

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education, I'm unable to attend today's hearing on LD 360 so please accept this written testimony in support of Dirigo Reads and the Legislation to provide some funding for it.

There are few things as important to a child's development as literacy. Developing an early interest in reading has been the goal of Dirigo Reads since its inception. Some of the first graders who have received some of the 80,000 books the program has sent out since 2019 have never before had a book of their own. The thank you notes the board has received from grateful first grade students and their families are proof of the importance of the program.

Dirigo Reads is totally administered by volunteers, there is no payroll. Money raised goes to the purchase of books for first grade students. The program has been funded since its inception by the generosity of Maine business's as well as by a very generous onetime grant from Stephen and Tabitha King and a couple of other foundations. The program has expanded every year adding new school districts, which adds to the annual cost. Today Dirigo sends out in excess of 3,500 books at a time. Obviously, the growth of the program has added cost making it very difficult to fully fund the budget strictly from the contributions of Maine business. Indeed, in this school year we have had to reduce the frequency of book distributions in order to stay solvent. Without assistance like we are requesting in LD 360 it will be difficult for the program to survive.

I served in the legislature during tight budget years, so I understand what the current legislature is facing. Please consider Dirigo Reads as a budget priority even in this tight money environment. Thank you for your consideration.

Jack Cashman  
Dirigo Reads Board of Directors  
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