



# Strong Start to reading™

"Making a difference in the life of a child"

Strong Start Annual Newsletter • December 2020

## Inside

### Letters, Sounds and Words™

Community Comes Together to Unlock Power and Joy of Reading ..... 2

### Get Ready for School™

A Place to Learn and Make Friends  
– A mother relates her story ..... 2

### Baby Connections®

Want to Learn, Won't Travel ..... 3

By the Numbers ..... 3

Thank You to Our Generous Donors ..... 4-5

Community Highlights ..... 6-8

Strong Start Team ..... 6

COVID-19 Impact on Children ..... 7

Stronger Together:  
Our Program Partners ..... 7

Gifts of Time ..... 8

Detailed program results and stories can be found on our website:  
[www.strongstart.ca](http://www.strongstart.ca)

Follow us on social media



## A Year of Disruption, Innovation and Hope

Each year as we reflect on the year that has passed, a theme naturally emerges. This year that theme is disruption; some of it was planned and a lot of it was not.

The 2019-2020 program year started with great promise and excitement: we welcomed the Bruce Grey region to our *Letters, Sounds and Words* program delivery catchment along with more schools in Elgin, Middlesex and Oxford Counties and Hamilton Region. We were tracking for record-breaking impact.

In late fall of 2019, working with KidsAbility and the YMCAs of Kitchener-Waterloo and Cambridge, it was decided that *Baby Connections* would come under the sole leadership of Strong Start, and move away from the tri-chaired steering committee model. This new model will help make *Baby Connections* more sustainable and offer new efficiencies to its delivery.

As an organization, we were also excited by the prospect of moving to a larger, more efficient location with attributes such as onsite warehousing of learning materials and games, as well as ideal facilities for volunteer training and game assembly. This location will provide more opportunities to engage the community and realize new possibilities including growing and expanding our programs.

This would have been more than enough for our small team to manage in one year. We could not have known that while we were executing our ambitious plans, the world would experience a global pandemic. Placed in lockdown overnight, Strong Start programs were immediately suspended. When the Minister of Education announced on May 19, 2020, that schools would remain closed until September and Regional Public Health announced that community centres would be closed until early summer, we knew that all three of our programs would be suspended for the balance of the program year.

Our team moved swiftly to provide ongoing support to our *Get Ready for School* families and start preparing our *Letters, Sounds and Words* program for safe delivery in the 2020-21 program year, including creating an online Volunteer Coach Training Program.

When it is safe for schools to restart our program, Strong Start will be ready with trained volunteers, PPE, sanitation products and adaptations to the games and activities which will help ensure the safety of the participants, while still delivering measurable results. *Get Ready for School* and *Baby Connections* are moving to an online format for 2021 to ensure that we continue to deliver impact while families can't meet in person.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the healthy development of young children, we're determined to mobilize the resources and volunteers needed to support them. Strong Start is poised to play a key role in the recovery. Thank you so much for your continued support!



*Machelle Denison*  
**Machelle Denison,**  
Executive Director



*Steve Cameron*  
**Steve Cameron,**  
Chair of the Board

“

"Helping children learn to read was magical. I fell in love with the process of helping someone learn to read."

Seemab Zahra, LSW Volunteer and GRFS Instructor

”



# Impact that Lasts.....

## Community Comes Together to Unlock Power and Joy of Reading – Christine Giese

When I heard about Strong Start and the *Letters, Sounds and Words* program, I was immediately intrigued. I learned that the program runs in partnership with schools, that teachers select children to participate and recommend skills for volunteers to focus on. The volunteers are well-trained and prepared to deliver a comprehensive 10-week program.

I was even happier to learn the program had recently expanded into my region, and immediately applied for the position of Program Co-ordinator for Elgin, Middlesex and Oxford.

I spent the first months in this new role meeting and developing connections with people who deliver the *Letters, Sounds and Words* program. I was

“*They told me how amazing it is when a child comes to them in the schoolyard or in the hall to ask them to listen to them read.*”

also able to see the program in action and talk with children and volunteers about their experiences. Many of these conversations left a powerful and lasting impression.

