READ TO GROW
building literacy from birth

newsletter
FALL 2026 | VOLUME 28, NUMBER 2

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

3 Million Books

A message from Executive Director Suzannah Holsenbeck

3,009,631, to be exact.

As of this writing, that's how many books Read to Grow has put into the hands of children across Connecticut since 2000. What began as the bold vision of a group of determined founders, starting in one hospital in one city, has grown into a statewide movement to ensure that every child has the opportunity to experience the joy and power of books.

As you'll discover in these pages, Read to Grow is advancing early literacy in more ways than ever before. From reaching every baby born in Connecticut's 23 birthing hospitals, to launching a vibrant new board book for little ones, hosting storytimes with beloved authors and illustrators, bringing our Bookmobile to communities across the state, and welcoming families into our newly reimagined Book Garden in Branford, our team has been unwavering in its commitment to getting books into children's hands and helping families build a foundation for lifelong reading.

But we know that access to books, while essential, is only part of the story. If we want every child in Connecticut to become a confident, capable reader, we must also address the complex and persistent barriers that stand in their way. That means looking beyond individual programs to the larger systems, policies, and conditions that shape children's earliest opportunities to learn and thrive.

This year marks an exciting new chapter in that work with the launch of Read to Grow's Early Literacy Data Hub. This powerful new resource transforms complex data into accessible, actionable insights, revealing disparities, identifying opportunities, and helping us better understand the factors that influence early literacy outcomes across Connecticut. By putting data and interactive mapping tools into the hands of policymakers, educators, healthcare providers, and community leaders, we are helping to drive smarter investments, stronger partnerships, and more informed decisions on behalf of Connecticut's children.

Three million books is an extraordinary number. And it is also a reminder of what is possible when a community comes together around a shared belief: every child deserves the opportunity to become a reader.

Our Annual Report and Appreciations

Please see pages 4–7 for our annual report and treasurer's report for the 2025–26 fiscal year, which ended June 30, 2026. Also on those pages is our appreciation to donors, book-drive organizers and volunteers.

Books for Babies Achieves Universal Reach

This fall, Read to Grow reached an important milestone: Books for Babies is now available in every birthing hospital in Connecticut.

With the addition of Waterbury Hospital and St. Mary's Hospital, the final two birthing hospitals to join Read to Grow's statewide Newborn Literacy Project, families welcoming a new baby at any birthing hospital in Connecticut can now receive a book and early literacy resources before they leave the hospital.

Since the program's launch in 2001, Books for Babies has reached 674,819 families across Connecticut. Families receive a brand-new baby board book, early literacy resources, and encouragement from healthcare professionals about the importance of reading, talking, and singing with their baby from birth.



The first family at Uconn Health Waterbury Hospital to receive RTG books.

And families are putting those resources into practice. 81% percent of families participating in Books for Babies report reading to or with their child daily during their first year of life. The impact extends beyond reading, too: 71% of families report that they talk or sing to their baby in addition to reading, creating more opportunities for meaningful bonding and quality time together.

With such a high percentage of participating parents reporting these meaningful early literacy practices, the data suggests that the program is helping empower families to make reading, talking, and singing a regular part of their baby's earliest experiences with learning and connection. "Whenever a new book comes, my daughter gets so excited. She enjoys it when we read to her, and now she can flip the pages on her own," shares a parent whose baby was born at Griffin Hospital in Derby, CT. Furthermore, families share that the information provided in the literacy packets helps to empower them with knowledge that what they are doing with their child is actually making a difference. "The info on development was helpful because I wondered if my baby was absorbing anything—it reassured me that she was," shared another family whose baby was born at Hartford Hospital.

Universal reach represents more than an expansion of Read to Grow's partnerships. It means that the approximately 35,000 babies born in Connecticut each year now have the opportunity to begin building early literacy habits from the very start of life, regardless of where they are born. This achievement would not have been possible without the dedication of our hospital partners, healthcare providers, donors, volunteers, and supporters who believe in the power of books to change lives.

