



**children's
defense fund**
Leave No Child Behind®

Equipping the Next Generation of Children's Advocates

Our country is in the midst of a historic demographic transformation. The majority of Americans under 18 are people of color and within 25 years we will be a “plurality” country with no racial or ethnic population in the majority. With this demographic shift have come growing movements to address past and current injustices. Young people of color in particular are driving this reckoning and pushing our nation to fulfill the promise of equality. It is more important than ever to develop future social justice leaders who reflect the rich diversity of our country – a diversity that is not always seen at the table, much less setting the agenda. In order to develop this next generation into leaders whose voices, vision, and service will shape our nation, we must ask:



Who will lead?

How will we ensure everyone has a place at the table and the agenda isn't set by the most privileged voices?

How will young people prepare for leadership?

How can we ensure young people of color and those from marginalized groups have opportunities to develop the skills and experiences they need to become leaders?

What kind of leaders will we need?

What leadership style and traits are needed for social justice movements to be successful in a diverse nation?

Who will prepare these leaders?

Who is doing the hard work of building the ranks of young people of color ready to become leaders in a diverse nation?

The Children's Defense Fund has a long history of responding to these challenges by doing the essential work of developing the pipeline of young leaders – especially young leaders of color. We are equipping the tens of thousands of people who are part of our alumni network to assume leadership roles in social justice movements, in classrooms, in community organizations, in churches, in the public sector, and anywhere where they can make a difference.

Embedded in every facet of our work is our imperative to uplift the next generation. We demonstrate this commitment by helping young people raise their voices and empowering them to act. We foster the next generation of advocates in their journey to join and lead the ongoing movement for children in their own communities and across the country.

The Children's Defense Fund's philosophy of equipping the next generation

From our inception, the work of the Children's Defense Fund has included a strong focus on training and preparing youth and young adults to be tomorrow's leaders and advocates for children, both in their own communities and across the country. Our commitment to children and young people includes empowering them to make a difference in themselves, in their communities, and in the world.

We know that young people can and do make a difference in the world. The Children's Defense Fund is informed by our roots in the Civil Rights Movement – a movement which demonstrated the power of courageous young people to effect transformative change. Today, young people remain at the forefront of social justice movements and they can learn from the past while shaping the agenda for today's struggles. Fostering their leadership skills means not just teaching them but allowing them to lead and giving them the freedom to be independent thinkers, problem solvers, and agents of change. We raise up the voices of young people because our work is not just for young people, but with them.

We instill in new leaders the principles of “servant leadership.” Our leadership model is not about raising individuals to prominence, but instead fostering a commitment to serve the community and to help others advance and thrive. Servant leadership is intrinsically intergenerational as each generation serves and mentors the next, and learning goes in both directions. Our leadership development efforts instill in young people the ability and desire to grow and help others grow; to take what they've learned and give back; and to put the needs of the most vulnerable first.

We create a community of ongoing support and learning. Leadership development is not just about personal growth but also about forming a supportive community. We build national networks that bring together young people committed to fighting systemic injustices faced by children. Through our state and regional offices, we also engage young people on the unique issues they face in their own neighborhoods. This combination of national-level engagement and local-level action is a potent combination for inspiring and effecting change.

With these principles in mind, our mandate is to build and sustain a movement of servant, not self-serving, leaders. Young people can make a difference in themselves, in their families, in their communities, in their country, and in the world. It is our responsibility to equip them with the power, tools, and skills they need to lead transformative change.



Healthy intergenerational dialogue

A young organizer from Arizona experienced a two-way street of listening and learning between generations while engaged with CDF. She said, “It showed me what healthy intergenerational dialogue and collaboration can look like, which has been pretty rare in my experiences in the trenches because Black Lives Matter young people were often so frustrated with attempts by older folks and clergy to come in and take over. I appreciated that the respect for elders existed, but that there was also space for healthy and hard conversations about the need to listen to young people. That was a different model for me to observe.”

Who is our next generation of leadership?

The Children's Defense Fund invests in the future by identifying and developing rising leaders committed to ensuring America leaves no child behind. We are unique in that we look beyond those who traditionally have plentiful opportunities to lead. Young people from upper middle class backgrounds, especially young white people, often have many doors open to them from a young age as a result of attending well-funded schools and coming from families that can afford enriching experiences and offer professional connections. We actively work to open doors and build pipelines for success for those with less access to these opportunities – helping them to learn, to gain meaningful experience, and to connect with a wider network to continue their development as leaders.

Young people are key to solving the problems created by previous generations. Every year we work with over 2,000 young people and over 12,000 children and youth across the country in a variety of ways to foster their development as leaders. And more join our pipeline of emerging leaders every year.

