



FAMILY & COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER

Dear Jowonio Families,

The theme that runs through this newsletter is all of the ways that Jowonio is a community, and the ripple effect we have on our larger community. In these challenging times in our world, Jowonio's commitment to building meaningful relationships, celebrating strengths, honoring diversity, and supporting all to thrive is not something that I take for granted. It feels incredibly important, and I celebrate the dedication of our staff and families to bringing this vision to life.

Along with the many examples of this that you will read about in this newsletter, I have been reflecting on our school community's response to the unfortunate incident on February 13th, and the resulting enforcement actions on the part of OCFS that, among other things, temporarily forced closure of the Earth Room. It has been a scary and challenging time that could have led to a lot of recrimination and finger pointing, as well as the loss of a school placement for 14 children and families. Instead, staff members, Board members, and families have used it as a tool for deep reflection and problem-solving about how to prevent an incident like this from happening again. Teaching staff who had already built community, established routines, and developed strategies to address the 14 children they currently had stretched themselves to welcome 2 new students and, in some cases, a new staff member into their classrooms. This has allowed all of the Earth Room students to continue to have a place at Jowonio as we go through the process of enforcement action with OCFS, and the children have settled in and continue to thrive. Families and Board members have repeatedly offered their gratitude and asked how they could help, re-affirming the commitment of our community to the work of the school.

We are almost through the enforcement process with OCFS, and there is hope that we will be able to reopen the Earth Room soon. But, no matter what happens, our community will band together and remain strong, ensuring that we can continue the wonderful work of engaging, interacting with, and educating children in a fully inclusive way.

I am grateful to all who are a part of this amazing community, and I look forward to continuing our journey together,

~Lori



WHAT'S NEW!

We've got some exciting news! Jowonio was recently awarded a **\$10,000 grant from the John Ben Snow Foundation** to guide our work in supporting the mental health of our school community.

This funding will enable us to create a year-long partnership with Nurturing Connections, a local mental health practice, resulting in whole-staff training, 1:1 coaching and support for individual teachers and students, and classroom support. We're so grateful for this investment and can't wait to put it into action!

Thank you!



Celebrate Jowonio

JOIN US FOR AN ANNUAL FUNDRAISER TO BENEFIT JOWONIO!

Friday, April 17th
5:30-8:30 pm

A night of great food, drink, music, silent auction, and raffles to support inclusive education

<https://celebratejowonio26.auctria.events>

What do we do on Wednesday?

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, to kick off our newly created collaboration with Nurturing Connections Marriage & Family Therapy, Tara Pieknowski & Michelle VanHatten led a professional learning session called "Remaining Grounded in the Face of Big Behaviors, Supporting Nervous Systems in Inclusive Classrooms". Together we explored brain development and impacting factors, why some nervous system responses may result in big behaviors and what we can do to support each other and kids to feel regulated, connected and grounded.



Tara and Michelle reminded us that connection always comes first

Jowonio staff
**LEAVE
THEIR
MARK**



In January, a team member at a local center I worked for in the past reached out to me to ask if Jowonio would be willing to give a presentation on AAC to their team. The SLPs at this center felt strongly about providing access to their kids, but weren't sure where to start. After talking with some team members, I created a presentation for SLPs, and a broader presentation for classroom teams about implementing AAC day to day. Shannon and I went to the center to talk about the funding process for an AAC device, how we implement AAC in a neuro-affirming way at Jowonio, and ways to support students and families with complex communication needs. The presentation turned into a great conversation about neuro-affirming practices, advocacy and using AAC from a child-led perspective. Jowonio's ability to provide this training for free made a huge difference for this center, and will help them start to build a program that helps more kids gain access to communication!

~Mikaella Verblaauw, SLP



Gen

Shannon

Mikaella

In January, I had the special opportunity to return to my alma mater, Syracuse University, alongside fellow Speech-Language Pathologist Mikaella Verblaauw and classroom teacher Gen Pandori – all three of us proud alumni – to present to the graduate “Seminar” class in the Speech-Language Pathology program. It was incredibly meaningful for us to come back not only as graduates of the program, but as professionals representing the work we are so proud to do at Jowonio.

