

Talking Points in Support of Cards for Kids Legislation and Library Service to Nonresidents February 2021

Introduction/Background

The Cards for Kids legislation (PA 101-632) specifies that K-12 students living in unincorporated areas in Illinois who are eligible to receive free or reduced price lunches under the National School Lunch Program, as determined by the Income Eligibility Guidelines established by the USDA, shall not be charged a nonresident fee to use the library. The student cardholder is entitled to the same services the library provides residents and the card “shall be issued compliant with any policy or guideline that the public library board has implemented for issuance of cards to minors.”

Illinois library staff have asked for advice on what to say when asked by taxpayers and others why giving “free” library cards to kids/students is a good idea, and to justify providing additional library services to nonresidents in general. The following talking points are designed to help meet these needs.

Cards for Kids Legislation Talking Points

Illinois State Senator Laura Murphy sponsored the Cards for Kids legislation. She was motivated in part by the story of a real-life student who visited his local library to find reading material during the summer break, only to discover that he would have to pay hundreds of dollars to simply check out a book.

Parents of children who attend schools in the community pay taxes to the schools to support their children’s education. The public library is also charged with supporting the educational needs of children (and everyone else). Many 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.

A main mission of a public library is to support literacy. 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.

When school libraries are closed, either due to COVID-19, summer vacation, or any other reason, kids still need and deserve access to e-books, books, periodicals, and the wealth of other online resources libraries have to offer.

All students should have equal access to all library resources to level the educational playing field. They should not be penalized due to where they live or the income level of their parents. The Cards for Kids Act will allow thousands of students to have the same access to library materials as other students.

Kids who go to the same school but live in an unserved area, watch their friends checking out materials from the local public library while they cannot. This is hard to explain to kids, but also to the parents who want their kids to have the same access to homework help, research materials, and librarian expertise that their friends and peers have.

Teachers often give assignments that may depend on students using the resources of a public library, not knowing that certain students won't have access to the library because of where they live. The Cards for Kids Act will help eliminate this issue.

Public libraries want to do outreach to schools in their area to promote programs, summer reading, etc. But library staff have always been in a difficult position of promoting services that a certain percentage of those students might not be able to take advantage of because of where they live. Cards for Kids allows library staff to speak to their schools without having to consider how many the message may not apply to because they are unserved.

Students 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 other important services besides books that can help 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 who are unable to pay for a library card 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.

Taking the long-term view, students will go on to become homeowners, taxpayers, and productive, active community members. If students in unserved areas don't have the opportunity to experience all of the benefits of public library service in their formative years, they may not be as likely to support and use their local library as adults. The 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.

School districts often look to public libraries to help combat the "summer slide" experienced by students who do not have access to a public library when school is out of session. Students from lower-income families who live 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.

Though some may say there is an equity issue when some have to pay for library service via their taxes while others do not, the same equity argument can be made in relation to what a person needs to pay to receive a library card. Fees vary widely between different libraries, and they are a much greater barrier to entry for some than for others. Students from low-income or disadvantaged families may not be able to afford any fee at all. These students could often benefit the most from having access to all library services.

Providing Library Service to Nonresidents Talking Points

Having widespread access to information is vital for the economic and intellectual development in a community. The public library is the only place charged with providing information to all, regardless of whether they are able to afford a library card.

Libraries are often the only place in the community where everyone is welcome, including all underserved and marginalized populations such as the homeless, immigrants, non-English speakers, the economically disadvantaged, and those without the means to continue their formal education. Regardless of education level, income, gender, race, or age, public libraries serve everyone. This ends up benefitting the entire community and helping to ensure its future.

Access to public libraries is a crucial part of early childhood literacy, lifelong learning, and academic success. Illinois residents are at a disadvantage with other states that have universal service when they compete for college admission or jobs throughout their lives.

Public libraries strengthen the economy of their communities. Libraries provide computer access and job-hunting assistance, including helping people create resumes and prepare for interviews. They also offer resources and support for small businesses and entrepreneurs. It is to the community's advantage that as many who live there as possible are employed. The library can help make this happen.

For many, the library is the primary source of computer and internet access. Over 1 million people in Illinois do not have internet access or only have access to a cellular data plan. Public libraries help bridge the digital divide.

Because government forms, health information, and often, employment opportunities have moved online, the library's internet access has become a lifeline for those without access at home. For example, many could not have filled out the 2020 Census form without assistance from the library. It was important to all community members that everyone was counted in the census to ensure access to educational and governmental resources for all.

All types of libraries (elementary school, high school, college, and public) are important to lifelong learning. Children start learning in a public library, then they transition to the grade school library, the high school library, and the college library. The public library again becomes an important resource for college students to continue learning after graduation from college. It is important for all children and adults to have continued access to library resources throughout their lifetime.