



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**House Education Committee
Public Hearing on
Home-Based Early Literacy
April 29, 2024**

Good morning, Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and distinguished members of the House Education Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) role in administering a statewide implementation of a home-based early literacy program for Pennsylvania. My name is Susan Banks, and I serve as the Deputy Secretary for the Office of Commonwealth Libraries (OCL) and State Librarian for the Commonwealth.

Background

Early literacy is a complex and thriving ecosystem in the Commonwealth. This ecosystem includes early learning centers, early literacy service providers, and every public library – most of which are already supported by state funds but which, currently, are also dependent on local charitable contributions in order to survive. These are precious and professional resources that can lead this effort and support any future changes.

The Office of Commonwealth Libraries has engaged in conversations with early literacy providers and advocates to understand the potential challenges and opportunities to implement this program statewide. Although there are successful implementation models to learn from, there are a number of considerations that must be examined before Pennsylvania resources are invested in any solution to produce outcomes in improved early literacy.

We believe it is prudent to explore all options designed to achieve the same ends. Investing heavily in a single program without recognizing the considerable investment and expertise in early literacy already in Pennsylvania is missing an opportunity to collect and leverage the strength of our Commonwealth's resources. Creating connections with the existing early literacy support structures in every community will provide more robust and long-lasting impacts in improving literacy outcomes for all Pennsylvanians from birth to age 5.

Context for a Program for Early Readers

PDE and OLC is supportive of programming that supports access to reading-level appropriate literature for Pennsylvanians ages 0-5, with an emphasis on getting books directly to children and their families to keep and collect. In the past, OCL had partnered with private and corporate funders like Verizon to offer PA One Book Every Young Child, a program that built supportive programming and services and leveraged Pennsylvania writers and publishers to connect existing early literacy providers. That program was designed to create a community-level fabric of support and enrichment for home-based literacy.

Studies have shown that literacy outcomes for children improve when they read at home and that parents are more likely to reinforce good reading behaviors with children when there are books in the house. Recent studies, as well, have indicated that book-delivery services, such as the Imagination Library, need to be long-term to truly impact literacy in at-home environments.

Early Literacy Landscape in Pennsylvania

The early learning landscape in Pennsylvania is a dynamic and multi-faceted network designed to support the development and early education of young children across the state. This ecosystem encompasses a variety of providers and organizations, each playing a role in fostering early literacy and preparing children for future academic success. Including:

Early Learning Centers and Childcare Providers: Pennsylvania is home to 5,777 childcare providers serving children ages 0-5, which include 4,025 childcare centers, 1,140 family childcare homes, and 612 group homes¹. These providers serve as foundational elements in the early learning landscape, offering structured environments where children under five can develop essential skills.

A key aspect of ensuring quality in these settings is the Keystone STARS program, which stands for Standards, Training/Professional Development, Assistance, Resources, and Supports. Keystone STARS is an initiative of the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL). It aims to improve the quality of early learning environments and promote positive outcomes for young children. The program encourages continuous quality improvement through standards that promote the best practices in early education. This system not only aids parents in identifying quality care but also provides incentives for providers to improve their services.

Public Libraries: With approximately 670 outlets, public libraries in Pennsylvania are pivotal in promoting early literacy. Public Libraries provide free programming that includes storytimes and other events designed to introduce young children to reading, as well as engage them in early learning activities that develop their concentration, social skills, communication skills, and encourage imagination and creativity. Library programs such as 1000 Book Before Kindergarten help develop a love of books and reading. Statewide initiatives such as Family Place Libraries and Play & Grow provide training and resources, ensuring library staff have a foundation of early childhood development and social emotional learning as they develop programs for children ages 0-5. Libraries also serve as community hubs, offering access to parenting materials, educational resources, and serving as a vital link between children and lifelong learning.

Early Learning Resource Centers (ELRCs): Early Learning Resource Centers serve as centralized hubs for families and early education professionals to find information and access services supporting high-quality childcare and learning programs. ELRCs help families identify optimal childcare options, connect them with subsidies, and guide childcare professionals in enhancing program quality. This network of centers ensures families have access to the resources needed to

foster children's development and support parents in maintaining employment.

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and Pennsylvania Head Start: These programs are specifically designed to support children from low-income families, ensuring they receive high-quality early education that emphasizes school readiness. Programs like Head Start not only focus on the child's education but also engage parents and communities to support the child's learning environment at home and in educational settings.

Home Visiting Programs: Programs such as Early Head Start offer home-based services that support family involvement in early childhood education. These programs deliver personalized guidance to parents, helping them to understand and stimulate their children's development from an early age.

