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Donated books connect poor county to the world

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Every year since 2005, the students in the poorest county in Texas have seen their schools receive a bounty of award-winning children's books and literary sets for the holidays.

Enough books, perhaps, to inspire dreams among the children of Rio Grande City in the colonias of Starr County, which lies along the Rio Grande.

That's a powerful motivator for [Farmers Branch](#) resident **Karen Furlong** to keep organizing the Starr Readers book campaign in North Texas for the border town where she spent summers with her grandparents.

"Literacy is crucial to a quality of life, but loving to read is just as important," said Furlong, a flight attendant for a private jet company.

It's why she works diligently at buying children's books that will inspire the students to imagine a different world than the one they grow up in. Most of the families live with no sewer service and little health care.

This year, the libraries of nine elementary schools will receive a complete set of children's books by Pura Belpré Award winners – outstanding Latino/Latina writers and illustrators whose work celebrates Latino culture – and sets of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.

In addition, every first-grader will get his or her own copy of *Moosletoe*, second-graders will receive *Mouse's First Spring*, and every fifth-grader will receive *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*.

She will accept donations up until next week. Donations by check to Starr Readers can be mailed to 3125 [Damascus](#) Way, Dallas, Texas 75234.

Furlong's donation is a godsend, said **Adelina Villarreal**, library director for Rio Grande City school district.

"Times are tough right now, and we can't re-sort the libraries as we'd like to," Villarreal said.

Texas legislators are already talking about budget cuts in education as they get set to grapple with a multibillion-dollar budget deficit in the upcoming legislative session. But times may get even tougher for the state's poorest school district.

Rio Grande City is facing an unexpected flood of students in its elementary schools.

It's one of the unforeseen effects of the drug wars raging on the other side of the river. Many families in the Mexican towns of Camargo and Ciudad Miguel Alemán have fled to escape the violence, many of them into Starr County.

"A lot of people who live in the colonias could make lives really easy for themselves and their children if they would run drugs," Furlong said. "It's to their decency and pride that the majority won't do it."

Furlong leaves Dec. 14 to deliver about 3,000 books. She keeps a watchful eye on where the donated books are placed and the environment in which they're used when she drives down each year.

All the books are new and are bought with deep discounts from Scholastic, which now partners with the nonprofit foundation Furlong has created.

But the books are especially anticipated this year, Villarreal said.

"A lot of these kids don't know what a library is because Mexican schools don't have libraries," Villarreal said. "For many of them, it will be the very first book of their own."