



January 23, 2020

INFORMATION ITEM

SUBJECT: EARLY LITERACY AND FAMILY BOOK DISTRIBUTION IN CALIFORNIA

Strategic Plan Priority Area: Child Development

Goal: All children birth through age 5 have high-quality, nurturing environments that ensure their learning readiness.

SUMMARY OF THE ISSUE

A wide body of research has demonstrated that exposure to books and positive parenting practices such as being read to in the first three years of life are critical to robust brain development. There are many programs and organizations hard at work in California to provide books and early literacy supports to young families. This item will provide the Commission an opportunity to learn about several active and proposed approaches to accomplishing this critical task.

As the Administration continues to prioritize a cradle to career framing of education policy, early access to quality books and reading supports is an important policy issue for many First 5 county commissions and is a key element of First 5 California's Talk. Read. Sing.® (TRS) campaign.

Most First 5 county commissions support early literacy programs, including book distribution and early literacy support services, including Little By Little in Los Angeles, Dolly Parton Imagination Library, Raising a Reader, and Reach out and Read in multiple counties.

The following are three examples:

Los Angeles: Heluna Health currently partners with The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to administer the Little By Little program, providing books to low income families at ten Los Angeles WIC offices. Launched with funding by First 5 Los Angeles, the model has been demonstrated to increase kindergarten readiness by up to 69 percent among children who participate in the program. At a cost of \$52 per child served, the program provides families high-quality, age appropriate books, guidance on developmental milestones, and messaging designed to emphasize the importance of reading to strong cognitive development.

Siskiyou: First 5 Siskiyou partners with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library to provide books and reading support services to children ages 0 to 5. Of approximately 2,000 eligible children in the county, over 1200 currently receive books through this program. Each book includes tips and activities for parents and providers to increase the quality of interaction during reading time. They have developed a network of providers and participating organizations ranging from WIC offices to child-care providers and community centers. At a cost of \$25 per year per child, the program mails one book to each participating child every month. The program is funded through a combination of First 5 and private funding. Preliminary research has demonstrated a positive impact on kindergarten readiness among participants. Ten First 5 county commissions, in addition to First 5 Siskiyou, report funding Dolly Parton Imagination Library implementations in their county.

Santa Clara: First 5 Santa Clara County participates in the Bridge Library program, which brings library services to families through family resource centers. The goal of the program is to serve as a bridge between family resource centers and libraries by removing barriers that make traditional libraries challenging for some families. For example, they do not require a library card, and borrowed books can be kept as long as they are needed. With eight locations throughout the county, families can access the full range of library services through their local family resource center.

California State Librarian: The California State Library, under the leadership of State Librarian Greg Lucas, will pursue \$10 million in the State Budget to fund the Strong Reader Network program. The program would leverage California's network of libraries and over 70 WIC sites to provide books and reading support services to low-income children and families by leveraging local networks of service providers who interact with families. The program would provide grants to participating sites to establish these reading support networks. In addition to books, the program will provide library cards, access to specialized reading support services at local libraries, transportation passes, and other services designed to support access to books and reading education.

BACKGROUND OF KEY ISSUES

Reading to children ages 0 to 5, as well as exposure to books, has been shown in myriad studies to have profound positive impacts on cognitive development that lasts well beyond a child's fifth birthday. Children who are read five books per day, for example, hear an estimated 1.2 million more words than children who are read only one book per day¹. This is commonly referred to as the "million-word gap," and significantly impacts a child's vocabulary development and school performance. Exposure to books in the home also has been shown to be strongly correlated to a child's educational performance and reading test scores. The more books a home has, the better a child does in school. Importantly, the effect of each additional book is highest in homes with the fewest book (the law of diminishing returns), and households in low socioeconomic

¹ Jessica A. R. Logan et al., "When Children Are Not Read to at Home: The Million Word Gap," *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics: JDBP* 40, no. 5 (June 2019): 383–86, <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0000000000000657>.

categories². Variety is as important as volume when it comes to books effects on cognitive development³. While many programs that distribute books focus on concept books (shapes, colors, animals, etc.), exposure to narrative books as well is important to develop language and cognitive development.

Daily reading, singing, and storytelling are recognized as positive parenting practices which research shows have significant impacts on child development, as well as reducing toxic stress in children, a recognized adverse childhood experience. Children who are not read to at all, for example, have been shown to have their risk of developmental delays increase by over 50 percent.⁴ Nearly all of the book distribution programs identified by F5CA include an education and training component for participating families, emphasizing the benefits of reading books together and using them as a bonding activity. Reading together and engaging in active questioning about what is in the books provides an opportunity for socialization, bonding, and even fun. The TRS campaign focuses on the importance of these activities and their myriad benefits. Access to books is the foundational element that enables families to engage in these important activities with their young children.

Recognizing the importance of getting books into households with small children, many programs, both private and public, have developed distribution strategies designed to increase the number of books children have in the home. Little By Little leverages existing service provider networks (WIC) to distribute books and reading education information to families during the course of pre-existing service visits. The State Library and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library deliver books to families through the mail while also leveraging programs like WIC to serve as entry points into their programs. F5CA operates the TRS campaign, which encourages families to engage in these activities, through advertising and local events and distributes more than 175,000 books to new families through the *Kit for New Parents* annually. All of these efforts have an impact. According to the most recent California Health Interview Survey, 87 percent of parents recognize the TRS messaging, and almost 90 percent of parents report reading to their children at least 3 times per week.

A frequent challenge for distribution programs is scalability. Unlike education campaigns that focus primarily on delivering information, such as TRS, book distribution programs must contend with the relatively high cost of purchasing and delivering books, as well as personnel support to provide training for families in how to maximize the positive effects. There is currently little ongoing state funding available to support these programs, despite the significant evidence base demonstrating their criticality in child development and success.

² M. D. R. Evans, J. Kelley, and J. Sikora, "Scholarly Culture and Academic Performance in 42 Nations," *Social Forces* 92, no. 4 (June 1, 2014): 1573–1605, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sou030>.

³ Rufan Luo, Catherine S. Tamis-LeMonda, and Alan L. Mendelsohn, "Children's Literacy Experiences in Low-Income Families: The Content of Books Matters," *Reading Research Quarterly*, June 4, 2019, rrq.263, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.263>.

⁴ Sarah E. Cprek et al., "Three Positive Parenting Practices and Their Correlation with Risk of Childhood Developmental, Social, or Behavioral Delays: An Analysis of the National Survey of Children's Health," *Maternal and Child Health Journal* 19, no. 11 (November 2015): 2403–11, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-015-1759-1>.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS COMMISSION DISCUSSION AND ACTION

The Commission has not previously taken action on this subject.

ATTACHMENTS

None.