

## **This nonprofit aims to remedy the achievement gap by donating 10 books to each kindergartner in 19 schools. • Charlottesville Tomorrow**

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### **Nearly 5,000 books donated to Albemarle County Title I schools valued at \$67,000 total**

On a typical weeknight before bed, Anton Largader reads to his daughter, Agnor-Hurt Elementary School kindergartner Adrienne. But now he plans to read to her even more.

That's because a nonprofit founded 41 years ago by Jeanna Beker in New York City, Soho Center, has added to Adrienne's collections of books. The center donates 300,000 children's books every year in Central Virginia and across the state.

But this year, it partnered with 19 local elementary schools, including Agnor-Hurt, at Albemarle County Public Schools and Charlottesville City Schools.

"I think it's a great program," Largader said. "... The books that the nonprofit is giving us are wonderful material."

Each kindergartner at a Title I school — or a school with a high percentage of population of students on free or reduced-priced lunch — will receive 10 books. The division estimates that nearly 5,000 books have been donated to county schools, a donation valued at \$67,000 total.

The students have been receiving one book per day since the school year began. By the 10th day, each child will have received 10 books.

Beker, who also serves as director of the center, said the books have been distributed to the schools prior to the start of the school year to ensure the children could start getting the books on day one.

She said her organization — which believes in giving "children a good start" — has many programs including one that donates books to newborns delivered at the University of Virginia Children's Hospital to celebrate the milestone of their birth.

This year's partnership was created because her company also wants to celebrate children starting kindergarten, she said. For her, it's another way to acknowledge these students and show how exciting it is to start elementary school, Beker said.

"Here's something that you can enjoy that will give you practice with reading — and here's something that your parents can spend some time doing with you that will be fun," Beker said of the book giveaways.

Another reason her company donated the books is to join the fight to remedy the achievement gap. Her book giveaways are primarily focused on low-income children, she said. For example, families' income level is a contributing factor to the achievement gap, according to the National Education Association.

"We want all children to have equal opportunities to enjoy books, learn and succeed in life," she said. "We know that not everybody is fortunate enough to have high quality books in their home."

Reading specialist Marianne Baker at Agnor-Hurt, who has been in the education field for three decades, said she has never seen a company supporting children to this extent. She added that starting to read at an early age is important for children.

She noted that children who do not have a story time are less accustomed to listen or enjoy books as they come to a formal school setting. More engagement gives them the enthusiastic buy-in that a school would want a child to have, she said.

Agnor-Hurt is a Title I school, Baker added, so the donation was much needed. Students have books at school, but the Soho donation allows them to have books at home as well.

"The joy on these kids faces was beyond words," Baker said of the book donation. "It was really a wonderful experience."

For Largader, the effect is less of a financial boost than an expansion of the books options available, he said.

"What I like about this program is that it's giving us different books," he said.