During our presentation, we explored what inclusive programming truly looks like in practice and why Jowonio stands apart. We discussed our commitment to child-led, play-based, and age-appropriate learning experiences that honor each child's strengths and interests. We highlighted our neurodiverse-affirming lens, ensuring that children are supported in ways that respect and celebrate who they are. We also emphasized our dedication to evidence-based practices that are thoughtfully individualized, rather than one-size-fits-all. Beyond the classroom, we spoke about the strong, collaborative relationships we build with families and the way we prioritize ongoing professional development among our staff. A significant focus of our discussion was our commitment to AAC and ensuring access for all children – recognizing communication as a fundamental right and embedding supports across environments so every child can meaningfully participate.

Our goal was to inspire the next generation of speech-language pathologists, share Jowonio's mission, and encourage future clinicians to consider joining our team as we continue to grow and meet the needs of children and families in the midst of a provider shortage.

~Shannon Keeley, SLP, clinical coordinator, Administrative Liaison



Jowonio Families
**LEAVE
THEIR
MARK**



We are so incredibly grateful to all our families for their support, understanding and flexibility with the staffing and classroom changes we were suddenly faced with. After hearing one classroom didn't have enough cubbies to accommodate their new-to-them students, a Bumblebee parent went home that day and built 2 new cubbies for them! We have the absolute best school community.

Family Events & Support Resources

Jowonio Welcomes
Caitlin Simmons!



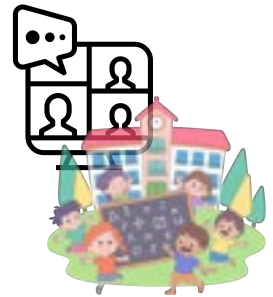
Hi My name is Caitlin Simmons and I'm excited to join the Jowonio family as a social worker, after previously interning here during my undergrad years (2008-2009). Jowonio has long been part of my life—my mom served as a speech pathologist here for 20 years, my brother Chris works in the Star Room, and my children are also alumni.

As a family social worker, I look forward to supporting children and families through advocacy, counseling, and connecting them with community resources. I'm eager to collaborate with teachers, therapists, administrators and partner agencies to help children and families thrive. Jowonio is a vital source of inclusion, hope and care in our community. Its mission is evident in the daily work done here, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to contribute and build meaningful partnerships. Thank you all for the warm welcome!

Thanks to the generosity of our Jowonio families and staff and our community partners we had a very successful giving season and were able to provide food and toys to 30 families. **15 students from Nottingham High School's Key Club** came through for us for another year to pack food baskets in November. The **Tillie's Touch** organization and **Broadview Federal Credit Union** toy drives came through for us in a huge way again this year with so many toys and gifts for our families, joined this year by **Nick's Barbershop!** We couldn't do this drive without these incredible community partners.



Thanks to our grant from OPWDD we were able to provide several fun events for parents, caregivers and kids in December and January: **Parent Respite Night Out @ My Gym**; **Advocacy & Networking @ Pheobes** (presentations by Michelle Olevano & Niki Dreis), **Family Day @ the Zoo** and a Transition to Kindergarten CSE Workshop (presented by Kristine O'Brien & Eric Young)!



If you are in need of support, information or resources, our door is always open. Please stop in, call or email the Jowonio Family Support Team: Melissa.Hyman@Jowonio.org and Caitlin.Blancharde@Jowonio.org.

Additional support resources to keep handy in every household:

2-1-1 CNY: a free service that connects callers to critical health and human services in your community. Navigators standing by to help find available resources. Dial "2-1-1".

