

# Ames Tribune

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## United Way of Story County: Partnering with our community to combat summer slide

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Imagine being told that everything about your job was going to change but you needed to continue to excel or do even better. Plus, you'd be doing things you'd never done before, or quite possibly never even heard of.

This is exactly what many teachers and young students had to do for several months during the beginning of the pandemic. This past school year was full of surprises, but it's no surprise that virtual learning and new safety precautions were hard for young learners to adjust to. Shifting from regular in-person learning to attending school through computers or with added safety measures caused many children to struggle, several falling behind. This happened all across the nation and Story County was no different.

United Way of Story County's (UWSC) funded programs in education have always fought against the summer slide. Adding the pandemic on top of an issue that was already detrimental, we had to figure out new solutions to these ongoing challenges. Story County Reads, our coalition focusing on education and specifically reading proficiently by third grade, is a community collaboration that provides an array of programming, including keeping students engaged over the summer months. When data from the Iowa Department of Education was presented this spring showing a major increase in students falling behind, Story County Reads partners reacted quickly to modify their programming to support students.

Many of our providers worked through challenges in program implementation brought on by COVID-19 such as staffing shortages and extra safety precautions. UWSC and community partners of Story County Reads also persevered by adapting programs and creating new supports for school-age children and youth.

Partnering with four local school districts, Story County Reads has supported summer programs with resources and program coordination. Our partner agency YSS takes the lead on implementing programs at three of the districts. At each of these districts, Story County Reads partners provided an enrichment program parallel to the summer academic component, allowing students to learn in different ways through STEM activities, art, reading, and more. These school-based programs served over 300 youth alone!

Another partner agency, Raising Readers in Story County, ran its Harrison Barnes Reading Academy and Summer Reading Buddies over the past two months, pairing volunteers with youth for reading sessions two times a week via Zoom. According to The Children's Reading Foundation, reading 20 minutes every day teaches most school readiness skills including vocabulary, counting, colors, social skills, etc. This makes the case of literacy being the main goal of Story County Reads, propelling students toward success by ensuring they are able to read. Through these reading programs, 100 students bolstered their reading comprehension, effectively reducing learning loss.

Other summer programs supporting local children include Ames Community Preschool offering a curriculum-based program for elementary students; All Aboard for Kids hosting camp-like activities especially for youth with autism but open to all; Boys & Girls Clubs of Story County serving youth at sites in Ames and Nevada; Campfire Heart of Iowa holding week-long summer camps for over 175 youth; and YSS enrolling elementary-aged children in community-based programs throughout Story County.

Well over 600 children participated in our partner agencies' education programs this summer. Whether there were attending summer camp, participating in Kid's Club, or completing an enrolled program through their school, these children kept their mind engaged over the "slippery" months of summer. Their transition back to the classroom will be smoother thanks to all of our partner programs that United Way (you!) helped fund. Together, we are improving lives by supporting the health, education, and financial stability of our neighbors, and our youngest are achieving their great potential.

*Allie Prusa is the United Way of Story County Marketing Director.*