

# 10 million books and counting

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Magical moments, 10 million of them, can grow from modest beginnings. More than a decade ago, the AFT and First Book joined forces to give books to children who otherwise might not have their own. I knew we were onto something early on, when I met a boy at a book giveaway in McDowell County, W.Va., one of the poorest counties in the United States. As he clutched a book to his chest he declared, “I’m going straight home to put this in my library.” I asked him what other books were in his library. Bubbling with excitement, he said, “This is the first one!” Since then, the AFT and First Book have given away millions of books to thousands of children, educators and families through our Reading Opens the World program. Last week, at joyous family literacy festivals across the country, we gave away more than 150,000 books in a single day, and we celebrated an amazing milestone—donating our 10 millionth book.

Why books? Reading is the foundation for all other learning. Reading well is an essential pathway to opportunity. Books can spark joy, imagination, confidence and critical thinking. But, like the boy in McDowell County, many kids don’t have books of their own. Too many families can’t afford to buy them, and too few educators get funds for classroom libraries. Children need access to books, with characters that reflect their worlds and show them new ones. That’s why, just like individual teachers dig into their pockets for food and supplies for kids, the AFT finances these book giveaways through our members’ dues to get books into the hands of those who need them most.

The millions of books we have given away are not used, marred or missing pages. They are brand-new books with engaging topics and characters who “look like me,” as kids have exclaimed.

At Saturday’s 10 million-book celebration in New York City, a teacher and grandmother of Haitian descent thanked me for the wide variety of books while holding *Freedom Soup*, a book about a traditional New Year’s Day dish celebrating Haitian independence. She said she was excited to read it to her grandchildren the following day, Mother’s Day, to teach them about their heritage, and that her family would long cherish this special book. We have given books to social workers in New York and Ohio, who bring them along on home visits to help them connect with children; school bus drivers in New Mexico, so students can read on long bus rides; and educators in Cleveland, who gave out thousands of books before the Christmas holiday at a Reading Parade.

Over the tumultuous past few years, the AFT has used Reading Opens the World to disrupt learning loss, connect with families and build relationships. As others have banned books and tried to erase history, AFT members have organized 390 community events across the country to encourage families to send their children back for in-person learning after pandemic closures—with books, bouncy houses and face painting as sweeteners. Our teachers host family learning circles and Zooms to help parents boost their children’s reading skills. Through [aft.org/read](https://aft.org/read) and the AFT’s [Share My Lesson](#), we have tips for parents to encourage reading and support reading success, as well as resources for educators on the science of reading, improving literacy for English learners and hosting family literacy nights. And our partnership with Reading Universe offers educators evidence-based reading instruction support online.

In this age saturated with social media and digital devices, books are still—and perhaps even more—important. [Research](#) by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development shows that teens who read physical books gain nearly 2.5 years of learning compared with teens who rarely or never read books.

Perhaps an even higher authority than the research are the kids themselves. Take it from

[Mason](#), a seventh-grade student in St. Clair, Mich., whose teacher filled her classroom library with books from the AFT and First Book. “I don’t know what happened to me, but I hated reading before,” Mason said. “And this year, my teacher had all these books and I just started reading.”

## Reading is the foundation for all other learning.

While the road to giving out 10 million books has come with considerable effort and expense, it’s worth it. I’ve seen kids jump with excitement as they choose books that will become treasured possessions. I marveled at the line to enter a book giveaway and family literacy festival in New York City that snaked down several blocks in the rain. And my eyes have teared up as I’ve watched teachers select books they know will excite and engage students. It’s a milestone worth celebrating: 10 million books down—bringing joy to millions of kids and their families—and countless more to go.



Photo: Pamela Wolfe

Weingarten, right, at the 10 million-book celebration in New York City on May 11.

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