READ TO GROW
building literacy from birth

newsletter
FALL 2025 | VOLUME 26, 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.

Books Light the Way

A message from Executive Director Suzannah Holsenbeck

The first family to receive Read to Grow books at UConn Health through Books for Babies enjoy Welcome To The World! *together.*

My nine-year-old recently underwent a routine surgery, and during the preoperative process, when the surgeon, anesthesiologist, nurses and child life specialist came to check in with him before the procedure and ask him if he had any questions, he stumped each of them with, "Well, what's your favorite book?" It is worth clarifying that we did not discuss this question in advance, and despite my day job, this query was all his own. It is also worth noting that the awesome medical providers were genuinely surprised by the question, and while I won't call them out here, the child life specialist was the only adult to have a genuine answer.

I share this anecdote for several reasons, including, admittedly, parental pride, but mostly because we were in a clinical setting and books were the comfort my son reached for, and more deeply, the feeling of liking and loving books and stories being shared at a moment of deep anxiety struck me as quite profound.

A study from the University of Florida and University College London published in August 2025 in the journal iScience found that daily reading for pleasure in the United States has dropped by more than 40% since 2003. Many reasons for this issue exist, including the fast rise of smartphone culture, increasing economic pressures, a decline in leisure time, and a decline in accessible, high-quality reading materials.

It is this last challenge that Read to Grow has taken on headfirst. Whether it's launching our 20th Books for Babies hospital partnership with UConn John C. Dempsey Hospital this fall, hosting our third highly successful Family Day onsite at Read to Grow, or nearly doubling the number of stops our Bookmobile made year over year, we are committed to increasing access and reaching the 35,000 newborns and 180,000 children between the ages of birth–5 living in Connecticut. And thanks to the data mapping work we've undertaken with North Arrow this year, we are able to be laser-focused on where the need is greatest.

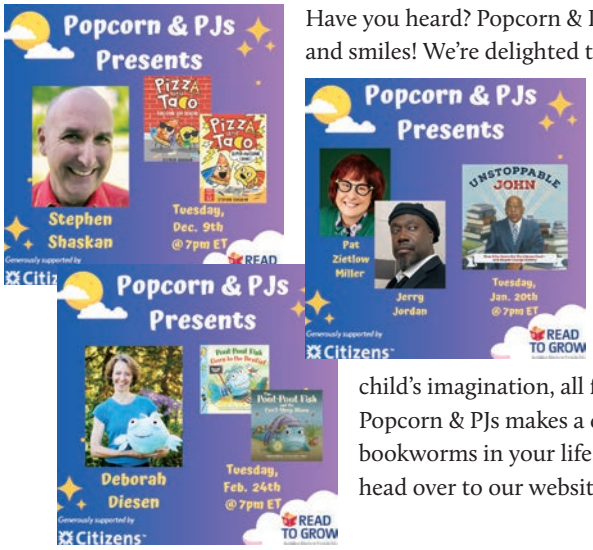
I am very lucky to have a schedule that allows me to put my children to bed nearly every night, and in our nightly routine, we still sometimes read picture books, but more often than not, we are now reading chapter books aloud. We just finished Kate DiCamillo's fabulous, *The Tale of Despereaux*, featuring a very tiny hero of the mouse variety and a funny, tragic tale about the decisions we must make while stumbling towards our better selves. I won't give away the ending (you should really read it if you haven't! And preferably aloud with someone!), but the coda brought me to tears, an occurrence my children find amazing:

I would like it very much if you thought of me as a mouse telling you a story, this story, with the whole of my heart, whispering it in your ear in order to save myself from the darkness, and to save you from the darkness, too.

"Stories are light" Gregory the jailer told Despereaux.

Reader, I hope you have found some light here.

Popcorn & PJs Launches 2025-26 Season



Have you heard? Popcorn & PJs is back for another cozy season of stories and smiles! We're delighted to welcome a stellar lineup of authors this fall, including the wildly imaginative Stephen Shaskan, creator of the fan-favorite *Pizza and Taco* graphic novel series. Stephen will help us wrap up the Fall 2025 season with a special December double feature—marking the very first time graphic novels take center stage for Popcorn & PJs!

It's a can't-miss milestone that promises fun, laughs, and a fresh way to ignite your child's imagination, all from the comfort of home. And remember—Popcorn & PJs makes a delightful holiday surprise for the little bookworms in your life. To see the full lineup and grab your tickets, head over to our website today!

Our Annual Report and Appreciations

Please see pages 4–7 for our annual report and treasurer's report for the 2024–25 fiscal year, which ended June 30, 2025. Also on those pages is our appreciation to donors, book-drive organizers and volunteers.

