

# Read Charlotte Transformation Network Leads Mini Reading Revolution At Ashley Park

By Liz Rothaus Bertrand

These days, when Marc Dickmann walks through the halls of Ashley Park PreK-8 School, he notices a new air of positivity and hopefulness. A former outreach pastor, Dickmann has been working to improve quality of life on Charlotte's west side for over 17 years. Now as the Director of Education and Community for Freedom Communities at Ashley Park, he oversees a flurry of volunteer initiatives and literacy-related activities at the school. He also serves as the site co-lead for the **Read Charlotte Transformation Network**, a program piloting in 12 CMS schools this year, and says this targeted and collaborative approach to improving literacy is unprecedented.

The Transformation Network aligns resources with community partners and uses research-based practices to dramatically improve third grade reading. This measurable, transformative change is spurred by four strategic objectives:

1. Helping children build home libraries.
2. Empowering families with effective home literacy routines.
3. Providing high-quality, targeted tutoring.
4. Stopping summer reading loss.

Historic segregation and discrimination have led to fewer available resources for families in West Charlotte. At Ashley Park, approximately 90% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and only 10.3% of third graders achieved reading proficiency (which Read Charlotte defines as a score of 4 or 5) on the NC EOG test in 2017.

Ashley Park is near its goal of 90 reading volunteers working one-to-one weekly with all kindergarteners and with third graders who are struggling with reading fluency. But it's not only the uptick in volunteers that is significant: it is their training and tools that make a difference. Tutors use proven, research-based methods and chart their scholars' progress weekly.

**"I'm grateful that Read Charlotte doesn't take a Band-Aid approach to systemic issues," says Dickmann. "[T]hey have a burning fire in their bellies to work with the school district and community partners to bring about the kind of system change that will bring lasting, hopeful outcomes for our scholars."**

"I didn't know what to expect knowing I had to follow this very structured program when working with the kids," says Alan Barnes, an Ashley Park HELPS volunteer. "But by the second week it was that process that made me feel empowered and encouraged."

Read Charlotte also works with partners Promising Pages and Scholastic to get books into the hands of kids through Book-A-Paloozas, where scholars can pick three books to take home, and Book Swaps which keep books in circulation. "We know our scholars at Ashley Park live in neighborhoods that are book deserts," says Dickmann. "Kids can't read books at home if there aren't books to read."



Another important aspect of the program is empowering parents and other caretakers with tools to use at home to promote reading and literacy. Ashley Park will host at least one Family Literacy Night per quarter, including Active Reading workshops, so parents and caregivers can learn to read with their scholars rather than to them. By incorporating a few simple, evidence-based steps, they can transform the reading experience to improve children's language skills, vocabulary and comprehension.

"I personally am so grateful for the financial generosity of corporations and foundations toward Read Charlotte and the work they are helping to mobilize in our city," says Dickmann. "To make a significant impact, these efforts must continue and expand. Charlotteans will need to mobilize in ways we have never seen before. It's our greatest opportunity and our biggest challenge."