

February 27, 2025

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

I am writing to voice my support for LD 360. My name is Elizabeth Sutherland, a business owner in Bangor and a resident of Glenburn, and I am here today as Vice President of the Board of Directors for Dirigo Reads—but more importantly, as someone who believes fiercely in the power of books to change lives.

I grew up surrounded by books. Some of my earliest memories are of getting lost in stories, turning pages by the glow of a neon green flashlight long after I was supposed to be asleep. Those books shaped me, nurtured my curiosity, and ultimately, helped me become who I am today. They taught me that words have power. They showed me new worlds, new perspectives, and endless possibilities.

But not every child in Maine has that same experience.

That's why Dirigo Reads exists.

Dirigo Reads was built on the belief that every first grader in Maine deserves to have books of their own—books they can keep, books that spark their imagination, books that make them fall in love with reading. Since the program began, thousands of books have made their way into the hands of thousands of Maine's first graders, many of whom might not otherwise have access to them.

And one of the things we've learned is that not every child falls in love with reading the same way. Some young readers get hooked by magical stories and adventures, while others prefer fact-based books that feed their curiosity about the real world. That's why Dirigo Reads provides a mix of fiction and nonfiction books—because when kids have books that truly interest them, they're far more likely to become lifelong readers.

The research is crystal clear—children who read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to graduate high school. They go on to earn more, contribute more, and break cycles of poverty that many Maine families struggle with. Early literacy is not just about reading—it's about economic development, workforce preparedness, and the future of our state.

And yet, despite the clear educational and lifelong economic benefits of early literacy, Maine has lost some of its most impactful reading programs.

- Raising Readers—which for 20 years provided books to children at their wellness visits—is gone.
- Other early literacy initiatives have disappeared due to funding challenges.
- Dirigo Reads is one of the only statewide programs left, actively working in all 16 counties to fill that gap and give kids the foundation they need to succeed.

LD 360 Dirigo Reads Funding Testimony

And the truth is—we can't do it alone.

Right now, Dirigo Reads relies on generous but limited private funding to reach as many kids as possible. But there are more children who need books, more schools and communities eager to participate, and a greater need than ever for state-level support.

I urge you to support this bill and help ensure that every child in Maine has not just the ability to read—but the joy of reading, and hope for a prosperous future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Sutherland, APR

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