

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

# Across the World and Back Again

*A message from Read to Grow Executive Director Suzannah Holsenbeck*

**T**his past winter, my husband and I logged onto Zoom for a parent-teacher conference with our six-year-old's first-grade teacher. There were compliments about his behavior and kindness to other students, but the words "struggling reader" and "not on grade level" reverberated most loudly. My immediate reaction was one of shame: how could I, the executive director of a literacy non-profit, dedicated to helping children read, have a child who is struggling to read? We read every night and sometimes at multiple times throughout the day, many times at his request! Of course, this meeting wasn't about me or my ego and pride, it was about my son and his literacy journey. "But he loves books," his teacher went on, "and he knows more vocabulary than most students." We discussed ways to help him practice certain skills, mostly focused on phonemic awareness, while also being careful not to extinguish his love of sharing stories.



*A mother and baby who received Welcome to the World! at Hartford Hospital celebrate the launch of the NICU project at HOCC.*

In early April, I had the honor of spending several days at Oxford University in the

UK, representing Read to Grow at the 2023 World Literacy Summit and presenting along with Dr. Lainwala, our NICU Literacy Champion, about the literacy intervention we support in several Connecticut neonatal units. The conference featured an abundance of inspiring presentations from researchers, educators, and NGOs from 85 countries, including a team of educators refining the reading curriculum for children in Malaysia, researchers charting the most effective interventions addressing the global drop in literacy rates due to COVID, a dynamic group from Kenya who are utilizing podcasts as a way to engage youth in remote villages in the powerful elements of storytelling, Dr. Nadine Gaab who has developed a new game-based dyslexia screener for young children even before they can read, and a panel featuring the CEOs of several education start-ups at the forefront of using voice-activated artificial

*(continued on page 2)*

## Books for Babies Expands to Norwalk Hospital and Hospital of Central Connecticut

Read to Grow has had a presence in birthing hospitals since the organization's founding in 2000. Since its inception at Yale New Haven Hospital, our flagship Books for Babies program has grown to be a trusted and sought-after resource to support families in strengthening their literacy routines throughout their pregnancies, after giving birth, and as their babies develop. This past November, Read to Grow further expanded the Books for Babies footprint by launching the Newborn project at Norwalk Hospital; thanks to a generous anonymous donor, every baby born at Norwalk Hospital now receives our literacy packet, including a copy of our board book *Welcome to the World!*, a copy of our "First Guide for Parents of Newborns" and the opportunity to sign up to receive more books and literacy support from Read

to Grow in their baby's first year of life. And in February, thanks to the generous support of the Auxiliary of the Hospital of Central Connecticut, we launched our third neonatal partnership with the NICU at HOCC in New Britain. Families experiencing the significant stressors of a preterm or sick infant are

now given baby books and empowering information encouraging them to read, sing, and talk to their baby while they are receiving care in the NICU. With the additions of Norwalk Hospital and HOCC, Read to Grow now has partnerships with 17 hospitals in Connecticut.



*Launching Books for Babies at Norwalk Hospital.*



*HOCC medical staff and Auxiliary members mark the beginning of the NICU project at HOCC.*

# Read to Grow Welcomes New Board Member



The Read to Grow Board of Directors is proud to welcome Anna Reiter as the newest member of the board. Reiter first learned about Read to Grow in the early 2000s when her college sorority ran a book drive for the organization,

and now, as a mother of two young children, has experienced first-hand the power of our Newborn project in providing books

and supporting parents as their child's first teacher. Reiter brings a breadth of experience as a career geologist, a manager of multiple successful political campaigns, and as an active citizen in her local community. Most recently Reiter spear-headed an incredibly successful campaign to raise funds to upgrade and replace a public playground benefitting all children in Old Lyme. "Anna's dedication to causes she cares about and her ability to engage others in building community make her a wonderful addition to our board," shared Governance Committee Chair Jen Fusco.

## Early Steps To School Success Deepens Impact in Bridgeport

Our dynamic Early Steps to School Success (ESSS) program operates in two of Connecticut's largest urban communities: New Haven and Bridgeport. Though the ESSS program initially took root in New Haven, the expansion to Bridgeport has allowed our coordinators to reach new populations since fall 2021. Our two Bridgeport coordinators, Lakenya Watford and Yazmin Benitez, work with four Bridgeport public elementary schools and more than 60 families to provide in-depth home library building and literacy support. Watford has seen significant increases in language and vocabulary in each of her families. "I've noticed this first hand with each



ESSS coordinators Lakenya and Yazmin providing literacy resources at a Bridgeport community event.

**NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW**

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53 School Ground Road, Branford, CT 06405  
203.488.6800 • [readtogrow@readtogrow.org](mailto:readtogrow@readtogrow.org)  
[www.readtogrow.org](http://www.readtogrow.org)

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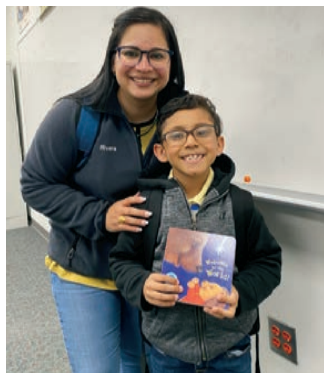
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interaction," said Watford, "and so do the parents." One of her families shared that they love receiving new books for their daughter, which they read consistently every night now thanks to the encouragement Watford provides. Watford said, "this particular mother raves about the creative activities that come with the books each month, and how she looks forward to implementing new activities with her daughter each week."

