

Reading opens the world

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In this season of miracles for many faith traditions, Veronica Rubio, a middle school librarian in Pico Rivera, Calif., felt like she was experiencing a miracle of her own as she selected free books for her students—young adult fiction, Spanish language titles and Star Wars-themed books—at an AFT Reading Opens the World event last weekend. “It’s like a dream,” Rubio said. “I don’t want to wake up.”

The AFT is donating another 1 million books and is working to create joyful and confident readers.

In many ways, that book giveaway was the fulfillment of one dream and the start of another. This time last year, the AFT pledged to distribute 1 million free books to educators, students and their families to promote the joy of reading as part of our Reading Opens the World campaign. We gave away the 1 millionth book in Pico Rivera—and announced that our union will give away another 1 million books to continue to work toward creating a nation of joyful and confident readers.

Amid an alarming rise in efforts to ban and censor books, we are giving away books that are both mirrors and windows—titles that reflect students’ own identities and experiences, introduce them to the experiences of others, and inspire them with compelling stories and characters. Our goal is for students to love to read and to read well.

The challenge of helping all children read well has been exacerbated by misunderstandings of the science of reading, by conflicts over the best way to teach students to read and, recently, by the pandemic. The AFT has worked to improve reading instruction with research-based reading resources and courses that have helped tens of thousands of educators teach reading more effectively.

But it all starts with books and the joy that comes from kids having books of their own that they are excited to read. I will never forget a visit to McDowell County, W.Va., one of the poorest counties in the United States. I offered a book to a boy who clutched it to his chest,

grinned and said, “I’m going straight home to put this in my library.” I asked him what other books he had in his library. Bubbling with excitement, he said, “This is the first one!”

And then there was Rafi, a student I met as we distributed books to schools in Puerto Rico. We took turns reading a bilingual book about Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. As I read in English and he read in Spanish, we acted out the words, smiling and laughing with each other, connected by a story.

Our book distributions are as varied as the books themselves. AFT members distributed free books at back-to-school events in Scranton and Syracuse, Nashua and New Haven, Lynn and Lowell, and many more places. The Detroit Federation of Teachers gave out 10,000 books by African American authors at a Juneteenth event. The Montana Federation of Public Employees distributed books at tribal schools. In New York, the AFT and the Public Employees Federation donated \$5,000 worth of books to the Sagamore Children’s Psychiatric Center. The AFT and the United Federation of Teachers have hosted book events throughout New York City’s boroughs, with lines often snaking for blocks. And our events in Yonkers and Albany featured books, bands and bouncy houses. All these events offer fun and research-based tips for families to support literacy.

This weekend alone, the AFT distributed 120,000 books, including as we helped

launch the Cleveland Reads Citywide Reading Challenge to collectively read 1 million books and/or 1 million minutes in 2023.

I am so grateful for the work AFT members do to heal, help, educate and make a difference in people’s lives. And I am angered by the baseless attacks they endure, particularly the attacks on educators, who have risen to the overwhelming challenges of teaching during the pandemic and meeting students’ surging needs. The truth about teachers stands in stark contrast to critics who denigrate them and blame teachers and their unions for a pandemic and other factors outside their control—yet do nothing to help.

The last few years have been hard on everyone. Reading not only helps kids improve their literacy skills but can provide respite, connection, growth and pleasure. Take it from Mason, a seventh-grade student from Macomb County, Mich., who said, “I don’t know what happened to me, but I hated reading before. This year, my teacher had all these books and I just wanted to read constantly and now I love it.”

Reading truly opens the world, and it paves the way for dreams to be realized. That is why we do what we do—donating 2 million free books in two years to children, families and educators across America to help us become a nation of joyful and confident readers. Join the AFT in making that a reality at aft.org/read.



Weingarten, pointing, during an event on Dec. 10 in Pico Rivera, Calif., where the AFT donated the 1 millionth book through the union’s Reading Opens the World campaign.

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