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Miami-Dade community leaders fight high illiteracy with mountain of books

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Teachers and librarians at Miami Dade College's downtown campus pack up donated books for students at high-poverty schools.

As a reading coach at a struggling inner city elementary, Judith Case knows the value of a bright, shiny new book.

“Our books are old, and students know that the books are old,” said Case, who works with younger children at Dr. Robert B. Ingram Elementary in Opa-locka. “New books bring new interest.”

Case was among dozens of teachers and school librarians who lugged boxes, suitcases and crates to Miami Dade College Monday to fill with some of the 40,000 glossy Disney books stacked on tables for students at high-poverty schools. The

books, among 120,000 trucked to Miami-Dade this week, were donated as part of a growing effort to boost reading in a community where illiteracy is a continuing issue.

Along with the books made available by the local teachers union, two other groups — The Children's Trust and Property Markets Group — donated another 40,000 books each. Those books will be distributed through a new Miami Dade College program at bookshelves placed at public facilities like the juvenile courthouse, where children will be able to read them and take them home.

The program, called Read to Learn Books for Free, goes through about 3,000 new books a week.

“This is the critical issue of the 21st century,” said United Teachers of Dade President Fedrick Ingram. “Our kids must learn to read.”

Improving Miami-Dade's literacy rate would seem to be a difficult task. A 2003 study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that more than half of adults in Miami-Dade — 52 percent — struggled to complete basic skills like reading a menu or a bus schedule. In comparison, the rate in Broward was 22 percent and statewide, it was 20 percent.

Miami-Dade schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said he thinks those rates “still stand.”

He's pushing another new literacy program endorsed last month by the school board. It seeks to partner with community organizations who offer needs-based after-school literacy programs for both children and their parents. Carvalho said the district will provide matching grants to organizations with sound plans.

On Monday, teachers —who often spend their own money for new books — sorted through a mountain of Disney books about princesses and superheroes Monday in search of something to grab students' attention.

Debbie McEathron sought out books on CD for her 18 kindergartners at Poinciana Park Elementary. She hoped the Disney fairies and superheroes would catch their interest, maybe even outside of school.

"I'm just trying to put books in our kids' hands," she said. "Our kids don't necessarily have books at home."

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