



Reading: A Lifelong Love

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

I CAN'T IMAGINE my life without books. My father was an electrical engineer, and my mother was a public school teacher; books were an integral part of my childhood. Throughout my career as a lawyer, teacher, and labor leader, books have remained my constant companions—stuffed into a briefcase, overflowing on my bedside table, stacked on my desk at work. Books have carried me to distant worlds, opened new doors, and made me feel empathy, compassion, anger, fear, joy, acceptance—and everything in between.

Forty-five percent of our nation's children live in neighborhoods that lack public libraries and stores that sell books, or in homes where books are an unaffordable or unfamiliar luxury. At the same time, two-thirds of the schools and programs in our nation's lowest-income neighborhoods can't afford to buy books at retail prices. That means that, today, 32.4 million American children go without books—even as study after study has shown that literacy is crucial to success in school, future earning potential, and the ability to contribute to the nation's economy.

Nearly four years ago, the American Federation of Teachers joined forces with First Book—a nonprofit social enterprise that has provided more than 125 million brand-new books to low-income children since 1992. Through First Book's unique marketplace, educators serving students in need buy books and educational resources at deeply reduced prices or receive them at no cost.

As one of First Book's biggest partners, we've put more than 2 million books in the hands of children in need, and we've helped First Book expand its marketplace of registered users from 20,000 to 150,000. AFT members have organized First Book events in communities across the country; last December alone, a total of 200,000 books were given away at five events in Massachusetts, New York, and Oregon.

However, our partnership with First Book is about more than just giving books to students in need. Our aim is to build on the empowerment that comes from owning that first book to create lifelong readers and lifelong learners.

A landmark study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation shows a correlation between the ability to read by the end of the third grade, continued academic success, and the end of the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Yet with 82 percent of fourth-graders from low-income families failing to reach the "proficient" level in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, achieving grade-level proficiency in reading is a key issue for our schools, our communities, and our nation.

We know that reading to children is a crucial step. From the beginning, babies who are read to are exposed to the cadence of language, and school-age children who read at home for 15 minutes a day are exposed to millions of words.

Growing demands on parents—whether they're single parents working two jobs to make ends meet, or English is their second language, or they lack a quiet space to read—can make it difficult for them to read with their children. At the same time, growing demands on teachers can mean there's little time for educators to connect with parents and give them the tools they need to help their children.

In McDowell County, West Virginia, one of the poorest counties in the nation, the AFT has partnered with First Book to teach parents how to make reading a fun, nurturing activity. And through Share My Lesson, an online community with free resources, the AFT offers companion materials for teachers and parents to help the books come alive. In addition, through our partnership with PBS station WETA and Colorín Colorado, we provide free online resources for parents and educators of English language learners.

Although books expand horizons by exposing us to worlds outside our own,

children also need to see themselves, their experiences, and their cultures reflected in the books they read. Unfortunately, for too many children, this is not the norm. Only 3 percent of the 3,600 children's books reviewed by the Cooperative Children's Book Center featured African American protagonists, while no more than 2 percent focused on Asian Americans, Latinos, or Native Americans.



Weingarten with a student at a Baltimore First Book event.

We aim to change this. The AFT and First Book are using the power of the market, and the increasing number of people we are bringing to the First Book marketplace, to push publishers to print more diverse books and support diverse authors.

As educators, AFT members understand the power of books. We've seen a child's face light up when he or she first understands words on a page. We've seen how books can create confidence in a struggling reader—the more a child reads and learns, the more that child wants to read and learn, until reading becomes a lifelong love and habit.

If you work or volunteer with children in need, register now at FirstBook.org/AFT and help instill a lifelong love of reading and learning.