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**Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County Awards  
Literacy Champion Grants**

Syracuse, NY – On March 23, 2026, the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County awarded \$100,000 through its 2026 Literacy Champion Grants program to 18 local organizations. The awards were made at a Champions Breakfast held at the Central New York Community Foundation’s Philanthropy Center Community Ballroom, 431 E. Fayette St., Syracuse, New York.

“The organizations receiving this year’s Literacy Champion Grants represent the creativity, dedication, and collaboration that make our community stronger. Together, these programs will help ensure that more children and families in Onondaga County have the opportunity to develop strong literacy skills and a lifelong love of reading,” said Richard Gasiorowski, Literacy Coalition Director.

The diverse award-winning grant projects and events align with the Literacy Coalition's core goal of promoting literacy across the lifespan. The work of grant recipients will encompass a wide range of initiatives, including adult education programs and services, early childhood literacy and development, extracurricular childhood and youth programs including those with a focus on summer learning, and family literacy programs and services. The full list of the grant recipients and the funded projects and events can be found below.

The Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County remains steadfast in its commitment to collectively build and support diverse literacy initiatives throughout the Onondaga County community. The Coalition is grateful for the support of the Central New York Community Foundation, the County of Onondaga, the United Way of Central New York, and other donors and partners who make its literacy work possible.



Following a convening of over 200 community members in extensive planning sessions in 2007 and 2008, the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County was formed. Today, the Coalition consists of a network of stakeholders and non-profit organizations advocating for and working to achieve literacy for all. Coalition efforts include the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, Adult Education Round Table, and Literacy Champion Grants, among others. The vision of the Coalition is to develop resources, cultivate initiatives, and engage a thriving community where everyone reads and everyone succeeds. Learn more at [onliteracy.org](http://onliteracy.org).

## **2026 Literacy Champion Grantees**

### **Aurora of CNY - Bedtime Book Series**

The Bedtime Book Series is an inclusive literacy program that introduces children to storytelling through both spoken English and American Sign Language. Expanding from a library-based model to local schools, the program removes barriers such as transportation and scheduling while increasing access for children and families who may not regularly attend library programming.

### **Elmcrest Children's Center, Inc. - Summer Literacy Camp: Literacy & History in Motion**

This six-week immersive program combines literacy, history, and cultural exploration for residential youth. Through engagement with historical figures, professional authors, museum visits, and creative activities, participants will build reading and writing skills while developing a deeper appreciation for storytelling, culminating in a community Wax Museum presentation.

### **Foundation of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse – Wit & Wisdom – Summer Enrichment Promoting Literacy at Most Holy Rosary School**

This program will provide targeted reading and writing instruction to 45-50 K-6 students from underserved and immigrant communities in Syracuse. Designed to prevent summer learning loss, the program focuses on building literacy skills, strengthening vocabulary, and supporting English Language Learners through small-group, differentiated instruction in a supportive school environment.



### **Friends of the Rosamond Gifford Zoo at Burnet Park, Inc. – Read, Roar, Explore!**

This early childhood literacy and animal science program builds a love of reading while supporting language development, early STEM learning, family engagement, and kindergarten readiness. Preschool learners participate in classroom-based literacy sessions followed by a zoo graduation experience where they explore animal exhibits, participate in literacy activities, and share their learning with a parent or caregiver. The program includes a take-home book to encourage continued reading at home.

### **Jowonio School – Increasing Access to Literacy for Young Children and their Families**

This initiative expands access to literacy and communication tools for young children and their families. The project involves installing permanent communication boards on school and community playgrounds to support language development for all children, including those using augmentative and alternative communication, while also providing bilingual books to encourage family reading and learning at home.

### **Light a Candle for Literacy - 2026 Literacy Parade and Book Festival**

This event, organized by Light a Candle for Literacy, is a community celebration on Syracuse's Southside promoting the importance of childhood literacy. The event features a parade, local authors and illustrators, live performances, activities for children, and free book giveaways, all designed to increase enthusiasm for reading, raise literacy awareness, and help combat summer learning loss.

