

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

Celebrating 25 Years and Preparing for the Next Chapter

A message from Suzannah Holsenbeck, executive director

More than a quarter century ago, a group of thoughtful, generous women gathered together to figure out a solution to illiteracy and lack of book access in Connecticut. Driven by the knowledge that not all children have books of their own at home, they parked a school bus outside of Fair Haven Community Health Clinic in New Haven and rallied the community to fill the bus with children's books, which were then distributed to families coming for appointments at the clinic. But the founders knew that they had to do more to change outcomes from the beginning of a child's life and they saw an opportunity to support families starting when their child was born. They began handing out baby books on the maternity floor at Yale New Haven Hospital and, armed with helpful information from the burgeoning field of brain science research, talked to families about the importance of reading, singing and talking to their babies.

Fast forward to today, and Read to Grow will be officially celebrating 25 years in 2025! We hope you'll join us on May 1 at the Westport Library, where we'll celebrate "A Night For The Books: Read to Grow's 25th Anniversary Celebration, Literacy Champion Awards and Fundraiser." There's a lot to



The youngest attendee and her mother at Read to Grow's Fall Into Reading Family Day.

celebrate: we have distributed more than 3 million books to more than 2 million people. Our Books for Babies program gives books to every baby born in 19 of Connecticut's 23 birthing hospitals and we will reach all 23 hospitals in 2025! Our Books for Kids program works with more than 200 organizations and childcare centers across the state every year and responds to thousands of CT families who submit book requests online. Our Bookmobile celebrated its second birthday in September

and has made nearly 200 stops in every county in the state.

But our work is far from over. According to the National Literacy Institute, 54% of adults nationwide read at or below a 6th-grade reading level. This has real consequences for individuals and for society as a whole in all spheres of life, including the personal, professional and medical: it is estimated that low levels of literacy costs the United States more than \$2.2 trillion (*Forbes*, 2020). Meanwhile, with the proliferation of various technologies and the advent of Artificial Intelligence, the ways we engage with text grows increasingly complex and the necessity of ensuring our children are literate in many ways and across many mediums only deepens.

Please join us as we prepare for Read to Grow's next chapter. As the premiere early literacy resource in Connecticut, we are honing our focus on the best ways to support families and children with early literacy and access to books, we are expanding and deepening our partnerships, and we are harnessing technology to improve the types of data we collect and the ways in which we do so to better inform our impact. Babies never stop being born and Read to Grow has no plans to stop providing each baby with their first joyful reading experience.

Books for Babies Continued Expansion



A Danbury Hospital physician checks out the Bookmobile.

At Read to Grow, we believe in the importance of partnership, a principle reflected in every aspect of our work. Our Books for Babies program serves as an example of this commitment. For the past 25 years, Books for Babies has cultivated relationships with the staff of hospitals, clinics, and birthing centers across the state.

Read to Grow's focus on expanding and improving Books for Babies has led to the establishment of several new partnerships, significantly broadening our reach. Since last spring, we have launched the Prenatal Project at Norwalk Community Health Center, the NICU Project at St. Vincent's Medical Center in Bridgeport and the Newborn Literacy Project at the Hospital of Central Connecticut in New Britain, Families are First Birthing

(continued on page 2)

Our Annual Report and Appreciations

Please see pages 4-7 for our annual report and treasurer's report for the 2023-24 fiscal year, which ended June 30, 2024. Also on those pages is our appreciation to donors, book-drive organizers and volunteers.

Read to Grow Welcomes New Board Members

Read to Grow is thrilled to welcome three new board members to the board of directors: Dr. Katherine Kohari, Nick Lebron and Irene Peluso. “Our new board members represent the diversity of background, geography and experience that helps make Read to Grow the successful organization it is,” shared Dr. Ferguson, board chair.

Dr. Kohari joined the Yale School of Medicine obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive medicine department’s division of maternal-fetal medicine in 2014, and her clinical expertise is focused primarily on prenatal ultrasound and diagnosis. She received copies of *Welcome to the World!* when she had her own children at Yale New Haven Hospital!

Nick Lebron was born and raised in Hartford and continues to serve the Hartford community with a focus on serving families who don’t fit the traditional mold. His career has taken him in many directions, including advancing gun control legislation and the rights of our LGBT+ community members, as well as piloting HEART, an innovative and first of its kind 911 response program. Lebron currently manages operations and community partnerships to provide wraparound services for Hartford children and families.

Irene Peluso is a talent development senior associate on the human resources team at Viking Global Investors. Prior to joining Viking in 2016, Irene was a substitute teacher in Simsbury, Connecticut. Irene first learned about Read to Grow while serving on a grants committee that identifies potential organizations to partner with in the early childhood space.



