

**CALIFORNIA STATE LIBRARY**  
**Final Program Narrative Report**

A final narrative report is required on the use funds from the State of California following the completion of a project period. Excerpts from this report may be submitted to the California State Legislature or Governor's office, or may be published by the State Library or shared with other institutions. Please answer all of the questions thoroughly.

Once complete, email the **unsigned** report to your grant monitor for approval prior to the report deadline. **The grant monitor will review all reports at a set date and time following the report deadline.** Upon review, you will receive an email from your grant monitor notifying you that your report has either been approved or a revision is needed. If a revision is needed, resubmit the report to your grant monitor for approval after you have made the requested revision. For approved reports, print a copy of the report and have the library director sign it in blue ink. Scan and email the signed report to the State Grants Coordinator at [annly.roman@library.ca.gov](mailto:annly.roman@library.ca.gov). Mail the original and TWO copies to the address below.

By Mail:

California State Library  
P.O. Box 942837  
Sacramento, CA 94237-0001  
Attention: Fiscal Office-State Grants

By Non-USPS Delivery:

California State Library  
900 N Street  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
Attention: Fiscal Office-State Grants

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

**Grant Information**

Organization:	Strong Reader Partnership (Formerly Imagination Library of California)		
Project Title:	Stronger Reader Partnership Program		
Grant/Agreement No.:	IL-22-02		
Amount of Grant:	\$19,226,651.00	Amount Expended:	\$1,205,222.76

**Project Coordinator Information**

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Organization Address:	1414 K Street, Suite 620, Sacramento, CA 95814		
Director Phone Number:	916-242-5550		
E-mail Address:	sonya@strongreaderpartnership.org		

Library Director Signature: (Please sign in blue ink)		Date:	
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## Project Abstract

Use past tense and write for a general audience by avoiding jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations. Also avoid highly technical project details, numerical lists of project goals, and bullets. If possible, state the "who, what, and why" of the project in the first sentence or two. High-level results can be included, but specific outcomes are more appropriate to the Outcomes section. Ideal length is 90-160 words. Refer to the project background and summary and project purpose statements in your grant agreement, and include any major changes in focus and activities.

### **Strong Reader Partnership: *Building a Statewide Foundation for Early Literacy***

#### **Background**

The Strong Reader Partnership (SRP), formerly the Imagination Library of California Strong Reader Partnership (ILCA), was established under the authority of Senate Bill 1183 (Chapter 992, Statutes of 2022), authored by Senators Toni Atkins and Shannon Grove and signed into law by Governor Gavin Newsom on September 30, 2022. The legislation authorized the California State Library (CSL) to partner with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) to expand access to free, high-quality books for children from birth to age five across the state.

As directed by the legislation, the CSL took the lead in establishing a nonprofit entity to support this work by filing the initial incorporation as Imagination Library of California Strong Reader Partnership (ILCA) in April 2023. In early 2023, CSL was responsible for engaging prospective board members and establishing initial documents governing the Board with the first official meeting of the board held on August 15, 2023.

CSL also coordinated with DPIL to facilitate a public announcement of the program expansion in California and began the process of a search for an executive director. CSL accepted the offer of DPIL to assist with the search which lasted through December 2023. DPIL requested the use of its preferred executive recruitment firm to identify an executive director and did not find suitable candidates which caused delays in developing organizational infrastructure and operations.

Initially the CSL supported ILCA to fulfill the statute and coordinated communication with DPIL. CSL staff scheduling was irregular and there was a lack of clarity around timing and the amount of grant funds which precluded the ability to hire any full time staff. A specific limitation on salary ranges and benefits was established at the directive of CSL. ILCA deliberated and determined a service contract would better serve the board for start up activities.

Despite having no funds, in order to ensure progress, a law firm was retained to establish non-profit status in 2023 and a consulting firm was selected in April 2024 to serve as an interim executive director. An executive director announcement was made in partnership with DPIL on June 14, 2024 to program partners. The ability to apply for the state funds was not made available until June 2024 – 21 months after the passage of the Legislation.

