

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

Connecticut's Best Kept Secret

A message from Executive Director Suzannah Holsenbeck

One of my favorite activities at Read to Grow is taking visitors on tours of our office and warehouse space.

It feels a lot like discovering a really good book with an unassuming cover.

Inevitably, the first comment when people walk in is, "I didn't know you all were here!"

My preferred route is a big circle through the building that follows the continuum of our programs. We begin in the Books for Babies office, where visitors can see copies of *Welcome to the World!*, then move on to the Books for Kids office and the Book Place, where families can come and choose books in person.

From there, we wind our way into the warehouse, passing shelves lined with Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and Pashto titles for our Prenatal program. We always spend time in what I affectionately call the beehive: the Books for Babies warehouse, where staff and volunteers assemble packets for the 35,000 newborns born in Connecticut each year. There is usually a pause as we admire the wall of banker boxes filled with hundreds of packets waiting to be delivered to our partner hospitals.



Read to Grow team members at A Night for the Books.

Next, we walk through the Books for Kids warehouse, where volunteers fill the hundreds of family book requests we receive. Nearby, the Books for Kids team is busy sorting, counting, and cleaning donations from generous community members who have organized book drives on our behalf.

We pass stacks of boxes waiting to be filled with books, popcorn, sketch pads, and crayons

for our Popcorn & PJs packages, and we stop in the Bookmobile room to admire the large wall calendar packed with upcoming visits throughout the month.

There is always a moment to take in the sheer volume of books and packages waiting to be loaded into our delivery van and transported to hospitals, clinics, schools, and community partners across Connecticut.

Most tours run longer than planned because they spark interesting conversations with team members at nearly every turn. Ideas emerge, connections are made, and new acquaintances transition to collaborators as they begin imagining new ways we might work together.

As the tour comes to an end, many visitors remark on something they had not fully appreciated before: the extraordinary amount of care that goes into every book that leaves our doors, destined for a child somewhere in Connecticut.

And just like that discovery of a really good book, something shifts. People begin to fall in love with what we do. They tell friends, coworkers and neighbors about Read to Grow and that good book continues to find new readers and devoted fans.

From Hospital to Home: Early Literacy Access for Every Family

Read to Grow's Books for Babies program has reached another milestone: expanding the Newborn Literacy Project into two additional birthing hospitals in Connecticut.

On November 6, 2025, Read to Grow officially partnered with UConn John Dempsey Hospital in Farmington, followed just three months later, on February 5, 2026, by Greenwich Hospital. Our sights are now set on launching at the final two birthing hospitals left to partner with: Waterbury Hospital and St. Mary's.

Along with serving more families, we've seen a notable increase in registrants for our first-year program. Most now choose to scan our QR code and register online, reflecting a significant shift in engagement. This transition is especially exciting because our upgraded website infrastructure is built to support families across Connecticut, ensuring a seamless experience for both digital and in-person participants to ensure that any family with a baby in CT gets the books and early literacy support that lead to more daily reading, talking and singing with baby.

No matter how families connect with us—online or offline—the Read to Grow team is ready to meet them where they are and provide the guidance and support they need. As the program continues to grow, we remain committed to giving every child a strong start in literacy, ensuring that the joy of reading begins from day one.



Families at Greenwich Hospital (L) and UConn John Dempsey Hospital (R) receive the first books distributed by Read to Grow at each site.

Turning the Page: Linda Sylvester's Legacy of Literacy

On March 5, 2026, Linda Sylvester—Read to Grow's Books for Kids Co-Coordinator—retired after 21 years of dedicated service, providing children and families across Connecticut with diverse, high-quality literacy materials.

Under Linda's leadership, Books for Kids served 6,421 families and distributed an astounding 2,029,570 books. But Linda's impact went beyond numbers. She personally ensured that every book request included a carefully curated selection tailored to the age and interests of each young reader, demonstrating both her expertise and her passion for fostering a love of reading.

