

Good morning. I am Dr. Lanre Falusi. As the president of the D.C. Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, I speak on behalf of the Washington, D.C. chapter of the national organization of 63,000 pediatricians committed to the attainment of optimal health and well-being for all children. The D.C. chapter has over 400 members, including pediatricians and pediatric subspecialists from every corner of the city.

This past Monday, a mother told me that her favorite activity with her 2-year-old son is story time. Yes, he makes her read the same book about 4 times in a row, but it amazes her how engrossed he becomes in the pictures and the sound of her voice as they move through the story together.

We pediatricians encourage parents to read, talk, sing, and play with their young children, starting from birth. Why? One reason is that we know that children's vocabulary is linked to their socioeconomic status. Kids in wealthier families hear – and therefore, learn – more words than their peers in lower income families. In fact, this word gap grows so dramatically that, by age 4, kids in poorer families have heard 30 million fewer words than kids in wealthier families. Hear fewer words, learn fewer words, and the word gap becomes the achievement gap. But when parents have the tools – in this case, books – to teach their children, we unlock children's potential. This is actually rooted in years of science and data. Healthy, curious, thriving children can then become productive, stable adults. We know that adults with higher literacy tend to have better control of chronic illness and better overall health.

We believe in this so strongly that the American Academy of Pediatrics recently launched the Books Build Connections initiative to help pediatricians and families promote the sharing of books, in partnership with several organizations, such as the Reach Out and Read program, a national program that promotes early literacy by providing books to doctors' offices to give to our patients. I am a general pediatrician and the Director of Pediatrics at Community Clinic, a federally qualified health center, and I serve a largely Medicaid and immigrant population. We have an active Reach Out and Read program, through which we give out books at our well child visits and have volunteers who read to children in our waiting rooms to model the behavior for parents.

One of my favorite parts of the day is walking into the exam room with a book, and watching the child's face light up when I hand a colorful book to him or her and the parent spontaneously tells me how much their child enjoys books. I just love to watch the 6-month-old explore the book by (of course) putting the book in her mouth, the 18-month-old pointing and naming objects in the book, and the 4-year-old who makes up his own story to the pictures in the book. Sadly, all too often, they tell me that the only books they have at home are the books I have given to them. Without Reach Out and Read, they would have no children's books at home. So it's almost magical to watch that parent and child bond over the book. This is why the Books from Birth Act of 2015 and other early literacy programs are so critically important. When a child gets a new book, and a parent shares that magic with the child – the child's vocabulary grows, the parent is reminded that they are the child's first and most impactful teacher, and the community shows that it cares for its most vulnerable citizens.

Thank you, Councilmember Allen, for bringing forward this bill and for the invitation to speak, and thank you all for your support for the children of D.C.