Why Early Intervention with Dyslexia Is Critical

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that affects how people read, especially sounding out words, recognizing them quickly and correctly, and spelling. It starts with the way the brain is wired—it's not a matter of low intelligence or low effort. A dyslexic student will likely have significant difficulty learning to read if appropriate intervention does not occur in a timely manner.

Although young children typically are not ready to read until kindergarten, they can be prepared to learn to read as early as soon as they are born.

At the State Education Resource Center (SERC), we support all learners, and we recognize that families and caregivers are equal partners in a child's education. Use these helpful tips to prepare your child for reading and writing success in school. If you ever have a question or concern about your child's literacy and language development, talk to their healthcare provider or their teacher, if they are in school.

- Use strong facial expressions and tones to show the child what's happening when you read, tell a story, or listen to a story.
- Let children enjoy stories over and over again. Repetition helps the brain learn!
- Talk to your child constantly. Talk to them about everything they're seeing and doing. Even if they cannot answer you yet, speaking to them teaches them about how language works.
- Teach your child the alphabet. Once they recognize some letters, point them out wherever you see them, especially the ones in their name. Around age 2–3, most children can start to learn the sounds that letters make. You can find many songs on YouTube that teach the appropriate sounds for each letter.

We have countless individuals working tirelessly to advocate for dyslexics across Connecticut. The Connecticut State Department of Education's Office of Dyslexia and Reading Disabilities (ODRD) has partnered with agencies from across Connecticut, including SERC. The year-long Dyslexia Awareness Collaborative, led by Kristin Allen at the ODRD, is packed with coordinated activities that help people better understand dyslexia and work toward making sure all students are identified and supported fairly. You can learn more here:

We also encourage you to take advantage of our library, where we offer thousands of resources for young children on literacy, language development, and so much more. Visit www.ctserc.org/library for more information.

Claire Conroy, Literacy Consultant with SERC

NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

A publication of Read to Grow, Inc.
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Read to Grow Welcomes New Board Members

Read to Grow is proud to welcome three new members to our board of directors: Dr. Shabnam Lainwala, Kymberlee Powe, and John Toscano. Each brings a unique and powerful perspective to our mission—united by a shared passion for early literacy, equity, and community empowerment.

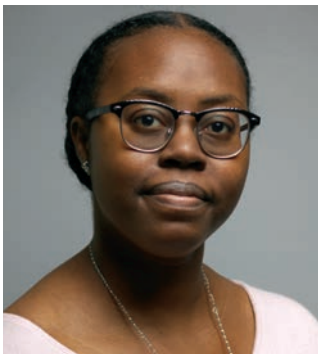
A physician, researcher, and passionate literacy advocate, Dr. Lainwala directs the Regional Neonatal Neurodevelopmental Follow-Up Program at Connecticut Children's Medical Center. She has led an innovative NICU reading initiative, helping lay the groundwork for healthy brain and language development from birth. "Dr. Lainwala embodies the deep connection between health and literacy," said Board Chair Dr. Monette Ferguson. "Her leadership in neonatal care and her commitment to providing early language experiences reflect the very heart of our work at Read to Grow. We are honored to have her expertise and advocacy on our board."

As the Children and Young Adult Consultant for the Connecticut State Library, Kymberlee Powe is a recognized leader in building inclusive and equitable library collections. Her work ensures young people across the state have access to books that reflect and affirm their identities. "Kymberlee's deep understanding of youth engagement and inclusive literature will be instrumental as we continue expanding access to books for all Connecticut families," shared Vice Chair Dr. Carla Horwitz. "She brings a vital voice and fresh energy to our board."

With more than three decades of experience in accounting and advisory services for educational institutions, John Toscano has long been a trusted voice in nonprofit financial stewardship. He currently leads the independent school segment at CLA, guiding institutions through complex fiscal challenges with clarity and integrity.

"John's insight into nonprofit financial management is unmatched," said Board Treasurer Jane Lee. "He brings not only expertise but also a strong commitment to our mission. His presence will strengthen the foundation of Read to Grow as we continue to grow strategically and sustainably."

Dr. Shabnam Lainwala



Kymberlee Powe

John Toscano

A New Connection for a Stronger Start: Read to Grow Partners with 211

We're thrilled to share exciting news: prenatal families in Connecticut who dial 211 can now be directly connected to Read to Grow!

Thanks to a new partnership with the United Way's 211 service, families seeking support during pregnancy will now be introduced to Read to Grow's free early literacy programs. This means that as soon as a family reaches out through 211 for help or information, they'll be offered access to our literacy resources and can even be signed up over the phone to start receiving free books right at home.