Before leaving Read to Grow, Linda shared a list of her five favorite middle-grade books, celebrating a category of children's literature

she admires for its unique ability to capture imaginations through the perfect balance of words and illustrations:

- *The BFG* by Roald Dahl
- *The Beatryce Prophecy* by Kate DiCamillo
- *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo
- *Toys Go Out: Being the Adventures of a Knowledgeable Stingray, a Toughy Little Buffalo, and Someone Called Plastic* by Emily Jenkins
- *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White

In her own words:

"When I called to inquire about this position 23 years ago, I said, 'I think you deliver books...'" "[Now,] I feel so fortunate to have made that call years ago and decided to find out if the job was a little more than just delivering books. Being part of Read to Grow

became the job I didn't know I was looking for: doing what I love most. Thank you for letting me be a part of it."

NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

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Celebrating Judy Morelli: Beacon Award Winner and Volunteer Extraordinaire

For the past 10 years, Judy Morelli has been a dedicated and inspiring volunteer at Read to Grow, and this year, we are thrilled to see her recognized with a Beacon Award—a Shoreline honor that has celebrated individuals since 2013 who strengthen their communities through service and compassion.

A retired Spanish teacher, Judy first connected with Read to Grow by volunteering to make phone calls to Book Places across Connecticut. As she learned more about our mission, her involvement quickly grew. Today, Judy is the only volunteer who supports all three of our core programs—Books for Babies, Books for Kids, and the Bookmobile. Her willingness to step in wherever she is needed most speaks volumes about her commitment to the families we serve.

When reflecting on her experience, Judy shared that one of the things she values most about Read to Grow is the welcoming environment. From her very first day, she felt

supported by staff who were friendly, patient, and deeply committed to making a difference for children and families. According to Judy, that spirit of kindness and encouragement has remained constant throughout her decade of service.

Judy especially loves riding on the Bookmobile because it allows her to interact directly with children. As a former educator, she treasures the opportunity to continue being part of children's learning journeys. Seeing children light up with excitement over books gives her hope for the future and reminds her that the joy of reading remains strong.

Although Judy is deeply honored by the Beacon Award itself, what meant the most to her were the heartfelt reflections shared by the Read to Grow staff during the nomination process. Quoting the old adage, "A word is a gift," Judy said those messages were the greatest reward of all.

Over the last decade, Judy has given Read to Grow far more than her time—she has given her heart, compassion, and steadfast belief in the power of literacy to change lives.



Read to Grow Welcomes New Board Members

Read to Grow is excited to welcome three new members to our Board of Directors: Valerie Ferdon, Kenneth Waller, and Thais Ortolaza. Each brings unique expertise and a shared commitment to early literacy, equity, and community empowerment.

Attorney Valerie M. Ferdon focuses on employment law in her practice, counseling employers, and defending them in state and federal courts. A graduate of Providence College and the University of Connecticut School of Law, Valerie brings a keen analytical mind and a dedication to community service. “Valerie’s insight, integrity, and commitment to the community are invaluable to our board,” said Executive Director Suzannah Holsenbeck. “Her leadership and perspective strengthen our mission and work in supporting families across Connecticut.”

As Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operations Officer of the Norwalk Community Health Center, Kenneth Waller ensures that families and communities have

access to safe, innovative, and efficient multi-primary care services. A healthcare leader with more than 20 years of experience, Kenneth’s work reflects his lifelong commitment to serving underserved populations. “Kenneth’s expertise in healthcare operations and his focus on equitable access to care bring a critical perspective to our board,” shared Vice Chair Dr. Carla Horwitz. “He will help us think strategically about the health and well-being of the children and families we serve.”

Serving as Clinical Director of Community

Operations at Community Mental Health Affiliates, Thais Ortolaza, LCSW, brings years of experience in nonprofit leadership and social work. A proud Puerto Rican and long-time Hartford resident, Thais is passionate about literacy, equity, and supporting underserved communities. “Thais’ dedication to literacy and social equity mirrors the heart of Read to Grow’s mission,” said Board Chair Dr. Monette Ferguson. “I have no doubt her involvement will deepen our impact in the community.”



Valerie Ferdon



Kenneth Waller



Thais Ortolaza

Dental Health and Early Literacy

A message from our partners at Connecticut Dental Health Partnership

This winter, Read to Grow and the Connecticut Dental Health Project partnered to bring a very special Popcorn & PJs event to children across Connecticut in honor of Dental Health Month in February. Renowned author Deborah Diesen joined us to share her books *Pout Pout Fish Goes to the Dentist* and *Pout Pout Fish and the Can't Sleep Blues*.

