



# Strong Start to reading™

"Making a difference in the life of a child"

December 2015

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## Our success is your success

Greetings from Strong Start. It has been another exciting, rewarding year with significant growth in our *Letters, Sounds and Words* and *Get Ready for School* programs. We reached a record 3,898 children in the 2014-2015 program year with the help of a record 2,210 volunteers! I hope you will enjoy our new infographic presentation on Page 3 which highlights some accomplishments and milestones.

In addition to growing programs, this has been a year of transition for our organization. We said goodbye to three team members — two directors and a valued employee — as they retired. Two had been with Strong Start from its early days and I invite you to read a tribute to them on Page 4.

We also welcomed two new board members and a new director of operations. Our staff and board are small but mighty, and their incredible dedication and talent help make the magic that is Strong Start.

While we are very proud of our numbers, it is stories that really touch our hearts and inspire us to keep growing. When we hear of a child's excitement at recognizing a letter on a street sign, or a volunteer's teary account of coaching a young boy and "seeing the light go on" for him, we are quickly reminded of the impact of our work.

Every day we help change young lives, and our success is your success. Whether it is through your gifts of time, treasure or talent, you play an essential role. Every Strong Start program is founded on charitable giving and delivered in partnership with more than 200 schools, community centres, organizations and institutions.

This year, volunteers gave more than 36,500 hours to Strong Start, primarily in schools. They ensure that every year we bring to life our vision of a community rallying around its children to help them learn to read. To all of you, in every role and on behalf of all the children and families we serve, I extend my heartfelt thanks.

All the best,

Machel Denison,  
Executive Director



## See Insert For:

- Thank you to our generous donors
- Our team
- Strong Start contact information

## Online

Detailed program results and stories can be found on our website:

[www.strongstart.ca](http://www.strongstart.ca)

@Strong\_Start



"After spelling B-A-T for me, Ryan said, 'Want to know how I can do that?'"

*Strong Start! Great program @Strong\_Start"*

Bethany Rowland  
@BethJayRowland  
via Twitter



# The view from the blue couch

## Rhys's Story as told by his mother, Sherri Roy



**Get Ready for School™**

A Strong Start to reading™ program

\* Based on the research of Dr. Juliana Backlund



Before coming to Cambridge, our family of four lived way up north, with few services or neighbours. We enjoyed the quiet lifestyle, but our sons, Ryan (11) and Rhys (4) needed some socialization and programs. For Rhys especially, we needed some help with his anxiety.

When we were looking for a program, I was desperate. Returning to work wasn't an option for me. It would have been too hard for Rhys. When we started going to the *Get Ready for School* program, it was a struggle to even get him out the door.

For the first three months of the program, I sat on the blue couch which was inside the room. Mostly Rhys would sit with me and watch the program from a distance. The instructors would encourage him to participate; they would try to integrate him into the activities. Rhys took little steps, so little you almost didn't recognize they were happening, until all of a sudden I was sitting alone.

Eventually I left the blue couch and sat outside the room. Every once in a while he would come and check that I was still



there, but that became less frequent. I knew the program was going to help him learn letter sounds, practise routines, and sing songs. I just didn't know all of the other benefits it

was going to have for Rhys and our family. Rhys has more confidence and feels more secure. I had some much needed me time and could connect with other parents. I even made some friends.

The *Get Ready for School* program helped Rhys and it helped me. Our futures look so bright.

*Note: to watch the video version of this story, visit our [YouTube Channel](https://youtu.be/y5xxCxdJ_qE) ([https://youtu.be/y5xxCxdJ\\_qE](https://youtu.be/y5xxCxdJ_qE))*

*"His anxieties were my anxieties, so when his anxieties were alleviated, mine were too."*

*Sherri Roy,  
Rhys's Mom*

## Building blocks to reading: the power of early literacy

*"It's more than books and reading. Singing, talking and playing are easy things I can do to help my baby learn."*

*Parent*

The experiences children have with books and stories in the first three years of life have a significant impact on their development of language and literacy skills. Research tells us that literacy and language skills will naturally unfold when babies have opportunities to enjoy books and share positive language experiences with the people around them. Activities

such as exploring and playing with books, as well as singing nursery rhymes and listening to stories are the building blocks for language and literacy development.