Countless volunteers have shared the joy they experience working with children. This year, while visiting a local school, I chatted with three volunteers in the staff lounge. They told me how amazing it is when a child comes to them in the schoolyard or in the hall to ask them to listen to them read.

I asked, “What do you see as the biggest change that happens when children go through the program?” One volunteer answered, “The children change. Once they get through the first one or two sessions and see themselves



being successful, they sit up straighter and smile and chat and they are excited about learning and excited about what they have learned. They are so proud to see the new letters they know and the words they recognize.”

Another volunteer added that the program had changed her, too. She feels she is doing something that matters and she knows she is actually making a difference because she can see it right before her eyes!

*Christine Giese, LSW Regional Program Co-ordinator in Elgin, Middlesex, Oxford*



**Letters, Sounds and Words**  
A Strong Start to reading program™

## A Place to Learn and Make Friends

### – Nahla’s Story

Nahla is five years old and in senior kindergarten. She is outgoing and social, and easily interacts with others younger and older alike. She is naturally artistic and extremely creative.

When Nahla began learning to read as a toddler, she easily recognized letters and sounds. However, she struggled to comprehend the meaning of the words.

Through a kindergarten connection program at the local library, Nahla’s mom, Karima, learned about Strong Start’s *Get Ready for School* (GRFS) program and enrolled her daughter. As Nahla began the program, Karima and her husband were very concerned that Nahla would find it difficult to adjust to being away from them, and taking direction from other adults. But soon those concerns faded away. Nahla was eager to attend and fit right in.. She was a social butterfly and had a keen ability to relate to her peers.

“*Once Nahla was able to read and understand what she was reading, she began to develop a love of learning.*”

*Karima, Nahla’s mom*

Her progress was significant. She blossomed throughout the program.

As Karima explains, “Once Nahla was able to read and understand what she was reading, she began to develop a love of learning. She became more inquisitive, and asked meaningful questions.”

*Get Ready for School* gave Nahla a new level of confidence and the learning environment gave her a place to make friends.

For Nahla’s family, *Get Ready for School* provided the family with a safe space, a place to make connections with other families and children in the program.

“We’ve built strong relationships,” Karima said. “We still organize playdates with many of the families from our program.



“It’s a program that has exceeded my expectations. I thought it would be a simple preschool program. I never expected it would be this detailed, high quality and professional.”

Strong Start’s *Get Ready for School* program reached more than 350 young children this program year, helping them develop the skills and vocabulary needed to become successful readers and learners.



**Get Ready for School™**  
A Strong Start to reading program™

\* Based on the research of Dr. Juliana Baciu

## Want to Learn, Won't Travel – Danielle Bruce

*How I learned about supporting my baby's early literacy from the safety of my home*

It was the mention of early literacy and online delivery that captured my attention. I was looking for programs I could do with my eight-month-old son, Noah, while staying home to limit exposure to COVID-19. I did not want to miss out on any opportunities for learning during that time.

I wasn't sure what *Baby Connections* would offer me that I didn't already know, but I was pleasantly surprised. Not only did the program offer new strategies and ways to interact with my baby, it provided new context to the many things we were already doing.

**“** I wasn't sure what *Baby Connections* would offer me that I didn't already know, but I was pleasantly surprised. **”**

