

Pittsfield's literary promise

Leading the way in reading

By Jenn Smith

Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD — A national organization has chosen 14 communities from around the United States to be stewards of the early literacy movement, and Pittsfield is one of them.

The National Civic League has designated Pittsfield an "All-America City" for a literacy campaign known as "Pittsfield Promise." Another city in western Massachusetts, Springfield, also earned this distinction. They are the only state municipalities to earn the honor in 2012.

The two cities were selected from the 32 finalists that the National Civic League chose from more than 100 entries. The winners were announced on Monday in Denver. Providence, R.I. is the only other representative from New England.

According to National Civic League records, Massachusetts hasn't had a municipality designated as an All-America City since 2009. There haven't been two winners from the state since 1978.

"It's remarkable that two cities from western Massachusetts were selected as winners," said John Bissell, the executive vice president of the Greylock Federal Credit Union, who was one of several Berkshire delegates that attended the awards ceremony.

The designation allows winning communities to leverage access to resources and field experts, as well as financial, legislative and technical support to help meet their literacy goals.

The winners have all set forth detailed plans to work to ensure that more children are proficient readers by the end of third grade.

At the Denver convention, Pittsfield and Springfield made a public pact to work with the cities of Worcester, Holyoke and Boston, so that everyone can reach their goals. Worcester was also selected as a finalist.

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"[This award] conveys that the rest of country supports third-grade reading as a priority and we should, too," Bissell said.

A total of 124 communities are already a part of this national campaign.

The National Civic League, which is partnered with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, joins a movement of community leaders, nonprofits and foundations across the country who are focused on

improving the literacy rate by having at least 90 percent of third graders reading proficiently at grade level by 2020.

Currently, state data shows only about six out of 10 third graders reading proficiently at grade level.

Pittsfield Mayor Daniel L. Bianchi sees Pittsfield Promise, which began in February, as "a real game changer."

"There is all sorts of data that supports the reality that a child who achieves [these reading goals] has all the more possibilities for a successful life," he said.

But before the effort can become a boisterous success, both Bissell and Bianchi agreed that more needs to be done to inform the public about the initiative, and to get more community members, businesses, schools and organizations involved.

"Just about anyone can help kids learn to read," Bianchi said.

Currently, Pittsfield Promise is hosting a summer learning campaign — led by Ron Latham, director of the Berkshire Athenaeum and Van Shields, executive director of the Berkshire Museum — in partnership with 15 city-based organizations.

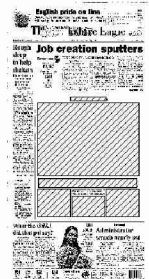
This fall, Pittsfield Promise, which has largely been run on volunteer hours from Berkshire United Way and other groups, plans to seek grants and other funding sources to hire a full-time coordinator for the literacy campaign. In terms of outreach, the campaign will be working with area health systems to relay the importance of early literacy to expecting parents.

Eventually Pittsfield Promise plans to expand its reach throughout Berkshire County.

The other Pittsfield Promise officials who attended the awards ceremony in Denver were Kristine Hazzard, the executive director of Berkshire United Way; Sue Doucette of the Pittsfield Public Schools; Alyssa Goddard of Berkshire Children & Families; Deb Blatt of Group Restoration; and

All-America Cities for 2012

Pittsfield
Springfield
San Francisco, Calif.
Tahoe/Truckee, Calif.
Dubuque, Iowa
Marshalltown, Iowa
Quad Cities, Iowa and Illinois
Louisville, Ky.
Baltimore, Md.
Southern Pines, N.C.
Providence, R.I.
San Antonio, Texas
Roanoke, Va.
Seattle and the South King County Cities, Wash.



Jonah Slattery of the Berkshire United Way.



Ben Garver / Berkshire Eagle Staff

Christian and Keira Francis read 'Horton Hears a Who' on Friday at the Berkshire Athenaeum in Pittsfield. The city has been chosen by the National Civic League as an 'All-America City' for a literacy campaign known as 'Pittsfield Promise,' to promote literacy among children.