

OUR MISSION: Read to Grow promotes language skills and literacy for children, beginning at birth, and supports families as their babies' first teachers.

Better Together

A message from Suzannah Holsenbeck, executive director

If you've ever been in conversation with me about Read to Grow, you've probably heard me say, "we're nothing without our partners."

- We are in partnership with families.
- We are in partnership with healthcare providers.
- We are in partnership with other nonprofits serving our communities.
- We are in partnership with teachers and early childcare educators.
- We are in partnership with authors and illustrators.
- We are in partnership with you, our supporters.

Without these partnerships, our mission to promote language and literacy skills for children and to support families as their babies' first teacher fails. Sometimes collaborative work can be easy and straightforward but more often than not, collaborative work is hard. It takes time and it takes commitment. It can be messy. But it is so very important.

The process of learning to read is quite literally a collective effort, requiring many partnerships within our own physical selves



and the community around us. For sighted people, our eyes, and the frontal, temporal and parietal regions of our brain must all function and communicate with each other to process the letters on a page and make meaning from the patterns. We must have at least one adult — imagine the power of having many caring adults — taking time to explicitly teach us the connections between letters and

sounds and vocabulary.

The team at Read to Grow has been busy exploring all sorts of new and expanded partnerships this year. Whether it's our new Books for Kids collaboration with the Community Health Network of CT to distribute thousands of English and bilingual Spanish English books to Husky Health hubs at barbershops, grocery stores, schools and other sites around the state, or a featured lineup of read-alouds and activities called "Read Together" with Read to Grow, Play Sparkler CT and five local Connecticut authors during Read Across America week (the read-alouds can be found online (<https://playsparkler.org/readtogether/>) or on the Play Sparkler App, Read to Grow is working hand in hand with many different constituencies to ensure children and families have both support and access to high quality literacy experiences. We are thrilled to bring our message to the capitol in a few weeks at a Legislative Roundtable focused on the impact of investing in early literacy on Connecticut's children. Will you join us in this collective effort? We need everyone!

Celebrating Outgoing Board Chair and Board Chair Elect

After more than a decade of dedicated service as a Read to Grow board member, and after serving two terms as board chair, Jeff Hartmann will be stepping down from his role. Beginning July 1, 2024, Dr. Monette Ferguson will begin her first term as board chair.

Jeff successfully guided the board through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and has been an active leader from day one. We're immensely grateful to Jeff for his wise counsel and generous, supportive leadership. We are excited to welcome Dr. Ferguson as chair and look forward to growth and expansion under her leadership.

Dr. Ferguson brings a deep love for and commitment to Read to Grow to the position of chair. She has been a member of the board since 2021 and served two years as

vice chair and has served on the Executive and Development committees. As executive director of the Alliance for Community Empowerment (formerly ABCD, Inc.) since 2018, Dr. Ferguson applies valuable lessons learned from childhood along with her education and training to her tireless commitment to helping others rise out of poverty. She has led the Alliance to fight against poverty, assisting more than 45,000 low-income individuals with vital resources, including energy assistance, housing, education, employment, and other basic needs such as food insecurities.

"Throughout her years of dedicated service to RTG, Dr. Ferguson has been an active and engaged member," said Jeff Hartmann. "There is widespread appreciation and



Jeff Hartmann, outgoing board chair, and Dr. Monette Ferguson, board chair elect.

respect for her insight, non-profit leadership, management experience, values, and wisdom. I am confident that Dr. Ferguson will be a superb and dedicated leader for the RTG board of directors."

Read to Grow Welcomes New Board Member Barbara Clerkin

The Read to Grow board is delighted to announce that Barbara Clerkin, RN, has joined the Read to Grow board this spring. Clerkin holds a masters in public health nursing from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an undergraduate nursing degree from The Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Most of her career has been in delivering quality and caring care for cancer patients as a clinical nurse and an administrator of multi-specialty practices at UCLA. She retired from UCLA in 2014 and moved back to the East Coast with her husband, Tom, and golden retriever, Lola, making Madison, CT their new home. Recently, Clerkin had an opportunity to work with a former UCLA colleague on a

pancreatic research study at YNH for several years. The pandemic officially brought a close to an impressive and enjoyable career. Since moving to Madison, she has been involved in literacy volunteer work and kayaking the Neck River. Clerkin joined the volunteer team at Read to Grow in 2023 and continues to regularly volunteer her time to assemble literacy packets for the Books for Babies program. “We are thrilled to welcome Barbara to the board,” said Jen Fusco, governance chair. “Her extensive background in providing high-quality care in clinical settings and her passion for bridging research and application will be so valuable as Read to Grow moves forward.”



