



children's defense fund

Leave No Child Behind®



Road to Freedom

The CDF Freedom Schools® program is rooted in the belief that reading is the key to unlocking a child's unlimited potential. With its roots in the 1964 Freedom Summer Project—a campaign to equip Black Americans in the rural South with political and educational power—*CDF Freedom Schools* provides a high-quality, culturally-relevant reading enrichment program for children living in underserved and under-resourced communities, most of which are communities of color. The *CDF Freedom Schools* afterschool and summer program improves children's reading skills and empowers them to believe in their ability to make a difference in themselves, their communities, and the world.



Since its inception in 1995, *CDF Freedom Schools* summer and afterschool programs have served over 150,000 K-12 "scholars," the majority of whom are children of color and children living in poverty. In 2019,

CDF Freedom Schools programs were offered at 183 sites in 28 states. Black children make up 62 percent of those served, and Latino children make up 15 percent; 81 percent of all scholars qualify for free and reduced-price meals. The sites are hosted by a wide range of organizations, including schools, churches, universities, juvenile detention centers, and homeless shelters.

Summer learning loss is a critical issue for all children, but children in poverty, who often lack resources like reading materials in their homes and summer enrichment opportunities, are at particular risk of losing knowledge and skills gained during the previous academic year. The *CDF Freedom Schools* integrated reading curriculum and the library of high-quality, culturally relevant books that accompany it, are designed to counter this learning loss. Scholars take part in activity-based lessons related to the books, which they find especially engaging because they see themselves reflected in the characters' faces, settings, and storylines.

Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® Program

More than 150,000 children have experienced the transformative power of the innovative *CDF Freedom Schools* model, achieving an average of 8+ months in reading gains over a 6-week period. More than 16,000 young people



have worked in *CDF Freedom Schools*, developing leadership skills and classroom experience. And hundreds of communities across the country have witnessed the impact of hosting a *CDF Freedom Schools* program site, with parents, local businesses, schools, churches, and volunteers working together to equip the next generation with the skills and confidence they need to succeed.



LA'MONT GEDDIS was already studying education at Howard University when he got involved with *CDF Freedom Schools*, but says much of what he knows about how to care for and reach children comes from his experience with *CDF Freedom Schools*: “My long list of what I learned through *CDF Freedom Schools* began with understanding poverty. I thought, initially, that poverty only had something to do with money or the lack of. I found out there is an emotional poverty, a love poverty, mental poverty, social poverty, and that’s what is comprised in our inner-city schools, impoverished children. These children are victims of poverty, and sometimes hurt people hurt people. So how do you help them and not exclude them? You know how? I learned it in Freedom School. You give them a voice. That’s what Freedom Schools help us to understand.” La'Mont co-founded Omega Freedom School and today is the principal of Maya Angelou Public Charter School’s Evans Middle School Campus in Washington, D.C.



“Our work as a country, the work at Freedom Schools, is about liberating the potential of our young people and, by doing that, we liberate ourselves as a country. This summer, you will teach students about history and about justice and about social action. You will empower them to make the same kind of difference for the next generation of young people that you are trying to make in their lives.”

Former U.S. Secretary of Education
John B. King Jr. at the Children’s
Defense Fund’s 21st Annual Freedom
Schools National Training

The appeal of the books boosts their motivation to read, fostering positive feelings about learning and increasing scholars’ self-esteem.

Research shows that the *CDF Freedom Schools* model works. A multi-year assessment of *CDF Freedom Schools* published in 2016 showed that the program has a statistically significant, positive effect on children’s reading skills, attitudes toward learning, and belief in themselves and in their ability to make a difference in the world around them. Scholars reading at grade level at the beginning of the summer earned eight months of reading gains on average, while those below grade level at the beginning of the summer achieved an astounding 1.2 years of reading gains. The largest gains of all were achieved by Black boys.

But improving scholars’ reading skills isn’t the only goal of the program. *CDF Freedom Schools* sites are places where scholars are encouraged to embrace their cultural history and taught that they have the ability and the responsibility to create positive change in the world. Scholars begin each day with the motivational opening activity, Harambee!—which takes its name from the Swahili word meaning “let’s pull together”—then progress to reading activities, which include age-appropriate curriculum-related discussions of such topics as fairness, voting rights, and conflict resolution. The culminating activity of the summer is a social action project based on an issue developed with the children and youth, such as a letter-writing campaign to an elected official or a drive to collect clothing for the homeless. *CDF Freedom Schools* are staffed by Servant Leader Interns, primarily college students of color from communities similar to those they serve, who act as mentors. Children can see themselves as future college students, advocates, and leaders. In fact, many *CDF Freedom Schools* scholars return the program as Servant Leader Interns once they reach college.

CDF Freedom Schools is an empowering, life-changing opportunity for children to build their reading skills, discover a love of learning, and unlock the confidence and power to make a difference. As the scholars sing every day during Harambee!, *CDF Freedom Schools* instills in children the belief that there is “something inside so strong,” and with that “something,” they are capable of anything.