

Talking Points in Support of Public Act 102-0843 (Cards for Kids Act Expansion) January 2023

Introduction/Background

Two public acts are helping to ensure that all children in Illinois have equal access to public library service. The Cards for Kids Act (Public Act 101-632) requires public libraries that offer nonresident cards to waive fees for K-12 students living in unincorporated areas who are eligible to receive free or reduced price lunches under the National School Lunch Program. The Cards for Kids Act became law on June 5, 2020. More information is available on the [RAILS website](#).

[Public Act 102-0843](#) took effect on May 13, 2022. It expands the Cards for Kids Act by allowing public library boards to adopt regulations waiving nonresident fees for everyone under the age of 18, regardless of their financial ability to pay for a nonresident card. While the Cards for Kids Act is a legal requirement, libraries are not required to waive nonresident fees for everyone under the age of 18. Public Act 102-0843 leaves that choice up to each library.

Some Illinois public library directors have asked for talking points they can use to demonstrate the benefits of expanding access to all students under the age of 18. Other library staff have asked for advice on what to say to taxpayers who ask why some kids/students should get “free” library cards when they must pay taxes to support the library. The following talking points are designed to help meet these needs.

Expanded Cards for Kids Act (Public Act 102-0843) Talking Points

Parents of children who attend schools in the community pay taxes to the schools to support their children’s education. The Expanded Cards for Kids Act helps Illinois public libraries highlight the strong role they play in supporting the educational needs of everyone in the community, including children.

The Expanded Cards for Kids Act levels the educational playing field for all Illinois school children. Some students in unserved areas attend schools that don’t have libraries. Other school libraries are facing severe budget cuts and dwindling resources. The public library may be the only option for library service these students have.

Many libraries sell cards using the mathematical formula model (which charges the same amount to any family regardless of the value of their home or their income level). This has the potential to be a greater barrier to students of lower-income families, who are often the ones who need the resources of a public library more than most. While some of these students would be exempt due to Cards for Kids, there are still plenty of households above that threshold that still would have difficulty paying the fee for a nonresident card.

Access to public libraries is a crucial part of early childhood literacy, lifelong learning, and academic success. It is to everyone’s benefit that we have a literate society, and one way to help achieve this is to encourage students to read and to remove as many barriers to using their local public library as possible.

Taking the long-term view, children will go on to become homeowners, taxpayers, and productive, active community members. They are our future leaders, voters, and decision makers. It is to the advantage of everyone in the community that all children are as educated and well informed as possible. The library is the place where all students can go in pursuit of this goal.

Public libraries provide many important services that can help all kids prepare for the future and ensure the continued economic and educational development of our communities. Providing the tools kids need to apply to college or vocational school, or to find a summer job are a few examples. Students in unincorporated areas are much less likely to access any library services. This increases their educational vulnerability and could have a very negative effect on their future and the future economic development of the communities where they live.

If students in unserved areas don't have the opportunity to experience all the benefits of public library service in their formative years, they may not support and use their local library as adults. The Expanded Cards for Kids Act will help these students see the benefits of public library service early on, making them more likely to advocate for libraries as adults.

Access to a library card for any unserved student, regardless of income, reduces the potential for shame and eliminates privacy concerns when staff need to ascertain whether a student meets the criteria for Cards for Kids.

School districts often look to public libraries to help combat the "summer slide," where students tend to lose some of the educational achievements gained during the previous school year. Students in unincorporated areas are far more likely to feel the effects of the summer slide. If they don't have access to library service during the summer months, they may have great difficulty catching up to other students in their class when they return to school.

Many public libraries want to do outreach to schools in their area to promote programs, summer reading, etc. But library staff have always been in the difficult position of promoting services that a certain percentage of students might not be able to take advantage of because of where they live. The Expanded Cards for Kids Act makes it possible for library staff to speak to students at community schools without having to consider how many the message may not apply to because they live in an unserved area.

While some public libraries have attempted to form intergovernmental agreements (IGAs) with schools in their community to ensure that all students have access to library services, many have reported having difficulty with the "very legal and complicated process" involved in forming an IGA. The Expanded Cards for Kids Act will provide a much easier course for them to extend library service to all school children.