

February 16, 2022

Dear Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, Members of the Committee,

My name is Helen Winder, and I am the head of the Imagination Library of Wheaton Woods Elementary School PTA affiliate. I am writing to express my support of the Maryland Senate Bill 438, Young Readers Program - Enhancement Act.

Wheaton Woods ES is a Title 1 school in the 20853 zip code of Rockville, MD. Our catchment area is culturally and socioeconomically diverse; of just over 500 students: 25.5% are African American, 63.6% are Hispanic, 4.2% are Caucasian, 4.8% are Asian, and 51.08% are limited English proficient. Over 80% of our students qualify for free and reduced meals. As you can gather, our families are coming from traditionally underserved populations. **We are now at 124 enrolled and 52 “graduates” of the Imagination Library program.**

We started our Imagination Library affiliate in June 2020, completely virtually as schools in Montgomery County had already shut down due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Reaching our families has been difficult during this time of limited face-to-face engagement. Our neighborhood does best with personal interaction, in-person conversations, and paper registration forms and those options have been impossible or severely curtailed during much of our affiliate’s existence, but I am proud of what we have accomplished so far. Our affiliate has conducted several impact surveys, and parents and caregivers have consistently said that they have noticed that since participating in the Imagination Library program, they are reading more with their children, and they have reported that their children are showing more interest in books, as well as showing development in pre-reading skills such as listening and word recognition. Additionally, almost all the parents and caregivers reported that the Imagination Library program was very important during the pandemic; while our community does have a wonderful public library close by, it was closed for months during the beginning of the pandemic. Receiving new books in the mail became something that our participating families treasured during periods of lockdown and quarantine. And over the next few years, Wheaton Woods ES will be welcoming 130+ children to its PreK and Headstart programs that will have already begun their journeys as lifelong readers thanks to the Imagination Library Program.

However, there is so much more we can do. I also work at Wheaton Woods ES as one of the Parent Community Coordinators, and on a daily basis I see or hear about so many younger siblings that I know are not yet enrolled in the Imagination Library program. Support such as that provided by the Young Readers Program - Expansion Act would help us reach our goal of expanding our program to **at least** 200 active children.

We are also constantly approached by families in neighboring school catchment areas who are hoping to enroll their children in an Imagination Library program affiliate. While our current funding source specifies that children must live within the Wheaton Woods ES catchment areas, it would be wonderful if in the future our affiliate could serve more of our neighbors. Another option would be setting up affiliates at neighboring schools; several have approached us for information on how to do so.

Members of the Committee, once again, thank you for your support of the Maryland Senate Bill 438, Young Readers Program - Enhancement Act.

Sincerely,
Helen Winder