Executive Summary - Examining the Impact of the Imagination Library Program on Kindergarten Readiness

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What does this research evaluate?: Reading to children provides one method for parental involvement in a child's early literacy development and has been documented as a contributing factor to long-term literacy and school performance. The present research examines whether consistent enrollment in The Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL), a book distribution program that provides 60 age appropriate books on a monthly basis from birth through age 5, is associated with a higher likelihood of kindergarten readiness. Our previous research has found that longer enrollment in Imagination Library was associated with more child-directed reading and story discussion even when controlling for child age, gender, income, parental education, race, parental nation of birth, and primary language spoken at home. Additionally, participant observations and interviews with refugee parents and program providers indicated that, while family literacy practices mostly centered on oral traditions, participation in Imagination Library and related programming led to familiarity and use of print-based forms of literacy.

How was the evaluation conducted?: The nationally normed AIMSweb test of early literacy's Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) screening tool was given to all incoming kindergarteners in the Syracuse City School district in the Fall of 2013 and Fall of 2014. Letter Naming Fluency is identified frequently as the best single indicator of risk for reading failure and it has been shown to have strong ability to predict future grade reading, vocabulary and language. Those in DPIL consistently (3 or more years of the 5 year program) were compared with those not enrolled in the program. The percentage achieving the school readiness cutoff score on this measure was compared both for the entire population and for statistically matched pairs of similar individuals (propensity score matching).

What did the research find?: Overall, there was a 28.9% increase in children ready for kindergarten based on the measure of LNF. Among children who were not in DPIL, 47.4% were assessed as ready for kindergarten (score of 13 or higher on the AIMSweb LNF) while 61.1% of those consistently enrolled in the program (3-4 years) were assessed as ready, a difference that was statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. Furthermore, we found that being consistently enrolled in the program (3 or 4 years) is associated with increased likelihood of being ready for kindergarten (13 or higher score on the AIMSweb LNF), even after controlling for race, gender, ESL status, special education status, and free and reduced lunch status. A similar and statistically significant pattern was seen both when comparing the entire population of children and when comparing statistically matched pairs of children.

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