The initial grant amount of \$19.2 million was awarded to ILCA on July 17, 2024 and an early disbursement of \$4.8 million was received in August. With the early disbursement, ILCA was able to pay contractors for legal and management services, which made the two vendors whole for months of work they had completed without compensation. The ongoing delays in direction and in receiving funds impacted the Board's ability to act for its first year as an organization.

Additional delays plagued the project. As ILCA continued to gain momentum, it experienced significant administrative delays with regard to memorandums of understanding and licensing agreements that were

required before commencing work. A consultation request of DPIL for each organization's attorney to meet also was not accommodated. DPIL executive staff who experienced family emergencies during this period did not have appropriate back up staff with authority, which also led to the delay of critical communications and coordination.

Not even two months after receiving its initial grant award, SB157/AB157-Section 84 was passed in August 2024 and redirected almost all of the funds directly to DPIL. After review of the Legislation, CSL provided guidance to ILCA in October 2024 determining the disbursed funds (\$4.8 million) were not subject to the redirection. CSL / ILCA agreed to develop a revised work plan for funds ILCA possessed that would be more narrow in scope and coordinated with DPIL activities to further the original intent of the funds -- supporting DPIL program expansion and increasing child enrollment.

As ILCA continued coordination with DPIL after the Legislation was passed, significant changes in DPIL leadership (North America Director) and scheduling further delayed progress in early 2025. Several discussions around each organization's scope helped shape the final work plan and ultimately led to a rebrand in 2025 to become Strong Reader Partnership (SRP). In discussions with DPIL, there was an acknowledgement of the value SRP could bring to local partners and in multi-lingual marketing. Furthermore, joint activities were scheduled with DPIL / SRP through the balance of 2025, including 1:1 needs assessments with several local partners, attending local expansion kick off events, and the request of DPIL to fulfill additional local partner requests (above and beyond the initial SRP plan).

### **The Challenge**

Despite California's economic and cultural strength, there continues to be a need for early literacy resources. Fewer than half of California's third graders read at grade level, with deeper disparities among children of color, dual-language learners, and those in low-income or rural communities. Research consistently shows that early exposure to books is one of the most significant predictors of later reading success, yet access to books in the home remains highly inequitable.

The ILCA was designed to close this gap by ensuring that every child, regardless of zip code, family income, or primary language, could build a personal library of books before kindergarten.

With the mandate to establish a first of its kind non-profit, with initial funding from the state, but no guarantee of future funding, building a robust organization with an eye toward both operational success and financial independence was imperative.

### **Driving a California-Centric Strategy**

Launching a statewide early literacy initiative of this scale required navigating multiple issues and needs simultaneously — contracting, data integration, local program readiness, national licensing, research and much more. SRP met these challenges with agility and collaboration, establishing relationships and aligning with partners around shared goals and adapting quickly to the evolving needs of implementation.

To shape an approach that reflected California's diversity, SRP conducted a data-driven consumer approach that revealed time and cost as major barriers for parents, especially mothers, seeking to engage their children in reading. Using these insights, the team designed outreach and education strategies that centered the real-world experiences of families.

SRP held group meetings with DPIL and one-on-one sessions with local partners to identify what was working, what needed adaptation, and where support was most critical. These conversations extended into prospective

counties to assess readiness and ensure that communities with the greatest literacy gaps were prioritized. SRP also conducted an extensive review of available DPIL materials to identify where additional cultural and linguistic adaptation would be needed to reach California’s multilingual population effectively.

From this foundation, SRP developed a three-pronged strategy: a statewide marketing campaign with multilingual messaging and tools; a community-based mini-grant program to strengthen local capacity; and technical assistance for partners to address implementation challenges. This support included access to bilingual public relations staff, customizable “program-in-a-box” materials, and resources that helped partners navigate operational hurdles.