Young People of Color

The young people we engage look different from those in many other leadership development programs – they look like the future of our country. The next generation of leadership should reflect this new demographic landscape, and not perpetuate the entrenched power structures of the past. The majority of young people we reach are people of color. For instance, of the more than 1,300 young people we train to be mentors and educators in the CDF Freedom Schools® program, nearly 70% are Black, nearly 90% are people of color, and around one-fifth attend HBCUs. And of the most recent group of high school seniors who received specialized mentoring and college readiness programming in six states, 83% were people of color.

Emerging Social Justice Advocates

The Children's Defense Fund works with young adults who want to advocate for justice. Many are college-age students, or are young people starting out in their careers in education, social work, law, medicine, ministry, or the nonprofit sector. Some are new to social justice work and others are already active but seeking to deepen their skills. What unites them is their desire to make an impact on the lives of children.

Rising Leaders from Marginalized Groups

We lift up the voices of traditionally marginalized people – young people of color, immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ people, and young people who have experienced poverty, disabilities, homelessness, incarceration, living in the foster care system, and other adversities. We need to make sure there is a place at the table for all. These young people can overcome tremendous odds and become leaders.

Young Educators

Every year we train over 1,100 college-age young people from around the country to be CDF Freedom Schools® instructors. These young leaders are often from the same communities as the children they serve, and nearly 90% are people of color. These “Servant Leader Interns” embody the ethic of servant leadership as they teach and mentor young scholars and engage with the wider community. Some continue in the field of education, and others choose child-focused careers in social services, policy advocacy, or community development.

Future Faith Leaders

Graduate seminary studies are a critical point in the path to ministry, and serve as a ripe opportunity to inspire and foster future leaders and to transform how faith leaders interact with their communities. We have formed unique partnerships with seminaries across a wide array of denominations to develop a curriculum that instills an understanding of the biblical, theological, and historical grounding for making justice for children a central component of ministry. We equip aspiring faith leaders with the inspiration and tools to stand up for children.

Children Ages 6-18 in Underserved Neighborhoods

No one is too young to learn the importance of civic engagement. Improving literacy is only one goal of *CDF Freedom Schools*. Equity, social justice, and conflict resolution are key themes in both the reading materials and daily activities. Instructed by college-age mentors who look like them and are from their own communities, young “scholars” are encouraged to study and appreciate their cultural history. They learn that they have the ability and the responsibility to create positive change in the world. Activities throughout the summer program reinforce these themes. Scholars hold mock elections, brainstorm solutions to the problems they see around them, and take part in actions to help their communities with voter registration, clothing drives, rallies, marches, and ‘Q&A’ sessions with elected officials they invite to their classrooms.

You give them a voice

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 the program: “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 is the principal of Maya Angelou Public Charter School's Evans Middle School Campus in Washington, D.C.



How do we develop skills and passion for social justice?

The Children's Defense Fund builds the leadership capacity of the next generation of advocates by rooting them in the history of the Civil Rights Movement that they don't learn in school; by empowering them to understand and dismantle systems that perpetuate injustice; by giving them new experiences and skills to embark on social justice efforts and greater civic participation; and by instilling in them from a young age a belief that they can have an impact on the world.

The young people we work with come from diverse backgrounds and have equally diverse interests and career paths. We offer more than just knowledge and new skills for engaging in the civic process. We offer them opportunities to put what they've learned into practice and we connect them with a wide network of diverse yet like-minded advocates.

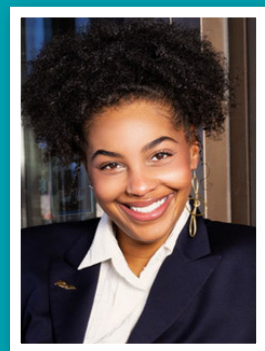
Education and Training

CDF offers intensive training, summer-long programs, mentoring, information sessions, and web-based resources to deliver the skills and tools future leaders need, which may include how to:

- Engage with policymakers
- Recruit and manage volunteers
- Facilitate trainings for peers and adults
- Organize a voter registration drive
- Access federal and state programs and support services
- Get media attention for activities
- Host a town hall meeting with members of the community
- Speak to a congregation about child advocacy
- Partner with those being oppressed
- Talk to community members about the 2020 Census and getting an accurate count
- Understand complex policy issues and processes
- Employ culturally-engaging pedagogy within and outside the classroom
- Transform their churches and faith communities to put justice for children at the center of their work
- Complete college and financial aid applications
- Master the art of public speaking

“Brilliant opportunities” for Flint youth

Ashnee Young was a business major in college when she was selected to be a Servant Leader Intern and trained as a mentor and educator for *CDF Freedom Schools*. After this experience she says, “I got the bug. I understood that my passion was youth.” In the years after graduation, she took on a series of leadership roles in *CDF Freedom Schools* in North Carolina and trained future leaders around the country before deciding to return to her home town of Flint, MI. “I decided to move back to Flint to implement everything that I had learned because my whole goal for those 8 or 9 years was to bring this phenomenal, dynamic educational opportunity to Flint. Now I am an Executive Director of a nonprofit organization ... we work to build partnerships and foster brilliant opportunities for education and youth.”



