

Red Deer Public Library

YOUTH Literacy Program



ANNUAL REPORT: SEPTEMBER 2025 - JULY 2026



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Program Overview

The 2025–2026 programming year marked the **third year of Red Deer Public Library's updated Youth Literacy Program model.**

The current model was launched in 2023–2024 following changes to the former Reading Pals program. That first year focused on rebuilding the volunteer base, strengthening program infrastructure, and re-establishing individualized literacy support across RDPL branches. The program began in October 2023 with only six volunteer tutors and 12 registered learners and expanded to serve **63 learners with 47 volunteers** by the end of the year.

In 2024–2025, the program entered a period of expansion. Its reach grew from eight schools to 21, 56 learners were matched with tutors, volunteer participation increased to 56, and reported volunteer hours rose substantially from 727 to 998.27.

The 2025–2026 year demonstrates the next stage in this development: **stabilization and sustained community demand.** A record **65 learners were matched**, volunteer retention remained strong, school connections were maintained across Red Deer, and the year ended with **17 learners waiting to be matched.**

After three years, the Youth Literacy Program is no longer rebuilding. It has developed into an established community literacy service with consistent participation, an experienced returning volunteer base, strong school relationships, and demand that increasingly exceeds available tutoring capacity.



2025–2026 Youth Literacy by the Numbers

Learners

During 2025–2026:

- **65 learners were matched with tutors**
- **17 learners were waitlisted** as of June 25, 2026
- **23 learners returned** from the previous programming year
- **30 learners**, including waitlisted learners, are projected to participate in 2026–2027
- **8 learners graduated** from the program

The 65 matched learners represent the **highest number of matched learners since the updated program model began**.

	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
Learners served/matched	63	56	65
Waitlisted	.*	8	17
Returning from previous year	-	24	23
Graduated	-	8	8

*The 2023–2024 report records eight learners on the waiting list partway through the year, but does not provide a directly comparable year-end waitlist figure. The report shows that the program ultimately served 63 learners.

The most important trend is therefore not simply growth in matched learners. It is the **growth in unmet demand**. Between 2024–2025 and 2025–2026, the number of matched learners increased by 16%, while the year-end waitlist grew from eight to 17.

By the end of the program's third year, its challenge is increasingly one of **capacity rather than awareness or recruitment of learners**.

Volunteers: From Recruitment to Retention

A total of **52 volunteers were active during 2025–2026**, including **25 returning volunteers**. The program conducted **36 volunteer interviews** and delivered **30 orientation and training sessions**, including two Games Nights designed to provide tutors with additional ideas and resources for engaging learners. Student volunteers continued to make up an important part of the volunteer team:

- **25 volunteers were students**
- **9 were Red Deer Polytechnic students**
- **16 were high school students**

Across three years, volunteer participation has remained remarkably strong:

	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
Active/matched volunteers	47	56	52
Returning volunteers	24 projected	35 projected	25 actual returners
Student volunteers	-	31	25
RDP students	-	13	9
High school students	-	18	16

The 2023–2024 program relied heavily on recruitment as the redesigned program was established. That year, 47 volunteers supported 63 learners and contributed 727 reported tutoring hours.

By 2025–2026, almost **half of active volunteers were returning volunteers**. This is an important indicator of program maturity. Experienced tutors require less introductory support, understand the program's relationship-based and learner-centred approach, and can provide greater continuity to returning families.

The continued involvement of high school and post-secondary students is another strength. Young volunteers are simultaneously developing leadership, communication and educational skills while supporting younger members of their community.

Volunteer Contribution

Volunteers self-reported **896 hours** during the 2025–2026 programming year.

Two volunteers, **Patty A. and Alain N.**, each contributed an exceptional **61 hours**. Alain N. tutored 10 students in the 2025-2026 program year. Alain N. is a French tutor and French tutoring is in high demand.

Over the three years of the updated program model, volunteers have reported more than **2,620 hours of tutoring**:

Programming year	Volunteer Hours (self-reported)
2023-2024	727
2024-2025	998.2
2025-2026	895.61
Three-year total	2,620.88

The 2024–2025 year represented a significant expansion in volunteer activity: reported hours increased from 727 to 998.27.

The 2025–2026 total is somewhat lower but remains substantially above the program's first year. More importantly, the program supported its **largest number of matched learners to date with fewer volunteer hours than the previous year**.