What makes this so powerful is that it reaches families at one of the most critical moments: before their child is born. Research shows that early exposure to language—even in the womb—has a profound impact on brain development and future reading success. Through this collaboration, more families will be empowered to begin their child's literacy journey from day one.

This partnership represents more than just an expansion of services. It's a milestone in creating a more connected, equitable support system for families across Connecticut. It ensures that early literacy isn't something parents have to discover by chance; instead, it becomes part of the fabric of prenatal care and community support.

As we continue working to close literacy gaps and build strong foundations for every child, this collaboration is a reminder of what's possible when organizations come together with a shared vision. We're proud to stand alongside 211 in making sure that every family, no matter their circumstances, has access to the tools they need to nurture a love of reading—from the very beginning.

Kascia Williams, Program Director, Read to Grow

Families choosing books together at our Fall Into Reading Family Day.

Empowering Families Through Reading: A Year of Popcorn & PJs with Western Connecticut Regional Adult & Continuing Education Program

Western Connecticut Regional Adult and Continuing Education (WERACE) was proud to partner with Read to Grow last year to bring Popcorn & PJs book nights to our Adult Education Family Literacy ESL programs. Each month, families received a special kit with a new children's book. Parents practiced reading the books during the program alongside their children, then brought the experience home—reading aloud, completing activities, and even tuning into live author readings. These opportunities sparked excitement for reading and helped families begin building lasting home libraries.

The results were inspiring. More than 300 families participated in Popcorn & PJs throughout the school year, and the kits had a clear impact on family engagement. Attendance on nights when the kits were featured increased by over 22% compared to average rates. Just as importantly, 88.52% of parents and guardians enrolled in the family literacy program reported that the book kits strengthened their ability to support their child's literacy at home.

WERACE's mission centers on advancing adult education and empowering parents as learners. This partnership with Read to Grow reinforced that mission by equipping parents with tools to strengthen their own literacy while modeling reading for their children. In turn, parents gained confidence, children gained support, and together families built a multigenerational love of reading that bridges home and school.

Rick Raucci, Director of the Danbury Adult Education Program

25 Years of Impact: A Night for the Books and Lifelong Literacy

This May, Read to Grow returned to the beautiful Westport Library to host a truly special edition of our annual fundraiser, A Night for the Books—one that not only brought together our community in celebration of literacy but also marked an incredible milestone: our 25th anniversary.

For a quarter-century, Read to Grow has worked to build a future where every child in Connecticut begins life with the tools to thrive, starting with the simple, powerful act of reading. What began in 2000 as a small program with a big mission has blossomed into a statewide movement, distributing more than 2.8 million books and supporting hundreds of thousands of families on their early literacy journeys.

This year's event honored a figure whose contributions have been deeply woven into our story. We were proud to present our inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award to Nancy Elizabeth Wallace, celebrated children's book author and illustrator. Nancy's books have introduced more than 400,000 newborns and their families to the joy of reading and the power of early literacy.

Thanks to the generosity of our community, we raised over $130,000 through sponsorships, paddle raises, our silent auction, and the always-popular mystery pulls.

As we look ahead to the next 25 years, we're filled with gratitude. Your partnership fuels our work and ensures that every child statewide has the chance to begin life with words, stories, and possibilities. Thank you for standing with us.

A MESSAGE FROM **JANE LEE**

Read to Grow's fiscal year from July 2024–June 2025 saw the expansion of programming in response to community needs. We celebrate the following highlights:

- Books for Babies distributed 38,150 books to 25,000 expecting families and families with newborns.
- Books for Kids provided 63,185 children's books to 21,000 children and their families.
- Our highly popular Bookmobile made 145 stops across the state and gave out 11,762 books to delighted children, marking a 30% increase in stops and book distribution since last year.
- In September 2024, we announced our fifth season of Popcorn & PJs: Virtual Family Storytimes with sponsorships from Citizens Bank and Connecticut Humanities. We began a new partnership with Danbury & Milford Adult Education programs and the seven author experiences were enjoyed by more than 2,000 people.
- Over the course of the year, the Newborn Project expanded to four more hospitals, including Bristol Hospital, Stamford Hospital, MidState Medical Center, and Danbury Hospital.
- Also in 2025, the NICU Project launched at Backus Hospital, the fifth location through which we provide literacy support and books to families of infants receiving care in neonatal intensive care units.
- In May 2025, we celebrated our 25th Anniversary with "A Night For the Books" at the Westport Library. The event honored Nancy Elizabeth Wallace, the author of *Welcome to the World!*, with a Lifetime Achievement Award.
- Our dedicated crew of amazing volunteers served a total of 3,645 hours, which is valued at $140,077.
- 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.