Read to Grow Welcomes New Board Chair and New Board Member

Read to Grow is pleased to announce that Dr. Katherine Kohari has succeeded Dr. Monette Ferguson as Chair of the Board of Directors and welcomes Janna Wagner as a new member of the board.

"I am thrilled to have Dr. Katherine Kohari as the next Chair of the Board of Directors," said Dr. Monette Ferguson. "Her thoughtful leadership, commitment to community, and dedication to improving the lives of children and families make her an excellent choice to guide Read to Grow into its next chapter. I look forward to seeing all that Read to Grow will accomplish under her leadership."

Read to Grow is deeply grateful to Dr. Ferguson for her leadership and dedication as Board Chair and looks forward to her continued involvement with the organization.

Read to Grow also welcomes Janna Wagner to its Board of Directors. Janna brings more than 25 years of experience in early childhood education, nonprofit leadership, and community advocacy to the board. A New Haven native and graduate of New Haven Public Schools, Janna co-founded All Our Kin in 1999 and helped grow the organization into a nationally recognized leader supporting child care educators and advancing early learning opportunities for children and families.



Dr. Katherine Kohari



Janna Wagner

With her deep knowledge of early childhood development, commitment to equity, and extensive experience building partnerships across communities, Janna will be a valuable addition to Read to Grow's continued efforts to ensure every child has access to books and the opportunity to develop a lifelong love of reading.

"Janna's passion for early learning and her decades of experience creating meaningful change for children, families, and educators make her an incredible addition to our board," said Executive Director Suzannah Holsenbeck. "Her expertise and perspective will help strengthen our mission as we continue working to expand access to literacy resources across Connecticut."

What's Happening with Early Childhood in Connecticut

As Connecticut's conversation around early childhood care and education continues to evolve, one thing is clear: investing in young children means investing in their futures—and in the future of our communities. In 2025, the state legislature took an inspiring step forward by establishing the Early Childhood Education Endowment with an initial investment of $300 million via Public Act 25-93.



Allyx Schiavone



Dr. Monette Ferguson

To better understand what this moment means for early literacy, we spoke with two longtime friends of Read to Grow and leaders in Connecticut's early childhood and community-serving fields: Allyx Schiavone, CEO of Friends Center for Children, and Dr. Monette Ferguson, Executive Director of Alliance for Community Empowerment and former Board Chair of Read to Grow.

We asked them to share their perspective on why investment in early childhood care and education is also an investment in early literacy, and how those investments can shape children's lives for years to come.

For Schiavone, the connection between early childhood education and literacy begins well before a child enters kindergarten.

"Early childhood education is not separate from literacy; it is where literacy begins. Long before a child reads independently, they are learning language, asking questions, making meaning, and discovering the joy of learning. Those foundations are built from birth."

Schiavone sees the potential for Connecticut's investments to reach far beyond early learning classrooms. High-quality child care supports families and employers while giving children access to the stable, nurturing relationships that help them learn and thrive.

"If Connecticut wants stronger readers, a stronger workforce, and a stronger economy, we cannot wait until kindergarten to invest. Investing in early childhood is a literacy strategy, a workforce strategy, and an economic strategy. It is an investment in Connecticut's future."

Dr. Ferguson similarly sees early learning and early literacy as inseparable, particularly for children and families who face the greatest barriers to opportunity. For her, ensuring equitable access to both is not only an educational priority, but a shared responsibility.

"Early learning and early literacy are deeply braided together—each strengthening the other and creating a foundation of hope, opportunity, and lifelong success. One should never exist without the other."

As Connecticut looks toward the future of early childhood care and education, Dr. Ferguson believes there is an opportunity to build on the progress already made and continue moving forward.

"The time to invest in our children, their potential, and Connecticut's future is now."

For Read to Grow, that commitment is deeply connected to our mission. Our partnerships with early childhood educators and early childcare centers and home childcare providers are so important precisely because literacy does not begin when a child reaches kindergarten; it begins with the earliest conversations, songs, stories and shared play. Together we are ensuring that our youngest learners have what they need to thrive.

NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

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Book Garden Debuts at Read to Grow

If you've ever visited Read to Grow's Branford office and warehouse, you know that our team is good at making a little space go a long way. Between staff workspaces, book storage, and staging areas for all of the materials we ship across the state, there's rarely a square foot to spare.

This past spring, our office expanded, giving some of our tightest spaces a fresh look—including the Books for Kids Book Place, now called The Book Garden. Thoughtfully arranged by our Books for Kids Co-Coordinators, the space is designed with children of all ages in mind. Every visitor is welcome to stop in, settle into a chair, and find a book to enjoy. What was once a cozy corner filled with books for children to browse and enjoy has grown into a larger, bright, welcoming space just beyond the new blue door. With bookshelves, carpeting, seating, and plenty of natural light, the new Book Place offers families and care providers a comfortable spot to discover new stories or revisit old favorites during their visits to Read to Grow.

Books for Kids' connection with families is part of Read to Grow's larger early literacy continuum, supporting children and their families as they grow from early childhood through their school years. Any family with children in Connecticut can request books from Books for Kids and at the time of request can choose whether they want the books mailed to them or they'd like to come and pick them up. We look forward to welcoming more families who select book pick up to the Book Garden!





The newly reimagined Book Garden at RTG is open for visitors!

Popcorn & PJs Returns This Fall!

For nearly six years, Popcorn & PJs has been a beloved Read to Grow program, bringing families together for memorable at-home literacy experiences. Through interactive virtual events, children have the unique opportunity to meet the authors and illustrators behind their favorite books and watch those stories come to life through engaging read-alouds, creative conversations, and hands-on activities.

Last season, Popcorn & PJs reached a new milestone, with 2,317 families receiving Popcorn Packages—the highest participation in the program's history. Families also reported an overwhelmingly positive experience: 100% of surveyed participants said their child enjoyed the program, and more than 70% noticed an increase in their child's interest in reading and talking about stories after participating.

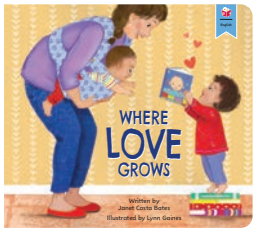
We're excited to welcome Popcorn & PJs back this fall with another fantastic lineup of guests! This year's series featured first-time Popcorn & PJs authors Winsome Bingham and Debbi Michiko Florence—both Connecticut natives, along with the returning author-and-illustrator team of Laurenne Sala and Zara González Hoang. And coming up in 2027 we've got award-winner Nikkolas Smith sharing *The Artivist*, Connecticut-based Sara Levine and her non-fiction picture book *Tooth By Tooth: Comparing Fangs, Tusks and Chompers*, Connecticut-based Scott Rothman and his playful *Blue Bison Needs a Haircut*, and finally, to round it out in April, a very fun new math book from Wendilen Van Draanen, *I Like Pi*.

Each participating family will receive a Zoom link before the event, along with a special Popcorn Package delivered right to their door. Every package includes a signed copy of the featured book, a bag of microwave popcorn, crayons, colored pencils, a sketch pad, and fun literacy activities designed to extend the reading experience long after storytime ends.

Whether you're joining us for the first time or returning for another season, Popcorn & PJs offers a fun and meaningful way to inspire a lifelong love of reading while creating lasting family memories.

To learn more about this fall's Popcorn & PJs events and how to participate, visit readtogrow.org We can't wait to share another season of cozy storytimes, creative activities, and unforgettable moments with families across Connecticut!

Where Love Grows: A New Chapter for Read to Grow



Picture settling in with your baby, a board book open between you and your little one, discovering the joy of a story—and the people and places that make them feel loved. *Where Love Grows,* a new board book written by award-winning author Janet Costa Bates and illustrated by Lynn Gaines, invites families into that special moment, celebrating the many ways love takes root in a child's life.