Tutor comments continue to demonstrate that the value of these hours extends beyond academic instruction. Tutors consistently identify relationships as one of the most rewarding aspects of volunteering:

“Connection with my student is wonderful! Reading with her, laughing with her! She very much enjoys word games! Graphic novels are her favourite.”

Another tutor described their favourite part as:

“Seeing my learner's progress and just spending time with them.”

Others valued the freedom to respond to individual learning styles, the educational experience they gained themselves, and simply the opportunity of:

“Spreading my love of reading.”

Feedback also identifies areas for continued improvement. Volunteers mentioned frustration while waiting for a match, inconsistent attendance and family communication, and situations where a learner may require support beyond what volunteer tutoring can provide. These observations will inform matching, communication and volunteer-support practices for **2026–2027**.

School Connections and Referrals

School relationships have undergone one of the most significant changes over the three years.

In 2023–2024, the program initially prioritized St. Patrick's Community School and Barrie Wilson School before expanding to serve learners from **eight schools across Red Deer**.

By 2024–2025, the program had received **56 teacher referrals from 21 schools**, a major expansion of its community reach.

In 2025–2026, the program received:

44 formal teacher referrals from 19 schools.

The largest numbers came from:

- Barrie Wilson Elementary School
- Father Henri Voisin School
- St. Patrick's Community School

When students from Alain N.'s class who entered through self-referral were included, the program had **54 school-connected referrals**.

	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
School represented	8	21	19
Teacher referrals	42*	56	44 formal/54 school-connected

*The 42-referral figure is the comparison figure used in the 2024–2025 report.

Viewed across three years, this does **not suggest declining school engagement**. Instead, the program appears to have moved from rapid expansion to maintaining a broad network of school relationships. The program now regularly receives referrals from schools across the city rather than depending primarily on a small number of partner schools.

What Families Tell Us: Reading, Confidence and Connection

Across all three years of the updated program, family feedback has demonstrated remarkably consistent outcomes.

In 2023–2024, parents reported improved reading levels, greater fluency, stronger English communication, increased confidence and children beginning to enjoy reading. One parent reported that their child had moved up nine reading levels, while another noted that their child had overcome shyness and begun speaking English.

In 2024–2025, the same themes continued: increased confidence, stronger literacy skills, enthusiasm for books and appreciation for individualized support. The report found that 100% of responding parents were satisfied or highly satisfied with the program.

The 2025–2026 feedback shows the same pattern. 100% of responding parents were satisfied or highly satisfied with the program.

One parent captured perhaps the program's most important outcome in five words:

“My child started to enjoy reading.”

Another wrote:

“It helped my daughter so much and we loved coming to the library every week.”

Parents repeatedly emphasized that one-on-one learning did not feel like school. One family explained:

“I didn't think my son would enjoy it but he ended up really liking it and it didn't feel like school to him. One on one and fun learning was what he needed to focus.”

Another reported:

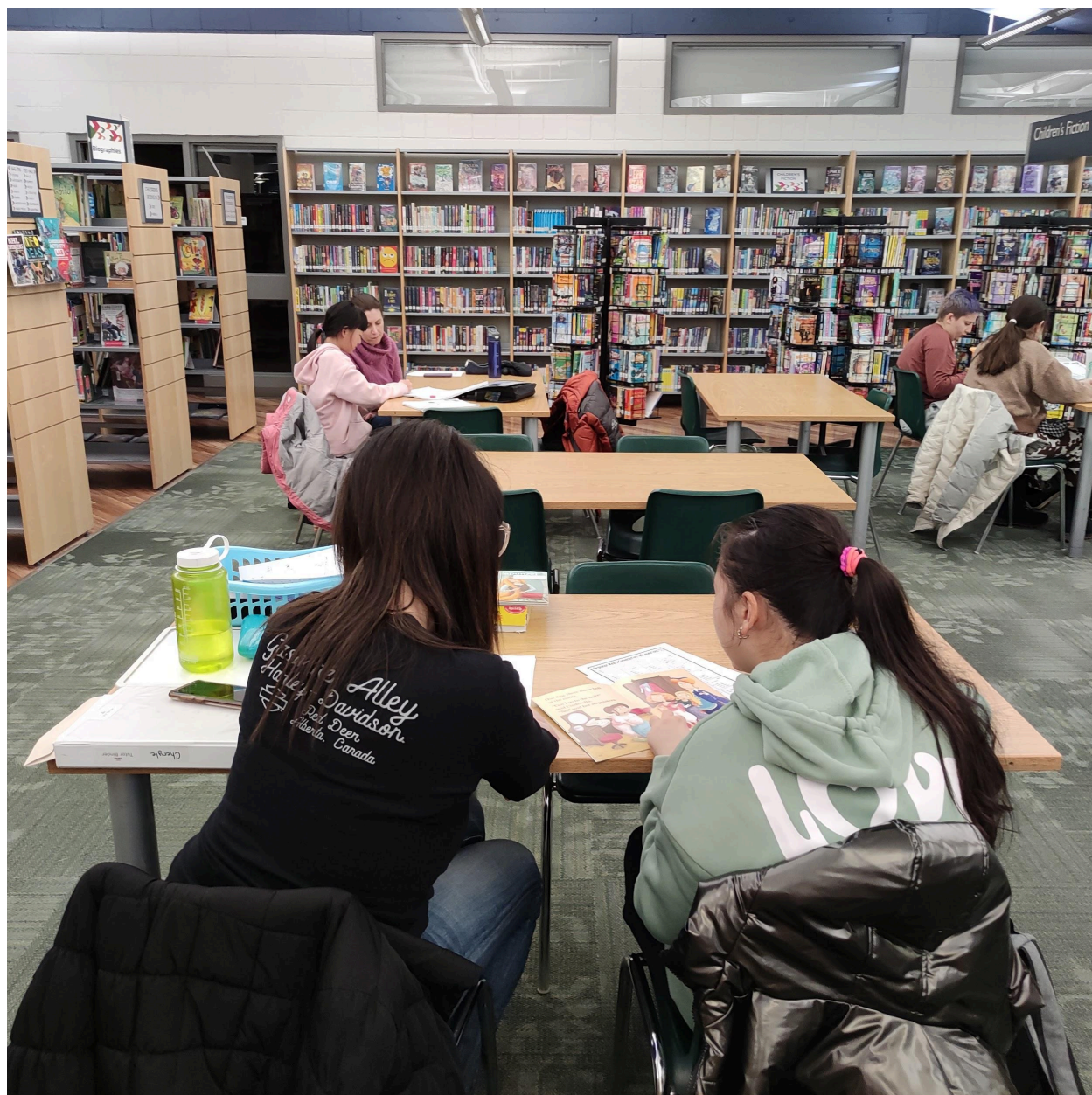
“My daughter has fallen in love with Piggie and Elephant books because of the program.”

For newcomer families, tutoring also supports language development, confidence and integration. One family described improved English as “the greatest help for us to live here” and reported that the effect over the past year had been significant.

Another family's favourite part of the program was learning about their tutor's hometown, holiday traditions and local foods.

These responses reinforce an outcome that has remained consistent throughout all three years: literacy development happens through relationships.

The program provides children not simply with someone who helps them decode words, but with someone who listens, plays, talks, encourages, shares books and creates positive experiences around literacy.



Youth Literacy Book Bundles

During September 2025–July 2026, staff created **50 customized Youth Literacy Book Bundles**.

This is very close to the 52 bundles created during 2024–2025. The Youth Literacy Book Bundles is a way of reducing the stress families experience selecting appropriately challenging books while introducing them to a wider range of RDPL materials.

The continued demand for approximately 50 bundles annually suggests that the service has become a stable extension of the tutoring program, allowing literacy support to continue at home and connecting families with the broader library collection.

Reading Pals Literacy Backpacks Project

Continuous improvement has been a feature of the updated Youth Literacy model from its beginning. In 2023–2024 and 2024–2025, summer projects focused on resource carts, volunteer training, program records and administrative systems. The 2024–2025 project, for example, resulted in inventoried and restocked English and French resource carts, updated training materials, a Master Tutor Binder, a revised Volunteer Tutor Handbook and streamlined administrative records.

In 2026, this work expanded to another important Youth Literacy resource: the literacy backpack collection housed at the Dawe Branch.

The **11 existing Reading Fun and Reading Pals backpacks** are being reviewed, refreshed, reorganized and re-catalogued as **Reading Pals Literacy Backpacks**.

The new name better reflects their role as multi-format literacy resources for emerging readers.