Together, these efforts demonstrated that California’s unique landscape could be supported by a tailor-made approach to increase early literacy, creating an enduring blueprint for how the state can scale programs that are data driven, culturally rooted, and locally supported.

### **Opportunity and Progress**

From its inception in early 2023, ILCA advanced through multiple deliberate phases:

- **Phase 1** focused on creating the legal, fiscal, and governance infrastructure necessary to transition from a concept to an operational non-profit entity.
- **Phase 2** established administrative systems, secured initial CSL grant funding (\$19.2 million), hosted public facing information sessions with DPIL, developed a strategic plan to support existing and future local partners, and executed contracts for key services to develop a statewide education campaign.
- **Phase 3** rebuilt momentum by revising the strategic plan to be more focused and fill gaps identified by partners, developed a strategic rebrand with multilingual communication channels (ultimately operating under SRP), and renewed engagement with local partners in multiple counties.

Through these coordinated efforts tailored to California’s population, ILCA / SRP built a functioning nonprofit infrastructure, collaborated closely with DPIL national operations, developed strong local partnerships, built a statewide educational campaign “Read Together, Grow Together” and positioned itself as a trusted statewide convener for early literacy.

### **Grant Termination and Reflections**

Despite this progress, the statewide Imagination Library effort faced considerable challenges. Legislative changes including the Assembly Bill 157 (Gabriel), signed into law on September 30, 2024, necessitated complex administrative transitions, evolving grant structures, and changing program priorities that created disruptions, slowed implementation and ultimately, due to the California State Senate Bill 105 (Trailer Bill) that was signed into law on September 17, 2025, led to the program’s closure.

SRP was surprised and disappointed by the termination notice given on September 25 2025. This notice was served without any indication that program efforts were out of line with grant specifications. SRP participated in good faith planning meetings with positive feedback throughout 2025 with DPIL and discussions with the CSL to conform the existing grant to a scope that furthered the original legislative intent.

While the termination represents a significant missed opportunity and potentially risks the public dollars already invested, SRP’s work leaves behind a strong foundation of systems, partnerships, and lessons that can inform future efforts. SRP leaves behind a plan that is available to be implemented immediately – with local partners at the ready.

Among the most important lessons learned are:

- California families are contending with a variety of different issues that may not allow them to fully realize the opportunity or need to foster literacy before the age of five;
- The programmatic requirements for DPIL can be overly burdensome to local organizations and difficult to comply with;
- Local program partners throughout California would benefit from state specific technical assistance, capacity building and funding to accelerate program success; and
- The statewide campaign showed that clear, multi-lingual, and culturally relevant messaging, delivered through trusted local partners, is essential to effectively reach California families and build awareness of early literacy programs.

As the program concludes, SRP expresses its deep disappointment in the early closure of an initiative that had begun to demonstrate its transformative potential. However, the organization remains proud of its accomplishments and steadfast in its commitment to the mission that guided this work: ensuring every California child, regardless of background or zip code, has the opportunity to grow up surrounded by books, stories, and the *joy of reading*.

## Project Outputs

What was created for the project and how much? (For instance, three promotional brochures were created and 75 copies distributed; or three training classes were designed; two sessions of each were held, and 80 people were trained)

### **Phase 1 (February 2023 – March 2024): Establishing the Foundation**

SRP developed the legal and fiscal infrastructure needed for operation under CSL oversight. This work built upon the legislative framework established by SB 1183 (Chapter 992) which was signed into law on Sept. 30, 2022 and the incorporation of the nonprofit organization was completed on April 18, 2023. Activities included board appointments, foundational meetings to define governance and compliance processes, and preparation of documents for nonprofit registration and reporting.

#### **Key activities included:**

- Appointment of initial board members by CSL.
- Initial board and strategy meetings to define governance roles, compliance expectations, and grant management processes.
- Development of foundational documents for nonprofit registration and financial reporting.
- Coordination with CSL on fiscal oversight and initial budget planning.

