



Strong Start to reading™

"Making a difference in the life of a child"

Strong Start Annual Newsletter • December 2021

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Follow us on social media



What a Difference a Year Makes!

We are so happy to be sending this update to our stakeholders: parents, volunteers, donors, funders, program partners and community champions after a year of challenges and uncertainty for all.

All through the pandemic Strong Start has remained steadfast in our commitment to provide services and supports to help young children learn to read. In the late fall of last year when it was confirmed that our community centre partners would not be open for in-person programming, we moved swiftly to transition both *Baby Connections* and *Get Ready for School* to an online format. We recognized that these babies and preschoolers would be in need of our support, even more with the extended stay-at-home order in early 2021. With a growing concern for the negative social and emotional impacts of isolation, creating these online communities for families brought benefits that far exceeded the literacy and language development of our little participants. Our parent participants were not only grateful for the learning, they genuinely enjoyed the human connection the programs provided.

Unfortunately, our school-based *Letters Sounds and Words* program remained suspended throughout last year. There were some exceptions in schools in communities with low case counts, but once the winter lock-down was announced even these schools had to stop the program. We applaud the incredible efforts of our teachers and parents, providing and supporting online learning for children. We acknowledge and appreciate that everyone did their best through this difficult time.

For our part, as a way to further support families with young children, we created our new online, downloadable parent resources. Now, not only do parents have more information about how to support their children's literacy development at home, they have 26 new games and activities to play with their children using items commonly found around the home and in nature. These resources are free, can be easily translated into multiple languages and are being accessed by families across Canada!

We are thrilled to report that our school board partners are starting to launch the *Letters, Sounds and Words* program in schools this fall. We are excited to be able to provide this critical, additional support to children as we slowly emerge from the pandemic. We have thousands of trained Volunteers at the ready, and we know that they will look forward to being part of the COVID-19 recovery effort. *Our Get Ready for School* and *Baby Connections* programs are also being offered in-person this year.

We are now settled in our new location and we're ready to resume and grow our high-impact programs, helping young children learn to read. What a difference a year makes!

We could not do what we do without you!

With heartfelt appreciation,



Machel Denison

Machel Denison,
Executive Director



J King

Jennifer King,
Board Chair

“

Despite the challenges during the pandemic, I commend Strong Start for doing an outstanding job committing to their program to an online venue. Way to go!

”

Miriam, Strong Start Donor and Volunteer



Impact that Lasts.....



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

Ready to Help More Children as Program Demand Grows

As we entered multiple waves of the pandemic in the 2020-2021 school year, the ongoing lock-downs and reopening of schools had rightfully taken priority. As a result, volunteers were not permitted to enter schools and so our *Letters, Sounds and Words* program was suspended.

As children return to school this fall, *Letters, Sounds and Words* will be needed more than ever before. Our children have experienced unprecedented learning circumstances and for a variety of reasons there has been a compounded impact on the learning disparity. In recent research, experts are describing the situation as

““ *Letters, Sounds and Words was founded on the principles of an entire community rallying around its children to help them learn to read.*

”” *“a generational catastrophe.”* Authorities on the subject believe in some cases young children who have been negatively impacted have fallen behind an estimated five to eight months in their learning and developmental gains.

Strong Start has continued to prepare for a return to regular program delivery throughout the pandemic. We introduced online Volunteer Coach Training in 2020. This resource allowed us to better meet the needs of volunteers during COVID-19, and has helped to ensure a continuous pipeline of trained volunteers ready to support children once schools reopened.

Bethany Jakob has worked with Strong Start since 2010, first as a Volunteer

Coach and now as a Strong Start volunteer trainer. Bethany was one of the key trainers to implement the online option for volunteers. “It’s worked very nicely. The online version allows us to train volunteers across Ontario. One Zoom session may include 13 volunteers, many from different regions.” What unites volunteers is a desire to contribute and help their communities. “Volunteers may be parents and grandparents, university or college students, and retirees. They all want to share and give back.”

Letters, Sounds and Words was founded on the principles of an entire community rallying around its children to help them learn to read. COVID-19 may have changed some of our methods for program delivery, but certainly not the fundamental purpose of the program; helping children develop the essential life skill of reading.



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Strong Start to reading™
“Making a difference in the life of a child”

2020-2021 PROGRAM YEAR

by the numbers, 20 years and counting

Thank You To date Strong Start has **350** annual program sites, reached over **49,744** children through **573,918** volunteer hours, **34,029** volunteers and **YOUR** generous donations.