Dr. Katherine Kohari



Nick Lebron



Irene Peluso

Additions to the Read to Grow Team

As Read to Grow continues to expand, so too do the responsibilities of our staff and volunteers. With the growing number of children and families we serve, it’s essential to ensure that our staff can keep pace. Addressing the diverse and evolving needs of our community requires not just maintaining but enhancing our capacity to deliver impactful services. We are excited to announce the addition of three new staff members who are playing pivotal roles in our continued success.

Kascia Williams has joined us as our new program director. In this role, Kascia is instrumental in refining and expanding our programs. Her leadership will ensure that our initiatives not only grow but also achieve greater depth and impact. By focusing on enhancing the quality and effectiveness of our programs, Kascia will help us ensure that our team is supported in delivering meaningful outcomes and continuing to meet the high

standards we set for ourselves.

Deja Senna-Leslie has come on board as our communications coordinator. Deja’s expertise is crucial in elevating our media presence and outreach efforts. Deja is working to amplify our message and broaden our reach. Her work is key in raising awareness about

Read to Grow, attracting new supporters, and strengthening our community connections.

Cynthia Beuns-Parker has joined the team as our new Books for Babies program manager. Originally from New York with a depth of experience as a case manager with various agencies serving families, Cynthia will be focused on the expansion of the Books for Babies program and the ongoing relationship building across hospitals, clinics and other sites.



Enthusiastic readers on a field trip to Read to Grow.

BOOKS FOR BABIES CONTINUED EXPANSION



Norwalk Community Health Center launch.

(continued from page 1)

Center at Bristol Hospital, and The MidState Medical Center Family Birthing Center in Meriden.

The expansion of Books for Babies reflects the growing recognition of the program’s value and impact. Each new partnership enhances our ability to provide essential literacy resources to families at a crucial point in their child’s development. Our goal is for Books for Babies to be available in every birthing hospital throughout Connecticut and we are now only five hospital partnerships away from this reality.

NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

A publication of Read to Grow, Inc.
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Books for Kids Receives Tremendous Donation

This summer, Books for Kids received a generous donation from Filling in the Blanks, an amazing organization dedicated to fighting childhood hunger. Filling in the Blanks has distributed more than 3 million meals to children from low-income households via 200 sites throughout Fairfield and Westchester counties. Filling in the Blanks donated more than 3,800 young adult books to Read to Grow throughout July and August.

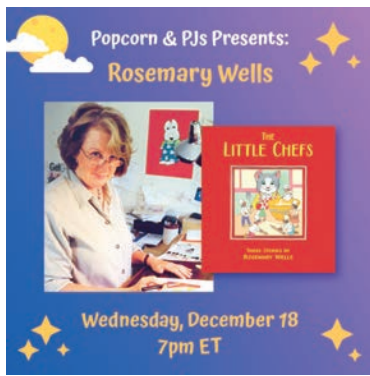
While the sheer volume of this donation is impressive, what truly makes it special is what it represents: the compassion displayed by Filling in the Blanks symbolizes the solidarity that Read to Grow shares with like-minded community action organizations throughout Connecticut. While Read to Grow focuses

on supporting young children, the Filling in the Blanks' donation has allowed us to be responsive to the growing community need for young adult books. We hear weekly from teachers and other community organizations who are trying to support their students as they strive to catch up on their literacy skills, especially since the disruption of COVID.

We continue to work hand-in-hand with nonprofits across the state that work tirelessly toward a better future for all children and families in need. Filling in the Blanks' donation is not just a single act of goodwill; it reflects the collective efforts of a vast network of dedicated individuals striving to create a brighter tomorrow for the beloved communities they serve.



Filling in the Blanks drops off thousands of new books.

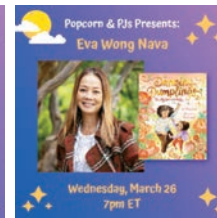


For tickets visit readtogrow.org.

Popcorn & PJs Launches 2024–2025 Season

Did you know that the latest Popcorn & PJs season has just begun? This year we're thrilled to host an extraordinary lineup of authors, including the legendary Rosemary Wells, creator of the beloved Max and Ruby series. Dive into the magic of storytelling with some remarkable voices and ignite your child's imagination from the comfort of your home. Popcorn & PJs also makes a terrific holiday gift for the little ones in your life.

For all the details on this year's authors and to grab your tickets, visit our website today!



The Bookmobile Turns Two!

This fall, Read to Grow is proud to celebrate the Bookmobile's 2nd birthday! That's right—our literacy resource on wheels has been traveling across the state to meet the growing demand for diverse, high-quality books for two whole years.

Since it was first introduced, the Bookmobile has been a game changer, allowing us to go directly to the communities that need us. Every one of our stops has made a positive impact in the lives of the children and families who come on board.

In just this short time, the Bookmobile has made nearly 200 stops and distributed more than 20,000 books. That's an incredible achievement, and we're committed to continuing this important work. Here's to another year of spreading joy and sharing books with our beloved Bookmobile!