#### **Outcome:**

The organization transitioned from concept to structure, establishing the necessary systems to move into implementation.

### **Phase 2 (April – August 2024): Building Administrative and Operational Systems**

SRP moved from setup to implementation, aligning budgets and roles with CSL and DPIL. Despite challenges stemming from revised grant allocations, SRP preserved \$4.8 million through legislative review and continued to build operational momentum.

**Key activities included:**

- Retained consulting firm to serve as interim executive director.
- Established fiscal and banking systems.
- Hosted public facing information sessions with DPIL.
- Developed a strategic plan to support existing and future partners.
- Approved contracts with The Shipyard and Axis for multi-lingual communications, marketing, outreach, and media support.
- Conducted readiness sessions with potential San Diego partners who committed to countywide expansion through 34 organizations.
- Held early outreach meetings with Fresno, Kings, San Benito, Yuba, and Sacramento counties.

**Outcome:**

By late summer, SRP established a functioning administrative framework and began aligning statewide outreach plans tailored to county readiness.

**Program Pause (September – October 2024): Strategic Realignment**

Following SB157/AB157-Section 84, ILCA received guidance from CSL on the authority to adjust the original grant workplan (\$19,226,651) to a more narrow and coordinated workplan that maximized the early distribution payment (\$4.8 million). After review of the Legislation, CSL provided guidance to ILCA in October 2024 determining the disbursed funds (\$4.8 million) were not subject to the redirection. CSL / ILCA agreed to develop a revised work plan for funds ILCA possessed that would be more narrow in scope and coordinated with DPIL activities to further the original intent of the funds -- supporting DPIL program expansion and increasing child enrollment.

**Outcome:**

None - program work paused.

**Phase 3 (November 2024 – September 2025): Rebranding and Rebuilding Momentum**

Following the pause, SRP entered a rebuilding phase, rebranding from the California Imagination Library to Strong Reader Partnership to reflect a broader statewide mission. The team focused on strengthening infrastructure, launching multilingual communications platforms, and re-engaging with local partners in multiple counties.

SRP held group meetings with DPIL and one-on-one sessions with local partners to identify what was working, what needed adaptation, and where support was most critical. There was an acknowledgement of the value SRP could bring to local partners and in multi-lingual marketing. These conversations extended into prospective counties to assess readiness and ensure that communities with the greatest literacy gaps were prioritized. SRP also conducted an extensive review of available DPIL materials to identify where additional cultural and linguistic adaptation would be needed to reach California's multilingual population effectively.

Furthermore, joint activities were scheduled with DPIL / SRP through the balance of 2025, including the 1:1 needs assessments with several local partners, attending local expansion kick off events, and the request of DPIL to fulfill additional local partner requests (above and beyond the initial SRP plan).

From this foundation, SRP developed a three-pronged strategy: a statewide marketing campaign with multi-lingual messaging and tools; a community-based mini-grant program to strengthen local capacity; and technical assistance for partners to address implementation challenges. This support included access to

bilingual public relations staff, customizable “program-in-a-box” materials, and resources that helped partners navigate operational hurdles.

**Key activities included:**

- Officially adopted the SRP name and strategic plan.
- Submitted an updated proposal to CSL under revised funding parameters totaling \$4.8 million.
- Held 1:1 needs assessments with several local partners.
- Drafted new scopes of work and master service agreements with key vendors, including The Shipyard and Axis.
- Launched a bilingual website, the “Read Together, Grow Together” statewide campaign, social media channels, and digital branding materials.
- Began translation of outreach content into 14 languages.
- Awarded a \$5,000 Community Engagement Grant in Yolo County to pilot local outreach and data tracking for sign-ups.
- Developed a “Marketing Accelerator” plan for use in Fresno County and other counties as needed to support local program promotion.
- Strengthened coordination with DPIL’s North America Director and reestablished relationships with local partners statewide.
- Attended local expansion kick off events.