7 Regions Across Ontario

Ontario by FreeVectorMaps.com

Strong Start Timeline

2008: *Letters, Sounds and Words™* Brant, Haldimand, Norfolk est.

2010: *Get Ready for School™* est.

2011: *Baby Connections®* est.

2018: *Letters, Sounds and Words™* Elgin, Middlesex, Oxford est.

2019: *Letters, Sounds and Words™* Bruce-Grey and Hamilton Region est.

2020: Strong Start Relocation and Global Pandemic

2021: *Letters, Sounds and Words™* Hastings, Prince Edward, Lennox, Addington, Frontenac est. Strong Start Parent Resources



Helping Families in a Time of COVID-19

When the realities of the pandemic began to settle in to our collective consciousness, concerns were raised regarding pandemic isolation and its impact on babies. This was a concern raised by many participating in Strong Start's *Baby Connections* program. "A lot of our parents and caregivers were looking for ways to help their baby, recognizing that lockdowns were creating a social isolation that could impact their baby's social and language development," explains Shelby, a facilitator with EarlyON Waterloo Region at the YMCA of Three Rivers. Although *Baby Connections* is delivered in person, the program moved online during the pandemic.

“*Baby Connections* has empowered new parents and given them confidence...”

Shelby Cornwall, EarlyON Facilitator



The virtual program has been embraced and continues to create impact for participating families. "Baby Connections has empowered new parents and given them confidence," says Shelby. "We help to affirm their interactions with their baby, develop healthy routines, and practice activities that contribute to their baby's growth." Shelby likes to create an environment of connectedness, even though she is delivering the program virtually to 4 to 5 parent/caregiver and baby pairings at a time. "If a baby gets fussy, we follow the baby's lead, if a baby is not interested, we try to engage in another way." What matters most is that parents can learn that literacy is

everywhere. A favourite game might not even involve words; when using the sensory toy, the baby will roll a ball back and forth with help from their adult. The back and forth emulates a conversation, and the baby is learning that rhythm.

The greatest endorsement of this program comes from families. Shelby has been a facilitator for over a decade. "I see families return to the program once they have had a second or third child. That shows us the value of *Baby Connections*."



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Get Ready for School @ Home Helps Families Learn in Virtual Space

Imagine you have recently left your home of thirty years, and travelled over 9,000 km to a new country. Nothing is familiar. The sounds, the food, the people, all different. Maybe you've been struggling to learn the new language, as has your spouse. Your 6-year-old daughter is enrolled in school, and adapting but still finds a critical language barrier. You are trying to help her, but face the same obstacle. Add to that concern, your three-year-old son who has been developing his words in your mother tongue, must now expand his small vocabulary to include a new language.

This was a common situation for many participating families in our *Get Ready for School at Home* program. Indeed, the program was designed to directly help preschoolers who may be disadvantaged

at school entry; children, who are learning English as a Second Language, and/or are from low-income backgrounds. This year we welcomed nearly 300 children and their families to the program, with one winter session and one spring session. For 10 weeks via Zoom families focused on language development, literacy skills, classroom learning behaviours, and self-regulation, helping to set children on a path for a positive school experience, both in learning and making friends.



Alfonso, age 4, was one child who benefitted greatly from the program. Alfonso's mom, Saki, was worried about his start to Kindergarten, because he did not speak English and struggled with being able to focus. However, Alfonso thrived in *Get Ready for School @ Home*. "He could sit for an hour and listen to the instructors, which was a big step for him and me," explained Saki. "Moreover, he would raise a hand and answer questions, he remembered songs and sang for me

after classes, and he picked up English vocabularies. My son learned a lot in this short time. By answering questions, he gained self-confidence and I could see he felt safe and comfortable with the teachers and class. The program materials were amazing too. He learned many things and I learned how to approach his learning with a positive attitude. Thank you very much for being patient with him and believing in him."

A by-product of *Get Ready for School @ Home* was its impact on parents. Of course the children in the program had opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions and experiences with adults and peers. But, parents expressed appreciation for the opportunity to develop connections with other parents in the program and our staff. This was especially important as many had felt isolated from COVID-19 restrictions. The relationships parents/caregivers developed through the program expanded the family's social circle, helping to alleviate stress and anxiety. Building this sense of community and



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Thank You

We couldn't do this without you.

Your financial support enables us to offer our quality programs.