## Growing Home Libraries

When Demaris gave birth to her first son at St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, she received our literacy packet, and then again when she had her second and third sons. She enrolled all three children in our follow-up program and has continued to access Read to Grow resources through Books for Kids. She shared with us recently that "We are so committed to our children's education as a family. The books we have received from Read to Grow are helping my boys to be interested in learning to read. They have a mini library at home thanks to Read to Grow!"



## ACROSS THE WORLD AND BACK AGAIN

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intelligence to teach children to read. I was struck by the sheer number of organizations and individuals dedicated to solving the complex task of ensuring a literate population, but I was perhaps most struck by the recurring and resounding message, backed by an ever-growing database of research, that reading and talking to your baby from birth remains one of the most effective tools we have to support healthy brain development and ensure positive life outcomes.

I returned from the conference, my mind swimming with ideas and new learnings, and questions about how to translate some of the most inspiring efforts into impact here in CT. But children are experts at bringing us back to earth; my first afternoon home, Alex snuggled up to me with his copy of *Lupe Lopez: Rock Star Rules*, e.E. Trujillo and Pat Zeitlow Miller's book from our most recent Popcorn & PJs series, eager to sound out words like "listened" and "politely," "barely" and "strutted." Was his reading perfect? Of course not. But he was happy to try and happy to be with me, his mom. And in that moment, that's all that mattered.





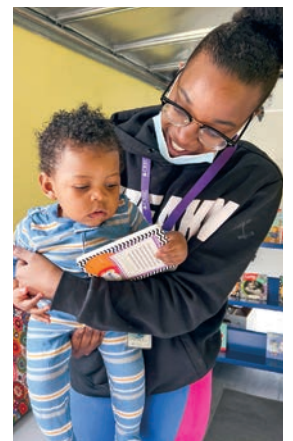
# Bookmobile Distributes 4,000 + Books Across Connecticut

Our latest program-on-wheels has been turning heads on and off the road. Since launching in September 2022, the Read to Grow Bookmobile has visited more than 20 schools, organizations, and community events. We are currently scheduled out through June and the demand is overwhelming: we're working through a waiting list 30 deep! With stops in nearly every county so far, including

K-8 schools in Cornwall and Falls Village, food pantries in New Haven, visits to schools in the Valley, CREC Head Start sites in Hartford, Windham Center Elementary and Putnam Elementary, the Bookmobile has provided 4,000 books and a magical experience to thousands of children already. Bookmobile visits have been an opportunity for local authors to join us; at Natchaug Elementary,

author and illustrator Barbara McClintock made a surprise visit and previewed her new book *Tomfoolery*. But the Bookmobile is more than an opportunity to pick out a new book, it's an opportunity to create a lasting love of literacy through an immersive experience. "That book just shouted my name," said a preschooler at a recent stop as he bounded off the Bookmobile.

*Keep your eyes peeled for a Bookmobile stop near you and consider donating to Read to Grow to help us keep the Bookmobile on the road.*





53 School Ground Road  
Unit 3  
Branford CT 06405

Visit us at  
[www.readtogrow.org](http://www.readtogrow.org)

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## Celebrate the Joy of Literacy with Read to Grow this Spring

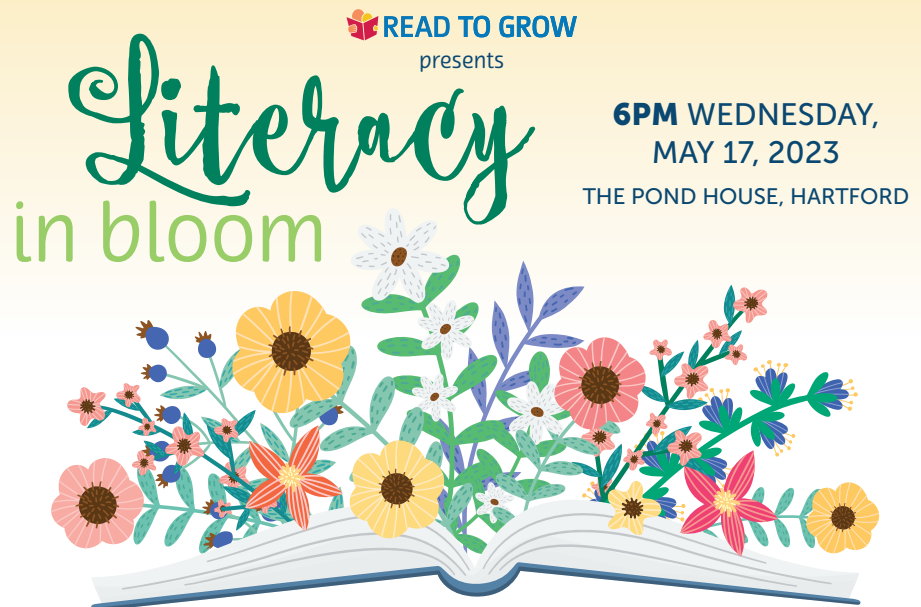
Please join us on May 17 at The Pond House in Hartford for our fabulous Literacy In Bloom event! Join us for an evening celebrating the joy of early literacy and our passionate Literacy Champions. Tickets include appetizers, drinks, live music, and more!



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