

**TESTIMONY OF SOUMYA BHAT, EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY ANALYST
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**At the Public Hearing on B21-34, Books from Birth Establishment Amendment Act of 2015
March 19, 2015**

Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee on Education, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Soumya Bhat, and I am the Education Finance and Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI is a non-profit organization that promotes opportunity and widespread prosperity for all residents of the District of Columbia through thoughtful policy solutions.

I am here today to offer our support for the Books from Birth Act. Young children who grow up in households that value early literacy and have access to age-appropriate reading materials are more likely to become strong readers, which is linked to academic success when they enter school. We also know that the low-income children have the most to gain from increased exposure to early literacy. Researchers cite a 30 million word gap between children from higher- and lower-income families, meaning that a child from a high-income family will experience 30 million more words within the first four years of life than a child from a low-income family.¹ This results in disparities in vocabulary and language processing between low-income and other children as early as 18 months, and a six-month gap found at 24 months of age.² These outcomes point to the importance of an early intervention strategy that begins at birth.

An evaluation of a similar book distribution program implemented in Syracuse, New York shows that the longer families participated in the program, the more likely they were to read to their children daily. This link remained even after controlling for other factors, including education level of parents, race, income, and primary language. Researchers found that longer participation in the program (more than four months) meant the percent of parents reading to their child three or more times a week increased from 60 percent to 85 percent and reading daily doubled from 29 percent to 59 percent.³

Given that long-term participation is a key to the program's impacts, it will be important to ensure that families without stable housing are still able to benefit from the program. There are currently over 400 children residing in the DC General shelter, and a number of these children are younger than age five. DCFPI encourages the Council and DC Public Library to explore appropriate

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

² Anne Fernald, Virginia A. Marchman, and Adriana Weisleder. SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months. *Dev Sci*. 2013 Mar; 16(2): 234-248.

³ Frank Ridzi, Monica R. Sylvia, and Sunita Singh. "Imagination Library: Do More Books in Hand Mean More Shared Book Reading?" Le Moyne College Center for Urban and Regional Applied Research (CURAR), 2011.

outreach strategies to ensure these homeless families, as well as families that move, are made aware of the program and are still able to access Books from Birth. We also urge the Council to include language in the legislation addressing specific challenges of administering the program at DC General or other family homeless shelters. 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? How have other jurisdictions dealt with this situation?

It will be important to make the registration process for the program streamlined and accessible, without barriers for parents with low levels of literacy. DCFPI agrees with the bill's plan to have health care practitioners – such as a child's first pediatrician visit – include a referral to Books from Birth. In addition, the DC Public Library could engage the city's maternal and child health home visiting providers to get additional referrals, particularly for the city's at-risk families.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.