

pride & pack

2026 SUMMER

A Community Collaboration by
Marion Independent School District and
Linn-Mar Community School District.

CHAMPIONING STUDENT SUCCESSES



Amy Kortemeyer
Linn-Mar Community School
District Superintendent

Between the two of us, we share 60 years of experience in education, and every graduation season brings the same sense of anticipation as the first. There is something special about watching students take their steps across the stage, ready to enter the world with fresh ideas and energy. This edition of *Pride and Pack* highlights the rigor in our public school districts, a key way we help prepare graduates from Linn-Mar and Marion Independent for life after high school.

In this edition, you'll read about how essential skills are built into our curriculum. The state of Iowa has created core standards to ensure all students are taught the same key concepts during the same grades, and that consistency across districts helps students develop problem-solving, communication and resilience skills at the same point in their educational journey. We'll share how our districts implement these standards in meaningful ways, creating learning experiences that help students' skills grow year after year.

You'll also learn how we use data to demonstrate progress and shape future leaders. We show how data helps educators better understand student needs, strengthen instruction and support continuous improvement, and how students use it to learn about measuring growth and improvement.

We also recognize that some students have individualized needs that require special education support. Our Marion community believes in "reaching higher," as our mayor often reminds us, and that belief is evident in how community businesses partner with our districts to create meaningful opportunities for students with diverse learning needs. Through job exploration, hands-on training and real workplace experiences, students build independence, discover new pathways and contribute their talents to the community where they live. In this edition of *Pride and Pack*, we highlight several Marion businesses that play an important role in ensuring all students, including those with special needs, benefit from rich and inclusive learning experiences.

Graduation season is a time of celebration, reflection and gratitude. As we prepare to applaud our students as they walk across the stage, we also honor the staff, families, community partners and support networks that helped guide them along the way. Our graduates leave us not only with academic knowledge, but with the skills, values and confidence shaped by a strong community of learning. Through our work together, we have prepared them for what comes next.



Janelle Brouwer
Marion Independent School
District Superintendent

Marion Businesses Provide Job Experiences for Students With Special Needs

Across the Marion community, several local businesses are making an extraordinary impact in a surprisingly simple way: by opening their doors to students with special needs through on-site job experiences. These partnerships give students a chance to learn real-world skills that go far beyond what can be taught in the classroom, and the businesses offering these opportunities say the experience is not only easy to manage but profoundly rewarding. Learn more about some of the local businesses that support student job experiences for Marion Independent and Linn-Mar students.



Fareway in Marion Steps Up to Make a Difference



Linn-Mar Community School District's Casey Robbins, Fareway's Matt Baldwin and Marion Independent School District's Brandee Gehl help ensure local students have work opportunities to prepare them for future career opportunities.

One standout community partner is the Fareway in Marion.

Marion Fareway has worked with local students for several years, and Assistant Grocery Manager Matt Baldwin said partnering with the districts gives students with special needs “a good opportunity to get exposure in the community and learn valuable work traits.” Students have assisted with stocking shelves, bagging groceries, cleaning and organizing shelves, and building essential customer service skills.

Baldwin noted that the program supports both the student and the business. “The districts are helping us help the students. For example, our shelves need to be stocked. The students get training on how to perform the task, and if they

need support, then the district staff are on hand to help ensure they are doing it correctly.”

Baldwin said what continues to surprise him most is how well students communicate and how well they interact with customers. He shared the story of a student who had various disabilities, including limitations with her vision and hearing, who made a remarkable impression on staff and shoppers alike. “She was always smiling, so patient, and she did fantastic. Our customers looked forward to seeing her during their visits, and we loved giving her the opportunity to work with us.”

Baldwin said he is grateful to partner with local students, noting that work experiences like these can open doors for students in the future — either at Fareway or elsewhere in the community.

Helping Students Write a New Chapter at Swamp Fox Bookstore



Swamp Fox Bookstore owner Terri LeBlanc helps make local connections to books and career opportunities in her Uptown Marion store.

Reading is only part of the mission at Swamp Fox Bookstore in Marion. Owner Terri LeBlanc shared that it is just as meaningful to provide learning experiences and support for students with special needs—a cause rooted deeply in the owners’ hearts. “We have family members who have special needs, and my husband has long served as a social worker, so our commitment to inclusivity is both personal and purposeful,” she said.

