

2022

21st CCLC Evaluation Report



DC Freedom Schools 2022 Summer Strong Programs

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Executive Summary

The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Center program to provide after-school and summer activities for children living in the poorest neighborhoods of Washington, DC. This evaluation report covers the last year of a multi-year grant and describes the implementation and outcomes of the *CDF Freedom Schools’* program for children attending two sites in Summer 2022: the DC Dream Center and the Social Justice School. This summer programming was supplemented with additional funding from the Washington DC mayor’s office, here referred to as the *Summer Strong* program.

CDF Freedom Schools faced considerable challenges implementing its extended time learning programs during the COVID-19 public health crisis which closed all DC Public Schools and schools nationally in March 2020. As public schools struggled to deliver their instructional program through distance learning, *CDF Freedom Schools* (and other after-school programs) (Mitchell, 2020) strived to meet families and children’s most immediate needs first and then to develop an enrichment program that could be delivered online to those scholars and families they were able to reach.



The impact of COVID-19 continued into the 2021-22 school year with some students still experiencing interruptions in their in-person instruction and *CDF Freedom Schools* struggling to maintain regular participation in after-school programs. Schools that had previously housed *CDF Freedom Schools* summer programs were reluctant to commit to this arrangement in Summer 2022. In order to best serve the neediest communities in DC, CDF identified two sites that could best support the *CDF Freedom Schools* model. The DC Dream Center, a community recreation center in Ward 7, was chosen to serve students in grades K – 5 from some of the same neighborhoods that had attended *CDF Freedom Schools* in prior summers (e.g., Boone and Plummer Elementary Schools). The Social Justice School, a charter middle school in Ward 5, was selected to serve scholars in grades 5 – 8. This charter school has previously offered a summer program based on the *CDF Freedom Schools’* model and offers a curriculum that features similar themes.

While registering 125 children from the neighboring communities for possible participation, 76 children actually participated in any program activities and ultimately 63 children were regular participants in the *CDF Freedom Schools’* summer programs. Data collection included staff interviews; child, parent and staff surveys; and a reading assessment for a sample of scholars at both program sites. These data allowed us to pinpoint program successes and challenges. The data also indicate that the program had a positive impact on the instructional reading levels, character traits, and social-emotional skills of the children who participated and on the attitudes of the Servant Leader Interns who staffed the program.

The experiences of the 2022 *DC Freedom Schools* summer program also suggest recommendations for future programming. These recommendations fall in the areas of staff training, parent engagement, and coordination with program sites.

Introduction

Communities continue to explore the best ways to support children during the summer to enhance the impact of school year classroom instruction. The U.S. Department of Education funds 21st Century Community Learning Center programs to provide students who are at risk of academic failure with opportunities for academic and personal enrichment. These 21st CCLC programs offer safe environments for students during extended learning time, after school and in the summer.

The Children’s Defense Fund has provided summer and after-school programs since 1995 and currently supports *Freedom Schools* programs in 75 cities and 26 states, including the District of Columbia. Through their program model, they strive to empower youth to excel and believe in their ability to make a difference in themselves and their families, and through social action, to make a difference in their communities and beyond. The program endeavors to enhance children’s motivation to read and their attitudes about learning by exposing them to a research-based, multicultural curriculum featuring culturally-relevant books. The books are designed to increase racial pride and encourage children to higher achievement, featuring heroes, heroines and settings that reflect the children’s own culture and history. At the same time the program connects families to the appropriate resources in their communities and promotes engagement in their child’s education. The program focuses on enriching the whole child, by providing children and families access to the following services:



- High quality academic and character-building enrichment through a research-based, multicultural, social justice and conflict resolution curriculum (Integrated Reading Curriculum)
- Parent and family involvement through parent meetings and engagement opportunities
- Civic engagement through lessons about social action and participation in civic events (e.g., CDF’s National Day of Social Action)
- Nutrition, physical and mental health by sharing resources for accessing food, physical fitness, mental health care and other basic needs.

In addition to the program’s focus on the literacy and civic engagement skills of its student participants, the program strives to develop the civic consciousness of its staff, most of whom are college students preparing for teaching or other social service professions, through intergenerational servant leadership development.

In September 2020 the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) received a multi-year grant to fund *Freedom Schools* after-school and summer programs serving children in the poorest communities of Washington, DC. This evaluation report covers the implementation and outcomes of the 2022 *DC Freedom Schools’* summer program, serving children and families at the DC Dream Center in Ward 7 and at the Social Justice School, a charter middle school located in Ward 5. CDF received additional funding from the Washington DC Office of the Mayor to help support their summer programs, also known as *Summer Strong*. CDF is particularly concerned about the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and school closures on Black families and resulting academic losses. As recent research shows, this has resulted in depressed academic achievement for many students, especially students of color from low-resource communities (McKinsey & Co., 2020). This presents an extra challenge to summer programs to not only prevent summer learning loss but also to help children catch up from any learning lost during the pandemic.

Evaluation Framework and Design

National studies have demonstrated that 21st CCLC programs can be effective in providing after school and summer program supports to low-income families and their children and can improve academic outcomes for participants (e.g., Afterschool Alliance, 2015; American Institutes for Research, 2015; Mathematica Policy Research, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education has identified nine characteristics present in high-quality expanded learning programs¹:

- Goal setting, strong management and sustainability
- Quality staffing
- Attention to safety, health and nutrition issues
- Effective partnerships with CBOs, juvenile justice agencies, law enforcement and youth groups
- Strong involvement of families
- Enriching learning opportunities
- Linkages between school year and summer personnel
- Monthly program activities and timeline
- Evaluation of program progress and effectiveness.

CDF has incorporated these characteristics in its *Freedom Schools'* program model, as illustrated in Table 1.

The 21st CCLC grant program requires a traditional implementation and outcome evaluation that examines program goals, services provided, and the impact of these services on the youth participants, their families and the staff interns. While the *CDF Freedom Schools* model incorporates all nine characteristics present in high quality expanded learning programs, this evaluation will focus on implementation and outcomes with respect to five of these characteristics:

- Quality staffing
- Strong involvement of families
- Enriching learning opportunities
- Linkages between school year and summer personnel
- Monthly program activities and timeline.

In addition, the 21st CCLC grant application (OSSE, 2020) requires that grantees include measurable objectives and targets in their evaluation and monitoring plan. CDF developed three measurable objectives and targets relevant to their summer programs:

- **Measurable Objective #2:** *50% of regular attendees will show improvement in their reading skills during the 5-week summer program, as measured by the Basic Reading Inventory.*
- **Measurable Objective #3:** *60% of regular attendees will show improvement during the 5-week summer program in their attitudes toward reading, learning (academic engagement)*

¹ USED, *Working for Children and Families: Safe and Smart After-School Programs* (April, 2000).

and self-efficacy (empowerment) as measured by the Child Survey.

- **Measurable Objective #4:** *Programs will offer at least three academically-enriched student/family events designed to increase parent engagement and knowledge of their student's academic program, as measured by program activity logs and surveys.*

Table 1. Characteristics of High Quality Extended Learning Programs Found in CDF's DC Freedom Schools

Characteristics of High-Quality ELPs	Program Features of CDF Freedom Schools Summer Programs
1. Goal setting, strong management and sustainability	CDF has more than 40 years of experience managing public, foundation and corporate grant-funded programs across the U.S. with repeated funding from multiple sources.
2. Quality staffing	Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) are recent college graduates or current college students with interest, training and experience working with children; staff members receive program-specific training (including one-week national training) and maintain 1:10 ratios with students.
3. Attention to safety, health and nutrition issues	Program is conducted on community campuses by staff with thorough background checks, following COVID protocols; children are served nutritious meals and snacks. The program shares resources with families for addressing food security and mental health needs.
4. Effective partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs), Juvenile Justice agencies, law enforcement and youth groups	CDF partners with schools, faith- and community-based organizations, municipalities, colleges and universities to offer their programs at no cost to participants. In Summer 2022, <i>DC Freedom Schools</i> partnered with HBCUs (e.g., Howard University) and CBOs (e.g., Urban Alliance) to recruit SLIs; the DC Dream Center and the Social Justice School for program sites; and several vendors to provide enrichment activities.
5. Strong family involvement	Program includes virtual and in-person meetings for parents (e.g., workshops) and whole family events (e.g., closing recognition celebration); parents are surveyed on program priorities and connected to appropriate community resources.
6. Enriching learning opportunities	Program includes the research-based Integrated Reading Curriculum (featuring high-interest, culturally relevant books with strong characters), STEM-themed enrichment activities, and culturally appropriate enrichment activities (e.g., African dance, drumming).
7. Linkages between school year and summer personnel	Program staff members (SLIs and site coordinators) work with summer staff at each site to coordinate use of shared space, implement COVID protocols, and in the case of the Social Justice School, serve the school's rising grade 5 – 8 students.
8. Monthly program activities and timeline	Program follows a weekly schedule for students with different activities each day of the week and a culminating field trip for scholars, and offers weekly workshops for parents.
9. Evaluation of program progress and effectiveness	The summer program includes a proposed program evaluation and monitoring plan; collection of child, parent and staff outcome data; and evaluation reports on program implementation and effectiveness.

