



PRESS RELEASE
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Decreased Revenues Force Early Literacy Program To Suspend Enrollment

TAMPA, FL — Due to decreased revenues and a commitment to ensure program benefits for families currently enrolled, the Imagination Library of Hillsborough County Partnership has temporarily suspended new enrollments for the early literacy program. The Imagination Library of Hillsborough County mails new age-appropriate books to children born after September 1, 2006 every month until they reach the age of five. As of May 1, 2009 families looking to enroll their child will now be placed on the program's waiting list. While families on the waiting list will not receive books, they will receive other program benefits including the program's electronic newsletter providing families with early literacy tips, invitations to free family early literacy workshops, and information on services provided by their local public library. "This tough economy is hurting our ability to raise the dollars necessary to keep this program growing at the current pace, however we feel it's important to take steps that will ensure we can meet the service requirements promised to those already in the program," said Joe Stines, Director of Public Libraries for Hillsborough County and Chair of the partnership. The program currently serves 11,148 babies in Hillsborough County. The partnership expects enrollments will gradually resume as funds are received.

Help support early childhood literacy

The Tampa Bay community can help support the Hillsborough County Imagination Library initiative and help to increase the number of children who enter kindergarten ready to learn by becoming a program sponsor. A \$30 donation provides a child one book a month for a year. A \$150 donation supports a child for five years, a total of 60 books.

Donations are welcome by visiting www.unitedwaytampabay.com/imaginationlibrary or by mailing a check made payable to United Way/Imagination Library, 5201 W. Kennedy Blvd., Suite 600, Tampa, FL 33609.

For more information on the Imagination Library of Hillsborough County, call (813) 272-5017 or e-mail ilibrary@hcplc.org

About Imagination Library

Dolly Parton founded Imagination Library in 1996 in her hometown of Sevier County, Tennessee as a gift of encouragement for young children. Today, Imagination Library partners with communities worldwide to take a proactive approach in helping children achieve academic and life success by exposing them to reading at the earliest opportunity.

Through the Tennessee-based Dollywood Foundation, Imagination Library has been replicated throughout the world. At the close of 2007, 732 communities in 43 states, the District of Columbia, six Canadian provinces, and one Canadian territory were participating in the program. Almost 4.5 million books were mailed; a 37 percent increase over 2006. Just last month, Imagination Library was made available to communities throughout the United Kingdom. Today, 420,000 children receive a new book every month.

To keep program costs to a minimum, the Dollywood Foundation manages the composition of Imagination Library, orders the books, and provides a mail system. A committee of professionals from the fields of education, child development, academia, and early childhood literacy are convened by the Dollywood Foundation to select the books for Imagination Library.

The Little Engine That Could[™] is the first book in each library. A children's classic, the book is the inspiration for program's "Imagination Express" logo and its infamous mantra — "*I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.*" — encouraging children to dream and achieve.

The Hillsborough County partnership

Imagination Library programs throughout the world maintain consistency of mission and basic operations, yet each affiliate is unique in its organization, leadership, and community outreach. Hillsborough County's Imagination Library is made possible through the collective efforts of the Children's Board of Hillsborough County, Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County, Healthy Start Coalition, Hillsborough County Head Start/Early Head Start, Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative, School District of Hillsborough County, United States Postal Service-Tampa, and United Way of Tampa Bay.

The local partnership is committed to meeting four goals: (1) increase the percentage of students entering kindergarten who are prepared and have the skills necessary for learning to read, (2) increase the number of age-appropriate children's books available in the home, (3) increase the amount of time parents spend reading with their children, and (4) increase community awareness of the importance of early literacy.

"Hillsborough County's Imagination Library partnership has distinguished itself by the breadth and depth of the cooperative relationships established to put books in the hands of children," says David Dotson, the Dollywood Foundation executive director. "Most Imagination Library programs begin with a single source; Hillsborough County's multi-faceted Imagination Library organizational and delivery model is the first of its kind."

Program evaluation

Also unique to Hillsborough County is the partnership's focus on qualitative and quantitative research to continually measure Imagination Library's impact on a child's school readiness and the community's return on investment. Short-term evaluation has begun. Focus groups, surveys, and individual assessment occurred in conjunction with the partnership's 2006-07 pilot, or test, program as a precursor to rolling out a countywide model.

"Both short and long-term evaluation provides ongoing feedback for program improvement and outcome data to assess impact, specifically school readiness improvement and parent behaviors," explains Luanne Panacek, Children's Board of Hillsborough County chief executive officer. "The Imagination Library partnership anticipates the return on investment to be exponential for both the parents and children involved in the program."

Imagination Library's long-term value will be assessed upon completion of Imagination Library's first full cycle (five years). The Hillsborough County partnership will utilize existing testing measures to study and report about program effectiveness, such as the School Readiness Uniform Screening System (SRUSS). This test is administered to children entering kindergarten within 30 days of admission, as mandated by state law. Specifically, two of the five sections, "Letter Naming Fluency" and "Initial Sound Fluency" test results will be monitored for improvement.

Local companion programs

To encourage active parent/family involvement in reading, Imagination Library books are mailed to the child at home. However oftentimes, parents are uncomfortable with books, do not have the skills to read to their child, or need additional guidance in the area of early literacy. Recognizing this need for additional support, the Hillsborough County partnership offers “companion programs.” Companion programs utilize the resources of program partners to provide parents of registered children free, out-of-home assistance that supports in-home early reading efforts. Imagination Library early literacy parent workshops are offered throughout the year and community, free of charge.

Testing the concept prior to a countywide launch

Hillsborough County’s Imagination Library partnership initially tested the viability of the program in the fall of 2006 with children born on or after September 1, 2006 living in six zip codes (33563, 33604, 33610, 33612, 33614, and 33619) eligible for participation. Within the first nine months, 1,100 children registered. Between November 1, 2007 and January 15, 2008 enrollment swelled to 2,140, exceeding the partnership’s first year pilot group projections. Pilot program enrollment was also slightly greater than Dollywood Foundation projections.

“To test this concept, our partnership focused on areas where public school FCAT needed improvement and most importantly, support,” explains Diana Baker, United Way of Tampa Bay president/CEO and the fiscal agent of the Imagination Library partnership. “Preschool reading and parent involvement are identified by educators as among the most important steps toward a child’s success in school. It starts with books in the home and we are committed to getting books into the hands of children who need them most.”

“We really appreciate all the books we have received,” says one parent in the pilot program. “I lost my job last year and it is nice to have more books to read to my daughter.”

Imagination Library also builds parents’ confidence in their own skills and their ability to help their children. “For me, I don’t know a lot of English and my 12-year-old helps me to translate,” explains another parent in the pilot program. “So I am learning new things as well. I have always read to my children in Spanish, now I can read in English as well!”

ENLACE FLORIDA is a statewide network funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and managed by NCCEP to promote college readiness, access, and success for underrepresented students through non-partisan research, communication, advocacy, and support. ENLACE Florida provides the Imagination Library of Hillsborough County Partnership with communications support.

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