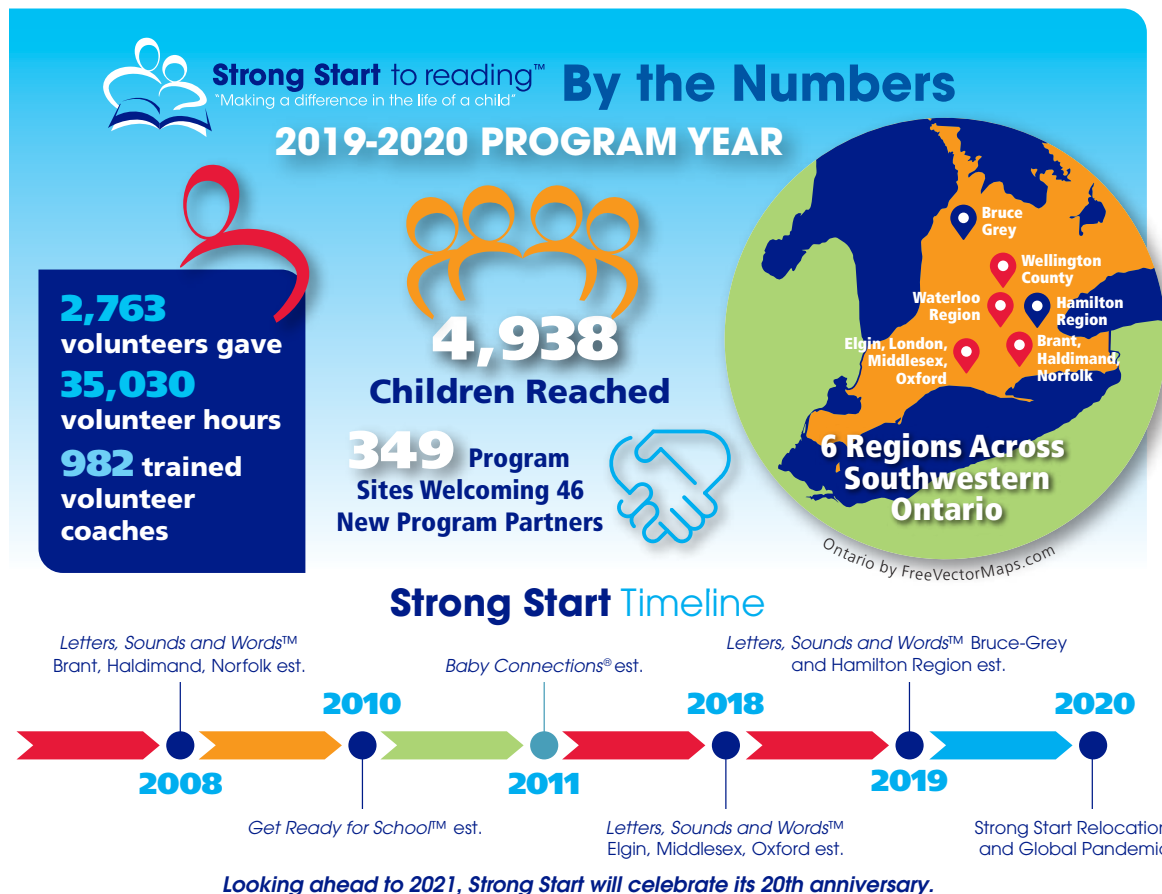
For example, when the Facilitator talked about labelling, I recognized that I had been using that strategy, but had not connected it to building literacy. Learning how what I am doing is helping my baby is both reassuring and motivating.

The messages around book reading really stood out for me. Before following the program, I would try to read the book. Now, I pay attention to the text less and



we spend time looking at the pictures, talking about the story and what we see. Noah enjoys flipping through the pages as we talk about the pictures. We find our time exploring books much more engaging and fun. It is a good feeling.

There were many good things about the program. I would definitely recommend it to other parents with young babies.



**Thank You**

To date Strong Start has reached over **49,177** children through **570,648** volunteer hours, **33,908** volunteers and **YOUR** generous donations.

The numbers above reflect the totals for the 2019/2020 program year for *Letters, Sounds and Words™*, *Get Ready for School™* & *Baby Connections®*

**DID?**  
YOU KNOW

**3,000** children were unable to complete *Letters, Sounds and Words™* in the 2020 Spring Round due to COVID-19 related school closures.

Demand for Strong Start programs continues to grow!

**140** children were on our waitlist for *Get Ready for School™* this year.

Although COVID-19 related closures impacted participants in *Get Ready for School™*, children did receive **40%** of the program.

**2,372** children completed the 2019 Fall Round of *Letters, Sounds and Words™*, setting them on a successful path for school and life.



# Thank You .....

***We couldn't do this without you.***

Your financial support enables us to offer our quality programs.