These objectives and their respective targets are also reflected in the evaluation design. Consequently, the evaluation included the following data sources:

- Basic Reading Inventory administered to a sample of scholars during Week 1 and again in Week 5 of the summer program
- A child survey of character traits (academic engagement, self-empowerment, civic engagement, conflict resolution) and social and emotional learning skills administered in Week 1 and again in Week 5 of the summer program
- Interviews with program staff (director, site coordinators) at the end of the summer program
- Surveys of parents and program staff (site coordinators, interns) at the end of the summer program
- Program attendance.

Program Overview

While the pandemic prevented in-person programs in summer 2020 and in-person after-school programs in school year 2020-21, in-person programs were once again allowed to operate at DCPS school sites in school year 2021-22 and summer 2022. The school buildings that serve the communities CDF worked with in summer 2021 (Boone ES, Plummer ES, Nalle ES and Miller MS) were not available for outside summer programming in summer 2022. Instead, CDF worked with these school communities to find alternative summer program sites. They settled on Ward 7's **DC Dream Center** to serve neighborhood scholars in grades K – 5. CDF also identified Ward 5 as a community that would benefit from summer programming and **The Social Justice School** as a site that had previous experience with the CDF Freedom Schools program model and emphasizes similar themes in its school year program.

The Social Justice School combined summer programming for their existing and incoming students with the *CDF Freedom Schools* model to provide a program for rising grade 5 – 8 students, also referred to as the *Ella Baker Summer Academy*. The two sites differed slightly in program schedules, including the number of program days, the hours per day, and whether any virtual sessions were needed. These schedule variations are shown in Table 2.



Table 2. Schedules for Program Sites

Program Site	Days in Session	Total Program Days	Program Hours per Day	Virtual Sessions
DC Dream Center	Jul 5 – Aug 5	24	7	Yes
The Social Justice School	Jul 5 – Aug 4	22	5.75	No

While the schedules differed slightly for the two program sites, both sites maintained the same critical components of the *CDF Freedom Schools* model:

- Harambee!** Each day started with a live Harambee!² led by the site coordinators and SLIs to pull the scholars together in a communal gathering that set a motivational, high-energy tone for the day.
- Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC).** Each morning, staff led scholars through the IRC, using multi-cultural, social justice-themed books selected to engage and motivate scholars to read. At the DC Dream Center, SLIs used Levels I (grades K-2) and II (grades 3-5) of the curriculum. Social Justice School teachers and SLIs partnered to implement Level III (grades 6-8) of the IRC during the morning English Language Arts block (1.25 hours). Teachers also provided math instruction in the mornings.
- Enrichment.** The program provides enrichment activities designed to build character and support social-emotional development. Each afternoon, SLIs and the program partner vendors led the scholars through hands-on enrichment activities specifically selected to appeal to the age groups served and build on themes encountered in their reading. These included the arts (e.g., music, choir, West African drumming and dance, drawing & painting), crafts/trades (e.g., sewing, international cooking, gardening, cosmetology), and fitness activities (e.g., basketball, football, dodge ball). In addition, scholars participated in field trips on most Fridays. DC Dream Center scholars enjoyed the Anacostia Aquatic Center, the National Aquarium, and swimming. The Social Justice School scholars benefitted from trips to Planet Word, Howard University, the DC Technology Lab and go-cart racing.
- Social Justice Themes.** The overarching theme for *DC Freedom Schools* is “I can make a difference.” This theme is expanded upon as scholars examine how they can make a difference in themselves, their family, the community, the country, the world, and more generally through social action. Scholars explored two themes for this year’s National Day of Social Action:³ “Climate justice is racial justice” and “Food justice is environmental justice.” Sites incorporated “climate change” or “food justice” in their activities. For example, the DC Dream Center scholars learned about ecology and animal life in the three DC area rivers (Anacostia, Potomac, Chesapeake) at the Anacostia Aquatic Center.



² *Harambee* is a Kenyan tradition of community self-help events, e.g. education, fundraising or development activities. *Harambee* literally means "let's pull together" in Kiswahili.

³ All CDF Freedom Schools students nationwide participate in the National Day of Social Action (NDSA), a collective action to bring about social change.

Scholars also participated in a protest at city hall regarding food deserts and the need for improved access to fresh fruits and vegetables in their community.⁴

School Community Profiles

The school communities served by *the CDF Freedom Schools'* summer programs share characteristics of the poorest wards in Washington, DC. The Social Justice School serves families in Wards 5, 7, and 8, all low resource communities with large numbers of Black students and large percentages of single parent households. The DC Dream Center serves children in Ward 7, most who attend Boone ES or Plummer ES during the school year. Table 3 shows the student profiles of Boone and Plummer Elementary Schools.

Table 3. Demographic Profile of Boone Elementary School

School	Demographic Characteristics			
	At Risk Students	Race/Ethnicity	2022 PARCC-ELA % meeting grade level expectations	2022 PARCC-Math % meeting grade level expectations
Boone ES	81%	93% Black 5% Hispanic	9%	1%
Plummer ES	67%	85% Black 13% Hispanic	23%	7%

The Social Justice School is a Title 1 charter school in Ward 5. In school year 2021-22 it served 105 students in grades 5-8. According to the DC School Report Card, 64 percent of its students are “at-risk” and 100 percent of its students qualify for free/reduced lunch. SJS has not yet released their April 2022 PARCC test results.

Program Enrollment and Attendance

DC Freedom Schools recruited families in the school communities served by the DC Dream Center and families whose children attend The Social Justice School. They registered children via a website that provided information about the program. Family outreach was led by a Family Engagement Coordinator, supported by the site coordinators who had already established relationships with their respective school communities, and supplemented by social media (e.g., Facebook posts). Recruiting efforts were successful and a total of 125 children either registered online or enrolled at the program site. *CDF Freedom Schools'* sites are offered at no-cost to families or children and many families sign up, still uncertain of their summer plans. Over the course of the summer, 76 different children attended multiple sessions of the program and 63 children were regular participants, attending more than half of their site’s scheduled program days.⁵ Participation levels were also reflected in the average daily attendance⁶ at each site: 79% at the DC Dream Center and 72% at the Social Justice School. See Table 4.

⁴ See recent efforts to improve access to fresh foods in Ward 7 (e.g., *Black-owned stores work to end D.C.’s food deserts*, [The Washington Post](#), July 7, 2022.)

⁵ Attendance at the DC Dream Center was interrupted by a COVID closure for 4 days in July. Virtual programming was offered to provide the full 24-day program. Those scholars who did not attend the virtual sessions were credited with 20 program days and scholars who contracted COVID and did not return were credited with 15 program days.

⁶ Average daily attendance (ADA) is a common indicator of participation levels in education, calculated as $(\text{number of days present}) / (\text{number of days present} + \text{number of days absent})$ across all attendees.

CDF Freedom Schools' summer programs were available to children in grades K through 8, based on the grade levels served by the program site. The DC Dream Center served children who had completed grades K – 5 in school year 2021-22. The Social Justice School serves middle school students grades 5 - 8 and thus provided *CDF Freedom School* opportunities for current or incoming students in grades 5 - 8. The CDF Freedom Schools' program continued to enroll slightly more to girls than boys, with more male participants in the elementary grades and more female participants in the middle school grades. Overall 54% of program attendees were girls. Most attendees were of Black race/ethnicity and from low income families, consistent with the student populations of their school communities. See Table 5.

