



INTERNATIONAL STORYTELLING CENTER

Connecting the World through the Power of Storytelling

ISC Outreach and Digital Learning Proposal 2025-2026

Introduction

The International Storytelling Center (ISC), in Jonesborough, Tennessee, is the world's premier arts and cultural institution dedicated to the art of storytelling. Since 1973, this nonprofit organization has transformed a folk and traditional arts movement into a global storytelling revival. We produce hundreds of hours of live storytelling with top-shelf talent each season, bringing people together to celebrate multicultural traditions and diverse ways of life. We also help laypeople use storytelling to build relationships, learn new skills, and solve real-world problems.

Key Programs

The [National Storytelling Festival](#) is ISC's flagship event—the first, largest, and most respected public event devoted exclusively to the art of storytelling. The Festival has spawned additional storytelling programs, festivals, organizations, and activities across the country and around the world. Through the Festival, ISC helped professionalize storytelling as an industry, artistic movement, and academic discipline. More than 50 years later, the National Storytelling Festival remains the world's premier storytelling event and the cornerstone of Jonesborough's reputation as the "Storytelling Capital of the World." In 2023, the Festival brought together more than 12,000 attendees from across the U.S. and other parts of the world to enjoy this enduring art form. ¹

The Festival's sister series, [Storytelling Live](#), is the only program of its kind in the United States. ISC offers weeklong storytelling residencies to established storytellers and musicians, beginning each May and running through October, with special holiday shows produced in November and December. These residencies feature world-class artists in daily public concerts and provide educational activities for community-based organizations (CBOs) throughout the region. In 2024, ISC hosted 27 artists throughout the six-month series, where we recorded one live concert each week as an online option for viewers who can't make it to a show in Jonesborough. We actively plan Storytelling Live's artist roster in service to established outreach partners like [Coalition for Kids](#), [Girl Scouts of Southern](#)

¹ In late September of 2024, ISC was ready to stage the 52nd National Storytelling Festival on October 4-6. All preparations were in place when Hurricane Helene unexpectedly hit parts of Northeast Tennessee, Southwest Virginia, and Western North Carolina, which were subsequently deemed Federal disaster areas due to catastrophic impacts on utilities, roadways, and residents. Numbers provided for this application were the most recent data from 2023.

[Appalachians \(GSCSA\)](#), [The Langston Centre](#), [Washington County Library](#), [Johnson City Public Library](#), and [David Crockett High School](#) to provide free performances and other educational opportunities. In 2024, the Storytelling Live program resulted in 192 days of arts activities and hosted some 19,000 audience members in total.

ISC's [Stories for Change](#) outreach initiatives vary from year to year, but we endeavor to remain consistent in the quality and diversity of offerings. In recent years, we have offered narrative workshops to Washington County residents through East Tennessee State University's TRiO program which serves low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities; Warrior's Canvas, dedicated to helping veterans through art as therapy and building a community for veterans; and Carver Parks & Recreation Center, where we assisted in the recording of stories from community elders about Carver's history and cultural relevance in the community.

ISC's weeklong [Kids Storytelling Institute](#) offers an immersive STEAM (STEM + Arts) experience that is free of charge for area fifth graders. Together with their teachers, the students hear true, historical stories from a professional storyteller and engage in creative learning activities with the artist. Educators are provided supplemental materials for follow-up lessons in their classrooms. Many students (including homeschooled students) come from rural communities in Northeast Tennessee that don't have regular access to performing arts and multicultural events. We expect to host 950 students for the 2025 program, which is planned for November 3-7. This year's theme is "Buckminster Fuller's Universe," an interactive performance with storyteller and teaching artist David Novak. With toothpicks, wax, chalkboard, overhead projector, and other simple materials, students will build models to explore the synergetic geometry that created Bucky's geodesic dome.

ISC offers [Story Guides](#) on its website, using footage from the National Storytelling Festival livestream, and made possible by Niswonger Foundation support. Part of our [Learning Library](#), these curriculum additions include links to each video, questions that help explore different facets of each story, activity suggestions based on the performances, and introductions for how participants can craft their own story. These Story Guides are free to public school teachers, private educators, and the general public to augment student literacy efforts in grades 3-8.

Impact of Niswonger Foundation's Support for Storytelling

ISC's goal as an organization is to uplift and share the art of storytelling with as many people as possible. That goal has been furthered by offering ISC's programming online, which has significantly expanded the footprint and reach of the organization.

Thanks to Niswonger Foundation support, ISC has been able to provide a free livestream from the Library Tent since 2015. The stream is accessible all day on Friday of the Festival, with programming that runs from 10 a.m. until 10 p.m. This content is geared toward families, teachers, and students and is made accessible for those audiences in addition to viewers who are new to storytelling or can't physically attend the event in Jonesborough. To date, viewers from all 50 states and more than 25 countries have tuned in to watch the live Festival feeds.

