

Dear Chairman and Ranking Member:

As your Subcommittee considers Fiscal Year 2022 appropriations, we respectfully request a total of \$50 million **for the Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL) grant program administered by the Department of Education**, authorized in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). IAL provides competitive awards to school libraries as well as national not-for-profit organizations, including partnerships that reach families outside of local education agencies (LEAs), to support children and families in high-need, underserved communities. By providing age-appropriate books, supporting parental engagement programs, and reinforcing professional development, the IAL program helps to support literacy skills to ensure that children enter school ready to learn and best positioned for success.

Since its inception in Fiscal Year 2012, 166 IAL grants have been awarded to national non-profit organizations and school districts across every region of the U.S. Through community partnerships, grantees have delivered critical literacy resources that have inspired a love of learning and positioned children for academic success. This year, the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting economic fallout imposed serious additional stress on families and communities. The consequences of the pandemic – serious losses in reading proficiency and learning – have been particularly acute for children in families with limited incomes and children of color already facing educational inequities. Boosting investment in the IAL program is vitally important at this critical moment for our nation’s students who need support after an extremely difficult year that has been isolating and traumatic for many. In addition to activities that enrich traditional educational settings, IAL grant support through non-traditional and informal educational settings can help children and their families – including the youngest children for whom healthy child development is critical to school readiness. Some examples of IAL grant activities include:

Local Education Agencies and School Libraries-

- Lane Elementary School in Atoka County, OK, with nearly 260 students is a majority American Indian school with 35 percent reading proficiency. Lane used its IAL grant to acquire books for its school library and classroom libraries. The grant supported improvements to student’s reading capacity; updated library resources to include specialized and modern literacy tools, ranging from Native American-specific books to wireless reading devices; implemented methods to work with parents in home reading techniques; formed collaborative efforts between teachers and library staff to enhance classroom efforts; and book distributions, so children can take books home.

National Non-Profit Organizations-

- Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) used IAL funds to support 33,000 students across 31 school districts with books and literacy resources to explore a model that drives summer reading outcomes by supporting students, teachers, and families. Fifty-seven percent of the students involved in the study showed gains in reading proficiency over the summer. RIF was also part of an IAL project with the Kentucky Education Development Corporation to support participating schools through access to books, resources, and training resulting in improved student performance in literacy

- Reach Out and Read (ROR), a pediatric primary care model, endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, that embeds early literacy promotion in well-child check-ups, partnered with Save the Children, to engaged schools and families of very young children in creating literacy-rich environments for more than 40,000 children in rural areas of Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky and South Carolina. Several school districts in Texas (Southwest, Charlotte, Cuero, Brownsville ISDs) and Oklahoma (Idabel) have incorporated the Reach Out and Read model in recent IAL projects. Pediatric primary care providers are able to reach children during the earliest years of life, ensuring that parents learn how sharing books together helps facilitate healthy brain development and language acquisition, starting at birth.

Access to high-quality literacy programming and resources remains a critical component of childhood literacy. For American families living in poverty and limited to the services of high-need local educational authorities, lack of access to quality reading materials and adequate learning facilities is prohibitive, fostering chronic disadvantages for already underserved youth. Without critical literacy support, students often fall behind in school and struggle to thrive in the workforce.

Congress has taken an important step in supporting the needs of disadvantaged students by providing IAL funding for book distribution, early literacy services, and effective school library programs. We ask you to provide \$50 million in funding for this important investment in the Fiscal Year 2022 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill.