



The NYC Imagination Library Initiative

College & Career Readiness Begins at Birth!



**Department of
Education**

Dennis M. Walcott, Chancellor



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A Birth-to-Five Early Literacy Program Targeting All NYC Children Ages 0 to 5 Years

*"The home is the child's first school, the parent is the child's first teacher, and reading is the child's first subject."
-- Barbara Bush*

The **Imagination Library** is a birth-to-five early literacy program, founded by singer-songwriter Dolly Parton, that assists preschool children in developing their vocabulary, school readiness, and love of learning and reading by ensuring that FREE, high quality, age-appropriate books are mailed once a month directly to their homes, and encouraging parents to regularly read aloud to their preschool children. With the arrival of the first book, the classic *The Little Engine That Could*, every enrolled child experiences the joy of finding their very own book in the mailbox – and spending quality time reading with parents and other family members. These precious moments continue each month until the child turns five and receives the book, *Look Out Kindergarten Here I Come*. The Dollywood Foundation launched a replication model in 2000 to enable other communities to provide the Imagination Library to their children. Currently, more than 1,000 communities are participating in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in the U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom, with more than 1.3 million children enrolled to date, including statewide, universal programs in Tennessee and the Yukon Territories.

Imagination Library books are a free gift to all enrolled children, through program sponsorship. During the 2010-2011 school year, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) partnered with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, and other New York City agencies and organizations, to pilot an **enhanced version** of the Imagination Library in targeted high-need communities in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens, with citywide expansion of the piloted **NYC Imagination Library Initiative** planned for the 2011-2012 school year. Along with the free book-a-month component, the **NYC Imagination Library** offers training for parents in simple to use and effective strategies to support children's early literacy and language development, supplemental bilingual and native language supports, parent/child reading incentives, and linkages with public and private school programs, public libraries, and other early literacy initiatives.

Our goal is to promote the development of emergent literacy and language skills that are important for every child's success in school and foundational to their college and career readiness, by encouraging all NYC parents to read aloud to their children **every day** from birth until age five – and beyond.

THE RATIONALE AND URGENCY FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS STRATEGY

Helping children to be on track for meeting the educational goal of "college and career readiness" begins way before children even enter pre-kindergarten – it actually begins at BIRTH! The foundations of literacy and learning are laid during infancy and toddlerhood, when the brain undergoes its most dramatic development. During these first 3 years, children acquire the ability to think, speak, learn, and reason. Young children's ability to use language and understand the meaning of spoken and written words is related to later achievement in reading, writing, and spelling. When early language and literacy skills are not appropriately developed in young

children, an achievement gap or “language gap” emerges and begins to widen long before a child’s scholastic career. Although this language gap can occur among at-risk children of varying socioeconomic backgrounds, statistics show that children of low-income families are most impacted.

- Nearly 61% of families in low-income communities do not have any age appropriate books in their homes. This lack of books impedes literacy development which is a key for school success.
- By age four, the average child in a professional family hears about 35 million more words than the average child in a low-income family. This word difference can impede learning and achieving for a lifetime.
- 50% of children from low-income families start school up to two years behind their peers. When children start school behind, they are more likely to stay behind for the rest of their lives, and this gap only widens over time.
- Reading difficulties is related to an increase in high school drop-out rates, unemployment, incarceration, and countless other issues in need of remediation.

Parents play a critical role in the development of communication and early literacy skills. Children’s experiences with parents/caregivers and other family members in the early years is key to how language unfolds in early childhood and how children develop a foundation for their enjoyment of communication and of literacy. Access to books and one-on-one reading time in the preschool years is an important predictor of future literacy skills, and multiple studies have confirmed that reading to children every day during their preschool years not only will provide a lifetime of benefits, but is the single most important thing parents can do to prepare children for success in school. Reading aloud to children from infancy on exposes them to the alphabet, to the sounds that words make, and to the idea that print letters translate into spoken words. Talking to children about a story boosts understanding and vocabulary.

Encouraging and supporting parents to read aloud to children for at least 15 minutes each day from birth until age five (and beyond), and to use everyday experiences as opportunities to talk to children and engage with them, will reap significant dividends throughout the entire academic career of a child, and can build a special bond between parents and their children that will last a lifetime.

The research is clear on the benefits of reading aloud to children at an early age, and the NYC Imagination Library can complement and support all school-based improvement efforts by proactively engaging preschool children and their families to address a root cause of low student achievement and PREVENT the achievement gap before it occurs. While it is critically important that we continue the focus on improving our schools to ensure we can provide a high-quality educational experience for every NYC child, the NYC Imagination Library Initiative gives us an opportunity to better engage families in our efforts to improve student outcomes by supporting parents in helping their children to develop a healthy love of reading and the important early language and literacy skills that will ensure children will have a good start in school toward academic success. Only with a dual focus on strengthening children’s early literacy development AND improving school-based educational programs will we have a fighting chance to eradicate the achievement gap. The long-term economic and cost-saving benefits of this proactive approach are also substantial in the potential for: reducing the need for costly K-12 programs to address the needs of struggling students; improving graduation rates; lowering rates of social problems; and improving the quality of New York City’s workforce.

