October 8, 2014

Elizabeth Ross
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave, SW, Room 3C100
Washington, DC 20202-5970

Dear Ms. Ross:

On behalf of the American Library Association and the Association for Library Service to Children, I am writing to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Proposed Requirements for School Improvement Grants (SIG) published by the U.S. Department of Education in the Federal Register on September 8, 2014. We are commenting specifically on the new intervention model that focuses on improving early learning educational outcomes (Section I.A.2(f)).

There are over 16,400 public libraries, in every corner of this country, staffed by literacy professionals who deliver services tailored to the needs of each community and are available to all members of the community, regardless of economic status.

According to a 2013 report from the most recent national survey of public libraries conducted by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, public libraries offered 3.75 million programs to the public. The survey found that the majority of these programs (61.5 percent or 2.31 million) are designed for children aged 11 and younger; attendance at programs increased 21.9 percent since FY 2005; and circulation of children’s materials has increased by 28.3 percent in the last 10 years and comprises over one-third of all materials circulated in public libraries.

In addition, the Pew Research Center released a report last year entitled “Parents’ and Children’s Special Relationship with Reading and Libraries” that found an overwhelming percentage of parents of young children, especially those with annual incomes under $50,000, believe that libraries are “very important” for their children, and are eager for more and varied family library services.

In spite of significant budget restraints, libraries are working at the local level to help support and complement early learning efforts:

- The Dayton Metro Library system in Ohio is a partner in the city’s “Passport to Kindergarten” program that is designed to help preschoolers in the Dayton region prepare for kindergarten. The goal of the program is to improve the oral language skills of preschoolers in the Dayton Region so they are ready to learn by the start of kindergarten. It uses research-based dialogic reading technique to help improve the preschoolers’ vocabulary. The program is led by ReadySetSoar and partners with schools, community organizations, and parents to help children build language skill critical to reading success.

- The Southern Pines Public Library in North Carolina is a core partner in an intensive program run by the school system, local Boys and Girls clubs, and a local neighborhood revitalization group. The school system identifies youth participants for the six-week, full-day program at the local Boys and Girls Club. Morning activities are academically focused, while the afternoon includes experiential activities.
- The Arlington Public Library in Texas is leading a planning effort to create a more coordinated approach to school readiness. The library is bringing together leaders from the school districts, United Way, Head Start, and other organizations to address low readiness scores and fragmented services. Using the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) model, they are analyzing neighborhood data to fill gaps in services and programs.

- The Carnegie-Stout Public Library in Iowa partners with kindergarten classrooms and daycare centers throughout their district for their Bridge to Reading project in order to support the 3rd grade reading initiative. The program encourages language development and pre-reading skills through reading a group of high quality and age appropriate books selected by children’s librarians. These books are then read aloud to children six and under. The program engages children by having them participate in activities related to the books and voting for their favorite book.

Simply put, our nation’s public library systems are equipped to deliver critical early learning resources to young children and families, especially those most in need. But, in far too many instances across the country, libraries are not able to participate in the patchwork of early childhood education grants and are not considered as a resource in helping to design the policies and practices that link children and their families to early learning initiatives.

Accordingly, the American Library Association and the Association for Library Service to Children ask that as you finalize the requirements for this new SIG intervention model that focuses on improving early learning educational outcomes, you consider ways in which SIG grants could be leveraged to encourage libraries as early learning partners. We believe this new early learning intervention model could be administered in a more coordinated and flexible manner that would help improve our early learning efforts without “recreating the wheel.” In particular, we would ask that you include libraries as eligible entities and allowable partners under the new intervention model that focuses on improving early learning educational outcomes (Section I.A.2(f)).

Our public library system stands ready to help improve early childhood education across the country, but we can only do so if policies are crafted in a way that allows for better collaboration, coordination, and real partnerships between libraries and the various federal early learning programs, including SIG grants.

Last year, IMLS released a report about “Growing Young Minds” that reiterates our point. In the report, Susan Hildreth, the Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, said that “now is the time for policy makers and practitioners to fully use the capacity of libraries…in their early learning efforts.” She went on to say that, “this is critical because we must work together to reach the all-too-many children who are still left out of effective community early learning opportunities and resources, and disconnected from the powerful programs for children, parents, and caregivers.” We couldn’t agree more.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any additional questions or need any information regarding ways in which our nation’s libraries can help to improve the new SIG intervention model that focuses on improving early learning educational outcomes.

Sincerely,

Emily Sheketoff
Executive Director of the Washington Office
American Library Association