**sgcunningham.**

LYLE S. HALLMAN  
FOUNDATION



Josslin Insurance  
a Real Insurance broker

**barterpay**  
IT FORWARD.ORG



**The Cloverleaf Foundation**  
A family working together to make a difference



**Brant Community Foundation**  
Building our Community. Investing in the Future.



Berg Family Fund  
Collins-Wright Family Fund  
Daidy & James Flavelle Fund  
General Youth Endowment Fund  
Langdon Hall Fund  
Marion Edgar Fund  
School Sisters of Notre Dame Legacy Fund  
Terry & Margret Osborne Family Fund



Alex & Trish Brown Family Fund  
Alex Schmidt Memorial Fund  
Community Fund  
David & Eleanor Yach Family Fund  
Heart Beats Hate Fund  
Landmann Family Fund  
Spinnaker Fund  
The Jim & Sue Hallman Family Fund  
Waterloo Region Record Literacy Fund  
Waterloo Region International Plowing  
Match 1995 and 2012 Fund  
Woolwich Community Fund



United Way of Brant  
United Way of Halton & Hamilton  
United Way of Haldimand Norfolk  
United Way of Greater Toronto  
United Way of Waterloo Region Communities  
United Way of Guelph, Wellington & Dufferin



Rotary Club of Kitchener-Conestoga  
Rotary Club of Kitchener-Grand River



Optimist Club of Kitchener-Waterloo  
Optimist Club of Lakeshore Village  
Optimist Club of Westvale-Waterloo

## Thank you to all our financial and in-kind supporters.

Your investment in helping young children read is making a lasting difference and will pay dividends now and in the future.

### Corporate

A Girl Named Trenholme  
Cowan Insurance Group  
Electricity Distributors  
Association - Niagara Grand  
Gilt Restaurant  
HM Advisors  
Manulife  
RLB Management Partnership  
TD Wealth Management

### Clubs, Schools, Groups

Elementary Teachers'  
Federation of Ontario  
Friends of Ruth Mills  
Kiwanis Club of Kitchener-  
Waterloo  
May Court Club of Kitchener-  
Waterloo  
May Court Club of London  
Millen Woods Public School  
Ontario English Catholic  
Teachers' Association-  
Waterloo  
Retired Teachers of Ontario-  
District #40  
Retired Women Teachers of  
Ontario-Brant  
The Park Baptist Church  
Christian Friends  
Waterloo Region Elementary  
Teachers Federation of  
Ontario

### Third Party Events

Elmira Maple Syrup Festival

### Foundations

Caledonia Community  
Foundation  
D.H. Gordon Foundation  
Elgin-St. Thomas Community  
Foundation  
J.P. Bickell Foundation  
Mersynergy Charitable  
Foundation  
Oxford Community Foundation  
Toronto Foundation -  
SAP Canada  
Vancouver Foundation -  
Enbridge Gas

### In-Kind Support

Arrowsmith Corporation  
Brantford Blast Hockey Club  
Brantford Golf and Country  
Club  
Carol Jankowski  
Chris Howlett  
Creative Day for Social Good  
Jeff Posluns  
Neil Denison  
Simpson Print  
Stephen Rice  
TechSoup Canada & Partners  
Wilke Movers & Storage

### Relocation Contributors

Barb Willoughby  
Bold Automation  
Brody Enterprises  
Conestogo Mechanical  
Craig Smith  
Elemental Interior Design  
GL Industries  
Gowling WLG  
Hi-Tech Door Automation  
I.C.I. Marble and Tile  
Keith Martin  
K-W Glass Systems  
Liftow

Mark Hallman  
Scott Dougall  
Shaw Contract  
Spencer Denison  
Steve Cameron  
TA Appliances and Barbeques  
Tony Denison  
Wellington Pierpoint  
Whitney Commercial Real  
Estate

### Individuals

Anonymous (17)  
Grant Baechler  
Janet L. Baker  
Shirley Baldwin  
Cheryl Bauman  
Douglas Bundock  
Gwynne Burgess  
Margaret Burnett  
Melissa Campbell  
Kirsten Carr  
Ron & Rita Cherkewski  
Carl Coelho  
Bill & Mary Cressman  
Garth Cressman  
Addie Denison  
Tony & Machele Denison  
Michael Dreisinger  
Susan Dusick  
Leanne Elnicki  
Luan English-Ferguson  
Constance Finn  
Lewis & Inge Ford  
Maryann Gavin  
Christine Giese  
Joan Good  
Todd Holyoak  
Susan Hood  
Christopher & Lynn Howlett  
Carol Jankowski  
Melissa Jessop  
Linda Kieswetter