Parents as Teachers: This program specifically focuses on empowering parents to be their children's first and most influential teachers. Parents as Teachers provides parents with the tools and knowledge to support their child's early development and learning, reinforcing the home as a primary learning environment.

Family Literacy Programs: Family literacy programs funded by the Pennsylvania Adult Literacy Education Grant Program established in Act 143 of 1986 include four instructional components: adult education, parent education, interactive literacy activities, and age-appropriate early childhood education. Programs provide instruction to participating adults and children that is research based and standards aligned, using best practices to support adults to improve their literacy skills, children to enter school prepared to learn to read, and parents/caregivers to help their children succeed in school. There are currently 15 family literacy programs funded by the grant program.

Foundations, Grant Makers, and Large Agencies: In Pennsylvania, the landscape of educational support is enriched by a variety of foundations, grant makers, and large agencies that play significant roles in advancing early literacy and educational opportunities by funding programs, supporting policy developments, and ensuring that educational initiatives have the resources needed to succeed. They contribute significantly to the ecosystem of support that nurtures early literacy and development across the state. Some notable organizations include:

United Way of Pennsylvania: This organization plays a pivotal role by advocating for educational policies and supporting programs that directly affect early childhood education. United Way of Pennsylvania works to ensure that all children have access to quality early learning experiences, which are essential for later success in school and life. They support initiatives that improve access to high-quality childcare and educational programs, aiming to enhance the overall effectiveness of early learning services throughout the state.

The William Penn Foundation: This foundation is committed to improving educational outcomes by supporting high-quality early childhood education among other civic initiatives. They have a long history of investing in educational programs that enhance public spaces and the cultural ecosystem, all of which contribute to a well-rounded educational environment for children in Pennsylvania.

The Pittsburgh Foundation: One of the oldest and largest community foundations in the United States, The Pittsburgh Foundation provides grants that focus on improving the quality of education in the public sector, including significant support for early childhood education initiatives that benefit underprivileged communities.

The Erie Community Foundation: Serving the Erie region, this foundation aims to improve quality of life through strategic grantmaking. Their focus includes supporting educational programs that address immediate community needs and foster long-term growth.

Coalitions and Advocacy Groups: Early childhood education is an important foundation for a child's future success. It not only helps children develop cognitive and social skills but also prepares them for a lifetime of learning. That's why it's heartening to see coalitions all over the Commonwealth coming together to support and advance early childhood education and policies. These organizations are key partners and advocates for effective policies, increased public awareness, and greater direct support that families need to ensure the well-being and education of children. Through their efforts, they are helping to ensure that every child has access to high-quality education and care, setting them up for a bright future ahead. However, this ecosystem faces challenges such as funding and resource allocation, particularly the need for sustained financial and human resources at the local level.² Additionally, the early literacy ecosystem in Pennsylvania, while comprehensive, is facing challenges that impact families, especially when it comes to accessing quality early learning centers. One of the significant hurdles is the geographical and economic barriers that leave a substantial number of children without access to early childhood education.

Resources Necessary to Establish a Program for Early Readers

There are a number of common elements across successful programs for early readers, from the administrative to the logistical. Some of these resources are provided by or available through Commonwealth agencies, while others emerge from community-based organizations and relationships.

- Establish administrative oversight and responsibilities for executing the program (PDE, Statewide, County levels)
- Create program parameters for participating individuals and organizations and develop

- marketing/promotion for program (OCL and Coordinators)
- Connect with existing early literacy and learning programs and providers (OCL and OCDEL)
 - Establish distribution methodology for books – Imagination Library and/or other solution (OCL and Statewide Coordinators)
 - Build support services and programs (OCL and Partners)
 - Evaluate the impact of the program over the course of 5 years, tracking participants' experiences as they age out of the program (PDE Research, Higher Education partners)

Current Numbers:

- Number of children under the age of 5 in PA (2024): 688,571
- Projected top number of children likely to participate: (65%) 447,571 (Based on the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) program projections:
<https://imaginationlibrary.com/usa/cost-estimator/>)
- Total currently enrolled through existing DPIL affiliates: 56,041

We appreciate the House Education Committee for providing the Department with the opportunity to provide context and foresight into an impactful and sustainable effort to increase Early Literacy through a home-based reading program using all of Pennsylvania's resources effectively.

Sources:

1. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. (2023). *State of Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: August 2023*. <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/890097018/>
2. Children First. (2023). *Pennsylvania 2023 Start Strong PA Fact Sheet*. Children First. <https://www.childrenfirstpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Pennsylvania-2023-Start-Strong-PA-fact-sheet.pdf>