Table 4. Summer Program Enrollment and Attendance by School Site

Program Site (Program Days)	Number of Scholars			Average Daily Attendance
	Registered	Enrolled/Attended Multiple Sessions	Regular Participant	
DC Dream Center (24 days)	61	41	35	79%
Social Justice School (22 days)	64	35	28	72%
TOTAL	125	76	63	75%

Table 5. Demographic Profile of Program Attendees

School Site (All Attendees)	Number of Scholars				
	Grade K-2 (Level I)	Grade 3-5 (Level II)	Grade 6-8* (Level III)	Female	Male
DC Dream Center (n=41)	15	26	0	19	22
Social Justice School (n=35)	0	0	35	22	13
TOTAL	15	26	35	41	35

*This included 8 scholars who did not participate in the IRC due to summer remediation classes and 4 scholars who as rising fifth graders participated in the grade 6 summer curriculum.

Staffing and Training

Groups of scholars were organized by grade level and staffed at a maximum ratio of 10:1 with 10 Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) across the two program sites. College students who had previous experience working with children were recruited to serve as SLIs; most were returning SLIs. All staff completed CDF's national *Freedom Schools'* training program (this year delivered virtually in June) and local training specific to the *DC Freedom Schools*. At the Social Justice School, SLIs worked side by side with summer school teachers in the classrooms. This summer the Social Justice School launched a teacher training initiative⁷ which provided grounding for teachers in the *Freedom Schools* model and co-facilitation strategies for both teachers and SLIs. Each program site was managed by a site coordinator with previous *Freedom Schools'* experience. Summer staffing also included a Family Engagement Coordinator who supported parent engagement activities at both sites.

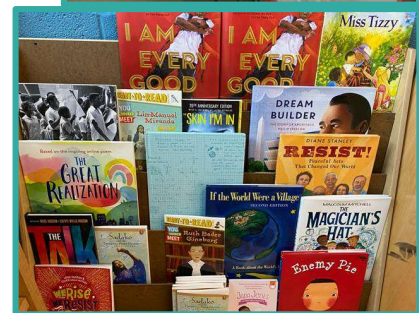
⁷ The CDF Freedom Schools' Ella Baker Child Policy Teacher Training Institute

Implementation Successes and Challenges

Program Successes

Based on information from interviews with staff and surveys of the children, their parents and the staff, the *DC Freedom Schools* summer program appears to have been successfully implemented. This success is reflected in the following information from staff interviews and surveys:

- **Enrichment activities.** Because of the successful partnerships with community vendors, *DC Freedom Schools* was able to offer a wide array of diverse activities that students were motivated to engage in. Cited most often were:
 - West African dance, a positive outlet for scholar energy
 - African drumming which helped scholars understand the beauty of this cultural tradition
 - Sewing which allowed scholars hands-on design of traditional African garments using authentic African fabrics
 - Activities connected to the social justice themes such as the DC Dream Center gardening project which supported both the climate change and food desert initiatives.
- **Collection of books.** Once again, *Freedom Schools* offered a diverse selection of books about topics that students could relate to in their own lives (e.g., conflict resolution) and in current events (e.g., racial profiling, political figures). These books stimulated rich group discussions.
- **Family engagement coordinator.** While COVID continued to present some challenges in getting parents involved in their children’s summer programming, the family engagement coordinator brought considerable passion and creativity to her mission of engaging families and offered a model for parent engagement to continue during the school year.



Surveys administered to scholars and their parents at the end of the program reflected general satisfaction with the program. Among the 37 scholars surveyed at the end of the program:


- Most scholars agreed or strongly agreed that *Freedom Schools helped me prepare for school.* (97.3%)
- Most scholars agreed or strongly agreed that *I was excited about going to Freedom Schools.* (88.9%)

And while only 11 parents responded to an end-of program survey, their responses also indicated general satisfaction with the summer program (see all parent survey responses in Appendix B, Figure 3):

- All respondents *would recommend the Freedom Schools program to other parents* (100%).
- All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that *my child was excited about going to Freedom Schools* (100%).
- Most respondents agreed that *Freedom Schools helped their child prepare for school* (91%).

Program Challenges

These program successes took place despite challenges cited by staff in three areas:

- **Site dynamics.** The *DC Freedom Schools* found themselves having to fit their summer program into the existing structure at each program site. At the DC Dream Center, rather than use the recreation center building, *CDF Freedom Schools* was offered an adjacent neighborhood house, the Southeast White House. While the house provided a warm and welcoming environment, the rooms had to be adapted to accommodate the 10:1 scholar to staff ratio. At the Social Justice School, the *CDF Freedom Schools* program was combined with the existing summer school program which required setting up joint training for the teaching staff and SLIs as well as establishing administrator and teacher buy-in of the *Freedom Schools* model.
 
- **Training.** The national *Freedom Schools* training was once again held virtually and while schools were still in session. This prevented staff members who were teachers during the school year adequate time to fully participate in the training. Returning staff commented that they didn't benefit as much from virtual training as the previous in-person training because they could not see the program practices modeled in action or learn from other SLIs. Staff also mentioned the need for additional training in classroom management and the difficulty working with children who were not yet reading.
- **Parent engagement.** The *Freedom Schools* program is built around parent engagement. While this year's summer program provided weekly parent meetings, the meetings at the Social Justice School had to be held virtually to accommodate its commuter population. And despite surveying parents on topics of greatest interest, it continues to be a challenge to get parents to participate in such weekly meetings on a regular basis. This was reflected in the relatively small number of parents who responded to the end-of-program parent survey, which did not include any of the parents at the Social Justice School.

Positive Impacts on Children

Through the program's critical components (Harmabee!, Integrated Reading Curriculum, enrichment activities, and social justice themes), *DC Freedom Schools* summer programs strive to support scholars to maintain or improve their reading skills as well as their character and social emotional skills. The program evaluation plan for CDF's 21st CCLC grant included two measurable objectives to reflect these desired positive outcomes for children enrolled in their summer programs:

- **Measurable Objective #2:** *50% of regular attendees will show improvement in their reading skills during the summer program, as measured by the Basic Reading Inventory.*

- **Measurable Objective #3:** *60% of regular attendees will show improvement during the summer program in their attitudes toward reading, learning (academic engagement) and self-efficacy (empowerment) as measured by the Child Survey.*

Reading

The Children’s Defense Fund has implemented its patented Integrated Reading Curriculum in its *Freedom Schools* summer programs across the nation to provide its scholars with reading materials and instruction at four grade level spans, K–2 , 3–5 , 6–8, and 9–12. Books are selected to engage young readers in stories featuring characters and themes that are relatable and inspiring. SLIs receive national training on how to implement the IRC, using its 300-page curriculum guide.

CDF’s national evaluation of the *Freedom Schools’* summer programs uses the Basic Reading Inventory⁸ to measure scholar’s instructional reading levels at the beginning of its 5-week summer program and again at the end of the summer program. The BRI assesses sight vocabulary (with graded word lists), decoding skills (with graded reading passages) and reading comprehension (with corresponding comprehension questions) to estimate the child’s instructional reading level, with materials at pre-primer, primer, and grade levels 1 through 12.⁹

Summer reading programs for children in low-achieving schools have in recent years focused on preventing summer reading loss¹⁰ as well as strengthening children’s foundational reading skills. With the pandemic, DC-area students experienced a shortened 2019-20 school year, mostly virtual instruction in school year 2020-21, and some interrupted instruction in school year 2021-22. National and local assessments conducted in 2022 show marked declines in reading scores since before the pandemic (see NAEP, 2022 and DCPS, 2022). Consequently, we have focused our assessment efforts on the extent to which scholars either maintained or improved their instructional reading levels over the course of the 5-week summer program. The BRI was administered individually to children in attendance during Week 1 of the 5-week programs at the DC Dream Center and the Social Justice School and again to those children in attendance during Week 5.¹¹

The capacity of the testing to measure true change in scholars’ reading skills was limited by several factors, most notably the short duration of the summer program and among some scholar’s, a lack of interest in reading in a testing situation only 4 weeks after the original assessment and during the last week when program staff and scholars were engaged in clean-up and closure activities. Among the 55 scholars available to test during the Week 1 and the 37 scholars tested in Week 5, we saw considerable variation in initial reading levels and moderate growth over the 5-week program.

Considerable Variation in Initial Reading Levels

At the DC Dream Center which served children who had just completed grades K – 5, initial reading levels ranged from scholars who had just completed grades K and 1 and were not yet reading, to grade 1 and 2 scholars reading below and above grade level, to grade 3 – 5 scholars who were mostly reading above grade

⁸ Johns, Jerry L. (2012). Basic Reading Inventory, 11th Edition: Pre-Primer through Grade Twelve and Early Literacy Assessments, Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2012.