THE VISION

While we want to ensure that children who are most at risk can benefit from the NYC Imagination Library, our goal is to enroll **ALL NYC preschool children**, regardless of income, because of the myriad of benefits to be derived – both academic and social-emotional. Just imagine how powerful it would be if all New York City children entered pre-kindergarten and kindergarten with common experiences by having read the same book as their peers. Positive communication, interaction, and relationship-building between children would be fostered, and their transitions to first entry in school would be easier. Teachers would be able to leverage children’s shared experiences to enrich the early grade teaching and learning process.

Our vision is within five years:

- Every NYC child, regardless of language, cultural, or economic differences, will develop a healthy love of reading, have a proficient vocabulary, and begin school with the early literacy skills that are important for academic success towards college and career readiness!
- All parents will be empowered with knowledge and strategies to support their active role in building their children’s early literacy and language development!
- The parent-child bond will be strengthened through the regular reading of books in the home!
- All NYC children will enter school with shared experiences by having read the same books as their peers! Kids’ shared experiences will help them to build positive relationships with each other and ease the transition from home to school!
- Kindergarten and first-grade teachers will leverage these shared experiences to activate children’s interest and enrich the teaching and learning process!
- As more children continue to “graduate” from the NYC Imagination Library, the achievement gap will be eliminated and all NYC residents will benefit from a higher quality of life, improved health, and ultimately realize a workforce with the skills needed to support New York City’s future.

IMAGINATION LIBRARY BOOKS

A blue ribbon committee of childhood education experts selects the books for the Imagination Library, which includes such well-loved classics as *The Little Engine That Could*, *The Snowy Day*, *Corduroy*, *Owl Moon*, and *Where Butterflies Grow*. Fundamental book themes include: inspiration and imagination; love of reading and learning; regard for diversity of people, their roles, culture, and environment; promotion of self-esteem and confidence; and appreciation of art and aesthetics. The committee also determines an age-appropriate timeline for book themes, including: visual and playful stimulation in year one; repetition and body awareness in year two; love and other emotions, values and character, and colors, letters, numbers in year three; diversity of others and poetry in year four; and science, appreciation, and school preparation and readiness in year five.

In addition to the English language books that are available through the partnership with Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, the New York City Department of Education has established a supplementary collection of age-appropriate bilingual and native language books for enrolled children and parents whose primary home language is other than English. The **NYC Imagination Library Bilingual/Native Language Book Collection** includes 60 books, leveled from birth to 60 months, in each of the following nine languages: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Haitian-Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Urdu. Books with audio and tactile support are also available to meet the needs of children (and parents) with disabilities.

CHILD/PARENT ENROLLMENT

During the 2010-2011 pilot year, children ages zero to five who were residents of one of the targeted high need communities in Brooklyn, Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens were eligible to enroll in the NYC Imagination Library's FREE book-a-month program. With citywide expansion planned for the 2011-2012 school year, contingent on the availability of funding, participation in the NYC Imagination Library Initiative will be free for any NYC child if he or she is under the age of five and resides within the five boroughs of New York City – regardless of family income. Parents are able to register their children in the NYC Imagination Library program by returning a printed enrollment form to the NYCDOE by mail or fax, or by registering online.

Partnerships have been established with other New York City agencies to ensure low-income families can take full advantage of this opportunity, including the NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA), NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS), NYC Agency for Children's Services (ACS), and the NYC Department of Social Services. Partnerships are also being established with local hospitals and the NYC Department of Health to give parents the option to enroll their children for the free NYC Imagination Library program at the time of birth certificate registration.

Additional program registration strategies include:

- Availability of translated versions of the NYC Imagination Library brochure/enrollment forms in the following nine languages: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Haitian-Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Urdu.
- Online child/parent enrollment, available at www.nycimaginationlibrary.org.
- Outreach, informational presentations, and brochure/enrollment forms made available to parents and staff at local child care centers, elementary schools, public libraries, hospitals, clinics/physicians' offices, homeless shelters, CBOs, and faith-based organizations.
- Engagement of local pediatricians, family physicians, and health centers to encourage them to offer parents of their preschool patients a "prescription to read," and a partnership with Reach Out and Read of Greater New York (ROR) at participating physicians' offices.
- Outreach to parent leadership organizations, local community leaders, and elected officials to enroll all eligible children.
- Partnerships with community development organizations, WIC programs, and local preventative service and family intervention provider coalitions, and creation of other public/private/corporate partnerships to enroll eligible children.

