



STRENGTHENING EARLY LITERACY ATTAINMENT FOR ALL WASHINGTON CHILDREN THROUGH THE IMAGINATION LIBRARY OF WASHINGTON PROGRAM

2026 Supplemental Operating Budget Decision Package

Agency: 3500 Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Budget period: 2026 Supplemental Budget

Budget level: PL

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Unlocking literacy skills early in life prepares children to succeed in K–12 education, college, career, and life. Access to high-quality, age-appropriate books is the simplest and most effective way to encourage the development of early literacy skills; however, not all Washingtonians have the resources to supply their children with sufficient reading material. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) requests that the state continue to invest in literacy tools for all early learners by funding the Imagination Library of Washington program under [RCW 43.216.200](#).

FISCAL DETAIL

Operating Expenditures	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Fund 001	\$1,608,000	\$3,422,000	\$4,294,000	\$5,118,000
Total Expenditures	\$1,608,000	\$3,422,000	\$4,294,000	\$5,118,000
Biennial Totals	\$5,030,000		\$9,412,000	
Staffing	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
FTEs	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Average Annual	0.0		0.0	
Object of Expenditure	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Obj. C	\$1,600,500	\$3,414,500	\$4,286,500	\$5,110,500
Obj. E	\$7,500	\$7,500	\$7,500	\$7,500
Revenue	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Fund 0	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Total Revenue	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Biennial Totals	\$0.00		\$0.00	

PACKAGE DESCRIPTION

Washington has a long history of making strategic investments in students' pathways to A literate community is a thriving community. As the common infrastructure over which information moves through systems, through culture, and through time, literacy is the most essential and fundamental skill students need to successfully navigate their world. Reading introduces children not only to information, but to a system that organizes that information, tools for interpreting it, and methods for communicating with it. What starts with letters and words applies later on to numbers and formulas, to codes, to blueprints, and to every language invented to capture, process, and communicate both general and specialized knowledge.

Early exposure to books and reading are the foundation on which literacy is built, and the key to developing strong literacy skills is simple: get books into the hands of early learners and their families. A child with at least 25 books in their home is more likely to finish their K–12 education than those without. However, not all Washington families are able to give their children sufficient access to high-quality, age-appropriate books. Recognizing the need for strategic investment in early literacy, the 2022 Washington State Legislature established the Imagination Library of Washington program to provide free, age-appropriate, high-quality books each month to children birth to age five (RCW 43.216.200). This opt-in state program partners with the Dollywood Foundation, a global nonprofit organization, to make these books available through 43 local programs across the state. During the first half of 2025, the program sent out over 1 million books to Washington's youngest learners and their families, fostering a culture of reading and connection between parents/guardians and children around literacy and learning.

What is the problem, opportunity, or priority you are addressing with the request?

The Imagination Library of Washington works to close a real and persistent equity and opportunity gap that impacts Washingtonians throughout their K–12 journeys, into their adult lives, and into their children's lives. Continually high costs of goods and services, combined with economic uncertainty, forces families to make tough choices when it comes to household spending. Through its partnership with the Dollywood Foundation, the state is able to support families by paying a small cost per book. This investment in early literacy will pay dividends for decades to come, as these young learners grow into literate critical thinkers. As technology and other emerging tools revolutionize the workforce and the world around it, a strong foundation in literacy will remain critical to Washingtonians' ability to attain fluency and expertise in the information systems of the future.

The Dollywood Foundation framework for a statewide program like Washington's is a 50/50 model where the state contributes 50% of the cost of the books, currently done through the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), and the local community program partners to raise the other 50%. The 2021–23 and the 2023–25 biennial budgets both funded the Imagination Library of Washington program and allowed the program to reach over a quarter of the eligible population in just a few years. The 2025–27 biennial budget, which included deep cuts to K–12 education programs, appropriated no funding to meet the state's obligation, essentially cutting the program entirely and leaving thousands of children and families without

access to the most effective tools to develop strong early literacy skills.

To protect the gains that Washington has made in strengthening literacy skill development among its youngest learners and to address the immediate funding crises, OSPI has temporarily redirected \$1,608,000 in state funding to keep the program operating through the 2026 fiscal year.

What is your proposal?

