

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

# Reading Is a Science

*A message from Suzannah Holsenbeck, executive director*

Pick up any newspaper these days and you are bound to see an article or op-ed about the new reading wars. The difference this time is that it seems we are not so much fighting a war as we are finally accepting that there are better, known, and most importantly, scientifically proven ways to teach reading. We are starting to admit that maybe nothing was wrong with the overwhelming number of children who didn't learn to read well across the country over the last twenty or so years and that the real problem was that we failed them by using curriculum and teaching methods not actually conducive to fostering decoding, fluency and comprehension skills in the early grades. At a time when most things are politicized and polarized, there seems to be uncommon consensus that we can do better when it comes to teaching children how to read.

When I graduated from college, my first job was teaching high school special education



on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. The majority of my freshman and sophomore students were reading at best at a third-grade level. I was sent to many professional development trainings focused on the Readers and Writers workshop method; I was encouraged to have my students engage in silent, sustained reading for twenty minutes each day and I was told that if they could do that (the silent, twenty minute part) that

they would improve whole grade levels in reading. It felt like a magical equation and there wasn't a whole lot of explanation for why those methods might actually work. When my students didn't show much growth in reading by the end of the first year, and then even less the second year, it was very easy to believe that something was wrong with my teaching and not the curriculum or methods I was told to employ. If I could go back in time, I would apologize to every single student I taught for not speaking up when I knew

in my heart that we were not giving them the tools to succeed. How could a 14-year-old who didn't know that "ea" makes a long "e" sound or that "igh" makes a long "i" sound improve their reading silently staring at pages of words they had never been given the direct instruction to decode?

In 2021, Connecticut passed the "Right to Read" legislation that mandates that state and

*(continued on page 2)*

## Read to Grow Receives State Funding to Scale Up Books for Babies Program

When Governor Lamont signed the most recent two year state budget into law this past June, the final version included appropriated funds for early literacy programming and Read to Grow, Reach Out & Read, and United Way of Central and Northeastern CT were included. Thanks to the hard work of Representative Dominique Johnson and the many voices that gave testimony to the

importance of early literacy, Connecticut has committed to investing in critical early literacy initiatives. Currently, Read to Grow reaches 60% of the prenatal and newborn population annually across the state through our partnerships with 14 birthing hospitals and 9 community health clinics. The funding Read to Grow will receive from the state this year and next will enable us to scale up our newborn

work with the remaining 7–9 birthing hospitals not yet in partnership with Read to Grow. That means that in about two years every baby born in Connecticut—nearly 35,000 annually—will receive their first book in the hospital and their families will receive supportive, empowering information about the importance of reading, singing and talking with their babies.



L–R: Sen. Bob Duff, Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz, ED Suzannah Holsenbeck, Rep. Dominique Johnson and Rep. Kadeem Roberts.



Read to Grow, Reach Out & Read, and United Way of Central and Northeastern CT join legislators at Norwalk Hospital to celebrate state funding.

### Our Annual Report and Appreciations

*Please see pages 4–7 for our annual report and treasurer's report for the 2022–23 fiscal year, which ended June 30, 2023.*

*Also on those pages is our appreciation to donors, book-drive organizers and volunteers.*

# Early Literacy Workshop Series Pilot in Bridgeport



A parent and child share a book together during the literacy workshop.

This year our Bridgeport Early Steps to School Success (ESSS) team kicked off our first annual Read to Grow Together workshop series in partnership with Alliance for Community Empowerment. This workshop series was developed to support families as their children's first teachers and to provide them with the tools and resources to help their children become the strongest readers they can be. Our coordinators discussed various topics throughout this workshop series, such as talking and reading with our children, developmental stages, what it means to read aloud, how to choose books and engaging with words in the world around us. To support families in building home libraries and encourage

continued home learning opportunities, they received two books after each session along with educational learning materials including alphabet magnets, whiteboards, markers, crayons and many more goodies to support their child's early literacy skills.

The last workshop included a visit from our Read to Grow Bookmobile packed with an array of quality, diverse books for children to choose from. In the end, our Read to Grow Together workshops provided families with paramount information, materials to support their child's learning, and an opportunity to build meaningful connections with members of the community.

