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# Online Reading Checkup Could Help Rebuild Charlotte Children's Skills

*WFAE / By Ann Doss Helms*

10-12 minutes

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Munro Richardson knew the 2021 reading scores for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools were bound to look bad after a year of remote and hybrid classes. And as expected, the Black, Hispanic and low-income students who were already trailing their classmates [dropped further behind](#).

For Richardson, who's president of [Read Charlotte](#), the biggest surprise was how much of a hit all the other students took, too.





Munro Richardson, executive director of Read Charlotte

"I think about the pandemic as an equal opportunity destroyer of children's literacy skills," Richardson said. "We saw the negative impact from third grade all the way through eighth grade. It was devastating for children all across our community."

Richardson found that CMS students saw a bigger drop on crucial third-grade reading scores than other large North Carolina districts, such as Wake and Guilford counties. The [results released earlier this month](#) also show CMS third-graders also saw a bigger drop than nearby districts such as Union, Cabarrus and Gaston counties.

Early reading skills are widely viewed as the foundation for future achievement. So an erosion of that foundation is devastating.

"We're going to need a massive collective impact effort to help get

our children back on track," he said. "CMS cannot do this alone."

## Online Tool Shows Promise

Charlotte's major foundations and corporations brought Richardson to town six years ago to figure out solutions. For years he's been reviewing data on reading programs. Most promise more than they can deliver, as CMS and the [state of North Carolina have seen](#).

But now Richardson says he sees a glimmer of hope.

A lot of recent attention has been focused on the science of reading. North Carolina is preparing to train all K-3 teachers in [a program called LETRS](#). Richardson says that's valuable, but he compares it to a doctor taking physiology classes.

"You want to make sure they understand physiology — how the body works," he said. "But simply understanding how the body works doesn't prepare you to be a surgeon."

What excites Richardson is the work of California-based researcher [Carol Connor](#), who looked at how to diagnose individual strengths and weaknesses and prescribe activities tailored to each student. Using that work, Read Charlotte developed a program called [Reading Checkup](#), which its partners rolled out during the

pandemic last year.

"I think of it as sort of a GPS for the adults in that child's life to help them know how to navigate that child to reading proficiency," Richardson said.

## **Quizzes Yield Simple Results**

Charlotte's [Black Child Development Institute](#) is one of the groups introducing Reading Checkup to families. Shenera Mackey, an educator on the staff, recently had her 5-year-old son, Jeremyah Warner, demonstrate.

First he took a quiz on recognizing letters and the sounds they make. "Click on the letter C, as in cat," the program prompted. When he got it wrong, he got some clues and another chance: "That's not quite right. Remember, the letter C curves around. Let's try again."

When he finished with letters, there was a second quiz on reading and understanding words: "Two of these words go together and one does not belong. Click the two that go together: Girl. Rock. Stone."

The checkup translates a child's skills to an age and grade level. Jeremyah's results show he's about where you'd expect for

someone starting kindergarten. He needs to work on basic phonics before he can move on to reading words.

## **Activities Are 'The Gold'**

Of course, there's no shortage of reading tests for students. Every school already assesses skills on a regular basis. Advocates of the Reading Checkup say the value is the way it puts the results into simple terms for parents and then spells out activities to help their kids.



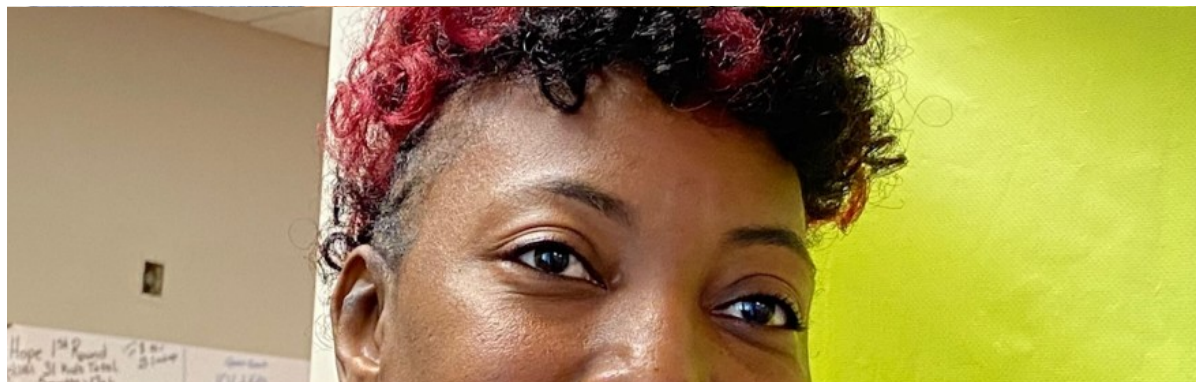
The Black Child Development Institute introduced families to the Reading Checkup at curbside events during the pandemic.

"We use the flash cards and do a matching game," Mackey said. The program suggests how much time each day she should work with Jeremyah and how much time he should work on his own.

Parents don't need expertise to use the checkup, according to institute President Devonya Govan-Hunt.

Last year she and her team set up outside grocery stores and gas stations to reach families who were trying to teach their kids from home. They passed laptops through car windows and helped people use their smartphones to log on.

"So that grandmother or that parent who's not tech-savvy, who might be struggling with literacy themselves, can still exercise the activities that are in this tool that are still being suggested," Govan-Hunt said. "And that's the gold in it."







