



Read
C H A R L O T T E

2021 ANNUAL LETTER



A LOOK BACK

at our work in 2021 and what's to come in 2022.





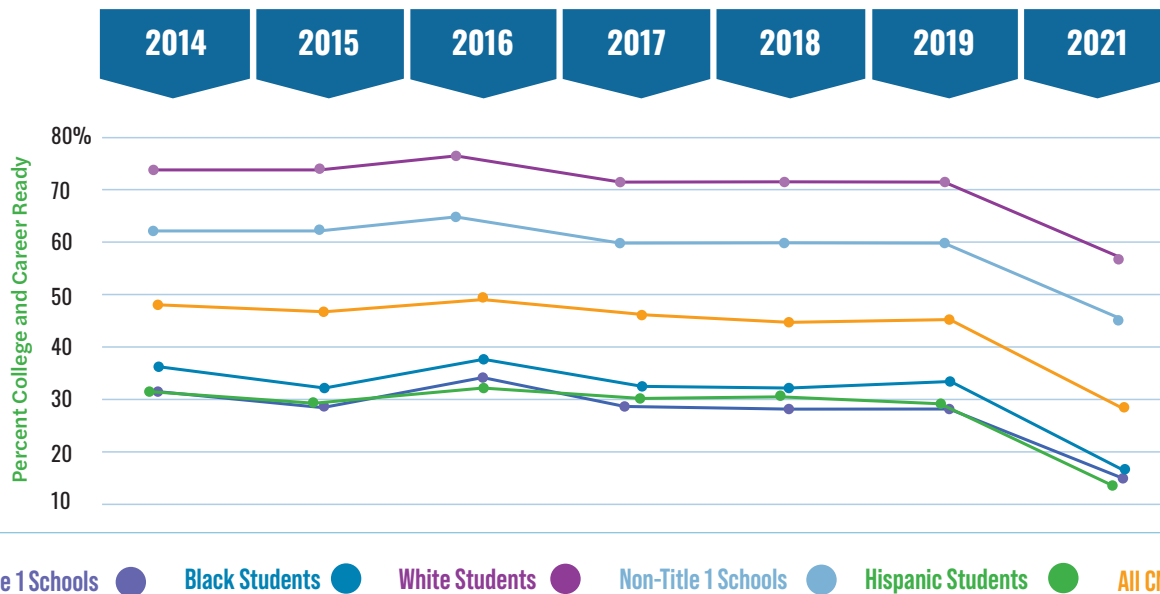
To the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Community:

2021 marked the second calendar year that our community was affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic. For the first three-quarters of the year, we were uncertain how much and in what ways the pandemic would affect children’s education, particularly early literacy. Some commentators predicted a “K-shaped recovery” for education, in which advantaged children would quickly recover and thrive, while disadvantaged children would continue to struggle and decline in their reading.

When North Carolina released Spring 2021 third grade reading test scores in August, we learned the true impact was worse than we imagined. The pandemic spared no one. It was an equal opportunity destroyer of early literacy, equally affecting children across racial and socioeconomic groups and in every part of Mecklenburg County. However, children who started at lower levels of reading achievement before the pandemic – particularly Black and Hispanic students and students who attend Title 1 schools – fell to the lowest levels of achievement since the start of Read To Achieve.¹

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Percent of CMS third graders at *College and Career Ready* on NC EOG reading assessment



These numbers, while frightening, do not fully convey the magnitude of the impact of the pandemic that our educators and community partners are witnessing. Only 22% of CMS students in Title 1 schools started Kindergarten in Fall 2021 meeting grade level expectations for early literacy.

¹Read To Achieve is the 2012 legislation passed by the North Carolina General Assembly that requires all third grade students to demonstrate grade-level reading mastery before promotion to the fourth grade.



For non-Title 1 schools it was only 45%. In Grades 1 to 3, roughly 40% of CMS students started the school year on level for reading. Across K-3, very low levels (15%-30%) of English language learners started the year with on-level reading skills. School staff understandably have a limit on their capacity to provide additional support to all the students who need them.