**Outcome:**

By September 2025, through these coordinated efforts tailored to California’s population, ILCA / SRP built a functioning nonprofit infrastructure, collaborated closely with DPIL national operations, developed strong local partnerships, built a statewide educational campaign “Read Together, Grow Together” and positioned itself as a trusted statewide convener for early literacy.

**Project Outcomes**

List any important outcomes or findings.

SRP achieved major progress toward creating a sustainable statewide infrastructure for early literacy. The organization built an operational nonprofit framework, launched a multi-lingual communications campaign, and reengaged county partners to strengthen local capacity. Through collaboration with DPIL and CSL, SRP developed adaptable systems that could be applied in future statewide literacy initiatives.

Despite this progress, the statewide Imagination Library effort faced considerable challenges. Legislative changes including the Assembly Bill 157 (Gabriel), signed into law on September 30, 2024, necessitated complex administrative transitions, evolving grant structures, and changing program priorities that created disruptions, slowed implementation and ultimately, due to the California State Senate Bill 105 (Trailer Bill) that was signed into law on September 17, 2025, led to the program’s closure.

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While the termination represents a significant missed opportunity and potentially risks the public dollars already invested, SRP’s work leaves behind a strong foundation of systems, partnerships, and lessons that can inform

future efforts. SRP leaves behind a plan that is available to be implemented immediately – with local partners at the ready.

Despite its early closure, SRP demonstrated that California benefits most from a data-driven, locally informed, and culturally inclusive approach to literacy. The systems, partnerships, and strategic tools established through this effort positions future partners to build on a tested model emphasizing local capacity-building, bilingual communication, and equity in access to early learning resources.

Please briefly describe the importance of these outcomes and findings for future program planning.

These outcomes highlight the importance of designing early literacy initiatives that reflect California’s diversity and leverage local partnerships. SRP’s approach demonstrated that culturally relevant and multilingual messaging, supported by trusted community partners, is essential to reaching families statewide. The preservation of core funding through legislative action reinforced the need for stable investment in long-term literacy infrastructure.

Future efforts should emphasize flexibility in funding structures, strong technical assistance for local partners, and continued investment in bilingual and culturally adapted materials. SRP’s lessons underscore that sustainable progress in literacy access requires collaboration between state agencies, nonprofit partners, and local champions who understand their communities’ needs.

Describe one or two of significant lessons learned.

1. California families are contending with a variety of different issues that may not allow them to fully realize the opportunity or need to foster literacy before the age of five;
2. The programmatic requirements for DPIL can be overly burdensome to local organizations and difficult to comply with;
3. Local program partners throughout California would benefit from state specific technical assistance, capacity building and funding to accelerate program success;
4. The statewide campaign showed that clear, multi-lingual, and culturally relevant messaging, delivered through trusted local partners, is essential to effectively reach California families and build awareness of early literacy programs; and
5. Transparent and consistent communication between CSL, DPIL, and SRP leadership was essential to navigating administrative and funding shifts.

### Success Story

Please detail a success story or stories that we should share with stakeholders.

SRP's success lay not only in operational achievements but also in its ability to bring together partners statewide around a shared mission.

In Yolo County, a \$5,000 Community Engagement Grant helped the local library host bilingual story hours and community events that increased family participation and program sign-ups. In Fresno County, the "Marketing Accelerator" plan established a framework for unified outreach among community organizations and library branches.

Perhaps most importantly, SRP itself stands as a success story of persistence and collaboration. From its authorization under SB 1183 to its formal establishment in 2023, SRP built a sustainable nonprofit model, developed a bilingual statewide campaign, and positioned itself as a convener for literacy equity. The systems, relationships, and tools it created remain ready to support any future relaunch of this vital early literacy initiative.

### **Additional Materials**

If you have additional materials you would like to provide, please attach after this page.

*File:(R:)'R'drive for LDS/statefunded grants*