Books for Babies: Creation through Community Collaboration

There’s a wise African proverb that states: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. Those sage words apply to the work we do every day and they are especially powerful as we launch our first Prenatal First Guide.

At Read to Grow, we continually strive to improve our literacy messaging and through listening to our community partners, we set to work creating a compelling and beautiful First Guide for expectant families, a companion guide to the First Guide for Families of Newborns that families receive once they’ve welcomed baby in the hospital.

The best heads and hearts were involved in this project. Members from each of our community health partners participated in focus groups, offering insights, perspectives, and opinions about what a Prenatal First Guide should communicate and what they thought it could look like. Our partners are front-facing, that is, talking with the expectant families who would be receiving this new messaging piece. We need their wisdom.

Then we tapped into the diverse and varied viewpoints of our staff, all of whom are mothers. We used our newborn First Guide as a guiding document creating a mind map the length of an office wall, where all Read to Grow staff could participate. We placed stick-it notes, cut out pictures and inspiring quotes, and pinned them on the wall. All this began more than two years ago. And like a

pregnancy, our project grew and changed, occasionally kicked, and was born to all our delight.

The final product is designed as an accordion, the colorful tabs unfold to offer simple sage encouragement with reading and literacy as the connecting theme. Beginning this spring, the Prenatal First Guide will be placed in the first of two prenatal session packets for every expectant family receiving prenatal care with our community health partners.

I think you’ll agree, we have come far together.

Laura Noe, Books for Babies Manager



Volunteers and staff celebrating the first printing of our new Prenatal First Guide for Expecting Families.

Books for Kids: Celebrating Zuri

Read to Grow celebrates Zuri, who has generously donated more than 500 books this year! Zuri’s journey with us began when she received her first Read To Grow book at Bridgeport Hospital after she was born. Zuri went above and beyond to ensure that the books were in excellent condition, diverse, and inspiring. Zuri shared, “my inspiration was to help young readers get a head start on learning how to read.” We are immensely grateful to everyone who contributes to our organization through book donations. Your support means the world to us! *Interested in running a book drive? Please visit readtogrow.org to learn more.*



NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

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Celebrating Financial Literacy Month

Money management skills are critical for long-term financial success. To help provide individuals of all ages with the confidence and tools to own their financial decisions and build brighter futures, Citizens is proud to support local partners like Read to Grow and their Popcorn to PJs program. In recognition of Financial Literacy Month in April, the featured book, *Lemonade in Winter*, by Emily Jenkins, teaches children how to count money.

We believe it is never too early to start teaching children about responsible financing. Here are some healthy money habits children can develop at home.

- As early as age three, begin teaching children the names of coins and encourage their participation in using money in daily transactions.
- Teach children how to budget by showing them how to allocate money for different expenses such as toys, snacks, and savings.
- Around age five, incorporate the difference between needs and wants in conversation.

- Teach children that you need to work to earn money; an allowance earned from doing simple household chores is a good way to start.
- As children get older, teach them about debt, saving for college and the importance of giving back.

At Citizens, we are here to support your financial journey. Our customer service teams are ready to listen and offer guidance to help you be prepared for right now and for what's next for you and your family. For additional financial tip and resources, check out our online learning (www.citizensbank.com/learning) or visit one of our local branches to meet with a financial planner.

Lisa Maass, Citizens Connecticut State President and Read to Grow Board Member



Read to Grow has distributed more than 75,000 books and participated in more than 80 community events around CT since June. Please help us reach more children.





building literacy from birth

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Two Ways to Support Read to Grow

Two Days of Online Giving
Help us reach our \$20,000 fundraising goal!




THE great Give
MAY 1-2, 2024
A 36-hour, online-giving event
to support local nonprofits




READ TO GROW *presents*

A NIGHT FOR THE BOOKS
Literacy Champion Awards & Fundraiser
At the Westport Library

6 P.M. THURSDAY,
MAY 2, 2024

Enjoy delicious food and drinks based on children's books, and celebrate our 2024 Literacy Champions: Representative Johnson, Kymberlee Powe, Susan Weinberger and Carol Bauer, and our INAUGURAL Book Joy Award Winner and PBS Librarian in Residence, Mychal Threets


