

UNITED IN PURPOSE

UNITED WAY OF ROCK RIVER VALLEY NEWSLETTER

LITERACY BY THE NUMBERS

Our early literacy push is grounded in research and real-time data. Here's how the impact is stacking up:

150,000+

BOOKS DELIVERED

to families in Winnebago County.

5,200+

CHILDREN ENROLLED

in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, receiving a new book each month.

20+

PEDIATRIC CLINICS PARTICIPATING

in the Reach Out and Read program where doctors give books and literacy guidance during every well-child visit.

19

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

From schools and libraries to health care providers and churches, we're working hand-in-hand to build a countywide literacy ecosystem.

3RD-GRADE BENCHMARK:

Only **1 in 3** third-grade students in Winnebago County currently read at grade level. United Way's long-term goal: **75% reading proficiency by 2034.**

2025/26 FUNDING STREAMLINED TO STRENGTHEN LITERACY IMPACT

To accelerate early childhood literacy in Winnebago County, United Way of Rock River Valley (UWRRV) has refined its 2025/26 funding process under the "United for Literacy" initiative. The new approach offers two targeted tracks: **Service Funding** and **Book Distribution**.

The shift responds to community feedback and emphasizes measurable impact. "We want to support organizations doing transformative work in literacy," said Jessica Iasparro, Director of Community Impact. "These funding streams give groups options aligned with their mission and capacity."

The **Service Funding** stream supports partners receiving over \$5,000 who integrate literacy into core services. These organizations participate in site visits, track outcomes, and support UWRRV's goal of 75% of local third graders reading at grade level by 2034.

The **Book Distribution** track awards up to \$5,000 for community events like book giveaways and read-alouds. With lighter reporting and access to discounted books, it helps stretch resources and boost family engagement.

Both funding paths emphasize three key practices: interactive read-alouds, independent reading time, and increasing access to books at home. A special focus is placed on empowering parents in underserved communities.

"This isn't just about handing out books," said Iasparro. "It's about building a culture of literacy."

Over 30 local partners will be collaborating through United for Literacy this year, aligning grassroots action with strategic investment to create lasting change across the Rock River Valley.

Learn more on our website:
unitedwayrrv.org/united-literacy



TINY & PAGE TURNER PROGRAMS OPEN DOORS FOR KIDS AND FAMILIES



In classrooms and living rooms across Winnebago County, something powerful is happening—one book at a time.

Through United Way's Tiny Turners and Page Turners literacy programs, children are not just receiving free books. They're developing lifelong reading habits, building stronger bonds with family, and discovering new ways to learn and grow. And the feedback from the people who see it happen every day—educators and home visitors—tells a story as compelling as the books themselves.

Tiny Turners: Tiny Moments, Big Impact

Geared toward infants and toddlers, the Tiny Turners program equips families with appropriate age books during home visits. And the impact, according to survey responses, is profound.

Most respondents described how the books became a centerpiece of interaction, transforming simple visits into opportunities for connection and growth. One family support worker wrote:

"We educate families on the benefits of reading to their infants. We also encourage moms to read to their babies in the womb to promote fetal bonding."

Others described using the books as tools to model reading behaviors, spark child-led learning, and even assess early developmental milestones. One respondent explained:

"I model reading to the families, especially those with low levels of literacy."

While every child's reaction is different, the message was consistent: families look forward to receiving these books. Educators report that the books spark curiosity and conversations—sometimes for the very first time.

Page Turners: Igniting a Love for Reading in Classrooms

If Tiny Turners plant the seeds, Page Turners waters them. Serving preschool-aged children and early elementary students, the program distributes books paired with curriculum materials and parent resources.

Teachers were asked: How impactful is the Page Turner program on student literacy? The majority, **86 percent, responded very and somewhat impactful.**

And the written responses paint a more complete picture:

"Any time you put literature in the hands of children, it increases their chances for future success."

"Many of my students don't have books at home. They're excited when I write their name on the inside cover—because it means the book is theirs."

"This bridges reading at school with reading at home. Students re-tell the story to their parents, which reinforces what they learned."

The program also builds more than just literacy. Teachers praised the books' ability to launch social-emotional discussions, spark vocabulary growth, and instill confidence.

A Shared Story

Both programs, despite their differences in delivery, share a common thread: books as tools for equity, connection, and empowerment.

Parents are engaging. Teachers are inspired. Children are thrilled to have something of their own. And across the board, the message is clear—these programs matter.

As one teacher put it:

"Students get so excited when they get a new book. So much of what we do at this age is about helping them fall in love with reading. This program makes that possible."

In a world where not every child has access to books at home, the Tiny Turner and Page Turner programs are more than thoughtful initiatives. They're lifelines—turning pages, and turning points, for the future.

