



Securing Equitable Access to Early Literacy through the Imagination Library

2027-29 Biennium Operating Budget Decision Package

Agency: 350 Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Budget period: 2027-29

Budget level: PL

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Washington lawmakers established the Imagination Library of Washington Program in 2022 to drive attainment of foundational early literacy skills among Washington children from birth to age five. Recent budget cuts have eliminated state support for this program despite its broad reach and proven results. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) requests \$5 million in the 2027-29 biennium to continue the effective program.

FISCAL DETAIL

Operating Expenditures	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030	FY 2031
Fund 001 (Program 05X)	\$2,338,000	\$2,588,000	\$2,588,000	\$2,588,000
Total Expenditures	\$2,338,000	\$2,588,000	\$2,588,000	\$2,588,000
Biennial Totals	\$4,926,000		\$5,176,000	
Staffing	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030	FY 2031
FTEs	0	0	0	0
Average Annual	0		0	
Object of Expenditure	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030	FY 2031
Obj. C	\$2,330,000	\$2,580,000	\$2,580,000	\$2,580,000
Obj. E	\$8,000	\$8,000	\$8,000	\$8,000
Revenue	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030	FY 2031
Total Revenue	0	0	0	
Biennial Totals	\$0		\$0	

PACKAGE DESCRIPTION

Literacy is the foundation on which all other academic skills are built, from the ability to comprehend various subject matter terminology to the early development of interpretation, pattern recognition, and communication fundamental to all future learning. Early exposure to books and reading is critical to brain development and fosters parents'/guardians' engagement in their child's education from an early age. The most efficient and effective strategy to support early literacy attainment among Washington children is to get books into the hands of early learners and their families. Acknowledging that not all Washington families are able to give their children sufficient access to high-quality, age-appropriate books, 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 2026, the program sent out half a million books to Washington families, providing the tools needed to develop early literacy skills to thousands of children across the state.

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

The Imagination Library of Washington program works to close a real and persistent equity and opportunity gap experienced most acutely by children in families facing financial hardship or belonging to already marginalized communities. As budgets tighten due to stubborn inflation and the high cost of basic household expenses, families shift spending away from nonessentials. Compounding the current cost of living crisis, families experiencing generational economic challenges driven by longstanding systemic inequities are less likely to have an embedded culture of reading and early literacy, having long deprioritized books and reading to make ends meet. By providing books to families at no cost, the Imagination Library of Washington program allows participating families to secure high-quality and developmentally appropriate reading material for their children without placing any additional pressure on household spending. The Program's partnership with the Dollywood Foundation allows the State to provide this service at a low cost per individual book, securing a statewide investment in early literacy and helping to remove a systemic disadvantage faced by children that they would otherwise carry throughout their educational journeys and beyond.

The Dollywood Foundation framework for a statewide program like Washington's is a 50/50 model with the state contributing 50% of the total cost of the books, and the local community program partners raising the other 50% through local and private fundraising. The 2021–23 and the 2023–25 biennial budgets both funded the Imagination Library of Washington Program, allowing rapid expansion across the state. 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 state support of the program entirely and leaving thousands of children and families at risk of losing access to the high-quality books on which they depend.

Fundraising efforts by nonprofit and community partners have secured short-term private dollars that will keep the program afloat with lower state investment in the 2028 fiscal year, however this model is both uncertain and unreliable when it comes to future funding, and does not address the State's failure to meet its financial commitment made when establishing the

program under the 50/50 model.

OSPI has advocated for the Imagination Library of Washington Program since its inception, though the Program currently operates through the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). The Legislature has considered recent legislation that would move program administration at the state level to OSPI.

What is your proposal?

OSPI proposes that Washington continue its investment in early literacy by funding part of its 50% share in the 2028 fiscal year, closing the gap left by private fundraising, and then meeting its full funding obligation starting with the 2029 fiscal year. This consistent, reliable, and adequate program funding will allow the Imagination Library of Washington to continue serving early learners and their families across the state, protecting the state's prior investments in a proven strategy for developing early literacy skills among Washington's youngest residents, and working to close persistent, lifelong opportunity gaps faced by children living in marginalized and economically disadvantaged families.

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 each 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?

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

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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 80,000 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. While partners have managed to secure a short-term private donation to continue to program into the next year after receiving no state funding in the most recent budget cycle, there is no guarantee that future donors will be found. Shifting the state's financial commitment onto private donors is not a sustainable funding model for an important program established by state statute.

If the Imagination Library of Washington Program disappears, 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. Private donations have secured one-time funding to keep the program operating through the 2028 fiscal year, but this fix is not a long-term solution.

ASSUMPTIONS AND CALCULATIONS

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

This proposal represents maintenance and potential expansion of services provided by the Imagination Library of Washington Program. Whether the Program expands depends on a number of factors at the local level including local funding partnerships and family enrollment. If fully funded, expansion of the program is likely.

Detailed assumptions and calculations:

OSPI would contract with a local nonprofit to fund a 50% book cost match for monthly books mailed to a projected 131,000 children in FY28 and 148,000 children in FY29. The total contract cost per fiscal year in 2028 is projected to be \$2,338,000 and \$2,588,000 in fiscal year 2029 and ongoing.

The breakdown of cost distribution is as follows:

- \$1,930,000 in FY28 increasing to \$2,180,000 in FY29 and ongoing to cover a 50% book cost match for providing a book each month to a projected 131,000 children in FY28 and 148,000 children in FY29 and ongoing.
- \$400,000 annual administrative costs for a local non-profit to operate this program. The administrative cost is projected to be \$400,000 in FY28 and ongoing. These administrative costs will include advertising, subscriptions, supplies/miscellaneous,

professional services-other (Advisory/Local Program Partner Exp.), travel, payroll, payroll taxes, employee benefits, technology; and non-profit indirect costs which includes insurance, finance, professional development, audit, rent and contract oversight.

- \$8,000 in OSPI indirect cost in FY28 and ongoing.

Workforce assumptions:

No FTE included in the cost for this program as it would be operated via a contract with a non-profit organization.

Historical funding:

There is no funding in the current budgets for the Imagination Library of Washington.

Fiscal Year 2028

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

Fiscal Year 2029

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

STRATEGIC AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Strategic framework:

Governor Ferguson's Priorities

This request supports one of Governor Ferguson's strategic goals.

Goal 1 – Education

Strengthening K-12 education in the state of Washington, which includes plans to invest a higher percentage of the total budget in K-12 education to ensure a strong start for Washington's younger residents. This priority references the Washington State [Constitution](#), which declares that "It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, colors, caste, or sex."

OSPI Strategic Goals

This proposal directly the first of [OSPI's four strategic goals](#), with primary alignment to the agency's commitment to "eliminating opportunity gaps and supporting students furthest from educational justice."

Goal 1: Equitable Access to Strong Foundations

This proposal 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.

Prior Legislative Commitments

2022 House Bill 2068, RCW 43.216.200

This proposal the Imagination Library of Washington Program established in [2022 House Bill 2068](#).

Performance outcomes:

Providing the state's 50% funding for the Imagination Library of Washington program will place nearly 1.3 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

1. [Imagination Library of Washington \(https://www.imaginationlibrarywashington.org\)](https://www.imaginationlibrarywashington.org)
2. [Dolly Parton's Imagination Library \(https://imaginationlibrary.com/\)](https://imaginationlibrary.com/)

Information technology (IT):

N/A