

WFAE 90.7

Grim CMS scores reflect serious challenges with reading, and signal a different type of success

WFAE | By [Ann Doss Helms](#)

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Once again, a Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board meeting began with bleak numbers: As of midyear testing, only 8.1% of Black third-graders are reading at the level CMS is aiming for. Interim Superintendent Crystal Hill told the school board there's little chance of reaching this year's goal: 30% of Black third-graders reaching the college-career ready mark on end-of-grade reading exams. That's a higher bar than grade-level proficiency and signals they're on a clearer path to longterm success.

"My best estimate would be between 17% and 25%," she said.

This year's third-graders took an especially hard hit from pandemic classroom disruptions: They went home for the final quarter of their kindergarten year and spent most of first grade moving between remote and hybrid classes. The school board has zeroed in on reading scores of Black and Latino students because they already faced racial disparities and were especially hard hit by disrupted learning.

Hill said she expects next year's third-graders to rebound faster, but that's little consolation for the kids who are moving toward the years when reading skills are essential for all subjects.

Still, Tuesday's review of the reading data was a victory of sorts. The board spent more than an hour peppering Hill with questions about strategies to help the children read better: How well is tutoring working? What supports are being offered to help teachers with kids who struggle? Are there specific strategies targeting Black students? They didn't spend time rationalizing the results, posturing about who's to blame or peppering the superintendent with their own theories about how to teach.

Hill said she's sending reading specialists into the schools with the biggest challenges to spend as much as three hours a day, three times a week, working in classrooms. She talked about using successful schools as demonstration sites where other educators could visit and learn. She highlighted data showing that 37% of this year's third-graders are good at deciphering words but can't yet understand what they're reading. Those children have the best hope of being pushed into the successful reading range by the end of this school year, she said.

“Tomorrow we have 36 instructional days left. Which means that every single day counts,” she said Tuesday.

And the session began with recognition of third-graders who had made big gains in reading, along with the teachers, administrators and family members who helped them get there. Board Chair Elyse Dashew urged her colleagues to “keep your questions strategic, keep them anchored to the text and keep those faces in your hearts as you speak.”

New book by CMS consultant explains the approach

The CMS school board sessions focusing on academic outcomes are the result of two years of [work with consultant A.J. Crabill](#). Most of it was tediously procedural – except when Crabill dropped none-too-subtle hints that the board needed to get a better academic strategy from Superintendent Earnest Winston or find a new superintendent (the board fired Winston in April 2022).

A few hours before last week’s CMS board meeting, Crabill announced the release of his book [“Great on Their Behalf: Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective.”](#) The failures he writes about aren’t the sensational kind where boards bankrupt their school systems or members trade insults, lawsuits and punches. They’re the quiet kind of failure that often masquerades as success: Boards that behave professionally, manage their finances responsibly and focus on the demands of their constituents. But in their focus on adult issues, Crabill contends, too many boards neglect the thing that should be every board’s central mission: Making sure students learn what they need.

“It’s not enough to be a professional board,” Crabill told me last week. “You also have to be an effective board.”

Crabill has played a number of roles in running schools: He chaired the Kansas City (Missouri) school board and is currently conservator of the DeSoto (Texas) Independent School District. That’s a person [appointed by the state](#) to oversee troubled districts. He works with the [Leadership Institute of Nevada](#) and the [Council of the Great City Schools](#), where his job is supporting large urban districts.

Crabill doesn’t name districts when he cites examples in his book ... though astute Charlotte readers might guess the identity of the district that hired “a great guy everybody loved” as superintendent, then fired him when “it became increasingly evident that the area of academics was not his strength.”

CMS is on the journey

When I asked Crabill how he’d rate the CMS board’s work so far, he said the work calls for continuous improvement and no one reaches perfection.

“CMS is definitely an example of a board that is on the journey. It is nowhere near perfection,” he said. He praised the board’s intense focus and said that bodes well. “But every single day will be a test. Will I prioritize what’s possible for adults, or will I prioritize what’s possible for children today? And every day they get to either fail or pass the test of being intensely focused on improving student outcomes.”

Crabill says boards that are serious about improving student outcomes have to do two things simultaneously: “They have to speak truth to what is the reality for our children, even if this is not flattering.” At the same time, he says, they have to celebrate the children who make gains, even if they’re not the traditional academic stars who normally gather accolades. “Because our children are not a deficit. Our children are putting in the best work that they can, all day every day.”

CMS certainly fits that pattern: The focus on data-driven goals has brought a relentless series of reports on areas where a majority of students fall short. And the recent celebration of local students mirrors what Crabill says his district in DeSoto does.

The CMS board has sustained its focus on student outcomes through an election that replaced most of the board. Crabill says the district is benefitting from an administration that has learned the process and “an interim who seems unusually competent at this particular line of work.” The board has made it clear that it’s looking for a permanent superintendent who has demonstrated results and can meet the demands of continued focus on meeting the academic goals.

Crabill continues to work with CMS board members and top leaders. He says he won’t be involved in choosing who the next superintendent is, but he’s actively guiding them on how to “weed out the charlatans who’ve never actually put points on the board for children.”

I told Crabill it’s been interesting to see all those dull procedural sessions start translating into real-life governance. He said success for the board may be bad news for reporters.

“Effective governance tends not to have a lot of sex appeal in terms of what makes headlines,” he said. “Often people don’t want to report on ‘Board effectively served children this week.’ That’s just not something that’s going to be scintillating.”