



# The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog  
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## Ensuring Early Literacy Efforts Reach All DC Families

By Soumya Bhat

A new program being proposed by the Council to ensure all DC children have “books from birth” would be a great addition to the city’s [early childhood system](#). It would add to the city’s efforts to support young children and help them prepare for when they start school. We hope this proposal can be tweaked to ensure that books get to children who may be hard to reach, such as those in homeless families.

Access to quality early childhood and development programs is critical to a child’s academic success later in life. Research shows the tremendous value of exposing children to early literacy and language development from birth and that low-income children have the most to gain from increased exposure to early literacy. One study found that lower-income children hear 30 million fewer words within the first four years of life than children in higher-income families.<sup>1</sup>

The “Books from Birth” program, modeled after a similar initiative in Tennessee, would provide every child in the city with a new, age-appropriate book every month until they turn five years old. The books would be mailed to the child’s home, along with information on other educational programs and services. The program would be managed by the DC Public Library.



Source: Huffingtonpost.com

It will be important to ensure that families without stable housing are able to benefit from the program. Books from Birth will need to address challenges such as getting books to children at the DC General shelter or other family homeless shelters. DCFPI encourages the Council and DC Public Library to explore outreach strategies to ensure these homeless families are made aware of the program and are still able to access Books from Birth. For example, what role will DC General staff be expected to play, if any, in storing books and are they able to take on this capacity? How will families be able to take their books with them if they move to another type of housing but are still registered and eligible for the program?

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<sup>1</sup> Hart, B. & Risley, T.R. “The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3” (2003, spring). *American Educator*, pp.4-9.

We also urge the Council to make the registration process for the program streamlined and accessible, so that there are no barriers for parents with low levels of literacy. The proposal includes sensible provisions to enlist health care practitioners – such as a child’s first pediatrician visit – in referring families to Books from Birth. In addition, the program could have DC Public Library partner with the city’s program to visit the homes of vulnerable families with newborns and young children to get additional referrals and ensure that all children benefit from Books from Birth.

You can read our full testimony [here](#).