⁹ The BRI is similar to other literacy screening assessments that measure a student’s frustration, instructional and independent reading levels. See for example Virginia’s Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (2015).

¹⁰ A number of studies have shown that low-income and minority students undergo larger summer reading losses than their middle-class and White classmates (e.g., Kim, 2004).

¹¹ The BRI was administered by four experienced assessment specialists trained specifically on the BRI. At both sites all scholars in attendance during the pre- and post-test dates were tested (Dream Center n=26 and n=18; Social Justice School n=28 and n=21).

level . The Social Justice School served students who had just completed grades 4 through 7 and planned to attend the charter school in grades 5 – 8 in Fall 2023. All scholars received the Level 3 Integrated Reading Curriculum which is designed for students reading at grade levels 6 – 8. Initial reading levels ranged from scholars who had just completed grade 4 and were reading at or above grade level to grade 5 – 7 scholars, most of whom were reading above grade level, up to grade level 12. Such variation in reading levels presented challenges for staff in accommodating a wide range of reading levels in each grade level group. This variation is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Reading Levels at Program Start

IRC Level	No. of Scholars Reading Below, At or Above Grade Level at Program Start		
	Below grade Level	At grade Level	Above grade Level
Level 1 (Grades K-2)	6	0	5
Level 2 (Grades 3-5)	1	1	13
Level 3 (Grades 6-8)	5	6	17

Moderate Improvement in Reading Levels

Despite these initial challenges, we found that scholars’ instructional reading levels improved overall by approximately 7 months on average over the 5-week summer program; the difference between pre and post-test scores was statistically significant ($p < .01$, paired t-test, $n=37$). This improvement included average growth of 4 months at the DC Dream Center (grades K-5) and 11 months of growth at the Social Justice School (grades 6-8), as can be seen in Table 7 and Figure 1.¹²

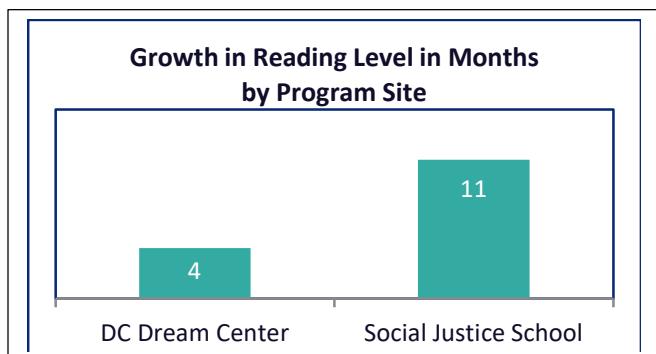
The analysis of reading growth was limited by several factors:

- *Among the scholars who had just completed kindergarten or grade 1 in the spring, a few were non-readers at the beginning of the program and still not reading at the end of the program. The program is not designed to teach children to read but rather to build upon their foundational reading skills. Non-readers were omitted from this analysis.*
- *About three-fourths of those scholars tested at baseline were available for post-testing in Week 5 (18/26 scholars at DCDC and 21/28 SJS scholars).*
- *We eliminated 2 scholars who only attended on days with special events. This left 37 scholars who were already reading in Week 1 and on average improved their reading skills by 7 months over the 5-week program.*

Table 7. Baseline and End-of-Program Reading Levels

Program Site	Instructional Reading Levels	
	Baseline Week 1	End of Program Week 5
DCDC (Grades K-5) (n=18)	3.50	3.89
SJS (Grades 6-8) (n=19)	6.74	7.84

Figure 1. Growth in Instructional Reading Levels

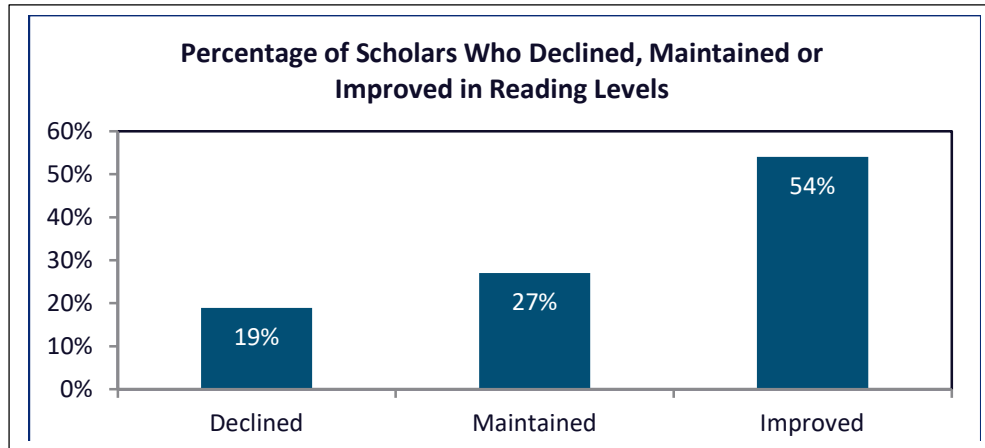


We also examined reading improvement in the context of the grant’s measurable objective, that is, the

¹² Growth is measured in grade levels and based on a 10-month school year. Thus average growth of .39 at DCDC is equivalent to .39 of a 10-month school year or 4 months. Average growth of 1.1 at SJS is equivalent to 11 months.

percentage of scholars whose instructional reading level was maintained or improved over the 5-week program. Most scholars maintained (n=10) or gained (n=20) in instructional reading level and did not experience summer reading loss (n=7); see Figure 2. Thus 81% of scholars maintained or improved their instructional reading level, exceeding the 50% target suggested by measurable objective #2.

Figure 2. Percentage of Scholars, Maintaining or Improving Reading Levels



To summarize, these data show that 81% of scholars participating in the two *CDF Freedom Schools* summer programs maintained or gained an average of seven months in their reading levels, which is comparable to gains shown in national results.¹³

Child Attitudes

In previous national evaluations, CDF administered a Child Survey to gauge the impact of their program on the promoted **character traits**: academic engagement, civic engagement, self-empowerment, and conflict resolution. Starting in 2020, the same 15 survey items were also used to measure the impact of the program on the **social and emotional learning (SEL) skills** considered so important in the healthy development of youth: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.¹⁴

To evaluate the impact of the *CDF Freedom Schools*' summer programs on child attitudes in these important areas—character and SEL, we administered the Child Survey individually to students during Week 1 and again during Week 5 to measure any change in their attitudes over the course of the program. This pre-post comparison provides the strongest possible measure of any changes in attitudes.

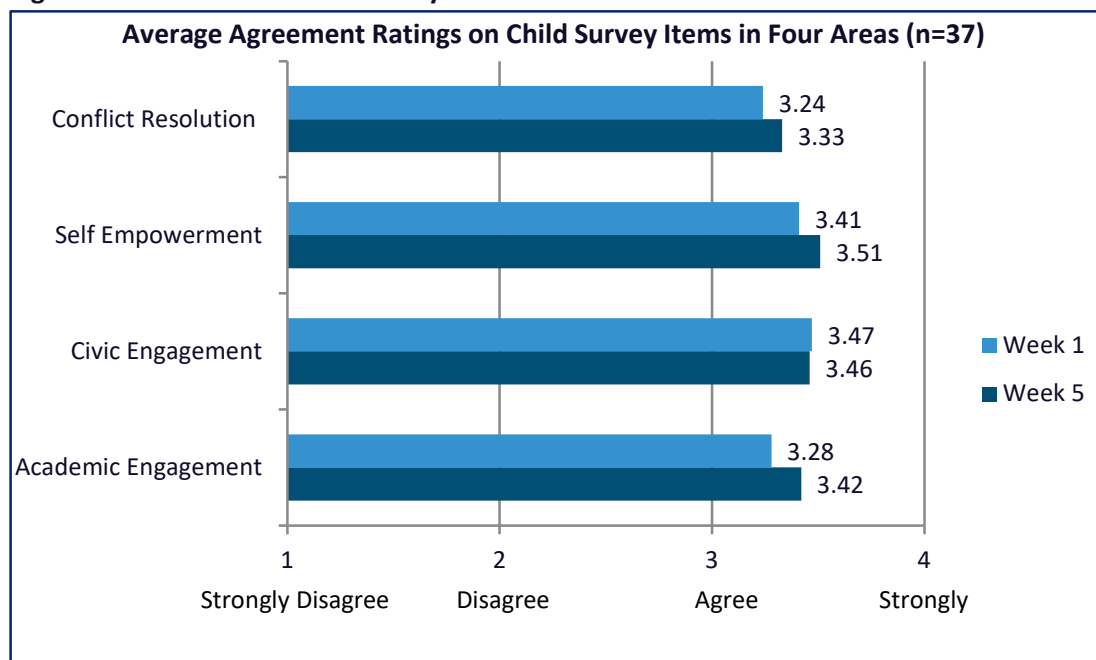
¹³ A national evaluation completed by CDF in 2021 showed that over 84 percent of students participating in *CDF Freedom Schools* maintained or gained an average of five months in their reading levels. Independent evaluations have found similar results. For example, the Center for Adolescent Literacies at UNC Charlotte found that 80-90% of scholars maintained or improved in their ability to read as measured by the Basic Reading Inventory (BRI) pre- and post-tests (Lara-Cinisomo, et al., 2020).