Lakenya Watford, ESSS coordinator

## Payton's Book

On a warm August afternoon, four-and-a-half-year-old Payton Payen and his mom, Althea Green, stepped into the Bookmobile. Althea looked at the books while Payton paced the Bookmobile, which had made a visit to the Optimus Healthcare Health Fair.

"Look Payton, a book about bikes," pointed Althea.

"Bike," repeated Payton. They chose a book titled *Do you Like My Bike?* from the Bookmobile to add to their home library. Familiar with Read to Grow's programs, Althea had requested books from us in the past and shared that Payton, who is neurodivergent and mostly non-verbal, is teaching himself Arabic.

"No one in our family speaks Arabic or any

language that is even close to it," Althea, who only speaks English reveals. "Payton likes to draw out the Arabic alphabets." On this day, the Bookmobile inventory did not include any books in Arabic, but our Books for Babies Coordinator Laura Noe was quick to suggest she could keep books in Arabic aside for Payton for our next stop in Bridgeport.

A week later at the back-to-school event, Payton's face lit up when Books for Kids Coordinator Evelyn Tomasello placed a book written in Arabic in his hands. Payton devoured the book—an Arabic-English version of *Cows Can't Jump*. "We provide books to all children, and when we are able to make a specific connection for a child who may learn

differently, it can make a world of difference to that child and that family," shared Noe. Shitu Rajbhandari, Grants Writer



Payton and his mother Althea are so happy to be connected to Read to Grow.

## READING IS A SCIENCE

(continued from page 1)

local school districts utilize science of reading curriculum for kindergarten through third grade and provides an infrastructure to support the professional development necessary for this shift in learning and implementation of science of reading curriculum for teachers and school administrators. Teachers by and large are responding with excitement and relief because they see the difference in outcomes for students first hand.

The perennial question at Read to Grow has grown more critical over time: how can we support families in being their child's first teacher even before they reach school? Reading is not a natural human action. We aren't born reading, but we are born ready to learn. The human brain has a tremendous capacity to take in information from the world around it and identify patterns and connections. With the explosion of neuroscience research over the past twenty

years, we know the parts of the brain that are activated when children are learning to read and what happens when a child as young as six months is read to daily by a human versus relying on a screen. We know that when caregivers spend time connecting with young children singing, talking and reading together, that the development of white matter—the connecting fibers in the brain that transmit information—is strengthened. Read to Grow remains laser focused on ensuring that all families in Connecticut are empowered with the knowledge that literacy begins at birth and to provide the tools and resources families need to foster language development and a love of reading with their children so that when they reach the developmentally appropriate age for more explicit instruction, they will readily learn that "ea" makes a long "e" sound and can unlock the the language on a page and in turn a world of opportunity.

### NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

A publication of Read to Grow, Inc.  
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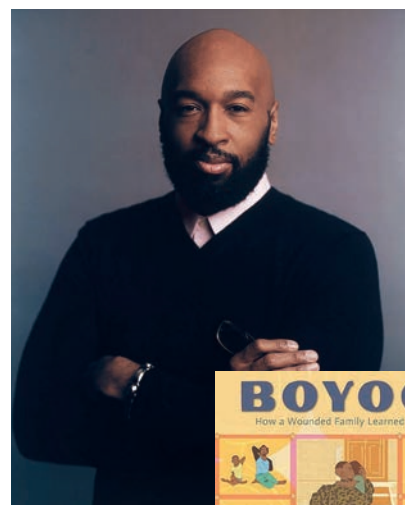


# Popcorn & PJs Launches Fourth Season

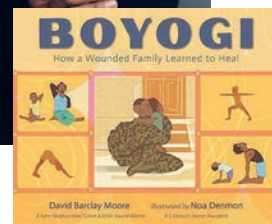
Popcorn & PJs is back by popular demand and we are thrilled to launch another dynamic season of virtual story time experiences. Families who participate report a high rate of satisfaction with the ease of remote participation, the quality of the books provided, the engagement and conversation with the authors and illustrators, and the ongoing learning their children demonstrate as a result of the monthly live events. One parent shared that her “four-year-old now always asks who the author and illustrator are when we sit down to read a book together.” Whether it’s John Steptoe Award-winner David Barclay Moore sharing his new picture book *Boyogi*, Julian Is a Mermaid author and illustrator Jessica Love sharing her new book

*A Bed of Stars*, return favorites e.E. Trujillo and Pat Zeitlow Miller reading their latest Lupe Lopez title *Lupe Lopez: Reading Rock Star*, or newcomer Andrea Caceré’s bilingual adventure *My Dog Only Speaks Spanish*, this season has something for everyone.