Over the last several years, the bookstore has welcomed two students who took on a wide variety of real-world tasks. From alphabetizing shelves and ensuring displays stay organized to completing special projects, entering data, and cataloging advanced reader copies, the students became an integral part of day-to-day operations. Their contributions not only supported the business but also brought joy, curiosity, and fresh perspectives into the shop.

“The students we’ve partnered with were so excited about books in general, but it was a real joy to work with students at various levels of learning. It was fun to bring together all these people who had a love for books, and to help give us ideas of which books to carry.”

The store’s commitment to community extends well beyond its walls. Working with multiple school districts, publishers, and authors, the bookstore regularly helps bring literary events into classrooms and

public spaces. Its location on 7th Avenue has become a hub for events featuring authors like Kay Arnold—who writes middle-grade and young adult novels—and John Patrick Green, who drew crowds from the local middle and high schools last year.

The bookstore also recently hosted the school districts' teacher-librarians where they exchanged ideas on how to improve aspects of the bookstore's website more effectively and brainstormed new ways to collaborate. One librarian returned the next morning seeking board book copies of classic children's books like Charlotte's Web and Frog and Toad—titles that are especially well suited for students with mobility challenges who may find paper books difficult to handle.

"Every year brings new ideas and new opportunities, and we love being part of it all," LeBlanc said.

Marion Chamber Partnership Brings Big Red Supply Company Pop-Up Store to Life

Marion's commitment to fostering student entrepreneurship was on full display as Big Red Supply Company, a store run by Marion High School students, launched a successful pop-up market with help from the Marion Chamber of Commerce. The student-led store, known for its handmade goods, was seeking a temporary retail space to sell its products.

Jill Ackerman, with the Marion Chamber, emphasized the importance

of collaboration between the Chamber and local schools. "Our relationships with both schools are phenomenal. We consider them some of our most important partners. They're a key factor in attracting families to our area. Any way we can support them, we will," she said.

Recognizing an opportunity to help the students elevate their program, Ackerman connected the high school with local property owner Jamie Hoth. That introduction opened the door for the students to use the former Maid-Rite building on Seventh Avenue and 10th Street as a temporary retail location during the Marion Chamber's Peppermint Walk this past winter. Marion Independent students worked months in advance to prepare products and determine their involvement.

"This was our first-ever market," said Kristi Dixon, a Marion Independent School District teacher. "I think it was a really great success."

The market benefited from high foot traffic and the lively downtown atmosphere as part of the winter celebration. "I think it was more successful because Small Business Saturday is a huge event," she said. "But the sheer excitement of Peppermint Walk and how busy that is—it puts everyone in one spot. We couldn't have asked for a better position to be front and center there."

Thanks to strong partnerships between the Chamber, local businesses and the school district, Big Red Supply Company continues to give students real-world

experience while strengthening community ties. And with the success of their first market behind them, the students are already looking ahead to future opportunities.

Refined Living Sees Positive Return on "Tuesdays with Julie"



Julie enjoyed partnering with Refined Living owner Keri Dahl during her work experience.

Along with her job coach, Linn-Mar High School senior Julie works alongside Refined Living owner Keri Dahl in the heart of Uptown Marion. From preparing packets for community events like the Chocolate Walk, Peppermint Walk and Galentine's event, to helping with pricing and organizing merchandise, Refined Living has extended the warmth of its home décor and small furnishings boutique to local students.

"Sometimes the work includes things that happen behind the scenes, but we're able to hop onto the cash register, too," Dahl said. "Julie knows how to greet customers when they arrive, how to scan the items, and how to say thank you when she completes the purchase."

This opportunity not only builds essential job skills for students like Julie, but also creates pride and excitement for students who are eager to learn. The impact extends beyond Marion. One Refined Living shopper from Iowa City shared that she would gladly make the drive back to Marion again because she loved seeing a local business so committed to inclusion and supporting high school students.

"We call it 'Tuesdays with Julie,' and we have fun working alongside her. I think she's learned a lot through her experience with us," Dahl said.



