

TESTIMONY

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted by: Heather A. Bouchey, Ph.D. Interim Secretary of Education
Catherine Delneo, State Librarian & Commissioner of Libraries

Subject: **S.303 – An act relating to supporting young readers**

Date: February 27, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the topic of S.303 – An act relating to supporting young readers.

The Agency of Education (AOE) and Department of Libraries (DOL) appreciate the committee's interest in this topic, and greatly respect the work of Dolly Parton as both a recording artist and as a leader in children's literacy. Additionally, both the Agency and Department appreciate the committee taking our concerns seriously and contemplating the updated draft last week. After having the opportunity to review Draft 1.1. and listen to the committee's discussion we would like to present to you our additional feedback and concerns.

Implementation Concerns

We believe the grant program contemplated, while well intended, may be duplicative of work happening at a local level and may not truly meet the committee's goal of expanding access to books for kids who are most in need. There is significant ongoing work being done by local public libraries, the Agency of Education (AOE), and Department of Libraries to ensure children in Vermont have access to books in their homes. While home libraries can play an important role in fostering an environment of learning, public libraries remain the best and largest source of free books for families and support the emerging literacy needs of our state's youngest readers. Public libraries welcome families to borrow books for home use based on the interest of each child and family.

The "State Expansion Model" as contemplated in Draft 1.1 is an option that is employed by certain states to proliferate local Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) non-profits. The bill proposes \$100,000 in grant funds, facilitated by AOE, to be allocated to local schools, districts, and public libraries, focusing on providing free books for children aged 0-5. Importantly, per Draft 1.1, matching funds from the local community are necessary to qualify for the grant. This provision aligns Draft 1.1 with Dolly Parton's principle of community investment and



not with the values of the Agency or Department, which strive to provide resources to the youth in high-need communities and households.

As drafted, it is not clear whether the highest needs communities in Vermont can afford to match the state funds, or whether that matching fund requirement really supports those with highest need for resources in our state.

The Agency and Department are concerned that the groups best positioned to take advantage of “the state expansion model” are the local branches of DPIL. We are concerned that what is intended to be a broader gift giving program will end up looking like what was originally outlined in S.303 which posed significant procurement barriers and concerns.

The lack of staffing provisions for the grant program contemplated in Draft 1.1 raises concerns about the Agency’s ability to effectively implement the program. In the opinion of the Agency of Education, the addition of a new grant program would be impossible with existing staff resources. In addition, the responsibilities outlined in the program, which are more suited for non-profit organizations and advocacy groups, are not aligned with the Agency's statutory mission and regulatory role in Vermont's education system. Facilitating the work of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library would force the Agency to abandon our status as a neutral, government entity in favor of advancing one program and one publisher, however laudable.

Book gifting programs, while laudable, are not among the programs about which the Department heard through the extensive study of the Working Group and would not be the Department’s top priority at this time.

Procurement Barriers

The Agency and Department have expressed significant concerns about the original draft of S.303, and specifically about procurement methods. These concerns were raised because the Dolly Parton Imagination Library purchases all books from a single centralized publisher, with distribution managed by one company, Penguin Random House. As a non-profit organization, the program as originally proposed uses a significant amount of public funds and directs them to just one publisher. The Agency and Department have concerns that this procurement method does not align with required State of Vermont procurement and contracting procedures designed for fair and impartial use of taxpayer dollars (Bulletin 3.5). Because other national gift book programs exist, the Agency and Department question whether it would be appropriate to set up a program of this type as a “sole source” program. With the changes to the bill contemplated in Draft 1.1, this is less of a concern.

That said, Draft 1.1 was proposed by the staff of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library and was characterized in testimony from Legislative Counsel as the “State Expansion Model.” While other programs could potentially receive grants from the funds established through the passing of Draft 1.1, the likelihood is that many of the funds would be directed toward that same publishing company and distributor. It is the opinion of both the Agency and Department that book selection for Vermont’s children should

be overseen by professional librarians and early childhood educators within our state who best understand the needs and interests of Vermonters.

Alternatives

Due to the current budget constraints on the State, we believe that these resources are better spent supporting the ongoing good work of both schools and libraries. The current appropriation is not included in the Governor's budget, and at a time of historical cost pressures, both on schools and the state budget, this is not an appropriation the Agency or Department can support. Alternatives, such as Idaho's and the federal Reading is Fundamental Inexpensive Book Distribution Program, both of which focus efforts around providing books to low-income children are compelling avenues for supporting early childhood literacy in Vermont.

Exploring statewide programs like these, under the guidance of the Advisory Council on Literacy, could lead to more effective outcomes for our youngest readers.

If the General Assembly aims to offer book gifting services akin to those provided by the Dolly Parton Imagination Library to Vermont students, one possibility would be to instruct the Secretary and/or Commissioner of Libraries to conduct a competitive bidding process to select a contractor for this purpose and allocate adequate funding accordingly. However, given the budget crisis facing our communities with respect to the Education Fund this year, we cannot support that for FY25.

In conclusion, while S.303 shows promise in expanding access to early childhood literacy resources, careful consideration of its implications and exploration of alternative models are essential to ensure the best outcomes for Vermont's youth. We cannot support this bill this year.