



February 15, 2022

The Honorable Cory V. McCray
Miller Senate Office Building, Room 221
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Senator McCray and members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee:

Bright Minds Foundation, the Howard County public schools education foundation, strongly supports Senate Bill 438: Young Readers Program Expansion Act. SB 438 will provide matching grant funds for the expansion of programs that provide books to young children in partnership with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. The qualifying program in Howard County, **Read With Me**, is administered by Bright Minds Foundation.

Howard County has approximately 20,000 children between the ages of 0 and 5 years. In our county and elsewhere, there remain persistent challenges with children who, regardless of socioeconomic status, are not receiving appropriate literacy exposure prior to kindergarten. Children's success with school readiness begins at home almost from birth, and delays in the early years of education are difficult to overcome. Access to age-appropriate books early on has both immediate and long-term positive effects on children's vocabulary, background knowledge, and comprehension skills. Unfortunately, many children lack adequate access to reading materials and adult support for reading.

As the Howard County affiliate for Imagination Library, Bright Minds brings **Read With Me** each year to more than 1,000 children, with a particular focus on low-income and high-need children in our community. Participating children receive one high-quality, age-appropriate book mailed monthly to their home through age 5. This early support aligns closely with state and county goals for early childhood support and will have far-reaching benefits for participating children, their families, and our county. If implemented widely, programs like **Read With Me** will reduce spending on intervention/ remediation, create economic advantages with improved skills for future employment, and decrease the number of students who drop out of school. Student civility, self-discipline, and social emotional skills will also improve.

Many more children could benefit from this program and Bright Minds would love to offer the program to a larger segment of children in our county. We have the staff, experience, and community partnerships needed to quickly and effectively expand this program in Howard County.

We sincerely hope committee members will support this bill. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or require anything additional from us.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Van Kirk

Jennifer Van Kirk
Executive Director
Bright Minds Foundation