Jerimiah and Kristian worked at Big Red's Supply Co. at the New Bo City Market this spring after a successful start in Uptown Marion.

Students Swing for the Fences by Working with D-Bat Marion



D-Bat in Marion helped connect Braeden's love for sports with job tasks in his work experience.

D-Bat partnered with the local school job-experience program for the first time when presented with the opportunity to connect one student's interest in baseball with real job tasks. During his time at D-Bat, student Braeden took on a wide range of responsibilities, including stocking new items, taking inventory, cleaning and dusting, restocking shelves, reloading pitching machines, counting baseballs, cleaning the AstroTurf, sorting materials, and stocking drinks and vending machines. These tasks helped him develop independence, attention to detail, and workplace problem-solving.

When General Manager Rod Schulte was creating a flyer for an upcoming camp, he invited Braeden to help with the design. Together they worked on fonts, colors and layout — giving Braeden hands-on experience with digital tools and creative decision-making. It was a small moment with a big impact, offering a professional experience tied directly to something he cares about.

"The smile on their faces is always such a reward," Schulte said. "Seeing how excited they are to participate makes every moment worth it. We still have the picture we took with Braeden posted in our lobby. He left a special place in everyone's heart. We even gave him a signed D-Bat bat and a shirt, and he was absolutely thrilled."

The experience helped students like Braeden feel recognized and valued within the D-Bat community. Because so

many high school students use the facility for training and practice, Braeden often heard familiar voices in the Linn-Mar High School hallways calling out, "Hey! Maybe I'll see you at D-Bat later today!"

A Simple, Supportive Way for Businesses to Make a Difference

Depending on the needs of the students seeking job experiences, the support they receive may look slightly different.

All students begin by building employability skills and learning how to tap into their own abilities and interests to find a good work experience. This includes developing soft skills such as communication, teamwork, workplace etiquette, time management and problem-solving — skills employers consistently say make the biggest difference in long-term success.

Some students who benefit from additional assistance also are accompanied by a trained job coach who works directly with them on completing assigned activities.

"This support means the experience doesn't take away from the work of current employees, nor does it require staff to stop what they're doing to provide training or supervision," said Casey Robbins, Linn-Mar High School employment specialist, who helps students with preparation and on-the-job coaching. "Businesses often discover that even small contributions from students help support workplace flow while strengthening the student's confidence and skills."

Many partners express pleasant surprise at how seamless the program becomes, and how quickly students grow in their roles. Some admit they were initially unsure what students would be able to do but soon found themselves impressed by their enthusiasm, reliability and attention to detail.

Watching Students Flourish Outside the Classroom

For district staff, the most exciting part is witnessing the personal transforma-

tion that takes place when students step outside the classroom and into their community.

"For many students, we find that they respond much differently once they're out of the classroom setting. They love to work, and it's amazing to see how fast they flourish," Robbins said. "These businesses are giving our students something we simply cannot replicate within school walls."

Students not only learn practical job skills but also develop communication, teamwork and self-advocacy skills that will help them long after graduation. District staff also consistently hear positive feedback from business partners, many of whom say the program brings fresh energy into their workplace and reinforces their values of inclusion, community support and service.

Marion Independent teacher Brandee Gehl praised local businesses for their patience, understanding and willingness to support students through each step of the process. "Our business partners are remarkable," Gehl said. "Their patience and support make a world of difference for our students. We're grateful for the way they welcome our young people, guide them and celebrate their successes."

A Community Partnership That Matters

"These students have real skills to offer an employer," Robbins said. "When businesses step up to provide that opportunity, they become part of a larger community effort that strengthens everyone. And our students are thriving with the opportunity to learn, contribute and grow."

In the end, many find the partnership feels less like a program and more like being a good neighbor. As more businesses participate, more students gain access to meaningful experiences that prepare them for adulthood — and more workplaces discover just how easy and impactful it can be.

If you're affiliated with a local business and are interested in supporting students with special needs in your community, consider joining this growing network of partners! Start with a conversation at either Linn-Mar Community School District or Marion Independent School District by contacting the high schools to share your interest and learn more!