Jennifer King  
Mary Klymko  
Anastasia Kuronen-Shoemaker  
Karen Lintott  
Deborah MacLatchy  
Patricia McConachie  
Judy McDonald  
Hulene Montgomery  
& Michael Graham  
Gary & Ruth Mills  
Colette Moffat  
Bryan & Jackie Murdoch  
Susanne Murdoch  
Stan & Donna Nahrgang  
Erin Nespoli  
Kristen Porritt  
Ross & Susan Robertson  
Noella Roy  
Beverley & Stan Saliwonchuk  
Tina Sarellas  
Bob & Mieke Schroeder  
Laura Scott  
Nancy Silcox  
Ken Silvester  
Caitlin & Craig Smith  
Ethelwyn Speers  
Dan van Leeuwen  
Peeranut Visetsuth  
Catherine Wiebe  
Ariane Wieck  
Scott Williams  
Marilyn Wilson  
Sheri Wunder  
Christina Young

### Other Gifts

Thank you for all named  
memorial gifts received in  
memory of:

Susan Bloos  
Karen Mitchell  
Matthew Mills  
Lynda Silvester

*This list reflects gifts received  
between July 1, 2019 and  
November 16, 2020.*



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

# News & Events.....



## Helps Take Strong Start to Hamilton

The Cowan Foundation made a generous three-year commitment to help Strong Start introduce its high-impact *Letters Sounds and Words* program to Hamilton region. After a successful pilot in Hamilton in spring 2019, eight schools ran the program this past year.

It is not the first time Cowan has made a contribution like this. In 2010, they played a key role in supporting our expansion in Brantford and the counties of Brant, Haldimand and Norfolk. With their early investment and multi-year commitment, Strong Start was able to grow the program in that community to full adoption by all 94 schools.

Thank you to Mary D'Alton, Executive Director of the Cowan Foundation, and to all the Cowan companies that contribute to its success. Your support is greatly appreciated and is making a real difference in the lives of young children.



Left to Right: Steve Cameron, Mary D'Alton, Colette Moffat, Machel Denison and Jerry McDougall

## Strong Start: Dynamic in Difficult Times – Ruth Mills



United Way

It is clear that COVID-19 is an unfolding crisis that is impacting us all, affecting not only our economy and our mental and physical health, but also impacting the education of our children.

The measures to combat COVID-19 have left our schools with the necessary option of modifying their policies around the use of outside volunteers and programs. This left Strong Start with the task of adapting delivery models to meet the health and safety guidelines of our school boards and of the provincial government.

Strong Start has been fortunate to have the generous support from Brant United Way, Haldimand Norfolk United Way, Hamilton Halton United Way, and Elgin St. Thomas Community Foundation. This support has provided us with the means to make the necessary modifications to meet safety guidelines.

With the support provided, Strong Start is able to provide hand sanitizer for our school program kits as well as personal protective equipment for our volunteers and Volunteer Coach trainers. We have also been able to create a new on-line version of our Volunteer Coach training. Furthermore, we have been able to offer additional in-person training sessions to accommodate small group, social distancing guidelines.

Thank you to our generous funders who provided us with the financial support to make these changes. Together we can make a difference in the lives of children.

Ruth Mills, LSW Regional Program Co-ordinator Brant, Haldimand, Norfolk.



## Barter Pay It Forward Foundation Helps Ease Relocation Costs

In spring of 2019, Strong Start was introduced to the Barter Pay It Forward Foundation and the timing could not have been better! With a move and major renovation in its near future, Strong Start was looking for innovative ways to reduce costs. The Barter Pay Network is a business-to-business network that trades goods and services with Barter Dollars. The Foundation is the charitable arm of the network, granting Barter Dollars to charities. BP Vendors offered Strong Start both total or partial barter transactions which together saved over \$28,000 in expenses. The products and services donated include cleaning, network cabling and telephones, security system and monitoring, and a photo copier. We thank the Barter Pay It Forward Foundation and BP members for their generous support of our organization and our work in helping young children.

