



Addressing Book Deserts: The *Open Books, Open Doors Act* *Senator Andy Kim (NJ)*

Endorsing Organizations: American Academy of Pediatrics, American Federation of Teachers, American Library Association, Association of Bookmobile & Outreach Services, Book Fairies, Book Harvest, BookSmiles, Book Trust, COABE, Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, Ed Trust, First Book, Levar Burton, Little Free Libraries, National Book Access Association, National Book Foundation, National Center for Families Learning, National Center for Learning Disabilities, National Education Association, New Jersey Council for the Humanities, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, Pen America, Reach Out and Read, Reading is Fundamental, Teach Plus, and Urban Libraries Council.

Background: The Growing Literacy Crisis

Access to books is one of the strongest predictors of a child’s academic success, yet millions of families face persistent barriers to building a culture of reading at home. [Nearly half](#) of children in the United States live in “book deserts”—communities without reliable access to public libraries, bookstores, or developmentally appropriate reading materials. These gaps emerge early, widen over time, and disproportionately affect low-income families, rural communities, and households facing language or housing instability. While libraries, schools, publishers, and nonprofits play a critical role, access to books remains highly dependent on ZIP code and family income.

Continued [declines](#) in national reading scores underscore the urgency of addressing access gaps earlier and more systematically. Children who are [not reading proficiently by third grade](#) are far more likely to struggle academically and drop out of high school, limiting long-term economic mobility and workforce readiness. [Illiteracy leads to intergenerational poverty](#) – children with lower literacy rates are more likely to drop out of school, become involved in the juvenile justice system, rely on public assistance, and not prioritize their own children’s literacy outcomes.

What the Bill Does

- 1. Establishes the “Open Books, Open Doors” Grant Program:** a competitive federal grant program within the Department of Education to support states, local governments, schools, nonprofits, libraries, humanities councils, and community-based organizations working to improve literacy outcomes.
- 2. Prioritizes Communities with the Greatest Need:** ensures that at least 70 percent of grant funding must support programs serving book deserts, with an emphasis on meeting families

where they already are—such as childcare centers, Head Start programs, barbershops, laundromats, faith-based institutions, health clinics, and other high-traffic community locations.

3. Expands Access to Diverse, High-Quality Reading Materials: enables grant funds to be used to purchase and distribute:

- Storybooks, chapter books, graphic novels, poetry, and magazines
- Multilingual and dual-language materials
- Accessible formats, including braille, large print, and offline digital content
- Reading materials that reflect diverse cultures, histories, and lived experiences.

4. Supports Family Literacy and Community Engagement: emphasizes family engagement, encouraging joint reading, storytelling, and caregiver engagement in home and community settings. Eligible activities include literacy events, book drives, neighborhood libraries, and culturally responsive programming.

5. Invests in Evidence-Based Literacy Strategies: supports programs grounded in the science of reading, including early screening and intervention for reading disabilities, while explicitly avoiding punitive or stigmatizing approaches.

6. Increases Coordination Among Federal Agencies: directs the Secretary of Education to coordinate with federal agencies across the justice, health, housing, nutrition, and national service spaces to align literacy efforts, share data and best practices, and integrate book access and federal supports into existing federally funded programs.

7. Protects Local Control and Free Expression: includes clear guardrails stating that nothing in the Act authorizes the federal government to ban, censor, or influence local curriculum or content decisions based on political or viewpoint grounds.

8. Establishes a federal clearinghouse on literacy: based within the Department of Education, this clearinghouse would identify and evaluate evidence-based book access strategies, disseminate toolkits and guidance, and provide background information on how applicants utilized grant funds.

The legislation authorizes \$100 million annually from FY 2026–2031, with accountability, reporting requirements, and interagency coordination to ensure effective implementation and measurable outcomes.