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Contacts: Liz Chandler, 704-552-6565
liz.chandler@lgapr.com
Stacey McCray, 704-552-6565
stacey.mccray@lgapr.com

Charlotte Leaders Launch \$5.5 Million 3rd Grade Reading Initiative
Goal to Double Percentage of Students Reading at Grade Level by 2025

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – Feb. 3, 2015 – Business, civic and philanthropic leaders from 14 of Charlotte's top companies and organizations announced the launch today of a \$5.5 million 3rd grade reading initiative called *Read Charlotte* that ultimately could steer millions of dollars into programs that make the greatest impact on children's literacy.

Read Charlotte is a collaborative, community-wide movement to double the percentage of 3rd grade students reading at grade level – from 40% now to 80% in 2025 – by starting at birth, working together and investing only in programs that work.

"Mecklenburg County has a serious reading crisis," said Katie B. Morris, *Read Charlotte* governing board member and chair of The Belk Foundation, who was a leader in the formation of *Read Charlotte*. "More than half of all 3rd graders in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools are not reading at grade level, and while there's a concentration in lower-income areas, these children come from every single school, neighborhood and income level in this county."

"If children can't read, they lose confidence, fail in school and struggle in life, all at a cost our community and their families can't afford," she said.

With a \$5.5 million funding goal for the first five years, \$4.6 million will be contributed by nine lead funders who have made multi-year commitments: Bank of America, The Belk Foundation, CD Spangler Foundation, The Duke Endowment, Duke Energy, Foundation For The Carolinas, PNC Foundation, PwC Charitable Foundation and Wells Fargo.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, City of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, Mecklenburg County Library and UNC Charlotte College of Education are providing in-kind support.

"Organizations like ours want to target their giving toward programs that can prove they make an impact," said Jay Everette, governing board member and senior vice president of government and community relations at Wells Fargo. "*Read Charlotte* will solely be focused on reading throughout this community, and hopefully will have influence over which programs are funded either through *Read Charlotte* or by corporations, foundations and others based on data and evidence of what works."

Rhett Mabry, a vice president with The Duke Endowment, agrees. "This is an important opportunity for us to come together to determine the best ways to serve children and their families," he said. "By focusing on proven interventions, we can set our sights on making a transformative impact in the community."

The governing board of *Read Charlotte* comprises lead funders, the superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and representatives from UNC Charlotte College of Education, Mecklenburg County, the City of Charlotte and the community. The governing board will set vision, develop strategy and oversee funding.

A lean central staff of three, led by an executive director, will facilitate and administer activities, gather and share data, build public support, advance policy and mobilize funding. Mecklenburg County Library will provide office space for the executive director and staff.

Four working groups of experts and community members will plan, prioritize and inform the governing board by being aligned around four critical times in a child's life that can affect reading proficiency.

- *Talk with Me, Baby* (promoting early language development)
- *Ready for School* (expanding quality early childcare and Pre-K)
- *Schoolhouse* (supporting teachers and classrooms)
- *Summer Learning* (keeping kids reading during the summer)

Foundation For The Carolinas will serve as fiscal agent for *Read Charlotte*, and will manage the operating budget for the initiative, along with a Transformation Fund that will help existing organizations be more innovative, collaborative and data-driven, and will seed new programs that meet unmet needs.

Targeted co-funding will have the greatest potential to make the largest impact because *Read Charlotte's* research will influence how many corporations, foundations, local government and other funders invest millions of dollars focused on childhood literacy.

Morris said *Read Charlotte* will benefit the community in these ways:

- Strong unified voice for early reading development, beginning at birth
- Influential leadership for the long run
- More informed funding decisions based on data and evidence across the community
- Alignment of services / focus on the "hand-off" from early learning to CMS
- Community education on what matters for reading
- Public-private partnership: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, County, City, corporations, foundations and service providers aligned together.

Read Charlotte will use the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other indicators to measure progress against the goal. NAEP is the largest continuing and nationally representative assessment of what American students know and can do in core subjects. Its results serve as a common metric for all states and selected urban districts.

Read Charlotte's governing board includes: Weston Andress, *PNC*; Rachel Banks, MD, *CMC-NorthPark Family Medicine*; Charles Bowman, *Bank of America*; Rev. Jerry Cannon, *CN Jenkins Memorial Presbyterian Church*; Ron Carlee and Holly Eskridge, *City of Charlotte*; Ann Clark, *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*; Dena Diorio, *Mecklenburg County*; Jay Everette, *Wells Fargo*; Patrick Graham, *Urban League of Central Carolinas*; Rhett Mabry, *The Duke Endowment*; Michael Marsicano and Brian Collier, *Foundation For The Carolinas*; Ellen McIntyre, *UNC Charlotte College of Education*; Rosie Molinary, *professor and author*; Katie B. Morris, *The Belk Foundation*; Anna Nelson, *CD Spangler Foundation*; Crawford Pounds, *PwC*; and Stick Williams, *Duke Energy*.

"Reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade is the most important predictor of high school graduation, career and life success," said Morris. "We have to do better. Our future depends on it."

For more information and to find nomination forms to serve on one of the working groups, go to www.ReadCharlotte.org.

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