



An Open Letter to the Board of Directors of the International Literacy Association

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Board of Directors

Chynita Turner-Pryor,
President
chynitatp@gmail.com
Charles Richards,
President-Elect
quietnva@aol.com
Joan Rhodes,
Vice President
vsrajoan@outlook.com
Karen Queen,
Treasurer
vsratreasurer@gmail.com
Connie Herman,
Recording Secretary
Cherman31@cox.net
Helen Bowman,
Corresponding Secretary
helenbowman48@gmail.com
Janie Hull,
State Coordinator
imbjhull75@embarqmail.com
Leigh Leslie,
Member-At-Large
lleslie@salem.k12.va.us
Jennifer Floyd,
Member-At-Large
jaf9d@virginia.edu
Anne Perdue,
Membership
adperdue1@gmail.com
Julie Gray,
Membership
vsrajulie@gmail.com

Dear Members of the ILA Board of Directors and Dr. Post,

As President of the Virginia State Reading Association I write to you today on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Virginia State Reading Association and as colleagues who value reading and embrace literacy. This year the Virginia State Reading Association is celebrating 50 years of service to our communities in the field of literacy. Over 40 of those years have been in partnership with IRA, now ILA. In this anniversary year we cannot help but reflect on the years of our shared mission, vision and work. We are proud to have been a partner of ILA for these many years and hope that you share the same view.

As a state council in good standing with ILA we represent and advocate for our stakeholders by carrying out programs in Virginia and at the same time bringing the messages of ILA to our communities throughout the Commonwealth. With 50 years of expertise and state conferences reaching well over 30,000 people, VSRA has a significant impact on Virginia's professional literacy community. Presently, our membership rolls consistently hover at about 3000 with new members continuing to join our vibrant and growing community.

Through the years, VSRA has worked hard as your partner to serve our shared mission and interests. Whether we are educating our colleagues or supporting ILA's advocacy agenda, VSRA continuously strives for excellence. There is a symbiotic relationship between VSRA, our local councils and ILA. Our organizations serve our membership through advocacy, programs and services. And as described in ILA's website, we similarly believe that **we** support the ILA in all areas of endeavor, cooperating directly with ILA—reinforcing the educational effort; helping to build our statewide community of educators; advocating before legislative and regulatory bodies at both the state and federal levels to enhance students' skills to setting standards for educators; and serving as an early adopter of ILA approaches and products. In other words, we work hard to strengthen the ILA brand at the state and local level.

It is for these reasons that we feel compelled to write to you today—Board member to Board member—to share our concerns for our nationwide community.

Recently we received materials pertinent to ILA's transition effort. As President, I appointed a task force comprised of Board members to take part in ILA's webinar and to lead the effort on the ground in Virginia. The webinar was led by Tiffany Sears, who did a good job of explaining ILA's various positions and the choices provided to Councils. Following the webinar, our task force met with the VSRA Board and a thorough discussion ensued. We understand and appreciate ILA's need to place more structure around the relationship it has with its councils and to create new affiliation agreements. We recognize that for ILA to report to the relevant federal and state oversight agencies, it must create new structures. It is there, though that we must convey the concerns that the VSRA Board has for ILA as it journeys down this path.

The relationship choices described through the agreements are defined from the standpoint of the state council's responsibilities, but there is inadequate explanation of the role of ILA as the national organization and its obligations to the state councils. Most of ILA's obligations to state councils are based on fees. As you can well imagine, without the kind of specificity required to make such a decision, we fear that our membership will find it less than optimal to join ILA in this endeavor. As good stewards of our organization, we know that you understand that we must consult with our membership before making a choice that places the organization on a directional path that will be set for years into the future.

It is our perspective that ILA has spent a great deal of effort outlining all the different ways councils may pay for services without making an adequate case for the fundamental relationship and the value that ILA brings to the state councils. Simply put, ILA has not demonstrated its responsibility in this agreement. There are many items on the Affiliation Benefits document that should be free to state councils regardless of their choice of category and gives the clear impression that ILA is balancing its budget on the back of its collective affiliates.

With the greatest respect we wish not merely to voice criticism but rather to bring focus to areas of mutual import. And so, in order to kick off an expanded dialog with the ILA Board we bring the following observations and suggestions to you. We appeal to you to consider opening the door for much greater dialog and flexibility in creating a new relationship that will last for many years. We have initial ideas for your consideration and ask that you work with us and other state councils to further reflect on these matters before moving forward.