LYLE S. HALLMAN
FOUNDATION



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



- Anonymous Fund
- Barrie Family Fund
- Berg Family Trust Fund
- Blasman Family Fund
- Collins-Wright Family Fund
- Daidy & James Flavelle Fund
- General Youth Endowment Fund
- Jane & Ken Wright Family Fund
- Langdon Hall Fund
- Marion Edgar Fund
- School Sisters of Notre Dame Legacy
- Terry & Margaret Osborne Family Fund

- Alex & Trish Brown Family Fund
- Alex Schmidt Memorial Fund
- Community Fund
- David & Eleanor Yach Family Fund
- Heart Beats Hate Fund
- Jim & Sue Hallman Family Fund
- Machelle & Tony Denison Family Fund
- Waterloo Region International Plowing Match 1995 & 2012 Fund
- Waterloo Region Record Literacy Fund
- Woolwich Community Fund

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



Rotary Club of Dunnville
Rotary Club of Kitchener-Conestoga



- Optimist Club of Hespeler
- Optimist Club of Kitchener-Waterloo
- Optimist Club Of Lakeshore Village
- Optimist Club of St. Jacobs

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.

Foundations

Brant Community Foundation
Donald & Jo-Anne Wilken Fund
Caledonia Community Foundation
Centre Wellington Community Foundation
Centre Wellington 100 Men Who Care
Community Foundations of Canada
Community Foundation of Grey Bruce
D.H. Gordon Foundation
Elgin St. Thomas Community Foundation
Excellence in Literacy Foundation
Haldimand Norfolk Social Services and Housing
J.P. Bickell Foundation
Oxford Community Foundation
Lessif Family Fund
William & Mary Mackesy Fund
Port Dover Community Foundation
Samuel W. Stedman Foundation
S.M. Blair Family Foundation
The Excellence in Literacy Foundation

Corporate

A Girl Named Trenholme
Bold Automations
Brody Enterprises
CHANGE Lifestyle & Apparel
Conestoga Mechanical
Elemental Interior Design
GL Industries

Hi-Tech Door Automation
HM Advisors
I.C.I. Marble & Tile
K-W Glass Systems
Kitchener-Wilmot Hydro
RLB Management Partnership
Syser Technologies
The Canadian Shield
Toyota Motor Manufacturing
Wellington Pierpoint
Westmount Sign and Printing

Clubs, Schools, Groups

ETFO - Waterloo Occasional Teachers' Local
Kiwanis Club of Kitchener-Waterloo
Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association - Waterloo Unit
Simcoe Lion's Club

Third Party Events

Elmira Maple Syrup Festival

Government

City of Brantford
City of Kitchener

In-Kind

2WA Consulting - Anne Birmingham
Arrowsmith Corporation
Brantford Blast Hockey Organization
Carolyn Vandenberg Coaching & Consulting
Creative Day For Social Good
Neil Denison
Chris Howlett
Carol Jankowski
Liftow
Jeff Posluns
Simpson Print
Stephen Rice
TechSoup Canada and Partners

Individuals

Anonymous (25)
Divya Ahuja
Joseph Akhil-George
Janet L. Baker
Cheryl Bauman
Douglas Bundock
Steve & Patricia Cameron
Melissa Campbell
Kirsten Carr
Stephen Cassin
Ron & Rita Cherkewski
Bill & Mary Cressman
Addie Denison
Tony & Mabelle Denison
Susan Dusick
Tonya Elliott
Linda Fabi
Constance Finn
Lewis & Inge Ford
Tyla Fullerton
Claudia Haack
Stephanie Hall
Jim & Sue Hallman
Susan Hood
Christopher & Lynn Howlett
Carol Jankowski
Jennifer King & Christopher McIntyre
Mary Klymko
Anastasia Kuronen-Shoemaker
Karen Lintott
Heather Lodge
Deborah MacLatchy
Theresa Marks
Judy McDonald
John Medley
Hulene Montgomery & Michael Graham
Gary & Ruth Mills
Colette Moffat
Bryan & Jackie Murdoch
Stan & Donna Nahrgang
Erin Nespoli
Deb Nielsen
Janet Peddigrew
Jonathan Rennie
Linda Rowe Moakler
Beverley & Stan Saliwonchyk
Tina Sarellas
Bob & Mieke Schroeder
Laura Scott
Amy Sergi-Hammond
Kimberley Shannon
Nancy Silcox
Ken Silvester
Caitlin & Craig Smith
Jean Stacey
Miriam Trump
Katherine Tyler
Carol Verity
Peeranut Visetsuth
Ryan West
Scott Williams
Julie Witmer
Christina Young

Other Gifts

Thank you for all named memorial gifts received in memory of:
Susan Bloos
Matthew Mills
Lynda Silvester

This list reflects gifts received between July 1, 2020 to November 15, 2021.



