

January 26, 2015

Good afternoon, Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, and members of the Committee on Children,

I am Hugh Blumenfeld, MD PhD, a family physician at Asylum Hill Family Medicine, and a faculty member at UConn's Family Medicine Residency Program, which is based there. I am writing on behalf of the dozen physicians and twenty-one residents who care for patients in our office. I also happen to be a former English Professor, a former Connecticut state troubadour and the father of two adolescent boys to whom I've read and sung since they were born. Therefore, I write today as a doctor, an educator, a parent, and also as a board member of Reach Out and Read Connecticut, to lend my support and that of my colleagues to Senate Bill 209, An Act Concerning Funding for the Reach Out and Read Program. As family physicians in Hartford (you can almost see our office from here) we see the health effects of low literacy on a daily basis. Every study in the past 40 years shows that education – and particularly literacy – is one of the strongest determinants of health. This effect is even more pronounced within minority and poor communities, who are disproportionately affected by all the major life-threatening illnesses we treat: obesity, diabetes, heart failure, COPD/asthma, HIV/AIDS and cancer. Among the children we see, childhood obesity, asthma and dental caries are far too common. The burden is immense, and most of it, tragically, is preventable or at least is more effectively controlled when children and parents can read.

Our practice has just over 500 children under the age of 5. Nearly all of them are Hispanic or African American, most are eligible for government assistance programs. Thanks to Reach out and Read, we will give out up to 5000 books to these children during their early years. Giving away books to needy children as part of their regular well-child visits is important in so many ways. First of all, these books may make up the entire library of a young family during the formative pre-school years. It is our hope, however, that these books are catalysts, promoting a family culture in which daily reading becomes a new norm, seeding bookshelves so that they will fill with other books, whether borrowed or bought.

Also, the books serve as an incredibly useful diagnostic and therapeutic tool at the well-child visits themselves. The majority of a routine pediatric assessment is accomplished by carefully observing a child's behavior and the way child and parent interact. The way a child reacts to a book reveals worlds about a child's fine and gross motor skills, their cognitive development, their social interactions and the parenting they receive. A child who grabs a book and smiles or laughs, opens it herself or with mom's help, and tries to digest the contents (whether by reading, pointing or nibbling at the pages) already has a lot going for her. The therapeutic value of giving a book as part of health care is that it signals to parents just how important reading is to the child's development and future health. We teach parents how to read to their children – a process that changes as the child grows – and we help them create an excitement and joy in reading that will last well into the school years. It also doesn't hurt if the children actually look forward to their visit with the doctor.

In fact, our physicians are so enthusiastic about including books as part of our standard care of young children that we have all invested the time to take Reach Out and Read's required online course that teaches us how to maximize its usefulness and impact.

You know the value of public programs for nutrition, healthcare and education. By getting books to the youngest kids years before they reach the schools – and by doing it in the context of their normal health care visits – Reach Out and Read advances all these goals.

As doctors, we know that a book is more important than any pill we'll ever give.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Hugh Blumenfeld, MD PhD
Assistant Professor of Family Medicine

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