

Gov. Pritzker Announces Statewide Partnership With Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

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METRO EAST — Today, Governor JB Pritzker joined Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton, along with state and local officials at Maplewood School in Cahokia Heights to announce Illinois' partnership with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. The recently signed FY24 budget allocates \$1.6 million to the program, which is dedicated to

improving the lives of children by inspiring a love of reading. The initiative includes a book gifting program that mails free, high-quality books to children from birth to age five, no matter a family's income.

“Imagination Libraries are already working their magic at a few dozen locations around the state, and the teamwork of my administration and the Dollywood Foundation will make it possible to bring Dolly to every doorstep,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “As a longtime early childhood advocate, I’m incredibly excited for what’s to come. These are some of the most crucial years for learning of a person’s lifetime, and this initiative will connect low-income families to resources their children will need for lifelong success.”

“Every child deserves the opportunity to discover worlds beyond their imagination. Leaders who put education first make this possible. Thanks to Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, children in every corner of Illinois can receive free books mailed directly to their home,” said Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton. “I applaud early childhood advocates like Dolly Parton, who are helping our children find joy in reading and creating future generations of avid readers.”

The Dollywood Foundation, which supports the Imagination Library Program, is a nonprofit organization founded by Dolly Parton in 1988. The Imagination Library Program was launched in 1995, with books originally being distributed to children living in Sevier County, Tennessee where Dolly grew up. However, it became such a success that in 2000, it was replicated nationally and by 2003, one million books had been mailed to children all over the country.

Numerous studies have found that the first five years of life are critical for young children, with around 90% of brain developing occurring during that time. Through the Imagination Library Program, children have seen a 29% increase in kindergarten readiness.

During the event, Governor Pritzker also celebrated the budget’s investments in early childhood education and care, including \$250 million in funding for the Smart Start Illinois Plan.

The plan includes:

- \$75 million increase for the Early Childhood Block Grant to create 5,000 new preschool seats next year
- \$130 million increase in childcare funding to support the creation of new Childcare Workforce Compensation Contracts that will raise the wages of childcare workers and provide stability to the field

- \$40 million increase for Early Intervention to provide a rate increase to providers and increase access to therapeutic services for children ages 0-3 with (or at risk of) developmental delay or disability, supporting healthy child development
- \$5 million increase to expand the Home Visiting program to meet the demand for services

Maplewood School is in the Cahokia School District and has an enrollment of approximately 350 students in Pre-K through 8th grade. Their goal is to create active and engaging classroom environments where all students can succeed.