Fighting for our children's futures

We believe an effective response to this challenge lies primarily in three areas:

Classroom instruction. Well-trained and well-equipped teachers are the best front-line response we have to the pandemic's effect on children's reading development. Supporting teachers with the best evidence-based strategies to get children's reading back on track is an imperative. Equally important are strong processes for soliciting teacher feedback and continuous improvement. Finally, it's important to remember the effect of the pandemic on educators themselves. They are heroes in our community and deserve our support, encouragement, and gratitude.

Tutoring. There is incredibly robust evidence to support the positive impact of tutoring on children's reading development. For early literacy, we focus on three skill areas: word reading (phonics), reading fluency, and meaning-making (vocabulary and comprehension). All three areas work together to produce strong readers. It's important to get the right tutoring to the right child at the right time. Strong research shows the impact of moving quickly to provide intervention as soon as a child shows the need for help (rather than waiting to see if they improve) is **five times greater** than the typical literacy intervention. Individualizing tutoring is key. Needless to say, we have a very strong preference for high-impact tutoring models that have been rigorously evaluated to show that they work.

Family empowerment. We define "empowerment" as providing families with the knowledge, confidence, and resources to support literacy at home. Parents and caregivers are children's first teachers. This work begins at birth (some would argue before birth) when parents talk to and with their children. This early language development is the first building block for early literacy, which later becomes augmented by learning the alphabet and how the symbols in our written language represent the sounds of our spoken language. Providing parents with user-friendly resources that help them meet the individual needs of their children must be the cornerstone of our local efforts to help children get back on track in reading.

Supporting programs and strategies across these three areas – classroom instruction, tutoring and family empowerment – is the most effective way our community can get early literacy back on track.

Read Charlotte's role

Read Charlotte does not run programs or directly teach children to read. Our partners do. Read Charlotte is a capacity-building intermediary, strengthening the ability of adults in children's lives to help them learn to read. We make it easier for adults to take actions proven to help children learn to read. We have a three-pronged approach to our work:

1. Use the very best current science on how children learn to read (the "Science of Learning to Read") and how adults teach children to read (the "Science of Teaching Reading"). These are related, but not exactly the same. Knowledge of how children learn to read in general is not the same as understanding how to meet the specific needs of an individual child, group of children, or classroom of children.



2. Identify the best interventions supported by rigorous, experimental studies that predict what types of positive outcomes we can expect. We carefully examine the research behind everything we support. Several of the evidence-based strategies and approaches we support have been popularly overlooked, underutilized, and/or underdeveloped. This is a key source of our confidence that our community can turn around literacy outcomes.
3. Use Implementation Science and Improvement Science to drive strong execution and produce positive results on reading outcomes. It's not enough for an intervention to work in research settings. It must be robust enough to survive the "messiness" of the real world. We focus on closing the "research-to-practice" gap with strong tools to guide execution. We are obsessed with identifying and avoiding failure so that our children can experience successfully delivered programs and strategies.

If I had to use one word to sum up our approach, it would be **rigor**. This applies equally to the strategies we support as well as their implementation. Our children deserve every ounce of rigor that our community can muster to help them recover from the impact of this horrible pandemic.

In 2021, Read Charlotte's work focused primarily in four areas spanning birth through third grade: (1) K-3 classroom instruction; (2) K-3 tutoring; (3) K-3 summer learning; and, (4) birth through third grade family empowerment to support literacy at home.