Ann Doss Helms

Devonya Govan-Hunt, president of the Black Child Development Institute-Charlotte.

Some of the recommended activities are online, but others involve old-school hands-on material.

"We give them this bag of material, this literacy kit, to go along with it We don't want them to have to purchase anything," she said. They get paper, crayons, index cards, pencils — "the whole 9 to make sure they have everything they need to carry out these activities."

## **Something Parents Can Control**

Govan-Hunt says parents are worn down by talk about failing schools and plunging pandemic test scores. They hear people say their kids might do better if they had more home support.

"This is an opportunity for them to really control something," she said. "You might not be able to control what they think about you, what they say about you. You might not be able to control whether somebody extends time on your rent this month. But you can control how many new words you introduce to your child."

The Black Child Development Institute and other Read Charlotte partners, such as the YMCA, are also training tutors to use the checkup.

This early in the year, with the delta variant raging, it's still unclear how much access volunteers will have to school buildings.

Richardson, the head of Read Charlotte, says all the groups he works with are eager to recruit volunteers.

"I think what's going to happen this year is a mix of in-person and remote tutoring," he said. "One of the difficulties for everyone is we don't know what's going to happen with this virus and we don't know what is going to happen with schools being open."

As of last week, CMS was admitting volunteers for in-person tutoring only if the district has a memo of understanding with a group working on academic skills.

## **Tools For Classrooms**

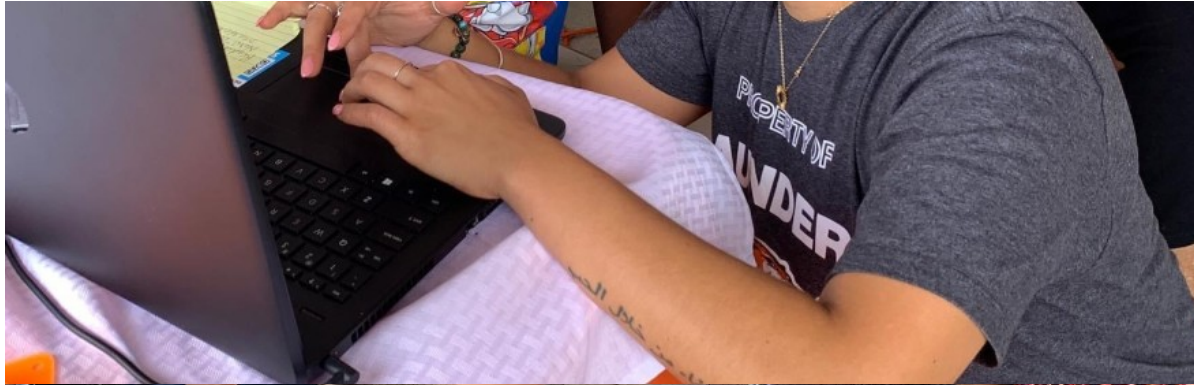


Richardson bases his enthusiasm for Carol Connor's programs on her years of research, including seven randomized control trials. Before she died in 2020, Connor launched a company called [Learning Ovations](#) and a program known as [A2i](#), for Assessment To Instruction. A2i is designed for classrooms. Richardson says it can be adapted to work with any curriculum, including [the EL program CMS has adopted](#).

There's been talk of piloting A2i in some CMS elementary schools, but that's not locked in. In Iredell-Statesville Schools, Union Grove Elementary is launching A2i this year. And Read Charlotte is working with [Bradford Prep](#), a K-12 charter school, to act as Charlotte's pioneer.

"One of the things that was very interesting about it is that it looks at the growth for every student, including the students that might be above grade level," said Kelly Painter, head of the northeast Charlotte charter school, which has about 1,500 students.





Parents and children use the Reading Checkup at a Black Child Development Institute event.

Bradford Prep students also lost ground during the pandemic. Painter says she likes the detailed suggestions for teachers working with each student, similar to the Reading Checkup recommendations for parents.

"I do think it provides teachers with information in a way that we've never seen it presented before," she said.

It's too early for Bradford Prep to have results. Munro Richardson says 17 school districts in California, Pennsylvania and New York state have been using A2i long enough to have a first batch of test scores, but those scores have been delayed by the pandemic.

Still, Richardson says he's more confident of this than anything else he's seen.

"It really does work," he said. "I think we found the needle in the haystack that will help the adults in kids lives be able to meet their needs."

## How To Help

- Any Mecklenburg County resident can use the **Reading Checkup** with children from pre-K to third grade: [ReadingCheckup.org](https://www.readingcheckup.org).
- **Read Charlotte** can provide information about opportunities for people who want to volunteer or donate and for families who want support for their children: [ReadCharlotte.org](https://www.readcharlotte.org).
- **Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools** is working with three groups to provide tutoring: [Heart Math Tutoring](https://www.heartmath.org) and two groups focused on reading: [Augustine Literacy Project](https://www.augustine.org) and the [Helps Education Fund](https://www.helpseducationfund.org). The district is also working on arrangements with other groups to provide volunteer opportunities related to academics. Contact [CMS](https://www.cms.edu) or individual schools to learn more.
- The **United Way of Central Carolinas** can provide information about [volunteer opportunities](https://www.uwcc.org) in Mecklenburg and four nearby counties.



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