OSPI proposes that Washington continue its investment in early literacy by fully funding its 50% share of the cost of books sent to children through the Imagination Library of Washington program. Ensuring the program receives consistent and adequate funding will protect the state's past investments in early literacy, honor legislative intent under RCW 43.216.200, and allow the program to continue to grow and thrive. OSPI also requests that the Legislature reimburse OSPI for state funds used to bridge the program through the current fiscal year.

How is your proposal impacting equity in the state?

Please describe in detail how this proposal is likely to benefit communities and populations who have historically been excluded by governmental decisions. Include both demographic and geographic information about communities.

The Imagination Library of Washington program is, first and foremost, a commitment to equity. There are many reasons why families may not buy books for their children. Adults who were raised in households devoid of books or where they did not engage in reading grow up unfamiliar with the practice of reading with family and may not prioritize access to books for their own children. Families that struggle financially are less able to provide the kinds of access to books and reading that wealthier families can afford, leading to a resource-driven gap between the households that develop a culture of reading and those that do not, and a gap in acquisition of early literacy skills between children living in economic hardship and their wealthier peers. And by mailing books directly to the homes or, as needed, to the local post offices for reach participating family, the Imagination Library of Washington Program has eliminated geographic barriers so that children in rural communities have equitable access to books as those living in more urban areas.

The Dollywood Foundation has also rooted its work in equity. Through this program this year, Washington was able to launch a fully bilingual English/Spanish book collection. While the program already sends two bilingual books each year to all participants, families that enroll can now choose to receive all bilingual English/Spanish books. This new opportunity supports both families whose primary language is Spanish as well as English-speaking families that want to build a multilingual learning foundation with their children.

Describe how your agency engaged with communities and populations, particularly those who have been historically excluded and marginalized by governmental decisions?

At the forefront of every program, policy, and decision, OSPI actively focuses on ensuring all students have access to the instruction and support they need to succeed in our schools. This proposal is focused on the needs of our most vulnerable students, particularly students of color, American Indian/Alaska Native students, and highly mobile students including students who are migratory, students in foster care, and students experiencing homelessness. These student groups face unique systemic barriers to completing their K–12 education, barriers that perpetuate larger systemic inequities that persist along racial and socioeconomic lines.

What input did your agency receive and how was it incorporated into your proposal?

See above.

Explain why and how these equity impacts will be addressed, i.e., consider communities or populations excluded or disproportionately impacted by the proposal.

See above.

What are you purchasing and how does it solve the problem?

The state's 50% share of funding for the Imagination Library of Washington program covers half the cost of the books themselves, and purchases the administrative services needed to sustain the centralized statewide program elements. These administrative expenses include staffing costs for program oversight including contract management, office supplies, technology, marketing to eligible families, and software subscriptions and licenses needed to carry out the work of administering the program. These services support the 43 local community partner programs that send out over 100,000 books each month to enrolled Washington families.

What alternatives did you explore and why was this option chosen?

If Washington does not provide the 50% state funding match required by the Dollywood Foundation, the Imagination Library of Washington program will no longer be able to operate. Tens of thousands of enrolled families will no longer receive books for their children at no cost, and many of those children will consequently miss out on a critical window for building foundational early literacy skills. A gap in access to books will follow the impacted students throughout their K–12 journeys and into adulthood, and could negatively impact their learning, narrow their postsecondary and economic opportunities, and lessen the chances that they will prioritize reading and early literacy for their own children, impacting the literacy of Washingtonians for generations to come.

OSPI is not resourced to provide what the Imagination Library of Washington program is able to provide to children and families across the state. The program's emphasis on local partnerships tailors outreach to the needs and populations of each community, leading to higher rates of enrollment than would be expected from a more centralized approach. To establish a similar

program within OSPI or DCYF would be expensive and may not be able to achieve such wide-reaching results.

What resources does the agency already have that are dedicated to this purpose?

Neither OSPI, nor DCYF, the agency currently tasked with administering the state's investment, has resources dedicated to this purpose outside what is specifically appropriated in the state's Operating Budget. OSPI was able to put together one-time funding to keep the program operating in fiscal year (FY) 2026, but will not be able to sustain the program beyond the year.