We want all babies to:

- Learn how books work (this includes turning pages, opening and closing books, and even safely chewing on books).
- Practise communication using sounds, words and gestures like "bye bye."
- Begin to play with sounds through songs and rhymes.
- Know that reading books can be fun and start their journey to become life-long learners.

The importance of early literacy is the reason Strong Start, KidsAbility and YMCAs of Cambridge and Kitchener-Waterloo collaborated to develop and lead Baby Connections – a free community program which promotes the importance of early literacy.

This year Baby Connections programs were offered to families at 23 community locations. Additional programs were delivered by family visitors in people's homes and to targeted groups across the region.

In total, 955 families received a Baby Connections kit to use with their baby. The kit contains carefully selected resources, including a song time cd, a puppet or ball, a variety of books, and additional tips to help their baby's language development.

A special thank you goes to the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, the KWCF Waterloo Region Record Literacy Fund, and a private donor for sponsoring Baby Connections' toolkits for families.

For more information about Baby Connections, helpful tips, resources for parents and research on baby literacy please visit [www.BabyConnections.ca](http://www.BabyConnections.ca)



**a baby connections**  
building blocks to literacy



# The world opened up

A story from Oliver's perspective, as shared by his mother, Melanie Lee



## Letters, Sounds and Words

A Strong Start to reading program™



It's a funny thing learning to read. It seems to come so easily for some kids, while others need more help learning their letters, sounds and words. I was in this second category. At the end of Junior Kindergarten, I only knew two or three letters.

I was really scared about my first day of Senior Kindergarten. Every morning I would wake up and ask, "Is today a school day," hoping it would finally be the weekend. I liked school and my friends, but they seemed to have an easier time reading.

After a few weeks, things started to change. My teacher introduced me to a nice lady named Sherry who was going to come and work with me on my letters and sounds. At first I was nervous, but I really liked playing the games and activities each week. We had a lot of fun together and I was so proud to bring home my sentence strips to show Mom and Dad. They couldn't believe what I was learning.

About 8 weeks later, I was in the car with Mom when I started to notice letters on signs. That's a "B" I shouted, when we



were driving by Bell Street. Mom was so happy, and that's the moment the world opened up to me. I started spelling my friends' names, writing cards to my stuffed animals, and reading words. I was so excited!

*"Now he loves to read. I often have to tell him to put a book down so he can actually eat his breakfast."*

*Melanie Lee  
Parent*

Now I love books and bring them with me everywhere. I even see my little brother copying me, always looking at his own books. Sometimes I struggle with big words, but Mom and Dad tell me to take my time, and sound it out. I no longer worry whether it's a school day or the weekend. I have more confidence in myself and can't wait to learn more. This experience meant the world to me and my family. You should see what my mom had to say: visit Strong Start's website [www.strongstart.ca](http://www.strongstart.ca) to hear more.



## By the Numbers

3,898  
children  
reached

2,210  
volunteers

244  
program  
partners

36,531  
volunteer  
hours

↑65%

22 new schools added to the Letters, Sounds and Words program in Brant, Haldimand and Norfolk for 2014-2015.

102

Letters, Sounds and Words training sessions were held for Volunteer Coaches in 2014-2015.

955

Families received a Baby Connections program kit in 2014-2015.

↑33%

4 new sites added to the Get Ready for School program for a total of 16 in 2016.

Thank You

The numbers above reflect the totals for the 2014-2015 program year for Letters, Sounds and Words, Get Ready for School and Baby Connections.

To date Strong Start has reached over **26,000** children through **365,000+** volunteer hours, **20,400** volunteers and **YOUR** generous donations.

# Community highlights

## Optimists' Charity Challenge gives lasting gift to kids



Al Balfour, President of the Optimist Club of Waterloo North presents a cheque to Machele Denison, Strong Start's Executive Director.

We extend our sincere thanks to the Optimist Clubs of Waterloo North and Conestogo-Winterburne for choosing Strong Start as their charity partner for the 2014 Optimist Charity Challenge Hockey Tournament. The event, which is held each November, brings together hockey players and fans for a day of sport and fun in support

of children/youth causes in Waterloo Region. Thanks to their efforts, a \$12,000 gift was directed to Strong Start and our programs.