PARENT TRAINING, RESOURCES, AND SUPPORT

The **NYC Imagination Library Early Literacy Parent Workshop Series** is designed to empower parents with a strong knowledge base and simple-to-use and effective strategies to support their children's early literacy development. The parent training is organized as a four-session (2-hour/session) interactive workshop series, delivered over four consecutive weeks in multiple cycles throughout the year, and the curriculum is aligned with Reach Out and Read's Developmental Milestones for Early Literacy and the New York State ELA and Literacy Common Core Standards for Pre-K.

During spring 2011, the **NYC Imagination Library Early Literacy Parent Workshop Series** was conducted at twenty-three sites in targeted communities in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens, and included NYCHA community center sites, public libraries, and CBO partner sites. Parents who regularly attended the

workshops were eligible to receive a **free MP3 player with audio books in adult titles** for their own reading pleasure, as both an incentive and a means to expose them to the rich experience of being read aloud to, in order to encourage them to regularly read aloud to their children and to model for them expressive read aloud techniques.

Additional supports for enrolled parents available at each NYC Imagination Library training site include:

- Free access to the **Rosetta Stone** language learning program to support English language learner parents to become more proficient in English.
- Free access to the **IBM Reading Companion** online adult literacy program to support parents who have a need to strengthen their basic literacy skills.

Additionally, the **New York City Early Language Learning (NYCELL) Program**, a partnership between the NYCDOE's Office of Early Childhood Education and the New York City Housing Authority, is an intensive 12 week early literacy training model for parents and children hosted at select NYCHA community center sites.

PROGRAM IMPACT

We are proud of the accomplishments we've made thus far toward meeting our goals!

Since our January 25th, 2011 NYC Imagination Library launch we've:

- ❖ Enrolled over 20,000 children in the Imagination Library book-a-month program!
- ❖ Mailed over 50,000 books to the homes of NYC preschool children to date!
- ❖ Established a collection of 540 bilingual and native language books – 60 books in 9 languages, leveled from one month to 5 years!
- ❖ Established a parent early literacy training program, and delivered training to more than 350 parents in spring 2011!
- ❖ Provided free access for parents to the Rosetta Stone for English language learning program (all 5 levels) at Imagination Library training sites, as an additional support for English language learner parents.
- ❖ Established an incentive program with donated MP3 players and audio books in adult titles for distribution to parents who regularly attended the NYC Imagination Library early literacy workshops.
- ❖ Established active partnerships with other city agencies and local organizations serving children and families.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

A number of longitudinal studies, including studies conducted by Tennessee, Hawaii, the First Foundation for Childhood Literacy in Georgia, and the High Scope Educational Research Foundation, have affirmed the positive impact of the Imagination Library on children's love of reading, readiness for school, and academic achievement in the early grades. In 2003, the High Scope Research Foundation surveyed a national sample of parents and determined that 66%-75% of all families reported that they now read to their child more frequently. Since then, dozens of local surveys of parents have found similar results. The Tennessee Board of Regents asked kindergarten and pre-kindergarten teachers to compare learning attributes between children who received the Imagination Library and those that had not participated in the program - again, it was affirmed that Imagination Library children fared better on these learning attributes.

Evaluation of NYC's Imagination Library Initiative

For the pilot year implementation, we are evaluating the impact of the **NYC Imagination Library Initiative** by capturing and analyzing qualitative and anecdotal data on parent/child perceptions regarding program efficacy and efficiency, and self-reported changes in their daily reading behaviors. We are also assessing the program's effectiveness in establishing and implementing best practices for:

- meeting pilot year child/parent enrollment goals
- ensuring efficiency in monthly book fulfillment
- delivering early literacy training for parents
- establishing strategic partnerships to coordinate efforts with other early literacy initiatives
- establishing a continuous improvement communication and feedback loop to ensure responsiveness in meeting the needs of parents and families
- meeting fundraising goals to support program expansion

In year 2 of program implementation, we will design evaluation protocols and begin data collection to support a longer-term longitudinal study of the on-track performance toward college and career readiness of children in grades K to 12 who participated in the NYC Imagination Library program, with inclusion of additional study variables, e.g., parent training, UPK enrollment, etc.

PROGRAM FUNDING

The New York City Department of Education is the sponsoring organization for the NYC Imagination Library Initiative. While the 2010-2011 pilot year implementation was grant-funded, we are actively seeking additional funding to enable all 540,000+ NYC children under five and their families to be served by this important program. Plans for expansion beyond the current grant period are reliant on funding from corporate sponsorship, individual donations, federal/state grants, and foundation grants, with the ultimate goal of establishing an endowment to provide a more permanent funding stream to sustain the implementation.

PROGRAM CONTACT

For more information, please contact:

Sharon Rencher, Executive Director
NYC Imagination Library Initiative
Office of Early Childhood Education | Division of Portfolio Planning
New York City Department of Education
Office: (718) 348-2994 | Cell: (917) 690-4449 | Fax: (718) 642-5876
Email: SRenche@schools.nyc.gov