The book is a heartfelt celebration of the many places within a community where love can blossom. It honors the special people who help nurture a child's love of learning while creating joyful memories and positive associations with books along the way. And now, *Where Love Grows* is finally ready to reach its first Connecticut families. This December, the book will be available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and Arabic as part of Read to Grow's Books for Babies programming in hospitals across the state.

While *Where Love Grows* marks an exciting new chapter for Read to Grow, it does not mean saying goodbye to the beloved *Welcome to the World!*, Read to Grow's signature board book written by Nancy Elizabeth Wallace. Distributed since 2011, *Welcome to the World!* will now continue to reach families through our prenatal program.

We couldn't be more excited to share *Where Love Grows*—and the message of love, community, and literacy at its heart—with all of the babies being born throughout Connecticut.

"Goodnight stories. Goodnight kisses. And for you, my sweet child, always and forever, an abundance of love."—the closing of *Where Love Grows*

A MESSAGE FROM **JANE LEE**

Read to Grow's fiscal year from July 2025–June 2026 saw steady growth across all programs. We celebrate the following highlights:

- Books for Babies distributed 35,923 books to expecting families and families with newborns.
- Books for Kids provided 60,494 children's books to children and their families.
- The Bookmobile made 166 stops across the state and gave out 12,798 books to delighted children.
- In September 2026, we announced our sixth season of Popcorn & PJs: Virtual Family Storytimes with sponsorships from Citizens Bank and Connecticut Dental Health Partnership and distributed more than 2,100 packages to families for the events.
- Over the course of the year, the Newborn Project expanded to two more hospitals, including UConn Health John Dempsey Hospital and Greenwich Hospital.
- In May 2026, we celebrated Read to Grow's new book with supporters at our fundraiser "A Night for the Books: Where Love Grows" at the Westport Library. The event honored community providers The Diaper Bank of Connecticut and Filling in the Blanks.
- 93 volunteers gave a combined 4,289 hours of their time to the organization, the equivalent of $170,000.
- We received a fourth year of state funding to expand our Books for Babies program.
- We received a clean audit from the accounting firm Whittlesey.

The support of our donors and volunteers remains critical to our success and we are truly grateful for the time, care and generosity shown by our community.

Jane Lee, Treasurer
Read to Grow Board

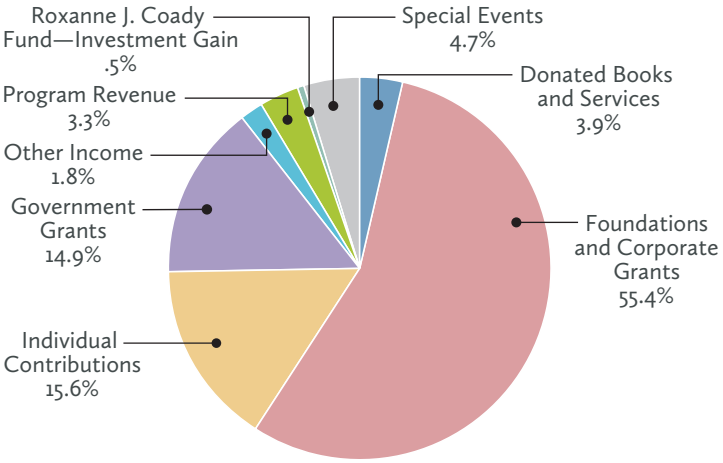
This annual report is available online at www.readtogrow.org/newsletters-and-annual-reports/