**Happy Birthday Bookmobile
20,000 books and counting!**



A MESSAGE FROM JANE LEE

Read to Grow’s fiscal year from July 2023–June 2024 saw the expansion of programming in response to community needs. We celebrate the following highlights:

- Books for Babies distributed 41,175 books to 23,800 expecting families and families with newborns.
- Books for Kids provided 60,600 children’s books to 19,800 children and their families.
- Our highly popular Bookmobile made 94 stops across the state and gave out 9,464 books to delighted children.
- Early Steps to School Success (ESSS) delivered 2,675 books to the children they served. From 2019–2024, Read to Grow partnered with Save the Children to offer ESSS to families in New Haven and Bridgeport. The program helped prepare children for school success through home visits, parent-child playgroups, and school-based book distributions. In 2023, Save the Children informed us that it would discontinue the ESSS program in urban settings and the program was sunsetted in March 2024.
- In September 2023, we announced our fourth season of Popcorn & PJs: Virtual Family Storytimes with sponsorships from Citizens Bank and Connecticut Humanities. The seven author experiences were enjoyed by more than 600 families.
- In May 2024, the Newborn Project expanded to the Hospital of Central Connecticut and the NICU Project launched at St. Vincent’s Medical Center in Bridgeport, the fourth location through which we provide literacy support and books to families of infants receiving care in neonatal intensive care units.
- In May 2024, we held “A Night for the Books” at the Westport Library. Our celebration honored Literacy Champions Kym Powe, Carol Bauer and Susan Weinberger, Representative Dominique Johnson and our first Book Joy Award recipient: PBS librarian-in-residence, Mychal Threats.
- Our dedicated crew of amazing volunteers served a total of 3,387 hours, which is valued at \$123,428.
- We received a clean audit from the accounting firm Whittlesey.

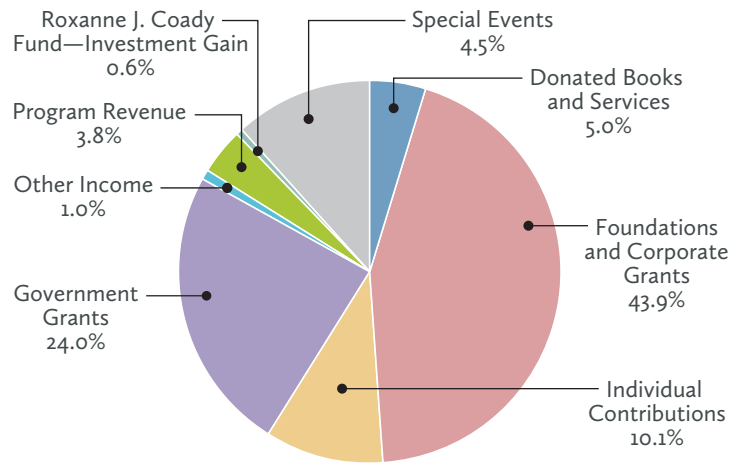
We are humbled and deeply grateful for the wonderful support of our volunteers and donors who enable us to continue our critical early literacy work across Connecticut.

Jane Lee, Treasurer
Read to Grow Board

This annual report is available online at www.readtogrow.org/about-us/annual-reports/

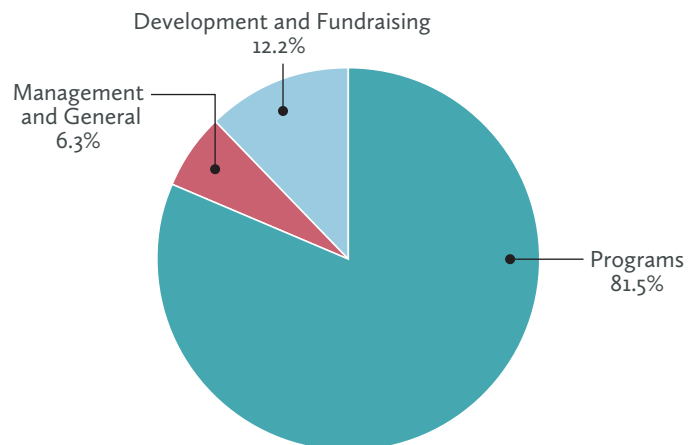
PUBLIC SUPPORT AND REVENUES

Donated Books and Services	\$ 74,574
Foundations and Corporate Grants	654,877
Individual Contributions	151,261
Government Grants	358,334
Other Income	15,372
Program Revenue	57,317
Roxanne J. Coady Fund - Investment Gain	8,413
Special Events	171,430
Total Public Support and Revenues	\$ 1,491,578



FUNCTIONAL EXPENSES

Programs	\$ 1,126,975
Management and General	87,768
Development and Fundraising	168,131
Total Functional Expenses	1,382,874
Change in Net Assets	\$ 108,704





We thank all our donors in the last fiscal year (July 1, 2023–June 30, 2024). 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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READ TO GROW ANNUAL REPORT 2024



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