

House Homeland Security Committee  
December 11, 2024  
Proponent Testimony SB 290

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Chair Ghanbari, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Thomas, and fellow members of the House Homeland Security Committee, thank you for providing us with the opportunity to write in favor of the passage of SB 290 which would create a license plate for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.

The Literacy Cooperative leads Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) in Cuyahoga County where we have over 39,000 children enrolled. We are grateful to Senator Antonio for introduction and her work on this bill, and the cosponsors of SB 290. We welcome the bipartisan support of a license plate for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and the attention it will bring to our work locally, in Cuyahoga County, to the work of our counterparts statewide, and to the importance of reading aloud in the early years. Raising visibility of this issue in Ohio will benefit families statewide. The license plate fees will also benefit local organizations like The Literacy Cooperative that are tasked with raising the funds to sustain and grow the program.

Dolly Parton's model depends upon local organizations like The Literacy Cooperative to serve as local program partners, finding the funding for and managing the program. While the program is free to all participating families, funding is needed to sustain the program long-term. We can think of no other program that can be brought to scale so cost-effectively and efficiently with such importance and impact. Our local program has mailed over 2 million high-quality books to over 75,000 Cuyahoga County children.

Brains are built, not born. They're built on a foundation of early experiences that provide either a strong or weak foundation. Since human beings are not evolved to read and write, we need to build the wiring in the brain to allow for fluent reading and writing later. The best time to do that is in the first 3 years of life, the critical window of opportunity for language development and when 85% of brain development occurs.

The research is also clear that exposure to books and reading prior to starting school is critical for later school success. We know that far too many children across the state start kindergarten behind and that children who start behind often stay behind. Before the pandemic, only 40% of Ohio children were demonstrating readiness for kindergarten. Post pandemic, that number has shrunk to just one-third of Ohio's children ready for kindergarten. In addition, without a strong language foundation for all children, reading interventions will have limited success.

Our annual survey, conducted by the Center for Community Solutions, consistently shows that children want to read more since they began receiving the books in the mail and families are

reading more often with their children. In the most recent survey, 78% of families report reading more often together after enrolling in the program. This increase is even more profound among families with incomes of less than \$25,000 with 91% reporting that they're reading more often and that their children are asking to be read to more often. So of course, we weren't surprised when an analysis conducted by CWRU showed a positive relationship between DPIL participation and higher kindergarten readiness scores.

We hear from families regularly about the excitement that comes when they receive books in the mail each month. Young children learn best through high quality interactions with real people, objects and books and crave attention from their parents and caregivers. When an adult and child read together, it promotes the family bond, strengthening that relationship and a positive association with reading. It's a winning proposition.

Please support this newest effort to draw attention to the importance of reading in the early years and the need for financial support of the program statewide.

Thank you for your past support of the program statewide and for your attention today.