## Meet the Team

### Board of Directors:

**Steve Cameron** Chair of the Board

**Keith Martin** Board Member

**Linda Fabi** Board Member

**Mark Hallman** Board Member

**Jennifer King** Board Member

**Kimberley Hogan** Board Member

**Teresa Norris-Lue** Board Member

**Kristiina Montero** Board Member

### Team Members:

**Machelle Denison**

Executive Director

**Colette Moffat**

Director of Program & *Letters, Sounds and Words™* Program Co-ordinator for Wellington County, Bruce-Grey & Hamilton Region

**Caitlin Smith**

Director of Operations

**Mary Tuomanen**

Administrative Assistant

**Susie Gamble**

Warehouse Co-ordinator

**Iwona Dmitrienko**

*Get Ready for School™* and *Baby Connections®* Program Co-ordinator

**Kirsten Carr**

*Get Ready for School™* Program Co-ordinator

**Ruth Mills**

*Letters, Sounds and Words™* Program Co-ordinator for Brant, Haldimand and Norfolk counties

**Jean Stacey**

*Letters, Sounds and Words™* Program Co-ordinator for Waterloo Region

**Christine Giese**

*Letters, Sounds and Words™* Program Co-ordinator for Elgin, Middlesex, Oxford

### Introducing:

**Laura Scott**

Director of Development

Please visit our [website](#) to read more about our team.



Thank you to all our program staff and volunteers who deliver *Letters, Sounds and Words™*, *Get Ready for School™* and *Baby Connections®*. We are so grateful for your enthusiasm and time to help children learn to read. We couldn't do this without you.



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



# Stronger Together.....

## Our Program Partners



**Letters, Sounds and Words**  
A Strong Start to reading program™

- Braemar House School
- **Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board**
- Brantford Christian School
- **Bruce-Grey Catholic District School Board**
- Carizon Encompass Program
- Central Baptist Academy
- Emily C. General Elementary School
- **Grand Erie District School Board**
- **Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board**
- I.L. Thomas Odadrihonyanita Elementary School
- Jamieson Elementary
- KidsAbility School
- Koinonia Christian Academy
- Laurentian Hills Christian School
- Lloyd S. King School
- MAC Maple Grove School
- Oliver M. Smith Kawennio Elementary School
- **Thames Valley District School Board**
- W. Ross Macdonald School for the Blind
- **Waterloo Catholic District School Board**
- **Waterloo Region District School Board**
- **Wellington Catholic District School Board**

### Program Supporters

- Conestoga College
- Fanshawe College
- Mohawk College
- Six Nations Polytechnic
- University of Guelph
- University of Waterloo
- Western University
- Wilfrid Laurier University

## COVID-19 Impact on Children: our help will be needed more than ever

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed communities across the world, with shifting restrictions and uncertainties affecting all levels of society.

The impact on our children's education continues to be felt, even as some have returned to school after months away from the classroom and critical learning.

According to University of Toronto



**Get Ready for School\***

A Strong Start to reading program™

\* Based on the research of Dr. Juliana Baciu

- Activa Sportsplex, Kitchener
- Bridgeport Community Centre, Kitchener\*
- Centreville Chicopee Community Centre, Kitchener
- Chandler Mowat Community Centre, Kitchener
- Country Hills Community Centre, Kitchener\*
- Downtown Community Centre, Kitchener\*
- Forest Hill United Church, Kitchener
- Grow Community Centre, Cambridge
- Kinbridge Community Association, Cambridge
- Kingsdale Community Centre, Kitchener\*
- Langs, Cambridge\*
- Linwood Community Centre, Linwood
- McCormick Branch Library, Waterloo\*
- St. Peter's Catholic Elementary School, Cambridge
- Stanley Park Community Centre, Kitchener\*
- Victoria Hills Community Centre, Kitchener\*
- Williamsburg Community Centre, Kitchener
- Wilmot Family Resource Centre, New Hamburg\*
- Woolwich Memorial Centre, Elmira

child development professor Emis Akbari, "For the youngest children in our schools, the cumulative effects of inequities are particularly concerning. The interruption to their learning is happening precisely at a time when crucial developmental gains matter most, since these gains provide an important **foundation for child well-being, competence, skills and maturation.**"

Children who struggled before the lockdown will be further behind as a result. Many parents are weighed down with juggling working from home while striving to support their children's learning. Children affected by significant setbacks will require increased support to succeed.