Through our partnership, we’re spotlighting one of the most persistent — yet most preventable — threats to children’s oral and academic health: cavities. Research has found that dental problems — especially untreated tooth decay, toothaches, and dental infections — cause millions of lost school hours each year in the United States.

Moreover, literacy begins with language. Strong oral language, vocabulary, and phonological awareness are foundational to learning to read. Dental problems that

affect speaking comfortably or confidently can interfere with children’s opportunities to develop and practice these skills.

Cavities — clinically known as dental caries — are the result of tooth decay, a process that often goes unnoticed until significant damage has already occurred. As decay progresses, it can lead to pain, infection, and tooth loss — and the effects go beyond the mouth. Untreated cavities can make it hard for children to eat, sleep, and speak comfortably, affecting their ability to focus in school and participate fully in daily life.

But here’s the thing — cavities are largely preventable. Brushing twice a day, limiting sugary beverages, and establishing a dental home through regular preventive visits can make a significant difference. Families that make brushing teeth a consistent — even fun — part of the daily routine are giving their

children a strong foundation for lifelong oral health.

If you work with young children and families in Connecticut, Connecticut Dental Health Partnership is a resource for you. We administer dental benefits for Connecticut adults and children enrolled in HUSKY Health, and we’re out in the community year-round connecting families with care and information. HUSKY Health members can also reach us directly through our call center by calling 855-CT-DENTAL (855-283-3682) Monday through Friday, 8am–5pm for help with benefits and finding a provider. Translation services are available.

To see where we’ll be next, we list our events at <https://ctdhp.org/> here every month. For more information about partnering with us, visit <https://ctdhp.org/why-partner-with-us/>.

Bookmobile Read-Alouds Bring Books to Life All Across Connecticut

Did you know that the Read to Grow Bookmobile offers more than just free books for children and families across Connecticut to take home? We now also bring stories to life through fun, interactive read-alouds.

Over the past year, Read to Grow has been working closely with writer, teacher, and national literacy advocate Hannah Schneewind to train staff and volunteers in the art of reading aloud. With more than 25 years of experience in education and literacy, Hannah has been sharing her expertise with our dedicated Bookmobile team and volunteers. Her guidance helps ensure that children who climb aboard Read to Grow’s literacy resource on wheels leave with more than just a book—they

leave with an experience. Through engaging, interactive storytelling, young readers can feel the excitement of being transported to another world by a great story.

The read-alouds provided by our team and volunteers are designed to spark curiosity, laughter, and imagination while reinforcing the joy of reading. By bringing storytelling directly into communities, the Bookmobile experience ensures that children don’t just leave with a book, they leave with a meaningful, deepened connection to stories as they continue on their literacy journey.

Visit us at
www.readtogrow.org
f: ReadtoGrowCT i: readtogrow

Where Love Grows: Celebrating Community, Literacy, and Connection

On Thursday, May 7, Read to Grow welcomed supporters, partners, and community members to the Westport Library for our annual fundraising gala, A Night for The Books. This year's theme, "Where Love Grows," celebrated the many places within a community where love can flourish while also honoring our newest baby board book, *Where Love Grows*, written by Janet Costa Bates and illustrated by Lynn Gaines.



Community Champions of the Diaper Bank of CT receive their award at A Night for The Books.

The evening brought together supporters of literacy for a joyful celebration of community and connection. Guests enjoyed fresh food from Zucca and Alina's Bakery, beautiful centerpieces handcrafted by members of the Westport Artists Collective, and special live appearances from both Janet Costa Bates and Lynn Gaines, whose creativity helped inspire the spirit of the event.

A highlight of the evening was the presentation of Read to Grow's Community Champion Awards. This year, we were proud to honor Filling in the Blanks and The Diaper Bank of Connecticut for their extraordinary work supporting families across Connecticut. Through their efforts to combat child hunger and provide essential hygiene products, both organizations are helping ensure children and families have access to the basic necessities they need to thrive.

While the evening was filled with celebration, its greatest impact was in support of Read to Grow's mission. Thanks to the generosity and enthusiasm of everyone who attended, A Night for The Books was a tremendous success. The funds raised will help us continue expanding literacy opportunities

and increasing access to books for children across Connecticut throughout 2026.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who joined us, supported the event, and helped make the evening such a meaningful celebration of literacy, community, and the places where love grows.

