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Testimony in Support of Dirigo Reads

Before the State of Maine Legislature

RE: Urgent Need for State Support for Dirigo Reads Literacy Program

Dear Chairperson,

I am expressing my strong support for increased state funding for early literacy programs in Maine, particularly for **Dirigo Reads**, a program that provides essential books to first graders across our state. As research consistently shows, early literacy is one of the most critical factors in a child's future academic and economic success.

Reading proficiency by third grade is a key predictor of a student's long-term educational trajectory. Children who do not meet this milestone are four times more likely to drop out of high school, limiting their future opportunities and placing greater strain on social and economic systems. Early literacy enhances brain development and vocabulary and lays the groundwork for a more skilled and competitive workforce in Maine.

Unfortunately, Maine has lost several key literacy initiatives in recent years. **Raising Readers**, which served children for over 20 years, is no longer operating, and other community-based literacy efforts have struggled due to funding challenges. Dirigo Reads is now one of the only remaining statewide programs actively working to fill this gap, ensuring children have access to books at a critical stage of their development.

Since its launch, Dirigo Reads has distributed tens of thousands of books to first graders, fostering a love of reading and providing children with the resources they need to succeed. However, without sustained state funding, the program cannot continue to grow and meet the demand in more communities. Other states have recognized the long-term benefits of investing in early literacy and have allocated public funds to similar programs. Maine should do the same.

Investing in early literacy is not only a moral imperative—it is a **smart economic decision**. Research shows that every dollar spent on early childhood education yields a return of up to **\$7** in future benefits, including reduced remedial education costs, higher graduation rates, and increased workforce earnings. By supporting Dirigo Reads, the Legislature can ensure that all Maine children, regardless of background, can access the books they need to become strong, confident readers.

I urge you to support funding for Dirigo Reads and other early literacy initiatives to help build a stronger future for Maine. Our state has a proud tradition of valuing education—let's continue that legacy by prioritizing early literacy.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue further and look forward to your support in ensuring that every child in Maine has the opportunity to thrive through the power of reading.

Sincerely,

Kerri Watson-Blaisdell

Vice President

The County Federal Credit Union