Advocacy

Advocacy is the fundamental responsibility of every national membership organization that purports to represent its constituency. To further the success of national advocacy programs, organizations need their grassroots constituents to help carry the messages both to legislative representatives and government agencies at the federal and state level. Including advocacy in the fee for service line of programs makes little sense from the standpoint of a successful nationwide advocacy program. And in this challenging national climate, there is no more important time for our collective, grassroots voice to be heard. There is little if any incentive for your grassroots members to participate if they are charged a fee in addition to the basic affiliation fee. Advocacy should be a part of that basic

affiliation. We fear that ILA is taking a fundamental element of the basic relationship between national and state and building a wall between us that can only hurt all of us who care about reading and learning in this nation.

Sound Financial and Management Practice

Similarly it is in the best interest of ILA to answer immediately and fully any state council's questions about essential nonprofit management. The ILA should meet its fundamental responsibilities to its affiliates to quickly and accurately answer financial questions without concern for fees as this is within the realm of what highly rated national nonprofits do for their affiliates. Once again, we are concerned for ILA essentially creating a disincentive to sound nonprofit management within its own family and for which it must report to the various watchdog and government agencies. Frankly, we found this baffling.

Further to the realm of sound practice, we found the statement in the agreement referring to exclusivity to be unclear and perhaps deliberately obtuse. Please explain why ILA is informing state councils that they cannot engage in reasonable commerce, specifically in fund raising to meet its goals to bring high quality education and programs to its members. As you know, if you limit state organizations' ability to reach out to corporations with a marketing interest in reading or other potential donors, you restrain a state's abilities to carry out their work and reduce the likelihood of their success. We cannot believe that this is your intent, but because of the lack of specificity herein, we request clarity on these issues.

In these two instances we require further specificity in order to meet our own fiduciary responsibility as members of the board of VSRA.

Board Representation

ILA suggests that if state organizations wish to have a member of the ILA board attend a state meeting, state boards need to pay for the individual. In our view, it goes without saying that the state organization should underwrite the reasonable expenses of the individual to attend, but, let's be honest, it is in the ILA's best interest to have representation at every major state function and as such it should plan to attend. We, in Virginia, welcome such involvement; however, it is in our view, incumbent upon ILA to ensure that it plans for this. Otherwise, we fear that ILA will become so distant from the states that it will lose out on the opportunity to garner attention and respect for its own programs, services and its value to its grassroots constituency. This is another instance in which we believe an artificial barrier to good relations between us has been constructed.

Looking at other areas, again we feel that there is inadequate representation by ILA in the actual agreements and their supporting documents. We are fearful that this misrepresents the ILA Board's intent to offer a meaningful relationship with each state council. Much emphasis is placed on the punitive for the states, but very little is described regarding ILA's obligations and meeting its requirements. Minimally, there needs to be strong statements beyond getting a council's name listed on the website—hardly a value added—about the expectations of the state council for high quality and good faith efforts by ILA to carry out its responsibilities. In other words, respectfully, please do not overlook our expectations of ILA for excellence. You must prove your value to the membership of VSRA—it's the least that can be expected.

It is with these significant concerns that we offer the following as a pathway to carry on with ILA's transition and meet its immediate concern about getting its house in order with its numerous state and local councils:

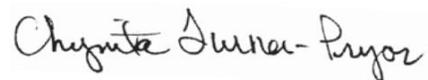
Restart the Clock

1. A redraft of the affiliation agreement is offered to councils that reflects further specificity of the role of ILA.
2. A representative task force comprised of the state councils with the largest budgets and those others who wish to participate be appointed to work with ILA leadership on transition planning.
3. Within the re-drafted affiliation agreement there is a moratorium on termination damages until such time that a representative task force of the state councils with the largest budgets and those others who wish to participate can collaborate with ILA on the obligations of ILA to state councils and state councils to ILA. Such a re-draft with the moratorium could be turned around fairly quickly for state and locals to sign so that ILA meets the obligations it has to oversight agencies.
4. In 12-24 months, once the task force has worked with ILA to create a set of reasonable fee for service offerings, plans for shared fund raising and support for legal fees related to the transition, a new agreement is offered to state councils in good standing.

By restarting the clock and engaging those who have the most to lose, we believe that ILA will strengthen the relationship it has with its councils and therefore with its stakeholders and create a lasting and mutually successful future.

For many years national and international nonprofits have worked to grow and achieve increased membership roles. In recent years membership rolls have diminished in many professional fields. Programs and services have been tightened and publications eliminated. In many national organizations, annual conferences have moved to every other or every third year so we do understand ILA's transition needs. However, there should remain a symbiosis between national and state. There may not always be agreement on all things, but underlying all is a fundamental belief in the mission and the vision. And as nonprofits, all we really have is this—our shared belief in achieving good.

With much respect,



Chynita Turner-Pryor, President on behalf of
The Board of Directors
Virginia State Reading Association

CC:

Boards of Directors of ILA State Councils
Presidents, Virginia Local Councils
Past Presidents, ILA
Past Presidents, VSRA
Tiffany Sears, Council Advisor