We also broadcast Storytelling Live concerts each week throughout the season, reaching an estimated 8,000 viewers for that series in 2024.

Each year, ISC organizes a designated “School Day” at the National Storytelling Festival. Student ticket subsidies allow middle and high school students to experience the magic of live storytelling performances firsthand. Each year, up to 700 students and chaperones can attend this cultural event for free or at a deeply reduced rate. We are also able to offer reduced admission for college students. In 2025, students from East Tennessee State University, Sewanee University, and Maryville College are planning to attend.

Niswonger funds also support ISC’s youth outreach programming through our Storytelling Live series and Stories for Change initiative. In 2024, these programs allowed teaching artists to engage directly with 1,820 students and/or youth in 32 subsidized programs for groups ranging from elementary to college. Informal polls conducted at these pro bono performances tell us that for many, it was their first exposure to a live storytelling performance.

The Niswonger Foundation grant provides for a story-based teacher workshop offered free to East Tennessee teachers each year. In 2024, storyteller Mo Reynolds recorded “Storytelling in the Classroom” as an on-demand option for distribution to Niswonger education partners. The recording offers practical advice and inspiration about the potential of storytelling and story-sharing in any classroom, subject, and grade level. Archived on ISC’s YouTube channel for ease of use, the workshop also contains supplemental classroom materials linked in the video description.

2025-2026 Funding Request

ISC is respectfully requesting \$15,000 for FY 2025-2026 (July to June). This request includes \$10,000 to support virtual access to the National Storytelling Festival and Storytelling Live, and encompasses costs associated with production, marketing, archiving, and any required technical upgrades; \$1,500 for a story-based teacher workshop available free of charge to East Tennessee educators; and \$3,500 to support and expand ISC’s youth outreach programming, including Stories for Change, ISC’s Learning Library, and subsidized performances and learning experiences for regional students through Storytelling Live.

Proposed Project Activities

Expanded Access to the National Storytelling Festival and Storytelling Live

While thousands of visitors from around the country (and sometimes the world) travel to Jonesborough to attend ISC events each year, many cannot, including regional residents from underserved populations. ISC is committed to keeping performing arts accessible to distressed and at-risk communities in Northeast Tennessee, which include the following target counties as determined by the Tennessee Arts Commission: Cocke, Hancock, Carter, Greene, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington. Online recordings of storytelling performances broadcast to professional-quality videography and archived for public preservation help ensure expanded access to ISC’s live

performance events.

- ISC will record and distribute segments of the 2025 National Storytelling Festival as part of the virtual offering of the Festival. We will emphasize this option in our regular Festival marketing campaign to further broaden the impact of this unique and relevant performing art.
- ISC will record and make available one virtual concert each week for the duration of the Storytelling Live performance season beginning in July 2025 and running through June 2026.

A Story-based Teacher Workshop and Resources

In 2025, ISC will offer a continuing education workshop for elementary school teachers who are interested in applying storytelling techniques in their classroom and/or to support curriculum development. The on-demand workshop will be professionally recorded and forwarded to the Niswonger Foundation for distribution to education partners. Access to the recorded material is granted on a limited-use, non-commercial basis for educational purposes. ISC will provide related supplemental materials developed in conjunction with the workshop. In addition, age-appropriate recorded content from the National Storytelling Festival will be made available to the Niswonger Foundation for distribution to its partner network for classroom viewing.

Continued Outreach and Training for Individuals, Youth, and Teachers

ISC works with area schools and community partners to provide private student performances and off-site arts activities each year to help children develop critical language and literacy skills. ISC programming will include a wide variety of storytelling expertise and story content to illustrate the effectiveness of storytelling as a cross-disciplinary STEM/STEAM learning tool.

- ISC's Stories for Change initiative will continue to partner with community-based organizations like the Langston Centre, Boys & Girls Club of Greater Johnson City, and Coalition for Kids through their afterschool and summer bridge programs.
- ISC will continue to expand its online Learning Library, geared toward teacher resources for classroom application.
- ISC will continue to offer pro bono performances and related talkback sessions for the region's public, private, and homeschool students throughout the 2025 and 2026 Storytelling Live seasons.

Measuring Program Impact

Through combined live and virtual outreach efforts in 2025-2026, ISC hopes to provide arts access for 3,000 school-aged children in Northeast Tennessee. Quantitative outcome measures will be based on the number of cultural arts activities hosted by ISC, the number of artists participating, and the number of children/youths in attendance. Qualitative outcomes will be gauged through direct feedback collected from participating administrators, teachers, and students; social media response; and the levels of interest indicated by requests for information.