

**Chair Senator Brian Campion:** We're going to kick off [the Hearing of S. 303 by the VT Senate Education Committee on February 15, 2024 at 2:30 pm] with Ms. Nora Briggs [Executive Director of the Dollywood Foundation]. We're very excited Ms. Briggs to virtually welcome you to Vermont. Where are we finding you?

**Ms. Nora Briggs:** Actually today I'm in Palm Beach. I'm in Palm Beach Florida today.

**Campion:** Okay, same weather down there I'm sure that what we're experiencing up here in Vermont.

**Briggs:** May be just a tad different. I was hoping to join you today in person but the travel just did not work out.

**Campion:** Well it's very kind of you to take the time for us, and we are thrilled to have you here, albeit, virtually, and if you ever are in Vermont we hope you will take the time and come visit us here at the State House. It would be a real pleasure to welcome you, but we're excited to hear your thoughts on the bill that's been put together as well as we're likely to have some questions so please, the floor is yours.

**Briggs:** Perfect. Thank you. So let me begin first by saying that Dolly sends her greetings and she thanks you for considering expansion of Her Imagination Library across to all young learners in Vermont, and we agree nothing is more basic, more essential, more foundational to a child's success in life than the ability to read.

The research in science is very clear. We cannot wait for kindergarten for children to have access and exposure to books and reading. We need to reach them early and reading at this age under five, happens primarily at home, and reading at home requires books.

We know that not all families have access nor can provide books so this is where we can help. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is that contactless home book gifting program for children zero to age five, their fifth birthday. They receive an age appropriate (down to the month's age) high quality book with their name on it, every month, at home, no cost to the family.

We know that books in the home lead to increased kindergarten readiness, changes in the home literacy environment, with families connecting around the book, and all family members focused on reading.

Significantly stronger reading, math, and science academic outcomes both starting in third grade and continuing on. We track children all the way through kindergarten and higher high school graduation rates. We know that simply getting the books into the home starts the change and the change in the trajectory of the lives of the kids and families and communities. A statewide program provides more benefits to the State than

a collection of local programs. County level program Partners ensure statewide coverage for all zip codes, equitable access for all families to early learning resources.

Children start kindergarten with a shared experience and help level the playing field. This creates a shared bond with children across neighborhoods, communities, race, and economic differences. It starts to help break the division at an age when children notice the differences between themselves and other children. They all receive the same books. It's a special gift. It's an instant bonding.

We partner with state agencies to find the most vulnerable and underrepresented families: special programs for foster care children, babies born to parents who are in a correctional or other type of facilities, and that could be an adult or a youth who has a child under five; working with WIC and other agencies to find the families that most need help to have books in their home. We partner with the state birthing hospitals to enroll at birth. And children come in right when they're born, receiving a book every month, so they can have a collection of 60 books into their home by the time they graduate [on their fifth birthday].

We partner with the State Department of Education, if you like to flag Imagination Library participants. Most states put a flag on the student's Master Record Card which indicates that they were in Imagination Library. That helps track participants, also the return on investment by the state, and program effectiveness. We find that schools also use it to plan the remedial and one-on-one tutoring that's necessary in kindergarten, based on the saturation rates of children getting books in the school districts. Partnerships with the State and local library system with the aim to tie and focus Library usage for all family members, all families that have library cards with children under five and Imagination Library. All children in families with children should have local library cards! There are ties to adult literacy and dual language programs. We place a multi-generational focus on literacy; as the best way to learn to read is children's picture books and the best way to learn a new language is children's picture books. And it's simple; we're connecting adult literacy to the books that are coming into the home.

We can sometimes do a fun state level focus on family time and reading. One example is the "Drive With Dolly" license plate campaign. We put Dolly's face on a license plate. In the state of Vermont "We focus on reading." We do billboard campaigns, and of course all the funds generated that would come back to a community go to the local program partners to help, um, pay for their local community share.

There's also an estate program, an opportunity, if you like, to layer on other family resources. Some states do book buses using the Imagination Library books and then connecting and partnering them with food and medical programs. Statewide programs are special. We also do Story Time Out in the parks with the Department of Recreation and bring books into the community to people at the parks all focused on reading and family fun. State programs work at a State level to fundraise and help local communities so there are never children on waiting lists, and if there's a budget deficit in a coming

year, they have mitigation funds to ensure that the program continues. A statewide program ensures equitable access, providing increased opportunity for improving statewide kindergarten readiness, academic achievement, and creates a state focus on literacy.

But really the program is special. Dolly calls this her “heart program”. It really is about connecting hearts in the home, in the families, connecting to each other with the snuggling and cuddling that happens. The book is the tool. It's about creating a love, a sense of security, and comfort that comes from the book, coming into the home. Really, Dolly just wants to help create a love for books and reading, and make sure that every Vermont child has access, equitable access, in books and learning -- really providing the best start they can have in education and in life.

Thank You.

**Chair Champion** ----- thank you Miss Briggs; while just after you started, **Senator [Bobby] Starr** joined us, and he's the lead sponsor of this initiative. So he may have some questions as we go along as well as any questions for Miss Briggs who's with the Dollywood Foundation. Do you have any questions, Sen. Starr? Well, are you going to be able to stick around [Ms. Briggs]?

**Ms. Briggs:** Absolutely, absolutely. This is a top priority for Dolly and the Foundation.