Opportunities to Lead

Leadership development must go beyond training by reinforcing concepts with practical experience. The Children's Defense Fund offers opportunities for young people to put their training into practice, further developing their skills and exposure to the wider social justice community. A few recent examples of ways we have helped young leaders deploy their leadership skills include:

- A young immigrant spoke about her experiences in front of 400 people at a national conference;
- 60 early-career educators led training sessions for hundreds of youth and adults on how to implement a summer educational program;
- A first-year college student led a successful Change.org petition to demand a question about child poverty in a presidential debate for the first time in 20 years;
- A seminary student initiated an ongoing listening circle for transgender youth in partnership with a community youth center;
- A newly-elected judge galvanized community support to create a pilot eviction prevention program;
- A college student developed a financial literacy workshop for high schoolers preparing to attend college, some of whom are the first in their families to attend college;
- A young formerly incarcerated person was connected with faith leaders and local advocates to develop his organizing skills as he started a program to help young people speak up against youth incarceration;
- Two high school students testified at city council meetings on the importance of restorative rather than punitive approaches to school discipline;
- And an aspiring educator worked with young children to produce a video on preventing gun violence.



Building and Engaging a Network – We bring together advocates and aspiring leaders to learn from more experienced leaders and from each other, find support and inspiration in their shared goals, and see different perspectives. Young people are welcomed to and given a voice at national conferences, at state capital rallies, at statewide virtual town halls, in mentoring workshops, in interactive online courses with experienced organizers, and in other settings. In these spaces young people forge bonds with their peers and with adults in the wider social justice community. Members of the Children's Defense Fund's network come from across the country, and are intergenerational, interracial, multi-ethnic, from diverse faith traditions, and in a range of professions. Yet they are united in their desire to give back to their communities. The knowledge sharing also helps us learn from those at the front lines of social justice in their communities and from the young leaders we serve.

Strategic Partnerships

The Children's Defense Fund engages in collaborations with other organizations, leveraging the strength of strategic partnerships to develop new leaders. For example, we partner with over 20 seminaries to fill a gap in traditional theological education by demonstrating ways to put faith into action for children. We also work with organizations like Jack and Jill of America and FosterClub to equip young people with the tools and information they need to speak to policymakers and others in power. Every year we partner with community-based organizations around the country – colleges and universities, local nonprofits, churches – to launch and sustain summer programs for youth and organize social actions around issues facing children.

Transportation justice in Seattle

Students at Rainier Beach High School in Seattle face many barriers – over 80 percent qualify for free or reduced price lunch and many must travel for miles to get to school. The city only provided free bus cards to middle and high school students who lived more than two miles away, leaving those who could not afford the bus to walk, often through unsafe neighborhoods. The *CDF Freedom Schools* serving these students, operated by the local nonprofit WA-Bloc, took action by organizing a two-mile march to City Hall to call for change. Servant Leader Intern Tyra Griffith reflected, “As we marched down the street, I felt inspired that our scholars pulled together with pride and courage, fighting for what they know to be true. I saw big smiles filled with pride. I also felt angry because of the disregard for scholars, but motivated by their willingness to fight.” At City Hall, students testified before city leaders. Ninth grader Mariam Bayo testified that asthma made the walk so difficult it was a struggle to get to school on time. The City Council approved an expansion allowing more students – and all high school students – to receive free bus cards. Mariam saw results: “I’m on time. Now I’m getting A’s and B’s.” Servant Leader Intern Jerrell Davis said “This is not just about transportation. This is about their livelihood, about justice. It’s connected to something larger.”



How is our work evolving?

Advocacy efforts that bring messages to policymakers and leverage coalitions to amplify messages and create broad support are critical. We also recognize the power of other advocacy efforts – amplifying the voices of young people and marginalized populations, using new technology and media to reach new audiences, and working alongside the people most impacted by injustice. The Children's Defense Fund has played an important role in building the next generation of advocates and we are evolving in how we support new leaders and learn from them.