K-3 Classroom Instruction

In 2021, we were very active behind the scenes in advocating for the use of the *A2i Professional Support System* to assist K-3 teachers to individualize reading instruction for K-3 students. We have tracked the research behind *A2i* since Summer 2017. It has the strongest evidence we've seen for how to provide successful literacy instruction. *A2i* is a web-based platform that combines quick, adaptive assessments of word reading, vocabulary, and comprehension with evidence-based algorithms for grades Pre-K-3. *A2i* helps teachers identify the individual reading needs of each child, providing recommendations for how to use classroom time with existing curricular materials for every child in their classroom (behind, on-level, and advanced). ***A2i is the most promising, high-impact solution we've seen with strong evidence of improving K-3 outcomes – in both experimental and real-world settings.***

Two charter schools began to use *A2i* in Fall 2021. We reached an agreement with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools for a pilot of *A2i* in six elementary schools to begin in early 2022. You can learn more about how *A2i* works online (<https://www.learningovations.com/a2i>). Contact me if you'd like to learn more about the research and mechanics behind *A2i*. This is the number one strategy I recommend these days to anyone I talk with around the country about early literacy.

Tutoring

As mentioned earlier, high-impact tutoring is one of the few proven strategies to help children get back on track with reading. We've had several organizations providing tutoring for a number of years, such as Augustine Literacy Project-Charlotte, UNC Charlotte, and the Helps Education Fund. The problem is that we don't have enough of it. We especially don't have enough phonics-based tutoring. Last year, we began to address this problem by helping after school programs use a community-based version of the *A2i* system called *A2i After School*. *A2i After School* has the same core components of the classroom-based version, but is modified for use by non-educators. In addition,



it includes automatically-generated parent reports for each child (in English and Spanish) that are updated when students are re-assessed. In 2021, the Read Charlotte team devoted countless hours to the development of training, coaching, resources, and data systems to support local nonprofits to use this platform to guide the delivery of high-impact tutoring within existing after school programs. This work is organized around six-week tutoring cycles intended to help children recover reading loss and accelerate to grade-level reading proficiency. By the end of the year, we successfully recruited, trained, and coached four nonprofit groups to begin using the *A2i After School* system in their after-school programs serving 352 students. We had four more groups in the pipeline to start in 2022.

In January 2021, at the request of then CMS Chief Academic Officer Brian Kingsley, we assisted Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools to organize an effort to expand the *HELPS* fluency tutoring program, operated by the Helps Education Fund. The District had specific dollars from the North Carolina Governor's office that could be used for tutoring as part of the *North Carolina Education Corps*. We played a behind-the-scenes technical role in helping with the successful application to the *North Carolina Education Corps*. Further, we helped CMS and Helps Education Fund get organized to hire paid tutors in Spring and Summer 2021. A total of 324 children were served by *HELPS* tutoring through this effort.

In October 2021, CMS released a three-year, \$50 million request for proposal (RFP) for K-12 out-of-school tutoring (after school and summer). This sum comes from the District's allotment of American Rescue Plan funds. As the RFP was released, we partnered with the YMCA of Greater Charlotte to co-host multiple meetings with nonprofit agencies to help coordinate responses among and across organizations to submit proposals to CMS. (In February 2022 we learned that every single group we helped coordinate had their proposal accepted by CMS.)

Summer Learning

In Summer 2021, we partnered again with the YMCA of Greater Charlotte in supporting the *Summer Literacy Infusion (SLI)* project, which adds one hour of literacy a day to summer camps. Read Charlotte made a grant of \$84,011 from the Transformation Fund to the YMCA to manage this program. Fourteen agencies (in addition to the YMCA's own summer camps) participated at 19 different sites. A total of 330 campers were served outside of YMCA sites, of which 94% maintained or improved their reading skills over the summer. This was the fourth summer of this successful partnership with the YMCA to implement this low-cost, high-yield program we adapted from a model in Philadelphia. One unexpected benefit from this effort was that a few of the Summer 2021 *SLI* agencies joined in on our *A2i After School* tutoring effort. They really liked the coaching and support they received over the summer and were eager to continue it during the school year.