### **Liverpool Public Library – Reading Buddies**

This is a collaborative program between the Library and the Liverpool Central School District that pairs high school students in the Career Technical Education Early Education Program with elementary students who need additional reading support. Through weekly one-on-one tutoring sessions with their high school "buddies", students strengthen reading skills and families receive materials to continue practicing literacy skills with their children at home.

### **Onondaga Community College Foundation, Inc. – Barbershop Books Syracuse Launch**

Barbershop Books is a nationally recognized literacy initiative that places culturally relevant children's books in neighborhood barbershops and trains barbers to create welcoming reading experiences. Led locally by the OCC Foundation, the program transforms routine barbershop visits into opportunities to strengthen early literacy skills, particularly for Black boys and other underserved children in Syracuse.



### **Onondaga County Public Library – Summer Book Buddies at OCPL**

Summer Book Buddies at OCPL is a pilot program designed to support young readers during the summer months through one-on-one literacy mentoring. In partnership with the United Way of Central New York's Book Buddies program, trained volunteers will provide structure phonics-based tutoring sessions to beginning readers (grades kindergarten through third grade) at four Syracuse City library branches.

### **Preserve the Black Child – Preserve the Black Child Book Fair**

This community literacy event celebrates Black children through culturally affirming books, authors, and educational experiences. By providing access to diverse literature, author showcases, and free book distribution, the event promotes literacy equity while ensuring children see themselves positively represented in the stories they read.

### **Pride Community Center of CNY, Inc. - CNY Pride Festival 2026 Book Giveaway**

This literacy initiative promotes inclusion and representation by providing free books at the CNY Pride Festival. The program focuses on sharing stories that reflect LGBTQ+ identities and diverse families. We are partnering with Onondaga County Library staff to distribute these books to children and also engage them in literacy activities.

### **Read to Them – One School One Book Program at Grimshaw Elementary and Onondaga Nation Schools**

The program, offered through the non-profit Read to Them, encourages schools and families to read the same children's book together on a shared schedule. By giving every student in these two schools a copy of the book, the program fosters a community-wide reading experience and helps families build stronger home literacy habits. School curriculum for teachers and take-home family resources are also included.

### **Refugee & Immigrant Self-Empowerment (RISE) - Youth Afterschool and Summer Program**

This program supports refugee and immigrant youth in Syracuse through culturally responsive tutoring, literacy development, and academic enrichment. Serving youth from New American communities, the program provides individualized instruction, English language support, and structure activities designed to strengthen academic skills and promote long-term educational success.



### **Road to Emmaus Ministry – Expansion of Children’s Activities Program and Reading Corner**

Road to Emmaus Ministry will enhance its family reading corner by adding new books, learning materials, and activities that support children’s literacy and creativity. The program provides a safe and welcoming space where children can read, learn, and participate in educational activities, while also expanding access to books in the waiting room of the organization’s free dental and medical clinic.

### **Syracuse Reads+ - Stories, Sounds, and Songs!**

Led by Syracuse Reads+, this family literacy initiative is designed to support early literacy development for children from birth to age seven and their caregivers. Through interactive literacy events, caregiver modeling, and take-home materials, the program builds key early reading skills such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and letter recognition.

### **Tillie’s Touch: Tillie’s Touch Books for Home**

Tillie’s Touch Books for Home expands access to age-appropriate books for children participating in Tillie’s Touch programs. By providing books for families to take home, the initiative helps strengthen reading habits, build academic confidence, and support long-term educational success for children from economically challenged backgrounds.

### **United Way of Central New York – Full STEAM Ahead: Igniting Imagination through STEAM Books**

This literacy initiative provides a new STEAM-themed book each month to kindergarten through third grade students in four Syracuse City School District elementary schools. Modeled after the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, the program promotes early literacy while encouraging curiosity about science, technology, engineering, arts, and math.

### **Upstate Foundation - Connections Through Reading**

Connections Through Reading promotes a love of reading among children receiving care at Upstate pediatric practices. Building on a successful pilot program, the initiative will expand to additional pediatric and pediatric psychiatry outpatient locations providing literacy resources and engagement opportunities to more than 25,000 children and teens. In addition, they plan to offer provider workshops to enhance this project.

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