Expanding Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Statewide

Roanoke City Public Schools

Background: Reading to young children builds the skills they need before they even start kindergarten. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library mails a free, age-appropriate book to enrolled children every month, from birth to age five, no matter the family's income. This allows children to build a personal library of up to 60 books before entering kindergarten. An independent study of over 86,000 caregivers found that children in the program were far more likely to be read to often, to enjoy books, and to show early literacy skills such as vocabulary and print awareness.

Virginia has made progress in expanding Dolly Parton's Imagination Library across the Commonwealth. Virginia now has 89 Local Program Partners, and lawmakers included $1,500,000 in the state budget for both FY27 and FY28 to support the program, which halves the cost for local program partners. But only 90,990 of the 495,281 eligible children who could be served are currently enrolled, as of August 2026. Whole regions of the Commonwealth, including Fairfax City, Norfolk, Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, and Prince William, do not have a local program partner, so children cannot enroll, no matter how much their families want to sign up. Without local program partners who are willing to take on fundraising, the Commonwealth's children do not all have an equitable opportunity.

Current Reality: The current state funding of the Imagination Library leaves room for growth:

1. The state funding is not a dedicated, permanent line. It sits inside a broader Department of Education account (the Supplemental Educational Assistance Programs section of the budget bill) and must be manually reallocated every budget cycle. That means the program's funding could shrink, stall, or disappear depending on other priorities in a given year.
2. Coverage still depends on finding a local nonprofit partner in every city and county. Communities without an existing 501(c)(3) organization willing and able to serve as a local program partner are left out. Concern over sustainable funding gives some otherwise willing nonprofits pause.
3. At least fifteen other states have already committed to statewide Imagination Library coverage, starting with Tennessee in 2004 and including states such as North Carolina, Washington, California, and Kentucky. These states show that a statewide, state-funded program is a proven model. At the same time, several of these states have seen enrollment pause or funding cut when the state's contribution did not keep pace with need or got left out of a tight budget year. This provides an opportunity for Virginia to lead in a sustainable statewide model.

RCPS recommends the General Assembly:

1. Create a permanent, dedicated, and recurring funding line for the Imagination Library, separate from other Department of Education accounts, following the model already used by many other states that fund the program statewide. This would:
    a. Give the program a stable source of funding that does not depend on the biennial budget process.
    b. Allow local program partners to plan ahead and focus on enrolling children rather than fundraising.

c. Protect children already enrolled from having the monthly mailing stop due to a funding shortfall, as has happened in other states when funding did not keep up with demand.

2. Fund and support a path to full statewide coverage, so that every locality has a Local Program Partner.
3. Set aside dedicated growth funding, not just maintenance funding, so the appropriation can rise as more children enroll and more communities join.