

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library



The Issue

Learning to read is a process much like learning to walk or talk – the process begins at birth. A 1998 study shows that children develop much of their capacity to learn in the first three years of life, when their brains grow to 90 percent of their eventual adult brain weight.

A Department of Education publication emphasizes the importance of a child's interaction with his/her environment rather than intelligence as a key factor in determining the ease at which a child will learn to read. Numerous studies show that parents who read to their children will "help the children's language development, help them be ready to read when the time comes and help parents and children spend loving moments together."

The Opportunity

United Way of Greater Kansas City's Women United was established in 2009, and two years later the group chose education as the key area of focus for its efforts. After months of research, Women United chose to bring the unique early childhood literacy program, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, to Kansas City. The Imagination Library provides a free, age-appropriate book every month for children from birth to age 5 living in selected disadvantaged neighborhoods.

By inspiring parents and caregivers to read to their young children, we can help thousands of children in our community dream more, learn more, care more and be more.

The Approach

United Way initially partnered with five school districts – Kansas City, MO, Shawnee Mission, Independence, North Kansas City and Center – to enroll children in low-income neighborhoods in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. The first books were mailed in August 2013; today, the number of children receiving the free books each month has surpassed 2,700, plus another 1,200 kids who previously received books but "graduated" at age 5.

Funding for the first year of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Kansas City was generously provided by BMO Harris Bank and Government Employees Health Association (GEHA).

Why it matters

To immerse a child in a literacy environment can be a stronger predictor of literacy and academic achievement than family income. The more words a child hears, the larger the child's vocabulary, and the larger the child's vocabulary, the more likely the child will be a proficient reader. Children from high-income families are exposed to 30 million more words in early childhood than children in poor families – a difference that has lasting effects on a child's performance later in life.

Numerous studies have shown that 88 percent of children who have difficulty reading at the end of first grade display similar difficulties at the end of third grade, and Yale researchers found that 75 percent of students who are poor readers in the third grade will remain poor readers in high school. Reading below grade level by third grade is also an indicator for increased risk of dropping out of school.

Simply put, teaching children the love of reading at the earliest possible age is the single most important tool that parents can give their children to help them achieve academic success throughout their lives.

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In 2015, Burns & McDonnell made a significant gift in order to fund Imagination Library enrollment for the more than 700 preschoolers living in the Urban Neighborhood Initiative area. Women United provides ongoing volunteer support in conducting library enrollment events in school districts throughout the metro area.

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Focus on Results

Since 2000, more than 85 million books have been mailed to children in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. More than 1,600 communities currently provide the Imagination Library to more than 1,017,831 children every month.

Statistics and independent reports to date have shown Dolly Parton's Imagination Library drastically improves early childhood literacy for children enrolled in the program. Further studies have shown improved scores during early literacy testing.