“PRACTICE MAKES PROGRESS”

When it comes to learning, student achievement often starts with small steps forward. At both Marion Independent School District and Linn-Mar Community School District, teachers and students embrace the idea that ‘practice makes progress.’ This philosophy is visible in many ways including using data in smart, simple ways to ensure progress is visible. These steady efforts add up to stronger skills and improved confidence for local students.

Wildly Important Goals Are Targets for Students at Both Districts



FranklinCovey’s Four Disciplines of Execution (4DX) is a framework designed to help organizations and schools turn important goals into real, measurable results. This framework helps buildings and teachers identify one or two “Wildly Important Goals” or WIGs to track, measure, and celebrate as progress on those goals is measured. In many buildings across the two districts, Linn-Mar and Marion Independent staff are working on how to use the structure in a way that best fits each district’s needs at the classroom level.

The education team at Linn-Mar’s Wilkins Elementary uses schoolwide and classroom WIGs in both academics and wellness. Instructional Coach Debra Barry said, “For example, we had a music teacher set a WIG to reduce reluctant learners in kindergarten during new song learning in music. She tracked student engagement then focused on consistently communicating expectations trying different strategies to keep kindergarten students engaged specifically during new song learning. This was a small, simple goal but it was grounded in data and made a big difference in her

classroom.” Barry notes that they have several levels of goal setting in their building, and use lead measures (or small, predictive action steps) to help tie teacher work to their building goals. They elevate the work by tracking their lead measures on scoreboards, and use weekly check-ins to see how they’re doing.

“We encourage our teams to keep their lead measures manageable,” Barry shared. “Doing one small thing consistently over time can make a big difference toward your goal.”

Measuring Healthy Improvements in Physical Fitness



Some students in PE classes in both districts are becoming active participants in their own fitness journeys by using data to better understand the impact of physical activity on their overall health. Using heart rate monitors, students can see in real time how adjustments in their activity can increase their heart rate. Their teachers help them use that data to set personal goals and celebrate healthy, moderate growth in a way that’s monitored and safe.

“Using heart rate monitors empowers students to take charge of their fitness journeys with a data-driven, instant feedback approach,” says Marion Independent Physical Education teacher Kyle VonBehren. “They learn to set goals, create a fitness plan, and establish healthy habits by evaluating the growth made while managing multiple types of exercise and training zones. It is a valuable, hands-on experience in sharpening the mind, optimizing performance, and managing stress, all aspects of a future leader working towards lifelong health and wellness.”

Building Healthy Reading Habits



While reading is a quiet activity, decades of research speak loudly to the impact of reading on the overall success of our students. “Tracking reading minutes isn’t actually about quantity,” explained Linn-Mar Director of Elementary Teaching and Learning Lori Manley. “At the earliest ages we want to begin building reading habits in our students and we know by reading regularly our students are building their ability to read fluently and improve their comprehension of what they’re reading,” she said.

Many times these measurement tools overlap. “We use Wildly Important Goals to help every child meet a literacy goal with their teacher at least twice a month,” said Principal Nicole Harmer from MISD Longfellow Elementary. “Students get to celebrate by ringing the bell and signing the board for all their classmates to see. They have been highly motivated to celebrate their learning like this.”

Data-Driven Support for Students Needing Support

Students in grades K- 6 across both districts are regularly assessed to look for strengths and opportunities for growth. The state of Iowa requires screening of students in both reading and math, which are not high-pressure tests, but are a simple way to ensure students don’t slip through the cracks. Screening data is used by teachers to prepare more focused lessons, guide targeted support for students who need it, and can increase the rigor for students who are ready for an additional challenge.

Today’s students know that practice doesn’t make perfect. But they know that practice absolutely makes progress.

SKILL-BUILDING / PROGRESSION OF STANDARDS

Let's take a closer look at how Marion and Linn-Mar students progress through core curriculum in our local classrooms.

Social Studies Standards: Making and Deepening Connections

A great social studies education does more than teach dates and facts; it helps children understand the people, places, and stories that shape their lives. Iowa's social studies standards ensure that every student can make meaningful connections between their own life and the wider world around them.



GRADES K-2

In the early grades, students begin by exploring the world right outside their front door. They learn about families, neighborhoods, rules, and traditions, and how communities change over time. Using simple maps, picture books, and hands-on activities, they start to see themselves as important members of a community.