New York State 988 Crisis and Suicide Hotline: free emotional support 24/7 for you or a loved one call or text "9-8-8"

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ALWAYS A

JOWONIO KID

Jowonio has truly been woven into every chapter of my life. I was first shaped by its inclusive nurturing community as a child, where I spent my own preschool years, while also watching my parents dedicate their work there to supporting children and families in different capacities. After graduating college, Jowonio became not just my first job, but my only job - deepening my commitment to inclusive education and inspiring me to pursue a master's degree in Early childhood Special Education. Years later, it became the place where my daughter began her own journey, experiencing the same warmth and belonging that meant so much to me. What started as a childhood experience grew into a lifelong calling, rooted in the values and community that Jowonio embodies, and has allowed me to give wings to so many children.

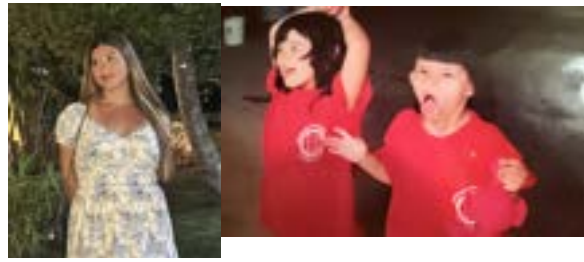
~Gen Pandori



Jowonio has been the thread running through my whole life. It's where my first memories took place. Jowonio is where I learned what inclusion really means, where I watched my mother pour her heart into her work, and where I later returned as a teacher, shaped by the same values that first shaped me. Years later, watching my son walk those same halls and witnessing him growing into himself, felt like everything was coming full circle. Jowonio has raised three generations of my family and instilled a lifelong belief in community and belonging! ~Maddy LaPorta



Lexi, Gen & Maddy are currently all Sunflower Teachers!



My name is Zoe and I'm the Teacher Aide in the Sea Turtle Room. My sister, Lizzy, and I both attended Jowonio between the years of 2000-2002. We started at Jowonio when Jowonio was at their old building, and followed into the building we are in today. Lizzy has Global Developmental Delays and Autism. We both loved our time at Jowonio, and she still talks about this place to this day. We would play "jowonio" at home and I'd always be Ms. Jenine (my preschool teacher). Now, 24 years later I ended up here helping kids just like Lizzy and I were back in 2000. I've been working with children since I was 13 years old and I've loved it ever since. When I'm not here, I teach Hebrew to 3rd graders and I run my own babysitting services. What I love so much about this school is that everyone makes you feel welcomed, everyone is kind to one another and the little things we do have the biggest impact on these children. Any job working with children is the most important job, and Jowonio is why I fell in love with teaching. I'm so blessed to have the opportunity to be a part of such an amazing place and work alongside other amazing teachers, therapists, social workers etc.

~Zoe Hylan



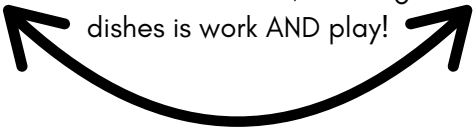
I have been connected to Jowonio my whole life, my mom Jenn Barr works here so my siblings and I all went to school here. I was a Jowonio kid from 2007-2009, I volunteered here when I was in middle school, I did my college internship here and right after that I started to work here as a floating sub and now I am working in the Sunflower Room. Once being a Jowonio kid meant growing up in a place where curiosity was encouraged and everyone belonged, everyone was accepted for who they were, and kindness and inclusion were part of everyday school life. I loved the freedom to learn through art, nature and play. I really loved playing outside with my friends, dramatic play, and I really loved creating art then and now! I also loved playing with my teacher Gen. Some of my favorite memories as a kid was when trike town opened up and when we did the follies in the Jungle room. Returning back to Jowonio feels full circle in the most meaningful way, I once had Gen and Maddy as my teachers and now I get to work with them! I get to carry forward the same values of inclusion, curiosity, and compassion that once was given to me and help create that same safe, joyful space for a new generation of Jowonio Kids. I couldn't be more grateful for all that Jowonio has taught me and all the learning opportunities and experiences I've had here! ~Lexi Barr

“Play is our brain’s favorite way of learning.” -Diane Ackerman

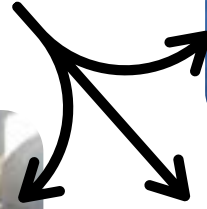
This winter Jowonio kids learned about families, communities and community helpers!