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News & Events.....



United Ways Across Strong Start Communities

In recent months, Strong Start has benefited from United Way support across communities. These have included Brant United Way, United Way Haldimand and Norfolk, United Way Halton and Hamilton and United Way Waterloo Region Communities. Thanks to the restructuring of the United Way Waterloo Region, a new giving framework qualified Strong Start for support. Our *Letters, Sounds and Words* and *Get Ready for School @ Home* programs have benefitted from this local investment. "We are so happy to be able to support an organization like Strong Start," Joan Fisk, CEO of United Way Waterloo Region Communities, said. "They have been part of our community for 20 years and they provide an important resource that so many parents are grateful for."

We appreciate the support from our United Way partners, not only their financial investment in our programs, but also their leadership within our communities.

Ontario Trillium Foundation – Helping to Create Resilient Communities



This Spring, Strong Start was awarded a \$96,600 grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, as part of the Resilient Communities Fund. Investment will contribute to Strong Start's ability to adapt and evolve the delivery of programs and services in order to meet the emerging needs of young children and their families, all with the goal of helping children develop the essential life skill of reading.

Young children will greatly benefit from Strong Start programs, not only in helping them learn to read but also providing the social and emotional support that comes from working directly with a caring adult. Strong Start is extremely grateful to the Ontario Trillium Foundation for their investment and looks forward to supporting recovery efforts associated with COVID-19.



BusPlanner Helps Give Kids a Lift, to School and at School

Giving back to the community has always been a personal goal of BusPlanner's Executive Team, and a partnership with Strong Start seemed a natural connection.

BusPlanner's business is built on getting children to and from school safely. However, COO Janice Linders says they also care what happens in school, hence the partnership with Strong Start.

This family-owned tech company was founded in 1983 and based in Waterloo. It is a leader in student transportation software and its routing technology is used by hundreds of school boards across North America.

The support of small businesses and corporate philanthropy like that of BusPlanner helps Strong Start ensure thousands of young children each year acquire the foundational skills needed to become confident and successful learners.

Meet the Team

Board of Directors:

- Jennifer King** Board Chair
 - Teresa Norris-Lue** Vice-Chair
 - Jodi Ritter, CPA, CMA** Treasurer
 - Dr. Kristiina Montero** Board Member
 - Dr. Valerie Nielsen** Board Member
 - Kimberley Hogan** Board Member
 - Steve Cameron** Board Member
 - Mark Hallman** Board Member
- Thank you and best wishes to retiring Directors, Linda Fabi and Keith Martin!*

Team Members:

- Machelle Denison**
Executive Director
- Caitlin Smith**
Director of Operations
- Laura Scott**
Director of Development
- Mary Tuumanen**
Operations 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

Introducing:



Lisa Williams
Director of Program



Claudia Haack
Bookkeeper

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.....



Get Ready for School™
A Strong Start to reading program
Based on the research of Dr. Juliana Baciu 2010



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

- 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 Heights Community Centre, Kitchener
- Grow Community Centre, Cambridge
- Kinbridge Community Association, Cambridge
- Kingsdale Community Centre, Kitchener*
- Langs, Cambridge*
- Linwood Community Centre, Linwood
- McCormick Branch Library, Waterloo*
- Stanley Park Community Centre, Kitchener*
- St. Basil Catholic Elementary School, Owen Sound
- Victoria Hills Community Centre, Kitchener*
- Williamsburg Community Centre, Kitchener
- Wilmot Family Resource Centre, New Hamburg*
- Woolwich Memorial Centre, Elmira

- Cambridge Family Early Years Centre
- Carizon Family & Community Services
- EarlyON Listowel
- EarlyON Stratford
- 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)
- Our Place Family Resource and Early Years Centre
- 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)

*Sites also offering a Baby Connections® program

This list reflects program partners between September 1, 2020, to November 15, 2021. For a list of current program partners, please visit our website.