Family Empowerment

In 2021, we focused on expansion of the *Reading Checkup*, the family-focused version of the *A2i* system we first introduced to Mecklenburg County in Summer 2020. The *Reading Checkup* empowers families to identify their Pre-K-3 children's reading and vocabulary levels and get individualized recommendations on what they can do at home. We curated or created nearly 400 easy-to-use skill-building activities, which are embedded in the *Reading Checkup*. In the first quarter of 2021, we ran a competitive small grant program from our Transformation Fund to learn promising community-based innovations to promote family engagement with the *Reading Checkup*. Five funded organizations began work in January. Two of the five groups focused on Pre-K; the others focused on elementary-aged children. One of the best examples of local innovation using these resources is the *Reading Bridge* program created by the Charlotte Bilingual Preschool. Another community partner, the Charlotte affiliate of the Black Child



Development Institute, has integrated the *Reading Checkup* into their family outreach work. We codified these promising practices in a web-based Family Portal that we now make available to local organizations that seek to promote family empowerment for early literacy. Through December 2021, we had a total of 3,956 completed “Reading Checkups” by families in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

Last year, we continued support for other key birth-to-five family empowerment strategies. Since 2017, we’ve partnered with Reach Out and Read Carolinas to expand the availability of the *Reach Out and Read* program in doctors’ offices across Mecklenburg County. Using *Reach Out and Read*, doctors “prescribe” books and language during well-child visits. In 2016, only 29% of children under five years in low-income households in Mecklenburg County were served by this evidence-based program. By 2020, with support from Atrium Health and Novant Health, this number was strategically increased to 70%. The goal is to maintain this level of service and increase it to 75% by 2024.

In 2017, we introduced the evidence-based *Ready4K* text messaging program to Mecklenburg County. *Ready4K* sends tips and advice about early childhood development and literacy to families of children from birth to Kindergarten three times a week. In 2020, we began a strategic partnership with Smart Start of Mecklenburg County. Last year, 1,066 families were enrolled and using *Ready4K*. Of these, 676 (63%) were from birth-three years – the critical years for early brain development. A parent survey of *Ready4K* users found that 97% reported stronger relationships after using *Ready4K* activities. Moreover, 98% reported that *Ready4K* activities helped their children express and manage their feelings. (Based upon a total of 181 respondents – about a 17% response rate.)



Looking Ahead to 2022

Despite the uncertainty and continued disruptions in the external environment, we stayed focused on our core work in 2021. We strengthened our ability to help more Pre-K-3 children at scale in our community through existing out-of-school programs. As we look ahead to 2022, we are primarily focused in four areas:

1. **Tutoring** – we will focus on direct support to nonprofits providing access to free, high-impact tutoring. This includes in-school, after school, and summer programs. We will continue to advocate for the importance of tutoring in the community. This will not be a quick endeavor and will require sustained investment and effort over multiple years.
2. **Pre-K-3 Instruction** – we plan to continue advocacy and support for *A2i* use in K-3 classrooms, and explore potential use of *A2i* in Pre-K classrooms in 2022. Having reviewed dozens of interventions, *A2i* simply is the best solution for improving classroom literacy instruction we have seen over the past seven years.
3. **Family Empowerment** – we will continue to focus on providing families with the knowledge, confidence, and resources to support their children’s reading development at home. This includes key strategies such as *Reach Out and Read*, *Ready4K* and *Reading Checkup*. We will also focus on connecting family empowerment with local efforts to provide high-impact tutoring.
4. **Scale** – we will focus on scaling tutoring to reach more children. In 2021, we identified 60 priority CMS elementary and K-8 schools. From 2014-2021, an average of 61% of third graders in these schools were not proficient in reading. In November 2021, we found an average of only 13 students were receiving high-impact tutoring in these very same schools. Our community can and must do better. Read Charlotte is focused on increasing access to free, high-impact tutoring year-round across these schools.



Since the start of *Read To Achieve*, only five (out of roughly 60) CMS Title 1 schools have ever had 50% or more of their third graders score at *College and Career Ready* on the North Carolina end of grade (EOG) reading assessment. We believe that we can lift this number to 30 or more by 2025—but only if our community works together. We have the knowledge and resources to individualize reading supports inside and outside of the classroom. What’s needed is the collective will to get it done and our community working together like never before.

I hope you will stay with us in this fight of a lifetime for our children’s future.

Sincerely,

Munro Richardson
Executive Director, Read Charlotte



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