"We were so honoured and humbled to receive this generous gift," said Machele Denison, Executive Director of Strong Start. "When groups like the Optimist Club support Strong Start, they are making a lasting difference in the life of a child."



To learn more about the Optimist Club's Charity Challenge Hockey Tournament, visit: [www.optimistcharitychallenge.com](http://www.optimistcharitychallenge.com).

## Fond farewells to Strong Start Staff and Volunteers



From left: Stan Nahrgang, Mieke Schroeder and Glen Boy, celebrating their retirement this past August.

Strong Start bid an appreciative farewell to three people this year, one of whom had been with the organization from the start.

Accountant Stan Nahrgang was Lyle Hallman's controller when the philanthropist teamed up with educator Lynda Sylvester to develop a volunteer-driven method of helping young children learn to read. After Lyle's death, Stan, as a trustee of the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, helped the foundation manage and finance Strong Start.

Executive director Machele Denison described Stan as a wise and gentle coach.

"I have been privileged to help carry on the original vision and I wish the best for the future of Strong Start," says Stan, who championed the organization's growth while overseeing budgets to help ensure its sustainability.



## Here we grow again

Our goal of reaching more children is well underway thanks to a generous grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. With the support of their 2014 capital investment in Brant, Haldimand, Norfolk, we now have enough program materials to expand to every school in that community. Generous local donors help ensure operating support keeps pace with need.

Since the 2012-2013 program year, the number of our school partners has increased substantially, from 32 to 54 in 2014-2015, and from there to 74 in 2015-2016. With the Ontario Trillium Foundation enabling this growth, more children are learning to read, in turn gaining self-esteem.

"At the end of each session it's incredible to see the progress they (the children) make," said Kristy Hawkins, Site Co-ordinator at Central Public School, Brantford. "You don't just see progress in their assessment results, you see an increase in their confidence as a reader."



Photo credit: Brian Shypula, Brant News

Last year, over 800 children participated in a *Letters, Sounds and Words* program in the region. With the help of 572 caring volunteers, giving thousands of hours to support these children, 94% made gains in early literacy that were categorized as considerable, excellent, or outstanding. By giving children the essential skills they need to be successful learners, we are helping set them on a path for success in school and in life. We thank the Ontario Trillium Foundation for making an investment in our Brant, Haldimand, Norfolk community.

Mieke Schroeder was newly retired as a school principal when she joined Lynda at Strong Start. As Program Co-ordinator, Mieke helped expand *Letters, Sounds and Words* in Waterloo Region, Wellington and Brant, Haldimand, Norfolk, training volunteers, meeting school staff and, particularly in Brant, raising funds to support expansion.

Mieke found the range of tasks "exhilarating and empowering." She brought the same energy to her most recent role as Operations Manager, involved in purchasing and the logistics of future expansion. Now she finally has a chance to enjoy retirement with her husband, Bob, a volunteer courier and coach during Mieke's tenure.

Glen Boy, a professional fundraiser, joined the board in 2010 after participating in feasibility studies on provincial expansion and infant literacy, the latter leading to the launch of Baby Connections. Machele credits Glen with helping Strong Start understand philanthropy and develop tools to nurture longtime donors and inspire future supporters.

This year we also welcomed two new board members, digital marketer Mark Hallman and human resources specialist Kimberley Hogan.

# Strong Start Team

## Board of Directors

Steve Cameron – Chair	Carol Jankowski
Keith Martin	Mark Hallman
Linda Fabi	Kimberley Hogan

## Executive Director

Machelle Denison

## Director of Program

Inge Ford

## Director of Operations

Caitlin Smith

## Administration and Program Support

Darlene Koebel

## Development Co-ordinator

Christina Proctor

## Get Ready for School Program Co-ordinator

Ashley McKinnon

## Letters, Sounds and Words Program Co-ordinators

Leslie Tinning  
Waterloo Region & Wellington

## Get Ready for School Assistant Program Co-ordinators

Kirsten Carr  
Iwona Dmitrienko

Ruth Mills  
Brant, Haldimand, Norfolk

## Gifts of Time

We are so grateful to the thousands of volunteers who generously give their time to help children learn to read. We know the one-on-one time a caring adult spends with a child is vital to the *Letters, Sounds and Words* program. Our *Get Ready for School* volunteers help staff ensure pre-school children have a positive early learning experience. The many individuals who package literacy materials at our warehouse and other locations help keep our costs low. To all of you, we say a heartfelt "Thank you!"