- **Algonquin & Lakeshore Catholic District School Board**
- 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
- **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**

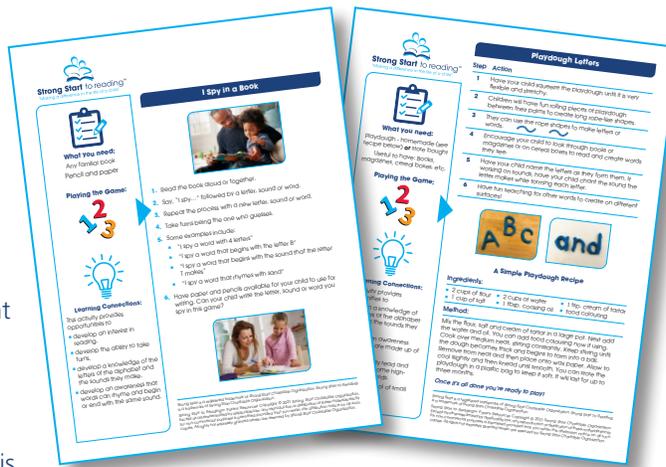
Program Supporters

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

New! Online Parent Resources

COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on young learners. "We worry about the mental health and social-emotional development of all children during the COVID-19 pandemic," noted recently retired Strong Start Director of Program, Colette Moffat. "Equally concerning is the knowledge that studies are showing that those young children who struggled with literacy prior to shutdowns and isolation, fall further behind due to interrupted support of their learning."

Strong Start responded to growing community needs with the development of a series of online parent resources, released in February of 2021. The free, downloadable interactive games and



activities support literacy development at home, using items and supplies that are often on hand and easily accessible. The resources were developed by our educators who specialize in early literacy. Games and activities are highly adaptable for children ages 3 to 9 years.

The parent resources can help children acquire fundamentals of reading, while providing parents/caregivers an

opportunity to support children in the home. One mother shared, "At-home learning has been a struggle for me as a parent. I didn't feel confident in my abilities so you might appreciate my relief when I discovered Strong Start's new parent resources. They have been a hit in our home; we schedule a new one each week and we all enjoy them; my kids don't even realize they are "learning" because the activities are fun (they especially enjoyed "Move like a letter"). Thank you Strong Start!"

The resources are widely circulated and available to all, free of charge. Please view these resources at <https://strongstart.ca/resources/families/parents/>



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A New Spin on Retail Creates Positive CHANGE

A new St. Jacobs shop, CHANGE Lifestyle & Apparel at 1440 King St. N, # 2, welcomes visitors with a dual purpose in mind.

The store, which opened in the spring, is the vision of local entrepreneur Dan Vandermolen and, as the name suggests, it is not a typical clothing store. Dan sums up his philosophy this way: "They say it's better to give than to receive. We say, why not do both."

"Doing both," Dan explains, is part of a global movement known as B Corp, or Beneficial Corporations, that balances purpose and profit while benefitting customers, workers, the community and the environment. Each quarter, Dan partners with a local charity and donates 10 percent of his store's revenue to that organization. Strong Start was chosen as the beneficiary for October to December.



Check it out in person or online at 1440 King St N #2, St. Jacobs, or order online at <https://www.changeapparel.ca/>.



← LEARN MORE



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.

NEW This Year!

Create even more impact by registering as a Monthly Donor!



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

Online: www.strongstart.ca

Cheque by mail:

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

Email: info@strongstart.ca

Call: 519-743-9578



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Charitable Registration
#825948060RR0001

DID? YOU KNOW

Get Ready for School @ Home™ was introduced in 2021 as a way to support preschool aged children during Ontario's stay at home orders. **278** young children and their families benefitted from the program and **37** languages were represented in the classes.

269 families benefited from **Baby Connections® @ Home** during Ontario's province-wide shutdowns.

195 volunteers were fully trained in our online volunteer training sessions, and will join nearly **3,000** Strong Start volunteers to deliver our programs as regular programming resumes this year!

Our new online Parent Resources have been accessed across the country and beyond, with over **9,000** page views!

Experts predict young children have fallen behind an estimated **5-8 months** in their learning and development as a result of the impacts of COVID-19.

Thank You Colette Moffat



After five years of dedicated leadership as Strong Start's Director of Program, Colette Moffat retired in October, 2021. Colette joined Strong Start in 2016 after a full and rewarding career in education, retiring from the Waterloo Catholic District School Board. In her time at Strong Start Colette has shared her passion for early literacy and has been instrumental in expanding our programs and our impact. Colette has built and nurtured relationships with schools and school board partners across Ontario and has provided exceptional leadership to our program teams. We wish Colette all the best in this exciting next phase of her life's journey.

Thank you for your vote!



We were delighted and humbled to be nominated for Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Award and the Waterloo Region Record Readers' Choice 2021 Award. Strong Start was named Platinum Winner in the Readers' Choice Non Profit/ Foundation Category.