TREASURER'S REPORT

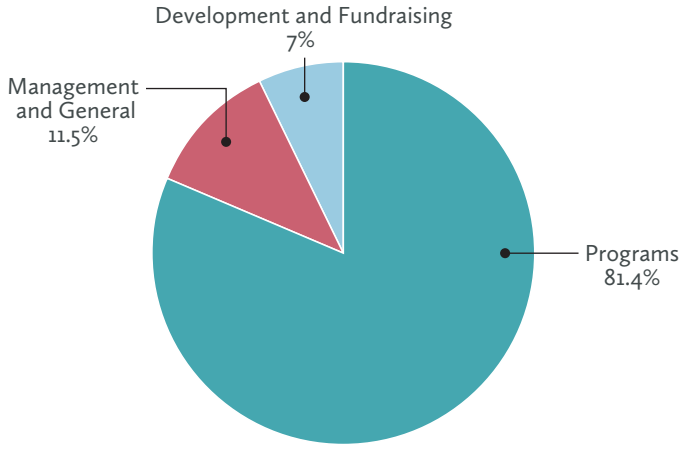
PUBLIC SUPPORT AND REVENUES

Donated Books and Services	$	86,851
Foundations and Corporate Grants		1,239,724
Individual Contributions		348,550
Grants		333,334
Other Income		41,345
Program Revenue		72,821
Roxanne J. Coady Fund—Investment Gain		12,152
Special Events		104,352
Total Public Support and Revenues	**$**	**2,239,129**



FUNCTIONAL EXPENSES

Programs	$	1,295,639
Management and General		183,413
Development and Fundraising		111,709
Total Functional Expenses		**1,590,761**
Change in Net Assets	**$**	**648,368**



We thank all our donors in the last fiscal year (July 1, 2025–June 30, 2026). 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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A Record-Breaking Year for the Bookmobile

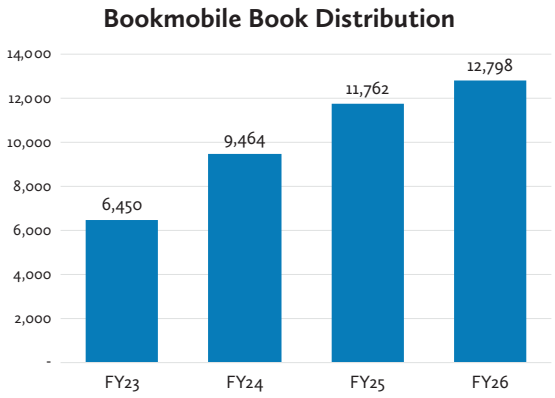
Read to Grow's Bookmobile team works tirelessly to bring free, high-quality books to children and families in communities across Connecticut. Behind every Bookmobile stop is careful planning involving balancing scheduling demands, inventory limitations, travel time, and the unique needs of each community to make sure as many requests as possible can be fulfilled.

That work reached a new milestone this past fiscal year, when our Bookmobile completed 166 stops—the most in a single year in the program's existence to date. Reaching that record number of stops was no small feat. The Bookmobile is not limited to making just one stop each day. While some days have only a single visit, on others the team may make as many as four stops, traveling from community to community with carefully selected collections of books tailored to the children they are serving. Each stop requires the team to be prepared with a diverse selection of engaging books that offer children opportunities to see themselves reflected in stories while also discovering experiences and perspectives beyond their own.

The demand for the Bookmobile continues to grow, too. Over the past four years, the number of books distributed through the Bookmobile has increased by an average of approximately 27% year over year.

This steady growth reflects increasing demand for free, high-quality books and more opportunities for children across Connecticut to choose books, build home libraries, and develop a lifelong love of reading.

The communities we serve see that impact firsthand. "This is the best program ever! Thank you so much for all you do and the happiness that you bring to our community every time you visit. If it were not for the Bookmobile, some children would not have access to new books," shared a partner recently from Norwich Public Schools. In New Haven, our friends at United Way reached out with the following feedback, "The Bookmobile, with its diverse selection of books and engaging staff, was a fantastic highlight of our event, providing a valuable reading opportunity and supplementing home libraries. One memorable moment was seeing the children excitedly running toward your truck and exploring the Bookmobile, which made a significant difference in the success of our event."



The growing number of requests we receive is another testament to how well-known and beloved the Bookmobile has become. Families, schools, libraries, community organizations, and neighborhood groups across the state continue to invite us to bring the joy of reading to their communities. Although the team cannot fulfill every request, they approach each one with care and creativity, constantly looking for ways to reach more children.