¹⁴ The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has developed an SEL framework comprised of these five skills. The benefits of social and emotional learning (SEL) are well-researched, with evidence demonstrating that an education that promotes SEL yields positive results for students. Meta-analyses of hundreds of studies show that SEL leads to beneficial outcomes related to: social and emotional skills; attitudes about self and school; social behaviors; conduct problems; emotional distress; and academic performance (CASEL, 2021).

Pre and Post Child Surveys

Of the 63 regular *CDF Freedom Schools*' participants at the DC Dream Center and the Social Justice School, 54 completed the survey during Week 1 (baseline) and 37 were available to complete the survey again during Week 5 (end of program). A comparison of responses of only those 37 scholars who completed the survey at baseline and again at the end of program, suggested a positive but modest impact on three of the four **character skills** measured by the survey, as shown in Figure 3. At baseline and again at post-test, the respondents averaged between 3 and 4 on a 4-point scale, indicating agreement with items reflecting the four desired character traits: conflict resolution (3.24 **improved** to 3.33), self-empowerment (3.41 **improved** to 3.51), civic engagement (3.47 **maintained** at 3.46), and academic engagement (3.28 **improved** to 3.42). These modest improvements approached statistical significance for self-empowerment and academic engagement.

Figure 3. Pre and Post-Child Survey Results on Four Character Traits



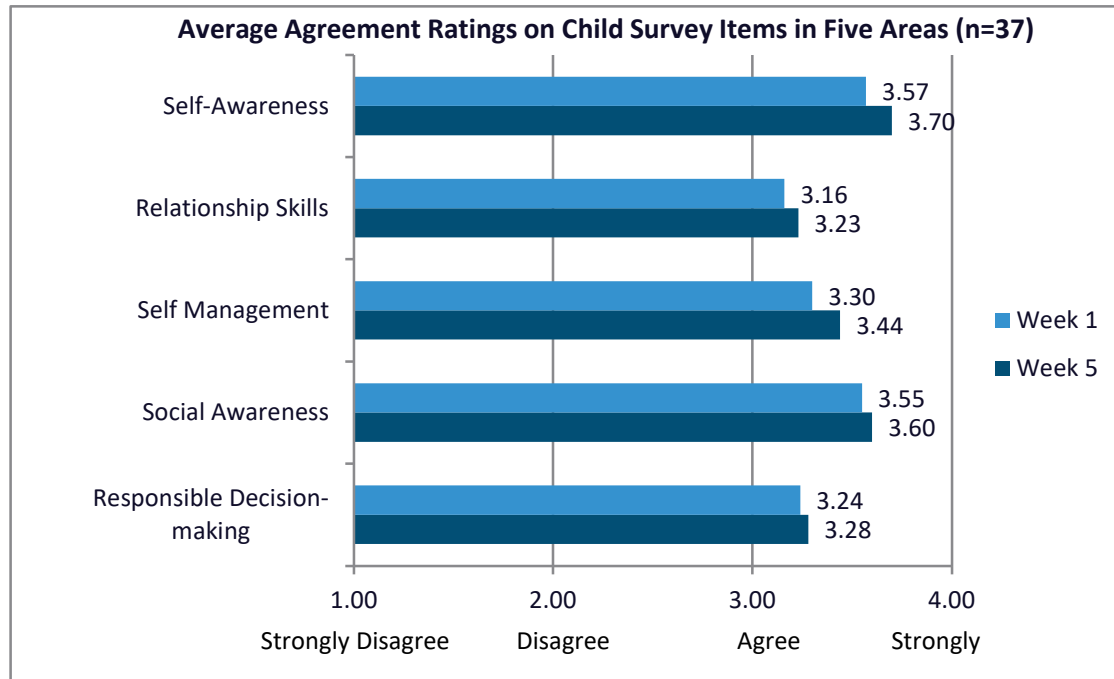
Looking at individual survey items, we found that:

- Most scholars agreed or strongly agreed with statements measuring the four character traits with average ratings ranging from 3.24 (conflict resolution) to 3.51 (self-empowerment) on a 4-point agreement scale.
- Scholars reported the highest ratings for **self-empowerment**; more than three-fourths of the respondents strongly agreed with the following statements at program's end:
 - *I am confident to achieve my goals (86.5%).*
 - *I feel proud of myself (75.7%).*
 - *I feel supported by an adult (75.7%).*

Responses to these same survey items were analyzed to reflect five social-emotional learning skills considered important in the healthy development of youth. The comparison of the responses of only those 37 scholars who completed the survey at baseline and again at the end of program, suggested a positive but modest impact on the five SEL skills measured by the survey, as shown in Figure 4. At baseline and again at post-test, the respondents averaged between 3 and 4 on a 4-point scale, indicating agreement with items

reflecting the five desired SEL skills: self-awareness (3.57 **improved** to 3.70), relationship skills (3.16 **improved** to 3.23), self-management (3.30 **improved** to 3.44), social awareness (3.55 **improved** to 3.60), and responsible decision-making (3.24 **improved** to 3.28). One of these modest improvements approached statistical significance (self-awareness: paired t-test, $p=.05$, $n=37$).

Figure 4. Pre and Post-Child Survey Results on Five SEL Skills



Looking at individual survey items, we found that:

- Most scholars agreed or strongly agreed with statements measuring the five SEL skills, with average ratings ranging from 3.16 (relationship skills) to 3.70 (self-awareness) on a 4-point agreement scale.
- Scholars reported the highest ratings for **self-awareness**; more than three-fourths of the respondents strongly agreed with the following statements at program's end:
 - *I am confident to achieve my goals. (86.5%)*
 - *I feel proud of myself (75.7%)*
- Scholars also reported relatively high ratings for **social awareness**; roughly three-fourths of the respondents strongly agreed with the following statements at program's end:
 - *I show respect to my friends at Freedom Schools. (78.4%)*
 - *I feel confident I can make a difference around me. (73.0%)*

The pre- and post-testing at the DC Dream Center and the Social Justice School allowed us to also examine the program's performance against one of the measurable objectives in the 21stCCLC grant evaluation plan:

- **Measurable Objective #3:** *60% of regular attendees will show improvement during the 5-week summer program in their attitudes toward reading, learning (academic engagement) and self-efficacy (empowerment) as measured by the Child Survey.*

Applying this standard to the four character traits and the five SEL skills for the 37 regular attendees¹⁵ surveyed and allowing for several scholars who measured at the same level at baseline and 5 weeks later, the program approached or exceeded this measurable objective, as can be seen in Figures 5 and 6.¹⁶

Figure 5. Program Performance on Character Traits

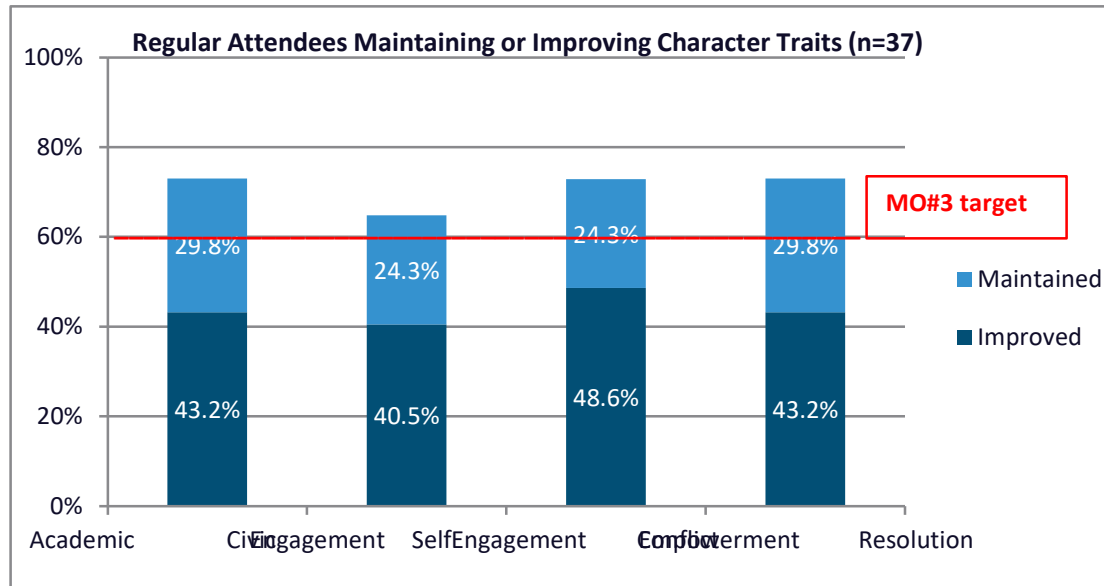
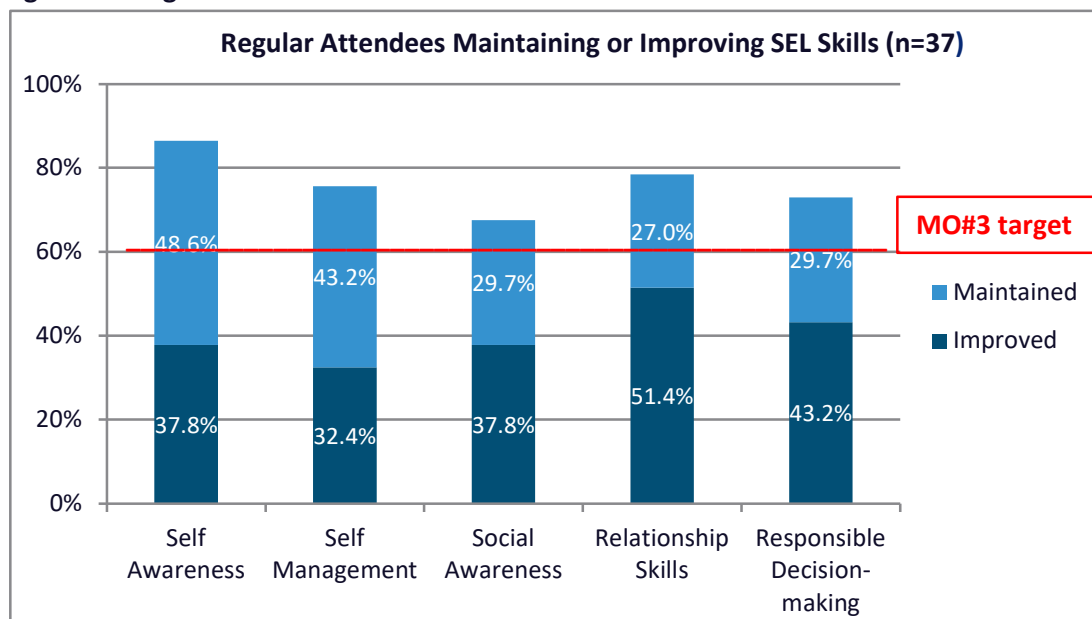


Figure 6. Program Performance on SEL Skills



The end-of-program results from all 15 child survey items can be found in the Appendix B, Figures 1 and 2.

¹⁵ We eliminated from this analysis 2 Social Justice School scholars who only attended the program sporadically.

¹⁶ Note that the SEL skills were not included in the measurable objective as originally written.

Parent Perceptions

We also surveyed parents of scholars about how their child had changed as a result of participation in the *CDF Freedom Schools* summer program. While it was more challenging to elicit parent responses due to COVID restrictions at the school sites, 11 parents (all from the DC Dream Center program site) did respond to follow-up emails asking them to complete an online survey. These parents agreed or strongly agreed with six statements suggesting that their child had grown in self-empowerment, civic engagement, conflict resolution and academic engagement. Four survey items indicated what parents perceived as the strongest program impacts on their children:

- *My child more strongly believes that he/she can make a difference. (81.8% strongly agree)*
- *My child is more likely to be involved in community groups. (81.8% strongly agree)*
- *My child is more likely to vote when he/she is an adult. (81.8% strongly agree)*
- *My child learned ways to resolve conflicts. (81.8% strongly agree)*

See Appendix B, Figure 3 for all parent survey results.

Positive Impacts on Staff

One of the goals of *CDF Freedom Schools* is to promote the character skills of the Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) and Site Coordinators, through staff training and their experiences working with children at risk of academic failure. Similar to its work with children, the program strives to foster in its interns a sense of self-empowerment, a focus on academic and career pursuits, and civic responsibility. Staff members were surveyed at the end of the summer program on the extent to which their program experience had changed their opinion about statements reflecting these three character traits: self-empowerment, academic/career engagement, and civic engagement. Survey items were designed to measure these three traits.¹⁷

Eight of the 10 SLIs and site coordinators completed the survey, representing both program sites. Almost all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with each of the 12 survey items, suggesting a positive impact of their summer program experience on each of the character traits measured (see Appendix B, Figure 4). Survey highlights include:

Parent comments:

-- I love having a program that helps children and parents in the community!
-- My child is more confident. Her social skills have sharpened and her reading has improved.
-- My child felt so loved; she was able to show that love in her reading, self-esteem and knowing she has something so strong inside that will help her succeed.

SLI: I felt supported and encouraged by the DC Freedom School team and learned invaluable skills while participating in children's enrichment activities.

SLI: I received plenty of feedback and advice from teachers and program staff that I plan to implement in my classroom to improve my skill set.

SC: The experience helped me grow in many areas — parent engagement, student engagement; I learned how to understand people and make better decisions.

¹⁷ A factor analysis conducted on similarly-worded items in a national survey of *CDF Freedom School* SLIs during summer 2020 confirmed the survey's conceptual framework.

- Staff members' program experience most strongly impacted **self-empowerment** with an average rating of 3.69 on the 4-point agreement scale, followed by **civic engagement** at 3.65 and **academic/career engagement** at 3.42.
- Five survey statements received the highest ratings, reinforcing the impact of the program on civic engagement and self-empowerment:
 - *I feel more confident that I can make a difference around me. (3.88)*
 - *I feel more confident in expressing my opinions about community issues. (3.75)*
 - *I can make people listen to what I have to say. (3.75)*
 - *I feel less likely to give up when life gets challenging. (3.75)*
 - *I feel more proud of myself. (3.75)*
- Respondents were somewhat less confident about the impact of the program on their career goals, not surprising given that most of the SLIs were still college students:
 - *My career goals are set. (3.25)*
 - *I am more committed to a career in the education field. (3.50)*
 - *I understand what I learn in school and how it relates to my career goals.(3.50)*

Overall, the survey showed that the program had a positive impact on staff attitudes about self-empowerment (3.69), civic engagement (3.65), and academic/career engagement (3.42).

Parent Engagement and Family Involvement

Following US Department of Education guidance on the characteristics of successful after-school and summer programs, the Children's Defense Fund has incorporated a parent engagement component to promote strong family involvement in *DC Freedom School* programs. As part of their 21st CCLC grant evaluation and monitoring plan for their after-school and summer programs, CDF focused one of four measurable objectives specifically on parent engagement:

- *Measurable Objective #4: Programs will offer at least three academically-enriched student/family events designed to increase parent engagement and knowledge of their student's academic program, as measured by program activity logs and surveys.*

CDF promotes a broad vision of family involvement with parents viewed as assets and engaged as partners in supporting the academic and social justice goals of *CDF Freedom Schools*. CDF included a Family Engagement Coordinator in their summer *DC Freedom Schools* staffing with explicit goals around engaging and involving families. Activities included family events that provided relevant and actionable information about how parents can become more engaged in their child's education and support their scholar outside of school programming. Weekly parent meetings were built into the *Freedom Schools* summer programming and held in-person at the DC Dream Center and virtually at the Social Justice School.

Parents were surveyed at the beginning of the summer about the topics and resources they would like to learn more about at these weekly parent meetings. Based on survey responses from 33 DC Dream Center parents and 22 Social Justice School parents, the following topics were covered



at parent meetings and coordinated with what scholars were learning:

- Black authors and literacy at home
- Strategies for social-emotional learning
- Fitness and healthy eating.