Popcorn & PJs packages make a terrific gift for the 3–7-year-olds in your life. Go to [readtogrow.org](http://readtogrow.org) or scan the QR code here to learn more and purchase a package. To sponsor the participation of a family or group of families from one of our community partner organizations, please email [readtogrow@readtogrow.org](mailto:readtogrow@readtogrow.org). All proceeds go to support Read to Grow’s critical early literacy programming.



Author David Barclay Moore



**Read to Grow has distributed 30,000 books since June.  
Please consider donating to help us reach even more children.**





## A MESSAGE FROM JANE LEE

Read to Grow's July 2022–June 2023 year saw the expansion of programming in response to community need. We celebrate the following highlights:

- Over the course of the year, our Books for Babies program distributed 37,300 books to 23,300 expecting families and families with newborns; Books for Kids provided 55,300 children's books to 14,750 children and their families; and Early Steps to School Success delivered 4,800 books to the children they serve.
- In September, 2022, we launched our new, highly popular Bookmobile, which made 47 stops across the state and gave out 6,450 books to delighted children. We are grateful to Centreville Bank who funded the Bookmobile.
- In Fall 2022, we announced our third season of Popcorn & PJs: Virtual Family Storytimes with sponsorships from Citizens Bank, Connecticut Humanities, and Elm City Communities. The seven author experiences were enjoyed by more than 1,100 attendees.
- In November, 2022, the Newborn Project expanded to Norwalk Hospital and now serves 14 Connecticut hospitals.
- In January 2023, the NICU Project launched at Hospital of Central Connecticut in New Britain, the third location for our NICU work through which we provide literacy support and books to families of sick and preterm infants receiving care in the neonatal intensive care units.
- In May 2023, we held a "Literacy in Bloom" event at the Pond House in Elizabeth Park in Hartford. Our celebration honored three Literacy Champions: Updike, Kelly and Spellacy; Hartford Hospital and the Hartford Hospital Auxiliary; and Nichole Hawkins, Hartford Public Library. These Literacy Champions were recognized for going above and beyond to increase access to high-quality early literacy experiences for children and families.
- With assistance from nonprofit consultant Cathy Cohen, the board of directors created and approved a new three-year strategic plan in Spring 2023.
- We received an incredibly generous three-year total grant of \$525,000 from the Seedlings Foundation to help sustain and expand our literacy work in Connecticut.
- Our dedicated crew of amazing volunteers served a total of 3,233 hours, which is valued at \$111,741.
- We received a clean audit from our auditors at Whittlesey.

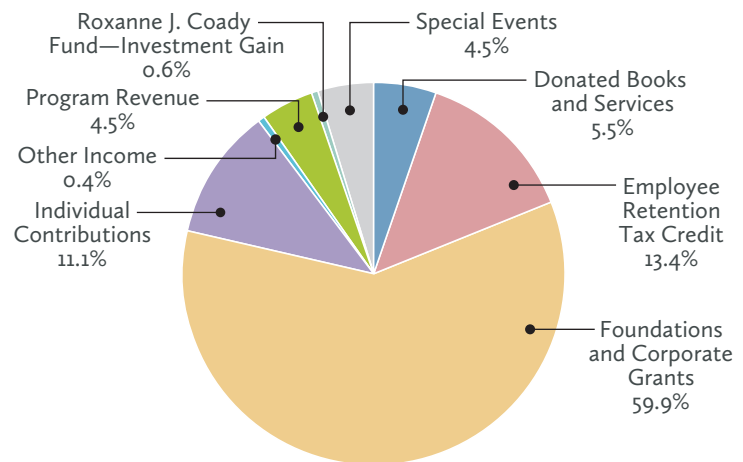
We are humbled and deeply grateful for the wonderful support of our volunteers and donors who enable us to continue our critical early literacy work across Connecticut.

