



COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
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Books from Birth Act of 2015

Less than half of third graders in the District scored proficient or advanced in reading skills in 2014.¹ But research shows that early literacy development and preparation for learning begin well before preschool – in fact, studies show that children who have access to books and adults who read to them will have heard 30 million more words at home by the age of 4 than children who do not.² This is what educators call the “word gap” and, sadly, it is an accurate predictor for educational achievement throughout the student’s academic career and beyond.

Writing on behalf of the Too Small To Fail early childhood wellness initiative, Hillary Clinton described the word gap as a significant but solvable challenge, one that is essential to the work of reducing inequality:

*Coming to school without words is like coming to school without food or adequate health care. It makes it harder for kids to develop their creativity and imagination, to learn, excel, and live up to their full potential. It should spur us to action just like child hunger and child poverty.*³

It is critical that the District confront the literacy and achievement gap at its starting point, well before it shows up in the classroom. Books are direct building blocks for learning but children must be exposed to them to use them. The Books from Birth Act of 2015 is a key step in that effort:

- Every child in the District would receive an age-appropriate book each month in the mail until his or her 5th birthday;
- The DC Public Library would connect the Books From Birth program to the Sing, Talk, & Read initiative, creating a direct link for families to DCPL’s early childhood programming and resources;

¹ 2014 District of Columbia Comprehensive Assessment System Results (DC CAS), July 31, 2014, [http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2014%20DC%20CAS%20Result%20July%2031%202014...FINAL .pdf](http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2014%20DC%20CAS%20Result%20July%2031%202014...FINAL.pdf).

² Laura J. Colker, *The Word Gap: The Early Years Make a Difference*, Teaching Young Children Vol. 7, No. 3 (October/November 2013), pp. 26-28, <http://www.naeyc.org/tyc/article/the-word-gap>.

³ Hillary Clinton, *Closing the ‘Word Gap’*, The Clinton Foundation, Oct. 3, 2013, <https://www.clintonfoundation.org/blog/2013/10/03/closing-word-gap> (last visited Jan. 12, 2015).

- A selection committee would work collaboratively with DCPL to ensure the book titles represent the District's diversity in characters, culture, and authors; and
- Each mailing would include information about educational programs or services, including DCPL's adult literacy resources, providing a bridge for learning between the home and the local library branch.

According to the most recent data from DC Action For Children, approximately 41,000 young children call the District of Columbia home; more than half of whom are infants and toddlers under age 3. In jurisdictions that have implemented similar book distribution initiatives, such as Tennessee, the annual average cost per child is less than \$30.

Increasing young children's access to age-appropriate books is a widely-recognized, evidence-based approach to improving early literacy outcomes. Families who participate in the Tennessee initiative are more likely to read with children, go to the library, and talk about books; children who receive the books monthly score 11 points higher on reading readiness than non-participants.⁴ Reach Out & Read, a nonprofit organization of medical providers that distributes books to families during well-child visits, has demonstrated similar gains, with participating children showing a nearly 10 percent increase in receptive language scores.⁵

With Books From Birth, the District would join a growing list of cities and states across the country focused on closing the word gap and working to ensure every child starts school ready to learn.

⁴ An Evaluation of the Shelby County Books from Birth Program, Executive Summary, The Urban Child Institute, July 2012,

<http://usa.imaginationlibrary.com/medias/BfB%20Report%20Executive%20Summary%20Evaluation.pdf>.

⁵ Reach Out & Read, Research Findings, <http://www.reachoutandread.org/why-we-work/research-findings/>.