Parent and families were also asked to support the Family Fun Day scheduled on the last day of the summer program to celebrate the *Freedom School* scholars.



Parent Survey

As part of the national evaluation of its Freedom School programs, CDF has developed a Parent Survey for administration at the end of their summer

programs. Parents were asked via email to complete an online survey the week after the program ended. With this limited access to parents, only 11 online surveys were completed, all from the DC Dream Center program site.



The survey included four items asking parents to reflect on how their participation in the *CDF Freedom Schools* program had changed them, in terms of academic and civic engagement. All parent respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- *I plan to be more engaged in my child's school work next year. (73% strongly agreed)*
- *I have a better understanding of how to help my child be successful. (55% strongly agreed)*
- *I am more likely to volunteer with a group to help my community. (55% strongly agreed)*
- *I am more likely to vote. (55% strongly agreed)*

Parents were also asked about any parent meetings they attended and provided the following relevant comments:

- *Very informative!*
- *I love the interaction [with other parents] and knowledge of the staff. . . very friendly and caring.*

The complete parent survey results can be found in Appendix B, Figure 3.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Children's Defense Fund met the challenge of transitioning children from more than a year of mostly virtual instruction to once again attending in-person school and summer programs with their peers. CDF worked with community organizations to develop and structure summer programs at two sites, the DC Dream Center and the Social Justice School. Both community sites were able to implement the critical components of the *CDF Freedom Schools* program model: Harambee!, the Integrated Reading Curriculum, a diverse selection of enrichment activities, social action events, and parent engagement opportunities. While somewhat challenged by the less than 100% attendance by the scholars during summer vacation, the program

still resulted in moderate improvement in children’s average instructional reading levels among the 5-week participants as well as scholar perceptions that the program had positively impacted the promoted character traits and social-emotional learning skills. Staff also expressed positive changes in some of these same character traits (i.e., civic engagement, self-empowerment, and academic/career engagement). Based on the challenges the summer program faced and the information shared through staff interviews and surveys, we offer recommendations in three areas: staff training, parent engagement, coordination with program sites.

- **Staff training.** One of the characteristics of effective expanded learning time programs is high quality staffing (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The *CDF Freedom Schools’* summer programs are primarily staffed by college students studying in fields related to working with children such as education or social work. These Servant Leader Interns typically have prior experience working with children and participate in the one-week national training provided by the Children’s Defense Fund. Many of this summer’s staff had previously worked as SLIs. Still, feedback from the current program staff on implementation challenges suggest that staff would benefit from additional in-person training, particularly on best practices in classroom management, reading instruction for children not yet reading, and the cultural foundations of the *Freedom Schools’* approach. The joint teacher-SLI training initiative at the Social Justice School should serve as a model for future training efforts.
- **Parent engagement.** Another characteristic of quality expanded learning time programs is strong family involvement. *CDF Freedom Schools* has recognized the importance of parent engagement and each year has planned events and activities to get parents involved in the program. Starting with parent outreach to recruit scholars, effective communication with parents to ensure families can support their scholars, and finally program activities that meet parent needs, *CDF Freedom Schools* has at times struggled to get parents effectively engaged in their child’s summer program. The Family Engagement Coordinator sought to meet specific needs identified by this summer’s parents (e.g., SEL strategies, Black authors). Still, a relatively small number of family members attended the weekly meetings. CDF recognizes the need to continue to work with parents to better engage them in their child’s educational experience.
- **Coordination with program sites.** A third characteristic of effective summer programs is the linkage or coordination between the summer program and school year or site staff. This coordination has both a logistical and an instructional component. Logistically, because these summer programs are working in community settings, there needs to be good communication with these program sites regarding expectations around shared space and possibly shared activities. And instructionally, the *CDF Freedom Schools’* summer program includes components that support the school year instructional program, in particular the Integrated Reading Curriculum. Summer program staff might benefit from more information about children’s reading abilities upon entering the summer program. This coordination was facilitated at the Social Justice School by teachers who taught in both the charter school year program and summer *CDF Freedom Schools’* program. In addition, *CDF Freedom Schools* should be able to access DCPS student data for participants in order to, for example, check instructional reading levels.

Staff also shared some lessons learned from the Summer 2022 *CDF Freedom Schools’* experience that should be incorporated in future programming:

- At the structural level, the administration and management of the program need to be fully staffed to accommodate grant management requirements, program oversight, and the provision of growth opportunities to staff.

- Family engagement efforts should be continued; parent involvement in program activities is a critical program component.
- CDF should continue to utilize local enrichment providers from the community to create a culture of community caring.

APPENDIX A: References

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APPENDIX B: Survey Results

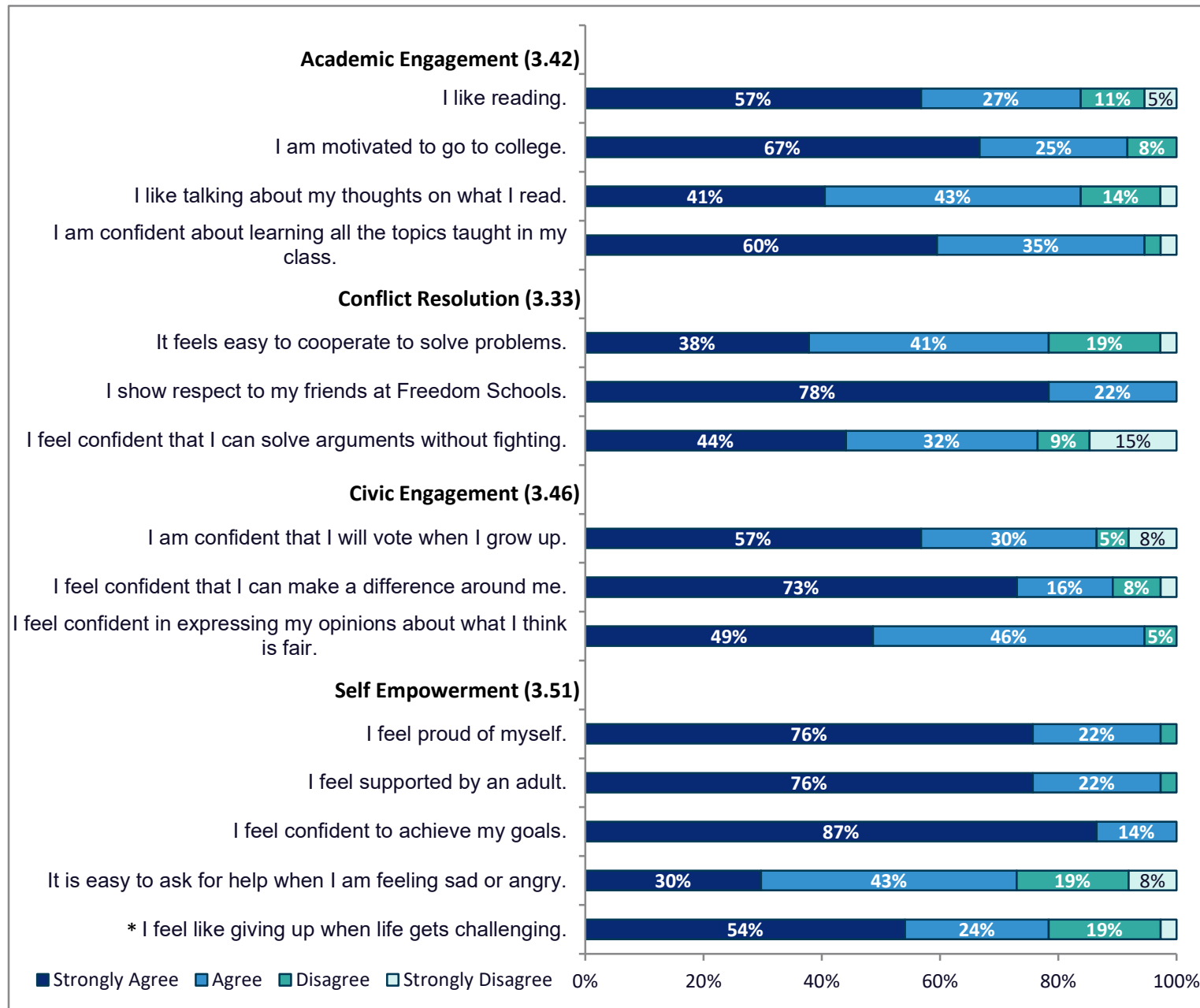
Figure B1: Post Child Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Four Character Traits