The vision of Strong Start continues to be one of communities rallying around their children with time and resources to help children learn to read. Please note that your gift can be designated to a specific program or community.

### To Support Strong Start® Donations Can Be Made:

**Online:** [www.strongstart.ca](http://www.strongstart.ca)

#### Cheque by mail:

Strong Start Charitable Organization  
20 Crestview Place, Kitchener, ON N2B 0A2

Charitable Registration #825948060RR0001

Email: [info@strongstart.ca](mailto:info@strongstart.ca)  
Call: 519-743-9578

# Program Partners

## Letters, Sounds and Words™



- Islamic School of Cambridge
- KidsAbility Centre for Child Development
- Laurentian Hills Christian School
- Lloyd S. King School
- MAC Maple Grove School
- Nipissing University
- Plattsville Christian School
- W. Ross Macdonald School for the Blind
- Wilfrid Laurier University

## Get Ready for School™

- Bridgeport Community Centre, Kitchener
- Centreville Chicopee Community Centre, Kitchener
- Chandler Mowat Community Centre, Kitchener
- Country Hills Community Centre, Kitchener
- Downtown Community Centre, Kitchener
- Grow Community Centre, Cambridge
- Kids and I Resource Centre, Elmira
- Kinbridge Community Association, Cambridge
- Kingsdale Community Centre, Kitchener
- Langs, Cambridge
- McCormick Branch Library, Waterloo
- Our Place Family Resource & Early Years Centre, Kitchener
- Preston Heights Community Group, Cambridge
- The Family Centre, Kitchener
- Victoria Hills Community Centre, Kitchener
- Williamsburg Community Centre, Kitchener

## Baby Connections™

- Cambridge Early Years Centre
- Carizon Family and Community Services/Mosaic Counselling
- Family and Children's Services of Waterloo Region
- Highland Stirling Community Centre
- Idea Exchange
- KidsAbility Centre for Child Development
- Kitchener Public Library
- Langs
- Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) English at First
- Our Place Family Resource and Early Years Centre
- Project READ Literacy Network
- Region of Waterloo's Healthy Babies, Healthy Children Program
- Region of Waterloo's Infant and Child Development Program
- Region of Waterloo Public Library
- Waterloo Public Library
- Wilmot Family Resource Centre
- YMCA Early Years Centre
- YMCAs of Cambridge and Kitchener-Waterloo



# Thank you...

## We couldn't do this without you.

Your financial support enables us to offer our quality programs.



LYLE S. HALLMAN  
FOUNDATION



Optimist Club of  
Waterloo-North



Optimist Club of  
Conestogo-Winterbourne



An agency of the Government of Ontario.  
Un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario.



Brantford Kiwanis



THE KITCHENER  
AND WATERLOO  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION

Alex Schmidt Memorial Fund  
Dr. John Stewart Fund  
Erb & Good Family Funeral Home Community Fund  
Greater KW Chamber of Commerce - Corporate Challenge Fund  
Landmann Family Fund  
Lonsdale and Roberta Schofield Fund  
McMurtry Family Fund  
Paul Kuntz Legacy  
Rosalind & Dieter Kays Family Fund  
TD Bank Financial Group Employees Endowment Fund  
The David and Eleanor Yach Family Fund  
The Jim and Sue Hallman Family Fund  
The Molz Family Endowment  
The Spinnaker Fund  
The Waterloo Region Record Literacy Fund



Cambridge & North Dumfries  
Community Foundation

Chris Jones Fund  
Collins-Wright Fund  
Daidy and James Flavell Fund  
Dr. Gary Ramsay Fund  
Gwyn & Sam Purdy Fund  
Jane & Ken Wright Family Fund  
John and Marlene Krebsz Fund  
Leslie and John Doherty Family Fund  
Marilyn Savage and David Hysinger Fund  
Preston Chapter IODE  
Smart and Caring Community Fund  
Terry and Margaret Osbourne Family Fund  
The Marion Edgar Fund