ASSUMPTIONS AND CALCULATIONS

Expansion, reduction, elimination or alteration of a current program or service:

This request funds the continuation of an existing statewide program established under RCW 43.216.200. Washington appropriated \$26,000 to establish the Imagination Library of Washington program in the 2021–23 biennium, and \$2,000,000 for the Program in the 2023–25 biennium. This funding was provided in DCYF's budget.

Because of its clear benefits for early literacy, the program remains a high priority. To sustain implementation, OSPI patched together one-time resources in fiscal year 2026 while legislative funding is being pursued to provide ongoing support.

Detailed assumptions and calculations:

- The expenditure totals include three distinct cost buckets:
 1. costs for books mailed,
 2. costs for partner organization operations, and
 3. costs for OSPI indirect charges.
- Funding will be managed as a contract with the partner organization.
- The eligible population serviced by this program is children ages 0–5 in Washington state, with a total estimate of 440,172 children. This number is based on U.S. Census data and was provided by the Dollywood Foundation.
- Children enrolled in the program receive one book per month until the month of their 5th birthday, equaling 12 books per child, per year. If they are enrolled at birth, each child will receive a collection of 60 books in total by their fifth birthday.
- The projected cost of each mailed book is \$2.60, of which the proposed state share is 50% or \$1.30 per book. The other 50% of the costs are borne by local partner organizations.
- OSPI estimates that the requested funding will deliver the following numbers of books per fiscal year:
 - FY 2026: 954,000 books
 - FY 2027: 2,257,000 books

- FY 2028: 2,891,000 books
- FY 2029: 3,525,000 books
- The United Ways of the Pacific Northwest (UWPNW) partner organization's administrative costs for the Imagination Library of Washington program are \$30,000 per month in FY 2026, \$40,000 per month in FY 2027, and \$44,000 per month in 2027–29. These expenses include payroll, payroll taxes, employee benefits, technology, and travel as well as UWPNW indirect costs which may include insurance, finance, professional development, audit, rent and contract oversight, advertising, subscriptions, supplies/miscellaneous, and professional services-other (advisory/local program partner expenses.) These fees total:
 - \$360,000 in FY 2026,
 - \$480,000 in FY 2027, and
 - \$528,000 per year in 2027–29.
- OSPI assumes these funds would be distributed to the partner organization as a contract. The indirect that would be charged to the first \$50,000 valuation of the contract at 15% is \$7,500 per year.

Workforce assumptions:

There are no FTEs requested.

Historical funding:

Fiscal Year 2026

- FTE = 0.0 FTE
- Total Funds = \$0
- Near General Fund = \$0
- Other Funds = \$0

Fiscal Year 2027

- FTE = 0.0 FTE
- Total Funds = \$0
- Near General Fund = \$0
- Other Funds = \$0

STRATEGIC AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Strategic framework:

Early literacy is an essential component of *OSPI's Strategic Goal #1: Ensuring Equitable Access to Strong Foundations*, and supports the agency's vision to prepare every student for postsecondary pathways, careers, and civic engagement. Literacy is the foundation of a world-class education, and this investment supports the state's historic commitment to ensuring the best education possible for all its learners. The Imagination Library of Washington program operates in the spirit of Results Washington, using an innovative, community-based approach to

a statewide equity issue, and employing immediate, direct, and concrete solutions for a persistent equity gap that delivers the best results to Washington children and families.

Performance outcomes:

Providing the state's 50% funding for the Imagination Library of Washington program will place nearly 2 million high-quality, age-appropriate books into the hands of Washington children each year. These children and their families will have more opportunities to engage in reading together, which develops critical early literacy skills that will have benefits through each child's K–12 education career and beyond. More Washingtonians will have stronger and deeper literacy skills and will be able to use those tools to adapt and thrive.

OTHER COLLATERAL CONNECTIONS

Intergovernmental:

The Imagination Library of Washington program is currently administered at the state level by DCYF.

Stakeholder impacts:

This request is supported by Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and the United Ways of the Pacific Northwest, who have partnered with the Washington state for multiple years to administer the Imagination Library of Washington program.

Legal or administrative mandates:

This request supports the goals and strategies set forth in RCW 43.216.200.

Changes from current law:

None

State workforce impacts:

None

State facilities impacts:

None

Puget Sound recovery:

N/A

Governor's salmon strategy:

N/A

OTHER SUPPORTING MATERIALS

[Imagination Library of Washington](#)

Information technology (IT):
N/A