NEW ORLEANS - The rebuilding of hundreds of Gulf Coast schools and school libraries damaged or destroyed last year by hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma is vital to the recovery of the coast, first lady Laura Bush said Monday.

"Good schools will help bring families back to the Gulf Coast," she said in opening remarks to a national town hall meeting at the American Library Association annual conference at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. It was the first major convention in New Orleans since Katrina flooded 80 percent of the city Aug. 29.

The first lady, a former school librarian whose Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative awarded $500,000 last month to 10 hurricane-affected schools in Louisiana and Mississippi, said schools are "perhaps the most important part of the Gulf Coast recovery."

She also called the ALA convention "an important step in New Orleans' rebirth." An estimated 18,000 librarians are attending the seven-day event.
that ends Wednesday.

The first lady said the task of rebuilding Gulf Coast schools is "unprecedented," noting that the U.S. Department of Education put the number of public and private schools damaged or destroyed by the hurricanes at more than 1,100. She said the rebuilding of school libraries will be a "long-term endeavor" that "must start now."

Before concluding her brief remarks, the first lady encouraged her audience to "reach out to corporations in your community and ask them for help." She did not take part in a roundtable-style town hall discussion moderated by Lester Holt, anchor of "NBC News Weekend TODAY."

At the conclusion of the town hall meeting, Scholastic President Dick Robinson and Dollar General Chief Executive Officer David Perdue called on corporations and foundations nationwide to commit funding and resources to rebuilding and revitalizing school libraries across the Gulf Coast.

Robinson said libraries should be "the center of our children's learning" and can be "vital educational and community hubs for schools and their surrounding communities during the recovery period and beyond."

Donna Gambrell, regional director of the Office of the Federal Coordinator
for Gulf Coast Rebuilding, said the private sector can help rebuild school libraries by making financial contributions or providing technical assistance.

"We look forward to working with private industry," she said.

Louisiana Recovery Authority Chairman Norman Francis said donations can be made to the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation in Baton Rouge.

ALA president-elect Leslie Burger, director of the Princeton, N.J., public library, said the opportunity is there to make school libraries better than they were before the hurricanes.

"We can't go back to pre-Katrina days," Francis, who also serves as president of Xavier University of Louisiana, agreed. "We've got to do it better."

"There is an urgent need and real opportunity to re-examine the current state of school libraries and the role they play in fostering reading as learning, as districts look not just to rebuild but to reform schools," Robinson said.

Keith Curry Lance, library research service director at Colorado State
Library, said libraries that are well-staffed, well-stocked and well-funded translate into higher student test scores.

"The school library is critical to student achievement," Linda Williams, president of the American Association of School Librarians, added. She said libraries also help to "bring things back to normal for the students."

"For many children, especially low-income children, the loss of the school library has meant the loss of their primary access for books and exposure to - and practice with - electronic information resources," Williams said.

Jennifer Koehl, library media specialist at St. Tammany Junior High School in Slidell, said libraries "enhance students' and teachers' learning."

Koehl said the library lost everything to Katrina and is having to "rebuild from scratch." The school recently received a $60,000 grant for books from the Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative of the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries.

The foundation will make two more rounds of grants, in August and at the end of the year.

Library grants
Louisiana Libraries getting money in the first round of grants from the Dollar General School Library Relief Effort:

Seventh Ward Elementary, Abbeville, $15,000

JB Nachman Elementary, Alexandria, $5,000

Staring Education Center, Baton Rouge, $5,000

Belle Chasse High, Belle Chasse, $5,000

Freshwater Elementary, Denham Springs, $5,000

Grand Caillou Elementary, Dulac, $10,000

Erath Middle School, Erath, $5,000

West Jefferson High, Harvey, $5,000

Grand Lake High, Lake Charles, $10,000

Lake Charles-Boston High, Lake Charles, $10,000
M.E. Norman Elementary, Morgan City, $5,000

Benjamin Franklin High School, New Orleans, $10,000

N.O. Charter Science and Math, New Orleans, $5,000

Brock Elementary, Slidell, $5,000

Salmen High, Slidell, $15,000

Slidell High, Slidell, $5,000

St. Tammany Jr. High School, Slidell, $10,000

Ville Platte High, Ville Platte, $5,000

Zachary High, Zachary, $5,000