Figure B2. Post Child Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Five SEL Skills

Figure B3. Parent Survey: Percent Agreement on Items in Three Areas: Child, Parent, *Freedom Schools* Experience

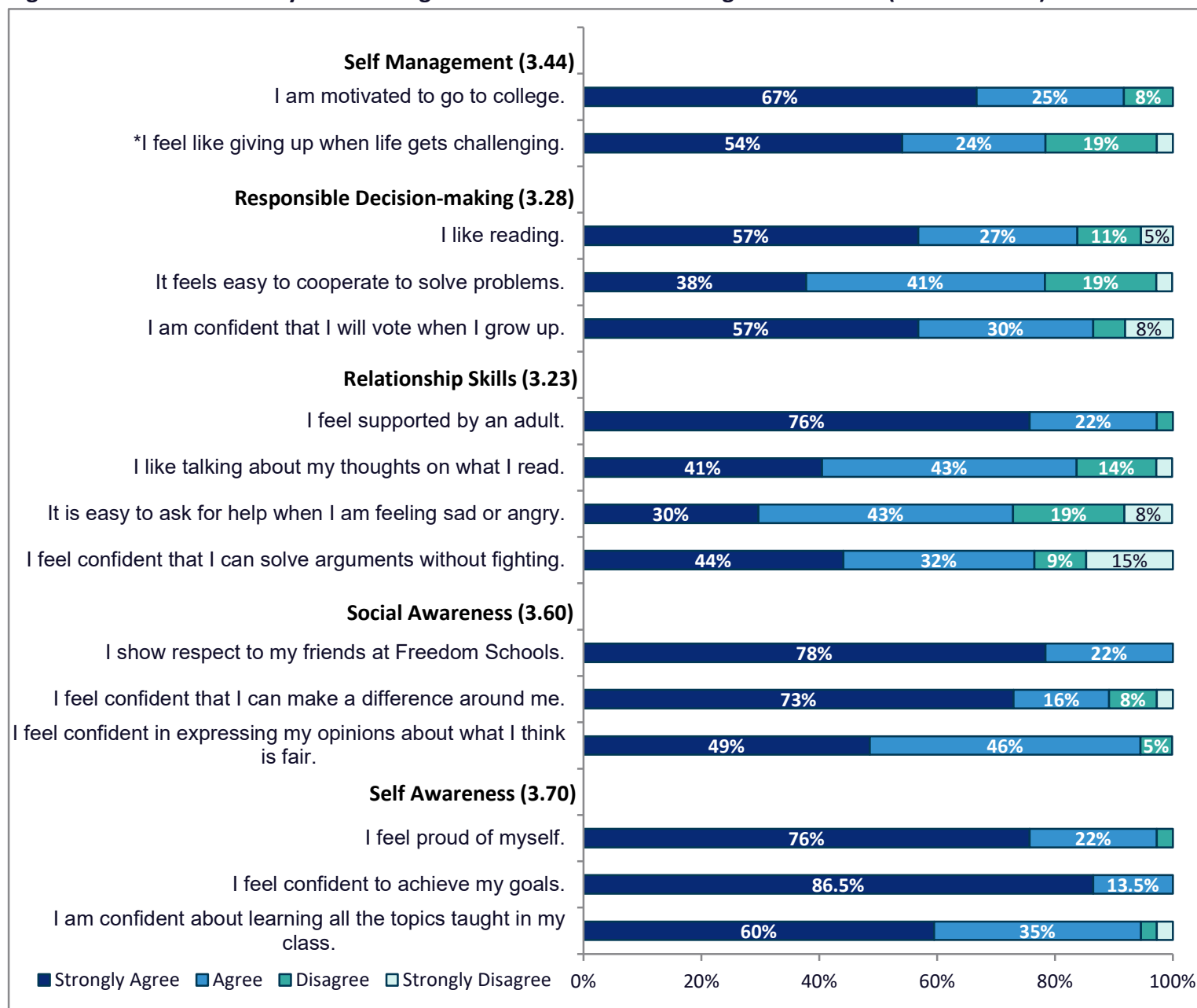
Figure B4. SLI Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Three Character Traits

Figure B1. Post Child Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Four Character Traits (n=37 Scholars)



*Note that coding was reversed on this survey item to reflect positive self-empowerment.

Figure B2. Post Child Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Five SEL Skills (n=37 Scholars)



*Note that coding was reversed on this survey item to reflect positive self-management.

Figure B3. Parent Survey: Percent Agreement on Items in Three Areas: Child, Parent, *Freedom Schools* Experience (n=11)

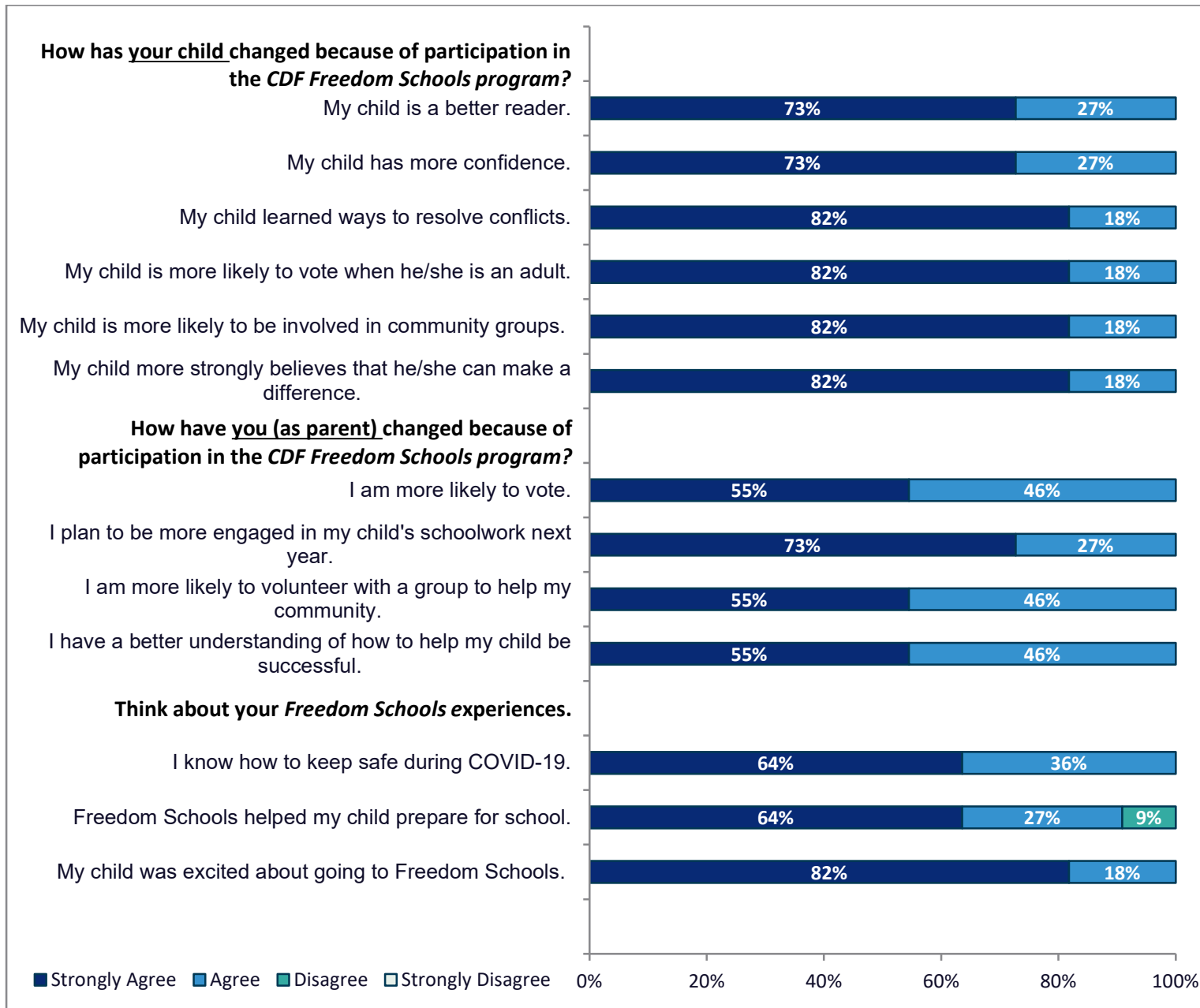


Figure B4. SLI Survey: Percent Agreement on Items Measuring Three Character Traits (n=8 SLI/SC)

