

The Washington Post

Book Club

Reviews and recommendations from critic Ron Charles.

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(Courtesy of First Book)

A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned that restrictive new laws in right-wing states might inadvertently kill off classroom libraries. Teachers justifiably nervous about attracting the attention of governors collecting dry sticks might decide to play it safe and keep extra books out of their rooms. Such political interference and the paranoia it generates will hit the poorest kids especially hard. The Department of Education reports that 2.5 million U.S. students are enrolled in school districts where there are no libraries.

For years, teachers have been filling those book deserts on their own. First Book, a nonprofit that has distributed hundreds of millions of books to low-income children, surveyed more than 1,200 educators. About half the teachers said they had spent more than six years building their classroom libraries; about a quarter of them had spent more than a decade.

In many cases, these are not large collections – some teachers said they had fewer than 50 books – but classroom libraries, close at hand and well curated, have been shown to significantly improve children’s reading habits.

Susan Neuman, an education professor at New York University, writes that after more than two years of disruption caused by the pandemic, “classroom libraries will be the linchpin in reigniting student passion for reading.” But she goes on to note, “A quality classroom library is not simply a collection of books stacked in some far-off corner of the room. There is a science to creating a classroom library, a set of characteristics and design features that may strongly influence whether or not the classroom library will be used to its full potential.”

To help teachers meet that potential, Neuman and First Book have released “**The Literacy Rich Classroom Library Checklist**.” It asks yes/no questions to help evaluate a classroom library, and it provides suggestions for designing the physical space, managing the collection and getting extra funding.

Parents will find some of this information relevant to their own home libraries, too. And all of us should advocate for teachers to have the funds *and the freedom* to build rich book collections in their classrooms.