GRADES 3-5

In these grades, students explore how the United States developed, and key events that shaped the United States. They are taught to ask thoughtful questions, learn how to review evidence, and begin learning about personal finance.



GRADES 6-8

Students are broadening their views from local and national history to a global perspective.

- ▶ 6th grade explores ancient civilizations and the Middle Ages—how people lived, governed and traded.
- ▶ 7th grade examines world regions, cultures, and modern global issues.
- ▶ 8th grade returns to American history, focusing on the nation's founding, growth, conflicts, and turning points.



GRADES 9-12

In high school, students take a deeper dive into U.S. history, civics/government, world history, geography, economics, and financial literacy. These classes help students learn how to make informed decisions, participate responsibly in democracy, and manage real-world financial and civic responsibilities.

Math Standards: Perseverance and Problem-Solving in Math Grade Bands

Math in our schools is about so much more than numbers on a worksheet—it's about curiosity, perseverance, and learning to tackle real-world problems with confidence. Across every grade, students build essential skills step by step, discovering that math is something you use to make sense of the world.



GRADES K-2

In the earliest grades, math includes hands-on discovery of learning activities. Students learn to count, compare and sort, and begin connecting math to everyday life. They learn to use rulers to measure objects, and how to explain their thinking using math words.



GRADES 3-5

Upper-elementary students make big leaps in understanding. They master multiplication and division, explore fractions in depth, and learn how area, arrays, and geometry connect to real-life problem-solving. Today's students are learning why math works, building strong reasoning skills that help them explain their strategies, and are choosing the right tools for tasks.



GRADES 6-8

Middle schoolers dive into more complex ideas such as ratios, proportions, algebraic expressions, geometry, and data analysis. This is when students start sounding like true problem-solvers by asking questions, debating strategies, and explaining their thinking out loud.



GRADES 9-12

With algebra readiness built throughout their K-8 years, high schoolers begin applying math to real-life decisions, advanced coursework, and future career pathways. High school math includes the classic courses—Algebra 1, Geometry, Algebra 2—but the focus is on much more than getting the right answer. They learn how to further advance their learning by using tools like a graphing calculator, digital software, and diagrams.

Students who progress through our Linn-Mar and Marion public schools are not just advancing from one grade to the next, they're building a strong foundation of skills designed to prepare them for life beyond graduation. Iowa's state academic standards outline clear learning goals at every grade level, and our teachers use these standards to help students grow from early readers and problem-solvers into confident thinkers who are ready for enlistment, college, careers, and citizenship.

Iowa Core standards for elementary students focus on foundational skills, exploration, and building conceptual understanding. Students across the state have grade-specific expectations in English Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies, and how they tackle these topics advances considerably based on their age and skill. While elementary students are building foundational skills and building conceptual understanding, as students move to middle school, we see students begin increasing their independence. High school students build upon concepts learned at the elementary and middle levels, as they apply their prior knowledge to analyze and solve increasingly complex problems.

Literacy Standards- Growing from Curiosity to Confidence

In literacy students shift quickly from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn.' The standards for literacy include literature, informational text, writing, speaking and listening skills, and grammar use in writing and speaking.



GRADES K-2

In these early years, students begin to understand how language works. They explore letters, sounds, and patterns while learning to answer big questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? Literacy for these little learners comes alive through stories, conversations, and hands-on activities designed to help build strong speaking, listening, and early writing skills.



GRADES 3-5

Upper-elementary students begin to write with purpose. They learn to craft opinion pieces, personal narratives, and research projects that help them make sense of the world around them. As they read more deeply, they start noticing how authors express ideas—skills that in turn turn them become thoughtful writers, too.



GRADES 6-8

Middle schoolers expand their literacy skills by diving into richer literature and more complex informational texts. They examine themes, analyze authors' choices, and evaluate how structure and word choice shape meaning. Writing also becomes more powerful as they craft arguments using evidence and clear organization. They learn how to showcase their communication skills through discussions and presentations.



GRADES 9-12

High school students tackle complex texts across subjects—from literature and history to science and technical materials. Writing becomes a tool for creating persuasive narratives and conducting research. They also learn to interpret data, charts, videos, and multimedia, skills that are essential for modern careers.