Jane Lee, Treasurer  
Read to Grow Board

This annual report is available online at [www.readtogrow.org/about-us/annual-reports/](http://www.readtogrow.org/about-us/annual-reports/)

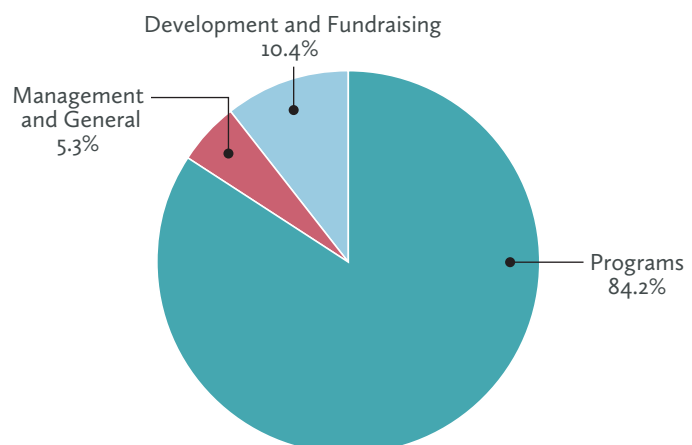
### PUBLIC SUPPORT AND REVENUES

Donated Books and Services	\$ 91,773
Employee Retention Tax Credit	224,927
Foundations and Corporate Grants	1,003,485
Individual Contributions	186,685
Other Income	7,232
Program Revenue	75,400
Roxanne J. Coady Fund—Investment Gain	9,930
Special Events	75,324
<b>Total Public Support and Revenues</b>	<b>\$ 1,674,756</b>



### FUNCTIONAL EXPENSES

Programs	\$ 1,240,186
Management and General	78,701
Development and Fundraising	153,655
<b>Total Functional Expenses</b>	<b>1,472,542</b>
<b>Change in Net Assets</b>	<b>\$ 202,214</b>







We thank all our donors in the last fiscal year (July 1, 2022–June 30, 2023). The names of donors who gave “In Honor” or “In Memory” of someone appear in those special categories near the end of the listings.

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We are so grateful for our incredible volunteers who gave a combined total of 3,233 hours to our programs, which is the equivalent of \$111,741.

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## Prenatal Literacy Project Strengthens Curriculum and Resources

Our prenatal program, now in its seventh year, is growing just like the families we serve. We partner with nine community health centers at 13 different locations. Our collaborations currently serve an at-need population in seven of the eight counties in Connecticut.

Our healthcare partners provide Read to Grow prenatal literacy packets and early literacy messaging to expecting families at their 13-week and 28-week checkups. The first session includes literacy materials that clearly and succinctly explain to families the



UConn Health Prenatal Parenting class members visit the Bookmobile with their infants.

positive impact reading, singing and talking to their baby, even in utero, has on their little one's brain development. We also include a sing-along, rhyming board book to help families start a home library and encourage the playful, joyful reading and engagement that comes with sharing a book. The second session includes prompts for families to reflect on their own experiences with reading and the encouragement to write down their hopes, dreams and plan for their child's literacy journey; we also include a black and white board book to align with our messaging about ocular development in the early months after birth.

We work closely with our partners to ensure their families feel seen and heard. One of the most impactful ways we do this is by providing bilingual books in their native language. Our prenatal informational materials have been offered in English and Spanish, and this summer we expanded the language offering to include Portuguese in response to requests from providers in both Hartford and Bridgeport who serve a large Portuguese-speaking population. In addition we try our best to maintain an inventory of books in

nine languages, including Arabic, Mandarin, Dari, English, Filipino/Tagalog, French Creole, Pashto, Portuguese and Spanish.

*Laura Noe, Books for Babies coordinator*



Coordinator Noe drops off Prenatal Literacy materials to Nurse Manager Ogbjesi at 150 Sargent Drive in New Haven.