Strong Start's programs will be needed more than ever in the recovery efforts to enable all children to reach their potential.



- Carizon Family & Community Services
- EarlyON Listowel
- EarlyON St. Mary's
- EarlyON Waterloo Region, YMCA of Cambridge & Kitchener-Waterloo
- Family & Children's Services
- Idea Exchange (multiple locations)
- KidsAbility Centre for Child Development
- Kitchener Public Library (multiple locations)
- Langs
- Project READ Literacy Network (multiple locations)
- Region of Waterloo Healthy Babies Healthy Children
- Region of Waterloo Infant and Child Development Program
- Region of Waterloo Public Library (multiple locations)
- Waterloo Public Library (multiple locations)
- Wilmot Family Resource Centre

*\*Sites also offering a Baby Connections® program*

*This list reflects program partners between September 1, 2019 to November 15, 2020. For a list of current program partners, please visit our website.*

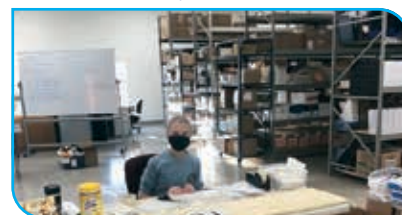
## Thank You Youth Volunteers



Austin



Jocelyn and Ella



Taite

## SG Cunningham Chooses Strong Start as 2020 Community Project

**sgcunningham.**

From our first meeting with SG Cunningham's CEO Georgia Cunningham in January, we knew we were in good hands with her team of seasoned construction professionals. Project Manager Allan Doerr and Site Supervisor Russ Leighton ensured that no detail was missed. Not only did SG Cunningham deliver a quality renovation on time and on budget, as their community project they generously donated their profits back to Strong Start. To think, they did all of this during a pandemic!

In support of our work in helping young



*Left to Right: Russ Leighton, Machele Denison, Allan Doerr, Georgia Cunningham and Caitlin Smith*

children learn to read, and with the encouragement of Georgia, eight other suppliers also made donations, and many other vendors and service-providers offered discounts and free products to help make it all possible.

Thanks to this incredible support, Strong Start is ready to grow its impact. For a full list of contributors, see the Thank You page.

## Strong Start Teams with Cyber Security Expert Jeff Posluns

Strong Start takes privacy and security very seriously. We rely on technologies to manage and scale our administrative capacity. This allows us to work efficiently, accurately and cost-effectively, while growing our programs. With cyber security crime on the rise, we wanted to protect our information even more. Our dreams were answered when we were introduced to **Jeff Posluns**. Jeff is a sought-after Chief Information Security Officer (CISO) and leader who specializes in governance, risk, compliance and cyber security. Jeff and his team generously volunteer all of their time to support the



development of robust security policies and procedures. Jeff also connected us to two security organizations: **MetaCompliance** and **Threat Status**. As a

result, our team received award-winning cyber security training and e-mail monitoring, respectively.

Jeff also volunteered with our partner, **Network Telecom**, to ensure a Fort Knox - secure network in our new location.

Jeff has given a gift of immeasurable value. Through his expertise and advice, we are better prepared to reduce the risk of security incidents.

*To read the full story, please visit our website and click on the "News" section.*

**Thank you for your vote!** We are delighted and humbled to announce that Strong Start was named the 2020 Diamond Winner of the Waterloo Region Record's Readers' Choice Awards in the Non Profit / Foundations category.



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



## Make a gift today to help children learn to read

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.

### Please make a gift today to help set a child on a path for success:

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

#### **Cheque by mail:**

Strong Start Charitable  
Organization  
1-565 Kumpf Drive  
Waterloo, ON, N2V 1K3

**Email:** [info@strongstart.ca](mailto:info@strongstart.ca)

**Call:** 519-743-9578



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Charitable Registration  
#825948060RR0001