

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education, I am writing to voice my support for LD 360.

As a father of young children and a member of the Bangor School Committee, I see first-hand how critical early literacy is to their development and future success. Research shows that reading proficiency by third grade is one of the most significant indicators of a child's academic trajectory. Children who fall behind at this stage are four times more likely to drop out of high school, limiting their opportunities for higher education and future careers. The early years are crucial—not just for learning to read, but for brain development, vocabulary growth, and setting the foundation for lifelong learning. That's why I worry when I hear about declining literacy rates and the loss of programs that once supported Maine's youngest learners.

For more than 20 years, Raising Readers provided books to Maine children, but that program, along with others like it, has disappeared due to funding challenges. This has left a significant gap, making it harder for parents and educators to ensure kids have access to books at a young age. Thankfully, Dirigo Reads is stepping up, putting new books in the hands of first graders across the state. This program is already making a difference—tens of thousands of books have been distributed, and children are developing a love for reading at a critical age. But without sustainable funding, Dirigo Reads cannot reach all the students who need it most.

That's why I urge the Legislature to support funding for Dirigo Reads. Investing in early literacy isn't just the right thing to do for our kids—it's a smart economic decision. Studies show that every dollar spent on early childhood education yields up to \$7 in future benefits, from higher graduation rates to increased earning potential. Other states have recognized this and committed public funds to similar programs. Maine must do the same. Our state has a proud tradition of valuing education; let's continue that legacy by ensuring every child has access to the books and resources they need to succeed.

Ben Sprague

Bangor