

## Low-income children get new books

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More local children are getting their hands on new books, thanks to a national group with southern Mecklenburg ties.

First Book, a nonprofit that distributes books to students from low-income families, started a local chapter last year.

Since then, First Book-Charlotte has raised enough money for about 20,000 new books, Chairwoman Colleen Ludington of Matthews said.

"The fact that we're able to decide locally where the money goes, it's wonderful," she said. "We almost get to be like Santa Claus."

First Book was founded in 1992 and has distributed more than 50 million books to children in more than 1,300 communities nationwide.

Ludington, a children's author who donates her royalties to charity, launched First Book-Charlotte in February 2006 with Erin McClure, literary facilitator for Pinewood Elementary in southwest Charlotte.

The organization collects money from businesses and charities and uses it to buy books from publishers at a discounted rate of about \$2.50 each, Ludington said.

"When it comes to books, they're (normally) expensive," she said. "We can do so much that folks couldn't tap into at those price points."

First Book-Charlotte then distributes the books, either all at once or in a cycle of six to 12 books per student per year, to Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, after-school programs and local youth groups.

Charlotte-area businesses and organizations have jumped in to help. SunTrust Mortgage donated enough for more than 2,200 books, it said last week.

And the Kiwanis of Pineville-South Meck recently donated about \$500, Ludington said.

Area children are reaping the benefits. The English as a Second Language program at Nations Ford Elementary received grants from First Book's local and national chapters for about 1,000 books, CMS spokeswoman Cynthia Robbins said.

McClure said the group hopes to help local children overcome the challenges they face to become better students.

"Most of them do not have any books at home, and without that reading material, it makes it very difficult to practice reading," she said. "We're trying to combat these students' struggling in school by giving them something to practice with."

### Want to Help?

First Book-Charlotte is always looking for volunteers, and it accepts applications for grants on a rolling basis. To apply, at least 80 percent of a group's students must receive free or reduced-price lunches. Details: [www.firstbookcharlotte.org](http://www.firstbookcharlotte.org).