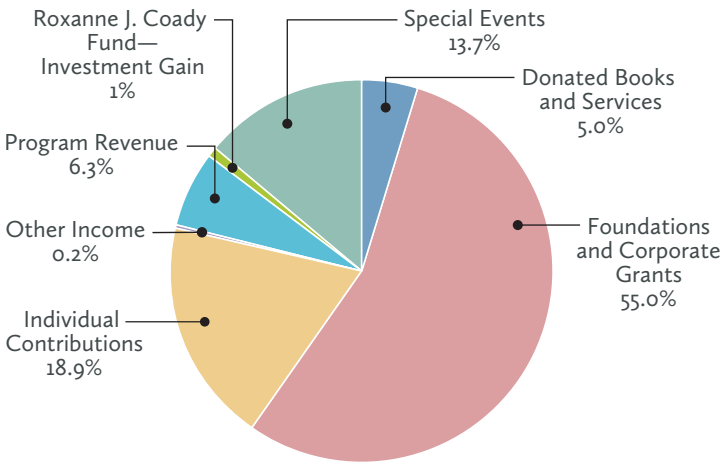
Jane Lee, Treasurer
Read to Grow Board

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

TREASURER'S REPORT

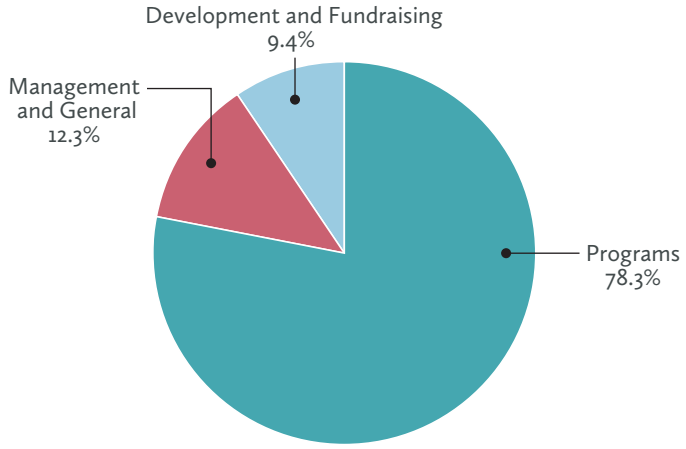
PUBLIC SUPPORT AND REVENUES

Donated Books and Services	$	67,332
Foundations and Corporate Grants		743,030
Individual Contributions		255,325
Other Income		2,250
Program Revenue		85,080
Roxanne J. Coady Fund - Investment Gain		13,281
Special Events		185,717
Total Public Support and Revenues	**$**	**1,352,015**



FUNCTIONAL EXPENSES

Programs	$	1,164,215
Management and General		182,516
Development and Fundraising		139,680
Total Functional Expenses		**1,486,411**
Change in Net Assets	**$**	**(134,396)**



We thank all our donors in the last fiscal year (July 1, 2024–June 30, 2025). 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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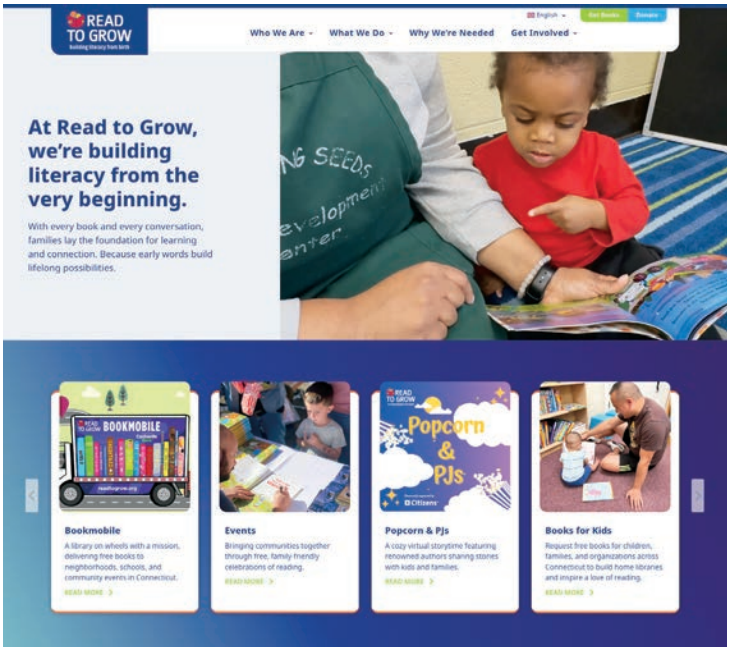
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