The backpacks will also be catalogued under both the **Wade Courtice Memorial Collection** and the **Marion Baine Memorial Collection**, recognizing donations from both families that support this project.

Each backpack is being updated individually and temporarily shadowed in the catalogue while work is underway.

As of this report, **five of the 11 backpacks have been completely updated and re-catalogued — almost half of the collection**. The project therefore remains on schedule for completion by the end of 2026.

The backpacks represent another way the Youth Literacy Program supports literacy beyond formal tutoring. Books, games and interactive resources provide families with opportunities to practise reading through play, exploration and shared activities.

Facility Service Dog Program Statistics and Feedback

Sit, Stay, Read with Katja

Katja, Red Deer Public Library's facility service dog, continued to support emerging readers through *Sit, Stay, Read with Katja* during the 2025–2026 programming year.

The program provides children with individual time to practise reading aloud to Katja in a calm and welcoming environment. Unlike a human reading partner, Katja does not correct mistakes, hurry a reader, or react when a child struggles with a word. Her role is simply to listen, creating a low-pressure opportunity for children to practise their skills and build confidence.

Sit, Stay, Read complements the one-on-one tutoring provided through the Youth Literacy Program. Some Youth Literacy learners also book time with Katja, giving them another opportunity to practise the skills they are developing with their volunteer tutors. Other children participate independently, making *Sit, Stay, Read* another entry point into RDPL's wider range of literacy supports.

Reading by the Numbers

Sit, Stay, Read statistics are tracked by **calendar year**, rather than by the Youth Literacy programming year.

Since 2024, children have participated in **361 individual reading sessions with Katja and read 1,135 books to her**.

The statistics also illustrate how the program has evolved. In 2024, 48 sessions were recorded. In 2025, participation grew substantially to 212 sessions, demonstrating the program's increasing integration into regular library literacy services. With 101 sessions already completed in 2026 to date, *Sit, Stay, Read* continues to provide a well-used opportunity for children to practise reading in a supportive environment.

Calendar year	Reading Sessions	Books Read
2024	48	413
2025	212	514
2026 to date	101	208
Total since 2024	361	1,135

The relationship between sessions and books read also shows that there is no single “right” way to participate. Some children may work carefully through one longer or more challenging book, while another emerging reader may enthusiastically complete several short books during the same appointment. For this reason, both statistics are useful: the number of sessions reflects the opportunities provided for individual reading practice, while the number of books helps illustrate the volume and variety of reading taking place.

Building Confidence Through Reading

The value of *Sit, Stay, Read* goes beyond the number of books completed.

Feedback collected since Katja began working as RDPL's facility service dog consistently emphasizes **confidence, motivation and enjoyment**.

One particularly telling story from the 2024–2025 report involved a child who was initially reluctant to participate because he believed that he could not read. He ultimately read eight books to Katja. Another family described how their child began thinking between appointments about which books Katja might like, motivating him to look through and pre-read books at home before selecting something for his next session. His parent felt that the experience helped him begin to identify himself as a reader.

These experiences reflect an important principle shared by *Sit, Stay, Read* and the Youth Literacy Program: developing literacy is about more than improving technical reading skills. Children also need opportunities to experience themselves as **capable readers**.

For a child who associates reading aloud with correction, frustration or comparison with classmates, successfully sharing a book with Katja can provide a very different experience.

Part of a Larger Literacy Continuum

Over the past three years, Katja's role has become increasingly integrated with RDPL's broader approach to literacy.

The Youth Literacy Program provides one-on-one volunteer tutoring, Book Bundles, literacy games and resources, and Reading Pals Literacy Backpacks. *Sit, Stay, Read* adds another form of individualized support — an opportunity focused particularly on reading aloud, confidence and enjoyment.

A learner might practise phonics, vocabulary or comprehension with a volunteer tutor and then use another library visit to read a favourite book to Katja. Another child may first become connected with RDPL's literacy services through a *Sit, Stay, Read* appointment and later discover other library resources and programs.

In this way, Katja's work is part of a larger continuum that helps children move from **learning how to read, to practising reading, to choosing books independently, and ultimately to seeing themselves as readers.**

This connection was already becoming evident in the 2024–2025 program year, when the Youth Literacy report noted that learners supplemented their tutoring sessions by reading to Katja. Even Katja's stuffed-toy counterpart became a tutoring resource because having it nearby sometimes helped learners remain focused and engaged.

