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NOW SERVING ONE OUT OF EVERY TWO CHILDREN UNDER AGE FIVE, TENNESSEE'S IMAGINATION LIBRARY IMPROVES SCHOOL PREPAREDNESS

Pre-K, Kindergarten Teachers Report Imagination Library Participants Start School Better Prepared to Learn

NASHVILLE, TENN. – With just over half of Tennessee's population of under-five children currently registered in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library –and over 80,000 Tennessee five-year-olds who have "graduated" from the statewide program since 2004– the Tennessee Board of Regents has completed the first large-scale study on the Imagination Library's impact on the learning preparedness of children now enrolled in public schools.

In 2007, the Governor's Books from Birth Foundation commissioned the TBR to solicit kindergarten and pre-kindergarten teachers' professional judgments on the readiness and performance of students who had participated in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library – a program that mails a new, age-appropriate, hardcover book every month to registered children, from birth until age five, at no cost to the family and regardless of income.

Responding kindergarten and pre-K teachers collectively affirmed that children who had participated in the Imagination Library were "better prepared" than students who had not participated in the program. On average, Imagination Library participants also exceeded teacher expectations: Forty-eight percent of kindergarten teachers and 64 percent of pre-K teachers stated that Imagination Library participants performed "better than expected" or "much better than expected" than students from previous classes – as compared to only ten percent of kindergarten teachers and 11 percent of pre-K teachers reporting that *non*-participants performed "better than expected" or "much better than expected."

"This research underscores how reading to a child early and often improves their ability to succeed right from the start of their formal education," said Governor Phil Bredesen. "I hope these promising results will encourage all Tennessee families with children under age five to register for the Imagination Library and make a commitment to read with a child every day, starting at birth."

Administered in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Education last fall, the Web-based survey contained questions related to overall learning preparedness (reading, thinking, listening and social skills) for two groups of students in a teacher's class: those who had participated in Tennessee's Imagination Library, and those who had not. Teachers were asked to consider all students in each group as a whole, and used a five-point rating scale of expectations for assessing readiness, performance, and comparison to previous classes. Nearly 320 kindergarten teachers and over 150 pre-kindergarten teachers responded.

"Through a major study sponsored by the Dollywood Foundation in 2003, we knew the Imagination Library significantly improved household literacy habits among participating families," said GBBF President Lady Bird. "But to have evidence on how this program has improved school preparedness *in Tennessee* is very exciting – and particularly validating for our volunteers across the state, who work so hard to make sure children in their communities have access to these wonderful books."

Additional highlights from the TBR study's findings:

- Teachers believed that Imagination Library participants enjoyed learning new stories more than non-participants –especially at the pre-kindergarten level– and that the Imagination Library fostered creativity.
- Open-ended comments were highly positive: Teachers applauded the fact that the Imagination Library provides books to children who might not otherwise be able to own any books, and that the books were useful classroom learning tools. Many teachers said they made sure to register their own children in the program.

- Some teachers thought that the Imagination Library would be even more effective if parents and communities would take *full* advantage of it (i.e., registration of any and *all* children under age five).
- *Experienced* teachers agreed that the Imagination Library has aided preparation for pre-K and kindergarten.
- Although survey responses could not be controlled for extraneous factors in early childhood development such as intervention from other programs (i.e., *Voluntary Pre-K for All* or Head Start), student backgrounds, or number of years enrolled in the Imagination Library, the survey still allows for understanding the *probable* effects of Imagination Library participation on literacy and early childhood learning as an aggregate.

“We are optimistic that these teachers’ assessments will help with our biggest challenges going forward – finding and registering the other 50 percent of Tennessee’s under-five children, and raising adequate funds to support these additional children,” said Bird.

According to 2000 U.S. Census results, 52 percent of the state’s total population under age five –almost 194,000 children– are registered to receive a free book in the mail this month. With over 80,000 Tennessee five-year-olds having already “graduated,” Tennessee’s Imagination Library has served more than 274,000 children, and delivered over 5.1 million books, since Gov. Bredesen established the GBBF in 2004.

About Tennessee’s Imagination Library:

Dolly Parton created the Imagination Library in 1996 as a gift to the children in her hometown of Sevierville, Tenn. The cost of purchasing and delivering books –\$28 per child, per year– is split evenly between a non-profit sponsoring organization in every Tennessee county, and a State budgetary allocation administered by the non-partisan, not-for-profit Governor’s Books from Birth Foundation®.

A blue ribbon committee of early childhood education experts selects the books for the Imagination Library, which includes such beloved classics as *The Little Engine That Could®*, *Spot Goes to the Farm*, *The Snowy Day*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and *Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten*.

Any child in Tennessee under age five can be enrolled in the program. Registration forms are commonly available at local public libraries, and online registration is available in participating counties at www.ImaginationLibrary.com.

To learn how you can support the Imagination Library in *your* county, or for information on registering a child, visit www.GovernorsFoundation.org, or call toll-free, 1-877-99-BOOKS.

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