We recently invested in new software that helps us engage more effectively with our network and ensure they receive information and tools that are relevant to them. It will also help us identify the multiple ways we interact with people – as seminarians become faith leaders with their own congregations, as *CDF Freedom Schools* instructors become teachers or social workers, as scholars grow up to start new programs.

The annual CDF Samuel De Witt Proctor Institute is an inspiring, informative, and transformational experience. Yet the expense of attending can be prohibitive for many of the people who could most benefit, especially young activists, including college students, formerly incarcerated youth, young people who aged out of foster care, and immigrants. We pay the full costs for many to attend and hope to expand this in future years to be sure these young leaders have the opportunity to participate and to tap into our national network of advocates.

We are also expanding our outreach to learn more about how our network puts into practice what they learn from the Children's Defense Fund and what changes have been prompted as a result – in their communities or in their own life trajectory. We want to do more to link network members to each other and to resources for support and knowledge exchange. Our alumni network is vast and engaged – we are looking for ways to make it stronger by learning more about what's worked and hasn't and what additional tools we can provide.

The long-term engagement this sparks will enable us to achieve on a larger scale what we have already seen – people who get involved with the Children's Defense Fund want to remain involved and they benefit from the relationship at various stages of their studies, careers, and social justice journeys.



What are the results?

The Children's Defense Fund inspires and trains the next generation of leaders, helping them see how they can make a difference, developing their skills, and introducing them to a wider network of activists.

In post-program surveys, young people report positive changes in their leadership skills, self-empowerment, and academic/career development. They sometimes report changes in educational or career paths that reflect a new importance in fighting for justice for children. We see impact through the actions they lead, the projects they launch, and the others they inspire to action.

There are rippling and intergenerational effects. For instance, an evaluation of the CDF Freedom Schools® program suggests that sparking interest in civic action in children can influence parents' attitudes: In 2019, over 90 percent of *CDF Freedom Schools* parents who were surveyed reported at the end of the program that they were more likely to vote, to participate in social actions, and to volunteer in their communities than they had been before the program.

We regularly see young people who we have helped at one stage of their lives return to the Children's Defense Fund to learn more and to reconnect with the wider community of advocates we sparked. Some young people we served in elementary school return to us when they reach high school or college, eager to tap into more ways to learn and grow. Some who first engage with us in college return to us as they enter the workplace, looking for ways to shape their classrooms, nonprofits, congregations, and communities. Many of the young people we work with have changed their majors or career trajectories towards service and civic engagement.

The Children's Defense Fund continues to build a cadre of empowered activists, advocates, educators, ministers, practitioners, and leaders, especially people of color and people who have firsthand experience with systemic injustice. We have helped plant these seeds that develop into the next generation of service-focused leaders who are driving community and national transformations and improving the lives of children.



Mayor of Stockton and servant leader

Our impact also is seen in the service and achievements of those whose lives we have touched. The mayor of Stockton, California, **Michael Tubbs**, has walked a path riddled with obstacles. He was born into poverty to a teenaged mother and an incarcerated father. Michael credits the encouragement and high expectations of his family and church for his academic achievement, but believes his engagement with the Children's Defense Fund shaped his purpose and developed his leadership skills. As a college student, he attended Children's Defense Fund conferences and leadership trainings he calls "eye-opening and inspiring." He took part in many of our youth leadership development programs, learning organizing strategies and connecting with social change-minded young people from across the nation. He says his experiences "put a language and structure around my passion for children in poverty. It clarified my goals and sharpened my educational focus." The tragic murder of his cousin sparked Michael's decision to return home after completing his Master's program and to run for office—he became the youngest ever City Councilman in Stockton. In 2016, at the age of 26, he was elected Mayor, the youngest and the first Black mayor in the city's history. In these roles, he has exhibited servant leadership and a commitment to help the most vulnerable members of his community. He established summer schools and a mentoring program for public school students, spearheaded a re-entry project to employ 50 formerly incarcerated felons, and piloted the first city-level Universal Basic Income program in the country. Michael is an example of the transformative ways young people trained through CDF's leadership development programs go on to make a difference in their communities and improve the odds for the next generation.



What are our primary channels for developing young leaders?

SAMUEL DEWITT PROCTOR INSTITUTE FOR CHILD ADVOCACY MINISTRY

Building on our longstanding partnerships with faith communities, we created the Proctor Institute to equip and renew people for transformative justice-seeking work and help them put their faith into action. Each year, around 450 advocates, community leaders, faith and civil rights leaders, seminarians preparing for ministry, and organizers gather to be part of this community. We raise up the voices of young people and those who have been directly impacted by structural injustice. Young people serve as speakers and leaders, both learning from and sharing their perspectives with a wider community. Together, participants draw strength from their faith and from kindred spirits with different cultural and life experiences.

