

S.303 Supporting Vermont's Young Readers  
Vermont Senate Committee on Education

Nicole Campbell - 2.8.2024

- Thank you to the Senate Committee on Education for hearing my testimony in support of Senator Robert Starr's bill S.303. I want to also thank Senator Brian Campion for his ongoing and dedicated support of early literacy in Southern Vermont, Representative Kathleen James for guiding my earliest explorations of seeking a statewide Imagination Library, and Representative Woody Page for his earnest attempt at a statewide program two years ago with House Bill H.636. Also thank you for your presence Nora Briggs - your commitment to establishing statewide programs, large and small around the country, may be one of the largest impacts on the next generation of American readers. Finally, I'd like to thank my unwavering counterpart in the Northeast Kingdom, Ed Helm. His enthusiasm and dedication to this endeavor is unmatched.
- I'm Nicole Campbell, executive director of Shire Kids, the local affiliate for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) in Southern Vermont. We serve all of Bennington county, western Windham county and a few proximal towns in Rutland and Windsor counties for a current total enrollment of 1,114 children in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Many of you are familiar now with how the Imagination Library works. So I am going to share my experience with how I got involved. I'm not an educator, or a literacy expert, nor did I have any experience working at or with nonprofits. So how did I start and run an early-literacy nonprofit and end up in front of your fine committee?
- In 2013, I was living in Washington, DC, when my first son was born. After joining a few parent groups in my neighborhood, a friend told me to sign up for the Imagination Library, and we'd receive a new book every month. I thought, surely with our modest but adequate income, in some way we wouldn't qualify for what sounded like a magical program. But I enrolled, and we started receiving these wonderful books. Two years later, my second son was born, I signed him up, and we received two age-appropriate books every month. In 2017, with a nine-month old, and a three year old, my family relocated to Dorset, Vermont. That was when I learned that we could not just "update our address" to receive our Imagination Library books in our new home, because there was no local Imagination Library affiliate. I was disappointed, but as a full-time working parent with young children, I sought literacy resources at our wonderful libraries and the amazing Northshire Bookstore. But when my three year old said, "When is my next book coming in the mail," it broke my heart to tell him we wouldn't get books in the mail anymore, and that's the day I looked up how to start a new local affiliate.
- That's the reason I started Shire Kids, but what is more important is how Dolly Parton's Imagination Library impacts children all around Vermont.

- Evidence of the value and success of the Imagination Library in helping literacy is overwhelming. The Dollywood Foundation focuses on identifying common outcomes for all Imagination Library programs. This means that the impact of this program in Vermont will reflect the success seen in other states with long-standing statewide programs. Research-based outcomes that are documented through several studies on the DPIL website reflect how this program establishes building blocks for lifelong literacy, and how it supports the research on evidence-based literacy.
- I'm grateful to Senator Starr for proposing a statewide Imagination Library within this comprehensive bill to improve how children in Vermont are taught how to read. In a Seven Days article written by Alison Novak on October 4, 2023, neuroscience professor Reid Lyon is quoted saying "The biggest impediment to kids learning to read well is how they are taught." Novak's article goes on to say that Lyon told the group of lawmakers that effective teaching should begin with clear, systematic instruction in the sounds that are contained within words and how those sounds connect to print. Building a strong foundation in those two skills, known as phonemic awareness and phonics, is an essential step to becoming a successful reader. The National Reading Panel considers phonemic awareness and phonics, along with vocabulary, comprehension and fluency, the Five Pillars of effective reading instruction.
- This brings me back to Imagination Library books. Every parent has heard that you are your child's first teacher. In fact, engaging parents and families is an important policy position at Vermont Agency of Education. Families are empowered to be a better teacher to their children with Imagination Library books. Each book has a front or back panel with guidance on how to make the books come alive. These books have expert but accessible guides to help parents engage with their children by introducing elements of the Five Pillars of effective reading instruction even before the child is explicitly taught how to read. One of the books selected by the Blue Ribbon Book Selection Committee is *Shhh Bears Sleeping*, by Northeast Kingdom author James Martin. He shared with the local NEK affiliate that the special book flaps are added to some of the best picture books in the world and reminds parents that young children learn through play. Through a combination of play, and by introducing elements of the Five Pillars of effective reading instruction, children will have increased early literacy behaviors, which is a foundation for school success.
- A Scholastic Research Compendium states that 61% of low-income families have no children's books in their home. Having books in the home leads to more reading. California Professor of early literacy, Dr. Susan Nuefeld, who was an early supporter and important leader in introducing a statewide Imagination Library in California, shares her research showing evidence that providing books to children that they 'own' is highly impactful. A study done by Clark and Poulton (2011) for the National Literacy Trust which explored the correlation between book ownership and behaviors and attitudes of children toward reading found that children who owned books were more likely to visit the library, enjoy reading, and read more frequently. Children who did not own books did not enjoy reading and did not visit the library. Without access to books of their own, young people were less likely to have positive experiences of reading, were less likely to do well at school, and less likely to be engaged in reading in any form (Clark & Poulton, 2011). Imagination Library books are owned by Vermont children and will stay with them, even if they move in with grandparents, an aunt or uncle, or spend time with a foster family.

- Before diving headfirst into this exciting new chapter for the Imagination Library in Vermont, I want to acknowledge where it all started. When I was starting Shire Kids, I received guidance and support from the first affiliate in Vermont, Addison County Readers. They mentored me, and many other new affiliates over the last fifteen years. Thank you to Dinah Bain, Mary Dodge, and Pat Anderson for blazing the trail for the Imagination Library in Vermont.
- Thank you again to Senator Starr, the Senate Education Committee, Ms. Nora Briggs, and everyone I've worked with over the last five years who love helping young children prepare for life.