

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5961

As of February 2, 2026

Title: An act relating to transferring the imagination library program from the department of children, youth, and families to the office of the superintendent of public instruction.

Brief Description: Transferring the imagination library program from the department of children, youth, and families to the office of the superintendent of public instruction. [
Revised for 1st Substitute: Transferring early literacy programs from the department of children, youth, and families to the office of the superintendent of public instruction.]

Sponsors: Senators Wilson, C., Dhingra, Frame, Nobles, Shewmake and Wellman; by request of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Early Learning & K-12 Education: 1/15/26, 1/21/26 [DPS-WM, DNP, w/oRec].

Ways & Means: 2/02/26.

Brief Summary of First Substitute Bill

- Transfers the Imagination Library of Washington Program from the Department of Children, Youth, and Families to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).
- Directs OSPI, subject to appropriations, to contract with a nonprofit entity experienced in the provision of promoting early literacy for children through pediatric office visits.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON EARLY LEARNING & K-12 EDUCATION

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5961 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Wellman, Chair; Nobles, Vice Chair; Wilson, C., Vice Chair;

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Cortes, Hansen and Krishnadasan.

Minority Report: Do not pass.

Signed by Senators Dozier and McCune.

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.

Signed by Senator Harris, Ranking Member.

Staff: Ailey Kato (786-7434)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Staff: Trevor Press (786-7446)

Background: Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. In 1995, Dolly Parton launched the Imagination Library, which mails a book each month free of charge to children under the age of five, starting in Tennessee. The Imagination Library is currently located in five countries and is supported through funding shared by the Dollywood Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and local community partners in those countries. Local affiliates can be businesses, school districts, small or large organizations, or individuals.

The Dollywood Foundation covers overhead and administrative expenses, including negotiating wholesale pricing for the books and coordinating the monthly mailings. Local affiliates and partners are responsible for enrolling children who live in the geographical area, promoting their local programs, and covering the costs of the books and shipping fees. Books are free to enrolled children and their families, regardless of income. The age-appropriate books are selected by early childhood literacy experts.

Washington's Imagination Library Program. In 2022, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), in coordination with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), was directed, subject to appropriations, to select a Washington State-based qualified 501(c)(3) non-profit organization to create and operate the Imagination Library of Washington Program. The selected nonprofit organization must establish local affiliate programs across the state.

The selected nonprofit organization must submit an annual report to the Legislature and the Governor including the number of affiliate programs, the number of children enrolled in each affiliate program, and the number of children enrolled statewide.

The selected nonprofit organization must provide payment to the national nonprofit foundation that equals 50 percent of the cost to provide books to eligible children enrolled in the program. Each local affiliate program must provide payment that equals the remaining cost to provide books to eligible children enrolled in the program. Eligible children means children from birth to age five.

Nothing requires that state funding be provided to the selected nonprofit organization or the program. DCYF may seek and accept gifts, grants, or endowments from public or private sources for the program and may spend any gifts, grants, or endowments or income from public or private sources on the program according to their terms.

The state operating budget appropriated state funding of \$1 million in fiscal year 2024 and \$1.5 million in fiscal year 2025, one-time, for the program.

Early Literacy Program. The 2023-25 operating budget provided \$600,000 for the biennium for DCYF to contract with a nonprofit entity experienced in the provision of promoting early literacy for children through pediatric office visits.

Summary of Bill (First Substitute): The Imagination Library of Washington program is transferred from DCYF to OSPI.

Subject to appropriations, OSPI must contract with a nonprofit entity experienced in the provision of promoting early literacy for children through pediatric office visits.

EFFECT OF CHANGES MADE BY EARLY LEARNING & K-12 EDUCATION COMMITTEE (First Substitute):

- Adds a new section directing OSPI, subject to appropriations, to contract with a nonprofit entity experienced in the provision of promoting early literacy for children through pediatric office visits.
- Amends the title.

Appropriation: The bill contains a section or sections to limit implementation to the availability of amounts appropriated for that specific purpose.

Fiscal Note: Available. New fiscal note requested on January 22, 2026.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Original Bill (Early Learning & K-12 Education): *The committee recommended a different version of the bill than what was heard.* PRO: Early literacy and developing a love of reading is incredibly important for young children because of their developing brains. The Imagination Library program is currently serving 120,000 children and families throughout the state. Both DCYF and OSPI agree that this shift makes the most sense, and the transition is a natural and logical fit. Imagination Library is an education investment because it helps with school readiness and kindergarten preparedness. This program isn't just about buying books; it is about

preventing future costs. Early literacy boosts test scores.

Persons Testifying (Early Learning & K-12 Education): PRO: Senator Claire Wilson, Prime Sponsor; Brooke Fisher-Clarke, Imagination Library of Washington; Scott Herrick, The Dollywood Foundation; Dr LoAnn Ayers, United Way of Benton & Franklin Counties; Misha Cherniske, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Early Learning & K-12 Education): No one.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on First Substitute (Ways & Means): PRO: Aligning early literacy and K-12 makes sense. It helps promote early literacy in Washington. When children have access to high quality early literacy they arrive in school ready to learn. A book each month is one of the most effective tools we have to promote early literacy, support parents as their first teachers and create a foundation for school readiness. The Imagination Library is fundamentally an early literacy and kindergarten readiness initiative and OSPI is the state agency already charged with advancing these outcomes. For many of the children that are enrolled, these are the first books they own. Providers and preschool teachers report higher engagement and better vocabulary among students in the program. This bill does not change how the program works for families, it strengthens the system behind it.

Persons Testifying (Ways & Means): PRO: Brooke Fisher-Clarke, Imagination Library of Washington, Executive Director; Tovi McClellan, Child Care Action Council; Shannon Blood, Reach Out and Read Northwest.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Ways & Means): No one.