April 4, 2014

The Honorable Tom Harkin  
Chairman, Labor, HHS, and  
and Education Subcommittee  
Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jerry Moran  
Ranking Member, Labor, HHS,  
and Education Subcommittee  
Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Moran:

As your Subcommittee considers the Fiscal Year 2015 Appropriations bill for the Department of Education, we urge you to maintain the investment in the Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL) grant program under the Fund for the Improvement of Education. IAL provides competitive awards to school libraries and national not-for-profit organizations, including partnerships that reach families outside of local educational agencies, for providing books and childhood literacy activities to children and families in high need communities. The program also supports parental engagement and focuses on promoting student literacy from birth through high school.

The importance of this grant program was recognized when $28.6 million was first appropriated for IAL in FY12 and most recently in FY14 when $25 million was directed to the initiative. In September 2012, the U.S. Department of Education awarded two-year IAL grants to 46 nonprofit organizations and school districts in 21 states and the District of Columbia.

Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) is one such grantee and their IAL initiative has significantly increased low-income children’s access to high-quality books in impoverished communities nationwide and served as a critical intervention to stem students’ loss of reading achievement over the summer. In one south Texas community, the books distributed through RIF’s project are the only books that students receive and read over the summer. In this RIF IAL project, the organization successfully increased parent participation, which allowed students to make their first trip to the local library that only 10 percent of the children had visited before.

Another such grantee was the Lowndes County Public Schools in Alabama. Lowndes Schools received an IAL grant in 2012 and is leveraging the award to help implement the Transforming School Libraries to Facilitate a Culture of Learning (TSLFCL) goal in their schools. The funding has been used to update their school library materials including books, e-readers, computers, and other such materials that are necessary for a state of the art school library. Lowndes Schools has increased the number of their library reading materials that are checked out by 63 percent. In addition, the e-readers that were purchased with grant funds have provided students with simultaneous access to popular titles so the wait time for high-demand books has been eliminated. Their grant has also been used to open the school libraries on weekends and provide professional development for the district’s school librarians.

Ensuring children’s access to books is a critical component of our nation’s effort to promote lifelong learning and remains a key aspect of early childhood literacy. For American families living in poverty, access to reading materials is severely limited. Children living in poverty have fewer books in their homes than their peers, and this unfortunate reality hinders their ability to prepare
for school and stay on track. We also recognize the importance of effective school library programs in promoting literacy and advancing student achievement.

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 that you maintain this investment in the FY15 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill.

Sincerely,

Jack Reed

Chuck Grassley

Patti St. Hansen

John Hoeven

Robert Menendez

Frank Lautenberg

S. Boozman

Elizabeth Warren

Amy Klobuchar
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