the school, reportedly, was the relatively high level of trust that existed between parents from Southeast Asia and school employees. A five-week pilot program was created to teach children to swim.

A curriculum was developed to emphasize safety, both indoors and in natural settings. Teachers from the school led the classes, volunteering to drive the kids from their homes to the Y pool and back. Children who completed the course were given life jackets and instructions on how to use them. The leadership of the Y secured funding to expand them with more students and year-round classes. The program, Teach Them to Swim, which focuses on fifth-grade

students, is part of the local Y's annual fundraising appeal. There were seventy-four students in the first session, and a special graduation ceremony was held at the end of the semester. Parents were invited to attend and refreshments were provided. The school principal handed out certificates of completion, and the local newspaper covered the event.

Collective Impact and Communitywide Initiatives

What began as a dialogue on poverty in 2006 morphed into a communitywide effort to improve educational opportunities known as the Start Sooner, Stay Longer, Keep Learning initiative. The consensus in the group of organizations and individuals supporting this effort was to begin with the “start sooner” part. Partly inspired by Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone in New York City, the group decided to focus on the neighborhood surrounding one elementary school. “The neighborhood around Rogers Elementary School is geographically small,” noted principal Mick Jurgensen, “but it is very densely populated. The school opened in 1879 and the housing around Rogers reflected that era and also the early 1900s. Generally, they are quite large houses that for the most part have been cut up into smaller apartments. We have several thousand addresses, and those addresses constitute some of the lowest-cost housing in Marshalltown, and frequently are used by people who don’t have a lot of financial resources. When they do gain in wealth they tend to purchase homes in other parts of town. My school last year was 94 percent free and reduced-cost lunch. We have a pocket of Burmese people who mostly speak Chin. My kindergarten is 20 percent Chin, but the predominant second language in our school is Spanish. We are by far a minority majority school, reflecting this neighborhood.”

A door-to-door survey was conducted in the neighborhood to gather information and identify three- to four-year-olds who weren’t already enrolled in a prekindergarten program. A two-week summer program was initiated to prepare kids for kindergarten or other early learning programs. The group began a community education program called Little Ones Need Words, which emphasizes the importance of exposing young people to as many words as possible. Books were provided to parents so they

could read to their kids. With support from the 21st Century Learning Center, the six-week, full-day program called Rogers University provided intensive math and reading instruction to a hundred kids identified by the school, as well as physical activity, nutrition education, and a variety of enrichment experiences. After two years, reading scores on standardized tests at Rogers Elementary were running five to fifteen points higher than those of comparable students at other district elementary schools.

In 2011, while participating in the award presentations in Denver, the local delegation found out about the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a national coalition of communities and organizations committed to improving the reading skills of at-risk children. Pulling together a number of existing local efforts, including Start Sooner, Stay Longer, Keep Learning, the Rogers University, and the Imagine 7 Big Ideas task force, the community agreed to focus on the three priority areas identified by the campaign—school preparedness, summer learning opportunities and school attendance—proven to affect performance. To rally public support, MICA’s Arlene McAtee began amassing facts about the importance of kids being able to read proficiently by the time they finish fourth grade, a major predictor of everything from performance in later years to high school graduation rates. “I think the facts are very, very helpful in making the pitch,” notes Marshalltown’s city administrator, Randy Wetmore. “When you are talking in terms of broad concepts, you may understand those concepts, but when you have the facts, you see how it affects the individual child, that’s what gets you fired up.”

The Mid-Iowa Community Action and the Martha- Ellen Tye Foundation took the lead in forming a steering committee for the new initiative called Spread the words!—Read by 3rd! (RB3!). Participating groups included the local chamber of commerce, the school district, city government, the local Y, the Marshalltown Education Association, the public library, and the local chapter of the United Way. All participants in the planning process were volunteers or staff persons who were funded through their own organizations. Other than the proposed coordinator, it is expected that all steering committee and task force members will continue to be volunteers.

