

**Libraries and Foundations Partner to Help Children Read: *After Ten Years,***  
*Holistic Education Program Proves Effective in Closing CT's Opportunity Gap*



Six-year-old Kaylee Mendoza, of New Haven's Fairhaven neighborhood, sounds eager to share her experience with READy for the Grade. A program launched by NewAlliance Foundation in 2013, READy for the Grade offers supplemental summer reading education and support for children in kindergarten through third grade. The goal is to prevent "summer slide," the loss of skills gained during the school year. Since its inception, NewAlliance Foundation has partnered with local libraries throughout Connecticut to offer READy for the Grade to 1,565 children. In 2023, the program ran at seven locations in six communities. While testing does not drive how each site operates, program leaders test children's reading skills at the start and end of the summer to measure the program's efficacy. Annual independent evaluations report students maintain or improve their reading skills during the summer, year after year.

Kaylee participated in READy for the Grade at New Haven Free Public Library's Wilson Branch for the first time in 2023. "It was sometimes hard work," she said, but she had friends there, got to play Candyland, and discovered a favorite book, *Pete the Cat*. Kaylee's increased enthusiasm for reading is typical of children who participate in READy for the Grade, and that is by design.

Children who lose reading skills during the summer start the next school year behind their peers and struggle to catch up. This begins a cycle most kids can't escape without focused

help. Families sometimes don't know where to turn. New Haven Free Public Library's Stetson Branch manager Diane Brown said caregivers approach her after trying and failing to get their children the supports they need from the school system. "It's not like these parents don't want help. Some of them just feel defeated."

A lifelong resident of New Haven, Luis Chavez-Brumell struggled to learn to read as a child and found support in New Haven's libraries and later in private schools. "There's a social anxiety to learning how to read," he said. Today, Chavez-Brumell serves as Assistant Director of the New Haven Free Public Library System.

By the time children reach fourth or fifth grade, it's far more difficult for them to reach grade level reading than when someone catches their issues earlier. Children from low-income families have far fewer opportunities to read during the summer than their peers from families with adequate or higher income. In the United States, this opportunity gap is widest in Connecticut, where it disproportionately affects non-White children. Since reading is a skill that transcends subjects, failure to read at grade level makes learning science, history, and math difficult or impossible. This challenge continues or worsens as students enter middle and high school, when assignments are more complex. Suddenly, they're navigating adult life, missing essential skills. The National Center for Education Statistics reports seventeen percent of Connecticut adults struggle to read and comprehend basic information.

"Learning and reading also serve as coping mechanisms for people of all ages who navigate social inequities daily," said Chavez-Brumell.

NewAlliance also partners with The Scripps Family Fund for Education and the Arts (SFEEA) to aid communities with children in need. SFEEA's involvement expanded in 2022 to support the launch of new program sites at Willimantic and New Haven Stetson Branch libraries.

Linda Marshall, Foundation Advisor for SFFEA, said, “We have visited several RfG sites over the years and have always been impressed by the engagement of the children, the quality and dedication of the staff, and the variety of interesting programming.” Each program is uniquely designed to reflect the needs of the children in that location. Examples of READY for the Grade’s customizability include yoga at the Stetson Branch, live music and sing-a-longs at the Wilson Branch, and food crafts in Rockville-Vernon.

Veteran educator Maureen Kearney launched the program in Rockville-Vernon, and her passion for the work comes through in the way she runs it. Kearney said READY for the Grade allows her to teach like she used to. “It truly is my favorite thing. I was so excited to be on the ground floor, and it's really just evolved.”

Vernon library director Jennifer Johnston praised Kearney’s creative approach, which includes daily puppet theater performances written by the students. “Some teachers might say that's not literacy related, but it truly is because it's creating stories; it's the beginning, middle, and end. It’s creating characters. She's doing things that children are not experiencing in school the rest of the year. And I think it really makes a difference. Children are engaged. They want to come year after year,” Johnston reported.

Geoconda Berrios, a paraprofessional at Hamden Middle School who teaches for READY for the Grade at NHFPL’s Wilson Branch, said engaging in fun activities enhances reading skills surreptitiously. “We are building up their vocabulary and their reading level without them knowing it, and we do it constantly.”

At New Haven’s Stetson Branch, elementary school educator Shefau Daubre leaned into her yoga teacher certification to share “belly/heart” breathing, a technique she hoped children would take with them to self-soothe anytime, anywhere. Daubre said she felt gratified when she

overheard some caregivers reminding their child to use the breathing exercise to calm themselves. Chavez-Brummel said in addition to education and equity, NHFPL wants to highlight that sense of curiosity and fun that's unique to the library space.

Through READy for the Grade, NewAlliance Foundation and The Scripps Family Fund for Education and the Arts have provided libraries with funding to cover education, testing, and holistic supports for students and families. While some supports vary by site, READy for the Grade considers family celebrations, gift cards, book distribution and school supplies as core components. Family celebrations build community among adults and children, provide nourishment, and showcase children's developing intellectual, social, and emotional skills. Free books, school supplies and gift cards help families prepare their children for the coming school year academically, socially, and practically. The people this program serves live with low-to-moderate income, in communities with high concentrations of poverty. When paying rent and utility bills is a struggle, added expenses for school supplies and books can overwhelm a family.

"It's fun reading," Kaylee added, and said she feels more confident about reading now. Reading in front of people at school still makes her feel nervous, though. "I get scared," she shared, but said when she steps out of the spotlight, she feels good about her reading abilities. Kaylee expects to return to RfG in 2024.

READy for the Grade educators are also looking forward to summer 2024, and not only for the chance to help children maintain or improve their reading skills. "They feel loved," said Maureen Kearney. "They feel like it's a safe place and a fun place to be. For me, that almost matters more than how they performed."

Giaconda Berrios said she was excited to see a community develop around READy for the Grade at the Wilson Branch. Parents supported each other, jumping in to pick up or drop off other children. In addition to supporting children's improved reading skills, Berrios wanted families to feel welcome in the library. "When they come, we want them to feel like family."