Beyond Sit, Stay, Read

Katja's contribution as RDPL's facility service dog extends beyond scheduled reading appointments.

During the 2025–2026 year, Team Katja continued to participate in school and daycare outreach, storytimes, community events and other library activities. These visits help introduce children to the library in an approachable and memorable way and create natural opportunities to talk about books, reading and library programs.

For some children, meeting Katja outside the library becomes their first connection with her. A school or community visit can lead to a later library visit, participation in *Sit, Stay, Read*, or exploration of other RDPL programs and collections.

Katja also contributes to activities where literacy is not the primary objective. Her training allows her to provide a calm presence during stress-relief activities and other situations where connection and emotional support are valuable.

This broader role reinforces that the Facility Service Dog Program is not simply an animal-assisted reading program. Katja serves as a **literacy partner, library ambassador and community connection point.**

Looking Ahead

After three years of tracking *Sit, Stay, Read*, the cumulative statistics provide a meaningful picture of the program's reach: **361 reading sessions and 1,135 books shared with Katja since 2024.**

Yet the strongest evidence of impact continues to come from the experiences behind those numbers: a reluctant reader finishing eight books, a child choosing books at home because they think Katja might enjoy them, or a learner becoming confident enough to think of themselves differently as a reader.

As the Facility Service Dog Program continues, *Sit, Stay, Read* will remain connected to RDPL's broader literacy work while Katja's outreach and community engagement roles continue to create additional pathways into the library.

The program's contribution can be summarized simply: **Katja gives children another reason to pick up a book — and a safe, patient listener when they are ready to read it.**

Three Years of the Updated Youth Literacy Program

The three-year comparison provides the clearest picture of how the program has evolved.

Key Indicator	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
Learners served/matched	63	56	65
Active volunteers	47	56	52
Volunteer hours	727	998.27	895.61
Schools represented	8	21	19
Teacher/school-connected referrals	42	56	44 formal/54 incl. self-referrals
Year-end waitlist	n/a	8	17
Graduates	n/a	8	8
Book Bundles	n/a	52	50

The statistics suggest three distinct stages of program development.

2023–2024: Rebuilding and Launch. The redesigned program began with six tutors and 12 learners and grew rapidly to 63 learners and 47 volunteers. Staffing, volunteer management, training and resources were being rebuilt around the new model.

2024–2025: Expansion and Capacity Building. School reach increased dramatically, volunteer hours approached 1,000, staffing and administrative processes strengthened, and volunteer retention improved.

2025–2026: Stabilization and Sustained Demand. The program reached a three-year high of 65 matched learners while maintaining a volunteer team of more than 50 people and connections with 19 schools. At the same time, the waitlist more than doubled from eight to 17 learners.

That last number is perhaps the most important indicator for future planning.

The program has demonstrated that it can recruit learners, build school partnerships, recruit and retain volunteers, and provide meaningful literacy experiences. The emerging challenge is ensuring that **volunteer and staff capacity can keep pace with demand**.

Looking Ahead to 2026-2027

After three years, the updated Youth Literacy Program has moved beyond its initial development phase.

Across those three programming years, it has served approximately **184 learner placements**, engaged dozens of community volunteers, generated more than **2,620 self-reported tutoring hours**, developed relationships with schools across Red Deer, strengthened its literacy resources and established a sustainable structure for individualized tutoring.

The next stage of development will focus less on expansion for expansion's sake and more on **sustainability, retention, quality and capacity**.

Priorities for 2026–2027 include continuing to recruit tutors where demand is greatest, retaining experienced volunteers, improving the speed and effectiveness of matching, supporting consistent communication between tutors and families, and completing the Reading Pals Literacy Backpack renewal project.

Most importantly, the program will continue to protect the quality that families and volunteers repeatedly identify as its greatest strength: **individual relationships**.

Across three years of feedback, parents have talked about children becoming confident enough to speak English, progressing through reading levels, discovering favourite books and — perhaps most importantly — beginning to enjoy reading. Tutors have talked about laughter, games, relationships, watching learners progress and sharing their own love of books.

The statistics demonstrate reach and demand. The feedback explains why the program matters.

Three years into the updated model, Youth Literacy has developed into a stable and valued library service where literacy is supported not only through books and instruction, but through time, trust, encouragement, play and human connection.