According to the community action plan:

Parents played an important role throughout the planning process. To ensure that hard to reach community members were represented, translation services were made available as needed. Also, the group used focus groups to reach out to low-income families. The steering committee met with elementary school parents, Head Start and Early Head Start families, and the Community Y's Young Parents group for teen mothers. Interpreters, child care, and meals were provided for each focus group in order to encourage participation. The focus groups reviewed the work done by the steering committee and the task forces. Parents were asked to evaluate the value of proposed strategies and the likelihood that they would result in the desired results. All strategies that received a 75 percent or higher affirmative rating have been included in the first set of strategies to be pursued.

Observations

When it comes to education, Marshalltown has the challenges of a much larger urban area, but it also has the tightly knit civic fabric of a small town. Associations and organizations work well together in efforts that united the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Turf wars are said to be uncommon. "I've seen over the years that when people are made aware and are given an opportunity to participate, they will step up and do it," says Betty Bolar. "Let me give a very specific example. I've been working with the committee on summer learning loss, and one of the projects we started is called Munch and More, a summer reading program based around the school food sites where kids can come in over the summer and get free lunch. We have one part-time person at an agency that helps us with it, but otherwise its entirely volunteer run. This last year we asked one of the Kiwanis clubs to help and they immediately had a handful of volunteers. We went to the Lennox [Industries] leadership club and got tremendous support from the company."

The program gets a number of regular volunteers from the Lennox plant to read to the children during their lunch breaks, but some of the volunteers were

not able to eat during that time, so one volunteer asked if the plant cafeteria could make box lunches available. "So now, when Lennox volunteers come over from the plant to read, they stop off at the cafeteria and pick up a box lunch," said Bolar. "Those little things are so important."

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Marshalltown's civic leaders and volunteers are quick to act when they perceive the importance of a particular challenge. When they realized the scope of their lead problem, they created a task force and assumed a regional leadership role in abatement efforts. After the drowning incidents in the Iowa River, the chief of police, YMCA, and a local school administrator worked together to address the issue. When the community was made more aware of the link between reading proficiency at an early age and future educational performance, it joined a national campaign to get more kids reading at grade level by fourth grade. There are early indications that the effort is paying off.

Local officials seem to understand that education is a communitywide effort. As Marshalltown's city administrator, Randy Wetmore has no direct responsibility for the local schools. Officially, public education is the responsibility of the Marshalltown Community School District, but Wetmore sees his role as broader than his actual job description. "Part of my job is making this city the best it can be," says Wetmore, who has served as a public manager in Iowa, Oregon, South Dakota, and Kansas, where he grew up. "I try not to put myself in a box where I'm just making sure the streets are paved or the sewers are working. I think it's our job to look at the broader perspective and be involved, and not just in name."

Wetmore serves as cochair of the school attendance task force. He and the other members of the task force attend school assemblies to tout the importance of regular attendance. They go to the schools on registration day and hand out information. They

go to restaurants and put the information on table-tops and put up posters around the city. Wetmore also volunteers for a local effort to give free books to kids who may not have the financial resources to buy their own. “It’s one of the most fun things I do,” he says, “handing out those books and watching their eyes light up.” Wetmore admits that his participation in these education initiatives is partly a “personal thing.” “If I were independently wealthy,” he adds, “I would spend all my time on the third-grade reading stuff. I just think it’s something we really need to do. When I was growing up in the middle of Kansas, reading allowed me to go to different places and think about different things. I want the same opportunity for the kids we have now. If there is a little bit I can do, I want to make us the best we can be.”

When asked whether he thought the early learning education initiatives are making a difference, he said, “Oh, yes. We are making some progress. I spend most of my time on the attendance part, and we have seen some improvements. We have seen a better rate of attendance at the kindergarten grade.” He cited one example: Many of the local immigrant families had a habit of going back to their native Mexico for extended visits, taking their children out of school for three or four weeks at a time. The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and others have identified poor school attendance as a major challenge for young readers. “We’re starting to get that a bit under control,” he said. “We’re trying to work with the local pork plant to help keep these people in town.”