"[Proctor Institute] is a space that is intentional about justice work for youth and children. There are very few spaces where religious leaders, advocates, and seminarians can gather in one space and be in community."

– Young advocate for queer youth in Georgia

SEMINARY PARTNERSHIPS

Graduate seminary studies are a critical point in the path to ministry, a ripe opportunity to foster future leaders and to offer a new model for interactions with their communities. We partner with more than 20 seminaries to transform churches by transforming theological education. We connect theology, preaching, youth work, and organizing through the mandate of justice-oriented advocacy with those on the margins. They are inspired to work with, rather than for, young people, addressing systemic injustice rather than dispensing charity. This past year was our largest class yet with 66 seminarians from a range of denominations.

"This is an opportunity to further make sense of [my] vocation. The speakers, preachers, and activists collectively explore the relation between faith and political action. In addition to being inspired and challenged by prophetic preaching and courageous conversations, I am briefed on the national policy campaigns that I can take back and promote among my local community."

– Graduate seminarian and advocate for homeless youth in Michigan

CDF FREEDOM SCHOOLS® NATIONAL TRAINING

Every spring we gather over 1,300 young people for an immersive training experience to equip them as "Servant Leader Interns" and site leaders for our *CDF Freedom Schools* program. Training includes pedagogy and classroom management but also community engagement and how to inspire action, instill pride, and foster in their young scholars the confidence that they can make a difference. Much of the training is led by young people with experience as Servant Leader Interns. These trainers, typically early career educators, offer instruction and technical assistance to the young people and adults who run *CDF Freedom Schools* sites around the country.

"As an educator, children and families and their education are my passion. Being on a team of professionals with talents in differing arenas, we can impact families and communities on a large scale and cover multiple aspects of living and thriving for those individuals."

– Lindsay Johnson, trainer and 4th grade teacher who collaborates with the Durham Association of Educators in organizing North Carolina's Day of Advocacy

CDF FREEDOM SCHOOLS®

Our Servant Leader Interns do more than just learn how to teach and inspire their scholars – they are deployed to low-income communities around the country to put those skills into practice. The practical experience they gain can set them on a path to success in education, community organizing, social work, or other social justice career paths. Their work with *CDF Freedom Schools* scholars and their families inspire a deep commitment and empowerment to serve children and their communities.

“The program themes are helpful in empowering the students to feel that they have a voice in order to change their community. The scholars realize that the change in their communities starts with their individual actions. They begin to love themselves more, they are confident in their ability to make a change, and they also help to influence others around them by modeling positive behaviors that are adopted by their peers and even their siblings at home.”

– Atlantis Browder,
CDF Freedom Schools site
coordinator in Washington, DC

CDF BEAT THE ODDS®

We uplift high school students who have faced tremendous adversity, demonstrated academic excellence and given back to their communities. We offer these young people multi-year leadership development, college preparation, and post-secondary scholarships to help them overcome barriers to success and send a clear signal that someone cares and understands what it takes to thrive while coping with difficult challenges like family breakdown, homelessness, neglect and abuse, disabilities, or gun violence.

Brandon Gassaway lost his mother at age 16 when his father stabbed her to death. Brandon was forced to leave everything familiar behind—school, house, and even his sister after custody battles put them in separate households. CDF’s Beat the Odds program “helped me get through college and showed me different avenues of how to help others.” Brandon graduated from the University of New Mexico and then Prairie View A&M with a master’s degree in architecture. He mentors other young men. “I always try to help out with the younger guys. A lot of them don’t see the importance of education. This is a lifelong commitment.”

NATIONAL DAY OF SOCIAL ACTION

The importance of civic engagement and social action is woven throughout our programs in different ways all year round. One day is set aside for action to unite all of our partners from every generation, with young people leading actions to raise local awareness of problems facing children. The theme is different every year and represents an urgent national issue facing children – gun violence, voter participation, food insecurity. Young leaders organize marches, create videos or artwork, launch voter registration drivers, and write to policymakers. They demonstrate that everyone can stand up to make a difference.

“I know this is little, but I know it’s going to help a lot. The children who suffer from child hunger could be our future president, doctors, or teachers. (Food) gives you nutrients to grow. It gives you brain power. And it gives you the power to accomplish your goals that you have in life”

– Amiah, an 11-year-old *CDF Freedom Schools* scholar who participated in a march to end hunger in Waco, TX