With a shared community goal of “every child in our community will be ready for kindergarten,” the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library and the United Way of Greater Topeka are partners on Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. The program mails a free age-appropriate book every month to enrolled children birth to age 5. All children under 5 years old in Shawnee County are eligible regardless of household income. Imagination Library is an effective strategy to reach children on a scale that isn’t possible with other stand-alone literacy programs. Our goal is to create a more literate community for whom reading is an essential part of life.

Access to books is especially problematic for children living in poverty. It is estimated that one child living in a middle-upper income household has on average 13 books of their own, where in low income communities, there is one book for 300 children. With the Imagination Library all children enrolled at birth will have at least 60 books of their own when they turn 5.

Imagination Library books are selected by a blue ribbon panel with representatives from education, child development, academia and early childhood literacy expertise. The books incorporate specific themes targeting age-appropriate developmental milestones. New titles are introduced each year to avoid duplication of books older siblings may have received.

A recently released research report that summarizes several different studies of the program concluded that children who participate in the Imagination Library score 28 percent higher on kindergarten readiness measures than non-participants. **Morgan County Schools in Georgia saw their kindergarten readiness scores increase from 46 to 90 percent after three years of the Imagination Library.**

**Year 1 Results**

The Imagination Library has been a success in Shawnee County enrolling 60 percent more children than the Dollywood Foundation, who runs Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, estimated would enroll by the end of the first year. Grants and contributions from individuals and businesses to support this program have enabled more children to participate and receive books mailed directly to their homes.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Shawnee County Imagination Library Year 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Program enrollment began</td>
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<tr>
<td>Predicted number of children enrolled by April 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actual number of children enrolled by April 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total books delivered</td>
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<td>Year 1 Costs</td>
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No family pays to enroll in Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. The cost of books and postage are borne by The Library Foundation and United Way of Greater Topeka, and are offset with corporate and individual donations. The Library Foundation manages donations for the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library. The foundation and the United Way of Greater Topeka are continuing fundraising to achieve sustainable funding for the program. All donations and grants received are used only for direct program expenses of purchasing and mailing books to children.

“We began receiving these books soon after the program was brought to our area. My 2-year-old son, who I’ve read to since before he was born, never really had any interest in books or reading. Since getting several of these books, *Otis and the Kittens* in particular, HE LOVES BOOKS! On average we read this book 10-15 times a day! They have sent some really cute books and my 4 and 2 year olds love them!”

- Shawnee County resident Renessa Ullery Lolly posted on Facebook

**Imagination Library’s Goals**

1. Increase the number of books in children’s homes
2. Increase literacy activities in the homes of participating children
3. Increase parent-child interaction
4. Increase children’s interest in reading
5. Increase parent awareness of child’s reading level

Shawnee County Postmaster Sheryl Stark supports Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library at kick-off event April 2017.

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