Science Standards- Building a Scientific Understanding

Science in our schools is a hands-on journey of asking questions, investigating ideas, designing solutions, and discovering how the world works. Iowa's science standards help students build understanding across physical, life, and earth sciences, preparing them to think critically and solve real-world problems from kindergarten through high school.



GRADES K-2

In the earliest years, children learn science through basic observations like pushing and pulling objects to see what happens, or watching how sunlight warms different surfaces. They learn the power of experimentation and even try beginning engineering challenges. These hands-on investigations help students start thinking like young scientists while also strengthening early reading, writing, and math skills.



GRADES 3-5

Students begin tackling more complex scientific ideas and showcase their learning by building models, collecting data, looking for patterns, and testing solutions to real-life problems.



GRADES 6-8

These students experience how different sciences are interconnected. They revisit major concepts over several years, each time with more depth and complexity. They also explore engineering by defining problems, testing prototypes, refining designs, and explaining their solutions. This approach gives students a deeper understanding of life, physical, and earth-space sciences while sharpening their scientific reasoning skills.



GRADES 9-12

High school science courses—including physical sciences, life sciences, earth and space sciences, and engineering/technology—help students deepen their understanding and apply science to real-world challenges. Students analyze data, construct models, design experiments, and solve problems using the scientific practices they've been building since kindergarten.

Schools use course pathways to ensure every student meets state standards, and those interested can take additional courses to pursue advanced topics.

Meet Your MISD and Linn-Mar Community BOARD OF DIRECTORS

School boards play a vital role in shaping the educational experience for students in our community. As the governing bodies for their respective districts, school boards establish the vision, goals, and expectations for public schools, ensuring students receive high-quality educational opportunities.

In the November 2025 elections, three seats were up for election on both the Marion Independent and Linn-Mar school boards. In Iowa, school board members are unpaid volunteers dedicated to serving their districts and making decisions that impact thousands of students and families. Board members serve four-year terms and work closely with district leadership to guide policy, manage resources, and uphold student success.

Linn-Mar Community School District Board of Directors

The Linn-Mar school board is made up of seven elected members who collectively serve approximately 7,500 students.

- Board meetings are open to the public and are held at the Educational Leadership Center, 3556 Winslow Road, Marion, Iowa.
- Board meeting information including agendas can be reviewed at policy.linnmar.k12.ia.us

Marion Independent School District Board of Education

The Marion Independent School District (MISD) Board of Education also includes seven elected community members, serving approximately 3,300 students.

- Board meetings are open to the public and are held at the MISD Administration Offices, 777 S. 15th Street, Marion, Iowa.
- Board meeting information including agendas can be reviewed at marion-isd.org/page/board-of-education

Elections and Community Involvement

Community engagement is essential to strong public schools. Attending meetings, staying informed, and participating in school board elections are all meaningful ways to support local students and ensure our districts continue to thrive.



Linn-Mar Community School District Board of Directors

Back row from left: Brittania Morey, Board Member. Term Expires Nov. 2027. Evan Langston, Board Member. Term Expires Nov. 2029. Jonathan Galbraith, Chief Financial/Operating Officer and Board Secretary/Treasurer (Appointed by the Board of Directors). Justin Foss, Vice President. Term Expires Nov. 2027.

Middle row from left: Midhat Mansoor, Board Member. Term Expires Nov. 2029. Laura Thomas, Board Member. Term Expires Nov. 2029.

Middle row from left: Amy Kortemeyer, Superintendent of Schools. Barry Buchholz, Board Member. Term Expires Nov. 2027. Katie Lowe Lancaster, President. Term Expires Nov. 2027.



Marion Independent School District Board of Directors

Back row from left: Denise Allison, Board Member. Term Expires Nov. 2027. Michelle Henry, Board Member. Term Expires Nov. 2027. Shari Funck, President. Term Expires 2029. Bryan Fentress, Board Member. Term Expires Nov. 2029.

Front row from left: Jon Fitch, Board Member. Term Expires Nov. 2027. Angelica Vannatta, Board Member. Term Expires Nov. 2029. Carl Lantermans, Vice President. Term Expires Nov. 2027.