

Gov. Pritzker Announces Illinois' Statewide Launch Of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

December 6 2023 9:21 AM



CHICAGO — Today, Governor JB Pritzker was joined by Dollywood Foundation Executive Director Nora Briggs, United Way of McLean County President and CEO David Taylor, local officials, parents, and community members at the Bloomington Public Library for the statewide launch of Illinois' partnership with The Dollywood Foundation to provide Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. This book gifting program

mails free, high-quality, and age-appropriate books to children from birth to age five, regardless of the family's income. Governor Pritzker's FY24 budget allocates \$1.6 million to the program to support early childhood learning in Illinois and instill lifelong reading practice.

"Today, I couldn't be prouder to announce that Illinois is beginning its journey to provide every child under the age of five an opportunity to sign up and have a free book delivered to their house every month," said Governor JB Pritzker. "Research shows that early literacy makes a big difference for our youngest learners when it comes to developing language and social skills. It's one of the many reasons my administration allocated funding in FY24's historic budget to make this partnership possible—furthering our transformative early childhood education goals."

"I am so excited to announce that Illinois is expanding my Imagination Library statewide," said Dolly Parton. "Thank you to Governor JB Pritzker and all our local program partners across Illinois who worked so hard to make this dream a reality."

The Imagination Library Program is supported by The Dollywood Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded by Dolly Parton in 1988. Since launching in 1995, the Imagination Library has become the preeminent early childhood book-gifting program in the world, with the mission of inspiring a love of reading in children from birth to age five. Inspired by Dolly's father's inability to read, the Imagination Library Program was launched in her home county of Sevier County, Tennessee. The program's significant impact led to its international expansion and has gifted over 220 million free books in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and The Republic of Ireland. On a monthly basis, the Imagination Library mails over 2.8 million books.

The program is currently active in areas across forty counties in Illinois with over 30,000 children currently receiving books and with this expansion, is expected to fully cover the entire state. To ensure that all children can participate, new local program partners are needed, and existing Imagination Library programs are encouraged to grow capacity to register additional children.

Research has shown that the first five years of life are critical for young children, with around 90% of brain development occurring during those years. Daily readings by parents or caregivers provide the greatest opportunity to prepare their child for school, and literacy is a long term major social determinant of health and economic impact. Children receiving books through the Imagination Library see increased readiness for kindergarten and higher academic achievement.

"I'm thrilled Dolly Parton's Imaginary Library is expanding, bringing the love of reading to children across Illinois," said Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton.

“Advocates like Dolly Parton have helped get our children excited about reading, learning, and discovery, and I’m grateful Illinois can partner with such a strong voice. I am firmly committed to supporting early childhood education—and how magical it is that we get to send free books to kids right at home?”

"Every child should have access to books at home," said Dr. Tony Sanders, Illinois State Superintendent of Education. "The Dolly Parton Imagination Library and State of Illinois are removing barriers to early literacy by providing free books to our youngest readers."

“Today’s students who don’t have opportunities to become strong readers are tomorrow’s adults—adults who desperately need literacy to sign a lease agreement, fill out a job application, manage their own health care, support their children’s education, and participate in our democracy,” said Senate Majority Leader Kimberly A. Lightford (D-Maywood). “The Dolly Parton Imagine Library is a critical program that gives young students the tools they need to succeed—both now and throughout life.”

“The Dolly Parton Imagination Library is a symbol of hope and opportunity for our youngest minds,” said Senate Assistant Majority Leader David Koehler (D-Peoria). “This initiative is crucial for children, serving as the foundation that shapes their love for reading, learning and creativity—all while improving literacy rates and empowering our youth—regardless of their socio-economic background.”

"As someone who grew up with limited access to books at home, projects like the Dolly Parton Imagination Library matter deeply to me," said House Majority Conference Chairperson Theresa Mah (D-Chicago). "I was proud to fight to secure this item during the budget process because I know from experience how much a project like this can do for kids without books. We are working to build the best education system in the country for Illinois kids, and I believe projects like the Dolly Parton Imagination Library are an integral part of that effort."

"In addition to bolstering our public education system, one of the best things we can do to help kids learn is foster learning, reading especially, outside of school," said State Representative Sharon Chung (D-Bloomington). "This library gives kids who may not have many books incredible opportunities to fulfill that need. Building a stronger future for Illinois kids starts with maintaining projects like this, and I plan on fighting to do so every day I stand for my community in Springfield."

“Governor Pritzker's visit underscores the importance of literacy, echoing Dolly Parton's visionary Imagination Library,” said Bloomington Mayor Mboka Mwilambwe. “As we

welcome such influential initiatives, our ongoing library renovations, coupled with the Public Library Per Capita Grant we received, reflect our commitment to creating a vibrant and resourceful community hub."

To learn more about becoming a local program partner, contact Pam Hunsaker at Phunsaker@imaginationlibrary.com.

To check to see if a program is available in your area, visit the 'find my program' page on www.imaginationlibrary.com. You can enroll your child or sign up to be notified when a program comes to your community. Visit back often as we expand across the state.

About Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

Since launching in 1995, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has become the preeminent early childhood book-gifting program in the world. The flagship program of The Dollywood Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, has gifted over 200 million free books in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and The Republic of Ireland. This is achieved through funding shared by The Dollywood Foundation and Local Community Partners. The Imagination Library mails more than 2.8 million high-quality, age-appropriate books directly to children's homes each month. Each child enrolled in the program receives one book per month from birth to age five - at no cost to families. Dolly envisioned creating a lifelong love of reading and inspiring children to Dream More, Learn More, Care More and Be More.

The program's impact has been widely researched, and results demonstrate its positive impact on early childhood development and literacy skills. Penguin Random House is the exclusive publisher of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.