Arlene McAtee sees a change in the community with the more recent education initiatives, which seem to be having a broader impact. “I think it is about putting teams together across sections of the community and having us learn together, not separately within our own world, but across our disciplines, to look at things and learn from one another,” she said. “I will say that I think there were a couple of things that were very helpful. The first was when the chamber executive in about 2005 said he would get on board. I think that was enormously helpful to have someone from the business community step forward. It was the executive of the chamber at that time, Ken Anderson. I had invited him and some other business and community leaders to attend a forum on poverty and several of them got on board

for the long haul. These folks have been working on this stuff now for years. And we went from talking about poverty to talking about education as the antidote. That was a big moment. I also think when education opened its doors, when they said come on in, in the Rogers neighborhood. When that principal allowed us and the district administration gave the go-ahead—those were the two big moments.”

Marshalltown was named an All-America City in 2012, the year the National Civic League joined the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and dedicated the award to communities that drafted comprehensive plans to get more kids reading proficiently by the end of third grade. Marshalltown was one of fourteen communities that won the award that year, a list that included much larger cities, such as Baltimore, San Francisco, San Antonio, Louisville, Roanoke, and Providence, to name a few. Marshalltown reading advocates credit the award for helping mobilize the community and raising awareness of the reading challenge. They believe winning the award helped them obtain a federal Promise Neighborhood grant, which has, in turn, helped to focus more resources on attendance and other school issues in the Rogers neighborhood, which now has one of the lowest chronic absentee rates in the school district.

The family of Rogers Elementary School principal Mick Jurgensen moved to Marshalltown when he was three years old, and he lived there until he graduated high school and went off to college. “For sixteen years I was a student and educator and administrator in other Iowa communities,” he explained, “and the part that was missing in my heart was working in a place where I knew I was making a difference, and I can say in the last few years, starting with the All-America City and the Rogers University and Promise Neighborhood—all of these things have helped us take the next step to deal with issues. It has been a dream come true for a school administrator who loves the community he is working in, and I just can’t explain to you what it means to me to make this kind of impact, to watch the kids in my building just light up over things like college.”

He related a story about Rogers University, the summer learning program for young kids in the neighborhood. The first time a representative of an

Iowa college came by to talk to the kids about higher learning opportunities, the concept the kids asked questions like “Where would I live?” and “Would I sleep in a bed?” The follow-up question was: “Would I sleep in my *own* bed?” The young college rep thought the kids were joking, but Jurgensen explained that it was a serious question. Many of the children who lived in that neighborhood had to share beds with siblings. By the fourth or fifth visit from a college representative, the students began to get the idea, and when a representative from Grinnell, a small, prestigious liberal arts college southeast of Marshalltown, told them that the college would find financial support for those who worked hard and had good attendance records, their questions became more sophisticated. “That got their attention,” said Jurgensen, “and something that had seemed out of reach came within reach. So, within a few weeks, the questions changed from “Where would I sleep?” to “Can I study marine biology?”

Recently, members of a community task force have been studying the idea of going to year-round schools, a dramatic step, but one that could have a significant impact on some of the local school challenges, such as summer learning loss. If the district decides in favor, it would be the first school district in the state to do so. “Everywhere you turn, we’re reinventing ourselves,” said Jurgensen. “We’re on the verge of doing something very unique here.”

Jurgensen, who is something of an unofficial local historian, noted that back in 1950s, 1960s,

and 1970s, when Marshalltown was still a thriving industrial center, members of the leading families would meet regularly to discuss the needs of the community. “Every morning they would meet in the basement of our city library and have coffee and they’d talk about what their fair city needed to grow and thrive. We don’t have those key leaders with that ability to make things happen anymore. Now we have to all collaborate together in complicated ways to have the same impact. That’s the neatest thing about the All-America City Awards and the Campaign [for Grade-Level Reading] putting that out there and saying, you come together communities and make a difference. It made a huge difference to us to set our sights high, to collaborate and then to get some recognition along the way.”

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