

Jessica Ward
Bangor
LD 360

Testimony in Support of LD 360: An Act Supporting the Dirigo Reads Literacy Program

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education,

My name is Jessica Ward and I am writing today in strong support of LD 360: An Act Supporting the Dirigo Reads Literacy Program. As a former early childhood educator, a board member of Dirigo Reads, and currently the Vice President of Philanthropy & Donor Engagement at Heart of Maine United Way, I see firsthand how programs like Dirigo Reads are vital to the well-being of our communities.

As an educator, I witnessed how books could unlock a child's potential, shaping their confidence and curiosity. But I also saw how children without access to books at home started school struggling to catch up. The research is undeniable—if a child is not reading proficiently by third grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of high school. Early literacy is a key predictor of future success, yet far too many children in Maine do not have the resources they need to build this foundation.

For over 20 years, Raising Readers helped fill this gap by providing books to young children, but with its closure, Maine has been left without a statewide, publicly supported early literacy initiative. Dirigo Reads is now one of the only programs ensuring that first graders receive new books, fostering a love of reading at a critical age. Since its launch, tens of thousands of books have been placed in the hands of Maine children—books that they can call their own, that they can take home, read with their families, and cherish for years.

As someone working daily to connect community resources with real needs, I know that literacy programs like Dirigo Reads do more than provide books—they provide opportunity. Without sustained funding, this program cannot scale to meet the demand, leaving many of Maine's youngest learners without this essential support. Other states have committed public funding to similar programs because they recognize that every dollar invested in early childhood literacy saves money long-term—reducing the need for remedial education, increasing graduation rates, and strengthening the future workforce. Maine must follow suit.

I urge you to support LD 360 and invest in Maine's children. This is not just about education; it is about building stronger communities and a brighter future for our state. Let's continue Maine's long-standing commitment to education by ensuring that every child, no matter their background, has the opportunity to develop a lifelong love of reading.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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