EFFICIENT, IMPACTFUL GIVING

IRA Qualified Charitable Distributions

United Way of Rock River Valley is very grateful to receive gifts of IRA Qualified Charitable Distributions.

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Questions? Please contact Kay Larrick, director of stewardship at kay@unitedwayrrv.org, (331) 716-0136.

KARL COLE BRINGS IMAGINATION AND EMPATHY TO THE IREAD CLASSROOM

When Karl Cole first stepped into a first-grade classroom at Ralston Elementary as a United Way IREAD volunteer, he wasn't new to mentoring young students—but what he discovered over the course of the year deepened his appreciation for both the joys and the challenges of early literacy.

Cole's journey began a few years earlier through a literacy initiative supported by Rockford Rotary. "That experience really opened my eyes," he said. "Not so much to working with kids—that's always been comfortable for me—but to the wide range of reading abilities among them." He recalls mentoring two third graders: one reading at a higher-grade level, and another still struggling with basic words. That range of skills, he learned, would become a defining feature of his IREAD experience as well.

In his small group IREAD sessions, Cole witnessed the power of personalized attention. "I had kids who couldn't sound out three-letter words and others already reading chapter books. It amazed me that the teacher could even create lesson plans to support them all."

That challenge didn't discourage him—it inspired him. He worked closely with classroom teacher Sue Pfeiffer to ensure all students stayed engaged, especially those who needed extra help.

Cole's natural storytelling flair quickly became one of his most impactful tools. He recalls reading aloud to the entire class, using animated voices and vivid imagery to bring the text to life. "I'd ask, 'Can you hear the wind?' or describe a creaky shutter banging in the breeze. I wanted them to paint a picture in their minds." That approach kept the students glued to every word. "Sue even joked, 'They're never that quiet for me!'" he laughed.

But perhaps the most rewarding moments came not during reading,

students and filling the classroom with laughter. "It was fun for me, and fun for them. That joy becomes part of how they experience reading and school."

Through it all, Cole says his understanding of the Harlem School District—and the complexities of early literacy—has grown. "It's not just about teaching kids to read," he said. "It's about meeting them where they are, making it fun, and helping them believe in themselves."

And for Cole, the biggest challenge?

I READ 2024/25:
**26 VOLUNTEERS
IN 3 SCHOOLS**
PARKER EARLY EDUCATION CENTER
RALSTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
OLSON PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



but in the relationships built around it. "A couple of boys I worked with every week became my little buddies. I even gave them nicknames. I called them 'Nick and Nack.' We joked around, and they'd run up for hugs. It's those connections that stay with you."

He didn't shy away from fun either. One day, he showed up dressed head-to-toe as a Christmas elf, surprising the

"Making sure no one falls through the cracks," he said. "You want every child to feel seen, capable, and supported."

Thanks to volunteers like Karl, the IREAD program continues to do just that.

COMMUNITY GATHERS AT "TEA FOR TOMORROW" TO CONFRONT LITERACY CRISIS



More than 290 people gathered June 12 at the Tebala Event Center for Tea for Tomorrow: Building a Tradition of Literacy, hosted by United Way of Rock River Valley to spotlight the urgent literacy crisis in Winnebago County.

Only one in three local public school students read at grade level by third

grade—a critical milestone linked to future academic and economic success. "This is a community crisis that demands a community response," said United Way President and CEO Julie Bosma. "When children can't read by third grade, their chances of

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CONTINUED: TEA FOR TOMORROW FUNDRAISER

graduating and rising out of poverty drop significantly.”

The event was aimed at educating and inspiring the community.

Keynote speaker Dr. Karen Walker, a local literacy consultant, urged attendees to view literacy as a shared responsibility—not one that falls solely on schools. “Parents, employers, nonprofits, city leaders—we all have a role to play,” she said.

Rockford 2025 Youth Poet Autumn Rose Smith and budding poet Mariah Wrenn delivered moving readings, highlighting both the power of words and the need for urgent action. Local authors Karla Clark, Barb Kohl, Elissa



Schwartz, Lynn and Bryn Gibson, and Emily Grobe held book signings, while a gourmet menu from GreenFire, silent auction, and 50/50 raffle added community flair and support.

“Our work isn’t just about giving away books,” Bosma said. “It’s about building a culture of literacy at home and across every neighborhood.”

She closed with a call to action: “We can’t wait for someone else to fix this. It’s on all of us—parents, teachers, business leaders, community members. Literacy unlocks a stronger, safer, more prosperous future.”



Dr. Ebony Wrenn, budding poet Mariah Wrenn, and keynote speaker Dr. Karen Walker.



Cherice Ullrich, President & CEO Julie Bosma, and MC Whitney Martin.



NEED HELP? CALL 2-1-1 | YOUR LINK TO COMMUNITY RESOURCES.

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