

Senator Raftery, Representative Murphy, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education, I am here to support LD 360, An Act Supporting the Dirigo Reads Literacy Program, and I appreciate the opportunity to do so.

There are a number of pieces of testimony that have been submitted by educators, school board members and parents, and I hope you will find the time to read those.

I am the co-founder of Dirigo Reads, the current Board president, and a father of two daughters.

For those of you unfamiliar with this program, the intent is simple: to provide a new book - to keep - every month of the school year, to first graders in Maine. The goal is to do this in every public school throughout the state. Currently, we are serving over 100 schools, with more than 3500 Maine kids receiving new books through this program, spread throughout all 16 counties.

There is no cost to the schools, to the families or the teachers. Dirigo Reads is funded primarily through business partnerships and some foundations, grants, and donations.

The program developed from a desire to give back. As you can probably determine from my haircut, I'm not independently wealthy. But, I am a lover of reading who is determined to give the same opportunity to fall in love with reading to children all over Maine. When my oldest daughter came home from school one day with her Scholastic book order, and wanted to give one of her books to a classmate because - in her words - "They never get books when we do," it sparked an idea. Sure...that classmate's family could have any number of reasons why they didn't order books from Scholastic. But, one of those reasons could have been that it was not financially possible to purchase books for their kids.

After some research, we determined what you all likely already know - that there are economically disadvantaged parts of our state in every county, city, and town. And, yes, families struggle monthly determining how to pay for food or fuel. Books, in those cases, are a luxury item that do not always float to the top.

After many conversations, a lot of work, and some fundraising, we pilot-programmed Dirigo Reads in six communities with first grade counts ranging from 2 kids to 100 kids in those schools. We figured out what worked and what didn't work logistically, but more importantly, we heard overwhelmingly positive remarks for this program from teachers, administrators, families and kids. To this day, other than small occasional printing costs, every dollar raised for Dirigo Reads is spent on books for first graders. Our team is made up of volunteers - there is no other overhead.

I have brought some samples of thank you notes from the minds and hearts of first graders, and I have brought some of the books that have been distributed this year. But, I will leave you with a note that was sent to me from a first grade teacher who did not want to be identified because she did not want the student to be identified. She wrote "A new student to our school received his first book with the rest of his class last month. He had trouble understanding the book was

his to keep. I told him to write his name in the front because it was his book to keep forever. He had never owned a book before. He was proud to write his name in the book."

I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.