United Way  
Brant



### Corporate

BlackBerry  
Essroc Canada Inc.  
Giant Tiger  
Investors Group  
Kitchener-Wilmot Hydro  
M R & R Data Services Inc.  
Manulife  
Norwex  
Paul A Bender Insurance  
The Custom Apparel Shoppe  
WalterFedy & AEC Developments

### Clubs, Schools, Groups

ETFO - Waterloo Occasional Teachers' Local  
Graham Bell Public School Council  
Kiwanis Club of Brantford  
Langton Public School  
Lansdowne-Costain Public School  
Paris Central School Council  
Prince Charles Public School  
Rotary Club of Brantford  
Rotary Club of Brantford - Sunrise  
Scotland Yoga Group  
St. George Women's Institute  
St. Paul School  
Twin City Women's Probus Club  
Waterford Public School  
Waterloo Unit - Ontario English  
Catholic Teachers Association  
Young at Hearts

### In-Kind Support

Arrowsmith Corporation  
Brantford Blast Hockey Organization  
Simpson Print  
Social Venture Partners Waterloo Region  
Staples Business Depot - Brantford  
Westmount Moving & Warehousing

### Foundations

Catholic Community Foundation of Waterloo Region  
D.H. Gordon Foundation

### Government

Corporation of the City of Cambridge  
Corporation of the City of Kitchener

### Third Party Events

Accelerator Centre Client BBQ & Christmas Lunch  
Internet of Things (IoT) Waterloo Event  
Koi Music Festival  
K-W Oktoberfest - A Blooming Affair Fashion Show  
Mighty Machines  
Vender Extravaganza  
WR Talk Smash for Cash

### Individuals

Anonymous (3)  
Mark Auge  
Nancy Barros  
Anna-Katharina Becker  
Glen & Robin Boy  
Elissa Bridges  
Ron & Rita Cherkewski  
Alayna Cherry  
Bill & Mary Cressman  
Laura Crits  
Ted Cross  
Megan Demille  
Tony & Machele Denison  
Leo & Joan Doodchenko  
Wray & Ted Dougherty  
Bev Eastick  
Dean & Sharon Elliott  
Linda Fabi  
Suzanne Fisk  
Chantal Fortin-Menchenton  
Susan Gerth  
Shirly Gowing  
Linda Gumble  
Jennifer Guy  
Jim & Sue Hallman  
Brent Heard  
Margaret & Carl Hennig  
Laurie Herald  
Karen Hodgson

Stephanie Hodgson  
Karlee Holroyd  
Keith Martin & Jackie Hatherly-Martin  
Carol Jankowski  
Patricia Janowski  
Donna Johnson  
Patti Johnson  
Bonnie Jones  
Darlene Koebel  
Sandy Laird  
Kathryn Lamoureux  
Christine Loker  
Marcia Lubert  
Mallory Manchur  
Rick & Nancy Martin  
Carrie McGinnis  
Dale & Fran Melchin  
Melissa Martz  
Hulene Montgomery & Michael Graham  
Andrea Miller  
Judy Moffatt  
Sharon Monteiro  
Tanya Morose  
Joanne Mumford & Ted Schlotzhauer  
Susanne Murdoch  
Stan & Donna Nahrgang

Sandra Nervo  
Megan Obergan  
Kirk Omand  
Toby Little & Phillip Williams  
Bernie Pickett  
Rebecca Presley  
Brian & Stephanie Rempel  
Beverly & Stan Sallwonchuk  
Helen Samuel  
Susan Sanderson  
Carrie Schiel  
Bob & Mieke Schroeder  
Shelley Sherritt  
Ken Silvester  
Dianne Snyder  
Jennifer Stockall  
Angela Szijarto  
Louise Thompson  
Rosemary Trakalo  
Jen Urquhart  
Amanda Vreeland  
Ruth Wohlgenuth  
Joyce Wong

*Thank you for all memorial gifts received in memory of Deborah Gordon, Richard Denison, and Rita Karges.*



**Strong Start to reading™**  
"Making a difference in the life of a child"