
Press and Publicity Report

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This summer, thousands of kids in Pueblo learned that reading pays



By Shanna Lewis
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Micaiah Cisneros, 5, enjoyed reading during Pueblo's Reading Pays program this summer.

More than 7,000 children in Pueblo County earned \$100 each for reading this summer. They were in a program called [Reading Pays](#) and it was the first to use the Pueblo city and county cuts of American Rescue Plan Act or [ARPA funding](#). There was a rocky start for some kids, but a stellar finish for many of them.

Children from neighborhoods around the county participated in Reading Pays. They picked ten books from their local libraries, and then wrote, drew, or made videos about at least one.

Nine-year-old Olivia Gonzales made a video where she said she liked a book called "The Pride," which tells about the story of Harvey Milk and the rainbow pride flag. She also read another book called "Splat the Cat: First Day of School."

"I like it because he makes a lot of good friends and making friends is really fun," Gonzales said.

Antonio Mondragon produced a video too.

"Today we are going to make sugar cookies from this baking book from the library because ... part of that reading thing," he said in it, the oven beeping in the background.

Pueblo School District 60 literacy coach Abbie Spillman said she's happy that the monetary incentive got the kids reading more. "If that's what it takes to start with," she said, "and then they mature into realizing, hey, reading is just something that I need to be successful."

The program was open to any Pueblo County resident under 18. Nick Potter of the Pueblo City-County Library District managed it. He said the highest participation was among 8- to 10-year-olds.

"That's an age where kids are excited about reading and reading is fun," he said. "It's this whole new thing that you just learned how to do."

But over the course of the summer, organizers noticed a high rate of completion for children from more affluent neighborhoods, while youth from other areas often weren't completing the work. It was something Potter said they wanted to address.



Nick Potter, Pueblo City-County Library District Director of Community Relations and Development managed the Reading Pays program. He stands in front of the main library in Pueblo.

"When school was coming back in session, that was really a perfect time for us to get them back into an environment where they had a lot of stability and they had an adult there that was able to help them to complete the program," he said.

By working with school staff like Spillman, they helped the kids pick books, read and report on them in class. Potter said by doing so, they were able to radically boost the completion rate for children in some of the schools.

For example, Columbian Elementary School in south Pueblo raised the number of students finishing the Reading Pays program from 15 percent up to 95 percent by the time it ended.

"It is very significant, not just for our school, but for our town and for Pueblo," said Columbian principal Jimmie Pool, "just that excitement and to get them thinking about things and experiences that they can do."

The kids told him what they wanted to do with their \$100. Maybe get a dog. Or go to the pumpkin patch or spend it on a boat and a hula hoop.



Shanna Lewis/KRCC News

Pueblo School District 60 literacy coach Abbie Spillman and Columbian Elementary School principal Jimmie Pool helped students during Pueblo's Reading Pays summer program.

Pool and Spillman said at first a lot of the children and their parents thought the whole program sounded too good to be true.

"So many times kids are promised so many things and it doesn't happen for them for whatever reason," she said. "When they got it, oh my gosh, you want to talk about excitement there it was."

The kids talked about practical items they needed too, like school supplies. Potter said this level of reward is unusual for summer reading programs, which typically give away small items and coupons.

The program also had an incentive for the kids to save their earnings. If the participants opened a savings account and kept \$50 in it for a certain time frame, they would earn an additional \$10.

Pueblo mayor Nick Gradisar came up with the idea of paying kids \$100 for reading, because he said reading is an essential life skill, and he said that money would likely stay in the community. The more than \$700,000 cost of the program is split evenly between the city and the county. Gradisar said if ARPA funds come in as expected next year he'd like to see it happen again.

Black Friday - Santa Claus visiting Pueblo Mall - Pueblo Chieftain, The (CO) - November 26, 2021 - page A1
November 26, 2021 | Pueblo Chieftain, The (CO) | Tracy Harmon; Pueblo Chieftain | Page A1

Pueblo Mall merchants are gearing up for Black Friday deals and Santa Claus will make a special appearance to kick off the holiday shopping season on Black Friday.

With more than 50 shops and restaurants, the Pueblo Mall is an ideal one-stop location for shoppers. Black Friday kicks off early at 7 a.m. and runs through 9 p.m. on Nov. 26.

The highlight of the day will be the noon arrival of Santa Claus who will be transported to the mall by horse and carriage. Youngsters can have a chance to whisper their wishes in Santa's ear and have their picture taken with the jolly old elf with reduced wait times thanks to a new reservation system which can be accessed online at reservations.cherryhillprograms.com.

Santa will be hanging out in the festively decorated Santa Village at the mall which is spruced up and lit up with animated characters to welcome the holiday season.

"We will have a special event for the kids where they can decorate a sugar cookie and make a holiday craft. We were going to do that last year but it was canceled due to the COVID pandemic, so we are grateful to do it this year," said Cara Fitzgerald of Centennial Real Estate.

"Although Pueblo doesn't have some of the big city Black Friday mob scenes, the mall is going to have "additional security on that day just to be on the safe side."

While national news has highlighted staffing and supply shortages, Pueblo has not been immune to the challenges. A search of job websites shows several retailers are looking for seasonal sales associates in Pueblo.

Some of the jobs offer incentives like \$250 bonuses or 30% off merchandise.

"I have seen help needed and help wanted notices and some (businesses) have asked me to advertise the positions on our website so it (staffing shortage) has hit us here," Fitzgerald said. "But I have not heard from any of our Pueblo Mall stores that getting merchandise is an issue so far."

For those who still feel a bit uncomfortable about shopping in person, the mall is continuing its Retail to Go and Shop Now programs which started last year during the pandemic.

Last year's COVID-related slow down caused three businesses at the mall to close their doors. As 2022 approaches, Centennial staff are in negotiations with a new restaurant owner and several other tenants to fill those empty storefronts.

"We are excited for this holiday season and really excited for 2022. I think people have still been hesitant in 2021, but 2022 is looking strong," Fitzgerald said.

Other events on tap this holiday season include a 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. Dec. 5 sensory friendly Santa experience for children. The event will be hosted without the holiday music which can cause sensory overload for some children.

The mall also will partner with Kiwanis of Pueblo and the Rawlings Library for the 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dec. 11 Gingerbread Jubilee at the former Victoria's Secret location. A total of 500 gingerbread home making kits will be available for children and holiday stations will be set up throughout the mall.

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