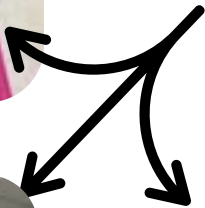
For Waterfall Kids , washing dishes is work AND play!



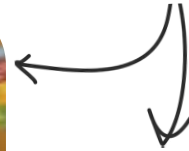
Bunny kids learned about community helpers like doctors & fire fighters



Rainforest kids celebrated Friendship day with facepaint, bubbles, dancing and cupcakes!



Sunflower Families helped kids learn about community helpers (even Otto!!)





Winter Field Trips!

Sunflower kids visited Fire Station #10 in Syracuse



Star Room kids had a fantastic time at Highland Forest!



Earth Room kids visited the library on a cold snowy day



BEHIND THE SCENES

Jowonio kids & teachers are the stars of the show around here, but couldn't do it without our wonderful Buildings & Grounds Maintenance Crew we affectionately call FOJ (Friends of Jowonio). Craig and his team keep this building warm, clean and safe for kids to play and learn!



Tammy, Mike, Craig, Josh & Sam

Friends of Jowonio proudly recognizes the dedication and expertise of our facility teams. Sam and Josh keep our spaces safe and functional, while Mike and Tammy ensure our environment is clean, welcoming, and conducive to learning. Their varied skills, unwavering commitment, and genuine care for students and staff are what make our community thrive.

~ Craig Holava, Facilities Director

Jowonio Board Corner

thank you

Friends of Jowonio Board of Directors

Liz Dwyer, President
Jason Benedict
Jim D'Aloisio
Nicole Schuster
Jaime Riley
Craig Holava, Facilities Director
Jen Petrie, Assistant Director
Lori Saile, Director

Jowonio Executive Board of Directors

President - Liz Dwyer
Vice President - Jakia Durham Kelly
Treasurer - Michelle Hammerle
contact the board: board.member@jowonio.org
to reach Liz Dwyer: board.president@jowonio.org

The Board would like to thank **Mike Rey** for his service on the board for the last 7 years. Mike was the board's treasurer for two years followed by a year as the vice president before serving as the board president for the last 3 years. Mike will remain on the board for the year ensuring a smooth transition and continuing to share his expertise!

In addition to this change, former vice president, Liz Dwyer, is now the board's president and Jakia Durham Kelly is now vice president. Michelle Hammerle remains the board's treasurer.

We appreciate the support and guidance of all Jowonio's board members!



We were thrilled that Jowonio was chosen as one of the benefitting organizations for the 2026 SADA Charity Preview. On February 11th Jowonio sponsors, families, board members and staff enjoyed a great evening at The OnCenter to celebrate the start of the Syracuse Auto Show.



SAVE THE DATE

Celebrate Jowonio

ANNUAL FUNDRAISER TO BENEFIT JOWONIO

Friday April 17 5:30-8:30 pm
2026

St. Sophia's Church
325 Waring Road, Syracuse

Hope to see you there!

<https://celebratejowonio26.auctria.events>



Join us in building a brighter future

Celebrate Jowonio invitations will be arriving in your mailbox or inbox in the next few weeks. Please consider attending to support Jowonio !

Monthly or annual donations provide a sustainable way to support our mission and grow the educational experience.

Donations can be made in various ways:

- Online: Visit our website at www.jowonio.org and click on the "Give" page to make a secure online contribution or set up automatic donations.
- Check: checks can be made payable to "Jowonio School"

Employer Matching Programs: Many employers offer matching gift programs to support employees' philanthropic efforts. Matching donations double the impact of your contribution. To participate:

- Contact HR: Reach out to your Human Resources department about your company's matching gift program and fill out the necessary forms.



United Way of Central New York



Birthday Fundraisers: Families and students have created beautiful birthday traditions where friends and family are asked to provide donations to Jowonio School in honor of a birthday. For every donation made in honor of your birthday or your child's birthday, we send a thank you note to those who donate, designed with love.